



SECTION 25A REPORT

REPORT DATE	PUBLIC BODY	PREPARED BY
Date	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science	Name

The purpose of the table below is to assist the public body in completing the Section 25A (1) report to the Southern Regional Assembly. This report will be used by the Regional Assembly to complete the Section 25A (2) Monitoring Report to be submitted to NOAC and which will focus on progress made in securing the overall objectives of the RSES.

It is intended that the Monitoring Report will be succinct, covering the 2-year period 2022-2024, and therefore we would ask that the response to the questions are as short as possible and for example we do not need the full detail of each policy or programme outlined.

For further information, please contact Brigh Ryan at bryan@southernassembly.ie or Claire Breen at cbreen@southernassembly.ie

Please return the report to this office by **Friday, 2nd February 2024**.

This can be submitted by email to: cbreen@southernassembly.ie

PLEASE OUTLINE ANY PROGRESS MADE IN SUPPORTING THE OBJECTIVES OF THE RSES WHICH ARE RELEVANT TO YOUR DEPARTMENT-

In framing your response please provide a short overview of key public investment mechanisms and proposals by reference to:

1. Please outline progress on improving access to high quality further education as a critical enabler of balanced regional development throughout the Region, including the allocation of sufficient resources to cater for planned population growth to of 340,000 to 380,000 in the Southern Region to 2040 under the NPF and Southern Region Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES).

In February 2022 the Minister announced a major project fund called the FET College of the Future Major Projects Fund (COTF). The objectives of this fund include addressing existing deficits in current FET infrastructure, supporting projects that drive reform of the FET sector, including consolidation of provision in high quality facilities, integration of further education and training, realisation of specialist centres of national and regional skills development and unified tertiary planning. Projects over the value of €5m were considered under this programme call.

A total of twelve projects nationally were progressed at the first stage of the assessment process and these moved to the next stage of the development process – The development of a Preliminary Business Case. Five of these projects are in the Southern Region in Cork, Kerry, Tipperary, Limerick and Kilkenny.

Completed preliminary business cases were submitted to SOLAS by Friday 12th of January 2023. These business cases will be evaluated under criteria such as value for money, affordability and strategic policy and priority alignment, in line with the requirements of the infrastructure guidelines, and ETBs will be informed of the outcome of this evaluation process in the coming months.

Wexford College of FET officially opened in November 2023. This is a state-of-the-art facility for Further Education and Training (FET) and brings together programmes in a new and custom-designed 52,000 sq. ft facility. The new college is one of the first fully integrated FET College of the Future projects in Ireland. It runs a number of programmes including:

- Apprenticeships;
- Traineeships;
- Post Leaving Certificate (PLCs);
- Adult Literacy programmes;
- Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS);
- Community Education;
- English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL);
- Back to Education programme.

The 4th Near Zero Energy Building (NZEB) training Centre of Excellence in Ireland was launched in Cork city on 15th May 2023.

The SOLAS Learner Support Unit are continuing to embed Universal Design Learning (UDL) across the FET sector. Actions under examination include:

- New reporting protocols for tracking the uptake of the UDL Digital Badges by FET Practitioners;
- A bi-annual sector-wide report to bring to highlight examples of best practice.

They are also contributing to a research project led by Munster Technological University, which aims to develop ways to improve public services for people with different levels of digital skills.

The Learner Support Unit provided a briefing to DHFREIS in relation to the ongoing collaboration between FET and Down Syndrome Ireland (DSI), particularly the Latch-On Programme. This programme supports learners with Down syndrome to continue their literacy and numeracy development in an age-appropriate, post-secondary school environment. Latch-On is provided by

DSI through a number of ETBs.

On May 22, 2023, SOLAS marked Biodiversity Day by launching a new FET green skills initiative. This pilot program aims to train local authorities and public sector bodies to protect nature in their day-to-day work.

SOLAS coordinates and funds eCollege, the National Online Learning Service FET. Over 40 programmes are currently available on a fully online basis, with a further 20 programmes planned for Q1 2024. They include offerings in subject areas such as data, ICT and digital skills. Plans to introduce programmes in business, sustainability, and transversal skills are underway. eCollege programmes are completed online on a flexible part-time basis. They are open to those over 18 at no cost to the learner. The service meets the need for high quality online learning available nationally, serving regional growth and development by removing cost and access barriers for learners.

Skillnet Ireland is a business support agency of the Government of Ireland, with a mandate to advance the competitiveness, productivity and innovation of Irish businesses through enterprise-led talent development. Since its inception Skillnet Ireland has demonstrated a strong commitment to regional development. 19 of the 70 Skillnet

Business Networks are based in the Southern Region. These include sector specific Skillnets and 11 mixed sector supporting locally traded enterprises of all sizes across all sectors through upskilling and business supports.

Skillnet Business Networks offer upskilling across a wide range of areas including management development, technical skills, sustainability and digital skills. Regionally based Skillnet Business Networks in the Southern Region include Cork Chamber Skillnet, Waterford Chamber Skillnet, Wexford Chamber Skillnet, Tipperary Chamber Skillnet, Carlow Kilkenny Skillnet, Duhallow Skillnet, South Kerry Skillnet, and South West Gnó Skillnet. In addition, many of the sectoral Skillnet Business networks form centres of excellence in strategic regions such as Biopharmachem Skillnet in Cork, Tech Industry Alliance Skillnet in Cork, Aviation Skillnet in Shannon and Skillnet Climate Ready Academy in Limerick.

