



Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)

Submission to

Department of Education and Skills

on

The Future of Apprenticeship in Ireland

August 2013

Background Comments

Though today only three Education and Training Boards (ETBs), City of Dublin, Cork and Dublin & Dun Laoghaire, are involved in training apprentices, the ETB sector has a long history of successful involvement with apprentice training.

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

Indeed, from their very inception in 1930, VECs and their predecessors, the Technical Instruction Committees going all the way back to 1899, provided apprentices with all their off-the-job training until the Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs), now the Institutes of Technology (IoTs), took responsibility for much of this training in the 1970s. Of course, the Regional Colleges were originally part of the VEC system. The original purpose of the VECs was to administer continuation and technical education for 14- to 16-year-olds, where continuation education was defined as ‘general and practical training in preparation for employment in trades’, while technical education was described as ‘pertaining to trades, manufacturers, commerce and other industrial pursuits’.

Now, given that the Irish Training and Employment Authority’s (FÁS) Training Services are about to become part of the ETB structure, the ETB connection to apprenticeship training has, as it were, come full circle; and ETBs are well placed to play a major role in the education and training of future apprentices. ETBI believes that ETBs have the potential, if appropriately resourced, to provide cost effective off-the-job training to apprentices across a very 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.

While we have historically tended to think in terms of training apprentices, in future the development of apprentices must also have a clear educational focus. In a world where change is the only constant, it will not be sufficient to provide apprentices with the skill set to go on doing the same things in the same way; we will need to provide them with the knowledge, skills, competences and dispositions to solve new problems, as they emerge, in new ways.

We will need, more than anything else, to provide them with the capacity to be willing and effective lifelong learners and the capacity for personal, vocational and career progression, so as to avoid skilled workers becoming marooned in declining areas of work. Their initial apprenticeship training must be designed in a way that provides them with career progression routes that enable them to adapt, on a continuous basis, to the ever-changing face of industry and commerce. It may not be possible to predict the skills and

competences that will be required in the workplaces of the future but it is possible to build flexibility and adaptability into the initial training/education of all workers. As Doug Richard notes in the Richard Review of Apprenticeships in England:

... 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.¹

That said, there is much to admire about the way Irish apprentices have been trained using the model of training put in place at the end of our last recession. As our performance in the World Skills competitions attest, the model has provided apprentices with very high levels of skill and it would be important to ensure that this is not lost in reforming the system. On the other hand, while both learners² and employers³ have expressed high levels of satisfaction with the Irish apprenticeship programme, the Irish economy is in a very different place today to what it was in 2007, when the last of these surveys was undertaken. In 2007 industries served by the apprenticeship system were still doing very well and so they had good reason to feel that the system had served them well. Similarly, apprentices and tradespersons of all kinds would have been earning good incomes and would have been looking forward to successful careers.

The number and range of designated apprenticeships is much lower in Ireland than in the rest of Europe, with Irish trades essentially being confined to technical occupations in construction, engineering, the motor and electrical trades, and printing. Indeed, in Europe generally, particularly in the stronger economies of Northern Europe, apprenticeship covers a much wider range of activities - retail, financial services and health care, office administration, etc. It is instructive to note that one of the world's foremost economic powers, Germany, has some 340 apprenticeships compared to 26 in Ireland. In Germany apprenticeship is the route into work and further career development for nearly two-thirds of all young people while in Ireland apprenticeship only accounts for approximately 2% of all school leavers.

Here, the OECD's recommendation⁴ that Ireland consider expanding its range of apprenticeships would seem timely.

Even since the early 90s, when the current, standards-based model of apprenticeship was established, the numbers of people employed in agriculture, industry and services has changed dramatically. Services now employ 77% of all employed persons while industry,

¹ See [Richard Review of Apprenticeships](#) (November 2012) p.4

² Follow Up Survey of apprentice recruits of 1999, SLMRU, 2006/7, FÁS

³ Survey of Employers' Usage of FÁS Services – 2007, S Conway & R Fox, July 2007, FÁS

⁴<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/2/6/44592419.pdf>

including construction, has declined to from 28% to 18% since 1998.

