



Vocational education and training in Ireland

Short description



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The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
(Cedefop) is the European Union's reference centre for vocational education and training, skills and qualifications. We provide information, research, analyses and evidence on vocational education and training, skills and qualifications for policy-making in the EU Member States.

Cedefop was originally established in 1975 by Council Regulation (EEC) No 337/75. This decision was repealed in 2019 by Regulation (EU) 2019/128 establishing Cedefop as a Union Agency with a renewed mandate.

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Foreword

Initial vocational education and training (IVET) and continuing vocational education and training form a single sector within the Irish education system, more commonly known in Ireland as further education and training (FET). FET acts as a bridge between secondary and higher education, offering vocational education and training (VET), apprenticeship and second-chance education for young people aged 16+ and adults. In Ireland, IVET is delivered not in the post-primary (secondary) school sector but only in the FET sector.

The major FET providers are Ireland's 16 education and training boards, each with its own geographical region. An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (SOLAS) is the devolved State agency that funds and coordinates FET and sets national FET strategy priorities, while Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is an awarding and quality assurance body, whose remit extends to both general and vocational education and training awards. Both SOLAS and QQI act under the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, which has overall responsibility for the tertiary education system, comprising FET and higher education.

A key feature of the Irish system is its dual learning model, including apprenticeships that alternate between workplace learning and off-the-job training in centres or colleges. Strategic priorities in the FET sector include implementing an outcomes-based funding model, expanding apprenticeships and giving education providers increased responsibility for craft apprenticeships. Key areas of focus include fostering inclusion through the adult literacy for life strategy, developing micro-qualifications in AI and green skills under the skills to advance initiative, and moving towards a new unified tertiary sector to provide seamless progression pathways between FET and higher education.

Irish VET policy is strongly aligned with the EU's VET priorities and commitments as stated in the [2020 Council recommendation on VET](#) and the [Herning Declaration](#) under the Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union. They resonate with the [union of skills](#) and the [European skills agenda](#), showcasing Ireland's contribution to fostering Europe's competitiveness and potential to inform the [upcoming EU VET strategy](#). The guidelines of QQI for FET providers are complementary to the [European quality assurance reference framework for VET](#). The national approach to the recognition of prior learning and to access, transfer and progression is aligned with the [2012 Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#). Ireland's focus on upskilling for the transition to a net-zero economy and the emphasis on addressing skills shortages in the construction and green sectors reflect the country's efforts to meet [European Commission recommendations](#).

During Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2026, VET continues to be high on the policy agenda in both Ireland and the EU. Ireland's priorities include a strong emphasis on good practices in green, digital and construction skills, as set out in the first national 10-year FET policy, green skills 2030, and delivered through its implementation plan. Ireland's priorities show the important role VET plays in balancing the skills needs of the rapidly evolving economy and labour market with a strong lifelong learning culture, supporting citizenship and inclusion. The country's efforts to strengthen lifelong learning are reflected in some VET indicators. For example, in 2025, the share of unemployed adults aged 20–34 years with a learning experience in the last four weeks was 31.5 %, which is above the EU-27 average of 25.8 % and exceeds the EU target of 20 % set by the skills agenda for 2025. Ireland has made significant progress in reforming apprenticeships, and it increased the share of recent IVET graduates (20- to 34-year-olds) with work-based learning experience as part of their VET from 39.2 % in 2023 to 48.7 % in 2024 (the EU-27 average was 65.3 % in 2024).

This publication, prepared in close cooperation with representatives from SOLAS, aims to provide European readers with a succinct overview of Ireland's VET system. It highlights its distinctive features, strategic policy developments, challenges and opportunities, as well as the close links between FET and the labour market, and the contribution of FET to strengthening social cohesion and actively promoting a lifelong learning culture. We hope it contributes to mutual learning and exchange, cooperation and policy innovation within and across EU Member States.

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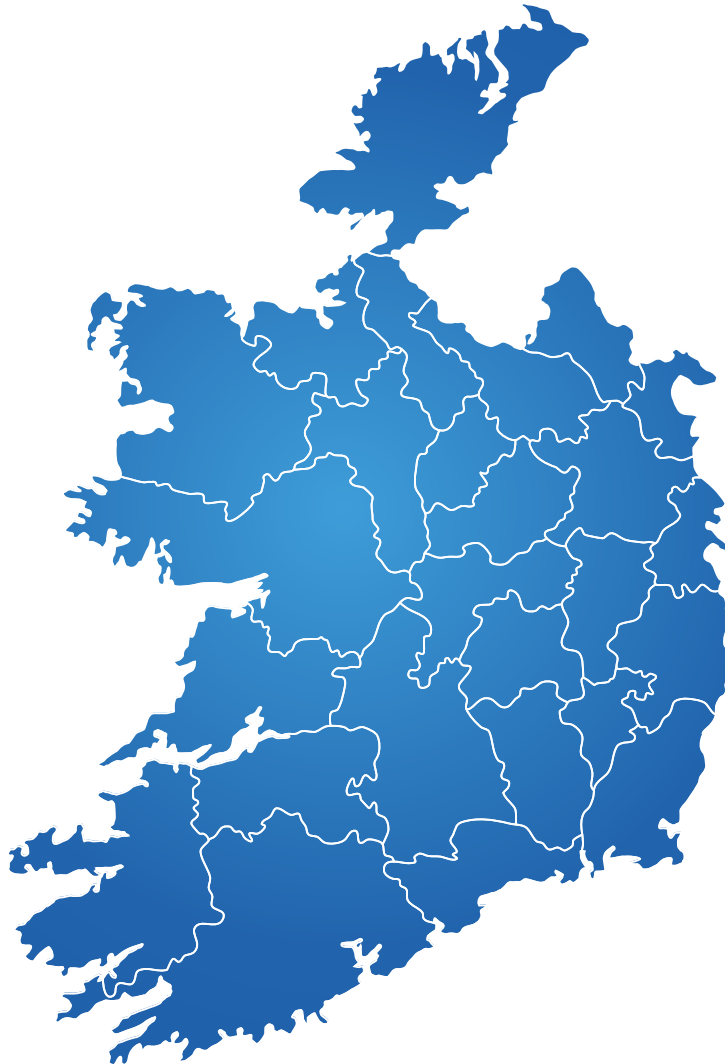
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Ireland



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General Information

Area	69 947 km ²
Capital	Dublin
Government	The Prime Minister (Taoiseach), who is the head of government, is appointed by the President after nomination by the lower house (Dail) and exercises executive power. The President, who is the head of State, mostly has ceremonial powers. The parliament has two chambers (an upper and a lower house).
Political system	Parliamentary republic
Gross domestic product per capita	EUR 81 200 in 2024

Source: [European Union: Principles, countries, history: EU countries: Ireland](#).

External factors influencing VET

Demographics

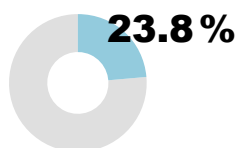


Population

5 440 278

In [2025](#) (+ 7.4 % since 2021; EU + 1.1 %).

**Old-age
dependency ratio**
23.8 % in [2025](#)
(expected [50.6 %](#) by [2070](#))



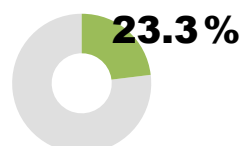
**Ageing
population**
(2015-2025)

15.7 % age 65+
(+2.8 %)

12.7 % age 15-24
(+0.5 %)

Foreign immigrants and inhabitants

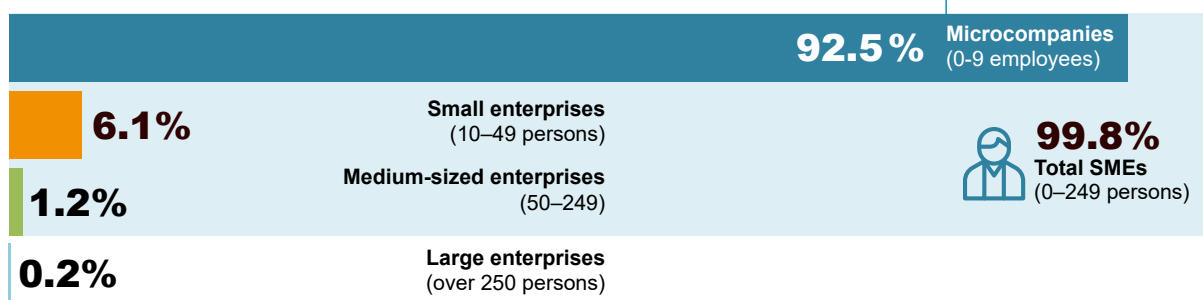
23.3 % ([2025](#)), with 6.7 %
born in the EU, and 16.6 %
born outside the EU



