AN ANALYSIS OF THE TRAINING NEEDS OF STAFF IN THE FURTHER EDUCATION SECTOR IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

Gerry McNamara, Carmel Mulcahy and Joe OíHara
School of Education Studies, Dublin City University

ABSTRACT

This article examines the training needs of educators working in the further education (FE), adult education, and Second Chance sectors in the Republic of Ireland. The research on which it is based was funded jointly by the European Union Leonardo da Vinci Programme and the Department of Education and Science of Ireland and took place from 1998 to 2002. It consisted of a survey of the coordinators of 162 further education (FE) centres and follow up interviews with 13 of these coordinators. The paper concentrates largely on the skills and competencies identified as the key to providing a quality service for the clientele of FE in Ireland. It begins by describing the different types of provision which the FE label refers to in Ireland and then presents some quantitative data which establishes the training deficit suffered by staff in the system. The main part of the paper is based on the interview data obtained, which offers a very complex picture of the skills and competencies perceived as vital in delivering a service which meets the needs of the clientele. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the extent to which further and adult educators perceive personal development and interpersonal communications skills to be the most vital tools in their work. In consequence, it is argued, programmes of professional development for staff in this field must find ways to enhance these skills.

Keywords: a: further education, Ireland, standards, competencies, interpersonal communication, professional development.

Introduction

This paper reports the results of a research project undertaken by the School of Education Studies at Dublin City University to analyse the training needs of teachers in the further education (FE) sector in Ireland. Funding was obtained for this project from the EU Leonardo Da Vinci Programme and the Department of Education and Science, Ireland (DES).

The project ran from 1998 to late 2002 and began with the development of a methodology of training needs analysis. This involved bringing together key informants from the FE sector and conducting brainstorming sessions using the techniques pioneered by Edward de Bono (1999). Out of these sessions a questionnaire was developed and distributed to FE coordinators throughout the system. The data from the questionnaire were used to inform the development of a structured interview schedule which was used with FE centre coordinators throughout the country.

The range of this research was extensive. However, this paper concentrates on the data which emerged in relation to many competencies which respondents felt were required by educators/trainers to provide a quality service. In order to gain deeper insights into the needs identified, the quantitative data are only very briefly reported, while the interview data is explored in more detail.

The paper opens with an overview of the evolving FE sector in Ireland and attempts to link it with recent developments in other education systems, particularly the FE sector as it has emerged in the UK. The main body of the paper presents an account of the data in relation to the skill and competency training needs identified in the research.

Further education in Ireland

Providing a context

The FE sector in Ireland as described in this section is a broad, somewhat undefined entity that has emerged in a piecemeal fashion over the last two decades. It consists of programmes in areas such as Second Chance or post compulsory education for early school leavers, adult literacy programmes, targeted community development initiatives and state-funded industrial training programmes. Most of the initiatives that are now grouped under the FE banner were targeted initiatives designed to address particular social problems or perceived training gaps. In recent years, with the growth of the Irish economy, the focus has moved from addressing problems to providing opportunities for all individuals to access education and training. As such the role to be played by FE in Ireland is similar to the role suggested for the UK FE sector in both the Kennedy (1997) and the Fryer (1997) reports. The FE sector is seen as a key agent in the encouragement of lifelong learning and wider participation in education and its physical location within a variety of 'community venues' (Kennedy 1997, p 27) is seen as ideal for the development of this form of social structure.

This evolving understanding of the role and nature of the FE sector has been something of a double-edged sword for practitioners and participants alike. At an official level in Irish education you would find very few who would argue with the Further Education National Training Organisation's (FENTO) recent acknowledgement that 'breadth and diversity are valuable features since they are the stimulus for the combination of the responsiveness and innovation which characterises the sector'

(2004, p 2). However, it is precisely this sectoral diversity and the associated governmental difficulties when attempting to allocate responsibility – and perhaps more importantly resources – for its support that has resulted in FE practitioners taking on the status of what Lucas (2004, p 35) calls the 'benign neglected'.

