Written Evidence submitted by Ulster University for the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee’s inquiry into Devolution and democracy in Northern Ireland – dealing with the deficit (DDD0012)

Introduction

Ulster University is a world leading university delivering outstanding research and teaching and encouraging the innovation, leadership and vision needed to help Northern Ireland thrive. As Northern Ireland’s civic university, we are also committed to delivering a positive impact and influence on the economic, cultural and social prosperity of Northern Ireland.

As Northern Ireland’s largest university and with campuses in Greater Belfast, Coleraine and Derry~Londonderry, Ulster University’s multi-campus dynamic means that although we are international in our outlook, we have our roots firmly embedded in the local community. The University has a national and international reputation for excellence in higher education, innovation and engagement with business and industry.

Ranked as one of the world’s top 150 young universities, our student-centred approach to learning and teaching combined with our modern and engaging learning environment supports the intellectual and personal ambitions of each and every student. We inspire and equip our graduates to be adaptable and to thrive in their chosen fields.

Ulster University believes that in working collectively with the Northern Ireland Executive (NI Executive), we can deliver transformative change to the social and economic prosperity of Northern Ireland and the health and wellbeing of our people.

As a leading research institution, we are committed to contributing towards a better Northern Ireland society. Given our resource and our skills, we have an opportunity to inform and impact policy making; to transform lives; to drive innovation; and to be at the heart of our creative culture. Our team of research professionals can help to address some of Northern Ireland’s most pressing problems. Partnerships are at the heart of our society’s development – citizens, the private sector, Government, academics and the third sector all working together to achieve the outcomes outlined in the Northern Ireland Assembly’s Programme for Government (PIG)\(^1\).

The impact on services, businesses and communities of the lack of Executive

Ulster University is grounded in the heart of the community and aims to make a positive contribution to society as a whole. We believe that our strategic vision to transform lives and minds, develop skills and raise ambitions complements the overarching aims of the PIG.

Ulster University is a key partner on a number of actions within the PIG Delivery Plans. With the breakdown of the NI Executive, we are losing the opportunity to link together the NI budget with the developing policy statements such as the PIG and the NI Executive’s Industrial Strategy. Consequently, there is a degree of uncertainty across a range of sectors crucial to ensuring economic and social growth in Northern Ireland.

\(^1\) The Consultation on the Draft Programme for Government closed on 23 December 2016. The Consultation on the associated Equality Impact Assessment closed on 27 January 2017. However, power-sharing in the NI Executive broke down on 16th January 2017, meaning that the PIG has not been formally agreed by the NI Executive.
Ulster University’s Economic Policy Centre is part-funded by the Department for the Economy and carries out a range of policy research on behalf of the Department and other sponsors with a core aim of helping NI achieve its economic ambitions. Projects such as the research into Corporation Tax, benchmarking competitiveness, the pioneering Skills Barometer and current research into the Living Wage are designed to help the Department, and ultimately the Executive and Assembly, make effective, informed policy choices.

Education and recruitment in primary healthcare and the medical workforce – a significant matter for the NI population more broadly – requires the support of an Executive to progress.

Ulster University particularly welcomed the commitment within the PfG to “work with Ulster University on a long-term development for Magee Campus.” In November 2016, Ulster University received cross-party support for the development of a Northern Ireland Graduate Entry Medical School (referred to as NIGEMS) based in the North West of Northern Ireland.

Presently there is an unprecedented crisis in terms of the heavy workloads, retention and recruitment of GPs, with rural GP practices in the North West having particular issues with recruiting GPs.

The Health Minister prior to the collapse of the Executive, Michelle O’Neill MLA, indicated that she was keen to progress the plans following discussions with Ulster University. An outline business plan was submitted to both the Departments of Economy and Health; which included outlines as to how the medical school would boost the areas of health and education; which are traditionally underprovided for in the North West.

Currently the business plan for Ulster University’s Medical School is with the Department of Heath’s Permanent Secretary for review.

