

The Irish Association for Cultural, Economic and Social Relations

‘A Vision for North-South Co-operation?’

Strand 2 – a generation on’

Report from fourth symposium,

‘North-South symposium on education and culture’

Linen Hall Library, Belfast, 8 Apr.2025

· Context and Purpose:

The fourth and final event in The Irish Association for Cultural, Economic and Social Relations' series, “A Vision for North-South Co-operation?” focused on the themes of Education and Culture. Held on Tuesday, 8 April 2025, in the historic Linenhall Library, Belfast, this symposium marked the culmination of a dialogue series dedicated to exploring Strand II of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), which provides the framework for structured cooperation between the jurisdictions on the island of Ireland.

This session turned attention to the foundational role of education and cultural exchange in fostering mutual understanding, enriching civic life, and sustaining peace across communities. The event brought together educators, cultural leaders, researchers, and commentators to examine the ways in which cross-border initiatives – formal and informal – are shaping a new generation’s experience of identity, diversity, and shared heritage. Through keynote addresses, practitioner panels, and concluding reflections, the symposium offered a space for assessing not only what has been achieved, but also what is possible in the years ahead. Participants explored the transformative power of collaboration in education and the arts, acknowledging both the opportunities and the institutional, political, and financial challenges that shape these sectors.

· Structure of the Report:

This report is structured around the flow of the symposium and includes the following sections:

1. Introduction: Outlining the thematic focus and context of the event within the wider Strand II series.

2. Keynote on Education – Prof. Tony Gallagher: A keynote address reflecting on the cross-border potential of educational engagement, chaired by Prof. Brian Walker.

3. Panel: Education Practitioners' Perspectives: A discussion featuring voices from educational research, autism support, school leadership, and cross-community programming, chaired by Dr. Conor O'Malley.

4. Keynote on Culture – Bob Collins: A wide-ranging address on culture's role in public life, identity, and cooperation, chaired by Brian Walker.

5. Panel: Culture Practitioners' Perspectives: Contributions from leaders in music, language, heritage, and museum curation, chaired by Stephen Douds.

6. Summing Up – Analysts' Perspectives: Final reflections from leading analysts and commentators, identifying key themes and future directions, chaired by Dermot O'Doherty.

7. Conclusion and Closing Remarks: Summary of insights and closing words by Brian Walker, President of The Irish Association.

Keynote Address on Education: Professor Tony Gallagher, QUB

Prof. Tony Gallagher identified two key areas for exploration in his talk: (1) examples of existing cross-border educational cooperation and (2) patterns in higher education student mobility.

He highlighted the Centre for Cross Border Cooperation as a pivotal institutional framework supporting educational collaboration and as secretariat for two notable initiatives:

1. **SCoTENS (Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South)** – Founded in 2003, SCoTENS focuses on teacher education with an annual conference providing a space for dialogue and innovation, a model for modest but impactful collaboration.
2. **Universities Ireland** – Also established in 2003, this initiative fosters collaboration among higher education institutions North and South. Notably, it played a key role in the "Decade of Anniversaries" academic work and acts as a platform for policy-level engagement.

Turning to higher education student flows, Gallagher acknowledged the difficulty of obtaining consistent and comprehensive data due to differing categories and data sources. Nevertheless, he outlined key trends:

- **Outflows from Northern Ireland:** Historically, many students from Northern Ireland studied in Dublin, particularly at Trinity College and UCD. In the 1960s, more students from NI went to the Republic than to Great Britain. This shifted due to a massive expansion in NI's student population and the onset of the Troubles.

Gallagher identified two groups:

- **Determined leavers**, who were eager to leave Northern Ireland for cultural and political reasons.
- **Reluctant leavers**, often unable to secure local university places due to supply-demand issues, especially in high-demand fields like law, medicine, and accountancy.

Notably, Protestant students tended to go to Scotland, while Catholic students preferred North West England, where Irish communities were more established.

- **Inflows to Northern Ireland:** The vast majority of students in NI universities are from NI itself. Students from the Republic once formed a larger contingent (e.g. in 1996–97), but those numbers declined before recently ticking upwards again. Students from Great Britain and non-EU countries are increasing, reflecting a shift in university funding pressures.

Gallagher highlighted that while Republic of Ireland students are still treated as “home” students in terms of fees, cost of living and capacity pressures—especially due to the Leaving Certificate points system—pose real challenges for increased mobility.