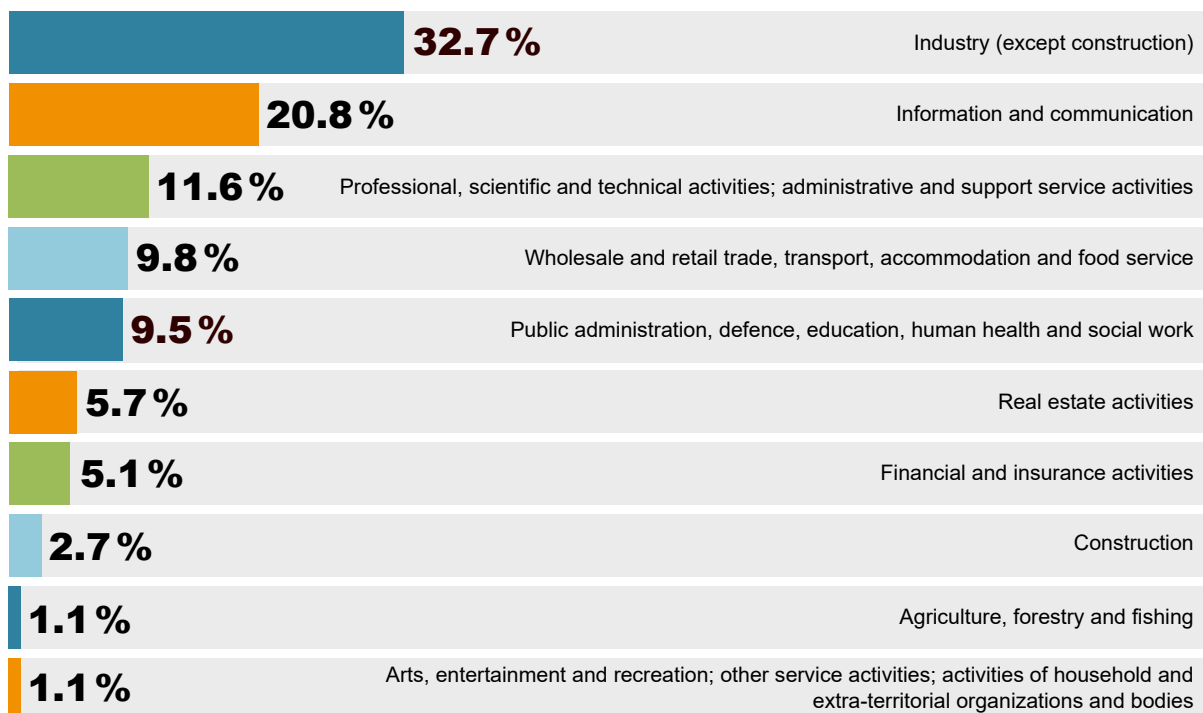
Economy and employment

Large, medium, small and micro companies in [2024](#)

Employing
26.4 %
of all employees



Main economic sectors by gross value added in [2024](#)



Government spending on education (% of GDP, [2024](#))

2.7 %

Labour market

In terms of labour market regulation, Ireland's regulatory framework is flexible. There are comparatively few occupations for which a VET qualification is a prerequisite for employment (notable exceptions include electrician and gas installer).

4.7%
Unemployment rate

In [2025](#), EU: 6.0 %.



9 pp
Gender employment gap

In [2025](#), EU: 9.6 pp.

The employment rate for men aged 20–64 is 9 percentage points higher than for women, close to the EU average of 9.6 percentage points. This indicator has steadily improved in Ireland over the recent years, as it has dropped by more than 2 percentage points since 2022 (11.4).



73.5%
VET graduate employment rate

In [2025](#), EU: 80.2 %.

Employment of recent VET graduates (age 20–34, one to three years after completing upper secondary or post-secondary VET) was 73.5 % in Ireland in 2025. This is below the EU average (80.2 %).



Occupations with most job openings by 2035

([Cedefop 2025a](#))

- Professionals
- Technicians and associate professionals
- Legislators, senior officials and managers
- Service workers and shop and market sales workers



Occupations with most replacement demand by 2035

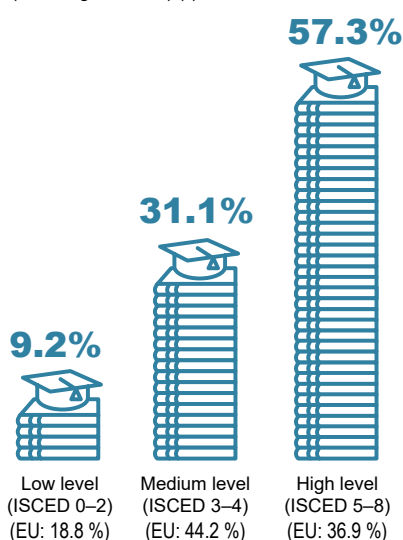
([Cedefop 2025a](#))

- Professionals
- Service workers and shop and market sales workers
- Legislators, senior officials and managers
- Technicians and associate professionals

Education and skills

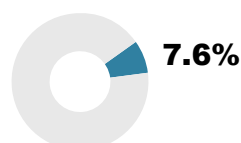
Education attainment

(2025, ages 25–64) (*)



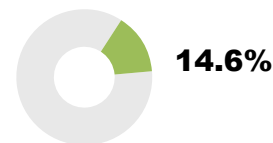
(*) Computed from Eurostat, [lfsa_pgaed](#) (extracted on 5 May 2026).

NEETs rate for 15- to 29-year-olds



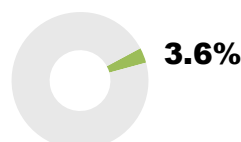
In [2024](#), EU: 11 %
EU target: 9 % by 2030

Participation in lifelong learning in the last 4 weeks (ages 25–64)



In [2025](#), EU 13.7 %

Early leavers from education and training



[2025](#) (decrease by 1.4 pp since 2020),
EU: 9.1 %; EU target: below 9 %

Basic digital skills



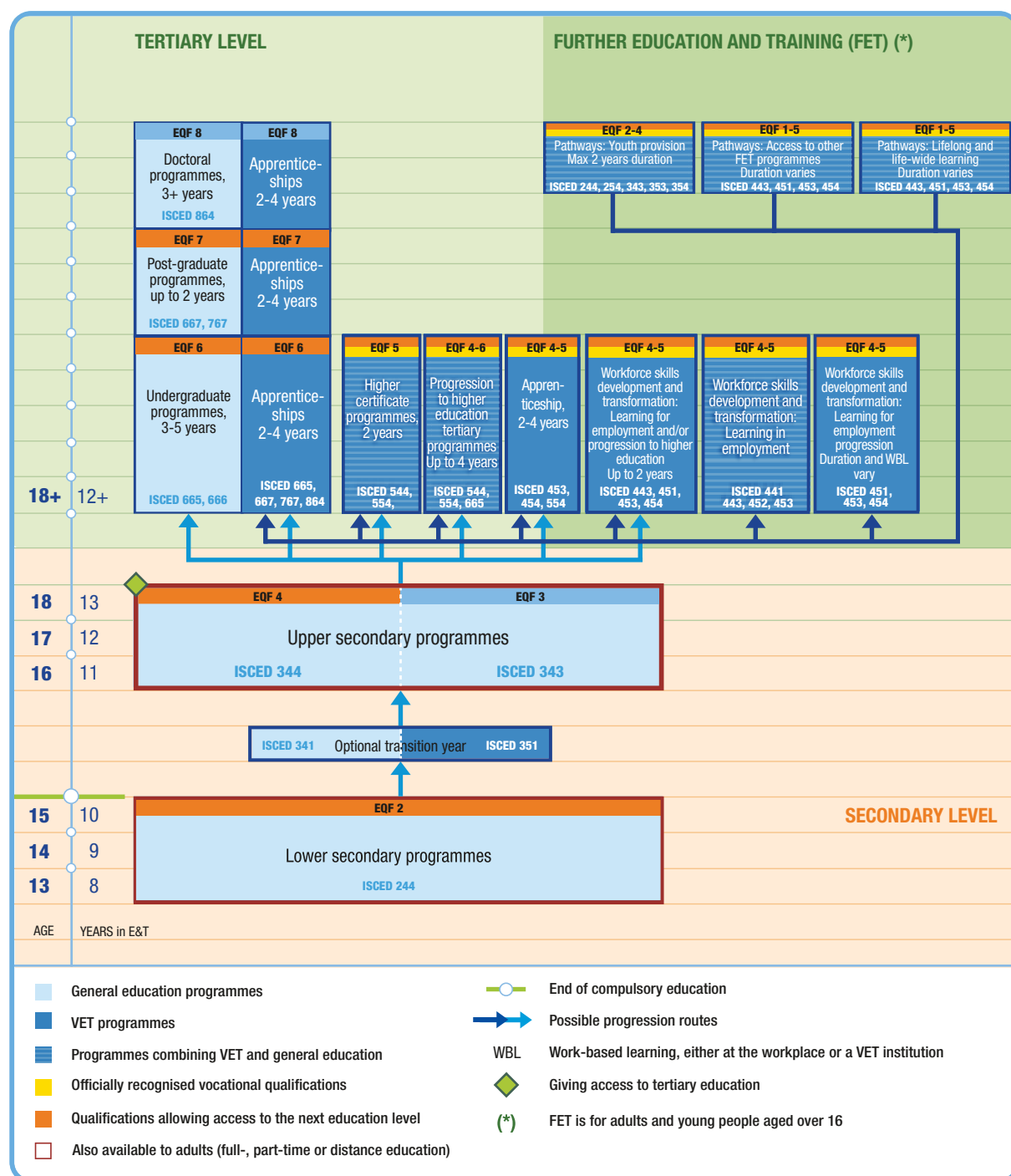
[Digital economy and society indicators 2026](#), EU: 60.40 %