It is in this context that the need to identify particular skills and competencies for educators within the sector needs to be understood. The educators employed in the FE sector come from a variety of backgrounds and many have worked within the sector through this period of change. Because of the piecemeal nature of its development there has never been an opportunity to 'map' the Irish FE sector in a way similar to that undertaken by the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) in the UK in 1995 (FEDA, 1995). It follows from this that the identification of national 'standards' for educators as defined by FENTO in the UK (FENTO, 1999), has never been undertaken. Finally, the lack of a nationally recognised qualification for educators within the FE sector means that it has been difficult to objectively frame a list of required skills or competencies for FE educators in Ireland.

It is worth noting that the absence of a comprehensive framework of identifiable competencies or standards would not necessarily be viewed as a bad thing by many educators working in the Irish FE sector. The debate that has accompanied the development and application of the FENTO standards in the UK (Bailey and Robson, 2002), and the broader imposition of standards based training throughout the British education system has been followed closely in Ireland. Indeed, many of the issues relating to autonomy, quality and control find echoes both in the formal and informal discussions regarding the future shape of Irish educational policy (Gleeson, 2004; McNamara and O'Hara, 2004).

For those educators involved primarily in the FE sector, the debate that in many ways has most resonance is that surrounding the contested nature of professionalism in the sector (Goodrham and Hodkinson, 2004) In recent years professionals involved in FE in Ireland, in common with colleagues in many other countries, have been challenged by a number of discrete discourses relating to the most appropriate way to provide a formation for professionals that will ensure the development of a high-quality, flexible and motivated cohort of educators. One such discourse, drawing its core ideas from the work of Schön (1983) amongst others, seeks to assert the primacy of reflection and self-knowledge exercised in a collegial atmosphere dedicated to the improvement of educational provision. Characterised by a commitment to action based on reflection, this perspective argues that educators should be viewed as autonomous professionals capable of self-regulation and committed to the maintenance of quality in their daily practice.

An alternative, and at times conflicting, discourse argues that the centrality of the educational process to the economic and social health of a country demands a high degree of transparency and accountability, with quality being assessed against clearly defined and easily measurable benchmarks. This perspective argues that FE professionals should be trained to apply the standards with precision and accuracy and that, to an extent at least, autonomy should be replaced by conformity to a set of well-calibrated and comprehensive standards.

For the duration of this research, and indeed beyond, the debate as to the most appropriate model of professional formation to be adopted was a live one (McNamara, Mulcahy and O'Hara, 2001). Many course providers and practitioners instinctively reacted against the

> *'myth of the formula' (believing that) a single cohesive blueprint for checking any teacher's performance, to which most professionals agree and which can be applied justly, cannot be devised.* (Brundrett and Silcock, 2002, p vi)

Indeed, the criticisms of the reductionist, neoliberal and behaviourist nature of many of the competence systems that have been developed (Barnett, 1994; Velde, 1999) would resonate with many Irish educators.

As has already been mentioned, one of the key areas of concern that arises when discussing the possible development of a competency-based approach is that of the potential impact on the professional status of the educator. The role played by managerialist, quality-assurance-based models of training in challenging the professional status and autonomy of teachers and trainers is widely acknowledged in the literature (Ainley and Bailey, 1997; Meier, 2002; Cochrane-Smith, 2005). As far back as 1994, Eraut identified the deprofessionalising intent of systems based on the imposition of external inspections and performance indicators on to a traditionally self-directing and autonomous group of professional educators. In addition, he identified an inherent weakness in the core concept of the competency approach in that it can tend to drag performance down to the level of the competent and finds it difficult at times acknowledge professional practice that exceeds competence and is truly excellent and innovative.

A further criticism of the competency model is that it can tend to lead to the micro-management of everyday educational interactions in a way that is inimical to the development of an appropriate learning atmosphere. Attempts at creating comprehensive measures of quality can, and at times do, lead to the development of competency systems of such complexity that they are almost impossible to implement in practice without turning experienced educators into little more than form-filling bureaucrats, thus alienating the very individuals the systems are meant to assist (Cullingford, 1999; McNamara and O'Hara, 2002).

