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Strengthening skills governance to build a joined-up skills ecosystem in Ireland

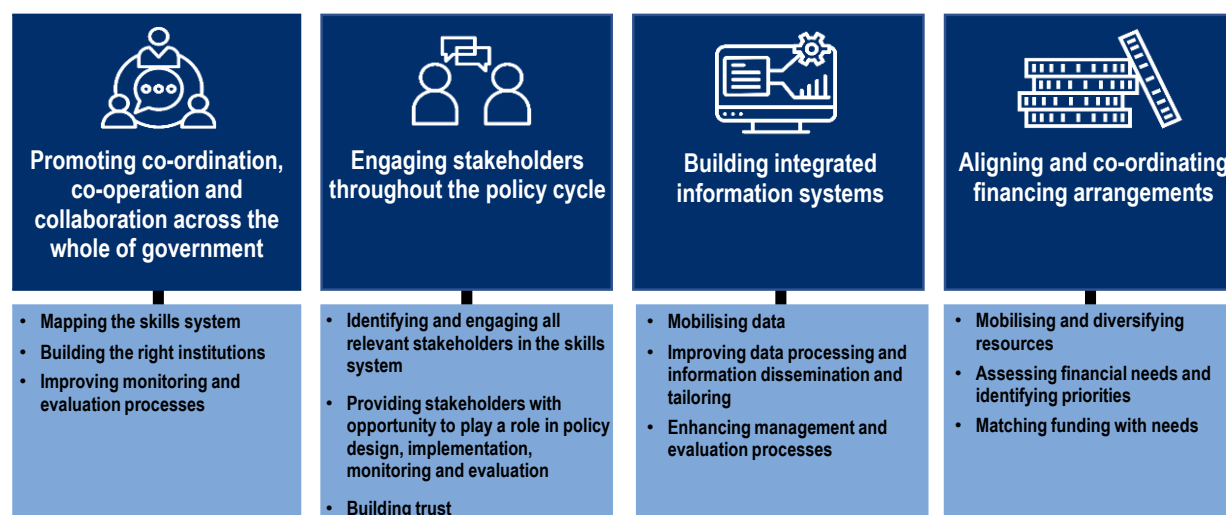
Well-functioning skills governance arrangements are the bedrock of a “joined-up” skills ecosystem, where skills policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation are impactful, mutually reinforcing and rooted in an extensive and robust evidence base. The complexity associated with skills policies, compounded by the uncertain and rapidly changing environment in which skills policy decisions are made, makes strong skills governance essential. This chapter explores three opportunities for strengthening skills governance to build a joined-up skills ecosystem in Ireland: 1) promoting a whole-of-government and strategic approach to skills policy; 2) supporting effective engagement with stakeholders throughout the skills policy cycle; and 3) strengthening the collection, exchange and use of skills information.

The importance of strengthening skills governance to build a joined-up skills ecosystem

Well-functioning skills governance arrangements are the bedrock of a “joined-up” skills ecosystem,¹ where skills policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation are impactful, mutually reinforcing and rooted in an extensive and robust evidence base. Policies aiming to secure a balance in skills (see Chapter 2), foster greater participation in lifelong learning (see Chapter 3) and leverage skills to drive innovation (see Chapter 4) will only realise their full potential if embedded in strong governance arrangements.

Setting up well-functioning skills governance arrangements can be challenging due to the complexity associated with skills policies.² Skills policies sit at the intersection of several policy fields, including education, labour market, innovation, industrial, migration and other policy domains. As a result, a wide range of actors from within and outside the government are implicated in designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating skills policies. Furthermore, skills policies are designed and implemented in the context of uncertainty and constant change, particularly as the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, Brexit, the Russian Federation’s invasion of Ukraine, as well as megatrends such as the digital and green transition, and evolving global value chains reshape economies and societies, including in Ireland. To help countries govern skills systems effectively in the face of these complex pressures, the OECD Skills Strategy (2019_[1]) identifies four building blocks of strong skills governance arrangements (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1. Four key building blocks of strong skills governance arrangements



Source: Elaboration on OECD (2019_[1]), *OECD Skills Strategy 2019: Skills to Shape a Better Future*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264313835-en>.

Promoting a whole-of-government approach to skills policy is central to minimising inefficiencies in skills policy, making and fostering a shared conviction about the strategic importance of skills. A whole-of-government approach includes: 1) horizontal co-ordination between different governmental departments and agencies; and 2) vertical co-ordination between different levels of government (i.e., national and subnational levels).

Effectively engaging non-governmental stakeholders (i.e. employers and their associations, trade unions, education and training providers, learners, civil society, etc.) throughout the skills policy cycle is an equally important part of a whole-of-government approach. Stakeholder engagement allows policy makers to tap

into stakeholders' on-the-ground expertise and insights regarding the real-world effects of skills policies and regulations, increases the perceived legitimacy of skills reforms, and builds support for policy reform (OECD, 2020^[2]). In turn, integrated skills information systems facilitate the assessment and anticipation of current and future skills needs as well as the dissemination of skills information among different target groups, which is crucial for supporting policy makers in making evidenced-based policy decisions and for informing individuals' education and career choices. Finally, aligning and co-ordinating financing arrangements is necessary for ensuring sufficient skills funding and the sustainability of skills investments.

The analysis and recommendations in this chapter seek to provide input into Ireland's main strategic document for skills policy, the National Skills Strategy (NSS) 2025, which was launched in 2016 (Department of Education and Skills, 2016^[3]). In particular, Opportunity 2 of this chapter (see below) analyses Ireland's progress in achieving the NSS 2025's second objective on employer participation in the development and use of skills.

Box 5.1. This chapter and Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025

The analysis and recommendations in this chapter's Opportunity 2 (Supporting effective engagement with stakeholders throughout the skills policy cycle; see more below) can be used to assess the progress towards the NSS 2025's second objective ("employer participation in development and use of skills"). Under the second objective, the NSS 2025 foresees a number of concrete actions, including supporting collaboration between employers and education and training providers in skills development.

In addition, the chapter analyses the challenges and opportunities of new bodies set up by the NSS 2025, such as the National Skills Council (NSC) and the Regional Skills I (RSF).

More broadly, this chapter supports the effective implementation of all objectives, actions and measures of the NSS 2025, which require a whole-of-government approach to skills policy, engagement with non-governmental stakeholders and robust collection, exchange and use of skills information.

Source: Department of Education and Skills (2016^[3]), *Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 – Ireland's Future*, www.gov.ie/en/publication/69fd2-irelands-national-skills-strategy-2025-irelands-future/.

This chapter begins with an overview of Ireland's current skills governance arrangements and performance. Subsequently, it examines three skills-related policy areas – or opportunities – for strengthening skills governance to build a joined-up skills ecosystem:

1. promoting a whole-of-government and strategic approach to skills policy
2. supporting effective engagement with stakeholders throughout the skills policy cycle
3. strengthening the collection, exchange and use of skills information.

Overview and performance of skills governance

Overview of the current skills governance arrangements

The governance of the skills ecosystem in Ireland is complex and involves a wide range of governmental actors and non-governmental stakeholders. Roles and responsibilities for skills policy are distributed across three levels of government – national, regional and local.

At the national level, skills policy is overseen by governmental departments and agencies, some of which also oversee associated regional and local structures. At the regional and local levels, the roles of regional assemblies and local authorities include identifying regional and local development objectives via

dedicated strategies and plans, which can include skills-related objectives. Certain local authorities (e.g. the Fingal County Council) have even developed their own skills strategies.

Outside the government, a wide range of stakeholders, including education and training providers, employers, employees, learners, civil society and representatives of all of these stakeholders (e.g. associations, chambers, unions, etc.) are involved in the design and/or implementation of skills policy. Table 5.1 provides an overview of the key actors in Ireland's skills ecosystem and details their roles and responsibilities.

Table 5.1. Overview of key actors with roles and responsibilities for skills policy in Ireland

Actor	Brief description of roles and responsibilities
Governmental departments	
Department of Education (DEP EDU)	Designs and implements education policy in early childhood education (together with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth [DCEDIY]) at primary and post-primary levels and in special education. Oversees the Education and Research Centre, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the National Council for Special Education and the State Examinations Commission, among others.
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE)	Designs and implements policies for stimulating foreign direct investment (FDI), enterprise innovation, fair competition in the marketplace, protection of consumer standards and workers' rights. Oversees Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland, Local Enterprise Offices, and the development of Regional Enterprise Plans, which outline strategies for supporting regional enterprise growth, competitiveness, innovation and job creation across Ireland's nine regions. Provides secretariat to the Expert Group of Future Skills Needs.
Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)	Designs and implements higher and further education and research policy. Oversees the Higher Education Authority, National Training Fund (NTF), QQI, Regional Skills I, Science Foundation Ireland, Skillnet Ireland, and SOLAS. Provides secretariat to the National Skills Council (NSC) (see more in Opportunity 1).
Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform (DPENDPDR)	Manages public expenditure, including on skills policy, and leads work on reform and innovation across Ireland's civil and public service.
Department of Social Protection (DSP)	Designs and implements social protection policies, including administering income support schemes. Operates the public employment service (Intreo) and funds a range of employment programmes and job seeker guidance services. Provides secretariat to the Labour Market Advisory Council (LMAC) (see more in Opportunity 1).
Department of the Taoiseach	Supports the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and the government in implementing the government programme. Chairs meetings of the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) and provides inputs into the development of NESC's work programme. Participates in the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF) (see more in Opportunity 1).
Governmental agencies and entities at the national level	
Education and Research Centre (ERC)	Provides assessment support services to schools and centres for education and conducts independent research on all aspects of education at all levels of the education system.
Enterprise Ireland (EI)	Supports the development, innovation and growth of Irish enterprises to help them expand into world markets, including by supporting enterprises with reskilling/upskilling.
Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN)	Advises the Government of Ireland on the economy's current and future skills needs and associated labour market issues that impact national potential for enterprise and employment growth.
Higher Education Authority (HEA)	Governs and regulates Ireland's higher education (HE) system. Promotes equitable access to HE, internationalisation of HE and responsiveness and research capacity of HE institutions.
IDA Ireland	Oversees attraction of FDI into Ireland, including by assisting foreign enterprises established in Ireland with reskilling/upskilling.
Intreo (the public employment service)	Serves as a single point of contact for all employment and income supports and services.
National Apprenticeship Office (NAO)	Manages the delivery of apprenticeships in Ireland. Is accountable to HEA and SOLAS.
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)	Develops research and advises DEP EDU on curricula in early childhood, primary and post-primary education, and assessment procedures used in schools.
National Council for Special Education (NCSE)	Runs a national network of Special Educational Needs Organisers who interact with parents and schools and liaise with the Health Service Executive (HSE) in providing resources to support children with special educational needs.
Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)	Oversees external quality assurance of further education and training (FET) and HE in Ireland.
Science Foundation Ireland (SFI)	Funds basic and applied research in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

Actor	Brief description of roles and responsibilities
Skillnet Ireland	Runs sectoral and regional enterprise learning networks to increase education and training participation within enterprises and, thereby, enterprise competitiveness. Operates under a joint investment model, where government funding of on-the-job training is matched by contributions from enterprises.
Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU)	Carries out analysis of Ireland's skills supply and demand to inform the work of the NSC and the public. Supports the development and review of policies and practices by the RSF, the EGFSN and other government bodies, including SOLAS and the education and training boards (ETBs).
SOLAS	Manages or oversees a range of FET programmes (e.g. Skills to Advance, apprenticeships, traineeships, etc.) and houses the SLMRU.
State Examinations Commission (SEC)	Oversees the development, assessment, accreditation and certification of the second-level examinations (i.e., the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate).
Subnational authorities and entities	
Regional assemblies (3)	Identify regional development objectives, support co-ordinated implementation of national planning and economic policy, and manage the delivery of European Structural and Investment Funds across Ireland's nine regions. Develop Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES). RSES provide a high-level, 12-year framework for regional economic development and defines Regional Policy Objectives in several fields, including skills.
Regional Skills Fora (RSF) (9)	Act as regional one-stop-shops for supporting employers with reskilling/upskilling. Raise awareness of the range of services and programmes available across Ireland's education and training system among employers, help employers identify their skills needs, collect data on employers' skills needs, refer employers to suitable education and training providers and help design tailor-made reskilling/upskilling programmes reflecting employers' needs, among others.
Local authorities (county councils, city councils, city and county councils) (31)	Oversee the provision of a range of local services (e.g. housing, fire services, register of electors, etc.). Develop the Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs) in collaboration with the Local Community Development Committees. LECPs set out the objectives and actions needed to achieve economic and community development of the relevant local authority, including in the field of skills, over a six-year period.
Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) (31)	Act as local one-stop-shops to support starting, growing and developing a business. Offer mentoring and training programmes for developing business and management skills.
Non-governmental stakeholders	
Education and training providers	Provide formal education and training to students and adults, non-formal education and training programmes to adults, and offer guidance services. Include schools, universities, institutes of technology, technological universities, ETBs and others.
Employers, employees, learners, civil society	Provide input into skills policy design and implementation via various fora (e.g. the NSC, National Training Fund Advisory Group [NTFAG], public consultations, etc.) with representation varying by specific forum.

Note: The table aims to provide an overview, not an exhaustive list. Actors are listed in alphabetical order in each category.

Roles and responsibilities for collecting, exchanging and using skills information (including administrative data and surveys on skills supply and demand) in Ireland are similarly widely distributed between a number of actors (Table 5.2). Some of Ireland's key sources of skills information come from international organisations or associations (Table 5.2). Information from administrative data and surveys is combined, or further complemented, and used to produce a number of regular publications on skills, particularly reports by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) (sectoral or thematic analyses of future skills needs) and by the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) (e.g. the National Skills Bulletin, Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply, etc.).

Table 5.2. Overview of key sources of information on skills supply and demand in Ireland

Name	Overview of information provided	Responsible actor(s)
Administrative data		
Employment permits	Third-country (non-EU) workers in Ireland by occupation, nationality, qualification level, etc.	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE)
Further Education Outcomes – Graduation Years 2010-2016	Outcomes (e.g. employment status, enrolment in further studies, etc.) of further education and training (FET) graduates between 2010 and 2016 by National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) level, field of study, gender, etc.	Central Statistics Office (CSO)
Higher Education Outcomes – Graduation Years 2010-2019	Outcomes (e.g. employment status, earnings, enrolment in further studies, etc.) of higher education (HE) graduates between 2010 and 2019 by NFQ level, field of study, gender, education and training institution, etc.	CSO
Skills-OVATE	Vacancies from private and public job portals by sector (NACE, the statistical classification of economic activities in the European Community), occupation (International Standard Classification of Occupations, ISCO), educational level (NFQ) and specific skills (European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations Classification, ESCO)	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP)
Skills for Growth dataset	Specific skills needs reported by enterprises to the Regional Skills Fora, Department of Social Protection (DSP) and Enterprise Ireland	Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU)
Skills for Jobs database	Shortages and surpluses by occupation (ISCO), skills levels (ISCO) and specific skills. Qualification and field-of-study mismatches. Leverages a new methodology for calculating the importance of skills in occupations, relying on information retrieved from online job postings	OECD
Skills forecasts	Quantitative projections of the future trends in employment by sector of economic activity and occupational group, as well as the future trends on the level of education of the population and the labour force	CEDEFOP
Vacancy data	Vacancies by sector (NACE), occupation (SOC, Standard Occupational Classification), education level (NFQ)	Jobs Ireland (DSP)
Surveys		
Adult Education Survey (Every 6 years)	Formal and non-formal education and training and informal learning participation in the last 12 months, time spent on education and training, obstacles to participation, guidance and financial support, etc. The data feeds into relevant European Union (EU)-level statistics	CSO
Census of Population (Every 5 years)	Numbers and characteristics of Ireland's inhabitants, including education attainment, field of study, employment status/industry/occupation, etc.	CSO
Continuing Vocational Training Survey (Every 5 years)	Provision of continuing vocational training (CVT) courses and other forms of CVT, participants in CVT courses, costs of CVT courses, time spent in CVT courses, among others, within enterprises with at least ten employees. The data feeds into relevant EU-level statistics	CSO
Earnings, Hours and Employment Costs Survey (Quarterly)	Vacancy rates, earnings and labour costs across sectors. The data feeds into relevant EU-level statistics	CSO
European Company Survey (Every 4-5 years)	Work organisation, human resource management, skills use, digitalisation, direct employee participation and social dialogue, among others, within enterprises with at least ten employees	Eurofound
Graduate Outcomes Survey (Annual)	Outcomes (e.g. employment status, earnings, enrolment in further studies, etc.) of HE graduates by NFQ level, field of study, gender, etc.	Higher Education Authority (HEA)
Irish National Employer Survey (NES) (Irregular)	Employers' satisfaction with graduates from FET and HE, views on recruitment barriers and collaboration with FET/HE institutions, etc.	HEA, SOLAS, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)
Labour Force Survey (Quarterly and annually)	Labour force and employment status, occupation, education level, formal and non-formal education and training participation in the last four weeks (except guided on-the-job training), etc. The data feeds into relevant EU-level statistics	CSO
OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (Every 5 years)	Teachers' and school leaders' working conditions and learning environments	OECD

Name	Overview of information provided	Responsible actor(s)
Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) (3 rounds to date [2012, 2015, 2018]; results of the next round to be released in 2024)	Adults' proficiency in literacy, numeracy and problem solving, information on how adults use their skills at home, at work and in the wider community	OECD
Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (Every 5 years)	Fourth-grade students' proficiency in reading	International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)
Programme for International Student Assessment (Every 3 years)	15-year-olds' proficiency in reading, mathematics and science	OECD
Recruitment Agency Survey (Annual)	Views of selected Irish recruitment agencies on occupations that are proving difficult to fill	SLMRU
Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (Every 4 years)	Fourth and eighth-grade students' proficiency in mathematics and science	IEA

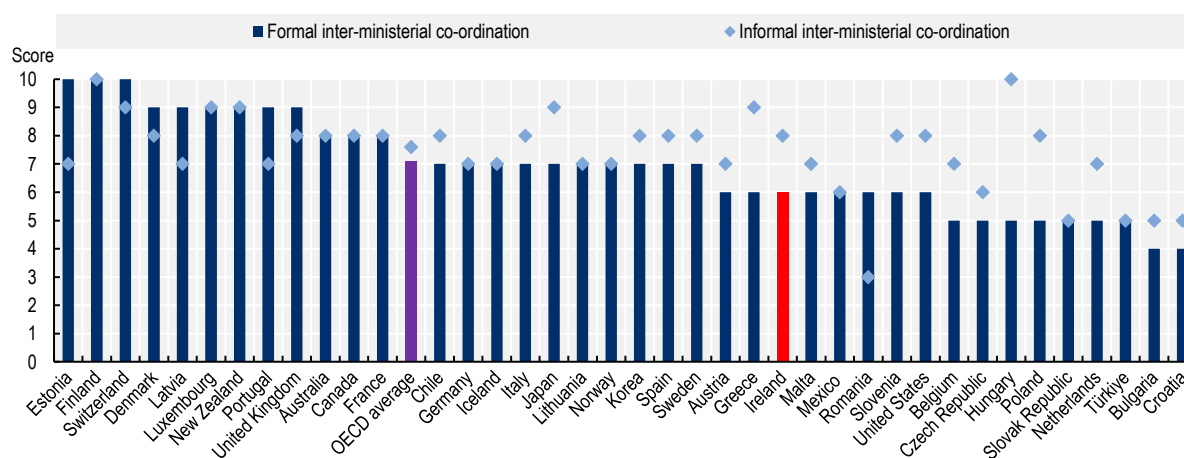
Note: The table aims to provide an overview, not an exhaustive list. The skills information sources are listed alphabetically in each category.

