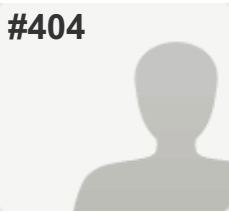


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PAGE 1: Please complete this consultation paper in respect of your area of interest and/or expertise

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Q4: 1(a) What improvements can be made within existing resources

Ireland enjoys a strong reputation worldwide for its education system and the quality of its graduates. The capacity of our education and training systems to meet the needs of enterprise is a critical component of competitiveness. Notwithstanding significant progress over the last twenty years, we continue to experience skill shortages in key areas and our rates of youth and long term unemployment and levels of educational attainment pose major policy challenges despite the rapidly reducing unemployment rate which is currently 7.9%.

The NRF concurs with the view of the National Competitiveness Council in setting out 'Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2025' that "The availability of talent will increasingly be fundamental differentiator in Ireland's value proposition for attracting and maintaining inward investment and export market growth. From an enterprise perspective, talent is critical to productivity and succeeding in both locally traded and global markets, and in ensuring that innovative indigenous enterprises have the capacity to scale and create employment."

A recurring concern from employers is that the education system is not sufficiently adapt at keeping pace with the world of work. Whilst estimates differ there are some predictions that over 60% of children will work in jobs that currently do not exist. What workers expect from their jobs and careers is changing, as is the way adults choose to learn and to work. Our education service offering must boost play its part as an engine for growth and employment opportunities in matching the expectations of employers and workers in equal measure and help to establish Ireland's reputation as the best small country in the world to work in. This demands an investment in the knowledge, skills and innovation capacity of our nation.

The NRF is well positioned to provide regular feedback on the Irish jobs market to inform public policy and initiatives. Our capacity to promote new opportunities and labour market progression as a means of addressing under employment working in cooperation with education providers, employers and workers will be especially relevant as the full implications of the changing nature of work impact on the Irish labour market.

Q5: 1(b) What improvements can be made through new provision

Our education and skills policy must seek to future proof the needs of enterprise by building important capabilities in STEM, ICT skills and in our proficiency in foreign languages and in promoting a culture of entrepreneurship. In our third level institution's we need a greater commitment and system of support to ensure that undergraduates complete their studies and are skilled for a lifelong experience of innovation and change in the workplace. Similarly at fourth level, a significant improvement of our performance in research and the output of graduates with relevant doctoral qualifications and postdoctoral experience is very much needed.

Q6: 2. Comment on work currently being undertaken by the Department in your area of interest and/or expertise. (What are we doing well, what could we do better)?

The “Enterprise 2025” strategy sets out a clear objective that Ireland should be renowned for its talent, for its highly skilled and adaptive people, equipped with higher order capabilities needed in the 21st century workplace, and for its openness to continuous learning.

In meeting supply issues upskilling has tended to emerge from investment in in-work training and/or through skills immigration. Despite these inputs, the talent market is impacted by low levels of educational attainment and too often those emerging from second and third level can still be poorly equipped for the world of work. This is often reflected to the NRF by employers expressing concerns about candidates having insufficient competencies in terms of flexibility, capacity for innovation and judgment. Indeed the National Employers Survey (May 2015, see www.education.ie) confirmed that the level of employer satisfaction with graduates entrepreneurial skills and business proficiency skills was low at less than 45%.

The powerful forces driving change such as demographics, globalisation and technology – are also impacting on higher education institutions, the business community and government policy. The means of creating wealth has evolved that increasingly now depends upon innovative networks, business clusters, the creation and application of new knowledge and the availability of world class talent. Much has been discussed over the last ten years in terms of the implications of becoming a “knowledge-based economy” but it is essential that in this continuing journey that we have a business and regulatory environment in which enterprise can flourish and in which higher education institutes become more responsive to the needs of enterprise (both employers and workers) and learners. Issues such as globalization, the growth in internationally traded services, the growing importance of knowledge and of infrastructure are key issues in creating the demand for higher skills in the “knowledge economy”.

Today, innovation both in the creation of new products and services have become more important than conventional assets. Innovation requires new knowledge (through research), human capital (through education), infrastructure and new state supportive policies such as in the areas of intellectual property and tax, all of which depend both on public and private investment and upon the capacity of higher education institutes, and on corporate research and development. Innovation 2020, the new strategy for science and technology, research and innovation, contains commitments to increasing public and private investment in research to reach 2.5% of GNP by 2020. This is a key target under the Europe 2020 10 year growth strategy. As part of the work of Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) the commitment to developing 12 world-leading research centres working with 200 industry players is recognised which include critical areas of importance in Pharma; Big Data; Medical Devices and Nanotechnology.

