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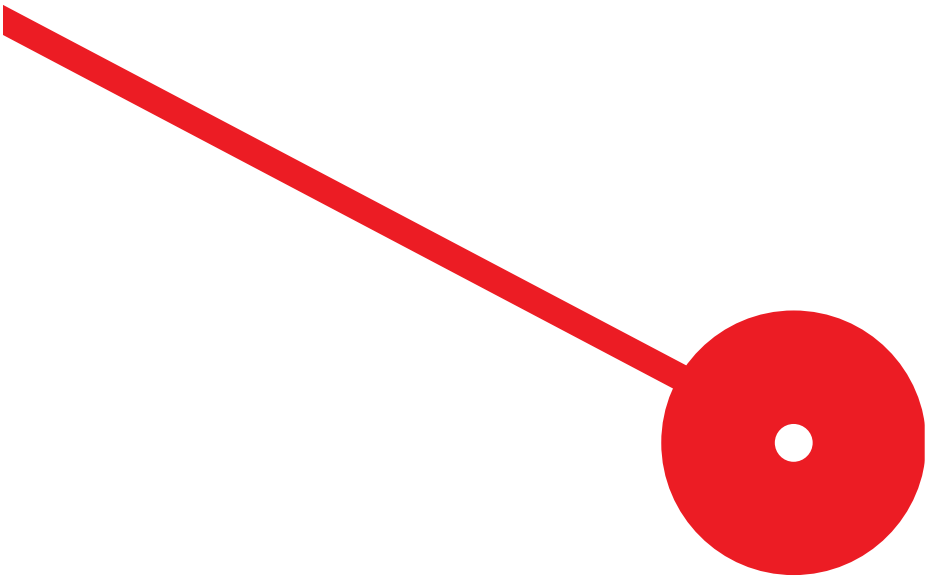
The impact of Brexit on Further Education mobility in Northern Ireland.

Teresa Margarida Dias Salvador

10/2024



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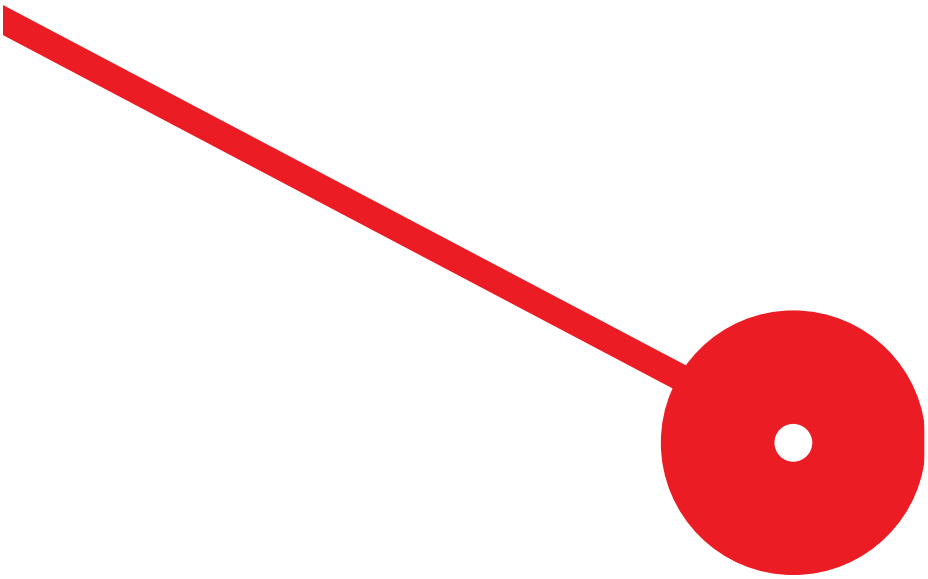
Internship Report presented to the Porto Accounting and Business School to obtain the Master´s Degree in Intercultural Studies for Business, under the supervision of Professor Clara Maria Laranjeira Sarmento e Santos.



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Abstract:

As part of my Master's Degree in Intercultural Studies for Business at the Porto Accounting and Business School (ISCAP) I completed an internship as a Project Coordinator in Belfast with Intern Europe. This internship report reflects on my experience and explores the profound impact of Brexit on student mobility within Northern Ireland's Further Education (FE) sector. By examining the region's complex historical and political context, alongside the withdrawal from the Erasmus+ programme, this study highlights the unique challenges arising from the UK's exit from the European Union and the opportunities created by the region's unique political status. Through a combination of historical analysis, policy review, and practical case studies, the findings reveal a marked decline in student and staff mobility, exacerbated by new visa regulations and the bureaucratic constraints of the Turing Scheme. Accessing comprehensive data on the effects of Brexit has proven challenging, even when engaging with government bodies, underscoring the significant gap in available information. Key insights are drawn from the case studies of Northern Regional College and North West Regional College, illustrating the significant funding reductions and operational challenges faced by these institutions. Additionally, the experience of Intern Europe, which facilitates in-bound vocational work placements under Erasmus+, emphasizes the broader organizational impacts of Brexit. The research highlights a growing distrust among EU member states regarding mobility to the UK and emphasizes the need for new policies and initiatives to restore mobility opportunities. Ultimately, this report calls for a collaborative approach to rebuilding international partnerships, enhancing funding structures, and simplifying bureaucratic processes to ensure that Northern Ireland's educational institutions can continue to provide meaningful mobility experiences in a post-Brexit world.

Key words: Brexit, Northern Ireland, Further Education, Mobility.

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List of Abbreviations

UVF: Ulster Volunteer Force

IRA: Irish Republican Army

RUC: Royal Ulster Constabulary

NICRA: The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association

PIRA: Provisional Irish Republican Army

GFA: Good Friday Agreement

EU: European Union

UK: United Kingdom

UKIP: United Kingdom Independent Party

SDLP: Social Democratic and Labour Party

NI: Northern Ireland

GDP: Grossed Domestic Value

OCN NI: Open College Network Northern Ireland

CTA: Common Travel Area

WA: Withdrawal Agreement

GB: Great Britain

UUP: Ulster Unionist Party

DUP: Democratic Unionist Party

SDLP: Social Democratic and Labour Party

CSTS: Catholic Schools Trustee Service

CCMS: Council for Catholic Maintained Schools

CnaG: Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta

GBA: Governing Bodies Association Northern Ireland

NICIE: Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education

FE: Further Education

HND: Higher National Diplomas

IT: Information Technology

MAC: Migration Advisory Committee

VET: Vocational Education and Training

I-VET: Initial Vocational Education and Training

C-VET: Continuing Vocational Education and Training

CAFRE: College of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Enterprise

LDM: Long-duration mobility

MPs: Members of Parliament

MLAs: Members of the Legislative Assembly

RH:I Renewable Heat Incentive

USA: United States of America

CEO: Chief Executive Officer

EEA: European Economic Area

ISCAP: Instituto Superior de Contabilidade e Administração do Porto

ESPA: European Student Placement Agency

CRM: Customer Relationship Management

TWGAE: Temporary Work Government Authorized Exchange

IE: Intern Europe

HR: Human Resources

DfE: Department for the Economy

NWRC: North West Regional College

NRC: Northern Regional College

This internship report was conducted during my final semester of the Master's programme in Intercultural Studies for Business. During this time, I interned as a Project Coordinator at Intern Europe, a company based in Belfast, Northern Ireland, that facilitates student mobility for vocational students from mainland Europe, allowing them to participate in work placements in Belfast and its surrounding areas. Through the experience and testimonies I gathered in this role, I had the opportunity to conduct an in-depth report on the impact of Brexit on Further Education mobility in Northern Ireland.

The United Kingdom's exit from the European Union, commonly known as Brexit, marked the beginning of a new period of uncertainty and disruption across various sectors, with education being one among the ones significantly impacted. This report explores and demonstrates how Brexit has affected student mobility within Northern Ireland's Further Education (FE) sector. Northern Ireland, with its complex historical and political context, provides a unique case study for understanding the consequences of Brexit. Historically, the region has navigated a landscape shaped by a legacy of conflict, political tensions, and a delicate peace process. This context is crucial for understanding the consequences of Brexit, especially given that Northern Ireland voted to remain in the European Union. These factors influence current educational policies and frame the responses of educational institutions and stakeholders to legislation established by the central government. One of the most significant decisions resulting from the UK's exit from the EU was the withdrawal from the Erasmus programme, which had historically facilitated cross-border educational opportunities and student exchanges. The UK had been a substantial participant in Erasmus, receiving a significant high number of students. The withdrawal from the programme raises urgent questions about the future of student exchanges, the viability of cross-border collaborations, and the broader implications for educational institutions and learners in Northern Ireland. A second significant decision was the implementation of visa requirements for EU citizens, which has introduced further barriers to mobility and collaboration, complicating the landscape for students and organizations alike.

To understand the impact of Brexit on student mobility in this region, several crucial aspects are explored. The research begins by delving into Northern Ireland's intricate historical and political landscape, examining the enduring legacy of past conflicts, from those which led to its creation to the 30-year conflict between the two major religious-

political factions, commonly referred to as "The Troubles." It proceeds to contextualize the transformative peace process that followed and the impact of Brexit on the region. This historical backdrop is crucial for understanding how Brexit's implications are distinct within Northern Ireland's regional dynamics, particularly given its complex relationship with both the United Kingdom and the European Union. Furthermore, this section contextualizes the education system in Northern Ireland, emphasizing the intricate interplay of socio-political factors, including religious segregation, which has historically influenced educational access and equity. The discussion will focus particularly on the Further Education (FE) sector, a vital component of the educational and economic landscape that serves diverse student populations and will also define mobility within the Further Education sector.

The second chapter analyses the evolving landscape of student mobility policies following Brexit. It initially examines the policy-making and political landscape in Northern Ireland by defining the structure and functions of the UK Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly, focusing on their roles in legislating and overseeing education and other devolved matters. The chapter discusses the significant political changes since the Good Friday Agreement, highlighting the evolving power dynamics among parties and the implications for governance in the context of Brexit. It proceeds to examine the impact of Brexit on the Erasmus programme in the UK, revealing the program's significance in facilitating cross-border educational exchanges prior to the UK's withdrawal from the EU. Additionally, it analyses the United Kingdom's replacements for the Erasmus program, such as the Turing Scheme, examining the implications of this transition for student mobility, funding, and broader educational opportunities in the UK. The chapter further investigates post-Brexit policy changes in student mobility, detailing the new regulatory frameworks that have emerged with the application of visas to EU nationals. Within this context, special attention is given to Northern Ireland's 'grey area,' where the complexity of its legal status creates a unique structure. This 'grey area' involves legal ambiguities that institutions can navigate to facilitate student exchanges effectively. Lastly, the chapter anticipates the present and future of the UK's mobility policies, exploring how the recent changes in government bring renewed hope for a more inclusive approach to immigration policies, with commitments to improve ties with Europe while addressing challenges posed by Brexit.

In addition to comprehensive theoretical and policy analysis, this study integrates a practical case study of Intern Europe, an organization dedicated to facilitating work placements for students in mobility from mainland Europe. As part of my fourth and final semester in the Master's program in Intercultural Management for Business, I had the opportunity to intern as Project Coordinator at Intern Europe, where I gained firsthand experience in the complexities of student mobility in a rapidly changing landscape. Chapter 3 provides an in-depth exploration of the organization's history and operational framework, detailing the key tasks and responsibilities I undertook during my internship. This case study not only highlights the daily operations of Intern Europe but also serves as a crucial perspective through which the broader impacts of Brexit on student mobility can be understood. It illustrates how organizations on the ground are navigating the challenges presented by a post-Brexit world, adapting their strategies to support students in a new context. By examining the various aspects of my role and the organizational structure of Intern Europe, including the pivotal work done with participants, host companies and partners, this chapter aims to reveal the intricate dynamics of student mobility and the vital support mechanisms that organizations like Intern Europe provide to facilitate successful experiences for students, particularly in the current post- Brexit reality.

The final chapter provides data on the impact of Brexit on the six Further Education Colleges in Northern Ireland, highlighting the challenges of obtaining updated public information on the subject. Data was collected through a series of inquiries made to the Committee for the Economy and the Minister for the Economy, via Members of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly (MLAs). Additionally, the research includes valuable insights from interviews conducted with representatives from Northern Regional College and Northwest Regional College. These real-world testimonies reveal the economic toll and operational challenges the colleges face, as well as the adaptations required in response to Brexit-related changes. Moreover, the study examines Intern Europe's experiences, analysing its financial trajectory and changes in participant numbers before and after Brexit, thereby bridging the gap between theoretical impacts and real-world consequences. By integrating qualitative testimonies with quantitative data, this chapter provides an analysis of how international mobility in further education has changed in Northern Ireland, reflecting both the resilience and challenges faced by educational institutions in a post-Brexit landscape.

Ultimately, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of Brexit on student mobility within Northern Ireland's Further Education (FE) sector through a combination of historical analysis, policy review, and practical case studies. By shedding light on these critical issues, the study contributes to the ongoing dialogue about how Northern Ireland can navigate the complexities of a post-Brexit landscape, particularly concerning educational mobility. The findings underscore the necessity for innovative policies and collaborative strategies that can effectively address the challenges posed by Brexit. Additionally, this research highlights the importance of rebuilding trust and partnerships with European counterparts to enhance mobility opportunities, particularly by taking advantage of Northern Ireland's unique legal landscape. As institutions adapt to the shifting realities of a post-Brexit world, this study serves as a testimony of the desire of Northern Irish educational institutions and organizations to remain closely connected to Europe. It highlights how they continue to feel a strong European identity and recognize the need for new legal and political frameworks to rebuild and strengthen relationships with the European Union, thereby allowing Northern Ireland to once again benefit from student and staff mobility, thus enriching its educational and cultural sector.

1 Contextualization

1.1 The Historical and Political Evolution of Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland resides in a complex social and political landscape. To fully understand the country's present reality and the forces driving its policies, one must first examine its past. As one of the four nations of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland's current context is deeply intertwined with its historical inclusion in the UK. The following section examines the history of Northern Ireland, beginning with its early days as part of Ireland through the impact of English and Scottish colonization, the Ireland's partition, and well-known conflicts of the twentieth century known as The Troubles, to the peace efforts embodied in the Good Friday Agreement. Additionally, it analyses present-day political and social dynamics, including the impact of Brexit. Understanding this historical path provides critical insights into the current concerns and challenges that define Northern Ireland.

1.1.1 Historical Background

The Troubles represent a tragic but intriguing time in Irish history. This time not only saw death, injury, and destruction, but it also triggered enormous political and social changes. The conflicts, which erupted in 1968, had roots that extended back many decades (McKittrick & McVea, 2002), one might even say centuries. Ireland's history over the last 300 years has been marked by a struggle for land and power among groups with opposing interests and religious beliefs. Under Henry VIII, England made an intensive attempt to exert control over Ireland due to both geopolitical and religious reasons. By 1541, he declared himself King of Ireland, marking a pivotal shift toward Protestant dominance (Fenton, 2018). From the 16th century onward, the British government attempted to conquer the Irish island and impose a foreign ruling class on the native Catholic population. This resulted in a division between Unionists (Protestants) and Nationalists (Catholics) that can be traced back to the seventeenth-century Protestant 'plantation of Ireland,' or 'plantation of Ulster' when the British Crown encouraged English and Scottish Protestants to settle in the northeastern part of the region (Kennedy-Pipe, 1997).

In the 18th century, the rise of Irish nationalism led to violent opposition to British rule, challenging British control. Throughout the nineteenth century, The Protestant

community in the north, notably in Ulster, became associated with economic strength and political dominance, aided by British military involvement (Kennedy-Pipe, 1997). Belfast and its surrounding areas established a thriving economy based on sectors such as linen, shipbuilding, and engineering. This made the region very much part of the overall British economic fabric (McKittrick & McVea, 2002). The movement for Irish home rule emerged as a substantial challenge to British power, sparking considerable political mobilization among southern Catholics. Influential personalities like as Wolfe Tone and the Sinn Féin party, founded in 1905, supported the cause. However, Ulster Unionists were passionately opposed to these initiatives, fearing that they would lose economic and political influence under a primarily Catholic Dublin government (Kennedy-Pipe, 1997). As the home rule movement gained traction, Unionists feared that the proposed Dublin parliament, while initially subordinate to Westminster, was a precursor to full independence, which would end the union with Britain and erode Protestant and British control, especially in the predominantly Protestant northeastern counties (McKittrick & McVea, 2002).

In the early twentieth century, tensions grew with the introduction of the Third Home Rule Bill in 1912. This sparked a crisis when Unionists fiercely opposed it, resulting in the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and threats of military resistance. This century also saw the growth of militant nationalism, as embodied by the Irish Volunteers and, subsequently, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which desired complete independence from British authority (Kennedy-Pipe, 1997). Unionists promised to fight Home Rule by any means necessary. In early 1914, Unionist commanders smuggled 25,000 firearms and 3 million rounds of ammunition from Germany to arm the UVF, a rebel Protestant force. Their big rallies and military manoeuvres demonstrated their willingness to disobey the law. However, just as a major confrontation seemed inevitable, World War One broke out, diverting attention away from the Home Rule argument. In 1916, Dublin witnessed the Easter Rising, in which a small group of republicans rose against British rule. The uprising was quickly crushed, and many were executed. However, the strong British reaction sparked widespread outrage and increased support for republicans (McKittrick & McVea, 2002). Even though the rebellion was destroyed, it sparked a surge in nationalist sentiment and helped Sinn Féin grow into a major political force (Kennedy-Pipe, 1997).

By the end of World War I in 1918, the Irish desire for home rule had matured into a push for a separate Irish Republic. The newly formed Irish Republican Army (IRA) began a violent campaign against Britain, which is now known in the South as the War of Independence (McKittrick & McVea, 2002). The Irish Protestant opposed such a move, seeking to keep Ireland within the United Kingdom (Kennedy-Pipe, 1997). After three years of war, in 1921, the Irish Free State was established, encompassing the twenty-six southern counties. Westminster granted Ireland a form of self-government, though not complete independence. The Protestant-majority northern region, consisting of six counties, remained part of the UK with its own devolved parliament, leading to the establishment of Northern Ireland (McKittrick & McVea, 2002).

The controversy over the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, as well as Northern Ireland's refusal to join the Irish Free State, sowed discord between the two territories, eventually leading to civil war and a long period of struggle that continues to this day (Husband & Ireland, 2022). Northern Ireland was born in violence, from June 1920 to June 1922, Northern Ireland witnessed 428 deaths, with two-thirds of the victims being Catholics. The latter felt confined within the new state, denied their Irish identity, and isolated from fellow Catholics in the Free State. Above all, the unionist elite consistently discriminated against Catholics in employment, housing, political rights, and other aspects of life. Initially, Unionist leaders rejected Belfast's autonomous parliament, preferring tighter connections to Britain. However, they quickly saw its utility in consolidating their power following the 1920 settlement. They swiftly consolidated their power by altering electoral systems and local government boundaries to dominate the seventy-three local councils, which were critical for patronage in housing and education. Their influence extended to the judiciary and law enforcement, with the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) remaining 90% Protestant (McKittrick & McVea, 2002). Sectarian violence escalated in the 1920s, and the 1930s economic collapse intensified community tensions. The Unionist government, with the help of its police forces, especially the infamous B-Specials, and British military aid, implemented strict rules under the Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act of 1922. These included curfews, restrictions on public meetings, and arbitrary arrests, particularly targeting the Catholic minority suspected of supporting nationalist causes or the Irish Republican Army (Kennedy-Pipe, 1997). Many Catholic representatives, frustrated with Stormont’s perceived ineffectiveness, frequently boycotted it. To protect Catholics from Stormont's influence, the Catholic Church insisted

on maintaining strict control over education. Despite calls for integration, both unionists and nationalists preferred separate schools. Discrimination in work and housing led to high emigration rates among Catholics, deepening cultural and political divides (McKittrick & McVea, 2002). In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the IRA's "Operation Harvest" aimed to remove British forces and reunite Ireland using guerrilla tactics (Kennedy-Pipe, 1997).

