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Education and Training
Boards Ireland

*Boird Oideachais agus
Oiliúna Éireann*

Education and Training Boards

Further Education and Training

▶ **Vision for Tertiary Education**

Contents

INTRODUCTION

It has become clear during the public health emergency just how much we depend on essential or key workers. The skills of health care professionals continue to be highly regarded. But we are learning to value the skills of other workers, including construction workers, care home workers, public transport workers, food suppliers and retail staff who serve us from behind glass partitions. We need to place a higher value on education and training that provides these skills.

In responding to the pandemic, a common feature of education systems around the world, including the Education and Training Board Further Education and Training sector (hereinafter referred to as ETB FET sector), has been the wide scale introduction of 'emergency remote learning'. While this provides some level of programmes and services, the rapid transition from face-to-face learning and in-company training to e-learning is far from ideal for many ETB learners. The ultimate aim is to return to full on-site learning and workplace training whenever feasible.

Separate to the pandemic, ongoing reform due to demographics and social and economic developments has been a feature of the education system in Ireland in recent times. Further Education and Training and Higher Education were no exception. Both sectors continue their transformation and are leading players in an evolving Irish tertiary education system.

The ETB FET sector believes the time is right to set out its vision for a tertiary education system. The vision sets out a strategic trajectory for a tertiary system with learners as its primary focus.

The ETB FET sector also sets out its approach, including deeper collaboration with HE and other partners as well as identifying key tasks to be initiated or supported by ETBs essential for a stronger and more integrated system. The ETB FET sector takes the opportunity in setting out this approach to incorporate its response to the Department of Education and Skills draft paper 'Creating a stronger tertiary education system' (TES).

This ETB FET sector paper is divided into three sections. The first consists of the background and context in which the ETB FET sector operates. The second section is divided into two parts. Section 2A draws out possibilities and practicalities arising for ETBs in driving forward a stronger and more integrated TES, including joint activities. These inform an ambitious and inclusive vision the ETB FET sector envisages for tertiary education which is presented in Section 2B.

Section 3 is divided into nine sub-sections providing a carefully considered response to each of the nine questions posed by DES in its draft paper.

The reader, it is hoped, will find the information and considerations in Sections 1 and 2 informative, coherent and helpful when considering the ETB FET sector vision and the observations and constructive suggestions made in responding to key proposals in the DES draft paper in Section 3.

A summary with concluding remarks and a selected bibliography complete Education and Training Board Further Education and Training, 'Vision for Tertiary Education'.

SECTION 1

Background and context

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SECTION 1

Background and context

Responsiveness of ETBs

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has responsibility for overall policy development and oversight of FET including the development and implementation of FET Strategy. Measures introduced by the Government in line with HSE COVID-19 recommendations, to safeguard the health of the citizens of Ireland, closed all education settings including the ETB FET sector from March 12, 2020. The ETB FET sector is represented on the relevant Departmental Tertiary Education Covid-19 Structures, organised to manage and progress the work across further and higher education during the initial lockdown phase.

ETBI established strategic groups including Strategy, Planning, Quality Assurance, Active Inclusion and Work-based Learning with senior FET representatives from within the sixteen ETBs to address the challenges associated with COVID-19. These groups developed sectoral contingency planning arrangements including distance/remote learning and QQI approved assessment responses. The Further and Higher Education Roadmap was published in the summer. This provided an overview of the phased return of further and higher education such as opening of adult education facilities in Phase 3 and induction of new entrants in Phase 4. The phases in this roadmap were informed by the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

Six months on from the initial lockdown there has been a phased re-opening of the country including, businesses, schools and further and higher education institutions. The Tertiary Education Covid-19 structures continue to complement work taking place at institutional and provider levels as education activity including FET recommences.

To facilitate the on-going safe opening of FET, advice was sought from FET stakeholders on specific issues impacting on-site opening arising from the May 2020 Government/HSA Return to Work Safely Protocol. Follow-up guidance from DES was then set out in the July 2020 'Practical Guidance for Further and Higher Education for Returning to On-site Activity in 2020'[1]. Opening FET learning sites and keeping them open continues to be informed by a comprehensive risk assessment carried out by that institution and evolving public health advice.

A new medium-term Government plan to deal with Covid-19 is to set out the continuing threat posed by the pandemic in Ireland, chart the country through coronavirus challenges into 2021 including how the state intends to respond to further localised spikes or a second wave of Covid-19. It is inevitable therefore that revisions and updates to public health advice over the coming months will continue to impact the type of learning that FET participants can expect to experience over the coming months.

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[1] https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a7d05-practical-guidance-for-further-and-higher-education-for-returning-to-on-site-activity-in-2020/

The ETB FET sector has a strong tradition in responding quickly and flexibly to national economic and social priorities. The continued and ongoing responsiveness of the ETB FET sector to the current public health emergency is another case in point demonstrating a swift and appropriate response to the disruption to teaching and learning arising from COVID-19.

With the ultimate aim of returning to full on-site learning in due course, emergency remote learning was implemented. Online platforms, tools and technologies were quickly adopted, and staff and tutors were supported with equipment, upskilling and professional development to meet the COVID-19 challenge[2]. Direct teaching, training and guidance staff continue to engage with learners and parents supporting continuity of learning and assessment and wellbeing.

Adult literacy and English language inputs, including exercises, continue to be provided through a range of online platforms. Learning packs are also delivered to adult literacy and English language learners, containing lesson material and general information that will support the individual's learning. ETBs are keeping in contact with learners who do not have access to broadband or ICT equipment by phone. The provision of 17,000 laptops to be distributed to tertiary level students including FET to assist with online learning is welcome. ETBs devised innovative approaches to learner assessment and their development and launched and continue to launch many online 'in demand' courses (e.g. EHAI Primary Certificate in Food Safety, Emergency Care Services, Infection Prevention and Control). Virtual open days and on-line graduations were introduced, and like in so many other workplaces, e-meetings and webinars for staff became the norm.

In parallel to these efforts ETBs continued to:

o   Progress national FET strategic aims as set out in the FET Strategy 2014-2019 and second FET Strategy 2020-2024 and in individual ETB strategic plans.

o   Implement improvement plans arising from completed /planned independent evaluations of key FET national programmes such as PLC and Youthreach, VTOS, Specific Skills Programme.

o   Deliver on commitments as set out in the inaugural three-year strategic performance agreements with SOLAS.

o   Make significant contributions to FET system collaboration including FET learner database, SOLAS funding application systems and FET data analytics to underpin evidence-based decision making in respect of the effectiveness of FET.

o   Contribute to Regional Skills Fora, post 2016 new apprenticeship structures and new QQI agreed quality assurance arrangements.

o   Develop QQI QIP processes

o   Develop QQI Self-Evaluation of Contingency Arrangements for TLA during Covid-19.

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[2] Dept of an Taoiseach, Social Implications of COVID-19 in Ireland Preliminary Assessment.

Labour Market

While the steep rise in unemployment due to COVID-19 restrictions has decelerated appreciably over recent weeks, it is not certain how far unemployment will fall as we move through the accelerated Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. The COVID-19 crisis continues to adversely affect the labour market. A new COVID-19 Adjusted Measure of Unemployment indicates a rate as high as 15.4% if all claimants of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) are classified as unemployed[3]. This is approximately three times the pre-pandemic rate of unemployment. Hospitality, tourism, personal services and retail have been the hardest hit sector. These are 'first-order' effects. Other occupations and sectors may be affected in the future due to weaker demand for goods and services.

OECD is forecasting the deepest peacetime recession in the century with recovery to be slower in comparison with recovery from a 'normal' recession[4]. Some commentators forecast that unemployment in Ireland will average double digits for the rest of this year and stabilise at around 7% towards the latter half of 2022[5]. The former is on par with the level experience during the financial crisis.

The number of longer-term unemployed persons, including young people, is therefore likely to increase. This implies an increase in structural unemployment (due to changes in composition of economy), which is much harder to reduce during an upswing than cyclical unemployment (e.g. recession induced). A recent survey indicates that only a fifth of companies intend to hire more staff in 2020[6]. However, as employment growth lags output recovery, significant improvements are hoped for in the job market over the coming months. In short, the labour market is again very challenging and with over 80% of all businesses affected, it will be two to three years before activity returns to pre-COVID levels[7].

Developments relating to FET and HE

There are important developments to note relating to FET and to the reconfiguration of HE. These include

- Establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

- Emergence of the Technological University sector

  - Technological University Dublin was designated in January 2019.
  - Munster Technological University (MTU), is due to be designated in January 2021.
  - Three other consortia are in various stages of becoming TUs, namely

    - o Technological University for the South-East Ireland (TUSEI)
    - o Connacht Ulster Alliance (CUA)
    - o Athlone Limerick Technological University (ALTU).

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[3] CSO statistical release, 09 September 2020, Monthly Unemployment, August 2020.
[4] OECD Economic Outlook, June 2020.
[5] ESRI, IBEC, Minister for Finance.
[6] CIPD, 'COVID-19 impact survey', 22nd June 2020.
[7] Special Oireachtas Committee on COVID Response, 16th June 2020 – economists' forecasts provided to the Committee.

- Plans are progressing to establish a Higher Education Commission to replace the Higher Education Authority.

- Introduction of new apprenticeships at Levels 5-10 including apprenticeships delivered / co-delivered by the ETB sector.

- On-going review of QQI Common Award System (CAS).

- Planned development of broad standards for QQI Further Education and Training Awards at NFQ Levels 1-4 to guide programme development.

- Publication of the FET Strategy 2020-2024.

- Development of a new 10-year adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy (development to be led by SOLAS).

- The Minister will task SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority, with the development of the strategy and asked them to report back within 6 months.

- QQI Quality Assurance Inaugural Review for ETBs.

Programme for Government

The new programme for government includes a list of FET commitments, many of which are presented below. They include reskilling those who lost their jobs amid the public health emergency. In that regard SOLAS is developing a new initiative to shape delivery of further education and training to the needs of jobseekers. There are plans for more apprenticeship places (+10,000). A comprehensive Green Further Education and Skills Development Plan and a standardised system of accreditation of prior learning are also other areas of relevance to FET.

The Programme for Government commits to FET courses being linked into at least one university course, where appropriate, providing a map to learners who wish to continue their studies. There is also a commitment to link post-primary schools with at least one Further Education provider to ensure the system is coherent in providing equal opportunities for all students. These are important statements in the context of a more integrated tertiary education system and for the ETB FET sector in particular.

Programme for Government

Back-to-work schemes and initiatives to assist in upskilling those who are seeking new employment opportunities after the crisis

Comprehensive Green Further Education and Skills Development Plan (incl. 10,000 apprenticeships)

'Returnships' to support women who have taken time out of work to re-enter the labour market

Post primary schools should each be linked with at least one Further Education provider

Wide range of education and training programmes for jobseekers, to support economic recovery and green skills development

Traveller and Roma Training, Employment and Enterprise Plan

The ETB FET Sector

Standardised system of accreditation of prior learning

Springboard expansion throughout Further and Higher Education

All Further Education courses are linked into at least one University course where appropriate

New 10-year strategy for adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills

Culture of lifelong learning within the workforce

New fast track midcareer educational models

Trends impacting FET

While COVID-19 has undoubtedly had an immense impact on economic and social life, a number of longer term or 'mega' trends had already been reshaping the economy, labour market and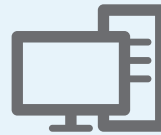 wider society. At least four were significantly impacting education and training systems, including the ETB FET sector.

o The first is increased globalisation giving rise to more people seeking higher skills and qualifications.

o The second is ageing, where the share of those over 65 years of age will increase significantly. Older workers already face increasing labour market insecurity and will increasingly seek access to high-quality re-skilling and up-skilling opportunities.

o The third is digitalisation. There is an increasing need for digital literacy and critical thinking for learners as well as workers.

o The fourth is automation. EU data indicates that over 1 in 10 jobs face a very high risk of automation while 4 in 10 jobs will need to change some of their tasks and skill needs to complement new technologies[8].

Funding

ETBs are statutory education and training authorities and manage and operate second-level schools and community national schools and are responsible for youth work. They also operate a network of colleges and further education centres. ETBs occupy an important position in the Irish education and training system and are the largest publicly funded provider of further education and training. ETBs are an important provider of programmes targeted at unemployed persons (e.g. short-term and return to work programmes).

ETBs receive substantial annual government funding for the FET provision through SOLAS. In 2019 this amounted to €600m and for capital projects an amount of €11m was provided. Excluding capital, the annual funding allocation has been relatively stable in recent years.

The bulk of this funding (€400m) is allocated to full-time programmes (70,000 starters), with €77m allocated to part time /variable time programmes (150,000+) starters under 20+ distinct provision types[9]. Education and training support for companies and for employees is also provided by ETBs. Arising from Covid 19 impacts, front-loading of 2020 funding for ETBs and Agencies and Bodies funded through FET has been arranged.

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[8] EU Skills Panorama 2019, 'Machines, robots and the threat of automation to EU jobs'.

[9] Examples of full-time programmes are Bridging and Foundation Training, Justice Workshops, Local Training Initiatives, PLCs, Apprenticeship, Traineeship, VTOS, Youthreach, Specialist Training Provision for Persons with a Disability. Examples of part/variable time programmes are Adult Literacy, Refugee Resettlement, Community Education, Back to Education Initiative, ESOL, Education provision in the prison service, Education and training supports for companies and employees.

Each of the 20+ ETB FET provision types may have a different profile of learners, course aims, curricula, qualification levels and diverse learner outcomes, including employment.

Community education which takes place in community settings outside of the formal sector places a strong emphasis on individual empowerment and community development as a way of reducing education and social disadvantage. Literacy and numeracy provision also plays a crucial role in that regard where nearly one in six adults has problems reading and understanding information, while many others lack basic digital skills. Because community education is taking place in varied community settings (offshore islands, for example) and is often unaccredited, it can be relatively 'eclipsed' in comparison with more formal, certified on-site or campus-based learning. Yet approximately one quarter of FET part-time provision consists of community education (which increases to just under 50% if literacy/numeracy provision is included).

SOLAS allocates funding to a range of other entities providing FET interventions including nine Voluntary Secondary Schools, Community and Comprehensive Schools (VSCCS) and a broad range of bodies and agencies related to FET[10].

It is worth noting that state funding for Irish higher education institutions decreased by approximately 37% in real terms between 2008 and 2016. This decline was accompanied by a large increase in learner numbers (26%) over the same period, which resulted in the reduction of approximately 20% in funding per student and an increase in staff-student ratios from 16 to 20.

