

CHAPTER 4 FURTHER EDUCATION & TRAINING

Apprentices earn while they learn and build valuable skills in their chosen occupation.



FURTHER EDUCATION & TRAINING Contents

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The Further Education and Training Sector

Highlights from 2017



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The author provides a very comprehensive overview of highlights in the FET sector in 2017, including funding, strategic planning, regional skills fora, apprenticeships, employee development, literacy and numeracy, research, CPD development, programme evaluations, and more.

Introduction

Further education and training (FET) programmes and services continue to be delivered in communities in every county in Ireland. They are a crucial component of the education and training landscape in Ireland and an important enabler of government economic and social priorities.

In 2017 funding of around €800+ million will be invested in FET. This means SOLAS-funded FET provision encompasses over 20,000 courses and over 300,000 beneficiaries across 28 FET programme types, such as Apprenticeship, PLC, Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), and Youthreach. The vast majority of publicly funded FET provision through SOLAS is from the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and covers many disciplines, from engineering to business, from technology to performing arts.

Many courses are aimed at skills development for those looking to re-skill or up-skill, including workers, jobseekers, and job changers. Equally important are FET programmes that primarily support social inclusion or personal development. ETB-run community education programmes are important for social inclusion and are focused on, among other things, providing the skills to access further education and employment.

Strategic planning of FET in 2017

A career-themed approach to classifying FET provision, as recommended by the National Economic and Social Council (NESC), will be implemented as part of the 2017 service planning exercise. These 'skills clusters' have been introduced to help identify and design education and training that gives FET participants the skills, knowledge, and competences that increase their mobility across employers and sectors. It has potential to communicate to a wide audience how the national economy is structured and expected to develop, and thus to give learners, parents, educators, and trainers a framework in which to make decisions.

The key components of a new SOLAS funding model were developed in 2017 for implementation across all 16 ETBs in the latter stages of the 2018/2019 annual service planning exercise.

High-level mid-term review will enable DES, SOLAS, and other FET partners to assess the impact of strategy implementation to date.

One of the crucial jobs that SOLAS does, in conjunction with ETBI and its member ETBs, is ensuring that provision and funding for the sector is strategically planned against identified skills needs. In 2017 the sector completed a strategic pilot initiative to increase strategic planning capacity in the sector. Based on its success, SOLAS and ETBI decided to proceed with the next phase in developing and installing a ‘strategic inputs and outcomes-based’ planning and funding model.

This is made possible by the insights gleaned from the pilot, the successful ongoing roll-out of the Programme Learner Support System (PLSS), and the commencement of development work on counterfactual impact evaluation of FET. The key components of a new SOLAS funding model were developed in 2017, in consultation with the Department of Education and Skills (DES), for implementation across all 16 ETBs in the latter stages of the 2018/2019 annual service planning exercise.

FET highlights 2017

As this year is the midpoint of implementing the FET Strategy 2014–2019, SOLAS, on behalf of the DES, began a high-level mid-term review. It will enable the DES, SOLAS, and other FET partners to assess the impact of the strategy implementation to date, and seek to improve it to 2019 in the context of a much-improved economic and labour market.

A related initiative, the new SOLAS Corporate Plan 2017–2019, was completed in 2017. In conjunction with a wide range of stakeholders – including ETBI and its member ETBs, other FET partners, the DES, and the National Skills Council – SOLAS is working to deliver on Ireland’s stated ambition of having the best education and training system in Europe within 10 years. The new corporate plan is designed to enable, support, influence, and lead the sector towards achieving this.

New national skills identification infrastructure: Regional Skills Fora now have representation from every ETB. A protocol between ETBI and Local Government Management Agency has also been developed, as has a protocol between ETBI and Enterprise Ireland which identifies the priority actions and areas of focus for ETBI and each member ETB. A memorandum of understanding (MOU) between ETBI and FIT has been agreed and signed. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) has completed a series of bilateral engagements with key stakeholder groups, including SOLAS and ETBI, to assess the contribution of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) to date and to identify future policy priorities for NFQ development on awards at levels 1–3.

Apprenticeship: SOLAS Apprenticeship Services Unit is currently engaged in diverse work, including quality assurance, developing occupational standards, and developing, validating, and implementing existing and new apprenticeship programmes. In response to the Action Plan to Expand Apprenticeship and Traineeship in Ireland (2016–2020)¹, four new apprenticeship programmes were validated in July 2017: Commis Chef, International Financial Services Associate, International Financial

1 www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Action-Plan-Expand-Apprenticeship-Traineeship-in-Ireland-2016-2020.pdf.

The new SOLAS Corporate Plan 2017-2019 was completed in 2017.

Services Specialist, and Accounting Technician. Two Industrial Training Orders (ITOs) from Q1 2017 were also approved by the SOLAS board: Butchery Industry, and Information and Communications Technology Industry.

The SOLAS board previously approved the adoption of ITOs designating new industrial activities, to enable the development and implementation of new apprenticeships. Per the requirements of the 1967 Act, these ITOs have been laid before both houses of the Oireachtas.

Consequently, consortia have been able to develop and submit their proposed apprenticeship programmes to QQI, directly or by delegated authority, for validation. Over the last year, eleven new apprenticeship programmes have been validated. Some fall within the scope of ITOs adopted prior to 2016.

At the time of writing, the following were submitted to the SOLAS board for ratification as programmes in respect of which SOLAS will give consent under Section 31 of the 1967 Act to the employment of apprentices, that is, Statutory Apprenticeship Programmes:

Apprenticeship title	Award title
Insurance Practice	B.A. Insurance Practice
Industrial Electrical Engineering	B.E. Industrial Electrical Engineering
Polymer Processing Technology	B.S. Polymer Processing Technology
Manufacturing Engineering	B.E. Manufacturing Engineering
Manufacturing Technician	H.C. Manufacturing Engineering
*IFS Associate	H.C. International Financial Services
*IFS Specialist	H.D. Financial Services Analytics
Commis Chef	A.C. in Culinary Arts
Accounting Technician	A.C. in Accounting

** International Financial Services*

H.C. = Higher Certificate; H.D. = Higher Diploma; A.C. = Advanced Certificate

A second call for apprenticeship proposals was made in 2017 and remained open through an online proposal system. The 'Developing a National Apprenticeship' handbook and '2017 Call for Apprenticeship Proposals' guidance document were also developed. SOLAS, ETBI, and the ETBs finalised an agreed Apprenticeship MOU for delivering the apprenticeship programmes.

Other FET-enabling strategic partnerships in the form of MOUs and Service-Level Agreements for delivering National Craft Apprenticeship have been agreed between all ETBs and SOLAS. MOUs have been agreed by ETBs, Department of Defence, Foróige, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, and the Joint Further Education Representative Group. A collaborative framework has been formally established with QQI. Eight

Over the last year eleven new apprenticeship programmes have been validated.

ETBs are currently involved in Erasmus+ projects on both Key Action 1: Mobility, and Key Action 2: Strategic Partnerships (ETBI).

FET employee development: SOLAS gave the DES a combined document containing a draft FET Policy Framework 2017–2025 and Implementation Plan Priorities 2017–2021.

Literacy and numeracy: The DSP and ETBI protocol for learner referral is fully operational across all 16 ETBs. Pilot projects continue to progress literacy schemes focused on including adults with general learning disabilities. CPD for literacy and numeracy personnel will be contained within the Professional Development Strategy 2017–2019, while ETBI has agreed a programme of CPD for the FET sector in literacy and numeracy. This is being delivered by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) to all ETBI FET providers.

Improving the evidence base in relation to FET: independent research commissioned by SOLAS to identify best practice education and training for entrepreneurship in FET provision was published in 2017 and is available at: www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/TMA_EET_in_FET_final_report.pdf. SOLAS also published research into the ‘Barriers to Participation in FET’ in 2017, and it is available at: www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/Barriers%20to%20FET%20Final%20June%202017.pdf.

Independent research commissioned by SOLAS to expand the evidence base to inform literacy policy and provision in embedding literacy and numeracy provision across all FET provision began in 2017. The aim of this research is to increase the evidence base on how literacy and numeracy education can best be developed and integrated for learners across all levels of FET provision, including programmes at levels 5 and 6 on the National Framework for Qualifications. The research is being undertaken by ICF Consulting on behalf of SOLAS.

FET CPD strategy: A national FET co-ordinator for professional development was appointed in ETBI and is collaborating with SOLAS, ETBs, and the National Steering Group on implementation of the FET CPD Strategy. Working groups have been established or planned for staff development plans, quality assurance, leadership and management (ETBI).

