Reading Between the Lines: Exploring the Implementation of Irish Further Education and Training Policy at Practice Level

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Abstract

Adult Education in the Republic of Ireland has experienced exponential change. Since 2013, the Further Education and Training (FET) sector has developed and implemented a range of strategies and policies transforming the landscape. Policy implementation is a complex process and as the 16 Education and Training Boards work to interpret FET policy and transform their offerings, practitioners are concerned that policy implementation may misalign with policy intention and compromise philosophies. This article aims to explore implementation in action. It describes the policy context, actions being taken to implement policy, the concerns of practitioners, and provides questions for consideration and reflection.

Keywords: Adult Education Policy, Policy Implementation, Change Manage–ment, Adult Education Values

Introduction

Over 10,000 people currently work in the Irish Further Education and Training (FET) sector catering to almost '200,000 unique learners per year' (SOLAS, 2022a, p.14) and in March 2023 the 16 Irish Education and Training Boards (ETBs) celebrated ten years since their formation. Over this period, adult education in the Republic of Ireland has experienced significant transformation and development under the umbrella of FET. ETBs were established to provide the functions formerly fulfilled by the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) and Fás, the state training authority. SOLAS, the state's further education and training agency, was created and simplified the context. Since its inception, SOLAS has led out on the development of FET policy and past developments have catalysed substantial gains in the field of adult and further education. More recently SOLAS's strategy and system development includes a

Revised Funding Model for the new Strategic Performance Agreements (SPAs) with each of the 16 ETBs. Each ETB has autonomy around implementation at a local level. At present, there are escalating concerns among FET practitioners that in leading sectoral change ETB management is signalling approaches that threaten to sacrifice adult-only educational environments, programmes, adult educational philosophies, and ethos. This presents a dilemma in that the theory and experiences of best practice in adult education (especially for learners who have experienced disadvantage in their first experience of mainstream schooling) and those gains and learning achieved over decades of development in adult education could be lost, 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater'. With funding tied to outcomes, there is a risk of a myopic focus on outcomes at the local level rather than considering the achievement of outcomes within the full context and intention of FET policy.

Both authors are involved in initial teaching qualifications for adult and further education, and both are active practitioners in the adult and further education sector, both statutory and non-statutory, in Ireland. We have experienced the landscape change from a marginal adult and community education sector to its incorporation into the new further education and training structures, particularly the availability of accessible vocational qualifications for adults and a growing emphasis on FET for labour market activation. A number of assumptions are made in this article. Firstly, we consider that adult education practitioners are open to change that is not in conflict with their adult educational philosophies and ethos. Secondly, we consider adult and further education pathways as offering excellent opportunities for the populace in general and for educationally disadvantaged learners in particular. FET and adult and community education can facilitate transformational learning for adults (Brennan and O'Grady, 2022). Thirdly we consider that the desire to hold onto good practice is shared by the provider, funder, and practitioner and this requires all stakeholders involved to work in partnership. A further assumption is that many practitioners may feel themselves in the position of policy takers and be negatively affected by implementation actions that seem to be aligned with policy intentions but have the effect of riding roughshod over previous good practices and innovations.

This article draws on current FET policy, Murtagh's (2021) policy review of the current FET Strategy, and the concerns of practitioners around the implementation of policy. This provides the reader with a snapshot in time from different perspectives. It is anticipated that the timely identification of risks will help mitigate them and offer possibilities for practice.

Context

The inaugural national Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019 was published by SOLAS in 2014. During the lifetime of this strategy, the FET landscape underwent a transformation, and many substantial developments were made in the sector. However, concerns were also raised about the impact of some changes to adult and community education (Grummell, 2014; Fitzsimons, 2017). They located the move to mainstream adult education developments funded by the state as neoliberal in nature, if not a manifestation of new managerialism, and viewed this as a means to control the sector rather than simply funding it.

The current FET strategy, *Future FET: Transforming Learning 2020-2024*, is the second strategy to be published and aims to build on the developments and achievements over the life of the first. This strategy addresses three core pillars in FET: fostering inclusion, facilitating pathways and building skills. Published in 2020, the timing of the second strategy coincided with the COVID-19 global pandemic – a time during which FET organisations and practitioners were grappling to effectively respond to the educational needs of learners in an online environment. This issue of timing is noted by Murtagh in his 2021 review of the FET Strategy for *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner* who pointed out that the launch of the strategy received limited attention due to COVID-19 and Brexit. Murtagh notes the ambitious nature of this strategy, describing its 'recognition of community education and the broader purposes of learning [as] laudable' (p.144) and sees it as reflecting a move away from a neoliberal focus in the earlier, first strategy.

