

# AHECS BIENNIAL

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE CORK

# 20 26

20 & 21 MAY

Reimagining Career Development Learning  
in the VUCA Age - Harnessing the Human  
Advantage



#ahecscon26





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# FÁILTE

As Chair of AHECS, it is a real pleasure to welcome you all to our 2026 Biennial Conference in University College Cork. These moments matter. In a sector that is evolving as quickly as ours, taking the time to pause, reflect, and learn from one another is not just valuable but essential.

Over the next couple of days, we will explore how our professional practice continues to evolve in response to a changing world of work. The pace of change, particularly with the emergence of AI and shifting labour market dynamics, is reshaping not only the opportunities available to our students and graduates, but also our role as practitioners. This conference gives us the space to ask some important questions:

How do we remain relevant and impactful in this changing landscape? How do we balance innovation with the deeply human elements of our work? And how do we ensure that all students regardless of background are supported to navigate increasingly complex career pathways?

What I value most about AHECS is our willingness to engage with these questions openly and collectively. We have an opportunity to challenge our thinking, share practice, and leave with ideas we can bring back into our own institutions. I hope you find the sessions thought-provoking, the discussions energising, and the conversations valuable.

I'd like to extend my thanks to our hosts in UCC for their generosity and support in bringing this conference together. Organising an event of this scale takes significant effort, and we're very grateful for the warm welcome.

Thank you also to our speakers for sharing their expertise and insights, and to our sponsors for their continued support of our community.

Most importantly, thank you to all of you. Your commitment to supporting students and graduates, often in challenging and uncertain contexts, is what drives this profession forward.

I hope you enjoy the conference, take the time to connect with colleagues, and leave with renewed energy and ideas for the work ahead.

**Marie Laffey**  
**Chair of AHECS**

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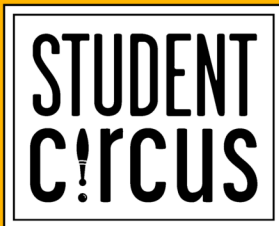


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# DAY 1

- 10AM** Registration & Refreshments - *Devere Hall*
- 11AM** Welcome - *Devere Hall*  
Eleanor Donoghue
- 11:10AM** Opening Address - *Devere Hall*  
Prof. John O'Halloran, UCC President
- 11:20AM** AHECS Welcome & Chair Address - *Devere Hall*  
Michael McDonnell AHECS Vice Chair
- 11:25AM** OVPLT Welcome - *Devere Hall*  
Prof. Paul McSweeney
- 11:30AM** Keynote 1 - *Devere Hall*  
**Artificial Intelligence: Harnessing the Human Advantage**  
Prof. Barry O'Sullivan, UCC
- 12:20PM** **Workshop 1 - Parallel Sessions, Choose 1**
- a) Changes in Student Needs & Expectations in a VUCA Age: How Their Voice & Online Behaviours are Shifting**  
*Room ORB132*  
Eimear Gallagher, Queens University
- b) AI-Augmented Employability Learning in the VUCA Age: A Case Study in an MBA Module**  
*Room ORB123*  
Bernie Burke, UCD
- c) Mind the Gap: Using Employer Data to Close the Skills Gap**  
*Room ORB156*  
Gavin Connell, University of Limerick & Nicholas Standage, Symplicity
- d) Designing for Student Success: A Human Centered Transformation of the Placement Journey**  
*Room ORB101*  
Niamh Mullen, RSCI
- 1:15PM** Lunch - *Devere Hall*
- 2:15PM** Keynote 2 - *Devere Hall*  
**The Human Core of Career Guidance**  
Dr. Kristina Mariager-Andeson
- 3PM** Keynote 3 - *Devere Hall*  
**Rethinking Careers Services for the VUCA Age**  
Naomi Oosman-Watts
- 3:45PM** Refreshments - *Devere Hall*
- 4PM** CoP Networking /AHECS Awards Posters - *Devere Hall*
- 7PM** Entertainment: UCC Quercus Scholars - *The Kingsley*
- 8PM** Barbeque - *The Kingsley*

