
EXECUTIVE SELF-EVALUATION

REPORT

EXECUTIVE SELF-EVALUATION REPORT FOR LAOIS AND OFFALY ETB

December 2017

Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board

Ridge Road, Portlaoise, Co. Laois.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction, Purpose and Objectives	4
2. Overview of Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board	5
2.1 Profile and Mission Statement of Laois and Offaly Education & Training Board	5
2.2 Laois-Offaly Region: Socio-Economic, Employment Statistics	6
2.3 LOETB Further Education and Training Profile	8
2.4 Establishing a QA Framework for LOETB (post amalgamation)	9
2.5 Integrating FET Provision in LOETB	10
3. Executive Self-Evaluation Process	13
4. Governance, Planning and Management of LOETB FET Quality Assurance	14
4.1 Introduction	14
4.2 Current Governance Arrangements	14
4.3 Planning of FET Delivery: ETB & Centre-Level	21
4.4 Arrangements for Programme/Course Development and Approval	22
4.5 Governance of Strategy, Policy and Risk	23
4.6 Evaluation of Governance, Planning and Management of LOETB FET QA	26
4.7 Areas for Improvement: Governance, Planning & Management of LOETB FET QA	28
5. Delivery of FET	29
5.1 Introduction	29
5.2 QQI Programmes and Courses in LOETB	29
5.3 Course Delivery & Continuous Professional Development & Assessment	29
5.4 Assessment	30
5.5 Programme/Course Review, Monitoring and Self-Evaluation	35
5.6 Public Information and Communication	37
5.7 Evaluation of Delivery of Further Education and Training	37
5.8 Areas for Improvement: Delivery of FET	40
6. The Learning Experience	40
6.1 Introduction	40
6.2 Learner Referrals	40
6.3 Learner Admission	40
6.4 Access, Transfer and Progression	41
6.5 Learner Information and Guidance	42
6.6 Supports for Learners	42
6.7 Guidance for Learners	43
6.8 Care for Learners	43
6.9 The Learning Experience & Environment	43
6.10 Feedback from Learners	44
6.11 Tracking Learner Outcomes	44
6.12 Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL)	45
6.13 Evaluation of the Learning Experience	45

6.14 Areas for Improvement: The Learning Experience	46
7. Information and Data Management	47
7.1 Introduction	47
7.2 Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS)	47
7.3 Other Data Management and Information Storage Systems	48
7.4 Time & Attendance Clocking system and Trainee Apprentice Payroll System	49
7.5 Data Security	49
7.6 Data Analysis	50
7.7 Evaluation of Information and Data Management	50
7.8 Areas for Improvement: Information and Data Management	50
8. Collaborations and Stakeholder Relationships	51
8.1 Relationships with Key Stakeholders	51
8.2 Second Providers	52
8.3 Third Level Providers	53
8.4 Irish Prison Service	53
8.5 Further Education and Training Cooperation Hours	53
8.6 Collaborative Relationships	54
8.7 Evaluation of Collaborations and Stakeholder Relationships	54
8.8 Areas for Improvement: Collaborations and Stakeholder Relationships	55
9. Apprenticeships/Traineeships & Work Based Learning	56
9.1 Introduction	56
9.2 Apprenticeships	56
9.3 Traineeships	56
9.4 Work Related Learning Initiatives	57
9.5 Evaluation of Apprenticeships/Traineeships & Work Based Learning	57
10. Conclusions	58
10.1 Conclusions	58
Appendices	59
Appendix 1 ETB Executive Self-Evaluation Terms of Reference	59
Appendix 2 Executive Self Evaluation Formal Meetings	61
Appendix 3 List of Locations of QQI Delivery	62
Appendix 4 Testimonials	63

1. Introduction, Purpose and Objectives

This Report describes the Executive Self-Evaluation of the governance and management of quality assurance within the delivery of Further Education and Training (FET) provision in Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board (LOETB). The Self-Evaluation Process was conducted in line with the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Statutory Core Quality Assurance and Sector Specific Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines for Education and Training Boards, and within nationally agreed Terms of Reference (See Appendix 1).

The purpose of this process is to evaluate the governance and management of quality assurance, the effectiveness of quality assurance systems within the FET service of the ETB, which will contribute to the development of an improvement plan. This will support the FET service LOETB in meeting its statutory requirements for the establishment and operation of internal quality assurance procedures, in line with the QQI Core and Sectoral QA Guidelines. In doing this, it aims to:

- contribute to and support improvement planning, governance of quality, and quality enhancement for FET;
- promote the improvement of quality assurance and, in doing so, further embed a culture of quality in the ETB;
- use findings from this self-evaluation to support improvement across the ETB sector;
- identify current gaps and priorities for improvement in the context of QQI statutory QA guidelines.

LOETB is committed to quality assuring all its FET programmes and services. This Executive Self-Evaluation process is enhancement-based and is focused on identifying improvements to policies, structures and processes, with a view to improving the quality of learning opportunities for all learners within LOETB. It is an objective of Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board to ensure compliance with QQI Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines.

This evaluation specifically looks at Further Education and Training (FET), and it should be noted that any areas for improvement or actions identified relate to FET only.

2. Overview of Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board

2.1 Profile, Vision and Values of Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board

2.1.1 Profile

Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board is one of sixteen Education and Training Boards (ETBs) established in 2013 by the Education and Training Boards Act 2013. Following ministerial approval, County Laois Vocational Education Committee (VEC) and County Offaly VEC were officially dissolved on 30th June 2013 (Section 55) and the Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board was officially established on 1st July 2013. Responsibility for the SOLAS training function (formerly under the auspices of FÁS) transferred from Longford and Westmeath ETB to LOETB in March 2016.

LOETB is a statutory authority which has responsibility for education, training and youth work and provides Post-Primary Education, Further Education and Training and Youth Services in addition to other Community-based education programmes and services.

2.1.2 Vision and Values

Our vision is to actively lead the provision of high-quality education and training in Laois and Offaly. Our mission is excellence through education and training. We put learning at the heart of everything we do through the provision a wide range of education and training programmes, services, and supports to young people and adults across the LOETB region. We believe that lifelong learning is key to personal development and wellbeing, social inclusion, and economic prosperity.

Our core values as a service provider are as follows: Equality Fairness, respect, and inclusion in the treatment of our students, stakeholders, and staff and a culture where diversity is welcomed and valued.

- Collaboration: Working in partnership with our students, stakeholders, and staff and to facilitating the sharing of knowledge, expertise, and skills.
- Innovation: Remaining a leader in the provision of education and training by encouraging new ideas, trying out different approaches, and responding to change.
- Professionalism: Courtesy, efficiency, and excellence in our dealings with our students, stakeholders and staff and working to the highest standards in education and training.
- Integrity: Honesty, transparency, and confidentiality and meeting our responsibilities as a provider of lifelong learning in a consistent and ethical fashion.

2.2 Laois-Offaly Region: Socio-Economic, Employment Statistics

2.2.1 Geography and Demographics

The Laois and Offaly ETB region encompasses the counties of Laois and Offaly.



Diagram 1: Laois Offaly region

Laois and Offaly is a predominantly rural area of approximately 3715km², with a population of 162,658 people (Census 2016) stretching from Banagher on the banks of the Shannon to the River Barrow on the edge of Carlow town. The most recent CSO figures indicate that the population of the region has grown by 3.5% since 2011, just below the national figure of 3.8%. The two counties combined have a slightly younger than average age profile of 35.6, below the national figure of 37.4.

The population change in Laois and Offaly is significantly varied. Smaller rural towns and villages experienced a considerable reduction in the number of people living in the area, for example the population in Shannonbridge decreased by 12% (2011-2016) whilst the population in some of the more urban settings grew significantly e.g. Portlaoise (15.5%) and Portlaoise (11%) in the last 5 years.

Overall, the population grew in Offaly by 1.2% from 2011, with Laois reporting as one of the fastest growing counties in Ireland with an increase of 5.2%.

2.2.2 Socio-Economic

The CSO figures show that those under the age of 15 represent 36.9% of the region's total population compared to an average of 31.5% in the Leinster region. Those aged 0-14 and 65+ (the 'age-dependent groups') represent 53 persons per 100 of the 'active' age groups.

A total of 22,547 (13.8%) of the population of the two counties was recorded as having a disability in the 2016 census, an increase of 2,077 from 2011. Foreign nationals account for 13.35% of the population in the region.

2.2.3 Employment

According to the Census (2016) there are 60,624 currently employed in the Laois Offaly region. The main sectors of employment in the region are Professional Services (22.5%), Commerce and Trade (19.7%) and Manufacturing (16.9%). It is noteworthy that the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector provides employment for over 7% of those working in the region.

There are 9,993 people on the live register in Laois and Offaly (October 2017), with 1,307 under the age of 25. Of those that are on the live register, 55% are male.

2.2.4 Educational Attainment

Of the population of the two counties, an average of 34% of those aged 15 years and over have completed third level education, compared to the national average of 42%.

At the time of Census 2016, an average of 1.25% of the population of the two counties had completed no formal education, whilst 7.8% of the population completed primary education only compared to a national average of 7%. The average age of ceasing education in Laois and Offaly is 18.5 years compared to a national figure of 19.9 years old.

The number of Ph.D. holders increased by 97 from 2011 to 342 in 2016 and the number holding advanced certs/apprenticeships increased by 107 in the same period to 3,513.

The FET Service of LOETB provides a range of programmes and services at eleven Further Education and Training Centres, and two Prison Education Centres. QQI-certified programmes are also offered in second level schools for learners with special educational needs. FET programmes are delivered to a wide range of target learners: early school leavers, learners with intellectual disabilities, recent school leavers with Leaving Certificate, adults returning to education after many years, and the long-term unemployed. Programmes may be offered on a part-time or full-time basis, as appropriate. While most programmes are classroom-based, others, such as traineeship programmes, combine classroom-based learning with a significant element of work-based learning.

The following table and chart outlines the number and distribution of learners per programme who have benefited from FET courses in the full calendar year 2016. Please note, an individual learner could have benefited from more than one course on one or more programmes in the calendar year.



LOETB processes applications for certification under the Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) and the Quarrying Skills Certification Scheme (QSCS) for Approved Training Organisations in a number of areas: Laois, Offaly, Longford, Westmeath, Kildare, Dublin City, County Dublin and Dun Laoghaire, Cavan, and Monaghan. The schemes provides for the assessment, certification and registration of non-craft operatives within the construction sector. Operators who successfully complete a CSCS assessment are awarded QQI Certification and are issued with a CSCS Registration Card. The QQI Certification is for a Special Purpose Award at Level 5. In 2016, 4,959 certification requests were made and approximately 5,200 requests will be made in 2017.

2.4 Establishing a QA Framework for LOETB (post amalgamation)

When the VECs of Laois and Offaly amalgamated in July 2013 to form Laois and Offaly ETB, the main priority of the two Adult Education Officers (AEOs) at the time was to ensure that a consistent approach be taken to the provision of Further Education in both counties. During the summer of 2013, significant progress was made in relation to the planning of FE provision in each county, to eliminate unnecessary duplication and to scope/track progression opportunities from one programme to another. Similarly, the quality assurance agreements in each former VEC (one QA agreement in each VEC) were compared and contrasted to identify areas in which quality assurance arrangements differed. Fortunately, there were very few differences between what each individual VEC had committed to in their QA agreement with QQI (then FETAC) and therefore it was decided that, with some small adjustments, a joint QA document which reflected the commitments of the new organisation would be the most positive way forward. The joint document was collated by the AEOs, the Quality Assurance Manager, and representatives from the FET centres.

Once the joint document was agreed, the process of incrementally developing a common set of policies and procedures began. Common documentation was introduced in the first academic year following amalgamation, and staff briefings were provided where the documentation was introduced and explained. In the second academic year (September 2014-June 2015), the certification process was managed centrally by the QA Manager, and this arrangement has continued since then. Central management of the certification process provides:

- an assurance of transparency, consistency, and fairness,
- an opportunity for oversight of the process by management,
- a shared responsibility for ensuring that identified corrective action is implemented, where required.

The responsibility for quality assurance is one that is shared among all staff members of the FET Service. Staff are regularly briefed on their responsibilities and provided with relevant updates as required. Awareness of quality assurance and recognition of the need for a consistent approach to quality assurance provision has significantly increased, particularly since the introduction of QA briefings and, more recently, the establishment of the QA Department.

In March 2016, LOETB took over responsibility for the provision of former SOLAS training programmes in Laois and Offaly from Longford and Westmeath ETB. While redeployment options were offered to former SOLAS staff, none opted to transfer to LOETB at the time and, as a result, an internal recruitment campaign was launched to resource the Training Services team on a temporary basis. While all positions were filled with very able and competent staff members, none of these

employees had any experience in the provision of training programmes such as Specialist Training, Specific Skills Training, etc. Furthermore, operation of the Transition Quality Assurance System (TQAS), is significantly different to the QA agreement in place for Further Education provision, this presented a challenge as LOETB did not have an experienced Training Standards Officer (TSO). Training and (ongoing) support was provided by the Training Standards staff of LWETB, which was of great benefit to the QA Department.

Despite the lack of programme-specific experienced staff in March 2017, the newly appointed Training team have made significant progress in establishing a learner-focused training service which responds to the needs of industry and local employers. Mount Lucas National Construction Training Centre to Mount Lucas is now under the remit of LOETB, and since August 2017, has been operating at almost full capacity through the provision of Construction related programmes. A Services to Employers Unit has been established which aims to address the Training needs of those that are in employment in order to boost their employment statuses and provide a highly trained workforce in the Midlands. The number of apprentices in Laois and Offaly is continuously increasing (76% increase in the number of live apprentices in Laois and Offaly since March 2016). Meanwhile the types and locations of community and contracted training is constantly being developed and improved to take into account local training needs in different parts of the two counties.

The acquisition of responsibility for training services in Laois and Offaly in 2016 represented a significant change in the focus of the former Further Education service. It became very apparent that the only way to successfully provide a comprehensive, responsive service to the adult learners of Laois and Offaly was to integrate the Further Education and Training (FET) service.

2.5 Integrating FET Provision in LOETB

2.5.1 FET Centre Model of Provision

LOETB has established a number of newly refurbished integrated Further Education and Training Centres in communities across both counties. An array of full-time and part-time courses are now provided in each LOETB FET centre using multiple funding strands to offer learners the opportunity to progress through the NFQ on a single site.

At first, the idea of integration of FET Services amounted to accommodating a Training programme in an established FET Centre. However, opportunities were quickly identified whereby the combination of resources would serve to benefit learners. The adoption of this approach has allowed for the innovative integration of Further Education programmes with Training programmes across the region.

2.5.2 Innovative FET Projects

- During Summer 2017, a seven-week Bridging/Foundation employment focused (Contract Training) programme was delivered to learners in Youthreach Centres in both Laois and Offaly. The programme focused on both Construction Skills and Beauty Therapy during which the learners worked on practical projects that provided real-life work experiences that allowed them to apply their academic and technical skills and develop their employability.

- As a result of collaboration between the Literacy service and the Apprenticeship Authorised Officers, a 'Maths for Trades' module has been developed to assist both current and potential apprentices with the mathematical element of Phases 2, 4 and 6 of the Apprenticeship programme. The purpose of this module is to equip students with a solid foundation in the maths element needed for a variety of the technical apprenticeship trades.
- This year, Banagher FET Centre hosted a Local Training Initiative (LTI), a Contract Training programme and elements of the Youthreach Programme, all of which had a construction focus. It required the Contact Trainers and Second Providers to develop and schedule the programmes to ensure all learners gained the required knowledge and experience to facilitate learning, assessment and certification in the various modules. The outcomes include a construction facility that will enhance future learning opportunities across all programmes, and progression to local employment for some of the learners.
- At the beginning of each year, the Training Services team meet with all second providers, both individually and collectively, and agree the parameters for each programme – with each agreed within the context of the spectrum of programmes offered by LOETB – including through second providers; from literacy/ community education/community training at one end of the spectrum to PLC/Traineeship and employment-focused contract training at the other. All parties agreed to work in partnership to ensure the programme meets the needs of its target group and on ensuring that there are internal progression options. For example, every application for an LTI must have identified those progression options (sometimes FE, sometimes Training) for learners prior to approval.
- LOETB provide an Entrepreneurship programme for young adults through our Youthreach programme and our Community Training Centre. Through collaboration with Foróige, the Local Enterprise Office, as well as local and regional business mentors we provide guidance and support to learners during the initial setup and development of their businesses. Throughout the programme target groups participate in business mentorship sessions, business visits and are exposed to numerous guest speakers from the business community, whilst developing, showcasing, and pitching their business product/idea to a range of audiences. Elements of the programme are being integrated with modules in each centre so that learning is captured and accredited where appropriate.

