Submission on Reform of Apprenticeship in Ireland

To Review Group on Apprenticeship Training in Ireland

BY

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The opinions and views expressed in this document are those of the author and do not in any manner represent the views and opinions of any institution, agency, group or organisation.
Introduction

As indicated on the cover page of this document, the views and opinions expressed are those of the author and are made to contribute to the Minister for Education’s decision to invite submissions from interested parties so that Ireland will maintain and further develop a high quality and effective system of apprenticeship training.

Apprenticeship is one of the oldest forms of training and is one of the cornerstones on which a skills bank is built. It has evolved from a system of master and indentured apprentice, which existed in the period of the medieval guilds, to the modern dual system of education and training with both on-the-job and off-the-job components of training. The current system of apprenticeship in Ireland, known as the Standards-Based Apprenticeship (SBA), has served Ireland well since its development and this is evidenced by, among other things, the fact that to the author’s knowledge there was never need to import skills in the craft area because we did not have crafts people with the necessary skills: it was necessary to employ immigrants from other jurisdictions simply because we did not have sufficient people with the required skills.

However, notwithstanding the success of the current system of apprenticeship, after almost 20 years of its implementation it is timely of the minister for education to seek a major review of its operation etc.

The SBA has many good features but there are elements which, based on the experience of the deliverers of all the phases, there are serious issues to be addressed.

International comparisons of different paradigms of apprenticeship in other jurisdictions, particularly Germany, Switzerland, Austria, etc will inform our opinions on craft-type training but it must be borne in mind that it is not possible to successfully ‘borrow’ a model from one country and ‘parachute’ it into another as tradition and custom and practice are obviously different not the mention the issues of social partnership.

Much has been written about apprenticeship training in other countries, including by one member of the Review Group, consequently it is unnecessary to give an overview of other systems in this document although reference will be made to them later in the submission.
In addition to studying the literature on apprenticeship in other countries, the author has visited some countries to see the operation the apprenticeship system both on and off-the-job.

**The Importance of Apprenticeship in Ireland**

Definitions of apprenticeship abound but most agree that it is a system of skills training of a long-term character in a recognised occupation and the skills developed must be transferable and of a broad occupational nature. The skills learned by the apprentice enable that person to become a contributing member of society whereby she/he helps the ongoing development of the economy and in return earns a reasonable wage.

Apprenticeship conforms with many current ideas that this type of learning, acquired in two different environments, namely, on and off-the-job, is an ideal skills development platform, provided it is properly structured, supervised and the skills properly assessed as learning progresses.

There is also a societal benefit to the success of a pragmatic and viable apprenticeship system and that is by maintaining entry levels at reasonably low level (as they are now) it offers a potentially good career path to those who wish to join the work force at an early age. Employers can, of course, insist on higher qualifications for those they wish to recruit as apprentices.

**SBA**

The SBA is essentially a competence-based model with the emphasis on outcomes to meet *minimum* standards of industry. The structure is that it is divided into seven Phases with both on and off-the-job components. Apprentices are required to be assessed at each of the phases. Apprentices are recruited by the employer and become statutorily entitled to the off-the-job phases as soon as the employer registers them with FAS. Unusually for a competence-based model, the wage rate for apprentices is based on the year of apprenticeship rather than on the successful completion of a Phase. Consequently, apprenticeship in Ireland is still time-referenced and four years is still the minimum time in which the SBA can be completed. Apprentices are paid the appropriate yearly rate whilst on either on-the-job phases or in a training institution. In addition, apprentices are paid additional expenses to cover travel and/or accommodation during the off-the-job Phases. FAS allowed apprentices to repeat the off-the-job assessments twice but always allowed a fourth attempt after a formal appeal was made by the apprentice to FAS.
The author is not aware of any apprentice ever being failed after 3\textsuperscript{rd}/4\textsuperscript{th} attempt in Phase 2. This is most unusual for a training programme particularly when the minimum entry level is quite low.

Phase 2 of the SBA is delivered in a FAS training Centre and Phases 4 and 6 are delivered in an Institute of Technology (and in a College of Further Education in a small number of cases).

The over-arching body tasked with over-seeing the development and structure of the SBA has been the NAAC which was representative of FAS, institutes of technology, department of education & science, department of finance, employer organisations and trade unions. The NAAC dealt with all matters pertaining to apprenticeship in the 26 designated trades and advised the board of FAS on all such matters, including development of the curricula.