The great strength of the apprenticeship approach to building workforce capacity is that it provides workers with the competence set required in the workforce. This is crucial at a time when employers' principal criticism of the education system is that the competences of its graduates do not match what is required in the workplace. This criticism is highlighted by the extent to which there are regular claims that thousands of jobs go unfilled in ICT and other industries because workers with the requisite competence set cannot be sourced in Ireland, at a time when there are some 450,000 on the live register.

It is acknowledged in the strongest economies that apprenticeships can smooth the transition from full-time education to work for young people. However, the overwhelming case for apprenticeship training lies in its capacity to facilitate skill development to the benefit of businesses, their employees and the wider economy, at a time when the gap between education and the workplace is, if anything, widening. Furthermore, as is evident from the experience in countries like Germany, Australia, Norway, Austria, Switzerland and Finland, the apprenticeship model is capable of accommodating male and female apprentices with a wide range of abilities and aptitudes and a wide range of career areas – from child care and health care, to construction, engineering, hospitality and administration/office work. Significantly, also, in the strongest economies of Northern Europe, the apprenticeship model has the support of labour unions, public and private enterprises and government.

In this regard, it is instructive to note the following⁵.

- 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 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 ILO to engage in the promotion of quality apprenticeships, including in developing countries.

⁵ 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

The following table⁶, which sets out the number of apprentices per 1,000 employed persons in 2008/2009 highlights the extent to which Ireland underutilises apprentices to develop its workforce skills.

Australia	Austria	England	France	Germany	Ireland	Switzerland
39	33	11	17	40	11	43

On this basis, there would seem to be a strong case for expanding rather than contracting the application of the apprenticeship model for preparing skilled workers in Ireland. This is not to suggest that there is no place for what education providers have to offer. Rather that the contribution of the education providers needs to be complemented by real workplace experience and that the two strands of the apprenticeship programme need to be integrated as closely as possible.

If we continue to restrict apprenticeship training to the current range of trades, the capability of the apprenticeship model to build workforce capacity will remain confined to a relatively small minority of school leavers. Currently, it is estimated that the proportion of school leavers entering an apprenticeship is approximately 2.0% - on the basis that 58,124 young people left school in June 2011 while only 1,170 commenced apprenticeships that year.

While Ireland prides itself on its school retention rates and the proportion of school leavers who proceed to third-level education, there are growing grounds for concern around the extent to which senior cycle and third-level education is meeting either the personal development needs of a significant minority of young people and/or the current skills needs of either the private or public sectors of the economy. Clearly, there is a significant minority of young people who learn best by doing and fail to thrive in exclusively class-based education/training settings.

In Ireland, according to a recent Cedefop report⁷ the NEET⁸ rate for 18 - 24 year-olds and the 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). Broadening out the range of apprenticeships might be expected to address these issues.

FÁS traineeships, developed to meet skills requirements in ICT, Personal Services, Administration and Business, Agribusiness, Sport and Leisure, and Technical and Operative areas are akin to apprenticeships. Again, the training is acquired through a combination of off- and on-the-job training. The principal difference between traineeships and apprenticeships relates to the total length of the training, with all apprenticeships being of four (4) years duration while traineeships are between 15 and 59 weeks duration. Is there

⁶ See p.2 <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/special/cepsp22.pdf>

⁷ See p.40 - Cedefop Research Paper No. 21 July, 2013

⁸ NEET is a relatively new acronym that stands for 'Not in Education, Employment or Training'.

a case for combining the traineeship and apprenticeship schemes in a reformed apprenticeship model, where the duration of particular apprenticeships is a function of the time required to provide the apprentices with the required competence set and where the level of qualification awarded is a function of the breadth, range, and kind of learning that apprentices have to undertake in order to obtain their qualification?

Currently, all who complete an apprenticeship receive a major award at level 6 on the NFQ notwithstanding the reality that 73% of all new entrants to apprenticeships in 2011 had a Leaving Certificate qualification. In effect, therefore, 73% of all apprentices will only move one level up the NFQ as a result of their four (4) year apprenticeship programme. This contrasts with the progression of those entering third level, following completion of the Leaving Certificate who will, over the same period of time, move three (3) levels up the NFQ. While it is appreciated that the learning undertaken by third-level students may be of a higher order and volume than that undertaken by the apprentice, it nevertheless begs the question: is there a differential of 300% between the two?

