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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.



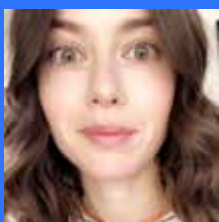
Leslee O'Loughlin, HR Manager, Enterprise Mobility Ireland

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, Events Operations Manager, Intercom

Fiona is the Event Operations Manager at Intercom, overseeing the operational delivery of global brand initiatives and marketing events. Previously, Fiona spent over eight years working across marketing, events, and operations at gradireland and GTI in the UK and Ireland. She is passionate about collaboration and supporting initiatives that help students succeed in their early careers. This is her second year serving as a judge, and she is delighted to continue celebrating impactful work across the sector.

Awards submission summaries:

Strategic Innovation

Pobal Bia- Student Food Pantry

Atlantic Technological University, Galway

Sally Reidy and Sinead Lomas

Pobal Bia, the Atlantic Technological University's student food pantry, provides an innovative response to the rising cost of living and the burgeoning problem of food waste. By collaborating with FoodCloud, an initiative that redistributes surplus food from shops to community groups, Pobal Bia transforms potential waste into a valuable resource that directly supports students. This approach maximises existing resources and reduces the environmental impact associated with food disposal.

For a contribution of five euro, students can attend Pobal Bia on the Galway campus on Wednesdays and fill a tote bag with available food items, delivered by FoodCloud. Rather than receiving pre-packed parcels, students select items that suit their individual dietary needs and preferences, reducing waste while encouraging responsible consumption. Letting students choose their own food aligns with the principles of equality, diversity and inclusion by considering that our students come from a diverse range of cultures, with varying needs.

This initiative aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 13 (Climate Action). This initiative reduces greenhouse gas emissions linked to food decomposition and production, while simultaneously supporting student wellbeing and financial resilience.

Pobal Bia is staffed by a team of student and staff volunteers. The student volunteers are encouraged to register with studentvolunteer.ie to receive recognition of their work in building this innovative, supportive, and environmentally friendly community. They are engaged in active, experiential learning, while creating a sustainable service with meaningful social and environmental impact.

From Service to Strategy: Repositioning Employability as an Institutional Capability. A Strategic Redesign of Learning, Leadership and Delivery

University College Cork

Eleanor Donoghue and Professor Paul McSweeney

Strategic Innovation is represented in deliberate repositioning within the last 14 months of Careers and Work Integrated Learning (WIL) from fragmented service functions to a strategically-governed academic capability embedded within Learning and Teaching.

Informed by international benchmarking evidencing the global shift of career services into academic affairs and research supporting curriculum-integrated career development, UCC Careers intentionally transitioned into the Office of the Vice-President for Learning & Teaching (OVPLT). Not just an administrative relocation, it's a structural realignment to embed career development, transversal skills and graduate attributes within the Connected Curriculum and UCC Strategic Plan.

Concurrently, WIL was repositioned from operational coordination to institution-wide governance. Two vacant posts were amalgamated to create a single University-wide WIL Lead role, establishing end-to-end accountability, compliance oversight and quality assurance across UCC. Placement management was restructured into thematic STEM and Business models, reducing duplication and enabling scalable, data-informed provision.

Graduate Attributes Programme (GAP) transitioned from a silo initiative into Careers, integrating skills development and employer engagement into a unified employability ecosystem. This ensured measurable developmental practice embedded within curriculum and industry partnership.

Collectively, this strategic innovation integrated governance reform, curriculum alignment and digital capability, repositioning Careers as core strategy that strengthens and delivers sustainable institutional impact. In parallel, a digital transformation shifted delivery to scalable, AI-enabled provision using platforms such as CareerSet and Shortlist.Me, enabling significant efficiency gains, all anchored through Academic Board approval of a University Employability Framework (2025) aligning all careers education, WIL, placements and skills, within a single strategic architecture.

From Silos to Sector Voice: The Graduate Futures Framework

A Coordinated Cross-HEI Thought Leadership Initiative in Irish Higher Education

University of Limerick

Olga O'Sullivan, Arlene Loughnane and Gavin Connell

Graduate Futures created the first coordinated framework enabling Irish higher education careers services to speak collectively on graduate employability.

Developed and coordinated by the University of Limerick Careers Service in collaboration with AHECS members, Graduate Futures established a cross-institution digital thought leadership initiative designed to strengthen how the sector contributes to national discussion on graduate careers.

Delivered under the #GraduateFutures banner, the initiative mobilised careers leaders across universities, technological universities and specialist institutions to co-create structured, research-informed content addressing emerging themes in the graduate labour market.

Using LinkedIn as a shared platform, institutions publish from their own feeds while coordinated scheduling and sector engagement ensure thematic alignment and amplification. Employer insight, graduate voice and practitioner expertise are translated into accessible commentary.

Across the first cycle, 16 higher education institutions produced 27 articles, with a further 13 scheduled before the end of the academic year. Contributions have come from across the sector, with wider participation through commentary, resharing and discussion.

The series has generated more than 79,000 impressions and over 1,000 engagements, demonstrating sustained interest across a broad range of employability themes.

Graduate Futures repositioned careers services from parallel institutional communicators to coordinated sector commentators, establishing a new model for collective sector advocacy.

The UDL Advantage: Enhancing Stakeholder Value and Student Outcomes through Strategic Redesign

Technological University of the Shannon Midlands Midwest

Aoife Prendergast

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. This entry recognises the ambitious strategic redesign of career and employability services across the Technological University of the Shannon (TUS). By embedding Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles across seven campuses, TUS transitioned from a traditional, reactive model to a proactive, inclusive ecosystem that anticipates the diverse needs of its entire student body.

