

Transforming Learning Strategic Performance Agreements


**The Further Education
& Training System 2022-2024**



Rialtas na hÉireann
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The resilience and commitment demonstrated by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) since the onset of the global pandemic has been nothing short of remarkable. There is no doubt the learner is at the heart of all Further Education and Training (FET) provision, with the core priority to keep learning flowing during that time.

When COVID and its restrictions emerged in 2020, FET was in the midst of an exciting reform agenda and was growing its learner numbers and key outcomes. Fuelled by the first set of strategic performance agreements between SOLAS and the ETBs in 2018, setting out plans, commitments and contributions to national FET system targets over the three-year period 2018-2020, performance until the end of 2019 had been very encouraging. The pandemic took us into unprecedented challenge and change, with restrictions lasting for most of the next two years. By the end of 2020, this had an inevitable impact on the number of learners able to engage with FET, and with the constraints of the pandemic continuing throughout 2021, a decision was

made to pause the development of the next Strategic Performance Agreements until the future operating environment became clearer.

Now in 2022, as we move back into a more normal operating environment, and with a new National FET Strategy: '*Transforming Learning*', in place from 2020, it is timely to establish the new Strategic Performance Agreements for the period 2022 -2024. These new agreements set out the future plans for development and innovation across the FET system and include the planned contribution from each ETB to the national system targets agreed with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

The system targets include reference to areas and themes deemed critically important in the inaugural agreements 2018-2020 such as employment outcomes, progression to higher education and lifelong learning, while also incorporating key national priorities such as in green skills and workforce reskilling. As the agreements are implemented, they will allow the FET system to 'reboot' to activity and outcome levels which existed prior to the pandemic and then grow further. Most critically however, they provide for the reform and realisation of the ambition of the Future FET strategy, '*Transforming Learning*', across the 16 ETB regions. This system report summarises the progress and achievements made since the first agreements were put in place, the key themes emerging from these agreements that will shape system development, and the national FET targets that will be delivered over the period 2022-24. This means that by the end of 2024, the FET system will:

- Grow its employment outcomes by over 10% on pre-pandemic levels, and have a single Skills to Compete offering for the unemployed, reskilling circa 20,000 per annum
- Refocus on pathways within FET, growing beyond pre-COVID progression levels between NFQ Levels 1-6, and expanding FET-HE pathways by up to 25% in support of a unified tertiary system

- Ramp-up certification of transversal skills and widen participation of key target groups by at least 10% on pre-pandemic levels, while adding 10,000 places in support of the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy
- Grow lifelong learning participation well beyond pre-COVID levels, while doubling the scale of the Skills to Advance workforce upskilling initiative
- Further expand provision focused on critical skills needs by 15%, ramp up Near Zero Energy Buildings/retrofit provision to more than 7,000 places per annum and embed green skills modules across all FET provision.

This shared ambition has been the product of intensive work with the ETBs, and I would like to thank them for their incredible commitment to the process and passion for the further development of FET. We look forward to continuing to work with them closely throughout this exciting journey.



Andrew Brownlee
Chief Executive Officer, SOLAS

The Further Education and Training System

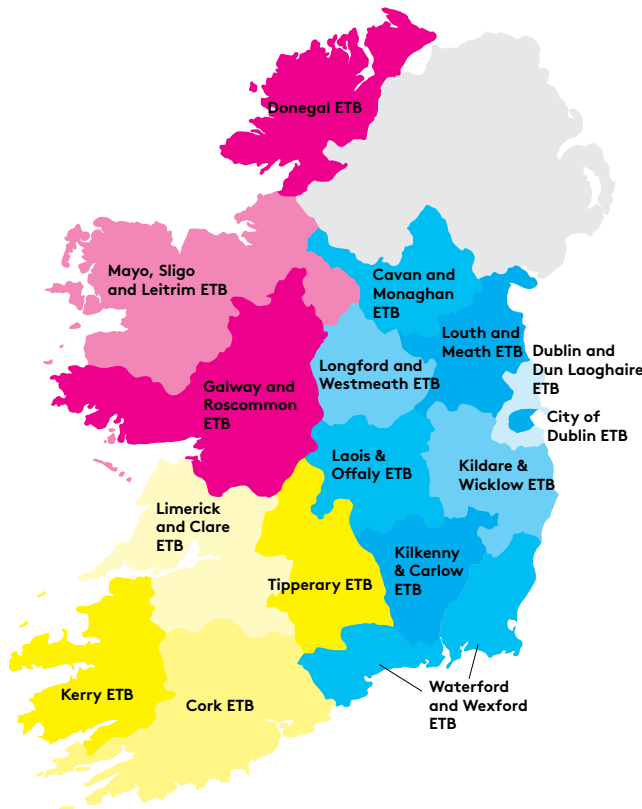
Around 200,000 unique learners take part in further education and training each year. The FET system provides a continuum of learning opportunities from Level 1 to Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications. Around €1 billion of funding is invested by

SOLAS annually in FET, the majority of which is channelled through the 16 Education and Training Boards which coordinate FET at regional level as shown in the map below.

The FET system can evidence substantial outcomes for learners, in certification and completion rates but also in terms of learner outcomes, such as progression to employment, attainment of transversal skills and support of overall individual lifelong learning journeys.

Investment in the national data infrastructure as well as dedicated research and impact studies over the course of the last number of years has paid dividends in terms of the clear impact made by FET at an economic level, in critical skills needs sectors such as health and construction, but also at a social level and in driving higher levels of self-efficacy of learners who choose FET.

A study into early leavers from FET evidenced that many return within a year and even go on to achieve certification in skills areas not initially studied. The hugely successful pathways following completion of Post Leaving Certificate provision is well established, with 64% of graduates securing substantial employment, 27% progressing to a higher-level degree programme in higher education in the same field of learning, and



within that, 16% of graduates progressing to both higher education and substantial employment within 12 months of completion.

The new strategic performance agreements were developed over the first half of 2022, with encouraging signs already emerging that learner numbers and key outcomes were 'bouncing' back up after COVID related declines since 2020. The incredible changes that resulted in the way we live, work, learn, do business and interact with each other as a result of the pandemic will have a lasting legacy. In terms of learner profile, many chose to learn through the multitude of online and blended learning options that became available across the FET system during this time and will want to continue to avail of such flexible options for at least some of their learning. Whereas some learners particularly from priority cohort groups or who chose to learn within their communities found it very challenging to remain engaged, and supporting their re-engagement now is a critical priority. It is also important to acknowledge that the response to COVID actually accelerated some aspects of the **Transforming Learning** agenda, such as in digital transformation.