Recommendations

- **Expand the range of career areas covered by apprenticeship**

Expand the range of career areas covered by the Irish apprenticeship programme to encompass all areas of work (retail, financial services, health care, child care, office administration, ICT, personal services, technical and operative areas, etc.) along the lines of what already exists in Northern European countries and, in doing so, incorporate the current FÁS Traineeship programme into the apprenticeship programme – along the lines of what has been done recently in Australia. In making this recommendation, the current budgetary constraints are appreciated; thus it is proposed that this change should be implemented on a phased basis over the course of a 10-year period.

While, for example, the German model has worked well for Germany, it is not just a matter of transplanting it, or any other system, to Ireland. Our context is different and we should only adopt those elements of other systems that fit our context – no matter how well they appear to work in their own countries. There is much more underpinning the success of the German economy than its apprenticeship system.

At the core of the apprenticeship approach is the notion of the apprentice acquiring a significant proportion of his/her vocational competences in the workplace thus ensuring the work-readiness of apprentices on completing their apprenticeship.

In Germany, employers, through their chambers of commerce, are centrally involved in establishing the competences that apprentices must acquire in the course of their training. However, though business must have real involvement in determining the standard of competence that apprentices attain in the course of their training/education, we do not necessarily have to go down the road of handing most of the responsibility for apprentice training to business. Certainly, the employability of the qualified apprentice in the short term will depend on the extent to which s/he is work ready on qualifying but the training/education of apprentices must go beyond

what employers require at any particular time in order to ensure that apprentices acquire the knowledge, competences and dispositions to be good citizens and lifelong learners. In this sense, apprentice training inevitably involves collaboration between employers and education/training providers. In this collaboration it is important that the education/training providers take a medium to long-term view in the interests of both the apprentices and the future skill needs of the economy.

Recommending that the apprenticeship system be significantly expanded does not imply that apprenticeship is the only effective model of vocational training. Where those being trained are not yet ready to commence work or where they have considerable work experience in the area that they need to build further skills, other models of vocational education/training may be more appropriate. The reality is that many younger learners need to acquire a particular skill set before they are employable.

- **Curriculum matters**

The curriculum for all apprenticeships must accommodate not only vocational skills but also the knowledge, skills, competences and dispositions required for constructive citizenship. More than anything else, as Sir Christopher Ball⁹ notes, ‘we belong to the first generation that knows for certain that it doesn’t know what the future will be like’. In this kind of world, the capacity of citizens to go on learning for the whole of their lives and to take personal responsibility for adapting to ever-changing circumstances is critical. The curriculum must manifestly reflect this reality. Many of the problems citizens face in the second decade of the 21st century have their genesis in the assumption that what is will continue indefinitely and it is up to others, such as the State or the employer, to build the citizen’s capacity to cope with change. The citizen and worker of the future must willingly embrace change and take personal responsibility for acquiring whatever new competences may be necessary to deal with change – in the family, in the community and in the workplace.

The curriculum would also need to address literacy, numeracy, information and communication technology, innovation and creativity, sustainability and, where appropriate, science. It is understood that a significant proportion of those who failed to complete their apprenticeship in the recent past found the maths and science elements of the programme a major challenge but there was no strategy in place to remediate the difficulties.

- **Entry Qualifications**

Currently the minimum qualifications for under 18s to enter apprenticeships is five (5) subjects at Grade D or above in the Junior Certificate or completion of a pre-apprenticeship course. Those over 18 require at least three years appropriate experience. On the other hand, 73% of apprentices registered by employers in 2011 had a Leaving Certificate qualification. As second-level school retention rates have

⁹ <http://learning.londonmet.ac.uk/cice/docs/2006-11.pdf>

now reached 90%, it would seem that a case can be made for raising the minimum entry standards to all apprenticeships. Would it be feasible to raise the minimum entry standards, for apprenticeships, to either five (5) subjects at Grade D or above in the Leaving Certificate or the completion of a pre-apprenticeship course?

