



National Skills Council

Extraordinary meeting of the National Skills Council

8th June 2022 – 2.00 to 4.00pm

The meeting was co-chaired by, Mr. Bob Savage, Chair NSC, Vice President, Regional CIO for EMEA and Cork Site Leader, Dell Technologies and Mr. Andrew Bell, Head of OECD Skills Strategies.

National Skills Council Members present:

Mr Bob Savage, Dell; Mr. Jim Breslin, DFHERIS; Mr. William Beausang, DFHERIS; Prof. Philip Nolan, SFI; Dr. Brendan McCormack, THEA; Prof. David FitzPatrick, IUA; Mr. Pdraig Walsh, QQI; Mr. Liam Ryan, SAP Labs Ireland; Mr. Andrew Brownlee, SOLAS; Ms Jasmina Behan, DPER

Apologies from National Skills Council Members:

Mr. Dalton Tattan, DoE; Mr. John McKeon, DSP; Mr. Paul Healy, Skillnet Ireland; Ms. Patricia Roberts, No.1 Pery Square Hotel & Spa, Pery Square; Mr. Alan Wall, HEA; Mr. Martin Shanahan, IDA; Mr. Leo Clancy, EI; Mr. Paddy Lavelle, ETBI, Dr. Orlaigh Quinn, DETE; Mr. Martin McVicar, Combilift; Mr. Peter Mulrine, P. Mulrine & Sons.

OECD Skills Strategies Team

Mr. Andrew Bell, Head of OECD Skills Strategies; Mr. Bart Staats, Project Leader OECD Skills Strategies; Ms. Laura Reznikova, Policy Analyst, OECD Skills Strategies; Tamar Friedman Wilson, Policy Analyst, OECD Skills Strategies; Heather Carey, Policy Analyst, OECD Skills Strategies, Sofia Gomez-Sanchez, OECD Skills Strategies

Regional Skills Fora Chairs present:

Mr. John McKenna, RSF Midlands; Mr. Laurence Conroy, RSF South East;

Regional Skills Fora Managers present

Ms. Natasha Kinsella, RSF Dublin; Ms. Siobhan Keogh, RSF Mid East; Mr. Joe Leddin, RSF, Mid West; Mr. John Costello, RSF Midlands; Mr. Ray Murphy, RSF North East; Ms. Hilary McPartland, RSF North West; Mr. Edmond Connolly, RSF South East; Dr. Siobhan Bradley, RSF, South West; Ms. Denise Rocks, RSF, West.

Cross Departmental Project Team:

Ms. Nicki O'Connor, DFHERIS; Tanya Kenny, DFHERIS; Ms. Nora Condon, SLMRU.

Others in attendance:

Ms. Vivienne Patterson, HEA; Ms. Breda O' Tool, IDA; Mr. Paul Keating, DoE; Mr. James Maher, DFHERIS; Eimear Hayes, DSP; Donal Leahy, EI; David Hegarty, DETE.

Secretariat:

Ms. Stephanie O'Brien, DFHERIS; Ms. Emma Kinsella, DFHERIS, Ms. Karolina Murphy, DFHERIS; Mr. Noel Martin, DFHERIS.

1. Welcome from the NSC Chairperson (including approval of minutes)

The Chair welcomed Council members, the OECD Team – including Mr. Andrew Bell, Head of OECD Skills Strategies, members of the Cross Departmental Project Team and the Regional Skills Fora Managers and Chairs. He noted that this Extraordinary Meeting of the National Skills Council (the second of three through 2022) is the main anchor of the Assessment Phase of the Skills Strategy Project.

Minutes of meeting of 7th of March, 2022 were approved.

2. Welcome from the Secretary General of DFHERIS, Mr. Jim Breslin.

Secretary General thanked everyone for their attendance at the NSC meeting, which is marking the midpoint of the OECD's Skills Strategy Project for Ireland.

He noted that although our skills system has served us well to date, OECD are here to help us further improve our capability and seize the opportunities of the future.

3. Opening presentation by Mr. Andrew Bell, Head of OECD Skills Strategies

Mr. Andrew Bell, co-chair, welcomed all participants to the Extraordinary Meeting of the NSC. He thanked all of the stakeholders for ongoing collaboration that resulted in providing OECD with invaluable insights into the skills ecosystem in Ireland. Those contributions have been critical in assisting the OECD in developing the list of potential opportunities for Ireland under each key priority area on which the skills project focuses.

He added that OECD are looking forward to the upcoming workshops and group discussions to see what further insights they produce, which will feed into the next stage of the project, the Recommendations Phase.

He gave a presentation outlining the project and its progress made to date during the Assessment Phase:

The main objectives of the OECD Skills Strategy project for Ireland are to:

1. Review how the National Skills Strategy 2025 might need to be adapted to ensure that it is still fit for purpose, and
2. Identify policy priorities for Ireland, by reviewing the most important challenges and opportunities for Ireland's skills system.

Priority areas on which the OECD Skills Strategy Project will concentrate:

1. Securing balance in skills through a responsive and diversified supply of skills
2. Fostering greater participation in lifelong learning in and outside of the workplace
3. Strengthening the governance across a joined up skills ecosystem
4. Leveraging skills to drive innovation and strengthen the performance of firms.