Ireland's skills governance performance

While several of the governance structures in Ireland's skills ecosystem, such as the NSC, the RSF and the EGFSN (see more below), are seen as international good practices (OECD, 2019^[1]; 2020^[4]; 2021^[5]; 2021^[6]), there are significant opportunities for further improvement in the governance of Ireland's skills system, which need to be seized to help realise Ireland's ambition of evolving from a strong to a top performer in terms of skills outcomes. Taking a bold approach to addressing the existing skills governance challenges is equally important for setting Ireland's skills ecosystem on a path of continuous improvement and building up ample capacity to meet future skills challenges and opportunities.

According to the Bertelsmann Foundation's Sustainable Governance Indicators (SGI), Ireland ranks below the OECD average on formal inter-ministerial co-ordination and above the OECD average on informal inter-ministerial co-ordination (across all policy areas) (Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2. Performance in inter-ministerial co-ordination in Ireland and selected countries, 2022



Note: Formal co-ordination refers to scores that countries are assigned on the question, "How effectively do ministry officials/civil servants co-ordinate policy proposals?" Informal co-ordination refers to scores that countries are assigned on the question, "How effectively do informal co-ordination mechanisms complement formal mechanisms of inter-ministerial co-ordination?" Scores range from 1 to 10. The higher the score, the better the country's performance. Scores are assigned by country and sector experts and reviewed by scholars and practitioners.

Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung (2022^[7]), *Sustainable Governance Indicators (SGI)*,

www.sgi-network.org/2022/Good_Governance/Executive_Capacity/Interministerial_Coordination.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/tfnk5b>

In skills policy specifically, given the complexity of Ireland's skills ecosystem (Table 5.1) and the fast pace with which new skills policies, programmes and initiatives are being introduced, effective and efficient co-operation, co-ordination and collaboration across the whole of government is vital. Co-operation, co-ordination and collaboration within and across the government on skills policy have become more important following the split of the Department of Education and Skills (DoES). In 2020, the mandate of DoES was divided between two separate departments: the Department of Education (DEP EDU) and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), each now overseeing specific sub-sectors of skills policy (Table 5.1).

Stakeholders consulted during this Skills Strategy project (hereafter "project participants") underlined that not all departments in Ireland perceive skills from a holistic, life course perspective and, therefore, as necessitating close cross-departmental collaboration, but rather as an exclusive domain of DFHERIS. Equally, as many departments are directly affected by skills imbalances (such as shortages) arising in their respective areas of oversight and related sectors, the departments should be taking a more active role in, and greater ownership of, addressing such pressures, in collaboration with DFHERIS and other relevant actors (see Opportunity 1).

Despite the NSC's mandate to, among others, facilitate cross-departmental co-operation, co-ordination and collaboration on skills in the Irish skills ecosystem (see more in Opportunities 1 and 2), the NSC does not sufficiently support such collaboration and co-ordination across departments. Cross-departmental co-operation, co-ordination and collaboration on skills in Ireland occur to a large extent thanks to informal, ad hoc connections between civil servants, often leading to the establishment of various cross-departmental processes for collaboration at a technical level (see details in Table 5.3 in Opportunity 1). However, these collaboration arrangements are not being set up in a fully transparent and co-ordinated manner.

In addition, there are challenges in co-operation, co-ordination and collaboration at the regional and local levels, which arise due to overlapping mandates and lacking communication between actors who engage with employers on reskilling/upskilling on the ground, despite the existence of regional one-stop-shops (RSF) for employer engagement on skills. From an employer's perspective, such "crowding of space" leads to confusion. Equally, communication channels between the national level and regional actors (RSF) are under-developed (see Opportunity 1).

While it is positive that Ireland is planning to prepare a follow-up to the NSS 2025 with the view of further supporting a whole-of-government approach to skills, there are lessons to be learned from the implementation of the NSS 2025 itself to ensure effective implementation of the NSS 2025 follow-up (see Opportunity 1).

Ireland has created several mechanisms for engaging non-governmental stakeholders in skills policy. An overview of the stakeholder engagement mechanisms is provided in Table 5.5 (see Opportunity 2). While it is positive that opportunities for stakeholders to shape the design and implementation of skills policy exist, there are important challenges that Ireland should address to ensure effective and impactful engagement.

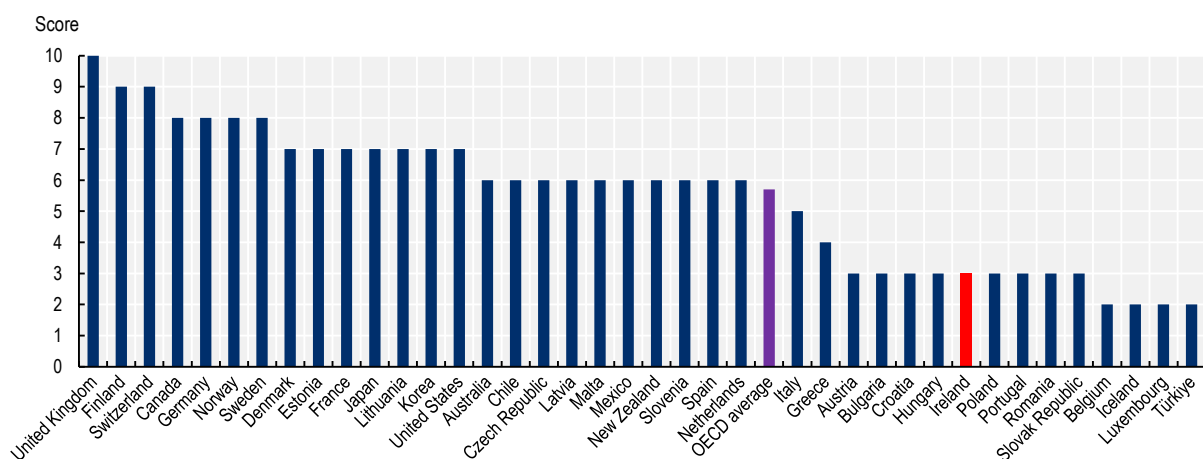
The NSC has not yet succeeded in developing an influential role and a strong voice in Ireland's skills ecosystem commensurate with skills and workforce challenges (see Opportunity 2). While according to its mandate, the NSC aims to create space for engaging stakeholders on skills policy (among other roles; see above and Opportunity 1), NSC meetings could in practice facilitate better engagement with non-governmental stakeholders on shaping skills policy priorities (see more in Opportunity 2). The NSC needs more representative and diverse non-governmental membership, stronger accountability mechanisms, sufficient resourcing and visibility. The collaboration between the NSC and Ireland's other stakeholder engagement mechanisms (Table 5.5) also needs to be strengthened to foster a truly "joined-up" governance of the Irish skills ecosystem.

Equally, the current functioning of the National Training Fund Advisory Group (NTFAG), established to support greater involvement of employers in decisions surrounding the National Training Fund (NTF), could provide more opportunities for stakeholders to provide input and advice into decisions on NTF expenditure, and to do so in a timely manner. Moreover, despite a large number of positive examples of engaging stakeholders in the design of education and training programmes, such engagement is not sufficiently systematic, inclusive (particularly of small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) voices), efficient and co-ordinated (see Opportunity 2).

While Ireland has a rich collection of skills information (Table 5.2), there are significant opportunities for further improvement, including by greater coordination between the bodies responsible for the collection of data and information in this regard. The range of information on (not only) skills needs collected from employers could be further expanded, and the granularity of such information further improved (see Opportunity 3). Information on outcomes of learners in further education and training (FET) is not collected systematically. At the same time, available economy-wide skills forecasts are not fully reflective of the specificities of the Irish labour market. Collecting data on skills needs directly from employers requires better co-ordination to enable more effective use, while skills data exchanges within the government and with stakeholders are complicated by technical challenges (see Opportunity 3).

Improved collection and use of skills information will be particularly important for strengthening Ireland's capacity to rigorously evaluate skills policies. Bertelsmann Foundation's SGI suggest that Ireland's *ex post* evaluation of public policies is relatively under-developed (Figure 5.3). Moreover, evidence gathered from project participants confirms that, despite improving in recent years, the evaluation of skills policies is not undertaken systematically enough (see Opportunity 3).

Figure 5.3. Performance in *ex post* policy evaluation, Ireland and selected countries, 2022



Note: Scores reflect the performance of countries on the question, "To what extent do government ministries regularly evaluate the effectiveness and/or efficiency of public policies and use results of evaluations for the revision of existing policies or development of new policies?" Scores range from 1 to 10. The higher the score, the better the country's performance. Scores are assigned by country and sector experts and reviewed and approved by scholars and practitioners.

Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung (2022^[8]), *Sustainable Governance Indicators (SGI)*, www.sgi-network.org/2022/Good-Governance/Executive-Capacity/Evidence-based-Instruments.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/unlex2>

Opportunities for strengthening skills governance to build a joined-up skills ecosystem

This section describes three main opportunities that were selected for Ireland to strengthen the governance of its skills ecosystem. The selection is based on input from literature, desk research, discussions with the Cross-Departmental Project Team and discussions with a broad range of project participants – e.g. government departments and organisations, employer organisations, educational establishments and other interested parties – during workshops, group discussions and several related meetings. As a result, the following opportunities are considered to be the most relevant for Ireland’s specific context:

1. promoting a whole-of-government and strategic approach to skills policy
2. supporting effective engagement with stakeholders throughout the skills policy cycle
3. strengthening the collection, exchange and use of skills information.

Opportunity 1: Promoting a whole-of-government and strategic approach to skills policy

A whole-of-government approach aims to promote horizontal (at the national level) and vertical (between national and subnational levels) co-ordination of government activity in order to improve policy coherence and use of resources and minimise overlaps and gaps in public programmes. A whole-of-government approach thus capitalises on synergies and innovation that arise from involving and engaging with a multiplicity of governmental actors while also providing seamless public service delivery to individuals and businesses (OECD, 2019^[1]). Engagement with non-governmental stakeholders (see Opportunity 2), such as enterprises, employees, learners and education and training providers, is an important part of a whole-of-government approach to skills policy.

Strategies and action plans are key enabling mechanisms that support a whole-of-government approach to skills policy. They are essential for setting goals, priority groups and targets, clarifying roles for government and stakeholders in skills policy, articulating the challenges that require co-operation and allocating roles and responsibilities (OECD, 2019^[9]).

Recommendation 1: Strengthen the commitment to and efficiency of adopting a whole-of-government approach to skills to help achieve a step change in Ireland’s skills system

The complexity of Ireland’s skills ecosystem (see the Overview section above) requires active collaboration, co-operation and co-ordination on skills policy at the national and subnational (i.e. regional and local) levels, as well as between them. Responsibilities for skills policy at the national level are distributed between several departments (e.g. DEP EDU, DFHERIS, Department of Social Protection [DSP], Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment [DETE], Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform [DPENDPDR], etc.) as well as governmental agencies and institutes (e.g. Higher Education Authority [HEA], SOLAS, Skillnet Ireland, IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland [EI], Science Foundation Ireland [SFI], Quality and Qualifications Ireland [QQI], etc.) (Table 5.1).

In Ireland, more could be done to place skills “higher on the agenda” of certain departments, which have traditionally not perceived skills as part of their core mandates. Some departments in Ireland do not yet perceive skills policy holistically and from a life course perspective but rather as primarily the domain of DFHERIS, leading to a lesser willingness to collaborate on skills issues and/or limited input in NSC discussions (see more on NSC meetings in Opportunity 2). Equally, given that several departments are directly affected by skills imbalances (such as shortages) arising in their respective areas of oversight and related sectors, these departments would benefit by taking greater responsibility for addressing such pressures in collaboration with DFHERIS. At the same time, as the impacts of global megatrends continue to change skills requirements across Ireland’s sectors while positioning certain industries and activities (e.g. renewable energy) as increasingly important, there needs to be a commensurate increase in

commitment and action across the whole of Ireland’s government to work together on developing a pipeline of talent with the relevant skills.

As noted above, Ireland’s NSC aims to, according to its mandate,³ facilitate collaboration and co-ordination between Ireland’s governmental actors responsible for the different sub-sectors of skills policy. The NSC brings together appointed departmental representatives (Secretaries General and Assistant Secretaries General) of DEP EDU, DETE, DFHERIS, DPENDPDR and DSP, and representatives of EI, HEA, IDA Ireland, SFI, Skillnet Ireland, SOLAS and QQI, in addition to non-governmental stakeholders.

However, as detailed further in Opportunity 2, the meetings of the NSC are structured around the NSC members exchanging views on pre-selected topics to be judged of increasing relevance for Ireland’s skills system, and as noted by project participants, do not help facilitate cross-departmental collaboration and co-ordination on skills. At the same time, it should be noted that attempts to leverage bodies similar to the NSC for both cross-departmental collaboration and co-ordination as well as for engagement with non-governmental stakeholders may run the risk of not effectively delivering on either of the two objectives (OECD, 2020^[4]; 2021^[5]).

As highlighted in Recommendation 3, Ireland should thus adjust the NSC’s terms of reference and membership to position the NSC primarily as a platform for strategic engagement with non-governmental stakeholders. At the same time, the cross-departmental co-ordination and collaboration issues should be addressed by a different set of policy levers. More specifically, Ireland should promote greater establishment of cross-departmental processes for collaboration on skills in areas of strategic importance while paying due attention to avoiding unnecessary duplication and overlaps (see more below). For example, DFHERIS and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDYI) have recently started collaborating on jointly addressing pressing challenges related to the supply of social workers. Certain project participants saw the DFHERIS-DCEDYI collaboration as a worthwhile partnership that could be replicated more widely. For example, some project participants suggested promoting collaboration between DFHERIS and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications on green skills, or between Intreo and SOLAS on strengthening the labour market relevance of training for Intreo clients, among others. Equally, the need for a whole-of-government collaboration on skills should be repeatedly stated by DFHERIS and other relevant departments at the ministerial level in cabinet meetings or other high-level government fora, such as meetings of relevant Senior Officials Groups (SOG),⁴ in order to bring all relevant departments “on board”. In SOG meetings, the buy-in for the establishment of potential, new cross-departmental processes for collaboration could also be secured.

Notwithstanding the above, it should be recognised that cross-departmental collaboration on certain skills policy issues does already take place in Ireland. Such collaboration often develops at the technical level between career civil servants, partly thanks to informal, personal connections. Given the challenges related to the role of the NSC in facilitating cross-departmental collaboration on skills (see above), it is not surprising that project participants agreed that such collaboration “was there before the NSC” existed. Table 5.3 provides a non-exhaustive list of Ireland’s existing cross-departmental processes for collaboration (e.g. working groups, committees, protocols, etc.) on skills policy.