Gallagher closed by cautioning against treating cross-border cooperation as a “nice to have” initiative. For such collaboration to be sustainable and meaningful, it must be grounded in robust institutional frameworks and treated as a policy priority. He pointed to the significant changes in tertiary education, particularly the Republic’s more rapid evolution, as a reason to take cooperation seriously. In a nod to the Belgian anecdote with which he began, Gallagher underscored the danger of drift. Without conscious effort, systems that once shared a foundation can diverge to the point where reconnecting them becomes a major challenge.

Q&A

Gallagher affirmed that most students who leave do not return. In the 1990s, there was an added problem of low inward migration. Although that has improved, recent declines in international student numbers have caused significant financial strain on UK universities, including Queen’s University Belfast, which is facing job and course cuts. However, he noted that Northern Ireland’s increasingly diverse school population will eventually shape university demographics and dynamic.

Panel One: Education Practitioners

Speakers:

- **Ann Devlin**, Research Officer, ESRI
- **Stephen Douthart**, CEO, Middletown Centre for Autism
- **Robin McLoughlin**, Headmaster, Banbridge Academy
- **Chair:** Dr. Conor O'Malley, Secretary, The Irish Association

Stephen Douthart, CEO of the Middletown Centre for Autism noted his organisation's creation as part of the GFA framework, though unlike other implementation bodies, the Centre stands apart in both structure and governance. Funded equally by both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, the Centre's work spans the entire island, offering flexibility and responsiveness not often found in public sector initiatives.

Douthart emphasised that their work is not confined to the classroom. It's also about preparing children for society and helping them transition into wider community life. He returned to his initial question — the purpose of education — and suggested that for autistic young people, that purpose must include equipping them to navigate the complexities of the world around them with confidence and support. Douthart outlined a second strand of the Centre's model: to develop training programmes for teachers and education professionals. To date, they've trained over 100,000 professionals and continue to offer postgraduate courses in autism studies.

He noted that the Centre's model is unique in Ireland — operating seamlessly across north and south, and deliberately designed without regard for borders. Douthart remarked that autism does not respect jurisdictional lines, and neither should the support services that aim to assist autistic children. He also spoke about the importance of digital engagement. Recognising the changing expectations of today's parents, teachers, and students, the Centre has invested in developing online resources, including webinars and podcasts featuring global experts. This reflects an effort to create a sense of ongoing learning and connection rather than one-off training sessions.

Anne Devlin, an economist and co-author of the 2022 *North-South Comparative Education Report*, delivered opening remarks that explored the growing educational disparities between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Her presentation was grounded in the findings of the report, which continues to resonate in 2025. One of the central concerns Devlin raised was the diverging levels of educational attainment. In 2005, the two jurisdictions showed broadly similar attainment levels. However, in recent years, ROI has pulled significantly ahead. While graduate-level achievements remain comparable, the most striking differences are found in the levels of post-secondary non-tertiary qualifications – such as those gained through Further Education (FE). ROI has seen a substantial rise in these qualifications, whereas NI has lagged behind.

Devlin attributed some of this divergence to the different ways the two systems treat and promote Further Education. In NI, the FE sector is increasingly under pressure. Schools are encroaching into vocational territory, and universities have begun offering higher-level apprenticeships, both of which squeeze FE providers. In contrast, ROI has actively worked to boost the sector's appeal. National advertising campaigns have sought to reshape public perception of FE, and crucially, the CAO (Central Applications Office) system in ROI now includes FE courses, making them more visible and accessible to school leavers.

This difference has consequences beyond education — particularly in terms of earnings. Devlin pointed to wage data showing that ROI workers earn more than their NI counterparts across all education levels, including those with low or no qualifications. On average, ROI wages are about 30% higher. Interestingly, the one area where wage levels are similar is among people with FE qualifications — a fact Devlin interpreted as a sign that Northern Ireland has demand for this level of skill, but lacks the supply of workers with the right qualifications. Devlin also addressed broader systemic issues, notably early school leaving and educational disadvantage. In NI, early school leaving remains a persistent challenge.

By contrast, the Republic's DESH (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme was held up as a successful example of targeted intervention. Unlike NI, which lacks ring-fenced funding for educational disadvantage, ROI has a system that not only recognises need but actively supports schools in addressing it. In Northern Ireland, ongoing financial pressures mean that schools often have to redirect any available resources to cover basic operational costs rather than addressing structural inequality.

