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INOUE Submission to the Action Plan for Education 2018

Incorporating the Department of
Education and Skills APE Survey Questions

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INTRODUCTION

The INOU welcomes this opportunity to feed into the development of the **Action Plan for Education 2018**. This submission will look at the existing Plans for Education and their relevance for meeting the needs of unemployed people; it will then explore the changing unemployment context; and finally use the APE 2018 survey questions to examine what needs to happen in 2018 to ensure that unemployed people can gain access to their right education and training option for them to improve their long-term employment prospects.

“The INOU is a federation of unemployed people, unemployed centres, unemployed groups, community organisations and Trade Unions. The INOU represents and defends the rights and interests of those who want decent employment and cannot obtain it. We promote and campaign for policies to achieve full employment for all. We also campaign for an acceptable standard of living for unemployed people and their dependents. The INOU is an anti-sectarian, anti-racist, non-party political organisation which promotes equality of opportunity within society.” (INOUE Mission Statement)

The organisation has over 200 affiliated organisations and 2,750 individual members. We work at the local and national level on issues affecting unemployed people through the provision of training and welfare rights information services; analysis of Government policies and related advocacy work; and working with a wide range of other organisations on issues of common concern.

Action Plan for Education 2016-2019

On September 15th 2016, the Government launched their Action Plan for Education (APE) which included an ambition for Ireland *“at becoming the best education service in Europe”*. On page two it rightly notes that *“Education and training services support people throughout their lives. They play a huge part in developing their mental resilience and personal wellbeing. They equip people with the ability to adapt, to work with others, to think critically and to be creative. They give people the skills and knowledge to fulfil their personal goals.”* It is curious that given the inclusion and acknowledgement of ‘training’ within the plan, that the word is not included in the title or the stated ambition.

With regard to the labour market it noted *“In collaboration with key stakeholders, we will ensure that our education and training system provides flexible opportunities for learners to acquire the skills needed, so that they can access the labour market and increase Ireland’s competitiveness by addressing areas of strategic skills demands and deepening collaboration between industry and the education and training sector.”* (p9)

The Plan contained five goals:

1. Improve the learning experience and the success of learners
2. Improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with special educational needs

3. Help those delivering education services to continuously improve
4. Build stronger bridges between education and the wider community
5. Improve national planning and support services

Under Goal 2, Action 44 a National Policy on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) should be developed. This would be a very welcome development and should provide an opportunity for people who have no qualifications, but who have good work experience to gain formal recognition of their existing skills.

Under Action 45 the plan aimed to *“ensure FET is meeting the specific needs of unemployed people and other groups impacted by disadvantage.”*

- *ETBS working closely with Intreo offices under new protocols expanding provision to DSP client groups in line with Pathways to Work 2016-20.*
- *Conduct research into barriers to participation in FET, with particular emphasis on unemployed people and other disadvantaged group.*
- *Research findings disseminated to providers to inform the annual service planning process.”*

Under Goal 3, Action 79, the plan aimed to implement *“the Programme Learner Support Service (PLSS) to provide a FET database which provides information on outcomes and supports linkages with other data sets, to allow for the follow-up of learners upon course completion, measurement of course impact on learners’ socio-economic status, and the planning of support services and investment priorities.”* And under Action 80 to *“Improve the impact of PLC, VTOS and BTEI schemes, by reviewing each programme, publishing the review, and setting out time-bound implementation plans.”*

Under Goal 4, Action 91: *“Develop innovative responses to skills gaps across key priorities areas of the economy including ICT, languages, bio-pharma.”* To ensure that unemployed people can benefit from these developments, Action 105 which aimed to *“Oversee development and annual calls for Springboard+”* has an important role to play. There is an anomaly that has arisen recently that must be addressed: whereby people in receipt of a Jobseekers payment are barred from the two year part-time ICT Conversion course. This affects a small cohort of people, but could enhance their long-term employability and in a work area short of skilled people.