A key strength of the Skillnet Business Network model is the networking aspect and capacity of sharing knowledge across private sector businesses of all sizes. The Skillnet network model offers businesses and the education and training system an opportunity to work together to meet the emerging talent and skills needs of their regions, from micro-credentials to Masters level programmes with third level institutes. Examples of collaborations in the Southern Region are detailed under Q 6.

2. Please outline details relating to the Department's support for Lifelong Learning, UNESCO Learning Cities and other related initiatives which will support the development of the Southern Region as a Learning Region in line with RSES Policy at Section 7.1.6 and 7.17 and RPOs 186 and 190

The HEA manages a number of skills related funding calls for the DFHERIS. These include Springboard+ and Human Capital Initiative both initiatives provide funding for HEIs to run lifelong learning programmes to address key skill needs in the regions. The Southern Region Universities have been very successful in both initiatives offering a number of places across a range of skills and levels such as IT, Engineering, Digital, Hospitality, Tourism, Construction, Healthcare, financial services.

- The national Adult Literacy for Life Programme Office has been established in SOLAS. Regional Literacy Coordinators based within ETBs have been appointed to support local development, including those in the Southern Region.
- A national and regional awareness campaign took place in September 2023 to tie in with International Literacy Day. It included over 30 regional events across the country, which engaged with 1,350 people, and an advertising campaign comprising of radio, digital, Video On Demand, social media and outdoor advertisements.
- The ALL office partnered with An Post, who ran a significant literacy campaign in September. ALL hosted a stand at the National Ploughing Championships, engaging with over 580 people.
- The first meeting of the National Literacy Coalition took place in October 2023, representing 10 government departments, 4 state agencies, 3 NGOs and employers/trade unions.
- A health literacy liaison group has been established within the Department of Health and plans are underway to develop an action plan for 2024.

- The plain language project was launched which will see plain language training provided to over 100 staff working across government departments, agencies and public sector bodies. 30 staff working in public services will be trained to become plain language editors.
- In 2023, Minister Harris announced the recipients of the Adult Literacy for Life Collaboration and Innovation Fund. 51 projects from across the country received a total of €1m in funding to help adults learn literacy in fun ways such as through cooking, boxing and comic books.

3. The role of universities and research centres in providing continuing professional development, advanced research, facilities to support business growth and clustering, and providing skills to attract and retain international investment.

Research funded by SFI promotes and assists the development and competitiveness of industry, enterprise and employment in Ireland. Several of our funding programmes support direct collaboration between academia and industry (MNCs and SMEs) to engage in advanced cutting-edge research and/or to provide training opportunities. Examples of such programmes are the SFI Research Centre Programme, SFI Strategic Partnership Programme, SFI-NSF I-Corps@SFI Entrepreneurial Training Programme, SFI Industry RD&I Fellowship Programme, SFI Centres for Research Training Programme 2018.

The SFI ARC Hub Programme is co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Union under two European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) Regional Programmes - the Southern, Eastern and Midland Regional Programme 2021-2027 and the Northern and Western Regional Programme 2021-2027. The goal of the SFI ARC Hub Programme is to establish a new model for regional innovation and entrepreneurial training that will catalyse a step-change in the translation of cutting-edge, publicly-funded research towards impact at a regional level. The SFI ARC Hub Programme will enhance and accelerate the commercialisation of research to create new products, processes and services. The SFI ARC Hub Programme launched on June 1st 2023. Following full proposal deadline on 22nd September, four proposals were submitted, in the areas of Food and Agritech, Digital Healthcare, ICT and Therapeutics. The review process is underway, with a decision timeframe and planned start-date in Q2 2024.

Almost all other SFI's awards involve training of PhD students. The list of all such awards in the region with a 2022/23 start date is included as a response to question 9.

4. The role of Education Training Boards to deliver labour market focused programmes and apprenticeships to meet emerging skills needs supported by Regional Skills Fora, providing a pathway to participation, and assist in tackling disadvantage.

Apprenticeship

Apprenticeship is an employer driven, demand led educational and training programme that aims to ensure that qualified apprentices are fully skilled to act in an independent capacity in their respective industries. While apprenticeships are national programmes, it is the pattern of employer recruitment of apprentices that determines the availability of individual apprentice opportunities. Apprenticeships are available in many sectors that have a strong regional presence such as manufacturing, hospitality, construction, and retail. The continued expansion of the apprenticeship system into new sectors of the economy, such as agriculture and horticulture, together with the opportunity of online and blended learning, will bring real opportunities for learners and employers throughout the country.

Objectives such as balanced regional development will inform the manner in which the education and training system can support employers in planning and addressing their skills requirements. This is why a survey undertaken by the Regional Skills Fora Managers of 340 SMEs across the country formed part of the consultation process for the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025.

The National Apprenticeship Office (NAO) drives promotional activities to heighten public awareness and that of employers of the range of apprenticeship offerings throughout the country. Visibility of programmes will be supported through the national Generation Apprenticeship campaign and continued engagement with regional vocational skills showcases.

The Regional Skills Fora, with their in-depth knowledge of the local and regional landscape, will support the NAO to ensure that there is a strong regional focus to the future development of apprenticeships. The increased diversity of new apprenticeships, many of which have off-the-job training delivered through online or blended learning provides a significant opportunity for widening of access to apprenticeship for rural businesses and learners. In addition, Education and Training Boards (ETBs), Institutes of Technology (IoTs), and Technological Universities (TUs) are spread throughout the country and play a very important role in ensuring apprenticeship provision has a strong regional dimension.

Under the Action Plan for Apprenticeship prospective apprentices from all geographical locations will be able to find out information about apprenticeship opportunities and will receive more support and clearer communication throughout their entire learning journey.

