

President's Address to ETBI Congress

Cllr Noel O'Connor, 19 September 2013

A Aire agus a dhaoine uaisle...

Tá an-áthas orm labhairt libhse ar an ócáid mhór seo, ár naoú gComhdháil Bhliantúil is céad – agus an chéad chomhdháil de Bhoird Oideachais agus Oiliúna Éireann.

Cuirim fáilte mhór roimh chách chuig an gComhdháil agus tá súil agam go mbainfidh sibh taitneamh as bhur gcuart ar Chontae Chill Dara.

Minister, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen...

As ETBI President, it is my great pleasure to welcome you all, especially our distinguished guests, to our 109th Annual Congress – the first congress of Education and Training Boards Ireland.

I am particularly pleased to welcome you, Minister, to your third Congress as Minister.

Privileged to be inaugural President....

Delegates, I am privileged to be the inaugural President of the ETBI as we face into a new and what we hope will be a successful chapter in the Sector's history and in the lives and times of those we serve.

Our VECs have been decommissioned after 83 years of wonderful service to Irish education.

And the ETB ship has unfurled its ensign and member ETBs confidently look forward to providing a world-class further education and training service to job-seekers and other learners, as they seek to rebuild their lives in the wake of the worst economic crisis since the 1930s.

Welcome to FÁS training services personnel...

The reconfiguring of VECs and the integration of FÁS training services into these new configurations to create ETBs bring much needed coherence to further education and training and, today, I welcome formally those who will be transferring from FÁS to the newly blended ETB family.

There have been very constructive discussions between ETBI and FÁS around the integration process; and the positivity and can-do attitude of all involved is to be applauded.

Minister, your decision to integrate FÁS training services and VECs into ETBs constitutes the most significant strategic change to education and training since the establishment of the VECs in 1930.

ETBs – an idea whose time has come....

For ETBI, the integration was simply an idea whose time had come.

It provides the State with the capacity to modernise and update the competences of our workforce, at a time when workforce competence is crucial to both economic and social progress.

Minister, member ETBs appreciate the confidence you have reposed in them, and you can be assured that they will deliver real and sustainable improvements in further education and training.

Education and Training Boards & Further Education and Training Acts....

Delegates, when others are writing the history of the early years of the 21st century, I am confident they will conclude that the Education and Training Boards Act (2013) and the Further Education and Training Act (2013) provided the architecture and impetus for Ireland's social and economic progress in the 2020s and 2030s – provided the objects of the legislation are fully realised.

In this regard, we must acknowledge that the legislation constitutes only the design phase of the work, and we all (ETBs, Unions, SOLAS and the DES) have a huge task on our hands to ensure that vision becomes reality.

As the futurist Joel A Barker noted, 'Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision just passes the time. Vision with action can change the world.'

Vision must be resourced...

Minister, now that we have the vision and the architecture that embodies it; we must resource its realisation.

As the Bard himself acknowledged over 400 years ago,

'There is a tide in the affairs of men.

Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune'.

Delegates, the establishment of the ETBs and SOLAS provides us with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for reforming further education and training that we must fully exploit, or the opportunity for real reform will be lost for decades to come.

Reform must be about improving learner outcomes – not cost cutting...

This reform cannot be just an opportunity to cut spending. It must, in every respect, be about improving learner outcomes in a way that will drive social and economic progress.

This can only happen if the reform is appropriately resourced.

Minister, the seeds of reform have fallen on fertile soils, and there is a palpable appetite and commitment in ETBs to bring the reforms to a successful conclusion by reconfiguring and reforming services and the way things are done - to create and sustain a world class further education and training service.

Limit to capacity of ETBs to do more with less....

However, there is a limit to the capacity of ETBs to do more with less.

While the integration of FÁS training services into the ETBs will generate synergies, more resources must be allocated to ETBs – if they are going to enable the 1,000s unemployed, with little prospect of employment unless they acquire new skills, to rebuild their lives.

Remember, we have some 170,000 long-term unemployed, and ETB FET services are already operating to full capacity.

Delegates, while there is a need for resources to employ more tutors to deliver more programmes to more people, there is one area literally crying out for more resources – our adult education guidance service.

Vacant information and guidance posts must be filled...

The moratorium on appointments has resulted in a number of the 39 Adult Guidance Services being left without an information officer, and others without a guidance officer.

Minister, as a matter of urgency, all vacant information and guidance posts must be filled.

Furthermore, there is urgent need to review the adequacy of the resources being devoted towards the Adult Guidance with a view to significantly expanding its capacity to meet the needs of the 1,000s requiring information and guidance in order to make the most of the education and training opportunities available to them.

