

EU Reference Group

April 2026



Dearbhú Cáilíochta
agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann
Quality and
Qualifications Ireland



Co-funded by
the European Union

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
The role of European Projects in Ireland in contributing to the Union of Skills		
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	Mark Empey
12.20-12.40	Erasmus+, EPAL, eTwinning, Eurodesk & YouthWiki 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 - A Facilitated Discussion & Workshop	Conor Thompson
15.30-15.45	Wrap Up & Close	Órla Barry



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Taighde, Nuálaíochta agus Eolaíochta
Department of Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation and Science

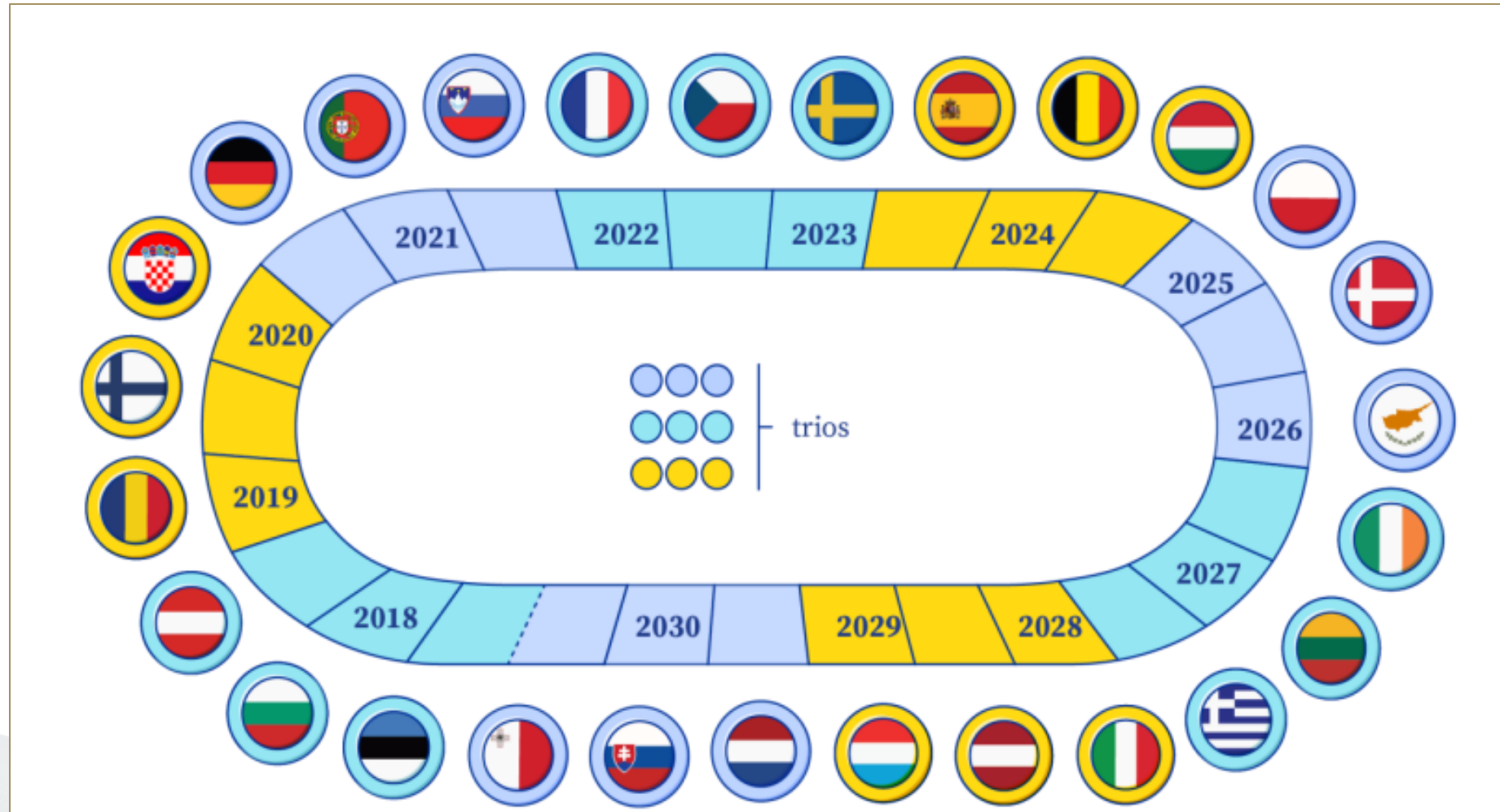
Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the EU July – December 2026

- DFHERIS EU Presidency Unit
- March 2026

Ireland's 8th Presidency of the Council



1974
1979
1984
1990
1996
2004
2013
2026



Ireland's 8th Presidency of the Council



What We Aim to Deliver

- Steer the work of the Council and advance legislative and policy files through Council formations and preparatory bodies
- Chair meetings of the Council and its preparatory bodies at Ministerial and official level
- Act as an honest broker, facilitating negotiations among Member States
- Represent the Council in interinstitutional engagement, including with the European Parliament and the European Commission
- Host a programme of political and official-level meetings in Ireland

1 July to 31 December 2026

Spain	July-December	2023
Belgium	January-June	2024
Hungary	July-December	2024
<hr/>		
Poland	January-June	2025
Denmark	July-December	2025
Cyprus	January-June	2026
<hr/>		
Ireland	July-December	2026
Lithuania	January-June	2027
Greece	July-December	2027

Presidency Calendar: Brussels and Luxembourg



- **Formal meetings of the Council**
 - 10 Council Configurations
 - 40-50 Council meetings per semester, in Brussels and Luxembourg
 - All chaired at Ministerial level
- **Meetings of the working parties**
 - All chaired at official level

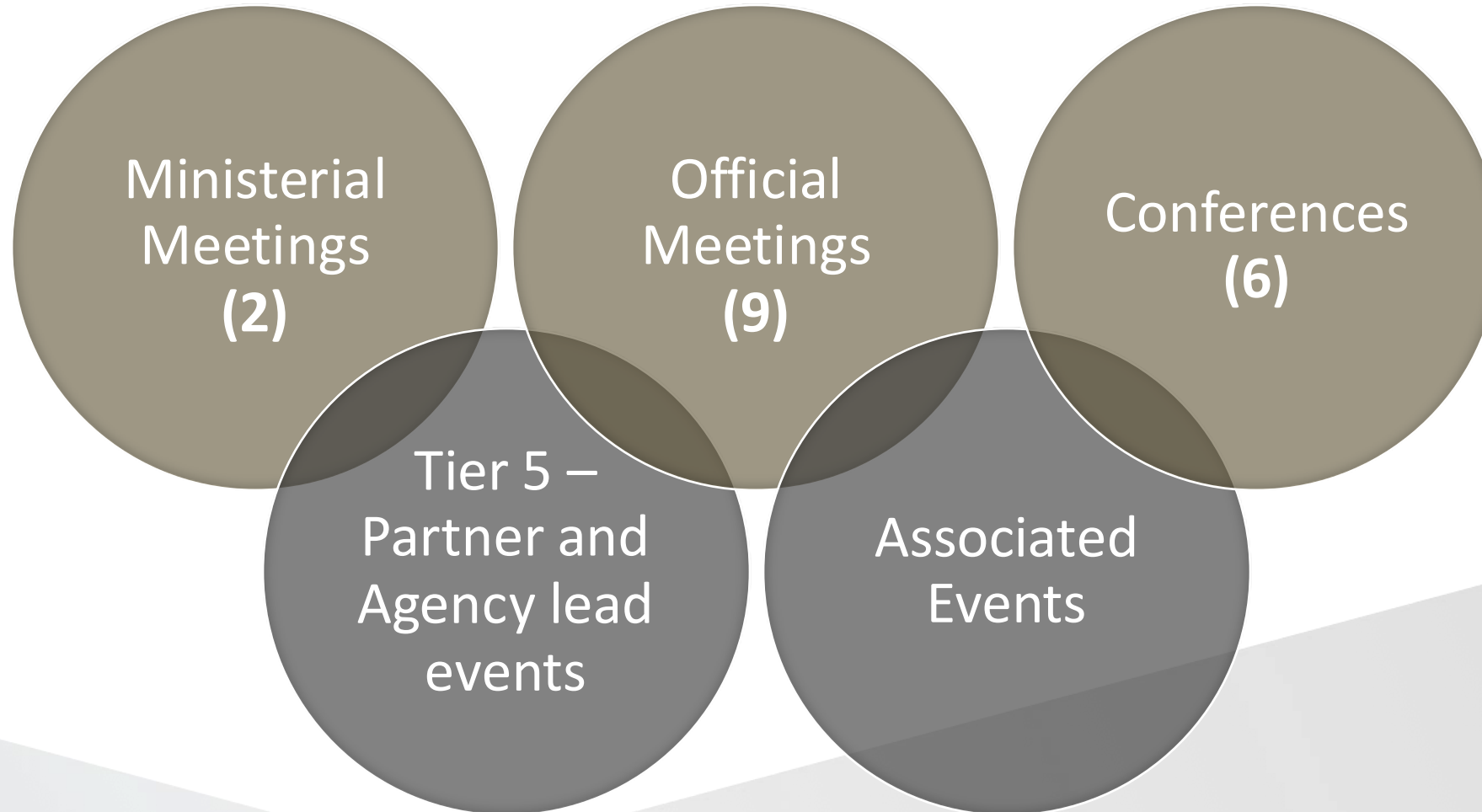


Presidency Calendar: Ireland

- Total of c. 280 Presidency meetings and events (as currently proposed), incl.
 - European Political Community Summit
 - 22 informal Ministerial Council meetings
 - Official level meetings
 - Presidency Conferences
 - Stakeholder events



DFHERIS EU Presidency Calendar



Draft Calendar of DFHERIS EU Presidency events in Ireland in 2026

	(June)	July	Aug	September	October	November	December
Ministerial *shared with DoEY		Informal COMPET (R&I) 20 – 21 <i>Dublin Castle</i>			Informal EYCS (Education)* 15 – 16 <i>Dublin Castle</i>		
Official *shared with DoEY	High Level Group on Education and Training* 24-26 <i>Dublin Castle</i>	Research Working Party Meeting 22-24 <i>Trinity College, Dublin</i>		European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructure (ESFRI) National Maritime College TBC 22 – 24	Director Generals for Vocational Education and Training (DG VET) 18– 20 Mount Lucas, Offaly European Research and Innovation Area Committee (ERAC) 12 – 13 <i>Dublin Castle, Printworks</i> European Social Fund+ Committee (ESF) and Joint Technical Working Group 14 – 16 Venue TBC Director Generals for Higher Education (DG HE) 22 – 23 <i>Royal Hospital Kilmainham</i>	Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) 4 – 6 <i>Venue: TBC</i>	Education Committee Meeting* 9 – 11

Draft Calendar of DFHERIS EU Presidency events in Ireland in 2026

	(June)	July	Aug	September	October	November	December
Conferences		<p>European University Initiative Forum - Alliances Conference</p> <p>10th Maynooth University, Kildare</p>		<p>European High-Performance Computing (EuroHPC) User Days 2026</p> <p>22 – 24</p> <p><i>Clayton Hotel Burlington Road, Dublin</i></p>		<p>Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action Conference (MSCA)</p> <p>4 – 5</p> <p>Technological University Dublin, Grangegorman</p> <p>Education for Sustainable Development Conference</p> <p>17th</p> <p>Croke Park, Dublin</p>	<p>Week of Innovative Regions in Europe 2026 (WIRE)</p> <p>2 – 3</p> <p>Technological University of the Shannon, Limerick</p> <p>The Future of the EU’s Startup and Scaleup Ecosystem (EIC)</p> <p>8 – 9</p> <p>University College Dublin</p>

Operations Team - Responsibility



○ Preparation of DFHERIS Events in Ireland

- Accreditation
- Accommodation
- Transport
- Manpower – Staffing
- Cultural Programme
- Liaise with IDG OPP, DFAT Operations, the OPW and other Departments
- Liaise with EU GSC (General Secretariat of the Council)
- Budget Management



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Policy updates

Overview of the DFHERIS Presidency Programme

DFHERIS Presidency Team



Permanent Representation of Ireland in Brussels



Permanent engagement with the Council and the EU institutions ;

DFHERIS Presidency Team

- Coordination of Presidency events
 - OPS side
- Coordination of Policy priorities and orientations
 - Policy Side



