Preparing learners for the workplace in Europe: vocational education and training in France and Ireland

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ABSTRACT This paper examines features of vocational education and training in France and Ireland including forms of learning—formal, informal and non-formal learning, as well as the context for skills validation irrespective of where/how knowledge is acquired. The paper concludes that vocational education and training in both France and Ireland are well embedded in the general education policy frameworks; VET in both countries are also heavily influenced by the development of vocational education and training policy in the European Union, as agreed in Council of Ministers key policy documents such as the Lisbon and Copenhagen processes.

Keywords Vocational education and training, Labour market, Employment, Apprenticeship, Competence, France, Ireland, Europe

Introduction

Europe’s vocational education and training policy is predicated on economic factors such as jobs and growth, part of a wider strategy to make Europe the most competitive economic region in the world (Ogunleye, 2007; Com, 2009), when labour market participation among 20-64 years old is projected to reach 75 percent by the year 2020 (Com, 2010). However, despite the differences in the national features and structures of vocational education and training, it is instructive to note that member states of the European Union align their vocational education...
and training policy with the Lisbon and Copenhagen processes (see, for instance, Stenfors-Hayes et al., 2008; Ogunleye, 2011). This alignment is evident in the two examples—case countries—highlighted in the following paragraphs.

Vocational education and training in France

Since the 1971 Law on the organisation of vocational training and the subsequent location of vocational training under state and regional jurisdictions in France, the reform of vocational education and training has progressed unabated (see, for instance, Cedefop, 2008). The French model of vocational education and training is centralised and embedded in the comprehensive education system. The first track of vocational education is situated in the secondary school system—initial vocational education and training (IVET), where students in upper secondary schools combine classroom learning with practical workshop activities. According to Cedefop (2008, p.28), ‘37% of students in their final year of junior high school choose vocational route—26.5% going on to vocational high school, 3.7% to agricultural high school and 6.7% into apprenticeship—while the others continued general schooling.’ Students studying towards IVET in schools receive certificate of vocational skills (COP) which aims to meet the ‘immediate requirements’ of the labour market. Apprenticeship as a school-based vocational education takes place in workplaces or at training centres across the country; however, the low take up of apprenticeships is linked to the poor confidence that stakeholders, mostly employers, have in the apprenticeship programme. Furthermore, the apprenticeship route is largely ‘underdeveloped’ (Mehaut, 2006, p.3) albeit expanding.

The second track of France’s vocational education is continuing vocational training (CVT) and is concerned with people—young and old—who left formal education without a qualification: this category of people may already be part of the workforce or may include those seeking jobs. The central aim CVT is to assist people ‘to find or return to work, to remain in employment, to develop their skills and acquire different levels of vocational qualification, to enhance their earning power and to improve their cultural and social circumstances.’ (Cedefop, 2008, p.36). IVET is supervised by the Ministry of Education; CVT is supervised by the Ministry of Labour.

Three variants of vocational education qualifications are awarded in France—diplomes, titres and certificats. Ministry of education awards diplomes, which have a dual value—it could be both academic and vocation; Ministry of Labour awards, titres, have an equal standing with diplomes. Private bodies and organisations award certificats (CQP) to people that have followed continuing education and training
CQP certificates enable holders to seek career change or change jobs. It is worth noting that each award relates to occupation or employment; although, high school diplomes are often well regarded by employers. This latter development notwithstanding, concerns have been raised, especially by small businesses as to the ability of diploma holders to adjust to work situations or their capacity to be job-ready.

In France, vocational learning is conceptually understood to include but not exclusively ‘learning at all levels’; here, as mentioned previously, there is a significant emphasis on the labour market which either intentionally or unintentionally favours those who are in work. The French laws give every French resident/citizen legal rights to vocational training but these rights apply more to people in employment than those out of the labour market, which raises the issue of exclusion of unemployed people, in particular socially vulnerable groups including people with mental illness, ethnic minority groups and single parents. However, in the past few years, France has implemented vocational training through a number of articles (texts) and laws—most notably the law on social modernisation (January 17th 2002), the law on vocational training and social dialogue (May 4th 2004), the law on local freedoms and responsibilities (13 August 2003) and article 133 on validation of ‘acquired experience’ (see Tulip, 2008). These laws and policy texts emphasised continuing education and lifelong vocational training albeit this new orientation places an emphasis on employment as opposed to social and cultural reasons for learning. For example, Law no 391 of the 4 May 2004 guarantees the rights of individual people in employment to individual training leave (as earlier noted), individual vocational training, individual professional development that could take the form of internship. The law also guarantees the individual right to negotiate training sessions that could take place during or outside official working hours; it also guarantees the validation of ‘acquired experience’ or knowledge and experience gained in a variety of settings.

