

Meeting Note of the 11th Annual Meeting of EU Reference Group of Agencies of the DFHERIS

2025



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Dearbhú Cáilíochta
agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann
Quality and
Qualifications Ireland

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1. Overview

The 11th Annual Meeting of the Irish EU Reference Group of Agencies of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) was hosted by QQI in the Alex Hotel, Dublin on the 12th of March 2025. The Irish EU Reference Group first met in 2014 and has met annually since then, except for a short break in 2024. The EU Reference Group is a key activity of the [Europass and European Qualifications Framework National Coordination Point \(EQF-NCP\) project](#) for Ireland.

This year's event was attended by over 65 individuals from a broad range of agencies and organisations across Ireland. Attendees gathered to listen and discuss EU-related activities and key ideas and developments of interest to the wider education and training community.

The event was divided into two sessions. The first session included updates from the agencies of the Reference Group, including Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), SOLAS, the Higher Education Authority (HEA), and Léargas. The second session involved a breakout session to encourage discussion on future directions for the group.

2. Presentations

On behalf of QQI, Órla Barry, Head of Qualifications Information and Learning Opportunities, opened the meeting, welcomed attendees, and outlined the remit of the meeting.

QQI

Órla provided a presentation update focusing on the Europass and EQF-NCP project. The presentation started with an overview of the role of QQI including its European Representations.

The first half of the presentation focussed on insights and developments regarding the work of the EQF-NCP. Órla outlined the two relevant qualifications frameworks in Europe, the [European Qualifications Framework \(EQF\)](#) and the [Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area \(QF-EHEA\)](#) and provided an overview of the [Irish National Framework of Qualifications \(NFQ\)](#).

Órla highlighted that there is a priority at European Commission level to create inclusive National Qualifications Frameworks. Although the Irish NFQ is already considered inclusive and flexible, QQI is working towards further developments in this area with specific reference to the Listed Awarding Body scheme and policy discussions around micro-credentials. In addition, Órla shared the latest updates on work being undertaken to review the infrastructure and policies of the Irish NFQ and informed attendees about the publication of the [Green Paper on Intermediate Qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6](#) and [Green Paper on a Revised QQI Access, Transfer and Progression Policy](#). A brief introduction about the role of the [Irish Register of Qualification \(IRQ\)](#) was provided, including plans to redevelop the site.

The second half of the presentation focused on the role of QQI as [Ireland's National Europass Centre \(NEC\)](#) and updated the attendees on some Europass tools that may be beneficial to learning and working in Europe. Órla then brought attention to developments and upcoming priorities for Europass noting:

- a recently updated returns process for organisations issuing [Europass Mobility](#),
- the completion of a survey with Designated Awarding Bodies and Higher Education Providers on the implementation of the Europass Diploma Supplement and plans to update the diploma supplement template,
- work undertaken and further plans to increase engagement with Europass, and
- upcoming usability testing of the Europass platform.

Andrina Wafer, Head of International Mobility and Prior Learning at QQI, delivered an update on EU initiatives and actions around recognition, nationally and internationally, which included

information and relevant updates on the Lisbon Recognition Convention, Global Recognition Convention, Baltic Benelux Treaty, and Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act.

Andrina then provided an overview of the [National Academic Recognition and Information Service \(NARIC\) for Ireland](#), which is hosted by QQI. Andrina brought attention to the publication of [statistics on the recognition of foreign qualifications in Ireland](#) and the current development of country education profiles to support understanding of different education and qualification systems to enable the recognition of qualifications. Andrina then outlined details to attendees on a number of Erasmus+ projects related to the work of the [ENIC-NARIC](#) network.

ETBI

Rosarii Molloy-Curran, Euroguidance Ireland hosted by Education and Training Boards Ireland, provided an overview of the [Euroguidance Network](#) and the activities of [Euroguidance Ireland](#).

The Euroguidance Network is comprised of national career guidance and information centres which link together the Careers Guidance systems throughout Europe. It was established in 1992 and currently has 38 member countries. Rosarii noted that the main target group of Euroguidance is guidance practitioners and policy makers from both the educational and employment sectors.

Rosarii drew focus to the three common goals of Euroguidance:

- 1) To support the development of the European dimension of lifelong guidance.
- 2) To support the development of guidance practitioners and raise their awareness on the value of international mobility.
- 3) To provide information and communication on the European dimension of guidance.

Rosarii then informed attendees of the work of the Euroguidance Network Steering Group and Main Task Groups.

Rosarii presented on the activities of Euroguidance Ireland and network participation, highlighting that Euroguidance Ireland is hosted by [Education and Training Boards Ireland \(ETBI\)](#). The presentation then covered insights on the Academia Mobility Network and Academia Ireland initiatives which promote mobility of guidance professionals.

ReferNet

Aedin O'Toole, from the [ReferNet](#) team hosted by [SOLAS](#), provided an outline of what ReferNet is, why Solas is the ReferNet Partner for Ireland and the importance for Ireland in progressing EU Vocational education and training policy. ReferNet is a network that provides information on the

national vocational education and training (VET) system in EU member states, Iceland, and Norway by sharing knowledge, insights and analysis of how each country is progressing in its implementation of common European policy objectives. It exchanges ideas, information, best practices, and promotes understanding of the different VET challenges in the member states through the Cedefop platform. ReferNet also publishes information, data, insights, and analysis to monitor development in national VET policies and systems to help policy makers, social partners, researchers, and other stakeholders.