Ulster University remains fully committed to the opening of the Medical School in terms of both financial and staff commitment in developing the course, the application process for General Medical Council accreditation, engagement with external stakeholders and political representatives and the development of innovative teaching, research and cross-border opportunities.

However, Ulster University needs a response to the business plan that has been submitted, as we are now constrained in what we can do.

The impact on budgeting and legislative timetables, particularly the budget for the next financial year;

A world-class higher education system is vital to meeting the economic and social goals that have been set for Northern Ireland in the PfG.

In 2011, there was parity in funding between Scotland, England and Northern Ireland; with the Executive operating a mixed model of funding. However, since then Northern Ireland HEIs have received ongoing and severe cuts in funding with the systematic erosion of the Executive level of support.

It must be noted that the number of undergraduate places available in Northern Ireland for Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) is capped for Northern Ireland domiciled students and EU students from outside of the UK, including the Republic of Ireland. The cap no longer applies to English, Welsh or Scottish students.

Ulster University has experienced a cumulative cash cut of £71 million between 2011 and 2017, with annual core funding from the NI Executive falling from 89.7m in 2010/11 to £70.8m in 2016/17.

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2 If HEIs in Northern Ireland recruit above the cap for students living in Northern Ireland and EU Students outside of the UK, they are fined.
Correspondence Ulster University received from the Department of Economy advised that the impact on Ulster University’s resource funding is likely to be further cuts in the block grant. The correspondence indicates that this could be a 2% cut for 2017/18, which has already been actioned, 3.5% in 2018/19 and 4.5% in 2019/20. Cumulatively this equates to cuts of 5.5% in 2018/19 and 9.7% in 2019/20.

A sustainable funding model for higher education is vital. We are committed to working with the NI Executive to achieve such a model that will both support skills, economic and social development and we will support the University to make a greater contribution to the PfG goals.

A number of key points should be kept in mind when considering the importance of a sustainable funding model.

- Substantial economic development is brought about through Ulster University’s position as the only multi-campus regional University in Northern Ireland. Our strategic mission asserts our commitment to a strong regional narrative for each of our campuses that is aligned to the economic and social ambitions of the local area. While our commitment to grow each of our campuses and support the development of their local communities remains undiminished; without adequate financial investment, we will be unable to maintain existing commitments let alone expand. Our current regional position is not sustainable which will, in turn, have detrimental social and economic consequences at a local level. A position that is completely at odds with the commitments in the nascent programme for government.

- Ulster University is not funded to support a multi-campus structure, which costs in comparison to a single campus proposition; an additional £15million per annum to deliver. Additional to this stress, is a lack of rates discount, as available to Universities in the rest of the UK, placing further strain on Ulster University as a multi-campus University.

- Northern Ireland’s ability to build a solid skills base is being undermined; impacting not only opportunities for our young people; but also, our ability to attract and retain foreign direct investment.

- The ability to deliver our widening access commitment; to reach the most disadvantaged in Northern Ireland; is being destabilised.

- It is increasingly difficult for our Institutions to compete with its counterparts in Great Britain; as the investment gap facing Northern Ireland continues to widen.

It is our view that Northern Ireland, with strong leadership, has an opportunity to take a meaningful role in the wider UK higher education funding debate.

Recent independent benchmarking has identified that Ulster University’s funding is significantly less than comparable benchmarking group in England; with current differential being £27m per year of teaching income.

Ulster University teaches 14.8% more students than the benchmark group per academic FTE; has 108 fewer FTE academic staff than our peers; 105 fewer academic support staff and 164 fewer professional services staff. As a consequence, Ulster University’s challenging staff student ratio is detrimental to our ability to attract international students, who provide an additional income stream and contribute to the overall diversity and culture expected in an international university.

Evidence of underfunding and lack of investment has made it increasingly difficult to plan ahead. However, despite this, Ulster University continues to deliver international leading research, excellent teaching and a quality student experience. Our staff, by any benchmark, are world class and whilst they continue to be committed to the delivery of an exemplary education, there is no further stretch in our system.