The initiative achieved multi-campus synchronisation, aligning geographically dispersed services to ensure equitable, high-quality support from Athlone to Limerick. Central to this innovation was the shift from reactive to proactive support; by building accessibility into the foundational design of all workshops, employer events, and resources, TUS reduced the burden of individual disclosure and freed staff for high-impact coaching. Furthermore, the integration of “digital-first” inclusive technologies provided asynchronous access to career guidance, optimising resources while maintaining deep engagement.

The success of this strategic overhaul was formally validated in September 2025, when TUS Careers & Employability won the eGovernment Award for Universal Design. This accolade confirms the project as a benchmark for public sector excellence, proving that embedding UDL into strategic operations not only improves efficiency but ensures no student is “designed out” of their professional future. By establishing a shared language of inclusion across all teams, TUS has created a scalable blueprint for the HE sector, demonstrating how strategic innovation can foster true institutional equity and long-term stakeholder value.

P.A.C.E Programme

Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland

Niamh Mullen and Fiona Houlihan

PACE (Professional, Action, Career, Empowerment) is an innovative, interdisciplinary career development programme embedded within the 2025 RCSI Research Summer School. Designed for first- and second-year undergraduate students across all schools. PACE reimaged how early-career readiness could be delivered within a research-focused academic setting. PACE was developed in response to a unique challenge: delivering meaningful, relevant career development content to a heterogeneous cohort spanning multiple disciplines and varying levels of career awareness.

QR-Enabled Active Learning:

Interactive learning environments through the integration of QR codes embedded in live in person sessions. Students accessed targeted activities instantly via our platform, enabling

- Immediate participation during workshops
- Seamless transition between in-person and self-directed learning
- Real-time feedback and data collection
- Enhanced digital engagement with institutional resources

Blended & Adaptive Design

PACE combined:

- In-person workshops
- Structured self-directed activities
- Platform-hosted resources
- Stakeholder-led sessions

The programme was grounded in DYL mindsets and design-thinking approach, enabling students to:

- Apply professional practices proactively
- Develop and communicate a personal brand
- Build career tools (CVs, LinkedIn profiles, outreach emails)
- Expand industry insight into research pathways
- Engage in self-directed career management

This approach shifted career development from passive information delivery to active professional identity formation

Survey results post completion: 100% of respondents either had a CV or were in the process of creating one, 75% had developed a career goal, 25% saying they were more informed on how to create a goal, 100% felt more confident about networking and exploring opportunities

"I enjoyed seeing examples of people putting what we spoke about into action"

Gen AI and Careers Education; a strategic initiative to develop and enhance skills and knowledge in the UCD Careers Network team to support students in the Agentic Age

University College Dublin

Michelle Coen and Nicola Fortune

In response to the rapid emergence of Generative AI (Gen AI), Michelle Coen and Nicola Fortune, Careers & Skills Consultants at the UCD Careers Network designed a strategic initiative to build internal capability in the effective and responsible use of Gen AI to augment career education. Aligned with the ambitions of the UCD Strategy to 2030 Breaking Boundaries which highlights the importance of digital transformation and AI in education and the future of work, the project aimed to ensure that the team were equipped with the knowledge, skills, and ethical frameworks required to guide students navigating an AI-enabled labour market.

The initiative engaged the full Career & Skills team at Smurfit & Belfield campuses.

Through structured workshops, peer to peer learning and collaborative discussion, the team explored how AI tools can augment career education while maintaining integrity and ethical engagement. The outcome of the project was that:

- all members attended foundation training developed and designed by Michelle Coen and Nicola Fortune in April & May 2025
- all members collaborated on the development of a Code of Conduct for the ethical use of Gen AI in June 2025.
- all team members completed the Digital Badge in Gen AI for Teaching & Learning (HEA) by August 2025
- an internal digital Gen AI resource repository was created for sharing of useful resources, including a Gen AI prompt library

This project strengthened our collective capability to support students in developing the AI literacy and career management skills required for the Agentic Age.

Innovating Placement Preparation through Technology-Blended Curriculum Delivery

Dublin City University

Elaine Daly and Yvonne McLoughlin

DCU's Careers Service and the School of Physical Sciences have transformed placement preparation by embedding a credit-bearing "Professional Skills Module" directly into the second-year Physics curriculum. This strategic innovation ensures students are recruitment-ready early in their academic journey, combining class-room based learning with advanced technology-blended delivery.

The initiative has yielded impressive results. Physics students consistently secure work placements as part of degree programmes, with stakeholder feedback specifically noting a marked increase in student confidence.

The value extends beyond the School of Physical Sciences. It supports accreditation standards and has been successfully adapted to DCU's Institute of Education professional placement modules. This partnership ensures graduates are not only technically proficient but are future-capable professionals equipped for the modern labour market.

Innovating Career Learning for Gen Z at MTU

Munster Technological University Cork

Mary-Rose O'Sullivan and Roisin Garvey

MTU Careers has strategically transformed traditional careers advice into a scalable, mobile-first digital ecosystem that empowers students to develop essential employability skills. By combining bespoke multimedia learning with integrated digital platforms, MTU Careers delivers accessible, high-quality career education aligned with Gen Z learning preferences.

Central to this innovation are three interactive eLearning courses — Careers CV, Careers LinkedIn, and Careers Interview — delivered through the Canvas Learning Management System and embedded within pre-placement preparation across multiple degree programmes. Available 24/7 to all full-time undergraduate and postgraduate students, these courses provide structured, self-paced career learning. Since launch, they have generated 2,183 student enrolments, supporting students to develop high-quality CVs and LinkedIn profiles and undertake comprehensive interview preparation before entering the placement and graduate recruitment market.

