

Meeting Note of the 12th Annual Meeting of the EU Reference Group of Agencies of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)

2026



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1. Introduction

The EU Reference Group meeting (April 2026) brought together key national stakeholders to examine how European education, training and skills initiatives can contribute to Ireland's forthcoming Presidency of the Council of the European Union (July–December 2026).

The meeting of the EU reference group this year was structured to provide both strategic context and programme-level insights, positioning the Union of Skills as a central policy framework and highlighting opportunities for collaboration across the tertiary education, adult learning, and youth sectors.

A central framing for updates and discussion around the EU presidency was the European Commission's Union of Skills initiative, launched in 2025 as a flagship response to skills shortages, labour market transformation and the need for lifelong learning. The Union of Skills encompasses a wide range of actions, including basic skills support, upskilling and reskilling, micro-credentials, vocational education and training reform, STEM education, and talent attraction and retention. Within this framework, the Skills Portability Initiative (SPI) was highlighted as a key forthcoming measure planned for this year, aimed at improving transparency, recognition and acceptance of skills and qualifications across Member States.

2. Presentations

On behalf of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), Órla Barry, Head of Qualifications Information and Learning Opportunities (QILO) opened the meeting by welcoming attendees and introducing the agenda and objectives for the meeting.

Introduction to the EU Presidency 2026 - The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research and Innovation (DFHERIS)

DFHERIS provided an overview of Ireland's eighth presidency of the Council of the EU, including:

- The core functions of the Presidency, and DFHERIS' coordinating and participatory role
- The scale of activity anticipated, with approximately 280 Presidency-related events to take place
- The importance of coordinated engagement across departments, agencies and stakeholders

Ireland's EU Presidency will be delivered against overarching themes of competitiveness, values and security, with DFHERIS leading on policy priorities within the EYCS and COMPET Council configurations.

DFHERIS set out that the Presidency programme emphasises agenda-setting, coordination, and representation at EU level, alongside the hosting of a substantial number of ministerial, official-level and stakeholder events in Ireland.

Stakeholder engagement is a critical mechanism for strengthening Ireland's policy positioning and ensuring alignment between EU-level negotiations and national education, skills and research priorities.

Introduction to the Union of Skills – Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

QQI introduced the Union of Skills, a flagship European Commission initiative launched in March 2025. The Union of Skills aims to strengthen Europe's skills base through high-quality education, training and lifelong learning and is intended to respond to skills shortages, labour market transitions and emerging competitiveness.

QQI outlined that the Skills Portability Initiative (SPI) is a key project associated with the Union of Skills. SPI aims to enable the free movement of workers and improve how people's skills and qualifications are used and accepted across EU Member States and, therefore, support worker mobility, address labour shortages, and boost competitiveness in the EU.

National Europass Centre (NEC) & European Qualifications Framework National Coordination Point (EQF-NCP) at QQI

The contribution from QQI also focused on the role of Europass and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) in operationalising the SPI.

QQI provided an overview of the EQF and detailed its use as a framework for promoting understanding of qualifications across borders, thus promoting greater mobility of skills. As the EQF-NCP, QQI participates in referencing exercises for third countries to the EQF with the aim of assisting translation of qualifications.

As the National Europass Centre, QQI is promoting tools that support the documentation, comparability and recognition of skills and qualifications, aligned with both national policy objectives and EU developments under the Union of Skills.

Planned future activity includes continued user testing of Europass, the redevelopment of the Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ), exploration of the use of AI in the IRQ and other information databases, and further work on the relationship between the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and the EQF.

National Academic Information Centre (NARIC) at QQI

QQI also outlined the work of the ENIC (European Network of Information Centres) NARIC (National Academic Recognition Information Centre) Ireland in facilitating recognition of qualifications. The work of the ENIC NARIC fosters a culture of recognition.

Operating as the NARIC, QQI staff provide information and advice on the recognition of foreign qualifications by maintaining a database comparing foreign qualifications, where possible, to major award types on the NFQ. This directly ties in with the initiatives under the SPI by supporting worker mobility through recognition of qualifications and accelerating recognition and validation of knowledge and skills.

There has been a steady increase in the use of the NARIC for comparability statements with 41,564 comparability statements downloaded in 2025, an increase of 12% from the previous year. The NARIC team has also developed specific rough guides for Ukrainian, Syrian and Afghan Qualifications in the context of the Irish NFQ to support these populations in navigating the Irish education system and support employment.

Euroguidance at Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)

Euroguidance which is hosted by ETBI, presented its role as a long-standing Erasmus+ policy network supporting lifelong guidance across Europe. Key work for Euroguidance centres on strategic cooperation, competence development for guidance practitioners, and engagement with European instruments such as Europass, the EQF and EURES.

Euroguidance Ireland contributes through practitioner mobility, professional development, and thematic work linked to digitalisation, career management skills and the Union of Skills, reinforcing guidance as a key enabler of mobility and lifelong learning.

Euroguidance presented several key areas of focus: Career Management Skills development and maintenance, promoting and supporting research in guidance, implantation of European guidance eligibility for migrants and supporting projects surrounding the digitisation of guidance.

Erasmus+ at Higher Education Authority

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) outlined Erasmus+ implementation trends, with a strong emphasis on inclusion, widening participation and flexible mobility formats.