**Strengths of the SBA**

The SBA has produced high quality crafts people in the designated trades that are comparable to any produced by apprenticeship systems in other countries. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Irish craft workers that emigrate to other countries are always in high demand and are often promoted to supervisory positions after a relatively short time. It is also worth noting that in some countries particular apprenticeships do not develop the same broad range of skills and technical knowledge in their training programmes as is done in the SBA. For example, the trade of carpentry & joinery is one trade in Ireland whilst in Germany it is divided into three separate trades, i.e. carpentry, roofing and joinery. Similarly, the trade of plumbing in Germany is divided into two separate trades, i.e. sanitation and heating whilst in Ireland it is one trade. There is also evidence that former apprentices who engaged in further study at higher award levels, mainly in institutes of technology, successfully completed their course of study and achieved very good results. This is an indication of the transferability of the technical skills and knowledge developed during their apprenticeship training. Clearly, a properly structured apprenticeship system can develop both the technical knowledge and hand-skill elements demanded of a good craftsperson and there is evidence to suggest that the SBA succeeded in this regard and equipped qualified craft persons in Ireland to develop the tacit knowledge necessary to work and succeed in the relevant industry. Other issues pertaining to the suitability of the SBA as model of intermediate skills development are:

- All registered apprentices have a statutory entitlement to seven phases
Phase 1 is perceived by many trainers to be very important because it is effectively an enculturation and socialisation process for apprentices. Apprentices experience the real world of work at the very beginning of the apprenticeship and before the state expends any funds on training. It also gives the employer an opportunity to assess the suitability of the person, in both attitude and aptitude.

- It gives a good balance of structured training both on and off-the-job.

- Apprentices experience the use of the most modern technology in their field during training.

- The SBA provides participants with a good range of skills and technical knowledge, skills and knowledge that are transferable.

- It sets minimum standards of competence

Weaknesses of the SBA

Virtually every education and training programme has both strengths and weaknesses and the SBA is no exception in that regard. The author identifies the following issues as a cause of concern for those associated with the SBA.

- The dichotomy of a minimum duration of apprenticeship (4 years) in a standards based apprenticeship.

- The mismatch between the number of apprentices recruited by employers and the number and availability of training places on the off-the-job Phases at FAS training centres for Phase 2 or subsequently at the Institutes of technology for Phases 4 and 6. This has led to situations where apprentices were held up from completing a particular Phase because there were no places available either in FAS for Phase 2 or in an Institute of technology for either Phase 4 or 6, at the appropriate time, despite the Department of Education & Science and FAS developing additional facilities and recruiting additional staff to cope with the situation and at huge cost to the state. This particular anomaly is now reversed with many more places available in both FAS and the institutes.
of technology because of a major downturn in the number of apprentices being recruited by employers. It also caused increased expenditure on training allowances being paid to some apprentices whilst attending the off-the-job phases because the allowances equated to the trade union rate paid to apprentices based on time served rather than on Phase completion. For example, if a second-year apprentice was not given a place in an institute of technology for Phase 4 of the course and was delayed until the third year of apprenticeship then the allowance paid to the apprentice equated to the third year apprenticeship rate.

- The duration of the Phase 2. Many stakeholders, particularly employers, have stated in the past that the Phase 2 element of the SBA programme should be shortened. They substantiated this view by claiming that some apprentices developed a negative attitude towards authority and instructions when that had returned to employment for the Phase 3 work-based element.

- There is a lack of monitoring of the work-based Phases by FAS. This has meant that during the ‘boom’ some apprentices were being used merely as ‘cheap’ labour and required to do elements of the trade that were of a repetitive nature and narrow in skills base.

- There has been a lack of robust quality assurance procedures through-out the SBA. This was evidenced by the lack of external monitoring of the delivery and assessment at the FAS training centres, the Institutes of Technology and the on-the-job Phases. Anecdotal evidence now suggests that this is changing with the appointment of external monitors, at least in some trades.

- Curricula do not promote independent learning. Much of the programme is assessed by ‘ticking boxes’

- The marking schemes for the assessment of the off-the-job Phases are in many cases inappropriate, particularly for the practical elements of the course. The cognitive functions underlying task performance are not measured.

