

Expanding eTwinning into Initial Vocational Education and Training in Ireland

A Feasibility Study

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

| | |
|---------|--|
| CEDEFOP | European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training |
| CPD | Continuous Professional Development |
| CSS | Central Support Service |
| DFHERIS | Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science |
| EPALE | Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe |
| ETB | Education and Training Board |
| FET | Further Education and Training |
| KA1 | Key Action 1 |
| KA2 | Key Action 2 |
| IVET | Initial Vocational Education and Training |
| NA | National Agency |
| NSO | National Support Organisation |
| OECD | The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| PD | Professional Development |
| QQI | Quality and Qualifications Ireland |
| SEG | School Education Gateway |
| SOLAS | An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna |
| VET | Vocational Education and Training |

1. INTRODUCTION

This document presents an initial feasibility study into the expansion of eTwinning to Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET) in Ireland. The overview of IVET in Ireland is underpinned by a small-scale qualitative research study comprising 11 participants and 10 semi-structured interviews. The report presents the context of the study including an overview of IVET in Ireland and the findings from the qualitative interviews. The report concludes with a series of recommendations for key actions and promotional activities that emerged from the focused discussions with IVET stakeholders.

2. CONTEXT OF THIS STUDY

The following sections present a broad overview of Erasmus, eTwinning and IVET in Ireland. The section presents a brief overview of Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland and the structure and provision of programmes and courses accredited by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) in the IVET sector. It presents some aspects of the most recent SOLAS (An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna) strategy that pertains to teaching and learning in IVET and the proposed changes that are underway in order to integrate and redefine the FET sector. These strategic changes impact the physical structure and location of FET but also extend to the provision of awards and qualifications in IVET. The changes in FET influence the priorities and needs of the FET sector and the staff within it. Some strategic actions relating to Professional Development (PD) and internationalisation are outlined in the following sections.

2.1 Erasmus+

Erasmus+ is the largest European educational programme that provides financing of mobility and cooperation projects in the field of education, training, youth and sports. Erasmus+ identifies key priorities for funding applications that reflect specific challenges in the European Union. In 2022, these were Inclusion and diversity, Digital Transformation, Environment and fight against climate change and Participation In democratic life, common values and civic engagement (European Commission, 2022, p.7). The programme has three specific objectives to promote earning mobility of individual and groups; promote non-formal and informal learning mobility and active participation amount young people and promote learning mobility of sport staff (European Commission, 2022, p.6).

The Erasmus+ Programme Guide explains that “Online platforms such as eTwinning, the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPAL), the School Education Gateway (SEG) and the European Youth Portal will offer virtual collaboration spaces, partner-finding databases, communities of practice and other online services for teachers, trainers, youth workers, policy makers and other practitioners, as well as for pupils, young people and adult learners in Europe and beyond” (2022, p.16).

2.2 eTwinning

Launched in 2005, eTwinning is now available in 44 countries across Europe and neighbouring states and has over 900,000 registered teachers in more than 200,000 schools. eTwinning describes itself as “the community for schools in Europe – [it] is a free online educational community of more than 946,000 registered users, the majority of whom are teachers at every

school level. They work together online in a range of activities from projects between schools at national and international level, to collaborative spaces and professional development opportunities” (European Commission, 2021, p.7).

As part of a range of monitoring and evaluation activities, the eTwinning Monitoring Report (European Commission, 2021), focused on investigating “the impact of ‘embedding eTwinning’ in national policies on three main areas: professional development and recognition, curriculum integration and innovative pedagogy”. The Central Support Service (CSS) collected data through a combination of desk research and focus groups with key stakeholders in eight countries: Finland, France, Greece, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and Turkey. Findings include the fact that introducing internationalisation in teachers’ careers inspired a new set of activities that promoted teachers’ PD; also, eTwinning expanded PD opportunities during COVID and eTwinning teachers were better prepared to cope with remote teaching during the pandemic. Some countries are recognising teacher participation in eTwinning through formal and informal processes and note that participation in eTwinning is acknowledged and appreciated by parents, principals and other stakeholders.

eTwinning is having an impact on curriculum and action plans in some countries and is linked to the implementation of competence and key competence-based frameworks in some member states. Multilingual competence, cultural awareness and expression, and digital competences in pupils are recognised as part of the impact of embedding eTwinning in curricula. Participation in eTwinning also increases pupil motivation, energy and commitment, as well as introducing teachers to innovative and flexible pedagogy and cross-curricular approaches. The Foundation for the Development of the Education System in Poland, (Tokarz, 2021) emphasises that “thanks to eTwinning tools, students can improve their language skills and learn about the history and customs of the country they are about to visit. eTwinning can also be used during theoretical preparation for a traineeship. Nothing stands in the way of learning the ways of training in a given profession, its specifics and safety rules remotely, before going abroad” (p. 34).

The Monitoring Report (European Commission, 2021) indicates that there are some challenges across countries to the uptake of eTwinning, including: misconceptions about eTwinning and contextual factors that hinder its adoption, for example, constant national educational reforms; internet access; rigid curricula; going beyond pioneers and expanding eTwinning across education; funding and recognition; and links to Erasmus+.

2.3 eTwinning Ireland

In Ireland, Léargas are the National Support Organisation for eTwinning. Léargas supports Irish teachers participating in the programme by providing technical and pedagogical support and by promoting eTwinning at national, regional and local level. As of April 2023, over 2,590 Irish teachers had registered on the platform and more than 1,225 projects had been registered involving Irish schools.

After 15 successful years of supporting primary and secondary education, eTwinning Ireland is working to increase and recognise the work of IVET in eTwinning across Europe. This is part of a wider policy of the European Union (EU) aimed at better equipping people with knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences required on the labour market. Teachers registering in eTwinning will now be able to indicate whether their school/institution is a VET (Vocational Education and Training) school/institution. As a result, they will find it easier to create projects with like-minded professionals, bringing forward the importance and innovation of VET.

The evaluation of eTwinning in Ireland (D’Arcy, 2020) found that eTwinning has the potential to address barriers that students, particularly underrepresented groups, encounter, such as motivation, language and confidence. The eTwinning report suggests that the “expanding on the collaboration with initial teacher training, a partnership between schools and their local tertiary education provider could be established to address some of the challenges experienced by students when they reach the stage where they will need to make a decision to participate in a mobility abroad” (p. 88).

In May 2022, the European School Education Platform was launched, which merges under one roof the SEG and eTwinning into a presentation of content and services (European Commission, 2022). The new website explains that the European School Education Platform will be accessible via EU Login, the European Commission’s user authentication service. It explains

that “the European School Education Platform is the meeting point for all stakeholders in the school education sector – school staff, researchers, policymakers and other professionals – spanning every level from Early Childhood Education and Care to primary and secondary school, including Initial Vocational Education and Training. The platform is also home to eTwinning, the community for schools in Europe” (European Commission, 2022).

The European Commission description from the Beta website for the European School Education Platform explains that: “eTwinning is a community that is exclusively open to educators and other school staff in initial vocational education and training and education from early childhood education and care to upper secondary schools from countries participating in eTwinning. eTwinning embodies a methodology, a pedagogical approach, a community of practice, and a platform that enables innovation, communication, and collaboration” (European Commission, 2022).

2.4 Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET)

The European Commission describes IVET as taking place at upper secondary level and post-secondary level before students begin working life. It takes place either in school-based environments (mainly in the classroom) or in work-based settings, such as training centres and companies (European Commission, 2022). The Council of the European Union (2020) adopted a Recommendation on vocational education and training for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience.

The Recommendation states that: “High quality and innovative vocational education and training systems provide people with skills for work, personal development and citizenship, which help them to adapt to and deliver on the twin digital and green transitions, to cope with emergency situations and economic shocks, while also supporting economic growth and social cohesion. Thereby providing them with skills that help them get or create jobs in demand on the labour market” (Council of the European Union, 2020, section 3).

The structure of IVET provision in each EU member state varies significantly. According to the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) Data Insights into IVET (2018) and their presentation of vocational students as a percentage of all upper secondary students of the 28 EU countries, Ireland is the only country from the dataset (2015) that has 0% of IVET students as a percentage of all upper secondary students. This implies that Ireland stands alone as an EU country that separates IVET from upper secondary education. Most EU member states offer variations of IVET provision that is integrated into lower and upper secondary level of school – either in general education, vocational or mixed pathways – and systems that separate IVET into post-secondary, vocational and tertiary progression routes. Reforms in IVET have been ongoing over the last 20 years focusing on (a) transfer – allowing people to move between modes of post-lower secondary level education (academic, school-based vocational education, and apprenticeship) without penalty; and (b) progression – allowing young people to progress to the highest levels of educational attainment through the IVET route (Gambin, 2009).

| LEVEL | | | | |
|-------------|---|--|---|---|
| Integration | Lower Secondary Level | Upper secondary level: vocational training | Apprenticeship | Tertiary |
| Yes | IVET provided as part of a fully integrated general education | Extent of shared curricula, ability to transfer to other streams | Emphasis upon a strong general education, ability to transfer to other programmes | Tertiary education part of the general university system; ease of progression to bachelor level |
| No | Distinct IVET system available | Distinct courses with little chance to transfer and/or progression | Distinct programme of study; transfer unlikely; limited scope for progression | Tertiary delivered by separate institutions; progression to bachelor level uncertain |

TABLE 2.1: TYPOLOGY OF INTEGRATION OF IVET (SOURCE: GAMBIN, 2009, P. 42).