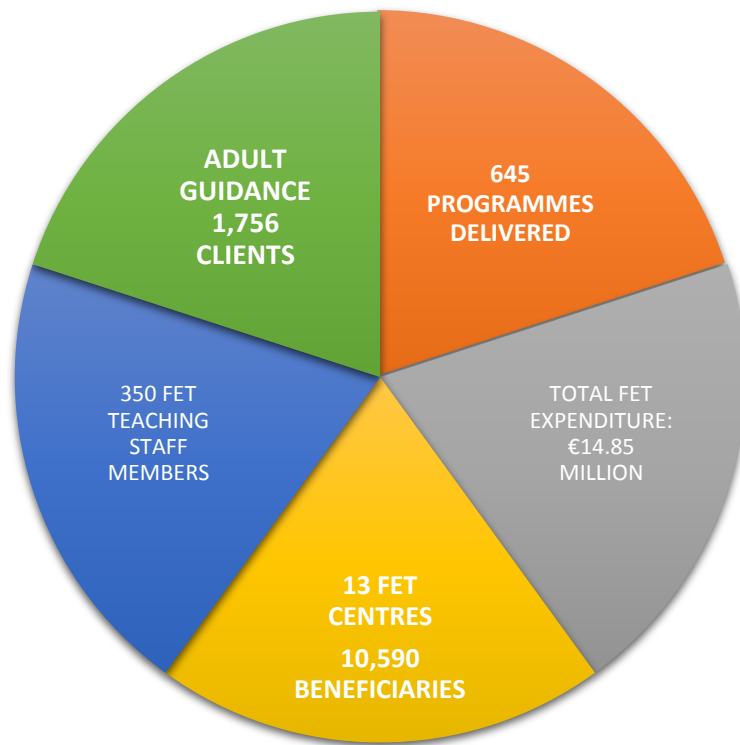
These initiatives require the cooperation of a range of staff, including Senior Management, Centre/Service Managers, Training Officers, QA staff and administrative staff. Significant time and effort continues to be invested into the integration of FET services to ensure maximum benefit for the learners.

2.5.3 Review of FET Continuum of Provision

LOETB are constantly evaluating methods of ensuring optimum access, transfer, and progression opportunities for learners and have thus far reshaped much of its provision to ensure that courses are not duplicated and offer ease of progression, for example:

- Bridging/Foundation provision has been reduced significantly, and replaced through the provision of BTEI funded courses.

- LTI/Youthreach/CTC provision has been reviewed to allow for progression to Level 5 options in CT, Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) and Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) programmes.
- Contract Training provision is also being mapped to Level 5 provision in PLC and VTOS to allow for progression options that enhance employment opportunities.



3. Executive Self-Evaluation Process

The Terms of Reference for the Executive Self-Evaluation (ESE) process were agreed nationally between the FET Directors of ETBs and QQI (see Appendix 1). The LOETB QA Manager was assigned as project lead to coordinate the project, and an external facilitator was identified to work with the project lead, the FET Director and the FET Senior Management Team (QA Manager, FE Manager and Training Manager) in advising and facilitating the process.

A governance questionnaire was completed as an initial step in this process, in order to identify LOETB's current governance structures. This was evaluated by the external facilitator and a written report was presented to the FET Director and QA Manager. The findings of this feedback report identified areas for discussion for the evaluation process and helped to inform the governance section of this report, while information was sought from representatives of the FET services and projects to inform the rest of the report.

This Evaluation Report sets out, at an overview level, the current arrangements in place in LOETB. It is not intended to be a forensic, detailed examination of all QA activity, but rather a "snapshot" description of the existing situation, with identified areas for development and improvement listed for consideration in the Quality Improvement Plan.

4. Governance, Planning & Management of LOETB FET Quality Assurance

4.1 Introduction

This section sets out the current governance structure in place to oversee the FET planning and provision and the Quality Assurance structures and processes that underpin current activity.

4.2 Current Governance Arrangements

LOETB corporate governance has regard to the statutory structures and function and responsibilities as set out in the Education and Training Boards Act 2013. In addition, LOETB operates in accordance with the provisions of Circular Letter 18/2015, 'Code of Practice for the Governance of Education and Training Boards'.

LOETB is governed by a Board comprising 21 members, in accordance with Part 3 (Membership of Education and Training Boards) of the Education and Training Boards Act 2013. This includes 12 representatives from the two local county councils, two staff representatives, two parent representatives from the second level schools, and five members with a special knowledge of education and training including a learner representative and a business representative.

The functions of the Board and the Chief Executive (CE) are clearly defined. Functions of the board are referred to as "reserved" functions and functions of the CE are referred to as "Executive" functions. The reserved functions of the LOETB Board are set out in the Education and Training Boards Act 2013. Anything that is not described as a reserved function is an executive function. The Act does not prescribe a specific role for the ETB Board in terms of oversight of FET services and the attendant QA requirements for these services. This is an executive function and corporate responsibility rests with the Chief Executive (CE).

LOETB has established an Audit Committee and a Finance Committee in accordance with Circular Letter 18/2015. These committees have established Terms of Reference, meeting schedules, and reporting arrangements in line with the Code of Practice, and have a broad oversight remit with respect to all LOETB activity.

In relation to the governance, planning and management of quality assurance, LOETB is cognisant of its responsibilities and commitments to SOLAS as the national Further Education and Training Authority and the funding body for the majority of FET activity, as well as the requirements set out in QQI Guidelines.

4.2.1 Executive Level Governance

The CE of LOETB is ultimately responsible for the oversight of all LOETB activity, including FET. Responsibility for QA is an executive function.

The CE and three Directors are the senior management team (SMT) of LOETB and are responsible for the governance and management of all LOETB activity.

The Director of FET reports to the CE and has operational responsibility for the coordination and management of FET Services and activity, and is responsible for the planning and delivery of high quality and responsive FET provision and the governance and management of FET, as well as coordinating a FET Senior Management Team and having responsibility for workforce planning and performance management.

The Director of Schools also reports to the CE and is responsible for assisting the CE in the leadership of teaching and learning and the governance and management of schools.

The Director of Organisation Support and Development reports to the CE and is responsible for assisting the CE in the leadership of the organisational administrative function and the governance and management of ETB services.

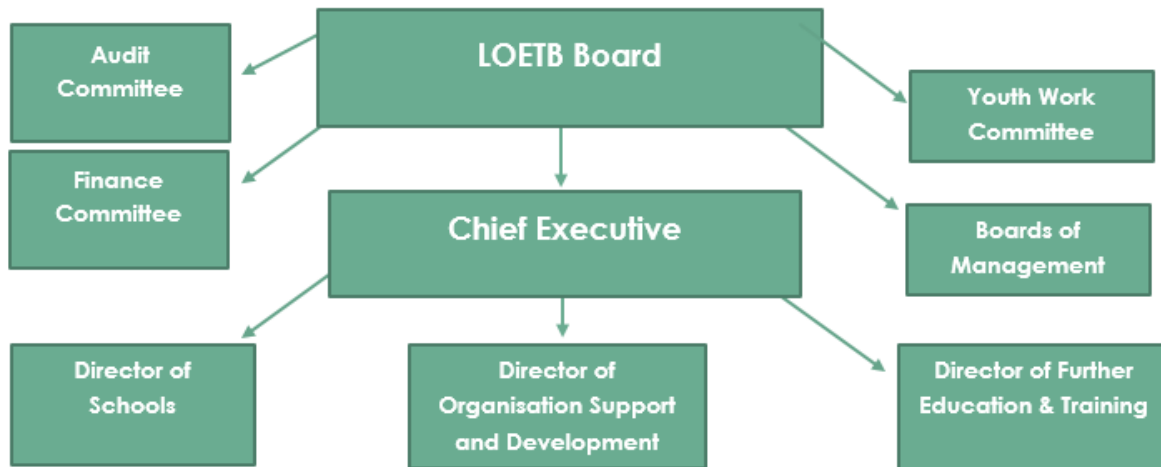


Diagram 4: LOETB Governance structure

4.2.2 Current FET Governance

The diagram below illustrates the current governance structure for FET Services in LOETB. It is important to note that whilst the diagram outlines how governance functions at present in the FET service, some of the sub-groups have yet to be formalised (Terms of Reference, roles and responsibilities, etc).

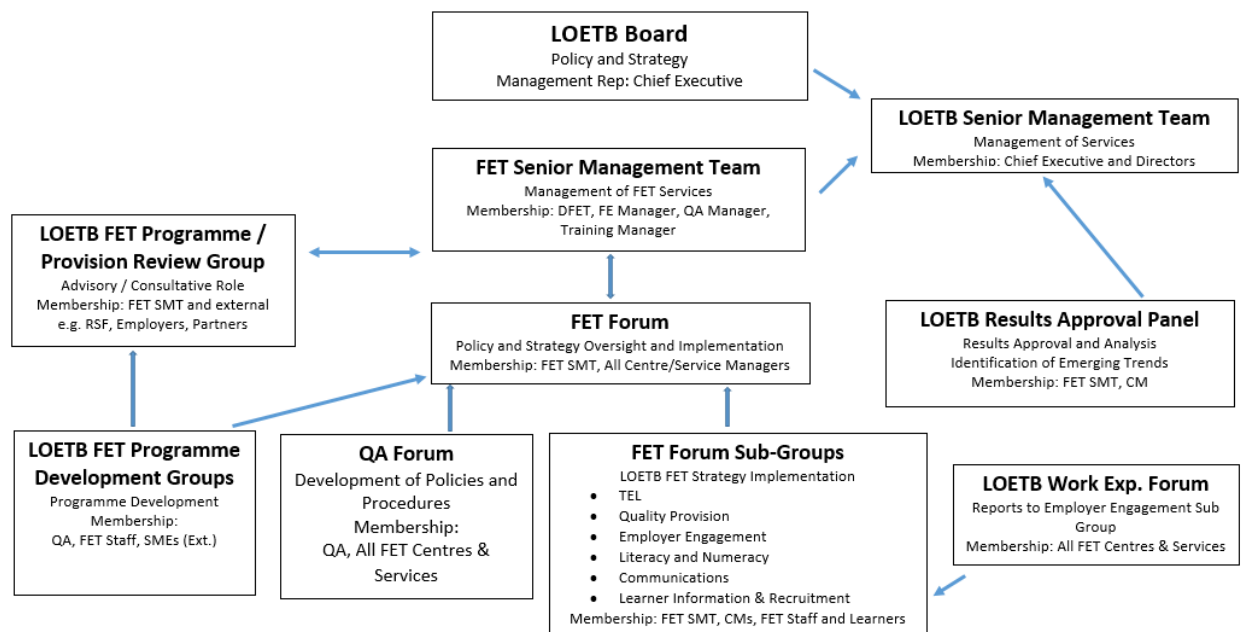


Diagram 5: Current LOETB FET Governance structure

4.2.2.1 Further Education and Training (FET) Senior Management Team

The FET Senior Management Team is made up of the Director of FET and three managers with distinct responsibilities in relation to the FET Service – the Further Education Manager, the Training Manager and the Quality Assurance Manager. The three managers report directly to the Director of FET. The SMT meets weekly to discuss operational and strategic issues.

The diagram below outlines the current line management / reporting structure in LOETB FET Services.

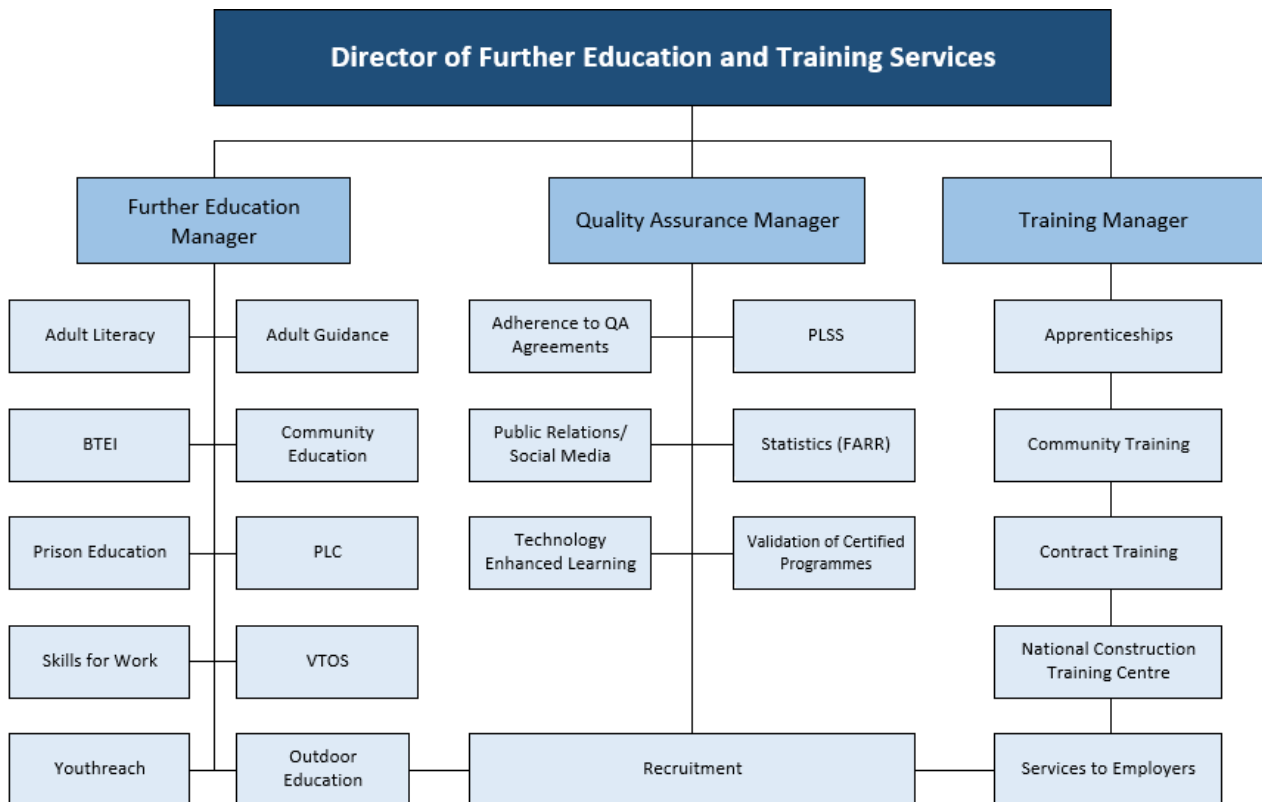


Diagram 6: LOETB FET Line management / reporting structure

4.2.2.2 FET Forum

LOETB established a FET Forum to provide a platform for the sharing of information and networking amongst FET management. The membership of the Forum consists of:

- Chief Executive
- Director of FET
- QA Manager, FE Manager and Training Manager
- All FET Centre/Service Managers, Coordinators and Officers

Other FET Staff are also co-opted onto the Forum as and when deemed necessary. The Forum meets four times a year and has agreed Terms of Reference as follows:

- Manage and oversee the development and maintenance of a consistent, integrated FET Service that meets the needs of the local region and FET learners.

- Develop and implement a FET Strategy that is consistent with local and national policy and ensure that this strategy is measured, reviewed and amended as appropriate.
- Act as an advisory group for QA policies and procedures proposed by LOETB's QA Forum.
- Provide a platform for the sharing of resources and knowledge and the development of innovative projects across the FET Service
- Act as an advisory group for all programmes proposed by LOETB's Programme Development Groups.