As noted in the preceding paragraphs, the main beneficiaries of vocational training are people in work (employees) and job applicants as well as young people aged 16-26 who are entitled to ‘assisted’ job placement or employment. The low priority given to particularly disadvantaged groups, such as those who are kept away from the labour market because of mental illness, or who might not be in work due to physical incapacity or other factors, have raised the legitimate issue of equity and equality of access to vocational training in France. On the contrary, the French national system of skills validation, which now gives recognition to prior learning and ‘acquired’ experience, provides a useful tool in promoting social mobility and inclusion: for example, individuals are now able to validate vocational learning by ‘a diploma, academic award’ through the national vocational qualifica-
tion system. This means work undertaken in social, community and voluntary settings can be validated just as the learning acquired or experience acquired in a work context, or in any other setting. Gramain et al. (2006) point out that the French ‘social assistance renewal’ policy embraces the spirit of the European Union social policy agenda, and is widely recognised as a major policy tool for promoting social cohesion and for engaging socially disadvantaged groups.

The term competence is at the heart of French vocational education, especially as constructed in the European Qualification Framework. It is therefore important to note the construction of the meaning of ‘competence’ in the French context. Performance in the workplace is central to French vocational training—be it IVET or CVT. As a result, competence is based on knowledge (Brockmann et al., 2008) and it is defined as the ability of an individual ‘to deal with complex work situations, drawing on multiple resources that the employee brings to the workplace’. This development of an individual competence is not limited to task alone, but also includes the development of the whole person, something that makes French model almost unique in the European Union member states.

France operates a policy of ‘no-discrimination’ in relation to skills validation irrespective of the settings in which the learning took place. According to Law 2002 on Validation of Experience Knowledge (VAE), it is possible to validate knowledge and skills acquired on the job as well as those acquired in non-formal and informal learning settings. The new system of assessment and validation (bilan de compétences) allows individuals—or those working in the public, voluntary or private sectors, including craftsmen and tradesmen—to identify their competences and aptitudes and have these assessed with a view to obtaining a full or partial vocational qualifications such as the state-designed national vocational diploma qualification or sector-based professional qualifications. An OECD (2005, p.21) report indicates that between 1992 and 2002, 12000 people obtained ‘a certification by the recognition of their professional experience’ and an additional 15000 individuals have obtained full or partial certificates since law 2002 on validating knowledge, skills and on-the-job experience was introduced. There is a framework for accrediting prior achievements; this was developed partly to encourage other groups such women and unemployed adults to join or return to the labour market (Gendron, 2001), and partly to address the high level of unemployment in the economy (see, also, Colardyn, 2004). It is important to note that social partners are involved in setting up and validating vocational qualifications for the professions; this is a significant role in the system of continuing vocational training in that social partners have decision-making powers as well as a consultative and funds management function (Mehaut, 2006).

National policies on vocational education and training recognised and sup-
ported the three forms of learning, although the system does not give an equal weighing to each of the learning activities. However, a recent reform of the national qualification system has removed the traditional distinction in the system of validation between formal education and training and non-formal and informal learning. As noted earlier, it is now possible for a person to identify and assess their competencies and aptitudes ‘without going through a formal validation or certification process’ (OECD, 2005, p.14). The state funds vocational education, but companies are required by the Law of 2004 to contribute to the funding of employees’ training.

Vocational education and training in Ireland

There is no single ‘one-stop’ vocational education and training policy in Ireland as different policy aspects fall under different ministries. However, the responsibility for initial vocational education and training (IVET) fall under the Department of Education and Science, while that of continuing vocational education and training (CVET) falls under the Department ofEnterprise, Trade and Employment. The initial vocational education and training includes those vocational courses offered in schools, colleges, further education and higher education institutions; while continuing vocational education and training includes vocational provision offered in work places including ‘responsibility for policies to upgrade the skills and competencies of the adult population within a framework of lifelong learning’ (Harper and Fox, 2003, p.9). There is also a CVET scheme designed to train unemployed people, to provide them with on-going education and training to bring their skills and competences up to date. Since there is no single, one-stop policy for VET in Ireland, questions have been raised about the lack of coherent VET in Ireland since the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, which oversees IVET only sees situation from its own point of view, while other government departments are concerned about their own interest—for example, the Department of Agriculture is only interested in VET policy as applied to fisheries and agriculture, which clearly illustrate an absence of a ‘one stop’ VET policy.

