

**ERASMUS-EDU-2021-PEX-COVE****Project number: 101056023****AgriNext Project****Proposal for flexibilisation of vocational  
education and training (VET)****Ireland**

## Partners



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ARCTUR - Computer  
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SLOGA - Agricultural and  
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Society sloa Kranj, z.o.o.



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VUKA - University College  
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SKINK - Skink, d.o.o.

## Summary

The vocational (Further) Education and Training (VET/FET) sector in Ireland contributes significantly to education and skills development for diverse learners, including school leavers, adults returning to education, and those seeking to upskill or reskill. A roundtable discussion titled “Transforming Agriculture Education Through Flexible Learning Approaches” was organised by the Technological University of Shannon, Ireland, to propose systemic changes for the Flexibilisation of VET in Ireland, under the auspices of the AgriNext Project focusing on multifunctional agriculture. Stakeholders from the Further Education and Training (FET) institutes, Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS), Education and Training Boards (ETBs), Irish Farmers’ Association (IFA), Agricultural Colleges, Higher Education Institutions (HE I), agriculture industry, and government agencies (Teagasc) were present at the roundtable discussion.

Participants discussed and proffer suggestions on strategies and best practices for implementing flexible learning in agricultural programmes to suit the needs and interests of students and the farming community, including tailoring agricultural education to farmers’ and industry needs, designing inclusive learning processes, recognising micro-credentials and prior learning experiences, leveraging technology for enhanced learning, and creating relevant agriculture education programmes. This document highlights the key recommendations for the flexibilisation of VET in Ireland, focusing on agriculture programmes.

## Abbreviations

CAO	Central Application Office
ETB	Education and Training Board
FET	Further Education and Training
MA	Multifunctional Agriculture
NQF	National Qualification Framework
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SOLAS	Further Education and Training Authority
Teagasc	Agriculture and Food Development Authority
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WBL	Work-based Learning

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## 1. Introduction

*"Flexible learning enables learners to access education in ways that fit their needs, preferences, and contexts, promoting lifelong learning and adaptability." Collis & Moonen, 2001*

One of the objectives of the AgriNext (Agricultural and Rural Excellence Incubator and Competence Exchange Platform) Project is the Flexibilisation of School Systems to better integrate systematic changes at the national level, enhancing the responsiveness of vocational education and training (VET) to evolving job market demands in multifunctional agriculture (MA). As the agricultural sector adapts to technological advancements and sustainability requirements, VET institutes must evolve to ensure teachers and learners are well-equipped with the skills and knowledge required in the 21st century.

The roundtable discussion on "Transforming Agriculture Education through Flexible Learning Approaches" successfully brought together diverse stakeholders and perspectives on flexible learning in agricultural education to adapt to job market demands. Several recommendations were proffered, including curriculum flexibility, industry partnerships, teacher training and support, and policy changes. The group emphasised that implementing these changes will require supportive national-level policies that encourage flexibility in the school system. Regulatory frameworks must allow for modular course structures, credit transfers, and competency-based learning models that can respond to shifting industry needs and student interests.

## 1.1. The Proposal For Flexibilisation Of Vocational And Professional Education And Training In Ireland

Participants at the roundtable discussion on “Transforming Agriculture Education through Flexible Learning Approaches” underscored the importance of integrating flexible learning approaches in agriculture education. Systematic changes at the institutional and policy levels are essential to ensuring that the next generation of agricultural professionals is well-equipped to meet the demands for knowledge, skills and competencies in the rapidly changing labour market, particularly for multifunctional agriculture.

The proposals for the Flexibilisation of VET in Ireland summarise the challenges in the current learning process in agriculture education and best practices to better align with the dynamic demands of the job market and propose systematic changes to enhance the responsiveness of the VET sector to evolving employment needs by engaging stakeholders from academia, industry, and policymaking bodies

## 2. Flexibilising Vocational and Technical Education and Training

Adaptive vocational education and training (VET) systems in multifunctional agriculture represent a pathway to creating a transformative and flexible learning ecosystem. These systems can be reshaped to promote diverse learning pathways that cater to the interests of various learners—ranging from school pupils and students to adult learners in both formal and non-formal settings, including individuals with disabilities. They are sustainable by fostering lifelong learning for everyone involved in co-creating the VET system.