Apprenticeship Meeting Skills Needs

Apprenticeships have been shown to be responsive to changes in society and in the economy. As such, they have a crucial role to play in meeting Ireland's skills needs now and into the future. A key strength of the apprenticeship model is that it is a demand-led approach to meeting workforce and skill requirements in our economy. Apprenticeship has undergone transformation over the past eight years. Expansion to date has widened the impact of apprenticeship to areas of skills shortage such as engineering, technology skills, logistics, and fintech. Under the Plan there will be increased online visibility regarding apprenticeship engagement and development processes for employers/sectors who wish to assess the potential for new apprenticeships.

Applications for new apprenticeship development are open on an ongoing basis, allowing employers to progress the development of programmes in response to emerging skills needs on an as-needed basis in all sectors of the economy. Budget 2024 provides €67m additional funding for apprenticeship. This will provide core investment into the apprenticeship system and allow craft apprenticeship to continue to grow from 13,000 places in 2022 to over 16,000 places in 2024. This funding will support skills development in key areas, especially in construction skills, and support delivery of Government commitments on Housing for All, and the Climate Action Plan.

Inclusion in Apprenticeship

One of the five overarching objectives of the Action Plan is "Apprenticeship for All" by ensuring that the profile of the apprenticeship population will more closely reflect the profile of the general population. The Plan promotes general access, diversity, and inclusion in apprenticeship by offering targeted supports to encourage participation from under-represented groups including those with disabilities, women and those from ethnic minorities.

Targets for participation by under-represented groups, and additional specific actions to support those target groups will be set in conjunction with the recently established Access & Inclusion Sub-Committee of the National Apprenticeship Alliance (NAA) and will be monitored on an ongoing basis to ensure that interventions are effective in supporting increased diversity of the apprentice population. A gender-based bursary for apprenticeship employers has also been rolled out as part of the Action Plan. The bursary, worth €2,666, is available to employers who employ apprentices in the minority gender on any national apprenticeship programme with greater than 80% representation of a single gender.

Funding of €450,000 was secured through the Dormant Accounts Fund (DAF) to support members of the Traveller community to access apprenticeships. A pilot Traveller Apprenticeship Incentivisation Programme is underway in 2023 and 2024. It is aimed at both increased uptake of- and retention on- apprenticeships. It is supported by the Irish Traveller Movement, Pavee Point, and the NAO.

In May 2023 a new access and inclusion bursary to support access to national apprenticeships was announced. From September 2023, learners who participate in one of the highly-targeted Access to Apprenticeship courses in the technological universities are eligible to receive the bursary. These Access programmes aim to support the transition of young people (16-24 years of age) from under-represented groups into national apprenticeships. Over 80% of learners who participate in these Access courses continues on to become an apprentice. The bursary will provide €3,000 in financial support to each learner, helping to cover the costs of travel, accommodation and successful participation. The

impact of the bursary will be assessed during this pilot year with the aim to expand it to a wider range of access courses and initiatives in 2024.

Construction Apprenticeships

The Action Plan for Apprenticeships 2021-2025 sets a target of 10,000 annual registrations by 2025. Recent years have seen large intakes onto construction and construction-related apprenticeship programmes. As of the start of 2024, there are now 29 apprenticeship programmes identified as being construction or construction-related, including the Civil Engineering Technician (Level 6) and Civil Engineering (Level 7) programmes which were launched last year. As of the end of December 2023, there were 4,946 registration on construction programmes, and 848 registrations on construction related programmes. This is a combined total of 5,794 registrations across construction and construction-related programmes, representing an increase of 3% in registrations compared to 2022. As of the end of December 2023, there were 20,019 apprentices in the system currently undertaking a construction or construction-related apprenticeship. This also represents an increase of 3% of the total apprentice population compared to the end of December 2022.

Careers in Construction Action Plan

The Report on the Analysis of Skills for Residential Construction & Retrofitting 2023–2030 identifies the construction skills needs from the tertiary sector in order to meet housing and retrofitting targets outlined in Housing for All and the National Retrofit Plan. To deliver the government’s targets in housing and domestic retrofitting and to continue to engage in general residential repair and maintenance work, it is estimated that 50,831 new entrants will have to be recruited in managerial, professional, skilled, and semi-skilled occupations over the period 2023-2030. The Careers in Construction Action Plan aims to address and minimise barriers in the sector, and actions include changes in structure, training and upskilling, and promotional activity.

NZEB/ Retrofit Training and Centres of Excellence

The government has set an ambitious target to retrofit 500,000 homes by 2030. Education and training relevant to the skills needed in the retrofitting and construction sector are delivered through more than fifty programmes running in six NZEB/Retrofit Centres of Excellence operated by Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board, Limerick Clare Education and Training Board, Cork ETB, Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board, Mayo-Sligo-Leitrim Education and Training Board, and City of Dublin ETB. Courses are also delivered in Tipperary ETB.

Following progress in developing a national network of Centres of Excellence in retrofit skills training, including NZEB skills, the number of workers availing of these opportunities has increased steadily. Enrolment numbers have risen from 793 in 2021, to 2,034 in 2022. Provisional enrolment figures for 2023 are more than double the 2022 figures, at 4,442. These courses provide skills training for individuals currently working in construction wishing to upskill. They also provide a pathway to participation and assist in tackling disadvantage by offering free, introductory courses to those who are unemployed or seeking to move into the sector.

Within the boundaries of the SRA, the Centres of Excellence operated by Waterford and Wexford ETB, Limerick Clare ETB and Cork ETB and the courses provided by Tipperary ETB have seen significant student numbers pass through in recent years with 626 enrolments in 2021, 783 in 2022, and provisionally 1,998 enrolments in 2023.

