



## **National Skills Council**

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### **Statement of Priorities Autumn 2020**

#### **Background**

At its meeting in September 2020, the National Skills Council, within its remit to advise on the prioritisation of identified skills needs and on how to secure delivery of these needs, discussed how the July Stimulus Package will enhance support for the further and higher education sector and its stakeholders including learners, students, employees, employers and further and higher education providers. €100m has been allocated from the July Stimulus Package to the further and higher education sector to fund over 35,000 additional places in the current year. Building on the Council's Summer Statement, which fed into the July Stimulus Package, the meeting provided an opportunity for the Council to discuss what further actions are necessary within the further and higher education sector to respond to the challenges emerging post Covid-19.

#### **Key measures supported under the July Stimulus**

##### **Skills to Compete**

The education and training under this initiative provides for 19,000 additional full time and part time places focused on those who have lost their jobs because of Covid19 at a cost of €37 million. Courses offered under the initiative are built around three key priorities:

- delivering the essential skills required for modern workplaces
- building strong digital skills; and
- developing the specific vocational skills to secure opportunities in growing sectors and occupations.

##### **Skillnet Ireland**

Skillnet Ireland are providing 3,550 places under the July Stimulus package through a number of programmes to help those seeking employment and to support SMEs to adapt and innovate in response to the Covid crisis:-

- an employment activation scheme including career advice, upskilling and mandatory work placements;
- training support for SMEs; and
- a SME productivity scheme.

### **Apprenticeship Incentivisation Scheme**

Under this scheme, employers are being paid €3,000 per apprentice registered between 1<sup>st</sup> March 2020 and 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020. €2,000 is paid once the apprentice is registered with a further €1,000 after 12 months if apprentice remains in employment.

### **Retrofit Skills Training**

A significant increase in the numbers of individuals skilled in retrofit and zero-energy building methods is required to meet the targets set out under the Climate Action Plan. To deliver 50k retrofits per annum over the coming years in addition to existing construction activity DCCAE projections are for a ten-fold increase on 2019 employment levels to 25-35k workers involved in retrofit per annum by 2030 €500k was allocated to prepare for the rollout of housing retrofit education and training programmes in 2021.

### **Springboard+ and HCI Pillar 1**

Under the July Jobs Stimulus package an additional €10m of funding provided for 2,000 places across both Springboard+ and HCI Pillar 1, providing free and subsidised full- and part-time provision in areas of identified skills need. This additional funding brings to 15,000 the total number of places available on both programmes. At the time of the meeting, over 60% of participants, were in employment, but there is also strong interest from those in receipt of DEASP payments.

### **Postgraduate Skills Provision**

Funding for an additional 2,650 places will be provided across a range of existing part-time and full-time postgraduate taught programmes. Programmes will be focused on a range of areas where identified skills needs exist, serving not only the requirements of the new economic model envisaged by the Programme for Government but also specific economic and social needs arising from Covid-19. Courses will be open to returners to the workforce, those in employment and recent graduates. All participants, with the exception of returners, will contribute 10% of the course cost.

### **Modular Skills Provision**

Total funding of €15m will be provided for shorter, more focused courses that can be offered in a flexible manner and through blended or online learning to allow people to gain important skills without taking a considerable period away from the labour market. The modular courses will be part-time and delivered in either blended or online format, and accredited in such a way as to provide building blocks to a full qualification should the student so wish. Each module will also be stand-alone so that participants can acquire skills and put them into practice immediately in the workplace. The modules can be at any level on the NFQ including enabling non-traditional learners to engage with higher education.

**The Council underlines the importance of and identifies the following key priorities and principles for the further and higher education system:**

**Timely and considered responses to national and regional existing and future skills needs:**

- The challenges as a result of Covid-19 demonstrates how crucial it is for the further and higher education sector to continue to be responsive, innovative and considered in delivering responses that enhance and support access to lifelong learning/upskilling/reskilling for the benefit of our economy and our society.
- There is a clear recognition and strong consensus amongst all stakeholders, nationally, regionally and internationally, regarding the value of a broad skills agenda with programmes and supports that can be flexibly delivered. These programmes need to be available to a diverse range of stakeholders, including employers, employees and learners, the labour market status of which will often change over their working lives.
- The continued availability and delivery of online and blended further and higher education programmes will be crucial to support all stakeholders across the economy and society. The continued acceleration of online and blended further and higher education programmes by all providers needs to ensure considered access for all stakeholders to ensure that the disadvantaged are not become left behind.

**Address the digital skills divide amongst our economy and society:**

- Covid-19 has highlighted the digital skills divide amongst our economy and our society. There is significant overlap between those presently impacted by Covid-19 and those with low levels of digital skills.
- The need to continue to design and develop appropriate education programmes that support the digital and transversal skills needed for those in our economy and society who are unemployed or at risk of becoming unemployed is crucial. SOLAS has been tasked with the development of a new 10-year National Adult literacy Numeracy and Digital Skills Strategy.

**Support the pathways for progression across the further and higher education system:**

- There is no one-size fits all provision across the further and higher education sector when it comes to meeting the needs of all stakeholders. Different people have different needs. The importance of a variety of pathways for progression must be paramount within the further and higher education sector. A seamless transition between both sectors must be developed.

- There is a need to promote both the further and the higher education sector as being mutually dependent on each other and should be considered accordingly depending on the skills needs of stakeholders such as learners, employees and employers.
- As it is employer led, the apprenticeship model has to be clearly defined and reflective of the needs of employers and the resources of the state. Apprenticeship training and the qualifications and careers to which it leads needs to be promoted and valued across the economy and society. There is a need to communicate the varied career paths available through the apprenticeship programmes across all sectors that can meet the career ambitions of all learners.

### **Protecting the quality of learning across the further and higher education system**

- The need to continue to ensure the quality of all further and higher education provision is crucial in terms of Ireland's standing as a world class further and higher education sector even as we face the different challenges across our economy and our society.
- The need for ongoing engagement between all stakeholders including industry, education providers and awarding bodies to identify and address issues as they arise is an important part of the response to the skills needs of our economy and society.

### **The further and higher education system needs to be Brexit ready:**

- The challenges of Brexit have already started in some sectors and regions. The further and higher education system needs to continue to be proactive in its responses to identify and address the skills needs brought about by Brexit.
- The Council recognises there may be opportunities across some sectors and to avail of these opportunities there is a need to identify upskilling and reskilling requirements for industry and employees and provide appropriate and timely programmes in the relevant sectors and regions.

**The Council recommends that these priorities and principles be kept to the forefront in planning policy responses across the further and higher education system, which will mitigate the fallout from the pandemic and provide a positive response to ongoing and future challenges to our economy and our society.**

