

The future is bright with Further Education and Training (FET) Apprenticeships

WITH the CAO deadline fast approaching at beginning of 2026, many Leaving Certificate students across the country are gearing up to plan their next steps after school.

Although direct entry into university was once seen as the main route after school, our education system now recognises that each student has their own individual interests and abilities. We are now at the place where there has been an almost 12% growth in the number of school leavers choosing FET and apprenticeships as a first destination over the last five years.

There have never been more options for school leavers to pursue flexible learning pathways tailored to their needs. Available in every county through all 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs), Further Education and Training (FET) opportunities for school leavers include post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses at Levels 5 and 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

FET programmes operate independently of the points system and can provide students with a valuable pathway to university, the opportunity

to gain work-ready skills and qualifications for immediate employment, or the ability to explore a subject area before committing to a long-term career direction.

Flexible next steps

PLCs also provide flexibility for those unsure of their next steps. This was the case for Anthony, a school leaver from Drogheda who had gone straight from Leaving Certificate into a Biopharmaceutical Science degree course and realised that a career in science was not for him. Anthony looks back on that time before he decided to leave the degree course and remembers "I had it in my head that I wanted to be a pharmacist, but I was not happy with the career progression."

Seeking a new direction, he went to his local FET college, Drogheda Institute of Further Education (DIFE) where he completed a pre-university Business and Accounting PLC course. Shortly after, he was accepted to a business studies degree at DCU. This was a huge achievement, considering he hadn't studied business or accounting for the Leaving Certificate.

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Reflecting on his journey, Anthony shared how the PLC had set him up with a great advantage when he started his degree course. "What really stood out to me was the level of knowledge that I got throughout the year because when I started first year in the level 8 in DCU in Business Studies, I was already kind of near enough three quarters of the year ahead of everybody else, because I have had a brief introduction to the majority of the modules by having taken the PLC course."

Anthony's course also included paid work experience, where he held the position of Investment Analyst with Enterprise Ireland, which gave him valuable industry experience and helped him to bring his career goals into focus. "I'm hoping that the experience I've gotten there, and the industry can definitely help me build up my banking skills and ultimately become a banker."

New degree routes

In addition to traditional PLC courses, new and innovative pathways are constantly emerging within the FET sector. The recent offering of joint



David Wren, Mechanical Automation and Maintenance Fitter (MAMF) apprentice with Novo Nordisk Ireland, Apprentice of the Year 2025 Overall Award Winner

degrees available through the National Tertiary Office is provide more flexible options for students to begin their higher education journey outside the conventional university setting.

These programmes commence in a FET College. Students spend 1-2 years there and then automatically transfer (subject to passing exams) to a higher education institute to complete a degree programme.

Earn while you learn

The apprenticeship route is another smart learning pathway for school leavers seeking to earn while they learn from day one while gaining a qualification. There are now 78 apprenticeship programmes available, spanning a wide variety of innovative fields. In addition to the

longstanding apprenticeships in trades like plumbing and electrical, opportunities have expanded into sectors such as finance, ICT, social work, and many more.

A community of almost 30,000 apprentices are at the forefront of skills development in Ireland, providing a high level of talent and innovation to businesses across the country. Recently the the National Apprenticeship Office shone a spotlight on the vital contribution apprentices make to our workforce at the National Apprentice of the Year Awards.

The overall apprentice award winner, David Wren, a Mechanical Automation and Maintenance Fitter (MAMF) apprentice with Novo Nordisk Ireland was selected from over 330 nominations representing every

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region of the country.

Upon receiving his nomination, "I'm absolutely over the moon to be named Apprentice of the Year 2025... It means a lot to be able to bring this recognition back home to Offaly and hopefully inspire more young people in the area to go for opportunities like this. This is only the beginning, and I can't wait to see what the future holds."

We encourage all Leaving Certificate students to explore the wealth of PLCs on offer in their local area at thisisfet.ie/localcourses, to look at the expansive range of apprenticeships now available at apprenticeship.ie.

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