CHAPTER 1.

VET provision



Figure 1. VET in the Irish education and training system



NB: ISCED-P 2011 codes are provided by ReferNet Ireland (SOLAS) for programmes in place in 2026. They may differ from the 2020-2021 [ISCED mapping](#) available from Eurostat at the time of publication.

Source: Cedefop and ReferNet Ireland, 2026

1.1. Education and training system overview

Ireland's education and training system comprises five sectors:

- early childhood care and education (ECCE);
- primary education;
- post-primary (secondary) education, divided into lower secondary education (European qualifications framework (EQF) level 2) and upper secondary education (EQF levels 3–4);
- non-tertiary further education and training (FET) (including vocational education and training (VET);
- tertiary education.

Education is compulsory from the age of 6 to 16 or until students have completed three years of post-primary education. Most children attend State-funded schools.

1.1.1. Structure of the education system

ECCE provision is a free, two-year preschool programme for two- to five-year-old children ⁽¹⁾. Childcare services delivering the ECCE programme adhere to both the national quality framework [Síolta](#) ⁽²⁾ and the curriculum framework [Aistear](#) ⁽³⁾ for ECCE. All forms of pre-primary education are optional.

In Ireland, all children are entitled to free primary education. The compulsory age to begin education is six, although children can start at age four or five. The primary school cycle is eight years long, with most children completing primary education by age 12. Ireland's [primary school curriculum](#) is set by the Minister for Education and Youth, who is advised by the [National Council for Curriculum and Assessment \(NCCA\)](#).

Post-primary (secondary) education is for a minimum of five years:

- a three-year lower secondary cycle for the junior certificate (national framework of qualifications (NFQ) level 3 / EQF level 2), with examinations at age 15/16;
- a two-year upper secondary cycle for the leaving certificate (NFQ levels 4–5 / EQF levels 3–4), with examinations at age 17/18.

The [junior](#) and [leaving certificate](#) curricula are also set by the Minister for Education and Youth, advised by the NCCA.

In upper secondary education, also known as the senior cycle, there is an optional one-year programme, known as [transition year](#) (TY). This is a stand-alone programme with a locally adapted curriculum, designed around the development and learning of students moving from the junior into the senior cycle, and as they prepare for their future lives as local, national and global citizens (Cedefop, & SOLAS, forthcoming). Learning outcomes achieved in TY do not form part of the assessment of the senior cycle.

In 2025, to support innovation in TY, the NCCA partnered with Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) ⁽⁴⁾ and SOLAS to develop and publish [initial vocational education and training \(IVET\) modules](#). These IVET modules are delivered by FET and higher education (HE) providers to TY school students, in local and regional partnerships with schools. Their delivery started in 2025 as micro-courses, with microcredentials embedded into the IVET module, where possible. This development gives school students the opportunity to build workplace and life skills in a FET setting (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2026a).

⁽¹⁾ The Department of Children, Disability and Equality publishes the age eligibility criteria for the ECCE programme by year of birth and the age range the child must be within by certain calendar dates.

⁽²⁾ [Síolta](#) is the national quality framework for early childhood education.

⁽³⁾ [Aistear](#) is the national early childhood curriculum framework for children from birth to age six years.

⁽⁴⁾ For more information, see [IVET – FET transition year programme](#) on ETBI's website.

FET in Ireland comprises post-secondary and second-chance education and training (Cedefop, & SOLAS, forthcoming).

HE is provided by universities, technological universities, institutes of technology and colleges of education. It also encompasses a [unified tertiary degree system](#), integrating FET with HE (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2026b).

VET is provided primarily within the FET sector. However, since 2016, the apprenticeship system has been expanded to include new programmes that are delivered not only within FET but also in HE (Cedefop, & SOLAS, forthcoming).

1.2. Government-regulated VET provision

Ireland's [FET strategy for 2026–2030](#) was launched in May 2026, building on the earlier [FET strategy](#), which ran to 2024. During 2025, a public consultation on the 2026–2030 FET strategy took place.

The FET sector was characterised by a high degree of diversity in terms of programme, level and learner types. Programme-based rigidity around the deployment of resources and operational regulations has been another challenging aspect of the FET sector. For these reasons, a new [FET funding model](#) has been developed, following a review by an international panel to move away from programme silos, to reflect the outcomes and performance of Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and to facilitate strategic investment in long-term priorities (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2026c). In this context, FET programme categories have been streamlined as follows:

- apprenticeships (offered in FET and higher education);
- workforce skills development and transformation;
- FET pathways; and
- strategic investment (see section 1.5).

1.2.1. Apprenticeship

An apprenticeship is a programme of structured education and training that formally combines and alternates workplace learning with learning in an education or training centre. It is a dual system, combining on-the-job, employer-based training with off-the-job training, and leads to an award on the NFQ (Cedefop, & SOLAS, forthcoming).

Legislation governs the national apprenticeship system, primarily the [1967 Industrial Training Act](#). The legislation sets out the overall structure of the national system and the protections and responsibilities of apprentices, employers, and education and training providers. The [2012 Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act](#) (Irish Government, 2012) also underpins apprenticeship, in particular validation and quality assurance arrangements (Cedefop, & SOLAS, forthcoming).

A [structured craft model apprenticeship](#) has been implemented in Ireland since the 1980s. Next to the craft model, a new model of apprenticeship was introduced in 2015 following the publication of a [review of apprenticeship training in 2013](#). Both models are currently operational. Craft apprenticeships are primarily in areas such as construction, electrics, motor mechanics and engineering, while new apprenticeships are available in areas including biopharma, ICT, finance, property services, hospitality and food, logistics, and sales (Cedefop, & SOLAS, forthcoming).

The [craft transfer plan](#) (Generation Apprenticeship, 2026b) is a strategic initiative of DFHERIS agencies to transfer responsibility for craft apprenticeships from SOLAS to education providers. It aims to improve quality, ensure that programmes remain aligned with labour market needs, and deliver meaningful outcomes for learners, employers and society. A high-level craft transfer plan was approved in January 2026. Since then, the DFHERIS, SOLAS, the Higher Education Authority

(HEA) and QQI, in close cooperation with FET and HE providers, have collaborated to develop a detailed implementation plan ⁽⁵⁾.

Apprenticeship in Ireland is open to all individuals above the statutory school-leaving age (16), including young adults leaving education and training and those already in employment. The minimum educational entry requirement is the junior certificate or equivalent (EQF level 2) (Cedefop, & SOLAS, forthcoming). Different entry requirements may exist in some apprenticeships and employers. Apprenticeships may also target different groups, such as lower secondary education graduates.

