



Independent national experts network in the area of adult education/adult skills

Full Country Report - Ireland

Written by Thomas Collins
September - 2017



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

Directorate E — Skills

Unit E.3 — VET, Apprenticeship and Adult Learning

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1.0 Country overview

1.1 Trends for the entire population

1.1.1 Employment rate – entire population

Table 1.1: Evolution of employment rate - national average (2010-2016) compared to EU data

| Geographical area | Years | | | | | | | | | Targets | |
|----------------------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------------------------------------------|---------------|
| | 2000 | 2005 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | EU 2020 | National 2020 |
| EU-28 average | : | 67.9 | 68.6 | 68.6 | 68.4 | 68.4 | 69.2 | 70 | 71 | 75% of the 20-64 year-olds in employment | 69-71 |
| Member State | 70.1 | 72.6 | 64.6 | 63.8 | 63.7 | 65.5 | 67 | 68.7 | 70.3 | | |

Source: Employment rates by age and educational attainment level (%) Eurostat code lfsa_ergaed, last updated 25 April 2017.

Explanatory note: This table compares the average employment rate of the population (ISCED all levels) aged 20 to 64 in a given Member State over the period 2000-2016 to EU targets and average, including the EU2020 target, national 2020 targets and the average EU employment rate for 2016.

-Comparison to EU2020 target:

The recovery in the Irish labour market evident since 2013, continued in 2016 as the employment rate increased from 68.7% (2015) to 70.3% (2016), an increase of 1.6 percentage points. The employment rate in Ireland is now within 5% of the EU2020 target of 75%.

-Comparison to National 2020 target:

The Irish employment rate, at 70.3% in 2016, has now reached the National 2020 target of 69-71%.

-Comparison between 2016 national data and the EU-28 average for 2016.

Reflecting the strong labour market recovery in Ireland, the gap between the Irish employment rate (at 70.3%) and the EU-28 average (71%) has been narrowing and the Irish rate is now 0.7% behind the EU-28 average, compared to a gap of 4.8% in 2011.

-Evolution over time.

The national employment rate has increased consistently between 2012 (63.7%) and 2016 (70.3%), Prior to this it fell from 70.1% in 2000 to 63.8% in 2011.

Progress in the employment rate is reflected in reduced unemployment rates. In December 2011, the unemployment rate was 15.2%. The seasonally adjusted rate for May 2017 is 6.4%, the lowest it has been

since 2008 and down from 8.4% in May 2016¹. The long term unemployment rate has also declined in that time frame from 9.5% in 2012 to 4.2% in Q3 2016. There has also been a 50% decline in the number of young unemployed people since 2012².

1.1.2 Participation rate – entire population

Table 1.2: Evolution of participation rate in education and training - national average (2010-2016) compared to EU data

| Geographical area | Years | | | | | | | | | Targets | |
|----------------------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| | 2000 | 2005 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | EU 2020 | National 2020 |
| EU-28 average | : | 9.6 | 9.3 | 9.1 | 9.2 | 10.7 | 10.8 | 10.7 | 10.8 | - | - |
| Member State | : | 7.4 | 7 | 7.1 | 7.4 | 7.6 | 6.9 | 6.5 | 6.4 | 15% of adults in lifelong learning (LLL) | |

Source: Participation rate in education and training by sex and age (%), Eurostat code trng_lfse_01, last updated 25 April 2017.

Explanatory note: This table compares the participation rate in lifelong learning of adults aged 25-64 to EU data over the period 2000-2016.

-Comparison to EU2020 target

At 6.4%, the national participation rate stands well below the EU2020 target of 15% of adults in LLL.

-Comparison between 2016 national data and the EU-28 average for 2016.

The participation rate in education and training in Ireland at 6.4% (2016) stands below the EU-28 average of 10.8% for this same year. The gap in the participation rate between Ireland and the EU-28 average continued to widen in 2016, as the rate in Ireland fell by 0.1% from 2015 and the rate in the EU 28 increased by the same rate.

¹ Central Statistics Office (2017) CSO Statistical Release May 30 2017: Monthly Unemployment Rate <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/mue/monthlyunemploymentmay2017/>

² Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. (2017). Action Plan for Jobs 2017. Dublin. <https://www.djei.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Action-Plan-for-Jobs-2017.pdf>

-Evolution over time.

The national participation rate has fluctuated over time, but overall there has been a declining trend between 2005 (7.4%) and 2016 (6.4%).

The gap between Ireland's performance and the EU average for Lifelong Learning participation rates has been evident for more than a decade – during both positive and negative economic climates. During a time of economic boom and full employment in Ireland in 2005, the gap stood at 2.2%; at the time of severe recession in 2011, the gap was 2%; and since 2012 as Ireland has undergone rapid economic recovery the gap has widened to 4.4% in 2016. One of the key targets set out by the Action Plan for Education 2017 includes an ambition to increase Ireland's lifelong learning participation rate to 10% by 2020 and to 15% by 2025³.

1.2 Trends for low qualified adults

1.2.1 Share of low qualified adults

Table 1.3: Share of low-qualified adults (ISCED 0-2) – national data (2010-2016) compared to EU-28 average 2016

| Geographical area | Years | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | 2000 | 2005 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 |
| EU-28 average | : | 30.6 | 27.3 | 26.6 | 25.8 | 24.8 | 24.1 | 23.5 | 23 |
| Member State | 42.4 | 34.8 | 27.2 | 26.4 | 25.4 | 23.3 | 21.2 | 20.2 | 19.9 |

Source: Population by educational attainment level, sex and age (%), Eurostat edat_lfse_03, last updated 25 April 2017.

Explanatory note: this table compares the percentage of the population with low qualifications (ISCED levels 0-2) in 2016 to the EU-28 average for 2016 and the period 2000-2016.

-Comparison to EU-28 average.

The percentage of adults with low qualifications (ISCED levels 0-2) fell in 2016 below 20% in Ireland for the first time (19.9%). This compares to a rate in the EU-28 average of 23% for 2016. Since 2014, the gap between Ireland and the EU-28 average has stayed consistently at approximately 3%.

-Evolution over time.

The share of low qualified adults has been declining in both Ireland and EU-28 average this century. The decline has been more rapid in Ireland than for the EU-28 average. In 2005, the rate in Ireland of 34.8% was almost 4% higher than the EU-28 average. The following year, the rate in Ireland had fallen to the same rate as the EU-28 average, just greater than 27%. Since then the EU-28 average rate has fallen at a relative consistent 1% and close to 2% change per year in Ireland from 2012-2014. This rapid and

³ Department of Education and Skills (2017) Action Plan for Education 2017

<http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Strategy-Statement/Action-Plan-for-Education-2017.pdf#>

consistent decline in Ireland means that the rate has more than halved since 2000 (when the rate was 42.4%).

1.2.2 Employment rate of low skilled adults

Table 1.4: Employment rates of low skilled adults (ISCED 0-2) – national data (2010-2016) compared to EU-28 average 2016

| Geographical area | Years | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | 2000 | 2005 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 |
| EU-28 average | : | 55.7 | 53.8 | 53.4 | 52.7 | 52 | 52.6 | 53.2 | 54.3 |
| Member State | 55.9 | 58.4 | 47.6 | 45.8 | 44.1 | 46.9 | 46.6 | 48.8 | 49.5 |

Source: Employment rates by age and educational attainment level (%) Eurostat code lfsa_ergaed, last updated 25 April 2017.

Explanatory note: This table compares the employment rates of those with low qualifications (ISCED levels 0-2) to the EU average over the period 2010-2016.

-Comparison to EU-28 average.

In 2016, the national employment rate increased to 49.5% (from 48.8% in 2015). This rate stands under the EU-28 average rate of 54.3%. The recovery in the overall employment rate in Ireland over the last four years is also evident in the employment rate of low skilled adults. Despite the partial recovery in the national rate, it remains nearly 5% lower than the EU-28 average of 54.3% and increased by a lower rate in 2015/2016 at just less than 1% compared to the EU-28 average increase of 1.1%.

-Evolution over time.

The employment rate of low skilled adults in Ireland was particularly badly impacted during the time of the economic crisis. The rate stood at 55.9% in 2000 and reflecting continued economic growth in the first five years of the decade, by 2005 - before the economic crisis - the employment rate for low skilled adults in Ireland had grown to 58.4%, nearly 3% higher than the EU-28 average. The economic crisis resulted in a dramatic and rapid increase in unemployment in Ireland in 2008-2010, with the employment rate of low skilled adults falling from the peak of 58.4% in 2005 to 47.6% in 2010. The rate continued to fall to a low of 44.1% in 2012 – a fall of more than 14% from the peak in 2005. Rates for the EU-28 average also declined across this period, but by less than 1% a year and an overall 3% 2005-2012, a far less dramatic fall. Recovery in Ireland over the last five years has also been at a greater rate than the EU-28 average as rates increased by 5.4% between 2012-2016 in Ireland compared to 1.6% in the EU-28 average. The main gains in Ireland were between 2012-15. The increase in 2015/16 as discussed above were greater at EU-28 level than in Ireland.

1.2.3 Participation rate of low skilled adults

Table 1.5: Participation rate of low skilled adults – EU average in comparison to national average

| Geographical area | Years | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | 2000 | 2005 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|---|-----|-----|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| EU-28 average | : | 3.7 | 3.9 | 4 | 3.9 | 4.5 | 4.5 | 4.3 | 4.2 |
| Member State | : | 2.7 | 2.8 | 3 | 3.2 | 3.4 | 2.4 | 2.4 | 2.5 |

Source: Participation rate in education and training by sex and educational attainment (%), Eurostat code and trng_lfse_03, last updated 25 April 2017.

Explanatory note: This table compares the participation rate in lifelong learning of adults aged 25-64 with low qualification levels (ISCED levels 0-2) to EU data and over the period 2000-2016.

-Comparison to EU-28 average.

The participation rate in lifelong learning of adults aged 25-64 with low qualification levels (ISCED levels 0-2) in Ireland was 2.5% in 2016 compared to 4.2% in the EU-28 average. The rate in Ireland has been relatively static over the last three years – a time of substantial employment recovery, while it has EU-28 average declined by a small percentage since 2014.

-Evolution over time.

There was little variation in the participation rate in lifelong learning of adults aged 25-64 with low qualification levels in both Ireland and the EU-28 average between 2005-2016. In general, the rate has moved less than 1 percentage points in both geographical areas. The rate was at its highest in Ireland in 2011-2013 at 3-3.4%, the most severe years of the economic crisis. The rate fell by 1% in 2013/14 but has been relatively static since then. The level in 2016, is approaching the level evident in Ireland in 2005, a time of economic boom. Turning to the EU-28 average, the rate in 2016 at 4.2% is slightly lower than the peak of 4.5% in 2013, but remains higher than the rate of 3.7% in 2005.

The European Education and Training monitor shows that adult participation in Lifelong Learning in Ireland is lower than the EU-28 average irrespective of prior education level. For those with high education background, participation in Ireland was 9.4% in 2016 compared to 18.8% in the EU; for medium education, it was 5.6% in Ireland compared to 8.8% in the EU and for low education, was 2.4% in Ireland compared to 4.3% in the EU⁴.

