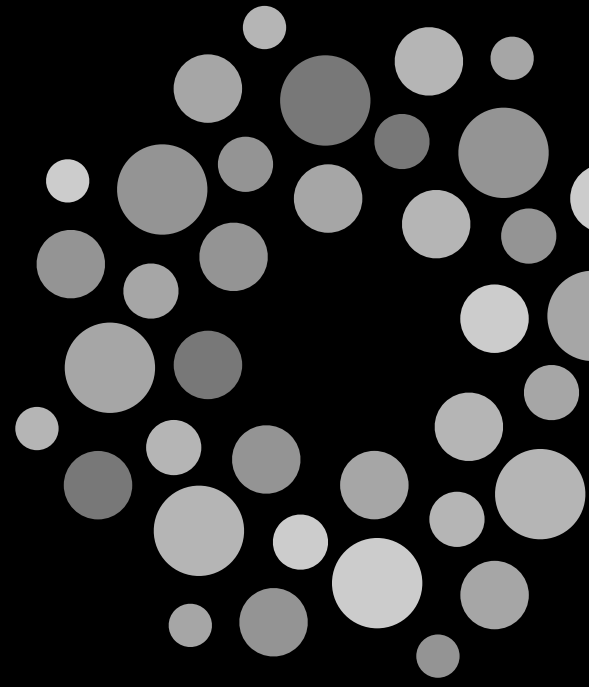




Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann
Royal Irish Academy

RIA ROUNDTABLE ON THE PEACE PLUS PROGRAMME AND HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

21 APRIL 2021



SUMMARY OF OBSERVATIONS AND POINTS DISCUSSED

In April 2021 the Royal Irish Academy, supported by funding from the Communicating Europe Initiative at the Department of Foreign Affairs, convened a virtual roundtable discussion focusing on how the higher-education (HE) and research sector can positively engage with the impending PEACE PLUS programme to achieve the maximum impact in furthering the objectives of both the HE and research community and the PEACE PLUS programme itself.

Participants in the roundtable included representatives from the HE and research sector from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. They were asked to consider the following questions:

- How can the types of collaborative and cross-border HE and research projects that would be of benefit to the PEACE PLUS programme be instigated and facilitated?
- How can the HE and research community develop a shared ambition for how it could engage with the PEACE PLUS programme to advance HE and research goals?
- What value can the HE and research community offer to the PEACE PLUS programme?

Participants were asked to speak freely in the knowledge that the Chatham House Rule would be observed. This report gives a non-exhaustive overview of the observations made and points raised by the participants.

This discussion report will be used to inform a wider public webinar on this topic on 26 May and will be disseminated among community and programme stakeholders to raise awareness of the programme and of the potential opportunities it offers for the HE and research sector.

The PEACE PLUS Programme

The key aims of the PEACE PLUS programme are to contribute to a more peaceful, prosperous and stable society in Northern Ireland (NI) and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland (RoI), and to leave an enduring legacy by funding activities that promote peace and reconciliation and contribute to cross-border economic and territorial development. The programme's strategic objective is to build on the opportunities and address the needs arising from the peace process, with a two-fold aim: to boost economic growth and stimulate social and economic regeneration; and to promote social inclusion, particularly for those at the margins of economic and social life.

The programme will strive to address long-standing social and economic challenges that have affected, and continue to affect, communities in rural border areas, as well as continuing challenges that exist in urban settings. It will also recognise the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on society and the impact associated with the UK's exit from the EU.

The PEACE PLUS programme has been drafted to allow for support for activities that will address the challenges and opportunities in NI and the Rol border area as they arise over the coming years. Specifically, there will be investment under the economic regeneration theme to include support for business and skills development; and under the partnership and collaboration theme, there will be support for strategic planning and cementing cross-border collaboration at various levels between government (local and national), communities and citizens.

The programme area includes Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic, namely, Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan and Sligo. This is the core programme area, but there is also flexibility to include partners or activity outside the core area if appropriate. Cross-border collaboration is not strictly limited to the administrative borders of the programme but has a flexible geography, depending on the topic concerned. This is called a functional area and allows for organisations and institutions that are not based in the core programme area to get involved in projects by linking with partners in the core area.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION POINTS

The following points are a non-exhaustive account of the ideas, opportunities and obstacles discussed by the participants in the roundtable.

Core Aims and Objectives of the Programme

The maxim underlying the PEACE programmes in their successive iterations is to aid relationship-building between individuals and organisations in support of the normalisation of lasting peace. PEACE PLUS is a practical policy emanation from this objective and seeks to continue in its Northern Ireland and cross-border manifestations to support and foster peace and prosperity.

The programme should operate under broad parameters with core objectives such as the development of relationships and project management skills, the creation of linkages between companies, including SMEs, and the building and embedding of partnerships.