# DAY 2

**9AM** Registration & Refreshments - *The HUB*

**9:30AM** **Workshop 2** - Parallel Sessions, Choose 1

**a) Scaling Employability with Technology & Structured Reflection**

*Room ORB101*

Maire Buckley, Maynooth University & Owen Hollins, Shortlist.Me

**b) The Resilience Pivot: Reimagining 'Bouncing Back' as a Core Employability Competency in the VUCA Age**

*Room ORB123*

Aoife Prendergast, TUS

**c) Framing the Future: Photovoice & Sustainable Employability Capital in Inclusive Career Development**

*Room ORB132*

Emma Lennox, Queens University

**d) Putting Data to Work: Using Data to Personalise the Student Experience**

*Room ORB156*

Nicola Fortune, UCD

**10:30AM** Keynote 4 - *Aula Max*  
**Dr. Ciarán Dunne**

**11.15AM** Refreshments - *Aula Max*

**11:45AM** **Workshop 3** - Parallel Sessions, Choose 1

**a) I am Not a Robot - Harnessing AI to Support Students' Career Development Needs**

*Room ORB101*

Paddy McLaughlin & Cathy Moore, Ulster University

**b) What Role Does the Human Element Play in the Future of AI Augmented Careers Consultancy**

*Room ORB123*

Mary McCarthy, UCC

**c) Future Ready Skills: Mastering Transversal Competencies for Sustainable Employability**

*Room ORB132*

Bridie Killoran, ATU

**d) Leading When you Don't Know the Way: How to Build a High Performing Team that Prioritises Culture**

*Room ORB156*

Trevor Johnson, Queens University

**1PM** Take Away Lunch /Close - *Foyer The O'Rahilly Building*

# AI: Harnessing the Human Advantage

Prof. Barry O'Sullivan



## KEYNOTE 1

The field of Artificial Intelligence is 70 years old this year. Recent advances in Generative AI have raised unprecedented challenges for education and learning. There is much comment in the public discourse about job and career impacts of AI.

This keynote will consider the development of AI, the ethical challenges it raises, and will cut through the hype around the technology to understand what the likely impacts will be in the foreseeable future in terms of the future of work.

Professor Barry O'Sullivan, FAAAI, FAAIA, FEurAI, FIAE, FICS, MRIA is a full professor at the School of Computer Science & IT at University College Cork (Ireland) and a visiting professor at Northwestern (Illinois, USA). He works on artificial intelligence, constraint programming, operations research, AI/data ethics, and public policy. He contributes to several global Track II diplomacy efforts related to geopolitical aspects of AI.

He is founding director of the Insight SFI Research Centre for Data Analytics at UCC and the SFI Centre for Research Training in AI. He is founding Editor-in-Chief of ACM AI Letters. He served as Vice Chair of the European Commission's High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence which formulated the EU's ethical approach to AI. He currently represents the European Union at the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence.

He conducts his diplomacy work in collaboration with INHR (Geneva, Brussels, Washington DC), the Center for New American Security (Washington DC), and the Geneva Centre for Security Policy. His awards include Science Foundation Ireland Researcher of the Year (2016), Member of the Royal Irish Academy (2017), IPEC-EATCS Nerode Prize (2020), Science Foundation Ireland Best International Engagement Award (2021), and the European AI Association's Distinguished Service Award (2023). Professor O'Sullivan has been involved in winning and overseeing over €750m in R&D funding.

# The Human Core of Career Guidance

Dr. Kristina Mariager-Anderson



## KEYNOTE 2

In a context of increasing complexity and growing reliance on AI, what remains distinctly human about career guidance?

This keynote explores professional judgement, ethical agency, and relational intelligence, arguing that AI exposes rather than replaces the social and ethical core of guidance practice.

**Kristina Mariager-Anderson** is Associate Professor in Career Guidance at the Danish School of Education (DPU), Aarhus University, and Professor II at the University of South-Eastern Norway.

Kristina heads the research unit for professional guidance at DPU and leads Working Group 3 on Critical Practice in Career Guidance within the European COST Action 'Critical Perspectives on Career and Career Guidance' (2024–2028). Her research focuses on career guidance in times of uncertainty, with particular attention to youth transitions, educational participation, and the role of professional judgement in institutional contexts.

She works from a critical perspective, examining how policy frameworks shape practice and possibilities for action. Kristina is especially interested in how guidance professionals can strengthen ethical agency and relational practices to support meaningful career development in a VUCA world.



# Rethinking Careers Services for the VUCA Age

Naomi Oosman-Watts



## KEYNOTE 3

If we were designing careers services from scratch today, would we build what we have now?

This session takes a critical look at legacy delivery models and explores how digital transformation offers an opportunity to fundamentally rethink career development learning. It will consider the role of technology as an enabler of scale and personalisation, the growing importance of data in shaping strategic decision-making, and the need to move towards more embedded, institution-wide approaches.

