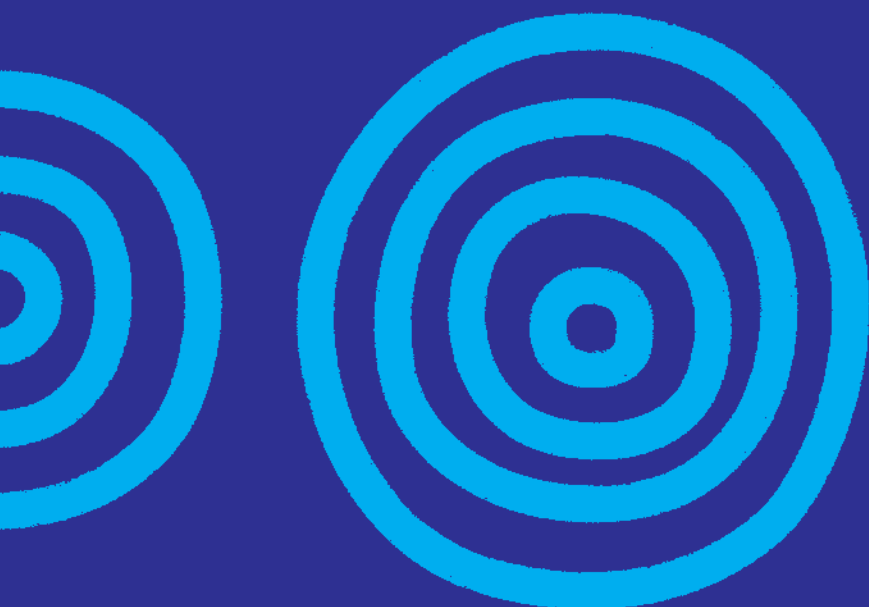




Future FET: Transforming Learning

The National Further
Education and Training
(FET) Strategy



2024



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

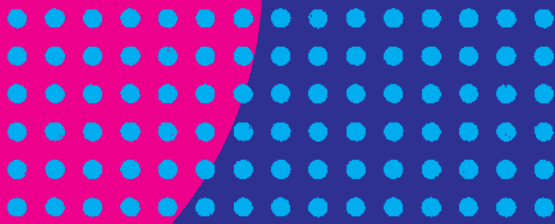
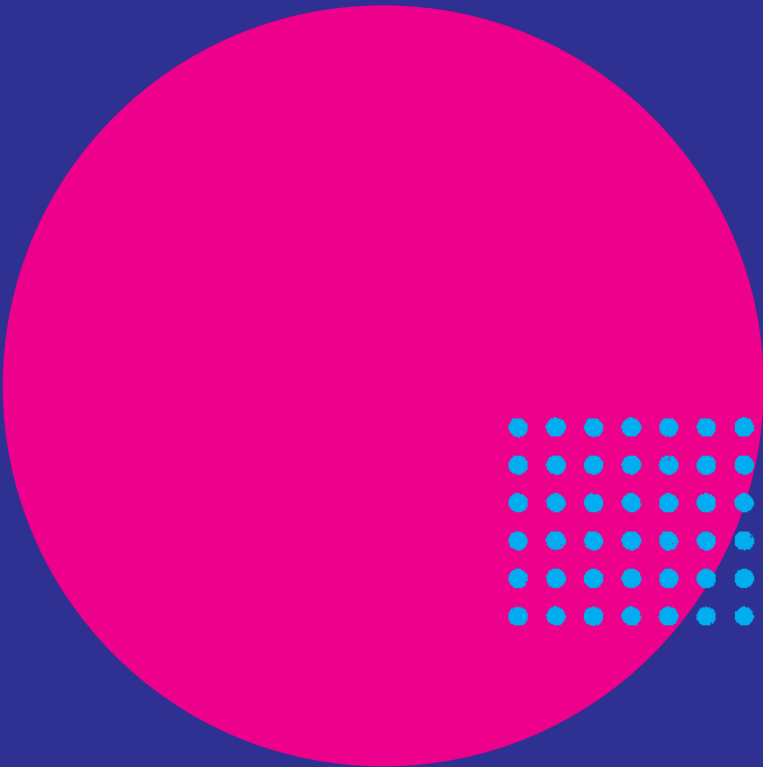
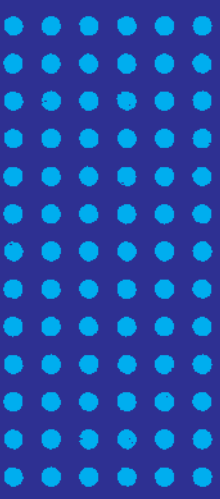
SOLAS
learning works



Ireland's European Structural and
Investment Funds Programmes
2014-2020
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Minister's Foreword

I am really excited that this is one of my first official duties as Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

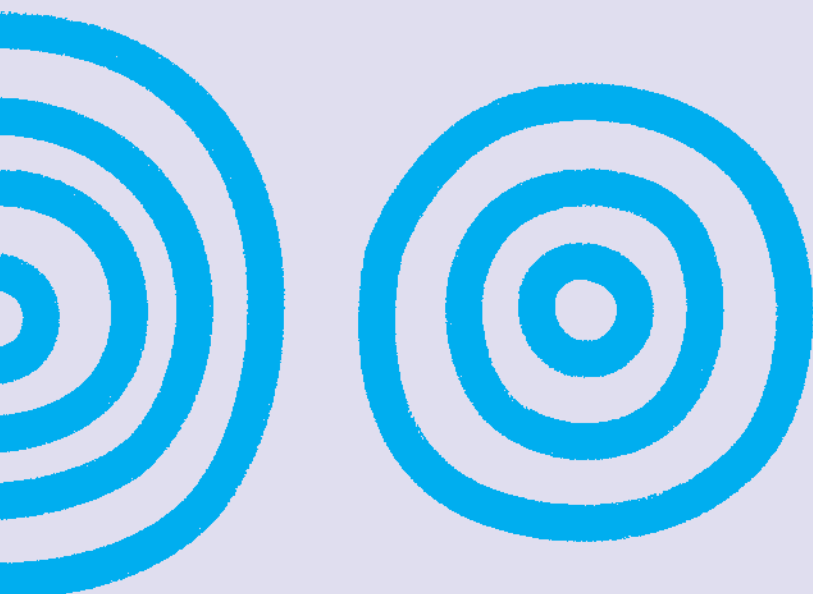
Further education is at the heart of communities across this country but as the economy and society change, we must reshape our plans for this area. This exciting new strategy aims to repair, repurpose and revive our economy and our communities over the course of the next five years.

“Future FET: Transforming Learning” is an ambitious new strategy based around the three core pillars of building skills, fostering inclusion, and facilitating pathways.

The role of Further Education and Training is broad and multifaceted, and the strategy reflects this while also being both concise and specific about its core objectives and its proposed outcomes.

The breadth of provision offered through FET is as impressive as it is diverse. From community outreach programmes, family learning, integration and inclusion initiatives, to traineeships and apprenticeships, FET can put you on a pathway to anywhere you want to go in education, in work and in life.

FET was a lifeline for many during the economic recession, and once again FET will be critical to our post-Covid recovery. Now more than ever, FET will support the economy through targeted initiatives, particularly around re-skilling and up-skilling opportunities. Our ways of working have changed dramatically over time, as well as more recently, and this strategy offers a clear pathway to recovery and opportunity for everyone.

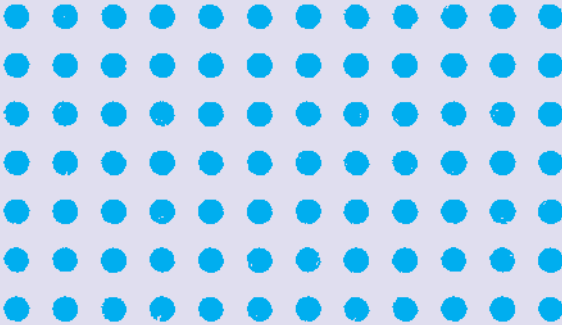


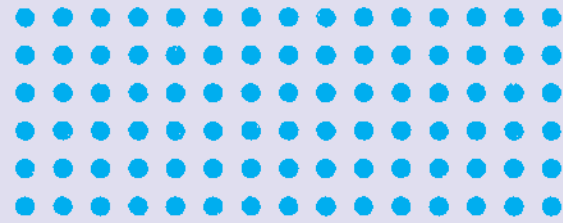


Further Education and Training is also a valuable enabler of social cohesion. Ireland is a diverse and vibrant society, and the Programme for Government commits to encouraging and enabling full inclusion and equality for all. We recognise the importance of community education in facilitating integration of our diverse population; FET now has a vital role in enabling this equality and cohesion to flourish in communities throughout the country, working with the Government to create a fair, inclusive, and equitable Ireland for all.

I congratulate SOLAS, ETBs, teachers and instructors, as well as all the key stakeholders, in creating such an inclusive vision for Further Education and Training and I look forward to engaging with you all on bringing us there.

Minister Simon Harris TD
Department of Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation and Science





SOLAS Foreword


The ambitious agenda set out in this new FET strategy for the period 2020-2024, as its title suggests, is aimed at Transforming Learning over the next 5 years. As we transition from the first FET strategy which followed the establishment of Education and Training Boards and SOLAS, we are moving towards a phase where real reform and performance improvement can deliver a more strategic and integrated FET system. The timing is perfect, with the formation of a new Department dedicated to both further and higher education, new Ministers in place to oversee a more cohesive approach across both, and a programme for Government which sets out a range of commitments to grow the role and contribution of FET over the next few years.

The new approach is based around three strategic pillars: building skills; fostering inclusion; and facilitating pathways. This will be underpinned by a strong focus on four enabling themes: digital transformation; learner and performance focus; staffing and structures; and capital development. It is the product of extensive analysis and a comprehensive consultation process, and we would like to thank all those who took the time to meet with us or make submissions to support its development.

The central premise of the new strategy is that FET is for everyone and will serve as a major driver of both economic development and social cohesion. It is available in every community and offers you a pathway to take you as far as you want to go, regardless of any previous level of education. FET must become louder and prouder, with more and more people of all ages becoming aware of the opportunities to learn, develop, and progress through FET. There is a real opportunity to grow the contribution and profile of FET and generate a more collaborative and cohesive post-secondary education system for Ireland. To achieve this, the sector must simplify its structure and learning pathways, facilitate easier access to education and training, ensure a more consistent learner experience, and build a more powerful identity within communities and for potential learners.

FET is starting this journey from a good base. It supports around 200,000 unique learners annually, underpinned by state investment of around €800million, and offers a range of learning opportunities and supports across Levels 1 to 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). It is delivered by 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) ensuring that FET reflects regional characteristics and meets regional needs, and a range of other FET providers and support agencies.

While this new strategy marks a pivotal moment for FET, the Covid-19 crisis which we are all now experiencing in 2020 makes the need for change all the more pertinent. The way in which we work, learn, do business, and even engage with each other was already fundamentally changing as technology advanced, but the lessons and legacy from this Covid period will only intensify the pace at which this will happen in the future. Individuals will make different career and lifestyle



choices, employers will adopt new business models and education providers will have to fully embed technology in the delivery of learning or else risk becoming irrelevant. There will also be significant social and economic damage as a result of the crisis, and FET must be there to support the up-skilling and re-skilling of those who require a route back into sustainable employment, the re-invigoration of communities hit hard by restrictions, and the competitiveness of businesses as they seek a return to growth.

Add to that the looming threat of Brexit, and the importance of a strategic, agile and responsive FET system is never more apparent. The way that ETBs, other FET providers, agencies and bodies have responded to recent challenges underlines their commitment to shape and lead this next critical phase of development, and we would like to thank them for their continued excellent work.

We would also like to acknowledge the many other stakeholders who play an important role in supporting the FET system, including our new parent department, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; and the Department of Education and Skills, with whom we have worked so closely over the last few years. Finally, we would like to thank SOLAS colleagues and our Board members, for their part in moving us into this exciting next phase of FET development. Making a difference in our educational landscape is something we all pride ourselves on. As an organisation with diverse responsibilities, we have worked hard to define common values and a shared sense of purpose, with the needs of the FET learner at the heart of everything we do.

We hope you enjoy this new strategy, and that you will all play a part in FET's exciting future.

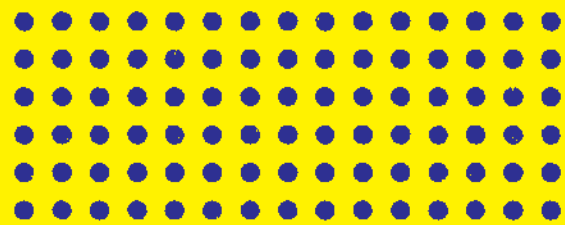
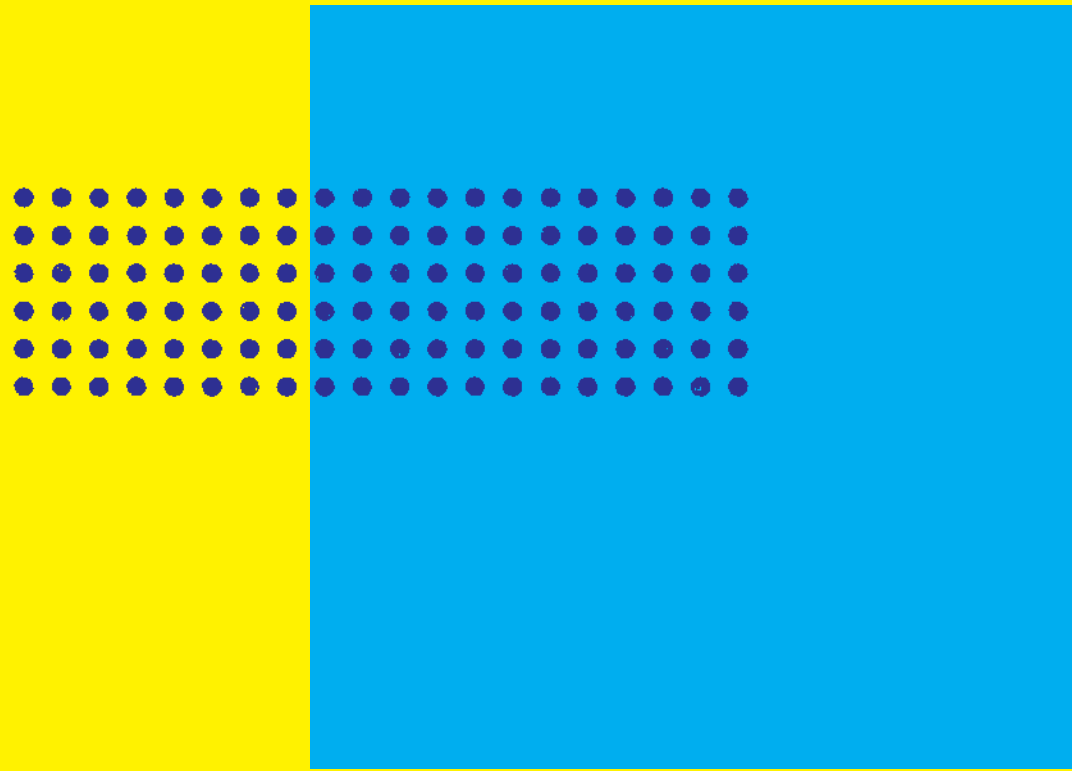


Sean Aylward
Chair, SOLAS



Andrew Brownlee
CEO, SOLAS

Transforming
Learning

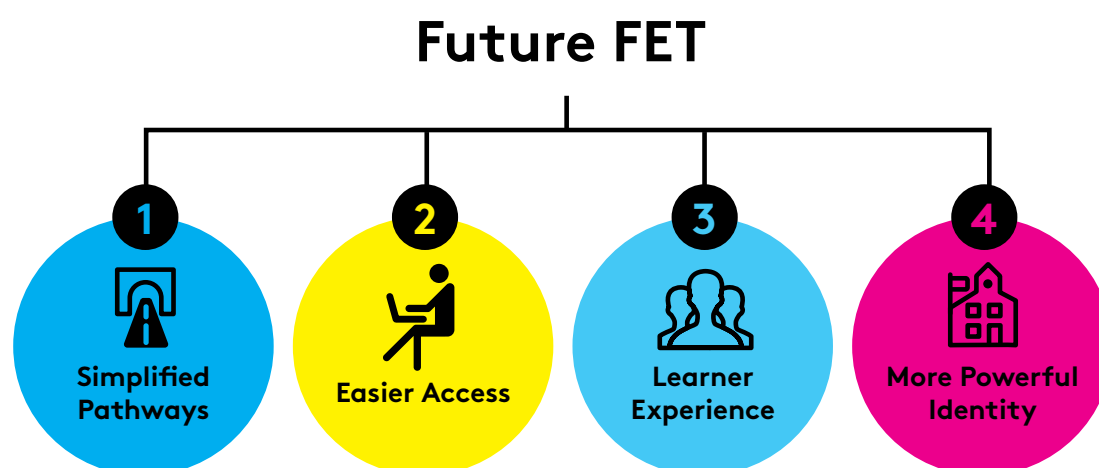


Future **FET**

FET - Further Education & Training

Future FET: Transforming Learning

FET is unique. FET is for everyone. It is available in every community in Ireland, and offers every individual, regardless of any previous level of education, a pathway to take them as far as they want to go. It can offer personal development and fulfilment, a link to community and social networks, and a range of supports that reflect the diverse base of its learners. It also offers great opportunities to move into exciting and interesting vocations and careers, or a platform to develop the skills that will allow someone to flourish if they go on to further study in higher education.



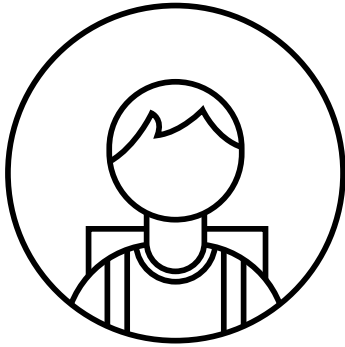
Learner feedback is generally positive, employment and progression outcomes are strong, and employers are highly satisfied with the quality of FET graduates.

But FET has to change. It needs to ensure that it can meet the needs of the future world and the evolving needs of economy and society. It must simplify its structure and learning pathways, facilitate easier access, ensure a more consistent learner experience and build a more powerful identity within communities and potential learners. It must become louder and prouder, with more and more people of all ages becoming aware of the opportunities to learn, develop and progress at local level. There is a real opportunity to grow the FET contribution to a more collaborative and cohesive, developing tertiary education system for Ireland.

This will mean transforming FET and promoting what Future FET means for all those who can benefit from its provision, for example:

- the school leaver;
- the lifelong learner;
- the employee looking to up-skill;
- the marginalised who want to re-engage in education; and
- the employers and the communities which FET helps to serve.

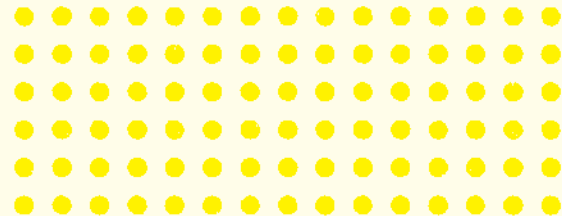
School Leaver



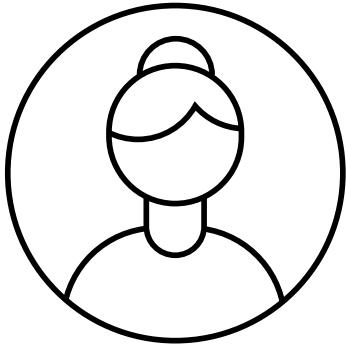
“I wanted the college experience but I didn’t want to wait 4 years before I started earning.”

#FutureFET will mean:

- I will be learning in a diverse, vibrant college setting of scale where a range of different FET options will be available
- At CAO time, I will have access to the same level of information about FET and apprenticeship options as those in HE, and a parallel mechanism to pursue my interest in them
- The outcomes from those that have done my course before me will be clear so I can make a smart choice
- There will be courses within FET that offer a clear pathway directly to an interesting vocation or career or into an HE degree programme
- If I leave school early, FET will offer valuable pathways, in small group supported learning settings to finish my senior cycle or to develop my skills so I can work out what to do next
- At least 30% of the Level 5/6 FET course offering will be work or practice based
- The financial support I receive in FET will be the same regardless of the course I do and will be consistent with what I would receive with an HE choice
- I will be digitally enabled so I can track my learning and achievements far beyond my first experience in FET, and learn in flexible and convenient ways supported at all times by technology



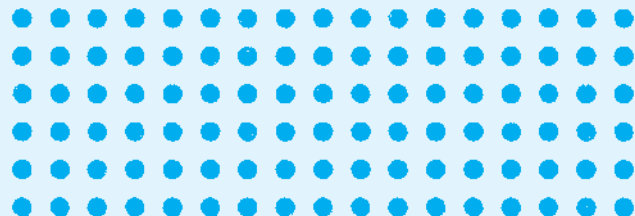
Lifelong Learner



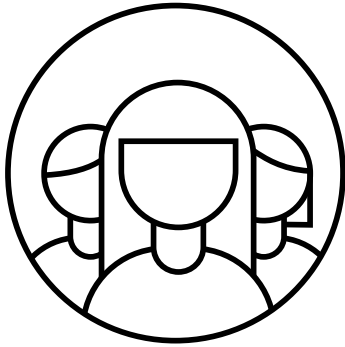
“I have local access to education opportunities that I can dip in and out of whenever my life and career requires.”