As a result of the consultative process carried out by the SMT during the development of LOETBs Strategy Statement, the FET Forum agreed to establish sub-groups. These groups are, at present, chaired by a member of the FET SMT and focus on the implementation of the agreed FET strategy actions. The sub-group actions and progress to date are an agreed agenda item for all future FET Forum meetings.

4.2.2.3 FET Forum Sub-Groups:

Literacy and Numeracy

The purpose of the group is to facilitate and support the development of an integrated Literacy and Numeracy strategy across FET Services. By consulting with colleagues within the organisation on the development work and sharing feedback received with the FET Forum, the group aims to raise awareness of, and support, the integrated literacy model within LOETB

Communications

The purpose of the group is to explore methods of improving communication systems within the organisation to ensure that all staff members are aware of the services and supports that are provided by LOETB. The organisation has changed considerably in the last four years so the group will focus on raising awareness of FET provision and the roles of all staff in the FET Service, in particular the new roles that have been established since the establishment of the Training Service team and the QA Department. The group will also focus on the communication of information to learners before, during and after the provision of a FET programme.

Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL)

The purpose of the group is to ensure that the national TEL Strategy is implemented locally using the SOLAS Baseline & Action Plan as its starting point in reviewing capacity under four key headings within the strategy: Infrastructure including ICT, Pedagogy and ongoing CPD, Content creation, access and sharing, and Organisational structures and practice. The group has adopted a twin pronged approach in planning actions that address structural deficits but simultaneously implementing actions that address the immediate TEL-related training needs of LOETB staff, with a particular emphasis on those that enhance the blended and IT-based learning opportunities for all learners.

Quality Provision

The purpose of this group is to ensure that quality is the main focus of all aspects of FET provision. The group will focus on improving quality in specific policy areas over the coming years, and in particular will focus on the provision of a consistent service across all programmes. The group will also focus on ensuring that all staff members are aware of their responsibilities in relation to quality

assurance. Particular emphasis will be put on communicating with staff members to ensure that they recognise the importance of providing a quality service.

Employer Engagement

The purpose of the group is to enhance the quality of service to employers in Laois and Offaly who currently engage with LOETB (work experience, work placement, employee development, traineeship, apprenticeship) – ensuring a streamlining of that service through better internal sharing of information on levels of engagement with individual employers, developing awareness-raising strategies and information materials for employers, providing training for LOETB staff in conducting, interpreting and responding to Training Needs Analysis and in Occupational Skills Profiling and developing key actions that enable, facilitate and support employer participation in programme development particularly in Traineeship

Learner Information / Recruitment

The main priority of this group is to establish a standard admissions process for relevant programmes across the FET service. Other actions identified include conducting an audit of all information that is provided to learners in various formats, to ensure accuracy and consistency. The group will also focus on establishing transparent progression pathways for learners from programme to programme.

4.2.2.4 QA Forum

The purpose of the forum is to review, revise and compile QA policies and procedures relating to the delivery of QQI programmes in compliance with the QA agreement. Members have an opportunity to share information, raise issues arising in their centre, and to obtain advice from members from other centres. Members receive updates from the QA Department, which is then passed on to centre management and staff. Members ensure QQI/QA is a standing item on staff meeting agendas and that staff members receive accurate and up-to-date information at those staff meetings. Where required, members are expected to collect any information required from centres/services to feed back to FET Forum. Members use Forum meetings as an opportunity to share information, resources and ideas.

4.2.2.5 Results Approval Panel

The purpose of the Results Approval process is to confirm that the assessment of learner evidence and authentication of assessment results (including Internal Verification and External Authentication) has been carried out in line with the Quality Assurance agreements of LOETB. It confirms fairness and consistency in the assessment process and ensures the validity of the results produced.

The process must include consideration of the Internal Verification and External Authentication reports. The Results Approval Panel has a responsibility to recommend/ take corrective action where appropriate.

Following completion of the Internal Verification and External Authentication process, a Results Approval Panel will be convened made up of the following, as appropriate:

- Chief Executive
- Director of FET Services

- Further Education Manager / Training Manager / Quality Assurance Manager
- Adult Literacy Organiser / Centre Manager / Community Education Facilitator / Principal / Deputy Principal
- External Authenticator
- Internal Verifier

A minimum of three of the above must be in attendance in order for the functions of the Results Approval Panel to be carried out effectively.

4.2.2.6 FET Programme Provision / Review Group

The purpose of this group is to review current provision and to consider proposals for new programmes. New proposals for new programmes or adjustment to current programmes will be presented for consideration. Factors such as duplication, progression pathways and employment progression prospects will be considered before the group make a recommendation to the FET Forum / FET SMT. This is a new initiative by LOETB which will be formalised in early 2018.

4.2.2.7 FET Programme Development Groups

These groups are convened on an ad-hoc basis when a new programme is proposed. The group tends to be made up of the centre/service manager, relevant teaching staff with subject matter expertise, a member of the QA Department and other subject matter experts as required. Examples of such groups include groups that worked on the development of a construction related traineeship and a hospitality traineeship.

4.2.2.8 Work Experience Forum

The purpose of this forum is to ensure a consistent approach to the delivery of Work Experience / Work Practice modules across the service. The group consists of all teaching staff involved in the delivery of the module. The group meets three to four times a year to agree a consistent approach to delivery and organisation of placements. A Pack was compiled for all employers engaging in the work placement element of the programme in order to ensure a consistent message regarding the parameters of work placements is given to all employers.

4.2.3 Centre-level Roles and Governance Structures in FET

All centres and services are supported in managing the quality of education and training by the QA Department.

Centre / service managers of the following programmes/services report directly to the Further Education Manager:

- Adult Literacy
- Back to Education Initiative
- Community Education
- Post Leaving Certificate Provision
- Prison Education
- Refugee Resettlement
- Skills for Work
- Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme
- Youthreach
- Outdoor Education

In most former VEC centres, a named person will have responsibility for managing assessment information (providing estimates for certification to QA Office, entering learners into QBS, preparing for IV, EA etc.) and monitoring. This person may be a deputy principal, examinations coordinator, QQI Coordinator, etc., depending on organisational demands and staffing structures.

The QA Department makes the necessary arrangements regarding Internal Verification/External Authentication (IV/EA) processes, and convenes Results Approval Panel (RAP) meetings which review the results of the IV/EA processes, and address any quality assurance issues which may have arisen in the course of the assessment process. The QA Department will liaise with the assigned person in each centre/service in order to ensure the smooth running of the certification process. Following the RAP meeting, findings are collated by the QA Department and shared with centres, in an anonymised form in briefings for all teaching staff. It is the responsibility of the centre manager/coordinator to ensure that each teacher/tutor receives their own individual feedback from IV/EA processes and that identified corrective action is taken where relevant.

The Centre Manager of the National Construction Training Centre, and Training Officers with responsibility for monitoring of the following Training programmes, report directly to the Training Manager:

- Community Training (Community Training Centre, Special Training Providers and Local Training Initiatives)
- Contracted Training (Specific Skills Training, Bridging/Foundation, and Traineeships)
- Apprenticeships
- Services to Employers

The former SOLAS Training Services' documentation, which was developed for the TQAS, is still in operation in LOETB. All EA Reports are sent to the QA Manager, and the QA Officer convenes RAP meetings for Contract Training and Local Training Initiative programmes. The QA Department reviews and collates findings from the EA and RAP reports (areas of strength, areas for improvement, issues arising etc.). As part of LOETB's monitoring role, the QA Office conducts certification audits for each programme prior to requesting certification from QQI. The findings of the Certification Audits are documented in the report which gives the provider a rating from "Very Effective" to "Ineffective" and presents any identified corrective actions that the provider must put in place for the next programme.

4.3 Planning of FET Delivery: ETB & Centre-Level

LOETB has developed its Statement of Strategy, and a summary of the strategic goals and priorities is outlined in Diagram 7 below. It is evident from these that quality is central to all actions undertaken by the organisation.

Strategic Goals	1 Excellent Education and Training	2 Excellent Experience for Learners	3 Organisation Transformation	4 Staff Development
Strategic Priorities	1.1 Excellent teaching, learning, and assessment for all.	2.1 Provide positive learning experiences and environments	3.1 Provide a culture of innovation and improvement.	4.1 Recruit and retain a stable, highly qualified and motivated work force
	1.2 Quality-assured provision with high levels of achievement and accreditation by students.	2.2 Commitment to technology-enhanced learning to support independent and collaborative learning.	3.2 Promote effective governance to ensure accountability.	4.2 Staff support, continuing personal, professional and career development
	1.3 Evidence-based planning, co-ordination and review.	2.3 Enhance feedback opportunities to and from learners and parents.	3.3 Enhancing the LOETB brand	4.3 Capacity building for active leadership
	1.4 Reflective practice to support programme improvement	2.4 Equality and active social inclusion.	3.4 Strategic networking and partnerships with key stakeholders.	4.4 Collaboration and Sharing of Knowledge

Diagram 7: LOETB Strategic Goals and Priorities

As outlined above, the planning of programmes within FET aims for “evidence-based planning, co-ordination and review”, in order to achieve “relevant, responsive, integrated and innovative programmes and initiatives”.

In order to achieve this, the annual FET planning process will be reflective of the following:

- National strategies and policies relevant to the FET sector (refer to Appendix 5)
- The SOLAS annual Overarching Planning and Funding Parameter and Requirements for FET Provision.
- LOETB Strategic Priorities

Annual planning at ETB-level starts by gathering key labour market intelligence. For example, the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) of SOLAS is invited annually to present the FET SMT on labour market key statistics and future skills needs in the midlands region. SLMRU data is combined with labour market intelligence gathered through the Regional Skills Forum, Department of Social Protection, Local Partnership Committees, Local Enterprise Offices etc., to inform the focus and schedule of courses planned for the following year.

Thereafter, the FET SMT, and the FET Forum, review provision from the previous year and identify innovations/new initiatives to address key priority areas for the following year (achieving these priorities is now the responsibility of the relevant FET Forum sub-groups).

At centre level, planning for delivery is informed by the decisions made by the centre managers, FET SMT as well as by learner feedback, staff evaluations, local employment or progression routes, and a review of course effectiveness. The QA Department circulates an online learner survey annually to measure overall learner satisfaction levels. Qualitative and quantitative data is collated with respect to achievements of the previous year, and planned provision for the coming year; all research is collated and a final plan is formulated which is submitted to SOLAS via the Funding Allocation Request (FAR) templates.

The priorities set out by SOLAS as well as priorities identified through LOETB's consultation process is integrated into the LOETB Service Plan for the relevant year.

4.4 Arrangements for Programme/Course Development & Approval

LOETB delivers QQI programmes developed to lead to major awards under the Common Awards System (CAS), which follow the model common in ETBs where a programme leading to a major award has a wide range of modules (in line with the award structure, as outlined in the award specification). Validation is sought from QQI for a programme on behalf of the entire ETB, with named centres identified for delivery. That programme may then be used in a range of courses, each with its own unique specialism and module selection, across a range of centres within the ETB, and even in different courses within the same centre. Approval is sought from the FET Director/FET SMT for delivery of a course in a centre. The QA Department is consulted prior to approval, in order to ensure that the centre meets Specific Validation Requirements, and has the required resources available to them in order to successfully deliver the programme.

4.4.1 Development of new Programmes and Modules

LOETB's former VEC centres mainly deliver QQI-certified programmes. Programmes from Levels 1 to 3 were developed and validated under a Programme Approval Agreement with Co. Westmeath VEC prior to VEC amalgamations. Programmes at Levels 4 to 6 were developed and validated under the ETBI Shared Programme Development Process. The Shared Programme Development Process was a huge task which was shared by all of the VECs at the time, and supported by staff members from the Further Education Support Service, and led to a very comprehensive range of awards. In general, the programmes developed under those processes have largely met the programme needs of the centres. However, from time to time, the need for a new programme has been identified, either at FET Management level, or at centre level, in response to a locally-identified need. In this situation, a centre manager or staff member will request permission and support to develop a programme or module from a QQI award specification. Consideration is given as to whether the development is in line with identified organisational goals. Once it has been agreed that there is a need for development and that the required resources are in place, development may proceed, with appropriate training for the writers and evaluators (provided by the Further Education Support Service) involved in the development process. The QA Manager coordinates all stages of the development process, and after writing and screening is complete, the programme/ module is evaluated against a range of criteria. Once development of the programme is complete, including writing, screening and evaluation, it is sent to the FET SMT, where a decision is made as to whether or not to approve it for application for validation.

4.4.2 Approval for Inclusion as Named Centre in Programme Validation

When validation applications were made to QQI following the introduction of the Common Awards System, all centres were listed as named centres for each programme at Levels 1-3. At Levels 4-6, where programmes had specific validation requirements, only the centres that could meet those requirements were included as named centres. Despite the fact that centres are listed as named centres, they must still request approval to provide a programme that hasn't previously been run in their centre. At that point, the suitability of the centre to provide the programme is assessed – including reference to available physical resources, suitably qualified staff, etc. They will be asked to provide evidence that, where they are delivering any modules with special validation requirements and/or regulatory and professional requirements, these are fully met, or will be fully met, before commencement of the programme.

4.4.3 Approval for Course Delivery for Centres

Centre managers wishing to offer a certified course for the first time must request permission from the FET Director and present a business case in order to ensure that this is in line with LOETB's overall strategic plan for programme delivery and identified local needs. Such requests are also screened to ensure that the centre is included as an approved centre on the QBS.

4.5 Governance of Strategy, Policy, and Risk

4.5.1 Strategy

A Strategy Statement for the years 2018-2022 has been developed by LOETB. This was developed with the support of the Senior Management Team, after a consultative process with all sectors within LOETB, and key external stakeholders, and was approved by the Board in December 2017. The Strategy sets out four Strategic Goals (Excellent education and training programmes, Excellent experience for learners, Organisation Transformation, and Staff Development with a range of strategic priorities to further the achievement of those goals. This strategy document has goals for all sectors of the ETB, including FET, and will inform future decision-making processes. It will further facilitate the prioritisation of target areas for development, particularly with respect to quality assurance, and the policies and procedures needed to ensure appropriate oversight of all FET programmes. As the new FET governance structures are developed, it will be essential to align them to the strategic plan and identify where responsibility lies for the prioritisation of organisational objectives at the different levels.

4.5.2 SOLAS/ETB Strategic Performance Expectation Initiative

From 2015-2017, LOETB were selected as one of three ETBs to engage in a SOLAS/ ETB Strategic Pilot Initiative. The three ETBs were selected to reflect the diversity of both provision and location of FET providers and to ensure appropriate support and resources from SOLAS to the pilot. The pilot consisted of a series of 'strategic conversations' with each of the three ETBs with the aim of incorporating the learning from the pilot into the 2017/2018 annual service planning exercise. A supporting 'strategic toolkit' was developed by SOLAS to facilitate the process.

Agreed inputs, outputs, and outcome targets were set out in a Strategic Expectations agreement, which was signed by the CE of LOETB and the SOLAS Executive Director. A quarterly progress report template was developed and initiated by SOLAS to monitor progress in implementing commitments set out in the Agreement.

The input from SOLAS and the SLMRU during the pilot supported the FET SMT to:

- Think more strategically about the needs of the Laois-Offaly region and future FET provision
- Identify more relevant in-demand FET programmes and services, e.g. STEM, Hospitality etc.
- Restructure existing provision to improve the quality and accessibility of the programmes e.g. restructuring of PLC provision
- Develop new services e.g. establish the Quality Assurance Department, Services to Employers etc.
- Place greater emphasis on balancing learner needs and the needs of the local and regional economy
- Become more aware of importance of developing transparent pathways for learners regarding Access, Transfer and Progression through the FET continuum

4.5.3 Policy

4.5.3.1 Policy Development

Development and implementation of a number of new QA policies within the FET Service has been well received by staff over the last 18 months, as staff sought clarity on a number of issues. The establishment of a Quality Assurance Department in April 2016 has aided this process significantly. Some of these policies were in response to identified need at local level, while other policies were developed based on needs identified by the QA Department and the FET SMT.

