



Further Education and Training Colleges Ireland

The Voice of FET College Leaders | A Committee of NAPD



Vision for the FET College in the Tertiary Education Sector

A Discussion Document

April 2021

Table of Contents

Glossary of Terms	4
Introduction	6
Executive Summary	7
Structure of this Discussion Document	8
SECTION 1 – FET College Ireland’s Overall Approach	9
The Tyranny of Language	9
Evolving Policy Landscape	9
SECTION 2 – FET Colleges Ireland Proposals	12
The FET College of the Future	13
FET College of the Future – the FETCI Vision	14
SECTION 3 – Strategic Priority: Building Skills	16
Skills Policy in Ireland	16
A Competence Approach to FET Programmes and Skills Development	17
A New Level 5 and Level 6 Proposition	19
SECTION 4 – Strategic Priority: Fostering Inclusion	22
A “world-class integrated system of further education and training in Ireland” as a public good	22
Universal Design approach to the development of the new FET sector	22
Unified Student Supports Structure	23
SECTION 5 – Strategic Priority: Creating Pathways	24
Learner Pathways: Access to, Progression through, and Graduation from FET	25
Learner Pathways – From FET to HE	26
Towards an Integrated Tertiary Education Sector – a Process of Convergence	29
SECTION 6 – Enabling Themes	31
Staffing, Capabilities and Structures	31
- ETB/Regional FET Ecosystem	31
- FET College of the Future	33
- Future Staffing Framework	37
- Professional Development	38
Learner and Performance Centred	38
- Strategic Performance Agreements	38
- Mechanisms for Learner Feedback and Engagement	39
Digital Transformation of FET	39
Capital Infrastructure	40
Appendix 1	42
References	44

Glossary of Terms

TERM	MEANING
ACCS	Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools
ALND	Adult Literacy Numeracy and Digital Literacy
BTEI	Back to Education Initiative
CAO	Central Applications Office
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DBEI	Department of Business Enterprise and Innovation
DEASP	Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DETE	Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science
EGFSN	Expert Group on Future Skills Needs
EMU	European Monetary Union
ESRI	Economic Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
EU	European Union
FÁS	Foras Áiseanna Saothair, Training and Employment Authority
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FET	Further Education and Training
FETCI	Further Education and Training Colleges Ireland
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institute

HELs	Higher Education Links Scheme
INTREO	The Public Employment Service
JMB	Joint Managerial Board
LC	Leaving Certificate
MLE	Managed Learning Environment
NAPD	National Associations of Principals and Deputy Principals
NESC	National Economic and Social Council
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PD	Professional Development
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SEC	State Examinations Commission
SLMRU	Skills and Labour Market Research Unit
SOLAS	An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (Further Education and Skills Service)
TEL	Technology Enhanced Learning
UD	Universal Design
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UK	United Kingdom
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VTOS	Vocational Education Opportunities Scheme

Introduction

The National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) is the professional association for all Principals and Deputy Principals in Post Primary Schools, Further Education and Training (FET) Schools and Colleges in Ireland. Further Education and Training Colleges Ireland (formerly the NAPD FET Committee) is a Committee of NAPD, representing Principals and Deputy Principals from over 100 FET Schools and Colleges in Ireland under the auspices of the three managerial bodies, ETBI, JMB, and ACCS. Established in 2000, this committee has represented NAPD on many State Boards, national working groups, and committees involved in FET. In addition, a nominee of this committee is a member of the NAPD National Executive, and works with the NAPD Executive in addressing FET issues as they affect Principals and Deputy Principals in their role in leading and managing their Schools and Colleges.

The members of the Committee are from around the country and represent the collective experiences and knowledge of Principals and Deputy Principals who are involved in delivering many different FET programmes such as:

- PLC Programme
- Apprenticeships (Pre- and Post-2016)
- Traineeships
- SkillsETB
- Momentum
- BTEI
- VTOS
- Adult Education – part-time night provision
- Skills to Advance
- Skills to Compete

The full list of members of the FET Colleges Ireland (FETCI Committee) is in Appendix 1.

Executive Summary

The National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals proposals contained in our Discussion Document are based on the FETCI vision for the FET College of the Future. In our view, within a single unified system of FET provision, the FET College of the Future, will consist of the following:

(The following could be a blend of central ETB services and College-based services, depending on the particular requirements within each ETB region):

Building Skills

- A new FET College of the Future, separate from post-primary sector, which will consolidate all level 5 and level 6 provision;
- An integrated funding model for all FET provision;
- Provide FET courses 12 months of the year, day, evening and weekend, on site, online, in the workplace, and in the community;
- Teaching support, and employer engagement staff to support the teachers in the development and delivery of programmes;
- Data Analysis – Using data from PLSS and QQI to inform resource requirement and programme design
- Employer Engagement service to liaise with employers about skills needs within the workplace.

Inclusion

- Admissions Office and access teams to support the learning within FET Colleges;
- ICT services for staff and students, educational technology support for staff and students;
- Provide integrated system of educational supports for all students on all courses, including support for learning needs, literacy and numeracy, counselling;

- Integrate adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy (ALND) into all aspects of the curriculum.

Pathways

- A 2+2/2+1 model of tertiary education in which the first two years of post-secondary provision could take place in the FET College with progression to year three in a University or Institute of Technology;
- A single unified system for all applications for higher education from both the State Exams and the QQI routes;
- Careers Advisors;
- A properly resourced employer engagement service to support in-course placements and employment opportunities;
- Collaborate with all other FET services, such as Adult and Community Education, and Youthreach, to ensure that the FET College is a key part of seamless learning pathways, and that the transitions are smooth and supportive.

College Management and Administration

- A modern and appropriate middle-management structure;
- A modern and appropriate administrative structure and systems, including specialist educational administrators;
- A modern and appropriate Managed Learning Environment (MLE) that will support the learner journey. This would integrate student admissions, students accounts for IT and web-based services, results and certification. It would also support the corporate governance of the College;
- A modern and appropriate estates and facilities management structure.

Structure of this Discussion Document

The structure of this Discussion Document consists of two main sections. The first section is introductory and outlines FET Colleges Ireland's overall approach to developing the proposals for implementing the goals and objectives stated in the FET Strategy. The second part of this document will outline the specifics of the proposals.

SECTION 1

FET College Ireland's Overall Approach

Since FET College's Ireland was established in 2000 as a Committee of NAPD, the members have engaged in numerous initiatives and discussions on the development of a FET College Sector in Ireland. Members of the Committee have participated in the review that produced the McIvor Report (DES, 2003), various FETAC and QQI innovations, the research (McGuinness et al., 2014) which accompanied the first FET Strategy (SOLAS 2014), and the most recent evaluation of the Post-Leaving Certificate Programme (McGuinness et al., 2018). Throughout its 21 years, the FET Colleges Ireland Committee has approached all strategic and policy development debates in a spirit of collaboration, openness, transparency and engagement. In keeping with the solution-focus, problem-solving ethos of NAPD, FETCI presents the proposals in this Discussion Document as our contribution to this national debate.

As stated in the FET Strategy 2020-2024 (SOLAS, 2020), FET is available

“...in every community in Ireland, and offers every individual, regardless of any previous level of education, a pathway to take them as far as they want to go. It can offer personal development and fulfilment, a link to community and social networks, and a range of supports that reflect the diverse base of its learners” (p. 8).

Consequently, FET provision in one part of the country will be different to another. The unified FET system that emerges from this process will need to be such as to accommodate the richness of this diversity of provision. As the voice of leaders in FET Schools and Colleges, the proposals contained in this document are from the perspective of the Schools and Colleges within an overall FET system.

FET College Ireland contributes these proposals to the national debate and welcomes all constructive engagement on their merits.

The Tyranny of Language

The diversity of FET in Ireland is one of its many strengths, but can also be a weakness. The education and training system is very adept at developing jargon and acronyms. The FET Sector is particularly so. In many ways, this is a product of our combined history. Is it education or training? Student, trainee, or learner? Adult education, community education, formal and informal sectors? Beneficiaries or learners? Further or higher education? Academic or vocational? It is a bewildering array for many of us working in the FET system. What must it be like for our learners, employers and other stakeholders? Many of these terms are a product of the multiple funding streams that have emerged over time. PLC, VTOS, BTEI, Adult Education, Adult Literacy, Apprenticeship, Traineeship – the list appears endless.

As we all working together to bring uniformity and consolidation to a heavily fragmented and siloed FET system, the persistence of this variety of terms is not helping to achieve this shared goal. This tyranny of language is increasingly becoming an obstacle to our collaborative efforts.

As we move collaboratively towards our shared goal of implementing a new single system of FET provision for all learners, at all levels, perhaps we should also be open to developing a new shared language in line with our new system.

Evolving Policy Landscape

Since 2010, Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland has undergone enormous change. From 2010 to 2014, the focus was on putting the building blocks in place for the development of a new sector of the Irish education system. Having assumed policy responsibility for training, a single Skills Division was created for the first time in the renamed Department of Education and Skills (DES). The amalgamation

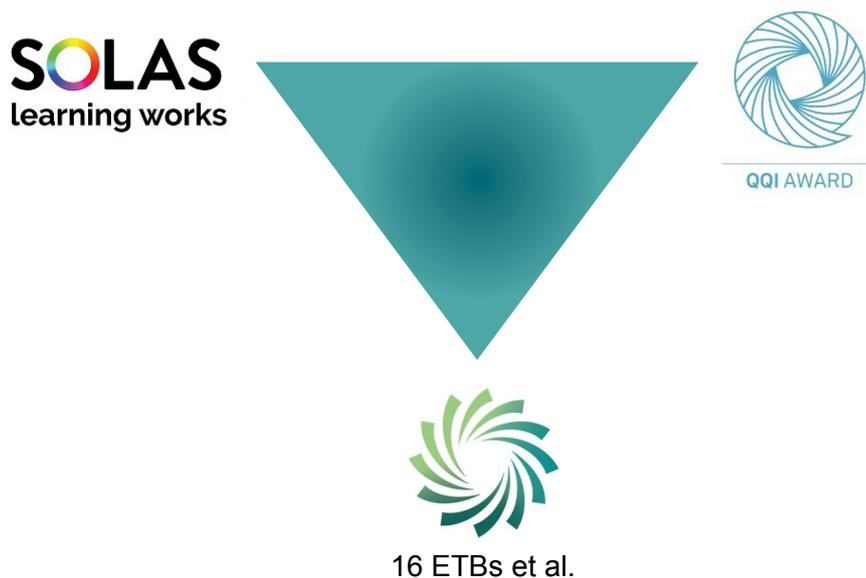
of the VECs, and the disbandment of FÁS, resulted in the establishment of the Education and Training Boards (ETB) in 2013. A new national agency to coordinate policy and funding for the FET Sector, SOLAS, was also established.

The employment services function of FÁS was transferred to the Department of Social Protection from which the INTREO service emerged. A single national agency for qualifications and quality assurance, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was established in 2012. By the end of October 2013, when SOLAS opened its doors, the institutional

triangle of FET - SOLAS, the ETBs, and QQI - was in place (Figure 1).

In May 2014, the first ever national FET Strategy was launched which presented “a roadmap and implementation plan to realise the vision of a world-class integrated system of further education and training in Ireland” (SOLAS, 2014, p.3). The five years of the first FET Strategy could be characterised as setting the strategic direction and structure for the FET sector in Ireland, and building upon the institutional triangle of FET – SOLAS, QQI, and the ETBs.