However, notwithstanding the many and comprehensive criticisms of competency-based standards systems, it must be accepted that at a policy level they have many supporters. While it is important to acknowledge and indeed validate the discomfort of many educators with the very notion of a conceptually limited competence approach, at a policy level the last decade has seen some significant structural changes in Irish education – the initial moves towards a system based around standards and competencies. The establishment of a new qualification structure under the control of the Further Education Training Awards Council in 2001 is significant not only because of the formal acknowledgement of the existence of Further Education as a sector (the previous provider of qualifications in this sector was the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA)) but also because of the criteria used for the award of qualifications. FETAC is specifically tasked by the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 to:

> *make awards and to determine the standards of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by the learner for the purpose of making an award.* (FETAC 2005, p 1)

It has further been tasked with developing a:

> *policy for determining standards which is relevant to national, economic and social needs of the state and the requirements of the further education and training sector (FETAC, 2005, p 1).*

While there has not, as yet, been a demand for the development of parallel set of standards for the certification of trainers in FE centres, indications from the broader educational policy sector would indicate that there is a system-wide commitment to at least investigating the possibility of developing a competence-based standards system for the certification of educators in Ireland. The most significant of these indicators was the recently published OECD (2005) report on the future of teacher education in Ireland, which recommends the establishment of such a system for initial teacher education in the primary and second-level sectors.

It is against this rapidly changing backdrop, then, that this research took place. Many of the themes and debates that have resulted in significant policy changes in recent years were present at the outset of this project. The discussions relating to the development of a competence-based standards system were in train, and a conscious decision was made on the part of the research team to explore the possibility of involving practitioners in the debate surrounding the possible development of such a system. While not necessarily championing the idea of the establishment of a national framework of standards for educators, the research team considered it likely that the demand for such a system was likely to increase. For this reason it was considered that there was a value to framing the research in such a way as to explore the potential impact of such a structure on the nature and operation of FE in Ireland.

It is important to note that from the outset there was a commitment to involving practitioners as active agents in the identification and codification of what they considered to be the key skills of competencies required to do their job well. Recognising the inability of many of the attempts by external bodies to capture the complexity of what actually happens in an FE centre, it was considered important to allow the practitioners themselves to paint as comprehensive picture as possible of the reality of their professional lives. This use of practitioner-led identification of competencies has the advantage of their being contextualised rather than imposed, an issue that emerged in Peeke's report on the FENTO Standards in Action (2000, p 15) as well as being a key concern of a number of critics of competency-based systems (Boreham and Samurcay, 1999). In addition, this approach is in keeping with the type of empowered and reflective FE professional who has emerged in recent years. Indeed there would be a strong congruence between the underlying values of reflective practice and scholarship, collegiality and collaboration identified in the FENTO Standards for Teaching and Supporting Learning (1999, p 2) and those claimed to underpin the FE sector in Ireland (McNamara, Mulcahy and O'Hara, 2001).

It is perhaps not surprising that the competencies identified in Table 1 below bear a striking similarity to the eight key skills areas identified in the FENTO standards (1999) as well as those identified in the US in the INTASC standards (Olson and Wyett, 2000). What is perhaps worthy of note is the importance given by practitioners to the support and guidance element of the FE professionals' role. Corresponding to area E, 'Providing Learners with Support' in the FENTO standards (1999) these skills in the areas of career path planning, vocational guidance and support and motivation of students are considered critical by practitioners. It is worth noting that the recent report by Betteridge, Tallon and Burnett (2004, p 4) identifies the 'guidance and behaviour of learners' as being one of the key themes of a proposed model for a Foundation Degree in post-16 teacher and trainer education. Olson and Wyett (2000, p 74) argue that mastery of these types of affective competencies are essential if an educator is to be successful, yet they acknowledge the difficulty in fitting them into rigidly defined, measurement-based assessment systems. This analysis finds an echo

in the institutional reports provided by Peeke (2000), where some FE institutions found it difficult to quantify the type and quality of support offered to students while still acknowledging the critical importance of these elements.

Ultimately the types of competencies identified in this research provide a vision of an FE professional who is both engaged and reflective and who is both a subject specialist and yet capable of supporting learners at different stages of their development. In short they are individuals who see their purpose to provide:

> *high quality teaching, to create effective opportunities for learning and to enable all learners to achieve to the best of their ability.* (FENTO, 1999, p 3)

Definition of further education in Ireland

Stokes and Watters (1997, p 18) define FE in Ireland as 'a range of post-compulsory education and training options provided in the education sector largely by VECs (the regional Vocational Educational Committees) in both school and out-of-school settings'. They include in their proposed definition (1997, p 16) the following areas:

• Vocational Preparation and Training Programme (VPTP);
• Post Leaving Certificate courses (PLCs);
• Youthreach;
• Traveller education;
• Vocational Training and Opportunities Scheme (VTOS);
• other measures aimed at those who have left school with poor qualifications;
• other adult and recurring education.

