

THEMATIC PAPER: APPRENTICESHIP

What's the story with apprenticeship in Ireland? Higher education institutions' experiences in implementing a new model 2016-2023

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Abstract

This paper reports on experiences of implementation of a new "consortium-led" model of apprenticeship in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ireland. The findings show differences in understandings and interpretations of how the new model of apprenticeship is intended to work, both within and between HEIs. These differences are not clearly linked to any type of HEI, but they are reflected in different ways of operationalization, which has implications in terms of the ways in which apprenticeships are experienced and of activity and impact in inter alia the higher education and apprenticeship systems. The findings also show that the ways in which new apprenticeship is experienced as different compared with HEIs' existing provision include those related to teaching and learning, assessment of learning, and greater complexity and resource intensity. The research provides a contribution to knowledge in an area that has been explored little in the literature.

Keywords

apprenticeship, reform, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Apprenticeship forms a key element in Irish Government education policy. Over the past 50 years or so the national apprenticeship system has gone through several formal national-level reviews that have led to major changes in the way in which apprenticeship is designed, developed, and delivered. The current national apprenticeship system is a statutory, regulated part of the formal tertiary education system. It includes a "standards-based" model of apprenticeship introduced in 1993—also known as "craft" apprenticeship—which operates primarily in construction-related occupations, is targeted mainly at school leavers, and leads to a further education and training (FET) award at level 6 on the 10-level Irish National Framework of Qualifications. It also includes a new "consortium-led" or "enterprise-led" model of apprenticeship first implemented in 2016

following a 2013 review of apprenticeship training in Ireland. This model, which includes a new system of governance, leads to both further and higher education (HE) awards at level 5 certificate to level 10 doctorate degree in a wide range of industries and occupations. There are plans to develop a single integrated national apprenticeship system (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2021).

One of the most significant aspects of the recent reforms in apprenticeship in Ireland therefore is that for the first time all higher education institutions (HEIs), including publicly-funded universities and "independent" including private HEIs can be involved in the development and delivery of apprenticeships that now lead to HE awards.


A HEI's participation in an individual apprenticeship may

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Received: 27 March 2025; Revised: 15 May 2025; Accepted: 19 May 2025

<https://doi.org/10.54844/vte.2025.0932>

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Irish NFQ levels 1–10									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Post-primary (second level) “Junior Cycle”			Post-primary “Senior Cycle”						
FET: levels 1-6					HE: levels 6-10				
				Statutory apprenticeship (two models) levels 5-10					
				“Craft” FET award level 6					
				New “consortium-led”					
				FET awards levels 5 and 6					
Number of apprenticeships (30) leading to HE awards levels 6-10 (December 2023)					HE awards levels 6-10				
					level 6	level 7	level 8	level 9	level 10
					9 (30.0%)	9 (30.0%)	7 (23.3%)	4 (13.3%)	1 (3.3%)

Figure 1. Apprenticeship in the Irish education system and the NFQ. NFQ, National Framework of Qualifications; FET, further education and training; HE, higher education.

be as either the coordinating ("ultimately responsible") provider with responsibilities that include the development and maintenance of the curriculum and assessment procedures for the program, or as a collaborating provider involved in the provision of that apprenticeship program and accountable in this respect to the coordinating provider (QQI, 2016). All consortium-led apprenticeships in Ireland have a coordinating provider but most apprenticeships leading to HE awards currently do not involve a collaborating provider(s). This research focuses on the coordinating provider role in consortium-led apprenticeship in HE.

A HEI's participation in an individual apprenticeship as the coordinating provider involves two distinct but related roles, roles in which there is some overlap in terms of responsibilities and activities. One role is as a consortium member, invited by other members of the enterprise-led consortium to work with them as the coordinating provider in the design, development, and management of an apprenticeship, at consortium level. Another key role is as the coordinating provider for that apprenticeship, working internally with HEI personnel and with individual employers and apprentices in the initial and ongoing delivery and management of the apprenticeship program.

At end 2023, some 30 new apprenticeships led by eight HEIs as coordinating providers were in place (Figure 1)

including seven leading to awards at honors bachelor's degree level (level 8), four at master's level (level 9), and one at doctorate level (level 10). A further three were in place at the end of 2024 (Generation apprenticeship, 2024).

The apprenticeships for which these HEIs have responsibility are officially recorded as being in biopharma, construction, electrical, engineering, finance, health & social, hospitality & food, ICT, insurance, logistics, and recruitment.

Experiences of the recent reforms in apprenticeship in Ireland from the perspective of supply-side stakeholders involved in apprenticeship policy and practice in HE have been explored in doctoral research (McNally, 2025). This paper reports on findings from this research related to HEI personnel's reported experiences of their HEI's implementation of the new model of apprenticeship as coordinating provider, including how new apprenticeship in HE is experienced compared with other HE provisions. Recent research on the introduction of higher and degree level apprenticeships in the UK indicates that there are challenges and opportunities associated with the introduction of these (Fabian *et al.*, 2021; Graham, 2019; Mulkeen *et al.*, 2017).

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design adopted is an exploratory qualitative

study. Primary data were gathered in 10 semi-structured interviews with a sample of key stakeholders drawn from personnel involved in the delivery of recent Irish national apprenticeship policy at two levels in HEIs (Table 1).