The Adult Guidance Service costs some €6.7M annually but how much does the service save the State?

There are real costs to the State and to learners when people enrol in unsuitable courses, and then drop out, or complete courses that do not provide

them with a progression route to either further education and training, or work suited to their aptitudes.

Appropriate investment in information and guidance saves scarce resources....

If we want value for money, we must ensure that adults have access to the information and guidance essential to enrolling in the courses that match their aptitudes and dispositions.

Minister, we are simply arguing for the efficient and effective use of scarce resources, as such investment will generate financial savings to the State.

Delegates, as Dr Deirdre Hughes (UK Commission for Employment and Skills, and Chair of the National Careers Council in England) noted in her address to the National Conference on Guidance this March, ‘... guidance makes a difference to people’s lives and if we invest wisely in guidance we will see economic and social returns’.

In this sense, the provision of information and guidance needs to be seen as a front line service.

Need to review adequacy of education guidance service....

Minister, the time has come to review the adequacy of investment in the adult education guidance service and the way the service links to, and with, the DSP’s

Intreo service, as it is absolutely crucial that these two services complement one another.

Some management posts need to be redesignated as frontline....

More generally, in the wider ETB further education and training service, notwithstanding the integration of FÁS training services into ETBs, the moratorium on employment will result in key programme manager posts being left unfilled – unless such posts are redesignated as frontline posts.

I am thinking here about Education Officer, Adult Education Officer and Adult Literacy Organiser posts but, given the way ETB further education and training services are being reformed, this list is neither exhaustive nor prescriptive.

The reality is that there are some FET programmes that can only be managed effectively by persons with a specific set of competences.

In this context Minister, ETBI asks that your department meet with ETBI over the course of the coming weeks to review what posts need to be redesignated as frontline posts.

Unless this happens, all FET programmes will not be as effective as they might be in delivering the desired learner outcomes.

And scarce funds will be wasted.

While the State's budgetary situation is fully appreciated, in practice an employment moratorium or an employment control framework is a blunt instrument and, at times, we need to use a scalpel to avoid collateral damage.

Unique character of FET needs to be acknowledged...

FET is dynamic, evolving, and needs to respond continually to the ever-changing needs of learners and the wider socio-economic context.

Such programmes need to be led by dynamic managers with appropriate competences.

In this regard, ETBI welcomes the establishment of the FÁS-ETB integration planning unit and hopefully this unit can assist in addressing this problem.

Review of apprenticeships is timely....

Before leaving further education and training I want to address the matter of apprenticeships.

The current review of apprenticeships is timely in the context of the establishment of the ETBs and SOLAS.

VECs and their predecessors, the Technical Instruction Committees, were centrally involved in the training of apprentices until the RTCs gained their independence some 20 years ago.

Indeed, VECs were established to provide ‘general and practical training in preparation for employment in trades’ - where technical education was described as ‘pertaining to trades, manufacturers, commerce and other industrial pursuits’.

ETB connection to apprenticeships has come full circle....

Once FÁS Training Services are integrated into the ETBs, the ETB connection to apprenticeship training will have come full circle.

Indeed, ETBI believes that ETBs will be well placed to provide cost-effective off-the-job training to apprentices in their local communities, thus reducing the cost to both the State and the apprentices.

Opportunity to reform apprenticeship training as part of wider FET reform....

The current review of apprenticeships provides an opportunity to reform apprenticeships as an integral part of the wider reform of further education and training.

Historically we thought in terms of training apprentices but, as the Richard Review of Apprenticeships in England notes:

‘... while we must ensure that apprenticeships are training people for real and specific skilled occupations, we must also ensure that an apprenticeship is broad enough to equip someone with genuinely transferable skills: skills which they will need and use in any job, and

skills which enable them to be competent and confident beyond the confines of their current job, both in their sector as a whole, and beyond it’.

Strong economies of Northern Europe recognise the potential of apprenticeships....

Delegates, the strong economies of Northern Europe and beyond, recognise how apprenticeships can smooth the transition from education to work, and how they can accommodate males and females with a wide range of abilities and aptitudes in a wide range of career areas – from child care and health care, to construction, engineering, hospitality and office work.

In Germany, with 340 apprenticeships, apprenticeship is the route into work for nearly two-thirds of all young people.

Ireland can learn from these countries....