The evolution of the Departments policies and strategy in the period ahead should increasingly recognise the importance of encouraging innovation and a higher level of collaboration by all of our Universities and Institutes of Technology with business to produce world-class research which is capable of commercialisation. This will require a new wave and focus on sector-wide collaboration that can draw on the collective strengths of all of our third level institutions. This will also require the investment in talent streams to match industry demand for post graduate researchers, and career development opportunities for post-doctoral researchers.

Despite considerable progress in the last ten years, there is still a perception that the complex of our third level institutions can be intimidating for business and for SME’s in particular. The OECD, in its Economic Review of Ireland 2015, noted that future innovation requires a greater contribution by our domestic firms and that Government can strengthen the indigenous sector by rebalancing its innovation policies towards more support for collaboration or partnering with public research performers. Where such perceptions exist there is an obligation on institutions to review their programme of engagement with the business community including with SMEs such that any obstacles to deepening the relationship between business and those bodies are removed.

Q7: 3. Are there opportunities (e.g. new areas of work) which the Department should consider when developing the 2016 - 2018 strategy which would advance the achievement of our mission, vision and objectives across the continuum of education and skills?

N/A

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Q8: 4. How should success on achieving our strategies be measured.

N/A

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Q9: 5. Comment on any issues relating to the continuum of education and skills, in addition to your particular area of interest and/or expertise

An area of concern which needs much greater attention is the need for greater recognition of prior learning. This has received very little attention in managing progression and levels of qualification and indeed in areas of continuing professional development.

Below third level, the dropout rate from second level remains too high and we need to increase the proportion of students graduating from second level and facilitate increased access to higher education for a greater number of our students.

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Q10: 6. Any other observations that you would suggest the Department should consider in the formulation of our strategy for education and skills 2016 - 2018

A major focus of policy needs to be to encourage and to build capacity for continuous development and learning by young people and adult learners throughout their career.

The experience of the national 'One Step Up' initiative, facilitated by the National Framework of Qualifications some years ago was mixed but was a welcome development which sought to engage with the Irish workforce at all levels of attainment. It paid significant attention to those with low levels of qualification and in lower level occupations, who were least likely to receive sufficient access to learning opportunities. As the economy recovers and the labour market continues to tighten, the NRF believes that a similar initiative suitably framed for current labour market requirements should be considered so as to ensure that those with lower skills levels are not left behind and are equipped to progress through the labour market and can make an active contribution over their working lifetime.

In view of the fact that people are today living longer and with changes to the state pensions age, increasingly older people will be seeking out work opportunities that can provide an income into later years. It is important that the level of public funding for continuing education of adult employees reflect this change circumstance. Accordingly it is the view of the NRF that any increase in public funding for the training of older workers should focus on helping the most vulnerable groups and avoid subsidising general higher education.

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Q11: 1(a) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

Respondent skipped this question

Q12: 1(b) How should progress on Prioritising Early Years be measured?

Respondent skipped this question

Q13: 1(c) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

Respondent skipped this question

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Q14: 2(a) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

N/A

Q15: 2(b) How should progress on Tackling Disadvantaged be measured?

N/A

Q16: 2(c) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

N/A

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Q17: 3(a) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

N/A

Q18: 3(b) How should progress on Diversity and Choice for Parents be measured?

N/A

Q19: 3(c) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

N/A

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Q20: 4(a) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

The NRF welcomes the commitments in the Programme for Government in this regard and in particular the commitment to nurture different ambitions through new subject choices and greater engagement with enterprise on future skills needs. The introduction of new technology to bring remote learning into classrooms as part of the Digital Strategy is welcome. Further commitments are made in respect of additional professional development for teachers and this in the view of the NRF should include a focus on building a culture of entrepreneurship and on building softer skills to ensure that students are more prepared for the world of work. Our views in this regard are more fully set out in our responses to Section 5 below on promoting creativity and entrepreneurial capacity in students.

Q21: 4(b) How should progress on Promoting Excellence and Innovation in Schools be measured?

