

Part 4

Higher Education, Lifelong Learning and Social Inclusion

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INTERACTIONS BETWEEN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING AND THE LABOUR MARKET IN EUROPE: A CASE STUDY OF IRELAND'S FORMALISED FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

Abstract

The work reported in this paper is part of a large European study commissioned by the Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) which explores interactions between the labour market and vocational education and training as well as up-dates the content Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET) provision in 15 European countries in the study. This paper presents the interactions between VET and the labour market in the Republic of Ireland. The paper examines the nature of VET system, the feedback mechanisms and the characterisation of the feedback loops in Ireland's VET system. The paper concludes with a highlight of the significant features of the interactions between VET and the labour market.

Keywords: VET, Labour market, feedback mechanisms, feedback loops, Europe

The nature of Ireland VET system

Ireland operates a coordinated vocational education and training system in the context of coordinated market economy. The key elements of the coordination are the national government and the social partners – such as the Irish Business and Employers Confederation, the Construction Industry Confederation and the trade unions, who are members of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. Parties in this partnership work together to shape the country's social and economic developments in particular issues relating to the labour market and education and training. The partnership agreements are encapsulated in a rolling national programme for economic and social developments. The system of national partnership is essential for the realisation of the objectives of the National Reform Programme (NRP) that sets out a three yearly plan on how the government aims to meet the European Commission's Employment Guidelines as set out in the Lisbon Strategy. The current NRP articulates how Ireland intends to achieve a sustainable high level of employment, adequate supply of labour to meet the demand of the economy, as well as the national efforts to improve education and training. Although, a system of social partnership has been in place since 1987, the current partnership agreement,

which runs from 2006-2016 faces a challenging time more so since December 2009 when the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) decided to withdraw from the agreement in the face of the most severe economic recession in Irish modern history. IBEC's decision has raised questions about the employers' commitment to skills acquisition as a driver of competitiveness and equity. The population of Ireland is small and as such, the country has no strong regional VET authority; but there is a strong representation of the state at the local and city levels through the 33 vocational education committees (VECs). VECs are statutory local education authorities with responsibility for among other things vocational educational training and the implementation of VET programmes. FAS, the National Training and Employment Authority, deliver initial VET locally through 23 VEC training centres across the country. The social partners are represented within the structure of the national partnership system. However, the role of the social partners in vocational training is narrow and limited, in most cases, to industrial training, hotel and hospitality training, HR and a few others.

Overview of VET system and pathways

There is no single 'one-stop' VET policy in Ireland as different policy aspects fall under different ministries (Ogunleye, 2011). The Department of Education and Science has responsibility for school-based vocational education while the labour market authorities, led by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, have responsibility for vocational training system. As a result, figures for VET participation are not easily delineated. VET participation at lower secondary level are limited to Youthreach programme delivered in vocational education centres and Young Traveller Programme delivered in Travellers training centres. VET participation by youngsters in upper secondary level education represents a third of the total students. The age of participants in upper secondary education ranges from 16 to 18 years. The apprenticeship system is 100% vocational and managed by FAS, the National Training and Employment Authority, with the support of the government, employers and the trade unions under the umbrella of the National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee. Minimum age for participation is 16 years.

VET in Ireland is an open system because it interacts with other pathways in the education system. At lower secondary level, the main IVET programme relates to: Youthreach, which provides integrated education, training and work experience for youngsters, aged 16 to 21 who have left school early without qualifications or vocational training. The Youthreach programmes are managed locally by VECs and regionally by FAS. Successful completion leads to progression onto the Junior Certificate or LCAP. At upper secondary level: There is a two-year school based full-time course for students on the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme. LCVP is 100% school-based; LCVP provides students with qualifications for employment and for pursuing further studies including third level education and self employment (Refnet, 2009). There is also a two-year school based full-time course for students on the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (LCAP). LCAP is considered more vocationally oriented than LCVP as it integrates learning from a variety of contexts – including practical and non-practical modules. Many secondary level schools also offer Post-Leaving Certificate VET courses for school leavers who might want to upgrade their qualifications or further their studies. PLC is

designed to enhance participants' employability (Government of Ireland, 2011). PLC is one of the largest full-time further education programmes in Ireland offering over 1000 courses in 60 disciplines, delivering in 213 centres in schools and colleges (OECD, 2010).

