

General Secretary's Speech to Congress

19th September 2013

The Role of VET in Ireland's Economic Recovery

The ETB Challenge

- Vocational Education and Training (VET) is now central to Europe's strategy to reposition itself in the global economy, and VET is the sector closest to the labour market.
- The challenge for ETBs now will be to deliver on the knowledge, skills and competencies that the labour market needs. The current review of both PLCs and Apprenticeship Training is designed to establish how effective the education and training authorities in meeting the skills needs of industry.
- The broad mission of education and training encompasses objectives such as active citizenship, and personal development and well-being, and these go hand-in-hand with the need to upgrade skills for employability. ETBs, through their second-level schools and further education colleges are well placed to develop transversal generic skills, while also delivering on the industry-specific skills through our further education programmes.
- The Government's stated intention to build a world-class FET (Further Education and Training) system is in line with the EU objective to develop a world-class vocational education and training system across EU member states. The EU sees education and skills enhancement as a core strategic asset for growth. The European Commission has urged Member States to target investment in Vocational Education and Training to address skills shortages and support

Education and Training Boards Ireland
Piper's Hill
Kilcullen Road
Naas, Co Kildare, Ireland

Tel: +353 (0)45 901 070
Fax: +353 (0)45 901 711
Email: support@etbi.ie
Web: www.etbi.ie

growth in such sectors as ICT, green economy, health, marine economy, etc. Therefore, instead of cutting back on PLC resources by raising the pupil-teacher ratio, the focus must be on enhancing and growing this sector in line with EU policy.

- A world-class VET system is now seen as crucial to the reduction in skills shortages. A recent example is the 4,500 ICT jobs in Ireland that remain unfilled because of lack of skilled personnel. Our Further Education colleges can deliver on the skills needs and competences but they need the capacity to do so – and that has not been a feature of recent government policy, where cuts to resources are the order of the day.
- The focus now is on Learning Outcomes (LOs) (EQF and NQF). We need to tap in to the potential of ICT and open educational resources for learning. The digital revolution brings important opportunities for education, but investment in education and training, especially in ICT-based educational tools and content, must be a priority. Investment in education and training is key to both productivity and economic growth potential. Any under-spending today will have serious consequences in the medium- to short-term for Ireland's skills base. In this time of severe financial constraints, we need to focus on smart specialisation. We need to focus on identified skills shortages—ICT, green economy, healthcare, etc.

Partnerships

ETBs generally have well-established links with industry, but this partnership between education, business and research needs to be enhanced, not just at local ETB level, but also at national level. Knowledge alliances and sector skills alliances are features of the third-level sector's links with the world of business and research.

ETBI is now more actively engaged with the world of industry and business. This year we initiated a series of Business Education Fora which brings together senior management personnel from education

and training, and business communities, to debate such topics as “Is Education and Training meeting the needs of industry?”.

At international level, ETBI is now a key partner in a Leonardo da Vinci-funded project—EDISON, which aims to transfer successful experiences and strategies from Austria, Spain and Italy, to national VET association in Ireland, Netherlands and UK, in the realm of Entrepreneurial Learning Pathways in VET, designed to encourage the entrepreneurial capability of students to meet the current needs of industry.

Challenges

The challenges ahead for ETBs and ETBI are significant. Aside from the difficult and time-consuming HR/IR issues, there will now, in respect of education and training programmes, be a need to ensure:

- Flexibility in the delivery times and modes
- Capacity to deliver programmes to meet the changing demands of industry
- Capacity to change, modify and deliver programmes through both contract and direct provision: contracting training for services will represent a significant cultural challenge for ETBs, where traditionally, the vast majority of programmes were delivered by ETB staff
- The building of a coherent and unified staff within a culturally coherent ETB
- New ways of work: more extensive and diverse training programmes responding directly to labour market demands
- Working with SOLAS in building a world-class FET system, ensuring that the vocational education tradition is not lost in the SOLAS strategic planning

Human Capital

Education plays a critical role in the development of human capital and it is a critical factor in determining life chances, and a strong predictor of adult life chances. Countries which invest heavily in education benefit socially, culturally and economically. The opportunity costs will be very significant and we will pay the price for hitting educational outcomes as is bound to happen if one year-on-year cuts the funding to the sector.

The challenge of globalisation, modernisation and rapid technological change means that we must increase the level of educational standards of knowledge workers, as knowledge is the key to our future. Knowledge workers require higher levels of education, and a highly educated workforce in Ireland is a prerequisite for inward investment, especially in the area of new technology. To continue to attract the high level technological industries, we need a suitably educated workforce, and that workforce has to have the benefit of the best educational experience possible.

The danger we face in the education sector now is that it will be the survival of the fittest, that education can become more and more the preserve of either the well-off or those who are well-off either financially or intellectually. My fear is that, in these straitened times, the system could well fail those who need assistance most.

Current educational reform processes, such as Junior Cert reform, recognise the transformation required to re-orientate education to provide young people with critical skills. So we are moving in the right direction. Similarly, the structural reform of Further Education and Training, in an attempt to bring focus and coherence into the delivery of skills training, is also welcomed as a timely and important initiative.

However, such reforms must be backed by adequate resources to ensure that there are outcomes which raise the education and training standards of our students to a significant degree. We must move

therefore from managing outputs to enabling outcomes which match the targets and deliverables we have set.

ENDS