

FIT Input to FET Strategy 2020-2024



Figure 1: Updated Pillars

FIT is suggesting the addition of two horizontal pillars, **Marketing & Communications** and **Leadership, Competency & Excellence**. These are proposed as ‘joists’ to underpin the

strategy and we believe they are fundamental to its effective implementation -see figure 1 above.

Marketing & Communications is in danger of being the missing keystone, and one that uniquely optimises the impact of the FET strategy. The further education sector has suffered in the past, often as the poor relation, when it comes to getting its message effectively shared within the society in which it operates. Actors in other policy areas (Road Safety Authority, IDA Ireland, Vaccination Campaigning etc.) have been much more adept in understanding the part that marketing and communications play in their success – it's not enough to have the best product, service or solution if your target audience do not get to hear about it and to understand how it can improve their lives.

Leadership, Competency & Excellence is proposed as the second horizontal pillar and it is also an aspect of strategy on which FET traditionally places insufficient emphasis. If one thinks of examples in the public sector that people commonly associate with achievement, success and excellence, many bodies come to mind such as the IDA, the ESB, the Revenue Commissioners and the NTMA. A common thread in these cases is one of effective leaders working with teams of dedicated and highly competent staff. These public bodies reflect a culture of excellence whereby they can achieve continued success from generation to generation. If we want Irelands FET sector to move in that direction and strive to achieve such levels of success we need a strong focus in the 2020-2024 strategy on Leadership, Competency & Excellence.

1. Supporting Job Creation

Much of FET provision is developed and delivered in alignment with local, regional and national industry needs. This approach maximises opportunities for FET graduates and allows them to transition back into employment, change or improve their career prospects and assist entrepreneurs in developing their own business. In the period since the current FET strategy was published we have witnessed a remarkable turnaround in our economic fortunes. As a result, much of the provision needs to be planned on the basis of 'in employment' as opposed to 'for employment', while not losing sight of the need to provide activation provision for those who remain outside of the labour market. This will require the sector to adopt structured, proactive and targeted approaches to maximise the jobs secured for learners on completion of courses. A greater understanding of skills needs and more effective monitoring of employment outcomes, allied to a more coordinated and targeted approach to employer engagement has the potential to boost the employability of FET learners. The FET sector is committed to assisting companies and employees

to optimise their skillset for the mutual benefit of enabling improved productivity and innovation in the workplace. And given the vocational focus of the sector it has a key role in developing awareness of the pipeline of potential FET graduates which can benefit industry, as employees.

Features include:

- o Skills and labour market intelligence from SOLAS
- o Targeting the needs of industry
- o Apprenticeship and traineeship models
- o Local and regional skills needs and job opportunities
- o Employer engagement structures
- o Promotional campaigns
- o Appropriate flexible delivery options included online and blended learning
- o Tackling skills mismatches and taking a strategic approach to provision based on local, regional national needs

1.1 Please share your thoughts on Supporting Job Creation

Knowledge-intensive, exporting sectors

It is widely acknowledged that FET has the lead role in helping low-skilled and disadvantaged groups achieve social cohesion and increase their labour market participation. It is less widely acknowledged, including within the sector itself, that it has a major complementary role alongside HE in supplying the skills requirements of Ireland's knowledge-intensive exporting sectors.

Knowledge-intensive, exporting enterprises are not – nor do they wish to be – enclaves of those educated to Level 8 or higher.

The Advanced Manufacturing Technician Programme supported by Intel, the Advanced Certificate in Original Equipment Manufacturing (OEM) supported by Combilift and other case studies should feature prominently in the text of the new FET Strategy as headlines to be copied. The Level 6 ICT Programmes and the Tech Apprenticeships in Software Development, Network Engineering and Cybersecurity coordinated by FIT are receiving great attention in the technology related sectors as an increasing opportunity for attaining in-demand tech talent. Through such programmes, FET can make a significant quantitative

contribution to the skills needs of exporting sectors, increase the share of their recruitment that is sourced locally and broaden the social diversity of their workforces.

Large employers and the IDA need to find a stronger voice in saying this and demonstrating that FET graduates progress successfully into knowledge-intensive, exporting sectors. Accordingly, greater resources need to be invested and a determined promotion and marketing campaign needs to be undertaken to promote the credentials and currencies of FET to learners, employers and the wider community.

