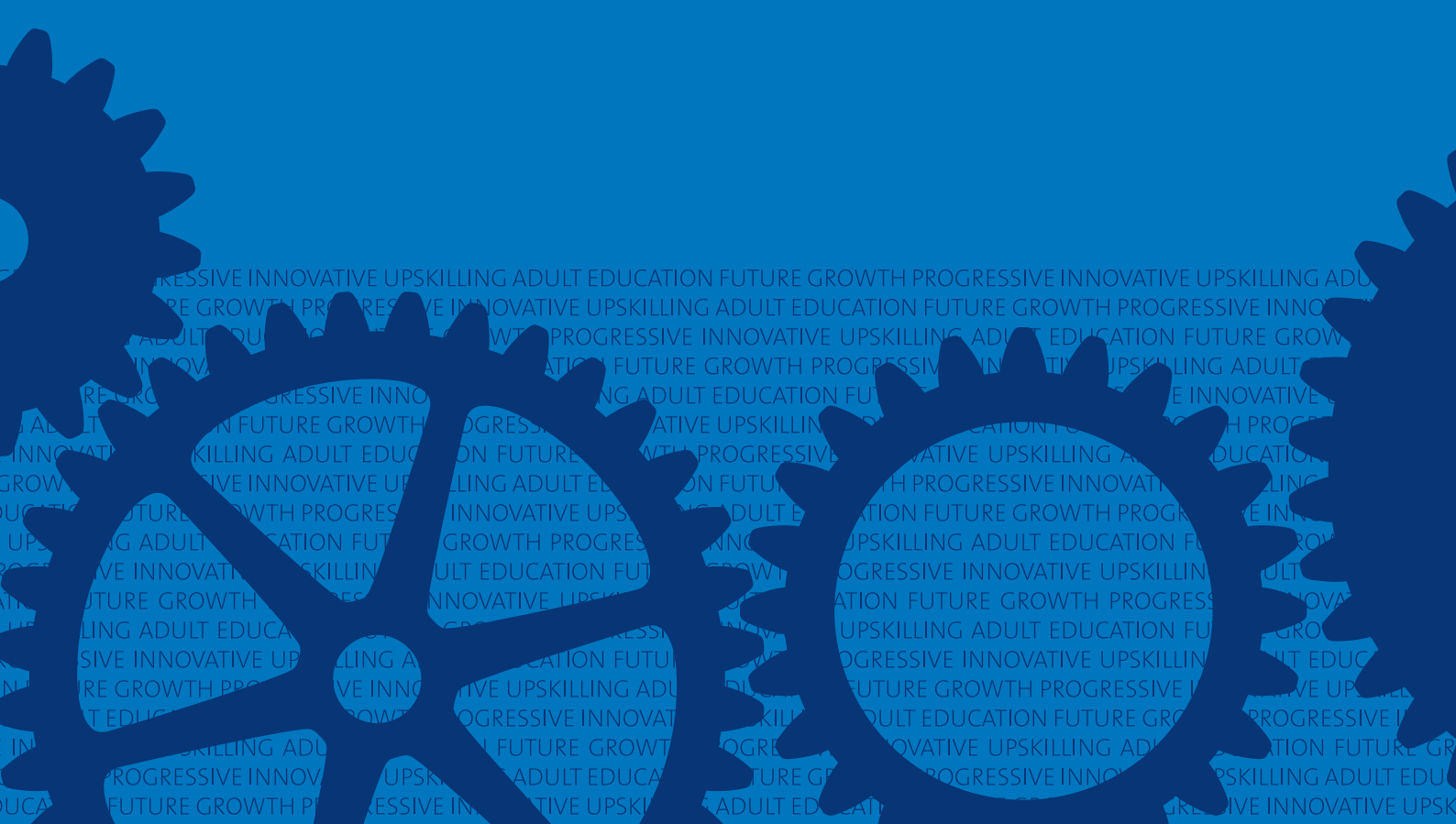




**Education & Training Boards (ETBs)
Balancing Effectiveness and Equity in the new
Further Education and Training Sector
An AEOA Perspective (November 2011)**



Introduction to AEOA Position Paper

The Government decision, on 22nd July 2011, to establish a new authority called SOLAS, with responsibility for the co-ordination of Further Education and Training, provides a unique opportunity for radical and strategic transformation of the Irish adult learning landscape. It gives the Adult Education Officers' Association (AEOA) a chance to use the specialist knowledge and experience of its members to inform and influence the creation of a new, modern, fit-for-purpose sector, as part of the mainstream education system. This paper, which is formulated from their perspective, is purposefully focused on the future.

As a first step in establishing the new sector, SOLAS will provide the change leadership required to support the merger of the education and training provision, institutions and staff of FÁS and the VECs, within new Education and Training Board (ETB) structures. Given the fact that merger integration is widely acknowledged as presenting the ultimate change-management challenge, the AEOA believes that, for the process to be successful, it must begin with clear consensus on the strategic direction and objectives of the new combined entities (ETBs) and a shared understanding of the primary values driving them.