Raising the entry standards for apprenticeships may be expected to raise the status of apprenticeships and it may also be expected to raise the standards of those who complete their apprenticeships successfully thus improving the productivity of enterprises and the national economy generally. However, raising entry standards would also produce an unintended downside. For example, the current entry standards provide young people who do not thrive, educationally or otherwise, in senior cycle education with an alternative progression route to skilled employment and a rewarding career. Unless and until senior cycle education is reformed in a way that facilitates its meeting the education/training and personal development needs of such students, this alternative route needs to be kept open. Otherwise, a significant minority of young people will be lost to education/training too young and, as a consequence, their lives will not be as fulfilling as they might otherwise be.

To ensure the maintenance of an alternative route to apprenticeship for those who do not thrive in the senior cycle, it would be important to put in place a two-year pre-apprenticeship programme at levels 4 and 5 on the NFQ, with this programme being delivered using a mix of on-the-job and off-the-job phases in line with the apprenticeship model. Those completing only the level 4 module could be awarded a level 4 FETAC certificate and those completing the full programme could receive a level 5 certificate, which would qualify them for entry to a full apprenticeship programme. If necessary, such a pre-apprenticeship programme could be extended to three years if it was felt that a Leaving Certificate standard could not be reached in two years, given that a significant proportion of the programme would be on the job. Alternatively, there might be merit in allowing those with a level 4 qualification to enter some apprenticeships.

- **Exit Qualifications**

Ensure that all education/training components of an apprenticeship programme, including those undertaken on the job, are accredited and that each stage in an apprenticeship programme, where satisfactorily completed, provides progression to further education/training or employment. This means that an apprenticeship programme should be divided into component minor awards and, where feasible, these minor awards should align with further or higher education minor awards.

Currently, all who complete an apprenticeship receive a major award at level 6 on the NFQ and those who fail to complete their apprenticeship, even if they only fail to meet the completion requirements in a very small way, receive no qualification. This is not only unfair, as it results in learning not being accredited but it also, where known, dissuades young people from commencing an apprenticeship. Significantly, in this

regard, according to the Department of Education and Skills, 23% of those who completed at least one year of an apprenticeship between 1993 and 2011 either did not achieve the standards necessary to complete their apprenticeship or left the apprenticeship programme early. The economic downturn has also resulted in the redundancy of thousands of apprentices, despite the best efforts of FÁS to put programmes in place to enable redundant apprentices to complete their apprenticeships.

- **Apprenticeships at different levels on the NFQ**

Offer apprenticeships at different levels on the NFQ as is done in Australia, England and France. This would allow those completing apprenticeships that involve a wide range and large volume of learning to qualify at level 7 on the NFQ while those with a narrower range and lower volume of learning might qualify at level 6 or, in some instances, level 5.

Currently, it seems manifestly unfair that those entering apprenticeships with very good results in higher level papers in the Leaving Certificate only move one step up the NFQ ladder after a three-year apprenticeship in, say, the electrical trade. The placement of all apprentice qualifications at level 6 on the NFQ has undermined the status of apprenticeship and resulted in many academically able young people, who would have been well suited to an apprenticeship opting to go directly to third Level instead. The sooner 'trade qualifications' are aligned with the learning outcomes of particular apprenticeship programmes the better. Indeed, the public perception of apprenticeships is unlikely to improve until this alignment is carried out.

In a reformed apprenticeship programme with a much wider range of career areas, being able to offer apprenticeships at different levels would be hugely important. There might also be possibilities for offering qualifications at even level 8 for those who might acquire the competence set to be classified as master craftspersons.

Given the focus that parents, schools and young people have on direct progression from school to third-level studies, there is a real need to provide education and career paths that allow those with an aptitude for and an interest in work that involves 'technical' skills to achieve to the best of their capacity. Our current preoccupation with entry to third-level studies being the most desirable outcome for those leaving school does not serve a significant minority of young people well; nor does it serve the future skill needs of the economy. Improving the status of apprenticeships and ensuring that those who opt for the apprenticeship route can subsequently progress to higher education, where the learning undertaken in the course of their apprenticeships will be appropriately recognised, can go a considerable way to making the apprenticeship route more attractive to young people, their parents and those who provide them with careers and educational guidance.