The domestic economy

Sectors of the economy focused on the domestic market account for some 60 per cent of total employment in the economy. The productivity of these jobs and, thus, the skill sets of the people who hold them, is crucial to the quality, sustainability and scale of job creation in the domestic economy. Initial and continuing access to FET is how the majority of workers in the domestic economy acquire and maintain the skills that enable them to remain in employment and to earn well.

The new strategy should highlight the role of FET in supplying skills that domestic employers (indigenous industry, SMEs, the civil service, public agencies, local government, NGOs, etc.) need in order to exploit new technologies and meet the needs of a more diverse and demanding customers / clients.

Employer bodies and Enterprise Ireland could play a much stronger role in encouraging and demonstrating FET's role in fostering productivity and quality in the domestic economy. The quality and productivity of jobs serving local and regional markets is an integral part of what makes a region attractive to inward investors and to mobile, high-skilled workers. As the Prospectus 2018 high level review notes, *'skills training and development is especially critical in respect of the health of local and regional economies and communities'* and, thus, most of it will have to be carried out with and on behalf of SMEs who are the dominant employers at these levels.

Employers supplying services or goods to the domestic market have to reckon with strong competition for some skills (e.g., IT, project management, languages) from the knowledge-intensive, exporting sectors of the economy. Yet the former, too, need more of these skills to improve quality and productivity. The inauguration of two IT apprenticeships by the Civil Service in 2019 is a headline example of both what is needed and what is possible.

1.2 Please provide suggested actions that you feel are required in this area

- 1.2.i The Regional Skills Fora should be more than forums, however useful, for deepening co-operation and collaboration between independent actors. They should be supported in acquiring the capabilities and resources to develop new projects on which members agree and to oversee their implementation. Enterprise Ireland (EI) and the DES should jointly establish and administer a competitive fund for rewarding innovative training measures proposed by the Regional Skills Fora.
- 1.2.ii A nationwide promotion campaign to raise employer awareness of the new apprenticeships should be funded and delivered by SOLAS across all media channels. The investment should be of a similar order to advertisement budget of other major bodies who have a track record of running national awareness campaigns e.g. the RSA had a total budget of approx. €4 million to spend on advertising in 2015. Consortia who have developed new apprenticeships should be funded explicitly to run parallel awareness campaigns.
- 1.2.iii Employer engagement structures should be strengthened by piloting sectoral skills consortia, for example, the FIT apprenticeship consortium could be asked to pilot a Tech Sector Skills Consortium under the aegis of the National Skills Strategy. A Tech Sector Skills Consortium could articulate where skills bottlenecks are limiting job creation, oversee FET awareness promotional campaigns and could take a lead role in developing flexible delivery training content and resources such as online courses.
- 1.2.iv A strategic step towards instilling the role of FET in attaining quality employment is needed, as little has been done to progress the SOLAS brand since inception in 2013. Shifting the narrative to illustrate how FET can provide a steady skills supply is also important for job creation as it indicates an additional talent pool to fill future vacancies.
- 1.2.v To deliver a renowned programme of FET provision that can address the skills needs with the rapid emergence of new technologies, procedures and practice - CPD / technical skills training of FET tutors and trainers to meet industry standards is paramount and must receive more than consideration but rather substantial ongoing investment if FET learners are to reap the benefits changing industrial base and growing economy.

2. Learning Pathways

Learning pathways need to be reviewed and enhanced so that the learner can move seamlessly on a journey through the broader educational continuum. At present FET provision is characterised by a multitude of programmes spanning across levels 1-6 of the National Framework of Qualifications. SOLAS data shows there are very significant levels of learner movements within FET on an annual basis as learners take more than one short programme to develop their skillset and prepare themselves for further study in FET or HE or to move directly into the labour market. On this basis learning pathways include the need for clearer learner pathways into FET, within FET and out of FET. Pathways from FET to Higher Education (HE) form a distinct element of the potential learner pathway and should be clear, transparent, and tangible, with opportunities for all learners move to HE should they wish to do so.