A flexible education system allows individuals to move seamlessly between education, training, employment, or self-employment within the multifunctional agriculture (MA) sector. This flexibility empowers trainees to tailor their educational pathways to match their unique interests and abilities, both during their studies and throughout their professional careers. The model for flexibility in VET has been developed based on an analysis of flexicurity practices—both in legislation and implementation—across the four project partner countries. It consists of 10 interconnected and complementary elements:

1. Flexibility in educational programming and school autonomy;
2. Flexibility in the enrolment process;
3. Offering multiple pathways for programme implementation;
4. Individualised approaches to programme delivering;
5. Modularising programmes, allowing for choice, and transferability;
6. Integration and development of new competencies;
7. Recognition of prior learning, credit transfer, and qualifications frameworks.
8. Involvement of social partners and responsiveness to labour market demands;
9. Enabling horizontal and vertical transitions;
10. Encouraging programme completion.

The model is symbolised by a sunflower, where the central cluster of flowers represents individual components that come together to form a connected whole. This metaphor of connectedness reflects the creation of an educational ecosystem where professionals, schools, teachers, learners, social partners, and others collaborate to break down barriers and increase opportunities. This shared effort is essential in building a flexible VET system that responds to the challenges faced by agriculture and related industries. Together, we can establish a flexible, responsive VET system that fosters transformative and sustainable education, promotes lifelong learning, and develops competencies for all stakeholders involved.



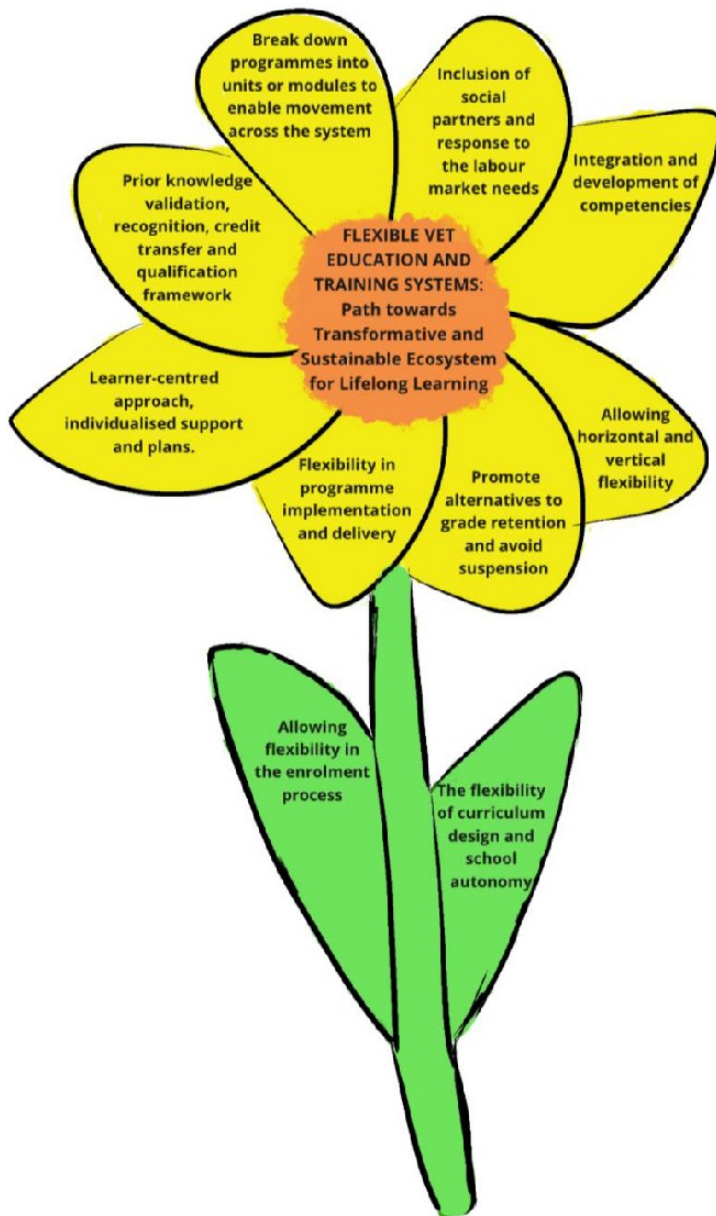


Figure 1: Model flexibilisation of VET - Sunflower.

