

Reflections on Ten Years of Apprenticeship Expansion and Change

Introduction

Apprenticeships have been part of the education and training landscape in Ireland since the end of the 19th century, with periods of significant change and expansion over subsequent decades, including in the 1970s after the introduction of the Industrial Training Act, 1967. This legislation continues to underpin the system. The most recent period of transformation began after publication of the comprehensive *Review of Apprenticeship Training in Ireland* (Government of Ireland, 2013a). The review was influenced significantly by an EU apprenticeship renaissance at the time and by the imperative for Ireland to mobilise on skills investment and development as it emerged from a deeply damaging recession.

The review included far-reaching recommendations on the evolution of apprenticeships in traditional craft areas, and expansion into new areas, with further and higher education providers to play a key role in supporting industry to design, develop, and deliver apprenticeship training and keep it up to date. It underlined the need for a more open and agile model and the importance of employers and industry, commenting that employers 'should be firmly in the driving seat' (ibid., pp. 19–20).

Development

When the recommendations from the 2013 review began to be implemented, Ireland was still in the shadows of the recession. There were 7,000 apprentices in training and fewer than 3,000 apprenticeship employers. Almost every apprentice was under 25 years old and male, with only 30 women out of c.7000. They were participating in just 27 programmes, in the traditional craft areas of construction, electrical, engineering, and motor. All apprenticeships led to awards at level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).



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This article reflects on the expansion of the national apprenticeship system in Ireland since publication in 2013 of the milestone report *Review of Apprenticeship Training in Ireland*. It offers a summary account of the major developments during that decade of transformation, and it points to the resilience and innovation at its heart, continuing to shape the apprenticeship system into the future.

Implementation of the 2013 report has effectively been under way for the past 10 years. A national Apprenticeship Council was set up in 2014 to drive implementation. It oversaw the introduction of new apprenticeships and expansion into areas including technology, biopharma, hospitality, international finance, insurance, advanced manufacturing, and engineering. These new apprenticeships would lead to awards from levels 5 to 10 on the NFQ.

In line with the 2013 recommendations, each new apprenticeship is overseen by an industry-led consortium, which includes a coordinating training provider generally drawn from further or higher education. In 2016, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) produced a set of statutory guidelines for apprenticeships, including guidance on the new model of industry-led consortia and coordinating providers. This marked a departure from the more centralised approach that continued for craft apprenticeships, where the further education and training agency SOLAS remained the coordinating provider.

Current status

As we approach the end of 2024, and in a prospering, full-employment economy, the figures tell their own story. As of the end of September, there are over 28,400 apprentices in training – close to 2,500 of them women – employed by some 9,300 employers. Annual registrations hit a record 8,712 in 2023 and 9,352 in 2024. There are 77 national apprenticeship programmes, spanning a broad range of industries, over 25 of which lead to degree and master's awards, and one at PhD level. A further 23 programmes are due for launch over the next 12–18 months.

All this expansion is the result of an enormous amount of work and commitment from what is now an apprenticeship community of 50,000, including apprentices, employers, social partners, training providers, and support personnel across further and higher education. Increased State investment via the National Training Fund has been crucial, going from €88m in 2013 to €298m in 2024 and with €78m of additional funding confirmed in Budget 2025.

As of the end of September 2024, there are more than 28,400 apprentices in training employed by some 9,300 employers. Of the 28,400 apprentices, 2,500 are women.



Action plan

In April 2021, the government published a new *Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021–2025*. Its aim is to fully achieve the vision for a flexible system as set out in the 2013 review: ‘This plan seeks to provide a single system for the future which builds on the well-established strengths of craft apprenticeship and the learning from five years of consortia-led apprenticeship’ (Government of Ireland, 2021, p.14). Later, it states:

It is evident from the extensive consultation with stakeholders in the development of the new plan that it will not be viable to significantly expand and develop the apprenticeship system over the next five years without addressing the disparities in governance, funding and responsiveness [between the craft and consortia-led models]. (ibid., p.17)

The main rationale for creating the new single integrated model is to ensure that the system is future-proofed and agile.

New governance structures in the plan included establishment of a new National Apprenticeship Office (NAO) to oversee and manage the system as a whole, and a new advisory body, the National Apprenticeship Alliance, to include key employer, apprentice, social partner, and training provider representatives, building on the work of the previous Apprenticeship Council.

The plan includes 63 actions that aim to ‘deliver an apprenticeship system that is flexible and responsive, providing a strong value proposition for employers and potential apprentices, is attractive and easy to engage with, and delivers high standards and sought after qualifications’ (ibid.).

The goal at the heart of the plan – to create a single integrated system for apprenticeship – is the most transformative and has received perhaps the most intensive debate among partners. The main rationale for creating the integrated model is to ensure that the system is future-proofed and agile. That requires a system with industry at the heart of design and delivery, supported by expert education and training providers and adequate investment to enable growth and continuous enhancement of the experience for both apprentices and employers.

Parity in funding supports for employers is sought as part of the new model, along with updated governance arrangements for industry-led consortia working with the NAO, and reconfiguration by SOLAS of its involvement in craft apprenticeships, with transfer of its coordinating-provider role to education and training providers. The awarding body or bodies for craft apprenticeships are also being considered; in the future, QQI may no longer be the sole awarding body.

Conclusion

Throughout this period of change, a sense of history is so important and useful. History reminds us that the apprenticeship system has in fact been characterised by periods of transformation since the late 19th century. The ability of not just the system but the people in it to adapt and show resilience and innovation is what has created the highly successful system we have today, and it will support the important work in the coming years to fully achieve the vision set out in 2013 for Ireland's apprenticeship system.

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