CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Ireland's architecture for identifying, prioritising and responding to skills needs
Authors	Trench Bowles, Nora
Publication date	2019
Original Citation	Trench Bowles, N. (2019) 'Ireland's architecture for identifying, prioritising and responding to skills needs', Learning Connections 2019: Spaces, People, Practice, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland, 5-6 December, pp. 16-19. doi: 10.33178/LC.2019.04
Type of publication	Conference item
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/LC.2019.04
Rights	© 2019, the Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Download date	2026-11-15 15:26:20
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/10731



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Ireland's architecture for identifying, prioritising and responding to skills needs

Nora Trench Bowles
Irish Universities Association

Introduction

Based on a request from the Irish Universities Association (IUA) Council, which is made up of the seven Irish university Presidents, the State architecture for identifying, prioritising and responding to Ireland's skills needs was examined. This was done to help universities take greater cognizance of the government's skills agenda, and better understand what misalignments may exist between the university context and the State's conception of skills 'supply and demand', which may have an impact on universities' response to skills needs.

State architecture

The *National Skills Strategy 2025* (2016) introduced a new State architecture for identifying, prioritising and responding to Ireland's skills needs.

The National Skills Council was established in order to oversee research identifying skills needs, to advise on prioritisation of identified skills needs, and to promote and report on the delivery of responses. An advisory body under the Department of Education and Skills, membership is largely drawn from government departments and agencies. A Chair from industry was recently appointed, and membership is also drawn from the university, technological higher education, and further education and training sectors.

A network of nine Regional Skills Fora was also established, providing an opportunity to channel regional intelligence to the national level through the National Skills Council. These Fora are primarily emphasised as platforms for engagement on skills needs between local employers and education and training providers. A key role has emerged as helping employers better understand and access existing education and training provision, and facilitating employer involvement with education provision.

Efforts have been made to design the State architecture in such a way that it is coordinated and integrated. Universities are key actors in this architecture, with representatives on local Regional Fora and with a member on the National Skills Council.

However, the intelligence that is gathered and disseminated across the system has proven to be of limited use in informing mainstream university provision for a wide range of reasons, some of which are outlined below.

Identifying and prioritising skills needs

The Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU), placed in SOLAS, manages the National Skills Database. An annual National Skills Bulletin is published using this labour market information on behalf of the National Skills Council, a core component of the research identifying skills needs.

To take the latest published version as an example, *National Skills Bulletin 2018* lists 78 skills or labour shortages, covering all sectors of the economy. Shortages are identified at the level of job title, with very general detail on the specific shortage given. Shortages are not quantified, nor prioritised in terms of relative importance or urgency; the causes of the shortages are not identified, nor are appropriate responses identified. At such a granular level, and without indications of magnitude or scale, it is questionable how this information can be helpfully used to inform universities' response to identified skills needs.

Crucially, the skills/ labour shortages identified in the National Skills Bulletin are generally immediate. Forecasts are not provided, unless potential shortages are implicit in the data already used, nor is analysis of shortages over time, on which future predictions could be based. This also presents challenges to the university context, considering the period of time it takes for graduates of new/ modified programmes to emerge.

The horizon scanning role in the State's architecture is held by the Expert Group on Future Skills

Needs (EGFSN). An advisory body like the National Skills Council, it is placed in the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation. Also like the National Skills Council, membership is largely are drawn from government departments and agencies. It publishes an average of three lengthy reports each year on behalf of the National Skills Council, another core component of the research identifying skills needs. Recent reports examine digitalisation and the potential trade implications of Brexit.

Estimating the projected magnitude and scale of skills needs, which could be helpful in informing future university provision, is done in only a small number of EGFSN reports. *Forecasting the Future Demand for High Level ICT Skills in Ireland, 2017-2022* identifies 73,000 potential new job openings connected to computer and electrical/ electronic engineering skills. Other reports identify numbers of job openings in the biopharma industry and freight transport, distribution and logistics sector to 2020. EGFSN research is constrained by Department of Finance 5-year growth forecasts which presents challenges, considering the period of time it takes for graduates of new/ modified university programmes to emerge.

Responding to skills needs

The SLMRU publishes an annual follow-up report to the National Skills Bulletin, also on behalf of the National Skills Council. With reference to shortages listed in the National Skills Bulletin ("demand"), Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply calculates "supply" as the number of awards by broad/ detailed ISCED codes and by NFQ level where a qualification is likely to be required or sought by employers.

The alignment of award and shortage is determined by SLMRU. However, CSO Higher Education Outcomes research shows that for most broad fields of study, large numbers of graduates, who have developed a wide range of skills, move across disciplinary boundaries in employment, dispersing among a wide range of NACE sectors. It is therefore questionable how this information accurately reflects and can be helpfully used to inform universities' response to identified skills needs.

This conception of skills 'supply and demand' also fails to recognise what we know to be the broad value of university education and the significance of transversal graduate skills, where universities have dedicated much effort to developing graduate attributes which go beyond disciplinary/ technical expertise. It is also misaligned with the university context whereby particular skills, for example data analysis, are developed in learning outcomes across a breadth of fields of learning.

The EGFSN is currently modelling growth of design skills by 2025 for an upcoming report. Related education and training provision is also being examined, on the basis of a 'key word search' of a list of programmes. Again misaligned with the university context, modularisation is therefore missed, where design skills could be part of the learning outcomes of another, wider, or simply differently titled programme.

Further consideration

Universities have always responded to Ireland's skills needs and are eager to effectively continue to do so. How can we ensure that the State architecture for identifying, prioritising and responding to skills needs takes the university context into account in such a way that facilitates this? How can we ensure that the intelligence that is gathered and disseminated across this architecture helpfully informs mainstream university provision, without then becoming overly prescriptive?

References

CSO (2019). *Higher Education Outcomes - Graduation Years 2010-2016*.

Department of Education and Skills (2016). *Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025*.

Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) on behalf of the National Skills Council (2019).

Forecasting the Future Demand for High Level ICT Skills in Ireland, 2017-2022.

Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) on behalf of the National Skills Council (2018).

Addressing the Skills Needs Arising from the Potential Trade Implications of Brexit.

Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) on behalf of the National Skills Council (2018).

Digital Transformation: Assessing the Impact of Digitalisation on Ireland's Workforce.

Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) in SOLAS on behalf of the National Skills Council (2019). *Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply 2019*.

Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) in SOLAS on behalf of the National Skills Council (2018). *National Skills Bulletin 2018*.