

Tertiary Degrees in Further Education and Training, guaranteeing progression to Higher Education.

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

STRATEGY/ACTION PLAN

 IRELAND

Timeline

2022 Implementation 2023 Implementation 2024 Implementation
2025 Implementation

ID number 45186

Background

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) estimated, using current trends in demand, that an additional 39 000 learners (making 222 000 in total) will seek higher education places by 2030. The National Further education and training (FET) strategy outlines the context of the wider education and skills policy, the National Skills Strategy and a three-year Action Plan for Education through the development of a unified tertiary education framework call for a more co-ordinated approach between FET and higher education (HE).

Objectives

The published policy platform Progressing A Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge outlines 35 key objectives that could be summarised as follows.

- (a) Learning and Development Opportunities: creation of HE/FET collaborative programmes through the development of more collaborative approaches to programme planning, development and delivery across the sectors;
- (b) Inclusion: development of more unified frameworks across FET, HE and research and innovation (R&I) to progress equality, diversity and inclusion in line with cross governmental equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) strategies;
- (c) Adapting to Change: development of a tertiary system approach to meeting digital skills needs arising from the implementation of the National Digital Strategy;
- (d) Regional Rebalancing: growth of engagement of the FET network in innovation through Regional Enterprise Plans, consistent with the objectives of the Smart Specialisation Strategy, to build local engagement, coordination and opportunity;
- (e) Skills and Talent: engagement with and promotion of the joined up skills agenda at EU level which is a whole of tertiary and research approach.

Description

Creating a unified tertiary system is one of the strategic priorities of the National FET strategy 2020-24. Key stakeholders, DES, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), SOLAS

(the national authority for FET), Higher Education Authority (HEA), Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) and the Irish Universities Association (IUA) agreed on an action plan to work towards a more strategic and consistent transitions approach to FET and HE. The action plan includes:

- (a) setting clear national targets for FET-HE transitions and embedding these in HEI performance compacts and ETB strategic performance agreements;
- (b) the development of FET-HE talent pipelines to address specific skills needs, e.g. ICT, building on a collaborative FET/HE approach to regional skills development;
- (c) further research on the reasons a significant number of FET learners offered a place in HE, chose not to accept it;
- (d) comparing and contrasting a selection of Level 6 awards/programmes in cognate areas across FET and HE by examining learning outcomes, content, entry standards and progression;
- (e) piloting systems where students who withdraw from their HE course are steered towards an alternative FET route immediately;
- (f) considering the potential for greater recognition of FET awards in comparison with Leaving Certificate points within the Central Applications Office (CAO) and how this might be benchmarked;
- (g) standardisation of university entry requirements for FET graduates, in addition to constructing a common system across the technological HE sector.

The Further Education and Training (FET) Progression to Higher Education (HE) Transitions Reform Working Paper (June 2020) and the establishment of a new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) in 2020 started the progress towards establishing a unified tertiary education system offering seamless progression pathways from FET/VET to HE.

2022 Implementation

In 2022, the publication of the policy platform *Progressing A Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge* was published. It draws together the components of Ireland's further education and training, higher education, research and innovation sectors and, in the context of Programme for Government commitments, and frames a vision for the unified system. The platform was put to public consultation in May-August 2022 and a report followed in December 2022.

Also in 2022, the Higher Education Authority Bill was enacted into Irish law, and the Strategy for Tertiary Education, as set out in this legislation is a key step in the attainment of the vision for a more unified system.

The National Tertiary Office (NTO) was established, following the Memorandum of Understanding between SOLAS and the HEA and as announced by the Minister in December 2022. The NTO started the development of joint further and higher education degree programmes in 13 separate disciplines.

2023 Implementation

From September 2023 there were twenty-three (23) new tertiary degree programmes for the academic year 2023/2024 across eleven (11) locations and in different fields of provision including Business, ICT, Arts, Engineering, Manufacturing & Construction and Health & Welfare. This was the first iteration of a tertiary course that commences in a VET provider (Education and Training Boards - ETBs) and continues in a Higher Education Institution (HEI). These new and supported pathways through further and higher education help school leavers achieve their career goals and offer several advantages, including local availability of courses with guaranteed progression and the removal of geographical and financial barriers.

2024 Implementation

In 2024, the number of new tertiary degrees expanded. It increased from the first twenty-three programmes to over forty (40) to serve the needs of learners including

school leavers, facilitate access, widen participation, diversify student population and open new doors. Also in 2024, the minister launched a new guidance toolkit, developed by the National Tertiary Office (NTO) for schools' guidance counsellors to make sure that information is available to all and that students find their pathway with a tertiary degree and pathways from VET to higher education.

2025 Implementation

The roll out of the tertiary degree courses continued, with 17 new courses commencing in September 2025 for the 2025-26 academic year. The new courses are in the subject areas of ICT, Nursing and Healthcare.

