

Bridging Brexit: Cross-Border Collaboration in Higher Education



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Ulster University's efforts in educational and research collaboration are central to bridging Brexit. The university is part of a formal cross-border further education and higher education cluster, whose founding principle is to enable learning pathways at tertiary level in response to current and future challenges for the region. This article outlines those pathways and shows the strategic importance of cross-border collaboration.

Derry is renowned worldwide for its spirited approach to Hallowe'en, but with a potential no-deal Brexit looming, *Samhain 2020* is a little spookier than normal. As the UK's exit from the EU plays out against the backdrop of Covid-19, cross-border collaboration in education and research provides no little solace in these anxious times.

Ní neart go cur le chéile ('there is no strength without unity') was the message of EU President Donald Tusk after his meeting with then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar in December 2017. Since then this adage has been adopted by communities the length and breadth of the island in the face of Covid-19.

Ulster University's track record in research collaboration and partnership programming in teaching is central to bridging Brexit. As a civic university with a regional mission, our concerns about a potential no-deal Brexit are many and varied. With two campuses in Greater Belfast (city centre and Jordanstown) and two in the North West (Coleraine and Magee), we have staff, researchers, and students who cross the border daily to work, learn, and collaborate. Brexit has implications for every facet of our work, nowhere more so than at the Magee campus situated just three miles from the UK-EU international frontier.

Cross-border collaboration as a bridge forward

Brexit has cast a menacing shadow for some time now, so how are we responding to the challenge? We are members of a formal cross-border further education and higher education cluster with Letterkenny IT (LYIT), North West Regional College (NWRC), and Donegal Education and Training Board. This North West FE-HE cluster, supported since its foundation in 2018 by the Irish Higher Education Authority, is a key antidote to post-Brexit obstacles, its founding principle being

to enable learning pathways at tertiary level in response to current and future challenges for the region.

The success of the cluster is due in no small part to the foresight of the North West Strategic Growth Partnership, co-chaired by Derry City and Strabane District Council and Donegal County Council and incorporating key stakeholders in education, research, and industry. It has a unique interjurisdictional structure, endorsed by both governments through the North-South Ministerial Council, and supports the global positioning of the region as a location for foreign direct investment.

This collaborative approach provides a strong foundation to tackle the challenges ahead, all parties engaging with local Chambers of Commerce to invest time in jointly understanding the issues arising from a North West perspective. The agreed objective is to pursue strategic plans that will enable economic growth and minimise the impact of Brexit, aligning our strategic approach so we achieve growth via the stewardship of education and a smart industry board.

Colleagues have remarked to me that they have never seen such a conscious effort to work together. Our attitude has shifted towards looking at how the border can become a bridge and a pathway for the benefit of students and employees on either side, aligning teaching and research programmes with industry requirements and government priorities.

We are exploring ways to make more cross-border collaboration happen through research and teaching activities. For example, increased employability in the fintech (financial technology) sector has encouraged us to partner with NWRC on the sixth FinTru North West Financial Services Academy, offering twenty graduate training places in each iteration and fantastic employment outcomes built in.

Together with LYIT we have developed and delivered a joint master's degree in Innovation Management in the Public Sector, now in its fifteenth year, and new collaborations will include trans-jurisdictional taxation, export, and enterprise. Data science is also a growth area in both Derry and Letterkenny. Collaborative provisions in support of smart industries are a shared focus at present, and we look forward to identifying even more opportunities for collaboration.

Research is an international endeavour

Research partnerships, both local and global, are vital in creating world-leading centres of excellence which define a university city or region. While Ulster's research income has doubled over the last four years through large-scale collaboration with other universities and industry partners, we have diversified our funding income mix, moving more towards UK research and innovation funded projects. EU research contracts are still highly significant to us, however, and we very much hope that UK universities can continue to participate in Horizon Europe beyond Brexit.

Collaborative networks continue to evolve and new projects emerge. The EpiCentre has been a key enabler for new research centres which City Deal will deliver for Derry. This is a multi-million-pound technology

partnership, established in 2008, between LYIT, NWRC, and Ulster's Intelligent Systems Research Centre at Magee which provided practical support for electronics and engineering companies in the North West.

The £38m Cognitive Analytics Research Lab (CARL) and the Centre for the Industrialisation and Digitisation of Robotics and Automation (CIDRA) also have critical roles to play. CARL will help businesses become world-leading in their use of artificial intelligence and data analytics, while CIDRA will enable industry to unlock the powerful potential of automation and robotics and to up-skill staff.

