Investing in Skills for SME Competitiveness:

An EU-Ireland Dialogue for the 2026 Presidency

On 22 October 2026, ACCA convened European and Irish policymakers, business leaders, educators and accounting professionals for the high-level conference, Investing in Skills for SME Competitiveness: An EU-Ireland Dialogue for the 2026 Presidency, in Dublin. At a time when businesses are navigating labour shortages, technological disruption and growing sustainability demands, the discussion centred on a critical question: how can Europe develop the skills and talent needed to strengthen competitiveness and support long-term growth?

The conference underscored the increasingly strategic role of accountants and Small and Medium-sized accounting Practices (SMPs), which are helping Small and Medium-Sized Entreprises (SMEs) navigate regulatory change, embrace digital transformation, adopt AI and respond to evolving sustainability requirements.

Accountants Matter

A highlight of the conference was the keynote address delivered by **Michael McGrath**, European Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection. The Commissioner emphasised that “accountants matter", underlining that **investment in the profession's skills and expertise delivers benefits far beyond the profession itself**, strengthening the capacity of SMEs to grow, innovate and adapt in an increasingly complex business environment. Drawing on his own experience as a qualified accountant, he recognised the vital role accountants play as trusted advisers to businesses and highlighted ACCA's contribution to developing the skills needed to support Europe's competitiveness.

Europe's Skills Challenge: A Competitiveness Imperative

Across Europe, the accounting profession is facing growing talent shortages. According to ACCA's SMP Talent Management Toolkit, SMPs are competing to attract and retain digitally skilled, analytically minded professionals, while demographic pressures and changing career expectations make recruitment increasingly challenging. At the same time, AI, automation and evolving regulations are reshaping the profession. Accountants are expected to combine technical expertise with digital, data, sustainability and advisory skills to meet changing client needs. **Without a strong pipeline of future-ready accounting professionals, SMEs in Europe will be less equipped to navigate the digital and green transitions**, **access finance**, manage risk and pursue growth opportunities in an increasingly complex business environment.

Insights from the EU-Ireland Competitiveness Dialogue

1. Make Skills a Strategic Priority in the Next EU Long-Term Budget

The next EU long-term budget for 2028-2034 should recognise skills as a strategic investment in Europe's competitiveness. Increased funding for upskilling, reskilling and professional education, particularly in areas linked to digitalisation, AI and sustainability would be welcome. Long-term investment is essential to help SMEs adapt to economic change and ensure accounting professionals have the expertise needed to support business transformation.

2. Simplify Skills Funding and Improve SME Access

Too many SMEs and SMPs are unable to benefit from existing support because funding programmes are complex and difficult to navigate. Simplification of application procedures and the reduction of administrative burdens could improve awareness of available opportunities. Easier access to funding will enable more businesses and accounting practices to invest in workforce development and future-proof their operations.

3. Build a European Culture of Lifelong Learning

A culture of lifelong learning through greater investment in modular training, micro-credentials, apprenticeships and flexible learning opportunities that can be accessed throughout a person's career is welcome. Skills policies should encourage employers to embed learning into workplace culture and make continuous professional development more accessible for SMEs and smaller professional firms.

4. Recognise SMPs as Empowers of SME Competitiveness

SMPs have become critical partners for SMEs seeking to navigate digitalisation, sustainability, AI adoption and access to finance. SMPs must explicitly be included in future skills, innovation and SME support initiatives. Investing in the capabilities of accountants creates a multiplier effect, helping millions of SMEs access the expertise they need to grow and compete.

5. Strengthen Skills Portability and Labour Mobility Across Europe

EU initiatives, such as the Fair Labour Mobility Package, that aim to improve the recognition and portability of skills and qualifications across Member States, seek to make it easier for professionals to move where their expertise is most needed. A more integrated European labour market will help address workforce shortages, support business growth and enhance opportunities for accounting professionals across the Single Market and beyond.

Future considerations

Discussions throughout the conference highlighted the importance of placing skills and talent development at the centre of Europe's competitiveness agenda. Participants emphasised the **need for continued investment in lifelong learning, more accessible routes to skills development for SMEs, support for future-focused accounting and business skills**, and recognition of the role that accountants and SMPs play in helping SMEs innovate, adapt and grow. Together, these priorities were seen as important to strengthening business resilience and supporting long-term economic growth.

About ACCA

ACCA (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants) is a global professional accountancy body whose purpose is to advance standards in accountancy and finance worldwide.

Through our globally recognised qualification, our thought-leadership content, and our education resources, we support a diverse community of over 266,100 accounting and finance professionals and 546,500 future members in 179 countries, including over 70,000 members and future members in the European Union.

Our members work in a wide range of sectors and industries, including within governments, regulatory bodies, and international development organisations. Many of our members are part of small practices, and with support from ACCA, play a crucial role in supporting and advocating for SMEs.

ACCA undertakes research on a wide variety of topics impacting the profession and the society we serve, providing thought leadership to policy makers and business leaders. In addition to our professional qualifications and training, our research supports our efforts to build capacity around the world to ensure equitable and inclusive development of sustainable economies. Founded in 1904 as a force for public good, we uphold the highest professional and ethical values. For more information: www.accaglobal.com.

For any comments or questions about this brief, please contact:
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CONFERENCE PROGRAMME
Investing in Skills for SME Competitiveness: An EU-Ireland Dialogue for the 2026 Presidency
22 October 2026

09:45 – 09:52	Introduction & welcome: **Stephen O'Flaherty** FCCA, former ACCA Ireland Chair & Partner, BDO Ireland
09:52 – 10:00	Opening Address: **Stephen Noonan**, Head of ACCA Ireland
10:00 – 10:15	Keynote Address: **Michael McGrath**, European Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection
10:15 – 11:05	**Panel 1 – Online – Europe's Skills Challenge: Building a Workforce for SME Competitiveness** ▪ **Leo Kilroy**, First Secretary, Education and Youth, Permanent Representation of Ireland to the EU ▪ **Araceli Mora**, President, European Accounting Association (EAA) ▪ **Salvador Marin**, President, European Federation of Accountants and Auditors for SMEs (EFAA) ▪ **Lucie McAnea**, Policy Advisor, Social Affairs & Training Policy, SMEunited Moderator: **Fiona Murray**, Head of EU Public Affairs, ACCA
11:30 – 12:20	**Panel 2 – In Person – Ireland's Leadership Opportunity: Driving Skills Solutions for the EU Presidency** ▪ **Michael Dwyer**, Policy and Public Affairs Manager, Skillnet Ireland ▪ **Anthony Glennon** FCCA, Partner, Friel Stafford ▪ **Ian Barrett** FCCA, Partner, BDO Dublin ▪ **Orla Collins** FCCA, Deputy MD Aberdeen Ireland, ACCA Past President ▪ **Prof. Alan Lynch** FCCA, Faculty Lecturer, Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology Moderator: **Caitriona Allis**, Head of Europe, ACCA