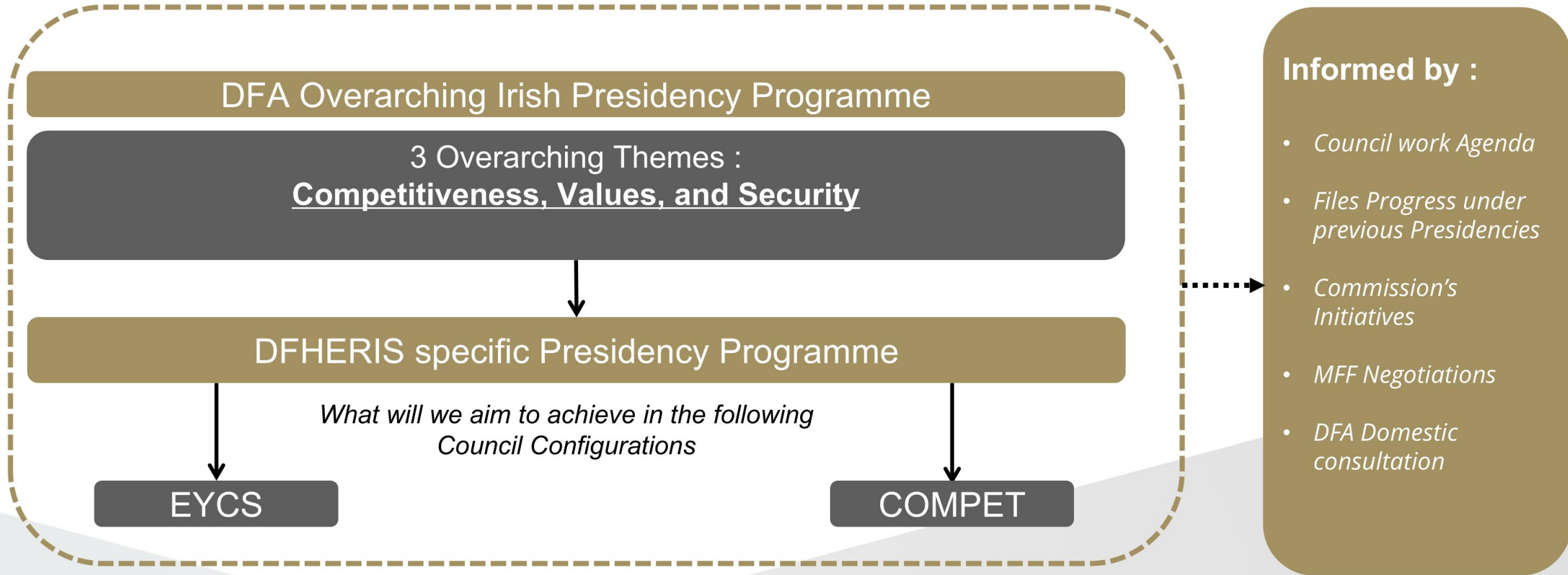
DFHERIS units

- Policy Expertise
- National Policy context

Cross-Department Collaboration

- DFA through IDG / Bilateral exchanges
- Coordination with DEY and DETE

Overarching Priorities : Policy Context



Policy Priorities and main files for DFHERIS



EYCS

1

Erasmus+

2

Council Conclusions on
STEM Education

3

Council Conclusions on
Skills and Competences for AI

COMPET

1

Horizon Europe Regulation

2

European Innovation Act

3

European Research Area

Tertiary and Further Education Policy Priorities



1

Erasmus+

- Progressing the file to reach an agreement on most points of the Programme
- Flagship EU programme with direct relevance to Irish education, training, skills and inclusion objectives

2

STEM Education

- Council Conclusions reflecting the strategic importance of STEM education
- Strategic pipeline issue linked to competitiveness, innovation and long-term workforce needs, with importance across the Tertiary education system

3

Skills and Competences for AI

- Council Conclusions recognising the importance of AI-related skills and competences across education and training in the context of emerging technological change.
- Economy-wide issue linked to competitiveness, innovation and workforce adaptability, with implications across education, training and lifelong learning

Domestic Insights for DFHERIS' Presidency Priorities



Through the national consultation led by DFA, stakeholder input across education, skills and research has directly informed our Presidency approach.

This process has:

- Tested and strengthened alignment with domestic priorities
- Reinforced our policy positioning at EU level
- Identified additional perspectives to enrich future deliverables

Not a one-off: Establishing continuous dialogue with key stakeholders across the Presidency.

Total submissions to DFA : 486
Relevant to DFHERIS policy areas: 28 (≈6%)

Breakdown by contributor type:

- ✓ Higher Education Institutions: 16
12 institutional, 4 individual
Official submissions from most Irish Universities
- ✓ Civil Society / NGOs: 5
- ✓ Research Centres: 3
- ✓ Skills / Workforce Bodies: 3
- ✓ Public Agencies: 1



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Thank you!

Any questions?

Union of Skills

- Flagship initiative of the European Commission launched in March 2025
- Investing in people for a competitive European Union
- Plan to improve high quality education, training and lifelong learning
- It aims to
 - deliver higher levels of basic and advanced skills
 - provide opportunities for people to regularly update and learn new skills
 - facilitate recruitment by businesses across the EU
 - attract, develop and retain top talent in Europe

**One in five
adults**

struggle with reading
and writing

**One in four
15-year-olds**

falls short in reading,
maths and science

**Nearly four
in five SMEs**

cannot find the
talent they need



- basic skills support scheme
- STEM education strategic plan
- EU vocational education and training (VET) strategy

Building skills for quality lives and jobs

- Expand use of micro-credentials
- Pact for Skills
- Skills guarantee

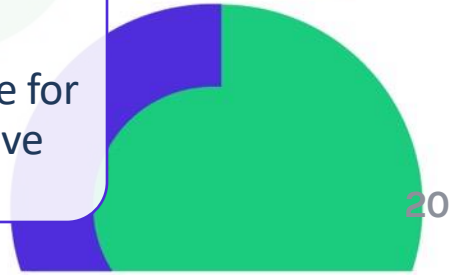
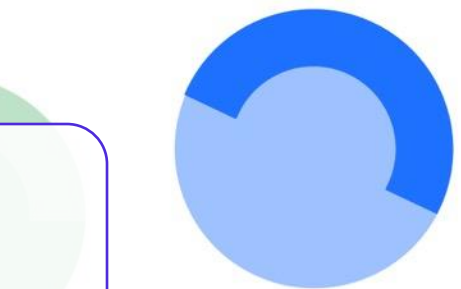
Regular upskilling and reskilling

- Skills Portability Initiative
- European degree
- European VET diploma
- European universities alliance & centres of vocational excellence
- European school alliances

Free movement of workers

- EU talent pool
- Visa strategy
- Choose Europe for science initiative

Attracting, developing and retaining talent



Skills Portability Initiative

Aims to 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

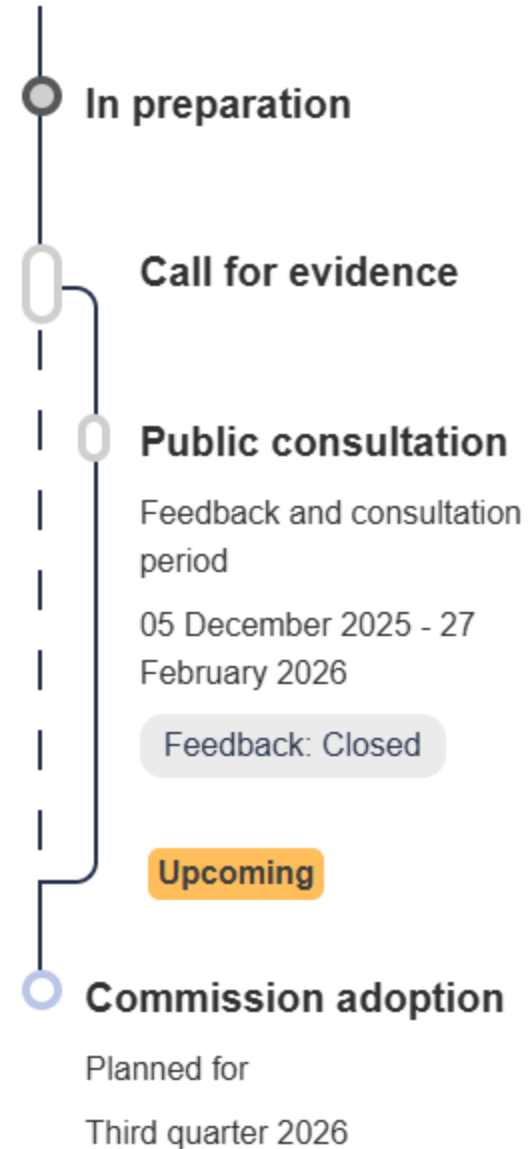
SPI is a comprehensive package of three interrelated actions.

Action 1: a potential legislative proposal to facilitate worker mobility through **improved transparency** of skills and qualifications, and **digitalisation**

Action 2: potential measures to facilitate, modernise and expand recognition processes for **regulated professions** (**Directive 2005/36/EC**)

Action 3: a potential legislative proposal for common rules to simplify procedures for the recognition of qualifications and skills of **third-country nationals**

Status of Skills Portability Initiative



Supporting the Skills Portability Initiative: How Europass and the European Qualifications Framework Facilitate Mobility

Naomi Oldenburg

Senior Manager - Qualifications Information and Learning
Opportunities



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Qualifications Ireland



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National Europass Centre and National Coordination Point for the Implementation of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

Location: Ireland

Start Date: 01 January 2024 **End Date:** 31 December 2026

Programme: ERASMUS2027 **Project ID:** 101163116 **Topic ID:** ERASMUS-EDU-2024-POL-NTWK-EQF-EUROPASS-IBA

Coordinator Contact Details: info@europass.ie

Funded by: European Union

Project Summary:

The Europass EQF-NCP Ireland project is a three-year collaborative programme of activities led by Quality and Qualifications Ireland which aims to promote Europass platform and operate the EQF-NCP for stakeholders and the general public in Ireland.

National Europass Centre and EQF National Contact Point at Quality and Qualifications Ireland combine project activities for the period from 1st January 2024 to 31st December 2026 to advance understanding and transparency of qualifications and opportunities for learning and working in Europe.

Our project will strive to promote and support the use of Europass extensively. Our project also aims to build awareness and further the agenda of the EQF-NCP through a range of planned, strategic activities closely aligned to the strategy of Quality and Qualifications Ireland and our Department of Further and Higher Education Research Innovation and Science (DFHERIS).



