Response to Consultation on Review of Apprenticeship Training in Ireland

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Introduction

This paper has been prepared by City & Guilds in response to the public consultation on the apprenticeship training in Ireland. The paper presents background information on City & Guilds and its current activities and focus. This is followed by an identification of the strengths and challenges of the standards based apprenticeship training system in Ireland. Suggested recommendations for improvement to the system are presented along with supporting arguments and concluding remarks.

About City & Guilds

City & Guilds is a leading global awarding organisation for competency-based, industry-relevant and internationally recognised qualifications. It currently offers over 500 qualification portfolios (ranging from Levels 3 to 9 on the Irish National Framework). All City & Guilds qualifications are developed in partnership with industry experts and span a wide range of sectors, including: ICT, Green Skills, Digital Media, Engineering, Food Manufacturing, Services, Tourism, Health and Social Care, Agriculture, Forestry, and Leadership and Management.

Two million learners worldwide

City & Guilds qualifications are offered through 8,500 approved colleges and other providers of training in over 81 countries worldwide. Almost two million learners across the globe receive City & Guilds certification annually. There are 150 approved centres in Ireland, supported by City & Guilds in Dublin, and each year over 15,000 Irish learners are awarded City & Guilds certification. In October 2011, the Ireland office took full responsibility for all European business development and increased its staff members to 14 in the following months.

Enhancing employability

Our mission at City & Guilds is to enable individuals to develop the work-based skills and competencies that will enhance their employability opportunities. We pioneer the most up-to-date delivery and assessment methods, and seek to improve vocational education through forging partnerships that deliver the skills and training required to develop the kind of workforce that is needed for economic prosperity. We implement robust quality assurance and external verification processes so as to optimise the learning experience and contribute to good learning outcomes for each City & Guilds learner.
Continuous updating and development

City & Guilds is a registered charity, so any surplus is used to further develop the qualifications and resources required in the rapidly changing workplace. In recent years, City & Guilds has developed online assessment and e-learning supports as well as new qualifications to support the skills needed in newly emerging sectors such as the green economy.

City & Guilds in Ireland – from 1901 to 2013

City & Guilds has a long tradition in Ireland. The first formal engagement between City & Guilds and the then Department of Technical Instruction and Agriculture took place in 1901. From the late 1980s until 2001, tens of thousands of trainees received dual certification (under the arrangement between the authorities in Ireland and City & Guilds), which enhanced their movement in the labour market, both in Ireland and abroad.

National recognition of qualifications

In operating globally, we respect and fully support national systems. Since 2008, over two thousand City & Guilds qualifications were formally aligned with the National Framework of Qualifications by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, now Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). This alignment provides formal national recognition so that each City & Guilds qualification fits into the Irish National Framework and provides a clear progression route for our learners.

Partnering with employers

City & Guilds has always maintained a strong commitment to the Irish labour market, working in partnership with stakeholders and educational institutions to offer vocational qualifications that are highly respected and valued by employers. We work in partnership with a large range of leading employers who use our job-related, competency-led qualifications to train, upskill and reskill their employees within the workplace. Our employer partners include: McDonalds Restaurants of Ireland, Glanbia, Diageo, Coillte, Clonmel Pharmaceuticals, Shell E&P, Windmill Lane Studios, the Irish Pharmaceutical Union, etc. We also support a number of government departments through our partnerships with FÁS, the Irish Prison Service, Irish Rail and the ESB.
The Context – Immense Changes and New Challenges

The Bruges Communiqué of December 2010 defines the European VET strategy up to 2020. It calls for an active policy to enhance the potential of VET to support smart and sustainable growth, and to turn VET across the EU into a highly attractive choice. However, because of the economic crisis, the Irish VET and apprenticeship system faces intense challenges in supporting this strategy. This paper focuses on the Standard Based Apprenticeship Programme (SBA) and uses several sources of information to assess the effectiveness of the current SBA model and identify areas for improvement.

The paradigm shift from a time-served system steeped in history to the current competence-based system, which can adapt to changing technology, has been immense (O’Connor & Mullins, 2004). Apprentices begin to establish themselves in the community through learning by doing, listening, watching and talking to established master apprentices, and progress from apprentice to craftsperson.

