

Border People Briefing

Improving Cross-border Access to Third-level Education

Alternative Qualifications as Barriers to Mobility

Considering the fact that Ireland is a small island which shares a common language and two intimately comparable education systems, it would be natural to assume that large numbers of students from each jurisdiction would cross the border each year to study. The potential benefit from educational exchange has been well studied. An improvement in educational and employment opportunities for individuals would be matched by wider economic and social benefits to both jurisdictions; the wider pool of graduates would bolster the all-island job market and contribute towards the creation of a fluid all-island economy, while the opportunity afforded to students to experience life in the other jurisdiction would further the cause of reconciliation and strengthen the ongoing peace process.

Unfortunately, the reality of the scale of cross-border study is that only a very small proportion of students choose to further their education within the alternative jurisdiction. In higher education, for example, figures obtained by The Centre for Cross Border Studies from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in the Republic and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in the UK reveal that in the year 2011/12 just 6.8% of students in Northern Ireland higher education institutions were domiciled south of the border; even more starkly, only 0.9% of students in ROI higher education institutions were from households in Northern Ireland.

In order to secure the fullness of the potential benefit to our society from cross-border mobility in education, it is vital that we work to tear down any barriers to the free movement of students across the border; that is, that we work towards creating a true "Single market for education" on the island. One such barrier is the subject of this paper. Across both jurisdictions, students holding alternative secondary and post-secondary qualifications (defined as those awards other than Leaving Certificate or A-level) often find that their qualifications are not recognised or accorded appropriate value by institutions across the border in which they may want to study.

This paper constitutes a preliminary examination of the impact of this situation on the educational experiences of affected students, and will attempt to pinpoint the root causes of this barrier to free movement, focusing primarily on the reported experience of educational practitioners. As such, the conclusions of this paper are intended as a basis for further discussion and investigation. With a view towards clarifying the possible policy implications, a list of proposed "action priorities" is additionally included.

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Entry to Tertiary Education

In Northern Ireland, the largest providers of tertiary education are by far the two universities; Queen's University Belfast and The University of Ulster. The "standard" route of entry to these institutions is through the achievement of the GCE A-level award - offered as the standard school-leaving qualification in Northern Ireland, England and Wales - in respect of a number of subjects. Although the number of students from the Republic of Ireland studying at these institutions is still (worryingly) low, the two universities have acquired significant experience in dealing with applications from students offering the standard Irish school-leaving qualification, the Leaving Certificate. This is bolstered by the fact that UCAS, the university application system for the UK (and the system through which the vast majority of applications for undergraduate study must be made), maintains an official mechanism for translating grades achieved in the Leaving Certificate into UCAS "tariff points" in a similar manner to results gained in UK qualifications. These tariff points are often the main criterion utilised by third level institutions when making admission decisions, and the existence of this mechanism ensures a consistent comparability between the Leaving Cert and A-level qualifications.

In the Republic of Ireland, two major options exist for those considering entry to tertiary education; these are the seven universities within the state - four of which are *constituent universities* of the National University of Ireland (NUI) - and the thirteen institutes of technology. The primary criterion utilised for admissions by these institutions is a candidate's performance in the Leaving Certificate, as measured through a grade to point-tariff calculation via the CAO national application system in a similar manner to UCAS (in the case of the institutes of technology, a facility for direct application is often also available). Again, CAO maintains a point-tariff translation mechanism for A-level qualifications, providing comparability between the two qualifications for admissions purposes. In addition to this, extended experience of processing applications from students from Northern Ireland and Great Britain has resulted in a degree of familiarity with, and trust in, the value and relevance of A-level qualifications in Southern institutions.

Alternative Qualifications

While there is occasional disagreement on cross-border point weighting for the two qualifications within the national applications systems, A-level and Leaving Certificate awards are for the previously indicated reasons largely portable with respect to the border. However, not all students seeking to access tertiary education across the island hold a qualification of this type. Many who fall into this category have left secondary education

without one of these school-leaving qualifications, or have achieved results that are insufficient by themselves to facilitate progression to third level. In this case, many students opt to pursue one of the many other qualifications on offer at this level in either jurisdiction.

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In Northern Ireland the major qualifications offered at the pre-bachelor's level (excluding A-level awards) include the Higher National Certificate (HNC), Higher National Diploma (HND), levels 3,4 and 5 of the BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council) award, the Foundation Degree, and the Adult Access Diploma. These are studied primarily through the North's network of six *colleges of further and higher Education*, as well as through some schools.

