SOUTHERN REGION LAUNCHES NEW REPORT TO DEVELOP A UNESCO LEARNING REGION

Improving human capital through Lifelong Learning is key to unlocking the potential of the Southern Region according to speakers at the *Towards a Learning Region* launch which was held in Waterford City Hall today. Attendees also heard that the Southern Region is moving towards becoming a UNESCO Learning Region, the first of its kind in the world.

Speakers at the *Towards a Learning Region* launch highlighted that the current level of participation in Lifelong Learning is a major weakness in the Southern Region and there is a substantial gap to bridge in order to compete with European leaders. Lifelong Learning is all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective. Given the transformations expected in almost all industries with the disruption of new technologies and digitalisation, educational providers and public bodies believe that higher participation levels in Lifelong Learning is essential in developing an agile skills and talent workforce.

To address this weakness and to enhance the skills and talent proposition of the Southern Region, the Southern Regional Assembly, together with regional stakeholders across Higher Education Institutes, Further Education and Training (FET) and community education, co-produced *Towards a Learning Region*.

Inspired by the Southern Region’s existing UNESCO Learning cities of Cork and Limerick, the purpose of this initiative is to maximise the growth of the Regions human capital base by expanding the UNESCO principles across the entirety of the Southern Region. *Towards a Learning Region* has identified 19 actions to make this a reality.

Significantly, the Elected Members of the Southern Regional Assembly have given their full backing to this initiative having formally adopted it at their Assembly meeting in June this year.

Cllr. Oliver Walsh, Cathaoirleach of the Southern Regional Assembly said:

*“The endorsement by Assembly Members sends out a powerful signal of intent by the Southern Region. Growing the Southern Region’s human capital base – by supporting providers of Higher Education, Further Education and Training, and Community Education – will support the supply of a skilled workforce, creating conditions necessary to deliver effective regional development.*

*It will help achieve progress in disadvantaged areas and marginalised communities and will ensure they are not left behind. In this regard, the adoption of Towards a Learning Region by Assembly Members is a significant milestone in National Planning Framework (NPF) and Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) implementation and is an exemplar of a local and regional based initiative working to progress national priorities.”*

David Kelly, Director of the Southern Regional Assembly, said:

*“The Assembly is committed to commencing the development of a Learning Region as it offers a unique opportunity to develop the UNESCO approach to supporting Learning at scale. As a co-creation, stakeholders will be central to implementation, as it is recognised that a Learning Region, must be built community-by-community involving partners in both formal and informal learning.*

*Developing a Learning Region is an opportunity for different parts of society to come together and to work collaboratively to share our knowledge. If we can do this together, we can fulfil the Southern Region’s vision of becoming one of Europe’s most “Creative and Innovative”, “Greenest” and “Liveable” Regions, ensuring no person or place is left behind.”*

Guest speaker, Raúl Valdes from the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning launched the journey towards a Learning Region and said:

*”As the team leader for the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities, I am delighted that you are celebrating Lifelong Learning through the establishment of a Learning Region.*

*What matters is a people-centred and learning focused approach which builds the basis for a learning society. I invite you to join our international network as together we can continue cultivating Lifelong Learning in your Region and beyond.”*