



# Briefing Paper

The Cross-border Further Education and Higher Education Cluster for the North West City Region

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# The Cross-border Further Education and Higher Education Cluster for the North West City Region

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## Introduction

The Cross-border FE HE Cluster comprises Ulster University (UU), Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT), North West Regional College (NWRC), and Donegal Education and Training Board (ETB). Funding for this initiative in 2019 and 2020 was secured through the Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA), and specifically a funding stream to support the restructuring of the higher education landscape. The North West Strategic Growth Partnership (NWSGP), led by Derry City and Strabane District Council and Donegal County Council, was instrumental in the launch of this partnership in February 2018. NWSGP is a unique interjurisdictional structure, endorsed by both Governments through the North South Ministerial Council.

Ulster University, with 25,000+ students across four campuses in Derry, Coleraine, Belfast, and Jordanstown, is uniquely placed to engage local communities, support expansion of the knowledge-based economy and contribute to the economic, social and cultural development of Northern Ireland and the North West cross-border region. The University is organised around four faculties: Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences; Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment; Life and Health Sciences; and Ulster University Business School. The University's well-developed research infrastructure is of key importance to the cluster.

LYIT is organised around four academic schools: Business, Engineering, Science, and Tourism at two modern integrated campuses in Letterkenny and Killybegs. Students study from a suite of programmes where the Institute awards Higher Certificates, Ordinary Degrees, Honours Degrees, taught Postgraduate Programmes, and Research Degrees at Masters and Doctorate level. Student numbers have grown in recent years to 4,000+ with a significant increase in part-time student numbers.

North West Regional College has main campuses in Derry, Limavady and Strabane, with some 15,000 full-time and part-time enrolments. Learners attend from all parts of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, undertaking full-time or part-time study programmes in a range of vocational or non-vocational areas. It has four academic departments Science, Technology and Creative Arts; Training and Skills; Health & Sport; and Business, Hospitality, Tourism and Performing Arts. Each department caters for school leavers, mature students, professionals,

community organisations, and the unemployed. An extensive selection of Higher Education programmes provides direct access onto degree programmes throughout the UK and Republic of Ireland. The college's commitment and experience in workforce development is of great benefit in furthering the aims of the cross-border cluster.

Donegal Education and Training Board is the largest education and training provider in County Donegal, offering a broad range of education and training services to approximately 25,000 students and learners on an annual basis. Donegal ETB is the leading provider of Further Education and Training (FET) in Donegal, providing a wide range of full and part-time courses, adult learner guidance, apprenticeships, basic education, community education support, Youthreach (early school leavers), and services for employers. The ETB also manages fifteen post-primary schools across the county, together with outdoor education and training, music education through the Donegal Music Education Partnership, and has legal responsibilities for youth services. Donegal ETB's experience in the provision of traineeships and apprenticeships is of great value to the cross-border cluster.

LYIT's Strategic Plan 2019-2023 affirms that the Institute is motivated to seek out collaboration partners that can add value, extend our reach, or provide impetus to ongoing activity. The continuation of the cross-border cluster engagement is strategically important to LYIT and key to our pursuit of Technological University status through the Connacht-Ulster Alliance. Our partners in the cross-border cluster share our understanding of the challenges that Brexit represents, and this cluster offers opportunities for a better coordination of the FE and HE response to these challenges for the North West cross-border region.

## Recent Developments

The first six months of 2020 has seen significant commitment by both the Irish Government and Northern Ireland Executive to transform further and higher education provision in the region. The *New Decade, New Approach* agreement,<sup>1</sup> endorsed by Northern Ireland's main political parties on 10 January 2020, includes the pledge that the Northern Ireland Executive will expand university provision at the Magee campus of Ulster University including the establishment of a Graduate Entry Medical School. The agreement also states that the Northern Ireland Executive will bring forward proposals for the development and expansion of the UU campus at Magee including the necessary increase in maximum student numbers to realise the 10,000-student campus target. Funding for the Graduate Entry Medical School was signed-off by the NI Executive on 9 July 2020 with UU hoping to complete preparations to ensure students can commence their studies in September 2021.

