

## Opening statement to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills: Mr. James Nicholas Bryant

Firstly, I would like to thank the Chair and the Committee for the invitation to address the important issue of digital literacy in adults. In this opening statement, I hope to highlight some of the main aspects of my written submission.

Ireland is a highly-skilled, knowledge economy with a particularly high rate of ICT graduates. This is a direct result of a historically strong education system and the presence of many large multinational corporations which require such a labour force. By EU standards (according to the DESI report), Ireland also benefits from an above-average level of broadband coverage and female ICT specialists (as a percentage of female employment).

While these results all suggest a strong position for the country, there are a number of underlying problems that may negatively impact Ireland. For instance, while broadband coverage may be good, the price of broadband is a limiting factor in the take-up of such services. Additionally, approximately 50% of individuals lack least basic digital skills, with a similar amount lacking at least basic software skills.

These differences between those who are highly technologically literate and those without basic digital skills are the foundation for the inequality known as the digital divide. The digital divide describes the, sometimes severe, cost a citizen can incur (economically or socially) by being unable to participate in a network society such as Ireland's. This ranges from being unable to easily access government services to being significantly less employable and finding it difficult to upskill at the required rate. As the public and private sectors both further digitize, the exclusionary effect on those without basic digital literacy grows faster. New challenges such as job automation, A.I. and algorithmic bias are becoming significant parts of our dialogue as an economy and society and this is a dialogue that benefits from having a diverse, skilled citizenry participating in it.

In my written submission I outline some of the main barriers to access for adults lacking digital skills including having the ability, means, skills or motivation to engage with digital systems. However, I also note that gaps in digital literacy and the above-mentioned barriers often have their foundations in societal inequalities and that these need to be addressed as part of any comprehensive solution. I make several suggestions for policymakers which I am happy to discuss in more detail. These range from conditional subsidies or stimulation for lagging groups to encouraging open access for information. Overall, I believe Ireland is in a good position to try and close the gap in the digital divide, though this will depend heavily on sustained political will and private sector buy-in on a range of solutions detailed by submissions to this committee.

I thank the committee again for the invitation to make both written and oral submissions and I look forward to helping answer any questions on the topic where I can.