While establishing various cross-departmental processes for collaboration on certain skills policy topics is a step in the right direction, promoting an effective and efficient approach to collaboration is equally key, given that the latter is a time-intensive exercise. In Ireland, the cross-departmental processes for collaboration on skills policy are at times being set up on an ad hoc basis, without great consideration, and sometimes knowledge of, already existing processes or structures, which risks generating inefficiencies and missing out on potential synergies. For example, while the recent establishment of the Strategic Skills Group is a positive development, especially as Ireland’s key skills data entities (the SLMRU and the EGFSN) are housed by different departments (Table 5.1) thereby making close collaboration and co-ordination imperative, the remit of the Strategic Skills Group (as currently defined) partially overlaps

with the remit of the equally recently established Evidence for Policy Unit (EfP) in DFHERIS (see more on the EfP Unit in Opportunity 3).

Table 5.3. Cross-departmental processes for collaboration on skills policy in Ireland

Name	Objective	Actors involved
DFHERIS-DCEDIY collaboration	Boost the supply of social workers	DFHERIS, DCEDIY, other stakeholders
DSP-DFHERIS High-Level Group	Co-ordinate action between public employment services and the education and training sector to assist job seekers in reskilling	DSP, DFHERIS, DCEDIY, SOLAS, HEA, Skillnet Ireland
Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities Implementation Group	Support the implementation of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities	DCEDIY and other governmental departments, National Disability Authority, HSE, Ibec, ICTU
Guidance High-Level Group	Develop a national strategic framework for lifelong guidance	DEP EDU, DFHERIS, DSP, DETE, DCEDIY
Interdepartmental Committee on Economic Migration	Examine requests for changes to the employment permit eligibility lists	DETE, DEP EDU, DSP, DPENDPDR, DHLGH, DJ, DH, DAFM, DTCAGSM, SLMRU
Job Loss Protocol	Co-ordinate action across Irish regions to respond to worker redundancies	DSP, DFHERIS, DETE
National Oversight Group for the Regional Enterprise Plans	Oversee the preparation of the new Regional Enterprise Plans	DETE, DFHERIS, DRCD, Regional Assembly, LEOs, IDA Ireland, NTDA, non-governmental stakeholders
Strategic Skills Group	Support better use of skills information	DFHERIS, DETE, SLMRU, RSF, non-governmental stakeholders by invitation
Transitions Group	Support the smooth transitions of students from second-level education to further and higher education	DEP EDU, DFHERIS, Central Applications Office, higher education institutions

Note: The table does not aim to provide an exhaustive list. It includes collaboration processes still in place at the time of this report's finalisation. The collaboration processes are listed in an alphabetical order and the acronyms used in the table are as follows: DFHERIS: Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; DCEDIY: Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; DSP: Department of Social Protection; HEA: Higher Education Authority; HSE: Health Service Executive; ICTU: Irish Congress of Trade Unions; DEP EDU: Department of Education; DETE: Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment; DPENDPDR: Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform; DHLGH: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage; DJ: Department of Justice; DH: Department of Health; DAFM: Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine; DTCAGSM: Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media; SLMRU: Skills and Labour Market Research Unit; DRCD: Department of Rural and Community Development; LEOs: Local Enterprise Offices; NTDA: National Tourism Development Authority; RSF: Regional Skills Fora.

To promote a more co-ordinated approach to cross-departmental collaboration, Ireland should map, monitor and raise awareness of existing cross-departmental processes for collaboration on skills. Such a mapping would help ensure that any new collaboration processes on skills are not established in a duplicative manner while making it possible to explore synergies between the existing processes and potentially leveraging the latter to advance the priority areas of the NSS 2025 follow-up (see Recommendation 2), where relevant. The mapping should be regularly updated and made accessible across departments. In this context, Ireland could take inspiration from Canada's information-sharing tool developed to facilitate collaboration between federal public servants (Box 5.2). Conditional upon a commensurate increase in resources (see Recommendation 3), the NSC secretariat may be well placed to take on the responsibility for the undertaking, sharing and updating the mapping, given the secretariat's experience with cross-departmental communication in the context of organising NSC meetings. Tasks related to undertaking, sharing and updating the mapping would be added to other roles of the NSC secretariat (see Figure 5.4 under Opportunity 2).

Box 5.2. Relevant international example: A cross-departmental knowledge-sharing platform

Canada: GCpedia

Launched in 2008, GCpedia is an internal knowledge-sharing platform accessible only to Canadian public servants. Public servants from across government departments and agencies can publish information on the platform, offering governmental employees access to subject matter expertise and a whole-of-government perspective on a given policy, project or concept.

Acting as an internal wiki not available to the public, any government user can edit and publish without approval on GCpedia. As a result, while GCpedia is not an authoritative government source, it does allow public servants to quickly update and share information across agencies and departments. As of 2016, GCpedia had roughly 71 000 users.

Gcpedia is part of a larger suite of resources used within the Canadian government called GCTools, including a government-wide directory (Gcdirectory), messaging service (Gcmmessage) and networking service (Gcconnex), among others. Gcpedia is managed by the GCTools Team, which works under the Office of the Chief Information Officer of Canada within the Treasury Board Secretariat of Canada. The suite of tools was fully redesigned in 2016 with input from user experience testing and feedback sessions.

Source: Government of Canada, (2018^[10]), *GCTools/GCpedia*, <https://wiki.gccollab.ca/GCTools/Gcpedia>; Treasury Board Secretary, (2016^[11]), *Treasury Board Secretariat Public Service Renewal Results, 2016*, www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/corporate/reports/treasury-board-secretariat-public-service-renewal-results-2016.html.

In the context of this project, consideration was given to the possibility of establishing a central oversight body (e.g. a formal committee) at the national level with membership from all relevant departments and agencies and potentially high-level political representation (e.g. at a ministerial level) (OECD, 2020^[4]; 2021^[5]). The central oversight body would aim to strengthen Ireland's cross-departmental commitment to skills policy issues at the national level; promote a more co-ordinated approach to cross-departmental collaboration on skills; and minimise the risk of creating processes and structures with competing objectives and mandates (see more below on how overlapping mandates and lacking communication complicate collaboration on skills at the regional and local levels). Such a body could equally oversee the design, implementation and evaluation of the follow-up to the NSS 2025 (see Recommendation 2). However, project participants broadly agreed that in Ireland's specific context, adding an additional layer of governance by introducing a new, formal governmental body/committee may only exacerbate existing complexity in Ireland's skills governance (Table 5.1, Table 5.3 and Table 5.5) while running the risk of compromising its effectiveness. Therefore, when considering potential policy solutions, improvements to the existing skills governance system were prioritised.

Collaboration, co-operation and co-ordination on skills at the regional and local levels should be similarly strengthened. The RSF, in addition to serving as one-stop-shops for reskilling/upskilling support services for employers (Table 5.1), play a particularly important part in fostering co-ordination, collaboration and co-operation on skills at the regional and local levels. The RSF participate and share insights on employers' skills needs in the numerous regional/local groups established by other governmental actors or employers (e.g. Regional Enterprise Plan Steering Committees, implementation groups for local skills strategies, industry-led clusters, etc.), while certain RSF also involve representatives of local authorities. Given the complexity of the Irish skills ecosystem, it is important that Ireland continues to promote co-ordination, collaboration, and co-operation on skills at the regional and local levels, such as is currently done by the RSF. However, it should be noted that the RSF are currently constrained by capacity and resourcing issues (see Recommendation 4 and Chapter 3).

Moreover, as mentioned above, the RSF are meant to serve as a one-stop-shop for reskilling/upskilling support services for enterprises. In practice, however, there is a plethora of other actors on the ground (e.g. engagement officers and managers from EI, ETBs, IDA Ireland, LEOs, Skillnet Ireland, etc.) who all approach employers to promote their respective reskilling/upskilling support services (including conducting skills needs audits – see more in Opportunity 3 and Chapter 3). In certain regions, this engagement occurs without prior co-ordination between involved actors, even though they are all, typically, members of the RSF. Also, according to project participants, engagement in RSF meetings and with RSF activities on the part of RSF members varies from region to region.

A more co-ordinated approach to employer engagement on the ground would reduce the complexity and confusion around Ireland's education and training offer, which is already difficult to navigate (see Chapters 2 and 3), without requiring considerable time investment from employers who tend to be time-poor (especially SMEs). Equally, such a “crowded space” where several actors compete to provide reskilling/upskilling solutions to employers due to overlapping mandates only further underscores the need for a more co-ordinated approach to the design and implementation of skills policies, programmes and initiatives between governmental actors at the national level.

Going forward, DFHERIS, in collaboration with other relevant departments, should address the co-operation and collaboration challenges between the various actors who approach employers on reskilling/upskilling on the ground (e.g. by undertaking a detailed, joint assessment of the existing overlaps in roles and responsibilities, issuing guidelines encouraging a more collaborative approach, etc.). In the long term, a co-ordinated approach to skills policy design and implementation at the national level should be equally promoted via a clearly defined strategic vision in the foreseen follow-up to the NSS 2025, which should be developed and implemented in close collaboration with all relevant departments and stakeholders (see Recommendation 2).

Nonetheless, project participants pointed to positive examples of collaboration between the RSF and other regional/local actors. For example, in the context of the Spotlight on Skills initiative, EI works closely with the RSF. RSF managers are a key part of the design of Spotlight on Skills, and EI actively connects companies participating in the initiative with the RSF. Also, certain RSF managers have put in place memoranda of understanding (MoUs) between the RSF and their different member groups (e.g. an MoU between RSF Dublin and education and training providers) to help promote greater collaboration. Such examples of good practice, which help support co-ordination and collaboration on skills at the regional and local levels, should be considered by DFHERIS and other relevant partners in addressing the co-ordination and co-operation issues at the regional and local levels highlighted above.

Finally, there is space to further support collaboration, co-operation and co-ordination on skills between Ireland's national and regional levels. Given the varied roles that the RSF play mentioned in Table 5.1 and above, the RSF have a good overview of skills developments and the regional and local levels. Going forward, communication channels between the regional and national levels should be expanded, and relevant regional voices (such as the RSF) should be represented on the NSC (see Recommendation 3).

Recommendation 1: Strengthen the commitment to and efficiency of adopting a whole-of-government approach to skills to help achieve a step change in Ireland's skills system

A well-coordinated, whole-of-government approach to skills policy is essential for achieving a step change in Ireland's skills system and delivering joined-up responses to Ireland's skills challenges, particularly in as complex a skills ecosystem as Ireland's. However, not all departments in Ireland perceive skills policy holistically and from a life course perspective but rather see it as primarily the responsibility of DFHERIS. In addition, more departments should be taking more responsibility for addressing skills pressures (e.g. skills shortages) that directly affect their respective areas of oversight. Moreover, where existing cross-departmental collaboration processes on skills do exist across Ireland's government, they are not being established in a fully transparent and co-ordinated manner. At the local and regional levels, co-ordination and co-operation challenges arise due to overlapping mandates and lacking communication between governmental actors who engage with employers to promote their respective reskilling/upskilling support services on the ground.

Ireland can undertake the following specific actions to strengthen its commitment to and efficiency of adopting a whole-of-government approach to skills:

- 1.1. **Adopt processes to support cross-departmental collaboration on addressing skills challenges in areas of strategic importance.** Ireland should consider establishing new processes for collaborating on the development, use and governance of skills over the life course in areas of strategic importance while avoiding duplication (see more below). For example, departments facing strong skills pressures in their respective oversight areas could establish collaboration processes with DFHERIS and/or other relevant departments and agencies to work jointly to address these pressures, such as has already been done between DCEDIY and DFHERIS (Table 5.3). In addition, the importance of cross-departmental collaboration on skills should be regularly underlined by DFHERIS and other relevant departments at the ministerial level in cabinet meetings or other high-level governmental fora, such as relevant meetings of Senior Officials Groups. Equally, DFHERIS, in collaboration with other departments and DFHERIS agencies, should address the co-operation challenges and increasing competition between governmental actors who engage with employers on reskilling/upskilling at the regional and local levels (e.g. by undertaking a detailed, joint assessment of the existing overlaps in roles and responsibilities, issuing guidelines encouraging a more collaborative approach, etc.).
- 1.2. **Reduce duplication and promote synergies by mapping, monitoring and raising awareness of existing processes to support cross-departmental collaboration on addressing skills challenges.** Ireland should establish a mapping of existing, cross-departmental collaboration processes on skills (e.g. working groups, committees, protocols, etc.), which should be regularly updated, and made accessible across departments. A single entity could be tasked with undertaking, updating and sharing the mapping. The secretariat of the NSC might be well suited to take on such responsibilities, given the secretariat's experience with cross-departmental co-ordination in the context of organising NSC meetings. However, taking on such a role would need to be met with a commensurate increase in the secretariat's capacity and resources (see Recommendation 3).

Recommendation 2: Prepare a follow-up to the National Skills Strategy 2025 to help place skills at the top of Ireland’s policy-making agenda, and enable effective implementation

Ireland’s NSS 2025 sets the overall vision and direction of skills policy in Ireland. It was launched by the former DoES in 2016 (Department of Education and Skills, 2016^[3]) (see the Introduction section).

The launch of the NSS 2025 has been a step in the right direction. Project participants mentioned that while the topic of skills is often mentioned across many governmental strategies (Table 5.4), which is positive, skills should be seen as a policy priority in its own right rather than a second-order issue merely facilitating and enabling other priorities (e.g. green transition, foreign direct investment [FDI] attraction, etc.). A standalone skills strategy that adopts a life course perspective, such as the NSS 2025, can help elevate the profile of skills on the governmental agenda. It can also help put skills policy higher on relevant departments’ priority lists by creating consensus around and shared commitments to concrete goals and actions. Equally, as mentioned above, overarching, holistic skills strategies are one of the “enabling conditions” to support a whole-of-government approach to skills policy. However, achieving such benefits is conditional upon the effective design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of skills strategies, including the NSS 2025.

Table 5.4. Overview of the key strategies related to skills in Ireland

Name	Objective	Lead actor
Action Plan for Apprenticeship, 2021 to 2025 (2021)	Supporting the development and uptake of apprenticeships in Ireland	DFHERIS
Adult Literacy for Life 2021-2031 (2021)	Equipping adults in Ireland with the literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needed to fully engage in society and realise their potential	DFHERIS
AI – Here for Good: National Artificial Intelligence Strategy for Ireland (2021)	Supporting Ireland in becoming an international leader in using artificial intelligence (AI), including by equipping people with relevant skills to enable each individual to benefit from increased AI adoption	DETE
Climate Action Plan 2021 (2021)	Decarbonising the Irish economy and transitioning Ireland to a low-carbon status by 2030, and a zero-carbon position in the decades beyond, including by equipping people with the right skills to be able to participate in and benefit from the future net zero economy	Government of Ireland
Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (2015-2024)	Addressing the obstacles to the employment of disabled people, including by developing skills	DCEDIY
Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027 (2022)	Equipping learners in schools with the knowledge and skills they need to successfully navigate the evolving digital world	DEP EDU
Driving Recovery and Sustainable Growth 2021-2024 (2021)	Encouraging foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows into Ireland, including by assisting foreign enterprises established in Ireland with reskilling/upskilling	IDA Ireland
Economic Recovery Plan (2021)	Supporting Ireland’s recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Plan has four pillars, with one dedicated to helping people get back to work, including by reskilling/upskilling.	Government of Ireland
ESD to 2030: Second National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (2022)	Supporting the contribution of education towards a more sustainable future at individual, community, local, national and international levels	DEP EDU
Future FET: Transforming Learning, The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy (2020)	Supporting the development, relevance and uptake of FET in Ireland	SOLAS
Harnessing Digital – The Digital Ireland Framework (2022)	Advancing the use of digital technology in the delivery of public services, and the adoption of digital technology in enterprises and across the education and training system	Department of the Taoiseach
Housing for All: A New Housing Plan for Ireland (2021)	Ensuring access to sustainable, good-quality and affordable housing, including via reskilling, upskilling and skills forecasting measures in the construction sector to deliver the labour force required to build an average of 33 000 homes per year	Government of Ireland

Name	Objective	Lead actor
Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy (2022)	Maximising the impact of research and innovation (R&I) in Ireland, including through the development of research talent and strengthening linkages between the public R&I system and private performers	DFHERIS
Languages Connect – Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026 (2017)	Supporting the acquisition of foreign languages by individuals in Ireland	DEP EDU
Leading in a Changing World 2022-2024 (2022)	Supporting enterprise creation and development in Ireland and the expansion of Irish enterprises into world markets, including by supporting enterprises with reskilling/upskilling	EI
Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy (2021)	Increasing the uptake and ensuring the sustainability of remote working opportunities in Ireland, thereby aiming to support better use of skills in Ireland	DETE
National Smart Specialisation Strategy for Innovation 2022-2027 (2022)	Providing a link between regional and national innovation strategy building and decision making, bringing coherence to research, development and innovation (RD&I) planning and advancing the RD&I agenda regionally and nationally. The strategy acknowledges the importance of skills for RD&I in Ireland.	DETE
Pathways to Work Strategy 2021-2025 (2021)	Increasing employment levels and expanding labour market participation among under-represented groups (i.e. lone parents, the young unemployed, persons with disabilities, women/carers/those with home duties, etc.), including by reskilling/upskilling. The strategy serves as a key delivery mechanism of the Economic Recovery Plan.	DSP
Project Ireland 2040 (2018)	Providing improved social, economic and cultural infrastructure for all people in Ireland. Project Ireland comprises the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the National Development Plan 2021-2030 (NDP). The NPF sets the vision and strategy for the development of Ireland to 2040, including by supporting skills development, and the NDP provides the enabling investment to implement the NPF.	Government of Ireland
Resilience and Recovery Plan (2021)	Supporting a sustainable, equitable, green and digital recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, including by outlining reforms and investments in reskilling/upskilling. The plan is co-funded by the European Union.	Government of Ireland
STEM Education Policy Statement 2017-2026 (2017)	Further developing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education in Ireland	DEP EDU
Technology Skills 2022 – Ireland's Third ICT Skills Action Plan (2019)	Meeting the demand for high-level information and communications technology (ICT) skills in Ireland	DFHERIS, DETE
White Paper on Enterprise 2022-2030 (2022)	Supporting Irish-based enterprises to succeed through competitive advantage based on sustainability, innovation and productivity while delivering rewarding jobs and livelihoods. Skills, talent, and workforce development are identified among the key enablers of a competitive enterprise environment.	DETE

Note: The table aims to provide an overview, not an exhaustive list, and includes key strategies published since the launch of the NSS 2025 in 2016, which were still in place at the time of this report's finalisation. Strategies are listed in alphabetical order. The lead actor acronyms are: DFHERIS: Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; DETE: Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment; DCEDIY: Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; DEP EDU: Department of Education; EI: Enterprise Ireland; DSP: Department of Social Protection.

