



On September 2nd 2020, Minister for Further & Higher Education, Research, Science and Innovation, Simon Harris TD joined Dublin Chamber to participate in a webinar to address members. Due to time constraints, the Minister was unable to answer all questions from the audience during the webinar. Minister Harris kindly provided the below follow-up answers to the questions put to him during the webinar.

Follow on questions from Dublin Chamber of Commerce

After webinar with Minister Harris 2nd Sept 2020

1. In many emergencies, Mike Ryan's advice that speed trumps perfection is hugely important and mitigates against paralysis in face of challenges. What can we learn in dealing with many challenges such as housing and traffic congestion , climate action in terms of creating momentum taking action and actively reviewing – bring speed to those challenges rather than stasis resulting from pursuit of a perfect solution . Speed in introducing PUP and TWSS shows what is possible.

Mary Rose Burke, CEO, Dublin Chamber

Taken with

Minister will be interested to know that having identified the challenge for many businesses in digital literacy that was recognised early in lockdown Chamber partnered with DMI to address this skills deficit and we are delighted that 300 people across 210 companies are actively participating in upskilling . Chamber happy to liaise with minister and his department in roll out of any programme

Mary Rose Burke, CEO, Dublin Chamber

Taken with

From UCD / TUD Transversal skills Students - How do we intend to ensure access to the

adult population? Cost is an issue for people to take courses and time from current work.

Are we looking at other countries as a model for Higher Education?

Response to Question 1

Digitalisation and automation is here to stay and will in some ways dictate our existing and future economy and society. Even before the onset of Covid-19, the new and emerging technologies of the 21st century have developed at unprecedented pace and have transformed the way that we all live and work, how we learn and how we teach. New technology is bringing with it new ways of working, new ways of learning, new ways of teaching and new ways of communicating, all of which is influencing our economy and our society. Virtual meetings have changed how we communicate with each other in business regardless of where we are based. Zoom calls are now part of interaction between families right across the globe. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, immediate responses have been put in place by the further and higher education system at short notice, such as the move to online delivery of courses and remote examination. Skills provision to respond to immediate labour market activation needs requires short, focused and agile programmes consistent with the current priorities for skills provision. A number of issues had already been identified as priorities for the further and higher education system and have been accelerated by current circumstances. These include 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 system, a focus on Lifelong Learning and a need for speed and agility in responding to the identified needs of industry. These priorities are exemplified in particular by the objectives of SOLAS's Skills to Advance, Skills to Compete, by core Skillnet Ireland provision, and through higher-level education via Springboard+, and the Human Capital Initiative and the work of the Regional Skills Fora.

There is an appetite and a willingness from the further and higher education system to continue to design, develop and deliver relevant and timely online programmes where possible, to meet the needs of learners, employees and employers in the times we now live and work in. The establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science will further develop and enhance the evolution, agility, flexibility and responsiveness of our further and higher education system to meet the current and future skills needs of our economy and our society.

2. Fully support the Minister in his views and ambition re inclusion, life-long learning models, and changes in responsiveness etc. As mentioned by the Minister, a key aspect is the need for a change in societal engagement across non-Level 8-degree education. How would the Minister envisage business, industry and education combining to lead the change in that debate? As a follow-on - is the separation of FE and HE not an impediment in structuring the post-secondary education continuum? Thanks. David FitzPatrick (TU Dublin)

Taken with

Well done Minister on managing us through COVID so far - the response in Ireland, has been considered, resilient and a credit to all. In terms of businesses and recovery – what innovations and assistance do we collectively need to provide to Irish Indigenous businesses to help them pivot and thrive in the future (beyond cash supports). I am thinking of your Innovation & R&D portfolio.

Taken with

How will you influence companies to step away from their current hiring model of requiring high level (7/8) degree for junior roles? - UCD

Taken with

How do you plan to bridge the gap between what third level graduates are offering and what employers are requiring? Many Irish employers require several years' experience for entry level positions and sometimes even for internships.

Taken with

Now that there are increasing upskilling and training options available to SME's and businesses, would it not be fair to say that most SME owner/managers would say that time and cost prevent them engaging, so how do you propose we can overcome this challenge?

Taken with

How will you promote the newly model degrees and micro-degrees to local employers that might be reluctant to a new system and will still require applicant's 4-5yr degree?

Taken with

Minister Harris thank you for all your hard work leading us through Covid. You did a tremendous job. My question is: What challenges do you think the businesses in Dublin City in particular face as we head in the winter months and what supports is the government planning to attract people back into Dublin City?

