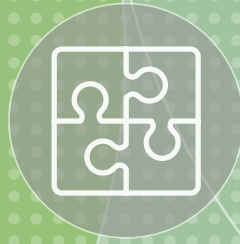


# Quality Assurance of Further Education and Training in the ETB Sector

**SECTORAL REPORT**  
MARCH 2023



QAI REVIEW

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This review of the quality assurance arrangements for further education and training (FET) in the education and training boards (ETBs) was prepared by an independent group of experts appointed by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). This review builds on the independent quality assurance reviews of 16 ETBs which took place from March 2021 to May 2022. To support the preparation of this report, the seven members of the sectoral report team attended QQI's Ten-Year Anniversary Conference<sup>1</sup> in Dublin in October 2022 and met with stakeholders at the event. The team also conducted a series of virtual interviews with stakeholders from November 2022 to January 2023.

The sectoral report team identified many aspects of the quality assurance of FET in ETBs which were well managed, as well as some areas where improvements could be made. This report is based on the assumption that every ETB is responsible for establishing, evaluating and monitoring the effectiveness of their own quality assurance system within a set of national guidelines set by QQI. To further strengthen the effectiveness of quality assurance in further education and training in the ETB sector, the sectoral report team is making the following four main recommendations:

1. ETB autonomy in relation to planning, implementing, monitoring and reviewing their approaches to quality assurance needs to be encouraged and strengthened,
2. the quality assurance of the effectiveness of individuals' teaching is underdeveloped and more needs to be done to improve its monitoring and evaluation,
3. the processes which are used to review and update programmes need to be strengthened,
4. ETBs and the ETB sector need to make better use of quantitative data to support quality assurance.

In addition, there is a fifth recommendation relating to the organisation of the next external review of ETB quality assurance arrangements in FET.

The sectoral report team also identified areas where the effectiveness of quality assurance could be improved. The following are areas where some, but not all, ETBs would benefit from adopting the best practice in the sector:

- » the importance of strengthening the learner voice in quality assurance,
- » reducing the differences between learner experiences when these depend on which ETB centre provides FET,
- » strengthening the quality assurance of work placements particularly through more systematic use of employer and learner feedback,
- » reviewing the quality assurance approaches used in relation to blended and on-line learning,
- » considering whether the provision of data through PLSS can be simplified,
- » considering how to provide training and community education providers with access to ETB quality assurance information,
- » considering how to strengthen the ETB brand,
- » considering how the sector and its representative organisation(s) can support the development of quality assurance procedures and best practice,
- » considering how regional partnerships can enhance quality assurance,
- » considering how ETB Boards can take oversight of the quality assurance of FET provision.

1 <https://www.qqi.ie/events/qqi-10th-anniversary-conference>

# FOREWORD

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is responsible for the external quality assurance of higher education (HE) and further education and training (FET) in Ireland. One of QQI's most important statutory functions is to ensure that the quality assurance procedures that providers have in place are implemented and are effective. To this end, from March 2021 to May 2022, QQI conducted an inaugural review of the quality assurance arrangements which have been established by each of the 16 education and training boards (ETBs). Following the completion and publication of the conclusions of each of these reviews<sup>2</sup>, QQI commissioned a sectoral report to identify system-level observations. The individual ETB reviews and this sectoral review included reviewers with international experience of quality assurance in the FET sector. This recognised the value of mutual learning, the benefit of external perspectives, and was an acknowledgement that Ireland's FET sector operates within an increasingly competitive international market.

This report provides an independent overview of quality assurance of FET in the ETB sector. It is intended to inform system-level stakeholders and the broader public of developments and issues that have an impact on quality assurance in the sector. It is also intended that the findings will help to inform and shape future strategic decision-making relating to the development of quality and quality assurance in the sector.

In line with its Terms of Reference<sup>3</sup>, the sectoral review was dependent on the findings from the individual ETB reviews. This sectoral review considered:

- » progress in establishing integrated and effective quality assurance systems,
- » the strengths and weaknesses in quality assurance across the ETBs,
- » success factors and obstacles to effective quality management in the sector,
- » the extent to which a quality culture exists in the sector, whether the quality assurance/enhancement activities undertaken to date by the ETBs are contributing to the further development of this, and how this might be further embedded,
- » the existence of cross-sectoral structures/initiatives among ETBs, the benefits and challenges of such, and the potential opportunities to support and enhance the quality of provision in the sector through collaborative activities, and
- » the development of recommendations for future strategic or sectoral priorities for the enhancement of quality.

Throughout the report, references to FET centres should be understood to include the colleges, centres, settings and organisations (including community education organisations and contracted training providers<sup>4</sup>) providing further education and training in the ETB sector.

2 The 16 reports are available on the QQI website at [https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/quality-assurance-education-training/reviews?sector=7&provider\\_type=14&document\\_type=All&year=All&provider\\_name=](https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/quality-assurance-education-training/reviews?sector=7&provider_type=14&document_type=All&year=All&provider_name=)

3 Inaugural Review of Quality Assurance in Education and Training Boards SECTORAL REPORT: TERMS OF REFERENCE. QQI. 2021 <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-11/sectoral-report-terms-of-reference-inaugural-review-of-quality-assurance-in-etbs.pdf>

4 Contracted training and community education provision, formerly regarded together as second provision, can be any organisation which has a contract with an ETB to provide further education and training. Each contracted trainer is required to operate within the ETB's quality assurance procedures and guidelines. Community education providers often have their own quality assurance procedures in line with QQI's guidelines. The recruitment of training staff is the direct responsibility of the contracted trainers and community education providers, and it is their responsibility to ensure they have sufficient staff with the appropriate skills to meet their contractual obligation with the ETB.

# THE SECTORAL REPORT TEAM

This review was conducted by seven reviewers selected and appointed by QQI. Each member of the team had already participated in at least one ETB review. The team attended QQI's Ten-Year Anniversary Conference<sup>5</sup> in Dublin in October 2022, and conducted a series of virtual interviews with stakeholders from November 2022 to January 2023 (annex 1). The sectoral report team would like to thank QQI for organising these interviews, and all those who generously contributed their time and expertise to inform the preparation of this report.