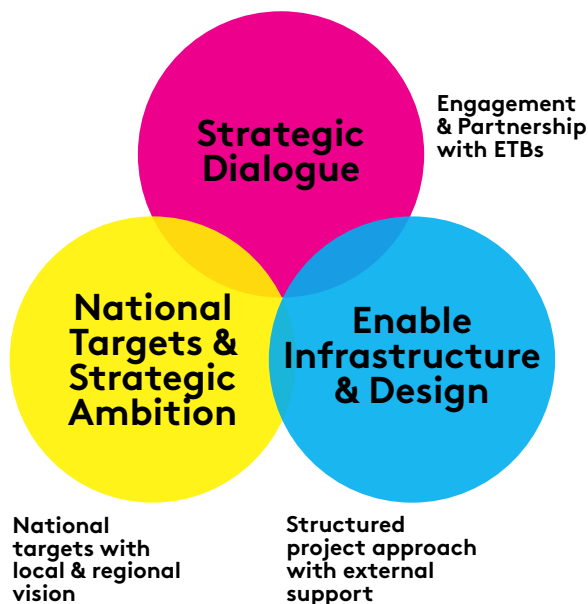


Developing the new Agreements

The process to establish the new Strategic Performance Agreements commenced in Q3 2021, with an aim to agree plans and commitments through to 2024, in line with the timeline for the ultimate delivery of the **Future FET: Transforming Learning** strategy.

SOLAS sought the views of key stakeholders prior to developing the approach to support the new agreements. Internally, consultation was undertaken with the Senior Leadership Team in SOLAS, the Strategic Planning Committee (a sub-committee of the SOLAS Board) and the Board itself. There was also intensive consultation with ETBs to ensure that the agreements were co-designed and co-developed in a spirit of mutual respect and partnership. A draft framework was then developed by SOLAS in consultation with the ETBs, and with agreement by DFHERIS. This framework was underpinned by a set of principles as set out opposite.





The framework developed included the proposed new national system target areas, a review of the inaugural Strategic Performance Agreements 2018-2020, themes for innovation and expansion and a suggested enabling infrastructure for ongoing review. It included three distinct components of strategic dialogue, national targets and strategic ambition and enabling infrastructure and design.

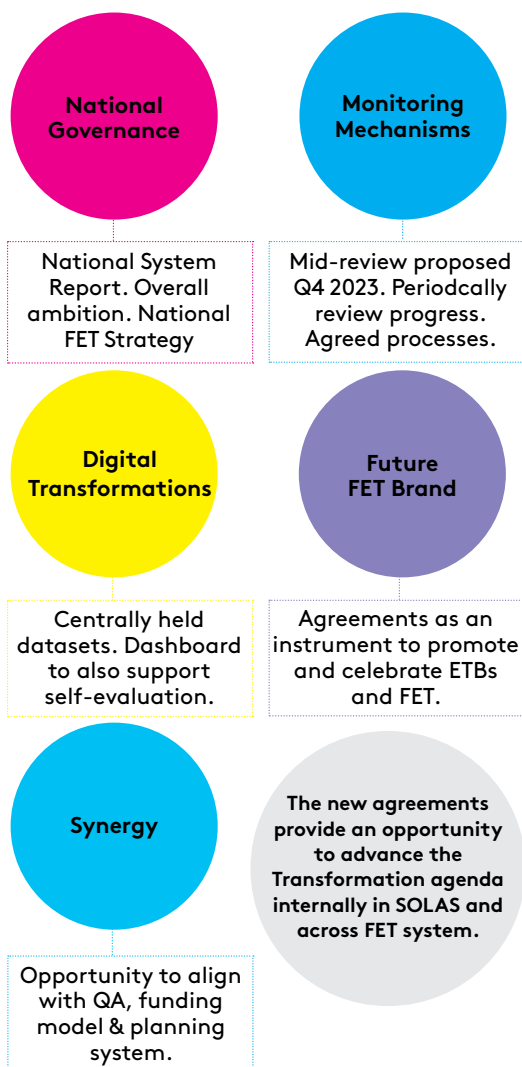
The national system targets proposed included 5 themes; supporting jobs; learning pathways; facilitating inclusion; upskilling through life and careers; and targeting key skills needs. Each theme referenced either up to a potential 10% growth from the baseline established in 2019, or a specific target number, as set out above.

1	Supporting Jobs	Employment Outcomes Increase by 10% from 2019 baseline. 50,000 places in Skills to Complete.
2	Learning Pathways	Progression within FET Progression from FET to HE increase by 10% from 2019 baseline
3	Facilitating Inclusion	Transversal Skills Widening Participation Increase by 10% from 2019 baseline Adult Literacy for Life Targets
4	Upskilling Through Life & Careers	Lifelong Learning Increase by 10% from 2019 baseline Skills to Advance Targets
5	Targeting Key Skills	Key Skills Needs Retrofitting & FET Green Skills Construction Apprenticeship

The mechanisms to review as well as support ETBs throughout the delivery of the new agreements include innovative elements, such as a new interactive 'live' system data dashboard, ongoing dialogue and synergy with other national initiatives and strategic priorities. This includes the inaugural ETB independent quality assurance reviews with QQI, the national commitments to Adult Literacy for Life, climate change and Housing for All and the National Apprenticeship Action Plan 2021–2025 and alignment with the proposed ESF+ initiative. The enabling infrastructure to support delivery of the agreements from 2022-24 is set out opposite.

Governance, monitoring, data sets, proposed infrastructure to enable success as well as provide a clear process for revision, review and possible performance oversight an action.

Enable Infrastructure & Design



The Strategic Dialogue meetings between SOLAS and the ETBs were a critical component in the development phase. An online event to launch the commencement of Strategic Dialogue Meetings between SOLAS & the Education and Training Boards was held in early March 2022, with the dialogue meetings taking place in person and onsite with each ETB throughout March, April and May. The meetings included a focus on the strategic pillars of the national FET Strategy - Building Skills; Fostering Inclusion; and Creating Pathways as well as the Enabling Themes identified. There was also dedicated time set aside as part of each dialogue for some reflection on achievements and learning from both the inaugural Strategic Performance Agreements 2018-2020 and in the face of responding to the pandemic.

The meetings were attended by the SOLAS and ETB Chief Executives as well as representatives from their respective senior leadership teams and a cross section of key people with responsibility for delivering on targets in the agreements. Two independent expert panel members also participated in each dialogue, appointed by SOLAS to avail of their national and international experience and knowledge and to provide an impartial aspect to the process.

Information circulated to ETBs in advance of the dialogue included an agenda (focused on the FET Strategy priorities and Enabling Themes), the 1st Strategic Performance Agreement, a performance overview report,

a Skills and Labour Market Research Unit regional report, the national FET Strategy and an indicative overview of the proposed National System Targets.