1.1.2 The Troubles

The campaign for civil rights intensified in the 1960s (McKittrick & McVea, 2002), leading Northern Ireland through a turbulent time with increasing sectarian bloodshed. The British government's detachment from Irish affairs, believing it was no longer a pressing issue, combined with Stormont Prime Minister Terence O'Neill's failed attempts at modernization, exacerbated pre-existing tensions (Kennedy-Pipe, 1997). O'Neill's policies, which intended to reconcile Protestant and Catholic communities, were met with fierce opposition by Unionists (McKittrick & McVea, 2002). The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), was established, inspired by international civil rights movements (Fenton, 2018). By October 1968, civil rights marches in Derry had acquired global attention. Under the leadership of a broad alliance that included socialists, republicans, and nationalists, the march aimed to confront the prejudices that kept the Catholic minority at a disadvantage, exposing the underlying concerns that spurred discontent (Prince, 2018). Deepening tensions and persistent turmoil resulted from IRA attacks spreading to England and threats of bloodshed from loyalist groups (Fenton, 2018). The events culminated in the deployment of British troops in August 1969, marking the beginning of what is commonly euphemistically called the Troubles—a prolonged period of sectarian warfare and political instability that would continue into the 1990s. At first, soldiers defended Catholic neighbourhoods against Unionist attacks. Known as the "Honeymoon" phase, there was a brief era of harmony between Catholic locals and soldiers at this time. As violence escalated, especially from the Provisional IRA, the Army's role grew despite initial expectations of a temporary presence. Aiming to be a transitory peacekeeping force, the Army's engagement in Northern Ireland became controversial and long-lasting after detention without trial was introduced in 1971, adding to already high tensions. When British forces were first sent to Northern Ireland in 1969,

they concentrated on addressing urban unrest in Belfast and Londonderry. But the fighting soon moved to the vital border region, where the PIRA was able to undertake guerrilla operations, avoid British forces, and use the border as a safe haven for regrouping and resupply due to the area's difficult terrain and local support. These factors strained ties with Dublin and made security activities in the area more difficult (Kennedy-Pipe, 1997).

Between 1970 and 1971, Northern Ireland suffered a dramatic increase in violence and unrest, characterized by intense clashes between Republicans and Loyalists, as well as confrontations between the British Army and Catholic residents, especially in Belfast. Notable incidents, such as the Falls Road curfew and the controversial internment program that began in August 1971, increased tensions and alienated the Catholic population, fuelling continued bloodshed and drawing global criticism (McKittrick & McVea, 2002). The crisis peaked in 1972, the deadliest year of the Troubles, with British soldiers killing 13 nonviolent protestors on Bloody Sunday, aggravating nationalist grievances and increasing recruitment to the Irish Republican Army (IRA) (Fenton, 2018; McKittrick & McVea, 2002). The subsequent Sunningdale Agreement of 1973 intended to establish cross-community governance and encourage power-sharing but was met with significant hostility from hardline unionists and loyalists, resulting in greater bloodshed and the agreement's collapse (Fenton, 2018). By the mid-1970s, the British strategy shifted to reduce the Army's role in favour of increasing police action; however, the Provisional IRA's adaptation into smaller, more effective cells continued to escalate violence, demonstrating the group's resilience and adaptability amidst British efforts to stabilize Northern Ireland (Kennedy-Pipe, 1997).

Under Margaret Thatcher's leadership in the early 1980s, the British government remained strongly pro-Unionist, considering Republican paramilitaries as a major security danger. Despite this robust stance, the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement represented a significant shift, involving the Republic of Ireland in Northern Irish issues and implying a shift away from firm Unionist backing (Kennedy-Pipe, 1997). The Agreement, which stated that changes to Northern Ireland's status required majority approval and established an intergovernmental conference for UK-Irish collaboration, was viewed by Thatcher as a critical security measure rather than a political compromise, shocking many unionists (Fenton, 2018). Following the Agreement, violence persisted, fuelled by both loyalist and republican paramilitaries, and controversial police enforcement measures, including the

"shoot to kill" policy and the use of supergrasses (Kennedy-Pipe, 1997). The Hunger Strike of 1980-1981 in Northern Ireland was a critical protest by Republican prisoners against the British government's removal of their "special category" status, which had allowed them privileges acknowledging their paramilitary associations. Led by Bobby Sands, who died after 66 days, the strike sought to regain some privileges, like dressing in their own clothes and having more visitors. Sands' election to Parliament during the strike garnered international attention. Despite ten deaths, the strike had a huge impact on Sinn Féin's strategy and the wider Northern Irish conflict and prompted Republicans to go towards electoral politics (Fenton, 2018). The political party further pursued this goal, even facing Thatcher's measures, which included restricting Sinn Féin's media presence and withholding the "right of silence" for suspects, which enabled judges to assume guilt based only on a suspect's silence. This signified a cautious shift toward political engagement in the midst of continuous conflict (Kennedy-Pipe, 1997).

In the 1990s, Northern Ireland's path to peace was significantly shaped by the 'peace process,' a coordinated effort by the British and Irish governments to end the Troubles. Early in the decade, the British Army played a critical role in convincing the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) to disarm and enter cease-fire talks. As nationalist movements increasingly turned to politics, progress quickened, but problems persisted. The 1993 Downing Street Declaration emphasized that the future of Ireland, both north and south, should be determined by mutual consent, suggesting the possibility of a united Ireland. While the declaration did not drastically shift British policy, its explicit mention of a united Ireland marked a new development. Prime Minister John Major collaborated closely with unionist leaders to secure a controlled response, while nationalists saw the proclamation as a step toward their goals (Fenton, 2018).

1.1.3 The Peace Process

In the end, the Troubles resulted in 3,600 recorded deaths (McKittrick & McVea, 2002). The Belfast Agreement, often known as the Good Friday Agreement, was signed on Good Friday in 1998, representing the transition from conflict to peacetime. This ambitious agreement changed Northern Ireland's constitutional status, allowing it to remain part of the United Kingdom until a majority vote in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of

Ireland supported the union (Fenton, 2018). The GFA was reached in the context of EU membership and the rising degree of openness and collaboration with the rest of the island of Ireland offered by the EU framework (Doyle & Connolly, 2017). In particular, it was significantly influenced by the European Union's (EU) approach to resolving territorial disputes. This strategy emerged in response to conflicts in which national minorities sought reunification with their home countries. The EU's strategy involves two key steps: affirming the territorial status quo by having Member States renounce territorial claims on neighbours and recognizing and promoting the rights and identities of substate national minorities. Reflecting this, the GFA had the Republic of Ireland renounce their territorial claim in exchange for North-South institutions, while the UK pledged to protecting minority rights, reflecting the EU's influence on the Agreement's framework (Nagle, 2018).

Despite initial opposition and challenges, including continued paramilitary violence, the Agreement received overwhelming support in the referendum in Northern Ireland, resulting in the re-establishment of the Stormont Parliament and a new era of governance and peace (Fenton, 2018). The agreement garnered endorsement from 71.1% of voters in Northern Ireland during a May referendum (Nagle, 2018). The foundation of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) lies in principles such as power-sharing between Unionist and Nationalist communities, the acknowledgment of both identities in Northern Ireland's social and public spheres, the transfer of authority within the UK resulting in Northern Ireland's self-governance, and the promotion of cooperation between Northern Ireland and Ireland, including aspects of the all-island economy (EUROPEAN POLICY CENTRE & Biskup, 2020). It required strict power-sharing between the major nationalist and unionist parties, with equal powers given to a First Minister and Deputy First Minister. It established mechanisms such as the Petition of Concern to avoid discriminatory laws and employed proportional representation in elections to secure minority participation (Fenton, 2018). Furthermore, The Good Friday Agreement confirms the right of Northern Ireland citizens to hold British and Irish citizenship and a guarantee that this 'would not be affected by any change in the status of Northern Ireland' (Tonge, 2017). It is worth noting that the Good Friday accord is rarely referred to as a peace accord by nationalists and the Irish government. The agreement is part of a broader peace effort, aiming to reinforce IRA ceasefires and included provisions for regional government, North-South collaboration, improved integration, demilitarization, human

rights, and equality. The Agreement did not provide an endpoint, but rather launched a process. The Irish government and the Irish nationalist society were not compelled to abandon their goal of Irish unity; instead, they promised to seek it only via peaceful means. (Doyle & Connolly, 2017). It is unlikely that Northern Ireland will ever achieve complete peace. The region's inception was characterized by a lack of universal consent and the period known as The Troubles left long-lasting and deep scars (McKittrick & McVea, 2002).

Present-day Northern Ireland is relatively free of violence. However, this does not imply a civilization at peace with itself. Instead, it depicts an unstable equilibrium caused by competing demands from the region's two largest ethnonational groupings (Kennedy, 2020). For instance, the summer of 2018 in Derry was marked by a haunting echo of the Troubles' early years: young men hurling petrol bombs at police, a visual shorthand of revolt reminiscent of decades past (Prince, 2018). The summer of 2024 saw young men, as young as 7 years old, rioting in South Belfast, with attacks turning into the police force (Scott, 2024). Reactions to these acts vary significantly. Younger generations tend to take it quite usuriously, disregarding it has the actions of uneducated and troubled kids. On the other hand, older generation tend to experience immediate concern. For them, these acts evoke memories of the years of fear they endured during the Troubles, and the anxiety of experiencing it again.

1.1.4 The impact of Brexit on Northern Ireland

On June 23, 2016, 26.3 million people in the United Kingdom voted in a national referendum. Voters were asked to vote on whether the UK should remain a member of the European Union or leave (Clarke, et. al, 2017). David Cameron, prime minister from 2010 to 2016, called for the Brexit referendum in response to rising internal and global pressure. Divisions within the conservative party over EU membership widened, and increased support for the UK Independence Party (UKIP) aggravated the tensions. To address these concerns and appease his party's mounting demands, Cameron promised to renegotiate the UK's relationship with the EU and organize an in/out referendum (FitzGerald & Morgenroth, 2019). Ultimately, 51.9% voted to leave the EU, leading to the beginning of Brexit negotiations (Clarke, et. al, 2017).

This historic decision, the first of its sort for an EU member state, reflected several long-term and contingent factors. Historically, the United Kingdom's relationship with the European Union has been paradoxical. Despite being regarded as an 'awkward partner'—frequently hesitant and critical—Britain has been successful in shaping EU policy to align with its interests (Menon & Salter, 2016). Importantly, one of the aspects Britain has traditionally disliked about the European Union is its supranational nature (O'Rourke, 2019). Additionally, the outcome of the referendum was affected by the campaign itself. Prime Minister David Cameron's policy of promising a referendum, condemning the EU, and then pushing for continued membership was ineffective. In contrast, the Leave campaign resonated well with a public increasingly distrustful of politicians (Menon & Salter, 2016).

In the general UK Brexit campaign, immigration emerged as the most pressing topic, with polls indicating that reducing immigration and limiting migrants' benefits were top priorities (Clarke, et. al, 2017). However, Northern Ireland's concerns on Brexit differs significantly from other areas of the UK, focusing on unique challenges such as the impact on the peace process, economic consequences of leaving the single market, and implications for social policy and human rights (Doyle & Connolly, 2017). The Brexit referendum highlighted the specific challenges surrounding the Northern Ireland border. Although not initially a major consideration, the border has become a central issue with three key aspects: the nature of the border (soft or hard), the location of border controls (between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland or Ireland and Great Britain), and the concept of the "border in the mind." The third and most important aspect, "the border in the mind," addressed the psychological and identity-related effects of the border on Northern Irish communities, emphasizing that Brexit's consequences went beyond physical and administrative changes to deeply affect regional sentiments and identities. Despite the pressing nature of these issues, the impact of Brexit on the Northern Irish border received little attention in UK media during the campaign (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017). The turnout for the Brexit Referendum in Northern Ireland was 63%, nine points lower than the UK average and the lowest of any region. This level of disengagement was probably certainly due to the campaign's lack of attention on Northern Ireland or Irish problems (Pow, 2019).

Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU by 55.7%. The referendum posed a direct challenge to the peace process, with contrasting sharply with the overall UK result to

leave (Tonge, 2017; Gormley-Heenan et al., 2017). Northern Ireland and Scotland had different stances than England and Wales, with 60% of Scots voting to remain (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017). In NI, the largest support to remain was among Catholics (88%), Nationalists (92%), Irish (90%), and Sinn Féin or SDLP supporters (91%) (Gormley-Heenan, et. al, 2017). However, surveys during Brexit negotiations indicated rising preferences across Northern Ireland's political spectrum for the UK to remain in the EU or pursue the softest possible Brexit scenario, indicating unusual consensus on this critical issue in Northern Irish politics (Pow, 2019). In fact, only 35% of unionists in British Unionist areas supported staying in the EU, indicating a great divide among unionists (Tonge, 2017). Besides the unionist/nationalist divide, age emerged as a significant factor in voting preferences, with younger generations generally more supportive of EU membership compared to older voters (Gormley-Heenan et al., 2017). In fact, several politicians and journalists alike consider age to be the major divisive factor in the Brexit vote (Tonge, 2017).

In 2017, a European Parliament briefing identified Northern Ireland as the region of the United Kingdom to be most affected by Brexit. Northern Ireland is the UK's smallest country, with a population of 1.8 million, or 2.9% of the overall UK population (Tonge, 2017). Over the last decade, its economic growth has fallen behind that of the UK as a whole (Southgate et al., 2021). The Northern Irish economy faces critical challenges, including a lower GDP per capita compared to the UK and productivity accounting for just 75.9% of the gross value added. However, productivity has increased faster than the UK average over the last decade (The Independent Commission on the College of the Future, 2020). A cautious assessment suggested that a UK exit from the Single Market would reduce Northern Ireland's GDP by 3%, compared to an expected 2% fall in UK GDP, a significant drop for a fragile economy. Additionally, EU provided considerable aid to Northern Ireland in several important areas. Agriculture and fisheries, supported by EU subsidies and initiatives such as the Common Agricultural Policy and Peace Funds, play critical roles due to the small industrial sector (Doyle & Connolly, 2017). The North-South institutions, predicted in the Good Friday Agreement, were expressly established to facilitate EU matters, such as the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland, which managed the distribution of 1.3 billion euros for peacebuilding efforts (Nagle, 2018). With Brexit, Northern Ireland stands to lose approximately £300

million from its budget, exacerbating existing economic vulnerabilities in a region where the public sector accounts for roughly 60% of GDP (Doyle & Connolly, 2017).

In 2021, the Open College Network Northern Ireland (OCN NI) raised concerns about the disproportionate impact Brexit would have on Northern Ireland, on the matter of border sharing, as the only UK country sharing a border with an EU member state. They highlighted concerns for those who cross the border for study and work, noting that the new economic relationship with the EU would significantly impact both the economy and skills (Southgate et al., 2021). Notably, in 2020, 7% of Northern Ireland's employment came from the European Economic Area, a figure only surpassed in the United Kingdom by London (Tonge, 2017). By June 2016, the north/south border within the island of Ireland had become nearly indistinguishable. Prior to Brexit, the Northern Ireland peace process made a coordinated effort to reduce the significance of the border, which was supported by the EU's assistance in changing it from a barrier to a soft crossing. The Good Friday Agreement's structure was inextricably linked to the UK and Ireland's EU membership, a relationship that changed dramatically as a result of Brexit (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017).

Brexit undermines the institutional framework of the Good Friday Agreement, weakening power-sharing and devolution in Northern Ireland. Legally, Irish citizens are subject to UK immigration rules, though these regulations have historically been applied only during World War II and its aftermath (Tonge, 2017). The Common Travel Area (CTA) predates EU membership, providing British and Irish citizens with rights to migrate, work, study, vote in certain elections, and access welfare and healthcare in either jurisdiction (Cabinet Office, 2022). Post-Brexit, fears regarding the border were eased when both countries decided to maintain their Common Travel Area (Doyle & Connolly, 2017).

More importantly, the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement (WA), signed in 2020, integrated the Northern Ireland Protocol, which regulates NI´s new status. This protocol is critical for addressing Brexit's ramifications in Northern Ireland (NI). While most of the United Kingdom left the EU's Customs Union, Northern Ireland remained aligned with EU Single Market laws to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland. This establishes Northern Ireland as a bridge between the UK and EU customs areas, with customs procedures applied to goods passing from Great Britain (GB) to NI. Additionally, NI also

follows EU VAT and sanitary laws, allowing for seamless trade with the Republic of Ireland and the rest of the EU. The Protocol requires the Northern Ireland Assembly to approve NI's compliance with EU rules on a regular basis, ensuring local consent (EUROPEAN POLICY CENTRE & Biskup, 2020). In 2023, the Northern Ireland Protocol was replaced by the Windsor Framework. The EU maintained the 2019 protocol's essential structure, including the commercial border between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The Stormont Brake was a significant addition, granting Northern Ireland conditional veto power over EU legislation revisions. Despite parliamentary approval and considerable operational improvements, implementation delays have caused business concerns (Campbell, 2023). Boris Johnson raised severe worries about Rishi Sunak's Brexit arrangement for Northern Ireland, which made revisions to the protocol Johnson negotiated and which went into effect in 2021. This agreement, which Johnson promised would not create a border in the Irish Sea, has resulted in goods inspections between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, contradicting his earlier commitments. The implementation of these inspections has resulted in considerable political and economic problems, with Northern Ireland's differential treatment under the protocol undermining the Good Friday Agreement's idea of cross-community support (BBC News, 2023a).

Politically, Brexit fundamentally shifted the landscape regarding a potential referendum for Irish unification, a matter which had previously been a less prominent political topic. Significant identity disruptions in Northern Ireland have resulted from Brexit. Nationalists, who valued EU membership for its cooperation with the Republic of Ireland, feel destabilized, potentially challenging Northern Ireland's constitutional stability. Though attitudes differed within the UUP, Unionists, particularly the DUP, embraced Brexit as a means of "taking back control." (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017). Polls before Brexit indicated mixed sentiments on a united Ireland, with support at 32% and uncertainty at 23% due to perceived feasibility. However, recent polls since trade agreement negotiations show increased support for Irish unity, reaching 42%. Brexit has heightened considerations in Northern Ireland towards reunification with Ireland, explicitly authorized under the international treaty of the Good Friday Agreement (Daniels & Kuo, 2021). Interestingly, unionists in Northern Ireland have also become increasingly aware of the potential negative impacts of Brexit on the region's relationship with Great Britain (Pow, 2019). In fact, just a year after the referendum, 7% of Brexit

voters would already reconsider if it was held again (Gormley-Heenan, et. al, 2017). In 2021, Brexit continued to present challenges for the European Union and UK government entities, worsening tensions in Northern Ireland and even leading to increased unrest (Husband & Ireland, 2022).

1.2 Northern Ireland's Educational System

Northern Ireland's educational landscape is deeply influenced by its political context, particularly in Further Education (Husband & Ireland, 2022). Despite the post-conflict status, the legacy of the Troubles has left a lasting impact on the education system, which remains structured along religious lines. Catholics primarily attend "maintained" schools, while Protestants predominantly attend "controlled" or state schools (Borooah & Knox, 2017). The Government of Ireland Act (1920) mandated that no financial support could be provided for any religious institution for educational purposes, leading to a funding hierarchy in Northern Ireland. This centralized governance of educational provision in the region, requiring historically Roman Catholic or Protestant-affiliated schools to rely on private funding for religious education (Husband & Ireland, 2022).

Following the establishment of the Northern Ireland Parliament in 1921 and the enactment of the Government of Ireland Act (1920), the Northern Ireland Department of Education assumed control over educational services. This legislative framework established a department within the UK structure specifically for Northern Ireland, allowing for unique educational governance while maintaining ties with central Westminster (Husband & Ireland, 2022). Northern Ireland's educational structure involves multiple entities in management and administration. The Department of Education, accountable to the Assembly, oversees the sector and ensures effective policy implementation. The Minister for Education holds the Department accountable for its statutory duties and the management of public funds. The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 mandated the Department to promote integrated education, facilitating inclusion of Protestant and Roman Catholic students. It also empowered the Department to allocate funds to organizations supporting integrated education. Additionally, the Department was tasked with promoting Irish-medium education and providing financial support to relevant organizations (Perry, 2016).

