

# Further Education and Training in 2024: A Journey of Transformation, Growth, and Reform

## Introduction

SOLAS and our partners, the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs), have been on an incredible journey of transformation, growth, and reform over the last five years. *Future FET: Transforming Learning*, the second national further education and training (FET) strategy, has guided our course over that period, and as it comes to its conclusion at the end of 2024, it is a perfect time to reflect on its successful implementation and to consider what comes next.

This includes important progress on how FET is delivered, widening participation to those most marginalised in our communities and ensuring that FET becomes a valuable and recognised learning pathway in Ireland. Preliminary figures show that we will reach record numbers of people engaged in FET, apprenticeships, or construction skills schemes in 2024. Indeed, one in ten adults now engage in learning supported by SOLAS in some way.

The delivery of the FET strategy hasn't been without its challenges. Dealing with the uncertainty of a global pandemic tested the sector in ways we could never have imagined, with restrictions putting enormous strain on the system that resulted in losing 10–15% of the learner base in 2020 and 2021. However, by the end of 2022 we had already bounced back to pre-Covid-19 levels, and in the course of 2023 and 2024 the FET learner base has grown by a quarter.

As the state agency responsible for FET in Ireland, much of SOLAS's focus has been on driving the innovation, transformation, and sustainability that can grow and maintain this footprint. The commitment and courage of our colleagues to do things differently has enabled us to reach a place where we have a more strategic, visible, and integrated sector of which we can be very proud. This has



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**This article offers an overview of further education and training (FET) in Ireland in 2024 and details a year of steady growth and expansion for the sector. It describes the key achievements in FET and apprenticeship during the year and over the lifetime of the FET strategy, and it looks ahead to the future possibilities.**

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allowed us to make real changes – always with an unwavering focus on the needs of learners, as they are at the heart of everything we do, and they will continue to inspire us as we push on to our next stage of evolving the sector.

## Highlights of 2024

In 2024 we are at a stage where school leavers are increasingly choosing FET and apprenticeships as a first destination; where there are clear, accessible pathways between FET and higher education; and where FET is becoming the go-to place for upskilling and re-skilling, and a resource that can respond to the critical skills needs in Ireland.

For the first time ever, over 400,000 FET places were taken up in 2024. Other highlights of the year include:

- » *Construction and green skills:* Around 140,000 cards have been issued across our construction skills schemes, fuelling the workforce in this critical industry, with around 6,423 trained in essential zero-emission-building and retrofitting skills by the end of November 2024. A new national FET green-skills strategy to 2030 was also produced, which maps out the provision and skills required for taking effective climate action and positioning Ireland as a leader in emerging green industries and occupations.
- » *Flexible, online learning:* There is now a thirst for online learning like never before, with enrolments in eCollege up by 47% to 36,717 in 2024 as it diversified its offering. This takes us beyond even the levels of mass demand seen during the height of the pandemic, when we made the online resource free for everyone. There has also been important work to enhance and embed digital learning throughout the delivery of all FET, with a framework in place and work progressing on FET digital identity, common standards for FET digital learning, and professional development to ensure that the expertise exists to innovate and reform the FET offering.
- » *Apprenticeship:* Working in partnership with the Higher Education Authority to manage the National Apprenticeship Office, we have seen a record 9,352 new apprentices registered and phase 2 craft apprenticeship capacity expanding by 45% in a single year. There are now 77 different apprenticeship offerings, and close to 10,000 apprentice employers with apprentices working for them. Work is also continuing on implementation of a plan to realise a single, integrated apprenticeship system, which will be a key focus of 2025.
- » *FET College of the Future:* There have been record levels of capital investment in FET this year, with six flagship FET College of the Future projects also moved to design stage. These new colleges – in Bray, Cavan, Clonmel, Cork, Kilkenny, and Newcastle West – will serve as beacons of

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learning and enterprise in their communities, driving lifelong learning and workforce transformation, and providing the flexible upskilling and re-skilling we will all need to respond to this fast-changing world. A second phase of project proposals will be considered in early 2025.

- » *Adult Literacy for Life*: The vision for Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) is coming to fruition, with real progress on linking education to health, social protection, local government, community development, and family services at local, regional, and national levels. The national and regional infrastructure is now in place to effect real change in this regard, with regional coordinators, coalitions, and action plans in place to drive and monitor progress. The need for this joined-up, cross-government, cross-society, cross-community approach has never been more apparent, with the first Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIACC) survey in 12 years confirming that one in five people still struggle with literacy, and one in four with numeracy.
- » *School leaver choices and tertiary pathways*: An aim throughout the last five years has been to 'move the dial' on school leaver choices and to show the value of alternative pathways. Major growth in demand for post-Leaving Certificate (PLC), apprenticeship, and new tertiary degree programmes in 2024 means that since 2019 there has been an 11.8% increase in those choosing alternative pathways to direct university entry.
- » *FET for enterprise*: FET is becoming a go-to place for enterprise, with 25,000 employees upskilling through Skills to Advance in 2024 (and over 83,000 since the initiative began). An exciting new funded partnership with Enterprise Ireland was also launched, to expand access to companies, with particular targeting of the clients of Local Enterprise Offices.
- » *Strategic impact*: There is ongoing transformation across the FET system, with funding model reform, consistent learner support, and a new community education framework. With the *Transforming Learning* strategy concluding, the regional strategic agreements with 16 ETBs also came to an end. Over the period 2022–2024, national system targets were met for widening participation, progression through FET, certification of transversal skills, employee upskilling, tailored re-skilling support for the unemployed, lifelong learning participation, literacy provision, and delivery of critical skills needs. A new round of strategic dialogue with ETBs is putting plans in place for 2025 onwards.

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Another bumper year for FET, apprenticeships, and construction activity across the country is a great way to close out *Transforming Learning*. But attention has already turned to how we sustain this momentum, grow our footprint further, and shape the strategy for FET in Ireland over the next five years.

## The future of FET

Our focus is now set firmly on the future of FET, with a legislative mandate to produce a new FET strategy for 2025–2029. In 2024, we undertook an extensive strategy consultation with stakeholders, including industry, FET sector partners, and learners, to help us carve out a clear vision for future growth, transformation, and development.

While much progress has been made in ensuring that we can respond as a sector to the critical skills needs in Ireland, megatrends like climate action, digital transformation, global disruption, and ageing demographics have already had a major effect on FET, and this will only intensify in the years to come. We are also facing challenges like artificial intelligence and its impact on learning, on learners, on the skills needed for work, and on the wider world. It is vital that the next FET strategy is agile and allows us to pivot and adapt to new challenges as we face them.

As well as our ambition for growth in the sector, we also want to take the next steps to becoming an OECD world-class skills leader and increasing our lifelong learning participation rate. To meet our 2030 EU target for lifelong learning, an additional 560,000 learning places (estimated by the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit) will have to be made available, and FET will have to be a core driver of this additional provision.

Taking this into account, key themes over the next five years, which you will see framed within a new FET strategy in the first half of 2025, will include:

- » leading the way on the green and digital skills essential for our economy and society to survive and prosper
- » fundamentally changing how further education and training is delivered
- » powering workforce transformation and lifelong learning, including the further development of specialist skills capability
- » ensuring access to education for all by linking our learning to the wider supports and services required by those at greatest risk of marginalisation and exclusion.

This exciting agenda will ensure that 2025 can take FET and apprenticeships to even greater heights, where it becomes valued as an increasingly essential piece of national infrastructure in the same way that housing, transport, or health is valued.

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