Examples of policies/processes developed for implementation across the FE provision include:

- Assignment Extension Request Policy
- Security of Assessment Materials Policy
- Exam Notification and Supervision Process
- Assessment Malpractice Policy

However, the development of policies has in some ways been delayed or slowed by the forthcoming changes that will be brought about by the new core and sectoral QA guidelines. For example, LOETB has been involved in the ETBI/QQI Validation Working Group, while at local level, new policies and procedures in relation to Assessment Deadlines and Exemptions have been developed across all services. Furthermore, an appeals policy has been developed for the Further Education Service. A common feature of all policy development in LOETB is the routine use of internal consultation as part of the development process.

4.5.3.2 Policy and Procedure Documentation

LOETB continues to operate under two different legacy Quality Assurance agreements: the revised QA Agreement which was developed on amalgamation of Laois and Offaly VECs, and the TQAS agreement that is in operation for the former SOLAS Training services. Both systems have documented QA policies and procedures, however, the detail with which these were documented varies, with the TQAS policies and procedures and related documentation being very detailed. Equally, there are differences in the extent to which centres were given freedom to develop and document their own procedures, with the former SOLAS training services having a much more uniform approach to QA policies and procedures and their documentation than the former VECs.

4.5.3.3 Policy and Procedure Review

There is currently no formalised mechanism for reviewing QA policies on a systematic basis; where policies are reviewed, it tends to occur on an ad hoc basis, in response to a particular need, and any changes arising are brought by the QA Department to the FET SMT for approval. Clearly, as LOETB starts to move towards one common set of QA policies and procedures, it will be necessary to review the existing sets of procedures to identify the extent to which they are still fit for purpose and have regard to the Core and Sector-Specific QA Guidelines. Once those new, common policies and procedures are in place, it will be important to build in a formal review schedule to ensure that they remain fit for purpose.

4.5.4 Risk

An organisational Risk Register is in place, and is reviewed twice annually depending on the categorisation of the identified risks. An operational FET Risk Register has been developed for FET through a consultative process with managers. The register was reviewed by the Senior Management Team, and was presented to the Audit Committee of the LOETB Board. Currently, risk identified at centre level can be raised at the FET Forum, and if necessary, brought for consideration to the FET SMT meeting, which takes place weekly.

From an academic perspective, risk to the integrity of the assessment process is managed by the checks of the IV, EA and RAP processes, and will be managed even more efficiently by the malpractice policy which is currently being developed by the Assessment Procedures Working Group. In relation to the Training Services, risk is further managed by the existence of common AISs, which are securely maintained on the Centralised Assessment Management System (CAMS) and managed by the QA Department.

4.6 Evaluation of Governance, Planning and Management of LOETB FET Quality Assurance

4.6.1 Governance:

The purpose of governance structures is to ensure that policies and procedures are implemented as intended, and to identify themes and future areas for policy development. At the local level, governance and oversight structures with respect to the quality assurance of FET programmes have been in operation since the original QA agreements were entered into, with what was then FETAC. As such, those systems and structures are working well in terms of ensuring the implementation of the policies agreed upon at the time (especially regarding B.6, Fair and Consistent Assessment of Learners).

However, with the publication of the Core and Sectoral QA Guidelines, it has become apparent that more work needs to be done to develop a multi-layered FET governance system—one which links centre-level systems more clearly with ETB-level governance structures, takes account of the overall corporate responsibility of the Chief Executive, and also ensures that policy development is aligned to the LOETB strategy.

Prior to the amalgamations, the Adult Education Officers in both VECs were solely responsible for the governance and quality assurance of programme development. Whilst the FET SMT has evolved to take on a number of other quality assurance oversight roles, such as the approval of policy development, it is clear that the role of this group does not currently address all the requirements of the new Core and Sectoral QA Guidelines.

An area of improvement could therefore be the formalisation of FET governance structures, with the aim of developing an over-arching QA governance structure, aligned to the LOETB Strategy, with clear lines of responsibility at all levels of the ETB, and across FET services.

A series of thematic sub-groups of the FET Forum have recently been formed which have responsibility for areas such as Quality Provision, Learner Information, Communications, Technology Enhanced Learning. Agreement and formalisation of the membership and Terms of Reference for each of these groups is necessary in order to provide clarity for the service. This would facilitate the separation of responsibilities between the development and approval of materials, policies etc. Local centres could provide information to the sub-groups, thus ensuring a chain of responsibility for the governance and management of quality assurance from the Chief Executive to centre level. The development of an over-arching QA governance structure would require detailed terms of reference for all groups and sub-groups, as well as a clear documentation of where decisions are made, and where they are approved.

The governance with respect to QQI assessment (IV/EA/RAP processes) is well-established, and is discussed and evaluated in greater depth in Section 5.4.7 below. Currently, across all the centres, oversight for non-QQI awards is managed solely at centre-level; there may not be the same awareness that quality assurance responsibilities at ETB-level should be comprehensive, and include all certified and non-certified courses, and not just those leading to QQI certification. As new governance structures are developed, it will be crucial, for the sake of comprehensiveness, to ensure that they allow for the same oversight of non-QQI certification at centre and ETB-level, as there is of QQI certification.

4.6.2 Planning of FET Delivery

LOETB policies and procedures around the development of new programmes from award specifications are reasonably well-developed as they were inherited from the Shared Programme Development Process. These procedures will need to be reviewed with respect to the new Validation Policy & Criteria. For example, the new policy calls for self-evaluation rather than independent evaluation. Furthermore, until recently, external consultation primarily occurred at the award development rather than programme development stage. Under the new Validation Policy & Criteria, external consultation with industry experts will need to be included in the programme development process. It might be helpful to explore at national level how this may be done. LOETB has been involved in piloting the development of new programme templates in line with the new validation policy, and continued engagement with such working groups will be helpful in ensuring that the policies and procedures supporting programme development are in line with Core & Sectoral QA Guidelines, as well as the new Validation Policy.

Currently, the QA Department only considers the development of programmes leading to QQI awards. For the sake of a comprehensive approach to governance and QA policies and procedures, consideration should be given to the QA Department having a formal role in approving new programme development leading to awards of other awarding bodies.

Procedures around programme/course approval need to be more fully documented to ensure that they are as transparent as possible, and that all centres are fully aware of the procedures. LOETB needs to review how this will be governed. A review of the procedures and documentation for requesting course approval would be helpful to ensure that any centres starting to run a course have the required staff and resources in place, and are compliant with relevant regulatory and professional requirements.

4.6.3 Risk

The processes to manage risk within an academic context, such as IV/EA/RAP, are working very well across LOETB's FET service, and while all services currently have their own plagiarism policies, the development of a common malpractice policy will further serve to maintain the integrity of the assessment processes. Furthermore, there is a need for learners to be properly informed, at induction stage, about the definition of plagiarism, and the consequences of same.

The FET Service has developed a Risk Register which identifies the risks under a number of categories which the FET Service must be aware of and endeavor to reduce. The FET Risk Register must be reviewed on an ongoing basis. All FET Centre/service managers participated in the development of the Register and meet quarterly to review same.

4.6.4 Strategy

Development of the LOETB Statement of Strategy, including extensive consultations with all sectors and services within the ETB, has been completed, and has been approved by the board. The Core Guidelines say that the QA system should focus on how those strategic objectives are being met. Therefore, as governance structures are being developed, it should be clarified and documented where responsibility for that review of strategy lies: whether with the SMT, FET SMT, FET Forum, QA Forum or other sub-group. Governance structures should be aligned to, and support the achievement of, the strategic plan.

4.6.5 Policy

The routine use of consultation, both internal and, where appropriate, external, is a very useful aspect of current policy development within LOETB, and one which could be further formalised. As new governance structures are put into place, consideration should be given to identifying a group with responsibility for developing policy, and a separate group which approves policy after it has been developed. Governance arrangements around the review and amendment of policies and procedures is needed, as major and minor changes could have different approval routes. As policies and procedures are developed and/or reviewed, this must be documented robustly (the QA Department commenced using a document control procedure in September 2017), and the changes must be communicated to all concerned. Currently policies, procedures and related documentation is available on the password-protected Staff Resources section of the LOETB website. The QA Department has recently added a learner section to the website, which is publicly available, where policies and relevant documentation is available.

4.9 Areas for Improvement: Governance, Planning and Management of LOETB FET QA

4.9.1 Governance

- Formalise governance structure for LOETB FET Service
- Finalise Terms of Reference (TOR) for FET Senior Management Team (SMT)
- Finalise TOR and membership of FET Programme Provision Review Group
- Finalise TOR and membership of FET Programme Development Group
- Finalise TOR and membership of QA Forum
- Review TOR of the Results Approval Panel groups
- Map all non-QQI certification being delivered in FET centres
- Develop structures and procedures for ETB-level oversight of non-QQI certification

4.9.2 Planning of FET Delivery

- Introduce a process of consultation with FET Forum in new Programme Planning process
- Formalise Planning and Approval Process
- Establish formal Programme Review process for existing programmes which takes into account learner satisfaction, retention, completion, progression

4.9.3 Governance of Strategy, Policy and Risk

- Review the Risk Register according to identified timelines, take necessary actions to reduce risk
- Introduce common Plagiarism policy; educate learners about plagiarism at induction stage
- Roll out anti-plagiarism software in centres on an incremental basis

5. Delivery of FET

5.1 Introduction

This section sets out the current arrangements in place for the delivery of FET programmes and the Quality Assurance structures and processes that underpin current activity.

5.2 QQI Programmes and Courses in LOETB

LOETB delivers QQI programmes designed to lead to major awards under the Common Awards System (CAS), as well as delivering a limited range of non-QQI awards. The QQI programmes have been developed under the IVEA/ETBI Shared Programme Development process, and follow the model that is common in ETBs where a programme leading to a major award has a wide range of modules (in line with the award structure, as outlined in the award specification). That programme may then be used in a range of courses, each with its own unique specialism and module selection, across a range of centres within the ETB, and even in different courses within the same centre.

The latest versions of all programme and module descriptors for QQI awards validated for LOETB's further education provision, are stored securely on a password-protected section of the LOETB website, which is maintained by the QA Department, and is available to all teachers delivering courses. The site also has resources to support assessment such as guidelines around policies and procedures, documentation, checklists, deadlines and resource lists, that support teaching staff in their roles. Teaching staff on Training Service provision do not have access to this section of the website, as the information only relates to programmes developed under the IVEA/ETBI Shared Development process and validated for the former VEC Further Education Centres. Limiting access reduces the risk of staff delivering the incorrect versions of the programmes. There is potential for the website to be further developed to provide additional resources to staff such as FAQs, information disseminated at briefings, FESS resources, etc.

5.3 Course Delivery & Continuous Professional Development & Assessment

5.3.1 Course Delivery

All courses provided by LOETB are delivered by fully qualified staff, and all teaching staff that teach on certified programmes are Teaching Council registered. Trainers on Training Services programmes have the 'Train the Trainer' qualification, at a minimum, as well as subject-specific qualifications or experience. All staff are employed in line with LOETB HR protocols. An applicant for a teaching position will not be shortlisted for the post unless they have evidence of suitable Teaching Council registration. Where centres propose a new programme to be delivered by existing staff, they must always confirm that the person is suitably qualified for that subject area.

Centre Managers provide centre-specific induction for new teachers on an ongoing basis. The QA Department provide a number of briefing sessions for new staff each year, and where a staff member is not available or misses a briefing, a member of the QA Department will meet that staff member on a one-to-one basis to explain their QA responsibilities as a teacher. The QA Department also provides refresher training for staff on request. The feedback from the briefings provided by QA department has been very positive to date but there is a need for more topic-specific briefings/in-service, for example for particular modules (such as Work

Experience/Communications) or in the area of integration of assessment. This is an area which would merit further consideration in the future. The QA Department also holds briefing sessions for second providers that are delivering programmes for the Training Service. The purpose of the briefing session is to explain their responsibilities under TQAS and to disseminate documentation and explain the deadlines for same.

5.3.2 Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

LOETB is committed to growing as a learning organisation, and ensuring that all staff have access to continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities. CPD includes enabling staff to enhance their skills, update competencies, explore modern teaching methods and collaborate with colleagues.

Responsibility for identifying professional development needs rests at centre level, either by the staff member or the staff member in consultation with their manager. The training or qualification needed may be sourced externally (e.g. Postgraduate Diploma or Masters' Degree) or internally (where the LOETB QA Manager/Officer may deliver in-service for the centre, or for individual teachers). Furthermore, the Further Education Support Services (FESS) provide a range of CPD training opportunities which are available to all teachers/tutors and other staff, while eCollege provides online courses available to all staff. These opportunities are promoted by the FET SMT. Currently, participation in professional development opportunities, either formal or informal is not systematically recorded, so it is not possible to establish the extent to which these opportunities are availed of. In addition to traditional CPD training, teachers/trainers are engaged in a range of communities of practice and national fora such as NNITT (National Network of IT Teachers), and FEN (Further Education Network), a community of practice for teachers engaged in further education.

At the corporate level, LOETB is actively engaging with ETBI and SOLAS to develop and deliver on the seven key priority areas identified in the National FET Professional Development Strategy 2017-2019. These key priority areas are: Quality Assurance; Working with and Supporting FET Learners; Vocational Upskilling and Reskilling; Employer Engagement; Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL); Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and Leadership and Management Development.

5.4 Assessment

5.4.1 Assessment Philosophy

LOETB has not currently articulated and published a common philosophy of assessment. As the new ETBI assessment procedures and guidelines are developed, such a philosophy could be developed to inform the elaboration of LOETB assessment procedures.

5.4.2 Assessment to Support Standards Based on Learning Outcomes

In both VEC-developed module descriptors and the AIs used in the training service, assessments are mapped to the individual learning outcomes as published in the QQI component specifications. These learning outcomes are reflected in the assessment guidelines and marking sheets, so that learners are marked on their achievement of the learning outcomes. Should it be discovered that an assessment does not properly address the learning outcomes, LOETB has procedures to correct this as part of a module review. Assessments leading to non-QQI awards are for the most part

developed by the awarding body. There is currently no ETB-level oversight of non-QQI assessments delivered in centres, other than invigilation of assessment events.

5.4.3 Assessment to Support Effective Teaching and Learning

Formative and summative feedback, which occurs during and after assessment tasks, are crucial elements of effective teaching and learning within LOETB. The different QA agreements in operation have different procedures for ensuring it occurs, and for documenting it, but the IV process monitors that it takes place. Currently there is no systematic procedure across all centres for feedback to be given on summative assessments that take place at the end of the course, such as the final exam.

The IV/EA/RAP processes provide an opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of teaching through a review of the assessment submitted for certification, grades achieved, and whether they were in line with the national standard etc. Identification of any issues arising, allows for CPD to be put into place to ensure effective teaching and learning in the future.

5.4.4 QQI Assessment Processes

In the former VEC centres, teachers are required to prepare assessment plans/schedules to ensure that they deliver the programme, and that the learners have the opportunity to complete all the required assessments in the time allocated for the delivery of the course. The assessment plans/schedules are included in an accompanying Assessor Pack which is monitored as part of the Internal Verification process. There is a common LOETB template for assessment plans/schedules.

The QA Department have devised a common Assessment Checklist which is used by all former VEC centres. The purpose of the checklist is to ensure that all teaching staff submit the documentation that is required for IV, EA and RAP processes with the learner assessment material. The checklist requires the teachers/tutors to present the information in a prescribed format to ensure consistency and to reduce the amount of time wasted in seeking this information at various stages of the process. All centres are provided with a calendar of dates for the different certification periods at the start of each academic year, so that assessment plans can be compiled in accordance with deadlines.

Learners are provided with briefs appropriate to the NFQ level, for all assessments they are asked to undertake. These include details of the assessment task at hand, criteria, marking schemes and deadlines, where appropriate. Currently, in centres run by the former VECs, teachers are expected to devise their own briefs for assessment. Monitoring of those briefs currently varies across centres. In some centres, briefs are reviewed by the course coordinators or the centre QQI coordinator. In other centres, a department or programme team may either devise briefs communally, or they may review briefs that have been developed individually. In these centres, a centralised store of briefs is maintained: where they may be available as samples, and teachers are free to use them, or develop their own. Where it occurs, the sharing, or common development of briefs facilitates the maintenance of standards across the centre. It is the learner's responsibility to complete assessments and demonstrate their achievement of learning. Assessments delivered on training programmes use the standardised Assessment Instrument Specifications (AISs) for each module, which include briefs, marking schemes and other documentation for all assessment instruments, which are issued by the QA Department.

