

PROMOTING SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP IN EMPLOYEE TRAINING

IRELAND COUNTRY REPORT



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Abstract

Ireland is among the European countries that were severely hit by the financial crisis of 2007/2008. As a result of the crisis, the Irish system of Social Dialogue was abandoned and collective bargaining – with the exception of the public sector – did no longer occur at the national level. It does, however, play a role at the company level when pay and training may be jointly negotiated. Today, Ireland is back on a growth path with high GDP growth and a decline in unemployment rates. The training and upskilling of the workforce has thus become a key priority for Irish enterprises. Social partners agree that teaching the right digital skills will be particularly important for the Irish economy to keep a competitive edge in the global market. Social partners are involved in the field of continuing vocational education and training (CVET) in the following ways:

- **Anticipation and identification of skills needs:** An Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) advises the government on skills needs of the economy and on other labour market issues. The group comprises of civil servants and representatives from the employer and trade union sides. In addition, social partners carry out own training needs analyses at the company level. Social partners are also jointly involved in the Apprenticeship council tasked with the establishment of new apprenticeships which can also be used to upskill employees.
- **Mobilising resources:** Training for employees is financed by their employers. In addition, employers also pay a levy of 0.8 percent of their wage bill to the National Training Fund. This fund allocates resources to various initiatives in the field of education and training for both employed and unemployed individuals.
- **Information, support and guidance:** As CVET is not part of centralised collective bargaining, Irish social partners stress the importance of informing their members about training offers and the benefits of training. Unions inform and support their members via online tools and by spreading information at the local level. Employers' associations see their role more in policy advice but they also offer targeted help in the field of human resources directly to their members.
- **Contribution to quality, transparency and efficiency:** Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI) is an independent state agency which oversees, defines and monitors quality standards in education and training and is in charge of maintaining the Irish National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Social partners are not officially linked to the agency, albeit they may be contributing at an informal level. Social partners stress the importance of quality in the training market and the value and signal of certified degrees also in the field of CVET.
- **Recognition and validation of competences and qualifications:** The recognition and validation of competences and qualification in Ireland also falls under the responsibility of QQI. Social partners would like to be involved to a larger extent in this field although they acknowledge the high quality standards that are being guaranteed under the current system.
- **Provision of learning:** Besides the 21 public third level institutions, 16 public Education and Training Boards who provide training offers for unemployed and employed individuals and further private providers, social partners are also training providers themselves. Unions have their own not for profit training companies offering training to their members in their respective trades. They occasionally cooperate with private training providers to provide specific courses they could otherwise not offer, e.g., because of the capital equipment involved. Employers offer training courses for business owners and managers in a range of managerial and legal fields. They, too, sometimes rely on private providers for specific topics. Trainings are offered at level 6 of the National Qualifications Framework; they are quality assured and certified. Longer courses may lead to officially recognised degrees.

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1 Introduction

Ireland is among the European countries that were severely hit by the financial crisis of 2007/2008. In the follow-up of the crisis, the government had to rely on a bailout by the ESM until 2013. As a result of the crisis, the Irish system of Social Dialogue was abandoned and collective bargaining – with the exception of the public sector – did no longer occur at the national level. Along with this change in industrial relations came several reforms in the field of education and training, e.g., the introduction of a new agency in charge of qualifications and quality in further and higher education as well as additional legislative reforms in the field of training in the years 2012 and 2013.

Today, Ireland is back on a growth path with high GDP growth and an extended decline in unemployment rates. Being a country with few natural resources, the Irish economy relies on the skills and the knowledge of its workforce. The teaching of “digital skills” for new labour market entries is seen just as important as upskilling the existing workforce. Especially the latter is considered by social partners to be a key policy objective for Ireland to remain competitive in the global economy. Lifelong learning and continuing vocational education and training (CVET) thus play an important role for employers’ and employees’ organisations alike.

2 Facts and figures on employee training

The following chapter looks at participation in employee training in Ireland from the individual and the company perspective and also puts a focus on factors that may prevent both sides from taking part in further training. For the sake of inter-country comparability we rely on data the Continuing Vocational Training Survey (CVTS) from 2005 and 2015 as well as from the Adult Education Survey (AES) from 2011.

