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INOUE Submission to the Department of Education and Skills

Consultation Paper on their Statement
of Strategy 2016-2018

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IRISH NATIONAL ORGANISATION OF THE UNEMPLOYED

Introduction

The Department of Education and Skills ran a consultation process on their Statement of Strategy 2016-2018 in late May, early June 2016. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: the first part contained six overview questions; while the second part reflected the sections in the education chapter, chapter 10, in the new Programme for Government. In this submission the INOU focused on the first part of the questionnaire, and question eight in the second part which covers the further education and training and reskilling elements of the education and training system.

This submission was completed on-line at: <http://education.ie/en/The-Department/Statement-of-Strategy-2016-2018/Consultation-Paper-Statement-of-Strategy-2016-2018.html#sthash.VSIKeM6D.dpuf>

1. How well does the Education service meet the needs of children and students?

1(a) What improvements can be made within existing resources

Improved provision of information on the options that are available to unemployed people, people employed in low skilled employment, and early school leavers, so they can assess their learning opportunities and improve their employment prospects. Improved integration and transition between the employment services and supports and education and training opportunities, opportunities that are meaningful for the learner and lead to better outcomes. Integral to this is getting the referrals / matching piece correct: underpinning this must be good guidance; appropriately trained and experienced staff; and having IT systems that are working effectively. And, if multiple systems are being used e.g. BOMI, CRS, PLSS, then they should connect or interact properly.

1(b) What improvements can be made through new provision

Key to tackling disadvantage is people being able to move out of unemployment, out of low paid, precarious work into decent jobs. Such a transition invariably requires retraining and upskilling. At the organisation's recent Annual Delegate Conference, delegates called "*for the provision of a full range of education and training supports for unemployed people which recognises diversity and specific needs when accessing training and education.*" The Programme for Government states "*We will support an increase in the number of flexible courses and opportunities available; giving people the opportunity to attend courses part time, during evenings, in the summer and at weekends.*" (p93). While this development is welcome and acknowledges the importance of part-time and flexible education and training, it fails to recognise that for many people who need them, they are often unaffordable. To properly address social exclusion and disadvantage, the costs of participation in lifelong education and training must be addressed.

2. Comment on work currently being undertaken by the Department in your area of interest and/or expertise. (What are we doing well, what could we do better)?

The Further Education and Training Strategy and National Skills Strategies are welcome developments. However, there is a gap between these strategies and the reality on the ground. Some of this is emerging because of timing issues, the VECs and FAS Training Centres were reconfigured and emerged as the ETBs; the Department of Social Protection absorbed FAS Employment and Community Services and they re-emerged as Intreo. However, there are serious concerns about who is and should be assessing unemployed learners' needs and identifying the most appropriate re-skilling options for them, options that should improve their prospects of securing and maintaining a decent job. There is also a concern that the training element to FET is losing visibility and there is a lack of clarity as to who exactly is responsible for ensuring that this provision happens, and that potential learners are made aware of it and referred to it where appropriate.

3. Are there opportunities (e.g. new areas of work) which the Department should consider when developing the 2016 - 2018 strategy which would advance the achievement of our mission, vision and objectives across the continuum of education and skills?

A stronger commitment to FET, backed up with the necessary resources to ensure that this sector plays its full part in addressing the learning and re-skilling needs of unemployed people and others of working age. The ESRI's evaluation for the Department of Social Protection of the Back to Education Allowance, where the outcomes for people engaging in second chance education were very disappointing and deeply worrying given the strong correlation between educational and employment status. It is absolutely vital that the education and training sector understands why these results were so disappointing. Does it reflect that the fact that for some participants, alternative provision is required rather than re-entry into a system that may not have delivered for them the first time around? Does it reflect on employers' preferences, that they only recognise, value certain routes through the education system and fail to value others? It is important to get considered answers to these questions if the Department of Education and Skill's mission "*To facilitate individuals through learning, to achieve their full potential and contribute to Ireland's social, cultural and economic development*" and its vision to have "*An internationally recognised education and training system based on evidence informed policies designed to anticipate and respond to the changing needs of learners, society and the economy*" are to be secured.

