

The logo consists of the letters 'AHECS' in a bold, sans-serif font, enclosed within a black-outlined chevron shape pointing to the right.

AHECS

EMPLOYABILITY AWARDS

2026

**ASSOCIATION of HIGHER
EDUCATION CAREERS SERVICES**



Research Informed Practice Award

Shortlists

AHECS

Research Informed Practice

Early Careers Employer Publication

University of Limerick

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

- Insight into salaries, hiring forecasts, AI trends, and graduate expectations
- Broad and diverse cross-section of sectors, industries, and organisation sizes



Ireland's Largest Early Careers Employer Dataset

**ASSOCIATION of HIGHER
EDUCATION CAREERS SERVICES**



**UNIVERSITY OF
LIMERICK**
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

**Cooperative
Education and
Careers Division**

Research Informed Practice

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

**Aoife Prendergast, TUS
Careers & Employability**



Social Care Practice Placement An Essential Guide

Áine de Róiste, John McHugh & Aoife Prendergast

Title: Social Care Practice Placement: An Essential Guide
Authors: Áine de Róiste, John McHugh & Aoife Prendergast
Pages: 208
ISBN: 978-1-73845-453-2
Price: €36.99
Pub date: May 2024
Orders: www.borupress.ie/bookshop or local bookshop

Written for social care students working through practice placement.

Also for placement supervisors, college placement co-ordinators and lecturers

Anchored in the CORU Standards of Proficiency for Social Care Work

- ▶ An invaluable practical guide for social care students and their supervisors/field practice educators across all stages of their placement journey.
- ▶ Discusses common student concerns relating to placement, including development of, and reaching SoPs, applying theory to practice and completing placement-related assignments.
- ▶ Explores all facets of professional development, with particular reference to the student on placement.
- ▶ Examines placement from the perspective of the student, supervisor/field practice educator, college tutor, supported person/service user.
- ▶ Demonstrates how to develop evidence of learning and professional development.
- ▶ Illustrates how placement supervision can be used to achieve placement and professional development goals.
- ▶ Explores in detail the links between everyday practice and learned concepts, values, policies, and theories.
- ▶ Introduces reflective practice as an essential skill which holds the balance between professional autonomy, accountability, and responsibility.
- ▶ Explores the key principles of social justice and the application of a human rights-based approach in social care.
- ▶ Describes evidence-informed practice and considers its relationship to quality assurance placement.
- ▶ Explores professional relationships within social care practice; how they are established, maintained, and ended on placement.
- ▶ Examines what it means to be a social care worker, operating within a wide range of health and social care professions.
- ▶ Includes numerous case studies, checklists, and guides to track progress through placement.

This entry recognises the transformative impact of the co-authored academic textbook, *Social Care Practice Placement: An Essential Guide*. 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.

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.

The results demonstrate a measurable improvement in stakeholder collaboration, providing a shared language for HEIs and placement providers. It stands as a premier example of how practitioner-led research can evolve into a significant contributor to European social policy.



'An Investigation into the Effectiveness of a Professional Development Programme Partnership Between the Careers Service and the Department of Creative Education, Atlantic Technological University, Galway'

By Ms Fiona O'Donnell & Dr Pauline Logue

Employability Awards 2026

Research Informed Practice

PRIMARY AIM



The main aim of this research was to establish students' perspectives on the effectiveness of a professional partnership training programme for preservice teachers, entitled the 'Professional Development Programme'. This is part of an accredited Professional Studies module, which is a bridge between professional preservice training and first-time formal employment in teaching in the role of a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT).

METHODOLOGY



This is a mixed method case study, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data, predominately qualitative in nature, and ensuring data gathering triangulation for the purpose of increasing the validity and reliability of findings.



CONCLUSION



With respect to the significance of this study, the results confirm the learning benefits of this partnership initiative, which can now be used for future planning. A recommendation from this study is to expand the assessor panel, in the next iteration, in order to increase expertise and efficiency.

**ASSOCIATION of HIGHER
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Ollscoil
Teicneolaíochta
an Atlantaigh

Atlantic
Technological
University

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

Authors: N Mullen; Prof J Strawbridge; Dr M Spooner; Prof J Illing. RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences.



Background

This research represents the first systematic review to evaluate and synthesise interventions specifically designed for first-generation and underrepresented medical students. It's core innovation lies in applying Bourdieu's theoretical framework of capital, habitus, field and doxa not simply as an interpretive lens but as a practical design mechanism for career and support intervention planning.



What is the problem?

- The field of medicine is making progress towards becoming a more inclusive profession however, it is slower to respond than other professions (Jones-Berry, S. 2015;Health 2019)
- First Generation and URiM students have additional challenges and accelerated rates of burnout (Haveman et al 2023)
- Diversity in medical education leads to positive experiences for the student throughout their education improved patient care and addresses health disparities (Shen et al 2018)



Where is the Gap?

- Identification and evaluation of interventions that have proven successful in supporting first generation and URiM students is a critical step to identify how best to support these students, and address equal opportunities in medical education.