Ireland can learn from these countries about building an apprenticeship model capable of driving social and economic progress and, in reforming our FET system, we can construct an apprenticeship model that:

- encompasses all areas of work;
- involves an alignment between the curriculum in IoTs and that for apprenticeships, eliminating a disincentive to young people opting for the vocational route;

- incorporates a pre-apprenticeship programme to provide an alternative route to apprenticeship for those not meeting minimum standards for entry to apprenticeship; and
- accredits each apprenticeship phase so those exiting it at the conclusion of any phase have a progression route to further education and training.

Seduced by what third level education promises....

Delegates, we have been seduced by the promise of what a third level education has to offer school leavers.

Yet we know that a significant proportion of school leavers are unsuited to third level studies at the time they leave school.

A reformed apprenticeship programme would enable young people to enter employment first – yet retain the option of third level education....

A reformed apprenticeship programme would allow these to enter an apprenticeship, on leaving school, while retaining the option of progressing to a related course in further or higher education – at a later date.

Minister, the integration of the FÁS training centres into the ETBs gives the sector the capacity to accommodate most of the off-the-job training for an expanded range of apprenticeships, with specialist input, as required, from the IoTs.

The big skills challenge is in low and medium skills – in FET....

Delegates, our over-preoccupation with school leavers going directly to third level has blinded us to the reality that the big skills challenge for Ireland will be in the area of low and medium skills and qualifications – in further education and training.

US studies show that that, even in a high tech world, some two-thirds of all jobs will be in the mid to low skills range – 44% mid-range and 22% low skills¹.

For Europe, Cedefop² concludes that in 2020, those with medium to low skills will still amount to 65% of those employed – 50% with medium skills and 15% with low skills.

Reform of apprenticeship must provide a seamless progression route...

The reform of apprenticeship must provide a seamless progression route from pre-apprenticeship right up to tertiary studies – thus allowing participants to exit the route with worthwhile skills, qualifications and progression routes - at the end of each stage.

Minister, today, ETBI asks that your Department and SOLAS, once established, engage with ETBI to explore ways in which ETBs can add value to a reformed model of apprenticeship – one that accommodates the needs of our young

¹ America's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs – see: http://www.urban.org/UploadedPdf/411633_forgottenjobs.pdf

²See http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Upload/Information_resources/Bookshop/546/4086_en.pdf - p.13

people for education and training and the wider needs of the economy and society.

Second level education faces real challenges around reforming teaching and learning...

Delegates, I turn to the challenges facing second level education in reforming teaching and learning.

In this regard, Minister, ETBs are committed to collaborating with your department to deliver the changes essential to our young people becoming lifelong independent learners.

However, ETBI has serious concerns about the capacity of schools, given the cutbacks of recent years, to deliver the necessary changes, unless they have the structures and resources appropriate to the task.

Remember, the task is to deliver real change – not just to tick boxes.

School management stretched to the limit and situation disimproving...

At last year's congress, I warned that school management was stretched to the limit and the situation has deteriorated further.

And all of this as we embark on implementing the new Junior Cycle Framework, new models for the placement of trainee teachers in our schools, and new models for the induction and probation of newly qualified teachers.

If principals and deputy principals are to lead these reforms, we must provide them with the middle management structures and supports essential to doing so.

Second level education faces real challenges around reforming teaching and learning...

Minister, as I said in Ballyconnell, we must look again, without prejudice, at the middle-management infrastructure in our schools.

Without fit-for-purpose middle management, our schools will not be able to deliver sustainable reform.

It may not be possible to resource all that is desirable now, but all schools require a minimum middle management structure.

Furthermore, all schools require dedicated resources, over and above what they currently have, to facilitate and support the implementation of the Junior Cycle Framework. Otherwise, this crucial initiative will fail.

Number of post-holders in a school is currently a matter of chance ...

Currently, the number of post of responsibility holders in a school is a matter of chance: a lot of retirements, disaster; few retirements, just about tolerable.

But this is not just about the number of post holders in a school.

We need a system where each post holder has responsibility for specific functions and is held accountable for the way these functions are performed.

In other words, we must have real public service reform.

Need urgent improvement in context of long term strategy for managing schools...

Minister, Congress asks that your officials meet immediately with the management bodies to devise a solution to ensure that all second level schools have the supports essential to both their effective management and the successful implementation of reform programmes.

Also, that a time limit be placed on these talks, so that real improvements can be in place before Congress 2014.

If a phased implementation is necessary, so be it.

The bottom line is that some improvement is essential, and this must be in the context of a long term strategy for the effective management of our schools and colleges.

If we further avoid this issue, we put the management of our schools and the implementation educational reforms at risk.