## 2.1. Flexibility in curriculum design and school autonomy

Research has shown that school autonomy leads to higher learner engagement and course completion rates by providing education that is relevant, accessible, and tailored to individual needs. Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers under the supervision of the education and training boards (ETBs) should be accorded full autonomy in designing their curriculum, similar to the Higher Education Institutes (HEI). In partnership with industry and civil society, VET providers should be able to design and validate certified and non-certified agricultural programmes without interference from the Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS), the national agency overseeing curriculum development and implementation.

Empowering VET providers with full autonomy in curriculum design will ensure agriculture programme development aligns with industry needs and priorities. The curriculum for agricultural programmes must emphasise practical learning, such that internships or apprenticeships in farms or agribusinesses correspond to 30% of the module. Moreover, full autonomy often comes with increased opportunities for professional development, enabling educators (teachers, trainers, and instructors) to continually enhance their skills and knowledge towards delivering innovative practices and pedagogies that can improve student outcomes.

## 2.2. Flexibility in the enrolment process

Ensuring flexibility in the enrolment process for agricultural programmes is crucial to attracting and retaining learners, particularly farmers who often have unpredictable schedules and varying levels of availability. VET providers can create a flexible and accommodating enrolment process through rolling/staggered admissions and simplified application processes in agricultural programmes, where learners can start their courses at multiple points throughout the year rather than a single start date. For example, in agriculture programmes with large farmers' intake, flexible admission dates will allow farmers to register at different times, depending on their availability and prior knowledge. Also, varied enrolment dates for individual modules rather than the entire programme offer farmers the flexibility to join and complete specific modules as their schedules permit balancing education with their farming responsibilities.

## 2.3. Flexibility in the implementation and delivery of the training programme

Attracting and retaining learners who are professional farmers to apply and study for a course can be difficult during their daytime commitments. Education and training boards must ensure the VET providers design and implement flexible agriculture programmes to accommodate demanding schedules and the diverse needs of professional farmers. For instance, flexible and seasonal scheduling of classes during evenings and weekends can avoid disrupting farmers' critical work periods.

Designing programmes consisting of standalone modules and short courses (micro-credentials) is a flexible approach for farmers to gradually accumulate knowledge and skills and complete them at their own pace and availability. More importantly, VET providers should create part-time and adjunct teachers/instructors positions for evening and weekend schedules, implement job-sharing arrangements where two or more instructors share the responsibilities of a single full-time position (allowing them to cover evening and weekend sessions), provide additional financial incentives for evenings and weekend instructors such as higher hourly rates or bonuses, and offer opportunities for professional development as a reward for taking on less desirable time slots.

## 2.4. Student-centred approach; individual support and plans

VET providers should implement student-centred learning approaches such as group discussions and peer-to-peer learning to enhance learning outcomes. Peer-to-peer learning among farmers nurtures a collaborative learning environment for sharing knowledge, experiences, challenges, and solutions. Also, learners should have access to e-learning resources tailored to suit different learning styles and needs and schedule classes to accommodate working farmers and other adult learners. Feedback sessions should be part of the learning outcomes, where learners can provide input on the curriculum and teaching methods. Such feedback helps tailor the learning experience to suit students' needs and participation in curriculum design and decision-making processes to ensure their voices are heard and considered.

Also, VET providers should prioritise the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to align with instructional materials, learning activities, assessments, and outcome measures to remove any barriers to learning and give all students equal opportunities to succeed. For example, options for reading, including print, digital, text-to-speech, audiobooks, text enlargement, and choices for screen colour and contrast for dyslexia (word blindness) learners.

## 2.5. Division of programmes into units or modules

Short and intensive modules are an effective strategy to attract and retain learners to upskill. Each unit or module should be self-contained, covering a specific topic or skill that can be independently completed and assessed. VET providers should allow learners to choose modules based on their interests and needs without committing to an entire programme that may affect their daily farming routines. Also, learners can access certificates after completing each module, which they can accumulate towards a full qualification. The educational and training board should liaise with the relevant accrediting bodies to ensure each module is formally recognised and stacked towards a full qualification.