In present day, Northern Ireland's educational landscape comprises five sectors: Controlled schools, Catholic maintained schools, voluntary grammar schools, grant-maintained integrated schools, and other maintained schools, including Irish-medium education (Perry, 2016). Controlled schools, from nursery to grammar levels, are governed by Boards of Governors. Catholic maintained schools receive support from the Catholic Schools Trustee Service (CSTS) and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), adhering to Department of Education policies. Irish-medium education is facilitated by Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG), promoting bilingual learning. Additionally, other maintained schools offer primary, special, and secondary education. Voluntary grammar schools, represented by the Governing Bodies Association Northern Ireland (GBA), and integrated schools, supported by the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE), further contribute to the diverse educational landscape (Department of Education, 2023). Although Northern Ireland's education system asserts openness to all students, it remains segregated in practice, reflecting attendance patterns based on perceived religious identity and influenced by societal pressures (Borooah & Knox, 2017).

1.2.1 Religious Segregation in Northern Ireland's Education

Northern Ireland is a divided multicultural society with largely distinct education systems for the two main communities (Roulston & Hansson, 2021). Due to Northern Ireland's history of violence and segregation, the passing down of religious practices between generations is especially important. Churches and their linked networks continue to play a significant role in shaping and sustaining identity and community, both in urban and rural areas (Henderson, 2020). Education remains a key factor in preserving ethnic divisions in Northern Ireland, even after the conflict ended. Despite various efforts to integrate schools, the system remains predominantly separated along religious lines, with Catholic and Protestant schools. This persistent sectarianism in schools mirrors broader societal divisions, including residential segregation and cultural disparities, which continue to impact educational practices (Milliken et al., 2020).

Despite the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, the Catholic/Protestant divide remains prevalent in Northern Ireland, particularly in education, where Catholic and Protestant

groups primarily attend different schools. The divisions are so deep that many communities effectively live separate lives (Roulston & Hansson, 2021). Following the partition of Ireland in 1922, Northern Ireland inherited a predominantly denominational education system (Milliken et al., 2020). Despite efforts by the first Minister of Education to build an integrated education system, strong opposition from both churches practically ensured a separate system of state schools, with Protestant schools alongside Catholic Church-run schools (Roulston & Hansson, 2021). The 1923 Education Act aimed to create a unified, non-denominational system by prohibiting religious instruction, but reactions from both Protestant and Catholic communities led to changes in 1925 that reinstated religious instruction (Milliken et al., 2020). Following the dissolution of Northern Ireland's regional government in 1972 and the implementation of Direct Rule by Westminster, a Direct Rule minister initially supported Integrated education politically and financially. Despite these efforts, local party support for integrated education was limited. From that time up to the present, the dominant Protestant Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Catholic Sinn Féin party have expressed opposition to integrated schooling (Roulston & Hansson, 2021).

Although both religious forms of education share a common curriculum, Catholic schools emphasize Irish cultural identity, while Controlled schools often display British symbols. Furthermore, the availability of particular subjects, such as Irish language, varies significantly across school types, reflecting long-standing sectarian tensions (Milliken et al., 2020). Catholic schools are maintained by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and retain a Catholic tradition, while Protestant schools are controlled by the Department of Education and frequently include clergy in their governing bodies (Hughes & Loader, 2024). This segregation has resulted in deeply ingrained stereotypes and social divisions. Despite economic arguments against segregated schools, the system persists, leading to resource duplication and social fragmentation. Almost every settlement in Northern Ireland has duplicated provisions, with most mixed villages having a primary school for each community, often with insufficient enrolment (Roulston & Hansson, 2021).

Efforts to address these divisions included the introduction of integrated schools in 1981, aimed at educating students from different religious backgrounds together, and the shared education initiative launched in 2007 to facilitate cross-group learning (Hughes & Loader,

2024). The Integrated education movement began in the late 1970s with a parent-led initiative advocating for the joint education of Protestant and Catholic children. The first integrated school opened in 1981, and despite initial dismissal as a middle-class movement, it spread into less wealthy areas of Belfast. By the mid-1980s, the British government began subsidizing integrated schools, and the 1989 Education Reform Order formalized the policy, boosting their growth. Between 1990 and 1998, 27 new integrated schools opened. In 2021, Northern Ireland had 65 integrated schools, accounting for about 7% of total student enrolment. Despite the challenges, the growth of integrated education has had positive social impacts, such as more moderate political views and stronger inter-community ties. Public support for integrated schooling remains strong, though expansion has been modest due to political and cultural challenges (Roulston & Hansson, 2021). The introduction of 'shared education' in 2007 aimed to bridge gaps by encouraging collaboration among schools of different denominations through joint classes and activities. This effort seeks to create 'porous barriers' that facilitate contact and relationships between students, teachers, and parents, with the goal of enhancing intercommunity relations and promoting peace (Loader, 2022). While Shared Education has gained political support, critics argue it may delay real structural improvements and intensify existing differences, illustrating the complex interplay between educational reform and political goals in Northern Ireland (Roulston & Hansson, 2021).

Nearly a century later, the system remains profoundly divided, with 93% of pupils in 2017-18 attending schools separated by ethnic identity, and only a minority enrolling in integrated schools (Henderson, 2020; Milliken et al., 2020). The ongoing separation along ethno-religious and socioeconomic lines contrasts with efforts to build a cohesive society, highlighting the contradiction between integration objectives and the reality of segregation (Hughes & Loader, 2024).

1.2.2 Further Education in Northern Ireland

Further Education (FE) refers to all forms of study undertaken after secondary education that do not fall within the category of higher education, which typically includes undergraduate and graduate degree programs (Government Digital Service, 2015a).

The Further Education (FE) sector in Northern Ireland (NI), plays a crucial role in addressing societal challenges and fostering social cohesion. For many, entering FE at 14 or 16 is their first encounter with classmates from various community backgrounds, which is an important step for both students and staff in promoting social integration (Irwin, 2019). Northern Ireland (NI) relies heavily on Further Education (FE) Colleges to provide training and education. The institutions play a crucial in improving literacy and numeracy levels, as well as up-skilling and re-skilling individuals through various courses leading to certificates, especially at the national level. The number of enrolments in NI Further Education increased by 20% in the two past recent years of 2022 and 2023 (Statistics and Research Branch (Tertiary Education), 2024). This FE sector provides a wide range of courses, from basic English and mathematics to Higher National Diplomas (HNDs). For students aged 16 to 19, FE offers three categories of technical and applied qualifications. Level 3 Tech Levels are specialist courses designed to prepare students for certain technical occupations. Level 2 Technical Certificates assist students in finding work or progressing to a higher level of technical education. Applied General Qualifications allow students to expand their general education through applied learning. Overall, FE provides essential avenues for skill development, career preparation, and post-secondary education (Government Digital Service, 2015a).

In 2021, Wales had 15 colleges, Scotland 27, England 248, and Northern Ireland 7, illustrating not just the size differences between sectors but also the different geographic densities of colleges within each country. The scarcity of public material on further education in Northern Ireland often leads to the misconception of identical policy frameworks with England and Wales. Further Education (FE) in Northern Ireland is profoundly influenced by the region's political context, religious-cultural context, and recent governance changes (Husband & Ireland, 2022). From 1920 onwards, vocational education and training in Northern Ireland were overseen by Westminster. In the late 1940s, nationwide education reforms introduced access to tertiary education to working-class students, both Catholic and Protestant (McKittrick & McVea, 2002). The 1964

Industrial Training Act placed FE colleges under eight Industrial Training Boards within the Northern Ireland Training Authority. The Education Reform Order of 1989 introduced a single curriculum, and in 1990, the Training and Employment Agency was formed under the Department of Economic Development. Despite political unrest in the 1990s, reforms continued, culminating in the 1998 Northern Ireland Act, which established a new Assembly and transferred control of further education to the Department for Higher and Further Education, Training, and Employment. Political instability persisted until the NI Executive reconvened in 2007, with further reorganization finalized in 2016. The 2016 Departments Act restructured the Executive, emphasizing further education's economic role (Husband & Ireland, 2022). Educational Governance in NI is devolved to the NI Assembly. However, the Assembly's intermittent functionality has led to delays in making strategic decisions and allocating funds. Further Education (FE) policies in Northern Ireland frequently mimic those in England, with adaptations for local settings. This method, known as 'adaptive convergence', enables NI to remain aligned with UK educational standards while addressing its specific post-conflict challenges (Irwin, 2019). Nowadays, the Department for the Economy governs Northern Ireland's Further Education (Husband & Ireland, 2022). The Department is responsible for the policy, strategic development, and financing of the statutory FE sector (The Independent Commission on the College of the Future, 2020).

In 2024, Northern Ireland's Further Education system includes six regional institutions that provide vocational and technical education and training ranging from basic literacy to higher education credentials. Belfast Metropolitan College, the largest, provides a wide range of degrees in technology, business, and the creative arts. with over 37,000 students enrolled across multiple city-centre sites. Its flagship campus is located in Belfast's Titanic Quarter, which reflects the city's cultural and historical evolution. Belfast Metropolitan College is more than just a tenant; it collaborates with neighbouring and local industry to suit their different needs and serves as a key incubator for enterprises with new product ideas and seeking innovative support for growth (Irwin, 2019). Northern Regional College serves an extensive area with campuses in Ballymena and Coleraine, focusing on engineering and healthcare. Southern Regional College, with multiple campuses, emphasizes innovation and expertise in IT and construction. South Eastern Regional College, located in Bangor, Lisburn, and Downpatrick, specializes in fields such as hospitality and tourism. North West Regional College caters to the north-

western region with programs in the arts, sciences, and trades. Finally, South West College, serving Tyrone and Fermanagh, is renowned for its offerings in sustainable energy and engineering (Further Education (FE) Colleges, 2021).

The six colleges in Northern Ireland play an important part in the region's educational environment and economic development. With over 118,000 regulated enrolments, these institutions educate more than 61,000 students each year. In addition to their instructional contributions, the colleges work with over 9,000 Northern Ireland firms to establish strong ties between education and industry. These colleges employ over 3,000 people and contribute more than £126 million to the economy each year through salaries and wages (Further Education NI, 2024). Policy efforts such as the 'Further Education Means Business Strategy' and the 'Success through Skills Strategy' seek to match the FE curriculum with employer demands and improve vocational training. Despite these efforts, the FE system must deal with financial difficulties and the broader economic consequences of Brexit (Irwin, 2019).

1.2.3 Student Mobility in Further Education

It is important to distinguish internal student mobility in Northern Ireland from external student mobility and specify that the focus of this report is on mobility from a European perspective, particularly the impact of Brexit on external Northern Irish mobility.

Internal mobility in Northen Ireland is characterized by the movement of students to the rest of the UK and Ireland. The choice is influenced by factors such as academic competition, qualification recognition, and financial considerations but also by religious and national identities. Many students from Northern Ireland choose to study in the rest of the UK due to high competition for local university places and better awareness of educational opportunities there. On the other hand, fewer students from Northern Ireland opt to study in Ireland, partly because of challenges in meeting matriculation requirements and a lack of detailed information about Irish courses (Smyth et al., 2023). Patterns of student mobility in Northern Ireland also reflect cultural ties and historical migration trends. On an interview conducted with Allan Leonard, writer and photographer with particular expertise in documenting peacebuilding and community relations in Northern Ireland for over 20 years, the journalist stated there exists a stereotype regarding

mobility in the region. It is commonly believed that Protestants tend to move to Scotland or England for further education and frequently remain there for work, tending not to return to Northern Ireland. Catholics, on the other hand, are more likely to either stay within Northern Ireland or pursue their studies in the Republic of Ireland, often returning after completing their education (A. Leonard, interview, 15 April, 2024).

In the realm of external mobility, the Erasmus programme is prominent. Erasmus+ provides mobility and cooperation opportunities across a wide array of educational and developmental sectors, encompassing higher education, vocational education and training, school education (including early childhood education and care), adult education, youth programmes, and sport (European Commission, 2024b).

In a 2018 report by the Migration Advisory Committee on the impact of international students in the UK, was detailed that EU students were the largest international demographic in further education colleges and English language centres, while Chinese students constituted the largest group in higher education (Migration Advisory Committee, 2018). In the same year, Northern Ireland's Department for the Economy responded to the UK's Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) regarding the impact of international students. Andrew McCormick, then Permanent Secretary at time of enquiry, highlighted the vital role of short-term mobility for international strategies in Further Education and Higher Education. The Erasmus+ program was singled out as particularly influential providing transformative experiences and serving as a key marketing tool. Institutions strongly endorsed Erasmus+, with Northern Ireland receiving €9.29 million from 2014 to 2016, representing 5.1% of the UK's total for these sectors. They stressed the need to maintain access to such programs, promote full participation of UK and EU citizens, and reduce barriers for international student enrolment to enhance recruitment and talent attraction (McCormick, 2018).

Data from the 2019/2020 academic year indicates that both Roman Catholics and Protestants were overrepresented in Erasmus+ placements compared to their enrolment numbers at further education (FE) colleges. Although a higher percentage of Catholics (34%) were enrolled in FE colleges compared to Protestants (27%) during this period, their representation on Erasmus+ placements was nearly equal, with Protestants at 37% and Catholics at 38%. Protestants showed a more significant overrepresentation, comprising 37% of Erasmus+ participants despite only making up 27% of FE college enrolments (McCullough & Department for Education, 2021).

Finding information on Further Education from a European Union perspective proves challenging, as most articles focus on Higher Education. Further Education, from a British interpretation, might be considered part of Vocational Education and Training (VET). According to the EU definition, Initial Vocational Education and Training (I-VET) is typically provided at the upper secondary and post-secondary levels, preparing students for the workforce through school-based learning or work-based training in settings such as training centres and businesses. Meanwhile, Continuing Vocational Education and Training (C-VET) occurs after basic schooling or during professional life, with the goal of improving skills and personal growth, frequently through work-based learning (European Commission, 2021). The UK government defines Further Education (FE) as any form of study pursued following secondary education that does not come under higher education, such as undergraduate and graduate degree programs (Government Digital Service, 2015a). Thus, Further Education excludes all Higher Education Vocational Qualifications. In Northern Ireland, vocational qualifications are available through a number of full-time and part-time courses at the region's Further Education Colleges. These institutions comprise six regional colleges and the College of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) (Nidirect Government Services, 2023).

In 2020, short-duration mobility (SDM) in Vocational Education and Training (VET) in the European Union accounted for more than 75% of all mobilities sponsored by the ERASMUS+ project. Long-duration mobility (LDM) is uncommon in VET contexts (Baião, 2020). It can be concluded that Further Education or VET mobility is predominantly characterized by short-term work placements.

CHAPTER II – POLICY MAKING: THE IMPACT OF BREXIT ON STUDENT MOBILITY POLICIES

2 Policy Making: The Impact of Brexit on Student Mobility Policies

2.1 Policy Making in Northern Ireland

The Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is the country's highest legislative authority. It has legislative supremacy, which means it has complete control over all other political entities in the United Kingdom and its overseas territories (UK Parliament, 2022b). The UK Parliament is divided into two Houses: the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Both are involved in making laws, scrutinizing the government, and debating issues. The House of Commons, which is made up of publicly elected Members of Parliament (MPs), is in charge of fiscal issues including taxation and spending. It also discusses important political topics and new legislation, with the majority party forming the government. In contrast, the House of Lords, an unelected house, examines and supplements the work of the Commons. While it helps to shape legislation and oversee government actions, it cannot veto or alter financial bills. This dual-chamber arrangement ensures a system of checks and balances in Parliament (UK Parliament, 2019).

The Northern Ireland Assembly is the devolved legislature in Northern Ireland. It is in charge of enacting laws on transferred matters in Northern Ireland, as well as overseeing the work of Ministers and government departments (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2024b) Transferred areas include health, education, and agriculture. Excepted matters are still the responsibility of the Westminster Parliament. Westminster also handles reserved topics, unless the Secretary of State decides to devolve some of them to the Assembly (N. I. a. I. Office, 2007). It has 90 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) elected from 18 constituencies and functions on a power-sharing basis, requiring cross-community agreement for crucial issues such as budget approval. The Assembly is chaired by a speaker, who oversees debates and represents the Assembly, and decisions are usually made by simple majority. MLAs participate in debates, committee work, and constituency duties, with committees offering in-depth review of government departments and policies. To become legislation, bills must pass through multiple stages in the Assembly and get Royal Assent, after which they are implemented by the appropriate government department (Nidirect, 2022).

2.2 The Contemporary Political Landscape of Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland's political landscape has changed dramatically since the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998, with devolution being notably unstable and facing frequent suspensions and crisis (Murphy & Evershed, 2022). The Northern Ireland Assembly, established in December 1999 with two Junior Ministers and six Standing Committees, experienced early instability, including a suspension in February 2000 due to IRA decommissioning difficulties. Despite operating on a regular basis and adopting substantial legislation between 2001 and 2002, the Assembly was suspended again in October 2002 due to a Sinn Fein controversy (N. I. a. I. Office, 2007). Initially, moderates led the government, but by 2003, the more extreme parties, Sinn Féin and the DUP, had taken control, changing Northern Irish politics. Following the IRA's complete disarmament in September 2005, the St Andrews Agreement allowed the DUP and Sinn Féin, Northern Ireland's main parties, to resume power-sharing in 2007. To incentivize the DUP, St Andrews required Sinn Féin to support policing and the judicial system, recognizing Northern Ireland's constitutional legitimacy. Meanwhile, the DUP pledged to fully participate in all government institutions. The New Labour era under Tony Blair, followed by David Cameron's Conservative leadership, were pivotal moments in Northern Ireland's power-sharing history. Blair's tenure (1997–2010) was centred on achieving the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), which he considered a personal success. The stability of Northern Ireland's power-sharing government in the early 2010s coincided with a quieter election campaign in May 2011, with voter turnout down to 54.7% in 2011 from 62.3% in 2007. This fall indicated both a shift away from polarizing sectarian politics and growing dissatisfaction with the DUP/Sinn Féin coalition's low policy accomplishments. However, the time was not without tensions, as evidenced by symbolic issues such as the Union flag flying over Belfast, which sparked violent protests and highlighted persistent divisions despite institutional progress under the Good Friday Agreement. Cameron's government (2010-2016) implemented austerity policies that had a significant impact on Northern Ireland's public sector-reliant economy. The Stormont House Agreement of 2014 sought to address these issues, but it encountered implementation challenges, resulting in further instability (Nagle, 2018).

Electoral swings in 2016 and 2017 reflected increased political fragmentation and challenges to the DUP/Sinn Féin dominance, as well as broader issues including the impact of Brexit on the GFA's integrity (Nagle, 2018). The Northern Irish Brexit vote

paralleled political party positions: Sinn Féin, the SDLP, the UUP, and the Alliance supported remain, while the DUP supported leave, a notable portion of unionist voters diverged from their party lines, complicating the political landscape. As a result, 40 Assembly members were in favour of withdrawal and 50 were against it (Doyle & Connolly, 2017; Tonge, 2017). The Good Friday Agreement requires cross-community consent for key decisions, which complicated matters surrounding EU withdrawal, due to nationalist opposition. Despite Northern Ireland's unique position, the Northern Ireland Assembly has no formal ability to invoke Article 50 or enact future Brexit-related legislation. Legal challengers in NI attempted legislative consent from the Assembly, citing the Good Friday Agreement's principles and equality assessments, but were dismissed by both the Belfast High Court and the UK Supreme Court (Tonge, 2017).

