Case Study
Work-Integrated Learning for Law students: Optimising When & Where (WILLOW)

UCC
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh
University College Cork, Ireland

OVERVIEW

The WILLOW project at University College Cork (UCC) is a strategic initiative to reimagine how **work-integrated learning (WIL)** can be embedded within **postgraduate legal education**, i.e. for students completing one of our Masters in Law (LLM) or graduate-entry LLB programmes.

At a time when universities are being asked to demonstrate both academic excellence and meaningful employability outcomes, the WILLOW project aims to respond to a critical challenge: how can postgraduate law programmes create authentic, discipline-relevant opportunities for students to engage with the worlds of work, professional identity formation and civic practice, particularly where traditional placement models are limited or unevenly accessible and may be subject to regulatory controls.

In 2023 UCC adopted the globally recognised definition of **Work Integrated Learning (WIL)**:

"an educational approach involving three parties – the student, the educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, enabling the integration of theory with meaningful practice relevant to their discipline of study and/or professional development."

WILLOW is a pilot project running between September 2025 and December 2026, as a **partnership between the School of Law and the Career Services**.

The project has adopted a students as partners approach and follows on from research undertaken as part of Dr Cubie's Masters in Teaching & Learning in Higher Education (MATLHE, UCC 2024-25). The findings from the project will be integrated into future activities in the School's postgraduate (PG) programmes through an iterative development process.

Postgraduate Degree Programmes: The School of Law runs nine taught Masters in Law (LLM) programmes covering a range of specialised fields of law, such as environmental and natural resources law, marine and maritime law, alternative dispute resolution, and international human rights law. The School also runs a 1-year and 2-year graduate-entry accelerated law degree (LLB).

In academic year 2025-26, there were a total of 47 students taking the LLB degree and 99 students taking the various LLM programmes.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The WILLOW project has **four key strands of activity**:

1. To develop an online site in partnership with the UCC Careers Service, combining clear signposting to existing university-wide supports with tailored guidance on careers in legal practice and in wider law-related and non-traditional professional contexts.
2. To conduct a series of dialogues with the PG class representatives.
3. To provide seed-funding to catalyse programme-level innovation, supporting activities such as site visits, guest lectures from industry and community partners, and other locally relevant WIL initiatives.
4. To outline plans for knowledge capture based on the experiences of the pilot project to strengthen staff capacity to embed employability more confidently within the curriculum.

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ACTIVITIES

Between November 2025 and March 2026, a **series of dialogues** were held with the PG class representatives and with the PG Programme Directors. These information sharing sessions were designed to identify the key work skills and career information priorities for students and academics within the context of a short (i.e. 1-2 year) postgraduate law degree.

A key consensus arising from these discussions was the need to provide **targeted and accessible sources of information** for PG law students on careers and employability. It was agreed that there was no need to reinvent the wheel since the UCC Career Services already provides extensive information online and through in-person session. However, it was recognised that there was a need to curate and refocus some of this information for the specific requirements of law students.

Based on discussions with the PG class representatives, the project recruited an experienced IT student as a research assistant to develop an **online careers portal**, comprised of an overarching resource page on Canvas (available on an opt-in basis for all PG law students) which links to a more detailed SharePoint site.

The SharePoint site is structured as a clear pathway for the students to follow – starting with their high-level career objectives, then progressing to CV resources, job search and interview preparation.

However, the layout of the SharePoint site and the different stages allow students to engage with the portal at whatever stage they are at, i.e. entry level, mid-career or those who want a change of career. The resources are intended to bridge the gap between the students' academic programme and the challenges of arranging internships and placement experiences within a 12–24-month programme.

A demonstration of the site was provided to the PG class representatives and Programme Directors in March 2026. The draft version of the portal was well received, but the need for more **information on legal careers and work opportunities** was highlighted. This led to the recruitment of a PG law student as a second research assistant to update existing Career Services materials for law students.

This process incorporated direct input and feedback on the needs of law students and led to the creation of 10 information sheets and 5 worksheets to allow students to take charge of their careers and forge a path that is tailored for them guided by the most relevant resources.

Work-focused activities: another key component of the project was to provide seed funding to the PG Programme Directors to help cover the costs of engagement with external shareholders (e.g. travel costs), and to encourage authentic work-focused experiences both in the classroom and through external visits.

For this component of the project, we drew on the work of ASET, the Work Based Learning and Placement Learning Association. ASET's spectrum of work-based and placement learning activities provided a framework for mapping the different types of activities undertaken across different PG modules and programmes.

