

 World-Class  
Belfast

Professor Gillian Armstrong  
Ulster University



# Where there's a brilliant foundation, there's a way

Professor Gillian Armstrong's strength lies in her ability to listen deeply and respond with an absolute laser focus. It's no surprise then that she's taken on the role of Director of Ulster University Business School's Business Engagement Unit.

Conveniently for us, that means she's also perfectly placed to talk about how the private sector can help to build a World Class Belfast. More importantly, she can tell you how many of their partners are already doing so.

We begin.

## Do you think we're currently in an era of opportunity or has the moment passed?

"Between Brexit and COVID, it's been a very changeable and difficult environment. But I think we have different components of what's happening in Northern Ireland at the moment, and there's a brilliant foundation there too. There's something really interesting happening in recent years and we're seeing that a lot of firms that come into Northern Ireland tend to stay and grow.

"There's some really impactful case studies of firms we've worked with, where over five years Belfast went from being almost a satellite service centre to being a major force in those global firms. When I talk to firms about the talent that comes out of the Northern Ireland schools and the education system, they are still very good."

## Why do you think that that's the case?

"The Business School does a lot of work around customising programmes and learning solutions - maybe it's a degree programme that really suits the knowledge, skills and behaviours that an employer needs. A great example of this is Deloitte's growth in Belfast and the Deloitte BrightStart Degree Apprenticeship programme in Business Technology. This programme was co-created between the Business School and Deloitte and is reported to be a key component of their growth for Belfast.

"Just recently, we launched a new Degree Apprenticeship opportunity with PwC in Leading on Customer Operations which will support the continued expansion of PwC Operate in Belfast. Apprenticeships are providing a dynamic new pipeline of talent to these firms in a short time frame and the apprenticeship provision is expanding every year.

"So it's all joined up in Northern Ireland, and that's the scale. Everyone knows everybody else here. Many US firms coming in have said that this is really unusual - that they would never get such access to the university sector, never mind a university that's willing to change its programmes and respond quickly.

“I think all parties play a really effective role in that. But for firms coming in and growing it has real potential, because it means that you're getting the very best talent, and you're shaping their education in a range of ways with us. Businesses are also supporting programmes to retain their talent and the Business School is a key partner in that. And that's really the way that the Business Engagement Unit was set up, to try and build on that. If we get that right, we grow jobs and retain the best skills.”

### **What industries are you inspired by right now, and that will be important in the coming years? What should we keep our eye on?**

“I'm probably very biased because of those we work very closely with, but for us at the moment I think the services sector – in the broadest sense – is what we should be looking at, be that financial services and fintech, technology and professional services, business and shared services. That all seems to be in growth.

“At the Business School that's something we've focused on for a few years now and increasingly with our colleagues within the School of Computing, and as a result we've gained some valuable expertise in it. But there's great synergy in these sectors, with much more sharing of practices. I think that will continue to happen, and those are the sectors I would certainly want to support and see growth in.

“At the moment there are some major multi-million pound office developments happening in the city, between PwC's move to Merchant Square and Deloitte to Bedford Square, which between them will house more than 3,000 staff. Such significant growth planned is tremendous and offers new opportunities for collaboration and innovation.

“But that's not to say we're exclusively in those sectors. SMEs and start-ups make a significant economic and social contribution to the Northern Ireland economy and we are also focused on deepening our ties with these indigenous companies to help them realise their growth potential. We have been doing that for many years through practical advice, tailored support, research and schemes such as Innovation Vouchers and Knowledge Transfer Partnerships which have had great impact. For Northern Ireland to have a strong economic recovery, the SME and entrepreneurship landscape is an area of huge importance.

“We also have a strong Business School presence in the Coleraine and Magee campuses. So although we have our enhanced Belfast campus coming on board this autumn, we're very active on all the campuses to ensure high levels of business and community engagement across the region. Having said that, the level of change, expansion and innovation tends to be led by Belfast City.”

### **Is there a buzz in the city around the new campus?**

“It's funny, since lockdown is starting to relax, and we've had a bit more movement in recent weeks, I've started to do a bit of walking around the campus in the city on the weekends. I think it really will be interesting – it's great to have the two universities in the city. I think for us to have that physical presence in the city centre will be a great reminder to the wider public of Ulster University and the sort of work that we're doing. The Business School prides itself on being very approachable to businesses, with an open door that's here to help. Being in the city will allow us deepen our relationships with industry and increase collaborations.

