

**Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) opening statement to the
Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research,
Innovation and Science
on the
“Reopening of Further and Higher Educational Institutions in a Safe and
Sustainable way”.**

8 July 2021

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1. Introduction

On behalf of Education and Training Boards Ireland, and the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) that ETBI represents, I am very pleased to make this statement to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on the topic of the reopening of Further and Higher Educational Institutions in a Safe and Sustainable way.

The Education and Training Board (ETB) sector is the leading provider of education and training services nationally, and with a budget of over €2.2 billion and 32, 000 staff is a key actor responding strategically to emerging trends and needs, both nationally and on the international stage. As a vibrant and responsive sector, ETBs deliver Further Education and Training to over 220,000 unique FET learners annually in over 200 FET Colleges, Training Centres, Youth Education and Training Centres.

As the collective representative body of all 16 ETBs, ETBI supports the sector, providing, procuring, promoting relationships with relevant bodies and agencies, and coordinating services at national level through three main pillars of Schools, Further Education and Training, and Organisational Support and Development. It fulfils this role through harnessing the expertise and comprehensive skillset of its professional staff both internally and within ETBs, and in doing so, vigorously and ambitiously builds on the fulfilment of its strategic priorities within and on behalf of the sector. In an uncertain future where Education and Training continues to regenerate and build a better future for all age groups, abilities and ambitions, ETBI maintains its focus on prioritising high level delivery of services to people and communities, building strategic partnerships and collaborations, and developing future potential and innovations over the coming years.

2. COVID-19 Response Plan in ETB Further Education and Training

Following the COVID-19 Closure Announcement made on the 12th of March 2020, the Further Education & Training Sector, along with all other provision, put in place contingency plans to deal with the disruption to teaching and learning. FET Institutions continued to deliver a large portion of their services to learners during the initial period of full national lockdown with the transition to blended and remote teaching and learning and the continuation of learner supports and assessment where possible.

In view of the specific features and context of FET campuses, colleges and centres, TUI and SIPTU sought context-specific detail on issues relating to their members. The Key Stakeholders Steering Group was established on 30th of July 2020 to focus on any issues arising in relation to COVID-19, and to agree on a relevant guidance documents provided for the ETB FET sector. Arising from same, the Operational Working Group was established to facilitate ongoing positive engagement and discussion with key stakeholders on the issues arising in relation to the re-opening of FET Institutions.

The purpose of the group is to ensure that open communication channels are maintained to allow for issues, arising in the transitional period, to be addressed and to maintain a coherent coordinated approach, cognisant of the sectoral priority needs and requirements.

The FET Key Stakeholders Working Group includes members from: Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU), Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI), Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DHFERIS), SOLAS, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), the ETBI Chief Executives Forum (CE) and ETBI Directors of Further Education and Training Forum (DFET).

Since the creation of the FET Key Stakeholders Working Group, the members have met sixteen times virtually to discuss and provide guidelines in relation to the safe return to education and training and the wider reopening of FET Centres. ETBI is continuing to work with the FET Stakeholders Working Group on developing relevant guidance documents for the sector in accordance with the national public health guidelines.

2.1 Phased Reopening of ETB Further Education and Training Provision

FET Key Stakeholders Working Group continued the review of any queries arising ahead of the September 2020 re-opening.

ETBI had developed and shared with the FET sector a suite of return to learning resources including the FET Learner Induction Framework and relevant templates. There was a continuing engagement within the system on arrangements for apprentices attending training around the country, accommodation, responses in the event of localised restrictions, protocols in the event of instances of Covid-19 in locations, among staff/apprentices. Guidance provided by SOLAS on the delivery of apprenticeship training to maximise blended learning and engagement within the system on resources (personnel, equipment, facilities) to accommodate the maximum number of apprentices was shared with the sector.