The roll-out and resourcing of Action 109 will also be important, and in keeping with a motion to the INOU’s 2016 Annual Delegate Conference, which sought *“to ensure that all AEGI services are fully staffed including those services that have no staff currently or have staff on leave as nationwide access to Adult Educational Guidance and Information is a very necessary and important service for the unemployed.”* Action 109 aims to *“Review guidance*

services, tools and careers information for school students and adults and recommend changes to improve services.”

Action Plan for Education 2017

On 6th February 2017, the Government launched the Action Plan for Education 2017, which again noted that it is part of the Government’s strategy *“to provide the best education and training system in Europe over the next decade”*. The plan contains more than 400 action under five strategic goals named in the APE 2016-2019.

On page 29 it notes *“We will expand the range of education and training programmes to better meet the needs of key target groups, including the unemployed and early school leavers.”* Action 45, under Goal 2 again it states the plan will *“Ensure FET is meeting the specific needs of unemployed people and other groups impacted by disadvantage”*. This Action has three parts and the delivery agents for each part in order are: SOLAS; the Department of Education and Skills; the Education and Training Boards. Action 45 sub-actions 1-3 are slightly different to the APE 2016-2019 version and are as follows:

- 45.1 Publish research into barriers to participation in FET, with particular emphasis on unemployed people and other disadvantaged groups.
- 45.2 Set targets for participation by unemployed people at programme and ETB level through the agreement of 2017 Service Plans.
- 45.3 Deliver FET provision to DSP client groups, in line with Pathways to Work 2016-2020, through ETBs working closely with Intreo Offices under new protocols, to support and develop engagement between ETB and Intreo centres and local branch offices, to ensure case officers have a full understanding of the range of programmes provided through the ETBs, to support improved client matching and to ensure that the emerging education and training needs of DSP clients are highlighted and addressed through local area liaison.

Under the theme of ‘inclusion’ most of the plan focuses on the formal education system. However, amongst its target it states that it will aim to *“Reduce the percentage of the Labour force at levels 1-3 on NFQ TO 7%, from a current rate of 15% by 2020”*. (p34). According to the latest Quarterly National Household Survey, Q2 2017, 25.8% of people who are unemployed had attained no higher educational level than ‘lower secondary’.

There are other actions under Goal 2 that could have a positive impact on people of working age. For example, under Action 42 the Departments of Education and Skills; Social Protection; Children and Youth Affairs will *“Prepare a report on the barriers to lone parents accessing higher education, and publish the report’s recommendations in advance of Budget 2017.”* While under Action 43 they will *“Reintroduce maintenance grant for the most disadvantaged post graduate students.”* And later on in the year, under Action 44, the

Department of Education and Skills; Quality and Qualifications Ireland; and the Higher Education Authority will “*Publish a national policy on the Recognition of Prior Learning.*” Under Goal 4 and the measures to address skills needs, the Government plans to provide:

- Over 5,000 Springboard+ places in 2017 within an overall target of 50,000 Higher Education places provided by 2021.
- Further Education and Training to over 320,000 beneficiaries in 2017.

While under Action 104 it is still proposed to “*Review guidance services, tools and careers information for students and adults and recommend changes to improve services.*” This action will be led by SOLAS; National Centre for Guidance in Education; and the Higher Education Authority.

CHANGING CONTEXT

According to the latest Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS), Quarter 2 2017, there were 141,500 people unemployed and the unemployment rate stood at 6.4%. 48.7% of those unemployed or 68,900 people were long-term unemployed. Quarter 3 2010 was the last time the proportion of people who are long-term unemployed was less than half the overall figure. In Q2 2017 the long-term unemployment rate was 3.1%. There were 2.063m people employed and the employment rate for 15-64 year olds stood at 65.7%.

These statistics are a huge improvement on the crisis height of 328,100 people unemployed in Q3 2011, and for those unemployed more than a year, 204,300 in Q1 2012. Q1 2012 is also the quarter when employment dipped to its lowest point, 1.825m people.

However, there is still a considerable distance to go to reach pre-crisis levels. Ten years ago, employment reach a height of 2.17m people in Q3 2007, in Q2 2017 there were 2.06m people employed.

Looking at these figures from the perspective of level of education attained, a more challenging picture emerges, in particular at the lower end of the education and training spectrum. This scenario not only presents challenges for the unemployed people effected and their search for decent work, but also presents challenges for Ireland as the country strives to ensure it has the right skills mix for sustainable economic development.

