

# VTOS AND BTEI: The local Adult Education Service moves towards maturity

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## **Introduction**

VTOS and BTEI, two major adult education programme strands, are strange sounding acronyms. They have little meaning to the general public but are very significant to adult education practitioners and to adults trying to improve their education and enhance their employment opportunities. In this article I will first look at the origins of both programmes, then compare the programmes as they have developed and continue to operate. The operating context for the programmes within the fledgling adult education service is then considered. The influence of EU funding is briefly noted within the evolving context of publicly funded adult education. Finally, I will offer some reflections on the maturing local adult education service.

## **Rationale and Origins**

The origins of the *Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme* (VTOS) go back to the late 1980s. Piloted in Tallaght and Limerick as the Employment Opportunities Scheme (EOS) VTOS established itself throughout the country in the 1990s. In 1990 unemployment in Ireland was approaching 20%. The statistics showed clearly that those with the weakest educational levels were the least likely to access or retain employment. The two-year, full time VTOS became a vehicle for assisting long term unemployed adults access the education that they needed to get work. It also had the beneficial side effect of taking a large number of people off the live register.

There have always been two ways of delivering the VTOS programme. Core VTOS consists of stand alone groups operating an independent educational programme, usually within a solely adult education environment. Dispersed

VTOS allows programme places to be located within schools and become integrated with the other educational activities of the school especially the PLC programme. Both models continue to operate successfully.

The *Back to Education Initiative* (BTEI) emerged in the *National Development Plan 2000 – 2006* as a response to the fact that Ireland is “lagging significantly behind other countries in terms of the proportion of the population aged 25-64 with less than upper secondary education.” The NDP goes on ... “The proportion is 50% for Ireland, compared with 18% for Norway, 19% for Germany, 26% in Sweden, 34% in Denmark. Within the labour force alone, there are 658,700 people over the age of 15 with less than upper secondary education. In addition, the International Adult Literacy Survey points to adult participation in continuing education and training in Ireland (22%) also being considerably below the European average of 34% and the best performer, Sweden at 54%” (p.100). The need is highlighted in the NDP for much greater flexibility in the delivery and timing of educational provision to enable it to be combined with family responsibilities and employment.

*Learning for Life, the White Paper on Adult Education* (2000) commits significant resources to the development of part-time options under the BTEI and suggests that “It will provide opportunities to return to learning for adults and provide a re-entry route for those in the workplace who wish to upgrade their skills in line with emerging needs” (p.93).

*The EU Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (2000) focuses on “promoting active citizenship and promoting employability” (p.5). It encourages education and training systems “to adapt to individual needs and demands rather than the other way around” (p.8). The Memorandum goes on... “Employability is obviously a key outcome of successful learning, but social inclusion rests on more than having paid work. Learning opens the door to building a satisfying and productive life, quite apart from a person’s employment status and prospects” (p.9).

### **Compare and Contrast**

The Back to Education Initiative, in contrast to the VTOS programme, was developed at a time of high economic growth and high employment. The challenge in our new knowledge society was no longer simply to get people into work. More people than ever were at work. The challenge now was to provide a

flexible part-time system that allowed both unemployed, under-employed and workers to avail of quality educational programmes at times and venues to suit their varied needs and time schedules. The Department of Education and Science Circular Letter 45/99 (Management Structure for VTOS) comments that there is a “growing need for diversity and flexibility in provision and mode of delivery to meet the needs of early school leavers, young people and adults with low qualifications, and the long term unemployed in promoting the overarching objective of social inclusion”.

Clearly VTOS, the pre-existing programme, was regarded as an unlikely vehicle to meet this challenging demand. VTOS was a full time programme. In the new Celtic Tiger Ireland, fewer adults, it was thought, would be in a position to avail of full time programmes. VTOS operated either in the fledgling Adult Education Centres or in schools. While the former might be regarded as reasonably flexible institutions, schools with their more rigid timetables and opening hours, were unlikely to possess the levels of flexibility required by this new programme.

In late 2002 BTEI began to be rolled out across the country. By the end of 2003 the shape of BTEI on the ground was emerging clearly. Hundreds of part time accredited programmes had been initiated and thousands of students were availing of certified courses relevant to their needs. Programmes operated in a wide range of settings, including adult education centres and schools. In addition, programmes also ran in facilities owned by other agencies, including health services and partnership companies. The community strand of BTEI with its 600 reserved places has also encouraged groups to operate creative niche programmes in community settings.

### **Operating Context**

Both BTEI and VTOS programmes operate significantly within the fledgling local adult education service operated mainly by the Vocational Education Committees. Over the past decade the VEC adult education service has, in virtually every county and city area, grown to become a more adequate and considerably more learner driven service.

To set VTOS and BTEI in context, it is worth noting the journey that the VEC service has taken in the last decade or so. From a service that primarily organised self-financing non-accredited evening classes, largely of the leisure and hobby

variety, the VEC adult education service is now focused primarily on social inclusion issues. 95% of adult education budgets are now spent on compensatory or second chance programmes for adults of low educational attainment.

This compensatory role has grown inexorably especially since the early nineties. This agenda was taken up willingly by VECs who recognised that the hobby and leisure emphasis of much of its adult education programme, while important for local community building and liberal personal development, would never play a significant role in addressing social disadvantage or low educational attainment.

Adult literacy needs began to be recognised in the late 1970s but no funding was available until the arrival of the ALCE (Adult Literacy and Community Education) budgets following the Kenny Report of 1983. However, these original budgets were so small as to make hardly any difference to literacy practice, which remained a largely voluntary activity until the expansion of the late 1990s.