Finally, Devlin spoke about the state of North-South cooperation in education suggesting such cooperation now tends to rely on individual champions or specific local circumstances. While there are some ongoing examples of partnership, such as the Middletown Centre for Autism and collaboration between inspectorates, the overall picture is one of missed opportunities and under-resourced ambition. Devlin's address offered both a sobering account of educational divergence and a call to rethink the systems shaping young people's opportunities across the island. Her insights highlighted the importance of structural investment, inclusive policy, and genuine cross-border dialogue — not just for comparative learning, but for building a more equitable educational future.

Robin McLoughlin, Principal of Banbridge Academy and former Principal of Grosvenor Grammar School, opened his compelling and informed contribution by noting he had served on two major education bodies: the *14–19 Transition Strategy Board* and the *Independent Review Panel of Education*, established under the New Decade, New Approach agreement.

McLoughlin noted that across the democratic world — from the UK to the US — education systems are undergoing deep reviews in the wake of COVID-19. The pandemic, he argued, had underscored a truth now widely acknowledged: no economy can afford to export its talent. Instead, regions must “grow their own,” and education is the foundation for doing so — not just for economic success, but for building cohesive, resilient societies. In this, McLoughlin asserted, the future of both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland depends on how serious investment in education. He was keen to clarify a common misunderstanding around the Independent Review, emphasising that it had examined the entire education system, not just schools. FE, he said, was given serious attention — echoing themes raised by Anne Devlin — and the review was underpinned by a vision of a fully integrated 20-year roadmap. This roadmap centred on the learner, aiming to boost both economic output and social cohesion.

McLoughlin spoke of the success of students from NI who now work in world-renowned institutions like NASA and CERN. “We punch above our weight,” he said. Yet, these successes coexist with persistent inequalities. The strong correlation between social disadvantage and educational outcomes remains, and while the UK education system (to which NI is attached) shows the smallest attainment gap nationally, that's still, in his words, “not good enough.” Drawing from data featured in the TransformED strategy, McLoughlin

described how, unlike most jurisdictions where a steady trend links disadvantage and lower attainment, Northern Ireland's data tells a different story: schools with the same socio-economic context can perform dramatically differently. Some sit well above the trend line, others well below. The lesson, he argued, is clear — more needs to be done to understand and learn from those schools that are succeeding in challenging contexts.

He urged attendees to examine the “blue pages” of the Independent Review — where 25 key recommendations are laid out. These include curriculum and assessment reform, a clearer emphasis on literacy and numeracy, and simplification of the qualifications framework. Employers and learners alike, he noted, are often confused by the current system. A telling anecdote he shared involved a senior official from the Austrian government who, when learning that NI offers 35,000 qualifications — of which only 3,500 are actually taken up each year — replied that Austria offers only 350 in total. The contrast, McLoughlin said, speaks volumes.

McLoughlin also welcomed the recent publication of the TransformED strategy by the Department of Education — a ten-point action plan aimed at tackling disadvantage — and referenced the 14–19 Framework, which encourages diverse academic and vocational pathways. Turning to the theme of North-South cooperation, McLoughlin identified several areas with significant potential: curriculum and qualifications alignment, early years education, SEN policy and practice, targeted interventions, and teacher professional development. He also emphasised the power of shared data and research to support and scale what works. For him, these are not abstract aspirations, but achievable steps toward a more inclusive and effective education system.

In closing, McLoughlin called on participants to embrace cooperation as a model for tackling complex societal challenges. The Independent Review, alongside the TransformED strategy, the 14–19 Framework, and new initiatives like RAISE, offer a “roadmap for change.” North-South cooperation, he concluded, can and should be a vital catalyst in bringing that vision to life — ensuring that all children, across this island, receive the best education we can offer.

Celeste O' Callaghan, Principal Officer in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit in the Republic's Department of Education contributed remotely via a pre-recorded conversation with Dr. Conor O'Malley. Her presentation focused on the Creative Connections programme — a new, cross-border initiative designed to integrate creativity into school life across the island of Ireland. Creative Connections is specifically designed for a shared island context, developed through direct cooperation between the Republic's Department of Education and their counterparts in Northern Ireland.

