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FURTHER EDUCATION & TRAINING



The number of young people registering for apprenticeships continued to rise in 2018.

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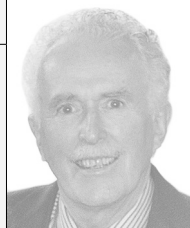
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Key developments and challenges

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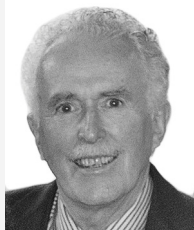
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Dr Bryan Fields
Education and
Training Consultant

OVERVIEW OF FURTHER EDUCATION & TRAINING 2018–2019

Key developments and challenges

Seeing where we have come from is a good vantage point to reflect on progress made and to scan the contours of horizon 2018–2019. Today over two and a quarter million people are at work in Ireland, the highest on record.¹ Current levels of unemployment (5.6 per cent in August 2018) were last seen nearly ten years ago.² The economy is approaching full employment, with growth of just under 5 per cent forecast for this year and just over 4 per cent for 2019.³

In comparison, as the restructuring of the FET sector got under way in earnest in 2014, the country had just exited the EU–IMF bailout. Unemployment was over 10 percent.⁴ The Government's economic strategy for 2014–2016 also looked very ambitious.⁵ It presented a return to full employment by 2020, adding over 100,000 new jobs to the economy.

Education and Training Boards (ETBs) were just over a year in operation. SOLAS was nine months into the process of establishing and structuring itself to lead the sector. A comprehensive review of the apprenticeship system in Ireland had just signposted the renewal and strengthening of existing traditional apprenticeship, and expansion to new sectors. A new Apprenticeship Council was established in November 2014 to drive this.

A new strategic framework for the FET sector also emerged in 2014 when the first-ever Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019 was launched. It contained over fifty actions to be implemented by the sector. The first SOLAS Annual FET Services Plan and the first SOLAS Corporate Plan 2014–2016 were then published, both heavily informed by the new Strategy. FET was shaping a new coherence, realising new capabilities, and creating new solutions.

In 2016, the new National Skills Strategy was launched. Among other things, it identified the need to refocus on upskilling those in employment as well as unemployed people. In 2017 an important part of the new national skills architecture emerged, with the establishment of the National Skills Council and nine Regional Skills Fora, with FET representation on both Council and Fora. Later that year, a report by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER)⁶ signalled a further shift in FET investment priorities. It acknowledged that while FET plays an important role supporting some hard-to-reach people and groups to achieve their potential, FET expenditure at this juncture should be based in the first instance 'on the requirements of the labour market'.

The announcement by Government in September 2018 of the first-ever dedicated capital budget for FET, with an allocation of €300m over the next decade, is a welcome development. This is expected to assist with new equipment and facilities and with upgrading, repairing, and renewing existing facilities and equipment.⁷ In summary, the sector has come a long way in a relatively short time, but there is still some way to go.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE

Given developments since 2014, a SOLAS-commissioned independent high-level review of progress of the FET Strategy was published in 2018.⁸ It found that the Strategy goals remain relevant and that significant progress had been made since 2014 across all aspects of the Strategy. The many key achievements included the establishment and capacity-building of the FET infrastructure, including SOLAS and the ETBs; ongoing development of new apprenticeships and traineeships; development and roll-out of the 'Professional Development Strategy 2017-2019'; implementation of the 'Literacy and Numeracy Strategy'; progression of a new provider-led quality assurance model; and development of data management systems, including the Programme Learner Support System (PLSS).

TARGETED IMPROVEMENTS SIGNALLED FOR 2018-2019

The FET Strategy update also pinpointed governance/oversight and clarity of FET policy as two core areas needing to be addressed to improve the effectiveness of both the current FET Strategy and its successor. On governance, it recommended increased accountability for delivery of strategic actions by individual organisations, underpinned by explicit commitments in formal partnership agreements.

The review also proposed greater clarity in FET policy, particularly on its expected role and contribution as part of the wider education and training system. It identified a lack of understanding of the benefits of engaging with the sector as one of the biggest barriers to successful implementation of the FET Strategy. The need to establish the value proposition for FET based on evidence is now paramount for 2018-2019.

The announcement
by Government in
September 2018 of the
first-ever dedicated
capital budget for
FET is a welcome
development.

FET PROGRAMME EVALUATIONS 2018-2019

One source of this evidence comes from independent evaluations of FET provision. The FET Strategy commits SOLAS to organise and conduct a schedule of evaluations over the lifetime of the Strategy. The SOLAS-commissioned PLC evaluation by ESRI and the SOLAS response to the findings were published in 2018. The ESRI evaluation confirmed the positive role played by PLC provision. The report also highlighted where improvements were needed, including greater responsiveness of job-specific PLC courses to changing labour market conditions. SOLAS and its partners are currently implementing an agreed three-year improvement plan for PLC.

The SOLAS-commissioned evaluation of the National Youthreach Programme is currently being concluded by the ESRI on behalf of SOLAS. It is the first-ever evaluation of the Programme, including Community Training Centres. The findings are expected to generate policy-relevant

knowledge about the effectiveness and relevance of this type of provision in a changing environment, including higher retention rates at second level. The report is due to be submitted to SOLAS in late 2018.

Finally, economic consultants Indecon, on behalf of SOLAS, is evaluating the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme and the Specific Skills Training Programme. Again, SOLAS is looking to the findings to identify the outcomes and outputs of both types of provision and their overall effectiveness and relevance in an evolving education and labour market. The report is due to be submitted to SOLAS in late 2018.

WORK-BASED LEARNING

The most common forms of work-based learning include apprenticeships, traineeships, internships, and on-the-job training. This approach is an attractive option for both jobseekers and employers. The former gain valuable experience and in-demand skills in a real work environment; the latter have a source of skills tailored to company needs or can use the placement to screen for potential employees. An accompanying article in this section discusses developments in the Irish apprenticeship system and the PLC sector.

Work-based learning is also highly valued by existing employees. Given the improving landscape in 2018–2019, the launch of the DES ‘2018–2021

Further Education and Training Policy Framework for Skills Development of People in Employment’ is both welcome and timely. The new policy will enable targeted and systematic FET support, including work-based learning for vulnerable groups in the Irish workforce, particularly those who have lower skills levels. It also prioritises FET support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that need assistance to invest in and develop their workforce.

The need to establish the value proposition for FET, based on evidence, is paramount for 2018-2019.

INTEGRATED GUIDANCE PROVISION

Section 10 of the FET Strategy sets out a vision for an integrated pathway of high-quality, accessible FET guidance in Ireland. It commits to developing and implementing an integrated FET Guidance Strategy, incorporating agreed national referral protocols between Adult Guidance Services, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP), and other national agencies.

In January 2018 the Minister for Education and Skills launched a review of career guidance in post-primary schools, further education and training centres, and higher education institutions. Its purpose is to ensure that a high-quality, relevant career guidance support service is being provided to all students from post-primary level up to further and higher education. The next phase of work on the integrated FET Guidance Strategy will be informed by the outcomes of this review.

BREXIT AND FET

Brexit is expected to have a material impact on the Irish economy.⁹ It will affect trade, foreign direct investment, and the labour market.¹⁰ SMEs along the border counties may be more badly affected than other businesses.¹¹ This could give rise to location- or sector-specific challenges. Consequently, in

2018/2019, ETBs – especially those in or adjacent to the Border, Midland and Western (BMW) region – are scoping and developing programmes to equip people impacted by Brexit with new or higher-level skills.

Some potential FET-related opportunities may also emerge, including an increase in employer and student demand for new and existing FET provision, including new apprenticeships, most notably those relating to transport and freight forwarding, financial services, and food export. These changes will be reflected in the individual ETB strategic performance agreements for 2018 and 2019.

PLANNING FOR FET STRATEGY 2

The progress review of the FET Strategy flagged critical themes that will feed into the initial development of FET Strategy 2 during 2019. These include a focus on lifelong learning and workforce upskilling, reflecting the changing needs of the economy. Other prerequisites will involve:

- establishing a clearer learning pathway with better guidance, information and support for FET learners;
- a more accessible system for those in employment;
- clearer transition and progression routes into and from FET.

With the development of FET Strategy 2, demands on FET will be amplified not only by Brexit but by longer-term trends such as technological change, globalisation, and an ageing population. Two other trends are also of concern. The hollowing out of the middle skill base in favour of higher and lower-level occupations is significant in Ireland. There has been a 15 per cent swing from middle to high-skilled occupations in Ireland in the last twenty years.¹² There are also persistent low levels of literacy and numeracy skills in a significant cohort (one in five) of the workforce.¹³

There has been a 15 per cent swing from middle to higher-skilled occupations in Ireland in the last twenty years.

STRATEGIC PLANNING PILOTS

Key to developing the strategic performance agreements introduced in 2018 was the SOLAS/ETB strategic planning pilot initiative. The pilot encompassed three ETBs: Cork, Laois/Offaly, and Donegal. It aimed to inform the development of an appropriate strategic planning framework for FET in Ireland, to inform the outcomes-based target-setting approach of SOLAS, and to develop appropriate counterfactual impact evaluation tools for FET.

The pilot also showed it was possible to track thousands of learners at different points in time after course completion. This provided evidence that key full-time FET provision is broadly effective in terms of progression outcomes to employment and to further or higher education.

NEW AMBITION FOR FET

The second SOLAS Corporate Plan 2017–2019 was designed to contribute to broader government efforts to underpin and sustain economic growth and social inclusion. It also incorporates a new ambition for FET expressed as a set of annual aggregate sectoral targets and a set of SOLAS-specific deliverables to be achieved in 2018–2020.¹⁴ The sector targets include a

combined 50,000 new apprenticeship and traineeship registrations by 2020. SOLAS deliverables include a new SOLAS unit established in 2018 to ensure an effective bridging mechanism between social-inclusion policy and its implementation. A funding model to support FET innovation and continual improvement is another important SOLAS deliverable.

FOOTNOTES

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3. Central Bank of Ireland (2018) Quarterly Bulletin QB3. July 2018, p.11.
4. CSO (2014) *Live Register, November 2014*. CSO statistical release, 3 December 2014.
5. Department of An Taoiseach (2014) *Statement of Government Priorities 2014–2016*. www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/Publications/Publications_2014/Statement-of-Government-Priorities-2014-2016.pdf.
6. Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (2017) *Spending Review: Analysis of Further Education & Training Expenditure by Education Training Boards*.
7. Department of Education and Skills (2018) 'Taoiseach & Ministers Announce €11.9 billion Investment in Education as part of Project Ireland 2040'. 14 September. www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2018-press-releases/2018-09-14.html.
8. SOLAS (2018) *Progress Review of the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019*. [www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/FET%20Review_Final_10_5%20\(7\).pdf](http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/FET%20Review_Final_10_5%20(7).pdf).
9. Central Bank of Ireland (2017) *Brexit Task Force Update*. December 2017.
10. Ibid.
11. ISME (2017) *Brexit Survey Results 2017*.
12. OECD (2017) *Employment Outlook*, p.86.
13. OECD (2017) *Skills Outlook*, Figure 1.7.
14. For a detailed discussion of this topic, see the article by Andrew Brownlee, executive director of SOLAS, in the present *Yearbook*.



Forty- one different apprenticeships are currently available in Ireland and more are planned.

TOWARDS AN ETB ECOSYSTEM OF FET PROVISION

From strategy to implementation



Dr Rory O'Sullivan

Principal of Killester College of Further Education, and Chair of the FET Committee.

Since 2010, Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland has undergone enormous change. The first four years of this period focused on putting the building blocks in place to develop a new sector of the Irish education system. A single Skills Division was created for the first time in the renamed Department of Education and Skills (DES) when it assumed policy responsibility for training. The amalgamation of the VECs and the disbandment of FÁS led to establishment of the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). A new national agency to coordinate policy and funding for the FET sector, SOLAS, was also established. The employment services function of FÁS was transferred to the Department of Social Protection, from which the INTREO service emerged. A single national agency for qualifications and quality assurance, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), was established in 2012.

By the end of October 2013, when SOLAS opened its doors, the institutional triangle of FET – SOLAS, the ETBs, and QQI – was in place. In May 2014, the first ever national FET Strategy was launched, in which was presented ‘a roadmap and implementation plan to realise the vision of a world-class integrated system of further education and training in Ireland’ (SOLAS, 2014, p.3). The last four years focused on evaluation and implementation. However, ‘what matters most to macro policy outcomes is local capacity’ (Clarke, 2014, p.200).

