

Reforming Irish Apprenticeship

critical both to real FET reform and to ETBs
reimagining their future in the shadow of their past

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THE WHEEL COMES FULL CIRCLE

For generations, Vocational Education Committee (VEC) schools provided those who eventually became tradespersons with their basic education through the Group Certificate and the Intermediate Certificate. They also provided many who would take up apprenticeships and similar employment with their core vocational skills – woodwork, metalwork, mechanical drawing, home economics, typing and book-keeping.

From their inception in 1930, VECs, and their predecessors, the Technical Instruction Committees, going back to 1899, provided apprentices with all their off-the-job training until AnCo (An Comhairle Oiliúna) and the Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs) took responsibility for much of this in the 1970s.

Given current developments in further education and training (FET), it is worth recalling that the original purpose of the VECs was to administer continuation ('general and practical training in preparation for employment in trades') and technical ('pertaining to trades, manufacturers, commerce and other industrial pursuits') education for 14- to 16-year-olds.

Now, with the former Irish Training and Employment Authority's (FÁS) Training Services an integral part of the ETB

structure, the ETB connection to apprenticeship training has come full circle. Indeed, it is instructive to note that the division between education and training, which the Education and Training Boards Act (2013) and the Further Education and Training Act (2013) brought to an end had its origin in the early 1930s. At the time, it seems that failure to agree a role for education in the formation of apprentices resulted in apprenticeship being statutorily provided for in the Apprenticeship Act (1931) rather than in the Vocational Education Act (1930). While the 1931 Act did provide for apprentices receiving obligatory technical education through the VECs, a foundation had been laid for separating apprenticeship from the education system and a difficulty that would encumber the full blossoming of FET for more than four decades was incubated.

IRELAND'S PREOCCUPATION WITH THIRD-LEVEL EDUCATION

From the late-1960s on, following the introduction of free post-primary education, enrolment and retention in second-level education increased dramatically. In VEC schools this process went through a number of phases. Firstly, pre-employment courses were established for those who had only completed the Group Certificate and were predisposed to leaving school. Then, the Vocational Preparation and Training Programme (VPTP), which eventually morphed into

the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), was introduced with the support of the European Social Fund (ESF) to enhance the employability of those who would otherwise have left school after the Intermediate Certificate. In the 1980s, as the numbers remaining on in VEC schools to do the Leaving Certificate increased appreciably, and as employment opportunities dried up, the VEC sector innovatively developed a raft of Post Leaving Certificate courses (PLCs) to provide those who had completed their Leaving Certificate, but were not destined for third-level, with an educational progression route or, more likely, employability.

As the number of students completing their Leaving Certificate increased, more of these students began to aspire to entering some form of third-level institution. This aspiration was facilitated by four developments over the course of those decades: the expansion in the number of third-level institutions, a steady increase in the range and diversity of courses in all third-level institutions, the evolution of a tertiary education grants scheme, and the availability of European Social Fund (ESF) support for those undertaking courses in the RTCs/IoTs.

These developments, combined with a widespread belief across Irish society that the key to socioeconomic success lay in 'going to college' meant that by the mid-1990s, most parents saw a

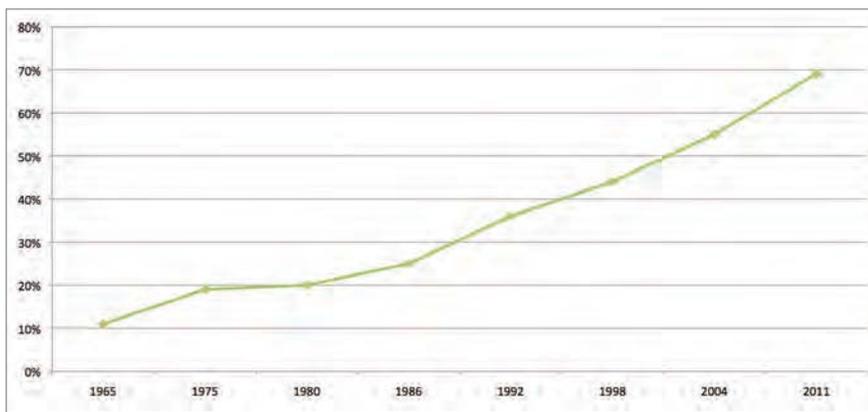


Figure 1¹

third-level education as the route to a better life.

Figure 1 tracks how Ireland, over the course of a half century, became obsessed with third-level education as the principal means to achieving its socioeconomic destiny.