FET programme evaluations: SOLAS’s response to the PLC evaluation commissioned by SOLAS and undertaken by ESRI was submitted to the Minister for Education and Skills and DES in 2017. The National Youthreach programme tender has been finalised, with the contract awarded to the ESRI. The purpose of the Youthreach programme evaluation is to generate policy-relevant knowledge on the outputs and outcomes of the programmes and their effectiveness. SOLAS is preparing to commission an independent evaluation of VTOS for completion in 2018.

Conclusion

2017 represents another positive step in the reform of FET, thanks to the dedication, commitment, and professionalism of the entire sector, including support partners such as DSP, DPER, QQI, Aontas, NALA, employers, and local communities.



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Are current demands being met?

Reflections from the front line



Pat Maunsell

Principal, Limerick College of Further Education

Speaking from the coalface, Pat Maunsell welcomes the new structural changes and policy initiatives in FET, but warns of the danger of initiative overload. He recommends a 'strategy pause' for a few years to enable management at colleges and centres to implement what has already been rolled out. And while structural change at a national level was an important first step, it will only be effective if the structural, funding, and operational reforms that are needed within the colleges and centres themselves are addressed now.

Introduction

There has been substantial change in Ireland's further education and training (FET) landscape since 2012. Legislation such as the Quality and Qualifications Act 2012, the Education and Training Boards Act 2013, and the Further Education and Training Act 2013 have all impacted on FET providers in one way or another over recent years. The national strategy for FET¹ "follows a radical overhaul of the structures of the sector by the government, which included streamlining 33 existing Vocational Education Committees (VECs) into 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs), the abolition of FÁS, and the creation of SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority".

National FET Strategy

SOLAS launched its national strategy for FET in May 2014. Its main focus is "to plan, fund, and drive the development of a new integrated and accessible FET service". The aim is to provide a framework to develop a modern, fit-for-purpose FET sector to meet the needs of today's and tomorrow's learners.

The FET strategy has five key goals:

- » Skills for the economy
- » Active inclusion
- » Quality provision
- » Integrated planning and funding
- » Standing of FET.

The five goals have been broken down into 52 separate, yet interlinked, actions and are set out in a detailed FET Strategy Implementation Plan. The recently launched National Skills Strategy 2025² and the Action Plan for Jobs 2017³ also set out clearly defined targets for the FET sector. I am also mindful of the EU Agenda (in particular the ESF PEIL 2014–2020 programme) in striving for excellence in Vocational Education and Training (VET), which is a guiding force behind strategy development and implementation in Ireland.

The backdrop to this structural change in FET has been the recent recession and the government's drive since then to improve the national economy and

Is this neo-liberal approach to policy and national strategy in FET the best approach?

employment figures. The national policy position is therefore underpinned by a strong economic imperative, and although social inclusion is mentioned, it is in a context of skills for employment. This national policy for FET appears to be situated in what Fairclough⁴ describes as ‘part of the neo-liberal discourse of economic change ... which demands “adjustment” and “reform” to enhance “efficiency” and “adaptability” in order to “compete”’.

As economy improves is this the right approach?

The question needs to be asked, though, if this neo-liberal approach to policy and national strategy in FET is the best approach. As the Irish economy comes out of recession, the strong economic orientation of the national strategy may need to be revisited as employment figures rise and new demands are put on the FET national service, such as a focus on re-skilling and up-skilling in the workplace, which require a rethink and review of how FET programmes are delivered into the future.

Since the formation of ETBs and SOLAS, changes, advancements, and supports for FET have been rolled out, with mixed success. Some of the key initiatives are listed below:

Employee Engagement Development	ETBI QA Developments
FET Professional Development Strategy	Annual FET Services Plans
Programme Learner Support System (PLSS)	National Integrated Guidance Strategy
Funding Allocation Model	New Apprenticeships
Numeracy and Literacy Strategy	Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Strategy
New Career Traineeships	Regional Skills Fora

Regional Skills Fora

The setting up of the Regional Skills Fora is a good initiative because no one can deny the relevance of local employer input to local education and training. These nine fora are tasked with aligning educational provision (both FET and higher education) with the existing and emerging needs of industry in each region. Providers do, however, find themselves stretched through engaging with this process. The restrictive nature of the management and operational models of some providers poses challenges. For example, in the PLC sector, releasing teachers from an academic timetable to engage with the fora and employers can prove challenging. Each year, a principal and his/her staff must try to find a balance between the immediate needs of existing learners and the development of relevant courses for the next academic year. While the stated needs of employers include flexible provision, accelerated programme development, and embedded industry expertise, the structure and nature of the FET state-funded system is, at times, at odds with these demands.

Continuous Professional Development Strategy

The FET Continuous Professional Development Strategy, rolled out in 2016, is welcome. There has long been a need for professional development specifically for the teachers and trainers in our sector. But it must be provided in a flexible mode and at times which do not affect tuition or training time. What is surprising in this strategy is that the need to have

What is surprising in this strategy is that the need to have Teaching Council registration for all teachers in the FET sector is not explicit.

Teaching Council registration for all teachers in the FET sector is not explicit. Under Section 30 of the Teaching Council Act 2001, commenced in January 2014, all teachers must be registered with the Council if being paid by State funds. This limits the FET sector's flexibility, as schools and colleges cannot hire industry experts to deliver up-to-date expertise as they are not Teaching Council-registered. The reality is that an IT expert, for example, is not going to work within the education system as they can earn a better income in the private sector. However, some experts are willing to engage in teaching or training for a small number of hours a week, and our systems in FET need to facilitate this industry specific expertise and allow FET providers flexibility in terms of engagement with part-time and occasional industry experts who are not Teaching Council-registered.

Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Strategy

The Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Strategy⁵ acknowledges the excellent work already being done in the use of technology in FET. This strategy will, however, need to be broken down into key actions and goals at local ETB level if it is to have a meaningful impact on the provider and learner. It will also need to be resourced. The Digital Strategy for Schools⁶ was rolled out in 2015 for the post-primary sector, and each school has received a yearly budget to implement it. Yet the FET sector has to apply for funding and justify why it needs it. Surely this has to change?

Programme Learner Support System (PLSS)

The Programme Learner Support System (PLSS) is a joint initiative from SOLAS and ETBI to develop a suite of applications designed to provide, for the first time, an integrated approach to collecting key data on FET programme outputs, outcomes, and performance. For years, the sector has been burdened with a plethora of databases developed organically, creating administrative and organisational headaches. Whilst the PLSS is a work in progress, it is very welcome and is beginning to play an important role in the planning and integration of FET programmes. It must be said, though, that principals and managers are challenged with the roll-out of this new integrated database, especially with the ongoing moratorium on posts of responsibility and administration posts.

FET image

The FET sector has a major image problem. For many years, it has been the neglected middle child of the Irish education system. It lacks the resources and status of schools and universities. Traditionally, it is the old run-down buildings which were allocated to FET providers while second-level schools and Institutes of Technology moved on to new sites and buildings. This needs to change if we are to have a first-class FET sector in Ireland. Structural change was an important first step, but capital investment must accompany it if we are to achieve the vision of a world-class FET sector in Ireland. The author acknowledges the allocation of a small capital budget of €8 million in the FET sector this year and hopes that this will increase substantially in the years ahead.

Many young school leavers and their parents see FET as a last option or another route to get into higher education. However, the recent overhaul of State-sponsored apprenticeships and the setting up of the National

Resources will be the key ingredient for success.

Many young school leavers and their parents see FET as a last option or another route to get into higher education.

Skills Council should give school leavers a positive alternative path to third-level education, as well as better meeting the needs of industry. Some 35 new apprenticeships are now available in areas such as software development, polymer processing, and insurance, alongside more traditional apprenticeships for bakers, chefs, and plumbers. Developing and sustaining a world-class apprenticeship system will be crucial to enhancing the status of FET over the coming years. Equally, the results of the recent SOLAS PLC review need to be released. Despite some serious resource and operational issues, initial indications are that the PLC sector is contributing significantly to the FET landscape and has been for many years.

I believe the image is changing slowly. At FET Centres level, parents are asking more questions about FET in general. More needs to be done by the DES, SOLAS, and ETBI to promote the FET sector to the wider public. Principals and guidance counsellors in the post-primary sector also have a role to play, by telling young school-leavers and their parents about the value of an FET education.