It is positive that in the design phase, the NSS 2025 took a life course and holistic perspective on skills policy. Beyond supporting the development of relevant skills in formal education, the NSS 2025 counts greater participation in lifelong learning and more effective use of skills in workplaces among its six strategic objectives.

Non-governmental stakeholders were actively involved in developing the NSS 2025, which is important for ensuring its relevance. The development of the NSS 2025 was overseen by the National Skill Strategy Steering Group (NSSSG), which included representatives of DoES (now DEP EDU and DFHERIS), DSP, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (now DPENDPDR), Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (now DETE), HEA, SOLAS and non-governmental stakeholders. Moreover, DoES held a public consultation to gather views on the NSS 2025 from stakeholders not involved in the NSSSG, and received

over 120 submissions from a diverse range of governmental and non-governmental actors (DFHERIS, 2021_[12]).

The NSS 2025 has several features that should facilitate its effective implementation in practice. For each of the six strategic objectives, the NSS 2025 identifies broad action areas and concrete measures for implementation. Each measure is assigned “lead(s)” (i.e. actor[s] from within and outside of the government), who are responsible for the measure’s implementation. Measurable, mid- and long-term indicators are also set out (DFHERIS, 2021_[12]).

However, project participants broadly agreed that implementing the NSS 2025 in practice has not been without challenges, partly because parts of the implementation period coincided with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the restructuring of certain departments in Ireland. The NSS 2025 refers to using “existing governance and performance structures and processes” for monitoring purposes. In practice, however, there has been little and/or unsystematic follow-up on how relevant leads are implementing measures for which they have been assigned responsibilities in the NSS 2025. While some departments mentioned reporting on the specific NSS 2025 measures shortly after it was launched, all leads did not adopt such reporting, and the reporting results had not been evaluated.

Project participants mentioned that the lack of accountability mechanisms has been at least partly behind the challenge in implementation. In addition, the scope (i.e. the number of measures) of the NSS 2025 was seen as overly extensive, which made it difficult for the leads to prioritise between the measures assigned to them. Even more importantly, project participants agreed that the structure of the NSS 2025 did not leave much space for updating the listed measures based on new developments in the Irish skills ecosystem and the evolving socio-economic conditions. The limited flexibility to update the actions defined in the NSS 2025 has also complicated the alignment between the NSS 2025 and other, more recent strategies covering specific sub-sectors of the skills policy, or broader economic strategies (e.g. Economic Recovery Plan, Resilience and Recovery Plan, etc.), which include reskilling/upskilling among their priorities (Table 5.4). Project participants also highlighted that greater emphasis could be placed on evaluating the impact of measures implemented under the NSS 2025, for which it will be crucial to further strengthen Ireland’s evaluation capacity in skills policy (see Opportunity 3).

The opportunities for improvement, which were identified during the implementation of the NSS 2025, provide important lessons in the preparation of a follow-up to the NSS 2025, which is planned by DFHERIS. The idea of preparing a follow-up strategic document, which builds on the NSS 2025, should be supported, given the important role that such documents play in supporting a whole-of-government approach to skills policy and in helping to elevate the profile of skills on the governmental agenda.

The design of the follow-up to the NSS 2025 should, again, be an inclusive, cross-departmental initiative, with emphasis placed on sourcing inputs from other relevant departments and agencies as well as stakeholders while carefully promoting synergies between existing and foreseen relevant strategies and action plans. Once designed, the final version of the NSS 2025 follow-up could be subject to the approval of the NSC in order to promote ownership and secure buy-in for subsequent implementation from all the key actors besides DFHERIS. A collaborative approach to the design of the NSS 2025 follow-up would also help ensure that identified skills priorities become accurately reflected in other departments’ relevant strategies and action plans, reinforcing, in turn, impactful implementation and further elevating the strategic profile of skills across the government. Consideration could also be given to establishing standing, technical-level implementation groups, with members sourced from across departments and stakeholders as relevant, to support the implementation of the specific priority areas of the NSS 2025 follow-up.

Skills data and information from the SLMRU and the EGFSN should feed into developing the NSS 2025 follow-up. Consideration should also be given to prioritising a smaller number of more strategic, high-impact priority areas in the NSS 2025 follow-up, as was highlighted by project participants during an Extraordinary Meeting of the NSC organised as part of the consultations for this project. The follow-up to the NSS 2025 should also have a more flexible structure, enabling continuous updating. Ireland’s recently

published *Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy* (Box 5.3) was frequently quoted by project participants as a good example of a strategic document that introduces a sufficient degree of flexibility thanks to differentiating between the “core” of the strategy and a more flexible work programme.

Box 5.3. Relevant national example: Introducing flexibility into strategic documents

Ireland: Research and Innovation Strategy (“Impact 2030”)

Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy (“Impact 2030”) was launched in May 2022 and aims to advance the strategic development of Ireland's research and innovation (R&I) system by 2030.

Impact 2030 has five key pillars: 1) maximising the impact of R&I on Ireland's economy, society and the environment; 2) impact of R&I structures on excellence and outcomes; 3) innovation driving enterprise success; 4) talent at the heart of the R&I ecosystem; and 5) all-island, EU and global connectivity. For each of the five pillars, Impact 2030 defines a set of more concrete, strategic objectives.

Impact 2030 will be delivered through three three-year work programmes, the first of which covers 2022-24 and is included in an annex of the publicly available version of Impact 2030. For selected strategic objectives, the 2022-24 work programme defines specific actions that should be undertaken and the actor(s) who should take the lead in implementing each action. The work programmes can be updated as need be to enable flexible implementation.

Source: Government of Ireland (2022^[13]), *Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy*, www.gov.ie/en/publication/27c78-impact-2030-irelands-new-research-and-innovation-strategy/.

As highlighted above, the follow-up to the NSS 2025 should have clearly defined accountability mechanisms. Therefore, consideration could be given to establishing clear progress-reporting guidelines, which all partners involved in implementation should follow. For example, the relevant parties could report progress with the implementation to the NSC secretariat at regular intervals, allowing the secretariat to compile a report tracking the implementation progress. The progress report could be regularly presented and discussed at the NSC in order to obtain stakeholders' feedback before being submitted to the government as part of a broader, regular NSC report (see also Recommendation 3). Similarly, in Northern Ireland (United Kingdom), issuing an annual report on the progress with implementation of the goals of the Skills Strategy, “Skills for a 10x Economy”, is part of the mandate of the newly established Skills Council (Box 5.4).

Box 5.4. Relevant international example: Accountability mechanisms for implementing strategic documents

Northern Ireland (United Kingdom): Annual reporting on Skills Strategy implementation via the National Skills Council

The Northern Ireland Skills Council (NISC) is a new advisory body set up to provide strategic advice to Ministers of the Northern Ireland Executive and governmental departments on issues related to the development of skills policy with the view of meeting the objectives of the Programme for Government, the economic vision for Northern Ireland's “10x Economy: Northern Ireland's Decade of Innovation” and the Skills Strategy, “Skills for a 10x Economy”.

One of the council's objectives is to issue an annual report on progress against the goals of the Skills Strategy and the commitments specified in implementation plans. In addition, the mandate of the NISC includes: advising and supporting the strategic development of 2-5-10-year implementation plans underpinning the Skills Strategy; identifying and making recommendations on key strategic priorities for

Northern Ireland's skills system; supporting economic development and greater social inclusion; and rationalising the advisory infrastructure in Northern Ireland's skills system.

The NISC will remain independent from the government and maintain a strategic advisory role. It will continue to operate for the duration of the Skills Strategy (i.e., until 2030).

Source: Department for the Economy (2023^[14]), *Northern Ireland Skills Council (NISC) - Competition to appoint chair and members*, www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-skills-council-nisc-competition-appoint-chair-and-members.

Finally, in the long term, it would be advisable for DFHERIS and other relevant actors to conduct an impact evaluation of key, relevant interventions introduced under the NSS 2025 follow-up and the NSS 2025 itself. For this purpose, the evaluation capacities of the recently established EfP Unit and/or other evaluation structures in the government (see Opportunity 3) could potentially be used, as relevant, while allowing stakeholders and other departments to provide feedback on the evaluation process and findings (e.g. during NSC meetings).

Recommendation 2: Prepare a follow-up to the National Skills Strategy 2025 to help place skills at the top of Ireland's policy-making agenda, and enable effective implementation

Strategies and action plans are key enabling mechanisms that support a whole-of-government approach to skills policy (see Recommendation 1) and are important for ensuring that skills remain on top of policy makers' agendas. In Ireland, it is imperative that skills feature high among governmental priorities. Based on the experience with implementing the NSS 2025, there are important lessons that Ireland can draw upon when preparing the planned NSS 2025 follow-up to enable effective implementation.

Ireland can undertake the following specific actions to prepare a follow-up to the NSS 2025 to help place skills at the top of its policy-making agenda and enable effective implementation:

- 2.1. Apply a whole-of-government approach to the design and implementation of the National Skills Strategy 2025 follow-up.** DFHERIS, who is leading the development of the NSS 2025 follow-up, should actively involve other departments and key stakeholders in the design of the follow-up. Active cross-departmental and stakeholder collaboration on the design of the NSS 2025 follow-up would help establish consensus around the identified priority areas and, therefore, greater salience of the follow-up and ownership of its implementation among all relevant parties going forward. At the same time, a collaborative approach to the design of the NSS 2025 follow-up would help ensure that identified skills priorities become accurately reflected in other departments' more specific strategies and action plans as relevant. Consideration could also be given to establishing standing, technical-level implementation groups, with members sourced from across departments and stakeholders as relevant, to support the implementation of the specific priority areas of the follow-up.
- 2.2. Prioritise a smaller number of high-impact priority areas in the National Skills Strategy 2025 follow-up and consider a more flexible structure.** In preparing the follow-up to the NSS 2025, DFHERIS and relevant partners should prioritise fewer yet higher impact priority areas to support effective implementation. When considering the structure of the NSS 2025 follow-up, DFHERIS and relevant partners could consider differentiating between the core of strategy and related, more flexible work programmes, such as those included in Ireland's *Impact 2030* Strategy (Box 5.3) in order to create space for updating, as need be.

2.3. Establish clear accountability mechanisms to support progress reporting on and evaluating the measures implemented under the National Skills Strategy 2025 follow-up.

Consideration should be given to establishing clear progress-reporting guidelines, which all partners involved in the implementation of the follow-up should follow. For example, the relevant parties could report progress with the implementation to the NSC secretariat at regular intervals, allowing the secretariat to compile a report tracking implementation progress. In addition, the progress report could be regularly presented and discussed at the NSC in order to obtain stakeholders' feedback before being submitted to the government as part of a broader, regular NSC report (see also Recommendation 3). In the long term, it would be equally advisable for DFHERIS and other relevant actors to conduct an impact evaluation of the key, relevant interventions introduced under the NSS 2025 follow-up and the NSS 2025 itself. For this purpose, the evaluation capacities of the recently established EfP Unit and/or other evaluation structures in the government could be used, as relevant, while allowing stakeholders and other departments to provide feedback on the evaluation process and findings (e.g. during NSC meetings).

Opportunity 2: Supporting effective engagement with stakeholders throughout the skills policy cycle

Engaging with stakeholders supports policy makers in dealing with the inherent complexities of skills policies. Stakeholders are uniquely positioned to provide policy makers with valuable insights into the real-world effects of skills policies. Information on “what works and what does not” on the ground can be difficult for policy makers to access. However, it is essential given that the effects of skills policies can be quite different in practice from those that governmental policy makers initially intended (OECD, 2020^[2]).

Stakeholder engagement also helps generate political legitimacy, which can itself be an important resource when designing and implementing ambitious skills reforms. Reform efforts based on a broad consensus between involved actors are more likely to be fully accepted and broadly supported. This will, in turn, increase the likelihood that policy decisions will be implemented according to the initial intentions of decision makers and thus improve the overall effectiveness of the policy-making process.

The notion of the “skills policy cycle” implies that there is a constant feedback process between the phases of policy implementation and (re-)design, as skills policies are revised according to implementation experiences and, ideally, based on input from research (OECD, 2020^[2]).

Recommendation 3: Strengthen the National Skills Council and other stakeholder bodies to enable stakeholders to more effectively shape Ireland's skills policy priorities

Ireland has several mechanisms for engaging stakeholders in shaping skills policy priorities (i.e. providing input into the strategic direction of skills policy). These mechanisms include public consultations run by different departments and a range of bodies and groups (Table 5.5). While some of these bodies and groups have a mandate broader than providing advice on skills policy and only touch upon skills issues occasionally (e.g. the National Economic and Social Council [NESC] provides advice on strategic policy issues relating to sustainable economic, social and environmental development), others are concerned with a specific sub-sector of skills policy (e.g. the National Apprenticeship Alliance [NAA] advises on the development of the apprenticeship system and approves the development of new apprenticeships). The NSC focuses on skills policy specifically, with skills policy understood holistically (i.e., going beyond a specific sub-sector of skills policy). Given the NSC's membership and according to the NSC's mandate (see more below and the overview in Table 5.5), the NSC aims to create space for engaging stakeholders on skills policy (among other roles, see above).

Table 5.5. Ireland's key mechanisms for engaging stakeholders in skills policy

Name	Overview of roles and responsibilities	Members
The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI)-Department of Further and Higher Education Research Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) Joint Research Programme on Irish Skills Requirements	Undertakes research on developments in the Irish labour market and the shifting nature of skills	DFHERIS and related agencies, NTFAG, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE), ESRI
Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF)	Provides a forum for tripartite dialogue on economic and employment issues affecting the labour market, including skills (on occasion)	Departments, employer associations, trade unions
Labour Market Advisory Council (LMAC)	Advises the Minister of Social Protection and the Government of Ireland on the efficient operation of the labour market, focusing on increasing participation rates, minimising unemployment levels and reducing average unemployment durations. Discussions can touch upon skills on occasion.	Departments, governmental agencies, employer associations, employers, trade unions, education and training providers, independent experts
National Apprenticeship Alliance (NAA)	Advises on the development of the apprenticeship system. Oversees and approves the development of new apprenticeships. Monitors the implementation of the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025.	Departments, employer associations, trade unions
National Competitiveness and Productivity Council (NCPC)	Reports to the Taoiseach and the Government of Ireland, through the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, on key competitiveness issues facing the Irish economy and offers recommendations on policy actions (including on skills policy, on occasion) required to enhance Ireland's competitive position	Departments, governmental agencies, employer associations, employers, trade unions
National Economic and Social Council (NESC)	Advises the Taoiseach and the Government of Ireland on strategic policy issues relating to sustainable economic, social and environmental development in Ireland, including skills policy (on occasion)	Departments, employer associations, trade unions, civil society representatives
National Skills Council (NSC)	Provides advice on priority skills needs, the direction of skills and knowledge development in line with emerging global trends, and the opportunities and challenges for learning and work. Prepares an annual prioritisation of skills needs to advise DFHERIS and to inform decisions on the allocation of funding across further education and training, higher education and Skillnet Ireland. Oversees research and approves reports and publications by EGFSN and Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU). Set up by the National Skills Strategy 2025.	Departments, governmental agencies, education and training providers, employers
National Training Fund Advisory Group (NTFAG)	Develops evidence-based recommendations to the NSC to maximise the effectiveness and impact of National Training Fund (NTF) expenditures and facilitates NTF-related inputs from non-governmental stakeholders, including employers, to DFHERIS in the context of the annual estimates cycle.	Departments, governmental agencies, employer representatives, civil society representatives
Project steering and implementation groups of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN)	To support and oversee the progress of each EGFSN study, a representative steering group, composed of the key public and private sector stakeholders for relevant sectors or occupations, are established. Project steering groups help create consensus on establishing the evidence base and the measures needed to address the skills needs identified in EGFSN studies. The groups also help steer the comprehensive engagement with industry, as well as government and education and training sector stakeholders, which help inform each study's findings. Project implementation groups seek to support the implementation of EGFSN's recommendations, with the EGFSN secretariat encouraging the replication of the initial project steering groups where feasible.	EGFSN and a wide range of stakeholders

Note: The table aims to provide an overview, not an exhaustive list. Stakeholder engagement mechanisms are listed alphabetically.