Following strategic dialogue, a summary follow up template was developed by SOLAS and shared with the ETB and discussion commenced to agree all components of the new agreements, including the individual ETB contribution to each of the national system targets.

Each Strategic Performance Agreement is unique to the ETB and provides a basis to set out at a local level its key strengths and commitments, as well as its contribution nationally. Although a similar format is applied across all 16 agreements, the diversity, excellence and ambition in different areas of FET is clear to see. Each agreement sets out:

- **The ETB in Profile.** An overview of the characteristics of the ETB and the region it serves.
- **Performance and Targets.** A focus on the achievements of the ETB across 2018-2021, and the target contribution to FET system targets it proposes to make over the period 2022-2024.
- **FET Strategy - Building Skills.** The ETB's strategic plans and commitments in delivering against the overall FET Strategy objective, Building Skills.

- **FET Strategy – Fostering Inclusion.** The ETB's strategic plans and commitments in delivering against the overall FET Strategy objective, Fostering Inclusion.

- **FET Strategy – Creating Pathways.** The ETB's strategic plans and commitments in delivering against the overall FET Strategy objective, Creating Pathways.

- **FET Strategy – Enabling Themes.** The ETB's strategic plans and commitments in terms of staffing, capabilities and structures; capital development; digital transformation; and embedding a learner and performance centred approach.

Each agreement includes the **learner voice** at relevant places, reflecting on the value of FET or aspects of provision. **FET leader case studies** are also identified to highlight good practice by the ETB from which sectoral learning can be drawn.

The agreement concludes by setting out, at a high level, the ETB's ambition 'at a glance', with its top 10 critical priorities identified.

Achievements and Context: 2018-2021

It was noted in the introduction of this report that the pandemic had an extremely disruptive effect on further education and training. This was all the more frustrating as the first strategic performance agreements were already demonstrating their transformative impact when the pandemic arrived in 2020. The agreements built a more strategic approach across FET and a dynamic, constructive working partnership between SOLAS and the ETBs as the primary providers of education and training. The targets themselves provided a real focus on delivery and FET outcomes grew over the first two years of the agreements, with the prospect that all six core FET system targets would be far exceeded by the end of the agreements.

However, with the arrival of COVID restrictions in March 2020, ETBs were forced to close their facilities and move as much provision as possible online. With restrictions sustained throughout most of 2020, this had an inevitable impact on ETB learner numbers, which fell by 16.6% between 2018 and 2021, although it should be noted that the opening of national e-college online FET courses during the pandemic generated over 30,000 learners per annum which partly offset this. Nevertheless, the drop in ETB learners had an

inevitable knock-on impact on key outcomes like progression through FET, lifelong learning participation and certification of transversal skills, while employment outcomes suffered in the midst of ongoing economic restrictions.

While there was a decrease in learner numbers, the reduction in learners could have been far greater given the extreme circumstances and credit must be given to the swift responses and solutions put in place by ETBs to keep learning flowing to ensure learner numbers could be maintained to the extent that they were. ETBs sometimes served as 'lifelines' to their communities, maintaining contact and support with the most vulnerable learners, and arranging access to digital devices to facilitate access to online learning.

In addition, a really significant achievement by the ETBs over this period was their continued commitment to delivery of critical skills needs, with provision continuing to grow in 2020 despite the contraction of overall learner numbers. Indeed, there was a clear and agile response by many ETBs in expanding healthcare skills offerings to support public health efforts. Another area which bucked the trend was in FET-HE progression, with strong levels maintained in 2020.

With regard to wider provision, online courses were quickly developed, with the

support of QQI to ensure key sectors, such as hospitality, logistics and IT could continue to be supported. The Skills to Advance workforce upskilling initiative was of critical importance at this time and in many cases was fully utilised to support industry and people in employment to ensure they had the skills they needed in order to continue to operate and maintain services. The emergence and growth of Skills to Advance since 2018 has been a real success story for FET and its further expansion will be a critical aim within the next agreements.

Of course, such were the changes to the way we work, learn, do business and even interact with each other, there was major concern, accompanied by grave economic forecasts, about the structural change that would occur in the labour market as a result of the pandemic, with certain skills and occupations predicted to become almost obsolete. This prompted Government to ask FET to respond with a re-skilling initiative which would provide those who lost their jobs as a result of COVID with the skills to allow them a pathway back into sustainable work. Built on the foundations of the programmes and provisions already in place, the resultant Skills to Compete initiative offered a package of employability skills to help find a job, the digital skills required for almost every occupation, and the sector-specific skills that would allow particular growth industries to be targeted for work. Together with an acknowledgement that green skills would be critical to future sustainable development and realisation of climate action and housing

targets, both Skills to Compete and a FET Green Skills Action Plan became an integral part of the National Recovery and Resilience Programme for Ireland which was agreed between the Government and the European Commission during the pandemic.

Thankfully, as yet there has been no major economic downturn or mass unemployment in Ireland following the end of COVID restrictions. Although there remains a highly volatile global political and economic environment, Ireland remains close to full employment, and the anticipated additional demand for the Skills to Compete initiative has not yet materialised. However perhaps its real legacy, and one on which the new agreements are seeking to build, is the fact that it broke down programme silos and created a single tailored upskilling offer to the unemployed. Helping over 26,000 people out of work since its launch, it will now continue to operate as the single FET upskilling initiative for the unemployed.

The other striking achievement since 2018 has been the commitment of ETBs to driving new skills and future skills. ETBs have taken on the mantle of new national apprenticeships, in areas as diverse as Commis Chef, Craft Butcher, Hairdressing, Scaffolding, Arboriculture, Sales Professional and Wind Turbine Maintenance. They continue to drive expansion of craft apprenticeships and are embracing the challenge of responding to major waiting lists which resulted due to COVID. ETBs have also been leading on key skills areas such as Smart Driving, Near Zero

Energy Building/Retrofit, Remote Working and Leadership and Manufacturing. Two new programmes developed by DDLETB on behalf of all 16 ETBs reflect best practice for the Irish Early Learning and Care Sector – L6 Advanced certificate in Early Learning and Care and L5 certificate in Early Learning and Care. FET is now increasingly becoming the ‘go to’ place to find agile responses to emerging skills needs. What is also encouraging is the increasingly collaborative approach to curriculum development across ETBs in order to achieve this, including a major initiative around early learning and care.

