

CONFERENCE

“Building the AI-Ready University: Tools, Systems, and Strategies for the Future”

Hosted by Queen's University Belfast

Monday, 19 and Tuesday 20 October 2026

Concept Note

The world is changing at an unprecedented pace, presenting both transformative opportunities and complex challenges such as the rise of digital technologies and robotics, multiple geopolitical crises, concerns around energy and the environment, and major shifts in the age-balance of populations. **AI tools are not only driving change: they offer powerful ways to navigate it.** Knowing what those tools can do and how to use them - and what their limitations and risks are - will be key skills in the coming years. Deloitte (2025) observes that **“AI is now a structural component in how work is organized,”** even at this relatively early stage of implementation across many organizations.

Universities have played a key role in the thinking behind contemporary AI systems, for example in research on neural networks, probability, and deep learning. They are places of training for computer scientists to develop such tools, and of reflection on the nature of their artificial “intelligence”. However, the development and characteristics of AI tools are only part of the story. It is just as important to identify how, where, and in what ways to implement them. McKinsey’s “State of AI in 2025” notes that 90% of respondents reported use of AI in their organization, that over 60% were experimenting with AI agents, but that two-thirds had not begun to scale such AI usage. These findings point to a **need for further education and training,** reflected in the development of programmes in Applied AI at a number of universities. At the same time, as organizations in their own right, universities face similar questions to other institutions about where and how to implement AI at scale.

In order to be “AI ready,” universities face a unique spectrum of opportunities and challenges, because they serve at once as (i) sites for training and research in AI development; (ii) locations for training people to use AI; (iii) places where researchers and students use AI but where they are evaluated on the intelligence of their own work; and (iv) organizations where AI may be implemented into workflow. This distinctive intersection of activities certainly invites careful ethical reflection, as witnessed by the number of universities that have now adopted policies on AI use. It likewise invites exploration of the practical use and deployment of AI tools across the full range of a universities’ activities from education and research to administration and organization.

How can universities harness AI to prepare students, researchers, and institutions for the future? How can they adapt their practices to leverage AI’s potential while understanding its limitations? This event will explore how to make our universities fully “AI ready”. Participants will bring diverse perspectives on what that involves, and on their own institutions’ experience of the challenges and opportunities ahead.

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Queen's University Belfast, 19 - 20 October 2026

WORKING PROGRAMME (as of 28 September 2026)

Overall Chair: Luciano SASO, Secretary-General, UNICA

Monday, 19 October

12:00-13:00	Registration & Sandwich Welcome lunch
13:00-13:30	Welcome addresses
	• Margaret TOPPING, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Global Engagement), Queen's University Belfast • Luciano SASO, Secretary-General, UNICA
	• Intro to the Seminar by Helen MCCARTHY, Chair of Nanomedicine in the School of Pharmacy at Queen's University Belfast and Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Academic Business Development, Queen's University Belfast (TBC)
13:30-15:00	Session 1 From Chalkboards to Chatbots: AI in Modern Higher Education <i>How should we train students to use AI tools in their work? Beyond the question of academic integrity, what practical knowledge and experience do students - and their teachers - need to have? How should universities prepare students for a world in which they are likely to encounter and need to use AI tools/agents? Is it likely that we will use AI widely as teaching or assessment tools?</i>
	Chair: Katharine ROBSON BROWN, Vice-President for Research, Innovation, and Impact, University College Dublin Panel discussion: • Manuela APARÍCIO, Pro-Rector for Pedagogical Innovation, NOVA University Lisbon • Philip HANNA, Dean of Education, Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences, Queen's University Belfast

	• Simona Vasilica OPREA, Professor, and Adela BARA, Professor, Department of Economic Informatics and Cybernetics, University of Economic Studies, Bucharest University of Economic Studies Q&A
15:00-15:30	Coffee break
15:30-17:00	Session 2 Beyond the Buzz: What AI Tools Really Offer Universities in 2026 <i>What AI tools really offer universities in 2026: There has been much talk about the potentially transformative effect of tools on organizations and institutions. At the same time, actual implementation to-date has been more patchy. What AI tools are available to universities in 2026 that could genuinely improve administrative processes and support student learning? What practical examples do we have from non-university organizations?</i>
	Chair: Andrew GINGER, Leader and Researcher in Higher Education Panel discussion • Anet LELLO, Head of AI, Tallinn University • Clare PHELAN, Membership and Project Coordinator, European University Association • Christine O'DEA, Reader & Programme Director, King's Business School, King's College London; Academic chair, Knowledge Hub on AI of Circle U • Katharine ROBSON BROWN, Vice-President for Research, Innovation, and Impact, University College Dublin • Stephen MCCABE, Executive Director at Momentum One Zero, Queen's University Belfast Q&A
17:00-18:00	Tour of innovative teaching facilities at QUB
18:30	Networking dinner

8:00-8:30 Welcome coffee

8:30-10:00 Session 3 | AI Accelerating Discovery in Academic Research

Accelerated discovery: machine learning in research: Increasingly, researchers across all disciplines from history to medical science are using machine-learning to enhance their research. What tools are involved, and what is the best practice in supporting researchers to use them?

Chair: Archie CLEMENTS, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Research and Enterprise, Queen's University Belfast

Panel discussion

- **Alistair NOLAN**, Senior Policy Analyst, OECD Directorate for Science, Technology and Innovation (online)
- **Kaan ORHAN**, Vice Rector and Dean of Research , Ankara University (online)
- **Daniela PETKOVA**, Policy Officer, AI in Science and Critical Technologies, DG Research and Innovation, European Commission (online)
- **Iain STYLES**, Professor Of Computer Science, Queen's University Belfast

Q&A

10:00-10:30 Coffee break

10:30-12:00 Session 4 | AI for Scholarly Productivity: Publication and Grant-Writing

LLM applications are demonstrably able to turn notes and evidence into draft articles and proposals. What is best practice in guiding researchers in the use of these tools? How can publishers and grant agencies protect against a deluge of productivity, or indeed "AI slop"?

Chair: Margaret TOPPING, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Global Engagement), Queen's University Belfast

Panel discussion

- **Archie CLEMENTS**, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Research and Enterprise, Queen's University Belfast
- **Richard GAULT**, Lecturer, Academic Convenor for the Vision and Language, School of Electronics, Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, Queen's University, Belfast



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- **Cristina HUIDIU**, Product Owner Digital Library Services, Wageningen University & Research
- **Zoltán Tibor LANTOS**, Head of the Department of Virtual Health Guide Methodology, Semmelweis University
- **Karen SIU TING**, Lecturer in Computational Biology, School of Biological Sciences, Queen's University Belfast

Q&A

12:00-12:45	Closing remarks
12:30-13:30	Farewell lunch
13:30	Social programme - Cultural walking tour in Belfast