Features include:

- o Career guidance for learners as part of learner supports

- o Opportunities for FET learners to move between programmes in a linear and non-linear fashion

- o Ongoing development work on the structures to facilitate transitions between FET and HE

- o Collaboration between the FET and HE sectors on skills planning and provision

- o Improved data analysis to monitor and report on the learner movements both within FET and out of FET in to HE

2.1 Please share your thoughts on Learning Pathways

A more profound discussion than has yet been had, is still needed between educationalists and the corporate sector to ensure they understand together the full breadth of competencies and skills needed to underpin working lives in the future. It is then for early, primary and secondary education in Ireland to embrace and nurture all young people with their different talents, interests and intelligences by providing the learning styles that suit them and the requisite diversity of opportunities on leaving school to make promising starts to their working lives.

The impact of digitisation is growing exponentially across industry sectors and skill gaps are growing. While the lack of qualified talent can alter the expansion plans and locational choices of organisations with positions to fill, it simultaneously provides unprecedented career opportunities and prospects for indigenous job seekers willing to develop in-demand skills.

A key objective of the new FET strategy must be to develop mechanisms to inform educationalists and career guidance professionals and to encourage a broader cohort of job seekers to appreciate the interesting and rewarding opportunities within their reach and delivered through FET.

FIT's twenty-year engagement in the tech sector equips it to critique weaknesses in the education and training system and signpost new approaches and possibilities. The belief that the lions' share of IT jobs to be filled require a higher education qualification is still too widely held and based on the data received in repeated FIT ICT Skills Audits is simply wrong and misleading. FIT believes too many young people now are transferring directly to higher education from school whose aspirations, more beneficial patterns of learning and immediate employment prospects would be better served if they could enter quality, occupation-focussed FET programmes and defer their commencement of third level education in tandem with their career development. It is important that pressures on young people to seek entry to HE immediately, are lessened by the greater provision of quality alternatives for gaining good employment at Levels 5-6 that include clear pathways to HE at a later stage. A number of the new apprenticeships provide good example of the quality and technical competencies that can be achieved through revamped FET provision.

2.2 Please provide suggested actions that you feel are required in this area

- 2.2.i The tech sector and its representative bodies need to be more proactive in supporting education and training institutions in attaining a full appreciation of their eco-systems and the jobs within. This should take the form of an ongoing dialogue to facilitate a forward-looking perspective on emerging techniques and resulting state-of-the-art technologies that will inform future roles and professions, yet to be defined.

Similarly, students/job seekers must be assisted to understand the implications and career prospects emanating from new technologies and their application in an everchanging and dynamic workplace.

- 2.2.ii Apprenticeship Consortia should be funded to develop sectoral career guidance web sites which can be used as a resource by teachers and learners in the second level system and FET more generally.
- 2.2.iii The generation of an FET career map is merited to demonstrate the progression opportunities such as complementary follow-ons within FET, HE and employment.
- 2.2.iv The current plethora of FET programmes need to be streamlined to address confusion amongst the vast range of programmes on offer and we therefore recommend specific FET training for guidance counsellors to build awareness of the programmes and opportunities on offer.
- 2.2.v Integrate a higher presence of apprenticeship options into the CAO platform thereby reducing the divide between higher education and FET within the secondary school system.

3. Active Inclusion

The FET sector creates opportunities for marginalised individuals and groups to access the skills they need to compete in the labour market but also to realise their personal development ambitions. These groups include long-term unemployed people, people with disabilities, young people aged 18-24 years who are not in education, employment or training, and those experiencing literacy and numeracy difficulties. The FET system is striving to embed an ethos of active inclusion throughout all processes and practices that are applied in the design and delivery of its services. This role that Further Education and Training plays in working with marginalised individuals, groups and communities to ensure their active inclusion in education and training is critical to a more equitable society.

Features include:

- o Targeting of socially, economically and educationally disadvantaged groups
- o Integrating literacy and numeracy supports
- o Personal and community development
- o Equity of access across the FET sector
- o Transversal skills clusters – general learning and ICT
- o Accreditation of lower levels of National Framework of Qualifications

o ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages)

3.1 Please share your thoughts on Active Inclusion

Total employment in Ireland in absolute terms has recovered strongly and reached 2.27m in 2018 (Q3). The pre-crisis high was 2.25m in Q3 2007.

Notwithstanding this, the Irish labour market is still not particularly inclusive or participatory. For example:

- Both the employment rate (proportion of the working age population in employment) and the participation rate (proportion in work or looking for work) are below their pre-crisis peaks (the former at 69% as against 72.5%, the latter at 62% as against 69%) making Ireland only an average performer in the Euro area and EU 28;
- A rapid decline in the unemployment rate has slowed and remains above 5%, some 35% of unemployed people are long-term unemployed (out of work for over a year, and the risk of drifting from short-term into long-term unemployment (the persistence rate), though it has been consistently reduced, remains high (24% in Q1 2018).