The other major change since 2018, has been the maturing of the data and research infrastructure which can track FET learners, provision and its impact in a much more

timely and effective manner. The previous strategic performance agreements tracked indicators based on rigid programme definitions, rather than overall employment, progression or certification levels, or by looking at participation by key target cohorts. While the types of performance these indicators were trying to measure were valid, new definitions have been developed for the 2022-24 agreements which allow a more holistic analysis of key FET outcomes. We have also been able to backdate this analysis to 2018 to allow real trend data to highlight some of the developments noted above, but also provide an informed and accurate basis from which new targets for the next three years could be agreed and set. The trend analysis is set out in the table below.

Target	2018	2019	2020	2021	Sector Change
Supporting Jobs					
Jobs: Return employment outcomes to 2019 levels and grow by a further 10% by 2024	25,874	26,776	19,642	Not yet available	-24.09%
Skills to Compete: Deliver 50,000 places to support those who lost their job to find a pathway back to sustainable work	0	0	7,968	18,170	-
Creating Pathways					
Progression within FET: Return progression movements within FET to 2019 levels and grow by a further 10% by 2024	31,123	33,675	27,531	27,163	-12.45%
Progression from FET-HE: Grow levels of progression by a further 10% by 2024	5,412	5,364	5,553	Not yet available	2.61%

Target	2018	2019	2020	2021	Sector Change
Fostering Inclusion					
Transversal Skills: Return certification at NFQ levels 1-3 to 2019 levels and grow by a further 10% by 2024	26,869	29,328	24,406	19,549	-27.24%
Widening Participation: Return participation levels by key target groups to 2019 levels and resume growth	11,930	17,271	14,803	13,803	15.70%
Adult Literacy for Life (ALL): Increase provision for literacy and numeracy	52,609	59,325	44,279	40,740	-22.56%

Upskilling Through Lifetime & Careers					
Lifelong Learning: Return engagement in lifelong learning to 2019 levels and grow by a further 10% by 2024	103,603	105,783	88,656	83,981	-18.70%
Skills to Advance: Continue to grow workforce upskilling enrolments	479	5,605	8,758	10,558	-

Targeting Key Skills Needs					
Key Skills Needs: Grow the number of places addressing key skills needs	27,880	30,290	30,330	30,447	8.20%

The 2021 data for the 'Jobs' target and the 'Progression from FET-HE' target is not available yet. The data for these two targets comes directly from the Central Statistics Office on an annual basis – and is normally received approximately halfway through the following year.

COVID and the measures imposed to curtail its spread, particularly the closing of FET facilities, was a major barrier to access and the continuation of learning during 2020 and 2021. The restrictions are behind the drop in ETB learners over the two year period; having an inevitable knock-on impact on employment, progression through FET, lifelong learning participation and certification of transversal skills.

What the FET System will Deliver by 2024

While there are positive indicators of significant achievement over the period 2018-2021, there is no doubt that the COVID impact was stark and caused many core FET outcomes to contract over the last couple of years. Recognising this during the development of the new agreements with ETBs, the central and immediate aim was to return ETBs to the pre-COVID outcomes experienced in 2019 as quickly as possible. With this 'reboot' achieved over the initial period of the new strategic performance agreement, each ETB could then target further growth over the remainder of the agreement.

What was just as stark in the development of the agreements was the contrast in terms of the resilience of different ETBs in maintaining outcomes during the pandemic and their ability to start bouncing back in 2021. While it is acknowledged that there are many regional factors and ETB characteristics affecting individual trends, there is no doubt about the power of this trend data in identifying areas of improvement for each ETB. Clear actions were shaped in response to analysis which showed a particular ETB below the sectoral trend with regards to particular indicators. ETBs were very keen to understand the data

and its implications, and very quick to agree responses in areas where performance appeared to be relatively poor.

Thanks to this approach, the ETBs in aggregate have been able to commit to ambitious targets to help the FET system grow and prosper through to the end of 2024. The table over the page sets out the detailed metrics based on ETB proposed contributions to each FET system target for each of the years 2022, 2023 and 2024. This section includes the ETB agreed contribution to all national FET system targets for the period of 2022–2024 in tabular form. In summary, this means that by 2024 the FET system will aim to deliver:

- An increase in **sustainable employment outcomes** of over 12% from pre-pandemic levels, with over 30,000 FET graduates in 2024 securing sustainable work.
- A **single Skills to Compete re-skilling offering** which will support circa 20,000 people experiencing unemployment to find a pathway back to sustainable employment
- A refocusing on **learning pathways within FET** to address the decline since COVID and grow the number progressing onto other FET courses to over 35,000 by 2024

- Supporting a unified tertiary system by growing **FET-HE progression levels** by almost 25% from the most recent data available (2020)
- Addressing the major decline in **certification levels for transversal skills** during COVID and increase these outcomes by over 10% from pre-pandemic levels
- Widen **participation in FET by key target groups** by over 10% on pre-pandemic levels by 2024
- Increase provision relevant to the **Adult Literacy for Life (ALL)** strategy by 10,000 places by 2024
- Grow **FET lifelong learning** levels by over 7% on pre-pandemic levels
- More than double **Skills to Advance workforce upskilling** provision by 2024 (from its 2021 level)
- Continue to **focus on critical skills needs** by further expanding relevant provision by 15%
- Ramp up **NZEB/retrofitting skills development** via FET centres of excellence to over 7,000 places a year by 2024
- Embed **green skills across all FET provision** by rolling out a Level 4 blended and an online module to over 50,000 FET learners.

Target	2022	2023	2024
Supporting Jobs			
Jobs: Return employment outcomes to 2019 levels and grow by a further 10% by 2024	27,410	28,830	30,172
Skills to Compete: Deliver 50,000 places to support those who lost their job to find a pathway back to sustainable work	20,065	21,637	22,956
Creating Pathways			
Progression within FET: Return progression movements within FET to 2019 levels and grow by a further 10% by 2024	30,219	33,419	35,958
Progression from FET-HE: Grow levels of progression by 10% by 2024	5,859	6,238	6,672

Target	2022	2023	2024
Fostering Inclusion			
Transversal Skills: Return certification at NFAQ levels 1-3 to 2019 levels and grow by a further 10% by 2024	25,378	29,639	32,398
Widening Participation: Return participation levels by key target groups to 2019 levels and resume growth	16,788	18,266	19,474
Adult Literacy for Life (ALL): Increase provision for literacy and numeracy	59,316	64,987	70,095

Upskilling Through Lifetimes & Careers			
Lifelong Learning: Return engagement in lifelong learning to 2019 levels and grow by a further 10% by 2024	97,325	106,176	113,605
Skills to Advance: Continue to grow workforce upskilling enrolments	14,854	18,501	22,290

Targeting Key Skills Needs			
Key Skills Needs: Grow the number of places addressing key skills needs	29,667	32,502	35,008
Retrofitting Skills: Expansion of reskilling provision to meet retrofitting needs	3,006	5,270	7,150
Green Skills for All: Embedding of core green skills module across FET courses	18,428	41,000	64,000

How the FET System will Build Skills

Within the national commitments by the ETBs for the FET Strategy 2020 – 2024, the strategic pillar ‘Building Skills’ contains the ambition to develop a **new skills proposition** for Level 5 and 6 within the wider agenda for integration and consolidation of provision.

