The Apprenticeship Council’s recent call for proposals from consortia of industry and education and training providers to develop new apprenticeships in areas outside the current 27 trades could have profound implications for the future of vocational education in Ireland. While it may appear a very specific item on a huge Further Education and Training (FET) reform agenda, it could be a catalyst to transform some of the policy rhetoric that surrounds business-education engagement into reality.

This claim may not be as exaggerated as it first appears. Nobody expects large numbers of new apprenticeships to appear suddenly. There is a significant amount of technical work to be undertaken in defining occupational and education standards. But the new model offers an opportunity for business and education to collaborate in expanding apprenticeship into new sectors of the economy and across a range of qualification levels.

This type of collaboration has not been embedded to date. Most recently, the Global Talent Competitiveness Index1, published ahead of the World Economic Forum in Davos, identified our lack of investment in apprenticeships and other forms of ‘on-the-job’ training as a barrier to labour flexibility.

The criticism is not new and this is a subject on which there is no shortage of over-simplistic analysis. This usually includes a reference to the well-established dual systems of countries such as Austria, Denmark and Germany. However, much of the commentary tends to ignore the fact that Ireland cannot simply adopt systems that have been built over generations, upon very different economies, labour markets and institutional arrangements. We have much to learn from these systems. But we need structures that reflect the realities of Ireland’s institutional structures and economic requirements.

The limitations of the current model are already well documented:
- Designated apprenticeship trades are limited to a small number of occupations in the construction, engineering, electrical and print sectors. These occupations do not reflect the broader skill needs of the Irish economy.
- A fixed legislative structure makes it difficult for the apprenticeship system to adapt to economic and technological developments.
- The system cannot react to sudden or rapidly shifting economic cycles.
- Fixed duration (four years in most cases) and fixed awards regardless of the learning outcome creates inefficiencies.
- There is insufficient balance within the curriculum of literacy, numeracy and ICT, along with other transferable skills, which are not specific to the particular trade.
- Costs are higher than apprenticeship systems in other countries.
- Female participation is negligible.
- Irish society tends to judge education attainment in terms of leaving certificate points and higher education entry to the detriment of vocational education.

Following the recommendation of the Apprenticeship Review Group2 the Minister for Education and Skills launched a new Apprenticeship Council, which could provide a structure to address some of these challenges. Its current priority is to identify the level of interest from industry sectors in developing new apprenticeships and the current call is part of this process.

The Apprenticeship Council will then examine and analyse the proposals arising from the call. Proposals received will be evaluated against criteria that will include a ‘sustainability test’. This will require proposers to set out:
- The numbers to be trained.
- The extent to which proposers are representative of the industry.
- The continuing demand for apprenticeships into the future.
- The occupational, academic and/or successive apprenticeship progression opportunities for apprentices.

“ETBs should be actively seeking out these industry groups, identifying opportunities and collaborating on the development of new (apprenticeship) programmes.”

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Evidence of labour market needs and future strategic economic priorities, supported by evidence-based studies
The capacity to support quality training facilities, participation in training of trainers, capacity to provide required range of experience, coordination with other employers, etc.
The willingness of employers to recruit and meet the relevant costs associated with Apprenticeships
A willingness of employers and education and training providers to engage collaboratively in development and delivery of apprenticeships
A marketing plan to promote apprenticeships

In addition, proposers will be asked to outline the format and structure of the programme proposed, the main occupational needs to be addressed, the depth and transferability of the skills to be acquired and the entry levels proposed. A key requirement in the submission will be to set out the opportunities for learners to progress to the next occupation and learning level.

SUCCESS FACTORS
But will all this work? This programme will succeed, but only if a number of factors are in place.

BUSINESS MUST ENGAGE WITH THE NEW MODEL:
It is self-evident that apprenticeships cannot exist without employers. However, we also need to accept that employers will only engage if they have a genuine skills requirement based on business demand. Given that an economic recovery is beginning to take hold, the timing of the call could be propitious. The launch of the two-year ‘earn-as-you learn’ Associate ICT Professional programme3 (featured later in this section), which is supported by almost 30 of the top technology companies in the State, suggests new thinking in some sectors.

FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION MUST WORK TOGETHER:
Ireland’s education system tends to work in silos and an effective rollout of the new model will depend on further and higher education working together in a way that has not happened to date. No one sector can continue to ‘own’ apprenticeships. Apprenticeship should offer an effective pathway for highly skilled work, including professional and senior job roles. Therefore, higher education should be an integral component of any future apprenticeship model. For this to happen, access, transfer and progression in both education attainment and careers must be at the centre of its architecture.