2.5 IVET in Ireland

As observed in the research report by McGuinness et al., *Further Education and Training in Ireland Past Present and Future* (2014), FET provision in Ireland currently addresses many areas of provision:

- i. Providing IVET, including high quality apprenticeships;
- ii. A re-entry route for individuals to education and training, including literacy and basic education;
- iii. Professional or vocational development of individuals in the workforce or re-entering the workforce;
- iv. Community education and training, and;
- v. Other systematic and deliberate learning undertaken by adults in a wide variety of settings and contexts, both formal and informal.

The research report highlighted that the “diverse nature of the sector was seen as making it difficult to form a clear identity for FET” and that its lesser status in comparison to higher education was seen as “reflecting broader societal norms and expectations, but was also seen as relating to the fragmentation of FET provision and perceptions of current provision” (McGuinness et al., 2014, p. viii). It also pointed out that the “Irish FET provision currently seeks to cater for the needs of school leavers, employees, firms, the unemployed and those on the margins of society without any clear mission objective relating to any particular component of provision. In terms of its purpose, Irish provision appears similar to the Scottish FET system which is also more diverse, combining occupationally-specific vocational education with an additional focus on raising educational standards among poorly qualified adults” (2014, p. 111). This approach is in contrast to systems in the Netherlands, Germany and Australia, which focus on preparing individuals for specific vocational occupations. Germany and the Netherlands stream students into specific pathways within the school system, while in Australia, Scotland and Ireland students choose their pathway after school.

Terminology can also prove confusing across the EU and other systems of IVET, as the terms ‘Vocational Education and Training’ (VET) and ‘Further Education and Training’ (FET) are not consistently understood and can mean different approaches, structures and routes in different countries.

As Dunlop (2022) explains: “Most upper secondary education students in Ireland (98%) are enrolled in general programmes and the remaining 2% are enrolled in vocational programmes (Leaving Certificate Applied). Most students who enrol in vocational programmes (Further Education and Training (FET)) do so at the postsecondary non-tertiary level. Enrolment rates at this level peak at 14%, among 18-year-olds”.

There are FET courses available to learners over 16 years of age, but the FET provision is not categorised under specific IVET or Continuing Vocational Education and Training (CVET) classifications (Dunlop, 2022, p. 6). Across Europe, IVET is VET that is carried out in the initial education system usually before entering working life (CEDEFOP, 2014). In Ireland, many FET courses are offered to learners over 16 years of age. However, FET provision is different from that in other EU countries in that it is not categorised in specific IVET or CVET classifications. Ireland “incorporates VET along with adult education and training into what is defined in Ireland as FET, which is available for everyone, offering provision to learner as early as age 16 with no upper age limit” (ibid, 2022, p.8).

This provision is funded by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) through An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (SOLAS). Close to 1 billion Euro is allocated to FET annually through 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs), which provide FET programmes and initiatives on a regional basis in the 26 counties of the Irish Republic. There is a wide variety of programmes available, including qualifications at QQI Levels 5 and 6, apprenticeships and traineeships, Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses, adult and community education, such as literacy and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), as part of the core provision (Dunlop, 2022). Awards at QQI Levels 1 to 6 can be provided through ETBs, SOLAS e-college, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private providers, training units in organisations and a wide variety of education and training routes. FET courses vary greatly in length from several years to just a few weeks. They are certified at Levels 1-6 on the National Framework of Qualifications, ranging from basic skills, such as, literacy and numeracy programmes, to higher level skills in a wide range of vocational areas (Department of Education, 2021, p.31).

FIGURE 2.1: OVERVIEW OF FET INFRASTRUCTURE (SOURCE: SOLAS, 2020, P. 23)



2.6 Changes in FET

FET is going through a change process driven by three strategic priorities:

1. Driving the skills agenda, the change drivers being the Apprenticeship Incentivisation Scheme and the Skills to Compete and Skills to Advance initiatives.
2. Fostering inclusion, the change drivers being the publication of Adult Literacy for Life (2021) and the enhanced SOLAS Fund for Students with Disabilities.

- Facilitating pathways to learning, the change drivers being the placement of FET programmes, both PLCs and apprenticeships, on the CAO for the first time, starting on 5 November 2021 (Munroe, 2021, p. 252).

Monroe points out that FET has been further impacted by the “government response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic stimuli provided for FET, the publication by SOLAS of Future FET: Transforming Learning 2020–2024, and the establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)” (2021, p. 251).

SOLAS’s second strategy for the FET sector: Future FET: Transforming Learning, points out that: “It is important to agree on an appropriate future staffing framework, which breaks down the barriers between different FET settings and programmes and facilitates more flexible deployment of staff to meet evolving needs. ... It must look at the role of the teacher and the instructor and how these roles can evolve and be effectively deployed across FET settings, and brought together within an integrated FET college of the future” (SOLAS, 2020, p. 56).

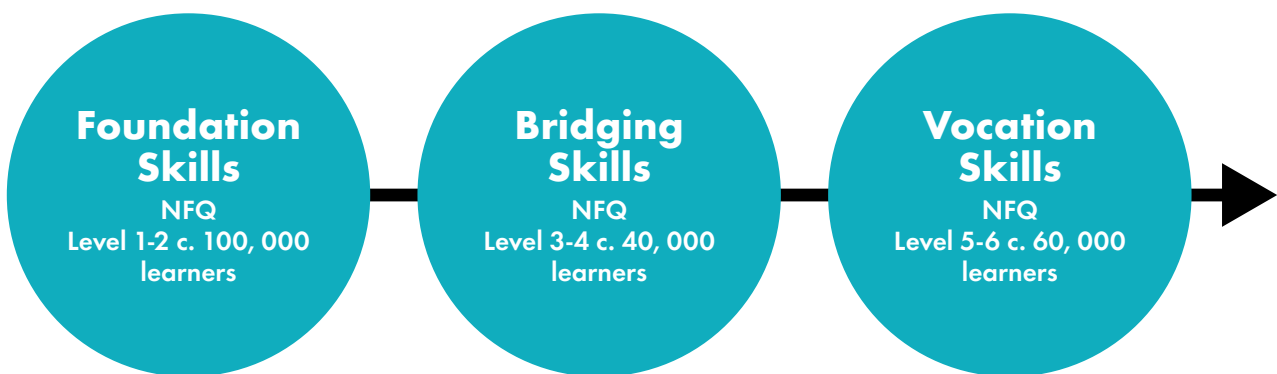


FIGURE 2.2: FET BY BROAD TYPES OF PROVISION (SOURCE: SOLAS, 2020, P. 24)

2.7 FET and IVET Practitioners

The Further Education and Training Professional Development Strategy 2017-2019 defines an FET practitioner as “anyone working in the sector who is involved in working directly with learners or in supporting or influencing the learner experience in FET” (SOLAS & ETBI, 2017, p. 16). According to the FET Skills Profile (2017), the 54 job roles can be categorised as learning practitioners (72% of the workforce), managers (14%), and support and administration staff (13%). The SOLAS research states that 71% of learning practitioners “currently hold a teaching/training qualification” (p. 16). It is not clear whether these teaching/training qualifications are obtained through initial teacher education, short ‘training the trainer’ courses or training awards.

In November 2009, the Teaching Council published the Teaching Council (Registration) Regulations, which set out the Council’s requirements for people wishing to become registered teachers in Ireland. In 2011, Further Education: General and Programme Requirements for the Accreditation of Teacher Education Qualifications was published, allowing for a Route 3 for registration of teachers in FET with the Teaching Council (Teaching Council, 2011). At present, teachers who trained as second-level teachers and are registered with the Teaching Council through Route 2 can work in FET settings. Route 3 was introduced to acknowledge that some FET settings come under section 30 of the Teaching Council Act 2001, which pertains to Registered Schools. These schools require teachers that they employ to be registered with the Teaching Council in order to be paid by funds from the State.

As Grummell and Murray (2015) point out, “The further education sector is staffed by tutors with high levels of vocational and experiential knowledge as practitioners, rather than formal teaching or other academic qualifications. The practitioner emphasis is typical of adult and community education professional identity rather than the formal schooling or higher education sectors where professional qualifications are valued” (p. 438).

In 2019, the CEDEFOP ReferNet Ireland Report classified VET Teacher/Trainer categories as follows: Teachers (PLC courses and VTOS (Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme); Apprenticeship Instructors; Apprenticeship Lecturers; Work Based Tutors; Tutor/Trainers. At present, only Teachers working in PLCs or recognised schools under section 30 of the Teaching Council Act are required to register with the Teaching Council. Requirements vary across non-teacher roles: “tutor/trainers work on programmes of training (other than apprenticeship) or education (e.g adult literacy), often on programmes aimed at the unemployed (e.g. specific skills training or other VET programmes), or early school leavers (general education). For other types of VET training in the FET sector, the qualifications and professional standards of trainers vary. In general, programmes leading to a QQI award require a subject matter qualification (usually one level higher than that of the course being taught), a pedagogical qualification (usually at third level) and 5 years’ industry experience. For all other training e.g. computing, accounting, trainer profiles tend to vary depending on the awarding body, the subject matter being taught and the provider” (Burke, Condon and Hogan, 2019, p.38).