Apprenticeship is not easy to define and measure consistently. The practice of apprenticeship has a long history, with origins in the craft guild system of medieval times. This entailed young people being inducted into a guild of highly skilled and respected craftspeople (what Lave & Wenger, 1991 would call a community of practice) to learn the practice of that guild through working closely with and learning from the master over a period of years. Traditional apprenticeship resembles informal on-the-job training in its low educational content, lack of structure and orientation towards production work (McGrath et al, 1995; Ryan, 1999).

In continental Europe, vocational and general education form part of the package, and apprenticeship is treated as part of vocational education, usually at upper secondary level (Ryan, 2000). Researchers from other branches of social science have identified models of apprenticeship that embrace formal and informal learning within structured on- and off-the-job training provided by employers (Fuller, 1996).

For clarity, apprenticeship in this paper will be understood as follows: “It generally denotes a formal structured programme of vocational preparation, sponsored by an employer, which juxtaposes part-time off-the-job instruction with on-the-job training and work experience which leads to a recognised vocational qualification at craft or higher levels and takes at least two years to complete.” (Ryan, 2000:42-65)
New requirements, new pressures on apprenticeship system

Organisational requirements for employee development in recent times have been highlighted as a means of improving the effectiveness of the economy. Competitiveness was traditionally gained through financial efficiency, marketing capability or technology innovation. West (1994) postulates that future competitive advantage will be gained through the creation of new knowledge and disseminated through the organisation. According to Gunnigle et al (1997), the move towards organisational delayering and employee empowerment, and the adoption of some elements of the ‘flexible firm’ model require a culture of continuous development and competence upgrading. The popularisation of the notion of competitive advantage (Porter, 2004) and the idea of excellent companies (highlighted in Peters & Waterman, 1982) have led to organisations striving for competitive advantage by using various strategic tools. However, these are merely a means of assisting a company in designing a business strategy. The execution of strategy lies in the hands of the individuals, so if an economy or company fails to take account of its people, it is doomed to partial success at best. The last two decades have created many changes that have substantially affected employee development. Barrow and Loughlin (1992) suggest that companies require that employees:

- Have the ability to learn new skills and adapt to changing circumstances
- Can conceptualise the contribution of their role to organisational effectiveness
- Can work in flatter structures and without supervision
- Can manage the interface between customers and the organisation
- Possess capabilities such as problem-solving, creative thinking and innovativeness

All these requirements put considerable responsibility on the apprenticeship system and government organisations to ensure that people are equipped to meet these demands.

Review of Competence-Based System

This review paper will adduce evidence from a variety of sources, including a private research study undertaken by the writer, to explore whether a competence-based apprenticeship system, with emphasis on outcomes to meet minimum standards, is the most appropriate method to train apprentices.

This study focuses on one sector of the apprenticeship training and development system which is experiencing ever-increasing pressures from industry due to constant change driven by rapid technology improvements and the economic challenges the industry is faced with. The discussion
focuses on threads within the SBA model that are common to the system and where learning can be achieved.

The research study was conducted using qualitative research, with semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The target audience for the research was individuals working directly in the apprenticeship programme and employers within the industry, while the focus-group participants were apprentices who were just entering the final phase of the programme.

SBA strengths and challenges

**Strengths**

- The Irish dual competence-based apprentice training system is a good way to train apprentices. Harris et al (2003) and Gendron (2010, cited by Rauner & Smith, 2010:7-17) stress that moving away from time-served approaches will lead to more relevant, authentic, efficient, transferable and team-oriented training.

- The Irish apprentice performance in the World Skills competitions has been exemplary over the past number of years. It is important to build on this success in promoting apprenticeships as a career choice and branding.

- The dual system is the most effective way to implement apprenticeship training; a healthy ratio of on-the-job and off-the-job training must be maintained. Also, the dual system learning environments both on- and off-the-job strongly benefit the apprentice. Indeed, Lave and Wenger (1991) stress that, through participation in communities of practice, apprentices not only acquire knowledge but also an identity.

