



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme

IVEA

Representing Vocational
Education Committees

Up skilling: Learning from our European Neighbours The Norwegian Experience

Presentation by Pat O'Mahony, IVEA Education Research Officer

IVEA Annual Congress 17 September 2009

At the outset, I want to make a few background points.

- This is very much a personal perspective. I don't expect other participants in the IVEA study visit to Norway last June would necessarily take the same lessons from the experience. The whole study visit, which was financed by Leargas through the Leonardo da Vinci programme, provided us with a wonderful opportunity to look in detail at how Norway does its vocational education. I could not recommend the programme too highly.
- As I see it, upskilling today's workforce is essentially about enabling individuals, throughout their lives, to develop their aptitudes (intelligences) and interests to the maximum – on the understanding that we are all intelligent in different ways.
- To some degree, I have a difficulty with the idea of upskilling and wonder if we should not be talking about competences (the capacity to apply skills and knowledge to solving real problems) than about upskilling or the knowledge society. What we seem to need is a competent society rather than one loaded with knowledge and skills but missing the vital ingredient of being apply to apply these.
- In a historical sense, Irish second level education grew out of a church run school system that had as its focus the education of young people for the Church, the professions and the civil service – a system that saw intelligence in linguistic and mathematical terms and those who lacked these talents were considered unintelligent.
- This historical influence still casts a shadow today. Indeed, the DES rules governing the operation of post primary schools are very much influenced by the perspective. For example, recognised students at second level are required to study certain subjects, assessment is very much based on terminal examinations and so on. None of this is surprising. After all, most senior teachers, inspectors, DES officials, lecturers in teacher training programmes and even union officials are products of single sex, old style secondary schools – as I am myself.

McCann House, 99 Marlborough Road

Donnybrook, Dublin 4, Ireland

- My first five years as a teacher were spent in vocational schools where the primary emphasis was on the Group Certificate – on providing young people (mainly young males) with practical skills for living and work, where relationships were relaxed, where Johnny was as good as his master, where practical skills (multiple intelligences) were highly valued – where the Leaving Certificate had yet to take hold.

Looking back, I wonder if making all schools the same was necessarily wise. Indeed, I wonder if the root cause of much student underachievement (low skills) and disaffection with schooling is not due to the extent to which education policy, at second level, is underpinned by a view that, in post primary education, ‘one size can fit all learners’ – that the most desirable outcome for students leaving the school system is further full-time study in a third level institution and that anything else is very much second best.

In Ireland, we seem to be hypnotised by the notion that real learning only takes place in educational institutions.

Significantly, in Norway, there is a strong recognition that people learn at work and that work is very educational. Norwegian research shows that adults in the workplace are more literate than school students even if they are not more educated than them.

So, when I headed to Norway on the 5th of June, I carried these experiences and assumptions with me.

What stood out in Norway for me?

The most striking feature of Norway’s school system is the preparedness to reform it radically - wherever reform is considered necessary to ensuring its relevance to the needs of individual learners and society generally.

Indeed, radical reforms in both 1994 and 2006 hugely improved the attractiveness of vocational education in Norway and now 54% of students take the vocational route in upper secondary.

By contrast, Ireland has tended to tinker with the existing system and so we have ended up with an amalgam of initiatives and categorical programmes resulting in considerable confusion.

While there are clearly marked progression routes up through the Norwegian education system, the routes through the Irish system are more akin to snakes and ladders.

The Norwegian system is transparent, integrated, logical, easy to understand, centrally informed but locally managed so responsive to the particular needs of local communities.

Maybe Ireland should go back to the blank canvass rather than feeling that it has to substantially stick with the old system. We certainly need to make our further education and training system more streamlined, integrated, coherent and easy to understand for learners and those who advise them.

Norwegians entering Upper Secondary education have the right to one of three options –

vocational, academic, and vocational followed by a one year programme to facilitate access to university – the latter is also available to qualified apprentices.

