

Transforming Learning: Transformation of the FET Sector, 2020–2024

Introduction

2024 is an important year for SOLAS and the further education and training (FET) sector, as it marks the end of the current FET strategy, *Future FET: Transforming Learning*, which centred on the three pillars of building skills, fostering inclusion, and facilitating pathways. We are now focused on strategy development for the next five years (2025–2029), which will set a clear roadmap of our future goals and ambition. This also gives us an important opportunity to reflect on how far the sector has come and to acknowledge some of our collective achievements in transforming learning.

As the state agency responsible for FET in Ireland, SOLAS drives the innovation, transformation, and sustainability of the sector and works collaboratively with our key stakeholders and partners, including the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs), to ensure that FET and apprenticeship provision can deliver to its full potential. Over the last five years, we have achieved significant progress through implementing the FET strategy, focusing on reviving and repairing our economy and supporting our communities across the country since the emergence of Covid-19.

The strategy set out a strong mandate for reform and performance improvement to ensure we could deliver a more strategic, visible, and integrated sector, offering learning opportunities for everyone. To achieve this ambitious goal, SOLAS set about securing increased investment in recurrent and capital funding and established a project management office to progress key actions in the strategy. This helped us put in place structures and processes to work towards consistency and accountability across all FET providers.

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This article offers a snapshot of developments in further education and training (FET) in Ireland. It details how SOLAS and key partners have driven the transformation and reform of FET and apprenticeships during delivery of the FET strategy, *Future FET: Transforming Learning (2020–2024)*.

have seen unprecedented growth and demand. Last year, the learner base grew by 17%, with one in ten adults now engaged in FET and apprenticeships – something we are really proud of. The sector's transformation is a result of our collaborative approach: with our sector partners we have co-developed and co-designed innovative ways of delivering FET. The incredible support from our colleagues has enabled us to make real changes resulting in positive outcomes for learners, such as widening participation and providing a range of accessible pathways.

FET for transformation

Future FET: Transforming Learning has given us a wide-reaching and visionary strategy to work from. Over its lifetime, we have driven change and reform across the FET system, providing easier access, simplified pathways, a consistent learner experience, and a stronger identity, while empowering ETBs to respond to skills gaps at local level. Key achievements include the following:

Performance targets

National FET system performance targets have played a vital part in ensuring that we provide for the reform and realisation of the ambition of the FET strategy across the 16 ETB regions. The agreements between SOLAS and ETBs highlight priority areas, such as employment outcomes, progression to higher education, and lifelong learning, while also incorporating national priorities such as green skills and workforce reskilling. They have supported development and fostered innovation across the system and provided an important link between local needs and national priorities.

Funding model reform

Implementation of funding model reform with the 16 ETBs is moving towards effectively linking the resourcing of FET and apprenticeships directly to outcomes. This approach also enables the sector to respond promptly to FET demand and to address immediate needs and priorities that arise at local and national level.

FET college of the future and capital programme

Over the course of this strategy, SOLAS secured a specific capital allocation for vital investment in FET. This has resulted in many exciting projects, including an allocation for minor works, devolved grant allocations to ETBs, and a dedicated health and safety programme. These initiatives will help us build college identities for FET and ensure that ETBs can provide learners with quality learning environments and spaces that reflect current provision.

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FET for enterprise

The diversity, flexibility, and wide availability of FET provision locally mean it is uniquely placed to respond to critical skills needs in Ireland and will play an important part in addressing future skills needs such as digitisation, decarbonisation, and demographic change.

We have ramped up provision to ensure that the sector can provide enterprise with the necessary skills and career opportunities for their employees, so they can thrive in the Irish economy. This includes developing targeted and flexible upskilling options under the Skills to Advance initiative, including FET micro-qualifications to ensure that enterprise can respond to the rapidly changing world of work.

FET for communities

The importance of FET for inclusion has been maintained throughout the strategy's implementation. We recognise the valuable role that FET plays in local communities across Ireland: it not only benefits learners and communities but also supports a cohesive society:

- » We have continued to support thousands of Ukrainians with English-language and other skills, helping them integrate into communities.
- » In 2024 we launched the Community Education Framework to ensure a more consistent approach to SOLAS-funded community education across Ireland. We are now focused on implementing its actions, and in collaboration with local providers we will create structures that support and foster innovative ideas and best practice.
- » SOLAS is leading Adult Literacy for Life, a 10-year, whole-of-government and society approach to ensuring that everyone has the literacy skills to meet their needs, and that this is valued and supported at every level of society.

SOLAS also continues to support the National Apprenticeship Office in delivering the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021–2025, with apprenticeships now considered a major route to skills development in Ireland. Another key outcome in progressing the strategy's facilitating-pathways pillar is the establishment of the National Tertiary Office, which provides accessible options for learners outside the traditional systems.

The future of FET

With one in ten adults in Ireland – some 425,000 – now impacted in some way by the learning supported by SOLAS, our ambition is to grow this to half a

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million by 2026. To achieve this, we will require additional funding so we can provide the extra places by 2030. We will also need to focus on investment so we can respond to the rapidly evolving skills environment, ensuring that FET can deliver for the workforce transformation.

SOLAS, along with our key partners, has been on a journey of transformation, and while we have achieved a great deal, it is important that we continue on this trajectory so that we can be a pivotal driver of equality and inclusion, ensuring access to education for all and pathways that will allow everyone to realise their true potential.



NATIONAL CHAMPION IN THE WORKPLACE AWARDS 2024

80 nominations nationwide with seven individual/team award winners, and one overall winner.



(L-R) Mary-Liz Trant, Director of the NAO, Lorraine Powell, Stryker Ireland, and Pat O'Doherty, Chairman of the National Apprenticeship Alliance

Stryker Ireland's Lorraine Powell was announced overall winner of the national Generation Apprenticeship Champions in the Workplace 2024 Awards at a spectacular ceremony on 5 December 2024.

Now in its sixth year, the awards celebrate exceptional businesses across the country passionate about supporting and developing the talent and success of apprentices. Representing their company, six outstanding employees and two teams received category awards at the ceremony, including Lorraine Powell, who was also presented with the Apprenticeship Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Advocate category for her work advocating for inclusion in Stryker Ireland.

The apprenticeship route is growing in stature nationwide. This year, over 10,000 employers are investing in apprentices across 75+ occupations to find and retain talent and support Ireland's economy and society.