⁴ Education and Training Monitor (2016) https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/monitor2016-factsheet-ie_en.pdf

2.0 Brief Overview of adult learning system

2.1 Main features and a concise summary of historic development

Ireland's education and training system beyond a person's school years primarily comprises of publicly funded further education and training (FET), and higher education (HE) sectors. FET is open to those aged 16-66. As the FET sector incorporates both labour market and social inclusion agendas, the sector is generally taken as a proxy for adult education provision in Ireland. Adult learners in a FET setting are defined as anyone who is over 16 years (left school early) or wants to further their learning.

As outlined by McGuinness *et al* in the comprehensive strategic overview of the FET sector carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) in 2014, FET provision can be categorised as diverse and heterogeneous as follows:¹

- 1) Providing initial vocational education and training, including high quality apprenticeships;
- 2) A re-entry route for individuals to education and training, including literacy and basic education;
- 3) Professional or vocational development of individuals in the workforce or re-entering the workforce;
- 4) Community education and training;
- 5) Other systematic and deliberate learning undertaken by adults in a wide variety of settings and contexts, both formal and informal.

Reflecting the diversity of the sector, providers range from public organisations to private providers and community/voluntary groups offering courses with no accreditation up to Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

The last six years has seen a fundamental and radical re-organisation of FET structures and strategy in Ireland, accompanied by new legislation, while high unemployment rates arising from the fiscal and economic crisis has led to a thorough re-structuring of labour market activation services.

In 2013 the existing national level FET agency - FÁS - was disbanded and a new Further Education and Training Authority - SOLAS, was established under the [Further Education and Training Act 2013](#) to oversee funding and policy direction for the Further Education and Training sector. SOLAS was tasked with building the identity and values of a world-class, integrated Further Education and Training system, while social protection moved from a system of passive income support to a focus on actively enabling unemployed people to get back to employment, training or education as soon as possible through a new service called INTREO. INTREO is a newly integrated employment and support service managed by the Department of Social Protection (DSP). It provides a single point of contact for all employment and income support by offering practical, tailored employment services, and support for jobseekers and employers', including assistance and advice on employment, training and personal development opportunities².

The reform and re-structuring of FET was part of the Government's wider public service reforms, which emphasised the need for efficiency, effectiveness and value in the deployment of public funding. Access routes into the FET sector include referrals from the DSP, together with direct access from adults, such as employed or retired individuals; early school leavers, school leavers and the economic inactive.

¹ McGuinness S., Bergin, A., Kelly, E., McCoy, S., Smyth, S., Whelan, A., Banks, J.. (2014). Further Education and Training in Ireland: Past, Present and Future – ESRI Research Number 35. Dublin. ESRI. <https://www.esri.ie/pubs/RS35.pdf>

² http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Intreo_home.aspx

Notwithstanding the structural change arising from the re-organisation undertaken over recent years, the sector remains diverse, in terms of both rationale and providers. A shortcoming of the sector has been a difficulty in estimating the breakdown of activity and outputs between providers. (This shortcoming is being addressed through the strategic development of the sector outlined in Section 3). The strategic overview carried out by McGuinness *et al* estimated the breakdown in provision from the perspective of accreditation in 2012¹. While some community and voluntary providers provide training with no accreditation, this estimate provides the most comprehensive overview of the breakdown across providers. The analysis showed that publicly funded sector accounted for approximately 70% of Further Education and Training Provision and the private sector and community and voluntary sector about 30%. Private providers have been particularly active in recent years in the delivery of Springboard² programmes.

Ireland shares, in common with some other OECD countries, a pronounced pattern of early completion of upper-secondary education and commencement of further and higher education around the age of 18. The enrolment rates for 15-19-year olds exceeds the OECD and EU22 averages at 95%, and is considerably higher than that for 20-29-year olds at 27%. These findings, and as concluded by the OECD suggests that there is a strong emphasis on initial formal education and training for the younger age group compared to the older ones³.

The latest figures from Eurostat also in terms of participation in formal education and training are presented in table 2.1 below. The figures offer a breakdown by educational level, and indicates that over 25 year olds engaged in formal adult learning, are mostly participating at post-secondary non-tertiary education.

Table 2.1 Number of participants in formal education and training by level of education and age

| | Age 20-24 | Age 25+ | Total |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|---------|-------|
| Level of education | | | |
| Primary | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Lower secondary | 219 | 11 | 230 |
| Upper secondary | 3172 | 4,609 | 7,781 |
| Post-secondary non-tertiary education | | 35,765 | |
| Short-cycle tertiary education | | 8,170 | |
| Bachelor's or equivalent level | | 33,533 | |
| Master's or equivalent level | | 20,219 | |
| Doctoral or equivalent level | | 7,094 | |

¹ McGuinness S., Bergin, A., Kelly, E., McCoy, S., Smyth, S., Whelan, A., Banks, J.. (2014). Further Education and Training in Ireland: Past, Present and Future – ESRI Research Number 35. Dublin. ESRI. (summarised p. viii)
<https://www.esri.ie/pubs/RS35.pdf>

² Springboard courses are all in areas there is a proven shortage of skills currently, and in the coming years. Each course aims to cross-skill or upskill participants to restart their careers, and to provide a dynamic pipeline of graduates for enterprise sectors that are growing and expanding. Springboard has been running since 2011, with over 10,000 people enrolled in courses to date and 40% of those are back in work six months after their course. Springboard is funded by employer contributions to the National Training Fund.

³ OECD. (2016). Education at a Glance 2016 Education Indicators. Paris. OECD.
<https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/International-Statistical-Reports/Education-at-a-Glance-OECD-Indicators-2016-Briefing-Note.pdf>

Source: Eurostat, Eurostat database table "Pupils and students enrolled by education level, sex and age (educ_uoe_enra02)", accessed 2017.08.21

2.2 Provision

The main providers of publicly funded FET are the 16 Education and Training boards (ETBs) which were established in 2013 replacing the former Vocational Education Committees (VECs). The ETBs manage and operate second-level schools, further education colleges, Training Centres (formerly FÁS training Centres) and a range of adult and further education centres delivering education and training programmes. Other public providers include Universities and Institutes of Technology for full and part-time vocational upskilling, and specific sector specific organisations such as Crafts Council of Ireland, Coillte (forestry), Teagasc (agriculture), Fáilte Ireland (tourism), Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM) (fisheries), Enterprise Ireland (internationally trading Irish companies), Local Enterprise Offices (micro enterprises), Bord Altranais (Nursing) and Irish Prison Services.

Private Training providers include Private Colleges, Chambers of Commerce, Irish Congress of Trade Unions, organisations such as the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) and Company based training through and employer networks (Skillnets).

Community and voluntary groups are generally publicly funded through funding programmes such as those managed by SOLAS and Pobal¹.

2.2.1 Helps adults improve their Basic Skills

There is provision in the area of basic skills, mainly in the form of adult literacy support, The SOLAS Annual Report for 2016 shows that there were approximately 40,000 participants in part-time Adult Literacy courses in 2016 and 16,000 in the NALA 'write-on' courses. Such provision is outlined in Goal 2 of the FET Strategy 2014-2019 which relates to Active Inclusion including a Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

2.2.2 Helps adults achieve a Recognised Qualification

Over 300,000 learning opportunities in programmes from level one to level six on the National Framework for Qualifications were provided in 2016 through the ETBs and other providers. As Ireland moves from a position of high unemployment to full employment, the need to develop the rights skills for Ireland's workforce sharpened in focus as a prevailing theme across Government and the education sector in 2016.

2.2.3 Helps adults develop other knowledge and skills, not for vocational purposes

Community Education works with adults who wish to return to or continue their education, with a focus on people who are distant from education. Community education is grounded on principles of justice, equality, social inclusion and citizenship leading to positive personal, social and economic outcomes. Community Education is delivered all over Ireland by a range of providers including statutory organisations and independently managed not-for-profit groups. It takes place in a wide variety of community projects,

¹ Pobal manages various funding programmes which promote social inclusion, reconciliation and equality through integrated social and economic development initiatives within communities on behalf of the Irish Government and the EU. www.pobal.ie

resource centres, voluntary organisations, etc. There were almost 54,000 participants in community education funded by SOLAS in 2016.

2.2.4 Facilitates Transition to the Labour Market for unemployed people or those at risk of unemployment (ALMPs)

Approximately 60% of all provision in 2016 was for individuals that require introductory level courses/supports (across FET programmes up to level four on NFQ or equivalent) to assist them with progression back to employment over a longer timeframe. Examples of programmes include:

- The VTOS programme: an educational and training opportunities scheme for unemployed persons designed to develop employability or further opportunities leading to employment. In 2016, there were over 8,200 participants on VTOS schemes;
- The Back to education Initiative (BTEI): provides part-time further education programmes for young people and adults. The aim is to give participants an opportunity to combine a return to learning with family, work and other responsibilities. In 2016, there were 37,412 participants;
- Post Leaving Cert courses (PLC courses): are aimed at those who have secondary education and would like to develop vocational and technological skills in order to get a job or to go into further education and training. The courses are aimed at school-leavers and adults. The courses are full-time and last for one to two years. They offer a mixture of practical work, academic work and work experience. They are designed as a step towards skilled employment and, as such, they are closely linked to industry and its needs. Most PLC courses are delivered by Education and Training Boards (ETBs). A wide range of disciplines are covered including business, electronics engineering, computing, catering, sport and leisure, theatre and stage, performance art, art craft and design, equestrian studies, multi-media studies, journalism, tourism, marketing, childcare and community care, hairdressing and beauty care, applied science, horticulture etc. In 2016, there were almost 58,000 participants on PLC courses.

2.2.5 Opens up Higher Education to adults

In Ireland, an adult/mature entrant to higher education is defined as a student who was 23 or over on the 1 January of the year of entry to the higher education institution. In 2015/16, 10% of the 43,460 new entrants to full-time higher education were mature while 85% of part-time entrants¹ were mature². In 2010/11 the percentage of mature full-time entrants to higher education was 15% and part-time was 92%. The reduction in full-time entrants since 2010/11 is arguably linked to the improvement in employment opportunities since the peak the economic recession.

2.2.6 Enables adult employees to develop their work-related skills

With an improving economy and as the number of people on the live register decreases, FET has to re-orientate towards providing skills for people in employment. Following the publication in January 2016 of a new National Skills Strategy, SOLAS was tasked with the development of a policy framework for employee development in consultation with relevant partners. The framework will be designed to guide activity undertaken by the FET sector to support employee development in Ireland. The framework will be

¹ There was a total of 37,249 part-time enrolments (i.e across all years of registration) in the higher Education sector in 2015/16.

² HEA (2016) HEA Facts and Figures 2015/16. Dublin. <http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/HEA-Key-Facts-and-Figures-201516.pdf>

published following its formal agreement with the Dept. of Education and Skills and implementation of its proposals will commence in 2017 continuing through to 2019.