First Generation Student (FG):

A student whose parents or guardians did not attend university, also known as First in Family students (Haveman et al 2023)

Underrepresented in medicine students (URiM):

Those racial and ethnic populations that are underrepresented in the medical profession relative to their numbers in the general population (AAMC 2024)

Bourdieu Theoretical Framework



Bourdieu helps explain structural inequalities for FG and URiM students

- Capital:** Economic, Cultural and Social
- Field:** The arena of medical school
- Habitus:** The inherited disposition
- Doxa:** The hidden curriculum



Key Findings and Impact

Success for this student cohort is achieved through relational and sequential interventions that are aligned with the student stage

"having a mentor who understood my background made me feel like I finally had a place in medicine"



Methodology

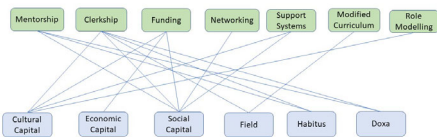
This review followed the PRISMA Guidelines for systematic reviews. A search was conducted using five electronic databases: Ovid Medline, PubMed, Scopus, Cinahl and APA PsycInfo. The Johanna Briggs Institute critical appraisal tools were used to appraise the studies for quality, and a narrative synthesis of the included studies was conducted

Results

Figure 2.2: Main categories in each intervention

Author	Mentorship	Clerkship	Funding	Networking	Support Systems	Modified Curriculum	Role Modelling	No of Categories
Goines et al								1
Conner D M et al								5
Colburn R P								3
Hoff M L et al								5
Duong D K et al								3
Chang S M et al								1
Duncan A F et al								4
Santoro-Parker J R et al								4
Chenopodopolsky S et al								1
Kennedy A et al								4
Solomon-Gutierrez et al								5
Zhang M Y et al								1
Nellis J C et al								3
Tyson J et al								5
Henry Y L et al								3
Alcala D et al								7
Joshi J et al								1
Callahan et al								2
Olivier M M G et al								4
Wideman A H et al								3
Givetti J A et al								3
Raghunathan M et al								3
Woolf S et al								2
Zhou S Y et al								2

Categories and Bourdieu Conceptual Framework



Students: Significant gains in confidence, motivation and professional identity formation. Enhanced sense of belonging through targeted habitus formation

Faculty: Developed **richer learning environments** and deeper engagement. Strategic mentoring models reduced "field" barriers.

Systemic: Measurable improvements in **progression rates**, elective participation and an increase in residency attainment rates.

'BUILDING FORWARD:

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

Caitríona Horgan, Christine Nolan & Mary Rose O'Sullivan



The contemporary workplace requires adaptability, continuous upskilling, career self management, and the ability to articulate skills and potential. Mature students bring strong motivation and rich experience but often face competing responsibilities, career uncertainty, non linear pathways, and transitions such as career change, relocation, or re entry to education.

The Building Forward programme reframes these lived experiences as assets for employability, enabling mature students to translate their stories into compelling, future focused career narratives.

Developed through cross service collaboration between the MTU Careers Service and Access Service, the programme provides an integrated, inclusive model of career development. Now in its sixth year, it is designed specifically for mature undergraduates.

Course Content

Introduction: Career planning, programme overview, and MTU careers supports.

Modular Workshops Include:

- **Stand Out CVs for Mature Students:** Narrative and skills based CVs
- **Interviews & Career Storytelling:** Articulating transitions, gaps, and transferable skills
- **My Story, My Way:** Career identity, design thinking, strengths, and future direction
- **Participant Presentations:** Career agency, confidence, goal setting, and belonging
- **Strengths for Employability:** Strengths Profile and Interpretation
- **One to One Career Guidance:** Personalised debrief and tailored support

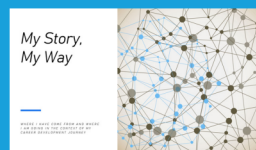
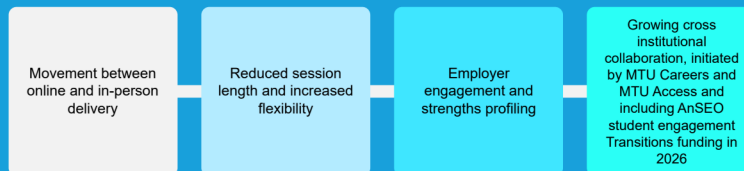
Additional one to one appointments, employer engagement links, and supported navigation of MTU services through a **Joint Access and Careers approach**.

Rationale for Programme Development

- Recognises that mature students often follow non linear educational and career pathways.
- Responds to common features such as career gaps, transitions, caring responsibilities, health issues, and geographic mobility.
- Addresses the need for a strengths based, inclusive, and narrative approach to careers education for mature learners.