During the developmental period of 2010 to 2014, the Minister for Education of the day described the FET sector as having been treated as the ‘black sheep’ (Quinn, 2012), ‘backwater’ (Quinn, 2013), and ‘Cinderella’ of the education system (Quinn, 2014). The legacy of neglect of the vocational sector (Walsh, 2011) in general and the FET sector in particular has resulted in a situation where ‘FET in Ireland has suffered from a persistent capacity deficit’ (O’Sullivan, 2018, p.332). To move from such under-resourcing to become a world-class FET system (SOLAS, 2014), or indeed to be part of the best education and training system in Europe by 2026 (DES, 2016), a conscious effort is required on the part of government to commit the necessary investments, both financial and structural.

This article, while acknowledging their wider remit, including primary and post-primary education, focuses on FET provision in ETBs. It highlights some of the key demands being placed on ETBs and makes the case for significant investment and reforms in ETBs.

CONVERGENCE OF FET AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The establishment of the ETBs resulted in the amalgamation of the suite of programmes previously provided separately by FÁS and the VECs. Currently, SOLAS funds twenty-six different FET programmes. A clear opportunity for rationalisation of the programmes is yet to be realised. The 2017–2018 period witnessed a crystallisation of the policy goals and objectives to be placed on the FET provision in ETBs. A number of strategy statements emerged from SOLAS during this period:

- Strategy for Technology-Enhanced Learning in Further Education and Training 2016–2019
- Further Education and Training Professional Development Strategy 2017–2019
- Supporting Working Lives and Enterprise Growth in Ireland – 2018–2021 further education and training policy framework for skills development of people in employment.

The Evaluation of the Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) programme (McGuinness et al., 2018), by far the largest of the programmes, was published in January. It highlighted the increasing difficulties with the location of the PLC programme in a post-primary model. The SOLAS response to the evaluation made forty-five recommendations (SOLAS, 2017a). A PLC Programme Improvement Advisory Committee was established to examine the implementation of these recommendations, and its work is ongoing.

Currently, SOLAS funds twenty-six different FET programmes, [of which] the PLC programme is by far the largest.

In April–May 2018, SOLAS engaged in strategic dialogue meetings with the ETBs. This followed a process whereby SOLAS agreed its Corporate Plan for 2017–2019 with the DES. The plan specified national targets to be met by the FET sector over the three-year period (SOLAS, 2017b):

- Target 1 – Skills for the Economy: 10% more learners securing employment after undertaking a relevant FET course
- Target 2 – Progression: 10% more learners progressing to other FET courses or higher education from relevant courses
- Target 3 – Transversal Skills: 10% increase in the rate of certification on courses primarily focused on social-mobility skills development that is transversal in nature
- Target 4 – Lifelong Learning: 10% increase of adult learners taking part in lifelong learning delivered through FET
- Target 5 – Certification and Qualifications: From 2018, for three years, an average of 10,000 more learners each year are to achieve qualifications related to business sectors where employment growth and skills needs have been identified
- Target 6 – Apprenticeships and Traineeships: 30,500 new apprentice and trainee registrations from 2017–2019.

The Strategic Performance Agreement signed between SOLAS and each ETB stipulates the ETB's contribution to achieving the overall national targets by the end of the three-year period.

QQI similarly engaged with ETBs in a series of Initial Quality Dialogue Meetings (IQDMs) in late 2017. In the previous 12 to 18 months, the governance of the Quality Assurance System (QAS) in each ETB migrated from the legacy situation under FETAC, which in many cases consisted of central QA policies with local procedures in each centre, to a consolidated ETB-wide QAS. These IQDMs focused on a dialogue about the work achieved to date and the plan for improvements. This places a greater emphasis on the corporate responsibility at ETB level for the governance of Quality Assurance.

It is interesting to note that the Strategic Performance Agreement Model being implemented by SOLAS is based on a similar model used between the Higher Education Authority and the third-level institutions. Similarly, the Quality Assurance Review Model to be rolled out by QQI in relation to the ETBs is based on the model used for Institutes of Technology (QQI, 2018). With the creation of a single division in the DES for higher and further education and training policy in 2017, the trajectory of convergence between FET and higher education is gathering pace. Despite these trends, however, colleges of further education, both within and outside of the ETBs, are still post-primary schools, as pointed out in the PLC Evaluation Report.

Walsh (2018), discussing the QAS framework with ETBs, highlighted the need for administrative changes in the ETBs to support the new governance requirements. Given the increasingly similar demand being placed on FET and higher education institutions, he observes:

The HEA performance framework report in 2014 indicates that 53% of staff in the university sector are classed as administrative, this falls to 31% in the Institutes of Technology sector. It is considerably lower again in the ETB sector, yet the development, compliance and reporting responsibilities of the ETBs are now commensurate with those for higher education. ... This shouldn't have to mean greater diversion of teachers from frontline teaching, as the current burden of administrative work is already doing this, but a move towards a more balanced mix of administrative and teaching staff across the sector. (p.3)

A persistent feature of FET provision is its fragmented nature.

Building capacity in the ETB for QA governance will be especially relevant when the issue of delegated authority to make awards at ETB level reaches the top of the agenda. However, higher education institutions tend to be geographically clustered on a small number of sites. By contrast, FET provision in the ETBs is more geographically dispersed. Any increase in the non-teaching staffing capacity of ETBs would therefore require a different approach to that of higher education.

THE ETB ECOSYSTEM

A persistent feature of FET provision is its fragmented nature. Siloed programmes result in islands of activity that operate in isolation from, as well as alongside, other programmes. This has also led to a programme-specific approach in the policy discourse on FET. Similarly, the resourcing model for FET continues to be programme-specific.

Rather than continuing to examine FET provision on a programme basis, it may be more productive to focus on the infrastructure for FET provision. In each ETB is a network of geographically dispersed sites already engaged in FET provision. If the focus of strategic development was on the development of this infrastructure, the capacity of each ETB would increase to a point where the success of macro FET policy is more assured. The establishment of the ETBs resulted in an organisation which consists of various types of FET centres – colleges of further education, training centres, Youthreach centres, VTOS centres, adult education, and so on. Currently, the staffing model focuses on the centre, but given the new demands being placed on ETB FET provision, perhaps a more flexible approach is needed.

FET programmes are essentially a set of rules that govern their approval, funding, and staffing, aimed at addressing a particular policy objective. These rules and objectives can change in response to the changing policy landscape. The PLC programme, for example, was assigned an activation objective at the beginning of the recession that it never had in the past (Sweeney, 2013). The difficulty in this case was that the policy objectives of the programme changed but the provision infrastructure did not.

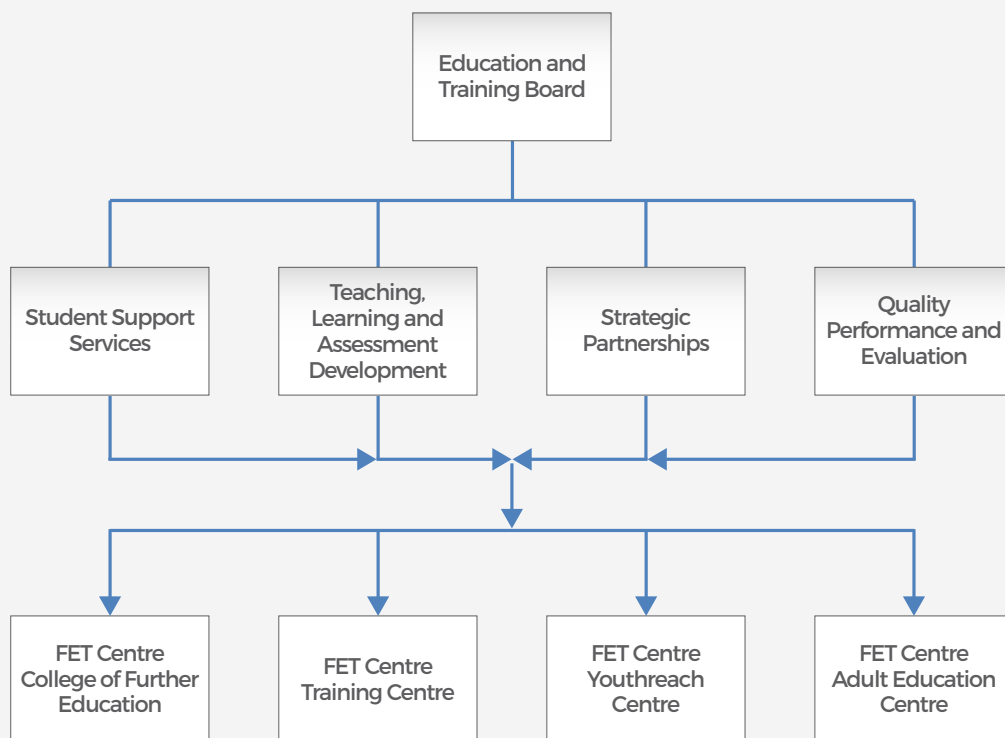
Colleges of Further Education are still post-primary schools, as pointed out in the PLC Evaluation Report.

This situation highlights a key issue to be addressed for FET provision in the future. By continuing to focus the policy discourse and the funding model on a programme, the dysfunctional relationship with the FET provision infrastructure will increase. Increasing ETBs' capacity for the immediate and future demands of FET provision will require that a flexible infrastructure be developed which can accommodate the provision of a range of FET programmes. Given the constantly changing nature of the FET policy context, this ETB infrastructure would need to be flexible enough to respond to this. In other words,

the ETB could be viewed as a FET provision ecosystem. Investing in this ecosystem will build local capacity, increasing the likelihood of success for macro-policy outcomes.

ETB FET ECOSYSTEM

The diagram below outlines a possible model for an ETB FET ecosystem. It proposes a layer of support units between the ETB head office and the FET centres. Non-teaching staff supports would not be concentrated solely in the FET centres. There could be a blend of staff in the various support units, and a coordination/liaison-type role in the centres. Equally, as an ecosystem, this ETB FET provision infrastructure could adapt to the needs of the changing policy landscape. For example, when unemployment is high, the ecosystem could be recalibrated to respond appropriately. In times of economic growth, it could be recalibrated towards increased provision for people in employment. Based on economies of scale, this model could apply collaboratively to a number of adjacent ETBs.



The ETB FET Ecosystem

The Student Supports Services Unit could include a coordination role for career guidance and learning supports, including psychological services. The Teaching, Learning and Assessment Development Unit would coordinate the development of the Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL) Strategy as well as teaching, learning, and assessment methodologies. The Strategic Partnerships Unit would include employer and enterprise engagement, stakeholder engagement, and education partners in Erasmus+ projects, for example. The Quality Performance and Evaluation Unit would coordinate the QAS for the ETB. This would include quality improvement plans, quality monitoring, and institutional reviews. This unit will be vital to achieving delegated authority status from QQI to make awards.

While this article has focused on FET provision in ETBs, the ecosystem model for ETB provision could also provide much-needed supports to non-FET provision in the ETB. Indeed, the option for non-ETB FET provision to ‘purchase’ supports from such a system may be open to consideration.

CONCLUSION

ETB system capacity will be the key determinant in the likelihood of success of macro-policy outcomes for FET. The legacy of underinvestment for many years, coupled with increasing demand on the FET system, have brought this issue into specific relief. The ambition to have a world-class FET system and the best education and training system in Europe by 2026 – just eight years from now – puts an onus on government to make a substantial investment in the ETB FET ecosystem.

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Open Day at Whitehall College of Further Education, Whitehall, Dublin.



Students from Whitehall College of Further Education, Dublin, shared their skills and experiences with visitors at the College Open Day. Pictured here are Nursing Studies students (l-r): **Bursa Aktar**, **Tshepo Tingwane** and **Yasmin Dolan**.

Conor McCabe Photography

EARN AND LEARN

An overview of apprenticeship development



Martin McVicar
Managing Director,
Combilift

Forty-one different apprenticeship programmes are currently available in Ireland, and more are planned. This expansion is aligned with government policy, with the aim of developing over seventy apprenticeships across a range of industries by 2020. The National Skills Strategy 2025 has set a target of 50,000 apprenticeship and traineeship places to be provided over 2016–2020.

Apprenticeships are available in Insurance Practice, Logistics, Biopharma, Industrial Electrical Engineering, Polymer Processing Technology, Manufacturing Technology, Manufacturing Engineer, Accounting Technician, Auctioneering, Commis Chef, International Financial Services, Network Engineer, Software Developer, and OEM Engineering.

As managing director of Combilift, I chaired the industry-led Consortium Steering Group (CSG) that developed the OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturers) apprenticeship. Recruitment will begin in 2019. This article outlines the rationale for the development of apprenticeships and encourages career guidance professionals and parents to consider the apprenticeship route in the same light as going to university.

THE OEM APPRENTICESHIP STORY

In 2015, Combilift turned the sod on a new, 46,500m², €50 million global headquarters and manufacturing facility. At the same time, Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board (CMETB) was completing the development of a new education campus in Monaghan town. Recognising that the new Combilift factory and a growing order book would increase the need for skilled employees, I approached Martin O'Brien, then CMETB chief executive, to see if the ETB could help. Both he and his successor, John Kearney, were very supportive.