Across the agreements, there are multiple references to effective and innovative practices of **FET integration**. This includes the establishment of Kerry College of FET in 2019, the 1st ETB nationally to initiate integrating FET provision into a single college across multiple campuses.

Employment | Progression | Apprenticeship



Significant achievements are also evident in Limerick Clare ETB within the design and effective establishment of the Ennis College and the successful approach being delivered in terms of dual provision. Monaghan Institute, located within the overall campus by Cavan Monaghan ETB, which also hosts

a primary school, and a theatre is a strong testament to the Future FET agenda.

This initiative has achieved key successes including:

- Evolving programme titles to courses for employment and progression
- A dedicated course promotion /recruitment function
- Staff communities of best practice being established across campuses
- A centralised approach to employer engagement and work experience placements

However, it is evident that considerable efforts are required to fully advance this agenda to integrate further education and training, ‘FE’ and ‘T’. It is acknowledged by SOLAS that barriers do exist particularly within staffing and funding frameworks, as well as overall infrastructure and that support must be provided in order to progress these issues nationally. It is encouraging however to see the commitments set out across the ETBs to deliver on this strategic ambition.

Engagement with industry and the successful establishment in many ETBs of effective **employer engagement** teams and services has been fundamental to the national success of the Skills to Advance initiative, which a number of ETBs have grown substantially over this period, including in Tipperary ETB and Cork ETB. With the support of SOLAS and the continued commitment by Government to **upskill people in employment**, ambitious targets have now been agreed with all ETBs to expand this area. There is significant potential to drive this initiative, particularly given the current existing high employment. ETBs have committed to targets in line with their local environments.

The recent developments in micro credentials and micro qualifications which are now ready for roll-out in future skills areas such as Robotics in Louth Meath ETB and Aquafarming in Galway Roscommon ETB and across all ETBs in the new sustainability modules marks a transformative milestone for the FET system.

The **Green Skills** agenda and the critical importance of meeting the skills needs to support the Housing for All Strategy is a key component of the national system targets. Specific areas relate to the 6 ETBs who will have a dedicated Retrofit and Near Zero Energy Building (NZEB) Centre of Excellence over the course of these agreements. A leader in this area, Waterford Wexford ETB must be acknowledged for the dedication and the

drive to pilot and successfully implement the national provision in the areas of NZEB and Retrofit. The targets and related commitments to deliver on this area are clearly set out in the agreements. A notable and transformative development includes the agility and speed of Laois Offaly ETB in the delivery of these specific skills as well as the establishment of the National Construction Training Centre in Mount Lucas.

The development of the National Construction Training Centre at Mount Lucas in Laois Offaly ETB offers a range of construction training schemes (including CSCS and QSCS), hosts a new apprenticeship in scaffolding, a new traineeship in utilities and a range of construction vehicle courses. Designated the 2nd Centre of Excellence for NZEB/retrofitting with demonstration facilities built onsite, over 1,000 people are expected to be upskilled in these critical green skills in 2022.



The strategic importance of **apprenticeship** is also referenced within this section of each Strategic Performance Agreement. Although not a specific national system target in the context of the agreement, commitments and ambition are set out by each ETB in terms of both expanding their provision as well as their ongoing operations.

The Building Skills strategic priorities also propel system targets and local and national activities of the ETBs to support **people who are unemployed** (Skills to Compete), as well as consider localised **skills specialisms** which are unique to the ETB.

How the FET System will Foster Inclusion

The impact of the Pandemic on **community education** and the reach to learners from priority cohorts was significant. Many learners found it challenging to continue to engage with FET solely through online contact and many community groups struggled to continue to operate during the most difficult periods of the Pandemic. As a result, many learners at a national level were 'lost' during this time and particularly those **priority learners**; learners who self-declare a disability, learners from the Traveller and the Roma Communities, as well as migrants and asylum seekers.

It should be noted however this trend has reversed and to date in 2022, it is evident many learners are now reengaging with FET and with the ETBs, given the full reopening of the FET system from late 2021.

All ETBs over the course of this period significantly committed to maintaining a reach to their communities and in fact in some areas, efforts were so successful that despite some fall in numbers, which was understandable, ETBs were able to continue, as well as strengthen their connections with local communities. This was achieved through innovative and creative means, including

offering online provision to care homes looking after the elderly, something that had not been previously possible, and through bespoke custom courses, in partnership with key stakeholders to support individuals with disabilities, or from the Roma and Traveller Communities.

Innovative and good practice examples of how ETBs remained connected to learners from priority cohorts over the course of the Pandemic and current good practice examples include the Dublin and Dun Laoghaire ETB "Healthcare at Home" course, being provided to women from the Traveller Community to support individual pathways, the approach by Mayo, Sligo, Leitrim ETB to establish a one stop shop contact facility and the high impact partnership project led by Kilkenny Carlow ETB to support people with an acquired brain injury, the Kilkenny Brain Works Initiative.

All ETBs acknowledged the critical role played by the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage fund during this period in maintaining the reach to their communities. This fund has now been mainstreamed and rebadged the 'Reach' fund to continue to support this priority provision over the course of the new agreements.

A national priority which is reflected across the agreements is the need to commit to returning to achievement of certification for Levels 1-3 which saw a sharp decrease since the onset of the Pandemic. The related Transversal national system target captures this ambition.

The new agreements also set out the national and individual ETB contribution to delivering on the 10-year **Adult Literary for Life Strategy**. This is through both the national system target to engage over 70,000 learners by 2024 in lifelong learning but also through commitments across the ETBs to achieve key objectives such as a common assessment approach for literacy in line with national guidance and expansion of provision to build digital capabilities.

Within this section each ETB also includes their plans to achieve a consistent learner support framework in line with the ambition of the Future FET: Transforming Learning Strategy.



How the FET System will Create Pathways

The establishment of the national **FET and Apprenticeship options via the CAO campaign** in November 2021 has achieved significant impact, with over 20,000 visits to date made directly from the CAO platform to the national FET website – www.fetchcourses.ie, and over 35,000 to the national apprenticeship platform – www.apprenticeship.ie

All ETBs are committed to continuing to strengthen and further support this campaign, with new offers at Level 5 as well as Level 6 to be made available as part of this campaign in 2022.

