



**Chambers
Ireland**
Advancing business together



Chambers Ireland submission to SOLAS on the strategic review of eCollege and technology enhanced learning (TEL) supports in further education and training (FET)

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Please describe your current involvement and experience with eCollege and/or technology enhanced learning (TEL)

Chambers Ireland, the voice of business throughout Ireland, is an all-island organisation with a unique geographical reach. Our 38 members are the Chambers of Commerce in the cities and towns throughout the country – active in every constituency. Each of our member Chambers is central to their local business community and all seek to promote thriving local economies that can support sustainable cities and communities.

The issue of skills is to the forefront of our membership's concerns. Recruiting and retaining skilled and experienced workers is a pressing issue that is having a detrimental impact on the competitiveness of businesses right across the country.

For this reason, upskilling and reskilling opportunities are very important and, the digital provision of these services, can minimise barriers to engagement and incentivise individuals to pursue opportunities, regardless of their geographical position or local training amenities.

Many of our Chambers are actively engaged with their local education and training boards to drive the skills provision in their area to meet local labour needs. They represent the businesses, big and small, that create employment opportunities and contribute to local economies. They are well placed to progress the skills agenda and to promote their locality as a competitive place in which to do business.

Currently what are the key strengths of eCollege and TEL provision in FET?

eCollege and technology enhanced learning provision in further education and training have a number of benefits and key strengths.

Covid-19 accelerated the move to digital mediums for working, learning and socialising. People of all ages across the country adapted to the movement restrictions by adopting new technology and engaging with one another across online platforms and specialist software. We now have an opportunity where a much broader audience has familiarised themselves with new technology and the prospect of digital learning is no longer as daunting as it may have been pre-pandemic. This means that more people can avail of digital training opportunities than ever before as your geographical location or local learning provision is no longer a barrier to access.

The face-to-face contact through eCollege's eTutors or the blended learning model by ETBs also offers a human element that may help bridge the gap with anyone that is nervous of digital learning and in need of additional support.

The high levels of awareness surrounding ETBs and, more recently, eCollege is another key strength. ETBs are firmly established in local areas and, for many, would be their first stop in

pursuing training opportunities. eCollege also had a huge profile boost during Covid-19, as people looked to learn new skills and sought out online opportunities.

Digital learning also facilitates more flexibility. Building learning around personal and professional commitments means that more people can engage with programmes and develop their skills. This is crucial at a time when we are fast approaching full employment and complete labour force activation is important if we are to continue to grow our economy.

As mentioned in the previous response, the Chamber network actively engages with ETBs across the country. This local, on-the-ground insight into skills needs means that ETB courses and programmes can be more flexible and adaptive in meeting those needs. Businesses can engage with ETBs on their hiring needs and can even recruit directly from the pool of individuals completing particular courses. This focused and bespoke aspect of ETB-delivered training is another key strength.

We are pleased to see that online examinations are now offered in most, if not all, of the eCollege programmes. This is a welcome development and promotes true remote learning. This should also be facilitated across digital ETB courses.

Currently what are the key weaknesses of eCollege and TEL provision in FET?

While digital learning can promote flexibility and create opportunities for more people to engage with training opportunities, a key weakness of this model is the requirement for an individual to invest in adequate technology and to have a reliable internet connection. This can be a barrier to some in accessing these services.

The courses and programmes available across eCollege and ETBs generally offer only an introduction to a particular topic or concept. While the courses can be a useful upskilling opportunity for employees in their current positions, the courses on offer will likely not suffice in reskilling an individual to take on a new position in a new, specialist sector. For those interested in pursuing a new career, they may have to go on and complete more specialist training and incurring further costs to do so. This could be a significant barrier for those who are unemployed but looking to move into an in-demand sector.

However, costs are unlikely to be the only barrier. Due to the foundation level of available programmes on offer, they may not offer a true insight into the programme area or what may be involved for learners wanting to move to the next step and to achieve a QQI accredited qualification. Better career guidance and pathway progression opportunities should be offered or highlighted to all learners completing eCollege or ETB programmes.

What are the key opportunities for eCollege and TEL provision in FET to help fill current skills gaps and deliver the skills needed by employers and industries?

Digital learning offers opportunities for SMEs across the country to upskill and reskill staff to meet the evolving needs of their business. This has particular benefits for more rural businesses, as digital learning can also mean remote learning. The flexibility to fit studying around personal and professional commitments without the need for regular in-person attendance can have a positive impact on both individuals and their employers, as well as the domestic economy.

eCollege and ETBs can also engage with local businesses and stakeholders to assess what local and national skills needs are and to establish how they can support the delivery of programmes that address these needs. This flexibility is a key opportunity.

The Irish FET sector could lead the way with microcredentials. Chambers Ireland and our network are advocates for this mode of learning - bite-sized accredited courses where an individual can dip in and out of a programme and has the opportunity to progress to more advanced qualifications over time. This way of learning works for businesses and for individuals, and is particularly suited to digital delivery. Microcredentials also address the potential weakness, as outlined in the previous response, of the learning gap between a short online course and choosing to complete a level 7 degree in the same subject for example. A learner can progress at their own time and pace. This would also be supportive of national goals to increase the lifelong learning rate amongst adults.

What systemic obstacles, in your opinion, prevent the use of eCollege and TEL being optimized?

A common issue with digital learning and, in particular, free digital learning is retention. Individuals are often enticed by online advertising and other marketing to sign-up for courses without fully realising the workload or comprehending the commitment required. Research into MOOCs or massive open online courses, indicate potential retention rates of less than twenty percent. This is likely to be an issue impacting eCollege course completion rates.

Online learning is also a competitive sector. There are numerous independent training providers, companies, colleges, and universities, both national and international, offering online training. Although there are many factors that may influence a person's decision to choose an eCollege programme over another provider, the accreditation that is on offer may be a key factor. For some learners, learning new skills and advancing their knowledge in a particular area may be their purpose in completing an eCollege course. However, for others they may be hoping to achieve a recognised certification that will boost their CV and improve their chances of being hired. eCollege course certification may not go far enough to improve an individuals' employment potential.

Are you aware of your counterparts in other countries or the rest of the education sector in Ireland that are using digital learning to deliver skills needs well?

Chambers Ireland is an active member of Eurochambres – the European Chamber of Commerce. In 2020, they carried out a survey that revealed around 75% of businesses took decisive steps to digitalise their activities during the pandemic and that one of the main obstacles to pursuing a full digital transition is the lack of digitally skilled employees.

The European Commission is trying to address this through the publication of a Digital Compass for Europe, which sets out digital targets up to 2030 and focuses, in particular, on skills development. It provides the foundation for a holistic and long-term digital strategy, which enhances digital skills across all levels of education.

Next year has also been allocated as the European Year of Skills and there will be great opportunities to engage with our European counterparts on technology enhanced learning and digital skills delivery.