Review of Apprenticeship System in Ireland

Submission of Henry Murdoch

Background

I was the senior executive in FAS in the 1990’s with primary responsibility for the introduction of the standards-based apprenticeship system which is now the subject of this review in 2013. Two previous attempts by AnCO (the Industrial Training Authority) to modernise the apprenticeship system had failed, due to pressure from vested interests.

The breakthrough came when a commitment was made by the social partners in the 1991 national agreement - the Programme for Economic and Social Progress – in which a whole page was devoted to the introduction of a standards-based system for the 24 designated trades in construction, engineering, electrical, motor and print.

Even with that commitment, there was considerable opposition to the replacement of a time-served apprenticeship system with a standards-based system. The new system presented all the parties with challenges. Apprentices could now fail if they did not meet the new standards. Teachers and instructors had to have their skills upgraded – they now had to teach the new curriculum, which was based on the needs of industry. Employers now had increased responsibility for delivery with the increased emphasis in the new system on on-the-job training or work-based learning.

The benefits for the learner apprentice of the standards-based system included: (a) the apprentice earned while learning; (b) the work-based learning ensured the relevance of the skills being acquired; and (c) the apprentice gained, through certification, international employment mobility advantages after graduation.

The benefits for the employer were considerable also and included: (a) the employer selected the apprentice and there was a “suitability” phase for both parties during the probationary period; (b) the employer had the benefit of the apprentice’s productive work; (c) the employer did not pay wages during the off-the-job phases of training / education; (d) the employer had a major influence on the relevance of the skills being acquired and the acquisition of any workplace practices or ethos, unique to the firm; and (e) the employer provided for the future skill needs of the firm or industry.

Present Review of the apprenticeship system

The standards-based apprenticeship system of the 1990’s was a considerable improvement on the old system, but it was not perfect. Pragmatic compromise decisions had to be made at the time to get the new system “off the ground” and to ensure that it didn’t suffer the same fate as the previous attempts at reform.
This current review of the apprenticeship system presents an opportunity to revisit these pragmatic decisions, in so far as they still survive, to see if they are still relevant in an ever changing employment market:

(a) Duration of Apprenticeship

It was decided that all apprenticeships in the standards-based system should be of 4 years duration, even though it was recognised that that duration was not necessary to develop the knowledge and skills required in all trades. There was a concern that having different durations would possibly reduce the status of trades with a shorter duration and possibly be used (or abused) for wage differentiation. There also was a desire to provide for some “maturing” of young teenager apprentices.

I believe that the primary determination of duration should be the time necessary to acquire the level and range of knowledge and skills required. This will inevitably result in apprenticeships having different durations eg the duration of an “aircraft mechanic” apprenticeship would be longer than that of a “plasterer”.

(b) Certification

In order to protect the integrity of the new standard-based system and not have “half-baked” crafts-persons, it was decided that there should not be any “interim” certification. It was feared that apprentices would not complete their apprenticeship if “interim” certification were available. The only certification would be the National Craft Certificate (later a FETAC certificate) at the end of the apprenticeship (Phase 7).

I believe that interim certification should be available at particular stages in an apprenticeship, at the appropriate level or award type within the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). This would not only recognise the knowledge and skills acquired, it would facilitate progression where an apprenticeship is interrupted for whatever reason, not only in Ireland, but also for those who have to emigrate to find work or to complete an apprenticeship in another country.

Again, to ensure the equal “status” of the different trades, there was a great desire expressed from certain quarters in the 1990’s that the trades should all be at the same certification level in the NFQ. This view, in so far as it still exists, must be challenged. A trade qualification arising from an apprenticeship should be at the level justified by the rigorous criteria of the NFQ and not by considerations of “status”. This whole area should be revisited.

(c) Phases on and off-the-job

The seven alternating Phases of apprenticeship on and off-the-job were introduced to increase work-based learning in the on-the-job provision and to share the provision of training / education, driven primarily by the available facilities. However, the alternating Phases were introduced on a “one size fits all” basis.

