

Education and Training Boards Ireland

Annual Conference

Kilashee House Hotel

Naas

Co. Kildare

Thursday 19th September, 2013

Minister Ruairí Quinn, T.D.,

Minister for Education & Skills

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to address your first conference as Education and Training Boards Ireland.

Last year, at the IVEA conference in Cavan, I spoke about the forthcoming reform of the VEC sector.

Today, at this inaugural ETBI conference, I want to begin by acknowledging 83 years of innovation, flexibility and high quality education - provided by Vocational Education Committees throughout the length and breadth of the country.

The establishment of 16 Education and Training Boards on 1st July last represents another step in that journey.

I appreciate the work that was undertaken in each VEC to ensure the success of the mergers to the new ETBs, and I know that this work is still ongoing.

I also know that you are currently preparing for the transfer of FÁS training centres in Dublin, Cork and Kerry to ETBs by the end of this year, and for the transfer of the remaining training centres before the end of 2014.

You cannot do this work alone.

ETBI has a central role to play in supporting ETBs in this transformation.

The Education and Training Boards Act, 2013 gives statutory recognition to ETBI as *“the association established to collectively represent education and training boards and promote their interests”*.

The Act goes on to empower me, as Minister, to request Education and Training Boards Ireland to carry out specific roles and functions to support ETBs.

I look forward to working closely with ETBI as an enabler supporting the 16 new Education and Training Boards, both individually and collectively.

Another important governance structure which will support this significant change agenda, is the ETB/SOLAS Programme Board which has been established by the Department.

This Programme Board is chaired by the Secretary General and includes members of the Department's senior management team.

The Programme Board is now being expanded to include:

- ETBI's General Secretary, Michael Moriarty,
- 2 ETB CEOs – Paddy Lavelle and David Leahy,
- and Paul O'Toole, Director General of FÁS, which will soon become SOLAS.

This Programme Board is tasked with enabling the sector to manage the transition from VECs to ETBs, and to take on the training services currently delivered through FAS.

The Board is supported by a Project Management Office which is working to assist ETBs.

Helping you to put in place the necessary structures and processes to assist in delivering the reform of the sector.

The Project Office has identified five strategic priority areas for the sector, including governance, communications and human resource matters, and is actively working to progress these.

Some immediate operational issues confront ETBs, particularly in respect of their back office functions.

The Project Management Office is prioritising its efforts on these matters, while also seeking to develop strategies to meet longer-term objectives.

Work on key decisions around these priority areas is already underway.

The intention is to establish Project Teams, whose members will be drawn from the sector, to consider and build business cases for shared solutions, where this is appropriate, and to manage their implementation.

I understand that, in these straightened times, to ask ETBs to provide the staff who can successfully complete these projects for the overall good of the sector, is challenging.

But we have no option.

To do nothing would result in even greater strains on the sector.

Successful communication is key to any endeavour.

It is important that the Project Management Office, the Programme Board, ETBI and individual ETBs, have effective communication channels through which problems and successes can be shared and resolved.

To that end, a Communications Plan is being developed, and we will ensure everyone in the sector is regularly briefed on progress.

Today is an important part of this communications process.

So are the regular meetings, between senior officials in my Department, Chief Executives of ETBs and the General Secretary of ETBI.

I expect before the end of the year to visit a number of ETBs and ETBI at its headquarters here in Naas.

I have recently confirmed that I will begin by visiting the Galway/Roscommon Education and Training Board on Thursday 17th October, and the Cork Education and Training Board on Friday 22nd November.

I have previously made clear my determination to visit each of the new ETBs over the coming months, and that remains my firm intention.

These visits will provide a further opportunity to continue our conversation around the important work that ETBs do and the strategic direction for the sector.

Membership of Boards

I understand that some ETBs, particularly those which have resulted from the merger of three former VECs, will have boards with a significant number of members for a limited period of time.

Large boards such as these can present challenges.

However, I believe that to ease the transitional process from VECs to ETBs, it was vital that existing members of VECs automatically became members of the new education and training boards.