2.2.7 Other (if any)

The European Globalisation Adjustment Fund is a European funded programme, designed to assist EU Member States to provide labour market activation support to those citizens who are made redundant, through the effects of globalisation. In 2016, the SOLAS EGF Co-ordination Unit provided a comprehensive variety of services in support of over seven hundred redundant workers, nationally.

3.0 Adult Learning Policies

3.1 Context

3.1.1 Distribution of responsibilities regarding adult learning

The comprehensive review of FET in Ireland carried out by McGuinness *et al*¹ which was undertaken to provide an evidence base for the purposes of assisting SOLAS in the development of a five-year strategic plan for the FET sector, and an associated implementation plan concluded that *“it is clear from both the national and international evidence that the Irish FET system has historically lacked an appropriate governance structure that gives strategic direction to providers”* (p. vii)

The re-structuring of the FET sector envisaged a revised governance structure, which moved away from a highly decentralised system of governance (where FÁS and VECs had autonomy with respect to the composition and nature of provision with little strategic direction coming from national authorities), towards a more layered approach where SOLAS has been tasked with fulfilling a more proactive and unifying governance function across the sector².

SOLAS Board Members are appointed by the Minister for Education and Skills, The Board comprises of a Chairman and 12 ordinary members, including the Chief Executive Officer – SOLAS (ex-officio). The ordinary members comprise representatives from employer, trade union, education and ETB, and adult learner interests.

SOLAS oversees a national system for FET, while the main providers of publicly funded Further Education and Training are the 16 Education and Training boards. Organised at a local/county sub-regional level the ETBs were statutorily established on 1 July 2013 by the [Education and Training Boards Act 2013](#). The ETBs are collectively represented by Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) which were established under the [Education and Training Boards Act 2013](#). Under the Act, ETBI acts as an Association to collectively represent education and training boards and promote their interests.

3.1.2 Major national socio-economic strategies governing the provision of Adult Learning

Tackling the unemployment rate arising from the fiscal and economic crisis has underpinned Government economic and social policy over the past six years. Adult/further education is a key element in addressing this priority and is reflected across a number of strategies as follows:

- The Government's 'Pathways to Work' strategies was introduced with a goal of reversing the dramatic rise in the numbers of unemployed jobseekers on the Live Register^{3, 4}. Due to the jobs recovery experienced in recent years, the Pathways to Work strategy for 2016 to 2020 reflected a shift in focus from 'activation in a time of recession' to 'activation in a time of recovery and growth'. Strand 6 of the strategy relates to Building Workforce Skills and is focussed on ensuring that the strategic reforms

¹McGuinness S., Bergin, A., Kelly, E., McCoy, S., Smyth, S., Whelan, A., Banks, J.. (2014). Further Education and Training in Ireland: Past, Present and Future – ESRI Research Number 35. Dublin. ESRI. <https://www.esri.ie/pubs/RS35.pdf>

² McGuinness S., Bergin, A., Kelly, E., McCoy, S., Smyth, S., Whelan, A., Banks, J.. (2014). Further Education and Training in Ireland: Past, Present and Future – ESRI Research Number 35. Dublin. ESRI. <https://www.esri.ie/pubs/RS35.pdf>

³ Government of Ireland. (2012). Pathways to Work - Government Policy Statement on Labour Activation. Dublin <http://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/pathwaystowork.pdf>

⁴ Department of Social Protection. (2016). Pathways to Work 2016-2020. Dublin. <https://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/PathwaysToWork2016-2020.pdf>

underway in the education and training sectors are closely aligned with the needs of employers, workers and jobseekers. The Strategy aims to ensure that the right opportunities to acquire the knowledge, skills and competencies necessary to find and sustain employment are available to jobseekers.

The National Skills Strategy to 2025¹ emphasised the importance of lifelong learning and the skills agenda to the Government's overall economic plan to restore full employment and deliver long term sustainable growth. The Strategy proposed the development of a new skills architecture, including a National Skills Council and Regional Skills Fora. The new architecture is designed to foster closer collaboration between relevant Government Departments and agencies and develop structures to strengthen engagement between the education and training system and enterprise. The National Skills Council will oversee research, advise on prioritisation of identified skills needs and on how to secure delivery of identified needs, and have a key role in promoting and reporting on the delivery of responses by education and training providers to those priorities. The members of the Council are drawn from senior levels in the public and private sector. It will be an advisory, non-statutory body under the remit of the Department of Education and Skills.

- The Regional Skills Fora are designed to foster stronger links between employers and the education and training sector. Nine Regional Skills Fora have been set up to:
 - Provide a cohesive education led structure for employers and the further and higher education system to work together in building the skills needs of their regions;
 - Help employers better understand and access the full range of services available across the education and training system;
 - Enhance links between education and training providers in planning and delivering programmes reduce duplication and inform national funding decisions.

Each region has published a regional Action Plan for Jobs which focus on job creation at a regional rather national level and the identification of skill needs and regional provision.

- The adult literacy and numeracy strategy and the work of the National Adult and Literacy Agency (NALA). The Further Education and Training Act 2013 sets out that the FET strategy needs to include a strategy for the provision of FET programmes aimed at promoting, developing and encouraging literacy and numeracy. The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011-2020)², published in 2011, drives the implementation of a programme of reform focused on curriculum, assessment and teaching practices to underpin a high quality, relevant learner experience and to enhance learning outcomes in early years settings, primary and post-primary schools. Many of the targets set in the original strategy have already been met. The fundamental principles of the strategy continue to provide a framework for reform of curriculum, assessment and teaching practices in early years setting and in primary and post-primary schools.
- A Lifelong Learning motif as the guiding principle for all education policy in Ireland was introduced in the White Paper on Adult Education – Learning for Life³ nearly two decades ago. The Paper proposed a “systemic approach” recognising that the interfaces between the different levels of educational provision, and the quality of the early school experience have a critical influence on learners’ motivation and ability to access and progress in adult education. Lifelong Learning therefore has underpinned education policy for a number of years. The lifelong learning theme continued in the ambitious public sector reform programme introduced in Ireland over the last five years⁴. The Education and Training reform programme recognises the importance of all levels of education and training as integral

¹ Department of Education and Skills, (2016). Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025. Dublin. https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf

² Department of Education and Skills. (2011). Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Literacy-and-Numeracy/Literacy-and-NumeracyLearning-For-Life.pdf>

³ Department of Education and Science. (2000). *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education*. Dublin: Stationery Office. https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/fe_aduled_wp.pdf

⁴ Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. (2014). Public Service Reform Plan 2014-2016. http://www.reformplan.per.gov.ie/2014/sectoral_priorities_nav/3.3_education/3.3.html

elements of a framework for lifelong learning and skills development which starts through quality early childhood provision and is continually developed during school years and in learning beyond school. The Action Plan for Education¹ articulates the vision for this “whole-of system” approach. It states “the Irish education and training system should become the best in Europe: delivering to the highest international standards; equipping learners of all ages to participate and succeed in a changing world; allowing Ireland be a leader across a broad range of endeavours; and harnessing education and training to break down barriers for groups at risk of exclusion” (p.13).

- **The Government’s ‘Action Plan for Jobs’².** First introduced in 2012, the annual Action Plan for Jobs has been one of the Irish Government’s key instruments to support job creation against a backdrop of the economic recession and dramatic increases in unemployment. Over the course of the five annual plans there have been approximately 1,500 Actions to be taken by 16 Government Departments and over 60 State Agencies to support job-creation. In the Action Plan for Jobs 2016³ Actions 47-72 concern the education component of the task of Delivering Skills for a Growing Economy. Actions range from the implementation of the National Skills Strategy, to initiatives in higher education, labour activation education, strategic developments in further education and training and initiatives to align skill development with labour market needs.

3.2 Adult learning policy framework

3.2.1 A summary of major developments/ changes since 2010

The last six years has seen a fundamental and radical re-organisation of FET structures and strategy in Ireland, divided into two phases:

- **2011-2013: Reform and re-structuring**

In July 2011, the Irish Government approved a radical restructuring of the Further Education and Training sector. This involved:

- the dissolution of FÁS and the establishment in 2013 of SOLAS as the Further Education and Training Authority;
- the re-configuration in 2013 of the main providers of further education and training from 33 Vocational Education Committees (VECs) into 16 Education and Training Boards, which also incorporated the previous FÁS training centres; and
- the establishment in 2012 of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) as a new integrated agency, replacing the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB). QQI is responsible for the maintenance, development and review of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and is in charge of quality assurance of further and higher education and training in Ireland. In addition, to validating programmes and making awards for certain providers in these sectors.

¹ Department of Education and Skills. (2016). Action Plan for Education 2016-2019. Dublin.
<http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Strategy-Statement/Department-of-Education-and-Skills-Strategy-Statement-2016-2019.pdf>

² Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. (2016). Action Plan for Jobs 2016. Dublin.
<https://www.djei.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Action-Plan-for-Jobs-2016.pdf>

³ Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. (2016). Action Plan for Jobs 2016 – Table of Actions. Dublin
<https://www.djei.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Action-Plan-for-Jobs-2016-Table-of-Actions.pdf>

The role of SOLAS is to focus on planning, funding and driving the development of a new integrated FET sector while the ETBs are responsible for the delivery of co-ordinated education and training programmes across Ireland.

- **2014-2016: Strategy development, implementation and improvement**

SOLAS published the first [FET Strategy 2014-2019¹](#), which articulated a vision of a flexible, responsive, quality-driven, labour-market relevant and integrated sector that supports learner progression, transition into employment and personal development, and aims to support economic development and social inclusion.

Implementation of the Strategy was based around three phases of action:

- 2014 - Building the Foundations: Managing the transition to the new integrated FET system and detailing the plans for the next steps in the transformation of FET;
- 2015 - Pathways to Progress: Development and piloting of major operational changes and early delivery on critical issues;
- 2016 - Delivery, Reflection and Continuous Improvement: To have in place a fully-functional and operational organisation, working with and for the FET sector.

The Annual SOLAS FET Services Plan monitor progress and present information related to programme and course provision, current and planned beneficiaries of FET provision, grants, grantees, and systems that support the sector now and systems in development to support the sector in the future. The most recent services plan for 2016 outlined three main priorities²:

- Provision of FET programmes to skill, reskill or upskill unemployed persons as well as other job seekers to find a job and/or progress to higher/ further education and training that will equip them to compete in the labour market.
- Provision of FET programmes to support a diverse range of individuals seeking personal, social and developmental skills to enable them to engage or re-engage in learning, or to enable them to make a meaningful contribution to society and to their communities, or to progress to further education and training.
- Target priority cohorts such as the long term unemployed and unemployed youth and target participation rates. The target for people who have been unemployed for a long time remains at the 2015 level of circa 52,000.