2.1 Participation in employee training

The Adult Education Survey (AES) informs about adult learning. Learning activities are divided into formal education, non-formal education and informal education. Formal education and training is defined as education provided by the system of schools, colleges, universities and other formal educational institutions that normally constitutes a continuous ‘ladder’ of full-time education. Non-formal education and training is defined as any organised and sustained learning activities that do not correspond exactly to the above definition of formal education. Non-formal education may therefore take place both within and outside educational institutions (courses, work-shops or seminars, guided-on-the-job training – such as planned periods of education, instruction or training directly at the workplace, organised by the employer with the aid of an instructor – and lessons). Informal learning is defined as intentional learning which is less organised and less structured than the previous types. The participation rate in education and training covers participation in both formal and non-formal education and training. Employer-sponsored learning activities are defined as all activities paid at least partially by the employer and/or done during paid working hours.

The employed persons’ participation rate in job-related non-formal education and training lies considerably below the EU average (19.5 percent / 40.8 percent). In the European Union participation rates are only lower in Greece and Romania. Non employer-sponsored training is slightly more common than em-

employer-sponsored training (10.0 percent / 9.5 percent), where-as on the EU average employer-sponsored training is by far more frequent (37.7 percent / 3.1 percent). In Ireland Women are more likely to participate in training than are men (22.5 per-cent / 17.2 percent). This pattern can also be observed for other European countries, with the gap being much smaller on the EU average (41.5 percent / 40.1 percent).

Table 2-1: Employed persons' participation rate in job-related non-formal education and training

In percent, persons from 25 to 64 years

	2011		
	All	Employer-sponsored	Non employer-sponsored
All	19.5	9.5	10.0
Men	17.2	8.9 ^u	8.3 ^u
Women	22.5	10.2 ^u	12.2 ^u
Age groups			
25-34	22.7	9.8 ^u	12.9 ^u
55-64	: ^u	: ^u	: ^u
Educational attainment level ¹⁾			
ED 0-2	: ^u	: ^u	: ^u
ED 3-4	11.5 ^u	: ^u	: ^u
ED 5-6	27.0	12.7 ^u	14.2 ^u

Source: AES 2011; special evaluation of Eurostat

1) ISCED97

u low reliability

The Continuing Vocational Training Survey (CVTS) informs about enterprise activities. CVET is divided into courses and other forms of learning. CVET courses are usually separated from the active workplace (learning takes place in locations specially assigned for learning, like a class room or training centre). They show a high degree of organisation (time, space and content) by a trainer or a training institution. Other forms of CVET are typically connected to the active work and the active workplace, but they can also include participation (instruction) in conferences, trade fairs, etc. for the purpose of learning. The following types of other forms of CVET are identified: planned training through guided-on-the-job training; through job rotation, exchanges, secondments or study visits; through participation (instruction received) in conferences, work-shops, trade fairs and lectures; through participation in learning or quality circles; and through self-directed learning/e-learning.

Irish companies' participation rates in continuing vocational training are above the EU average for both 2005 and 2015. Between these two years, the participation rate rose from 67 to 77 percent while the increase was even stronger on the EU average (59.7 percent / 72.6 percent). The increase was mainly

driven by a rise in the participation rate of small enterprises in Ireland: In 2005 six out of ten small enterprises participated in continuing vocational training, whereas their participation rate was 75 percent in 2015. Still, small companies are less likely to participate in CVT than are medium and big enterprises (89 percent / 95 percent). This pattern can also be observed for other European countries. While participation in courses remained rather constant between 2005 and 2015 (56 percent / 57 percent), there was a large increase in other forms of learning (59 percent / 74 percent). Therefore, other forms of learning are nowadays much more common than traditional courses. On the EU average, companies are slightly more likely to participate in courses than in other forms of learning for both points in time.