Apprenticeship in Ireland is delivered by both further and higher education and training providers. It leads to awards at EQF levels 4–8. The duration of apprenticeship is between two and four years. All craft apprenticeships currently last four years. The duration of new apprenticeships varies between two and four years, with most of them lasting two years. All apprenticeships are expected to offer progression pathways. As of April 2026, [82 different apprenticeships](#) were available, with more in development.

Apprenticeships must include at least 50 % on-the-job learning, although different arrangements may apply in some cases.

The National Apprenticeship Office's [progress report for 2024 and plans for 2025](#) (Generation Apprenticeship, 2025) states that 9 352 new apprenticeship registrations were recorded for 2024.

1.2.2. Workforce skills development and transformation

This provision aims to meet the specific skills needs of the national or regional economy, industry sectors and the individual learners. Workforce skills development and transformation encompasses:

- progression to higher education, including the [new tertiary degrees](#), or to or within employment;
- certification, including for regulated employment sectors, such as construction, childcare and healthcare;
- upskilling/reskilling needs (employees/jobseekers), including [micro-qualifications](#) as a flexible, agile provision.

This FET provision for workforce typically includes the following upskilling and reskilling initiatives and programmes:

- learning for employment progression;
- learning in employment; and
- learning for employment and/or progression to higher education.

1.2.2.1. Learning for employment progression

Part-time [evening training](#) courses typically last 30 hours over 10 weeks. They provide learners with employability-related skills and qualifications through short upskilling modules for both unemployed and employed persons.

A [traineeship](#) is a full-time programme of structured training combining learning in an education and training setting with workplace learning. Traineeships typically last four to nine months.

[Specific skills training](#) courses are full-time courses. Courses of six months or longer are designed to meet industry needs in several sectors and are fully certified. Shorter courses of 4 to 10 weeks allow individuals to upgrade their skills quickly.

Providers of workforce skills development and transformation programmes include FET colleges and enterprise networks. Learners may receive a full or partial award (partial awards are being recognised as part fulfilment of the requirements for a full award). Awards span EQF

(5) For more information see [craft transfer plan newsletter, May 2026](#).

levels 4–5. Relevant or specialist industry certification from other awarding bodies may be delivered in response to the needs of the labour market or specific industry.

Traineeships, specialist skills training and evening training account for approximately 10 % of SOLAS-funded VET provision, according to a [2024 report](#) (SOLAS, 2024a). Regarding Enterprise provision, the [Skillnet Ireland 2024 annual report](#) indicates that, of the 90 136 learners who undertook training with Skillnet Ireland in 2024, 2 046 (2 %) were jobseekers who participated through Skillnet Ireland's Skills Connect programmes across 26 Skillnet Ireland business networks.

1.2.2.2. *Learning in employment*

This FET provision includes courses that respond to the specific skills needs of employees, employers and industry, requiring certified training or education to support career progression, upskilling and reskilling.

[Skills to advance](#) is a national initiative that provides upskilling and reskilling to employees in jobs undergoing change and to those currently employed in vulnerable sectors.

[eCollege](#) is a government-funded online learning platform. It provides free online courses with certificates. The courses are available to anyone over 18. They cover topics such as information technology, business, graphic design and software development.

Providers of learning in employment programmes include FET colleges and eCollege. Awards include full or partial certification at EQF levels 4–5 and industry-relevant certification not aligned to the NFQ. The share of learners in this programme type out of the total number of VET learners corresponds to approximately 10 % of SOLAS-funded VET provision, according to a [2024 report](#) (SOLAS, 2024a).

1.2.2.3. *Learning for employment and/or progression to higher education*

The [post leaving certificate \(PLC\)](#) programme is a full-time programme that provides specific vocational skills to those who have completed the senior cycle, adults returning to education who are deemed to have the necessary competences, and those who are unemployed and seeking to upskill. PLC courses represent the largest component of full-time FET provision in Ireland. While initially developed as a route into employment, and therefore largely as an alternative to third-level education, PLC courses have also provided a route into higher education. PLC courses last at least one academic year, and many offer the option to progress into a second year. According to [recent research findings](#), over 91% of the 2021/2022 PLC graduate cohort were either in employment or education or both one year after course completion. These findings confirm that PLC courses offer viable pathways into employment and further education for learners.

The [vocational training opportunities scheme](#) is a full-time programme established to provide a range of courses that meet the education and training needs of unemployed people. The scheme allows successful applicants to keep their social welfare allowances while attending their courses. Learners can attend for a maximum of two years.

Providers of learning for employment and/or progression to higher education programmes are ETB FET Colleges. The certification received depends on the course followed. Usually, courses lead to awards that have been placed at EQF level 4 or 5. Depending on the curriculum and learning outcomes of the certification, they are recognised for entry to the labour market, career progression, progression to other VET courses or progression to higher education. The share of learners in this programme type out of the total number of VET learners corresponds to approximately 19 % of SOLAS-funded VET provision, according to a [2024 report](#) (SOLAS, 2024a).

According to [recent research findings](#), over 91% of the 2021/2022 PLC graduate cohort were either in employment or education or both one year after course completion. This finding confirms that PLC courses offer viable pathways into employment and further education for learners.

1.2.2.4. *Progression to higher education – tertiary programmes*

A new development in Ireland since 2023 has been the introduction of [tertiary programmes](#), which offer a seamless progression route from FET to HE through the development of shared curricula, teaching collaboration, programme co-design and co-delivery within shared spaces and a shared student experience. The degree programme offers learners two years in a FET college and then progression to complete the degree programme in a partner HE institute in a further two years. Certification at EQF levels 4 and 5 is achieved through the first two years in a FET college, with certification at EQF levels 5 and 6 being delivered by the partner HE institute.

Providers for this programme include ETBs and FET colleges for EQF levels 4 and 5, and universities for EQF levels 5 and 6. Learners receive a bachelor's degree upon completion of their course.

1.2.2.5. *Higher certificate programme*

'Higher certificate' refers to two-year undergraduate higher education courses at EQF level 5. They are taught by universities and charge a fee.

1.2.3. FET pathways

FET pathways offer education and training opportunities. They often bridge the gap between foundational learning and accessing VET. This provision offers a range of progression opportunities, as follows:

- youth provision;
- access to other FET programmes;
- lifelong and life-wide learning.

1.2.3.1. *Youth provision*

Youth provision targets learners aged 16 to 21. The national [Youthreach programme](#) is a full-time programme and delivers a range of both learning supports and certification options at EQF levels 2–4 to early school leavers or unemployed young people, typically with less than a junior or leaving certificate (EQF levels 2–4). The programme usually provides two years' integrated education, training and work experience. The main providers include ETBs, designated centres for education (Youthreach centres) and Community Training Centres. The work-based learning component accounts for at least 30 % of the programme. The share of learners in this programme type out of the total number of VET learners corresponds to approximately 5 % of SOLAS-funded VET provision, according to a [2024 report](#) (SOLAS, 2024a).

Flexible part-time provision is also available through FET pathways from school provision. In this case, learners must be aged 16 or over and attend the secondary education TY programme. IVET modules began on a phased basis in schools as part of the TY programme under the upper secondary senior cycle. These short vocational modules are delivered as practice-based learning to develop workforce skills across a wide range of industry sectors. Where possible, micro-qualifications are built into the course to support progression between secondary education and FET.

1.2.3.2. Access to other FET programmes

The [back to education initiative](#) delivers a range of part-time modular certification opportunities for adults and young people aged 16 or over. Courses lead to certificates at EQF levels 1–4 in a range of vocational and general education modules. Learners can build credits towards a full award to support their progression to [other FET programmes](#), including [full-time courses](#).

[Bridging and foundation courses](#) help prepare learners for labour market-led courses or entry-level employment. These courses can be short or long. They deliver EQF levels 2–3. They are aimed at individuals who have not worked for at least a year, or who wish to return to employment, education or training after a long period outside work.

The [local training initiative programme](#) is a project-based training and work experience programme carried out in the local community by local community groups. It is delivered in a variety of settings, such as football clubs, community centres and horticultural sites. The programme is designed for people with low levels of education, primarily aged 18 to 35, who are unemployed and have difficulty entering the labour market due to personal, social or geographical disadvantage. It is a full-time programme, but its duration can vary. It offers a range of certification options at EQF levels 2–5.

[Specialist training provision](#) delivers full-time training courses for people aged 16 to 65 who have disabilities or physical or mental health issues and need more intensive support. The programme is delivered in a range of community-based and outreach locations. Courses last from 6 months to 3 years and offer a range of certification options at EQF levels 1–5.

