



NEXT STEPS

for Teaching and Learning:

Moving Forward Together



The Impact of Covid-19 on the Future of Work: Supporting Lifelong Learning and Graduate Work-Readiness



Ibec is Ireland's largest business lobby and representative group, with our members employing over 70% of private sector workers. We believe the cornerstone of Ireland's social and economic success is a strong pipeline of talent supported by a world class education system. Ibec's contribution to the Next Steps project is understanding the impact of Covid-19 on the future of work and what this means for teaching and learning.

The Impact of Covid-19 on the Demand for Skills

The Covid-19 crisis has demonstrated how quickly the skills needs within an economy can change and in unprecedented ways. According to Ibec research¹, 65% of CEOs agree that Covid-19 has meant a permanent change in their business model with many companies facing an immediate need to upskill staff to respond to Covid-19 related business challenges. The availability of skills remains a challenge for 81% of organisations planning to recruit in 2022² where leadership and social influence, self-management, communication skills, people management and teamwork and collaboration are among priority areas for skills investment³. At the same time broader environmental, demographic and socioeconomic drivers are interacting to create complex challenges for society, such as climate change and globalisation, which will continue to drive the skills agenda.

Supporting Lifelong Learning

The education system must be flexible to support the resilience of learners with multiple contact points over the course of their lives to respond to societal challenges, technological advancements and the evolution of business processes. Ireland has set a target of achieving a 15% participation rate in lifelong learning by 2025 and 73% of businesses indicate that lifelong learning is a high or top priority for their organisation⁴. Despite the growing societal and economic importance of lifelong learning, data from the CSO⁵ shows that 32.4% of adults have some unmet demand for lifelong learning. Flexible pathways to learning such as part-time courses, online and blended learning and micro-credentials can help to achieve Ireland's target for lifelong learning and support individuals to develop their resilience for the future of work.

Preparing Graduates for the Future of Work

While the Covid-19 crisis demonstrates that the skills need within an economy can change in unpredictable ways, we can point to several broad trends that will be important for future proofing the skillsets of graduates. These include:

- **SME Management Skills:** A lack of qualified employees and skilled managers in Irish SMEs is reducing SME innovation capacity and competitiveness. Instilling management and leadership-based skills to SMEs is critical for reducing the productivity gap. These skills may include people management, project management, strategy development and implementation, developing an innovation culture and successful sales.
- **Green Skills:** Increasing awareness of climate change and the transition towards a low-carbon economy has given rise to new 'green occupations' and the 'greening' of existing jobs has created demand for green skills across the labour market. Green skills are particularly relevant for sectors of the economy such as transport/logistics, waste management, energies and resource management, environmental administration and monitoring, building design and construction, retail and agriculture. Skills associated with energy and resource efficiency and development, green entrepreneurship and innovation, carbon monitoring, sustainability skills across the supply chain and lean manufacturing will be important.
- **Digital Skills:** Digitalisation has become an important economic policy for Ireland and ensuring that Ireland has the secure pipeline of ICT specialists is essential. Digital skills are also a part of the everyday work lives of Irish people and a critical skill for entering the labour market. Employees now need a competent level of digital literacy to be proficient in their jobs and reap the benefits of new technologies. However, only 53% of Irish people have basic digital skills falling below the EU average⁶.
- **Employability Skills:** Technology is allowing people to focus more time on complex tasks which require cross-functional approaches. The World Economic Forum identifies top ten skills which will be relevant for the future of work across industry areas including: complex problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, people management, coordinating with

1 Ibec (2021) 'Business in 2021 and Beyond: A CEO Perspective' <https://www.ibec.ie/connect-and-learn/research/ceo-survey>

2 Ibec (2021) 'HR Update 2021: Workplace Trends and Insights' https://www.ibec.ie/-/media/documents/connect-and-learn/research/hr-update-survey/hr-update_report_2021.pdf

3 Ibec (2021) 'HR Update 2021: Workplace Trends and Insights' https://www.ibec.ie/-/media/documents/connect-and-learn/research/hr-update-survey/hr-update_report_2021.pdf

4 Ibec (2020) 'HR Update 2020: Key Pay and HR Trends' <https://www.ibec.ie/-/media/documents/employer-hub/hr-leadership/ibec-hr-update-2020-key-pay-and-trends.pdf>

5 CSO (2018) 'Adult Education Survey 2017' <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/aes/adulteducationsurvey2017/>

6 European Commission (2020) 'Digital Economy and Society Index 2020: Ireland' https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc_id=66920



others, emotional intelligence, judgement and decision making, service orientation, negotiation and cognitive flexibility.

Ultimately, the education system needs to focus on the development of 'T-shaped' graduates with deep subject knowledge in key occupational areas, supported by a strong foundation in transferable skills.

Key Recommendations for the Future of Teaching and Learning

Embed employability: Skills related to leadership, teamwork, critical thinking and self-management need to be embedded in the fabric of the education system across all disciplines and courses. This includes developing an institution-wide policy to foster employability driven by senior management and in-depth reviews of programmes to consider opportunities for employability in the curriculum. Academic staff also need to have access to employability supports and guidance to make the necessary developments.

Interdisciplinary learning: The Covid-19 crisis has proven the need to develop learners with not only the technical skills to harness new technologies, but also the interpersonal and critical thinking skills to collaborate, create and apply technologies to grand societal challenges. Responding to the Covid-19 crisis has required the expertise and skill set of hybrid teams from different functions, cultures and performance parameters. Creating a pipeline of talented graduates will require breaking down the silos between disciplines such as Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) and Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) and imagining a dynamic and interdisciplinary approach to learning and sharing knowledge.

Problem-based learning: The Covid-19 crisis has presented innumerable challenges for business operations which will require innovation, creativity and problem-solving skills to find solutions. Issues such as Brexit, climate change and shifting demographics will continue to pose challenges to our economy and society. Problem-based learning where students have the opportunity to collaborate to resolve real-life problems allows learners to experience and prepare for the types of challenges they will face in the working environment.

Work experience: Opportunities for work-integrated learning are important for providing students with real-life work experiences where they can apply their academic and technical skills. Work-integrated learning prepares students for entering the labour market and boosts their job-readiness. A more standardised process for placements and work experience built from good practice would better support industry engagement.

Flexible pathways for learning: To create an equitable recovery post-Covid-19 and to build resilience for future shifts, flexible pathways need to be developed to boost lifelong learning. The future of work will see more people needing to be able to connect with the education system at different stages of their careers and often balance work and other commitments with learning.

Labour market intelligence: A modern, fit for purpose labour market intelligence system is critical for enabling informed investment decisions for business, government and the education and training system. Identifying the correct data and utilising modern technologies is key to balancing the need to address immediate skills gaps with a long-term strategic view of skills trends.

Lifelong career guidance: Ireland needs a new model of career guidance which supports learners to engage with the education system throughout their careers. A high-quality lifelong career guidance service will have an important role in helping individuals to understand the new world of work and supporting them to adapt their skills to harness change.

Meadhbh Costello

Policy Executive, Ibec

Meadhbh.costello@ibec.ie