The practical response was swift and resulted in the development of the Engineering Traineeship, a year-long course aimed at preparing learners for work in the sector. This was delivered in conjunction with the ETB at Monaghan Institute. The traineeship combines theory and practical industry experience to give a solid understand of engineering practice.

Combilift helped to design the curriculum, which focuses on engineering, electronics, and hydraulics. Combilift supports the delivery of the Traineeship, with two members of staff seconded to teach on the course. Trainees also receive practical placement

and a bursary from Combilift for the duration. Trainees complete 12 weeks in industry working with Combilift, and study for 24 weeks at Monaghan Institute. Work placement is spread across the year in blocks of 2–3 weeks, after which trainees receive a QQI level 5 award on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

Most graduates have gone on to be offered full-time employment with Combilift, and many progress in their careers at the company.

INDUSTRY GROWTH

In 2015–2017 Combilift was not the only company facing a demand for skilled employees. There are 12,790 manufacturing enterprises dispersed around Ireland, many in the OEM sector. Most are small, with 83 per cent employing up to 10 people (micro firms) and 95 per cent up to 50 people.

OEM companies manufacture across a wide spectrum of equipment. Many are market leaders in their field, and range in size from SMEs and family-run businesses to larger companies such as Combilift, Dairymaster, Dennison Trailers, and Dromone Engineering. They provide innovative and practical solutions to a range of customer needs. Their products contain complex electrical, battery, electro-mechanical, hydraulic, pneumatic, and electronic technology.

Combilift supports the delivery of the Engineering Traineeship, with two members of staff seconded to teach on the course.

Manufacturing firms play a critical role in the Irish economy as drivers of exports, as employers, as a source of revenue, and as drivers of growth. GDP from manufacturing in Ireland increased from €26,206 million in Q3 2017 to €28,551 million in Q4 2017. GDP from manufacturing in Ireland averaged €11,514.41 million from 1995–2017, peaking at €28,551 million in Q4 2017 from a low of €4,601 million in Q3 1995.

Manufacturing also has significant spin-off effects, such as indirect employment supported in other sectors (e.g. services and logistics). Manufacturing firms source approximately €14 billion of materials and services from Irish-based suppliers. The sector grew at a record pace in December 2017, as business conditions improved.

The Investec Purchasing Managers' Index, which measures the health of the industry, rose from 58.1 in November 2017 to 59.1 in December, the strongest reading in the history of the series. This was driven by stronger new-order growth and the fastest rise in employment in the sector since the survey began in 1998. The rate of growth in new orders was the fastest since June 1998, as client demand improved and new export orders increased sharply. This led to a steep increase in output, with production rising for an eighteenth consecutive month.

APPROACHES TO SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

The steep rise in output brought with it a growing demand for skilled employees. This was identified in the Forfás report 'Future Skills Requirements of the Manufacturing Sector to 2020', which addressed the emerging demands for skills in the sector in Ireland. Specific skills needs were also identified by the Mid-Tier Engineering Group.

The Government's 'Action Plan for Jobs 2012' highlighted the need for a focus on manufacturing that led to the Forfás report. This study has been developed in tandem with the wider government strategy for manufacturing, 'Making It in Ireland: Manufacturing 2020'. The 'Future Skills' report highlighted concerns among engineering firms about the shortage of a qualified, skilled workforce, capable of working with machinery that combines mechanical, electrical, electronic, and IT/software technologies.

In the manufacturing and engineering sectors, there has been considerable interest in Combilift's approach to meeting its skills needs and developing its relationship with the ETB. The apprenticeship approach to training was of particular interest, since many companies were familiar with existing craft apprenticeships.

The Apprenticeship Review defines an apprenticeship as 'a programme of structured education and training which formally combines and alternates learning in the workplace with learning in an education or training centre'. This combination of on-the-job and off-the-job employer-led training was deemed the most suitable response to the complex needs of the OEM sector. There was considerable support among companies for developing a recognised apprenticeship award on the NFQ.

CONSORTIUM STEERING GROUP

In 2015 a group of OEM companies formed a Consortium Steering Group (CSG) to respond to the Apprenticeship Council's call for proposals. It reviewed the apprenticeships on offer and concluded that they did not meet all of the OEM sector's skills requirements. The companies felt that a new programme should be designed to meet those needs.

A decision was taken to submit a proposal for a Level 6 Apprenticeship in Original Equipment Manufacturing (OEM) in conjunction with Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board (CMETB) and Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board (LCETB).

In 2015, a group of Original Equipment Manufacturing (OEM) companies formed a Consortium Steering Group to respond to the Apprenticeship Council's call for proposals.

The role of an OEM technician was recognised by SOLAS as a 'green-field' one. The consortium and its education partners worked on developing a three-year programme leading to a Level 6 Advanced Certificate in OEM. In October 2018 the OEM apprenticeship programme was approved, and the first recruitment will begin in 2019.

DIVERSE SKILLS TRAINING

The OEM technician will be trained in diverse engineering skills to assemble a range of components, involving different processes, in order to manufacture and support original equipment. They will acquire general practice skills across a range of processes, to put together a disparate range of components to manufacture a product.

This type of apprenticeship has not existed before. It is aimed at secondary-school leavers who have completed their Leaving Certificate, or mature applicants who wish to pursue a career in this area. The overarching aim is to give apprentices the underpinning academic knowledge and

practical experience needed to enhance their employment and educational opportunities, in companies specific to the OEM sector.

The combination of academic and work-based training ensures that all apprentices will graduate with an enriched experience of the traditional classroom blocks of study which can be directly applied to the workplace. This applied feature provides a unique experience, ensuring sustainability and applicability responsive to the OEM industry.

Apprentices will be employed by approved companies operating in the OEM space. On-the-job learning will take place in that company, and the learner will also attend off-the-job education and training on a block release basis at the dedicated premises of the coordinating education provider.

While common engineering skills will be developed over the programme, the OEM engineering technician, uniquely, will cultivate the skills necessary to assemble, install, test, commission, and electronically control engine-driven (diesel and gas) and battery-powered systems. The technician will have the skills to analyse electrical wiring, hydraulic, pneumatic, and robotic systems to identify specific faults encountered in OEM products.

They will gain the expertise to support customers on the use and maintenance of the products they manufacture. They will learn how to interpret technical and calibration data and use torqueing testing instruments for effective product assembly, fault diagnosis, and rectification. They will also be responsible for installing and calibrating sensors and for transmitting and controlling devices.

The role of an Original Equipment Manufacturing (OEM) technician was recognised by SOLAS as a 'green-field' one.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

The apprenticeship programme has been developed to give a consistent number of apprentices to be hired, retained, and developed for this dynamic industry. Delivering committed, adaptable, and ambitious people into the OEM sector year on year, this apprenticeship will be a key contributor to strategic recruitment and planning of many indigenous and international organisations in Ireland.

The 'Future Skills' report says there is a clear consensus among stakeholders that the manufacturing industry suffers from negative perceptions among the Irish population, and that this dissuades suitable people from seeking a career in it. The industry faces a talent shortfall, as young people completing their second-level education are often encouraged to prioritise university and college courses.

Whilst there are programmes to promote STEM subjects and careers, such as Discover Science and Engineering, Smart Futures, and STEPS, the firms that were consulted argue that there is now an urgent need to highlight and educate in manufacturing in Ireland. There is a particular need to promote advances in the industry and the excellent career opportunities available.

The current approach to second-level education does not suit everyone. High-achieving students and those who struggle academically often say they would prefer a more practical approach to learning. Learning by doing

is a valued method, one that every young child can relate to. So why are we not encouraging our children to consider a practical, hands-on approach to their choice of training after the Leaving Cert?

The move towards continuous, practical assessment, with the reform of junior cycle, will intensify the demand for active, hands-on learning. The experiential approach in an apprenticeship programme allows for reflection on tasks undertaken, and is facilitated by employers through on-the-job placement.

WORK-BASED LEARNING

Employers contribute uniquely to the design and delivery of apprenticeship programmes. An apprenticeship is a work-based learning programme, designed by employers in association with education and training providers. A study by the KOF Swiss Economic Institute concludes that the main features of vocational educational training in top-performing countries include the fact that employers are involved in setting qualification standards.¹

In Irish apprenticeships, experienced industry professionals have the opportunity to pass on their skills. In universities such experts are highly sought after: they are invited to give guest lectures and encouraged to take students on work placement. In an apprenticeship, they design and deliver the course content and act as mentors to apprentices.

The expectation from employers, students, and indeed parents is that participants are work-ready on graduation. There has been an increase in the number of degree courses that combine substantial work-based learning (either through placement or project work) with academic education. This approach has attracted more applicants looking ahead to life after graduation.

Educational programmes that include work-based learning allow a smoother transition from school to employment. Evidence shows that career prospects are better for students with work experience, particularly experience gained through apprenticeships.

**An apprenticeship
is a work-based
learning programme,
designed by employers
in association with
education and training
providers.**

STRUCTURED CAREER PATHS

Apprenticeships provide a mix of job-specific and transversal skills that are difficult to acquire in classroom-only environments. Industry and other stakeholders have expressed a clear need for more structured career paths in manufacturing – to make career opportunities in the sector more visible and attractive, and to improve human resources and training practices.

A more clearly structured career path in the form of an apprenticeship recognises both formal and on-the-job training. It will provide recognised progression pathways linked to the NFQ. The OEM apprenticeship

1 KOF Swiss Economic Institute (2016) 'Feasibility Study for a Curriculum Comparison in Vocational Education and Training: Intermediary Report II: Education-Employment Linkage Index (draft)'. Available at: <http://e-collection.library.ethz.ch/eserv/eth:49542/eth-49542-01.pdf>.

programme seeks to open up such pathways in order to give good career choices for the graduate.

The value of completing an apprenticeship is clear: the apprentice gains a qualification, develops transferable skills, and has opportunities for career progression. Successful apprentices have higher earning power and acquire higher-level degrees. By offering apprenticeships, employers attract the interest of potential employees, thus future-proofing for skills and competitiveness.

APPRENTICESHIPS AS A FIRST CHOICE

Even with growing interest in apprenticeship-style training, there is a need to review the perception of apprenticeships. In Ireland, apprenticeships and traineeships are acknowledged as another option outside the CAO system for students. That in itself perpetuates the perception that non-CAO options are often a fall-back, primarily for those who don't get the points for an university or college course. It is time we divested ourselves of the idea that apprenticeships are only for students who do not achieve high grades, and that it is not good for a secondary school to report a lower-than-average transition of its students to university.

A view of apprenticeships as 'second best' to academic education is not uncommon to Ireland. Such career options have struggled to achieve what researchers call parity of esteem with academic education.² Bias against apprenticeships and traineeships as a first option is evident in the fact that we do not refer to apprenticeships as part of the higher education system, even though many apprenticeships are at Level 6–9 on the NFQ.

Career advice and decisions driven by school league tables are not serving our children or country well.

Career advice and decisions driven by school league tables are not serving our children or country well. There is a personal, financial, and social cost to making the wrong decision, and a financial implication to non-progression: 14 per cent of students who entered higher education institutions in 2014 did not progress to year 2.³ The cost of a year's study mounts up, with registration fees, course fees, and living costs. The cost to the taxpayer must also

be considered. It is even more expensive if the student does not get a job on completion.

The typical student most likely to progress to second year is a female student of education or healthcare in a university or college, with relatively high Leaving Cert points. The student most likely not to progress is a male student with relatively low Leaving Cert points, studying a Level 6 or 7 course at an Institute of Technology in computer science, construction, or engineering. Yet there is a suite of apprenticeships available in areas such as engineering and IT, to complement the traditional craft apprenticeships, which may be of more benefit to this category of student.

2 See for example Hansen, K. and Vignoles, A. (2005) 'The United Kingdom education system in a comparative context: What's the good of education?', pp. 13–35.

3 <http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/09/HEA-Progression-Higher-Ed-201415-201516.pdf>.

In May 2018, Combilift partnered with the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) and hosted a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) day for career guidance counsellors on site at the new Combilift global headquarters and manufacturing facility. It was held during the official opening of our €50 million facility in Monaghan. Guidance counsellors met with our employees and heard about the traineeship and apprenticeship programmes and the different career-development pathways in the company. Their engagement and response were excellent. This model needs to be replicated across the country, where career professionals engage with local industry to identify options and pathways for their students.

The pressure to go to college, to get a degree and a good job, is not always beneficial to school leavers. We must avoid an approach where apprenticeships, traineeships, and other vocational options are seen as being only for those who do not get the points for other options. We must not overlook the value of apprenticeships as a good first choice for many. Otherwise, we are doing a disservice to students and employers alike.