[Prison education](#) is available in all prisons in Ireland. It is provided in partnership with a range of educational agencies including the ETBs, public library services, the Open University and the Arts Council. Literacy, numeracy and general basic education provision are prioritised, but a broad programme of education based on an adult education approach is also available. It includes the junior certificate, the leaving certificate and other courses.

The main providers for the pathways detailed above include ETB's FET colleges and centres, and community and outreach locations including prisons and disability service providers. The share of learners in this programme type out of the total number of VET learners corresponds to approximately 11 % of SOLAS-funded VET provision, according to a [2024 report](#) (SOLAS, 2024a).

1.2.3.3. Lifelong and life-wide learning

The [adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills](#) and [community education](#) programmes are courses designed to meet the needs of the most educationally, socially or economically disadvantaged learners. They empower individuals and communities to achieve personal, educational, employment or other goals. In a needs-led approach, courses can offer a range of part-time certified and uncertified learning opportunities to meet the needs and interests of individuals and groups of learners. Certification ranges from EQF level 1 to level 5.

[Adult Literacy for Life \(ALL\)](#) is a ten-year, whole-of-government systems-based response to meet the needs of adult learners for literacy, numeracy and digital skills. In September 2025, Ireland's National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) was [awarded one of three UNESCO Confucius prizes for literacy](#) for its eLearning programme [Learn with NALA](#). This programme supports unmet literacy and numeracy needs of adults in Ireland as part of the adult literacy for life strategy. It is a web-based programme offering over 50 free courses for learners aged 16 and over.

The [community education framework](#) was launched in 2025 by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) together with SOLAS and key partners from the FET sector in Ireland (ReferNet Ireland & Cedefop, 2024). It marks an important step forward for community education in Ireland and seeks to ensure consistent approaches to community education across the FET sector.

In Ireland, [English for speakers of other languages](#) classes are provided by ETBs to meet the day-to-day social, cultural and work-related language needs of new community members. Priority is given to unemployed migrants, asylum seekers and refugees with limited or no English language skills.

The main providers for the pathways detailed above are the ETB's adult and community education service and Youthreach centres and Community Training Centres. Community education is delivered in partnership with community groups or other statutory and non-statutory agencies. The share of learners in this programme type out of the total number of VET learners corresponds to approximately 5 % of SOLAS-funded VET provision, according to a [2024 report](#) (SOLAS, 2024a).

1.3. Upskilling programmes for adults

[Skillnet Ireland](#) is Ireland's national workforce development agency. It works through 70 sectoral business networks and national initiatives to design and deliver flexible demand-led upskilling programmes in partnership with Irish industry and education and training providers. Skillnet Ireland funds free upskilling courses for unemployed individuals under the [Skills Connect programme](#) to help jobseekers acquire skills that are in demand by enterprises. The programme aims to help participants who have recently become unemployed return swiftly to the workforce.

1.4. VET governance

VET in Ireland is mainly part of the [FET](#) sector, which encompasses VET for young people aged 16+ and adults. Although [IVET modules](#) have been available in TY since 2025, upper secondary education (leading to the leaving certificate) is generally academic. Therefore, IVET generally occurs at the post-secondary, non-tertiary level. Continuing vocational education and training is a major focus of the Irish FET system, with provision taking place through upskilling/reskilling and adult learning programmes. VET at the tertiary level occurs through apprenticeship, higher certificate programmes and progression to higher education programmes, including the tertiary degrees introduced in 2023.

The [DFHERIS](#) is responsible for FET EQF levels 1–5 (NFQ levels 1–6). SOLAS is the devolved statutory agency under the aegis of the DFHERIS for funding and coordinating FET. SOLAS is also responsible for the national FET strategy's priorities and setting the national system performance targets. Ireland's [FET strategy for 2026–2030](#) was launched in May 2026.

The tertiary education system comprises FET and HE, both under the DFHERIS, with SOLAS being responsible for FET and the [HEA](#) acting as the statutory body for HE.

The National Apprenticeship Office is a joint body established by SOLAS and the HEA on behalf of the government to manage all aspects of the apprenticeship system. SOLAS is the statutory authority for apprenticeship in Ireland. Its responsibilities include maintaining a register of employers approved (by SOLAS) to take on apprentices, and a register of apprentices. A condition of employer approval and apprentice registration is an agreement to abide by the [Apprenticeship Code of Practice for Employers and Apprentices](#) (Cedefop, & SOLAS, forthcoming).

The [2013 Further Education and Training Act](#) (FET Act) outlines the statutory functions of SOLAS, defines its role in the national education and training system, and sets out its relationship with ETBs and the DFHERIS. As a statutory agency under the aegis of the DFHERIS, SOLAS is accountable for the performance of its functions. The legislation also confers responsibility on SOLAS for gathering and disseminating data on education and labour market trends, and for supporting a system-wide response to identified skills needs.

While it does not directly deliver education and training programmes, SOLAS is responsible for shaping, coordinating and supporting a cohesive, strategically aligned FET system. Operating at the interface between government policy and frontline delivery, SOLAS acts as the primary conduit between the DFHERIS, the 16 ETBs and other FET providers.

Its statutory functions, as defined in the FET Act, include:

- planning, allocating and overseeing funding to ETBs;
- preparing and monitoring national strategies;
- collecting and analysing system-wide data;
- providing policy and performance advice to the minister.

The act also mandates SOLAS to produce a FET strategy every five years for submission to the DFHERIS. These functions are intended to ensure that FET provision is strategically planned, appropriately resourced and responsive to learner, labour market and regional needs.

SOLAS operates as a co-governance partner in the National Apprenticeship Office, established on an administrative basis under [Section 18 of the HEA Act 2022](#).

In addition to its primary legislative foundation under the FET Act (Irish government, 2013) the statutory remit of SOLAS is further defined through a series of statutory instruments (SIs) that operationalise its functions. An example of these is [SI No 291 of 2013, Safety, Health and Welfare at Work \(Construction\) Regulations 2013](#), which provides the legal basis for the [safe pass programme](#) and schemes such as the [construction skills certification scheme](#) and [quarry skills certification scheme](#). These provisions were subsequently updated through [SI No 129 of 2019, Safety, Health and Welfare at Work \(Construction\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2019](#). Under Sections 4 and 5 of this SI, SOLAS is designated as the national authority that is responsible for administering and certifying construction safety training programmes.

Upon the enactment of the [Construction Safety Licensing Bill 2023](#), it is proposed that the construction skills and quarry skills certification scheme programmes will transition into a formal licensing regime that designates SOLAS as the licensing authority.

SOLAS is also responsible for fulfilling its functions under the [Industrial Training Act 1967](#), as amended. Under this legislation, SOLAS has specific responsibilities relating to the making of industrial training orders and other matters. Under the craft transfer plan (Generation Apprenticeship, 2026b), responsibility for craft apprenticeships is currently being transferred from SOLAS to education providers (see also Section 1.2.2).

1.5. Financing VET

In 2024, FET funding was EUR 1.176 million ⁽⁶⁾, processed through SOLAS for the provision of FET programmes. Included within the funding allocated for FET is the funding for VET programmes. The funding is received from two main sources, the exchequer and the National Training Fund. The exchequer is the main bank account held by the Irish government in the Central Bank of Ireland. The National Training Fund supports the training of those seeking to take up employment, and those in employment seeking to upskill and facilitate lifelong learning. It is financed by a levy on employers. Most of the funding (EUR 1.080 million) is allocated through SOLAS to the ETBs (Cedefop, & SOLAS, forthcoming).

In 2022, SOLAS published a [review of the FET funding model](#), following close, extensive consultation and ongoing collaboration among the DFHERIS, SOLAS, the ETBs and other key stakeholders, including industry, staff and learner representation. The review sets out a new vision

⁽⁶⁾ [SOLAS annual report and accounts for 2024](#).

for the approach to the funding of ETBs, involving a simplification of the process into a [‘five pot’ structure](#) for outcomes-based funding (Cedefop, & SOLAS, forthcoming).

The [FET funding model review](#) provides the outline of discretionary funding to drive innovation, collaboration, performance and strategic initiatives to support the reform of the FET system or the delivery of transforming learning. One pot makes sure resources are channelled to key areas such as quality assurance, enterprise engagement, consistent learner support, agile programme development and data analysis. The remaining four pots drive provision under funding pillars covering apprenticeship, FET pathways, workforce skills development and transformation, and strategic investment.

