

20

Flexible Education & Widening Participation Annual Review

Access - Progression - Success

2nd Edition



Welcome Message



Professor Ruth Fee

Dean of Flexible Education &
Widening Participation

This has been a year of significant achievement for Flexible Education and Widening Participation (FEWP), delivered by a small team with a very big impact. Across our work, learners, communities and employers have remained at the heart of everything we do, shaping provision that is inclusive, responsive and aligned to Ulster University's strategy.

We have continued to strengthen our contribution across widening access, flexible learning, apprenticeships, skills and partnerships, ensuring that our activity supports individual transformation and wider regional need. The growth in apprenticeship numbers reflects the strength of our employer engagement and our commitment to developing high-quality, work-based learning pathways in partnership with faculties. The continued impact of micro-credentials has also been significant, increasing learner numbers while supporting workforce development and the broader economy.

This year we welcomed the Department for the Economy's public consultation on a refreshed approach to Widening Participation (WP), which aligns strongly with our renewed focus on meaningful, evidence-informed engagement. The successful pilot of Ending Violence Against Women and Girls activity aligned to the Widening Participation Plan has demonstrated the importance of embedding safety, confidence and belonging across the university and within communities.

The evaluation of the Ask4 project has been especially encouraging, demonstrating clear positive impact for Widening Participation learners, and strong strategic alignment with Ulster University's growth ambitions at Derry ~ Londonderry. As we look ahead, Flexible Education and Widening Participation will continue to connect people, place and partnership to widen opportunity and deliver lasting impact.

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Meet the Team



Abbie McKenna

Head of Centre for
Apprenticeships Skills &
Flexible Education



Claire Mulrone

Head of Widening Participation

Centre for Apprenticeships, Skills & Flexible Education



Peter Bell

Support Assistant



Kim Hughes

Operations & Project Manager



Aideen Hunter

Project Co-ordinator Lead



Aileen O'Connor

Contracts Co-ordinator



Lauren Stuart

Skills Project Manager



Phillip Turbitt

Curriculum Manager



Evan Vellis

Governance & Policy Officer



Hilary Wilson

Executive Assistant

Administration Team



Sharon Copeland

Administrative Officer



Clare Paradi

Executive Assistant

Widening Participation Team



Claire Gordon

Educational Partnerships
Manager



Richard Gormley

Operations & Project Manager
Project Hub - Ask 4



Catherine O'Donnell

Policy & Community
Partnerships Manager



Siobhan Flynn

Educational Outreach Officer



Darryl McCullagh

Educational Outreach Officer



James Wray

Educational Outreach Officer



Gareth Murphy

Educational Outreach Officer



Anne Mooney

Community Outreach Officer



Paul Cassidy

Community Outreach Officer



Susan Stokesbury

Community Outreach Officer
(Science Shop)



Martin Hinch

Data Development &
Enhancement Analyst



Andrew Toye

Widening Access &
Participation Officer



Barbara Hunter

Access Officer
(Policy & Practice)



Aidan McLaughlin

Manchester United Foundation

Centre for Apprenticeships, Skills & Flexible Education



Abbie McKenna

Head of Centre for Apprenticeships
Skills & Flexible Education

The 25/26 year reflects continued progress for the Centre for Apprenticeships, Skills & Flexible Education.

This has been achieved by close collaboration with Faculties and Schools to broaden opportunities for apprentices and learners through innovative, inclusive and industry-responsive programmes and micro-credentials. Working closely with colleagues throughout the university, the Centre ensures robust compliance and audit processes, supporting effective funding drawdown, reporting and high-quality delivery.

Through strong partnerships and a collaborative approach, CASFE provides the infrastructure that enables apprentices, employers and micro-credential learners to achieve their full potential. Our focus on engagement and partnership continues to shape a responsive, impactful experience, helping individuals thrive while supporting employers to access skilled, work-ready talent.



(l-r) Apprentice Stephanie Bradford and Economy Minister Dr Caoimhe Archibald MLA at NIAA 2026, Digital Futures Conference, Brave Women in STEM, and the Kainos team at Ulster University Apprenticeship Achievement Awards

CASFE Statistics



1,100
total apprentices



16
Undergraduate
programmes



310
new apprentices
in 2025/26



6
Postgraduate
programmes



1,000+
Micro-credential
learners



220
Neuro-Illuminate
Participants



400+
DfE 'Skill Up'
funded learners



60%
of Micro-credentials
learners
fully funded



300+
employer
partners



80+
academic
partners

Did you know?

The CASFE team work with all faculties and schools across every campus.