It is clear there are still significant numbers in Irish society not accessing the increased jobs the economy is creating. Without ready access to skilled workers from abroad, many employers, particularly but not only in exporting sectors, would be unable to continue growing their operations in Ireland. It should be a key objective of the new FET strategy that more of those who remain unemployed or inactive in Ireland are supported to acquire the skills necessary to hold good quality employment in our open labour market – through ready access to appropriate FET provision in manner that delivers the level and type of skills required by industry to support their productivity, growth and development.

3.2 Please provide suggested actions that you feel are required in this area

- 3.2.i The large improvements recorded since the peak of the crisis are an opportunity to increase the quality of the training provision enabling people to do this. Re-invigorated and more imaginative approaches to up-skilling groups of disadvantaged jobseekers (the long-term unemployed, adults in jobless households, residents of disadvantaged or remote areas, etc.) should feature significantly in the new Strategy.

This will require a willingness to spend more on effectively designed and well managed FET programmes that include disadvantaged participants and support their progression into quality employment.

It will also require a willingness and capability to conduct robust evaluations that identify which programmes and courses deliver the sustained quality employment participants are looking for and are effective in translating additional resources into proportionately better outcomes for participants.

- 3.2.ii More creative and effective collaboration between Ireland's Public Employment Service (Intreo) and the FET sector, building on what has been learned to date, should feature prominently in the new strategy.

- 3.2.iii Fund the development of a range of pre-apprenticeship and feeder programmes to support wider participation in the ICT apprenticeships and new apprenticeships generally. Apprenticeship opportunities need to scale nationwide, with a particular focus given to access. Vehicles such as Traineeships, VTOS, YouthReach, PLC, Specific Skills Training and other FET programmes could help to support wider participation in new apprenticeships. Greater integration of Pre- FET has long been considered the education and training providers for those most-distant to the labour market. However, due to the varying range of levels within FET, market segmentation is required to spotlight provision with an access focus. Existing policy seems to endorse this approach but action at a significant scale is lacking, indicating the need for targeted funding and annual implementation goals.

- 3.2.iv Reevaluate the secondary supports required to actively engage all cohorts of job seekers to boost inclusivity of those who may be detached from the labour market because of barriers such as childcare, location of employment and transportation. There is ample scope to consider how remote working can facilitate access to the increased number of jobs created by the economy.

- 3.2.v There are strong concerns that advanced countries are neglecting the extent to which groups and regions within their societies are being 'left behind' as technology, globalisation and migration reshape their labour markets. Consequently, the OECD is now committing to assess the labour market performance of its member states, on the basis of the quality and inclusiveness of the employment they provide, in addition to correlation in economic performance and employment statics. The desire is to redress the cumulative

evidence emerging that technologies (principally ICT) and globalisation can, combine to cause a polarisation in national labour markets, to the point of fuelling widespread popular and political opposition to further economic internationalisation.

The intent is to ensure that access to decent employment by, for example, women, young people without higher education, older workers, people with a disability, and residents of regions distant from major urban centres is prioritised and actioned to ensure satisfactory labour market performance. Ireland should aim to become the exemplar of social and economic cohesion by incorporating these concerns and necessary responses as cornerstones in future skills development policies.

4. Lifelong Learning and Workforce Upskilling

The FET system is ideally placed to deliver lifelong learning opportunities; it has a presence within most communities, a track record of delivering both part-time and full-time provision to people of all ages and strong connectivity with local employers and their employees. The embedding of more flexible delivery models for FET will be key to the effective development of lifelong learning in the future. Flexible provision that is: more accessible (e.g. in the workplace, in community facilities); at times to suit participants (e.g. evenings, weekends); via blended learning to reduce the requirement for physical attendance and associated travel; or tailored to suit particular backgrounds and settings (e.g. family initiatives, group working). These approaches will continue to ensure that FET lifelong learning opportunities are available and accessible to all throughout the regions which they serve.