The 2017 elections were historic as the Assembly lacked a majority of unequivocal Unionist members for the first time. Traditional unionist parties gained 45% of the vote, while 40% supported parties advocating Irish unity. This trend, which began in the late 1980s as a result of reduced nationalist emigration and increased acceptance of nationalist identities, reflects ongoing demographic and political shifts. These changes have an impact on perceptions toward unionism and Irish unity, as North-South relations and EU links evolve (Doyle & Connolly, 2017). In the same year, the devolved assembly government, shared by Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party, collapsed due to party differences, leading to governance reverting to Westminster (Husband & Ireland, 2022). The main issue resulted from the fallout of the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) scandal. The scheme, overseen by First Minister Arlene Foster, faced allegations of mismanagement and corruption. Tensions escalated when Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness resigned in protest and refused to appoint a new deputy first minister, triggering a snap election. The consequent political impasse and increased nationalist support, combined with the unfolding scandal, forced the suspension of the Assembly, revealing significant differences and governance concerns in Northern Ireland (O'Leary, 2019). The sad death of journalist Lyra McKee during a riot in Londonderry in April 2019, deemed a 'terrorist incident' by Northern Irish police, rekindled calls for political action. Her accidental shooting displayed the ongoing potential for violence and unrest in the region. This event prompted renewed talks, that resulted in an agreement, and a devolved assembly was reinstated in January 2020 after extensive discussions (Husband & Ireland, 2022). The Northern Irish assembly was suspended during most of Brexit

negotiations, which came into conclusion in December 2020. Regardless, Northern Ireland had a very weak constitutional position when it came to designing Brexit. The UK-EU relationship was not delegated to the Northern Ireland legislature. A special joint ministerial committee would have given the Northern Ireland Executive some participation but no veto power. After Brexit, Northern Ireland's laws were set to undergo significant changes through the "Great Repeal Bill." This legislation sought to incorporate EU laws into UK statute, affecting devolved powers in Northern Ireland. However, the Assembly could only approve changes within its own devolved competence, demonstrating its reliance on UK government decisions made during Brexit discussions (Tonge, 2017).

In the 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections Sinn Féin emerged as the largest party with 27 seats out of 90, a noteworthy achievement with a 1.1% gain in vote share (BBC News, 2022). This result made Sinn Féin the first nationalist party to win the most seats in a Northern Ireland election (Burton, 2022). In contrast, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) saw a fall, winning 25 seats with a 6.7% decrease in vote share, relegating them to second-largest party position (BBC News, 2022). Meanwhile, the Alliance Party had its best electoral performance to date, rising to third place in the Assembly (Burton, 2022). The Northern Ireland Assembly was again suspended that same year due to a DUP blockade. The DUP's move was motivated by their displeasure with the post-Brexit trade arrangements, which they believed harmed Northern Ireland. Following a 24-month suspension, Northern Ireland's devolved government was reinstated at the beginning of 2024. The suspension ended once a settlement was reached, and with Sinn Féin leader Michelle O'Neill named Northern Ireland's first nationalist first minister (McCormack, 2024).

The UK general election was held on Thursday, July 4, 2024 (UK Parliament, 2024). Following the last general election, Sinn Féin has emerged as Northern Ireland's main political party, with the highest representation in councils, the assembly, and now Westminster. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) experienced significant setbacks and reducing their presence in Westminster to five. This election shift represents a significant movement in Northern Irish politics, reflecting Sinn Féin's 4.2% increase in vote share from five years ago (Andrews, 2024). The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) has two seats, with the Alliance Party, Ulster Unionist Party, Traditional Unionist Voice, and an independent party each having one (BBC News, 2024). However, Sinn Féin, the

nationalist party, abstains from taking seats in the House of Commons (Evershed & Murphy, 2022), casting doubt on the significance of this electoral change and, as a result, their influence on Northern Irish policy. While they hold a majority saying within the Northern Irish assembly, their decision not to attend the supreme legislative body may limit their influence on broader policymaking.

2.3 The impact of Brexit on the Erasmus programme in the UK

Since 1987, UK-based students have participated in the Erasmus initiative. The United Kingdom, a founding member alongside ten other nations, used this project to promote short-term international educational mobility ranging from three to twelve months. The scheme offered students bursaries and waived tuition expenses for studies in other member nations. Starting from the academic year 2022–2023, UK students can no longer participate in the Erasmus+ programme, nor can students from other European countries attend UK universities under this scheme (Brooks & Waters, 2023).

The choice to leave the EU did not require the UK to give up its involvement with Erasmus+, since it could have continued to participate in all or some of the programme's major actions as a third nation (Lewis, 2023). Associated countries have the same obligations as member states, however non-associated countries can engage in some activities. If the United Kingdom had opted to participate as an associate country, it would have been subject to the same duties as a member state but would not have had voting rights (Zotti, 2021).

In fact, during Brexit negotiations, The UK House of Lords asked the government to ensure the UK's participation in the Erasmus and Horizon projects, as well as to create a new national mobility plan if full participation wasn’t secured. Furthermore, they stressed that even a well-funded national program couldn't fully replicate Erasmus+’s established network and reputation. (Zotti, 2021). In April 2017, the Education Select Committee recommended making Erasmus+ a "priority programme" in negotiations with the EU and characterized ongoing participation as the "best outcome" for the UK. However, if this was not feasible, a replacement program for student and staff mobility should be devised (Lewis, 2023)

On January 15, 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson informed the House of Commons that the UK would continue to participate in the Erasmus+ project. He stated:

> "There is no threat to the Erasmus scheme, and we will continue to participate in it. UK students will continue to be able to enjoy the benefits of exchanges with our European friends and partners, just as they will be able to continue to come to this country." (Lewis, 2023).

Statements like these led institutions and organizations in Northern Ireland to believe that the UK would not withdraw from the Erasmus programme. This belief resulted in little public debate on the matter at the time. However, a year later, they experienced the full consequences when Boris Johnson decided to completely withdraw from the Erasmus programme. This decision had significant impacts on their businesses and institutions.

The EU and the UK signed the Trade and Cooperation Agreement on December 24, 2020, and declared that, contrary to prevailing expectations, the UK would not continue to be connected with the Erasmus + 2021-7 project, but would instead establish its own mobility programme, the Turim Scheme, named after mathematician Alan Turing (Hubble et al., 2021; European Commission, 2024a). This new initiative is guided by four primary objectives aimed at addressing specific socio-economic and geopolitical challenges identified by the government. Firstly, it seeks to promote 'Global Britain' by forging new international relationships. Secondly, it aims to support social mobility and broaden participation across the UK. Thirdly, it focuses on developing key skills to bridge the gap between education and employment. Lastly, it ensures that international student mobility provides value for UK taxpayers (Brooks & Waters, 2023). In simpler terms, the UK government's decision to withdraw from the Erasmus+ Programme and to create the Turing Scheme stems from a desire to control borders, eliminate free movement, and promote a "Global Britain" agenda (James, 2021). James states the UK could have achieved the same goals by remaining at Erasmus and creating their own global adjunct programme (2021). Perhaps most importantly, The Turing Scheme provides funding for people from the UK and British Overseas Territories to study, work, or train in another country (known as 'outward mobility') (Lewis, 2023). However, unlike the Erasmus program, it does not cover the costs of students traveling to the UK for study mobility periods. This implies that students visiting the UK must either support themselves or seek financing from their own universities or countries (James, 2021).

The Scottish and Welsh Governments expressed dissatisfaction with the UK's withdrawal from the Erasmus+ programme and its subsequent replacement (Lewis, 2023). The Welsh government, launched in 2022, their international learning exchange programme, Taith. The programme funds educational exchanges for learners and staff across Wales and welcomes international participants to Wales across Adult education, Further and vocational education, Higher education, Schools and Youth work (Welsh Government, 2023). Taith has been received with several positive reactions, particularly due to its inbound inclusion. Scotland launched, in 2023/2024, an Education Exchange 'test and learn' program in partnership with its universities and colleges. The program aims "to try and repair some of the damage that has been caused by not being fully able to access Erasmus+" and enhance global connections through staff and researcher exchanges (The Scottish Government, 2024).

In the education and youth sectors, there was also widespread disappointment over the Government's choice to exit the Erasmus+ programme. While some welcomed the announcement of a replacement scheme in December 2020, concerns have arisen about whether the Turing scheme can adequately replicate the advantages of Erasmus+, especially considering its narrower focus and the absence of funding for students coming to the UK (Lewis, 2023). With Brexit, there was a sense that the mechanisms in place to encourage colleges to prioritise the generation of international income were exacerbated by the impending impact of leaving the EU, creating a new climate of uncertainty for boards as they considered the financial and procedural implications for FE colleges (Husband & Ireland, 2022).

It is believed that Boorish Jonhson pulled out of the Erasmus + program mainly due to budget cuts, however, it didn't take into account disadvantages such as increased administration, loss of reciprocity, and difficulty accessing funding, and above all the funding the European Union was injecting into the UK (James, 2021). The reality was that the financial benefits the EU injected into the UK through the Erasmus+ program exceeded the value of the UK's contribution to the European Union. Criticism of the Erasmus program often centred on its annual cost of participation, approximately £200 million. However, this critique overlooked the substantial financial and non-financial advantages that participation brings. Research conducted by Universities UK indicates that the UK derived a net profit of £243 million per year from its involvement in Erasmus (Horton & Fras, 2021). In 2018, 29,797 students went to the United Kingdom as part of

the Erasmus scheme, which included study and work internships. This was 64% higher than the scheme's participation rate in the United Kingdom. France sent the most students to the UK, totalling 7,155, followed by Germany, Spain, and Italy. A report from earlier 2021 estimated that withdrawing from Erasmus membership could result in a yearly cost to the UK exceeding £200 million. (Hubble et al., 2021)

The government specifically marketed the scheme as a replacement for Erasmus+, emphasizing its benefits such as facilitating mobility to more locations (not just Europe), allowing for shorter stays abroad, and focusing on disadvantaged students (Brooks & Waters, 2023). In actuality, Brooks & Waters state that while academic literature on the Turing Scheme was limited at the time of writing, scholars have critiqued the cost to universities of establishing new mobility agreements (2023). The promotional focus of the Turim scheme is largely limited to specific geographic regions, notably prioritizing the USA and other English-speaking countries of the Global North, along with longstanding relationships within mainland Europe. Additionally, promotional material does not clearly highlight the targeting of disadvantaged groups or the availability of enhanced Turing grants for them. Finally, the Turing Scheme appears to expand short-term mobility options through increased involvement of third parties, yet the quality and impact of these experiences, particularly in developing key skills and cultural understanding, remain uncertain without more comprehensive research and data on funding and participation. (Brooks & Waters, 2023). Other issues are highlighted by management volatility which has seen substantial changes in a short period. Originally operated by the British Council, the initiative was eventually transferred to Capita (Turing Scheme, 2023 & Adams, 2021) and is now controlled by the Department for Education (Department for Education, 2024). The Turing has undergone three separate management transitions, in just four years.

The rollover of the Erasmus 2017-2020 cycle permitted staff and students to complete their mobility periods and receive funding up until the conclusion of the 2021-22 academic year (Hubble et al., 2021). In the current 2021-2027 Erasmus+ programme, the UK is classified as a non-associated country. Grant recipients are allowed to allocate up to 20% of their final awarded project grant for outgoing mobility to third countries not associated with the programme (European Commission, 2024d; European Commission, 2024e). Colin Blackburn, CEO of the European Student Placement Agency and Intern Europe, states that although European Union organizations can use up to 20% of their

Erasmus+ budget for outbound mobility to the UK, the administrative and logistical challenges associated with sending students to non-associated countries often discourage many organizations from using this budget for such mobilities, with some actively refusing to do so (C. Blackburn, interview, July 8, 2024).

2.4 Post-Brexit policy changes in Students' mobility

The key policy change was the withdrawal from Erasmus; Brexit itself wouldn't have particularly affected students. Services like the European Health Insurance Card remained recognized, allowing EU students to visit the UK for up to 6 months. Before Brexit, students from the European Economic Area (EEA) enjoyed several advantages over non-EEA students in the UK. EEA students did not require visas for any course of study, their undergraduate tuition fees were capped at the same rate as domestic students, and they had access to student loans. Additionally, EEA students could remain in the UK after completing their studies if they met the conditions for exercising their treaty rights. UK students had similar rights when studying in other EEA countries (Migration Advisory Committee, 2018).

The second key policy change was the decision of implementing visas. From January 2021, the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement ceased free movement between the EU and UK, significantly restricting both long-term migration and short-term mobility for certain groups, particularly young people. Exceptions to this rule include people protected by the Withdrawal Agreement or Irish nationals, with whom the UK shares a Common Travel Area. Short-term travel remains visa-free, but longer stays for job, study, or family reasons are now subject to the immigration restrictions of each EU Member State as well as the UK. This reform has drastically limited EU citizens' short-term visits to the UK, while also introducing stricter immigration criteria and increased long-term stay expenses (Cîrlig & European Parliamentary Research Service, 2023). The UK government extended the Global Talent route to EU citizens on the same basis as non-EU citizens. The most highly skilled individuals, who can achieve the required level of points, will be able to enter the UK without a job offer if they are endorsed by a relevant and competent body (Secretary of State for the Home Department, 2020).

If a student is considering studying in the UK, the length, type, and location of the course will determine the required visa. For shorter courses up to 6 months, a Standard Visitor visa is applicable. English language courses lasting 6 to 11 months require a Short-term study visa. Longer courses necessitate a Student visa, sponsored by a licensed institution, which may include potential work permissions. Children aged 4 to 17 attending independent schools can apply for a Child Student visa, which permits limited work for those aged 16 and over. If an individual intends to work in the UK, their visa choice depends on their skills, job offer, sponsorship, family relocation plans, and the nature of their work (e.g., sporting, charitable). Entrepreneurs can apply for an Innovator Founder visa to establish a business in the UK. (Government Digital Service, 2019)

Individuals can visit the UK as a Standard Visitor for tourism, business, short study courses (up to 6 months), and other permitted activities. This includes holidays, visiting family or friends, volunteering for up to 30 days with a registered charity, transiting to another country, attending business meetings or interviews, participating in permitted paid engagements or events, joining a school exchange program, taking recreational courses up to 30 days, studying or taking exams, and coming for medical reasons. Academics, senior doctors, and dentists may also visit under this visa. However, they cannot do paid or unpaid work for a UK company or as a self-employed person unless it is for a permitted paid engagement or event. Additionally, they cannot claim public funds, live in the UK through frequent visits, or marry or register a civil partnership without a Marriage Visitor visa (Government Digital Service, 2015b). Depending on nationality, individuals will either need to apply for a Standard Visitor visa before traveling to the UK or be eligible to visit the UK for up to 6 months without a visa (Government Digital Service, 2015a). No EU or EEA country is included in the list of countries that require a visa (Government Digital Services, 2024a).

For UK residents, traveling to the EU and Schengen area typically does not require a visa for short-term visits under specific conditions. Specifically, individuals can stay for up to 90 days within a 180-day period without needing a visa, provided the purpose of their visit aligns with tourism or other approved reasons. These reasons encompass activities such as studying a short course, receiving medical treatment, conducting business on behalf of a UK employer (such as attending meetings or conferences), or engaging in journalism or other media-related activities (Government Digital Service, 2024b). The capacity of British nationals to live, work, or study in an EU Member State beyond short-

term visits is determined by the host country's immigration laws and visa requirements, which may require specific visas or permits for longer stays or non-exempt purposes (House of Commons, 2023).

Further education mobility consists mostly of work placements and short-term mobilities, as opposed to lengthier semester-based academic mobility in higher education (and not excluding semester-long internships) (European Commission, 2019). However, the term "internship" does not formally exist within British education, which means that while the student's internship may be recognized in their home country, it may not be recognized in the UK. Additionally, there is no developed visa route for internships in the UK.

For EU students undertaking work placements in the UK after April 2021, it became necessary to apply for a Tier 5 visa, which, at the time, required a Certificate of Sponsorship and cost £244 (roughly €300) (Davidson Morris, 2024). In 2020, the Erasmus+ programme in the UK was administered by the UK National Agency, a partnership between the British Council and Ecorys UK (Hubble et al., 2021). This agency remained active throughout the rollover of the Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020) and held a government license to issue Certificates of Sponsorship (Hubble et al., 2021; Erasmus+, 2022).

By the end of the 2021-22 academic year, the rollover of the Erasmus 2017-2020 cycle concluded, leading to the dissolution of the Erasmus+ UK National Agency and the cessation of Certificates of Sponsorship (Hubble et al., 2021; Erasmus+, 2022). Additionally, the government transitioned from the Tier 5 Visa to the TWGAE Visa (Temporary Worker - Government Authorised Exchange Visa). This change limited eligibility to higher education, requiring that the work performed be skilled to at least Level 3 on the National Qualification Framework, generally defined as 'A level and above,' and actively excluding vocational training from the visa route (UK Government, 2024)

Currently, European Union students seeking short-term placements can bypass the traditional visa route by utilizing the "volunteer for up to 30 days with a registered charity" option, however, this leaves space for a very limited scope of placements. For internships outside this scope, EU higher education students must apply for a Temporary Work – Government Authorised Exchange visa. This process involves obtaining a certificate of sponsorship from an approved sponsor, detailing job specifics aligned with

the sponsor's activities. Approved sponsors can include exchange scheme managers, higher education institutions (for researchers, academics, or examiners), or government agencies (Government Digital Service, 2021). For a student coming to the UK for an unpaid internship under the Temporary Work – Government Authorised Exchange visa, there are currently two available sponsors listed among the government-authorized sponsors: Fragomen, an international immigration firm, charging £970 for the certificate of sponsorship, and BUNAC, a youth travel and work experience provider, charging £1100 (C. Blackburn, interview, July 8, 2024).

Additionally, applicants are required to pay a £298 application fee per person, plus the healthcare surcharge (currently £1,035 per year) if the placement exceeds 6 months. They must also demonstrate adequate personal savings. Visa durations range from 12 to 24 months, permitting entry up to 14 days before and departure 14 days after the job's start and end dates respectively. Permitted activities include the sponsored role, secondary employment (up to 20 hours per week) and bringing eligible dependents. Prohibited activities encompass seeking permanent employment and accessing public funds (Government Digital Service, 2021).

The reality is that following the specifics of policy changes has been extremely difficult. The government has complicated the process by often changing policies and regulations. In fact, after the UK's exit from the European Union, all EU references had to be removed, which required remaking UK government websites. Additionally, there is no specific visa process for vocational students, and even if one were implemented, the related expenses would most likely be unaffordable for many students. One could argue that policymakers are uninformed of the changes affecting mobility policies and have ignored the development of policies for vocational and internship mobility (C. Blackburn, interview, July 8, 2024).

On December 6, 2022, the House of Lords European Affairs Committee held a hearing to seek information about young people's post-Brexit mobility (UK Parliament, 2022a). Colin Blackburn, CEO of Intern Europe, was invited to join Charley Robinson, Head of Global Mobility Policy at Universities UK International, one of six panellists at the hearing. This session sought not only facts and data, but also recommendations for the government (Parliamentlive.tv, 2022). Panel B mostly discussed educational mobility, underlining substantial obstacles in this area. Charley Robinson stated that the UK is now viewed as "more expensive, more complicated, and less welcoming as a study

destination." Anne-Marie Graham, chief executive of the UK Council for International Student Affairs, described the visa system for EU students as "overly complex and lengthy," resulting in "poor experiences" She stressed the importance of improving accessibility and reducing complexity for EU students studying in the UK (European Affairs Committee, 2023).

Robinson presented critical information that appeared to be unfamiliar to the lords in attendance, as was much of the data shared during the hearing. She emphasized the absence of an internship visa route, stating:

> "We also critically lack an internship visa route. The impact of the loss of freedom of movement means that EU students coming to the UK no longer have an internship visa route, which is a huge problem. We are sending around 6,000 UK students to Europe, and we don't have a reciprocal visa route. This is causing a lot of tension for our European partners. So, I think looking at an appropriate route to facilitate work placements and internships for European students should be a priority." (Parliamentlive.tv, 2022).

Concerns and ideas raised throughout the hearing clearly illustrate the need for improved visa routes, with the prospect of expanding the Youth Mobility Scheme Visa to EU and EEA nations addressed multiple times.