#FutureFET will mean:

- I will have access to year-round learning options in a local FET centre or college where I can share my experience with other learners
- Part-time options will be available at Level 5 and Level 6 to allow me to re-skill or up-skill and enter a new career or provide a pathway to further study in FET or HE
- I can access my learning in bitesize chunks, taking modules and courses that fit with my personal and working commitments, that enable me to also build my credits and credentials over time
- Learning opportunities will be available in flexible modes, allowing me to study in my own time using technology wherever appropriate, and a range of blended and online options will be accessible from an eCollege portal
- A range of providers will offer me a variety of community education options which can link to longer-term pathways within FET and beyond
- The outcomes of all the learning I undertake can be recognised
- I will be able to track and plan my past, current and future learning in FET and easily understand the courses that may be most relevant to my needs
- Learner support and guidance will be tailored to my individual needs and available within my local community setting



Community



“The FET college helps to sustain our community. It’s a place to meet, to make friends, to learn and to share ideas.”

#FutureFET will mean:

- There will be a local FET resource serving as a beacon for learning and skills development in our community
- There will be a FET college of scale within my immediate region where I can pursue Level 5 and Level 6 options which lead to exciting careers and play a huge part in the local identity of the community
- Linking to local community and voluntary organisations to ensure that FET can understand and respond to the needs of all within the community
- Offering correctly focused support and provision which can address the needs of the most marginalised within each community
- Supporting a diverse network of community education providers and projects consistently across the country and encouraging innovation in ground-up community-based learning initiatives
- Linking community education to wider learning pathways within FET and HE
- Using technology to ensure that communities can access diverse FET options
- A role in supporting the development of vocational options and vocational pathways within its schools
- Providing a facility to bring people together to learn, socialise, share ideas and hold community and cultural events

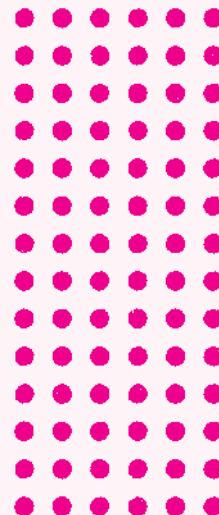
The Employee



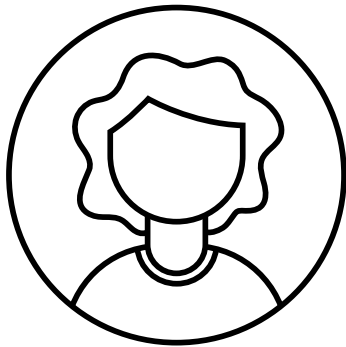
“I never had the time to study due to work and family commitments but FET offered me a way to do it at my own pace in a way that helped both me and the company I work for.”

#FutureFET will mean:

- Bitesize courses will be available from the ETB to provide focused up-skilling in key areas and my participation will be recognised via digital badges
- There will be a range of FET options relevant to my needs available in a flexible manner so that I can fit learning around my work commitments
- I will be able to take FET courses at no or very low cost that will help me to keep my skills up-to-date
- I will be able to access good guidance and information to make smart up-skilling and career development decisions
- My company can work with the local ETB to develop courses which are tailored to my needs and those of my co-workers and which we can access collectively
- I will be able to engage in FET via a high quality digital experience and technology will play a big part in facilitating flexible access to the skills development I require
- Online courses will be available from the eCollege portal giving me access to industry accredited courses that will keep me at the cutting edge of technological change
- A range of Level 5 and Level 6 programmes will be available at the local FET college in the evening which will allow me to look at different potential vocational and career pathways
- FET can help develop core skills that are critical in my company in areas like digital capacity, communications, marketing and people management



The Returner

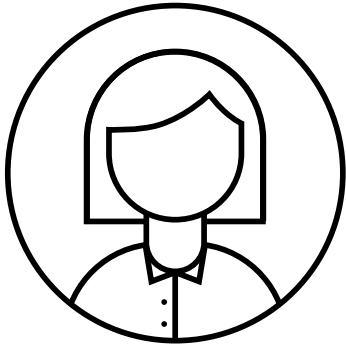


“It was a big step to re-engage in education but the support I’ve had since I stepped through the door of the ETB means I have never looked back.”

#FutureFET will mean:

- I can get used to re-engaging in learning by working in small group settings in a comfortable environment with experienced tutors who can give me initial skills and confidence to succeed
- Support for my literacy and numeracy needs will be available and will be integrated with whatever FET course I am pursuing
- There will be a range of supports and initiatives available from the ETB which target the needs of particularly vulnerable groups or disadvantaged communities
- I will have the option to have my learning validated and certified
- The financial support I receive while engaging in FET will be clear and DEASP and ETB advice and support will be consistent and focused on meeting my long-term and development needs
- Community education initiatives will be supported which target the needs of those around me and link to pathways within FET and beyond
- Pathways will include access to exciting apprenticeships and other work-based learning courses which link to interesting vocations
- I will be digitally enabled so that I can track my learning and achievements far beyond my first experience in FET, and learn in flexible and convenient ways supported at all times by technology

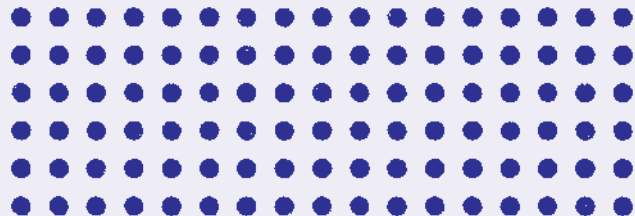
The Employer



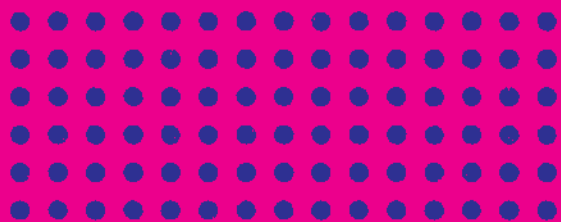
“We needed to re-skill some of our workers to respond to new technology and my ETB developed a course to meet our needs and sustain our business.”

#FutureFET will mean:

- My ETB will serve as a key resource for my business, helping us to understand our future skills requirements
- I can be confident that FET graduates will have the key skills and competencies we need for our business to operate and flourish
- There will be a range of FET courses which will ensure we have a future pipeline of talent available from the local labour pool to meet our future business requirements
- My ETB will provide much of the up-skilling, professional and management development support required by our existing employees
- A range of exciting apprenticeships and other work-based learning programmes relevant to my business will be available and will allow me to take on and develop staff with the critical technical and core skills to succeed
- A single point of ETB contact and a coordinated approach to employer engagement, to ensure that our needs are understood and met in an efficient and effective manner
- An opportunity to come together with other enterprises in my sector or region to discuss and agree common skills development responses which can then be delivered by the ETB
- Opportunities to engage in a range of FET support activities, including work placement, programme development and quality assurance to ensure alignment between provision and employer need



A New Strategy
for FET



Section 1

1 A New Strategy for Further Education and Training

1.1 Introduction

Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland transforms our people, our communities and our enterprises. It makes a difference to the lives we lead, helping us to develop personally, learn new things, shape our choices, and create and inspire. It can support us in securing employment, and continue to support us throughout successful careers in diverse occupations and industries. FET is available in every community and has something for everyone, regardless of any previous level of education, offering a pathway to take them as far as they want to go.

FET is also at an exciting stage of development. Since SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) were created in 2013 and the concept of an integrated FET approach was introduced, it has been in a development and establishment phase, with some key milestones set out in Figure 1. The immediate priority was setting up the organisations and embedding systems and processes to support planning, funding and gathering of learner data. This was reflected in a first further education and training strategy that was all-encompassing and focused on clarifying roles and responsibilities across multiple stakeholders, with 5 goals and 52 detailed actions set out.

A clearer agenda for FET began to emerge with the launch of an action plan for apprenticeships and traineeships, and the agreement of national FET system targets with the Minister of Education and Skills, which then framed the establishment of 3-year strategic performance agreements between SOLAS and the ETBs in 2018. An independent review of progress of the first FET strategy, also in 2018, acknowledged the significant achievements made in establishing a clear sense of a FET 'system', the successful development of ICT, operational and governance infrastructures and the value of FET for learners, employers and the wider economy. It also stressed the need for a more focused and holistic vision for its future development.

While challenges remain, particularly around organisation structures and capabilities, this has all provided a platform for the real reform, integration, innovation and performance improvement which is now continuing apace across the FET system. FET is louder and prouder, with more and more people of all ages becoming aware of the opportunities to learn, develop and progress at local level. There is a real opportunity to grow the FET contribution to a more collaborative and cohesive tertiary education system for Ireland.

This strategy sets out to do this by simplifying the FET structure, improving access to it, supporting its learners consistently, and building its provision around a distinct, diverse and vibrant community-based FET college of the future.

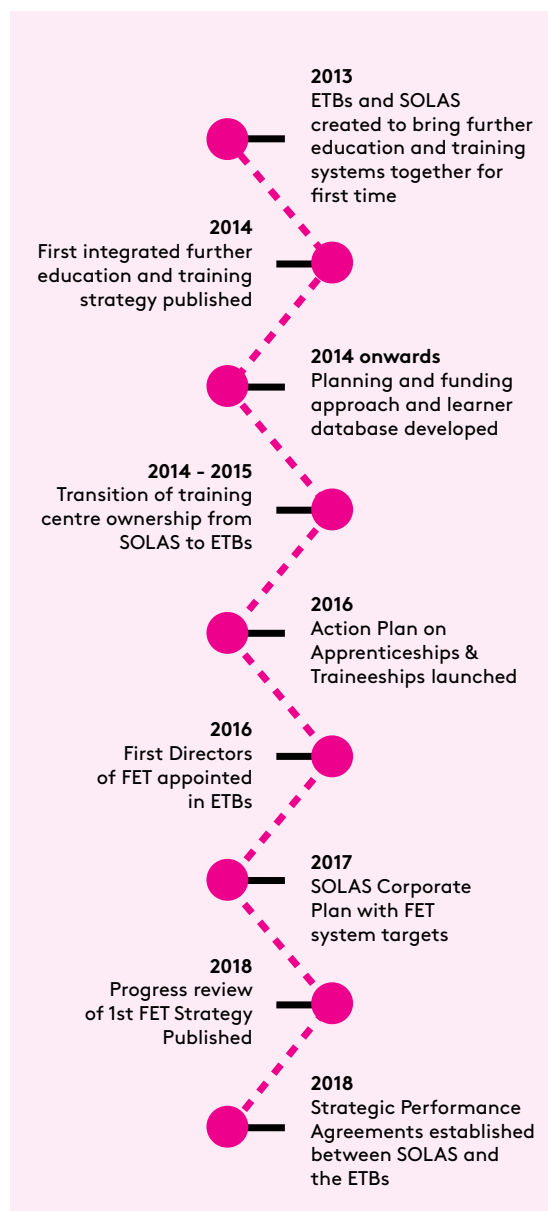


Figure 1: Key Milestones in FET Development

While the development of this strategy has been underpinned by a year-long process of extensive analysis, consultation and planning, we have attempted to keep this final document concise and accessible. It focuses on ensuring there is a clear understanding of the nature of FET and the rapidly evolving environment in which it must operate. It then sets out a vision for FET's development over the next five years, based around three pillars of **skills, pathways and inclusion**, with associated strategic priorities. There was strong - indeed, an almost overwhelming - endorsement of the direction in which FET needs to move. But it was also stressed that there were other areas that need to be addressed to realise this future FET vision, and these are set out across four enabling themes. The strategy concludes by setting out the robust implementation arrangements which will be put in place to ensure delivery and success.

We hope you enjoy reading the strategy, and that you will play your part in ensuring that FET has the profile necessary to make the contribution that will be essential to the next critical phase of social and economic development in Ireland.

1.2 The New Strategy in Context

SOLAS is charged with overseeing the planning, funding and co-ordination of publicly funded FET. Under the Further Education and Training Act 2013, SOLAS must prepare, and submit to the Minister, every five years, a strategy in relation to the provision of further education and training. This strategy must reflect Government policy in relevant areas, the evolving environment and the future world of education and work. It will steer the FET system to respond to this context over the next five years. The strategic framework set out in Figure 2 helps to ensure that this future direction aligns with how FET is planned, supported and delivered on the ground.

Two major developments in recent years have supported the move to a more strategic, integrated, quality and outcomes-focused approach in FET.

The first of these developments was the establishment of strategic performance agreements in 2018 between SOLAS and the ETBs providing a key link between national strategy and FET provision over a multi-year planning period.

These agreements:

- reflect on the unique characteristics and needs of the area served by ETBs
- detail the resources and infrastructure available to ETBs to meet these needs
- summarise the baseline provision in terms of FET
- set out the ETBs' strategic priorities for FET over a three-year period
- identify the challenges and risks in the context of providing FET
- highlight the contribution to be made by ETBs to delivering on national policies and strategies and individual FET strategy objectives
- propose an ETB contribution to meeting each of the national FET system targets

Alongside this, the ongoing work between QQI, ETBs and other FET providers around quality assurance and quality enhancement is critically important in facilitating a more agile, responsive and integrated quality FET system. This process has supported the development of holistic cross-FET QA structures, systems and processes within each ETB, driving continuous improvement and reform, and it provides a platform for more effective programme development by FET providers in future.

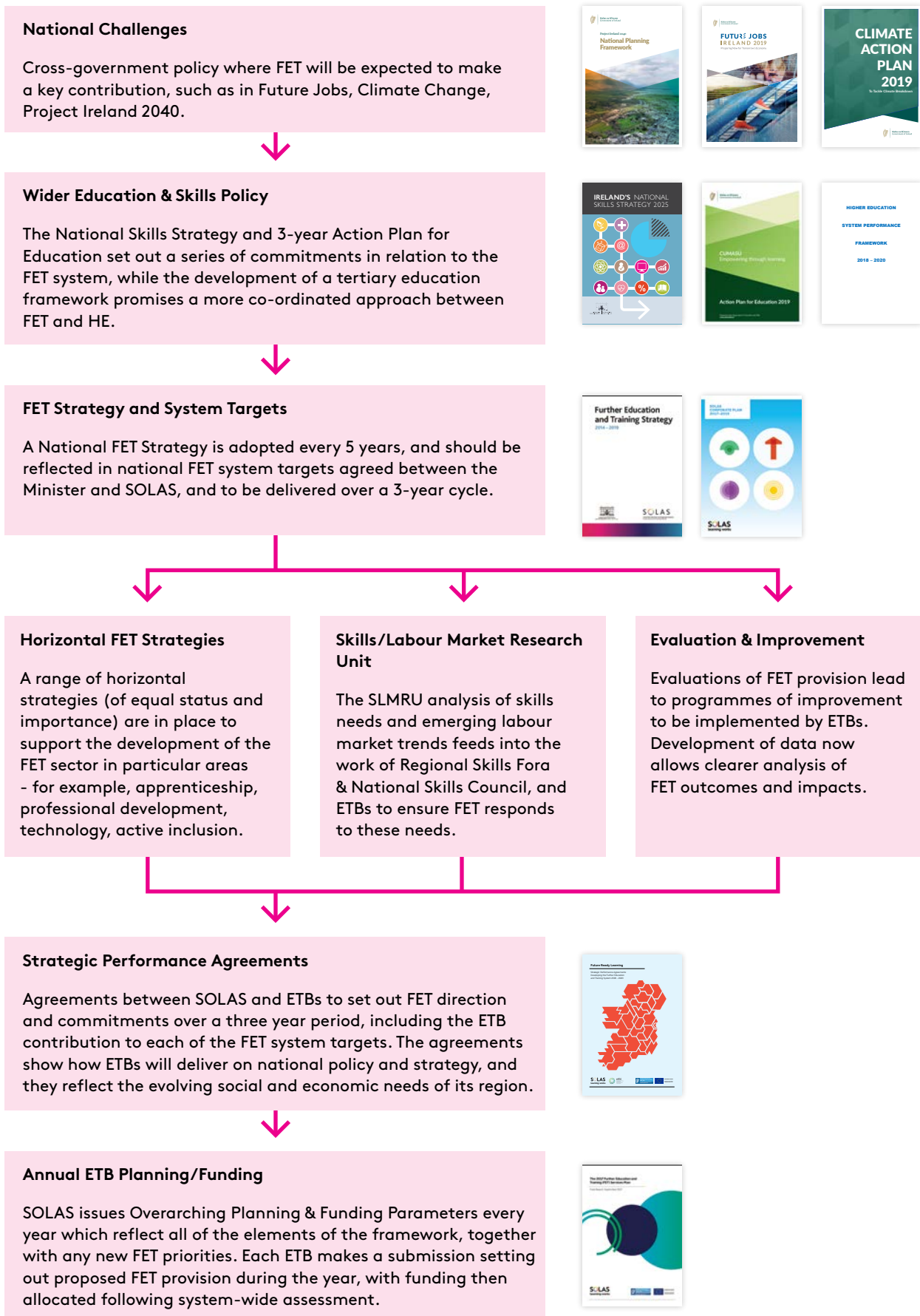


Figure 2: Strategic Framework for FET

1.3 How the Strategy was developed

This strategy represents the culmination of an intensive and inclusive development process, with three distinct phases:

- **Phase 1** focused on developing an understanding of the policy context, the evolving environment and the nature of FET provision in Ireland, and then benchmarking this against other international approaches to further and vocational education and training. It was also important to reflect on the success of the first strategy, taking on board the findings of the independent progress review, and of other evaluations and research studies which had been undertaken on particular programmes or aspects of FET.
- **Phase 2** focused on extensive consultation with all stakeholders with an interest in FET, reflecting their different perspectives and determining common priorities. This included an open call for submissions to ensure that any individual or organisation that wished to have input into the development of the new FET strategy could do so. In addition to the widespread consultation, SOLAS, as the body responsible for setting FET policy and the ultimate recipient of this strategy, liaised closely with the Department of Education and Skills throughout the development process.
- **Phase 3** involved gathering all of the analysis of the current and expected future context, and the comprehensive and rich feedback from key stakeholders. This helped the iterative development and finalisation of the strategy. Phase 3 also included development and testing of key theories and priorities through regional ETB and national multi-stakeholder workshops, and a social media think-in which engaged a mass audience in discussing #FutureFET.

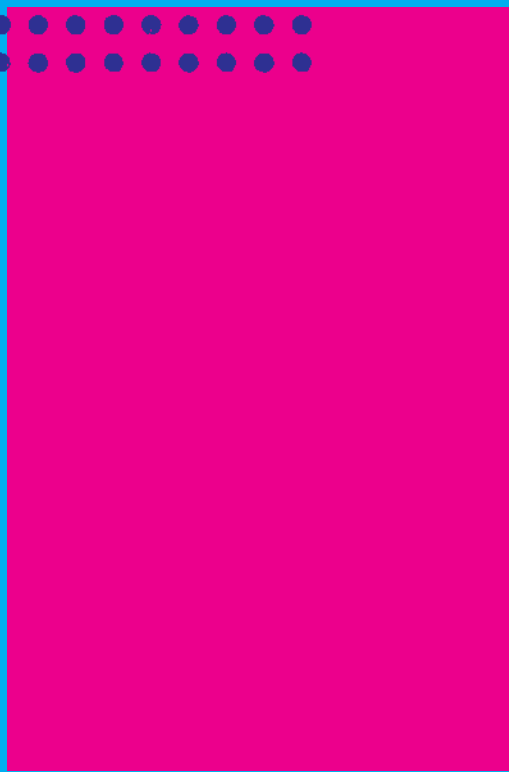
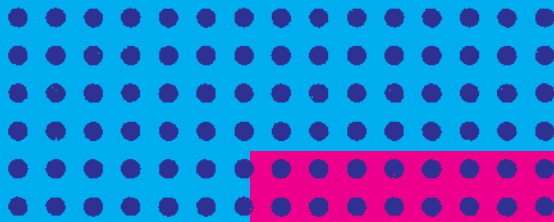
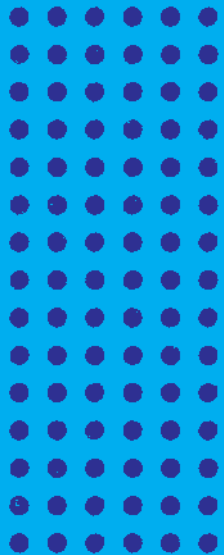
An overview of the methodology which underpinned the strategy development process is set out in Figure 3.

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Environment and Horizon Scanning	Determining Priorities with Stakeholders	Strategy Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Analysis of the policy environment — FET research & evaluations (including review of previous strategy) — Skills and labour market research — Review of literature around the future world of work — Benchmarking international FE/VET systems & strategies — Horizon scanning and scenario planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Multi-layered consultation with ETBs — 34 bilateral meetings with other external stakeholders (industry, unions, NGOs, state agencies and Government Departments) — Open call for submissions attracting 64 responses — Internal SOLAS consultation with Board, Senior Leadership Team & Staff — National Learner Forum with over 100 learners identifying priorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Regional workshops with ETB staff with over 200 contributing — Social media ‘think-in’ with over 2 million engagements — Multi-stakeholder workshop to test and finalise future strategy — Development and sharing of content — Drafting of the strategy — Incorporation of feedback — Finalisation of strategy — Submission of strategy

Figure 3: Strategy Development Process

Section 2

This is FET



2 This is FET

2.1 FET Provision

FET is truly unique. FET is for everyone. It offers the opportunity to engage in learning in virtually every community in Ireland regardless of any previous levels of education and a pathway to progress as far as any individual wants to go. Serving around 200,000 unique learners each year, FET provides a continuum of learning opportunities from Level 1 to Level 6 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) as set out below, focused on both core and specific skills development, accompanied by a range of learner supports to facilitate the active inclusion of all citizens.