Table 2-2: Companies' participation rate

In percent

	2005			2015		
	All forms of CVT	Courses	Other forms of learning	All forms of CVT	Courses	Other forms of learning
Average	67	56	59	77	57	74
Small	61	49	53	75	53	72
Medium	86	80	79	89	76	86
Big	100	100	96	95	90	94

Source: CVTS 2005, 2015

2.2 Motives and barriers for employee training

Table 2-3: Main barriers for employee training

In percent

Companies (non-training)	2015
Existing qualifications, skills and competences corresponded to the current needs of the enterprise	79
People recruited with the skills needed	51
High workload and limited / no time available for staff to participate in CVT	27

Source: CVTS, 2015; multiple answers possible

From the point of view of non-training companies, the main barriers for participation in employee training are sufficient skills and competences of the employees (79 percent) which is also the EU wide top reason (77 percent). One half of the non-training companies state that they recruit people with the skills needed (51 percent), again the share is quite close to the EU-average (49 percent). No time ranks third both in Ireland (27 percent) an EU wide (32 percent). Thus, non-training companies in Ireland see very similar obstacles compared to non-training companies in other European countries.

AES data for individuals' barriers are unavailable for Ireland at the time of this report.

3 Legal framework and institutional setting

3.1 Embedment of CVET in general education system

CVET is offered at various levels. State funded programmes range from provision of basic skills for Adults (e.g., Adult Literacy – AL) to Back to Education Initiatives (BTEI) for participants with less than secondary school leaving certificates to Vocational Training Opportunity Schemes (VTOS) and advanced third level programmes that provide participants with labour market relevant practical skills. However, the majority of the state funded programmes address the unemployed. The Department of Education and Skills is responsible for devising policy and for the provision of funding in the area of CVET also for low skilled/qualified. SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority (*An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leá-núnaigh agus Scileanna*) is responsible for allocating funding, planning and co-ordinating training and further education programmes. The Education and Training Boards are responsible for organising the delivery of tuition at local level (Eurydice, 2018). The Higher Education Authority (HEA) has a statutory responsibility for the effective governance and regulation of the higher education system. Relevant legislation assigning function to the HEA includes the Higher Education Authority Act (1971), the Irish Universities Act (1997) and the Institutes of Technology Act (2006). The Technological Universities Act (2018), underpinning the development of a new type of higher education institution and building on the mission of institutes of technology, was passed in March 2018.

Two publicly (co-)financed training schemes that target employed individuals are Apprenticeships and Skillnet Ireland. Apprenticeships may be implemented for individuals just entering the labour market or for upskilling the existing workforce. Skillnet Ireland funds training through 65 networks of private sector companies nationwide (Eurydice, 2018).

Apprenticeships are demand-driven and follow a pre-defined standard curriculum (agreed and designed by the industry). Graduates receive an internationally recognised certificate upon completion defining them as a craftsperson. With their degree, graduates are also eligible for entry in Institutes of Technology (when meeting additional criteria). A number new apprenticeships have been introduced in 2017 and it remains to be seen how successful their implementation will be. A national Apprenticeship Council is tasked with the expansion of apprenticeship into new sectors of the economy and identifying sectors where new apprenticeships can make a real difference to both employers and employees. The Council is enterprise-led with representatives from business, trade unions, further education bodies and the Department of Education and Skills.

Best practice: Skillnet Ireland connects private companies to coordinate their training needs

Skillnet Ireland (www.skillnetireland.ie) brings together networks of private firms with similar training needs, typically on a regional or sectoral basis. Currently, 65 training networks are listed supporting 14,000 companies and 50,000 trainees. Via the Training Networks Programme, Skillnet enables these firms to jointly carry out training they could not offer alone. “Member companies, and their employees, are directly involved in the identification, design, delivery and evaluation of training” (Eurydice, 2018). Skillnet Ireland is co-funded by the Department of Education and Skills through an annual grant of approximately €18 million from the National Training Fund in 2017 and employers. Social partners are present in the board of Skillnet Ireland, with three members from trade unions, three members from employers and three members nominated from the government.

In addition, Springboard (www.springboardcourses.ie) which was first launched as part of the Government's Job's Initiative in 2011, is a specific initiative that strategically targets funding of free higher education courses to enable jobseekers to upskill or reskill in areas where there are identified labour market skills shortages or employment opportunities. Springboard courses range from levels 6 to 9 on the NFQ with work placements are offered on almost all of the courses. Together with the ICT skills conversion programme, Springboard courses are today run as a joint initiative under the banner brand Springboard+. Springboard+ courses are fully funded by the Department of Education and Skills and no fees are charged to participants. The initiative is funded by the National Training Fund with co-funding from the European Union under the European Social Fund, as part of the ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014-2020.