- The apprenticeship training centres, trainers and lecturers (FÁS, Institutes of Technology) have gained invaluable tacit and explicit knowledge that should be retained and built upon.

**Challenges**

At the same time the model faces a number of challenges:

- The current economic crisis is making intense demands on the apprenticeship system as the current apprenticeship model is limited to a very narrow set of occupations, many of which have been affected by the economic crisis (e.g., the building sector).

- The phase timelines on certain programmes need to be addressed, and consideration should be given to adjusting the total time it takes to achieve certification in certain trades (one size does not fit all).
Robust quality assurance procedures across the entire value chain must be maintained and continuously improved. During the interviews weak assessment procedures for on-the-job phases were identified in some areas. The standards to be achieved are laid down by FÁS in its documentation for each element and phase, but the standards are liable to varying interpretations and may not be managed well during on-the-job phases. Pedagogical awareness and understanding within companies can be weak and needs to be developed.

Destination surveys and research on VET outcomes is fragmented and not systematically evaluated.

Career guidance services are geared towards tertiary education streams; there is a lack of VET focus.

There is a lack of formal industry networks, associations, skills councils and learning centres to promote new knowledge, share and develop ideas, and develop occupational standards.

Curriculum development needs to be opened up to specialist qualification providers so as to gain external knowledge, experience, speed and economies of scale.

In Ireland, where the apprenticeship trades are traditionally male occupations, the participation of women in apprenticeship is negligible.

The cost of apprenticeship provision in Ireland is relatively high compared with other European countries.

**Recommendations**

There is abundant international research that indicates competency-based dual apprenticeships models are a good way to train apprentices. There are, however, clear opportunities to improve the current system.

The following recommendations are based on a wide range of sources coupled with the writer’s experience of being an apprentice, working as an apprentice, employing apprentices, teaching apprentices, as well as City & Guilds’ experiences in the UK market. The recommendations should be understood as having equal importance. These proposals for change, if implemented, would improve the structure and operation of the system, and likely lead to improved performance.

**Maintain the dual apprenticeship model**

Maintain the current standard-based dual apprenticeship model (SBA) in Ireland as part of the review. The general consensus from the research review is that the SBA model is a suitable way to train and develop apprentices. The writer concurs with the comments of Harris et al (2003) and Gendron (2010,
cited by Rauner & Smith, 2010:7-17) that moving away from time-served approaches will lead to more relevant, authentic, efficient, transferable and team-oriented training.

**Supporting arguments**

The difference between education and training is especially important in the context of apprenticeships with the current modular curriculum in SBA model. The difficulty in combining the training received by an apprentice via the FÁS training system with the education that is provided for apprentices through the Institutes of Technology (IoTs) and further education providers could possibly be compounded by the philosophical differences between the two strands. One of the key features of apprenticeship is the manner in which individuals are exposed to different learning environments; the worksite and the training organisations are two primary sites.

Fuller and Unwin (1998) suggest that the key problem with traditional apprenticeships is the dualistic conception of theory and practice, where theory is what is learned at college and practice is what apprentices do at work. One of the objectives of this review is to explore how workplace (on-the-job) and provider environments (off-the-job) might best complement each other to meet the vocational needs of apprentices. A key question is where the most fruitful occupational learning takes place – in the college or in the workplace. Following Lave and Wenger (1991), it is clear that both environments are of value to the apprentice. However, participation in communities of practice concerns ‘the whole person acting in the world’. Through this participation in a ‘system of relations’, apprentices do not just acquire certain knowledge; they acquire an identity through the broad meaning of learning as part of social practice; they are part of a network of social communities and a community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

As Lave and Wenger (1991) point out, by becoming a legitimately peripheral participant, the apprentice brings value to the community he/she is joining. At the same time, in not just gaining skills but also developing a sense of identity, their involvement both on- and off-the-job ensure valuable learning experiences through both the practical knowledge gained and participation as an active member of the community.