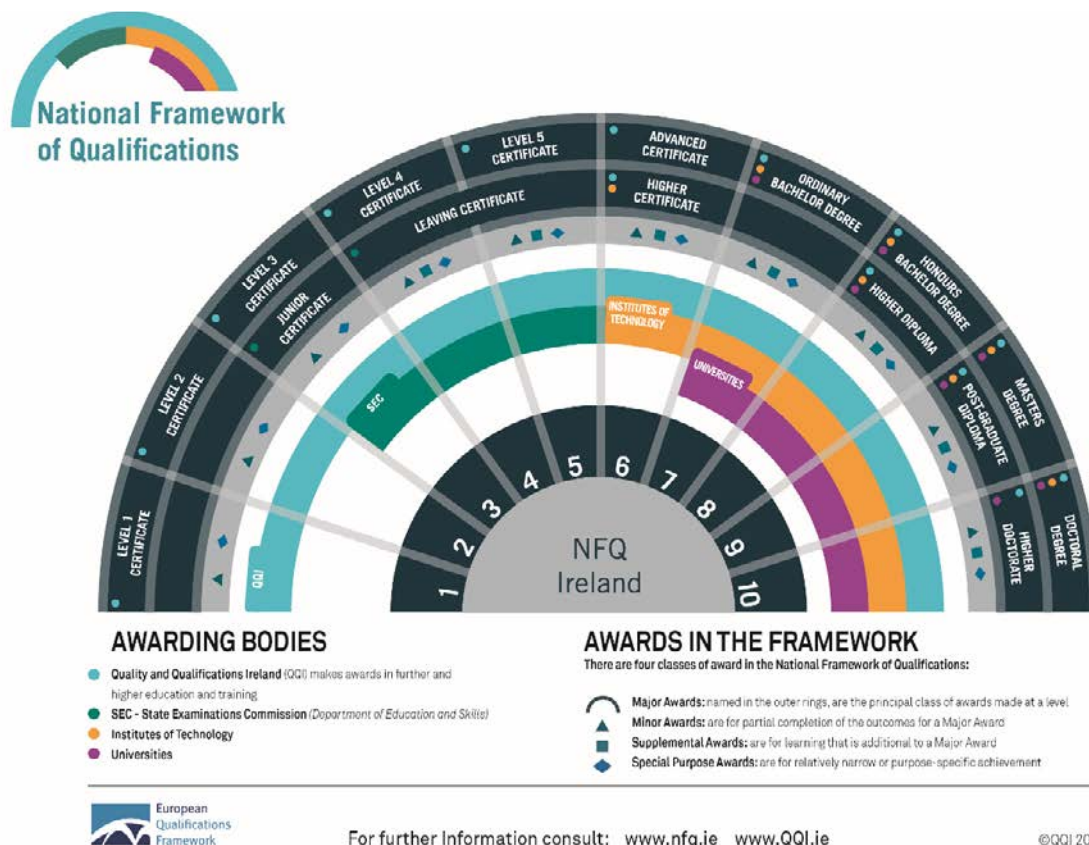


Figure 4: FET and the National Framework of Qualifications

Almost €800 million of funding is invested by SOLAS annually in FET. The majority of this funding is channelled through ETBs, as set out in Figure 5 (with funding levels for 2018 noted) who deliver FET provision either directly or via a network of contracted training or community education and training providers in response to the needs of their respective regions. Outside of this FET coordinated by ETBs, there are approximately 25 independent community and voluntary secondary schools funded to deliver PLC courses, while a range of support organisations are also funded to deliver specific services across the FET system (e.g. NALA on adult literacy and Aontas on learner voice and AHEAD on Universal Design for Learning).

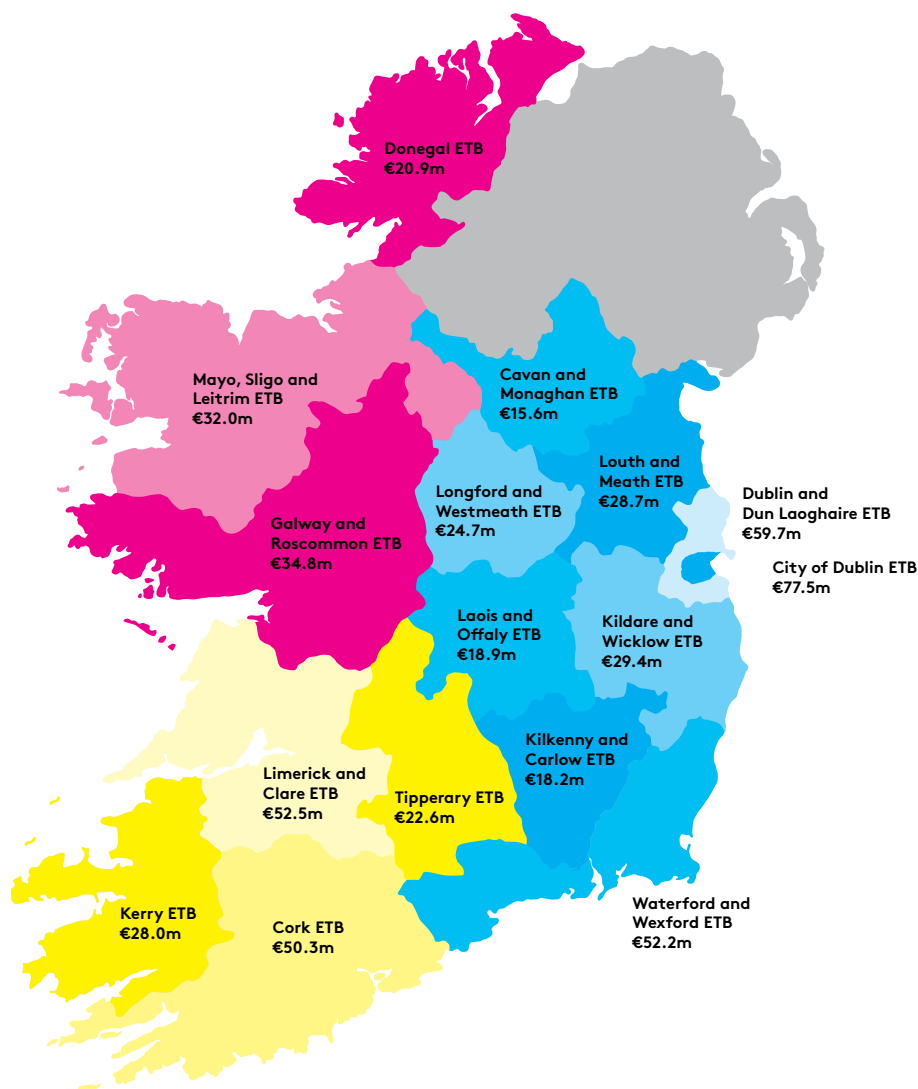


Figure 5: ETBs in Ireland

With the exception of statutory apprenticeships, the maximum length of a FET course is one year, although some provision carries a two year option with a distinct award at the end of each year. This means learner engagement with providers tends to be shorter term than, for example, higher education, yet often these learners enrol in multiple courses, sometimes within the same year. This means for example that the 200,000 learners in 2018 had over 340,000 engagements in FET courses.

In terms of FET infrastructure, there are 64 FET centres focused primarily on either what was traditionally seen as training or further education at Level 5 or Level 6. There is then a wider network of 293 community based facilities providing critical access to education and training opportunities, primarily at Levels 1 to 4, as presented in Figure 6. Provision across 58 second-level institutions also offers critical access to PLC qualifications in particular communities, alongside the community and voluntary secondary schools referenced above delivering such courses outside of the ETB structure. There has been gradual development of integrated FET approaches across the Level 1-4 facilities while preserving community access. Although this has been less apparent for the Level 5-6 hubs, there have been some initiatives by ETBs to break down barriers between PLC and other training provision at these Levels.

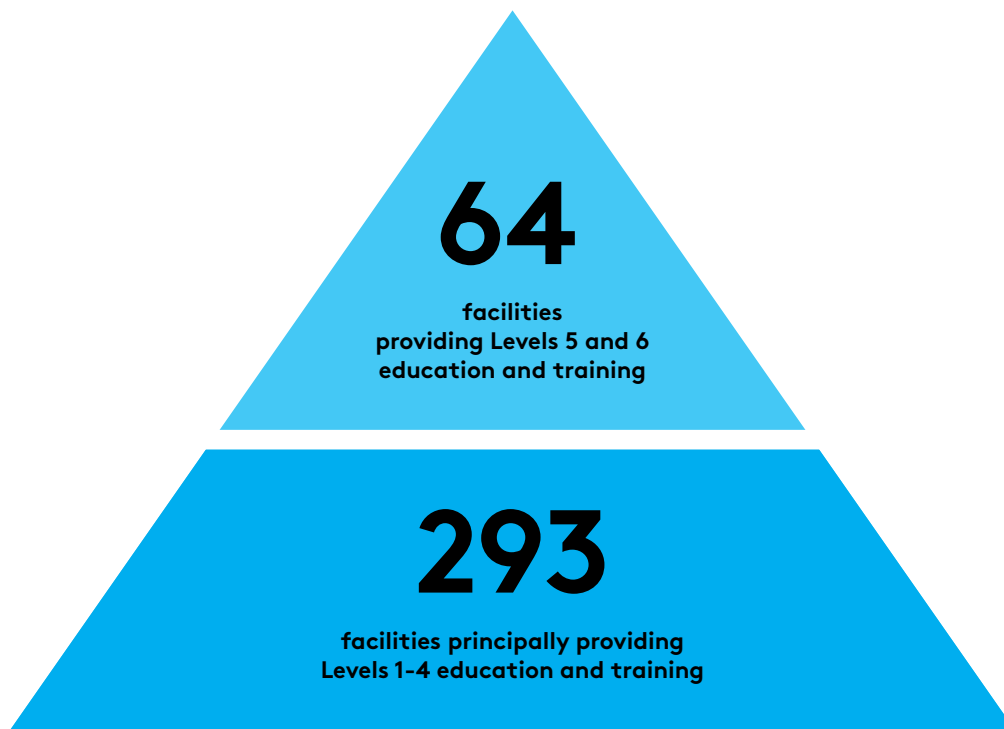


Figure 6: Overview of FET Infrastructure

The quality of capital (buildings, equipment and so on) across the FET system requires significant modernisation. This is a critical priority. Training centres are generally of better quality - they benefitted from ongoing programmes of annual upgrade and investment when under FÁS ownership, and also because of the need to maintain modern industry-relevant kit and equipment to ensure the continued validity of provision. The rest of the capital stock across FET is of varying quality, with a lot of use and re-use of legacy buildings inherited by ETBs and VECs before their incorporation. This issue is a critical priority for the future.

FET provides a diverse range of programmes and supports designed to meet the needs of individuals at different stages of the learning pathway. This includes courses which are focused on **foundation** or transversal skills development, including literacy and numeracy (for example, Adult Literacy, ESOL, ITABE), in order to build the core capabilities which will allow participants to move on to more advanced learning opportunities. A range of programmes (for example, Youthreach, Back to Education Initiative, Skills for Work) are focused more formally on facilitating **pathways** to other education and training opportunities and often **bridge** the gap between foundational learning and accessing vocational education and training. Within this latter **vocational** group, PLC provision has a focus on both facilitating progression to higher education and direct generation of employment outcomes. Other programmes (for example, traineeships, apprenticeships, specific skills training) are based around the principle of work-based learning, and seek to lead directly to sustainable jobs for participants (or involve employment from the outset in the case of apprenticeships), including all apprentices being employed from Day 1 until the end of their apprenticeship.

Figure 7 shows the approximate breakdown of foundation, bridging/pathway, and vocational provision by the overall numbers of unique FET learners partaking in each type of activity.

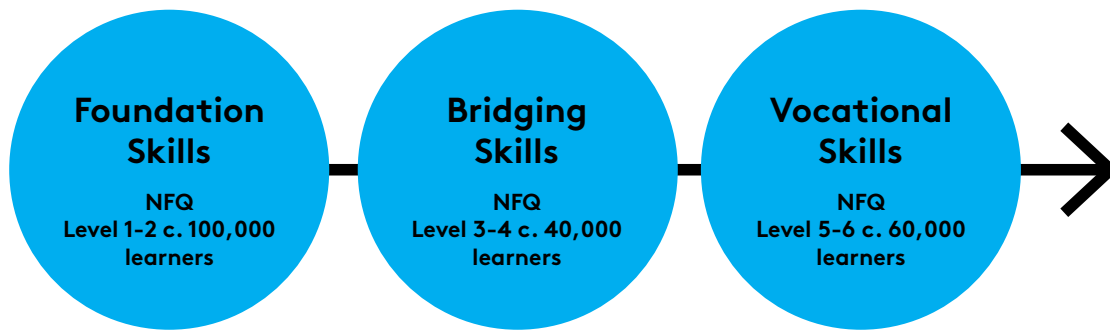


Figure 7: FET by Broad Type of Provision

The community-based ethos of FET is of huge importance to its effectiveness and success. One component of FET which is not as easy to categorise but which forms a critical part of provision is community education, with ground-up initiatives developed to serve the needs of particular localities, often in partnership with local organisations. While much of this provision helps to develop core or foundational skills (and for simplicity the estimated 50,000 learners in 2018 are included in the foundation skills cohort), it can range across multiple NQF levels, including some initiatives which link to higher education programmes. QQI analysis indicates over 100 independent community and voluntary education providers involved in this type of provision.

It is also important to note that Skillnet Ireland also supports a range of FET level provision via industry-led networks which issue competitive tenders to provide training which meets defined sectoral, occupational, managerial or regional skills needs, with funding split 50/50 between public and private sources. SOLAS has been working increasingly closely with Skillnet Ireland to ensure a coordinated approach to meeting national and regional requirements.

2.2 FET Outcomes

The learner is at the centre of all further education and training, and there has been a strong and increasing focus in recent years on ensuring a range of outcomes that will support this ethos. The national FET system targets, defined and agreed between SOLAS and the Minister of Education and Skills, encapsulate the core benefits that FET should be able to offer learners: a better chance of a job; the opportunity to progress to other education and training; the transversal skills that will allow them to integrate and engage effectively with society; a means of accessing education throughout a lifetime; vocational skills that are linked to regional and national critical skills requirements; and new models of delivery which can meet their rapidly evolving needs. These benefits, and the metrics which are now being used to track FET's ability to deliver successful outcomes for the learner, are set out in Figure 8.

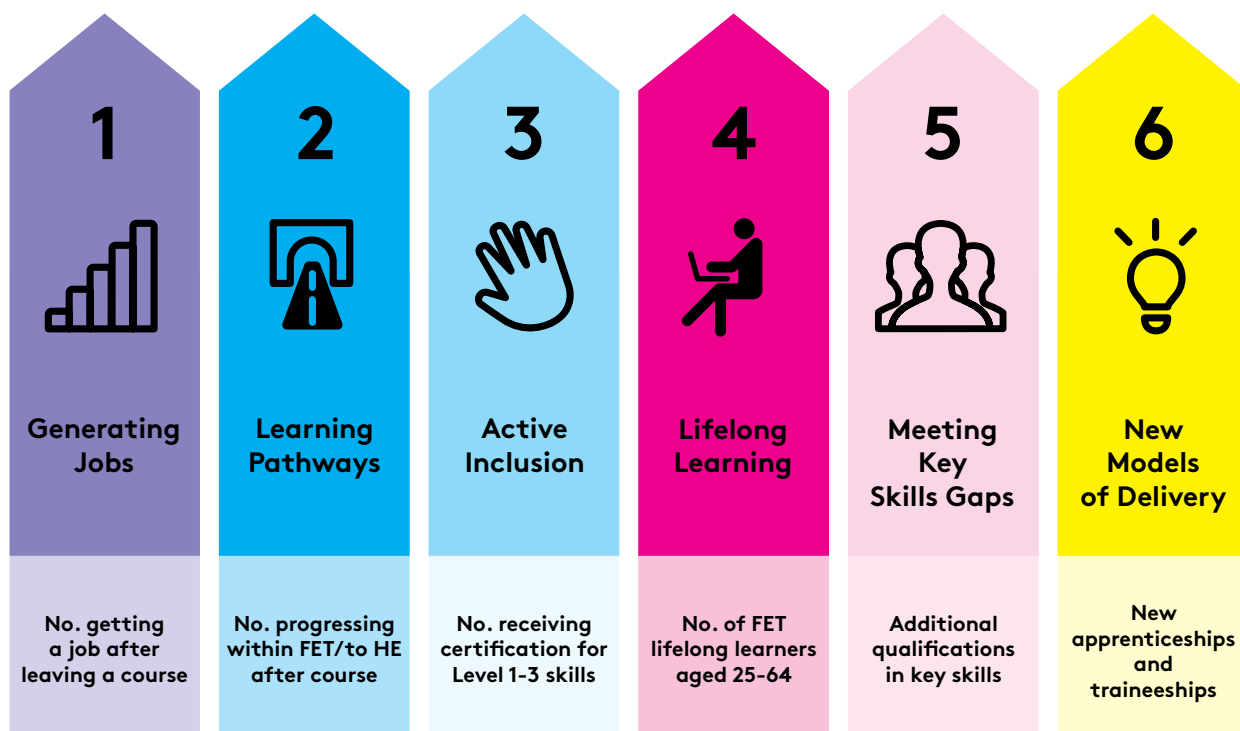


Figure 8: FET Outcomes

While the establishment of these outcome metrics has been relatively recent, and while the data systems underpinning them are still maturing, there are already positive signs emerging from the analysis SOLAS has been able to undertake thus far. This indicates that:

- 52% of FET graduates from labour market focused FET programmes secured some form of employment in 2018, with 44% in sustainable employment for at least 3 months, and 30% taking up sustainable employment after completion of the course. Between 2017 and 2018, it is estimated that overall employment outcomes from FET grew 4 percentage points. A recent CSO report found that 62% of 2016 FET graduates with major awards were in substantial employment in the first year after graduation.
- PLC FET provision generates over 75% positive outcomes 2 years after graduation: 48% of the class of 2014 were in employment and 27% were in higher education (with over half of the latter cohort also working alongside study). One quarter of the first year intake of the technological higher education sector are PLC graduates, and the estimated retention rate of HE students with a foundation in PLC is around 70-75% (based on the classes of 2012 and 2013). While there is no exact comparison with completion rates of those who enter HE directly, the recent longitudinal study of completion conducted by the HEA suggested that 50% of those with 300 Leaving Certificate points completed their degree.
- There were over 30,000 progression movements from one course to another within FET of at least the same NFQ level, demonstrating the increasing focus on learning pathways in the system.
- The level of certification of transversal skills in active inclusion focused programmes increased by 20% between 2017 and 2018.
- The number of qualifications awarded in key skills areas (i.e. in priority sectors identified by Government) increased by 16% from 2017 to 2018, demonstrating that ETBs are refocusing provision towards areas of greatest regional and national need.

- Strong growth in apprenticeship registrations from 3,153 to 5,648 between 2015 and 2018, with the overall apprenticeship population more than doubling from 8,317 at the end of 2015 to 17,045 in September 2019. There are now 55 apprenticeship programmes in place, with many of the newer programmes very different in structure, duration and level from those already in place.

These learner outcomes are reinforced by strong employer endorsement of the quality of FET graduates. The national tertiary education employer survey in 2018, conducted by Fitzpatrick Associates, revealed that satisfaction with FET graduates was on par with those from HE. It also revealed that employers valued key attributes of FET graduates such as ability to work in teams, as set out in Figure 9.

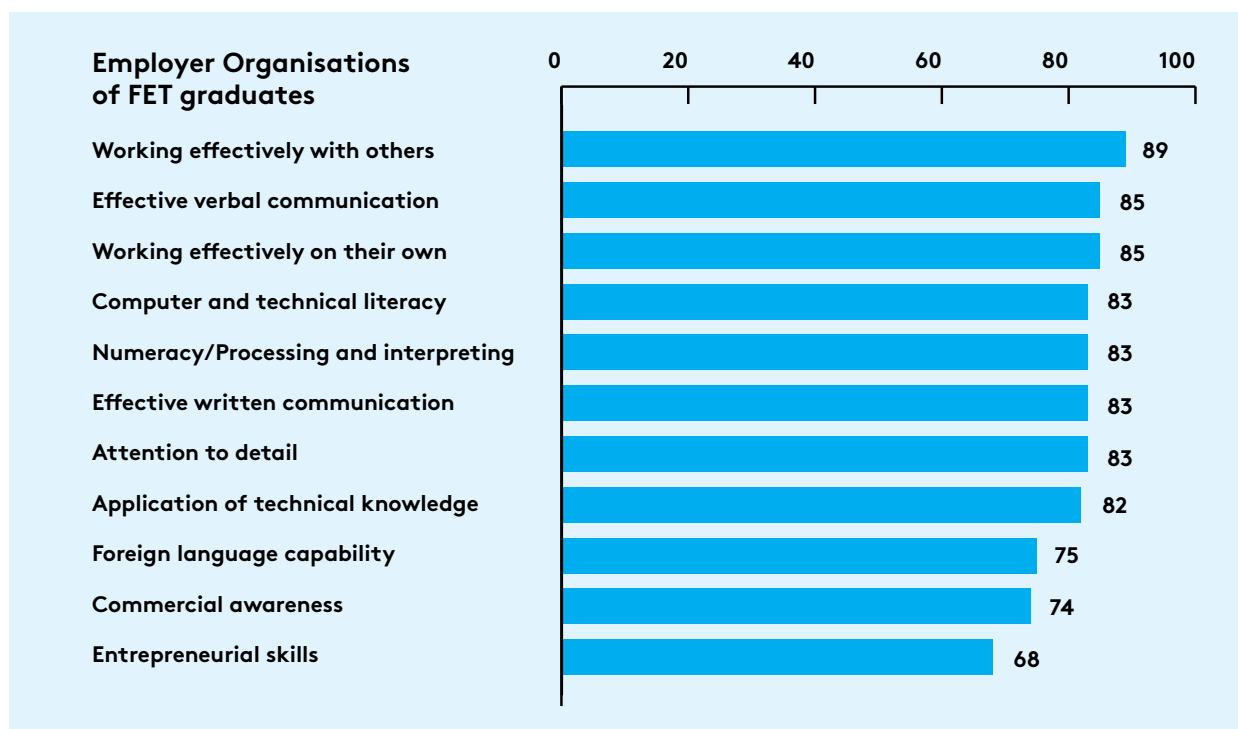
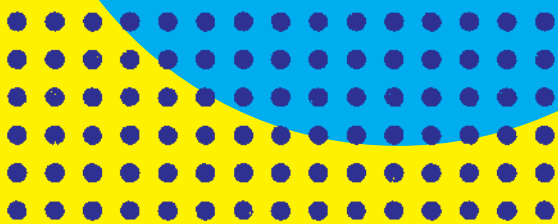
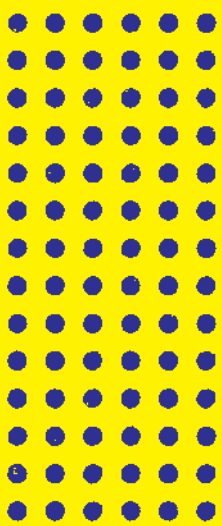


Figure 9: Employer Satisfaction with FET Graduate Attributes

All of these measures of learner outcomes and employer perspectives are vital to understanding the impact FET provision has for learners and the wider economy. However it is also important that we measure the wider benefits of learning from FET, and those which have impact, in particular, at an individual level for the learner. These can relate to improved learner confidence, empowerment and engagement; increased appetite for additional study; community development; and enhanced societal engagement and integration. FET can have a transformative impact on the lives of our learners, therefore we must ensure that such a spectrum of benefits is integrated into the way that its value is measured.