Bodies responsible

- Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS)
- Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)
- Higher Education Authority (HEA)
- Technological Higher Education Association (THEA)
- Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)
- Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)
- Irish Universities Association (IUA)
- City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETb)
- Cavan Monaghan Education and Training Board (CMETB)
- Cork Education and Training Board (CETB)
- Donegal Education and Training Board (DETb)
- Dublin Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board (DDLETB)
- Galway Roscommon Education and Training Board (GRETb)
- Kildare Wicklow Education and Training Board (KWETB)
- Kerry Education and Training Board (KETB)
- Kilkenny Carlow Education and Training Board (KCETB)
- Louth Meath Education and Training Board (LMETB)
- Longford Westmeath Education and Training Board (LWETB)
- Laois Offaly Education and Training Board (LOETB)
- Limerick Clare Education and Training Board (LCETB)
- Mayo Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board (MSLETB)
- Tipperary Education and Training Board (TETB)
- Waterford Wexford Education and Training Board (WWETB)
- National Tertiary Office

Target group

Learners

Learners in upper secondary, including apprentices

Young people (15-29 years old)

Young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs)

Learners with migrant background, including refugees

Learners at risk of early leaving or/and early leavers

Learners with disabilities

Adult learners

Older workers and employees (55 - 64 years old)

Unemployed and jobseekers

Persons in employment, including those at risk of unemployment

Low-skilled/qualified persons

Learners from other groups at risk of exclusion (minorities, people with fewer opportunities due to geographical location or social-economic disadvantaged position)

Education professionals

Teachers

Trainers
School leaders
Adult educators
Guidance practitioners

Entities providing VET

VET providers (all kinds)

Other stakeholders

National, regional and local authorities

Other

Higher Education Institutes
(HEIs)

Thematic categories

Governance of VET and lifelong learning

Coordinating VET and other policies

Engaging VET stakeholders and strengthening partnerships in VET

Modernising VET offer and delivery

Expanding VET programmes to EQF levels 5-8

Supporting lifelong learning culture and increasing participation

Permeability between IVET and CVET and general and vocational pathways, academic and professional higher education

Subsystem

IVET CVET

Further reading

[Ministerial announcement of new national Tertiary Office](#)

[Policy Document: Progressing A Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge](#)

[Higher Education Authority Act 2022](#)

[Further Education and Training \(FET\) Progression to Higher Education \(HE\) Transitions Reform Working Paper - June 2020](#)

[National Tertiary Office - Director](#)

[National Tertiary Office website](#)

[Tertiary Programmes Launch July 2023](#)

[National Tertiary Office Toolkit for Guidance Counsellors](#)

[Minister announces major expansion of joint degree courses with more than 40 options to be offered - May 2024](#)

[Minister announces 17 new tertiary degree courses for the 2025/2026 academic year](#)

Related policy developments

2025 Design

Future Proofing the National Qualifications Framework: NQF Levels 5-6 (EQF 4-5) Proposal for Intermediate Awards in European Higher Education Area

The consultation process for QQI is similar to the Irish parliamentary processes of Green and White Papers. Where QQI issues a Green Paper, this is the first consultation of policy proposals for debate and discussion as part of the consultation with stakeholders.

 IRELAND

Type of development

Practical
measure/Initiative

Subsystem

IVET CVET

2025 Design

Public Consultation on Tertiary Education Strategy to Identify the Objectives and Outputs of Further Education and Training in Tertiary Education

Respondents to the public consultation were asked to consider a number of questions, which were:

 IRELAND

Type of development

Strategy/Action
plan

Subsystem

IVET CVET

2025 Implementation

Further Education and Training Colleges of the Future (CotF): Capital Call

The National FET Strategy defined that CotFs should have the following characteristics:

 IRELAND

Type of development

Strategy/Action
plan

Subsystem

IVET CVET

2025 Completed

The Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-25

Ireland's Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-25 was launched in 2021 by the Ministers for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Minister of State for Skills and Further Education.

 IRELAND

Type of development

Strategy/Action
plan

Subsystem

IVET CVET

2024 Completed

Green Skills for Further Education and Training (FET) Roadmap 2021-2030

The policy roadmap 'Green Skills for FET 2021-30' sets a strategic direction for green skills initiatives throughout the Irish FET sector and points to key areas for the FET Sector in the transition to a green economy.

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Type of development

Practical
measure/Initiative

Subsystem

IVET CVET

2025 Implementation

QQI and ETBs: Evolving Quality Assurance following Inaugural Review: Quality Dialogue Meetings and Annual Quality Reporting (AQR)

The external review is conducted by review teams. National and international external reviewers are selected for their expertise in one or more specific areas, providing perspectives from education and training, quality assurance, learner voice, community and industry.

 IRELAND

Type of development

Subsystem

IVET CVET

2023 Completed

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science Strategy 2021-23

DFHERIS funds and creates policy for the higher and further education and research sectors. It also oversees the work of the State agencies and public institutions operating in these areas.

 IRELAND

Type of development

Strategy/Action plan

Subsystem

IVET CVET

2021 Approved/Agreed

Transforming Learning 2020-24: Ireland's National Further Education and Training Strategy

The FET strategy 2020–24 was developed in consultation with the FET sector and other key stakeholders. Consultation was wide-ranging and included bilateral meetings, regional workshops and a public call for submissions.

 IRELAND

Type of development

Regulation/Legislation

Subsystem

IVET CVET

“ ... ” Cite as

Cedefop, & ReferNet. (2026). Tertiary Degrees in Further Education and Training, guaranteeing progression to Higher Education.: Ireland. In Cedefop, & ReferNet. (2026). *Timeline of VET policies in Europe* (2025 update) [Online tool].

<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/timeline-vet-policies-europe/search/45186>

