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Borders, Brexit and the Irish Academic Community

Anne Fuchs reports on the reaction in Ireland to the implications of Brexit



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In the autumn of 1989 I was part of the worldwide television audience that watched the fall of the Berlin Wall with astonished incredulity. I had grown up in postwar West Germany with the conviction that the Berlin Wall, and the division of the country and of Europe, were the forever-cemented historical outcome of National Socialism and of the Second World War. The historic events of 1989 then taught me the lesson that history is contingent and unpredictable.

In 1992 I travelled for the first time from Dublin to Northern Ireland. I crossed a border that, with its watchtowers, checkpoints and armed police on the Northern side, appeared grotesquely obsolete: it reminded me of the former German-German border. The historic signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998 then brought those ugly structures down, and through their disappearance it seemed that Ireland and Europe had finally entered a new borderless age of openness, free mobility and integration.

My professional career exemplifies the benefits of free movement as enshrined in Article 45 of the Treaty on the

Functioning of the European Union. In 1989 I moved from Germany to work in England, then to Ireland, on to Scotland, from there to England, and finally, in the historic political year of 2016, back to Ireland – where my grand tour of the British Isles came to an end.

A new hard border in Ireland?

The Brexit referendum has put the issue of borders back on the agenda, so creating serious problems for the Irish economy, and potentially for the precarious peace in Northern Ireland. The idea that a new border could hack through the island in two years time is an appalling and, indeed, preposterous prospect for all citizens, North and South. Even though the UK government and the EU have repeatedly stated that the preservation of the Common Travel Area, which predates the EU, is a shared objective, it is quite unclear how this can be achieved. There is no evidence that the traffic of people and goods between Northern Ireland and the Republic can be monitored by technology alone. The only land border with the EU is approximately 500 kilometres long and contains a myriad of small roads, intersecting the border area. This is a potential terrain for traffickers and smugglers of deregulated goods that do not meet the high EU safety and quality standards. The problem of the Northern Irish border is compounded by the UK government's pledge to break with the European Court of Justice (ECJ). Withdrawal from the single market,

the customs union and the jurisdiction of the ECJ would make default to a hard border most likely.

Brexit also threatens the EU programmes in support of peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Between 1995 and 2013 three PEACE programmes received €1.3 billion European funding for a wide range of projects, including community building across the religious divide, support for victims and survivors of political violence, and urban regeneration. PEACE IV was launched in 2016 and will run until 2020 with a further investment of €270 million: this programme especially targets children and young people through educational activities and community development.¹

Impact on higher education sector

Besides potentially jeopardising the all-Ireland economy and the peace dividend, the spectre of new borders and boundaries, visible or invisible, also poses a significant challenge for the Irish higher education sector, which shares with the UK a similar research ecology and culture. The UK is the single most important partner for Ireland on EU grants. It also ranks first in co-authored publications, and it is an important destination for early-career researchers, postdoctoral fellows and academic staff. Longstanding channels of collaboration include external examinations, joint conferences and membership of editorial boards, bi-national professional organisations, and fully-fledged Horizon 2020-funded research programmes.² North/South research collaborations in

particular are dependent on EU funding: in the period between January 2014 and October 2016, €63.4 million funding was won in Horizon 2020 for joint North/South projects. The Northern slice of EU funding constitutes more than half of all Northern Irish funding awards in that period. It is inconceivable that the UK government will make up this shortfall, should the UK exit from the EU funding framework.

Royal Irish Academy survey

The Royal Irish Academy (RIA) has therefore set up a Brexit Taskforce to consider ‘how the higher education sector can best address the implications of the UK’s exit from the EU and identify potential sector strategic priorities for Ireland’s Brexit negotiators.’ The RIA is an all-island body and as such in a unique position to represent the interests of the entire academic community.

In response to Brexit-related risks and opportunities, the Taskforce has identified three strategic priorities for the Irish government:

- Additional investment in Ireland’s higher education and research ecosystem to attract the very best international academic and research talent.
- Enhanced strategies to build the international, outward facing reputation of Ireland’s higher education system.
- Mechanisms to secure future Ireland-Northern Ireland-Britain co-operation for the purposes of higher education, training and research rec-

1. For further information see ‘Northern Ireland PEACE Programme’ (European Parliament Fact Sheets on the European Union, 5.1.9).

2. For a detailed breakdown of figures relating to research links between HEIs in Ireland and the UK, see Alun Jones and Liam Cleere, ‘The educational turbulence of Brexit’, *Education Matters* (2017, in press).



PHOTO: PAUL FAITH (AFP/GETTY).

ognising the sector's achievements in building strong all-island co-operation.³

In preparation of its report, the RIA Taskforce carried out a comprehensive empirical survey of the academic community, North and South.⁴ Participants were asked to rate their agreement with a series of statements on the impact of Brexit on higher education, research and innovation. This survey generated 390 responses with a fairly even split between Northern and Southern respondents and a balance between the sciences and the HSS subjects. Some key outcomes of the all-island survey can be summarised as follows:

- 79 per cent of all respondents agree that collaboration with the UK is significant for their respective discipline or field.
- 96 per cent of all respondents evaluated the impact of Brexit on the Northern Irish higher education sector as negative. There is little variation between Northern and Southern respondents.
- 77 per cent of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Brexit would have a negative impact on the future of North/South collaborations in the medium to long term.
- 75 per cent of northern respondents believe that the impact of Brexit will be negative for higher education in Ireland, North and South.
- 41 per cent of southern respondents believe that Brexit may create new opportunities for the higher education sector in the South. Comments suggest that the Republic could become an attractive destination for EU researchers and international students who had been planning to move to the UK prior to Brexit. Further potential bene-

fits identified by respondents include enhanced competitiveness in Horizon 2020 bids, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, and Erasmus+ bids.

Our survey also asked about specific measures that could support international research collaborations, both North and South.

The respondents in the Republic of Ireland identified the following priorities: improvement of foreign language provision in Irish higher education institutions, in support of Ireland's ambition to deepen its ties with existing and new EU partners; the creation of incentives to attract excellent researchers and international students who may wish to carry out research in an EU country with English as a first language; immediate increase in funding for PhD studentships, postdoctoral fellowships, and international research collaborations; retention of staff and student mobility along the N/S and E/W axes. It seems that respondents from the Republic are seeking a silver lining in the Brexit clouds.

Respondents in the North are understandably very concerned to protect the status quo: they prioritised the retention of existing funding mechanisms, arrangements for N/S collaboration and access to the major EU funding frameworks. Northern respondents frequently raised concerns about the impact of Brexit on student fees and student mobility.

The academic community, as well as the citizens of Ireland, North and South, are united in emphatically supporting free movement and an open border. The citizens of the island of Ireland did not vote for Brexit, but they are likely to feel the repercussions for generations to come, whether the border is visible or not. ■

3. See the forthcoming Advice Paper: 'Research and Higher Education on the Island of Ireland after Brexit: A Paper by the RIA Brexit Taskforce'.

4. For further details see 'Royal Irish Academy Brexit Taskforce Survey Results: Impacts and Opportunities for Higher Education and Research on the Island of Ireland post Brexit' (Survey Results Analysis no. 1, July 2017).