

New Thinking in FET

Covid-19 as a
catalyst and driving
force for advancing
the sector



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This article is an opinion piece on how Covid-19 has accelerated the FET strategy in the last 20 months. It gives examples on how SOLAS and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science supported the enabling themes of the strategy to transform the sector.

Introduction

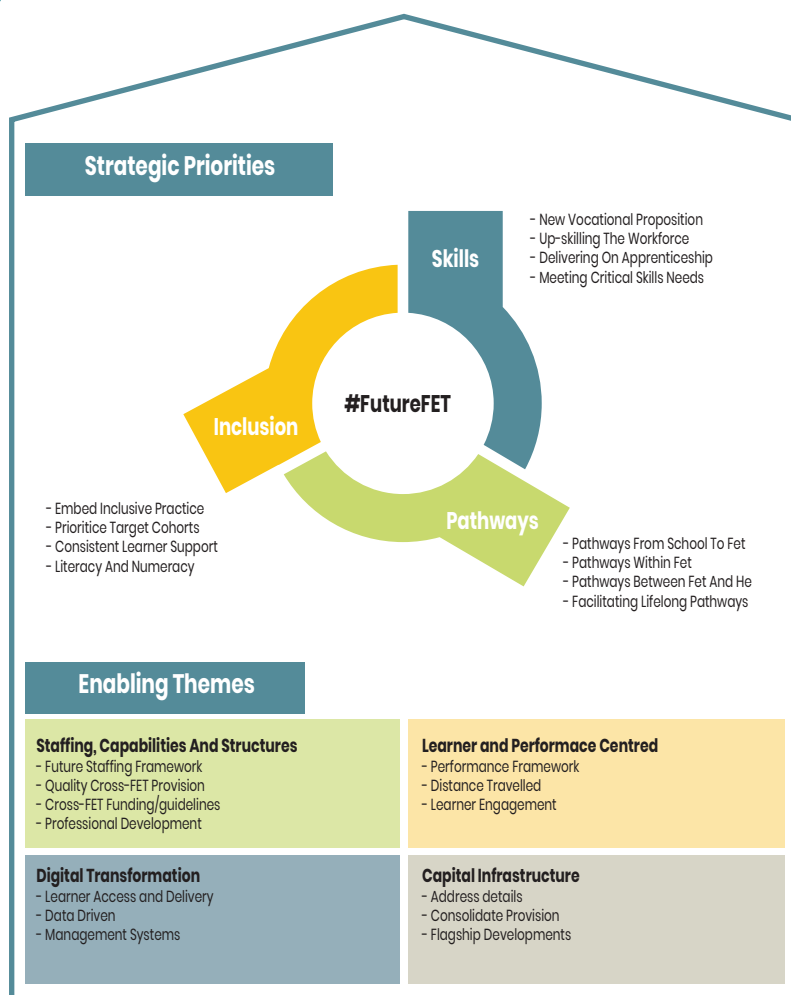
When I reflect on the last 20 months of further education and training (FET), the proverb 'necessity is the mother of invention' springs to mind. Since March 2020, FET, like all other essential sectors of society, adapted and reformed. Add into the mix the government response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the economic stimuli provided for FET, the publication by SOLAS of Future FET: Transforming Learning 2020–2024, and the establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), and it's safe to say that Ireland Inc. has accelerated the FET sector in a short space of time.

This article presents my opinion on the drivers of change that have reshaped the capacity of FET to take on board new ways of thinking in the past year and a half.

How different was the Covid-19 response?

To the seasoned FET veteran like me, the agility of the sector, its staff, and its learners to respond to economic demands and reform agendas is well documented and nothing new. So how was the Covid-19 response different? It was different because the sector, through the availability of economic stimuli and the drive by DFHERIS to rapidly engage with the scaffolding and strategic framework determined by SOLAS in Future FET, was strongly supported to change (see image).

This support and direction had to be solution-focused, as it was funded by the Exchequer, which was looking for measurable outcomes on how the strategic priorities of the strategy were achieved. What follows is a snapshot of the many different drivers of changes over the past 20 months.



Future FET strategic framework (Source: SOLAS, 2020)

1. *Driving the skills agenda*: the change drivers being the Apprenticeship Incentivisation Scheme and the Skills to Compete and Skills to Advance initiatives.
2. *Fostering inclusion*: the change drivers being the publication of Adult Literacy for Life 2021 and the enhanced SOLAS Fund for Students with Disabilities.
3. *Facilitating pathways to learning*: the change drivers being the placement of FET programmes, both post-Leaving Certificate Courses (PLCs) and apprenticeships, on the CAO for the first time, starting on 5 November 2021.

Sean Aylward, chair of the SOLAS board, and Andrew Brownlee, CEO of SOLAS, in their foreword to Future FET, highlighted that the 'central premise of the new strategy is that FET is for everyone and will serve as a major driver of both economic development and social cohesion'. Little did they know that the ambition set out for training and skills in the document

would be called upon in the Economic Recovery Plan 2021 as an essential pillar in helping people back to work after this pandemic:

Ireland's increasingly agile skills architecture will be increasingly responsive to demands. A high-quality FET sector is central to lifelong learning and to providing a mix of fast-track educational models which respond rapidly to skills needs. (Government of Ireland, 2021c, p. 22)

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Be under no illusion, it is a tough and challenging environment for all who work in FET, particularly those who implement strategy and deliver on reform agendas through engaging with learners. While the bulk of delivery changes surfaced in the Education and Training Board (ETB) sector, all FET providers rose to the challenge.