This list is further expanded in the recent White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life* (DES, 2000, p 85), to include:

• adult literacy;
• basic and community education provision;
• self-funded night-class provision in second-level schools and other centres.

Not included, although a good case can be made, is FÁS (Industrial Training Agency) education/training provision for unemployed school leavers and redundant workers, the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (LCA) (designed for less academically inclined young people in the school system) and education and training programmes for people with disabilities.

The 1998 Green Paper, *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning* (DES, 1998), (hereafter referred to as *Adult Education*), offers perhaps the most comprehensive definition, describing FE as a sector within lifelong learning informed by a definition of adult education which sees it including 'all systematic learning by adults which contributes to their development as individuals and as members of the community and of society' (DES, 1998, p 16).

Main programmes in the FE sector

A distinctive feature of FE in Ireland is the diversity and breadth of provision. However, for the purpose of this research, it has been decided to limit the scope of

enquiry to manageable proportions by concentrating on the following key pro-grammes.

- **Youthreach**

Youthreach was established in 1988 to provide education and training for young people who leave school without qualifications. The stated aim of Youthreach is to provide participants with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to make the transition from school to adult and working life (ESF, 1996, p 22). Youthreach is targeted at early school-leavers between the ages of fifteen and eighteen.

- **The Vocational Training and Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)**

As described in *Adult Education* (p 16), VTOS is a second-chance education and training programme of one- or two-year full-time courses for adults of 21 and older who are at least six months unemployed. The policy objective of VTOS is to train the long-term unemployed with a view to placing them in stable employment or in further education and training

- **Traveller education**

In 1993, the Department of Education estimated that there were approximately 20,000 to 25,000 individual Travellers in the Republic of Ireland. (Murray, Smith and Bir-thistle 1997, p 58). Their participation rate in mainstream second level education is very low, and to address this 28 Senior Traveller Training Centres have been set up across Ireland. The centres were originally designed to cater for trainees in the 15ñ25 age group, but this has been extended in the light of older adult participation. The original 48-week course duration has also recently been lengthened to two years to tie in with the course length of other interventions such as Youthreach (Connolly, 1998).

Existing education opportunities for trainers in the further education sector

In general, there is very limited training provision in the area of teaching and learning for trainers in the FE sector, and a high percentage of such trainers have undergone no formal teacher training or obtained qualifications.

The training provision for educators in FE takes the form of:

- courses in universities and other third-level institutions;
- in-service training – one-day courses provided by national co-ordination support teams for particular courses;
- a number of privately offered courses.

While national policy in Ireland regarding the training of FE educators does not yet formally exist and is only beginning to be developed, there is a commitment in the White Paper on adult education, *Learning for Life* (DES 2000, p 152) to establish a training qualification for Adult Educators at tertiary level. In addition, policy con-cerning issues of access to appropriate qualifications is outlined which states that:

> *people working in the field who currently lack a qualification will be facilitated to attain certification through in-work education, block release and in-service oppor-tunities.* (DES 2000 , p 152)

In short, therefore, training provision for educators working in the FE sector is extremely limited and a high proportion of staff in the sector have undergone little or no training in the education field. In many ways this represents a doubling of disadvantage for the learners in the FE sector. Most of these have experienced failure and disappointment in their educational experience to date and those charged with providing them with a second chance have little training in the type of skills likely to be required. A first step in reducing this inequality is to identify the skills perceived by educators as vital to the development and delivery of effective programmes. The remainder of this paper concentrates on this analysis of needs.

Educating FE educators: coordinators' perceptions of the training needs of educators in the FE sector

This part of the paper reports on the research undertaken to identify training needs in the FE sector. As indicated in the introduction to the paper, an extensive questionnaire and interview schedule dealing with a wide range of subjects was used in the research. What follows is an attempt to focus on one area of the research, namely the training needs in terms of key skills for quality provision identified.

