

# Redefining and Reprioritising the Asia Ireland Higher Education Partnership in a Post Covid-19 World

Policy Report to Simon Harris T.D., Minister for Further  
and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science  
by the Asia Matters Expert Member Working Group on  
Higher Education, Research and Global Talent



# 1.

## Background and terms of reference

Further to a meeting of key stakeholders in June 2017, Asia Matters established a working group with a remit to further the development of the Asia Ireland Higher Education Partnership.

This report is the outcome of the presentations and discussions of the expert member working group and Asia Matters offers it as a contribution to the development of the next national strategy for international education when the current strategy ends in 2020.

See terms of reference along with contributors in appendices.



A young man with dark hair and glasses is smiling while reading a book. He is wearing a blue t-shirt. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with green foliage and sunlight filtering through the trees.

## 2. Context

From the first discussions, there were clear objectives established to focus the work of the expert member group:

- Given the increasingly pivotal role of Asia globally, Ireland must expand beyond the legacy comfort zone of the Anglo world countries and Europe to equally embrace Asia. In essence, there is a need for redefining and reprioritising the Asia Ireland Higher Education Partnership
- True partnership from Ireland with Asia has to progress beyond the focus on revenue from Asian students but instead develop a more sustainable and mutually supportive relationship based on joint programmes, shared research, staff exchange and mutual student mobility.
- Ireland should establish greater brand recognition for quality higher education among students in Asia
- Irish students need to become more Asia competent and develop stronger understanding regarding the global importance of Asia in their future careers.
- Asia facing Irish agencies and Higher Education institutions (HEIs) could better co-ordinate their connected work in academia, research and global talent creation

Clearly the impact of Covid-19 has proven the risk exposure for Irish higher education institutions who have a narrow Asia focus based solely on a reliance on student fees. Equally it has opened up a new opportunity in the accelerated digital pivot to blended learning whereby online programmes can be virtually delivered to students across Asia. Irish HEIs with strong Asia partnerships, based on established trust, can more easily transition to new models.

Where the Ireland brand is understood, it has an international reputation as an innovative, highly educated, fair and welcoming society. Visiting students, their parents, the funding organisation that support them, will be and are core to our future business partnerships in Asia. The mirror reflects both ways - we are under scrutiny and will be compared to other countries. In an era of instability further impacted by Covid-19, Brexit, migration by circumstance not desire, costly trade wars and a general lack of cultural understanding; Ireland, if proactive, may find unique opportunity to be seen as a reliable, quality focused and digitally competent Higher Education Partner.

### 3.

## Trends in international education and the implications of Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a disruptive impact on internationalisation but certain trends were already evident and need to be considered by Irish policy makers. Among these trends has been a shift from the primary focus of international education being on cultural and academic co-operation to a broader understanding that includes the race for talent. The latter is caused by demographic trends in many countries and insufficient local student participation in fields such as STEM. Attracting mobile students and academic professionals, especially if they stay permanently, is an important way to tap into the global talent pool.

Another trend has been the shift in the share of international students. The US and the UK remain in first and second place, respectively, but they have experienced meagre year-over-year growth rates. This is due to a combination of factors, but in recent years, anti-immigrant sentiment has been a growing factor in reducing positive country perception. More significantly, other regions, notably Asia, have expanded their provision while becoming more attractive and affordable to their own domestic and other regionally-based students, especially as their universities climb in the international rankings.

Given the impact of Covid, the future, at least in the short term, is likely to shift to being a buyer's market. As competitive pressures heat up, institutional and national weaknesses are likely to be exposed, and the quality and value-for-money of the offer will become even more important. There will be an impact too on global university rankings. These rankings are often used by international students, their parents and/or grant makers to gauge quality; at the same time, the ability to attract international students is used by rankings agencies as an indicator of quality. This interdependence has now become deeply problematic for the institutions and the ranking agencies.