At its core, Creative Connections is a school-based programme that brings together young people, teachers, and professional creative practitioners to explore creativity as part of education. The goals go beyond arts education alone: it is intended to promote wellbeing, personal development, and creative learning — particularly for children experiencing disadvantage. What distinguishes Creative Connections from previous efforts is its intentional co-design approach. O' Callaghan described how the programme has been shaped by a shared design team, incorporating insights from Tralee Education Centre, creative practitioners from both jurisdictions, teachers from the North and South, and representatives from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. This collaborative design process has been vital in navigating the practical differences between the two education systems — including curriculum frameworks, school calendars, and teacher training.

Celeste O' Callaghan underscored the spirit of co-creation that has underpinned the programme's development. Creative Connections is not about exporting one model from one jurisdiction to another — it is about building something new, together, that responds to the specific educational contexts of both North and South. She expressed confidence that this model of cooperation — practical, creative, and child-centred — has the potential to serve as a blueprint for future shared island initiatives.

Following the formal presentations by the panel, the tone shifted toward dialogue, with contributions ranging from deeply personal reflections on education to policy-focused commentary. These exchanges further illuminated the interwoven challenges of educational inequality, community engagement, vocational training, and regional divergence.

A concern was raised around the underperformance of working-class boys in areas such as East Belfast, asking what was being done to address this. Robin McLoughlin and Anne Devlin both acknowledged the deep gender gap and class-based educational inequality that persists. McLoughlin traced the issue to a lack of clarity and confidence in vocational and technical pathways, which remain underdeveloped compared to academic routes.

Brian Walker raised a question about the under-utilisation of Further Education (FE) colleges, noting recent capital investments in campuses such as Enniskillen and Coleraine. The response from panellists, was emphatic: while facilities are often world-class, the FE sector in Northern Ireland struggles due to competitive pressure from schools, where sixth-form retention often takes precedence over directing students into vocational alternatives. The “bums on seats” funding model, as it was frequently described, encourages schools to retain students regardless of the suitability of their curriculum offerings. Anne Devlin pointed out the cultural and parental bias toward university education — often based on familiarity or status — which can distort decision-making, especially in the absence of transparent, well-communicated pathways through FE.

The final contribution came from Rev. John Dunlop, who posed two questions to Robin McLoughlin: one on the impact of academic selection on regional school inequalities, and another on the lack of university places for Northern Irish students, which often forces them to study in Britain. McLoughlin responded that while academic selection continues to dominate debate, he argued, the more urgent issue lies in the curriculum itself — its relevance, its clarity, and its alignment with both learner needs and economic demand. Selection is a distraction from deeper structural reform, he asserted. On university access, he echoed points raised earlier in the day: many young people leave not because they wish to, but because they have no choice. The failure lies in both capacity constraints and policy misalignment, leading to a loss of talent that may not return.

3. Keynote Address on Culture: Bob Collins

The afternoon session of the symposium was opened by Bob Collins, former Chair of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Director-General of RTÉ, and most recently Chair of the Policing Authority of Ireland. Drawing on his expansive experience across cultural, civic, and institutional life on both sides of the border, Collins delivered a thoughtful, layered reflection on the role of culture in reconciliation and shared understanding on the island of Ireland.

Collins drew inspiration from the 1991 Dun Laoghaire “Cultures in Ireland” conference, where he noted culture was explored in its potential to bridge divides, not reinforce them. He quoted Brendan Kennelly and Hubert Butler to frame his central argument: that culture should be a dynamic, evolving force, not a relic or a weapon. Yet in Northern Ireland, culture has too often been deployed as a marker of difference and division, rather than as a shared means of expression or exploration. He was particularly critical of the narrow, inherited view of culture prevalent in Northern Ireland, in which cultural expressions are seen as sacrosanct, immutable, and exclusive. He argued for a conception of culture as responsive and living, shaped by its social context, influenced by migration, and vital to community flourishing. In his words, a living culture must be “open to new influences, shaping and being shaped by its environment.”

