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**Awards Directory and
Directory of Careers Services**



**ASSOCIATION of HIGHER
EDUCATION CAREERS SERVICES**

Each year AHECS presents a number of Awards for Excellence at the annual gradireland Awards event in the areas of Employability.



The Employability Awards recognises and showcases the very best in employability initiatives implemented by AHECS member careers services throughout the year.

The number, variety and quality of nominations received over the years are testament to the creativity of careers services in addressing the area of employability and the continued importance attributed to this area.

Judging Panel

The AHECS Employability Awards were adjudicated by a team of independent judges



Paul Vance, Director and Head of Resourcing at KPMG

Paul Vance is the Director and Head of Resourcing at KPMG, where he has been a People Function leader since 2007. His expertise spans Global Mobility, Immigration Management, Experienced Hiring, and Campus Recruitment, ensuring seamless talent acquisition and management across the organisation. Before joining KPMG, Paul held a number of European roles at Intel, in HR and project management leadership roles.



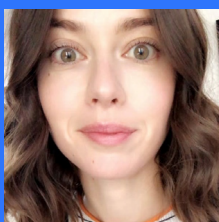
Leslee O'Loughlin, HR Manager, Enterprise Mobility Ireland

Leslee O'Loughlin joined Enterprise Rent-A-Car's Graduate Training Programme in the United States in 1997. After successfully completing the training programme, Leslee received a series of internal promotions which afforded her the opportunity to assume key roles within the organization in both a managerial and marketing capacity. In 2004, Leslee was promoted to Group Recruiting Manager and was responsible for developing strategic partnerships with key universities throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. In 2007, Leslee was promoted to Group Human Resources Manager for Enterprise in the Republic of Ireland. Since that time, Enterprise has been the proud recipient of many workplace and inclusion awards including Chambers Ireland Workplace Award and multiple gradireland Diversity Recruitment awards with the most recent being awarded in 2024.



Judy Murphy

Judy is former Head of Careers Service in SETU Carlow. A seasoned Career Development Consultant with 25+ years in HR, specialising in communications, learning & development and recruitment. An experienced, accredited executive coach and supervisor, she offers a unique perspective shaped by diverse industry expertise and is a member of a number of professional organisations, dedicated to advancing career and personal development.



Fiona Doherty, Operations Manager, gradireland

Fiona is the Operations Manager at gradireland, where she oversees events, marketing, content, and operations for the Irish business. With over eight years of experience at gradireland, she has held a variety of roles across the UK and Ireland.

She is passionate about working cross-functionally and collaborating with students and employers to help them achieve their goals. Supporting student success and employability is a key motivator in her work. This is her first year serving as a judge, and she is delighted to be part of celebrating the impactful work happening across the sector.

Awards submission summaries:

Research Informed Practice

Conversations of Transition – Engaging student and alumni voices within a sustainable careers ecosystem

Queens University Belfast

Emma Lennox

While some students will have a clear career target and path in mind when graduating from university, other subjects offer a variety of options and often non-linear career trajectories. Using JISC funding, this project employed and trained 20 undergraduate English students to conduct informational interviews with 21 alumni from their course working in a variety of sectors. The aim was to examine the experiences of recent English QUB UG alumni as they transition from university to either employment or further study, how they experienced and managed key transitions, to identify possible areas of difficulty, and suggest recommendations on how QUB might better support this graduating cohort in the future. Student interviewers were surveyed before and after the project to assess the impact of this career intervention on their career development.

The alumni responses placed them as central actors in a sustainable careers ecosystem. They were able to detail skills from their degree they used in the workplace but also which were missing – having direct implications for the current curriculum. They had wanted more career input at an earlier stage of their university journey but all had accredited their degree to their current role. Student Likert scale results post-project demonstrated an increased confidence in digital and communication skills, a decrease in anxiety when considering future career options, and an increased preparedness for post-graduation decision making, quantitatively confirming the benefits of the initiative. Results from both cohorts provide insights relevant to non-vocational subjects, professional and academic staff, and HE institution sustainability.