All courses selected for funding under Springboard+ are in areas of identified enterprise skills needs. Courses were selected, following a competitive call for proposals, by an independent evaluation panel using published criteria that included value for money, flexible delivery, engagement with industry and skills relevance.

From 2017 onward, the eligibility criteria has been expanded to include homemakers and those in employment including those in self-employment who wish to upskill, reskill or cross skill in the Bio-pharma/Med Tech sector and those in employment, or self-employment in the ICT sector who wish to upskill from a level 7 to a level 8 qualification. Starting in 2018, all Springboard+ has been extended so that all courses are now open to people irrespective of their employment status. Level 6 courses will remain free to all participants, whereas employed participants on courses on NFQ level 7 - 9 are required to contribute just 10% of the fee with 90% of the course fee being funded by the Government.

3.2 Regulatory level of CVET

The current legal framework on CVET in Ireland is based primarily on three legislative Acts that were introduced after the financial crisis – the Further Education and Training Act (2013) that set up general responsibilities for SOLAS, the Education and Training Boards Act (2013) that outlines the functioning of the Education and Training Boards as major providers of CVET and the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act (2012) that defines the system of quality assurance in CVET in the responsibility of Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI).

Given the dissolution of Social Dialogue on the national level in Ireland in the wake of the financial crisis in 2009, CVET is not part of collective bargaining at the national level. It does, however, play a role at the company level when pay and training may be jointly negotiated.

3.3 Public financing/funds and tax incentives

Many education initiatives are financed by the National Training Fund (NTF) which was established in 2000 by the National Training Fund Act (2000). Employers have to make contributions amounting to 0.8 percent of their wage bill to the fund; this levy is set to increase to 1.0 percent by 2020. The spending focus is mostly on activation measures and programmes for the unemployed, but the NTF also sponsors Apprenticeships, Skillnet Ireland initiatives and Springboard+.

Concerning employees, Employment Regulation Orders issued by the government (e.g., ERO, 2017) state that employees have the right to get paid a certain fraction of the minimum wage when they take part in a mandatory course of study or a training authorised by their employer during normal working hours.

3.4 Regulations on training leave

There are no legislative regulations on training leave in Ireland with the exception of study and examination leave for public officers who are entitled to five to ten days of paid leave when they strive to attain a third level primary or masters degree (Department of Public Expenditures and Reform, 2018). Without any explicit entitlement, employees can freely negotiate about training or study leave with their employers. Unpaid leave for up to three years is particularly prevalent in the public sector and mostly concerns teachers (ICTU, 2018).

3.5 Training providers

Publicly funded CVET is mainly offered by the 21 public third level institutions and 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). They are statutory authorities responsible for the provision of training. The offered programmes range from level 1 to 10 of the National Qualification Framework (NQF). Apart from universities, institutes of technologies and – to some extent – private providers who can be supported through publicly funded programmes, the ETBs oversee a multitude of education and training centres offering these programmes.

Social partners also provide training for their members (employers and employees), sometimes with the help of additional private organisations. When taking part in a Skillnet Ireland network, such courses may be publicly co-sponsored. Depending on course duration and content, graduates receive either general certificates of participation or even advanced and recognised degrees up to NQF level 9.

4 The role of the social partners

With the collapse of Social Dialogue in the wake of the financial crisis in 2009, the Irish social partners have mostly lost their collective bargaining influence at the national level (except in the public sector). In addition, topics such as CVET are not agreed upon nationally, either. Still, employers' and employees' associations in the private sector cooperate locally on a range of educational issues as both sides see the need for qualifying Irish employees to stay competitive in a global economy.

The employees' side is represented by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), the umbrella organisation for 44 affiliated trade unions. At the national level, the government bargains with ICTU for labour conditions in the public sector. Trade Union density in general has declined from a level of 33 percent in terms of active employees in 2010 to 24 percent in 2016 (Eurydice, 2017). However, it is considerably higher in the public sector.