Conclusion

The author cautiously welcomes the new structural changes and policy initiatives happening in the FET landscape in Ireland. However, there is a real danger of initiative and policy overload. There are so many strategies emanating from SOLAS and ETBI. Should there be a 'strategy pause' for a few years to enable management at colleges and centres to implement and embed them? The reality is that it is proving very challenging to implement what has already been rolled out because of the lack of action on the operational, funding, and structural changes which are needed at this level. Despite the best efforts of the ETBs, college principals and managers of centres do not have the means to fully implement the strategies and initiatives without proper support within the centres themselves. Structural change at a national level was an important first step, but it is time for key stakeholders to bite the bullet and address the structural, funding, and operational reforms that are needed at the coal face.

Not surprisingly, resources will also be a key ingredient for success. There were considerable cut-backs in education during the recession and the FET sector did not escape. It is laudable to have goals, action plans, and strategies in FET, but if they are not backed up with proper resources, they will remain pipe dreams. The author acknowledges that resources are finite, but it is important to educators such as myself that the goals and plans laid out are achievable. Otherwise, our leadership in our colleges and centres will not be seen as trustworthy and authentic by those whom we lead. As educators, we cannot allow this to happen.

I say I cautiously welcome the changes in FET. I would argue that education policy in Ireland, especially FET policy, is based on economic, market driven, neo-liberalist imperatives. According to Andreas Schleicher, deputy director of the OECD, 'skills have become the global currency of 21st-century economies'.⁷ This is fine to a degree. No one could deny that obtaining key skills and good employment is important for economic and social well-being. However, I agree with Murphy when she argues that

The effective Principal/Manager will have to make sense of these changes with staff.

if the only FET education policy rhetoric ‘is that education equals skills, we risk ignoring the fundamental purpose of education that prepares individuals to become responsible citizens, improve social conditions and ultimately enhance individuals and society’.⁸

Finally, the manner in which current policy is understood and translated to the teachers and trainers in schools, colleges, and training centres in Ireland is central to its success. The effective Principal/Manager of today will have to conceptualise and make sense of these changes with staff. Policy must be explained in intelligent ways that align with the values of the colleges and centres as agreed by all staff. The goals and targets set at this level will have to make sense and be owned by the people who work there. This is why it is imperative that there is real, meaningful collaboration, discourse, and dialogue between the policy-makers and the practitioners at the coal face. The success of the implementation of the FET strategy depends on this dialogue – without it, the desired changes in FET will remain an aspiration.

FOOTNOTES

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2. Department of Education and Skills (2016). Ireland’s National Skills Strategy 2025.
3. Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (2017). Action Plan for Jobs 2017.
4. Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. Oxon: Routledge.
5. ETBI and SOLAS (2016). Technology-Enhanced Learning Strategy 2016–2019.
6. Department of Education and Skills (2015). Digital Strategy for Schools 2015–2020.
7. OECD Observer, 2016.
8. Murphy, H. (2017). The Professionalization of Adult Education: A Critical Exploration of Policy, Discourse and Practice. Unpublished PhD, University College Cork.

DCU STEAM Hackathon

DCU students from diverse disciplines came together in November 2017 for a STEAM hackathon, powered by Intel Ireland. The 72-hour ideas marathon brought together student innovators, creatives, entrepreneurs and developers to explore the intersection between arts and technology. The overall hackathon winner was D’ArtSpace (above). The group created a digital art space using Intel technology.



Initial Teacher Education in FET settings

Affirmation and Aspiration



Dr. Justin Rami



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It is important, write Drs Justin Rami and Jane Kelly, that government and educational bodies acknowledge and affirm the wealth of experience and knowledge accumulated by practitioners in FET settings.

In recent years, a number of higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education and training (FET) settings have begun to forge mutually enriching relationships in the placement of students who wish to obtain a teaching qualification for FET. Traditionally, the focus of debate between the two settings relates to access routes for students from FET into higher education. Placing HEI students in initial teacher education (ITE) in FET settings, to understand and experience teaching and training across a complex range of courses and levels, is providing new opportunities for both sectors to learn from each other about the innovative and learner-centred approaches used by current practitioners in FET and the educational and vocational theory that underpins and informs that practice.

This article outlines why it is important that government and educational bodies acknowledge and affirm the wealth of experience and knowledge accumulated by practitioners in FET settings. The initial training of teachers for FET would benefit from formative research and dialogue with practitioners in the sector who can contribute their experience and views of learners' needs to the ongoing discussion on appropriate and relevant instructional strategies and optimum organisation of the learning environment.

SOLAS is the state organisation responsible for funding, planning, and co-ordinating FET in Ireland (www.solas.ie). It has three strategic objectives:

1. Leading and co-ordinating the change management process of integrating FET institutions and programmes.
2. Co-ordinating and managing the funding and performance of FET programmes.
3. Leading the modernisation of FET programmes to ensure they are focused on the lifelong needs of learners, especially jobseekers, and are flexible and relevant to the needs of the labour market (McGuinness et al., 2014).

Recent statistics indicate that over 339,000 learners are undertaking 22,000 courses in education and training delivered through Education and Training

Boards, Colleges of Further Education, Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) colleges, programmes such as Youthreach and the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), and community education programmes, as well as private sector companies and teaching and training organisations (SOLAS, 2016).

The Teaching Council of Ireland is the professional standards body for the profession. It promotes and regulates professional standards in teaching, and ‘acts in the interests of the public good while upholding and enhancing standards in the teaching profession’ (Teaching Council, 2016). It published ‘Further Education: General and Programme Requirements for the Accreditation of Teacher Education Qualifications’ in March 2011 in preparation for the requirements for Further Education to be in place with effect from 1 April 2013. The Teaching Council recognised the complex and unique nature of FET and its teaching:

Teaching in further education is characterised by learner–teacher relationships based on mutual respect and equality. ... Certification of programmes of further education study is based on the achievement of stated learning outcomes rather than on coverage of centrally defined syllabi. A crucial requirement of the further education teacher therefore is the capacity to analyse learners’ needs, to develop a programme of study in response to those needs and to assess learner progress. (Teaching Council, 2011, p. 9)

As part of the modernisation of FET programmes, SOLAS must also ‘provide or assist in the provision of training to those charged with the delivery of further education and training programmes’ (McGuinness et al., 2014, p. 21).

The placement of students undertaking initial teacher education (ITE) qualifications for recognition as teachers in the FET sector is relatively recent. Many of the students entering ITE courses are experienced practitioners employed in FET but who – owing to the nature of the sector and the complexity of courses, levels and access routes on offer – may not have any formal Teaching Council–recognised teaching qualifications. Some will be students who have entered higher education through the CAO directly from second level. Research conducted in DCU’s Further Education and Training Research Centre (FETRC) suggested that the age profile of FET practitioners tends to be older, and younger novice teachers may be seen as unsuitable for the learner profile. The FET Strategy 2014–2019 (SOLAS, 2014) acknowledges that there are ‘a number of dimensions to qualifying and up–skilling FET tutors, namely, subject–specific (vocational) competence, pedagogical competence and the potential barriers to deploying teaching/training resources to meet business needs’ (p. 110).

The CEDEFOP (2016) ReferNet thematic articles on professional development of VET teachers and trainers show that most European countries regulate their teaching profession, setting qualification requirements by legislation (Croatia, Malta, Austria, Finland), by specific regulations (Estonia, Iceland, Poland), through professional standards (Estonia, Ireland, Netherlands, UK), or by defining specific requirements

Eight Higher Education Institutions now provide Initial Teacher Education programmes, with embedded work-based placement, to individuals wishing to train as teachers and gain Teaching Council recognition in FET.

in vocational training programmes or curricula (Slovenia, Lithuania). Accreditation of ITE programmes in Ireland for FET by the Teaching Council began in 2013. Consequently, eight HEIs now provide ITE programmes, with embedded work-based placement, to individuals wishing to train as teachers and gain Teaching Council recognition in FET.

There is much for academics and teacher trainers to learn from the FET practitioners who are entering ITE courses to obtain qualifications to meet a professional standard in teaching. There are discussions about terminology and nomenclature, as the word ‘teaching’ is often associated with compulsory education. The teaching and instruction role in FET can be a tutor, educator, practitioner, facilitator, and trainer; they may be part-time or full-time. There is an opportunity for HEIs to understand how a diverse group of teachers and tutors not necessarily trained in pedagogical competences and theory are providing engaging and valuable education and training programmes to distinct and challenging sets of learners. In the Education Matters Yearbook 2015–2016, Bryan Fields from SOLAS wrote:

All of the good work that has taken place in 2015 to fully integrate the ‘FE’ and the ‘T’ – and it is substantial – is aimed at improving learner access and outcomes for all who will engage in FET so that they too can fulfil their potential and meet their career employment, personal or developmental aspirations.