Micro-qualifications

In January 2024, 24 micro-qualifications were established. These were co-designed by SOLAS and ETBS with enterprise agencies including the Regional Skills Fora and private companies. This ensured that these micro-qualifications provided accessible upskilling that are relevant to business need. They are currently being rolled out by ETBs under the Skills to Advance policy and address emerging skills needs such as:

- Green skills for sustainability;
- Digital business skills; robotics;
- Aquafarming;
- Business innovation;
- Market development.

ETB staff received training to facilitate a rollout of a FET micro-qualification in sustainability awareness for FET Learners. To raise awareness of the new micro-qualifications in green skills, a national promotional campaign ran for six weeks across radio, social, digital media and the press. A green skills week ran across the ETBs in November 2023 to increase awareness at a local level of the green skills micro-qualifications. Stakeholder engagement continues to scope out the potential to expand the suite of micro-qualifications in digital skills, such as AI, Datafication and Cloud Computing, as well as other priority skills areas such as the life sciences and financial services.

5. Progress in the development of multi-campus Technological Universities (TUs) to lead the development of skills and talent in the Region

In November 2023 South East Technological University (SETU) signed contracts to purchase a site of over 20 acres that was formally known as the Waterford Crystal site which is adjacent to the SETU Waterford campus. Also in November 2023 a Local Authority led CPO process for the Wexford Campus project was announced as nearing conclusion. SETU are currently preparing business cases for the infrastructure that will be required for both of these sites and these are expected to be with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) by the end of Q1 2024.

The Technological Sector Strategic Projects Fund (TSSPF) was launched by the Minister in early 2022 to strengthen the technological sector by supporting additional capacity and delivering core infrastructure improvements including research and innovation activity. This fund will support the identification of a pipeline of projects which will support an ambitious transformation agenda for the Technological University sector, including the strengthening of progression pathways from further education, and to realise the full potential of digital technologies to ensure that our campuses are flexible and future-proofed. In December 2023 the Minister also announced that under the Technological Sector Strategic Projects Fund (TSSPF), MTU Cork's combined extension project along and MTU Kerry's development of a Campus Learner Centre at the Tralee Campus have both been approved to progress to the next stage of development of appointing a design team.

The SFI Frontiers for Partnership Awards call was launched in 2021 to specifically support the Technological University (TU) / Institutes of Technology (IoT). The call was open to research proposals led by the Technological University (TU) / Institutes of Technology (IoT) sector with partners from the more established University sector. The list of SFI awards currently held by Technological Universities can be found in the attached spreadsheet. SFI Research Centres are large multi-institutional awards that link scientists and engineers in partnerships across academia and industry to address crucial research questions. Both MTU and SETU are partners in 6 SFI Research Centres respectively and receive funding as part of the programme. While some of these awards were made prior to 2022 they are currently active in the SE Region. <https://www.sfi.ie/sfi-research-centres/>

All SFI Programmes are open to the TU/IoTs. SFI has expanded the eligibility of teaching buyout across its programmes to better cater to researchers in the Technological Universities. Details on awards made during 2022/23 in the SE region to Technological Universities (TUs) can be found by filtering by the attached spreadsheet by Research Body.

Across Higher Education, existing Government Initiatives such as Springboard+ and Human Capital Initiative (HCI) are in place which provide opportunities for the enhancement of skills, talent and innovation and fostering of collaboration between enterprise, higher education institutions and public sector. Springboard+ complements the core State-funded education and training system and provides free and subsidised upskilling and reskilling higher education opportunities in areas of identified skills need. Springboard+ 2023 was launched in June 2023, providing 8,729 places on 260 courses. Under Springboard+ 2023, 1,810 places on 63 courses were available in the Southern region; courses are in areas of new and emerging technologies such as Cybersecurity and Virtual Reality, from Level 6 to Level 9 on the NFQ.

HCI Pillar 1 courses were originally one-year, full time conversion courses at Levels 8 and 9 but HCI Pillar 1 2023 now includes part-time courses. These courses are in areas of identified skills need, building on experience of the ICT Conversion Courses under Springboard+. Under HCI Pillar 1 2023, 983 places on 40 courses were available in the Southern region from a total of 2922 courses being provided on 105 courses overall. Please note while Springboard+ and

HCI Pillar 1 programmes aren't all located in the Southern region, with the flexible delivery in place through Springboard+ and HCI Pillar 1 they are accessible to participants from across the region. All courses provide job-readiness training and most offer the opportunity for work placement, project-based learning or industry site visits where appropriate. All courses approved for funding under were selected following a competitive tendering process. Full details on Springboard+ and HCI courses, the eligibility criteria and how to apply can be found on the website: www.springboardcourses.ie.

HCI Pillar 3, Innovation and Agility has two key areas of focus – innovation in modes and methods of delivery and agility in response to future skills needs. It aims to ensure that courses in areas of skills needs demonstrate innovative methods of teaching and delivery, which will include flexibility in course provision. HCI Pillar 3 will deliver 22 projects in higher education institutions, 17 of which involve collaborations between institutions. The projects include the use of virtual laboratories in higher education, a new hub to upskill the building sector on green construction, and the establishment of Creative Futures Academy to support digital and screen culture, cinema, literature and broadcasting, art, design, and fashion. There are 12 projects that HEIs in the Southern region are leading on. Many of these projects display innovation in how they develop courses and how they collaborate with external stakeholders. The UL@work Masters in Professional Practice allows learners to design their own interdisciplinary Masters by combining stackable postgraduate diplomas in over 30 fields.

