

A SHORT REPORT ON US SCHOLARSHIP SCHEMES TO UNIVERSITIES IN IRELAND

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Introduction

The UK and Ireland are among the most popular destinations for US students studying abroad. In 2001-2002, the UK was the most favoured destination, with over 30,000 American students, although only 300-400 of these came to Northern Ireland. The Republic of Ireland was the eighth most popular destination with 4,375 students (this was a 10.1% increase over the previous year, despite a weak US economy and post 9/11 concerns). These numbers include full-time registered students and 'study abroad' students on short-term semester or summer school programmes; the latter make up over 70% of the total.

The numbers of US students who come to study at universities on the island of Ireland for a year or more through nationally funded scholarship schemes is a small proportion of this total. There are currently three such scholarship schemes (although one is in abeyance). The longest-established is the **Fulbright Programme**, the US government's foremost official educational and cultural exchange programme since the late 1940s, which awards around 4,500 grants annually for US postgraduate students and scholars (i.e. academics) to study and teach in over 140 countries around the world, and for foreign students and academics to do the same in America.

There are currently seven Fulbright postgraduate students and six Fulbright scholars in the Republic of Ireland; and two Fulbright scholars (but no Fulbright students) in Northern Ireland. Since the programme began in the Republic in 1957, around 350 US students and scholars have spent time at Irish universities (and 500 Irish students and scholars have spent time in the US). The equivalent numbers for Northern Ireland are not known, since the exchange is part of the United Kingdom's overall Fulbright Programme, but they are much smaller.

The **George J. Mitchell Scholarship Programme**, named after the US senator who played a key role in the Northern Ireland peace process, began in 2001. It is the only major US programme sending students to universities in both Irish jurisdictions, and brings 12 postgraduate students to universities in Ireland, North and South, every year. The programme is administered by the Virginia-based US-Ireland Alliance, a non-profit organisation dedicated to building US-Ireland relations whose president is Trina Vargo, a former foreign policy adviser to Senator Edward Kennedy. It is financed principally by a \$2.77 million endowment fund set up by the Irish

Government in 1998, but also by significant funds from the US State Department and from the Irish and US private sectors.

The **Ferris Scholarship Programme** was announced by Hillary Clinton in 1999 as a scheme to create 10 scholarships for African-American postgraduate students to study at the nine universities on the island of Ireland. Funding was offered by the Virginia-based Ferris Foundation and the Irish Department of Education and Science. In the event only one cohort of four US students came to Irish universities – three to the Republic and one to the North – in 2002-2003, after which it was discontinued.

The three scholarship schemes are outlined in greater detail below.

THE FULBRIGHT SCHOLARSHIPS

The Fulbright programme has been operating in Northern Ireland (as part of the UK) since 1948 and in the Republic of Ireland since 1957. Its aim is to promote “peace and understanding through educational exchange”. The programme emphasises that ‘Fulbrighters’ are “an elite group of international leaders in academia, government, the media and the arts” and “having the status of a ‘Fulbrighter’ opens many doors and opportunities”. More Fulbright alumni have won Nobel Prizes than any other academic programme. In the South, the Irish Fulbright Commission emphasises that it is the only official educational exchange programme between the US and Irish governments.

For postgraduate students, the programme usually involves a year of study or research at masters or doctoral level. Northern Irish students and academics are eligible to apply for Irish Fulbright postgraduate scholarships in the US – although there are no Northerners in the 2003-2004 cohort – but US postgraduate students and academics wanting to go to Northern Ireland come under the US-UK Fulbright Commission.

The Irish Fulbright Commission receives annual grants of around \$260-270,000 from the US State Department and around €254,000 from the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs (although over 40% of the latter sum goes into a trust to fund the programme in the long-term). Each US scholar (academic) receives an annual (or *pro rata*) stipend of €30,000 (of which €10,000 is contributed by the university s/he is attending), and each student receives an annual stipend of €15,000 (with normally no monetary contribution from the university except an optional fee waiver).

It is at the discretion of individual universities whether to waive fees for Fulbright students, and accommodation (unlike in the Mitchell scholarships) has to be paid by the students themselves out of their stipend.

In the 2003-2004 academic year, there are seven Fulbright students in the Republic of Ireland: one is at UCD, one at TCD (an annual deaf studies award to a student from the Gallaudet University in Washington DC which caters exclusively for deaf students), one at UCC, one at NUI Galway, one at the Teagasc agricultural research centre in Wexford, and two are unattached. There are six Fulbright scholars (academics): one at Dublin City University, one at UCC, one at TCD, one at NUI Galway, one at Mary Immaculate College of Education in Limerick and one at UCD

(holding the Mary Ball Washington Chair in American History – one of 39 Fulbright Distinguished Chairs in 13 countries).