Respondent skipped this question

Q22: 4(c) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

Respondent skipped this question

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Q23: 5(a) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

The focus on this issue in the Programme for Government is very welcome. The majority of future work opportunities for the children of today will come from entrepreneurs who have yet to establish their businesses. The importance of entrepreneurship and building an appreciation of the world of work has long since been emphasised by business and is increasingly recognised by the state in the evolution of its enterprise strategies. The Government's National Policy Statement on Entrepreneurship in Ireland (2014) has ambitious targets which includes doubling the jobs impact of start-ups in over five years. This focus on entrepreneurship also needs to be a central feature of our education and national skills strategy to encourage young entrepreneurs in particular and guide innovation. There is a marked absence of both capability and guidance at primary level to enable entrepreneurship amongst children in making their later career choices. The legitimate focus on entrepreneurship and educating children from an early age about the world of work and the opportunities that lie within needs to feature from an early age both in curricula development and in building the capacity of the teaching professional through training to deliver these skills and which encourage a multi disciplinary approach. This also involves the need for greater collaboration at professional level between enterprise, the teaching and career guidance professionals, schools, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. The NRF is uniquely positioned to provide trend analysis from its membership about future skills requirements, gaps and opportunities.

The continued implementation of the Junior Cycle reform programme is important and has the capacity to bring about important changes to teaching methods and experiences for students that will be more suited to preparing them for the world of work. The NRF notes and welcomes the commitment to accelerate the Digital and ICT agenda in schools by including a coding course for the Junior Cycle and introducing ICT/Computer Science as a Leaving Certificate subject.

The commitment in the Programme for Government to the utilisation of the transition year "to prepare young people with key skills before they make the transition to higher education or work" is noted. The NRF also believes that considerable value can be gained from a post leaving certificate but pre pre-university course which could involve periods of service in the voluntary sector where participants would have the opportunity to develop their social and other skills which will be much needed in future years and on which they can build through their future participation in higher education.

Similarly the NRF believes there is value in having a wider range of modular options with credits and a degree of choice to take time out to do internships or engage in community and voluntary work which can be credited as part of their third level programme. Ultimately the focus should be on building a culture of entrepreneurship throughout our education system such that graduates are capable of entering the workplace with a level of real world and problem resolution based learning to enable them to take maximum advantage of the work opportunities that lie ahead. This should be a key focus of the proposal to "benchmark entrepreneurial activity in higher education and work with the Higher Education Authority to ensure an ambitious and implementable plan to identify and address skills gaps, ICT and STEM needs."

Q24: 5(b) How should progress on Promoting Creativity and Entrepreneurial Capacity in Students be measured?

This should be amongst the range of issues which should be assessed and measured through school inspection reports and schools self evaluation.

Q25: 5(c) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

Respondent skipped this question

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Q26: 6(a) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

N/A

Q27: 6(b) How should progress on Making Better use of Educational Assets within Communities be measured?

N/A

Q28: 6(c) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

N/A

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Q29: 7(a) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

N/A

Q30: 7(b) How should progress on Special Needs Education be measured?

N/A

Q31: 7(c) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

N/A

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Q32: 8(a) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

There has been much comment recently about the relevance and success of the national internship programme and it is noted that a formal review of the programme has been initiated by the Department of Social Protection. The programme has in the opinion of the NRF been a significant success since its inception in 2011 with some 46,000 placements. Whilst some abuses of the scheme have been reported these have been very much at the margins. In terms of the review of the scheme, the NRF would encourage the adoption of a scheme which is more targeted at those who are at risk of long term unemployed, the long term unemployed and the youth unemployed and should allow for employers to make an additional payment to the social welfare payments applicable under any revised scheme.

In respect of education, the NRF welcomes the proposal to support an increase the number of flexible courses and opportunities available and the introduction of mid-degree “sandwich year” courses, whereby students spend their third year of university working in industry. There is to be a substantial increase in the numbers of apprenticeships and traineeships by 2020 working with the Apprenticeship Council, Solas, the Education and Training Boards, and industry.

It is recognised that both business and academia have a shared ambition that as an outcome to our education cycle that society will have the benefit of a highly educated and engaged individual who can contribute to society and the workplace. It is increasingly important that the views of business are sought when it comes to development of curricula and provision of relevant programmes at third level. The NRF is happy to play its part in this regard and looks forward to a productive relationship with the Department in this regard.

As a reminder of the current difficulties being faced, the recent ‘Vacancy Overview’ by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs for 2015 drawing on the Recruitment Agency Survey showed the following vacancies as difficult to fill (DTF):

Occupations (DTF)

- Professional (70%)
- Associate professional (11%)
- Sales and customer services (5%)
- Skilled trades (3%)

Sectors (DTF)

- Information and communications (40%)
 - Industry (28%)
 - Health and social care (12%)
-

Q33: 8(b) How should progress on Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future be measured?