The project to promote the recognition of prior and lifelong learning led by South East Technological University (IUA and Thea) has been structured so that HEI project partners utilise technology to support a systems approach to enhancing organisational RPL capacity. Examples include the development of an online platform allowing RPL coordinators to work virtually with potential RPL applicants from initial query through to portfolio creation. Ireland's Knowledge Centre for Carbon and Climate project led by Munster Technological University aims to build a national platform for the development of knowledge and skills to support the transition to a decarbonised, sustainable economy.

The development of digital skills is also a key feature of various projects under Pillar 3, including MTU's Cyber Skills which, in direct collaboration with industry experts, has been designed to address the skills needs of the broader IT sector to ensure that the challenges of an increasingly digitalised world are met.

Further information on the projects in the Southern area can be found on <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2023/06/HCI-Pillar-3-Midterm-Evaluation-Report.pdf> for a summary of each of the above projects and how they are progressing at the midterm point

It should be noted that the Higher Education Institutions play a key role in the provision of apprenticeships offering Phase 4 and 6 across all craft apprenticeships in the TUs in the region as well as a number of consortia led apprenticeships across the region offering apprenticeships from Level 6-10 such as Level 10 in Engineering, Level 8 Cybersecurity, Advanced Manufacturing, Chef, etc.

6. Opportunities for the enhancement of skills, talent and innovation and fostering of collaboration between enterprise, higher education institutions and public sector.

The Regional Skills Fora foster engagement and collaboration by providing an opportunity for employers and the education and training system to work together to meet the emerging skills needs of their regions. This involves identifying, interrogating and validating skills needs, while acting as an impartial broker to ensure that employers are linked to the right places to get responses they need. Greater collaboration and utilisation of resources facilitates programme co-creation by partnering enterprise with education and training system providers to develop innovative solutions to skills gaps, while also enhancing progression routes for learners.

There are two Regional Skills Fora (RSFs) in the Southern region: South East RSF & South West RSF. Each RSF has a voluntary chair and a full-time manager, responsible for delivering on their strategic priorities.

Membership of each Forum is comprised of:

- Employer representatives; · Education and training providers i.e. Third level institutions (UCC, MTU & SETU); ETB's (Kilkenny & Carlow, Waterford & Wexford, Tipperary, Cork and Kerry ETBs); Skillnet Ireland networks (Carlow Kilkenny, Co. Wexford Chamber, Waterford Chamber, Co. Tipperary Chamber, Cork Chamber, South West Gno, South Kerry; Duhallow and the Tech Industry Alliance Skillnets)

- Enterprise Support Agencies e.g. IDA, Enterprise Ireland, LEO's, IBEC, Chambers of Commerce, ISME
- Government bodies e.g. Local authorities, Regional Enterprise Programmes, Dept. of Social Protection

Science Foundation Ireland Fellowship Programme. This programme aims to provide postdoctoral researchers with the opportunity to develop their career through experiencing, first-hand, the diversity of activities carried out by a funding agency, through a placement within SFI. <https://www.sfi.ie/funding/funding-calls/sfi-fellowship-programme/>

SFI Industry RD&I Fellowship Programme seeks to support academia-industry interactions in order to address industry-informed challenges. Awards under this programme can be made to academic researchers (at faculty and postdoctoral level) wishing to spend time in industry worldwide through the temporary placement of academic researchers with an industry partner. <https://www.sfi.ie/funding/funding-calls/sfi-industry-fellowship-programme/>. The SFI Public Service Fellowship is an initiative from SFI that offers researchers a unique opportunity to be temporarily seconded to Government Departments and Agencies (Host Organisations) to work on specific projects where they can add value resulting in mutually beneficial outcomes. <https://www.sfi.ie/funding/funding-calls/public-service-fellowship/>.

SFI Centres for Research Training awards, while made prior to 2022, are currently active in the SE Region. The purpose of the SFI Centres for Research Training is to build on research excellence and to provide cohorts of academically outstanding future research leaders with the skills and knowledge required to address the future challenges of an ever-changing work environment. <https://www.sfi.ie/funding/centres-research-training/>

The National Challenge Fund is a €65 million programme is part of the Government's National Recovery and Resilience Plan and is funded through the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility. Challenge-based funding is designed for teams to work towards a solution to a particular problem. The eight active challenges are in the broad domains of green and digital. Of the 98 awards made, 34 were awarded to Research Bodies in the Southern Region.

SFI-funded researchers based in the region had **932** engagements with **743** companies in 2022.

420, with of these were with SMEs, **512** with MNCs.

396 were with companies based in Ireland, **536** were with internationally-based companies.

SFI-funded researchers across Ireland had **456** engagements with **270** companies based in the region.

248 were with MNCs and **208** were with SMEs.

Publications

SFI-funded researchers in the region produced **888** publications in 2022.

Team Members

857 PhD and Masters students supported by SFI in the region in 2022.

368 postdoctoral researchers supported by SFI in the region in 2022.

Details on all three types of fellowship awards made in the SE region during 2022/23 can be found by filtering by Programme name on the attached spreadsheet.

In December 2022, Minister Harris announced an expanded mandate for Skillnet Ireland, appointing Skillnet Ireland as the agency with a leadership role for talent and workforce development including increased engagement with the third level education system to develop enterprise-led talent development programmes and upskilling initiatives.

Skillnet Ireland is continuing its focus on fostering collaboration between enterprise and higher education institutions, and through its 70 Skillnet Business Networks has been involved in the co-creation of new talent development programmes in partnership with industry and the tertiary sector.