The quantitative data emerged from a questionnaire sent to 162 coordinators of FE Centres. This represents the full population of coordinators for three subsectors of the FE sector, namely VTOS, Youthreach and Senior Traveller Training Centres. Eighty-two (50.2 per cent of the total number) were returned and analysed. Follow-up interviews with 13 centre coordinators were then conducted. Some of the key issues that emerged from the questionnaire are presented below.

The perceived need for a teaching qualification

The figures indicate that around one-third of full-time staff and more than half of part-time staff do not have a teaching/training qualification. Just over half of centre coordinators possess such a qualification. Coordinators were asked whether such qualifications should be required.

Figure 1: Do you feel that there should be a minimum level of teaching/training qualification required for educators in the further education sector ?
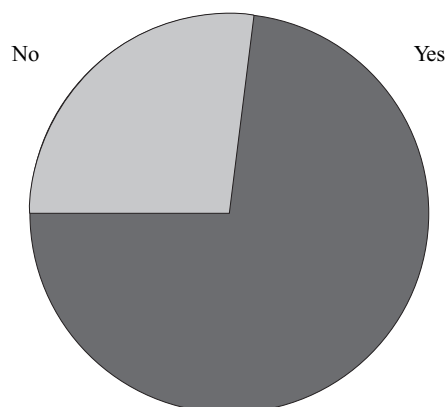
Table 1: Percentage of coordinators who rated items as 'of importance' or 'of great importance' in terms of training needs for a teaching / training qualification.

Item	Percentage
Vocational guidance	96.3
Communication skills	95.1
Information and communication technology	95.1
Identification of training needs of individuals and groups	95.1
Preparation for work	94.2
Mediation skills (basic counselling)	93.9
Management of learning group	93.9
Motivation of students / trainees	92.7
Learning differences and difficulties	92.7
Assessment of student learning	92.7
Evaluation of programmes / courses	91.5
Learning methodologies	90.3
Educational group work	90.2
Management of self	89.0
Quality assurance processes	88.8
Teaching methodologies	87.7
Human resource management	84.1
Curriculum design	81.7
Concepts and perspectives in education / training	80.4

Nearly three-quarters of coordinators considered that there should be a required teaching/training qualification for educators. Coordinators who themselves had a teaching/training qualification were more likely to think there should be a minimum teaching/training qualification than coordinators with no such qualification.

Coordinators were asked the level of qualification in the teaching/learning field which they would consider appropriate for staff working in the Further Education sector. There was a 2:1 preference for undergraduate diploma (2 years duration) rather than undergraduate certificate as the required minimum level for educators without a degree. For educators with a primary degree, coordinators expressed a marginal preference for a postgraduate certificate rather than a postgraduate diploma as the required minimum level.

The range of necessary training skills as perceived by coordinators

Coordinators were asked about the training needs of FE educators in terms of the teaching/training skills required. They were asked to rank items in terms of importance.

The highest and the lowest selection in this table indicate the particular needs as perceived by centre coordinators. However, taken as a whole it is clear that these are significant demands on any trainer and indicate the level of professional engagement required in the sector as a whole.

Training deficit

The quantitative data made clear therefore that there was a major training deficit in the FE sector. Very large numbers of staff have no formal teaching/training qualification. Centre coordinators believe strongly that such training is necessary to provide a quality service and a picture emerges of the rather daunting range of skills and competencies perceived as important for FE educators. The second part of the research, the interviews to which we now turn was primarily concerned with obtaining a more elaborate picture of these skills and competencies.

Bridging the training gap: coordinators speak about staff training

Research methodology employed

The qualitative interview questions reviewed here emerged from the large-scale questionnaire. In this way, the quantitative and qualitative approaches are merged in the sense put forward by Greene *et al* 'where the first method is used sequentially to inform the second' (1989, p 257).

These interviews were conducted in the workplaces of the FE coordinators. They were based on a series of fourteen questions and the same sequence of questions was used throughout all the interviews. They were constructed in the knowledge that a balancing act had to be maintained between building a rapport with the interviewees and eliciting detailed responses to the questions. The interviewees were chosen as representatives of the entire FE sector and from different parts of the country. The sizes of the centres varied and also the number of years the centres had been in existence. Both male and female coordinators are represented. Common factors for all those interviewed included access to the information required, cognition of what was required of them and motivation to become part of the research process.