Increasing people's lifelong learning activity, particularly those in the workforce requires substantial upskilling and reskilling of the adult population at all levels. There is a shift in focus from 'for employment' to 'in employment' across all FET provision. Successfully upskilling and reskilling the workforce will require demand driven, flexible and responsive FET policies and frameworks.

Features include:

- o Recognition of prior learning
- o Adult learners
- o Technology enhanced learning

- o Promotion of the benefits of lifelong learning
- o Training needs analysis
- o Awareness of the FET offering with SMEs
- o Skills to Advance

4.1 Please share your thoughts on Lifelong Learning & Workforce Upskilling

Major long-term trends are under way that will change where people work and how they work. They have been well researched- e.g., the impact of AI and robotics, the reconstitution of global supply chains, dealing with the opportunities and challenges of demographic ageing and of climate change, a more contested globalization and increased trade competition, etc. The majority of those who will be employed in Ireland's economy in 2030 are already in work but, to remain so and earn at a decent level, they will have to embrace major changes in what they work at and how.

It is an immense challenge, therefore, that 331,800 people in employment (full- and part-time) in Ireland struggle with numeracy and 227,600 with literacy (are at or below Level I, PIAAC 2013). In addition, 203,227 are below Level 1 in their digital skills ('problem solving proficiency in a technology-rich environment'). These are large numbers. By comparison, the total number of beneficiaries of FET in 2018 was 337,966.

Workers with these deficits are extremely poorly equipped to cope with workplace change, or to experience mobility or even satisfaction in their work. While they may appear fortunate in comparison to disadvantaged jobseekers in that they have a job, but in fact, they are also hugely disadvantaged and vulnerable in major ways to either becoming unemployed themselves or seeing the terms and conditions of their employment deteriorate.

Currently, the least educated and lowest skilled workers are the least likely employees to participate in FET and the most likely to consider it as complex, costly and 'not for them'. SOLAS's background paper to its new Policy Framework for Skills Development of People in Employment notes that the general participation rate in LLL in Ireland in 2017 was low, at 8.9%, below the EU average (10.9%), and far behind the 27-30% recorded by the EU's best performers (Sweden, Denmark and Finland), and that the specific rate for those in employment was 8.3% against a 12% EU average.

The September 2018 publication of Ireland's first FET Policy Framework for Skills Development of People in Employment needs was overdue as well as hugely welcome. Its

rationale, methods and targets need to be widely and vigorously communicated. The new Strategy, therefore, should clearly anticipate and prepare for the participation of much larger numbers of employees in programmes and courses that enable them to upskill or acquire new skills. It should deliver on the vision in the 2018 Policy Framework of a world of work in Ireland where:

- upskilling during one's working life is normal practice and associated with increased job security, earnings and autonomy at work for employees;
- indigenous and multinational firms alike routinely invest in the development of their staff and reap benefits in the form of the improved productivity and competitiveness of their businesses;
- FET provision is flexible, high quality, accessible and relevant to the changing needs of employees, the economy and industry.

4.2 Please provide suggested actions that you feel are required in this area

- 4.2.i The requirement that workers, not once but repeatedly as their job requires, can have recourse to short or long courses that equip them with new and higher skills reinforces the need that the new Strategy endorse and demonstrate that FET and HE must be conceptualized and planned as a continuum of provision that facilitates flows in either direction for individuals at every stage in the life cycle and at any stage in their careers.
- 4.2.ii FIT's experience and series of ICT Skills Audits indicates that in today's fast paced environment tech practitioners can no longer depend on just honing and deepening a skill set acquired in their initial tech education. They must change and take on additional multi-skills sets to a greater or lesser extent as the tech driven transformation evolves (e.g. apps, cloud, dev ops, security, AI / ML, AR /VR, non-relational database tools, IoT, etc.). Equally transversal competencies are increasingly essential such as Project Management, Problem Solving, and Entrepreneurial Approach etc. These transversal competencies cannot be gained in a classroom but require hands-on learning and professional development to bring them to the levels required in today's tech workplaces. Consortia who have established new apprenticeships in the FET domain should be funded to develop 'lifelong learning' programmes to support the CPD of alumni.
- 4.2.iii As the appetite for apprenticeship grows, scope for adapting or adding modules should be considered. This format of the apprenticeship model is more agile and thus more suited to the future of work.

