

A strategic objective of the new National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy is to develop a new level 5 and level 6 proposition. This article takes the current suite of level 5 and level 6 FET programmes as a starting point and discusses what this new proposition could look like and how it might be achieved. It concludes with a proposal for charting a way forward.

Introduction

One of the most persistent features of further education and training (FET) provision over the years has been its fragmented nature (NAPD, 2019). A multiplicity of course types, with narrowly defined rules and eligibility criteria, has resulted in a 'confusing array' (SOLAS, 2020, p. 40) of FET programmes, which in itself is a barrier to participation. All of these programmes began as responses to particular policy objectives since the 1970s. Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses, for example, began life as Pre-Employment Courses in 1977, developed in response to rising youth unemployment.

When the Education and Training Boards (ETB) were established in 2013, the suites of FET programmes provided by the Vocational Education Committees (VEC) and the National Training Authority, FÁS, were amalgamated, thus increasing the number and range of FET programmes. Currently, there are over thirty such programmes funded by SOLAS.

Given that FET professionals would be hard pressed to have a clear understanding of this range of programmes, where does a prospective learner even begin? Furthermore, there is considerable waste in the administrative overhead of managing a collection of siloed funding streams for each of these programmes. Rationalising the range of FET programmes, and their associated funding streams, is long overdue, and the new National FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2020) is the ideal platform to provide the appropriate strategic context.

The new National FET Strategy

The new National FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2020) identifies, as a strategic objective, the development of a new level 5 and level 6 proposition:

The confusing array of vocationally focused programmes in FET, with apprenticeships, traineeships, evening training, specific skills training and PLCs offered in two very distinct

A New Level 5 and Level 6 Proposition

What might it look like, and how might we achieve it?



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settings (training centres and FE colleges), must be replaced by a new Level 5 and Level 6 proposition. This will have a core brand, focused on the discipline/the career and NFQ level, and be linked to regional skills needs and clear employment or progression outcomes. (p. 40)

This article will focus on what this new proposition might look like and how its development might be realised. In particular, it will take the current suite of FET programmes as the starting point and propose a direction for rationalisation that could chart a way towards achieving this strategic objective.

Rationalising level 5 and 6 provision

The need to consolidate FET programmes is nothing new. In 1985, the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) observed that the variety of vocational programmes ‘tended to be piecemeal in nature [consisting] ... of individual and largely unrelated programmes’ (p. 35). NESC concluded that ‘all post-compulsory vocational education ... should form consistent parts of an overall coherent framework. ... Ultimately, the first apprenticeship year could be regarded as one component of ... the Vocational Preparation Programme’ (p. 114) (known as the PLC programme today). Indeed, some consolidation occurred in the early 1990s, when a range of post-compulsory initiatives in post-primary schools was consolidated under the PLC programme.

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SOLAS funds over thirty FET programmes, including PLCs, apprenticeships, and traineeships (SOLAS, 2019). In addressing the challenge of today’s confusing FET landscape, one approach could be to categorise programmes by type and purpose. On that basis, four categories can be readily identified:

Initial FET:	for people starting or restarting a career, e.g., PLC, Apprenticeship, Traineeship, Specific Skills Training
Continuing FET:	for people in employment, e.g., Skills to Advance, Skills to Compete
Activation FET:	for people recently unemployed and close to the labour market, e.g., Springboard, Momentum
Developmental FET:	for people who are a distance from the labour market, and perhaps long-term unemployed, e.g., VTOS, adult education.

Considering FET across these four categories of course types highlights the various modes of provision and the diversity of learners. This article will focus on the Initial FET (IFET) category of level 5 and level 6 programmes in place. These include:

- PLC course
- Apprenticeship – both pre- and post-2016
- Traineeship
- Specific Skills Training
- Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS).

While these programmes were developed in response to differing policy objectives over time, in recent years, because of systemic convergences (O'Sullivan, 2018), they have in effect evolved to address similar goals. In other words, there are increasingly few differences between them. For example, a significant proportion of IFET programmes, delivered in either Colleges of Further Education or Training Centres, lead to the same form of certification provided by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).