5.4.5 Assessment Procedures

An ETBI Assessment Procedures Working Group is currently developing a set of common procedures. Procedures have so far been developed for Assessment Deadlines, Reasonable Accommodations, Compassionate Consideration, Assessment Malpractice, Assessment Security and Storage, and Exam Regulations. Once these are agreed upon and signed off by ETBI, they will be made available to ETBs. Whether these will be adopted 'as is' for LOETB, or become a framework document, is yet to be determined. There has, as yet, been no learner input into the development and review of assessment procedures, although learner representative groups, such as AHEAD, have given feedback to aspects of the assessment procedures that were of relevance to them.

5.4.6 Integrity of Assessment Processes

The integrity of assessment materials is ensured in different ways in different centres, depending on their context and infrastructure: second providers on training programmes must have lockable, secure storage for AISs and other assessments. Some centres store shared assessments on a common drive or other password-protected virtual platform which learners cannot access. The integrity of assessment processes is monitored through the IV/EA/RAP processes across all services, and any issues that are identified which could compromise the integrity of the assessment are immediately reported to the QA Department.

All learners sign statements of authenticity when they submit an assessment. Instances of plagiarism are currently addressed differently across centres in LOETB, but a set of malpractice procedures are being developed by the ETBI Assessment Procedures Working Group, which will inform a common set of LOETB malpractice procedures.

5.4.7 Internal Verification/External Authentication and Results Approval Panel

5.4.7.1 Internal Verification

Internal verification (IV) procedures check that assessments have been undertaken in a quality assured fashion: the correct assessment instruments have been used, learner details and results correctly entered into the QBS, etc. and for a sample of learners, marks are checked. Prior to the June 2017 certification period, centres took individual responsibility for IV.

In 2017, it was decided by the FET SMT to implement this new IV process in order to achieve consistency across the service. IV is currently conducted by a panel of Internal Verifiers who have undergone training and familiarisation with the IV process. The same guidelines, checklists and report templates are used in every centre. The final IV report is made available to the External Authenticator. The advantages of the new approach to IV include:

- In centres where IV was previously conducted by teaching staff, teachers/tutors felt uncomfortable reporting issues with their colleagues' work. The provision of independent IV panels removed any potential tension between colleagues
- As the panel of internal verifiers was very small, this ensured that a very consistent standard was maintained in all centres. The panel regularly met to consult on various issues, in order to ensure that a consistent approach was taken.
- As the internal verification was scheduled on a specific date(s), this meant that adherence to deadlines was observed in all centres.

- The timely provision of IV findings to centres provided staff with ample opportunity to remedy any errors or omissions prior to the EA visit.

The former SOLAS training provision is internally verified by the second providers, using documentation developed as part of the TQAS, and internal validation is undertaken by the QA Staff when the Assessment Pack is submitted to the QA Office.

5.4.7.2 External Authentication

The External Authentication (EA) system is a core element of ensuring the quality and integrity of the assessment processes. It is the role of the External Authenticator to review the IV report to ensure that assessment has been undertaken in a quality assured manner, to review the learners' assessments to ensure that they have been assessed in a fair and consistent manner, and to authenticate that the grades given are in line with the national standards for that level.

LOETB operates a panel of External Authenticators, selected from the QQI panel and the list of recently FESS-trained EAs. EAs from this panel, or from the QQI list of EAs, are engaged for the Further Education Service. LOETB guidelines have been developed for centres preparing for the EA process, as well as for EAs, and these are sent to EAs when they agree dates for External Authentication. EAs are chosen for the training programmes from the established EA panel that was recruited and trained by SOLAS, for authenticating assessments undertaken as part of the AIS. For both the Further Education Services and the Training Services, it is the QA Manager or Officer that selects an appropriate EA for each centre/service/programme. This ensures a level of transparency across the service. Furthermore, on occasion, the same EA has visited a number of centres that offer similar provision in order to ensure a common standard.

EA reports are reviewed by the Results Approval Panel within the centre, and by the QA Department. Collated feedback from all EA reports is reviewed by the FET SMT, and anonymized. Collated feedback is shared with all teaching staff in order to share learning across all centres. EAs for training programmes send their EA report directly to the QA Manager. It is the responsibility of each centre manager to ensure that individual teaching staff members receive their own specific feedback from the IV and EA processes. From time to time, a member of the QA Department will meet with individual teaching staff members to discuss feedback in order to ensure that the required corrective action is taken.

Finding appropriate EAs is currently a significant challenge for LOETB, given the policy not to engage the same EA for more than three times in a row, particularly for the June certification round each year. A new model for External Authentication is currently being developed by ETBI, and when it is finalised, it will be introduced in LOETB. That will provide an opportunity to review the LOETB panel, prepare briefing sessions for all new EAs, and review EA documentation.

5.4.7.3 Results Approval Panel

The Results Approval Panel (RAP) provides an opportunity for the centre manager and FET SMT to review the results of a given assessment period, identify issues arising out of the assessments, and decide on recommendations for future actions to be taken. These IV/EA and RAP procedures facilitate the fair and consistent assessment of learners, and support academic decision-making which reflects the interests of learners and the maintenance of standards.

5.4.7.4 IV/EA/RAP Documentation

Following the amalgamation of Laois and Offaly VECs, a review of the IV, EA and RAP documentation was undertaken in 2013, and LOETB common templates were created. Revised IV/EA and RAP documentation is stored on the Staff Resources section of the LOETB website, which is accessible to all staff. Currently, training services, which are still operating under the TQAS, use their own templates, although the underlying processes are similar to those used in other centres.

5.4.7.5 Quality Assurance Issues Arising

In the event that an oversight in one of LOETB's quality assured processes occurs and is identified, it is immediately reported to the QA Department by the centre in which it occurred. Great emphasis is put on developing a culture of openness and honesty within LOETB; mistakes are not something to be hidden, but to be resolved and learned from. Therefore, in the event of a QA oversight arising, the centre and the QA staff work together to find a resolution to ensure that learners aren't unduly affected by a situation not of their making. Depending on the nature of the problem, QQI may be contacted for assistance. The issue is documented by the QA Officer, with details of the issue, the corrective actions taken, and recommendations are made to ensure it will not happen again. A copy of the documentation is held by the centre as well as the QA Officer. A high-level report on all such incidents is prepared for the FET SMT, and is used to identify future policy development or CPD needs. Anonymised versions of the incident may be shared, where appropriate, at the FET Forum, or at QA staff briefings, in order to share the learning across all centres. This process also ensures that there can be consistency in the manner in which similar issues are handled, should they arise in another centre.

5.4.8 Non-QQI Assessment Processes

Non-QQI assessments are undertaken in line with the quality assurance regulations of the certifying body. Currently, all assessment procedures being undertaken for non-QQI assessments are managed solely at centre-level. The QA Department support the relevant centres by providing exam invigilators.

5.4.9 Academic Appeals

Learners have the right to appeal their results for QQI awards, should they not agree with the assessment judgement that has been made. LOETB runs an appeals process for QQI certification twice a year, which is managed centrally by the QA Officer. Learners may have their assessment scripts reviewed by highly experienced appeals examiners who are independent of LOETB. In the event that their appeal is upheld, LOETB informs QQI of the amended grade. An appeals handbook is available to all centres, outlining the appeals process, and includes forms, sample letters etc.

Learners may appeal the results of non-QQI assessments through the relevant certifying body.

5.4.10 Learner Grievance Procedures

Where learners have complaints, they are expected, in the first instance, to address it with the person concerned. If still unsatisfied, they may take their concerns to the course coordinator, and thereafter may appeal to the management within the centre. Where a learner has appealed an academic issue to the manager within their centre, but is unsatisfied with the outcome of that process, they may wish to appeal at ETB-level. Where such an appeal is made, LOETB will convene an Appeals Panel, an ad-hoc panel consisting of at least two members of the FET SMT, and, where

appropriate, external experts. This panel, appointed by the FET Director, and supported by the QA Officer, will review all existing evidence, examine whether due processes have been followed to date, and will either uphold the original decision of the centre, or make alternative suggestions. The Appeals Panel is the final academic appeal body within LOETB, and should the learner still remain unsatisfied with the result, they will be instructed to raise their concerns with the Ombudsman. Where learners have grievances of a non-academic nature which are escalated to ETB-level, these are handled by the LOETB Corporate Services Department.

5.5 Programme/Course Review, Monitoring and Self-Evaluation

5.5.1 Course/Programme Review

Courses are reviewed at the end-of-course evaluation at centre level. Such reviews provide an opportunity to review assessment loads, assessment methods, and other aspects of course delivery, and, where necessary, amend these based on learner and staff feedback. These reviews also provide an opportunity for past module options to be considered and, if appropriate, new module options to be identified. The modular nature of the current ETB programme development model allows for modules to be changed from one iteration of the course to the next, so as to respond quickly to changing local employment needs or learner demographics.

If a required module is not on the programme descriptor, a request can currently be made to the QA Department to have it included to the programme under the 20% rule. The QA Department screens it, and if suitable, approves the request. LOETB does not operate programme boards or other mechanisms to review a programme at ETB level as, at the moment, the ETB model of programmes is more modular in focus. No routine programme reviews have been undertaken recently, in anticipation of the QQI award review and revalidation processes.

5.5.2 Module Review

Where a teaching staff member identifies that there are issues with a module developed by the former VECs, this is relayed to the QA Department. In the case of a minor issue (typo etc.), this can be corrected quickly. Where a major issue is identified which requires attention, a module review group is formed, with representatives of all centres delivering the module; the revised module is circulated for consultation, considered by the Programme/Provision Review Group and then approved by the FET SMT. Where minor issues are identified with an AIS, these are logged by the QA Department. A more formal review of AISs is currently being undertaken by ETBI.

A document control process is in place with respect to all programme/module updates. The Staff Resources section of the LOETB website always has the latest version of a given programme/module for the former VEC centres, and all centres are informed of any relevant changes.

5.5.3 Course Monitoring

In contracted training programmes, where a course is delivered by contracted trainers, very tight monitoring procedures are in place: contracted trainers are monitored once a month by the contracted training officer, and a traffic light system is used to flag underperforming contractors.

Monitoring of Community Training programmes (STP, LTI and CTC) courses takes place with mid-course and end of course evaluations, by the Community Training Officer.

Currently, further education courses are monitored at centre-level, but practices differ widely from centre to centre. It usually takes place as part of a mid-course and end-of-course evaluation. However, course coordinators have responsibility for managing a course on a daily basis; whilst this is not considered monitoring per se, it does allow issues to be identified quickly and to be acted upon, and further supports to be put into place, should these be necessary. The RAP meeting provides an opportunity for centre managers and FET SMT to monitor results and issues arising from that particular assessment period. RAP meetings are convened by the QA Department which facilitates the identification of long-term trends.

There is currently no common approach to monitoring, and it is not enforced at ETB level. The QA Department have compiled documents which identifies the responsibilities of teaching staff and of centre managers in relation to quality assurance. Currently, any information gathered as part of the monitoring process stays at centre level, and that information is not fed back to ETB level.

5.5.4 Self-Evaluation

Self-evaluations occurred within services/centres on a cyclical basis in the past, but this has been waning over the past couple of years, as centres have waited for clarification from the Core and Sectoral QA Guidelines as to whether there would be a new approach to self-evaluation. Currently, the main form of evaluation is the mid- and end-of-course evaluation, but that is not as systematic as a formal self-evaluation, does not typically result in an improvement report, and is not fed back to ETB-level. This executive self-evaluation report is the first systematic self-evaluation to be undertaken at ETB level, and as such, has been a valuable source of learning.

5.6 Public Information and Communication

The LOETB website provides information on the range of services available to learners, including links to its various centres, and contact details. A range of information is made publicly available on the website. This includes the LOETB Statement of Strategy, service plans, financial statements and a range of policies.

In addition to the LOETB website, some FET centres have their own websites, in which they provide information about courses, admissions criteria, progression opportunities etc. Many of the centres run open days at which the public can get information on the range of courses offered, and many centres also publish details of courses in the local media, and through leafleting in the local community. LOETB also has a strong social media presence, on both Facebook and Twitter, where course information is regularly posted.

All FET courses are scheduled on the National Course Calendar, and this information is made publicly available through the FETCH website. This contains a range of information such as entry requirements, target award, modules included, scheduling, work experience requirements, centre facilities etc.

The QA Department maintain responsibility for providing relevant course information on social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter. This ensures that accurate and timely information is provided. Any promotional material (online or print) designed at centre level must be approved by the QA Department prior to publication.

5.7 Evaluation of Delivery of FET

5.7.1 Course Delivery and CPD

Systems to ensure that staff are properly qualified and recruited in line with LOETB HR policies are well established and operating effectively. However, processes and documentation specifically around approval for course delivery in centres need to be reviewed to include information around staff qualifications. This review could be included as part of the overall review of governance structures. While induction for new teachers is occurring, there is currently no schedule of refresher courses for existing staff delivering FET programmes. Therefore, unless staff actively seek out refresher training, they may not be aware that it is available to them.

LOETB staff are welcome to seek out CPD opportunities—either externally, or through the range of CPD opportunities and in-services that are available on an ad hoc basis, either by the Department, FESS, eCollege or others. However, it would be helpful to systematically record participation in all professional development activity, in order to establish a baseline from which current participation can be analysed and future participation promoted.

LOETB has introduced a Staff Continuous Professional Development Policy which invites staff members to apply for part funding to assist them in relevant professional development programmes. This helps to ensure that LOETB staff skills are up to date and relevant.

5.7.2 Assessment Processes

The work of the ETBI Assessment Procedures Working Group is welcomed, and the procedures developed will be reviewed to identify how they may be incorporated into common procedures across LOETB centres, which could include the articulation of a philosophy of assessment.

IV/EA/RAP processes are well-established, but while processes are similar, the training services currently have their own documentation under the TQAS. It might be useful to review the IV/EA/RAP documentation, and to explore the possibility of creating an ETB-wide set of documentation for these processes. Given the variation in feedback procedures across centres in LOETB, and the centrality of feedback within the teaching and learning process, it could be helpful to consider whether a standardised approach to feedback would be appropriate, while being cognisant of the varying profiles of learners within the ETB.

Once the EA model, developed under the auspices of ETBI, has been published, this should be reviewed in LOETB with a view to adopting it, and renewing the existing panel of EAs.

5.7.3 Monitoring, Review and Self-Evaluation

Course reviews that take place as part of an end of course evaluation are a highly effective method of ensuring that courses remain relevant to learners' needs and responsive to local employment requirements. However, a common approach to evaluation of programmes needs to be implemented across the service, where the learner voice is heard and the feedback from learners and staff is taken into account in planning for the improvement of existing courses and development of new courses.

EA and RAP reports are reviewed at ETB level, and this is a positive process, as it allows CPD needs and areas for policy development to be identified and acted upon. Apart from this review, and the monitoring that is undertaken with respect to contracted training and community training,

monitoring would currently appear to be an area for improvement in the ETB's provision. There is currently no common approach to monitoring across the different centres, no templates or guidelines, no commonly agreed data to be used for analysis at ETB level, and the findings of monitoring are not currently being reviewed at ETB level, and therefore not informing decisions and planning adequately. Currently, any information gathered from monitoring stays at centre level, and apart from EA reports and RAP reports, that information is not fed back to ETB level.

A more systematic approach is needed with respect to monitoring whether previous recommendations have been implemented, either in RAP reports or with respect to QA issues arising. For example, where QA issues have been identified, raised with the QA Department, and recommendations for improvement made, a review date should be set to ensure that those recommendations have been followed up upon.

A common ETB-wide approach to monitoring and associated procedures needs to be developed. This could include identifying what is to be monitored and by whom, identifying the type of indicators to be used, developing templates or guidelines, identifying how that information should be used, how it should be fed back to ETB level, etc. Development of these common procedures will be essential in promoting a consistent approach to monitoring.