Employers are primarily represented by the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) which is also involved in collective bargaining. The Small Firms Association (SFA), representing companies with less than 50 employees, is also part of IBEC but is not involved in collective bargaining. As an exception, employers in the construction industry have their own representative body, the Construction Industry

Federation (CIF). ISME, the Irish Small and Medium Enterprise Association represents SMEs with less than 250 employees. It does, however, not engage in collective bargaining but rather serves as a lobby group for its members (Eurydice, 2017).

Bipartite and Tripartite bodies are still in place on some fields. These are, e.g., the bipartite Low Pay Commission, the tripartite National Social and Economic Council (NSEC) and the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF). Except for the Low Pay Commission that addresses the Irish minimum wage, no pay-related issues are discussed in any of these bodies (Eurydice, 2017). Wage bargaining in the private sector takes place at the company level following an agreed upon protocol, the Private Sector Protocol (2010) which was later extended. Generally, collective agreements are not legally binding but rather follow a “voluntarist” approach. Still, the National Labour Court strongly advises against disregarding collective agreements as non-adherence could give rise to disciplinary measures (Eurydice, 2017).

4.1 Anticipation and identification of skills needs

An Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) was established in 1997 to advise the government “on current and future skills needs of the economy and on other labour market issues that impact on Ireland’s enterprise and employment growth” (SkillsIreland, 2018). The group comprises of civil servants and representatives from the employer and trade union sides. It is supported by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation as well as SOLAS. The main tasks of the EGFSN are skills foresight and benchmarking, advice on education and training strategies, the provision and analysis of data on supply and demand of skilled labour as well as influencing and monitoring the implementation of the group’s guidance (SkillsIreland, 2018).

In addition to the work of the EGFDN at the national level, social partners carry out skills needs analysis at the enterprise level. Both sides agree that digitisation and the need for (new) digital skills will be among the main drivers in terms of future skills. Apart from that, SME representatives in particular emphasise the importance of providing business development skills to their members. In addition, the ongoing negotiations about the Brexit leave many companies looking for employees with specific “Brexit skills” in terms of legal and other aspects.

Challenge: Digitisation and the need for new skills

After having overcome the economic downturn in the wake of the financial crisis, Irish companies are once again looking for new business opportunities. Given the relative scarcity of natural resources in Ireland, the country’s economy heavily depends on the knowledge and human capital of its people. Equipping the workforce with the relevant skills to face the digital transformation is an enormous task for employers and employees alike. ICT skills but also general knowledge about digital topics (e.g., General Data Protection Regulation) are scarce and need to be taught quickly and extensively in order not to fall behind in competitiveness in the global market.

4.2 Mobilising resources

Employee training in Ireland is financed by employers who pay a levy of 0.8 percent of their wage bill to the National Training Fund (NTF). As participation in training is not yet back at the pre-crisis level, both employers’ and employees’ organisations aim at more resources to flow in this field. Given the recent

economic upturn in the Irish economy, both sides argue for a shift in spending from financing projects for people to find employment towards financing training for people in employment.

Social partners agree that it is particularly important to support smaller companies and their training needs as SMEs may be inadequately prepared to tackle imminent skills gaps. One way for SMEs to train their staff is to cooperate with other companies in clusters or via the Skillnet Ireland initiative.

4.3 Information, support and guidance

As CVET is not part of centralised collective bargaining, Irish social partners stress the importance of informing their members about training offers and the benefits of training. Unions inform their members via their website and newsletters as well as by word of mouth at the regional and local level. They try to motivate more employees to participate in training by emphasising that increased training leads to increased knowledge and skills which will in turn lead to a higher remuneration. Unions also undertake training needs analyses and gap analyses at the company level to ascertain the best match between the training needs of their members and the needs of the enterprise. Typically, this process is initiated by local representatives rather than individual members.

Employers' associations seek to promote the upskilling agenda by influencing government and working closely with education and training institutions to ensure that the training provided is relevant to enterprise needs. Apart from providing their own training, they also lead some Apprenticeship and Skillnet Ireland consortia. ISME representatives state that they employ an HR expert who supports members – specifically micro enterprises – in issues concerning their personnel work which also includes training. This service is highly demanded.