About Combilift:

Combilift is the largest global manufacturer of multi-directional forklifts and an acknowledged leader in long load handling solutions. More than 40,000 units have been sold in over 85 countries since Combilift was established in 1998. The driving force behind Combilift's operations is a desire to deliver innovation in the material-handling arena.

Combilift continually invests 7% of all revenue in research and development as part of its relentless quest to find safer, more productive, and more cost-effective ways to lift challenging loads in challenging environments. The company's commitment to new product development has seen it continue to blaze a trail through the lifting and handling industry worldwide, cementing the company's reputation as a global leader.

Combilift employs more than 600 people at its purpose-built €50 million global headquarters and manufacturing facility in Monaghan. The new purpose-built 46,500m² facility was officially opened by An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar TD in 2018.



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SHAPING FUTURE FET VIA STRATEGIC PERFORMANCE AGREEMENTS

Multi-annual strategies, outcomes, and impacts



Andrew Brownlee

Executive Director,
Strategy and
Knowledge, SOLAS

The establishment of an outcomes-focused multi-annual approach to planning is a pivotal moment in the continued development of a strategic and integrated further education and training (FET) system.

The journey began in 2013 with the formation of SOLAS and Education and Training Boards (ETBs), which brought the FET sectors together for the first time under a devolved delivery model. There followed a natural establishment phase to ensure that structures, roles, and responsibilities in the organisations were aligned with the policy, economic, and social objectives that the FET system was designed to serve.

The challenges in this regard should not be underestimated. Any merger is complex and requires careful planning and management, and this was certainly the case with such large and multifaceted VECs coming together, in most cases to form larger ETBs with no sense of shared regional identity or infrastructure. It was also true of SOLAS itself, where the role of FÁS in centrally controlling and operating a national training system evolved into one of setting the overall direction for an integrated FET system, steering and supporting its change and development, funding its devolved operations, and ensuring accountability for this investment.

The incorporation of SOLAS as a much smaller organisation to deliver on this remit required a change in culture, strategy, and systems. Indeed, it is to the credit of SOLAS and the ETBs that there was a seamless transition to the new approach to provision, with no impact on learners, who continued to avail of high-quality, accessible learning regardless of location across the country.

Although such challenges were acknowledged, the scale of ambition for the new system of FET was clear from the outset. The first five-year strategy, published in May 2014, set out the direction in which it needed to develop and committed to a system of outcomes-based planning and funding to underpin it. It was recognised that to facilitate this move to an outcomes focus, new systems and capability had to be built.

The first step was to develop the Funding Allocation Request and Reporting (FARR) system, a bottom-up approach to planning that required ETBs to set out the activities they would deliver across the range of FET programmes in each calendar year. This played a major role in developing a holistic understanding of provision across each

region, and of the diversity and contribution of each ETB in meeting the unique needs of its learners, communities, and industries.

The establishment of a robust annual planning system was accompanied by the incremental development of learner data infrastructure via the programme learner support service (PLSS). This brought together a learner and programme database with a national course calendar to provide a platform to begin to track, analyse, and challenge the outcomes arising from FET.

Given this platform, the potential was recognised for a more strategic and multi-annual approach to planning and funding FET. This is particularly critical for FET, where real thought and planning must go into how provision needs to evolve to keep pace with the rapidly changing social, economic, and technological context. We are perhaps in an unparalleled period of industrial transformation, with changes every day in the world of work, how people learn and develop, how communities survive and prosper, and how enterprises do business. A multi-annual strategy, fuelled by a strong evidence base, disruptive thinking, and local context and connectivity, is essential to ensure that ETBs can respond flexibly to emerging regional needs and deliver clear outcomes in return.

We are in an unparalleled period of industrial transformation, with changes every day in the world of work.

To begin such a process, a pilot initiative was established between SOLAS and three ETBs (Cork, Donegal, Laois/Offaly) which looked at how strategic priorities could be set and targets pursued over a three-year period. Following its success, a framework was agreed with ETBs for a new strategic dialogue to inform the development of

multi-annual strategic performance agreements with SOLAS. The launch of the SOLAS Corporate Plan in 2017, with a series of core national FET sector targets agreed with the Minister for Education and Skills across a three-year period, provided further clarity on what was expected from SOLAS and the ETBs.

The development of strategic performance agreements between SOLAS and each of the sixteen ETBs for 2018–2020 involved an intensive eight-month process launched in February 2018. A notable aspect of this process was the appointment of an independent expert panel, bringing together expertise in education and training provision in both a national and an international context, and in other relevant areas such as active inclusion, EU learning programmes, and public sector reform, to provide constructive

THE PERFORMANCE AGREEMENT

- introduction
- regional characteristics
- ETB FET resources & infrastructure
- strategic priorities and key commitments
- role in delivering relevant policies and strategies
- risks, opportunities and challenges
- summary of actions/initiatives to progress FET strategy goals
- summary of ETB contribution to 6 national FET sector targets
- agreement and monitoring arrangements

challenge and objective input. SOLAS issued templates and guidance to help gather relevant information and set out programme development plans. Development workshops were held with groups of ETBs to discuss the evolving context and support strategic and transformative thinking in setting out a direction for the next three years.

Perhaps the most pivotal component was strategic dialogue, with structured meetings hosted by the ETB to discuss plans across FET. These dialogue meetings provided the bedrock from which focused strategic agreements could be developed, harnessing policy, strategies, targets, labour market insight, and continuing programme evaluation and improvement to set out a clear direction for ETB development from which annual plans can then flow and be linked to resource allocations.

More than this, the agreements give a flavour of what's unique about the particular region that an ETB serves, and of the good practice that is in place or is planned to respond effectively to these unique characteristics. The high-level structure of the agreements is shown in the box. Along with the agreements, each ETB was required to submit target templates showing detailed plans for delivering on each target, together with the rationale for any programme change in each case.

While the individual agreements stand alone in setting out the strategic direction of each ETB, their collective value is also striking. They demonstrate how clear plans are in place to deliver on the FET sector targets agreed with the Minister for Education and Skills by 2020, including:

The strategic performance agreements show the real transformation that is taking place across the FET system.

- Enabling jobs for the economy: over 20% more learners securing employment from provision which primarily serves the labour market than was the case in 2017.
- Supporting progression to other learning opportunities: over 25% more learners progressing to other further or higher education courses from provision primarily focused on this purpose than was the case in 2017. The critical role which PLC provision plays in facilitating progression to higher education will also be enhanced.
- Transversal skills development for active inclusion: certification on courses primarily focused on transversal skills development growing by 20%.
- Lifelong learning and workforce upskilling: a 10% increase in adults starting a suite of lifelong learning-relevant programmes over 2017-2020.
- Focusing on Ireland's critical skills needs: a rebalancing of existing provision from non-prioritised towards key skills areas, and an enhanced focus on ensuring that activity in these skills areas is fully accredited, and that expansion of FET provision is concentrated as far as possible in these areas, delivering an annual average increase of 10,000 key qualifications.
- Embracing new models of apprenticeship and traineeship: with new programme development in emerging skills areas and a shift in other skills-specific programme provision to fit the traineeship model, stimulating 13,900 new traineeship registrations from 2018-2020.

The expansion of apprenticeships, in terms of demand for established programmes and development of post-2016 initiative, will also continue across the FET system.

There are of course risks and issues that need to be addressed in order to facilitate the reform and development set out in the agreements. Further enhancement of management structures and resources, capital funding to ensure modern and relevant facilities, addressing inconsistencies across programmes in staffing and learner support, and a more coordinated and streamlined approach to quality assurance and programme validation will all be critical enablers to drive the system forward.

Nonetheless, after a period of development and establishment, the strategic performance agreements show the real transformation that is taking place across the FET system. The increased formalisation and accreditation of learning, a focus on transparent and more consistent progression routes, a rebalancing of provision towards key skills areas and workforce needs, and the expansion of lifelong learning provision are facilitating a clearer learner pathway into, within, and from FET.

Further evidence of performance and impact will emerge from PLSS development, the data partnership between SOLAS and the CSO (allowing learner impacts to be tracked and validated), programme evaluations, and thematic research. This will reinforce and enhance the strategic performance agreement, but at its first attempt it has already set out a clear direction for FET and made clear the sector's ability to deliver on critical targets for employment, progression, transversal skills, lifelong learning, and meeting key skills needs.



Martin McVicar, Managing Director of Combilift, driving the elevation of manufacturing apprenticeships to a much higher level.



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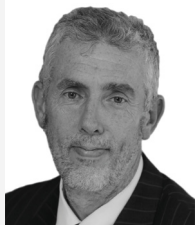
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Dr Padraig Walsh
Chief Executive, QQI

QUALITY IN FURTHER EDUCATION

Towards more consistency and comparability

Although Irish further education (FE) awards at levels 5–6 of the National Framework of Qualifications are aimed at providing workplace opportunities, holders of major awards increasingly use their qualifications to access opportunities in higher education.

Higher education institutions need to have confidence that applicants presenting with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) awards from different providers, or from colleges within the same provider, have achieved similar levels of knowledge, skill, and competence that will allow them to succeed on their higher education programme. For this to happen, there must be comparability and robustness in the quality assurance system in place for the QQI Award, as there is for the better-understood Leaving Certificate qualification certified by the State Examinations Commission.

PROVIDER-LED QUALITY ASSURANCE IN FURTHER EDUCATION

How is quality assured in the Irish FE system, so that it is comparable to the purely external mechanisms of the state-certified examinations? In FE, responsibility for quality assurance is shared between the provider and QQI. Each provider is required to have a verification and authentication process in place to ensure that assessment is fair, consistent, and valid.

Internal verification is where a provider's assessment policies and procedures are internally verified by the provider itself. This takes place on a sampling basis, with one or more internal verifiers assigned.

External authentication provides independent, authoritative confirmation of fair and consistent assessment of learners in accordance with national standards. It is done by assigning an independent external authenticator.

Each provider or centre must also establish a *Results Approval Process* whose purpose is to ensure that results are fully quality-assured and signed off by the provider before submission to QQI. This must include consideration of the internal verifier and external authenticator reports.

THE RE-ENGAGEMENT PROCESS FOR ETBS WITH QQI, 2017–18

In 2016, QQI issued Quality Assurance Guidelines for education and training generally,¹ and separate guidelines for universities, institutes of technology, education and training boards (ETBs),² and

private or independent providers. The next step for all providers with a prior relationship with QQI's antecedent bodies was to agree quality assurance procedures with QQI, taking the above guidelines into account.

For the ETB sector, this process, termed re-engagement by QQI, began in 2017. It involved working with the newly appointed Directors of Further Education and Training in the sixteen ETBS and with Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI). Each ETB was required to develop an Executive Self-Evaluation Report (ESER) that described its corporate oversight and management of the quality assurance procedures across its many colleges and centres.

In November–December 2017, QQI held a series of dialogue meetings by visiting all sixteen ETBs and met with senior management and staff. This paved the way for QQI to approve the quality assurance procedures of all the ETBs between April and June 2018.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN ETB QUALITY ASSURANCE

QQI, as a product of amalgamation itself, recognises the challenge of integrating the quality systems of the former vocational education committees and FÁS training centres into a single quality assurance system.

City of Dublin ETB (CDETb), the largest ETB, has around 3,500 staff providing courses for almost 23,000 full-time and 30,000 part-time learners each year in Dublin. CDETb currently operates sixteen colleges of further education, two training centres, an adult education service that operates in five areas across the city, ten Youthreach centres, and education and training facilities in seven prisons.

**In Further Education,
responsibility for quality
assurance is shared
between the provider
and QQI.**

The challenge for CDETb was to move from twenty-two separate legacy quality-assurance agreements in 2014 down to four in 2018, covering FE colleges, Youthreach, and adult and prison education and training. The aim for CDETb is to move even more towards a unified total quality assurance management framework.³

ACCESSING HIGHER EDUCATION WITH QQI FE AWARDS

Of the 23,733 major award level 5 certificates issued by QQI in 2017,⁴ over 70% (16,102) were made in the ETB sector. Holders of these awards make up the majority of non-mature entrants to the country's higher education institutions outside of the Leaving Cert cohort. In recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of learners accessing higher education on the basis of their QQI FET award, usually a level 5 PLC programme from a further education college.

These entrants are facilitated through what is known as the Round 0 offering of the Central Applications Office (CAO). This is where many higher education courses now have an entry route for applicants presenting QQI FET awards, where quotas are set aside for these applicants on certain programmes. Offers are made each year in advance of the main Round 1 offers to applicants presenting with Leaving Cert qualifications.

