

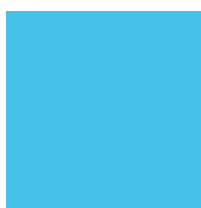
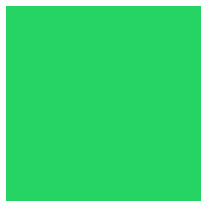
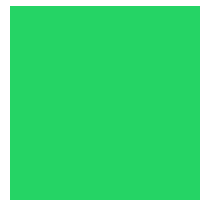
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# IMPLEMENTING EUROPEAN PRIORITIES IN VET

Making national VET agile,  
flexible, innovative, attractive,  
inclusive and quality assured

## IRELAND

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# **Implementing European priorities in VET**

Making national VET agile, flexible, innovative, attractive,  
inclusive and quality-assured:  
Ireland

[Thematic perspectives](#) provide national overviews of specific themes in a common format and offer comparative dimension across the EU Member States, Iceland and Norway.

This thematic perspectives series complements the general information on vocational education and training (VET) policies and systems provided in [VET in Europe database](#) and the [Timeline of VET policies in Europe](#). The themes presented in the series feature high on the European agenda.

This thematic perspective was prepared based on data/information from 2023.

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## CHAPTER 1. Introduction

At the time of this analysis (June 2024), the Irish National Implementation Plan (NIP) was still pending. Therefore, this document examines the most important policies and main measures/initiatives that took place in 2023 in Ireland and how they relate to European priorities as set in the VET Recommendation. We will also look at the progress made since 2020 and the challenges that remain. It should be noted that in Ireland, the term Further Education and Training (FET) is used to describe most of the activity that would be defined as Vocational Education and Training (VET) as understood in a European context. Following a review of the apprenticeship system in 2016, higher education providers have offered a number of apprenticeship courses, with the number of programmes continuing to expand every year.

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) [Statement of Strategy 2023-2025](#) sets out the vision for the Department from 2023 to 2025. The national vision is to develop Ireland's tertiary education, to support people to reach their full potential and create a prosperous, sustainable and vibrant society, ready to meet the challenges of a changing world. This vision reflects the objectives as set out in the Council Recommendation on VET.

Another key strategic document is the [National FET Strategy 2020-2024](#) produced by SOLAS, the State agency that oversees the building of a world class Further Education & Training (FET) sector in Ireland. This strategy is based around three strategic pillars: building skills; fostering inclusion; and facilitating pathways. These are underpinned by a strong focus on four enabling themes: digital transformation; learner and performance focus; staffing and structures; and capital development. Again, these strategic themes strongly reflect the emphasis of the VET Recommendation. In Ireland, FET is primarily delivered, by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). There are 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) in Ireland.

Some of the challenges that these strategy documents aim to address is introducing, embedding and incentivising a new culture of learning, that is life-long and life-wide. There is a challenge to achieve a culture shift in Ireland, where learning and working are interwoven. It requires a mind-set shift to move from a 20<sup>th</sup> century understanding of education as something that ceased upon entering the world of work. There is a strategic importance of enabling everybody to take up the opportunities available to them to upskill and reskill throughout their working life, to ensure sustainable employment, economic development and social cohesion.

There are other national strategic documents that relate to the Council Recommendation on VET and links to these documents are contained throughout this analysis and at the end.

## CHAPTER 2. Main policy developments in 2023

There have been many important policy developments that took place during 2023 in Ireland. The following are examples of these but there may be others not included due to the brief nature of this analysis.

## 2.1 Agile and resilient VET, adaptive to labour market needs

In the area of [Apprenticeships](#), there has been excellent progress made in relation to policy implementation. From 2018-2023 the Irish government has invested over EUR620 million in apprenticeship to reinforce work-based learning. Some policy developments that occurred in 2023 include:

- (a) a Memo of Understanding signed between SOLAS and the Higher Education Authority (who have a statutory responsibility for the effective governance and regulation of higher education institutions and the higher education system) to formalise the partnership between the agencies regarding the National Apprenticeship Office (NAO). The NAO now has responsibility for all aspects of the management, oversight and development of the apprenticeship system and for implementing the [Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025](#);
- (b) a range of new apprenticeships were launched in 2023, with 73 different apprenticeship offerings now available. These apprenticeships include an expanded number of apprenticeships in higher education providers across tech, engineering, farming, horticulture and hospitality, and will go a long way towards delivering the skills and talent in these sectors;
- (c) the [Construction Safety Licensing Bill 2023](#) was formally launched by the Irish Government on 24 March 2023. The legislation reforms and modernises the existing model for the construction sector and gives recognition to people on construction sites who are not qualified apprentices or professionals but do have relevant construction skills. The FET Sector in Ireland will play a key role in ensuring that safety skills will be embedded into worker skills development as the existing training model where qualification certificates are issued for life is replaced;
- (d) the [One More Job](#) initiative was launched by the NAO in April 2023. It aims to encourage small employers to create 'one more job' via apprenticeship. It includes free online mentoring for employers new to training apprentices, grants towards training costs and guidance during the first year of training;
- (e) the Workplace Champions Initiative was launched by the NAO on 31 May 2023. The awards of this initiative recognise and celebrate all those apprenticeship champions in the workplace who show commitment to the development and success of apprentices.