Learner Profile

The ETB FET sector comprises a proportionately more diverse profile of learners than students in secondary school or higher education. It often comprises learners who are young, adolescents, middle-aged, or older. Some are focussed on entering working life for the first time, others re-entering the labour market or re-engaging with education after a long interval. Approximately 6,000 individuals start their apprenticeship each year. Others want to change their skill level or move on from their current job. Some are employees and small to medium sized employers who need to upgrade their workforce skills[11].

Many have or are currently experiencing unemployment, some for the first time, while a significant cohort of learners wish to improve their literacy and numeracy skills. There is a strong social inclusion mission embedded within the ETB FET sector provision that directly supports the implementation of national inclusion strategies in relation to persons with a disability, older persons, youth, migrants, members of Traveller and Roma communities. These cohorts form a significant and important part of the larger ETB FET sector learner population[12]. Older individuals or early school leavers returning to complete second level education are valuable additions to the overall learner population as are ex-offenders and recovering addicts who wish to restart their lives.

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[10] Such as NALA, Age Action Ireland, Ahead, Aontas, Irish Countrywomen's Association, The Peoples College and Fast Track into Technology (FIT).

[11] For example, 'Skills to Advance' and 'Skills to Work' initiatives.

[12] For example relating to people with disabilities, including National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021), relating to older people including National Positive Ageing Strategy, relating to younger people, including National Youth Strategy 2015–2020, relating to women and girls including National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017–2020, relating to Traveller and Roma communities including National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017–2021, relating to migrants including Migrant Integration Strategy and relating to carers including Carers' Strategy.

Constituencies of ETB FET Sector

Inevitably, a diverse range of constituencies are served by the ETB FET sector. The sector strives to address the diverse needs of its learners while also serving a broad set of existing and emerging interests. ETBs strive, in the context of the annual resources allocated to FET, to moderate the underlying expectations of their respective constituencies.

The 200,000+ learners who engage with ETBs each year is the most important constituency. DES and SOLAS provide policy direction and funding. There are other Government Departments and Agencies who have a stake in the ETB FET sector. The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection for example is a principal partner in terms of training/retraining for persons in receipt of social welfare supports while organisations such as Aontas advocate on behalf of adult learners.

SECTION 2A

Achieving a stronger tertiary education system

Possibilities and practicalities

SECTION 2A

Achieving a stronger tertiary education system
possibilities and practicalities

Like most concepts in the social sciences there is no natural or universally accepted definition of tertiary education (or FET). Education and training structures differ across countries. What works in one country may not work in another. Consequently, there is no universal configuration of FET or Tertiary Education.

Definitions of tertiary education, therefore, tend to be broad and generic reflecting the heterogeneity of education and training systems. For example, OECD classifies tertiary as education that builds on secondary education, providing learning activities in specialised fields of study including what is commonly understood as academic education but also advanced vocational or professional education. It consists of short-cycle tertiary education, bachelor's or equivalent level, master's or equivalent level and doctoral or equivalent level[13].

In more recent times the term 'tertiary education' - referring to higher education plus further education - has gained a visibility in the discourse on Irish education. At the same time the **'T'**raining part of FET and HET has faded. This may reflect particular sentiments on the value of certain educational activities deemed to be more worthy and worthwhile that others. This is regrettable as the '**T'** part relates to the capacity for 'intelligent doing' i.e. the unity of thinking, doing and making certain things (such as hairdresser, doctor, mechanic, engineer electrician, barrister, secretary, architect and so forth). Where the academic is elevated over the practical then this unity is broken. If the pandemic has taught us anything it is that this very unity is essential to sustain national and individual economic wellbeing and to secure a range of purposes useful to the community and the country.

The Department of Education and Skills does not provide a definition of tertiary education in its draft paper, but provides clarity on its purpose, namely 'to allow learners to develop and specialise their knowledge, skills and competence'. It also provides a description of tertiary education providers, i.e. encompassing a wide range of public and private higher education and further education and training providers[14]. The absence of a received definition of tertiary education provides broad scope within which possibilities and practicalities arising for ETBs in achieving a stronger TES can be explored and drawn out.

Looking through a strategic lens

In theory all things seem possible. In reality, a number of dilemmas must be faced up to and overcome to achieve a stronger TES. Before we take out an operational lens through which to view some of the challenges, it is worth taking stock of some strategic implications for the ETB FET sector.

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[13] OECD use the definition of tertiary education provided in 'ISCED 2011 Operational Manual Guidelines for Classifying National Education Programmes and Related Qualifications'.
[14] Including universities, technological universities, institutes of technology, education and training boards, and other private and independent HE and FET providers.

At the heart of the DES proposal is a rebalancing of education and training outputs from ETBs and HE. Its central tenet is that there is an over-emphasis on the role of academic education to meet demographic changes resulting in over-qualification of the workforce more generally. Consequently, not all the expected increase in demand for HE can or should be met solely by academic education.

While the funding crisis in HE is certainly to the forefront in the DES proposal it is nevertheless broadly in keeping with OECD recommendations relating to setting the right policy direction for tertiary education. The balancing act is to deliver overall coherence within the system while at the same time encompassing and protecting extensive diversification. Extensive collaboration and strong system linkages are therefore critical.

> **In more normal times, notwithstanding the HE funding crisis and public health emergency, the rebalancing of education and training outputs, on its own merits, represents a significant and positive development for the FET sector, its learners and for the tertiary education project.**

From the ETB learner perspective, rebalancing ought to increase the demand (and value) for intermediate level skills (Levels 5/6, NFQ) in occupations with good prospects[15]. It has the potential to build a wider 'vocational' bridge between second level and HE, thus increasing access for ETB learners. There should be better matching of school-leavers and jobseekers to course options so that HE attrition rates can be reduced further.

It should also be beneficial from a taxpayer point of view in that it will ease capacity/funding crises in HE and increase system efficiencies. From an employers' perspective, there ought to be better matching of skills and qualifications to actual job requirements. It may also increase funding for ETBs, act as an impetus to innovate new curriculum and enhance teaching and professional development opportunities for staff. Consequently, the profile and standing of FET should be raised within the education system and in the wider public domain.

Yet the proposal also carries significant implications for the ETB FET sector. How feasible is it to anticipate a large cohort of numbers of school leavers choosing FET in preference to HE, thus sufficiently lowering demand for HE? As the CEO of SOLAS remarked '*We have a cultural issue in Ireland where there's an almost obsession with people going into higher education*[16]. An additional 39,000 learners (222,000 total) are expected to seek higher education places by 2030. Arising from the calculated grade initiative an additional over 2,000 places have been provided this year in universities and institutes of technology, in a diverse range of high-demand courses as part of a package of measures to support those applying to college in 2020. It remains difficult to envisage that the trend whereby comparatively few school leavers choose FET while over 60% choose HE, one of the highest in Europe will change to any great degree in the foreseeable future.

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[15] International Standards Classification of Occupations equivalent to Skill Level 2 and 3 (from Skill levels 1-4). Occupations at Skill Level 2; e.g. secretary, accounts clerk, electrician. Skill Level 3; e.g. IT support technician, legal secretary, sound engineer.
[16] Irish Times, Monday, September 2nd, 2019.

Given the 'obsession' with HE a more integrated TES system will be difficult to conceive of in terms other than 'HE in FET'. This is precisely what happened in England where it is separated from tertiary but linked to the Universities and in Scotland where it is part of tertiary but separate to the Universities (see Sections 2B & 3.7 for further details of these systems).

> **ETBs will also be regarded as (co-)providers of tertiary courses rather than simply suppliers of qualified applicants for HEIs.**

While 'HE in FET' may sound attractive to school-leavers and parents, it could mean increasing relevant ETB FET provision, most likely, at the expense of reducing other programmes regarded as central to the mission of ETBs. Strengthening progression options to HE in this way may end up weakening the unique contribution that the totality of ETB provision continues to make to social and economic life.

> **The policy system must be realistic about the type of FET provision that will be deemed attractive and valuable to learners to sufficiently effect a change in the upward demand curve for HE.**

As tertiary structures stand it is not too difficult to envisage (in addition to QQI) two funding organisations having responsibility for this type of joint FET/HE provision, including monitoring. Both funding bodies operate on different strategic timeframes and funding cycles and are likely to make separate demands on ETBs - notwithstanding QQI developments in respect of aligning QA arrangements for each sector. The Scottish policy system determined that merging two funding agencies into a single funding council (covering FE and HE sector) was a key enabler of achieving deeper collaboration between FE and HE in the interests of widening access to HE.

The current funding arrangements for the ETB FET sector and for HE raises questions in respect of the planning and co-ordination of investments in joint ETB/HE activities including the associated governance of these investments. For example, will planning take place as now or will it take place at a central level as part of existing COVID-19 structures? Who leads on joint activities and where does accountability lie? Will FET have any input into the HE part of any joint activity and vice versa? A shared understanding of tertiary education, its purpose and role and the position and functions of the ETB FET sector may provide much needed clarity around these matters.

While Brexit has been very quiet, it has not gone away. Understandably COVID-19 has deflected a lot of attention away from other concerns, including Brexit. Ireland is the UK's 5th largest export market and the 10th largest source of imports. The UK technically left the EU on 31st January 2020 but in practice very little has changed in the meantime. Whatever positive arrangements may emerge from the EU-UK Future Partnership negotiations with the EU, (including proposed new UK Government Bill to amend the UK's Brexit deal), trade will not be the same after 31st December 2020. This will impact many businesses, particularly those trading with the UK[17].

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[17] Office for National Statistics and the HMRC Database 'UK Trade Info'.

The skills and labour market will be affected. While many business sectors will be impacted, it is likely that small-to-medium sized service businesses and their workers along the border counties may be more severely affected[18]. Further education and training opportunities will however continue to be available to students and trainees from Ireland going to the UK and vice versa under the Common Travel Area arrangements. Yet the UK exit is also likely to reduce the overall European level of funding available for programmes such as the European Social Fund. Over time, this may result in a reduction in funds available for FET in Ireland.

Looking through an operational lens

On balance, the potential benefits of joint activities for FET learners are likely to outweigh the challenges. Taking the view that we need to start from where we are and not from where we may wish to be, the way forward in the shorter term must be to build on systems and good practice we already have or are in the process of developing. We can then augment these with sensible initiatives to increase the range of feasible options, **where possible and as appropriate**.

> **The reason for taking this approach is that ETBs have a strong ethos of accommodating new initiatives into their existing portfolio of provision. This can result in some initiatives running ahead of support systems with consequences for delivery schedules.**

In taking on board the TES project, ETBs need to be vigilant not to undermine the overall productivity of the various units. At this moment in time it is not a matter of simply expecting ETBs to develop and provide more joint programmes to meet increased demand from those who might have gone to third level but are now coming to ETBs. In the medium term, the fundamental question of what we expect from our ETB FET sector within a TES needs to be clearly stated.

Given unprecedented unemployment levels, FET-related commitments in the new programme for government including the new SOLAS initiative for jobseekers, it is likely that ETBs will need to consider further contingency arrangements to

- o Expand capacity (including as part of the SOLAS initiative).
- o Prioritise access for unemployed people including those referred by DEASP to upskilling and reskilling courses where shorter-duration provision will be an important option (e.g. evening, part-time, on-line and blended learning[19]).
- o Increase places for new apprentices and provide opportunities for redundant apprentices to complete their Phase 3, 5 and 7 training with employers.
- o Develop and install a system-wide RPL system.
- o Ensure that all teaching and learning can continue safely in a changed environment where inevitably more technology-based, remote teaching and learning is in use following reopening of ETB FET sector facilities, and where not all courses will be able to revert to the same format prior to the public health emergency.

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[18] Expert Group on Future Skills Needs have identified clear gaps in customs expertise, financial management and for more individuals with freight transport, distribution and logistics expertise. There will also be a need to reskill workers who lose their jobs.

[19] 'Blended' understood to consist of a combination of classroom, other face to face and on-line.

The full implications of an evolving 'distance economy' are dominating operational management strategies across all workplaces, including ETBs, to ensure some level of programme and service continuity. At this stage formidable challenges experienced by education providers during lockdown and those arising as facilities re-open are well documented. These include:

o   Teaching and learning remotely.
o   Re-scheduling courses.
o   Implementing arrangements around state examinations and other FET-related assessments.
o   Ensuring physical distancing in classrooms, lecture theatres and workshops, corridors, canteens and outside of facilities.
o   Putting an emergency plan into operation if an outbreak occurs.

The multi-site nature of its estate/facilities introduces further complexity for ETB operational management and staff. Different facilities have different spatial arrangements (many facilities were not purpose built for education and training). They can house different programmes and delivery formats often with variable trainee/instructor and learner/teacher ratios. Many of these programmes are not delivered in a semester format and run throughout the year. Re-opening and keeping FET operational remain a logistical challenge.

There is also a need for ETBs to develop and continuously monitor 'return to work protocols' for staff. As the public health advice evolves, occupational health and safety risk assessments and safety statements will require updating, including how levels of COVID-19 related risk associated with various workplaces and how work activities can be addressed.

> **Even with the best health and safety systems in place it is inevitable that the wellbeing of some learners and staff will have been or continue to be adversely affected by the public health emergency due to anxiety, stress or grief. Understandably they may be reluctant to return to / remain in the new learning /work environment. It is essential that supports are made available for affected learners and staff to facilitate their return to the learning environment.**

Many ETB learning sites are experiencing varying degrees of additional complications in keeping their operations accessible. These are detailed in Section 3.3 'Barriers' and include issues such as technology deficits, teaching and instructional challenges, flexibility, curricula, validation and guidance services.

Flexibilities

For the foreseeable future joint activity with HE is likely to take place against a different learning/work environment. In more normal times getting vertical FET to HE teams on the same page in respect of aligning curriculum and delivery methods is the relatively easy part. Experience confirms that the challenging part comes as the process becomes iterative and draws in extensive time and resources. For various reasons, such as total working time scheduled to develop and approve curricula, assessments and awards while negotiating within internal ETB institutions and external partners, invariably falls short of the actual hours needed to complete the work. Remote working arrangements are bound to extend the timing of work schedules. Where flexible provision is at a premium, again, it seems as though all things are possible. Many variables and combinations are often considered:

- o **Time** Day, evening, weekend, back-to-back training.

- o **Type** More full-time and part-time, distance, on-line, blended, modular,

  Shortened existing full-time courses (with the option of continuous intakes across type).

- o **Delivery** Co-delivery, in-house or contracted, Recognition of Prior Learning

  (RPL).

- o **Duration** Several hours to several years (e.g. apprenticeship).

- o **Start date** Any time during the calendar year including summer.

- o **Location** As broad a geographical reach as possible throughout the country.