## **Joint Chair**

Frida Hengeveld studied social pedagogy at the University of Utrecht and educational development at the University of Twente in the Netherlands. Frida specialises in the development of non-profit organisations including educational institutions. She has written guidance on using the European Foundation for Quality Management's (EFQM) model of quality assurance in higher education.

Frida's career has included working as a teacher and director in higher education – and membership of the board of three FET institutions from 2000-2017. From 2008-2012 Frida was a member of the board of the national organisation for FET institutions in the Netherlands. She has also worked as an inspector for higher education and helped to develop national quality assurance processes in the higher education sector. Since 2018 Frida has volunteered as an expert to support education in less developed countries and has worked in Nepal, Indonesia and India. She is also a member of two governing boards of primary and secondary schools.

Frida was the chair of one ETB review: Dublin and Dún Laoghaire (DDLETB).

## **Joint Chair**

David Jones stepped down as Chief Executive/Principal of Coleg Cambria at the end of 2019 after steering the institution to great acclaim. A champion of work-based learning, apprenticeships, fund raising and accessible education for people of all ages, he has made a vast contribution to shaping the careers of tens of thousands of young and mature learners over more than three decades. Initially a chartered electronics engineer, as the CEO/Principal of Deeside College from 2004, David led its mergers from 2009 to 2013 with the Welsh College of Horticulture, Llysfasi College and Wrexham's Yale College, to create Coleg Cambria.

In addition to a wide range of previous non-executive appointments, David is currently the Chair of Qualifications Wales and the Defence Electronics Component Agency (DECA). He is also a Board member of Estyn (the Office of His Majesty's Inspector of Schools and Colleges in Wales). He was a commissioner for the UK-wide Independent Commission on the College of the Future which published its initial reports in 2020.

David was the chair of three ETB reviews: Laois and Offaly (LOETB), Kilkenny and Carlow (KCETB), and Kildare and Wicklow (KWETB).

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5 <https://www.qqi.ie/events/qqi-10th-anniversary-conference>

### **Report coordinator**

Keith Brumfitt has worked as a consultant for the European Commission, its agencies and contractors for fifteen years. This includes providing expert advice to the European Credit for vocational education and training (ECVET) and the European Quality Assurance for vocational education and training (EQAVET) networks; and supporting the European Network of Experts on graduate tracking in vocational and higher education. Before working as a consultant, Keith was a senior manager in three national agencies in the UK – he was the Director of a Sector Skills Body, a National Manager in the government’s agency for teacher training, and the Principal Advisor for Vocational Qualifications in the government’s qualifications regulator. He has also taught in universities, vocational colleges and secondary schools.

Keith was the coordinating reviewer of two ETB reviews: Cork ETB and Louth and Meath (LMETB).

### **Sectoral report team member**

Anna Jakobek is a full-time further education student on an Advanced Business Studies course in Cork ETB. Anna is a strong advocate of education and wishes to inspire other people to continue their education. In recent years Anna has been part of the Washington Ireland Programme, completed interviews for the Echo, RedFM and 96FM, served as Vice Chairperson of the Learners’ Voices Group and as Student Representative at Mayfield Training Centre.

Anna was the learner representative on two ETB review teams: Tipperary ETB and Louth and Meath (LMETB).

### **Sectoral report team member**

Conor Moss was appointed as Professor of Work-Based Learning at Sheffield Hallam University in August 2021 in recognition of his contribution to employability and work-based learning. He is an accomplished academic with over 20 years’ experience in higher education. He started his academic career working in Business Schools specialising in strategic management, leadership development and organisational development.

As Dean of Work-Based Learning, Conor ran the development of the institution’s award-winning employability, enterprise and employer engagement services. Conor has led the development of new business-facing services at two institutions. This includes developing Degree Apprenticeships and continuing professional development and employer-led provision at Sheffield Hallam University. Since May 2022 Conor has been the Dean of the College for Business, Technology and Engineering at Sheffield Hallam University – a multi-disciplinary college with 12,000 students.

Conor was the chair of one ETB review: Waterford and Wexford (WWETB).

### **Sectoral report team member**

Dr Oran Doherty is employed by the Irish Business and Employers’ Confederation (IBEC) as the manager of the Apprenticeship in Retail Supervision Programme. Prior to IBEC, Oran was employed by the Department of Education and Skills as the Regional Skills Forum Manager for the Northwest of Ireland. Oran was also employed as the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Work-based Learning Coordinator at the Letterkenny Institute of Technology from 2006-2016. His main areas of expertise are in future skills, work-based learning and the recognition of prior learning. He completed his doctorate in work-based learning partnerships between industry and education providers in 2017. In recent years Oran has run workshops on future skills, the recognition of prior learning and work-based learning throughout Ireland and continental Europe.

In addition to his academic experience, Oran has worked in a range of sectors including finance, IT, retail and hospitality. Oran has been a member of numerous QQI validation and accreditation panels.

Oran was the industry representative on one ETB review team: Limerick and Clare (LCETB).