MINIMAL BUREAUCRACY:
Governance of an industry-led apprenticeship system poses a particular challenge. The UK addressed this through the establishment of Sector Skills Councils (SSC), employer-led state-sponsored networks that contribute to the development of national occupation standards and the design/approval of apprenticeship frameworks. Some SSCs work effectively and deliver good outcomes for employers and apprentices. But the recent Richards Review warned that ‘the system is far too complex and in practice, SSCs and awarding organisations – rather than employers themselves – were the ones in the driving seat …for many employers the process of defining an apprenticeship is too far removed from them, too opaque and too much in the hands of skills’ professionals rather than real employers.’ Ireland must avoid this.

ADEQUATE FINANCIAL SUPPORT FROM GOVERNMENT:
Employers already pay a levy of 0.7% of payroll costs into the National Training Fund. This is capable of funding the operation of an apprenticeship scheme in full, but it is diverted to other schemes. The fund generates in the order of 350m per annum, of which approximately 52m is deployed to meet apprenticeship costs, and the remainder is allocated to other programmes. There is a strong case for re-focusing the role of the fund more explicitly towards apprenticeship programmes.

A SPECIFIC STRATEGY FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH SMES:
Encouraging small firms to engage with apprenticeships will pose particular challenges. They tend to have limited time and resources and, however misplaced, will have particular concerns around staff that they have developed moving on. Yet, given the size of this sector (over 45% of total private sector employment is in companies with less than 50 staff), SMEs must be seen as a priority. A specific strategy to demonstrate the value of apprenticeships to small businesses is needed.

EMPLOYMENT COSTS MUST BE CONTROLLED:
The background issues paper for the Apprenticeship Review demonstrated that Irish apprenticeship costs per participant are very high when compared to equivalent costs in most other EU countries and beyond. The new model must not be undermined by direct costs that would prove to be a disincentive to potential employers. The Apprenticeship Review Group was unambiguous on this point, stating: ‘The rate of payment to be made to apprentices in new occupational areas should be determined by individual employers, and the Apprenticeship Council should have no role in this.’ The apprenticeships should be judged by quality of training, and their potential to equip apprentices with the skills to take up sustainable and high-quality employment.
NEW APPRENTICESHIPS MUST BE DEFINED BY THEIR QUALITY:
Apprenticeship was defined by the Apprenticeship Review Group as a programme of structured education and training which formally combines and alternates learning in the work place with learning in an education or training lasting at least two years. Its completion prepares the participant for a specific occupation and leads to an NFQ award. Therefore the new apprenticeships must be differentiated from other work-based learning programmes by the duration and depth of learning.

AN APPRENTICESHIP MARKETING CAMPAIGN IS REQUIRED:
It is widely acknowledged that apprenticeships and FET tend not to share parity of esteem with traditional academic education routes amongst young people, their parents, employers or, indeed, Irish society. This attitude has been reinforced by government policy. Ultimately, this attitude will challenge the new apprenticeships delivering education and employment opportunities which are equal to, or better than, those provided by traditional academic routes. But initially branding and marketing are important if learners and employers are to engage in the new programmes, and if parents, education and training providers and guidance staff are to be convinced of the merits of the new approach.

If all of these factors are effectively in place, the new apprenticeships will work. Ongoing structural change in the Irish economy requires a flexible apprenticeship system where the terms of the apprenticeship depends on the needs of the specific sector. The governance framework and operational arrangements encompassed within the Apprenticeship Council acknowledge this. They are designed to include real possibilities to create new apprenticeships rapidly, and to react to emerging needs and target resources and participants towards sectors with high potential for growth.

The Apprenticeship Council will assess submissions for viability and sustainability and submit proposals to the Minister on what new apprenticeships have development potential. The Council’s assessment process may include dialogue with individual proposers or groups of proposers in advance of reporting to the Minister. This may include investigating the potential for different proposals to be merged or developed to deliver the greatest sectoral or occupational coverage.

The Apprenticeship Council will also consider the overall cost effectiveness of progressing proposals. Education and training providers (at further and higher education level) are being asked to consider the potential of converting existing provision to provide the off-the-job elements of new apprenticeships.

There are a wide range of Irish business and professional organisations who are already considering potential apprenticeships occupations with a view to engaging with the Apprenticeship Council. They will be looking for education partners.

Further information and application forms are available at: www.apprenticeshipcouncil.ie

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