



## **Submission to Solas on the Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024**

**May 2019**

### **Introduction**

Dublin Chamber represents 1,300 businesses across the Greater Dublin Area, employing 300,000 people nationally. Members include businesses from across the spectrum of size and industry. Dublin Chamber is also an active participant in the Dublin Regional Skills Forum. We welcome Solas's decision in the *Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020-2024* to move away from the previous strategy's focus on 'provision for employment' and toward meeting the need for upskilling and lifelong learning.

This change in emphasis is in-keeping with national data on employment levels as well as Dublin Chamber's internal data in relation to the skills needs of business community. Ireland is now facing full employment. Revised CSO figures for April/May show that unemployment is now at just 4.6%.<sup>1</sup> This is the first time that the figure has been below 5% since the economic crash. Moreover, just 35.7% of those in unemployment are long-term unemployed (unemployed for 1 year or more).<sup>2</sup> In this context, it is unsurprising that approximately 60% of respondents to a recent Dublin Chamber member survey reported that they are having trouble finding staff with the skills they need.<sup>3</sup> The tightened labour pool nationally and the unmet skills needs facing Dublin businesses means that upskilling existing staff to fill any skills gap should be a priority.

Dublin Chamber recommends that the *FET Strategy 2020-2024* target the employer as well as the employee, and in doing so, work to dispel any misconceptions that FET is solely for the unemployed. We commend Solas and the FET sector on the range of options available for people to upskill and advance in training, and we recommend that a plan be put in place to better communicate these options to employers as a means of further facilitating employees' access to upskilling and further training opportunities.

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<sup>1</sup> CSO Unemployment Figures April 2019

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/mue/monthlyunemploymentapril2019/>

<sup>2</sup> RTE.ie <https://www.rte.ie/news/business/2019/0521/1050766-labour-force-survey/>

<sup>3</sup> Dublin Chamber Q2 2019 Business Outlook Survey <http://www.dublinchamber.ie/business-agenda/business-trend-survey>

## Recommendations

### **1. Campaign to Target Employers**

Support for staff training represents a 'win-win' for employers and their employees. As well as offering obvious benefits to individual recipients, the use of such supports aids employers by upskilling their workforces and promoting staff retention. In a Dublin Chamber survey, 30% of respondents indicated that they use upskilling and training as their main tool for staff retention.<sup>4</sup>

Dublin Chamber recommends that as part of the new *FET Strategy*, employers should be targeted in an ongoing communications campaign to inform them of how they can support staff in accessing supports. Cost effective FET programmes such as Springboard+ would be possible for many employers to offer to fund, or partly fund, and allow a level of flexibility for employees to attend. Communication of FET options to employers would help increase uptake of existing supports and further re-enforce a culture of lifelong learning, a key objective outlined in the Government's *Future Jobs Ireland 2019* strategy.<sup>5 6</sup>

### **2. Employer-Friendly Course Schedules**

The format of training delivery needs to be employer and SME-friendly. Dublin Chamber would welcome an increase in night-time courses, online delivery of courses, and other means of scheduling course delivery to suit people who are already in employment but looking to upskill. It would also be a clear signal that FET is for all, and not just for those in unemployment. We acknowledge the intention of Solas to make improvements in this regard, and recommend that the *FET Strategy* seeks to improve scheduling of its courses in the light of changing work practices and the need for constant upskilling. If a culture of lifelong learning is to be achieved, consideration must be given to the needs of employers, and particularly SMEs which may have a small staff and be unable to operate at reduced capacity.

### **3. Communicate Apprenticeship Opportunities & Improve Flexibility**

Improved communications are also required for apprenticeships. The work that has been done in broadening the apprenticeship offering in recent years has been exceptional, with apprenticeships now available in areas far beyond the traditional 'trades'. However, there remains a lack of awareness about the opportunities now available through the apprenticeship model, all the way up to Level 8 and beyond. Dublin Chamber particularly recommends improved communications to parents and secondary school career counsellors. A 'one-stop-shop' for apprenticeships, similar to that of the CAO portal, would be advisable.

We also recommend that Solas review the apprenticeship model with a view to establishing greater flexibility in relation to time spent in on the job and off the job learning, utilising options of blended and night-time study. Efforts also need to be made to reduce the cost borne by the employer during the commitment of the apprenticeship.

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<sup>4</sup> Dublin Chamber Q2 2019 Business Outlook Survey <http://www.dublinchamber.ie/business-agenda/business-trend-survey>

<sup>5</sup> Dublin Chamber Q2 2019 Business Outlook Survey <http://www.dublinchamber.ie/business-agenda/business-trend-survey>

<sup>6</sup> Future Jobs Ireland 2019 p.54 <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Future-Jobs-Ireland-2019.pdf>

#### **4. Soft Skills**

The FET Strategy should include training for 'soft skills' and transferable skills. As the future of the working world will be marked by an increase in automation, skills in communication, critical analysis, decision-making and leadership will be increasingly valuable in the years to come. The need for improved leadership skills among the Irish labour force was highlighted in the *Future Jobs* strategy.<sup>7</sup>

#### **5. Pathways to Higher Education**

Pathways to Higher Education (HE) should be included in the *FET Strategy*. Clear signposting of how a student can progress upon the completion of a FET course should be included as a reference point. This should serve to open the opportunity of higher education to those who may not otherwise have considered it.

Pathways for transfer and progression into higher education would also be important to mitigate any degree of class-based disparity in access to higher education.

#### **Conclusion**

Finally, we commend Solas and the further education sector for the work of recent years and thank them for the opportunity to feed into the 2020-2024 strategy. We acknowledge that Solas recognises the overall change in the economic and employment landscape, and recommend that employers be communicated with to further foster an environment of lifelong learning and upskilling across the business community into the future.

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<sup>7</sup> Future Jobs, p.44