Digitalisation of higher education offers potential avenues to address the current (and probably

medium term) restrictions on international travel due to the pandemic, as well as a reluctance of parents to see their young people travel, or concern on the part of the students themselves. As with other trends in higher education, the pedagogical landscape was changing in what has been described as the “early stages of a learning revolution” (Eurostat, 2019). The pandemic moved teaching and learning online effectively overnight.

New teaching and learning pedagogies with an emphasis on student engagement and the use of technology in the lecture halls are redefining the way students learn and the role of the lecturer. Digital learning tools including e-learning and other digital measures such as blended learning, the use of collaborative learning platforms, digital assessments, etc. are transforming learning and provision. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is not a new phenomenon but it is now playing a crucial role in providing access to millions of people globally. ODL has the potential to facilitate access to students for whom constraints of the standard university experience (time, location, cost, etc.) pose a barrier to entry. This will broaden opportunities for international/trans-national education.

The use of blended learning offers multiple opportunities, and challenges, for Irish higher education institutions. They can greatly increase the limited availability of their online presence internationally thus attracting students and revenue – although there is a cost to this in building the infrastructure and developing appropriate programmes. They can use online learning in the short term to retain existing international students who may have returned home and are now unable or unwilling to travel due to the pandemic. Institutions can also use online programmes or modules to act as a “shop window” for the attraction of international students who, following a semester or a year online, can be attracted to the on campus experience

4.

## Strategic policy perspectives

International education and its promotion have long been central features of the Irish Government's overall policy for higher education and research. In 2010, Ireland published its first International Education Strategy. This strategy focused strongly on the income generating dimension of international education with frequent references to international partners as "markets". Six years later in 2016, in the second iteration of the strategy up to 2020, into which there was a more comprehensive input from the HEA, there was a significantly broader recognition of the manifold benefits and attributes of international education. The then Minister stated "This Strategy aims to support the development of global citizens through Ireland's high quality international education system, by attracting talent from around the world to our education institutions, equipping Irish learners with the skills and experience they need to compete internationally, engaging in world-class research and international collaborations, and addressing global challenges."<sup>1</sup>

Yet despite this shift in emphasis, a study commissioned by the HEA, found "a recurring theme in the data was the emphasis on increasing numbers and revenue rather than using resources to meet the needs of international students".

This report (2018)<sup>2</sup> concluded that "The reliance on this approach was viewed as problematic and there was a general awareness (among HEIs) that other factors should also inform approaches to internationalisation. These included increasing mobility in the student market, the promotion of outward mobility of students and staff from Ireland and securing international accreditation for programmes and government policy."

The aim of increasing numbers and revenue nevertheless appears to be strongly present in the sector. The recent publication by the HEA (2019 Survey of Student Engagement) shows that the growth in the proportion of international students attending Irish higher education institutions (HEIs) is significantly outpacing that of Irish students. International student numbers grew by 26 per cent in the past three years, climbing to 14,412 in 2019 while

Irish student numbers grew by 5 per cent over the same period, or some 122,257.

In 2018 there were 9,512 Asian full-time students in publicly funded HEIs, of which 62% came from China (27%), India (21%) and Malaysia (18%) – an increase of 36% on 2015. The most significant change in terms of the countries of origin is that India has moved up the ladder with Saudi Arabia dropping out of the top 3.

There is a widespread assumption that international education is mainly about student recruitment. However, international education activity has evolved significantly to embrace a much wider range of activities while international education has moved from being a marginal activity to occupy a mainstream area of interest in the higher education sector. Among the "typical" activities that fall under this area of operation are:

- Student and staff short-term mobility in both directions
- International student recruitment to full degree programmes
- International staff recruitment
- Capacity building projects
- Strategic partnerships
- Joint research
- Targeted professional development programmes
- Distance/on-line/blended learning initiatives
- Pre-entry foundation programmes especially English language preparation
- Internationalisation of curricula
- Campus internationalisation
- Joint programmes/degrees
- Overseas branch campuses
- International education mark

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<sup>1</sup> Irish Educated, Globally Connected: An International Education Strategy for Ireland 2016-2020, (2016)

<sup>2</sup> Internationalisation of Irish higher education", Associate Professor Marie Clarke (UCD), Dr. Linda Hui Yang (UCD) and David Harmon commissioned by the Higher Education Authority and funded by the Irish Research Council under its Research for Policy in Society action (2018).