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- Technology and labour demands are fast moving
- Education and training systems need to keep up with the pace of change
- Widening skills gap, particularly in key areas
- Increased need for:
 - greater mobility of workers with key skills
 - seamless recognition of qualifications
 - More opportunities for lifelong learning; upskilling and reskilling

The Skills Context in Europe



europass



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- Union of Skills launched in March 2025 as a key strategy of the EU Commission
- Build solid skills foundations and promote engagement in lifelong learning
- Support European education and training systems to provide equal opportunities to all
- Enhance the portability of skills across the EU for a wide range of skills, regardless of where or how they were acquired



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The Union of Skills

OUR GOALS:



Empower our people by enhancing skills to access quality jobs and navigate transitions



Enhance companies' competitiveness by helping them find the talent they need



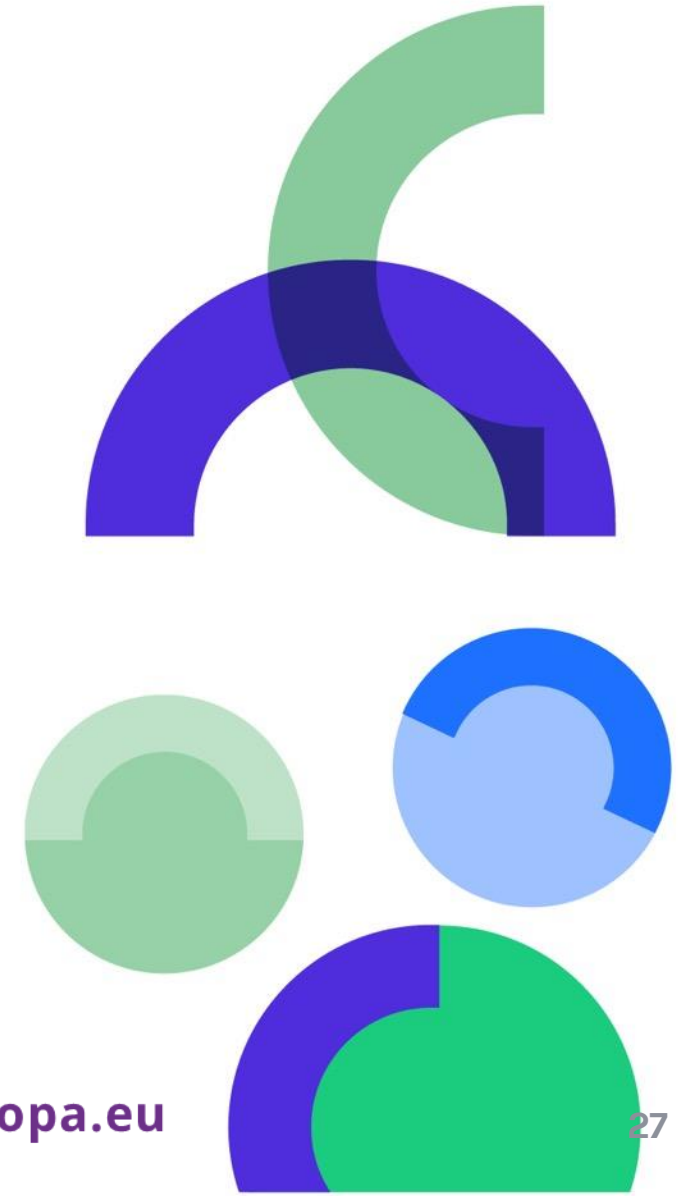
Make skills portable across the EU, independently of where or how they were acquired

europass.europa.eu

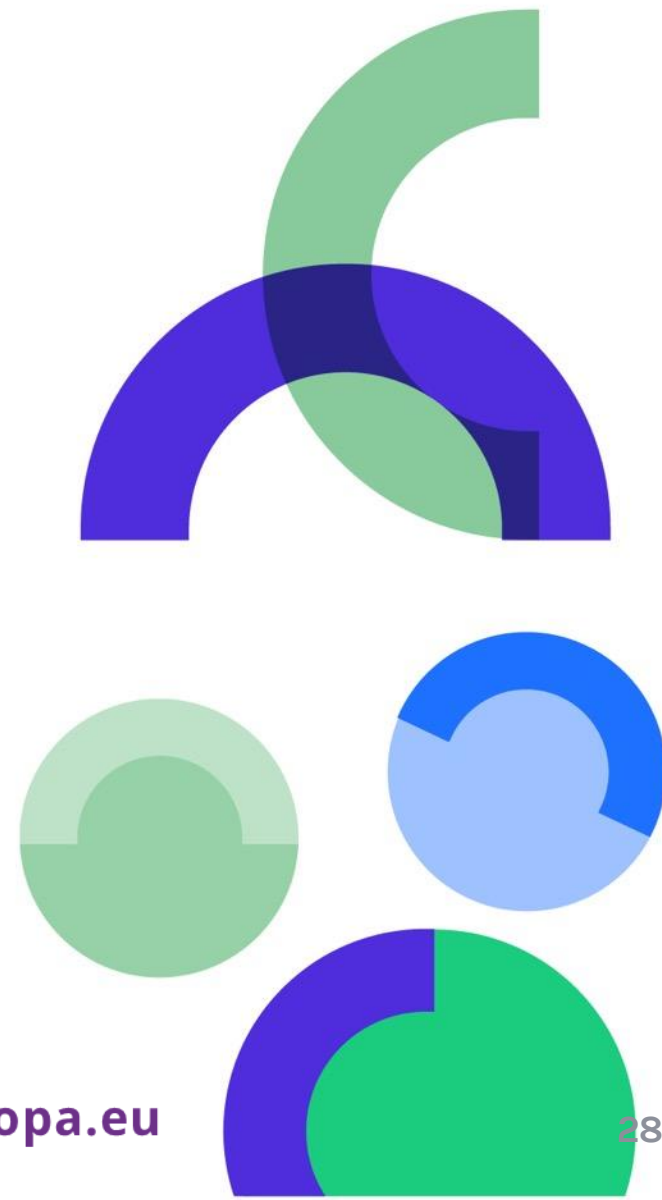
What is the Skills Portability Initiative (SPI)?

The SPI aims to improve how people's skills and qualifications are used, understood and accepted across the EU, it proposes measures to:

- Facilitate worker mobility through improved transparency tools of skills and qualifications as well as through digitisation
- Facilitate, modernise and expand recognition processes for regulated professions
- Standardise rules to simplify procedures for recognition of qualifications and skills of third-country nationals



The European Qualifications Frameworks (EQF) and National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF/NFQs)



- 8 level framework
- Learning outcomes-based
- Covers all types of qualifications at all levels
- Facilitates changing education and training systems
- Compatible with the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area and complements the Bologna Process



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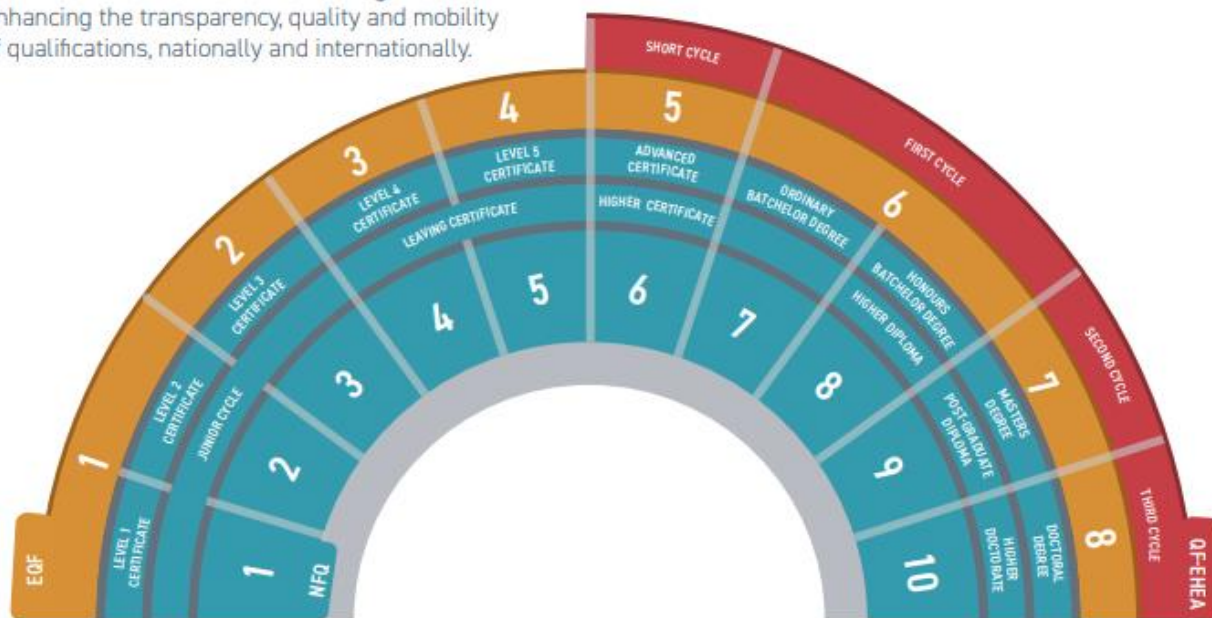
The European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

europass.europa.eu

The EQF and Skills Portability

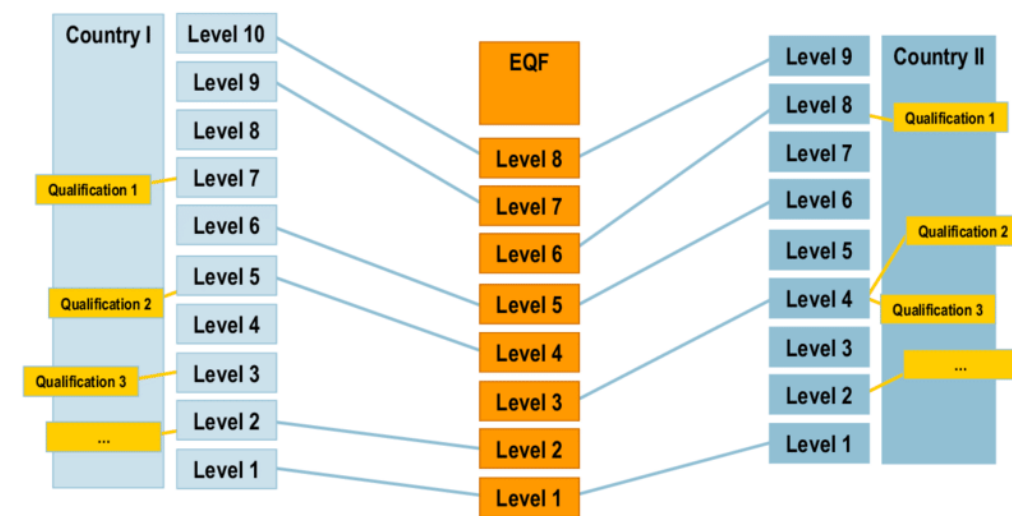
Qualifications Frameworks - Going Global

Enhancing the transparency, quality and mobility of qualifications, nationally and internationally.



- NQF Irish National Framework of Qualifications
- EQF European Qualifications Framework
- QF-EHEA Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area

EQF – The European Qualifications Framework



A reference system enabling comparison of national qualifications systems on the basis of learning outcomes



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The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) - Meta framework

The EQF serves as a translation tool between different national qualifications frameworks

improves transparency, comparability and portability of people's qualifications and makes it possible to compare qualifications from different countries and institutions from across the EU

EQF- A Unified Understanding of Qualifications

NQFs in the Union of Skills - Cedefop

https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/9207_en.pdf

- Learning-outcomes based NQFs are increasing the visibility, recognition and trust in qualifications and skills
- As qualifications systems continue to evolve, countries are actively updating their referencing reports
- Increasing number of countries including NQF levels on certificates/diplomas promoting transparency of qualifications
- NQFs are becoming more flexible;
- NQFs and the EQF have helped countries to simplify international comparability of qualifications; Increasing awareness of NQFs amongst learners, employers and general public

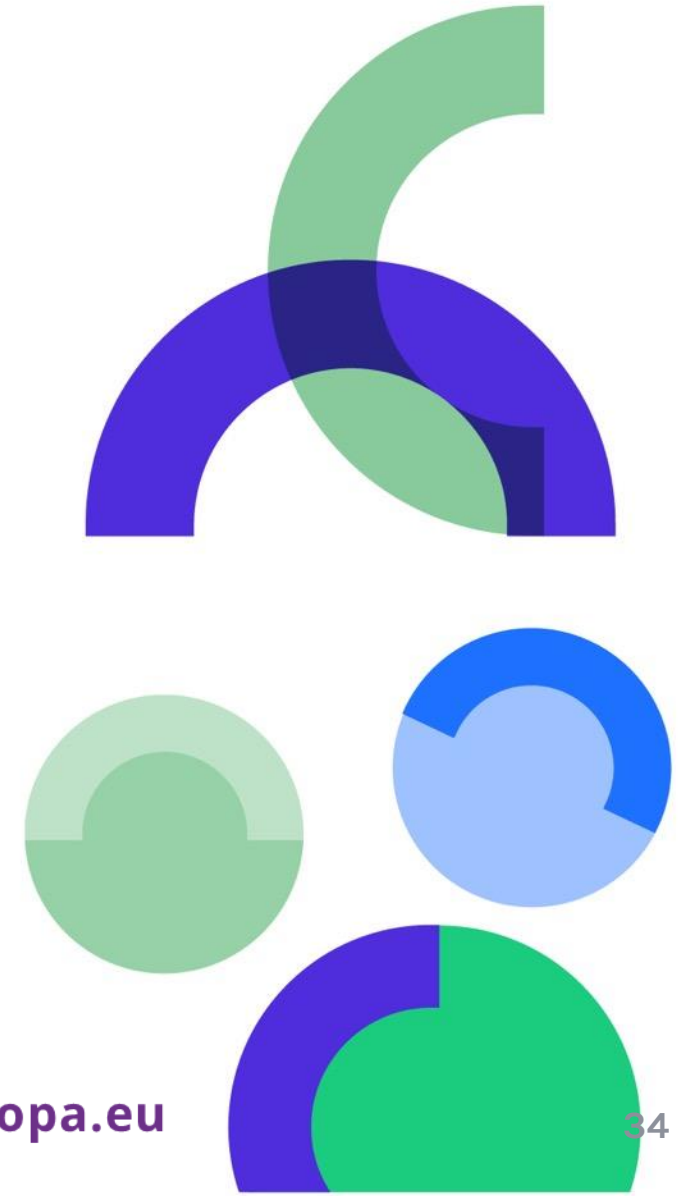


The role of the Irish NFQ

- Inclusion of non-formal qualifications and micro-credentials in the NFQ
- Redevelopment of the Irish Register of Qualifications (www.irq.ie)
- Exploring the use of AI in gathering up to date programme information
- Referenced our NFQ to the EQF in 2020
- QQI as EQF NCP has participated in projects which support the comparison of third country qualifications frameworks with the EQF, such as the project group to update 'Guidelines for Comparison of the EQF and Third Country Qualifications Frameworks' ([Guidelines for comparison of the EQF and Third Country qualifications frameworks.pdf](#))



