

Entrepreneurship education and training in the FET sector

Tom Martin, TMA Consultants

Introduction

Making Ireland one of the most entrepreneurial nations in the world, acknowledged as a world-class environment in which to start and grow a business, is a key government policy aspiration.

Encouraging entrepreneurship has many positive outcomes for Ireland Inc: increased employment (Central Bank research reveals that start-up companies in the first five years of existence account for two-thirds of all new jobs created in Ireland), improved competitiveness and reduced dependence on multinational companies.

Entrepreneurship is more than just a Government policy aspiration; it's also something that resonates within a significant proportion of us as individuals: the 2016 GEM Report on Entrepreneurship in Ireland found that 16.9% of the adult population aspire to be entrepreneurs, up from 9.8% in 2006.

Entrepreneurs: born or not made?

It used to be said that entrepreneurs were born and not made. But this view no longer holds sway, and it's now widely accepted that the education and training system has an important role to play in nurturing entrepreneurial talent.

The EU has been to the forefront in promoting awareness of the role and value of entrepreneurship education and training. A study published by the Commission in 2015 found that students participating in entrepreneurship education are more likely to start their own business and their companies tend to be more innovative and more successful than those led by persons without entrepreneurship education backgrounds. It also found that entrepreneurship education graduates are at lower risk of being unemployed and are more often in steady employment. Compared to their peers, they have better jobs and earn more money.

Here in Ireland the Government is focussed on improving the situation in Ireland. The Department of Education and Skills, for example, is currently developing an Entrepreneurship Education Policy Statement and when published later in the year it will cover the whole of the education and training system. The National Policy Statement on Entrepreneurship in Ireland published in 2014 noted that education plays an essential role in shaping attitudes to entrepreneurship — from the primary school level up.

The Department's focus is not just on entrepreneurship: it also recognises the importance of entrepreneurship's soul-mates: creativity and innovation. The Department's Action Plan for Education 2017 calls for the education and training system to recognise the need to adapt our national skills base so as to nurture talents in these three areas.

The FET sector has long had an involvement in the provision of entrepreneurship education and training (think Start Your Own Business (SYOB) courses in the former FÁS Training Centres). But more needs to be done.

The FET sector has a key role to play in enabling Ireland to become a more 'entrepreneurship-friendly' society. The Community Colleges in the US (largely equivalent to our Colleges of Further Education) are prime examples of what can be achieved. They have come to be recognised as one of the most important parts of the American post-secondary education system because of their large number (more than 1,000), their central role in vocational education and training (more than 50%) and the fact that they are increasingly important players in local development as well as providing educational opportunities for less advantaged students. Community Colleges have a major focus on entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education. Entrepreneurship education has been integrated into Community Colleges' missions and curricula across the US, with hundreds of schools providing visionary leadership in this increasingly popular educational field.

One-third of Community Colleges have formed themselves into the National Association for Community College Entrepreneurship (NACCE) which brings together their collective wisdom and experience in creating economic value through entrepreneurship — involving educators, administrators and centre directors focused on igniting entrepreneurship in their community and on their campus. NACCE has two main goals:

1. Empowering the college to approach the business of leading a community college with an entrepreneurial mind-set;
2. Growing the community college's role in supporting job creation and entrepreneurs in their local ecosystem.

Research by TMA Consultants on behalf of SOLAS into best practice provision of entrepreneurship education and training in the FET sector found that entrepreneurship education represented a quite modest level of overall provision in the sector. Although the number of learners taking entrepreneurship modules has been increasing the number gaining certification in these modules represented less than 0.5% of all QQI minor awards.

When we started our research in 2016, a coherent data infrastructure for the FET sector was only getting off the ground with the consequence that information on entrepreneurship education and training provision was hard to come by. However, we found that the entrepreneurship education and training was delivered to a wide range of learners by an equally wide range of providers. As a side note, if we as professional researchers found it difficult to find information on entrepreneurship education and training provision, just think how challenging it must have been for prospective FET learners?

However, SOLAS, Education and Training Boards Ireland (the representative body for the network of Education and Training Boards) and other further education and training partners have been working hard to address the information deficit. They have developed an online database, Fetchcourses.ie, to help learners to find relevant further education and training courses through a single online portal.

Types of further entrepreneurship education and training courses

The three main methods used for providing entrepreneurship education and training in the FET sector include the provision of dedicated modules on entrepreneurship, the development of an entrepreneurial mind-set among learners and a combination of the two.

We also discovered that while the Department of Education and Skills through SOLAS was the main funder of entrepreneurship education and training provision in the FET sector, other government departments, notably the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, also provided funding for entrepreneurship programmes. In fact, non-ETB providers were significant providers of entrepreneurship courses, particularly the network of Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) which offers short SYOB programmes.

To help us identify good practice in FET entrepreneurship education and training provision the TMA team of researchers developed a checklist against which we could benchmark exemplars of entrepreneurship education and training courses. The checklist included headings such as senior management support, continuing professional development for tutors and the presence of strong links to employers and the business community.

