National Reforms in Vocational Education and Adult Learning

In Ireland, Further Education and Training is provided to learners who have completed their initial schooling and are not participating in higher education. Provision includes adult literacy and basic education, programmes for early school leavers and the unemployed, vocational training, and national apprenticeship programmes. Awards are made at Levels 1 to 6 of the National Qualifications Framework. Since May 2010, responsibility for vocational training falls within the remit of the Department of Education and Skills. Up to 2013, vocational education was provided in schools and out of school centres coordinated through local Vocational Education Committees (VECs). Training was provided through a range of agencies, mainly through FAS, the National Training and Employment Authority.

Under legislation set out below, the systems were integrated in 2013 under the remit of newly established Education and Training Boards [1], and FAS and the VECs were abolished. As part of this re-organisation, employment offices were integrated into a new service called INTREO under the remit of the Department of Social Protection, which also assumed responsibility for work experience programmes for the unemployed.

The Further Education and Training Act 2013 [2] provided for the dissolution of FAS (the National Training and Employment Authority) and the transfer of its training functions to An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileannna (SOLAS), established in October 2013. In partnership with the 16 new education and training boards, SOLAS is responsible for the integration, co-ordination and funding of the wide range of training and further education programmes around Ireland.

Momentum [3] is an initiative which provides up to 6500 education and training places annually to persons who have been unemployed at least a year. At least 2,000 places are reserved for young people under 25 as part of the Youth Guarantee. Provision is through contracted public and private providers offering vocational education and training in the FET sector at levels 4 to 6 of the National Framework of Qualifications, targeted at sectors of growth in the Irish economy. Courses are free and range in duration from 23 to 45 weeks. They feature integrated education and training, a work experience placement and follow-up supports. Occupations covered include construction, ICT, transport, distribution and logistics, tourism, financial services, and manufacturing.

Momentum is administered by SOLAS and funded by the Department of Education & Skills through the Labour Market Education & Training Fund (LMETF). Under the FET Services Plan for 2016, the number of participants on Momentum was expected to decrease to just under 800 in 2016, as increased participation in new apprenticeships and traineeships takes hold. There is no new intake so far to the scheme.

**National Training Fund**

The National Training Fund (NTF) was established by the National Training Fund Act, 2000, as a dedicated fund to support the training of those in employment, and those seeking employment. The Act also provides for the funding of research to provide information on existing and likely future skills requirements of the economy.

The creation of the fund was announced in Budget 2000 by the then Minister for Finance to raise the skills of those in employment, to give jobseekers relevant skills and to facilitate lifelong learning. The NTF replaced the Apprenticeship Levy which was set up under The Industrial Training (Apprenticeship Levy) Act 1994. In May 2010, responsibility for the NTF was transferred from the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Innovation to the Minister for Education and Skills.

**Post-Leaving Certificate Programme Evaluation**

With origins in the late 1970s, PLC courses offer a combination of general studies, vocational studies and work experience opportunities, catering for young people who have completed their Leaving Certificate, adults returning to education and unemployed individuals wishing to upskill. It takes place usually on a full-time basis over one academic year, leading to major awards at NFQ levels 5 and 6. It is the largest full-time FET programme and is provided in colleges of further education across all 16 ETB areas. The programme is primarily delivered in the ETB sector with a smaller number of places in the voluntary, community and comprehensive sectors.

Resources are based on an overall national allocation of 32,000 places, although some colleges enrol beyond their allocation without attracting additional resources. Overall annual expenditure on the PLC programme is circa €160 million, with the bulk of these resources allocated by the Department of Education and Skills through the post-primary allocation model.

**Apprenticeships**

Recognising that apprenticeships were one of the great casualties of the recession - registrations fell by 80% over the period - the Minister is attempting to not only reverse this trend and rebuild traditional pathways but to significantly expand apprenticeships into new industries with a commitment to doubling the number of apprenticeships and traineeships by 2020.

