

# **JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT**

## **The development and promotion of the Cross Border Further and Higher Education Sectors including, in the context of LYIT, the development of technological university status.**

The Cross-border FE HE Cluster comprises Ulster University (UU), Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT), North West Regional College (NWRC), and Donegal Education and Training Board (ETB). The North West Strategic Growth Partnership (NWSGP), led by Derry City and Strabane District Council and Donegal County Council, was instrumental in the launch of this partnership in February 2018. NWSGP is a unique interjurisdictional structure, endorsed by both Governments through the North South Ministerial Council.

The agreement is the result of years of successful collaborative working amongst the four education sector providers – Letterkenny Institute for Technology (LYIT), the Ulster University (UU), North West Regional College (NWRC) and Donegal Education and Training Board (ETB) – with the aim of improving access to higher and further level education and training to students living and studying in the North West City region.

The North West Strategic Growth Plan identifies that for the North West to remain competitive and at the cutting-edge, the education partners must increasingly collaborate and adopt a joined-up approach to attract students to their campuses”.

This formal strategic alliance among the four partners provides a conduit for a collaborative project which will harness the breadth of partners’ programmes and facilitate development of shared services; boost the economy of the North West region; strengthen the local skills-base; and block the brain-drain of students leaving the area for what they perceive are better opportunities elsewhere. The partners work together as ‘anchors’ for the economy of the region exploiting the links between research, education, workforce development and economic competitiveness.

The project partners are committed to supporting activity which can enable delivery, in a value-adding context, of the following strategic outcomes which are cited in the Irish Higher Education Strategy:

- Better planning and organisation of programmes, allowing for differentiated offerings;
- Greater impact through pooling of effort and development of shared services;
- More explicit attention to student pathways and progression; and
- A coordinated approach to enterprise and other stakeholders at regional level.

Additionally, the agreement supports work which can contribute to the following outcomes of the Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland:

- Facilitate cross-border student mobility;
- Reduce the obstacles to student mobility between North and South;
- Pursue collaboration that is beneficial to the institutions involved and for students; and

- Facilitate cross-border cooperation in teaching and learning, particularly where it is geographically advantageous.

Funding of €250,000 from the HEA Landscape Call 2018 was announced on 7 November 2018 to:

- establish a functioning regional cluster
- focus on programme mapping and student pathways
- develop a regional FE/HE prospectus
- identify opportunities for collaboration to better support the innovative industry in the North West City Region (NWCR).
- examine opportunities to make the region more attractive to inward investment.

The 2019 proposal to support Smart Industry in the North West City Region (Smart Industry NoW) received €500,000 from the HEA Landscape Call 2018 recognising that the NWCR has transitioned over the past decade to become a hub for companies in the Smart Industry sector with a particular strength in Fintech/ICT. This proposal:

- concentrates on industry engagement
- focus on Smart Industry sector
- deliver on the significant potential of the education partners
- better support the innovative industry in the NWCR.

This *Smart Industry NoW* proposal is in line with *Future Jobs Ireland 2019 Preparing Now for Tomorrow's Economy* will give students/employees the skill sets that are in very high demand and offer access to exciting and rewarding careers. The partners collectively have the potential to deliver the key cutting-edge skills identified in the report: Artificial Intelligence, Augmented and Virtual Reality, Data Analytics, the Internet of Things and blockchain.

Further projects from this alliance will aim to leverage the partners' ingenuity and flexibility in providing bespoke cutting-edge programmes for innovative industry in the NWCR. Partners provide research informed education and training via the very significant and developing research assets in the region. These assets include the WiSAR Lab at LYIT together with LYIT's INTERREG funded cross-border centres: Centre for Advanced Manufacturing (involving Ulster University), Centre for Personalised Medicine (involving Ulster University), and Bryden Centre (Renewable Energy); and Ulster University's key research strengths at its Magee campus: Cognitive Analytics Research Lab (CARL); Intelligent Systems Research Centre (ISRC); and further enhanced through City Deal Innovation projects: Centre for Industrial Digitalisation, Robotics and Automation (CIDRA); and the Transformation for Healthcare Research, Innovation and Value-based Ecosystem (THRIVE).

LYIT's Strategic Plan 2019-2023 affirms that the Institute is motivated to seek out collaboration partners that can add value, extend our reach, or provide impetus to ongoing activity. The continuation of the cross-border cluster engagement is strategically important to LYIT and key to our pursuit of Technological University status through the Connacht-Ulster Alliance with our partners IT Sligo and GMT. Our partners in the cross-border cluster share our understanding of the challenges that Brexit represents, and this cluster offers opportunities for a better coordination of the FE and HE response to these challenges for the North West cross-border region.

Two years of funding via the HEA Landscape Fund has allowed for a deepening of relationships and provided a glimpse of the future potential of this collaboration. The initial focus was on the

development of the Cross-border FE and HE Prospectus to look at addressing impediments to progression for learners in the region. Funding in 2020 was aligned with the Irish Government's Future Jobs Strategy to give students/employees the skill sets that are in very high demand and offer access to exciting and rewarding careers. By the end of 2020, the cluster will have a Smart Industry Board in place actively supporting the growth of employment in the North West City Region and will also deliver further collaboration on education and training programmes including research studentships that will be jointly supervised by the higher education partners. In addition, the partners will promote the significant strengths in tertiary education in the region and the growing network of innovation centres and digital hubs through a new website and an annual conference.

In June 2019, the education partners presented their plan for 2020 in 'Delivering Economic Growth through Regional Innovation Pathways and Networks' at the North West Strategic Growth Partnership (NWSGP) meeting at Dublin Castle on 17 June 2019. The coming years clearly offer many exciting opportunities for increased collaboration in tertiary education in the North West City Region with the significant City Deal projects for Derry and Strabane, commitment via the Irish Government for greater support for cross-border collaboration in higher education and research via the *New Decade New Approach* agreement, plans to develop the Ulster University Magee campus including the delivery of the School of Medicine (opening August 2021), and the planned €20 million extension at LYIT.

The close proximity of Letterkenny and Derry, approximately 35km apart, allows for innovative programme collaboration and the significant history of collaboration on INTERREG funded research projects will be further leveraged to enhance research collaboration including opportunities available via the recast Peace Plus programme. The Student Services and Stakeholder Engagement work-stream offers great opportunities to capture good practice and there is significant learning to be gained from the strong focus on industry engagement in the North West cross-border region with its significant strengths in International Financial Services and FinTech, advanced manufacturing, renewable energy, MedTech, and the region is home to two large regional hospitals.

The initial MoU between the partners reflected the HE strategies of RoI and NI, and regional development strategies on both sides of the border. There has been significant ongoing alignment of this project with the changing national policy context and the changing operating environments for each of the partners. Much has changed since the MoU was signed in February 2018; at that point the real implications of Brexit had not been fully grasped and the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement including the Executive, the Assembly and the North South Ministerial Council were not operating as planned. The inclusion in the 'Programme for Government – Our Shared Future' of the establishment of a Shared Island Unit recently launched by An Taoiseach is also very welcome in progressing the work of the Cross-border Cluster. The future impact of Brexit on the North West cross-border region, the most connected cross-border region on this island, has garnered significant national and international attention and has both shaped and given greater impetus to the activities of the Cross-border FE HE Cluster.

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