Few self-evaluations at centre-level have been undertaken in the past couple of years. As a first step to re-establishing a regular self-evaluation regime, a common approach to self-evaluation should be identified, and a set of procedures developed in order to implement that approach. Thereafter, a schedule of self-evaluations, at both programme and centre level should be re-instituted to ensure that they continue on a regular basis. An identified group within the governance structures could have responsibility for oversight of the self-evaluation report and improvement plan, as well as for monitoring that any recommendations have been implemented as outlined in the improvement plan. It might also be helpful to consider conducting thematic self-evaluations at ETB level, and these could be identified and managed by the same governance group.

5.7.4 Public Information and Communication

There is currently a range of information regarding courses available to the public, both through the LOETB site, centre-specific sites, and the FETCH site. A significant effort has been made by the QA Department to ensure that the information provided on the National Course Calendar, which feeds into the information on FETCH website, is accurate. It is intended to conduct a review of all LOETB-related websites in order to ensure the accuracy of information. While some ETB-level policy and other information is available on the LOETB site, all QA policies are not currently made publicly available online. The QA Department has established a Learner Section on the website but work on this project is at an early stage. Over time, as policies and procedures are developed/revised in line with the new QA guidelines, these could be made publicly available online where appropriate.

5.8 Areas for Improvement: Delivery of FET

5.8.1 Course Delivery and CPD

- Consult with centre/service managers to identify priority areas for improvement of resources and premises
- Provide annual CPD calendar for FET staff
- Provide CPD for teaching staff on how to incorporate Office 365 into programme planning and delivery, e.g. workshops, collaboration sessions.
- Staff CPD -Support interested staff in upskilling using options available through SOLAS e-college
- Complete SOLAS TEL Baseline and Action Plan
- Conduct survey of FET staff to capture the current capacity of staff in using technology
- Plan for the implementation of TEL strategy
- Provide regular QA updates and briefings on QA policy to FET teaching staff
- Facilitate the establishment of communities of practice / subject networks to allow for sharing of knowledge and resources
- Utilise the skills and knowledge of existing staff members to facilitate the sharing of knowledge through provision of briefings, mentoring, and snapshots of good practice

5.8.2 Assessment Processes

- Introduce a common feedback process for learners across LOETB's FET Service
- Agree a mechanism for evaluation of learner feedback
- Formalise a policy regarding timely provision of feedback to learners
- Introduce common Plagiarism policy; educate learners about plagiarism at induction stage
- Roll out anti-plagiarism software in centres on an incremental basis

5.8.3 Monitoring, Review and Self Evaluation

- Plan and consult on development of an ETB-wide monitoring cycle
- Identify how centre/service self-evaluation should be governed
- Devise schedule for self-evaluation

5.8.4 Public Information and Communication

- Further develop the LOETB staff Resources section of website as a resource for staff to access information and resources
- Provide a bank of briefing materials for teaching staff to include videos, interactive presentations, etc
- Design an information document for all staff detailing LOETB FET services
- Organise a LOETB FET Service Awareness Campaign for both internal and external stakeholders
- Formalise a LOETB Social Media Policy – to further enhance consistency of information to stakeholders

6. The Learning Experience

6.1 Introduction

This section sets out how the FET Service ensures a high quality learning experience for all learners.

6.2 Learner Referrals

Learners engaging with FET services generally engage with the services through one of two referral routes; self-referral, or referral by another agency. Self-referral has been a significant feature within the Further Education sector for many years, with many learners engaging with PLC, Adult Literacy, and Community Education by identifying the programmes and option most appropriate to their needs, and engaging directly with the programme providers/centres. Self-referral was not a feature of training services until recently; however, this aspect is increasing and is an area that LOETB is anxious to develop.

LOETB has a network of referral agencies and partners throughout the two counties. A referral protocol is in place with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and the local case officers have built up links with coordinators at a local level. However, the level of referrals from DEASP officers is relatively low, and in the case of training, where all referrals previously had to come through DEASP, the level of referral has sharply reduced.

Second level guidance counsellors provide a referral mechanism for students into some FET programmes, in particular PLC courses, apprenticeships and traineeships. LOETB's Adult Educational Guidance and Information Service (AEGIS) provides another avenue of referral for learners into FET services, in particular those learners in need of basic education supports. Other services, including HSE agencies, community development groups, probation services, etc. also act to refer learners into FET services. The importance of "casual referrals", i.e. referral based on word of mouth or personal recommendation is hard to quantify, however, it is believed to account for quite a sizeable number of those accessing FET services.

6.3 Learner Admission

The introduction of the PLSS Learner Database provides for a standardised application procedure across services. The learner database will make it easier for a learner to progress through different levels and sectors of the FET Service as they will not need to provide detailed personal data to register on a subsequent course and their progression and certification will also be tracked. LOETB centres do not currently have a common, equality-proofed, Admissions Policy for all of its FET services. This is a priority for the new academic year in 2018. The Policy and related procedures should make reference to the information that must be provided to learners with respect to the programme, fees and grant opportunities, reasonable accommodations etc., as well as good-practice, equality-proofed procedures and templates regarding interviews/advisory meetings and selection criteria.

On receipt of application/referral, centres call applicants for an initial assessment. For programmes at Level 4-6, this is an online assessment in English (and Maths where Maths is a component of the chosen course). Where a learner has evidence to indicate that they would normally have had reasonable accommodation in previous education settings, the applicant will be afforded the same accommodation for the assessment e.g. a reader.

The need for a common assessment tool to determine suitability for programmes was identified in the past number of years. It emerged that the main reason for learners leaving programmes early was because the level of the programme did not match the capacity of the learner. The learner may have been struggling from a literacy point of view, and sometimes where there was a mathematical element to the programme, this presented a barrier to the learner successfully achieving a major award.

The assessment tool that was sourced by LOETB aims to identify the applicant's capacity prior to entry on the programme. Where an applicant is deemed unsuitable for the particular course based on results of the assessment, the centre will refer the learner to the Adult Guidance Service in order to discuss their options. Where there appears to be only a slight mismatch between the learner's result and the level of the programme, relevant supports are put in place for the learners such as extra English or Maths classes, to ensure that learners don't fall behind in the first three months of the programme, until their confidence has been developed to enable them to proceed as normal.

Having used the online assessment for two academic years, findings would indicate that the retention rates and completion rates, on Level 5 programmes in particular, have significantly improved.

The results of the online diagnostic assessment determine whether or not the learner is at, or close to, the required level for the particular course. If so, typically, the applicant will then be invited to attend an informal interview to assess their suitability for the course for which they are applying. The admissions interview is conducted by the course coordinator or an experienced teacher on the course. The purpose of the interview is to assess whether the learner meets the entry criteria for the course where these exist, or to facilitate the learner to find the course most suitable for their needs. Other, course specific, information is given to learners upon entry to the course. The LOETB Admissions Appeals Policy outlines procedures for appeal for those learners who are not successful in their application onto a course.

Since its establishment, LOETBs QA Department manages and co-ordinates the BKSB process across the FET services ensuring a more consistent approach to the assessment process for learners.

6.4 Access, Transfer and Progression

The programme descriptors used in LOETB, which were written as part of the ETBI Shared Development Process outline access criteria, albeit in a fairly generic manner, without referencing specific criteria for each programme. Currently, it is simply expected that any learner seeking to access a particular course would have the knowledge, skills and competencies at the level of the NFQ detailed in the programme descriptor for access on to that programme. The initial assessment detailed in 6.1 above is LOETB's method to determine whether the applicant has the capacity to enter onto a programme at that particular level. LOETB has set a benchmark level that the applicant must reach in the assessment to access programmes at Levels 5 and 6. Where the learner does not reach the level indicated but is near the cut-off point, course coordinators will take into account relevant life skills or work experience and may make a decision to allow admission onto the programme but only on the condition that they attend extra English and/or Maths classes for a given period of time as an extra support to help them to participate successfully in the course. There

is not a common procedure for this across all centres, but it is increasingly the common approach in PLC centres.

Depending on the nature of the course, a learner whose native language is not English may be asked to complete a separate module on the online assessment tool, and achieve the level indicated in the programme descriptor required to successfully participate in the course.

6.4.1 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

LOETB does not currently have agreed quality-assured processes to support the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for any purpose other than access, as outlined above. Where a learner has previously achieved a non-CAS module that has been migrated to a component listed in the programme structure (i.e. old FETAC/NCVA) that is not more than 5 years old, they may receive an exemption from that module. Applications for exemptions using certified learning from other non-CAS awards will be processed in line with the QQI list of exemptions. In September 2017, the QA Department introduced a new Exemption application process for learners who wish to use previously acquired certification (CAS or non-CAS) as exemptions for the purposes of a major award, in line with the five-year rule. The purpose of the introduction of this process was to ensure that the rule was being applied consistently across the service and to ensure that learners did not miss out on using exemptions due to any delay in certification by an ETB centre.

6.5 Learner Information and Guidance

On starting a course in LOETB, learners have an induction session/s in which they receive general information about the centre, as well as course-specific information such as modules to be covered, the course calendar and timetable, assessments and assessment deadlines, attendance policies and procedures, assessment policies and procedures, supports available to learners, SUSI grants, code of conduct, complaints procedure and other relevant information. It is the responsibility of each centre to provide information to learners at induction. However, the provision of a common Induction information pack has been identified as necessary in order to ensure consistency.

Upon receiving notification of final results, learners are informed of their right to appeal their grade in accordance with the LOETB Appeals Policy.

6.6 Supports for Learners

In all centres, learners are encouraged, upon application for admission, to disclose any special needs or disabilities they may have, in order that appropriate supports or reasonable accommodations may be put in place. Where such a disclosure is made, an appropriate staff member will meet the learner to discuss the nature of the supports that may be required. Depending on the nature of those supports, and the centre in which the course is being delivered, that staff member may be the centre manager, guidance counsellor, the course coordinator, or the class teacher. The nature of the supports may involve application for a HEA grant in the context of a PLC student (e.g. for laptop, sign language interpreter etc.) and other reasonable accommodations, such as extra time in an exam. New guidelines around reasonable accommodations are being developed by the ETBI Assessment Procedures Working Group, and these will inform the development of the common LOETB policy on reasonable accommodations.

Every reasonable effort is made to support learners with difficulties, either before admission or once they have started on the course. These differences might include prior learning or experience, maturity, differing capabilities or other. In this case, the supports needed will be agreed in consultation with the learner, and could include one-to-one learning supports around additional literacy or maths needs, or other additional tutoring where this may be required. However, it is acknowledged that not all support needs may be able to be met within the physical, financial, and staffing restrictions within which the centre and LOETB must operate.

The pilot project currently being run with the Adult Literacy service and the Apprenticeship Senior Training Advisors (referenced in Section 9) provides additional supports to apprentices as required to support successful progression throughout all phases of the apprenticeship.

LOETB engages with stakeholders to provide relevant specialist supports for all learners, including those with a disability. Learners are supported to access the Fund for Students with Disabilities. LOETB provides a range of IT supports for learners with disabilities. These include 'BrowseAloud', 'Text Help Read Write Gold', 'Touch Type Read and Spell', 'Inspiration' and 'Clicker 6'.

6.7 Guidance for Learners

Guidance is available to learners with respect to progression opportunities. AEGIS provides support and guidance to learners on a range of programmes. In other centres, such as Youthreach centres or training centres, course coordinators or resource workers offer similar support. A national strategy for guidance is currently being developed by SOLAS and ETBI.

6.8 Care for Learners

Within each centre, and for each course, a designated person, such as the course coordinator, guidance counsellor, course teacher, or other named person will be available to address any concerns the learner may have, and that person will have overall responsibility for the care of the learner.

The Guidance Counselling and Psychological Support Service is available to students in Youthreach centres. The service offers short term support and provides broad psychological supports to learners, subject to a centre making a request. The service facilitates onward referral of students to other specialist agencies appropriate to their needs. The Psychological Support Service gives precedence to responding to critical incidents that occur within LOETB.

6.9 The Learning Experience and Environment

6.9.1 Physical Environment

LOETB is committed to creating within its centres, a learning environment which in its physical, social, cultural and intellectual aspects allows learners to have a positive and holistic learning experience, facilitating them to develop both personally and academically. This means, for example, that learners will experience safe and clean classrooms with appropriate equipment and other resources such as software. In establishing the FET centre model of provision, LOETB has significantly invested in the refurbishment of buildings and the availability of resources for FET learners.

6.9.2 Social Environment

Learners engaging on a course will be respected and treated in an equitable manner in line with LOETB's commitment to equality. Where possible or appropriate, centres organise activities to support a positive social and cultural learning environment through activities such as field trips or guest speakers.

Many of LOETB's centres hold fundraising events for local or national charities. Events such as cake sales, sponsored walks, fancy dress or Christmas Jumper days are held regularly. The satisfaction and leadership skills gained by the learners from organising such events is very worthwhile and boosts their sense of citizenship and belonging, which demonstrate the wider benefits of learning.

Portlaoise Institute encourages interested learners to take part in extracurricular activities such as drama and sport. The PLC centre has a Gaelic Football team that participates in the Sigerson Cup. LOETB is a strong advocate for learner participation in extra-curricular activities in order to boost their confidence and overall wellbeing.

6.9.3 Oversight of Work Placement

LOETB is committed to ensuring that the work-based learning environments that learners experience as part of their work placements are appropriate, safe, and not exploitative of the learners that engage in them. To this end, a named person within each course will have responsibility for oversight of that placement, usually the individual Work Experience teacher. Guidelines for centres organising work placements, as well as for work placement supervisors, have recently been developed to ensure the placement is properly supported, and that the work placement supervisor understands what is expected in an appropriate work placement context.

LOETB has established a Work Experience Forum which is made up of staff that teach Work Experience modules from Levels 3 to 6. The purpose of the group is to share knowledge, skills and resources in order to ensure that the Work Experience modules is as beneficial as possible to the learners. Where the Forum identify a need for in-service training in a particular area, the QA Department will facilitate same. For example, in-service training was provided recently in the area of job-seeking strategies, and in the next few months, several in-service training sessions will be provided in order to help teachers to become more familiar with the changes that have been implemented nationally to how the Work experience modules are assessed.

6.10 Feedback from Learners

Learner feedback is an essential element to the life cycle of a course within LOETB. Feedback is sought for most courses through end-of-term evaluations, and the information gathered can be used to address issues arising throughout the course, and informs future iterations of the course, (e.g. with respect to module choice etc.), as well as new course development. In addition, learners can raise any concerns or feedback they may have with either the course teacher or course coordinator at any time between the formal feedback opportunities. Currently, other than those grievances that are brought to the appeals panel, there is no process to review learner feedback at ETB-level on a systematic basis.

The QA Department circulate an annual end-of-year Learner Satisfaction Survey to learners - a link is sent via text to all learners. The response rate is improving each year and the level of satisfaction

is improving. The survey provides an opportunity for learners to provide feedback in an anonymous way and to provide ideas about how the service can be improved.

6.11 Tracking Learner Outcomes

LOETB reports regularly on the outcomes for learners using the Funding Allocation Requests and Returns (FARR) system. The accuracy and verifiability of the information reported is a cause for concern for LOETB. It is difficult to track where learners have progressed to once they have left a centre due to difficulty contacting individuals, the volume of learners to follow up and report on, the time required to follow up and the reluctance of some learners to provide progression information. Furthermore, this reporting is at a moment in time, and the data on progressions may be significantly different if taken at another point in time.

A significant proportion of learners embark on PLC programmes for the purposes of progression to further learning. Through a variety of routes and mechanisms, including the Higher Education Links Scheme, and progression agreements with Higher Education providers, a significant number of students completing PLC courses progress on to further studies.

In 2016, LOETB commenced a pilot project whereby all of the learners in one particular centre were contacted at various stages following course completion in order to track their progress. The results of this project were very positive. It is intended that LOETB will expand this project to other centres in the future. However, it is a labour intensive task which requires significant investment of time from staff. LOETB is reporting as accurately as possible, with limited resources. However, a much more robust process for reporting and tracking progressions is required from SOLAS in order to provide verifiable data. LOETB will work with SOLAS to develop and implement a robust system that will track outcomes.

