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Centre for Cross Border Cooperation

Creating, strengthening and retaining talent on the island of Ireland:

Cross-border push and pull factors

Thursday 17th September 2026
The Ballymascanlon Hotel, Dundalk

#CCBCconf

The mission of the North West Tertiary Education Cluster in conjunction with key stakeholders is to create a *Shared North West*; a connected, high performing region achieved through the pursuit of the clear opportunities available via Smart Growth, Sustainable Growth, and Inclusive Growth.

North West DEPTH
Digital Employment Pathways Training Hub

The North West Digital Employment Pathway Training Hub (NW DEPTH) initiative will improve equal access to inclusive and quality services in education, training and lifelong learning in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland.

This project - supported by the PEACEPLUS Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body - will be delivered through the North West Tertiary Education Cluster.

The NW DEPTH project will run for a four-year period and will see close to investment of €10 million in digital skills in the North West.

North West Tertiary Education Cluster | ATU | Ulster University | north west regional college | etb

Evidence, innovation and action for fair and inclusive employment

Led by Ulster University, EPIC Futures NI is a £4.8 million UKRI-funded partnership that takes a place-based approach to addressing employment challenges. By bringing together research, policy and practice, it develops evidence and solutions to support fair and inclusive employment across Northern Ireland.

Areas of Focus

Place-based evidence and insight

Exploring how labour-market conditions, employer needs and lived experiences vary across places.

Employer action

Working with employers to identify workforce needs . Identifying practical approaches to inclusive recruitment, retention and workforce development.

Digital and AI-enabled tools

Developing digital tools that make labour market information easier to access while identifying emerging needs, barriers and skills gaps.

Collaboration and learning across places

Connecting researchers, government, employers and communities to share evidence, learn across places and tackle labour market challenges together.

Behavioural insights

Examining behavioural and structural barriers to fair and inclusive employment, and how behavioural insights can inform policy.

Evaluation and policy impact

Evaluating what works, for whom and in what contexts, including a distance-travelled framework that captures progress overlooked by conventional measures.

Commissioning wider expertise

Investing £1 million in a diverse portfolio of expert-led projects across business, academia and the community and voluntary sectors to address evidence gaps and inform policy and practice.

Inclusive employment pathways

Developing evidence on what helps people facing labour-market disadvantage to access, remain in and progress through fair and inclusive employment.

Delivered by ESRC, AHRC and Innovate UK

EPIC Futures NI is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), Innovate UK and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

Stay Connected

Join our research community, stay up to date with our latest activities, or explore collaboration opportunities.

Email: Epicfutures@ulster.ac.uk
Web: epicfuturesni.org

Programme

8.00am **NETWORKING BREAKFAST**

9.15am **WELCOME**

Peter Osborne, Chair, Centre for Cross Border Cooperation

9.20am **OPENING REMARKS**

James Lawless, TD, Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

9.25am **INTRODUCTION BY CO-HEADLINE SPONSORS**

Kindly supported by North West Tertiary Education Cluster and EPIC Futures NI

Paul Hannigan, Vice President for Cross Border Engagement at Atlantic Technological University, and representative of North West Tertiary Education Cluster

Prof Malachy Ó Néill, Director of Regional Engagement, Ulster University, and representative of EPIC Futures NI

9.35am **PANEL 1: CREATING TALENT – THE DEMAND SIDE**

Kindly supported by Queen's University Belfast and Dublin City University

CHAIR: **Fiona Reynolds**, Director of Student Recruitment, Dublin City University

Aisling Cannon, Legal Intern, Philip Lee LLP

Molly Clifford, Doctor, St James's Hospital

Beth Dunbar, Civil Servant, Ministry of Justice

Aidan Garner, Researcher, Demos

10.50am **NORTH WEST TERTIARY EDUCATION CLUSTER – SUPPORTING CROSS BORDER STUDENT MOBILITY: A PILOT ADMISSIONS FRAMEWORK TO RECOGNISE MIXED-QUALIFICATION STUDENT PROFILES**

Dr Billy Bennett, Registrar & Chief Academic Officer, Atlantic Technological University

11.05am **EPIC FUTURES NI – CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR TALENT TO THRIVE: BUILDING THE EVIDENCE BASE FOR BETTER SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT POLICY**

Prof Kristel Miller, Professor of Entrepreneurship & Small Business Development, Ulster University

11.20am **REFRESHMENTS**

11.50am **PANEL 2: CREATING TALENT – THE SUPPLY SIDE**
Kindly supported by the All Island Institute of Public Health