There were around 75 applications for the seven student places, and 35 applications for the six scholars places in the current year. Normally Fulbright students and scholars apply on an individual basis to universities, seeking a letter of acceptance and applying separately to either the US Institute for International Education (students) or the US Council for International Exchange of Scholars (academics) for a Fulbright scholarship. The Irish and US-UK Fulbright Commissions make the final selection from a list of qualified applicants supplied to them by the IIE or the CIES.

The 2003-2004 intake of US students and scholars to the Republic come from the following universities: University of California, Los Angeles (two), Yale University, Boston University, Clemson University (South Carolina), University of Georgia, Kean University (New Jersey), San Diego State University, Gallaudet University (Washington DC), University of Michigan, Lehigh University (Pennsylvania), American University (Washington DC) and Virginia Commonwealth University.

Most of the studies the Fulbright students undertake in Ireland are specialised and research-based. For example, the seven current Fulbright students are studying the following subjects: the environmental health impact of manure; violence and community in Belfast (1918-25); developing videotape resources for interpreters working with deaf people; poetry and loud music; medieval Irish literature and folklore; women's studies and gender equality; and oral histories of Irish women journalists.

The Irish Fulbright Commission is moving towards more studentships funded by the higher education institutions themselves. In the academic year 2004-2005 these will include two awards funded by the Dublin Institute of Technology; one award funded by the National College of Ireland in the Dublin docklands; and one award funded by MediaLab Europe in Dublin.

There are currently two Fulbright scholars in Northern Ireland: one a professor of political science and public administration at Rutgers University in Newark, who has taken up the annual Fulbright-Queen's University Belfast Fellowship at the Institute of Governance, Public Policy and Social Research; the other a professor of urban studies and community planning at Rutgers University in Camden, New Jersey, who is spending a term at the University of Ulster's Institute for Conflict Resolution and Ethnicity (INCORE) in Derry.

There are currently no Fulbright students in Northern Ireland and have not been any since the academic year 2001-2002 (when there was one). In the five years between 1997-1998 and 2002-2003, there were three Fulbright scholars and three Fulbright students at the two Northern Ireland universities. An international officer at one of the Northern universities commented that "it would obviously be beneficial to the university if we could attract more Fulbright students and scholars as it is a very prestigious award." [To put this in context, there are 15 Fulbright students and six scholars at UK universities in the current academic year. Queen's University estimates that the *overall* number of US students studying long-term or short-term in the university is 144; the estimate for the University of Ulster is 170].

THE MITCHELL SCHOLARSHIPS

Although they are only in their fourth year of operation, the Mitchell scholarships have already gained a high profile in the US, attracting postgraduate students of the highest calibre. On its website, the US-Ireland Alliance says the scholarships were established “to educate future American leaders about the island of Ireland and to provide tomorrow’s leaders with an interest in, and an affinity with, the island from which 38 million Americans claim descent.” By 2003 the Mitchell scholarship programme was already being listed in the *New York Times* as one of the six most prestigious scholarships a young American could receive.

The scholarships allow US students to undertake one year of postgraduate study (i.e. a master’s course) in any discipline offered at higher education institutions in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. In their applications to an independent selection panel set up by the US-Ireland Alliance, candidates rank the institutions and courses in order of choice, and, since every Irish university has given a commitment to accept up to two Mitchell students, they usually get their first or second choice. Tuition fees are waived, accommodation is provided by the receiving universities, transatlantic air fares are paid, and a generous \$11,000 living expenses stipend is provided.

The US-Ireland Alliance’s fund-raising for the Mitchell scholarships, led by its president, Trina Vargo, has been extraordinarily successful. In January 2004, for the second year running, the US Congress voted to recommend that the State Department provide \$500,000 for the programme, meaning that the \$2.77 million endowment fund set up by the Irish Government in 1998 to finance the scholarships over the long-term – and which had been depleted by stock market losses – only has to be drawn on to a limited extent in 2003 and 2004. The Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland also funds two scholarships.

In addition there has been significant funding from Irish and US business, currently running at around \$50,000 per year plus ‘in kind’ contributions. Firms making monetary contributions include CRH, Diageo, Iona Technologies, Jurys Doyle hotel group, Riverdeep, Elan, the Crucible Corporation, Automsoft, Becton Dickinson, Bombardier Aerospace and Cross Atlantic Capital Partners, a Dublin venture capital fund which gives about \$30,000 a year to the programme. A wide range of companies also give donations ‘in kind’. American Airlines provide free transatlantic plane travel; the student travel company USIT provides the students with a \$1,000 travel stipend for trips around Ireland; CIE provides a monthly train pass; the Abbey Theatre and the Irish Film Board provide free theatre and film festival tickets.

Nearly 250 people applied for the 12 scholarships offered for the autumn of 2004. The 12 students selected will go to UCD (two), TCD (two), QUB (two), University of Limerick (two), NUI Galway (two), DCU and University of Ulster. They will come from Princeton University (two), Stanford University, Loyola University (New Orleans), Furman University (South Carolina), University of Virginia, University of Florida, John Hopkins University, Northwestern University, University of Minnesota, Mississippi State University and Indiana University.