Additional resource is required to keep Northern Ireland’s universities world class, competitive and widely accessible to people of talent. While the current situation is unsustainable, the prospect of the
further cuts that has been communicated by the Department of Economy has turned a serious situation into a critical one.

Ulster University strongly supports the idea of a mixed model of funding for higher education; alongside the maximum student number (MaSN) level. A financial contribution from the student, in the form of tuition fees, and from the Government, in the form of a block grant, recognizes both the public and private benefit of higher education. The key to this is sustainability and the ability to plan ahead.

This is currently not happening in Northern Ireland as the private contribution rises only in line with inflation and the public contribution, as outlined above, continues to fall. A balance between the public and private contribution is vital, we believe, to ensuring the higher education system meets the needs of students, society and the economy.

Ulster University is keen work with our politicians, civil servants and the community at large to find appropriate funding solutions. As such we have written to political leaders locally and also to Minister of State for Universities and Science, Jo Johnson.

The gap left in EU negotiations and alternatives for NI’s voice in talks.

Brexit is the most significant issue of our generation presenting opportunities and challenges to all parts of our society.

Northern Ireland is unique in that it is the only part of the UK to share a land border with another EU country, it has crucial differences in legislation and economic make-up, as well as being the only part of the UK to not have a working political administration during the crucial UK negotiations to leave the EU.

As discussed in the previous section, Universities in Northern Ireland are already funded in a different way to the rest of the UK, which has resulted in a major shortfall. As a multi-campus University, within travelling distance of the border with the Republic of Ireland, we have a large number of staff and students that commute between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland on a daily basis.

Furthermore, there are a number of cross-border initiatives and collaborations that have been set up through EU funding; which Ulster University has demonstrated research excellence within. It is therefore crucial that Ulster University’s voice be highlighted within the EU negotiations.

The NI economy is different in a number of ways to the UK economy, including having lower wages, lower labour productivity rates, an over dependence on the public sector, lower GVA per capita, lower levels of business investment in R&D, a weaker skills profile amongst the working age population and higher levels of economic inactivity. However, Northern Ireland does attract proportionately more Foreign Direct Investment than other parts of the UK.

Currently, the ease of travel between countries and institutions means recruiting non-UK researchers from EU countries is straightforward; and the EU relationship is pivotal in attracting talent to UK universities. In leaving the EU, there is the risk a more complicated visa system will be put in place, which may reduce competitiveness of our universities in attracting top researchers and staff.

It is crucial that there is clarification around leave to remain and the visa status of current and newly appointed EU national staff members working within universities.

Student mobility and access to research funding is important not only for Universities in Northern Ireland; but also, the wider NI economy. Based on 2011/12 student figures, EU students in Northern Ireland generation over £78 million annually for the economy and support over 840 jobs. Over the last five years, Ulster University has been awarded over £20 million of EU research funding.

Students from the Republic of Ireland are the largest cohort of fee paying EU students studying at Ulster University.
Risks are associated with reduced or limited student mobility; including international competitiveness as well as a number of UK students leaving to attend EU based Universities that can provide programmes such as Erasmus. Consideration must therefore be given to making allowances for higher education recruitment in any legislation relating to mobility/borders-visa processes as part of the UK's negotiations on leaving the EU.

Any impact on staff and student mobility and access to research grants could undermine our ability to continue to attract FDI and undermine NI's regional economic policy that is dependent on access to economic resources, including market access, the flow of skills and the ability to collaborate on R&D programmes across national boundaries.

Ulster University has strong cross-border connections ranging from the development and delivery of course provision through to research partnerships with University College Dublin and Dublin City University in key areas including connected health technology and public health.