Evolution of Programme Iterations – Practitioner Response to Evaluation

Multiple iterations since 2020 reflect responsiveness to evaluation and student need, including:



Jose Lorenzo Prada: Yr. 2 L8 Marketing, MTU



Ludmyla Shurpo: Yr 2 L8 Visual Communications, MTU



Kyaw Swar Hsing: Yr 3, Level 8 Structural Engineering, MTU



Nana Kakazu: Yr 2, Level 8 Business Information Systems MTU



Research Informed Methodology and Evolving Iterations

Theoretical Methodology

- Career Construction Theory (Savickas): Narrative identity, meaning making, life themes
- Happenstance Theory (Krumboltz): Adaptability, curiosity, and opportunity awareness
- Strengths based and values led approaches
- Adult Learning Principles: Self direction, relevance, experiential learning

Practitioner Research

- Continuous evaluation through reflective practice, surveys, focus groups, and iterative redesign
- Informed by research on mature students, digital inequality, reskilling, AI, and employability (HEPI, OECD, WEF, EPAL, HEA)

The Student Voice

Student feedback directly shapes programme design, influencing delivery mode, timing, and structure. The programme evolved from inter-connected workshops sequence to a flexible, modular model with drop in sessions and individualised support.

Social Aspect of Programme

- Strong peer to peer support and sense of belonging
- Informal interaction, lunch time snacks and chat fosters trust and connection
- Cross disciplinary engagement normalises non linear career journeys, reduces isolation and enhances connectedness across all institution opportunities.

Positive Outcomes and Impact

- Increased career confidence, clarity, and self efficacy
- Improved articulation of transferable skills and career narrative
- High engagement despite academic, work, and caring commitments
- Enhanced professional identity, digital presence, and career ownership
- Strong sense of belonging and validation of non linear pathways
- Demonstrates value of a research led, co created careers model within a widening participation context

Impact Data:

- 90% report increased career confidence
- 87% developed a clear, actionable career plan

Contributes directly to institutional priorities of retention, progression, equity, and employability.

For the first time, I could see my story as an asset rather than a detour.

Meeting other mature students made me feel more connected and more capable.

The programme helped me make sense of my career change and find my direction.

This programme helped me join the dots between my experience, my degree, and what comes next.



Building Effective Partnerships Award

Shortlists

CO-CREATING WORKPLACE SUCCESS UCC'S EMPLOYER PARTNERSHIP FORUM

Building Effective Partnerships Award Category 2026

Submitted by Yvonne Harding & Grainne North UCC Career Services, University College Cork

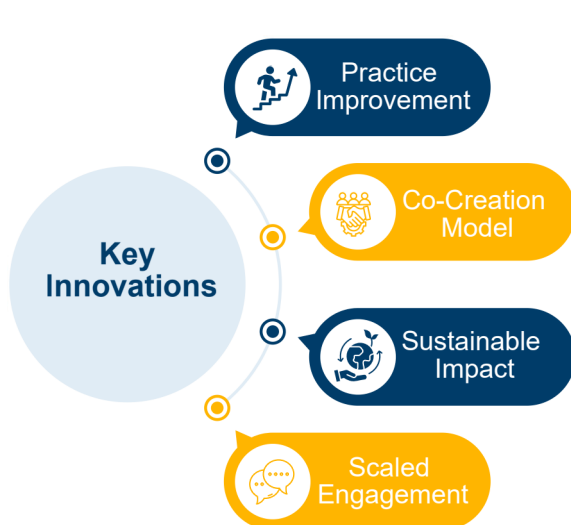
AIM OF FORUM

- Bringing stakeholders together to establish a strong, collaborative partnership.
- Strengthening relationships with employer partners.
- Encouraging collaboration.
- Co-designing future focused placement practices.



KEY OUTCOMES

- Tangible changes for employers.
- Students provided with a platform to influence employer engagement while gaining insight into work placement expectations.
- Models best practice in partnership-led employer engagement for HE sector.



"The forum has become a key engagement event for UCC in our strategic industry engagement activities. Through the forum UCC can gather clear, actionable insights that inform curriculum dialogue, student development priorities, and the wider employability strategy."

-Rachel O' Leary, UCC Director of Business Engagement

"A truly valuable and collaborative experience."

-Thermo Fisher Scientific

"Feedback was shared candidly in the interest of the common good."

- MSD

"As a student entering the workplace for the first time, I gained an insight into what employers want and I provided insights into what would enhance the experience for students."

- Abbey Maher, 4th Year BComm Student

About INTRA

- Over 40 years of industry–education partnership
- 40,000+ students completed placements to date
- Supporting 52 degree programmes across 4 faculties
- Collaborating with hundreds of employer partners annually



The Initiative

In 2025, DCU launched the inaugural INTRA Student Awards to:

- Recognise outstanding student contributions during placements
- Strengthen employer & University partnership
- Showcase the impact of work-integrated learning
- 6 award winners selected by DCU judging panel
- Awards ceremony held in January 2026
- Attended by:
 - Senior university leadership
 - Employer partners
 - Academic staff

Impact & Outcomes

For Students

- External validation of achievements
- Increased motivation and ambition
- Stronger professional identity

For DCU

- Strengthened employer relationships
- Enhanced visibility of INTRA
- Reinforced commitment to employability

For Employers

- Platform to recognise emerging talent
- Strengthened partnership with DCU
- Visibility of their investment in students

Student Testimonial

The award recognised my work and initiative. It reinforced my confidence in pursuing a career that combines innovation, marketing and entrepreneurship- *Gabriella Dyrz, DCU Student.*

Employer Testimonial

Moments like this highlight the real value of the INTRA programme and the bright future ahead for the next generation of professionals. -*Ciara Lambe, Director, Operations, Irish Funds*

Academic Testimonial

The awards served to allow valuable new interactions between employers and the University. This initiative allowed the relationship to be deepened and lengthened, which will hopefully strengthen these links into the future.