Project participants generally viewed the establishment of the NSC positively, particularly because the need to engage with non-governmental stakeholders on skills policy is perceived to be very important in Ireland. Equally, conditional upon effective functioning, standalone skills-focused bodies similar to the NSC help put skills higher on stakeholders' agendas (OECD, 2020^[2]), thereby helping to further elevate the

profile of skills in the country to facilitate reform efforts (see also Opportunity 1). However, the NSC has also been subject to a certain degree of criticism related to its limited influence in the Irish skills ecosystem, where the NSC has not yet succeeded in positioning itself as a “strong player”.

Project participants signalled several potential reasons behind the NSC’s limited influence. First, there is a lack of clarity around the NSC’s mandate. The NSC’s mandate is defined in the NSC’s terms of reference (ToRs) (as summarised in Table 5.5). The ToRs state that the NSC “brings together education and training providers with representatives from business, to effectively respond to skills needs” (DFHERIS, 2022^[15]). The NSC should advise the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, and DFHERIS more broadly, on Ireland’s “priority skills needs” (i.e. skills policy priorities) on an annual basis in order to inform decisions on the allocation of funding across FET, higher education (HE) and Skillnet Ireland. The NSC should also oversee research and approve the publication of reports by the EGFSN and the SLMRU, action plans developed by the EGFSN for implementing recommendations in EGFSN reports and receive costed proposals for the EGFSN’s annual work programme. The ToRs also require the HEA and SOLAS to report to the NSC on their respective funding allocations. As per the ToRs, IDA Ireland, EI, and SFI should, in turn, report on developing sectoral opportunities and potential target areas for increased FDI into Ireland and provide advice on the extent to which Ireland’s skills supply can meet such potential new employment opportunities. Further, the NSC should receive regular updates from governmental departments on relevant strategies, as well as from public education and training providers on how the providers are responding to the identified skills needs. The NSC should also consider updates on the work of the RSF (DFHERIS, 2022^[15]).

However, the actual NSC meetings only mirror the original ToRs to a limited extent. While the EGFSN and the SLMRU present new research to the NSC for approval, the rest of the NSC’s original ToRs are not being translated into practice. Divergence from the original NSC ToRs is not strictly negative, given that the original ToRs already create relatively limited space for sourcing advice from non-governmental stakeholders on skills policy priorities. The original NSC ToRs, as well as NSC’s current membership (see more below), position the NSC to be a space dedicated primarily to cross-departmental co-ordination and reporting on skills (even though not without challenges – see more below and in Recommendation 1) rather than to engagement with stakeholders.

In contrast to the NSC’s original ToRs, each NSC meeting largely consists of a high-level discussion on a topic determined in advance by the NSC secretariat (i.e. the Skills Policy and Enterprise Engagement Unit in DFHERIS). An expert on the particular topic typically facilitates the discussions (e.g. an international consultancy firm facilitated the discussions on the “workplace of the future”). Despite a recent improvement in the engagement in NSC discussions by NSC members, project participants suggested that the quality of discussions could be improved, and the contributions of some NSC members, including governmental departments, are limited (see also Opportunity 1). Nonetheless, project participants highlighted that governmental actors rather than non-governmental stakeholders still dominate most NSC discussions. Project participants also mentioned that participating in NSC meetings can sometimes be seen as a “turn-up, tick-box exercise” without real commitment, while the discussions around EGFSN and SLMRU reports tend to be limited, and the reports’ approval is perceived merely as receiving a “rubber stamp”. Stakeholders similarly pointed out that the selection of NSC discussion topics could be undertaken more collaboratively. At present, certain topics (e.g. research skills and talent) are only discussed at the NSC to a limited extent and would merit greater attention.

To a certain extent, the modest level of engagement of certain NSC members could also be explained by the fact that members are not clear on what the NSC’s mandate and objectives are and, therefore, what difference their contributions to NSC discussions will make in practice. In recent months, the NSC secretariat started compiling a summary of NSC discussion outcomes, which are shared with NSC members and within DFHERIS. Nonetheless, it is unclear whether or to what extent the discussion outcomes influence skills policy, partly because there are no accountability mechanisms to facilitate effective follow-up.

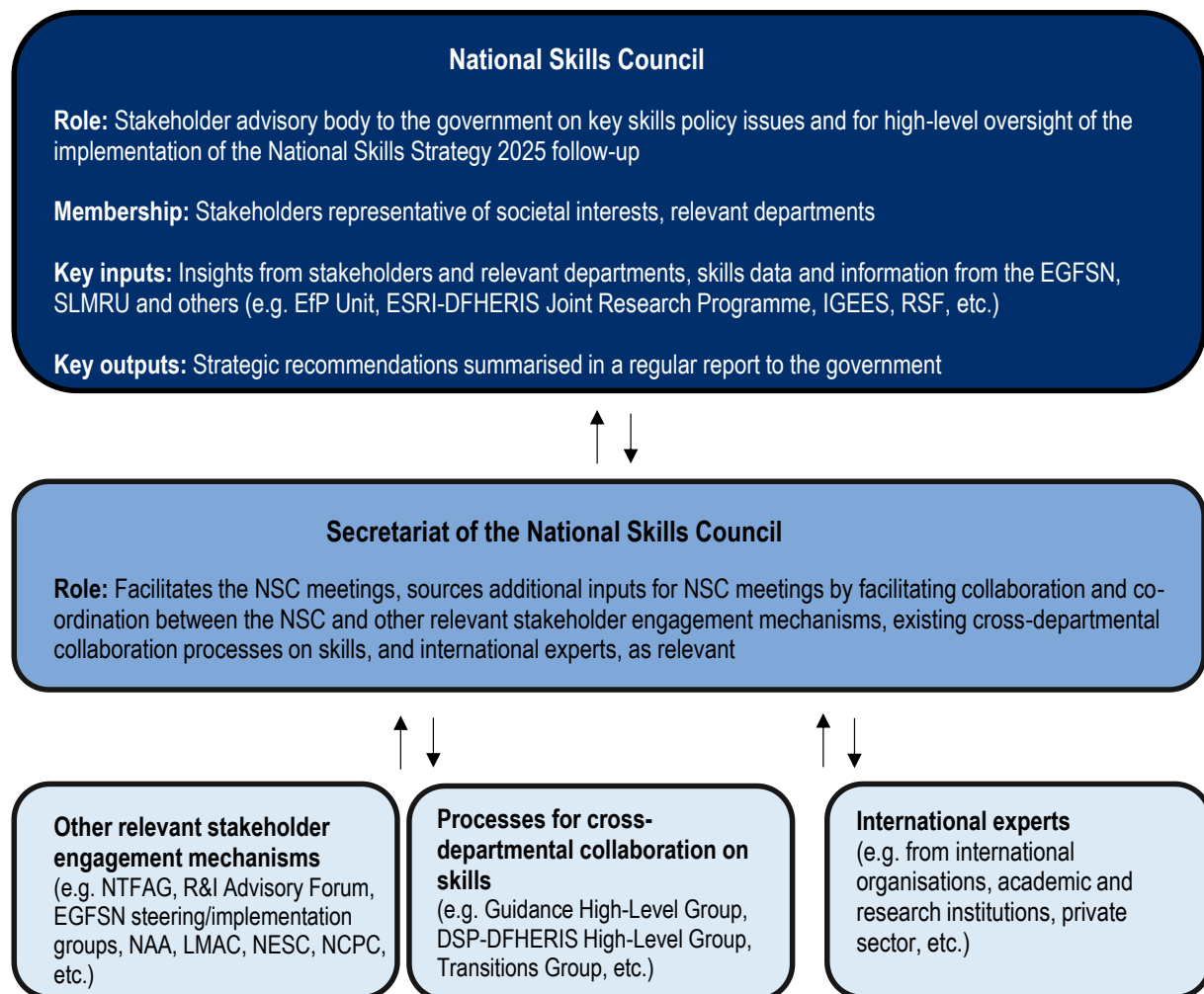
Second, the legitimacy of the NSC among stakeholders in Ireland is negatively impacted by the lack of representativeness and diversity in the NSC's membership base. Even if the NSC's mandate was clearly defined and understood, and the discussions led to concrete outcomes which influenced policy, the relevance of the NSC's advice could still be questioned due to its relatively homogenous and non-representative membership. While as noted above, the NSC ToRs state that the NSC “brings together education and training providers with representatives from business, to effectively respond to skills needs” (DFHERIS, 2022^[15]), and the NSC is chaired by an enterprise representative, the NSC membership is dominated by governmental actors. More specifically, 13 out of 21 seats on the NSC are taken up by governmental representatives (i.e. representatives of departments or governmental agencies and institutions). The eight remaining seats are distributed between representatives of public education and training providers (three) and individual employers (five – including the chairperson) (DFHERIS, 2022^[15]). Therefore, it is not surprising that the NSC discussions are dominated by governmental actors, even though some might be more active in NSC discussions than others (see above). Participants in a public consultation survey carried out as part of this project also stressed that the NSC has not succeeded in securing gender balance in its membership, which should be addressed.

Project participants highlighted that the NSC has limited visibility outside of governmental departments and that the dissemination of information about the work of the NSC to external audiences is generally insufficient. For example, consulted representatives of SMEs were unaware of the NSC's existence. At present, the NSC does not have a dedicated website. Existing, publicly available information on the NSC can only be found in a small section of the website of the Irish government, outlining the NSC's ToRs and membership, providing links to NSC agendas and meeting minutes, and stating the contact details for the NSC secretariat. Finally, the fact that the NSC secretariat is constrained by limited capacity and is responsible for tasks other than managing the NSC poses obstacles to NSC's effective functioning. It could complicate effectively implementing further improvements in the future.

Going forward, DFHERIS should address the challenges related to clarifying NSC's mandate, membership, accountability mechanisms, visibility and secretariat resourcing. In addition, DFHERIS should revise the NSC ToRs to clearly position the NSC as a stakeholder advisory body to the government on skills policy issues instead of a discussion forum for governmental officials (see more on improving cross-departmental collaboration and co-ordination on skills under Recommendations 1 and 2) and adjust the NSC's membership accordingly (see below). Figure 5.4 provides a simplified overview of the structure and functioning of the “refreshed” NSC, while further details are provided below.

In revising the NSC's ToRs, DFHERIS should determine (e.g. via the Strategic Skills Group) how the work of the EGFSN and SLMRU, and/or other relevant entities and partnerships working on/with skills data and evidence (e.g. EfP Unit, ESRI-DFHERIS Joint Research Programme, Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service [IGEES], RSF, etc.) could be better leveraged and co-ordinated to advance the NSC's work. DFHERIS should equally ensure that those governmental stakeholders who will be part of the refreshed NSC (see more on adjusting the NSC membership below) are assigned relevant roles in the ToRs. For example, as mentioned above, while the NSC ToRs now state that IDA Ireland, EI, and SFI should report on developing sectoral opportunities and potential target areas for increased FDI into Ireland, only IDA Ireland has a mandate for attracting FDI to Ireland.

Figure 5.4. Overview of the structure and functioning of the “refreshed” National Skills Council



Note: The figure provides a simplified overview. Further details can be found in the text below. The acronyms used in this figure stand for the following bodies and terms: EGFSN: Expert Group on Future Skills Needs; SLMRU: Skills and Labour Market Research Unit; EFP Unit: Evidence for Policy Unit; ESRI-DFHERIS: Economic and Social Research Institute-Department of Further and Higher Education Research Innovation and Science; IGEES: Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service; RSF: Regional Skills Fora; NTFAG: National Training Fund Advisory Group; R&I: Research and innovation; NAA: National Apprenticeship Alliance; LMAC: Labour Market Advisory Council; NESCC: National Economic and Social Council; NCPC: National Competitiveness and Productivity Council; DSP-DFHERIS: Department of Social Protection-Department of Further and Higher Education Research Innovation and Science.

DFHERIS should pay particular attention to ensuring that a wider range of relevant non-governmental stakeholders representative of different societal interests are members of the NSC (Figure 5.4) and that governmental actors do not outnumber the non-governmental stakeholders. For example, Norway’s Skills Policy Council includes a broad array of non-governmental stakeholders (Box 5.5). Similarly, in Ireland, relevant stakeholders to include on the NSC could include representatives from social partners (i.e. representatives of employers, including SMEs and trade unions), as well as relevant regional stakeholders (such as RSF), representatives of disadvantaged groups, private education and training providers, learners, independent experts and the community and voluntary sector. A wider range of relevant non-governmental stakeholders on the NSC would not only strengthen stakeholders’ voices in shaping skills policy priorities, but also facilitate a more substantial discussion on the EGFSN and SLMRU reports prior to approval and publication. Furthermore, in the establishment of structures similar to the

NSC, it should be ensured that stakeholders representing economically less influential individuals and groups (e.g. SMEs, non-governmental organisations [NGOs], etc.) are also given a seat at the table (OECD, 2020^[2]).

Box 5.5. Relevant international example: Including non-governmental stakeholders in stakeholder engagement bodies

Norway: Skills Policy Council

In order to improve skills governance arrangements in Norway, the Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy 2017-2021 (Nasjonal Kompetansepolitisk Strategi) introduced the establishment of the Skills Policy Council. The council's mandate was renewed in 2022 and stipulates that the council's purpose is to promote good co-operation in skills policy design. The council's main task is to highlight specific issues and discuss possible solutions, so that the government receives views and input from different actors and points of view.

As of 2022, Norway's Skills Policy Council has the following members: four representatives of employers; four representatives of employees; an NGO umbrella organisation association for lifelong learning; a lifelong learning association; the Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions; the Vocational School Council; and county municipalities represented by a county director/county councillor. The government is represented by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs; the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation; the Ministry of Education and Research; the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries; and the Ministry of Health and Care Services. The Sami parliament has observer status.

The council is chaired by the state secretary responsible for skills policy in the Ministry of Education and Research. The Ministry of Education and Research also provides the secretariat to the council. An administrative working group with representatives from the members of the council assists the secretariat with preparing council meetings. The Ministry of Education and Research summons the group to meetings before the council meetings and co-ordinates the work.

As of 2020, the Skills Policy Council meets three to four times a year in sessions that last around two hours. High-level discussions at the ministerial level are supplemented by working-level discussions with the participation of civil servants, thereby ensuring that skills are on the agenda of decision makers and that concrete outputs in terms of policy making are met.

Source: Regjeringen.no (2022^[16]), *Kompetansepolitisk råd*, www.regjeringen.no/no/dep/kd/org/styrer-rad-og-utvalg/kompetansepolitisk-rad/id2569522/; OECD (2020^[2]), *Strengthening the Governance of Skills Systems: Lessons from Six OECD Countries*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/3a4bb6ea-en>.

Equally, identifying relevant (and less relevant) stakeholders, as well as governmental actors, is an important part of designing effective governance structures. The exact number of stakeholders and governmental actors to be involved depends on a country's context and existing relationships between stakeholders and government. It is important to note that maximising effective stakeholder involvement is not the same as maximising the number of stakeholders (OECD, 2020^[2]). Therefore, careful consideration should be given to the make-up of the NSC in Ireland, while efforts should also be undertaken to secure gender balance at the NSC as a whole.

The NSC secretariat should share the key discussion points ahead of NSC meetings to enable NSC members to adequately prepare for NSC meetings. The secretariat should equally allow the members to influence the agenda setting of NSC meetings to ensure that the topics are selected in an inclusive manner and that no major topics are neglected while paying attention to fairly balancing between topics suggested by both non-governmental and governmental stakeholders.

To ensure that NSC members are motivated to participate in NSC meetings, DFHERIS should create accountability mechanisms regarding the advice they provide. For example, NSC meetings could aim to conclude with clear, actionable items or recommendations to which the relevant parties (departments and/or stakeholders) would be required to respond. In the Netherlands, for example, the government is obliged to respond to the advice received from the Social and Economic Council (SER) within three months (Box 5.6). The NSC recommendations and subsequent responses from relevant actors and/or actions undertaken could be summarised in a regular NSC report to be submitted to the government (Figure 5.4). The NSC report could also include a progress update on the implementation of the NSS 2025 follow-up, while the NSC recommendations could provide valuable input in the design of the suggested, flexible work programmes of the NSS 2025 follow-up, as relevant (see Recommendation 2). Similarly, broad alignment between the strategic vision set out by the NSS 2025 follow-up and the focus of the specialised NSC's sub-groups, the potential set-up of which is currently being considered by DFHERIS, should be promoted.

Box 5.6. Relevant international example: Accountability mechanisms for following-up on stakeholder advice

Netherlands: Social and Economic Council

The Social and Economic Council (SER) is an advisory body on social and economic policy to the Government of the Netherlands and Parliament. The SER works to achieve its objective of “a strong and sustainable economy in which as many people as possible are in work; and a fair distribution of income”. Although SER was established by law, it is not a government institution and is funded indirectly by industry through the General Unemployment Fund.

SER is part of the “consultative economy” in the Netherlands, whereby consultation occurs within enterprises via Work Councils, at the sectoral level where trade unions negotiate collective labour agreements with employers’ representatives, and at the national level where SER and the Labour Foundation operate.