Turning to the Protestant community’s engagement with culture, Collins lamented a lack of confidence and visibility in its own cultural contributions—particularly in the arts. Quoting historian Connal Parr, he rejected the lazy assumption that working-class Protestant culture is limited to “the Orange Order and Rangers Football Club,” urging a broader recognition of the rich, though often overlooked, artistic and intellectual heritage in that community. The theme of arts underfunding was a recurring concern, with Collins decrying the long-term erosion of resources available to the Arts Council in Northern Ireland as reflective of a deeper misunderstanding—that the arts are a luxury rather than an essential dimension of civic life. He challenged this idea, stressing that everyone engages with culture, even if they don’t recognise it as such, and that cultural choice is universal—even when tastes differ.

Asserting that diminishing the place of culture in public life weakens both personal identity and social cohesion, Collins insisted that a greater understanding of each community’s cultural contributions is essential—not only to identity formation, but to reconciliation itself. He observed that lack of interest between the two jurisdictions, North and South, is as significant as the internal divides in the North, with little institutional drive to close the cultural gaps that remain.

He offered a clear call to action, suggesting that the Irish Association—and other agencies—could do more to support cultural exchange and shared appreciation. Specifically, he proposed:

1. Revisiting and updating the themes of the 1991 conference.
2. Embedding cultural studies within history and language curricula.

3. Leveraging broadcaster archives (BBC, RTÉ) to promote shared cultural narratives.
4. Encouraging the two Arts Councils to jointly showcase cross-border cultural output.
5. Developing shared programming and exhibitions across libraries, museums, and universities.
6. Promoting mutual understanding of Britishness and Irishness—outside the context of constitutional debate.
7. Convening key institutions like the British Irish Association and Cooperation Ireland in collaborative cultural initiatives.

From there, Collins transitioned to three key themes that structure cultural life: the arts, language, and sport. As an Irish speaker himself, he challenged both those who weaponise the language and those who reject it out of tribal reflex. On sport, Collins praised its capacity to unite, pointing out how easily it accommodates both the elite and the amateur, the partisan and the neutral. He contrasted this with the arts, which are too often seen as “not for us.” In sport, participation is near universal—something arts and culture sectors should aspire to mirror in accessibility and public engagement.

Collins closed with a powerful meditation on reconciliation. He described it as “radical, challenging, and dynamic”—not a slogan or a destination but a continuous process requiring real effort. He challenged both unionists and nationalists to take active steps toward mutual understanding—not just politically, but culturally. He argued that no constitutional vision is credible or worth pursuing if it cannot account for and protect both Irishness and Britishness. Echoing Louis MacNeice in his conclusion, Collins reminded the audience that we must press ahead—in building bridges, in revisiting inherited assumptions, and in promoting culture as a space of shared humanity.

Panel Two: Culture Practitioners’ perspectives

- **Tom Boland**, Chair, National Youth Orchestra
- **Ian Crozier**, CEO, Ulster Scots Agency
- **Sean O Coinn**, CEO, Forás na Gaeilge
- **Eimear O’Connor**, Director of Collections and Access, National Museum of Ireland
- **Chair:** Stephen Douds, Past President, The Irish Association

Douds invited the four panellists to “a curated conversation” rather than formal speeches. Each was asked first to react to Collins’ challenge: culture as a living, shared space rather than a badge of tribal difference.

Seán Ó Coinn – Foras na Gaeilge

Ó Coinn welcomed Collins’ plea to free the Irish language from the “contentious political arena.” Most of Foras’s work, he noted, lies far outside constitutional debate:

- Living community language. Irish remains a day-to-day tongue in Gaeltacht districts; safeguarding it should be viewed like protecting archaeological or natural heritage.
- Common inheritance. Whatever one's identity—Irish or British—people on the island share stewardship of the language “because nobody else will if we don't.”

He sketched current priorities: 28 community language centres, a statutory role in terminology and online lexicography, and a deliberate turn toward attitudes and opportunities to use Irish, not solely classroom ability.

Ian Crozier – Ulster-Scots Agency

Crozier welcomed Collins' call for nuance but cautioned against a return to “two-tribes” thinking. For Ulster-Scots communities the real task is:

- Moving beyond the 1990s framework. Identity in Ulster is shaped by English, Scots and Irish strands; reducing everything to Catholic/Protestant or British/Irish erases that texture and alienates Ulster-Scots people in Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal who are culturally Scots yet proudly Irish citizens.
- Inspiring, empowering, engaging. The Agency's strategy supports confidence-building (lambeg drumming, piping, local history) and qualification pathways so young people can see their folk culture recognised in schools and public life.