**Sectoral report Team member**

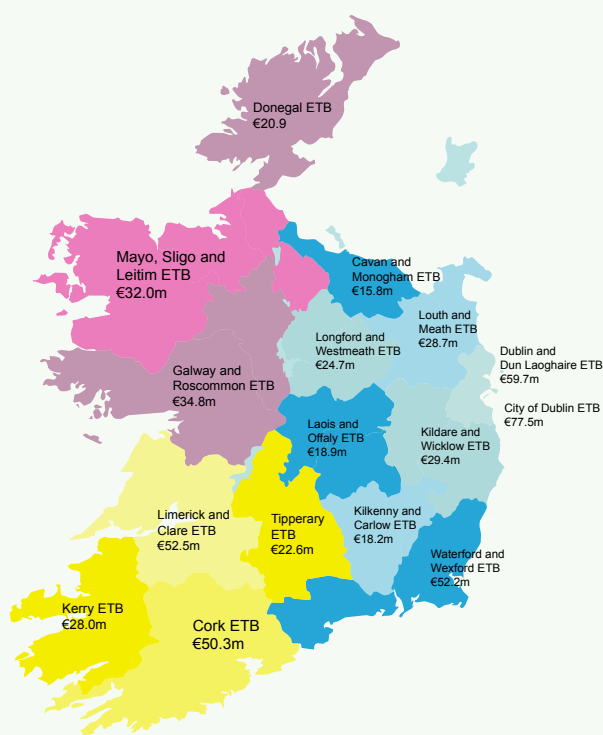
Maria Emília Galvão is an education and training consultant with a decade of experience working in quality assurance and improvement in FET. She was a consultant for the European Quality Assurance for vocational education and training (EQAVET). Maria Emília has helped Portuguese FET institutions to align their quality assurance approaches to the EQAVET Framework and supported the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) and the European Training Foundation's work in FET quality assurance. Prior to joining the EQAVET Secretariat, Maria Emília was the Director General for European Affairs and International Relations in the Portuguese Ministry of Education. Previously, she worked as a teacher in secondary schools and a polytechnic and has been involved in curriculum development and teacher training. Maria Emília graduated in Germanic Philology at the Universidade Clássica (Lisbon) and completed a master's degree in Education at the Universidade Nova (Lisbon).

Maria Emília was a member of one ETB review team: Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim (MSLETB).

# INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

1. The 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) were established under the 2013 Education and Training Board Act<sup>6</sup> and employ more than 32,000 people<sup>7</sup>. Each ETB (Figure 1) is a statutory authority with responsibility for education, training, and youth work. Each ETB operates and manages a range of centres administering and providing adult and further education and training (FET). ETBs also administer secondary and primary education through schools and engage in a range of non-accredited provision. These non-FET areas of ETB provision are not covered by this report on quality assurance.
2. As independent organisations, each ETB works within the funding arrangements set by SOLAS<sup>8</sup> and QQI's national guidelines to establish and operate their own governance and quality assurance arrangements. In addition, each ETB sub-contracts with training organisations and community education organisations for the delivery of education and training alongside the services offered by ETB centres.

Figure 1 - the 16 Education and Training Boards<sup>9</sup>



6 <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2013/act/11/enacted/en/html>

7 <https://www.etbi.ie/etbs>

8 SOLAS is the State agency that oversees the development of the FET sector in Ireland. <https://www.solas.ie/>

9 This map is from page 22 of Future FET: *Transforming Learning The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy*. SOLAS. [https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas\\_fet\\_strategy\\_web.pdf](https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf)



3. With the establishment of the ETBs, the previous arrangements for FET which were overseen by the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) and the national training and employment authority Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS) were dissolved.
4. This report includes recommendations for the ETB sector and for QQI. It also includes observations on the effectiveness of the arrangements for managing quality assurance in the sector. These observations may be of value to other organisations with an interest in the quality assurance of FET provision.
5. The external quality assurance of FET provision is overseen by QQI. In April 2016 QQI established [Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines](#) for all FET providers and [Sector Specific Quality Assurance Guidelines](#) for ETBs in May 2017. These guidelines outline the quality assurance responsibilities of ETBs in relation to FET. They cover all the education, training and related services of an ETB leading to a QQI award, other awards recognised in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), or awards of other awarding, regulatory or statutory bodies.<sup>10</sup> These guidelines set out what is expected at the institutional level rather than describing the quality assurance arrangements for individual qualifications or programmes. As ETB education and training responsibilities extend beyond FET provision, these guidelines only cover some aspects of the institution's arrangements for quality assurance.
6. *The Core Quality Assurance Guidelines* make clear that quality and its assurance are primarily the responsibility of providers of further education and training. However, as shown in figure 2<sup>11</sup>, QQI also has responsibility for the quality assurance of FET at the national level.

**Figure 2 - the national context for quality assurance**



7. QQI has an obligation to organise external reviews of ETB quality assurance systems. This led, in October 2019, to QQI's publication of a [Policy for the Inaugural Review of Quality Assurance in Education and Training Boards](#). This outlined QQI's approach to the inaugural external review of quality assurance of FET in the ETB sector. A review of each of the 16 ETBs took place from March 2021 to May 2022<sup>12</sup>. Each review was conducted by an independent team of evaluators who were selected and appointed by QQI. The reviews involved an analysis of each

10 Page 4 of QQI's *Policy for the Inaugural Review of Quality Assurance in Education and Training Boards*. <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-11/qp-21-policy-for-the-inaugural-review-of-quality-assurance-in-education-and-training-boards-etbs.pdf>

11 Taken from page 5 of the QQI's *Policy for the Inaugural Review of Quality Assurance in Education and Training Boards*. <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-11/qp-21-policy-for-the-inaugural-review-of-quality-assurance-in-education-and-training-boards-etbs.pdf>

12 The 16 reports are available on the QQI website at [https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/quality-assurance-education-training/reviews?sector=7&provider\\_type=14&document\\_type=All&year=All&provider\\_name=](https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/quality-assurance-education-training/reviews?sector=7&provider_type=14&document_type=All&year=All&provider_name=)

ETB's self-evaluation report (SER) and other documentation, and a week of interviews. Due to government restrictions associated with Covid-19, these reviews were conducted using an online methodology.