- **Duration of apprenticeships**

Just as the level of the qualification awarded to those completing an apprenticeship

successfully should reflect the amount of learning achieved in the course of an apprenticeship, the duration of a particular apprenticeship should also reflect the amount learned during an apprenticeship. On this basis, all apprenticeships should not necessarily be of the same duration. Indeed, having all apprenticeships of the same duration results in apprenticeships that could be completed successfully in a lesser time costing more than they need to cost. Conversely, apprenticeships that might require more time to achieve the required learning outcomes are deprived of the time the apprentices require to achieve the outcomes with a degree of comfort.

- **Need for permeability between apprenticeships and higher education**

Ensure that all apprenticeships offer clear routes to Higher Education. Currently, those who complete an apprenticeship receive a FETAC level 6 Advanced Craft Certificate and this provides progression to level 6 of the HETAC programmes (1st year of third-level programmes) and a number of institutions offer courses specifically tailored to holders of this qualification. The perception, however, and the practical reality in many instances, is that there is no clear or obvious progression route from many apprenticeships to third level, though the provision of such progression routes is very much the implicit focus of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012. Here, there would seem to be a case for the establishment of Sector Skills Councils to steer the establishment and maintenance of such progression routes.

Since many young people and their parents see the maintenance of education and career options as a key factor in making a decision about whether or not to pursue an apprenticeship, the lack of clear progression routes to higher education militate against young people opting for 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 complete their third-level courses and graduate, they often find that they have not acquired the competence set to give them a route to employment.

It would have been much better for these young people if they had 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 Irish young people and their parents have been deluded by the dazzle of what third-level education seems to promise.

This view is substantiated by the results of a recent research project undertaken by City and Guilds¹⁰ to investigate how young people completing compulsory education make career and education decisions, particularly in relation to vocational routes. The

¹⁰ *Young People and Vocational Choices in Ireland*, City and Guilds Centre for Skills Development, London, 2013.

City and Guilds report raises serious concerns about the perceptions and understanding of vocational education among young people in this country. It also highlights the extent to which parents, with limited information about other education/career options, influence their sons/daughters into aspiring to going to college.

The provision of clear progression routes between apprenticeship and third-level studies would go a long way towards changing these perceptions. However, the establishment of these progression routes would need to involve a clear alignment between an expanded range of apprenticeships and the courses offered in IoTs. Those entering an apprenticeship should be able to see, at the point they enter the apprenticeship, exactly how they may progress to higher education on completing the apprenticeship. Such progression might entail the completion of some kind of bridging programme and, if so, that should also be clear from the outset.

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 has noted:

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).¹¹

- **Use modern information technology, where appropriate, to deliver off-the-job education/training**

Given that fast broadband will shortly be widely available in all education institutions and in a majority of Irish homes, it would seem that some elements of the off-the-job phases of apprenticeship could be delivered via the Web. At a minimum, there is little point in apprentices being required to travel long distances to receive information. Face-to-face sessions will of course be necessary for apprentices to acquire practical skill and wherever the education/training experience requires significant engagement between learners and between teachers/instructors and learners. Undoubtedly, the use of distance learning can generate savings for both the State and the apprentice but financial savings should not be the motivation for employing such teaching and learning modes. The motivation should be the maximisation of learner outcomes. In the first instance, the proper deployment of distance learning may in fact increase expenditures because the development of effective distance teaching/learning resources will inevitably entail significant investment both in developing the resources

¹¹ http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/20248/1/Apprenticeship_A_Strategy_For_Growth.pdf - see p.8

and in building the capacity of those delivering the training/education to use distance teaching effectively.

Whether more of the skills development element of apprenticeship training could be provided on the job is open to question. If it was possible, it would certainly leave education/training providers with more time to teach core/soft skills. However, the capacity of small enterprises to provide some advanced technical skills might well be limited. They might not have the necessary technology; they might not have qualified personnel with the required level of expertise in the use of cutting edge technology; and, even where they have both the technology and personnel skilled in its use, such personnel may not have the competence to teach apprentices how to use the technology to maximum effect. Here, it may be necessary to build the capacity of small enterprises both to use sophisticated technology to the full extent of its capacity and to instruct apprentices in how to use it effectively. And, in the long run, it might be less costly and more effective for the education/training provider to teach apprentices how to use this technology correctly and effectively.

