Response to the National Skills Strategy Consultation Process on behalf of South East Regional Skills Forum

December 1st 2015
Introduction

This document is submitted on behalf of the South East Regional Skills Forum. The forum was established in May 2015. The purpose of the forum is to foster better engagement between Department of Education and Skills providers (Education and Training Boards, Institutes of Technology, Universities, Skillnets) employers and other regional stakeholders in building the skills of their regions. The forum will provide a framework to enhance and support individual education and training providers and groups of providers in establishing and maintaining connections and relationships with employers. The result of this should be a more cohesive education led structure for employers and the Further Education Training and Higher Education system to work together in building the skills of the South East region by facilitating input to the planning of programmes to be delivered by the education and training system.

The work of the South East Regional Skills Forum is intrinsically linked to the Action Plan for Jobs for the region. The forum currently comprises an Education Providers Group and a Steering Group. An employers group will be added at a later date. The Forum has met a number of times across the region.

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<tr>
<td>27th April</td>
<td>IT Carlow</td>
<td>22nd June</td>
<td>WIT</td>
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<td>(6th May)</td>
<td>IBEC meeting in Kilkenny</td>
<td>26th August</td>
<td>Tipperary ETB, Clonmel</td>
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<td>20th May</td>
<td>Kilkenny</td>
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In November 2015 the Forum applied for, and was awarded funding to commence implementation of the project plan that was developed from the meetings above.

This submission has been developed by the Forum to provide a regional response to the consultation. Members of the forum may also make individual submissions.

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Patricia Mulcahy

Dr Patricia Mulcahy
President,
Institute of Technology Carlow
• THEME 1: Developing relevant skills

• Relevant Skills:

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

• To maintain the recovery and build a sustainable economy Ireland’s skills strategy must develop creative, innovative and enterprise focused people.
• Competencies such as problem solving ability, communication skills, time management, initiative and adaptability are just a few that employers now require for each individual they hire.
• Developing individuals with the combination of technical competence and industry know-how needed by organisations
• The technical skills required are specific to sectors and roles and the level of entry of the employee

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

• What is meant by initiatives? If programmes are the focus there is a need to constantly review and develop new programmes, for instance the new apprenticeship system.

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?

• The system must be responsive. Flexibility for providers to deliver the education and training needed by learners and employers is essential.
• The development of the regional skills forum will be a key input to this process
• Skills shortages are emerging now in certain occupations, both skilled and lesser skilled. Long term planning is needed to address where there is a systemic shortage in the labour market, eg in developing ICT professionals. Short term planning may address other areas where reskilling / upskilling can be done within a shorter timeframe.
• In the UK a programme of ‘Work Ready’ training courses were designed by a private sector training company to help graduates get jobs as quickly as possible and be successful in their early days of employment. Developed in collaboration with universities and employer associations, these courses enhance skills developed at university by focusing on areas such as commercial awareness, negotiation, influential communication, business etiquette and self-confidence. Elements of these courses could be developed by the regional skills groups and delivered nationally with support from DES and employers

• Measurement & targets:

1. What indicators should be used to measure progress in the new Skills Strategy (e.g. NFQ levels, Employer surveys, other)?
• Indicators to measure progress will obviously depend on the KPIs published in the strategy. The merging into QQI of the other bodies has been a positive step. The NFQ is gaining currency among external stakeholders. This is increasing the demand from employers and learners alike for programmes on the NFQ and also from special purpose to major awards. The ‘value’ of accredited programmes is increasing. Employer surveys are useful for measuring output & satisfaction with output but not so useful for estimating demand.

• Life Long Learning:

1. 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?

• Adult motives for engaging in lifelong learning are diverse. A common finding is the perceived benefit (intrinsic or extrinsic) to the learner and the satisfaction obtained through learning. Research shows that it is adults with a higher level of participation in education who are most like to engage in lifelong learning programmes. Therefore there is a close link between initial education and lifelong learning.

• The OECD report from 2004 found many reasons for non-participation in adult education and training: among others, lack of information, time, motivation, incentives, funding.

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

• Research is needed on the main challenges and obstacles to employer engagement in lifelong learning.

• Co-funding of education and training provided external to organisations. The level of input by SMEs into the training and development of their employees is lower in Ireland than other OECD countries.

• Provide SMEs with financial incentives for training, especially by measures that reduce training costs e.g. via subsidies and tax incentives, targeted on small firms and existing employees.

3. What actions can be taken by education & training providers to support and encourage increased participation in lifelong learning?

• Continued promotion of the NFQ & entry / re-entry points

• Increased flexibility, integrating formal learning with workplace learning processes

• Promotion of pathways into FET/ HE

• Outreach delivery of programmes clearly oriented towards local and regional labour markets
4. What actions can be taken by the State to support and encourage increased participation in lifelong learning?