In the '80s, young people with no prospect of work remained in school to complete their Leaving Certificate and then a PLC course. Today many undertake postgraduate studies, often in vain pursuit of employability. But it is not only at this level that resources are wasted. A recent HEA report noted that one in six² who enter third-level don't continue into second year. While this raises questions about the adequacy of careers guidance in schools, it also challenges us to reconsider the suitability of third-level for a significant minority of school leavers.

The 1995 White Paper on Education noted that our third-level participation rates lagged behind most other European countries³. Today, however, Ireland⁴ has the highest proportion of young people with third-level qualifications across the EU with 51.1 percent of 30-34 year olds having tertiary qualifications compared with 36 percent across the EU. The EU target for 2010 is 40 percent for this age group.

We have concluded, in our euphoria over progression to third-level, that the job market will require mainly tertiary graduates. Certainly, prosperity and social cohesion depends on the extent to which a proportion of the workforce is highly skilled but, as studies in both the US⁵ and Europe⁶ conclude, for the foreseeable future, even in high tech economies, some 50 percent of the workforce will require medium-level skills and some 15 percent will require low-level skills.

IRELAND'S SKILLS' CHALLENGE IS IN LOW AND MEDIUM SKILLS – IN FET

At every occupational level, workers will require ever increasing levels of competence. But focusing exclusively on high tech jobs requiring tertiary qualifications would expose a proportion of our citizens to unemployment, poverty and exclusion. Already, as NESC Reports⁷, there is evidence of such a development with 23 percent of Irish households jobless in 2010. The next-highest countries were the UK and Belgium at 13 percent, with an average of 11 percent for the 15 EU countries studied. Furthermore, 56 percent of Ireland's jobless households contain children as compared with 30 percent in the other EU-15 countries. As the NESC report acknowledges, an underlying factor here is the disconnect between the competences of those without jobs and the competences required in the workplace. This syndrome is not, however, peculiar to Ireland. As a recently published McKinsey report⁸ notes, 'an overriding reason for young people being held back is a lack of skills relevant to the workplace'. In fact, the report concludes that when it comes to designing an education system that provides such skills, education providers, employers and young people operate in 'parallel universes'. This situation is exemplified by the extent to which so many recent arrivals to Ireland hold down low- to mid-level skill jobs at a

¹ The data displayed in this figure is extracted from the 1995 White Paper on Education (p 93-94), Who Went to College in 2004? A National Survey of New Entrants to Higher Education. The 2011 figure derives from unpublished data analysis undertaken by the ESRI in replicating the work of the 2006 report.

² <http://www.hea.ie/node/1281>

³ 1995 White Paper on Education (p 93)

⁴ <http://www.mediahq.com/europeancommission/51936/ireland-tops-class-in-third-level-education-tables>

⁵ America's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs – see http://www.urban.org/UploadedPdf/411633_forgottenjobs.pdf

⁶ See http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Upload/Information_resources/Bookshop/546/4086_en.pdf - p.13

⁷ http://files.nesc.ie/nesc_reports/en/137_Jobless_Households.pdf

⁸ Education to Employment: getting Europe's Youth into Work pp 5-15 - http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/social_sector/converting_education_to_employment_in_europe

time when so many 'locals' fail to find or hold such jobs.

The big skills challenge for Ireland is in the area of medium- to low-level skills and qualifications, in FET, where apprenticeship is now widely recognised as the education/training model best suited to conferring employability and good life prospects on those operating from levels 4 to 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Certainly, we need 40 to 50 percent of school leavers progressing to higher education. However, failure to build future-oriented skills on the middle to lower rungs of the qualifications ladder could result in large sections of the population failing to benefit from economic growth generated by those with high-level skills.

Since many young people and their parents see the maintenance of education and career options as a key factor in making a decision about pursuing an apprenticeship, the lack of clear progression routes from apprenticeship to higher education militates against youngsters taking the apprenticeship route. Instead, a significant proportion of school leavers, who for a variety of reasons are unsuited to third-level studies at the time they leave school, choose to 'go to college' to do courses for which they are not suited and, inevitably, drop out. Indeed, even where some of these young people graduate they often find that their qualification does not bestow employability.

Would it not be better if these young people entered employment through an apprenticeship route on leaving school, and later on had the option of expanding their career and education options by progressing to a related course of study in higher education? Unfortunately, for many years now, a significant proportion of our young people and their parents have been dazzled by what third-level education seems to promise.



The provision of clear progression routes between apprenticeship and third-level studies would assist in changing these perceptions. But the establishment of such routes would require clear alignment between an expanded range of apprenticeships and the courses offered in IoTs. Those contemplating an apprenticeship should be able to see exactly how they may progress to higher education on completing the apprenticeship.