To complement this structured learning, MTU Careers developed four short, mobile-friendly animations on key topics including careers fairs and graduate programme applications. Accessible via YouTube and the Careers Fair Plus app, these resources enable just-in-time learning at the point of need.

These bespoke resources operate within a wider digital ecosystem that includes CareersConnect, enabling students to self-book appointments and access jobs, employers and events, and the MyCareer eLearning hub, which provides self-assessment tools and AI-powered CV review and interview practice.

Developed in collaboration with MTU's Technology Enhanced Learning Department, this innovative approach maximises resources, strengthens student engagement and agency, and supports MTU's student-centred learning strategy and the Higher Education Authority's Impact 2030 focus on talent and career readiness.

Students Supporting Students: A Peer Ambassador Model for Work Placement Success in the B.Comm Global Programme

University of Galway

Breda Kenna and Marie Monahan

At the University of Galway, work-based learning (WBL) is embedded across more than 60 undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, enabling students to gain valuable workplace experience. Within the B.Comm Global programme, approximately 200 students undertake placements annually. However, many students are initially uncertain about the range of opportunities available or hesitant to pursue placements they perceive as less attractive, potentially limiting their skill development and career exploration.

To address this challenge, the Placement Ambassador initiative was introduced, adopting a peer-to-peer model where final-year students share their placement experiences with pre-placement cohorts. Through workshops, panels, and mentoring sessions, ambassadors provide practical insights on the application process, workplace expectations, and the benefits of exploring diverse placement opportunities.

The initiative has delivered measurable impact. Students who engage with the programme demonstrate stronger employability outcomes, with 80% securing employment within six months of graduation, compared to 60% of non-participants. Engagement levels remain consistently high, with over 120 students attending sessions annually. Participants report increased confidence, improved interview skills, and greater awareness of career pathways.

Placement Ambassadors also develop valuable leadership, mentoring, and communication skills while acting as role models for peers. Employers benefit from more prepared interns and graduates and improved engagement with university talent.

By combining peer-led support with data-driven insights and strong employer collaboration, the programme enhances employability, broadens placement participation, and fosters a sustainable culture of student-to-student learning. Its successful replication across placement programmes demonstrates a scalable and innovative model for preparing students to succeed in the workplace.

Building Effective Partnerships

Boost your Ability@Work with MTU Careers

Munster Technological University Cork

Annmarie MacFeely, Kirsti O 'Flynn (with support from Alan O'Brien and Nicola Nagle) and Horizons Ability@Work, Marian Hennessy

MTU is the strategic partner of the annual Cork Lifelong Learning Festival (C.L.L.), with formal launch at City Hall. MTU Careers approached Horizons Ability@Work (employment service for young adults with intellectual disability/ autism) as part of this, to co-create the ' Boost your Ability@Work with MTU Careers' event, subsequently included in the Festival booklet, print & social media.

MTU Careers analysed needs with Marian Hennessey, Ability@Work Programme Manager, Horizons & Doras Training Centre Supervisors to learn more about the needs , barriers and enablers for this cohort who are preparing to seek work . Marian advised that student engagement , clear communication and humour would be key enablers during the workshop and outlined the challenges of concentration fatigue and confidence .Key learning objectives were discussed, identified and agreed.

Universal Design Learning principles were scrutinised , with UDL digital badge enrolment, subsequently awarded. It became clear that standard MTU Career resources would not suffice . The most appropriate materials /delivery methods were explored, researched and designed . The task was daunting and time consuming but definitely worth the investment.

The workshop was a great success with participants engaging in activities, roleplays, card games and a specially adapted Simon Cowell's TV programme to 'Ability@Works got talent' interview game. Participants loved the musical presentation ceremony and spontaneously danced. Subsequently asked to speak at the Horizon formal graduation day. These events have not only supported young adults , carers, coaches and colleagues outside HE but have also enriched MTU work and reputation.

Co-Creating Workplace Success: UCC's Employer Partnership Forum

University College Cork

Yvonne Harding and Gráinne North

Partnering with employers and connecting them to students is at the heart of work undertaken at UCC Career Services. Through engagement with small, medium, and large-scale organisations, similar challenges were consistently emerging relating to work placement processes. This prompted a renewed focus to bring stakeholders together to establish a strong, collaborative partnership and in 2023 the work placement team launched a biannual Employer Partnership Forum with the aim of 1) strengthening relationships with its employer partners 2) encouraging collaboration and 3) co-designing future-focused placement practices. In 2023 nearly 50 employers from diverse industries participated in the forum, creating a rare opportunity for cross-sector dialogue. The forum was supported by a student survey completed by over 800 students and focused on key topics including job description design, skills gaps and hybrid working. Feedback was incredibly positive with employers reporting that the collaborative nature of the forum led to improvements being implemented to enhance the work placement offering within their organisations.

The 2025 forum further embedded partnership working, with a strong focus on collaboration, feedback and the placement experience for students. Almost 70 employers were surveyed in advance to identify key challenges facing industry in relation to the placement experience for students. UCC personnel, employers and colleagues from local universities worked together to develop solutions and to identify recommendations for implementation within organisations.

Employers have reported improved placement structures, stronger alignment between student capability and organisational need whilst UCC has enjoyed sustained and strategic benefits particularly around reputation and student outcomes.

Inaugural INTRA Student Awards

Dublin City University

Sarah Fleming

For over 40 years, DCU's INTRA internship programme has built sustained partnerships between higher education and industry, enabling students to apply academic learning in real-world environments while supporting employers in developing future talent. Since its inception, more than 40,000 DCU students have completed INTRA placements across a wide range of sectors. Today, the programme supports students from 52-degree programmes across four faculties, working in partnership with hundreds of organisations.

