

The Higher Education Colleges Association HECA/Dublin Business School DBS/Submission on the Development of a new National Skills Strategy

Theme 1: Developing relevant skills

Relevant Skills

1. What do you consider to be the relevant skills for development in the period to 2025?

The sustainable growth and prosperity of the national economy as we continue to show significant recovery from the national and global economic crisis which was experienced over the last number of years will be dependent upon developing relevant skills.

A clear focus on the emerging growth sectors of the economy such as ICT, Financial Services, Retail, Hospitality and Tourism and the re-emerging Construction industry. In some of these sectors there are global skills shortages so we will be competing with other countries for labour talent. For example, the areas of Computer Science/Engineering, Business Intelligence and analytics, digital marketing and analytics are all areas which require development.

2. Do we have the right mix of initiatives to deliver the future needs of enterprise, the economy and society?

This is a difficult question to answer. There have been a lot of successful initiatives taken over the last number of years. For example the Springboard Plus national initiative has been instrumental in addressing the high levels of unemployment which the country experienced.

The critical aspect of the overall initiative is to establish sustainability of the effort with clear goals and objectives to be achieved as part of the plan. This will require the integration of short term measures into the medium term plan with regular review and monitoring of goals and objectives achievement.

From the Dublin Business School and Higher Education Colleges Association perspective our experience in retraining, upskilling, converting and developing new skills for learners has indicated that a range of initiatives need to be developed as part of the strategy which focus on the different elements, timelines, sectors learners/participants, employers and stakeholders to whose interests and requirements it is trying to address.

For example initiatives are required for:

1. Conversion of talent and people to emerging economic growth sectors
2. Continued training and updating of the existing workforce.
3. Development and delivery of training and skills programmes for the 'yet to emerge' talent sector.

The above requires immediate as well as sustainable medium and long term investment in resources if it is to lead to successful outcomes.

3. How can employers and education and training providers work more effectively to identify, and address skills needs and ensure the "work readiness" of learners?

There are a number of responses that could be made to this question. Obviously more engagement and consultation in the short, medium and longer term aspects of the strategy from all stakeholders is desirable.

The management of the “tension” between stakeholders which exists for example, between the terms training and skills on the one hand and education on the other is also a critical area which requires ongoing engagement.

From a Dublin Business School and Higher Education Colleges Association perspective, we have taken an industry led and informed approach to the initiatives we have undertaken while ensuring that all higher education academic standards are being maintained in the process.

Measurement and standards

What indicators should be used to measure progress in the new?

Skills Strategy (e.g. NFQ levels, Employer surveys, other)?

A combination of standards should be utilised in this area. NFQ is and will continue to be a consistent and good indicator. However it alone must not be the only benchmark utilised.

Measurement of “work readiness” will involve measurement of employer satisfaction to future initiatives which are undertaken.

Learner satisfaction measurement would also be relevant in this regard especially on a pre and post-employment basis.

Life Long Learning

How can we motivate more people to participate in life long learning? What are the attitudinal and structural barriers to learning that need to be overcome?

The critical issues for potential participants will revolve around time and finance. To motivate participants in lifelong learning, employees may have to be incentivised to participate by for example monetary means such as state sponsored or subsidised programmes and the provision of training and education programmes which are provided on a flexible learning basis by the use of classroom, online and blended mechanisms of learning.

At national level, the Government may need to set aside further funding to provide an additional resource for the National Training Fund.

What actions can be taken by employers to support and encourage increased participation in lifelong learning?

Employers could participate in a number of ways as follows:

- Make increased contributions to the development of a National Training Fund.
- Incentivise their employees by allocating a number of training days under the area of continuing professional development (CPD) as part of their employment contract.
- Work with higher education and training professionals to provide credit or recognition for all employer led training in the workplace.
- What actions can be taken by education & training providers to support and encourage increased participation in lifelong learning?