Myriad of DES circulars, guidelines, procedures, legislation and strategies...

Delegates, there is a related matter that I would like to address – the myriad of DES circulars (500 active circulars on the DES website), forms, guidelines, procedures, legislation and strategy documents that ETBs, board of management members, principals, deputy principals and other school staff need to be conversant with to do their job effectively.

Matters governed by more than one circular...

When it comes to DES circulars, for example, they are quite difficult to locate, and in many instances, a particular matter is governed by more than one circular.

Urgent need to bring rationality to the mountain of documentation ...

There is urgent need to bring rationality to this mountain of documentation and reduce the workload on those who manage our schools, giving them time and space to undertake their more important functions.

Minister, I am going to propose a course of action that, I believe, could go a considerable way towards resolving a difficulty that is growing exponentially.

Small working group to develop a continuously updated handbook for management of schools...

Could a small working group be established, comprising representatives from school management bodies, the NAPD and the DES to develop a well-laid-out,

easily searchable, easy to follow and understand, and continuously updated handbook for the management of schools?

Such a project, which would require the full support of the DES to be successful, would require very little funding.

The handbook could be published on the web and it would be necessary to agree protocols for continuously updating it, as new circulars, guidelines, etc., are published.

Compiling a handbook is not about reinventing the wheel and a model for its development already exists....

This is not matter of starting from scratch. A lot of the resources already exist and it is a matter of drawing these resources together into a coherent, accessible repository.

Those who govern and manage our schools should be able to locate easily all relevant circulars and guidance on any matter – confident in the knowledge that the information is always up-to-date.

Handbook could be relatively short with hypertext providing direct access to other relevant detail...

Minister, if your department was to lead the development of such a project, I feel sure it would have the cooperation of other relevant parties.

Its development would, I believe, make the day-to-day governance and management of schools more effective and it would hugely facilitate the implementation of vital reforms to our school system:

- ✓ the introduction of the Junior Cycle reform;
- ✓ the implementation of a sustainable self-evaluation process;
- ✓ the implementation of the National Strategy to improve Literacy and Numeracy,
- ✓ the implementation of the Action Plan and guidelines on Bullying; and
- ✓ the implementation of the new model of school placement for trainee teachers, the new model for the induction and probation of newly qualified teachers, and the new guidelines for mental health promotion and suicide prevention in post primary schools.

Key reforms will not be implemented successfully unless school leaders are released to lead those reforms...

None of these will be implemented as they should be implemented unless we enable school leaders to manage and lead without spending an inordinate amount of time finding out what they need to do to solve the day-to-day issues that arise in schools.

The availability of an always up-to-date handbook would hugely facilitate these developments.

Reform of school admissions

Minister, ETBI welcomes your proposals for reforming school admissions.

They are a proportionate response to addressing a problem that many face each year in obtaining a school place.

It is unconscionable that families should face the prospect of not being able to obtain a school place as of right; that those with special needs are deprived of attending the school of their choice, and that schools and parents have to negotiate a complex and adversarial appeals process.

That said, the new procedures must be set out in guidelines that school management and parents can easily understand.

They should not have to wade through legislation and regulations in order to understand the system.

An increase in PTR would set schools back a generation...

Minister, with an eye to the budget, this congress implores you not to increase the PTR for second level schools.

The consequences would be disastrous for subject choice, and for those with some form of special education need.

It would also undermine the viability of many small schools. Indeed, it would ring their death knell.

We fully realise the budgetary pressures but, in our opinion, a further increase would set second level education back a generation.

Concluding Comments...

In conclusion, delegates, on the first of July 2013 our sector closed one chapter in its 111-year history, and we have just begun to write an exciting new chapter.

The establishment of the ETBs and SOLAS provides us with unprecedented opportunities to influence the future of our country, and I have no doubt that we will grasp those opportunities.

Taking these opportunities will no doubt present problems and challenges.

In a sense, we are in uncharted waters.

There is no blueprint for overcoming the challenges we face.

But, working together, we can write our own script.

Despite the understandable fears, how could one not be excited about the opportunity that has been presented to ETBs to transform education and training, and the lives of our learners?

Of course, resources are an issue, but, if we work together constructively - we will find a way through.

Remember, as Henry Ford noted: ‘when everything seems to be going against you, remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not with it’.

Minister, delegates and guests, I thank you for your attention and courtesy.

To each ETB member, to each CEO, to each staff member, and to each friend of ETBI, I say: go raibh míle maith agaibh.

That ends my 2013 address to Congress