2.4.1 Policies in Northern Ireland's "Grey area"

The policy landscape in Northern Ireland is unique in that it has been altered in ways that differ significantly from those that have influenced others, particularly in terms of the implications of the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union (colloquially known as Brexit) and the collapse (and subsequent re-establishment) of the Northern Ireland Assembly (Husband & Ireland, 2022). Importantly, amidst these changes, it is crucial to note that the Northern Ireland Assembly is not responsible for immigration policy in Northern Ireland, as this is a power reserved for Westminster (Tonge, 2017).

Post-Brexit, Northern Ireland occupies a unique position as the only part of the UK sharing a land border with the EU. The region's peace and reconciliation framework, supported by both the UK and Irish governments, was instrumental in securing the Northern Ireland Protocol within the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement (McCrudden, 2022).

Nevertheless, Northern Ireland's complex and divided attitude toward policy, influenced by deep-rooted ethno-nationalist divisions, results in varied compliance and resistance to state-led initiatives (Graham & Nash, 2006).

Since Northern Ireland's inception, its citizens have perceived a distinct lack of commitment from Westminster to the Union (McKittrick & McVea, 2002). Historical figures such as Reginald Maudling, who visited as Home Secretary in 1970, displayed a profound lack of engagement with Northern Ireland, dismissing it as an unpleasant concern, despite his nominal unionist stance. His predecessor, William Joynson-Hicks, assured Stormont's Prime Minister that he "knew his place" and "didn't propose to interfere". This persisted into more recent times, as exemplified by Karen Bradley's admission in 2018 of her limited understanding of Northern Ireland's electoral dynamics during her term as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Bush, 2023).

This perception of neglect continued into the Brexit referendum, where the central issues of the Northern Irish campaign received minimal attention elsewhere in the UK. Northern Ireland's concerns differed significantly from those of the rest of the UK, focusing on critical issues such as the future of the Irish border, trade, and the impact of losing European Union funding on peace and stability. This lack of focus highlighted a significant disconnect between Britain and Northern Ireland and underscored a broader dissatisfaction with the UK's post-1998 political framework (Murphy, 2021). From the Troubles to Brexit, British political disengagement has worsened Northern Ireland's challenges (Bush, 2023). Brexit has particularly exposed flaws in the UK's devolution structure, with local concerns in Northern Ireland frequently overlooked by the central government. This oversight has increased uncertainty about Northern Ireland's future, fuelling debates over its constitutional status and prompting calls for either greater autonomy or Irish reunification (Murphy, & Evershed, 2022).

Westminster's lack of commitment, combined with Northern Ireland's strong Irish identity, has created what many locals refer to as a 'Grey Area.' This indifference from policymakers, along with a troubled history, has fostered a general disengagement among residents, who may feel less inclined to adhere to laws and regulations. Colin Blackburn, CEO of the European Student Placement Agency and Intern Europe, recounts how Northern Ireland has long operated in this 'grey area' economically, even before the peace process, often being left to its own devices. This reality has led to widespread non-compliance with general legal requirements, such as TV licensing and car registration.

However, Blackburn also highlights Northern Ireland's strong sense of openness and willingness to stay connected with Europe and the international community (C. Blackburn, interview, July 8, 2024).

Indeed, the Brexit campaign revealed a significant desire among Northern Irish individuals to preserve their European identity while maintaining open connections with EU countries. The majority of Northern Irish voters chose to remain in the EU, and many who voted to leave expressed regret in post-referendum assessments (Gormley-Heenan et al., 2017).

Additionally, the historic cultural and political ties between Ireland and Northern Ireland continue to influence policy, with the FE sector facing unique challenges (Husband & Ireland, 2022). The Good Friday Agreement created a multidimensional structure of governance and cooperation among Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and the United Kingdom. Although Northern Ireland left the European Union through Brexit, the Republic of Ireland, a current EU member, retains some influence and involvement in Northern Irish issues. This allows, for example, Northern Ireland university students to continue to participate in Erasmus through a partnership with the Irish government (Hubble et al., 2021). For instance, in 2023, Ireland allocated €2 million to Northern Irish students to allow them to study abroad through the European Union's Erasmus+ program (BBC News, 2023b.).

2.4.2 The present and the future of UK’s mobility policies

EU nationals now have to face the rapid changes in UK immigration policies, which are becoming stricter by the day. Over the past year, under the 2022 to 2024 Sunak Conservative government, several decisions have been made to tighten these laws.

Since January 1, 2024, most overseas students are unable to bring family members to the UK, with the exception of postgraduate research courses and courses with government-funded scholarships. In the fiscal year ending September 2023, 152,980 visas were given to dependents of students, up more than 930% from 14,839 in the fiscal year ending September 2019. This policy aims to reduce migration and prevent abuse of the immigration system (Home Office, 2024).

On April 4, significant changes were made to the UK's immigration policies for Skilled Worker visas. The general salary threshold for new immigrants has been raised by 48%, from £26,200 to £38,700. Furthermore, the Shortage Occupation List was replaced with a new Immigration Salary List, and the prior 20% discount on the going rate for shortage jobs was removed. This means that firms can no longer pay migrants less than UK workers for certain positions. On April 11, the minimum income needed to sponsor someone for a family visa was raised by 55%, from £18,600 to £29,000. By early 2025, this threshold will have risen to £38,700 (Home Office news team, 2024). Applicants for a family visa as a partner must normally establish that their combined yearly income exceeds the new £29,000 limit. This provision, known as the 'minimum income requirement,' is intended to provide financial stability for anyone wanting to bring family members to the UK (Government Digital Service, 2024c). The previous year also saw substantial changes; in May 2023, significant reforms were announced to reduce the use of student visas as a backdoor path to employment in the UK. To address this issue, the new policy forbids overseas students from changing from a student visa to a work visa before finishing their studies (Home Office, 2023).

The impact of the previous government's efforts to drastically restrict the number of migrants is already evident. Applications for Skilled Worker, Health & Care, and Study visas decreased by 25% in the first four months of 2024 compared to the same period last year. The impact on student dependent visa applications is even more dramatic, with a 79% fall following limitations on most postgraduate students bringing dependents. Similarly, applications for Health and Care dependants fell by 58% in the first full month following limits on care professionals bringing dependents, from 15,100 in April 2023 to 6,400 in April 2024 (Home Office news team, 2024).

On the other side, in April 2024, the European Commission suggested the Council to open negotiations with the United Kingdom to improve youth mobility between the two countries. This plan reacts to the reduced mobility that resulted from Brexit, notably from young people seeking educational, cultural, and professional exchanges across the Channel. The deal aims to eliminate present barriers by adopting rules that allow young EU and UK nationals aged 18 to 30 to study, train, or work in each other's countries for up to four years. The Commission's recommendation will now be discussed in the Council, and if agreed, negotiations with the UK will begin to potentially restore some of the pre-Brexit mobility rights for younger generations. This program marks a significant

step in improving bilateral relations and cultural exchanges post-Brexit (European Commission, 2024c).

However, a recent government change has occurred. The UK general election was held on Thursday, July 4, 2024 (UK Parliament, 2024). Prior to this date, institutions, corporations, and individuals whose businesses and livelihoods rely on the UK's international openness and have been badly impacted by Brexit anxiously awaited the election and its results. Their hope was for a new government committed to creating a more inclusive and globally connected Britain, with the goal of addressing the challenges faced by the country's exit from the EU.

As a result of general elections, Labour won a majority, replacing the previous Conservative government. Labour won 411 seats, an increase of 209 over the 2019 election. Meanwhile, the Conservatives suffered a huge loss, obtaining 121 seats, down 244 from their previous total of 365 in 2019 (Baker, 2024). In the Labour's manifesto, the commitment is clear: while Britain remains outside the EU, the focus is on making Brexit a success and strengthening ties with European states. Labour wants to redefine the UK's relationship with Europe, emphasizing cooperation and friendship. This does not imply a return to the single market, customs union, or free movement. Instead, Labour intends to improve trade relations by eliminating unnecessary trade obstacles, negotiating a veterinary agreement to expedite food imports, assisting touring artists, and creating reciprocal recognition of professional qualifications (The Labour Party, 2024).

On July 7th, 2024, the new Secretary of Foreign Affairs, David Lammy, wrote an article on the UK Government website headlined "It's Time to Reset Britain's Relations with Europe.". The piece, published on the day of his travel to Germany, Poland, and Sweden, reaffirmed his unflinching commitment, together with Prime Minister Keir Starmer, to resetting relations with Europe. Lammy reaffirmed the UK's determination to be a trustworthy partner, ally, and neighbour. This commitment was the driving force behind his immediate visit to these European countries (Lammy, 2024).

In the coming months, the Labour Party's promises will be put to the test, revealing whether they will have any positive impact on immigration policies for EU nationals on student mobility.

CHAPTER III – INTERNSHIP AT INTERN EUROPE: A HISTORY AND OPERATIONAL OVERVIEW OF THE COMPANY

3 Internship at Intern Europe: A History and Operational Overview of the Company

From March 4th to September 6th, 2024, I undertook an internship as a Project Coordinator in Belfast with the company Intern Europe. This internship was an integral part of my Master's Degree in Intercultural Studies for Business at the Porto Accounting and Business School (ISCAP). This Master's program is internationally focused and designed to equip students with the skills needed to navigate and manage intercultural business environments. In my fourth and final semester, I was required to choose between a dissertation, a project work, or a professional practice. I opted for a professional practice to gain hands-on experience in an international setting.

Intern Europe is a company that organizes short-term work placements for students from vocational schools in mainland Europe coming to Belfast. This experience was the result of a carefully considered decision that aligned with my academic and professional goals, as well as my long-standing desire to explore new cultures and live abroad. The choice of this internship was influenced by several factors, beginning with my intention to maintain an international focus throughout my studies. During my third semester, I studied in Arras, France, where I pursued a double diploma in combination with the Master's in Languages and Intercultural Management at the Université d'Artois. This dual-degree opportunity was presented during the introduction to the master's programme at ISCAP, and it was one of the key reasons I applied. The prospect of earning a double diploma in two distinct cultural contexts was incredibly appealing and fuelled my enthusiasm for the possibility of being accepted into the Master's. Continuing this international trajectory into my fourth semester was a natural progression for me. This was motivated not only by the global orientation of my master's degree but also by a deep personal interest in gaining cross-cultural experience. Additionally, I believed the experience could enhance my CV and provide valuable leverage when applying for jobs abroad.

At the time of applying for the internship, I was a few months into my experience living in France. Although the prospect of moving countries twice within six months was daunting, I remained committed to finding an internship that would allow me to immerse myself in a new cultural environment. The first point of my decision process was to determine which countries I wanted to explore for my internship. Initially, I considered

making a bold move by going to the Middle East or South America, as these had long been of interest to me. However, I eventually postponed these options due to personal commitments back home and the logistical challenges such a move would entail during my internship period. Instead, I decided to start by focusing on internships in France to minimize the logistical challenges of another international move. However, my search quickly expanded to include opportunities in neighbouring countries and European countries where English was generally learned. My primary focus was on roles in international communications, organizations, and logistics— an area that had captured my interest during my studies in Artois. I was particularly keen on working in a dynamic, intercultural environment that would keep me actively engaged with the local culture and community, rather than being confined to a desk job I could equally do no matter the location.

As I explored various options, I received an email from ISCAP, forwarding a list of internships advertised by ESPA (European Students Placement Agency). One of these positions was a Project Coordinator role in Belfast, which immediately caught my attention. Belfast and Northern Ireland had already been on my radar as potential destinations, partly due to a growing fascination with Northern Irish history and culture sparked during my first year of the master's program in the English Culture for Business course taught by Professor Clara Sarmento. This interest was further solidified during a visit to Northern Ireland, which I took with my master's colleagues during our mobility in Artois. During our travels, I was struck by the warmth and hospitality of the people and how comfortable I felt in Belfast. The job description for the Project Coordinator role was also highly exciting and aligned closely with my previous experience, particularly in organizing volunteer mobilities, event organization, and stakeholder communication— skills I had gained through various volunteer projects and university initiatives.

Although I had limited professional experience, my extensive volunteer work in different areas and countries since I was young provided me with assets I could use to demonstrate my potential value to the company. The position involved tasks such as preparing cultural events and social activities for participants in town, research, contacting and negotiating with potential stakeholders, and supporting the placement of students in work environments. These responsibilities matched my skills and interests, making me confident that I could add value to the team at Intern Europe. The fact that the internship was unpaid was balanced by the provision of accommodation, which was a significant

responsibility relief given the other logistical challenges I faced, such as finishing my semester exams in France, returning home briefly, and preparing to move to a new country. Even with the additional cost of acquiring a visa for a short work placement in the UK, which amounted to roughly 1,000 euros, the support offered by the agency in navigating this process, as well as covering the costs of transportation, accommodation and utilities was invaluable.

In the end, I felt fortunate to have secured an internship in a city I was eager to explore, with tasks that were hands-on and engaging. Intern Europe, coincidentally the sister company of ESPA, was a small organization with only two employees at the time of my arrival, which meant that I was quickly integrated into the team and given significant responsibilities. Despite being an intern, I was expected to learn quickly and contribute meaningfully to the company's operations. My role naturally expanded beyond the initial job description, which included the tasks: researching and contacting suitable organizations in Belfast interested in the mobility programme, adding them to the database; supporting the placement team in creating suitable mobilities for participants, organizing the necessary documentation; setting up interviews to prepare incoming participants for their placements; managing the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system database to ensure all aspects of the projects and database were up to date; and supporting mobilities on-site by preparing cultural events and social activities for participants in town. The human element was particularly strong in this role, as I was often involved in helping students adjust to living alone and working abroad for the first time, resolving any issues that arose during their placements, as well as handling the logistical side of managing accommodations. Additionally, I supported my manager with any ad hoc tasks, regardless of how unexpected or specific they were. This experience not only fulfilled my academic and professional objectives but also provided me with a rich cultural experience that deepened my appreciation for Northern Ireland and its people.

3.1 The History of Intern Europe

Intern Europe's development and operational strategies have been deeply influenced by the insights and decisions of its key leaders. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the company's evolution, I conducted an interview with Colin Blackburn, the current CEO, and an in-office discussion with Kevin Chevillon, the General Manager of Intern Europe. Colin Blackburn, who founded the European Student Placement Agency in 2012 to coordinate internships for higher education students in the UK, was invited to take over Intern Europe in 2014 during a pivotal transitional period. Since then, he has overseen the company's adaptation to important industry changes, and his strategic decisions have shaped Intern Europe's response to external challenges, making his perspective crucial to this analysis. Kevin Chevillon began his journey with Intern Europe as an intern from France eight years ago. He quickly progressed through the ranks, serving as a Marketing Manager before rising to the position of General Manager in 2022. He plays a crucial role in operational workflow, partner relationships, and project delivery. His insights provided valuable details on the day-to-day operations and long-term strategic planning at Intern Europe. The information obtained from the interview with Colin Blackburn and the in-office discussion with Kevin Chevillon, conducted in July and August 2024, has been integrated throughout this chapter to provide a firsthand account of the company's history and operations.

Intern Europe was founded 25 years ago by a Northern Irish entrepreneur under the original name of International Services. The founder's name was not disclosed by the current CEO during our interview. The businessman, who had been working in Brussels as a policy adviser supporting international institutions, decided to return to Northern Ireland following the signing of the peace agreement in 1998. He believed that Northern Ireland, which had been a closed society due to the Troubles, was now ready to open up and benefit from the Erasmus exchange programme. His vision was to showcase Northern Ireland as a welcoming community with genuine people and beautiful landscapes. Despite his enthusiasm and initial success in attracting a few clients, running a small business proved challenging. Consequently, he joined a consulting firm in Belfast called McClure Watters, bringing International Services with him. At that time, funding was primarily directed towards higher education, and before 2014, the majority of incoming participants were graduates, particularly from Spain and Portugal. These graduates faced limited job

opportunities in their home countries and were therefore granted funding for a three-month experience in Belfast (C. Blackburn, interview, July 8, 2024).

McClure Watters was eventually acquired by RSM, a prominent accounting and consulting firm that was, at the time, listed among the major consulting firms in the UK. RSM demonstrated significant interest in expanding their services and decided to open an office in Bristol, where they already had a regional presence. Unfortunately, this venture failed due to a lack of understanding of the business. Within two years, RSM was looking to exit the business and approached Colin Blackburn, the current CEO of Intern Europe (C. Blackburn, interview, July 8, 2024).

In 2012, Colin and his wife Madeline launched ESPA (The European Student Placement Agency), an organization dedicated to offering high-quality internships in higher education for individuals in long-term mobility programs in the UK and Ireland. Initially, RSM inquired whether Madeline and Colin were interested in managing the struggling business, but when they declined, RSM proposed a takeover. During the negotiations, RSM was taken over by Baker Tilly, who quickly agreed to the deal. The Bristol branch, having lost £89,000 over two years, was closed, and the focus shifted solely to Belfast (C. Blackburn, interview, July 8, 2024).

The new ownership took effect in Belfast in January 2014. Colin aimed to integrate a higher education work experience program for group mobilities with the ESPA program for long-term mobility. However, the new Erasmus 2014-2021 program brought unforeseen challenges. The management fee for creating individual programs was cut from €500 to €350, a 30% reduction locked in for seven years. Additionally, the European Union decided to cut benefits for graduates, reallocating funds to vocational training. Despite these challenges, Intern Europe had already secured group bookings for 2015 in the higher education sector, benefiting from the Erasmus funding rollover. By 2016, the company faced the reality of navigating a new sector and embarked on a mission to make Belfast a top destination for English-speaking vocational mobility. Belfast was undergoing significant change, evolving from a fractured society to a more international area, particularly in South Belfast. Students arriving in Belfast were unaware of The Troubles and viewed it as an attractive UK destination with English-speaking locals, landmarks like the Giant’s Causeway, and at the time, the filming of "Game of Thrones." (with some Spanish students even working as extras) (C. Blackburn, interview, July 8, 2024).

Over the years, the company expanded as the partners sought to send more people to diverse locations. This led to the opening of the Glasgow office, followed by the Liverpool office in 2019, with the ambition of establishing Intern Europe in all four home nations. Wales remained the only nation yet to have an office. By 2019, the company had reached 969 participants in the programme (Intern Europe Limited, 2019b) and employed 13 people (Intern Europe Limited, 2019a). In 2020, Intern Europe had 1,200 participants booked, but the onset of COVID-19 led to numerous cancellations and the closure of the young Liverpool office, which would have required substantial funds to survive. Despite the pandemic, the company persisted. However, in December 2020, the UK officially exited the Erasmus Programme without prior notice, as part of Brexit. Although the UK had been asked to contribute significantly to the Erasmus Programme, a large percentage of the funds ultimately benefited the country. Intern Europe, in particular, not only brought money in but also promoted tourism to Northern Ireland. Participants would return home and encourage friends and family to visit, thereby contributing to the local economy by supporting language schools, bus companies, tourist activities, and landlords. The withdrawal from the Erasmus Programme restricted international partners to allocate only 20% of their funding to the UK (European Commission, 2024d; European Commission, 2024e). While this limitation was challenging, it was not unmanageable, given some partners' strong trust in Intern Europe's services. However, to make matters worse, in April 2021, the UK government mandated visas for all incoming visitors without warning. (C. Blackburn, interview, July 8, 2024).

Colin Blackburn vividly remembers the day when news broke that students would need a visa for work mobility in the UK, on April 13, 2021:

> "Finding out that students on mobility programs were being targeted, requiring a visa for work experiences (...). They did it suddenly, with no plan, no warning, and no preparation time," he recalls. "When you're on mobility, you're not a worker; it's about language, culture, and education. They misunderstood and misrepresented it, driven by emotional political decisions." (C. Blackburn, interview, July 8, 2024).

Blackburn goes on to assert that this was a move by the Conservative government to demonstrate to their supporters that they were restricting immigration. However, he emphasizes that for those on mobility programs, like those facilitated by Intern Europe, they all return home. "Especially because they are still pursuing their studies, enrolled in

college. On vocational programs, they are not staying." (C. Blackburn, interview, July 8, 2024).