Since Ireland is currently in the midst of an unprecedented economic crisis, labour market activation has, by necessity, become a key policy driver in all areas, particularly education. The current process of integrating adult and further education and training systems is a clear demonstration of the Government's commitment to the reform of labour market policies. The fact that it has pledged to "*strengthen the labour market activation system and its links to employment support systems*", as part of the EU/IMF Programme of Financial Support for Ireland (July 2011), further reinforces the urgency of this reform.

Those charged with developing the new Further Education and Training sector have the onerous responsibility of holding on to the broad vision of Lifelong Learning, while also responding to the demands of the activation agenda. This vision, which has been prioritised in EU and National policies for over a decade, must underpin the new sector and highlight the three inter-connected goals of learning: 1) economic progress 2) personal development and 3) social inclusiveness. Restrictive activation measures may help to combat unemployment but on their own are insufficient to address the much more complex issues associated with poverty and exclusion.

It is imperative, therefore, that the newly merged Further Education and Training sector places equal value on both the social and the economic outcomes of learning.

Policy Context for the Establishment of ETBs

The emergence of the Education & Training Boards takes place against a background of unprecedented public service reform: a response, in large part, to global, European and national economic crises and the need for labour market reform, complete with systems and structures to support new patterns of employment and unemployment.

There is strong consensus, in Ireland, on the merits of a coherent, **activation-based approach** towards addressing the crisis of long term unemployment: “*Job Creation and Protection Plan*”, ICTU, May 2009; “*Activation in Ireland: An Evaluation of the National Employment Action Plan*”, ESRI, April 2011; “*Supports and Services for Unemployed Jobseekers*”, NESC, August 2011; “*Ireland Economic Survey*”, OECD, October 2011. The Government decisions, in March 2011 and July 2011, to establish a National Employment and Entitlements Service (NEES), and to create a single authority called SOLAS to be responsible for the coordination and funding of Further Education & Training, indicates a strong commitment to reforming how education, training and guidance are designed, integrated and delivered.

There is increasing emphasis on the role that education and training must play within active labour market policies (ALMPs), which integrate national skills strategies with employment support policies. ALMPs focus on labour market integration and re-integration and include measures such as labour market training, job creation, job search support, hiring subsidies and support for enterprise creation.

Furthermore, the concept of **flexicurity**, which is a political strategy to enhance flexibility of the labour market and at the same time provide unemployment security¹, has been consistently promoted at EU level, since the beginning of the 21st Century. The flexicurity model is built around three pillars: 1) Employment Protection Legislation 2) Unemployment Benefits and 3) Active Labour Market Policies, often referred to as “the golden triangle”. To date, Ireland, like many other EU countries, has treated these three pillars as isolated policy instruments with minimal interaction between them. Since flexicurity is expected to contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy, it will undoubtedly have a major influence on the design of arrangements to join-up welfare policies, education/training policies and employment legislation within a new integrated employment policy framework in Ireland.

Labour market activation cannot, however, be the sole factor defining education and training curricula. Globalisation, economic downturn, changing patterns of employment and rapid advances in technology are all creating urgent demands for a new set of **generic skills/key competences** – both for living and for working. The Forfás report, “*Sharing our Future: Ireland 2025*” (2009), highlights the increasing range of generic skills that individuals now require in order to operate successfully within society and the economy. These generic skills, which mirror the “*Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*” agreed by the EU Council (2006)², include basic skills such as literacy, numeracy and use of technology; language skills, as well as people-related and conceptual skills. In their report “*Tomorrow’s Skills – Towards a National Skills Strategy*” (2007), the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) indicates that there is substantial evidence to show that employers regard generic skills as equal to, if not more important than, technical or job-specific skills for the 21st century workplace.

1 Income security while unemployed or under-employed

2 EU key competences are: 1) Communication in the mother tongue (reading, writing, etc), 2) Communication in foreign languages; 3) Mathematical and basic competences in science & technology; 4) Digital competence; 5) Learning to learn; 6) Social & civic competences; 7) Sense of initiative & entrepreneurship; 8) Cultural awareness & expression.

Profile of VEC Adult Education Sector

The “*National Report on Lifelong Learning in Ireland*” (2008), published by the Educational Disadvantage Centre, Drumcondra, stated that the VEC Adult Education Sector ‘**has arguably more adult learners than all other providers combined and could thus be considered the most pervasive adult education provider in the State**’. In 2010, over 180,000 learners participated in VEC adult education and up-skilling programmes, in almost 2,000 venues across Ireland. Of these learners, 22,900 attained minor awards and 3,110 major awards at levels 1 – 3. At levels 4 – 6, a further 22,360 achieved minor awards and 7,000 achieved major awards. Overall awards attained by VEC learners in 2010 represented 44% of all awards made by FETAC in 2010.

An increasing number of adults followed blended learning programmes, through www.writeon.ie, the interactive website provided by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) with face-to-face support provided by local VEC Adult Education Services. In addition, over 60,000 adults took advantage of the information and guidance supports provided by the local VEC Adult Educational Guidance Services.

