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# Teagasc Submission to the SOLAS Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2025-2029

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Submitted to SOLAS as part of Public Consultation call for the Further Education and  
Training (FET) Strategy 2025-29

21<sup>st</sup> February 2025



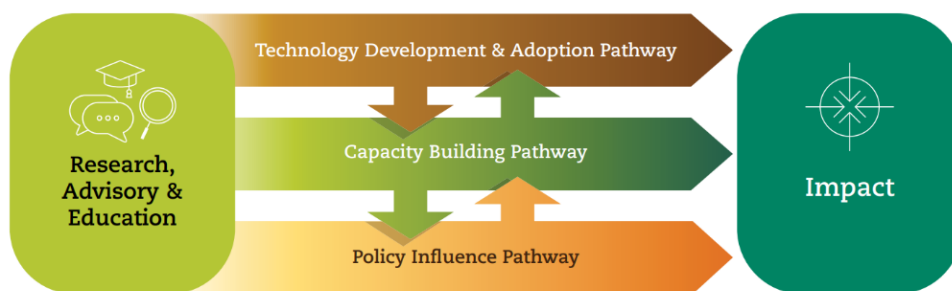
## The Role of Teagasc in Further Education and Training

The SOLAS Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2025-2029 consultation provides an important opportunity to shape the future direction of FET in Ireland. Teagasc welcomes this consultation process as it allows for a collaborative approach in defining a strategic vision that ensures alignment across all sectors, including the land-based sectors. As a leading provider of education and training for agriculture, horticulture, forestry, and equine sectors, Teagasc has a unique and critical role in delivering high-quality, practical-based learning that supports both generational renewal and workforce development in these sectors. Our response to this consultation highlights the key areas where Teagasc can contribute to the national FET strategy and the structural challenges that must be addressed to maximise our impact.

### Education and Training provided by Teagasc

Teagasc, as Ireland's national authority for agricultural and food development including research, advisory, and education services, plays a fundamental role in the Further Education and Training (FET) landscape. It is a unique organisation, delivering education and training specifically tailored to the needs of the agriculture, horticulture, forestry, and land-based sectors. As the sector faces increasing pressures to meet competitiveness and sustainability goals, climate action commitments, and evolving consumer demands, the importance of education in ensuring a skilled, adaptive, and innovative workforce has never been more critical.

Teagasc has a unique mandate to create and impart knowledge to the Irish agri-food sector. Education and training lie at the heart of Teagasc's mission to support science-based innovation and to underpin profitability, competitiveness and sustainability. The 'Capacity Building Pathway' has been identified as central to pathways utilised by Teagasc for ensuring impact of its combined efforts (Figure 1), and education is the main channel to delivering this pathway.



**Figure 1. Impact Pathways for Teagasc Research, Advisory and Education activities on the agri-food sector.**

Teagasc provides an extensive range of education and training programmes, ensuring the continued development of knowledge, skills, and professional competencies required by the agricultural and land-based industries. Across all its programmes, Teagasc engages with approximately 5,000 learners on an annual basis across the full range of programmes and collaborations. It offers full-time Level 5 and Level 6 courses at its network of colleges, as well as part-time and distance learning programmes, such as the 'Green Cert', which is a

fundamental qualification for farmers seeking access to various agricultural schemes and incentives. Teagasc has also developed apprenticeships in agriculture, horticulture, and sports turf management, providing structured pathways for learners to develop advanced skills while engaging in practical, work-based learning.

Furthermore, Teagasc has long-established partnerships with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), supporting the delivery of Level 7 and Level 8 degrees in agriculture and horticulture. Through these collaborations, learners benefit from the practical settings and facilities in which Teagasc can contribute to the teaching within these programmes, and also through progression pathways between further and higher education, allowing for academic progression and career mobility within the sector. Additionally, Teagasc plays a vital role in lifelong learning by providing short courses, micro-credentials, and continuous professional development (CPD) programmes for those already working in the land-based sectors and industries.

Despite the breadth and depth of Teagasc's educational provision, the organisation sits outside the mainstream FET system governed by SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). This creates structural challenges in funding, learner support, and policy alignment, limiting the opportunities available to Teagasc learners compared to their counterparts in ETB and other FET institutions and providers. Addressing this disparity is essential to ensuring equivalency of experience and support to learners, avoiding duplication of effort, and maximising the impact of FET provision for the agricultural sector.