VTOS was among the earliest programmes, emerging with Youthreach, the programme for early school leavers, in the late eighties. Gradually over the intervening years other programme strands have emerged and created the local adult education service as it exists today. Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) Programmes also developed significantly through the 1990s. Adult literacy expanded hugely following the publication by the OECD of the International Adult Literacy Survey in 1997. An Adult Guidance service began to be piloted in some areas in 2000 and has at present expanded to 24 areas in the country. The much-heralded Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) finally emerged at local level in late 2002 and began to roll out in 2003. Community Education Facilitators (CEF) were appointed to every area in 2003.

The adult education service at county or city level is primarily funded through these discreet programmes, each with its own budget, held together in a more or less coherent way by the local VEC. The officer who manages this local service is in most areas the Adult Education Organiser (AEO). The AEO attempts to hold together these programme strands as well as other projects and school based self-funded courses and maintains cooperative networks with other service providers. This in general is the shape of the local publicly funded adult education service.

### **Challenges to the Local Service**

When you are an actor in the middle of the local adult education drama it is difficult to maintain a clear view of how the service might be managed in a more rational and coherent way. Clearly, what exists works. However, there is plenty anecdotal evidence that suggests that it could be working better in the interest of the learner and that the enormous resources now being spent on the broad area of adult education could yield better results at local level.

At present it is too easy for any one programme strand, including VTOS and BTEI, to operate as an independent entity, working in relative autonomy, offering its own programme with little reference to the other programme strands going on often under the same roof. From the learner's perspective accessing the service as it exists in most places can be quite a challenge. Access routes are sometimes not clear. Getting a service can be dependent on personal contacts rather than clear procedures. Knowing someone on the course may ensure quicker access than reading the brochures.

Until recently professional guidance was unavailable for almost everyone outside the large PLC colleges. The advent of an adult guidance service in many areas has provided the learner with a much more professional service before entry, during the programme and in terms of progression. More than any other initiative, however, the guidance programme also highlights the deficiencies of the existing service. The glaring gaps in programme availability from one area of the country to another become more visible. The guidance service also highlights infrastructure deficiencies in terms of transportation, childcare and access as well as the poor availability of progression options for learners who have completed programmes.

The challenge in terms of local service coherence is not merely to get programme strands into regular dialogue with each other and other service providers, but to create a strategic vision for the entire local service. The VEC, usually in the person of the AEO, spends a great deal of time in attempting this with varying levels of success.

### **European Funding**

European funding has been an enormous impetus and support in the development of innovative, targeted educational programmes for adult learners. Without European Social Fund (ESF) support in the late 1980s, VTOS could

not have developed. VTOS attracted European Social Funding from its inception until 2000. Since then the programme is entirely state supported. BTEI by contrast receives substantial European funding. This reality has significantly influenced the fate of the two programmes, effectively capping the development of VTOS since 2000, while allowing BTEI to expand.

European social funding has kick started and continues to fund many of the programmes in the adult educational landscape. However, it is time to examine the effects of this kind of funding on the development of the local service. Funding the local service through discreet programme strands clearly has the potential to encourage fragmented local development. Many of these programme strands in turn are funded significantly by Europe. Accompanying audit requirements demand clear lines of demarcation or even ideally a physical separation of local programmes and services. While this approach makes sense to European auditors it often makes a nonsense of local strategies which seek to maximise resources through active cross programme collaboration, sharing and joint planning. The sharing of buildings, utility bills and other costs, a process critically necessary as the service seeks to maximise its resources is apparently at odds with EU audit requirements.

### **Final Thoughts**

Adult learners approaching the local adult education service care little about acronyms like VTOS or BTEI or PLC. Their need is deeply felt and all they want of the service is to be welcomed and matched to the most appropriate educational programme. The need for adequate professional guidance and learner support in this context is very clear. In an ideal world a mature adult education service would always act in this way, in the very best interests of the student.

What might this mature adult education service of the future look like? Clearly, the nationally determined general mission of a publicly funded local adult education service will focus on educational disadvantage in all its manifestations. Many different target groups including unemployed, low literate and ethnic groups will continue to be the focus of this mission. This broad vision will then need to be translated into a reality relevant to each local area. This approach must involve real local decision-making and partnership in order to establish priorities and allocate budgets. Current funding practice does not encourage this more coherent approach.

When learners approach the local adult education service they should expect to experience a welcoming point of contact, a guidance service that includes assessment, consideration of a menu of opportunities, learner support, certification as well as clear progression options. The learner should have a choice of part-time or full-time programmes that might include VTOS or BTEI or PLC or some other programme. Finally, if no appropriate course is available within the existing programmes then referral procedures to other agencies like Local Employment Services, FÁS or other providers should apply.

In order to provide a responsive and professional local adult education service the national policy, which focuses on educational disadvantage and social inclusion, needs to remain firmly in place. At local level this national policy must to be made more real through the establishment of the Local Adult Learning Boards (LALB). These Boards, promised in the White Paper of 2000, need firstly to be created and then facilitated to generate a vision and a plan that will create learning programmes more in tune with local needs.

In time the LALB will create its own menu of learning programmes in line with both national policy and local priorities. While national certification increasingly determines the shape of many programmes it is likely that as the LALB becomes more mature and comfortable in its role, programmes for educationally disadvantaged adults like VTOS and BTEI, will blend into more locally devised and responsive programmes. Thus targeted programmes bearing acronyms like VTOS and BTEI that initiated training courses when the local adult education service barely existed may fade as the Local Adult Learning Boards come to maturity as brokers of their own educational destiny.

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