Figure 1.1: The FET Triangle



It is important to note that the first strategy was developed during the last months of the ‘Troika Years’, during a period of economic recession and high unemployment. As we approached the end of this strategy, the economic circumstances were very different with the country experiencing economic expansion and an unemployment rate for May 2019 (seasonally adjusted) of 4.4% (www.cso.ie). Consequently, while the first strategy was developed during economic recession and high unemployment, the second strategy will be responding to completely different circumstances. However, the global

pandemic in 2020 has changed the social and economic circumstances for all countries.

FET Colleges Ireland is of the view that, while the first strategy set the strategic direction and structure for the FET sector in Ireland, a significant capacity deficit still exists in the FET provision infrastructure as a result of a legacy of persistent underfunding by successive governments (O’Sullivan, 2018a). Indeed, the success of macro-policy is significantly dependent on local capacity to deliver. Therefore, while the national context can vary from one strategic plan to the next, this Discussion Document will present the

FET Colleges Ireland vision for the development of the FET Sector in Ireland which will be capable of responding to the needs of the Irish economy and wider society, regardless of the prevailing economic circumstances.

The second FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2020) states:

“This strategy sets out to do this by simplifying the FET structure, improving access to it, supporting its learners consistently, and building its provision around a distinct, diverse and vibrant community-based FET college of the future” (p.16).

It further elaborates, “It then sets out a vision for FET’s development over the next five years, based around three pillars of skills, pathways and inclusion” (p.17).

Section 2 presents the FETCI proposals for implementing the strategic objects set out in the FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2020). This section begins with an overview of the key pillars, strategic objectives and enabling themes stated in the document. This is followed by an outline of the key elements contained in the FETCI Vision for the FET College of the Future as part of a unified FET system of provision. The place of FET within an integrated tertiary education sector is also discussed.

These proposals are based on the collective experience and wisdom of the members of FET Colleges Ireland. The Leaders of FET Schools and Colleges have developed considerable expertise and experience in the implementation of FET policies for more than 30 years. While this experience does not include every aspect of the diverse FET landscape, it is extensive in terms of its breadth and its depth.

SECTION 2

FET Colleges Ireland Proposals

The FET Strategy 2020-2024 sets out a roadmap for the development of FET over the five years of the strategy, based on three pillars, and three associated

strategic priorities (Figure 2.1). It also identifies four enabling themes (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.1: Three Pillars and Associated Strategic Priorities (Source: SOLAS, 2020, p.37)

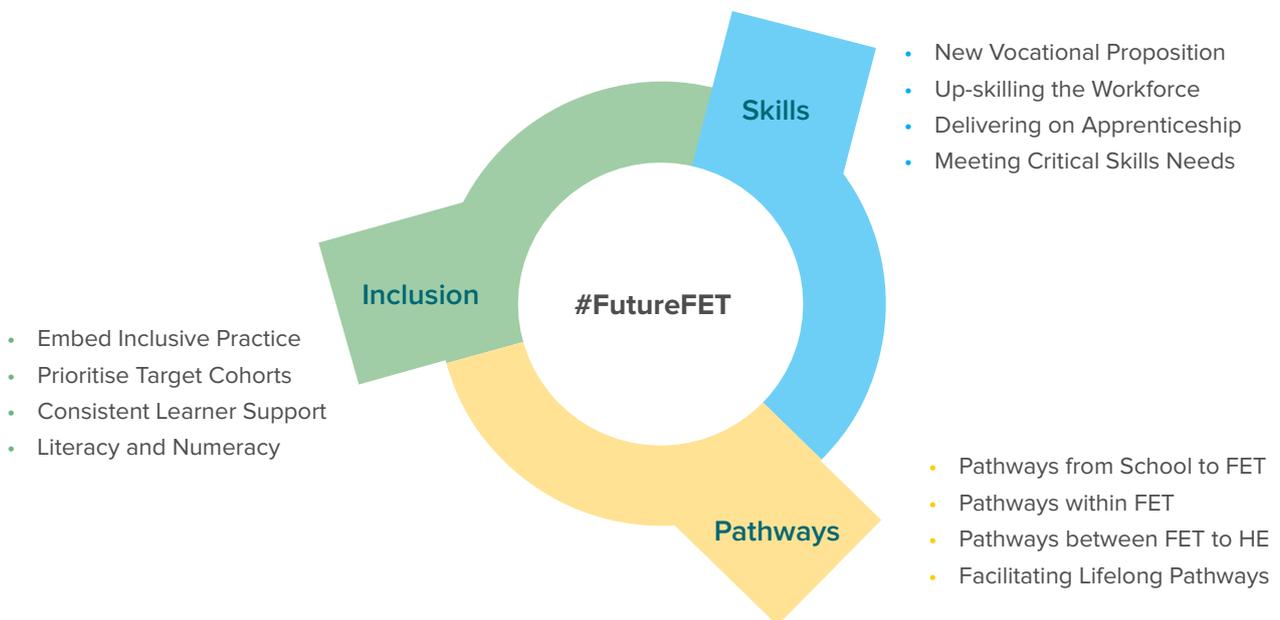


Figure 2.2: Four Enabling Themes (Source: SOLAS, 2020, p. 37)



The FET College of the Future

The Strategy states:

“Key to successful development in relation to skills, pathways, and inclusion will be the evolution of FET facilities and provision into a distinct integrated college of FET that can serve as a beacon of community-based learning excellence” (p.38).

Figure 2.3: Characteristics of the FET College of the Future (Source: SOLAS, 2020, p.38).



FET College of the Future – the FETCI Vision

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Pathways

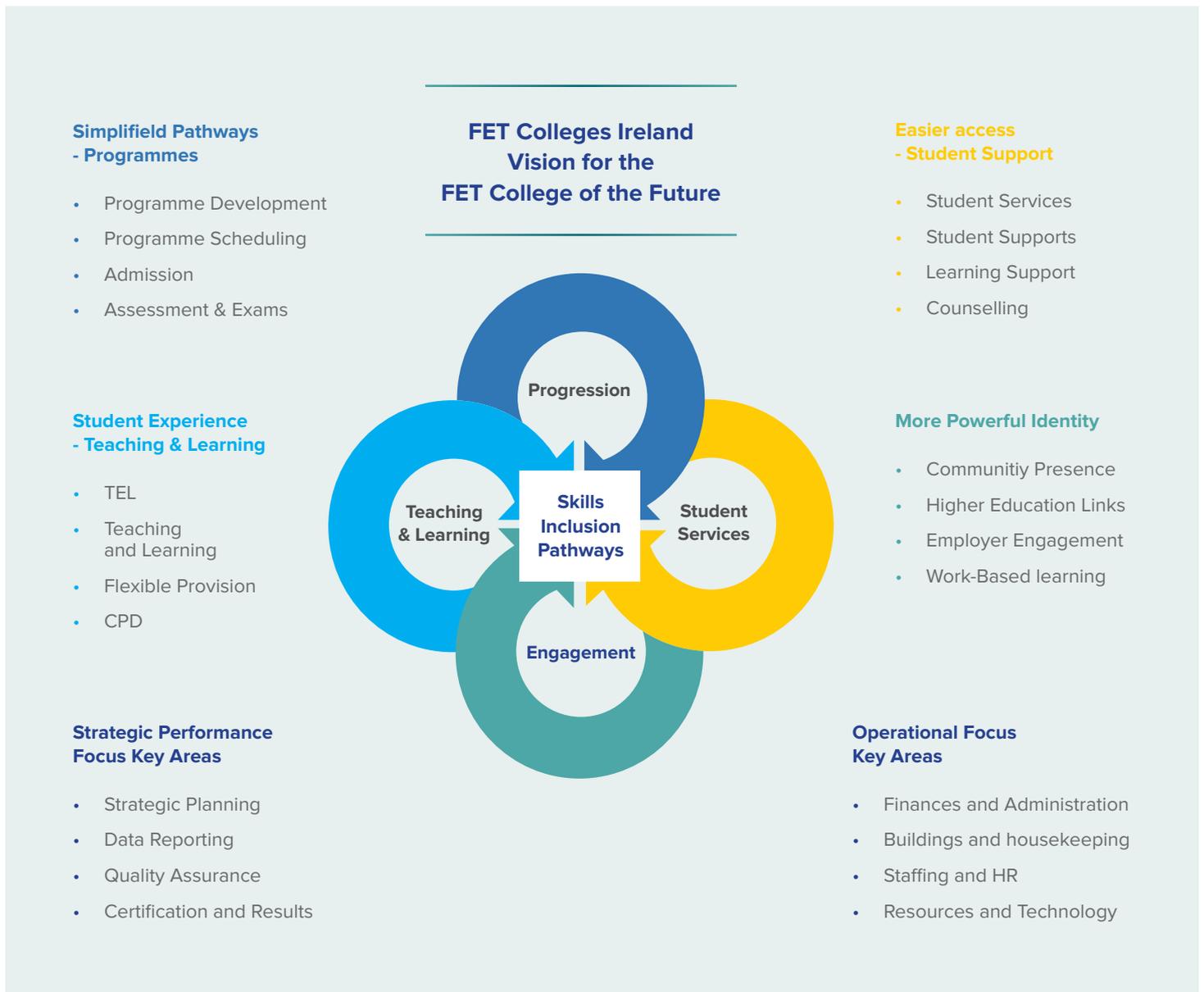
- A 2+2/2+1 model of tertiary education in which the first two years of post-secondary provision could take place in the FET College with progression to year three in a University or Institute of Technology;
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The proposals outlined below are to resource this FET College (Figure 2.4).

Figure 2.4: FET Colleges Ireland Vision of the FET College of the Future



SECTION 3

Strategic Priority: Building Skills

Skills Policy in Ireland

Since the beginning of industrialisation, ensuring the availability of sufficiently skilled workers has been a matter of concern in all political economies. Indeed, technological change associated with industrial development has driven the evolution of skills policy across all economies of the world. The skill formation system, and the associated institutions and organisations within any political economy, are crucial to ensuring that the skills of new workers, as well as of the existing workforce, keep pace with the evolving needs of the economy.

Since the transformative days of Sean Lemass and TK Whitaker, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has had a major influence on skills policy in Ireland. Indeed, Professor Frank Barry of Trinity College has stated that the post-secondary education and training system in Ireland has been “driven by the country’s FDI focussed strategy” (Barry, 2007, p.283). While undoubtedly FDI has been, and continues to be, a vital component of Ireland’s economic policy, employment in FDI companies only account for roughly 10% of the Irish labour force. Consequently, this raises that question of possible over-influence of FDI on skills policy. The Irish labour market has been monitored and analysed by a number of different agencies in recent years, especially the ESRI, the NESCF, the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) (established in 1997 during the Celtic Tiger following skills shortages in FDI IT Companies), and the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) (formerly in FÁS) in SOLAS. Policy responsibility for these agencies is spread across numerous government departments.

In 2010 policy responsibility for training was transferred to the Department of Education and Skills and a process of skills policy convergence began. By 2014, QQI, SOLAS and the ETBs had been established, and the first ever National FET Strategy

had been published. The establishment of the National Skills Council and the nine Regional Skills Fora followed soon after. In 2018 the Department of Education and Skills stated the strategic objective of “an integrated tertiary sector”. SOLAS, QQI the ETBs have succeeded in raising the profile of FET within the national consciousness. Apprenticeships were attracting more attention across all of tertiary education. After many years of policy fragmentation, joined-up thinking in Skills Policy was becoming apparent.

However, by 2019 the Future Jobs Ireland Strategy emerged from the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation that was heavily biased towards higher education. The question of a potential return to policy fragmentation across multiple departments loomed. This Department’s Statement of Strategy (DETE, 2021) states that they will

“Maintain strong connection between enterprise and the higher education sector to ensure that future skills needs to business are met, including through upskilling” (p.11).

