

# 2022: A Year of Progress and Forward Thinking in FET and Apprenticeship

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This article offers an overview of further education and training (FET) in Ireland in what proved to be a year of progress and exciting developments for the sector. It describes the key achievements in FET and apprenticeship in 2022 and looks ahead to a busy 2023.



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## Introduction: taking stock and looking forward

2022 was a year of much progress right across the further education and training (FET) system, with SOLAS and the education and training boards (ETBs) looking ahead together to a positive future. 2020 and 2021 were years of many milestones despite the challenges and disruption faced globally; 2022 has continued on this path, being a year of considerable shared effort and tangible investment into the future of FET.

The north star for the past three years has been Future FET: Transforming Learning, the FET strategy launched in July 2020, and the three strategic priorities it set out: to build skills, create pathways, and foster inclusion. Despite the immense changes and challenges brought to our society and economy due to Covid-19, full delivery of this strategy is well on track. Underpinning all of the work to progress it is a focus on the needs and experiences of FET learners, and on ensuring that their unique potential is realised.

With all of this as the backdrop, it has certainly been a period of significant change in FET. As I see it, 2022 has been a year of implementing vital building blocks that together will make up the future of FET in Ireland, with strides made in important and transformative areas such as long-awaited funding-model reform and national system targets. Major steps have also been taken in the world of apprenticeship, setting the scene for further development in 2023 and beyond.

## Establishing the National Apprenticeship Office

In April 2021, Minister Simon Harris launched the five-year Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025. It sets out a roadmap for a single apprenticeship system and a five-year strategy to deliver on the Programme for Government commitment of reaching 10,000 new apprentice registrations a year by 2025. A key objective of the plan is

to ensure that the apprenticeship system will increase its contribution to meeting Ireland's skills requirements.

As part of the Action Plan, in January 2022 the National Apprenticeship Office was set up, a new body jointly managed between SOLAS and the Higher Education Authority. The new National Apprenticeship Office continues to drive reform in the system under the banner of Generation Apprenticeship, spearheading a range of new initiatives to support both employers and apprentices.

There are now around 25,000 apprentices training in Ireland, across 66 diverse programmes, with around 9,000 employers on board. Apprentice registrations were over 8,607 in 2021, which is the highest since 2007 and an increase of nearly 40% compared to 2019. At the time of writing we were on track to match these levels in 2022 as well.

In April 2022, a new gender-based bursary for apprenticeship employers was announced. The bursary, which is worth €2,666, is available to employers who employ apprentices on any national apprenticeship programme with more than 80% representation of a single gender. In July 2022, the roll-out of €17.2 million in capital funding to respond to the growing demand for apprenticeships was announced.

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This October, the National Apprenticeship Office celebrated the first ever Apprentice of the Year Awards, which showcased the talent, drive, and commitment of the apprentices at the heart of this dynamic, exciting system. 2023 is set to be a similar year of growth for the office, as more targets set out in the Action Plan will no doubt be achieved.

## **Watershed moment for FET funding**

In July 2022, plans for a significant shift in the funding model for the FET sector were announced. This announcement was the product of extensive consultation by an independent expert panel over the last number of years, with close engagement with the Department of Further and Higher Education, SOLAS, the ETBs, and other key stakeholders including industry, staff, and learner representatives.

This report, and the plans based on it, simplified the legacy approach to the funding of ETBs, streamlining it into a 'five pot' structure that will allow for greater autonomy and flexibility. This simpler model puts a focus on providing core funding, which will allow each ETB to be an effective and strategic deliverer of FET and to meet the needs of their regions, recognising the individual characteristics and challenges faced around the country.

More specifically, this new funding approach will allow for investment in critical capabilities that will enable transformation in areas such as learner support, digitalisation, quality assurance, agile course development, and capital infrastructure. It will drive innovation and growth in FET provision

and facilitate the harmonisation of FET programmes. It will ensure fairness and transparency in how FET is funded, and link more clearly to the learner outcomes generated by ETBs.

### Reform and ambition: strategic performance agreements and system targets

**Ten FET College of the Future projects have been approved for further development, in Bray, Cavan, Cork, Galway, Kilkenny, Castlebar, Newcastlewest, Killarney, Clonmel, and Fingal.**

2022 has also seen the rolling out of new strategic performance agreements with each of the 16 ETBs, which act as the second realisation of the Transforming Learning strategy at regional level. These will run in 2022–2024, and each one is unique to the ETB, clearly setting out its strengths, characteristics, and agreed commitments to a range of national FET system targets.

These national system targets have been agreed at Department level, building on those set in the original strategic performance agreements in 2018–2020, with additional focus on policy and skills imperatives. The new agreements embed clear annual ETB contributions to the national targets, which cover areas such as employment outcomes, pathways within FET, progression to higher education, nearly-zero-energy building (NZE) and retrofitting, green skills, and adult literacy.

### Future-focused capital development

Key to the delivery of these national targets, and to wider transformation of the FET system, will be new strategic investment in capital infrastructure projects. Major capital funding calls have been launched to help deliver on the FET College of the Future vision set out in the Transforming Learning strategy, with investment committed towards this shared national project and future for FET provision.

This is an important movement away from what has historically been a siloed provision of FET programmes, towards a system based on course offering, National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) level, or learner outcome, be that progression to higher education or to the workforce. Ten FET College of the Future projects have been approved for further development, in Bray, Cavan, Cork, Galway, Kilkenny, Castlebar, Newcastlewest, Killarney, Clonmel, and Fingal.

We have also seen the exciting further development of the National Construction Training Centre and a Modern Methods of Construction Demonstration Park in Mount Lucas under the Housing for All plan. The Advanced Manufacturing Training Centre in Dundalk has also received new investment. The specialisation of ETBs in meeting critical needs of industry like in these two examples is another key goal of the Future FET vision. Add to that the exciting development of a Dublin city centre FET campus at

Cathal Brugha Street, and new integrated college developments in Wexford and Ennis, and we are truly seeing a new FET landscape emerge.

### To a bright future for FET

FET holds importance not just as an education and training choice, but also as a key component of Irish society. FET holds a unique position due the pathway options it offers into and within our communities, and the role it plays in unlocking potential across many different aspects of our society – from the apprentice to the adult literacy student, from the school leaver to the lifelong learner, and everyone in between.

Those working in the FET sector keenly understand this unique value, and that is what keeps us working together for change and development. 2022 has been a year of progress, and I'm certain that 2023 will be a year in which that progress is built upon. The future is bright.

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