A further implementation and monitoring system was introduced in September 2016 with the introduction of the Action Plan for Education³. The Plan outlines actions to be implemented across the education sector, including FET from 2016-2019 with a view to ensuring Ireland has the best education and training system in Europe. Key actions related to FET include:

- Publishing a detailed implementation plan for Apprenticeships and Traineeships

¹ SOLAS. (2014). Further Education and Training Strategy. Dublin. SOLAS. <http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/FETStrategy2014-2019.pdf>

² SOLAS. (2016). Further Education and Training Services Plan 2016. Dublin. <http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/FET%20Services%20Plan%202016.pdf>

³ Department of Education and Skills. (2016). Action Plan for Education 2016-2019. Dublin. <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Strategy-Statement/Department-of-Education-and-Skills-Strategy-Statement-2016-2019.pdf>

- Developing Regional Skills Plans to respond to local needs
- Expanding Skillnets to reach more employers with new options for upgrading skills
- Increasing the availability of quality entrepreneurship programmes and modules in schools, Higher and Further Education

At a structural level, the introduction of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) has made it easier for learners to understand how the education system works and how one award can lead on to another. It helps the learner map out the route that their education will take and clarifies for prospective employers that the NFQ is a system of 10 levels ranging from basic education at level 1, to doctorate level at level 10.

3.2.2 Main legislative act(s) governing the provision of adult learning

Further education and training in Ireland is largely state regulated. Public funding for the sector is channelled by the Department of Education and Skills through SOLAS, the further Education and Training Authority. The functions of SOLAS, which are set out in the Further Education and Training Act 2013 are wide-ranging, incorporating strategic development for the sector, funding for the main providers of training in the sector - the ETBs, evaluation of ETBs, and programmes and development of new and existing FET programmes. The first step in this task for SOLAS was to publish the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 to 2019 (as below)¹.

3.2.3 Main Strategies

The Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 to 2019² is the current key policy framework underpinning FET in Ireland. In addition, since its establishment, SOLAS has published three Further Education and Training Services Plans³. These are the first attempt at developing an integrated service plan across the further education and training sector.

The Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 to 2019 is the current key policy framework underpinning FET in Ireland⁴. Five high level strategic goals were identified:

- 1) Skills for the Economy: to address the current and future needs of learners, jobseekers, employers and employees and to contribute to national economic development,
- 2) Active Inclusion: to support the active inclusion of people of all abilities in society with special reference to literacy and numeracy,
- 3) Quality Provision: to provide high quality education and training programmes and to meet the appropriate national and international quality standards,
- 4) Integrated Planning and Funding: FET provision will be planned and funded on the basis of objective analysis of needs and evidence of social and economic impact,
- 5) Standing of FET: to ensure a valued learning path leading to agreed employment, career, developmental, personal and social options.

¹ SOLAS. (2014). Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019. Dublin. SOLAS.

<http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/FETStrategy2014-2019.pdf>

² SOLAS. (2014). Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019. Dublin. SOLAS.

<http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/FETStrategy2014-2019.pdf>

³ SOLAS. (2016). Further Education and Training Services Plan 2016. Dublin. SOLAS

<http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/FET%20Services%20Plan%202016.pdf>

⁴ SOLAS. (2014). Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019. Dublin. SOLAS.

<http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/FETStrategy2014-2019.pdf>

While the FET strategy 2014 to 2019 is designed to provide direction for the sector, each year SOLAS works with its partners in the FET sector, particularly with the Education and Training Boards, to develop an integrated annual services which sets out detail around the type, mix and volume of programmes and services to be delivered by the FET sector each year as well as the associated funding and estimated outcomes relating to programmes and services. Three FET Services Plans have been published to date in 2014, 2015 and 2016¹. Historically, funding allocations were agreed by the Department of Education and Skills on a programme by programme basis with individual VECs/ETBs. Given the significant structural reforms that have taken place across the FET sector it became necessary to review, in its totality, the approach to agreement of grant allocations. Significant change took place in the planning and funding allocations process in 2015 and changes made continued to apply in 2016. The grant allocation process incorporates a strategic approach to planning and funding requiring consideration of FET provision in its entirety rather than on a singular programme basis. The aim of this approach is to facilitate the identification of gaps and overlaps in provision and where provision need was met as required. Grantees operate within their fixed funding allocation as set by SOLAS and request funding through compilation of a Funding Allocations Requests (FARs) for submission to SOLAS.

The Further Education and Training Strategy commits to the replacement of the legacy funding formula through development of a strategic inputs/outcomes based funding model for all FET provision. This new funding model is currently evolving and is designed to be informed by feedback on existing funding models, relevant stakeholders and national and international best practice. The key principle of the planning process is that the grantee (ETB or other FET organisation) reviews and builds upon their FET services provision. Part of the 2016 planning process required ETBs to take cognisance of local and national education and training and labour market needs, the SOLAS Overarching Planning and Funding Parameters and Requirements and the total grant allocation set by SOLAS. In addition, grantees take into consideration the learners' and employers' education and training requirements and, through their Funding Allocations Requests, demonstrate value for money. The overall long-term goal is to develop a fit-for-purpose Planning, Funding and Reporting process for Further Education and Training. The planning process for 2016 is the second year of a three-year cycle in developing a new planning and funding model.

3.2.4 Main implementing acts

Key to successful planning is the availability of reliable data. While the 2016 Further Education and Training Services Plan represents a significant move forward in terms of embedding a new planning model/process, the data yielded at this point are estimates from the professionals in the field generated without the aid of a comprehensive IT System. The capability to estimate will be improved greatly over the coming years through the roll-out of the Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS). In terms of accurate planning and reporting, this is clearly a high priority action.

State regulation also underpins the private and community/voluntary sector as any accredited training provided is structured under the state regulated National Framework of Qualifications. Non-State regulated training relates to non-accredited training in the private and community/voluntary sector. For those in employment, further training does not have the status of an individual statutory right in Ireland, for example, through provisions for statutory leave periods for further training and education. Take-up of training for

¹ SOLAS. (2016). Further Education and Training Services Plan 2016. Dublin. <http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/FET%20Services%20Plan%202016.pdf>

those in employment is voluntarist but can negotiated between employers and employees and/or their representatives.

The Further Education and Training Act 2013 (whilst also a long-ranging legislative Act) lays out funding for the main providers of training in the sector - the ETBs, evaluation of ETBs, and programmes and development of new and existing FET programmes.

3.3 National quantitative policy targets

Table 3.1 outlines the national level targets that apply in Ireland that link to Adult Learning.

Table 3.1 Targets linked to Adult Learning in broader economic policies/LLL strategies/framework or implementing act

| General information | | Progress toward target | | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Target (target figure and date to be achieved by) | Adoption date (e.g. 31/03/2013) | Initial value (at date of adoption) | Current value | Summary of progress against target | Source of information |
| 339,283 beneficiaries of FET provision in 2016 | 2016 | 93,883 | 338,427 beneficiaries | The target for beneficiaries was largely met. The definition of 'beneficiary full-time courses, ranging from for example, a thirty-three week course delivered over an academic year, and a part-time course delivered over a number of weeks for five hours a week. | FET Services Plan 2016 and SOLAS Annual Report 2016 |
| 10% of new entrants to higher education coming from the further education sector by 2019 | 2015 | 6.6% in 2013 | | | The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher education. |
| 16% of full-time entrants to higher education to be mature | 2015 | 13% | | | The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education. |
| 24% of full-time/part-time/flexible entrants to higher education to be mature | 2015 | 19% | | | |

| | | | | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------|------|---|---------------------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 31,000 cumulative new apprenticeship registrations by 2020 | 2017 | 0 | 3,472 apprentice registrations forecast for 2016 | | Action Plan to Expand Apprenticeship and Traineeship in Ireland 2016-2020 |
| 19,000 cumulative new traineeship registrations by 2020 | 2017 | 0 | 2,500 traineeship registrations forecast for 2016 | | Action Plan to Expand Apprenticeship and Traineeship in Ireland 2016-2020 |

3.4 Quality assurance

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) are mandated through the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 to quality assure institutions of further and higher education and training, validates educational programmes and makes awards to learners. All providers offering QQI awards are required to have a quality assurance system agreed by QQI. Validation is the process by which QQI evaluates a programme, before it is delivered, to ensure that it can provide a learner with the opportunity to achieve a specified award. QQI monitors and evaluates programmes. Monitoring is a multi-faceted system of gathering information on providers' programmes, services and the quality assurance systems which support them. If the evaluation of this information indicates it is necessary, then either the validation of the programme or the agreement of the quality assurance procedures can be reviewed.

Certification in the Further and Higher Education and Training Sector is usually in alignment with the National Framework of Qualifications – an awards framework of 10 levels which is aligned to the European Framework of Qualifications¹. FET awards are generally made at Levels 1 to 6 of the National Qualifications Framework, while HE awards are generally made at level 7-10.

In addition to programme validation, SOLAS has commenced the process of linking quality to funding. The funding guidelines in respect of 2016 grant allocations by SOLAS to agencies and bodies in the FET sector, contained a new condition in relation to funding based on the achievement of stated objectives

3.5 Future policy developments

The ability of the FET sector to move from addressing the unemployment crisis to make Ireland a leader in responding to rapidly changing skills needs will be a key policy concern over the coming years. A recent spending review by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform of FET expenditure by ETBs was critical of the sectors performance and ability in this regard². The analysis found that ETBs' rationale for funding different types of programmes was unclear, and there remained a continuation of a 'fragmented' and 'disjointed' approach to the FET provision.

¹ [http://www.qqi.ie/Pages/National-Framework-of-Qualifications-\(NFQ\).aspx](http://www.qqi.ie/Pages/National-Framework-of-Qualifications-(NFQ).aspx)

² Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. (2017). Spending Review 2017 - Analysis of further Education & Training by Education Training Boards. Dublin. www.per.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/Further-Education-and-Training.pdf

The report noted that while SOLAS had made progress towards the development of a reliable and comprehensive database, the continued gaps in data undermined attempts at evaluating and examining efficiency and effectiveness of the provision. The report recommended prioritisation of the Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS) platform so that SOLAS and the DES can capitalise on the improved data as it emerges from PLSS rather than waiting until it is fully operational. The report also recommended that the mid-term review of SOLAS strategy should evaluate how the level of provision and expenditure correlates with wider labour market conditions, and consider, whether there should be a stronger correlation between FET expenditure and the needs of the wider labour market.

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform report also called for a review of the National Training Fund (NTF), its overarching strategy and objectives, and its governance arrangements. The recently published *Expert Group on Future Funding of Higher Education Investing in National Ambition: A Strategy for Funding Higher Education 'Cassells Report'*¹ called for an increase in the Training Fund Levy of 0.3% (raising approximately €150m) in order to support programmes in skill development in higher education.