Other than the Leaving Certificate, the most prominent qualifications offered at this level in the Republic include the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) Level 5 and 6 Certificates. The provision of these courses is organised primarily through the South's regional Vocational Education Committees (VECs) via local *institutes of further education*. Some further education institutions in the Republic also offer alternative UK qualifications, such as BTEC.

Comparability of Qualifications: The QCF and NFQ Frameworks

Both the Irish qualifications authority (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI) and the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual), which regulates vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland, publish schemas which standardise the level of each qualification administered within their jurisdiction; these are the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in the Republic of Ireland, and the National Qualification Framework (NQF) and Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) in Northern Ireland and England; in the latter case, vocational qualifications reside primarily on the QCF. These frameworks allow for internal comparability of qualifications, and is used as a point of reference by institutions when dealing with applicants holding unfamiliar accreditations. These schemas are both standardised against the European Qualification Framework (EQF), in theory providing for comparability with these qualifications across a range of European education systems.

In addition to these two separate systems of standardisation, QQI and Ofqual (in addition to a number of other organisations) jointly publish guidelines to allow for the comparison of qualifications from Northern Ireland and England with those from the Republic of Ireland, as well as with qualifications administered by the Scottish and Welsh national authorities (*Fig. 1*); an overview of these guidelines is published in the jointly-published document "Qualification can cross boundaries"[1]. In theory, the existence of this framework should make it easy for qualifications to cross the border; equipped with a direct mechanism for placing cross-border qualifications within their own national framework, destination institu-

tions should be empowered to make appropriate admissions decisions based on the real value of accreditations from the other jurisdiction. As shall be detailed in this report, however, this does not appear to be the case in reality.

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	National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (ROI)	Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) (NI & ENG)		
	Level 3	Level 1		
	Level 4	Level 2		
Level 5 Certificate (FETAC level 5), Leaving Certificate	Level 5	Level 3	GCE A-Level & AS-Level; BTEC awards, certificates and diplomas at level 3 (inc. BTEC Extended Diploma)	
Advanced Certificate, Higher Certificate	Level 6	level 4	Higher National Certificate (HNC), Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE)	BTEC Professional Diplomas, Certificates and Awards
Ordinary Bachelor's Degree	Level 7	level 5	Higher National Diploma (HND), Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE), Foundation Degree	
Honours Bachelor's Degree	Level 8	Level 6	Bachelor's Degree	BTEC Advanced Professional Diplomas, Certificates and Awards

Fig. 1: Approximate relative weighting for various qualifications according to the Ofqual and QQI guidelines.

Barriers to Mobility: North to South

In an attempt gauge the ease with which alternative qualifications crossed the border, the author canvassed the views of a number of further education institutions in both jurisdictions. Following contact with careers advisers and other career planning professionals, a clear theme began to emerge; that recognition of many alternative qualifications by institutions on the other side of the border was very poor, and that in some cases these qualifications were not being recognised at all. It should be noted that the contacted further education institutions accept cross-border alternative/further education qualifications for entry to their own programmes as a

matter of course.

The situation of the North West Regional College (NWRC), a college of further and higher education located in County Derry/Londonderry, provides an illustrative example. NWRC offers a range of further education courses at all levels, including BTEC Level 3/Extended Diplomas, HNCs and HNDs, foundation degrees, and adult access diplomas. The acceptability of these qualifications for admission to UK universities is verified by the fact that NWRC successfully progress large numbers of students to UK universities using the listed awards; indeed, according to statistics provided to the

author, in September 2012 533 students holding these qualifications were progressed to degree courses in 61 different universities.

Yet when the case of student progression to Southern universities and institutes of technology from NWRC is examined, the situation changes significantly. Reports received by the authors indicated a number of difficulties in in terms of the progression of students with these alternative qualifications to Southern institutions:

- No overall framework for NI alternative qualifications is implemented by southern institutions. NWRC has had to resort to negotiating local agreements with a handful of specific institutes of technology in order to ensure the acceptability of some of its qualifications for admission to these institutes. For example, as a result of these agreements, four institutes now accept QCF level 3 programmes for admission to NFQ level 6/7 and 8.
- Universities in the Republic of Ireland tend not to recognise the acceptability of QCF level 3 programmes for admission to their courses.
- There is no clear pathway for NWRC students who have achieved qualifications at level 4 or 5 of the QCF, including HNCs and HNDs, to progress to NFQ level 7 and 8 programmes. Students holding a QCF level 5 qualification would normally be exempt from at least the first year of an appropriate honours bachelor's degree within a UK university.
- Adult Access Diplomas are not standardised within the QCF.