5. Meeting Key Skills Gaps

Strategically planned education and training supported by a close matching of provision to the needs of the labour market helps both workers and employers across all sectors and occupations to adjust successfully to changes in technology and markets. The on-going demand for people with diverse levels of qualifications and types of experience includes those with further education and training credentials. Utilising labour market intelligence and aligning FET provision with the needs of the labour market to boost learners' employability represents a significant opportunity to support economic growth. Meeting key skills gaps necessitates the FET sector to respond to the skill needs of the regional areas, to rebalance some existing provision from broad based skills towards specific vocational needs and to ensure that provision is fully accredited.

Features include:

- o Accreditation of learning
- o Employer engagement structures
- o Skills forecasting and labour market intelligence
- o Sectors where employment growth/skills needs have been identified
- o The development of 'soft' skills to accompany technical attributes
- o Regional Skills Fora

5.1 Please share your thoughts on Meeting Key Skills Gaps

Where employers and FET providers can design and deliver programmes that meet the requirements for filling entry-level and middle-level positions (such as the two-year ICT Associate Apprenticeships developed by FIT), there can be several advantages: the response to skills shortage is faster - employers and candidates can be matched in programmes of, at the most, two years duration rather than after four-year degree courses (and frequently, subsequent graduate placement programmes); companies gain a business advantage by having a wider and more diverse pool of talent on which to draw; companies are able to increase the proportions of their workforces that are indigenous and reduce some of the

accommodation / sustainability issues that accompany the recruitment of graduates from abroad.

Understanding employers' skills needs at a granular level is critical to the development of relevant FET training programmes and apprenticeships. The FIT ICT Skills Audit series (2012, 2014 and 2018) is a recognised example (cited in Ireland National Skills Strategy 2025) of employers in a sector taking a lead in defining and forecasting skills gaps and emerging needs in a manner that encourages responsive training and education programmes.

5.2 Please provide suggested actions that you feel are required in this area

- 5.2.i Labour market intelligence should be more pro-actively tailored to the actual regions which the Regional Skills Fora serve. For example, greater and more timely use should be made of appropriate aggregations of the Small Area Population Statistics (SAPS) gathered in each Census and of relevant county data gathered annually in some CSO series (e.g., in its Business Demography data set). By contrast, QNHS data gathered for NUTS 3 *statistical* regions should be used with caution and carefully interpreted by each Regional Skills Forum.
- 5.2.ii Expand the deployment of FIT Skills Audits Methodology into sectors beyond ICT where skills gaps are prevalent or growing. Similar skills need audits undertaken across other key sectors of the economy would be highly beneficial in determining appropriate skills and competencies that can be attained through new, revised and revamped FET delivery while building employer buy-in, influence and confidence contributing to effective dialogue.
- 5.2.iii Such research into employers' skills needs should encompass what both higher education and FET are capable of supplying to ensure the FET activation programme are not stand-alone. With this in mind, further development and promotion of dual-education is required with proof that employability and productivity are enhanced by harmony between the theoretical and the practical.
- 5.2.iv The Regional Skills Fora have a major role, individually and collectively, in articulating the skills requirements of employers regionally, while facilitating the coordination of programme delivery across the spectrum of tertiary education (FET & HE) through a jointly developed and comprehensive delivery plan.

6. New Models of Delivery

New models of apprenticeship and traineeships continue to be rolled out with targets for 31,000 and 13,900 registrations on these programmes between 2016 and 2020. The delivery of new apprenticeships and traineeships is supported by coordination and collaboration with industry and other providers. Further new models of delivery include pre-apprenticeship which prepares future apprentices by equipping them with skills and work experience providing a foundation to build an apprenticeship on. In addition, technology-based education tools and programmes are becoming embedded in the FET sector as flexible learning opportunities are offered via online, blended, modular, semester and evening delivery.

Features include:

- o Apprenticeship and traineeship provision
- o Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL)
- o Quality Assurance Structures

6.1 Please share your thoughts on New Models of Delivery

It is true that a system-wide performance framework for the FE sector can learn much from that which has been developed for the higher education sector (Prospectus High-Level Review, 2018). This should include, not just allowing ETBs to identify their respective strategic niches and missions and agree strategic performance agreements in alignment with funding as Prospectus proposes, but also allowing and fostering individual Community Colleges and Training Centres to specialise in specific areas of FET – as Centre’s of Excellence, developing regional and even national profiles as a result.