8. Following the completion of the individual reviews of each ETB, QQI appointed a sectoral report team to consider sector-wide issues relating to quality assurance in FET in the ETBs. The team's review took place from October 2022 to January 2023. To complete this report, the team analysed the 16 individual ETB reports on the quality assurance of FET, met many individuals with an interest in the quality assurance of FET, completed virtual interviews with a range of stakeholders, and liaised with QQI officials.
9. In addition to QQI's requirements for quality assurance at the institutional level, ETBs are expected to operate quality assurance arrangements for individual programmes and awards. These programmes include QQI awards, other awards recognised in Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), and awards of other awarding, regulatory or statutory bodies. Each of these qualifications, often as a condition of approval or accreditation, has a set of rules relating to internal verification (IV), external authentication (EA), the organisation of results approval processes (RAPs), feedback to learners, data collection etc.
10. Each ETB has a Strategic Performance Agreement with SOLAS<sup>13</sup> which provides funding for FET provision. At the start of the inaugural review process, each ETB operated within a performance agreement lasting from 2018-2021<sup>14</sup>. These agreements set out SOLAS's expectations in relation to the outputs of the ETB's provision, e.g.:
  - » learner participation rate,
  - » learner completion and certification outcomes,
  - » progression rates to employment and further study.
11. As part of SOLAS's monitoring of the Strategic Performance Agreements, there is an annual review meeting with each ETB's senior management team. These meetings focus on progress and challenges in relation to performance targets, future opportunities and the development of specific initiatives. The meetings do not include any monitoring of the quality assurance of provision, and there are no connections between the amount of funding allocated to FET provision in ETBs and the quality of their provision. However, it is worth noting that SOLAS's *Future FET: Transforming Learning* strategy paper for 2020-24 makes many references to the quality assurance of provision which is seen as one of six attributes of ETB provision that is required to realise ETB potential over the next five years<sup>15</sup>.
12. The quality of training provided by the ETBs is seen as strong. SOLAS reports<sup>16</sup> that '*learner feedback is generally positive, employment and progression outcomes are strong, and employers are highly satisfied with the quality of FET graduates.*' SOLAS goes on to note that '*learner outcomes are reinforced by strong employer endorsement of the quality of FET graduates.*' *The national tertiary education employer survey in 2018 revealed that satisfaction with FET graduates was on par with those from higher education.* This SOLAS report also notes

13 SOLAS is the State agency that oversees the development of the FET sector in Ireland. <https://www.solas.ie/>

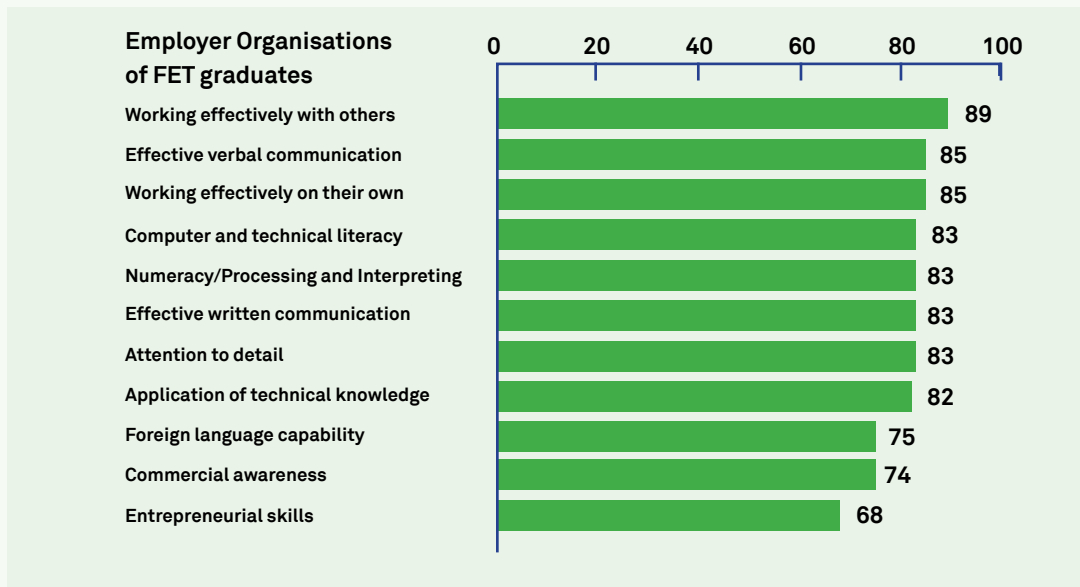
14 SOLAS's National System Report accompanies the 16 Strategic Performance Agreements between SOLAS and ETBs from 2022 - 2024. This report describes the context of the national Further Education and Training system and includes a summary of the national ambition of the ETBs and SOLAS. The ETBs' 2022-24 Strategic Performance Agreements are available at <https://www.solas.ie/about/fet-system-performance/>

15 Page 37. *Future FET: Transforming Learning*. The National Further Education and Training Strategy SOLAS. [https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas\\_fet\\_strategy\\_web.pdf](https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf)

16 Page 10. *Future FET: Transforming Learning*. The National Further Education and Training Strategy SOLAS. [https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas\\_fet\\_strategy\\_web.pdf](https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf)

that employers valued key attributes of FET graduates such as their ability to work in teams, as set out in Figure 3<sup>17</sup>.

**Figure 3 - employers' views of the skills demonstrated by FET graduates**



17 Page 26. Future FET: Transforming Learning. The National Further Education and Training Strategy, SOLAS. [https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas\\_fet\\_strategy\\_web.pdf](https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf)

## DISCUSSION OF THE ETB REPORTS

13. The 16 individual reviews of the quality assurance of FET in the ETB sector highlight considerable consistency in how quality assurance is managed at the programme and institutional level. Much of this consistency arises from the expectations of awarding bodies and their requirements for the delivery of awards and programmes. The individual ETB reports identify many activities which should be commended. These included the ETBs' commitment to:
- » develop and improve their quality assurance systems,
  - » establish a quality assurance team to support greater consistency in the quality assurance approaches used throughout the ETB,
  - » learner-centred teaching and learning,
  - » greater consistency in the quality assurance of the assessment processes used in each ETB centre,
  - » meet, when possible, the needs of employers,
  - » support all learners, including those taking awards offered by training contractors and community education providers (contracted by the ETBs) and those re-engaging with education as adult learners,
  - » support individual learner progress and future success,
  - » develop governance structures which can support improvements in quality assurance,
  - » meet the needs of learners and staff during the government's restrictions arising from Covid-19.
14. In addition to these commendations which were noted in many of the ETB reports, there are areas where individual ETBs demonstrate good practice in relation to quality assurance at the institutional level. These include ensuring each centre in an ETB uses the same assessment processes, staff from different centres in an ETB work together to moderate and 'second mark' learner assignments, the development of communities of practice for staff to share their pedagogic experiences on specific programmes and awards, the development of exemplars for assignments, the use of an ETB intranet to centralise all quality assurance policies and procedures etc.
15. The individual ETB reports include many examples of high-quality practice such as:
- » the provision of continuing professional development for teaching staff,
  - » the provision of support to disadvantaged learners or those with additional needs,
  - » the provision of information to potential learners,
  - » the publication of information for external stakeholders,
  - » support for the recognition of prior learning and achievement.