CASFE Key Events





NI DfE Apprenticeship Awards

5 nominated
apprenticeships

Launch of Semester 3 Micro-Credentials

Content Studio Neuro-Illuminate



Collaborating with WP

CASFE and WP Team
working in partnership
to showcase
Apprenticeship
pathways for care
experienced young
people

Flexible Framework Exam Boards

1,000+ students going
through Exam Boards
for PG CPD and UG
CPPD Programmes.

Summer Graduations for Degree Apprenticeships



July
'26

Apprenticeship Week

Belfast & Derry ~
Londonderry Campus



Introduction to Art Psychotherapy Practice

Launch of new micro-
credential



Evan Vellis

Governance & Policy Officer

Apprenticeships

Academic year 25/26 saw the introduction of a new Apprenticeships framework, and with it a growing number of Apprentices and Employer partners.

We have continued to expand our engagement work, with on-campus events, off-campus celebrations and Apprenticeship employment fairs, and online information events; all focused on increasing awareness of and access to this important pathway through higher education. Through closer collaboration with colleagues in the Educational Partnership and Widening Participation teams, our apprenticeship provision is not just a great opportunity, it's also used as a powerful tool for social mobility.

"The Apprenticeship programme truly was a game changer for me. Having the opportunity to pursue a fully funded degree while earning a full-time wage made all the difference, it meant I could focus on my studies and career growth without worrying about financial strain."

Stephanie Bradford,
Degree Apprentice, Danske Bank

"We've always had fantastic support from the team, we've worked together to shape the curriculum so it stays relevant to the industry. Our relationship has continued to evolve, and consistently delivers positive outcomes for everyone involved – long may it continue!"

Deborah Sanderson,
Global Early Careers
Programme Lead, Kainos



Lauren Stuart

Skills Project Manager

Skills Projects

This year, we have been mobilising the North West Digital Employment Pathways Training Hub (NW DEPTH), a €10 million, four-year project supported by PEACEPLUS, a programme managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). In partnership with Atlantic Technological University, North West Regional College, and Donegal Education and Training Board, the project will deliver digital skills training to over 2,000 learners.





Phillip Turbitt

Curriculum Manager

Flexible Education

Micro-credentials are short, credit bearing flexible learning programmes designed to support individuals to upskill, reskill, or access higher education.

In the 2025/26 academic year, Ulster University had 1,011 micro-credential learners undertaking a diverse portfolio of courses, including Introduction to Art Psychotherapy, Emergency Planning Response and Resilience, Sustainable Tourism Practice in Destinations, Management Ambassador Programme and others aligned to employer and sectoral demand.

Undergraduate micro-credentials offer accessible 'taster' experiences of higher education, while postgraduate micro-credentials provide the opportunity to enhance, acquire and apply knowledge and skills.

A distinctive feature of Ulster's approach is the ability to 'stack' micro-credentials; this enables learners to build credit over time towards a recognised qualification.



Dr Aideen Hunter

Project Co-Ordinator Lead

Neuro-illuminate, established in 2025, has made a significant impact on neuroinclusive practice across the Further Education sector through a programme of professional learning, collaboration, and research.

Over the past year, more than 250 staff have engaged in a wide range of development opportunities, from targeted workshops to accredited CPD programmes at Levels 4 and 7. This engagement level demonstrates the demand for staff development opportunities and evidence-informed approaches to supporting neurodivergent learners, colleagues, and teams.

Neuro-illuminate aims to be an agent of change within Northern Ireland society and this is evidenced through the development of applied CPD intervention projects that translate learning into tangible institutional change.

Widening Participation Team



Claire Mulrone

Head of Widening Participation

The Widening Participation (WP) team delivers a range of innovative and impactful engagement programmes to promote fair access, progression and success at Ulster.

Within Widening Participation there are three distinct teams:

- Educational Partnerships, working directly with WP post-primary schools and FE collaborative partners
- Policy & Community Partnerships, which coordinates the WAP Plan and targeted engagement with WP community partners
- Project Hub - Ask 4 at DLD, which, with DfE Taskforce funding, has developed new engagement projects with WP post-primary schools in the North and West and bespoke activities for learners in partnership with our neighbour and friends at the North West Regional College.

We have had a busy year introducing innovative engagement opportunities for learners to explore pathways to FE and HE.



Claire Gordon

Educational Partnerships Manager

Educational Partnerships

The Educational Partnerships Team delivered over 3,493 in-person pupil engagements this year, providing meaningful exposure to higher education for many who would be first in their family to attend Univeristy.