Regardless of any mention of FET in this statement, this objective would seem to be contrary to the Department of Further and Higher Education having responsibility for skills policy. The absence of FET from inclusion with future skills, would also be in line with the Future Jobs Ireland Strategy (DBEI, 2019) that was heavily biased towards higher education. Has the policy coherence begun to crack? Is FET at risk of becoming the hidden sector of Irish education again?

So what of this emphasis on higher education? In the age of evidence-based policy, does the evidence back this up? Labour markets worldwide are described and categorised using various criteria, such as employed/unemployed, age cohorts, industry sector, and gender. However, when it comes to the skill profile of labour markets, the

most commonly used criteria is highest educational attainment, which is taken as a proxy for skill level. So, is this helpful for skills policy? The OECD in its Employment Outlook 2017 examined the change in high, middle and low skills level jobs over a 20 year period from 1995 to 2015. It found that, for Ireland, while the level of low skill jobs remained roughly the same, high skill jobs increased by 15% over this period, and middle skilled jobs decreased by the roughly the same amount. As this is based on “employment rates of people according to their education levels” (www.oecd.org) is this change a description of the change in the education profile of the Irish population, or if the labour market change was examined by occupational category, does this describe the actual change in the skills required?

Using Labour Market data from the CSO based on Standard Occupational Classification, the profile of the Irish Labour Market has changed very little from 2007 to 2019. The breakdown of the labour market based on changes in skills required is as follows: High skill 28-30%, intermediate skill 59-61%, and low skill 10-12%. How can this be so different? The principle reason is that by using highest educational attainment as a proxy for the skills profile of the labour market, the level of over-education is hidden. According to the ESRI, “the percentage of Irish workers reporting skill levels in excess of those required for their job is the third highest of 28 EU countries”. This is affirmed by recent research by SOLAS (2021). Evidence-based policy making needs to include all the evidence.

All of the evidence to date has shown that the FET College, as part of the skills infrastructure of the state, has a crucial role to play in responding to the skills needs in their region. As is the case with all areas of public policy, the success of national policy is largely dependent on the local capacity to implement it. Consequently, a modern, appropriately resourced network of FET Colleges, as part of a unified FET system of provision, and within an integrated tertiary education system, is strategically placed throughout the country to play a significant role in the future of tertiary education in Ireland.

A Competence Approach to FET Programmes and Skills Development

The first FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2014) presented “a roadmap and implementation plan to realise the vision of a world-class integrated system of further education and training in Ireland” (p.3). Yet, little time have been spent discussing the best approach to skill formation for the Irish labour market and economy. While different approaches can be identified in the advanced economies around the world, no two are the same. Each country has developed an approach that best suits its own circumstances. While historically, the approach in Ireland has evolved in line with developments in the United Kingdom, recent years have witnessed some divergence of approach. In 1979, when Ireland joined the European Monetary Union (EMU), the historical link between the Irish and British currency was severed. This was followed soon after by the emergence of the social partnership process in the 1980s, which was based on the European model. Increasingly, while continuing to maintain many similarities with the UK, Ireland has been moving away from its nearest neighbour towards the EU. Brexit has been the latest manifestation of this trajectory.

The dominant public discourse in FET in Ireland today is what could be called transactional learning – there is a skill gap, put on a course to fill it – a transaction. The ESRI research on FET in Ireland (McGuinness et al., 2014) quotes a contributor to their research who describes the approach to skill development in Ireland somewhat glibly as:

“We are going to bestow these [skills] on you like a coat of paint” (p. 77).

While glib, this reflects the approach that viewed skills as something to be acquired rather than developed. This approach is narrow, short-term and fundamentally unsound. It’s focus is on employability rather than career or vocational development. A more holistic skills development or competence development approach is based on the active learner participating in constructing knowledge. Such a learner or employee is seen as bringing all of the resources he/she has at his/her disposal to deal

with complex situations in the workplace. This holistic view includes all aspects of the person – personal, professional and social. In other words, the learning is context-dependent and situated in the context of the relevant occupation.

Adler (2004) argues that a skill consists of two key components:

“Mastery of the complexity of the tasks required of workers by their jobs, and mastery of the relations that coordinate activity across these tasks” (p.246).

These components can be viewed as the technical dimension of the skill and the social dimension necessary for it to be effective in a given context. From an occupational perspective, the totality of skills required for a particular employment will consist of technical and social components. Dessinger (2004), referring to the German VET system, states that “social and personal behaviour patterns are taught along with the relevant technical and practical job skills” (p.29).

A discussion about skills in isolation from their corresponding occupation or field of employment would be incomplete. Indeed, some commentators are of the view that acquiring skills is inseparable from identity formation for the individual (Streeck, 1989). Rauner (2007) goes further and states:

“It has been commonly accepted in pedagogical science that competence development is inseparably linked to the formation of vocational identity” (p. 117).

When a young person leaves school, or an older person is considering a change of career, they seek to acquire the skills for a particular occupation or area of employment. For example, the young person becomes an apprentice and trains to be a carpenter. Equally, he or she could go to medical school to train to be a doctor.

AFET Student brings with them a wealth of experience, both positive and negative, from previous education, employment, unemployment, and personal interests and circumstances. This experience has contributed to some degree in their course choice and in their subsequent chosen career path or progression path to further study. Work is a central part of life for most people. As well as the tangible benefits of an income

to pay for life’s necessities, for many it also gives a sense of purpose and meaning to their life. Equally, those suffering unemployment can suffer from feeling alienated, a loss of self-esteem and work-related or occupational identity. A person’s work has a significant influence on their identity, both as individuals and as members of social groups.

Education and training is widely seen as providing the key to work. Consequently, in preparing people to enter, or indeed re-enter, the world of work any discussion of skills formation must consider both the development of both the technical skills and the socialisation into the particular occupational community of practice. This has been the traditional approach to apprenticeship for hundreds of years.

Mulder and Winterton (2017) state:

“A main problem of many educational programmes is that they are containerships stacked with course units or modules which are inserted by departments or faculty members under the umbrella of a programme name, but which are really incoherent sets of overloaded and overspecialised introductions into disciplinary knowledge domains” (p.5)

This statement, in many ways, describes, to an ever-increasing degree, the experience of many FET programmes. Mulder (2015) states, “the meaning of competence is situation- or context specific” (p.4). As has been the case with apprenticeships for generations, learning to be part of an occupational ‘community of practice’ requires not only technical knowledge and skills, but also the social skills and the development of the situational or contextual knowledge of how the knowledge and skills are applied in the work place. The learner constructs meaning for him or herself by placing his/her learning within the appropriate occupational context. Mulder continues, “there are certain relationships between personality and ability factors, and competence and on-the-job performance ratings” (p.4).

Mulder refers to the most recent approach to conceptualizing competence as ‘situated professionalism’. He elaborates:

“A major constituent of this approach is the appreciation that a certain competence representation can mean something totally different

for one job holder or job situation to another. Furthermore, important notions are that the agency of a person and the affordances of a job context enable the development of competence..., the idea that the work context takes shape as a community of practice in which players interact and share and negotiate meaning, and that personal epistemologies have a stronger influence on professional development than mere skills training. Finally, it also acknowledges that desired competence is defined by what key stakeholders in a professional context expect in terms of professional action” (p.1).

It is worth emphasising, as Mulder points out, that a learner’s previous experience of learning, both in education and in work, has a stronger influence on their skill formation than actual skills training. Taking a more holistic, developmental and transformative view of FET programmes, within a competence approach to assessment of/for/as learning, would provide the learner with a richer learning experience, which would prepare them for not only the job opportunities of today, but also with the capacity to respond to future occupational changes through lifelong learning opportunities.

Figure 2.4. Three-Site Learning Model (Source: O’Sullivan, 2019, p.250).



A New Level 5 and Level 6 Proposition

One of the most persistent features of further education and training (FET) provision over the years has been its fragmented nature (NAPD, 2019). A multiplicity of course types, with narrowly defined rules and eligibility criteria, have resulted in a “confusing array” (SOLAS, 2020, p. 40) of FET programmes which in itself is a barrier to participation. All of these programmes began as responses to

various particular policy objectives since the 1970s. Rationalising the range of FET programmes, and their associated funding streams, is long overdue and the new National FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2020) is the ideal platform to provide the appropriate strategic context.

The new National FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2020) identifies, as a strategic objective, the development of a new Level 5 and Level 6 proposition:

“The confusing array of vocationally focused programmes in FET, with apprenticeships, traineeships, evening training, specific skills training

and PLCs offered in two very distinct settings (training centres and FE colleges), must be replaced by a new Level 5 and Level 6 proposition. This will have a core brand, focused on the discipline/the career and NFQ level, and be linked to regional skills needs and clear employment or progression outcomes” (p. 40).

The range of Level 5 and Level 6 programmes currently being delivered includes:

- Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) Course
- Apprenticeship – both pre- and post-2016
- Traineeship
- Specific Skills Training
- Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)

While these programmes were developed in response to a range of differing policy objectives over time, in recent years, as a result of systemic convergences (O’Sullivan, 2018), these programmes have, in effect, evolved to address similar goals. In other words, there are increasingly fewer differences between them. For example, a significant proportion of these programmes, delivered in either Colleges of Further Education or Training Centres, lead to the same form of certification provided by QQI.

The new National FET Strategy also sets a strategic objective for this new proposition of at least 30% being work-based (SOLAS, 2020, p. 40). This will have implications for provision, in terms of modes of delivery, staffing and on-going continuous professional development for FET staff. On the assessment side, there will be associated governance implications, particularly in relation to consistency of assessment. There may also be an implication for the number of credits given to the work-based element of the learning. In the current level 5 and level 6 awards, the certification requirement under QQI’s Common Awards System, used widely on PLC Courses, provides only 15 of the 120 credits, or 12.5%, for work experience placement. This would appear to be out of line with the strategic objective of ‘at least 30% work-based’ strategic objective and may need further consideration.

From a Range of FET Programmes to a New Proposition (O’Sullivan, 2020)

FET Programmes are essentially a set of rules that govern approval, funding, and staffing aimed at addressing a particular policy objective. Over the years these rules have been shown to be too narrow in their focus and unresponsive to the changing policy landscape. In recent years, through the Strategic Performance Agreement process between SOLAS and the ETBs, full-time programmes are categorised as primarily ‘labour market focussed’ or ‘progression focussed’. In the context of the vision for the FET College of the Future (SOLAS, 2020), which involves the consolidation of existing FET provision within a single integrated college structure, there may be an opportunity to examine the suite of current level 5 and 6 programmes through the dichotomy of ‘progression focussed’ versus ‘labour market focussed’ programmes. However, regardless of this dichotomy, it needs to be borne in mind that ‘labour market focussed’ courses, leading to level 5 and 6 QQI awards, can also facilitate progression through the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

The reviews commissioned by SOLAS in recent years into a number of these programmes identified strengths and weakness in all (McGuinness et al, 2018; SOLAS, 2017). In examining these reviews together complementarities begin to emerge, with the strengths in one programme type potentially complementing the weakness in another and vice-versa. For example, the evaluation of the PLC programme identified the work experience element as a weakness, while one of the strengths of the traineeship has been identified as employer engagement and the quality of the structured training within the work placement element of the course. From an evaluative perspective, these various programmes could be seen as having ‘piloted’ a number of different approaches to various aspects of similar policy issues. It is now time to collate the lessons learned and move forward with a unified offering.