These examples of high-quality provision are often included without a description of the quality assurance model/framework which is being used by the ETB, or any comments on whether the examples:

- » were covered by the ETB's quality assurance processes, or
  - » had been developed as a result of the institution's quality assurance procedures.
16. In addition to the commendations, there are a series of recommendations in each ETB report. Many similar recommendations occur in the 16 reports. However, despite a considerable degree of consistency, there are different priorities for each ETB. The following paragraphs highlight those recommendations which occur most frequently. The sectoral report team used these recommendations to inform their discussions with stakeholders and reflect on whether there were system-wide issues which could be influencing or affecting quality assurance.
17. A common theme in many individual reports is the extent to which the FET directorates in ETBs work with 'legacy systems' inherited from previous training organisations. Despite the creation of the ETB sector in 2013, there are examples of:
- » incompatible IT systems,
  - » different approaches to quality assurance being taken by individual centres within ETBs,
  - » inconsistencies in the support which is offered to learners and teaching and learning staff across each part of an ETB (e.g., access to an ETB's quality assurance documentation and policies, and the support offered to those organisations providing training or FET under a contract with the ETB),
  - » difficulties in deploying staff to different centres in the ETB,
  - » challenges associated with establishing ETB-wide teams to review and amend those inherited systems which operate differently across ETB centres.
18. The analysis of the individual ETB reports also draws attention to the following aspects of provision (these are not listed in priority order) where there appears to be a system-wide challenge in relation to quality assurance:
- » the arrangements for reviewing and updating programmes offered by ETBs are insufficient to ensure learners receive the most up-to-date, industry-relevant content<sup>18</sup>. The development of new programmes or qualifications takes too much time, requires considerable staff expertise and commitment, and the quality assurance of the development/revision of programmes is not sufficiently robust. In these circumstances, there is risk that some programmes offered by ETBs are out-dated and unresponsive to employers' current and emerging needs. In addition, there appears to be uncertainty about who is responsible for developing and revising validated programmes leading to QQI awards.

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18 Work is ongoing involving ETBs, ETBI and QQI to establish processes and structures to support new programme development and replacement of old programmes. A working group and an overnight group are in place involving all these parties. A work programme has been devised with the following main deliverables:

1. a revised process for programme documentation, validation and sharing among ETBs,
2. a list of programmes prioritised for development / renewal,
3. a process for QQI to devolve responsibility to ETBs for programme evaluation pre-validation and programme maintenance post validation.

- » how best to establish and implement governance arrangements for the quality assurance of FET in an ETB. In a context where the ETB Boards are responsible for a large number of staff, learners and centres, there is a danger that the quality assurance of FET can be seen as a relatively small part of the organisation's overall operation.<sup>19</sup> The sectoral team believes that the quality assurance of FET provision should be covered by the institution's governance arrangements which include a strong voice for internal and external stakeholders i.e. employers/industry, staff and learners. The sectoral report team recognises that quality assurance is an executive function within ETB legislation. However, if ETBs are to strengthen their culture of quality, the sectoral team believe that quality assurance should be seen as a central theme of good governance and every ETB Board should have a process in place to ensure there is robust oversight of the monitoring and review of high-quality provision.
- » each ETB has arrangements in place for the learner voice to be included in the quality assurance processes. In some instances, this engagement is managed internally, sometimes it is organised through an external contractor and sometimes there is a combination of approaches. The sectoral report team felt this voice was not as loud as would be expected, and the arrangements for senior managers to hear and act on these voices can be inconsistent and insufficient. Strengthening this aspect of quality assurance would include making arrangements for learners to be represented in decision-making groups as well as ensuring there are more structured opportunities for learners to provide feedback, and to see how their views contribute to decisions.
- » the arrangements to monitor the quality of teaching and learning are not sufficiently robust. For example, the absence of processes to appraise or manage the performance and effectiveness of individual members of the teaching staff may inhibit managers' ability to quality assure the most important factor that affects the quality of FET provision. In some ETBs there are performance management arrangements in place for staff employed by training contractors/community education organisations as part of their contractual obligations. The sectoral report team noted these different expectations in relation to monitoring the quality of teaching and learning of staff employed by other organisations when compared to ETB centre staff.
- » the experience of learners in different centres in the same ETB can vary. This can arise because individual centres operate different approaches to quality assurance, staff support, staff induction, self-evaluation, assessment, learner recruitment and selection, recognition of prior learning etc.
- » an insufficient use of quantitative indicators, targets or benchmarks to inform quality assurance. Most ETBs have a great deal of data, particularly on learner achievement. This data (e.g., from SOLAS's PLSS system<sup>20</sup>) is not being used systematically to support the quality assurance of provision. The ETBs do not set, monitor or report on key performance indicators (KPIs)<sup>21</sup> relating to the quality of provision, and there is an absence of external benchmarking or internal trend comparisons between ETB centres, or between individual ETBs and the ETB sector average. The sectoral report team recommends much better use of data to support improvements in the quality of provision.

19 Quality assurance is one of the six core attributes of the National Further Education and Training Strategy. Figure 12, page 35, National Further Education and Training Strategy [https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas\\_fet\\_strategy\\_web.pdf](https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf)

20 PLSS - Programme Learner Support System. This database holds records of all applicants and learners who have applied for an FET course; and details of the course providers.

21 As set out in paragraph 10, the Strategic Performance Agreements with SOLAS include a set of expectations in relation to learner achievement.

