

This article highlights the progression routes and opportunities for skills development in further education and training, looking beyond direct entry to third-level education, and shows why FET can 'hold the key to that degree'.

Further education and training in Ireland

Ireland has traditionally had high levels of direct progression to third-level education. When free second-level education was introduced, it transformed society, enabling school-leavers to build academic careers rather than craft. This left an unhealthy focus on the third-level academic pathway as the preferred option of the vast majority of parents for their children.

Many students are not suited to academic learning at second level, and the heightened academic routine associated with third level may be mismatched with their natural learning preferences. This is where further education and training (FET) comes into its own, with pathways to get to the same destination while earning money and gaining work experience and life skills alongside academic learning.

FET routes offer a wide variety of lifelong education options for learners who wish to develop their abilities and skills in a way best suited to them, and to progress in a flexible time frame suited to their lifestyle. As well as giving school-leavers a direct route into many careers, FET can take learners further throughout their career. The idea that a burst of education in our late teens and early 20s is enough to last an entire career is no longer feasible. Through FET, we can upskill and re-skill, as well as benefiting from 'earn while you learn' programmes that benefit us and our employers.

FET is at the heart of every community throughout Ireland, enhancing engagement and integration across the country. Options include apprenticeships, traineeships, Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses, community and adult education, and core literacy and numeracy services. The world is changing, and FET is changing with it. As a nation, we have learnt to pivot to new ways of working and learning, and FET is now taking centre stage.

The Value and Appeal of Further Education and Training

Shining a light on FET in Ireland in 2021



Fiona Sneddon

Further Education and Training Manager, Cork Education and Training Board

When Simon Harris was appointed Minister for Further and Higher Education in June 2020, one of his first official duties was to launch a new FET strategy that aims to repair, repurpose, and revive our economy and our communities over the next five years. The strategy marks a pivotal moment for FET. The ways we work, learn, do business, and engage with each other have changed fundamentally and will continue to do so. People are making different career and lifestyle choices, employers are adopting new business models, and education providers are working to embed technology fully in the delivery of learning to keep up with technological changes.

There is already significant social and economic damage as a result of the global health crisis, and FET is working to support the upskilling and re-skilling of those who need a route back into sustainable employment, the reinvigoration of communities hit hard by restrictions, and the competitiveness of businesses as they seek a return to growth. It is an ambitious strategy based on building skills, fostering inclusion, and facilitating pathways.

Building skills

The ways that we work, learn, do business, and even interact with each other are changing. The world is being transformed by megatrends such as globalisation, digitalisation, ageing demographics, and climate change. The impacts of current and future technological advances on our working lives will be stark, with significantly increased use of automation, smart technology, artificial intelligence, big data, and augmented and virtual reality.

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While vocational and technical skills will remain important, they will continually and rapidly evolve. A member of the workforce will be unlikely to prosper in their career unless they are equipped with essential ‘meta-skills’ in areas like complex problem-solving, emotional intelligence, creativity, service orientation, and cognitive flexibility.

The current skills shortage exists not only in Ireland but across Europe, making it difficult for companies to find workers with the qualifications they need. There will always be a role for the traditional academic undergraduate degree, but it must reflect the changing nature of the world. FET offers solutions to Ireland’s skills shortage, with ‘micro qualifications’ and ‘earn as you learn’ courses that allow people to upskill without committing to full-time degrees. Upskilling allows people to broaden their knowledge and skill set as well as those of the team.

For FET to make the impact it deserves, there will have to be a major change in perceptions of the relationship between education or training and social class. Other European countries have a history of developing highly skilled, apprenticeship-rooted workers who are recognised to have equal standing with those who progress through third level.

Small class sizes in the further education sector, alongside project-based assessment methods and work placements with local employers, are particularly suitable. More collaboration between industry and education will mean that relevant programmes are designed in conjunction with local

employers and are aligned with their needs, so the skills developed on a course are relevant to both the local and wider labour markets.

Fostering inclusion

Ireland has a diverse and vibrant society, and FET has an important role in community education to help the integration of our diverse population. FET enables equality and cohesion to flourish in communities, and works with government to create a fair, inclusive, and equitable Ireland for all.

In September 2021, the government launched its Adult Literacy for Life strategy (SOLAS, 2021b). Covid-19 brought technology to the forefront of all aspects of day-to-day life, yet as the strategy details, 47% of adults in Ireland lack basic digital skills. This stops them not only accessing some everyday services but also unleashing their full potential for employment, further widening the Irish skills gap. FET providers will help make digital literacy skills accessible to all, allowing adults across Ireland to participate fully in society and also to strengthen the country's workforce.

The vision for FET is to provide pathways for everyone, to empower learners to participate fully in society and become active citizens, and to drive vibrant and diverse communities. FET will become the smart choice for school-leavers, employees looking to upskill, and learners at all stages of their lives. Future FET colleges will be recognised as dynamic, modern, and high-quality learning environments. FET will prepare people for work and successful careers, facilitate progress through tertiary education, and equip its graduates for a lifetime of continual learning and development.

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Facilitating pathways

The breadth of provision offered through FET is as impressive as it is diverse. From community programmes, family learning, integration, and inclusion initiatives to traineeships and apprenticeships, FET can put people on a pathway to anywhere they want to go in education, work, and life.