He argued that misunderstandings persist—“you have no culture” tropes—and that education and broadcasting need to treat Ulster-Scots traditions as legitimate, not curiosities.

Tom Boland – National Youth Orchestra of Ireland

Boland, chair of an all-island orchestra of 105 teenagers, offered a practical illustration of Collins' theme: “What begins as playing with a hundred strangers suddenly becomes playing as one—*as if we had been lifelong friends.*”

The NYOI's mission is musical excellence and relationship-building across the island. About 10 percent of current members come from Northern Ireland; many NI players also sit in the Ulster Youth Orchestra, creating natural circuits of collaboration. Performing north of the border, he conceded, has been sporadic, something the orchestra hopes to address as audiences develop.

Eimear O'Connor – National Museum of Ireland

O'Connor reflected on the South's “trauma response” to decades of violence—an instinct to avert the gaze from Northern affairs—and argued that genuine collaboration must be actively championed:

- Advocacy from below. Individuals who have forged north-south friendships must become vocal ambassadors for deeper institutional ties.

- Museums and archives. She echoed Collins’ suggestion that cultural institutions curate joint exhibitions and touring programmes to normalise shared heritage.

During questions several common themes converged:

1. Education as gateway to culture. Both Ó Coinn and Crozier stressed that schools still under-serve Irish-medium and Ulster-Scots traditions. Music can act as a portal: piping and flute-band tuition in working-class areas, or bilingual youth drama, build pride and visibility.
2. Events as encounters. Ó Coinn flagged two forthcoming showcases that will bring tens of thousands from across the island to Belfast—the Irish-language festival (2024) and *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* (2026)—opportunities to encounter Ulster-Scots fiddle traditions and the city’s broader cultural mix.
3. Bridging the empathy gap. Collins, invited back to comment, lamented “an intimacy that excludes affection” in southern attitudes to the North. Real reconciliation, he insisted, depends on ordinary curiosity—knowing neighbours’ art, sports, idioms—long before constitutional questions.

Summing Up - Analysts’ perspectives

Speakers:

- **Liam Hannaway**, Chair, N. Ireland Arts Council
- **Sam McBride**, Northern Ireland Editor, Belfast Telegraph
- **John D’Arcy**, National Director, Open University in Ireland
- **Anna Walsh**, Director, Tyrone Guthrie Centre, Annaghmakerrig.
- **Chair:** Dermot O’Doherty, Vice-President, The Irish Association

John D’Arcy said the day demonstrated “just how entangled the supposedly separate worlds of education and culture now are.” What really caught his ear was Tony Gallagher’s analysis of student mobility: the North’s “reluctant leavers”, the South’s “determined leavers”, and the way choice rather than tariffs alone drives young people. That fed directly into the Open University’s own experience: the University’s 6,500 Northern and 1,000 Southern students study together online without noticing borders.

Anna Walsh fixed on one word—*contest*. Language, land, even memory of the same field remain contested, she said, and scarcity thinking drives that. If Ireland cannot resolve such tensions on its own doorstep, “how can we inhabit the new world order that’s emerging all around us?” The Guthrie Centre’s ethos, she reminded everyone, is an act of generosity: that principle, not zero-sum arguments about whose culture “wins”, should guide the next phase.

Liam Hannaway drew specific attention to the amateur-drama movement which he claimed is already a single, island-wide cultural ecosystem. Thirty-seven festivals from Ballymoney to

West Cork compete together under the Amateur Drama Council; nationalist groups stage Stewart Parker, unionist groups stage Martin McDonagh, nobody blinks.

Sam McBride said two lines from Bob Collins' keynote lingered with him: "culture must be experienced to be appreciated" and "language policy needs reciprocity." He recalled Father Martin Magill's visit to a Twelfth parade a few years back arguing that the moment people walk into an 'other' space it becomes less alien. But Sam also delivered the first cold splash of the afternoon: when violence ended, Southern newspaper sales figures proved that interest in the North collapsed, not because editors were malicious but because "eWe can only pay attention to so many things," he said; news values are brutal.

Dermot invited John D'Arcy to sketch practical cooperation that *is* working. The OU, he noted, had 92,000 graduates since 1969—64 % from the North, 36 % from the South—"a truly borderless university before the term was fashionable." Its latest venture, created with Technological University of the Shannon and three Northern FE colleges, is a cross-border higher-level apprenticeship for "accounting technologists"—designed in a single year because the profession wanted mobility on both sides.