A public consultation process on an Exchequer/Employer Investment Mechanism for future funding of further and higher education and training was announced in March 2017². The policy proposal outlined in the consultation document invited views on an increase in the National Training Fund (NTF) levy in order to help fund both HE and FET. Interestingly, the '*Cassells Report*' only proposes the introduction of an increase in this levy for the purpose of ensuring stable future funding for HE, not FET³. Clarity on this question will be required in the first instance when consultations are considered. *A total of 28 written submissions were received in response to the joint consultation paper*⁴. These are currently being considered by the Department of Education and Skills. IBEC, the national umbrella organisation for business and employers in Ireland, expressed concerns in their response to the consultation that the proposal for an increased levy on industry comes at a sensitive time when the challenges to industry have increased with Brexit and other changes in the international landscape⁵. In addition, IBEC's response points to existing criticisms in the responsiveness of HE and FET to employer needs which in industry's view need to be addressed in the context of NTF as it stands not to mention with an increase in employers levy. These criticisms include:

- Detailed cost-benefit analysis of all programmes supported by the NTF should be undertaken. NTF supported programmes which are not meeting explicit employer-defined upskilling should be discontinued or funded from alternative exchequer sources.
- The NTF should include governance structures in which employers have a direct input to decisions on training priorities and funding allocation. At least 50% of its allocation should be directed toward in-company training programmes (such as those supported through Skillnets) and apprenticeships

¹ Department of Education and Skills. 2016. Investing in National Ambition – 'Cassells Report'. Dublin. <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Investing-in-National-Ambition-A-Strategy-for-Funding-Higher-Education.pdf>

² Department of Education and Skills (2017) Public consultation – Proposed Exchequer-Employer Investment Mechanism for future funding for higher education and further education & training https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/pub_ed_proposed_exchequer_employer_investment_higher_further_training_2017.pdf

³ Department of Education and Skills. 2016. Investing in National Ambition – 'Cassells Report'. Dublin. <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Investing-in-National-Ambition-A-Strategy-for-Funding-Higher-Education.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Higher-Education/Exchequer-Employer-Investment-Submissions/>

⁵ IBEC. (2017). Response to proposed Exchequer-Employer Investment Mechanism for HE and FET. Dublin <http://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Higher-Education/Exchequer-Employer-Investment-Submissions/IBEC-exchequer-employer-investment.pdf>

- There should be major re-orientation of the Fund to demand-driven training schemes. These could include a new cost reimbursement scheme which would enable employers to choose suitable training services from individual accredited education and training providers. This should be augmented by training needs analysis services to companies who require help in identifying their specific skills requirements.

A second policy concern will be the task of building coherent pathways from further education to higher education. The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education sets the target of having 10% of new entrants to higher education coming from the further education sector by 2019. Further Education and Higher Education institutes have been set the objective of working in partnership to develop access and foundation courses.

In terms of a new policy initiative, the Action Plan to Expand Apprenticeship and Traineeship in Ireland 2016-2020¹ was published in 2017. By the end of 2017 it is expected that up to 15 new apprenticeships will have been introduced, providing an additional 800+ places. In addition 4 new or relaunched traineeships with an intake of 200 has been targeted. Over the period 2016-2020, 31,000 new apprenticeships (in 40 new programmes) and 19,000 traineeships (in 30 new/relaunched programmes) are targeted.

¹ Department of Education and Skills (2017) Action Plan to Expand Apprenticeship and Traineeship in Ireland 2016-2020 <http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/ActionPlanDec16.pdf>

4.0 Investment in adult learning systems

4.1 Total investment in adult learning and change over time

The most comprehensive analysis of total expenditure on continuing vocational education and training in Ireland (which can be taken as a proxy for adult learning systems) was carried out by the Expert Group for future Skills Needs (EGFSN) over a decade ago¹.

It outlined total expenditure in 2003 as follows:

- Total expenditure by employers on training costs is estimated to have been in the region of €1 billion. This figure included both the direct costs of training, including tuition fees and the wage costs of employees while engaged in training.
- State expenditure on training to assist unemployed individuals secure work, accounted for about €270 million.
- Expenditure on training and education of employed persons by public providers and bodies amounted to about €173 million. €124 million of this was accounted for by apprenticeship training while Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET), state funding to support the training of persons in employment – was in the region of about €49 million.
- In addition, there was public expenditure of about €41 million on part-time enrolments at third level institutions and €45 million paid in private fee expenditure. Some of this €45m was already included in the €1 billion expenditure from employers.

This amounts to a total expenditure in 2003 of approximately €1.5bn – with employers' accounting for the vast majority of expenditure on education and training of people at work.

A survey of continuing vocational Training carried out by the Central Statistics Office estimated the cost of training course activity equal to 2.6% of total labour costs in 2005. The survey estimated direct costs at 28% of total training costs, the time spent on training courses made up 30% of costs and the labour cost of staff working on training activities was 42% of all training costs². Applying the Central Statistics Office direct cost estimate of 28% to the €1 billion expenditures estimated by EGFSN, this would translate to €280m direct costs by employers.

Looking at direct costs only then, an estimated total direct cost in 2003 of €780m can be estimated – made up of two-thirds public expenditure and one third private expenditure. It should be noted that contained within the public expenditure is expenditure distributed from the NTF - funding which is gathered from an employer's levy.

No more up to date comprehensive data is available at this time. Considering the turbulent economic conditions in the intervening years, it is difficult to make an accurate estimate of current total expenditure. Some data available provides pointers:

¹ Expert Group on future Skill Needs. 2005. Data Analysis of In-employment Education and Training in Ireland. Dublin. <http://www.skillsireland.ie/Publications/2005/Data-Analysis-of-In-Employment-Education-and-Training-in-Ireland.pdf>

² Central Statistics Office (2007). Continuing vocational Training Survey 2005. Dublin. <http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/earnings/current/cvts.pdf>

- Due to the recession, National Training Fund income fell between 2008 and 2016 from €413m to €400m. Expenditure from the NTF also fell from almost €400m to €350m (a surplus is held to meet demand in future years)¹.

In the absence of any more up to date data, the relatively unchanged figures for the NTF are used to estimate that direct employer costs for education also stayed relatively static - resulting in an estimate of €280m.

In total then, direct expenditure of the private and public sector combined is estimated at almost €1.1bn. If private sector wage costs of employees while engaged in training are taken into consideration, this estimate increased to €1.8bn.

Considering no adjustment is made for inflation, this suggests a relatively static investment in adult learning over the last 15 years. In the context of constrained national finances linked to the economic recession and turbulent economic conditions facing the private sector over the last decade, such consistency may arguably be regarded as a positive commitment to adult learning.

4.2 Public national investment

Public funding for FET and higher level institutions is channelled through the Department of Education and Skills (DES)².

Investment in the FET sector has remained relatively stable in Ireland since 2008, with overall annual expenditure of over €800 million. However, the composition of spending has changed significantly. Following the onset of the economic crisis in 2008 and rising unemployment rates, there was a refocus of investment away from traditional craft based apprenticeship schemes/in-employment programmes, towards the education and training of unemployed people and specific skills training. As the employment situation has improved over recent years, the scope for redirecting investment back towards in-employment programmes has been utilised to some extent³. Overall, labour market and social inclusion agendas continue to be the dominant themes for publicly funded FET provision in Ireland⁴.

The majority of the funding for FET is channelled by the Department of Education and Skills through SOLAS – the further Education and Training Authority. SOLAS had a budget of €638m in 2016 from the total budget of €848.5m available for FET expenditure in 2016/2017⁵. The allocation to SOLAS is funded evenly between exchequer and the National Training Fund. Some €578 million is spent on the provision of Further Education and Training Programmes, largely through the Education and Training Boards. Administration

¹ Department of Education and Skills (2017) Public consultation – Proposed Exchequer-Employer Investment Mechanism for future funding for higher education and further education & training http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/pub_ed_proposed_exchequer_employer_investment_higher_further_training_2017.pdf

² https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Ireland:Organisation_and_Governance

³ Dept. Of Public Expenditure and Reform. (2017). Spending Review 2017 - Analysis of further Education & Training by Education Training Boards. Dublin. www.per.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/Further-Education-and-Training.pdf

⁴ SOLAS. (2017). Annual Report 2016. <http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/SOLAS%20Annual%20Report%202016.pdf>

⁵ Department of Education and Skills (2017) (Figure 8., p.19) Public consultation – Proposed Exchequer-Employer Investment Mechanism for future funding for higher education and further education & training (p.18) http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/pub_ed_proposed_exchequer_employer_investment_higher_further_training_2017.pdf

and pension costs account for the balance of funding to SOLAS¹. In addition to SOLAS, €150m of the €848.5m overall budget is publicly funded to provide for teacher salaries for Post Leaving Certificate courses (PLCs) which are attended by a combination of school-leavers and adults returning to education. The balance of €60.6m is from employer's contribution to the National Training Fund.

The National Training Fund (which provides approximately 50% of SOLAS funding) was established under the National Training Fund Act 2000 and is mainly resourced by a levy collected from employers as part of social insurance contributions. It is currently set at 0.7% of the reckonable earnings of employees in certain employment classes, which is collected through the PAYE/PRSI system. The Fund can be used to support programmes which aim to:

- Raise the skills of those in employment;
- Provide training to those who wish to acquire skills for the purposes of taking up employment; and
- Provide information in relation to existing, or likely future, skills requirements in the economy.

The resources available for expenditure from the NTF for 2017 is €366 million divided between training programmes for those in employment (29%) and training programmes for employment (71%). This compares to 17% and 83% respectively in 2013 when the unemployment rate was higher. Prior to the crisis in 2008, there was a broadly even split between those in employment and for employment².

In addition to direct funding of FET provision, €1.1bn of Exchequer funding was invested in 2016 by the Dept. of Social Protection in for-employment supports³.

A total budget of €848.5m is available for FET expenditure in 2017⁴:

- €637.9m will be spent through SOLAS (SOLAS allocates FET funding to the 16 regional Education and Training Boards (ETBs)).
- €150m of the €848.5m overall budget is utilised to provide for teacher salaries in the context of Post Leaving Certificate courses (PLCs). (PLCs are full time courses with around 30,000+ places taken up each year).
- €60.6m is National Training Fund expenditure for Springboard and skillnets training and other training grants to industry, community and voluntary organisations.
- Within the SOLAS €638m budget, the two main sources of income to SOLAS (excluding pensions) in 2016 were €295m exchequer funding (which included advance of ESF and European Globalisation Fund) and €286m from the National Training Fund⁵.
 - The total grant to the providers of training (the ETBs) was €538m
 - Training for employment channelled to ETBs in 2016 was €226.3m.
 - Training for the unemployed/basic skills/second chance was €229m

¹ Dept. Of Public Expenditure and Reform. (2017). Spending Review 2017 - Analysis of further Education & Training by Education Training Boards. Dublin. www.per.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/Further-Education-and-Training.pdf

² Dept. Of Public Expenditure and Reform. (2017). Spending Review 2017 - Analysis of further Education & Training by Education Training Boards. Dublin. www.per.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/Further-Education-and-Training.pdf

³ Dept. Of Public Expenditure and Reform. (2017). Spending Review 2017 - Analysis of further Education & Training by Education Training Boards. Dublin. www.per.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/Further-Education-and-Training.pdf

⁴ Department of Education and Skills (2017) (Figure 8., p.19) Public consultation – Proposed Exchequer-Employer Investment Mechanism for future funding for higher education and further education & training (p.18) http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/pub_ed_proposed_exchequer_employer_investment_higher_further_training_2017.pdf

⁵ SOLAS. (2017). Annual Report 2016. Dublin. <http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/SOLAS%20Annual%20Report%202016.pdf>

- In 2016 the majority (77%) of NTF funding was training for employment; in 2017 this has reduced to about 71%¹.