While no perfect fit exists, perhaps a “best fit” could be achieved through a hybrid or bricolage of the key strengths of these programmes into a new level 5

and level 6 proposition. The parameters within which this new programme would operate should be of sufficient flexibility to facilitate different situations. In other words, rather than having multiple, narrowly defined programmes, leading to the same level 5 and 6 QQI awards, addressing different aspects of the same policy objective, why not create a single flexible programme, leading to a level 5 and level 6 award. This flexible proposition can then be adapted to meet the evolving needs of the Irish labour market, including sector specific requirements. This would make the need for multiple programme labels, and multiple associated funding streams, redundant.

In higher education, many course types are distinguished by their level on the NFQ – level 7 degree, level 8 degree. There is no reason why FET cannot adopt a similar approach. This new proposition could be described by the level of qualification achieved at the end – a Level 5 Certificate or a Level 6 Advanced or Higher Certificate. From the broader perspective of an integrated tertiary education sector, there would be significant advantage in having the entire range of post-secondary course types, within disciplinary or occupational fields, distinguished by their NFQ level – from Level 5 Certificate, and Level

6 Advanced or Higher Certificate, to Level 7 and Level 8 Degrees, and beyond.

This approach would address the need, referred to in the FET Strategy, of providing much needed clarity on the “core brand, focused on the discipline/ the career and NFQ level, and be linked to regional skills needs and clear employment or progression outcomes” (SOLAS, 2020, p. 40). Such an approach builds on the strengths of the current range of programmes and would also address a number of the strategic objectives under the three pillars of the new National FET Strategy – skills development, learning pathways, and inclusion. Developing a new proposition for Level 5 and Level 6 would facilitate employer engagement in skills development as it would clearer what is being offered. Similarly for students, the learning pathways would be clearer, thus removing the significant informational barrier that currently exists and, in so doing, facilitate greater participation and inclusion. The development of this new proposition would also have the added benefit of rationalising the administrative costs associated with current programmes thereby potentially freeing up funds to reinvest in its implementation.

SECTION 4

Strategic Priority: Fostering Inclusion

A “world-class integrated system of further education and training in Ireland” as a public good

In a modern society, where public services are often seen as something to be consumed as opposed to being a public good, the importance of an inclusive and equitable system of education is of vital importance. How the different pillars of an education system are structured and regarded within a society has profound implications for the equal distribution of education benefits amongst the citizens. In other words, education and/or skill levels are strongly linked to socio-economic prosperity of a society. Busemeyer (2015) states

“...variations in the institutional setup of the education and training systems do have enormous consequences for the distribution of skills, income, and wealth in the political economy at large” (p.2, emphasis in the original).

Fleming (2018) observes that

“Many adults have been ‘locked out’ of opportunities by their previous schooling, life experiences and continuing financial barriers. Disability and literacy difficulties also exclude many from the twin desires of education and work” (p.1).

Indeed, by comparison with the 1980s, Collins (2014) states that

“...education levels in the overall population are significantly higher than [in the 1980s]. This means that...those today with lower levels of educational attainment may well be more disadvantaged now relative to the population as a whole than would have been the case in the 1980s”. (p.xi).

In the last Census, for example, the unemployment rate amongst people with a disability was over twice that for the population as a whole.

The OECD (2017) described the change in the skill profile of its member countries over a 20-year period and found that in the Irish labour market, the gap between low-skill and high-skill is not only widening but is becoming increasingly difficult to cross. So, why is a world-class FET system so important? Busemeyer (2015) put it best when he states

“Levels of socio-economic inequality are significantly lower in countries with well-established VET systems, since VET opens up access to well-paid and secure employment for those in the lower half of the skills distribution” (p. 254)

It is no accident that one of the strategic goals in the first FET Strategy was Active Inclusion, namely the inclusion of people excluded from the labour market. It is a matter of a public good, and indeed, in the national interest, that our FET system is world class.

Currently, the network of FET Colleges is geographically dispersed across the country, and based firmly within their communities. These Colleges are ideally placed to be a central part of the new integrated FET system in Ireland. Looney (2019) proposed that the FET College could be a “beacon in, and for, the community”. FETCI is strongly of the view that the current network of FET Colleges, as part of the new FET Colleges of the Future, can be leveraged to become even greater beacons in their communities than they already are.

Universal Design approach to the development of the new FET sector

In seeking to arrive at a vision for the FET System of the Future, it would be important to situate this new entity within the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of this landscape. Government departments (DES, DEASP, and DBEI) and the executive agencies (HEA, SOLAS, and QQI), for example, populate the

macro-level. The meso-level consists primarily of the ETBs and the higher education institutions (HEI), with the FET Colleges being located at the micro-level. Change at one level will necessitate corresponding change at the other levels.

As the new FET landscape is emerging, FETCI is of the view that a Universal Design (UD) approach to the design of the new FET system, within the nascent unified tertiary education sector, would be optimal. Universal Design and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approaches focus on the interaction between person and environment (physical, social, technological and social) and represent the highest expression of person-centred planning philosophy (Bencini, Garofolo, and Arengi, 2018). Indeed, the National Planning Framework for Project Ireland 2040 (Government of Ireland, 2018), has highlighted the need for a universally designed approach:

“Planning affords an opportunity to facilitate and deliver a more socially inclusive society through the integration and greater accessibility at all stages of the life cycle. Housing, education, health and transport are four key areas where social inclusion can be improved...through universal design...to deliver greater accessibility for all...” (p. 84).

This increasing diversity of learning venue, as discussed in Section 3, combined with the diversity of sectors of the economy, and size of companies, presents a highly set of complex external environments in which the FET Colleges must engage. The external environment also includes the higher education sector and the local INTREO offices. FETCI strongly supports the commitment in the FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2020) to adopt:

“...a universal design for learning (UDL) approach in shaping its future provision” (p.45).

Unified Student Supports Structure

Just as the range of environments is complex, so too is the diversity of students accessing FET programmes. Placing the diversity of students and their complex range of vulnerabilities in the mainstream of FET provision, rather than as a “reasonable accommodation” after the fact, is of great importance to FETCI. In particular, mainstreaming a student support infrastructure, which appropriately reflects this diversity, is crucial for a FET College’s capacity to meet the needs of all students. In particular, any new funding model for FET should include an allocation for student supports. For example, if a full-time equivalent (FTE) funding model was to be used, then a multiplier of, say, 1.2 per FTE could be appropriate, where 0.2 is the initial student support allocation. This would mean that funding is available for student supports from the first day of the course rather than the multi-week delay that is currently the case. Any additional funding can be sought after the course has commenced.

SECTION 5

Strategic Priority: Creating Pathways

The FET Strategy 2020-2024 states:

“The ability to build skills that are relevant to the economy, and to offer inclusive provision that supports citizenship and sustains communities, are two core attributes of FET” (p.45).

FETCI is of the view that all learning at all levels should be valued equally. Every learner should be encouraged and supported to achieve his or her own goals. The education system in general, and FET in particular, must ensure that any arbitrary system, administrative or procedural barriers are removed, or at least mitigated to the greatest degree possible. Taking a Universal design approach the new unified FET system of provision should seek to include and support as many people as possible, and to the greatest extent possible in learning throughout their life.

Equality of opportunity is not enough. The new unified learner-centred FET system of the future must ensure to the greatest extent possible that every learner will not only have an equal chance to access a course, equal chance to participate on a course, but also have equal chance to succeed. This includes, success in assessments, progression to further study, and/or employment.

According to the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, access to a course is defined as

“access by learners to programmes of education and training, including recognition for knowledge, skill or competence previously acquired” (Section 2(5)(a)).

This definition does not specify which type of learning should be included. With education internationally, there has been a tradition of requiring formal educational qualifications as part of the entry requirements. FETCI is of the view that this practice is narrow and exclusionary. The definition above includes all forms of learning – formal, informal and non-formal learning.

In Ireland, in particular, there has been a long history of not valuing vocational qualifications over the academic qualifications provided through the state examinations system. It is interesting to note that the various access programmes for higher education and based on the prerequisite of having a Leaving Certificate.

Currently, within the FET to HE pathway, QQI qualifications at Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) are given a maximum value of 390 points in the CAO system in the Institute of Technology route, while the Leaving Certificate, also at Level 5, has a maximum value of 600 points (not including bonus points). Further discussion of this pathway will be made below.

In this context, it is worth re-quoting Busemeyer (2015) as we did in the last section:

“...variations in the institutional setup of the education and training systems do have enormous consequences for the distribution of skills, income, and wealth in the political economy at large” (p.2, emphasis in the original).

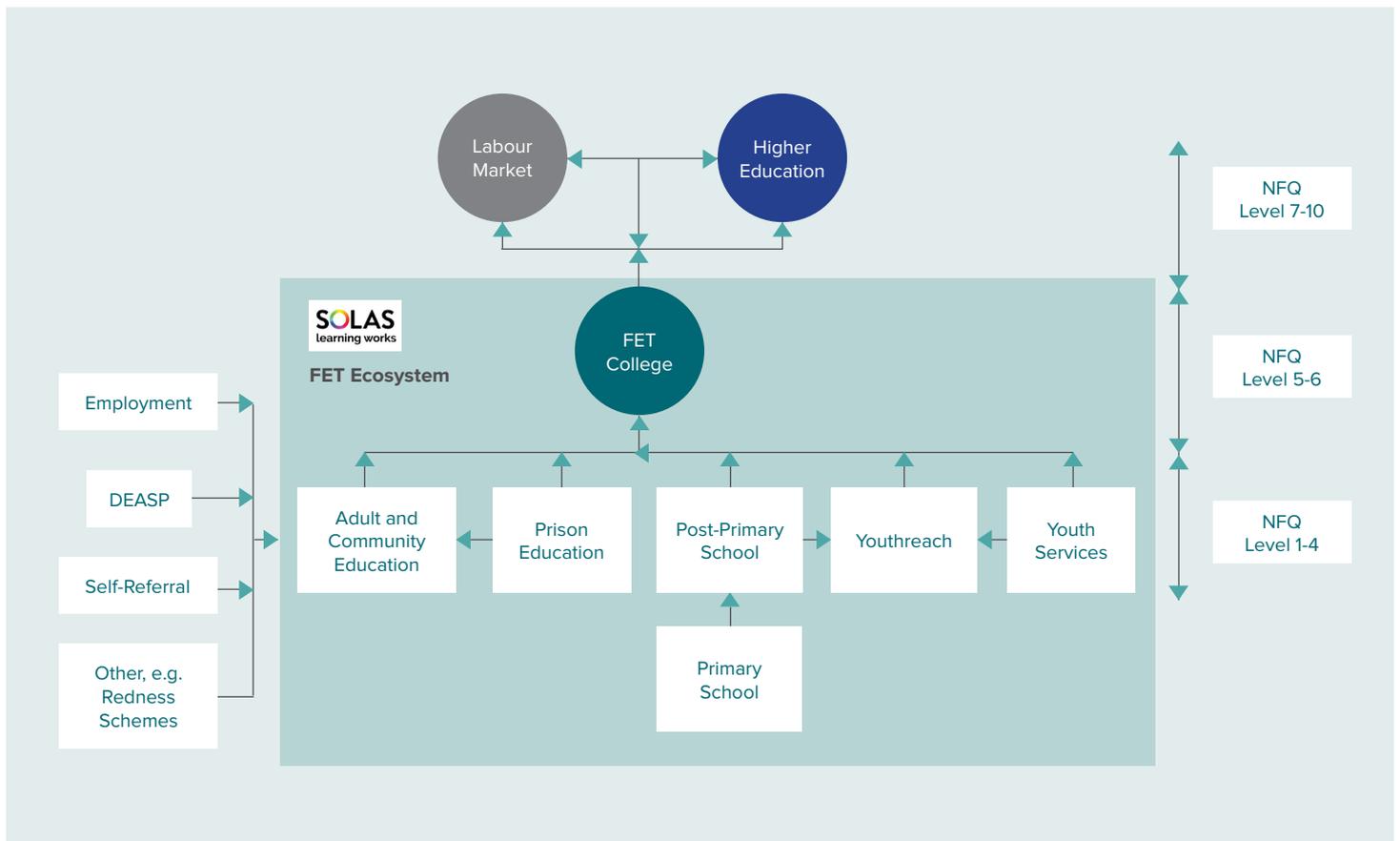
Learner Pathways: Access to, Progression through, and Graduation from FET

In the view of FETCI, the key to simplifying pathways is to fully implement the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Since the 1990s, when frameworks began to emerge internationally, the issue of access, transfer and progression has been high on the agenda. The launch of the Irish NFQ in 2003 was a seminal moment for the entire education system in Ireland. It has facilitated the simplification of connections between courses at different levels. The entire system now needs to embrace the spirit of

the NFQ and remove the final system, administrative and procedural barriers to achieving optimal learning pathways for all learners.