One or a combination of options may have consequences for overhead budgets and staff resources. This might include possible under-utilisation of staff and facilities or a reduction in the productivity of fixed human resources. Options incorporating RPL might involve significant additional resources to set up, operate and administer. Moreover, despite all the benefits often cited, online classes continue to display serious retention issues (up to 80% may not complete their on-line programme) and can work out more costly when additional supports needed are taken into account. See Section 3.9 'Other Comments' for more discussion on this.

Consideration will also have to be given to current employment legislation. The running of hundreds of modular or part-time courses during the day with full time staff on fixed contractual hours could mean that the productivity of a teacher/staff could fall significantly. There are various arrangements in place for reflective of learning that takes place all year round and learning that does not.

Against this backdrop any vacant slots would prove difficult to utilise for other provisions. Clearly, a different agreement with staff involved would be required. In addition, part-time out of hour's capacity within ETBs has been weakened[20] and only adds to ETB concerns around the actual level of flexibilities within the system.

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[20] BTEI Tutor contract / hours (part time and out of hours) is now similar to teacher contract/hours.

> **In short, it is a challenge to align staffing as and when required to evolving government priorities.**

The construct of more joint FET/HE provisions may inevitably lead to an increase in full-time longer-term learners. This may have a knock-on effect on the rotation rate of new learners into ETBs. It is likely that places to be set aside to meet increased demand from unemployed persons could be restricted.

Moreover, many unemployed persons engaging with further education and training will have lost jobs as a result of the public health emergency. Understandably, many are bound to be preoccupied with getting back to work as soon as possible rather than considering a longer-term joint ETB FET/HE course option.

Active inclusion measures are important for those furthest from the labour market and places and supports for these learners may also be affected. In that regard immersive on-line learning options will not be suitable.

Other flexible combinations may result in rationalisation of some ETB provision/courses and/or redeployment of staff to intensive resource areas such as programme and assessment development and quality assurance. Where technology enhanced learning is part of the delivery format, ETB staff will need the technology/expertise to develop and deliver learning inputs and assessments. This includes reliable IT platform supports such as stable content and learner management systems.

All of the above is then to be weighed against the benefits of greater flexibility to the learner. There is little point of setting out on this journey if these options cannot be resources. Given the position of state finances there is little doubt that difficult choices will have to be made with regard to ETB provision and the joint activities with HE to be prioritised.

It is inevitable that ETB management on a daily basis will be deciding the key driver of priorities. Is it staff utilisation or the needs of clients? The choice of what is right to do by learners and by staff in these circumstances will have to made.

> **The essence of strategy is choosing what not to do.**

Early Enablers

Few if any would disagree that a more integrated FET sector is essential to a stronger TES. At this moment in time, what might be called the 'priority of priorities' is to make certain that existing and new learners can rely on ETBs to continue with or commence their FET courses. Making sure that the new calculated grade arrangements for leaving certificate examinations are in place for some FET learners and the option of November written examinations is an example of one such priority.

Funding is an important enabler in making the right choices, including the choice of joint activities with HE. However, a consistent point of tension exists between ETBs and funders in respect of grant allocation and the orientation of annual priorities. The current model uses a moderated strategic inputs/outcomes-based funding approach.

Broadly speaking, full and part-time ETB FET provision that is accredited at levels 5-6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is expected to deliver higher-labour market impacts, higher retention rates and higher certification numbers than Levels 1-4 NFQ. From a management perspective applying the same base measure to all provisions to calculate funding allocations is not appropriate if ETBs are to deliver evolving Government social and economic priorities.

Inevitably L5-L6 NFQ provision is then positioned at the top of the funding agenda. Predictably, it tends to exert a stronger pull on the limited financial resources available. Consequently, this can mark out L1-L4 NFQ provision as intrinsically less important. ETBs do not agree with this 'two-tier' approach and certainly do not wish to see any joint activity subsequently morphing into a so-called third top tier.

The ETB FET sector does not agree with the two-tier approach as it runs counter to the long standing inclusive 'open door' mission of further education and training, as well as the lifelong and life wide learning agenda. The Education and Training Boards Act 2013 does not elevate a particular provision over another[21]. Hopefully given that SOLAS is reviewing its funding model, the 'tiered' approach will be replaced with a more nuanced model that recognises the contribution of all levels of ETB provision and drives performance and impact accordingly.

The National Post Leaving Certificate programme (PLCs) is most likely one of the possibilities being considered for quick wins in terms of joint activities by policy makers, funders and other ETB constituencies. This would be a natural 'go to' programme and the approach has merit, since existing links and pathways to HE are well established within it. There is also a cohort of PLC courses where the primary emphasis is on direct entry to the labour market. PLCs would appear to encompass the best of both worlds in terms of learner options and key funding metrics (progression to HE and strong employment outcomes).

> **Building on the PLC model therefore makes sense,
> but it is not the only option open to ETBs.**

The ultimate goal is to open up similar options for all ETB L5 and L6 NFQ award holders (or equivalent) in training centres and other types of facilities irrespective of where their journey starts, what type of programme they are undertaking or where the programme is based.

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[21] Part 2, Section 10, 1,C.

Finally, the DES draft paper posits that a stronger tertiary education system uses the terms 'integration' and 'collaboration' often and interchangeably. These terms may have multiple meanings for policy makers, practitioners such as ETBs and other key informants. As generally understood, greater collaboration is usually a pre-condition to more integration. But collaboration does not require integration.

In short, the concern of ETBs is that 'integration' ultimately signals that one system, namely FET, may be subsumed into HE under one corporate governance structure. This could equally be applied to a national programme, e.g. PLCs or specifically to those PLC courses, where the emphasis in on progression to HE. However, should 'integration' mean 'collaboration' and prove any concerns in that regard to be groundless? A clarification from the policy system would again be useful. ETBs' understanding of what collaboration / integration means in the context of tertiary education is as follows

> **The means by which ETB individuals/teams and HE individuals/teams can work together and with other partners, to enable the separate and shared knowledge of FET and HE, bring a combined effect on programmes and services provided to learners.**

Finally, ETB/FET also expects that the existing educational and financial supports for learners would not be negatively impacted by coming under the canopy of tertiary education. For example, eligibility for Back to Education Allowance vis-à-vis PLC and vis-à-vis PLC progression to HE as well as eligibility for training allowances.

SECTION 2B

ETB FET Vision for Tertiary Education

2B

SECTION 2B

ETB FET Vision for Tertiary Education

Positioning FET

In the FET sector, institutions and mix of provision is country-specific. The same holds for tertiary education systems. Both are often products of impetus from other parts of the social, economic and political system. These might include new programmes for government, education reforms, social security reforms and environmental/green energy targets. FET is usually the least homogenous and unitary of the education systems and tends to sit at a tertiary level beyond second level and near to but behind higher education.

Three examples below illustrate the country-specific nature of FET vis-à-vis tertiary education. The first example is a tertiary system comprising three elements. The first bullet point would not be out of place within ETBs.

In Japan there are three components of tertiary education, (of which the first two might sit comfortably within the FET sector in Ireland). The three components are

- Specialist schools offering two-year courses typically vocational e.g. hairdressing, fashion, caring, business.
- Short-term universities similar to specialist schools (2-year courses) but less vocationally focused (learners required to study other subjects outside of their chosen one).
- Universities (800) of which
  - o 90 are National Universities funded by the Government
  - o 100 are Public Universities run by the prefecture in which the university resides
  - o 600 Private Universities who do not receive any state funding and are therefore very expensive. They tend to have better facilities and account for over three quarters of student numbers.

The second example has a different configuration of tertiary education.

Further Education is defined by the UK Government as including 'study after secondary education that's not part of higher education (that is, not taken as part of an undergraduate or graduate degree). It has a dual mandate - to meet the needs of the community and lead a renaissance in higher-level technical skills. It remains separated from higher education and outside of tertiary education. Further education colleges (FECs) in England have delivered courses of higher education for some time (college-based higher HE) in higher technical skills –in addition to its traditional range of courses equivalent to Levels 1-6 NFQ.

Higher technical skills are at levels 4 and 5 (UK), including Higher National Certificates and Diplomas, Foundation Degrees (equivalent to Irish NFQ Level 6) and they also franchise some University degrees.

The third example comprehends further education as part of the tertiary system and the HE that it provides is separate to the Universities. It could be described in Irish terms as an amalgam of much of ETB and IoT provision.

Scottish Further Education consists of 26 Colleges (Scotland's Colleges) and is part of the tertiary education system in Scotland. They are funded by a single entity, the Scottish Funding Council - which also funds 19 Universities. The FE 'Colleges' provide courses at Irish NFQ equivalency of Levels 2-8 inclusive (including degrees). Higher education provision in these colleges is distinct from Universities. Some of the FE colleges are called 'Super Colleges' catering for 40,000+ students. A College typically provides four categories of courses roughly equivalent to Irish NFQ Levels 2, 3, 4; Level 5; Level 6; Level 7/8 (Degree).

The important point is that the concept of FET is a dynamic phenomenon reflecting country-specific priorities, values, expectations and norms. It is these characteristics that tend to determine where it is positioned vis-a-vis tertiary education.

Theoretical Perspectives

There are sound theoretical perspectives that support a range of important social benefits of learning provided through ETBs (in addition to employment). The learning content and methods practised can foster confidence and self-esteem in learners. They also offer inputs to support the individual's engagement with family and civic life more generally (e.g. family literacy).

Learning inputs are not exclusively directed at imparting job-related skills and competencies (although these are very important). Often the most effective skill sets are the transferable and interpersonal ones to equip and empower FET learners to manage various complex situations and engagements outside of work (as well as in work). Also referred to as 'soft', or 'core' skills, they are over and above the most important set of skills for many ETB learners. They are highly personalised and central to the wellbeing of many individuals and communities served by ETBs. Community education is a good example of provision where these skills are central to the aims of increasing social inclusion through empowering individuals and developing communities.

Such skills by their very nature become difficult for many to understand, define and recognise, including by those who say there are very important, namely employers. The reason is that it remains a challenge to measure their impact even though they often underpin improvements in attitudes and values leading to wider and better social and economic outcomes for learners (so-called 'hard outcomes'). The ETB FET Active Inclusion Group project on the wider benefits of learning is adding to our understanding of the effectiveness of these skills.

Their elusiveness in terms of metrics can lead on the part of some to a scepticism about their effectiveness and hence where they may be positioned in funding priorities.

> **Difficulty in providing metrics for soft skills can lead to some being sceptical about their effectiveness and hence their positioning in funding priorities**

Developing shared understanding

Part of the FET system would appear to have developed a more advanced understanding of the concept of TES as it applies to the ETB FET sector. A SOLAS presentation[22] in 2019 in respect of the new FET Strategy 2020-2014 stated that *'We now have a framework in place for a strategic and integrated further education and training system…'* and *'a Tertiary Education Framework [and that a] Concept of tertiary education system introduced with plans for a framework linking FET & HE.'* A SOLAS Twitter post on June 12th, 2020 stated that *'there's been so much good work to embed a tertiary approach across FET/HE…'*

> **ETB FET understanding of the Tertiary Education concept and its embedding across FET and HE is not complete.**

While there is clarity that ETBs (among others) are providers of tertiary education, ETBs would welcome a definition of tertiary education and the role and function of the ETB FET sector within it. There are a number of questions to be asked:

- Is the term 'Tertiary Education' a change in name from 'FET' and 'HE' or does it signal a more fundamental change? If so, what is that change?
- Is all ETB provision included?
- Is other publicly funded FET by SOLAS and other Government-funded FET, for example Pobal, included?[23]
- Are all private providers of FET included in tertiary education?
- What criteria are used for inclusion of FET providers in the tertiary system?
- Is this part of a longer-term plan for FET and HE?

Existing Progression Opportunities (Transitions)

The role of education and training including the ETB FET sector is central to the whole of the Government's strategy contained in *'Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 Ambition, Goals and Commitments'* published in January 2020. It aims to build on existing inclusion strategies, including education, that have been developed across Government over time and which include social inclusion as a core objective. This Roadmap aims to reduce the number of people in consistent poverty in Ireland and increase social inclusion for those who are most disadvantaged.

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[22] For example, to the National Guidance Forum 2nd April 2019.
[23] Pobal as part of their wide remit also provides education and training interventions to long term unemployed persons, young people, farmers / fishermen, families, Travellers, older people and ex-prisoners. DEASP administers a Training Support Grant designed to fund quick access to short term training or related interventions for jobseekers on the live register being supported by the department.

The Government also committed that the new FET Strategy 2020-2024 would include specific provisions to encourage and support so-called 'non-active' groups to participate in education and training as a stepping-stone to employment. The National Youth Strategy 2015-2020 includes a specific objective which recognises that young people are better able to participate in the labour market through enhanced skills and competence. This contributes to the broader aim of that strategy to enable young people to reach their full potential.

Against this policy backdrop, the importance of enabling ETB learners and those that are 'at-risk' in particular, to progress to HE cannot be overstated. The improvements in life chances and circumstances for those with higher levels of education (and the disadvantages facing those with lower education and skill levels) including job prospects are well-researched. The policy system is unequivocal with regard to providing more equitable and coherent transition routes to HE[24]. However, research by the HEA indicates that equity of access to higher education is still not as broad-based as it ought to be.

While existing transition routes from the ETB FET sector to HE are open and transparent, the National Post Leaving Certificate Programme (PLCs) has a pre-eminent role through the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS) with circa 5,000 PLC learners transitioning to HE each year. While there are local arrangements exclusive to one or two institutions, in the main, learners on other types of ETB FET provision such as Apprenticeship, Youthreach and Specific Skills courses tend to account for a relatively small number of transitions (100s).

Existing transition routes include:

- The Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS) that links particular courses with QQI level 5 and level 6 major awards in ETB FET colleges to the first year of selected higher education courses in participating HEIs (800+ links).
- A small number of awards formerly made by FÁS, Teagasc and Fáilte Ireland on the NFQ can enable progression to HEI programmes.
- Regional Network arrangements for example:
  - o NEFHEA, (North East Further and Higher Education Alliance) and MEND (Midlands, East, North Dublin). The primary aim is the promotion, access, transfer and progression of learners between Further and Higher education/ training facilities within these geographic regions.

NUI Galway established a Further Education to Higher Education Working Group. This group features representatives from the five colleges that make up

  - o NUI Galway and the Galway Roscommon ETB (GRETB).
  - o Arrangements under regional skills fora structures.
- Broad entry on a competitive basis to Cork University for FET learners who are holders of a recognised QQI Level 5 or Level 6 award.

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[24] For example, National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019, SOLAS Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019, Higher Education Strategic Performance Framework.