The importance of highlighting **School to FET** pathways and building on the successful engagement evident in the FET system with Transition Year students is a key priority across all the agreements. Nationally, there has been a decrease in the numbers of Post Leaving Certificate places being taken up across the system, which is a concern. The commitments set out in the agreements will aim to address this. Many ETBs are planning innovative and creative Transition Year engagement modules, including in areas such as Robotics, AI, Green Skills and Digital to encourage interest and participation from

students. A hugely encouraging consistent trend reported across the system is the very active and pro-active attitudes of local schools seeking out engagement with ETBs on FET as well as potential apprenticeship pathways.

There is also a clear opportunity realised across the ETBs of greater involvement in FET pathways across ETB schools. In addition, the **senior cycle review reform** provides a platform for ETBs, with huge strengths in this area to pilot provision of senior cycle modules, this could be a real game changer for the School to FET pathways agenda.

The Government commitment to progressing a more unified tertiary system for learning, skills and knowledge creates an exciting opportunity for FET and particularly within the FET to Higher Education (HE) pathways perspective. There are existing strong **FET to HE pathways** in place for many ETBs, some involving well established progression arrangements in key skills areas such as health, business and social care, which link to both Irish HE institutions as well as UK and Northern Ireland HE providers. Strong examples of this are evident in Donegal ETB and City of Dublin ETB. CMETB has also established co-delivery models for degree programmes with Technological Universities (TU's). There is significant potential to develop this further and build stronger

relationships to foster additional pathways. The establishment of the Technological Universities across Ireland is vital in pursuing the ambition with regard to progression to and from Higher Education.

The recent developments in DCU have led to the opening up of 64 courses for wider FET entry. TUD and other Technological Universities are looking to expand access, and this is a testament to the recognition by Higher Education of FET. This ambition is referenced in the national system target of progression from FET to HE, which aims to achieve at a national level 6,672 learner progressions in 2024.

Progression within FET is also a national priority, acknowledged within the ambitious national system target set to enable almost 36,000 learner progressions in 2024. This is a significant portion of learners and is reflective of the strength of all ETBs in supporting learners on their FET journey as well as an indication of how FET is fundamental to support lifelong learning. It has long been evidenced that many learners choosing one course in FET, then go on to choose another and maybe another, with a substantial cohort of learners progressing from one Level of education to another.

An important addition to the Strategic Performance Agreements 2022-2024 is the inclusion of each ETBs learner voice. There is nothing as powerful as the real-life stories

and journeys evidenced by learners who choose FET.

This section of each of the agreements also references progression in terms of employment, the importance of Recognition of Prior Learning and other valuable and vital aspects of learner progression, such as the Erasmus experience for learners, highlighted by Longford Westmeath ETB, and the commitment by the ETBs to deliver on the overall lifelong learning agenda.

The national system targets for 2022-2024 take account of the relevant aspects of EU definitions and parameters as well as the ambition in the national FET strategy to consolidate and integrate FET provision, reducing programmes and working towards more outcome-based provision across Levels 1-6. This has enabled the definitions of the system targets to ensure either all provision in FET is now captured, or there is a distinct way to measure FET national outcomes. This is of substantial value in terms of aligning with national and EU priorities, such as the EU definition for lifelong learning, in reporting at national level, the employment progression rates, validated by the Central Statistics Office for FET Levels 5 and 6 and ensuring all FET provision is included in key areas such as progression within FET.

Enabling Themes to Transform Learning

Future staffing and related frameworks that tackle the evident and existing barriers to progressing the Future FET Transforming Learning agenda are a national priority and as such the commitment from SOLAS to progress this, in collaboration with the DFHERIS is acknowledged in all 16 Strategic Performance Agreements.

The exciting and impactful ambition across the FET system to establish **FET Colleges of the Future** is set out in this section of the agreement, under capital infrastructure. So much has already been achieved in 2022 in progressing this important strategic priority. In partnership with DFHERIS, SOLAS has developed frameworks to enable capital investments, as well as invested further in resourcing and expertise to support at a national level, initiatives and applications which will potentially realise the FET College of the Future landscape over the course of these agreements.

The acceleration of the **digital transformation** agenda by the FET system as a result of the Pandemic has significantly altered the FET system landscape, providing a basis to explore consistent and sustainable mechanisms and processes. The

overnight shift of FET to a completely online environment tested the capabilities and the capacity of all that FET has to offer. It is clear that many aspects of what was achieved, through innovative and creative resilience will be retained, such as online and blended aspects of delivery in provision such as apprenticeship. The commitment and energy of all FET practitioners and how they reskilled and maintained their connection to each other and their communities in continuing to provide FET services through the Pandemic online has evidenced the huge strength of everyone in FET.

In June 2020, Kildare Wicklow ETB introduced the 'PD Virtual Hub' online learning platform for all FET staff in MS Teams. The hub aspired to connect staff and build professional networks to foster a culture of collaborative working and sharing of knowledge and experience. With more than 370 members the PD Hub is updated weekly with PL&D opportunities together with resources and on-demand video content. Developed from an initial response to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) the Hub provides an integrated space for information and support for staff in the areas of PL&D, TEL, UDL, ALISS and Induction together with closed channels for collaborative FET Projects and CoPs.



Each ETB will continue to further strengthen their activities and commitments in relation to the ‘Learner Voice’. This will include working alongside Aontas with their FET Learner Forum and also developing their own practices and processes, in line also with their actions related to the independent quality assurance reviews completed by QQI. The quality assurance reviews conducted across 2021 and 2022 required significant and dedicated effort by all ETBs. These independent reviews, conducted by a panel appointed by QQI were the 1st ever reviews completed by QQI for the ETBs. Many of the ETBs have now developed a subsequent action plan arising from the reviews, while the others are all in the process of completing this. Some aspects from the reviews are of significant importance in terms of the strategic performance agreements. One of these relates to curriculum development. SOLAS is committed to supporting the ETBs to further progress this and in working with the ETBs more widely on the quality assurance agenda.