In meeting the skills needs of the future, the Programme for Government promises a step change in the capacity to educate, develop, deploy and retain talent, setting targets for critical skill provision and competitive funding models will encourage their delivery in partnership with enterprise. As a county we tend to invest in businesses over people and skills. However the NRF is concerned at the absence of any strategic NRF involvement in the roll out of the National Skills Strategy (NSS) including participation or connection with the National Skills Council to oversee research, forecasting and prioritisation of skills needs in the economy.

The NRF welcomes the commitment to further the development of the Regional Skills Fora to support increased employer engagement with education and training providers to meet the skills needs of each region. The NRF believes strongly that a one for all approach cannot succeed in shaping our approach to skills development. The NRF utilising its own regional profile wishes to explore with the Department the contribution it can make to the work of the Regional Skills Fora in designing and shaping regional clusters to encourage skills development suited to local conditions and prospective opportunities for each region. Ireland faces considerable challenges in attracting and retaining those who are highly skilled but it is increasingly the case that faced with a growing level of optimism in the domestic economy, the continuing recovery in international markets and the continuing decline in unemployment rates that state funding should increasingly be focussed on the training of those in employment.

The recruitment industry operates at the nexus of the talent management relationship between those organisations that require talent to support and to build competitive advantage and those who provide that talent. All matters of employment and public policy that impact on the effective performance of that relationship in terms of the functioning of the labour market, the regulatory environment for the industry, and supporting competitiveness, growth and employment generally are amongst those matters of concern to the NRF in promoting the common interests of its constituent agency members in Ireland and is therefore an important potential resource of knowledge and insight for the Department.

Q34: 8(c) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

Amongst the key skills areas for sectors that need to be addressed by education and training providers are broadly as follows:

- ICT is a significant skills requirement across all sectors. The ICT Skills Action Plan 2014-2018 should be revisited to reflect the need to address the increase requirements and projected demand for ICT Skills;
- Biopharma. The growing importance of the BioPharma sector is evidenced by the scale of inward investment from the sector over recent years and which has a growing requirement for skilled recruits. Existing skills gaps, particularly in the area of biologics manufacturing needs to be urgently addressed;
- Design. Ireland has a growing reputation for our capacity to leverage design as a driver of innovation. The extent of our future skill requirements and availability in this important area should be assessed and to explore ways to bring the disciplines of STEM and creative design closer together.

Vocational Education & Apprenticeship

Our systems and structures of vocational education and the contribution of professional education has been under appreciated by education policy over the last twenty years. There are some signs that this is changing and the National Skills Strategy commits to 50,000 Apprenticeship and Traineeship places being supported over the period to 2020. The Programme for Government commits to doubling the number of apprenticeships to provide a total of 31,000 places by 2020 through an annual call for proposals and targeting over 100 apprenticeship schemes. There is also a commitment to develop a mechanism to recognise a person's practical work experience and expertise in order to enable them to take on an apprentice which the NRF welcomes. In delivering on these commitments, the NRF recommends that an implementation plan with KPI's should be prepared and published by the Apprenticeship Council with annual statements of performance.

The NRF understand that proposals before the Apprenticeship Council are for apprenticeships across up to 27 different trades. The progression towards this new model of apprenticeship will need to be accelerated if the Governments ambitious targets are to be met. Apprenticeship is defined as a programme of structured education and training which combines and alternates learning in the work place with learning in an education or training centre, (a dual system i.e. a blended combination of on-the-job employer-based training and off-the-job training) whose completion prepares the person for a specific occupation and leads to an award, recognised under the NFQ from Level 5 to Level 10.

Apprenticeships are now to meet various criteria and must:

- be industry led, be 2 years minimum duration & with at least 50% on the job training;
- provide learning that alternates between the workplace and an educational / training institute.

The NRF is also aware that there are a diverse range of supported training under the National Training Fund which is generally work based in its focus such as Momentum, Springboard, Traineeships etc. To improve service utilisation and coordination the capacity for these to be brought together and managed through a central portal should be examined.

The further fall in unemployment to 7.9% is welcome along with the annual employment growth of 2.4% in Q1, 2016 or by 46,900. The NRF recognises that significant challenges remain in terms of tackling underemployment issues along with short term unemployment in particular. The targeting of measures under Pathways to Work for those long term unemployed will require high levels of engagement between the state support services, trainers and employers at regional level to maximise the opportunities for those who remain long term unemployed. Finally, as stated earlier in this submission the NRF through its extensive regional presence is willing to explore with the Department how it can support this effort and to how the NRF can contribute to the important work of the Regional Skills Fora.