Challenge: Reaching out to SMEs

While companies – especially larger companies and multinationals – are typically well informed about their training needs and the available training offers in the market, the same does not necessarily hold for SMEs. Especially micro companies (who represent the majority of Irish companies) outside of Dublin may not be engaged in training to an optimal extent and may not even know about all available offers. Reaching out to these enterprises and equipping them with the necessary equipment to map their training needs and find the right training remains a top priority. Digitisation and e-learning offer helpful ways in that respect that should be further strengthened in the future.

4.4 Contribution to quality, transparency and efficiency

The general amount of information about available training offers is deemed as relatively high by unions. From their point of view, the access to training is clear for all actors and that transparency is thus given. Concerning the quality of the available training offers, the union side states that they are not officially linked to the independent state agency Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI) which oversees, defines and monitors quality standards in education and training and is in charge of maintaining the Irish National Qualifications Framework (NQF). However, the unions do ascertain that their own training offers (see Chapter 4.6) are follow quality standards and certified.

Best practice: QQI as a one-stop-shop

Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI) was established in 2012 as an independent state agency under the Ministry for Education and Skills. It was created by merging four former agencies that dealt with issues of quality assurance and qualifications in the field of further education and higher education. By combining these resources into one organisation, QQI offers today a one-stop-shop in all matters of qualification ranging from quality assurance and the recognition of learning outcomes to maintain the Irish National Qualification Framework.

Employer representatives say that they are to some extent involved in the work of QQI and that a functioning accreditation system is very important for both employees and employers. As the private training industry in Ireland is mainly unregulated, QQI accreditation (which costs providers a small fee of approximately 20 Euros) is a relevant quality signal. However, there is no official tool which helps customers by ranking or rating training providers based on the quality of their courses.

4.5 Recognition and validation of competences and qualifications

The recognition and validation of competences and qualification in Ireland falls under the responsibility of QQI. QQI has established award standards for learners in the field of further education and training based on the Irish NQF and is constantly reviewing existing standards and developing new ones. The organisation also oversees the recognition of foreign qualifications and offers information about foreign qualifications, e.g., via the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC). Social partners point out the importance of officially certified competences in the Irish labour market.

As mentioned above, there is no official involvement of social partners in the QQI governance. Employers support QQI on specific standards issues relating to their own sectors.

4.6 Provision of learning

Apart from state and private providers, social partners are training providers themselves. Trade unions have their own training centres, e.g., the Education, Training and Organizational Services (ETOS), a not for profit training company owned by the Technical Engineering & Electrical Union (TEEU). In case that some specific modules cannot be offered by ETOS resources directly, it cooperates with third parties to provide the relevant courses.

Employers' organisations also offer training courses for their members, especially targeting owners and managers. The offers range from short courses on clearly defined topics to longer programmes that lead to level 6 special purpose awards at level 6 on the NFQ. SME representatives stress the importance of e-learning as it may help them to more easily reach their members all across the country. Today, many of the smaller employers would be hard pressed in terms of time and money if they had to physically attend training in central places such as Dublin.

5 Conclusion

After the collapse of Social Dialogue in the wake of the financial crisis collective bargaining did not play a role at the national level anymore (except for the public sector). CVET is no part of collective bargaining but is negotiated individually at the enterprise level. Legal regulation in the field is low with virtually no legislation on training leave. Recognition of learning outcomes and quality assurance lie in the responsibility of Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI), an independent state agency with no official social partner involvement at board level.

As the Irish economy lacks vast natural resources, employers and employees alike know about the relevance of training and human capital investments to keep a competitive edge in the global market. Training is thus an important field in which social partners themselves are also active as training providers for their members. While the general need for training is undisputed, the information about skills needs and subsequent training needs is not equally shared by all companies. SMEs and particular micro enterprises which comprise a large part of the Irish economy have particular needs that have to be addressed. While the digital transformation of the economy increases the demand for new skills, it also offers new opportunities to reach SMEs, e.g., via e-learning. With an even stronger focus on upskilling its workforce, the Irish economy will be well qualified to tackle future skills needs.

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