Guiding Future Professionals in Careers & Employability: “Social Care Practice Placement: An Essential Guide” - A Research Informed Tool

Technological University of the Shannon Midlands Midwest
Aoife Prendergast

The “Social Care Practice Placement: An Essential Guide”, authored by TUS Careers & Employability Manager, Aoife Prendergast, Áine de Róiste (MTU), and John McHugh (Carlow College), is a research-informed textbook designed to enhance the practice placement experience for social care professionals. This publication provides a comprehensive guide for students, supervisors, careers and employability professionals and educators, covering all stages of placement from preparation to learning from practice.

The book examines placements from multiple stakeholder perspectives, addressing student concerns and challenges while offering practical solutions. It emphasizes the development of evidence-based learning through tools like case examples and checklists, facilitating the achievement of professional standards. The authors highlight the value of supervision in building professional confidence and ensuring a rich placement experience.

Furthermore, the guide bridges the gap between theory and practice, demonstrating the application of learned concepts and values in real-world scenarios. It underscores the importance of reflective and evidence-informed practice, alongside the application of social justice and human rights principles. The book also explores professional relationships in social care, using case illustrations to demonstrate person-centered care and therapeutic relationships. This resource serves as a valuable tool for placement agencies and supervisors, contributing to the professional education and training of future social care practitioners.

Paving Pathways to Employability – Cooperative Education, Eighteen Years of Learning Outcomes

University of Limerick
Dr. Colm Cunniffe

The founding ethos of the University of Limerick was based around relevance to industry and business. Central to this was a commitment to employability and the introduction of the concept of work integrated learning in the form of the Cooperative Education programme. This orientation was very novel in the higher education and the socio-economic contexts of Ireland in the 1970s but it remains enduringly relevant in the open and networked economy of today. The programme has expanded over the past 50 years to its current scale of approximately 3000 students annually.

The Cooperative Education & Careers Division (CECD) supports these students in developing their employability i.e. the skills, understandings, knowledge, attitudes and achievements that will make them more likely to gain sustainable employment and to be successful in their future careers, to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. Cooperative Education is academically accredited, and curriculum embedded. Therefore, as a formal component of their assessment and evaluation students are required to complete a self-reflective exercise and rate themselves with examples across eight key transferable competencies before and after their placement. This study presents the analysis of eighteen years of Learning Outcomes data for 25,000 students, and seeks to understand the most appropriate mathematical way to present the percentage change in learning outcomes. This large-scale longitudinal study shows the consistency of students’ transferable skill development across the eight transferable skill domains and across the eighteen years.

Supporting Student / Graduate Employability

MU Student Success Micro Internship Programme **Maynooth University** **Máire Buckley**

The Maynooth University (MU) Student Success Micro Internship scheme, coordinated by the UpSkill Team in the Careers and Employability Service and funded by the Thrive Initiative, exemplifies innovative approaches to enhancing student and graduate employability. A first of its kind in Ireland, this experiential learning programme enables full-time undergraduate and postgraduate students to work on defined student success projects within professional service units for up to 100 hours. Through the programme, students gain a unique opportunity to expand their knowledge and develop critical employability skills, while professional service staff refine their supervisory and leadership capabilities and gain valuable insights from student perspectives.

Positive outcomes include improved confidence and professional readiness for students, enriched project outcomes for the University, and strengthened partnerships between students and staff. Stakeholder feedback consistently highlights the programme's transformative impact on student confidence and employability skills. Data from student self-assessments and staff feedback surveys are used to refine the initiative year-on-year, ensuring its continued relevance and success. The scheme fosters best practice in student success by promoting collaboration between students and staff and demonstrates innovation by leveraging our student body to achieve better outcomes for our university.

Demonstrating Being Future-Ready **Queens University Belfast** **Careers, Employability & Skills Department at Queen's** **University Belfast**

The Careers Employability and Skills service at Queen's University Belfast is committed to helping students realise their potential by providing an extensive suite of insight programmes and interventions.

