

# 2021: A Milestone Year for FET and Apprenticeships

This piece offers an overview of further education and training (FET) in Ireland in what proved a milestone year for the sector. It describes the major developments in FET and apprenticeship in 2021, outlines the policies and strategies at play, and looks ahead to an exciting 2022.

## Introduction

2021 was a milestone year for further education and training (FET) and apprenticeships. The launch of the Central Applications Office (CAO) website in November was another important step in ensuring that these pathways are valued equally to traditional degree routes. For the first time, all of the further education and apprenticeship options are on the table alongside higher education choices when students are discussing and deciding their next steps after school.

The class of 2021–22 can now apply directly for over 650 further education courses within a few clicks from the CAO website. Information on 62 apprenticeship programmes is also directly available, including eligibility criteria, testimonials, job opportunities, and a freephone helpline on how to take the next step in becoming an apprentice in your chosen area of interest.

Ensuring greater awareness of the diverse pathways available is only the first step in the process, and simplifying access routes into FET and apprenticeship should immediately stimulate some additional interest. It has been no small feat to bring us to this point, with great collaboration from the CAO and intensive work by our own team in SOLAS, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), and Education and Training Boards (ETBs), and strong support from our Ministers and Departments to see this through.

This should also serve as a major strategic development as it evolves in the medium and long term, starting to change the conversations between school leavers and their peers, teachers, guidance counsellors, and families and allow them to make smart choices about their futures. This will be done by working towards further integration with the CAO system, by refining ETB application processes to more consistent entry routes to FET, by more clearly promoting FET-HE (higher education) pathways within the resource, and by expanding the FET options available to



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include more practical and shorter-term opportunities for school leavers, including traineeships and focused skills training.

This is another critical reform in support of our central premise that FET be for *everyone*, a driving ambition of Transforming Learning, the Future FET strategy launched in 2019. The strategy focuses on three core priorities: building skills, facilitating pathways, and fostering inclusion. Alongside the CAO development, there have been many other highlights throughout the year in support of these priorities, which I discuss in more depth below.

### Delivering on Ireland's critical skills priorities

There is increasing acknowledgement of the critical role that FET will play in developing the skills and expertise required to deliver on Housing for All and the Climate Action national policy agenda. Housing for All commits to building 33,000 new houses each year, but a significant skills pipeline will have to be put in place to support delivery of this plan. SOLAS is working with partners across government and industry to do this, with key areas of focus including apprenticeship catch-up and expansion; investment in non-apprenticeship FET provision; continued development of Safe Pass, with the establishment of an online delivery option from early 2022; and a major retrofitting upskilling programme.

This focus on retrofitting is also a core part of a green skills action programme funded under the National Recovery and Resilience Programme. There are currently two centres of excellence for retrofitting/NZEB (nearly zero-energy building), operated by Waterford and Wexford ETB and Laois and Offaly ETB; three more are planned for Cork, Limerick, and Sligo early in 2022, with 4,500 upskilling places to be delivered that year. There are also plans to develop and roll out a green skills module that can be embedded across every FET course, and to update apprenticeship curricula to reflect the need for such expertise across all trades.

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### Exciting new era for apprenticeships

The launch of the Apprenticeship Action Plan 2021–2025 signalled a move to a new single apprenticeship system, with an ambition to increase apprenticeship registrations to 10,000 per annum by 2025. A more consistent approach to governance, employer support, access, and funding across all apprenticeship programmes is planned, with a new National Apprenticeship Office to be set up, jointly managed by SOLAS and the Higher Education Authority (HEA).

A move to a more devolved, consortia-led delivery model for craft apprenticeships has also been flagged over the lifetime of the plan. This will be introduced in tandem with the expansion of capacity in craft apprenticeship provision, a critical priority both to address waiting lists for training due to Covid-19 restrictions over the last two years, and to meet the future skills needs flagged above. Investment of €20m to expand facilities, the recruitment of new instructors, and a new delivery model for phase 2

training involving three annual intakes instead of two are already playing a part in addressing the backlog, which peaked in the summer.