They will take one-year masters courses in equality studies, globalisation, comparative ethnic conflict (two), zoology, civil engineering, drama studies, international studies (two), economic policy evaluation, politics, and peace and conflict studies.

A pattern is emerging in the placement of Mitchell scholarship students in universities in Ireland. TCD, UCD and QUB tend to get an average of two students per year with other universities getting an average of one to one and a half. DCU will have received four students during the programme's first five years, and NUI Maynooth will have received two.

The Departments in charge of higher education in Dublin and Belfast and the universities in Ireland are unanimous in their praise for the calibre of the students coming via the Mitchell programme and the quality of the programme's organisation by the US-Ireland Alliance. A senior Department of Education and Science official said it was "the best ever US programme, getting lots of attention and with a great fund-raiser in Trina Vargo." A senior Department for Employment and Learning official said it had proved to be "a very worthwhile and prestigious scholarship." An international officer in a Dublin university said the Mitchell students were all "very bright, talented and energetic, with CVs which would make you weep – they would make you wonder what you had done with your life." An international officer in a Northern university said she "could not praise the Mitchell students highly enough – last year we had a student from Arkansas who received the highest ever marks in her political communications course and is ambitious to follow in the footsteps of Arkansas' most successful son, President Clinton." It is also interesting that relatively few of the Mitchell scholars appear to come from Irish-American backgrounds.

Unlike the Fulbright programme, the Mitchell programme also includes a packed and fully-funded programme of cultural and social events. The students' 12-month stay in Ireland includes four or five organised trips to beauty spots and places of historical interest around the country and, in appropriate cases, internships with leading politicians in Dublin. This year's cohort were received by the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, and John Hume will present them with their 'pass rings.' When they visit a university as a group, there is a reception and dinner and free tickets for arts and sporting events. Trina Vargo says the aim of the programme is to give the high-achieving participants "such an amazing time, a time they'll never forget, so that in the future, when they are people in positions of influence, they will become its main advocates and fund-raisers." She says that Irish university presidents "know that these kids are their biggest salespersons back in the US."

THE FERRIS SCHOLARSHIPS

This small scheme for African-American students to study at universities on the island of Ireland, now discontinued, was first announced by Hillary Clinton in a speech at NUI Galway in 1999. It had been proposed by the Ferris Foundation for Graduate Education in Virginia, which had a programme going back several years of awarding postgraduate scholarships to Irish students to study at Georgetown University in Washington DC. The Irish Department of Education and Science offered up to

IR£50,000 per annum to support the scholarships. The universities in Ireland offered to waive tuition fees.

The Conference of University Rectors in Ireland (CRI) was asked to facilitate the Ferris scholarships in Ireland in 2000. The Ferris Foundation was to select the postgraduate students to participate and the students themselves were to pick one year masters courses at the universities of their choice. In the event, however, only one cohort of four US students came to study in Ireland under the Ferris scheme, in 2002-2003. The four students were placed in UCD, DCU, NUI Galway and the University of Ulster. Three of the four completed their one-year courses.

With the demise of the CRI in 2002, the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities temporarily took over the Irish end of the scheme's administration. However there do not seem to have been any plans to take applications for the scheme in the academic year 2003-2004. When Universities Ireland was launched in July 2003 Andy Pollak had one phone conversation with Dr Richard Ferris of the Ferris Foundation, but no firm proposals were put forward. He said he would keep in touch with Dr Ferris as Universities Ireland's work programme developed in the hope that the Ferris scholarship scheme could be re-activated.

A note in the file from CHIU says it "had proved difficult to get any clarification from the US side on now the scheme should operate. While broad objectives had been stated, the type of selection process and the criterion for selection of students had not been worked out. There were cost implications for the universities regarding the waiving of fees. Much of the confusion about the proposal resulted from the hasty way it had been approved for announcement by Hillary Clinton."

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The two major scholarship schemes bringing US postgraduate students to universities on the island of Ireland are each valuable and prestigious in their own right. The Fulbright scholarships, as the US government's showpiece overseas educational exchange programme, are widely sought after by high-achieving academics and students throughout the world. Their organisation in the Republic of Ireland has been re-energised since 2001 with the appointment of the first full-time executive director. There is a desire in Northern universities to attract more Fulbright scholars and students, although this is difficult given that applications come from individual American students to particular departments.

However the perception in Ireland, North and South, is that Fulbright has suffered slightly in recent years in comparison with the more high-profile, more lavishly funded Mitchell scholarships. The extraordinary promotional, fund-raising and lobbying talents of Trina Vargo and her colleagues at the US-Ireland Alliance have ensured that the Mitchell scholarships offer an educational, social and cultural experience equal – and possibly superior – to any on offer to high-calibre US postgraduate students anywhere in the world. "People are turning down Fulbright and Rhodes scholarships to get onto the Mitchell programme", observed one senior Department for Employment and Learning official.

