



# Further Education and Training Strategy 2025 – 2029

*Public Consultation: January 2025*

**Response Deadline:** 5pm, Friday 21<sup>st</sup> February 2025

## **Background to this Public Consultation**

SOLAS (An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna) was established in 2013 as the state agency with responsibility for further education and training (FET) in Ireland. As part of its remit, SOLAS is required to prepare and submit a strategy in respect of FET every five years to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

A public consultation is now open in which SOLAS is seeking input from all interested parties to help us shape the strategic direction for the FET sector up to the year 2029. 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. This will only exacerbate in the years to come. We are also facing challenges like Artificial Intelligence (AI), and its impact on learning, the learner, the skills needed for work, and the wider world in which we live. 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 within the sector, we also want to take the next steps to become an OECD world-class skills leader and increase our lifelong learning participation rate in Ireland. The next FET strategy has a critical role to play in meeting Ireland's future workforce and skills needs. The 2023 OECD Skills Strategy Review comprehensively reviewed Ireland's skills structures and approaches.

The review concluded that the scale and pace of change globally requires Ireland's skills ecosystem to undertake a step change to address these challenges and leverage opportunities to sustain Ireland's economy. It also posited that it is timely that Ireland considers how to build ambitiously on its strengths and put skills at the centre of whole-of-Government approach, along with significant investment.

The new Programme for Government 2025 highlighted the need for ongoing investment in further and higher education as being core to the ambition of delivering sustainable economic growth and committed to ensuring that this investment also offers opportunity to everyone, while remaining agile to address the key skill challenges faced by our country as well as new and emerging technology and work practices. A well-resourced further and higher education sector is essential not only to develop the talent for our economy, but to support local communities as employers and in nurturing cultural and sporting activities.

The FET sector has undergone a significant transformation over the last five years, and it is important that we continue with this trajectory so that FET can be a pivotal driver of equality and inclusion, ensuring access to education for all and pathways, and that FET is recognised as an essential piece of national infrastructure in the same way that housing, transport or health is valued. We are seeking to build an ambitious roadmap for FET over the next five years ensuring that it can play a critical role in meeting Ireland's future workforce and skills needs, widen participation in learning amongst adults of all ages, ensure a consistent learner experience, and continue to drive transformation and reform across the sector.

### **The Further Education and Training (FET) Sector in Ireland**

FET is primarily delivered by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) at local level. There are 16 ETBs in Ireland who, as part of their remit manage and operate Further Education (FE) colleges, training centres, Youthreach centres and a range of adult and further education centres delivering education and training programmes across the country.

The FET sector experienced extraordinary growth in demand in 2023 and 2024, with the learner base growing by some 17% from 2022 to 2023 and further growth in 2024. One in ten adults in Ireland – around 425,000 people – were engaged in FET activity in 2023 and 2024. These figures give us a strong indication that FET is growing and delivering and also provide a strong platform to drive further ambition for FET not only for its learners, but also for the economy, the workforce, communities and society. These figures also indicate increases in the rate of lifelong learning and widening participation amongst the most marginalised in our communities.

## **Delivering on Ireland's Skills Needs**

FET has the capability to build a resilient and flexible workforce to meet Ireland's future skills needs and Government priorities including Housing for All, the Climate Action Plan, the National Digital Strategy, and the National Development Plan 2021-2030, which highlight requirements to meet digital, construction and green workforce skill needs including those related to modern methods of construction (MMC) and offshore wind. FET also plays a significant role in the Action Plan for Apprenticeships 2021-2025. Enhanced engagement and partnerships with employers, industry and industry representative groups will be key to the development of a responsive FET system aligned to workforce and skills needs.

The role of FET in skills development and in providing pathways to employment and to other educational opportunities offers the chance to equip Ireland with a flexible, responsive and agile skills system, capable of addressing global skills megatrends of digitisation/artificial intelligence, decarbonisation and deglobalisation that are driving rapid economic and social transformation, as detailed in the OECD Skills Strategy Review.

The FET sector, via its 16 ETBs, will be uniquely positioned within the tertiary education landscape to address core intermediate skills needs in the labour market and to bolster lifelong learning for adults that will be critical to meeting 21st century requirements, drive innovation and boost productivity in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in a world of work being transformed by technology. By fostering this skills development and providing pathways to employment and other educational opportunities, ETBs have a key role in ensuring that all learners can achieve their full potential.