2.8 EU and VET Teachers

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) publication *Teachers and Leaders in VET (2021)* acknowledges that “teachers need to develop the digital and soft skills of their students, as these are increasingly in demand in the labour market. To do this, teachers need to have knowledge of innovative pedagogical approaches that foster the development of these skills. They also need to have strong digital skills themselves, to be able to use new technologies in teaching and remain up to speed with technological innovations in the workplace” (p. 91). The report points out that “designing appropriate Initial Teacher Education and Training (ITET) programmes for VET teachers is important to ensure a good mix of pedagogical skills, vocational competence and industry knowledge (Musset, Kuczera and Field, 2014, p.87). VET teachers’ level of educational attainment, together with work experience and continuous learning opportunities, have a significant effect on their teaching competence, as confirmed in the case of Korea (Kim and Phang, 2018). They point out that industry-relevant hands-on skills and knowledge are important for VET teachers, who have academic qualifications only, and that VET teachers without academic studies need training in pedagogical skills. The report emphasises that “in Australia, a national study (2015-17) found that higher qualifications in VET teaching, especially at degree level, made a significant difference to VET teachers’ skills, confidence and quality” (Smith, 2019).

The OECD report also found that “having strong pedagogical skills will also support teachers when engaging with a diverse group of students...VET teachers teach more diverse groups of students with different abilities and different aspirations. soft skills are playing an increasingly important role in the labour market, and VET teachers need to develop these skills among their students” (p. 93).

In terms of PD needs of VET teachers, “the most pressing training needs ... are information and communications technology (ICT) skills (46% of VET teachers), teaching in a multicultural learning environment (45%), and individualised learning (43%), but there are substantial differences between countries” (p. 112).

The report points out that “practical and collaborative learning (82% and 75%, respectively) were also identified as a characteristic of PD by a large share of VET teachers who reported that their PD had a positive impact on their teaching. Collaborative learning can have many benefits, as involving teachers within the same VET institution or across different VET institutions can motivate them to learn new practices, and plan and implement putting their newly learned techniques into practice. Collaborative approaches to PD enhance motivation, responsibility and professionalism” (2021, p. 113).

The OECD Report concludes: “a number of emerging pedagogical approaches and technologies are available for VET teachers, which facilitate developing their students’ digital and soft skills while teaching vocational skills. To use those teaching tools and methods, VET teachers need access to high quality professional development opportunities, as well as peer learning opportunities, so they can update their practice and increase their confidence in the use of technology. Moreover, strong ties between VET institutions and employers allows teachers to learn about new technology developments as well as labour market demands” (2021, p. 157)

The OECD have found that “flexible recruitment and time arrangements make it easier to hire industry professionals and allow VET teachers to also work in industry to bring up-to-date industry knowledge to VET, but casual VET teachers have no clear career prospects, and much more limited employment benefits (e.g. paid annual leave) than those employed on a permanent contract” (2021, p. 44).

The European Council Resolution on a Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning called for priority areas that included improving the quality of adult education staff, for instance by defining competence profiles; establishing effective systems for initial training and PD; and facilitating the mobility of teachers, trainers and other adult education staff (Council of the European Union, 2011).

2.9 Irish VET System

The Irish VET system comprises mainly of VET programmes provided through apprenticeship and traineeships, vocational elements and awards within the PLC course provision and some elements of the VTOS and some Youthreach Centres. There are also specific skills training programmes targeting the unemployed.

The Irish apprenticeship system has undergone a series of reforms and post-2016 and resulted in an expansion of apprenticeship programmes from FET into the higher education sector across 65 programmes and from Level 6 to Level 10 on the QQI framework.

PLC courses are aimed at learners who have completed the Leaving Certificate examination at the end of upper secondary education. They are full-time courses that last between one and two years (Burke, Condon and Hogan, 2019). PLC courses offer vocational courses (hairdressing, beauty, security) and general education (art, design, psychology) to young people and to mature learners. The majority of courses offer a work experience component.

| MAIN VET PROGRAMMES | TYPICAL DURATION | AWARDS | TYPICAL FIELDS OF LEARNING | NO OF ENROLMENTS | PROVIDER |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------|
| Pre-2016 Craft Apprenticeship | 4 Years | NFQ 6 ECF 5 | Engineering & construction | 7000 | ETB & institutes of technology |
| Pre-2016 Craft Apprenticeship | 2-4 Years | NFQ 5-10 | | 100 | ETB & institutes of technology |
| Traineeship | 6 months- 2 years | NFQ 4-6 EQF | Health/welfare; services | 4500 | ETB |
| Traineeship for the employed | | NFQ 4-6 | | | ETB |
| Specific Skills Training | 6 weeks - 24 weeks | NFQ 4-5 EQF | Engineering & construction | 15400 | ETB |
| PLC courses | 1-2 years | NFQ 5-6 EQF | Health/welfare; services; business | 32000 | ETB |
| VTOS | Varies; typically 1-2 years | NFQ 4-6 EQF | Business; services | 8900 | ETB |

TABLE 2.2: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MAIN VET PROGRAMMES IN IRELAND (SOURCE: BURKE, CONDON AND HOGAN, 2019, P. 25)

VTOS programmes are second-chance learning opportunities for unemployed adults (Burke, Condon and Hogan, 2019) that offer a range of courses such as basic and foundation courses in literacy and numeracy and practical skills, courses leading to State examinations such as the Junior or Leaving Certificate and PLC courses.

Youthreach programmes are provided through the ETBs and are aimed at early school leavers, offering a variety of awards at QQI Levels 3, 4 and 5 to people aged 15-20. There are some vocational components to the awards including employability skills and life skills, as well as practical skills in woodwork, catering and hairdressing.

VET in Ireland is responsive to a number of key national policies and strategies, including the National Skills Strategy 2025, the National Digital Strategy, the Future Jobs Programme 2018, the Strategy for Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL) in Further Education and Training 2016-2019 and the SOLAS strategies that are published every five years. The current strategy, Future FET: Transforming Learning 2020-2024, presents an ambitious plan for integrating and consolidating FET provision under the FET College of the Future.

2.10 The FET College of the Future

The SOLAS vision of the FET College of the Future will “consolidate existing FET provision within a single integrated college structure that incorporates the previous functions of both colleges of FET centres. It will offer courses designed to facilitate immediate entry to careers and employment and those that link directly to further study in HE and explore opportunities for co-delivery with higher education institutions via 1+2 and 2+2 type models” (SOLAS, 2020, p. 38). The FET College of the Future will build on the current FET provision while consolidating and integrating provision – providers, courses and programmes, staffing mechanisms – across the country under the regional focus of ETBs. This is already underway with the relocation of programmes and staff to centralised ‘campus’-type structures for FE colleges under each ETB. These campuses will offer a centralised specialism or set of specialisms for learners to access, providing a transparent and clear progression route through QQI Levels 5 and 6 to higher education or employment.

SOLAS states that “at least 30% of the Level 5 and 6 FET course offering will be work-based or practice-based, delivered by FET practitioners who keep their skills and the learning content they deliver up to date to reflect industry requirements. The development of consistent and structured work placements will be particularly important in ensuring success, with internship models worthy of further explorations, and mechanisms like Erasmus used to facilitate an international dimension to the placement approach” (SOLAS, 2020, p.40).

The SOLAS strategy further points out that transversal skills or ‘meta’ skills will be “critical to prospering in the future world of work, and all vocational FET offerings must contain components that build capability in areas like complex problem solving, critical thinking, creativity and people management, providing FET graduates with labour market skills or preparing them to succeed if they transition to higher education” (SOLAS, 2020, p. 40).

The Framework for restructuring FET provision will influence how learners progress through the FET system and the link between FET and higher education through a new approach to tertiary education.



FIGURE 2.3: FRAMEWORK FOR RESTRUCTURING FET PROVISION (SOURCE: SOLAS, 2020, P. 53)

SOLAS (2020, p. 56) has pointed out in its recent national strategy that “Management and leadership, digital transformation, and quality assurance and programme development are critical areas requiring some capability building across FET.” It is proposed that education and training for FET staff will be delivered through professional learning development facilitated by the appointment of PD Directors in each ETB, and the proposed development of a professional learning hub centralised in the Education and Training Boards of Ireland (ETBI).

3. DATA COLLECTION

This study is an initial feasibility study into the expansion of eTwinning from compulsory school settings in Ireland to the IVET settings as part of FET. The decision was taken to interview a small number of stakeholders in eTwinning and the FET sector in Ireland. A small sample of thirteen stakeholders was identified through purposive sampling and interviewed. Each interviewee was provided with an informed consent and plain language statement in line with ethical best practice. Each interview was carried out over Zoom and the audio recording transcribed. Interviews were semi structured and lasted 30 minutes on average. Twelve interviews were conducted, with one participant providing answers to an interview guide through text.

The interviewees consisted of: five practitioners in FET nationwide involved in the management, coordination or delivery of IVET awards on the QQI Framework at Level 5 or 6 and/or involved in the coordination and organisation of Erasmus+ KA1 (Key Action 1) or KA2 (Key Action 2) projects (FE1 to FE5); three vocational teachers from Poland, Czech Republic, Austria (VT1 to VT3); four members of the Irish NSO / NA – (NSO1 to NSO4), and one senior coordinator Coord1 involved in national coordination activities on internationalisation in FET. Responses were anonymised in line with ethical guidelines.

| FET PRACTITIONERS (N=5) | EU VOCATIONAL TEACHERS (N=3) | MEMBERS OF THE IRISH NSO & NA | SENIOR COORDINATOR |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| FE1 | VT1 | NSO1 | Coord1 |
| FE2 | VT2 | NSO2 | |
| FE3 | VT3 | NSO3 | |
| FE4 | | NSO4 | |
| FE5 | | | |

TABLE 3:1: PARTICIPANT BREAKDOWN

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The following sections present the findings from the 10 interviews and single text response. Each interview was guided by a set of questions relating to the participant’s knowledge of IVET and eTwinning; their knowledge or participation in EU activities; their use of existing online platforms and networks; the possible benefits or challenges of eTwinning to IVET; and any suggestions on how the concept of eTwinning might be presented to IVET providers.