Table 4.1 Breakdown of public national investment

| General information | | Progress toward target | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Title of public investment source | Financing amounts | Targeted number of participants | Targeted level of provision | Total | Year the funding started | Reference document |
| SOLAS | €637.9m | 339,283 | | | 2013 | Solas Annual Report |
| NTF | €60.6m | 6,471 Springboard places and 42,228 in employment people trained through skillnets | | | 2000 | |
| Dept. Education and Skills | €150m | 30,000 | | | | |
| | | | | | | |

4.3 EU support via structural funds (primarily ESF)

4.3.1 Structural fund support planned as part of 2014-2020 financial framework

ESF funding is delivered through the ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) 2014-2020² and is aimed at promoting employment, social inclusion and skills. The plan proposes to invest over €1.15 billion total funding between 2014-2020 of which €610m comes from the EU budget. This includes €475m through the ESF and €68 million from the Youth Employment Initiative³.

According to the data on financial support to the Member States between 2014 and 2020, available in July, 2016 for the European Commission from Operational Programmes for the European Social Fund (ESF),

¹ Department of Education and Skills (2017) Public consultation – Proposed Exchequer-Employer Investment Mechanism for future funding for higher education and further education & training. https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/pub_ed_proposed_exchequer_employer_investment_higher_further_training_2017.pdf

² <http://www.esf.ie/en/Programmes/ESF-Programme-for-Employability-Inclusion-and-Learning-PEIL-2014-2020/>

³ <http://ec.europa.eu/esf/main.jsp?catId=443&langId=en>

the planned financial support from the European Union for the investment priority most directly targeting adult learning, i.e. Investment priority 10.3 – Enhancing access to lifelong learning, is EUR 96.4 million’.

4.3.2 EU support via structural funds (primarily ESF) provided as part of 2007-2013 financial framework

The Human Capital Investment Operational Programme (HCI OP) was the ESF programme for Ireland for the period 2007 to 2013 with €751m total funding for the Programme including €375m co-financed by the EU through the ESF.

4.4 Effectiveness of investment

The fundamental re-organisation of the FET system in Ireland over the last six years has provided as noted by Sweeney¹ an opportunity to shape a more coherent and effective system of provision. Such reform and re-organisation was advocated by Sweeney following a Strategic Review of Further Education and Training in relation to the Unemployed. In this report, Sweeney was critical of existing provision on a number of fronts as outlined below. The analysis examined activities funded under the HCIOP such as youthreach, the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI); Adult Literacy and the vocational training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS). Sweeney noted:

- Not all VET was optimally aligned with employer needs nor was all FE provision that addressed social exclusion sufficiently linked with eventual employment outcomes;
- The relevance of a significant proportion of specific skills training was flagged as a concern;
- The Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) was found to have only one in five advancing to employment and less than two in five using the scheme to progress to more advanced education;
- There was a need to ensure that the unemployed are matched appropriately with FET;
- The quality of data collection was inconsistent in the FET system;
- Robust evaluations of programme outcomes were sparse and not comparable where they existed.

The report made a number of recommendations, which were addressed in the formation of SOLAS and the re-organisation of the FET sector. The SOLAS FET Strategy 2014-2019 acknowledged a range of issues confronting the sector. The SOLAS Strategy noted:

- Provision at NFQ Levels 1 to 6 was considered diverse and dispersed, and entry and progression pathways often not clearly evident to prospective learners and outlined revisions in approaches to the funding of Further Education and Training in Ireland;
- A significant amount of state funding of further education and training has tended, in many instances, to be determined more by legacy formulae than by evidence-based needs;
- Continuing to offer more or less the same course profile from one year to the next is not appropriate; and

¹ Sweeney, J., (2013) ‘Strategic Review of Further Education and Training and the Unemployed’. Dublin. NES. <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/A-Strategic-Review-of-Further-Education-and-Training-and-the-Unemployed.pdf>

- There is broad consensus that the current funding model around FET needs to change and respond to demonstrable demand and need as well as reflecting the local, regional and socio-economic profiles of ETBs.

This was acknowledged by SOLAS where three phases of action for the implementation of the FET Strategy 2014-2019¹:

- 2014 - Building the Foundations: Managing the transition to the new integrated FET system and detailing the plans for the next steps in the transformation of FET;
- 2015 - Pathways to Progress: Development and piloting of major operational changes and early delivery on critical issues; and
- 2016 - Delivery, Reflection and Continuous Improvement: To have in place a fully-functional and operational organisation, working with and for the FET sector.

We are now in the delivery, reflection and continuous improvement phase of the Strategy. The SOLAS annual report outlines progress in integrated planning and delivery, an outcomes based funding model and professional development within the sector. Of particular importance is the outcomes based funding and planning model. This is currently in a pilot phase with three ETBs. These ETBs each signed a strategic framework agreement with SOLAS for one year during 2016. The agreement articulates a set of agreed expectations between SOLAS and the Education and Training Board. This is a key step in the evolving process of moving towards a more strategic outcomes-based funding and planning model.

This would entail that ETBs will, with support from SOLAS, transform how they plan their FET provision and associated services, taking into account local/regional/national economic and social trends. More specifically the agreement and associated implementation plan include;

- FET programme purpose and suggested refinements
- Current measures of success (in terms of placement, progression and certification completion)
- New agreed measures of success (in terms of placement progression and certification completion)
- Current FET profile by International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) – Fields of Learning
- Agreed amended FET profile for the ETB
- New planned improvements/upgrades in FET provision and services
- Challenges and risks

The roll-out of this pilot across all ETBs will be essential to the effective delivery of FET in Ireland in future in order to address the key weaknesses in the effectiveness of adult learning systems as acknowledged by SOLAS in the FET Strategy.

Other reforms implemented by SOLAS include the introduction of annual service plans to provide the framework for monitoring progress against agreed quality and delivery targets, and a framework of

¹ SOLAS. (2014). Further Education and Training Strategy. Dublin. SOLAS. <http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/FETStrategy2014-2019.pdf>

continuous evaluation to underpin progress and development. The aim is that only courses with a positive track record for participants will be funded going forward. Courses with less successful outcomes will be adapted, restructured or terminated in favour of other alternatives.

An information technology system, the Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS), a joint initiative between SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards is being implemented. The delivery of this system was identified as critical for future understanding of the effectiveness of investment in the recent analysis of FET spending by ETBs by the Dept. of Public Expenditure and Reform¹. This report noted that in order for SOLAS to effectively carry out its statutory functions, it needs a strategic evidence based approach to planning, funding and coordination of FET provision which can only be delivered when reliable data can be accessed. The delivery of this system will contribute to formal review and evaluation of the individual funding programmes. The outcomes of these reviews will inform the further development of the planning and funding process. The process will also be strengthened by the availability of better and more current data on programme outputs and outcomes with the delivery and rollout of the Programme Learner Support System (PLSS) in 2016 and 2017. The intensive work across a range of initiatives in this area are designed to deliver a planning and funding model clearly driven by performance and outcomes.

In summary, the rationale underpinning the formation of SOLAS, the publication of the SOLAS Strategy 2014-2019 informed by previous evaluations and Government commitments to more effective FET provision, the introduction of annual service plans, the introduction of reforms, a robust data system and better planning and evaluation are all designed to address the weaknesses widely accepted to be impeding the effectiveness of the FET system. While progress has been made across a number of fronts, the analysis of FET spending by ETBs carried out by the Dept. of Public Expenditure and Reform found that variations in the way the ETBs apportion funding to their programmes, coupled with the overall variances on programme spend from ETB to ETB, is consistent with findings from the previous 2014 McGuinness *et al* report on FET provision², and points towards a continuation of a 'fragmented' and 'disjointed' approach to FET provision. The population of the PLSS data platform and a recommendation that the mid-term review of the SOLAS strategy should focus on evaluating the correlation between FET provision and the needs of the wider labour market were identified as priorities by the analysis.

¹ Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. (2017). Spending Review 2017 - Analysis of further Education & Training by Education Training Boards. Dublin. www.per.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/Further-Education-and-Training.pdf

² McGuinness S., Bergin, A., Kelly, E., McCoy, S., Smyth, S., Whelan, A., Banks, J.. (2014). Further Education and Training in Ireland: Past, Present and Future – ESRI Research Number 35. Dublin. ESRI. <https://www.esri.ie/pubs/RS35.pdf>

5.0 Assessment of existing policy

This section addresses the key question: “to what extent is the present adult learning structure in your country sufficient or not to meet the needs related to adult learning? What are the gaps or weaknesses?”. In doing so, the response covers six key areas assessment areas as below:

The economic crisis and accompanying high unemployment levels in Ireland in the early part of this decade, led to an urgency and focus on up-skilling; re-skilling, access and activation in Irish education and labour market policy. As the numbers on the live register declined over the last two years, FET had to re-orientate towards proving skills for people in employment and ensuring the right skills for Ireland’s workforce are being provided. As the FET sector has undergone a radical re-organisation, much of the policy developed over recent years is only recently rolled-out/ is in nascent stages of implementation/evaluation.

5.1 Develop learners’ interest in learning

Despite the myriad of education and skills programmes available in Ireland, as outlined in Section 1, Ireland lags behind EU averages and has made little progress toward the EU2020 target for lifelong learning in recent years. The National Skills Strategy 2025 identifies engagement in lifelong learning as a key objective. A range of measures are outlined within four themes:

- The benefits of lifelong learning will be promoted and communicated to the full population of Ireland;
- There will be more and easier opportunities for those in employment to engage in education and training;
- There will be greater recognition of workplace learning and capacity for recognition of prior learning will be developed;
- Career guidance will be strengthened significantly, with the aid of employer engagement.

The National skills Strategy is currently being rolled-out and the impact of these measures will emerge over coming years.

5.2 Increase employers’ investment in learning

Employers investment in learning (through the public system) is funded through the National Training Fund (NTF) - a levy on employers of 0.7% of reckonable earnings of employees in certain employment classes, which is collected through the PAYE/PRSI system.

The ring-fenced fund provides for expenditure on training for those seeking employment, training for persons in employment, literacy and numeracy, training for those in the community and voluntary sector and also provides funding for the identification of existing and future skills needs for the economy. The levy raised €340m in 2014. The majority of the training funded by the NTF (87% in 2011) takes place in the further education and training sector. As outlined above, a public consultation process on an Exchequer/Employer Investment Mechanism for future funding of further and higher education and training

was announced in March 2017¹. This followed on from the '*Cassells Report*² which called for an increase in the Training Fund Levy of 0.3% (raising approximately €150m) in order to support programmes in skill development. The responses to this consultation are currently being examined by the Department of Education and Skills.

In addition to the NTF, employers invest in the upskilling of existing staff. The National Skills Strategy 2025 acknowledges that employer engagement is currently inconsistent across regions and sectors. The Strategy asserts that employers of all sizes and in all sectors of the economy can be involved in the development of skills and the effective use of skills, by influencing the skills development of graduates, by up-skilling existing staff, and by supporting knowledge transfer between educational institutions and enterprises. A range of measures, building on existing good practice are outlined in the Strategy including:

- Employer participation in skills development through active collaboration with education and training providers;
- Enhancing capability of SMEs through management development programmes and skills assessment resources for SMEs;
- Enhancing employer engagement with Higher Education institutions in relation to research and innovation;
- Improved employer participation to strengthen the promotion and communication of career opportunities.

