

COUNCIL OF PROFESSORS AND HEADS OF COMPUTING

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Northern Ireland Report

AI Strategy for Northern Ireland Public Sector

Following on from the AI Castle Conversation at Hillsborough Castle the Task and Finish Groups have completed their work for Phase 1 and the Office of AI and Digital was announced at the AICC Governance Board Meeting on the 12th of June at the Belfast Campus of the Ulster University.



<https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/news/new-ai-and-digital-office-will-drive-innovation-and-transform-services-oneill-and-little-pengelly>

From Phase 2 onwards the development will continue internally within and across the NI Assembly Departments. The Chief Scientific and Technology Adviser (CTSA) Prof Helen Mc Carthy has established an External Reference Group to provide objective oversight of the strategy development going forward of which Prof Wallace is a member.

GenAIEDU 2025

The Fourth National Conference on Generative Artificial Intelligence in Education curated by colleagues within the School of Computing, Engineering and Intelligent Systems with my Faculty, took place at the York Street Belfast Campus of Ulster University on Friday 20th June 2025 – the conference was sold-out. It included a Practitioner Showcase across Primary and Secondary education in the use of A.I.

<https://www.ulster.ac.uk/conference/genaiedu-2025-june#panel1-1716844>

Innovation in Placement Awards 2025



Now in its 23rd year the Faculty's annual Innovation in Placement Awards across the 3 subject areas of the Faculty, Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment, took place on the afternoon of the 20th of June on the Belfast Campus. Prof Wallace when he led placement in the Faculty as part of his then Director of Academic Enterprise Role, developed these awards to allow us to recognise and showcase the positive impact that our students can have on their placement organizations. The students are nominated by their placement organisations, only if they felt they had made a significant impact upon their organisation, above and beyond that expected as the duties of a normal placement student. Innovations this year included development of new policies, new technologies and software development which have significantly improved business insight and operational efficiencies in their placement companies.

Impact of AI on Mandatory Placement and HE Course Curricula

In relation to the above celebration of innovation and impact in placement, both Ulster University and Queen's University have mandatory placement across their Computing and Engineering Courses. There is a significant concern for Computing Placements this year where at this stage there are unprecedented numbers across both institutions still seeking placement. There are four primary factors contributing to this:

- Global economic uncertainty due to US Tariffs, etc. this is affecting in particular the FDI companies in NI – therefore the companies are offering less placements in the current climate.
- The above is compounded with the impact of AI where companies are utilising AI to do the job of what placement interns and junior graduate software engineers would have done previously.
- Increased demand for part-time Higher-Level Apprenticeships (HLAs) which is unfortunately less viable from a funding perspective for the institutions.

- To a lesser degree the engagement of students in seeking placements early enough in the year.

Overall, this causes potentially significant concerns as the mandatory placement year is seen as a significant strength of the courses as well as the graduates from these courses for both institutions. The number of local students is controlled using the Maximum Aggregate Student Number (MASN) formula. It is set by Stormont's Department for the Economy and depends on available funding. MPs on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (NIAC) report the cap makes it harder to attract investment and impedes business growth. Northern Ireland's universities have long campaigned for the cap to be lifted. This situation, were students permitted en masse to go to final year, would cause bunching with a significantly higher final year cohort and also negatively impact the MASN for the next year for first year students having a longer-term ripple effect on the supply of graduates for the sector. The students will inevitably see it as one less year of debt / student loans, but this is a short-sighted perspective as typically we find that any in the rare circumstances we have permitted students to go to final year they lack the maturity and skills development that placement brings to them, and they tend under achieve in final year.

Similarly, as discussed in depth at the Faculty's Computing Employer Advisory Board (CEAB) and the AICC'S Technology & Skills Advisory Board (TSAB) on the 20th June and 29th of June respectively, both of which Prof Wallace Chairs, this has potentially significant impact upon HE Course Curricula and graduate jobs not only in the software sector going forward.

To that end we have been engaging directly with the CEAB and TSAB members and Software NI to look to address both the current downturn in available placements, viable alternatives for those unplaced, and also future module and course curricula. If the companies don't have the junior software engineers coming through, how will they have future senior engineers with the knowledge skillsets that current senior software engineers have ? We are currently planning a one day workshop either before or after AICON <https://ai-con.ai/> in the first week of October to address this and working with Software NI to address the immediate current shortfall to get as many computing students placed across both institutions as possible.