



**Submission to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Education
and Science in response to its consultation on the Apprenticeship Action Plan**

2021- 2025

September 2020

Introduction

Dublin Chamber is the largest member organisation representing the business community of the Greater Dublin Area. Its membership spans the spectrum across sectors and from SME to MNC and includes representation from both the higher education and further education sectors.

Dublin Chamber is heavily engaged in the skills requirements of the Dublin business community. The Chamber is represented on the Dublin Regional Skills Forum and launched its Sustainability Academy in February 2020 in order to ready the business community for a low carbon economy.¹ The Chamber was also the lead partner in the European Commission consortium that researched, developed, piloted, and launched the EuroSTART platform to teach entrepreneurs management skills.²

We commend the work done in recent years to expand the apprenticeship offering and to increase the public private partnership approach to developing new apprenticeships. The newer 'Consortium' apprenticeship as an addition to the 'Craft' apprenticeship is a very positive development. We welcome the public consultation on the Apprenticeship Action Plan 2021-2025.

International Best Practice & Context

Germany's apprenticeship system is built into the fabric of the labour force talent pipeline, having grown out of the guild system, and it is hugely successful. In Germany, over 500,000 new apprenticeships are completed each year and this has been credited with keeping youth unemployment low by European

¹ Dublinchamber.ie <https://www.dublinchamber.ie/sustainability-academy>

² Dublinchamber.ie <https://www.dublinchamber.ie/business-services/international-trade-services/eurostart>

standards.³ In recent years, the number involved in apprenticeships that held the qualifications to enter a university has grown to a third.⁴

Meanwhile, in Switzerland, two in three school leavers opted for apprenticeships with approximately 230 options available. However, students choose this option at a very early stage, aged just 14.⁵ While there is criticism that this is too early an age to make such a life choice, Swiss authorities remain assured of the success of the system.

The European Commission has made strides to support the role of vocational training for a modern and sustainable labour force through its Erasmus+ programme.⁶ Erasmus+ is a programme to support education and training across the EU, enabling Europeans to gain experience abroad and its inclusion of apprenticeships highlights the value placed on the system for talent provision.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has issued guidance to United Nations member states on the value of apprenticeships and stresses the necessity for strong public private partnership to maximise skills availability, thus supporting growth and productivity.⁷

International best practice suggests that apprenticeship systems which are built into the fabric of the skills and training pipeline for businesses and for society are most successful, as is the case in Germany and Switzerland. For apprenticeships to be an even stronger part of the Irish skills and education pathway to employment, the apprenticeship brand and definition needs to be strengthened and broadened to be a greater part of the talent pipeline across sectors.

Increasing Participation

The apprenticeship offering in Ireland has developed considerably in recent years to encompass qualifications up to PhD level and to occupations such as recruitment, financial services, and ICT, going well beyond what had been considered the traditional 'trades'. However, it is unclear how successfully this has been communicated to school leavers and young people making decisions on their professional futures. It is also unclear how this has been communicated to the business community.

Dublin Chamber recommends a full communications campaign be devised to show the modernisation of the apprenticeship offering, the employment outlook that this form of education and training provides,

³ FT.com <https://www.ft.com/content/1a82e8e0-04cf-11e7-aa5b-6bb07f5c8e12>

⁴ Apprenticeship-Toolbox.EU <https://www.apprenticeship-toolbox.eu/germany/apprenticeship-system-in-germany/143-apprenticeship-system-in-germany>

⁵ Swissinfo.ch <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/why-the-world-should-take-note-of-the-swiss-apprenticeship-model/45810312>

⁶ European Commission https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1421

⁷ International Labour Organisation https://www.ilo.org/skills/areas/work-based-learning/WCMS_669785/lang--en/index.htm

the NQI qualifications that can be achieved, and the pathway and career outlook it offers in new industries. This communications campaign should target a number of cohorts, including; leaving cert students, the parents of leaving cert students, recent school leavers, those that have become unemployed due to Covid-19, and, those whose jobs will be impacted by digitalisation and the move to a circular economy. The business community also needs to be targeted to inform them about the modernisation of apprenticeships and the skilled graduates that are emerging for a number of sectors. While we acknowledge the work of *Generation Apprenticeship*, it remains unclear that the messaging has yet penetrated either the employer or prospective learner markets outside of those who had traditionally looked to the apprenticeship model. The branding of apprenticeships needs to consider the long-term societal association that Ireland has between the traditional 'trades' and apprenticeships. *Dublin Chamber recommends that a considerable re-branding campaign for apprenticeships is developed so that the evolved Irish apprenticeship offering is understood more widely.* This may prove difficult considering the long-held societal association with apprenticeships, fully rebranding the label of 'apprentice' will be necessary.