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/856998/2020-01-08\\_a\\_new\\_decade\\_a\\_new\\_approach.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade_a_new_approach.pdf) [last accessed 31/07/2020].

A key section of the New Decade, New Approach agreement in terms of Irish Government commitments to the Cross-border FE HE Cluster is detailed under the heading 'Investment in the North West and Border Communities':

*The Irish Government welcomes the UK Government's announcement to invest up to £105m in Derry and the North West through the Derry and Strabane City Deal and the Inclusive Future Fund. The Irish Government is committed to exploring opportunities for investment that will further support opportunities to bring greater economic prosperity and social benefits to the wider region.*

*In this context, the Irish Government welcomes the development of plans for ambitious new higher education provision in Derry. This investment can support more access to third-level education for young people on a cross-border basis, enable further cooperation between third-level institutions in the North West including in research and innovation, and underpin broader economic development and opportunities in the region. The Government is willing in principle to contribute to capital investment to support expanded provision at Ulster University Magee Campus, alongside the commitment made as part of this agreement by the UK Government. We look forward to early discussion at the North South Ministerial Council on taking forward this coordinated investment in order to deliver this vital project for the North West region (p.60).*

On 4 May 2020, the Northern Ireland Executive committed match-funding for the Derry City and Strabane City Deal, mirroring the UK Government announcement of 7 May 2019, and ensuring that £200m+ funding is available for the project. Led by Derry City and Strabane District Council, the bid was developed with the support of a wide range of local education, business and economic partners – including Ulster University and North West Regional College. At the core of the bid is education, innovation, job creation and skills development, with a key focus being the advancement of the expansion and growth of the Magee campus of Ulster University.

The new Irish coalition Government has commenced implementing its 'Programme for Government – Our Shared Future' since taking up office on 27 June 2020. The development of the stand-alone Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the establishment of Shared Island unit within the Department of the Taoiseach are very welcome in our efforts to progress the work of the Cross-border FE HE Cluster. The combination of FE and HE in a single department will facilitate greater coordination of tertiary education provision and allow for initiatives that will prioritise student pathways between FE and HE, collaborative provision, and joint initiatives for up-skilling and re-skilling. Further support for the activity conducted through the Cross-border FE HE Cluster is evident in the new National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy, published on 16 July 2020, which seeks to promote greater collaboration between FE and HE. The Shared Island Unit is

established to enhance, develop, and deepen all aspects of North-South cooperation and the all-island economy. Specifically, the new programme for government recommits the Irish Government to the New Decade, New Approach agreement and states that the Irish Government will ‘Work with the Executive and the UK Government to commit to investment and development opportunities in the North West and Border communities, including third-level opportunities for young people from across the region at the Ulster University Magee Campus in Derry’ (p.105).

## Regional Development Strategies

This collaboration between the partners accords with a series of Republic of Ireland National Development Plans (NDPs), including Project Ireland 2040,<sup>2</sup> published in February 2018, comprising the National Development Plan 2018-2027,<sup>3</sup> and the National Planning Framework (NPF).<sup>4</sup> Equally the Northern Ireland Regional Development Strategy (RDS), RDS 2025<sup>5</sup> and its successor RDS 2035,<sup>6</sup> give prominence to supporting the North West as a cross-border region.

The NPF outlines that Donegal is unique within the Republic of Ireland due to its extensive coastline and proximate relationship to Northern Ireland. County Donegal shares 181km of border with three counties in Northern Ireland to the east and only 11km of border to the south with County Leitrim in the Republic of Ireland. In addition, County Donegal has 58 road crossing points to Northern Ireland and only 7 with County Leitrim. The NPF also recognises cross-border inter-dependencies between Donegal and Derry/Strabane, related to employment, education, healthcare and retail activity. The NPF details that the North West Strategic Growth Partnership is the first of its kind on the island of Ireland representing a new approach to joined-up government that has the potential to bring about real and positive change for the North West City Region which comprises County Donegal and Derry City and Strabane District Council area.