It was noted by participants that funding proposals put forward should resonate with and be relevant to the wishes, opportunities and needs of the communities in the project area. Innovation will be key, and the HE and research sector must consider its involvement in the programme in an innovative way. Proposals should aim for seamless cooperation between HE institutions in both the North and the Republic.

The Impact of Brexit

Brexit has changed the environment in which the PEACE PLUS programme is operating but has not changed its aims. On a practical business basis, the Northern Ireland Protocol is functioning effectively in a number of areas; for example, the dairy industry supply chain continues to work well on an all-island basis. Activity such as this can and should be underpinned by the PEACE PLUS programme. The inclusion of the Interreg strand in PEACE PLUS provides scope for all-island engagements to deliver positive outcomes in NI and the Rol border areas.

Opportunities for the HE and Research Sector

An engaged research approach that is collaborative, change-oriented, ethical, inclusive and creative should be utilised. It would stimulate interest in and engagement with the programme and would leverage PEACE PLUS for communities, to develop university alliances and to engage with civic and local stakeholders with a view to building the expertise for transformative projects. An engaged research approach would be flexible, allowing for the involvement of major players or the adoption of new methodologies to support a more outward- and forward-looking, bottom-up networking approach.

Universities can and should play a key role in supporting and implementing PEACE PLUS, given their track record of involvement in previous programmes and their contribution—through research, teaching and learning—to issues such as conflict resolution, innovations and definitional issues for the PEACE programme.

There are also opportunities for the subject-specific expertise that exists in universities to be used in areas such as community youth work, tackling trauma, migrant rights and new minorities, and improving services for young people at a local or broader level.

Universities could function as resource spaces, including as venues providing shared space, and as centres for the identification and dissemination of best practice in policy-driven activities.

It could be useful if the HE sector supported mainstreaming work and activities and helped to develop platforms for network- and collaboration-building, as well as projects to put partnership-based research in place. Initiatives should be brave, with colleges challenging their own researchers.

The HE sector should respond, in particular, to the programme's Theme 5: Supporting a Sustainable and Better-Connected Future in such a way that there would not be a narrow focus on applied STEM feedback. It is important that the arts, humanities and social sciences be adequately involved in the programme.

Theme 3: Empowering and Investing in Young People was seen to offer particular opportunities to promote better access to higher education, North and South, for young people and to support social cohesion objectives. The discussion noted the challenges faced by undergraduates from Northern Ireland in accessing HE in the Republic due to the equivalences applied between A Levels and the Leaving Certificate, whereas students from the Republic have reported difficulties in accessing state supports to pursue doctoral-level programmes in Northern Ireland. The programme could usefully attempt to address these issues to allow for increased cross-border study and mobility across the HE system on the island in support of greater social cohesion. For example, improvements in access to online methods of study that we expect to arise from the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic may be beneficial to opening up access to HE in previously underserved communities.

It was observed that under previous PEACE programmes many of the most effective initiatives had community outcomes and community impact as a key success factor. Such community-based approaches offer an opportunity to explore cultural issues. Several examples of collaborative network-building and sharing of expertise (e.g. in the context of mental health) were cited.

The HE and research sector should look at examples of the most successful community-based outcomes achieved under programmes to date. These examples of community networks and expertise could then serve as models for developing partnerships in the future. It would be useful to be able to access general learnings from previous iterations of the programme so that these can be built on. It was observed that the PEACE PLUS programme offers significant opportunity to develop community engagement in research co-creation for HE.

Participants referred to the effectiveness of the Belfast–Dublin Economic Corridor initiative and the potential lessons that could be learned from that process. The case for an Atlantic Corridor, on a Galway–Coleraine axis, was discussed as an idea that would merit further consideration.

Concluding Points

The programme should take account of other initiatives in terms of overall funding and should be synergistic with these. It should look to embed engagement for the long term to allow initiatives to come to fruition.

It was noted that it is doubly complex to work on cross-border projects. There is a necessity to engage in long-term planning and to build relationships and networks.

The programme should look to economies of scale and proximity in terms of where mutual gains could be realised. Consideration must be given to the sustainability of the work and outputs that are proposed in funding applications.

Notes

The points made above are a summary of the discussion that took place at a virtual roundtable on 21 April 2021. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the Royal Irish Academy or the Communicating Europe Initiative. They are transcribed here, without prejudice, to give an accurate reflection of the discussion that took place. The Academy hopes that this discussion, and the public webinar that will take place on 26 May, will help to raise awareness of the PEACE PLUS programme and the opportunities within it for the higher-education and research sector in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The Academy wishes to note the grant funding received from the Communicating Europe Initiative via the Department of Foreign Affairs (RoI) that has supported this work.