With the introduction of SOLAS in 2013 came a drive to join the ‘T’ of training with the ‘FE’ of education, though it is suggested that there are still legacy issues delaying the acceptance of this paradigm shift from FE to FET (Rami and O’Leary, 2017).

There is an opportunity too for FET settings to affirm existing practice and contextualise pedagogical and andragogical innovation as part of a unique approach to learners from differing backgrounds, age groups, cultures, and experiences. Tutors and trainers in FET settings who have not obtained teaching qualifications are unfamiliar with ITE placement programmes and, as such, may need to add skills such as mentoring, supervision, and feedback to their skill sets. HEIs are in a position to offer these skills as CPD to tutors and trainers and to improve existing HEI practice in line with FET innovation. Bathmaker and Avis (2007), in their examination of schooling cultures in further education, explore the identity of teachers and point out that for the teacher, ‘there is a need to engage with the socially and historically situated experience that learners bring with them to the learning context, and the wider social context in which that experience is rooted’ (p. 515).

At present, qualified teachers from second level are able to work in the FET sector, as they are recognised as teachers by the Teaching Council of Ireland. It could be queried whether second-level teachers have sufficient ITE training or teaching practice experience and are equipped to work with adult learners or young people who may have found the formal education system unsuited to their personal, social, and vocational needs. The

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teaching of adults as opposed to the pedagogy of teaching children needs to acknowledge specific aspects of the learner as an adult.

Malcolm Knowles's theory of andragogy is as a 'constructivist approach to learning which involves facilitating adults to draw on their own experience and so create learning based on new understandings' (Cox, 2015, p. 29). Knowles presented six characteristics of adults that influence their learning: adults need to know; they are self-directed; they have an abundance of prior life and work experience; they learn when they are ready and have a need to learn; they are life-centred in their orientation to learning; and they respond well to external motivators but are primarily intrinsically motivated (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). It could be argued that learners of different ages, including adolescents, would appreciate the recognition of some or all of these characteristics.

It has also been acknowledged that there is a need to focus 'on training competency in subject matter areas and an appropriate pedagogical approach in the delivery of training to various cohorts, i.e. a standard professional qualification and CPD requirement for those employed in the FET sector' (SOLAS, 2014, p. 111). This professional qualification may be vocational and skills-focused, either industry- or university-accredited.

The challenge for HEIs lies in providing an appropriate teacher training programme that ensures the student teacher understands and appreciates the ethos and values of the placement setting as well as the needs of each learner in the learning environment. There is no one-size-fits-all for learner need or teaching strategy in FET. FETRC's research outlines that FET providers have expressed the need for students on placement to be intrinsically motivated, flexible and responsive to learner need, and willing to research and read into a subject where necessary (O'Kelly, Rami, & Lalor, 2016).

Acknowledging and affirming this wealth and diversity of experience and knowledge accumulated by practitioners in FET settings is crucial for an integrated approach to supporting educators and trainers in the FET sector. Part of this integration needs to come from government ensuring that all aspects of the system are in synergy with the aims of our national education and training strategies. Steps are being developed to help address some of these issues, such as the work being conducted by the HEI FET Forum (made up of the FET ITE HEI providers).

The Teaching Council is represented on this forum, and *Guidelines on Student Teacher Placement in the Further Education and Training (FET) Sector*, in partnership with the ETBI, has been produced and is currently being circulated to the sector. This publication does not seek to address the wider concerns of FET teacher/trainer sectoral competence in terms of vocational and subject-specific knowledge, but rather sets out a clear overview of what a placement for students undertaking an ITE qualification in FET might entail for the student, the designated teaching and learning practitioner, the placement setting, and the HEI.

Research centres such as the Further Education and Training Research Centre (FETRC) in DCU's Institute of Education work closely with stakeholders in

FET to ensure that initial training and continuing professional development are responsive to the needs of the sector and ultimately of wider society. Research and continual feedback and improvement of initial and continuing training for practitioners, through HEIs, SOLAS, the Teaching Council, and other stakeholders, will ensure that practitioners in the sector preserve their flexibility and innovative approaches through the support of evolving theory and proven pedagogical and andragogical practice.

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2017 Student Media Awards

Joanna Gnasiuk, Level 5 Photography student at Stillorgan College of Further Education (2016-17), wins the News Photographer of the Year award.



Supporting Progression from FET to Higher Ed

Bridging the Gap



Rose Ryan

Director of Access at Maynooth University
and Chair of FET2HE Network

The author discusses the increasing opportunities for the Further Education and Training (FET) sector and the Higher Education (HE) sector to collaborate with the aim of enhancing access, transfer, and progression prospects for students. A formal network, FET2HE, established in 2015 in the Leinster region with the support of the HEA, aims to identify and address barriers to seamless progression from FET to HE.

The overhaul of the Further Education and Training (FET) sector with the establishment of SOLAS, the new Education and Training Boards (ETBs), and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) offers the opportunity to develop a new approach to providing lifelong learning in Ireland. The National Strategy for Higher Education had also emphasised the importance of opening up higher education to more diverse groups of learners, an objective which was repeated in the National Access Plan published by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in 2015.

New target set

This Plan has set a target that new entrants to higher education whose basis for admission is a further education qualification will increase from the current target of 6.6 per cent to 10 per cent from 2015 to 2019. It identifies that collaboration between QQI, SOLAS, the HEA and the higher education institutions (HEIs) in each region will support the achievement of this target. In numerical terms it represents an increase of about 2,000 new-entrant students progressing to higher education on the basis of their further education award over the next five years.

FET2HE Network established

Responding to this need, a formal network, FET2HE, was established in 2015 in the Leinster region with the support of the HEA. It includes representatives from eight ETB partners (Cavan/Monaghan, City of Dublin, Dublin/Dun Laoghaire, Galway/Roscommon, Kildare/Wicklow, Laois/Offaly, Longford/Westmeath, and Louth/Meath) and the four HEIs in the region: Dublin City University, Maynooth University, Dundalk Institute of Technology, and Athlone Institute of Technology. The FET2HE Network also has representatives from QQI and SOLAS, who signed a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 2015. The Network's overall aims are to identify barriers to access, transfer, and progression, to identify good practice in this area, and to see how, as a region, we can create more transparency, more certainty, and more opportunities for students in FET to progress seamlessly to higher education.

'For many students who go on to further education, their FE qualification is an end in itself, and with it they can achieve an entry qualification for the labour market; for others, it is a step along a pathway to higher education.'

(National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019, HEA, December 2015, p. 19)¹

The further education sector needs to know that for many students this qualification is a route to higher education and not a full stop.'

(Anthony Barrett, second-year Social Science student at Maynooth University)

Shared commitment to improve progression opportunities

The development of key relationships between the two sectors across the region has been notable over the last three years. The regional approach has focused on students' experience across the region, how they see and access pathways and progression opportunities, rather than the experience in one institution. The signed MOU was important because it was a tangible reflection of a shared institutional commitment to improved and transparent progression opportunities across the region. The FET2HE Network is aware that many people undertake programmes of study in FET as a second-chance or indeed first-chance education opportunity. For some students, it is the start of a journey to higher education, an aspiration acknowledged in the National Access Plan:

For many students who go on to further education, their FE qualification is an end in itself and with it they can achieve an entry qualification for the labour market; for others, it is a step along a pathway to higher education².

Barriers to progression

The opportunity to use FET to access HE is very important for students who are the first in their family to progress to higher education, for mature students, for lone parents, and for students with disabilities, among others. This diversity of the student cohort in FET creates an additional imperative for more equitable opportunities to progress to higher education. Research by the FET2HE Network, however, identified many barriers for students who wish to use a further education qualification to access higher education. These barriers can be financial; they also include the lack of consistency in entry requirements across the sector, and the lack of information and certainty about progression opportunities to HE.

Importance of information and advice

Anthony Barrett is a second-year student doing a degree in Social Science at Maynooth University. After losing his job in 2011, Anthony started a VTOS course in Leixlip. Even at the open day for that course, he was struck by the fact that before starting the course he was given advice about progression to third-level education. The progression opportunities were simplified for him, and any concerns or fears about possible next steps were addressed. From the outset, Anthony was clear that he wanted to use this route to get into university. He feels that the lack of certainty about progression opportunities holds back many students who need to know at the outset how the further education qualification can be used to continue to higher education. As he noted, 'There is no consistency across the further education sector, no clear pathway.'