The Future-Ready Award is the most inclusive and accessible offering, giving students practical ways to gain formal accreditation for extracurricular experience gained during their time at Queen's. It is available at all levels, with three unique application routes for this employability award – single, combined and work experience. Examples of accepted activity include part-time work, active roles within committees, and volunteering.

In the increasingly competitive graduate recruitment landscape, the award signals to employers that Queen's students can develop and demonstrate the skills and knowledge crucial for success in the workplace. Based on feedback from students and employers, the award was reinvigorated in January 2024 to become agile and responsive to the evolving ways students undertake their experiential learning. An intensive awareness raising campaign to internal and external stakeholders (including events, print, and digital media) resulted in providers offering a broader and more diverse range of accredited experiences supporting the development of Future-Ready skills for Queen's students. This has subsequently resulted in an 80% increase in overall unique student accreditations. Students now have the opportunity to select from 145 approved accreditation routes, an increase of 20% since the campaign. The Future-Ready Award adds value to students' ability to demonstrate to employers how they have combined academic and experiential learning, proving their ability to pivot from study to work.

Mental Health Matters – supporting students transition from Higher Education into Employment

Technological University Dublin

Christiane Brennan

Jigsaw (the National Centre for Youth Mental Health) and UCD School of Psychology's My World Survey 2 found that 58% of higher education students were classified as outside the normal range for depression and anxiety. This was Ireland's most comprehensive study of young people's mental health to date. The top three stressors students identified were college, finances and the future. Knowledge of these students' needs in addition to the considerations needed to be aware of when working with these students is currently lacking in National Career Guidance training. Similarly, no training had been offered to AHECS members in relation to how best support these students' career decisions.

Subsequently, TU Dublin Career Development Centre designed and delivered a suite of resources to assist students with mental health difficulties make the transition from higher education into employment and also to enable career professionals to support this cohort of students effectively. This suite of resources includes a student career e-guide, delivery of an interactive workshop on how best to support students make the transition to employment at AHECS biennial 2024 and dissemination of a career coaching guide for career professionals. The Career Coaching Guide – supporting students with their mental health, shared with all AHECS members, aims to enhance career professionals' knowledge and expertise when working with this cohort of students and graduates. In addition, all AHECS member institutions were granted access to host the mental health student Career e-guide developed by TU Dublin Career Development Centre on their own institution websites.

Global Graduates, Local Impact: Empowering International Students for Career Success in Ireland

University of Galway

Grainne Carey

Marie Laffey

The Career Development Centre (CDC) has transformed the employability support available to non-EEA students, addressing the unique challenges they face in transitioning to employment in Ireland. In response to the 2023 HEI Graduate Outcomes Survey, which reported a decline in employment outcomes for international graduates (78% employed within seven months), the CDC in collaboration with the University of Galway's International Office established a dedicated Global Employability service which sought to implement a strategic holistic programme of tailored initiatives, collaborative academic and industry partnerships to address the needs of international students. Key achievements of this programme of support include the delivery of over 70 bespoke workshops and events, attracting 6,600 attendees, and the development of an International Student SharePoint page providing 24/7 access to resources. Early engagement initiatives, including pre-arrival sessions in Southeast Asia and in-class employability workshops, gave students a vital head start.

The team harnessed AI tools such as CareerSet and Big Interview to enhance employability skills for the Irish Labour market. To support employer knowledge gaps on graduate work permissions, a comprehensive FAQ was created and distributed to 500 Galway Chamber members, Ibec, and Enterprise Ireland, increasing employer confidence in hiring international talent. Collaboration with leading organisations like Medtronic, Grant Thornton and Expleo has opened new opportunities for international students, while real time data-driven insights have shaped agile, responsive services specifically tailored to students needs. Leveraging alumni who share experiences of their recruitment journeys has inspired current students and provides relatable insights into securing graduate roles in Ireland.

