

# Further Education and Training Strategy 2020 – 2024

*Public Consultation 2019: April – May 2019*

Response Deadline: 5pm May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019

## Background to this Consultation

The Further Education and Training (FET) system delivers a continuum of learning opportunities from Level 1 to Level 6 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), focused on both core and specific skills development, accompanied by a range of learner supports to facilitate the active inclusion of all citizens. Further education and training 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 transversal skills development including literacy and numeracy (e.g. 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 (e.g. Youthreach, Back to Education Initiative, Skills for Work) are focused more formally on facilitating progression to other education and training opportunities
- Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) provision has a focus on both facilitating progression to higher education and direct generation of employment outcomes
- Other programmes (e.g. traineeships, apprenticeships, specific skills training) are based around the principle of work-based learning and seek to lead directly to sustainable jobs for participants.

The community-based ethos of further education and training ensures a widespread geographic distribution of provision across all corners of the state. Community education is a key component of this landscape, with ground up initiatives developed to serve the needs of particular localities, often in partnership with local organisations. This further reinforces the diverse learner profile across FET, with many availing of courses on a part-time basis, often in evenings or via online resources. The maximum

length of a further education and training course is one year, although some provision carries a two year option with a distinct award at the end of each year. This means engagement with providers tends to be shorter term than, for example, higher education, yet the system is also characterised by re-engagement of learners for multiple courses, sometimes within the same year.

SOLAS is the authority responsible for planning, funding and co-ordinating Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland. It's vision is for FET programmes to be recognised for their demonstrable benefits for learners, enterprise and communities, where FET is valued for its effectiveness and quality, playing an integral role in helping Ireland achieve its ambition of the best education and training service in Europe.

SOLAS is charged with a range of responsibilities including:

- Supporting the development and implementation of further education and training strategy
- Funding of the FET system to maximise the impact of state investment
- Overseeing the development and implementation of the Strategic Performance Agreements between SOLAS and each Education and Training Board (ETB) which set out 3 year plans to further embed a strategic and integrated FET system
- Statutory responsibility for the apprenticeship system
- Analysing the labour market and identifying and anticipating key skills needs, and
- Promoting the standing of Further Education and Training.

SOLAS funds, co-ordinates and monitors Further Education and Training (FET) provision by Education and Training Boards (ETBs) on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills. In 2018, the sixteen Education and Training Boards supported over 300,000 beneficiaries, delivering education and training across 33 skills clusters including, but not limited to, built environment, engineering, food and beverage, information technology and tourism.

The Further Education and Training Act 2013, under which SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards were established, brought the further education and training sectors together for the first time under a devolved delivery model. There followed a natural establishment phase to ensure structures, roles and responsibilities within the respective organisations were aligned with the policy, economic and social objectives which the FET system was designed to serve. The Act also stipulates that SOLAS will, every five years, prepare and submit a strategy in respect of further education and training to the Minister for Education and Skills. The first such strategy (*Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019*) was published in 2014.

Aligned with the restructuring of the sector in 2013, the implementation of the 2014 FET Strategy has resulted in significant progress in the development of the FET sector. Some of key achievements of the

current Strategy include new planning and funding approaches for the system; the development of a comprehensive learner database; ongoing evaluations of current FET provision; the delivery of new apprenticeship and traineeship models; the development and ongoing implementation of a literacy and numeracy strategy; and a policy framework for skills development for those in employment.

In addition, following on from the publication of national core FET targets in the *SOLAS Corporate Plan 2017-2019*, SOLAS initiated a series of strategic dialogue meetings with each of the sixteen ETBs, resulting in sixteen three-year strategic performance agreements which set the direction of travel for the sector in a planned and systematic manner. The implementation of these agreements to date has resulted in: enhanced employer engagement, increased formalisation and accreditation of learning, a focus on more consistent progression routes and expansion of lifelong learning provision; all of which is facilitating a clearer learner pathway into, within and from FET.