Since 2014 we have engaged in over ninety projects with c.£35m in grant income; around half of these have involved cross-border collaboration. Exemplars include the 'Crossing Borders, Breaking Boundaries' project to tackle discrimination; the North West Centre for Advanced Manufacturing; the Health Technology Hub; the Northern Ireland Centre for Stratified Medicine; and the Centre for Personalised Medicine, a cross-border collaborative project involving thirteen partner organisations.

Cross-border collaboration remains a key tenet of our research strategy, and healthcare innovation is particularly important in enhancing and defining the region. C-TRIC, the Clinical Translational Research and Innovation Centre at Altnagelvin, is now in its second decade. The expansion of world-class personalised medicine research facilities via THRIVE – a new health research institute aligned to City Deal – alongside the School of Medicine opening at Magee in 2021 will increase the region's attractiveness as a place to study, live, and work.

Since 2013 the Magee campus has been home to Ireland's only Magneto encephalography facility, a £5.3m facility which measures brain activity. This research infrastructure enables academics in Ulster to lead island-wide responses to the current pandemic, such as Dr Magda Bucholc's coordination of track-and-trace analytics, and Prof. Tony Bjourson and Dr Victoria McGilligan, who have just received significant Covid-19-specific research funding from Science Foundation Ireland.

The scale of collaboration in the North West will inevitably lead to more projects in areas such as health, intelligent systems, and public sector policy – all priority areas for government both north and south. In this way the border will become a bridge, and the unique trans-jurisdictional partnership of the North West cluster will enable placement opportunities and dual accreditation for graduates in the region.

Supporting students and staff around Brexit

Cross-border cooperation and student mobility are crucial from an economic, social, and cultural perspective. The UK government, in its white paper 'The Future Relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union', committed to 'facilitating mobility for students and young people, enabling them to continue to benefit from world-leading universities' once the UK leaves the EU. Universities UK (UUK), of which Ulster University is a member, is calling on the UK government to use the upcoming Immigration Bill to ensure that future academic and student mobility is not impeded by unnecessary bureaucracy, regardless of the

immigration status of EU/EEA nationals after the UK has left the EU. Building and preserving that border bridge is pivotal.

Take Sophie Carlin, for example, a nineteen-year old student from Donegal. Sophie is doing a voluntary third-year placement at C-TRIC in Derry, supported by Optum Ireland as a healthcare scholar. Sophie drives across the border every day to take part in a world-class research project on childhood cancer with Dr Kyle Matchett. She wishes to pursue a career in cancer research.

This is just one student, but thinking of Sophie traversing the border seamlessly every day is an example of what good looks like. We work every day to make this region an attractive place to stay and to pursue a career. Student mobility needs to be protected at all costs.

Ulster University values co-operation with partners from Europe and across the world. We were pleased to see that the Irish government's Brexit Readiness Action Plan references schemes to allow continued participation in Erasmus+ for eligible students in Northern Ireland institutions. We are looking at how we can best support existing and future staff in terms of their 'settled' or 'pre-settled status'. We want government to ensure there are no barriers to attracting world-class staff or inhibitors to collaboration on research.

Continued growth 'in between'

Rather than being on the periphery of European and UK research and innovation centres, North West city region's collaborative approach has enabled this place to position itself as the bridge, the conduit through which interjurisdictional creative and learning pathways can prosper. In his collection *The Haw Lantern* (1987), Séamus Heaney recalled growing up between two traditions and achieving equilibrium therein:

*Two buckets were easier carried than one
I grew up in between.*

Ireland's North West, and the region's academic, industry, and civic leaders, stand ready to embrace opportunities as the bridge 'in between'. The most impactful research is achieved when experts from different institutions in different parts of the world work together. International and interjurisdictional cooperation must be protected and facilitated in a post-Brexit world as we all find our footing with the threat of Covid-19 still with us.

Research-led teaching is about the next generation of thinkers, developing a skilled workforce that will help local companies make an impact on the global stage. While challenges like Brexit and Covid-19 were unforeseen for many of us, new possibilities will arise as a result of them. The future is not yet written, but let's learn from our past and stay focused on a strategic, aligned, and collaborative approach. Let's bridge Brexit for a brighter future for us all. *Ní neart go cur le chéile!*