Strategic Innovation

Different Approaches, Better Outcomes: Using Employers and Alumni to Provide a Personalised and Scaled Careers Service National College of Ireland

Caroline Kennedy

As one of Ireland's most diverse higher education institutions, NCI experienced a 54% increase in full-time student numbers over four years. Many of our students lack professional networks and industry connections, presenting challenges in career development, professional networking, and social mobility. With static staffing, delivering what students wanted - personalised career support using a traditional careers model was unsustainable. Realising that what students needed is "Access to a professional network" we reimagined our approach and integrated employers and alumni into career initiatives, transforming them into key resources for student success and graduate outcomes.

Alongside career workshops open to all, we have scaled networking and every programme now includes:

- Employer networking events with a 1:12 employer-to-student ratio.
- Alumni-student mixer events fostering connections at a 1:3 ratio.
- Employer-led mock interviews with personalised feedback.

While AI is reshaping recruitment, human connections remain crucial. One conversation or one introduction can change a life. We moved away from passive presentation-based events to interactive, relationship-focused experiences that build career confidence, professional networks and social capital. Using alumni and employers, we transformed a resource-limited challenge into a sustainable, scalable model that personalises career support and enhances graduate outcomes. This ensures students leave NCI not just with degrees, but with meaningful career connections. "The Careers Team was one of the major benefits of NCI, the events were so helpful. Prior to the first event I hadn't heard of the company I now work for. Following a careers event I applied for an internship and still work here now."

Enhancing Strategic Innovation: A Multi-Campus Initiative in Careers & Employability at TUS Technological University of the Shannon Midlands Midwest **Aoife Prendergast**

Technological University of the Shannon (TUS), a multi-campus university spanning seven locations across Ireland's Midlands and Midwest, has launched a pioneering initiative in the Irish technological university sector: a unified Careers & Employability Service. Recognizing the critical link between graduate employability and regional development, TUS has strategically prioritized equipping its 15,000+ students with the skills needed to thrive. This centralised hub provides comprehensive career development support, encompassing a range of initiatives designed to enhance student employability and ensure equitable access to these crucial services across all seven campuses. The service integrates career guidance, placement support, and employability skills development, aiming to produce work-ready graduates. This University-wide Career Impact Strategy is a first for the sector, directly addressing the diverse needs of students across a geographically dispersed institution and demonstrating TUS's commitment to student success and regional economic growth. The initiative not only strengthens TUS's position but also sets a new standard for multi-campus career service delivery within the Irish technological university landscape.

Ready, Steady, Co-op.... a story of innovation, scale and impact

University of Limerick

Dr Patrice Twomey
Elle Fahey
Patrick Fox
Sarah Dillion

University of Limerick's Cooperative Education Programme (co-op) is Europe's largest undergraduate work placement programme. Over the last fifty years, the programme has grown from an initial 100 students to over 3,000 in 2025. For many students, co-op is their first experience of a formal recruitment and selection process, and for most, their first experience of professional life.

Effective, purposeful preparation of our students has been a key factor in Co-op@UL's success. However, with the changing worlds of work and higher education, we realised that the delivery and content of our traditional preparatory programme were not meeting the needs of our students - particularly given the significant expansion in student numbers. This called for a rethinking of our content and delivery, and a reimagined preparatory model that was more student-centred, agile, engaging, and sustainable. This was the starting point of the "Ready-Steady-Co-op" model, an interactive, learner-led, games-based platform to support students in their placement readiness. Ready-Steady-Co-op represents a 12-month collaboration between placement specialists and educational technologists. This innovative twinning has meant that placement preparation - in terms of its design, content and delivery mode - has been completely reimagined to take account of the demands of the new world of work and the principles of instructional design. Put simply, students work through each section in a game-like way, testing their learning via quizzes, and earning badges to progress to the next level e.g., "world of work", "making your CV work", "acing interviews", and "reflecting back".

Career Pathways: An Innovative, Interactive, and Modular Self-Directed Learning Platform

University of Galway

Aisling Conroy
Marie Laffey

The Career Development Centre (CDC) has redefined career service delivery through Career Pathways, an innovative, scalable, and student-centred solution designed to empower students to manage their own career development. Faced with increasing demand and limited resources (2.5 Career Development Advisers for over 20,000 students), the CDC reimagined its service model to promote self-agency, inclusivity, and flexible access to high-quality career support.

