

Vocational Education and Training in Ireland

Strengths, Challenges and Recommendations

STRENGTHS

The Irish VET system has a number of strengths:

- There is a good range of provision of different types of VET at post-secondary level, targeted at a wide range of different client groups, including those in and out of work and with second chance opportunities.
- The national qualifications framework is comprehensive, integrating both vocational and general qualifications and includes a strong commitment to the avoidance of dead-ends and pathways of progression.
- Collaboration with social partners is well-established and takes place at most relevant levels.
- The apprenticeship system is well-structured with a systematic blend of on and off-the-job elements.
- At high level there is good co-operation between the two lead departments, with little sense of rivalry. The National Skills Strategy¹ provides for common objectives.
- There are some innovative ways of engaging employers in a bottom-up approach to provision, such as Skillnets – an initiative widely supported by employers.

CHALLENGES

- The current economic crisis is making intense demands on the system to provide education and training for a sharply increasing number of people and poses serious challenges in particular to the apprenticeship system.
- Apprenticeships are limited to a narrow set of occupations. Workplace training is insufficiently used in many VET programmes.
- Many of those looking after VET students, in particular those in companies, lack pedagogical training.
- Weak literacy and numeracy are serious problems among many learners but problems are often not identified in time or adequately addressed.
- FÁS (Foras Áiseanna Saothair), the Irish National Training and Employment Authority, is a large body with multiple missions. Evaluations and data to assess its efficiency and effectiveness are lacking.
- Data on labour market outcomes are fragmented and research on VET is scarce. The wide range of VET programmes has not been systematically evaluated.
- Career guidance services are fragmented and weakly underpinned by information on labour market opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Review the apprenticeship system to improve its efficiency and fairness in addressing the skills needs of the labour market. Make extensive use of workplace training in all VET programmes building on the existing types of provision and the experience with apprenticeship.
2. Respond to the crisis, both modifying and reinforcing existing measures.
 - Offer differentiated support to redundant apprentices, depending on their occupation and how far they have already progressed in their apprenticeship.

1. www.skillsstrategy.ie

- Review, immediately, the Employer Based Redundant Apprentice Rotation Scheme with a view to shifting the resources involved to more cost-effective across-the-board measures in support of redundant apprentices.
 - Consider measures to retain young people in education and training where the benefits outweigh the costs.
 - Carefully target education and training programmes for adult learners at their particular skills needs as well as the needs of the labour market.
3. Conduct a review of FÁS training services to enhance mechanisms for accountability and quality improvement. This would involve an improvement in the quality of data and evaluation, and consultation with employers.
 4. Systematically identify the literacy and numeracy problems of those who come into contact with training services and provide basic skills support to those in need.
 5. As a means of enhancing the competences of the VET workforce ensure that all teachers, trainers and instructors have some pedagogical training, and as a longer term goal offer pedagogical training to supervisors of VET students (e.g. apprentices, trainees) in companies. Encourage convergence in the qualification requirements for teaching in different sectors of the VET system.
 6. Create an instrument to track progression through the education and training system, undertake routine evaluation of programmes and pursue economic analysis such as cost-benefit studies of apprenticeships. Encourage more research on VET. Create a comprehensive website with career guidance information.

FURTHER READING

Vocational education and training (VET) has a key economic function in up-skilling and integrating young people into the labour market and in providing high quality technical skills. But in recent decades, VET has been a neglected part of initial education: education policy research and reform have tended to focus primarily on school and tertiary education.

The OECD's policy review of vocational education and training (VET), *Learning for Jobs*, comprises a programme of analytical work and individual country reviews and is designed to help countries make their VET systems more responsive to labour market needs.

[Learning for Jobs, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training Policies, Ireland](#) (OECD, 2010) was released in February 2010 and assesses the main challenges faced by the VET system and presents an interconnected package of six policy recommendations. For each recommendation, the report describes the challenge, the recommendation itself, supporting arguments, and issues of implementation.

Further information about the policy review and reports on VET systems in other countries is available on the OECD website www.oecd.org/edu/learningforjobs