SER provides advice upon request from the government or at its own initiative. SER has set up various committees to prepare its advisory reports with recommendations. The draft advisory reports prepared by committees are then discussed in full council meetings. A key feature of SER’s work is developing recommendations on the basis of a dialogue with all stakeholders. Therefore, SER’s motto is “thinking, for support through dialogue”.

SER has 33 members – 11 representatives of employers, employees and independent experts (Crown-appointed members), respectively. The independent experts are often professors in economics, finance, law or the social sciences. Representatives of government ministries can attend the council's public meetings and committees' private meetings as observers.

More than 80% of the advice put forward by SER is unanimous. Even though the Dutch government is not obliged to follow SER’s advice, any unanimous agreement between the employers’ organisations, employees’ organisations and independent experts sends a powerful signal. Within three months, the government is required to respond to SER’s advice. If the government chooses to deviate from the advice provided by SER, it must explain the reasons for doing so.

Source: Social and Economic Council (2023^[17]), *About the SER*, www.ser.nl/en/SER/About-the-SER.

Improving the visibility and communication around the activities of the NSC will also be important for strengthening the NSC’s role in Ireland’s skills ecosystem. While NSC’s website needs to remain integrated on gov.ie as per the existing communication guidelines, DFHERIS is considering organising an annual high-profile skills-related event (e.g. a Skills Summit) in Ireland. DFHERIS could consider linking certain

NSC meetings to the Skills Summit to help raise NSC's visibility or potentially present and discuss NSC's recommendations at the event.

As mentioned in Recommendation 1 (see above), equipping the NSC secretariat with more capacity and resources will be essential to support the effective functioning of the refreshed NSC. Beyond providing support in preparing NSC meetings and implementing the above-suggested improvements to the NSC, the NSC secretariat could support co-ordination between the NSC and the cross-departmental processes for collaboration on skills (see Recommendation 1). The NSC secretariat could also be in charge of co-ordination between the NSC and Ireland's other existing mechanisms for engaging stakeholders on skills (Table 5.5), as well as the proposed Research and Innovation Advisory Forum under the *Impact 2030* governance structures, in order to make sure that the NSC remains up to date on skills-related discussions in other fora, and, as appropriate, is able to provide and source relevant, additional inputs with the view of leveraging potential synergies. The NSC secretariat could also consider more frequent collaboration between international experts and the NSC, which project participants saw as desirable. As a result, bearing in mind co-ordination-related tasks that the NSC secretariat may be well placed to carry out (see Recommendation 1), it should be ensured that the secretariat has sufficient capacity and resources; these are currently lacking.

Beyond strengthening the NSC, which was seen as a priority, project participants have also raised the importance of improving the functioning of the NTFAG. The NTFAG was established following an external review of the NTF (Indecon, 2018^[18]) in order to support the greater involvement of employers in decisions surrounding the NTF (see Chapter 3). As mentioned in Table 5.5, the NTFAG aims to develop evidence-based recommendations to the NSC to maximise the effectiveness and impact of NTF expenditures and facilitates NTF-related inputs from non-governmental stakeholders, including employers, to DFHERIS in the context of the annual estimates cycle.

While establishing the NTFAG was seen as a broadly positive development, project participants mentioned that the group has not been convening regularly or frequently enough in recent months. Certain project participants also felt that the NTFAG meetings did not create sufficient opportunities for discussion and room for stakeholders to raise funding-related issues they consider important. Instead, it was pointed out that the NTFAG meetings often consist of governmental representatives presenting NTF-related updates to stakeholders, with insufficient space for stakeholder inputs. As a result, stakeholders struggle to provide adequate input regarding annual NTF expenditure decisions and do so in a timely manner. In addition, the link between the NTFAG and NSC has not yet been formalised, which means that the NSC ToRs do not yet include the provision of feedback on and/or approval of NTFAG recommendations on NTF priorities. In practice, NSC meeting minutes show that NTFAG recommendations are not considered systematically at NSC meetings (DFHERIS, 2022^[19]), despite NTFAG's mandate as outlined in Table 5.5. Therefore, in addition to strengthening the role of the NTFAG (see Chapter 3), DFHERIS should make sure that the NTFAG meetings are convened regularly and frequently enough for stakeholders to provide feedback, which can be taken into account in NTF expenditure decisions, and that the agenda of NTFAG meetings allows for active discussion and voicing of stakeholder inputs. Equally, the link between the NSC, the NTFAG and NTFAG recommendations should also be clarified and potentially formalised in the revised NSC ToRs (see above).

Recommendation 3: Strengthen the National Skills Council and other stakeholder bodies to enable stakeholders to more effectively shape Ireland's skills policy priorities

The National Skills Council (NSC) aims to create opportunities for engaging stakeholders in shaping skills policy priorities, with skills policy understood holistically and from a life course perspective. The National Training Fund Advisory Group (NTFAG) aims to maximise the effectiveness and impact of National Training Fund (NTF) expenditures. However, there is significant room for strengthening both the NSC and the NTFAG to improve their functioning, the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement and ultimately, the responsiveness and resilience of the Irish skills ecosystem.

Ireland can undertake the following specific actions to strengthen the NSC and other stakeholder bodies to enable stakeholders to more effectively shape Ireland's skills policy priorities:

- 3.1. Revise the National Skills Council's terms of reference, improve its visibility, and adequately resource its secretariat.** DFHERIS should consider revising the NSC's terms of reference (ToRs) to primarily position the NSC as a stakeholder advisory body to the government on skills policy issues (Figure 5.4) instead of as a discussion forum for governmental officials (see more on improving cross-departmental collaboration and co-ordination on skills under Recommendations 1 and 2) and adjust the NSC's membership accordingly (see below). In revising the ToRs, DFHERIS should determine (e.g. via the Strategic Skills Group) how the work of the SLMRU, the EGFSN and/or other relevant entities and partnerships working on/with skills data and evidence could be better leveraged and co-ordinated to advance the NSC's work. As appropriate, the collaboration between the NSC and other relevant stakeholder engagement mechanisms on skills, existing cross-departmental processes for collaboration on skills (see Recommendation 1) and/or international experts should be actively facilitated by the NSC secretariat. Equally, DFHERIS should raise better awareness of the NSC and its work, such as at potential annual Skills Summit events. In order to adequately implement the suggested changes and strengthen the overall role of the NSC, consideration should be given to better resourcing the NSC's secretariat, the role of which is currently constrained by limited resources.
- 3.2. Ensure that a wider range of relevant non-governmental stakeholders is represented at the National Skills Council, promote gender balance in its membership and foster accountability with regard to its advice.** DFHERIS should ensure that relevant non-governmental stakeholders, representatives of different societal interests, have a seat at the NSC. Relevant stakeholders could include social partners (i.e. representatives of employers – including SMEs – and trade unions), as well as relevant regional stakeholders (such as RSF), representatives of disadvantaged groups, private education and training providers, learners, independent experts and the community and the voluntary sector. As maximising the number of NSC members does not automatically translate into improving NSC functioning, attention should be paid to carefully identifying relevant (and less relevant) stakeholders, as well as governmental actors, to be included on the NSC. Gender balance in the NSC membership base should be equally promoted. Room should be created for NSC members to provide input into agenda setting of NSC meetings, and clear accountability mechanisms should be put in place regarding the advice provided by NSC members. NSC meetings could aim to conclude with clear, actionable items/recommendations. At the same time, the relevant parties could be asked to showcase how they had acted on the advice received or their reasons for not doing so, such as in the Netherlands (Box 5.6). NSC recommendations and subsequent responses from

relevant actors and/or actions undertaken could be summarised in a regular NSC report, to be submitted to the government, together with a progress update on the implementation of the NSS 2025 follow-up (see Recommendation 2).

- 3.3. Convene more regular National Training Fund Advisory Group meetings and provide adequate opportunity for stakeholder input.** NTFAG meetings should be convened regularly, which is currently not the case as highlighted by project participants. The timing of convening the meetings should allow stakeholders to provide input on NTF spending at points in time when the input can be considered in NTF expenditure decisions. Sufficient space should also be set aside on the NTFAG meeting agendas for discussion and sourcing stakeholder inputs without the presentation of NTF-related updates by governmental officials dominating the meetings. Consideration should also be given to clarifying, and potentially formalising, the link between the NTFAG, NTFAG's recommendations and the NSC in NSC's revised ToRs (see above).

Recommendation 4: Scale up existing good practices and promote a more inclusive, efficient and co-ordinated approach to stakeholder engagement in the co-design of education and training

Engaging stakeholders in the design of education and training (i.e. in shaping the content of new courses and in updating existing curricula) is important for strengthening the responsiveness of further education and training (FET) and higher education (HE) to labour market needs (OECD, 2017^[20]; 2022^[21]) (see a broader discussion on the responsiveness of Ireland's skills system in Chapter 2). During an interactive survey carried out at an Extraordinary Meeting of the NSC convened in the context of this project, 84% of participants expressed that Ireland needed to facilitate closer interactions between enterprises and FET/HE providers to strengthen the responsiveness of the education and training supply to labour market needs. The importance of engaging stakeholders, and particularly employers, in the development and review of curricula, is also acknowledged in the National Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024, the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025, and the Strategy for Higher Education-Enterprise Engagement 2015-2020 (SOLAS, 2020^[22]; DFHERIS, 2021^[23]; HEA, 2015^[24]), among others.

The National Employer Survey (NES) shows that in both FET and HE, only 5% of Irish employers report collaborating with relevant educational and training institutions on course design (Fitzpatrick Associates, 2019^[25]). Nonetheless, project participants highlighted that Ireland has made progress in engaging stakeholders in the design of education and training in recent years in both FET and HE. In the area of apprenticeships, the NAA, with representatives of social partners, has been established. The NAA oversees and sanctions the development of new apprenticeships in Ireland. It also reviews and approves occupational profiles (i.e. summaries of the skills needed to perform a job), which are essential for developing labour-market-relevant apprenticeship curricula (ILO, 2015^[26]). Occupational profiles themselves are developed by stakeholder-led consortia (DFHERIS, 2021^[23]).

Engaging enterprises in designing FET programmes other than apprenticeships (i.e. traineeships, Post-Leaving Certificate [PLC] courses, community and adult education, etc.) has similarly improved over the last few years. Employers are engaged in developing courses under the Skills to Advance initiative, introduced in 2018 to provide subsidised reskilling/upskilling opportunities for low-skilled employees vulnerable to job displacement. For example, SOLAS, ETBs, the Irish Hotels Federation, the National Tourism Development Authority, and the RSF collaborated to develop a hospitality and tourism programme and design processes (e.g. for optional PLC modules).

Engaging employers in the design of HE programmes has become more common in recent years. For example, the Springboard+ initiative,⁵ providing free (for job seekers) or heavily subsidised (for workers), mostly part-time, one-year reskilling/upskilling opportunities in HE, encourages enterprise engagement in

course design. Any provider who wishes to deliver a Springboard+ course needs to “demonstrate clear evidence of engagement with enterprise/industry partners” in the funding application (Government of Ireland and HEA, 2021^[27]). Similarly, Skillnet Ireland plays an important role in the collaborative co-design of training, working with regional and single or multi-sector enterprise networks, as well as higher education institutions (HEIs) and FET providers on the design of customised, subsidised training programmes. At present, Skillnet Ireland supports almost 23 000 Irish enterprises by facilitating access to tailored training offers, among others (see more on Skillnet Ireland in Chapter 3). In addition, professional bodies (i.e. professional associations that represent and/or regulate a profession) play an important role in accreditation processes in HE.

While there are many positive examples of engaging employers in course design by various individual institutions (see above), challenges remain. Stakeholder engagement in course design is not systematic across Ireland’s skills ecosystem. The relatively high degree of autonomy of HEIs and the growing autonomy of public FET providers, combined at times with capacity constraints, complicates systematic employer engagement. Not all education and training institutions engage with employers on course design to the same extent, and engagement also varies across regions. For example, project participants suggested that technological universities, which primarily deliver vocationally and professionally oriented science and technology programmes (Eurydice, 2022^[28]), could be more proactive in their course co-design efforts with stakeholders. In addition, notwithstanding the existing, successful examples of collaboration on course co-design between universities and enterprises [such as in the case of Dublin City University (Country Reports, 2022^[29])], these collaborations tend to be developed on an ad hoc basis, often on the basis of informal connections.

Employer engagement efforts in course design could also be more inclusive. Where engagement (especially university-stakeholder engagement) does occur, it tends to be dominated by multinational enterprises, with limited space for input in course design for SMEs. Project participants similarly highlighted that employers (large and small) need to be engaged in the course design process earlier than is currently the norm.

Going forward, Ireland should consider further expanding existing good practices to help systematise enterprises’ engagement in training co-design. Conditional upon demonstrating overall satisfactory outcomes (see also Recommendation 6), consideration should be given to expanding skills development programmes and initiatives where collaboration with employers is a core feature (e.g. Skills to Advance, Skillnet Ireland Networks, etc.) and/or where receiving funding is linked to demonstrating collaboration between education and training providers and enterprises (e.g. Springboard+). Where possible, incentives should be introduced to create more systematic opportunities for SMEs to provide input on co-creating FET qualifications and HE curricula. A co-ordinated approach to stakeholder engagement in course co-design should be promoted by actively collaborating with the RSF (see more below).

While certain existing mechanisms for incentivising education and training providers to engage with enterprises in course design are perceived as good practices (see above), others are proving more challenging to effectively implement. For example, conditional upon receiving public funding, ETBs need to demonstrate to SOLAS that they have engaged with the RSF in the planning of the FET provision (SOLAS, 2020^[30]), given that the RSF possess first-hand information on employers’ skills needs (Table 5.1). In practice, however, certain ETBs demonstrate RSF engagement simply by highlighting that they are members of RSF, even though their (providers’) engagement in RSF meetings and activities can sometimes be absent or lacking, which should be addressed (see Recommendation 1).

Project participants also pointed out that there is space for improving the efficiency of enterprise engagement in FET qualification co-creation on the part of ETBs, to better focus ETBs’ engagement efforts and further raise the quality of provision. Therefore, following a transparent and competitive process, Ireland could consider establishing dedicated “curriculum hubs”, which would act as “centres of excellence” for FET qualification co-creation in selected ETBs. Similarly, curriculum hubs in further education exist in

Northern Ireland (Box 5.7). Under such a model, a designated hub would focus on developing cutting-edge FET qualifications in specific industries and/or areas of horizontal skills needs (e.g. digital/green skills) in collaboration with employers, other ETBs and other relevant actors (including relevant RSF, skills data entities at the national level, etc.). It would be important for representatives of the hubs to be engaged in the relevant RSF (see below). In their operation, the hubs could, in the long-term, benefit from access to the proposed common online skills needs database and a digital data exchange solution (see Recommendation 5). After a certain period since establishment, the functioning of the curriculum hubs should be duly evaluated.

Box 5.7. Relevant international example: A targeted approach to qualification co-creation in further education and training

Northern Ireland: Curriculum hubs

In 2016, the Department for the Economy (DfE) of Northern Ireland published the Further Education Means Success Strategy. The strategy set out 21 policy commitments to be implemented through 8 key projects. An important aspect of Project No. 1 was the designation, development and implementation of “curriculum hubs” in each of the six further education (FE) colleges throughout Northern Ireland.

On the basis of a competitive process, a lead FE college was designated as a curriculum hub in one or more selected priority occupational areas. The occupational areas included digital information technology (IT), engineering and advanced manufacturing, construction, health and social care, life sciences, entrepreneurship and hospitality and tourism.

Each lead college has been tasked with collaborating with the other five colleges, as well as employers and other stakeholders, to support a consistent approach to the delivery of training in the selected priority occupational areas and fostering high-quality, current, responsive provision.

Evaluation of the curriculum hub model found evidence of high levels of engagement and sharing of new ideas and good practices across FE colleges. Progress has also been made in forming partnerships with employers and other key stakeholders. There is evidence that the curriculum hub model can significantly improve the quality of provision across FE in Northern Ireland.

However, the evaluation has also identified challenges of the curriculum hub model, which should be addressed going forward. The challenges include: raising the strategic profile of the curriculum hubs; strengthening their co-ordination and reporting capabilities; promoting and attracting inward investment; and further developing international partnerships.

Source: Education and Training Inspectorate (2022^[31]), *Evaluation: The Curriculum Hubs in the Six Colleges of Further Education in Northern Ireland*, www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/evaluation-the-curriculum-hubs-in-the%20six%20colleges-of-further-education-in-northern-ireland_0.pdf.

In establishing the suggested hubs, Ireland should carefully determine how and where the latter would fit into the existing skills ecosystem to avoid adding further complexity to it. For example, where relevant, consideration could be given to building on the existing industry and/or occupation-specific networks and groups set up by the RSF across several regions. RSF groups and networks convene a range of employers and education and training providers typically to support co-ordinated course co-design efforts between industry and education and training providers and provide peer-learning opportunities in the relevant industry/occupation. For instance, the RSF West established the Sales Professionals Network, which included representatives of relevant ETBs, relevant Skillnet Ireland Networks, and relevant employers, among others (Regional Skills West, n.d.^[32]). There are typically several such RSF networks and groups in each region, while multiple regions may have groups and networks with similar areas of focus. In the long run, establishing designated curriculum hubs could also help avoid duplicating training co-design

efforts through parallel RSF networks and groups across regions while rationalising their existing range, especially as the RSF are constrained by limited resources (see more below).