There have been increasing calls over the past decade by governments, working parties and individual experts for a more integrated model of training, through partnerships between industries and training providers. These calls are supported by Deissinger’s (1996, 2000) German research into a model more suited to integration of on- and off-the-job learning. Deissinger has shown that the dual system is still the approved method, with Germany being viewed as a model for other countries (Deissinger, 1997; Mayer, 2001). Mayer (2001) shows that this system arises out of a historical connection with craft and
trade that has been revised to bring it into line with modern apprenticeships. Mayer also claims that the dual system involves co-operative forms of training between totally different providers of training (Mayer 2001:190).

In-company training is also more cost-effective than training in a school workshop. Companies also benefit from apprentices’ work during training, while recognising that robust regulation is needed to avoid apprentices being used as cheap unskilled labourers. In Germany, economic activity was higher among apprentice graduates than among graduates from tertiary education or school-based VET (Winkelmann 1996).

**Extend apprenticeship to new sectors**

Extend the range of occupational sectors covered by the Irish apprenticeship programme (work-placed learning occupations) to encompass new areas of work (retail, financial services, healthcare, childcare, office administration, ICT, personal services, technical and operative areas, sport & leisure, hairdressing, etc).

**Supporting arguments**

Gender imbalance in the apprentice system is not unusual in the manual trades. It is unusual to provide a generously funded apprenticeship scheme whose beneficiaries are almost entirely male. Other forms of vocational educational provision (such as Post Leaving Certificate PLC) are disproportionately female-oriented. In brief, the current arrangements are not consistent with gender equality. There is a strong argument for broadening the apprenticeship programmes within work-based training schemes to encourage higher female participation; this could include programmes already delivered by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). This approach would also leverage greater workplace training participation for VET courses, encouraging smoother transition to the labour market and allowing employers to learn about trainees’ ability and skills, thus increasing the likelihood of achieving the right employee/employer fit.

The number and range of designated apprenticeships is much lower in Ireland than in the rest of Europe; Irish trades are essentially confined to technical occupations in construction, engineering, motor, electrical and printing. In the stronger economies of northern Europe, apprenticeship covers a much wider range of activities – retail, financial services, healthcare, office administration, etc. Germany has some 340 apprenticeships compared to 26 in Ireland. In Germany, apprenticeship is the route to work and further career development for nearly two-thirds of all young people; in Ireland apprenticeship accounts for only around 2% of all school-leavers. Services in Ireland now employ 77%
of all employed persons while industry, including construction, has declined from 28% to 18% since 1998.

There has been a new focus in the UK on developing apprenticeships after many years of decline. The National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) is committed to increasing the number, range and quality of apprenticeships on offer. In a recent development, City & Guilds in the UK has brought employers, training centres and apprentices together to create one million apprenticeships in the two-year period from 2011 to 2013. City & Guilds’ apprenticeships now cover 170 different job roles in over 25 industry sectors.

In addition, in Ireland, there are regular claims that thousands of jobs go unfilled in the ICT sector and other industries because workers with the requisite competence set cannot be sourced locally, at a time when there are some 450,000 on the live register.

**Vary the duration of training**

Different occupations require different types and levels of preparation. The current system assumes that one size fits all within the current offer of apprentice provision running over a four-year period and seven phases. Each job requires different learning processes and, in many cases, the learning process is faster, depending on the skills levels needed to carry out the job. The system needs to be more flexible so as to allow for a more streamlined approach to apprentice provision. This would mean, for example, that in occupations that require less initial training, the apprentice would be able to move into productive work faster; this would immediately generate added value for the employer. Standard apprenticeship training periods can add unnecessary costs to the training while also involving unproductive time for the employer during the off-the-job phases.

The duration of apprenticeships should be determined by the specific trade employer representative body, awarding body, and subject-matter experts from industry, taking skill levels and complexity into consideration. The concept of varying apprenticeship training periods needs to be managed by the overarching body, and the different award levels need to be considered. There are many examples of such systems (Switzerland, UK, etc) that can be drawn upon to determine the optimum time for apprentice provision.