The interviews were formulated around Kvale's (1996) seven stages of the interview investigation ranging from the formulation of the purpose of the interviews, through the design of the questions, conducting the interviews, transcribing them, analysing and verifying their reliability and finally reporting and communicating the findings. The questions were descriptive and explorative at the early stages to build up rapport. They then progressed to co-operative and participative questions which allowed the respondents to freely express their own viewpoints on a range of training issues. In the final question, each respondent was encouraged to add any further comments on issues which they felt might not have been included in the interview schedule.

What follows is an attempt to faithfully represent the views of the respondents. Their voices are represented by allowing their comments to speak for themselves through reproduction of their actual words in the commentary (Cortazzi, 1991).

The major issues identified by coordinators in the course of the interviews were:

- **Ethos**

It became clear from the outset that the coordinators were strongly committed to their centres and to the community of staff and students that make up these centres. The coordinators were unequivocal in their vision of the centres as places where people are encouraged to grow and develop both on an academic level but also on a personal level.

Strong emphasis was placed on the caring and sharing nature of the ethos, which is encouraged across the range of centres. Time and again reference is made to the

development of personal effectiveness and the growth in self-esteem. One coordinator stated that 'at the core of our philosophy is the growth in personal effectiveness. The building of self-confidence and self-esteem underpins everything we do here.'

There is a strong sense that the FE sector has come in from the cold in recent years and begun to be recognised as a vibrant part of the overall education system. The growth in profile has in some cases resulted in an increase in the number of younger students who attend the various courses on offer. However there is still a strong presence among the student body of those returning to education who need to be encouraged and motivated. One manager summarised his centre's approach as follows: 'we offer not just a mentoring system but a nurturing system as well. If you are an adult learner, then you must be treated as such. Success is not measured purely by academic success. We look at growth in personal development. People set their own aims and objectives and we lead them to their goals'.

• **Facilitator and mentor**

When asked to define the role of educators within the FE sector there is general agreement that the term facilitator is favoured to describe the relationship between students and staff. Because of previous negative experience on the part of many students, it is seen as essential that positive relationships are established. It is suggested that much of the success of students hinges on the ability of staff to tap into their needs and to provide guidance and support. To quote one respondent: 'It is our job to help students to succeed… We look at the overall needs in a holistic fashion and do our best within the available resources to make positive interventions.'

Much emphasis is placed on how educators within the sector can help students to achieve success not just on an educational level but also on a personal and social level. One coordinator represents many by stating that 'in many instances our students need social skills as well as education skills'.

The role of staff is multifaceted and encompasses all aspects of the learning cycle. It is best summed up by one of the replies: 'We are friends and listeners. We are called on to solve problems and act as counsellors. To meet objectives, goals and dreams, that is our central role.'

• **Identifying staff training needs**

There is a clearly recognised need for staff training within the FE sector. However, the exact nature of this training and the best mode of delivery seems very dependent on the type and size of centre, the conditions of employment for staff and the proximity or otherwise to training providers such as universities. Coordinators highlight the lack of motivation amongst some staff members to involve themselves in training because of the uncertainty of tenure of their employment and the fact that they may have hours in two or more centres. This is seen as a major disincentive to further training.

The level of training varies widely from centre to centre. All are trained in their own specific subject field but may have no training in education. Those who have training in the education field may be trained to work with younger children or adolescents rather than adults. The mix of backgrounds is appreciated by most coordinators, but they are also aware of the difficulties caused by lack of experience.

There is strong evidence of gaps in training right across the range of FE centres. Coordinators identify three major areas where further training is deemed necessary. Foremost of these is the area of personal development. The term 'personal develop-

ment' as used in the interviews seems to encompass facilitation, counselling, team building and the whole area of adult learning.

Several respondents make reference to the fact that in many instances centres are working with people who may have experienced disadvantage or are currently experiencing problems in their lives. There is a strong call for training which would facilitate trainers in building up the confidence, self-esteem and trust of the trainees. One respondent states that: 'Staff require training in encouraging people. They need to see beyond the disadvantage. People fall out of education because of personal issues. If staff can work on these issues then students won't be resistant to education.'