- » the quality assurance of work experience (or work placements) is not well developed. It is not clear whether the quality of work-based learning is improving over time, whether learner experiences match the learning outcomes of their programmes, and whether learner competences match the needs of employers. Despite the positive findings from the 2018 independent evaluation of employers' views on the skills of FET graduates (see Figure 3), individual ETBs do not have sufficient feedback from employers to amend and quality assure the work experience offered to learners or those taking an apprenticeships.
  - » the quality assurance of some aspects of learner provision needs further development e.g., the quality assurance of blended learning and IT-based provision.
  - » ETBs responded positively to the inaugural review of quality assurance. The reports from the review process suggest ETBs react well to external requirements relating to quality assurance. However, the reviews also suggest the ETBs have been less proactive in developing their own culture of quality assurance.
19. In addition to the recommendations and commendations in the individual ETB reports, the sectoral report team identified the following issues during their interviews with stakeholders:
- » the complexity of providing data through PLSS – particularly for learners on short, non-accredited or community programmes,
  - » the ability of ETBs to respond quickly and accurately to the changing skills needs of employers and industry,
  - » some staff working for ETBs under a contract with a training or a community education organisation do not always receive the same support or access to ETB quality assurance documents as those who work directly for an ETB centre. This creates divisions between two groups of staff rather than developing a partnership approach based on common objectives,
  - » ETBs have not sufficiently developed an ETB brand which highlights the benefits of FET and the role of the ETBs. In some ETBs, individual centres (rather than the ETB) are promoted and are the focus of marketing and promotional activities,
  - » ETBs and ETBI<sup>22</sup> should identify opportunities for the latter to play an appropriate role in providing greater support for the development of quality assurance in ETBs including organising mutual learning and strengthening national developments. This should include responding to common ETB commendations and recommendations identified in the inaugural review process, where they are more effectively and efficiently addressed at a sector level,
  - » ETBs see the value and benefit of greater autonomy in relation to quality assurance. The sectoral report team believes the ETB sector has the capacity and enthusiasm for taking more responsibility for the development of a quality culture. This requires:
    - an increase in ETB capacity to develop their competences and expertise in relation to quality assurance,
    - greater clarity over responsibility for the review and development of programmes,
    - enabling the ETBs to allocate funds to central services and administrative support for quality assurance,

22 Education and Training Boards Ireland is the national representative body established to collectively represent the 16 Education and Training Boards and promote their interests. <https://www.etbi.ie/about-etbi/>

- a simpler and less bureaucratic process for ETBs to recruit (or redeploy) additional staff to manage or organise quality assurance,
- a clear set of expectations in relation to how information and data from the internal quality assurance processes will be monitored externally and used to review FET provision.
- » the rapid introduction of blended and online learning as a result of government lockdowns led to ETBs developing provision where the quality assurance arrangements were unproven,
- » some of the physical resources (e.g., buildings) are no longer appropriate for the provision of FET. In some ETBs there is a significant need for capital investment,
- » the importance of ensuring that the quality assurance processes used by ETBs support community education programmes and value lifelong learning as a key contributor to social inclusion and economic success in a rapidly evolving work environment,
- » the benefits of creating regional partnerships between neighbouring ETBs and higher education institutions,
- » the consultation on the development of a Tertiary Sector<sup>23</sup> covering higher and further education was welcomed. This could lead to greater consistency in how quality assurance is managed, the development of similar expectations in relation to autonomy and transparency in the FET and HE sectors (e.g., why are the self-assessment reports in the FET sector published when those in the HE sector are not), and the development of a stronger culture of quality assurance.

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23 See the national consultation on a unified tertiary sector.  
<https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/982e2-unified-tertiary-education-sector/>



## QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE SECTOR

20. Based on the ETB reviews and the sectoral report team's discussions with stakeholders, the following paragraphs set out a number of system-wide issues relating to quality assurance. These issues are presented for information as they inform the sectoral team's recommendations in the final section of this report.
21. In 2021, SOLAS commented that recent years has seen progress in the quality assurance mechanisms which are managed by ETBs.<sup>24</sup> However, the sectoral report team believes there is more to be done to enable ETBs to 'take ownership' of their approach to quality assurance. This could include, for example, an annual review of provision which involves all staff in the ETB. This should be accompanied by an annual action plan whose implementation is monitored and reviewed through the ETB's governance processes. The sectoral report team believes the Board of each ETB should ensure that the quality assurance processes used in FET lead to improvements in the quality of provision. ETBs tend to be reactive and responsive to external requests to quality assure programme and institutional arrangements. This led the sectoral report team to note that more needs to be done to establish a proactive quality culture which is based on continual improvements in quality as a result of the effective monitoring, evaluation and review of ETB practice in relation to FET. Developing a culture of quality requires ETBs to assume greater autonomy and responsibility for quality assurance, and the ability to manage their FET budgets.
22. The current approach to quality assurance in ETBs focusses on implementing external requirements set by agencies such as QQI and SOLAS, and other awarding bodies. This places ETBs in a dependent role and inhibits their ability to take full responsibility for the quality assurance of their provision. The sectoral report team noted a number of reasons for this dependency e.g.
  - » ETBs are funded on the basis of learner programmes<sup>25</sup> and have insufficient capacity and expertise to fully develop their quality assurance role at the institutional level,
  - » the difficulties and delays faced by ETBs in gaining approval to recruit additional members of staff,
  - » the uncertainty associated with responsibility for programme development and updating,
  - » the lack of opportunity to deploy existing staff to new roles,

24 The quality assurance structure across FET is fundamental to developing curricula, teaching and learning, assessment, maintaining standards and enhancing quality. There has been significant progress in developing ETB capability in quality assurance, with a re-engagement process with QQI, quality enhancement plans agreed, and ETB-wide quality reviews scheduled for 2020. Taken from SOLAS, (page 58) Future FET: Transforming Learning. The National Further Education and Training Strategy

25 Page 20 of SOLAS' report notes that 'the current in-year planning and budgeting system gather estimates of learner numbers, and offers scope for the allocation of additional resources if evidence of additional demand for provision can be set out. There is no direct link between the level of funding and overall ETB performance. The cost base of each ETB has largely been driven by historic expenditure in further education by the relevant VECs, and on the training activity previously delivered by FÁS within the region. These have been adjusted incrementally in each year since 2013 to reflect changing circumstances or the scale or nature of provision since the funding base was established.' This situation should change following the publication of Further Education and Training Funding Model Review. Final Report by the Independent Expert Panel. SOLAS. June 2022. <https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/99ca806e56/fet-funding-model-review-june-2022.pdf>

- » the workload facing members of staff,
- » a lack of agreement on which indicators should be used at the national level to monitor and report on the quality of provision. A stronger, clearer set of national indicators would help to develop greater consistency for learners irrespective of where they complete their education and training.