Higher education and training providers need to work with all stakeholders to design and deliver programmes which address the requirements of the skills strategy.

- What actions can be taken by the State to support and encourage increased participation in lifelong learning?

At national level, the Government could provide finance incentives or partially fund the cost of lifelong learning initiatives. The Government might also consider fiscal incentives packages for employees and employers to encourage participation.

How can we give recognition to prior learning including skills acquired in work, home or community settings?

The recognition of prior learning including skills is a complex area. The more formal the learning the easier the recognition of it is through an evidence based learning outcome approach.

More work would be required to address experiential learning and training. Perhaps a mechanism could be established to award this category of learning credit which aligns to the qualifications framework.

What barriers need to be addressed in order to stimulate investment in training by Irish enterprises?

The critical barriers which need to be addressed to stimulate increased participation might include consideration of:

- Lack of stakeholder participation by employer or their representative bodies in the process.
- Resistance by the employer group to invest in this area.
- Perception by employers that they will not receive value added outcomes if they do invest.

What barriers need to be addressed to encourage disabled people to engage with education and training?

Improvement in infrastructure, facilities and modes of learning and related supports would be required to encourage increased participation in education and training by the disabled community.

Real world experience for learners

How can the range of work place experiences be expanded, particularly in SMEs, to increase opportunities for learners to gain practical experience as part of their education and training programme?

For SME's investment in time and the monetary cost of engagement in work placement initiatives will be the critical areas to be addressed. An SME package of incentives may have to be created to encourage greater participation by this sector.

Skills infrastructure

Is the structure and architecture for the education and training system fit for purpose?

Overall the answer would be yes with a proviso that the positioning of skills initiatives needs to be clarified and possibly redefined within the further and higher education categories. As previously mentioned, the tension which exists between higher education and industry requirements in

relation to skills needs to be addressed if Ireland is to maintain a global competitive position.

Is there a need for greater collaboration, particularly in the post-secondary sector to support learners to access learning opportunities and to meet the skills needs of employers?

Yes.

Also, lessons learned or best practice global models of excellence could be utilised in relation to looking at solutions to the above two questions.

How can we encourage the provision of a range of programme offerings by education and training providers that are relevant to learners and enterprise needs?

Encourage more engagement and communication between all relevant parties by perhaps establishing regional forums or regional centre of excellence models.

Incentivise training and education providers by creating a competitive environment for initiatives. Showcase collaborative successful models of best practice.

What can institutions do to ensure their policies and practices are inclusive and open to people with disabilities and other underrepresented groups?

The restrictions in this area require investment in:

1. Facilities and Learning supports
2. Learning Pathways and solutions which allow progression into mainstream programmes.

There are divergent views on the issue of over-education and the scale of skills mismatches in the economy. It is clear that enterprise requires skills at all levels of the NFQ. We would welcome views on this issue and the implications that it has for the skills system and in particular the balance of provision between further education and training and higher education.

As previously mentioned the positioning and meaning of skills within the further education and higher education categories needs to be addressed

How can education and training providers and employers work together more effectively to respond to the results of the Employer Survey to achieve greater satisfaction amongst employers in future with the skills of graduates?

This was a very good initiative but the time parameters for completion were tight.

Use lessons learned and ongoing data capture and evidence as the driving force for more effective responses which should be frequently measured.

Perhaps a simple “You Said, We Did” approach should be taken.

Theme 2: Activating Skills Supply

What changes can be made to the approach to training and skills development to improve the employment prospects of people who are long-term unemployed?

There is a need to firstly engage with the long term unemployed to restore their confidence and dignity. Initiatives such as Learning to Learn or Fundamental Skills Back to work programmes should be a prerequisite to technical upskilling or retraining.

Employers need to be further incentivised to recruit from this group.

Mentor programmes need to be integrated into the above initiatives.

How can the education and training system better engage with unemployed people with low levels of educational attainment?

See above.

