

Response to the “Review of Apprenticeship Training in Ireland 2013” from the Institute of Guidance Counsellors

Introduction

In 2013 SOLAS published the “Review of Apprenticeship Training in Ireland 2013”. The Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) commend the main objectives outlined in this publication. We have a number of observations which would facilitate these objectives.

Recommendations on how to proceed:

- Extend the range of apprenticeship options to reflect labour market trends, nationally and internationally.
- Develop a website to showcase/advertise openings in different apprenticeships. For example, the Careers portal model outlines skills required, tasks inherent in a position, whilst offering video footage of trained craftsmen describing their training and typical work duties.
- Create a database where employers and potential apprentices can both advertise their respective positions or availability and basically find each other in a transparent and open manner.
- A centralised application form similar to the CAO application form where students can clearly see what and where their options are would achieve a lot in terms of earning parity of esteem in the mind-set of students for apprenticeships vis-à-vis higher education. Students need to be aware of what apprenticeships exist and if they are geographically viable in order to choose. Logistics are a big part of the further education decision making process.
- Provide clear and easily accessible information about progression within and leading on from apprenticeships. This resonates with the aspiration expressed in the 2013 Apprenticeship Review that apprenticeships could progress on to a Master Trade qualification.
- A return to the pre- apprenticeship courses which would boost the academic abilities of students applying to apprenticeships in particular those with a high science, mathematics or science content. These courses should address current and forecasted labour market needs especially in subjects like: “literacy, ICT, maths and science” (SOLAS, 2013, p112).

This review discusses the notion of incentivising employers to take on an apprentice. The review mentions how: “over 90% of Irish firms employ less than 10 people, and only 0.2% employ 250 or more”. (SOLAS,2013, p37). It is the view of the IGC that we should be looking at ways to incentivise employers of small groups of people to take on an apprentice. We suggest that the government:

- Offer employers a reduction to PRSI payable when they take on an apprentice
- Facilitate joined up thinking between SOLAS and Forfás when making decisions about which apprenticeships to offer, this would result in higher up take of apprentices on the part of employers and resonates with Tony Donohue’s observation. “We need to accept that employers will only engage if they have a genuine skills requirement based on business demand.” (Donohue, 2015, p 27).

- It has also been suggested to us by employers who have been through the apprenticeship themselves, that a period of work shadowing / on the job training with the employer should proceed any formal training element to ensure apprentice and employer compatibility.

We welcome the proposed contract outlined in this document which would protect the interests of apprentices. “The majority of submissions recommended that apprenticeships should have a statutory underpinning, and that there should be protections for the apprentice to ensure a quality programme, an obligation on employers to release the learner for off-the-job education and training without reduction of pay, and to have a formal contract of apprenticeship governing employment conditions.” (SOLAS,2013, p74).

Skills required by 2020

Guidance Counsellors are all too cognisant of the lifeline offered by apprenticeships to our students. Working in schools, Youth and Adult Services we are strategically positioned to demonstrate to students of all abilities how choosing an apprenticeship is a valid option. We can explain to ambitious students of all abilities, the progression pathways proposed in the apprenticeship review, how they work and to what level they can progress over their lifetime culminating with a level 9 or 10 qualification or at Master Craftsman level if they so wish.

We read with interest the forecasting of skill requirements in the review. “CEDEFOP estimates that by 2020, while all jobs will require higher levels of skill, 50% of them will need medium level skills and 15% low level skills.” (SOLAS, 2013, p91).

Students equipped to supply medium and low skills in the labour market need a higher level of support and direction from the guidance counsellor than their peers if they are to achieve their full potential. These students typically present with low levels of self-confidence and self-awareness, they need regular input from their guidance counsellor to work out what their unique skill set is and to nurture the fragile process of bolstering a new found self-esteem. For students who are predominantly kinaesthetic learners, the traditional learning experience which still dominates second level education can be a soul destroying experience, this category of student typically excel in hands on, practical learning situations. If they become switched off at school and have no-one to join the dots for them they are in danger of not signing up for apprenticeships. In many schools, the guidance counsellor’s first opportunity to interact with their students on an individual basis is in 5th year. By then it is too late to retain or influence disenchanted students. We need timely access to our students to identify potential apprenticeships at the very latest by 3rd year.

