



Chambers Ireland Submission to the Department of Education on the Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance 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, lifelong guidance has a broad and all-encompassing remit that has the potential to create decent work, develop sustainable communities, promote equality, and drive innovation across different sectors.

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

Chambers Ireland's Perspective

The final report of the Indecon Review of Career Guidance² was published in April 2019 and highlighted some important issues relating to the effectiveness of guidance provision across all levels of education. It is therefore disappointing that the points raised in this review are only being addressed now, almost four years later. In those four years, we have also experienced a seismic shift through the impact of Covid-19. Attitudes to training and skills have changed as a result and the mediums through which people choose to learn have also changed. This can be demonstrated by the fact that the Government education and training portal, *The Right Course*, was the most viewed non-Covid campaign on gov.ie throughout 2021³. The appetite for learning is there, so we now need to be able to offer appropriate guidance and support those looking to upskill, reskill or pursue a new career opportunity.

More recently, we have witnessed the ESRI publish a research bulletin entitled 'Career decision-making among young people in Ireland'⁴ which highlighted some of the same issues in terms of significant inequality in pathways pursued by young people after leaving school and the level of access they have to career guidance. Despite this, it is welcome that Government are now moving to address these inefficiencies, and the establishment in March 2022 of a Policy Group for Lifelong Guidance is an encouraging, cross-Government initiative that represents positive momentum. The involvement of senior officials from the Department of Education; Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; Department of Social Protection; Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; and the

² Indecon Review of Career Guidance (2019) - <https://assets.gov.ie/24951/dffde726604b451aa6cc50239a375299.pdf>

³ The Right Course - <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/f205a-the-right-course/>

⁴ Career decision-making among young people in Ireland (2023) - <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RB202305.pdf>

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment should give prominence to lifelong guidance and the united approach is a progressive step in the right direction.

The National Training Fund surplus should be utilised to establish a lifelong guidance system that is flexible and accessible to all. As we approach full employment, we need to ensure that the system can engage with and offer support to anyone in Ireland that is eligible to work and looking for an opportunity that may suit their particular skills and personal circumstances. As a result of Covid-19 and the increased workplace flexibility resulting from remote and hybrid working arrangements, the number of women participating in the workforce reached a record level of 72%. This flexibility of working conditions opened up opportunities for many that may have previously disengaged from the workforce and is demonstrative of how important it is to introduce diverse and dynamic solutions that can promote labour force activation across all levels of society. Guidance is key to unlocking this potential and promoting new opportunities.

Chambers Ireland welcomes the move to create “a more unified guidance system that will allow all young people and adults to have access to high quality and appropriate lifelong guidance.” In the past, career guidance in schools would have sit separately to student supports in further and higher education, while information accessible to job-seekers may have varied from that available to employees looking for upskilling or reskilling opportunities. The disjointed approach does not make sense in the broader context of developing an open, educated and skilled workforce that can drive forward the Irish economy, improve productivity, and meet the skills’ needs of the future.

Comments on the Draft Vision for Lifelong Guidance

The draft vision for Lifelong Guidance, as detailed in the consultation document, sets out some high-level priorities for a future strategy. We welcome the holistic approach to guidance, which

encompasses careers information, advice, guidance counselling, assessment of skills and mentoring. It is positive that career mobility is also a key focus and that upskilling, reskilling and self-employment are given attention. This broader approach to guidance reflects the differing needs and priorities of a range of individuals across all ages and career stages. It is also conducive to creating a workforce that is more dynamic and able to diversify over time to meet future demands.

We welcome the move to professionalise the guidance sector, however, the consultation document is limited in detail on how this will be achieved and what it may mean for guidance counsellors and other careers advice professionals. It is mentioned that CPD will be consistently available to practitioners and that relevant training will be provided to all those that provide guidance which is relevant and appropriate to particular roles. While this is needed and will be crucial in ensuring high quality, accurate and up-to-date advice is given to all who seek support, it will be difficult to ensure continuity and compliance, as the information is only useful when it is practiced. Without more detail and a clear implementation plan, we may continue to see gaps in the provision of guidance, gaps which may continue to be harmful for the marginalized or most at risk.

We also welcome the focus on entrepreneurship. This is an important aspect for any individual to consider when weighing up career options and it is therefore welcome that it will be included in the lifelong guidance strategy. Entrepreneurship also has significant potential to be a driver under pillar three – access and inclusion. If we can empower all individuals to pursue their potential by offering support and championing new ideas, we can create a more diverse business landscape.

We have highlighted a few of our key considerations below.

1. More direct involvement from employers and associated stakeholders.

Chambers Ireland is an all-island organisation with a unique geographical reach that represents employers of all sizes from all regions in Ireland. We have a vested interest in ensuring that sufficient, accurate and informed guidance is available to all individuals at any stage in their career journey, as it is these individuals that have the potential to drive forward the economy by supporting and growing businesses.

With Ireland consistently having one of the highest growth rates in the EU, almost full-employment, and Britain leaving the European Union, we ought to have one of the most attractive economies in Europe for people seeking opportunities. However, we are consistently hearing from our network that finding and employing suitably skilled employees is harder than ever and that skills gaps in certain sectors are widening, not shrinking.

For this reason, we would like to see the engagement of employers and associated stakeholders being prioritized in a lifelong guidance strategy. This is important for three reasons:

- i. For sharing information on skills gaps and identifying key sectors and skills that will have increased demand over time.
- ii. For encouraging the uptake of apprenticeships and being involved in the modelling and development of future apprenticeship programmes.
- iii. In making work experience a more meaningful and impactful medium for individuals to explore new career opportunities.