- In Q2 2007 the unemployment rate for people with primary education or below was 8.4%; in Q2 2017 it was 15.3%.
- For people with lower secondary education, the unemployment rate was 7.5% in Q2 2007 and 12.5% in Q2 2017.
- For upper / higher secondary education, the unemployment rate ten years ago was 4.7%, in comparison to 8.5% in 2017.
- For post-secondary non-tertiary the gap is not as large, 4.3% in Q2 2007 vis-à-vis 7.1% in Q2 2017.

- For third level non-degree the gap is again smaller, 3.5% ten years ago in comparison to 4.4% in Q2 2017.
- In both time periods the lowest rates of unemployment are seen for those with third level degree or higher: 2.1% Q2 2007 vis-à-vis 3.1% in Q2 2017.

SURVEY QUESTIONS

In response to the question ‘*Are you satisfied with progress made to date in implementing the Action Plan?*’ two options were given: yes or no, and then respondents were asked to give their comments on the progress made. Progress has been made on some issues, the report on “*Barriers to Further Education and Training with Particular Reference to Long Term Unemployed Persons and Other Vulnerable Individuals*” was published in July. The report explores the motivational/dispositional; economic and social welfare; organisational; information and guidance issues facing people. It captures the range of issues that need to be addressed if, for example, FET is to play a key role in realising the goals of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection’s *Action Plan for Jobless Households*.

However, the INOU is concerned that in the second progress report for 2017 under Action 45.2 “*Projections for participation on FET Programmes are set in the FET Services Plan. A decision was taken not to include targets for unemployed people due to the improved economic position.*” This is particularly worrying given the higher unemployment levels for people with lower educational status. The numbers crisis may be over, but significant socio-economic challenges remain, and there is a real danger that as Ireland strives to upskill itself that many people will be left behind caught in a low pay / welfare impoverishing merry-go-round.

The additional 1,000 places announced in Budget 2018 for Springboard+ is welcome and provides an important support for unemployed people to gain additional or new skills in areas of the labour market with decent jobs.

However, it is disappointing that ‘a national policy on Recognition of Prior Learning’ has yet to emerge; or that the evaluation of the Post Leaving Certificate courses has yet to be published.

The Survey then went on to ask ‘*what actions for 2018 should DES consider in order to*’

1. *Improve the learning experience and the success of learners*
2. *Improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with special educational needs*
3. *Help those delivering education services to continually improve*
4. *Build stronger bridges between education and the wider community*
5. *Improve national planning and support services*

Improve the learning experience and the success of learners

- 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, which must be underpinned by good guidance provided by appropriately trained and experienced staff, who in turn need to be supported by IT systems that work effectively.

Improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with special educational needs

- 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.
- 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. As part of this process community education and traineeships have important roles to play.
- To properly address social exclusion and disadvantage, the costs of participation in lifelong education and training must be addressed; and integral to this is the proactive provision of information on affordable and accessible courses.
- Undertake research to ascertain why the outcomes from second chance education appear to be poorer for unemployed people in comparison to their peers. The ESRI's research into the Back to Education Allowance¹ was deeply worrying as it throws up questions for the well-established and strong correlation between educational and employment status.

Build stronger bridges between education and the wider community

- Important to support and resource good quality alternative and community based learning; and 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.

¹ An Evaluation of the Back to Education Allowance, ESRI Research Series, November 3, 2015

- Resource the provision of good quality information on the options that are available in the local community and how it could assist the learner to meaningfully meet his or her needs.

Improve national planning and support services

- Plan for the employment and unemployment impacts of Brexit and in particular to identify the emerging and possible job losses, the potential alternative enterprises and jobs, and the education and training supports that are required to ensure unemployed people can gain access to these jobs, which must be decent and sustainable.
- Resource the provision of good career and employment guidance to support unemployed people to make informed choices, access appropriate education and training, leading to good quality employment in terms of job security and salary levels and in particular to ensure this is available to individuals and communities most disadvantaged in the labour market.