## 2.2 Flexible VET, providing progression and lifelong learning opportunities

The following policy developments contribute to the idea of programmes based on modules or units of learning as well as digital learning:

- (a) the online module 'Energy and you: Reduce your Use' was made available in 2023 via [eCollege](#), the [national online learning service for further education and training](#);
- (b) in 2023 the FET Micro-Qualifications (MQ) model was developed by SOLAS. These were developed collaboratively with ETBs, enterprise agencies, education partners and companies;

- (c) 4 MQs commenced in Q3 2023 with over 1 700 learners to date availing of micro-qualifications in green skills for sustainability and digital. The other 20 MQs in the areas of robotics, aquafarming, business innovation and market development were rolled out progressively by ETBs during 2024.

## 2.3 Innovative and excellent VET

The following policy developments address the concepts of Centres of Vocational Excellence, state-of-the-art infrastructure and the green transition:

- (a) the fifth and sixth Centres of Excellence in Ireland for Nearly Zero-Emission Building skills training (NZEB) and retrofitting were launched by ETBs in 2023. These centres provide training in a number of areas of NZEB and Retrofit, including NZEB Fundamental Awareness, NZEB Retrofit, NZEB Ventilation, NZEB Site Supervisor, and Retrofit Insulation Skills;
- (b) to showcase the latest technologies and methods in modern construction techniques, planning of a Modern Methods of Construction Demonstration Park began in 2023. This was led by the FET sector through SOLAS and the Laois/Offaly Education and Training Board. This aims to support the Irish Government's commitment to high-quality, affordable homes for all citizens;
- (c) the setting up of a [College of the Future \(CotF\)](#) Unit in SOLAS to support the development of new state-of-the-art integrated FET Colleges;
- (d) the setting up of Ireland's 1<sup>st</sup> National Centre for Electric Vehicle Skills was announced on 13 November 2023;
- (e) training overviews on the Circular Economy, Lean Practice for Sustainable Business and Sustainable Supply Chain Procurement were delivered to FET tutors.

## 2.4 Attractive VET, based on modern and digitalised provision

The following policy development contributes to flexible and transparent pathways between FET and higher education:

In autumn 2023, for the first time ever, [Joint Tertiary Degrees](#) commenced. 13 degree programmes were developed by the National Tertiary Office (NTO) and co-designed and co-delivered by Higher Education Institutions and the FET Sector. The importance of this development is to provide seamless, transparent pathways from FET to Higher Education. The NTO was only established in December 2022.

## 2.5 Inclusive VET promoting equal opportunities

These policy developments promote equality of learning and make programmes more inclusive and accessible for all sections of Irish society:

- (a) in late 2022, the national Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Programme Office was established. In 2023, this office coordinated the appointment of 16 Regional Literacy Co-Ordinators throughout Ireland. They work with stakeholders across the education, health, community development and local government supports and services to embed the required systems-based approach to addressing unmet literacy;

- (b) in 2023, the ALL Collaboration and Innovation Fund was set up for projects to help adults learn literacy beyond conventional educational settings and methods;
- (c) as part of International Women’s Day 2023, the ‘Facts, Faces, Futures’ campaign with girls’ schools was launched by the NAO, to address the gender imbalance in apprenticeships;
- (d) a new bursary managed by NAO was launched in 2023, to support learners from underrepresented groups who wish to access apprenticeships. Successful applicants on ‘access to apprenticeship’ courses are eligible to receive up to EUR 3 000 each to help with travel, accommodation and other costs.

## CHAPTER 3. Involvement of VET stakeholders in the implementation of policy developments related to NIP

For the policy developments that took place between January and December 2023 and for the strategic documents that guided these policies, there has been extensive stakeholder participation throughout the FET sector. The following are examples of structures and partnerships. Generally speaking, stakeholder participation in the Irish education sector is very high.