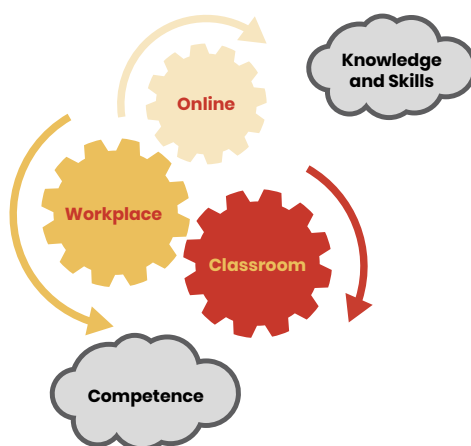
The increasing importance of employer engagement as a policy imperative, and responsiveness to the ever-changing nature of the labour market, raise further challenges of course content and modes of provision. A more flexible approach to all skill-formation provision, in both further and higher education, will be required. In these changing circumstances, requiring attendance in a classroom for a course as the only form of provision is no longer sustainable. The increasing acceptance of the value of work-based learning, with its implications for assessment, also needs to be part of the vision for the future. This would ensure that learning is placed in its occupational context – what Mulder (2015) refers to as the 'situated professionalism' approach to competence development.

In short, education and training provision will occur in three principal venues: classroom, workplace, and online (see image). The blend of these three will depend on various factors. Their accommodation in assessment will be an increasing part of education and training provision. Indeed, it is the level of integration of the learning across these three learning venues, within a situated-professionalism approach to competence development, that will be the key to the quality of all FET programmes (O'Sullivan, 2019).

Reflecting the new reality, courses can take place in the classroom, online, or in the workplace, with a blend of the three venues depending on the learning circumstances.

The new National FET Strategy also sets a strategic objective for this new proposition of at least 30% being work-based (SOLAS, 2020, p. 40). This will have implications for provision, in terms of modes of delivery, staffing, and ongoing continuous professional development for FET staff. On the assessment side, there will associated governance implications, particularly for consistency of assessment. There may also be an implication for the number of credits given to the work-based element of the learning. In the current level 5 and level 6 awards, the certification requirement under QQI's Common Awards System, used widely on PLC courses, provides only

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Three venues of learning competence model of skill formation (O'Sullivan, 2019)

15 of the 120 credits, 12.5%, for work experience placement. This appears to be out of line with the strategic objective of 'at least 30% work-based' and may need further consideration.

From a range of FET programmes to a new proposition

While opportunities for consolidation across the range of IFET courses may include some elements of the apprenticeships, as suggested by the NESI in 1985, the remainder of this article will focus on full-time courses. The inclusion of apprenticeships in the new proposition will be left for a future discussion.

FET programmes are essentially a set of rules that govern approval, funding, and staffing aimed at addressing a particular policy objective. Over the years these rules have been shown to be too narrow in their focus and unresponsive to the changing policy landscape. In recent years, through the Strategic Performance Agreement process between SOLAS and the ETBs, full-time IFET programmes are categorised as primarily 'labour market focussed' or 'progression focussed'.

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In the context of the vision for the FET College of the Future (SOLAS, 2020), which involves consolidating existing FET provision within a single integrated college structure, there may be an opportunity to examine the suite of current level 5 and 6 programmes through the dichotomy of 'progression focussed' versus 'labour market focussed' programmes. Regardless of this dichotomy, it needs to be borne in mind that 'labour market focussed' courses, leading to level 5 and 6 QQI awards, can also facilitate progression through the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

As mentioned above, the suite of such programmes includes PLC (with the new pre-apprenticeships), VTOS, Traineeships, and Specific Skills Training. Clearly there are individual differences in the structure of these programmes, in particular, duration and degree of work-based learning. However, if we ignore the labels attached to the programmes and view them as IFET programmes leading to level 5 or 6 awards, their similarities come into focus. In addition, the three venues of learning can be clearly identified.