4.1 Change Process Underway in FET

There is currently a requirement for all ETBs (Education and Training Board) to provide clear and comprehensive details of their FET provision. The clarification of FET provision is part of a decade long approach through SOLAS national strategies to provide awareness of FET and improve consistency of presentation of FET opportunities to the public (SOLAS, 2014; SOLAS, 2020).

This includes renaming colleges and relocating courses and programmes under specific specialities headings; and rebranding FET college locations as ‘campuses’. While the focus is first on Levels 5 and 6, it will then move to community education and adult education. It is intended that this integration will facilitate a clear and identifiable progression route for learners through the FET system. According to one participant, “So it’s kind of a five year plan of amalgamation, starting with the FE colleges, and then bringing in community education and literacy services after” (FE1).

FE3 emphasised that the FET and the PLC sectors can also prepare people very well for College: “I think that anyone who does a PLC, they don’t regret it. And because they do say that it has given them that foundation to know how to write assignments to know how to write a bibliography, you know, it is a level five, on some of them are level sixes, of course, and it gives them that stepping stone, then they get into the college and they’re in a better frame of mind, they kind of have more sticking power, and they don’t drop out as much.” This view is particularly relevant this year as the participant stated that the attrition rate was particularly high. They explained that fewer students entered FET this year: “but this year, because of obviously, the Leaving Cert and I don’t know what it was, it’s hard to put your finger on it, maybe extra college places or whatever. But we definitely didn’t get as many students in the door this year. And we certainly aren’t going to get as many qualifying and coming out the other end with a full qualification” (FE3).

FET participants also explained that you can have retirees coming through who want to change professions: “Sometimes it’s a second chance saloon” (FE3). This means that there is a range of age groups in FET whose members there for different purposes (FE3).

4.2 Perception of VET

Participants outlined their participation in IVET as: all courses at Levels 5 and 6 at FE colleges, apprenticeships in training centres and technological universities, some Youthreach Centres and potentially some VTOS programme services (FE1). However, they added that their understanding of VET has shifted over the last three decades to a broader view “I think we would have seen the further education colleges as one unit, we have a training centre for apprenticeship that would have been very much separate. But I think under the current policy, and under the current policy of the department as well, the idea is to integrate those much more” (FE1).

The discussion on IVET showed some lack of clarity in what IVET is. FE4 stated that “It’s a tiny bit of a grey area when you’re talking about the initial vocational education as to what exactly you’re terming that because we would look. Let’s suppose we’re looking at PLC Youthreach. Some of the VTOS programmes as well, but there’s a little bit of grey area there, like they’re adult focused programmes, but they’re in vocational areas” (FE4).

4.3 Teacher Status and Validation

FE3 explained that you cannot work as a teacher in an ETB school without Teaching Council recognition, but “they we do have hairdressers, we do have dog groomers”. They have to go through the process of getting recognised for teaching: “But we’ve got some teachers who have got one foot in both camps” (FE3).

In terms of needed Teaching Council validation for staff, FE4 felt: “If you were looking at that as a form of validation, you’d definitely be missing out, I think on certain numbers of staff. But, you know, a lot of people would have Teaching Council registration, though probably getting that number.... it’s getting smaller and smaller all the time. Definitely in VTOS and PLC. And apprenticeships is where the big gap probably would be.” They pointed out that all centres would have registration numbers and many of them also have school roll numbers across ETB networks (FE4).

FE5 explained that staff roles and validation in FET are changing as [their college] now falls under schools and under SOLAS and the ETB, so “We might have 60 teachers, and 55 of them are teachers registered by the teacher Council, with a teacher council to get paid. But we also have tutors now coming in, who don’t have to be registered with the teaching council.” In their view, “In the future, it’d be a lot more tutors that will be hired by ETBs to work in further education and training.” This in effect means poorer terms and conditions for tutors than teachers. These tutors may wish to get involved with Erasmus and eTwinning but would not have teaching council accreditation (FE5).

FE4 further explained that in their view, part-time contracts are more common in adult education than PLCs and that there is no formal policy around what staff are entitled to do in terms of staff mobilities. It needs to be decided in terms of all staff, as “It’s not equal if you don’t get paid for it” (FE4).

FE5 stated that they are following the inclusion aspect of Erasmus, to ensure that staff mobilities are offered to all staff across different departments in the institution. This year they had places for all staff except for one staff member, who had finished their contract and was ineligible. Otherwise, there would be a selection process; but the part-time nature of their contract would not prohibit them from applying. The cascade model is applied in that staff are expected to share their learning with others when they return (FE5).

4.4 Knowledge of eTwinning

FE1 has been signed into eTwinning for the last decade. They indicated that they have not used eTwinning for projects but more for contacts with other VET settings, such as upper secondary schools and teacher mobility: “People have contacted us usually and in relation to sending teachers, we’re usually much more open about teachers, because teachers don’t take so much work, with students, you have to get placements and they’re your responsibility, with teachers who are coming job shadowing. If at all possible, we nearly always say yes” (FE1).

FE1 pointed out that their teacher mobilities through eTwinning tend to be funded through different national and EU models of funding. Some have already obtained an Erasmus grant or they are going to apply the next year; or else they have obtained national funding. According to FE1, there is a national fund for teachers who want to take PD abroad: “The Spain one actually has become somewhat problematic in the last year or so because the Spanish government are pushing for teachers to go for longer periods, before you used to be just maybe a week or so.” The Spanish teachers are not just looking for job shadowing, but are also wanting to teach. They point out that their teaching causes challenges in the Irish context, as unions may take issue with Irish teachers being replaced by international teachers who are not being paid. There is also a duty of care: “You can’t just leave the Spanish teacher, take over the class, you know, and not be paid for it because of those insurance implications and other implications.” According to this participant, the Netherlands also has a programme called ‘the Excellence Programme’, which funds teachers to visit other countries to improve their national standards (FE1).

4.5 Importance of Partner Finding

All participants spoke of their partner finding and partner retention as a process that has evolved over time through relationships and networks strengthened by project activity: “Our partner finding I suppose at this stage is largely through the network of partners we have; it’s one partner who knows another partner” (FE1).

FE2 explained that they were not part of any networks but carried out “due diligence and research” to find partners. They noted that they had met partners through Erasmus networking event such as one held in Kilmainham. They pointed out that: “You get quite a lot of agencies that want to spend your organisational budgets and want to be a partner.” They emphasised that they look for partners who are chartered holders or registered institutions that have a similar curriculum (FE2).

The benefits of particular partnerships relate to changing sectoral and national policies. FE1 explained that a network of large institutions is of benefit to their ETB at present, as the partner institutions are very large organisations with 15/16,000 students and nine campuses all in one college: “And so we were sending a lot of staff, to those colleges at the moment, so that people can get used to the idea of much bigger colleges and how they operate and how that kind of structure works”. The choice of partners aligns and responds to national challenges and European priorities (FE1).

FE5 has met partners through KA2 partnership projects and at TCA (Training & Cooperation Activities) events hosted by Léargas and other national agencies. They have also found partners through contact seminars. They never use platforms for partners, as they have 50-60 partners all over Europe and get frequent requests for partners. They pointed out there seems to be a list of those who have the Erasmus charter, “published by the European Commission in each country that seemed to trigger a lot of cold calls cold emails, and people that I didn’t know, looking to work with us here in Ireland” (FE5).

4.6 Use of Networks/Platforms

FE3 explained that they did apply for a contact making seminar in Berlin when they first started in Erasmus just before Brexit: “I really felt overwhelmed and inundated with loads of offers and people trying to get students because they want to learn English.” They tend to use word of mouth and speaking to more experienced colleagues. They drove to Galway and spoke to a colleague in another ETB who had posted on social media about their EU activities. They signed up for EPALE (Electronic

Platform for Adult Learning in Europe) but had little time to look at it due to a range of roles that take time (FE3).

FE4 has come across eTwinning at Léargas events and ‘showcase of practice’. They believe that an eTwinning platform would be useful for newcomers to Erasmus in IVET. They use EPALE and have had colleagues present at a training event on the platform. They mainly use it to look for training or other events that are coming up (FE4).

FE4 explained that they have an informal network of people across ETBs working in the professional learning development role, which is useful. Some of these colleagues would have EU project responsibility as well. They would also link in with Léargas and the informal Erasmus network to meet up every couple of months for practice sharing. This is where they see the differences between the ETBs and how they are working within EU projects. They pointed out that there is an opportunity for ETBs to: “run with Erasmus the same way that the universities would have” (FE4).

FE5 was aware of EPALE and eTwinning, but “never looked at eTwinning as something that in VET we could benefit from” (FE5).

Coord1 stated that the people they are working with across ETBs are very familiar with EPALE and Léargas: “These will be their go-to places, you know, when it comes to trying to find potential partner collaboration opportunities” (Coord1).

Coord1 talked about their experience of collaborative platforms as part of EU and other funding, but felt that what is often lacking is “a clear strategy for a sustainable use case or a sustainable use model for how these things are going to actually be made, and integrate into everyday work”. Their view was that if you are trying to “push the usability from a top down approach, we’re always going to be fighting a losing battle”. They suggested that there needs to be an incentive: “a good reason that people would think to themselves, yeah we need to plug into this because there is something critical here that we need to do” (Coord1).

