

Concept Note and Programme

Irish EU Reference Group of Agencies under the aegis of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) Annual Meeting

The role of European Projects in Ireland in the delivery of the Union of Skills

14 April 2026

Dublin, Ireland

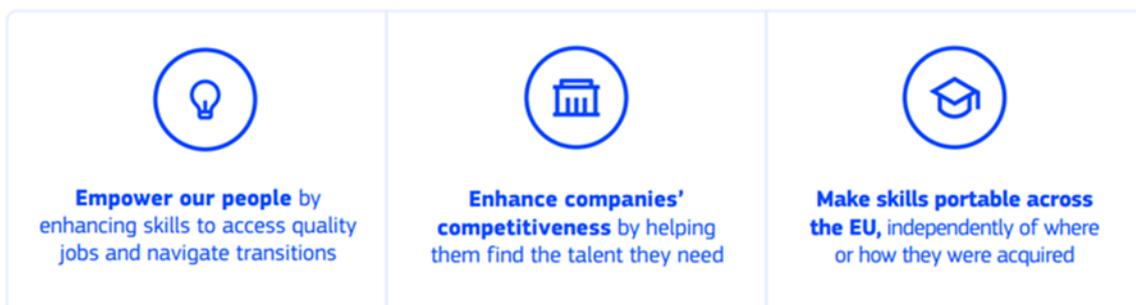
Background

The [Union of Skills](#) is a major European Union (EU) strategy launched by the European Commission in March 2025 to address skills shortages, support lifelong learning and make the EU's workforce more competitive and adaptable. It aims to strengthen education and training, promote regular upskilling and reskilling, improve the portability of skills across EU countries, and attract, develop, and retain talent from within the EU and globally. The initiative is built around four key pillars:

- building strong foundational skills,
- making continuous learning the norm,
- facilitating mobility of skills across the single market, and
- boosting the EU's ability to draw in and keep skilled workers.

The Union of Skills outlines three key challenges; skills shortages and gaps, transformation speed gap and fragmented governance and skills intelligence. The EU Reference Group meeting will focus on skills shortages and gaps, and skills intelligence.

OUR GOALS:



Skills shortages and gaps

Europe isn't producing enough skilled graduates from universities or vocational training, and it also isn't helping enough people improve or change their skills during their careers. On top of that, Europe has trouble attracting talent from around the world. More detailed information about skills development, labour, and skills shortages in Ireland is available, demonstrating that Ireland is performing better than the EU average.

- Vocational Education:

Jobs that require vocational qualifications, like skilled trades, are in high demand, especially where there are serious worker shortages. About two-thirds of the most common job shortages in the EU are in hands-on trades. These shortages might get worse because not many young people (under 30) are going into these careers, especially in sectors like farming and fishing.

- Higher Education:

By 2035, more than half of new jobs will need highly skilled workers. But Europe isn't producing enough graduates with advanced qualifications. To fix this, Europe needs to invest more in universities and encourage schools to share resources and work together, such as through European university alliances, so students can access top-quality education, new ideas, and high-level skills.

- Adult Education:

People will need to keep learning and updating their skills throughout their lives, but right now, one in five adults in Europe has trouble with basic reading and writing. Also, fewer than 40% of adults take part in any education or training, which is well below the EU's goal of 60% by 2030. On a positive note, Ireland is doing well, with about half of its adults involved in lifelong learning.

Fragmented governance and skills intelligence

Skills policies are closely connected to areas like education, jobs, the economy, finance, and social inclusion. But these areas are usually managed by different government departments, each with its own goals. Many groups, such as schools, businesses, employment services, unions, and community organisations, work on skills issues, but they often don't coordinate well. This lack of coordination makes it hard to invest wisely and understand what skills are really needed. Because experts and agencies don't work together enough or plan ahead, it's difficult to match the skills people have with what will be needed in the future, including for supporting legal migration.