- Restoration of funding to postgraduate learners
- Integration of non-formal learning into entry pathways to FET / HE

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

- National standard for RPL and an agreed process for assessment of same across FET / HE

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

- Research needs to be undertaken to determine what are the barriers

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

- Research consistently reports that the main barriers to be addressed are access and funding. Access in this context means transport as well as entry points

- **Real world experiences for learners:**

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

   - A system of traineeships could be introduced to integrate learners into the workplace. Various submissions to the review of the Irish apprenticeship system made the point that there needs to be greater integration of the education system and the workplace.

- **Skills infrastructure:**

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

   - The merging into QQI of the other bodies has been a positive step.
   - Qualifications must be recognised and relevant and obtained from a provider who has a rigorous quality assurance process

2. 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. The role envisaged for the regional skills fora will go some way to meeting the need for improved communication.

3. 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?

• The national skills system will depend on an evidence based approach to programme development to ensure the development of relevant skills.

4. 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?

• By designing an evidence based national skills strategy.

5. What can institutions do to ensure their policies and practices are inclusive and open to people with disabilities and other under-represented groups?

• Throughout the HE and FET sector programmes are open to applicants irrespective of their ability, ethnic origin, or socio economic background. Our student services provide assistance to those considering applying for programmes and assistance to learners when they enter those programmes.

6. 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.

• The government commitment to developing a highly educated workforce does emphasise a particular type of teaching and learning. Much has been written about the need to develop the apprenticeship system along the lines of the German system yet the German system is suffering from low demand from German learners. The strong labour market in Germany is incentivising German students to continue their education into the university system rather than the apprenticeship system.
• Greater employer input into formulating occupational standards that can be addressed through focused learning outcomes would assist the DES providers in developing appropriate programmes and levels of qualification.

7. 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?

• Responsiveness is key. The system must be capable of allowing education / training providers to adapt to changing demand to ensure that the right skills are
acquired by the right people, at the right time, in the right place, and through the right mode.

- Greater employer input into formulating occupational standards that can be addressed through focused learning outcomes would assist the DES providers in developing appropriate programmes and levels of qualification

**THEME 2: Activating skills supply**

1. 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?

- ‘Pathways to Work 2015’ offers some guidance on this point. One of the key targets was to “make a range of SOLAS, ETB Further Education and Training and Higher Education Programmes available to meet the needs of the long term unemployed”. While much of this report is welcomed there is work to be done in better integrating the work of Intreo into the FET / HE providers. The Regional Skills Forum has a role to play in this. Active participation by Intreo in the fora nationally would assist in better targeting of activation places.

- Greater employer input into formulating occupational standards that can be addressed through focused learning outcomes would assist the DES providers in developing appropriate programmes and levels of qualification

- DES education and training providers should be incentivised to provide such programmes including assistance with qualification / programme design and off-campus / flexible course delivery to individual companies and business networks.

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

- The introduction of the national framework of qualifications has provided a framework where learners can progress through the system. However the framework must be supported by a variety of entry and re-entry points that are accessible to learners with clear and understandable entry requirements. This may require reducing some barriers to entry and increasing the recognition of work acquired learning and the transferability of skills.

- There is still a significant proportion of the long term unemployed with lower secondary or less education. Re-engaging this cohort presents particular challenges. UK research segments this group of NEET into three subgroups; Open to learning, Sustained NEET & Undecided and NEET. Each subgroup needs a different approach, eg ‘Open to Learning’ NEET as the name suggests can be re-engaged relatively easily whereas ‘Sustained’ NEET were more likely to choose a work-based route from unemployment.

3. How can we encourage people with disabilities and other under-represented groups to return to education or to retrain for employment?
4. 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?

- Key here is a reduction in barriers to entry.
- Clear, relevant and targeted information on entry and re-entry pathways into FET / HE
- Personalised supports including financial support and career guidance
- Increased entry level provision including foundation learning programmes

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

- Information on opportunities, particularly around career progression, quality of life is an important issue
- A customised version of Springboard to encourage reskilling / upskilling of returning migrants could be developed
- Data regarding motivations for returning and the perceived obstacles returnees anticipate facing is required in order to prepare migrants for their return to Ireland.
- Other countries have dedicated government departments targeting overseas workers. These departments assist with job placement / search, skills training, and provides a database to employers of skilled migrants.

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

- Reduction in barriers to entry.
- Clear, relevant and targeted information on entry and re-entry pathways into FET / HE
- Personalised supports including financial support and career guidance
- Increased entry level provision including foundation learning programmes
- The technical skills required are specific to sectors and roles and the level of entry of the employee

7. How best can this reskilling and retraining be facilitated?

- There are a number of issues here;
  - The proportion of ‘older’ people who participate in training schemes is low. Therefore barriers to entry need addressing
  - US research suggests that employers rate older workers loyalty and commitment highly but rate their ability to learn new skills as low. This
would suggest a bias in hiring. The various Irish government papers also make reference to these points. This bias needs to be addressed

- Training must be offered close to the person’s home. More local programmes aimed at preparing older adults for retraining could be developed with pathways to FET / HE developed through Regional Skills Forum
- Programmes must take account of a person’s formal and informal learning and be designed to provide flexibility in entry, progression, and re-entry to the system.

**THEME 3: Developing relevant skills**

1. 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?