This is not a problem peculiar to Ireland. As a special report

published by the Centre for Economic Performance at London School of Economics and Political Science notes:

'Many young people wisely want to keep open the option of entering courses of higher education when making post-16 choices. Many of the more able students, for whom apprenticeship would be a highly suitable choice, will only opt for that path if it offers the clear opportunity of qualifying for further study at sub-degree

and degree level. One of the important developments needed in Modern Apprenticeship is the provision of clear routes through from apprenticeship at NVQ Level 3 to part-time or full-time learning at NVQ Levels 4 and 5 (higher education).⁹

While Ireland is an extreme example of a society besotted with third-level education, few countries have been immune to this contagion. As Lerman¹⁰, in his 2014 report to the Canadian Council of Chief Executives notes, until recently, policymakers tended to define skills in terms of academic qualifications and there has been a strong bias against career-focused education among educators and policymakers. In both Ireland¹¹ and North America this partiality is reflected in the inadequacy of guidance for young people who might be open to pursuing a vocational rather than an academic route to qualifications and work.

The old order is changing however, and policy makers are realising that any discussion of skills must go well beyond academic attainment. A wide range of reports stress employers' demand for workers with strong occupational skills.¹² Of course, many of these skills cannot be acquired within the classroom as the attainment of mastery requires the application of what is learned in the context of a practical task. Though we acknowledge that surgeons, accountants, lawyers, policemen and aircraft pilots can only qualify by gaining hands-on experience

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in the workplace, we have assumed that lower-level skills can be acquired in the classroom.

WHY THE APPRENTICESHIP MODEL?

There is overwhelming support across the EU and beyond for countries developing their apprenticeship systems and this may be summarised as follows.

The great strength of apprenticeship is that it delivers the competences required in the workforce. This is crucial at a time when employers' global criticism of the education system is that the competences of new employees do not match what is required in the workplace¹³. Today, though 430,000 are on the live register, thousands of jobs go unfilled because workers with the requisite competences cannot be sourced in Ireland.

Apprenticeship has the capacity to facilitate skill development to the benefit of businesses, their employees and the wider society, at a time when the gap between education and the workplace is perceived to be widening. Furthermore, as is evident from the experience in countries like Germany, Australia,

Norway, Austria and Switzerland, the apprenticeship model can accommodate males and females with a range of abilities and aptitudes in a wide range of career areas – from childcare and healthcare, to construction, engineering, hospitality and administration/office work. Significantly also, in the strongest economies of northern Europe, apprenticeship has the support of labour unions, public and private enterprise and government. It is also interesting to note that, in Ireland, a pilot 'apprenticeship programme' is about to commence in the area of information technology – an area that, until recently, many would consider to be the preserve of the tertiary graduate.

In Europe, support for apprenticeship is virtually unanimous, as is evident from the contents of a background paper provided to the ET2020 Working Group on Vocational Education and Training (VET) in advance of its workshop in Paris on 26 and 27 June 2014. This paper cited the following support for countries focusing more on vocational education and apprenticeships.

- Evidence in many EU countries proves that apprenticeship-type schemes can be a good solution for

⁹ http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/20248/1/Apprenticeship_A_Strategy_For_Growth.pdf - see p.8

¹⁰ <http://www.ceocouncil.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Lerman-Expanding-apprenticeship-training-in-Canada-April-2014.pdf>

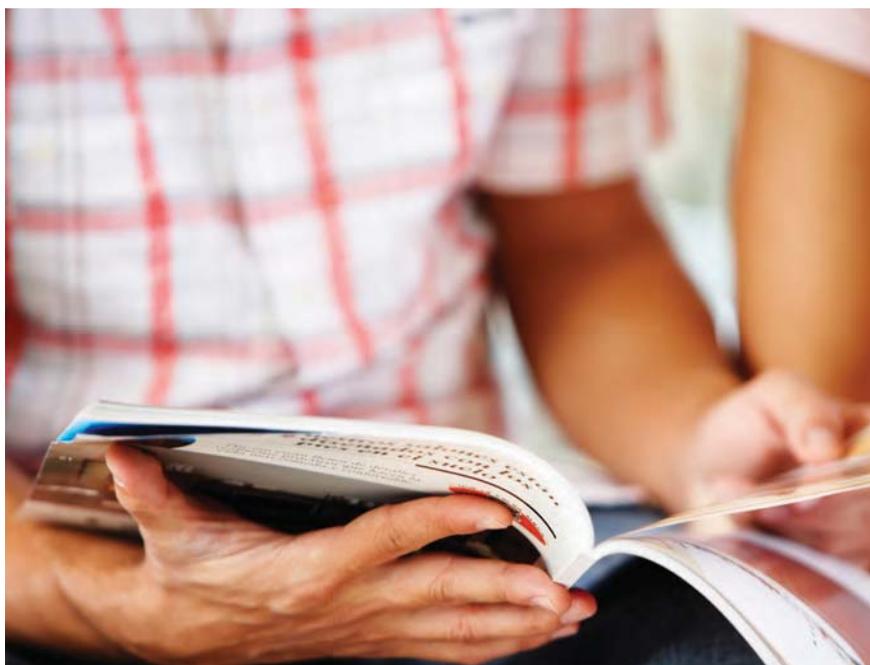
¹¹ See *Young People and Vocational Choices in Ireland*, City and Guilds Centre for Skills Development, London, 2013, for report on how young people completing compulsory education make career and education decisions, particularly in relation to vocational routes. Also Section 9.2.4 in ESRI's *Leaving School in Ireland Report* http://www.esri.ie/publications/latest_publications/view/index.xml?id=3944