## 5.

# Key public bodies and programmes

The decision of the Irish government to create a new **Department of Future and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)** is strongly welcomed by Asia Matters and will clearly lead to a positive evolution of Ireland's value proposition to Asian partners.

There are a number of other key actors in how Ireland currently organises the delivery of its international education strategy.

**The Department of Education and Skills** sets overall national policy and national internationalisation targets and oversees implementation by the HEA and the higher education institutions.

**The Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation** is the parent Department of Enterprise Ireland which in turn manages Education in Ireland.

**The Department of Foreign Affairs** plays an important role through such strategies as the Asia Pacific Strategy and the Global Ireland Strategy implemented on the ground in Asia by the Irish Ambassador and embassy teams.

**The Higher Education Authority (HEA)** has a central oversight and partnership role to play in supporting the internationalisation of Irish higher education. The HEA uses its strategic dialogue process and related performance agreements to set challenging targets

for each HEI, supporting institutions to adopt a holistic approach to internationalisation as a strategy for quality-enhancement.

The HEA manages the **Government of Ireland International Education Scholarships** which have an annual fund of €600,000. In 2019, 58% of the awards went to Asian applicants up from 43% in 2018. The programme is now under review. 75% of the awardees are pursuing a master's programme: 20% a PhD and 5% a Bachelor's.

The HEA is responsible for the **Government of Ireland International Academic Mobility Programme** (€500,000), which is ideal to commence a relationship with an Asian partner institution. The details for the awards made in 2018 for implementation in 2019 show that the following Asian countries are involved in projects: China (5 projects), India (3 projects), Japan, Indonesia and Vietnam (2 projects) and one each in Thailand and Singapore.

The HEA is the **Erasmus+ National EU Agency** whereby Irish HEIs can apply for competitive funds to support student and staff mobilities to and from Asia. There is now a range of staff in Irish HEIs who engage with Asia and a small but growing number of students who have studied in Asia forming a valuable cohort for the future. A new Erasmus+ programme will be launched in late 2020 and it is likely that there will be increased support for EU engagement with Asia.



**Enterprise Ireland** manages the *Education in Ireland* national brand under the authority of the Minister for Education and Skills and is responsible for the promotion of Irish HEIs overseas. While the work of Education in Ireland is strongly appreciated by the sector and within government in accordance with their remit, concern was expressed in working group discussions about this understandably commercial focus being mistakenly perceived by international partners and prospective students/staff as the sole priority across Irish international higher education. In several presentations to the working group, a clear view emerged that Asian countries, along with Irish HEIs, want to see international education policies and practice contributing to a genuine win-win partnership, a two-way mutual exchange of staff, researchers and students creating a deepening of relationships between countries based on respect and understanding.

**Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)** is the public-sector body responsible for maintaining quality assurance in post-secondary education provision and developing and promoting the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) to underpin the recognition of Irish qualifications. It is revising a code of practice for the provision of international education and will shortly be introducing an international education mark based on compliance with the code. QQI maintains relations with its agency counterparts internationally, particularly in those

countries where Irish higher educational institutions have a strong presence such as China, Hong Kong and Malaysia. In response to the higher education sector digital pivot due to Covid-19, QQI has published enhanced Quality Assurance Guidelines on Blended Learning. Given this is becoming the new normal globally, the work of QQI is vital in ensuring that Ireland remains competitive in digital as well as campus learning models.

Finally, but not least there are the **higher education institutions** (HEIs) themselves. All institutions now have an International Office and a number of the larger HEIs have international offices at the faculty level with a number having officers focused on specific regions of the world. Each have their own strategies and in general each institution pursues its own strategy, promotes their offering via missions to various countries; attendance at study fairs in Asian countries, use of in-country student recruitment agencies and the employment of social media to spread awareness and information. There is little or no direct relationship with other HEIs, although there is some element of joint working in international fairs. The issue of greater cross institutional collaboration arose repeatedly in the course of the work of the Working Group and is addressed in the recommendations in this report.

