Teaching in Further Education and Training

Implications for the professional formation of the FET practitioner

This article explores policy and theory relating to a vision of the further education and training practitioner. It considers the importance of initial teacher education and the professionalisation of the role in contributing to the standing of FET. To achieve the vision of an FET College of the Future, the time is now right to turn our attention to the professional role of the FET practitioner.

Introduction

Further education and training (FET) in Ireland has come a long way since the first FET Strategy of 2014–2019. Of note is the progress of the 'Standing of FET' (Goal 5) (SOLAS and DES, 2014). This progress is the result of planned and unplanned drivers that have heightened societal recognition of the sector and its potential worth. The value, needs, and strengths of the Irish FET sector have been lauded by media and stakeholders, especially the learners themselves. One driver of progress has been the Covid-19 crisis, which accelerated progression of the original Strategy.

The 2020 FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2020) compounded this work by demonstrating its agility, flexibility, and learner-centred approach. In the context of a newly formed tertiary education system, FET providers have shown that they deliver quality outcomes for all our citizens, at both community and national economic levels. At the centre of FET provision is the learner–trainee–employee. The 2020 Strategy states that feedback from learners is positive and that employment and progression outcomes are significant. Employers are satisfied with the quality of FET graduates. But there is recognition that FET has to change: 'It needs to ensure that it can meet the needs of the future world and the evolving needs of the economy and society' (SOLAS, 2020, p. 8).

FET sector

The European Economic Community (EEC) has shaped vocational education and training in Ireland (Coolahan, 1981; O'Sullivan, 2005, cited in McGuinness et al., 2014), while the 'further education' sector (a term first used in the 1995 White Paper on Education) was created from the bottom up, with local networks of providers developing programmes in response to local needs (McGuinness et al., 2014).

The five key areas of adult and training provision comprise initial vocational education and training, including apprenticeships; a re-entry route to

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education and training; professional or vocational development for those in or re-entering the workforce; community education and training; and other learning undertaken by adults, both formal and informal (ibid.). Due to the wide range of areas, the sector lacked a clear identity. Grummell and Murray (2015) wrote that it:

> developed in a fragmented historical context in the Republic of Ireland, emerging from the training needs of different economic sectors and state departments, often in isolation from the rest of the education system.

The Five-Year Strategy (2014–2019) by SOLAS was the first strategy published for the FET sector in the history of the Irish State (SOLAS & DES, 2014) and by necessity addressed a wide range of structural and other challenges. Building on its successes, the 2020 strategy, Future FET: Transforming Learning, points out:

> It is important to agree on an appropriate future staffing framework, which breaks down the barriers between different FET settings and programmes and facilitates more flexible deployment of staff to meet evolving needs. ... It must look at the role of the teacher and the instructor and how these roles can evolve and be effectively deployed across FET settings, and brought together within an integrated FET college of the future. (SOLAS, 2020, p. 56)

The role of teaching, training, delivery

The Further Education and Training Act 2013, Section 7(k), states that SOLAS will provide or help provide training to people charged with delivering FET programmes (SOLAS, 2020, p. 109). Although the strategy stated that 'a focus needs to be placed on training competency in subject matter areas and an appropriate pedagogical approach in the delivery of training to various cohorts, i.e. a standard professional qualification and CPD requirement for those employed in the FET sector' (p. 111), it is not yet clear how this focus will be implemented in terms of initial education or continuing professional development.

The FET Professional Development Strategy 2017–2019 defines FET practitioners as 'anyone working in the sector who is involved in working directly with learners or in supporting or influencing the learner experience in FET' (SOLAS & ETBI, 2017, p. 16). In this article the definition of FET practitioners and discussion on professionalism and initial education pertain to vocational, educational, adult, and community education in formal and non-formal settings. According to the FET Skills Profile (ibid.), the 54 job roles can be categorised as learning practitioners (72% of the workforce), managers (14%), and support and administration staff (13%). The SOLAS research states that 71% of learning practitioners 'currently hold a teaching/training qualification'. The regional Education and Training Boards (ETBs), which are responsible for providing secondary and post-compulsory education, remain one of the main employers for adult and further education practitioners.

SOLAS envisages 'a model of professional development that is individually embraced, organisationally driven and strategically directed' (SOLAS & ETBI, 2017, p. 18) but falls short of a policy requirement for a professional

standard of teaching qualification in FET across the sector. There are many reasons for this, including the legacy issues of diverse pathways into teaching in FET; the history of the growth of FET; its range of settings across vocational, adult, formal, and community education; the absence of a clear strategy and policy that united these settings; and the lack of data capturing the challenges of issues more commonly connected to industrial relations, precarity of conditions, contracts, and employment status.