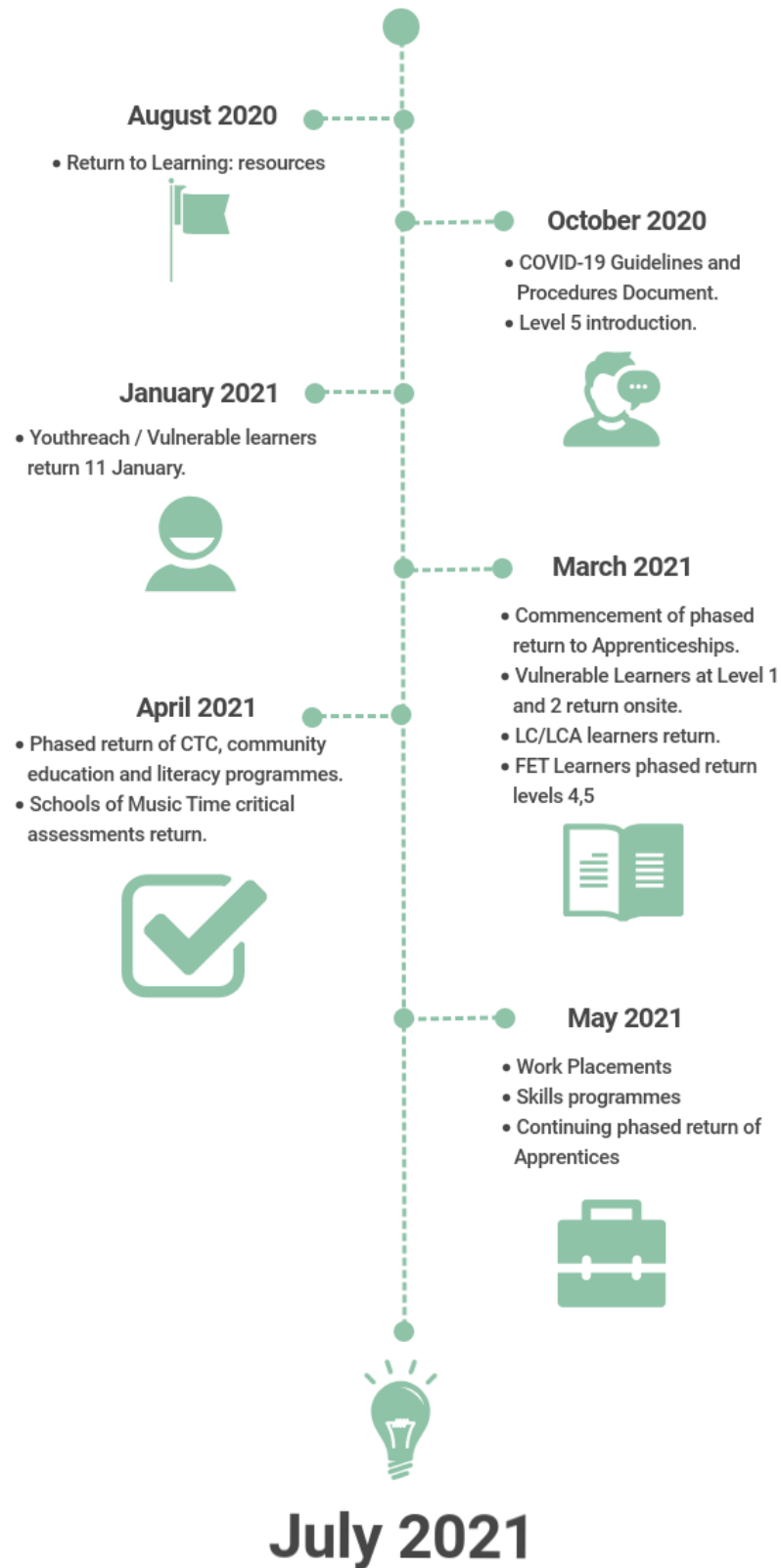


Figure 1 Timeline of re-opening

In October 2020, ETBI had drawn up COVID-19 Guidelines and Procedures Document in consultation and collaboration with Staff Representatives, informed by public health advice and supported by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and SOLAS. This document provided guidance on the steps and processes to be in place across further education and training institutes to respond to COVID-19 effectively and efficiently in these settings, including prevention measures, and procedures for effectively and efficiently responding to suspected and confirmed cases of COVID-19 on site.

The Government decided that as of midnight on Wednesday 21st October, all of Ireland would be placed on Level 5 of the Plan for Living with COVID. The Level 5 measures announced designated further and higher education as essential insofar as onsite presence is required, and such education activities cannot be held remotely. Essential activities at Level 5 in Further Education and Training included among others practical and skills-based tuition, learners requiring additional support and learners' access to onsite study space.

The following programmes had full onsite delivery:

- Youthreach, adult literacy, STP, and VTOS2, BTEI (vulnerable learner) tuition to continue on-site.
- Apprenticeship and practical courses e.g., Horticulture/Welding should continue on-site.