SOLAS stated in the FET strategy (2020) that the existing funding model would be reformed:

> …to move away from approaches that reinforce programme silos, to reflect the outcomes and performance of ETBs, and to facilitate strategic investment in long-term priorities (2020, p.56).

In June 2022, the *Further Education and Training Funding Model Review* was published, bringing with it a change from a funding allocation to the 34 programmes based on estimated numbers of learners, to an allocation of funding to a general FET pot for each ETB based on the previous years' figures. This modified funding approach is noted as being necessary to realise the commitments of 'easier access, simplified pathways, a consistent learner experience and a more powerful identity,' in the Strategy (SOLAS, 2022a, p.3).

In late 2022 the Strategic Performance Agreements specific to each of the 16 ETBs, covering the three-year period from 2022-2024, were published. These agreements are intended to build upon the preceding 2018-2020 agreements and act 'as the second realisation of The Transforming Learning strategy at the regional level' (Brownlee, 2022, p.205). It is noted in the *Transforming Learning Strategic Performance Agreements Report* that these agreements set 'out the future plans for development and innovation across the FET system' (SOLAS, 2022b, p.1). They outline each ETB's commitments to achieving targets under five themes and their contribution to national system targets relating to supporting jobs; learning pathways; facilitating inclusion; upskilling through life and careers; and targeting key skills needs, as agreed with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

A Snapshot: On the Ground

It is clear from the ETB profiles and performance from 2018, mapped in the current Strategic Performance Agreements, that each ETB is at a different stage of implementation and development in their FET transformational journeys. This is particularly evident in relation to buildings, estates, and staffing. Some ETBs operate each of their FET programmes from individual buildings, with programme-designated and contracted staff, essentially a stand-alone silo, e.g. designated Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) centres managed by VTOS Co-ordinators. Others work as individual programmes, with programme- designated and contracted staff in shared FET centres e.g. Back to Education Initiative (BTEI), staffed by BTEI Co-ordinator, Adult Educators, Teachers and Tutors; VTOS by VTOS Co-ordinator, Administrators and Teachers, and Literacy with Adult Literacy Organiser, Adult Educator and Tutors etc. Each staff member can be operating in a shared physical space, but their role is specific to the delivery of their programme. It is important to note that the contracts in each programme also differ, with terms, conditions and remuneration being programme specific e.g. a teacher contract, or an adult educator contract with teaching responsibility, or a BTEI Co-ordinator having a different contract to an Adult Literacy Organiser. Essentially this model sees silos operating in a shared space, although in some settings programme Co-ordinators work collaboratively with one another to create learner pathways and opportunities across programmes (often this is largely dependent on personal relationships). Others are further along the path of a unified approach to FET delivery and operate in shared FET centres, with a designated FET manager (at present often having a contract assigned to a particular programme but working beyond their initial role description with local agreements in place) e.g. centres managed by VTOS Co-ordinator or BTEI Co-ordinator with Adult

Educators from a range of programmes and full centre administration in place. In these instances, from the learner perspective, they do not see programme-specific offerings but are rather presented with a menu of full-time and part-time programmes across the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). All of these offerings are adult-centric and underpinned by adult educational philosophies and approaches.

It is our observation that to date the majority of Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses NFQ Level 5 and 6 have been offered in second-level school settings with a small number being offered in stand-alone PLC colleges. The tuition is delivered by teaching staff on teacher contracts. The philosophies and ethos underpinning this provision have emerged from second-level education and are at odds with adult education philosophies.

The Issues

If we are to successfully transform our FET sector to effectively address the pillars in the strategy of facilitating FET learner access and inclusion, offering pathways in FET and from FET and upskilling learners, then a number of essential areas and legacy issues must be considered. These are explored below:

Communications

As of April 2023, a structure has yet to be introduced to disseminate the strategy to practitioners and facilitate discussion and exploration of the content and implications of the current policy: the Strategy, the Strategic Performance Agreements and the new funding model. Trust is a prerequisite of change and communication is critical to building trust. It is imperative that FET Leadership teams disseminate the critical information and facilitate opportunities for all FET staff to engage in meaningful collaborative dialogue and input into planning, development and implementation.