Applicants are offered the quota of places for QQI FET applicants. Places are limited and are allocated based solely on the applicants' score. Where students have the same score, places are allocated by the CAO based on random selection. Many courses also have an entry route for applicants presenting QQI FET awards which do not have a specific quota. These courses offer places in Round 1 at the same time that applicants presenting with Leaving Cert qualifications are considered.

In 2018, QQI provided the results and scores to CAO for the roughly 15,000 applicants who said they wished to use a QQI award to access a college place. In 2017, 5,343 applicants received offers based on their QQI score alone – up 7.7% on 2016. In University College Dublin in 2018, for example, over 180 places were reserved for QQI FET applicants across seventeen different entry programmes.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN QQI MONITORING

As a complement to the internal verification and external authentication elements of assessment moderation described above, QQI data monitoring also has a role to play. Most QQI monitoring is routine and desk-based, although there are provisions for direct interventions in the case of complaints or concerns identified through the QQI policy on monitoring.⁵

In UCD, in 2018, over 180 places were reserved for QQI FET applicants across seventeen different entry programmes.

QQI FET awards at levels 4–6 are graded pass, merit, and distinction. QQI sends annual grading reports to all its FET providers (currently numbering about 450). Reports are sent more frequently to the ETBs, given the number of centres and learners. The information is sent with directions that it is to be used for both review of internal consistency in grading and for benchmarking against national comparators. The information includes the following:

- Grade distribution by component within the provider: two separate reports allowing comparison across all components in a year and by individual components across years. If it is a multi-centre provider such as an ETB, this also allows comparisons between different centres and centre types, e.g., FE colleges versus training centres.
- National benchmarks per component assessment by the provider, i.e., the total number assessed nationally in the year, aggregated across all providers, and the distribution of grades therein, i.e., what proportion achieved distinctions, merits, passes, etc.

QQI also gives each ETB a breakdown of all FET components assessed in a year, showing grade distributions and standard deviations when aggregated across all providers. These are very useful in identifying which fields of learning and forms of assessment show the greatest variability in grading. It was evident during the dialogue meetings between QQI and the ETBs in 2017 that this data was being carefully considered by the ETBs as part of their internal quality assurance systems.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW

After QQI approval of the QA procedures for the ETBs in April and June 2018, the next step is an external review of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures in the sixteen ETBs. This will follow the well-established

practice of a self-evaluation report (this time at the wider ETB level, rather than just the executive), a visit by the expert panel, and a public report with commendations and recommendations for improvement. The intention is to conduct an omnibus review of all sixteen ETBs in 2020. This will be an opportunity to see the progress being made towards an integrated quality system in each ETB.

QUALITY ENHANCEMENT

QQI also has a role in supporting providers in enhancing quality. In November 2018, QQI is organising separate consultation events on assessment in further and higher education, in the context of QQI's green paper on assessment issued earlier in the year.⁶ The further education event is being hosted jointly by QQI and ETBI.

FOOTNOTES

1. Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for use by all providers (2016). www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Core%20Statutory%20Quality%20Assurance%20Guidelines.pdf.
2. Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for Education and Training Boards (2017). www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/Sector%20specific%20QA%20Guidelines%20for%20ETBs.pdf.
3. City of Dublin Education and Training Board: Quality Assurance. <http://cityofdublin.etb.ie/quality-assurance/>.
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5. QQI Policy on Monitoring (2014). www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/QQI%20Policy%20on%20Monitoring%202014.pdf.
6. QQI Green Paper on Assessment of Learners and Learning (2018). www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Green%20Paper%20Assessment%20of%20Learners%20and%20Learning%20March%202018.pdf.



Minister for Higher Education **Mary Mitchell-O'Connor** greets **Beatrice Dooley**, President of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC), at the IGC Annual Conference held in The Helix, DCU Campus in October 2018.



Beatrice Dooley
President of the
Institute of Guidance
Counsellors

STRATEGIC CPD PLANS FOR THE INSTITUTE OF GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS

2001 was the best year of my life. It was the year I met my husband – on my birthday. I also qualified with a Postgraduate Diploma in Human Resources Management. From Armstrong's *Handbook of Human Resource Management Practice* (1999), I learnt that development is the 'growth or realization of a person's ability and potential through the provision of learning and educational experiences', and that 'the human resources plan flows from the strategic plan and contributes to it by spelling out how much more can be achieved by investing in people' (p.480).

Armstrong taught me that a human resources development strategy should be designed to benefit *all* stakeholders. In the world of guidance counselling, this means employers, jobseekers, clients, students, educational partners, and labour market stakeholders. As the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) has charitable status, it is appropriate that any investment in our human resources should benefit the wider community.

IGC PLANS FOR CPD

In the IGC, plans are under way to roll out two types of recommended Continuous Professional Development (CPD) nationwide, to equip our members to meet current challenges in their workplaces. The aim is that all guidance counsellors, regardless of working context or location, will have a uniform, cutting-edge CPD experience.

The IGC is a professional association 1,335 members strong, made up of qualified professionals working in a broad variety of settings which include second-level schools, further education and training (FET), higher education, adult education, youth services, the prison service, probation services, and private practice. Any CPD we plan must address our holistic role and furnish us with new and relevant learning about personal, educational, or vocational guidance.

1. VOCATIONAL OR LABOUR-MARKET-FOCUSED CPD

The first type of CPD relates to opportunities in current labour market initiatives, such as new and existing apprenticeships, traineeships, and up-to-date labour market information (LMI) on current and projected labour market shortages, such as in STEM and ICT. We plan to bring the main employers, FET and apprenticeship course providers, to guidance counsellors at branch level to deliver information on how to identify suitable candidates, where they can find a mentor, training course, and career progression routes out of these. SOLAS will provide the holy grail of LMI.

In May 2018, we organised a pilot of this CPD which was hosted by Combilift in Monaghan town. James Eustace (ETBI) gave a comprehensive overview of current apprenticeship opportunities in Ireland. Our members travelled from Donegal, Clare, Cork, and Dublin to attend – a testament to the fact that we are starving for reliable and up-to-date LMI.

The IGC is indebted to our colleagues in the Joint Managerial Body (JMB), the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS), and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) for communicating their full support of this CPD to school managers, and for encouraging school principals to release their guidance counsellors for it. Without their support, guidance counsellors could not have attended.

Why should guidance counsellors be informed about apprenticeships and traineeships?

- As outlined in key national policies, such as the National Skills Strategy 2025 and the FET Strategy 2014–2019, the Government aims to significantly grow ‘work-based learning’ through the development of apprenticeships and traineeship routes.
- The target set by the Government is 50,000 apprenticeship and traineeship places to be provided over 2016–2020.
- The apprenticeships system includes awards from levels 5–10, and traineeship programmes offer awards at levels 4 and 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications.
- The national apprenticeship system is being expanded into new industry sectors, with recent examples of new apprenticeships in aviation engineering, IT, design, and the culinary arts.
- At the time of writing, there are 36 apprenticeships and 31 traineeship programmes available and many more being developed.

For students who are predominantly kinaesthetic learners, the traditional learning experience can be soul-destroying.

For students who are predominantly kinaesthetic learners, the traditional learning experience that still dominates second-level education can be soul-destroying. These students typically excel in hands-on, practical learning situations. If they become switched off at school and have no one to join the dots for them at the right time, they are in danger of dropping out.

As the direct link between employers and potential employees, guidance counsellors play a pivotal role in guiding students and jobseekers of all ages into appropriate courses and careers to match their unique skills, aptitudes, interests, and personalities. Empowering the guidance profession to deliver a first-class service will accelerate Ireland’s economic recovery by ensuring the optimum fit between potential employees and labour market requirements. The IGC are now asking the labour market stakeholders to communicate the labour market needs and information to us.

2. ENHANCED COUNSELLING CPD

The second type of CPD is tailored to address skills needed to ‘hold’ students experiencing mental health difficulties who have been referred out but are on waiting lists and at risk. We also need upskilling on boundary

management, cyberbullying, and what to do when referral breaks down or gets stuck in a time loop. We need CPD on handling situations when caregivers do not follow our recommendations to take their child to the GP urgently, or when the child cannot tell the GP what their problems are and end up back with their guidance counsellor.

Guidance counsellors are key front-line personnel who identify and address the mental health issues of our next generation across all education sectors nationwide every day. Due to resource constraints and a lack of joined-up thinking in our health services, guidance counsellors are often left to 'hold' individuals in a counselling space until our referrals are actually followed up on by the appropriate mental health services. This can continue for months and in severe cases up to a year.

The IGC wants to be proactive, but this requires resources, especially access to a network of external professionals for referral, with parental consent, to appropriate services. We worry when we read news stories about referral agencies. We wonder about the fate of the 'at-risk' students and adult learners we refer out.

Guidance counsellors identify and address the mental health issues of our next generation.

Ireland has the fourth-highest rate of suicide among teens across thirty-seven OECD and EU countries (UNICEF, 2017). The IGC believes that each life we save is priceless – and make no mistake, we are saving lives. But we need referral systems that work, in addition to timely supports for guidance counsellors who are left to deal with tragedies alone. We engage in mental health triaging in schools and adult education services throughout the country, but we are not being adequately resourced or supported. The current and next generation of learners in this country deserve better. Guidance counsellors and their management deserve better.

Meanwhile, the IGC continues to consult with our members on what type of counselling CPD they need to support their practice. Armstrong (1999) writes that the aim of a training needs analysis is to define 'the difference between what is happening and what should be happening' (p.514). He advises against falling into the 'deficiency model' approach which focuses on what is lacking, and favours a positive approach concerned with 'identifying and satisfying learning and development needs ... increasing all-round competence' (ibid.). Our CPD plans are not about being reactive: they are about being proactive and planning for the future.

THE VALUE OF CULTIVATING A LEARNING ORGANISATION

Mullins (1999) describes a learning organisation as 'an organisation which facilitates the learning of all of its members and continuously transforms itself' (p.351). If the IGC is to survive and evolve, geography should not be an impediment to offering high-quality CPD to our members in all sixteen branches, which students and adult clients will benefit from.

Vision can be defined as 'a mental image of a possible and desirable future state of the organisation' (Lynch, 2000, p.443). My vision for the IGC is a professional body where all practitioners, regardless of their working context or geographical location, have equal access to high-quality CPD that

will empower them in their role, where all our labour market stakeholders recognise that we are the umbilical cord between the jobseeker and industry. As the professionals who interface with jobseekers across the lifespan, we are a valuable resource, and it makes economic sense to supply us with cutting-edge LMI and forecasts of labour market shortages.

If you have visited our head office, you will know it is in a basement. Glancing out the window, you see the feet of people walking by. Next time you look out our basement window, look beyond the legs and observe the stars: *Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem* (John Henry Newman, in Lynch, 2000).

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Pictured at the Annual Conference of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) in the Helix, DCU Campus, in October 2018, l-r: **Beatrice Dooley**, President IGC, **Mary Mitchell O'Connor**, Minister for Higher Education, and **Professor Brian Mac Craith**, President of DCU.



Niamh O'Reilly
CEO, AONTAS, the
National Adult
Learning Organisation



Luke Murtagh
Adjunct Lecturer, NUI
Maynooth

HALF A CENTURY OF LIFELONG LEARNING ADVOCACY

AONTAS at 50: past, present, and future

AONTAS is the national membership organisation that promotes and advocates for adult learning. In 2019 it celebrates its fiftieth birthday. This article offers a preview of a larger piece of work cataloguing the historic role of AONTAS in the dramatic and ever-evolving field of adult, community, and further education and training, abbreviated here as ACFET.

In 2019 *The Adult Learner* journal will provide a comprehensive record of AONTAS's role in ACFET. The present article offers a snapshot of how AONTAS has been setting the agenda for advancing educational equality over the last half-century, and notes some key challenges for the future. First it summarises AONTAS's achievements in making an impact on the lives of all adult learners, through:

- (a) building and developing the advocacy organisation
- (b) influencing the policy process
- (c) advocating for marginalised groups.

Second, it lists AONTAS's immediate priorities for ACFET, concentrating on where AONTAS is influencing the decision-making, implementation, and evaluation of public policy most affecting adult learners. Finally, the article looks forward to Ireland becoming a global leader in ACFET and looks at how Ireland can reach its fullest potential as a model society for lifelong learning.

THE ROOTS OF POSITIVE CHANGE

When Fr Liam Carey returned from Columbia University in 1967, having researched how adult educators cooperated in England, Wales, Scotland, Canada, and the US, he established a national adult education association in Ireland. Over the following two years, three formative events changed the face of learner advocacy:

- In 1968, Carey worked with prominent adult educators to organise an international conference on the theme 'Adult Education in a Changing Irish Society', with speakers from the US, UK, European Bureau of Adult Education, and Irish Management Institute.
- A committee was formed, consisting of the Department of Education, University College Cork, rural organisations, Forás Éireann, the Vocational Education Colleges, and the Dublin Institute of Adult Education. It was tasked with setting up a national adult education association, the first of its kind on this island.