Career Pathways delivers interactive, modular, and on-demand learning journeys that cover CV and cover letter writing, interview preparation, job search strategies, and self-awareness for career exploration. This structured approach integrates seamlessly with AI-powered tools, providing personalised, real-time feedback and enabling students to build skills at their own pace. The impact of the Career Pathways has exceeded expectations. Originally targeting 500 users for the academic year, Career Pathways has already engaged 1,201 students, 140% over target, with 46% being undergraduates, including significant uptake from first and second-year cohorts. PhD students have also engaged, demonstrating cross-cohort value. Student input has been central to the development and continuous improvement of Career Pathways. Regular feedback from focus groups and data analytics has informed enhancements, including the introduction of a Self-Awareness Pathway, emerged as the second most-used, informing new service developments focused on career exploration. The CDC's collaborative approach has extended beyond the university. Best practice has been shared with AHECS members, and further collaboration with employers is underway to co-create discipline-specific pathways. Career Pathways has evolved into a transformative model for delivering scalable, inclusive, and impactful career guidance.

Building Effective Partnerships

Careers without Borders

South East Technological University Waterford

EU-CONEXUS Career Network

Members include Angela Collins (South East Technological University, Ireland), Dr Rebecca Power (South East Technological University, Ireland), Christelle Tallon (La Rochelle University, France), Dr Antonis Vlassopoulos (Agricultural University of Athens, Greece), Margarita Navickaite (Catholic University of Valencia, Spain), Indrė Puškorienė (Klaipėda University, Lithuania), Severina Mamić (University of Zadar, Croatia), Marko Galić (University of Zadar, Croatia), Mihaela Iftode (Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest, Romania), Sabine Brüser (University of Rostock, Germany), Toulia Dimitripoulou (Frederick University, Cyprus), and Andrea Athanassiou (Frederick University, Cyprus).

"Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much" (Helen Keller).

SETU is a partner of EU-CONEXUS since 2022, a European university for smart, urban, coastal sustainability. This alliance of 9 universities across Europe comprises ~69,000 students and ~8,000 staff. EU-CONEXUS unites education, research, and training to tackle societal challenges in urban and coastal regions across diverse cultures and disciplines. The Careers Development Centre, SETU Waterford, leads the EU-CONEXUS Career Network.

As a collective, the EU-CONEXUS Career Network has built effective partnerships across universities and industry to:

- Enhance student career readiness through job opportunities, employer engagement, and career events.
- Support staff professional development through knowledge-sharing and training.
- Strengthen employer-university connections, equipping students with relevant job market skills.

Key achievements include:

- Student Engagement: 5 online events, engaging 1,000+ students, alumni, and employers. Topics ranged from international mobility (Go Global) to industry-specific insights (ConstructFest).
- JobTeaser Career Platform: Student registrations grew from 300 to 850 in 24 months, providing a one-stop platform for job hunting, skills development, and employer connections.
- Lunch & Learn Series: A professional development initiative with 1083 registrations and 574 attendees, fostering knowledge-sharing and best practice exchange across institutions.
- Industry Collaboration: Engaged 26+ stakeholders (employers, alumni, career professionals), strengthening academia-industry relationships and ensuring long-term employer engagement.

Without the EU-CONEXUS Career Network, universities would work in silos, limiting career support, industry engagement, and skills development for students and staff. Through shared resources, collaboration, and innovation, we have created lasting partnerships that enhance employability, professional growth, and cross-border education.

Communicating for Success

Munster Technological University Cork

Annmarie MacFeely
Sarah O Sullivan

A collaborative innovative programme developed by MTU Careers and MTU Department of Biological Sciences to support students, who were unable for a variety of reasons (Medical, neurodiversity, anxiety, socio-economic) to participate in Placement during their third academic year. An alternative to placement programme was designed to cover technical and transferrable skills.