Key National Themes

Across all 16 Strategic Performance Agreements there are a number of national priorities recognised in which each ETB has set out their vision and plans to achieve these locally but also their commitments nationally. These include:

- Delivering on the FET College of the Future
- Integration and consolidation of FET provision, enabling the Future FET ambition
- Achieving the new national L5 and L6 proposition
- Enabling Lifelong Learning for all
- Contributing to the Green Skills agenda and rolling out the sustainability eCollege module
- Expanding and strengthening the reach to priority learners
- Growing transversal skills by increasing the certification rates at levels at 1-3
- School to FET pathways and engagement with Transition Year students
- Driving successful outcomes for learners through the commitments of the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy
- Engaging with industry to ensure FET is supporting the skills needed in employment

Commitments by SOLAS

Throughout the Strategic Performance Agreements, references are included which relate to the commitments made by SOLAS to ensure support for the ETBs to deliver on the national system targets and their plans and ambition by 2024. These commitments are summarised here:

- To work with the ETBs, in collaboration with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to ensure the vision for a new Staffing framework can be realised
- Roll out the new funding model for the FET system in order to meet the Future FET ambition and deliver on system outcomes
- Enable the national vision for the FET Colleges of the Future by providing the necessary system capabilities to support capital infrastructure
- Develop and empower the ETBs through bespoke Data Performance Dashboards required for monitoring and reviewing the national system targets for the duration of the agreements
- Further progress the tools and mechanisms in partnership with the FET system to evidence distance travelled and qualitative outcomes of learners at a national level
- Continue to develop and modernise the data, research and funding infrastructure across SOLAS to ensure alignment with the ETB ambition in the agreements
- Work closely with the Central Statistics Office to explore reporting of outcomes of employment and progression to Higher Education to determine what additional reporting may be possible
- Engage with Northern Ireland and UK authorities and agencies to explore how to gather outcome data of FET graduates who progress to other learning or employment opportunities outside Ireland
- Continue to engage with all ETBs and review targets and areas in line with any changing economic or policy led initiatives

Performance and Monitoring Infrastructure

Throughout the period of the Strategic Performance Agreements, there is a commitment by SOLAS to actively review and monitor progress of each agreement. This will be completed with all ETBs and will form part of ongoing and regular dialogue.

As the agreements are co-designed, in collaboration with each ETB, as underpinned by the principles that established the new agreements, this creates a transparent and open framework on which to proceed.

Of pivotal importance is the new transformative mechanism of the bespoke live digital dashboards for all national system targets. All 12 target areas will be updated by SOLAS on an ongoing basis. For 10 of these areas, these will be updated with live data from the national FET system PLSS. For the 2 targets, for which annual CSO reports are required, progression to jobs and progression from FET to HE, these will be updated as reports are received. As noted in the section above, SOLAS is committed to working with the CSO to explore the parameters of these reports over the course of the agreements.

With the introduction of the dashboards, visible to both each ETB and to SOLAS, there will at all times be a clear live record of the status of national system targets. This will provide a basis in which targets can be revised, perhaps upwards or in the event that this is needed, can also support engagement between SOLAS and the ETB on the targets. In certain circumstances, if deemed necessary by SOLAS and in line with national funding conditions, an action plan will be put in place to address any concerns. This action plan will be signed by the CEO of SOLAS and the respective ETB CEO. Support will be provided throughout this process to the ETB by the SOLAS directorate responsible for Strategic Performance Agreements, the Research, Data and Strategic Engagement Team.

Within each agreement there is acknowledgement there are many valid reasons whereby a review of targets may be required, for example given the current high employment levels in Ireland, and the relatively low number of people on the live register, this may over the course of the agreement, reflect the number of people participating in the national Skills to Compete Initiative.

Further to ongoing review and dialogue there will be a mid-review of all the agreements, which is planned for Q4 2023, ahead of the last full year of the agreements. This mid-

review will take account of the current status of the system targets and strategic progress and will include strategic dialogues with all 16 ETBs.

The strategic performance agreements will be considered in the context of the new funding model and existing funding parameters and requirements to ensure there is synergy within the overall funding and performance national infrastructure.

With a dedicated new function established within SOLAS and a newly created senior manager role to lead out the ongoing review and performance of the agreements within the SOLAS Research, Data and Strategic Engagement Directorate, ETBs will have at all times a direct contact to SOLAS in relation to any issues or concerns relating to the Strategic Performance Agreements.

As well as the mid-review process, and given the agreements are underpinned by the implementation of the Future FET, Transforming Learning Strategy 2020-2024 it is planned that a system update will be completed and published at the end of each year pertaining to the agreements. The first report is planned for December 2022.

SOLAS is committed to working in partnership with the ETBs to ensure success of the Strategic Performance Agreements and to ensure the agreements can also be utilised to promote and raise awareness of ETBs. Through local and national promotion, SOLAS will aim to build the brand of FET and the ETB through the relevant aspects of each agreement.



Appendix 1

Definitions National System Targets 2022 – 2024

Supporting Jobs

- **Jobs:** Return employment outcomes to 2019 levels and grow by at least a further 10% by 2024. Specific reports will be provided to the ETB by SOLAS on this target from the CSO via ISCED/Skills Cluster annually and earlier if possible. Learners will be tracked across Levels 5 and 6 and will no longer be specific to only certain types of provision, (or skills cluster) in line with the FET Strategy. Employment is defined as continuous 12 weeks employment within 12 months of exit from FET and may include multiple employers. Will include early leavers as well as completers from 2022. **The initial target number is the 2019 trend baseline as referenced above of 26,776, with then a further 12.7% increase to 30,172 by 2024.**
- **Skills to Compete:** To deliver 50,000 places to support those who lost their job to find a pathway back to sustainable work (building on the commitments set out in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021-2022 and the Pathways to Work

Strategy). Skills to Compete, initially designed as a response to the Pandemic, is now the national FET system initiative to support unemployed people. Learner numbers will be tracked from PLSS in the new learner dashboard and will be defined as the agreed definitions within the Skills to Compete Implementation Guidance (July 2021) until any further guidance overrides this. As per the National Recovery and Resilience Plan the **target number for 2022 includes a minimum requirement to deliver 8,900 enrolments and achieve 16,700 Skills to Compete places by the end of 2022. The target agreed for this is 22,956 by 2024.**

Creating Pathways

- **Progression within FET:** Return progression movements within FET to 2019 levels and grow by up to a further 10% by 2024. Includes learners who progress at the same level or higher across all provision. Learner numbers can be tracked from PLSS in the new learner dashboard. **The initial target number is the 2019 trend baseline of 33,675, with then an initial further 6.7% increase of 35,958 by 2024. This target will be reviewed in late 2022 to aim to increase to the national 10% target of 37,042 by 2024.**