Apprenticeship is a programme of structured education and training which formally combines and alternates learning in the workplace with learning in an education and training centre. An apprenticeship prepares participants for a specific occupation and leads to a qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications. There was a total of 4,843 new apprenticeship registrations in 2017 bringing the population to 12,849 by year end. Currently, over 5,000 employers use the apprenticeship system as a talent pipeline in Ireland.

Building on the Programme for Government, the Action Plan for Education contains a commitment to enrol 31,000 people on apprenticeship programmes in the period 2016-2020 which represents a near doubling on current activity. The achievement of these ambitious targets will require commitment from a number of stakeholders and strong employer demand.

The Plan sets out a clear pathway for developing new apprenticeships, a development timeline of 12-15 months, clear annual targets for apprenticeship registrations as well as targets for the development of new programmes.
In June 2019 it was announced that capital funding of more than €7.5 million was being allocated for nine Institutes of Technology and the Technological University (TU) Dublin.

The funding forms part of the Government’s commitment, under Project Ireland 2040, to increase investment in higher and further education and training and to the modernisation of equipment available for craft apprenticeship provision.

The announcement brings the total capital funding allocated to support the modernising of craft apprenticeship programmes in the sector since 2017 to more than €23 million.

This funding will support the roll-out of new syllabi for apprenticeships in Plumbing, Carpentry, Electrical, Brickwork, Motor Painting and Decorating, Vehicle Body Repair, Fitting, Toolmaking and Wood Manufacturing and Finishing.

It will enable Institutes of Technology and TU Dublin to provide apprentices with training in the most up to date techniques, including sustainable and renewable technologies such as solar and wind energy and energy efficient construction methods and materials.

6,500 apprentices are expected to undertake training in an Institute of Technology or TU Dublin in 2019.

2018

National Training Fund

Following a consultation process, the Government, as part of Budget 2018, decided to raise the rate of the National Training Fund (NTF) levy by 0.1% in 2018 to 0.8% and by a further 0.1% in both 2019 and 2020.

This measure allows for additional expenditure of €47.5 million from the NTF in 2018 under the EU fiscal rules.

Following issues raised by employers during a consultation process with them a number of key reforms to the NTF are being introduced to make it more responsive to employer needs and to give employers a greater say in informing priorities for the Fund.

This increase in the NTF levy takes account of the benefit to employers of having access to skilled graduates across further education and training and higher education to meet their identified skills needs as well as being able to access training for their current employees.

The increase is being accompanied by a programme of reforms in how the NTF is managed, evaluated and reported on. Some of the key reforms include:

- A Comprehensive Review of the NTF;
- Additional and refocused expenditure on programmes relevant to employers;
- An NTF more aligned with employer needs;
- A greater say for employers, more transparency and stronger evaluation;
A new strategic dialogue model, incorporating strategic performance agreements clearly aligning local/regional and national targets, will be put in place in FET from 2018.

The rate of the National Training Fund levy increased by 0.1% in 2018 to 0.8% and will provide €47.5 million of additional investment in the Higher Education and Further Education sectors. The rate will increase to 0.9% in 2019 and to 1.0 in 2020 subject to implementation of necessary reforms to ensure that employers have a greater role in determining the priorities and the strategic direction of the fund. The report shows how over €415 million is being invested in programmes in 2018 which meet the skill need of the economy, support unemployed people in their journey back to work and assist those in employment to acquire new skills. This includes the expansion of the apprenticeship and traineeship schemes, additional investment in Springboard and additional support to increase skills for those in employment through Skillnet Ireland.

In 2018, the National Training Fund will:

- Include for the first time, higher education provision most closely aligned with the needs of the economy;

- Support the expansion of apprenticeships by over 6,000 new registrations and 10 new apprenticeship schemes in key economic areas including indigenous sectors such as retail and hospitality;

- Support 3,900 traineeship places;

- Introduce new pilot programmes aimed at those already in employment for upskilling and reskilling;

- Support an additional 1,000 places on Springboard courses; and

- Provide an additional €3.5 million for Skillnets allowing people in work to upskill.