With the current Strategy concluding at the end of 2019 work is now beginning on developing a new Further Education and Training Strategy for the period 2020-2024. In preparation for this new FET Strategy an independent progress review of the FET Strategy took place in 2018 and it identified the need to prioritise key themes within the next FET strategy, including a shift from provision 'for employment' to targeted workforce upskilling, the development of clearer learner pathways and a whole education and training system approach which considers the role of FET and Higher Education working in a more coordinated manner.

The new FET Strategy will also be informed by national priorities and strategies including the National Skills Strategy 2025 and the Action Plan for Education 2016-2019. The current economic landscape is very different from the economic climate of 2014 when the first strategy was launched; with reduced unemployment levels (5.8%), very different labour market conditions and structural reform of the FET sector. The new strategy will provide renewed direction and focus for the setting of investment priorities, and, in particular, for the further development of an integrated FET sector that will respond to the needs of the learner, enterprise and communities. The strategy will build on progress to date and support the sector to ensure that FET continues to meet Ireland's societal and economic needs over the next 5 years.

## Making a submission

Submissions are invited from interested parties to assist SOLAS and the Department of Education and Skills in defining the strategic direction of Further Education and Training up to the year 2024.

The development of strategic performance agreements between SOLAS and ETBs identified six core aspects of further education and training, with associated FET system targets, as set out in the diagram below. This structure has been used as a framework to assist those who wish to participate in the consultation process, with views sought in relation to each aspect of FET in turn. However, submissions can of course include reference to other issues and themes that you/your organisation deem to be appropriate.



# Supporting Job Creation

Much of FET provision is developed and delivered in alignment with local, regional and national industry needs. This approach maximises opportunities for FET graduates and allows them to transition back into employment, change or improve their career prospects and assist entrepreneurs in developing their own business. In the period since the current FET strategy was published we have witnessed a remarkable turnaround in our economic fortunes. As a result much of the provision needs to be planned on the basis of 'in employment' as opposed to 'for employment', while not losing sight of the need to provide activation provision for those who remain outside of the labour market. This will require the sector to adopt structured, proactive and targeted approaches to maximise the jobs secured for learners on completion of courses. A greater understanding of skills needs and more effective monitoring of employment outcomes, allied to a more coordinated and targeted approach to employer engagement has the potential to boost the employability of FET learners. The FET sector is committed to assisting companies and employees to optimise their skillset for the mutual benefit of enabling improved productivity and innovation in the workplace. And given the vocational focus of the sector it has a key role in developing awareness of the pipeline of potential FET graduates which can benefit industry, as employees.

## Features include:

- Skills and labour market intelligence from SOLAS
- Targeting the needs of industry
- Apprenticeship and traineeship models
- Local and regional skills needs and job opportunities
- Employer engagement structures
- Promotional campaigns
- Appropriate flexible delivery options included online and blended learning
- Tackling skills mismatches and taking a strategic approach to provision based on local, regional national needs

**Please share your thoughts on Supporting Job Creation**

**Please provide suggested actions that you feel are required in this area**

# Learning Pathways

Learning pathways need to be reviewed and enhanced so that the learner can move seamlessly on a journey through the broader educational continuum. At present FET provision is characterised by a multitude of programmes spanning across levels 1-6 of the National Framework of Qualifications. SOLAS data shows there are very significant levels of learner movements within FET on an annual basis as learners take more than one short programme to develop their skillset and prepare themselves for further study in FET or HE or to move directly into the labour market. On this basis learning pathways include the need for clearer learner pathways into FET, within FET and out of FET. Pathways from FET to Higher Education (HE) form a distinct element of the potential learner pathway and should be clear, transparent, and tangible, with opportunities for all learners move to HE should they wish to do so.

## Features include:

- Career guidance for learners as part of learner supports
- Opportunities for FET learners to move between programmes in a linear and non-linear fashion
- Ongoing development work on the structures to facilitate transitions between FET and HE
- Collaboration between the FET and HE sectors on skills planning and provision
- Improved data analysis to monitor and report on the learner movements both within FET and out of FET in to HE

**Please share your thoughts on Learning Pathways**

**Please provide suggested actions that you feel are required in this area**

# Active Inclusion

The FET sector creates opportunities for marginalised individuals and groups to access the skills they need to compete in the labour market but also to realise their personal development ambitions. These groups include long-term unemployed people, people with disabilities, young people aged 18-24 years who are not in education, employment or training, and those experiencing literacy and numeracy difficulties. The FET system is striving to embed an ethos of active inclusion throughout all processes and practices that are applied in the design and delivery of its services. This role that Further Education and Training plays in working with marginalised individuals, groups and communities to ensure their active inclusion in education and training is critical to a more equitable society.