– *Karen Cunningham, Bank of Ireland*

Response to Question 2:

It is crucial we have the continued co-operation between industry and the further and higher education system, especially in these challenging times. My Department will continue to, design and develop education and training programmes and qualifications that reflect what is required in the workplace, by working with industry to address current needs, and looking beyond the current world of work and to prepare individuals to succeed in the existing and future labour market. On a national and regional basis, the need to ensure that all sectors of our economy have timely access to a highly skilled and flexible labour force, that meets the different existing and future skills needs of our economy and our society, is a priority for my Department. We cannot do this alone, to ensure the system responds to industry skills needs at a macro and micro level, we need to continue to build relationships with all

stakeholders, including industry, in order to source accurate, quality and timely information on national and regional skills needs and find solutions to respond to these needs. The National Skills Council, the Regional Skills Fora, The National Training Fund Advisory Group, the Apprenticeship Council are all excellent examples of effective partnership between the education and training system and industry and industry representatives. I understand that in July of this year, members of the Dublin Chamber of Commerce attended a virtual employer engagement event with the Dublin Regional Skills Fora Manager. The event highlighted the work of the Fora and provided an opportunity to discuss a new online employer engagement form developed by the Regional Skills Fora Managers that will assist employers in identifying and responding to their existing and future skills needs. The recently launched Further Education Strategy is a good example of where the engagement between relevant stakeholders, such as industry, has fed into the development of the SOLAS Further Education Strategy to cover the next 5 years. At the Higher Education level, a key tenet of Technological Universities, (TU's) is their research-informed teaching and learning based on interactions with industry and relationships forged with local and regional enterprise stakeholders. TU's also play a pivotal role in facilitating access and progression particularly through relationships with the further education and training sector. The presence of a technological university in a region, with a specific mandate for promoting regional development, will have a transformative effect on local and regional communities. As I am sure most of you are aware, TU Dublin is the first in the state, being established on 1 January 2019 and is the largest Higher Education Institute with over 28,000 students. The Munster TU application was approved in May and a number of other consortia nationally are working towards submitting applications for TU designation. The ongoing engagement and partnership approach between the further and higher education system with industry will continue to ensure we are all heading in the same direction in terms of identifying and meeting the different regional and national needs of the economy and society.

3. I would like to know if will be created more areas for apprenticeships and how many places are going to be offered next year. – *Virginia Murdock*

[Response to Question 3](#)

The Government has committed to publishing an updated Apprenticeship Action Plan, which will support 10,000 new apprentice registrations per year by 2025. That is an extra 3,000 people per year over our current numbers. To reach these numbers we need to simplify the messaging around, and delivery of, apprenticeships. We need to learn from what has worked, and what has not over the past while. It means looking at new ways of structuring, funding, and promoting apprenticeships. The consultation paper is the first step in gaining feedback from stakeholders. The Department has also spoken to the Regional Skills Fora managers to seek additional regional feedback from employers and we will roll out a feedback form for apprentices. I want to know your opinions to make sure, that the system will achieve what we want it to over the coming years. I want to make sure that apprenticeship is embedded into Irish enterprise and is clearly supportive of all – the plan will also include specific

targets for the uptake of apprenticeships by women, people with disabilities and disadvantaged groups. The Apprenticeship Council is enterprise-led with representatives from business, trade unions, further education bodies and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. It is the main means of providing stakeholder input to the new apprenticeship system and a strong process framework is in place for the development of new apprenticeships, with the roles of all parties clearly defined. Employer-led consortia identify occupations that are considered by them to be suitable for apprenticeships and make proposals to the Apprenticeship Council for funding. Apprenticeship is at its heart a contract of employment and the new action plan will ensure that apprenticeships will remain industry led. Evidence to date indicates that, where apprenticeship places are available then there are applicants for those places. To put it simply – we need to make sure that employers are bought in to the concept of apprenticeship as a way of recruiting and developing staff. Delivering 10,000 registrations per annum will depend on a strongly collaborative approach between employers and educational providers that provides a high quality work based learning experience, both for the employer and the apprentice. To encourage employer participation in apprenticeship we aim to improve the cost/benefit balance to employers – this can be through system design, support and capacity building – making it easy for employers to engage with the system. Financial supports are useful in certain circumstances – such as the female bursaries or the Apprenticeship Incentivisation Scheme during this period of downturn – however, international evidence offers limited support for the long-term use of financial incentives. Potential areas being examined in which we could support smaller employers include:

- Encouraging employers to find ways to share the responsibilities and risks associated with the provision of apprenticeships;
- Promoting bodies that work with groups of small employers to coordinate training;
- Supporting small employers with the administration and provision of apprenticeships.