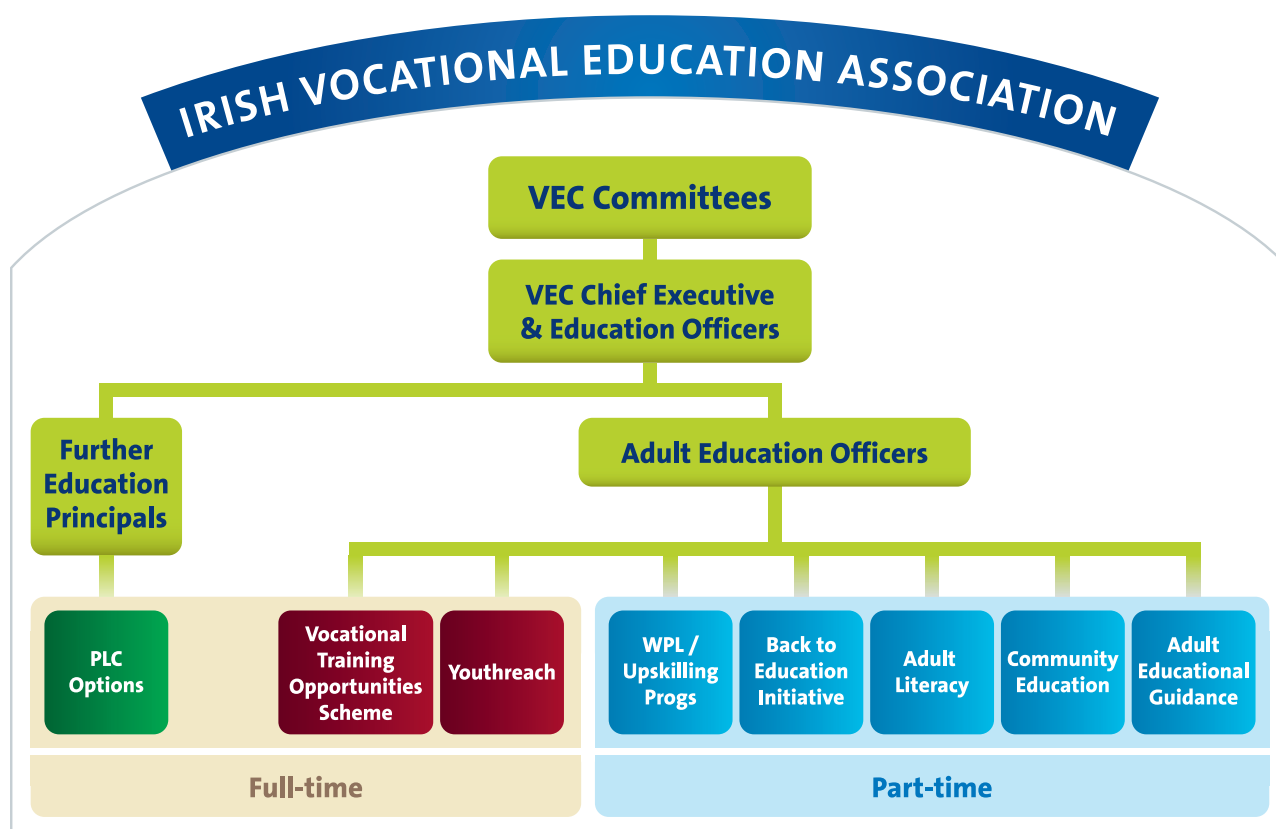


Diagram 1: VEC Adult & Further Education Organisational Structure

In each VEC, the Adult Education Officer leads a multi-disciplinary management team that is responsible for strategic planning, development and operation of the local VEC Adult Education Service. As illustrated in diagram 1, team members may include Adult Educational Guidance Co-ordinators, Adult Literacy Organisers, Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) Co-ordinators, Community Education Facilitators, Vocational Training Opportunity Scheme (VTOS) Co-ordinators and Youthreach Co-ordinators. The Adult Education Team reports to the Chief Executive Officer and/or Education Officer and the local Vocational Education Committee on a regular basis, through the AEO.