The emergence of such flagships for the FET sector will require leadership from the top down that, when necessary, should be recruited from beyond the sector itself just as high-performing public bodies such as the IDA, NTMA, Central Bank, the Universities and others conduct international searches to ensure senior executive positions are filled by people with the required experience and skill sets to drive the organisations forward.

Successful economies going forward will be characterised by the ability to adapt rapidly to the challenges and opportunities of the “4th Industrial Revolution” while ensuring cohesion and inclusion. The convergence of new technologies is radically transforming how work gets done across global value chains, enabling organisations to be more intelligent, more agile,

and better able to scale their operations, optimise supply chains and shift to new business models with unprecedented speed.

Ireland has undergone a remarkable recovery however to remain resilient to unforeseen shocks, and for future employment to be of a high quality and inclusive of the workforce nationally (across the country's nine regions), foreign investment and, especially, indigenous enterprises must embrace new technologies fully to boost productivity, innovate, grow their markets and most importantly remain competitive. It is critical that government, the development agencies and the regions provide the right conditions, skills and capabilities that corporate strategies demand and that they are in a position to clearly articulate how an Irish location can be part of a dynamic company's ambitions for growth.

6.2 Please provide suggested actions that you feel are required in this area

Supporting Upskilling across sector and within FET.

- 6.2.i Wherever possible, all new training courses for people in employment should allow at least some participants from among the unemployed and the inactive to also participate. The evident relevance of what is being taught to real workplaces and learning alongside people currently in employment can make the training particularly attractive to those who find themselves drifting, or already distant, from the contemporary world of work.

Similar opportunities should be offered to FET tutors and trainers so that they stay abreast and deliver in the classroom the skills and standards required by industry to remain relevant and competitive.

With regard to the effectiveness of new apprenticeships:

- 6.2.ii Carry out a review of existing administration processes for the new apprenticeships to improve their fitness for purpose, efficiency and effectiveness. The processes currently in use with relation to employer approval and apprentice registration are largely legacy systems developed for traditional apprenticeships and before current requirements such as GDPR came into existence.
- 6.2.iii There is an imperative to develop a uniform Apprenticeship CRM system accessible for coordinating providers to move away from heavy administration and lengthy registration lead times. The data captured should be analysed and reported via the Apprenticeship Forum thus guiding future recruitment procedures and employer engagement.

- 6.2.iv Undertake a high impact school-based awareness campaign to inform parents, career guidance providers, teachers and potential participants that an FET route is a valuable and viable pathway to a career in high skill sectors, including the tech sector.
- 6.2.v Design and resource an SME Apprenticeship Support Scheme to address barriers which may be faced by smaller enterprises in availing of the skills development opportunity available via the new apprenticeships. Pilot this for ICT Apprenticeships with a view to expanding it across sectors.
- 6.2.vi Establish a national Apprenticeship Forum, to capture the learning and experience of consortia, coordinating providers and other key stakeholders, and inform the ongoing development of new apprenticeships.
- 6.2.vii Develop and implement a national 'Women in Apprenticeship' campaign, with a vibrant public discourse, to promote apprenticeship as a valued career path for women. Engage a wide range of advocacy groups, employers, thought leaders and influencers to create an enduring impact.
- 6.2.viii Set more ambitious targets for the expansion of new apprenticeships to match the strong growth in the economy and the need for additional skills and recruitment streams. We are in danger of aiming low because the adoption of new apprenticeships is a challenging transformation which requires change in mind-sets and traditional approaches.
- 6.2.ix Develop funding models which more effectively support the early stage development and implementation cycle of new apprenticeships and take account of the diverse needs that pertain across sectors. A 'one size fits all' approach is in danger of slowing or impeding the necessary innovation.
- 6.2.x Some of the NTF's accumulated surplus and a higher proportion of its annual income should be expressly allocated to accelerating the development and implementation of new apprenticeships, recognising the potential of apprenticeship to broaden talent acquisition and thereby further Ireland's future growth and prosperity.

7. Overall Comments

Reflecting on the next Further Education and Training Strategy, please share any additional comments or suggestions that you would like us to consider.

Deep educational reform

The strength of current and expected demand for new skills sets and technologies, and continuing shift in the actual specific skills required, underlines the enormous need for young people who desire fulfilling careers, and the adults who currently do, to be committed to continuing learning.