Employers are eligible for a €3,000 payment for each new apprentice who is registered between the period 01 March and 31 December 2020. That is broken down to €2,000 per apprentice at the time of registration and a further €1,000 payable in Quarter 3 2021 for each eligible apprentice retained by their employer at that time. SOLAS has responsibility for delivering and administering this new scheme and I understand that they have contacted all existing eligible employers at this point. The incentive support covers all 58 national apprenticeship programmes currently available and will apply to any new apprenticeship programmes that are launched in 2020. It is in addition to the existing female apprentice bursary scheme (€2,660 to employers of female apprentices which is largely confined to the craft apprenticeships). The existing programme is time limited and is due to cease at the end of 2020. Any further supports for employers, or indeed apprentices, will be considered in the context of the Action Plan. This development underlines the Government's commitment to the value of apprenticeships and their continued expansion, while acknowledging the real financial difficulties faced by employers in these challenging times.

4. How will your department drive focus on sustainability and climate change across courses? As you mentioned earlier. *Catherine Cullen*

[Response to Question 4](#)

While there is, a clear need for an immediate focus on providing relevant skills for those affected by the Covid-19 crisis there is also an immediate focus on providing relevant skills for those affected by the ongoing transition to a low carbon economy. There is a need to identify and respond to the skills needs of these workers, which will support and enhance their employability and support access into sustainable and quality employment.

While there is a Climate Action Plan and my Department feeds into it, the National Skills Council meeting in February 2020 had Climate Change as the strategic discussion item. It was acknowledged by the Council, that the further and higher education system is already responding to the skills needs in the Climate Action area. Programmes such as Springboard+, apprenticeships, the previous and new Further Education Strategy, the Regional Skills Fora and existing education and training provision are part of the response. Through the continuing engagement with other Government Departments and Agencies and other relevant stakeholders, the further and higher education system will continue to play a key role in designing and developing upskilling and reskilling programmes for those workers transitioning to a low carbon economy. There is constant engagement with Higher Education Institutions to promote adaptation of courses, in consultation with stakeholders as appropriate, so that graduates have the necessary training and skills on the impacts of climate change. My Department, working with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) have written to Vice Presidents of Teaching and Learning in all Higher Education Institutions (HEIS). They were asked to examine integrating issues of Climate Action and the Bio-economy related awareness raising into curricula, and are to submit a report to the HEA on their progress. To support HEIs with this action the provision of academic seminars will be explored with the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. The Department is also in consultation with the IUA Sustainability working group to progress these issues in the higher education sector.

5. Are you aware of the unfair anomaly where learners from families who are

eligible for a SUSI grant still do not qualify for their maintenance grant on fulltime QQI approved degree programmes at the likes of Griffith College and Dublin Business School and other institutions because they are independent third-level colleges? The Joint Oireachtas Education Committee recommended in 2018 that this inequity should be dealt with. – *Griffith College*

[Response to Question 5](#)

The criteria that a higher education institution has to meet in order to be considered an 'approved institution' for student grant funding purposes are outlined in section 7 of the Student Support Act of 2011. Any consideration to extend the list of approved institutions would not only have to consider the potential impact on existing approved institutions but also other institutions both in Ireland and across

the EU. Issues regarding the future funding of the higher education sector will be informed by the work of the future funding group.

6. You mentioned the mouthful that is the name of your new department. Do we have too many options when it comes to educational institutions, all which seem to be described with acronyms that you know, but the end user does not? – *Declan Gray, Evolve*

Response to Question 6

I do not believe we have too many options when it comes to our educational institutions. Learners, employees, employers and all stakeholders should have access to education provision that meets their individual needs. There is no one size fits all approach to delivery further and higher education responses. That is why as well as having different educational institutions across the further and higher education sector we also have different courses and programmes across each sector. These different programmes are targeted at different cohorts. We have the further education sector providing programmes in apprenticeships, for the low skilled, for the hard to reach, traineeships, short courses, eCollege online courses, skills to compete, skills to advance and many other offerings. Across the higher educational institutions, we have the various programmes at third level; we also have Springboard, the Human Capital Initiative and apprenticeships at higher end levels.

7. Is there any update regarding HCI pillar 3 - €210M for innovation, agility and collaboration between enterprise and higher education? Was due to be announced in June and launched in July... *UCD*

Response to Question 7

Proposals under this pillar have been assessed by an independent panel with national and international expertise, and a recommendation on projects to be funded is due in the coming weeks.

ENDS