## **Overarching challenges for FET provision to the land-based sectors**

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The provision of FET for the land-based sector faces several critical challenges that must be addressed to ensure its long-term sustainability and effectiveness. One of the primary challenges is the duality of funding and governance structures, with Teagasc operating under the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM), while most FET institutions fall under the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) through SOLAS and the ETBs. This separation creates potential disparities in access to funding, student supports, and policy alignment, leaving learners across Teagasc programmes at a potential disadvantage compared to those in other FET providers.

Equivalence of learner supports and financial aid is another significant issue. Unlike ETB students, Teagasc learners do not currently qualify for SUSI grants, free fees, or other supports that are crucial for accessibility and inclusivity. This places an undue financial burden on agricultural students and creates an inequitable system where learners pursuing careers in the land-based sector face greater obstacles than those in other industries. Ensuring that Teagasc students can access equivalent financial supports is essential for maintaining enrolment levels and ensuring that agricultural education remains a viable option for prospective students. Given the important but relatively small numbers engaged in Teagasc programmes relative to the 400,000 students across FET, the cost of extending supports to FET learners within Teagasc would be minimal in the context of overall FET investment, while having considerable benefits in helping ensure equivalency of learner experience and support for learners in land-based programmes.

Another challenge is the growing competition from alternative education providers offering agricultural qualifications. The rise of private institutions and some ETBs delivering courses equivalent to Teagasc's Green Cert has created an increasingly crowded landscape. While additional training opportunities are beneficial, a lack of coordination between providers risks duplication of effort and inconsistencies in quality standards. A more structured approach to collaboration and recognition of Teagasc's unique position as the national agricultural education provider is needed to ensure coherence and avoid unnecessary duplication.

The demand for modernised infrastructure and digital learning resources also presents a challenge. The nature of agricultural education requires extensive practical and hands-on learning, necessitating investment in state-of-the-art facilities, demonstration farms, and digital tools such as virtual simulations and online learning platforms. While significant advancements have been made in digital education across other FET providers, Teagasc faces unique challenges in scaling up its digital capacity due to limited access to capital funding.

Lastly, demographic and structural shifts in the agricultural workforce, such as the increasing average age of farmers and the need for lifelong learning pathways, require a more flexible and responsive FET system. Teagasc is well-positioned to address these trends through CPD programmes, modular learning, and targeted skills development initiatives. However, achieving this requires better integration with national FET policies and access to dedicated resources for lifelong learning initiatives.

A more formal inclusion of Teagasc within the broader FET framework would assist in ensuring equitable access to funding and student supports and strengthening collaboration across providers. This would facilitate building a more cohesive and effective agricultural education system that serves the needs of both learners and the broader agri-food sector.

## Specific comments on the thematic areas

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The public consultation called for specific comments and views regarding the three thematic areas that will be fundamental to the success of the new FET Strategy:

- **Theme 1:** Delivering on Ireland's Skills Needs
- **Theme 2:** Fundamentally Changing the Way We Deliver FET
- **Theme 3:** Further widen participation by linking to communities and services.

Comments under these themes are provided in the following sections.

### *Theme 1: Delivering on Ireland's Skills Needs*

The land-based sector is at the core of Ireland's economic and environmental strategies. With increasing emphasis on food security, rural development, and sustainability, agricultural and land-based education must respond proactively to national policy priorities such as the Climate Action Plan, Food Vision 2030, and the OECD Skills Review recommendations. Teagasc is mandated and is uniquely positioned to lead this effort for the land-based sector, given its extensive research base, advisory services, and strong engagement with the industry.

A key priority in this context is ensuring that Teagasc's curriculum remains responsive to evolving policy objectives. The rapid development of precision agriculture, digitalisation, and climate-smart farming requires continuous upskilling. Farmers, horticulturalists, and forestry

professionals must be equipped with knowledge and technical competencies in fundamental areas in order to underpin competitiveness and business development, as well as newly emerging and evolving areas of regenerative agriculture, low-carbon livestock systems, and biodiversity management. Ensuring that FET provision reflects these advancements is crucial to maintaining Ireland's leadership of the agriculture and land-based sectors to be economically, environmentally and socially sustainable into the future. Teagasc is uniquely positioned to ensure agricultural, horticultural and forestry education is operating at the cutting edge of new knowledge and technology.