The Norwegian vocational stream comprises 9 different programmes (*Technical skills and industrial production, Electrical and electronic subjects, Building and construction technology, Restaurant trades and nutritional subjects, Health and social subjects, Design and craft subjects, Media and communication, Service and travel, and Agriculture, fishing and forestry*) and there is a national curriculum for each programme, thus ensuring a common standard of provision.

Indeed, Norway has an integrated national curriculum from primary school through to upper secondary, thus ensuring the continuity and coherence of the whole curriculum.

Each vocational programme is aimed at preparing participants for a particular subset of apprenticeships, a matter I will return to later.

Irrespective of the vocational programme, the teaching and the learning is practical and hands-on, with students invariably learning through both doing and reflection. Consequently, students engage with both their teachers and the subject matter as a matter of course.

Student assessment in Norway also has a practical basis with students being required to demonstrate their skills and competences rather than to regurgitate information. Oral exams are available in all subjects and continuous assessment is central to the work of schools – this is a huge advantage over the terminal exam approach which holds such sway in Ireland.

The Norwegian approach is in stark contrast to ours where many Leaving Certificate syllabi are so wide and so deep that many students experience little real engagement with either the subject matter or the teacher.

We know that young males, in particular, find it difficult to achieve educationally in what may be termed ‘academic’ subjects yet they thrive in practical situations. They seem to have an innate capacity for hands-on learning but fail to engage in more abstract learning contexts. We wonder about what to do about improving retention rates and skills? Is the answer not obvious?

Norwegian schools have great flexibility in meeting student needs. Those who fail to thrive in school may undertake the work-based part of their apprenticeship first and the school-based part second, when they are more mature.

Unlike Norway, Ireland does not have a vocational education stream at school level. Irish students and their influencers place a preponderant value on the established Leaving Certificate and, for many, anything else, including the LCA, is very much a less attractive option.

Maybe Ireland could learn from Norway and provide those entering senior cycle with the option of either a two year education programme providing access to third level or a two year vocational programme proceeding towards apprenticeship and work.

However, any vocational alternative would have to attract a significant proportion of the cohort, be integral to the NFQ, and allow those who opt for it to re-enter the 'academic stream' without having to go back to the beginning of the queue, as is the case with LCA graduates currently - though all three Leaving Certificates are placed at levels 4/5 on the (NFQ).

Were we to put a proper vocational option in place at Senior Cycle, there is good reason to believe that up to 50% of students could opt for it.

A major difference between Norway and Ireland is Norway's comprehensive apprenticeship system. There is hardly an area of work not covered by apprenticeship – hospitality, health care, clerical and administration, agriculture, engineering, childcare, education, construction, and so on.

The Norwegian apprenticeship system bestows a status and a quality standard on work that, in Ireland, may be considered semiskilled. Such work then acquires an attractiveness that it lacks in Ireland. The Norwegian system acknowledges and, celebrates the notion of multiple intelligences while, in Ireland, the primacy of linguistic and mathematical intelligence holds sway. It also ensures that skills and competences are workplace relevant.

The way the Norwegians manage apprenticeship proved particularly interesting.

The County, and there are 19 of them, manages of both upper secondary education and apprenticeship – so schooling and apprenticeship are linked. Also, apprentices are mainly trained in the workplace by trained instructors/mentors - trained by the County.

Where employers can't meet all training outcomes or an enterprise is too small to employ instructors/mentors, the County makes up the deficit.

Norwegian adults can obtain trade qualifications on the basis of their work experiences. Firstly, their prior learning is assessed. Then they have free access to programmes to make up skill deficits. Finally, they are assessed before obtaining their qualifications.

The apprenticeship system is highly regarded by both the public and the private sector in Norway and both actively recruit apprentices in the vocational schools.

Generally, employers and unions are positively involved in Norwegian education. There is no 'them and us' attitude. The relationship between schools and the workplace is complementary and symbiotic.

Industry-Provider forums are a feature of Norwegian upper secondary vocational education and these ensure connectivity between the content of vocational education programmes and the skills needs of local companies – in the context of nationally determined curricula.

Might FAS, IVEA and the two parent departments explore how the Irish school and apprenticeship systems could be pulled more closely together? I think so.