Also, use the skills and knowledge of organisations such as the Irish National Organisation for the Unemployed who should be given more resources to engage with the training and education sector.

How can we encourage people with disabilities and other under-represented groups to return to education or to retrain for employment?

To motivate people with disabilities and other underrepresented groups to engage, you need to provide them with the confidence that:

- Appropriate facilities and learning supports will be in place.
- Financial support or reward will be at an appropriate level.
- Employers will engage and employ individuals from these groups.

What measures can be taken to improve the progression of young people from education and training – as well as those not in education or training, including early school leavers – to employment?

Establish clear pathways to employment for each group which will involve buy in from employers. Look at pre and post-employment initiatives in this regard. Publicise successes and tell the individual success stories.

What can we do to facilitate and support the return of skilled Irish migrants in the coming years?

A comprehensive package of initiatives should be looked at in the areas of:

- Financial Compensation/Incentive packages
- Tax incentives
- Housing and related environmental/infrastructural incentives.

Would have to be considered in this regard. Also have a fast track system of reintegration of migrants returning and avoid bureaucratic process if possible. And finally perhaps provide a long term stay incentive to those returning which crystallises at a defined future point or over a future period of time.

How can we encourage older people to reskill & retrain and continue to participate in the labour market? What skills will they require?

Finally carry out research through the various mechanisms and agencies, community groups etc to establish interest and the types of activities older people would love to engage in.

As a precursor to determining what skills this group require, establish what skills they currently have paying special attention to the life long learning knowledge they will have already accumulated.

Establish what areas of the economy employers would be interested in providing employment for the older generation and whether they would be interested in job sharing initiatives etc.

How best can this reskilling and retraining be facilitated?

Utilising the data and evidence obtained above and other interventions such as employment opportunity presentations to the various elements within this group to establish what returning or upskilling activities would be appropriate.

Theme 3: Effective Use of Skills

What changes could be made to ensure that future skills needs of the economy can be anticipated and communicated most effectively to education and training providers, employers, students and those already in employment?

The sharing of market intelligence between industry and Government agencies would create a powerful platform for planning and execution of future strategies to meet the emerging growth areas of the economy.

How can all stakeholders work more effectively to increase awareness of skills requirements and career opportunities among both school leavers and those already in the labour market?

A targeted campaign to communicate where the growth areas are to the general population needs to be undertaken at national and local levels. I would recommend that use be made of individual personal success stories. For example, in the IC T sector these stories have yet to be told.

How can the new network of Regional Skills Fora best contribute to the development of the skills base in each region?

The Regional Skills Fora should supplement the National Strategy and as stated above publish and 'localise' the success stories.

How can we ensure a better understanding of the skills that are available, for instance in creating a common understanding of language proficiency?

Create personalised skills portfolio files for employees. For example in addition to the further education and higher education qualifications that an individual possesses, highlight skills that they have developed in a more formal evidenced based manner.

How can we promote a more effective use of skills at work? In particular, how can managers be supported to identify effective work and organisational practices that make the best use of skills available to them?

Create a regional/national awards scheme which recognises best practice by managers. Introduce Train the Trainer style initiatives for managers to develop their leadership skills in this area.

How can this best be promoted among SMEs?

Initiatives could be supported for SME's by the Regional Skills Fora.

How can workplace learning be used more effectively to link training provision more closely to employer needs?

Real time information is required from employers on where the organisational skills gaps exist. Feedback mechanisms perhaps through the Regional Fora and other similar means need to be put in place to provide responses and training solutions.

What additional measures are required to support entrepreneurial education and entrepreneurship skills in Ireland?

Teach more of the basic skills in this area in the primary, secondary, further education and higher education sectors.

How can SMEs be better supported and encouraged to engage with training?

As per previous questions on this topic a range of measures are required including:

- Make the training easy to access and relevant for the SME sector.
- Provide financial and tax incentives
- Regionalise the training provision.

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