Europass and the SPI



- Allows users to create a Europass profile; add in skills, experience, qualifications
- It contains a number of tools to assess your skills and competencies
- Users can use profile information to create CVs and Cover Letters
- Search career and learning opportunities across Europe
- Europass Library
- Interoperability: feature to support the exchange and easy flow of data and information with employment and education providers
- Tool to compare qualifications on National Qualifications Frameworks to EQF

Intro to Europass




Tabhair cuairt ar Europass inniu!
 #AnChéadChéimEile
 Visit Europass today!
 #TakeTheNextStep

Europass

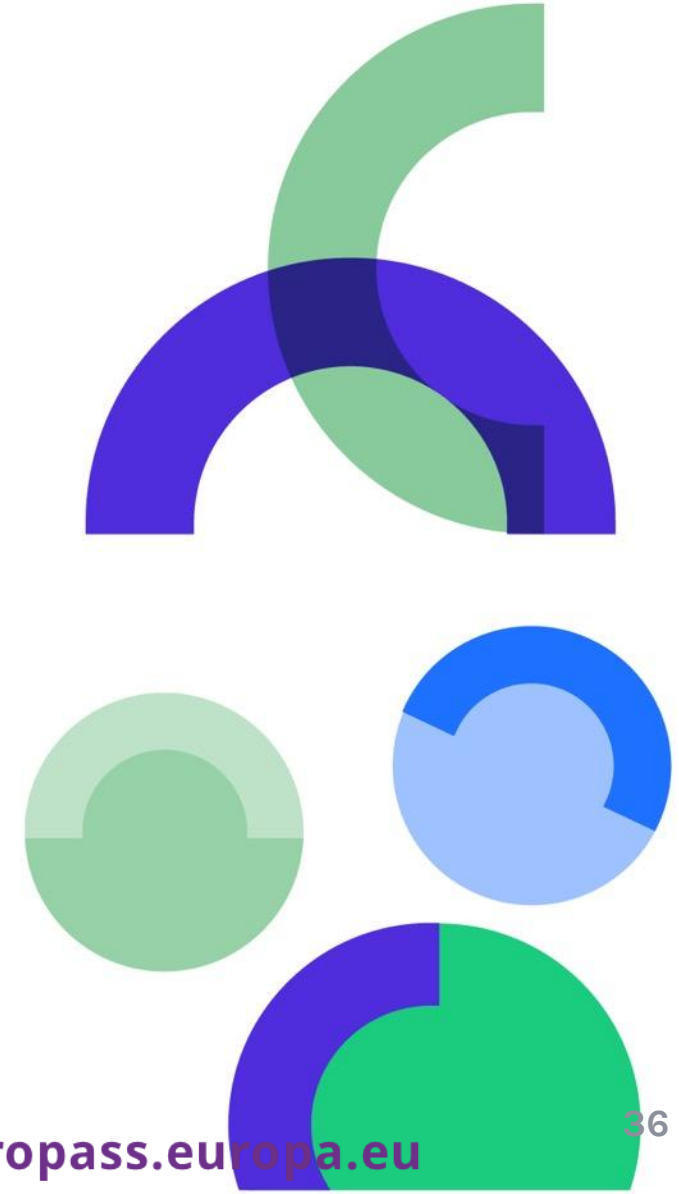
An bhfuil tú réidh uirlisí agus acmhainní SAOR IN AISCE a aimsiú maidir leis an bhfoghlaím agus le dul ag obair san Eoraip?
 Are you ready to discover FREE tools and resources for working and learning in Europe?



 europass.europa.eu
  @europassIE

Europass and Digital Credentials

- Organisations can create digital credentials for learning (EDCs)
- Europass hosts an EDC issuer and EDC viewer tool for building, issuing and viewing digital credentials
- Europass users can add digital credentials to their profile
- European Digital Credentials may become increasingly important as part of the SPI aligned with the EU Digital Identity Wallet



- **Certificate Supplement:** document which provides information about vocational and further education qualifications in a simple understandable way
- **Diploma Supplement:** for graduates of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) which provides free individualised document available from the HEIs with information on personal achievements, including course credits, grades, and learning outcomes
- **Europass Mobility:** document which can help showcase skills and learning acquired during an organised mobility experience

Europass Supplements

The image shows the first page of the Europass Diploma Supplement form. At the top, there is a box for the 'Institution logo here', the 'europass DIPLOMA SUPPLEMENT' logo, and the 'DIPLOMA SUPPLEMENT' logo. Below this is a paragraph explaining the purpose of the supplement: 'This Diploma Supplement follows the model developed by the European Commission, Council of Europe and UNESCO/CEPES. The purpose of the supplement is to provide sufficient independent data to improve the international 'transparency' and fair academic and professional recognition of qualifications (diplomas, degrees, certificates etc.). It is designed to provide a description of the nature, level, context, content and status of the studies that were pursued and successfully completed by the individual named on the original qualification to which this supplement is appended. It should be free from any value judgements, equivalent statements or suggestions about recognition. Information in all eight sections should be provided. Where information is not provided, an explanation should give the reason why.'

1. INFORMATION IDENTIFYING THE HOLDER OF THE QUALIFICATION

1.1 Last name(s) 1.2 First name(s)
 1.3 Date of birth (dd/mm/yyyy) 1.4 Student identification number or code (if available)

2. INFORMATION IDENTIFYING THE QUALIFICATION

2.1 Name of qualification and (if applicable) title conferred (in original language) 2.2 Main field(s) of study for the qualification
 2.3 Name and status of awarding institution (in original language)
 2.4 Name and status of institution (if different from 2.3) administering studies (in original language) 2.5 Language(s) of instruction/ examination

3. INFORMATION ON THE LEVEL OF THE QUALIFICATION

3.1 Level of qualification 3.2 Official length of programme
 3.3 Access requirements(s)

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What's Next?

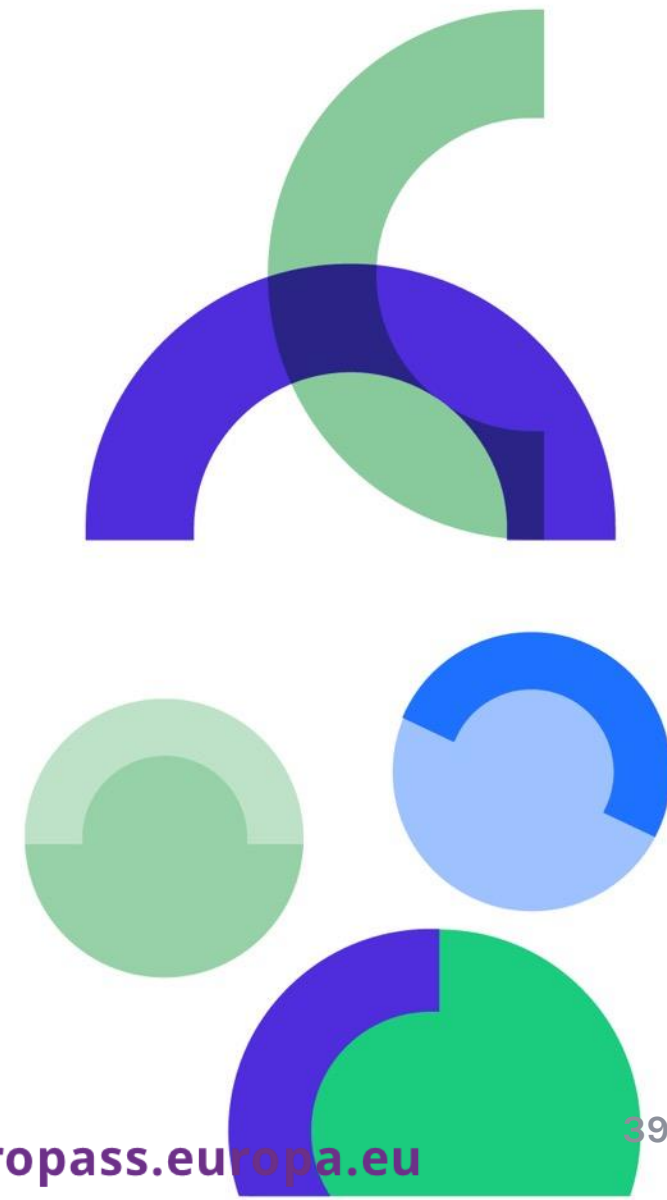
- Ongoing User Testing with Europass users to improve functionality of the Europass website
- Survey on Certificate Supplement
- Consideration of the role of skills in qualifications frameworks and renewed focus on NFQ policies
- IRQ redevelopment ongoing, exploration of use of AI in databases
- Planned re-referencing of the NFQ to the EQF

Follow us on LinkedIn for updates!



Europass (Ireland)

Thank you!





Euroguidance

Lifelong Guidance Across Europe

Rosarii Molloy-Curran

euroguidance@etbi.ie · www.euroguidance.ie



Co-funded by the
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About the Network

Euroguidance · Overview

A network of national resource and information centres dedicated to lifelong guidance — active since 1992, currently across 38 European countries.

1992

Founded

Over 30 years of European guidance leadership

38

Countries

One of the key Erasmus+ policy networks

30+

National Centres

Each hosted by a dedicated expert team

∞

Resources

All tools and publications freely accessible



Common Objective

Three Core Activity Areas

Developing the competence of the guidance community on the European dimension of lifelong guidance.

1 Strategic Cooperation

Knowledge sharing and strategic collaboration within lifelong guidance across Europe.

2 Competence Development

Supporting the competence growth of the European guidance practitioner community.

3 European Instruments

Contributing to and implementing key European guidance instruments and policies.



Mobility for Guidance Practitioners

Academia Network giving guidance professionals the opportunity to participate in a learning mobility period in a participating country. Launched in 1995 — over 2,000 practitioners have taken part.

Joint Projects

Annual cross-border seminars supporting collaborative initiatives spanning multiple countries to develop shared resources and strengthen guidance systems.

Knowledge Exchange

Promoting the sharing of research, innovative practices, and policy developments throughout the European guidance community.

Cooperation Activities

Structured dialogue with European institutions to inform guidance-related policy. European Conference: Sustaining Guidance within the Union of Skills.

01

Training & Professional Development

Supporting the design and delivery of training programmes for career guidance practitioners across Europe.

02

Mobility Opportunities

Facilitating professional mobility so practitioners can experience guidance in other European contexts.

03

Resource Development

Creating and disseminating toolkits, handbooks, and online materials to strengthen practitioners' European competencies.

04

Practitioner Communities

Building communities of practice enabling ongoing peer learning and support among European guidance professionals.

Europass

Promoting the suite of Europass tools that help citizens document and present their skills and qualifications across borders.

European Qualifications Framework

Supporting awareness and use of the EQF to improve transparency and recognition of qualifications in Europe.

EURES

Connecting practitioners with the EURES job mobility portal and encouraging cross-border labour market awareness.

Skills Agenda

Aligning guidance practice with the European Skills Agenda and contributing to its implementation goals.

Lifelong Learning

Integrating guidance into lifelong learning strategies and policies at both national and European levels.

Quality Assurance

Supporting quality standards and frameworks that ensure consistent, high-quality guidance across Europe.

Hosted by Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)

Lifelong Guidance Support

Supports the development of lifelong guidance in Ireland, providing resources and expertise to the practitioner community.

Competency Building

Builds the competency of career guidance practitioners, delivering training, tools and professional development opportunities.