The National Association for Principals and Deputy Principals Further Education committee (NAPD – in 2020 renamed FET Colleges Ireland (FETCI)), in a recent document, points out the 'tyranny of language' that inhibits the coherence of approaches and understanding of FET. It is difficult to agree on the terminology of what constitutes an educator, a trainer, an instructor, a resource teacher. It can also be challenging for staff in these roles to articulate how the roles relate to the teaching profession.

After Teaching in FET was included in professional teaching routes (as defined by the Teaching Council of Ireland), eight Irish higher education institutions (HEIs) created postgraduate and undergraduate qualifications for initial teacher education (ITE) in FET under Route 3 and formed a unique Forum of HEIs from across the State who are committed to developing and recognising FET in its own right (heifetforumireland.ie).

At present, second-level teachers working in FET are clear about their recognition as teachers as defined by the Teaching Council. New entrants into FET from the Council through Route 3 are less clear about this, as they currently straddle a well-defined traditional model of teaching in second-level compulsory education and a less well recognised – or, we would suggest, less well understood – model of teaching, training, and facilitation in FET.

This article and the Forum suggest that the FET teaching role is more aligned to the role of a lecturer in higher education (HE) than that of a teacher in compulsory education. Educators in both roles work with modules or units of learning, instructional design, flexibility in planning and delivery, learner-centred approaches, and a relationship that is defined by respect and equality as appropriate to adult learners. It can be a co-constructed space that uses pedagogic and andragogic approaches and is responsive to the group of learners in front of the educator, irrespective of setting – ESOL, literacy, recovery services, psychology – and of QQI level (Quality and Qualifications Ireland).

Initial teacher education

The recent Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) policy, in the context of building skills for practitioners working in literacy, recognises that:

> there are different HE qualifications that can help you enter the profession of teaching literacy or digital skills, but there is no standard initial education requirement for FET, nor are the different HE options funded in the same way or valued consistently across ETBs. (*Government of Ireland, 2021, p. 55*)

The Teaching Council is providing a dedicated route into teaching in FET in 'recognised schools', but it is unclear how this route is being seen within FET. Initial teacher education and training (ITET), which allows future teachers to obtain necessary teaching qualifications, is a vital element of teaching quality and career development for teachers (OECD, 2019). The OECD acknowledges that teachers in vocational education and training (VET)

> *need to have not only theoretical and practical knowledge and relevant experience of the broad package of skills required for the profession they teach, but also knowledge of and experience in effective teaching for learners who often struggle with academic study. (2019, p. 86)*

Designing appropriate ITET programmes for VET teachers is important to ensure a good mix of pedagogical skills, vocational competence, and industry knowledge (Musset et al., 2014, cited in OECD, 2021). The European Council Resolution on a Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning called for priority areas that included:

> *Improving the quality of adult education staff, for instance by defining competence profiles, establishing effective systems for initial training and professional development, and facilitating the mobility of teachers, trainers and other adult education staff (Council of the European Union, 2011, p. 15).*

Challenges remain in defining what initial teacher education is for people delivering education and training in FET. The Teaching Council recognised the complex and unique nature of FET and its teaching:

> *Teaching in further education is characterised by learner–teacher relationships based on mutual respect and equality. … Certification of programmes of further education study is based on the achievement of stated learning outcomes rather than on coverage of centrally defined syllabi. A crucial requirement of the further education teacher therefore is the capacity to analyse learners' needs, to develop a programme of study in response to those needs and to assess learner progress. (Teaching Council, 2011, p. 9)*

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Is it now time for an inclusive discussion on how it is delivered, on the outcomes for graduates from these ITE programmes, and on progression routes for new entrants into FET? This discussion should go as far as to ask whether ITE is desirable or necessary for staff already working in these roles, and to address the link between ITE, professional development, professionalisation, and the identity of FET as a pillar in the continuum of education in the State. This article contends that the standing of FET, linked to the professionalisation of staff in FET, is an opportunity for a new model of teaching that is informed, designed, and created by FET staff in collaboration with other stakeholders, building on decades of experience and theory in education and training through dialogue and cooperation.

Professionalism in adult education

Egetenmeyer (2019) writes that international policies for lifelong learning and education, for instance of the European Union and UNESCO, have focused the issue of professionalisation in adult education during the last 20 years, with particular emphasis on the question of quality in lifelong learning and education (Commission of the European Communities, 2000, 2006, 2007, 2011, 2016; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2009). In an earlier article on new professionalism, she contended that the regulating role of the State

> *causes stronger links between professionalism and organisations and the demands of self-conscious learners, which simultaneously affect the work of the institutions and the organisations (regulating and sanctioning laws and programmes) and the work of the adult and continuing educators (content-related performance of trainings, interaction with learners). (2019, p. 10)*

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What Egetenmeyer is intimating is that professionalism in adult and community education cannot be expressed in the classic professional model but must be looked at as a complex series of interrelationships (Gieseke, 2014). Working conditions, areas of expertise, and possibilities provided by adult and continuing education organisations influence how professionalisation occurs. These in turn are profoundly influenced by societal and institutional contexts, including policies, regulations, governance, and educational and economic demands. Professionalisation must therefore be understood in the context of an 'interdependent relationship of personnel (learning practitioners, managers, support staff), organisations (ETBs, FE Colleges, Adult Education Centres, community education) and society (economic drivers, societal expressed needs, individual learners)' (Egetenmeyer et al., 2018).