I think that the INTRA awards ceremony should become an annual feature of the University calendar. -*Prof. Enda McGlynn, School of Physical Sciences*

Industry Engagement

- 150+ employer nominations across multiple sectors
- Rich testimonials highlighting:
 - Application of academic knowledge
 - Initiative and innovation
 - Real organisational impact

Long Term Value

- Extended employer engagement beyond placements
- Created new collaboration touchpoints
- Established a scalable model for future growth
- Social media reach of 160,000+ via university LinkedIn



Looking Ahead

- Expand award categories (mentorship, inclusion, innovation)
- Continue strengthening industry partnerships
- Celebrate student impact at an even greater scale

The Sustainable Innovation Challenge

Building Effective Partnerships Submission

Introduction

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 to work in groups to develop 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 including:

- Ulster University
- The R&A (Open Championship)
- University of Liverpool
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- Berlin School of Economics and Law
- 20 employers, including RSK Group, Enterprise Mobility, Golf Now, Fintru, Bank of America
- Belfast City Council
- Causeway Coast and Glens Council
- Tourism NI



Students conduct a site visit at Royal Portrush Golf Club, host of the 153rd Open Championship.

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 from the winning team, at a celebratory event in Belfast City Hall, who proposed a Biodiversity Corridor solution.

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.

Feedback

"The Challenge gave me a deeper appreciation for teamwork, sustainability, and creative thinking in a real-world context" (Year 2 Student)

"This experience was fast, challenging and genuinely inspiring" (Year 1 Student)

"Please do send our career opportunities to the participating students, they were excellent" (Enterprise Mobility representative)

Employer-Partnered Legal Experiential Learning Programme

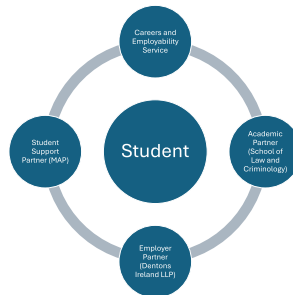
Maynooth University Careers and Employability Service

Submitted by: Máire Buckley and Rebecca Boyle

Programme Overview

This experiential learning programme is a value driven partnership that opens doors to a profession traditionally hard to access.

Collaboratively delivered by the Careers and Employability Service, Maynooth University School of Law and Criminology, 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.



High Level Outcomes

31 Year two undergraduate students supported across two cycles, with growing participation expected.

220 Hours of mentor engagement delivered to date.

11 Events, including mentor and mentee orientations, masterclasses and mock interviews.

Positive Partnership

This partnership matters because it unites the distinct expertise of each contributor to deliver an experience none could achieve alone. The School of Law and Criminology brings academic alignment and industry relationships; the Maynooth Access Office ensures inclusive recruitment and wraparound support; the Careers and Employability Service leads structured preparation, mentoring design, and evaluation; and Dentons Ireland LLP provides sector insight, professional development resources, and committed mentor engagement. Together, we create a coordinated, high-quality model that strengthens Maynooth University's (MU) relationships with the legal sector and expands meaningful access for underrepresented students.

Impact

Evaluation data from the first programme cycle. As a result of the initiative students reported a:

67% increase in knowledge of the skills required for legal careers.

61% increase in familiarity with application process.

50% increase in belief in their capacity to succeed.

55% increase in their ability to articulate skills to employers.

"My experience in the programme has been genuinely transformative. Before joining, I knew almost nothing about the process of becoming a solicitor, and the whole path felt confusing and out of reach. This programme changed that completely." - 2025 Participant



Raising the Profile of our Service

The programme highlights the distinctive value of careers expertise within a multi-partner model.

The Careers and Employability Service led the design and delivery of the structured preparation framework (including the online reflective workbook, mentoring resources, and evaluation tools) that underpin the quality and consistency of the student experience.

Further, through the integration of sector-aligned employability tools and targeted preparation for workshops, mentoring, and mock interviews, we ensured students engaged with employers confidently and professionally.

"This was a fantastic programme and an opportunity to help someone at the very start of their careers." – Mentor, 2025

This approach has increased recognition of careers practice across Maynooth University, strengthened MU's reputation with legal partners, and contributed to the programme's expansion. It has also received institutional recognition, as the recipient of a 2025 MU President's Award and being shortlisted for the 2025 MU Public Engagement Award.

"This programme is rewarding because it brings together dedicated colleagues across MU and our partners with a shared commitment to supporting our students. Seeing students grow in confidence is incredibly fulfilling. It is a meaningful initiative and one I am very proud to be part of." – School of Law and Criminology Partner, 2026

The Co-Curricular Advantage

Building Student Skills through Partnership

Submitted By: Sophie Carey, Aradhna Mathur & Andrea Maynard

AIM

The Co-Curricular Community of Practice (CoP), led by the UCD Careers Network, strives to create partnerships across UCD to help students discover co-curricular opportunities, reflect on learning, and graduate with a clear advantage.