This sentiment equally applies to all of us in the FET sector. While our diversity is a strength, it can also be a de facto weakness. The historical fragmentation and siloed approach to FET provision to date has, in effect, discouraged progression with FET provision. Within a new unified FET system of provision, learner pathways into, through and beyond FET will be facilitated to the maximum extent. Figure 5.1 illustrates what such pathways could look like.

Figure 5.1 Learner Pathways through FET



Learner Pathways – From FET to HE

The issue of FET to HE progression has been on the agenda to varying degrees since the early 1990s. During this period O’Sullivan (2018a) found that, in Irish government policy documents from 1996 to 2007, of all the references to certification and qualifications, the issue of access, transfer and progression, including progression from FET to HE, was the most prominent.

While ‘holders of further education qualifications’ are identified in the National Access Plan for Higher Education (DES, 2015) as an under-represented group in HE, the FET to HE issue is also about removing the system, administrative and procedural barriers to fully opening this pathways.

Currently, the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS) has two primary FET to HE pathways – a quota based system for the universities, and a points based system for the Institutes of Technology with a maximum of 390 out of 600 CAO points applying. Not every CAO course accepts FET qualifications, the entry requirements are inconsistent in terms of the required academic standard, and are often accompanied by a range of specific module requirements.

In other words, the two qualifications systems of the state, the State Examinations Commission (SEC), and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), are treated demonstrably differently by the Central Applications Office, a private company, which manages admissions into HE. Surely this must raise questions about the system currently in place.

The current system is complex and lacking in transparency. FET professionals find it difficult to navigate. What must it be like for students? (See Figure 5.2a).

The Transitions Working Paper on FET to HE progression (DES, 2020) made a number of recommendations on this issue. FETCI looks forward to engaging positively with all stakeholders to bring clarity to this issue for students.

Numerically, the widening participation in HE agenda would be very difficult to achieve. Using the numbers, there are only two ways to increase the participation of under-represented groups in HE. Firstly, increase the number of places available in HE every year. This is not financially sustainable from the national exchequer perspective. Secondly, place quotas in the levels of participation of the over-represented groups, which is politically and ethically not sustainable. Therefore, the only way to actually achieve widening participation is by ensuring equity of competition for year one places in HE.

With this in mind, FETCI is of the view that there should only be one route into HE for all applicants (Figure 5.2b). This will involve consolidating the administrative dimension of processing applications followed by the competitive dimension.

Administrative Dimension

- QQI pathway into Year One of all courses on CAO list
- Within domain progression e.g. Business to HE Business
- Consistent Entry requirements – common matriculation requirements
- Eliminate unnecessary specific subject requirements

Competitive Dimension

- Single CAO points system for all HE applications
- Using the NFQ as the national infrastructure for progression
- CAO points equivalence for QQI grades with LC grades
- Expansion of QQI grading system.

This will involve some benchmarking between the Leaving Certificate and QQI qualifications. However, any reform of the system must meet the test, inherent in the title of the national access plan – ‘Equity of Access to Higher Education’.

Figurer 5.2a: Progression to Higher Education (Year 1) - Current System

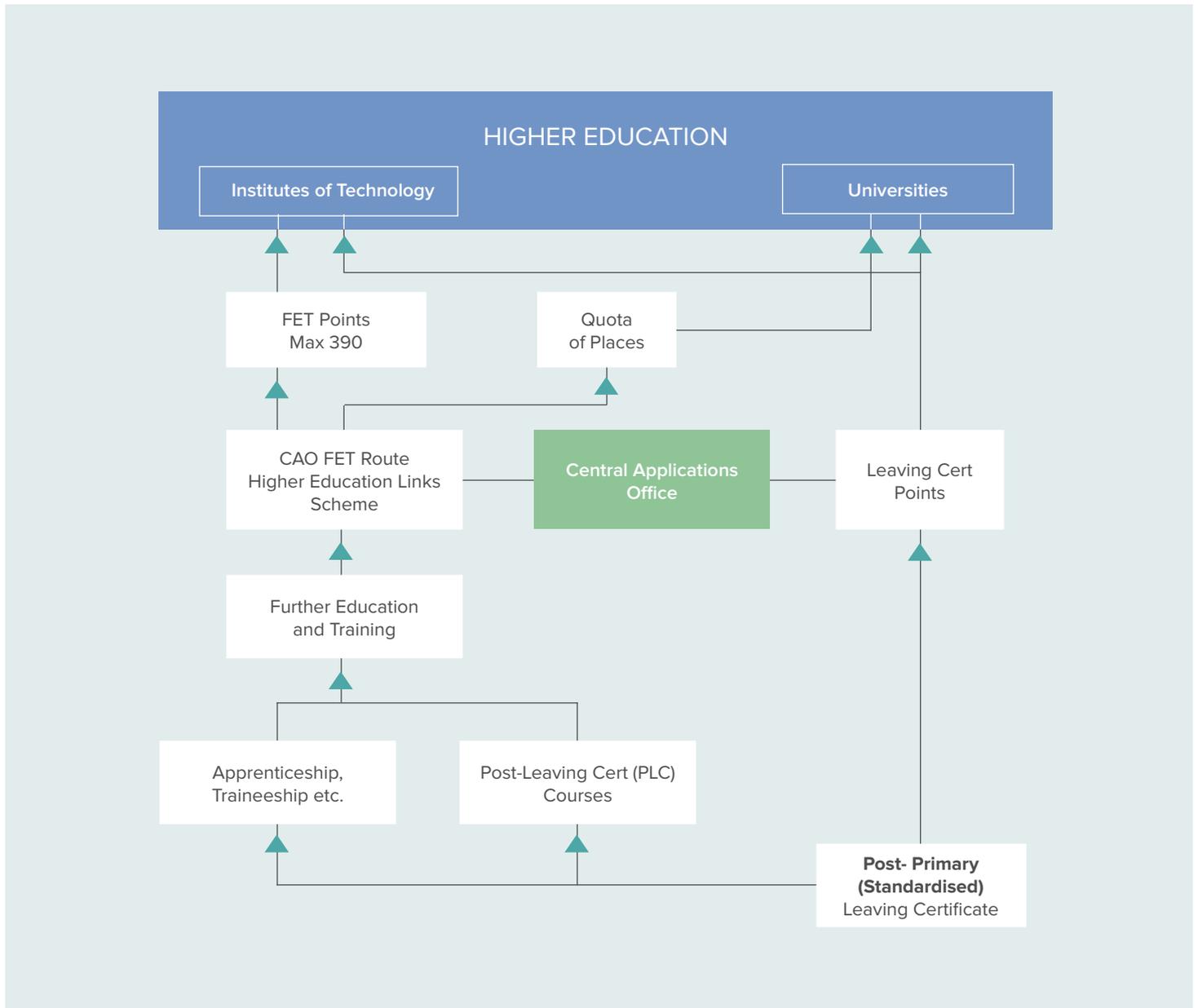
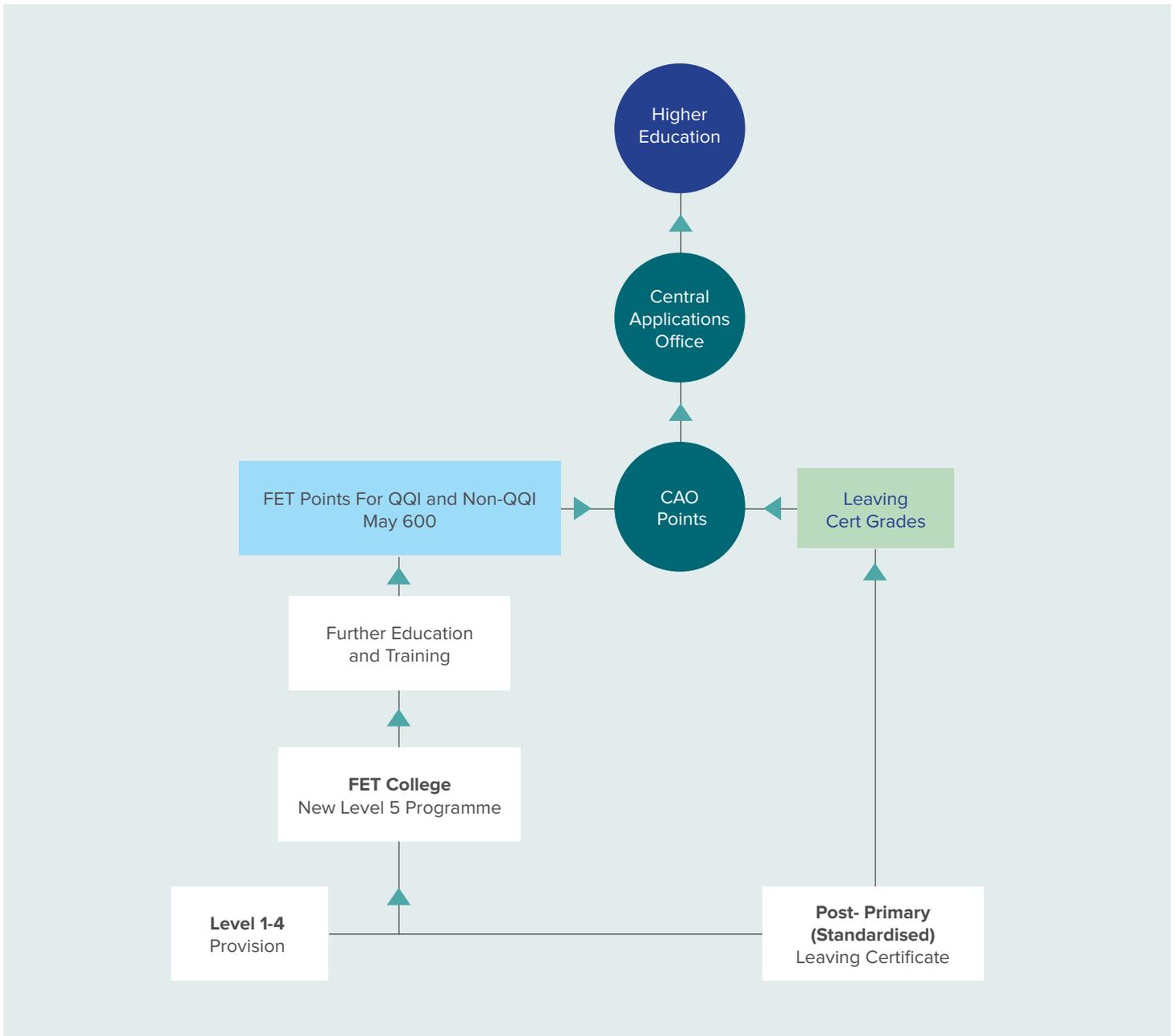


Figure 5.2b: Progression to Higher Education (Year 1) - Future System



Towards an Integrated Tertiary Education Sector – a Process of Convergence

A particular feature of the current policy landscape has been the convergence of FET and Higher Education (HE), at both the policy and institutional levels. This process of convergence has its foundations in the developments in relation to qualifications and the National Qualifications Framework in the 1990s and 2000s. In recent times, this convergence has become apparent in the establishment of a single division in the DES for Higher and Further Education and Training Policy, as well as the strategic engagements between the SOLAS, QQI and the ETBs. In 2018, the Department of Education and Skills' Statement of Strategy (DES, 2018) stated:

“Increase the alignment of higher education and further education and training to achieve a more integrated tertiary education system” (p.14).