- A report was prepared, and a proposal was approved to establish AONTAS at its first annual conference in 1969 (Carey, 1979).

1. BUILDING AND DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY ORGANISATION

From the outset, AONTAS understood that its role in developing adult education meant creating a space for, and giving voice to, adult learners – especially those most marginalised by systemic barriers to accessing education and those whom the education system excluded and failed.

The organisation's origins and current activities can be defined by how it seeks to achieve its aims by drawing on domestic and international expertise, producing robust research to inform and reform policy, nurturing nationwide relationships and building international networks, communicating policies to AONTAS members and policy-makers, and appointing highly qualified CEOs who were also leading adult educators.

During its first ten years, three more pivotal events shaped AONTAS:

In 1970, AONTAS affiliated with the European Bureau of Adult Education, thus embracing best international practice, broadening domestic horizons, and influencing Irish and European ACFET policy. International engagement by AONTAS has contributed enormously to the development of ACFET in Ireland, evidenced by AONTAS becoming the national coordinating body for the European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL). As coordinator for Ireland, AONTAS contributes to increasing participation in adult learning across the EU, enhancing policies and supports for adult learners, and gathering and disseminating best practices to benefit learners in Ireland and farther afield.

In 1970, AONTAS affiliated with the European Bureau of Adult Education, thus embracing best international practice.

The decision of P.J. Carroll Ltd in 1974 to provide £75,000 funding to AONTAS over a five-year period – to employ a full-time secretariat, undertake a research project, and sponsor an international conference – strengthened AONTAS's advocacy capacity, reinforced its research and international engagement strategies, and moved it from an organisation run by highly dedicated volunteers to one managed by extremely committed professionals. The research project on women's participation in adult education was to have a profound effect on the focus of AONTAS and its advocacy role.

The third crucial moment, in 1977, was the decision to tackle the literacy problem in Ireland by establishing the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA). To support it, AONTAS developed a draft five-year programme and provided £5,000 seed funding (O Murchu, 1984). The establishment of NALA was a key development in Irish ACFET (Murtagh, 2014).

After a decade of intense research in the 1980s, and critical engagement with high-profile government reports on adult education (in 1973 and 1984), AONTAS launched its manifesto for ACFET: 'For Adults Only: A case for adult education in Ireland' (Bassett et al., 1989). It drew together all available research to articulate AONTAS policy on its structures, service provision, funding, tutors and teaching, the facilities and resources of the

time, priority areas for advocacy, access, and the development of adult education. This comprehensive, ambitious, and progressive blueprint gives the organisation its roadmap and compass to this day.

In articulating, analysing, critiquing, and further developing ACFET policy, 'For Adults Only' is buttressed by *The Adult Learner*. Established in 1985 by the Adult Education Organisers' Association (AEOA), the journal continues to be a vital catalyst for policy development and advocacy work. With solid foundations laid down by the good work of the AEOA, AONTAS took over responsibility for publishing *The Adult Learner*.

With full-time staff and international recognition gained for its significant contribution to knowledge in the area, not only is the journal's future secure, but it is set to continue as a shining example of how to provide a forum for critical reflection on teaching and learning practices, and how to address educational disadvantage, social exclusion, inequality, and workplace learning.

The first twenty-five years created a clear path for building organisational capacity to deliver the highest standard of advocacy, and for earning the esteem of members, partners, stakeholders, and decision-makers. These are no small feats in a historically fragmented educational ecosystem hampered by a longstanding lack of coherent government policy. The quarter-century saw a phenomenal pace of change in ACFET in Ireland, with AONTAS playing a pivotal role.

In 1977, the decision [was taken] to tackle the literacy problem in Ireland by establishing NALA.

2. INFLUENCING THE POLICY PROCESS

From its foundation, AONTAS was influencing ACFET policy. At its inaugural conference in 1969, the Minister for Education announced the establishment of a commission on adult education. Members included Fr Liam Carey, the chairman of AONTAS, and two other founding members. The commission recommended that AONTAS be recognised as the National Advisory Body on Adult Education (Hyland and Milne, 1992).

One of its most effective interventions happened in 1997, when AONTAS and NALA joined forces to argue for a White Paper and a Minister with specific responsibility for adult education during that year's general election. As a measure of the campaign's success, Willie O'Dea was appointed as the first Minister for Adult Education in 1997. This was followed by the publication of a Green Paper in 1998 and a White Paper in 2000.

Another important strategy to bring about positive change has been AONTAS's active engagement with the Department of Education (DES), helped by having a high-ranking Department official on the committee which originally established the organisation (Carey, 1979). Working tirelessly to build and sustain this relationship, AONTAS maintains close, constructive communication with the DES to develop and implement evidence-based policies.

3. ADVOCATING FOR MARGINALISED GROUPS

Learners are central to the work of AONTAS and we are committed to supporting the capacity of learners to influence policy and practice in adult and community education. (AONTAS, 2013, p.15)

From its very foundation, AONTAS championed the inclusion of women in ACFET as part of a broader movement for women's rights. The first phase in the 1980s involved supporting, encouraging, and coordinating the establishment of community-based women's groups. EU funding was secured in 1992 for the *New Opportunities for Women* project. Further funding led to the Women's Education Networks' Development project to provide management training and capacity-building for women's groups. In the early 2000s, the Strategies to Advance Networks Collective Empowerment (STANCE) programme, co-funded by the DES and the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, further developed the sector's capacity, especially for women to empower themselves through education.

To consolidate women's education development, the Women's Community Education Quality Assurance Framework project 2003–2005 was established. AONTAS published the Women's Education Quality Assurance Framework in 2005 to help women's groups ensure quality and have a resource which:

- frames the social analysis and distinctive practice of women's community education
- builds a shared language for women's community education
- quality-assures the practice of women's community education (AONTAS, 2005).

From its foundation,
AONTAS championed
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in adult, community,
and further education.

The expertise developed in community education through its women's projects and research gave AONTAS a powerful voice to influence policy in the Green Paper (DES, 1998) and White Paper (DES, 2000). Consequently, in 2003, the Department announced that AONTAS would be commissioned to deliver the Training and Support Programme for Community Education Facilitators.

Support for community education continued to strengthen in the twenty-first century, when the 'Citizen Learner Conference Report' (AONTAS, 2005) was published. In 2007 the establishment of the Community Education Network (CEN) gave a voice to the community and voluntary sector and to individual adult learners. This initiative has had significant benefits in influencing implementation of the recent fundamental changes in ACFET, and in enhancing the authenticity of the advocacy activities and the credibility of its work to reform flawed policies and propose progressive new ones.

CEN, comprising 130+ community education organisations, is closely supported by AONTAS to continue achieving sector-wide recognition for having a positive impact on the lives of learners, to raise the profile of community education, and to lobby decision-makers for sufficient resourcing. CEN is the only national network dedicated to independent

voluntary community education groups committed to bringing about positive social change by empowering all adult learners.

In its recent submissions to SOLAS and in meetings with the SOLAS executive, AONTAS highlighted that community education was not given appropriate attention in initial SOLAS policy proposals. AONTAS ultimately succeeded in having community education explicitly recognised in the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2018 (SOLAS, 2014).

CURRENT ADVOCACY FOCUS

AONTAS has undergone substantial changes in recent times, with a new CEO in 2016, an extensive organisational review, and a two-year growth plan. The AONTAS president led an extensive board review to place AONTAS in the best possible position to modernise and meet current best practice standards in corporate governance. A new AONTAS Constitution – the most extensive governance review of the organisation since its establishment in 1969 – was another milestone.

As an all-island non-governmental advocacy organisation, AONTAS responds to the deep and varied needs of its 450 members. It lobbies for positive change in adult and community education through learner-centred consultation, advocacy, and communications. By keeping learners at the heart of its work, AONTAS ensures it is rooted in the current context for learners, has insight into the complexity of policy implementation at individual level, and makes authentic and meaningful representation. Meeting the needs of adult learners has always been a key advocacy focus for AONTAS. To ensure their voices are heard, an Adult Learner's Forum was set up in 2010.

Meeting the needs of adult learners has always been a key advocacy focus for AONTAS.

KEEPING AN OUTWARD FOCUS

Adult learning advocacy is an international movement made up of committed social-justice advocates. AONTAS has established itself firmly in this global collective that strives for more equitable provision of education. By broadening its focus in this way, it has become an increasingly important constituent of NGOs engaged in EU and cross-border initiatives.

This work brings benefits closer to home. For example, working in close mutual support with adult learning organisations across the UK, AONTAS co-hosted the first 'five nations' event with colleagues in Northern Ireland, held in Belfast and entitled 'Borders, Boundaries and Bridges'. This brought adult learning advocates together from Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and England.

At EU level, AONTAS is a partner or lead in all three key action funding programmes of ERASMUS+. AONTAS:

- is a National Coordinator of the European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL) and engages with the European Commission
- contributes to EPALE
- is a board member of the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) for EU policy influence

- continually strengthens its expansive network across adult learning NGOs and education ministries across Europe.

Broader engagement has given our members the opportunity to engage in continuous professional development across Europe and raised the profile of the Irish lifelong learning system, particularly in learner voice and community education.

AONTAS's work also includes building the research basis for adult learning through *The Adult Learner*, promoting adult learning through the Adult Learners' Festivals, building the capacity of community education through CEN, directing the public to learning opportunities through the OneStepUp information and referral service, and leading the National FET Learner Forum. These activities empower learners and mandate AONTAS to represent members at national and EU level.

Before 1969, and throughout AONTAS's evolution, the main factor underlying the historical and persistent need for advocacy work in this area is the endemic inequality of access to and outcomes of educational opportunities for adult learners. To gain any ground for the most disadvantaged people in the population, AONTAS and its membership have always believed it is essential to lobby for sustainable, equal participation in learner-centred, quality, accredited and non-accredited lifelong learning.

Currently, the lifelong learning participation rate is 8.9 per cent (Eurostat, 2018). While this represents progress, it is worth noting how the recently published Adult Education Survey (AES) by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) shows there are continuing and changing forms of educational inequality. Stark inequalities still exist in lifelong learning participation among 25–64-year-olds.

Stark inequalities still exist in lifelong learning participation among 25–64 year olds,

Factors influencing the likelihood of participating in education include age, gender, level of education, region (geographically, and urban/rural), and level of deprivation. If you leave school early, you are seven times less likely to participate in formal, accredited education (2%) than if you have a degree (14%). Simply put, those who can access and benefit well from the education system continue to participate more in lifelong learning.

FET policy is focusing on those who are in employment through the new policy framework 'Supporting Working Lives and Enterprise Growth in Ireland: 2018–2021 further education and training policy framework for skills development of people in employment', officially launched by Minister Richard Bruton on 11 September 2018. With lifelong learning becoming the new norm for employees, it is important that all have the opportunity to participate to improve their prospects.

The AES states that unemployed people were over three times more likely to participate in formal education than employed people (28.2% versus 7.6%), possibly due to labour market activation policies. Additionally, employed people were much more likely to have participated in non-formal education than unemployed people (59.3% versus 38.3%). More employed

people participated in lifelong learning than unemployed people (62.6% versus 52.9%).

But what does this tell us about employee access to education? We know you cannot view people in employment as a homogenous group, a clear example being the 2017 OECD report stating there are major differences in access:

- i. Non-standard workers (those in precarious conditions with little or no job security, part-time, temporary and self-employed people) are more likely to be women, receive less training and employment stability.
- ii. In Ireland, every tenth employee is an involuntary part-time worker.
- iii. Full-time temporary workers are 20% less likely, and part-time workers 40% less likely, than standard workers to receive training and skills development, which leads to further wage inequality.
- iv. Immigrants and workers low in skills receive less education and training from employers.
- v. Generally in OECD countries, employers spend twice as much on employees with tertiary education as opposed to those lower in skills.

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN ADULT LEARNING

The AES highlighted cost, family responsibilities, and health as significant barriers. For example, 21 per cent of people whose highest level of education was primary cited their health as the reason they could not participate in education; 15 per cent of those with a lower-secondary qualification cited the same. Only 4 per cent of those with third-level qualifications cited health.

Rates of depression in Ireland are more than 10 percentage points lower for those with third level education.

While we cannot determine the health issues involved, we do know from OECD data (2017) that rates of depression in Ireland are more than 10 percentage points lower for those with third-level education than for those with below second level. Clearly, education policy change alone cannot overcome every barrier. Of course, educational

inequality cannot be understood or addressed in isolation from wider societal inequality.