Good practice examples

We found a number of good practice examples where providers had gone over and above the call of duty to provide learners with entrepreneurship skills. These examples included the provision of entrepreneurship modules as an optional extra to allow PLC students to take this module where it could not be accommodated in their already full programmes (Ballsbridge College of Further Education). Ballsbridge CFE also facilitates its learners to participate in EU-funded entrepreneurship projects such as the Corkscrew social enterprise/entrepreneurship initiative delivered by Exeter College.

Other Colleges of Further Education recognising that many learners on certain PLC programmes would be destined to be self-employed have made a conscious decision to include entrepreneurship in the syllabus (Kinsale College of Further Education with its Horticulture/Permaculture course). The National Policy Statement on Entrepreneurship expressed a hope that entrepreneurship would be recognised as an option in the existing craft apprenticeship programmes and in the roll-out of the new employer-led apprenticeship programmes.

The Entrepreneurs Academy in Dublin is a good example of a FET provider whose entrepreneurship tutors have personal experiences of starting/running a business and which has a strong focus on evaluating the outputs of training provision.

We found many examples throughout the FET sector where providers organised open days in which learners got the opportunity to present project work to the general public. One provider arranged for students on an office supervisors course to form a “company” which is responsible for supplying business stationery to the college.

Notwithstanding that some ETB providers have strong links with the business sector, in general providers of FET entrepreneurship programmes were found to have limited connections with the business community and State development agencies. Hence, learners

have relatively few formal opportunities to meet with entrepreneurs. In Northern Ireland the case of Belfast Metropolitan College is a good example of a FET college with strong links with local, national and international companies and which employs both teaching and non-teaching staff with widely-based industrial and business experience. It boasts a new €20m facility (e3 Building) designed to promote employability, entrepreneurship and economic development which has specialist zones dedicated to digital media, manufacturing technology, catering, business incubation, SME training and renewable technologies. Central to this facility is an open-plan project-based learning zone where learners can work in multi-disciplinary teams relating to their programme of study.

Weak linkages within the same ETB family of providers of entrepreneurship programme came to light in the research. In other instances, the research also indicated a low level of interactions with non-ETB providers. The bewildering multiplicity of courses on offer across the education sector and from private providers can be daunting for prospective learners.

The Waterford Collaborative Enterprise Network (WCEN) is a Waterford Area Partnership initiative that is working to address these types of issues. The WCEN comprises the main FET providers and partners in the county along with other key stakeholders in which information on entrepreneurship services, supports and courses are shared among network members. This puts WCEN member organisations in a better position to advise their clients/constituents on the most relevant entrepreneurship programmes/supports and on possible progression opportunities. It also has the added benefit to WCEN members that overlaps and gaps in course provision can be identified and dealt with.

If entrepreneurship is riding high on the national agenda, what are the challenges facing SOLAS, ETBI and its member ETBs and other FET partners? TMA's research for SOLAS indicates that providers face challenges in providing entrepreneurship courses. For some, the programmes they offer necessitate the delivery of a suite of compulsory modules within the academic year or within agreed the course schedules leaving little room to include an additional entrepreneurship module. Other providers do not have access to tutors with academic or practice experience of entrepreneurship and point to limited opportunities in existing CPD provision to upskill tutors in entrepreneurship and related areas. Some ETB colleges say, for example, that they would like to arrange for successful entrepreneurs in their communities to contribute to their programmes but there are significant barriers to overcome if this is to happen. Others point out that unlike other sectors of the education system (think the Student Enterprise Programme at second level), there are few enterprise competitions to stimulate the interest of learners in the FET sector.

The future?

The ETBs under the direction of SOLAS have begun to address the findings of the TMA research. SOLAS has advised the ETBs that their annual service plans and funding applications to SOLAS must include (among other things) details of how they intend to increase entrepreneurship levels over the period 2018-2020. This information together with other performance-related data for a range of other FET programmes will then be incorporated into an annual Strategic Agreement between the ETB and SOLAS. It is intended that SOLAS funding will be linked to the implementation of the strategic agreement.

In addition to the publication of a national entrepreneurship education policy statement, the Department of Education and Skills should resource SOLAS in conjunction with ETBI to prepare an entrepreneurship education and training action plan for the FET sector.

There is also scope for considerably more collaboration between providers within the same ETB network and with external providers (which is envisaged to happen as part of the process of developing the ETB Strategic Agreement with SOLAS and as part of a wider endeavour to strengthen links with employers; for example, as part of implementing all of the SOLAS recommendations following independent reviews of key SOLAS-funded provision such as the recent review of PLC and the associated SOLAS recommendations).

Ultimately, the way forward for the FET sector in relation to entrepreneurship education and training provision is to function as an eco-system in which all players — local and national — must work closely together to maximise learner benefits. But to function properly, this eco-system needs to be set within a clear and consistent policy framework and be adequately resourced.

TMA were commissioned by SOLAS to undertake research on best practice in the provision of entrepreneurship education and training in the Further Education and Training sector. The report is available from the SOLAS web site:

(http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/TMA_EET_in_FET_final_report.pdf).