DESIGN



Bringing together staff leaders across the university community



Providing a forum for collaboration, engagement and partnership



Identifying common challenges and developing practical approaches to improving student engagement

Members of the CoP are from a range of Departments across UCD

UCD Access & Lifelong Learning	UCD Innovation Academy
UCD Alumni Network	UCD Library
UCD Careers Network	UCD Student Union
Gaeltacht UCD	UCD Student Advisors
UCD Global	UCD Global Campus Singapore
UCD Equality, Diversity & Inclusion	UCD in the Community
	UCD Student Recruitment

And Many More!



"A standout moment was how the UCD Advantage Award directly helped me secure a job. An employer specifically asked about the award during interviews, highlighting its significant impact and value in the job market. This recognition greatly enhanced my job prospects."

Student Testimonial



"Collaborating with UCD Careers to provide the Student Ambassadors with another tangible benefit for their time in the role via the Advantage Award has so far proven incredible in adding further value to their time in the programme."

Ronan O'Rourke

CoP Member, Project Executive, Student Recruitment



OUTCOMES



Strengthened how co-curricular opportunities contribute to student development and employability



More coordinated approach to recognising learning that takes place beyond the classroom



Exponential growth of the UCD Advantage Award, which recognises students who actively engage in co-curricular activities

- Students can participate in over 350 recognised activities
- Participation growth of 89% over the last 3 years, reaching 1004 students in 2025
- Increased engagement from all cohorts, from undergraduates to PhD students
- The award has been extended to students enrolled in online courses and to UCD's international campuses in Singapore and China

Other activities conducted by the CoP include:

- | | |
|---|--|
| • Sharing current & future co-curricular offerings | • Promoting the Advantage Award |
| • Sharing best practices | • Developing a co-curricular online hub |
| • Running focus groups to capture student voice & experiences | • Hosting an annual co-curricular showcase event |
| • Design-thinking workshop | |



Supporting Student and Graduate Employability Award

Shortlists

Supporting Student / Graduate Employability

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

***Aoife Prendergast, TUS
Careers & Employability***



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. TUS has created a high-impact, data-validated model for sustaining national leadership in graduate employability.

FUTURE-READY SKILLS COURSE

The Future Ready Skills Course (FRSC) delivers measurable benefits for students, academic schools, and the wider university careers ecosystem. FRSC is a self-directed, 100% online, course which creates space for students to reflect on and articulate the skills they have developed both through academic work and extracurricular activities including part time jobs.



QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST

CAREERS,
EMPLOYABILITY
AND SKILLS



POSITIVE OUTCOMES & IMPACTS



- Scaled from 983 students (2 schools) to 10,000+ students across 10 schools.
- Tailored versions co-designed with academic partners for discipline relevance.
- Reduces pressure on schools to create bespoke careers content.
- Sustainable model for delivering high-quality, scalable careers and skills education.

STUDENT INSIGHTS

- Continuous improvement through evaluations, analytics, and user interviews.
- All modules achieve 90%+ satisfaction; Career Management Skills module at 98%.
- 93% of students would recommend FRSC.
- Higher engagement from widening participation, female, and domestic students.
- Student feedback directly shapes structure, accessibility, and learning formats.
- Mixed-media and gamified activities developed in response to learner preferences.



"FRSC helped me understand how to apply my degree in the real world and made me think more intentionally about my career choices."



"Thank you to the wonderful team for creating such a meaningful and impactful course."

"The course gave me the confidence to explore opportunities I didn't know existed."



INNOVATION



- A key innovation is the interactive learning using Twine, where students apply knowledge in a game environment, this helps build critical thinking and confidence.
- FRSC integrates critical engagement with emerging technologies such as AI.
- Fully online, voluntary, self-paced model supports large cohorts without extra staffing.
- Additional incentives through prize giveaways to encourage participation has boosted engagement and motivation.
- Demonstrates how digital learning can scale meaningful careers and skills education in a cost effective way.

BEST PRACTICE & COLLABORATION

- Co-designed with the career department and academic schools to ensure discipline-specific relevance.
- Careers service leads design, delivery, marking, and updates to help reduce school workload but still provide strong results.
- Strengthens strategic relationships across faculties.
- Accessibility scores consistently 96%+ on Canvas.
- Continuous data informed updates to ensure high-quality, inclusive, and impactful content.
- Provides a sustainable framework for embedding employability across the university.