- **Delivery of off-the-job phases of apprenticeship programmes**

The integration of the FÁS training centres into the newly established ETBs provides the ETB sector with the capacity in every respect to deliver all phase 2 training for apprentices in the currently designated trades. Besides, the IoTs and the Colleges of Further Education (CFEs) had, prior to the current economic downturn, the physical infrastructure and staff capacity to provide phase 4 and 6 training for apprentices. That said, it is appreciated that a significant proportion of this capacity may have been redeployed to provide education and training to other groups of learners. Where, however, this capacity has not been redeployed, it would seem logical that the capacity should be used to provide this training.

In a reformed apprenticeship programme, offering vocational skills to those entering a much wider range of career areas, there would be a certain level of need for specialist teaching facilities available only in third-level colleges. On the other hand, ETBs, once the FÁS training centres and FÁS training division staff have been integrated into them, should have the capacity to lead apprenticeship training.

Firstly, ETBs would have the capacity to provide the pre-apprenticeship programmes recommended above on a nationwide basis. Specifically, ETB schools/centres and what were FÁS training centres would be able to accommodate the off-the-job element of these programmes and staff transferring to the ETBs from FÁS would have the skill set to coordinate and oversee the off-the-job element of the programme. Patently, such pre-apprenticeship programmes would have to incorporate a very significant on-the-job component, proportionate, at a minimum, to the on-the-job element of current apprentice programmes. In this respect, it needs to be borne in mind that many likely to take the pre-apprenticeship route would not have had great experiences of the education system, so an effective off-the-job element and appropriate mentoring would be critical to the success of a pre-apprenticeship

programme. Commencing a pre-apprenticeship programme with a heavy off-the-job phase could well prove counterproductive.

Secondly, ETBs, now incorporating FÁS training services, should, on a phased basis, be able to develop the capacity to accommodate most the off-the-job training/education for an expanded range of apprenticeships, with specialist input, as required, from the IoTs. The big advantage of the ETBs in this regard is that they have schools, colleges and centres of education in literally every community in Ireland and so apprentices could receive their off-the-job training locally rather than having to relocate to major urban areas. This would result in savings to the apprentices, their families and the State. ETBs should also be able to develop the capacity to oversee and quality-assure the on-the-job phases of these new apprenticeships, as they come on stream.

Significantly expanding the range of apprenticeship programmes, especially if this was done in conjunction with the establishment of an effective pre-apprenticeship programme, might be expected to bring a significant number of NEETs into education and training. This would mean that the demand for education and training would expand with a consequent increase in demand for State investment. However, moving towards an apprenticeship system similar to what operates in northern European countries such as Germany, over a period of 10 years, would not necessarily place a significant increase on the already overstretched exchequer, as it should be possible to generate synergies between the existing PLC and IoT programmes and an expanded apprenticeship programme. Reforming and expanding the apprenticeship programme would inevitably result in a rebalancing of the number of education/training participants between PLC and IoT students, on the one side, and those in apprenticeship on the other. This would result not only in facilities currently being used to accommodate PLC and third-level IoT students being released to accommodate apprentice education/training but it would also result in staff currently employed to teach PLC and third-level students being redeployed to provide off-the-job training to apprentices. The current welfare payments being made to young people who are neither in education or training would also be leveraged to fund such programmes – with the welfare payments being converted into apprenticeship payments.

It should also be possible to harvest other synergies between what might be termed mainstream education/training and a reformed apprenticeship programme. For example, it should be possible to use IoT teaching/training 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/training at times other than when these facilities are being used for other than mainstream education purposes. It is no longer possible to justify expensive high tech capital facilities being used for relatively short periods each day, over the course of some 34 weeks of the year.

- **Funding and cost of apprenticeships**

It would be tempting at a time of budgetary constraint to recommend that there be focus on cost cutting in reforming the apprenticeship system. But, since the priority is to expand the numbers completing apprenticeships, such a focus would almost certainly be counterproductive, at least in the short term. The principal short-term focus needs to be on making apprenticeships more attractive – to school leavers, parents and others, such as guidance counsellors, who provide guidance to school leavers about career and study options. In the medium to long term, however, there may be a number of options for generating savings to the exchequer. In this regard, the following areas offer potential.