6.12 Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL)

LOETB will develop a TEL Action Plan in response to the SOLAS Technology Enhanced Learning Strategy for FET 2016-2019. There is a commitment by SOLAS to support the enhancement of TEL as part of the annual services planning process with ETBs. It is intended that the Baseline Assessment, once completed, and subsequent Action Plan for LOETB will provide a strong basis for ongoing and enhanced investment in technology-enhanced learning to support innovative teaching and learning practices. Actions include building staff capacity through CPD; expanding the ICT infrastructure, developing TEL Communities of Practice and networks, and supporting the curation, creation and sharing of digital content. The planning process involves an extensive consultation phase across all FET services and centres, incorporating workshops and face-to-face visits to support the development of an integrated and comprehensive LOETB-wide Action Plan.

6.13 Evaluation of the Learning Experience

The learner is at the core of LOETB's further education and training provision, as evidenced in the guidance and care provided to learners, and the supports put into place to ensure that each learner is facilitated to achieve to the full of their potential. While the ETB as a whole, and each centre in particular, will continue to strive to improve in addressing the needs of their learners, the creation of an appropriate and meaningful learning experience for all learners is one of the strengths of LOETB's quality-assured provision.

LOETB acknowledges the importance of learner feedback, both from current learners in the context of course review, and feedback from graduates now engaged in the labour market, in providing valuable information for course review and programme development. However, gathering and analysing this feedback at ETB level remains challenging. Therefore, more work needs to be done with respect to developing processes to ensure that learner feedback can be reviewed at ETB level.

While much of the practice within the ETB with respect to access criteria and information provision is broadly in line with QQI's ATP Policy, consideration needs to be given to developing a clear, transparent Access Transfer and Progression policy and associated procedures. This could include, for example, developing a common set of procedures for selecting learners seeking admission based on initial assessment, life experience, and other criteria. It would also be useful, at ETB level, to compare admissions versus successful participation data, as a tool to reviewing the appropriateness of current admissions procedures. LOETB currently has no RPL policy and does not facilitate it other than for access purposes, and in limited circumstances for exemption purposes. As governance structures are developed, consideration could be given to developing a possible future unit which would have decision-making responsibility for RPL and other access-related requests.

6.14 Areas for Improvement: The Learning Experience

- Engage with learners and teaching staff to identify the barriers to programme completion / achievement of certification
- Evaluate the barriers identified and put plan in place to reduce identified barriers
- Develop a LOETB Access, Transfer and Progression Policy
- Research mechanisms for better tracking of progression
- Introduce a common Induction Process for all learners
- Formalise Policy and Procedures for Reasonable Accommodation for learners

7. Information and Data Management

7.1 Introduction

The amalgamation of two VECs and former SOLAS Training Services into one ETB meant that a number of different information management systems were inherited by LOETB, and are still being operated on a legacy basis. Over time, some of these will be phased out, as they are replaced by the Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS), an information management system designed to manage course and funding planning, course management, learner data, evaluation and reporting.

7.2 Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS)

PLSS is a national SOLAS/ETBI initiative and data is hosted by SOLAS. The system incorporates the National Programme Database, the National Course Calendar, National Learner Database, and Funding Allocation Requests and Reporting (FARR) system. It is in the third year of its rollout, with a focus on on-going collaborative development and improvements nationally.

7.2.1 National Course Calendar (including the Learner element)

The National Course Calendar (NCC) facilitates scheduling of Courses by ETBs. Once a Course is scheduled on the NCC, all Course data will be copied across to the DEASP ACM (BOMI) System. All Course information will be available to DEASP users and also available to the public through www.fetchcourses.ie. www.Fetchcourses.ie is a public-facing website which consolidates instances of courses scheduled on the NCC across the FET sector. It is being accessed by a range of organisations, providers and professionals requiring information in relation to FET provision. Where the option is available to them, learners can apply to do courses via the FETCH website and in the future, there will also be a payments system. It is also intended that Moodle content of a particular course will be linked to that course in the National Course Calendar in the future. The system is a web-based application which means no additional software is required to be installed. The Learner element of the NCC allows centres/colleges to manage learner applications prior to the course starting and during the course. Learners can be contacted via a range of communication methods. Each learner can be tracked on their educational journey via their PPS number which is a unique identifier number. They are attached on the system to the course they are attending and when this is finished, their outcome is recorded, thus building up a picture of previous courses attended. It also allows for an XML file with the Learner's details and Course Modules to be created and uploaded to the QQI QBS system. The Learner Database will be used for learner reports.

7.2.2 National Programme Database

The National Programme Database (NPDB) contains a repository of programmes. All SOLAS national programmes are stored in a central partition. Each ETB has its own local partition where locally developed programmes shall be stored. The NPDB facilitates scheduling of courses on the National Course Calendar (NCC) system and provides the course data seen on the Fetchcourses.ie website. Where a programme is a national programme, it cannot be modified by any particular ETB. In the local partitions, if an ETB develops a new programme for use, it is published on a secure local partition within the NPDB. Published programmes developed in one partition are not available to other partitions, except as read-only.

A programme specification must be fully developed before publishing the programme. In programmes that require validation by an awarding body, validation should already have taken place during the development process. The specification will contain the course profile including a module bank.

7.2.3 Funding Allocation Request and Reporting (FARR) System

From 2016, all statistical returns are being made via the FARR element of the PLSS system. At the start of the calendar year, projections/estimates are made regarding expected provision in the following 12 months. Then actual numbers are recorded to cover the periods Jan–May, June–Sept and Oct–Dec. This captures inputs such as number of starters on courses, outputs such as retention and partial/full course completers achieving a QQI Major Award or Component Awards only and outcomes such as progression to other FET courses, HEI or employment.

7.2.4 PLSS Reports

This management information system facilitates the timely analysis on a range of indicators in LOETB FET Provision. Examples of the type of indicators include:

- Number of Instances of Courses by Award Body, Level, Target Award, Location and Course Delivery Method
- Learner Age Range, Gender, Previous Educational Attainment, Economic Status and whether is DSP or Self Referred

Features to be aware of when using data generated by the PLSS system (including the FARR element):

- All data is compiled based on a calendar year rather than an academic year. Each calendar year contains parts of two academic years.
- FARR counts the number of beneficiaries rather than individual learners. It is intended that when the Learner Database is fully operational, it will be possible to count individual learners also.
- The Instances of Courses shows the total number of the instances of courses that happen in that calendar year. A particular course could be counted a multitude of times depending on how many times it is run in that year

7.3 Other Data Management and Information Storage Systems

LOETB uses a range of other data management systems in addition to the ones mentioned above, such as the QBS (QQI Business System) used by centres to enter learners for certification, and the RCCRS (Results Capture and Certification Request System), which is used to upload results from training programmes on to the QBS. The training services also use the AppClient Management System for apprenticeship programmes and SAP for administration and reporting purposes.

A range of information storage/document repository systems are in place, both to address current and future as well as legacy needs. The Staff Section of the LOETB website is available to all FET teaching staff and hosts the latest versions of programme and module descriptors, assessment resources, and all templates and policies which have been revised since amalgamations. The CAMS (Centralised Assessment Management System) is currently used by the QA Department for storage of, and access to, assessment instruments for training programmes. A decision with respect to the future of AISs and the CAMS will be made at ETBI level.

Moodle is available to ETB centres through SOLAS, and is currently being introduced incrementally in LOETB centres. The introduction of Moodle will provide access for LOETB to anti-plagiarism software – therefore centres offering programmes at Levels 5 and 6 are being prioritized for roll-out.

7.4 Time & Attendance Clocking System and Trainee Apprentice Payroll System

The Time and Attendance Clocking System (TACS) is used to track learners' attendance on all training programmes in order to calculate the appropriate payment.

The Trainee Apprenticeship Payroll System (TAPS) manages the payment to the trainees entitled to payment and to apprentices based on the information recorded on the TAC system.

7.5 Data Security

LOETB, as a public body, is covered by the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 2014. In accordance with Section 8 of this Act, LOETB publishes as much information as possible in an open and accessible manner on a routine basis and as part of normal business activities. The LOETB website, www.loetb.ie, is the main source of information to the public. This contains a range of information of relevance to members of the public, including:

- General Information on LOETB Services
- LOETB Decision-Making Processes
- Procurement
- Financial Information
- Board membership
- LOETB publications and policies
- FOI Disclosures Log and details on how to make a freedom of information request

LOETB is subject to the provisions of the Data Protection Acts 1988 & 2003 and, accordingly, is registered with the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner. LOETB has put procedures in place regarding the safeguarding of personal information of individuals such as staff and learners, and providing access to it, on request, by the persons to whom it relates. A designated Data Protection Officer deals with queries relating to Data Protection.

Access to databases is by named and authorised personnel only for the purposes of entering data in local centres and for reporting as appropriate at local centres or centrally within LOETB. A list of personnel entitled to access PLSS and their level of access is maintained by the QA Department, and is periodically reviewed. Other initiatives to ensure the security of learner data include the policy of not including PPS numbers on assessment marking sheets for modules developed for former VEC centres (introduced in September 2017). Assessment records for learners are maintained by centres for a given period after the opportunity for appeal has passed. After that time has lapsed, assessment records are shredded securely by a reputable shredding company. IV/EA/RAP Reports are maintained and stored securely, as well as signed Authentication Reports.

A robust data impact statement is in place for PLSS, which informs learners of usage and sharing implications. Learners are required to sign this statement, and the information is presented in both written and video formats. LOETB has developed a Freedom of Information Policy and learners are informed of their right to request any data pertaining to them.

LOETB will be reviewing its policies and procedures in advance of the enforcement of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Regulation (EU) 2016/679) in May 2018.

7.6 Data Analysis

LOETB has access to a considerable supply of data—for example from FARR reports and QBS reports. As such, the ETB is data rich, but does not, as yet, extract enough meaningful analysis from this data. For example, a wide variety of reports are currently sent from QQI on an ad hoc basis, but these are not being systematically mined for information; no decisions are being made as to which reports are most valuable, and thus, that information is not being passed on to QQI. Equally, more consideration needs to be given to how FARR reports (and other data sources) can be analysed at ETB level and used to enhance planning, monitoring and review, policy development etc.

7.7 Evaluation of Information and Data Management

The PLSS is now in its third year of roll-out, and between the National Programme Database, the National Course Calendar, the Learner Database and FARR, it is increasingly addressing the data management needs of the ETB; legacy systems will thus become less important over time. PLSS is proving to be a very valuable recruitment tool, acting as an interface with the DEASP, allowing prospective learners to find courses on the FETCH site, and enrol directly via the Learner Database. In addition, the range of reports produced by the FARR database are powerful tools to facilitate analysis and planning at both centre and ETB level, the outcomes of which have the potential to inform future strategy and policy. Consideration needs to be given as to what data needs to be gathered, by whom, and how it should be reviewed and analysed.

Security of learner data stored in PLSS is managed at ETB and centre level through the identification and periodic review of personnel authorised to access data. QA Department staff are available to support centres in using the PLSS system effectively and securely, and the QA Officer represents LOETB on the national PLSS Advisory Group to address any development needs that might arise, such as policies and procedures around data security. Supported as it is by SOLAS, the PLSS and its associated systems appear to be robust.

7.8 Areas for Improvement: Information and Data Management

- Consider how existing data sources and systems may be effectively analysed to inform planning, monitoring and day-to-day operations.

8. Collaborations and Stakeholder Relationships

8.1 Relationships with Key Stakeholders

8.1.1 SOLAS

SOLAS is responsible for the funding of a wide range of FET programmes within the sixteen ETBs; as such, it is one of LOETB's key stakeholders. LOETB submits an annual service plan to SOLAS, which includes performance targets, such as inputs, outputs, certification, and reports on these targets to SOLAS three times a year through the FARR database. The ETB provides administrative support staff, as well as the support of the QA Manager, to aid centres reporting to SOLAS through FARR. In addition, there is a financial reporting process to SOLAS that LOETB engages in. SOLAS have now begun to discuss introducing a strategic dialogue process with all ETBs, following the participation of three ETBs, including LOETB, in the Strategic Expectations Pilot Initiative.

SOLAS has statutory responsibility for craft apprenticeships (as coordinating provider). Two Senior Training Advisors are in place in LOETB who are authorised officers acting on behalf of SOLAS to approve the companies based in Laois and Offaly in which apprentices shall be employed.

8.1.2 QQI

LOETB is a legacy provider for QQI, currently operating under two QA agreements, and working towards re-engagement with QQI, and this executive self-evaluation report represents a first step in that process. In addition to delivering QQI certification across its centres, in which learners achieved 3,978 awards in 2016, LOETB engages closely with QQI in a number of working groups and pilot projects, such as a validation working group.

8.1.3 Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP)

The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) and its Intreo offices are strategic partners for LOETB in its efforts to provide appropriate education and training opportunities for the individuals who are out of the labour market, and is the primary referral agency for training programmes. An interagency agreement between LOETB and the DEASP is in place to manage this relationship.

8.1.4 Employers

Engagement with employers is a critical element in LOETB's FET services, if these services are to meet the priorities set out in the FET strategy and ensure that programmes and courses are relevant to the needs of local business and industry. A number of mechanisms and avenues for engagements with employers exist across FET services, with individual centres and staff within an area generally having built up good informal contacts, as well formal relationships, with employers. Some staff within the training services have, as part of their responsibilities, the necessity to engage with employers, including the Senior Training Advisors for Apprenticeship.

LOETB recently established the position of Services to Employers Officer. The role of the Services to Employers Officer is to link with employers to ensure that LOETB programmes meet labour market requirements of the local and national economy and that LOETB graduates possess the relevant level and quality of 'job ready' skills that employers need. A key feature of the work of the Services to Employers Officer is Workforce Development, providing Education and Training programmes for

those in employment, to upgrade or enhance their skills in their current job, or prepare them for new roles.

LOETB liaises with a number of industry representative groups including the Construction Industry Federation, Irish Restaurants Association, Irish Hotels Federation, Health Service Executive, IBEC, IDA and Enterprise Ireland.

8.1.5 Regional Skills Forum

LOETB is represented on the Midlands Regional Skills Forum. This forum provides an opportunity for the ETB, with other bodies and agencies, including Athlone Institute of Technology, Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board, Skillnets, Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland, County Councils, local LEOs, Intreo (DEASP), Fáilte Ireland, IBEC, to engage in structured dialogue between enterprise sectors and education and training providers focused on identifying skills requirements and building customised solutions responsive to regional business needs.

8.2 Second Providers

8.2.1 Contracted Training

Contracted training is a procured service to deliver training within Laois and Offaly. A new tendering process developed by the Office of Government Procurement and SOLAS has almost been completed, and successful contractors who win the tender, may work with LOETB training services for up to four years. When delivering training on behalf of LOETB, they do so under LOETB's QA agreement for training services (i.e. the TQAS). The internal verification process is undertaken by the contracted trainer, while the QA Officer organises the EA from the EA panel. A certification audit is conducted by the QA Office prior to requesting certification. Results are uploaded to QQI by the QA Officer via the RCCRS. Contracted training providers are monitored on a monthly basis by the Contracted Training Officer, and there is a traffic light system in place to monitor underperforming contractors.

8.2.2 Community Training Providers

Community Training provides training within the community for people who are economically or educationally disadvantaged. This is a granted service for programmes delivered on behalf of ETBs; internal verification is undertaken by the provider, all results are reviewed by the QA Officer, and all certificates are requested through the QA Department. Training is provided across the three different programme types outlined below:

8.2.2.1 Community Training Centres (CTCs)

CTCs provide second chance education and training for early school leavers, aged 16–21 years. They are operated by the Boards of independent companies, funded by LOETB through a service level agreement and with specified programme deliverables and outcomes identified for the services. CTCs are required to adhere to LOETB Quality Assurance policies and procedures and are monitored on a regular basis by training services staff. There is one CTC operating within the Laois Offaly area, in Tullamore.

