

## **Response to the EU Skills Portability Initiative Call for Evidence**

This document has been prepared by the Centre for Cross Border Cooperation in response to the call for evidence issued by the EU Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion on its Impact Assessment on the Skills Portability Initiative.<sup>1</sup>

### **About The Centre for Cross Border Cooperation**

The Centre for Cross Border Cooperation (CCBC), based in Armagh, Northern Ireland, has a strong reputation as an authoritative advocate for cross-border cooperation and as a valued source of research, information and support for collaboration across borders on the island of Ireland, between the island of Ireland and Great Britain, elsewhere in Europe and beyond.<sup>2</sup> The Centre was established in September 1999 as the Centre for Cross Border Studies and has been trading under the name of Centre for Cross Border Cooperation since celebrating its 25th anniversary in September 2024. It is a “think and do tank” – researching and analysing public policy of relevance to cross-border cooperation, mobility and relations and using the results of its research to support improved cross-border cooperation and those with cross-border lives, including through its flagship Border People project.<sup>3</sup>

This response is informed by the Centre’s particular knowledge of, and experience in, engaging with political representatives and officials on cross-border socio-economic development involving a range of sectors from both Northern Ireland and Ireland, including public bodies, business and civil society. It focuses on those issues of greatest relevance to the Centre for Cross Border Cooperation’s work.

### **Response to the consultation:**

We note that the exact type of initiatives is still to be determined but we welcome the indicative actions outlined which aim to meet the objectives of:

- Facilitating worker mobility through improved transparency of skills and qualifications and digitalisation.
- Facilitating modernising and expanding recognition processes for regulated professions and
- Simplifying procedures for the recognition of the qualifications and skills of third country nationals.

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<sup>1</sup> This submission was authored by the Centre’s Director, Dr Anthony Soares, and Aidan Campbell, Research Programme Development Manager.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://crossborder.ie/>.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the Border People project, see <https://borderpeople.info/>.

There is no definitive data source on the numbers of people crossing the border for work or study purposes although official government statistics agencies estimate the number of cross border workers at 18,300.<sup>4</sup> This is considered to be an under-estimate as workers with no fixed place of work (e.g. those involved in construction, distribution and sales) are not included in this figure.

Individual citizens in the Border region benefit from freedom of movement across the Ireland-Northern Ireland border if they are UK or Irish passport holders or are non-visa nationals legally resident in Ireland or the UK. Businesses on the island of Ireland can potentially employ eligible workers from the other side of the border to address labour shortages and seek the skills they need to develop.

We welcome proposals which will enhance the transparency of skills and qualifications to facilitate cross-border movement of labour on the island of Ireland.

We also welcome proposals to expand recognition processes for regulated professions. CCBC is part of a landmark project, North South ESTEEM, led by Atlantic Technological University in Letterkenny in the Republic of Ireland, supported by PEACEPLUS, a programme managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). It promises to give students clear, accessible information on cross-border study options and to tackle the systemic issues that have kept mobility levels low. For skilled workers, it will address accreditation gaps and propose reforms to licensing and regulation, making it easier to work across jurisdictions.

The project will deliver three interconnected strands: improving student mobility, boosting employment skills portability, and developing a research-based strategy to align education and skills systems with the needs of an all-island economy. Pilot studies will test practical solutions, while policy recommendations will aim to make mobility simpler and fairer.<sup>5</sup> We believe that the EU Skills Portability Initiative has the potential to make a significant impact on the issues the NS ESTEEM project is addressing.

We also welcome the proposed objective to ease formal recognition of qualifications for nationals from third countries as many businesses in the Border region face labour shortages in key areas. Any practical measures that could be agreed between the EU and UK government in relation to skills portability and mutual recognition of

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<sup>4</sup> *Ireland and Northern Ireland – A Joint Census Publication 2021-2022*, Central Statistics Office and Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency July 2025 available at

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpini/irelandandnorthernireland-ajointcensuspublication2021-2022/labourforceemploymentcross-borderworkersandeducation/>

<sup>5</sup> For further information on the North South ESTEEM project click <https://www.atu.ie/news/breaking-barriers-new-north-south-esteem-project-aims-to-transform-education-and-skills-mobility-across-ireland>

qualifications would be welcome following the end of Mutual Recognition of Qualifications between the EU and UK on 31 December 2020.

Research undertaken by the Centre for Cross Border Cooperation into the conditions of the labour market on the island of Ireland in 2024 includes chapters on qualifications and skills.<sup>6</sup> Evidence gathered during the compilation of the research identified a range of issues and examples related to the professional recognition of qualifications in relation to professional services. It pointed to problems in relation to nursing, pharmacy and teaching qualifications, where add-on courses or modules are required to achieve equivalency but are provided by private educational bodies and so are ineligible for public funding. A further case study involved evidence from an Advice sector representative on the recognition of health qualifications:

*“CORU is Ireland’s multi-profession health regulator. Applying for jobs in Ireland which depend on CORU registration can lead to months of frustration as Northern Ireland degree courses contents are scrutinised to make sure course content aligns with Ireland requirements e.g. the Social Work degree from Queen’s University Belfast will need all the elements of the degree scrutinised to determine if it will be a suitable qualification for Ireland. This is completed for each candidate rather than accepting the Degree in its complete form. So, for example, this could be 50 different candidates all requesting the same information. The over complicated and complex nature of the CORU process has led to several good candidates not taking up posts cross-border.”<sup>7</sup>*

Further detailed examples of difficulties experienced in relation to the professional recognition of qualifications of cross-border workers can be found in the report.

The introduction of the EU Digital Identity Wallet in 2026 may offer EU citizens the opportunity to enhance the portability of their qualifications, but consideration needs to be given as to how this system will accommodate and facilitate access to citizens from third countries to ensure the flow of workers from Northern Ireland across the border into the Republic of Ireland is maintained.

SMEs make up a large proportion of businesses in the Border region, North and South. Many of these businesses already report challenges in recruiting and retaining the skilled workers they need to develop. Measures that enhance the portability of skills can help to address these challenges.

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<sup>6</sup> A study into the current conditions of the island of Ireland labour market, and challenges and opportunities for effective operation for workers and businesses across the island, O’Reilly M. et. al. August 2024, pgs. 74-92. Commissioned by the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF) Shared Island Working Group, available at <https://crossborder.ie/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/All-island-labour-market-study-2024.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid pg. 81

We strongly support the policy options set out in the call for evidence to:

- establish an approved list of qualifications or providers from third countries that meet minimum training requirements for selected priority regulated professions in the EU. Third-country nationals holding these approved qualifications would benefit from automatic recognition;
- develop pragmatic solutions to overcome barriers to accessing regulated professions for third-country nationals (e.g. the possibility for applicants to benefit from temporary job opportunities while the recognition process is pending); as well as adaptation periods or aptitude tests when there are substantial differences in access to regulated professions.