If quality assurance is to become a shared responsibility, ETBs need more autonomy in order to take full ownership of their internal quality assurance processes. ETBs need to be supported to establish and use 'feedback loops' for all aspects of provision to ensure quality is measured and enhanced through a more effective monitoring and review process.

23. One of the most consistent issues raised in the individual ETB reviews related to the development and review of existing programmes and the creation of new programmes to respond to employer and learner needs. As SOLAS recognised<sup>26</sup> in *Future FET: Transforming Learning* many of the existing FET programmes need to be revised and updated. The sectoral report team noted a lack of clarity over where responsibility lies for the updating of programmes – too often individual ETBs were waiting for QQI to make revisions, while QQI expected ETBs to take responsibility for making changes<sup>27</sup>. Examples from the review of individual ETB reports highlight how long it takes to revise learner programme, the level of expertise in curriculum development that is required, and the time commitment placed on staff. This does not seem manageable for individual ETBs, and it is unreasonable in the current environment to expect every ETB to develop and implement a rolling programme of course development based on their review of the appropriateness of course content. A better solution is needed to ensure every FET programme is up-to-date and the ETBs have the capacity to respond to the emerging skills needs of employers. ETBs cannot be regarded as implementing fully their quality assurance responsibilities when it is apparent that there are programmes that need substantial change.
24. Throughout the individual ETB reports there are references to the need to make better use of quantitative and qualitative data to monitor, evaluate and review the quality of provision. Every ETB collects an extensive amount of data on learners<sup>28</sup>. However, it seems that this data is rarely used to support the institution's quality assurance system. The sectoral report team noted that many ETBs felt these data collection activities were undertaken as part of the Strategic Performance Agreements and were designed to support the work of SOLAS. The data was not seen as providing a basis for developing key performance indicators (KPIs) or targets, comparing centres within an ETB, comparing the achievement of different groups of learners, making comparisons between different subject areas or qualification levels etc. The use of quantitative data for quality assurance purposes is significantly underdeveloped and this inhibits the ability of ETBs to make improvements in quality using evidence based on the achievement of learners. In addition to the limited use of PLSS data for quality assurance purposes, many ETBs are not systematically collecting and using feedback from learners and employers to underpin quality improvements. Many of the ETB reports noted that informal systems were often used to discuss the delivery of programmes with learners and employers. However, there were few examples of a more consistent and systematic

26 Page 10 of SOLAS's report comment 'But FET has to change. It needs to ensure that it can meet the needs of the future world and the evolving needs of economy and society. It must simplify its structure and learning pathways, facilitate easier access, ensure a more consistent learner experience and build a more powerful identity within communities and potential learners.'

27 Work is ongoing involving ETBs, ETBI and QQI to establish processes and structures to support new programme development and replacement of old programmes. A working group and an overnight group are in place involving all these parties. A work programme has been devised with the following main deliverables:

1. a revised process for programme documentation, validation and sharing among ETBs,
2. a list of programmes prioritised for development / renewal,
3. a process for QQI to devolve responsibility to ETBs for programme evaluation pre-validation and programme maintenance post validation

28 Learner data is uploaded to SOLAS's PLSS student record system.

approach to using the voices of employers and learners in the decision-making processes relating to the quality and relevance of FET provision.

25. ETB quality assurance systems have struggled to respond quickly to the demands placed on them by external organisations. The frequent references to 'legacy systems' inherited from 2013 illustrates how long it is taking for the ETBs to amalgamate all FET provision under one set of quality assurance arrangements. While progress has been made in some areas (particularly in creating more consistency in the quality assurance of assessment processes) the ETB quality assurance teams simply do not have the capacity to review and revise all their inherited systems. In most of the ETB reports it is clear that staff, in addition to their teaching and assessment commitments, are asked to take on additional tasks relating to quality assurance.
26. The quality assurance of FET provision requires ETBs to have significant centralised resources and capabilities. This issue is described in SOLAS's *Further Education and Training Funding Model Review* as follows: *there is a growing acknowledgement of the types of core, central capabilities that are now required by an ETB. More focus on strategic planning and data gathering/analysis; quality assurance and enhancement; curriculum development and agile programme development; consistent learner support; technology-enhanced learning and digital infrastructure; enterprise engagement; capital management and development; and staff development have all been identified as key priorities.*<sup>29</sup> During the review of individual ETBs the published reports made clear that the centralised resources for quality assurance were insufficient to establish, monitor and regularly review all aspects of provision. ETB quality assurance teams were establishing priorities (particularly in relation to the arrangements for assessment) and focusing their attention and activities on those aspects of provision which would have the largest impact on quality and learner achievement.
27. It is universally recognised that the quality of teaching and learning is the single greatest influence on learner outcomes and the quality of provision. The majority of the ETB reports highlight that there are limited formal mechanisms in place to quality assure the effectiveness of individuals' teaching. The sectoral report team feels this is a major omission to assuring quality and improving outcomes for learners. This is especially relevant when QQI and the ETBs rely on an inadequately resourced model of quality enhancement based on ongoing self-improvement rather than an inspection system to monitor provision.
28. Many of the ETB reports commented on the value of 'communities of practice'. While these provide an important and relevant way for staff teams to benefit from each other's experience, there should be more opportunities for ETBs to collaborate on quality assurance at regional and national levels. Working with QQI and ETBI, much more could be done to share experiences on how to monitor, evaluate and review the quality of FET provision in ETBs. Support for mutual learning could take the form of webinars, workshops, consultancy and advice, seminars on specific quality assurance issues, or peer reviews. These types of activities can help to strengthen a quality culture which acknowledges that quality assurance is the responsibility of all professional staff.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

29. Based on the discussions set out above, the sectoral report team is making four main recommendations. In addition, there is a fifth recommendation relating to the organisation of the next external review of ETB quality assurance arrangements in FET.