Achieving and incentivising this involvement is a challenge. As noted by Sweeney³, at a time of demanding economic conditions, employers have less resources and incentive to engage in training than before as profits have shrunk and their business outlook remains uncertain.

5.3 Improve equity of access for all

While the fragmentation and diversity of the sector may be regarded as a weakness, it is also the case, that the system is designed to provide access for a wide range of activities and abilities addressing both labour market and social inclusion agendas. In addition, sector specific strategies such as the youth guarantee, the national literacy and numeracy strategy, and the Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities provide targeted interventions for the most difficult to reach. It will be important that any stream-lining of activities will simplify provision and communication of provision, but at the same time will not impact on access.

5.4 Deliver learning that is relevant

The national and regional structures for identifying skill needs were set out in the new National Skills Strategy. It set out how a new National Skills Council will be appointed, how the mandate of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) is to be refreshed and how new Regional Skills Fora will have an important role to play in engagement between employers and education and training providers to meet

¹ Department of Education and Skills (2017) Public consultation – Proposed Exchequer-Employer Investment Mechanism for future funding for higher education and further education & training https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/pub_ed_proposed_exchequer_employer_investment_higher_further_training_2017.pdf

² Department of Education and Skills. 2016. Investing in National Ambition – 'Cassells Report'. Dublin. <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Investing-in-National-Ambition-A-Strategy-for-Funding-Higher-Education.pdf>

³ Sweeney, J., (2013) 'Strategic Review of Further Education and Training and the Unemployed'. Dublin. NES. <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/A-Strategic-Review-of-Further-Education-and-Training-and-the-Unemployed.pdf>

regional skills needs. As part of this new infrastructure, the National Skills Council was launched in 2017. It will oversee research, advise on prioritisation of identified skills needs and on how to secure delivery of identified needs, have a key role in promoting and reporting on the delivery of responses by education and training providers to those priorities. The members of the Council are drawn from senior levels in the public and private sector. It will be an advisory, non-statutory body under the remit of the Department of Education and Skills.

Regional fora were established during 2016 in nine regions and a regional skills manager appointed to lead the activities of each forum. A regional skills website regionalskills.ie was launched as a communication tool for regional employers and education and training providers. By using the data and other supports from the SOLAS Skills and Labour Market Research Unit, the website provides access to a detailed profile for each of the nine regions drawn from all relevant skills research and datasets to provide the basis for informed dialogue on skills needs. ETBs are represented on and participating in the skills fora as well as Local Community Development Committees at local level.

In addition to this new architecture, the Expert Group on Future Skill Needs (EGFSN) advises the Irish Government on current and future skills needs of the economy and on other labour market issues that impact on Ireland's enterprise and employment growth. It has a central role in ensuring that labour market needs for skilled workers are anticipated and met. The National Skills Database (NSD), developed by the SLMRU, collates all available information on the supply and demand of skills in Ireland. It represents an effective tool for timely analyses and forecasting of the labour market at occupational level. It facilitates the use of a range of indicators and models to assess potential imbalances between the demand and supply of skills for more than 100 occupations.

5.5 Deliver learning that is of high quality

The re-structuring of the FET system in Ireland has focussed attention on the 'fit-for-purpose' of staff and structures. Sweeney¹ noted concerns of employers that the ETBs with their origins in the VECs have a more established background in the social arena but have relatively little background in specific workforce initiatives. He refers to the fact that "many employers believe that the ETBs come to this task (workforce development) poorly equipped by virtue of their wide spread of functions, composition and starting capacity to discharge it" (p.61). The focus on quality adult learning was addressed by the Further Education and Training Act 2013, which stated that SOLAS will provide or assist in the provision of training to persons charged with the delivery of further education and training programmes. The SOLAS Action Plan also called for standards around staff qualifications in the FET sector. The SOLAS Strategy noted that international research indicates that high quality initial and continuing teacher education is essential to fostering better learner outcomes. The SOLAS strategy indicates a commitment to ensure that information on the current qualification and skills profile of FET staff is collated with a view to assessing CPD needs of the sector which in turn will inform the development of a CPD strategy for the sector. In February 2016, a tender for the Development of a Continuing Professional Development Strategy for the FET Strategy in Ireland was published by SOLAS.

This strategy is now published². The strategy provides an overview of the current skill profile of FET practitioners in Ireland and outlines how a professional development culture will be embedded to meet the

¹ Sweeney, J., (2013) 'Strategic Review of Further Education and Training and the Unemployed'. Dublin. NES. <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/A-Strategic-Review-of-Further-Education-and-Training-and-the-Unemployed.pdf>

² SOLAS. (2017) Further Education and Training Professional development Strategy 2017-2019. <http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/SolasFETPDS.pdf>

needs of learners, employers and communities. The report outlines funding channels will be established for professional development in the FET sector while targeted professional development will focus on:

- Working with and supporting FET learners
- Vocational upskilling and reskilling
- Employer engagement
- Quality assurance
- Technology enhanced learning (TEL)
- Information and communication technology (ICT)
- Leadership and management development

It is encouraging that activity in relation to CPD has progressed, but clearly the reservations of Sweeney and employers remain a concern.

5.6 Ensure coherent policy

The White Paper on Adult Education – Learning for Life¹ was designed to provide a framework for the future development of the Adult Education sector in Ireland arguing for a lifelong learning motif as the guiding principle of all education policy. The Paper proposed a “systemic approach” recognising that the interfaces between the different levels of educational provision, and the quality of the early school experience have a critical influence on learners’ motivation and ability to access and progress in adult education. Lifelong Learning therefore has underpinned education policy for a number of years. A new impetus has been given to this approach through the ‘whole of system’ reform plan for education and training as part of the public sector reform programme. The reform plan recognises the importance of all levels of education and training as integral elements of a framework for lifelong learning and skills development starts through quality early childhood provision and is continually developed during school years and in learning beyond school.

¹ Department of Education and Science. (2000). *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education*. Dublin: Stationery Office. https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/fe_aduled_wp.pdf

6.0 Strengths and weaknesses of the adult education system

6.1 Strengths

The main trends as regards main statistical indicators

National statistics for employment and unemployment have improved dramatically over the last three years, especially in the context of the severe economic crisis in the early part of this decade.

The legal framework, governing adult learning, including policy targets

The most comprehensive programme of legislative reform related to the FET sector was introduced between 2011-2013. This legislation made effect the creation of new agencies - SOLAS to focus on planning, funding and driving the development of a new integrated FET sector and Education and Training Boards for the delivery of co-ordinated education and training programmes across Ireland. SOLAS published the first FET Strategy in 2014. The Dept. of Education and Skills sets FET policy and provides direction on a range of targets for FET provision including Government targets relating to the 'Pathways to Work' Initiative and the Action Plan for Jobs. The Annual FET Service Plan as well as the individual Annual ETB Service Plans reflect the DES agreed targets. However as pointed out in the FET Services Plan for 2016, no single metric can describe the overall picture of FET provision¹. The Services Plan uses the term 'Beneficiary' to describe the total number of interventions provided for through FET funding which individuals will benefit from in a given year, irrespective of whether they are present at the start of the year or join a course during the year. The Plan flags that consideration must be also given to the degree of participation. Some learners will partake in a full-time course, for example, a thirty-three week course delivered over an academic year, while others may participate in a part-time course for example delivered over a number of weeks for five hours a week. Both examples are considered equally when the term beneficiary is used. The plan notes that it is intended that future FET planning processes will encompass analysis of data to determine full-time equivalents within FET provision. This will facilitate a broader picture of the capacity of FET provision and provide a transparent base for the setting of targets.

Overarching responsibility for standards and awards development and overall monitoring of quality assurance provision is primarily the responsibility of QQI.

The assessment of 6 areas of policy intervention;

FET is accessible to all. It has provided an alternative pathway to the worlds of work and higher education for many. For example, adult and community education has meant added enrichment for many, and is a vital component in the delivery of life-long learning in Ireland. The range of courses on offer in terms of content, duration and location and the systems of accreditation, recognition of prior learning and progression, has enhanced access and opportunity and provides a road map for learners to progress.

¹ SOLAS (2016) The 2016 Further Education and Training Services Plan 2016. Dublin.
<http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/FET%20Services%20Plan%202016.pdf>

Apprenticeships which were previously limited to a narrow set of craft based occupations have been expanded to cover sectors not previously engaged in statutory apprenticeships such as accountancy, bakery, culinary industry, insurance and financial services.

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) has made it easier for learners to understand how the education system works and how one award can lead on to another. It helps the learner map out the route that their education will take and clarifies for prospective employers that the NFQ is a system of 10 levels ranging from basic education at level 1, to doctorate level at level 10.

6.2 Weaknesses

A clearly identified systemic weakness is the continued lack of transparent and robust data on learners including data on labour market outcomes. Progress in indicators for low skilled adults and lifelong learning is limited and is identified as a potential weakness.

With the establishment of SOLAS, the process for data collection is being strengthened by the availability of better and more current data on programme outputs and outcomes with the delivery and rollout in 2016 of the Programme Learner Support System (PLSS) and the Funding Allocation Request and Reporting System (FARR) in 2014. The new systems, when fully implemented, will record student retention, completion and accreditation data as well as progression to employment or further learning. The intensive work in this area by SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) is designed to deliver a planning and funding model clearly driven by performance and outcomes.

The “strategic input/outcomes-based” model in order to transform how ETBs plan their FET provision is currently being piloted in three areas. This will need to be rolled-out and implemented effectively across all ETBs.

Quality is being addressed through the development of a Continuing Professional Development Strategy for the FET sector. This strategy provides an overview of the current skill profile of FET practitioners in Ireland and outlines how a professional development culture will be embedded to meet the needs of learners, employers and communities.

The investment in learning

In the past, a significant amount of state funding of further education and training has tended to be determined more by legacy formulae than by evidence-based needs. Continuing to offer more or less the same course profile from one year to the next is not appropriate. There is broad consensus that the current funding model around FET needs to change. The aim outlined in the SOLAS Strategy 2014-2019 is to replace existing funding arrangements for all FET provision and replace it on a phased basis with a “strategic input/outcomes-based” funding model. In this new approach, elements of the funding to providers would be weighted in accordance with the type of provision and a range of strategic, economic and social inclusion performance indicators. The outcomes based funding and planning model currently in development is designed to transform how ETBs plan their FET provision and associated services, taking into account local/regional/national economic trends.

7.0 Further policy reforms and orientations needed

Arising from the wide-ranging reform programme undertaken in Ireland in recent years, the next few years will be characterised by implementation and evaluation rather than further reform.

With declining unemployment, orientation of policy will need to be firmly focussed on:

- skills mismatches and skills shortages;
- lower skilled and harder to reach cohorts;
- long-term unemployment;
- increased upskilling and reskilling opportunities;
- social or active inclusion for people with disabilities, people who were experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and people with literacy and numeracies difficulties;
- targeting provision to meet needs of jobseekers and employers.