¹² See, for example, http://www.deloitte.com/view/en_US/us/Insights/Browse-by-Content-Type/deloitte-review/eadd148c49305310VgnVCM1000001a56f00aRCRD.htm

¹³ See http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GAC/2014/WEF_GAC_Employment_MatchingSkillsLabourMarket_Report_2014.pdf and <http://www.fit.ie/index.php?page=ict-skills-audit>

some of the present labour market imbalances and benefit both learners and employers.

- In countries where apprenticeship-type systems are well developed, youth unemployment is usually considerably lower than the EU average. In Austria, Germany and Switzerland the unemployment rate for 15- to 24-year-olds is less than 9 percent, well below the 24 percent in France, 35 percent in Italy and, surprisingly given the standing of its education system, 18 percent in Finland.
- An analysis of the factors affecting employment growth in SMEs during the first post-2009 phase shows a clear positive relationship between the growth in the share of the labour force with a secondary qualification in vocational and advanced technical knowledge (including apprenticeships) and employment growth in the SME sector¹⁴.
- Against this background, the European Commission has proposed apprenticeship as a key component of a strategy to tackle youth unemployment and social exclusion aimed at giving young people offers of jobs, education and training.
- Apprenticeship-type schemes can be attractive to young people and they can facilitate a smoother transition from learning to work. By combining study and work, apprenticeship programmes provide individuals with an opportunity to acquire work experience while enhancing their skills in alignment with employer requirements.
- Because of their labour market connectedness, apprenticeship-type schemes can help to reduce skills



mismatch and ease transition from education to work. It seems that the skills mismatch is more serious in countries lacking an extensive apprenticeship programme.

- At EU level, in July 2013 the European Alliance for Apprenticeship (EAfA)¹⁵ was launched to increase the quality, supply and attractiveness of apprenticeships across Europe and to change public perceptions of this kind of training. The Alliance brings together key stakeholders from employment and education to coordinate and upscale initiatives for successful apprenticeship-type schemes.
 - With its Declaration on the European Alliance for Apprenticeships in October 2013¹⁶, the Council of the EU confirmed its strong commitment to combating youth unemployment and inactivity through high-quality apprenticeship schemes.
- It is not just in Europe that apprenticeship is being proposed as a solution to problems besetting economies and societies. Here, it is instructive to note the following¹⁷.
- In May 2012, the G20 Labour and Employment Ministers concluded that countries should: ‘...Promote, and where necessary, strengthen quality apprenticeships systems ...’ with a view to fostering ‘... sharing of experience in the design and implementation of apprenticeships programmes and exploring ways to identify common principles across the G20 countries by facilitating a dialogue among our social partners who have presented us with a shared sense of the importance of apprenticeships.’
 - The following month, the G20 Leaders’ Summit endorsed these orientations. At this summit, the B20

¹⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/sme/facts-figures-analysis/performance-review/files/supporting-documents/2013/annual-report-smes-2013_en.pdf

¹⁵ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-13-634_en.htm

¹⁶ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/lsa/139011.pdf ²⁰ See, for example, http://www.deloitte.com/view/en_US/us/Insights/Browse-by-Content-Type/deloitte-review/eadd148c49305310VgnVCM1000001a56f00aRCRD.htm

¹⁷ See ILO Contribution to the G20 Task Force on Employment (November 2012) at http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-ed_emp/-ifp_skills/documents/genericdocument/wcms_190188.pdf

Task Force Recommendations to the G20 leaders called for scaling up ‘... the number, quality and image of internships and apprenticeships for young people ...’

- In June 2012, the tripartite constituents at the International Labour Conference’s committee on the youth employment crisis called on the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to engage in the promotion of quality apprenticeships, including in developing countries.