4. How should success on achieving our strategies be measured.

Through on-going monitoring and evaluation: are programme meeting their objectives? If not, why not? Are some of the deviations from these objectives in response to otherwise unmet needs? Are learners progressing through the QQI framework? In particular are learners lower down the framework receiving the necessary supports to progress up to the next level? For some learners, they will dip in and out of learning, depending on the

demands of their job or job seeking: for these learners, are the supports in place to ensure that they can make this type of lifelong journey? Are the warning mechanisms in place to capture the implications of job redundancies, de-skilling? Mechanisms that will seek to ensure that people do not drift into precarious employment or structural unemployment? Who will capture data on the nature of the employment learners have secured, in particular unemployed learners, who will oversee whether or not they have secured decent and sustainable employment? These are the types of questions that must be continuously explored to ensure that *"individuals through learning, to achieve their full potential and contribute to Ireland's social, cultural and economic development."* (part of DES mission statement)

5. Comment on any issues relating to the continuum of education and skills, in addition to your particular area of interest and/or expertise

The proper provision of good quality guidance is required to assess peoples' existing skills, identify where there are gaps and provide good quality information on how best to address them. As part of this development a fully functioning RPL system is required, so that engagement in education and training is seen as acknowledging people's existing skills and experience and seen as an opportunity to further enhance and develop them. Depending on the first two issues, the provision of targeted education and training provision may be required, this could be sector specific and provided to facilitate the formal recognition of people's existing knowledge. Traineeships could be used as part of this process. A definition used by the European Commission states that they: *'...can be described as work practice (either as part of a study curriculum or not) including an educational/training component which is limited in time. They allow to document practical work experience as part of the individual CV and/or as requested in educational curricula or to gain work practice for the purpose of facilitating the transition from education and training to the labour market. They are predominantly short to middle-term (a few weeks up to 6 months, in certain cases one year).'* It is welcome that in the Programme for Government it notes that *"We will also significantly increase the number of traineeship places. We will develop a mechanism to recognise a person's practical work experience and expertise in order to enable them to take on an apprentice."* (p93)

6. Any other observations that you would suggest the Department should consider in the formulation of our strategy for education and skills 2016 - 2018

In the Programme for Government it notes that *"There has been significant change in the Further, Adult and Community Education sector in light of the dissolution of FAS and the VECs, and the establishment of new structures inclusive of SOLAS, Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI), and Education and Training Boards (ETBs). We will ensure that these new structures and systems are empowering those who did not get an equal opportunity for education in their youth, and that implementation of educational programs and skills training for those unemployed or underemployed are effective in supporting their path to*

quality employment. We will do this by initiating a Review of the Further, Adult and Community Education sector by the Oireachtas Committee on Education and an implementation of reforms to ensure the effectiveness of the sector.” (p94)

While welcoming this development, it would be important to note that for many unemployed people there is a growing sense that engagement in education and training is not acknowledged as they would like within DSP based progression plans. Yet for many unemployed people there is a skills gap between the jobs they could attain and the ones that are available, in particular the jobs that would secure them a better future. On the other hand, unemployed people have experienced being referred onto courses for the sake of it, being ‘activated’ as an end in itself, rather than as a means to an end. Neither development is welcome: it does not lead to a good use of resources; discourages productive learning; and, can undermine the provision of good quality education and training. These issues must be explored and addressed.

It will be equally important to support and resource good quality alternative and community based learning. To map out clear progression links to other education and training opportunities so unemployed learners can see a real pathway into a better future, a sustainable job. And to ensure the provision of good quality information on the options that are available, their relevance and usefulness to the learner and his or her needs.

8. Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future

8(a) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

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8(b) How should progress on Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future be measured?

Through on-going monitoring and evaluation: are programme meeting their objectives? If not, why not? Are some of the deviations from these objectives in response to otherwise unmet needs? Are learners progressing through the QQI framework? In particular are learners lower down the framework receiving the necessary supports to progress up to the next level? For some learners, they will dip in and out of learning, depending on the demands of their job or job seeking: for these learners, are the supports in place to ensure that they can make this type of lifelong journey? Are the warning mechanisms in place to capture the implications of job redundancies, de-skilling? Mechanisms that will seek to ensure that people do not drift into precarious employment or structural unemployment? Who will capture data on the nature of the employment learners have secured, in particular unemployed learners, who will oversee whether or not they have secured decent and sustainable employment? These are the types of questions that must be continuously

explored to ensure that *“individuals through learning, to achieve their full potential and contribute to Ireland’s social, cultural and economic development.”* (part of DES mission statement)

8(c) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

Implement the National Skills Strategy 2025 and ensure that Objective 5 is properly resourced and fully met, that *“There will be a specific focus on active inclusion to support participation in education and training and the labour market.”* And that proper interagency and departmental supports and actions are put in place to ensure that Objective 6, *“We will support an increase in the supply of skills to the labour market,”* is meaningful for unemployed people. It will be critical to also properly support community based learning as part of these developments, as often it is this learning route which is the most accessible to people distant from the labour market.