In 2025, the INTRA team introduced the inaugural INTRA Student Awards to recognise exceptional student contributions during placements while strengthening engagement with employer partners. The awards were designed as a collaborative initiative that invited employers to formally recognise interns who made significant professional and organisational contributions.

The response from industry was exceptionally strong, with over 150 employer nominations submitted across multiple sectors. These nominations provided rich testimonials describing how students applied academic knowledge, demonstrated initiative and delivered meaningful impact within host organisations.

Six overall award winners were selected by a DCU judging panel and announced at a January 2026 awards ceremony attended by senior university leadership, employer partners and academic colleagues. The event provided an opportunity to celebrate the achievements of students while recognising the vital role employers play in delivering high-quality work-integrated learning.

The INTRA Student Awards demonstrate how structured recognition initiatives can deepen employer partnerships, showcase the value of work placement programmes and strengthen collaboration between higher education and industry.

The Sustainable Innovation Challenge: Ulster University, The Open Championship (R&A), University of Liverpool, Manchester Metropolitan University, Berlin School of Economics & Law

Ulster University

Brian Byers and Dr Rachel Shannon

Ulster University was the lead partner in the 2025 Sustainable Innovation Challenge. The Challenge offered students an immersive opportunity to apply academic learning to tackle a real-world sustainability problem, and was delivered by a consortium of partners from across the HE sector and industry. The Challenge was set by the R&A, who run The Open Championship. In response to The Open's sustainability programme, the R&A tasked the students with developing a product, service, or initiative that would leave a lasting social and environmental legacy in local communities near championship venues.

The successful delivery of the Challenge relied on an effective collaboration and partnership between four HE institutions and 20+ industry stakeholders. A shared vision and goals, clear roles and responsibilities, and open and transparent communication were key components that enabled the partnership to thrive. This, in turn, resulted in an exceptional immersive student learning experience delivered through an action-packed three-day programme and the development of impactful and lasting outcomes.

Students and employers reported a range of positive outcomes associated with their participation in the Challenge, including increases in key employability skills and the expansion of professional networks. The partnership has successfully developed a model that is being repeated, scaled and utilised across different contexts to address sustainability challenges, with student agency and co-design at its core. In addition, it represents a strong example of an innovative cross-institutional and multi-sector partnership which has enhanced the reputation of the HE sector through its delivery of student-led solutions to complex real-world problems.

Maynooth University Employer Partnered Legal Experiential Learning Programme

Maynooth University

Máire Buckley and Rebecca Boyle

The Maynooth University Dentons Legal Insights Programme is a value driven partnership that opens doors to a profession traditionally hard to access. Collaboratively delivered by Maynooth University School of Law and Criminology, the Careers and Employability Service, the Maynooth Access Programme (MAP), and Dentons Ireland LLP, the initiative provides students from underrepresented backgrounds with meaningful, sector level engagement that builds confidence, networks, and professional capital.

What makes this programme distinctive is how it blends academic alignment, careers professional expertise, and employer commitment into a coherent, resource efficient approach. The partnership couples structured student preparation and evaluation with inclusive outreach and sector level engagement; raising quality and consistency across the experience and delivering outcomes no single partner could achieve alone.

The programme has earned strong institutional recognition, receiving the 2025 MU President's Award and being shortlisted for the 2025 MU Public Engagement Award. It has also demonstrated credibility through completion of two consecutive cohorts, and the expansion to a second major legal employer, Pinsent Masons. Most importantly, it advances social mobility by supporting students to envision and pursue futures in law, while strengthening the University's relationships with the profession.

Together, the partners have created a scalable, evidence informed model of inclusive employability that benefits students, the University, and the sector.

The Co-Curricular Advantage : Building Student Skills through Partnership

University College Dublin

Sophie Carey, Aradhna Mathur and Andrea Maynard

UCD Careers Network established a Co-Curricular Community of Practice (CoP), sponsored by the University Registrar, as a forum for collaboration, engagement and partnership to bring together staff leaders of co-curricular activities for students across the diverse university community. This was in response to one of key strategic initiatives emanating from the UCD strategy to 2030 focused on optimising the experience, wellbeing and sense of belonging of UCD students.

"The Co-Curricular CoP has been a highly successful initiative, bringing colleagues across UCD together to develop a shared understanding of co-curricular activity, enhance best practice, build strong connections and partnerships among activity leaders across campus and enhance our support for the development and experiential learning of our students outside the classroom." Professor Colin Scott, University Registrar. The Careers Network has led the CoP with 4 meetings annually since January 2024 and membership includes academic and professional staff activity leaders, representing a diverse range of co-curricular activities across our campuses.

This forum presented an opportunity to educate and engage members on the university's skills award (the UCD Advantage Award) which has expanded significantly recognising over 350 activities. Achievement of the award increased by 89% in 3 years to 1004 students. This is attributable to the partnerships created with activity leaders and pathways developed for students arising from our collaboration and the CoP has enabled better leveraging of resources across units and has optimised the experience, wellbeing and sense of belonging of UCD students across all our campuses

Empowering TUS Graduates: A Vision for Employability, Belonging, and Cross-Campus Excellence

Technological University of the Shannon Midlands Midwest

Aoife Prendergast

Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) presents “Empowering TUS Graduates,” an initiative centred on the transformative power of student partnership. Supported by the HEA SATLE grant, this project highlights how TUS Careers & Employability is evolving from a service provider to a collaborator, working alongside students to co-create a more inclusive and effective career ecosystem.