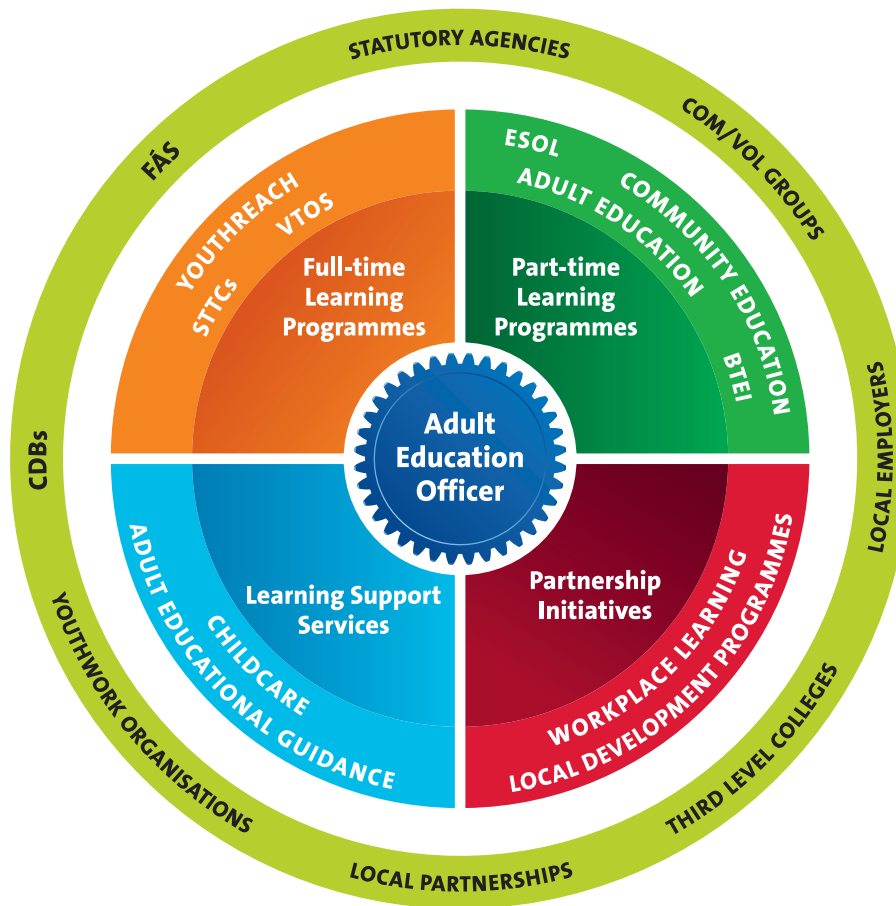


Diagram 2: VEC Adult Education Services - Central to the Local Learning Landscape

AEOs are responsible for the management, integration and delivery of all full-time and part-time VEC adult learning programmes and learning support services and, as such, play a distinctive role as facilitators of integration across adult learning opportunities, both within VECs and externally. As shown in diagram 2, this has placed them in a strategic position within the local and national adult learning and development landscapes and has enabled them build knowledge, expertise and experience that has huge relevance in the context of the current sectoral integration process.

Overview of the AEOA Position Paper

Most of the ideas and suggestions put forward in this paper derive from, and reflect the year-long consultation, thinking and analysis process that informed the “*AEOA Strategic Framework 2016: Contributing to the National Adult Learning and Skills Agenda*”, launched by Ciaran Cannon, T.D. Minister for Training and Skills, in May 2011. By resolutely looking to the future, this paper aims to contribute to the architecture of this new sector.

The AEOA proposals relate to 4 main elements of the change management process, as detailed in diagram 3, that will be required for effective integration of VEC Adult & Further Education provision and FÁS Training provision, prior to and post establishment of the new Education and Training Boards (ETBs), under the direction of SOLAS. The paper highlights the importance of implementing the merger of the two sectors using a planned and systematic change management process.



Diagram 3: Steps in the Change Management Process

The paper begins by focusing on the first step in the process, which is the design of the new ETB Integrated Organisational Structures and Management Systems. Secondly, the implications for staffing of the new entities are addressed. Thirdly, since the ETBs, and their staff, will not be working in isolation from the other stakeholders at regional and national levels, the role that Strategic Local & National Partnerships must play in the operation and provision of the ETBs is explored. Finally, having considered these fundamental building blocks of the new entities, i.e. 1- Integrated Structures, 2- Staff Competence, & 3 - Strategic Partnerships, recommendations are made regarding the core business of ETBS – i.e. 4 - the Design, Delivery and Review of Education and Training Programmes and Support Services that are relevant, modern and of high quality.

1 Integrated Organisational Structure

Design an integrated organisational structure along with integrated management systems that will promote the effectiveness, efficiency and coherence of the new ETBs.

Challenges

The new Education & Training Boards will face many challenges, not least the challenge of bringing together staff from the different geographical locations, backgrounds, specialisms and organisational cultures of FÁS and the VECs to create new, “fit for purpose” organisations – a process that will be further compounded by the concurrent process of VEC amalgamations. Building a new vision that recognises the different cultures and perspectives of FÁS and the VECs has to be the starting point. It must take the best of the old world but create something new that will inspire confidence in both staff and the public, and balance effectiveness and equity.

The priority focus should be the design of a new integrated structure that will accommodate and support the wide range of part-time and full-time further and adult education and training programmes and related support services provided at local level. The seamless integration of FÁS & VEC provision and staff within the new ETBs will be a major task. There is need for strong leadership and effective change management at all levels, as efforts are made to ‘synchronise’ mind-sets and build a new common organisational culture. The change process must recognise and maximise the strengths of all staff and identify new areas of cooperation. Critically, there will be a need to move away from a programmatic focus based on funding strands, in order to develop a coordinated, whole organisational framework and vision, where each staff member, each full-time programme, each part-time programme and each learner support service will have a particular role to play and be in a position to actively contribute to the ETBs’ objectives.

VEC Adult Education Sector Experience

- Adult Education Officers (AEOs), who report to the CEOs of local VECs, have much to contribute to the design of integrated structures, as a result of their extensive experience of managing disparate, and often geographically remote, part-time and full-time staff, programmes and support services (NQF 1-6)

- The distinctive role that AEOs have played as facilitators of integration across adult learning opportunities, both within VECs and with external organisations, places them in a strategic position within local and national adult learning and development landscapes.