Sources consulted by the author emphasised the financial effect of these barriers to their students; studying in the Republic often offers significant advantages in terms of degree funding, given that Southern university fees and costs tend to be set at a much lower level that comparative costs at UK universities. This is of concern to both Northern Ireland domiciled students who wish to study in the Republic, and Southern students holding Northern vocational qualifications who wish to pursue higher studies within their home jurisdiction. Concerns were additionally raised over the position of students from the Republic who had completed a further education qualification (usually a BTEC level 3 award) in a Northern Ireland FE college, either as a standalone qualification or as an addition to an existing leaving certificate award. Due to the general non-recognition of the NI further education qualification in the Republic, these students often find themselves "shut out" of the Southern higher education system, and are compelled to complete their education in the Northern Ireland or Great Britain.

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It might be assumed, given that many of these qualifications (with the exception of the Adult Access Diploma) are listed within the QQI/Ofqual cross-border comparison guidelines (*Fig. 1*), that their acceptance by southern institutions would be uncontroversial; however this is obviously not the case. Furthermore, a significant factor in non-recognition may be that CAO does not allocate "points" to awards of NI FE qualifications as it does for A-Level or Leaving Certificate grades. As a result of this, students with these FE qualifications often find themselves excluded from the mainstream point-based entry route to southern higher education institutions, particularly universities.

Barriers to Mobility: South to North

With regards to the experience of Southern institutions of further education, the situation of Cavan Institute provides typical example. Situated in Cavan Town, the Institute provides a range of Southern further education qualifications across a number of levels; in addition, it also provides a number of NI/UK further education qualifications, such as NHDs. Cavan Institute successfully progresses large numbers of its students to institutes of technology and Universities in the Republic. However, its students have experienced significant difficulty when applying for higher education across the border. Issues raised include:

- Holders of FETAC level 5 qualifications, while eligible for admission to degree programmes in the Republic, generally find that Northern universities do not recognise the value of their qualification; UCAS does not recognise FETAC qualifications for the purpose of the calculation of tariff points. This often leads to suitably qualified applicants being denied admission to Northern institutions.
- Again, the NI/UK qualifications provided by the institute are not generally recognised by third level institutions in the Republic, with the exception of the few Institutes of Technology which have experience of dealing with Northern applicants.
- The holders of higher-level FETAC qualifications may typically enter Southern degree courses at year 2 or year 3; there is very little recognition from Northern universities in this respect.

The institute has also encountered cases of students from Northern Ireland who, having earned Southern FE qualifications, are compelled to further their studies in the Republic as a result of the rejection of those qualifications by Northern institutions. Again, FETAC awards are listed within the QQI/Ofqual cross-border comparison guidelines (*Fig. 1*), and therefore their acceptance should be uncontroversial. Overall, then, the problems experienced by Southern institutions closely replicate the experiences of their Northern counterparts.

An interesting point was raised in conversation with some of the Southern institutions; this was that the acceptance or otherwise of alternative qualifications (both Northern and Southern) in general depended on the level of trust of, and experience with, these qualifications which exists in the destination institution.

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Recommendations

The nature of the difficulties encountered by cross-border students as detailed in this paper clearly suggest

a number of areas for action from a policy perspective. This paper thus recommends that relevant policy actors prioritise the consideration of action to:

- **Increase awareness of the Ofqual/QQI guidelines for comparability of Northern and Southern qualifications, and ensure that this is *successfully implemented* in the admission policies of all higher education institutions, North and South. The example of existing successful regional recognition agreements may be useful in this regard, as a demonstration of a situation in which trust in the value of the relevant alternative qualifications has been successfully established.**
- **Ensure that the relevant alternative qualifications are in future recognised for the purpose of “point/tariff” calculations in the national university application system (UCAS, CAO) of the other jurisdiction.**
- **Ensure that the Ofqual/QQI cross-border qualification guidelines are updated to include qualifications, such as the Adult Access Course, which are not currently included in the national frameworks.**
- **Encourage in-depth engagement on the issue of alternative qualifications between further education institutions and tertiary education institutions across the island, with the goal of building trust in, and experience in dealing with, alternative cross-border qualifications.**

References

- [1] *Qualifications can cross boundaries - a rough guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland*, <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/qualifications-can-cross-boundaries.aspx>, July 2013.
- [2] A. Pollack, *A Study of Obstacles to Cross-border Undergraduate Education*, The Centre for Cross Border Studies, 2011