Teagasc, through its extensive network of agricultural colleges and benchmark farms also retains a key and unique dimension to its programmes of affording extensive practical and hands-on learning opportunities to learners, with close connections to research and advisory supports to help support the careers of learners after their education programmes are completed.

### ***Theme 2: Fundamentally Changing the Way We Deliver FET***

The rapidly evolving landscape of education and training necessitates a transformation in how Further Education and Training (FET) is delivered. Teagasc, with its unique mandate in land-based education, must continue to innovate in its approach to course delivery, leveraging digital advancements, flexible learning pathways, and industry partnerships to ensure the best outcomes for learners.

One of the key areas requiring transformation is the integration of digital learning methodologies. As the demand for flexible, remote, and blended learning grows, Teagasc must enhance its digital infrastructure, incorporating e-learning platforms, virtual simulations, and interactive tools that complement traditional practical training. Investment in these technologies will enable learners to access high-quality education regardless of their geographic location, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility for rural communities.

Additionally, there is a need to strengthen the role of work-based learning, apprenticeships, and industry collaborations in course delivery. Expanding the apprenticeship model and increasing on-farm and industry placements will ensure that learners gain hands-on, real-world experience that aligns with employer needs. Strengthening ties between Teagasc, industry stakeholders, and government agencies can enhance these opportunities, ensuring that learners are adequately prepared for the workforce.

Another critical aspect of transforming FET delivery is improving learner support structures. The challenges of student retention and engagement, particularly in rural areas, require innovative solutions such as mentoring programmes, career guidance, and financial support initiatives. There is an opportunity for Teagasc and the wider FET sector to work collaboratively towards establishing a structured learner support framework, ensuring that students receive the necessary resources and assistance throughout their education.

### ***Theme 3: Further Widen Participation by Linking to Communities and Services***

Ensuring broad and equitable participation in agricultural and land-based education is fundamental to fostering a resilient and sustainable sector. Teagasc take a proactive approach in engaging with communities, addressing barriers to participation, and creating accessible

learning opportunities for underrepresented groups, including women, mature learners, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

A key element of this strategy involves strengthening outreach and community engagement initiatives. Teagasc can expand its partnerships with local organisations, schools, and industry groups to promote agricultural education and career opportunities. Targeted awareness campaigns highlighting the diverse career pathways within the land-based sector can encourage greater participation, particularly among younger generations and those unfamiliar with the industry.

In addition, increasing the availability of part-time, modular, and micro-credential courses will help accommodate learners with work or family commitments. Flexible learning options, including evening and weekend classes, distance learning, and short-term training programmes, will ensure that individuals who may not be able to commit to full-time study can still benefit from high-quality education and skills development.

Furthermore, enhancing support services for non-traditional learners is essential in widening participation. Establishing dedicated learner support mechanisms, mentorship programmes, and financial assistance schemes will help create a more inclusive learning environment. By working closely with stakeholders across education, industry, and government, Teagasc can ensure that all individuals, regardless of background or location, have the opportunity to engage in and benefit from agricultural education.

Teagasc sees significant opportunities for closer alignment between FET and Teagasc's programmes, particularly in ensuring parity of learner experience, progression pathways, and access to critical learner supports to help encourage and promote the attractiveness of land-based sector educational programmes and careers to as wide a community as possible in order to attract new talent to the sector.

## Conclusion

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The period 2025-2029 presents a significant opportunity to strengthen Teagasc's role within the national FET framework. Agricultural education is crucial to Ireland's economic, environmental, and social sustainability goals, and ensuring its alignment with national FET policy is essential. By addressing funding inequities, expanding digital learning opportunities, and enhancing learner supports, Teagasc can continue to provide world-class education that meets the evolving needs of the land-based sector.

We welcome the opportunity to engage further with SOLAS, DFHERIS, and other stakeholders to advance these objectives and ensure that Teagasc's role in agricultural FET continues to evolve in line with national priorities.

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