The Evolving
Environment

Section 3



3 The Evolving Environment

3.1 The Future World of Work

The way in which we work, learn, do business and even interact with each other is fundamentally changing. We are in the midst of a fourth industrial revolution where the world is being transformed by a series of megatrends such as globalisation, digitalisation, ageing demographics and climate change. It is anticipated that the impacts of current and future technological advances on our working lives will be stark, with significantly increased use of automation, smart technology, artificial intelligence, big data, and augmented and virtual reality. While vocational and technical skills will remain important, they will continually and rapidly evolve. A member of the workforce will be unlikely to prosper in their career unless they are equipped with essential core 'meta skills' in areas like complex problem solving; emotional intelligence; creativity; service orientation; and cognitive flexibility.

Another fundamental change is that people are now living longer. A 70 year life lasts about 600,000 hours, but live to 100 and you have clocked up 870,000 hours. Given longer life spans, new industries emerging, and older industries revolutionised through technological advances, the idea that a burst of education qualifications for someone in their early 20s can be sufficient to see them through their career no longer seems feasible. We are now in a world which necessitates workers engaging in periodic episodes of up-skilling throughout their lives.

To put the scale of change in context, and understand just how disruptive some advances have been in the very recent past, it is worth reflecting that currently the world's largest media company produces no content (Facebook); the world's largest taxi company owns no taxis (Uber); the world's largest movie provider owns no cinemas (Netflix); and the world's largest telecoms company owns no infrastructure (Skype).

The European Commission estimates that 4 in 10 EU jobs face a risk of transformation in the nature of their associated tasks. The Expert Group on Future Skill Needs report *Digital Transformation: Assessing the Impact of Digitalisation on Ireland's Workforce* reinforces this, finding that 1 in 3 jobs in Ireland are at high risk of being affected by the adoption of digital technologies. This report notes that the sectors most at risk in Ireland include agriculture, retail, transport and hospitality, and manufacturing. The jobs at highest risk of digital displacement by digital technologies include many elementary, low skilled occupations, but also include those in administration and customer service. Internationally the share of 'middle-skill' jobs declined by 11% in OECD countries from the 1990s to 2016, with a consequent growth in high skill and low skill occupations. This trend of job polarisation is likely to continue as digital transformation spreads across economies and societies. A job for life is a thing of the past, and lives will be characterised by multiple roles and potentially multiple careers. Many 'new' jobs are already being seen as more precarious (with characteristics like short-term contracts, low wages, inconsistent hours) and this may also hamper the desirability of work and efforts to increase participation.

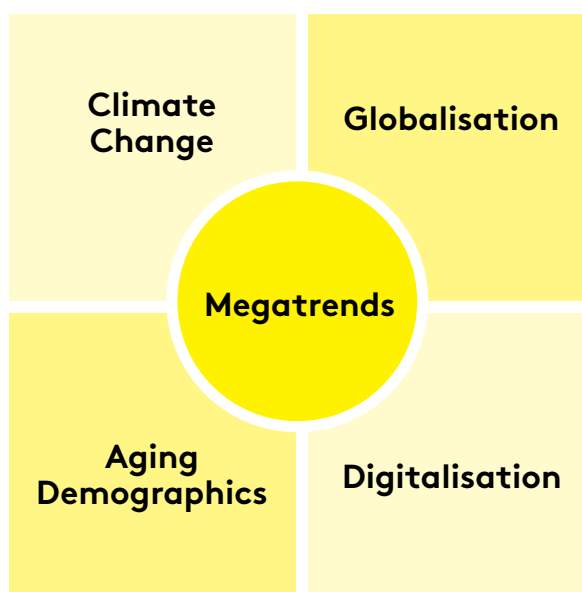


Figure 10: Future World of Work Megatrends

Climate change and sustainable development represents a significant and growing challenge to all areas of culture, society and economy and education lies right at the heart of progressing positive action to address it. Mitigation of the effects of climate change will require appropriate technological developments (for example, environmentally friendly technologies, sustainable energy consumption and production), transformation in the way goods are produced and services delivered and the development of the knowledge and skills to drive serious and proactive change. Some of the primary industries served by FET (for example, construction, agriculture, utilities) have central roles in the climate change agenda, pursuing the reduction of waste and energy consumption among other essential commitments.

Globalisation has increased connectivity around the world and supported freer movement of goods and people. It has facilitated the introduction of significant foreign direct investment into Ireland and allowed us to embrace the benefits of being a small open economy in this new world. Technological advances have strongly supported the globalisation process and transformed many sectors and their related skills needs, while opening up whole new areas of industrial activity that are less dependent on physical place but can operate seamlessly across borders with widely dispersed infrastructure, staff and customers. Of course the benefits for an economy like Ireland's are also countered by associated threats, with heightened exposure to global economic downturns. This can result in immediate unemployment shocks, making it imperative to invest in and support the sustainability of indigenous industry alongside Foreign Direct Investment (particularly the SME cohort), and that an agile education system is in place that can respond to sudden up-skilling and re-skilling needs.

Ireland is open, diverse, tech savvy, highly values education, and (for the moment) is still relatively young. All of these attributes leave it perfectly positioned to realise many positive benefits from these megatrends shaping the future world of work. It should also be noted that, despite some employment threats from automation, the overall number of jobs being added in industrialised economies remains substantial. Indeed, there are positive counter-effects to its negative effects: new products are produced at a cheaper rate and employment rises ('Uber effect'); the cost of necessities falls, freeing up income ('Walmart effect'); productivity expands, increasing the opportunities for industries (business to business effects); and new forms of work develop as a result of innovation, for example, the development of the social media industry (creation of new tasks). Therefore, if Ireland supports the development of its talent pipeline in a focused and inclusive manner, it should have a sound platform for continued social and economic development in this exciting new era.

3.2 Economic and Societal Challenges

In addition to the megatrends shaping the future world of work at a global level, there are many other economic and societal challenges to be faced by Ireland over the next five years, and FET must be equipped to respond effectively. They include:

- **Demographic Bulge:** A significant additional cohort of school leavers will require tertiary options over the period 2020-2030. The Department of Education and Skills estimate, using current trends in demand, that an additional 39,000 learners (222,000 total) will seek higher education places by 2030.
- **Literacy and Numeracy Levels:** Although the recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results for Ireland show young people have high levels in reading literacy and that Irish 15-year-olds perform above average in science and maths, it is the case that there are still relatively poor literacy and numeracy rates, particularly in older cohorts. PIAAC, the periodic survey of adult skills conducted by the OECD, found that Ireland placed 17th out of 24 participating countries for literacy in 2012 (the last time this survey was undertaken). For numeracy, Ireland stood 19th out of the 24 countries.

- **Lifelong Learning Rates:** Ireland’s lifelong learning rate in the last quarter of 2018 was 13%. While this is in line with the target set in the National Skills Strategy for 2020, it is behind the EU target for 2020, and further progress will be required to meet the skills strategy objective of 15% by 2025.
- **Digital Divide:** Despite a vibrant technology sector and strong use of technology across a large base of the population, there remains a digital divide, with the EU’s Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) recording that 52% of Ireland’s population in 2018 did not have basic digital skills.
- **Concentrations of Unemployment:** Despite the strong national rate of employment, there are areas of the country where unemployment remains higher than the national average (for example, the South-East) and there are significant pockets of disadvantage within counties (for example, Limerick city, which has 17 out of 79 areas officially categorised as unemployment blackspots).
- **Migrant Support:** There is significant net migration into Ireland with 33,700 additional migrants in 2018. While many have a range of education qualifications, supports are required to provide the requisite language training and other skills to help support their transition into the labour market and wider society.
- **Low Skills Cohort in the Existing Workforce:** There is a substantial base of the existing workforce with low levels of prior education, with 940,000 holding NFQ level 5 or below. A third of these workers are currently in low skilled occupations (for example, elementary /operative), and, as such, are extremely vulnerable to cyclical downturns and industrial change.
- **Female Participation:** Female participation in the labour market stands at 56.2% against 69.1% for males, and there are 218,000 women recorded as being ‘on home duties’ in Ireland. While a large proportion do not wish to re-enter the labour market, recent analysis by SOLAS suggests there are about 17,000 women with either upper secondary or higher education qualifications seeking to return to work. There are also challenges in female participation in particular skills development areas, with levels of just 3% in apprenticeship, despite rapid growth in recent years.
- **Future Jobs Agenda:** The Future Jobs Ireland 2019: Preparing Now for Tomorrow’s Economy report outlines the national ambition for our economy in the coming years. The plan notes the need for Ireland to: embrace innovation and technological change; improve SME productivity; enhance skills development and attract talent; increase participation in the labour force; and transition to a low carbon economy.
- **Skills Mismatch:** Ireland quite rightly prides itself as being one of the most educated workforces in the EU and OECD, with HE attainment levels helping to attract inward investment and drive productivity growth. While this reputation needs to be protected and built upon, there is research by the ESRI among others, which suggests some skills mismatch in the Irish workforce, and that more vocational options and pathways could help to address this, starting at secondary school level.

A challenge that pervades FET planning is that of a sudden cyclical economic downturn. FET planning must ensure agility to respond to a large base of unemployed people, or very vulnerable workers in need of up-skilling and re-skilling to re-join or remain in the workforce. This need is currently exacerbated by Covid-19 and the serious potential economic risks of Brexit. The Central Bank estimates that a disorderly Brexit would knock up to 4% off GDP growth in the first year¹, and is almost certain to lead to a sudden unemployment shock. While this risk may rise or dissipate very quickly, subject to a trade deal being agreed by the EU and UK following any withdrawal agreement, FET must continue to be prepared for this, or wider, economic shocks by building on existing contingency planning.

¹ Quarterly Economic Observer. Spring 2019. Nevin Economic Research Institute

This includes:

- Ensuring ETBs and other FET providers have the physical and teaching/instructing capacity to ramp up provision within a short timeframe.
- Undertaking labour market analysis and forecasting to identify the most at-risk regions, sectors and employers.
- Ensuring specific contingency plans are in place at ETB level to prepare for the impact of Brexit.
- Targeted interventions through Skills to Advance and other FET offerings are put in place to address particular regional or sectoral challenges that may arise.

Ensuring that the FET system can respond to these cyclical, political, economic and societal challenges over the next five years will be critical to growing its profile and contribution to driving Ireland's future development.

3.3 Learning from International Approaches

As noted earlier in this document, the methodology underpinning the development of this strategy has included analysis of international approaches to further and vocational education and training. SOLAS has benefitted significantly from working with the UK Commission on the FE College of the Future, chaired by Sir Ian Diamond, and involving representatives from England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, as they research and develop a future vision for the development of FE over the next 10 years. Consultations have also been held with relevant FET experts from New Zealand, Germany, Finland and Spain to identify learning to feed into the development of the FET approach here. Key trends and ideas identified during this international benchmarking process include:

- **FET-HE Balance:** A more balanced split in school leaver destinations between FE and HE (all systems), with a growing debate on the rationale for rebalancing towards FE in meeting critical regional and national skills needs (England, Scotland)
- **Institutional Scale:** Seeking larger scale institutional or organisational models to facilitate more strategic approaches, either through regional governance structures or college mergers (New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Finland)
- **Learner Engagement:** More mature learner engagement approaches, with enhanced roles in FE governance (Scotland), active student union and representative bodies (NI, New Zealand) and learner satisfaction surveys
- **Cross-Tertiary Approach:** Development of cross-tertiary structures and approaches to embed a more coordinated and collaborative approach across FET and HE (New Zealand, Scotland, Wales)
- **Simplified Funding Models:** Funding models driven principally by FET learner numbers while recognising distinct regional and socio-economic challenges across most systems, but with a real drive to simplify funding models by moving away from multiple confusing programme-based finance streams (Scotland, Wales)
- **Flexibility in Provision:** Increasing the flexibility of the system through individualised learning pathways, modular qualifications, and digital solutions (Finland)
- **Alignment with Industrial Strategy:** Linking between FE and industrial strategy and closing the gap between vocational education and training and real cutting-edge industry innovation and technology development through VET innovation centres (Netherlands, England, Basque Country in Spain)
- **Employer Partnership:** Systems that move from employer-led to co-construction type models where education providers and industry work together on curriculum development, rather than trying to duplicate and recreate the infrastructure and capability that already exists in educational institutions (Germany, Scotland, Wales)

- **Financial Autonomy:** Despite a mixed range of public and private sector approaches, there is allowance for providers to build up reserves and generate revenue independently in order to invest strategically in developing infrastructure and specialisms (all systems).

3.4 An Evolving Role for FET

The combination of technological advances, automation of work practices and external economic and societal challenges all point to significant disruption to our labour force over time. It is imperative that the FET system is agile and responsive to these changing needs, and can learn from international practice in shaping its future role. There are three core areas of evolution in this regard that flow from the earlier analysis. These are set out in Figure 11.

In all of this change, FET must be cognisant of the broader purpose of learning, which goes beyond meeting the skills needs of the economy. FET also facilitates personal development, vibrant and integrated communities, and a commitment to social justice that defines Ireland today. This must continue to remain a core part of its fabric. Throughout the history of further education and training, and in its journey since an integrated FET system was established, it has consistently demonstrated its agility and capacity to meet rapidly changing circumstances and needs. With real innovation over the next five years, FET can be a critical driver of the next phase of social and economic development.

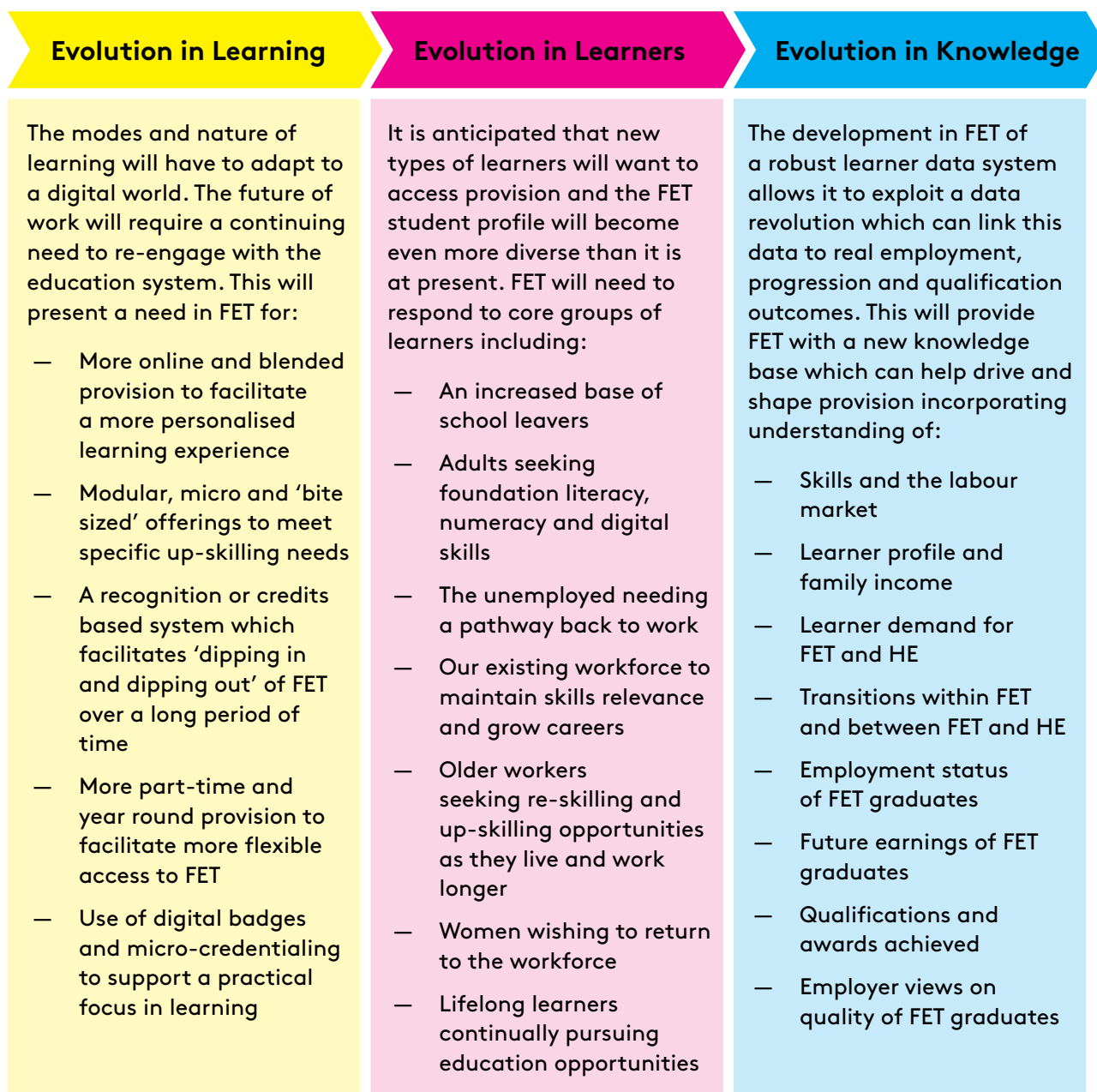
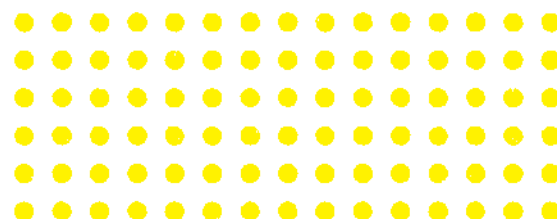
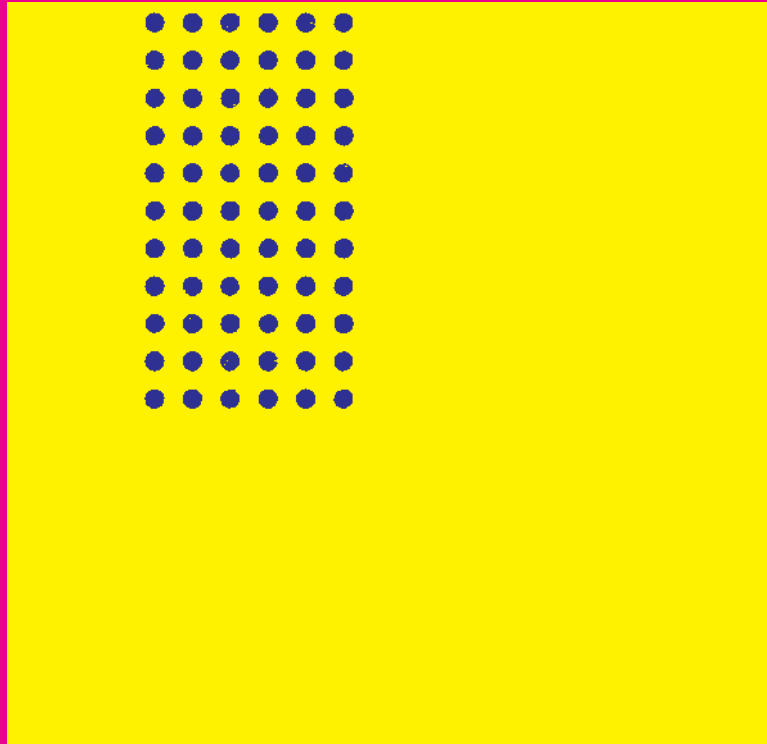
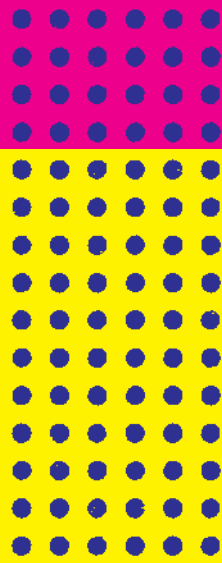
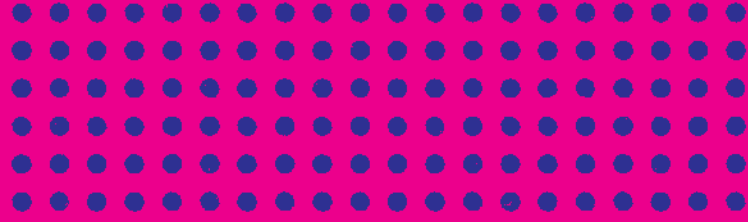


Figure 11: Evolution in FET



Section 4

The Strategic
Framework
for Future FET



4. The Strategic Framework for Future FET

4.1 Foundation for Future FET

The development path which has been followed in establishing an integrated and devolved FET system over the last six years has delivered significant achievements. The merging of the further education and training sectors has created a powerful dynamic, bringing the former’s long history in providing access to multi-faceted education opportunities to empower the individual as a contributing member of their community, with the latter’s vocational expertise, proximity to industry and focus on employment outcomes. The natural and diverse learning pathways which have been created as a result offer real potential for a strategic and agile FET system - a system which can respond to the future world of work, the emerging societal and economic challenges, and evolving expectations and needs in terms of its future role and contribution. There is now a really strong foundation for realising this potential over the next five years, with six core attributes underpinning the future FET strategy. These attributes are set out in Figure 12.