Aedin outlined why Solas is the ReferNet partner for Ireland. Solas are embedded as the national agency under the aegis of DFHERIS to co-ordinate and fund the Further Education and Training (FET) sector. Solas has the resources and most of the relevant skills data included from the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) and Data Analytics Unit. The Transformation Project Management Office (TPMO) within Solas has oversight of the last and next national FET strategy and strategic implementation plan.

Aedin summarised ReferNet's objectives for 2025 and 2026 and ongoing activities and how this work can benefit those in attendance at the meeting.

Usual deliverables and workflows for 2025:

- VET Policy Reporting – Policy Developments during 2024.
- National news on VET.
- Networking with stakeholders and partners.

Unique deliverables for 2025:

- Spotlights on Skills in Europe (publication Q4 2025) – labour market information and trends on labour market trends and future skills needs, including a focus on green and digital skills.
- VET Excellence and Inclusion (survey) – the future of VET in Europe through the policy lens of excellence and inclusion.
- Financing Adult Learning and Individual Learner Accounts (report) – review of policy developments.
- Micro-credentials for Employability and Lifelong Learning (country-specific report).

HEA

Dr Raasay Jones, from the [Higher Education Authority \(HEA\)](#), updated the meeting on the [Erasmus+ programme](#). She outlined current national and international developments for the programme in the context of national and European policy including initiatives to support participation and inclusion of a wider range of participants.

Erasmus+ programme is an EU programme to support education, training, youth, and sport. Over 16 million people have taken part since 1987. The current programme has a budget of €26.2 billion, with €5 billion to support learning abroad in 2025.

Dr Jones provided an overview on some of the initiatives to support participants of the Erasmus+ programme with fewer opportunities or face obstacles that prevent them from having effective access to opportunities under the programme.

- 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 to support social inclusion as one of the programme's key priorities.
- Students in receipt of a SUSI grant are eligible for this top-up.

An Erasmus+ 2021-2027 interim evaluation reported some positive results from these initiatives but also reported barriers that remain.

- "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".
- "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".

Dr Jones also provided an overview and update on blended intensive programmes. These are short, intensive programmes that use innovative ways of learning and teaching, including the use of online cooperation. Enabling more flexible mobility formats aim at reaching all types of students from all backgrounds, study fields and cycles.

Léargas

Deirdre Finlay, [Léargas](#), summarised the main developments in Education and Training Programmes at Léargas since the last EU Reference Group meeting including sector specific insights for adult learners and the VET sector. She highlighted developments in Erasmus+, the VET Team, eTwinning – The European School Education Platform, EPALE – the electronic

platform for Adult Learning in Europe, and Eurodesk Ireland, including the priorities for 2025 and upcoming events.

The presentation included detailed updates on [Erasmus+](#) in school education, VET, and adult education. Highlighting the high participation and growth of programmes. Deirdre also provided insights on the widened reach and participation of audiences in Erasmus+.

Deirdre then informed attendees of the work of [Ireland's National VET Team](#), which is a group of national experts from the VET sector and is an EU Commission initiative. Deirdre drew attention to the report "[Erasmus+ VET Mobility as a Route to the Acquisition of Transversal Skills](#)". An output which was produced under the guidance of the National VET Team.

Deirdre provided an overview of [eTwinning](#) the free online platform connecting more than teachers across Europe. It supports primary and post-primary schools to find partners and work on joint projects in any curricular area, using Information and Communication Technology.

eTwinning is funded by the European Union and administered in participating countries by a National Support Organisation (NSO). Léargas is the National Support Organisation for eTwinning in Ireland.

Deirdre also provided a progress update on [EPALE](#). Léargas is the National Support Service for EPALE in Ireland. EPALE is the hub for news, reports, events and discussion on Adult Learning (VET and Adult Education) across Europe, and invites teachers, trainers, researchers, academics, and policy makers to get involved. EPALE is funded by the European Union through Erasmus+. It is operated by the European Commission and supported by the governments of member states. EPALE has seen its highest growth period from 2023-2024 in EPALE Ireland, with users increased by 17% and organisations increased by 22%.

Deirdre also provided an overview of the upcoming [Eurodesk](#) events in 2025. Including plans to celebrate 30 years of Eurodesk in Ireland and 35 years in Europe.

2. Discussion - Future Cooperation and Ways of Working

Attendees were invited to provide feedback as to how the EU Reference Group Meetings are currently run and present ideas on future topics or directions for the group.

Much of the feedback was supportive of the Reference Group as a useful information source but there was a consensus that there could be more emphasis on collaboration and active participation. While updates from all agencies were useful, options for more targeted updates or updates in other formats prior to in person meetings were explored. Ideas around World Café formats or webinars were presented as methods for providing updates on work in a more regular and/or interactive way.

There were suggestions for thematic groupings for future Reference Group Meetings where specific projects or topics could be discussed. It was suggested that a focus on ESCO could be a useful focus as this is a wide-ranging project that cuts across many agencies and could be a good collaborative project for agencies involved in the Reference Group.

Mobility was another key theme which emerged as a key area of work for many agencies working in both the HE and FE space in terms of implementing and supporting mobility.

The need for a clearer communications plan from the group was also discussed as it is important that the work, tools, and projects to which Reference Group members contribute need to filter down to teaching staff and in turn to learners. In the longer-term encouraging input from the learner voice could be incredibly useful to highlight the impact of specific projects.

Consolidation of groups across thematic areas with offshoot steering groups was proposed to determine strategic direction across certain thematic areas which could then report into a broader interagency group.



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