Further Education is a pathway

Anthony's VTOS course had a broad curriculum which allowed him to take subjects that he had never studied before, such as psychology and sociology. These linked in well with the voluntary work he was doing in his community, particularly in the area of addiction. Anthony was elated when he was offered a place at Maynooth University, and he completed his first year as one of the best students on that course. Although he knew it was another step up academically, he felt ready for it because the further

education course he had completed prepared him so well for third level. He wants to encourage others, particularly those whose experience of education might not have been positive, to think about further education as a pathway: 'The further education sector needs to know that for many students this qualification is a route to higher education and not a full stop.'

Need for clear and transparent movement opportunities

There is an opportunity now, as universities, as institutes of technology, as ETBs, as policy makers, and as practitioners, to identify how we can best support progression between FET and HE in this region and nationally. We have a responsibility to ensure that as a sector we not only reach but exceed the 10 per cent target for progression from FET to HE. Pathways from FET to HE should not just be aspirational for some learners: they must become the expectation for all learners who wish to progress their education. These pathways from FET to HE should be clear, transparent, and tangible, with opportunities for all learners to flexibly move between, forwards and backwards and through FET and HE, appreciating the strengths of both sectors. Such a policy will support better choices and more opportunities for many thousands of students in the future.

FOOTNOTES

1. *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019*, HEA, December 2015.
2. *National Plan*, HEA, p. 19.

4-Day WorldSkills Competition 2017

The WorldSkills Competition is essentially the Olympics for apprentices, craftspeople and trainees. The 2017 event took place in Sao Paulo Brazil, with Ireland scooping two Gold Medals and eight Medallions for Excellence.



Generation Apprenticeship

Expansion project to more than double the number of apprentices



Maria Walshe

Communications Manager, SOLAS

The author portrays apprenticeships as attractive, exciting and fulfilling experiences. People choose apprenticeships because they like the particular work, and they are apt to progress to great careers.

Introduction

When we look beyond a young person's time in education towards the commencement of their working lives, what are the main things that parents want for their child?

We recently asked this question during a focus group with parents of students completing secondary school education. Financial stability was an important element, but job satisfaction was the primary wish of parents for their children. "There needs to be some form of contentment from a job" said one parent whilst another felt that "It's not all about financial factors but about the love of something".

If you were to ask any of the 14 young people that will be representing Ireland in the WorldSkills Competition this October how they feel about their apprenticeship, they would be unanimous in talking about their love for what they are doing. It is why they have worked hard to develop and hone their skills, competed to be the best in their apprenticeship in National Skills competitions and this year are part of the Irish WorldSkills Team.

WorldSkills competition

The four-day WorldSkills competition dates back to 1953 and sees 1,200 competitors from 60 countries facing 1,100 expert judges. It is essentially the Olympics for apprentices, craftspeople and trainees. Ireland has a strong success record at WorldSkills competitions, having won to date 61 Gold Medals, 53 Silver Medals, 79 Bronze Medals and 160 Medallions for Excellence. In the last competition in Sao Paulo Brazil, Ireland won two Gold medals and eight Medallions for Excellence.

The skills, competence and technical abilities demonstrated not only by WorldSkills competitors, but by over 100,000 people who have come through Ireland's apprenticeship system since the 1970's, are the very reasons why any negative image around apprenticeship has no validity.

An average of 4,000 new apprentices register every year – and these figures are increasing. Graduating

“There needs to be some form of contentment from a job,” said one parent whilst another felt “it’s not all about financial factors but about the love of something”.

The WorldSkills competition... is essentially the Olympics for apprentices, craftspeople and trainees.

apprentices have learnt their occupation in both on- and off-the-job training. Many people are unaware of the number and variety of great careers that apprentices pursue after they qualify.

Rewarding careers

Apprentices go on to become employees, employers, sole traders and company owners. These are young people who have pursued their interest and followed their own path through the apprenticeship route and into careers they find rewarding. They are the people who keep the national electrical supply working, they fix our cars, they fix and maintain the planes in which we fly around the world, they work with cutting edge technology in pharma and bio pharma plants nationwide, and they are the people who will help bring Ireland’s housing stock back up to sustainable levels.

Generation Apprenticeship

Many students and their families see the Central Applications Office (CAO) college route as the primary route into their chosen career. Apprenticeship in Ireland has traditionally been seen as the path to skilled occupations in a range of industries and sectors such as construction, engineering, motor and electrical. But things are changing with an expanded model of apprenticeship, where a wider range of occupations are attracting more people into apprenticeships. Since 2016 the range of apprenticeship options in Ireland has expanded into areas such as Insurance Practice, Electrical Engineering, Polymer Processing, Manufacturing Engineering, International Financial Services, Hospitality and Accounting with many more on the way.

This follows a review of apprenticeship training in Ireland (Department of Education and Skills, 2013) which made recommendations to expand the apprenticeship model, as is being done in other countries around the world, in order to meet both the needs of people and society’s future skills needs, which are developing at an unprecedented pace. Generation Apprenticeship is a renewal guided by the Apprenticeship Council to meet these skills needs. Following a call for apprenticeship proposals in 2015, the first of these apprenticeships was launched in 2016 and will continue into 2018. A new call for apprenticeship proposals was completed in September 2017. This call will further expand the options for Generation Apprenticeship with more occupations becoming available through the apprenticeship route.

The National Skills Strategy 2025 includes a target of 50,000 apprenticeship and traineeship places to be provided over the period 2016–2020. The benefits of apprenticeship training in matching skills formation to the specific needs of companies, the productivity of apprentices as well as recruitment and retention savings, are all positive elements that companies and people can benefit from.

Education offers individuals a way to pursue their interests, develop their knowledge and skills and move into satisfying careers. The ever expanding apprenticeship route is one that more and more people should be considering. Apprentices earn while they learn and build valuable work-ready skills in a chosen occupation. Apprenticeships open up exciting and rewarding careers, with learning grounded in the practical experience of undertaking a real job.

Learner-Informed Policy Evaluation

2017 marks the second year of the National FET Learner Forum (NFLF)



Benjamin Hendriksen
AONTAS Advocacy Lead

The author explains the important role of the annual National Learner Forum in amassing qualitative data through listening to Learners which, alongside quantitative metrics, will inform future policy for the Further Education and Training sector.

Throughout the development of the Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2014–2019, SOLAS, as the national FET authority, committed to hearing the voices of learners in FET as part of the ongoing evaluation and future development of FET policy in Ireland. This commitment created a unique space for learner participation in government policy-making that has been realised through the creation and implementation of the National FET Learner Forum (NFLF), starting in 2016. The forum was held in 2016 and 2017, with a further two-year commitment in the current FET Strategy for 2018 and 2019.

Forum for Learners

Based on our expertise in engaging with learners and highlighting their voices in policy evaluation, AONTAS¹ was asked to lead on the establishment of the NFLF for the duration of the current FET Strategy. By creating this annual forum, the government has indicated the importance of evaluating policy not only through the vital lens of quantitative metrics such as course attendance, completion rates, and employment targets, but also through qualitative data. It is critically important to speak with learners participating in FET and understand more deeply the issues affecting them as they work to succeed in education.

Ascertaining the needs of Learners

In keeping with best practice of public policy development across Europe, AONTAS believes that citizens must be the focus of policy development and evaluation. In the case of FET, the citizens who must be consulted are learners. Without learners the FET service would not exist. It is therefore important that the FET service meets their needs. For this reason alone the forum is vital to the success of the FET service, while also helping to establish a new best practice in policy development and evaluation here in Ireland.

Una Buckley, adult learner representative on the project advisory group, said:

It is critically important to speak with learners participating in FET and understand more deeply the issues affecting them as they work to succeed in education.

While formal learner representation on decision-making and governance structures is a welcome development, representation must be supported through a number of activities to ensure that the representation is meaningful, accountable and reflective of the diversity of learner issues.

Meaningful representation of Learners

In collaboration with one another, AONTAS and SOLAS, along with a project advisory group that includes critical stakeholders, have been building an NFLF that provides an open and engaging environment for learners to share their experiences and opinions on the FET service. It is equally important to ensure that the information collected from learners is useable for policy makers responsible for implementing the FET Strategy as a whole.

Qualitative Learner feedback

The work of AONTAS, with support from SOLAS, aims to create a space for qualitative learner feedback that leads to responsive policy action from those responsible for implementing the FET Strategy. This work will continue in 2018 and 2019, and perhaps beyond, in order to ensure that learner voices are central to the future of FET development.