Practitioner Mobility

Promotes mobility of guidance practitioners across Europe through the Academia Network and structured exchange programmes.

European Networking

Fosters European networking, collaboration and the sharing of good practices across the wider guidance community.



Academia Ireland

Promoting the mobility of guidance practitioners in Europe

- Coordinating network of Academia coordinators (co-coordinating with Germany)
- Overseeing the annual exchange of guidance personnel across Europe
- Organising a 3-day study visit in Ireland each year

2026 Exchange Programme

**Incoming: 20 from 13
countries**

**Outgoing: 15 to 9
countries**

2,000+

guidance practitioners
have participated
since 1995

Euroguidance Ireland — Key Focus Areas

Career Guidance as a critical tool to help individuals navigate career changes, identify upskilling needs, and connect personal aspirations with labour market demands.

1 Career Management Skills

Supporting career management skill development and maintenance, enabling individuals to plan and adapt their careers throughout life.

2 Research in Guidance

Engaging with and showcasing career guidance research involves bridging the gap between theoretical advancements and day-to-day practice, ensuring professionals remain informed on emerging trends and evidence-based methods.

3 Migrant Eligibility

Contributing to and implementing European guidance instruments and policies relating to migrant eligibility and the recognition of qualifications.

Digitalisation in Guidance

Supporting practitioners and policy makers in integrating digital tools, platforms and XR approaches into career guidance and learning delivery.





Thank You

Rosarii Molloy-Curran

Euroguidance Ireland

@ euroguidance@etbi.ie

www.euroguidance.ie

EU Reference Group

April 2026



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Erasmus+ at Higher Education Authority

14 April 2026

Erasmus+ in a nutshell

- EU's programme to support **education, training, youth and sport**
- One of Europe's most visible success stories
- Over **16 million people** have taken part since 1987
- Current programme has a budget of **€26.2 billion**
- Nearly **€5 billion** to support learning abroad in 2025

Erasmus+ programme structure

Key Action 1

Learning mobility of individuals

Key Action 2

Cooperation among organisations and institutions

Key Action 3

Support to policy development and cooperation

Key Action 131

Higher education student and staff mobility between programme countries

Key Action 220

Cooperation partnerships for higher education

Key Action 171

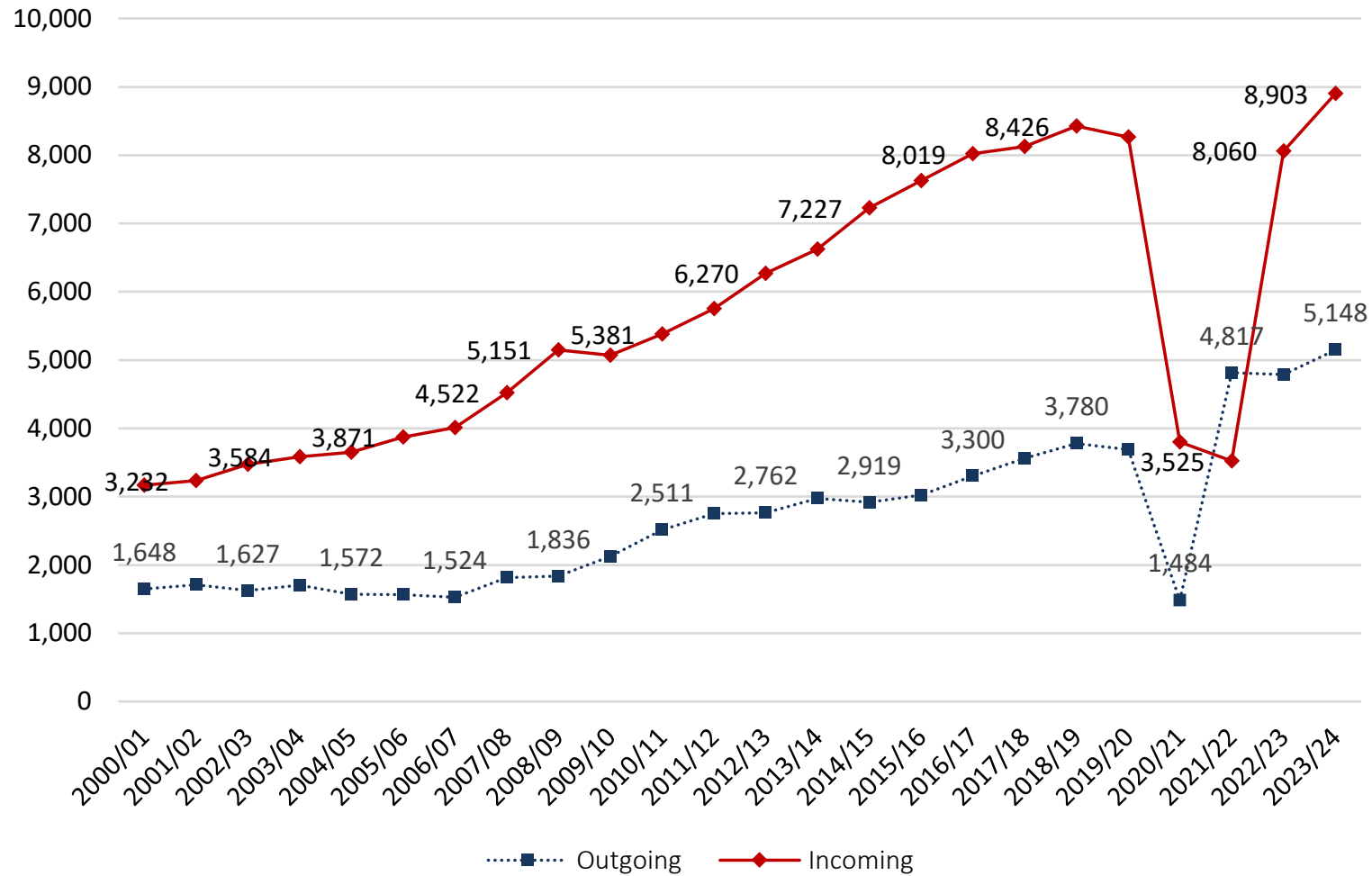
Higher education student and staff mobility between programme and partner countries

INCLUSION, GREEN, DIGITAL AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

Budget for higher education

	Key Action 131	Key Action 171	Key Action 220
2026	€19,364,762 (↓0.3%)	€3,035,208 (↑4.7%)	€948,808 (↓15.2%)
2025	€19,143,039	€2,995,558	€1,118,242
2024	€17,661,843	€2,948,839	€1,313,141
2023	€15,444,646	€2,721,000	€1,700,000
2022	€14,558,947	€2,701,810	€1,050,000
2021	€9,840,725		€2,467,841

Erasmus+ student mobility (completed) over time

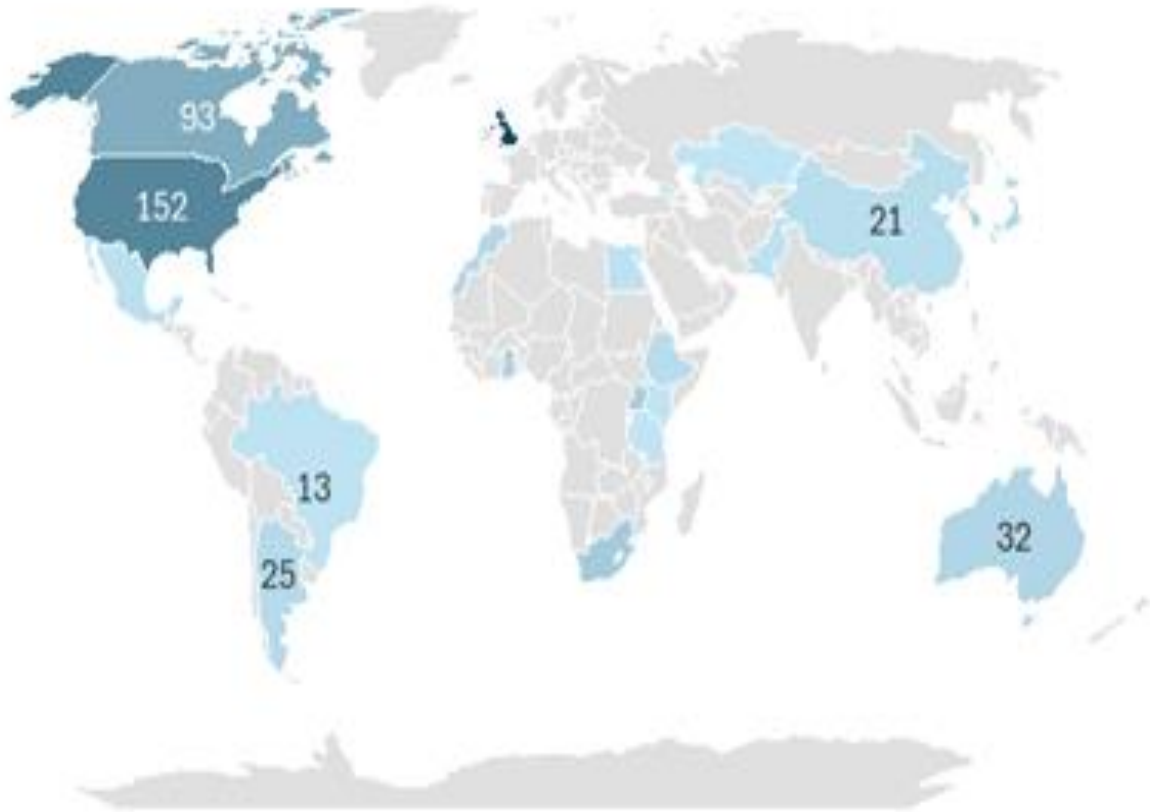


Mobility to Erasmus+ Countries*

Country	Number of mobilities	Country	Number of mobilities
Spain	4,837	Luxembourg	347
France	4,490	Estonia	240
Germany	3,291	Greece	180
Netherlands	2,262	Croatia	173
Italy	1,408	Slovakia	104
Belgium	1,300	Lithuania	102
Austria	916	Slovenia	100
Sweden	876	Latvia	99
Czechia	700	Türkiye	88
Portugal	656	Romania	86
Malta	630	Cyprus	80
Finland	595	Bulgaria	56
Denmark	479	Iceland	41
Poland	475	Liechtenstein	17
Norway	462	Bosnia and Herzegovina	13
Hungary	440	Serbia	7

**Erasmus+ 2021-2027 to date – Key Actions 131 and 171*

Mobility outside of Erasmus+ countries*



Country	Number of mobilities
United Kingdom	246
United States of America	152
Canada	93
South Africa	48
Uganda	42
South Korea	41
Ghana	36
Australia	32
Morocco	29
Qatar	26
Singapore	26
Argentina	25
Japan	25
Switzerland	22
Ethiopia	22
China	21
Mexico	18
Georgia	17
Egypt	14
Hong Kong	14
Pakistan	14
Brazil	13
Kenya	11
Kazakhstan	10
Tanzania	10

*Erasmus+ 2021-2027 to date – Key Actions 131 and 171

Participants with fewer opportunities

“People with fewer opportunities means people who, for economic, social, cultural, geographical or health reasons, a migrant background, or for reasons such as disability and educational difficulties or for any other reasons, including those that can give rise to discrimination under article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental rights of the European Union, face obstacles that prevent them from having effective access to opportunities under the programme.”

National policy context

- **National Access Plan**

“To promote Erasmus+ mobility options among all students, including those who have fewer opportunities (in line with the stated priorities and targeted groups in the Erasmus+ Programme 2021).”