The apprenticeship system is part of VET in Ireland and it is relatively well developed. The system is organised and developed by FAS—Training and Employment Authority—with the support of the Department of Education and Science. The goal of the system is to train an individual—an apprentice—to become a craft person; the training could take place on-the-job or in FAS approved training centres. It could take up to seven years to become a fully trained apprentice, after which a national certificate of craftsmanship is awarded by the Further Education and Training Awards Council. However, despite a well established apprenticeship
programme, there is ‘virtually no direct progression pathway [currently] on offer to craft persons’ (Buck and McGin, 2005). Also, the scheme is narrowly focused on a small set of occupations. This means that the scheme is under developed or underutilised by employers. This latter situation has led to a recommendation by the OECD (2010) that a total review of the system should be carried out with a view to improving ‘its efficiency and fairness in addressing the skills needs of the labour market. Make extensive use of workplace training in all VET programmes building on the existing types of provision and the experience with apprenticeship.’ In addition to apprenticeships, Ireland’s Youthreach initiative is another related but complementary vocational programme which is unique in many ways. The Youthreach programme offers a two year ‘integrated education, vocational and work experience’ to school dropouts or those young people who left or withdrawn early/late from school (Buck and McGin, 2005). In 2003, for instance, 40 per cent of young people who completed Youthreach programme went on to employment.

It is important to note the features of Ireland’s unique school Leaving Certificate Programme (LCP) which is also situated at the heart of Ireland’s vocational education and training. Leaving Certificate and Vocational Programme (LCVP) is an aspect of the LCP scheme which emphasises the vocational orientation of the leaving certificate programme. LCVP certificates are aimed at people seeking employment or those entering the labour market. According to Harper and Fox (2003), for instance, ‘in 2001, of the 54,499 students who completed the leaving Certificate, 12,354, 23% completed the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme.’ Many more young people who completed the vocational leaving certificate programme ‘enter labour market than do those who completed an established leaving certificate—the latter tend to pursue full time education’ (Buck and McGin, 2005). According to the OECD (2010), one of the strengths of Irish VET lies in the coherence and comprehensiveness of its national qualifications framework, which also integrate ‘both vocational and general qualifications and include a strong commitment to the avoidance of dead-ends and pathways of progression.’ Within the National Framework for Qualifications organised by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, a ten-level qualification is available for VET participants from foundation to doctorate. Awards for vocational education and training are undertaken by Further Education and Training Awards Council and Higher Education and Training Awards Council, aside from those awards that are made by the compulsory education (school) sector.

There are mechanisms for accrediting prior learning; for instance, the National Qualifications Authority has responsibility for recognising prior learning. This system enables learners to transfer knowledge across learning and qualifications con-
texts. There is also a mechanism for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (and prior learning) within the lifelong learning framework. However, the progress of accrediting and validating prior learning is slow.

VET is primarily funded by the state through intermediate bodies such as higher education authority, Vocational Education Committees (VECs), etc. However, VET is provided by a range of centres throughout Ireland; these centres include further education colleges, universities, Institutes of Technology (provide IVET for young people), local VEC-funded vocational education and training centres, Youthreach and Traveller Training Centres. At the county level, Vocational Education Committees are responsible for VET; one criticism of the current funding arrangement is that the ministry of education and science still dictates the direction of VET policy even though county authorities—39 Vocation Education Councils—supposedly make decisions on vocational education and training. The situation at the moment is that the 39 VECs are often keen to toe the central government’s line because the Exchequer, at the central level, still makes funding decisions. However, one reason for the latter arrangement is connected with the fact that Ireland is small and does not have strong institutions to deal with VET needs locally.

Delivering vocational education and training involves strong partnership between Ireland’s stakeholders. To this end, the partnership between the government and social partners (comprised of trade unions, and employers’ organisations) is well established. Indeed, since 1987, there have been rolling partnership agreements between the state and social partners; these agreements covered a range of issues, including policy development on vocational education and training. The social partners are not only involved in vocational training, but also decision making and funding. However, the role of social partners in vocational training is narrow and limited [in most cases] to industrial training, hotel and hospitality training, HR and a few others.

Conclusion

Vocational education and training in France and Ireland are well embedded in the general education policy frameworks. In both countries, initial vocational education and training (IVET) is fully incorporated and implemented at compulsory education (high school) level while continuing vocational education and training (CVET) is directed at unemployed adults or people seeking work or changing jobs. Despite these and other similarities, VET policy in France [especially recent VET laws] disproportionately favours people already in employment, compared to Ireland. Apprenticeship is at the heart of VET in France and Ireland, although it is
more developed or utilised in Ireland than does in France. The State remains the
main sponsor of VET in both countries and social partners such as trade unions and
the organised private sector [employers’ organisations such as chambers of com-
merce] play a significant role especially in delivering VET. All in all, vocational
education and training in both France and Ireland are heavily influenced by the
development of vocational education and training policy in the European Union,
as agreed in Council of Ministers policy documents such as the Lisbon and Copen-
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