Skillnet Ireland developed a wide range of new accredited programmes at with UCC, UL, TUS and other institutions in advanced manufacturing, climate change, dairy innovation, fintech and others. In addition, Skillnet Ireland developed a number of new micro credentials including Irelands first stackable micro credentials in climate action and more recently on in Electric Vehicle (EV) Fundamentals to enhance sustainability in the transport sector and reduce emissions.

7. Please outline any progress made by agencies that operate under the aegis of your Department, in supporting the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to that agency.

Skillnet Ireland supports the RSES objective to build a competitive, innovative and productive economy by advancing the competitiveness, productivity and innovation of Irish businesses through enterprise-led talent development. In 2022 Skillnet Ireland's 70 Skillnet Business Networks supported over 9,000 businesses and 32,000 learners in the Southern Region through its upskilling and talent development programmes and schemes, amounting to over 200,000 training days. Key sectors supported in the region include: Agriculture, Aviation, Construction, Engineering, Financial Services, Food & Drink, Green Technology, Health, ICT Manufacturing & Services; Pharmaceutical, Retail, Technology, Tourism & Travel, and Transportation.

Skillnet Ireland formed a strategic partnership with IDA Ireland in 2022 to promote inward investment and support the Irish economy, including the growth of the Southern Region's three cities, metropolitan areas and diverse rural regions. The partnership combines the IDA's business development and support services for FDI companies with Skillnet Ireland's talent development expertise and extensive delivery network to help drive companies' growth.

Skillnet Ireland is committed to supporting SMEs in the region with 95% of all businesses supported in the region having 250 employees or less. Skillnet Ireland supports SMEs in a number of ways including in the green and digital transitions as well as supporting the leadership development and business innovation.

8. Please provide details of any policy initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES

The Department is progressing a policy vision to develop a more unified tertiary education and research system, details of which were noted by Government on 24th May 2022. The vision is for a well-functioning, unified tertiary system for knowledge and skills, composed of complementary further education and training, higher education and research and innovation sectors. One of the key objectives for this vision is the creation of more comprehensive and unified regional and national systems.

This objective aims to create more coherent and powerful responses to the regional rebalancing objective of Project Ireland 2040 and the associated Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES). The combined presence of higher and further education and training providers and research centres has a footprint in every county across Ireland. A more unified further education and training, higher education and research and innovation system regionally could capitalise on this footprint to assist in necessary regional rebalancing as envisaged under Project 2040.

In that context, significant progress has been achieved across many of the actions highlighted in the Policy Platform document published in May 2022, including:

- New **capital programmes** now include an emphasis on unified tertiary objectives for infrastructure and campus development and applications must now demonstrate how they can support a more unified tertiary system. In June and July 2023, DFHERIS capital units convened five meetings to facilitate regional collaboration in the implementation of existing and future capital investment programmes across the tertiary sector. Representatives from the Further Education and Training (FET) and Higher Education (HE) institutions, along with local authorities in each region were invited to attend. The meetings served as an opportunity for the further and higher education sectors to share learnings as they move through the stages of the capital programme calls and allowed them to build awareness of emerging challenges and opportunities. The seminars were received very positively by all participants and it is intended to run another round of these meetings in the near future.
- The **National Tertiary Office (NTO)** was established in the Higher Education Authority in December 2022, jointly managed between the HEA and SOLAS, to work on the development of joint FET and HE programmes. 153 students were subsequently registered across the 14 joint tertiary programmes which began in September 2023, 9 of which are being delivered within the SRA region. In September 2023, NTO launched a call for proposals for a second round

of programmes that will start in 2024. The tertiary offering for 2024 will be announced in Q1 of 2024, and more than twice as many programmes will be available in key skills areas such as Software Development, Construction Studies and Nursing.

- Partnerships and collaborative pathways between FET and HE, community partners, and employers are being built through the **new National Access Plan**. The Plan also signals an intention to widen the scope of successive National Access Plans to encompass further education and training. Discussions have also taken place to progress the appointment of a PATH coordinator for the FET sector, with the aim of supporting further education to higher education transitions for priority groups.
- Commencing with the OECD Skills Strategy Review, a more unified approach to addressing **strategic skills needs through both the FET and HE** provision.
- To drive an overall step-change in participation in **Life Long Learning** in the workforce, the Department is considering the recommendations of the OECD Ireland Skills Strategy Review in respect of lifelong learning and how best to implement same on a whole of tertiary basis.
- Linking the innovation system with the further education and training system the new **National Modern Methods of Construction Demonstration Park** in Co Offaly is a tangible example where innovation is being put into practice by the apprenticeship system.

Regional Dialogue Initiative

The DFHERIS Regional Dialogue Initiative 2023 was formed in response to the responses in a public consultation process, and was based on the principle of two-way high-level dialogue between DFHERIS and regional further education, higher education and research and innovation sector leaders, meeting together for one day accompanied by other key regional stakeholders to discuss a series of agreed agenda items focused on key Government strategic priorities.

Six dialogue meetings held in Cavan, Galway, Cork, Waterford, Athlone and Dublin, were attended by senior department officials and regional leaders including University Presidents, CEO's of ETBS and Directors of Research Centres. Each meeting was chaired by either the Minister or the Secretary General. Sectoral agency, industry and civil society representatives were also invited to attend and contribute to the dialogue. The newly established National Tertiary Office presented on their work at each meeting. Over the course of six meetings, 29 DFHERIS officials met with approx. 142 representatives from across the tertiary sector. The agenda for the meetings focused on key Government strategic priorities through four themes - A More Unified Tertiary System; A Strong Regional Economy supported by Skills, Innovation and Research; Access, Inclusion, Diversity and Equality in a Regional Unified Tertiary System; and Transitioning to a Low Carbon and Climate Resilient Region.