FUTURE-READY SKILLS COURSE

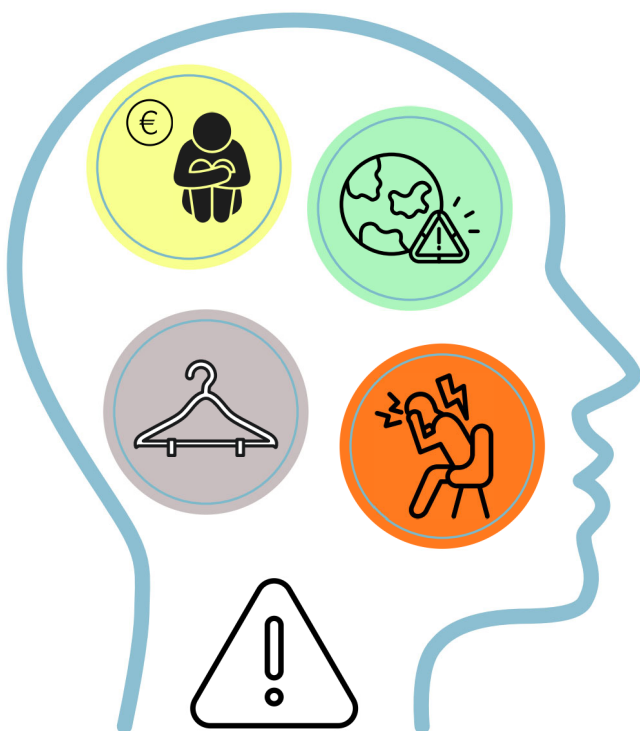
Build and Develop your Career Ready Skills.
Online and in your own time.
Totally Flexible, Seriously Useful.



Employability Awards 2026

Supporting Student/Graduate Employability

KEY ISSUES



- Limited financial resources, impacted by the cost-of-living crisis, make it difficult for students to afford interview-appropriate clothing.
- Single-use interview clothing generates unnecessary textile waste, highlighting the need for sustainable, reusable alternatives.
- Students often experience low confidence and heightened anxiety around interviews.
- Many students feel uncertain about interview expectations and professional norms.

OUTCOMES



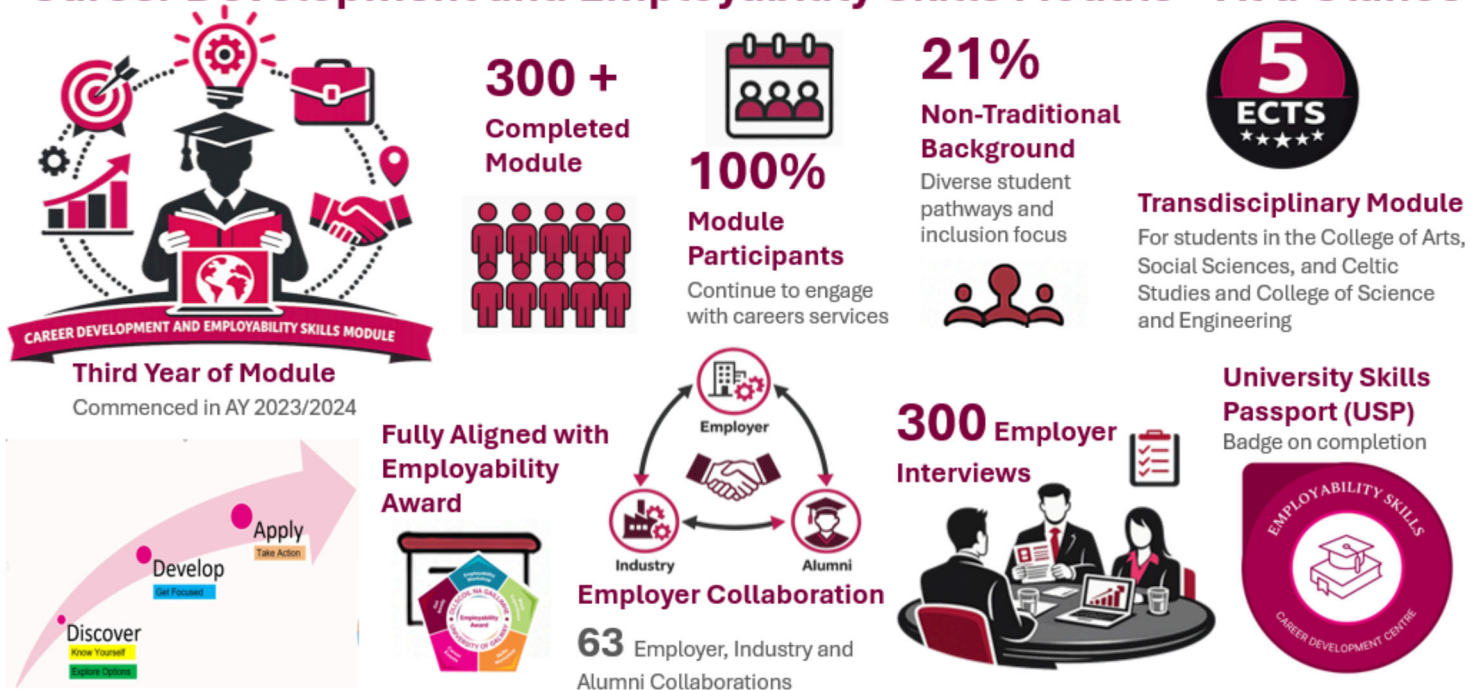
- Eases financial pressures by removing the cost of purchasing interview attire. 'Interview Wardrobe' stock is free of charge.
- Provides equitable access to quality workwear while reducing textile waste and supporting the circular economy.
- Offers practical techniques to help students manage and reduce interview anxiety.
- Delivers industry led simulated interview practice through both group and one-to-one formats.