Through longer-term programmes such as Options Plus (6 week workshop series on pathways, transitions and employability), curriculum-linked competitions, and on-campus Discovery Days, pupils gained practical insight into university study and courses, built confidence in their post-school decisions, and connected directly with academic staff and students. These experiences play a critical role in demystifying university, sharpening focus on subjects of interest and strengthening pupils' sense of belonging and aspiration to progress to higher education.



Catherine O'Donnell

Policy & Community
Partnerships Manager

Policy & Community Partnerships

The Policy and Community Partnerships team leads activities for Widening Access Policy, the Access Ambassador Programme, Science Shop, Fostering Aspirations, Virtual Campus and co-ordinates the allocation of Access Bursaries and Widening Access Travel Bursaries.

Some 2025-26 highlights include: 2653 Access Bursaries, 111 Care Experience Bursaries and 251 Travel Bursaries awarded; a three-day Care Experience Programme for community partners, social workers, and young people; a six-week Early Adversity and Developmental Trauma course for care-experienced adults; a Fostering Aspirations residential summer school; 110 Science Shop projects that deliver real-world impact, 10 Access Ambassador funded projects that empower adult learners and more than 90,000 active users of the Virtual Campus.



Richard Gormley

Operations & Project Manager

Project Hub - Ask 4

The Project Hub - Ask 4 Development programme delivered measurable impact across schools, Further Education, and adult learners, strengthening progression into education across the North West.

In schools, over 300 pupils participated in Discovery Days, with 92% reporting they would be more likely to consider Higher Education. With NWRC we engaged 35 students, resulting in 100% viewing university as achievable. Adult learners took part in a pilot pathway development programme reporting 100% positive feedback and increased confidence. These targeted interventions were enhanced by the rebrand of the Discovery Academy, creating a more accessible digital platform, and establishing a scalable, sustainable foundation for inclusive educational growth.

Widening Participation Statistics



WP Bursaries

£1,398,590

awarded to **2,653** students



Medical Selection Admissions Test Fee Waiver

266

Applicants

£23,142



Travel Bursaries

251

Students

£115,000



Care Leavers Bursaries

111

Bursaries

£111,000



Discovery Academy

31,000+

Enrolments

17,000+

Pupils Registered

140+

Schools

66

Courses



Fostering Aspirations

130

Attended Fostering Aspirations workshops

22

Care Leavers graduating July 2026

28

Students have completed the early adversity & developmental trauma course



Virtual Campus

90,000+

Active users

10

New locations mapped

116

Site users per country

69k

Website Views



Educational Partnerships

3,493

Pupils Engaged

115

Events

39

Schools

4

FE Colleges



Science Shop

110

Projects Completed

300

Students Engaged

42

Community Partners

14

Academic Staff



Project Hub - Ask 4

581

Participants

20+

Student Mentors

21

Events

11

Partners



Access Ambassadors

83

Participants

28

Student Mentors

10

Community Partners

17

Academic Staff

Educational Partnerships



Discover Sport at Ulster with St Louise's Comprehensive School and Mercy College



Paramedic Science Day with Holy Cross College Strabane



Sustainable Business Event - Project 1.5' attended by Blessed Trinity College, Malone College, Mercy College and St. Genevieves



Students from All Saints College attend Discover Law: From Ulster University to Citi



Creative Industries/Costume Design workshop at Linen Mill Studios attended by St Mary's High School, Newry High School, St Joseph's High School Newry

"I really enjoyed coming up to the lab today at Ulster University. The experience has really made me consider coming to Ulster University for a degree."

Pupil, Blessed Trinity



Frankenstein and Othello Lectures at English Discovery day with Belfast Met students

"For many of our young people, a significant number of them will be the first in their families to progress to higher education, so this was their first opportunity to step inside a university environment. The experience allowed pupils to see themselves studying at Ulster."

**Teacher,
Mercy College, Belfast**



Department for Accounting, Finance and Economics Event with Belfast Model School for Girls



Aspirin Synthesis with Blessed Trinity College Belfast



Students from Ashfield Girls attended Digital Futures Computing event and engaged in activities in AI, Robotics and Cyber Security.



Art Unwrapped: Unveiling of a donated painting from Ulster Museum



Policy & Community Partnerships



Through the Science Shop, Public Relations students partnered with Belfast Charitable Society to develop a PR strategy for a Mary Ann McCracken tour at Clifton House



Through Fostering Aspiration & the School of Psychology, students completed an Early Adversity and Developmental Trauma course funded by the Irish Youth Foundation

"On behalf of the North Belfast Advice Partnership, we want to express our sincere appreciation for the work, creativity and attention to detail that has gone into the development of our new website, branding and logo design. The quality of work delivered has been exceptional."