A defining moment in this journey was the May 2025 podcast episode, “Voices of Belonging,” featuring Aoife Prendergast (Careers & Employability Manager) in conversation with a leading UK academic. This specific dialogue explored the intersection of student identity and professional readiness, providing the conceptual foundation for TUS’s current partnership model. By examining how a sense of belonging directly influences a student’s confidence in the workplace, the team was able to refine its outreach to ensure every student feels represented and supported.

Building on the insights from “Voices of Belonging,” TUS has formalised its commitment to building effective partnerships. This involves moving beyond simple feedback loops to a model where students are active participants in the future design of the service. The result is a more responsive and empathetic service that demystifies the “hidden curriculum” of the professional world through the lens of student experience.

The success of “Empowering TUS Graduates” demonstrates that when student partnership is prioritised, the university fosters a culture of mutual respect and shared goals. By centralising the student voice, TUS is not only improving employability outcomes but ensuring that every graduate enters the workforce with a sense of purpose and belonging.

University of Galway Career Development Centre, Strategic Partnership with Medtronic

University of Galway

Brid Connolly

The University of Galway Career Development Centre developed a strategic partnership with Medtronic to move beyond traditional employer engagement and create a structured, year-round model of collaboration supporting student employability, employer recruitment and regional skills development.

Supporting over 22,000 students annually, the Centre identified a gap between student capability and employer awareness, with engagement often limited to final year recruitment. In response, the Careers Service designed a three-pillar partnership framework covering academic placements and internships, graduate recruitment pathways, and industry insight and employer brand-building activity.

Through coordinated planning between Employer Engagement, Placement and Careers & Employability teams, engagement was aligned with academic programmes, recruitment cycles and student preparation, ensuring students experienced a connected journey from career awareness to placement and graduate employment.

In its first year, the partnership increased placement numbers, broadened recruitment beyond core engineering disciplines, engaged hundreds of students through targeted panels, networking and innovation challenges, and improved applications to Medtronic from non-traditional disciplines. Annual impact reporting using engagement and recruitment data enabled the employer to measure return on investment and plan future activity collaboratively.

The model has since been adopted with other strategic employers and shared with European careers services through the ENLIGHT network, demonstrating how structured partnerships can enhance student outcomes, employer engagement and the profile of the careers profession across the sector.

Research Informed Practice

From Insight to Impact: The Early Careers Employer Publication

University of Limerick

Olga O'Sullivan, Aisling Ryan, Mark Robert, Colm Deegan,
Arlene Loughnane, Amy Trainor and Gavin Connell

The Early Careers Employer Publication (ECEP) was developed to address a growing disconnect between employer expectations and student perceptions of the graduate labour market. Convened by the University of Limerick and now in its twelfth year, the publication brings together employer recruitment data, student insight and careers leadership perspectives to provide a comprehensive view of graduate recruitment trends in Ireland.

Engaging 319 employers across 14 sectors, ECEP provides nationally relevant evidence on recruitment timelines, salary benchmarks, emerging skills demands and evolving early talent practices. Its findings are actively translated into employability delivery through the GetGradReady framework, reaching more than 4,000 students annually and helping students make more informed and strategic decisions about graduate recruitment.

Beyond the University of Limerick, the publication has become a trusted reference point across the higher education sector and among employers seeking to benchmark their graduate recruitment strategies. By integrating research, sector dialogue and practical application, ECEP has evolved into a national evidence platform shaping how institutions, employers and students engage with the early careers landscape.

From AHECS to Strasbourg: Scaling Professional Standards in Social Care Placement through Evidence-Based Research

Technological University of the Shannon Midlands Midwest

Aoife Prendergast

This entry recognises the transformative impact of the co-authored academic textbook, *Social Care Practice Placement: An Essential Guide*, published in June 2024. Addressing a critical gap in the HE careers and employability sector, the research provides a robust, evidence-based framework for work-based learning, student engagement, and professional standards within social care.

Initially disseminated through the AHECS "Lunch & Learn" series and distributed widely to students and providers, the work has successfully standardised the placement experience. By synthesising qualitative student insights with quantitative benchmarking, the research has reduced "placement anxiety" and fostered stronger professional identities among graduates.

The project's reach has scaled from local and national levels to a prominent international stage. In May 2025, the research was featured on a panel at the AIEJI Congress in Copenhagen, engaging a global audience of practitioners. This was followed in November 2025 by a presentation to the European Parliament in Strasbourg during a specialised seminar for social educators. These milestones highlight the guide's ability to influence international standards for vocational training and professional resilience.

The results demonstrate a measurable improvement in stakeholder collaboration, providing a shared language for HEIs and placement providers. By professionalising the relationship between students, educators, and employers, this initiative has optimised HE resources while elevating the status of social care placements within the international graduate labour market. It stands as a premier example of how practitioner-led research can evolve into a significant contributor to European social policy.

An Investigation of the Effectiveness of a Professional Development Programme Partnership Between the Careers Service and the Department of Creative Education

Atlantic Technological University, Galway

Fiona O'Donnell and Dr. Pauline Logue

Over the past decade the Atlantic Technological University (ATU) Galway Careers Service and the Department of Creative Education have engaged in a professional partnership in relation to the development and delivery of a programme of pre-employment training, for student teachers, entitled the 'Professional Development Programme'.