To deliver on skills needs, a more balanced education and skills system is needed, which was highlighted by the recent OECD review. This recognises that some people are better suited to more vocational and technical pathways like FET and apprenticeships particularly for school leavers, and that there needs to be clearer pathways between further and higher education (including through the new tertiary programmes – that support people to commence a course in an ETB and continue in a Higher Education Institution (HEI) to obtain a degree). Work to further enhance a more coordinated and consistent approach to FET-HE transitions will continue as part of the new FET strategy.

## **Fundamentally Changing the Way We Deliver FET**

The FET sector has a key role to play in ensuring that all learners can reach their full potential. However, the individual needs of learners are diverse and the way in which they learn is evolving. FET needs to be able to provide agile responses to a rapidly changing environment – taking into account individual, educational and skills needs.

A High-Level Review (HLR) of the current FET strategy acknowledges that, whilst there has been significant reform of the sector, further efforts will be required and calls for a ‘step change in the pace of progress in achieving the key enabling themes.’ Transformation and reform of the current organisational design, staffing structures and resourcing of the FET sector will be required to support the country’s future needs in terms of delivering on skilling, re-skilling and upskilling of the workforce and capital investment plans. The HLR also highlights the continued collection and analysis of data as essential to the optimisation of the FET system.

As outlined in the current FET strategy, key to successful development of the sector will be the evolution of FET facilities and provision into distinct integrated FET Colleges of the Future, that can enable community-based learning excellence, fundamental in meeting the skills needs of regional economies and in developing the future workforce of Ireland.

Modernising infrastructure is also a critical element in the process of transforming the FET sector and enhancing its flexibility, agility, and accessibility to meet Government priorities. Since 2020, there has been a significant increase in capital investment to address deficits in FET infrastructure. Whilst this is acknowledged, it is important to note that the FET College of the Future is more than just a physical structure. The strategic alignment of FET policy and capital investment is of central importance and will be critical to the success of the FET policy reform and the College of the Future. Included in this will be the development of specialist FET centres of skills development, focusing in particular on meeting SME upskilling needs in critical areas like hospitality, retail, construction, manufacturing, the green economy and tech.

#### **Further Widen Participation by Linking to Communities and Services**

FET has always played an important role in supporting inclusion and providing a route back to education for adults of all ages. COVID had a major impact on this role and although learner numbers from key target groups have bounced back there is scope to do much more. In addition, new challenges have emerged including the Ukrainian conflict, digital exclusion and an ageing population. There is opportunity to further embed the critical and unique role FET plays in local communities across Ireland in enhancing social cohesion and active citizenship. The new strategy must have a continued focus on inclusion to ensure that the most marginalised learners are not left behind by providing parity of opportunity for all citizens, enhancement of consistent learner experiences and supports.

## **Making a Submission**

We are seeking your views on three thematic areas that will be fundamental to the success of the new FET Strategy:

- **Theme 1:** Delivering on Ireland’s Skills Needs
- **Theme 2:** Fundamentally Changing the Way We Deliver FET
- **Theme 3:** Further widen participation by linking to communities and services.

This is your opportunity to input into the future of the FET sector in Ireland and shape the strategic direction of it for the next five years and beyond. All feedback will be collected, analysed and will help shape the discussions that follow.

Submissions should be emailed to [fetstrategy@solas.ie](mailto:fetstrategy@solas.ie) with “**FET Strategy Submission 2025- 2029**” in the subject line and should be submitted on or before **5pm on Friday 21<sup>st</sup> February 2025**.

### ***Freedom of information***

*Please note that under the Freedom of Information Act 2014 and the European Communities (Access to Information on the Environment) Regulations 2007 to 2014, information provided during this consultation may be liable to be disclosed. It is intended that all submissions received will be made available under the Freedom of Information Acts and as such may be published on our website following the publication of the Statement of Strategy.*

### ***What we will do with your response***

*A report on the findings of the consultation process will be developed to inform the design and development of the next FET strategy. This report may be published <https://www.solas.ie/data-protection/>*

*Many thanks for your time in supporting us in this vital work.*