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

## 5.1 Academic Mobility Programmes Should be Upgraded

The Government of Ireland International Academic Mobility Programme at an annual spend of €500,000 is very modest and could greatly enhance connectivity with Asia if annual funding, and so the number of awards, were increased. Consideration should also be given to supporting reciprocal exchanges, complementing Erasmus+.

## 5.2 The Irish Government should establish a Higher Education Council

A higher level of HE Sector collaboration would have greater impact. This was a strong view among the working group that such enhanced impact would be made for the entire sector and for each HEI. The HEA/DES should pursue this as a policy matter and build it into their strategic dialogue process. Asian government and HEI representatives consistently complain about the myriad of Irish entities representing the HEI sector leading to confusion of roles and messaging.

It is regularly perceived that individual Irish HEIs, often with similar course offerings, seem to be competing with one another rather than as Team Ireland versus competitor countries. The Asia Matters Expert Working Group recommends that a Higher Education Council, perhaps similar to the Export Trade Council, be established to be chaired by the Minister for Higher Education to meet in plenary twice a year, to strengthen cooperation and coordination across all Government Departments, State agencies and key stakeholders involved in the promotion and development of Irish Higher Education sector.

## 5.3 Ireland's international Higher Education Branding Should Be Optimised

Any discussion about inter-institutional collaboration leads immediately to the issue of branding. The Asia Matters Expert Working Group concluded that international communication and effective brand recognition of Ireland's international higher education offering is not optimised, requires improved structure and enhanced, clear messaging. It was the view that more needs to be done to promote the wider opportunities in a holistic way for Ireland by senior Government officials, within key government

departments and in tandem with our international development agencies and embassies.

Strategies to be explored include collaboration with local business networks. Alumni within the region, industry connectors here in Ireland and abroad, global university alliances, the wider Irish diaspora and professional trade associations could be engaged more effectively. This would be highly cost effective, inclusive for individuals and groups who have a genuine, strong desire to see Ireland's influence grow and develop stronger commercial links with Asia. Ireland has very successfully branded such products as Kerrygold and Baileys. Allowing that these are products and higher education is a more complex sell, the Asia Matters Expert Group nevertheless consider that this area should be given focussed attention by the Irish government and appropriate state agencies.

Equally, Ireland's Global Talent Proposition is a key brand driver for incoming Asian FDI companies. Ireland ranks in the top 10 globally for quality of the education system and in having a university education that meets the needs of a competitive economy. For incoming Asian FDI investors, the quality of the talent pool is a key decision making factor on where to locate. Often there is a key need to upskill local workforces through customised training programmes. Asia Matters has an expert working group on FDI & Location Competitiveness, which includes IDA Ireland, in which senior stakeholders look at global best practice in this area.

## 5.4 Ireland Should Leverage Student Brand Ambassadors to Digitally Promote Ireland

Returning students are our best brand ambassadors to communicate and raise awareness of the education experience offered by Ireland. This connectivity should not be squandered by lack of clear vision. We need to leverage this in a more structured manner - centred around the student. The use of social media in alumni global best practice models such as those of Denmark, Finland and Sweden can be embraced and modified to an Irish context to now digitally promote Ireland in Asia amidst the Covid-19 new normal world. Asia Matters recommends a register of student opinions and providing a national forum to address their needs, rate their experiences and recognise their contribution to the greater community during their stay in Ireland.

## 5.5 Ireland Should Prioritise Further Improving The Experience of International Students

Given their role as potential ambassadors, careful consideration needs to be given by HEIs on how to improve the experience of young international students. For them, leaving home, traveling to a foreign country with cultural differences can be daunting for most, perhaps more so for impressionable young adults. Safety, secure communication back home, a genuine sense of welcome and community, everyday cultural support and professional services are critical considerations. Accommodation is a key issue – cost, standards, security, proximity to the university and/or access to dependable travel networks are immediate concerns. On campus accommodation and placement is restricted though many universities are endeavouring to expand courses and build more student accommodation units with limited budgets.

