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The Wealthiest Region in These Islands? A Vision for Northern Ireland

A RESPONSE TO ‘DRIVERS AND BARRIERS OF CROSS-BORDER
SECTORAL ECOSYSTEMS: THE PHARMACEUTICAL
SECTOR IN AN ALL-ISLAND CONTEXT’ BY CHRIS
VAN EGERAAT AND DECLAN CURRAN*

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This is a well-written and thought-provoking article that clearly establishes the tremendous economic benefits that could accrue from greater education research, innovation and economic integration between the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. It rightly points out differences that have arisen between the jurisdictions, with the much larger pharma sector in Ireland dominated by US multinationals in contrast to the situation in Northern

*Read Chris van Egeraat and Declan Curran’s article, ‘Pulpit to Public: Church Leaders on a Post-Brexit Island’, <https://doi.org/10.3318/isia.2021.32b.49>

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Ireland, wherein the sector is dominated by small number of ‘home-grown’ companies such as Randox, Almac and Norbrook—all founded by highly driven and visionary individuals. The conclusions are validated through reference to extensive literature on the negative impacts of borders on many regions worldwide, based on the use of a ‘typology of proximities’, and while the case study is focused on the pharma sector, the arguments apply generically across all market sectors. These ‘proximities’ are a useful vehicle for exploring commonalities and identifying barriers that need to be addressed if cross-border cooperation in business and innovation is to be enhanced. The analysis rightly concludes that ‘geographical’ (location) and ‘cognitive’ (knowledge base) proximities are not significant limiting factors, and while there are ‘organisational’ and ‘institutional’ barriers, ‘it is a lack of social proximity that has proven to be a persistent barrier to the development of a cross-border pharmaceutical ecosystem’.

Unfortunately, the article does not really go into this central issue in depth, perhaps because the causes and solutions lie more in the realm of politics and social division than in economic theory. Borders are politically contentious, with discontented minorities often ‘trapped’ on either side. This discontent can be reduced by recognising rights of peoples of differing religions and cultures within a jurisdiction, seeking ways to foster positive cross-community engagement, and reducing the physical impact of borders through free movement of people and goods. Unfortunately, the local political culture in Northern Ireland continues to focus on maintaining divisions, with unionists focused only on links within the UK and nationalists prioritising links within the island of Ireland. Unionists have dominated policy up to now and, as they see stronger cross-border economic activity as a threat, it is not surprising that a culture of limited cross-border cooperation at institutional and organisational level exists. However, in the realms of research, innovation and entrepreneurship, openness is essential to underpin competitiveness and maximise the chances of success. Set against a background of rising political tensions in Northern Ireland, and its associated community polarisation, there is a need for a vision that can unify people across Northern Ireland in pursuit of a common goal to challenge the politics of division. This could be framed around a vision statement like ‘In 20 years, Northern Ireland will be the wealthiest region in these islands.’

On the one hand, this vision could be criticised as completely unrealistic, but on the other, it does provide a driving force for new strategies and policies—and if people generally adopt it as a central tenet for judging political

decision-making, it could force the politicians to ensure their policies are aligned with this unifying goal. Of course, the deep social and cultural divisions that continue to exist must also be addressed, but the current ‘business as usual’ political philosophy that fosters division cannot continue. To do so would be to ignore the dramatic changes in innovation processes (driven in part by the incredible response of science and innovation to the COVID-19 pandemic) that will bring ideas much more rapidly and effectively to market than before. Failure to implement coherent innovation-led policies can only bring further economic disadvantage to Northern Ireland, and its people, who deserve better.

So how realistic is this vision of transforming Northern Ireland into an economically vibrant and wealthy region—an innovative powerhouse that attracts the brightest and best globally, creating new businesses and investment at a scale never experienced before? Imagine a political team in Stormont unified with local business and research leaders in pursuit of this common goal, with cultural and identity rights protected for all by law, so that openness is no longer perceived as a threat. What are the key building blocks to get things moving towards this goal? Here are some examples that come to mind.

- Exploit the unique status of Northern Ireland emerging from the Brexit agreement—freedom to trade goods manufactured within the region throughout Britain and Europe. This provides a tremendous advantage not available anywhere else in Europe and therefore will attract companies seeking a location that provides a competitive edge in terms of market reach.
- Create a new strategy for cooperation and investment in the universities as key drivers of local innovation. Currently QS Global University Rankings 2022¹ place Queen’s University Belfast at 216 and University of Ulster at 651–700. A quantum increase in resourcing is required to drive these universities’ worldwide rankings into the top 100, through targeted recruitment of talented research leaders and investment in equipment and facilities.
- Enable universities and businesses located in Northern Ireland to participate in:
 - all UK-wide research and innovation programmes (as is currently the case)
 - all EU-funded research, innovation and exchange programmes on the same terms as member states (i.e. not as a third country)

¹ Available at: <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2022> (19 October 2021).

- all research and innovation programmes offered by Science Foundation Ireland as full partners.
- Allow Northern Ireland to continue to qualify for EU structural funding for infrastructure.
- Direct IDA Ireland to locate a targeted number of major foreign direct investment (FDI) initiatives in Northern Ireland; in particular, US multi-nationals should consider Northern Ireland as a location when seeking a European base for their operations. This should be viewed positively by the US government in terms of securing political stability in Northern Ireland (it supports the Belfast Agreement).

These and many more creative ideas will become apparent once transformation of the economy is placed centre stage as the unifying goal under which the policies of all political parties must be scrutinised. A key part of this vision is that local government in Northern Ireland must take responsibility for managing the regional economy, supported by Westminster, Dublin, Brussels and Washington. The current model of block grants from Westminster has not served the local political system well—taking responsibility into local hands will encourage strategic thinking rather than leveraging short-term opportunistic advantages when they arise.