Response to Consultation on

Review of Apprenticeship Training in Ireland

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Area 1 Overview

Having considered the Press Release and the Background Issues Paper I present my opinions and proposals for the future. Views expressed here also take account of the recent Forfar/Expert Skills Group report on “Ireland’s Construction Sector – Outlook and Strategic Plan to 2015”, the Forfar/Expert Skills Group report on “Future Skills Requirements of the Manufacturing Sector” and on the Government’s “Action Plan for Jobs” and in particular the commitment regarding a review of apprenticeships:

“Initiate a review of the apprenticeship model, including costs, duration and demand with a view to providing an updated model of training that delivers the necessary skilled workforce to serve the needs of a rapidly changing economy and ensures appropriate balance between supply and demand.”

I am also conscious of the challenging times we are in and the constraints on finances.

My views which are focused on trade apprenticeships are based on firsthand experience of apprenticeship training in Ireland covering the An Ceard Chomhairle day and block release system, the AnCO 1st year off the Job System and the current Standards Based System.

The current FAS system is based on trade apprenticeships for employees in designated occupations in the Construction, Electrical, Motor, Engineering and Printing Sectors. This system of apprenticeship has not been taken up or made attractive for other occupations in the public and private sector. There are other apprenticeship type systems in legal professions, hospitality etc which are not covered in these discussions.

An important and valuable aspect of the current trade apprenticeship system is that the apprentices are recruited, inducted and employed in industry. They are subject to PAYE and PRSI and are integrated into work practices throughout their apprenticeship.

The designated trade apprenticeship system approved by Government and Industry delivers widely recognised high standards. The system has provided tens of thousands of young crafts persons with NFQ/FETAC Level 6 qualifications. Two out of three entering apprenticeships are now at leaving cert level and are more mature when completing apprenticeships at 21/23 years of age. A very high standard of off the job facilities and tuition has been provided by FAS, Institutes of Technology and Further Education Colleges. The apprenticeship system provides phased on and off the job training but has little flexibility or variance across the trades covered. When new occupations were considered they had to fit the same model of off the job delivery shared mainly between FAS and IOTs. In the past, the system did not adapt quickly enough to the changing needs in the Printing, Furniture and Motor Industries. The high cost off the job provision and duplication of simulated practice facilities was not a major problem before but now needs to be addressed as identified in the Background Issues Paper.
It is of concern that 23% (20,121) of the 85,676 apprentices registered between 1993 and 2011, did not achieve the standard or left the trade. This aspect needs further analysis.

The employment based trade apprenticeship system with over 80% of the apprentice time with employers has been advantageous to the state compared with the attainment of many occupational qualifications through full time education.

A serious problem with the current system is the lack of any controls relating to the numbers entering apprenticeships.

I urge caution in considering and reacting to the impact of the unprecedented growth and rapid decline in the Construction Industry in the past decade. Direct employment in Construction peaked at 270,000 in 2007 and is now at 100,000. At the peak direct employment in construction was 14% of total employment (indirect + direct employment was over 20%). It is interesting to note that Spain also reached this unsustainable construction employment level. Construction employment in the UK and across the EU member states was 8% of total employment. Apprenticeship recruitment, without entry controls followed the employment growth pattern and forecasts. This brought about a rapid expansion of off the job facilities/courses provided by the state. Industry adjusted quickly to downsizing after 2007 but high cost over capacity of off the job resources remained for some time.

There are now so many different courses and schemes in place for school leavers and new ones being introduced with little connectivity to career paths and progression. There is a need for clarity, learning pathways and career mapping.

The major Government led changes brought about with the responsibility for training including apprenticeships moving to the Department of Education and Skills, the establishment of SOLAS, Education and Training Boards, and Quality and Qualifications Ireland provides potential for a new dynamic and change management to take acquisition of skills, qualifications, progression, youth employment and further education to viable, workable and successful levels.

**Area 2 Looking Forward**

I support the recent manpower forecasts to 2016 which would bring direct employment in construction up towards 120,000. Manufacturing industry employment is at 206,000 including 45,000 in skilled trade occupations. The Government Plan for an increase of 20,000 new manufacturing jobs by 2016 has been published. The recent Forfas - Expert Group on Future Skills Needs reports indicate that construction and engineering companies will increasingly be targeting work abroad. This will provide further
opportunities for qualified workers and will be important in considering the skills and qualifications required.

It is difficult to forecast the numbers needed in each trade but we must plan now for apprentice intake with completions in 2018 and beyond. Recent manpower studies do not take sufficient account of the availability and mobility of workers from other member states and that employers no longer depend on recruitment of apprentices to meet possible skill shortage needs into the future. With the increasing numbers of school leavers, it is now important to promote and incentivise apprentice recruitment and training.