For the implementation of the National FET Strategy, there is a lead Steering Group with Advisory Groups for each of the strategic pillars. During 2023, these groups met 15 times in total. These groups include various government departments, SOLAS employees, educational partner organisations, learner representative bodies and employers. They are responsible for supporting and monitoring the implementation of the FET Strategy. There are frequent bi-lateral meetings between SOLAS and individual Education and Training Boards (ETBs). In addition, there are meetings with ETBI (the representative body for ETBs) and with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS).

In 2023, the first national survey of apprenticeship employers was conducted by the NAO. The survey findings show that most employers of apprentices are micro-enterprises, with only 7% being large employers (over 250 employees). The 23-member National Apprenticeship Alliance met in 2023. This alliance is representative of apprenticeship stakeholders and brings together experience from the worlds of education providers, learners, industry partners and trade unions.

There was engagement with SOLAS, ETBI and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) on the development of an iVET module being introduced into 2<sup>nd</sup> level schools for the first time in 2024.

SOLAS sits on the AHEAD Inclusive Employment Advisory Group for People with Disability. This group is providing oversight on the development of a new framework, which will aim to reduce barriers and increase opportunities for people with disabilities to enter employment.

Under the Building Bridges project (a stakeholder collaboration partnership between SOLAS and the Irish Prison Service), Nearly Zero-Emission Building skills training (NZEB) training has been provided to prisoners in the Midlands and Wheatfield prisons, with prisoners coming to the end of their time in prisons.

The first meeting of the National Literacy Coalition took place in October 2023 representing 10 government departments, 4 state agencies, 3 NGOs and employers/trade unions.

Finally, to ensure the learner voice is included in stakeholder involvement, FET Learner focus groups and meetings with learner representative organisations took place with SOLAS and ETBs throughout 2023.

## CHAPTER 4. Achievements of implementation

As outlined and evidenced in the previous sections, there has been extensive progress across many areas since 2020. In summary, the most progress has been achieved in Apprenticeships, Upskilling workers through the Skills to Advance Initiative, the expansion of online offerings through eCollege, the development of Micro Qualifications, the rollout of the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy, supports for learners, the establishment of Centres of Excellence and the development of the concept of Colleges of the Future, Green Skills and NZEB Centres. Since 2020, the numbers of learners in FET has increased from 151 260 to 218 775.

An example of the success in upskilling workers would be the Skills to Advance Initiative. Skills to Advance (STA). Year-end figures for 2023 totalled 23 440 employees upskilled, representing 127% target achievement against [strategic performance agreements](#) with over 3 000 courses delivered. Over the period 2019 to 2023, over 65 000 employees have availed of Skills to Advance upskilling opportunities.

## CHAPTER 5. Challenges of implementation

Challenges since 2020 include:

- (a) backlog for craft apprentices accessing courses. The closure of centres during COVID-19 continues to have an impact on waiting lists for craft apprenticeship training. This remains challenging although the backlog has reduced from 8 377 at its peak, to 3 919 by end December 2023;
- (b) in addition to the closure of centres during COVID-19, there is also the issue of being able to recruit trained tutors for craft apprenticeships. This is due to the current staff shortages in the construction sector and the resulting high wages that are paid. Tutor pay rates are not able to match industry level of pay.

## CHAPTER 6. Conclusions

To address the challenges described in section 5, the following steps took place:

- (a) a media campaign targeting experienced tradespeople took place with the aim of recruiting new craft apprenticeship instructors;
- (b) ongoing engagement between SOLAS and other partners continued into 2023 with the aim of increasing capacity on programmes;
- (c) the conversion of some craft apprenticeship instructors from fixed term contracts to permanent posts to help address training demands and levels of registration;
- (d) a 3-intake model was expanded to the 10 craft apprenticeships and additional places secured across ETBs, higher education providers, private providers and in Northern Ireland.

Some other developments taking place in 2024 include:

- (a) the development of Ireland's 1<sup>st</sup> National FET Skills Strategy for the Green Transition. The purpose of this strategy is to collate national policy for the green transition and identify relevant transversal, specific and highly specialised skills required;
- (b) the development of the eMobility Capability Centre (NeMCC) for upskilling in electric vehicles with Longford Westmeath ETB;
- (c) the launch of the Community Education Framework;
- (d) developing a FET for Enterprise approach, to establish the ETBs as a key resource for enterprise and to meet enterprise and employee skills needs;
- (e) iVet model due to be rolled out to some 2<sup>nd</sup> level schools for September 2024;
- (f) 12 College of the Future projects are being developed to provide state-of-the-art infrastructures.

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