Contact

If you are an FET provider and would like to ensure that learners connected to your Education and Training Board (ETB) participate in the NFLF, please contact Karen Williams, Learner Supports Officer: kwilliams@aontas.com.

1. AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation, a non-governmental, voluntary-membership organisation with almost 500 members from across the lifelong learning spectrum. As the voice of adult learning, AONTAS advocates for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives, and promotes the value and benefits of lifelong learning.

The National FET Learner Forum, held annually, creates a unique space for learner participation.



Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

2017: A Year of Transition



Dr Padraig Walsh
Chief Executive, QQI

Dr Padraig Walsh explains the remit of QQI, its areas of responsibility, new initiatives in 2017, and updating of legislation.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is a state agency responsible for quality assurance and qualifications in education and training. The agency was established in November 2012.

QQI has oversight of the quality of Ireland's universities, institutes of technology, private higher education institutions, and the further education and training (FET) colleges operated by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). QQI also makes awards in the private FET sector.

QQI is responsible for the ten-level National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). It maintains Qualifax, the National Learners' database of course and career information, and it manages NARIC Ireland, which gives advice to help graduates from overseas get their qualifications recognised and understood in Ireland. It also provides information for Irish graduates to get their qualifications understood if they choose to travel and work or study abroad.

The QQI provider base currently consists of close to 50 higher education providers (both public and private) and approximately 450 FET providers.

Quality and qualifications

QQI has responsibilities in both the quality assurance and qualifications domains. The 2012 Act establishing QQI enshrines the principle that providers of education and training have primary responsibility for the quality and assurance of their provision. QQI's responsibility, following consultation with providers, is to issue quality assurance guidelines. Providers in turn are responsible for developing quality-assurance procedures consistent with these guidelines and for agreeing them with QQI. QQI is then required to review the effectiveness of these procedures periodically and to publish the outcome of any such reviews.

In the case of providers without their own awarding powers, QQI is required to validate programmes of education and training and to issue certificates to providers on behalf of learners who have successfully completed programmes of education and training

2017 saw the publication of guidelines for research degree programmes and for ETBs.

QQI is always conscious of its role of helping providers to enhance quality. It held its first Further Education Quality Enhancement Seminar for the ETBs in Farmleigh House.

that entitles them to a QQI award. In 2016, QQI award certificates were issued to 174,815 learners.

Quality assurance guidelines

In 2016, QQI published core quality-assurance guidelines for all providers of further and higher education and training and supplemented these with separate bespoke quality-assurance guidelines for independent and private providers, for statutory apprenticeship programmes, and for universities and institutes of technology.

2017 saw the publication of guidelines for research degree programmes and for ETBs. To further complement the suite of QA guidelines, QQI will publish guidelines for flexible and distributed learning later in 2017.

This full suite of quality-assurance guidelines is now available in an interactive form¹ which gives education and training providers a fit-for-purpose set of guidelines they can incorporate as appropriate to the diversity of their education and training offering. Providers are expected to review their current quality assurance procedures in the light of these guidelines, amend and improve them where necessary, then submit them or agree them with QQI.

This formal re-engagement will mark a clean break with the past and put the relationship between QQI and its provider base on a new statutory footing under the 2012 Act. In spring 2017, QQI engaged in regional briefings with providers who currently deliver QQI programmes in the community and voluntary sector and with private further and higher education and training providers. Almost 85 per cent of the 450 invited providers attended one of the 11 briefings sessions on re-engagement that were held.

Programme validation and institutional review

In 2016, QQI published core policies and criteria for the validation of programmes of education and training that apply to all programmes leading to QQI awards. The new policies commenced in 2016 for apprenticeship programmes (leading to QQI awards at NFQ levels 5 to 9), English Language Education (ELE) programmes (leading to QQI awards), and programmes of higher education and training (leading to QQI awards). A new challenge will be the roll-out of the new validation policy and criteria for FET providers. To assist with this, QQI worked in 2017 with several ETBs in a pilot exercise. This resulted in the successful validation of a level 6 Advanced Certificate in Digital Media in July 2017. From December 2017, all FET programmes will be validated under the new policy.

The publication in 2016 of QQI quality-assurance guidelines, policies, and criteria for programme validation and policy for reviewing the effectiveness of providers' quality-assurance procedures marked a formal break with the previous mechanisms of QQI's antecedent bodies and presented a unifying approach to quality assurance in Irish further and higher education and training.

In 2017, QQI validated new apprenticeship programmes in international financial services and for accounting technicians and commis chefs.

Following the annual dialogue visits to the universities, the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), and the institutes of technology, in late 2016 and early 2017, QQI noted the establishment of quality-assurance procedures by the universities (under the 2012 Act) and received and formally approved the procedures for the institutes of technology and RCSI. These engagements allowed the cyclical review of the effectiveness of quality assurance in the country's public-regulated HEIs to begin. This is QQI's primary quality-assurance relationship with the universities, RCSI, and institutes of technology.

QQI has developed a methodology and a timetable² of institutional reviews under the brand CINNTE (Irish for 'sure') that began in 2017, with self-evaluation reports from two institutes of technology due at the end of the year. Site visits to Letterkenny Institute of Technology and Institute of Technology Sligo will take place in early 2018, with the first reports under the CINNTE cycle due to be published in summer 2018. The remaining 20 publicly regulated HEIs will be evaluated as part of CINNTE over the next five years. One requirement of the 2012 Act relates to quality assurance of linked providers and institutions that receive awards from one of the universities. In 2016, QQI undertook an institutional review of one such provider, Mary Immaculate College, at the request of their awarding body, the University of Limerick. The report was published in summer 2017.

Apprenticeship

Soon after its formation in 2016, the new government announced its *Action Plan to Expand Apprenticeship and Traineeship 2016–2020* and published a *Handbook on Developing a National Apprenticeship*.³ QQI is the quality-assurance agency for further and higher education and training in Ireland, including apprenticeship. In 2016, QQI revalidated five of the main craft apprenticeships (including for plumbers and electricians) under the existing validation policies. In 2017, 14 craft apprenticeships are undergoing revalidation under the new QQI validation policy that was published in 2016.

As part of the government policy of expanding apprenticeship beyond its traditional (male-dominated) craft base, the Apprenticeship Council launched a call for new apprenticeships in 2015. This has resulted in 2017 in the QQI validation of new apprenticeship programmes in international financial services and for accounting technicians and commis chefs. One of the apprenticeships in financial services was validated at level 8 in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), the first time QQI will make apprenticeship awards beyond level 6 in the NFQ. Further apprenticeship programmes for bakers, ICT network engineers, and software developers are envisaged for validation later in 2017.

Quality enhancement

QQI is always conscious not only of its role in quality assurance but also of how it can help providers enhance quality. In 2016, it held its first Further Education Quality Enhancement Seminar for the ETBs in Farmleigh House. This was followed in September 2017 with an event focusing on governance for private providers offering FET programmes. QQI will also host its second annual enhancement events for higher education and English Language Education providers at conferences in December.

In 2017, QQI expanded its National Student Engagement Programme, where it is working with students to help learners discover how they can engage most effectively with HEIs.

QQI developed a new Infographics service on its website which provides a convenient interface for seeing what awards it is making and where.

In 2017, QQI expanded its National Student Engagement Programme, where it is working with students (with the support of Sparqs: Student partnerships in quality Scotland) to help learners discover how they can engage most effectively with HEIs.

Standards and qualifications

One of QQI's main functions under the 2012 Act is to develop award standards in partnership with stakeholders. In 2017, as part of its evaluation of the impact of the National Framework of Qualifications, QQI published the *National Qualifications Frameworks, Reflection and Trajectories*⁴. Later in 2017, QQI will publish the *Policy Impact Assessment of the National Framework of Qualifications* by Indecon Consulting that was commissioned by QQI in 2016. In October 2017 QQI hosted its Digitalisation Agenda conference on the theme of *Re-thinking the Role of Qualifications and Skills*.⁵

A proposed schedule of review of awards standards for 2017–19 was accompanied by a discussion paper on the *Review of QQI Award Standards*. QQI is the main provider of awards and certification in the FET sector in Ireland and makes higher education awards, mainly in the private sector. In 2016, QQI developed a new *Infographics*⁶ service on its website which provides a convenient interface for seeing what awards it is making and where. This service was expanded in 2017 to show the certification volumes at the level of provider and centre. Data on the 181,207 QQI awards made in the calendar year 2016 were published on *Infographics* in February 2017.