Coord1 referred to experience in previous EU funded projects where the EU ensured that any subsequent funding application in the specific sectoral area had to build on the work of designated projects. In their view: “you just stood a greater likelihood of winning funding and being involved with international projects” (Coord1). They acknowledged the challenges of dealing with the public sector whose members have different motivations for engaging with external projects or funders (Coord1).

They believe that the public sector are not motivated by profit or loss or growth, so you need some other type of incentive. They emphasised that it is important to know the stakeholders and what they value (Coord1).

4.7 Challenges with Erasmus+

There are criticisms of the new model of funding where funding is obtained before partnerships are confirmed. This can lead to FET services being approached for partnerships where organisations have secured funding and have not fully thought through the mobility activity. As FE1 explained, “And I think that’s the fault of the current programme”. Their perception was that the previous required applicants to secure partner before funding but the current Erasmus+ programme gives funding first, “And I think that’s actually a backward step. I think it means that people are getting funding, but they don’t even know where they’re sending the students” (FE1).

FE3 explained that Erasmus activities in FET can be challenging, as you only have one year with the students from mid-September until the end of April. “Yeah, you know, so it’s very hard to get to know a student in that very short timeframe, because we have to start interviewing in October or November to get people on a plane in January. So you are still trying to get to grips with you know, will these people sink or swim will they will they be suitable candidates to go.” They explained that it is better to have partners who can take more students, as they have to send an accompanying person over: students have fewer opportunities and less experience of work place and/or mobility (FE3).

FE3 spoke to the challenge of the age difference of students between countries and their IVET systems: “Sometimes it’s easier not to take students back even though that does not go with the ethos of Erasmus because we find that some of the IVET colleges, especially in the likes of France, where they mightn’t have very good English and they take students from the ages of 16, 17 and 18.” They explained that it is challenging for them as FET providers to find placements for students that are 16 years old for placement in a healthcare setting. They spoke of the calibre of students from Germany for childcare mobilities as “really, really good” as the German students have been in childcare education for four or five months. They point out that for learners, “the PLC can be a taster for some topics but in childcare it is a short period of time for training in comparison to some of the EU systems, which are three or four years” (FE3).

The issue of time was raised again by FE4, “as the FET year is approximately 32 weeks and the apprenticeship training goes in phases. Learners can be on the job a lot of the time so there can be challenges” (FE4).

FE5 explained that they were recommended by partners to arrange four-week placements for learners. They explained: “They’re always very surprised that we can only do that short period, because they can do a lot more as they have their students for longer in vocational education, especially in Finland” (FE5).

FE5 also highlighted the area of certification that is mandatory for Erasmus participation but questioned the value of Europass in Ireland. They pointed out that participation is recorded in the UK for tutors/teachers as part of their Continuous Professional Development (CPD) hours, whereas no system exists for this in Ireland (FE5).

4.8 Impact of COVID

FE1 explained that pre-COVID the modes of communication between partners would have been limited: “it would have been almost all either phone or email communication, probably 90% email and 10% phone. For that has certainly changed dramatically in the last two years. I think we’ve probably have conferences with all of our partners, online you know.”

FE1 explained that the ETB has purchased MS Teams as a platform for online communication, although they would use Zoom with colleges nationally and internationally. The need to use eTwinning for online communication or discussion was questioned:

“And if we’re doing that, now then why would we do it through the eTwinning as distinct from Zoom as distinct from Teams or say a group that meets or whatever. You know, different partners have different platforms, they prefer kind of thing. I suppose perhaps if a similar platform was available through eTwinning, and if it was regarded as secure...” (FE1).

FE3 pointed out that teachers are frustrated with technology at the moment, although a lot of IVET was online last year, and assessments are still being examined online. There is a need to find the balance between hard copy and soft copy and face-to-face and online processes.

4.9 Language Preparation in Erasmus+

One of the challenges for IVET in Ireland is the lack of language teaching across FET settings. This means there are no language teachers or resources in the system to provide language training or support activities that require preparation or translation. They provide language preparation through the European Language tool with mixed results: “So we do use it. If I’m honest, is it a success? No. I suppose really, like the language thing for us if you’re dealing with older students in particular. Like it’s a very difficult one, because we don’t provide languages generally within the FE colleges anyway” (FE1).

FE2 is a language teacher and speaks a number of languages. They pointed out that their college, which is a large College of Further Education, does not teach any foreign languages. They found that when it did provide language learning, the stu-

dents that came in had a very low language level and ability and it took a lot more time than the two or three hours that were timetabled each week. As a result, in their experience, the OLS (Online Language Support) can be a “hard sell” (FE2).

FE5 also spoke about the OLS, the online linguistic support tool, and how he does not find it fit for purpose: “And I would prefer to go back to the old way, have the money, pay the teacher, give them the classes, this online platform – like they have to do the first test. And they all get an A1, which is one of the worst results you can get, then they don’t have to do the course – but then they have to do the second assessment.” They explained that the OLS is a hard sell to students who are only on the course for 26 weeks in classes. They felt that there was a value in the vocational specialised vocabulary but also acknowledged that they have not used the management fund for language. This is because they have the OLS but know that it is insufficient (FE5).

FE2 explained that they used to provide cultural preparation with a native speaker teaching key phrases and cultural understanding, but the budget lines changed. There is no will in the organisation to provide language or cultural preparation out of the organisational budget (FE2).

FE1 related the challenges for language preparation or activities to the lack of time in the FET year. They explained that the students arrive in mid-September and are gone by May. Mobilities tend to take place in February and May, due to midterms and the end of the course. The ETB does not tend to send students before Christmas, as they are settling into the course, learning content and the idea of a mobility. Application and selection tends to take place after the end of October with placements offered in November. Consequently, they have less than six weeks, including major assessments and Christmas, to learn a language. There is an emphasis on basic language skills and phrases, “But in terms of real language learning, the duration of our courses just doesn’t allow for it unless they are coming with it from school with something already, then yes, that would help us” (FE1).

FE4 pointed out that the biggest thing the PLCs or FET settings do with regard to language is ESOL. They believed that there is some language learning in FET, but “Its not a core part of many of the vocational programmes, curriculum; some but not many.” They confirmed that the mobilities tend to go to English-speaking countries – Malta, Scandinavia, Germany and Eastern European countries, where the main language used is English: “I thought maybe it would slowly revert back to French or something. But yeah, not so far” (FE4).

4.10 IVET System Differences

One participant explained that the partners can vary between upper secondary schools and IVET colleges depending on the country and the system. As they explained, “So, again, to be an upper secondary, I think sometimes there’s kind of a mismatch between the Irish system and the European one.....they’re often fascinated when it’s one secondary school and there is not an upper and lower secondary, or that we don’t distinguish between the vocational or the other students, at 15, or 14, as they would in say, Germany or, or whatever.” They stated that the Irish vocational levels, especially Level 5, can match very well with the 18-year-olds in vocational schools (FE1).

In terms of the age differences between the Irish system and EU systems, the same participant (FE1) explained that they overcome the challenges of taking students who are legally children on placement by not officially taking on a ‘duty of care’ for 16 or 17 year old students. They explained that if they accept incoming students from an upper secondary school who are under 18 years of age, one of their teachers has to be with them. This teacher then takes on the duty of care for the students while they are in Ireland. They further emphasised: “The vast majority of the students who come from the secondary, the upper secondary, and in Europe to us, would be over 18. So, they would be usually in their final year and 18 or 19 years of age, and then we don’t have that same level of duty of care. And likewise, sending students back to EU placements, the students we would send back would always be over 18. We don’t send students under 18” (FE1).

4.11 FET Staff at Different Stages

One participant (FE1) pointed out that from their experience many ETBs recruited teachers and tutors in the early 1990s as a response to the recession in the 1980s and very high unemployment rates. These teachers have aged and are in different stages of their careers: “So, we have a huge staff who would be on their second half of their careers, let’s say, and I suppose that creates its own challenges as a lot of people would be looking towards retirement maybe and you hear a lot of people saying, oh, I have another two years to go or another three years to go and maybe motivation is reduced at that stage perhaps, so that would be another challenge”.

FE1 indicated that “In an ideal world what you want to do is you want to balance some older staff, you want an equal number of younger staff and experience being passed from the older to younger and, today, the structure we have in terms of numbers of staffing based on numbers of students and student numbers dropping, effectively means that you can count the number of new staff on your hands literally”.

4.12 Challenges of eTwinning

One participant was unsure of the value of eTwinning. “I suppose the question is what does the eTwinning add to the party that isn’t there through the current mobility experiences, and isn’t being provided by EPALE on the other side?” (FE1). In discussion, the view of eTwinning related to a perception that the projects between schools and school-age children are of benefit for that age group, but that the potential of eTwinning for 19/20-year-olds and sometimes 30-year-olds is less clear – specifically that the “almost penfriend idea doesn’t hold the same weight for them” (FE1)

The same participant (FE1) thought, in response to the move of eTwinning into IVET, that it was difficult to see where one ended and the other began, or what the distinction was between EPALE and eTwinning: “But I just, you know, think there needs to be either a line of demarcation, or a greater link of cooperation. Maybe when you sign up as a eTwinning user, in vocational education, you also sign up as an EPALE user at the same time so that you become a member of both platforms together? Or something?” (FE1).

FE3 explained that although they know that there is a wealth of information on European sites, “It’s trying to navigate it; I find this difficult; it’s trying to find what rabbit hole you need to go down.” They stated that if people new to Erasmus looking for partners or information could get guidance through eTwinning or EPALE it would be helpful, but the value needs to be demonstrated to staff first before inviting them to use it (FE3).

