



National Skills Council

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Statement of Priorities Summer 2020

At its meeting in May 2020, the National Skills Council, within its remit to advise on the prioritisation of identified skills needs and on how to secure delivery of identified needs, discussed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the responses to the fallout from same by the Education and Training System.

The Council recognises the responses to the crisis that have been put in place by the Education and Training System at short notice, such as the move to online delivery of courses, remote examination etc. The Council also notes that a number of issues that had already been identified as priorities for the Education and Training system have been accelerated by current circumstances including preparing for the future world of work and increased automation, the impact of transition to a low carbon economy, a need for increased digital literacy, a joint approach across the Further and Higher Education Sector, a focus on Lifelong Learning and a need for speed and agility in responding to the identified needs of enterprise.

The Council agreed that the National Training Fund (NTF) has a key role to play in responding to these challenges.

On that basis, the Council accepted the recommendations of the National Training Fund Advisory Group in respect of principles and priorities that should guide and shape skills policy in response to the current crisis using the resources available through the NTF. These principles and priorities are as follows:-

1. There is a clear need for an **immediate focus** on providing relevant skills for those affected by the crisis underpinning their employability and access into sustainable and quality employment. However, in meeting this objective the overall medium to long term direction of skills priorities and skills infrastructure must be sustained. This should inform education, training and supports for all learners supported by NTF resources, including jobseekers and workers and their employers to sustain skills priorities in relation to upskilling, reskilling and the embedding of life-long learning.

2. Skills responses should be **balanced and encompassing** in labour market terms. The NTF (as set out in its governing legislation) is available to provide training to those who are already in employment and those who are seeking employment. It is important to pre-empt any perception of competition for resources between “for employment / in employment” depending, for example on labour market conditions.
3. Reflecting the analysis contained in the National Skills Strategy and the implementation of the reform agenda for skills provision and the NTF there is a clear recognition and strong consensus regarding the value of a broad skills agenda with programmes and supports that can be **flexibly delivered to a diverse range of learners**, the labour market status of which will often change over their working lives.
4. Skills provision to respond to immediate labour market activation needs requires **short, focused and agile** programmes consistent with the current priorities for skills provision. These priorities are exemplified in particular by the objectives of SOLAS’s Skills to Advance, by core Skillnet Ireland provision, and through higher level education via Springboard+, and the Human Capital Initiative pillar 1). Education and training and skills responses should also:-
 - be firmly underpinned by and **build on the transferable skills** possessed by people with recent employment experience;
 - deliver **recognition of prior learning** and **guidance and career advice** supports.

Analysis of labour market impacts of COVID-19 highlight that there has been a particularly severe impact on sectors with workforces with lower levels of educational qualifications particularly in hospitality, retail and arts and entertainment. However, those previously employed in those sectors have significant skills which provide a strong basis for short, focused and targeted training interventions.

5. Skills interventions in sectors where demand has been maintained or would be expected to recover reasonably swiftly (albeit initially at a reduced level of activity) need to be **highly integrated** with the evolving economic and labour market situation. It is important to maintain support for education and training programmes with a strong work based component as sectors recover at different rates.
6. **Employers** can play an important **role advising on and shaping and supporting the delivery** of education and training provision. In this context, an acute focus is necessary on developments and trends at firm-level, including accelerated digital adoption, business product and service remodelling, cost containment strategies and adapting to COVID-19 protocols. These requirements will also be significant in shaping the medium- to longer-term skills responses.

7. It is evident that the very significant and highly impactful trends that were relevant in the ongoing development of the skills agenda prior to the crisis will continue to intensify as we move out of the crisis. These priorities include in particular:-
- embedding a culture of **lifelong learning** right across the workforce;
 - meeting skills required to drive the development of **green economy**;
 - accelerating the broad and wide-scale development of **digital skills** in all sectors of the economy;
 - ensuring a particular focus on the **leadership and management development skills** to enhance SME productivity;
 - building skills on a **regional basis** seeking in particular to build and maintain regional competitive advantages and opportunities and
 - responding to the challenge of **Brexit** ;
 - a focus on **labour market inclusion**, particularly for those who are less likely to be included in employer-arranged training or to directly engage in training themselves.

NTF-supported programmes need to strongly engage with these agendas.

8. **The current crisis is not the same as the economic crisis from 2008.** Skills policy and interventions must fully recognise this reality. The current crisis does not have a strong structural dimension and existing skill-sets have not become obsolete. There is not, therefore, as was the case in the wake of the 2008 crisis a need for a major reconfiguration of skills infrastructure, skills policy priorities and skills responses. Rather, existing provision (repurposed where necessary) to respond quickly, utilising and adapting existing delivery mechanisms.
9. There also needs to be a recognition that employment requirements in roles in those sectors especially affected by the COVID-19 crisis that are often incorrectly characterised as 'low skilled' should be re-evaluated and updated in light of the upskilling and reskilling requirements that will be essential to continue to successfully operate these roles using **digital and technology skills** in a digitalised economy.
10. **Online and digital learning** will also be crucial to the quick and agile response that is needed and it is recommended that there is an acceleration of online and blended education and training programmes. Institutions and providers will need support to enhance their platforms and capacity in this area and learners will need to be supported to ensure disadvantage does not become embedded.
11. In all employments the complexities involved in **ensuring safe working environments** will create an essential requirement for upskilling and reskilling to accommodate successfully the changes required to work in a continuing COVID-19 environment.

Conclusion:

The Council recommends that these principles and priorities be kept to the forefront in planning policy responses across the education and training system aimed at mitigating the fallout from the pandemic and in the use of existing, and development of future provision, particularly across the Tertiary Education Sector.

May 2020