AEOA Recommendations regarding Integrated Organisational Structures

- 1 A **comprehensive audit and analysis** of existing further education and training structures, functions and provision should be conducted in order to define the key functions of the new entity, within the context of current and future social & economic realities.
- 2 The new ETBs should have a **common organisational structure** in each region, which fully supports the management and delivery of 1) full-time learning programmes 2) part-time learning programmes and 3) learner support services and ensures the provision of equal opportunities across the country.
- 3 Design of the organisational integration process must recognise the need for **dedicated and skilled personnel at all levels, to provide the necessary leadership, management, facilitation, and support.**
- 4 On-going **training in Change Management** should be provided for all staff in order to ensure organisational coherence and effectiveness and enhance staff cohesion.
- 5 **Dispersed leadership** should be designed into the new structures, providing for a strong **multi-disciplinary management team** with expertise in, and responsibility for, key functions such as educational management, risk management, strategic planning & development, management of buildings, HR, finance, evaluation, ICT, etc.

2 Staff Competence

Build the capacity of all staff in the new ETBs, so that they can make positive contributions in the range of ETB teaching and learning environments, improving outcomes for adult learners.

Challenges

Harmonising the individual and separate cultures that currently exist within FÁS and the VECs and aligning their different job structures and roles, employment contracts & rights, qualification requirements and performance expectations within the new ETBs presents policy makers and managers with an enormous, but fundamental, leadership and change management challenge.

Furthermore, recent reports have highlighted the fact that not all teachers, trainers and instructors working in further education and training have had pedagogical training. Initial training and up-skilling of teachers, tutors and trainers is therefore a priority task, particularly in the light of the Teaching Council requirements for Further Education staff, which takes effect from 1st April 2013.

VEC Adult Education Sector Experience

- VEC Adult Education Services adopt a holistic approach to the provision of “general vocational education”, putting significant importance on the development of learners’ key competences: i.e. learning to learn; communication and language; mathematics and science; digital competence and interpersonal, social, civic, cultural and entrepreneurial skills. VEC educational personnel have, therefore, considerable experience and expertise in facilitating core skill development.
- Because of the flexibility and responsiveness of the adult education sector and the dispersed nature of provision and staffing, it has always been necessary to devise creative ways of approaching the continuous professional development of staff (CPD). A range of models and approaches have been used, including Communities of Practice, self-directed learning activities, tailor-made staff development programmes, production of staff resources and handbooks, etc

AEOA Recommendations regarding Staff Competence

- 1 Conduct an **audit and analysis of the competences** of all ETB staff, in order to build a picture of the strengths and capacity of the newly merged entity
- 2 Define the **qualifications requirements for teachers, trainers and instructors**, as they apply to teaching of specific subjects and at specific levels.
- 3 Plan for the **convergence of qualification requirements** for teaching in different parts of the Further Education & Training sector and ensure that all teachers, trainers and instructors have pedagogical training/expertise. (*OECD 2010*)
- 4 Since **Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)** will be accepted by the Teaching Council towards the stipulated 3rd level qualifications, it is important that options relating to this route be explored immediately, with the relevant Higher Education (HE) institutions.
- 5 A **formal CPD system** should be established and a **comprehensive plan** developed for all staff in the sector, drawing on international best practice to introduce teaching and learning methodologies and resources that are appropriate for adult learners.
- 6 While the new ETBs will require a wide and variable range of teaching/training specialists, on fixed purpose contracts, it will also need a **multi-disciplinary core staff team** with high levels of competence in areas such as Curriculum Planning and Development, Teaching & Learning, Assessment, Monitoring & Evaluation; Learning Technologies (ICT), Guidance and Key Competence development (Maths, Literacy, ICT, Career Planning, etc). It is important, therefore, that a comprehensive and appropriate staffing profile/structure be drawn-up in tandem with corresponding recruitment strategies.
- 7 Harmonisation of FÁS / VEC cultures should be promoted, by planning for, and supporting, **team approaches and internal partnerships**, using peer support mechanisms such as communities of practice, programme design teams, etc.

3 Strategic Partnerships

Support the stakeholders in further education, training and skills to work together in an atmosphere of trust, co-operation and mutual respect to develop adult learning and teaching responses that are both relevant and effective.

The establishment of the new National Employment & Entitlements Services (NEES) under the Department of Social Protection and the new Further Education & Training Agency (SOLAS) under the Department of Education & Skills provides policy makers in Ireland with a new institutional framework through which income support measures, employment services and active labour market interventions can be integrated in order to address the challenges of high unemployment.

Since job seekers and other learners have a complex array of needs, goals and aspirations that no single organisation can adequately address, it will be necessary to establish a range of strategic partnerships – both long-term and short-term, at local and national levels, in order to address emerging economic and social priorities: e.g. 1) industry relevance, 2) guidance provision and 3) social and educational inclusion.

The success of these partnerships, whether at local or national level, and the impact they will ultimately have on the quality and relevance of further education and training in Ireland will be dependent on maximisation of effective, in-built consultation and feedback mechanisms.

3.1 Industry Relevance

Challenges

Anticipation of educational and future skill needs is critical to inform decisions on educational curricula and provision, in order to balance supply and demand in the labour market. Building strong working relationships and establishing strategic partnerships with relevant local and national economic stakeholders will be fundamental to the quality and relevance of ETB provision, which in turn will shape public perception of the new entity.