- ✓ The wages and other supports paid to apprentices in Ireland are high by international standards. If apprenticeships were as attractive to young people as places in third-level institutions (certainly not the case currently) it might be possible to bring such payments more into line with third-level student support grants. On the other hand, since apprentices clearly add value to their employer's businesses, it is unrealistic to think that payments to apprentices could ever be as low as the student support grants for third-level or further education students.
 - ✓ With a greater level of employer involvement in determining the skills, competences and dispositions provided to apprentices on off-the-job training, employers would probably be prepared to devote more resources to training apprentices while on the job. This would reduce the amount of off-the-job training that the State would be required to fund. It would not, however, seem prudent to give employers responsibility for all apprenticeship training. The State needs to take responsibility for ensuring that all apprentices have a broadly based education that enables them to be lifelong learners in a world of continuous change. Inevitably, employers have a more short-term view of apprenticeship training and the State must ensure that the long-term interests of both the apprentices and the wider economy are taken into account in the training of apprentices.
 - ✓ Transferring responsibility for much of the off-the-job training from IoTs to ETBs, on a phased basis, might be expected to deliver the following savings – subsistence costs, where the training could be delivered in the apprentices' own communities; lower costs involved in delivering off-the-job training through the ETB network rather than through IoTs.
 - ✓ Using ICT, where feasible, to deliver some elements of the off-the-job job training.
- **Recruitment of apprentices**

The current approach to recruiting apprentices relies on the extent to which employers see financial advantage in employing apprentices. This approach resulted in large numbers of apprentices being recruited during the era of the Celtic Tiger and when that collapsed several thousand apprentices found themselves in a virtual no-man's land. There is urgent need, for the country as a whole, taking a medium- to long-term view of apprenticeship recruitment and this means that the recruitment

process needs to be aligned with evidence-based estimates of the future skills needs for the Irish economy, thus smoothing out the peaks and troughs that characterise the current approach.

Implementing a recruitment approach driven by the future skills needs of the economy may mean that, at times when particular sectors of the economy are contracting and at times when new areas of employment are beginning to develop, it may be necessary to incentivise employers to take on apprentices. On the other hand, when a sector is doing particularly well, the sector might be required to pay a levy to the State, the proceeds of which could go towards supporting apprenticeship in sectors with low demand for apprentices at that particular time.

A further consideration here relates to the putting in place of agreements at a national level around the numbers of apprentices to be employed in different sectors. It could be a responsibility of the National Apprenticeship Council/Board to set out a schedule of the numbers of apprentices to be employed in each sector on an annual basis and individual employers could be required to make application to the Council/Board for permission to employ an apprentice.

- **Governance**

While a revised and expanded apprenticeship programme would require some kind of statutory underpinning, the whole apprenticeship system would need to have the capacity to evolve continuously, in a structured way, as the socioeconomic and technological context changes. The legislation could give SOLAS responsibility for developing guidelines for the operation of the apprenticeship system and it could provide for the establishment of a board or council, similar to the NCSE or the NEWB to take responsibility for the strategic management, coordination and quality assurance of the system. If apprenticeship is to be reformed, it will need dedicated governance to drive this reform.

This Board/Council, of between 12 and 14 members, should include representatives from all stakeholders – ETBs, IoTs, industry and commerce, SOLAS, DES, ICTU, National Youth Council of Ireland, etc. To facilitate the work of the Board it would require a relatively small secretariat; this secretariat could be comprised of a permanent core staff and other staff seconded to the secretariat to deal with particular matters as they arise. The Board/Council should also have the power to establish small task forces to progress matters requiring particular expertise and it should have the authority to appoint persons with particular expertise to such task forces. The secretariat could facilitate and support the work of these task forces.

Currently, there exists within FÁS a group of experts whose role it is to manage the apprenticeship programme and it would simply be matter of redesignating these staff to act as a secretariat to the Board/Council with responsibility for governing a revised apprenticeship system.

The Board or Council would need to be appointed by the Minister on the nomination

of the different stakeholders – subject to those being nominated demonstrating that they possess a particular set of competences.