Elaine Burns,
Advice Manager, Ardoyne Association.



Interactive Media student winners of the Science Shop Digital Media Award who worked in collaboration with North Belfast Advice Partnership



Access Ambassadors project with Kevin Burns from Belfast School of Art delivered Fundamentals of Tapestry and Hand Weaving workshops at the Belfast Campus and Carnegie Oldpark Library

"The Tapestry and Hand Weaving workshop was a very rewarding, inspiring and therapeutic experience that has encouraged me to pursue future artistic endeavours!"

Marie Claire



Access Ambassadors project with the Children's Law Centre Youth Panel, engaging in activities and campus tour hosted by staff from the School of Law



Fostering Aspirations workshop at Derry ~ Londonderry with academic staff and participants from the North Star family project



Project Hub - Ask 4



Participants from the Community Plus programme at Derry~Londonderry



Discovery Day in partnership with North West Regional College



Ulster University Business School Discovery Day in partnership with Catalyst and North West Regional College



Women's Centre, Derry~Londonderry, Participants complete Community Plus course delivered by Ulster University & North West Regional College



Sacred Heart College Omagh pupils attending a Discovery Day at Derry~Londonderry Campus

"Through this programme I realised I can do more than I thought and now I can push myself to the best of my ability."

Community Plus Participant

FEWP Funded Activities



Ending Violence Against Women and Girls tertiary sector capacity building workshop



Ulster University School of Law was delighted to fund the second stage of the NI Mock Trial Initiative



Celebrating our Ulster graduates who successfully completed the Graduate Boost Programme, delivered with funding support from Widening Participation Team



Claire Gordon, Malachy O'Neill and new CEO of Man U Foundation, Ashley Hackett



Ability Counts Festival of Football: bringing together over 100 young people for a day of football, friendship and inclusion at Ulster University Coleraine



Celebrating Peer Parent Advocacy Awards with social work and law staff, Health & Social Care Trusts, and community partners.

Placement Programme



Bea Kinkaid

BDes (Hons) Graphic Design
Educational Outreach Assistant

My placement with the Educational Partnership team has been a wonderful experience that I am truly grateful for, I have learned so much about working for an established brand. My confidence in my own ability has grown. I am more comfortable with presenting my work and sharing designs in an environment that valued my development. I feel I am able to advocate for myself and to be more proactive by asking for projects that challenged me and offered me an opportunity to show my creative skills.



Arella Flood

BDes (Hons) Digital Design
Market Outreach Assistant

Working as a placement student in the Project Hub - Ask 4 has greatly enhanced my communication, organisational, and teamwork skills, as well as confidence through in-person delivery of events. I particularly enjoyed capturing and editing footage, not only supporting storytelling, but driving meaningful engagement with our young people. The rebrand of the Discovery Academy gave me the opportunity to meaningfully apply my degree knowledge, designing content to improve the overall user experience with our online-learning platform.



Megan Lochhead

BA (Hons) Illustration
Market Outreach Assistant

During my placement, working in the Project Hub - Ask 4 I have gained really valuable experience working across a range of creative, marketing, and digital learning projects. I've had the opportunity to design brand-aligned materials, create promotional content, and develop a stronger understanding of how design, accessibility, and user experience work within an educational setting. I'm really grateful for the experience and for the opportunity to learn from and contribute to such a supportive team.



Conor McColgan

BSc (Hons) Architectural
Technology & Management
Virtual Campus Placement

I have thoroughly enjoyed my placement, continuing to create accessible content mapping the University's campus for the Virtual Campus. I also had the opportunity to support a range of FEWP projects, with a key achievement being the development of an accessible micro-site for care-experienced young people to explore pathways to FE & HE. This placement has been an invaluable experience that has significantly shaped and enhanced my professional skills and career direction. I was also delighted to be nominated for the Innovation in Placement award.



Sonja McLaughlin

BSc (Hons) Interactive Media
Community Outreach Assistant

My placement within the Policy & Community Partnership team has been an invaluable learning experience. It has provided me with many opportunities to develop my creative skills and my professional confidence. I have embraced the opportunity to work on many different projects, being directly involved in encouraging young people and community partners to explore opportunities at Ulster University. This placement has demonstrated how creative media can contribute to the work of the University. I appreciate all the support I received from the FEWP team and my fellow student placements.

This publication was co-created by FEWP placement students
Megan Lochhead, Bea Kinkaid, Arella Flood, Conor McColgan and Sonja McLaughlin.