There is growing concern about a rising skills gap alongside high unemployment in Canada, the United States and Australia¹⁸. In an Accenture survey of large Canadian companies, 59 percent expressed concern about the availability of needed skills and, in the United States, 46 percent of companies have similar worries. There seems to be a widespread concern about the capacity of our 21st century education systems to equip young people with the competences required for both work and living. As Lerman¹⁹, in the Canadian study, highlights there seems to be a revival of technical and vocational education and training, especially apprenticeships, with the OECD, the IMF and the ILO all recommending the expansion of apprenticeship schemes. Apprenticeship initiatives have been launched across the world, in countries as diverse as the UK, Australia, India and China²⁰. The number of apprenticeships has tripled in Australia since 1996 and has jumped by a factor of 16 in the United Kingdom since 1990.

Lerman posits that apprenticeship training tends to promote higher

employment in manufacturing as the manufacturing sector accounts for 22 percent of German employment and 16 percent of Swiss employment, but only 10 percent of US employment. This is hugely significant for Ireland, where growing the productive side of the economy, of which manufacturing is a major part, is critical to prosperity and cohesion. Manufacturing in Ireland accounts for a similar percentage (11%) of civilian employment to that in the UK and Denmark, but only half that in Germany²¹. Manufacturing is the sector with the greatest capacity to employ those with medium to low-level skills and if highly-developed economies like Germany and Switzerland can sustain a thriving manufacturing sector, why can’t Ireland? We seem to be under the misconception that manufacturing can only thrive in low-wage countries and that our destiny lies exclusively in the high tech world; hence our preoccupation with tertiary education at the expense of FET.

REVIEW OF APPRENTICESHIP TRAINING IN IRELAND

When the Review of Apprenticeship Training in Ireland²² emerged in January 2014, the possibility of it remaining on the shelf for years before being actioned seemed strong. It was pleasing therefore to see an implementation plan²³ published on 30 June – a plan that includes a number of time-lined actions that have the potential to significantly change the FET landscape over the course of the next decade.

ETBI made a detailed submission to the Apprenticeship Review Group and

it is interesting to note the similarities between ETBI’s submission and the Review Group’s report – a similarity that is substantially rooted in a general agreement about what needs to be done about reforming FET in Ireland. Frankly, there is considerable stakeholder agreement across the globe about the benefits a society can gain from establishing an effective apprenticeship programme, an agreement that runs counter to the emphasis that Ireland has placed on sending as many school leavers as possible to third-level education. Here nearly 70 percent of school leavers transfer to third-level education, while in Germany, apprenticeship is the route into work and further career development for nearly two-thirds of young people.

Besides, the number and range of designated apprenticeships is much lower in Ireland than in the strong economies of northern Europe, with Irish apprenticeship essentially confined to technical occupations in construction, engineering, and motor mechanics. In northern Europe generally, apprenticeship covers a much wider range of activities - retail, financial services, health care, office administration, etc. Germany has some 340 apprenticeships compared to 26 in Ireland.

While a detailed discussion of the Review of Apprenticeship Training in Ireland report is beyond the scope of this article, the following summarises the report’s recommendations from an ETB perspective.

- An apprenticeship should involve a blended (alternating) combination of

¹⁸ <http://www.ceocouncil.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Lerman-Expanding-apprenticeship-training-in-Canada-April-2014.pdf>

¹⁹ <http://www.ceocouncil.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Lerman-Expanding-apprenticeship-training-in-Canada-April-2014.pdf>

²⁰ Smith, Erika. 2013. 'Occupational Identity in Australian Traineeships: An Initial Exploration.' *Technical and Vocational Education and Training: Issues, Concerns and Prospects*. 18. 131-41

²¹ <http://www.iae.ie/publications/publication/the-future-of-manufacturing-in-ireland-interim-rep/document>

²² <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Review-of-Apprenticeship-Training-in-Ireland.pdf>

²³ <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/Apprenticeship-Implementation-Plan.pdf>



on-the-job employer-based training (more than 50% of time) and off-the-job training that prepares the apprentice for a specific occupation and leads to a qualification on the NFQ at any level from Level 5 upwards.