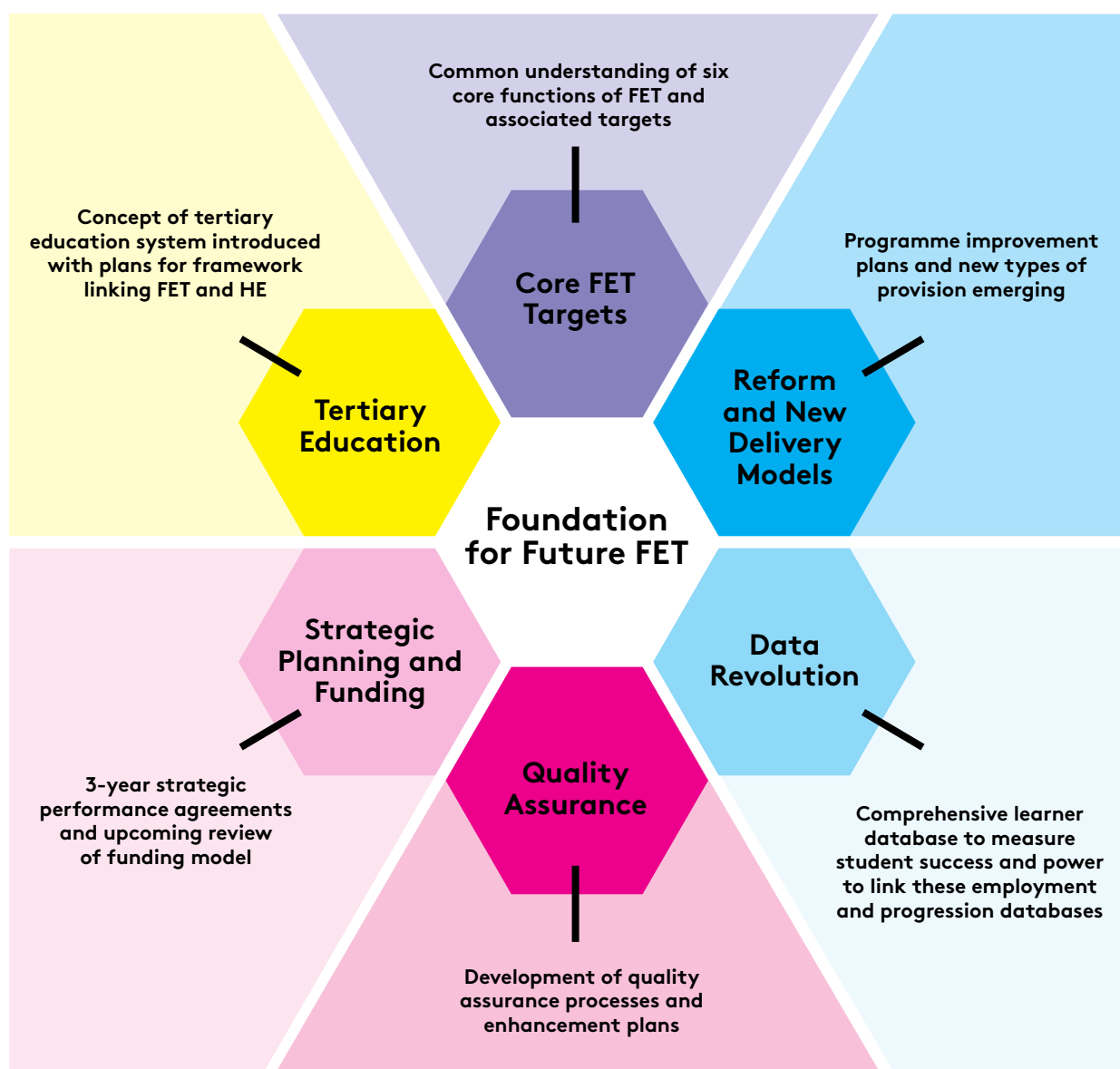


Figure 12: The Foundation for Future FET

This foundation allows a clear and focused ambition to be put in place, key priorities and enablers to be defined, and the sense of what a future FET college should look like. These concepts are set out over the next couple of pages.

4.2 Vision for Future FET

Up until now, there has been a reluctance to try to define FET as a single cohesive concept. This was, perhaps, because of the separate history of its 'FE' and 'T' components, the early stage of development of the new system, and its complex and multi-faceted nature. There was a general commentary over the lifetime of the previous strategy that FET was defined by what it was not. Communication over this period tended to focus on programme-based brands within FET, rather than FET as a valuable proposition in itself.

However, what has been clear during this strategy development process is that FET does have a critical and unique role in the Irish economy and society. This is evidenced by the passion of FET management, practitioners and learners, and from the commitment of communities and employers, and even from the endorsement of wider stakeholders in other parts of the education system or public service. The inclusiveness, agility and responsiveness of FET has been core to its success and reinforcing this should be central to its future, as encapsulated in the vision statement below.

A Vision for FET

FET will provide pathways for everyone. It will empower learners to participate fully in society and to become active citizens, and drive vibrant and diverse communities. FET will become the smart choice for school leavers, employees looking to up-skill and learners at all stages of their lives, with future FET colleges recognised as dynamic, modern and high-quality learning environments. FET will prepare people for work and successful careers, facilitate progress through tertiary education, and equip its graduates for a lifetime of continual learning and development. In five years FET will have grown its profile, with FET colleges serving as beacons of learning within communities which are widely recognised as a major driver of Ireland's next critical phase of economic and social development.

4.3 FET Strategic Priorities and Enabling Mechanisms

In setting future strategic priorities for FET, it is important to consider the stage of maturity of the system. We noted in Section 1 that the first FET strategy reflected the need for a development and establishment phase, with wide-ranging objectives, a focus on building systems and capabilities, and complex and multiple stakeholder arrangements underpinning delivery. With the many achievements over the lifetime of that strategy putting in place the strong foundation set out above, there has been almost universal feedback during the development process that the new strategy needs to be much more focused and accessible than its predecessor.

To achieve this, we have tried to find a structure that gets to the absolute core of FET. Fundamentally, FET revolves around skills development, learning pathways and inclusion, and it is around these pillars that we propose to frame the future strategic priorities. However, it must also be recognised that, in order to deliver real reform, integration and performance improvement, there must also be a parallel focus on key enabling factors. The diagram in Figure 13 sets out the proposed strategic framework. The core values of FET are lifelong learning, social justice, active citizenship and economic prosperity.

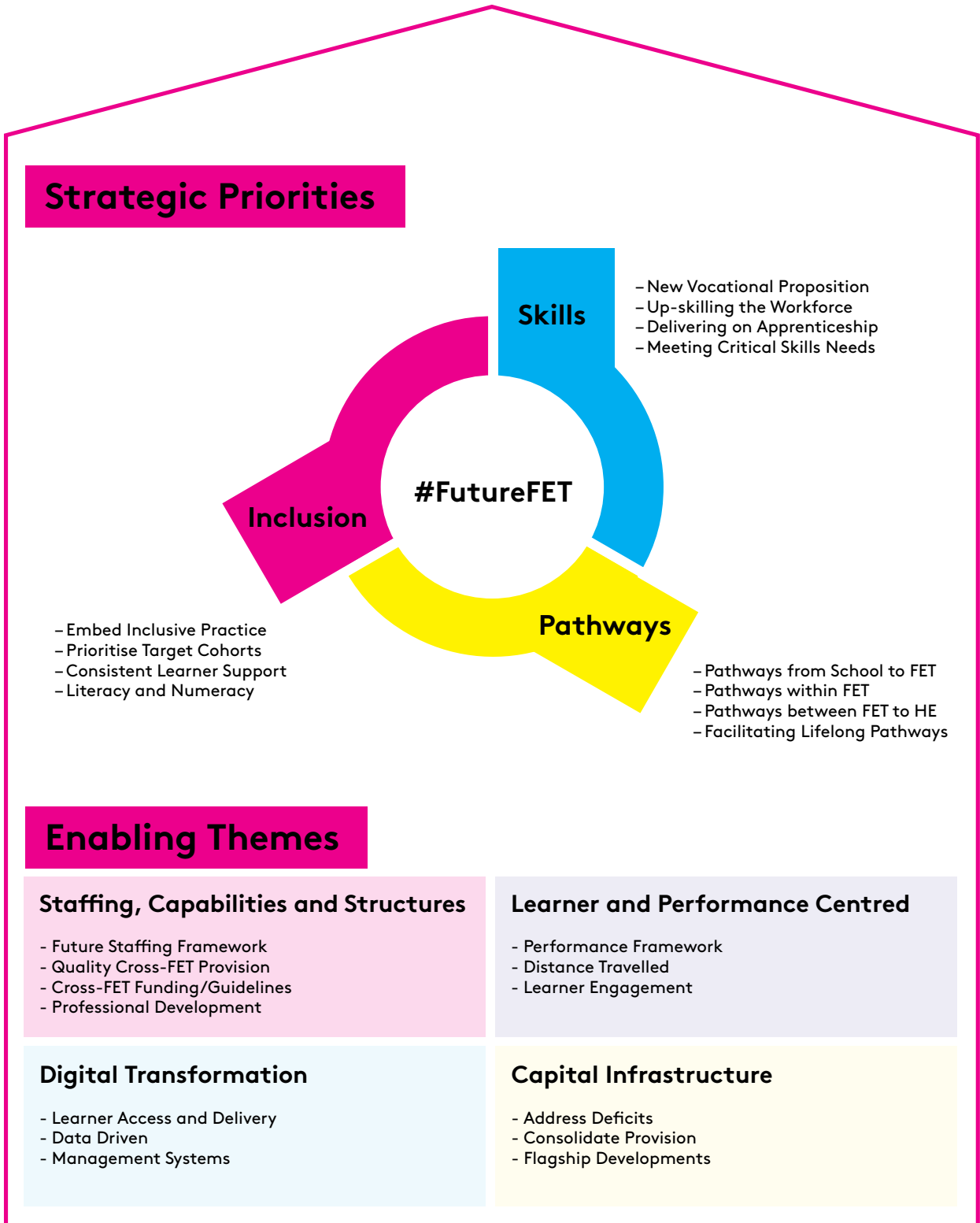


Figure 13: Future FET Strategic Framework

4.4 The FET College of the Future

Each of the strategic priorities, and the enabling themes, will be discussed in detail in the remainder of this strategy document. Key to successful development in relation to skills, pathways, and inclusion will be the evolution of FET facilities and provision into a distinct integrated college of FET that can serve as a beacon of community-based learning excellence which can start to change the hearts and minds of Irish society with regard to school leaving and lifelong education options. From the consultation and analysis undertaken, the FET college of the future should have the following characteristics:

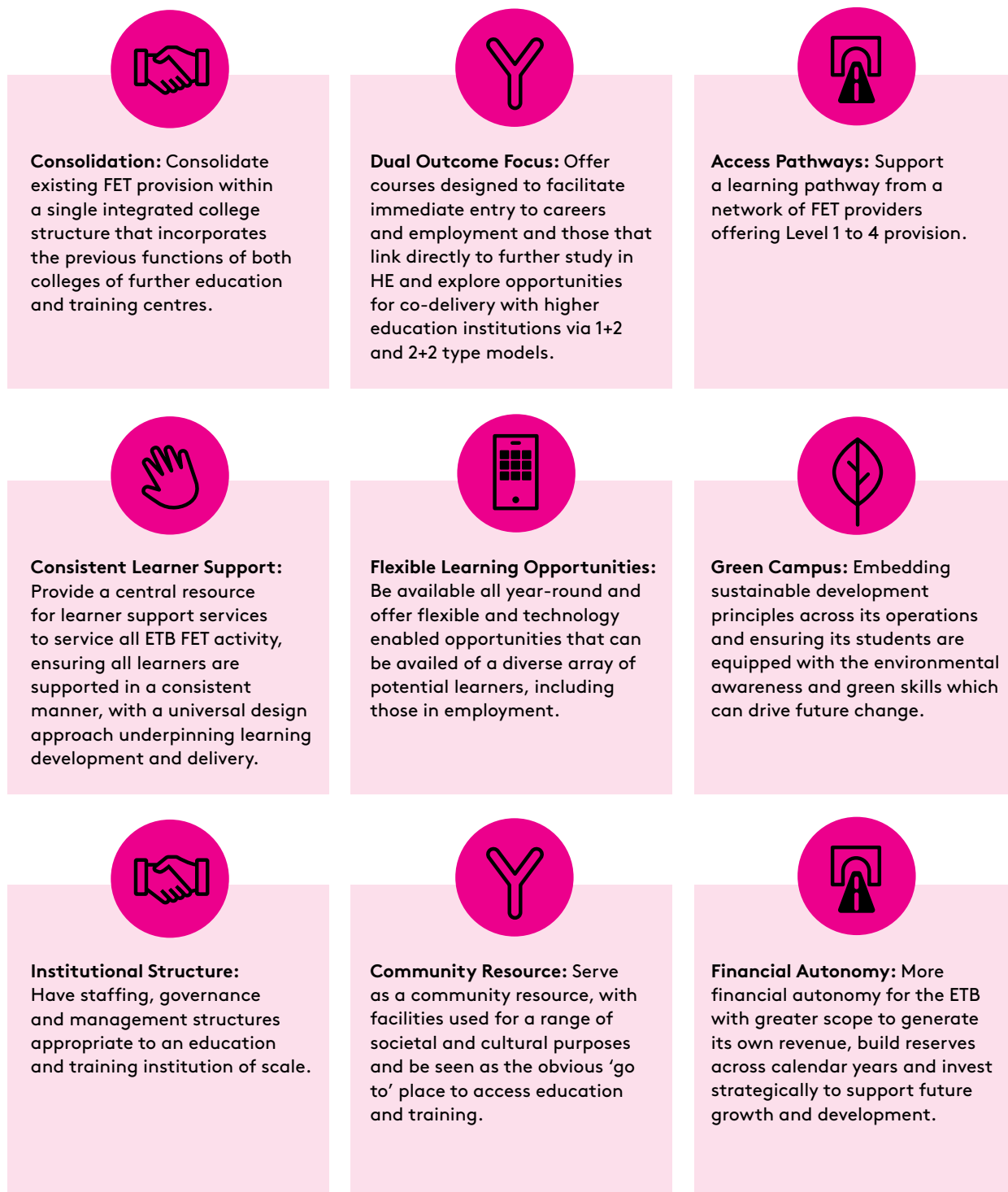
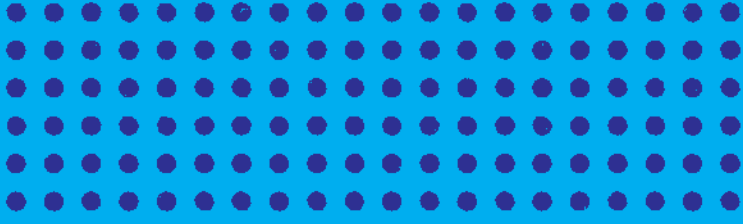


Figure 13: Future FET Strategic Framework

Strategic Priority:
Building Skills



Section 5

5 Strategic Priority: Building Skills

FET will build skills to anticipate and respond to rapidly evolving regional and national needs. FET can facilitate a pathway that will link to a particular career or profession, either directly or through ongoing study in higher education. It will not only provide a pipeline of talent for employers, but it will also provide them with a resource to ensure that the skills of their workforce remain relevant and equipped for cutting-edge technology and practice. All of this requires a focus on four core areas as set out in the sections below.

5.1 A New Level 5 and 6 Proposition

The confusing array of vocationally focused programmes in FET, with apprenticeships, traineeships, evening training, specific skills training and PLCs offered in two very distinct settings (training centres and FE colleges), must be replaced by a new Level 5 and Level 6 proposition. This will have a core brand, focused on the discipline/the career and NQF level, and be linked to regional skills needs and clear employment or progression outcomes.

At least 30% of the Level 5 and 6 FET course offering will be work-based or practice-based, delivered by FET practitioners who keep their skills and the learning content they deliver up to date to reflect industry requirements. The development of consistent and structured work placements will be particularly important in ensuring success, with internship models worthy of further explorations, and mechanisms like Erasmus used to facilitate an international dimension to the placement approach. Learners should be able to avail of these types of vocational offerings in new integrated colleges of FET, with existing facilities consolidated to achieve this.

Vocational education and training has attracted some criticism that an over-focus on technical skills can pigeonhole learners, with long-term stagnation of career opportunities outweighing any short-term employment and earnings benefits of employment. This criticism ignores the significant developments which have taken place in FET, and which already embed strong transversal skills enhancement in areas like communication, entrepreneurship and digital capability. As we have noted, 'meta' skills will be critical to prospering in the future world of work, and all vocational FET offerings must contain components that build capability in areas like complex problem solving, critical thinking, creativity and people management, providing FET graduates with labour market skills or preparing them to succeed if they transition to higher education.

Effective programme development will be key to the successful development of this new and cohesive Level 5 and Level 6 provision. This must be based on a model of collaborative partnership to facilitate efficient and effective delivery, and draw on existing education and industry expertise.

It should link to two immediate priority areas:

- Developing co-provision models across ETBs and other providers, supporting the sharing and streamlining of resources to minimise duplication and complexity around curriculum development, quality assurance and other key areas.
- Developing co-construction models between providers and employers rather than wholly employer-led approaches. This makes use of the existing educational capability and resources in providers rather than replicating them in external bodies lacking previous experience. Co-construction models allow industry to shape the nature of provision through clear and robust working partnerships, and facilitate a timely validation path which can ensure agile skills responses.

5.2 A Resource for Enterprise and its Employees

In recent years there has been major FET focus on ensuring that the skills of the existing workforce remain agile and responsive to rapidly changing, cutting-edge technology and practice. The Skills to Advance initiative heralded an enhanced and expanded approach to employee up-skilling, with structured engagement by ETBs with employers, clear and flexible opportunities available to employees, enterprises and targeted sectors, and financial and other incentives to encourage participation, particularly by SMEs. We will ensure that access to these opportunities is made as simple as possible for employees and employers, that the scale of provision continues to expand, and that the FET offerings are delivered in ever more flexible formats that can fit with the demands of business and work. Micro credentialing and digital badging will have a role to play in this, ensuring learning outcomes are recognised for all workforce development in FET.

Linked to this is the need to firmly establish ETBs as a key resource for enterprise, working with them to help them understand their future skills requirements, develop a future pipeline of talent to meet these needs, and provide the up-skilling and the professional and management development support required by their existing employees. This will be facilitated by a single point of ETB contact and a co-ordinated approach to employer engagement, to ensure that enterprise needs are understood and met in an efficient and effective manner. The approach will ensure that FET graduates have the key skills and competencies required to help enterprises operate and flourish. There will also be opportunities to engage in a range of FET support activities, including work placement, programme development and quality assurance, to ensure alignment between provision and employer needs.

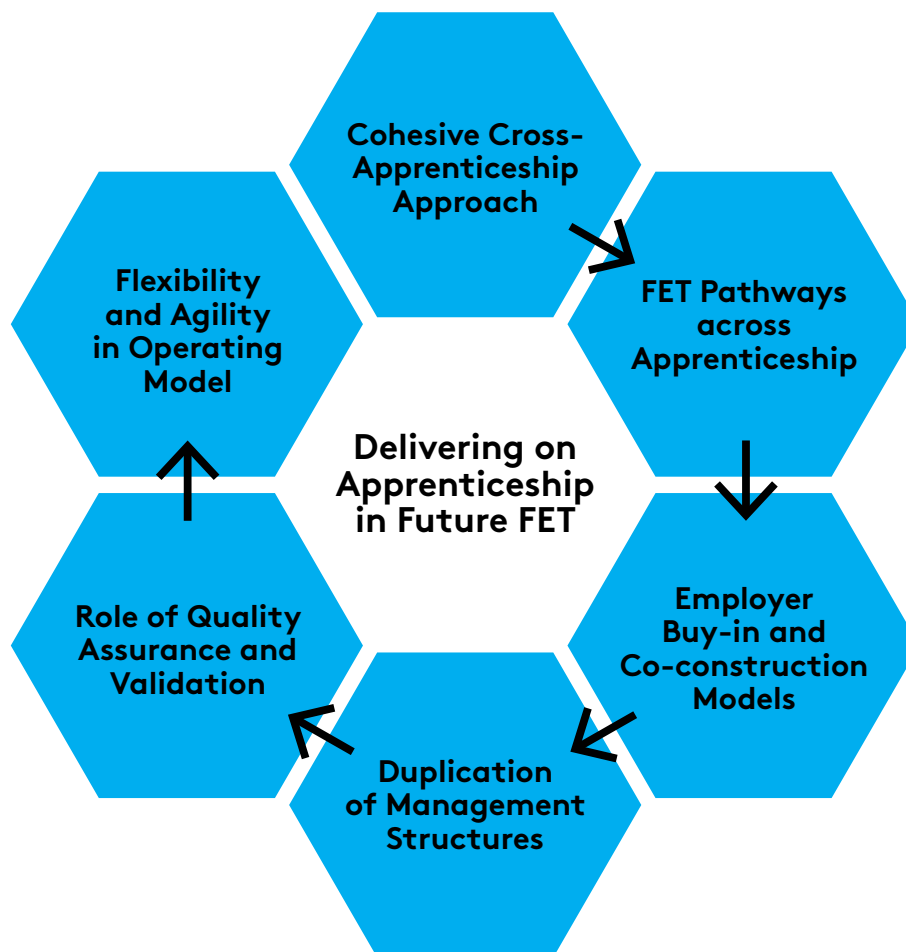
Many FET graduates will go on to start their own businesses, and FET must fuel such future enterprise by equipping its graduates with the initial knowledge, expertise and support to do this. This will require an active and working partnership with LEOs, Enterprise Ireland, Chambers of Commerce and other education and training providers. It will also require a continuation of the strong collaborative skills planning which takes place within the regional skills fora.