The Department published a Synopsis Report (available [here](#)) based on the predominant discussions themes that emerged through the dialogue meetings on 20 December 2023. The Report highlights specifically how the tertiary sector could become a policy focus for better realising the key Government priorities of stronger regional economies, social cohesion and addressing climate change. The report also draws out the characteristics of the tertiary system within each region, their distinctive strengths and challenges and highlights that the regional dialogue model is an effective means of engaging on a more regional basis with potential existing for further such engagement at a regional level. The insights in the Synopsis Report will guide the formulation and development of the Tertiary Education Strategy required under the Higher Education Authority Act 2022.

Modern Methods of Construction

Housing for All, the government's housing policy to 2030, recognises that to meet with this objective, the Irish construction industry must have the capacity to deliver the required new homes as efficiently and environmentally sustainably as possible. Greater adoption of Modern Methods of Construction (MMC), an umbrella term for a range of innovative construction processes, is a key pillar of the Government's approach to increasing innovation and achieving productivity gains in the delivery of housing.

MMC represents a significant ongoing transformation in construction, incorporating increased levels of offsite component manufacturing and assembly; new technologies, products and building systems; and increased digitalisation. Though factory-based offsite construction methods are not new, ongoing technological advances, the advent of digitalisation and the environmental sustainability imperative are prompting the continued evolution of the construction sector in this regard.

The end result of MMC, as well as a key principle of RSES, is the creation of a healthier and more attractive place to live, work, study and invest in.

Modern Methods of Construction – Skills

The construction skills landscape is evolving and the priority being placed on MMC at a cross-government level is to increase skills availability, productivity and environmental sustainability, and to reduce cost.

The Report on the Analysis of Skills for Residential Construction & Retrofitting 2023–2030 highlights that the greater adoption of MMC would be expected to lessen the projected increased need in labour demand set out in the report. MMC will also promote the diversity of career opportunities in the sector, including new and emerging careers, and will provide applicable specialist training towards emerging MMC skills requirements.

To identify and quantify projected future MMC skills requirements, the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) has commissioned research that is assessing needs across the industry over coming years, and will make recommendations on appropriate responses from the tertiary system and industry. On completion of this research (expected Q1 2024), DFHERIS will develop a responding action plan.

Modern Methods of Construction – Skillnet Programme

A 2022 research publication by the Construction Professionals Skillnet, 'Modern Methods of Construction – Defining MMC Business: Construction Professionals Skillnet' (available here) found that industry requires talent and upskilling supports for senior roles in MMC.

In response, a new micro-credential in Strategic Co-ordination and Collaboration for Modern Methods of Construction was launched in February 2023. This was developed following intensive engagement with industry to identify the key knowledge and skill gaps in the sector, the programme is highly practical and ensures that participants acquire the knowledge and develop the necessary skills to effectively deliver an MMC project.

This is the first of a number of micro-credentials being developed by the Construction Professionals Skillnet and covers project critical areas such as project managing with design freeze, commercial relationships and structures, and how to create a collaborative culture.

Modern Methods of Construction – Demonstration Park

The establishment of a national Demonstration Park for MMC, at the National Construction Training Campus at Mount Lucas, will enable exploration, demonstration and better understanding and awareness of the latest MMC technologies and offsite building systems. The overall aim of the park is to share knowledge and experience of MMC and help to advance relevant skills development in the construction sector. A Project Manager has been appointed to progress this unique initiative.

Green Skills

Ireland's flexible skills eco-system is designed to be responsive to societal challenges, including those resulting from climate change. NZEB training, delivered through a network of Centres of Excellence, described in Q 4 above, provides an example of targeted interventions designed to address specific, emerging skills needs for the green transition.

Other examples include emerging requirements in renewable energy and offshore wind, which is of particular relevance to the RSES. In this area, DFHERIS leads, in collaboration with DECC, on a dedicated Skills and Workforce Workstream as part of the cross-Departmental Offshore Wind Energy Programme, and supports the activities of a number of educational providers within the boundaries of the SRA. The Department has supported the completion of a detailed skills analysis for offshore wind, and has established an Expert Advisory Group for offshore wind skills and workforce requirements, which includes Waterford-Wexford ETB, Kerry ETB, Limerick-Clare ETB, South East Technological University, and the National

Maritime College of Ireland among its members. Kerry ETB is also the coordinating education provider for the new Wind Turbine Maintenance Technician apprenticeship programme, which began in 2022.

Alongside courses in NZEB and retrofit, a national suite of Green Skills programmes is currently being developed by SOLAS in collaboration with enterprise partners for blended delivery by ETBs in areas such as sustainability awareness and resource efficiency to assist in delivering on these challenges. These green skills courses are being developed and rolled out in ETBs across the SRA area.

Student Accommodation

In recognition of the challenges being faced by students, Government approved a proposal by Minister Harris in November 2022, for the development of a new student accommodation policy to help create more accommodation for students in public higher education institutions (HEIs) with the stated goal of assisting students attending colleges and universities in Ireland to find affordable places to live while they study. This new policy will unlock the construction in the short term of circa 1,000 beds, with further engagement ongoing on an additional 2,500 beds. A project for the University of Limerick has received Government approval in principle for its inclusion in the Departments short term activation programme. These were developments with planning permission, but which had stalled as a result of increased construction costs. 30% of the units will be made available at below market rates to the target cohort of students.