- **Progression from FET-HE:** Grow levels of progression from FET-HE by at least 10% by 2024, 2019 trend baseline of 5,364. Specific reports will be provided to the ETB by SOLAS on this target from the CSO annually. The FET to HE progression measure includes anyone who had a finish date in the same year, e.g., learner in FET in 2022 who enrolled in HE in 2022. **The initial target number is the 2019 trend baseline of 5,364 with then a further 24% increase of 6,672 by 2024.**
- **Adult Literacy for Life (ALL):** Increase provision for literacy and numeracy in line with the 10 year ALL Strategy. Specific targets to be measured against the indicative ALL Strategy targets. **Return to 2019 levels of 60,000 and develop in line with the ALL Strategy ambition. The target for 2024 is 70,095 which is an increase of 16.8% from the baseline established in 2019.**

Upskilling Through Lifetimes & Careers

Fostering Inclusion

- **Transversal Skills:** Return certification at NFQ levels 1-3 to 2019 levels and grow by at least a further 10% by 2024. Learner numbers can be tracked from PLSS in the new learner dashboard. Levels 1-3 completion and partial completion. **The initial target number is the 2019 trend baseline of 29,328 with then a further 10.5% increase of 32,398 by 2024.**
- **Widening Participation:** Return participation levels by key target groups to 2019 and resume growth. Includes, learners who self-declare they have a disability, are from the Roma Community, are from the Traveller Community, are a declared refugee or asylum seeker. Learner numbers can be tracked from PLSS in the new Learner dashboard. **The initial target number is the 2019 trend baseline of 17,271 with then a further 12.8% increase of 19,474 by 2024.**
- **Lifelong Learning:** Return engagement in lifelong learning to 2019 trend levels and grow by up to a further 10% by 2024. Age restrictions only, 25 to 64 (unique learner count). Total enrolments (starters plus those who started on a course before 1st Jan but were still on course during the next year). Learner numbers can be tracked from PLSS in the new learner dashboard. **The initial target number is the 2019 trend baseline of 105,783 with then a further 7.4% increase of 113,605 by 2024. This target will be reviewed in late 2022 to aim to increase to the national 10% target of 116,361 by 2024.**
- **Skills to Advance:** Continue to grow workforce upskilling enrolments based on the growth to date. Specific national targets are indicated for each year 2022-2024. Learner numbers can be tracked from PLSS in the new learner dashboard. **The target number for 2022 is 14,934 with an increase of up to 22,290 by 2024.**

Targeting Key Skills Needs

- **Key Skills Needs:** Grow the number of places addressing key skills needs by at least 10% based on 2019 trend baseline. To include certification completions based on key skills clusters (to be revised for 2023). Learner numbers can be tracked from PLSS in the new learner dashboard. **The initial target number is the 2019 trend baseline of 30,290 with then a further 15.6% increase of 35,008 by 2024.**
- **Retrofitting Skills Provision:** Stimulate industry demand to deliver NZEB/ retrofitting upskilling places. To tie in with commitments in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021-2022 and the Housing for All Strategy. Learner numbers can be tracked from PLSS in the new learner dashboard. **Minimum target of 2,650 registrations in 2022 in line with the National Recovery and Resilience Plan and the SOLAS Green Skills Action Programme. Targets set for 2024 are 7,150.**
- **Green Skills for All:** Embedding of core green skills module across FET courses. To include the new eCollege Green Skills Module to be added to PLSS in 2022 and the micro qualifications in this area. Learner numbers can be tracked from PLSS in the new Learner dashboard. **Target of 60,000 learners in line with the National Recovery and Resilience Plan and the SOLAS Green Skills Action Programme. Target set of 64,000 by 2024.**

Appendix 2

National FET System Outcomes

The Future FET system outcomes below depict the anticipated outcomes as outlined in the current FET Strategy and which are carried through to the Strategic Performance Agreements.



Future FET System Outcomes

In essence, this means that in 2024:

- 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 are using FET to up-skill and employers are 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.

FET System outcomes will be tracked using the PLSS and links to CSO datasets, though it is recognised that some work needs to be done to capture the wider benefits of learning – this was a recurring theme in the Strategic Dialogue meetings between the ETBs and SOLAS.

Outcomes Based Funding Model

There are some key differences between the inaugural Strategic Performance Agreements signed off in 2018 and the new agreements aligned to the FET Strategy 2020 – 2024. The idea of introducing an Outcomes Based Funding Model was initially proposed in the first national Strategy for Further Education and Training in Ireland. For some time, it has been acknowledged that there is a need for a clearer link between ETB funding, learner outcomes and performance.

The outcomes-based funding model has been signed off by the SOLAS Board and will be introduced to ETBs in 2023. The model will allow outcomes to be recognised and good performance to be rewarded. It aims to ensure fairness and transparency in how FET is funded, and more clearly link to the learner outcomes which ETBs generate while also recognising the individual characteristics and challenges faced by ETBs. Agreed definitions for inputs, outputs and outcomes will ensure funding is allocated fairly. Strategic, multi-annual planning will support this new funding approach, agreed and delivered through the Strategic Performance Agreements.

Appendix 3

Setting out what a strategic performance agreement is

When a new reporting requirement is introduced within the public sector, it is generally associated with ensuring accountability for Exchequer funding and usually related to the annual budgeting cycle. As a result, associated dialogue between the grantor and grantee tends to focus on what services are being provided this year, and how this has changed from the last year of reporting, with little scope for more strategic discussions around development or transformation of the service being provided.

For further education and training, it has long been recognised that, while public accountability is critical, real thought and planning must go into how provision needs to evolve to keep pace with the rapidly changing social, economic and technological context. Given the impact of the Pandemic on the last 2 years we are in times where perhaps the true nature of what the Pandemic has meant has not yet been realised. The importance of engaging with the ETBs through strategic dialogue over the course of the development of these agreements was a critical factor for this process and provided a basis and a space for much well needed reflection.

So, this, as well as the learning applied from the inaugural Strategic Performance Agreements between SOLAS and the ETBs over 2018-2020 allowed for the development of the 2nd multiannual strategy, fuelled by a strong evidence base, disruptive thinking, and local context and connectivity, that would ensure that ETBs could respond flexibly to emerging regional needs and deliver clear outcomes in return.

Appendix 4

Independent Expert Panel members	
Yvonne Croskery	Senior strategy, apprenticeship, youth training roles with the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland
Peter Baldwin	Ex Assistant Secretary at Department of Education and Skills with responsibility for FET
Justin Rami	Academic expert in further education and training at DCU
John Graystone	Welsh FET expert, former head of Colleges Wales, now Chair of FET awarding body
Angela Whiteside	Quality improvement expert in Northern Ireland with wider experience working with QQI panels
Tom Boland	Former Chief Executive of the Higher Education Authority
Barry O Connor	Former President of Cork Institute of Technology
Tony Donohoe	Policy Adviser, IBEC, Chair of Expert Group of Future Skills Need, Deputy Chair of Cedefop



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