Strategic investment funding in the FET sector aims to transform physical infrastructure, expand programme offerings and promote a learner-centred approach. It is expected that increased funding will be used in future years to address specific strategic challenges and stimulate agile FET responses. Areas like literacy, green skills and digital skills including AI are likely to be major areas of focus in the short term. According to the [national FET strategy for 2026–2030](#) (SOLAS, 2026), examples of strategic investment funding include the following initiatives:

- green investments, including the [colleges of the future](#);
- [strategic performance agreements](#), defining how ETBs contribute to achieving national performance targets for FET success;
- upskilling and enterprise funds, with significant capital directed towards [modern methods of construction](#), [green skills](#) and [near zero energy building](#);
- the [Reach Fund](#), to support community education.

The [SOLAS corporate plan for 2024–2026](#) outlines the process of implementation of the new FET funding model. In 2024, ETBs migrated to a single financial system to support its implementation.

1.6. VET teachers and trainers

1.6.1. Types of VET teacher

Given the diverse nature of FET, including VET, in Ireland, there are several categories of VET teaching and training professionals. In general, VET teacher/trainer categories are distinguished by the programmes they deliver, the technical and pedagogical qualifications required, and the funding mechanisms used. They can be summarised as follows.

- Teachers working in ETBs, in colleges of further education or centres that deliver post-leaving certificate courses and/or vocational training opportunities scheme programmes. Although FET teachers deliver VET programmes at International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) level 4 (leading to awards at EQF levels 4–5), they are registered with the teaching council as second-level teachers. To register, teachers must hold an honours bachelor’s degree (at EQF level 6; ISCED 665, 666) and an approved initial teacher education qualification (postgraduate diploma at EQF level 6 or 7). Alternatively, a teacher may hold a concurrent degree qualification in post-primary initial teacher education (EQF level 6), which combines the study of one or more curricular subjects with teacher education studies.
- Apprenticeship instructors working in ETBs, in training centres that deliver the first off-the-job phase of apprenticeship (phase 2). Instructors on classroom-based apprenticeship programmes are not required to hold a pedagogical qualification, but they must hold a craft certificate (EQF level 5) and have five years’ experience.

- Apprenticeship lecturers working in institutes of technology. These are tertiary education institutions, providing training on the remaining two phases (4 and 7) of the apprenticeship programme. Apprenticeship lecturers must hold a degree (EQF level 6) or equivalent in the subject area, or hold a craft certificate (EQF level 5) and have three years' postgraduate experience.
- Work-based tutors working in both the private and public sectors in craft occupations. They are responsible for overseeing the work and training of apprentices during the on-the-job phases of the apprenticeship programme (phases 1, 3, 5 and 7).

Employers must employ a suitably qualified craftsperson approved by SOLAS to act in the following roles.

- Workplace assessor. The assessor must have completed the SOLAS assessor and verifier programme provided by the ETBs. This course lasts approximately one day and is not aligned with the NFQ.
- Workplace tutor. The tutor must be competent and qualified, and hold a national craft certificate (EQF level 5), to train apprentices.

The assessor and tutor can be the same person, provided they hold the relevant qualification.

Tutors and trainers work on VET programmes or on general learning programmes in ETBs. They deliver training (other than apprenticeship) or education (such as adult literacy), often on programmes aimed at unemployed people or early leavers from education and training.

For other types of VET in the FET sector, the qualifications and professional standards of trainers vary. Programmes leading to a QQI award typically require a subject matter qualification usually one level higher than that of the course being taught, a pedagogical qualification usually at level 3 and five years' industry experience. For all other training, such as computing or accounting, trainer profiles tend to vary depending on the awarding body, the subject matter being taught and the provider. However, pedagogical qualifications are increasingly required for such courses.

Other trainers work in a variety of FET settings, including ETBs, Skillnet Ireland and private sector providers (Cedefop, & SOLAS, forthcoming).

1.6.2. Continuing professional development of teachers/trainers

In FET, continuing professional development moves away from classic learning systems and online learning towards a blended approach incorporating many ways to learn and access learning. It is becoming more individualised, allowing FET staff to access learning as and when they need it, both individually and through shared networks and collaboration.

FET practitioners also need to update their skills continuously to keep pace with the ongoing shift towards lifelong and work-based learning, in which upskilling and reskilling in ICT and other industry-required skills are crucial for FET to remain relevant.

The [national FET strategy for 2026–2030](#) outlines actions to:

- strengthen the FET sector through professional development opportunities;
- improve practitioners' capacity in digital teaching and learning;
- reform FET staffing structures to ensure a more responsive and agile system;
- design an agile FET workforce structure for the future that builds on the existing role mapping and benchmarking;
- enhance staff capability in areas that include quality assurance, programme development and AI;
- strengthen the talent pipeline of staff through collaboration and partnership with higher education, industry and local government (Cedefop, & SOLAS, forthcoming).

CHAPTER 2.

Shaping VET qualifications



2.1. Anticipating skills needs

Following the publication of the [national skills strategy for 2025](#) (in 2016) (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2026d), the system for the identification of skills needs in Ireland was restructured. The [National Skills Council](#) (NSC), originally established in 2017 and reconstituted in 2021 with greater industry representation (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2026c), now oversees the identification of skills needs (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2026e). The NSC consists of representatives from industry, social partners and skills experts. It provides the government with independent strategic advice to effectively shape policy responses aligned with labour market needs. It is informed by the work of these bodies.

- The [Expert Group on Future Skills Needs](#), which provides advice on projected skills requirements at the national and sectoral levels and makes recommendations on how best to address identified skills needs, informing sectoral developments in terms of employment. The expert group also makes recommendations on how existing education and training mechanisms can be adapted to better effect, taking into account the role of enterprises in shaping workforce skills.
- [Regional skills forums](#). A network of nine forums forms a direct link between education and training providers and employers at the local level.
- The [Skills and Labour Market Research Unit](#), which monitors the supply and demand for skills and occupational labour. Every year, it publishes the [national skills bulletin](#), a summary of the various supply and demand indicators for skills and labour in Ireland. The national skills bulletin (SOLAS, 2025b) also provides a list of the occupations for which a shortage has been identified, distinguishing between a skills shortage, a labour shortage and a possible future (within the next five years) shortage.

The work of the NSC is also supported by the [High-level Skills Implementation Group](#). This group was established in 2023. It consists of representatives of government departments and agencies, and supports the NSC with policy expertise and operational work.

Following a review of Ireland's national skills strategy for 2016–2025, and the associated skills architecture, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published its report [OECD Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and recommendations](#) (Irish Government, 2023) in 2023 (Cedefop, & SOLAS, forthcoming).

2.2. Designing qualifications

[QQI](#) was established under the [Qualifications and Quality Assurance \(Education and Training\) Act 2012](#) (Irish Government, 2012). QQI operates under the DFHERIS. It is both an awarding and a quality assurance body. Its remit extends to both general and vocational education and training awards. It plays a key role in setting standards and qualifications in VET, with a significant share of VET-related awards being made by QQI.

Examples of specific statutory functions of QQI include the following:

- establishing the standards of knowledge, skills or competences to be acquired by learners before an award can be made by QQI, or by an education and training provider to which authority to make an award has been delegated;
- making awards or delegating authority to make an award where it considers it appropriate and reviewing and monitoring the operation of the authority so delegated.

QQI sets standards for FET, including VET, and non-university tertiary education awards.

QQI award standards are determined within the [NFQ](#), including a grid of indicators, award type descriptors, and other policies, criteria, standards and guidelines that may be issued to support it.

QQI award standards for the QQI education and training awards and for those made by providers with QQI-delegated authority are consistent with the NFQ award types. The life cycle of an award standard consists of several stages (QQI, 2014).

- Development. During this stage, QQI ensures that the necessary development expertise is assembled and applied, and that award standards are consistent with the NFQ, will be recognised nationally and internationally, and will regulate assessable intended learning outcomes.
- Consultation. Once a draft standard has been developed, it is published for public consultation and may be modified following consideration of the consultation feedback.
- Formal determination. If a draft award standard is suitable for determination by QQI, the QQI executive presents it to the QQI Policies and Standards Committee for adoption.
- Publication. QQI publishes award standards on its website.
- Review. Award standards are reviewed from time to time as necessary. Changes to standards are published on QQI's website.
- Deactivation. Unused or little-used awards are withdrawn to ensure that award standards for FET are relevant and fit for purpose and to safeguard the integrity of the NFQ.