The company then worked with Ecorys, half of the UK national agency dealing with Erasmus and working with further education (Hubble et al., 2021). They provided the certificate of sponsorship, which involved extensive paperwork. Additionally, participants had to pay €300 for a visa stamp (Davidson Morris, 2024), a process that required them to visit the embassy and submit their passports. Many partners ultimately found these administrative requirements and cost burden to high. It became increasingly difficult to plan far in advance due to the weeks or even months needed for processing. Moreover, asking participants to allocate €300 out of a €1500 budget per person was simply not financially feasible (C. Blackburn, interview, July 8, 2024).

These obstacles forced Intern Europe to close its Glasgow office. In contrast, Belfast and Northern Ireland, in the eyes of the company, offered different dynamics. There are voices going around about Irish unification and support for Northern Irish students from the Republic Ireland. In the beginning, there was a lot of work alongside immigration lawyers to understand what could and could not be done. At one point in 2021, when the new rules were first implemented, the company had to send 9 French participants back home as the government effectively deported them for lacking the correct paperwork; their documents indicated they were coming for "work experience." This was a significant challenge for Intern Europe and similar organizations in the UK, but the company chose to persevere due to their commitment to the team's welfare (C. Blackburn, interview, July 8, 2024).

In 2022, the Tier 5 Visa was replaced by the TWGAE Visa, actively excluding vocational students (UK Government, 2024d; UK Government, 2024e), and the dissolution of the UK National Agency removed the only certificate of sponsorship scheme for vocational education (Hubble et al., 2021; Erasmus+, 2022). What the company had to do was work around what policies were already in place. Focusing on the volunteer aspect was essential to sustain the program, once the UK government allows individuals to visit as Standard Visitors for volunteering up to 30 days with a registered charity (Government Digital Service, 2015b). Northern Ireland, and specifically Belfast, was strategically chosen due to the robust history of the charity sector, which is considerably larger than in other regions and includes businesses that might function as commercial ventures elsewhere. If the company was based in Glasgow or Liverpool, the policy change would have posed more significant challenges.

Additionally, host companies in Northern Ireland remain enthusiastic about supporting international mobility and maintaining ties with mainland Europe, especially considering Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU. They want to be and feel the benefits of being international.

Looking ahead, the company looks forward to potential policy changes under the new government that could restore mobility opportunities and how they can take advantage if these changes do indeed occur.

3.2 The Operational Workflow at Intern Europe

The process at Intern Europe begins with identifying potential international partners for collaboration, a task overseen by the General Manager, Kevin Chevillon, and the CEO, Colin Blackburn. Typically, these partners are organizations that operate mobility programs, often under the Erasmus+ scheme, though other schemes are also considered. Potential Partners can include schools, intermediaries, associations, and similar organizations. Given the niche nature of this industry, where most players are well-acquainted with each other, partnerships are often established based on recommendations. This familiarity allows the company to choose its partners confidently (K. Chevillon, in-office conversation, August 8, 2024).

Once contact is established with a potential partner, the next step is to assess their specific needs, such as whether they plan to send a group, when this might occur, and how they envision the collaboration. For new partners, building a trusting relationship is essential. This involves understanding their expectations, explaining how Intern Europe operates, and potentially arranging visits to Belfast, including tours of the company, the city, and host companies. For existing partners, the focus shifts to understanding their annual plans, determining whether they intend to send groups, and discussing financial terms. Typically, the budget for the following year is set in October of the previous year; however, for 2025, many partners requested budget proposals as early as August. This budget information is shared through a detailed quotation that includes various options, such as accommodation (homestays with host families or self-catered in the company's apartments), airport transfers (private coach or public transport), and the possibility of

including language school classes or cultural activities (K. Chevillon, in-office conversation, August 8, 2024).

When a partner commits to sending a group, it is crucial to have them sign a booking form, which initiates the operational process and project delivery. This step allows the group to be entered into the CRM system, triggering the involvement of the Placements and HR teams. From a management standpoint, the next steps involve generating invoices, which are reviewed by the CEO before being entered into the QuickBooks accounting system, and promptly sent to the partner. Maintaining regular communication with the partner throughout the project is crucial to ensuring smooth operations and resolving any issues that may arise (K. Chevillon, in-office conversation, August 8, 2024).

The following steps are the responsibility of the HR and Placements colleagues, a process I assisted with and was responsible for during several moments of my internship. Once the students are entered into the CRM system, an automatic email is sent to schedule an interview with HR. The students must also complete a form that automatically populates their profile in the CRM system and upload their CV and passport. The primary focus of the interview is to understand the students' placement preferences and assess their English proficiency through an informal chat. Following the interview, the information is entered into the system, and the placements team begins the process of finding suitable placements for the students by consulting a database of host companies. If a student's preferred field is new, the team must identify and reach out to potential host companies in that area. Once a suitable placement is found and confirmed by the host company, a job specification is sent to the student for confirmation. Additionally, a quick Teams call is scheduled between the host company and the student. This call is not a job interview—although some companies may occasionally treat it as such—but rather an informal chat designed to familiarize the student with the company and communicate expectations.

After a student’s placement is confirmed, the system generates tasks for HR, which include creating a final placement document. This document outlines the student's role, including responsibilities, start date and time, working hours, dress code, and commute details. In some situations, the host company may request an AccessNI background check, which is normally required for businesses that engage with healthcare and vulnerable populations, such as childcare and senior care services. This process involves requesting criminal records documents from the student and completing the AccessNI

process online with a code provided by an umbrella institution associated with the host company.

Once all documents are completed, the team awaits the students' arrival. Upon arrival, students attend an induction meeting. This induction includes a presentation for current participants, held either on the first Monday of their language school course or the Monday before their work placement begins. The presentation covers various topics, such as information about the city, the students' responsibilities in their placements, house rules, logistics such as transportation, and general warnings. During their placement, students have access to a 24-hour helpline for both personal and placement-related concerns. One week before their departure, participants are required to submit a final evaluation of their placement and take part in a mandatory 15-minute group call with HR to provide feedback on their experience. Two weeks after departure, HR prepares a final report which contains the Europass, Learning Agreement, host company review, and any additional documentation requested by the partner (Mobility to Belfast with Intern Europe, 2024).

3.3 Key Task and Responsibilities during my Internship

As Project Coordinator, during my internship, I was responsible for understanding all aspects of the company's operations and providing support to any department as needed. My role encompassed a range of responsibilities, starting with a gradual, hands-on learning process. I began by assisting the HR department with interviewing new participants. These interviews involved discussing the specific courses they were taking at vocational schools, their work experience, and, most importantly, their placement preferences. We also addressed practical concerns such as medical conditions and allergies.

In addition to conducting interviews, I was responsible for arranging placements. After completing the interviews, I identified suitable host companies in our database that matched the students' placement requirements. If no suitable match was available, I reached out to potential new host companies and introduced them to Intern Europe. When a host company expressed interest, I sent them a work specification form to complete, which was then forwarded to the student for confirmation. Once both parties confirmed, I scheduled a Teams call between the student and the host company. The purpose of this

call was to introduce the student to a familiar face at their work placement, manage expectations, and address any questions. The number of placements that fell through after this call was considerably small. The responsibility for placements was gradually transitioned to a new colleague specifically hired for this role.

After a placement was verified by the host employer, the student was formally "placed," and the HR department handled the remaining steps. In some cases, I assisted HR with acquiring AccessNI clearance, which involved contacting Early Years and host companies for the necessary codes and requesting required documents from the students. During periods of colleague absence, I briefly oversaw the HR department, ensuring the continuity of critical processes. My responsibilities included maintaining regular communication with students to secure the signing of the Terms & Conditions documents before their arrival. I also tracked deposit payments and ensured that any additional required information was submitted promptly. Additionally, I created the final placement documents and maintained contact with host companies to collect their final evaluation documentation.

While my initial responsibilities at Intern Europe focused on supporting the HR department and being responsible for placements — particularly during the transition period between the departure of the previous colleague in charge of placements and the arrival of their successor —my role soon expanded to encompass the full range of responsibilities outlined in my job description. These responsibilities included researching and contacting potential partner organizations in Belfast, particularly charities, to identify suitable volunteer placements. I added these organizations to our database and supported the placement team in creating mobility opportunities. Additionally, I was responsible for organizing cultural events and social activities for participants in the city.

As I became more integrated into the team and the company's processes, I naturally assumed additional responsibilities. These included dealing with the human aspects of our work, connected with supporting young students who were living abroad for the first time, navigating a new language, and adapting to a different culture in the workplace. In addition to these responsibilities, I also assisted with various ad-hoc tasks and projects that arose during my internship and fully looked over departments when my colleagues were on annual leave.

3.3.1 Charities

The visa route allows international participants to enter the UK without a visa if involved in volunteer work for a charity for up to 30 days. Consequently, I was tasked with analysing the 2024 charities list in Northern Ireland, focusing on 1,485 charities located in Belfast postcodes out of a total of 7,174. The process involved researching these charities, filtering out unsuitable ones based on activities, operating hours, potential areas of involvement for participants, and other criteria. Following an initial assessment, further research was conducted to gather key information about each charity, particularly identifying the ideal contact person. These charities were then entered into the CRM system as 'Leads', initiating contact with two introductory emails: one to introduce our organization and another as a follow-up. We encouraged interested charities to schedule either a visit or a Teams call. After obtaining a response, we scheduled actual visits to charity sites to provide more thorough information about Intern Europe and our placement procedure, as well as to assess their suitability for placements. Positive visits resulted in updating the lead status to a Host Company contact in our system. In some instances, additional explanations were requested via email and sent to various departments within the organizations.

3.3.2 Social Events

One of the responsibilities outlined in my job description was to organize social events. The goal was to organize a social gathering once a month or on a schedule that allowed every group to participate in at least one event. Typically, these gatherings included icebreakers and games to allow participants to enjoy the city, learn about local culture, and build friendship among different groups. More importantly, the social event provided us with an opportunity to engage with participants in a relaxed environment and discuss how their placements were progressing. After or during each activity, the company would offer a pint, cider, or soft drink for each attendee.

My responsibilities for each social event included selecting an activity, planning and organizing it, confirming arrangements with our usual pub or locating a more acceptable place if necessary, and contacting participants to confirm their attendance. In circumstances of low attendance, I would often choose existing events in town, such as pub quizzes or bingo evenings, and attend with the students. Early in my internship, the

company's usual pub for social events underwent management changes. As a result, I was tasked with locating a new space that could accommodate gatherings of up to 50 people, preferably for free, to act as our primary venue. This required a few email exchanges, phone calls, and site visits. Additionally, it was my responsibility to attend and oversee each social event. I frequently assured my older colleagues, especially management, that I could handle these tasks independently, ensuring they did not have to work after hours.

Every Friday, I was responsible for putting together a cultural agenda featuring events happening in the city that would be of interest to the students. I would then share this plan with them, ensuring they had opportunities to engage with the local culture and make the most of their time in the city.

3.3.3 CRM system update

Intern Europe uses a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system, a software tool designed to manage and analyse interactions and relationships with customers and potential customers. This system integrates information from all team members, encompassing student contacts, partner projects, host companies, and updates on placement processes. Recognizing the need to improve system efficiency through process automation, I was assigned the task of creating a new component within the CRM called 'Placements'. The objective was to create a repository of past, current, and new placements categorized by job titles, simplifying research by allowing us to focus on job titles rather than needing to search through specific companies when exploring potential placements. This effort also attempted to automate processes including completing job specs, sending Job specs to host companies for editing, and completed job specs to students for confirmation.

This project involved designing the appropriate fields for placement creation, which were subsequently sent to the parent business (ESPA) for integration into the system. It was also necessary to identify opportunities for automation, such as sending links to host companies that allowed them to populate fields directly within the system, automatically generating job specification documents from populated fields, and sending automated emails to both host companies and students after placement confirmations. Additional potential automation included updating the 'placement status' after each step and generating automatic actions, such as contacting participants 48 hours after sending Job

Specs for placement confirmation. Successful implementation of these changes was dependent on collaboration with management and the parent company employee in charge of programming the CRM system.

3.3.4 Receiving students and other tasks

The responsibility of receiving students was distributed among employees based on availability. This included meeting students at the bus stop for the Dublin airport transfer, managing their transfer by pre-booked taxis, and, in the event of self-catering apartments, accompanying them to their designated housing. Upon arrival, we assigned students to their assigned rooms and addressed any logistical concerns they might have. While the primary responsibility for preparing accommodations lay with external service providers, a significant development occurred during my internship. Our company struck a new agreement with Queen's University, securing 30 rooms in student accommodation for the summer. This arrangement required our team to prepare these rooms, including making beds, setting up rooms, and ensuring kitchens were equipped with the necessary appliances prior to student arrivals. Additionally, we were responsible for dismantling everything before the start of the new semester.

After their arrival, I frequently accompanied, assisted, and occasionally substituted for my colleague responsible for HR during induction meetings. Following the induction, we would lead the group on a brief walk to the Belfast Visitor Centre in the city centre. Additionally, my role entailed aiding management with any unexpected challenges that arose from placements, homestays, or other aspects influenced by student conduct, unmet expectations, or external factors such as holidays, protests and riots that could endanger the participants. I also assisted with any occasional issues that arose with the company’s accommodations.

My time in this role provided me with a comprehensive understanding of project management, emphasizing the importance of fostering strong relationships with both internal teams and external stakeholders. Through diverse tasks, I gained valuable experience in both the operational and interpersonal sides of the company's operations, ensuring a smooth and supportive experience for all participants.

CHAPTER IV – DATA ON THE IMPACT OF BREXIT ON MOBILITY IN FURTHER EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

4 Data in the Impact of Brexit on Mobility in Further Education in Northern Ireland

4.1 Methodology

The methodology used to gather data on the impact of Brexit on Further Education mobility in Northern Ireland primarily relied on structured and semi-structured interviews. When public access to data through desk research proved challenging, the focus shifted to establishing contact with reliable sources and conducting interviews. Interviewing is a particularly effective method to collect data for qualitative research, especially when using case studies as the research methodology (Naz et al., 2022). These interviews involve asking detailed questions, guided by either a structured or semi-structured format, to gain a deeper understanding of individual perspectives (Aung et al., 2021). Both structured and semi-structured interviews are valuable tools for gaining insight into study participants' experiences and perceptions related to the topic of investigation (Naz et al., 2022). While structured interviews adhere to a pre-developed guide or protocol, focusing on the core topic, semi-structured interviews offer more flexibility. The latter allows the interviewer to explore new ideas and follow emerging themes as the conversation evolves (Magaldi & Berler, 2020).

To acquire data, I initially considered direct contact with the six Further Education colleges in the region. Recognizing that personal connections could increase the likelihood of receiving responses, I decided to resort to my network. My manager at Intern Europe, Kevin Chevillon, provided personal contacts at three of the colleges: Diana Farrelly, External Funding & International Affairs Manager at Southern Regional College; Aiveen Cassidy, Curriculum Area Manager for Hospitality at Belfast Metropolitan College (Belfast Met); and Anne Birt-Macartney, Head of Department for Travel, Tourism and Hospitality at Northern Regional College, with whom I made contact on June 26, 2024.

Anne Birt-Macartney was the only contact who responded, leading to further introductions within Northern Regional College. This allowed me to establish ongoing communication that same day with Aaron Ballantyne, Head of the Department of Science & Service Industries at the college. After several months of efforts to schedule an interview, I finally succeeded on September 9. During our conversation, Aaron provided valuable insights and referred me to Bronagh Fikri, European & International Projects

Officer at North West Regional College, with whom I conducted an interview on September 24.

Simultaneously, I sought to gather information by contacting the Department for the Economy, which oversees Further Education in Northern Ireland, on June 25 and 26, followed by additional inquiries on July 7. Despite sending numerous email inquiries to various departments, these efforts ultimately proved unsuccessful.

A more successful approach involved reaching out to MLA Nick Mathison from the Alliance Party. On July 11, I requested his assistance in submitting a question on my behalf to the Committee for Education. On July 22, Nick's office advised that, since Further Education falls within the authority of the Department for the Economy, it would be more effective to contact the Alliance Party representative on the Committee for the Economy, David Honeyford, or to contact the committee directly. The Committee for the Economy responded to my inquiry on August 16, indicating that the question would be introduced when the Assembly reconvened. They stated that while they certainly did not have the information I was seeking, members might be elected to request it from the Department. Additionally, they suggested that it might be faster if I asked Mr. Mathison to submit the question to the Minister for the Economy as an Assembly Written Question. Following this advice, I re-engaged with Nick Mathison's office on August 18, and on August 19 they confirmed that they would submit the question when the Assembly resumed in a few weeks.

The question was submitted by Nick Mathison MLA´s office in the first week of September 2024, when question submissions reopened, and a letter of reply (Appendix B) from the Minister for the Economy was forwarded on September 27. The Committee for the Economy discussed my request during their meeting on September 5 and informed me of their decision on September 9. The letter of reply (Appendix A), signed by Peter McCallion, the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy, regretfully declared that the Committee did not have the specific data I requested.

Parallel to these efforts, I discovered through ongoing research that Further Education mobility primarily involves short-term work placements rather than the semester-long exchanges typical of Higher Education. This was highlighted in a European Commission report titled *Vocational Mobility in Europe: Analysing Provision, Take-up and Impact*, conducted in 2019 (European Commission, 2019). This finding was further confirmed

during several in-office conversations with Colin Blackburn, CEO of Intern Europe, and Kevin Chevillon, General Manager of Intern Europe, who shared their experiences and the challenges they faced in attempting to collaborate with Northern Irish colleges on in-bound student mobility programmes. As a result, it became clear that Northern Irish colleges might not feel the direct impact of Brexit on inbound mobility, as many Further Education students don't go through the colleges for their mobility experiences. Recognizing this, I found it particularly valuable to include data from Intern Europe, an organization specializing in facilitating work placements for students in vocational schools coming in mobility from mainland Europe. Intern Europe provided a unique perspective on the impact of Brexit, especially since many similar organizations in the UK either ceased operations or attempted to relocate to Dublin, mostly unsuccessfully. Consequently, Intern Europe's experience serves as a crucial case study for understanding the broader effects of Brexit on Further Education mobility in Northern Ireland. To assess these effects, I analysed Intern Europe's financial statements from 2018 to 2023 and annual booking reports from 2017 to 2023, provided by Colin Blackburn, the CEO of Intern Europe, on July 8, 2024. Additionally, on the same day, I conducted an interview with Blackburn to gain deeper insights into how Brexit affected the organization's operations.

4.2 The impact of Brexit on Mobility in the Further Education Colleges

The limited availability of publicly accessible material on further education in Northern Ireland (Husband & Ireland, 2022) made it challenging to obtain data on the impact of Brexit on student mobility in this sector. Very few public studies address this issue. The most recent records available date back to 2018, when Northern Ireland's Department for the Economy submitted a response to the UK's Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) regarding the effects of international students. This response, given by Andrew McCormick, then Permanent Secretary, emphasized the crucial role of short-term mobility in both Further and Higher Education strategies. The Erasmus+ program was highlighted as particularly significant, offering transformative experiences and serving as a key marketing tool (McCormick, 2018).

As a result, obtaining updated information required direct contact with reliable sources. I focused on reaching out to the six Further Education colleges in Northern Ireland, as well

as the Department for the Economy (DfE), which is the managing authority. Additionally, I contacted the Committee for the Economy and members of the Northern Ireland Assembly to explore the possibility of presenting my questions during Assembly meetings.

In a recent interview with Bronagh Fikri, the European & International Projects Officer at North West Regional College (NWRC), conducted on September 24, I was provided with a valuable report, conducted by the Department for the Economy in 2019, titled *The Impact of EU-Funded Projects on the NI Further Education (FE) Sector since 2014.* This report included detailed information on mobility within Further Education in Northern Ireland prior to Brexit—data that is difficult to access through individual desk research. Between 2014 and 2019, the six further education colleges in Northern Ireland experienced significant benefits from mobility activities, with participation from 3,648 students and 1,471 staff. Notably, there was consistent annual growth in Erasmus+ participation, accompanied by an investment of €9.4 million (Department for the Economy, 2019). However, the question remains: what has changed in terms of numbers nowadays, post-Brexit?