Beyond creating more systematic, inclusive and efficient opportunities for enterprises to shape the development of HE curricula and FET qualifications, Ireland should also promote a more co-ordinated approach to enterprise engagement in training co-design on the ground, given the large variety of actors (e.g. HEIs, ETBs, Skillnet Ireland Networks, etc.) engage in curricula and qualification co-design. An advantage of a more co-ordinated approach to stakeholder engagement in the co-design of training is using enterprises' time more efficiently (see Chapter 3 for a discussion on time-related barriers to learning faced by enterprises) and avoiding duplicate engagements where possible.

In promoting a more co-ordinated approach to enterprise engagement in training co-design, Ireland could draw on the RSF, which, as mentioned above, bring together the relevant actors in RSF meetings and, despite certain challenges (see Recommendation 1), have already established a good basis for a more co-ordinated approach and could provide such a platform going forward. The RSF could similarly be leveraged to provide a more systematic solution for promoting and scaling up existing good examples of collaboration between individual education and training institutions, given that such collaboration is currently often concluded on an ad hoc basis and formalised via isolated MoUs.

While it should be noted that the RSF were only established in 2016 by the NSS 2025, the capacity and resources of the RSF remain limited (see also Chapter 3), as was stressed by project participants. At present, the RSF are housed within education and training institutions in the respective regions, with the majority of RSF activities carried out by a single RSF manager. The limited resources equally impact the communication undertaken by the RSF and, therefore, their visibility, which is a challenge. Project participants indicated that certain employers or education and training providers do not yet engage with the RSF because the tangible advantages of such engagement are not immediately obvious to them, and stakeholders (particularly SMEs) cannot afford to invest time in their own research.

Recommendation 4: Scale up existing good practices and promote a more inclusive, efficient and co-ordinated approach to stakeholder engagement in the co-design of education and training

Engaging non-governmental stakeholders in the design of education and training is important for strengthening the responsiveness of education and training to labour market needs and was underscored as being highly relevant for Ireland by project participants.

Ireland can undertake the following specific actions to scale up existing good practices and promote a more inclusive, efficient and co-ordinated approach to stakeholder engagement in the co-design of education and training:

- 4.1. **Expand successful skills development programmes and initiatives where collaboration with enterprises is core to the course design and/or where receiving funding is conditional upon collaboration with enterprise – and encourage input from small and medium-sized enterprises.** Skills development programmes and initiatives such as Skills to Advance and Springboard+, as well Skillnet Ireland Networks, conditional upon demonstrating overall satisfactory outcomes, should be further expanded to incentivise further collaboration between education and training providers and employers. Where possible, incentives should be introduced to create more systematic opportunities for SMEs to provide input on co-creating FET qualifications and HE curricula to promote a more inclusive approach to course co-design.

- 4.2. Consider establishing “curriculum” hubs” in selected education and training boards to better focus their stakeholder engagement efforts in further education and training.** SOLAS could consider establishing dedicated “curriculum hubs” in selected ETBs to increase the efficiency with which ETBs engage enterprises in the design of FET qualifications and to further improve the quality of provision. Under such a model, a designated hub would focus on developing cutting-edge FET qualifications in specific industries and/or areas of horizontal skills needs (e.g. digital/green skills), in collaboration with employers, other ETBs and other relevant actors, including relevant RSF as well as skills data entities at the national level, among others. Existing, relevant industry RSF networks and groups, where they are in place, could be built on when establishing such hubs, while representatives of the hubs should be engaged in the relevant RSF to promote a co-ordinated approach to training co-design (see below). After a certain period since establishment, the functioning of the hubs should be duly evaluated.
- 4.3. Ensure adequate co-ordination between actors who engage with stakeholders in course co-design.** Ireland should promote a co-ordinated approach to course co-design between actors who approach employers on the ground (e.g. Skillnet Ireland Networks, ETBs, HEIs, etc.). The RSF, which bring together the relevant actors, have already established a good basis for a more co-ordinated approach and could provide such a platform going forward. At present, however, the RSF are constrained by limited capacity and resources.

Opportunity 3: Strengthening the collection, exchange and use of skills information

Comprehensive, reliable and accessible skills information (i.e. information on skills supply and demand) can help a variety of actors within and outside of the government form a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to skills, which helps underpin effective governmental co-ordination, co-operation and collaboration and stakeholder engagement (see Opportunities 1 and 2, respectively). Skills information is equally essential for supporting evidence-based skills policy making, guiding individuals’ skills choices and supporting the work of guidance counsellors, among others (OECD, 2019_[33]).

To make the most out of available skills information, its effective use is essential but not automatic. To make informed decisions and carry out research, governmental and non-governmental actors need to access various data sources housed across a range of departments and agencies. However, they can face data privacy and other barriers. In addition, capacity or procedural constraints can hamper the systematic use of available skills data to evaluate skills policies and the use of the results of such evaluations in skills policy making (OECD, 2019_[33]).

Recommendation 5: Improve the range and granularity of information on current skills needs, strengthen information on training outcomes and enhance skills forecasting

Ireland has a rich collection of skills information (i.e. information on skills supply and demand) (Table 5.2), much of which is gathered and stored centrally in the SLMRU. As mentioned in Table 5.1, the SLMRU provides skills and labour market research analysis to inform the work of the NSC and the public. The SLMRU also supports developing and reviewing policies and practices by the RSF, the EGFSN, and other government bodies, including SOLAS and the ETBs. The SLMRU, together with the EGFSN (see Table 5.1 and below), are the key actors responsible for skills assessment and anticipation in Ireland.

Ireland could take further steps to strengthen its existing collection of skills information. The range of information on employers’ skills needs could be improved. The National Employer Survey (NES), developed collaboratively between the HEA, SOLAS and QQI, is Ireland’s representative survey of employers’ skills needs. As mentioned in Table 5.2, the primary focus of the NES is gathering employers’ views on the subject of recruitment from HE/FET. The latest edition of the NES from 2018 provides

information on: the recruitment incidence of FET/HE graduates; profiles of HE/FET graduates recruited in the past 24 months; employers' satisfaction with FET/HE graduates in terms of technical and interpersonal skills; views on recruitment barriers and collaboration with FET/HE institutions; employers' skills gaps in terms of skills developed in FET/HE; barriers to recruitment of FET/HE graduates; and level of, and satisfaction with, collaboration between employers and FET/HE institutions. The last part of the NES, however, asks employers questions on subjects broader than recruitment from HE/FET, including employers' support for continuing professional development of their employees (Fitzpatrick Associates, 2019^[25]).

Going forward, the NES could be expanded with additional questions, which would provide further insights into employers' skills needs (e.g. skills gaps among existing employees, etc.) and questions shedding light on the use of employees' skills in order to strengthen the evidence base on the uptake of high-performance workplace practices (see more in Chapter 4). In considering the expansion of the NES, the Employer Skills Survey in the United Kingdom could serve as a relevant example for Ireland (Box 5.8). Consideration could also be given to adjusting the NES to collect evidence specifically on the recruitment of research talent (i.e. graduate, postgraduate and doctoral research talent at National Framework of Qualifications [NFQ] Levels 8-10) (see more in Chapter 4), given that project participants highlighted that information on the demand for research talent should be strengthened. Going forward, consideration should also be given to carrying the NES out on a regular basis.

Box 5.8. Relevant international example: Large-scale, cross-sectoral survey of employers' skills needs

United Kingdom: Employer Skills Survey

Since 2011, the United Kingdom has conducted a large-scale, cross-sectoral survey of employers' skills needs. The United Kingdom's Employer Skills Survey is one of the largest employer surveys in the world. The survey is essential for the work of the Department for Education in England as well as their partners within national and local government.

The latest completed iteration of the survey was carried out in 2019 via telephone interviews and asked employers questions about: 1) recruitment difficulties and skills lacking from applicants; 2) skills lacking from existing employees; 3) underutilisation of employees' skills; 4) anticipated needs for skills development in the next 12 months; 5) the nature and scale of training, including employers' monetary investment; and 6) the relationship between working practices, business strategy, skills development and skills demand.

Across different sectors, the survey enquired about employers' skills needs at the level of occupations as well as specific skills (e.g. management, leadership, digital, people or specialist job-related skills). More than 81 000 randomly selected employers across England, Northern Ireland and Wales participated in the survey in 2019.

The next iteration of the survey, to be published in 2023, was commissioned to three market research agencies by the Department for Education (DFE) in England, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive, and covers England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Again, the survey will be conducted via telephone interviews.

Source: Government of the United Kingdom (2020^[34]), *Employer Skills Survey 2019*, www.gov.uk/government/collections/employer-skills-survey-2019; Department of Education (2022^[35]), *Employer Skills Survey 2022*, www.skillsurvey.co.uk/.

The granularity of information on current skills needs in Ireland could also be strengthened. In a public consultation survey carried out in the context of this Skills Strategy project, strengthening the granularity of Ireland's skills information was judged to be one of the most relevant policy directions that Ireland should consider to strengthen the governance of its skills ecosystem.

There are several sources through which Ireland can obtain granular skills information. While in most cases, and similarly to most OECD countries (OECD, 2016^[36]), skills needs are approximated by the level of education, field of study or via occupational needs trends, recently the SLMRU conducted a granular analysis of the specific skills in demand in Ireland on the basis of online job posting data from Lightcast (SOLAS, 2022^[37]). Online job posting data, such as those collected and made available by Lightcast or by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) (Table 5.2), can provide granular insights into skills demanded by employers in online job postings, which is valuable (see Figure 2.2 in Chapter 2 for the top-ten skills in online job postings in Ireland as found by CEDEFOP in 2020, by way of example). However, it should be borne in mind that online job postings are biased towards industries and occupations that seek high-skilled workers (Carnevale, Jayasundera and Repnikov, 2014^[38]; Brüning and Mangeol, 2020^[39]).

In Ireland, granular skills data are also gathered by RSF managers, who collect data on skills needs from employers on the ground as part of the Skills for Growth project (Table 5.2) and record the data in a standardised Excel spreadsheet template developed by the SLMRU. The template makes it possible to capture the skills required in occupations for which employers have a hiring need, among other variables (e.g. employer sector, region, etc.). Other actors, such as EI and DSP employer engagement officers, also use the Skills for Growth template when collecting information on employers' skills needs. While the Skills for Growth dataset is small (between 2018 and 2022, data from 750 companies were collected), the SLMRU considers the Skills for Growth data of great qualitative value for enriching the findings of the National Skills Bulletin (see more below). As mentioned above, the Skills for Growth template has been hitherto used to mostly collect information on employers' hiring needs (in terms of job title, skills, etc.). While the template was recently updated to also collect information on upskilling needs among existing employees, the template's structure does not allow for the easy capture of this information.

Going forward, the SLMRU could consider adapting the Skills for Growth template to clearly delineate room for the collection of information on both hiring needs and upskilling needs among current employees (in terms of job title, skills, etc.). The SLMRU should also apply a common skills taxonomy on the template at the data cleaning stage to enable easier connectivity between granular data collected at regional/local levels and national skills assessment and anticipation exercises. In addition, the SLMRU could consider using digital solutions (e.g. a common online skills needs database) to capture the data collected via Skills for Growth, given that the data are recorded at present in Excel spreadsheets and then sent to the SLMRU.

Similarly, the SLMRU's Recruitment Agency Survey (RAS) (Table 5.2), which provides information on recruitment difficulties (among others) of employers who look for new hires via recruitment agencies, is only able to capture a small number of recruitment agencies and is thus not considered representative. Nonetheless, similarly to the Skills for Growth data, the RAS provides valuable qualitative insights complementing the information from SLMRU's National Skills Bulletin, the NES, and the vacancy data from Ireland's public employment service (Jobs Ireland). The RAS also facilitates the identification of niche shortages (Gusciute, Quinn and Barrett, 2015^[40]). Since 2021, the recruitment agencies surveyed began reporting not only the most difficult-to-find occupations but also the most difficult-to-find skills, albeit only in selected thematic areas (e.g. skills related to the green transition) in the RAS. Going forward, the SLMRU should take advantage of the RAS to collect granular information on difficult-to-find skills more broadly (i.e. not only in selected thematic areas) and consider classifying the data according to a common skills taxonomy, as suggested for the Skills for Growth data.

Information on current skills demand in Ireland and, more specifically, on the labour market outcomes of learners following education and training completion, could be collected more systematically. In HE,

graduate tracking exercises are carried out on a regular basis, drawing on survey and administrative data (HEA, n.d.^[41]). In FET, a report on learners' outcomes based on a survey of FET participants was published in 2017 (SOLAS and Perceptive Insight, 2017^[42]). Since 2017, SOLAS has produced research on: 1) outcomes of FET graduates having completed the PLC, and therefore covering only one specific type of FET provision; and 2) outcomes of early leavers from FET (SOLAS, 2020^[43]; 2022^[44]). In 2019, the Central Statistical Office (CSO) carried out a one-off analysis of the outcomes of FET learners who completed training between 2010 and 2016 (CSO, 2019^[45]). However, regular analysis of FET learners, regardless of the type of FET qualification completed, is not being carried out. Project participants agreed that Ireland would benefit from a more systematic collection of information on FET learners' outcomes. For example, the United Kingdom collects and publishes analyses of FET learners' outcomes annually (Box 5.9).

Box 5.9. Relevant international example: Collecting information on the outcomes of learners in further education and training

United Kingdom: Further Education: Outcome-Based Success Measures

In the United Kingdom, the Department of Education publishes the Further Education: Outcome-Based Success Measures (FE OBSM). Published annually since being piloted in 2014, FE OBSM presents statistics on the employment, earnings and learning outcomes of learners in further education in the academic year after achieving their learning aim (i.e. qualification).

FE OBSM reports outcomes by various learner demographics and types and levels of learning. It covers adult (19+) learners in "FE and skills" (i.e. any study after secondary education that is not part of HE), as well as learners of all ages in apprenticeships and traineeships. FE OBSM does not cover learners funded through the Offenders' Learning and Skills Service or 16-19 year-old FE and skills learners.

FE OBSM draws on the Longitudinal Education Outcomes dataset, which allows the analysis of individuals' education and employment trajectories by linking information on schools and further and higher education from the DFE, employment information from HM Revenue and Customs and benefit histories from the Department of Work and Pensions.

For learners completing their qualifications from the academic year 2018/19 onwards, the FE OBSM results can be accessed via an interactive dashboard developed by the Department of Education's Unit for Future Skills.

Source: Department of Education (2021^[46]), *Further Education: Outcome-Based Success Measures*, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/further-education-outcome-based-success-measures/2018-19>

While there is space for improving information on current skills demand, Ireland could also benefit from strengthening the basis for conducting quantitative, economy-wide skills forecast exercises (i.e. quantitative projections providing general indications about future trends in skills supply and demand in the labour market) (OECD, 2016^[36]).

In Ireland, the SLMRU has access to and provides expertise to the skills (labour force) forecasts from CEDEFOP (Table 5.2). CEDEFOP skills (labour force) forecasts, available for all EU and six non-EU countries, provide comparative quantitative projections of the future trends in employment by sector of economic activity and occupational group, as well as the future trends on the level of education of the population and the labour force (CEDEFOP, 2018^[47]). However, it should be mentioned that CEDEFOP forecasts are not intended to replace national skills forecasting exercises (CEDEFOP, 2012^[48]), typically based on more granular data and knowledge of the national context. In the same vein, project participants agreed that while CEDEFOP forecasts were generally useful, it was also felt that these

forecasts were not always adequately capturing the specificities of the Irish labour market. In the past, SOLAS had carried out national, economy-wide skills forecasting exercises, which had drawn importantly on sectoral employment projections generated by the HERMES macroeconomic model run by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). However, since sectoral employment projections ceased being produced by the ESRI several years ago, Ireland's ability to produce economy-wide skills forecasts sufficiently reflecting the specificities of the Irish labour market became constrained.

Therefore, Ireland could consider reinitiating the development and systematic maintenance of a regular sectoral forecasting model to enable more relevant and accurate economy-wide skills forecasting by occupation and level of education, including graduate, postgraduate and doctoral research talent at NFQ Levels 8-10, as feasible (see more on the need for collecting more information on the demand for research talent above and in Chapter 4).

At the national level, more robust economy-wide skills forecasts could have several benefits. As mentioned in Table 5.1 and above, the EGFSN advises the Government of Ireland on the projected skills (labour force) requirements based on reports combining quantitative research, analysis and horizon scanning (based on interviews and workshops with project participants) in relation to emerging skills requirements at thematic and sectoral levels, and makes recommendations on how to address the identified needs (EGFSN, n.d.^[49]).⁶ Annually, the EGFSN tends to publish between two to three reports (excluding follow-up work) on selected sectors and/or themes with forecasts at the occupational and/or NFQ level. More robust economy-wide skills forecasts would prove useful in the EGFSN's sectoral and thematic skills forecasting exercises, as well as for the labour market monitoring reports produced by the SLMRU and other relevant agencies and provide a basis for a detailed analysis of emerging technical skills needed for innovation (see Chapter 4).