The timing of these activities and events also need to be examined as teachers cannot take time off on a Thursday morning to attend an in-person or online event. The timing of events at weekends is also problematic. One participant suggested that local events would bring in a “better return than a national event”. They also suggested using publications such as union publications from the TUI and ASTI that are put in every staff room (FE1).

FE4 could also see the value in linking learners together through eTwinning, particularly Youthreach learners, but acknowledged the challenges of a packed curriculum and time (FE4).

VT1 explained that in Poland there are some barriers to cooperation such as a lack of English. They explained that including an English teacher was a good solution for them when cooperating with other schools (VT1).

VT1 added that it can still be difficult to find good partners: “Especially for VET teachers, it’s still difficult. It’s not too many partners, and such international meetings, it’s really helped. Of course, online meeting is good. But meeting face to face. It’s much, much better.” They explained that their project was a winner in an eTwinning competition, and they went to Madeira for an international workshop, where they met 148 teachers (VT1).

VT1 pointed out that it can still be a challenge to find good VET partners (VT1).

4.13 Internationalisation

FE2 pointed out that the ETB that they work in has an international desk that is manned by a newly retired principal. In their view, they prefer to be independent in their activities although they will defer to policy and corporate guidance in terms of COVID and situations such as repatriating people from mobilities: “mean, to be honest, kind of, we don’t really have anything too much to do with the International desk. You know, we’re confident enough in what we do. And you know, not to have to bother them too much”. They said that engagement with ETBI is minimal (FE2).

On discussion of the new role in ETBI for an EU person FE4 suggested that they could try and bring a network together and map the different approaches that individual ETBs have to EU opportunities. They explained that internationalisation was one of the recommendations in their recent ETB QQI quality review (FE4).

FE5 had no information from ETBI in the EU space, although they acted in an advisory role for ETBs in terms of securing accreditation. They would suggest that ETBI could centrally support EU activity but would take issue with someone telling them how to run their projects. FE5 commended Léargas on the promotion and dissemination of VET opportunities within the ETB sector. They recognised the challenge of engaging with the sector but considered that there is more interest now in EU activities than there was in previous years. They said that managers and ETBs have been talking about taking money from the management fund of projects. This is an issue, as 99% of the work takes place on site. There would need to be a balance between settings managing their own projects and ETBI providing regular communication about Erasmus opportunities (FE5).

FE4 further suggested that the project goals for the new Erasmus, such as sustainability, could be a really good way to link in people: “Schools to kind of link in with places that are a little bit further down, especially for apprenticeship areas, and the building side of things ... NZ was a big huge one, there was retrofitting but even any, any area of vocational [skills building] of looking at the sustainability element.” They explained that new modules are being introduced across FET including Level 4 and 5 sustainability modules, which have already been introduced. The need for upskilling in retrofitting and zero energy building standards will be a major focus for Ireland and “practice sharing across borders” would be really useful (FE4).

4.14 Promoting eTwinning

This idea was presented within the context of attracting and supporting new applicants to EU programmes, specifically Erasmus+, in two ways: firstly, to find a partner and secondly, to find a centralised hub for teacher training courses for PD. There is a perception that there is no single centralised platform for FET organisations or other education institutions to find this information. FE1 explained that teachers can do training courses and apply for funding to do work shadowing which is all new to IVET in Ireland. They suggested a more proactive, systematic approach where teachers can search for courses on a particular topic such as inclusion and identify courses and the level at which they are being offered. They explained that this information is scattered at the moment and that there are a lot of agencies sending emails offering courses which are hard to evaluate or validate (FE1).

FE2 suggested that staff buy in is key and that the idea of using eTwinning could be floated initially with staff through using it in one module where there is already collaboration, such as graphic design. FE2 expressed concern that there might be a disconnect between the ability of students on courses such as business between countries such as Ireland and Finland, where Finland would have different emphases on topics such as entrepreneurship. They stated that you can see staff buy-in (or a lack of it) in some areas such as job shadowing (FE2).

FE3 agreed that there is a need for buy-in from staff: “We’ve got some very proactive staff who love it and who love going away. And we’ve got other ones who are at different junctures in their life where they might have small kids and just can’t commit to things like that at the moment.” They emphasised that “teachers don’t want to see it as extra work” (FE3).

They pointed out that teachers need to see the value and the benefits of such a platform to them. FE4 suggested a showcase of what eTwinning is used for and good practice: “If you can see yourself in something that somebody has already done,

then there's more of a chance of it being an attractive option." They also reiterated the importance of getting this information to the right person in an organisation or setting: "often coming into an organisation, and having a connection with somebody who can get it out to the right people. Yeah. So you know, you're working with the managers, its always an important one that there's bottom up, but also top down kind of buy-in" (FE4).

Coord1 believes that the eTwinning platform and its ability to facilitate interaction in the Twin Space would "lure in a lot of participation". They know that practitioners in FET may not have a lot of time between teaching, preparation and administration work, but that "if they see something that's very active and engaging and project based... it could certainly add a lot of value, and would have some great potential" (Coord1).

FE5 suggested that eTwinning could be used for research or capturing collaboration and practice. They also added: "I think people are tired of Zoom, Teams and all that ...but I think if it's on site [physically] somewhere, I think it'd be really useful, you know, more buy-in for people as well if they're there, and they can see it and they can chat to somebody face to face over coffee" (FE5).

Coord1 explained that all of the online platforms they were involved in would have started in a consortium face to face. In their experience the networks started during COVID purely online without that physical face to face kick-off do not have the same cohesion. There is a need to strike a balance between face to face and online and clearly explain what you do in person and/or online (Coord1).

Coord1 noted that people pick up a lot of opportunities from in person events. It seems to be a blended approach that works - platforms, international contact points and "fishing opportunities aswell... those in person events too" (Coord1).

4.15 Recognition of eTwinning Participation

In response to a question on validation or recognition of participation in eTwinning or mobilities, FE4 explained that their ETB "badges" people who participate in programmes. The system outlines their learning outcomes or objectives and is a record that people can take forward with them. There are a lot of these badges already in use: "Teaching and Learning Forum badges or the UDL, there's a whole host of them, you're probably familiar with those recognising that, there's a at least a 25 hour commitment behind them and that there is often research or review or curriculum redesign associated with it" (FE4).

VT2 pointed out that the recognition of your work depends on your head teacher and whether or not they are a fan of eTwinning. It is not a systematic recognition but it is changing: "But there are some other countries I know in Slovakia, for example, the neighbouring country where they have some credit system, and teachers are have some benefits for working in eTwinning." For them the recognition is through the learning and benefits of collaboration and partnership: "I think it can be also kind of reward for the teachers, when they can go to these professional development events or to contact seminars, or the events or, or conferences, because everything this is free of charge for them. And I think it's a nice experience: they learn new things, meet new people, and see new places and this is paid for them" (VT2).

4.16 Mandatory Use

FE3 said: "I thought about do you dangle the stick such to make it a condition of applying for funding, or you know, that you must use the twinning platform; it's a way, but it is like a stick approach. And sometimes the stick approach doesn't always work" (FE3).

FE5's view was that it should not be mandatory, but equally recognised that its value may well depend on what stage you are at in your Erasmus career: "So if I'm told, if you log into EPALE here's what you're going to get. Here's the benefit. If you're logging in eTwinning, here's what you're going to get. Here's the benefit, then I'd log in" (FE5).

4.17 People New to EU-Funded Activities

FE5 suggested that there is value for new participants and applicants to Erasmus in engaging in a collaborative online space. They pointed out that sometimes in the ETB sector there is an expectation that the partner comes with the funding. They welcomed the return of the preparatory visit, as it is extremely useful and important in meeting partners for the first time (FE5).

In discussion about the use of online spaces for preparation, FE5 explained that they are involved in a KA1 project focusing on drawing up guidelines on preparing students for going on placement, with a particular focus on managing expectations (FE5).

Coord1 recommended presenting to the strategic leadership in FET, as there is still restructuring happening across the sector. They suggested the FET Directors, who are “windows into that world of vocational education or the PLCs”. The presentation should highlight the value and incentivise participation, as well as demonstrating the ease of use and its accessibility. There would also be a need to highlight the success stories (Coord1).

4.18 Recommendations for Teaching

VT2 recommends that teachers plan the project very carefully: “At the beginning of the year, all the partners should meet and plan when they have time to work on it, when they have holidays, or in some countries, there are longer times of practice or training, the students are not at school, and they can’t work on the project. So it’s really important to plan this carefully and plan what they should do, and give them quite precise instructions” (VT2).

VT1 explained that they add eTwinning activities to their lessons as part of their planning and include the interactions throughout the year. They use different headings, such as soft skills, and include the activities where appropriate. They then connect with another school in the lesson and also present the students to each other. They say: “These are your new colleagues from other school.” They then put all of the students into the Twin Space. They assign the students tasks set in real life, where they have to work with another class group from the other college to complete the task. They noted their surprise in the fact that students who were not high achievers in marks did very well in the tasks communicating with real-life companies (VT1).

VT1 also gave students real-world deadlines for discussions or suggestions to projects that were upheld as they would be in a real-world situation. They started in October and finished in April and the project was worked out between partners on eTwinning. They pointed out that they are no longer able to undertake mobilities, due to family responsibilities, but they can collaborate through eTwinning. The projects have a lot of value both for the students and for the professional advancement of the teacher. They were asked to give a workshop on good practice from the project online. The activity encouraged other teachers to take part in eTwinning projects with them and there are now five teachers involved in the technical school. Students also enjoy sharing cultural activities with the other school. The Austrian partner mixed class groups at different stages of vocational education with their group, so that all have good opportunities of working together (VT1).