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Over the course of the project, work-focused activities included: eight guest lectures from practitioners, a Masterclass on legal writing provided by a High Court judge, a company visit to a leading law firm in Dublin, an insight day with the Irish Naval Service, and five graded projects (such as moot court assignments, drafting a funding application, model EU inter-state negotiations, and dispute mediation role play activities).

Lessons learned: as part of the iterative and ongoing process of reflecting on the work-integrated learning opportunities for PG law students, some interesting lessons can already be drawn from the first year of activities.

First, many of the Programme Directors did not require the allocated level of seed funding since industry partners generously provided their time and covered their own travel expenses.

Second, early engagement and integration of academic class representatives and the Law Society can ensure that students are consistently included in the process and provide their feedback and assist in organising relevant events and activities.

Third, while the staff were engaged and interested in the project, the planned staff lunchtime seminars to discuss good practices in work-integrated learning did not run due to constraints on staff time, especially during the teaching semester.

Action points for 2026-27: building on the experiences of the project to date, some additional actions have been undertaken for 2026-27:

- ✓ Information on the WILLOW Canvas page and SharePoint site was incorporated into the School of Law's PG Handbook for new PG students, and a presentation on the resources was given to new PG students at their orientation in September 2026.
- ✓ The importance of networking was highlighted by the students. So, LinkedIn pages for the individual PG programmes were established (nested under the School of Law's LinkedIn profile) by a third student research assistant. The aim of these pages is to encourage students to engage with alumni of their programme, and to visualise career pathways based on their specific PG law degree.

DISSEMINATION

Throughout the project, we have engaged with colleagues within UCC and externally. This has entailed both oral and poster presentations at: UCC's WIL Community of Practice showcase (April 2026); the ASET annual conference (Lancaster University, UK: Sept 2026); the UCC College of Business & Law's Learning & Teaching Showcase (Sept 2026); and the European Career Services summit (Barcelona, Spain: Oct 2026). Further dissemination is planned at the Higher Education Authority's Inclusive Education conference (Carlow: Oct 2026); and the Irish Association of Law Teachers annual conference (Belfast, UK: Nov 2026).

KEY FINDINGS / TAKEAWAYS

Student engagement:

- Consultation with students as partners in this project was key; although due to timetabling this works better in smaller groups (i.e. programme groups) in consultation with the Programme Directors.
- It is important to understand the diverse career needs and stages of PG law students, which in turn has implications on how best to engage with and include employers in any work-focused activities.

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- The timing of the introduction of the resources and the follow up from academic staff is important to ensure that students consistently engage with the resources and have the opportunity to use the Career Services from the beginning of their programme.
- There is a need for multiple points of engagement and awareness raising throughout the academic year (i.e. during the teaching semesters) and also during the summer months (i.e. after submission of assignments and during the dissertation writing process).

Programme Directors:

- Obtaining buy-in from Programme Directors helped to ensure that they would engage with their students regarding the work-based skills and careers resources in a meaningful way.
- Engagement with the Programme Directors allowed for a more nuanced and informed perspective about the needs of specific students, e.g. international students who need information and guidance about career pathways after graduation. The Programme Directors gave insights regarding relevant tailored information and resources for their students and how they would integrate the project into their programmes.
- Many skills-based and work-integrated learning activities can be conducted in-class as part of existing individual modules and consequently may only have limited budgetary requirements.
- Incorporating in-person WIL-type activities into graded assessments for PG students can provide a means of ensuring academic integrity and verifiable assessment in the context of increasing use of gen-AI tools.

Partnerships:

- By signposting and further highlighting available resources and tools provided by the Career Services, the project allows students to make full use of what is already there, while allowing for the specific needs of PG law students.
- There is a need for greater engagement with employers and external stakeholders, which requires coordination between the Programme Directors, School of Law, alumni office and Career Services.

FUTURE PLANS

1. The online careers portal will be updated and refined based on feedback of current students, Programme Directors and Career Services to ensure relevant and accurate information is provided to students.
2. The project team aims to explore opportunities for developing similar resources for undergraduate law students.

Project Team

- Clodagh Kerr – WIL Lead
- Dug Cubie – School of Law
- Richard Liu – Research Assistant (IT)
- Rumbidzai Mudzongo – Research Assistant (Law)
- Hein Htet Soe – Research Assistant (LinkedIn)

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TIMELINE

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Project funded by UCC's Strategic Alignment of Teaching & Learning Enhancement Funding in Higher Education (SATLE) 2025-26

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October 2026