   - Foster better engagement between DES providers (ETBs, Institutes of Technology, Universities, Skillnets) employers and other regional stakeholders in building the skills of their regions
   - Inter-agency and partner relations will provide synergistic opportunities to assist providers develop programmes and introduce them to wider networks. This will strengthen the sustainability & competitiveness of new & existing pathway
   - Improve communication between DES providers and employers. This process should be improved through the Regional Skills Forum
   - Focus on building more robust labour market intelligence and analysis of employer needs including improved access to regional data extracted from national reports
   - Prioritise the strengthening and outreach activities of the education and training providers of the region, including strengthened industry liaison functions generally and develop structured programmes of awareness raising of the capabilities and assets available to enterprises
   - Provide a framework to enhance and support individual education and training providers and groups of providers in establishing and maintaining connections and relationships with employers;

2. 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?

   - This process should be improved through the Regional Skills Forum
   - Inter-agency and partner relations will provide synergistic opportunities to assist providers develop programmes and introduce them to wider networks. This will strengthen the sustainability & competitiveness of new & existing pathway
• Provide a framework to enhance and support individual education and training providers and groups of providers in establishing and maintaining connections and relationships with employers;
• Focus on building more robust labour market intelligence and analysis of employer needs.

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

• Foster better engagement between DES providers (ETBs, Institutes of Technology, Universities, Skillnets) employers and other regional stakeholders in building the skills of their regions;
• The RSF will provide a cohesive education led structure for employers and FET and HE system to work together in building the skills of the South East region by facilitating input to the planning of programmes to be delivered by the education and training system.
• There is a need for more robust labour market intelligence and analysis and interrogation of employer needs. A recommendation to national coordinators on the need to better model the occupational structure of the region was made. Data is usually aggregated at a national level and doesn’t facilitate regional analysis and regional responses. There is a difficulty with a lack of data concerning the specific nature of skills shortages. For instance ICT professionals, high tech manufacturing etc. The media are converging the notion of skills shortages with vacancies.
• Inter-agency and partner relations will provide synergistic opportunities to assist providers develop programmes and introduce them to wider networks. This will strengthen the sustainability & competitiveness of new & existing pathway
• Prioritise the strengthening and outreach activities of the education and training providers of the region, including strengthened industry liaison functions generally and develop structured programmes of awareness raising of the capabilities and assets available to enterprises
• Provide a framework to enhance and support individual education and training providers and groups of providers in establishing and maintaining connections and relationships with employers
• In addition see A Strategic Approach to Employer Engagement (QQI, 2014)

4. 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?
Managers may require training in recognising and developing skills, technical and transferable. Managers must be encouraged to recognise the value of skills, apart from those in immediate daily use. Unless they are encouraged to do this it will not happen. It is not enough to invest in training. For organisations to reap the benefit of skills investment they must enable staff to use their skills.

An industry led pilot programme to support the upskilling of managers within SMEs. Such a programme may include a methodology for establishing best practice by driving productivity through skills development and increasing job satisfaction among employees. Focus areas may include
- Performance management and development
- Employee engagement

5. How can this best be promoted among SMEs?
- CEOs / MDs must champion the concept
- Awareness campaigns through industry associations, IBEC, ISME, Local Authorities / Local Enterprise Offices, Chambers and government departments particularly DJEI are necessary
- Organisations engaged in facilitating training should be encouraged to identify promising initiatives and exemplary practices and these could be published as case study examples.

6. How can workplace learning be used more effectively to link training provision more closely to employer needs?
- The quality and quality of workplace learning must match the needs of the employer and the future workplace
- The rapid pace of change in technology means frequent changes in skills requirements for most jobs. This places a growing importance on workplace learning. There is a considerable body of research to support the argument that employers who invest heavily in learning programmes experience great productivity returns (see eg Columbo, 2014; Lopes, 2013: Bailey 2007). Again this needs to be championed
- See eg A Strategic Approach to Employer Engagement (QQI, 2014)

7. What additional measures are required to support entrepreneurial education and entrepreneurship skills in Ireland?
- The work of the Campus Entrepreneurship Enterprise Network (CEEN) could be supported and rolled out nationally
- A Strategic Approach to Employer Engagement (QQI, 2014) offers draft Entrepreneurship Education guidelines. These are currently being piloted in a number of institutions and it is proposed that revised guidelines will be available for implementation across the HE sector in 2016.

8. How can SMEs be better supported and encouraged to engage with training?
Challenge is that there is not a ‘one size fits all solution’. Must be a recognition that small firms are not a scaled down version of large firms and have different needs and also different resources available to them.

Also there has to be a willingness on the part of SMEs to engage with training. The German system is much mentioned in the media in relation to the development of ‘job ready’ graduates. The German system places an expense on companies that Irish companies currently feel is covered by the levy on payroll. This means that the German system is much more expensive depending on the nature of the apprenticeship. The strategy needs to address how these new approaches to education and training will be funded.

Provide SMEs with financial incentives for training, especially by measures that reduce training costs e.g. via subsidies and tax incentives, targeted on small firms and existing employees.