Philosophies

An adult-centric philosophy and ethos is a fundamental requirement of incorporating adult education into FET provision, and this is understood in the FET strategy in its positioning of 'The Returner' (SOLAS, 2020, p.13). However, there is no other mention of adult education philosophies and processes in the Strategy. As ETBs move towards harmonising their FET offerings, it is critical that the approach adopted is in alignment with, and driven by, these philosophies. Varied transformation approaches are being adopted to implement the policy by ETBs at a local level. Such approaches

include working towards integrating PLCs into FET centres; relocating adult education provision to standalone PLC Colleges and changing reporting structures from adult education officers to principals; and exploring moving existing full-time adult education provision from FET centres to PLC in secondary school settings. FET practitioners consider the first approach to be consistent with FET strategic and policy intention and view the latter two approaches, particularly the last, as being inconsistent. There is concern that these approaches compromise adult education centric philosophies and approaches and run counterintuitively to realising the intentions under the pillars to forge pathways within FET.

Shared values have the potential to enable stakeholders to work together to achieve strategic goals: however, these are absent in the structure of the SPAs. What is also missing in the SPAs is a description of the process by which strategic goals and targets will be achieved.

Buildings/Locations and Resourcing

FET transformation requires dedicated, adult-friendly environments that are appropriately staffed and resourced. The existing educational environments, buildings and staffing structures described earlier have been determined and shaped by the previous funding mechanisms and parameters based on funding for the 34 different programmes. ETBs locating FET provision across NQF levels (full-time and part-time), provision in shared buildings, and resourcing it appropriately, not only dismantles programmatic silos, but also offers the opportunity to deliver enhanced access, and develop pathways within and from FET. Designated FET centres incorporating adult education offerings have evolved and established an identity that is underpinned by adult-centric philosophies. They are effective in enabling learner access. Unlike the approach of putting adult education into school settings described above, we suggest that locating and integrating PLCs within these FET centres would offer more scope for the opportunity and be less likely to muddy or dilute the adult-centric nature of service delivery and also ensure that buildings and settings contribute to the Strategy's intention of scaffolding a positive and coherent identity for FET and the vision for 'The FET college of the Future' (SOLAS, 2020, p.38). To date, 10 ETBs have been selected by SOLAS to receive funding and support for FET Colleges of the Future.

Roles

The legacy of the previous funding model means that currently FET management, teaching and administrative staff structures and contracts are programme specific. Some programmes have teaching staff, others have tutors, and co-ordination and management contracts differ.

Outcomes

There is a risk that, in the desire to satisfy those outcomes and the statistical reporting mechanism in the Programme Learner Support System (PLSS), the wider breadth of outcomes articulated as desirable in the strategy but not yet measured will be ignored or given a diluted priority when ETBs are considering the implementation of policy at local level. Alternative ways of measuring outcomes, for example, are available but not widely known or deemed relevant outside of adult and community education (Brennan and O'Grady, 2022).

Possibilities for Action

If trust between stakeholders is established and maintained in the process of aligning with current policy directions, there is potential to catalyse more engagement and help to reduce resistance and low morale (Brennan, 2017). As mentioned in the 'Communications' section above, trust in the leader-staff relationship is a key condition for transformation: trust that the learner will not only benefit from this transformation process, but that all transformation will be underpinned by the commitments to the learners; trust regarding the protection of philosophies and ethos; trust in relation to communication and opportunities for staff to engage and collaborate as part of the transformation (professional respect); trust around it being a priority to maintain integrity and values tied back to philosophy; trust in relation to environments conducive to empowering learners; trust that the focus will be on outcomes/measures that are broader than just accreditation and progression.

Values and philosophies can underpin the approach to transforming FET by adopting a facilitative approach to implementation at a local level with the support of SOLAS, the policymaker. The values not identified in SPAs can be the foundation for effective transformation by being identified, reflected on, shared, or even challenged.

Conclusion

While current FET policy offers significant opportunities to transform our sector and an understanding of change management is reflected in the performance agreement processes, we have presented some areas that merit further consideration. Policy implementation will have major implications for access and participation for educationally disadvantaged adults, and the staff who design and deliver the educational programmes. There are signs that positive elements of these policies will be lost in translation, as ETBs work under the new funding model towards realising their commitments under the Strategic Performance Agreements in alignment with the National Strategy.

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