Overview of formalised feedback mechanisms

At the level of lower and upper secondary vocational education, Minister for Education and Skills determines the curriculum on the advice of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), a statutory body. However, the curriculum for each apprenticeship programme has to be agreed with the requisite industry. The apprenticeship scheme is outside the remit of NCCA. The *Economic and Social Research Institute* and FAS, the *National Training and Employment Authority*, are leaders in Ireland in forecasting labour market skills demand and anticipation. The *Expert Group on Future Skills Needs* (EGFSN) advises the Government on current and future skills needs of the economy. EGFSN ensures that labour market needs for skilled workers are anticipated and met (Forfas, 2012). The Expert Group is made up of FAS' Skills and Labour Market Unit (SLMU), and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). *The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland* (NQAI) has responsibility for developing and maintaining qualification standards covering for all awards from initial schooling to further education and training through the National Framework of Qualifications. NQAI is an agency of the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Innovation. NQAI decision-making organ is composed of 9 members including representatives of the government, Irish Business and Employers Confederation, Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Higher Education and Training Awards Council, and Further education and Training Awards Council. *33 Vocational Educational Committees* – the statutory local authorities that run vocational schools/centres in 27 counties and in urban areas across the country; VECs have administrative responsibility over publicly-funded VET programmes/courses including the Youthreach programmes. The Youthreach programme is operated regionally by FAS. Schools have the responsibility for students' learning arrangement – they have responsibility for offering and delivering IVET courses/programmes.

Characterisations of formal feedback loop

Assessing Demand

The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and FAS, the National Training and Employment Authority, are leaders in Ireland in forecasting labour market skills demand and anticipation. The forecast provides an indication of how the occupational composition of the workforce would change via-a-vis a change in the performance of global and domestic economy over a medium term (Behan & Shally, 2010). The forecast identify likely developments in the labour market at occupational level, point to the likely change in skills requirements of the economy over a medium term, then use the output to inform policies on education and training and the labour market. The forecasting method used is based on a specially designed ESRI macro-economic model of 10 economic sectors. These sectoral economic

forecasts are then disaggregated into ESRI/FAS sectors which are then used as a basis for projecting 20 more detailed employment sub sectors. The latter process is repeated and used to make employment forecast in 43 occupations. The third layer of the forecast relates to occupational employment forecast by education level and occupational employment forecast by gender. A periodic report *Manpower forecasting* is published jointly by ESRI and FAS. The primary purpose of the *Manpower forecasting series* is to make detailed forecasts for the sectoral and occupational structure of the Irish labour market over the medium term, to inform education and training, the labour market and career guidance advisor.

Occupational standards

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) which advises the Government on current and future skills needs of the economy, make use of the research on the labour market needs for skilled workers published jointly by FAS, the National Training and Employment Authority, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). The government, through the State Examinations Commission (SEC), ensures that research on skills requirements feed into IVET curriculum delivery and assessment at upper secondary school programmes such as LCAP and LCAP. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) carries out a rolling review of the syllabi for Leaving Certificate subjects and new subjects including vocational subjects are being added to meet learners' need.

National qualification structure feedback loop

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) operates a single structure mechanism for recognising – including co-ordinating and comparing – all education and training awards. The framework facilitates progression and mobility for all learners. The NFQ is also a system of ten levels, covering all awards – from compulsory schooling, further training to university education up to doctorate degrees: For example, the State develops school curricula which forms the basis of second level secondary school qualifications such as LCVP and LCAP; and representatives of the social partners and FAS input into/determine other second level qualifications awarded to youngsters who have successfully completed the apprenticeship scheme.

Curriculum development

The State through the Minister for Education and Skills centrally determines school curriculum. In practice the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment advises the Minister on matters relating to curriculum development. Although the national curriculum sets out what is to be taught and how the particular subject is to be taught and assessed, each school adds its own particular character to it. For example, a school can adapt the curriculum to suite its own needs and could also determine the learning materials or text books to be used for learning. At upper secondary level, learners are prepared for LCP, LCVP and LCAP. Although the curriculum is set nationally, any school that intends to participate in LCVP will be required to state its reasons for wanting to participate in the programme, as well as what the programme aims, objectives and outcomes would be. Representatives of

the social partners and government (through FAS) determine and approve curricula for those on apprentices.