- An articulation agreement between Cavan Monaghan ETB and DKIT (and other HE partners) to facilitate progression from Level 6 QQI to the 2nd year of degree programmes.
- Waterford Institute of Technology progression pathway arrangements for partner FET Colleges in the south east region (outside of HELS and CAO).
- Access to Letterkenny IoT Certificate in Preparatory Studies for Youthreach learners [and other eligible individuals such as those holding Leaving Certificate Applied (160 credits) and mature entrants].
- Pathway arrangements in respect of VTOS graduates (dedicated and dispersed).
- Instances of competency-based entry onto courses (e.g. Blanchardstown TU) that are designed to train recruits to the company (minimum requirement stated is Leaving Certificate + Aptitude Test) but 'where 'QQI Level 5 and Level 6 qualification are welcome'.

Some key points in relation to the above arrangements are worth noting:

- Outside of PLC there is little progression from other ETB FET programmes to HE.
- Some FET ETB provision at Level 5 and Level 6 NFQ remains outside of HELS.
- Where there is some progression for FET QQI Award holders from non-PLC provision, it tends to be limited and arbitrary in nature, for example a HEI may or may not accept a Level 6 Advanced Certificate (Apprenticeship).
- FET learner progression to universities is more selective and limited mainly using quotas (this is being looked at by the university sector).
- Many of the arrangements outside of HELS are by their nature localised - one ETB and one HEI or a regional/local network of ETBs and HEI(s),
- Access in some instances is restricted to individuals already recruited by the employer.

> **In summary there is a requirement for a unified rather than a uniform system of transitions, covering all ETB FET L5 and L6 award holders while retaining what is already there and building on it.**

ETB FET Vision for Tertiary Education

Much good work is going on in relation to pathways from the ETB FET sector to FET and from the ETB FET sector to HE. This needs to be built upon and expanded. If we really are committed to a learner-centred TES, then there must be equal opportunity for **all** FET learners to progress through the ETB FET sector and from FET to HE and from right across the spectrum of ETB provision.

> **Tertiary education is comprehended as a lifelong and life wide learning continuum incorporating all Levels 1-10 NFQ. It encompasses all ETB FET provision leading to awards at Levels 1 to 6 on the National Qualifications Framework (or equivalent) and includes ETB elements of joint programmes and non-accredited ETB FET provision. It envisages all ETB learners, irrespective of their starting point, having their qualifications, experience and prior learning fairly recognised and ETB/QQI agreed access, transfer and progression options open to them on the continuum to meet the learning needs of their particular circumstances and aspirations.**

Consequently, if the spirit and the letter of this vision is to have any currency for learners it is worth reminding ourselves that tertiary providers including ETBs are obliged to fully implement statutory QA guidelines relating to fair recognition of education and training qualifications. This includes periods of study and prior learning (including informal and non-formal learning)[25].

In addition, ETBs (and other providers) are also obliged to:

- Identify transfer and progression routes into, and onwards from, all programmes leading to awards in the framework
- Specify any particular attainments in the awards to which their programmes lead, that are required for transfer or progression.
- Make the necessary adaptations to programmes to facilitate participants in making successful transitions; this procedure refers to the participation needs of all learners, but particularly those who are accessing programmes by non-standard routes, and includes transfer or progression into and out of programmes[26].

In this way each ETB FET course(s) can then be formally linked to at least one course at the next NFQ level. Moreover, linkages in themselves, no matter how clearly stated in course brochures and publicity material, will only work as intended and deliver better outcomes when all ETB FET learners have similar opportunities to access high quality real-time guidance and support to make more informed choices on career and course options.

Given that there are in the region of 20,000 courses provided by the ETB FET sector each year, the magnitude of the task is not to be underestimated. Although onerous, the work is essential to a more integrated ETB FET and a stronger TES.

Neither does the vision contemplate drawing red circles around provision at levels 5/6 NFQ or around specific national programmes within this provision such as PLCs. The vision is specifically intended to promote a TES, both in perception and reality, that is characterised by a unified horizontal continuum of lifelong and life-wide learning pathways as opposed to a tiered hierarchical pathway along the lines of:

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[25] QQI Core Statutory QA Guidelines - Learner Admission, Access and Recognition.
[26] QQI Policy Restatement 'Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression in Relation to Learners for Providers of Further and Higher Education and Training' (2015).

- Unaccredited and Levels 1-4.
- Levels 5-6 non-PLC.
- Levels 5-6 PLC.
- HE Levels 6-10.

Otherwise, it is likely that the learning prospects and life chances of FET learners on Tiers 1-2, who have most to gain from an inclusive TES, would be further diminished. However, ETBs are encouraged that the new approach for a TES is not about merging existing further education and training and higher education options. Rather it is about greater levels of cooperation.

> **The ETB FET sector is fully committed to better coherence, increased collaboration and stronger co-operation with HE and other stakeholders. These ways of working will be fundamental to a successful TES and a more successful FET**

The distinctiveness, diversity and unique geographical reach of ETBs and their proximity to many communities throughout the country is regarded as one of the core strengths and flexibilities that they can bring to a TES. They have capacity to deliver comprehensive and localised options, including those leading to HE, that are deeply reflective of demographic and geographical distributions.

The '2+2' Co-delivery model

It is encouraging to see Government's commitment to ensure that all further education and training courses are linked into at least one university course when appropriate, providing a map to students who wish to continue their studies. This commitment also feeds into ETBs proposals (below) in respect to joint activity with HE. Further encouragement for a successful TES is the fact that ETBs already share the Level 6 NFQ 'space' with HE.

This is a naturally collaborative space for joint activity (for the avoidance of doubt the emphasis remains on '**shared** space' rather than on 'priority space'). For example, Cork ETB and Cork Institute of Technology have been operating a **co-developed and co-delivered** programme for many years (i.e. co-delivery of the **one programme**). This is often referred to as the '2+2' model and is outlined below both in a case study and in diagram format.

> **Unlike FE in England or in Scotland, there is a deep collaborative relationship between the ETB part and the HE part of the '2+2' programme (or a derivative) with providers and the programme embedded in the tertiary system.**

This model does not always have to consist of four years or an even split of time spent in FET and HE. It can be adapted to take account of what provider(s) is best positioned to deliver what part(s) of the joint programme. For example, there could be a '1+3' model (one year in ETBs and three years in HEIs) or a '1 year +1'year model or a three month plus 6 month-model ('3+6') and so forth.

The point is that a shared programme can be co-developed and co-delivered in a way that optimises the career and progression options for learners and pools ETB/HE expertise to deliver innovation and efficiencies within the tertiary system. The structure of the programme, including durations and type of delivery, flow from that principle.

Cork Case Study

Cork ETB (CETB) has been delivering courses leading to recognised qualification in Montessori Education for over 20 years. Following a review of this provision Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) was interested in developing a replacement programme. However, if this was a stand-alone option, the impact on CETB offerings would have been significant. While CIT had some expertise in the Montessori area, it was acknowledged that there was a greater level of experience in CETB. CETB and CIT agreed to develop a 2+2 Level 8 honours degree programme in Montessori Education, with CETB delivering and certifying the first two years as a QQI level 6 major and CIT delivering and certifying the final two years. CIT has no Year 1 or 2 entries into the programme.

There are good examples of a shorter duration pathway models (technically not co-developed and co-delivery of same programme as in the Cork instance). For example, Cavan and Monaghan ETB have a series of arrangements in place which involve students completing the first year of their award locally and progressing to the second year of their award in for example Athlone IoT, Letterkenny IoT or Dundalk IoT. It might make sense to adapt such arrangements **where feasible** to the '2+2' model or a derivative.

Cavan Monaghan Case Study

There is an articulation agreement between Cavan Monaghan and DKIT to facilitate progression from Level 6 QQI to the 2nd year of degree programmes. CMETB FET centres and services have a number of co-operation and collaboration agreements in place with partner organisations. Amongst the aims of these agreements are to increase student progression opportunities from these centres/services to the respective partner organisation while supporting the learner to make such a transition. Such agreements currently exist with: Athlone Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, St James' Hospital, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, St Angela's College, Sligo, Stranmillis University College, Belfast, Sligo Institute of Technology

Other examples of existing joint support activities include ETBs supporting learners in HE settings:

- Learner support services in Louth Meath ETB works with apprentices providing literacy support to help them with their learning on Phases 4 and 6 in the HEIs.
- English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provided in ETBs is availed of by students studying in HEIs.
- As part of Galway Roscommon ETB's Quality Assurance Governance Strategy, a FET Quality Council was established this year with representation from GMIT and NUIG.

The ETB FET element of 'shared space' as outlined in the ETB FET sector Vision for tertiary education has two sub-elements: Level 5 and Level 6 NFQ. The vision again is quite clear that this provision is not a 'priority space' but a collaborative and shared space; one to be valued no more or no less than other ETB FET provision. It just so happens to represent one bridge from FET to HE (although an important one) in addition to its other function of preparing learners to compete in the labour market.

As is often the case, the learner progression journey is not simply a linear one from FET to HE, but also from HE to FET (and then perhaps back again to HE). Moreover, movements within the ETB FET sector are themselves not always linear. Many FET learners already hold higher education qualifications and update their skills or gain new skills (and will for example enrol on Level 5 programme and/or on a part-time evening course and so forth).

The **'Shared Space'** concept can be represented as follows:
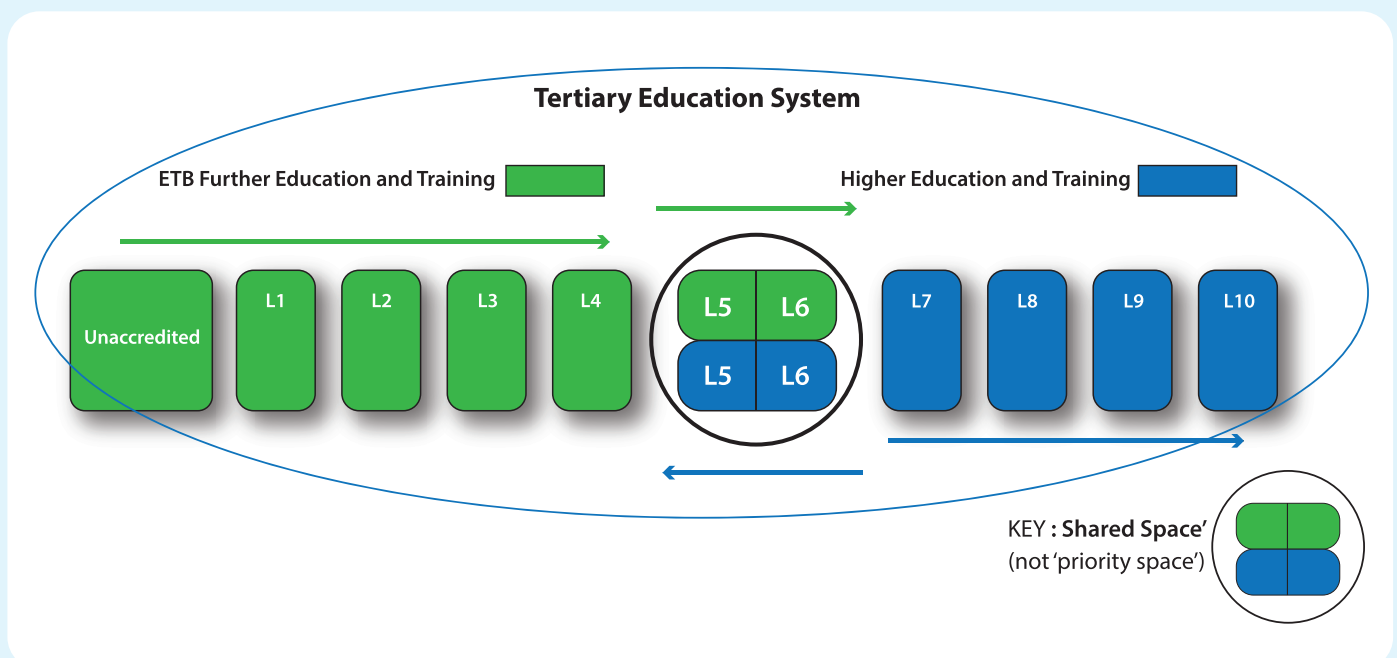
Advantages for FET learners of shared space' models include:

- o Many non-PLC Level 5 and Level 6 ETB award holders will now have single programme options ('2+2' or a derivative) open to them as a transition pathway to HE. In the meantime, existing transition arrangements, where feasible, should also be adapted to further accommodate non-PLC L5/L6 award holders.

- o Some PLC provision consists of L5 and L6 in the same field of learning. These courses could be considered for a new '2+2' model or a derivative. It is expected that existing transition arrangements to HE applying to PLC will continue, in addition to any new '2+2' single programme options.
- o In the scenarios above, ETB learners will still have the option of direct access to the labour market after achieving L5 or L6 awards - including any L5 and L6 awards achieved as part of a new '2+2' model or a derivative.
- o School leavers will have '2+2' programme options (or a derivative) open to them in ETBs in addition to a range of L5 and L6 provision (all L5 and L6 provision is ultimately expected to facilitate progression to HE in addition to equipping learners with 'in-demand' skills for work).

The co-delivery model of traditional apprenticeship is seen as one of its core strengths. ETBs and HEIs deliver three blocks of education and training in less than one year (from a total programme duration of four years - three of which are with the employer). Adapting this approach to other types of joint ETB FET/HE programmes also makes sense. Some new apprenticeships are delivered exclusively by the ETB sector (by one ETB or by a network of ETBs). Again, this is another delivery model that could be considered / further adapted.

Over time a more unified transitions framework may emerge. For example, a future CAO may incorporate both FET and HE course options for school leavers while also facilitating a broader cohort of FET learners who may wish to progress to HE. Probably it would be more feasible in the medium term to seek to unify all existing and new FET to HE progression arrangements into a single ETB FET to HE transitions framework (including CAO arrangements for ETB learners).

> **ETB Level 5 and Level 6 provision is well positioned to contribute to successful joint programmes with HE including the '2+2' model or a derivative.**

Internal ETB FET pathways (non-PLC) - Example case studies (group and individual)

There are many group and individual journeys taking place within ETBs. These pathways play a crucial role in the overall success of ETB learners in achieving their personal and career aspirations. Much of this work goes on behind the scenes and credit is due to all those involved.

It is rewarding for ETB learners, their families and for staff, as they travel from one level of learning to the next. It is also acknowledged that more needs to be done to make pathways more widely available within and across ETBs and within and across the same levels of provision. A sample of existing FET learner journeys encompassing Levels 1-6 NFQ are presented below (some include progression to HE).

Case Study 1

Youthreach City of Dublin ETB
Early School Leaver completes QQI L4 in a Youthreach setting. Progresses to a Training Centre to undertake a pre-apprenticeship - or can now progress to a college of FE to undertake a Pathways to Apprenticeship programme. These programmes are linked directly to national apprenticeships and also provide a structured workplace training element. The young person, then accesses and completes an apprenticeship.