8.2.2.2 Local Training Initiatives (LTIs)

LTIs provide vocational training opportunities, learning supports and project-based learning to marginalised learners, aged 16-35 years with low level education, who have been referred by the DEASP. They are delivered through training services by sponsoring and coordinating community-based organisations. The proposal for an LTI emanates from the sponsoring group in response to a

need identified at local level. Through a service contract with LOETB, LTI sponsors are provided with the funding to deliver a response to the specific training needs within their locality. LTIs are required to adhere to LOETB Quality Assurance policies and procedures and are monitored on a regular basis by training services staff.

8.2.2.3 Specialist Training Providers

Specialist Training Providers, such as the National Learning Network, address the identified training needs of people with disabilities who are experiencing exclusion and labour market disadvantage.

8.2.2.4 Other Community Education Providers

The Community Education strand of the Further Education service maintains a large network of relationships with community development groups and other community providers, through which the Further Education service delivers a wide range of courses, both certified and uncertified. Responsibility for these programmes lies with the Community Education Facilitator, who reports to the Further Education Manager. Certified courses are, for the most part, included in the IV/EA/RAP processes of the local Further Education and Training Centres. However, some legacy issues arising out of the differing QA agreements are yet to be resolved.

8.3 Third Level Providers

Progression to further studies is a targeted outcome for many LOETB programmes and participants. LOETB has a number of formal and informal arrangements and agreements in place to provide additional progression opportunities for learners into a large number of third level institutions, including Athlone IT and IT Carlow.

8.4 Irish Prison Service

LOETB operates the Education Centres in Midlands and Portlaoise Prisons, in collaboration with the Irish Prison Service. LOETB was involved with the IPS and other ETBs in the development of a three-year joint education strategy for the Prison Service for the 2016-2018 period. Participation on education and training courses is voluntary for inmates. A significant number of learners engage on certified programmes up to Level 6.

8.5 Further Education and Training Cooperation Hours

The Department of Education and Skills has, for a significant period of time, allocated additional teaching resources to LOETB under what is commonly termed the 'Cooperation Hours' scheme, to provide teaching services to other institutions and bodies as part of the remit of the ETB to provide for continuing education in their areas. Cooperation hours are allocated to a variety of services and bodies by LOETB including:

- Community Training Centres
- Disability Services
- Youth Services
- Language Support for Refugees

The rationale and criteria for awarding these hours are largely based on historical decisions. Activity under these arrangements varies from fully uncertified/unaccredited to programmes leading to full awards at levels 1-5 on the NFQ. LOETB has identified a requirement for additional monitoring of activity under these arrangements and has commenced introducing the necessary supports.

8.6 Collaborative Relationships

8.6.1 Sectoral QA projects

LOETB staff members are involved in a range of sectoral QA groups, projects, and fora, including the CE Forum, the FET Directors' Forum, the QA Strategy Group, the QA Forum, the ETBI/QQI Validation Working Group, the Work Experience Review Group, and the PLSS Advisory Group amongst others.

8.7 Evaluation of Collaborations and Stakeholder Relationships

8.7.1 Stakeholder Relationships

LOETB has a well-defined, positive, and reciprocal relationship with SOLAS. Developments such as the PLSS and the FARR Database support LOETB; not only in planning processes, but also in the quality assured delivery of learning, e.g. in uploading learner details to the QBS, and in maintaining historical and statistical records once it is fully operational. The Strategic Expectations Initiative Pilot project, which LOETB engaged in with SOLAS, provided an opportunity to engage even more closely with SOLAS, and it is anticipated that even more developmental initiatives and opportunities will arise out of that dialogue.

8.7.2 Collaborative Relationships

The collaborative relationships that the training services staff have with second providers and community training providers is well-documented, well-managed, and tightly monitored. As such, it is running well, and does not need to be reviewed as a matter of priority. The new tendering process for contracted training, developed by SOLAS, is currently being completed, which will require a period of familiarisation with the successful contracting companies and an increased level of customer relationship management. This will take time and cooperation from both side. Furthermore, a range of legacy issues arising out of the different QA agreements, with respect to community education delivery need to be resolved.

8.8 Areas for Improvement: Collaborations and Stakeholder Relationships

- Implement the new framework for tendering and awarding contracted training
- Continue to engage with employers in the development of Traineeship/Apprenticeship models that are most appropriate for employers and trainees in Laois and Offaly
- Review existing progression pathways and identify additional progression opportunities
- Increase awareness and identify transparent pathways for FET learners
- Engage expertise and internal resources to develop means of enhancing generic employability skills development among LOETB learners
- Collate documentation which provides examples of collaboration with employers which is already occurring within LOETB
- Begin awareness raising campaign focussing on opportunities for employers to benefit from engagement with LOETB
- Expand a centralised system for monitoring the delivery of programmes across the ETB, in particular for the delivery of programmes by second providers

9. Apprenticeships/Traineeships & Work Based Learning

9.1 Introduction

This section outlines LOETB's provision of Apprenticeships and Traineeships, and the provision of Work Based Learning through the FET Service.

9.2 Apprenticeships

LOETB does not currently deliver any apprenticeships at Phase 2, but plans to expand provision in that direction in the coming months. However, feedback from the Senior Training Advisors suggest that a significant number of apprentices that are engaged on apprenticeship programmes locally are struggling with the training programmes, in particular from a literacy, numeracy and study skills point of view. Therefore, LOETB has organised, through its Adult Literacy service, to provide additional supports to those apprentices through the provision of Maths and English classes. The aim of this initiative is to support apprentices on their journeys to successfully complete all phases of their apprenticeship. LOETB deliver a number of traineeships, with considerable emphasis on work placement in order to prepare trainees for the workplace.

In December 2017, Minister Bruton announced 26 new apprenticeships to be developed in the next two years. LOETB's proposal for a Scaffolding apprenticeship was one of the successful applications. In early 2018, LOETB will plan for the development and roll-out of this new apprenticeship, which will, at the outset, be hosted in the National Construction Training Centre at Mount Lucas.

9.3 Traineeships

LOETB provides a range of traineeships across the two counties. Following the transfer of responsibility for former FÁS training services to LOETB in 2016, the Training team developed a construction traineeship, in the area of Formwork. Significant time and resources were invested into the development of this programme, in partnership with the Construction Industry Federation (CIF). On conclusion of the first instance of the programme, the programme was reviewed and reshaped into a 30-week Traineeship programme that offers City and Guilds – Certificate in Construction Operations as the core award, which also incorporates the essential Site Dumper training with generic employment skills. Specific skills training in Formwork and Steel Fixing will also be provided. This phase will be a Blended alternance training approach – 3 days per week direct instruction in Mount Lucas and 2 days weekly on Work Placement. This new approach has the following features:

- Recognises that learners referred from the live register may not readily possess the competencies required to be a form worker / steel fixer. New entrants to the construction sector need time to build up experience in general construction first - before trying to specialise.
- Develops the skills locally to meet the local need - general construction workers in Laois and Offaly
- Recognises that the more general relevant construction skills new entrants possess, the greater the likelihood of an employment opportunity
- Contributes to the national requirement for enhanced Traineeship throughput

9.4 Work Related Learning Initiatives

Skills for Work is a SOLAS-funded national initiative for upskilling employees with few, no, or outdated qualifications. Courses may take place within the workplace or at a FET Centre, and learners have the opportunity to work towards certification. Skills for Work is primarily promoted through employers, such as those in retailing/manufacturing, or employers' bodies.

LOETB provides a Trainee Manager programme for Elverys Intersport. In collaboration with the Training Officer in Elverys, an accredited programme was developed which was relevant to the trainees' work environment. The nine-month programme, which leads to a QQI Level 5 Certificate in Retail Practice, offers the company's trainee managers an opportunity to gain a relevant qualification in their career area while also working full-time. The programme consists of monthly tutorials, monthly study days, distance learning and regular feedback and support from LOETB tutors. On completion of the programme, most trainees are promoted to Assistance Manager or Manager positions. Refer to Appendix 4 Testimonial.

9.5 Evaluation of Apprenticeships, Traineeships and Work Based Learning

Given that LOETB is considering the development of new governance structures as part of its re-engagement with QQI, it might be useful, when doing so, to allow for the possibility of future delivery of new apprenticeship programmes, and to develop governance structures which allow for, or which can be amended to allow for, the quality assured delivery of such apprenticeship programmes, either as the coordinating or collaborating provider.

10. Conclusions

10.1 Conclusions

The purpose of this Executive Self Evaluation was to review and evaluate current governance and management of quality assurance within the FET service, with a view to identifying current gaps and priorities for improvement in the context of the QQI statutory Core and Sectoral QA Guidelines. In undertaking a thorough review of all quality assurance processes underpinning FET delivery within LOETB, a number of strengths, as well as gaps, emerged and this evaluation process has proven to be a very valuable learning process.

One of the clear strengths that emerged from the evaluation was the quality of teaching and learning that learners experienced, as well as the care and support structures available to them. The learner is, quite rightly, at the centre of all teaching and learning in LOETB.

However, clear gaps in our FET quality assurance policies and procedures also emerged. The main gap emerging was the lack of formal processes in terms of how FET provision is planned and developed. While systems are in place, these are not formally documented. Therefore, in order to improve decision making at ETB and centre level, which is informed by robust data analysis, the FET Service has identified four priority areas for development which are:

1. Governance
2. Excellent Experience for Learners
3. Excellent Education and Training
4. Effective Collaboration and Communication

The four areas are linked to Strategic Priorities in LOETB's Statement of Strategy. The FET service has now prepared an action plan which takes account of the size and complexity of the ETB in this enhancement-based process, a plan which will be challenging enough to begin to action the changes needed, whilst ensuring that the quality of teaching and learning is maintained. Cognisance has also been taken of the constraints and resource implications in order to determine realistic timescales for achieving those actions.

The criteria in choosing and prioritising actions, therefore, involved identifying ones which would facilitate the long-term changes needed, while maintaining and improving current good practices. A need was clearly identified to prioritise putting underpinning governance and quality assurance structures in place, which would allow other areas of required improvement to be identified and addressed in an incremental manner.

ETB EXECUTIVE SELF-EVALUATION [2017]

TERMS OF REFERENCE [Version 0.1]

1. Background and Context

The 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) were established in 2013 following the amalgamation of former Vocational Education and Training Committees (VECs) and the transfer of 13 former FÁS training centres.

The 2012 Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act 2012 sets out detailed responsibilities that apply to the ETBs for quality assuring their programmes of education and training and related services. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) published Core Statutory Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines in April 2016 and Sector Specific Quality Assurance Guidelines for the Education and Training Boards in May 2017.¹ Since establishment in 2013 ETBs have been operating legacy quality assurance arrangements which transitioned to QQI under section 84 of the Act.

The FET Strategy 2014-2019 provides a clear policy context for quality in further education and training (FET). One of the five goals within the strategy is 'Quality Provision - that FET will provide high quality education and training programmes and will meet national and international quality standards.'² ETBs are moving now to new phase of quality assurance and establishing the foundations for the development of a sectoral QA Framework that will assure quality across the sector and enable the sector to deliver on both its statutory and policy objectives for quality. This is a transformational change and developmental process; several sectoral development projects are progressing and will impact in this regard.

2. Executive Self-Evaluation

It is the responsibility of each provider, i.e. ETB, to devise procedures for quality assurance and to have its own systematic processes for evaluating its own activity and for formulating plans and recommendations for its own improvement. The self-evaluation process needs to be flexible and appropriate to the provider and its stage of development. ETBs are relatively new statutory entities, within a significant transformational change process, including for structures and governance. In the context of the requirements of QQI Core and Sector Specific QA Guidelines, there is need to evaluate the effectiveness of legacy QA procedures which may no longer fit for purpose. Within the current developmental context of ETBs, this self-evaluation process is designed to:

- assist in building capacity and identify gaps within ETBs to ensure compliance with QQI statutory core and sector specific QA Guidelines
- enhance ownership of quality and quality enhancement processes
- demonstrate leadership within the ETB
- result in recommendations for improvement and priority actions for each ETB
- recognise the environment, contexts and emerging structures of the ETBs

This is an ETB executive management level self-evaluation which will be undertaken in the context of QA sectoral development projects and in accordance with these Terms of Reference.

2.1 Purpose

The purpose of the ETB executive self-evaluation process is to evaluate the governance and management of quality assurance and the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures, and to contribute to the development of an improvement plan which will support the ETB in meeting its statutory requirements for the establishment and operation of internal quality assurance procedures, recognising the developmental and transitional contexts.

3. Objectives

The objectives of the ETB Executive Self-Evaluation are:

- I. To contribute to and support the ETB quality improvement planning and ETB ownership and governance of quality and quality enhancement.
- II. To promote the improvement of quality assurance and further embedding of a quality culture in the ETB.
- III. To support sectoral level improvement by ensuring there is a consistency in the approach to the executive self-evaluation process, thematic focus and criteria applied self-evaluation report format and improvement plan.
- IV. To identify current gaps and priorities for improvement in the context of QQI statutory QA guidelines.

4. Process and Methodology

The executive self-evaluation will be conducted with an external advisor/facilitator(s). A project lead for the executive self-evaluation process will be identified in the ETB.

The FET management team in the ETB, in collaboration with the external facilitator(s) will identify the evidence basis for the self-evaluation, and will produce the ETB executive self-evaluation report addressing the agreed objectives, criteria and terms of reference.

The final report will be agreed and signed off through the ETB Chief Executive and will form the basis of the ETB Improvement Plan.

Appendix 2

Executive Self Evaluation Formal Meetings

- Executive Self Evaluation introduced to FET Strategy Group at the FET strategy Meeting on June 14th
- Chief Executive and Director of FET completed the Governance and Quality Management Questionnaire 13th September
- Feedback received from External Evaluator 25th September
- Initial meeting with External Evaluator, Director of FET and QA Manager 3rd October
- Meeting with FET SMT 6th November
- Lead attended Briefing in ETBI 9th November
- Meeting with FET SMT to discuss initial draft 13th November
- Meeting with FET SMT and FET Forum to review draft and provide opportunity for feedback 14th December
- Meeting with FET SMT and CE for final review
- Quality Improvement Plan approved

Appendix 3

List of Locations of QQI Delivery

Further Education and Training Centres

- Abbeyleix FET Centre
- Banagher FET Centre
- Birr FET Centre & Birr Outdoor Education Centre
- Clara FET Centre
- Edenderry FET Centre
- Midlands Prison Education Centre
- National Construction Training Centre, Mount Lucas
- Mountmellick FET Centre
- Portarlington FET Centre
- Portlaoise FET Centre
- Portlaoise Institute
- Portlaoise Prison Education Centre
- Tullamore FET Centre

Non-FET Locations of QQI Delivery

- Laois Partnership Company, Portlaoise
- Acorn Midlands Youth Education and Training Service, Edenderry

2nd Level Schools Delivering Level 2 Programmes

- Birr Community School
- Oaklands Community College, Edenderry

Appendix 4

Date	20/03/2017
ETB Name	Laois and Offaly ETB
Respondent Category	<div>Employer/Enterprise <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></div> <div>Learner <input type="checkbox"/></div> <div>Volunteer <input type="checkbox"/></div> <div>Volunteer Organisation <input type="checkbox"/></div> <div><i>Please tick as appropriate</i></div>
Respondent Name	Michael Gillespie
Respondent Telephone details	
Respondent email address	Michael.gillespie@elverys.ie

Testimonial

Please provide **testimonial detail describing how you have benefitted through your interaction with this ETB.** (Please limit the information provided to a maximum of 300 words)

(Please note that SOLAS may make direct contact with you to gain further information/insight)

LOETB has facilitated Elverys Intersport in provision of a QQI-certified programme in Level 5 Retail Practice for Trainee Managers. The tuition provided, through monthly tutorials and online contact, has been a fantastic help to our Trainee Managers as they embark on their management careers with Elverys Intersport. The programme was designed by LOETB with the specific needs of Elverys Intersport in mind, and the modules are all very relevant to the work that trainees do in their daily jobs. The flexibility of the programme and the availability of the tutor at all times throughout the programme added to its success. Elverys Intersport is delighted to work with LOETB and hopes to continue this very successful partnership into the future. On completion of the programme, the majority of the trainees have moved seamlessly into senior management positions in Elverys stores.

<http://constructionnews.ie/mount-lucas/>