

NCPP FORUM ON THE WORKPLACE OF THE FUTURE

Responding to Ireland's Skills Needs

Submission by:



Expert Group on
Future Skills Needs

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Introduction and Context

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) advises Government on skills and labour supply issues for the enterprise sector and makes recommendations on the steps required to address Ireland's skills needs. The National Training Advisory Committee, which was recently merged with the Expert Group, provides independent and strategic advice in relation to training people in employment. The EGFSN reports to both the Minister for Education & Science and the Minister for Enterprise, Trade & Employment.

The EGFSN welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the Forum on the Workplace of the Future. We are now at a new stage in our economic development. Our strategic goal of making the transition from an *investment*-driven economy to an *innovation*-driven economy will require fundamental changes in both the education and business environment. Against a backdrop of increasing global competition and rising costs at home, the ability of Irish businesses to respond to the changing economic environment will be crucial to the success of the economy going forward. A key element for the success of businesses in adapting to change will be the potential for employees to develop and acquire the necessary skills quickly. In this regard, upskilling and reskilling of the workforce will take on a greater significant role than ever before.

The EGFSN has, in its various reports, outlined the skills and training requirements of the economy to 2010 in key sectors of the economy. Our submission draws on the EGFSN's research findings and identifies particular areas we believe are relevant to the work of the Forum.

Key Issues for Forum on Future of the Workplace

Competitive Advantage based on Innovation

- The importance of recognising that Ireland's competitive advantage must be based on innovation and creativity cannot be understated. An innovative-driven economy will require flexible and adaptable education and training systems to ensure that it can respond to the changing needs of business.

Flexibility of Education/Training Systems

- The need for greater flexibility in higher education institutions has been reiterated in various reports by the Group and others. Part-time higher education requires to be further developed in Ireland. While inflexibilities in the universities and IoTs are being

partly addressed, more portability and cross recognition of programmes is required, and not just in IoTs, but *between* the IoTs and universities.

Greater Links between Enterprise and Third-Level

- There is a need for all third level institutions to adopt a much greater and more strategic enterprise focus, both in terms of satisfying the training requirements of business and industry as well as fostering new business and start-ups. While there have been major advancements in this area by some institutions in recent years, an institutional wide policy needs to be developed.

Need to Maintain a Balance of Skills Appropriate to the Needs of the Economy

- The importance of focusing on the higher end of the skills spectrum is now well recognised. However, equal recognition must be given to the importance of addressing the changing skills needs at the middle lower end of the labour market. In this context, there is a need to broaden the range of vocational training to ensure businesses can respond quickly to an ever-changing global economic environment.

LLL and Upskilling the Workforce Need to Become a Reality

- Priority should be given to the critical importance of embedding a culture of life-long learning in Ireland. According to the ILO, ***80% of all persons working 10 years from now are already in the workplace; meanwhile 80% of today's technology will have been replaced by that time.*** The extent to which adults participate in continued education and training in Ireland is poor relative to OECD countries (Ireland is ranked 13 out of 15 countries for the proportion of 25-64 year olds who participated in some form of continuing education and training within a 12 month period).
- The economic arguments for life-long learning and upskilling of the workforce are well documented in the *Report of the Task Force on Lifelong Learning*. There is a need to implement the recommendations set out in this report. Particular focus needs to be given to the funding anomaly between full-time and part-time education. Issues such as course flexibility and design need to be examined, including more extensive use of modularisation. Also, ways of accommodating study/exam leave requirements of in-work learners need to be explored.

- The need to increase participation of low-skilled workers in continuing education and training is likely to require some additional support to such workers when engaging in education and training¹.

Need for Greater Participation to Upper Second Level

- The EGFSN has shown that Ireland ranks 11th out of 13 countries for upper secondary graduation rates in 2000 with 74% of the population at the typical age of graduation achieved a leaving certificate standard of education. The graduation rate for males was found to be much lower than for females and 7% below the OECD average. The EGFSN believes that policy needs to focus on increasing the proportion of young people that achieve upper secondary level graduation.

Need for Greater Participation in Higher Education by Non-Standard Students

- The EGFSN believes that mechanisms to increase the proportion of people that enter the higher education system through alternative routes to the CAO process should be explored (e.g. mature students, further education, etc.). This is particularly important given the demographic trend towards falling numbers of school leavers.

Practical Experience, Project-based Learning and Flexibility/Innovation Skills

- Industry is increasingly looking to recruit people with practical work experience and commercial understanding. Institutions should aim to grow/ expand the level of internships.
- Fostering adaptability, flexibility, and innovation skills must become integral to the education system at all levels if the needs of a changing workforce are to be met.
- Project-based learning should be adopted widely at all post-secondary education levels. By moving in this direction, there is significant scope to improve both the quality of learning and the development of soft skills relevant to the workplace, without compromising the intellectual content of courses.

Multi-Disciplinary Skills

- Research by EGFSN indicates employers are increasingly looking for workers that have multi-disciplinary skills. Across all programmes of study, employers stated that a greater balance between the core area of study (whether in the technical or humanities areas) and ICT skills and generic skills is required. The main points to note are the following:

¹ Recent Census 2002 data indicates that 573,000 people in the Irish workforce currently have not attained a Leaving Certificate.

ICT Skills

- Given the rapid diffusion of computing technologies, there has been a huge increase in the number of jobs involving the use of IT. This has resulted in IT skills becoming increasingly important. Workforce IT skills is becoming one of the most important factors affecting business competitiveness. Such skills are increasingly viewed by employers as a ***basic skills requirement***.

Generic Skills

- Generic skills include basic skills such as literacy and numeracy, and also key skills such as communication, team working, planning, problem solving, and customer handling. Research indicates that these skills are becoming increasingly important in the workplace globally, and although some improvements have been made in the delivery of such skills in the education and training systems in Ireland, more needs to be done to prevent a gap arising in the future. Among the recommendations made by the EGFSN in the area of soft skills are: the need for soft skills development to be explicitly taken into account in a national policy agenda; initiatives in transition year; the need for soft skills to be incorporated into vocational programmes; and the development of soft skills at third level.

Guiding Principles: Key Characteristics of a Progressive Workplace

The only way forward for Ireland is to make the transition to an innovation-driven economy as quickly as possible. The EGFSN is of that view that investment in education and training is pivotal to making this transition by ensuring Ireland has the necessary skills available to become a knowledge society and securing our future prosperity. From the perspective of the workplace, employees are essential to the innovation process. Upskilling and reskilling must become *de rigeur* and become part of the culture of companies. However, the EGFSN believes this will require even greater commitment from all partners, including employers, employees, government, education providers and union organisations.

In this context, and having reflected on how successful organisations can help drive the innovation process, the EGFSN suggests that the workplace of the future will encompass the following key characteristics. It will be:

- Responsive (timely accommodation of external changes);
- Flexible and adaptive;
- Creative and innovative;
- Supportive of high levels of participation in life-long-learning (i.e. reskilling and upskilling a reality);
- Able to cope with continuous and incremental improvements in competitiveness;
- Facilitate maximum contribution of all staff.