- **Global Citizens 2030**

Work with HEA and Léargas to develop strategy to address affordability of Erasmus+ opportunities and to encourage greater participation in Erasmus + programme from groups identified in the National Access Plan and other groups who have underrepresented in the programme”

European context

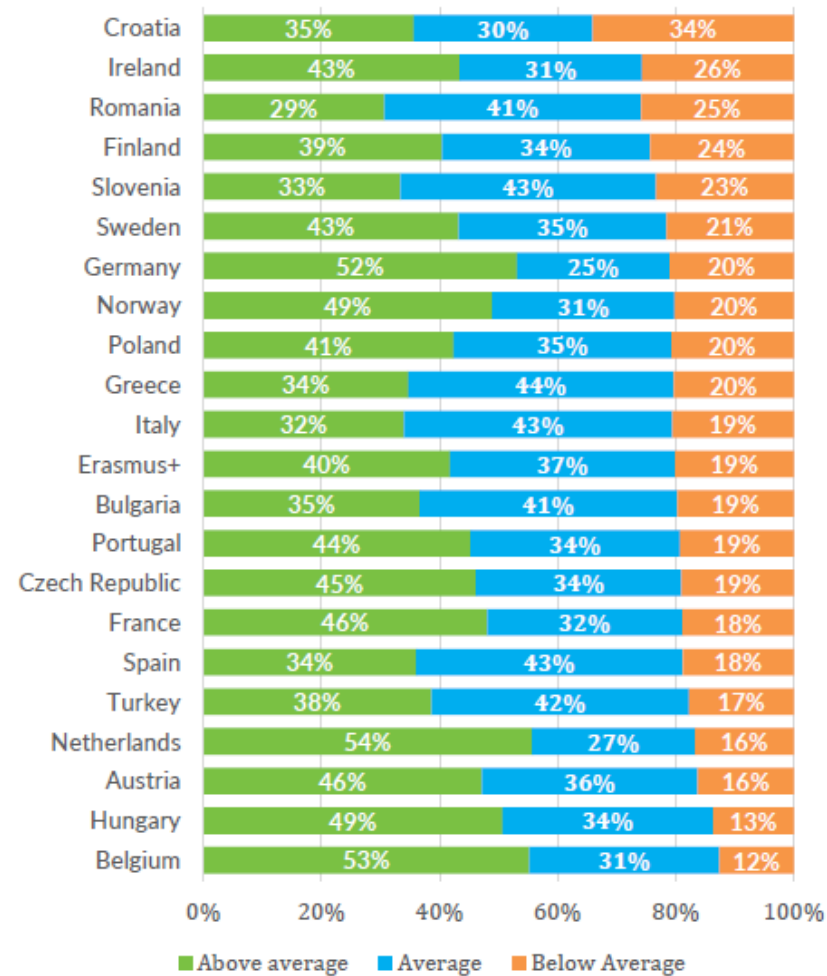


Figure 3 - breakdown of family income while growing up (n=9591)

Participants with fewer opportunities

- In 2014, a **top-up payment** of €100 per month was introduced for students with fewer opportunities
- This top-up rate **increased incrementally** each year and in 2020 was set at €180 per month
- Under the new programme, the Commission introduced a flat rate monthly top-up of €250 for long-term mobilities to support social inclusion as one of the **programme's key priorities**

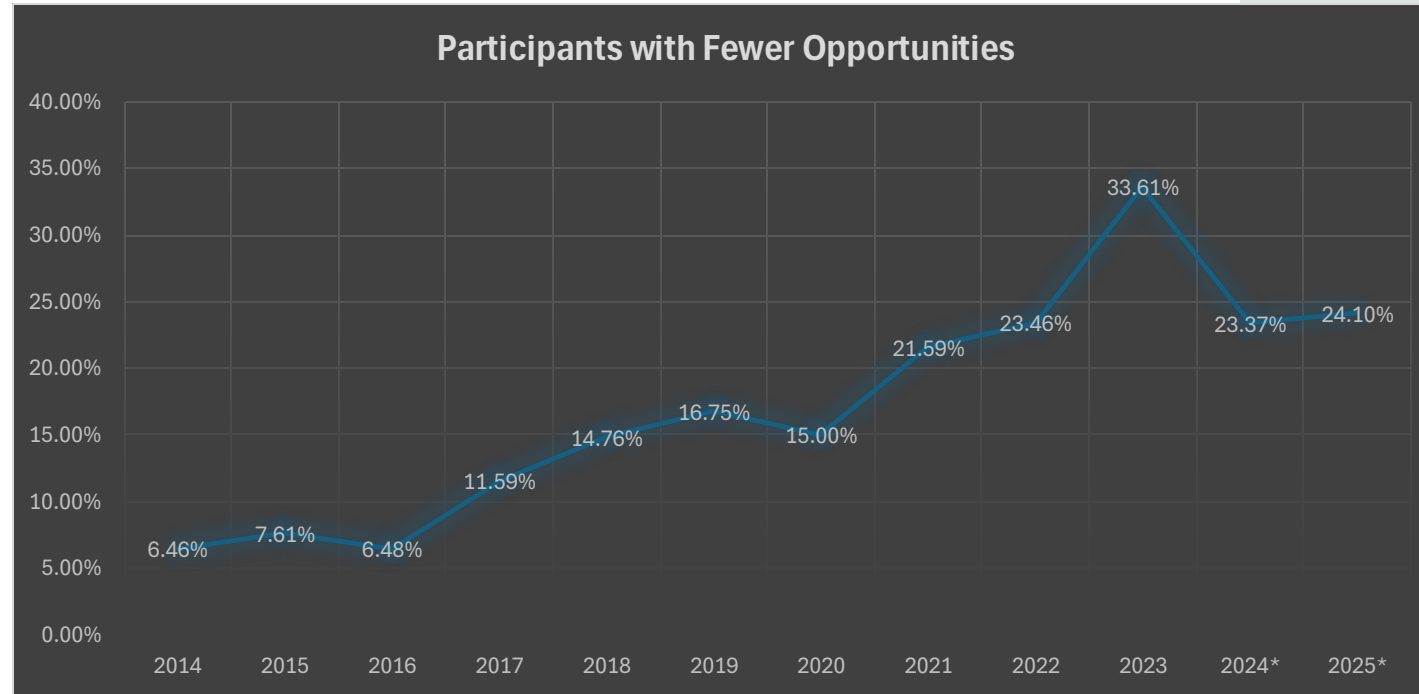
Widening the criteria for the top-up for fewer opportunities

- Key objective of the programme's inclusion and diversity horizontal priority is to promote and encourage the support of participants with fewer opportunities
- The HEA (as National Agency) defines the national eligibility criteria for the top-up
- The eligibility criteria for the top-up will be widened from the 2026/27 academic year onwards – the revised criteria are in better alignment with Ireland's National Access Plan 2022-2028

Latest Criteria for for fewer opportunities

- Students with disabilities who are registered with the disability service (or equivalent) in their home institution for any category of disability listed under the [Fund for Students with Disabilities](#) (FSD)
- Students who are experiencing significant ongoing illness
- Students who are in receipt of [SUSI](#) or the [Back to Education Allowance \(BTEA\)](#)
- Students who were in receipt of the [Student Assistance Fund](#) in the academic year prior to their mobility taking place
- Students who are lone or teen parents
- Students who are carers
- Students who have experience of the care system
- Students who are refugees or who have experience of the international protection process
- Students who are members of the Irish Traveller or Roma communities

Participants with fewer opportunities



2024 & 2025 projects ongoing – data correct as of 8 April 2026

Erasmus+ 2021-2027 interim evaluation

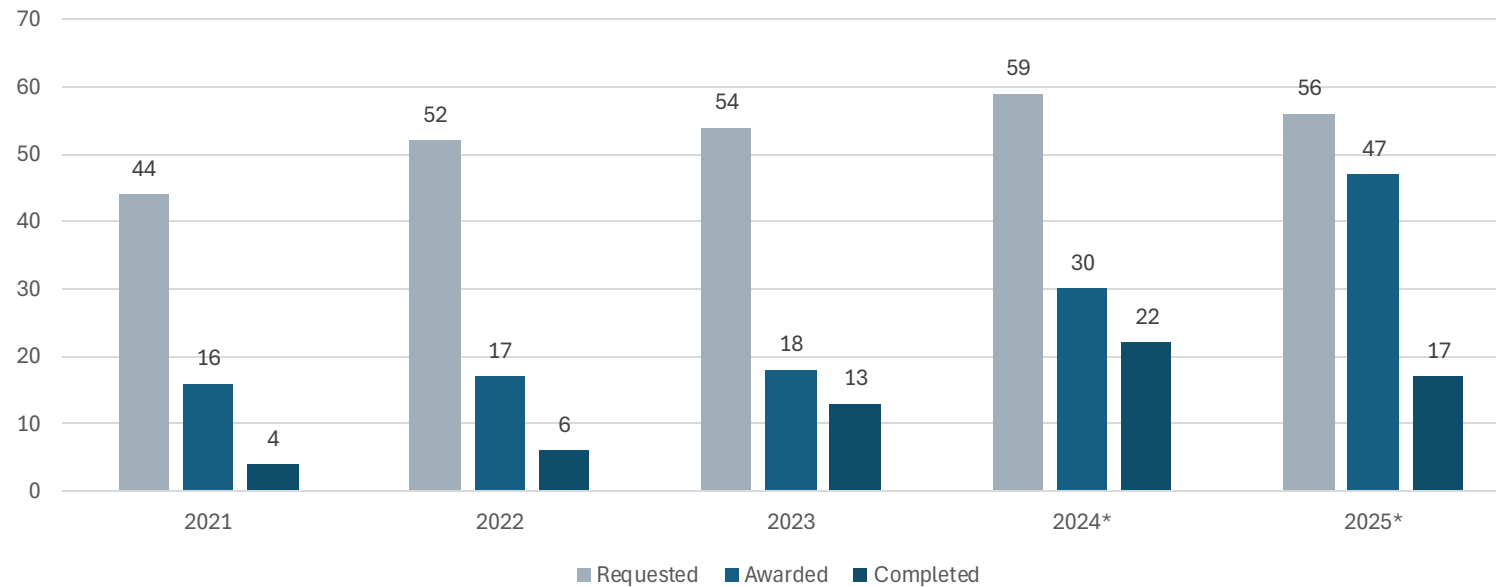
- *“all programme countries report an increased emphasis on inclusion and diversity within Erasmus+”*
- *“25 countries note a general increase in participation from hard-to-reach groups”*
- *“participants with socio-economic barriers are the most frequently mentioned in this context”*
- *“22 countries note that despite additional support, financial barriers remain significant for many hard-to-reach groups”*
- *“16 countries report difficulties with defining and identifying "hard-to-reach" or "fewer opportunities" groups, hindering targeted support”*
- *“19 countries report a lack of awareness about Erasmus+ opportunities among hard-to-reach groups”*

Blended intensive programmes (BIPs)

- Short, intensive programmes that use **innovative ways of learning** and teaching, including the use of online cooperation
- Developed and implemented by at least **three higher education institutions**
- **Short-term physical mobility** abroad combined with a **compulsory virtual component**
- Duration of the physical component is between **5 and 30 days**
- Enabling **more flexible mobility formats** aim at reaching all types of students from all backgrounds, study fields and cycles

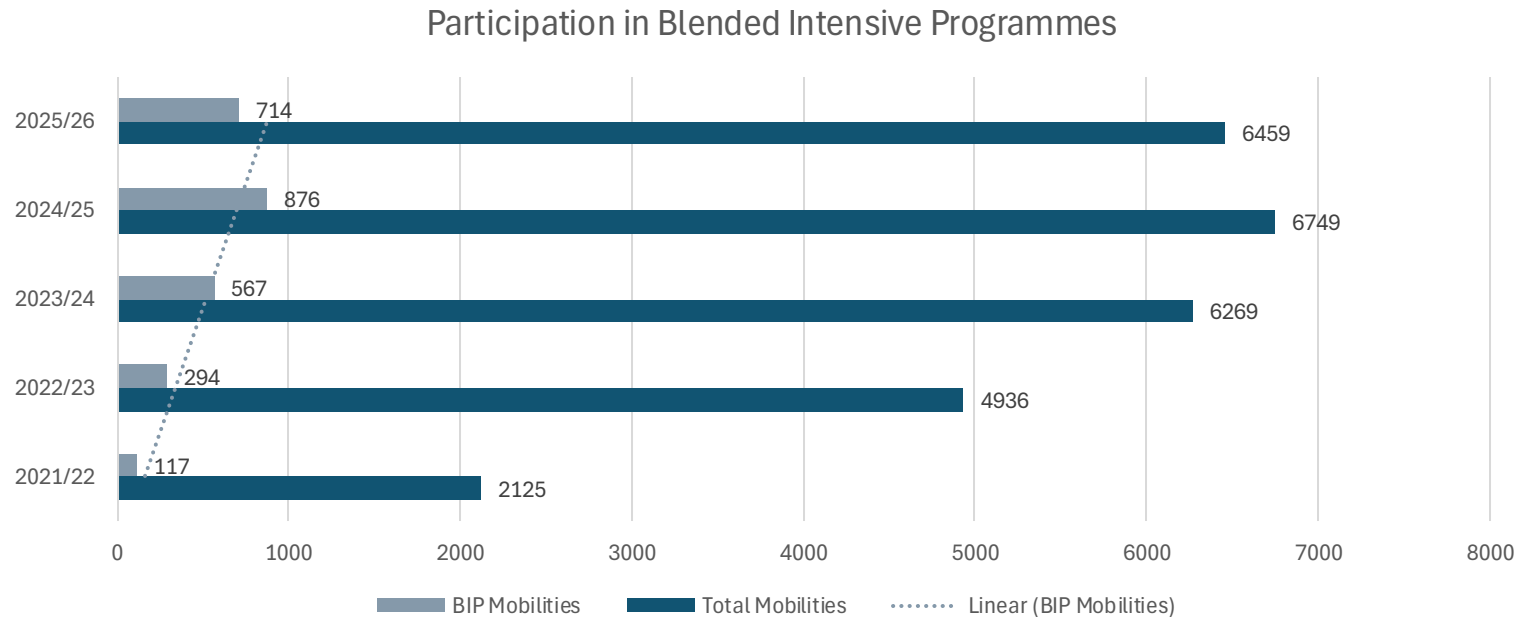
Implementation of BIPs

Implementation of Blended Intensive Programmes



* As of 8 April 2026

Participation in blended intensive programmes



European Universities

- Flagship initiative of the European strategy for universities
- Implemented primarily through Erasmus+ funding
- **65 European Universities** alliances with more than 570 higher education institutions of all types
- Long-term structural, strategic and sustainable cooperation
- Aim is to **increase the international competitiveness of European higher education**
- Irish higher education institutions are currently **partners in 13 alliances**
- 50% target for student mobility
- European degrees

Thank you

Dr Mark Empey
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Erasmus+
Enriching lives, opening minds.