- There should be a move away from placing all apprenticeships at level 6 on the NFQ so the level may reflect the amount of learning involved in completing the apprenticeship.
- Apprenticeships programmes should involve the integration of transversal skills, particularly literacy, numeracy, maths, science and ICT.
- The minimum entry level for each apprenticeship programme should be reviewed, while ensuring appropriate pre-apprenticeship programmes are available to those unable to meet these requirements.
- Existing e-learning resources should be used to optimum effect, and over time additional resources should be developed to support the delivery of the programmes.
- The structure and duration for each apprenticeship should reflect the time needed to achieve the learning outcomes for each occupation, with entry-level apprenticeships (those at level 5) being completed in a minimum of two years and those at higher levels taking longer.
- Existing apprenticeships should continue to operate as at present, under the management of SOLAS. Following a transition period, these should be integrated into the new operational arrangements, with devolved functions for the ETBs and HEIs depending on the level of the apprenticeship.
- The curriculum for each family of existing trades should be reviewed as a group and updated as a matter of urgency, thus ensuring that core common modules are provided wherever feasible, without diluting particular occupational requirements. Based on the updated learning outcomes needed for each occupation, the apprenticeship programme should be placed at an appropriate level on the NFQ. Consideration should be given to contracting out the curriculum reviews to ETBs or HEIs.
- Clear opportunities for progression to higher education from existing trades should be developed and publicised; and consideration should be given to establishing a master craftsman qualification.
- All apprentices should be employed

under a contract of apprenticeship.

- On qualification, apprenticeship 'graduates' should be qualified to work autonomously in a competent, professional and independent capacity.
- Apprenticeships should be open to persons of all ages above the statutory school leaving age.
- Employers taking on an apprentice should have the capacity to carry out the required training and be obliged to release the apprentice for off-the-job training.
- Assessors should have the right to visit the employer or training premises, subject to minimum notice.
- SOLAS should continue to have overall legal authority for the administration of the apprenticeship programme. However, an Apprenticeship Council should be established, hosted by SOLAS, but involving an equal partnership and close cooperation between SOLAS (representing FET) and the HEA, representing higher education. The Council should report to the Minister, be enterprise-led, comprise representatives from the DES, SOLAS, QQI, higher education, further education, business and the trade unions; and the Chairperson should be appointed by the Minister for Education and Skills.
- In many respects, the most significant recommendation in the report, from an ETB perspective, relates to the establishment of a ring-fenced fund to promote the development and establishment of apprenticeships in new occupational areas. This process should commence with the Apprenticeship Council inviting proposals from consortia of industries/education/training providers. The report envisages that these proposals should, inter alia, set out:
 - ✓ the extent to which the proposers are representative of industry,
 - ✓ the numbers to be trained,
 - ✓ clear evidence of labour-market need and the future demand for apprenticeships,

'Besides, the number and range of designated apprenticeships is much lower in Ireland than in the strong economies of northern Europe, with Irish apprenticeship essentially confined to technical occupations in construction, engineering, and motor mechanics.'

- ✓ the capacity of the industry to provide the high quality training of apprentices in the workplace,
- ✓ the willingness of employers to recruit and meet the relevant costs associated with the apprenticeship,
- ✓ the willingness of employers and education and training providers to engage collaboratively in developing and delivering the apprenticeships,
- ✓ the depth and transferability of the skills to be acquired, the entry levels proposed, and how learners would be equipped for progression to the next level of learning.

The report envisages that, if the Apprenticeship Council considers a proposal appropriate for a new apprenticeship, it would make a decision about whether the apprenticeship should be at Further Education (FE) or Higher Education (HE) and then transmit the proposal to either the HEA or SOLAS for further advice. The HEA or SOLAS would then probably commission a scoping study on the proposal or have it commissioned through either an ETB or a HEI. The scoping study would involve a thorough examination of all aspects of the proposal and the study report would inform the decision of the Apprenticeship Council about the viability of the proposal for a new apprenticeship.

Then, if the Apprenticeship Council approves the apprenticeship initiative, it would send it back to the HEA or SOLAS, as appropriate, for curriculum development, which would be undertaken by an ETB or a HEI, depending on the level. Though there

would be a report to the Apprenticeship Council after the curriculum development stage, this report would only be about demonstrating that the relevant sectoral actors had been engaged in the process; the curriculum would be a matter for the HEA or SOLAS.

All programmes for new apprenticeships would be subject to the normal QQI validation and quality assurance arrangements. Once an apprenticeship programme is validated, the HEA or SOLAS would either tender for delivery of the programme's education and training phases, or assign delivery responsibility direct to particular HEIs or ETBs.

- The functions of the Apprenticeship Council could be as follows:
 - ✓ To advise on the design, duration, entry levels and ongoing provision of apprenticeship programmes at FE and HE level, in line with national skill needs and to ensure optimum quality, efficiency and effectiveness.
 - ✓ To advise on the introduction of apprenticeships in additional occupations.
 - ✓ To promote seamless progression within occupational pathways and between further and higher education and training for participants in apprenticeship programmes - particularly important and relevant to removing a major barrier to young people entering apprenticeships.
 - ✓ To advise on the number of apprenticeship places needed in various occupations to respond to labour market needs.
 - ✓ To advise on the cessation of funding for apprenticeships

in occupations where the level of demand no longer justifies continued provision.