- There are no clearly defined paths of progression for qualified ‘apprentices’. There are some exceptions to this issue but no defined
concrete career paths into related courses in higher education and training exist on a nation-wide basis.

- There is a lack of communication between some of the providers. An example of this is that the lecturers in the Institutes of Technology are not provided with the results of the Phase 2 assessments achieved by apprentices when they attend an Institute of Technology for Phase 4.

- The cost to the state is excessive.

Options for Consideration

The author of this submission suggests that there are four separate paradigms of apprenticeship that may be considered by the Review Group:

1. Option one is to transfer responsible for apprenticeship training to employers in each sector, e.g. Construction, manufacturing engineering etc. In this scenario employers could contract out any required external training to public or private organisations and receive grant-aid from the state to fund such training. Of course employers could also decide to provide all the training in-house.

   In the opinion of the author this arrangement would lead to a negative skills equilibrium and would have very serious consequences for the economy in the longer term.

   *This would be the worst possible option for skills development of the type being considered by the Review Committee.*

2. Option two would be to develop a 2-year full-time course in each trade that would be delivered in an institute of technology/college of further education or in a FAS training centre. Apprentices would, on completion of the off-the-job course, seek employment in the appropriate trade and after a defined period of work experience be deemed to be qualified and would be awarded appropriate certification.

   This option would have many drawbacks including the fact that many of the positive attributes of the current system, such as apprentices experiencing the real world of work in their chosen trade before the state funds any off-the-job Phases for them. In addition it is possible
that graduates of the off-the-job course would endeavour to ply their trade without completing the on-the-job elements, bearing in mind that Ireland does not operate a Licence-to-Practice system for crafts people as pertains in some other countries. This would eventually lead to serious erosion of skills in this country.

A variation of this model would be to have a three-year apprenticeship with the second year spent in industry to gain experience. Whilst somewhat better that the first option it would still be a very poor alternative to the current model and would have serious consequences for skill development.

Both of these options are considered by the author to be very poor paradigms of apprenticeship training for Ireland and are not recommended by the author.

3. The third option would be to retain the current model of education and training but with a major review of certain aspects of it. The author would recommend the following changes:

- Serious consideration should be given to having elements of the off-the-job Phases delivered on the internet. For example; issues related to health and safety which, in the main require only rote learning, could be delivered in this mode quite easily. Certain other elements of the curricula which could be also be delivered electronically should be identified and the duration of the length of time spent in either the FAS Training Centres and the Institutes of Technology be reduced, thus reducing the overall cost of the programme. The author assumes that, based on his experience, the delivery of certain elements of the off-the-job Phases electronically to the apprentices would allow the remainder of the curriculum to be delivered in the time allocated below. The shortening of the duration would also add a certain dynamic to the course.

- Reduce the Phase 2 off-the-job element of the programme in the FAS training centres from the current 20 weeks duration to 12 weeks.

- Reduce the duration of the 4 and 6 off-the-job Phases to 8 weeks and deliver the remainder of the programme via the internet. These changes should apply to all the 26 trades.
Supervision of the 3rd and 5th on-the-job Phases to be transferred to the FAS instructors who taught the apprentices on the Phase 2 programme. The instructors will have gained much knowledge regarding the ability, development and progress of her/his apprentices during the delivery of the 2nd phase as she/he will have been their full-time instructor during that phase. The instructors are best equipped to follow up apprentices whilst they are working with their employer ensuring that they are being properly and adequately trained and that the apprentices are availing of every opportunity to successfully complete the Phase.

Reduce the minimum time in which apprenticeship in the 26 designated trades can be completed from 4 years to 3 years. This would bring the Irish model of apprenticeship more into line with that of our European colleagues.

Wages and training allowances paid to apprentices should be based on phase completion and NOT on time served. However, any written contract between the providers and the apprentice must state categorically that advancement to the next off-the-job phase Phase is dependent on a place being available as soon as possible after completion of the previous Phase. Consideration should be given to restricting the registration of new apprentices to certain times of the year in order to harmonise progression to the next off-the-job Phase of apprenticeship with that of the schedule of intake of the courses in the training institutions, reducing the possibility of apprentices being held up in the system.

Wages and training allowances should be based on a seven increment model reflecting the 7 phases of the apprenticeship system.

The state should continue to pay the training allowances to apprentices.