One of the strategic priorities included in [QQI's statement of strategy for 2025–2027](#) focuses on future-proofing the NFQ. Delivery of this priority is ensured through the further development of QQI's platforms to promote the NFQ as the authoritative source of information on quality-assured qualifications including microcredentials, and through the review and modification of the current system of award types in the NFQ to better serve learners in a more integrated tertiary education system, including general education qualifications delivered via the school system. In response to this priority setting, QQI published its [programme for the review of NFQ policies](#) in December 2024 (Cedefop, & SOLAS, forthcoming).

In December 2023, QQI published an [action plan for the review and renewal of common award standards](#) (CAS). Most FET award standards emerged or were developed within CAS. The 2023 action plan outlines the approach to reviewing CAS awards to ensure the ongoing relevance and quality of the award. Through this action plan, new broad award standards have been developed for EQF levels 1–3, aligned to the EU framework on key competences for lifelong learning. Other broad award standards have also been developed under the action plan as relevant to economic or industry sectors, and are integrated across EQF levels 4–6, such as early learning and care, and business ⁽⁷⁾. QQI, in partnership with the ETBs, has piloted devolved responsibility ⁽⁸⁾, aiming to build the FET sector's capacity to manage evaluations within the programme validation process.

2.3. Quality assurance

Under the [Qualifications and Quality Assurance \(Education and Training\) Act 2012](#) (Irish Government, 2012), QQI is required to develop and publish guidelines for providers for the quality assurance of their programmes and services. Providers are required by legislation to consider QQI guidelines when developing their own quality assurance procedures. In some cases, such as programme validation, providers' quality assurance procedures must be approved by QQI as fit for purpose. Given the variety of providers in Ireland, QQI has developed guidelines for a number of sectors, including FET. QQI guidelines for FET providers are aligned with and complementary to the European quality assurance reference framework for VET (EQAVET). QQI is Ireland's [EQAVET national reference point](#), actively contributing to EQAVET's work at the European level.

Programme validation is a key quality assurance process that QQI uses to approve new programmes proposed by education and training providers. It means that a programme meets

⁽⁷⁾ For more information, see [QQI integrated award standards](#).

⁽⁸⁾ For more information, see '[Devolved responsibility pilot with the ETB sector](#)'.

minimum standards in terms of learning outcomes and NFQ levels. It increases trust by assuring providers and learners that successful completion of a programme validated by QQI leads to a specific NFQ award. Programme validation includes the following two stages:

- approval of the provider's ability to quality-assure its programmes;
- validation by QQI of a specific programme.

QQI implements this process by appointing independent experts to compare provider proposals against the requirements of the specific NFQ award(s). If the proposed programme meets QQI criteria, it can be validated for up to five years. If the QQI criteria are not met, the programme cannot be offered as proposed.

In 2020, QQI proceeded to the inaugural review of quality assurance in ETBs. It was a milestone for both QQI and the ETBs, as it was the first review process to be conducted in the FET sector. It sought to further encourage and establish a quality culture within ETBs and strengthen public trust in the quality of FET provision by promoting transparency and public awareness. The review implementation was a collaborative effort, with support from SOLAS. The process was completed in 2023 (Cedefop, & SOLAS, forthcoming).

As a follow-up, post-inaugural-review [quality dialogue meetings](#) were held, moving into systematic annual quality reporting. The development of annual quality reporting is expected to start in 2026, following a collaborative and consultative approach. In 2025, the ETBs submitted [interim quality reports](#), which included links to published quality assurance policies and procedures.

2.4. Validation of prior learning

Under the 2012 [EU Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#), EU Member States should have arrangements in place for the validation of non-formal and informal learning no later than 2018. In Ireland, the [recognition of prior learning \(RPL\)](#) can be used to get access to FET programmes and seek exemptions from parts of programmes or awards. In some cases, it can lead directly to certification for partial and full awards.

Under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 (Irish Government, 2012), QQI is required to establish policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression (ATP) for providers. Based on these policies, providers establish ATP procedures, including policies on credit accumulation, transfer and identification and for the formal assessment of the knowledge, skills and competences previously acquired by learners, including for the purposes of awards.

QQI published an [ATP policy restatement](#) in 2015. Following consultation on approaches to policy development, the principles and operational guidelines for RPL in further and higher education and training were also republished. ATP has been fundamental to enabling learners to engage with the NFQ and benefit from it, providing an essential architecture of specified entry arrangements, transfer routes and progression routes; the accumulation of credits; information for learners; and the recognition of prior learning.

In 2023, a review was commissioned by QQI as Ireland marked the 20th anniversary of the introduction of the NFQ and the national ATP policy that informs how learners and education providers engage with the framework.

QQI monitors the effectiveness of policies and procedures and their implementation through cyclical review and annual dialogue meetings.

Significant collaborative work is undertaken nationally with stakeholders across the higher, further and community education sectors to support the sustainable development of revised, innovative RPL policies that continue to be informed by dynamic practice nationally and internationally (Cedefop, & SOLAS, forthcoming).

CHAPTER 3.

Promoting VET participation



3.1. Incentives for learners

Public FET provision is funded by the exchequer or the National Training Fund. As a result, FET is free or at a very low cost at the point of delivery, which provides a strong incentive for learners.

3.1.1. Grants, allowances and supports paid to learners by the ETB from SOLAS funding

FET learners who are already receiving a means-tested social welfare payment and are applying for specific full-time FET courses, whether under FET pathways or through workforce skills development and transformation, may be eligible for one of the following training allowances, depending on their individual circumstances (ETBI & SOLAS, 2024).

- Training allowance for learners aged over 16. The maximum payment is EUR 45 per week with travel and meal allowances, if the learner is eligible.
- Training allowance for learners aged 18 and over. This is paid at the same level as their existing social welfare payment, whether they are jobseekers or recipients of disability allowances or other means-tested social welfare payments. This includes learners who are adult dependents (for example, a spouse or partner) of recipients of a means-tested social welfare payment. Travel and meal allowances may also be paid if the learner meets the eligibility criteria, depending on the course.
- Craft apprenticeships. Apprentices are paid a weekly allowance for off-the-job training, equivalent to the recommended apprenticeship wage.

3.1.2. Grants, allowances and supports paid to learners by the DFHERIS

Learners enrolled on a PLC course can apply for a maintenance grant. [Student Universal Support Ireland](#) (SUSI) is the national awarding authority for further and higher education grants. SUSI offers funding to eligible students on approved FET courses. All types of students, from school leavers to mature students returning to education, can apply for funding, [subject to eligibility](#).

3.1.3. Grants, allowances and supports paid by the Department of Social Protection

The [Department of Social Protection](#), responsible for administering Ireland's national social welfare system, pays the following allowances and supports.

The [back to education allowance](#) provides income support for jobseekers and learner groups receiving qualifying payments who take full-time further or higher education courses. The scheme aims to help people improve their qualifications and, as a result, improve their access to sustainable employment.

The [further education option](#) supports courses of study for awards up to and including QQI level 6. This can include the junior certificate, the leaving certificate, PLC courses, and courses provided by ETBs and colleges of further education.

The [part-time education option](#) allows learners to keep their [jobseeker's allowance](#), [jobseeker's benefit](#), [jobseeker's pay-related benefit](#) or [jobseeker's benefit \(self-employed\)](#) and attend a part-time day or evening course of education or training (Cedefop, & SOLAS, forthcoming).

3.2. Incentives for enterprises and employees

The [skills to advance](#) initiative provides upskilling and reskilling opportunities for employees in jobs undergoing change and for people employed in vulnerable sectors. It aims to give employees the skills they need to progress in their current jobs or to take advantage of new job opportunities. The courses include a wide range of part-time evening options at EQF levels 3–5, and non-accredited

courses. They are generally delivered through a combination of online teaching and classroom-based learning (Cedefop, & SOLAS, forthcoming).

Since the initiative began in 2019, the ETBs across Ireland have been central to the rollout of skills to advance programmes in areas including leadership and management, hospitality, digital skills and green skills. The initiative has supported hundreds of businesses in developing their workforce by providing flexible, subsidised and accredited programmes. Since 2019, over 84 000 employees have participated in the skills to advance upskilling initiative. In 2025, SOLAS reached the important milestone of providing employees across Ireland with [over 100 000 opportunities for skills development](#) (Cedefop, & SOLAS, forthcoming).