2.1 Governance

The existing trade apprenticeships should continue to be covered by statutory underpinning.

The new statutory organisations being established will not provide sufficient involvement or influence on trade apprenticeships for employers.

The Skillnets remit could be broadened to rationalise and coordinate pre employment schemes and new non statutory industry apprenticeships /traineeships. Skillnets could also be responsible for producing national occupational standards and career path frameworks.

2.2 Equity

Career guidance experts need to address gender issues relating to future applicants and interest in trade careers.

Early school leavers and those below the minimum educational entry level should have opportunities and access routes to enter certain crafts/trades and non craft occupations.

In construction, a controlled pre apprenticeship entry system through work based placement and assessment would facilitate this.

2.3 Range of Occupations

- Continue with trade apprenticeships at Level 6/7 in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) for the 25 designated occupations in the Construction, Engineering, Electrical, Motor and Printing Sectors.

- Research and if viable introduce other flexible forms of new apprenticeships mainly at NFQ level 3/5.

There are many occupations/skills covered in PLC courses, traineeships, etc with blended learning that would benefit participants and employers if they were rebranded as part of recognised apprenticeships. Clear career paths and routes to employment and
progression to be made available online. This would be in line with recent developments in UK and other jurisdictions.

2.4 Funding

Employers should continue to pay the trade apprentice wages.

Employers and apprentices should continue to be subject to the payment of PAYE and PRSI contribution.

To encourage apprentice recruitment, training and compliance with registration, credits should be considered to off-set the employer and apprentice PAYE/PRSI contributions for the first two years.

Payment of apprentice allowances for off the job training should continue to be paid from the National Training Fund. This fund which commenced as an apprentice training fund replaced the cumbersome industry levy/grant schemes. Employers are contributing 0.7% with PRSI. Given the level of payments and allowances to apprentices and other training provided for employees there is a case to bring a level of equity and consider employee contribution to the NTF and thereby increase the Fund and support for Further Education and Training.

The cost of off the job training should continue to be paid by the State.

Employers and trade unions should consider a review the rates paid to apprentices and introduce increments based on standards achieved rather than time served.

2.5 Recruitment

Recruitment of trade apprentices (employees) to remain with employers.

Other apprenticeships could commence in the education system and be completed in industry

Planned and controlled apprentice intake levels to be agreed with SOLAS/ETBs and employers (CIF, IBEC, SIMI etc)

Establish an improved apprentice online registration, progression mapping, and monitoring system. This could be industry based and linked with other emerging registration systems.

2.6 Curriculum

Continue to review and update course content for off the job phases in agreement with employers and trade unions.
The off the job course durations could have different durations and different mix of technical skills and transversal skills for the various crafts.

Progression to post apprenticeship advanced craft awards at NFQ level 6/7 should be provided in locations to meet sectoral needs e.g. Built Heritage Sector traditional skills courses.

Progression routes should be clear and match job opportunities.

It is important to show that trade qualifications and jobs are recognised as significant achievements and that progression and further development can be part of the trade going forward.

2.7 Assessment

- The NFQ award levels for designated trade apprenticeships should be at level 6 and 7. This reflects the complexities and range of competencies in skilled trade occupations. This also provides for progression after 4 years training post leaving certificate at NFQ level 5.

- The established continuous assessment should continue covering on and off the job training.

- Interim awards, apart from adding to the cost would have the effect of apprentices leaving the regulated system before completion.

- Recognition of Prior Learning and adult entry to craft apprenticeships should be examined further.

2.8 Delivery

- Continue with the proven, established dual system of alternating periods of on and off the job training with some important modifications.

The off the job phases in the current scheme need to be changed to meet the stated aims of this review.

It is my view that off the job block releases of 16 weeks in year one, 8 week in year two and 8 weeks in year 3 is a good balance for construction trades and is achievable given
the high quality of tuition and facilities available, and that the entrants are older with 2 out of 3 having reached leaving cert standard. Some apprenticeships may only require 2 off the job phases. Access to relevant and approved evening courses/studies should become part of the off the job block release system. Together with other improvements and changes this will not reduce the level of competence and standards of those completing the 4 year apprenticeships.

Expand underpinning knowledge modules across groups of trades. Modify simulated practice and increase related trade/sectoral knowledge, applied maths, communications skills and job related computer skills.

Introduce cost effective accessible e learning programmes for trade apprentices. This learning mode is now at an advanced level and can include underpinning knowledge, tutorials, and visual demonstrations of best practice, tutor contact/support and assessment.

- Improve Industry/employer led mentoring and apprentice supervision on the job and introduce an element of independent monitoring.