In summary, in my estimation the Covid-19 pandemic drove the FET agenda forward about five years and has re-engineered new thinking on how we deliver further education and training. DFHERIS, in partnership with its agency, SOLAS, supported the enabling themes of the strategy during this pandemic. This support has been the catalyst for advancement and new ways of thinking.

Below I report on four enabling themes in the Future FET strategy: digital transformation; staffing, capabilities, and structures; capital infrastructure; and learner- and performance-centred.

Digital transformation

Digital transformation and its role in the economy has been well documented and is now central to Ireland's Economic Recovery 2021, Ireland's Pathways to Work Strategy 2021–2025, and DFHERIS's Statement of Strategy 2021–2023. We have known for many years that FET must engage with digital transformation to achieve better outcomes for learners.

As a direct result of Covid-19, learner access to education and training has been enhanced through the supply of laptops to FET centres. Our FET classrooms and training facilities are now more digitised, with both staff and learners having access to portable equipment, cloud-based software, and broadband.

The introduction of eduroam nationally is a change-maker. Eduroam, short for education roaming, is 'a Wi-Fi service which enables students, researchers and staff from participating institutions to securely access the internet at their college/university and whilst visiting other participating institutions' (HEAnet, 2021). Many of our FET colleges and centres are Higher Education and Research Network (HEAnet) members, and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) is engaging in a pilot programme to connect FET learners to this service.

Staffing, capabilities, and structures

Throughout this pandemic, the response from FET staff has been outstanding. Staff have engaged with continuing professional development (CPD), new

ways of working, and digital transformation across all programmes and fields of learning. The biggest change has been the implementation of blended learning in FET programmes. The flexibility this brings to course delivery and new ways of working, which has been sought for years, is now firmly accepted by staff and learners. They have realised the benefits of working this way over the last academic year.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) in 2018 published its guidelines on blended learning. The FET sector was slow to engage with these, as it lacked the capacity of resources and staff training and because few blended-learning courses for validation in FET were developed. Now, as a direct result of the emergency response to Covid-19, delivery opportunities are being harnessed and FET courses are being designed and validated for this delivery mode. For example, Infection Prevention and Control, a QQI level 5 special purpose award, is an essential qualification in a critical area for modern Ireland. This award, developed by City of Dublin ETB, is being delivered through blended learning modes across all ETBs.

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Staff and learner thinking have shifted during the pandemic, from the regular 100% face-to-face delivery to acceptance of blended learning as a delivery tool. The pandemic has shown that blended-learning courses provide flexibility and opportunities for different ways of course delivery that suit both FET staff and learners.

Capital infrastructure

The lack of cohesive and sufficient capital budgets in FET has long been a talking point. The National Development Plan 2021–2030 allocated €100m in capital funding to FET to develop its resources, for example the FET college of the future and provision of apprenticeships and green skills. This investment comes at a time when the economy is clearly dependent on the sector to deliver learners with qualifications that can take the economy into the next decade and beyond.

During the pandemic, Louth Meath ETB (LMETB) launched its Advanced Manufacturing Training Centre as a result of combined funding from SOLAS and the Border Enterprise Development Fund. Obviously planned pre-pandemic, this centre of excellence seeks to bridge the skills gap, to educate and train learners in an employer-focused, innovative, and flexible way, and to provide talent for the manufacturing sector. Being future-focused, the centre sets about creating a talent pool qualified in essential skills that are in short supply and in demand in Ireland, such as robotics, cobotics (collaborative robotics), additive manufacturing, 3D printing, simulation technology, augmented reality, virtual reality, and cybersecurity.

Budget 2022, announced on 19 October 2021, listed a host of measures for additional capital investment of €65m in FET. This included €34m for apprenticeships and €22m to address the Green Skills Action programme that is essential to Ireland's future (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2021). Capital investment in FET continues to be a key driver of

change in the sector. Learners who learn in a setting based on the modern working environment achieve better outcomes.

Learner- and performance-centred

The FET budget for 2021 is nearly one billion euros: €993m. This is a considerable investment. There is enormous pressure on the sector to make it count and to show that it is value for money. One way to do this is to analyse all the data and show how FET is making an impact on the economy, society, and the lives of its learners.

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The Skills and Labour Market Unit (SLMRU) in SOLAS regularly produces National Skills Bulletins that analyse the data and create tangible metrics for the public, policymakers, and the sector to work from. These bulletins highlight where there is employment and where there is a shortage of talent to meet employment opportunities:

The analysis in the National Skills Bulletin aims to assist with meeting these challenges by detailing the outlook across many occupations. The identification of the type of people employed across these roles will assist with the direction of education and training interventions required over the coming months. This Bulletin forms a key evidence base to inform labour market policy decision as Ireland moves to a new phase in its recovery from the pandemic. (SOLAS, 2021, p. 3)

As a direct result of this data analysis, initiatives such as Skills to Compete and Skills to Advance were introduced in 2020. Skills to Compete supports those who have lost their jobs because of Covid-19 to re-enter the workforce. Skills to Advance equips workers with the skills to progress in their current job or to take advantage of new job opportunities.

Conclusion

The combined focus of the developments to support the strategic priorities and enabling themes in the FET Strategy during Covid-19 has put FET in the spotlight as one of the main drivers of economic recovery. All of us who work in FET have been given a fresh outlook on how we complete our FET business as a direct result of this pandemic.

Certain things have become possible that one or two years ago would not have been conceived. We are now in a time of transformation where we can offer much more accessible education using online resources and different technologies. (Brownlee, 2021, p. 2)

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