4.19 Showcase the Value of eTwinning

FE5 found the idea of another platform difficult: “I think sometimes when you have another platform than you have to have another log in and email for it, and there’s so many of them already that sometimes it gets a bit to be too many of those platforms.... In an ideal world, everything would be a kind of a one-stop-shop, where you can just log into one platform and choose off the menu what you want” (FE5).

VT2 emphasised that it would be good for the “teachers to go somewhere for a conference, for example or somewhere where they can see the good practice or the teachers – and they usually talk about it very enthusiastically and they can inspire these teachers” (VT2).

FE2 suggested that eTwinning could be promoted to DEIS schools to address areas of disadvantage and raise awareness of the opportunities for Erasmus funding to encourage participation from disadvantaged and disenfranchised people. They also suggested it could be used as a vehicle to encourage people to stay in education (FE2).

FE2 recommended that a separate PR campaign should be established for eTwinning in IVET, which separates it from Erasmus and emphasises its value (FE2).

FE1 pointed out that their ETB had got more involved with EPALE over the last two years, as EPALE carried out a campaign to broaden their reach from adult education to vocational (FE1).

FE5 spoke of their own postgraduate research around the potential of KA1 and KA2 activities for professional learning for ETB staff. There are now professional learning development roles in each ETB, but there is no link to Erasmus. They aim to address this gap in strategy by demonstrating the benefit of Erasmus mobilities to CPD activities, and they have applied for funding to show this (FE5).

4.20 Value of eTwinning Activities

VT1 explained that they are changing their role from logistics into maths teaching but intend to continue their eTwinning activities. They are very invested in eTwinning and love it: "I love now new people: it's like it's my life". They pointed out that it's not just for students, but "there's benefits for me like when I participate in the different workshops, and I have possibility or chance to make my own workshop with Teachers" (VT1).

VT1 suggested: "If it's possible, just make international meetings with an experienced eTwinner, from what area from all Europe or what you can find and invite your teacher from vet school." They emphasised the need to have a teacher who has already done a project to promote the work. The only thing the students found missing after the project was the chance to meet the other students in real life. Otherwise, they had the opportunity to apply the skills to real life and learned a lot (VT1).

VT2 started working as an eTwinning ambassador in 2005 but had been involved in international partnerships since the 1990s with other schools. They have eTwinning projects with other schools in IT and programming, but they invited the IT teacher to assist them with the planning. They have also worked with social care students, where they cooperated with other schools and went into hospitals to help patients. Most of the eTwinning projects they work on relate to English language learning and communications. They are also involved in an economic project related to the student company, where they cooperate with five other countries through eTwinning on student companies, including an online job fair (VT2).

VT2 explained that they present the project as part of a subject over the whole school year. They may have three 45-minute lessons a week, so they set one task per month and use the month to work on it in class and outside class. They work in shorter bursts but over the whole school year. They link the activities to assessment in terms of creativity or participation. The students need motivation to take part but are very active once they have started (VT2).

VT2 also discussed the benefits of real-life applications, where writing an order for a logistics company or a presentation is done with purpose, as there are real people waiting for it and waiting to answer. The students gain confidence in the language as they communicate with other students who are also learning. They build their language competency together, overcoming mistakes and finding ways to communicate. They also learn about each other's country and culture: "I still think that education is much more lively with eTwinning; it's just more like a real life; and when they are really online and really speak to each other, that's something you don't learn at school without the partners." They noted that students "who work on a training project for example in the second year, they are more willing to go abroad for a mobility...they want to connect with other people from different countries and they are not so afraid because they know they can do it". The eTwinning experience prepares them for mobility and builds their confidence in their skills and in their language capability (VT2).

VT2 explained that they teach English so they are looking for English-speaking partners, but this varies depending on the teacher: “I have a teacher friend, who is a German teacher, also in a VET school... and she does a lot of eTwinning projects in German... the students are really practically centred. They are not very academic. And still she does wonderful eTwinning projects with them. Opticians, I remember opticians, they did some interviews, or it was a kind of dialogue at the shop with a partner. One of them was the shop assistant and one of them a customer and they met online, and the dialogue was very good” (VT2).

VT2 also explained that they have undertaken PD physically and online. They have also gone, as a lecturer, to PD in Prague for VET schools and teachers: “Also the groups are all teachers and some of the groups are moderated. So, you can also get a lot of inspiration there; all the teachers who join can get a lot of inspiration from the group” (VT2).

VT3, a vocational teacher, described how they write a blog on eTwinning live and on vocational training projects results. They promote their availability for eTwinning projects and have written eTwinning into their profile on their school and in terms of the vocational subjects that they teach. They also present in the Twin Space on their successful eTwinning projects such as projects on reducing sugar, revisiting grandmother’s recipes, healthy generations, eat local, think global (VT3).

4.21 Barriers to eTwinning

VT1 explained that in Poland there are some barriers to cooperation, such as a lack of English. They said that including an English teacher was a good solution for them when cooperating with other schools (VT1).

5. DISCUSSION

The research findings indicate that there is an awareness of EU projects funded through Erasmus+ and an acknowledgement of the value of Erasmus+ activities for learners and for FET practitioners. Participants acknowledged the value of collaboration and cooperation and demonstrated awareness of EPAL as a platform for adult education and IVET. eTwinning is perceived by most participants as a platform for the school community that facilitates communication and cooperation. The majority of the participants were unaware of the collaborative Twin Space and were unclear as to how the platform could add value to the mobility activities already taking place.

It is clear that successful project coordinators accessing Erasmus+ funding in Ireland have built partnerships over many years and have organically built their partner network through relationships that have already established trust. This word-of-mouth partner-finding activity is reflected in the informal networks built with colleagues across ETBs and regions. Participants speak of jumping in the car and driving to visit a person who can provide advice to them from their experience with EU funding. Others speak of “due diligence” when seeking and finding partners, using a range of parameters to assess whether partners are suitable, including size of institution; alignment with curriculum; ability to take multiple groups of learners across a range of topic areas; and relationships with other partners.

FET is changing in Ireland to a more integrated collaborative model of provision with centralised ‘Colleges of FET’ located regionally within ETBs, offering multiple campus provision of IVET, general education, literacy and specific programmes by sector or topic specialism. These offerings will link into a new model of provision integrated with undergraduate programmes in higher education, producing a tertiary offering that ensures an integrated pathway from colleges of FET to technological universities or higher education institutions.

Participants in FET speak of change within the Erasmus programme as challenging and in some cases unsuccessful. The removal of dedicated funding for language or cultural preparation, the funding of placements before partners are identified, and the unclear instructions – mandatory or not optional – use of systems such as the OLS mean that project coordinators develop a close relationship with the NSO but are potentially less well-disposed to innovation from the European Commission in online systems or online collaborative platforms.

The latest strategy from SOLAS talks about transforming FET and it is clear that there is a radical movement of FET provision – physically and culturally – happening in each ETB. In theory, the teaching and training within FET is devolved to the ETBI and the funding to support the myriad policies that impact that provision is also overseen by ETBI. In reality, it appears from the research that the history of ETBs and their legacy independence means that each ETB is developing its own strategy and actions for the FET sector. Each ETB is also undergoing review processes with QQI around quality in all aspects of teaching and learning, and internationalisation is being recommended as a key element of the work of ETBs.

ETBI has been given responsibility to oversee and manage a professional learning hub that will provide guidance and support to the network of 16 PD Directors across the ETB network. This network currently meets informally but may be more formalised as the ETBI develops the hub to support activities in each ETB. It implies a level of mapping of current provision, anticipating PD needs and exploring recognition for continuing PD courses, collaboration and communities of practice. The research shows that some ETBs are awarding digital badges in line with the practice of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and other organisations such as AHEAD and the Universal Design for Learning's course and badge. Micro-credentials and other mechanisms for recognition of staff development and learning are part of this strategy. The range of PD opportunities for teachers provided by the CSS and other stakeholders has potential to link in with national PD strategies and provide a conduit for FET and IVET practitioners to take up, develop and contribute PD events to the platform.

The accreditation and recognition of teachers in FET is another evolving area in which participants believe that decision-makers are discussing new roles and terminology for FET practitioners. For example, in recent years in particular programmes, only resource teachers have been recruited. This role is separate to a Teaching Council-recognised teacher and has different terms and conditions. In FET the organic development and growth of FET and its diversity have meant that practitioners, teachers and trainers have entered and remained in the sector under a wide range of contracts, terms and conditions. Generally, any person working in a Section 30-recognised school setting must be registered with the Teaching Council. This tends to mean that all teachers working in PLCs or Colleges of Further Education are registered as teachers. This is not necessarily the case across other settings or QQI levels of provision. It is certainly not necessarily the case in ETB Training Centres for apprentices, where IVET trainers and tutors contribute to off the job phases of apprenticeship training. As one participant pointed out, inclusion is a key criterion of Erasmus+ and in their setting, whereby all staff are offered the opportunity to apply for a mobility to another EU member state irrespective of role or Teaching Council status.

The need for validation is complicated in eTwinning by the fact that the Twin Space is used by primary and second-level children, where issues of child protection and safety are paramount. The validation of users as teachers and the implicit Garda Vetting that is part of the teaching professional practice and national legislation, influences the requirement for some standard or criterion for membership of the collaborative platform.