This submission focuses on the Transferrable skills aspect with the development of the 'Communicating for Success' programme which focuses on Communication and Teamwork. The National Access Plan provides evidence that there is a higher dropout rate among students who have disabilities etc. This exciting, experiential ,tailored programme successfully enriched the learning of this cohort of students with additional needs, through participation and feedback. The students developed individual personalised action plans focusing on their personal strengths and development areas, which will not only help in the short term, but throughout their career. Great use made of Career Assessments on the MTU online career tool MyCareer which has Accessibility screens to widen student participation and improve digital capability which aligns with several key strategic objectives. MBTI Personality profiles, communication activities and team working experiential kits were used to develop a highly engaging and impactful programme with excellent feedback from students, staff and management. The feedback has been excellent and is testament to strong EDI values. This programme has positively empowered a diverse population of learners to progress, graduate and be ready for work.

Trinity Inclusive Internship Programme

Trinity College Dublin

Sarah Jones - Career Service
Eithne Coleman - Disability Service

The Trinity Careers Service (TCS) have been partnering with The Trinity Disability Service (TDS) for many years, to ensure an inclusive offering for all and at times a specific collaborative appointment offering to students registered with the TDS.

In 2022 the TCS specifically worked collaboratively with the TDS as they designed and piloted "The Inclusive Internship Programme" which now provides Trinity students of all years that are registered with the TDS the opportunity to apply for a summer internship within a TCD service or department. <https://www.tcd.ie/disability/internships/>

As well as supporting the TDS during the initial phases, the TCS were the first area to take part and champion this collaborative project allowing the initiative to develop & grow. The initiative now partners with 17 areas across Trinity. TCS is now in it's fourth year of collaboration with the TDS and are committed to ongoing partnership in the future as both partners believe that the participating students, areas and Trinity College overall have benefitted both practically and philosophically from this collaborative project.

The Inclusive Internship Programme is part of a wider initiative within the Trinity Disability Service, the Community Engagement Project, guiding Trinity in its partnership and engagements with disabled people and the broader community.

"I felt really positive after working alongside our two interns this summer. I learnt so much about their individual viewpoints and I feel I have a different lens through which to consider all collaborative work across Trinity." (Career Service Team Member)

The Berlin Innovation Challenge- Ulster University, University of Liverpool, Berlin School of Economics & Law and Handshake Europe

Ulster University

Brian Byers

The Berlin Innovation Challenge was a hugely successful partnership between Ulster, University of Liverpool, Berlin School of Economics and Law and Handshake that enabled 70 students to visit Berlin to participate in a 3 day business challenge. Handshake provided the 'real world' business challenge, university partners led the facilitation of the innovation programme and alumni and employer connections mentored student groups as they developed their innovative solutions ahead of pitches at the conclusion of the 3 days.

This partnership model engaged students from under represented backgrounds to collaborate with peers from a range of locations and cultures, to develop innovative solutions and pitch their solutions to industry leaders. The cross cultural make-up of the student groups enabled students to learn new innovation methodologies within an inclusive and diverse environment. Ulster partnered with the Students Union to target student volunteers for this initiative. This included a target audience of 800 Course Representatives, Society members and Student councillors, supporting the recruitment of a diverse mix of participants. This Challenge was an outstanding experience for students, staff, employers and alumni and has made a significant contribution to social and global mobility, and students understanding of digital innovation and sustainability in a real world context. Participants reported significant learning gain and 80% have gone on to secure internships, placement and graduate opportunities. The legacy of this partnership will extend into 2025 as the 'Sustainable Innovation Challenge' will take place in Belfast and Portrush, delivered in partnership with the hosts of the Open Golf Championship at Royal Portrush, the R&A.

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About AHECS

The Association of Higher Education Careers Services is the representative body for Careers Advisory and Placement Professionals working in Higher Education in Ireland. Its mission is to lead, support and facilitate collaboration among Higher Education Careers Services throughout Ireland and be the recognised authority on graduate career development and learning, and employability. Included among the members are 25 Universities, Higher Education Institutes & Institutes of Technology.

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