INTEGRATING BROADER SUPPORTS

The ability to engage in lifelong learning, with ACFET especially, must be viewed in the context of a person's life situation. Supports for health issues, access to affordable quality accommodation, and alleviation of poverty all contribute to the likelihood of participating in lifelong learning. Similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, until the most immediate rudimentary barriers come down, educational inequality will persist. Integrated, whole-system approaches with wrap-around supports are needed to bridge gaps in engaging and retaining educationally disadvantaged learners.

Community education has traditionally offered an alternative, arguably more fit-for-purpose, set of supports. For example, counselling services, mentoring, and childcare are not only more person- and learner-centred, they represent straightforward features of best practice on what works well in allowing education to become an empowering force in learners'

lives, with positive effects on their families and communities, yielding deep socioeconomic and health dividends for all society.

With this knowledge, we can infer with a high level of confidence from the AES data (CSO, 2018) that the following recommendations will greatly increase the quantity and improve the quality of lifelong learning participation rates in Ireland, with lessons for other jurisdictions:

- **No financial cost** – Keep FET accessible by ensuring there is no cost for participation.
- **Support diversity of education provision** available, non-formal and formal offerings, particularly through part-time provision, so adults can manage other responsibilities (family/caring).
- **Widen access to accredited provision** for adults in a range of education contexts to address the low formal education participation rate.
- **Community education** – support local learning opportunities to address the regional disparities in lifelong learning participation.

As we move towards fifty years of AONTAS, unfortunately these issues are not new; nor are they exclusive to Ireland. A review of all thirty-five years of *The Adult Learner* highlights recurrent themes: the need to cover costs (no fees for learners, to revive the mantra of ‘no crèche, no course’); to provide adequate childcare; and to offer a holistic range of supports for learners.

What we have learned over the fifty years of AONTAS is that we have the answers to such questions through the wealth of knowledge from our members and adult learners. Diversity of adult learning provision is vital: part-time, flexible, accredited and non-accredited courses; clear progression paths; recognition of prior learning (RPL); learner supports (including financial) in formal and non-formal (i.e., community education) contexts; effective learning methodologies; and integrating learner voice across provision.

Recurrent themes: the need to cover costs; to provide adequate childcare; and to offer a holistic range of supports for learners.

A VISION OF ADULT LEARNING AT FIFTY

We have learned that community education is precious: it must never be taken for granted or allowed to stagnate. AONTAS, with its organisational culture rooted in the tradition of adult and community education, adhering to transformative values, and advocating for adult learning, has always been responsive to change. It adopts new methods of provision and proactively maintains its relevance for those it serves.

AONTAS has worked continuously to meet the needs of the most educationally disadvantaged; it has empowered communities, particularly women; and it has contributed to cross-generational educational equality as a home-grown, community-centred model of holistic education provision, in many ways making Ireland the envy of Europe. For an equitable vision for adult learning, it is time we gave community education the recognition, resources, and respect it deserves.

In 2019, AONTAS will adopt its new Strategic Plan, which encompasses extensive consultations, providing a roadmap for driving educational equality for all adults. Not only does Ireland have the capacity to become a

global leader in ACFET: it must. Reaching its full potential as a model lifelong learning society is no longer an option or aspiration; it needs to happen or we risk succumbing to negative outcomes that have occurred elsewhere, with deeply disturbing political, economic, and cultural consequences. Two of the main questions facing ACFET are:

- How will AONTAS build on its legacy of empowering those most excluded from the benefits of education?
- How will AONTAS vigilantly maintain its pole position in the broader sphere of influence, to ensure that its values and vision remain at the heart of driving progress in educational equality?

In a time of unprecedented uncertainty and inequality, we know that AONTAS's past record, present position, and new strategic plan place adult and community education on course to be at the heart of improving the health of Irish democracy and civil society in the twenty-first century.

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BRINGING OPPORTUNITIES TO THE LOW-SKILLED

The hidden people of our education and training system



Inez Bailey

CEO, National Adult
Literacy Agency
(NALA)

Against the backdrop of Ireland's much-vaunted international reputation for having the best-educated workforce, it comes as a shock to many that nearly half a million people in the current labour force have lower secondary as their highest level of educational attainment. In this article I will try to answer the following questions: Who are these 'hidden' people, and how have they been supported by our education and training system to raise their educational profile? Is the EU's Upskilling Pathways an opportunity Ireland cannot afford to miss?

Compared to many of our European neighbours, Ireland was late to introduce free second-level, in 1967. From this time, our education system began a significant transformation leading to mass participation in secondary education. Over time, this led to greater participation in third-level education (Coolahan, 1981). With the abolition of university fees in 1997, the course was set to continue increasing participation in higher education. This focus on increasing participation in the formal education system has continued apace.

Also in 1997, the current Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton, as Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, presided over the White Paper on Human Resource Development (DETE, 1997) which recognised the extent of the low level of educational attainment among the workforce and the critical need for upskilling and lifelong learning. A decade of policy wrangling between the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) and Department of Education and Science (DES) did not yield a significant measure to address the extent of upskilling required. While lifelong learning was adopted as a guiding principle of education policy, strategy, and implementation, to realise this slippery concept proved too great a challenge.

A further effort came in the first National Skills Strategy (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2007), which set targets for raising educational attainment levels for the workforce to be achieved by 2020. This report called for Government to help those without a Level 4 or 5 qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) to achieve this level of education through full- or part-time study without incurring costs and with a level of subsistence provided by the State.

Despite this ambitious plan being punctuated by the financial crash, all targets were either achieved or on course to be achieved by 2020 except for the one concerned with raising the level of educational attainment of those with lower secondary education. Consequently,

the target was rolled over into the current National Skills Strategy (DES, 2016) without a published analysis of why previous efforts had failed.

Drawing from the Labour Force Survey in quarter 3 2017 (Skills and Labour Market Research Unit, 2018), there are over 445,000 people aged 25–64 with at most lower-secondary education or Level 3 on the NFQ. The largest numbers are aged 45 and over. Most work as farmers and construction workers, with others in retail, food and beverage, and health care sectors. Most worryingly in terms of upskilling, this group of people have significantly lower levels of participation in lifelong learning than their counterparts with higher levels of educational attainment.

SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority, recently launched a new policy framework for skills development for people in employment which places an emphasis on those whose skill level is below Level 5 on the NFQ, with a target to reach 40,000 people described as vulnerable by 2021. ‘Supporting Working Lives and Enterprise Growth in Ireland’ (SOLAS, 2018a) was accompanied by a press release with the following comment from Minister Bruton:

To address the basic skills issue, the EU has outlined a three-step approach called Upskilling Pathways.

Ireland is currently behind in this area. This represents a major challenge for both enterprise and the education and training sector to develop and nurture the talent that is already in the workplace, both to drive enterprise success and to facilitate the personal career path of the individual. Both business and the education sector need to substantially step up their efforts to meet the very ambitious target we have set – at least 15 per cent of adults participating in lifelong learning by 2020. We will need a substantial increase in activity and novel, inventive programmes to deliver on this target. We are looking for measurable actions, which we will include and report on each year as part of our annual Action Plan for Education, which sets out our strategy to make Ireland’s education and training service the best in Europe by 2026.

UPSKILLING PATHWAYS – AN OPPORTUNITY FOR MUCH-NEEDED INNOVATION?

Chiming with Minister Bruton’s call to action, A New Skills Agenda for Europe (European Commission, 2016) similarly sets out the importance of skills for human capital, employability, and competitiveness, and guides member states to strengthen the quality and relevance of skills development. Chief among the actions required is the urgent need to raise the basic skills of the quarter of Europeans who struggle with literacy, numeracy, and digital skills. In Ireland, one in six Irish adults has low literacy and one in four has low numeracy (OECD, 2012).

To address the basic skills issue, the EU has outlined a three-step approach called Upskilling Pathways. The first step is to ensure that citizens have easy access to assess their skills. They should then be able to take up a flexible learning opportunity to meet their needs. The third step is to ensure that people are able to validate their skills level through certification.

Upskilling Pathways directs our focus onto the citizen who may need to upskill, and invites countries to examine how well they meet the three-step

standard through their existing education and training infrastructure. While most countries have given their initial responses to the EU, there is a common belief that all countries will have a gap between what is provided and the citizen facing the three-step standard of Upskilling Pathways.

In Ireland, like many other countries, assessment is usually embedded in education and training programmes, accessed after the person has decided to join a course. Upskilling Pathways compels us to think about how to make assessment available to the public before joining a course. Adult information and guidance services also play a role here, but again these services are often too predicated on the person already being with an education and training provider.

Innovation and technology will be increasingly deployed to offer solutions to this issue. The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) currently offers a basic skills-checker tool as part of the eLearning platform www.writeon.ie, which aims to help people with literacy and numeracy concerns clarify their skills level. Further research is required to ascertain how much this tool helps orient people on a learning path.

The extent to which learning opportunities are offered in flexible formats is another debatable element. Most further education and training provision takes place face to face, in classrooms, and during the week. But there is growing awareness and adoption of blended learning solutions, most notably writeon.ie, which is being used by Education and Training Boards for those wishing to upskill and gain certification at Levels 2 and 3 on the NFQ.

There is growing awareness and adoption of blended learning solutions, most notably writeon.ie

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), which speaks to the third step of Upskilling Pathways, is much written about as a way to encourage more people into lifelong learning. But it remains largely a policy artefact awaiting realisation as a commonly understood process by which people can validate what they already know and receive the appropriate qualification. Among the obstructions is the cost of providing such a service to the public. Again, technology can play a role here and in the area of upskilling; where the volume of learning is low, so are the associated costs. NALA has been providing RPL through writeon.ie for nearly a decade and has shown how it can meet the mantra of access and progression for adult learners.

Upskilling Pathways offers Ireland a new perspective from which to further develop and increase the support to people who wish to develop their basic skills. All the education partners are willing, but without increased investment, our efforts could fall short again.

ARE WE NOW READY TO SEE AND RESPOND TO THE HIDDEN PEOPLE OF OUR EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEM?

The existence, extent, and problem of people with low levels of educational attainment in the workforce have been recognised in policy terms for well over two decades. Despite targets being set, efforts to address the issue have consistently fallen short. Why this is the case remains largely a matter of conjecture.

With a new policy and strategy comes the hope that this failed trajectory will finally be broken, and that the people who have benefited least from our education and training system to date will get to share in the spoils that the rest of us know lifelong learning can bring.

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Dr Padraig Walsh, CEO, QQI; **Mary Mitchell O'Connor**, Minister of State for Higher Education; and **Billy Bennett**, VP for Academic Affairs and Registrar of Letterkenny Institute of Technology.

Conference on Best Practice

Quality and Qualifications Ireland, the state agency responsible for the promotion of quality in education and training in Ireland, recently hosted a conference on Best Practice in Student-Centred Approaches in Education and Training in Dublin Castle. The event was co-hosted by the Union of Students Ireland, the Higher Education Authority, the Irish Universities Association, the Technological Higher Education Association and the Irish Survey of Student Engagement.

Delegates heard from national and international experts on how to implement student-centred approaches with real impact in higher and further education and training. The event also showcased good practice in student-centred initiatives, demonstrating the impact on the quality of teaching and learning.

THE YOUTHREACH STORY:

Shining a Light on a lesser known narrative



Louise Cole

Bray & North
Wicklow Youthreach
Coordinator, KWETB
and National
Association of
Youthreach
Coordinators
Communications
Officer

It has been a year for review and reflection in the Youthreach community. 2018 saw the completion of a systematic evaluation of the Youthreach programme carried out by SOLAS through the ESRI as part of the programme evaluation commitments made in the FET Strategy 2014–19.

Preparing for the evaluation, there was a clear realisation that it was a unique opportunity to embrace the spotlight, and there was a hunger among Youthreach coordinators nationally to use the period of review to reflect on – and, most importantly, highlight to a wider audience – the work that is happening in our centres nationwide.

SO WHAT IS THE YOUTHREACH STORY?

Very often there is genuine misunderstanding of the Youthreach programme and of its place in, and contribution to, the Irish education system. Youthreach is a programme that caters for young people for whom mainstream education has not been successful, and for whom the supported and needs-based model that underpins the programme is much more suitable. It operates in 110 centres in twenty-five counties, managed locally by the sixteen ETBs.

Youthreach provides an invaluable educational opportunity to young people aged 16–20 who want a programme that gives them the chance to gain qualifications, develop their social and personal skills, and ultimately move on to further education, training, or employment. It is designed to meet the needs of a diverse range of learners in an ever-changing societal and educational landscape, by providing a safe space where they can identify and develop their strengths, address areas for improvement, and ultimately be the best version of themselves that they can be.

‘Youthreach is a good chance to get a practical education. Not all people can fit in a mainstream school – this is where they fit in now,’ said Shane, a learner in Wicklow Town Youthreach.