They will continue in office until the next local elections in 2014.

After these local elections, each ETB will comprise 21 members, composed of 12 local authority representatives, 2 staff representatives, 2 parents' representatives and 5 community representatives.

We have worked to ensure there will be a balance of members from each of the counties included in the ETB.

The 5 community representatives will be elected by the local authority, staff and parent members–

- At least one of whom represents employers or business,
- At least one of whom represents learners, and

- At least one of whom represents school management or leadership

As an example of how this will operate, the nominating bodies for employers – IBEC, ISME and Chambers – will each nominate a man and a woman.

From those nominees, the local authority, parents and staff members will be required to elect at least one to the board.

Similar type panels will exist for learners and for school management / patron bodies at both primary and post primary level.

These changes will ensure

- that smaller counties are adequately represented

- the importance of ensuring equity across all education and training boards
- an appropriate balance between local authority members and community representatives, and
- most importantly, that the membership of the new boards is big enough to allow stakeholders' voices to be heard but small enough to be effective

This new structured form of representation will ensure a more inclusive engagement with all education providers in the area of the ETB.

Further education and training

The many challenges presented by the current economic and unemployment crisis require a positive, concerted and coherent response from all interested parties.

While there are clear implications for our school system, of which the ETBs are a critical part, today I want to focus on the further education and training sector.

In this rapidly changing sector,

Government, training and education providers, employers and job-seekers

must all work together, domestically and internationally, locally and regionally, to meet the pressing challenges head-on.

An example of the co-operation which is required was set out in guidelines for aligning further education provision with the skills needs of enterprise, which were issued by the Department in 2012 and updated in 2013.

The guidelines were designed to respond to current and future skills needs in the economy and are based on Forfás and FÁS research.

Steps which can be taken by ETBs to progress this vital area of work include:

- ongoing close co-operation with local enterprise and existing public employment services in the development of relevant local courses
- and enhancing the workplace learning element of programme provision.

It is important to emphasise, that getting the sector to work for Ireland's future, doesn't mean that it will be exclusively focussed on what training for immediate employment.

You are working to forge an integrated further education and training sector – one that can cater for our diverse range of learners.

Different responses are required for school leavers, the unemployed, and those in employment looking to enhance their skills.

Different responses are required for those with deficits in core skills, against those who are much closer to being employment-ready.

However, all of our offerings need to be well-integrated, responsive, flexible and effective.

Our knowledge of what is required has deepened and broadened.

There are now a multiplicity of sources of good quality information – national and international.

They tell us that firstly, the jobs of tomorrow are going to need higher levels of skills than the jobs of today.

And that secondly, upskilling is required as much – if not more – in the core and generic skills areas, as it is in specialised or technical skills.

We also know that people who have better developed core and generic skills – literacy, numeracy, communication, ICT, teamworking – do better in work and are better able to engage with specialised and technical skills courses.

This points all the more to the need for an integrated further education and training sector.

One that can seamlessly offer learners a range of modules in a range of disciplines to meet both the needs of learners and the needs of our society and economy.

SOLAS

The creation of SOLAS will facilitate a coherent integrated strategic national response, across the further education and training sectors.

The government yesterday agreed to the nomination of Pat Delaney as Chairperson designate of the board of SOLAS.

As a former staff member of IBEC, and Director of the Small Firms Association, Pat will have a strong ability to ensure that the further education and training sector becomes increasingly aligned with the needs of industry.

The SOLAS mandate will be to ensure the provision of 21st century high-quality further education and training programmes to jobseekers and other learners.

These programmes will be excellent value-for-money, and will be responsive to the needs of learners and the requirements of a changed and changing economy.

The Skills Agenda

The creation of SOLAS, as you know, is part of wider range of Government reforms in the areas of Further Education and Training, and the activation of the unemployed.

The implementation of this wider reform process will prove extremely challenging.

This will require a dedication of purpose and a well-planned programme of change.