## 2.6. Inclusion and competence development

There is an urgent need to integrate technological competencies into agricultural programmes. Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning skills are becoming more beneficial to the agriculture sector, requiring VET providers to develop teaching competencies to meet learners' and labour market demand for these skills. VET providers can collaborate with industry partners, higher educational institutions, and professional bodies with the relevant competencies to train educators/instructors, ensuring a seamless development of competencies. Furthermore, integrating work-based learning (WBL) with the industry players creates opportunities for learners to develop the technological skills needed in the labour market. SOLAS, on its part, can provide funding and incentives for VET programmes that successfully integrate WBL as competency-based assessments.

## 2.7. Validation, recognition, ETCS transfer and the qualifications framework

Acknowledging learners' skills and knowledge gained through prior work experience, informal training, and life experiences encourages lifelong learning. Farmers without formal educational qualifications should be able to use their practical experience to access the VET agriculture programmes. Farmers are more likely to be motivated to continue their education and develop new competencies, knowing their practical experience is valued.

SOLAS should liaise with the state agency for agricultural education, research, and policy (Teagasc) and the regulatory authority on qualification (Quality and Qualification Ireland) to

develop robust assessment frameworks to validate prior learning experience, implement standard credit transfer systems across institutions that can facilitate movement and recognition of credits earned from different programmes, and utilise the national qualification framework (NQF) to map out and standardise qualifications, ensuring they are easily comparable and transferable across levels and institutions.

## 2.8. Involvement of social partners and responsiveness to labour market needs

VET providers should liaise with social partners to develop competency-based curricula that reflect the skills and knowledge required by the labour market, ensuring graduates are job-ready. Incorporating insights from social partners can contribute to a job-ready curriculum, ensuring programmes are responsive to current and future workforce skills. Also, regular surveys and focus group discussions with social partners are relevant for identifying skills gaps and developing relevant agriculture programmes.

Also, VET providers should incorporate WBL components such as internships, apprenticeships, and fieldwork with social partners to provide hands-on experience and facilitate industry placements for students, including continuous professional development for teachers to keep them updated with the latest agricultural practices and technologies.

## 2.9. Allowing horizontal and vertical flexibility and passability

VET providers must prioritise horizontal and vertical flexibility to accommodate diverse learning needs and career pathways, allowing learners to move across different agricultural subjects or programmes at the same level and to progress from basic to advanced levels. Also, curricula should be in module formats with clear learning outcomes and assessments, such that each stand-alone module can be combined to form complete qualifications or specialisations. ETBs should implement a standardised credit system that allows learners to accumulate and transfer credits across different programs and institutions while promoting interdisciplinary learning experiences between students across programmes.

Furthermore, VET programmes must have clear progression routes from entry-level to advanced qualifications, including reaching formal agreements on credit transfer and recognition of qualifications between ETBs and HEI, provided they meet the central application office (CAO) requirements.

## 2.10. Preventing early school leaving

Hands-on/practical and work/project-based assessments are alternatives that can lead to higher learner retention than conventional classroom assessments and examinations. Early intervention strategies such as assessment performance and teacher observations can assist in identifying and supporting below-average students to prevent academic failure. VET providers should encourage additional tutoring, counselling, and mentoring to provide guidance and encouragement and integrate self-awareness, self-management, and relationship-building into the curriculum to help students manage stress and improve resilience and emotional intelligence.

### 3. Conclusion

Forging collaboration with social partners and regulatory authorities will be essential in driving the success of these proposals. Participants emphasised that implementing these changes will require supportive national-level policies that encourage flexibility in the school system. Regulatory frameworks must allow for modular course structures, credit transfers, and competency-based learning models that can respond to shifting industry needs and student interests.

General recommendations from the roundtable include:

- Tailoring agricultural education to the farming sector and industry needs
- Designing inclusive learning opportunities for people with disabilities
- Recognition of micro-credentials and prior learning experiences
- Leveraging innovative technology for enhanced learning
- Create relevant agriculture education programmes suited to learners' needs
- Encourage learner's participation in designing the curriculum
- Allowing more flexibility in the enrolment process
- Providing outreach officers/guidance counsellors who engage and advise learners
- Integration of feedback as part of the learning outcomes