The World Bank (WB) study draws attention to what we now know about the breadth and depth of the skills that will enable people to navigate the new world of work successfully. Three types of skills, in particular, are seen to be hugely important:

i) non-routine cognitive skills (such as critical thinking and problem-solving) built on solid competency in numeracy and literacy;

ii) social-emotional skills (such as conscientiousness, goal orientation, and the ability to work in teams) built on sound self- and social awareness, good self-management and relationship skills;

iii) technical skills - up to date, job-specific built on sound labour market intelligence and effective, on-going collaboration between employers and education and training providers.

Similarly, an IBM CEO study (Leading through Connections, 2012) interviewed 1,800 CEOs in 80 countries on their priorities in running their organisations. The two top priorities identified were **adaptability** and **creativity**. How organisations respond to changes and threats in their environment was pivotal and required adaptability while, for long-term viability and relevance, creativity was deemed the top priority. While appreciating that the current education systems were originally put in place to meet the needs of the economy in a different age, corporates interviewed indicated that an alternative which stimulates creativity, collaboration and adaptability is needed in response to the challenges of the 4th Industrial Revolution and beyond.

Educational systems in every advanced country are aware of the challenge they face to articulate the blend of skills that young people will need to attain in order to have interesting careers and good jobs during their working lives. In every country, government is pursuing reforms to its educational system. Many acknowledge the inadequacy of delivering rote knowledge of a limited set of subjects in linear fashion over a set time, the dangers of

building an educational system on a narrow conception of intelligence, the need to reappraise the breadth of human talent and abilities whose currency in the world of work is growing. Correspondingly, recognise the need for a more urgent pursuit of the educational formats that fashion the best in all young people and which not only accommodate but actively promote diversity, talent, creativity and imagination.

Ireland's educational system, in international comparative studies (including the 2018 WB report), is considered a high performer and its contribution to Ireland's rapid economic and social progress since EU membership is widely acknowledged. It is important to acknowledge the changes that have been made in recent years to enhance the educational experience with regard to the Junior Cert, the proposed changes to the Leaving Cert and the increased emphasis on dual education initiatives, as instanced, for example, by the expansion of the apprenticeship model into new sectors of the economy. However, there is no lack of pins to puncture complacency in the high international standing of Ireland's educational system. Even leading educational systems are encouraged to critically review how they are ensuring that all their students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are equipped with the necessary cognitive and social-emotional skills to make them resilient to technological change.

Young people can feel defined by their Leaving Cert results and the inordinate influence of the 'points race' on the decision to proceed immediately to higher education and on what is studied – there are high non-completion rates in some programmes, while the number of graduates in elementary jobs and on low pay is high by international standards. Many of those who gain only low CAO points can enter adult life more conscious of what they do not have than of what they have. At a time of life when self-confidence should abound, some finish their schooling with little sense of achievement and low self-belief, which can lead to the dilution of their career aspirations and disregard of their potential. It is significant that some of the countries from which many EU workers come to Ireland have educational systems more equitable than Ireland's (Estonia, Poland, and Latvia²⁰).

FIT is profoundly aware of a 'waste of talent' among all too many of the 30%-40% of young people currently not transferring from school to higher education. It is also aware that making it easier for them to do so is not the answer as, for example, high non-completion rates in some HE programmes and the difficulties many graduates are having in getting jobs commensurate with their expectations attest.

In FIT's experience of promoting the capacity of FET programmes as a complement to HE provision for the tech and related sectors, the number of employers who need persuading of the credentials and competencies attained on FET vocational programmes is less and less. More often than not it is the participants themselves, along with parents, who must be convinced that there is nothing 'second-class' in choosing FET. There is a role for SOLAS as the FET authority to actively challenge and address this ill-informed perspective of FET and

to more fundamentally articulate its confidence in its quality and delivery to all key stakeholders, including learners, parents, guidance counsellors and employers.

Overall, a more profound discussion is still needed between educationalists and the corporate sector to ensure they understand together the full breadth of competencies and skills needed to underpin working lives in the future. It is then for early, primary and secondary education in Ireland to embrace and nurture all young people with their different talents, interests and intelligences by providing the learning styles that suit them and the requisite diversity of opportunities on leaving school to make promising starts to their working lives. SOLAS has a key role is facilitating this discussion and ensuring that FET rises to the challenge.