This programme prepares student teachers for employment interviews in the post primary sector. The aim of the study was to establish student and staff perspectives on the effectiveness of this training programme. Methodologically, this study was a mixed method case study, predominantly qualitative in nature. The research participants were final year preservice students (n=38), and staff (n=7). The data gathering methods included a student questionnaire, a student focus group (n=6) and a staff focus group (n=5). With respect to data analysis, a thematic analysis was conducted, aligned with the model articulated by Braun and Clarke (2022). The research demonstrated increased skills and knowledge on the part of the student cohort in areas such as school ethos, school planning, The Teaching Council Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers (2016) and current trends in education.

With respect to the significance of this study, the results confirm the learning benefits of this partnership initiative. The most significant challenge that was uncovered was the resourcing and training of interview panellists, to keep in line with the increasing student numbers in the department. A recommendation from this study is to expand the assessor panel, in the next iteration, in order to increase expertise and efficiency.

From Theory to Impact: Leveraging Bourdieu to Strengthen Career Supports and Student Success

Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland

Niamh Mullen

This research presents an evidence-based, practice-oriented framework to understand and enhance student success for first-generation and underrepresented medical students. A systematic review was undertaken to identify interventions that have been shown to be effective for these students and, to apply Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of capital, field, habitus and doxa as a framework for explaining how these interventions contribute to student success.

The research identifies seven key interventions, including dedicated student career support. These interventions offer a mechanism through which students acquire and convert economic, cultural, and social capital that is essential for progression in the medical field. Rather than treating these interventions as isolated initiatives, the research demonstrates how they work cumulatively and relationally. Early-stage supports foster belonging and habitus development, helping students negotiate the implicit norms and expectations of medical education. Later, field-embedded experiences such as clerkships, funded electives and research placements allow students to convert social, cultural and economic capital into recognised success markers, including assessments, graduation and post graduate placement attainment. The framework offers a clear set of practice principles that can be applied to all student populations and institutions: sequence interventions across the learner journey; make the hidden curriculum explicit; ensure access to visible and credible role models; pair financial support with mentored experiential learning; and design structures that create time, continuity and relational depth.

This research provides higher education careers and employability services with a theoretically grounded, practically applicable model to close equity gaps.

BUILDING FORWARD: MTU Career Development Programme for Mature Students; Building on the Past to Construct the Future, An Ongoing Story

Munster Technological University Cork

Caitríona Horgan, Christine Nolan and Mary-Rose O'Sullivan

The contemporary workplace demands continuous upskilling, adaptability, proactive career self management, and ability to articulate competencies, draw insight from experience, and demonstrate future potential. Mature students enter higher education with strong motivation but also responsibilities, upskilling needs, and the uncertainty of work-life transitions. This cohort includes career changers, those specialising, individuals formalising experience through qualification, returners to second chance education, and international students pursuing new opportunities. Each brings a story of transition and redirection that can become powerful expressions of career potential.

The Building Forward Programme, developed by MTU Careers Office in partnership with the Mature Student Office, now in its sixth year, specifically addresses the career development needs of this diverse group. Each cycle is refined through practitioner research and participant feedback. Accessible delivery modes, modular structure and core career preparation content alongside student surveys and reflective evaluation guide ongoing enhancement.

Thought provoking, experiential sessions are designed to maximise cross campus and cross disciplinary connection. Its methodology is grounded in contemporary career theory: Career Construction Theory shapes the focus on narrative identity and meaning making, while Happenstance Theory informs activities that build adaptability and openness to opportunity. Storytelling and reflective practice help participants identify transferable skills, reframe experience, and articulate coherent future narratives.

Outcomes consistently show increased career confidence, clarity, proactivity, and belonging. Building Forward provides mature students with a research informed, structured developmental process that integrates experience, skills, studies, and future direction. At a time when emerging research indicates rising mature learner participation and AI driven career redirection, the programme is both relevant and substantive.

Supporting Student/Graduate Employability

The UCD Career Ready Project – A Data Driven Personalisation of the Student Support Experience

University College Dublin

Nicola Fortune, Karina Septore and Edel Caraway

Sponsored by the University Registrar, the UCD Career Ready Pilot was created in response to insights from the annual Career Registration Survey. This survey identified a subset of students with low career readiness, a status that correlates with a higher probability of seeking employment after graduation (UCD Graduate Outcome Survey).

The pilot offered a personalised, curated experience tailored to student feedback from focus groups. To build career readiness, the programme integrated three key components: "Career Ready Pathways" - four structured online pathways aligned with career readiness levels; "Exploring Careers with My Degree" pages - 13 school-level pages; and "Career Coaching" - three 45-minute sessions with a dedicated consultant. The pilot successfully graduated 39 students from the Colleges of Science and Engineering & Architecture, each earning a Certificate of Career Readiness.

The initiative proved highly effective: 87% of students increased their career readiness, with over half advancing from "No Plan" or "Some Plan" to 'Clear Plan'. Evaluation data confirmed the value of the program's approach, with 95% of awardees reporting increased knowledge, 92% reporting higher confidence, and 100% would recommend the program to peers.

The pilot allowed the team to identify and refine interventions to be scaled university-wide. In September 2025, seven open 'Career Ready Pathways' and 37 'Exploring Careers with My Degree' pages were launched for all UCD students- with extended careers consultations off-peak to be trialled next. The success of the Career Ready project demonstrates that personalised interventions can significantly enhance career readiness and can be effectively scaled through leveraging technology.

The TUS Hat-Trick: Sustaining Ireland's Leading Graduate Outcomes through a Regional Ecosystem Approach

Technological University of the Shannon Midlands Midwest

Aoife Prendergast

TUS Midlands Midwest has redefined the national benchmark for graduate success, securing the title of Ireland's top university for graduate employment for an unprecedented third consecutive year. According to HEA Graduate Outcomes Survey data (2022–2024), TUS consistently outperforms the national average, achieving an 85.5% employment rate for honours degree graduates within nine months, exceeding the national benchmark of 74.9% by over 10%. In critical sectors such as Engineering and Construction, this figure rises to a sector-leading 96.4%, with 73.7% of these graduates securing permanent contracts immediately.

