

A Year of Incredible Growth and Transformation in Further Education and Training

Introduction

In the early days of SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards (ETBs), with the newly created 'further education and training' sector in its infancy, there was a lot of debate about how we market, promote, and develop that sector, and indeed about whether it was possible to even define the sector as a distinct entity.

The two very distinct legacy systems (overseen by FÁS and the Vocational Education Committees, from which the sector was born), the 34 legacy programmes that comprised the total offering across both, and the range of provision – from basic literacy support to high-end technical education and apprenticeship offerings – meant there was real doubt about whether FET, the immediate acronym for the new sector, could ever be something that would stand on its own as a valued and impactful learning pathway.

However, during the consultation in developing the new FET strategy throughout 2019, it started to become clear that the diversity of FET was exactly what made it so special and unique. As the *Transforming Learning* strategy put it when it was launched the following year, what made FET distinct – and what we could be loud and proud about – were the facts that it was for everyone regardless of level of formal education, it was available in every community in Ireland, and it would offer you a pathway to take you as far as you wanted to go.

The ambitious strategy seemed to resonate with most people, and there seemed to be increasing awareness among the public of the great opportunities that FET and apprenticeship had to offer. This was helped by initiatives



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This article offers an overview of further education and training (FET) in Ireland and details a year of incredible growth and transformation for the sector. It describes the key achievements in FET and apprenticeship in 2023 and looks ahead to 2024 as we deliver our final year of the current FET strategy: *Future FET: Transforming Learning*.

such as including FET and apprenticeship choices alongside higher education on the options landing page of the CAO website.

Meeting the challenge

By that point, though, Covid-19 was upon us. With FET providing access to education for those most at risk of exclusion, and offering technical and practical education that could only be delivered effectively onsite, demand inevitably suffered. In 2020 and 2021, the FET learner base contracted by 10%–15% as a result of the pandemic. There was real concern that, despite more people talking about FET and apprenticeship options, translating this into an expanded learner and apprentice base was proving impossible, particularly as restrictions continued to blight our society and economy. As these restrictions eased from early 2022, there were positive signs of FET bouncing back, and by the end of 2023, levels of demand for FET were approaching pre-pandemic levels, which was a relief to all across the sector.

The challenge then was to really see if FET could realise the potential which was seen in 2019, and start attracting a greater share of school leavers, serve as a resource for everyone to upskill and reskill throughout lifetimes and careers, and become the go-to place for the development of specialist skills for some of Ireland's critical industries.

Now, on the cusp of 2024, the incredible news is that FET and apprenticeships are growing like never before, with people of all ages turning to it for the learning they need. The challenge is to grow its contribution and impact in the way that *Transforming Learning* foresaw.

With 2023 not yet complete, we already know that one in ten people aged over 15 in Ireland – over 400,000 people – benefited in some way from FET and apprenticeships in 2023. This includes:

- » Over 150,000 undertaking construction safety training via the Construction Skills Certification Scheme, the Quarries Skills Certification Scheme, and Safe Pass, with a new online renewal system introduced in January, fuelling the workforce required for this critical industry and driving the delivery of Housing for All. Added to this, almost 5,000 people trained in essential nearly zero-energy building (NZEB) and related skills needed to retrofit 500,000 homes by 2030, and the construction of a new modern methods of construction (MMC) demonstration park at Mount Lucas by Laois and Offaly ETB.
- » An apprenticeship population of over 27,000, with registrations on course to hit their highest annual number ever, and up 7% on 2022 at the time of writing. There are now 73 different apprenticeship offerings, and over 9,000 employers with apprentices working for them.

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- » Around 217,000 unique learners taking other FET courses, with some 371,000 places taken up during the year (many of our courses are short, and many FET learners take more than one in a year). This is up around a fifth on 2022 levels – an amazing achievement.
- » Trends in FET underline its growing importance to everyone across our communities. Post-Leaving Certificate course enrolments (a prime destination for school leavers) are up 11% year-on-year, the sector is supporting over 20,000 Ukrainians in English-language and other skills, and over 21,000 employees are upskilling via the Skills to Advance initiative, up over a quarter on 2022.
- » Participation on our eCollege courses has grown by around 20% to 22,500, growing gradually back to the mass demand seen during the height of the pandemic, when we opened up the online resource to everyone. This has been fuelled by diversifying the offering, with green skills now part of the portfolio, and further plans to develop it as a gateway into FET in 2024.

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These numbers will only rise further as year-end totals are confirmed, but already they have surpassed expectations and provided an inkling of the fantastic further potential of this young and vibrant sector. It represents a major achievement for SOLAS and the ETBs, and a pivotal milestone as we marked 10 years since our establishment in October of this year.

Growth and impact

It is a story not only of growth but of real impact, as our national FET system performance targets were also all delivered in 2023. This included widening participation, where more people from key target cohorts than ever before took FET courses, progression within FET as people moved along learning pathways, and higher certification rates for transversal skills and key skills needs, ensuring that learning undertaken had a currency and relevance for industry and beyond.

This should give us an exciting platform for further development in 2024. The continued development of 12 exciting FET College of the Future projects, supported by a capital budget which invested a record €53 million in the sector in 2023, will help to change hearts and minds across the country, as these colleges become beacons of learning in their communities. They build on the many initiatives across ETBs to build college identities for FET, ensuring it becomes equally, if not more, valued as a closeknit college experience for those lucky enough to choose it. Reform of the funding model continues apace, linking FET and apprenticeship resourcing to outcomes and needs in the respective regions.

Links between FET and higher education continue to be built through government commitment to tertiary education policy, with new tertiary education programmes commencing in September 2023, allowing students to start degrees in FET and finish them in higher education. This is a real milestone, building on the 5,000 people who already progress from FET to higher education every year. It moves us away from the either/or sense which blights the ability to make smart learning choices, and opens up new and exciting pathways.

Community education is also a key aspect of FET, with investment having grown beyond recognition in recent years, learner numbers expanding rapidly, and a new community education framework on the horizon early in 2024 to solidify progress and ensure a more consistent approach to this critical driver of access to education. ETBs are also increasingly developing specialist centres of skills development, with initiatives around advanced manufacturing in Dundalk, construction in Mount Offaly, hospitality in Limerick, and biopharma in Cork.

So while 2023 was a year of incredible success, there is so much more to look forward to. We look forward to sharing the journey with you all, and if you haven't done a FET course yet, please make it your resolution for 2024.



Anna Durkan, Chair of An Cosán's Board of Directors, pictured with Miriam O'Callaghan at An Cosán's International Women's Day celebration in The Intercontinental Dublin in March 2023. Two An Cosán graduates received a standing ovation at the event after Miriam interviewed them about their achievements, which they attributed to An Cosán's unique learner-centred approach to adult community education.