**Rec. 1 ETB autonomy in relation to planning, implementing, monitoring and reviewing their approaches to quality assurance needs to be encouraged and strengthened.**

In order to strengthen the development of a 'quality culture', ETBs need the resources and freedom to take ownership of their quality assurance processes. To strengthen the development of a quality culture, ETBs need to be more explicit about the quality assurance model they use to monitor and review the quality of their provision. In addition, the development of greater autonomy will require QQI to balance support for the sector with a clear understanding of what each ETB can be expected to achieve by themselves or with guidance from their representative organisation.

**Rec. 2 The quality assurance of the effectiveness of individuals' teaching is underdeveloped and more needs to be done to improve its monitoring and evaluation.**

This reflects the fundamental importance of the quality of teaching and learning to maintain and improve outcomes for learners. Irrespective of the type of performance management or monitoring system that is used (which may be developed at national or local level) its development should take account of the views of staff, learners, managers and other internal and external stakeholders.

**Rec. 3 The processes which are used to review and update programmes need to be strengthened.**

The analysis of individual ETB reports highlights the lack of clarity in relation to how ETBs address the essential updating of programmes and qualifications. The reports note that programme development is a demanding task which cannot be done by full-time teaching staff as an extra responsibility. The sectoral report team recommends that QQI should initiate work with the ETB sector to clarify responsibilities, organise joint ETB programme development initiatives, and support ETBs in securing resourcing to undertake this aspect of their quality assurance function.

**Rec. 4 ETBs and the ETB sector need to make better use of quantitative data to support quality assurance.**

Working with ETBs and the sector, QQI should provide clear guidance on how ETBs can develop a risk-based approach to using data. This data should be used to establish and monitor achievement against a small number of key performance indicators (KPIs) and measure the impact of policy interventions on the quality of provision. This guidance should include examples of how the quality of individual centres, programmes

and qualifications can be monitored and compared within an ETB and against the national average. In addition to individual ETBs setting their own quantitative targets or expectations<sup>30</sup>, QQI should work with the sector to establish a small number of sector-wide quantitative targets for quality assurance which should be included in the Annual Quality Report (AQR)<sup>31</sup>.

### **Rec. 5 Proposals for the organisation of the next external review of FET provision in ETBs**

The inaugural review involved significant work for ETBs and QQI. The level of commitment is highly commendable, but it is not sustainable. The sectoral report team has reflected on possible next steps for QQI in meeting its external quality assurance responsibilities (see figure 2). The team believes, in the context of supporting greater autonomy and the use of data by ETBs for quality assurance purposes, that QQI should expect each ETB to use KPIs to complete an annual internal report on the effectiveness of the quality assurance of their FET provision. As set out in recommendation 3, this would be part of annual reporting to QQI through their AQR. The AQR should be based on a standard format<sup>32</sup> produced by QQI through discussion with the sector. The outputs of these reports should be publicly available. This should enable individual ETBs to compare their achievements (based on a small number of agreed KPIs) with the national average. In addition, the view of the sectoral report team is that the next external review of each ETB should take place within five years and be based on a QQI analysis of the risks to quality in order that support can be targeted where it is most needed.<sup>33</sup>

The sectoral report team believes that the next review should include substantial face-to-face contact with ETB staff, learners, managers and stakeholders. Each ETB review team should include an experienced report writer, and at least one reviewer with substantial experience and expertise relating to Ireland's FET system. In addition, ETBs should expect to focus their preparations on an analysis rather than a description of their quality assurance system. The sectoral report team note that the inaugural reviews have led to an undue emphasis on describing quality assurance (rather than analysing the effectiveness of quality assurance) in ETB self-assessment reports.

30. In addition to these recommendations, this report discussed a number of other considerations for improving the quality assurance of FET provision in the ETB sector. These are listed below for information:

- » the importance of strengthening the learner voice in quality assurance,
- » reducing the differences between learner experiences when these depend on which ETB centre provides FET,
- » strengthening the quality assurance of work placements particularly through more systematic use of employer and learner feedback,
- » reviewing the quality assurance approaches used in relation to blended and on-line learning,
- » considering whether the provision of data through PLSS can be simplified,

30 e.g., the ETB's drop-out rates fall by x% in the following year; the ETB's learner support team responds to x% of requests for additional help within 48 hours

31 <https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/quality-assurance-of-education-and-training/quality-monitoring-and-review>

32 The development of a QQI format should take account of the risks associated with the quality of each area of FET provision.

33 The current guidelines (see paragraph 5) will need to change in order that ETB self-evaluation processes in preparation for an external review include data on the KPIs from their annual quality reports.

- » considering how to provide training and community education providers with access to an ETB's quality assurance information,
- » considering how to strengthen the ETB brand,
- » considering how the sector and its representative organisation(s) can support the development of quality assurance procedures and best practice,
- » considering how regional partnerships can enhance quality assurance,
- » considering how ETB Boards can take oversight of the quality assurance of FET provision.

# ANNEX 1

A

Discussions were held between the sectoral team and staff from the following organisations:

- » Irish Business and Employers' Confederation (IBEC),
- » Education and Training Boards (ETBs),
- » National Learning Network (NLN),
- » Irish Association of Community Training Organisations (IACTO),
- » SOLAS,
- » The Technological Higher Education Association (THEA),
- » Ireland's National Adult Learning Organisation (AONTAS),
- » Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI),
- » Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI),
- » Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS).



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