## 5.6 The HEA Remit Should be Expanded To Enhance Brand Ireland with Asian Government Peers

It is recommended that the HEA be more directly involved in the promotional aspects of international education, given their key role of the HEA in international education including as national agency of the Erasmus+ programme and in setting objectives and performance measures in performance. Currently, they do not form part of various missions to Asian countries. This misses an opportunity for the HEA itself to forge peer relationships with government players in Asian countries and to develop a deeper understanding of the needs and aspirations of Asian students and their higher education sectors. The positive recognition from the experience of the Brazilian “Science without Frontiers” project, managed by the HEA, well demonstrates the benefits of this approach.

## 5.7 QQI Remit Should Be Expanded To Enhance Brand Ireland with Asian Government Peers

QQI, given their important role, should be more directly involved in the promotional aspects of international education. In Asia, QQI currently has established partnership agreements with peers in Malaysia and Hong Kong. QQI should be given

the resources to expand their peer agreements with particularly with China and India given their dominance in Asian student numbers in Ireland. Equally, there is a strong case to examine amending the legal and policy remit of QQI to commercially sell its expertise to ASEAN countries such as Indonesia who have priority upskilling needs in upgrading the quality of their national higher education systems. Such a ‘soft power’ role would significantly amplify Ireland’s brand credibility in Asia and would be self-financing.

## 5.8 Key Irish State Agency Remits Should Be Expanded To Promote Ireland Profile & Partnership in Asia

Further consideration should also be given to how the Irish Research Council (which comes within the overall remit of the HEA and which published its first International Research Strategy in 2018) and Science Foundation Ireland might each be more deeply involved in Asia promotional and partner relationship building activities.

## 5.9 HEIs Should Further Attract Asian PHD Students To Create A Virtuous Circle Opportunity for Ireland

While the HEIs place a very strong focus on undergraduate students, the Working Group heard of missed opportunities to attract PhD students and recommend that DFHERIS, DES and the HEIs consider these, in developing their strategies as a targeted offering for Asian countries seeking to build research capacity in their systems. Such alumni, on return, often teach in Asian HEIs and can create a virtuous circle of value to Ireland.

## 5.10 Ireland Should Prioritise Branding Of Discipline Rankings in Asia

International league tables of HEIs are viewed with considerable scepticism in Ireland and internationally – and for good reason. However in Asia, they have strong credibility and have a special impact in the recruitment of international students, many of whom choose their HEI by reference to where it stands in one or other of the tables. All of Ireland’s universities are still in the top 500 in the world (there are approximately 15000 HEIs) but have been slipping in

recent times. On the other hand, taking an approach to ranking that looks at disciplines, rather than institutions, shows Irish higher education in a much better light. It is recommended that the HEIs explore and deploy this approach where beneficial.

#### **5.11 Student Visas to Ireland Should be Simple, Fast and Digitally Available**

Although very significant and positive developments have occurred in the visa system in recent years, problems will continue to present themselves. HEIs are encouraged to raise these with INIS and/or the Department of Justice as soon as they emerge. Asian peers have stated that it is faster and simpler to get student visas to competitor countries so critical that whilst respecting the role of protecting the integrity of the state, that INIS and the Department of Justice look at comparative best practice in peer countries to simplify and accelerate the visa process where possible. In a Covid-19 world, the digital E-visa provision model should be prioritised.

#### **5.12 Ireland should Expand HE Partnerships with Key Asia Facing IFIs & the EU**

All key international financial institutions (IFIs) have a strong work focus on Asia, in particular the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Ireland membership of IFIs is held by the Department of Finance and Asia Matters partners at an operational level. Recently Asia Matters hosted three webinars with the ADB including an event with ADB Ventures on their new \$60 million VC investment fund open to Irish campus based start-up and early growth impact tech companies of value to developing Asia who may be experiencing liquidity challenges due to Covid-19.