Updating of legislation

Following an adverse High Court ruling in January 2015, QQI reviewed its powers under the 2012 Act. The review identified several issues impeding QQI's role in quality assurance and qualifications. These issues were confirmed in 2016 by the Attorney General's office.

Amendments are required to QQI's existing legislation to, among other things, give QQI the explicit authority to recognise awards in the NFQ and to provide for the introduction of the International Education Mark (IEM) for higher education and English Language Education providers. The amended legislation, to be introduced in 2017, is designed to strengthen QQI's role in regulating providers' access to QQI awards and to improve procedures for protecting enrolled learners in the private education sector.

The new legislation will help QQI realise its vision of extensive high-quality education and training opportunities with qualifications that are widely valued nationally and internationally.

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The Societal Role of Lifelong Learning

The broader purpose of lifelong learning



Niamh O'Reilly
CEO, AONTAS

The author discusses the role of Lifelong Learning, the danger of narrowing its focus to work skills, and the importance of broadening its remit to embrace the holistic vision reflected in the Delors report (1996), with its four pillars of knowledge: learning to be, to know, to do, and to live together.

The term *work-life balance* is a common way to describe the tension of rationalising work and life commitments. However, in *lifelong learning policy*, the life part becomes synonymous with work. Lifelong learning has increasingly been interpreted as relating principally to its role in employability, causing significant concern for adult and community educators. The resulting imbalanced focus on upskilling and skills-matching detracts from the concepts of consciousness-raising, citizenship, cohesion, cultural development, and community-building as set out in White Paper (2000).

Adult and community education practitioners and learners have long argued for learner-centred approaches, adapted to the needs and interests of the individual and encompassing a wide range of skills and training, rather than traditional subject-focused learning where the only goal is major award accreditation. However, and crucially, the broader perspective of lifelong learning can no longer be ignored, given the post-financial-crisis context where we witness increasing social inequality and precarious working conditions (TASC, 2016), in addition to worrying impacts of climate change, and political uncertainty in an increasingly populist post-Brexit Europe. Increased recognition of the importance of the broader outcomes of learning can no longer be seen as an extra – it is a pivotal aspect of lifelong learning policy.

Supranational lifelong learning policy

Supranational organisations have played a significant role in shaping lifelong learning policy. The wider benefits of adult learning have been extensively acknowledged, from the broad, all-encompassing views of lifelong education in the UNESCO reports *Learning to Be* (1972), to the holistic, integrated vision in the Delors report *Learning: The Treasure Within* (1996), with its four pillars of knowledge: learning to be, to know, to do, and to live together. Perhaps unsurprisingly in a neo-liberal policy era, the dual economic and social drivers in the EU Memorandum of Lifelong Learning (2000) have increasingly been replaced by a more employability-related skills focus

per the Renewed Agenda on Adult Learning (2011) and the new Upskilling Pathways (2016).

Although EU lifelong learning policy has been widely criticised by academics and educators, the EU has a history of providing vital funding for adult learning, for example the European Social Fund and, more recently, financially supplementing policy development and implementation via Erasmus+. In a recent AONTAS Erasmus+ mobilities project, winners of the AONTAS STAR Awards can now avail of a fully funded continuous professional development programme from across Europe, thus improving their practice, developing intercultural competences, and developing links with their European counterparts.

As part of the AONTAS project *Making an Impact at European Level (2016–2018)*, funding of €24,365 directly supports seven Community Education Network (CEN) organisations, 16 community education practitioners, and their 63 colleagues, benefitting 1,494 learners who will gain from newly upskilled tutors and best-practice teaching methods. This is a relatively small but important investment for improving the learning experience of the most educationally disadvantaged learners, enabling them to reach their potential.

The EU has a history of providing vital funding for adult learning...

Widening participation in lifelong learning

Mirroring the Education and Training 2020 European target, the Action Plan for Education's (2016–2019) goal of increasing the Irish lifelong learning participation rate is set at 15 per cent – albeit by 2025, rather than the EU-wide target date of 2020. The lifelong learning participation rate in Ireland is currently 6.4 per cent (Eurostat). This is almost 2.5 times lower than that of our closest neighbours, the UK, at 15.7 per cent, and lags behind the European average of 10.7 per cent.

More pressing is the need to widen access particularly for those who finish school early. The unequal participation in lifelong learning is closely linked to prior educational experience (Cedefop, 2017). In Ireland, statistics for 2015 reveal additional widening in educational inequality, with higher-level graduates four times more likely to participate in lifelong learning than those who held qualifications at lower secondary or less (EU Education and Training Monitor, 2016), even though the benefits of lifelong learning are far more impactful on people with low skills (BeLL, 2014).

Although Ireland's participation rate in formal learning is the sixth highest in the EU, it lags behind in non-formal learning. In the Irish context, community education offers non-formal adult learning which takes place in local community settings across the country. It is learner-centred and responds to the needs of the local community. The proposal has been made that 'the greatest progress towards improving the lifelong learning rate could be expected to come from expanding opportunities for non-formal learning'. Engagement of socially excluded adult learners and those with previous negative experiences of education is apt to increase in the non-threatening and supportive environment in which community education takes place.

Although Ireland's participation rate in formal learning is the sixth highest in the EU, it lags behind in non-formal learning.

AONTAS learners and practitioners express their fear that that lifelong learning is increasingly being viewed narrowly as a tool only for economic growth.

Whilst recognising the recent developments in further education, with the establishment of SOLAS, Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), it is vital that we continue to promote the right of all adults to learning, and its value. We must also acknowledge the important role of higher education in improving participation rates in lifelong learning. Increasing access to higher education for mature students could be strengthened with extended grant support, fee assistance for part-time learners, and many other potential policy tools.

Lifelong learning and employability

The value of lifelong learning has been extensively debated and researched, from the perspective of civic, social, health, and well-being benefits to increasing tolerance, trust, and community engagement. Adult and community education practitioners and academics frequently debate the impact of neo-liberal policies on education systems, particularly their negative impact on critical pedagogy but also their further disenfranchising of educationally disadvantaged learners.

Adult learners and practitioners tell AONTAS that effective adult learning requires time, resources for outreach to the hardest-to-reach potential learners, spaces for dialogue, and learner-centred accreditation processes. AONTAS members express their fear that lifelong learning is increasingly being viewed narrowly by policy-makers and subsequently by society as a tool only for economic growth rather than for the wider personal and societal benefits it offers.

Learner voice, Imani Tutu:

I decided to do English classes in the Cavan Adult Learning Centre. Learning a new language was not easy, and I put a lot of effort into learning English. I had a great tutor who gave me a lot of support, and I will not forget him. I started learning English as a beginner (QQI level 2), then I progressed to a QQI level 3 course. To further improve my English, I decided to take some other modules such as IT, cookery classes, communications, and maths, and continued to complete my QQI level 4 Major award. ... I have benefited a lot from learning English. I no longer need an interpreter to express my feelings, and I can now give my own opinion or converse in English with a group of people. Learning English has given me the confidence to talk in front of people without feeling sorry for myself.

Imani progressed to level 5 PLC Pre-law and is now doing a degree in law in University College Cork (UCC).

It is fair to say that at EU policy level, the level of apprehension among AONTAS members and other like-minded people in Ireland and elsewhere has some basis. The recent move of the adult education unit from the European Commission Directorate General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) to the Vocational Training and Adult Education Unit in Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion signals how the Commission views the role of adult learning. Furthermore, the language of lifelong learning and adult education is taking a back seat to vocational

education and training and adult skills, as evidenced in the European Vocational Skills week, rather than perhaps a lifelong learning week.

Has this caused a hollowing out of the wider benefits of lifelong learning? On the one hand, at this year's European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) General Assembly, a high-level EU Commission policy-maker said the move means a potentially higher place on the political agenda and increased funding for supporting policy implementation. Also, the value of high-profile conferences and EU weeks appears to have helped keep adult learning on the European political agenda. A move to reassess the role of lifelong learning seems to be emerging and is featured in other EU policies and statements. The EAEA welcomed the inclusion of lifelong learning as one of the 20 key principles of the European Union's Pillar of Social Rights, stating: 'Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market.' EAEA cautioned that those who benefited least from schooling also need a range of non-formal learning offers, outreach, guidance, and validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Adult learners returning to education not only develop and increase their confidence, but also gain the necessary building blocks for learning to learn.