[FET micro-qualifications](#) are short, stackable, accredited and subsidised upskilling programmes for enterprises and employees under the skills to advance initiative. In response to Irish businesses' emerging need for sustainability skills, SOLAS has collaborated with the 16 ETBs and industry partners to develop a suite of [micro-qualifications in green skills](#). These raise awareness of key environmental sustainability issues affecting organisations and equip learners with the green skills needed for sustainable business practice. Similarly, the suite of [micro-qualifications in AI](#) aims to provide vital upskilling opportunities for individuals and businesses, responding to Ireland's fast-growing need for accessible, relevant and trusted options in AI.

In 2024, SOLAS and Enterprise Ireland launched their [strategic partnership](#) to widen access to upskilling programmes for micro, small and medium enterprises, and to help drive their growth and competitiveness in Ireland.

The [Innovation through Collaboration Fund](#) supports ETBs, in partnership with other organisations, to find innovative solutions to operational activities and policy delivery challenges and opportunities arising from implementing the skills to advance initiative.

The [new FET strategy](#) sets the following goals for enterprises:

- advance FET as an agile, industry-aligned partner, delivering knowledge and skills that meet current and emerging labour market needs;
- develop enterprise training capability in businesses of all sizes and sectors, with a priority focus on micro and small businesses;
- expand partnerships and collaboration with industry and representative bodies, drawing on existing structures and integrating them with higher education as part of the tertiary education strategy (SOLAS, 2026).

3.3. Guidance and counselling

Guidance and counselling can take different forms in VET. Learners generally access courses and services through self-referral or after referral from the Department of Social Protection. For example, regarding PLC courses, school leavers or adults generally choose the course and apply directly by letter or online to the school or college offering the course they are interested in. In some cases, they may be called for an interview before final selection. PLC courses' participants may receive in-house education and career guidance on the choice of vocational area, on progression to work and on progression through a special links programme to an institute of technology.

Young learners who join the Youthreach programme on leaving school at the age of 16 (or younger) have access to counselling and psychological services, as well as a guidance service, in recognition of the social and personal challenges many Youthreach participants experience. The [National Centre for Guidance in Education \(NCGE\)](#), which is an agency of the education ministry, has a role in the support and development of guidance in Youthreach and similar programmes. The remit of NCGE is to develop and support high-quality guidance provision in the education sector

as part of lifelong learning, in accordance with national and international best practice. The NCGE has collaborated with the Youthreach programme in the development of the web wheel model, a core element of which includes the use of mentoring techniques to develop and guide one-to-one relationships between students and staff. This process uses a specific profiling tool, the wheel, to assess student needs, to structure and guide the mentoring conversations and to review and monitor progress.

SOLAS is working with the NCGE to coordinate the adult education guidance initiative within the ETBs, which provides nationwide guidance for learners before and after they participate in vocational training programmes.

The technological universities and Dundalk Institute of Technology provide higher education and some VET and FET programmes. Most of the institutes of technology offer a careers service to students. The main provision targets final-year students and recent graduates, though some careers services have started to provide careers education in the curriculum of undergraduate courses. Careers advisory and appointments offices provide information on education and employment opportunities. Universities and the institutes of technology are not statutorily required to offer careers services, and provision can differ across the sector. Many careers services are involved in programmes promoting student retention in higher education and training.

For apprenticeships, each person must first obtain employment as an apprentice in their chosen trade. The employer must be approved to train apprentices and must register the person with SOLAS as an apprentice within two weeks of recruitment. SOLAS then calls the registered apprentice for training.

FET practitioners require reskilling throughout their careers to meet the changing needs of learners in FET. Several organisations and agencies already provide development opportunities to FET practitioners, for example, the further education and support service in programme development and quality assurance; the NCGE for FET guidance personnel; or the National Learning Network and the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability for disability awareness.

One of the priorities of the national [FET strategy](#) for 2026-2030 is [consistent learner support](#) under the strategic objective of inclusion for prosperity and cohesion. The FET strategy sets out the following specific goals: to ensure that every community has access to further education and training, prioritising adult literacy needs and using targeted approaches for under-represented groups; to place learners at the heart of decision-making by strengthening the learner voice throughout the system; and to diversify and widen the learner base through new methods of outreach and a commitment to inclusion.

3.4. Challenges and development opportunities

FET in Ireland is changing significantly, with both progress and challenges. Ireland is committed to lifelong learning and inclusion (Cedefop, 2025b). The main challenges for the Irish FET system are delivering future-ready knowledge and skills, promoting inclusion for prosperity and cohesion, and supporting quality, innovation, collaboration and partnership (Cedefop, & SOLAS, forthcoming). The [national FET strategy for 2026–2030](#) outlines the policy response.

Ireland is implementing various initiatives to build skills and address skills shortages, including the reform of the National Skills Council and the establishment of the first national FET strategy for the green transition. The adult literacy for life strategy was launched to improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills. Ireland's efforts to foster inclusion include the launch of a community education framework (ReferNet Ireland & Cedefop, 2024), which emphasises diverse learning, technological integration and strategic partnerships (Cedefop, 2025b). The skills to advance

initiative provides employees with upskilling and reskilling opportunities, equipping them with the skills they need to progress in their current professional roles or respond to rapidly changing labour market needs. It also helps employers identify skills needs and invest in their workforce through subsidised training. The initiative provides suites of micro-qualifications focusing on green and AI skills.

To facilitate pathways in FET, Ireland is expanding tertiary degree programmes and restructuring apprenticeships through the action plan for apprenticeship. A review of the FET funding model was conducted to develop an outcome-based funding approach, giving ETBs more autonomy and flexibility (Cedefop, 2025b). Through the craft transfer plan (Generation Apprenticeship, 2026b), the Irish government is transferring the responsibility for craft apprenticeships from SOLAS and QQI directly to education providers. This aims to strengthen quality and alignment with labour market needs, while delivering meaningful outcomes for learners, employers and society.

In 2020, QQI conducted Ireland's first external quality assurance review. It aimed to improve ETB quality assurance procedures, strengthen the quality culture within ETBs and increase public trust in the quality of FET provision. SOLAS supported the review process. The first review process concluded in 2023. As a follow-up, the ETBs submitted interim quality reports in 2025.

Ireland has intensified efforts to tackle sustainability challenges and green skills shortages (Cedefop, 2025b). According to the European Commission (2024), further efforts are needed to achieve the transition to a net-zero economy. The country would benefit from further addressing skills shortages, especially in the construction and green sectors, and from continuing to support the employment and social inclusion of disadvantaged groups. Although Ireland has intensified efforts to expand tertiary education degrees and restructure apprenticeships, further progress is still needed to meet the EU targets linked to work-based learning. Continuing to enable high-quality education in Ireland remains a priority (European Commission, 2024).

Abbreviations

AI	artificial intelligence
ATP	access, transfer and progression
CAS	common award standards
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
ECCE	early childhood care and education
EQAVET	European quality assurance reference framework for vocational education and training
EQF	European qualifications framework
ETB	education and training board
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
EU	European Union
EUR	euro
FET	further education and training
HE	higher education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
ICT	information and communications technology
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
IVET	initial vocational education and training
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCGE	National Centre for Guidance in Education
NEET	not in education, employment or training
NFQ	national framework of qualifications
NSC	National Skills Council
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PLC	post leaving certificate
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RPL	recognition of prior learning
SI	statutory instrument
SOLAS	An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (Further Education and Training Authority of Ireland)
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland
TY	transition year
VET	vocational education and training

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[EQAVET](#)

[Further Education and Training \(FET\)](#)

[Higher Education Authority \(HEA\)](#)

[National Council for Curriculum and Assessment \(NCCA\)](#)

[Quality and Qualifications Ireland \(QQI\)](#)

[Skillnet Ireland](#)

[SOLAS](#)

Vocational education and training in **Ireland**

Short description

This short description provides an overview of Ireland's further education and training (FET) system, which encompasses VET for young learners aged 16+ and adults.

The Irish FET system is governed by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, with SOLAS acting as the statutory agency for funding, coordination and strategy. FET delivery is primarily secured through Ireland's 16 education and training boards. Quality and Qualifications Ireland is both an awarding body and a quality assurance body, playing a key role in setting standards and qualifications in VET.

A distinctive feature of the system is the dual apprenticeship model, alongside innovative tertiary degrees offering seamless progression pathways between FET and higher education. Key areas of focus include addressing skills shortages through micro-qualifications under the skills to advance initiative and fostering social inclusion through the adult literacy for life strategy and the new community education framework.

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