Given the impact of Covid-19 and the need for Irish HEIs to diversify revenue streams, Asia Matters held an ADB virtual meeting with the Asia Matters Working Group on Higher Education, Research and Global Talent to explore live, pipeline opportunities for Irish HEIs and how best to engage in the ADB Portfolio of 1,000 current projects with a value of \$102bn and 900 technical assistance projects valued at \$1.6bn. Irish HEIs, unlike some key competitor countries, are often unaware of their IFI sector value offering and the most effective engagement process. Similar opportunities

exist with other IFIs such as the International Finance Corporation (IFC)/World Bank Group, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Islamic Development Bank (IDB), ASEAN Infrastructure Fund and the Credit Guarantee and Investment Facility (CGIF).

Equally there is clear opportunity for Irish HEIs to enhance partnerships through EU – Asia Initiatives to strengthen student and academic exchanges with Asian countries through the Erasmus programme, the Marie Skłodowska Curie actions, mutual recognition of diplomas, and regional exchange of researchers and innovators. The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM Lifelong Learning (LLL) Secretariat will be hosted by University College Cork (UCC) from 2020 until 2025.

The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) based in Singapore prioritises Education as a key thematic area within a remit to promote better mutual understanding between Asia and Europe through greater intellectual, cultural, and people-to-people exchanges. It connects youth, students, teachers & educators, higher education, and Ed-tech experts with policy makers from 51 countries across Asia and Europe. Projects are free of charge and open for applications and partnership by Irish universities.

The EU's Erasmus+ Programme next phase is due to begin in January 2021 and until 2027. Despite the disruption of Covid-19, the budget for Erasmus will allow for the continuity of mobility, cooperation and policy in the fields of Education, Training, Youth and Sport. Erasmus+ provides opportunities for institutional cooperation with annual call for proposals between HEIs from Europe and Asia/ASEAN.

The EU's flagship higher education development programme with ASEAN is the Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region (SHARE) Programme, which will begin a two-year extension at the end of 2020. The programme is keen to leverage the participation of expertise from Irish institutions on the regionalisation and internationalisation of higher education in ASEAN to build sustainable partnerships.

A group of people are walking across a modern, curved pedestrian bridge made of glass and metal. The bridge is set against a backdrop of tall city buildings. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting daytime. The bridge has a sleek, contemporary design with glass railings and metal handrails. Several people are visible, including a man in a dark shirt and jeans in the foreground, and others further back. The overall atmosphere is one of urban activity and modern architecture.

7.

## Briefings to the Working Group

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& Fit

The Working Group received briefings from the IDA, the HEA, QQI, DCU, the Department of Justice, Atomic Creative Agency, Ambassador of India and the Education Attaché from the Embassy of Indonesia. The Group also had the benefit of presentations to Asia Matters by the Minister for Education, Thailand and the Ambassadors of China, Japan and Indonesia. The presentations from each briefing are available on the Asia Matters website. The following is a summary of some of the key issues.

In his presentation (*Place Branding for International Talent Attraction*), **Niall Dowling, Group Strategic Director, Atomic Creative Agency** provided expert insight on the business case for Place Branding for International Talent Attraction, the critical need for the EU and Ireland to attract tech talent, the drivers of talent attraction and need along with the economic return on talent immigration. He specified that the three elements to International Reputation are Trust, Integrity, Positive Reputation and addressed the challenge as to how to achieve the greatest reach and make the most impact with limited resources. Mr. Dowling suggested the solution lay in empowering international talent to do the branding. In his presentation he outlined examples of global best practice in Denmark, Finland and Sweden which demonstrated how international students can become effective ambassadors for nation branding.