The quantitative impact is evidenced by a robust regional ecosystem: over 60% of graduates are retained within the Midlands and Midwest, directly fuelling the regional economy. Longitudinal data indicates that 80% of graduates rate their programme as "Highly Relevant" to their professional roles, while employer feedback reflects a 20% reduction in onboarding time due to the "day-one readiness" of TUS alumni. By leveraging AI-driven resource scaling to increase employer networking events by 30%, TUS has created a high-impact, data-validated model for sustaining national leadership in graduate employability.

Students as Leaders: reimagining leadership development at Ulster University to empower a new generation of graduates to lead with purpose and impact

Ulster University

Kate Crosbie and Patricia McDonnell

Students as Leaders empowers Ulster students to become confident, impactful leaders with the skills to thrive at university and in their future careers.

Developed by Employability and Graduate Futures and launched in 2024/25, the cross campus initiative has already engaged more than 385 students from all four faculties and every level of study, from undergraduate to PhD. The flexible mix of in person and online sessions—offered at varied times—ensures accessibility and enables students to balance development alongside academic and personal commitments.

Delivered annually, over six months, the programme provides skills focused leadership development facilitated by multi sector leaders and academics. Content is aligned with employer identified skills, including self awareness, collaborative leadership, influencing change, future focused mindset. Drawing on real leadership experiences, sessions broaden students' understanding of leadership in practice and inspire them to apply their learning through student advocacy roles, volunteering, and wider development opportunities.

Aligned with Ulster University's Graduate Attributes, the programme benefits from strong partnerships with the Institute of Directors, Students Union, alumni, and employers, strengthening relevance and impact. Student feedback reflects its transformative influence:

"I have a fresh perspective on leadership and a new appreciation for how I can lead in all areas of my life." — Year 2, Law with Marketing

"I am a lot more career ready... more self aware of my skills, knowledge and values to succeed."
— Year 2, Social Policy

Guided by student input, Students as Leaders is a prestigious, forward thinking programme that develops influential leaders, strengthens student advocacy, and provides participants with distinction in the graduate labour market.

MTU Careers Employer Chats: From Campus to Career, Connecting Students with Employers

Munster Technological University Cork

Kirsti O' Flynn, Alan O'Brien and Nicola Nagle

Employer Chats is an innovative initiative at MTU Cork Bishopstown campus that brings employers directly onto campus, creating informal, accessible opportunities for students to engage with industry. Hosted on the busy D Block corridor, the initiative invites organisations to meet students, discuss summer internships, graduate programmes, employment pathways and opportunities. Typically, two companies participate on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10:00 to 14:00, providing multiple touchpoints for student-industry interaction.

Each session includes a short recorded 'Employer Chat' conversation with employers, addressing student questions on recruitment priorities, CV tips, interview processes, and sector insights. These recordings are shared widely across the campus, benefiting students and academic staff, and enhancing career readiness and employability outcomes.

Employer Chats aligns with MTU's Strategic Plan by supporting learner education and experience, research, innovation, entrepreneurship, and regional development. The initiative also demonstrates strategic enablers, including digital and physical infrastructure through accessible campus spaces, equity, diversity, and inclusion by offering opportunities for all students and community and industry partnerships that strengthen graduate employability.

By bridging the gap between academic study and professional practice, Employer Chats empowers students to make informed career decisions, build professional networks, and access opportunities that support their transition into the workforce. The initiative exemplifies a student-centred, inclusive, and impactful approach to employability, combining practical engagement, structured planning, and innovative use of resources to deliver measurable benefits to students, employers, and the wider MTU community.

Future Ready Skills Course – Queen’s University Belfast

Queen’s University Belfast

Tim Montgomery and Patricia Durkin

The Future Ready Skills Course (FRSC) is a 100% online, self-directed programme designed to support students in developing and articulating career skills gained through academic study, extracurricular activities, and part-time work. The flexible, work-at-your-own-pace format allows students to engage with career development alongside their academic commitments. Student feedback highlights the course’s practical relevance, with many reporting increased confidence, a clearer understanding of career pathways, and greater ability to communicate their skills to potential employers.

FRSC strengthens employability provision across Queen’s University Belfast. Initially piloted with 983 students across two schools, the programme has expanded to ten schools and now reaches more than 10,000 undergraduate students. Each version of the course is developed collaboratively with academic partners to ensure discipline-specific relevance, reducing pressure on schools to create their own careers content.

The programme demonstrates how digital careers education can scale effectively while maintaining quality. Continuous improvement is supported through course evaluations, analytics, and user interviews. Satisfaction levels remain consistently high, with all modules scoring above 90% and the Career Management Skills module reaching 98%. Additionally, 93% of students would recommend the course.

FRSC incorporates innovative learning design, including interactive learning resources that allow students to explore workplace scenarios and decision-making. The course also encourages critical engagement with emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence. Inclusive design is central to delivery, with accessibility scores exceeding 96% on Canvas.

Through collaboration, data-driven development, and scalable digital delivery, FRSC provides a sustainable and impactful model for embedding career readiness within higher education.