Provisions should be made to include an apprenticeships option on the CAO form. The apprenticeship pathway needs to be viewed as an attractive option and not as a second choice or the route only for those less academic. This change should be communicated to parents and to school guidance counsellors specifically. Apprenticeships as an alternative pathway to a career as opposed to a 'fallback' option needs to be supported, for example, including a league table for entry to apprenticeship programmes post leaving cert similarly to what is done for third level would be positive.

Furthermore, the role and association of 'traineeships' with, for example, accountants or solicitors and latterly 'internships' with a wide range of firms including those in tech, communications, and professional services are considered by many as the professional version of the apprenticeship and the differentiation between each option needs to be made to businesses. Internships specifically are wide ranging in their form and can be anything from several months of on-the-job work experience to a firm's in-house structured programme and talent pipeline for junior hires. Dublin Chamber argues that these traineeship and internship pathways to employment need to be supported as another form of 'earn as you learn' whilst also maintaining the difference between these models and the apprenticeship model in the 'earn as you learn' landscape. These distinctions specifically should be included in the re-branding and communications campaign when targeting prospective businesses/employers. This will be vital to increase interest from the business community in the structured apprenticeship option.

Increasing the participation rate of women generally will be essential in the coming years. The impact of Covid-19 on female labour participation has a poor outlook as the traditionally female-dominated areas of retail and hospitality were badly hit. The participation rate will be further hit as the essential infrastructure projects, which Dublin Chamber strongly supports, will provide significantly more jobs in traditionally male labour areas such as construction. The new Apprenticeship Action Plan should be considered as an opportunity to remedy this impact. The Action Plan needs to look ahead to what can be achieved in improving the female labour participation rate into the future by ensuring that new apprenticeships, including those in more gender balanced sectors such as finance and recruitment, as

well as those in apprenticeships that focus on the new requirements of a circular, low carbon economy, are appropriately packaged and communicated toward women, including school leavers, returners, and those who lost jobs due to Covid-19.

Development and Delivery of Apprenticeships

Public Private Partnerships have been lauded by the ILO as the best way in which to develop successful and valuable apprenticeships. Dublin Chamber similarly argues that the input, participation, and leadership of the business community in developing its own talent pipeline is hugely important for training to match the market's skills needs. Considering the evolving nature of work, the apprenticeship model is arguably the most responsive form of training and education.⁸ The Consortium approach, whereby an apprenticeship programme is developed by a consortium with representation from business, employers/employees, and education and training institutes, has proven to be a successful way in which to implement this approach in the Irish context.

There is huge potential in the apprenticeship pathway to develop the talent required to move Ireland to a low carbon, digitised economy. The Programme for Government promises the delivery of a Green Further Education and Skills Development Plan. Dublin Chamber recommends that the apprenticeship goals of this plan be included in the Apprenticeship Action Plan 2020-2025.

Process for setting up Apprenticeships

While traditional 'Craft Apprenticeships' remain under control of SOLAS, 'Consortium'-led apprenticeships are more market-led and responsive to evolving skills need.

The Consortium approach to developing and establishing new apprenticeships is largely effective. Dublin Chamber member feedback shows that the process is generally robust. However, there are a number of improvements that can be made, particularly in making the process of setting up a new consortium apprenticeship less cumbersome and to ensure that the apprenticeship offering reflects the need to offer more 'white collar' options in a modern apprenticeship landscape.

Member feedback indicates that apprenticeships that afford degree-level qualification are valuable as they communicate the strength of the course. Level 8 is a recognisable and understood qualification by employers. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) needs to be open to modern apprenticeships being part of the higher-level education spectrum. Furthermore, additional consortium apprenticeships with level 8 qualifications will add to the branding of the modern Irish apprenticeship.