The 2018 NTF allocations represent a major shift in the focus of expenditure from the Fund. Programmes will be tightly focused on the skills and competencies needed across higher education, further education and training and other funding recipients. €415.4 million will be invested through the Fund in 2018 to support skills (up by €49m since 2017), including:

- €182.5 million for Education & Training Board programmes focused on training people for employment;

- €122 million for apprenticeships;

- €37 million for Labour Market focused Higher Education;
• €30.4 million for Springboard courses;

• €21.7 million supporting Skillnet Ireland in meeting skills gaps in the economy.

This is part of the wider series of reforms announced as part of Budget 2018 responding to issues raised by employers during a consultation process with them to make it more responsive to employer needs, to increase transparency on the use of the Fund, and to give employers a greater say in informing priorities for the Fund.

The key reforms include:

• A comprehensive Review of the NTF;

• Additional and refocused expenditure on programmes relevant to employers;

• An NTF more aligned with employer needs;

• A greater say for employers, more transparency and stronger evaluation;

• A new approach to ensuring further education and training are aligned to local and regional needs through skills audits and performance agreements.

The comprehensive review of the National Training Fund is underway which is expected to be completed shortly will inform the 2019 budgetary process. The report [5] can be accessed on the Department for Education & Skills website at the following link:

Post-Leaving Certificate Programme Evaluation

In January 2018, an independent evaluation of the Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) programme was published.

The PLC programme is the largest of the full time further education and training programmes with over 30,000 places and an investment of over €160 million each year.

The report, which was carried out by The Economic and Social Research Institute [6], confirms the positive role played by PLC provision. On average PLC learners are 16% more likely to be in employment than if they had just entered the labour market straight after the Leaving Certificate.

The report also highlights a number of challenges for policy development in the PLC sector indicating a need for greater responsiveness of job-specific PLC courses to changing labour market conditions in terms of the types of courses offered and closer links with employers, as well as enhanced guidance for learners and extra training for teaching staff.

The findings from the evaluation have been considered, and the Minister and SOLAS have committed to implementing over 40 recommendations in response, including:
• Allocating 500 PLC places nationally to new ‘pre-apprenticeship’ courses. These will give those going on to do apprenticeships a strong foundation and knowledge base and will give employers further confidence in the apprentices joining their company.

• Ensuring that in future all courses will lead to Full/Major awards at NFQ Level 5 or NFQ Level 6 or equivalent.

• Providing more flexibility for students. Providers are to be required to offer PLC outside of the full-time mode of delivery and to provide more flexibility e.g. distance, blended and on-line modes of delivery to be available to learners.

• More co-ordination at a local level on provision, led by ETBs.

Employer engagement to become mandatory for new course proposals for job-specific/sector specific provision.

**Apprenticeships**

The Minister for Education and Skills announced capital funding of €8 million for 10 Institutes of Technology in June 2018. This Government is committed to more than doubling the number of new apprentices registered to 9,000 by 2020 and expanding further into new areas. Budget 2018 allocated €122m for apprenticeship training, an increase of almost 24% on the previous year. This will allow the Government to deliver 10 more apprenticeship programmes and over 6,000 more apprenticeship registrations in 2018.

The funding announced will enable the Institutes of Technology to purchase equipment and carry out enabling works for the delivery of new syllabi in 13 existing apprenticeship trades from 2018, in the following areas –

• Mechanical, Automation, and Maintenance Fitting (MAMF);

• Industrial Installation;

• Sheet Metalwork;

• Aircraft Maintenance;

• Vehicle Body Repairs;

• Wood Manufacturing and Fitting;

• Brickwork;
Painting and Decorating;

Agricultural Mechanisation;

Toolmaking;

Electronic Security Systems;

Electrical Instrumentation & Instrumentation;

Electrical.