**Naomi Oosman-Watts is Chief Education Partnership Officer at Group GTI.** Naomi leads global education partnerships and public-sector engagement across the company's employability and early-career technology portfolio. Her role focuses on scaling long-term institutional partnerships, aligning product strategy to national and international skills agendas, and supporting institutions across UK and international higher-education markets.

Naomi brings more than 17 years of senior leadership experience across higher education, public-sector organisations and national sector bodies. Prior to joining Group GTI in August 2025, she held leadership roles at Newcastle University, including Director of Student Success and Co-Director of Lifelong Learning and Apprenticeships, where she led multi-million-pound digital and capital transformation programmes.

She previously served as Director of Data & Insight at the Graduate Futures Institute (previously AGCAS), working closely with the Office for Students, Department for Education, HESA, ONS and JISC to shape national graduate outcomes and labour-market datasets. This background gives her deep expertise in data-led decision-making and regulatory environments.



**Dr. Ciarán Dunne** is the first Transversal Skills Director for Dublin City University (DCU), a unique role in higher education internationally, which focuses on helping students and graduates to thrive in an increasingly unscripted world through the acquisition, application and evidencing of a variety of key transversal skills.

Prior to taking on this role and following on from his experience working in both the public and private sector, Ciarán was Associate Professor in DCU, lecturing across multiple disciplines, including Sociology, Social Entrepreneurship and Innovation, Creativity and Creative Thinking, Futures Literacy, Intercultural Studies, and Spanish Language. He has a strong interest in understanding emerging trends and forces of disruption in both higher education and industry, so that students, graduates, employees and organisations can be future-capable in the context of rapid change. He is passionate about creativity, and his '[Talking Creativity](#)' podcast explores how this innate human capacity can be cultivated both individually and collectively.

Ciarán has been an invited speaker at a variety of academic and industry events, both nationally and internationally, and has contributed to diverse media initiatives, including the award-winning 'Where is My Mind?' podcast and the 'RTE Brainstorm' series. He has been nominated for multiple teaching awards, winning the award for 'Distinctive Approaches to Teaching' (2018) and the Team Award (2025) in DCU's President's Award for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

# DAY 1 WORKSHOPS 12.20PM

## Parallel Session, Choose One

### **a) Changes in Student Needs & Expectations in a VUCA Age: How Their Voice & Online Behaviours are Shifting**

Eimear Gallagher, Queens University

This presentation explores changes in student feedback, sentiments and behaviours from 2021–2026, with projections to 2031. Using a case study from Queen’s University Belfast, student feedback from surveys and event evaluations are considered. It also highlights behavioural responses to recent developments (including AI) and continuously growing demand for immediacy, personalisation, skills focus, ethical AI, and hybrid human-AI career support.

### **b) AI-Augmented Employability Learning in the VUCA Age: A Case Study in an MBA Module**

Bernie Burke, UCD

This practitioner showcase examines AI augmentation within a credit-bearing MBA employability module, incorporating Fulbright learnings from a recent visit to Georgia Tech. It centres on an immersive mock interview and the pedagogic design of structured practice, feedback and reflection. The session shares practical experience, student perspectives and key insights from what worked, what did not, and how this approach might inform career development learning in other higher education contexts.

### **c) Mind the Gap: Using Employer Data to Close the Skills Gap**

Gavin Connell, University Limerick & Nicholas Standage, Symplicity

In a rapidly changing labour market, how can universities ensure students are truly workforce-ready? This session explores how employer data can be used to identify emerging skills gaps, inform curriculum design, and better align learning with real-world demand. Discover practical approaches to embedding data-driven insights into career development, helping students build relevant, future-ready skills in an increasingly complex and uncertain world.

### **d) Designing for Student Success: A Human Centered Transformation of the Placement Journey**

Niamh Mullen, RSCI

This session explores how RSCI is transforming placement management through a human-centered digital approach. By streamlining fragmented processes, automating communications and centralising student supports, RSCI is adopting an intuitive and focused user friendly approach to their clinical elective journey. Attendees will gain practical insights into using technology to enhance student agency, improve operational efficiency and allow staff to focus on personalised, high-value guidance.

# DAY 2 WORKSHOPS 9.30AM

## Parallel Session, Choose One

### **a) Scaling Employability with Technology & Structured Reflection**

Maire Buckley, Maynooth University & Owen Hollins, Shortlist.Me

This session explores how using Shortlist.Me's video tool for interviews and structured reflection can help scale employability in higher education. Using real examples, we'll highlight how reflective activities are embedded within programmes and modules, including what's worked and key challenges, particularly around AI use. Attendees will gain practical insights and approaches for embedding employability in ways that are engaging, scalable, and impactful for students.