The key takeaways from the presentation by Professor E. Aminudin Aziz, Education Attaché, Embassy of Indonesia were:

- Higher Education is a top national priority for Indonesia. 20% of the annual budget by constitution must be spent on upskilling the nation.
- There is very minimal awareness of Ireland yet alone Irish HEIs in Indonesia and upon engagement, there is confusion regarding the roles of the myriad of organisations representing the Irish higher education sector which often appear similar.
- All Indonesian undergraduate students studying abroad are self-funded, while the Indonesian Government operates a scholarship scheme for Masters and PhDs.
- The critical importance of branding came across clearly from the presentation from Indonesia. A positive awareness of, or association with, a place among prospective students was a key factor in their decision on where to study abroad. A good example presented was the popularity of Manchester among young Indonesians who chose to study there – because of its football reputation.
- As less than 30% of faculty in Indonesian universities held PhDs, this presented a potential niche opportunity for Ireland, especially in view of our high standing in international research assessments.
- Although Indonesia, like many countries, award scholarships on the basis of the ranking of the host university in international league tables, it was also possible to attract scholarship students where a particular discipline had a high international ranking. This is of considerable significance to Ireland where we have only one university in the top 100 but we have several highly ranked disciplines across the sector.
- The two-year stay-back for recent foreign national graduates is an important marketing feature of the Irish offering, as are the opportunities for work experience during the study period.
- An office in South East Asia for processing visa applications would make a very positive contribution to our international education effort. This could perhaps be located in Jakarta to facilitate ease of liaison with the ASEAN Secretariat headquarters.

The following key issues were raised in the presentation by Mr. Ray Bowe, Head of Skills, IDA Ireland under the overall heading “*HEI engagement with IDA is vital in order to build a cohesive cluster proposition for inward investors and deliver the talent of the future*”:

- Availability of talent will be the key differentiator to attract FDI into the future. In an ideal scenario, Ireland will build a reputation as an attractive environment for Asian investors to build globally best in class talent.
- Considering how to incentivise students from Asia who have completed their studies to work in Ireland is also vital – looking at stay back policies – 2 years for PHD for example, extending this in other areas would be helpful.
- IDA’s success at winning investment from Asian companies such as Huawei, Wuxi, SMBC, Tata helps in encouraging students to stay and work in globally best in class Asian multinationals from an Ireland base.
- In order to deliver students with skills of the future, Mr. Bowe acknowledged the need to look at funding in the HEI sector.
- One recent initiative of note is Cyber Ireland, IDA recently joined with CIT in Cork to establish Cyber Ireland to address key challenges including skills needs and research. Speaking at the launch of Cyber Ireland, Martin Shanahan, CEO IDA Ireland said: ‘The cybersecurity industry in Ireland is growing at an unprecedented rate and we believe Ireland is uniquely placed to benefit from increased global investment to position itself as a world-class cybersecurity cluster’ This type of world class collaboration will be rolled out in other sectors.
- There is also a core need to effectively market modern Ireland in order to attract Asian investors – place making is becoming increasingly important.

In the briefing by the **Department of Justice** to the Asia Matters Expert Working Group in 2018, the commencement of direct flights between Dublin and Beijing was noted as critical. This was the first ever direct route to mainland China, leading to increased connectivity, benefitting students, among others.

The visa processing system has undergone unprecedented change in the recent years. Its crucial role is recognised in supporting economic activity in the State and facilitating trade and tourism while promoting Ireland as a destination for international education. Applicants can apply on-line for their visas from anywhere in the world, while a network of Irish Embassies, Missions and Visa Offices are spread across the world making it easier for applicants to apply for visas. The INIS website has been updated and contains a wealth of information on how to apply for visas and requirements for different visas. In addition, there are customer service helplines dealing with all types of immigration related queries. Much work has been done with the higher education institutions to work together and develop a shared understanding of mutual requirements. Additional resources have been allocated to visa processing in Dublin and a number of offices abroad, specifically to process student visas during the peak summer period. Online appointments systems have been introduced for re-entry visas and registration and INIS is looking at ways to streamline operations and business processes, make greater use of online technologies, and work more closely with customers.