The National Planning Framework (NPF) identified the key role that Letterkenny and Donegal must play in more balanced regional development. The NPF sets out a vision for the North West City Region: “Addressing enhanced connectivity is a priority for this regional area as well as enabling growth and competitiveness to support the strong links that exist between Letterkenny and Northern Ireland” (p.39). The NDP 2018-2027 states that: “The NDP represents a particular step change for the northern part of the island of Ireland, including the border counties and the North West” (p29).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/09022006-project-ireland-2040/> [last accessed 31/07/2020].

<sup>3</sup> <https://assets.gov.ie/19240/62af938dce404ed68380e268d7e9a5bb.pdf> [last accessed 31/07/2020].

<sup>4</sup> <https://assets.gov.ie/7338/31f2c0e4ba744fd290206ac0da35f747.pdf> [last accessed 31/07/2020].

<sup>5</sup> See Department for Infrastructure, <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/articles/strategic-policy#toc-1> [last accessed 31/07/2020].

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.planningni.gov.uk/index/policy/rds2035.pdf> [last accessed 31/07/2020].

Specifically, the NPF includes the National Policy Objectives:

- The regional roles of Athlone in the Midlands, Sligo and Letterkenny in the North West and the Letterkenny-Derry and Drogheda-Dundalk-Newry cross border networks will be identified and supported in the relevant Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy.
- In co-operation with relevant Departments in Northern Ireland, support and promote the development of the North West City Region as interlinked areas of strategic importance in the North West of Ireland, through collaborative structures and a joined-up approach to spatial planning.

## Higher Education Strategies

The Republic of Ireland's National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030,<sup>7</sup> published in January 2011, sets out changes for the sector that are aimed at providing for:

- a more flexible system, with a greater choice of provision and modes of learning for an increasingly diverse cohort of students;
- improvements in the quality of the student experience, the quality of teaching and learning and the relevance of learning outcomes; and
- ensuring that higher education connects more effectively with wider social, economic and enterprise needs through its staff, the quality of its graduates, the relevance of its programmes, the quality of its research and its ability to translate that into high value jobs and real benefits for society.

The strategy re-cast the role of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) to include cooperating and engaging with international counterparts and in particular deepening cooperation with higher education in Northern Ireland. In addition, the strategy identified that there is also significant potential for institutional collaboration on a North-South basis to advance cross-border regional development and strategically advance Irish higher education on an all-island basis.

The strategy also commits to supporting alliances or mergers within the institute of technology sector on the one hand, and within the university sector on the other, where they can deliver greater institutional quality. However, the strategy details that formal mergers between institutes of technology and universities should not in general be considered where an exception could be the formation of alliances on a cross-border basis. It goes on to state that cross-border alliances *"would be potentially very exciting and creative ways to align the higher education resources of those regions with the needs of students, enterprise and other stakeholders and should be encouraged where possible"* (p.99).

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<sup>7</sup> <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/National-Strategy-for-Higher-Education-2030.pdf> [last accessed 31/07/2020].

The Northern Ireland HE strategy was launched by the NI Employment and Learning Minister on 24 April 2012.<sup>8</sup> In terms of cross-border co-operation and student mobility the NI strategy states:

- *Cross-border co-operation and undergraduate mobility between institutions in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are important from an economic, social and cultural perspective.*
- *Such activity has the potential to drive the growth of the all-island economy, broaden the pool of graduates both north and south and support the ongoing peace process. The Department is committed to supporting cross-border co-operation in teaching and learning, with the aim of increasing understanding, sharing good practice and enabling students to move freely between the two jurisdictions.*
- *The Department is committed to working on an all-Ireland basis to remove barriers, real or perceived, to student mobility.*
- *The Department will support HEIs in collaborating on teaching and learning on a cross-border basis, in particular where it is geographically advantageous to do so, and where there are benefits for the institutions involved and for students (p.23).*