The establishment of the structures being proposed above would provide coherence to the whole apprenticeship system, in terms of both its ongoing and strategic management. Individual ETBs and IoTs and the ETB and IoT sectors could then have responsibility for managing particular phases of the apprenticeship system on a day-to-day basis in the context of a quality-assured framework put in place by the Board/Council. In this regard, both the ETB and IoT sectors might also be required to establish steering committees to bring coherence to apprenticeship training within their respective sectors.

The need for a memorandum of understanding between the ETB and IoT sectors around apprenticeship training would also be desirable and the sectors should meet regularly in the context of this memorandum to discuss matters of mutual interest and facilitate exchanges of good practice and facilitate synergies between the sectors in the training of apprentices.

Overall, the SOLAS guidelines might specify the complete architecture for apprenticeship training. This architecture might comprehend all the structures and relationships essential to the establishment and ongoing development of a coherent national apprenticeship system that:

- ✓ provides clear pathways into apprenticeship and obvious progression routes between apprenticeships and further and/or higher education;
- ✓ serves the needs of the apprentices, the needs of industry and commerce (both private and public) and the current and future skill needs of the economy; and
- ✓ has the capacity to evolve to cater to growth areas of the economy, as they emerge.

Concluding Remarks

Unless apprenticeship is reformed along the lines proposed in this submission, too many young people will be left without the opportunity to progress seamlessly from school to the acquisition of competences required in the workplace and internationally recognised qualifications – qualifications that also provide aligned progression routes to third-level education for those wishing to pursue third-level studies. The current system results in too many young people being deprived of such opportunities, at a huge cost to both the young people and the wider economy. These proposals also make provision for the continuous development of the skills that the economy will require to ensure growth and development in a world where socioeconomic and technological change is perpetually taking nation states and the global village in new directions. The proposals are predicated on the assumption that the future will be different but, since it is not possible to predict the exact ways in which it is going to be different, the critical ingredient in all education/training programmes must be that element which provides participants with the capacity to adapt positively to change – in the family, in the community and in the workplace. Furthermore,

the proposals offer an initial preparation for work framework that ensures that new entrants to the workforce are job-ready. More than anything else, it is this mix of job-readiness combined with a willingness and a capacity to adapt to ever-changing circumstances that will ensure our socioeconomic progress in the years that lie ahead. As a small open economy, Irish business, both public and private, must constantly adjust to the constantly changing demand of the global marketplace.

Though Ireland's future prosperity and social cohesion will depend significantly on the extent to which it succeeds in facilitating smart and sustainable economic growth, we cannot lose sight of the fact that a significant proportion of future jobs will be neither particularly high tech nor towards the top end of the occupational ladder.

The reality is that jobs, at every level on the occupational ladder, will, over time, require increasingly higher levels of knowledge, skill and competences. Focusing exclusively on high tech jobs requiring third-level qualifications would expose a large proportion of our citizens to unemployment and poverty. As Holzer and Lerman have noted in relation to the future skills needs of the US economy, 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 skills¹². This conclusion is equally valid in Europe where Cedefop, in its 2010 report on 'Future Skill Supply in Europe' opines that the 'qualification structure of the labour force in 2020 shows that almost half of the labour force will hold medium-level qualifications.'¹³ Indeed, in a Briefing Note published in February 2010, Cedefop expands on this opinion and advises 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.

Essentially, the big skills challenge for Ireland will be in the area of low and medium skills and qualifications – in further education and training, where an effective apprenticeship model can play a vital role. Indeed, one might well argue that, notwithstanding the critical importance of high-level qualifications, failure to build future-oriented skills on the middle to lower rungs of the qualifications ladder could result in large sections of the Irish population failing to benefit from the economic growth that those with high-level skills might generate in the future.

Finally, the effective reform of apprenticeship is not something that can be done on a piecemeal basis. The reform 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

¹² *America's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs* - see http://www.urban.org/UploadedPdf/411633_forgottenjobs.pdf

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

apprenticeship is reformed in this way, it will instinctively be attractive to young people, their parents and those who guide them because they will clearly see its limitless possibilities.

ENDS