Vocational education and apprenticeship are complementary. Furthermore, the apprenticeship system would seem to have the capacity to inform beneficially the school system and vice versa.

In a sense, Norwegian apprenticeships do what the PLC programme does in Ireland other than that the apprenticeship system covers a much wider range of career preparations.

Is there a case to be made for Ireland adopting the Norwegian apprenticeship model? At the very least, I think Ireland needs to look seriously at best practice in skills development in Northern Europe and particularly in Norway.

Would adopting the Norwegian system have implications for the PLC sector? Certainly, but not, I believe, in any overall negative sense. If Irish apprenticeships were extended to cover the range of apprenticeships available in Norway, it might be possible for VECs to cater to a multiple of the number of PLC students they currently cater to – with each apprentice spending some two days in school each week and three days in the workplace.

As I see it, Ireland needs to put in place a more structured, transparent and genuinely quality assured approach to skills, or should I say competency, development – an approach that links seamlessly, at either end, to the whole of our education system. Furthermore, it would seem that a dedicated vocational education stream at senior cycle level and a much more extensive apprenticeship system could well have a role to play in reforming Irish education and training in the interests of both individual students and the wider society.

What other examples of best practice were observed in Norway. Quite frankly, best practice abounded around every corner with the following being most relevant to the whole area of skills development.

- Education provision in Norway is rights based. Over 25s have a legal entitlement to avail of any unused portion of their 13 year entitlement to free education and training. Adults with low basic skills are entitled to a skills assessment and to have all their prior learning recognised for access, transfer and progression.
- There is an Ombudsman for upper secondary education and apprentices – this links with the rights based nature Norwegian education.
- Interestingly, the school motto for our host school, Romsdal Upper Secondary vocational School is: *‘Together we are shaping the future’*, which very much sets out the school mission.
- Technical support staff are available to support the work of teachers in the upper secondary vocational school system – 5 such staff are available in Romsdal Upper Secondary School.
- Norway has two education ministers - one for primary and secondary education and one for third level. This means that primary and secondary education are not dictated to by the third level system.
- Norwegian schools identify very much with their local community – this is particularly important when it comes to vocational education where schools set out very deliberately to meet the needs of their local communities.
- The importance of generic skills is very much acknowledged – with these skills being integrated into every syllabus and teachers of all subjects being responsible for teaching these core skills.

- Huge emphasis on enhancing teachers' competence at all levels of Norwegian system.
- Teachers in vocational education in Upper Secondary schools have the option of upskilling by working in business environments for a period and those working in business do some teaching in the upper secondary – making education more work-place relevant.
- Norway has a clear process for Recognising Prior learning.
- There is a clear route for adults to gain trade qualifications through the apprenticeship system – 25% of apprentices are adult.
- Practical examinations are monitored by teachers from neighbouring schools and this seems to work very well.
- Free 1 year courses available from University Colleges - institutions that are very like our institutes of technology. These provide a direct route to university for those with craft/trade qualifications.
- University colleges offer two year p/t teacher training courses to vocational teachers who lack a pedagogical qualification. Such teachers have a number of years within which they must acquire a teaching qualification.
- Quite small university colleges at local level – responding to local needs` of industry, etc. The University College in Molde was very impressive; its library system is linked into the local school library system – another example of integration.
- The Norwegian system operates to ensure that the duplication of courses is minimised. While programmes and courses are not the property of particular institutions, nevertheless the system works to ensure that a course with a relatively limited drawing power is only offered by one school in a particular county/community.
- Big emphasis on decentralised education even up to university level – to local communities.
- There is good use of blended learning in teacher education – consequently Norwegian teachers are more attuned to what blended learning approaches can offer their students.
- Emphasis on social integration in kindergarten rather than on individuals playing with toys. This would seem to contribute to improving the skills of young people to communicate and cooperate from an early age – something that is deemed to be critical to all citizens – in the family, in the community and in the workplace.

Overall, the whole study visit experience proved to be a wonderful success and, hopefully, it will result in ongoing conversations between the vocational education sectors in both Norway and Ireland.