The extension of the apprenticeship programme to include new sectors will necessitate a more flexible approach – not least in training periods – to develop fit-for-purpose skills and productive, employable people.
Enhance governance and quality assurance

At the very heart of the SBA model is competence and how competence is measured. Ashworth and Saxton (1990) state that defining competence is not an exact nor static science, and point out that competence can be performance-oriented. This concept matches the SBA model precisely, where performance is measured against the stated ‘standards’ of performance. In the case of the apprentice, competence can be attributed when the apprentice shows evidence of this standard.

A further complication is behavioural competencies, a described set of traits, characteristics or qualities that a person possesses, and that is most desirable in small to medium enterprises (SMEs). A key point highlighted by Fletcher (1991) is that, if assessment uses explicit standards of occupational performance as its foundation, then a logical way to assess whether someone is meeting those standards is to watch them working in that occupation (on-the-job assessment). In such a system quality becomes the nucleus of the SBA model.

A review by the OECD of Vocational Education and Training (Viktória Kis, 2010) identified various weaknesses within the system in both on- and off-the-job assessment. We discussed earlier how on- and off-the-job learning benefits the apprentice and how a large proportion of learning takes place on-the-job; therefore any assessment whether on- or off-the-job is fundamental to the success of the system. This raises the profile and strengthens the accountability of the programme for apprentices and industry, thus developing better collaboration, based on trust.

The evidence suggests that on-the-job assessment may not be carried out as it should in some cases. This is partly due to employers’ lack of knowledge about how to combine learning with work. During some interviews it was suggested that employers perceive learning as formal teaching (by someone else), and do not appreciate the natural learning processes, such as in communities of practice, which help people to build and share knowledge. (We cannot confirm if this is widespread, but the matter could be evaluated further in the future.)

Quality is not just a matter of output in isolation; indeed, quality on the input side is fundamental to apprenticeship success in skills identification, qualification development and training delivery. The entire value chain must be quality-assured to deliver the fit-for-purpose qualifications which will help people to develop the relevant skills to gain employment and contribute real value to industry and the economy. The responsible governing body or regulator should implement and monitor the quality assurance system across the entire process. There should be a continuous improvement strategy, and external provision could be considered to demonstrate impartiality and strict governance.
One way to enhance quality across the various training and assessment locations is to develop the competences of the apprenticeship workforce by providing pedagogical training for supervisors of VET apprentices for companies, service providers, schools and colleges. This will help to develop a balance of the technical, vocational and pedagogical skills across all delivery and assessment points both on- and off-the-job. Economic conditions and budget constraints mean that employers will not be keen on such investment. An alternative solution is to offer the task to a service provider specialising in quality provision and sector specialisation, and provide funding by the authority.

Local employers (SMEs) may not always be able to support all the required training and assessments. Variations between firms – even within the same sector – in terms of products, markets, clients and technology mean that learning opportunities are not the same for all apprentices in workplaces; off-the-job training providers must therefore fill these potential gaps in the system.

**Improve curriculum development and assessment**

Vocational education and training concentrates on direct preparation of students for their activities in the labour market and therefore should focus on ensuring a high level of employability among its graduates. Employability is probably the most important indicator of the quality of VET. Success in the labour market requires the acquisition of skills and knowledge which students can immediately use when entering the labour market. Mostly, this includes technical knowledge and craft skills as employers recruit graduates who can apply their skills and become immediately productive.

The labour market is changing rapidly and, therefore, VET students are required to have skills which serve the short-term and long-term economic interests of companies. Employees need to be flexible in adapting their skills to changes in their workplace, caused by rapid technological development and a company’s reactions to these developments. Employers increasingly seek a labour force with a strong ability to learn; this necessitates a balanced level of numeracy and literacy as well as team-working, problem-solving and communication skills, innovation, sustainability and information communication technology (OECD, 2009).