VEC Adult Education Sector Experience

- The Adult Education Sector can provide many positive examples of working in partnership with different sectors and different employers, through delivery of recent labour-market initiatives such as Labour Market Activation Fund; Skills for Work; An Post; WPL; SkillVEC and European Globalisation Fund.
- Many of the current ad-hoc Adult Education Boards include representatives of employer organisations and local businesses. VECs participate in a wide range of local partnerships and networks that have been established to promote dissemination & assimilation of labour market data and education/training design e.g. Kerry Future Skills Group; South Tipperary CDB Central Data Unit; Westmeath BTEI High Support Unit; Limerick City CDB Learning City Partnership; etc.

AEOA Recommendations regarding Industry Relevance

- 1 The ETBs should develop effective, two-way **communication channels with the National Expert Group on Future Skills, SOLAS and the NEES**, in order to access up to date and accurate national and international labour market intelligence and to feedback learning and information derived directly from local experience.
- 2 The ETBs should participate as key partners in formalised **structures for gathering local labour intelligence**, e.g. Learning Regions Partnerships, Future Skills Groups, etc. Identification of local skills needs is critical to the creation and sustainability of local employment opportunities (particularly in rural areas), and will allow for the development of bespoke education and training programmes.
- 3 A range of **innovative and relevant activities that help students learn about work** should be incorporated within all full-time and part-time education and training programmes (e.g. work experience, work placement, work shadowing, work simulations, mini-enterprise, etc.)

3.2 Effective Guidance Provision

Challenges

While labour markets have always been dynamic in nature, the instability and unpredictability of the current labour market in Ireland creates huge challenges for publically funded career guidance planners and workers. At a time when guidance has finally been recognised by policy-makers as a critical labour market intervention, the task of providing it has become infinitely more complex and the funding to support it is limited.

Adult guidance and job placement/matching services are currently provided by a wide range of agencies and organisations including VECs, FÁS, the Local Employment Service Network (LESN), HE Institutions, Local Community Development Partnerships and Citizen Information Services, with limited collaboration between them and in the absence of a common, overarching policy framework. The relationship between the NEES and SOLAS, and the joint systems and arrangements that they establish, will be fundamental to the emergence of an effective, coherent and much-needed national policy framework for provision of guidance and employment services.

In terms of guidance provision for job seekers and other learners, there are distinct but interconnected roles for ETBs and Public Employment Services (PES), which need to be clearly defined and understood by all. A more effective, integrated model of guidance provision must be developed by 1) maximising deployment of existing guidance staff and resources and 2) by developing the first-line guidance skills of non-guidance staff, including co-ordinators, teachers, trainers, reception staff, etc.

VEC Adult Education Sector Experience

- The Adult Educational Guidance Services (AEGS), which are a core element of the VEC Adult Education Services, are fully professional guidance and counselling services that support the most marginalised adults in our society to return to education and training and ultimately into employment. The AEGS model provides an excellent blueprint for the guidance support structures that are now required for all job seekers and adult learners in Ireland.
- Group guidance has been provided for adult learners through Career Planning courses, which help learners to develop critical key competences, such as accessing & interpreting information, decision-making, goal-setting, action planning, etc.
- Some VEC Guidance Services are active participants in well-established local Adult Guidance Partnerships.

- **Progression Guidance** should be initiated within the learning programme and continued through referral to other guidance providers (Job Placement Services, Higher Education Access Services, etc.) as appropriate.

- 3 **Formal referral systems** must be established between 1) the National Employment and Entitlement Service (NEES) and SOLAS to inform future provision, and 2) the ETBs and the local Employment and Entitlement Services to enhance the experience of job seekers and other learners, and maximise their progression outcomes.
- 4 **Local Adult Guidance Partnerships**, which are representative of all providers of guidance and employment services and reflect local circumstances, should be established.

AEOA Recommendations regarding Guidance Provision

- 1 A single, **coherent National Framework** for provision of all guidance, job search, and job matching activities must be developed.
- 2 Effective and relevant **guidance support is necessary at 4 main stages** of the adult learning journey: 1) Pre-entry 2) Induction 3) On-Course & 4) Pre-Exit /Progression.

ETBs must liaise with NEES and SOLAS to clearly define the specific, but inter-dependant, guidance remits and roles of each agency. Transition needs to be seamless and based on the needs of the learners and current and future employers.

- **Pre-entry guidance**, which is independent, should be provided by fully qualified guidance personnel within the National Employment and Entitlement Service.
- **Induction and on-course guidance** should be provided by the ETBs for individual participants on their courses. They should also provide Career Management and Planning courses as mandatory components of all learning programmes.

3.3 Social and Educational Inclusion

Challenges

As key providers of Lifelong Learning, the ETBs are not only responsible for enhancing employability, they also have a duty to advance social cohesion, active citizenship, equality, area regeneration and sustainability, within their local areas. A critical challenge will be to bring a balanced perspective to the prevailing discourse, which puts the needs of the economy to the forefront of the education agenda. It is increasingly important to demonstrate the impact of education on social inclusion, poverty reduction, and overall empowerment of individuals, families and communities, particularly in disadvantaged areas. Ultimately, the failure to strike a balance between economic and social priorities in education policies would result in further marginalisation and exclusion of sections of society, impeding future economic recovery.

