

Good afternoon Chairperson and members of the Committee.

I am deeply honoured to have been selected by the Public Appointments Service and by the Minister for Education and Skills and his Cabinet colleagues, to serve as Chairperson of SOLAS. I thank you for this opportunity to set out my vision for SOLAS and Further Education and Training in Ireland over the next five years. In one sentence, my reason for being here today is my passionate, life-long belief in the necessity for realising every person's human potential - the capacity inherent in every individual, regardless of their initial life circumstances.

Those of us who have been fortunate enough to build our lives and careers in this country know well the value of solid pathways to advancement. Building and maintaining those vocational supportive pathways is the central mission of SOLAS.

The SOLAS Board and I myself are very impressed with how the new SOLAS CEO and his colleagues on its Executive are embracing this mission. We are also fully supportive of the strategic direction that is being adopted by the CEO and the team.

I am sure the Committee will appreciate that I do not come before you today with ready answers to all the challenges which SOLAS faces. But what I can do is to touch on some of the fundamental issues which have to be addressed. As Chairperson, I will of course work with my board colleagues and with the staff of SOLAS in ensuring the highest standards of governance are maintained in achieving our objectives.

This is a pivotal time for further education and training in Ireland. Since SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) were established in 2013 and the concept of an integrated further education and training (FET) system was born, it has had to be focused as an organisation on an establishment and development approach.

I understand that the immediate priority in 2013 was on setting up the organisation; on getting the structures right; and embedding the systems and processes to support planning and funding and gathering of learner data. In turn, a further education and training strategy 2014 – 2019 was developed that was intended to be all-encompassing. It had many complex and multiple stakeholder arrangements, five goals and 52 detailed actions. It was an ambitious and challenging agenda.

The launch of the action plan for apprenticeships and traineeships and agreement of national FET system targets with the Minister for Education and Skills, and the establishment of strategic performance agreements between SOLAS and the ETBs is regarded by many observers as the breakthrough moment for SOLAS. This was the juncture at which a sense of the future direction in which the FET system needs to evolve began to emerge.

The significant progress which has been made over the lifetime of the strategy has put a really strong foundation in place for SOLAS to lead the system into an exciting new era, working closely, in partnership with ETBs and other FET providers, to deliver real integration, reform and performance improvement. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of these partnerships.

It is part of SOLAS' statutory responsibility to propose a FET strategy to the Minister every five years, and the work to prepare the second strategy for the period 2020-2024 has produced an exciting and I believe transformational vision for the next critical phase of FET development.

I am delighted to be put forward to chair the SOLAS Board as this new Strategy is nearing completion. It is a very exciting time for SOLAS and the wider sector. I am very impressed at the level of stakeholder buy-in to the ambitious vision for the future. The new strategy is based around a structure that gets to the core of FET, a sector that embodies diversity. Our learners come from all walks of life; are ages 18 to 70 and every age in between; and span the globe in terms of their places of origin. In 2019, we had learners from more than 180 countries taking part in FET courses.

Fundamentally, FET revolves around skills development, learning pathways and inclusion, and the system's future strategic priorities have been framed around these pillars At the same time there is a parallel focus on the key factors which should enable this : staffing and structures; digital transformation; a performance and learner centric approach; and capital infrastructure. This will mean that, over the next five years, the FET sector will be focused on simplifying the delivery landscape for its services through:

- The development of an ***integrated FET college of the future***, which will break down the existing divide between FE colleges and training centres

- and ensure that communities can more clearly identify with their local FET facility and its diverse array of learning opportunities
- The establishment of much ***clearer learning pathways***, including developing potential links with second level and a more consistent transition approach to higher education, alongside a more modular and technology-driven approach to learning delivery which will facilitate continual engagement with FET throughout lifetimes and careers
- A ***simplified programme structure***, addressing the current confusing portfolio of 26 different FET programmes, with consistent branding linked to level, discipline/skill and outcomes and a new Level 5/Level 6 proposition that will lead directly to a specific vocation or facilitate transition to a higher education degree programme.
- Building the ***influence of employers*** on the types of skills developed by FET, through cutting edge and accessible labour market and skills research, co-construction and co-development models, and by working with our partners to ensure that the growing interest and demand in apprenticeship as a route to exciting careers is built upon with significant employer buy-in to ensuring its future sustainability and success.
- A ***comprehensive approach to learner support***, meaning you can access the same level and quality of support (including financial support) regardless of where and what you learn, linked to a more strategic and consistent approach to community education, which ensures that FET continues to offer exciting opportunities in every corner of the country.

I would like, in concluding these remarks, to mention some issues that I believe jump out as requiring priority attention at this juncture:

- On **capital infrastructure**, dealing with legacy issues of old buildings not fit for purpose for modern learning and addressing deficits in capital stock.
- Creating some space for new 'flagship' capital developments which can help to change 'hearts and minds' about FET's role and potential.
- On **staffing and structures**, there are concerns about the necessity to break down rigidities around HR, learner support and operational regulations to facilitate integrated cross-FET service delivery.

- On **systems and technology**, we need to acknowledge that the way in which we in Ireland work, learn, do business and interact with each other is fundamentally & rapidly changing. Clearly, we have to change the way learning is delivered, how data drives service delivery; and we need to develop shared financial and other systems to support more robust and efficient management approaches.

Despite the challenges faced by the sector, I am assured the tools are there within SOLAS to fundamentally change the way FET is viewed and valued in Ireland, so that more and more people will recognise that FET can:

- Change their lives, allowing them to develop themselves personally, engage with their communities and go as far they want to go in life
- Help people re-engage with education and take the first steps in returning to work
- Give people a vibrant college experience without a 4 year commitment
- Offer direct routes into many varied careers
- Let people upskill at minimal cost if already in work and seeking to ensure that their skills remain relevant
- Prepare people to succeed, whether they want to go on to higher education, or straight into the workplace

Because that's what is truly unique about further education and training in this State : It affords the opportunity to engage in learning in every community in Ireland regardless of any previous levels of education and putting in place a pathway to progress as far as any individual wants to go. The impact of FET is already transformative. However I believe that, with the strong direction set out in the new SOLAS strategy, this sector can grow its profile and make a crucial contribution to the next critical phase of Ireland's social and economic development.

I have tried to set out today my perception of the main issues facing SOLAS in fulfilling its very important mandate and the broad strategy for tackling those issues.

Learning, whether formal or informal, is fundamental to how anyone does a job today and the activity involved never ceases. Whilst I bring to the role of Chairperson a personal background in both public administration and, more recently, legal education, I am sure the Committee will I hope appreciate that I am at an extremely early stage of learning about all the intricacies of my proposed role in SOLAS. At all stages I want our organisation to be a

listening one. I particularly recognise the role which members of this Committee have to play in shaping national policy in this area.

I look forward, hopefully with your endorsement & support, to working over the next five years with the SOLAS Board, the new SOLAS CEO, Andrew Brownlee, and his Executive team to deliver this ambitious Strategy

Thank you.

ENDS