The reviews commissioned by SOLAS in recent years into a number of these programmes identified strengths and weakness in all (McGuinness et al., 2018; SOLAS, 2018). In examining these reviews together, complementarities begin to emerge, with the strengths in one programme type potentially complementing the weaknesses in another, and vice versa. For example, evaluation of the PLC programme identified the work experience element as a weakness, while one of the strengths of the traineeship was identified as employer engagement and the quality of structured training in the work placement element of the course. From an evaluative perspective, these various programmes could be seen as having 'piloted' different approaches to various aspects of similar policy issues. It is now time to collate the lessons learned and move forward with a unified offering.

While no perfect fit exists, perhaps a ‘best fit’ could be achieved through a hybrid or bricolage of the key strengths of these programmes into a new level 5 and level 6 proposition. The parameters in which this new programme would operate should be flexible enough to facilitate different situations. In other words, rather than having multiple narrowly defined programmes, leading to the same level 5 and 6 QQI awards, addressing different aspects of the same policy objective, why not create a single flexible programme, leading to a level 5 and level 6 award. This flexible proposition can then be adapted to meet the evolving needs of the Irish labour market, including sector-specific requirements. This would make redundant the need for multiple programme labels and multiple associated funding streams.

In higher education, many course types are distinguished by their level on the NFQ: level 7 degree, level 8 degree. There is no reason why FET cannot adopt a similar approach. This new proposition could be described by the level of qualification achieved at the end – a Level 5 Certificate or a Level 6 Advanced or Higher Certificate. From the broader perspective of an integrated tertiary education sector, there would be significant advantage in having the entire range of post-secondary course types, within disciplinary or occupational fields, distinguished by their NFQ level – from Level 5 Certificate, and Level 6 Advanced or Higher Certificate, to Level 7 and Level 8 Degrees, and beyond.

This approach would address the need, referred to in the FET Strategy, of providing clarity on the ‘core brand, focused on the discipline/the career and NFQ level, and be linked to regional skills needs and clear employment or progression outcomes’ (SOLAS, 2020, p. 40). Such an approach builds on the strengths of the current range of programmes and would also address strategic objectives under the three pillars of the new National FET Strategy – skills development, learning pathways, and inclusion.

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Developing a new proposition for level 5 and level 6 would facilitate employer engagement in skills development, as it would be clearer what is being offered. Similarly for students, the learning pathways would be clearer, removing the significant informational barrier that currently exists and, in so doing, enabling greater participation and inclusion. The development of this new proposition would have the added benefit of rationalising the administrative costs associated with current programmes, potentially freeing up funds to reinvest in its implementation.

Conclusion

This article discussed the strategic objective of a new proposition at level 5 and level 6, highlighting the urgent need to address the current ‘confusing array’ of FET programmes. It discussed what this new proposition might look like and how it might be achieved. It proposed the development of a new, single, unified offering at level 5 and 6, based on the collective strengths of the current suite of programmes.

This hybrid, or bricolage, of elements of existing courses would render redundant the need for multiple labels and their associated funding streams. Based on the three venues of learning, such a proposition would

provide sufficient flexibility to facilitate a range of requirements, including local or regional, sector-specific, as well as the evolving needs of the labour market as a whole.

However, a new approach needs to be taken to policy development than has been the case heretofore. As NESC (1985) observed about the range of vocational programmes at the time: ‘Essentially they consist of individual and largely unrelated programmes grafted onto a system which has not undergone any basic change’ (p. 35).

Rather than following the traditional approach to policy development and ‘tweaking’ the way we have done things in the past, we need to look to what is needed in the future, and design and resource the provision of this new proposition accordingly.

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Students who completed Erasmus+ Work Placements

Beauty therapy learners at Blackrock Further Education Institute, Co Dublin, with trainer Gillian Byrne. These students completed their Erasmus+ vocational work placements at the Tenerife carnival in 2019.