A common theme running through the interviews was the need to train staff to become facilitators of adult learning and to have the skills to help students to manage their own learning. This theme is best expressed by the following comment from a coordinator: 'We need staff who are in a bit deeper. They need to be able to facilitate independent learning. We in the FE sector should be in the business of empowering people as individuals to become independent learners. Staff need to become advocates for the people they work with and help them to overcome prejudice.'

While emphasis is placed on equipping staff with these 'people skills' for the benefit of the student it is also recognised that the centres would benefit from having staff involved in such training. It would allow for the development of teamwork, remove some of the fragmentation that currently exists within centres and facilitate communication between staff members. One manager felt that: 'People need to be aware of how to support each other. For the continuation of centres, team-work needs to be built on. Training would facilitate communication, facilitate our human needs and remove the isolation that currently exists'.

The research identified two further areas of need in the field of training. There was a general consensus that staffs need regular in-service training to be equipped for the many structural, curricular and methodological changes that occur. The final area identified was the field of information and communications technology and e-learning.

While training cannot be seen as a panacea for all the ills of the sector, it does seem clear that a co-ordinated approach would benefit all the key stakeholders. This is best captured by the following comment: 'Training is about the transfer of skills but it is also about the cross fertilisation of ideas…to have space to share ideas and increase motivation.'

- **Training the coordinator**

When questioned about their own specific training needs, centre coordinators highlighted the need for training in core management skills. Most of them entered the job without any specific management training and felt that much of their learning was trial and error. Many commented on the lack of any formal job description.

All those surveyed noted the absence of any formal training in budgeting and finance. There was also a call for in-service on basic information to do with issues such as sick leave, holiday entitlements and selection procedures.

Many respondents cited the need for training in the field of human resource management. It was felt that the coordinator is pivotal to the running of a centre and that they must be equipped to deal with the many issues that arise for staff and students alike: 'the coordinator is the pinnacle. He or she must be able to offer support, empathy, vision and encouragement to staff and students alike. We should be able to alleviate stress and handle personal problems.'

There was a perceived need for training in communication and presentation skills, as centres increasingly need to recruit students and this is often the job of the coordinator. There is a perception among coordinators that the whole area of public relations and marketing has been largely ignored in many training initiatives. As one interviewee stated, 'access to adult and continuing education is two-way, our access to potential clients and their access to us.' This is an area that needs to be examined urgently.

There is a sense from the interviews that many of the coordinators feel they are at sea and would welcome structured training and guidelines in the field of management. In the words of one interviewee: 'If you're in the wilderness long enough without a compass or guide you'll do your own thing, when you want to and how you want to. This isn't necessarily the right way and may lead to tension and friction at many levels.'

Conclusion

The research clearly identified the need for further training of educators within the FE sector, with particular reference to areas such as personal development, front-line counselling and the facilitation of independent learning by adult students. While individual educators may have adequate expertise in their subjects or in the field of education, many do not have skills in both aspects of training. Most educators lack expertise in the delivery of programmes to adult learners. For their own part, co-ordinators also acknowledged the need for specific training to be made available in the management of personnel and organisational management. Educators in the FE sector are viewed as facilitators of learning, advocates for their students, counsellors and advisers. They offer motivation and support but in many instances the absence of recognised training and a clearly defined career structure can act as demotivators in their own lives.

All respondents recognise that educators in the FE sector are drawn to their work because of a commitment to what they are doing and especially to those with whom they work. Training may provide a better theoretical framework but to be successful it must be accompanied by recognition, it must be negotiated and must be accessible. Some form of quality control needs to be built into training courses so that the training offered in centres can in turn be standardised. One respondent summarised this point as follows: 'Training needs to help people on the ground to appreciate and in turn to deliver quality training in their own centres. Course providers need to monitor the effects of training by coming into the centres and measuring the effectiveness on the ground.'

Educators in the FE sector are called upon to deal with a wide range of issues and their training must equip them to deal adequately with these issues. There is a strong sense from the research that all trainers in the FE sector should undergo additional training and that such training should be obligatory for employment within the sector. This may seem a big task but in the words of one philosophical interviewee: 'Training in the sector is looking at wide issues, issues around values and personal issues. It is not sufficient to sit in a boat and sail down the river. Trainers in the sector need to be able to direct and steer the boat along its path. Trainers need to be taught to look at themselves and their philosophy of education.'

Training needs of FE staff in Ireland

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