“On the other hand, there’s still a bit to do about raising awareness. Parents, young people and Schools are starting to realise that you might get a better experience at the current time in Northern Ireland, and you might get better access to key employers, and you might have a better chance of getting a well-paid graduate job here rather than going somewhere else in the UK. I don’t think we have enough awareness about the new jobs and the growth in the areas and what’s happening in Belfast, and that’s something we’re trying to change.”

## **Do you think the two universities are at the heart of transforming the city centre experience as well?**

“Our institutions have huge potential to transform what we do in the city. It could change where people will live now and even after they have graduated and have had families. I’ve been looking at some of the new student accommodation and it looks excellent. And, I love the fact that the university is in the heart of the community. I think that the architect’s original idea was that you shouldn’t know where the university starts and the city begins, that should all merge into one. What a perfect metaphor for how we are part of this city.

“We have huge potential there, but we need to remember that it’s building on what we already do. We already play a civic role in Northern Ireland and that sort of leadership role in a city like Belfast gives you a great opportunity, just by being in that central location, and deepening relationships and partnerships with some of those stakeholders.

“Ulster University’s new innovative Belfast campus demonstrates a commitment to Belfast that stretches back many decades. It will be a catalyst for the city, delivering a creative, innovative, transformative and vibrant environment to inspire staff, students, local communities and wider society. The City Centre location will connect local people, businesses, academics and students to each other.”

## **Does the community understand the role you do/can play?**

“We are keen to progress activities around widening access and participation. One potential challenge at the moment in the city is that you have an increasing competition for skills and talent. We should not just rely on the amazing talent coming out of Northern Ireland schools, because increasingly we will need to consider other options to feed that supply chain. So as a region, we really do need to be looking at other sources of talent, for example older individuals, those who want to retrain and upskill, and look at some areas that are hard to crack. With the right upskilling programmes and support initiatives, the opportunities are there.

“We’ve done a little bit of work recently around those that were impacted by COVID. The Department for the Economy ran some initiatives around reskilling and upskilling and these were funded programmes. Those have been really interesting. People at all ages from all sectors have taken a leap of faith and University staff have been very committed to supporting such programmes. And actually, those initiatives can work really well. But we’re going to have to look really creatively at different pipelines, so that we’re not just focusing on the school leaver to meet the level of growth that the region wants longer term.

“We need to be proactive and innovative, and always looking at new models to help employers with that and work in partnership.”

## Is it perhaps countercultural in Northern Ireland to celebrate achievements in an individualistic way, as is sometimes the case with entrepreneurial culture?

“That’s such a good question. This is an important part of the culture here, and we’ll take time to change that. Our US partners, Babson College (a private Business School with a central focus on entrepreneurial education) report that the more entrepreneurial somebody is and their experience of business failure – it’s seen as a badge of honour. It’s something that tends to be respected and valued, but in Northern Ireland it’s very different. We don’t always view risk taking as a good thing, and it can sometimes hold us back. It could take a while to change this, and I think a lot of it also has to do with confidence.

“As a region we are quite restrained, and we’re not particularly good at shouting about what we’re good at. And I know for a lot of investors or FDI clients that come in, they’re always very surprised when they get here, and they hear the case studies of what is happening here – the “joined up” approach between the development agency, government and the education providers. I think that might be a cultural issue, that we tend to get on with the work rather than talking about it.”

## Is there anyone getting it right? Do you see a city or institution which has a model you’d love to emulate?

“Northern Ireland is getting it right with upskilling and reskilling more than most, with the increasing availability of apprenticeships and innovative skills training models; in addition to the provision of relevant academic programmes. There’s a lot of parties involved in that and it’s having a positive impact on the city and the region generally. But I think that there’s a time for new conversations, particularly around hard to reach communities and experienced individuals who have the potential to develop a range of new and enhanced skills. And there’s always been a lot of work done by the University to ensure community and political engagement.

“But to me, the Business School in particular plays an essential role as a bridge or a broker to try and bring all the relevant parties together and demonstrate a leadership role.

“There is a lot that could go really well, the potential is huge. But at the same time it’s a big job to get a lot of parties joined up and the relevant infrastructure in place – but there’s a real will there to do it from all stakeholders.”

It’s unclear if Gillian means a collective will or her personal drive. Either way, it would be unwise to bet against it happening with Professor Armstrong at the head of the Business Engagement Unit.





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