### Flexible and online upskilling opportunities

There is continued expansion of eCollege as a free, open-access source of online, eTutor-supported FET since it opened at the onset of the pandemic. Around 35,000 learners a year are now participating in these courses, with a new focus on linking them to learning pathways through FET with ETBs. Covid-19 has also had a lasting impact on the labour market, with a significant base of people no longer able to return to their pre-restrictions jobs.

This prompted the launch of the Skills to Compete initiative to help them return to sustainable employment, with ETBs delivering flexible programmes to improve employability, develop the digital skills now required for virtually every job, and develop the specific skills required to target work in growth occupations and industries. To date, this has helped 16,700 people make the journey back towards employment.

Add to this the continued success of Skills to Advance, which provides free or heavily subsidised upskilling access to employers and their employees, with over 10,000 participants expected in 2021, and the FET system has shown remarkable agility and flexibility in responding to a transformed environment.

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### Adult Literacy for Life

A really important development was the launch of the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) 10-year strategy in September 2021 to address literacy, numeracy, and digital-inclusion needs via a cross-government and cross-society approach. A range of commitments and actions are in place across four pillars, to ensure people can *understand* their needs and where to go to meet them; that they can *access* all the learning and support they need; that the learning and support available can *expand* to meet this massive challenge; and that we *empower* people and communities to make a real difference to their lives.

A national programme office and 16 regional ALL coordinators and literacy coalitions are being established to drive the action and partnership required to respond holistically to local needs. A major national campaign and a new one-stop shop, [www.adultliteracyforlife.ie](http://www.adultliteracyforlife.ie), is also up and running to help direct those with unmet literacy needs to the support and resources they need.

### Pandemic challenges

Allied to this, and to the need to facilitate access, tailor learning, and develop support for those furthest behind first, particularly in the context of Covid-19 restrictions, a second year of the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund was launched in 2022, with €10m available for community-based education. This is supporting activity in digital

technologies, learner assistance, outreach, engagement, and mentoring Fund and specific responses in the pandemic.

Of course, amidst all these positive developments, the continuing prevalence of Covid-19 constrains and impacts on FET's ability to operate effectively and fully support our learners. After a period of closure at the start of the year, and then the operation of FET facilities at significantly reduced capacity, a full return to onsite provision was finally possible only from September.

This has been important in beginning to address the significant backlog of apprentices waiting for off-the-job training referenced above. But it is also critical in enabling a full learning experience, particularly in the technical and vocational areas that characterise so much of FET, where practical face-to-face education and demonstration, and often work-based components, are an integral part of the offering. It is key in supporting and re-engaging with those learners most at risk of exclusion, for whom a wholly online learning experience has not been suitable.

### Concluding thoughts

I would like to thank all at SOLAS, all the ETBs, other FET providers, and all our other partners and stakeholders for their outstanding work and resilience in keeping the learning flowing and learners supported during another challenging year. But most of all I would like to thank all the learners and apprentices who came through FET in 2022, who showed tremendous dedication and understanding in coping with restrictions and changes to their learning experience, and who engaged with ETBs and ourselves to ensure we could tailor provision and support to adapt to the rapidly evolving circumstances in the best way possible.

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Despite this return, and the expanded access to online FET noted above, another immensely challenging year means that overall FET learner numbers remain below pre-pandemic levels. The priority for 2020 and beyond will be to 'reset' to 2019 levels and continue a growth trajectory that will reinforce the enhanced profile and contribution of FET and apprenticeship in meeting the current and rapidly evolving needs of our economy and society.

The platform is there for a really exciting 2022, where new three-year strategic performance agreements between SOLAS and the 16 ETBs will further embed the delivery of Transforming Learning; the development of the FET College of the Future vision will be underpinned by new approaches to capital and recurrent funding; and the commitment to a more integrated tertiary education system will be reflected in a reformed apprenticeship system and a major focus on pathways into and between FET and higher education.