Chambers Ireland Submission to the Department of Education and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy Consultation

February 2023

About Chambers Ireland

Chambers Ireland is an all-island business organisation with a unique geographical reach. Our 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.

Our Network has pledged to advocate for and support the advancement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Accordingly, we use the Goals as a framework to identify policy priorities and communicate our recommendations. We have a particular focus on five of the goals encompassing decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), gender equality (SDG 5), industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9) and climate action (SDG 13).[1]

In the context of the current consultation, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy are foundational skills that have a direct impact on all areas of society. In relation to the Sustainable Development Goals above, the ability to read, write, understand numbers and embrace technology are all crucial in creating thriving communities, empowering individuals, and growing our potential as an open, advanced, educated and competitive economy. It is for these reasons that Chambers Ireland are submitting a response to this consultation. An innovative and robust strategy for literacy, numeracy and digital literacy have direct implications in the future for businesses and the world of work.

Literacy and numeracy are crucial skills that demand continuous investment, evidence-based research, and sufficient resourcing. It is through education that we can transform lives,

---

[1] The Chambers Ireland SDGs. Available at: https://www.chambers.ie/policy/sustainable-development-goals/chambers-ireland-sdgs/

however, education is often not linear or equal and we need to promote an education system that is equitable, inspirational and transformative to the lives of all children and young people growing up in Ireland.

The move to incorporate digital literacy on the same footing as traditional literacy and numeracy is also a very welcome advancement that recognises the importance of the digital transition for individuals, businesses, the economy and society as a whole. Achieving a fair and just transition is a key focus in ensuring that no one gets left behind as we adopt and integrate new technologies into all aspects of modern life. Therefore, it is important we prioritise digital skills from an early age.

Overall, Chambers Ireland commends the achievements that have been made to date in literacy and numeracy levels across the country and welcomes the renewed focus on delivering a robust strategy that can meet the future needs of children and young people.

Prioritisation of digital skills

Since the last National Strategy, 'Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020', children in Ireland have faced a monumental social and learning challenge through the impact of Covid-19. Through an initial period of home-schooling, as schools across the country were forced to close their doors, followed by significant disruption incurred as a result of public health guidelines surrounding self-isolation, children are likely to have experienced prolonged absences from the traditional classroom model and interruptions to the ordinary course of the school curriculum. The move towards video conferencing and digitally-facilitated learning may have shone a spotlight on digital literacy deficits and so, it is therefore welcome that the new strategy will include digital literacy as a core focus.

In the European Commission's 2022 Country Report for Ireland[2], it was reported that while Ireland is an advanced economy, there are some factors holding back productivity in domestic sectors, with skills shortages in IT, science and engineering, as well as lagging digitalisation being noted as particular concerns. Therefore, strengthening digital skills and addressing the risk of a digital divide, particularly across the education sector, are core priorities for improving productivity.

In recognition of the importance of digital rights and freedoms, the Presidents of the Commission, the European Parliament and the Council have recently enshrined a set of European Digital Rights and Principles[3], which aim to promote a digital transition shaped by European values. The principle of solidarity and inclusion stipulates that technology should unite, not divide, people and that everyone should have access to the internet, to digital skills, and to digital public services. The safety and security principle also declares that the digital environment should be safe and secure and that all users, from childhood to old age, should be empowered and protected.

It is therefore timely that both the Department of Education and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth are moving to reflect the importance of digital literacy as a key educational cornerstone that is regarded in the same context as literacy and numeracy.

---

[2] 2022 European Semester: Country Report – Ireland

[3] European Digital Rights and Principles

Parental and community focus

Chambers Ireland welcomes the holistic approach to educating children and young people in the core skills of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. The delivery and facilitation of this education is not purely focused on traditional educators, in the form of teachers and early years educators, but is extended to include parents and local communities.

The education system is not always equitable, and some children face significant disadvantage in traditional school environments, therefore, extending the scope of this strategy beyond the classroom will mean that more children will get the support they need to develop these core skills. We would like to see a multi-dimensional, collaborative approach to learning that ensures no child is left behind and all are offered the support they need to progress their knowledge and competencies in the core areas of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy.

As discussed in the consultation document, "children and young people achieve better learning outcomes when their parents and families take an active interest in their education, supporting and encouraging them and creating achievable expectations." In the first high level factor proposed to underpin the new strategy, parents and communities are highlighted as core supports for children in the context of literacy and numeracy development. However, this scope should be extended to include digital literacy.

Promoting and exploring digital skills in the home can have an important knock-on effect on parents' digital competencies. Statistics from 2021 show that 70% of the Irish adult population had an overall basic level of digital skills. Although this is above the EU average, there is still a significant proportion of adults with no digital skills. Also, our definition of basic skills is likely to evolve over time and include higher levels of comprehension. Therefore, as we focus on digitalising public services and reducing skills gaps in the labour market, we should make sure that we do not isolate the education of digital skills from the home. Otherwise, we risk creating

a greater digital divide. Parents and guardians should be supported and empowered to get involved and to explore digital literacy with their child.

While the levels of access to technology may vary across households and depend on a number of factors, including socio-economic status and parental digital literacy levels, this may be where the intersection with community supports could provide important outreach. Libraries, for example, offer access to technology, courses, and other resources that could facilitate digital learning. Therefore, in taking a holistic approach to the education of children in digital skills, there could be an important opportunity to engage parents and guardians more effectively and ultimately improve their competency and overall confidence, which may inspire them to upskill.

Empowering educators

In the context of schools, we would like to see teachers and early years educators being empowered to teach these core skills in a way that is fun, interactive, inspirational and fully supportive. This can be achieved both through the curriculum and through equipping teachers and early years educators with the skills to deliver the curriculum. It is therefore welcomed that the proposed high-level factors underpinning the new strategy include a focus on improving the curriculum and the learning experience, as well as improving teachers' and early years educators' professional practice and leadership capacity.

Ireland has very positive outcomes in terms of reading literacy levels, ranking third out of the 27 EU member states, however, in the fields of mathematical and scientific literacy, we have slightly lower achievement levels and are ranked tenth in the EU. It is important that these skills are given equal attention and are taught by educators with enthusiasm and passion for the subject, as well as a thorough understanding of their application in the real world. This can

inspire a future generation to learn to love subjects such as science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) – areas where we have traditionally experienced significant skills gaps and which are essential in facilitating the digital transition.

In the section of the consultation document on 'International Characteristics', reading as a form of enjoyment was highlighted as a key strategic driver in other countries' approaches to improving national literacy levels. The same concept could be applied to our numeracy and digital literacy frameworks.