Table 1: Interviews at two levels in HEIs operating as apprenticeship coordinating providers

Number of interviews with interviewees	Level
5	Executive/senior management
5	Academic and professional support personnel

HEIs, higher education institutions.

Seven of the eight HEIs (88%) operating as coordinating providers in new apprenticeship in HE in Ireland are represented in this research. All 10 HEI interviewees are employed in these seven HEIs: In four HEIs either an executive/senior manager or an academic and professional support employee was interviewed, and in three HEIs both an executive/senior manager and an academic and professional support employee were interviewed.

Reflexive thematic analysis was employed in the analysis of the interview data gathered (Braun & Clarke, 2022). One of the themes developed in the analysis is titled "apprenticeship is different" and this is the theme to which the research reported in this paper refers.

RESULTS

HEIs' reports of their direct experiences as members of individual apprenticeship consortia indicate that some new apprenticeships have worked better than others with respect to the consortium, and some of the reasons for this are attributed to consortium members—including the HEI's own—levels of understanding of the requirements as well as levels of engagement in a consortium.

With respect to the HEIs' role as the coordinating provider, HEIs experienced some challenges and associated changes needed internally in terms of introducing and/or implementing new apprenticeship into the HEI, and many of these relate to alignment, or not, with existing systems and supports in the HEI. The reported challenges included, for example, dealing with questions and concerns from various quarters internally about the appropriateness or value of the new apprenticeship model for the HEI, and changes included those associated with teaching, learning, and assessment of learning, such as, for example, students—apprentices—playing a greater role in a more interactive process and some new roles and new ways of operating for HEI staff.

With respect also to the coordinating provider role, the findings highlight many ways in which new apprenticeship is reported to have been experienced as different compared with HEIs' other provision. As well as those related to teaching, learning, and assessment of learning they also relate to the number and nature of stakeholders involved, the level of complexity, level of control, and the level and type of additional resources needed.

In terms of the level of control, for example, the relative lack of control over a large element of an apprenticeship program was reported as one key difference by several interviewees. This was reported with respect to program design and the need for integration of the learning and assessment of the learning between the off-the-job and on-the-job elements of the program, and particularly in the context of the HEI's responsibility to "validly stand over learning outcomes" in a program "probably four fifths of which you don't have control over in delivery" (executive/senior management interviewee). In this regard, different approaches to assessment of learning were reported, including, for example, cases where all or most of the assessment of learning is done off the job by the HEI rather than the employer, and some cases in which marks are allocated to assessment of the off-the-job element of learning only while in others a certain percentage of marks is allocated to assessment of the work-based, on-the-job element also.

CONCLUSION

The finding of different understandings and interpretations among HEIs and among different personnel at different levels within individual HEIs and reportedly also among some other stakeholders including enterprise representatives of how the consortium-led model of apprenticeship is intended to work, and of different approaches to operationalization of the model with respect to HEIs' roles and responsibilities in national apprenticeship, reflect similar findings in the literature on public policy implementation. These include that there are different contexts, levels, and ways that policy can be "mediated and contested" both in terms of policy development and policy enactment (Bell & Stevenson, 2015).

The literature indicates also however that different understandings, interpretations, and operationalization may affect "impact, viability, and effectiveness" of HEI apprenticeship provision at different levels in a HEI, including, for example, at strategic, academic department, and teaching team or pedagogical levels (Qew-Jones, 2023).

The reported differences in understandings and interpreta-

tions of how the consortium-led model of apprenticeship is intended to work, both within and between HEIs, are not clearly linked to any type of HEI - university, technological university, or independent HEI - but they are reflected in different ways of operationalization by HEIs and other stakeholders involved in individual apprenticeships, which has implications in terms of the ways in which apprenticeships are experienced by stakeholders and of activity and impact in inter alia the HE and apprenticeship systems. These implications are exemplified, for example, in the view that new apprenticeship programs must be seen by all not as collaborative provision but as being "co-designed between enterprise and the academy" (executive/senior management interviewee), the implication here being that they are not currently seen by all in this way. The need for strong working relationships between employers and the education institution involved is confirmed in the literature (Taylor-Smith *et al.*, 2023), as is the need for specific resources to support co-design and collaboration in apprenticeships (Rowe, 2018).

Recommendations that may further support the implementation of new apprenticeship in and by HEIs include: (1) Greater clarity and guidance for HEIs and other stakeholders regarding the respective roles in apprenticeship, including in the co-design, co-development, and co-delivery of an apprenticeship program; (2) development of a framework for work-integrated learning with a specific focus on apprenticeship including with respect to teaching, learning, assessment of and for learning, and HEIs' validation of learning acquired in the apprentice's workplace.

DECLARATIONS

Acknowledgments

None.

Author contributions

McNally B, O'Kelly J: Writing—Original draft, Writing—Review and Editing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Ethical approval

The study protocol was approved by DCU Research Ethics Committee.

Informed consent

Written informed consent was obtained from the participants. The participants were informed that the interview

data would only be used for research purposes, and their information would be pseudo-anonymized when presenting the research result. Moreover, they could also stop the recording at any moment during the interview, and they refuse to respond to any question asked during the review.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Generative AI use declaration

None.

Data availability statement

No additional data.

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