Employability is not only desirable at the stage of graduation, but of concern throughout the career of an employee. Long-term success in employability can be dramatically improved if curricula development in VET includes skills that promote employability/re-employability. Following vocational training a number of students may decide to continue into tertiary education. This is not necessarily in the interest of firms, but the development of additional skills in VET – in particular, high levels of literacy and numeracy – equips students with additional competencies which may facilitate their transition into advanced education institutions.
The awarding of interim certification should be available to apprentices at various stages in an apprenticeship programme at the appropriate level within the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). This would not only encourage the apprentice to continue the apprenticeship, but also facilitate progression options on a different career path. Interim certification would also facilitate the apprentice should the apprenticeship be interrupted beyond the control of the individual and allow further progression and/or the seeking of new employment.

Employer inclusion in curriculum development sits at the very hub of the apprenticeship system. It is critical to integrate employers in curriculum development. Not only does this increase employer’s perception of the quality of VET education; employers also know best which specific skills are needed in the labour market (OECD, 2009) and have specific up-to-date knowledge within their sectors that can enrich the development of the curriculum.

City & Guilds specialises in qualification and assessment development in vocational qualifications (500 qualifications) and apprenticeships, covering some 170 roles in various apprenticeship sectors, and is regulated by the Office of Qualifications and Examination Regulation (Ofqual). Ofqual commenced work as a fully independent non-ministerial government department on 1 April 2010. Ofqual is accountable to parliament rather than to government ministers. Its function is to regulate qualifications, examinations and assessments in England. It has five statutory objectives that relate to qualification standards, the standards of National Curriculum Assessments, public confidence in qualifications and assessments, the benefits of regulated qualifications and the efficiency of the qualifications market. Ofqual gives formal recognition to bodies and organisations that award qualifications. It imposes recognition conditions on awarding organisations and monitors their performance. It can impose sanctions on an awarding organisation, including financial penalties, and can withdraw an awarding organisation’s recognition. It also has the power to cap fees charged by an awarding organisation.

In July 2006, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) adopted policies and criteria for the inclusion in, or alignment with, the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) of the awards of certain awarding bodies. City & Guilds has over two thousand qualifications aligned with the NFQ to date and is clearly collaborating with the regulators. It is strongly committed to developing its qualifications on the Irish market; this offers real opportunities in terms of qualification development, consultancy, knowledge and experience, which can increase efficiency in apprenticeship development while leveraging economies of scale, leading to reduction in costs.
Enhance profile and ‘attractiveness’ of VET

In Ireland the education system is growing and diversifying, with more courses for different target groups. In parallel, jobs and careers are constantly evolving and job security is diminishing. While these changes are expanding opportunities, they also intensify the complexity and difficulty of career choices for young people. Job-for-life expectations have increasingly been replaced by a sequence of complex choices and changes over a lifetime of learning and work. As a result, career choices, and therefore career guidance, are becoming both more important and more demanding.

A survey by the European Commission (2011) found that, among the general public in the Republic of Ireland, three-quarters of people thought vocational education has a positive image in the country, but only 10% said they would recommend vocational education to a person who is finishing compulsory schooling.

This prompted City & Guilds to investigate further these perceptions. The research was conducted by the City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development (CSD) for the City & Guilds Ireland Office. Conducted by Opinium, it involved a literature review and an online survey of 508 people aged 15 to 19 in the Republic of Ireland. The findings raise concerns about the perceptions and understanding of vocational education among young people in Ireland. The popularity of university and the influence of parents suggest that young people are encouraged to aspire to university, with only limited information about other options being available, including studying alongside working.

Young people on the whole seem keen not to restrict their future options; they would benefit from information about vocational options and how transferable they can be. It may be that young people do not consider vocational options because they see them as restrictive in terms of progression into different careers, in a way that they do not consider academic options to be restrictive.

The survey suggests that young people in Ireland commonly lack awareness and understanding of vocational education; less than half (46%) correctly described vocational education. The survey also shows that most aspire to take an academic route. Only 6% (29 young people) among those surveyed were planning to pursue a vocational qualification when their current course was complete, while more than half (52%) of respondents were planning to attend university in the Republic of Ireland and 7% to attend university in the UK. Of those planning to pursue an academic qualification, more than half (60%) had never even considered a vocational option.

We can conclude that vocational qualifications have a limited profile in Ireland and are considered a realistic option by only a minority of young people. This may be linked to parental expectations (31% did not consider vocational options due to their parents’ preference for an academic route). This is
borne out by CSD’s research report *New Directions* (Batterham & Levesley, 2011) conducted in the UK.