## Features include:

- Targeting of socially, economically and educationally disadvantaged groups
- Integrating literacy and numeracy supports
- Personal and community development
- Equity of access across the FET sector
- Transversal skills clusters – general learning and ICT
- Accreditation of lower levels of National Framework of Qualifications
- ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages)

**Please share your thoughts on Active Inclusion**

**Please provide suggested actions that you feel are required in this area**

# Lifelong Learning and Workforce Upskilling

The FET system is ideally placed to deliver lifelong learning opportunities; it has a presence within most communities, a track record of delivering both part-time and full-time provision to people of all ages and strong connectivity with local employers and their employees. The embedding of more flexible delivery models for FET will be key to the effective development of lifelong learning in the future. Flexible provision that is: more accessible (e.g. in the workplace, in community facilities); at times to suit participants (e.g. evenings, weekends); via blended learning to reduce the requirement for physical attendance and associated travel; or tailored to suit particular backgrounds and settings (e.g. family initiatives, group working). These approaches will continue to ensure that FET lifelong learning opportunities are available and accessible to all throughout the regions which they serve.

Increasing people's lifelong learning activity, particularly those in the workforce requires substantial upskilling and reskilling of the adult population at all levels. There is a shift in focus from 'for employment' to 'in employment' across all FET provision. Successfully upskilling and reskilling the workforce will require demand driven, flexible and responsive FET policies and frameworks.

## Features include:

- Recognition of prior learning
- Adult learners
- Technology enhanced learning
- Promotion of the benefits of lifelong learning
- Training needs analysis
- Awareness of the FET offering with SMEs
- Skills to Advance

**Please share your thoughts on Lifelong Learning & Workforce Upskilling**

**Please provide suggested actions that you feel are required in this area**

# Meeting Key Skills Gaps

Strategically planned education and training supported by a close matching of provision to the needs of the labour market helps both workers and employers across all sectors and occupations to adjust successfully to changes in technology and markets. The on-going demand for people with diverse levels of qualifications and types of experience includes those with further education and training credentials. Utilising labour market intelligence and aligning FET provision with the needs of the labour market to boost learners' employability represents a significant opportunity to support economic growth. Meeting key skills gaps necessitates the FET sector to respond to the skill needs of the regional areas, to rebalance some existing provision from broad based skills towards specific vocational needs and to ensure that provision is fully accredited.

## Features include:

- Accreditation of learning
- Employer engagement structures
- Skills forecasting and labour market intelligence
- Sectors where employment growth/skills needs have been identified
- The development of 'soft' skills to accompany technical attributes
- Regional Skills Fora

**Please share your thoughts on Meeting Key Skills Gaps**

**Please provide suggested actions that you feel are required in this area**

# New Models of Delivery

New models of apprenticeship and traineeships continue to be rolled out with targets for 31,000 and 13,900 registrations on these programmes between 2016 and 2020. The delivery of new apprenticeships and traineeships is supported by coordination and collaboration with industry and other providers. Further new models of delivery include pre-apprenticeship which prepares future apprentices by equipping them with skills and work experience providing a foundation to build an apprenticeship on. In addition, technology based education tools and programmes are becoming embedded in the FET sector as flexible learning opportunities are offered via online, blended, modular, semester and evening delivery.

## Features include:

- Apprenticeship and traineeship provision
- Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL)
- Quality Assurance Structures

**Please share your thoughts on New Models of Delivery**

**Please provide suggested actions that you feel are required in this area**

## Overall Comments

Reflecting on the next Further Education and Training Strategy, please share any additional comments or suggestions that you would like us to consider.