



**22<sup>nd</sup> November 2022**

**Opening Statement by Alan McGrath, SOLAS, to the Joint Committee on Autism.**

On behalf of SOLAS, I would like to thank the Chair and the Joint Committee Members for the opportunity to speak with you today.

SOLAS has responsibility for funding, planning and coordinating Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland. Through the 16 Education and Training Boards and other providers, the FET system offers access to a wide range of learning opportunities and supports in every corner of the country, regardless of background or formal education level, and a learning pathway to take you as far as you want to go. The FET system currently serves a base of around 200,000 unique learners/students per annum.

SOLAS also has statutory responsibility for oversight of the national apprenticeship system and serves as the coordinating provider for craft apprenticeship in Ireland. A National Apprenticeship Office, which is jointly managed by SOLAS and HEA, has recently been established.

The FET sector caters for many learners/students, including cohorts with diverse needs and those who require focused types of support to address their particular circumstances. FET continues to have a critical role in supporting social inclusion and providing access to education for the most vulnerable groups and individuals in our society during this post-Covid period.

The Further Education sector aligns to the range of inclusion strategies, national and international which seek to progress the move towards social and inclusive models of provision over the deficit-focussed medicalised measurement models of provision for diverse learners.

Fostering inclusion of learners of all backgrounds is a key pillar of the FET Strategy 2020 – 2024 and the actions taken by the FET sector are shaped by the above strategies.

The FET sector supports the inclusion of learners with additional learning needs in several ways. Firstly, FET programmes are available across the entire country, to all learners, including those with additional learning needs. All of FET provision assists learners with a disability to participate in FET provision by adapting course content, resources, and teaching methodologies to suit their ability.

Each of the 16 ETBs across the country are responsible for the identification of local needs and setting local priorities for their provision. It is discernible through qualitative information provided by ETBs that there are activities being undertaken to support the needs of learners with Autism. ETBs report progress in design inclusive programmes, with some dedicated programmes specifically designed for Autistic learners, and, in some instances, also for parents and carers of people with Autism. Some ETBs have developed spaces and hubs specifically designed with the needs of autistic learners in mind. Others work with Autism support groups, NGOs and charities to ensure staff are skilled in designing programme and learning settings that meet the needs of learners with autism.

To meet the needs of all learners through an inclusive approach the principles of Universal Design have been embedded across all FET provision. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles and practices can help practitioners address variability in their learner cohorts and reduce barriers to learning by building flexibility, accessibility, learner voice, and choice in the fabric of the learning interactions they design. Applying UDL Principles means offering multiple ways of engagement, representation, action and expression, providing necessary accommodations to remove obstacles to learning as well as providing, where required, one-to-one supports and assistive technologies to support differentiated learning. SOLAS, with partner organisations AHEAD and ETBI, have published Sectoral Guidance for FET practitioners on Universal Design for Learning in FET. This guidance is being embedded in the sector through CPD programmes, including a Digital Badge for Universal Design for Learning from the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning and the ARK programme (AHEAD). A new digital badge in *Universal Design in Student Services and*

*Engagement* is also in development via a consortium of partners including SOLAS, ETBI, UCD, the NDA and learner representatives.

In accordance with the relevant legislation, all FET providers offer reasonable accommodation to learners with additional needs. The nature of those accommodations varies depending on the identified needs of individual learners. Reasonable Accommodations offered by ETBs include but are not limited to:

- Project support
- One-to-one tutoring
- Assistive technologies
- Readers and/or scribes, note takers
- Sign language interpretation

### **Specialist Training Provision**

In addition, specific FET programmes are provided for persons with a disability who require more intensive support through Specialist Training Providers (STPs). A budget of 43million is provided to Education Training Boards to fund Specialist Training Provision across the country. Over 3,000 learners avail of this intensive support.

In 2022 over 36 million has been allocated to Education Training Boards in 2022 to provide a host of supports, including guidance, an education disadvantage fund, a specific fund for persons with disabilities for Post Leaving Cert provision, psychological supports as well as a general allocation 'Learner Support' fund for all learners in all provision. Learners can also avail of one-to-one teaching on courses such as literacy, numeracy and digital skills, other courses at level 1 – 3 have small class sizes with one teacher to three Learners. Courses to support those transitioning from school pre transition year level have team teaching as well as dedicated teachers for groups of 12.

SOLAS is aware of the importance of suitable initial assessment of individuals seeking to engage with FET and FET programmes in achieving the best prospects of a successful learning journey, and that, to help ensure this, issues are identified, and appropriate supports are put in place if required. At sectoral level, SOLAS has produced a suite of good practice guidelines and resources to promote a consistent approach to initial and ongoing

assessment of learners at NFQ Levels 1-6 in relation to their literacy and numeracy needs. The use of these guidelines and resources is being embedded in the sector through the SOLAS/ETB Strategic Performance Agreements process and annual funding requirements. Finally, guidance supports are also available to learners to ensure they are informed in their access to progression in and completion of their FET programme.

I hope that this provides a brief overview of SOLAS' role and related developments in the FET Sector. I would like to thank the Committee for their time today and look forward to further discussion on this matter.

**ENDS**