 **léargas**

 **eTwinning**

Léargas' European Programmes and the Union of Skills

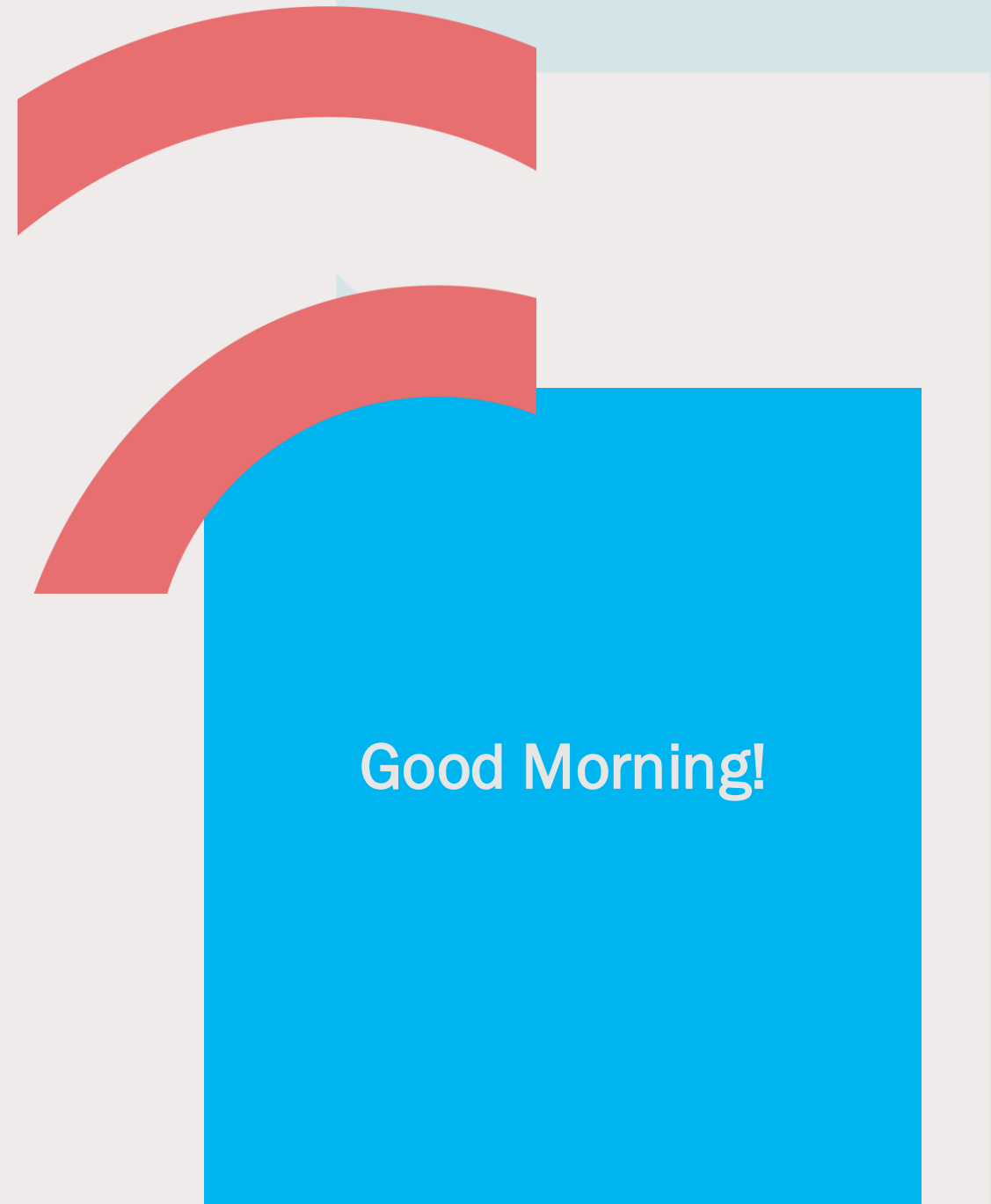
Deirdre Finlay, Léargas



Deirdre Finlay

HEAD OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROGRAMMES

LÉARGAS



Good Morning!

Europe is facing a major skills challenge.

The Union of Skills aims to close this gap.

**EU Programmes and initiatives operated by
Léargas contribute to the practical delivery of
the Union of Skills.**



The Union of Skills



Why the Union of Skills Matters

- **Skills Shortages and Gaps:** 4 in 5 SMEs struggle to find workers with the right skillset
- **Education Gaps:** Nearly 50% of yp lack basic digital skills; only 40% of adults participate in E&T - 60% below EU target; almost 50% lack basic digital skills; overall decline in maths, reading and science proficiency
- **Decline in Working Age Population:** Expected drop from 265M in 2022 to 258M in 2030
- **Future Skills Demand:** Over 50% of new job openings by 2035 will be in highly skilled occupations. [AI disruption](#) in future – ESRI April 2026

The Role of European Projects

Léargas-funded projects: practical implementation of the Union of Skills

- Providing Training and Education
- Promoting Innovation
- Enabling Transnational Partnership and Collaboration
- Individual Level impact on learners and workers
 - *Mobility = Transversal Skills Development.*



Erasmus+ VET Mobility as a Route to the Acquisition of Transversal Skills



Ireland's National VET Team
Research 2022-2023

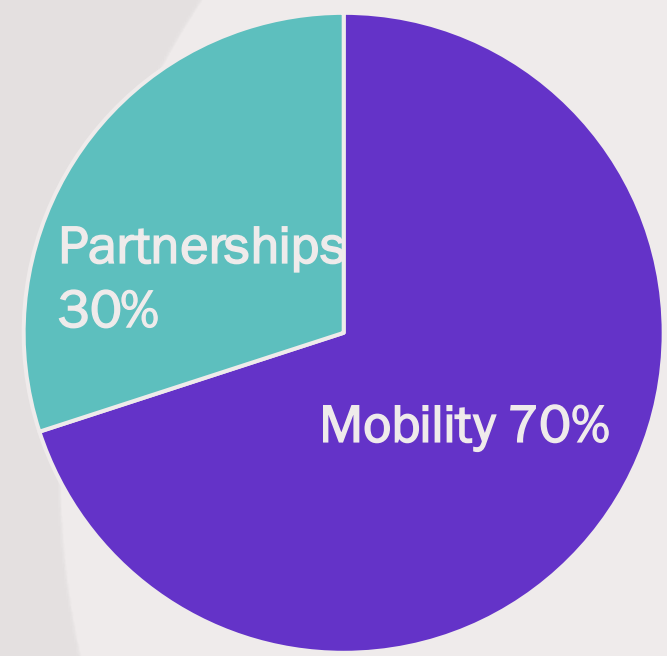


Léargas EU Programmes and Initiatives



Budget €26.2 Billion

**Erasmus+
2021-2027**
Enriching lives,
opening minds
through the EU programme
for education, training,
youth and sport





EUROPEAN
SOLIDARITY
CORPS

EU Initiatives



School Education



Union of Skills– School Education



Growth: €9.95M allocated in 2025. 31% increase in school projects from 2024 levels. Themes: STEM, digital, basic skills, CPD for teachers.



New Action 2026: European Schools Development Partnership €400,000



DEIS: In 2025, 36% of Erasmus+ School Education funding was awarded to schools in the DEIS programme. New DEIS Imp. Plan 2026-2028 refers to E+



eTwinning project: 58% increase in project registrations from 2022-2025



Early Years: 5 projects awarded in ECEC mobility for staff in 2025

Vocational Education and Training



Union of Skills - Vocational Education & Training



Programme Growth: Mobility projects for vocational learners continue to grow, from €1.5M allocated by Léargas in 2021 to €8.95M in 2025



cVET: Widened eligibility in 2026 to include 'continuing VET' learners.



FET Strategy 2026-2030: Referencing international under 'collaboration'



Organisational Development Through Partnership: Key Action 2/CoVE

Adult Education



Union of Skills - Adult Education



Programme Growth: €1.45M KA1 distributed in 2025. From 10 projects in 2021 to 103. Themes: basic skills, literacy, ELL, Digital skills, citizenship.



Inclusion: All projects reaching people living with additional needs e.g. addiction, disability, homelessness, migrants, refugees. Working with C&V sector and ETBs' Adult Ed service.



Research: In 2026 we launch our national report into the impact of Erasmus+ Adult Education on Irish participants, as part of wider RIA research programme.



Staff Learning: Themes of UDL, trauma-informed practices, digital skills etc.



EPALE: 2023-2025 - increase in Irish member content contributions of over 300% compared to the pre 2025 average and a growth of members of 8.5%

Youth



Union of Skills – Youth and Sport



Programme Growth: 4596 participants in 2025. Increased use of Youthpass to validate and recognise learning outcomes – linking the mobility to skills dev.



Outreach Project 2025-2027: DoEY-supported project to increase participation of harder-to-reach young people. Two new officers in place at Léargas.



Youth Participation Projects Increase: In 2026 166% increase in applications to this action – aims to increase citizenship and democratic engagement.



Eurodesk: ‘Time to Move’ campaign highlights skills’ acquisition via mobility. Opportunity Finder and European Youth Portal offer centralised information.



Youth Wiki: Updated with national policies related to E&T, youth employment and entrepreneurship and non formal learning. Contributes to improved policy making.

European Solidarity Corps

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Enriching lives, opening minds.

 léargas



Union of Skills – European Solidarity Corps



Impact: 100 participants in Irish volunteer projects in 2025; 37 in Solidarity Projects. More than 100,000 have done ESC across Europe since 2018.



Inclusion: 55% of participants are PWF0. Orgs participating are social inclusion orgs in Ireland e.g. DePaul, Simon, youth services (Ballyfermot, Finglas etc)



Employability: 71% of participants say they would not have found a similar job opportunity if they had not done ESC volunteering.



Learning: Structured learning plans per volunteer linked to measurable skills and competencies. Strong focus on transversal and non-formal learning.



Recognition and Employment: Youthpass to document and validate skills.

Conclusion

Contribution to the Union of Skills

- EU projects, mobilities and initiatives supported by Léargas deliver:
 - Real-life training, immersive learning, transversal skills
 - Innovation, partnership and collaboration
 - Digital and green skills
 - Inclusion
 - Life long learning
 - Strengthened future workforce and society.

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Enriching lives, opening minds.



Thank you

dfinlay@leargas.ie

Presidency 2026

Key priorities for Léargas during Presidency 2026

- Highlight the impact of EU programmes in Ireland through events, public communications and research dissemination.
- Grow take-up of our EU funded programmes and initiatives
- Support the Government's Presidency priorities with insights and updated information/briefings.
- Responding to DFHERIS policy and consultation requests e.g. Erasmus+ 28-34.
- Foster and enable dialogue amongst citizens on the value of the EU.