Variations of feedback mechanisms at the regional/local level

The National Training and Employment Authority, FAS' Employment Services operate in all the 8 regions of the country through a regional and local network of 66 offices and 20 training centres across Ireland. The Employment Services match information on demand and supply in the labour market at occupational, local and regional levels through its recruitment service to jobseekers and employers and also through its support and advisory service for industry and community enterprises providing information on skills and competences on new entrants into the labour market. Employers have a legal obligation to report vacancies as they arise to the Employment Services which then match jobseekers to reported vacancies.

The government has responded to the current economic recession in a number of ways including the use of EGFSN and FAS facilities – initiatives based on occupational needs are common in certain regions and local areas. For example, in terms of unemployment, the current recession has affected craftspeople and manual workers the most – currently more than 25% of the people in this sector are unemployed, compared with less than 5% for professional occupation (Refnet, 2010). FAS has worked with large employers to minimise the impact of redundancies on this category of workers (the agency has agreements with a number of large companies in the sector to increase the number of the apprentices). Additional training and employment opportunities were developed to ensure that those who have been made redundant are re-skilled to facilitate their return to the labour market. FAS has also reviewed its training requirements to ensure that its provision respond adequately to the need of the labour market during recession. Those recently made redundant were also offered enhanced Technical Employment Support Grant (TESG) to speed up their re-entry into the labour market. The grant is a short term financial assistance designed to help with job search but could also be used for short term training. FESG is also targeted at those unemployed people facing acute difficulties in entering or re-entering the labour market. To help people with low skills that were recently made redundant back into work, the government has increased places on the FAS evening courses.

Interaction of feedback mechanisms with institutional settings

The National Partnership Agreements which involves the government and social partners also applied regionally and locally. The current agreement – *Towards 2016* – which was drawn up in 2009 applies to local and regional industrial and occupational situations. Both the government and the social partners agreed on social and economic developments including policies on pay, education and training. They also agreed on the need to raise the level of workplace learning as a response to the current economic recession in Ireland. The National Training Fund (NTF) provides another forum for government and social partners through which VET provision in Ireland is shaped. The NTF forum ensures that the social partners – employers and trade unions – are consulted on fund allocations for skills training particularly for the employed. Members of the trade unions as do members of the

Irish Business and Employers Confederation and Irish Small and Medium-sized Enterprises and Construction Industry Federation across the country receive financial incentives to engage in training courses and programme to improve their skills and competences. This is in addition to training that these organisations provided to their members. Irish Congress of Trade Unions, for instance, works with the adult education provider, People's College, to offer non job-related training – including basic education and personal development – to members. The congress also operates a network of training centres specifically for unemployed workers seeking to re-train or to up-grade their skills.

Conclusion

Ireland faces a most severe economic recession in a generation. Part of the Government response, as set out its National Reform Programme includes: articulating how Ireland intends to achieve a sustainable high level of employment, adequate supply of labour to meet the demand of the economy, as well as a national effort to improve education and training; increasing progression of and the expansion of Post Leaving Certificate for secondary school leavers who might want to progress into third-level (higher education) VET programme; a legal requirement that all VET programmes must have provision for access, transfer and mobility; the establishment of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) to advise the Government and current and future needs to the economy. The EGFSN works with FAS, the National Training Authority. FAS provides Employment Services that match information on demand and supply in the labour market at occupational, local and regional levels. Employers report vacancies to FAS which are then matched with vacancies in its database; *action Plans for Jobs* aimed to get 100,000 unemployed people into work by 2014 and 2 million people into work by the year 2020; the development of new VET provision to respond to sectoral or occupational new skills demand identified in the labour market, particularly in science and technology education – for example, FAS has developed new curricula and introduced new training programmes in a number of industries and sectors including Bio-Pharmaceutical industry, the Sustainable Energy sector and the Financial Services sector.

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