5.3 Delivering on Apprenticeship

The launch of an action plan on apprenticeships and traineeships during the lifetime of the last strategy set out a policy imperative to establish an apprenticeship system which serves as a beacon for skills development, creating exciting new opportunities in a whole range of occupations and industries.

SOLAS was asked to use its experience in overseeing pre-2016 apprenticeships to serve as the statutory authority for the new range of apprenticeships, and to ensure that they remained true to the original ethos of practical workplace-relevant skills development. Although the new apprenticeships cover both FET and HE, it is critical that the FET system links closely to all pre-2016 and 2016-plus provision, regardless of the ultimate NFQ level, through pre-apprenticeship pathways. This will align with a strong focus on increasing the diversity of apprentices, with particular goals around increasing female participation and providing access to people with disabilities.

The new system has been initially successful in provoking interest in apprenticeship from a new generation, but while pre-2016 apprenticeship registrations have continued to expand rapidly, the pace of development of new 2016-plus apprenticeship provision has lagged behind what was originally targeted. Figure 14 summarises the priorities to be addressed for Future FET to effectively support apprenticeships. These priorities reflect issues that have been raised around the level of employer engagement, the appropriate funding model, the handling of off-the-job costs and the efficiency of duplication of management, governance and quality assurance resources across multiple providers. We must also look at how the operating model of pre-2016 apprenticeships fits with a devolved FET system, more flexible learning methods and a rapidly changing future world of work, and consider if this needs to evolve to keep pace with economic and societal needs.



We will work with relevant partners to ensure that these current approaches are fully reviewed in advance of the launch of a new apprenticeship action plan in 2020, with greater alignment across pre-2016 and 2016-plus programmes. It has been indicated that the new action plan will focus on the key themes of integration; employer support; access; and funding. These should provide a platform to ensure that the national ambition for apprenticeship is fully delivered, having gained so much traction in sparking public interest around an important new vocational route to a successful career.

5.4 Meeting our Critical Skills Needs

FET will be focused on meeting Ireland’s critical skills needs, will be shaped and influenced by its employers, and will deploy accessible labour market intelligence to underpin smart choices by learners and those who advise them.

The Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) produce analysis of key skills gaps and labour market trends which is already influencing ETB and other FET providers’ strategy and provision. The use of this data has been formally embedded within SOLAS/ETB strategic performance agreements and underpins the identification of the critical skills areas on which SOLAS requires ETBs to focus. The SLMRU will work on making this information more accessible to a wider audience, so that it can have a greater influence on potential learners, parents, guidance professionals and employers in influencing smarter choices around education and skills development.

Ensuring a focus on critical skills needs will require further development of skills specialisms by ETBs which reflect their unique capabilities and industry clusters within their catchment. There are already many examples of this, with particular ETBs specialising in areas like energy, media, aircraft maintenance and construction. ETBs taking the lead in developing 2016-plus

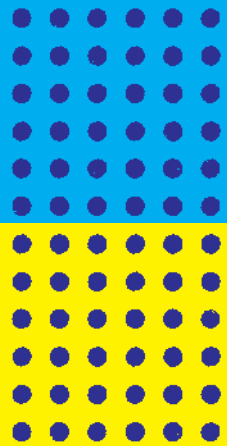
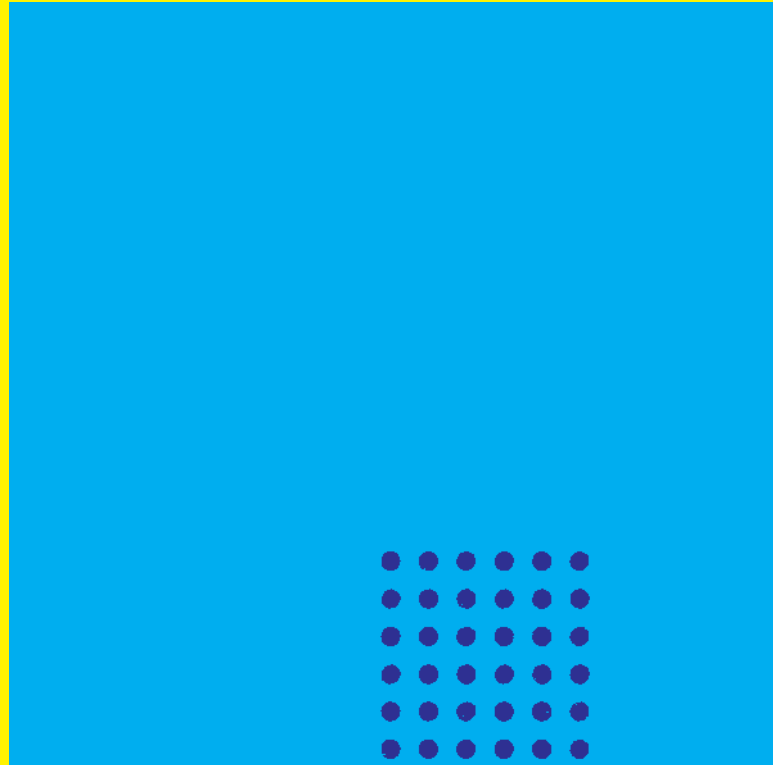
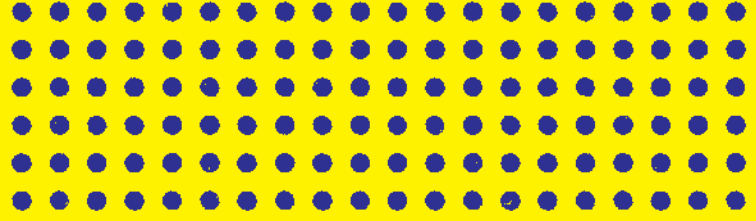
apprenticeships will further support the development of Centres of Excellence, and an approach to acknowledging, promoting and rewarding such specialist excellence should be considered. There are many other sectors that could develop along these lines with technology and pharma industries ripe for a more significant contribution to their talent pipeline from FET. Traditional areas of FET strength like healthcare, personal services and construction should be built upon, ensuring future skills requirements are embedded in FET curricula to maintain it as the core pathway to successful careers in these sectors.

Climate change and sustainable development must also be a critical focus for FET, with a strong contribution to the Government's call to action by building on FET's strong capabilities around energy, building and the environment. This will be central to the modernisation of construction skills, as innovating access in construction and skills related areas is vital. This will also enable any relevant support for any future legislative licence to practice. There should be a national roll-out of Nearly Zero Energy Buildings (NZEB) construction skills centres, programme development across all green skills areas should be ramped up, and curricula across all relevant apprenticeships and other FET programmes should be updated to embed a sustainable development focus. Perhaps most critically, there should be emphasis on ensuring that all FET provision is used to develop critical climate change and environmental knowledge, and that FET campuses are based on a strong sustainability ethos.

Of course, there is a short-term imperative for FET to lead the response to the critical up-skilling and re-skilling needs of those who have lost their jobs as a result of Covid-19. SOLAS and the ETBs have a track record in designing and delivering upskilling programmes that offer pathways back to work for those hit by the impact of recession. They also work closely in partnership with INTREO offices and social protection services at national and regional level to ensure access to FET by those individuals experiencing unemployment which aligns with their particular upskilling needs, and that appropriate referral processes and protocols are in place. Building on this approach by combining and ramping up three strands of FET provision - transversal skills development to help **employability**; building the **digital capabilities** now required for almost every job; and specific **Level 4-6 courses targeting growth sectors** and occupations - and linking this to **tailored advice and support**, there is potential for an immediate and powerful labour market activation response. Such an initiative, which has been titled *Skills to Compete*, will be fast-tracked over the first few months of the new strategy.

Section 6

Strategic Priority:
Fostering Inclusion



6 Strategic Priority: Fostering Inclusion

Active inclusion and community development have always been a central tenet of the work of ETBs and FET providers, with an extensive reach into and across local communities. FET balances the needs of skills for work with the just as critical skills for life through provision that supports citizenship and prosperity across communities and develops social capital. FET ensures that supports are available to allow any individual, regardless of background or formal education level, an opportunity to learn and develop. By pledging consistent levels of support and good practice for all learners; rooting FET in its communities; targeting and facilitating participation by the most marginalised groups in society; and tailoring literacy and numeracy resources to meet complex learner needs, a strong inclusive ethos will continue to underpin all FET.

6.1 Consistent Learner Support

The commitment by FET practitioners to tailor learning and support to meet the needs of learners is immediately apparent across all provision. However while a learner-centred ethos is clear, there are substantial variations in the nature and level of support across different programmes, usually as a result of legacy arrangements and approaches. This must be addressed over the next five years, with consistent and integrated support offered to all learners in all FET settings and such a pledge becoming part of the central FET proposition in recruiting new learners. This will be facilitated by:

- Structural change with cross-FET learner services functions and common IT-based student support resources introduced, breaking the link with specific programmes
- Dedication of a minimum proportion of the ETB FET budget to ensuring consistent learner support
- Setting relevant inclusion-related funding parameters and guidelines, which reflect national and EU inclusion and equality policy and legislation
- Developing and applying good practice guides and toolkits on inclusive practice across the system, adopting a universal design for learning (UDL) approach in shaping its future provision
- Using technology to personalise the learning experience and address each learner's unique support needs where possible

Inconsistency in support also extends to the level and type of financial support provided to the learner depending on the FET course on which they are enrolled. For example, if a learner is on a Level 5 PLC course, they can avail of a SUSI support grant in the same way as an HE student, but if the learner wants to do a Level 5 traineeship, they must sign on as unemployed to receive a training allowance. Such inconsistencies reinforce cultural issues around the credibility of FET and, although they will require wider welfare and cross-Government, cross-Departmental reform to resolve, a common cross-FET student financial support system must be a major goal in achieving a clear and coherent learner support structure for the system.

6.2 Rooting FET in the Community

One of the greatest attributes of FET is the way it has grown organically from the commitment in communities to come together to learn, develop and innovate to address local issues and promote local opportunities. This has created a diverse and inclusive FET system available in every corner of Ireland and it must remain rooted in its communities if it is going to continue to effectively evolve. Community education plays a critical role in this regard, supporting participation and re-engagement in education and training, with around 50,000 learners across FET each year. An extensive network of community education providers work in partnership with ETBs, using their local reach and connectivity to develop learning projects to address local needs and empower their learners and communities.

However, approaches to community education across ETBs are inconsistent which means level and focus of funding differs substantially from region to region. While the strength of community education must remain a 'ground up' approach, FET does need to ensure that there is general support for good ideas and projects across the system, and that communities benefit in the same way from financial and other support regardless of where they are based.

There is a missed opportunity to mainstream many of the powerful and innovative community-based learning projects that already exist across FET. Technology also offers significant potential to build on community education and widen access to the most marginalised groups, particularly those in rural areas who cannot travel to major FET or HE colleges in more urban areas, or who are constrained from leaving their homes due to care duties or other circumstances.

A community education framework should therefore be developed by SOLAS, ETBs, community education providers, learners and other relevant stakeholders (for example, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Department of Rural and Community Development, Pobal, Aontas and the Wheel) to ensure a more consistent approach. The framework will provide an enhanced basis to both record and promote national and local good practice, learner achievement and progression, and the overall benefits of community education and of 'learn local' in general. It will allow the unique characteristics of community education to be reflected in how it is supported within FET, while ensuring that it meets common FET requirements in terms of gathering basic learner data, linking to learning pathways, and offering consistent learner support. As a starting point in developing the framework, seven core principles are suggested in Figure 15.



Figure 15: Community Education Framework Suggested Principles

6.3 Targeting Priority Cohorts

We noted in Section 3 the challenges which FET must respond to, and the issues faced by the most marginalised groups in society despite a relatively prosperous wider economy. There are many cohorts with diverse needs, such as people with disabilities, new migrants, Travellers, the long-term unemployed, ex-offenders and women returners. All these require focused types of support to address their particular circumstances and needs. For such groups, the FET system should adopt a more targeted approach to addressing barriers around participation, completion and progression for marginalised and prioritised cohorts. ETBs should work in partnership with community and voluntary organisations who can represent or reach out to particular groups and facilitate a pathway to re-engage with education through FET.

Addressing the needs of people with disabilities will be a primary focus. Linking with commitments in section 7.2, more consistent support to this cohort across FET, expanding on the approach of the fund for students with disabilities which currently only covers PLC provision, will be driven by ongoing reform of the funding system and the roll-out of good practice guidelines, including those in relation to universal design for learning. The recommendations arising from the ongoing evaluation of Specialist Training Provision will be implemented over the lifetime of the new strategy, with scope to increase accommodation of people with disabilities in mainstream FET rather than separate dedicated provision.

An increasingly prevalent characteristic is the high proportion of learners citing mental health issues, particularly around learning at Levels 1 to 3. FET must ensure it has robust and consistent support mechanisms in place to help this cohort transition through FET, drawing on national and international good practice. It is also important that all FET staff and all learners have an understanding of mental health and wellbeing, and this will be embedded within professional development for the former and within the FET curriculum for the latter.

There has been a rapidly growing demand for English language support from new migrants in FET, including formal ETB responsibility for refugees and asylum seekers, with around 20,000 learners availing of this ESOL provision each year. This is critical in helping migrants to integrate within communities and to secure and sustain employment. A focus must be placed on linking this support to wider FET pathways which can also develop their other core and technical skills, and facilitate entry into work or progression to higher education. FET must continue to develop this response, mainstreaming good practice and using assessment toolkits which have been the result of recent research around this theme, and ensuring that recognition of prior learning plays a more prominent role.

Understanding the needs of priority cohorts and demonstrating outcomes for FET for each group is assisted by the ongoing data revolution. This facilitates more detailed profiling of the learner base (in line with all appropriate safeguards for data) and should be used to progress geo-profiling of FET participants and areas of deprivation to demonstrate the FET impact across communities. The FET learner data can also now be linked to welfare, revenue, qualifications and higher education administrative datasets which will facilitate longitudinal analysis of educational progression and employment outcomes over a sustained period of time. Of course, these hard outcomes only tell part of the story of the difference FET can make, and as something which can truly change people's lives. We need, therefore, to find a way to develop more effective means of measuring softer outcomes. FET must work with relevant partners across Government to embed a 'distance travelled' type measurement and monitoring tool, so that such outcomes are recognised during this new strategic period.

The data that is now available supplements the substantial knowledge and expertise across FET in understanding the inclusion challenges for marginalised groups, communities and societies. SOLAS, the ETBs and other providers must use this evidence base to raise awareness of these challenges; to develop, pilot and roll out initiatives that meet the needs of different target cohorts; and to influence the formulation of new cross-Government policies and approaches in this space.

6.4 Literacy and Numeracy Support

The FET system must continue its efforts to address the needs of the significant base of adults with low literacy and numeracy levels in Ireland. There has been significant progress in recent years in reducing reliance on voluntary support, on offering recognition and certification to learners, on raising public awareness of issues, on starting to integrate support across FET centres and in development of initial literacy and numeracy assessment approaches. There is an opportunity to build on this strong foundation with a new literacy and numeracy strategy over the next 5 years which can complete its journey from what tended to be a standalone service to one which is fully integrated with wider FET provision and which links learners to pathways within FET to further develop their skills. An overview of the literacy and numeracy strategy is set out in Figure 16.

Within the strategy, FET must help address the digital divide and provide learners with the core ICT skills to address digital literacy. FET must play a key role in supporting the implementation of the National Digital Strategy, and in shaping future Government responses to improve digital capacity. It must provide a sharpened focus on numeracy and core personal competencies. In line with the wider maturing of the system, the development work in recent years around initial assessment approaches, integrated provision and certification must now be consolidated to ensure a comprehensive and consistent approach across FET.

Building on the success of the 'Take the First Step' campaign in raising awareness of the help available for people with literacy and numeracy issues will be critical in ensuring that all who need localised support can and will avail of it. Access to literacy and numeracy support provided by FET can often be the first point of re-engagement with education for many, and the inspiring learner stories about the learning pathways from such initial support at NFQ Levels 1 and 2 have been a major driver of awareness and interest.

However, future campaigns must also try to break down the stigma of admitting literacy and numeracy issues by those at more advanced stages of education, with the work to integrate support for Level 4 to Level 6 FET learners a key enabler in this regard. The strategy will also seek to ensure **under the *Equal Status Acts (2000–2018)* which prohibit discrimination in the provision of goods and services, accommodation and education, that reasonable accommodations are made** by service providers so that people with disabilities can access and avail of relevant services on an equal basis with others, where it is practical to do so. Collaborating providers must have in place, policies and procedures for the provision of reasonable accommodation for apprentices. The strategy will also seek to ensure there is compliance as well as good practice supports available in relation to reasonable accommodation for learners.

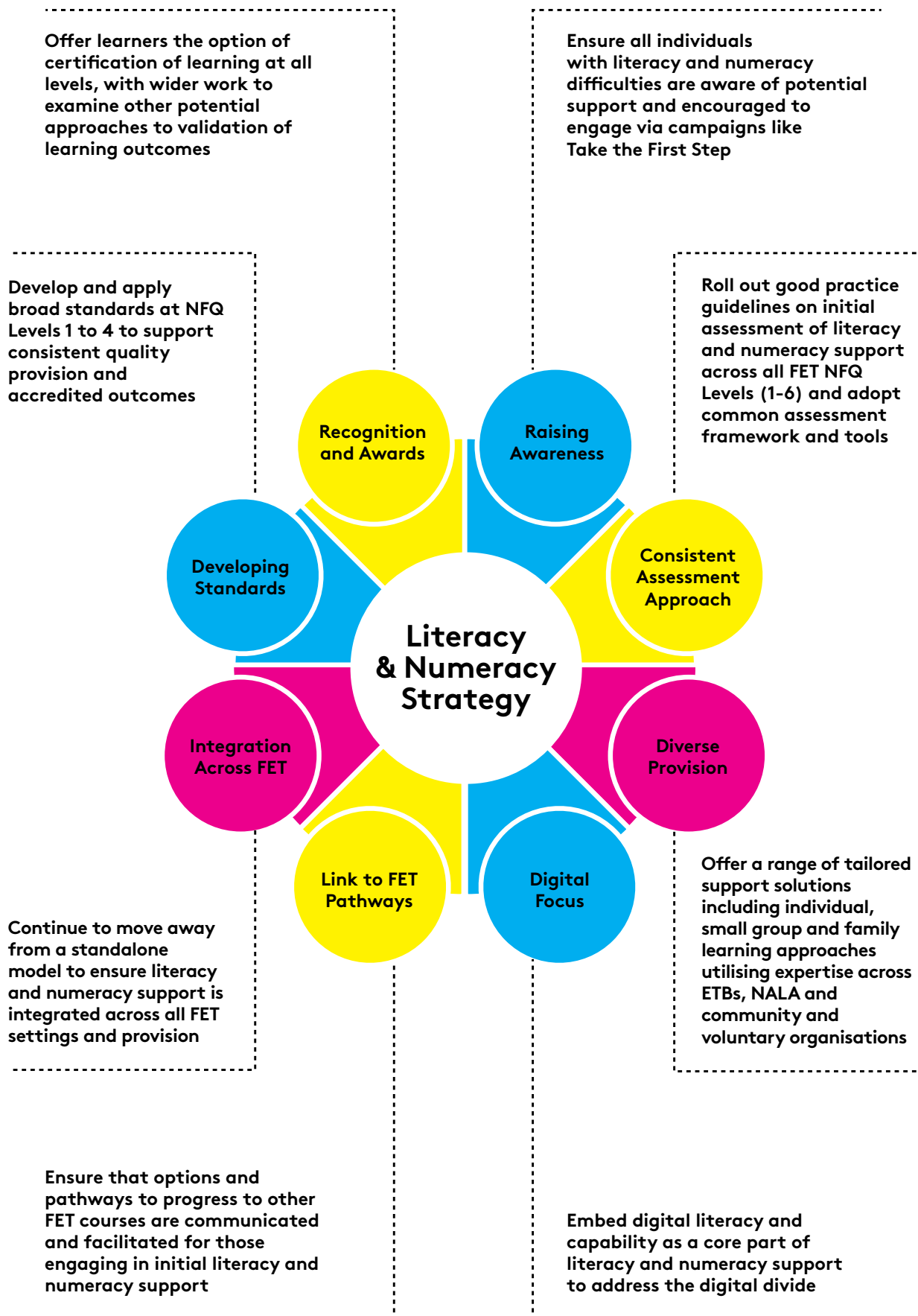
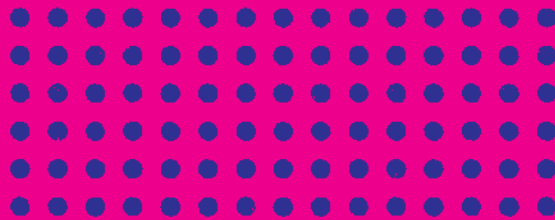