For a growing number of students, FET is the best route to their chosen career. Whether they have a particular job in mind and want the most direct route to it, are uncertain about what they want to do long-term but are keen to try a new area of learning, or want an alternative way into third level because they didn't get the points for the course they wanted, FET is the answer. It provides three routes designed to help school-leavers progress: PLC courses, apprenticeships, and traineeships. Each can act as a stepping stone into higher education or as a way to try something new or progress directly into a career.

PLC courses are full-time one- and two-year courses that offer a mix of practical and academic work and work experience. A huge part of their appeal, and their value, is that they focus on a mix of technical knowledge, core skills, and work experience. Small classes allow students to benefit from more one-to-one interaction; this can make PLC courses a great bridge to employment or third level. Courses such as pre-nursing, law,

or business can provide an alternative route into such courses at third level. Completion of a PLC course typically leads to an award at National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) level 5 or 6.

Apprenticeships combine college learning with work-based learning, and the 'off the job' element is delivered either as a block of full-time training in a training centre or on a day-release basis (SOLAS, 2021c). Qualifications range from QQI level 6 to master's degrees and PhD doctorates.

The recent resumption of economic activity and the government's programme for housing mean there are big increases in the numbers of people taking up well-respected crafts, offering routes to careers in areas such as electrical, plumbing, and engineering. Careers in construction offer bright futures to those interested in the industry. Many existing apprenticeships are world-class, and Irish apprentices are well regarded, with Ireland consistently performing well at WorldSkills competitions.

The range of apprenticeships is set to broaden further, to include green skills like wind turbine maintenance and white-collar areas such as international financial services and software or asset management. A new healthcare-assistant apprenticeship is expected to be especially popular, and there are programmes in farm management/technician, applied horticulture, construction, and leisure.



The lord mayor of Cork visits the carpentry and joinery workshop at Cork Training Centre

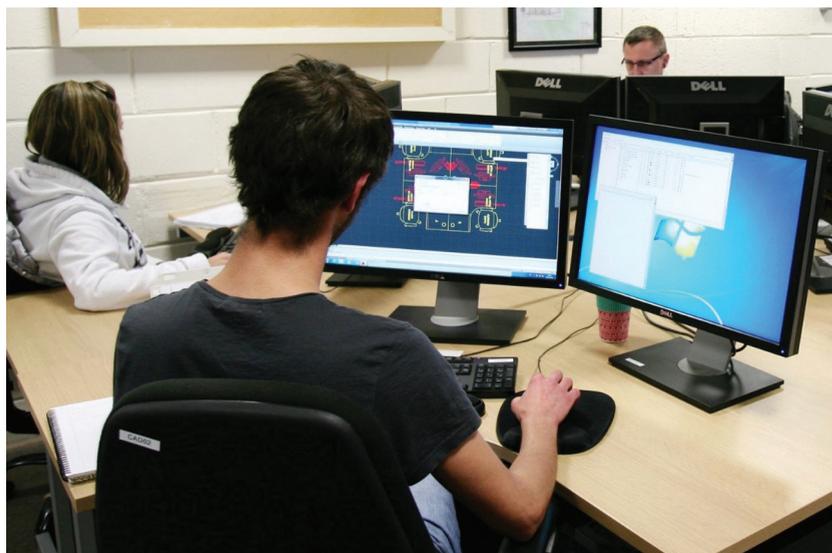
Coupled with ICT options like cybersecurity and computer networking, there is a path for all learners. With 62 types of apprenticeship, all allowing apprentices to 'earn while they learn', they are not just an alternative to third level but a different route to the same destination.

Apprenticeship numbers will double in the coming years under the government action plan (SOLAS, 2021a), and we must now engage fully with these options to develop opportunities in education and in the future world of work. The plan's five objectives are shown in the diagram:

Objective 1: A High Quality and Innovative Approach	Apprenticeship will deliver the highest quality of work-based learning, supporting and demonstrating innovation to empower apprentices and employers to meet current and emerging skills needs.
Objective 2: Employer-driven Responses	Apprenticeship will be recognised and valued by employers across all sectors of the economy as a key mechanism for building a highly skilled workforce, contributing to productivity and sustainable growth.
Objective 3: Apprenticeship for All	The profile of the apprenticeship population will more closely reflect the profile of the general population.
Objective 4: A Valued Option	Apprenticeship will be available and recognised as a work based learning opportunity, providing sought after qualifications across the tertiary education and training sector.
Objective 5: A Single Coherent System	There will be a single apprenticeship system underpinned by a clear governance framework with stakeholder input.

Five objectives in the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021–2025 (SOLAS, 2021a)

Traineeships are developed and delivered by ETBs in partnership with industry and employers. They are shorter than apprenticeships, typically lasting one or two years, and are designed to provide strong work experience so that participants leave with job-ready skills. A training allowance is paid to eligible learners.



IT class at Cork Training Centre

Current programmes include radio broadcasting, beauty therapy, medical administration, and childcare. All lead to NFQ levels 4–6 awards. These are specific courses designed for people to progress directly to working and will be an important part of rebuilding the economy.

The future of FET is exciting. The future of FET is now. All of us in FET need to continue to grow its profile to ensure that the sustainable value set out in the FET strategy can be widely acknowledged. Then it can start to change the hearts and minds of Irish society with regard to school leaving and lifelong education options.

There is a place for everyone to join this journey in transforming learning. FET is vital to developing these skills for us as individuals and as an economy. The full range of FET programmes can be seen at www.fetch.ie.

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Sara Mc Fadden from Castlebar, Co Mayo, one of 68 students awarded Sports Scholarships at IT Sligo. Sara is Ireland's first visually impaired person to compete in rallying.