Interview Wardrobe – Get Interview Ready

Atlantic Technological University Collaboration

Deborah Seddon and Adette Ring - ATU Sligo

Fiona O'Donnell and Áine Kilroy - ATU Galway Mayo

Gerard Martin - ATU Donegal

The Atlantic Technological University (ATU) Careers Service has developed 'Interview Wardrobe – Get Interview Ready', an innovative ATU wide initiative that integrates sustainability, equity, industry collaboration, experiential learning, and wellbeing to enhance student employability. Designed in response to rising cost of living pressures and student feedback, 'Interview Wardrobe' events provide free access to high quality, interview appropriate clothing across multiple campuses throughout the academic year, with items available at any time through the careers team. This ensures equitable access to professional attire while actively supporting sustainability through donation, reuse, and circular economy practices aligned with EU Green priorities.

Developed in partnership with regional employers and internal stakeholders, the initiative strengthens community engagement and promotes responsible consumption. Clothing not deemed interview appropriate is re donated to the Student Union (SU) Free Shop or local charities, ensuring zero waste and reinforcing environmental responsibility.

'Get Interview Ready' complements 'Interview Wardrobe' by focusing on confidence building, interview preparedness, and performance. Delivered in partnership with industry professionals and ATU's counselling service, it provides group and individual speed interviewing activities that simulate real world interview pressure, and a specialist workshop offering practical anxiety management techniques such as grounding, breathing exercises, vagus nerve regulation, and visualisation. These components address both the practical and emotional dimensions of interview success.

'Interview Wardrobe – Get Interview Ready' creates a holistic, data informed model of employability support that reduces financial barriers, promotes sustainability, and strengthens students' readiness for interviews, assessments, placements, and graduate employment.

Co Creating Success: UCC's Approach to Student-Alumni Mentoring

University College Cork

Clodagh Kerr and Alison O' Mahony

Established in 2020/2021 during the covid-19 pandemic, UCC's Alumni Mentoring Programme was created to support student and graduate employability by pairing final year students with alumni to build confidence and connection during the transition from university. Co-designed by Career Services and the Advancement Office, the programme provides insight, guidance, and encouragement that strengthen career readiness, expand networks from Cork to New York, and foster a culture of stewardship. Over the past five years, the programme has shown what it takes to create and sustain high-quality student-alumni relationships.

The internal collaboration and partnership between the Advancement Office and Career Services is characterised by clear roles, seasonal planning and joint delivery of the programme each year. The Advancement Office sources and vets' alumni mentors, while Career Services identifies student mentees through an online application process, interviews and an onboarding workshop. Academic and professional services colleagues across campus amplify reach through targeted promotion and recruitment campaigns to ensure equitable access and strong engagement.

The programme exemplifies best practice in mentoring and cocreation: it advances students personal and professional growth, normalises help seeking, and models a scalable, relationship driven approach to career development. By aligning strategy, stewardship, and student support, UCC's Alumni Mentoring Programme delivers lasting benefits for students, graduates, and the wider alumni community.

Embedding Career Development and Employability Skills: Empowering Students for Future Success

University of Galway

Marie Laffey, Aisling Conroy, Susan Kenny and Monica Turley

The University of Galway Career Development Centre developed the Career Development and Employability Skills module, a 5 ECTS credit-bearing programme for second and third-year Arts and Science students, to address low engagement with careers services and delayed career planning.

Following a gap analysis, the module was designed, delivered by the careers service to provide structured, curriculum-embedded career education, enabling students to develop self-agency, career research skills, employability capabilities, and confidence in navigating recruitment processes.

Students' progress through the Career Readiness Framework, moving from Discover to Develop and Apply stages, and gain practical skills including CV and cover letter writing, interview preparation, networking, postgraduate applications, and career planning.

The module integrates flipped learning, digital tools such as Career Pathways, CareerSet and Big Interview, collaborative projects, and employer and alumni input, creating authentic exposure to the world of work. Students have reported that the module supports personal development, reflection, and understanding of career pathways, with one student noting, "It made me truly reflect and plan on the future, without this module I likely wouldn't have put much thought into my future career." Academic colleagues have also recognised the module's value, describing it as "a unique selling point for our undergraduate degree programmes".

On completion, 100% of module participants continue to engage with careers services, demonstrating increased career confidence and proactive planning. The module has strengthened collaboration with academics, informed wider service initiatives including an online careers module and final-year career map and contributed to embedding best practice in employability education across the university.

Building Employability Through Curriculum, Employers and Peers

National College of Ireland

Caroline Kennedy

The Career Management Skills module at NCI is a 12-week, credit-bearing, curriculum-embedded module delivered to second-year School of Business students. Designed for a cohort where 70% reported having no professional network and only 17% had experience relevant to their career interests, the module was built to close opportunity gaps as well as skills gaps.

Its design is intentional. Small-group, structured networking formats reduce confidence barriers for students new to professional environments. Reflective career learning, MBTI and strengths profiling, CV and LinkedIn development, and employer-led mock interviews are sequenced to build self-awareness and professional capability before students engage directly with industry.

A structured employer networking event brings more than 30 employers across financial services, law, engineering, public sector, pharmaceutical and technology into meaningful conversation with second-year students.

A structured peer-learning event brings over 30 students currently on placement back to campus to speak with their successors, providing relatable, near-peer testimony that directly influences career decision-making.

The impact is measurable. By the end of the module, the proportion of students saying they had no idea what they wanted fell from 28% to 0%, while those saying they knew exactly what they wanted and how to achieve it rose from 6% to 20%.

Every employer who engaged recruited a student on placement or internship.

Placement completers achieve 100% graduate-level employment, outperforming non-placement peers across all four School of Business programmes.

The module offers a scalable, embedded model that widens access to professional networks, strengthens career agency and delivers measurable graduate outcomes.

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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 26 Universities, Higher Education Institutes & Institutes of Technology.

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