This focus will need to be accompanied by a framework of continuous evaluation to underpin progress, planning, policy and development.

The need to develop the rights skills for Ireland's workforce was a prevailing theme across Government and the education sector in 2016 with the publication of the National Skills Strategy, the Action Plan for Education, Action Plans for Jobs and Pathways to Work. These policies, together with the impetus provided by the new National Skills Council present a picture of a sector being directed to act and report on hundreds of Actions. In addition, the regional skills fora are designed to strengthen the relationship between provision and employers requirements.

As discussed in this document, the FET sector in recent years sector has been characterised by re-structuring and change. As change by its nature takes time, it is difficult to assess the future policy reforms and orientations needed, as some issues flagged may already be undergoing change. The questions then in a time of change are:

- Is the change happening at a quick enough pace/at an appropriate pace?
- Is the emerging structure of FET provision appropriately aligned with the needs of the labour market?
- Will the change introduce and facilitate agility and responsiveness in the system?
- Will the change embed stated objectives of evaluation and continuous improvement?

The most recent comprehensive analyses of the adult/further education system in Ireland was carried out by McGuinness *et al*¹ in 2014 to provide an evidence base to assist SOLAS in the development of its first five-year strategic plan and an associated implementation plan.

Policy implementation concerns flagged in that report are currently being addressed by SOLAS. The issues which have a particular impact on the functioning of the adult/FET system are:

¹ McGuinness S., Bergin, A., Kelly, E., McCoy, S., Smyth, S., Whelan, A., Banks, J.. (2014). Further Education and Training in Ireland: Past, Present and Future – ESRI Research Number 35. Dublin. ESRI. <https://www.esri.ie/pubs/RS35.pdf>

1. **Availability of reliable data on learners** - this process is being strengthened by the availability of better and more current data on programme outputs and outcomes with the delivery and rollout of the Programme Learner Support System (PLSS). McGuinness *et al* recommended a comprehensive data collection system be implemented incorporating information on completion, accreditation and progression at an individual participant level; course level performance aggregates to be compiled and ineffective provision identified. In the case of unaccredited programmes, appropriate metrics also need to be developed related to the programme objectives, thereby allowing such provision to be evaluated.
2. **Availability of data on national and regional skill needs in the immediate and medium term** – Structures in place such as the expert group on future skill needs and the national skills database is being added to by the National Skills Council and regional skills fora. The intensive work across a range of initiatives in this area are designed to deliver a planning and funding model clearly driven by performance and outcomes.
3. Concerns were raised by stakeholders as reported in McGuinness *et al* of the fit-for-purpose of the new staff and structures in the reformed FET system. A Continuing Professional Development Strategy for the FET sector is now published¹. This strategy provides an overview of the current skill profile of FET practitioners in Ireland and outlines how a professional development culture will be embedded to meet the needs of learners, employers and communities.
4. The funding model implemented needs a process where poorly performing programmes are no longer financed, and available resources are directed towards to areas identified as being of significant importance on the basis of emerging national or regional intelligence. In 2016, three ETBs signed a strategic framework agreement with SOLAS which outlined a set of agreed expectations between SOLAS and the Education and Training Board. This is a key step in the evolving process of moving towards a more strategic outcomes-based funding and planning model and will drive ETBs to transform how they plan their FET provision and associated services, taking into account local/regional/national economic and social trends. These strategic framework agreements will need to be expanded to remaining ETBs in the immediate term in order to ensure wide application of an effective outcomes-based funding and planning model.

¹ Solas (2017) Further Education and Training Professional development Strategy 2017-2019.
<http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/SolasFETPDS.pdf>

8.0 Summary

After the recent sharp global recession, Ireland's employment levels have recovered from an unemployment high of 15% at the end of 2011 to a seasonally adjusted rate for May 2017 of 6.4%, the lowest it has been since 2008 and down from 8.4% in May 2016¹. The long term unemployment rate has also declined in that time frame from 9.5% in 2012 to 4.2% in Q3 2016. There has also been a 50% decline in the number of young unemployed people since 2012². The national 2020 target of 69%-71% of 20-64 year-olds to be employed has now been achieved (70.3% in 2016).

Education levels in Ireland as measured by PIAAC place Ireland largely in line with the OECD average for literacy and below average for numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments. Ireland lags considerably behind the 2020 target of 15% of adults participating in lifelong learning (LLL). Moreover, despite increased emphasis on workforce training and re-skilling of the unemployed, the participation rate has declined from 7.1% in 2011 to 6.4% in 2016.

A sector wide reform of the education and training sector has been implemented over the last five years including a radical re-organisation of the Further Education and Training system. New legislation was introduced and a new policy and delivery system introduced tasked with building the identity and values of a world-class, integrated Further Education and Training system.

Reform took place in the context of the country dealing with the greatest economic crisis in its history. The challenge has moved quickly from one dealing with unprecedented levels of unemployment to focusing on harder to reach cohorts of the long term unemployed and dealing with the emergence of skills shortages in occupations such as advanced manufacturing and Information Communications Technology (ICT). One of the challenges now is to accurately assess the scale and nature of these skills shortages. This work is currently carried out by the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) through the National Skills Database, and the advice of the Expert Group for future Skill Needs (EGFSN). The national skills architecture was expanded in 2016/2017 through the establishment of The National Skills Council to oversee research, advise on prioritisation of identified skills needs and on how to secure delivery of identified needs, while a regional focus has been introduced with the establishment of regional skills fora, publication of regional Action Plans for Jobs, and a regional skills website, regionalskills.ie.

Harder to reach cohorts such as the long term unemployed or those without the sufficient skills to re-train in areas of skills shortages remain problematic.

As outlined in this report, much of the policy development and strategic direction for the FET sector and the broad skills agenda has been introduced in recent years. Recent years have been characterised by managing the transition to the new FET system to more recently roll-out and delivery. It is therefore too early to assess the impact of changes. Significant progress has been made in relation to setting and monitoring of national policy priorities, engagement with employers and learners, in developing appropriate reporting structures and introducing a strategic outcomes-based funding and planning model. The current priority is implementation of new policy – subject to ongoing evaluation, rather than further policy reform.

¹¹ Central Statistics Office (2017) CSO Statistical Release May 30 2017: Monthly Unemployment Rate <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/mue/monthlyunemploymentmay2017/>

² Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. (2017). Action Plan for Jobs 2017. Dublin. <https://www.djei.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Action-Plan-for-Jobs-2017.pdf>

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SEE ANNEXES BELOW

Annexes

Annex 1: List of adopted legal acts, strategies, laws

Table 9.1 List of adopted legal Acts

| Name | Date of adoption | Short description of content |
|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Further Education and Training Act 2013 | 27 October 2013 | <p>The establishment of SOLAS followed the dissolution of FAS. The functions of SOLAS, which are set out in the Further Education and Training Act 2013, are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• To prepare a strategy in respect of the provision of further education and training,• Fund ETBs and other bodies engaged in the provision of further education and training programmes |

| | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate ETBs and other further education and training programme providers to ensure that they are performing their functions in an economic, efficient and effective manner • Develop, and facilitate the development, of new and existing further education and training programmes; including the establishment of systems designed to monitor the quality of the education and training being delivered with the intention of ensuring that those programmes serve their purpose. |
| Education and Training Boards Act 2013 | 1st July 2013 | <p>The Establishment of the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The ETBs have responsibility for the delivery of primary, post primary and further education in line with their predecessor Vocational Education Committees (VECs). The former training functions of FÁS have also been transferred to the ETBs.</p> <p>The ETBs are collectively represented by Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) also established under the Act. Under the Act, ETBI was established as an Association to collectively represent education and training boards and promote their interests.</p> |
| Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012. | November 2012, Updated 13th April 2017 | <p>Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was established. Its functions include those previously carried out by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC); the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC); the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) and the National Qualifications</p> |

| | | |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | | <p>Authority of Ireland (NQAI). QQI is responsible for maintaining the ten-level National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ); are an awarding body and set standards for awards made in the NFQ; validate education and training programmes and make extensive awards in the further education and training sector including in the ETBs. QQI are also responsible for reviewing the effectiveness of quality assurance in further and higher education and training providers in Ireland.</p> |
| National Training Fund Act 2000 | 21st 2000 December | <p>The National Training Fund (NTF) was established as a dedicated fund to finance a range of schemes aimed at (i) raising the skills of those in employment (ii) providing training to those who wish to acquire skills for the purposes of taking up employment and (iii) providing information in relation to existing, or likely future, skills requirements in the economy. The NTF is resourced by a levy on employers of 0.7% of reckonable earning in respect of employees in Class A and Class H employments – this represents approximately 75% of all insured employees.</p> |

Annex 2: Inventory of policy interventions

| Name of intervention | Source (with hyperlink) | Budget | Outputs | Which of the 6 building blocks for successful adult learning policies does it target? (tick all relevant) | Further details/description (purpose, duration, responsible entity etc.) |
|----------------------|-------------------------|--------|---------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|----------------------|-------------------------|--------|---------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|

| | | | | Fosters learners' interest in learning | Employers' investment in learning | Improve equity of access for all | Learning that is relevant | High quality learning | Coherent policy | |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Further Education and Training Strategy | SOLAS. (2014). Further Education and Training Strategy. Dublin. SOLAS. http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/FETStrategy2014-2019.pdf | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | SOLAS 2014-2019 Strategy to provide integrated sector that supports learner progression, transition into employment and personal development, and aims to support economic development and social inclusion. |

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|----------------------------------------------------------|
| National Skills Strategy | Department of Education and Skills, (2016). Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025. Dublin. https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy | Department of Education and Skills. (2011). Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Literacy-and-Numeracy/Literacy-and-NumeracyLearning-For-Life.pdf | | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | | |
| Pathways to Work | Department of Social Protection. (2016). Pathways to Work 2016-2020. Dublin. https://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/PathwaysToWork2016-2020.pdf | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | Activation of the unemployed. Building Workforce Skills. |
| Youth Guarantee | Department of Social Protection. (2013). Pathways to Work - The implementation of the EU Council Recommendation for a Youth Guarantee - Ireland. Dublin. https://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/Youth-Guarantee-Implementation-Plan.pdf | | | ✓ | | | | | | Activation measures for under-25s |
| National Plan for Equity of Access to | HEA. (2015). National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education. 2015-2019. http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/04/national_plan_for_equity_of_access_to_higher_education_2015-2019_single_page_version_01.pdf | | | | | | | | | Target to increase first-time mature/adult entrants |

| | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|---|--|--|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Higher Education | | | | | ✓ | | | (combined full and part-time) from 19% to 24% and progression from further to higher education from 6.6% to 10%. |
| Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities | <p>Department of Justice. (2015). Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024. Dublin.</p> <p>http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Comprehensive%20Employment%20Strategy%20for%20People%20with%20Disabilities%20-%20FINAL.pdf/Files/Comprehensive%20Employment%20Strategy%20for%20People%20with%20Disabilities%20-%20FINAL.pdf</p> | | | | ✓ | | | A ten-year approach to ensuring that people with disabilities, who could and want to work, are supported and enabled to do so |

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