4.2.1 The Committee for the Economy and Minister for the Economy responses to Brexit-related Inquires

Further Education in Northern Ireland is overseen by the Department for the Economy and is therefore discussed within the Committee for the Economy in the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Committee is responsible for reviewing and developing policies, as well as consulting with the Department of the Economy, while also playing an important role in the preparation and implementation of laws (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2024a). In light of this, I contacted the Committee for the Economy on July 22, as recommended by Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) Nick Mathison, to request information on the following question:

"What data is available on the impact of Brexit on student and staff mobility in the six Further Education colleges in Northern Ireland, including any changes in participation in exchange programs, cross-border collaborations, and international recruitment since Brexit?"

The Committee held its first meeting after the summer recess on September 5, 2024, in which they discussed my question. Shortly after, I received a formal reply, which regrettably confirmed that the Committee did not hold the specific information I was seeking. The letter (Appendix A), signed by the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy, Peter McCallion, noted that the Committee had considered my request but ultimately determined that it was unable to provide the relevant data. The Committee suggested that my inquiry might be better addressed by directly contacting the Department for the Economy (DfE) or by requesting an MLA to submit the question to the Minister for the Economy on my behalf (McCallion, 2024).

This response underscored the difficulties in obtaining up-to-date and specific information about the effects of Brexit on Further Education mobility. Despite the Committee's efforts to consider my request, the lack of comprehensive data on the subject remained a significant challenge.

Before the official letter of response was received, the Committee had already recommended that an MLA submit the question on my behalf to the Minister for the Economy, in response to my inquiry on July 22. In early September, the Office of Nick Mathison, member of the Northern Irish Legislative Assembly for the Alliance Party, formally submitted the following question to the Minister for the Economy:

"To ask the Minister for the Economy to detail available data on the impact of Brexit on i) student and ii) staff mobility in Further Education colleges in Northern Ireland, including any changes in participation in i) exchange programs, ii) cross-border collaboration, and iii) international recruitment since Brexit."

A letter of reply from the Minister for the Economy (Appendix B), forwarded on September 27, 2024, stated that while data on student and staff mobility is held by Further Education Colleges, no formal analysis has been conducted on the impact of Brexit on these activities. The Minister noted that several factors, not just Brexit, would influence mobility patterns. He further highlighted that the Colleges have received less funding under the Turing Scheme post-EU Exit compared to its predecessor, Erasmus+, but he was unable to provide further details beyond this (Murphy, 2024).

This response further highlights the challenges in obtaining specific data on the effects of Brexit on Further Education mobility in Northern Ireland. While data exists, no detailed analysis has been undertaken, however, funding reductions post-Brexit, under the Turing

Scheme, are noted as a key impact. Nevertheless, there remains a notable lack of comprehensive data or analysis regarding the broader effects of Brexit on student and staff mobility in the six Further Education Colleges in Northern Ireland.

4.2.2 Experiences of Northern Regional College and North West Regional College Post-Brexit

While obtaining specific data has proven challenging, the testimonies from key stakeholders within the colleges provide valuable evidence for this research. As institutions adapt to the new funding landscape created by Brexit and the transition to the Turing Scheme, the lack of opportunities for international exchange programs significantly impacts student experiences. Insights from both Aaron Ballantyne, Head of Science and Service Industries at Northern Regional College, and Bronagh Fikri, European & International Projects Officer at North West Regional College, gathered during personal interviews, illustrate this point effectively.

In his interview on September 9, Aaron Ballantyne described how changes in international exchange programs and funding mechanisms have influenced mobility opportunities for students at the Northern Regional College. Traditionally, students at the college often participated in short-term educational programs abroad, such as visits to institutions or cultural excursions, rather than long-term work placements. For instance, a typical program might involve a two-week educational trip where students engage in a mix of academic and cultural experiences. One such trip involved a group of computing students who visited Belgium, attending talks, exploring industry practices, and participating in entrepreneurship workshops (A. Ballantyne, interview, September 9, 2024).

Aaron Ballantyne states that the consequences of the departure from Erasmus+ were particularly felt due to the absence of a dedicated international trips coordinator, and that reduced resources cause limited mobility opportunities. Northern Regional College is the smallest of the six regional colleges, with Ballantyne noting that they have never had a high influx of international students. However, the impact has been significant on outbound staff and student mobility. The college used to send small groups of teachers to other colleges in Europe to learn about educational practices. Since the withdrawal from Erasmus, none of these mobilities have occurred. Student mobility, particularly in

programs that were previously repeated annually, was also deeply reduced (A. Ballantyne, interview, September 9, 2024).

Brexit's impact is compounded by the bureaucratic challenges associated with the replacement program, the Turing Scheme. While Turing is designed to support student mobility, Ballantyne noted that it is perceived as more bureaucratic than its predecessor, potentially discouraging applications. Furthermore, Turing's global ambitions don't work in practice, as there are not enough funds to send students to countries like the United States, leaving students to pursue mobility within European countries (A. Ballantyne, interview, September 9, 2024).

In response to Brexit, the Irish government introduced some funding to support Northern Irish students' mobility within the island of Ireland. This funding was initially directed at higher education institutions but was later extended to further education through lobbying efforts. Despite this, the limited amount of funding available often restricted its use to within the Irish island rather than supporting mobility to broader European destinations (A. Ballantyne, interview, September 9, 2024).

Ballantyne also expressed a concern regarding the lack of comprehensive data on the impact of Brexit on Northern Ireland's FE sector. While there is some evidence of reduced mobility and fewer exchanges, particularly with European institutions, detailed data and studies specifically targeting the FE sector remain sparse. However, he notes the impact has been more pronounced in colleges with significant cross-border student populations, such as those near the Republic of Ireland. Institutions like the North West Regional College, which had a high influx of students from the Republic of Ireland, have experienced notable declines in cross-border student enrolment (A. Ballantyne, interview, September 9, 2024).

In our interview on September 24, Bronagh Fikri, the European & International Projects Officer at the North West Regional College (NWRC), shared insights into how international mobility has evolved in the college following Brexit, highlighting the challenges faced regarding funding, student exchanges, and staff mobilities (B. Fikri, interview, September 24, 2024). From 2014 to 2019, NWRC attracted the greatest level of funding from Erasmus+, securing approximately €3.3 million (Department for the Economy, 2019).

Mobility at NWRC traditionally involved providing both students and staff the opportunity to participate in study or work placements abroad. For students, this meant gaining invaluable experience through placements in European countries, enriching their learning by exposing them to different work and cultural environments. Staff mobilities, on the other hand, focused on exchanging innovative teaching methods and best practices, which could be applied at NWRC to enhance educational quality. These exchanges played a vital role in maintaining high standards in teaching and student engagement (B. Fikri, interview, September 24, 2024).

However, the decision to withdraw from the Erasmus programme brought significant changes, particularly in terms of reduced funding for both student and staff mobilities. Although specific figures were not provided, Bronagh indicated that the number of student exchanges has decreased. The most noticeable change post-Brexit, however, has been the loss of dedicated staff mobility opportunities. While staff can still accompany students on mobility programs, standalone staff exchanges have been eliminated due to the withdrawal of funding, significantly impacting the professional development of NWRC's teaching staff (B. Fikri, interview, September 24, 2024).

The UK government's introduction of the Turing Scheme as a replacement for Erasmus has both expanded and limited opportunities for NWRC. On the positive side, Bronagh highlights that the Turing Scheme allows for exchanges outside Europe, opening up possibilities for students to travel to countries such as the United States, Mexico, Thailand, and Cambodia. However, the new Erasmus cycle also allows this—a benefit the UK was unable to take advantage of. Despite this broader geographic reach, the overall funding provided by the Turing Scheme is less than what Erasmus offered. Moreover, the administrative burden of managing projects under the new scheme has increased significantly, with frequent changes to reporting procedures making it difficult for institutions to navigate the system smoothly (B. Fikri, interview, September 24, 2024).

Cross-border collaboration between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland has, however, increased in the aftermath of Brexit. NWRC is part of the Northwest Cross-Border Education Cluster, collaborating with institutions such as the Ulster University, the Atlantic Technological University, and the Donegal Education and Training Board. This collaboration has fostered the development of shared qualifications and pathways, ensuring that students benefit from educational cooperation between the two regions. Similarly to Aaron, Bronagh recalls how the Irish government stepped in to provide

additional funding for mobility, recognizing the unique challenges faced by Northern Ireland's FE sector post-Brexit. While this funding is often directed toward exchanges within the island of Ireland, NWRC has retained the flexibility to use it for broader international opportunities (B. Fikri, interview, September 24, 2024).

One immediate challenge brought about by Brexit is the new barriers faced by non-Irish EU students living in the Republic of Ireland who wish to study at NWRC. Previously, students from border areas, such as Donegal, could easily enrol in NWRC programs. Now, they are considered international students and must navigate a complex visa process, which excludes part-time students and those in lower-level courses, such as Level 1 or Level 2 qualifications. This has led to a decline in student enrolment from these regions, as many prospective students are unable to meet the visa requirements. Additionally, non-Irish EU citizens must now demonstrate English language proficiency, despite being educated in English, further complicating the enrolment process (B. Fikri, interview, September 24, 2024).

Fikri expresses deep frustration with the UK government's decision to leave Erasmus, particularly after assurances from then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson that the UK would remain part of the program. The unexpected withdrawal from Erasmus in December 2020 has had long-term consequences for FE institutions like NWRC, limiting their ability to engage with European partners and reducing opportunities for students to experience international education. While there is hope that the UK might rejoin Erasmus if the political landscape changes, there is no guarantee, and NWRC must continue to work within the constraints of the Turing Scheme and other available funding sources (B. Fikri, interview, September 24, 2024).

Most importantly, Fikri shared that a report on the impact of Brexit on mobility had been requested by the Department for the Economy in September 2024. This is the first such inquiry since 2019, when the report titled *The Impact of EU-Funded Projects on the NI Further Education (FE) Sector* was conducted. Fikri suspects that my inquiries may have prompted this new report. Unfortunately, she would require authorization to share the data, leaving me unable to access this critical information at present.

4.3 The impact of Brexit on Intern Europe

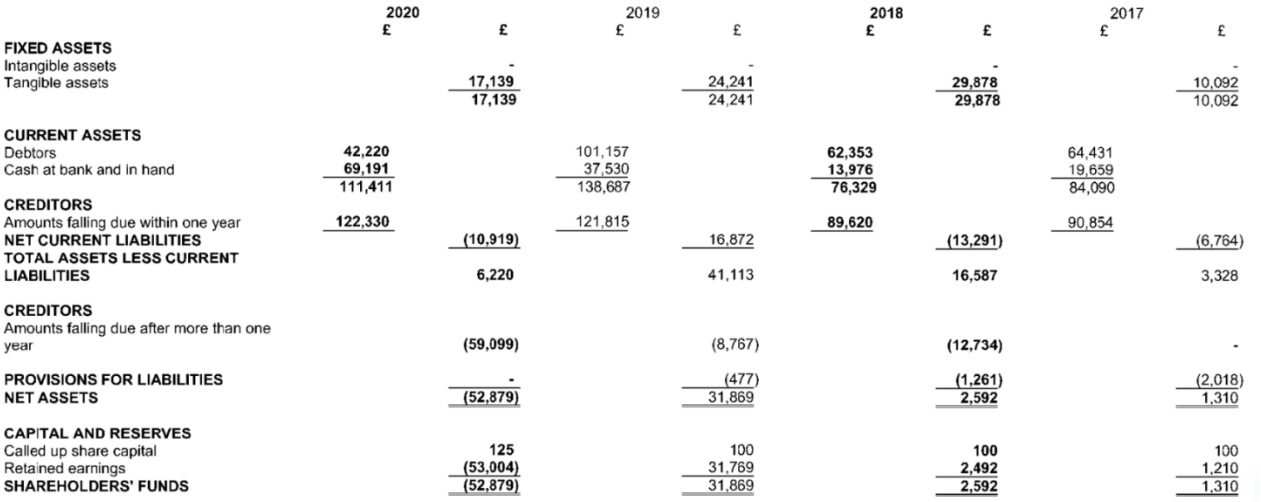
Intern Europe serves as a representative case study of the impact of Brexit on Further Education mobility in Northern Ireland. As a company that specialized in organizing vocational placements through the Erasmus Programme, it faced significant challenges following the UK's departure from the European Union. The resulting reduction in Erasmus+ funding allocations to the UK, along with the implementation of strict visa requirements, led to a marked decline in participants, the closure of company offices and step reduction of the number of employees. Intern Europe's experience reflects the broader challenges Brexit has posed to cross-border educational exchanges, highlighting the significant challenges to future further education mobility in the region.

4.3.1 The Financial Journey of Intern Europe (2017-2023)

The financial statements of Intern Europe over the years show considerable variations in retained earnings and overall financial health. From 2017 to 2018, Intern Europe's retained earnings increased by an astounding 105%, from £1,210 to £2,492. This significant increase, which more than doubled retained earnings, reflects a time of strong financial success (Intern Europe Limited, 2018a). The next year, from 2018 to 2019, saw an even more dramatic growth in retained earnings, skyrocketing to £31,769, which translates to a 13-fold increase (Intern Europe Limited, 2019a). By 2019, the company had reached 966 participants in the program and employed 13 people (Intern Europe Limited, 2019b; Intern Europe Limited, 2019a). However, 2020 marked a turning point for Intern Europe. The financial results reflect a significant slump, with retained earnings dropping to a deficit of £53,004, a 167% decrease from the previous year (Intern Europe Limited, 2020a). This sharp fall can be linked to the economic difficulties induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The company's current assets declined by only 20% during this time period, indicating that the significant loss in retained earnings was primarily attributable to rising debt from loans rather than a major decrease in asset value. Intern Europe reduced further losses with government assistance and strategic decisions, such as closing the young Liverpool office, which helped to stabilize the financial situation during a difficult year (C. Blackburn, interview, July 8, 2024).

Figure 1

Intern Europe Financial statements for the years 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020



	2020		2019		2018		2017	
	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	£
FIXED ASSETS								
Intangible assets		-		-		-		-
Tangible assets		17,139		24,241		29,878		10,092
		17,139		24,241		29,878		10,092
CURRENT ASSETS								
Debtors	42,220		101,157		62,353		64,431	
Cash at bank and in hand	69,191		37,530		13,976		19,659	
	111,411		138,687		76,329		84,090	
CREDITORS								
Amounts falling due within one year	122,330		121,815		89,620		90,854	
NET CURRENT LIABILITIES		(10,919)		16,872		(13,291)		(6,764)
TOTAL ASSETS LESS CURRENT LIABILITIES		6,220		41,113		16,587		3,328
CREDITORS								
Amounts falling due after more than one year		(59,099)		(8,767)		(12,734)		-
PROVISIONS FOR LIABILITIES		-		(477)		(1,261)		(2,018)
NET ASSETS		(52,879)		31,869		2,592		1,310
CAPITAL AND RESERVES								
Called up share capital		125		100		100		100
Retained earnings		(53,004)		31,769		2,492		1,210
SHAREHOLDERS' FUNDS		(52,879)		31,869		2,592		1,310

Note. From Financial Statements for the Year Ended 31 December 2018 & 2020 for INTERN EUROPE LIMITED

Intern Europe attributes its most significant challenges directly, to Brexit, manifested through two critical events: the UK's withdrawal from the Erasmus Programme in December 2020 and the implementation of visa requirements for EU nationals in April 2021 (C. Blackburn, interview, July 8, 2024). These decisions, made unexpectedly and without prior notice, had far-reaching consequences for the company's operations and financial health. The UK's abrupt exit from the Erasmus Programme in December 2020 caused a significant damage to Intern Europe, halting the flow of international students and professionals who were crucial to its business model. This decision greatly affected revenue, as the Erasmus Programme had supported a large number of exchanges and placements organized by Intern Europe. The situation deteriorated further in April 2021, when the UK government implemented visa requirements for EU nationals. The financial implications of these Brexit-related events were severe. Between 2020 and 2021, Intern Europe's retained earnings fell by 277%, from a deficit of £53,004 to a staggering £199,590 (Intern Europe Limited, 2021a). This dramatic drop illustrates the immediate and severe consequences of leaving the Erasmus programme and the new visa restrictions. Brexit had a profound impact on Intern Europe, resulting in the closure of the Glasgow branch and the severance of connections with over 600 of the more than 800 host companies with which it had previously worked (C. Blackburn, interview, July 8, 2024).

Figure 2

Intern Europe Financial statements for the years 2020 and 2021

	2021	2020
	£	£
Fixed assets		
Tangible assets	5,611	17,139
	5,611	**17,139**
Current assets		
Debtors	22,921	42,220
Cash at bank and in hand	18,552	69,191
	41,473	**111,411**
Creditors		
Amounts falling due within one year	(201,338)	(122,330)
Net current liabilities	**(159,865)**	**(10,919)**
Total assets less current liabilities	**(154,254)**	**6,220**
Creditors		
Amounts falling due after more than one year	(45,211)	(59,099)
Net liabilities	**(199,465)**	**(52,879)**
Capital and reserves		
Called-up share capital	125	125
Profit and loss account	(199,590)	(53,004)
Total shareholders' deficit	**(199,465)**	**(52,879)**

Note. From Financial Statements for the Year Ended 31 December 2021 for INTERN EUROPE LIMITED.

The following year, 2022, continued to experience financial difficulties. Retained earnings plummeted by 32%, raising the negative balance to £264,349, and the number of employees dropped to 6 (Intern Europe Limited, 2022a). This period most likely reflects the long-term impact of the initial shocks, as the corporation struggled to adapt to the changing operational landscape and lost partnerships. Despite these obstacles, 2023 provided a glimpse of optimism with a 25% recovery in debt values, which improved to -£197,565, with the setback of the number of employees falling to 4 (Intern Europe Limited, 2023a). This recovery suggests that Intern Europe has begun to stabilize its financial situation through strategic modifications.

Figure 3

Intern Europe Financial statements for the years 2021, 2022 and 2023

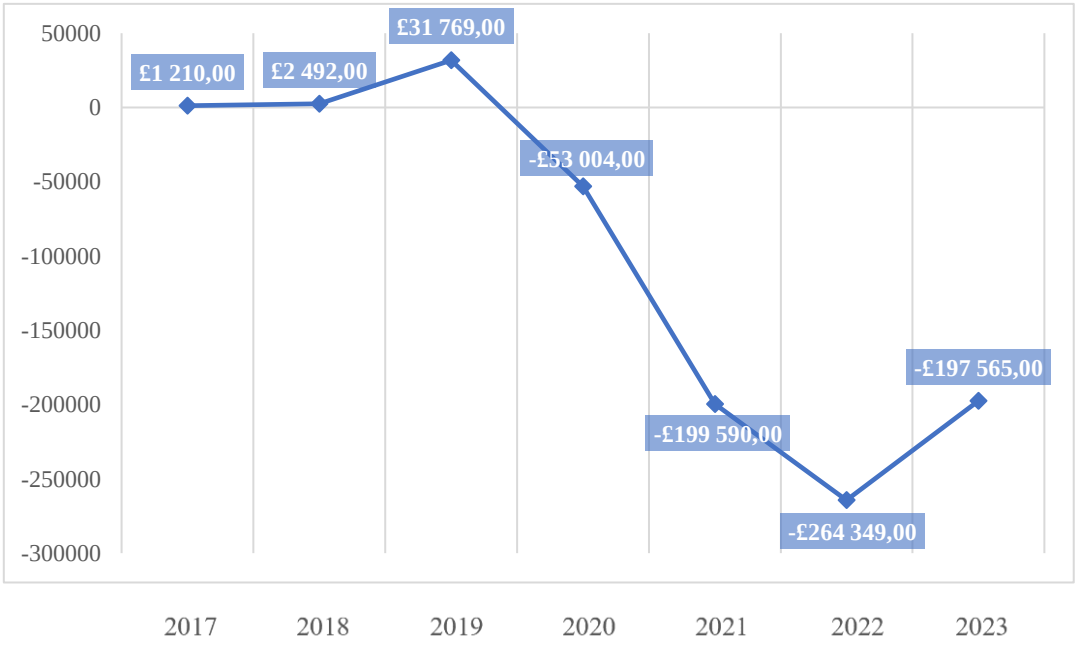
	31.12.23 £	£	31.12.22 £	£	2021 £
FIXED ASSETS					
Intangible assets		-		-	5,611
Tangible assets		1,253		-	**5,611**
		1,253		-	
CURRENT ASSETS					22,921
Debtors	17,386		25,691		18,552
Cash at bank and in hand	5,286		7,586		**41,473**
	22,672		33,277		
CREDITORS					
Amounts falling due within one year	141,911		246,203		(201,338)
NET CURRENT LIABILITIES		(119,239)		(212,926)	**(159,865)**
TOTAL ASSETS LESS CURRENT LIABILITIES		(117,986)		(212,926)	**(154,254)**
CREDITORS					
Amounts falling due after more than one year		79,454		51,298	(45,211)
NET LIABILITIES		(197,440)		(264,224)	**(199,465)**
CAPITAL AND RESERVES					
Called up share capital		125		125	125
Retained earnings		(197,565)		(264,349)	(199,590)
SHAREHOLDERS' FUNDS		(197,440)		(264,224)	**(199,465)**

Note. From Financial Statements for the Year Ended 31 December 2020 & 2023 for INTERN EUROPE LIMITED.

