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# Skellig Centre for Research & Innovation
# Learning Connections 2019 Conference

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**Introduction**

**Skellig Centre for Research & Innovation (Skellig CRI)** is a unique partnership between Kerry County Council, University College Cork and South Kerry Development Partnership focused on the regeneration of Cahersiveen on the Skellig Coast in County Kerry, Ireland. This town faces extensive and long-term challenges demographically, economically and socially. These challenges are impacting on the identity and sense of viability of the area.

The objective of Skellig CRI is to jointly establish a higher education satellite campus being an incubation hub for research, innovation and entrepreneurialism based in Cahersiveen, County Kerry. It is a space that fosters collaboration, community building, and a higher education research spirit. This Centre promotes local level collaboration with national and international research communities, emulating in a local context the impact of a third level institution on a rural community.

**Method**

**STAGE 1: The Question:** The main question asked by the community of the Cahersiveen area is how can the potential of the extraordinarily beautiful landscape of the area and The Wild Atlantic Way cultivate ecological and educational research, learning and tourism whilst generating future quality and sustainable employment, innovation and entrepreneurship. This question echoes the sentiments of the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA) and their 2014 report entitled *Energising Ireland's Rural Economy*. The community's views are in line with the vision of CEDRA in wanting to develop their rural area to create a "dynamic, adaptable and outward looking multi-sectoral economy"

It was established that in order to facilitate community wide interaction and the sharing of ideas, community-based workshops would be held which would signal the beginning of a process of design thinking and action research.

The Institute without Boundaries in the George Browne University in Toronto was identified as an ideal partner in facilitating the much needed collaboration in Cahersiveen and began with an initial workshop which led to a collective acknowledgement that the main focus of the local community was to create sustainable economic development that would enhance job creation in the Cahersiveen area.

Therefore, it was without question that a responsibility existed for both the local community and local government to work together in responding effectively, cohesively and strategically to the findings of the resulting report.

**Stage 2: Consultation with University College Cork:**

Kerry County Council engaged with relevant staff in the University, including the Deputy President & Registrar Professor John O'Halloran and identified staff therein who could meaningfully contribute to the region in County Kerry. This involved a number of presentations from key staff in the University, meetings of Kerry County Council senior staff and UCC senior staff, and finally a commitment from both institutions to establish a higher-level education outreach centre.

**Stage 3: Scoping Exercise:**

A member of staff was seconded from University College Cork to Kerry County Council to undertake a scoping exercise with the relevant community stakeholders, local authority and local higher education institutions. The objective was to assess the viability of establishing a university campus in Cahersiveen and identify the unique characteristics and opportunities in this place for the purposes of research and higher education programme delivery. This scoping exercise identified a range of opportunities spanning module delivery to programme delivery and to research in the area in the context of higher education, nationally and internationally.

**Stage 4: Establishment & Implementation:**

This final stage focused on the funding needs and involved the establishment of Skellig Centre for Research & Innovation (Fig.1) and implementation of its objectives. The Centre would have a planned schedule of programme offerings in place, with also the objective to expand these offerings nationally and internationally and therefore resource same, attracting people to the region and generating business for the local community, in a sustainable way.




**Figure 1: Skellig CRI logo**

**Findings**

Skellig CRI is a democratic body, dedicated to the sustainable and economic development of the region, collaborating with higher education institutions and other research bodies, promoting inclusion and equality in the community through its engagement and practice, which will be true to its environment, history and cultural heritage.

Central to the implementation of the project was its alignment to the Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) and the fact that local government is a key strategic partner in this community initiative lends itself perfectly to enriching the relationship of the Local Authority with the wider community.

Skellig CRI, operates primarily 'off season' through the Autumn, Winter and Spring, responding positively and appropriately to diversifying the economic activity to deal with issues of seasonality, low incomes and the challenges faced in peripheral areas. Economic development is critical to this project, as is enhancing the quality of life for the community, and this project is ultimately about community building, social justice and equality. We are responding to a community who has been experiencing extensive and long term social and economic problems directly connected to rural depopulation. The Centre is responding with relevant education and training in targeting skills deficits unique to the region, for example, working with the Gaeltacht area in promoting the Irish language in delivering a programme through the Irish language in the area and is now a member of the implementation committee tasked in delivering the Úibh Ráthach Taskforce plan.

The Skellig CRI centre is furthermore strengthening this idea of 'Communities of Place' through projects with the local secondary school; Coláiste na Sceilge and through research initiatives such as the role of the Men's Shed initiative as a space of social inclusion. New programmes have been designed in conjunction with the local community such as the Certificate in Practice Social Farming. Decision making in the types of relevant local educational programmes address employment in the context of rural regeneration, as well as the social infrastructure and community development and to date the Centre has engaged with over 500 participants across its many offerings.

**Conclusion**

The goal is to enhance the socio-economic fabric of the community which would not only attract new people but would build morale and improve quality of life for the local community. What is unique is in how this particular project promotes its broad reach, which we are continuously developing and strategically investigating how to bring new people to the area which will have a positive knock-on effect on local business and trade.

This project acts as a powerful example of being a driver of change, through the opportunities that effective partnership between University, Community Development Company and Local Government can provide for a rural community by engaging with and in community building.