The following programmes primarily moved to emergency remote delivery but accommodated on-site delivery as appropriate, for practical elements only:

- PLC
- VTOS and BTEI for provision not aligned with adult literacy.
- Evening Training Courses in Training Centres
- Contracted training

In January 2021, the Minister for Further and Higher Education Simon Harris TD confirmed the further restriction of onsite activity in response to the deteriorating COVID-19 situation. Minister Harris confirmed that further education and training institutions were to operate primarily online with most activities delivered remotely during this academic year. This meant that Further Education and Training programmes were moved to emergency remote delivery and on-site FET activity was minimised with remote working encouraged where possible.

In February 2021, the Stakeholders Working group commenced discussions in relation to the phased re-opening of the FET Sector.

Youthreach and Vulnerable Learners

Vulnerable learners requiring onsite presence to support wellbeing or access to workspace and Wi-Fi to complete course work were accommodated, bearing in mind the overall footfall of the FET centre/institution. In addition, as part of the phased reopening, onsite access for vulnerable learners at Level 1 and 2 including STP and NLN commenced from **March 22nd, 2021**, onsite activity included the minimum number of learners required onsite at any given time and was supplemented with emergency remote tuition.

Youthreach and Community Training Centres re-opened for learners from **April 12th, 2021**, with full onsite delivery. In addition, small group tuition for vulnerable learners in community education, literacy and numeracy programmes at Levels 1- 2 recommenced from **April 12th 2021**.

Apprenticeships

SOLAS, as the coordinating provider for craft apprenticeships, commenced planning for the return to training of a small number of critical and time sensitive apprenticeship classes, in February, with a reopening date for these groups of time-critical apprenticeship classes defined as **March 1st, 2021**.

Return to learning resources for this cohort were developed to assist with plans for reopening and were available on ETBI digital library. Apprentices had to complete the Safe Return module and achieve the associated certification prior to return to the classroom. SOLAS have ensured that the training centres delivering these time-critical classes have access to the craft assessment system.

Following the successful return of 251 apprentices from 1st March, a second group of 320 time-critical apprentices recommenced onsite practical training and assessment from Monday 15th March, with a third group of 589 time-critical apprentices recommencing onsite practical training and assessment since Monday April 12th.

Phased re-opening continued for time-critical return for apprenticeship (consortium-led where required as well as craft) as per agreed by the FET Key Stakeholders Working Group schedule. SOLAS continued to engage with ETBs who have craft apprenticeship classes starting remotely during May. A plan to address the backlog drawn up and agreed for implementation by the sector.

Final Year Leaving Certificate / Leaving Certificate Applied Learners

Final year Leaving Certificate / Leaving Certificate Applied session 4 learners enrolled in FET Centres including Youthreach/BTEI/VTOS etc. have received the same provisions in relation to on-site learning as second level schools and in accordance with the governmental guidelines reopened on **1st of March 2021**.

FET Learners at levels 4, 5 and 6

Phased return to FET centres for learners at levels 4, 5 and 6 who are engaged in time-critical practical elements across the awards including QQI, City of Guilds, Junior and Senior Trade examinations was carried out in a phased approach and in accordance with current Governmental *COVID-19 Resilience & Recovery 2021 – The Path Ahead* framework commencing on **March 15th, 2021**.

Schools of Music

In line with the advice issued on the matter to schools, all students who have returned to on-site tuition in post-primary schools from the **8th of April 2021** returned to on-site provision of:

- 5th Year Leaving Certificate Music Tuition
- 6th Year Leaving Certificate Music Tuition
- Instrumental/Practical Tuition of any grade where it supports the taking of music in the national post-primary curriculum.

Time-Critical Assessments Level 4 – 6 (Graded Music Examinations) returned to on-site provision on Monday **19th of April** with all practical tuition from Grade 4 upwards and Grade 5 theory learners required to complete the course.

It was also required that each school of music put provisions in place to ensure the safest manner of tuition for wind and voice practical tuition.

All other provision, including but not limited to, Grades 1 – 3 practical tuition, theory at any Grade other than Grade 5, and outreach programmes remained remote.

Work Placements and Skills Programmes

From **29th of April 2021** where work placements are required as part of the programme and the relevant industry was open and operating under the current Government Guidelines, and employers are in agreement to facilitate the placement, such placements were agreed to proceed. All placements are subject to public health guidelines including use of PPE, 2 metre social distancing and appropriate infection control measures.