CHAIR: **Suzanne Costello**, Chief Executive, All Island Institute of Public Health

Claire McGee, Chief Executive, Technological Universities Association
Prof John Doyle, Vice President for Research & Professor of Politics, Dublin City Universityy
Alistair Stewart, Director of Civic Engagement & Social Responsibility, Queen's University Belfast
Conor Thompson, Head of Advocacy & Policy, AONTAS

12.50pm **LUNCH**

2.15pm **TALENT IN MOTION: HOW WORKFORCE BEHAVIOUR IS RESHAPING ORGANISATIONS**
Barney Ely, Senior Managing Director Ireland & Northern Ireland, Hays

2.45pm **QUALIFICATION RECOGNITION – A BARRIER TO CROSS-BORDER TRADE AND EMPLOYMENT**
Ciara King, Director of HR, Recruitment & Training, Ohk Energy, and
Una McCabe, Training & Education Manager, Ohk Energy

3.00pm **PANEL 3: ATTRACTING, NURTURING AND RETAINING TALENT**
Kindly supported by InterTradeIreland

CHAIR: **Siobhán Fearon**, Strategy & Policy Manager, InterTradeIrelandd

Maeve McElwee, Executive Director Employer Relations, Ibec
Kirsty McManus, Professional Development Services & National Director, Institute of Directors NI
Linda Megahey, Director of Finance and Personnel, Waterways Ireland
Dr Dimitrios Argyros, Postdoctoral Fellow, Working in Ireland Survey

4.00pm **ACTIONABLE PATHWAYS FORWARD**
Kindly supported by C-CASE
Damian Duffy, Principal & Chief Executive, Belfast Met

4.25pm **CLOSING REMARKS**
Dr Anthony Soares, Director, Centre for Cross Border Cooperation

4.30pm **CONFERENCE CLOSES**

6.00pm **RECEPTION**
Presentation of honorary membership of the Transfrontier Euro-Institut Network (TEIN) to Ruth Taillon and Andy Pollak, by Anne Thevenet, Directrice adjointe, Euro-Institut

7.00pm **CONFERENCE DINNER**
Kindly supported by Ibec
Peter Osborne, will introduce our After-Dinner Speaker **Dawn Purvis**

Conference Speakers

Peter Osborne

Peter has been involved in good relations and reconciliation for most of his life. He is Chair of the Centre for Cross Border Cooperation, the Integrated Education Fund and Remembering Srebrenica in Northern Ireland. He is a member of the Policing Board and, in June 2026, was appointed to the Judicial Appointments Commission. Peter is former Chair of the Community Relations Council, the Parades Commission and former board member of the International Fund for Ireland.

James Lawless, TD

Appointed Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in 2025, James has represented Kildare North since 2016. He first got involved in politics as a commuter activist and remains a strong advocate for improving transport links, rail and bus services, and walking and cycling infrastructure including greenways. James studied Maths and Computer Science at Trinity College Dublin, and Law at King's Inns. As a barrister his speciality was maritime and freight law.

Paul Hannigan

Paul is Vice President for Cross Border Engagement at Atlantic Technological University (ATU) and Head of College at ATU Donegal. He is Chairman of Donegal Local Development Company, a Non-Executive Director of Catalyst and a member of the North West Regional Executive of Ibec. Paul is a former member of the Higher Education Authority and a former Director of the Central Applications Office. He graduated from University College Dublin with an MA in Business Studies.

Prof Malachy Ó Néill

As Ulster University's Director of Regional Engagement and Professor of Irish, Malachy's work supports initiatives that connect higher education, skills, innovation and place-based development. His focus is on regional economic development, cross-border collaboration and widening opportunity. Malachy is Co-Principal Investigator of Atlantic Futures, a major all-island research and innovation initiative funded under the North South Research Programme. He also represents Ulster University on the North West Strategic Growth Partnership and the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor.

Fiona Reynolds

Appointed to the role of Director of Student Recruitment at Dublin City University in March 2022, Fiona has overall responsibility for managing both the EU and non-EU student recruitment teams and spearheading strategic enrolment planning. She also oversees the strategy that drives domestic, EU and International student acquisition. Fiona brings over 15 years' leadership experience across the public and private international education sectors, with a strong focus on strategic alignment, partnership development and global marketing.

Aisling Cannon

Aisling is an LLM International Human Rights Law student at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and works in Dublin for Philip Lee LLP while completing her dissertation. Originally from Donegal, she graduated with an LLB in Law from QUB in July 2025. In 2023, she co-founded QUB Walkie Talkie Girlies (WTG), a society that helps people feel safe whilst exercising and socialising, with over 1,000 members. Aisling is also the lead organiser of WTG's Project Pink.