For the consortium-led approach to respond efficiently to market need while also ensuring a robust curriculum, the process must be efficient, and time limited in responding to market need. A long and

⁸ World Economic Forum <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/12/apprenticeships-future-work-4ir-training-reskilling/>

drawn out process is a barrier to businesses as the private sector is used to more responsive and dynamic timeframes than typically experienced in the education sector. It would be beneficial if the road map from inception of the apprenticeship programme to its final approval had a fixed timeline for completion with all stages/milestones outlined. Furthermore, the final stages of QQI and SOLAS approval should be carried out simultaneously as at this point of the process all administrative documentation has taken place. By including a timeline, a level of responsiveness for all parties will be encouraged, aiding overall efficiency without compromising the robust nature of the process.

This certainty and greater efficiency will also aid in removing the perceived barrier of drawn out bureaucracy for potential employers interested in development of an apprenticeship. Member feedback indicates that there must be buy-in to the apprenticeship process from the top for it to be successful. A timeline for the creation of the apprenticeship curriculum will help to establish this buy-in at a leadership level.

Supports for Employers & Encouraging Employers to take Apprentices

SOLAS and the Irish Government are to be commended for doubling the number of applications to become an apprentice since 2015. Also, to be commended is the significantly increased number of female apprentices, despite the percentage of female apprentices still being at just 3% of the overall number. However, the improved number of apprentice candidates cannot fully contribute to the labour force without engagement of businesses and employers. Data released in early 2020 shows that the number of employers seeking to take on apprentices was not high enough, and with the impact of Covid-19 likely to impede hiring for some sectors, it may prove difficult to improve this imbalance.⁹

For many SMEs, aside for those in some distinct sectors, it is unlikely that the stability to make the commitment to an apprentice for the full training period of four years is present as Covid-19 has caused extreme disruption and uncertainty for many. The commitment to paying apprentices during training periods may seem like an expensive option for SMEs. It is essential that damage is not done to the apprenticeship environment through apprentices being made redundant mid-way through their training due to economic circumstances beyond the control of an SME. Unfortunately, there were instances of this in the last recession in the construction sector and it is essential that the same mistakes are not repeated.

On the other hand, the current environment may be an ideal way in which to reset how businesses consider their own talent pipeline into the future, readying themselves for economic recovery. The Apprenticeship Scheme for Employers, affording a €3,000 incentive payment to the employer when taking on a new apprentice is welcome and will support some employers to take on apprentices.

As mentioned above, buy in at the businesses level is essential for the success of apprenticeships and member feedback indicates that larger employers in sectors that continued to experience growth during

⁹ Irish Times <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/number-of-school-leavers-choosing-apprenticeships-doubles-1.4148232>

2020 are more likely to have the wherewithal to take on apprentices and commit to them as a way in which to create their own talent and hiring pipeline long-term. The ILO shows in its guidance and research on apprenticeships that the model provides a good return on investment for employers. *Dublin Chamber recommends that this return on investment and control over talent pipelines should be communicated to Irish employers in growing sectors to encourage high level buy in.*

Recommendations

- Engage in a significant re-branding exercise to market the new generation of apprenticeships to businesses, parents, school-leavers, and career changers. Proactively communicate the changing reality of apprenticeships, emphasising the possibilities outside of traditional 'trade' careers, the options that range up to and beyond QQI Level 8, and the advantages of the 'earn as you learn' model to target more school leavers and young people of varying backgrounds. Communications should reach perspective apprentices from varying backgrounds, guidance counsellors, parents, and crucially, employers. Place apprenticeships in the market with differentiation from internship and traineeship options.
- Include an apprenticeships option or signposting on the CAO form, or direct students toward the apprenticeship application process to encourage consideration of apprenticeship as an option and not a fallback.
- Proactively engage with employers and agencies that will be key to providing the employment for apprentices, outlining the modern construct of apprenticeships as a model to develop an internal talent pipeline.
- Focus on provision of apprenticeships that support digitisation and the move to a low carbon economy.
- Make the process for establishing new consortia-led apprenticeships more efficient and less cumbersome and include a specified timeline from inception to first intake of apprentices thus providing certainty to employers/businesses in the consortium.