Supporting Student/Graduate Employability 2026 Embedding Career Development and Employability Skills: Empowering Students for Future Success

Challenge

Low level of engagement from students in the College of Arts, Social Sciences, and Celtic Studies and College of Science and Engineering in engaging in Career Supports and limited placement embedded in these colleges.

Career Development and Employability Skills Module – At a Glance



Solutions

- Students gain a deeper understanding of their skills, strengths and career motivations.
- Practical experience in job searching, networking, and personal branding.
- Confidence in making career decisions and handling job applications.
- A professional career plan tailored to individual goals.

Outcomes

- Earlier engagement builds confidence and boosts participation on internships and exploration of graduate and postgraduate pathways.
- Student voice drives continuous improvement, with students as co-creators.
- Strengthened institutional support for embedded career education, including adviser funding.
- Informed wider Career Service initiatives, including the Make the Most of Your Final Semester pathway for all students.
- Increased use of career resources, AI tools and employability supports.

Feedback

Student feedback researching "future careers and pathways that interest you" helped them understand opportunities.

Other Students value "personality and strengths profile tools" for self-discovery.

Student feedback also highlighted the benefit of "interaction with others and viewing other peoples' perspectives" as intellectually stimulating.

Prof.Derek Morris, Academic Partner:
"A unique strength of our undergraduate programmes, this module helps students build confidence, reflect on their strengths, and prepare for recruitment and future careers".

AHECS

Award Category:
Supporting Student/Graduate Employability

Building Employability Through Curriculum, Employers and Peers

This credit-bearing, second-year Careers module was designed to improve employability by building students' confidence, career clarity, professional networks and readiness for placement, internships and the graduate labour market. Embedded within the curriculum, the module combines reflective career learning, MBTI & strengths profiling with structured employer networking, peer learning, employer led mock interviews, and application support.

The module was designed for a cohort where 17% of participating students had work experience related to their area of interest and 70% reported having no network to support their career progression.

Through structured engagement with more than 30 employers, peer learning from students who had completed placement and recruiter led mock interviews the module helps students understand career options, build professional confidence and make more informed decisions about their next steps. 100% of engaging employers recruited a placement or internship student.

Its impact is evident in both learning gain and student voice.

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%.

The module offers a scalable, curriculum-embedded model of employability enhancement that widens access to networks, strengthens decision-making and supports stronger student, placement and graduate outcomes.

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NCI
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Quotes:

"The employer networking event was brilliant"

"The mock interviews really prepared me"

"I had not planned to do placement, but hearing from students who had completed it changed my mind"





Strategic Innovation Award

Shortlists



Pobal Bia- ATU Student Food Pantry

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).

The student volunteers who staff Pobal Bia are encouraged to register with studentvolunteer.ie to receive recognition of their work in building this innovative, supportive, and environmentally friendly community.

"Working with Pobal Bia has been a once in a lifetime experience. Encouraging food waste reduction while educating staff and students on the importance of sustainability through the food bank service is an incredible idea. I have learned how a successful organisation is run through the power of a passionate team. I strongly encourage everyone to visit Pobal Bia in the new academic year." (Student volunteer)



EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES ALLIANCE FOR SUSTAINABILITY:
RESPONSIBLE GROWTH, INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND ENVIRONMENT



Strategic Innovation

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

Aoife Prendergast, TUS Careers & Employability



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.

Award-Winning Standard: This methodology was validated by winning the eGovernment Award for Universal Design (Sept 2025), scoring in the top percentile for Public Sector Innovation.

Innovating Placement Preparation through Technology-Blended Curriculum Delivery

DCU's Careers Service and School of Physical Sciences have transformed and innovated placement preparation by embedding a credit-bearing "Professional Skills Module" into the second-year Physics curriculum, ensuring early engagement before the internships cycle



TIMELINE: SPANNING OVER 15 YEARS

- Launched as a final-year module
- Repositioned to Year 2 to align with INTRA Internships recruitment cycles
- Scaled interview practice via Shortlist.me (AI-driven video platform)
- Integrated CareerSet for 24/7 AI-driven CV and cover letter analysis

THE BLENDED DELIVERY MODEL

CDL: Embedded guest lectures on CVs, personal branding and interview skills

AI: Students use CareerSet for feedback on CVs and cover letters

Practise: Mock video interviews via Shortlist.me

Human Element: Live panel mock interviews

Assessment: 20% of module grade



DATA INSIGHTS

Between 24/25 and 25/26, the average placement rate across four Physics programmes rose from 73% to 84%.

Long-term growth is even more striking with Physics with Astronomy climbing from 46% in 21/22 to a peak of 92% in 25/26.

Additionally, Applied Physics achieved a 100% placement rate in 23/24.

IMPACT THROUGH SCALEABILITY



Physics

570+ students engaged with the professional skills module since inception

Business School

560+ students engaged in AI mock interview

Institute of Education

566 Post Primary teaching students with access to asynchronous learning and AI tools

STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES

The Student Voice: "The mock interview prepared me for the actual interview that secured my INTRA placement". Physics student

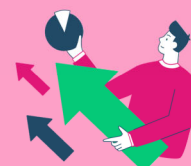
The Academic Perspective: "I have worked with DCU Careers colleagues for many years, and these colleagues are hugely innovative, and have ensured that this activity has remained up-to-date by incorporating the latest AI technologies, which brings tremendous advantages both to the students and staff..." Professor Enda McGlynn, Physics Academic colleague

THREE PILLARS SUCCESS FORMULA

Integrate: Embed into the core curriculum to ensure "buy-in."