## History of Collaboration

LYIT has collaborated on a cross-border basis on an ever-growing agenda over the past two decades. Drivers for this increased collaboration include convergence in higher education structures at European level, convergence between the Irish and UK systems, the more favourable political landscape, increased support for North-South initiatives, and the growing focus on the North West border area as a single region. Notable innovative projects which can be traced back to 2000-2005 include: LYIT obtaining support from Ulster University in its efforts to address the requirements of the Irish Qualifications Act 1999, including the very successful offering of Ulster's Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice (PgCHEP) at LYIT; the jointly developed and delivered Master of Science in Innovation Management in the Public Sector with Ulster University; and collaboration on the EpiCentre (Electronics, Production & Innovation Centre), a multi-million pound technology partnership with Ulster University and North West Regional College that represented the commencement of collaboration on innovation centre supports that has endured since.

In 2001-2003 LYIT was embarking on developing its Quality Assurance processes for external validation. The need for pedagogic support for lecturers was clear in a Quality Assurance context. The Institute investigated the provision of an accessible accredited programme for lecturers, and also to offer a series of talks on teaching and learning matters. Ulster University's Postgraduate Certificate in University Teaching (PgCUT) had many of the

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<sup>8</sup> Department for Employment and Learning, *Graduating to Success: A Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland* (2012),

characteristics sought. The Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching (PgCHET) was developed in conjunction with Ulster University to meet the Institute's needs.

In 2003 the two-year MSc in Innovation Management in the Public Sector commenced. The programme was developed jointly by LYIT and Ulster University in collaboration with the Department of the Taoiseach in Dublin and the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in Belfast. It is an Action Learning programme where public servants learn about programme and project control, risk identification and management, and demand and value assessment – all within the context of their own work. The revised programme title is MSc Public Service Leadership and Innovation. It is a joint award by Ulster University and LYIT and the participants continue to be senior public servants from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Recognised experts in the area of innovative government, transformational leadership, and change are centrally involved in programme delivery.

The focus of EpiCentre 2004-2011 was on developing a strong industrial research base by integrating existing capabilities in the three education partners. Supports provided by the EpiCentre allowed companies to innovate with existing products/services and to develop new activities. This encouraged growth and job creation in these companies and has also ensured that companies which may have otherwise left the region decided to stay in the North West and benefit from the continued support of the education partners. EpiCentre was also of great benefit to the partner institutions in scoping out and further developing their individual innovation supports.

In 2007 LYIT made a successful application under the HEA administered Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF), with support from Ulster University, for the North West Gateway Strategic Alliance (NWGSA) proposal aimed at providing a blue print for closer collaboration between LYIT and UU. The project was significant in that it was the only cross-border proposal funded via SIF. The project was strongly aligned with regional development strategy in both jurisdictions, where the NDP 2007-2013 referred to the need to strengthen innovation capacity at LYIT through collaboration with UU. Indecon Intl/London Economics were employed to undertake the study and their final report was published in March 2009.

The Indecon Intl/London Economics final report identified a number of specific areas where the critical mass formed through a strategic alliance between LYIT and UU could deliver significant benefits for the North West Gateway, including:

- additional high-quality programmes of study to help retain graduates in the North West Gateway
- additional facilities and enhanced support services for a greater student population
- improved research capacity and activity and the further commercialisation of research findings through partnerships with industry

- increased resources to adequately support regional development and the workforce development agenda
- widening participation and improving support systems for non-traditional learners
- enhanced lifelong learning opportunities encompassing flexible modes of delivery and eLearning
- stronger identity and voice for this unique cross-border Gateway.