Molly Clifford

A Foundation Year 1 doctor at St James's Hospital, Dublin, Molly graduated in Medicine from University College Cork. She was one of the few students ever in her Co Derry school to study medicine in the Republic of Ireland. Her cross-border educational journey has given her a unique perspective on medical training, student life, and healthcare across the island of Ireland. Molly appeared on the latest BBC Race Across the World alongside her father, Andrew.

Beth Dunbar

Beth is a Decision Maker in the Ministry of Justice's Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority, assessing claims from victims of violent crime. Her work involves evidence-based decision making, providing public recognition and compensation. She graduated with First Class Honours in Politics and Sociology from the University of Leeds. Beth completed an MSc in Public Policy and Management at the University of Glasgow and her dissertation explored how political language is used to legitimise human rights violations.

Aidan Garner

Aidan is a researcher at Demos, a cross-party think tank in London, and works on constitutional and institutional democratic reforms, devolution, regional growth, savings mechanisms and skills policy. He has co-authored reports on housing and planning, immigration, and public service reform. Aidan delivers the "Waves" programme which involves scaling digital deliberative democracy in local government. He studied Politics, Philosophy and Economics at Queen's University Belfast, followed by a Public Policy MSc at University College London.

Dr Billy Bennett

Billy is Registrar and Chief Academic Officer at Atlantic Technological University and member of the Senior Leadership Team. He is on the Board of Directors of the Central Applications Office and Asiera CLG, where he chairs the Audit and Risk Committee. Billy is a member of the Advance HE (UK) Leadership and Transformation Strategic Advisory Group, the Quality and Qualifications Ireland Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee, and Atlantic and Border Tertiary Cluster Steering Group.

Prof Kristel Miller

Kristel is Ulster University's Professor of Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development. Her expertise intersects the fields of innovation, entrepreneurship, strategy and regional competitiveness. Kristel's research has attracted over £5 million of research funding to date with business, the community and voluntary sector, and policy makers. She is the principal investigator of EPIC Futures NI which will provide an evidence base for policy and programmes to help individuals access fair and inclusive employment across Northern Ireland.

Suzanne Costello

Appointed Chief Executive of the All Island Institute of Public Health in 2018, Suzanne has worked in public health strategy and communications in the not-for-profit and public sectors in Ireland and the UK. She was elected President of EuroHealthNet (the European partnership of public health bodies) at its 2024 General Council Meeting. Suzanne holds an MBS, and a Diploma in Strategy, Innovation and Change from University College Dublin's Michael Smurfit Graduate School of Business.

Claire McGee

Appointed the inaugural Chief Executive of the Technological Universities Association (TUA) in April 2026, Claire has a strong track record in shaping Ireland's skills and innovation agenda. She leads TUA's strategic direction, representing technological universities and institutes of technology, and championing their role in driving regional development, enterprise engagement and future skills provision. Claire was Head of Public Policy at the Law Society of Ireland and Head of Education and Innovation Policy at Ibec.

Prof John Doyle

John is Vice President for Research and Professor of Politics in Dublin City University with 30 years' experience researching Northern Ireland, international conflict and peace processes, and the consequences of Brexit. He is commissioning editor for the Royal Irish Academy-University of Notre Dame collaboration ARINS, which has produced peer-reviewed research articles on economics, education, health and culture. John's latest book, "Before the Vote: planning for a united Ireland", will be published in Autumn 2026.

Alistair Stewart

As Director of Civic Engagement and Strategic Communications at Queen's University Belfast, Alistair leads a team of professionals to build partnerships and influence key stakeholders across local, regional and international political, civic and business sectors to deliver the University's flagship social and civic responsibility projects. He is a former civil servant in the Private Office of the Minister for Employment and Learning. Subsequently, he was Shared Education Programme project manager in QUB's School of Education.

Conor Thompson

Conor is Head of Advocacy and Policy at AONTAS, Ireland's national adult learning organisation, which works on an all-island basis. His work draws on evidence from learners, educators and providers to influence policy and strengthen adult and community education in both jurisdictions. Conor has worked as an English language and adult literacy tutor in further education, and in higher education access and support for disabled students. His focus is on improving equality, access, and inclusion.