Scale: Utilise AI (CareerSet/Shortlist.me) to handle volume without losing quality.

Preserve: Keep the human element (panels/coaching) for confidence building.



Digitizing Career Education for Gen Z at MTU

Mary Rose O'Sullivan, Róisín Garvey, Jane Lee & Marian Murphy



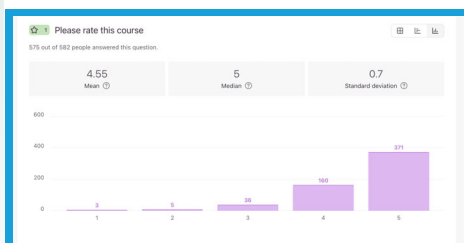
MTU Careers has innovatively transformed traditional careers guidance into a scalable, mobile-first digital ecosystem that empowers students to develop essential employability skills. Through three eLearning courses — CV Builder, LinkedIn Profile Builder, and Interview Preparation — embedded across multiple programmes, students engage with high-quality, accessible learning at critical stages such as pre-placement and graduate applications. Since launch, MTU Careers' digital employability courses have generated 2,183 student enrolments. The addition of four short, mobile-friendly animations supports just-in-time learning for careers fairs and graduate programme applications, with content validated through student leader and Students' Union feedback to ensure clarity and relevance.

This innovative approach delivers measurable outcomes, with strong student engagement, improved CV standards, and positive employer feedback, while allowing academic staff to integrate high-quality career guidance efficiently. By continually expanding to new courses, directing students through 1:1 advising, and sharing resources via YouTube, the Careers Fair Plus App, and the pre-AHECS Awards 2026 showcase, MTU Careers demonstrates best practice for the sector, combining sustainability, impact, and collaboration at scale.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND IMPACT

The digital careers learning resources have delivered measurable positive outcomes for students. The three Canvas eLearning courses recorded strong engagement in 2024–2025, with 269 enrolments in the CV course, 150 in LinkedIn and 97 in Interview Preparation.

Student feedback is exceptionally positive. As of March 2026, the CV Builder course has received 824 five-star ratings and 256 four-star ratings, with only three ratings below three stars. The LinkedIn course received 370 five-star and 160 four-star ratings, while the Interview course received 315 five-star and 115 four-star ratings, demonstrating sustained student satisfaction and perceived value.



Extremely helpful and easy to follow

Student testimonial
LinkedIn Course

It really helped me to see the best way to approach an interview

Student testimonial
Interview course

ACADEMIC AND EMPLOYER IMPACT

The courses are embedded in multiple programmes, supporting work-placement preparation across disciplines including Marketing, Computer Science, Chemistry, Accounting and Business. Academic staff report clear improvements in the quality of student applications. Marketing lecturer Michelle Collins notes that students who complete the CV course require "minimal amendments" to their CVs. Employers have also commented positively on the high standard of MTU placement applications.

EXTENDED REACH AND SUSTAINABILITY

Complementary animations hosted on the MTU Careers YouTube channel and Careers Fair Plus App further extend impact. The App recorded 1,457 unique users in the month surrounding the Careers Fair, enabling careers guidance to reach far more students than traditional delivery methods. Together, these scalable digital resources strengthen employability outcomes while providing a sustainable model of careers education delivery.

The bespoke interactive resources greatly complement the two digital platform licences introduced in the past five years: the CareersConnect platform and the MyCareer eLearning hub.

Creating original MTU digital resources successfully engages Gen Z students in a time-efficient and interactive format. It supports MTU's strategy for student-centred learning and aligns with the Higher Education Authority's Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy, particularly its focus on talent development, career guidance, opportunities, and transversal skill development for students.





AHECS Strategic Innovation Award 2026 Placement Ambassador Initiative

The Problem

- Students unsure of placement options
- Limited confidence & skills
- Narrow scope of applications

Our Impact and Outcomes

- Optimises resources and scales efficiently
- High-quality sessions to over 200 students annually
- Innovations such as sector-specific guidance and preparation guides
- Informal mentoring sessions enhance learning outcomes while maximising resource use.
- Replicated across other programmes, proving its scalability and sustainability.

Peer Learning in Action

Final Year Placement Ambassadors Supporting 2nd year Students



The Work Placement Peer Ambassador service was exceptional for me, as it provided me with tips and guides in preparing for my job interviews & to do well in my internship. -David Hanrahan

The work placement ambassador event was extremely useful in preparing my application for work placement. -Emily Walsh

Student Testimonials

The Placement Ambassadors were extremely helpful at every stage throughout this process - David Quinn

The logo consists of the letters 'AHECS' in a bold, sans-serif font, enclosed within a black-outlined chevron shape pointing to the right.

AHECS

EMPLOYABILITY AWARDS

2026

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