REACHING MILESTONES

The past year has provided Youthreach with platforms through which we have been able to share the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of learners like Shane. Not only was Youthreach undergoing evaluation and review, it was also celebrating key milestones.

The first of these came at the start of the academic year, with the celebration of sixty years of ESF funding in the EU, the bedrock of the Youthreach programme funding history. As one of the largest

ESF-funded programmes, Youthreach was given the wonderful opportunity to play a major part in the celebrations.

Youthreach input at this conference was all about the learner. Kirsty, a past learner from Clara Youthreach, County Offaly, gave an impassioned speech on her experience of Youthreach and how the centre's supportive and nurturing environment brought her from a difficult time in her life to a place where she is experiencing both happiness and success in her career. This was followed by the unveiling of *Youthreach: The National Picture*, a video developed for launch at the conference capturing the learner voice from all over the country.

THE LEARNER VOICE

Youthreach: The National Picture serves as an introduction to the programme in a very powerful way. Through the voice of learners, we can hear what Youthreach means to them and how it is empowering young people to achieve both academically and personally in their lives. This is supported by input from coordinators on the NAYC executive,¹ who provide context and structure to the overall video, ensuring that it will become a useful and informative promotional tool for use into the future.

Youthreach is a programme that caters for young people for whom mainstream education has not been successful.

Filming the video was a wonderful opportunity to involve many centres and learners in a combined effort to promote the Youthreach programme. The video team visited four centres around the country: Ballymun in Dublin, Sligo Youthreach, Galway City Youthreach, and The Glen Youthreach in Cork. The idea was to make the video truly national and to include as many ETBs as possible. Each host centre opened its doors to learners from centres in their region to come and take part. The finished video provides valuable insight into the workings of the Youthreach programme nationally and truly captures the learner voice.

SUPPORTING THE LEARNER JOURNEY

There is little point in sharing the voice of the Youthreach learner with the wider public if we don't take the time to listen to it ourselves. One of the underlying and most valued strengths of the Youthreach programme is the relationships developed between learners and staff. It is through these relationships that centres can best identify the challenges the learners face and the barriers that may exist to their succeeding at this stage of their educational and personal journey.

The 2018 annual NAYC Conference was themed 'Positive Pathways', to allow space for coordinators to explore how we can support this journey. There was a focus on mental health and on the challenges that exist not just for our learners but for the future of the programme and for meeting learners' needs. As Dr Mary Gordon identified in her 2017 NEPS research report:²

If approached in a crosscutting way, the Youthreach programme can be seen as a form of vocational education provision and as a resource for the building of resilience and as a location for the provision of guidance and support services to a particularly vulnerable group of young people.

The conference also included a facilitated reflection and consultation session with NAYC members on the Youthreach quality assurance tool, the Quality Framework. Since its establishment in November 2000, there has been continued emphasis on examining and improving implementation of the Quality Framework, with particular focus since 2014 on developing and adapting it further.

The primary purpose of the Framework is to help staff to examine centre practice, identify strengths and challenges, and implement actions to improve the service they provide, thus ensuring the continued enhanced provision of a programme that supports that all-important learner journey.

FROM RELECTION TO PRAXIS

Youthreach concluded 2018 with a celebration of all that we are and hope to become, as we move from a period of evaluation and reflection to one of action and change for the better. Not only did the year close with publication of the programme evaluation and associated recommendations, but it also saw a first-of-its-kind Youthreach event that celebrated the thirty-year anniversary.

YR FEST brought every centre in the country together for a celebration of learning, diversity, and opportunity. Held in the impressive National Sports Campus, learners from over 100 centres had the opportunity to engage with everything from sporting activities to workshops, learner performances and centre showcases. This was enhanced by a large exhibition area that brought together groups and organisations focused on progression into further education, training, and employment, and on health and well-being.

Youthreach is one of
the most important
developments in Irish
education over the last
30 years
- Dr Dermot Stokes.

2018 has been a year for positively exploiting every possible platform to communicate a single-minded and important ideal, an ideal that we plan to continue driving and supporting, an ideal that simply states: #WeAreYouthreach.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

In recognition of our thirty-year anniversary, it seems fitting to leave the closing words of this article to Dr Dermot Stokes, adjunct professor to DCU's Further Education and Training Research Centre (FETRC) in the Institute of Education, and the Founding Youthreach National Coordinator:

Youthreach is one of the most important developments in Irish education over the last 30 years, and its flexible, needs-based and learner-centred approach is widely recognised across Europe as a model provision for early school leavers. Along the way, we contributed handsomely to the growth of FET and the development of a new qualifications framework that records progress at the learner's pace and allows for both vertical and transversal progression. And we put centre planning and quality at the heart of teaching and learning in our centres. Most importantly, we worked with several hundred thousand young people. Of course we didn't succeed with everyone, but we always gave as best we could, given the situations that presented,

building the centres into learning and nurturing spaces in which participants could move from dependence to independence. But nothing stays the same. When we started out 30 years ago a mobile phone was the size of a peat briquette and only marginally more communicative! As the world around us changes, we change too. But, though the mission evolves, the essence remains now as it ever was, to put the young learner at the heart of the work.

Youthreach is co-funded by the Irish Government, the European Social Fund, and the Youth Employment Initiative as part of the ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014–2020.

FOOTNOTES

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YR FEST: First-of-its-kind Youthreach Event



YR FEST brought together 100 centres from around the country in October 2018 for a celebration of learning, diversity, and opportunity. Learners engaged with sporting activities, workshops, performances and centre showcases. A large exhibition area facilitated groups and organisations focused on progression into further education, training, and employment.

LEARNER VOICE

What it means for further education and training



Leah Dowdall
AONTAS Learner
Advocacy Officer

While learner voice has had a long history in broader adult education theory and practice, the 2014–2019 Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy for the first time incorporated learner voice as a component of a wider FET framework.¹ The change came after learners were invited to participate in the FET Strategy consultation.

This inclusion of learners was described as ‘one of the most informative parts of the consultation’, fuelling a desire to expand and embed learner voice practices into wider FET culture.² It was a novel concept and validated the Strategy’s aim to achieve a world-class FET system in Ireland. The Irish FET sector was promising to use learner voice to achieve something bold and innovative; the challenge now was to discover what this objective would look like.

LEARNER VOICE IN PRACTICE

When the FET Strategy was developed, learner voice had been gaining traction in Ireland and abroad. In 2003, Scotland launched SPARQS (Student Partnership in Quality Scotland), an agency dedicated to promoting student partnership models. SPARQS soon led the way in creating a Student Engagement Strategy, which outlined key practices and policies to foster meaningful student engagement across the third-level sector.³

The same year in the US, another NGO, SoundOut, launched a pilot project aimed at promoting student engagement in Washington public schools. By 2007, the US Department of Education was recommending SoundOut’s framework as a tool to promote a safe and supportive learning environment.⁴ In 2006, the UK’s Futurelab developed a handbook on learner voice designed for both second- and third-level institutions, outlining methods that could be used to promote a culture of learner voice in schools.⁵

These developments quickly reached Irish educational circles. In 2008, the School of Education at Trinity College began exploring the concept of learner voice.⁶ Trinity educational researcher Paula Flynn piloted a research project on learner voice in the Irish post-primary sector that captured the benefits of student engagement.⁷ While Irish universities had separately explored student engagement strategies, in 2014 educators moved towards a national strategy. A working group chaired by Professor Tom Collins developed a learner engagement guide that included principles for embedding the practice into the Irish university sector.⁸

In 2013, when the FET Strategy was being developed, there were numerous learner voice strategies and principles from which to draw

guidance. The only obstacle was that many were designed for the primary, secondary, or university sector. FET presented unique challenges, many of which meant that learner voice engagement needed to be multifaceted and comprehensive to ensure it was being implemented in an inclusive and meaningful way.

TESTING THE WATERS: ADVANCING LEARNER VOICE IN FET

After the FET Strategy was launched, important initiatives began to take place at local and national level. Nominations for learner representatives were sought on Education and Training Boards (ETBs), FET programmes began appointing learner representatives, and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) took a leadership role in creating a template of learner charters to be launched at ETBs across the country.

In addition to these developments, SOLAS asked AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, to deliver the first National FET Learner Forum. What started in 2016 as an annual national meeting of learners from across the FET sector has evolved into a series of regional fora held over the course of the year, with plans to reach all sixteen ETBs in 2019.

In its three-year existence, the Forum has reached 676 learners, and with regional fora becoming the core base of the national project, the number is projected to rise to 1,000 learners in 2019 alone. The expansion means that new and often unrepresented voices are now being heard. Of the 190 learners who have so far responded to questionnaires at the 2018 National Forum, 35 per cent said they had not been asked to share their voices before on their FET course.

The expansion [of the National FET Learner Forum] means that new and unrepresented voices are now being heard.

These advances have already had a tangible impact. Learners have praised the new processes in place, describing being heard and listened to as important features of the new culture in FET. The recommendations raised by participants, which are shared annually through

a national advisory report and learner report, can be seen representing the learner perspective in the FET midterm progress review.⁹

CHALLENGES TO MAINTAINING THE INTEGRITY OF LEARNER VOICE IN FET

One of the greatest challenges posed by the FET sector is its diversity. FET encompasses learners aged sixteen and up, each seeking educational opportunities for a wide variety of reasons: employment, upskilling, lifelong learning. There are also educational structures supported by SOLAS and ETBs to deliver FET courses to adult learners, including training centres, post-Leaving Certificate colleges, and community centres. This broad range of learners and structures means that learner voice strategies and processes – that use representational models often employed in the primary, secondary, and higher education sector – will simply not yield the same results when applied unilaterally to FET.

It is important to acknowledge this, because FET reaches some of the most vulnerable learners in the country, those who are not represented in traditional consultative bodies. There is a danger, if inclusivity and diverse representation are not the driving factors pushing learner voice forward,

that these voices will remain unengaged and ignored. Learner voice in FET, if implemented meaningfully, could provide an opportunity to bring these voices into policy. Such engagement would have an impact far beyond that of even the FET sector.

It is not an easy task. There are challenges to providing a safe and secure atmosphere in which these voices can be shared. Power structures, even implicitly created, can pose a barrier. As Robinson and Taylor have shown, learners enter the conversation at a different place from other stakeholders.¹⁰ To ensure equity in this conversation, traditional power structures have to be disrupted and learners have to feel comfortable sharing their opinions without judgement.

By allowing AONTAS, an NGO outside of the FET sector, to do this, SOLAS and ETBI built a structure that creates this climate. AONTAS, under the guidance of the Academic Expert Group advising the project, has made significant efforts to ensure this environment is continuously improving.

There is also the question of purpose: What will learner voice give us? In 2014, when the Economic and Social Research Institute completed a comprehensive study of FET, it cited a concerning 'lack of reliable data in the field'.¹¹ In an effort to rectify this, SOLAS committed to evidence-based research as a core aim.

This outlook shaped the way the FET Strategy was approached. However, focusing exclusively on the delivery of results can diminish the importance of learner engagement in building a FET community based on respect and democracy. As both Michael Fielding and Jean Ruddock have pointed out, the focus on using learner voice only for evidence-gathering over the promotion of learner well-being and active citizenship can threaten the integrity of learner voice strategies.¹² Jane Seale even argued there is a danger that policy agendas could hijack learner voice agendas.¹³

Traditional power structures have to be disrupted and learners have to feel comfortable sharing their opinions without judgement.

Results from the FET Learner Forum reaffirm the important function of learner voice engagement, beyond the aim of information-gathering. Learners said the most enjoyable part of learner voice events is 'being able to see so many people involved in adult education', 'speaking with people from the older generation', and 'listening to other people and knowing that they are going through what you are'.¹⁴ At the heart of these comments is an acknowledgement that these conversations have even greater value than the measurable data they yield. They are, in and of themselves, meaningful avenues of promoting a FET culture.

PLOTTING A PATH FORWARD

Given the significant challenges posed by the vast FET landscape, SOLAS and ETBs should be commended for their work so far. They have laid the groundwork for a culture shift in FET. And while we should celebrate the progress made, it is important to acknowledge the work to be done. To embed learner voice into FET, learners must continue to be empowered to feel they can share their voice in a way they feel comfortable with, and they must be resourced adequately to participate actively in this process.

A FET framework on learner voice should be developed. A commitment must be maintained to reach the most vulnerable learners in the FET system. This will require expanding processes like the Forum and other learner consultative events to ensure learner voice is as diverse and representative as possible.

One of the great challenges moving forward is to find a way to communicate that learner voice is more than just a tokenistic gesture, but rather a genuine commitment to learner engagement in policy development and evaluation. This requires expanding learner voice platforms, building mechanisms that communicate to learners the work being done to address their concerns, and consistently celebrating learner voice throughout FET.

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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