The duration of Craft Apprenticeships has gone down from 7 years, to 5 years and now 4 years. Even with older better educated entrants there is wide range of skills to be practiced in most trades coupled with stamina building. If the 3 off the job modules can be modified as proposed and completed in three years with appropriate assessment it leaves the 4th year with employers more flexible for completion. To avoid higher cost of releases running into the final year apprentice registration and formal commencement should be programmed to ensure that the releases and any repeats are in the first 3 years.

On the job monitoring and guidance could be linked with the tutors delivering the off the job courses if policy, programming and capacity issues can be resolved.

- Other new apprenticeships could operate effectively with the availability of day release and evening courses.

2.9 Providers

The availability of existing FAS/IOTs/CFEs facilities and experienced teachers/instructors give a number of options for the off the job phases for trade apprenticeships.

The off the job elements of other apprenticeships/traineeships could be delivered using existing FAS Training Centres, Community Training Centres. Advanced Craft courses (post apprenticeship) could be delivered by IOTs,CFCs and industry.

Some apprenticeships with small intake numbers could access off the job courses in other jurisdictions.
2.10 Economy

The impact of these proposals will modernise and meet the future skill needs relating to trade apprenticeships.

Further cost analysis is needed but there is potential to reduce the overall costs without lowering standards.

Area 3 Other Systems in Ireland

The FAS traineeship model which is flexible and cost effective should be developed further in discussions with SOLAS/ETBs and employer groups. Some traineeships would be more attractive and better positioned if referred to as apprenticeships.

The FAS Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) which is not covered in the discussion document is a highly successful lower cost system. This is an industry job based scheme covering elements of RPL, Blended learning, short off the job elements provided by registered providers and awards at NFQ Level 5. This is regulated under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (Construction) Regulations. This is also linked with skill cards which are required on sites. A similar scheme exists in UK/NI and mutual recognition arrangements are in place. This CIF, ICTU, HSA and FAS approved, cost effective model should be considered for other skills/occupations.

The Jewellery apprenticeship provided by the Crafts Council of Ireland and the Craft Butcher apprenticeship with much lower overall cost to the state are examples of other systems which should be supported and considered as models for other occupations.

The Skillnets system providing a flexible, employer led network approach to meeting identified needs has worked well and could be expanded. This rapid response system could embrace short to medium term skill needs without the need for provision in the education system.

It should be noted here that the Forfas, Expert Group on Future Skills Needs 2013 report “Future Skills Requirements of the Manufacturing Sector 2020” calls for career path frameworks and learning pathways but does not call for formalised apprenticeships.

Branding other courses and schemes as part of an “apprenticeship” would bring some clarity and status to targeted occupations. The introduction of new apprenticeships should be examined further and not introduced in a way that would add to the financial burden on the state and employers.
Area 4 Programmes in other jurisdictions

The current review of Apprenticeships in the UK/NI should be monitored closely and comparability considered for mobility and recognition of qualifications. There are 29 million people employed in UK/NI compared with our 1.8 million. Construction employment in the UK/NI is 2 million compared with our 100,000.

Construction and Engineering Apprenticeships in the UK appear to be at lower qualification levels with lower level entry. With the numbers involved in the UK and work practices trades have been broken down to many narrow specialisms. We should maintain our high level trade apprenticeships covering a broad range of skills.

We need to be better informed and closer aligned to research and development in other EU member states. The potential and value of Europass and EuroCert needs further consideration.

Area 5 Broader Integration

Note Area 3 above.

More research engagement with public and private sector employers and HR Specialists needed.

Area 6 Concluding comments

There is a real danger of trying to change everything quickly to address the current harsh economic realities. A two stage process is recommended.

Short Term Apprenticeships Plan- 2013

Agree short term achievable targets relating to industry engagement, manpower projections, new apprentice recruitment controls, registration, promotion of trade apprenticeships, providers of off the job phases, modifications and greater efficiencies of the current 7 phase/4 years apprentice training system.

Provide on line career path frameworks and occupational profiles. A considerable amount of this information already exists but needs updating and visibility.

Develop and pilot new apprenticeships for occupations agree with employers.

Introduce advanced e learning courses for apprentices.

Medium Term Apprenticeship Plan (20-20 Vision)

Carry out an in depth strategic review of Vocational Education, Skills Training and Further Education.
Consider the realignment and modernisation of occupational skill sets in line with changes in workplaces and future job opportunities. Consider changes in apprenticeships and best practice in other countries. Provide for increasing mobility, harmonisation of occupational standards, qualifications and apprentice training systems.

Review/realign industry/education partnerships, governance and provision of skills training.

I look forward to further discussions and I would welcome an opportunity to elaborate on my recommendations following this consultation stage.

_Peter McCabe_

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