

SOLAS,
Block 1,
Castleforbes House,
Castleforbes Road,
Dublin 1,
D01 A8N0

21st February 2025

Re: Further Education and Training Strategy 2025 – 2029

To whom it may concern,

Cork Chamber welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the Further Education and Training Strategy 2025 – 2029, coordinated by SOLAS and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

Cork Chamber represents 1,200 members together employing 130,000 people throughout the city, metropolitan area and county. Our vision is to lead a transforming and ambitious Cork City and County, uniting, representing and supporting our members and community. Our direction is guided by our formal pledge to uphold the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Cork Chamber has also been designated an SDG Champion by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications for 2024-25.

Cork Chamber's advocacy efforts are guided by the views and priorities of our partners, and are shaped by our continuous engagement with members, our board and key stakeholders in Cork City and County. Through this engagement, talent and skills have been identified as key priority areas for progress by Cork Chamber.

Ireland's ongoing competitiveness hinges on its ability to strike the right balance between leveraging FDI and supporting domestic enterprises to realise their full potential. Investing in and developing further education and training capabilities is a key cornerstone of progress in this area, and Cork Chamber is committed to supporting the development of the sector to address current and future skills needs, playing an important role in maintaining and enhancing Ireland's competitiveness on the global stage.

Cork City and County already punches well above its weight in terms of economic output, yet its ability to maintain and enhance its global competitiveness is dependent on the region's capacity to ensure the provision of a highly-skilled and talented workforce through nurture, attraction and retention.

As the new Government's term begins in earnest, now is the opportune time to set a course for future economic growth and competitiveness by strengthening Ireland's offering in terms of talent and skills development.

In Cork, we are fortunate to have a wide range of further education and training possibilities, benefitting from multidisciplinary and multisectoral expertise across UCC, MTU and Cork ETB, as well as additional courses and training opportunities from other providers.

The value of the work carried out by such organisations cannot be understated when it comes to recognising the strides already made in the provision of further education and training in the region, and Cork Chamber looks forward to supporting their work into the future, as well as the nationwide advancements that will be made in the sector in the years ahead.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Conor Healy', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Conor Healy

CEO

Theme 1: Delivering on Ireland's Skills Needs

At present, Ireland has well-identified skills gaps across a number of key sectors in the economy. A number of these skills shortages are particularly acute in the Cork region, which is home to a large number of firms operating in the pharmaceutical, life sciences, technology, and financial services sectors, among others. The 2024 National Skills Bulletin identified skills shortages across a number of key fields relevant for industry in Cork, including scientific professions, IT skills and craft occupations.¹

Cork Chamber carries out a quarterly Economic Trends survey to measure business sentiment and economic outlook among its members. In the most recent Economic Trend survey, which looked at the last quarter of 2024, skills shortages were cited as the top threat to business growth. Of those respondents who currently had vacancies advertised, 52% reported difficulties with filling those vacancies (i.e. jobs remaining vacant for three months or more following initial advertisement). 57% stated that specialist skills shortages were the top barrier to filling vacancies.² The availability of skills has consistently been cited as a limiting factor for business growth in Cork in recent years.

To meet current and future skills needs in the Cork region and across the country, the new FET Strategy should set a course to address skills gaps in a targeted manner to address specific skills shortages in certain sectors where they are more pronounced. Ongoing engagement with key industry and industry representatives will be critical to ensure that existing skills gaps are bridged, and that potential future shortages are mitigated.

In anticipating future skills needs, the growth of emerging sectors should be considered, particularly digitalisation/AI and the offshore renewable energy sector, which is a key emerging sector in the Cork region. The renewable energy sector is poised for considerable growth in the coming years, as we seek to meet ambitious climate targets set out at both EU and national level. Cork has a rich heritage in the energy sector and is home to many of the key industry players who will drive the green energy transition in the years and decades to come. With funding secured to develop the Port of Cork's infrastructure to facilitate offshore renewable energy, significant growth in the sector can be expected in the coming years.

Such growth, however, depends on the availability of a skilled and adaptable workforce, and industry engagement will be critical in this regard to ensure that Cork capitalises fully on the economic opportunity offered by the renewable energy sector. With an existing talent pool in the energy sector, priority should be given to those seeking to upskill and transfer their skills to the renewables sector, in tandem with efforts to reskill those interested in seeking employment in the sector.

¹ SOLAS National Skills Bulletin 2024, <https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/be80f7ad0c/national-skills-bulletin-2024.pdf>

² Cork Chamber Economic Trends survey, <https://www.corkchamber.ie/quarterly-economic-trends/>

The renewable energy sector represents just one example of the many growing sectors in Ireland at present, sectors which will require new skills and expertise. Attracting and growing these industries will be key to future-proofing Ireland's economy in the face of a rapidly-changing global landscape. Maintaining and enhancing our economic competitiveness depends on the country's ability to guarantee the provision of a highly-skilled and adaptable workforce, particularly in the face of ever-increasing challenges and competition to attract FDI to Ireland.