Barney Ely

Joining Hays in 1993, Barney is Senior Managing Director for Ireland and Northern Ireland. With more than 25 years' experience in recruitment, leadership and workforce consulting, he has built a reputation for helping organisations navigate changing labour market dynamics and secure the talent needed to drive growth. Barney works closely with employers across sectors including technology, life sciences, construction, engineering and professional services, providing insight into workforce trends, skills availability and hiring strategies.

Ciara King

Ciara is Director of HR, Recruitment and Training at Ohk Energy and has over ten years' experience in the construction industry. She has delivered traineeships, apprenticeships, undergraduate degree programmes and certified training to the wider workforce, and has overseen the delivery of 400 National Vocational Qualifications. Ciara is a STEM Ambassador and in 2021 received the Princess Royal Training Award on behalf of The Errigal Group for Excellence in Training Standards across the UK.

Una McCabe

Drawing on her extensive expertise in apprenticeships and vocational education in Northern Ireland, Una is the Training and Education Manager at Ohk Energy, where she is developing the skills pipeline to support the rapidly-expanding green energy sector. Una is a highly experienced leader in skills development, mentoring, workforce training and social policy. As the creator of the award-winning MEGA Mentoring Programme, she has played a pivotal role in transforming mentoring and talent development in engineering.

Siobhán Fearon

Siobhán was appointed Strategy and Policy Manager at InterTradeIreland in 2024. She engages with stakeholders across the island to identify opportunities for cross-border collaboration and leads the organisation's policy agenda in alignment with the economic priorities of both governments. Siobhán has a background in the community and voluntary sector, local government and further education. She has worked extensively as a partnership and project manager, facilitator and trainer, including managing projects in complex political environments.

Maeve McElwee

Maeve joined Ibec as Executive Director from the World Bank and has 25 years' experience of employment law, negotiations, dispute management, strategic human relations and lobbying. She is a member of the Labour Employer Economic Forum, an Alternate Member of the International Labour Organisation Governing Body and is on the Managing Board of Eurofound. Maeve was a member of the Workplace Relations Commission Board and a Council member of the National Economic and Social Council.

Kirsty McManus

Appointed Director for Professional Development Services at the Institute of Directors in March 2023, Kirsty has oversight for the development, delivery and assessment of the Chartered Director qualification. She is a member of Intertrade UK, which supports the East-West Council in promoting internal UK trade, and is a trustee of Charis Cancer Care. Kirsty has an MBA from Ulster University Business School and was a founding member of the Northern Ireland Business Brexit Working Group.

Linda Megahey

Linda joined Waterways Ireland as Director of Finance and Personnel in 2021. She is responsible for finance, HR, corporate services, IT, and property and legal issues. Linda has over 25 years' experience in commercial and financial management in a number of sectors driving growth, transforming data management and decision making. She is a chartered accountant with fellowship membership of the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants and is a school governor at Victoria College Belfast.

Dr Dimitrios Argyros

A Greek national, Dimitrios is a Postdoctoral Researcher on the Working in Ireland Survey. He holds a PhD in Economics from University College Dublin and an MSc in Economics from the University of Warwick. His research focuses on employment relations, job quality with a particular focus on workers' well-being and health inequalities and disparities across a variety of settings. He is also a Non-Resident Visitor (2025–2027) at the Population Studies Centre, University of Pennsylvania.

Damian Duffy

Appointed Principal and Chief Executive at Belfast Met in February 2026, Damian held the interim role from August 2024. He is Co-Chair of Belfast City Council's Economy Board and Chair of Belfast Region City Deal Employability and Skills Board. Damian has worked in the public sector in the UK, Northern Ireland and Europe for 30 years on reform programmes across a range of areas including skills, EU integration, civil service reform and regional economic development.

Dawn Purvis

Dawn is Head of Corporate Affairs at Choice Housing. She is Vice-Chair of the John and Pat Hume Foundation, a Board member of Healing Through Remembering, and Chair of Positive Life Northern Ireland which supports individuals and families living with HIV. Dawn was Northen Ireland Director of Marie Stopes International which established the first reproductive and sexual health clinic on the island. She is a former MLA and former Leader of the Progressive Unionist Party.

Dr Anthony Soares

As the CCBC's Director, Anthony oversees the development of policies and research at regional, national and European levels that support cross-border and transnational cooperation. He consults widely and submits evidence to parliamentary committees in Westminster and Dublin. Anthony is Secretary to Universities Ireland, Secretary to the Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South (SCoTENS), Convenor of the Ad-Hoc Group for North-South and East-West Cooperation, and a member of the Transfrontier Euro-Institut Network's Steering Committee.

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