This professionalism in further and adult education does not only include the micro level of direct contact with clients or students: it also has a meso, macro, and mega level (Egetenmeyer et al., 2017). Martin (2017) points out that jobs in adult education consist of many more roles than teaching, even if teaching is relevant for all of them (p. 99). It could be argued to be self-evident that the people most qualified and best placed to decide what teacher professionalism might mean in FET are the people in FET, in the roles of tutor, teacher, trainer, instructor, or facilitator.

This article suggests that a conversation at each of these three relationship levels is important to define the identity of a pillar of education in this country – one that is slowly revealing itself as a key stakeholder and driver of individual and collective achievement by learners: adult learners, young and old, who are citizens in our society and employees and employers in our economy. This achievement is facilitated and supported by staff across FET who joined through different routes, aspirations, and qualifications. This collective experience and energy is an intrinsic part of FET and contributes to its uniqueness and authenticity as an organic, responsive conglomeration of education and training provision.

According to Anke et al. (2020), some scholars argue that adult education should strive for greater professionalisation (Cervero, 1992; Egetenmeyer,

2016; Kapplinger et al., 2015), while others claim adult educators' diverse backgrounds and variable contexts of practice should be acknowledged and further professionalisation should be resisted (Collins, 1992; Nicoll & Edwards, 2012). Sachs (2001, p. 159) quotes Furlong et al. (2000, p. 175), who suggest

> *that we need to ask some fundamental questions about who does have a legitimate right to be involved in defining teaching professionalism. Are state control and market forces or professional self-governance really the only models of accountability available to us or can we develop new approaches to teacher professionalism, based upon more participatory relationships with diverse communities?*

In the most recent SOLAS strategy, there is a recognition that FET's uniqueness of delivery and variety of settings bring benefits and challenges to learner support and professional development of staff. These challenges are being addressed through unprecedented collaboration and cooperation across the ETBs in roles relating to FET provision and professional development.

This will take time to explore through consultation and dialogue. Dialogue is an important part of Freirean approaches in adult and community education in FET. It is the ethos that underpins a learner-centred approach, genuine teacher–learner relationships, and communication and connection in learning environments, from adult education classes to apprenticeships. This is what makes FET different from compulsory education and encourages vulnerable learners to walk into a FET centre and change their life, which truly echoes the trust of the newest SOLAS Strategy, Future FET: Transforming Learning.

> **Who you are and how you teach are inextricably linked: 'Consciously we teach what we know; unconsciously, we teach who we are'.**

Conclusion

FETCI, in a discussion document entitled 'Vision for the FET College in the Tertiary Education Sector' (NAPD/FETCI, 2021), suggests that 'The unified FET system that emerges from this process will need to be such as to accommodate the richness of this diversity of provision' (p. 9). Acknowledging the learner-centred approach and delivery across much of FET can be difficult to sustain. Learners need a level of understanding and facilitation that can be demanding to maintain without a nuanced understanding of their learning needs. FET practitioners need support and an understanding of the psychological, sociological, and philosophical influences and contexts of learners' behaviour.

There is a wealth of learning in the theory and competencies of initial teacher education that is fundamental to teachers' ability to take on the responsibility of guiding and supporting learners to reach their potential. This initial learning takes time to explore, discuss, transform, and internalise. ITE takes into consideration the meta nature of teaching how to teach, and incorporates the challenge of modelling that learning in the teaching. Who you are and how you teach are inextricably linked: 'Consciously, we teach what we know; unconsciously, we teach who we are' (Hamachek, 1999, p. 209).

The opportunity to engage with ITE is a chance to connect these two aspects together to best enable teachers to facilitate learning even in the most challenging circumstances, without compromising their own identity and ethos. For this to happen, there must be a commitment at government level and including the Teaching Council, SOLAS, ETBs, ETBI, QQI, the teacher unions, and current providers of FET teacher–education programmes. In 2018, the Department of Education and Skills' Statement of Strategy stated, 'Increase the alignment of higher education and further education and training to achieve a more integrated tertiary education system' (DES, 2018, p. 14). This was reiterated in the 2019 Action Plan for Education (DES, 2019). The renewed vision of a tertiary education sector may now provide the backdrop and rationale for a new and contextualised strategy for ITE for FET practitioners.

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