Theme 2: Fundamentally Changing the Way We Deliver FET

Cork Chamber welcomes the stated commitment to ensure that all learners can reach their full potential. People benefit from having access to a variety of paths to employment and education, and it is crucial to recognise that traditional higher and further education may not be the best fit for every individual, and indeed for every profession and sector of the economy.

Digitalisation has transformed the educational landscape, and with innovation continuing apace, leveraging the myriad of tools now at our disposal to develop an inclusive FET Strategy that caters to the individual needs of each learner is crucial. Indeed, such advances increase opportunities for collaboration with industry, both in-person and remotely, allowing learners to learn and apply skills in a practical context, bringing immense benefits for the economy by ensuring that learners are work-ready. Keeping pace with developments in the broader economy and society should be a key area of focus for the new FET Strategy.

In addition, new technologies and advancements will allow for an expansion of upskilling and reskilling for those currently in employment or seeking a change in career. This should be facilitated with an increase in flexible programmes, allowing for flexible modes of delivery, such as on-demand delivery of courses where appropriate and in-house training programmes.

Cork Chamber welcomes the commitment to evolve FET facilities and provision into integrated FET Colleges of the Future to encourage more community-based learning and tailored action to address the skills needs of regional economies. The development of specialist FET centres of skills development is particularly welcome to address skills needs in areas like the green economy and tech. Consideration should be given to the location of these centres of skills development relative to regional economies, and in particular, Cork's position as a green energy hub should be considered in the development of a specialist centre for the green economy. Such considerations will allow for a more holistic learning experience for those accessing training, enhancing opportunities for industry partnerships and practical experience.

Since the introduction of the last Further Education and Training Strategy for 2020 – 2024, there has been a notable and welcome increase in the numbers availing of further education and training, with over 400,000 FET places taken up in 2024.³ The new strategy should seek to build on this progress in the years 2025 – 2029, particularly in key areas of future growth such as the green economy, by adopting a holistic, coordinated approach to the development of future FET infrastructure and investment, taking account of regional economic development.

³ SOLAS, <https://www.solas.ie/solas-reports-record-numbers-of-further-education-and-training-places-taken-up-in-2024/>

Theme 3: Further widen participation by linking to communities and services.

Cork Chamber acknowledges the important role already played by the FET sector in local communities, encouraging upskilling, reskilling and participation in the workforce as a whole. The Chamber also welcomes the stated ambition to further embed the role of FET in local communities to enhance social cohesion and promote active citizenship.

Further developing industry partnerships in cooperation with local partners and organisations should be a key focus of the new FET Strategy. The benefits of closer cooperation are twofold; greater industry collaboration will bring immense benefits for learners, equipping them with industry-critical skills, while also bringing benefits to the local economy by ensuring the provision of a work-ready talent pool.

Cork Chamber has partnered with SECAD on the WorkAbility Cork: Inclusive Pathways to Employment Programme. The programme aims to create opportunities for individuals with disabilities, providing them with the tools and supports needed to allow them to achieve their employment goals. As part of this programme, the Chamber collaborates with local employers to source opportunities for those participating in the programme and supports them in accessing these opportunities.⁴ Such collaborations play an important role in promoting social cohesion in local areas, while also supporting individual employees to reach their full potential.

In addition, Cork Chamber is also a partner of the Cork Access Network and became the first formal partner from the business community to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with Cork City's Education and Lifelong Learning Partners in 2024. Cork Chamber's participation in the initiative serves to highlight the essential role of businesses in fostering a culture of continuous education. All project partners work together to mitigate against educational disadvantage in Cork City where possible, with project partners working across four broad pillars of access, namely further and higher education, community, the workplace, and schools.⁵

The new Strategy should seek to build on existing programmes and services in operation in communities across the country, providing flexible support and access to FET resources where appropriate. Such initiatives are critical to promote social cohesion and mitigate the impacts of marginalisation in vulnerable communities. Inclusion, accessibility and affordability should be at the core of the new FET Strategy, allowing for flexibility in delivery and individualised learning plans where possible.

Alongside collaboration with industry, consideration should be given to the role of business representative organisations in facilitating engagement with prospective employers and supporting learners on their journey to employment, bridging the gap between learning and

⁴ Cork Chamber, <https://www.corkchamber.ie/workability-cork/>

⁵ Cork Learning City, <https://www.corklearningcity.ie/>

work experience. Such organisations can play a key role in improving awareness among employers of the benefits to engaging with further education institutions. Many employers, particularly SMEs, may not have the resources in-house to engage with further education institutions, or to provide upskilling opportunities for staff, and representative organisations or community-based organisations can help to bridge this gap by providing information and linking in with educational institutions.

In this regard, the new Strategy should also consider how connections with the FET sector can be made more accessible to employers and employees alike, through the provision of accessible, reader-friendly guides and other communications activities aimed at enhancing understanding and raising awareness.