- ✓ To undertake scoping studies, evaluation, data gathering and research and manpower forecasting necessary to support the work of the Council.
- Recommendations regarding the role of SOLAS
 - ✓ To host the operation of the Apprenticeship Council.
 - ✓ To operate a national register of apprentices allowing for integration and transfer of data from ETBS and HEIs to SOLAS.
 - ✓ To operate a publicly accessible national database of employers approved to provide apprenticeships, based on data transfer from the ETBs.
 - ✓ To promote, plan, coordinate and monitor the implementation of an enterprise-led National Apprenticeship Programme at further education level.
 - ✓ To establish devolved management systems for apprenticeship provision through further and higher education and training institutions and other providers.
 - ✓ To provide for the commissioning of scoping studies and the development of curricula, at the request of the Apprenticeship Council, in respect of apprenticeships at further education level, working to the maximum extent possible through ETBs, and ensuring the full engagement of employers, trade unions, education and training providers and professional bodies in these processes.
 - ✓ To ensure programmes conform to the quality assurance arrangements of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).
 - ✓ To undertake labour market intelligence, manpower forecasting, statistical analysis and research necessary to

support a National Apprenticeship programme.

- Recommendations regarding the role of ETBs
 - Subject to the approval of SOLAS and the resources available, ETBs should have responsibility for the following:
 - ✓ Providing apprenticeship programmes at further education level in accordance with an agreed national framework and the quality assurance arrangements of the QQI.
 - ✓ Ensuring that programmes of apprenticeship operate to consistent high-quality national standards.
 - ✓ Ensuring appropriate mechanisms are in place for the accreditation of prior learning of those entering apprenticeships.
 - ✓ Undertaking or commissioning scoping studies and curriculum development for FET programmes when requested to do so; and ensuring the full engagement of employers, trade unions, education and training providers and professional bodies in these processes.
 - ✓ Promoting dialogue and coordination in the development and implementation of apprenticeship programmes between employers, trade unions, and education and training providers.
 - ✓ Providing the support services necessary for the operation of apprenticeships at FE level, such as management information systems, reporting and evaluation frameworks, teaching and learning resources, staff development and mentoring, ensuring coordination and synergy between FE and HE approaches

- ✓ Registering apprentices on FE programmes, ensuring appropriate data transfer to SOLAS, and ensuring compliance with entry criteria.
- ✓ Working with programme providers and employers to ensure appropriate scheduling of on- and off-the-job learning for existing apprenticeships, during the transition phase, and for FE apprenticeships generally.
- ✓ Determining the capacity of employers to provide the required on-the-job training for apprentices.
- ✓ Operating a local register of employers approved for the provision of apprenticeships, and ensuring such data is transferred to the SOLAS database.
- ✓ Providing for the continuing coordination of existing apprenticeship programmes for a transition period, and ensuring their integration into the new governance arrangements in the longer term.

APPRENTICESHIP IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

The prompt publication of the implementation plan signals government commitment to reforming apprenticeship in the context of the wider reform of FET.

The implementation plan progresses a number of significant recommendations in the review report and commits the State to the following action:

- The establishment of an apprenticeship council by Q3 of 2014.
- The completion of the review of five existing trades and a review of the system for revising all existing trades by Q4 of 2014.

'In northern Europe generally, apprenticeship covers a much wider range of activities - retail, financial services, health care, office administration, etc. Germany has some 340 apprenticeships compared to 26 in Ireland.'

- The Apprenticeship Council to call proposals for new apprenticeships by Q4 (2014), the proposals to be submitted to the Council by Q1 (2015) and evaluated by the Council by Q2 of 2015, with a report identifying viable proposals for new apprenticeships going to the Minister for Education and Skills in Q2 of 2015. The plan provides for the Minister approving the allocation of resources for establishing the new apprenticeships in the same quarter of 2015.
- The development of the new apprenticeships (curricula, awarding arrangements, apprenticeship contracts, progression pathways, recruitment process and allocation of places to registered employers) to be completed between Q4 2015 and Q2 2016.
- Legislation to underpin the whole new apprenticeship system to be enacted by Q1 2016.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While it is unclear how apprenticeships will be designated as FE apprenticeships, thus falling within the ambit of SOLAS and the ETBs, the proposal to expand the range of apprenticeships has huge implication for ETBs. The apprenticeship model is very much in the ascendant, a development much influenced by what is manifestly working well in countries such as Germany, Switzerland and Austria. Indeed it is likely that Ireland will, over the period of a decade or more, significantly expand its range of apprenticeships. This development will

inevitably involve the ETBs as it seems that most new apprenticeships will be FE apprenticeships. Hence the ETB sector needs to engage urgently with this development.