Skills to Advance programmes that were providing off-site training to employers / industry have also recommenced where the industries are open and operating under the current Government guidelines.

2.2 Key Dates 2020-2021

- **August 2020:** Learner induction resources were drafted by ETBI and shared with the sector.
- **6th October 2020:** Copy of the COVID-19 Guidelines and Procedures Document is published.
- **21st October 2020:** FET provision moves to Level 5 of the Plan for Living with COVID following Governmental announcement.
- **5th January:** first Key FET Stakeholder meeting of 2021. Pending the Government announcement, Youthreach provision would be delivered online until Monday 11th of January 2021.
- **1st March:** Small number of critical and time sensitive apprenticeship classes (251 apprentices) identified by SOLAS as the coordinating providers for craft apprenticeships return to training on 1st of March 2021.
- **15th March:** Level 4 and 5 learners who are engaged in time-critical practical elements return to onsite practical training across the awards including QQI, City of Guilds, Junior and Senior Trade examinations.
- **22nd March:** Vulnerable Learners at Level 1 and 2 can return onsite as part of the phased reopening. The onsite activity should only include the minimum number of learners required onsite at any given time supplemented with emergency remote tuition.
- **26th March:** Schools of Music provision - it was agreed that the learners preparing for the Leaving Certificate examination will be allowed onsite practical tuition with the rest of the provision being delivered online.

- **12th April:** Following the successful return of the first group of apprentices on March 1st, and the second group on March 15th, the third group of 589 time-critical apprentices returned to onsite practical training and assessment on Monday April 12th.
- **12th April:** Youthreach, CTC, community education and literacy programmes returned on a phased basis to meet the wellbeing and welfare needs of learners.
- **29th April:** It was agreed that where work placements are required as part of the programme and the relevant industry is open and operating under the current Government Guidelines, and employers agree to facilitate the placement, such placements can proceed.
- **29th April:** It was agreed that evening Training Courses in Training Centre will remain online until September 2021.
- **6th May:** The next stage of time-critical return for apprenticeship (consortium-led where required as well as craft) was agreed. SOLAS is engaging with ETBs who have craft apprenticeship classes starting remotely during May.
- **10th May:** 47 Commis Chef apprentices, across 6 ETBs will recommence on-site training for practical elements only from May 10, 2021.
- **10th May:** 75 Butchery apprentices recommenced on-site training for practical elements only starting from May 10, 2021.
- **10th May:** ETBs are informed that any planned FET graduation ceremonies can only occur remotely, with graduations conferred in absentia.
- **20th May:** In light of the HSE Cyber Attack, ETBI circulated Guidelines on how to cope with the HSE System down and the appropriate contacts for reporting COVID-19 cases within centres.
- **15th June:** SEC confirmed that the TS Hairdressing (Senior and Junior Trade) practical examinations began on the 14th of June and will run until Friday the 25th of June. In the case of one individual centre the examinations will run until the 1st of July.
- **15th June:** ETBI circulated the Summer Programmes Transport Safety Protocols.

3. Conclusion

ETBI welcomes the opportunity to present to the Joint Oireachtas Committee meeting on the Reopening of Further and Higher Educational Institutions in a safe and sustainable way.

ETBI's core principles are centred first and foremost on positioning the FET sector for future innovation, as a key contributor to developing appropriate learning and teaching policies. The functions of ETBI are rooted in the government's vision to make Ireland one of the leading providers of lifelong learning and long-term strategic, national plans to maintain a sustainable economy and place learners at the heart of educational development. It is within this vision that ETBI occupies a key function to advocate for, support, enable change, innovate and represent the sector.

ETBI believes that the continuous collaboration and the activities it undertakes make it a central resource for the ETB sector, providing flexible, wide-ranging supports which complement its mission. ETBI fulfils its key role by utilising the expertise of its professional staff and bringing together expertise that exists within ETBs. ETBI boasts an exemplary work ethic and proactive, collaborative approach to supporting the FET sector. As the education and training sector continues to evolve, so too does ETBI's pivotal role in enabling change through the range of supports it offers. As Ireland moves forward in meeting global challenges and developing education policies nationwide, ETBI continues to evolve while providing responsive, proactive leadership to the sector.