Upon examining Figure 4, one can observe significant fluctuations reflecting the company's turbulent financial journey. Retained earnings increased dramatically from £1,210 to an astounding £31,769 between 2017 and 2019 (Intern Europe Limited, 2018a; Intern Europe Limited, 2019a), demonstrating remarkable growth and financial success. However, the graph shows a sharp downturn in 2020, mostly as a result of the economic effects of COVID-19, with retained earnings plummeting to a £53,004 deficit (Intern Europe Limited, 2020a). The situation deteriorates between 2020 and 2021, as a result of Brexit-related issues, such as the UK's withdrawal from the Erasmus Programme and the implementation of visa requirements for EU nationals, with retained earnings falling further to a staggering £199,590 deficit (Intern Europe Limited, 2021a). In 2022, retained earnings continue to decrease, reaching a negative balance of £264,349, indicating persistent financial difficulty (Intern Europe Limited, 2022a). Despite these issues, the graph shows a slight comeback in 2023, with retained earnings rising to -£197,565, indicating that Intern Europe is beginning to stabilize its financial condition (Intern Europe Limited, 2023a).

Figure 4

Intern Europe Retained Earnings 2017-2023



Note. Adapted from Financial Statements for the Year Ended 31 December 2018, 2020, 2021 & 2023 for INTERN EUROPE LIMITED.

Intern Europe persevered, especially considering Colin Blackburn's witnessed many peer organizations in the UK closing down, with some attempting to relocate to Ireland—efforts that ultimately ended in disarray. Despite facing legal constraints, Intern Europe managed to endure and is now in the process of recovering both financially and operationally. However, it is expected that it will take 3 to 4 years to fully resolve the debts incurred during this period. They remain hopeful that with these changes, they will be well-positioned to support organizations seeking English-speaking mobility opportunities in the future (C. Blackburn, interview, July 8, 2024).

4.3.2 The number of participants from 2017 to 2025

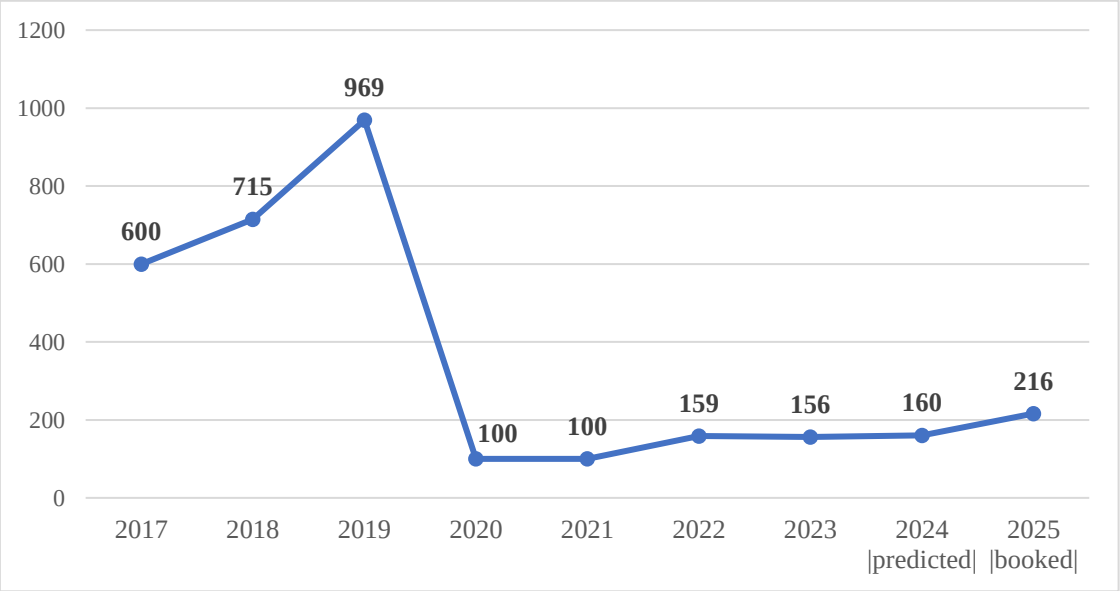
The trajectory of Intern Europe's international work placements in Belfast from 2017 to 2025 reflects the significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit. In 2017, the Belfast office welcomed 600 participants (Intern Europe Limited, 2017b) a number that steadily increased to 715 in 2018 (Intern Europe Limited, 2018b) and 969 in 2019 (Intern

Europe Limited, 2019b). However, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 resulted in a drastic decrease, with only about 100 participants arriving despite 1,200 pre-bookings made by partners for that year (Intern Europe Limited, 2020b; C. Blackburn, interview, July 8, 2024). Even with the challenges faced in 2020, there was a hopeful surge in bookings for 2021, with 2,000 participants booked (C. Blackburn, interview, July 8, 2024), as many expected to leave the effects of the pandemic behind. However, few could have predicted the UK's withdrawal from the Erasmus+ programme in December 2020 and the subsequent implementation of visa requirements for EU citizens in April 2021. Consequently, the downward trend continued into 2021, with the number of participants remaining similarly as low as 2020 (Intern Europe Limited, 2021b).

By 2022, the number of participants had dropped dramatically to 159 (Intern Europe Limited, 2022b), and by 2023, it had fallen further to 156 (Intern Europe Limited, 2023b). However, projections for 2024 indicate a slight increase, with the number expected to reach 160 by the end of the year, while current bookings for 2025 stand at 216. Since 2017, one of the few constants has been the length of placements, which have consistently ranged from 4 to 6 weeks for the majority of participants (K. Chevillon, personal communication, August 8, 2024).

Figure 5

Intern Europe number of participants 2017-2025



Note. Adapted from Intern Europe Database 2017-2024.

Despite the initial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the high demand for participation in the programme, demonstrated by the number of pre-bookings made for the 2021 cycle, showcases how Brexit and the subsequent decisions were the real blow to Intern Europe's operations. Kevin Chevillon, the general manager, attributes the current low levels of bookings primarily to the uncertainties surrounding visas and regulatory changes. The situation has been aggravated by the fact that Erasmus+ guidelines now permit only a small percentage of their budget to be allocated to mobilities in the UK, a direct consequence of the UK's decision to leave the Erasmus programme (K. Chevillon, personal communication, August 8, 2024).

The combined effect of these factors has created a challenging environment for international work placements in Belfast, leading to a dramatic decrease in the number of participants over the last few years. However, forecasts for 2025 offer a glimmer of hope, though uncertainty remains about whether the company will ever be able to return to the booking figures seen before the UK's departure from Erasmus+ and the implementation of visa requirements.

The case studies analysed in this chapter illustrate the significant challenges faced by Northern Irish educational institutions in facilitating Further Education mobility due to Brexit and subsequent decisions. Although the Committee for the Economy and the Minister for Economy were unable to provide specific data on the impact of Brexit on mobility within the six Further Education colleges in Northern Irland, the experiences of Northern Regional College (NRC) and North West Regional College (NWRC) illustrate a notable decline in both student and staff mobility following the withdrawal from the Erasmus Programme. NRC has experienced a sharp decrease in mobility opportunities, particularly in staff mobility, which is virtually non-existent. This decline has been exacerbated by the bureaucratic challenges associated with the Turing Scheme. Specifically, the absence of a dedicated international trips coordinator and reduced resources have limited NRC's ability to offer international experiences. Similarly, NWRC has faced significant funding reductions, resulting in a decrease in student exchanges and the elimination of standalone staff mobility opportunities. While the introduction of the Turing Scheme initially opened up new possibilities for global exchanges, the overall funding remains less than what was available under Erasmus, and administrative burdens have increased. Additionally, the college, which is in close proximity to the Republic of

Ireland, is facing a worrying trend of decreasing cross-border enrolments, underscoring the enduring implications of these changes for the Further Education sector.

The case study of Intern Europe serves to further illustrate the ramifications of Brexit on FE mobility, particularly concerning in-bound mobilities of EU students. Once thriving under Erasmus funding, the organization has experienced a dramatic drop in participants—plummeting from 969 in 2019 to merely 156 by 2023—due to the combined effects of Brexit-related funding cuts and new visa regulations for EU citizens. Intern Europe's financial decline, marked by an increase in debt and a decrease in staff, underscores the direct relationship between these regulatory changes and operational sustainability. Although there are signs of stabilization, the uncertainty surrounding future participation rates raises concerns about the long-term viability of FE mobility programs in Northern Ireland.

Collectively, the data and insights presented in this chapter paint a troubling picture of the challenges facing Further Education institutions in the post-Brexit landscape, underscoring the urgent need for adaptive strategies, renewed funding opportunities, and hopeful policy changes that mend relationships with the EU to support international collaboration and enhance student mobility.

This internship report has explored the complex impact of Brexit on student mobility within Northern Ireland's Further Education (FE) sector, focusing on the broader implications of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, particularly its exit from the Erasmus+ programme. Through a combination of historical analysis, policy review, and practical case studies, the research highlights the profound challenges that Brexit has introduced to the mobility of students and staff within Northern Ireland's educational institutions. The region's unique political and historical context presents both obstacles and opportunities as it navigates its place in a post-Brexit world. Northern Ireland occupies a distinct position as the only part of the UK sharing a land border with the EU. Additionally, the rights of its citizens established in the Good Friday Agreement, the open ties with the Republic of Ireland, and the outcome of the Northern Irish Brexit vote complicate its relationship with both the UK government and the European Union. This complexity has been exacerbated by the political instability in Northern Ireland and the ongoing challenges associated with the Brexit transition.

Key findings from this study reveal that the withdrawal from Erasmus+, combined with new visa regulations and the bureaucratic complexity of the Turing Scheme, has led to a marked decline in both student and staff mobility. Moreover, it is important to note the difficulty in acquiring public data on the full extent of this impact. Both before Brexit and especially in the current context, there has been a lack of specific data on Further Education mobility in Northern Ireland. The Committee for the Economy and the Minister for the Economy have indicated that there is no available data on how Brexit has affected mobility in the region's Further Education colleges, highlighting a significant gap in official reporting on the issue.

Despite this lack of formal data, the case studies of Northern Regional College (NRC) and North West Regional College (NWRC) illustrate these consequences vividly. These institutions, which previously benefited from solid mobility programmes under Erasmus+, now face significant funding reductions, the elimination of staff mobility opportunities, and in the case of NWRC, decreased cross-border enrolments, especially given its proximity to the Republic of Ireland. While the Turing Scheme offers some alternative pathways, it has not fully compensated for the loss of Erasmus+ in terms of funding or ease of access.

The research also highlighted the specific challenges faced by organizations such as Intern Europe, which previously thrived under the Erasmus+ programme by facilitating

work placements for vocational students arriving from mainland Europe. Brexit not only drastically reduced participant numbers but also caused financial strain, severely impacting the organization's ability to function and adapt in the post-Brexit context.

My internship as a Project Coordinator at Intern Europe afforded me invaluable firsthand insights into the challenges and complexities associated with the impact of Brexit on student mobility within Northern Ireland's Further Education (FE) sector. I witnessed firsthand how the realities of Brexit have not only altered the opportunities available to students but also influenced the financial and operational workflows of organizations engaged in facilitating student mobility with mainland Europe. When I first arrived at the company, there were only two employees, and during my initial training with the CEO, I learned how Brexit had led to a drastic reduction in staff, which had previously reached 15 before Brexit, and the closure of company branches in other cities. As the organization worked to recover, I took on the responsibility of understanding all aspects of its operations and providing support across various departments. The company had to make strategic decisions to survive the post-Brexit landscape, and while it is now experiencing growth, the limited number of employees has made it difficult for them to cover all aspects of operations independently. Additionally, activities that Intern Europe previously organized, such as social events, had been stalled for years as the company refocused its efforts on survival and the most crucial tasks. This reality led me to be tasked with reviving the social events, researching the old database, reorganizing a new format, and negotiating a new venue.

The legislative complexities brought by Brexit were also clear in the company's operations. Visa requirements were applied to EU nationals, making it prohibitively expensive for students to come from mainland Europe, particularly for those funded by Erasmus for short-term mobility. One way Intern Europe addressed this issue was by identifying a route that allows international participants to enter the UK without a visa if they are involved in volunteer work for a charity for up to 30 days. However, many of the host companies that Intern Europe had previously collaborated with did not qualify as charities and were unwilling to accept students without the necessary visas. In reality, Brexit severed connections with over 600 of the more than 800 host companies that had previously partnered with Intern Europe. My task of researching the database of charities in Belfast was crucial for rebuilding a solid network of host companies capable of receiving students for work placements. Additionally, many of the meetings I attended

with potential host companies involved explaining the charity visa route and detailing the duration of work placements, highlighting the complexity of post-Brexit regulations to a point where even local citizens struggle to understand the new requirements. This experience also led me to engage with former host companies that had not hosted students since Brexit, working to establish trusting relationships and clarifying the opportunities for hosting mainland students. While supporting my general manager in engaging with partners, I witnessed the effort to incentivize bookings and re-engage with old European partners who had stopped sending students after Brexit. These efforts clearly showcase how Brexit deeply hurt the trust European counterparts had for the UK and how these relationships were affected. Several efforts have been taken in rebuilding trust and partnerships with European counterparts.

The case of Intern Europe serves as a key example of the broader operational challenges encountered by institutions and organizations as they navigate the new legislative and financial realities in the post-Brexit era. Although Brexit has led to a significant decline in participant numbers, Intern Europe has sought innovative ways to facilitate mobility. Their experience underscores the resilience of local organizations in maintaining ties with the European community, despite the challenges posed by the current political landscape.

Beyond these practical challenges, Brexit has strained the relationship between Northern Ireland's Further Education sector and European mobility networks. The growing distrust among EU member states in facilitating mobility to the UK, along with the complexity of post-Brexit regulations, has resulted in a long-term reduction in international cooperation and exchanges. This shift has significant implications not only for student and staff development but also for Northern Ireland's broader economic and educational ecosystems.

In light of these findings, there is an urgent need for new policies and initiatives to address Northern Ireland's decreasing mobility opportunities. While the Turing Scheme has provided some avenues for international exchanges, the FE sector requires a more comprehensive structure that can effectively support both student and staff mobility in the post-Brexit context. This includes simplifying bureaucratic processes, increasing funding allocations, and, perhaps most importantly, rebuilding trust and partnerships with European counterparts. Strengthening these relationships will be crucial for ensuring that Northern Ireland's educational institutions and organizations can continue to offer meaningful international experiences to their students and staff, while also working to

restore the number of inbound students participating in mobility programmes. Furthermore, at the policy level, the UK government should explore negotiating specialized mobility agreements that bridge the gap left by Erasmus+ and foster continued collaboration with the EU.

During my time at Intern Europe, I made significant contributions to the organization's efforts to adapt to the post-Brexit environment. By rebuilding the network of host companies, I helped create new connections and re-establish old ones that had been severed due to Brexit. The ability to support my colleagues on every aspect of the company's operations allowed me to take on a supportive role when they needed to focus on more critical tasks. In moments when I engaged directly with participants, while I assisted the HR department with interviews, induction meetings, and final meetings, and especially during the social events I organized, my primary purpose was to provide genuine personal support and ensure the best possible experience for the participants, helping to solidify the testimonials and feedback on participating in the Intern Europe programme. My work in researching potential charity partners and clarifying the intricacies of visa regulations not only addressed the immediate needs of the organization but also laid the groundwork for future collaborations aimed at enhancing mobility opportunities for students. In meetings with host companies, the goal was to establish a trusting and open relationship built on belief in the Intern Europe project and a willingness to collaborate in the long term. This legacy of renewed relationships and a more robust operational framework will benefit Intern Europe as it navigates the complexities of student mobility in Northern Ireland moving forward, re-establishing trust and increasing the number of partners sending students for work placements in Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, Brexit has undeniably reshaped the landscape of Further Education mobility in Northern Ireland. As institutions struggle with less funding, declining participant numbers, and strained ties with European partners, the demand for focused policies and innovative solutions has never been more pressing. Organizations like Intern Europe demonstrate resilience and adaptability, reflecting the desire of Northern Ireland's people to maintain their European identity and continue welcoming European students. However, without a strategic approach that prioritizes international collaboration and simplifies mobility processes, Northern Ireland risks losing its unique educational advantages and the vibrant cross-border connections that have long benefited its students and institutions. Moving forward, a collaborative effort to rebuild these ties and enhance

mobility opportunities will be essential for fostering a dynamic and inclusive educational landscape in the post-Brexit era.

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Appendix A – Letter from the Northern Ireland Assembly: Committee for the Economy to Teresa Salvador.

Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Teresa Salvador
teresa.salvador@interneurope.org

Our Ref: **EC2024:315**

9 September 2024

Dear Teresa,

At its meeting of 5 September 2024, the Committee considered your request for information for your thesis on the impact of Brexit on cross-border FE participation.

Regrettably the Committee does not retain this information and Members felt that you may have more success with your query if you approach the Department directly or ask an MLA to make the query on your behalf. Consequently, the Committee agreed that it would be unable to action your query further.

Thank you for engaging with the Committee for the Economy.

Yours sincerely,

Peter McCallion

_____

Peter McCallion
Clerk to the Committee for the Economy

Peter McCallion, Clerk to the Committee for the Economy, Northern Ireland Assembly
Room 349, Parliament Buildings, Ballymiscaw, Stormont, Belfast, BT4 3XX.
Email: committee.economy@niassembly.gov.uk **Tel. 028 9052 1821**

Appendix B – Letter from the Office of the Minister Conor Murphy MLA to Mr Mathison MLA.

From the Office of the Minister
CONOR MURPHY MLA

Department for the Economy
An Roinn Geilleagair
www.economy-ni.gov.uk

Mr Nick Mathison MLA
Northern Ireland Assembly
Parliament Buildings
Stormont

Adelaide House
39-49 Adelaide Street
Belfast
BT2 8FD
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27 September 2024
AQW 14267/22-27

Mr Mathison MLA has asked:

To ask the Minister for the Economy, to detail any available data on the impact of Brexit on (i) student; and (ii) staff mobility in further education colleges, including any changes in participation in (a) exchange programs; (b) cross-border collaboration; and (c) international recruitment.

ANSWER

My officials are advised by Further Education Colleges that while data is held in respect of student and staff mobility, analysis has not been conducted on the impact of EU Exit on such activity, advising that a range of factors will have an effect on student and staff mobility. Other than reporting that the Colleges have received less funding for the activities identified under the Turing Scheme post EU Exit in comparison to its predecessor Erasmus+ pre EU Exit, I am unable to provide further information.

CONOR MURPHY MLA
Minister for the Economy