Ireland has obvious concerns around skills formation and youth unemployment. In terms of the latter, a 2013 Cedefop report²⁴ notes that our NEET²⁵ rate for 18 - 24 year-olds and our unemployment rate for 20 – 34 year-olds are higher (24.0% and 17.2%, respectively) than the EU averages (16.5% and 13.1%, respectively). On the basis of experience in many countries, broadening out the range of apprenticeships, especially if done in conjunction with the establishment of an effective pre-apprenticeship programme, might be expected to address these issues.

The two most significant impediments to Ireland undertaking the kind of FET reform that could really make a difference to our collective future are, firstly, a fear that we cannot afford it, and secondly, a fear on the part of many currently employed in the provision of FET that it might threaten their careers. These concerns, while understandable, are not well-founded.

Firstly, bringing a significant proportion of NEETs into apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship would increase the demand for education and training.

Secondly, moving towards an apprenticeship system similar to what operates in Germany, over a period

of 10 years, would not necessarily place a significant increase on an overstretched exchequer, as it should be possible to generate synergies between the existing PLC and IoT programmes and an expanded apprenticeship programme. Expanding the apprenticeship programme would inevitably result in a rebalancing between number of PLC, IoT and ETB training centre students, on the one side, and those in apprenticeship on the other. This would see facilities and staff currently employed to deliver ETB and/or IoT courses being released either to deliver or support off-the-job training for apprentices. Furthermore, the current welfare payments being made to NEETs could also be leveraged to fund such programmes – with the welfare payments being converted into apprenticeship allowances.

It should also be possible to harvest other synergies. For example, it should be possible to use IoT teaching facilities for the provision of off-the-job training at times when these facilities are not being used for third-level students. Similarly, ETB schools and centres could be used to provide off-the-job education at times other than when they are being used for mainstream education purposes.

If apprenticeship is reformed along the lines proposed in the Review of Apprenticeship Training report, many more young people will be given the opportunity to progress seamlessly from school to the acquisition of competences and qualifications that provide employability and progression routes to third-level education for those wishing to pursue such studies. The current system deprives many young people of such opportunities, at a huge cost to both those young people and the wider economy.

'What is being proposed also makes provision for the continuous development of the skills our economy needs to grow sustainably in a world where socioeconomic and technological change is perpetually taking the global village in new directions.'

²⁴ See p.40 - Cedefop Research Paper No. 21 July, 2013

²⁵ NEET is a relatively new acronym that stands for 'Not in Education, Employment or Training'



What is being proposed also makes provision for the continuous development of the skills our economy needs to grow sustainably in a world where socioeconomic and technological change is perpetually taking the global village in new directions. Most significantly, the proposals offer an initial preparation-for-work framework that ensures that new workforce entrants are job-ready and both willing and able to adapt to ever-changing circumstances, thus ensuring our prosperity and cohesion in the decades that lie ahead. As a small open economy, Irish business, both public and private, must constantly adjust to the ever-changing demands of the global marketplace.

The effective reform of apprenticeship is not something that can be done on a piecemeal basis. It must entail an integrated and coherent package of reforms. It is not just about expanding the range of apprenticeships, as

was assumed in England. Nor is it about improving the training, nor promoting the attractiveness of apprenticeship, nor any other single reform. The total apprenticeship package needs to be reformed to provide a seamless progression route from pre-apprenticeship right up to tertiary studies – a route that allows participants to exit the route with worthwhile competences and qualifications (and access to other education and training pathways without having to return to where they commenced their journey) at the end of each stage on the route. If apprenticeship is reformed in this way, it will intuitively be attractive to young people, their parents and those who guide them because they will clearly see its limitless possibilities.

Finally, in every sense, ETBs have the potential, if appropriately resourced, to provide cost-effective off-the-job education and training

to apprentices across a wide range of career areas in the communities where the apprentices reside, thus facilitating the apprentices and their families and reducing the cost to the State. What is being proposed for reforming apprenticeship in Ireland will undoubtedly pose challenges for ETBs. But, if these challenges are addressed strategically, these challenges offer ETBs the possibility of becoming the engine-room for Ireland's socio-economic renewal in the 2020s and 2030s and, in the process, fulfilling its original mission. If recent decades could be termed the third-level era, the next two decades have the potential to become the FET era.

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