Case Study 2

VTOS Louth Meath ETB Level 5 Software Development
There has been good progression rates from VTOS Navan to TU Dublin, Blanchardstown Campus degree programmes e.g. B.Sc. programmes in Digital Forensics and Cyber-Security; Computing; Creative Digital Media. Also, a former VTOS student was accepted for the Higher Cert. in Science in Networking Technologies (Learn + Work programme).

Case Study 3

Adult Literacy Service (ALS) Navan
ALS Navan progresses some of their Level 3 ESOL students to VTOS Navan's Level 4 course 'Boost Your English and Learn Customer Service Skills' where students can be awarded a Level 4 qualification in Retail Skills.

Case Study 4 (individual learner)

Dublin & Dún Laoghaire ETB
Lisa commenced learning in DDLETB Blanchardstown Adult Education Service in 2013/2014 when she engaged in Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE) delivered through the ETB Adult Literacy Services at QQI Level 3. Lisa developed her skills in the area of Information Technology. She progressed in 2014/2015 to a QQI Level 4 award in Digital Media and then in 2015/2016 earned a QQI Level 5 General Studies award themed to Digital Media. Lisa then progressed to ITB in Blanchardstown to study Cyber Security. She earned an ordinary degree in 2019 (Level 7) and decided to take a break from her studies. She secured a permanent position in the Tax Appeals office in the city centre. She plans to return to complete her level 8 with the support of her employer in the near future.

Case Study 5 (individual learner)

Community Ed. Kildare Carlow ETB
A Community Education learner who completed a Level 5 and 6 in Childcare, went on to complete a degree and is now employed the ETB as a tutor.

Experience to date in co-delivery of traditional apprenticeships, new post 2016 apprenticeships and existing transition arrangements gives confidence that the necessary consistency of approach for co-delivery of joint activities such as the '2+2' programme and new internal ETB pathways can be installed. Nonetheless, as a successful TES is intimately bound up with a successful and fully integrated FET, system the aim is that:

Ultimately all ETB L5 and L6 provision will facilitate direct access to the labour market and a pathway to HE, including co-delivery models as part of a unified and inclusive tertiary education transitions framework.
In addition, all ETB FET provision at L1-L4 NFQ or equivalent will, where possible enable direct and formal progression pathways to provision at L5 and L6
These pathways to apply within and across ETBs on a consistent basis.

e.g. PLC, Traineeship, Youthreach, Community Training, Specific Skills, Apprenticeship etc.)

It must be recognised that work to incorporate curricula into existing and new courses, that is effective on two fronts (providing in-demand skills, facilitating progression to HE) and sits within existing QA frameworks, is likely to prove challenging but not insurmountable. In addition, ETB QA policies/procedures in respect of access, transfer and progression relating to each course need to be fully implemented.

In short, there is much work to be done within ETBs to make their vision for TES a reality including:

❖ Increasing transition options to HE that encompasses all Level 5 and Level 6 provision for example
  o new '2+2' co-delivered programmes (or derivatives)
  o and/or adapting existing PLC courses to a '2+2' model (or derivative)
  o and/or bringing more non-PLC Level 5 and Level 6 provision under HELS)

and

❖ Pathways from Levels 1-6 will need to be more identifiable and transparent for learners
❖ The integration process of *FE & T*raining into FET (full and part-time) will continue to be a key part of each ETBs FET strategy
  and
❖ Innovating more 'in-demand' programmes to meet the skills needs of employers and assist jobseekers including the SOLAS initiative to compete more effectively in the labour market.

SECTION 3

ETB FET response to the Department of Education and Skills nine questions

3

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ETB FET response to the Department of Education and Skills nine questions

3.1 'Do you agree with the approach to integration proposed by this paper?'

The DES draft paper refers to the ambition to create a framework for a more integrated TES. It will provide the link between institutions at a range of levels under a single overarching canopy. The distinctiveness of institutions will be retained. However, there is a concern that FET distinctiveness may be diluted in that the FET Strategy 2020-2024 emphasises the consolidation of existing FET provision within a single integrated college structure.

> **ETB FET broadly agrees with the ambition of a more integrated TES and with the proposed framework encompassing an overarching canopy. ETBs are fully committed to improving cooperation and collaboration with HE to realise this ambition.**

The sector believes that there is an over-emphasis on the role of academic education to meet demographic changes, and the premise that not all of the requirements of the expected increase in demand for HE can nor should be met solely by academic education is valid. ETBs therefore see a lead role for FET in this regard.

An integral part of a successful TES is an overarching strategic plan incorporating a set of system-wide actions.

> **The sector welcomes the strong emphasis on co-ownership and co-creation as guiding principles in the development of this plan.**

Implicit in this emphasis is not only the breath of stakeholder contributions being brought to bear on the strategy, but that all stakeholder voices will be equally respected. In that regard, the ETBs anticipate that the value of FET learning will be enhanced under this canopy. This can only help foster ownership of the TES strategy.

> **Given that outcome, the case for retaining a re-purposed TES COVID-19 Structure with ETBI representation to act as this forum is sensible.**

In addition, the sector wishes to contribute directly to and support the development and implementation of the TES strategy, and to develop, drive and agree system-wide actions to drive it forward.

The ETB FET sector agrees that developing a sustainable funding model to meet both HE and ETB FET sector needs, is central to a more efficient and effective TES. The sector is confident that the evaluation of the various funding model options currently taking place will achieve that, and from a management perspective, will be fully enabled to deliver on Government's social and economic priorities.

An effective and more integrated TES will also depend, to a large extent, on greater integration of existing transition routes into a unified system, while incorporating and expanding existing arrangements, based on fairness and transparency that will deliver the same opportunity for progressing to HE for all ETB FET learners. The emphasis in the FET Strategy 2020-2024 to address the array of vocationally focused programmes and replace it with a new Level 5 and Level 6 proposition may prove enabling in achieving a unified transitions system.

> **A unified, integrated and inclusive transitions system is one of the most fundamental outcomes of a stronger TES. It is a welcome first step. The ETBs believe that the TES Strategy should ultimately aim to deliver a more inclusive and unified FET/HE transitions system.**

Vocational Excellence Platforms

Research is an essential component of professional practice and innovation. ETBs supports the DES view that a more integrated TES cannot be achieved through the loss of the integration of research within HE. In that context, ETB staff would benefit from forging stronger links to the HE research community in areas relevant to FET for example, in material and green technologies. At the same time ETB teachers and instructors can bring valuable experience and expertise to a range of overlapping areas of interest, such as, skills development strategies and the use and effectiveness of blended learning methodologies including on-line methodologies.

In taking a more strategic approach to joint research activities, collaborative research projects along the lines of Vocational Excellence Platforms (or clusters) have merit. Platforms are locally or regionally based clusters intended to become world class reference points for innovative vocational education and training. They consist of a range of local/regional entities including research centres, FET providers, HEIs of applied science and higher technical skills, employment services, employers/employer bodies, city/county councils and so forth.

Platforms pool their expertise to innovate in shared areas of interest such as specific sectors/trades including aeronautics, e-mobility, green technologies, or in specific societal challenges such as; integration of migrants, digitalisation, AI, upskilling and reskilling. There are 52 countries, including Ireland, already involved in setting up these platforms. The EU under Erasmus+ 2020 is supporting member states in that regard.

> **The Regional Skills Fora structure appears to provide a good starting point to build a network of platforms for vocational education and training innovation and research with ETBs and HEIs playing a prominent part.**

3.2 'What are the opportunities of integration?'

The ETB FET sector believes that the core of the integration concept is to combine the best curricular and pedagogical practices of further education and training and higher education into a single, integrated co-delivery model or programme at an agreed NFQ level. This can then be made available to all interested FET learners on a national basis. The use of respective IT infrastructures to support these joint activities therefore makes sense. In the first instance ETBs see opportunities for co-delivery in three broad areas

New joint activity using 2+2 approach or a derivative

Expanding HELS to other non-PLC provision at Level 5 and Level 6 NFQ or equivalent

Supporting activities
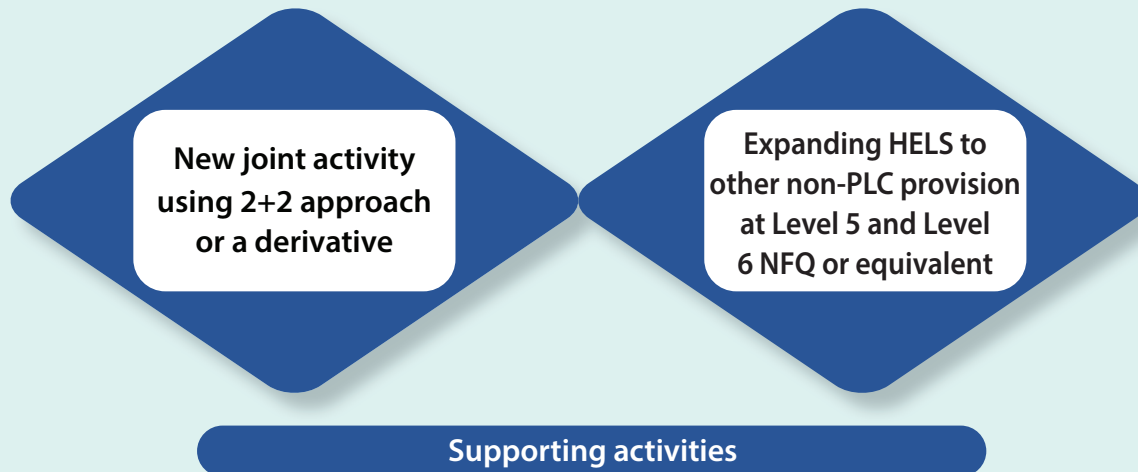
o   The first opportunity for better integration consists of identifying existing and new courses for co-development and co-delivery focussing on the '2+2' model or a derivative. This can be a completely new programme or an adaptation of existing ETB and HEI arrangements to the model.

o   The second opportunity is to consider how HELS can be expanded to other appropriate (non-PLC) level 5 and level 6 provision including traditional and post 2016 apprenticeship.

o   The third opportunity consists of identifying joint activities in programme support areas such as quality assurance, curriculum, data analytics and collaborative research platforms. More specifically these support areas might enable;

- **ETBs and HE providers to develop deeper and better sequenced curricula within the PLC programme.**
   - o   **One of the aims would be to eliminate the requirement for FET learners who progress to HE to undertake the learning inputs in year one already undertaken in FET. FET level 6 courses should augment the level 7/8 courses provided in HE. The Cork case study described in Section 2B above offers a workable template in that regard.**

Develop strategies and activities designed to foster a deeper understanding, awareness and acceptance of competing assumptions and ideologies underpinning provision in ETBs and in HE.

Align /further align subject-domain specifications, content specifications of ETB FET and HE programmes in similar fields of learning.

ETBs and HE providers, SOLAS, QQI and HEC cooperate in joint activities in best practice, teaching and instruction, curriculum and assessment design, data analytics.

Develop ETB /HE Recognition of a Prior Learning system resourced and delivered jointly.

Further develop Pre-University courses /modules to enable students to obtain the entry requirements for accessing programmes at Higher Education institutes **and** enable learners to acquire knowledge and skills necessary for employment in industry. Link ETB courses to at least one university course where practical.

Examine how to increase progression options pertaining to individual component credits within Major Awards (in a particular field of learning) to a wider cohort of HE award provision.

HE represented on existing ETB FET QA teams and data teams and ETB FET sector representation on HE QA teams and data teams. Build also on existing regional skills fora and regional ETB/HE Networks to identify and progress co-development activities relevant to the regional brief, including new courses and collaborative vocational excellence platforms

3.3 'What are the challenges of integration?'

Parity of esteem

QQI Level 6

Common understanding of TES

<table>
<tr><td>Unified Transitions system</td><td>Competing for learners</td><td>Operational issues</td></tr>
</table>

Parity of esteem

Different country specific contexts and expectations give rise to different priorities for these systems. The DES draft paper touches on one of the most influential expectations evident in Ireland namely, a comparatively high level of demand (almost two thirds) from second level learners for higher education.

From an employment perspective and with all that implies for subsequent life chances, the case for a higher education is compelling. Before FET can been seen as a viable alternative to HE, the distance between the levels of esteem enjoyed by FET and HE in the public estimation needs to be shortened both in perception and in reality.

This is no easy task. In reflecting on choices made, PLC courses, a key full time post-secondary programme within ETBs, are seen by many learners participating on them or considering them, as a compromise, in a context of not achieving sufficient grades to pursue higher education. This highlights the continued lower status of further education.

In addition, new apprenticeship registrations (almost 6,000 in 2019) in the context of new undergraduate entrants (almost 44,000 in 2018) again puts into perspective the strength of the pull of the academic arena. The uptake of new apprenticeships in non-traditional areas (approx. 1,000 of 6,000) in 2019 has been much slower than anticipated even with a strong pre COVID-19 tailwind of nearly full employment. This again serves to highlight the continued lower status of vocational training.

The most incisive challenge in respect of creating a more integrated TES appears to be the lack of parity of esteem between **FE** and **T,** and between FET and the secondary and higher education systems. Unless this improves, the concern remains that even a more integrated TES will not succeed in shortening the distance between FET and HE.

QQI Level 6

The ETB FET sector welcomes the research commissioned by QQI into the suitability of major awards at Level 6 namely, FE Advanced Award and HE Higher Award. They were originally developed to differentiate FET from HE. The research may provide guidance and inform how best to co-develop and operate more transparent and integrated progression opportunities for FET learners in this shared space. The situation of two awards at Level 6 within a unified qualifications framework, operating within an integrated tertiary system with a unified transitions system, is not feasible.

International classifications of Tertiary Education

To most people, tertiary education simply means higher education. It is true that the composition of higher education is much broader now than it was in the past. The ETB FET sector is aware of the definitions of tertiary education relied on by the European Commission, UNESCO and Eurostat. These are underpinned by ISCED Levels 5-8 (i.e. broadly equivalent to levels 6-10 on NFQ).

ISCED classifications facilitate collection of comparative statistics on education systems to enable a common understanding and proper interpretation of the inputs, processes and outcomes of these systems including tertiary education.

ETBs also acknowledge that its vision for TES encompasses Levels 1-6 NFQ and these sit outside ISCED Levels 5-8. This may be problematic from a statistical and analytical point of view. However, the potential to provide a truly equitable system of tertiary education ought to trump the challenges (and they may be considerable) that may present in innovating suitable reporting arrangements and undertaking comparative analyses relating to the TES.