Some key points to note:

- Skills need to remain at the top of government's agenda to future proof the society and economy as a whole. It is a challenge as skills have to compete for top spot with other pressing needs and it takes time and investment for skills benefits to become evident.
- Complexity of Irish skills system requires a joined up, whole-of-government approach in order to strengthen the system further.
- The following megatrends have ongoing impact on skills needs in Ireland and will continue into the future:
 - Automation and technology which can drive productivity but also create the need for constant upskilling and reskilling.
 - Skills requirements in the labour market are changing rapidly with a demand for high-level skills continuously growing, with a slightly more rapid growth in Ireland expected than across the rest of EU.
 - Digital and green transitions are the most impactful for Ireland.
 - Growing aging population- with people remaining in workforce longer creating the need to continuously upskill and reskill throughout the lifecycle. Digital upskilling contributes to sustainability because it ensures continuity of workforce for society.
- Pressing need has been identified to develop transversal, digital and green skills across the population to let everyone have the right skills to succeed in the rapidly changing, interconnected, digital world facing green transition.
- Many indigenous firms (SMEs in particular) do not have the level of skills needed to succeed in the future. Companies who initiate upskilling will reap the economic benefits.
- The prominent need to utilise the skills more effectively in and outside the workplace was identified. Skills in Ireland are not utilised optimally with many adults not having the right skills for their current jobs (with both over and under qualification, as well as field of studies mismatches observed). Skills mismatches highlight the necessity of step-change in lifelong learning (LLL) approach.

As the focus of the 2nd ENSC meeting was on Priority Area 2 “Fostering greater participation in lifelong learning in and outside of the workplace ” the following questions were also considered by members:

1. Where is it most important for Ireland to invest resources in career and LLL guidance?
2. How could Ireland best strengthen a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to provide and promote relevant LLL opportunities for all?
3. What would be most effective in addressing the obstacles frequently cited by individuals (family reasons and schedule constraints) wanting to participate in LLL?
4. What should be Ireland’s top policy priority to engage enterprises in promoting effective lifelong learning among their employees?
5. What can be done to promote continuous improvement of managerial skills in the workplace?

4. Key points from the discussion

Following the presentation and polled questions on Priority Area 2, discussion ensued with the following key points to note across all areas:

- Interlinkages across all priority areas have been identified that present the opportunities of interchangeability under each area. Merging of opportunities will happen in the next phase of the project: Recommendations Phase.
- Skills are innovation and shouldn’t be viewed separately. Innovation is multifaceted in Irish economy. Ireland does well in places but innovation is something that could be improved in enterprise. While the multinational sector does well, the SME sector and micro company sector lags behind. Many indigenous firms do not view innovation as priority and do not have strategies centred on innovation.
- It should be taken into consideration that there may be a timing issue in terms of where Ireland is in its progression regarding maximising the impact of research talent through innovation in the workforce. It may take time for high research output to translate into innovation in firms. However, we need to accelerate our efforts in this regard and innovation mind-set is required to bridge the gap with a focus on innovating workplace practices/processes.
- Existing talent and skills in work could be utilised better through improved implementation of High Performance Workplace Practices (HPWP). To drive innovation and improve productivity and performance, Ireland needs to continually develop managerial skills and capabilities.
- Challenge remains to ensure that skills levels across the workforce drive the innovation and productivity in Irish indigenous economy (SME sector in particular). Firms need supports for skills mapping in order to identify their skills needs and access the provision.

- Improving awareness of benefits of LLL to employers and SMEs in particular, is a necessity. Supports need to be more visible and backed up by communication campaigns advising what is available and what the benefits of LLL for business are. Mentoring, clusterisation, peer-to-peer networks and support programmes (for SMEs in particular) were cited as vital for growth and development.
- It was suggested that as a key challenge for SME is productivity, using a benchmark of ROI could be useful to engage in the developments of skills. With upskilled employees, productivity increases which in turn makes employers impactful advocates for LLL.
- Releasing staff for LLL is a significant challenge for SMEs with small businesses not having capacity to engage in LLL. There is a need to consider introducing tax incentives to support employers to release staff for upskilling and utility of systems like individual learning accounts, micro-credentials to be considered.
- Attaining transversal and digital skills is a vital requirement in the labour market that is changing rapidly so it is crucial to develop those skills across the society.
- A cultural shift around the perception of FET is needed. Awareness around FET and apprenticeship can only be improved when clearer pathways between the sectors have been developed (FET/HE and labour market) with comprehensible messaging tailored to all cohorts.
- To embed the goal of life long and life wide learning in the society, easier to navigate career guidance system is essential, with clear signposting and messaging that serves to motivate all cohorts (individuals and organisations) to upskill and reskill with more flexible options of learning and pathways offered.
- Areas for improvement for career guidance have been further discussed with development of nationwide career guidance service for all suggested. It was also noted that database for outcomes in HE is rich, however it could be further improved in terms of FET and STEM (data could be better utilised to facilitate more informed choices by making clearer associations between courses and specific jobs – both visualisation and messaging could be improved in this regard).
- To improve rates of participation in LLL, tailored supports for individuals are also needed (childcare and carer subsidies, funding, paid training leave) in order to reduce main barriers of participation in LLL which were cited as : family reasons, time constraints and cost.
- Building an accredited and flexible micro-credentials and qualifications system is crucial. Accreditation for micro-credentials and qualifications needs to have a quicker turnaround.
- Rationalisation of the skills ecosystem needs to be examined and better balance needs to be struck between a responsive and joined up skills system that is not overburdened at the same

time. Challenge is how to make significant improvements through effective change by reducing overlaps and operate with fewer bodies.

5. AOB and Closing Remarks:

Mr. Bob Savage, Chair, NSC, thanked all participants for their invaluable contributions to the rich discussion. He noted that the insights gleaned from ENSC and subsequent June meetings will inform the next stage of the project, where OECD will draft and, with the help of stakeholders, refine recommendations.

The next Extraordinary Meeting of the NSC will take place on Wednesday 19th October, 2022.