This was reiterated in the Action Plan for Education for 2019 (DES, 2019):

“Develop a framework for an integrated strategic approach to tertiary education” (Action 64.1, p.41).

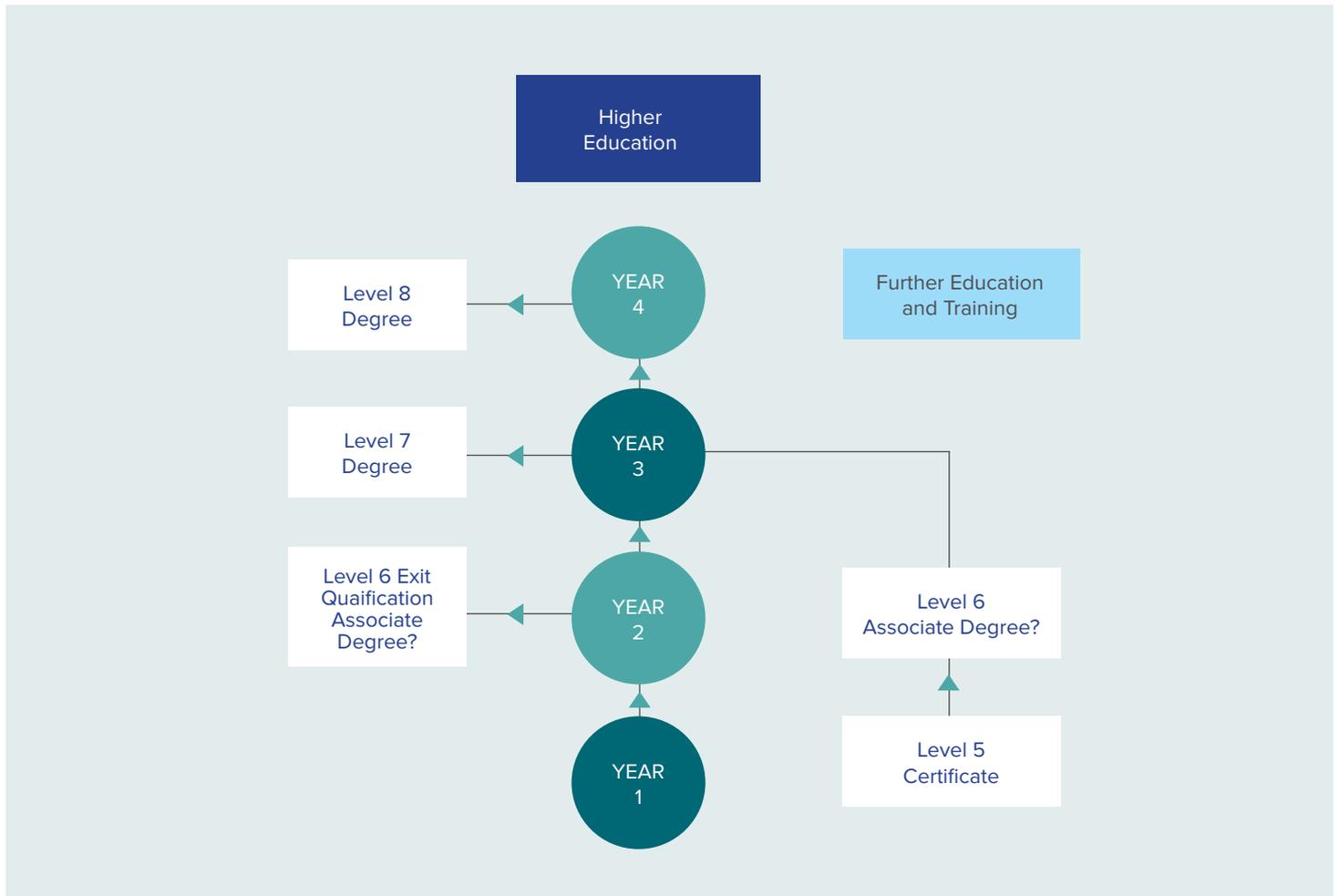
Speaking at the ETBI Conference in 2018, Dr Pádraig Walsh, CEO of QQI, in referring to the obligation of ETBs in relation to Quality Assurance, stated that “the development, compliance and reporting responsibilities of the ETBs are now commensurate with those for higher education” (Walsh, 2018).

Indeed, in its recent Statement of Strategy, QQI stated that the ETBs would be subject to an Institutional Review model based on the CINNTE model that applies to the Institutes of Technology (QQI, 2018). This is in line with the ambition to see ETBs assuming Delegated Authority to make QQI awards. Similarly, the Strategic Performance Agreements concluded recently between SOLAS and each ETB, were based on the model used for similar agreements between the Higher Education Authority and the third-level institutions.

Indeed, the recent programme of reforms in both FET and HE, have highlighted a number of areas where the desired degree of synchronisation between the various elements has yet to be achieved. For example, with FET Colleges now occupying the space originally the domain of the Regional Technical Colleges, and now Institutes of Technology, the duplication of provision at level 6, and in many cases, level 5, is a source of tension between the two sectors. In addition, the persistence of two sets of awards at level 6, one for FET and one for HE, has been an issue for some time. FET Colleges Ireland welcomes the QQI research project currently under way in this area and looks forward to the outcome. For further discussion see O'Callaghan and O'Sullivan (2019).

A further area which has come to the fore is the progression of FET graduates through the CAO system into HE programmes. While national targets have been set in this area, the lack of consistency and transparency persists and also requires attention.

Figure 5.3: From FET to HE – a 2+1/2+2 approach



The FET Colleges Ireland Vision for a unified tertiary sector is that, firstly, a new governance model for a FET College and a new FET Teacher contract are put in place. Secondly, following a rationalisation of the two sets of awards at level 6, a 2+2 model of tertiary provision could be developed.

This would involve FET providing up to the new single level 6 (or first two years of higher education), and higher education providing from level 7 to level 10. Transparent and equitable progression pathways would exist between year two of FET and year 3 of higher education.

SECTION 6

Enabling Themes

Staffing, Capabilities and Structures

ETB/Regional FET Ecosystem

As the recent reforms become more embedded, and the strategic direction for FET has become more apparent through the strategic agreements between ETBs and both SOLAS and QQI, the shape of the future skill formation landscape is beginning to emerge. The strategic and governance demands being placed on ETBs and FET Colleges continue to converge with those of HE. The contractual and regulatory boundaries within which ETBs and FET Colleges currently operate, in addition to the need for additional staffing, have resulted in capacity deficits in relation to meeting these demands. This represents a significant corporate risk. Building capacity within the ETBs will be of particular relevance when the issue of delegated authority to issue QQI awards at ETB level reaches the top of the agenda. However, higher education institutions tend to be geographically clustered on a small number of sites. By contrast, FET provision within the ETBs is more geographically dispersed. Consequently, any increase in the non-teaching staffing capacity of ETBs would require a different approach to that of higher education.

Within each ETB is an existing network of geographically dispersed sites, in particular the FET Colleges, which are already engaged in FET provision. If the focus of strategic development was on the development of this infrastructure, the capacity of each ETB would increase to a point where the success of macro FET policy is more assured. The establishment of the ETBs resulted in an organisation that consists of a variety of types of FET centres – FET Colleges, Training Centres, Youthreach Centres, VTOS Centres, Adult Education, etc. Currently, the staffing model focuses on the centre. However, given the

new demands being placed on ETB FET provision, perhaps a different, more flexible approach is need.

Increasing the capacity of the ETBs for the immediate and future demands of FET provision will necessitate the development of a flexible infrastructure that can accommodate the provision of a range of FET programmes. Given the constantly changing nature of the FET policy context, this ETB infrastructure would need to be flexible enough to respond to this constantly changing environment. In other words, the ETB could be viewed as a FET provision ecosystem. Such a perspective would be consistent with a Universal Design approach with a focus on the interaction between the person and the environment. Investing in this ecosystem will build the local capacity thereby increasing the likelihood of success for macro-policy outcomes.

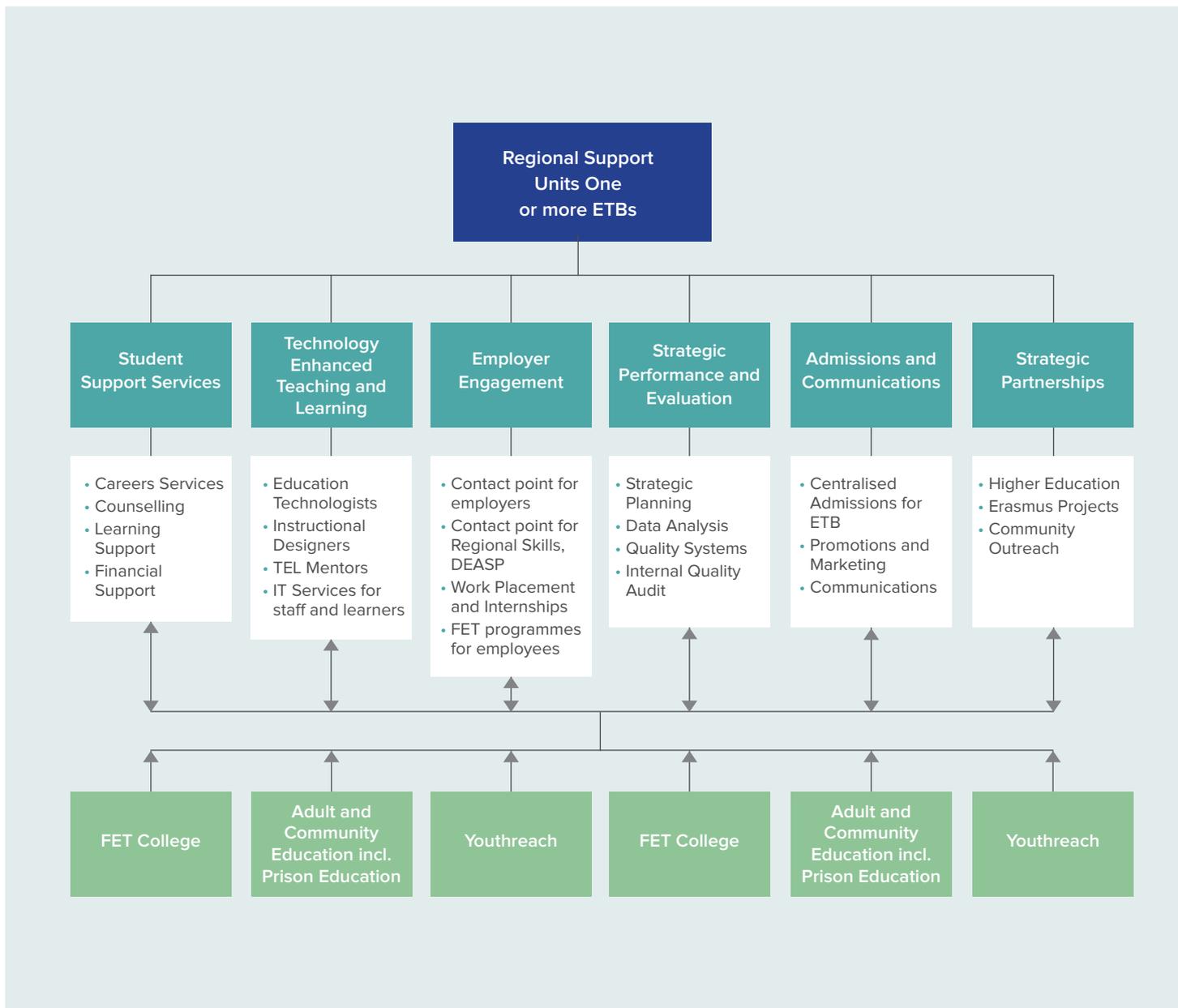
Figure 6.1 outlines a possible model for an ETB FET ecosystem. The ecosystem model proposes a layer of support units between the ETB Head Office and the FET Centres. In this model, the non-teaching staff supports would not be concentrated solely in the FET centres. There could be a blend of staff in the various support units as well as a coordination/liaison type role in the centres. Equally, as an ecosystem, this ETB FET provision infrastructure could adapt to the needs of the changing policy landscape. For example, during a recessionary period when unemployment is high, the ecosystem could be “recalibrated” to respond appropriately. Equally, during times of economic growth, the ecosystem could be “recalibrated” towards, for example, increased provision for people in employment. Based on economies of scale, and the varying needs in different parts of the country, this ecosystem model could present an opportunity for a collaborative approach across a number of adjacent ETBs.