Events

Events Linked to the Presidency 2026

- Informal Meeting of Directors of National Agencies of Erasmus+ - 28 September – 1 October
- The Gathering – Erasmus+ and ESC national event - October
- Adult Education Mobility in Practice – Research Launch - Sept
- Mental Health in Schools with NEPS and Jigsaw – 11 November
- Roundtable Half-Day Event Léargas and SOLAS – October
- Early Years Erasmus+ showcase – 13 June
- Traditional Sport and Games Léargas and GAA – Date TBD
- RAY Youth Research Triangular Summit – 21-24 October
- Youth Volunteering Conference on ESC – 2-6 November
- European Youth Week Agenda - Full Day Event – Date TBD

AONTAS Update

EU Reference Group Presentation

14th April 2026

Conor Thompson
Head of Advocacy and Policy
cthompson@aontas.com

Contents

- New European Agenda for Adult Learning
- Union of Skills- AONTAS Perspective
- EU Presidency- AONTAS Position and Plans
- Community Education Against Disinformation

About AONTAS

AONTAS are the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland, founded in 1969 and passionately working ever since to make education equal and accessible for all.



About AONTAS

We advocate and lobby for quality education for all adults and raise awareness of the impact of adult learning on people's lives and on society.



What does AONTAS do?

Membership

We have a vibrant community of over **450** members, including organisations and people committed to adult and community education.

- CE Map
- Membership Hub

Research

We conduct robust, evidence-based research into adult education, community education, and Further Education and Training (FET). We mainly do this through the National FET Learner Forum and research into community education in Ireland.

Advocacy

We work on behalf of our members, who connect with all communities across the island of Ireland. Our members and adult learners inform all our research and campaigns for social change.

What does AONTAS do?

- The annual Adult Learners' Festival and STAR Awards
- *The Adult Learner* journal
- National coordinator of NEAAL



New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEAAL)

- Defined in the Council of the European Union Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning (2021–2030)
- It is a policy framework guiding cooperation in adult learning across EU Member States
- 31 states involved
- Collaboration central

New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEAAL)

- **What is it?**
- An initiative by the European Union to improve adult learning across Europe
- Supports lifelong learning and skills development for adults
- **Key Objectives:**
- Increase participation in adult learning
- Improve quality and accessibility of education
- Promote upskilling and reskilling
- Support digital and green transitions



AONTAS NEAAL Activities

- AONTAS Summit
- Greener Tomorrow through Community Education
- Learners as Leaders
- Learner Voice Training and Development- Online and In person
- Campaigns



NEAAL 2024-2025

In Numbers

- **Workshops and Training Sessions:** 42 in total (overall target of 18 exceeded).
- 15 Learners as Leaders workshops
- 12 Learner Voice Training sessions
- 6 workshops over 2 days during large scale Summit event with
- 1 EU Themed event with Leargas
- 7 Storytelling for Connecting Communities workshops
- 1 month training programme as part of Community Education for a Greener Tomorrow

Number of Persons Benefiting from the Programme in 2024 and 2025: 666 people directly benefitted from the programme. Target of 300+

- 42 participants on Learners as Leaders programme
- 121 participants in in-person Learner Voice Training
- 37 participants on online Learner Voice course
- 83 participants in Storytelling for Connecting Communities
- 6 Greener Tomorrow Practitioners- 131 learners took part in six initiatives ran by the 6 practitioners
- 37 EU Themed Event Attendees
- 14 Campaign Learner Ambassadors
- 195 Summit Attendees

Overlaps-

Union of Skills

AONTAS

**NEAAL Areas
of Action**

Active Citizenship and Democratic Engagement

Learner Voice- National FET Learner Forum & Training

Community Education Against Disinformation

Community Education for a Greener Tomorrow

Learners as Leaders Programme

Union of Skills

AONTAS Position and Action

We welcome:

- Strengthening Erasmus+ opportunities
- Consideration of barriers and equality
- Tackling disinformation
- Active citizenship

Critical Comment:

- Risk of placing responsibility on individuals rather than addressing inequality
- Emphasis on *“opportunities to upskill”* may overlook real barriers and overlook key pathway entry points
- Missed opportunity: Learning for life, not just for work

Learners as Leaders 2025 Community Changemakers Programme



Learners as Leaders 2025 Community Changemakers Programme

'The most meaningful thing I learned was that there's people passionate about creating change for better communities for all.'

'That there are many people who care'

'Nothing can be fixed forever, small things matter'

'That if you put so many different people from different backgrounds in a room you can find an appropriate solution to anything'

'Empowerment, It really changed my life and it gave me more hope to stand'

'I think I have the ability to make a difference in my community'

'The most meaningful thing I learned was that there are others who truly care and we will make positive changes in our communities, we won't give up'

NEAAL: Community Education for a Greener Tomorrow



6 Community Ed Providers

Specialist Training with Saolta

Designing local level projects

Share learning and approach for scalability

Carolina Pena Navarro- Manager at Cranmore Community Coop Sligo

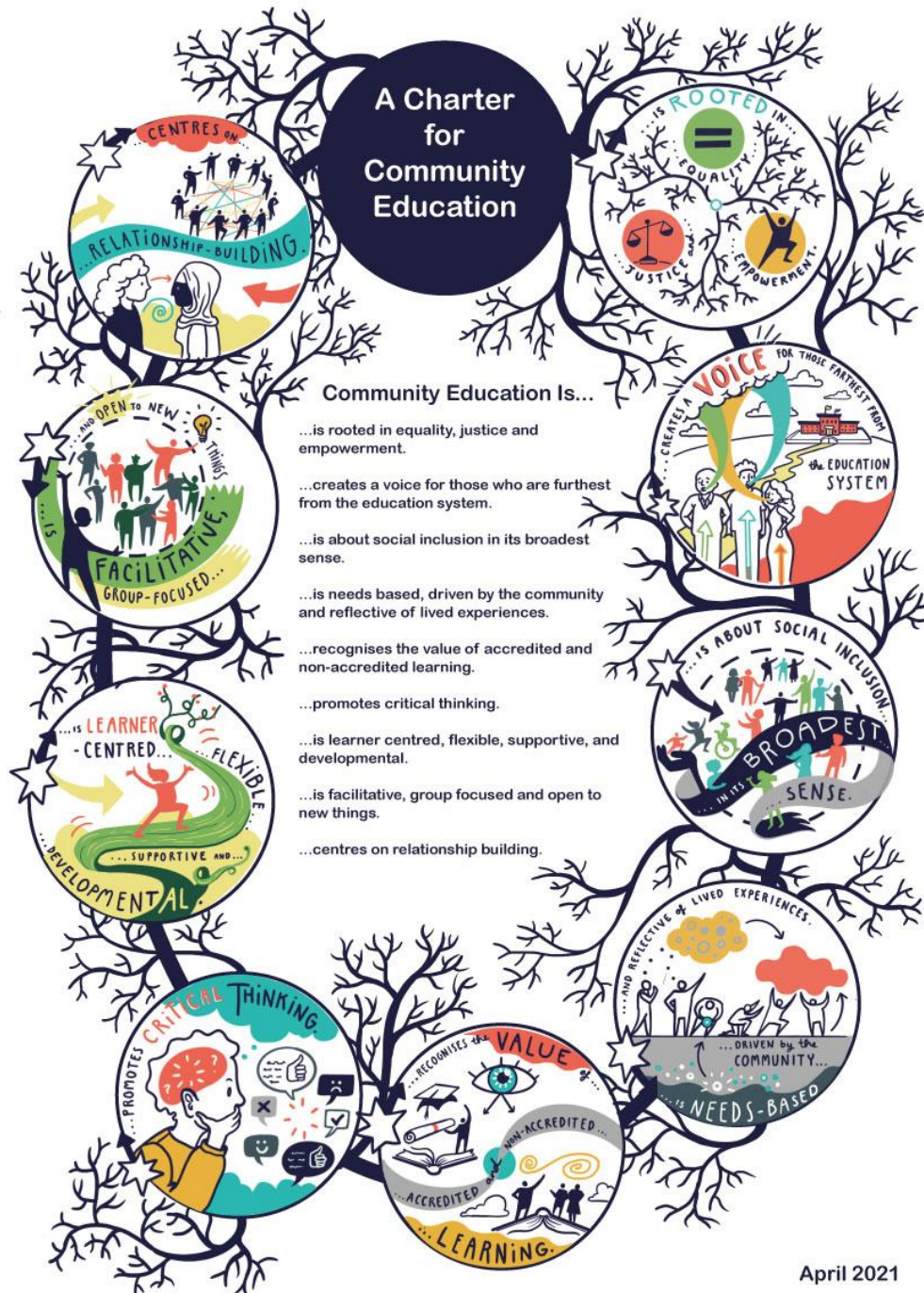
Presidency of the Council of the European Union





AONTAS Position

- **Theme 1:** Strengthening the Vision of a Social Europe
- **Theme 2:** Enhancing Civil Society Participation and Deepening Democracy
- **Theme 3:** Renewed Emphasis on a Just Transition



Presidency Focus on EU Values

- Article 2 of the Treaty of European Union:
- respect for human dignity
- freedom
- democracy
- equality
- the rule of law, and
- respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities



AONTAS Plans

- Adult Education Summit, 21-22 October
- Focus on Future of Adult Learning in Europe- Counter balance to the Convention on Education
- NEAAL National Coordinators Meeting 20 October

AONTAS
Theme for
2026:

Adult
Education for
Democracy

Why are social media accounts linked to Iran, Russia and China posting about Ireland?

Recent analysis highlighted Iranian information operation targeting Ireland, while accounts linked to Russia and China posted about the fuel protests

Ciarán O'Connor

Sat Apr 11 2026 - 07:05 • 5 MIN READ



“As Ireland assumes the [presidency of the Council of the EU in July](#), the risks of foreign information manipulation and interference – known by the acronym FIMI – are growing. The National Cyber Security Centre has warned “the threat from hostile actors is real”. Polarising domestic issues like migration, elections and even the fuel protests of the past week can be open to exploitation.”

THE
**AONTAS COMMUNITY
EDUCATION AGAINST
DISINFORMATION**
WORKBOOK

Community Education Against Disinformation (CEAD) project workbook



Coimisiún na hÉireann
um Chearta an Duine
agus Comhionannas
Irish Human Rights and
Equality Commission

Grant
Funded



The CEAD project co-created an activity workbook that supports community education participants' development of competencies to ensure they can engage with digital technologies in a critical, collaborative and creative way.

The workbook also shows the impact disinformation can have on our ability to empathise with one another, and on our communities.



Dr. Lucy Michael, sociologist and consultant specialising in equality and human rights gave a keynote address at the CEAD launch.

The keynote highlighted disinformation as a serious and growing threat to democracy, social cohesion, and human rights in Ireland.

It calls for urgent government action—through legislation, strategic planning, and investment in community education—to support grassroots efforts and resources like the CEAD workbook.

European Democracy Shield – Disinformation

- Disinformation identified as a core threat- active citizenship & education identified as part of solution
- The Commission frames disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) as a systemic threat to democratic institutions, elections, and public trust, often amplified by online platforms and AI tools.



CEAD Workbook Table of Contents

Introduction

- The role of adult and community education and the challenge of disinformation
 - Activities explainer
 - How to use this workbook
 - General tips for facilitators and educators
-
- The learning environment
 - Trauma, Transformation, and Resistance
 - Foster Emotional Safety and Predictability
 - Practice Inclusive, Non-Judgmental Communication
 - Additional Supports

CEAD workbook Table of Contents

- **Building Blocks**
- Communications
- Critical Thinking
- Values and Frames

- **Critical Issues**
- Storytelling and Narrative Construction
- Storytelling to Create Change
- Fact-checking
- Social Media: A Quick Overview of Platforms and Algorithm Dynamics
- Artificial Intelligence (AI) – What does the future hold?
- Group Dynamics and Social Psychology: How “In” and “Out” Groups Take Shape Through Disinformation
- Resisting hate speech – Fostering empathy

Community Education Against Disinformation

- Next Steps
- Community of Practice
- Workshops
- Link to the workbook:

https://www.aontas.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/CEADWorkbook_Design_WebVersion.pdf

Thank you!

Q&A

Conor Thompson

Head of Advocacy and Policy

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