Figure 16: Overview of Literacy & Numeracy Strategy 2020-2024

Section 7

Strategic Priority:
Creating Pathways

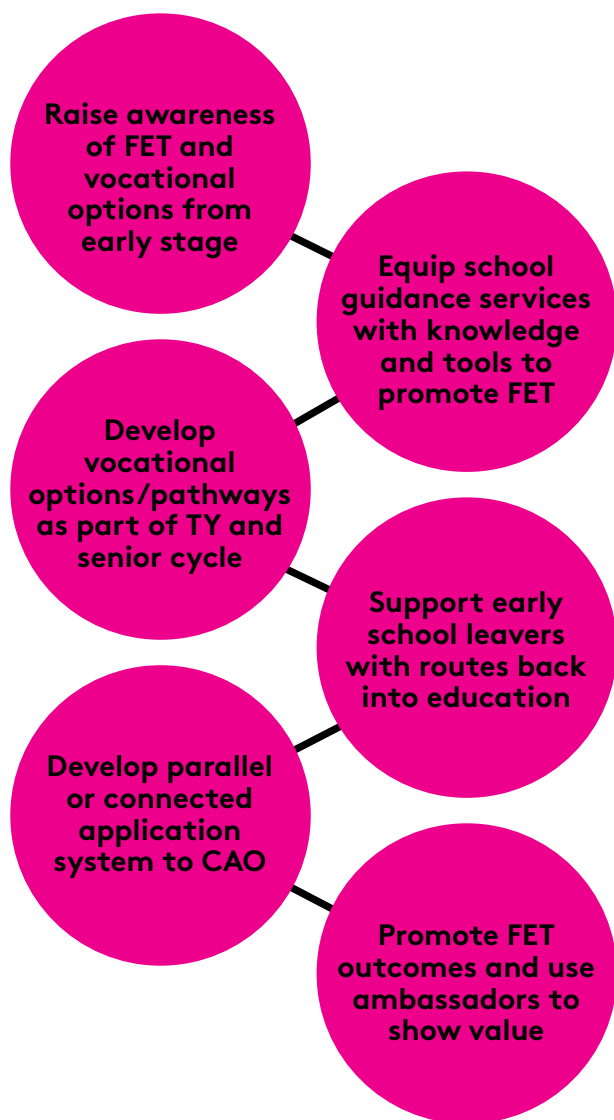


7 Strategic Priority: Creating Pathways

The ability to build skills that are relevant to the economy, and to offer inclusive provision that supports citizenship and sustains communities, are two core attributes of FET, and a strong vision for their further development over the next five years has been set out. Too often these attributes have been viewed as relating to separate parts of the system, with different FET services focused on one or the other, delivering on different national policy objectives. However, if a central goal for FET is sustainable job creation, this can only be secured by a seamless service where learners are equipped with all of the knowledge, support, and the core and technical skills that will allow them to lead fulfilled lives, continually learn, self-develop, and build successful careers. FET offers great opportunities for learners of all backgrounds and abilities, but a complex programme structure and lack of clarity about how its offerings link together to help a person progress can make it seem quite inaccessible to those considering it as an option. FET must be simplified by offering clear pathways into FET, within FET and from FET, encouraging and facilitating ongoing engagement at all stages of people’s lives and careers.

7.1 Pathways from School to FET

One of the impediments to developing interest in FET options for school leavers is the lack of exposure to vocational learning, and vocational options or pathways during the junior and senior cycles in many schools. International approaches suggest a potential role for FET in offering modules and tasters of vocational courses to second-level students where existing teaching



resources do not have the required technical experience available. ETBs also have the advantage of operating many second-level schools which could facilitate piloting of a new approach. This could ultimately look at offering Level 5 and Level 6 modules as an integrated part of the senior cycle alongside other options and components, and this should be investigated further as part of the NCCA senior cycle review. The potential for apprenticeship taster offerings as part of Transition Year is also currently being tested with some schools, where a month of the TY will be dedicated to this purpose, and this should be mainstreamed if effective.

As a general principle, it is important that FET is promoted as a valid and smart potential destination from the earliest stage within schools. The development of support resources to help teachers explain such future opportunities to students of all ages should be considered. There are many fantastic FET and apprenticeship ambassadors who can talk about their own experiences and provide inspiration and insight. These individuals should be deployed in a co-ordinated manner to build interest in vocational pathways across schools. Important work has been progressed on building knowledge of FET across the network of school guidance counsellors, and this must be further developed to allow this important cohort to offer advice on smart FET options

as an alternative to HE. There is also a need to consider how FET works in the context of the CAO. This is a major focal point for each cohort of school leavers, and the wider ecosystem which guides their choices. The absence of FET choices at this point undoubtedly devalues it as an equally valid option. The development of a parallel or connected application mechanism that would clearly demonstrate the wider portfolio of tertiary education options across FET, apprenticeship and HE needs to be considered in this context.

It is, of course, critical that practical experience of vocational pathways, and raising school awareness of FET and apprenticeship options, is augmented by provision of accurate and accessible information on FET progression outcomes which can influence school leaver choices. A major promotional campaign for FET should also be progressed so that ETBs can compete on an equal footing in the school leaver market with the extensive marketing budgets of higher education institutions.

It is also important that FET continues to support early school leavers by offering them routes back into education and training and potential careers through Youthreach centres and CTCs. While a recent evaluation found clear value from this provision, there is a need to more closely link it to pathways within FET and beyond, and to ensure that it continues to evolve to meet the changing and more complex needs of its learners.

All of this should facilitate and contribute to a wider debate on the overall balance between FET and HE as a school leaver destination in the future, with FET ready to take on a greater share. Recent work on exploring transitions completed by key stakeholders within FET should provide insight and context to this area.

7.2 Pathways within FET

The existing portfolio of 34 FET programmes is incredibly complex and confusing for the potential learner and undermines the credibility of FET as an option for school leavers and lifelong learners looking for appropriate education opportunities. An ecosystem of eligibility criteria, operational guidelines, staff terms and conditions and funding has grown up around each of these individual programmes. This has led to a very silo-based approach to delivery, with the result that the offering to the learner across FET can be very inconsistent.

The number of programmes will be substantially reduced over the lifetime of this strategy, with a clearer learning pathway articulated and implemented. This will be built around core skills provision (NFQ Level 1 and 2); bridging skills provision (NFQ Level 3 and 4); and vocational skills provision (NFQ Level 5 and Level 6), as presented in Figure 17.

Closer links and pathways between the different levels of FET provision will be facilitated by continuing to concentrate FET provision in larger centre and college facilities. This will require a major change programme to move all of the elements of the ecosystem noted above from a programme-based legacy approach to a cross-FET future focused system and structure, and also to brand and promote the new FET proposition to both existing and potential learners. The enabling actions to deliver on this are further discussed in Section 8. The process must be carefully managed and coordinated by SOLAS, the ETBs and other key stakeholders to ensure that no negative impacts for the learner result from pursuit of the longer-term benefits such simplification and restructuring will bring.

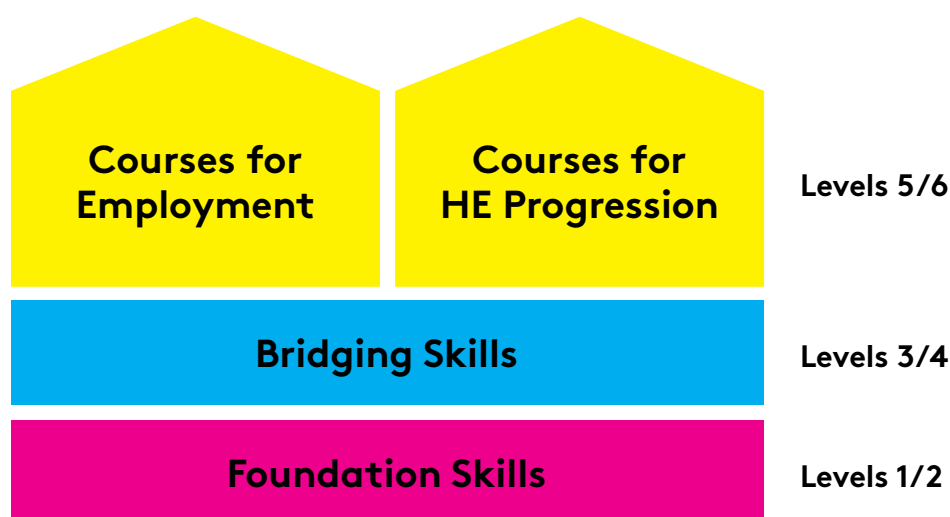


Figure 17: Framework for Restructuring FET Provision

A key driver of pathways within FET is the completion and certification of courses by learners and increased levels of accreditation have been a key focus in recent years. The new national FET system targets agreed with the Minister for Education and Skills committed to increasing Level 1-3 certification rates over the period 2018-2020, while also substantially increasing the number of qualifications awarded in critical skills areas, and this focus on growing accreditation of FET should continue. It is however acknowledged that there will always be a place within FET for informal learning, particularly when dealing with marginalised groups in the early stages of engagement. It is also accepted that other means of validating learning outcomes should be explored and developed, particularly as FET offers shorter courses to facilitate a dip in and dip out approach from lifelong learning. This should encompass strong support for recognition of prior learning and a means to recognise the development of softer skills from engagement in FET.

7.3 Pathways to/from HE

There has been significant work to put in place a more coordinated and consistent approach to FET-HE transitions. New data has shown that these transitions are already significant, accounting for around one-fifth of the annual intake of the technological higher education sector and about one-quarter of annual Level 5 and Level 6 PLC FET graduates (which rises to approximately 50% if you discount those staying within FET to progress their studies), with over 5,000 in total per year. We also know that those that do transition to HE after a FET foundation tend to prosper, with HE retention rates comparing very favourably with those entering HE directly from lower Leaving Certificate points brackets (i.e. less than 300 points).

There are in excess of 1,200 publicised entry links from FET to HEIs in Ireland, the UK and Europe, with over 200 advanced entry routes, but these have been largely dependent on institution to institution relationships rather than a consistent and universal transitions approach.

An action plan has been agreed to work towards a more strategic and consistent transitions approach between key stakeholders (DES, QQI, SOLAS, HEA, ETBI, THEA, IUA) as part of the work of the Transitions Reform FET-HE working group. The key actions agreed include:

- setting clear overall national targets for FET-HE transitions and embedding these within HEI performance compacts and ETB strategic performance agreements
- developing FET-HE talent pipelines to address specific skills needs (for example, ICT), building on a collaborative FET/HE approach to regional skills development
- further research into the reasons why a significant number of FET learners who are offered a place in HE chose not to take up a place

- comparing and contrasting a selection of Level 6 awards/programmes in cognate areas across FET and HE by examining learning outcomes, content, entry standards and progression
- piloting systems where students who withdraw from their HE course are steered towards an alternative FET route immediately
- considering potential for greater recognition of FET awards in comparison with Leaving Certificate points within the CAO and how this might be benchmarked
- standardisation of university entry requirements for FET graduates, building on the common system across the technological higher education sector

Ongoing engagement being led by QQI in partnership with SOLAS and the HEA, should be a starting point for considering the future role of Level 6 provision in tertiary education, and the respective contributions of FET and HE as we move forward. There is also considerable potential to look at dual provision models which begin in FET and can culminate in HE, building on a small number of co-delivered degree programmes between ETBs and IoTs, and on many examples of 1+2 and 2+2 approaches in overseas systems. The development of a tertiary education framework and the formation of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science marks a major milestone in ensuring a more cohesive and collaborative approach across FET and HE. This will not only fuel the actions noted above but also facilitate a strategic approach to these Level 6 and co-delivery questions, along with others like a common or connected school leaver application process and the desired overall balance between FET and HE intakes in this regard.

7.4 Facilitating Lifelong Pathways

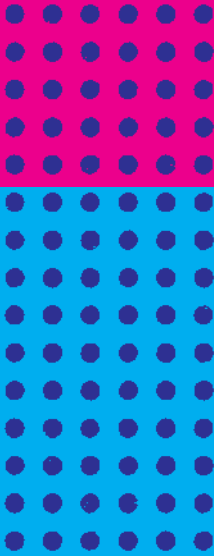
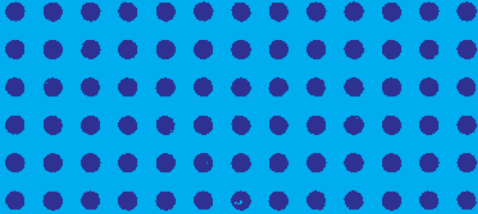
Analysis of learning across FET and HE is revealing that pathways are increasingly non-linear. For example, 10% of PLC students have HE experience, and analysis of flows between FET courses show movement both up and down NFQ levels. This trend will grow further in future years as learners pick particular offerings across the entire education and training continuum which suit their interests, motivation, up-skilling needs, and their particular stage of life.

FET must therefore position itself at the forefront of a new culture of lifelong learning. It must promote and facilitate engagement throughout careers and lifetimes by adopting more modular, flexible, technology-driven and year-round approaches which facilitate sustained learning pathways where credits and qualifications can be built up over time. It must also work with the HE system to investigate ways of cross-credentialing, where credits are recognised across systems over multiple years to facilitate a truly holistic tertiary approach. Use of digital badging and micro-credentialing will also be important as we move into an era of FET provision which can be tailored to meet the needs of learners and employers, and can be made available in bite-sized chunks to facilitate accessibility. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) should also be an important feature. Although this can be a very resource-intensive process, ETBs are beginning to demonstrate that RPL can be delivered at significant scale, and the models that have been piloted should now be mainstreamed as this route into education and awards can be a real attribute and selling point for FET in the future.

Critical to facilitating lifelong learning pathways is the pivotal role of ETBs in providing guidance on education, training, employment and careers to all within their regions. The approach to guidance is inconsistent across FET settings and provision, and this must be rectified with an integrated approach to guidance across ETBs. This should ensure that impartial guidance is available to all who seek it within the ETB region, and that the ETB positions itself to ensure that it works effectively for all FET provision and all FET learners.

Despite many different information resources, FET also lacks a good centralised single 'go to' IT portal which can offer more accessible information and advice without the need for face-to-face contact, and FET must support the development of such a resource as recommended by the recent Government Review of Career Guidance. This must include accessible labour market intelligence that can inform potential learners of the likely available future job and career opportunities from particular course choices.

Enabling
Themes



Section 8

8 Enabling Themes

8.1 Staffing, Capabilities and Structures

The passion and expertise of FET practitioners, and their commitment to putting learners at the heart of everything they do, is one of the great strengths of the system. While some progress has been made on the organisational design of FET within ETBs (most notably with the appointments of Directors of FET which have given it a real drive and strategic focus), there remain numerous legacy design matters that need to be resolved. As we enter a new phase of development for FET, these matters need to be addressed along with a clear sense of how ETB staffing and structures need to evolve to deliver on the Future FET goals set out in this strategy, and realise the full potential of the system. Under this enabling theme, four key areas of focus have been determined:

1. It is important to agree an appropriate future staffing framework, which breaks down the barriers between different FET settings and programmes and facilitates more flexible deployment of staff to meet evolving needs. Such an approach would also improve the ability for co-ordinated strategic planning across all FET provision within ETBs and help to reduce the overly programmatic approach that exists at present. It must look at the role of the teacher and the instructor and how these roles can evolve and be effectively deployed across FET settings, and brought together within an integrated FET college of the future. It will require constructive discussions around the long-term staffing approach between SOLAS, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, ETBs, unions and other key stakeholders.
2. To further enable the expertise and commitment of FET practitioners, a keen focus on professional development is required. This will equip those in the sector who deliver FET provision with the requisite skills and tools they require, and, in doing so, embed a culture of excellence and high quality. Management and leadership, digital transformation, and quality assurance and programme development are critical areas requiring some capability-building across FET. Professional development support will target these areas. There is also an opportunity to further ensure that FET learning is up-to-date and industry-related by pursuing secondments between FET practitioners and those who work in industry, building on some pilot initiatives which are already being progressed by ETBs.
3. The quality assurance structure across FET is fundamental to developing curricula, teaching and learning, assessment, maintaining standards and enhancing quality. There has been significant progress in developing ETB capability in quality assurance, with a re-engagement process with QQI, quality enhancement plans agreed, and ETB-wide quality reviews scheduled for 2020. Enhancing quality assurance practices and systems across ETBs and other service providers must continue to be prioritised, with associated investment in resources. In developing such systems it will be important that ETBs work closely with QQI in creating transparent mechanisms to assure and enhance the quality of FET provision; support and invest in activity to drive innovation and quality enhancement, work with SOLAS on data gathering for FET graduate tracking, and raise public awareness of the diversity of learning modes and opportunities available to FET learners. There should also be scope for cross-ETB approaches to curriculum development and quality assurance to facilitate timely delivery of new skills responses, achieve economies of scale, and consolidate programme design efforts.
4. A key concern in the FET system has been the programme-based rigidity around the deployment of resources and operational regulations. To address this barrier, we must develop cross-FET funding and guidelines to replace the previous programme-specific focus. The funding model will be reformed to move away from approaches that reinforce programme silos, to reflect the outcomes and performance of ETBs, and to facilitate strategic investment in long-term priorities. There should also be scope to look at a

multi-annual ETB financial and funding model over time, which facilitates longer-term strategic investment decisions to maximise FET's impact and leads towards greater financial autonomy.

8.2 Learner and Performance Centred

An essential focus of this strategy is to ensure that we develop a system that is learner-centred and performance-centred. The FET learner base is incredibly diverse, and FET must encourage and reflect this diversity in the way in which it supports learners and offers them clear pathways and outcomes over the next five years. The work on strategic performance agreements and learner voice has provided a strong platform to further enhance a learner-centred and performance approach. Three key areas of focus are to be prioritised:

1. A significant milestone in the development of the system has now been achieved in establishing a performance framework for FET through the strategic performance agreements. This approach must be continued and built upon as a critical mechanism to link this new FET strategy to delivery on the ground, and its impact for learners, communities, employers and overall society and economy. When the next performance agreements are put in place for 2021-2023, they will reflect this strategy's priorities and contain agreed contributions to new national FET system targets which will reflect its ambitious vision. In setting the new performance targets, there is an opportunity to take advantage of the data revolution referenced earlier in this document to agree robust indicators in terms of FET success in generating outcomes of employment, progression, active inclusion, lifelong learning, meeting critical skills needs, and new models of delivery.
2. System development would not be complete without appropriate mechanisms in place around learner feedback and engagement. To this end, we must continue the work of the FET learner forum in securing qualitative feedback at national and regional level on FET. There is also value in building on the work of the forum by initiating an annual survey of FET learners that captures their views on their experience and journey within FET. Learner participation on relevant governance, strategic and decision-making structures within FET is paramount to a future successful learner-centred approach. Over the lifetime of the new strategy, more effective means of representation should be developed, ensuring a clear learner voice on organisation oversight, planning provision, delivering support services, curriculum development, quality assurance and improvement, and future strategy. This should be accompanied by initiatives to build capacity of learners to engage effectively in these structures and articulate views and positions that can be taken into account by SOLAS, ETBs, other FET providers and other key stakeholders. FET learners can also be the most incredible ambassadors for the value of learning in our system and the great places it can take you. They must be actively recruited and supported to reflect the diversity of FET, and serve as a powerful promotional tool in encouraging smart FET choices in schools, communities and enterprises.
3. Central to the challenge of embedding both a learner-centred and performance-centred FET system is how to reconcile the fact that there are major benefits for the learner that are broadly understood, but that cannot be recognised within formal 'hard' performance metrics. There should be a focus on considering how learning outcomes can be validated without always being reliant on formal certification. Assessment tools can play their part in this, and this data can be complemented by the creation of a 'distance travelled' tool which captures and measures 'soft' or 'transversal' skills development of learners. There are various methodologies that have been adopted to put in place such distance travelled

measures, both by ETBs within FET and other external stakeholders (for example, Pobal) and it will be important to build on this work to agree a consistent framework which can be rolled out across the system.

8.3 Digital Transformation of FET

Good progress has been made in recent years to build capability in technology enhanced learning (TEL) across FET, focusing on using technology in pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning, and using tech-led approaches to the provision of education and training. This work is important, but if FET is to maintain its relevance, it must adopt a more holistic approach to how it will embrace and deploy technology over the next five years. Every other system is planning for digital transformation, and FET must be no exception.

There are three rationales for digitising education:

- Making better use of digital technology for teaching and learning
- Developing relevant digital competences and skills for digital society
- Improving educational systems through better data and analysis

There will also be a need to understand the current digital experience of staff and learners within FET to make effective plans for improvement, and to benchmark progress over time in the digital transformation journey. A regular short survey of FET digital experience should be considered, building on the model used in its recent introduction to HE in Ireland, and in other FET systems in England, Australia and New Zealand. SOLAS will work with the ETBs, other providers, learners and industry experts to set out a digital transformation framework, with four key areas of focus as set out below.