“Educational aspirations are formed as early as junior cycle, remaining relatively stable thereafter, and are highly predictive of the actual routes taken two or three years later.” (McCoy & Byrne, 2011, p61). It is not sufficient to merely identify these individuals; they also need regular encouragement and guidance which is vocational, educational, social and personal in nature to counteract their low self-esteem and lack of supports.

Talking about non acceptance rates of places on third level courses, McCoy & Byrne attest that:

“non acceptance rates were much higher for those who had attended working class schools many did not realise their initial goals because of their reluctance to step outside of their immediate

surroundings and embark on an unfamiliar trajectory.” (McCoy & Byrne, 2011, p84). Guidance counsellors possess the expertise to encourage their charges along, they are the professionals qualified to navigate their students through the complex application process leading to apprenticeships, further or higher education in what is a time consuming and skilled process, not a once off event.

Guidance Counsellors working in the Youth Sector currently devote significant amounts of time trying to encourage young people (aged 15 – 25) many of whom are significantly socially and economically disadvantaged, back into education, training and employment. Queries on apprenticeships are received on a regular basis, and recommendations would enhance this process of information exchange around training, employment, careers and increase social inclusion and economic security and access to opportunities. This guidance resource role is not recognised or funded in any specific way within the Youth Sector, yet plays a vital role in creating the Better Outcomes Brighter Futures aspired to The National Policy Framework for Children & Young People (2014 – 2020).¹

The FET Strategy 2014-2019 recommends a: "Widening of the remit of the Adult Educational Guidance Services to become the Adult Guidance and Information Services for the FET sector and general public, providing quality impartial education and career/vocational information and quality guidance provision through one-to-one guidance, group guidance and outreach provision." (p.114, FET Strategy 2014-2019)²

February 24th, 2015 our Tanaiste and Minister for Social Protection assured us that the Government is fully committed to renewing and significantly expanding the apprenticeship system in Ireland. "To achieve a sea change in public perception a sustained public awareness campaign will be needed, actively supported by employers, academia, VET providers, guidance counsellors and industry champions". (SOLAS, 2013, p120). Guidance counsellors are already committed to supporting this review, if the current government are serious in their commitment to the apprenticeship review, they will provide the requisite resources to translate this vision into a reality.

The National Training Fund

"The National Training Fund... generates of the order of €350 million per annum, of which approximately €52 million is deployed to meet apprenticeship costs and the remainder is allocated to other programmes". (SOLAS, 2013, p117). The IGC questions how the remaining €298 million is being "deployed" and suggests that some of this be invested in an initiative which would enable guidance counsellors to act as champion of this recently heralded review of the apprenticeship system. Ring fenced time for the qualified guidance counsellor to identify and guide suitable candidates into apprenticeships, through the application process and into the correct choice of apprenticeship. "A ring-fenced fund for development of new apprenticeships should be established." (SOLAS, 2013, p110).

¹ Paragraph by Susan Scott, Youth Guidance Sector

² Paragraph by Tadhg Crowley, Adult Education Guidance Services

Conclusion

1. The government want to reduce the record high level of youth unemployment, they assert that the success of the Apprenticeship review is a priority
2. The CIF want Irish nationals to have the first option on apprenticeships in Ireland, they wish to empower our young to choose an alternative to the live register
3. The IGC want a viable option for their students, tomorrow's employees who will offer medium to low level skills to the labour market, they need access to their students to make this happen

We can work together and achieve these common goals. Qualified and experienced guidance counsellors positioned in schools and youth agencies in every town in this country offer the solution to this dilemma right now.

References

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