To achieve this, the Union of Skills sets out a plan to:



A. Building skills for quality lives and jobs

- Develop solid foundations in education and training.
- Develop an attractive and innovative VET system.
- Create an inclusive and future-oriented HE system.

B. Upskill and reskill

- Upskilling and reskilling of adults including expanding the use of micro-credentials.
- Leveraging public-private partnerships and promoting cooperation in strategic sectors.

C. Circulate Skills

- Facilitating portability of skills and qualifications by simplifying recognition across the EU.
- Improve the free movement of learners and workers leveraging the European Degree and European VET diploma labels.
- Strengthen cooperation between universities.
- Make Erasmus+ more inclusive and accessible.

D. Attract, Develop and Retain Talent

- Facilitate targeted recruitment of non-EU skilled professionals to address critical shortages.
- Attract top students and researchers from non-EU countries.
- Offer competitive work conditions to attract top talents to Europe.

Presidency of the Council of the European Union

The presidency of the Council rotates among the EU member states every six months. During this six-month period, the presidency chairs meetings at every level in the Council, helping to ensure the continuity of the EU's work in the Council.

The presidency is responsible for driving forward the Council's work on EU legislation, ensuring the continuity of the EU agenda, orderly legislative processes and cooperation among member states. To do this, the presidency must act as an honest and neutral broker.

The presidency has two main tasks:

1. Planning and chairing meetings in the Council and its preparatory bodies
2. Representing the Council in relations with the other EU institutions

Ireland will hold the presidency from the 1 July – 31 December 2026.

Context & Rationale

The Irish EU Reference Group of Agencies under the aegis of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), known as the EU Reference Group, was first established in 2014 and has met most years since then.

The annual meeting has prioritized updates from organisations involved in EU projects, including Léargas and Higher Education Authority, and projects such as Euroguidance, Europass and European Qualifications Framework.

At the meeting in 2025, the regular updates were supported by roundtable discussions to explore new ways of operating the Reference Group. While participants found the Reference Group useful, it was generally accepted that it needed to be more focused on collaboration and active participation and that the usual updates could be given online and to more targeted audiences. Participants were interested in thematic approaches in the future.

Following this feedback, in June and September 2025, meetings with all the relevant agencies involved in EU initiatives were convened. It was agreed to use the 2026 meeting to focus on the Union of Skills and Ireland hosting the EU Presidency in 2026.

EU Reference Group (*Draft Agenda*)

14th April 2026

The Alex Hotel, Dublin 2.

EU Reference Group Meeting

9.15-9.45	Registration & Networking	
9.45-9.50	Introduction & Welcome	Órla Barry
9.50-10.05	Introduction to the EU Presidency 2026	Gillian Carty & Fiona Mongan, DFHERIS
10.05-10.10	Introduction to the Union of Skills	Órla Barry
<i>The role of European Projects in Ireland in contributing to the Union of Skills</i>		
10.10-10.30	National Europass Centre (NEC) & European Qualifications Framework National Coordination Point (EQF NCP) at QQI	Naomi Oldenburg
10.30-10.50	National Academic Information Centre (NARIC) at QQI	TBC
10.50-11.10	Euroguidance at Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)	Rosarii Curran
11.10-11.30	ReferNet at SOLAS	Aedin O'Toole
11.30-12.00	Coffee & Networking	
12.00-12.20	Erasmus+ at Higher Education Authority	Dr Raasay Jones
12.20-12.40	Erasmus+, EPAL & eTwinning at Léargas	Deirdre Finlay
12.20-13.00	New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEAAL) & Partner Up at Aontas	Conor Thompson
13.00-13.10	Wrap Up	Órla Barry
13.15-14.15	Lunch	
14.15 -15.30	Ireland's EU Presidency 2026: Exploring Opportunities across the Tertiary Education Sector - <i>A Facilitated Discussion & Workshop</i>	Conor Thompson
15.30-15.45	Wrap Up & Close	Órla Barry