Existing Transitions from FET to HE

An overview of existing transition arrangements from FET to HE and their limitations has been presented in an earlier part of this paper. One could argue that a consequence of these arrangements is that those who achieve a Level 5 or Level 6 Major Award in the same fields of learning as learners encompassed by these arrangements, find that they are excluded from the same progression opportunities, albeit they themselves are part of the same FET system (and tertiary education system). This situation is no longer tenable.

Furthermore, it would be helpful if there was clarity with regard to the exact point equivalences between eligible ETB Level 5 award holders and leaving certificate holders where the demand for a course exceeds the places available in the HEI.

Finally, the TES project is not helped where HEI trust levels in the quality of some ETB programmes is suspect, including curriculum and assessment outcomes and QA processes. This also needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency[27].

Competing for Learners

The Further Education & Training to Higher Education Regional Network conducted a Scoping Exercise on Access, Transfer and Progression from Further Education and Training (FET) to Higher Education (HE). Arising from this exercise, both ETBs and HEIs agreed a need to address the fundamental challenge of competing locally for learners in an un-coordinated manner.

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[27] Source: Further Education & Training to Higher Education Regional Network 2016, Scoping Exercise Access, transfer and progression from Further Education and Training (FET) to Higher Education (HE).

ETB Operational Issues

The recent public health crisis has highlighted key learning affecting the capacity to deliver existing on-line and blended learning and teaching activity which may have an impact on what ETBs can bring to joint activities.

Technology for learners

o The need for IT devices for all learners using on-line learning. The provision of nearly 17,000 devices for higher and further education is welcomed. Giving consideration to having programmes device/platform-agnostic for example, to support the practice of allowing learners use their own computers, smartphones, or other devices to learn (BYOD).

o Funding to support procurement of devices that are synchronised with ETB networks and can be supported and secured by dedicated IT staff teams. This will allow staff and learners work online from locations which are not office or centre based.

Approaches to teaching / instruction

o The necessary growth and effectiveness of blended learning courses is acknowledged. Nevertheless, online support is not appropriate for all learners and learning. If a learner wishes to engage face to face, this should also be facilitated whilst accepting learners need to learn 'how to learn' online.

Flexibility

o The ETB FET sector is planning to significantly speed up the current work on programme structure, scheduling and blended learning options to increase system-wide course flexibilities. This is subject to resources.

Curriculum

New and existing curricula with on-line content need to be upgraded to take account of;

o Augmented reality tools.
o IT skills incorporated into all courses.
o Tools to support virtual learning and other off-site learning and address 'signing in' requirements.
o How learners learn on-line.
o Providing evidence and verification of skills completion.
o Designated full or part-time structures, with a semesterised and continuous intake approach, based on skills needs and with variable path options to competence assessment.
o Alternative certifying bodies to design programmes and provide online resources to increase modular course options, including micro and 'bite sized' offerings to meet specific upskilling needs of individual learners.

Validation

ETB wide sectoral validation of programmes with QQI and online/blended learning delivery needs to be validated as one process.

Guidance

ETB adult guidance and information services in some instances is currently staffed with one or two individuals to serve a county. This is not feasible, especially given the recent independent review of adult guidance and the recommendation among others, for an integrated guidance service within FET.

3.4 'What are the potential impacts of greater integration?'

ETB FET anticipates positive impacts resulting from a more integrated TES including

From Learner point of view   *From Taxpayers point of view*   *From FET point of view*
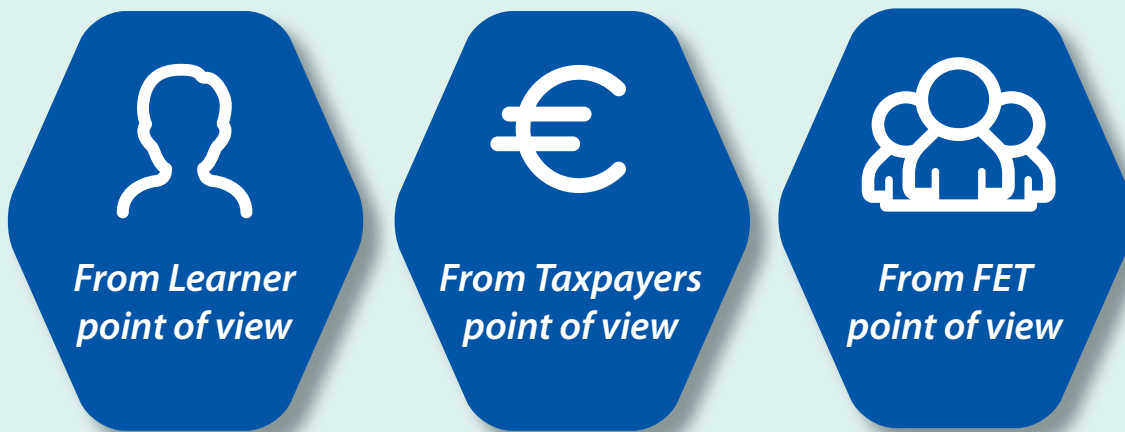
From the Learner Perspective - improvements arising from;

- Wider choice of progression opportunities to HE for school leavers.
- More effective transparent qualification pathways from ETB FET to HE.
- More progression pathway options within and across ETBs.
- A unified transitions framework inclusive of all L5 and L6 learners.
- 'In-demand' skills provided to enter labour market directly (or progressing to HE)
- Improved integrated guidance service better matching learners with job opportunities and course choices leading to better outcomes for learners.
- More reverse pathways from HE to FET to upskill or reskill (including those who drop out of HE and those who have lost jobs).

From the Taxpayers perspective - efficiencies arising from;

- Use of public funds in a more efficient way by redirecting demand for HE to FET.
- Avoiding duplication of provision with potential savings/efficiencies.
- Lower 'drop-out' rates arising from better matching of learners to courses and jobs as a result of integrated guidance service.
- Cost sharing and resource sharing arrangements across a range of activities including RPL systems.
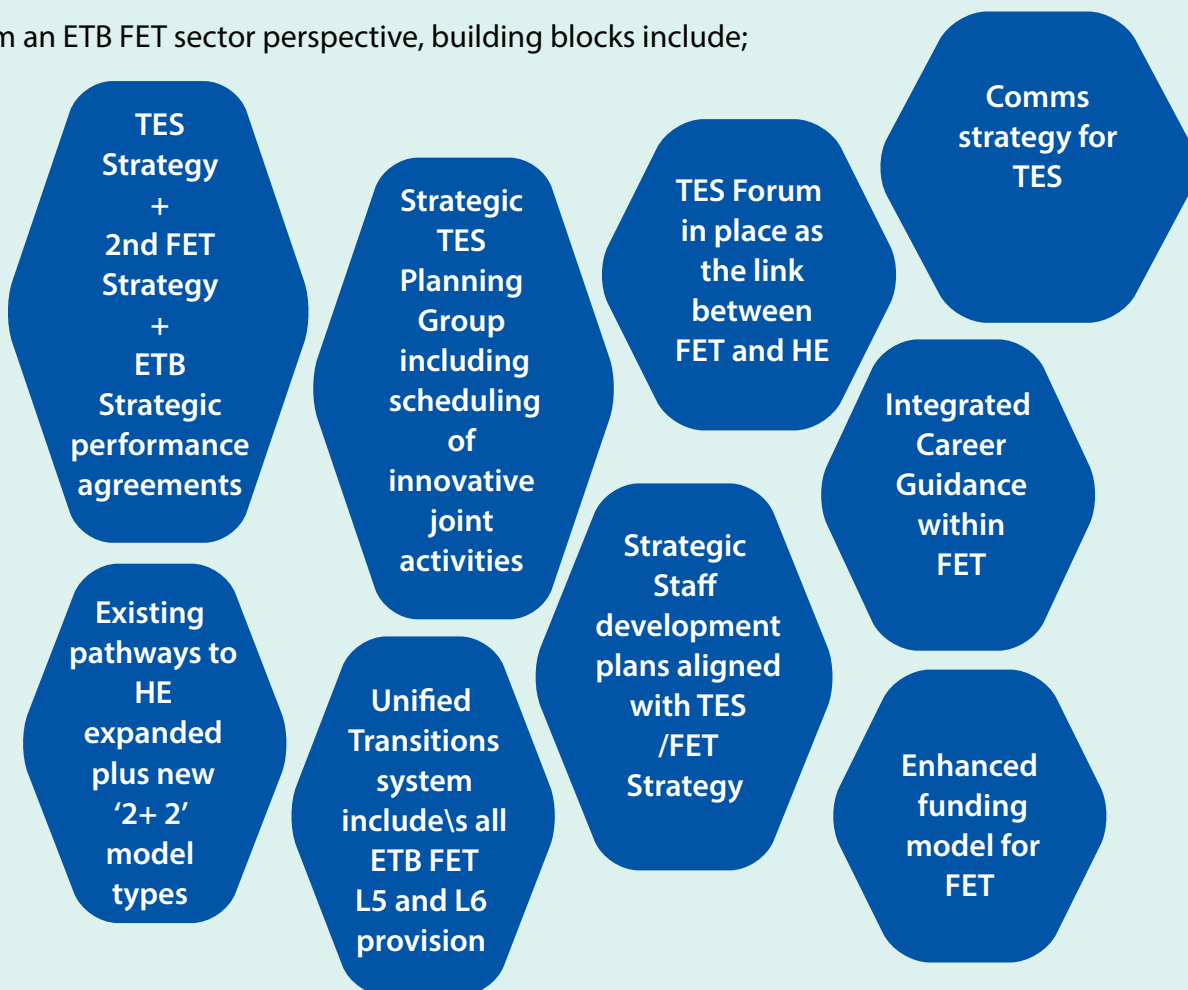
- Pooling of capacities in data collection and analysis to inform policy relating to TES, and the efficiency and effectiveness of its programmes and services.

From the ETB FET Perspective - improvements arising from;

- Tertiary system priorities being aligned in a systematic and coherent way and the pooling of expertise /facilities to jointly meet increasing demand for HE.
- More co-ordinated planning of FET and HE provision at central, regional and local level to eliminate duplication of provision and competition for learners.
- Integrated guidance service leading to better matching of learners to courses and job opportunities resulting in higher retention rates and better learning and career outcomes for ETB learners.
- Improved parity of esteem between FET and HE.
- More ETB FET and HE options available for all FET learners to progress to HE.
- Improved choice of pathways from Level 1 to Level 6 provision within and across ETBs.
- Improved funding model to enable ETBs meet Government social and economic priorities across Levels 1-6 NFQ.
- Enhanced levels of trust in the quality and reliability of FET provision arising from better coherence of ETB and HE quality assurance systems.
- Higher levels of innovation within ETBs arising from participation in HE research networks and on regional and local platforms of vocational excellence.

3.5 'What are the building blocks that are required for the development of a more integrated tertiary education system?'

From an ETB FET sector perspective, building blocks include;

TES Strategy + 2nd FET Strategy + ETB Strategic performance agreements

Strategic TES Planning Group including scheduling of innovative joint activities

TES Forum in place as the link between FET and HE

Comms strategy for TES

Integrated Career Guidance within FET

Existing pathways to HE expanded plus new '2+ 2' model types

Unified Transitions system include\s all ETB FET L5 and L6 provision

Strategic Staff development plans aligned with TES /FET Strategy

Enhanced funding model for FET

1. A Strategic Plan is a foundation stone for a stronger TES and should incorporate;
   o Clear definition of TES and its strategic aims.
   o Articulation of how we will know a more integrated TES has been achieved, including a roadmap to get there and milestones along the journey.
   o A description of the elements of TES including HE element(s) and ETB FET element(s): the position of publicly funded and private FET vis-à-vis tertiary education.
   o Investment plans for TES and the expected activity levels and performance criteria across this activity for the duration of the TES strategy.
   o An implementation plan to capture progress in achieving TES strategic aims.

2. FET Strategy 2020-2024 that;
   o Is aligned with TES strategic aims.
   o Enhances the mission of the ETB FET sector within a TES.
   o Increases capacities of the ETB FET sector to contribute effectively to a more integrated TES.

3. New ETB strategic performance agreements with SOLAS that are fully aligned to TES strategic aims and the new FET strategy.

4. A central TES Strategic Planning Sub-group within the TES Forum with senior ETB FET and HE representation to;
   o Advise TES Forum on optimum investment and activity plans.
   o Ensure plans pay due regard to relevant national priorities.
   o Ensure ETB and HE investment and activity plans are consistent with TES plans.
   o Ensure any TES related strategy or planning issues which are deemed significant risks are highlighted to the Forum, including mitigation of risk(s).

5. A TES Communications Strategy to;
   o Influence and support partners, to help persuade those who are not supportive and to influence and capture the attention of those who are not interested.
   o Provide consistent information to all FET and HE constituencies about TES strategic aims and the benefits to learners.
   o Foster a shared understanding of the concept and elements of TES.
   o Enable clarity of respective roles within the broader TES policy framework.

6. ETB FET strategic staff development plans to be in full alignment with the TES strategic aims and the mission of their organisations within TES.
   o The SOLAS FET Professional Development Strategy to be in alignment with TES strategic aims and the new FET Strategy.

7. Integrated Career Guidance Service within ETBs to better inform all FET learners of course and career options including joint ETB FET and HE options/pathways and jobs market.
    o In that regard the ETB FET sector notes that the Report of the Independent Review of Career Guidance Tools and Information recommends the integration of a consistent Learner Guidance and Support Service across FET.
        i. ETBs intends to contribute actively to the work of the National Policy Group to develop a coherent, long-term strategy for lifelong career guidance and to the work of the DES-led Implementation Task Force which will drive the proposed reforms.

8. More pathways from L1 to L6 available within and across the ETBs. More '2+2' models (or derivatives), in addition to an expansion in existing transition activities as well as joint activities in support areas agreed. Key enablers in this regard include;
    o A set of supporting changes to policies, accreditation, quality assurance, human resource management and career guidance to reflect and enable these pathways.

9. A new SOLAS funding model that further enables the inclusive mission of the ETB FET sector. Some considerations in that regard include;
    o Current SOLAS grant allocations to ETBs are calculated through full time equivalents but some smaller programmes i.e. literacy/numeracy etc., do not lend themselves to this criterion.
    o Standard costs are more difficult to comprehend based on learner numbers.
    o The funding required for areas such as equality, learner supports, adults at risk, health and safety, tends not to be adequately reflected in learner numbers.
    o The weightings applied across criteria need to be re-visited to achieve a fairer balance.
    o While there will be a set of shared metrics for all ETBs such as certification and placement, the different urban and rural profiles and other factors such as levels of poverty deprivation, are not easily factored into the weighting criteria.

10. A more inclusive unified transitions system that links each ETB course to at least one course at the next NFQ level above and is formally reflected by ETBs in their QQI approved QA procedures for 'Access, Transfer and Progression in Relation to Learners'.