As well as cross-border, academic networks and collaborations are greatly enhanced through access to EU funding streams, allowing for projects to be scaled up in ways not possible at local or national level. Already, Ulster University, amongst other universities, are being asked to leave consortia applying for EU funding and partners are reluctant to enter into arrangements given uncertainty.

Long-term, the UK’s exit from the EU means that partnerships are not renewed, potentially damaging UK research excellence and quality being undermined and global reputation damage. Consequently, vital mitigation measures for the UK Government to implement will be commitment to supporting and facilitating future networks and collaborations between UK and EU institutions.

Securing research funding from the UK Government has been increasingly difficult due to the challenging fiscal situation in recent years; meaning that EU funding has become increasingly important. Between 2007-2013, EU researchers accessed €8.8bn in EU research grants; in comparison to the €5.4bn UK contribution to these programmes in the same period.

Over the last five years, Ulster University has been awarded over £20million of EU research funding which includes EU framework programme, PEACE funding and other EU competitive funding sources.

Reduced and loss access to research funding will reduce the size, scale, breadth and depth of research conducted by UK Universities as well as having the potential to undermine or interrupt current and existing research projects. While Universities will work to explore new funding opportunities outside of the EU, this will be a lengthy process. Clarity is therefore required on research projects underway, a commitment by UK Government to underwrite any shortfall in research funding and a much broader commitment that the UK Government will secure or make available funds to match EU contribution and facilitate University based research.

As well as funding, there is the advantage of accessing the best large-scale research facilities, that are located in the EU; for instance, the high level of international collaboration that takes place at CERN, the European particle physics centre based near Geneva.

Furthermore, the Bologna process, which ensures co-operation and comparability between higher education institutes in Europe will impact the UK’s participation in the process; weakening our influence in advance of exit and our ultimate removal from it.

Ulster University staff and students benefit heavily from all-island initiatives that are dependent on EU framework funding, for example the UK-Ireland Research and Development Partnership supports research from tri-jurisdictional teams from the USA, Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The Partnership prioritises research in the core areas of health, sensors and sensor networks, nanoscale science and engineering, telecommunications and energy and sustainability.

Following the collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive, Ulster University convened a Brexit symposium in June 2017 of more than 200 leading business people, academics, unions and health care representatives to urgently consider the solutions that will address the unique complexity of Northern Ireland in Brexit negotiations.
Without political leadership, as a Civic University, Ulster University addressed a societal need, and convened the symposium which provided a safe environment to focus on the solutions and opportunities that present the most promising avenues for progress in the coming weeks, months and years\(^3\).

One of the primary messages that came from those who contributed to the Symposium was the need for the voice of Northern Ireland to be present within the negotiations through the NI Executive.

Ulster University is home to experts whose academic leadership and world-leading research is vital to the Brexit discussion, across a range of core themes; constitutional and political, business and the economy, healthy communities and education. Following the Symposium, Ulster University is designing a programme of activity to build on the momentum and take those ideas that were generated to the next level as well as generating a wealth of material examining the issues and opportunities that can be brought about through the UK’s departure from the EU. \(^4\)

**Conclusion**

As Northern Ireland’s civic university, Ulster University will deliver outstanding research and teaching. Through our resource and skills, we have an opportunity to transform lives; to drive innovation, stimulate creativity and culture, inform and shape policy.

As set out in the previous section, Ulster University will face more serious challenges as the UK leaves the EU; including the position of staff and students who commute over the Republic of Ireland/Northern Ireland border on a daily basis, to important cross border research collaborations and funding. It is issues such as these that require specific consideration and the swift communication of solutions during the UK negotiations to leave the EU.

Unquestionably, this is a challenging time for higher education, and this is intensified through a fundamental mismatch between Ulster University’s ambitions to deliver for the community and internationally with political instability and the funding environment.

21 December 2017

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\(^3\) https://www.ulster.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/230666/Report-on-Ulster-University-Brexit-Symposium.pdf

\(^4\) Ulster University lead academics and submissions on Brexit: https://www.ulster.ac.uk/brexit/home