VEC Adult Education Sector Experience

- Through their community-based provision, VEC adult education services have established a sound track record for creating supportive learning environments that encourage adults back into education and enable them develop their skillsets and competencies, thereby providing stepping stones on to further learning and employment.
- CEOs, AEOs, and other key personnel within VEC Adult Education Services (Adult Literacy Organisers, Community Education Facilitators, Back to Education Co-ordinators, Guidance Officers, VTOS Co-ordinators, etc) actively participate in a wide range of local development partnerships and networks: Local Community Development Partnerships; City & County Development Boards, Regeneration Committees, RAPID Committees, etc., all of which have a specific remit for social inclusion.

- VECs have extensive experience and expertise in the design and delivery of programmes that provide very effective Second Chance learning opportunities and offer learners access to alternative educational progression pathways. e.g. Youthreach; VTOS; BTEI; Skills for Work, ITABE, etc.

AEOA Recommendations regarding Social Inclusion

- 1 **Community-based learning** should be recognised as a critical part of the provision of the new ETBs.
- 2 As part of its overall NQF levels 1-6 provision, ETBs should ring-fence a significant proportion of their funding for **programmes at NQF levels 1 to 3** - both accredited and non-accredited.
- 3 It has been widely recognised that non-formal, community-based outreach provision is one of the most effective ways of engaging disaffected, **“hard to reach” adults** in learning. This element of provision must, therefore, be retained within the remit of the ETBs.
- 4 All aspects of programme design, delivery & assessment must take account of the particular needs of Second Chance adult learners, many of whom are disillusioned by, and alienated from, formal education & training systems.

4 Quality Programmes: Design, Delivery and Review

Ensure all programmes have currency and are effective in meeting the needs of learners, society, employers and industry. This must be reflected in the design of programmes, as well as in delivery methodologies that are relevant to the modern world and participants' realities. On-going and systematic programme review is fundamental to quality enhancement of education and training provision.

4.1 Programme Design

Challenges

Key competences have become increasingly necessary in the workplace, where change is constant, particularly in relation to developments in new technologies and work practices. In the current global economy, where specific technical skills become obsolete very rapidly, there is increased demand for more generic skills such as critical thinking and problem solving that can easily be adapted to the changing needs of an industry. ETBs must, therefore, design new programmes and curricula that reflect this changing reality.

The speed of change in our social, economic, technological and political environments demands that education and training providers review and maintain the currency of existing programmes on an on-going basis, in addition to designing new ones, in line with future skills needs. This will require high levels of knowledge, skill and expertise in the design and development of relevant, needs-based, flexible curricula. If the Education and Training Boards are to have staffing structures with the necessary expertise to provide such quality services, some concessions on the Government Moratorium on staff recruitment will have to be made.

VEC Adult Education Sector Experience

- The VEC adult education sector has a strong track record of being effective and efficient in providing rapid responses to demands for the design and delivery of new, flexible, modular, certified learning programmes for adults, on both a national and local basis e.g. Labour Market Activation; Jobs Initiative; SkillVEC; EGF; Skills for Work; etc.
- All VEC Adult Education Services have FETAC Quality

Assurance agreements in place, detailing systems and procedures that meet quality standards in relation to programme design.

- As providers of General Vocational Education, VEC Adult Education Services have always prioritised the development of learners' core skills/key competences. Some programmes are designed to focus specifically on key competence development e.g. Literacy, Numeracy, ICT, etc., while others integrate the key competences within a vocational specialism e.g. Catering, Woodcraft, Hairdressing, etc.

AEOA Recommendations regarding Programme Review

- 1 Design and implement an effective strategy for the **integration of key competences**, including literacy, learning-to-learn, inter-personal skills, social development, etc, within all courses.
- 2 New initiatives should be embedded in **the existing, robust adult education infrastructure** - i.e. learning supports such as literacy and guidance, expertise in curriculum development, learning technologies, etc, and facilities and resources (e.g. study spaces, self-access learning centres, etc).
- 3 Course content, asset down in invalidated programmes, for application across a range of settings, should be **indicative, rather than prescriptive**. This will facilitate tailoring of programmes to the needs of specific target groups, stakeholders and locations and updating in line with changing labour market circumstances and demands.
- 4 The new Qualifications & Quality Assurance Ireland (QQAI) agency, which will be established in 2012, should consider the regularity with which programmes are reviewed. The current **5 year review cycle** may need to be shortened, given the speed of technological, and other, changes and their impact on course relevance.

4.2 Programme Delivery

Challenges

It is increasingly important that education and training programmes reflect the realities, and respond to the needs, of the modern world. The challenge will be to deliver quality programmes in ways, at times and in places that are relevant to adult learners and enhance their lives at work, at home and in their communities. A particular focus has to be placed on the use of ICTs for communication, collaboration, teaching and learning, as technology is widely recognised as a powerful driver of growth and employment and as a key competence for living and working in the 21st Century.