ETB FET Pathways in a more integrated TES– what they might look like

Three examples of what a learner journey might look like in a stronger TES, including a more unified transitions framework (FET to FET and FET to HE), are now sketched out.

Example 1

Mary is an early school leaver and having met with the career guidance officer in the local ETB office she agrees a learning and career pathway. This involves going to her local Youthreach centre in Balbriggan where Mary achieves a QQI Level 3 General Learning Award including computer literacy and communication, and some months later, a Level 4 General Learning Major Award, including communications and computer applications. This Award in her field of learning means she is eligible to apply for a Level 5 Office Procedures Traineeship provided by a local ETB contracted trainer. This blended course is delivered via a combination of classroom, workshops on-line and workplace training. After nine months she achieves her L5 Major Award. This gives Mary three possible options for progression.

o   Firstly, to go directly into a job e.g. receptionist.
o   Secondly, to apply for a full time L6 course linked for progression purposes to her Award as part of an agreed ETB FET / HE pathway, for example Management course in the HEI network.
o   Thirdly, to register for Level 6 Sales apprenticeship administered by her local ETB where she can earn and learn and which would also make her eligible to apply for a Level 7/8 course in DCU.

Mary decides to take up the first option, starts working as a receptionist, and stays with her employer for one year but is made redundant. Mary registers for the L6 apprenticeship in Sales where she can earn and learn and after successfully completing her apprenticeship, she decides to transition in a Level 7 course in DCU.

Example 2

The second example is Tom who works in IT technical support in a small company. Tom has a master's degree in computer engineering and has always had an interest in training. He is hoping to become a trainer in IT. He has a discussion with a career guidance officer in his local ETB and agrees a learning path to achieve a QQI Advanced Certificate Level 6 Train the Trainer qualification on-line. While this is a qualification that is two levels below what he has, it is agreed that this is the right course of action. After two years he receives his L6 Advanced Certificate.

This gives Tom two progression options.

o   One, he can apply immediately for jobs as a qualified trainer.
o   Two, he is eligible to apply for a place on a course in HE that is linked for progression purposes to his L6 Award part of an agreed ETB FET / HE pathway, e.g. on-line Bachelor's degree in Education and Training. This course could also be a new co-developed course option jointly delivered by ETB FET SECTOR and HEI.

Tom decides to stay with the company and get some experience as a trainer while taking the on-line degree course on his own time at his own pace.
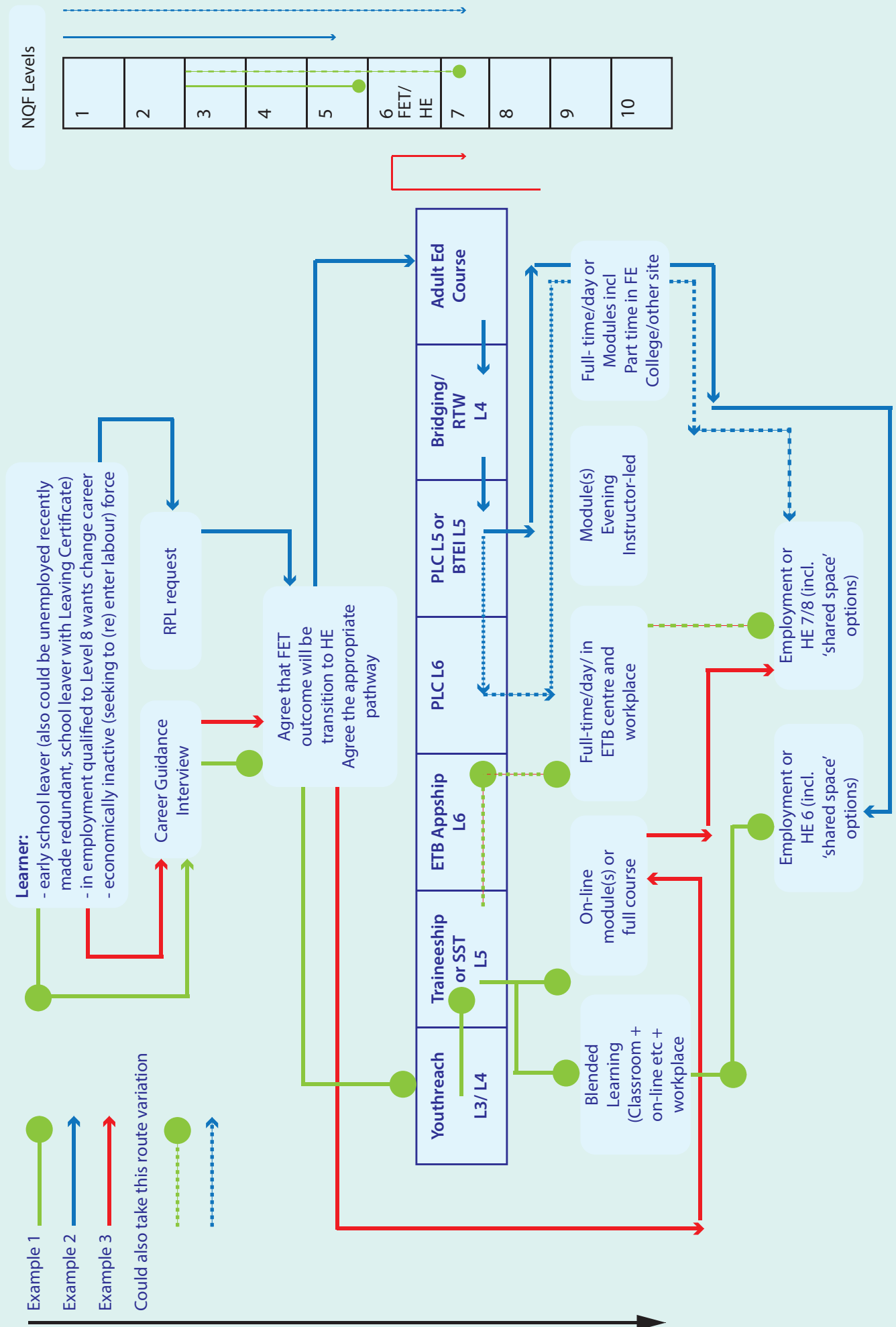
Example 3

Joan has decided to go back to education and wants to see how far she can progress after such a long time away from work and study, as she stayed at home to look after her family who have now grown up. Joan is not sure what she wants and is nervous that she will be overwhelmed with the new technology and what she may have to learn. Joan left school without her Junior Certificate and worked in a small office in Limerick for a few years before she got married.

Joan spoke with the adult guidance counsellor in the local office. Joan doesn't fancy any on-line courses preferring a teacher and classroom situation. She starts a sampler course in her local adult education centre, which includes literacy and numeracy classes, and after six month decides she would like to go back to work but would also like to keep her options open with regard to more study/education. Joan completes a return to work course at L4. This proves a good bridge to the world of work.

Joan decides she needs part time work since she now looks after her young grandchild two days a week and also realises that she will need to have a broader range of IT and communication skills. She starts a part time Business course QQI L5 (under BTEI) on a part time PLC course in her local FET campus. After successfully completing the course Joan now has three possible options as follows:

- o One, go directly into employment with her L5 Award.
- o Two, apply for a course in a HEI that is linked to her L5 award part of an agreed ETB FET/HE pathway.
- o Three, apply for a L6 PLC course that is a nominated progression option if she achieves a L5 Award in the local Institute of Further Education. On successful completion of her L6 PLC course, she can apply for an ordinary degree in the HEI network that is linked to her L6 Award as part of an agreed ETB FET/HE pathway. This course could also be a new co-developed course option jointly delivered by ETB FET SECTOR and HEI.

Figure 3.5.1 Examples of three alternative pathways in a more integrated tertiary system

NQF Levels

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 FET/ HE | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |

Legend:
- Example 1
- Example 2
- Example 3
- Could also take this route variation

Learner:
- early school leaver (also could be unemployed recently made redundant, school leaver with Leaving Certificate)
- in employment qualified to Level 8 wants change career
- economically inactive (seeking to (re) enter labour) force

Career Guidance Interview

RPL request

Agree that FET outcome will be transition to HE Agree the appropriate pathway

Youthreach L3/ L4

Traineeship or SST L5

ETB Appship L6

PLC L6

PLC L5 or BTEI L5

Bridging/ RTW L4

Adult Ed Course

Blended Learning (Classroom + on-line etc + workplace

On-line module(s) or full course

Full-time/day/ in ETB centre and workplace

Module(s) Evening Instructor-led

Full- time/day or Modules incl Part time in FE College/other site

Employment or HE 6 (incl. 'shared space' options)

Employment or HE 7/8 (incl. 'shared space' options)

3.6 'What are the priority actions for an integrated tertiary education system?'

The ETB FET sector believes that in the current circumstances many ETB learners would best be served, in the first instance by ensuring as much FET provision as possible is available and deliverable to them - including as much on-site learning as is feasible. Taking a pragmatic view, ETBs believe that in social distanced workplaces/learning sites, the following actions to progress the TES project are probably more feasible in the shorter term

TES Strategy

FET Strategy

TES Forum

ETB FET to HE Report

Comms Strategy

Developing joint ETB FET/HE activities

- Publish and disseminate a TES Strategy.
- Prioritise and implement key 'quick win' actions in FET Strategy 2020-2024 that underpin a more integrated TES.
- Agree Terms of Reference for the TES Forum in respect of tertiary education which will be fully supported in its work by ETBs.
- Examine the report /recommendations of the FE to HE subgroup of DES Transitions Reform Steering
- Group examining ways to improve transitions from FET to HE and identify immediate next steps.
- Publish and disseminate a Communications Strategy with regard to the new TES strategy.
- Update SOLAS FET Professional Development Strategy.
- Identify potential areas for new joint ETB FET/HE activity for consideration by the TES Forum including '2+2' co-delivery models or derivatives.

For convenience, actions outlined above and throughout this paper are collated in table format under three broad **indicative** timelines as follows;

Shorter-term Actions	Medium-term Actions	Longer-term actions
Continue to provide programmes and services remotely.	N/A	N/A
Re-open education and training facilities safely with as much on-site activity as possible.	N/A	N/A
A TES Strategic Planning Sub-group within the TES Forum with senior ETB FET and HE representation.	Provide inputs to TES planning and investment cycles	N/A
Prioritise and implement key 'quick win' actions in FET Strategy 2020-2024 that underpin a more integrated TES.	Progress medium commitments	Progress longer term commitments
Start developing new strategic agreements with SOLAS.	Commence implementation.	N/A
Increase capacity including SOLAS-led initiative for jobseekers.		
Identify potential joint activities (courses) using new '2+2' model or a derivative of the model.	Examine how HELS can be expanded to incorporate non-PLC Level 5 and Level 6 provision	Agree a unified transitions framework encompassing all relevant ETB provision.
Identify potential joint activities re existing ETB FET to HE transitions arrangements and support areas such as QA.	Examine how existing transitions arrangements can be expanded. Agree joint support activities and commence implementation.	Expand pathways within and across ETBs. More '2+2' pathways (or derivatives) available. Increase scale of joint activities across support services
Agree a schedule of joint activities through the Tertiary forum.	Develop implementation plan for each joint activity, commence implementation and report on progress each quarter.	Evaluate effectiveness of joint activities. Agree new joint activities.
Contribute to development of Tertiary Education Strategy.	Start implementing appropriate ETB commitments in TES Strategy.	Implement commitments and contribute to review of progress in implementing TES Strategy.
Examine the report / recommendations of the FE to HE subgroup of DES Transitions Reform Steering Group and identify next steps.	Work schedule agreed and commenced in respect of next steps.	Review of progress achieved to-date.
Start work on Comms strategy for tertiary education.	Publish and disseminate Comms Strategy.	Review impact of Comms Strategy.
Contribute to National Career Guidance Policy Group and DES-led Implementation Task Force.	Ensure ETB commitments are implemented.	Ensure an integrated FET Career Guidance Service is in operation.
A new funding model for FET agreed.	New SOLAS funding model for FET implemented.	New SOLAS funding model for FET evaluated.
Start updating SOLAS FET Professional Development Strategy, to take account of development needs of new joint activities etc. identified by TES Forum.	Ensure ETB FET SECTOR strategic staff development plans are in alignment with TES strategy, FET Strategy and ETB /SOLAS performance agreements (incl. updated SOLAS FET Professional Development Strategy).	

3.7 'Are there international models for tertiary education that we can learn from?'

Example 1

The mission, role and provision of community colleges in the US together with their prominent position in the US tertiary education system may prove instructive for the development of a more integrated TES.

The first junior or 'two-year' college as they were called, was founded in 1901. They were originally designed to prepare high school (second level) graduates in America for sub-baccalaureate or 'semi-professional' occupations (hence the two years duration). They multiplied in number after the Second World War to meet the huge demand for workers in an expanding economy. They were tasked with being 'highly serviceable' to local civil and economic needs, including the labour market.

They continue to have an important role in providing a wide range of community-based education and in 'intermediate-level' skills training for school leavers, workers and unemployed persons. They have also evolved into an increasingly prominent player in providing access to university education via their associate degree programmes.

Community colleges are two-year post second level tertiary institutions (1,000+). They share many similarities with the core mission of ETB FET provision. Access, responsiveness to community need and equity are also central to their mission.

They offer four main broad types of provision;

- Credit-based transfer education that provides a high-quality and affordable start for one's higher education career.
- Credit-based career education that leads to certificates and degrees relevant to the workforce needs of states and local communities.
- Developmental education for those needing to sharpen skills in Maths and English, especially prior to engaging in post second-level work.
- Non-credit education through which individuals can complete courses on everything from arts and crafts to advanced manufacturing.

They too have an open-door policy for learners (12m+) providing a range of low to high levels of technical skills, including skills for employees in a broad range of fields of learning similar to ETBs. They offer other forms of learning for a diverse profile of learners including adult education, community-based education, literacy and classes to improve Maths and English. They enjoy close links to secondary/high schools, community groups and employers in the local community.

Moreover, they also specialise in biomedical technology, biotechnology, robotics, laser optics, internet and computer technologies, and geographic information systems.

Community colleges educate approximately 40 percent of all undergraduates in the United States. In this regard these learners often include low-income, minority, first-generation college students, or those who are not qualified for a degree. A student can go to a community college and not have to pay fees for the first two years of their degree and then be able to transfer to university.

Community colleges two-year programmes (Associate Degrees) lead to the Associate of Arts (AA) or Associate of Science (AS) degree. Undergraduate students studying at community colleges can earn academic credit towards a bachelor's degree. Community colleges and 4-year colleges and universities often develop special agreements for the transfer of credits and degrees between the institutions.