A number of improvements have been made to Ireland's visa offering in recent years. Of particular note, in the context of international education, was the extension of the 'stay back' period for international students - from 12 to 24 months, the period during which legally-resident Chinese students may remain in Ireland after their studies to seek graduate level employment.

The Department stated that priority is always placed on student visa processing as INIS fully appreciates its importance. The Department saw engagement with the education sector as key, particularly in ensuring visa applications are submitted on time, completed properly with all supporting documentation required. It was acknowledged that there was always room for improvement and HEIs with concerns on particular issues were encouraged to talk directly to INIS/ Department of Justice and to students. An area of recurring difficulty is that delays occur because applicants leave it too late, apply online but do not submit their documentation, or supply incomplete documentation. HEIs need to support the applicants so they understand the requirements and time limits.

The following statistics were quoted. In 2017 there were 13,632 student visa applications with 86.1% approved (11,409). The top six nationalities for long stay student visas were India, China, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Kuwait, and Pakistan. The top six nationalities for short stay student visas were Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Ukraine, Colombia and China.

## Appendix 1

International Education in Ireland  
and Global Talent Memo on  
informal discussion hosted by Asia  
Matters 8 June 2017

#### Attendance:

Mary Doyle (DES); Andrew Deeks (UCD); Marian O'Sullivan (IPA); Brian MacCraith (DCU); Louise Campbell (Robert Walters); Graham Love (HEA); Tom Boland and Martin Murray (Asia Matters).

The following were the conclusions/possible action points arising from the discussion.

- There was support for the general principle of Asia Matters supporting institutional and national strategies on international education, with a focus in areas where it could have most impact and complement the existing work of other agencies. A working group should start from the position of identifying clear problem statements and then identifying what Asia Matters, uniquely, could do to advance the issues.
- The position with regard to a number of Asian countries was regarded as positive but capable of further development, a new approach in other specific areas of Asia could bring rewards.
- Prior consultation with Asian members and stakeholders in the sector had shown the need to enhance the brand of Ireland
- Equally, there is an issue regarding the brand of Asia in Ireland. The relatively small number of Irish students studying in Asia was seen as a problem. If this could be improved, it could bring benefits on two levels. In the first instance, it would be good for the educational and personal development of the Irish students. In the second, it would be seen as a very welcome development by Asian countries who would see it as Ireland making serious efforts to broaden and deepen relationships with them. This in turn would support our international education effort. Further support by the governments/embassies of countries involved could be explored.
- There is a need to more strongly link international higher education in Ireland to the global talent needs of employers for Asia competent staff
- Other issues raised included the opportunities provided by transnational delivery of education programmes, how the sector fits into the branding of Ireland, better co-ordination of institutional strategies, the visa regime and the role of the different agencies in the sector.

## Appendix 2

Asia Matters would like to express sincere appreciation to the Speakers and Member Representatives listed who have shared their expertise to contribute to the discussions and work of The Asia Matters Expert Working Group on Higher Education, Research and Global Talent

Tom Boland, Asia Matters Advisory Board Member ( Working Group Chairman )  
 Professor E. Aminudin Aziz, Education Attaché, Embassy of Indonesia  
 Ray Bowe, Head of Skills, IDA Ireland  
 Louise Campbell, Managing Director, Robert Walters Ireland  
 Anna Cunningham, Director of International Affairs, NUI Galway  
 Professor Andrew Deeks, President, University College Dublin  
 Professor Brian Donnellan, Vice-President and Dean of International Affairs. Maynooth University  
 Rebecca Doolin Director of External Relations, Maynooth University  
 Niall Dowling, Group Strategic Director, Atomic Creative Agency  
 Dr. Orla Flynn, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology  
 (in prior role as Vice President for External Affairs, Cork Institute of Technology)  
 H.E. He Xiangdong, Ambassador of China to Ireland  
 Samantha Hobbs, Director of Corporate Affairs, Asia Matters  
 Dr Teerakiat Jareonesttasin, Minister of Education, Thailand  
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