1. Comprehensive and accessible digital solutions ought to be devised to improve learner access for all potential FET learners in order to facilitate smart choices and to articulate clearer learning pathways and employment/progression outcomes. This will mean exploring the potential for individual learner accounts (including tracking credentials and credits achieved within FET over time), for use of smart technology which interacts with FET facilities, for communicating pathways and labour market intelligence on potential careers in a succinct and tech-friendly manner, and allowing extensive and repetitive form filling and record keeping to be by-passed by smart systems.
2. The first TEL strategy placed considerable emphasis on introducing necessary ICT and developing practitioner capabilities to enable the embedding of technology in teaching and learning. Some progress has been made in using virtual learning environment (VLE) platforms like Moodle to support learning delivery, but there needs to be a drive now to transform the way in which learning is offered to fully embrace the blended and online experiences which the future FET learner will expect. There are great examples of ETBs developing blended courses for a learner cohort which extends well beyond their region, but these are isolated, and the successful approach adopted in these cases needs to be mainstreamed and rolled out across FET. These types of offerings are critical to meeting the needs of enterprises and their employees, and in positioning FET as the 'go to' place for lifelong learning. There is potential to further develop eCollege as a national online learning service further to the expansion and roll out as a result of the impact of Covid-19. Consideration will be given as to how eCollege can best develop FET content, work in tandem with ETBs to support their blended and online delivery, or test innovative approaches such as hosting of MOOC's (massive open online courses) to inform teachers in secondary schools about the FET offering or initial online digital capability assessments or skills modules. Given the stage of maturity of the FET system, the possibility of working with partners who have already established effective digital learning offerings should also be investigated.
3. The strategy has noted the opportunities that exist from the enhancement of FET data and the linking of this data to external databases to track outcomes. The next key step is

to ensure the decisions made within the FET system are based on a strong evidence base and are data driven. There is now a platform to use data more effectively to: robustly monitor and challenge performance of providers and ensure accountability; to evolve the funding model for FET provision to reflect future needs; to inform smart learner and employer choices and reflect on the learner experience; to allow providers to identify the value of courses and shape provision according to need; and to underpin efficient and effective organisations across the FET system. There is further potential to work with external partners (for example, DEASP, HEA, QQI) to share and develop data to better inform respective operations, and also to better understand outcomes and impacts. We will continue to develop these relationships over the lifetime of the strategy.

4. Shared services such as management, financial and other information systems need to be developed to support more robust, efficient and effective approaches to the governance, management and development of FET. Modernisation of the management and financial administration systems is urgently required to standardise reporting and to support informed decision making. Currently, the lack of consistent financial systems limits the extent to which robust data on the cost of delivering FET can be gathered in a timely fashion, and adds another resource-intensive complex and bureaucratic requirement on providers to try to collect detailed analysis. While the development of shared service approaches led by the Department of Education and Skills are welcome, shorter and medium term solutions should be explored to establish whether a common interim financial system could be put in place in the meantime that would facilitate the capture of information across the system, and help ETBs to compare and contrast income, costs, activities and performance. There should also be potential for shared system approaches in relation to areas of opportunity like digital networks, digital authentication and digital brokerage. This is the approach in higher education in Ireland, where HEAnet provides these services to higher education institutions, while in the UK JISC provides these services across all levels of the education sector. While there are valid historical reasons for the FET system having developed in this manner, the lack of such shared infrastructure is a large first-order barrier to digital development.

8.4 Capital Infrastructure

This strategy has set out a strong sense of the potential of FET if it continues along a pathway of integration, reducing programme silos and structures, and developing much clearer learning pathways into, within and from FET. However, there is strong consensus that capital infrastructure is both a barrier and an enabler to fully realising this ambition. As noted earlier, FET capital stock is of variable quality and is characterised by small scale dispersed facilities, despite some effort to consolidate provision in particular locations within integrated FET centres. The first important step will be to fully understand the nature, purpose, quality and investment requirements across all capital infrastructure. SOLAS will, therefore, commence a full review with ETBs to construct a detailed database of FET buildings, their purpose, size and condition, provision type, numbers of learners and staff, and ownership details.

Alongside this, SOLAS will work with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, ETBs and other providers to agree a future approach to capital development in FET. The introduction of a tertiary education approach and associated framework has led to responsibility for both FET and HE capital investment being co-ordinated jointly by a single unit. This should facilitate a more collaborative regional tertiary education investment strategy. SOLAS in turn will work to understand the needs across the FET system and recommend the prioritisation of projects on this basis. To support this process, Figure 18 outlines a series of draft guiding principles which could potentially underpin a future approach to capital, with further details on each principle provided below. These are based on the developments that are currently ongoing within FET, on the issues and challenges identified in this strategy document,

and on feedback on key priorities from the strategy consultation process. They will serve as a basis for further discussion on how limited future capital funding might be appropriately channelled within the FET system over the lifetime of this strategy.

1. Consolidation at Level 5 and Level 6 –

While it is critically important to preserve a dispersed and community-based FET system, the small scale of facilities offering Levels 5 and 6 provision, the confusing binary system of training centres and FE colleges, and the ongoing FET programme reform, offers significant scope for consolidation of this provision within larger scale facilities. Establishing integrated FET colleges/centres/hubs for this purpose could deliver new or evolved flagship FET facilities which further build the profile and standing of FET as an option for school leavers and learners at all stages of their lives and careers. It might also facilitate the development of centre-of-excellence-type approaches within such facilities.

2. Integrated Community-Based Responses –

ETBs have increasingly developed integrated responses at community level where programmes and provision have been co-located within integrated FET centres, typically focused on NFQ Level 1 to Level 4 education and training. This work should continue to be supported while ensuring that access and active inclusion is preserved at community level.

3. Consistent with Strategic Performance Agreements –

There is now a multi-annual strategic planning framework in place, with ETBs asked to commit to specific contributions to core FET system targets and set out strategies to meet the unique further education and training needs within their respective regions over a three-year period within strategic performance agreements. These agreements set out the capital infrastructure available and should reflect any plans for development in order to focus or rebalance provision on the needs of learners, employers and the communities that they serve. Future capital investment should align with the plans and commitments in the agreements.

4. Minimum Standards of Capital Stock across the FET System – Addressing issues around the quality of FET infrastructure and health and safety concerns related to FET buildings must be critical priorities. A full understanding of the existing state of the FET stock will be developed as part of the review referenced above. This should be a pre-cursor to ensuring that, over

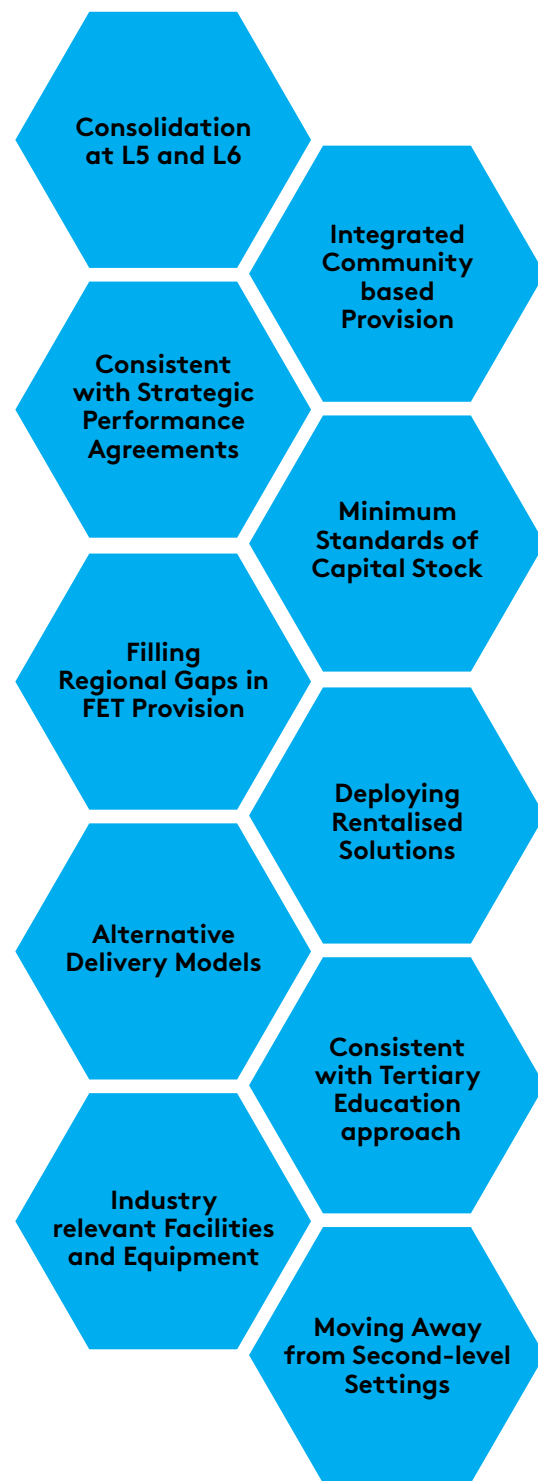


Figure 18: Capital Development Principles

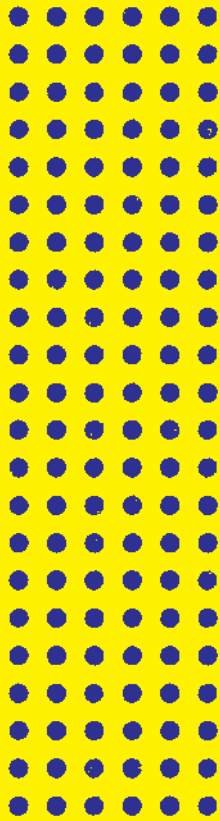
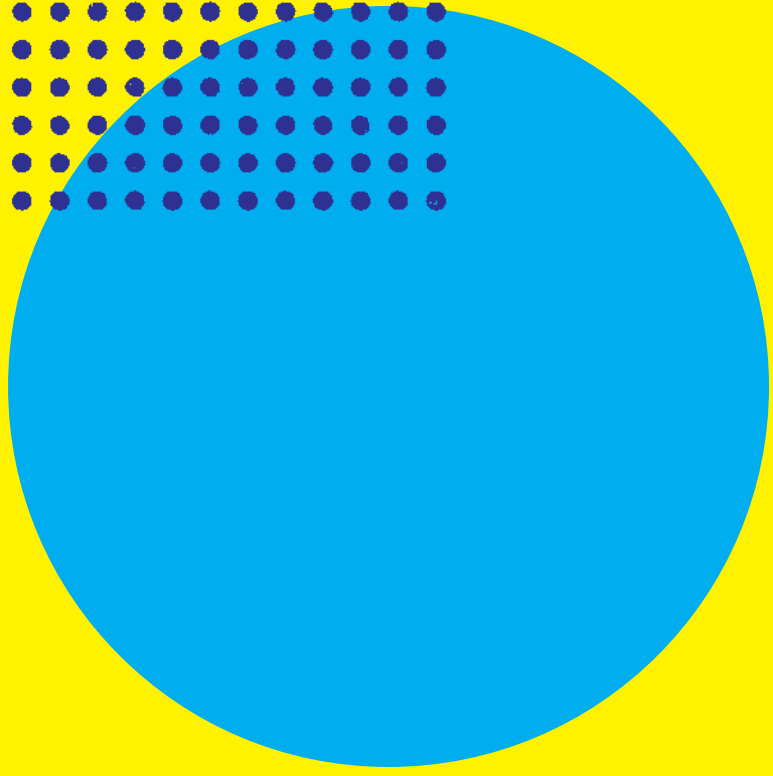
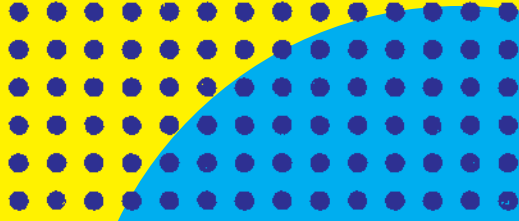
time, an appropriate standard of capital stock exists across the FET system and a means of monitoring such quality is in place.

5. **Filling Regional Gaps in FET Provision** – Although FET is characterised by a widely dispersed stock of facilities, there are areas where strong demographic growth has meant that legacy infrastructure and provision is not fully sufficient to meet regional need. Areas which form part of the wider Dublin commuter belt, where populations have expanded rapidly, do not have the levels of FET provision (particularly Levels 5 and 6), which you would expect given their catchment population. Investment must, therefore, be targeted to ensure a consistent supply of relevant FET provision across the country.
6. **Deploying Rentalised Solutions** – Some FET facilities are of poor quality and require substantial re-investment to remain fit for purpose. The future capital strategy should provide for, and encourage, the replacement of such facilities, using rentalised solutions where new or alternative ETB-owned solutions are not feasible. This would facilitate the gradual removal of poor quality FET capital stock from the ETB portfolio. Other relevant options may be feasible across the wider public sector, including Public Private Partnerships.
7. **Use of Alternative Delivery Models** – There has been a recent focus in FET on developing capability in technology-enhanced learning, and it can be expected that future FET will be delivered using more blended and online approaches. This has two implications for capital: firstly, it may change or reduce the level and type of physical space required for delivery; and secondly, it will necessitate investment in key technology, equipment, networks and other infrastructure to support TEL provision.
8. **Consistent with a wider Tertiary Education Approach** – The establishment of a Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science guarantees a more integrated approach to tertiary education. In planning capital investment, cognisance should be taken of existing higher education provision within the catchment area, and any potential collaboration with HE that might maximise the effectiveness and impact of capital infrastructure or investment.
9. **Industry Relevant Facilities and Equipment** – FET maintains its relevance (particularly in Level 5 and 6 offerings, by ensuring that it continues to meet the rapidly evolving needs of industry. For apprenticeship and other provision linked to particular trades, occupations or industrial sectors, this means an ongoing requirement for investment in modern kit, facilities and model settings to ensure a strong industry relevance to provision. The continued roll-out of 2016-plus apprenticeships is likely to increase the need for such investment.
10. **Moving away from Second-Level Settings** – The provision of PLC courses in a range of second-level schools has been important in the delivery of vocational education offerings within communities that would otherwise not have access to such opportunities. It is important to preserve outreach and accessible Level 5 and Level 6 provision, but options should be explored on the separation of FET provision from that at second-level over time, including in relation to governance, operational, funding and capital issues.
11. **Together, these principles effectively set out three core areas of focus for capital infrastructure:**
 - addressing existing deficits;
 - consolidating provision; and
 - facilitating flagship developments.

This will aim, over time, to put a Future FET system in place with capital stock that can communicate cutting edge, quality and accessible education and training to potential learners, staff, employers and communities.

Section 9

Implementing
the Strategy



9 Implementing the Strategy

9.1 Responsibility for Delivery

An exciting agenda for change for FET has been set out in this strategy that builds on the strong foundations in place. While the consensus around the future vision across many diverse stakeholders has been striking, a strong, comprehensive and focused approach to implementation will be key in bringing this to fruition. The Department of Education and Skills has charged SOLAS with delivering on this strategy, and overseeing the approach to implementation, including the development of detailed action plans, milestones and targets. The strategy of course can only be delivered by working in partnership with the many stakeholders with an interest in FET, and intensive focused engagement will be required to set out a pathway for success.

To ensure the required focus, it is not intended to re-establish the type of overall multiple-stakeholder Strategy Implementation Advisory Committee (SIAC) that operated over much of the lifetime of the previous strategy. There will, though, still be ongoing monitoring by SOLAS of an overall implementation plan, bringing together focused programmes of actions in relation to the three strategic priorities and four enabling themes. Each of these seven components will require its own distinct implementation structures, bringing the most relevant stakeholders together to deliver on the future direction sought in each case. Appropriate resources will be put in place to help support the work. SOLAS will oversee the establishment of this infrastructure, with ETBI advising on appropriate provider input across all seven areas, with input from non-ETB providers facilitated at all stages, and other stakeholders invited to engage in relation to their relevant areas of interest.

This more flexible and focused approach to implementation, with key parties working to enact the change required within specific areas of focus, will provide a platform to deliver on this exciting new vision for FET. FET is already truly transformational, and this strategy will ensure that it continues to grow its profile and contribution to meet the education and training needs across Ireland, and serve as a critical driver for the next phase of social, economic and technological development.

9.2 Role of the Strategic Performance Agreements and FET System Targets

The establishment of strategic performance agreements between SOLAS and ETBs provides a framework by which key elements of this strategy can be implemented over a three-year period. The first agreements run over the period 2018-2020, and during 2020 SOLAS will work with the Minister and Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to agree the FET system targets which will be embedded in the next cycle of agreements. SOLAS will then work in partnership with the ETBs to develop agreements for the period 2021-2023. There will also be a formal mid-term review of the agreements in 2022, and this will be linked to a wider progress review of the strategy at this stage.

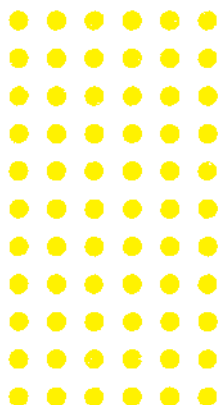
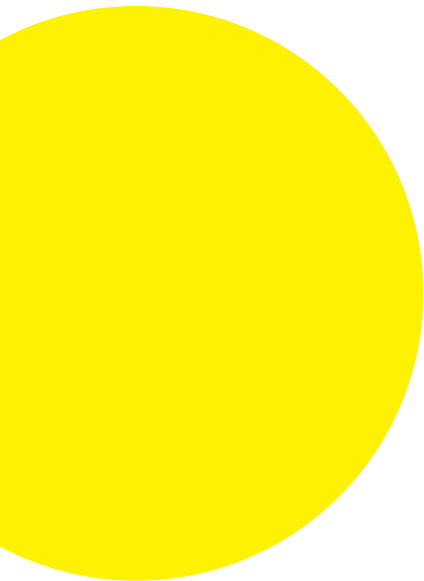
The agreements provide a powerful implementation mechanism to ensure that the strategy is reflected by strong performance and a commitment to change across SOLAS and the ETBs. While detailed targets will be developed, it can be expected that, by the end of 2024, Future FET will mean:

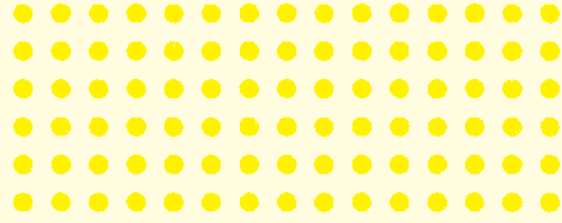
- There will be a greater overall penetration of FET across the population of Ireland
- A greater share of school leavers will be choosing FET or apprenticeship as their first destination
- People will move seamlessly between FET and HE with clear transition criteria in large numbers

- A significant and growing cohort of people in employment using FET to up-skill and of employers viewing FET as a critical enterprise resource
- Progression levels through FET will increase strongly, with pathways from core skills and community education available to all who wish to pursue them
- A digitally transformed FET system will offer a large portfolio of flexible, online and blended opportunities

9.3 Communicating the Strategy

The future of FET is exciting. The future of FET is now. There is a place for everyone to join this journey in transforming learning. However FET needs to grow its profile across potential learners, communities, employers and Government to ensure that the sustainable value from FET and the ambitious vision and reform set out in this strategy is more widely acknowledged. Building on the recent success of the 'This is FET' system marketing strategy, this will require a concerted and innovative communications campaign to articulate what Future FET will mean to all parts of Irish society, and effectively serve as a call to action to all individuals and enterprises to think about how FET can help them grow.





AONTAS	The National Adult Learning Organisation
BTEI	Back to Education Initiative
CAO	Central Applications Office
CE	Community Employment
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CSO	Central Statistics Office
CTC	Community Training Centres
DEASP	Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
DES	Department of Education and Skills
Digital Badging	Attaining an image, icon or indicator of an accomplishment, competency, learning, disposition or skill. It can be displayed, accessed and verified online.
DESI	Digital Economy and Society Index
DPER	Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
EGFSN	Expert Group on Future Skills Needs
EI	Enterprise Ireland
ESF	European Social Fund
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
EU	European Union
FARR	Funding Allocations Requests and Reporting System
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FET	Further Education and Training
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEAnet	Ireland's National Education and Research Network, which provides Internet connectivity and associated shared services across all levels of the Irish education system.
HEI	Higher Education Institute
Horizon scanning	A future-oriented methodology for detecting early signs of potentially important developments through a systematic examination of potential threats and opportunities, with emphasis on new technology and its effects on the issue at hand.
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IoT	Institute of Technology

IT	Information Technology
ITABE	Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education
IUA	Irish Universities Association
JISC	Joint Information Systems Committee, a not-for-profit organisation for digital services and solutions for UK higher, further education and skills sectors.
LEO	Local Enterprise Office
LES	Local Employment Service
Micro credentialing	Attaining a micro or digital credential. Examples include digital badges, web badges, nanodegrees, mini-degrees and microcertifications.
MOOCs	Massive Open Online Courses are free online courses that are open to all and designed to facilitate large numbers of participants.
MOODLE	A free and open source online learning management system (LMS) that supports learning and training needs for a range of educational institutions and organisations worldwide.
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
NSC	National Skills Council
NSS	National Skills Strategy
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
PIAAC	Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
PLSS	Programme and Learner Support System, incorporating a national FET course database, a national FET course calendar and a national FET learner database. It enables SOLAS, among other things, to access real time data on outputs and outcomes from all SOLAS-funded FET programmes and services.
QA	Quality Assurance
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Rentalised	A term used when considering or reviewing the cost of renting a premises or area of a premises
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RSF	Regional Skills Fora
SIAC	Strategic Implementation Advisory Committee
Silo	A term used to describe the limited sharing of knowledge and awareness across the separate programmes that are available in the Further Education and Training sector in Ireland.
SLMRU	Skills and Labour Market Research Unit

SLT	Senior Leadership Team
SME	Small-to-Medium sized Enterprises
SOLAS	An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh Agus Scileanna
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland
TEL	Technology Enhanced Learning
Tertiary	For the purposes of the FET Strategy, the learner journey right through from Levels 1–10 on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications, including provision at Further Education and Training and Higher Education levels.
THEA	Technological Higher Education Association
Transversal skills	Include creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship, critical and analytical thinking, teamwork, communication and business acumen. The European Commission also encompasses language proficiency, mathematical competence and ICT skills in its definition.
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
VEC	Vocational Educational Committee
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment, used to deliver content, support learners and manage assessments. Examples include Moodle and Blackboard.
2+2	After completing two years in college/FET, students can transition to university for the final two years, to earn a degree.