Phase 1 (on-the-job) was introduced to enable the apprentice and the employer to determine if the trade was suitable for the apprentice and also to act as a probationary period. This has merit and should be retained, although its duration might be different for different trades.
The other Phases should be more flexible, to meet the particular needs of the trade, and certainly not on a “one size fits all basis”. Some trades may justify a smaller number of Phases and others a larger number. And even “day release” to off-the-job education / training should be an option, provided release of the apprentice was mandatory.

Also the allocation of responsibility for Phase 2 to FAS training centres and of Phases 4 and 6 to the educational system, was a pragmatic decision, taken to share the off-the-job training and to have regard to the available facilities. Now that the FAS training centres, via the newly established Education and Training Boards, come under the remit of the Department of Education and Skills, there should be greater flexibility on where the off-the-job training / education takes place.

(d) Market driven

Another decision made in the 1990’s with the introduction of the standards-based system was to change the recruitment of apprentices from a mixture of employer and State recruitment to a totally market driven approach, where employers had total responsibility for apprentice recruitment.

This market driven approach has positive and negative consequences. In stable economic conditions, the skill needs of industry are met, apprentices are able to complete their apprenticeship and obtain employment after graduation. However, where there is “boom and bust”, as Ireland has experienced in recent years, there is inevitably chaos in the apprenticeship area during the downturn, with significant redundancy amongst apprentices and a dramatic reduction in the recruitment of apprentices in certain sectors.

For example, the apprenticeship population in Ireland increased nearly tenfold from 1994, when the standards-based system commenced, to 28,000 at the peak of the Celtic Tiger economy in 2007. And first year apprentice registrations soared from 1,046 to 8,306 in 2006. And then came the collapse, with the construction industry hardest hit, with its apprentice recruitment falling to 10% of its peak amount. This has led to a reduced demand on training / education provision and to significant problems for redundant apprentices seeking to complete their apprenticeship.

In these cases of market failure, there is justification for the State to intervene, as FAS has done with its Redundant Apprentice Placement Scheme, and which AnCO also did by incentivising companies, particularly those in State ownership, to recruit new apprentices.

To prevent the excesses of market failure, I would suggest that a hybrid scheme should be implemented whereby the State would financially support the off-the-job training / education of apprentices up to a certain recruitment cap per job type, and beyond that the industry or individual firms would be responsible.

(e) Other occupations

Again in the 1990’s a pragmatic decision was taken to concentrate on getting the existing 24 apprenticeship craft trades into a standards-based system and not have the focus diverted by
introducing new occupations to an apprenticeship system which itself was undergoing fundamental reform.

There are great strengths in the standards-based system of learning while earning and consequently consideration should be given to extending it to other occupations which would benefit from this multi-layered sandwich approach to learning.

There has been a resurgence of interest in the UK in developing apprenticeships after many years of decline. Despite the UK having many of the same economic problems as Ireland, their National Apprenticeship Service is committed to increasing the number, range and quality of apprenticeships on offer. The figures are impressive. City & Guilds in the UK has brought employers, training centres and apprentices together to create an extra million apprenticeships in the two year period from 2011 to 2013. City & Guild apprenticeships now cover 170 job roles in 25 industries.

A good starting point for the extension of the Irish apprenticeship system to other occupations would be to review the relevance of the 170 City & Guilds apprenticeships to the Irish labour market.

**Conclusion**

The pragmatic decisions made on the introduction of the “standards-based” apprenticeship system in the 1990’s were justified to get the new system up and running and to kill off the “time-served” system once and for all.

These pragmatic decisions regarding duration, certification, phases of training, market driven recruitment, and extension to other occupations, need to be changed.

I believe that there is now a need to reform radically the apprenticeship system, introducing a more flexible system of apprenticeship delivery, including renewed emphasis on work-based training, abandoning the “one size fits all” approach of the past, while maintaining the standards-based approach, reflecting the current and future skill needs of the Irish labour market.

There is also a need to extend the apprenticeship approach, similar to the recent initiatives in the UK, to a wide variety of occupations, and not be confined to the traditional craft trades.

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4th July 2013