Enterprise Digital Advisory Forum
6 September 2022

Discussion of Skills and the Digital Transition Fund

Attendees

Barry O'Brien (IBM)
Edward McDonnell (CeADAR)
Eoin Costello (DigitalHQ)
Erik O'Donovan (Ibec)
Kieran McCorry (Microsoft)
Lorraine Higgins (Digital Business Ireland)
Patricia Scanlon (AI Ambassador, Soapbox Labs)
Shona D'arcy (Kids Speech Labs)

Remote Attendees

Donal Travers, Donal Flavin (IDA Ireland)
Allan Beechinor (Altada)
Terri O'Donovan (J&J)

Officials

Jean Carberry, Gráinne O'Carroll, Ross Church, Marc McEntegart (DETE)
Ruairí Ó hAilín (Enterprise Ireland)
Fiona Bourke (Department of the Taoiseach)
William Beausang, Laura Brady (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science)
Paul Healy (Skillnet Ireland)

Updates from DETE

The meeting was chaired by Jean Carberry, Assistant Secretary, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment in place of the Minister for Trade Promotion, Digital and Company Regulation, Dara Calleary TD.

The meeting opened with brief introduction of the topics to be discussed, Skills and the Digital Transition Fund for the coming year. Also noted the progress on Digital so far this year:

- appointment of the AI Ambassador in May; launch of Grow Digital in June;
- delivery of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs Report on AI in June;
- confirmation that Ireland has retained its position on the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) for 2022;
- achievement of EU regulation, agreement on the DSA (retaining country of origin).

Coming events include:

- the appointment of Coimisiún na Meán/Media Commission as digital coordinator;
- the upcoming National Youth Assembly on AI to be held in October;
- and the Digital Ireland event to take place on 23 November.

Presentation from DFHERIS

William Beausang, Assistant Secretary, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, gave a presentation on digital skills and the role of DFHERIS in skills policy and development across the tertiary education sector.

William noted that digital skills are fundamental to Ireland's economic growth and that Ireland ranks third in Europe on the human capital portion of the DESI. William noted that high level digital skills provision is a priority under the National Digital Strategy. One of the key challenges is the identification of specific skills requirements to be met through focused and specific programmes short flexible modular programmes as well as the development of transversal skills.

Presentation slides are included as Appendix 1.

Presentation from Skillnet Ireland

Paul Healy of Skillnet Ireland gave a presentation on Skillnet Ireland, its structure and its role in delivering within the context outlined by DFHERIS. Fundamentally, four aspects to Skillnet Ireland's work:

1. SME Digitalisation
2. Emerging tech and skills
3. Underrepresented groups
4. Future tech skills, research and innovation

Most significant question for Skillnet has been, what is stopping businesses from getting the skills they need. From engagement, many businesses do not see digital as a priority or are focussed on other issues. Paul emphasised that that "not knowing where to start" is a significant issue.

Presentation slides are included as Appendix 2.

Responses/Proposals from forum members

1. Regarding the "full spectrum of digital skills," the forum agreed that, while the Ireland is well-positioned in general, there are issues at the extreme ends of the spectrum (which is to say, both at the lower end of digital skills and at the very high end). The forum identified a need to focus on those areas specifically when considering skills as a whole.

2. Related to the above, the forum noted the issue of high-quality candidates for third-level education being filtered towards subjects like medicine and law, this may be a cultural issue, but the question of how to ensure high-achieving Leaving Certificate students consider an education in, for example, software development or artificial intelligence should be asked.

3. There was also a strong message from businesses present about the need for "non graduate pathways" towards digital skills. These may take the form of recognised accreditations training, micro-credentials, or similar.

4. Participants identified a lack of focused communications to SMEs as contributing to the issue, adding that there is a skills/awareness need on the part of SME owner/managers as they seek to begin the digital transition of their business. There is an impression that many owner/managers "don't know where to start" with the digitalisation of their business.

5. Further to the above, as businesses undergo digital transition, their skills needs may change (the example was given of retailers having transitioned to online sales during the pandemic, finding themselves with new skills needs in areas that are themselves not specifically digital, like requiring people who speak the language of their new target markets, etc).

6. Forum members also noted the growing surplus under the National Training Fund, emphasising the need to make use of this resource. Discussions on this point included how best to utilise the fund, with proposals including industry accredited training and working with trusted partners. Ibec indicated that its budget proposal included a rebate to provide the equivalent of an upskilling/reskilling voucher.

7. Participants also noted that graduates in Ireland may have skills needs when the time comes to transition from academic environments to employment in businesses. This is specific skills need that is currently being addressed by businesses, but for which higher education institutions may be able to better prepare students.

Presentation from Enterprise Ireland on the Digital Transition Fund

Ruairí Ó hAilín of Enterprise Ireland presented on the Digital Transition Fund.

Outcomes

Based on the discussions of the Forum, it was agreed that a position paper would be developed on the matter to provide advice to Government on Digital Skills, which the secretariat to the Forum would formally submit to DFHERIS.

[Note: This paper was drafted and circulated to Members for agreement before submission to D/FHERIS in advance of Budget 2022.]

The next meeting of the Forum will take place on 16th November 2022, hosted by Ibec.

AOB

It is also noted that DigitalHQ made a submission to the EDAF ahead of this meeting, including three recommendations across different areas. These are set out in brief below:

- Skills – Creation of a competitive fund open to rural hubs to deliver digitalisation initiatives in their catchment areas
- Digital portal – Incorporation of "trusted providers" into the Department's Digital Portal (under the DTF) to encourage businesses to digitalise.
- A Skillnet dedicated to Social Enterprises empowering hubs across the country – Noted that hubs are typically managed by social enterprises ("businesses for social good"). To maximise impact, require the type of upskilling and professional development a Skillnet can offer.

These are set out in more detail in the submission itself. Discussion on this topic also noted the broader opportunities and needs of social enterprises as a whole, and the potential benefits of digitalisation for social enterprises.

EDAF Secretariat

October 2022