

This article highlights the importance of professional learning and development, the need to think differently in the midst of a pandemic, and the diverse activities and approaches taken across Ireland's Education and Training Boards in the past year.

### Introduction

Never before has the importance of learning and development been highlighted as it has in the Covid-19 pandemic. In the past 18 months this crisis has brought to the forefront the skills and abilities of key personnel in health, emergency services, education, postal, and retail to deal with the devastating effect on health, learning, and wellbeing. It is because many of these professions have placed such importance on ongoing learning and development that these professionals have the knowledge, skills, and training to respond to the virus and can adapt and look for solutions both individually and collectively.

With closures and lockdowns across the education sector in 2020 and 2021, educators and professional development professionals alike have had to move rapidly to a different approach to teaching. In the further education and training (FET) sector, the change has been fully embraced for the sake of the learners who continue to access its services in these challenging times.

In the business world, no commercial industry can take care of its customers effectively before it looks after its employees. Similarly, in education, learning facilities cannot take care of their learners without first taking care of those who provide the education and its supports.

In early 2020, SOLAS launched its FET Professional Learning and Development: Statement of Strategy 2020–2024, following its original 2016–2019 Professional Development Strategy. A key goal is to 'build the capability of those who work in the FET sector through the identification and deployment of strategic professional learning and development initiatives in priority areas' (SOLAS, 2020).

In the FET sector, Education and Training Boards (ETBs) have put systems in place to support a planned approach to professional learning and development (PLD). Through the great work of

# The Changing World of Learning and Development in FET

Professional learning and development in the Education and Training Boards



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PLD coordinators across the country, highly crafted and engaging learning and development initiatives have been operationalised at local, regional, and national levels.

### Current PLD in the FET sector

Professional learning and development is now as diverse as the people who partake in it, the subjects that are covered, and the time it takes to complete the learning. I could easily fill this Yearbook with a description of all the game-changing initiatives that have been developed and rolled out across the ETB FET sector in the past year, so with a limited number of words available I asked the experts, the PLD professionals in ETBs, to share some of the highlights to date.

“ The focus FETFest was on learning through technology, health, motivation, inclusion, and transformative thinking.

One event, which led to a turning point in my own professional learning journey, took place in June 2021. FETFest, a virtual event, was the brainchild of Ashley Stephens, PLD and research coordinator in Kildare and Wicklow ETB. Its focus for five days was on learning through technology, health, motivation, inclusion, and transformative thinking. The week featured 21 live events and more than 40 on-demand sessions from educators across Ireland.

FETFest was opened by Minister Simon Harris, and its programme included eight international presenters, including keynote speakers George Courros and Eric Sheninger on the future of learning and development on an international stage. To quote Eric, ‘It all comes down to relationships. Without trust, there is no relationship. Without relationships no real learning occurs.’

“ We worked hard to establish our group and build relationships, and we respect and trust the individuals in the collective – we know we are better together.”

This speaks so strongly about the PLD network: as Ashley Stephens said, ‘We worked hard to establish our group and build relationships, and we respect and trust the individuals in the collective – we know we are better together.’

Twitter was on fire over the five days, which saw FETFest trending in Ireland. On the worldwide stage, this evidenced the learning that was taking place over the week and beyond. As I said on Twitter, ‘FETFest looked effortless, creating space for everyone to contribute, not to compete, which makes for one of the most interesting and mind-blowing conferences I have ever attended.’ You too can experience the festival of learning and engage in some PLD on the FETFest YouTube channel: <https://bit.ly/fetfestchannel>.

In addition, and showing the diverse nature of PLD delivery in ETBs, Carrie Archer, PLD coordinator at City of Dublin ETB, has established a level 9 postgraduate certificate in Diversity and Inclusion specifically for the FET sector. This programme recognises that those who educate and provide supports are as diverse and unique as those who receive its benefits, and provides the essential learning for FET practitioners. A separate article on this topic appears elsewhere in this chapter of *Ireland’s Education Yearbook*.

Also in June 2021, Carrie and Ashley worked together to present a journey of PLD at the International Leadership for Professional Learning Symposium. They facilitated a focused conversation using *Alice in Wonderland* as a metaphor to structure professional dialogue for exploring PLD ‘Through the Looking Glass’, which considered how digital tools encourage reflective practice and communication towards building communities of practice.

Laois and Offaly ETB’s FET service held its first ever Inclusion Week from 4–8 October, rolled out by Jessica Mullen, PLD coordinator of LOETB. It was a resounding success, with over 1,000 FET colleagues attending the events taking place in our FET centres. It also included our online Lunch & Learn series, which featured guest speakers such as AsIAm, Caroline Martin of CDETB, Deirdre Madden from UCC, and Roisin Doherty of SOLAS, who helped open the event. These guest speakers and professional learning sessions gave our colleagues the opportunity to reflect and consider their approach to inclusive practice. To coincide with Traveller Mental Health Day, learners from Mountmellick FET centre planted a hazel tree, a symbol of travellers’ strength, history, culture, and resilience.



Kerry ETB rolled out guidelines on technology-enhanced teaching and learning for staff and learners – powerful tools to harness all the positive aspects of online learning tools and the richness of the classroom experience. Sharon Brown, the ETB’s adult education officer, had a clear goal not only to produce guidelines in this space but also to integrate them into everyday educational life. She highlighted that technology is here to stay and provided supports to allow for real change in the learning classroom, for example via ePortfolio, the flipped-classroom approach, and digital assessments.

Dublin Dun Laoghaire ETB (DDLETB) held its first Winter Connect Showcase using a Microsoft Teams live event, celebrating the creativity and resilience of the DDLETB learning community. It was attended by over 17,000 people.

So many other initiatives have been implemented this year. One that has been delivered countrywide is the TEL (Technology-Enhanced Learning) Mentoring programme established by staff for staff, to close the gap for those who want to embrace new ideas in educational technology. Donegal ETB, through its TEL coordinator, Treasa McGinley, rolled out this initiative, and Donegal ETB’s practitioners are already reaping the rewards.

The list could go on, with so many initiatives and such a focus on professional learning and development. But in conclusion, I can simply say that the future is bright in this FET space, for educators and learners alike!

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## Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

### **Carbery farmers achieve Diplomas in Environmental Science as part of innovative programme with UCC.**

In December 2021, 15 Carbery farmers graduated from UCC with a Diploma in Environmental Science and Social Policy. These farmers are part of an innovative first-of-its-kind partnership with UCC, to achieve their qualification through 'Retrospective Prior Learning' (RPL).

The partnership with UCC came about in 2017 when a pilot project was launched with a group of farmers from the Carbery Greener Dairy Farms programme. The goal was to ensure that the practical learnings taken by farmers from Carbery's Greener Dairy programme would be academically recognised by University College Cork (UCC) by means of RPL - Recognition of Prior Learning.

Under this process, UCC recognises the competencies, experience and skills learned by farmers who participated in the Greener Dairy project. The farmers are awarded over 60% of the credits needed for UCC's level 7 diploma in environmental science and social policy. Farmers are then given the option by UCC to achieve the remaining credits needed for the diploma in a more formal learning environment.

"To date, 38 of our farmer suppliers have completed this course and have been awarded diplomas by UCC. Having a diploma in environmental science and social policy gives those farmers huge confidence in themselves for what they have achieved," says Enda Buckley, Director of Sustainability at Carbery.

"And for us, it shows that our farmers are well ahead of the curve in terms of being interested in why and how to farm sustainably."