Indecon Intl/London Economics also found that the socio-economic profile of the North West region indicated a need for the region to 'catch-up' with elsewhere in the island of Ireland in terms of higher education provision and in terms of higher educational attainment among its residents. Surveys carried out as part of this research revealed very strong support among local businesses and employers for enhanced co-operation between Ulster University and LYIT with the surveys revealing very strong support among staff and students at both LYIT and UU for enhanced cooperation between the two partner colleges. Key opportunities identified through the NWGSA study included:

- further development of educational programmes, primarily at postgraduate level and with flexible delivery modes, e.g. part-time or online, that address the population's lifelong need for access to higher education
- joint initiatives in the development of programmes with an emphasis on STEM subjects
- collaboration in research, particularly in those areas where LYIT has current strengths
- joint approaches to the provision of services to businesses in the region.

The publication of the Indecon Intl/London Economics report came a year after stock markets around the world tumbled in 2008 and the true extent of the banking crisis and economic crash was only coming to light. The economic position impacted cross-border collaboration and impeded the partners in forging closer links for almost a decade.

INTERREG funding from 2017 for three significant research projects has given an important boost to research collaboration between the higher education partners. The Centre for Personalised Medicine (CPM) was established in April 2017 following an award of €8.6 million. This project brings together a total of 14 partners from academia, health services and industry to create the environment needed for personalised medicine: a research-based medical approach to guide clinical decisions to ensure a patient receives the right treatment at the right time. The academic partners are Ulster University, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, University of the Highlands and Islands, and NUI Galway. The North West Centre for Advanced Manufacturing is an €8.5m project bringing together 8 businesses and 4 academic institutions to deliver 15 world leading research projects as part of an Advanced Manufacturing Super Cluster based out of the North West. The academic partners include Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Ulster University, University of Glasgow, and IT Sligo. The Bryden Renewable

Energy Centre, is a cross-border Doctoral Research Centre for renewable energy involving five research partners – Queen’s University Belfast (QUB), Ulster University, Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT), University of Highlands and Islands, and AgriFood & Biosciences Institute. This €9.4 million funded project will be delivered through 34 PhD student projects and thirteen research assistants. The Bryden Centre is providing industrially relevant science, increased regional research and innovation capacity as well as the future industry leaders for the rapidly expanding renewable energy sector.

## Current and Future Plans

The Cross-border FE HE Cluster welcomes the increasing understanding from the administrations in Dublin and Belfast of the challenges that the unique North West cross-border region faces and the particular challenges that Brexit present for the region. It is also evident that the ‘New Decade, New Approach’ agreement and the new Irish Government’s ‘Programme for Government – Our Shared Future’ see collaboration in FE and HE as central to delivering on the significant potential of this region.

Two years of funding via the HEA Landscape Fund has allowed for a deepening of relationships and provided a glimpse of the future potential of this collaboration. The initial focus was on the development of the Cross-border FE and HE Prospectus to look at addressing impediments to progression, filling gaps in provision, and establishing additional progression opportunities for learners in the region. Funding in 2020 was aligned with the Irish Government’s Future Jobs Strategy to give students/employees the skill sets that are in very high demand and offer access to exciting and rewarding careers. By the end of 2020, the cluster will have a Smart Industry Board in place actively supporting the growth of employment in the North West City Region and will also deliver further collaboration on education and training programmes including research studentships that will be jointly supervised by the higher education partners. In addition, the partners will promote the significant strengths in tertiary education in the region and the growing network of innovation centres and digital hubs through a new website and an annual conference.

There is widespread recognition that ambitious new tertiary education provision in the North West border region can support more access to education for young people on a cross-border basis, enable further cooperation between the education partners in the North West including in research and innovation, and underpin broader economic development and opportunities. The North West City Region has a strongly pro-business climate with local authorities and central government committed to developing the knowledge economy and encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship. The North West’s track record in attracting overseas investment is significant with 40 major international companies operating in the region. The region boasts world-class clusters in a variety of sectors including technology, financial, professional and business services, life sciences, and the marine. Education partners take pride in their close links with these dynamic enterprises and the development of the

cluster can make an important contribution to establishing the region's reputation as an international centre of excellence for research and innovation further attracting and sustaining high-value employment.