The EGFSN establishes project steering and implementation groups for each study that it undertakes (Table 5.5) to, respectively: advise on and oversee the progress of its studies; create consensus on establishing the evidence base and the measures needed to address the skills needs identified by the EGFSN; and foster greater visibility and effective implementation of the recommendations proposed in the published reports. Project participants raised questions about the extent to which the EGFSN's involvement in supporting the implementation of its recommendations, which increased after the revision of the EGFSN's mandate in 2005, takes away from the quality of the analysis and the number of reports the EGFSN can produce per year. While there are legitimate trade-offs between emphasising the breadth of research versus devoting time to supporting the implementation of the produced recommendations, the role that the EGFSN plays in promoting implementation on the ground is valuable and should continue. The project steering groups, which the EGFSN establishes to support its research, provide an ideal basis for leveraging the networks, relationships and stakeholder ownership developed during the report preparation process in the subsequent implementation phase. Similarly, in Estonia or France, groups similar to the EGFSN – i.e. the sectoral expert panels overseen by the Co-ordination Council of Estonian Skills and Labour Forecasting System (Estonian Qualifications Authority, n.d.^[50]) and the Skills Employment Network in France (France Stratégie, 2021^[51]), respectively – are involved in the implementation of their findings.

Recently, the EGFSN also started exploring ways to further improve the granularity of analyses in their reports to provide forecasts at the level of specific skills, not only at the level of occupations and/or the NFQ level. In light of the outcomes of the consultations with project participants, where the need for more granular skills information was considered highly relevant, the EGFSN should continue with its plans to further strengthen the granularity of their research.

Recommendation 5: Improve the range and granularity of information on current skills needs, strengthen information on training outcomes and enhance skills forecasting

Improving the range and granularity of information on current skills needs, strengthening information on training outcomes and enhancing skills forecasting is essential for strengthening Ireland's skills information collection and the collection's potential added value for learners, employers, education and training providers and policy makers.

Ireland can undertake the following specific actions to improve the range and granularity of information on current skills needs, strengthen information on training outcomes and enhance skills forecasting:

- 5.1. **Expand the scope of the National Employer Survey to collect more information on skills needs and skills use and implement the Survey on a regular basis.** HEA, SOLAS and QQI could consider expanding NES with additional questions, which would provide further insights into employers' skills needs (e.g. skills gaps among existing employees, etc.), the use of skills of existing employees as well as the recruitment of graduate, postgraduate and doctoral research talent at NFQ Level 8-10 specifically, as feasible. NES should be carried out on a regular basis.
- 5.2. **Enable systematic collection of information on employees' skills gaps via the Skills for Growth initiative and strengthen the emphasis on skills in the Recruitment Agency Survey.** The SLMRU should clearly delineate space for collecting information on upskilling needs among current employees in the Skills for Growth data templates. In addition, the SLMRU could consider using digital solutions (e.g. a common online skills needs database) for capturing the data collected via the Skills for Growth initiative. The SLMRU should also consider using the Recruitment Agency Survey (RAS) to collect granular information on difficult-to-find skills not only in selected thematic areas but more broadly. In the case of both the Skills for Growth data and the RAS, the SLMRU should consider applying a common skills taxonomy.
- 5.3. **Support systematic collection of information on the outcomes of further education and training graduates.** SOLAS should initiate a systematic collection of information on the outcome of FET graduates, regardless of the qualification awarded. Such tracking of outcomes should be undertaken on a regular basis. Where feasible, SOLAS could consider using administrative data to track outcomes of FET graduates to mitigate against potential "survey fatigue" in Ireland.
- 5.4. **Consider reinitiating the development and systematic maintenance of a regular sectoral forecasting model.** DFHERIS could consider reinitiating the development of a regular sectoral forecasting model, which would allow to produce more relevant and accurate economy-wide skills forecasts by occupation and level of education, including graduate, postgraduate and doctoral research talent at NFQ Levels 8-10 as feasible. More robust, economy-wide skills forecasts would also prove useful in the EGFSN's sectoral and thematic skills forecasting exercises as well as for the labour market monitoring reports produced by the SLMRU and other relevant agencies. One actor should systematically maintain the sectoral forecasting model to ensure continuity. DFHERIS could consider financing the development and maintenance of the model from the NTF.

Recommendation 6: Enable more effective exchange and use of existing skills data and promote systematic skills policy evaluation to support evidence-based skills policy making

To make the most out of the collected skills information, enabling effective exchange and use of such information is imperative. It is essential that collected skills information is disseminated to end-users in a targeted and user-friendly manner to inform individual academic and professional decisions (see more in Chapter 2) and that policy makers design and implement skills policies according to the best available evidence on value and efficacy.

Data exchanges within the government and between governmental actors and stakeholders could be better facilitated in Ireland. At present, challenges related to data sharing complicate evidence-based decision making. For example, the DSP does not have access to ETB training databases, which would facilitate filling difficult-to-fill vacancies. Similarly, RSF managers pointed out that they would benefit from ongoing access to education and training registration and/or completion data to better inform their own course development and planning work with regional providers on the ground. Recently, several OECD countries began exploring solutions facilitating easier exchanges of data, including skills data. Such international experience could be relevant for Ireland to consider. For example, Estonia and Luxembourg have developed digital data exchange solutions to support seamless and secure data exchanges (Box 5.10). Ireland could similarly consider developing digital data exchange solutions to better enable skills data exchanges between governmental actors themselves, as well as with stakeholders.

Box 5.10. Relevant international example: Digital data exchange solutions

Estonia: X-Road

The X-Road software-based solution is the backbone of Estonia's e-solution environment ("e-Estonia"). X-Road connects different information systems that may include a variety of services, communicates with multiple information systems, transmits large data sets and performs searches across several information systems simultaneously.

Thanks to X-Road, access to individual databases can be controlled and regulated, with only authorised users being able to enter the databases and receive pre-defined content. Over 150 public sector institutions in Estonia are connected to X-Road, and it is used indirectly by hundreds of enterprises and institutions and over 50 000 organisations.

In the field of skills, X-Road serves to support data exchanges between, for instance, the Estonian Education Information System (EHIS) and other databases and platforms, such as the population register or the Health and Insurance Fund. Such connections have several benefits. For example, the connection between EHIS and the population register enables EHIS to access data on a student's place of residence without the need to collect such information from the students themselves. In turn, the Health Insurance Fund uses EHIS data to determine who is eligible for student health insurance.

Outside Estonia, the X-Road software is also implemented in Finland, Iceland, Japan and other countries. By linking the two X-Road-based systems initially developed separately in Estonia and Finland, the two countries are now exchanging relevant data between their respective business, tax and population registers across the maritime border.

Luxembourg: National Data Exchange Platform

The Ministry of Higher Education and Research of Luxembourg, in collaboration with several other governmental actors, launched an initiative to set up the National Data Exchange Platform (NDEP), to facilitate smoother data exchanges.

The NDEP aims to become a data exchange environment that provides the IT infrastructure and legal basis to facilitate data sharing between ministries and government agencies while complying with EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requirements. Actors working on the NDEP are currently identifying the list of priority fields that would benefit from this platform (top priority are health, then energy data) and developing the legal framework. The OECD Skills Strategy for Luxembourg recommends that going forward, Luxembourg should consider including skills data on the NDEP and use the NDEP to facilitate data exchanges not only between ministries and governmental agencies but also with stakeholders.

It is expected that the NDEP will become operational in the coming months.

Source: OECD (2023^[52]), *OECD Skills Strategy Luxembourg: Assessment and Recommendations*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/92d891a4-en>; OECD (2020^[21]), *Strengthening the Governance of Skills Systems: Lessons from Six OECD Countries*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/3a4bb6ea-en>; X-Road (2020^[53]), *Estonia and Finland launch automated data exchange between population registers*, <https://x-road.global/estonia-and-finland-launch-automated-data-exchange-between-population-registers>.

Project participants agreed that more could be done in Ireland to effectively use the information on skills needs collected directly from employers at regional or local levels. Until recently, only skills audit data collection templates used by RSF managers and DSP employer engagement officers had been aligned with the format of skills needs data used at the national level (i.e. the standardised Excel spreadsheets developed by the SLMRU; see more above), were reported back to the SLMRU and used for the preparation of the National Skills Bulletin. Recently, in the context of the Spotlight on Skills initiative, EI started working on aligning the skills needs data collection processes with those of the SLMRU to allow SLMRU to use IE's data, which is welcome.

EI's approach should be followed by all actors who carry out employer skills audits at the regional or local levels, and a requirement of reporting all the skills audit data to the national level (i.e. to the SLMRU) should be introduced. The suggested common online skills needs database could be used to support easy and quick centralised data reporting following the SLMRU's template. Access to the compiled data by relevant actors (including RSF managers) could be facilitated thanks to the suggested digital data exchange solution (see above). A more co-ordinated approach to skills audit data reporting would allow the SLMRU to use the data to produce a more comprehensive picture of Ireland's skills needs.

Facilitating effective skills data exchanges, in tandem with strengthening Ireland's skills information collection (see Recommendation 5), is essential for enabling the effective use of existing skills data to evaluate Ireland's skills policies and programmes. Project participants agreed that Ireland's skills ecosystem would benefit from more systematic and regular evaluations of existing skills programmes and initiatives (e.g. Skills to Advance, Skills to Compete, Springboard+, etc.) before they are expanded, or new ones are established.

The Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) is responsible for supporting better policy formulation and implementation based on economics, statistics, value-for-money analysis and evaluation across departments in Ireland (OECD, 2020^[54]) and has a broader mandate than solely carrying out skills policy evaluation. Similarly to other OECD countries (Golden, 2020^[55]), some departments and governmental agencies in Ireland commission policy evaluations to external bodies (e.g. the evaluation of the National Youthreach Programme undertaken by the ESRI and funded by SOLAS (Smyth et al., 2019^[56])) and/or have their own evaluation structures. For instance, while within the DEP EDU, each unit manages its own evaluations, the Labour Market Advisory Council (LMAC) has a dedicated group working

on evaluating policies designed and implemented by the DSP (DSP, 2020^[57]). At the start of 2022, DFHERIS established the EfP Unit, whose goal, once fully operational, will be three-fold: 1) improving data reporting within DFHERIS and between DFHERIS and related departmental agencies (Table 5.1); 2) strengthening co-ordination of research undertaken by the departmental agencies and identifying potential research gaps; and 3) evaluating the effectiveness of skills policies and programmes.

Going forward, it will be important to adequately resource and further strengthen the capacities of the EfP Unit as well as the evaluation structures and measures in other relevant departments in Ireland, and, in collaboration with the IGEES, promote co-ordination, collaboration and co-operation between one another as appropriate, given the breadth and cross-cutting nature of skills programmes and policies in Ireland, which would benefit from rigorous evaluation.

Recommendation 6: Enable more effective exchange and use of existing skills data and promote systematic skills policy evaluation to support evidence-based skills policy making

Fully leveraging the potential value added of a skills information collection requires enabling effective exchange and use of such information, so that individuals are supported in making informed choices, which will be rewarded in life and the labour market (see more in Chapter 2) and so that policy makers can design and implement impactful skills policies.

Ireland can undertake the following specific actions to enable more effective exchange and use of existing skills data and promote systematic skills policy evaluation to support evidence-based skills policy making:

- 6.1. Support the development of digital solutions to facilitate easier exchange of skills data.** DFHERIS, in collaboration with other relevant actors (e.g. the Data Protection Commission), could consider developing digital solutions (e.g. data exchange platforms) to facilitate easier exchange of data across the government (i.e. between relevant departments, agencies, institutes, etc.) and with stakeholders. Skills data “use cases” should be included on such a platform.
- 6.2. Enable more effective use of data from employer skills audits by promoting co-ordinated reporting and centralising the collected data.** DFHERIS, in collaboration with the SLMRU and with other relevant actors, should undertake a mapping of all governmental actors who carry out employer skills audits on the ground. At the national level, co-ordinated reporting should be promoted, including by contributing to the suggested online common skills needs database (see Recommendation 5) following the SLMRU’s template.
- 6.3. Support the development and adequate resourcing of dedicated evaluation structures and promote a co-ordinated and collaborative approach to skills policy evaluation.** Relevant departments (including DEP EDU, DFHERIS, DSP, etc.) should support adequate resourcing and capacity building of the respective evaluation structures and promote a co-ordinated and collaborative approach to skills policy evaluation, in collaboration with the IGEES, as appropriate.

Summary of policy recommendations

Table 5.6. Summary of policy recommendations for strengthening skills governance to build a joined-up skills ecosystem in Ireland

Recommendations	Specific actions
Opportunity 1: Promoting a whole-of-government and strategic approach to skills policy	
1. Strengthen the commitment to and efficiency of adopting a whole-of-government approach to skills to help achieve a step change in Ireland's skills system	1.1. Adopt processes to support cross-departmental collaboration on addressing skills challenges in areas of strategic importance. 1.2. Reduce duplication and promote synergies by mapping, monitoring and raising awareness of existing processes to support cross-departmental collaboration on addressing skills challenges.
2. Prepare a follow-up to the National Skills Strategy 2025 to help place skills at the top of Ireland's policy-making agenda, and enable effective implementation	2.1. Apply a whole-of-government approach to the design and implementation of the National Skills Strategy 2025 follow-up. 2.2. Prioritise a smaller number of high-impact priority areas in the National Skills Strategy 2025 follow-up and consider a more flexible structure. 2.3. Establish clear accountability mechanisms to support progress reporting on and evaluating measures implemented under the National Skills Strategy 2025 follow-up.
Opportunity 2: Supporting effective engagement with stakeholders throughout the skills policy cycle	
3. Strengthen the National Skills Council and other stakeholder bodies to enable stakeholders to more effectively shape Ireland's skills policy priorities	3.1. Revise the National Skills Council's terms of reference, improve its visibility, and adequately resource its secretariat. 3.2. Ensure that a wider range of relevant non-governmental stakeholders is represented at the National Skills Council, promote gender balance in its membership and foster accountability with regard to its advice. 3.3. Convene more regular National Training Fund Advisory Group meetings and provide adequate opportunity for stakeholder input.
4. Scale up existing good practices and promote a more inclusive, efficient and co-ordinated approach to stakeholder engagement in the co-design of education and training	4.1. Expand successful skills development programmes and initiatives where collaboration with enterprises is core to the course design and/or where receiving funding is conditional upon collaboration with enterprises – and encourage input from small and medium-sized enterprises. 4.2. Consider establishing "curriculum hubs" in selected education and training boards to better focus their stakeholder engagement efforts in further education and training. 4.3. Ensure adequate co-ordination between actors who engage with stakeholders in course co-design.
Opportunity 3: Strengthening the collection, exchange and use of skills information	
5. Improve the range and granularity of information on current skills needs, strengthen information on training outcomes and enhance skills forecasting	5.1. Expand the scope of the National Employer Survey to collect more information on skills needs and skills use and implement the Survey on a regular basis. 5.2. Enable systematic collection of information on employees' skills gaps via the Skills for Growth initiative and strengthen the emphasis on skills in the Recruitment Agency Survey. 5.3. Support systematic collection of information on the outcomes of further education and training graduates. 5.4. Consider reinitiating the development and systematic maintenance of a regular sectoral forecasting model.
6. Enable more effective exchange and use of existing skills data and promote systematic skills policy evaluation to support evidence-based skills policy making	6.1. Support the development of digital solutions to facilitate easier exchange of skills data. 6.2. Enable more effective use of data from employer skills audits by promoting co-ordinated reporting and centralising the collected data. 6.3. Support the development and adequate resourcing of dedicated evaluation structures and promote a co-ordinated and collaborative approach to skills policy evaluation.

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Notes

1. In this report, “skills ecosystem” is defined as all institutions, individuals, policies, laws and regulations concerned with the development and use of skills in the economy (OECD, 2020_[2]).
2. In this report, “skills policies” are understood to encompass all policies governing skills development and use over the life course, which contrasts with how skills policies are typically understood in Ireland (i.e. only those policies governing the “tertiary system”, higher education and further education and training).
3. Besides actions pertaining to DFHERIS and the agencies under its aegis, the terms of reference of the NSC state that the NSC should serve to “provide updates as required from other government departments on related strategies”, “receive regular updates from other relevant stakeholders (IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, etc.)”, “receive and consider costed proposals for the annual research/work programme of the EGFSN” and “receive, consider and approve prior to publication agreed action plans based on EGFSN research findings” (DFHERIS, 2022_[15]). See more in Opportunity 2.
4. SOG support the work of cabinet committees in Ireland. The cabinet committees assist the government in carrying out its responsibilities and reflect the government’s national priorities (Government of Ireland, 2023_[59]).
5. Springboard+ was originally launched as “Springboard” in 2011 and targeted primarily the unemployed by offering free training. In 2018/19, the initiative was extended to individuals in employment in a heavily subsidised form.
6. Projections of future skills needs are also undertaken by actors other than the EGFSN, usually to serve a specific need or fill a particular knowledge gap (e.g. IFS Skillnet has worked with employers to identify the key future skills requirements in the financial services industry (IFS Skillnet, L.C.G Market Solutions, FSI, 2022_[60]); a skills forecasting model was developed to identify skills (labour force) gaps by selected sectors and occupation groups at the local level (in Fingal) up to 2023 as part of the Fingal Skills Strategy (Fingal County Council, 2019_[58]), etc.).



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