According to the Bordeaux communiqué:

“Attractiveness, accessibility and quality should allow VET to play a major role in lifelong learning strategies, with a twofold objective: (a) simultaneously promoting equity, business performance, competitiveness and innovation; (b) enabling citizens to acquire the skills they need for career development, to take up training, be an active citizen and achieve personal fulfilment. VET should promote excellence and at the same time guarantee equal opportunities.” (Bordeaux communiqué, 2008)

VET attractiveness of VET is characterised as a cumulative process; the more VET looks attractive, the more people and stakeholders use it; the more that VET is used by the main stakeholders, the more attractive it is to others. Increasing the number of stakeholders involved in VET is therefore essential to VET’s attractiveness. Stakeholders may be either users or providers of VET and/or be involved in its governance.

*Set up research and data-collection body to inform policymakers*

Data collection and analysis are necessary for VET policymakers to develop an informed strategy for the future. Output data is also necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of the apprenticeship and wider VET provision in terms of cost and feasibility of different policy options. The establishment of a research institute responsible for analysing VET data and disseminating research findings should be considered – similar, for example, to NCVER in Australia, or the Swiss Leading Houses, a network of government-funded, long-term research projects, attached to one or more higher-education institutions; they aim to fill the gaps in the Swiss VET evidence base and to build up a VET research community.

Examples of topics addressed by these research networks include the quality of VET, the economics of education, company behaviour, training policies and social competences (OECD, 2009c; http://cee.lse.ac.uk/-http://www.sbfi.admin.ch/berufsbildung/01528/01529/index.html?lang=en).

*Set up mechanism to balance trainee numbers with industry demand*

The industry-led recruitment process for apprenticeship is based on economic conditions and sector performance. Seen in isolation, this is a sensible approach. However, such a system is difficult to manage in uncertain economic conditions, as experienced in Ireland in recent years. As outlined above, the data collection and analysis needs to be streamlined, and more accurate short, medium
and long-term forecast assessments need to be made. In addition, a contingency plan should be developed to cope with demand fluctuations, which will always be a factor. For example, the current collapse of the building sector has diminished apprenticeship numbers in the medium term, but a contingency programme will need to be in place to supply skilled workers when the industry recovers. This could be done by analysing the industry at employer level on an ongoing basis and activating a training programme to coincide with the demand forecast; in the current system, this would need to be done four years in advance of the actual need for new workers.

The idea is to balance apprentice numbers with demand, which helps the management of resources and is more rational and efficient. This type of analysis is difficult to carry out and intervention by state agencies (funded programmes) might be needed to induct a predetermined quantity of apprentices to various sectors to secure demand requirements when they arise. This model would support industry and the economy in times when uncertainty prevails. It could be used in future demand forecasts in all sectors to support the supply of skilled people as they are needed.

Depending on the policy and strategic decisions made on the range of occupations included in the apprenticeship programmes, demand forecasts will become more complex. There is merit in developing a more inclusive apprenticeship system in conjunction with the ETBs, IoTs and employers (or representative bodies/sector skills councils) at local level, and engaging with young people at secondary level to identify potential career opportunities for those who may become early school-leavers or simply want to gain a valuable vocational qualification. This approach could be initiated very quickly and immediately using existing resources (people and hardware) among the current providers.

Concluding Remarks

The current apprenticeship system in Ireland forms a very strong basis for the future development of the model. The current apprenticeship model is much more likely to remain an appropriate innovative training and skills development model if it is developed in line with the recommendations as follows:

- Build on the strengths of the model, extend the apprenticeship to new sectors, vary the duration of training in line with skill levels, enhance governance and quality assurance, improve curriculum development and assessment, enhance the profile and attractiveness of VET, set up a dedicated VET data collection body to inform policy makers and set up new mechanisms to balance trainee numbers with demand. City & Guilds remain committed to supporting the development of the apprentice system in Ireland and working with policy makers and stakeholders in the near future.
References:


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