The Student Supports Services Unit could include a coordination role for Career Guidance and Learning Supports, including psychological services. The Teaching, Learning and Assessment Development Unit would coordinate the development of the Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Strategy as well as teaching, learning and assessment methodologies. Strategic Partnerships Unit would include Employer and Enterprise Engagement, Stakeholder Engagement, and Education Partners in Erasmus+ projects, for example. The Quality Performance and Evaluation Unit would coordinate the quality assurance system for the ETB.

This would include quality improvement plans as well as quality monitoring and institutional reviews. This unit will be vital to the achievement of Delegated Authority status from QQI to make awards.

This ecosystem model of ETB FET provision could also provide much needed supports to non-FET provision within the ETB. Indeed, the option for non-ETB FET provision to perhaps “purchase” supports from such a system may be open to consideration.

Figure 6.1: ETB/Regional FET Ecosystem



FET College of the Future

In 2014, FETCI made a significant contribution to this debate with the publication of its vision document in 2014, *Realising opportunities – A Vision for Further Education and Training* (NAPD, 2014). Based on the landmark institutional presence of the network of FET Colleges already within the ETB regions, FETCI stated the vision of

“...the creation of a learner-centred, statutorily-mandated, strategically planned, responsive and dynamic college sector as a foundational pillar of a new and successful FET landscape” (p.35).

The document elaborates further by stating:

“Colleges envision a landscape where FE colleges, as ETB education hubs, will deliver [a range] of programmes on a year round basis” (p.10).

Dual Provision FE Schools

Currently, further education provision (as opposed to industrial training) takes place within a post-primary school governance model. At present there are some 100 post-primary schools providing FET courses, approximately 40 are dedicated FET Colleges, all within the ETB sector, and 60 are dual providers. In other words, they provide both the post-primary curriculum as well as FET Courses. Of these 60, some 40 are within the ETB sector, and 20 are in post-primary schools in the voluntary secondary, and community/comprehensive sectors.

Consequently, it would be important that any new FET governance model could be co-located in a post-primary setting, some of which is outside of an ETB environment. FETCI is of the view that, in dual provision school, FET provision should constitute a separate administrative unit within the school. In other words, two forms of provision, two forms of governance.

One approach may be to look at developing a parallel set of roll-numbers for the FET provision co-located within a post-primary. Currently, all FET Colleges are recognised post-primary schools with official roll numbers and are FET Colleges in name only. The first digit of the roll number identifies the particular post-primary sector – 6 is for Voluntary Secondary

Schools, 7 for ETB Schools, 8 for Comprehensive Schools, and 9 for Community Schools. Creating a designated separation may be as simple as creating a separate set of roll numbers for FET Colleges, perhaps starting with the digit 5. This would facilitate the separation within mixed provision settings. Namely, the current roll number for the mainstream post-primary provision, and a second roll number, which could essentially be the current number with the first digit changed to a 5. This would, at the very least, create a separate administrative entity called a FET College.

Cognisance would need to be taken of the developments in the proposed reform of the Senior Cycle in the post-primary sector. Given the juxtaposed, and in many cases co-located, nature of FET and the senior cycle, developments in FET are important for the reform of senior cycle reform and vice versa.

A New Management Structure for the FET College of the Future

The inadequacy of the post-primary governance model within which FET currently resides equally applies to the management structure. While the bulk of FET provision within the FET College may continue to take place within the standard academic year, new flexible delivery of programmes will have an increased management overhead. Delivering FET programmes during the day, the evening, weekends, and twelve month of the year, both full-time and part-time, is beyond the capacity of the current management structure in post-primary. “Tweaking” the current post-primary post of responsibility scheme will not work. While multiple course start times are facilitated in a number of FET arenas, e.g. Adult and Community Education, Youthreach, and Training Centres, facilitating multiple course starting times within the current post-primary FE College would carry a significant management and administrative overhead. Multiple starting times would also imply multiple finishing times thus necessitating the engagement with the six certification periods currently provided by QQI. Such changes will need to be included in the consideration development of the new management structure for the FET College of the Future.

The importance of strategic engagements with stakeholders has been highlighted as an issue of strategic importance for the FET sector. In particular, ongoing engagement with employers to ensure that FET programmes are aligned with the needs of the labour market is a central to the strategic development of FET. The work of the nine Regional Skills Fora, and the National Skills Council, is a significant resource

in identifying sectors of the economy where skills development is needed.

Figure 6.2 illustrated the types of roles that would be in the new FET College of the Future.

The Characteristics of Leadership and Management Roles identified in Figure 6.2 shows the proposed common qualities of roles as follows:

Targeted	Roles have stated core target areas, which indicates responsibility for the leadership of the activities and functions associated with the given areas
Responsive	Roles are responsive to need, and are agile to meeting changing demands and needs – mobility in assignment of responsibility is inherent
Layered	Roles can have a simultaneous ‘vertical’ area of responsibility, and a horizontal ‘cross-college’ area of responsibility. This is perhaps better explained as a full 360 degree view of the Leadership & Management Wheel, with a segment of direct responsibility therein.
Related	Roles are connected, with responsibility for and to other roles
Responsible	Roles assume responsibility for the relevant area, and as leadership roles, this responsibility is to ensure that activities and functions are addressed, and are effective
Generic	Roles are defined by the specific topic, but are equivalent in responsibility, authority and autonomy, while having stated areas of management focus
Scale-able	Roles can be allocated in a responsive manner to meet the needs of provision of differing sizes. Roles can be introduced for fixed term need to ensure agility
Collaborative	Roles interact and work collaboratively to ensure that all areas and functions are enabled to work effectively

Figures 6.3 and 6.4 illustrate a possible middle management structure for a FET College of the Future within an ETB.

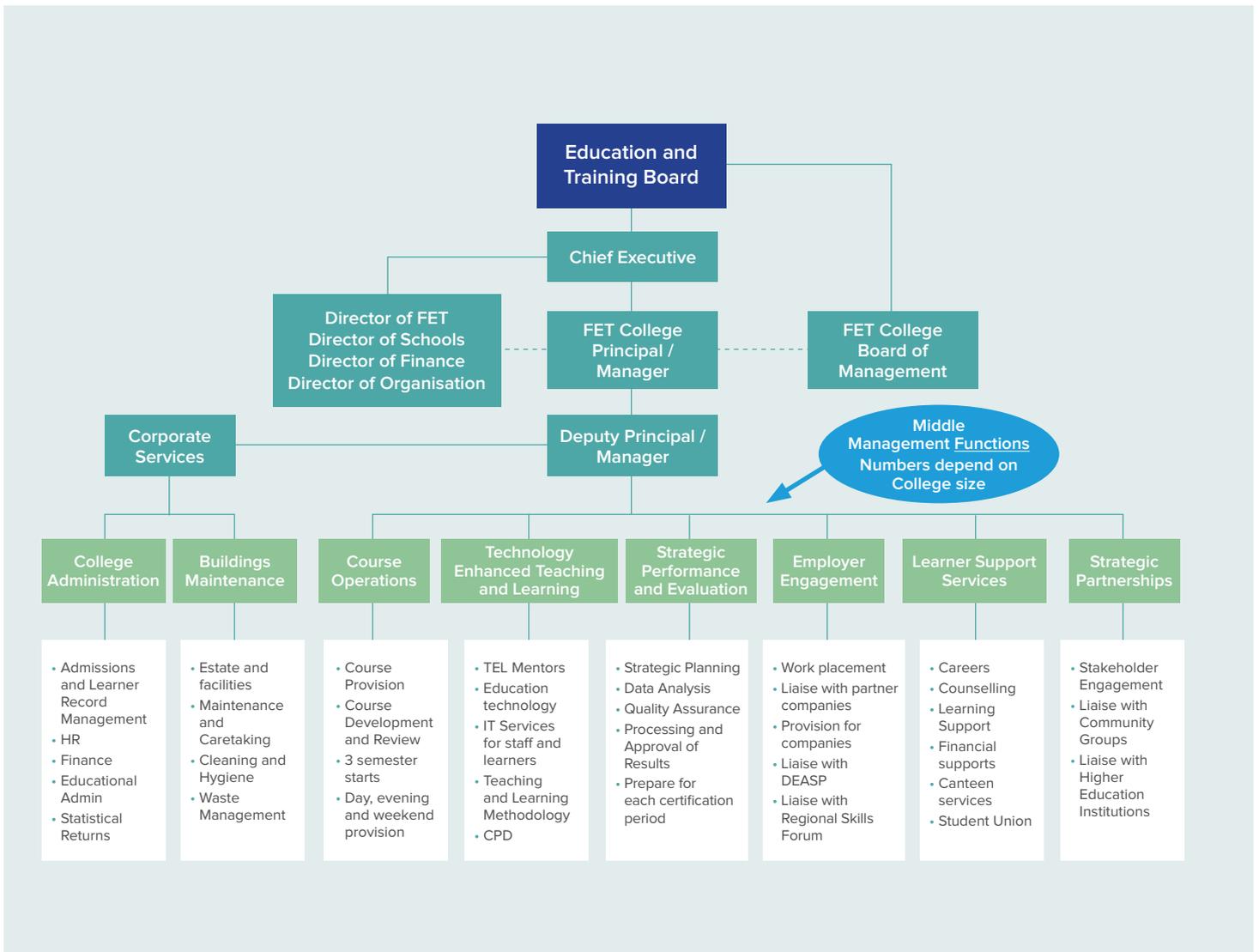
Figure 6.2: Types of College Role



Figure 6.3: FET College of the Future – Key Roles for the Leadership Team



Figure 6.4 Possible FET College Middle Management Structure within an ETB



Future Staffing Framework

Historically, staffing resources with FET Schools and Colleges have been based on full-time PLC enrolments. A minimalist, siloed approach pertained with regard to enrolments on other non-PLC full-time programmes as well as the variety of part-time programme-types. New flexible modes of delivery, involving off-site in-company training, or online learning, will necessitate a review of this approach. Equally, with the establishment of the ETBs, the suite of employment contracts that existed under FÁS, and those that existed under the VEC system, have been collated. As part of the review of a new governance, opportunities for consolidation may become available.