### **b) The Resilience Pivot: Reimagining 'Bouncing Back' as a Core Employability Competency in the VUCA Age**

Aoife Prendergast, TUS

In the VUCA age, students often feel lost and overwhelmed (affective barriers) by traditional employability demands. This workshop introduces a narrative-based framework where employability is not just a set of skills to be acquired, but a sense of belonging to be cultivated. Participants will learn how to help students transition from "Am I good enough?" to "How do I contribute?" by leveraging their unique "Human Advantage", empathy, resilience, and cultural intelligence.

### **c) Framing the Future: Photovoice & Sustainable Employability Capital in Inclusive Career Development**

Emma Lennox, Queens University

How do we support those who feel on the margins of career development and don't know where to start? Using the Employability Capital Growth Model framework, this session highlights a photovoice project with final year students, showing how visual storytelling helps learners articulate strengths, barriers, and aspirations, build agency, and navigate transitions. Participants will understand the framework and methodology, engage with photos, and hear the student recommendations and project impact.

### **d) Putting Data to Work: Using Data to Personalise the Student Experience**

Nicola Fortune, UCD

As students increasingly expect more personalised support due to the rise of GenAI, this workshop looks at how data can be used to bridge this gap. Using a design thinking approach, this interactive workshop will explore how we can use the data available to us to enhance the student experience. The "UCD Career Ready Project" will also be shared as a practical example of leveraging Career Registration Survey data.

# DAY 2 WORKSHOPS 11.45AM

## Parallel Session, Choose One

### **a) I Am Not A Robot – Harnessing AI to Support Students' Career Development Needs**

Paddy McLaughlin & Cathy Moore, Ulster University

Your students are already using AI. The question is: are they using it well? This lively session shares Ulster University's journey from large-scale Future of Work workshops (8,000+ students) to the 'I am not a robot' AI module. Join us to hear about how we are enhancing our students' employability by building AI-savvy, critically aware graduates – with practical ideas to refresh your own provision.

### **b) What Role Does the Human Element Play in the Future of AI Augmented Careers Consultancy**

Mary McCarthy, UCC

Change is constant! AI augmented environments are becoming normalised across all sectors. Through facilitated small group discussion we will discuss why unique human expertise, judgement, empathy, ethics, and professional skills must remain central in the Career Development and Consultation landscape. How do we evolve a human centric, personal service in partnership with AI, and generate practical actions for individuals and institutions? Together we will identify challenges, risks, and future-proof human connection.

### **c) Future Ready Skills: Mastering Transversal Competencies for Sustainable Employability**

Bridie Killoran, ATU

This workshop explores how skills-based education supports learner adaptability, employability and lifelong learning in an increasingly complex and uncertain (VUCA) world. It introduces ATU's micro-credential offering as one example within a wider skills ecosystem, aligned with World Economic Forum priorities. Participants examine how learners can assess, develop and evidence key skills through structured frameworks, supported by practical tools that enhance sustainable employability and career readiness.

### **d) Leading When you Don't Know the Way: How to Build a High Performing Team that Prioritises Culture**

Trevor Johnson, Queens University

Everything rises or falls on leadership and 'culture' is the engine that drives everything in your team, department or Careers Service. In this session we will deep dive into how to build, and change, the culture so that you develop a high performing team that delivers results. You will leave with an increased understanding of culture and your agency to lead change and Trevor will share his top 10 tips for leading culture change.



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a successful and  
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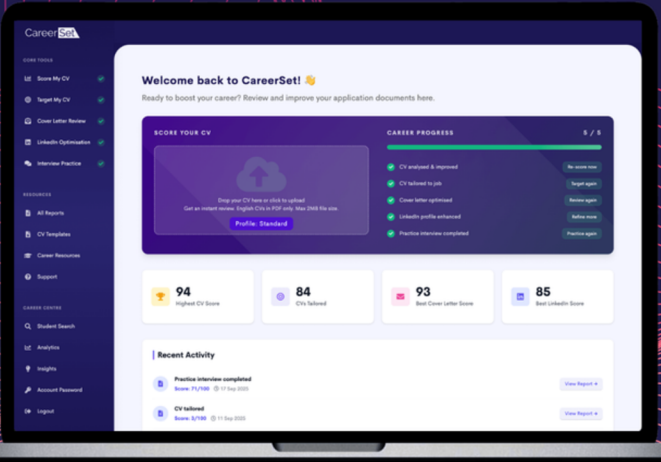
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