Highlights included:

- Continued growth in student and staff mobility under Erasmus+

- Increased emphasis on inclusion and diversity, including enhanced supports for participants with fewer opportunities
- Developments in blended intensive programmes (BIPs) enabling more flexible mobility formats
- Ireland's participation in European Universities Alliances as a key strand of long-term European cooperation in higher education.

These developments were framed as contributing to EU-level objectives on equity, access and international competitiveness in higher education, and as relevant to Presidency-level policy discussions.

Erasmus+, EPAL & eTwinning at Léargas

Léargas presented on the role of the European programmes operated by them in contributing to the delivery of the Union of Skills. Léargas highlighted the contribution of Erasmus+, EPAL, eTwinning, Eurodesk and YouthWiki to European cooperation in education and youth.

The presentation emphasised the added value of non-formal learning, youth engagement and cross-programme coordination in delivering Union of Skills objectives, and underlined Léargas' role in supporting policy development, inclusion and stakeholder engagement in the context of the EU Presidency.

New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEALL) & Partner Up at AONTAS

As national coordinator of the New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEALL), AONTAS outlined extensive programme activity and participation including its activities in relation to the NEALL, while welcoming the ambitions of the Union of Skills. NEALL activities by AONTAS have well surpassed targets for participation in projects. AONTAS provided an overview of key activities for the EU presidency focusing on adult education, democracy and countering disinformation.

AONTAS also emphasised the need to address structural barriers to participation and stressed the need to avoid over-individualisation of responsibility for upskilling which is present in many current policy and initiatives proposed around skills portability at the EU level. AONTAS stressed that EU and National level policy must continue to value learning for life, not solely taking the focus of learning for employment.

3. Ireland’s EU Presidency 2026: Exploring Opportunities across the Tertiary Education Sector – A Facilitated Discussion & Workshop

AONTAS’ Head of Advocacy; Conor Thompson, facilitated an interactive workshop on exploring opportunities across the Tertiary Education Sector in preparation for Ireland’s EU Presidency 2026.

The workshop was centred on group discussions which explored the following topics and questions:

Table 1 - Workshop Topics and Questions

Strategic Opportunity	Where could Ireland’s EU Presidency genuinely add value for the tertiary sector?
Cross-Sector Collaboration	What is difficult or fragmented right now across tertiary education that could improve through coordinated action during and after the Presidency?
Influence & Visibility	What do we want EU partners to associate Ireland’s tertiary education system with by the end of 2026?
Legacy	If successful, what would still be in place in 2027 that wasn’t there before?

1. Strategic Opportunity

Where could Ireland’s EU Presidency genuinely add value for the tertiary sector?

- **Showcasing Ireland’s frameworks and strengths**

There was strong consensus that Ireland could add value by championing the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) at EU level. While robust and intuitive domestically, there is a perception that it may not be as understood internationally. The Presidency could position Ireland as a leader in clear, outcomes-based qualification design, including apprenticeships and microcredentials.

- **Erasmus+ as a flagship opportunity**

The end of the current Erasmus+ programme in 2027 was identified as a timely strategic opportunity. Ireland could play a leading role in shaping or securing political momentum for the next phase of Erasmus+, building on Ireland’s strong and growing reputation in the programme.

- **Thought leadership on the future of learning**

Beyond programmes, participants highlighted a chance to influence EU thinking on what learning looks like now - non-linear pathways, lifelong learning, AI-enabled learning, and transversal skills - drawing on European best practice (e.g. German apprenticeships) while also learning from other member states.

2. Cross-Sector Collaboration

What is difficult or fragmented right now that could improve through coordination?

- **Fragmentation between FET and HE**

A recurring theme was the structural and cultural divide between Further Education and Higher Education, despite shared learners and outcomes. Progression pathways exist but are not always visible, consistent or valued.

- **Public and private provision misalignment**

Groups noted practical misalignments, particularly around learner supports and funding (e.g. SUSI not applying to private providers), which can inhibit access, equity and mobility.

- **Disconnected policy conversations**

While there is goodwill and appetite for collaboration - as evidenced by participation in the workshop itself - coordination across skills policy, apprenticeships, microcredentials, access and equality remain uneven. The Presidency could act as a catalyst for sustained cross-sectoral and cross-EU dialogue.

3. Influence & Visibility

What should EU partners associate Ireland's tertiary system with by end-2026?

- **A coherent, learner-centred tertiary system**

Participants indicated a desire for Ireland to be seen as having a joined-up tertiary education system with multiple high-value entry and exit points.

- **Excellence beyond traditional degrees**

There was strong emphasis on changing perceptions - that qualifications at NFQ Levels 6 or 7, short courses, or skills-specific provision are not lesser options, but integral to a modern skills ecosystem aligned with industry and societal needs.

- **Practical models of good practice**

Ireland could be recognised for transferability, permeability, NFQ clarity, guidance supports, and strong Erasmus engagement, while also positioning itself as open to learning from others.

4. Legacy

What would still be in place in 2027 if the Presidency were successful?

- **Lasting alignment across the tertiary system**

A recurring legacy ambition was system alignment so that any learner can clearly see how to move from FET to HE, into employment, or back into learning, supported by consistent messaging and supports.

- **Stronger European and domestic relationships**

Success would be measured not just in policy outputs, but in durable relationships between Irish sectors, and between Ireland and EU partners, supporting ongoing collaboration beyond the Presidency.



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