> **This is known as the '2+2' model**
>
> **(This model has been discussed in an earlier section of this paper – see Cork Case Study)**
>
> **In this '2+2' process you can earn a bachelor's degree with two years of community college, followed by two years of university study.**

The liberal/general studies and humanities associate degrees, account for a larger share of associate degrees and are intended mainly as a foundation for further study toward bachelor's degrees in a state university.

In certain states achievement of an associate degree guarantees a place in a state university. Under the old system, receiving institutions differed in the number and types of community-college credits they accepted and the courses they required for certain majors. Students who successfully transferred to college often ended up retaking classes. This too is a feature of PLC provision experienced by some students who progress to HE (which was also discussed in an earlier section).

> **Second level students take Community College 'dual enrolment' programmes which are jointly run with the schools where colleges share the expertise of their faculty and support staff with the schools.**
>
> **This is sometimes referred to as the '1 + 2 + 2' process.**

Example 2

Scottish further education colleges (known as Scotland's Colleges) provide a significant level of higher education provision that is relatively large, (more than in England) yet distinct and independent of Scottish universities. The Scottish Funding Council invests around £1.8 billion a year in Scotland's 19 universities and 26 Colleges. Scotland's further education colleges are part of the tertiary education system. They offer courses, academic and vocational, to develop skills and knowledge for work, continued study or general interest.

Courses are full-time, day release, evening, block release or open learning. Courses are available at a range of levels including:

o   National Certificate modules or clusters of modules
o   General Scottish Vocational Qualifications
o   National Qualifications including project-based national courses and cluster units
o   Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Higher National Diploma (HND)
o   Degrees.

The City of Glasgow is Scotland's First Super College and caters for 40,000 students. Its provision spans four groups of programmes within Levels 3-10 on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Levels 1-12. The four levels are roughly equivalent to Irish NFQ Levels 2, 3, 4; Level 5; Level 6; Level 7/8 (degree).

The policy framework encourages collaboration both between higher education institutions (HEIs), and between the HEIs and Scotland's Colleges. The merging of two separate funding bodies into one Scottish Funding Council for Further and Higher Education (SFC) in 2005 is regarded as significant in that regard.

An important objective of Scottish policy, particularly since devolution, has been to encourage greater collaboration between the Colleges and the HEIs in providing opportunities for students to progress from one sector to the other, and more generally, to create a cohesive system of tertiary education. Funding criteria help to promote deeper collaboration between FE and HE institutions.

3.8 'Can you suggest additional or alternative actions?'

It is seven years since the establishment of ETBs as part of the Government's reform of FET. The scale of the transformation was enormous, and the process involved highly ambitious, and is still on-going. It encompassed the fundamental restructuring of 39 organisations (33 VECs, four qualifications bodies, FÁS and DSP) into 19 new bodies (16 ETBs, SOLAS, Intreo/DEASP and QQI). It required three new pieces of primary legislation. Almost 9,000 staff were employed by the organisations involved.

It included a first-ever integrated FET Strategy and an associated detailed implementation plan. Enormous efforts were expended in getting the new organisations up and running with minimal disruption to the existing programmes and services. The first cycle of new strategic performance agreements was introduced in 2018 between each of the 16 ETBs and SOLAS and this is nearing completion. A new FET Strategy 2020-2024 has been launched.

At operational level, a key challenge for ETBs has been to successfully merge two different legacy cultures. While there has been much progress to-date, it will take time for the full benefits of this integration to materialise. Again, time is also needed for the full benefits of ETB system collaboration with SOLAS to be fully realised (for example the FET learner database).

The changed social and economic circumstances confronting the country are, if anything, more profound than the financial crash which acted as an impetus for the recent FET reform programme[28].

A return to full on-site delivery is not feasible in the short to medium term (albeit the aim of ETBs is to do just that as soon as feasible). Different programmes will need different solutions and different ratios of on-line to on-site learning. Practical hands-on skills development in such circumstances will prove challenging but will need to take place.

While ETBs are broadly in favour of a more integrated TES, the question needs to be asked as to whether or not we should concentrate all efforts first and foremost on making sure existing and new courses and services are available and remain so to as many learners as possible, with as much safe on-site learning as possible.

> **Given the impact of the public health emergency, FET related commitments in the new programme for government, the new SOLAS initiative for jobseekers, and the need to keep existing ETB FET accessible against a background where full on-site education/instruction will not be possible for the foreseeable future, the timing of joint activity planning and implementation will be crucial to their success.**

3.9   Other comments?

On-line - a 'silver bullet'?

Many myths have taken hold regarding the economics of distance or remote education, including on-line learning. Many decision-makers can be lulled into believing that on-line by its very nature has to be less costly than traditional classroom-based courses. The view that one programme can be taught to an infinite number of learners with no teacher, seems just too compelling an argument.

Today 'remote' learning usually comprises web-based learning, virtual classrooms and digital collaboration. It is typically delivered via the internet and a content or learning management system (CMS/LMS).

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[28] DES An Action Plan for SOLAS (An tSeirbhísí Oideachais Leanúnaigh Agus Scileanna), The new Further Education and Training (FET) Authority.

However, it is important to keep in mind that historically the mission of distance education has not been to reduce costs, but to increase access both geographic and time-based, even if it means higher costs than traditional methods. It is important and timely to consider the suitability of e-learning given that full traditional on-site teaching/instruction is unlikely to return to ETB FET sector for the foreseeable future.

E-Learning is bound to feature more prominently in future course delivery as on-line learning gives greater access. It is often the 'go to' preferred learning and teaching option because it also appears to be more cost effective. However, online programmes can turn out more costly than first anticipated. Often resources and activities that were not part of face-to-face teaching have to be introduced, including (but not limited to);

o   Software.
o   Communications technologies.
o   Staff development in how to teach remotely.
o   Staff support in converting classes from lecture to the remote format.
o   Course updating and/or redesign at regular intervals to keep pace with content and technology developments.
o   Instructional designers to reformat existing courses.
o   Support technicians, 24x7 (or as close as they can get) to provide technical support for students, and online academic/student services (including registration, advice, counselling, online bookstores, online libraries, online tutoring), that need to be made available to students that do not come to classrooms/campus.
o   Regulatory compliance relating to personal data.

> **Furthermore, despite all the benefits often cited (and there are many), online courses continue to display serious attrition rates (up to 80%) particularly on programmes that are fully on-line.**

Therefore, it makes sense to first consider education and training as a human activity for which direct human contact is essential, particularly for students (including many ETB learners) who, because of their socioeconomic background or the type of skills and competencies being developed, need that direct human intervention.

The reality is that there is a significant challenge reported by ETBs during the pandemic to ensure that all learners have the equipment needed to learn online, as well as the stable internet connection necessary to access that content remotely. Many do not have a computer or access to the use of a computer. The provision of funding to FET to purchase devices for learning is welcome. However, many FET learners have intermittent or no broadband, or the cap on their mobile package is limited or their personal circumstances at home make learning very much 'a hit and miss' affair. In short, the poorest families/individuals are inevitably the least likely to have access to the devices and connections needed.

These situations are not only confined to ETB FET learners. Teachers and other support staff report personal difficulties affecting their ability to work remotely. Clearer still is that current IT platforms and TEL strategy implementation require added impetus to be able to fully leverage stable content and learner management platforms from both learner and teacher perspectives.

In addition, large numbers of teachers/instructors who quickly switch to online teaching have insufficient understanding of the way online learners learn. Many are not up to sufficient speed on how to maximise use of the technology, which is constantly being updated. A key reason for the high attrition rates is ineffective course design often based on assumptions about the online learner. These assumptions may or may not be true e.g. that learners will inevitably be familiar and competent with mobile and/or social media technology.

On-line learning may also be confounded with emergency remote learning. The latter involves the use of remote teaching solutions that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face and which should return to that format once the crisis has abated. The objective is to provide temporary access to teaching and supports.

In the enthusiasm to develop joint ETB FET and HE activities and with on-line learning coming to dominate emergency remote learning, it is important in living with the virus to resist the temptation to rely on on-line learning to the exclusion of other formats. Courses expertly designed for classrooms, skill development and collaborative work, do not readily adapt to remote learning because the group interaction element is lost.

It is also certainly the case that occupational skills development - where learners are enabled to learn by doing, such as: hairdressing, healthcare assistant, electricians - do not lend themselves to immersive on-line learning. While some academic inputs can make effective use of on-line learning, the competencies these learners must experience at first hand in the contexts in which their learning will be applied, cannot be developed on-line. There is also an important social and cultural element integral to this learning process in embedding accepted practices, customs and values associated with many types of occupations, such as hairdressing. Hence the importance of transferring and applying the theoretical learning and practice from the classroom/workshop into the workplace.

> **Substituting on-line formats for elements of the learning requiring practical application of skills can result in distorted competencies, resulting in low productivity and the possibility of serious health and safety consequences for learners, employers and customers.**

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Strategic groups within the ETB FET sector are addressing the challenges associated with COVID-19 and examining arrangements to ensure safe working and learning environments within ETBs as they re-open and strive to remain open. Emergency remote learning has been introduced but the ultimate aim is to return to full on-site learning as soon as is feasible. In parallel, work continues to implement the agreed strategic aims of the FET sector and ETB commitments set out in strategic performance agreements with SOLAS.

The labour market is again very challenging at a time when there are a number of significant developments taking place in higher and further education. In addition, the new programme for government maps out a schedule of FET-related initiatives and changes for the next five years, including a number relating to joint activities with HE. Longer term trends such as globalisation, automation, digitalisation and changing demographics continue to significantly impact the ETB FET sector. ETBs have, with stable funding over recent times, continued to serve a very diverse base of learners and constituencies.

While there is clarity from DES on the purpose of tertiary education and its providers, there is no definition of tertiary education. The ETB FET sectors understanding of the concept of tertiary education remains incomplete. At the heart of the DES proposal is a rebalancing of education and training outputs from ETBs and HE, on the basis that not all of the expected increase in demand for HE can or should be met solely by academic education. The ETB FET sector sees this as a broadly positive development for ETB FET and its many learners.

On a positive note, ETBs are likely to be seen as (co-)providers of tertiary courses rather than simply suppliers of qualified applicants for HEIs. However, there are some important caveats. Not least is the strong attachment of Irish society to HE, raising questions about the feasibility of the proposal to divert demand for HE to FET and how it will work. The system has to be realistic about the type of ETB FET provision that will be deemed sufficiently attractive and valuable from prospective learners' point of view to smooth out the upward trend in the demand curve for HE.

The ETB FET sector will need to accommodate demand for this type of provision against a backdrop of existing and evolving operational pressures. These include remote learning, re-opening ETB FET sites, increasing overall capacity levels including the new SOLAS led initiative for jobseekers and providing more apprentice places. The choice of what is right to do by learners and by staff in these circumstances will have to made.

The ETB FET sector is encouraged that the PLC programme and a new funding model for FET may provide early enablers to replace some demand for HE with suitable FET provision. ETBs are committed to greater collaboration with HE in developing and delivering joint activities.

There are well regarded transition arrangements from FET to HE already in place. These are working well but only up to a point. In short, there is a requirement for a unified rather than a uniform system of transitions, covering all ETB FET L5 and L6 award holders, retaining what is already there and building on it. New joint

activities will need to be initiated including co-development and co-delivery by FET and HE of the one programme (the '2+2' model) or derivatives.

The **ETB FET sector Vision for Tertiary Education** comprehends a lifelong and lifewide continuum with equal access to and progression along the contiuum for ETB learners. There is more work to do within ETBs to make this vision a reality. This work is intimately bound up in a successful TES.

It includes increasing transition options to HE that encompasses all Level 5 and Level 6; providing pathways from Levels 1-6 that are more transparent for learners and are in full compliance with QQI criteria on access transfer and progression; innovating more 'in-demand' programmes to meet the skills needs of employers and the career aspirations of jobseekers and job changers.

ETBs are fully committed to improving cooperation and collaboration with HE to realise this ambition. The sector welcomes the strong emphasis on co-ownership and co-creation as guiding principles in the development of TES and retaining the distinctiveness of FET and HE institutions and systems within it. The case for retaining a re-purposed TES COVID-19 Structure with ETB FET representation to guide and direct the TES project is sensible.

The TES Strategy should ultimately aim to work towards a more inclusive and unified FET/HE transitions system. ETBs see joint activity opportunities in three broad areas

- o Identifying existing and new courses for co-development and co-delivery focussing on the '2+2' model or a derivative.
- o Considering how HELS can be expanded to other appropriate (non-PLC) level 5 and level 6 provision including traditional and post 2016 apprenticeship.
- o Identifying joint activities in programme support areas such as quality assurance, curriculum, and data analytics.

The challenges to integration include the lack of parity of esteem between FET and HE and two Level 6 Awards on the NFQ, one for FET and one for HE which clearly go against the grain of a more integrated tertiary sector. International classifications of tertiary education may also provide challenges in reporting on a tertiary education system that includes Levels 1-6 NFQ. Other challenges include competition for the same learners by FET and HE institutions in the same region while a number of ETB operational issues also need to be addressed.

Positive impacts arising from greater integration of FET and HE, for learners, for the taxpayer and for FET are outlined as were key building blocks for a successful TES. This includes the TES Strategic Plan, TES Communications Strategy, the new FET Strategy 2020-2024, a unified transitions system, a central TES Strategic Planning Sub-group and new SOLAS funding model.

Examples of what learner pathways might look like within and across ETBs and from FET to HE within a more integrated TES are outlined.
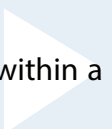
Priority actions for an integrated tertiary system are also identified including an examination of the report /recommendations of the FE to HE subgroup of DES Transitions Reform Steering Group and identifying the immediate next steps. Many actions are proposed in the ETB FET sector paper and these are tabularised for convenience under three broad indicative timelines.

Two international models of tertiary education are suggested for further consideration, USA and Scotland. Each has a configuration of an integrated tertiary system from which we might learn important lessons as we strive for a successful TES project.

In responding to the final two questions, ETBs point out that the timing of when joint activities are initiated and implemented will be crucial to their eventual success.

There is also a reminder that on-line learning is not a 'silver bullet'. Yes, it does have its advantages such as geographic and time access. But it also some serious downsides, not least the high attrition rates when compared to face to face learning plus 'hidden' additional costs often incurred to install a range of supports to facilitate stable remote teaching and learning. The lack of equipment and access to on-line learning by the poorest sections of society including some ETB FET learners remains a major concern.

ETBs are confident that its '**Vision for Tertiary Education**' can become a reality improving life and career opportunities for ETB learners. Innovative joint activity with HE with student-centred approaches will undoubtedly be pivotal in that regard.

Finally, ETBs look forward to working with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Higher Education partners, SOLAS and all other partners to make TES a success for learners, communities and businesses.

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