The value of mobilities and international placement and collaboration is well documented for both staff and learners. eTwinning has demonstrated the value of online collaborative activities between teachers and students across the EU. The impact of COVID on education systems illustrated the commitment of educators and trainers and students to education through online and offline modes, allowing teaching, training and mobilities to continue, albeit limited to remote and distance learning technologies and approaches. The impact of the pandemic on education and the cascade effect of social and face-to-face communication have taken a toll on people's resilience. The instability and unpredictability of life under COVID have for some people resulted in increased anxiety and a reticence in young people – especially to take opportunities such as a placement abroad (NSO1).

In the report “It Made Me Hungry For More”: Tracing the Impact of European Work Placements on the Skills, Attitudes, Education and Career Paths of Vocational Learners from Ireland”, Hughes (2021) recommended six actions emerging from the research findings. Recommendations 1, 2, 5 and 6 are particularly relevant to the introduction and promotion of eTwinning to IVET in Ireland:

1. Peer-to-peer connection should be further supported and encouraged.
2. Targeted, vocationally oriented language instruction would substantially enhance the experience of participants who have an existing knowledge in the language of their destination country, and those who undertake longer mobility placements.
3. Mobility placements could be used more flexibly to suit different cohorts of learners.
4. The Irish vocational sector in general, and VET learners in particular, should be made more aware of the opportunities that exist for them under European mobility programmes.

6. IVET IN IRELAND

This study has addressed in brief how IVET in Ireland is provided and accessed by potential learners. The legacy of division between vocational skills and general academic education is still evident in the overall structure of the education and training system in Ireland although the recent SOLAS strategy and new policy directions emerging from the DFHERIS show that the integration of IVET and academic provision at tertiary level is coalescing in order for potential learners to access a clear, sequential and logical education and training journey to a qualification. The opportunity for the old Institutes of Technology and now the Technological Universities to create a tertiary domain where QQI Levels 5 and 6 and traditional higher education Levels QQI 7, 8, 9 and 10 meet is part of the FET College of the Future proposals, which may open up and redefine IVET in Ireland. This redefinition does not currently align with the inclusion of IVET provision in compulsory education.

At present, apprenticeship and traineeships are provided post-2016 from Level 5 to Level 10 across a range of 65 apprenticeship sectors. Traineeships, unlike apprenticeships, are not regulated by law (there is no occupation profile); they tend to be developed in response to local employers’ needs, and curriculum content may vary according to local demand (CEDEFOP, 2019). PLC Colleges or Colleges of Further Education offer a broad range of programmes in IVET at QQI Levels 5 and 6. A range of providers, including some Youthreach Centres, VTOS Centres and private organisations, offer awards at QQI Levels 5 and 6 in settings that may or may not be under the management of an ETB. These private providers operate in health care, beauty and other industry settings. Generally, IVET can be offered as part of QQI awards at Levels 5 and 6, as long as the provider has received certification as a provider by QQI.

At present, eTwinning could be offered to staff in education and training settings that are part of apprenticeship and traineeship programmes; PLCs or Colleges of Further Education, some Youthreach Centres, some VTOS settings and private providers.

7. EXPANDING ETWINNING TO IVET IN IRELAND

The following are recommendations for key actions, suggestions for promotional content, and a reminder of the nuance required when stating a value proposition for eTwinning NSO in Ireland.

7.1 Key Actions for NSO

1.

- a. Review national workplan in light of the findings of the feasibility study.
- b. Identify key decision-makers in SOLAS, ETBI and individual ETBs.
- c. Identify IVET practitioners in Erasmus+ accredited settings that are open to eTwinning.
- d. Agree key value statement for eTwinning by category of IVET stakeholder.

2.

- a. Open dialogue with key SOLAS personnel involved in PD/governance frameworks for staff.
- b. Open dialogue with Coordinators for Professional Development based in the ETBI.
Open dialogue with Head of FET Directors in ETBI.

3.

- a. Create promotional campaign for eTwinning and/or the European School Education Platform targeted at staff in IVET in Ireland.
- b. Pilot promotional campaign with key stakeholders at practitioner, manager and coordinator level across IVET.

4.

- a. Present eTwinning to ETB management regionally.
- b. Present eTwinning to FET Directors' network and Professional Learning Directors' networks.
- c. Directors' networks.
- d. Present eTwinning to Erasmus+ FET Network for KA1 and KA2.

Where possible present in person to key strategic stakeholders

7.2 General Promotional Actions for eTwinning to IVET

1. Design an eTwinning in person promotion event for stakeholders including collaborative sessions and workshops hosted by successful eTwinners.
2. Attract IVET settings and practitioners interested in internationalisation by showcasing an eTwinning activity that successfully exploited all aspects of the eTwinning potential linked to Erasmus+.
3. Demonstrate and illustrate the successful potential eTwinning journey for an IVET practitioner.
4. Identify and recruit successful eTwinners and/or ambassadors from IVET to meet FET practitioners in IVET (PLC, ETB Training Centres, Youthreach, some VTOS).
5.
 - a. Position eTwinning as a potential contribution to PD.
 - b. Position eTwinning as part of internationalisation strategies for each ETB.

7.3 Specific Promotional Actions for eTwinning to IVET Teaching and Learning

1.
 - a. Position eTwinning as a valuable opportunity for collaborative online projects between practitioners and learners embedded in QQI awards at Levels 5 and 6.
 - b. Promote eTwinning as an opportunity to motivate and engage learners to take part in ‘real-world’ activities within a safe and secure online collaborative environment.
 - c. Suggest Twin Space for collaborative projects between practitioners and learners on topics related to IVET content and skills development.
 - d. Suggest Twin Space for collaborative projects between practitioners and learners on topics focused on sustainability, green transition and digital transitions.
 - e. Suggest Twin Space for collaborative projects between practitioners and learners on topics focused on the development of soft or meta skills.
 - f. Position eTwinning as a partner-finding mechanism for new IVET eTwinners for online collaboration in teaching and learning.
2.
 - a. Promote eTwinning as a valuable opportunity for PD for IVET practitioners in collaboration with EU partners.
 - b. Explore the recognition of eTwinning activity as part of an emerging strategy for PD in FET for all staff.
3.
 - a. Promote eTwinning as a collaborative space for newcomers to Erasmus+ where relationships can be established through online projects (potentially modelled on successful projects or mentored by experienced eTwinners).
 - b. Promote eTwinning as an opportunity to engage with IVET practitioners across the EU to share practice, affirm successful activities and approaches, and engage in collective innovation.
4. Leverage the knowledge of experienced eTwinners on protocols or local policies for engaging with partners with differing learner age groups and experience, and for accommodating practitioners funded through differing national education and training systems.
5. Demonstrate the connections between eTwinning and Erasmus+ using eTwinner testimony and case studies.

7.4 Links between eTwinning and Erasmus+ Activity for IVET

1. Position eTwinning as a partner-finding mechanism for new staff and learner mobilities through Erasmus+.
2. Position eTwinning as a hub for IVET practitioners to locate and access continuing PD from across the EU.
3. Position eTwinning as part of an integrated internationalisation strategy for teaching and learning in IVET that encompasses practitioners, learners and Erasmus+ activities.

7.5 Important Nuances for the Promotion of eTwinning in IVET in Ireland

1. Clearly position the value of eTwinning in IVET in Ireland.
2. Clearly articulate and present a statement of strategy and objectives of eTwinning in IVET.
3. Clearly present the roles and use of eTwinning by different stakeholders.
4. Clearly present the benefits to IVET practitioners and learners of participation in eTwinning.
5. Differentiate or integrate the eTwinning and EPALE platforms clearly for IVET in Ireland.
6. Acknowledge the history and variation in success of online collaborative platforms in EU-funded programmes.
7. Acknowledge the technical challenges of developing and using large-scale online platforms across EU member states.
8. Acknowledge structural differences in IVET provision across EU member states.
9. Differentiate the value of eTwinning for experienced Erasmus+ short-term projects and accredited projects in terms of value and outcomes.

Encourage experienced accredited Erasmus+ participants through mentoring and demonstration to explore the value of eTwinning for self-directed learner language or cultural preparation through role play or simulation activities with eTwinning partners (potentially in the early part of an academic year).

Support experienced accredited Erasmus+ participants through mentoring and showcasing of eTwinning online collaboration via teaching and learning in priority areas of green and digital transitions and soft or 'meta' skills.

8. CONCLUSION

This report provides an initial feasibility study into the expansion of eTwinning in Ireland to the IVET sector. It is recommended that the progression of this aim would benefit from further research and consultation with stakeholders in the apprenticeship and traineeship sectors, to potentially include private providers. It is suggested that – depending on the alignment of the eTwinning European and national work plans and priorities –the management of PLCs and other settings could be consulted on the value of eTwinning and its contribution to the European dimension of teaching and learning, the professional development of staff, and the benefits to learners. The sequencing and timing of these consultations may depend on the outcomes of discussions with decision-makers and stakeholders in FET. It is further suggested that Léargas as the NSO for eTwinning and the National Agency for Erasmus+ in Ireland, acknowledge that there has been a range of online platforms for mobility over the decades, and that different systems and options are confusing. A history of technical issues with platforms can also cause users to lose confidence. The report shows that there is potential for eTwinning to add value to the Irish IVET landscape through the PD of staff, the established benefits to learners of collaboration in a real-world setting with EU partners, and the additional value of developing and retaining relationships and partners with educators and trainers in another member state.

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