This investment will support an estimated 2,300 additional apprentices that will commence in one of these programmes in 2018 once the works are complete.

2017

The Further Education Sector moved towards the development of an inputs/outcomes focused funding model for all providers supported by the gradual rollout of a Funding Allocation Request and Reporting system (FARR) and a Programme and Learner Support (PLSS) system. 2017 was the third year of the FARR cycle. This new system, when fully implemented, will record student retention, completion and accreditation data as well as progression to employment or further learning.

A Memorandum of Understanding was agreed between Solas and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), under which the two organisations agreed to consult each other on policy developments, exchange relevant data, promote a coordinated approach to learner access, transfer and progression, data collection and work in partnership to enhance staff development.

In March 2017, the Ministers for Jobs Enterprise and Innovation and Public Expenditure and Reform launched a public consultation process on an Exchequer/Employer Investment Mechanism for future funding of further and higher education and training. The paper outlines the major investments to date in providing skills for the labour market and the ongoing reforms under way in both sectors. It seeks views on a proposal to increase the National Training Fund levy on employers from 0.7% of payroll at present, to 1% phased over a three year period. The proposal takes on board the need to put funding of the FE and HE sectors on a more sustainable footing through an increased employer contribution, allied with a greater role for employers in identifying and responding to skill needs. Responses to the consultation have been requested by April 2017. A greater contribution from employers had been proposed in Investing in National Ambition: A Strategy for Funding Higher Education [7] published in July 2016. The report is being examined by the Oireachtas (Parliament) and an expert working group has been established to develop a new higher education funding allocation model.

A new Action Plan for Jobs 2017 [8] was published in February 2017. This builds on the education and training measures announced in previous plans, and sets out a whole of Government approach to dealing with the challenges of Brexit, potential developments in international tax policy and waning support internationally for free trade. Expanding apprenticeships and traineeships, meeting skill needs in ICT, bio-pharma, life sciences and medical technology, implementing the new performance
framework in higher education, a foreign language strategy in education and a strengthening of science, mathematics, engineering and technology are all seen as important.

Driving export diversification and supporting firms affected by Brexit, investment in research, development and innovation, and a strengthened focus on clusters in the Agri-food and marine, tourism, retail, design, international financial services, construction and housing sectors form part of the approach.

**Apprenticeships**

Nearly €8 million is being invested to support the modernisation of the syllabi for another 13 apprenticeship programmes in Institutes of Technology. The further roll out of new apprenticeship syllabi, and this additional funding, will enable the institutions to ensure that apprentices are getting the most up-to-date and industry relevant programmes available.

An additional €20m was provided in 2017 to fund the expansion of apprenticeships and traineeships. An *Action Plan to Expand Apprenticeships and Traineeships 2016-2020* [9] was published in January 2017. This envisaged 15 apprenticeships in new areas with an intake of 800 in 2017, and 4 new or relaunched traineeships with an intake of 200. The target is to provide 50,000 apprenticeships and traineeships over the period 2016-2020.

From the call for proposals for apprenticeships issued in 2014, 25 were selected for implementation. Two of these (Insurance Practice and Industrial Electrical Engineering) began in September and November 2016 respectively. The two new programmes to date are offered at Ordinary and Higher Bachelor’s Degree level respectively. A further programme in Polymer Processing Technology (level 7- Ordinary Bachelor Degree) began in 2017. The Plan envisages that:

- Investment in capacity building in identifying training needs, curriculum design, integrated delivery of on and off the job training, quality assurance and enterprise engagement will be enhanced;

- Options to expand apprenticeships in the public sector will be explored;

- Category 2 and 3 proposals in the 2014 Call will move to the development phase, and a fresh call for proposals will be issued mid-year;

- A development to roll-out timeline will be implemented of 8-12 months for traineeships, and 12-15 months for apprenticeships.