Anna took the baton to illustrate how generosity looks in practice: twenty artists at a time live and work at Annaghmakerrig, but the house is open to *every* cultural body on the island for planning retreats, north or south. She issued a standing invitation: "We may have to juggle dates, but the doors are open—use the place."

Liam then gave the raw numbers. Government arts spend per head: £5 in Northern Ireland, £25 in the Republic. "You don't have to be an economist to know where a young artist migrates," he said. Yet despite that gulf the two Arts Councils co-fund Poetry Ireland, the Tyrone Guthrie Centre, the Ireland Professor of Poetry and emerging touring projects under the Shared-Island Unit: new accessible studios at Annaghmakerrig, a poet's bothy at Seamus Heaney HomePlace in Bellaghy, and *Léil*, a contemporary-dance company opening this year's Dublin Dance Festival and supported in Belfast.

Sam re-entered on the role of media and turning to audience appetite he described how the *Sunday Independent* launched a Northern edition: circulation doubled during a cut-price trial then slid once the novelty wore off. The paper's Dublin desk rarely lifts a Northern story because data show readers won't click. It isn't conspiracy, Sam said, but cold analytics. "Padraig Yeates posted a cross-community success story last week; it was their lowest-ever page-view count." Yet within his own company the *Belfast Telegraph* and *Irish Independent* swap copy daily—organic exchange works when it is editorially compelling.

Topics and Themes Discussed

The foundational role of education and cultural exchange in fostering mutual understanding, enriching civic life, and sustaining peace in Strand 2 of Good Friday Agreement.

Summary / Key Findings

Issues Identified

Cultural Conclusions

- Culture-led cooperation is already reshaping attitudes—through youth orchestras, community language projects, pipe-band qualifications and cross-border festivals.
- Large gaps remain: under-resourced arts councils, patchy media coverage, curricular blind-spots and lingering stereotypes.
- The practitioners/panellists urged sustained investment, visible exchange and personal advocacy to turn cultural diversity from a marker of division into a reservoir of shared enrichment

Policy Implications

- The future of both jurisdictions on the island depends on serious investment in education.
- Cross-border cooperation in third-level education must be more than a “nice to have” initiative: it must be grounded in robust institutional frameworks and treated as a policy priority.
- North-South cooperation in education still tends to rely on individual champions or specific local circumstances: the overall picture is one of missed opportunities and under-resourced ambition to the disadvantage of young people’s opportunities across the island.
- Culture understood as both personal identity and a driver of social cohesion remains an essential part of reconciliation. The continued under-provision of resources in Northern Ireland for this area inhibits reconciliation and greater cultural exchange.
- Public service broadcasters on the island - BBC, RTÉ, TG4 – have the potential to play a bigger role in the promotion of shared cultural narratives

Conclusions – based on Brian Walker’s Concluding Reflection at this Seminar

Across four symposia we set ourselves the task: take the temperature of Strand 2 bodies 25 years after their creation. The conversations – sometimes celebratory, sometimes exasperated, always candid – show an architecture that is *sturdier than the headlines imply yet far short of its potential*.

- When North–South cooperation is allowed to become routine it delivers. From shared health registries to cross-border waterway corridors, from joint language agencies to all-island research projects, practitioners described fluent partnerships that now feel perfectly normal.
- But normality is also the danger. Successes are under-reported, budgets remain asymmetric, and in too many areas (further-education places, creative-industries funding, systematic data-sharing) the momentum depends on individual champions rather than settled policy.
- Politics still matters – and so does imagination. Formal institutions stall when Stormont stalls; yet our speakers reminded us that artists, educators, clinicians and entrepreneurs keep inventing new pathways regardless. Their ingenuity is the best insurance policy Strand 2 possesses.

The Irish Association’s job was to listen, curate and test the evidence. We end this series convinced that *the mechanics of cooperation work; the ambition often doesn’t*. Raising that ambition – matching southern investment in culture, matching northern ingenuity in lifelong learning, hard-wiring evaluation and publicity into every joint initiative – is the unfinished business the Agreement bequeaths to the next 25 years. The record assembled in this report is therefore not a valedictory scrapbook; it is a prompt-book for the next act.

Symposium #4 proceedings account:
 Alex Richardson, apprentice rapporteur,
 as edited by The Irish Association