A theme running through these initiatives is the link between Industry and training provision, to ensure the continued alignment of programmes with the evolving skills needs of the economy.

In doing this we also need to recognise that the further education and training sector has a major contribution to make to driving economic growth.

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs advises the Irish 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.

It has a central role in ensuring that labour market needs for skilled workers are anticipated and met.

The FÁS Skills and Labour Market Research Unit provides the Group with data, analysis and research and manages the National Skills Database.

The Action Plan for Jobs contained a commitment to initiate a review of the Irish Apprenticeship training model.

The aim of this review is to provide an updated model of training that delivers the necessary skilled workforce to service the needs of a rapidly changing economy, and also ensures an appropriate balance between supply and demand.

This review is currently underway in the Department and has been undertaken in two phases.

The first stage was the preparation of a background issues paper.

This paper provides a factual description of the current system, including the governance arrangements, trends and forecasts in relation to recruitment, and identified strengths and weaknesses of the current model.

It also identifies the range of possible options for change, as well as information on models of apprenticeship in other countries.

Phase 2 of this review was announced on the 19th May with the appointment of an independent steering group, to progress a review of apprenticeship in Ireland through consultation with relevant stakeholders.

The group will produce recommendations to the Department based on that consultation process with relevant interest groups, and members of the public.

Membership of the review group led by labour court chair Kevin Duffy, draws on national and international

expertise including academic, business, and employee interests.

I expect their work to be complete by the end of this year.

The review will be cognisant of existing education and training policy and, in particular, national targets relating to second-level education and participation in higher education.

It will focus on apprenticeship as a progression route from second level provision.

It will also explore the potential for connections, between work-based learning, and other further education and training provision.

This will encompass an examination of alternative methods of work-based education and training.

Tackling Unemployment

One of the primary reasons for all of these initiatives, is of course to help us continue tackling the unemployment which blights our nation.

A new integrated employment and support service entitled 'Intreo' has been introduced, which is being managed by the Department of Social Protection.

The services and supports involved were previously provided by three distinct State services.

The integration of these supports has facilitated the development of a co-ordinated structure which provides unemployed people, particularly the long term unemployed, with options and assistance in finding jobs or referrals to appropriate education and training.

Effective local working arrangements between Intreo and ETBs will be critical to delivering for the unemployed.

As I mentioned already, management in ETBs will need to develop strong links with their counterparts in Intreo.

That will allow us to ensure education and training opportunities are closely aligned with the needs of the unemployed in each area.

And to ensure that good and up-to-date advice is available and that systems ensure that each placement is the right one for the learner involved.

This is an exciting time to be involved in further education and training.

There is a real opportunity to build on and integrate the range of provision developed over time by the VECs, and to shape a strong and coherent sector.

Individual ETBs will be working hard to bring together the offerings of VECs and training centres but you also all need to work closely together.

SOLAS and the forthcoming FET Strategy will help provide a focus for this work.

Bodies such as ETBI also give an important forum for communication within the sector and between the sector and the Department.

Conclusion

I want to again thank you for the opportunity to address your inaugural conference.

I also want to thank you for the work you collectively undertook to ensure the success of the establishment of the Education and Training Boards, and for your ongoing work in transforming the landscape of education and training.

The sector has just crossed the threshold from vocational education committees to education and training boards.

While the new bodies are undoubtedly bigger, with a greater geographic scope, to see them in only these terms would be to miss the point.

In creating the 16 new education and training boards and SOLAS we have fundamentally changed the game.

We are now bringing the delivery of education and training together under one set of bodies.

In SOLAS we are creating a body which will promote an appreciation of further education and training, while

providing funding to ETBs and assessing how they discharge their functions in this area.

ETBs are also conferred with power to partner with, and provide support services to, other players in the education and training arena.

VECs have proven over a long period of time their adaptability, responsiveness and innovation.

I have no doubt that, through these traits, ETBs will demonstrate once again the capacity the sector has to realise its potential.

Thank you.