Lifelong learning is essential for fair, secure, good-quality work, which is critical for social cohesion. With the increase in precarious work, particularly for women low in basic skills (Cedefop, 2017), it is vital that all have an opportunity to engage in learning opportunities. Vocationally oriented courses, and particularly QQI major awards, are increasingly seen as vital for upskilling, whereas learners and practitioners say that a range of provision is required for the heterogeneous needs of learners.

Interestingly, the World Economic Forum (WEF) has pushed back to what some consider a traditional adult education approach for creating learning cultures, advocating for 'learner-centred approaches, adapted to the needs and interests of the individual and encompassing a wide range of skills and training, rather than traditional subject-focused learning' (2017, p. 9)¹. The language of education for employment has been replaced with education for employability, and from job security to career security, indicating the need for transversal skills. Vocational programmes are undoubtedly important for supporting sustainable employment opportunities. Adult learners returning to education engaging in non-vocational, non-accredited courses not only develop and increase their confidence, but also gain the necessary building blocks for learning to learn – a skill often overlooked and perhaps taken for granted. The need to develop learning-to-learn skills, and other factors including employer investment, can in part explain the dominance of the most educated in lifelong learning participation rates.

The World Economic Forum (2017) put forward its new thinking on skills for the Fourth Industrial Revolution (by 2020), noting the need for complex problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, and cognitive flexibility, together with communicative skills of people management,

1 World Economic Forum (2017). Realizing Human Potential in the Fourth Industrial Revolution: An Agenda for Leaders to Shape the Future of Education, Gender and Work.

It is not simply about matching skills [but is also about] achieving your educational aspirations and greater participation in society...

coordinating with others, service orientation, and negotiation. Such 'new thinking' is perhaps exasperating for adult and community education practitioners in Ireland who have long sought greater recognition for such transversal skills gained from a range of education provision, including non-accredited programmes, which is primarily facilitated in a dialogical pedagogic process. Practitioners will tell you that the heart of adult learning is based on a philosophy of dialogue from Dewey (1933) and Brookfield (1980s+), to its more radical role in social change (Freire, 1971). Differing from the WEF view on individual learning responsibility, practitioners know that for such learning outcomes to take place, there is no quick fix; self-directed learning is part of the education process (Knowles, 1973), not an initial starting point or indeed the responsibility of learners.

Learners tell AONTAS that it is not simply about matching your skills. Achieving your educational aspirations and enabling greater participation in society take time, and for the most marginalised it is resource intensive.

Adult Learner John Connell:

When I began my journey back to learning, I couldn't even type or send an email, but after receiving great encouragement, my eyes have been opened. I have gained great qualifications but also acquired important life skills, such as sticking to deadlines, broadening my mind and way of thinking, and developing friendships. It's been a great experience with many benefits.

Learners tell AONTAS that a variety of education provision is needed to make lifelong learning a reality, similar to the newly proposed education ecosystems needing a mix of formal, informal, in-person and digital delivery, self-paced autonomous learning, community-based courses, workplace learning schemes, and adult learning colleges (WEF, 2017). Ireland is well placed to develop its education ecosystem further, with its already-established and internationally regarded community education system that offers QQI minor awards similar to the purported new concepts of micro-credentials aligned to national standards and qualifications frameworks (WEF, 2017). The importance of ensuring that community education organisations can offer QQI minor awards is re-emphasised with this purported shift in thinking.

What about the 'live together' aspect of adult learning, essential in an uncertain world?

Although diverging in views of public funding processes and personal responsibility for learning, there are interesting similarities between the long-established philosophy of adult learning and new concepts of effective education systems of the World Economic Forum. It seems that the long-held views of AONTAS and its members on lifelong learning are once again becoming understood as best practice.

Learning to live together

But what about the 'live together' aspect of adult learning which is also essential in an uncertain world? Growth in far-right populism, attributed to economic inequality and cultural backlash (Inglehart and Norris, 2016)², has been seen in the US and across Europe, with rising support for right-wing and predominantly anti-EU political parties such as Front

2 https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2818659.

The role of adult learning in equipping citizens to critically assess the media is vital for a functioning democracy.

The potential of adult learning to offer space for dialogue on critical issues is needed now.

National in France, True Finns in Finland, and the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands.

Ireland is not insulated from rising populism, considering the catalysing role in Brexit of the right-wing party UKIP. The potential of adult learning to offer space for dialogue on critical issues is needed now. Recently, setting the context of challenges for adult learning, Professor Tom Collins spoke of a society where people are increasingly stakeless, stateless, and homeless, which results in reckless decisions with grave consequence (DCU, 2017).

Adult learning has many benefits, but forefront to my mind is that it provides a place for intercultural dialogue and education that supports critical thinking and reflection. Last year, at a QQI minor award certificate ceremony in Warrenmount Community Education and Development in the heart of Dublin's liberties, I listened to music played by a Brazilian Fáilte Isteach learner whilst eating the Arabic dessert Zainab's fingers in a warm collegial environment. In a microcosm of multicultural Ireland, 43 nationalities were represented by 400 learners, two thirds of them female. It must be recognised that such an environment enables intercultural engagement and dialogue.

We should consider the potential of adult learning, and specifically critical thinking, as a factor not only for employability but also, importantly, for enabling criticism of populism and far-right nationalistic sentiments. The education theorist Henry Giroux argues that critical pedagogy, common in community education, has an important role for enabling liberal democracy by critiquing structural inequalities and supporting solidarity and collaboration in the face of increasing support for authoritarianism and illiberal democracy. The role of adult learning for equipping citizens to critically assess the media is vital for a functioning democracy in an era of 'information explosion'.

What's working?

Lifelong learning has a part to play in society, but how can we widen participation? Adult learners are telling AONTAS that a broad range of learning options are needed, not only specific, vocationally orientated courses but also non-accredited courses where they can build confidence, gain learning-to-learn skills, and take time to decide which area to focus on. Learners cite the key factors in access and retention as learner supports (childcare, transport, funding, guidance), learning methodology (dialogical, respectful, supportive), and collegiality (peer support, peer learning). Learners need to be part of the dialogue on how we can widen participation in lifelong learning to all of society, not just increase participation among groups who are already likely to participate.

The future of lifelong learning

It is vital to keep learning provision diverse and the purpose of adult learning broad. To build a quality system for supporting lifelong learning, we need a range of flexible, accredited, and non-accredited provision that enables a return to learning with effective supports and a learning methodology that supports collegiality. This learner-centred model, perhaps no longer viewed as a relic of an idealistic past but now a stated

requirement of supranational organisations with an employer focus, may gain greater credence among policy-makers, sceptical groups, and individuals in civil society.

Offering the kinds of learning needed for personal growth, social and civic engagement must also be centre stage. Shaping the discussion on the future of Europe, with the role of lifelong learning noted in the European Commission's Reflection Paper on the Social Dimension of Europe (2017), there may be increasing space for the broader purpose of lifelong learning. Are we coming full circle: from a holistic, integrated vision of learning to a narrower, instrumental view, albeit more pronounced in a time of financial collapse, to a rediscovery of the potential of adult learning? I hope so, and I hope we can hold on to this new evolution. The benefits of lifelong learning for individuals, families, communities, and society are too important not to.

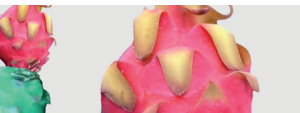
AONTAS is Ireland's national adult learning organisation for adult and community education providers and adult learners. It promotes the value and benefits of adult learning, and advocates on behalf of the sector. Founded in 1969, it is an independent NGO, with 500 member organisations nationwide.

Honorary Conferring at DCU



At a special ceremony in the Helix, Dublin City University conferred honorary degrees on Bill Clinton, 42nd President of the United States; Sr Stanislaus Kennedy, social innovator and founder of Focus Ireland; and Mr Martin Naughton, entrepreneur and founder of Glen Dimplex.

Pictured here are l-r: Prof Brian MacCraith, President DCU; Martin Naughton, Founder of Glen Dimplex; Bill Clinton, former USA President; Sr Stanislaus Kennedy, Founder of Focus Ireland; Martin McAleese, Chancellor, DCU.



Animation

Applied Entrepreneurship

Applied Psychology

Art

Arts Management

Creative Computing

Creative Media Technologies

Creative Music Production

Design for Stage + Screen
[Production Design / Costume Design /
Character MakeUp Design]

English, Media + Cultural Studies

Entrepreneurship + Management

Film + Television Production

New Media Studies

Photography

3D Design, Modelmaking +
Digital Art

Visual Communication Design

Innovative Creative + Entrepreneurial

