Quality and Accessibility

Northern Ireland’s higher education system is recognised internationally for its high quality teaching and research, and local higher education providers are open and accessible to everyone with the ability and the will to learn, regardless of their backgrounds or personal circumstances.

Many factors shape the quality of learning. These include: the aptitude and motivation of individual students and their own approaches to learning; the quality and diversity of the student body of which they are part; the curriculum they study; the calibre and strategies of those who teach them; the size and nature of their classes; the ways in which learning is encouraged by assessment processes and feedback; the learning resources (such as libraries, laboratories, and information technology) available and used; the scope for learning in the classroom to be enriched by learning outside the classroom; and the wider institutional and social context.

Northern Ireland’s higher education providers have a strong record of achievement in reviews of teaching quality, and, at 89%, they are performing above a UK average of 86% with regards to overall student satisfaction rates.¹ The proportion of graduates from Northern Ireland achieving first or upper second-class honours degrees continues to grow, from 68% in 2012/13 to 71% in 2013/14,² and a higher proportion of graduates from Northern Ireland are in employment six months after graduation than their counterparts from any other part of the UK.³

As well as maintaining consistently high standards of teaching and learning, the research undertaken at Northern Ireland’s universities is also of the highest quality. In the latest UK-wide assessment of research quality, some 70% of submitted research from Queen’s and Ulster University was deemed either ‘world leading’ or

¹ See http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/nss/results/2015/.
‘internationally excellent’. In several research categories, such as Law, Art & Design and Agriculture, Veterinary and Food Science, Queen’s or Ulster University were assessed as being in the top five UK universities, and Queen’s achieved the highest rating in the UK in Anthropology and Development Studies.\(^4\)

Over the past number of years the reputation of Northern Ireland’s higher education system, and the quality of its teaching and research, has continued to improve, and the number of higher education students coming to Northern Ireland from other parts of the UK and outside of the EU has more than doubled over the past ten years, from 2,540 in 2004/05 to 5,370 in 2013/14.\(^5\)

Northern Ireland also has an enviable record in widening participation and access to higher education. At almost 50% Northern Ireland now has the highest levels of participation in higher education from young people in the UK, and in 2013/14 almost 40% of participants were from lower socio-economic classifications, which is well above the UK average of below 33%.\(^6\) Northern Ireland’s higher education providers run a range of programmes targeted at attracting students from underrepresented groups, and the student finance system helps to ensure that higher education is free at the point of entry for the vast majority of local students.

To what extent do you think that the existing higher education system supports high quality higher education provision in Northern Ireland?

To what extent do you think that the existing higher education system supports fair access to, and widens participation in, higher education in Northern Ireland?

To what extent do you think that the existing higher education system enables social mobility more broadly in Northern Ireland?

However, while the demand for higher education places in Northern Ireland continues to increase, the funding available to sustain the growth of our higher

\(^4\) For more information visit [http://www.ref.ac.uk/](http://www.ref.ac.uk/).


The education system is now reducing significantly. Following several years of manageable budget reductions for higher education, met in the main through efficiency savings, grant funding for Northern Ireland’s universities and university colleges is now reducing by over £16 million this academic year. Funding for Northern Ireland’s further education colleges is also reducing significantly by about £12 million, with an obvious impact on their higher education provision.

As autonomous institutions, it is entirely up to each university how to manage these kinds of financial pressures, and both Queen’s and Ulster University have endeavoured to protect, as far as possible, the quality of their provision. To achieve this, they have, among other things, tried to ensure that the amount of money spent per student does not decrease significantly compared to previous years.

But in the context of significantly reduced funding, quality can only be protected at the expense of quantity. This academic year over 500 fewer student places have been made available for local students at Queen’s and Ulster, and this will rise to about 2,000 over the next few years.

With fewer places available locally, more students from Northern Ireland will likely opt instead to study in other parts of the UK or Ireland. Almost a third of full-time undergraduate students from Northern Ireland already opt to do so each year, and Northern Ireland is already the only net exporter of students in the UK. When these students leave they take with them a host of socio-economic benefits, and the vast majority (64%) do not subsequently return to Northern Ireland for employment.

Other prospective students who do not gain a place locally may instead opt not to enter higher education at all, and the evidence suggests that people from lower socio-economic groups will be impacted most. Students from other underrepresented groups—such as those with disabilities, who may not be as readily able to study away from home—may also be impacted disproportionately as local higher education places become increasingly restricted, and, at 4.4% in

2013/14, Northern Ireland already falls below the UK average of 6.8% in terms of participation in higher education from disabled students.⁹

A wide range of approaches to widening access and participation are taken in different parts of the world. In Northern Ireland, higher education providers opting to charge tuition fees above a certain level are required to produce Widening Access and Participation Plans (WAPPs), outlining the various ways in which they will use that additional income to reach out to underrepresented groups. Some countries run programmes which allow certain kinds of students to make exceptional applications to higher education on a reduced entry points/grades basis, recognising the impact which particular circumstances, such as a disability, can have on school attainment.¹⁰

As shown in previous sections, Northern Ireland’s economy is going to be increasingly reliant on higher level skills in the future, and to meet these skills demands it is clear that higher education will have to be an option for people from all kinds of backgrounds and circumstances. Widening access to higher education is therefore not just a matter of social justice; it is an economic imperative.

Northern Ireland’s universities also compete in a national and international higher education market. They not only compete to attract the best students and staff from throughout the world, but also to attract external sources of finance directly into the Northern Ireland economy. Students, through the payment of tuition fees, are also increasingly regarding themselves as paying customers, and they expect the education they are buying to be of a quality commensurate with the cost. For all these reasons, it is therefore crucial to ensure that provision on offer remains of the highest quality.

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¹⁰ For example the Republic of Ireland’s Disability Access Route to Higher Education (DARE) and Higher Education Access Route (HEAR).
To what extent do you think that disinvestment in higher education will undermine the quality of Northern Ireland’s higher education system, in both teaching and research?

Are there alternative models of higher education funding or delivery which you think could better support high quality higher education provision in Northern Ireland?

To what extent do you think that disinvestment in higher education will undermine equality of opportunity in Northern Ireland, particularly for people from lower income backgrounds, people with disabilities, and other underrepresented groups?

To what extent do you think that the adoption of exceptional application routes could help to address under-representation in higher education, particularly of disabled students?

Are there alternative models of higher education funding or delivery which you think could better support fair access to higher education and equality of opportunity in Northern Ireland?

Do you think that the existing higher education system strikes the right balance between: the quality of provision on the one hand; and the quantity of provision on the other?