

AHECS

Employability Awards 2026

Beyond the Shortlists

**ASSOCIATION *of* HIGHER
EDUCATION CAREERS SERVICES**



Boost your Ability@Work with MTU Careers Munster Technological University Cork

**Annmarie MacFeely, Kirsti O 'Flynn, Alan O'Brien, Nicola Nagle and
Marian Hennessy, Horizons Ability@Work**



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.



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.

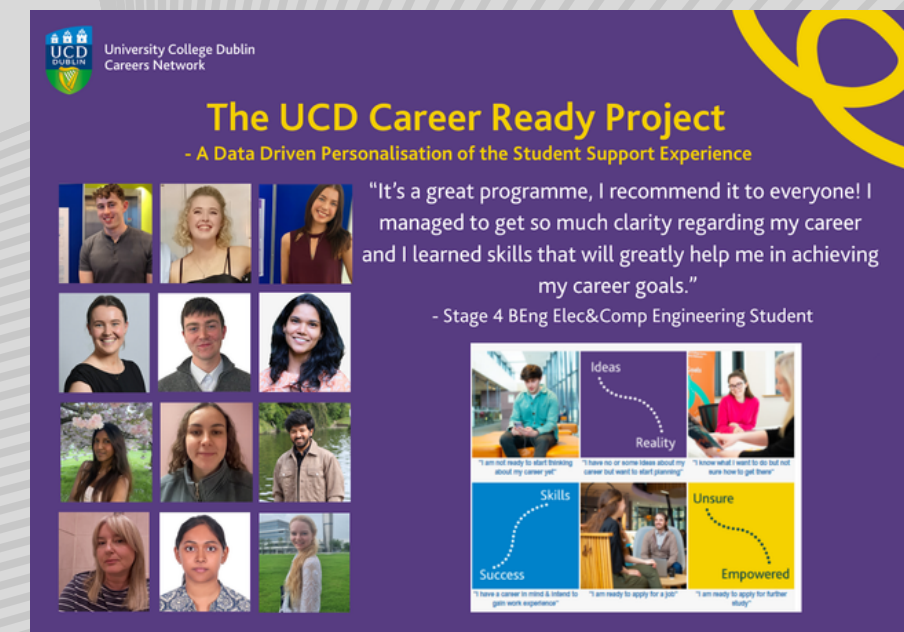
The model has since been adopted with other strategic employers and shared with European careers services through the ENLIGHT network, demonstrating how structured partnerships can enhance student outcomes, employer engagement and the profile of the careers profession across the sector.



The UCD Career Ready Project - A Data Driven Personalisation of the Student Support Experience University College Dublin Nicola Fortune, Karina Septore & Edel Caraway



University College Dublin
Ireland's Global University



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.



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, 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.

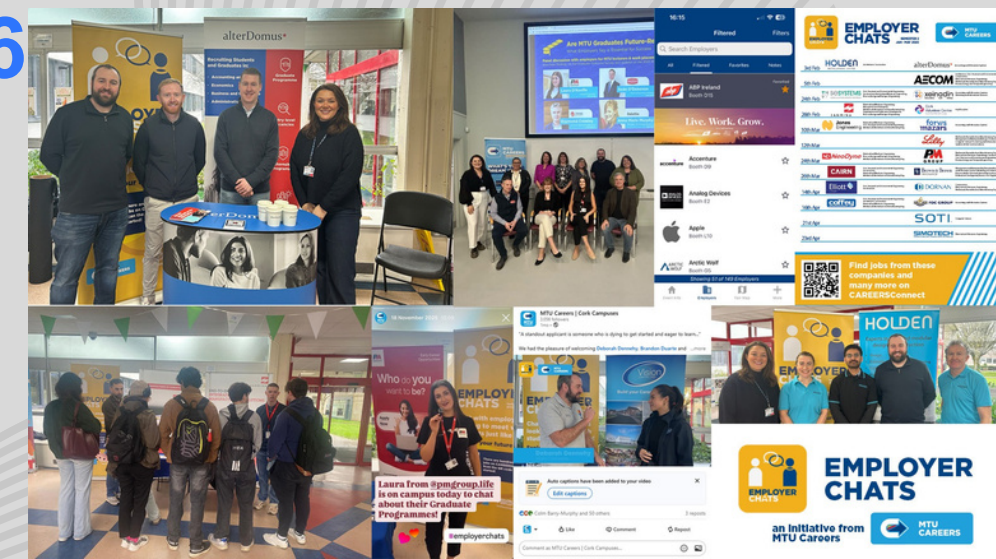
Aligned with Ulster University’s Graduate Attributes, the programme benefits from strong partnerships with the Institute of Directors, Students Union, alumni, and employers, strengthening relevance and impact. Student feedback reflects its transformative influence:

“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.



**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.

Strategic Innovation Award 2026

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.



UNIVERSITY OF
LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Cooperative
Education and
Careers Division

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.

Strategic Innovation Award 2026

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.

The logo features the acronym 'AHECS' in a bold, sans-serif font, centered within a white arrow-shaped graphic pointing to the right. The background of the entire image is a light gray with abstract, flowing, wavy lines in a slightly darker shade of gray, creating a sense of movement and depth.

AHECS

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