Fast Track into Information Technology (FIT Clg)

Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills on the Uptake of Apprenticeships and Traineeships

20th November 2018

Thank you for this opportunity you have given FIT to contribute to your review. FIT is the coordinating Provider of two ICT Apprenticeships (Ireland’s first) for Associate Professionals in Software Development and Network Engineering respectively. We were successful in the first call for submissions and you might think of us as a good case study of the particular challenges and opportunities that can arise in expanding apprenticeships into sectors and occupations (ICT) where there is no tradition of apprenticeship.

FIT was established in 1999 to promote an inclusive smart economy. Its board members (currently 23) are senior executives in leading tech sector companies. Over the last 20 years, in collaboration with FÁS and VECs and, latterly SOLAS and ETBs, we assisted 18,500 job seekers access quality ICT training of which over 14,000 have secured employment. The majority of these candidates have not been Third Level students, much less graduates who studied STEM subjects.

Prior to the first call for new apprenticeships, FIT had piloted a new dual education, two year training programme called *ICT Associate Professional* at NFQ Level 6 (FET) in collaboration with the DES, SOLAS and 8 ETBs. On this precursor to the tech apprenticeships, 259 candidates were sponsored by 143 companies with 85% of those completing securing employment. In collaboration with Intel and KWETB, FIT also designed and ran a new Advanced Manufacturing Maintenance Technician programme at NFQ Level 6 (FET). Over 80% of those who completed the programme to date secured employment in Intel and a further 10% elsewhere. The vast majority of these candidates had no previous knowledge or experience in the discipline further demonstrating how FET can cater for highly technical roles. In its recruitment messaging now,
Intel clearly cites NFQ Level 6 Award as a desired level of certification for employment. With the support of KWETB, the capacity of the programme has since been doubled.

In the light of this background FIT welcomed the development of a new national policy on apprenticeships and traineeships, the establishment of the Apprenticeship Council and the creation of QQI quality- and program-validation processes for apprenticeships. At the time of the first call for submissions, we made a strategic decision to develop some IT apprenticeships as flagship programmes in meeting the skills needs of IT employers and making IT employment more inclusive. We have invested heavily in doing so. The response we have got from IT employers to date and the evident degree to which they value competencies more than credentials wholly confirm us in our decision. It has led us to adopt the goal of achieving an annual intake of 1,000 ICT apprentices by 2021, by expanding the portfolio of tech apprenticeships into complementary areas such as Cyber Security, Fin-Tech, DevOps, Virtualisation and Digital Forensics.

There is, and will remain, strong employer demand in Ireland for ICT skills. It is coming, at the moment, more from ICT multinationals already here and expanding or the continuing arrival of new ones but increasingly from indigenous enterprises in multiple sectors of the economy and from bodies across the public system who see the potential of new ICT technologies to strengthen their competitiveness and improve the quality of their services. It is a demand not just for high skills but for intermediate /associate professional skills that are well within the capability of appropriately designed FET programmes to deliver. In periodic ICT Skills Audits based on large numbers of face-to-face interviews with IT employers, FIT has consistently found the majority of posts they were seeking to fill required the exercise of skills at levels the companies described as entry or competent rather than expert (58% vs 42% in 2018).

Employment of ICT practitioners is concentrated in our four largest cities but there are now growing pockets in every region, some of which have grown particularly rapidly. The national skills fora, in fact, are beginning to reckon with the opportunities that ICT technologies are offering to their region’s value proposition for hosting high-tech enterprises and attracting high skilled ICT practitioners to ‘de-commute’.
To ensure that the shared ambition for modern apprenticeships becoming a key source of talent acquisition for employers and an option of choice for many job seekers, it is FITs view that there are aspects of the current programme needing attention and enhancement namely; existing administration processes for the new apprenticeships need review to ensure fitness for purpose, a national and persistent promotional campaign needs to be implemented immediately to ensure broad appreciation of the range of apprenticeships now available and in development with a particular emphasis to encourage more women to consider the opportunity and the adoption of funding models which more effectively support the early stage development and implementation cycle of new apprenticeships and take account of the diverse needs that pertain across sectors. Finally, while early adoption of new apprenticeships may be challenging requiring a change in mindsets, more ambitious targets for the expansion of new apprenticeships are necessary to sustain the job growth in Ireland’s buoyant economy through a broadening of talent pipelines.

Thank You.