A new system of assessment needs to be developed to reflect the complexity and nature of craft skills and technical knowledge. This model should be a hybrid of the competence /competency models and adequately measure and reward the cognitive functions underlying task performance during the off-the-job Phases. The competence model of assessment should be retained for the on-the-job Phases.

Minimum entry qualifications should remain as they are at present in order to provide a possible career pathway for people who wish to leave school at the earliest opportunity. There is
ample evidence that people who have left school early can and do successfully complete apprenticeship.

The author is of the opinion that if the changes to the current system of apprenticeship being proposed in this model are implemented, then it will continue to develop and maintain a highly efficient and skilled workforce in this country.

This model of apprenticeship training is highly recommended by the author.

4. Serious consideration should also be given by the review group to recommending the development of a post-apprenticeship qualification, which would be built on top of the seven-phase apprenticeship system. This course is available as an option in countries such as Germany, Switzerland and Austria among others and is generally perceived as an option for higher achievers. It is known in Germany as the meister programme and is highly valued and regarded by employers. Applicants who apply for admission to the meister training programme must have completed their apprenticeship. The course fee for such courses in Germany may be paid by employers, by the individual craft person or a combination of both. It is also possible for a craft person to obtain a loan from the Lander to pay the course fee.

The course curriculum leading to the qualification includes modules of higher craft technology, pedagogy, communications, management and business administration and is very highly regarded among the business community.

The author of this submission has visited Germany to specifically research the training programmes to attain qualification as a meister and to see at first hand the contribution that meisters make in the workplace. The experience was both enlightening and impressive.

IN 2008 FAS submitted a proposed Meister programme to the Higher Education & Training Awards Council for validation at Level 7 on the framework of national qualifications (See end note). The delivery of the programme required partnership with a third-level institution but FAS failed to obtain a partner for the delivery of the course.
The proposed pilot programme was developed for the trade of carpentry & Joinery with the intention of using the curriculum as a template for other trades.

In the opinion of the author this programme would add significantly to the skills base in Ireland and lead to improved quality, a more focused approach to cost and productivity, greater adaptability and improved training for apprentices in the workplace.

*The author highly recommends this course as a progression route for qualified crafts people and, if implemented with the revised model of apprenticeship at OPTION 3 above, apprenticeship training in Ireland would have the potential to become the gold standard for apprenticeship education and training.*

**Licence to Practice**

In some other countries trades people require a special licence to ply their trade. This is not the case in Ireland (The trade of electrician will soon be an exception). The author is of the opinion that this concept must be given serious consideration in the future on both the grounds of health & safety but also to ensure that Ireland is at the forefront of the emerging quality revolution, that is quality of product and quality of service, being demanded by an ever increasing discerning buyer.

**Designation of Additional Trades.**

There are a relatively small number of designated trades in Ireland in comparison with many other countries. It is good policy to examine new emerging occupations, such as the trade of ‘Roofer’ in the construction industry and ‘Mechatronics in the manufacturing industry to establish if these occupations would benefit from designation and the formal training that would ensue. However, it is important to emphasise that the goodwill and assistance of employer groups is necessary to establish these occupation as new trades. It should also be noted that not all occupations require the same length or depth of training as that of the existing designated trades. In addition alternative methods of delivery may be required to meet the needs of employers and learners.
**Delivery of Off-the-Job Phases**

The author is of the opinion that the 2nd Phase of apprenticeship should continue to be delivered in the FAS training centres with delivery of the Phases 4 & 6 continuing in the Institutes of Technology and Colleges of Further Education. This is not to suggest that the instructors in FAS could not deliver the more advanced Phases but if these Phases were to be delivered in the training centres it is highly likely that a major industrial relations issue may arise.

**Conclusion**

Ireland is at a crossroads in terms of apprenticeship education and training, coming from a high of c.30,000 registered apprentices to c.1,500 at present due mainly to the collapse in the construction sector.

This collapse in apprentice registrations nevertheless provides opportunity to re-assess the complete training programme for apprentices and implement change which, if deemed necessary, will be made easier by the huge reductions in registrations.

The Minister for Education & Skills is to be commended for his timely intervention in establishing the Review Group to examine all options.

*Endnote: In 2007 FAS commissioned the author of this submission, in a personal capacity, to form and head a team of experts to develop a 'meister' type post-apprenticeship programme.*