In relation to skills gaps, businesses have a vested interest in communicating early about the issues they may be facing in recruiting for certain roles. According to the most recent

Recruitment Agency Survey⁵ conducted by the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit in SOLAS, the demand for skills in sectors such as life sciences, ICT, construction, health and finance is a continuing trend that is recurring year on year. This information should be filtering through the lifelong guidance chain of communication to young people planning for their future, job seekers looking to take a meaningful step towards secure employment, individuals weighing up a career change, and anyone else interested in a new employment journey.

The apprenticeship sector in Ireland has been through a period of significant growth and development over the last number of years with over 26,300 apprentices training in Ireland as of January 2023, compared to less than 15,000 five years ago. However, issues with retention rates, poor uptake by women and other marginalized individuals, cultural attitudes to apprenticeships, and the slow rollout and dissemination of information regarding degree-level programmes have reduced the potential growth opportunity that exists within the apprenticeship sector. Therefore, it is important that the future lifelong guidance strategy is able to address these issues and position apprenticeships more prominently as a viable and rewarding career pathway for individuals of all ages, abilities and career stages. One way this can be achieved is by engaging more employers directly. Many may not be aware of the developments within the sector and the expanded range of programmes that are now on offer. We welcome the newly launched *One More Job*⁶ pilot initiative that aims to provide assistance to small and micro businesses to employ one or more apprentices in 2023, as well as the new €2,000 grant per apprentice per year for those apprenticeships which do not include a training allowance. By engaging more employers, the apprenticeship sector has the potential to grow

⁵ Difficult-to-fill vacancies survey (2022) - <https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/2702562088/solas-difficult-to-fill-vacancies.pdf>

⁶ One More Job - <https://apprenticeship.ie/news-events/news/one-more-job>

and develop more rapidly and become a more viable option that guidance counsellors can confidently recommend and advise individuals on.

In relation to work experience, Chambers Ireland would like to see a more structured guidance framework being offered to employers to assist them in creating meaningful work experience opportunities for a more diverse range of individuals. Traditionally, work experience is often thought of in the context of transition year students or interns and, in many cases, there may be limited resources available to create a realistic representation of the work involved during the students' time at a particular business or organisation. However, when work experience or internships work well, they can inspire a young person to pursue their passion or, equally as importantly, show them that they may not be suited to a particular career path at an early stage. Employers often want to encourage and facilitate these opportunities for individuals to learn and experience a particular job first-hand, however, in order to do this, they need more support. With Ireland approaching full-employment, we need to ensure that our training and education is as efficient as possible to capture an individual's potential and offer them the right opportunities to succeed. By engaging employers on the successes and challenges they may have experienced in the past relating to work experience initiatives or internships, a best practice model could be created and rolled out to support employers looking to create informative and inspiring work experience programmes.

2. Tailored provision for upskilling and reskilling

Over the last decade, the world of work in Ireland has been constantly evolving at a very fast pace. In the draft strategy, we welcome the focus that has been placed on upskilling and reskilling but would like to see a more intensive focus on the guidance supports that will be offered in these scenarios.

According to Ireland's National Competitiveness and Productivity Council, annual labour productivity of domestic companies increased by an average of 0.8% between 2010 and 2019, which was well below that of multinationals, which increased by 8.8%⁷. Among the recommendations to increase productivity growth was increased innovation, knowledge diffusion, digitalization, diversification across industries, and upskilling.

Along with the drive for increased productivity, the changing trends within the labour market are shining a spotlight on increased labour mobility. People are no longer finding one job or career path and staying in the same position over the entirety of their working life. Similarly, the twin transition and our ageing population are also considerations that should form an important part of the lifelong guidance strategy. Instead of viewing these trends as challenges, they should be positioned as opportunities. Guidance, in the context of individuals looking to upskill or reskill, has the potential to encourage adaptability and dynamism that can only be beneficial for the labour market and the economy more broadly.

We now need a more flexible workforce that is open to change, capable of learning new skills and willing to transfer across sectors and industries. This openness can be fostered and encouraged through an informative, accessible, engaging and motivational multidimensional guidance system.

3. The unification of information via digital platforms

One of the fundamental issues arising from the current system of guidance in Ireland is the disjointed nature of information and available supports. For those within the education and

⁷ EU Commission 2022 Country Report – Ireland -

training sector, information may be more readily available and accessible. However, for individuals looking for personalized support on options that may be open to them, particularly in the context of upskilling, reskilling and entrepreneurship, it may be much harder to work out where is the best place to find relevant information and seek one-to-one advice and guidance.

This is where a digital platform should aim to unify competing options. We should build on the momentum of the cross-Government Policy Group for Lifelong Guidance and the strategic focus on developing and implementing a Lifelong Guidance Strategy by focusing on continuity and coherence of resources across a single, easy-to-navigate portal. Such a portal should also include access to one-to-one personalized career support and guidance. As well as unifying information, a simple online portal can showcase different pathways that may not ordinarily be considered or pursued by particular individuals. For example, apprenticeships may be of interest to people looking to return to the workforce or change career, while mentoring could be seen as a good opportunity for someone looking for a little more support.

In our recent submission to SOLAS on the strategic review of eCollege and technology enhanced learning supports in further education and training⁸, we also make the case for microcredentials as a valuable mode of learning that works for businesses and for individuals, and is particularly suited to digital delivery. An online guidance portal can highlight the versatility of this form of learning.

⁸ Chambers Ireland submission to SOLAS on the strategic review of eCollege and technology enhanced learning supports in further education and training - https://www.chambers.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Chambers-Ireland-submission_Skills-Focus-Group_Strategic-Review-eCollege-and-TEL-Supports-in-FET_December-2022.pdf

Overall, Chambers Ireland would like to see the unification of the lifelong guidance system and the establishment of a system that is equitable, informative and inspirational, and which promotes a diverse range of options and opportunities for individuals of all demographics.