New FET College Teacher

When the ETBs were established in 2013, not only were the variety of programmes from both the VECs and FÁS combined, but so too were the two different suites of employment contracts. Historically, in the FE Colleges and non-ETB FET provision, staffing resources have been based on the post-primary teacher contract and, in recent years, the requirement to have Teaching Council Registration. Circular Letter 52/2013 identified the need for specialist posts for PLC courses in areas for which Teaching Council Registration was not possible, such as animal grooming, hairdressing and beauty therapy. Such staff are known as Industry Specialist Tutors and are not registered teachers. In the former FÁS training provision, programme delivery has been primarily conducted by staff on instructor contracts.

The FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2020) is seeking “to agree an appropriate future staffing framework, which breaks down the barriers between different FET settings and programmes and facilitates more flexible deployment of staff to meet evolving needs” (p.56). In particular, it is seeking to ensure that the FET College of the Future will provide

“Flexible Learning Opportunities: Be available all year-round and offer flexible and technology enabled opportunities that can be availed of a diverse array

of potential learners, including those in employment” (p. 38).

New flexible modes of delivery, involving in College, off-site in-company or in the community, or online provision, will necessitate a review of this approach. Equally, with the establishment of the ETBs, the suite of employment contracts that existed under FÁS, and those that existed under the VEC system, have been collated. As part of the review of a new governance, opportunities for consolidation may become available.

Within the context of the FE Schools and Colleges, the post-primary teacher contract is often quoted as problematic for FET. However, FET Colleges Ireland does not support this view. FET Colleges Ireland is of the view that a vital part of the current FET sector is the cohort of professional teachers. The teachers provide excellent service in terms of planning, teaching, learning and assessment. FET Colleges Ireland values a qualified and regulated teaching profession and views this as essential to the esteem, success, and professionalism of the whole FET sector. However, there does remain a number of issues in relation to the industry-specialist tutor positions, which FETCI is available to discuss further.

Nevertheless, the duties carried out by post-primary teachers in an FET setting are different to those in a mainstream post-primary school. This was accepted by the parties to Conciliation and Arbitration in the 2008 Draft Agreement that, in the end, could not be implemented for financial reasons. However, the fact remains that the need for the stipulation of different duties was accepted by all parties. The range of duties identified in 2008 would need to be revisited given the significant changes that have taken place in the interim. However, whatever a new FET Teacher contract may look like, FET Colleges Ireland is equally aware that many of the wider requirements of the operation of the new FET College are not inherently comprehended within the teaching role. Teachers should be doing what they do best – teaching and assessing – and not unnecessarily diverted to other

tasks because there is no one else to do them. Indeed, this point was echoed by Dr Padraig Walsh, CEO of QQI, when he said:

“This [addition governance requirements] shouldn't have to mean greater diversion of teachers from frontline teaching, as the current burden of administrative work is already doing this, but a move towards a more balanced mix of administrative and teaching staff across the sector” (Walsh, 2018).

Equally, for instructors, who deliver very similar FET programmes leading to the same qualifications, e.g. QQI, City and Guilds, as their teacher counterparts, have a different set of contractual obligations. While fully accepting that FET Colleges Ireland has no role in industrial relations, the following proposal is a contribution to the debate on this crucial dimension of the proposed reforms.

Within the parameters of the FET College of the Future as outlined in the FET Strategy, it is proposed to:

“Consolidate existing FET provision within a single integrated college structure that incorporates the previous functions of both colleges of further education and training centres” (p. 38).

From a staffing perspective it would seem to follow that the staff in both the existing FE Schools and Colleges, and the Training Centres, will be working within the same framework. In other words, it is conceivable that instructors, teachers and industry specialist tutors will be working side by side, contributing the provision of the same FET course. For parties involved in the Conciliation and Arbitration, consideration should be given to how existing contract could be evolved to more appropriately reflect, not only the requirements within a single unified FET system of provision, but also the reality today. The 2008 draft agreement could be a useful starting point.

Professional Development

Professional Development (PD) for all staff, teaching and non-teaching, will be key to the sustainability of the FET College. Significant steps have already

taken place with the provision of PD coordinators in the ETBs. Consideration should also be given to supporting various modes of PD, such as, course fees, work shadowing, and secondment to the vocational workplace.

Learner and Performance Centred

Strategic Performance Agreements

FETCI supports the improvement of standards and system improvements, especially if they are learner-centred. With the introduction of the Strategic Performance Agreements (SPA) in recent years, the purpose of courses has been refined to labour-market focused and progression-focused. FETCI broadly welcomes this refinement.

However, FETCI is concerned about the potential impact of the introduction of any hard targets upon which funding would be provided. In any system, the risk with the use of targets is that it will result in good scores, not necessarily any improvements. Focus could shift from learner-centred performance to the feathering of the performance targets. Any system of performance indicators needs to have a level of sophistication so as to ensure balance. The consequence would be the 'Icarus Paradox', in which the feathered targets present the illusion of success but the reality is that, like the ill-fated Icarus, the wax in the wings will melt and the system will be undermined and subsequently 'crashed to earth'.

In the case of measuring performance of FET courses within the labour market, an equitable system of performance measures is also dependent on the labour market being in a state of equilibrium.

In other words, the levels of over and under education are minimal. That is not the case in Ireland, as discussed earlier. Equally, measuring success in FET students progressing to HE presupposes that the FET to HE is equitable and transparent. That is currently not the case.

Therefore, one has to question whether the performance framework currently in place will be tightened to introduce performance-based funding before equity and equilibrium are more evident in the wider context.

Mechanisms for Learner Feedback and Engagement

In the FE Schools and Colleges student engagement has been a feature of the learning landscape for many years. Given the dispersed nature of FET provision, providing a great FET learner voice at the national level is logistically difficult. FETCI have been engaging with USI with a view to developing proposals for a structured approach to learner engagement with the FET Schools and Colleges. This work could augment the valuable engagement infrastructures that are currently in operation throughout the FET sector.

Digital Transformation of FET

The Digital Transformation of FET consists of two broad elements – the enhancement of teaching and learning (including the teaching of digital skills), and the management and corporate governance of the FET system. Just as fragmentation has been a persistent feature of FET programmes, so too has it been synonymous with the siloed funding and reporting systems. In consolidating and rationalising FET provision into a single unified system, there is a clear opportunity to include the digitisation of the funding and reporting dimensions.

In keeping with Action 1 of the Government's public service reform plan Our Public Service 2020 (www.ops2020.gov.ie) – Accelerate digital delivery of services, FETCI is of the view that there is an opportunity to explore the digital transformation of the systems supporting the learner's journey through FET. From accessing information about courses, to making an application, seeking any supports required, IT services, and certification, an integrated Management Learning Environment (MLE) should be a goal of this strategic objective.

In our submission to the public consultation on the National Resilience and Recovery Plan (FETCI, 2021a), the Committee highlighted the importance of the digital dimension of the entire FET sector's response to the impact of COVID-19 on our learners. The submission also emphasised that in implementing this response, some gaps were identified.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and in particular, the resultant sudden shift to online learning, highlighted the issue of digital exclusion for many vulnerable groups in society. While there has been considerable resources made available to mitigate these difficulties, such as the availability of digital devices, e.g. laptops and tablets, the supporting of these new platforms in a learning environment has been highlighted as an area requiring additional investment.

The impact of the first Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Strategy (SOLAS, 2016) was evident even from the early days of the COVID-19 restrictions. Indeed, the appointment of TEL Coordinator in each ETB was particularly timely as the impact of the pandemic took hold. While these initiatives, along with the provision of the devices were positive first steps, the absence of educational technology and IT support, for both the teachers and the learners in FET, as is available in higher education, proved a significant obstacle to be addressed as part of the learning process. This resulted in teachers having to engage, as best as they could, in assisting students with technology issues, often during class-time, thereby reducing the time available for teaching and learning. Since the onset of the Covid-19 restrictions, and the move to online teaching and learning, teachers, tutors, and instructors have engaged in considerable reskilling and upskilling programmes to ensure that their skills in the area of online education and training were brought up to the required standard. This is a new pool of skills to be built on.

Equally, since the lockdown in March 2020, the vast majority of society have become far more familiar with online activities, albeit education, shopping, or meetings. This new reality makes the design and support of online programmes an area for immediate development in the coming years.

To this end FETCI is proposing the establishment, in each Education and Training Board (ETB), of a specialist Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Support Unit, and an IT Support Services Unit, to support the significant increase in online learning. This increase in online learning is expected to continue as a significant element of provision into the future. Within each ETB, this Unit would facilitate the development of digital learning content and resources for a digital repository. The repository could be built up over time through contributions from all such units in the 16 ETBs. This content would be held under the Open Education Resource and, through the open licencing and creative commons licencing protocols, would be available, nationally, to the entire FET sector.

Capital Infrastructure

FETCI strongly supports the ambition in the FET Strategy to improve the capital infrastructure in FET. In our submission to the public consultation on the National Development Plan (FETCI, 2021b) the need for a significant investment programme in fit-for-purpose Further Education and Training College buildings and facilities was highlighted.

In the 2019 National Risk Assessment (Government of Ireland, 2019), Risk number 4.1 is identified as the “Capacity of the Higher and Further Education System”. While the narrative in this report focuses heavily in the higher education system, the absence of mention of the FET system is in itself an even greater risk.

In this regard, there is an urgent need to significantly increase the current FET capital budget of €33m by several orders of magnitude.

Appendix 1

The Member of the FET Colleges Ireland Committee are

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Ms Maureen Conway	Former Principal, Ballyfermot College of Further Education City of Dublin ETB
Dr Jean Fitzgerald	Principal, Coláiste Íde College of Further Education City of Dublin ETB
Mr David Forde	Deputy Principal, Carlow Institute of Further Education and Training Kilkenny-Carlow ETB
Ms Geraldine Gibbons	Principal, Galway Technical Institute Galway-Roscommon ETB
Mr Stephen Goulding	Principal, Kerry College Kerry ETB
Ms Deirdre Hanamy	Former Principal, Blackrock Further Education Institute Dublin-Dun Laoghaire ETB
Ms Ann Marie Lacey	Principal, Cavan Institute Cavan-Monaghan ETB
Mr Tom Lowry	Principal, Moate Community School ACCS Representative
Mr Patrick Maunsell	Principal, Limerick College of Further Education Limerick-Clare ETB
Ms Paula McCarthy	Principal, St John’s Central College Cork ETB
Mr David McDonnell	Principal, Drogheda Institute of Further Education Louth-Meath ETB
Dr Markita Mulvey	Principal, Carlow Institute of Further Education and Training Kilkenny-Carlow ETB
Ms Cecilia Munro	Principal, Ballyfermot College of Further Education City of Dublin ETB

Mr Michael Murphy	Principal, Westport College of Further Education Mayo-Sligo-Leitrim ETB
Ms Catherine O’Sullivan	Director of the Further Education Support Unit for Voluntary Secondary and Community Comprehensive Schools
Ms Helen Ryan	Principal, Cork College of Commerce Cork ETB
Mr Ray Tedders	Principal, Bray Institute of Further Education Kildare-Wicklow ETB
Ms Alison Ward	Deputy Principal, Galway Technical Institute Galway-Roscommon ETB

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