Funding was also approved to assist the Technological Universities (TUs) in developing a student accommodation programme based on a regional needs and feasibility assessment. The HEA appointed consultants in June 2023, to oversee and assess the levels of supply and demand for student accommodation across our public higher education institutions (HEIs), including Munster TU, University College Cork, University of Limerick, Mary Immaculate College and South East TU. The result of the first phase of this work was a comprehensive student accommodation supply and demand framework. The study involved extensive data-gathering across all TUs, Universities and Colleges, 1-to-1 meetings with HEI representatives, and a centralised student survey on student accommodation. The long term student accommodation policy and methodology has been informed by the results of the first phase of this study.

The long term vision is to ensure that availability of accommodation does not act as a barrier to accessing higher education. This policy aims to enable options to mitigate demand for accommodation given the increased accessibility of HEIs and the role enhanced transport links can play. It attempts to balance the need for new supply with a recognition of the impact of 31 distributed campus locations associated with the establishment of the five Technological Universities and the complementary policies associated with tertiary education and flexible lifelong learning which enable participation locally. On 16 January 2024, Minister Harris received approval for the long-term policy and methodology from Government. This long-term policy will inform future student accommodation strategies and schemes which will be developed throughout 2024. The aim of this policy is to increase the supply of student accommodation and to examine alternative solutions that will remove accommodation as a barrier to higher education.

Through this policy:

- The Government will fund the delivery of purpose built student accommodation;
- A call for proposals for accommodation projects for Technological Universities will open in the coming weeks;
- Vacant properties will be repurposed into housing for students, including properties on college owned lands;
- Reducing cost of construction and increase the pace of delivery through standardised design;
- Improved public transport to be explored for students;
- Continued support of the digs scheme with local authority and medical card changes to come into effect.

This policy response includes the next phases of the TU study which will undertake an assessment of mechanisms for delivery of student accommodation and a framework for delivery of student accommodation for the regions. This process will commence with a call for proposals being invited in the coming weeks. In addition the standardised design review to ensure development of a model of accommodation which demonstrates value for money and affordability.

FET

Work is underway to develop the SOLAS eCollege into a portal that can integrate with multiple providers and multiple platforms. SOLAS hosted a meeting in October 2023 to review the proposed Framework Guide for Learner Supports in FET. Key messages are that the framework will be fully aligned to wider inclusive models and provide a focus on enhancing the learner experience beyond the classroom.

As the national talent development agency, Skillnet Ireland and the Skillnet Business Networks in the Southern Region have a key focus on developing talent in areas of strategic importance for the economy, including digitalisation, climate action and sustainability, and SME leadership development. As part of the Skillnet Ireland Industry Insights Series, Cork Chamber Skillnet is finalising a report on Cork's International Financial Services (IFS) sector, looking at the future skills needs for the IFS sector in the region.

The Skillnet Innovation Exchange is a programme that accelerates digital transformation for large multinational businesses (MNCs) by connecting them with indigenous Irish SMEs. This initiative facilitates innovative technology scale-ups to collaborate with MNCs to help address their innovation challenges. Skillnet Innovation Exchange established partnerships with three regional enterprise hubs in the Southern Region in Cork, Kerry and Wexford since 2022.

9. Please provide a summary of the funding programmes administered by your Department (or agency under the aegis of your Department), over the last two years, which have been awarded within the Southern Region with the following details requested:¹

- **Funding Programme**
- **County Project Name and Description**
- **Amount Awarded (€)**
- **Stage of Project**

The attached spreadsheet in the first tab "SE Region Awards" details SFI awards held by research bodies located in the SE region. Please note awards listed are new awards with a start date in 2022 and 2023; the amount funded is the total funding for the duration of the award, which varies depending on the Programme.

As mentioned above, SFI Research Centres are large multi-institutional awards. 7 of the 16 Centres are hosted by Research Bodies located in the SE region and we have estimated that over €66.6m of SFI funding was allocated to SE region-based researchers (UCC, UL, MTU and SETU) for Research Centre-related activities (research and training) in 2022 and 2023.

Attached is the Human Capital Initiative Funding by the Southern Regional Assembly Country. Attached also is the Irish Research Council Funding by Country (Southern Region) and the Springboard+ 2023 Funding by Southern Regional Assembly Country.

Regarding DFHERIS Capital Programmes Delivery unit, attached are two documents covering investment in both HE and the FE during the 2022 and 2023 period. Given the nature of both the ETB's which in many cases are across a couple of counties and the TU's which also cover a couple of counties, the breakdown has been provided as close to the request as possible.

Please provide any other comments that you would like to make with respect to your Department (including any agencies under the aegis of your Department) in implementing the RSES and addressing the issue of balanced regional growth, to fully realise the ambition and targets set out for the Southern Region under *Project Ireland 2040- National Planning Framework* and the RSES. This may include any recommendations that you consider would improve the implementation process and provide a greater focus on addressing regional imbalance.

SFI will continue to fund excellent research in the Southern Region on an ongoing basis. A new research agency is being created by amalgamating SFI and the IRC. The new organisation will be Taighde Éireann - Research Ireland. Research Ireland will build on the strengths of the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland in driving world-class research and innovation in Ireland and in the regions. SFI and DFHERIS will collaborate to grow research capacity and capability in the new Technological Universities in the region.

¹ Southern Region comprises 10 local authorities: Cork City, Cork County, Clare, Kerry, Limerick, Tipperary, Waterford Carlow, Kilkenny and Wexford.

The SFI ARC Hubs programme (described fully in answer No.3 above) is expected to have a significant impact on balanced regional growth. Applications are currently under review, with decisions Q2 2024. Hubs will be funded for a five-year period.

PLEASE PROVIDE A CONTACT POINT IN THE EVENT THAT WE NEED TO CONTACT YOU ABOUT THIS FORM.

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