VEC Adult Education Sector Experience

- Adult Education programmes have a well-founded reputation for quality and flexible programme delivery, with a diverse menu of modes, approaches and times of delivery.
- VECs have pioneered and established a sound track record in promoting digital inclusion through the development and delivery of a wide range of community-based digital literacy programmes and activities.
- In order to promote learner autonomy, participation and self-reliance, VECs have implemented a range of self-access learning and blended-learning models and approaches.
- While VECs have a number of dedicated adult education centres, adult education provision is not generally “institution-based”. Instead, it is delivered in multiple out-centres and venues e.g. Community Halls, Family Resource Centres, Social Centres, Care Centres, etc, in partnership with local stakeholders. As a result, VECs have established an extensive network of satellite centres across the country.
- A facilitative approach to delivery, as opposed to an instructor-led approach, is also at the heart of the adult education ethos, highlighting the importance of the relationship between tutors and learners.
- Most adult education teachers and tutors are educationalists, who base their practice on an adult education ethos, which promotes learner-

centeredness in teaching and learning. A key principle is that adult learners have accumulated knowledge and work experience that gives added value to the teaching and learning experience. Adult Education courses and programmes are developed around the adult learners’ needs, goals and circumstances. Provision is always learner-driven, as opposed to supplier driven.

AEOA Recommendations regarding Programme Delivery

- 1 The new ETB structures should value and allow for **local responsiveness, creativity, flexibility and innovative approaches** to the delivery of learning programmes.
- 2 **Allocate adequate resources** to the provision of a comprehensive national Continuous Professional Development programme, which can support the adoption of new and innovative approaches to delivery.
- 3 **Maximise the use, and potential, of new technologies** to 1) ensure all staff have digital capacity for their communication and teaching practices 2) promote learner independence and core skill competence and 3) promote a culture of innovation and research.
- 4 **Develop eLearning objects and supports**, at national level, for integration within all adult learning provision.
- 5 Build on the VEC Skills for Work Programme to design new models for the delivery of **workplace learning**, which require employers, education & training providers and employees to work in partnership.
- 6 Align eligibility criteria, welfare support entitlements and implications for social welfare payments across all education and training provision, in order to promote **equality of access and participation** for full-time and part-time students.

4.3 Programme Review

Challenges

In a context of global economic restructuring, the Adult and Further Education sector must demonstrate its effectiveness in terms of providing evidence-based outcomes. Performance accountability offers the chance to re-focus on what learners accomplish through participation in education and training programmes, and to re-orient every aspect of the system to achieve the best results.

While there has been a significant amount of “reporting” on Adult Education programmes, there have been few formal evaluations conducted on initiatives in the FE sector. Since accountability to learners, funders and policymakers relies on the capacity to track learner progress, SOLAS, the ETBs and government departments will have to work together to build the systems and the capability to manage this effectively. Such systems will allow for: 1) demonstration of outcomes for learners 2) comparison of learning across education and training provision and 3) evaluation of programmes against external quality standards.

The challenge will be to engage all of the stakeholders at local and national levels, in order to design a monitoring and evaluation system that builds on best practice, and provides a reliable evidence base for reporting and planning purposes. The key challenges will be to 1) agree on performance measurements and tools, 2) build mutual accountability relationships and 3) develop the capacity both to deliver and be accountable to learners and funding providers.

VEC Adult Education Sector Experience

- Significant efforts have been made over the past number of years at local level, to develop effective and appropriate self-evaluation systems (FETAC QA system; Youthreach QF; Adult Literacy QF; City and Guilds QA system; etc). The models of self-evaluation implemented have ensured that learners have a voice in the design and delivery of provision, through on-going consultation and feedback mechanisms.
- Participative research studies have been conducted to identify the wider benefits of adult learning (beyond certification and qualifications). These highlight outcomes in relation to the quality of learners’ health, family life, relationships, community involvement, etc.
- VEC adult education provision has been evaluated by a wide range of external stakeholders, who have been involved in co-funding programmes. e.g. HSE; Regeneration Agencies; Philanthropic Agencies; FÁS; DSFA; Dormant Accounts; EGF, ESF, SEUPB (Peace programmes, IFI, etc).

AEOA Recommendations regarding Programme Review

- 1 Findings from recent research studies on the **wider benefits of learning** should be taken into account when recording learner outcomes, and programmes’ effectiveness.
- 2 A common **progression tracking system** (building on the existing system between FÁS and the Department of Social Protection) could be used to monitor learner progression, using both NEES and ETBs data.
- 3 Any new national Learner Management Information System should be built on existing systems, such as the **FETAC Business system**, the FÁS/DSP shared database, etc. In order to track learner progress, the new MIS should be linked to the PPSN of each learner. This will enable and assist providers in ensuring that access, transfer and progression is tracked for each learner in the Further Education and Training sector.

Conclusions

While Ireland may be facing an unpredictable socio-economic future, it is clear that the new, emerging further education and training sector, with its new organisational structures and arrangements, must be built upon collaborative, integrated policy formulation and implementation. Furthermore, the education and training provision delivered through the new ETBs must be appropriate to the 2nd decade of the 21st Century and, therefore, significantly different from what went before, in terms of content, teaching and learning approaches and methodologies and modes of assessment and evaluation. The design, delivery and evaluation of all programmes must give detailed consideration to the provision of access, transfer and progression opportunities for learners.

It is incumbent on all involved in further and adult education and training: policy-makers, administrators and practitioners, to work together in order to change the landscape for adult learners in ways that will enable them develop the knowledge and skills they need, if they are to prosper in Ireland's rapidly changing society and economy.

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