



19th May 2022

Opening Statement by Alan McGrath, SOLAS, to the Joint Committee on Disability Matters

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

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 every year. 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.

Apprenticeship is a dual model that combines learning in the workplace, at least 50% on the job, and learning delivered by an education and training provider. Over 8,400 employers who currently use apprenticeship as a talent pipeline place a high value on the learning their apprentices complete in the education environment. It is intended that the number of employers using apprenticeship will grow significantly over the next few years, with 10,000 apprentice registrations per annum by 2025, requiring a significant expansion of the system.

There were very encouraging signs in 2021 of increased interest in new apprenticeship opportunities, of which there are currently 65 programmes. There were 8,607 new registrations in 2021, with an overall apprenticeship population of c24,000, far outstripping pre-pandemic levels in 2019. This demand has continued into 2022 with 2,286 registrations so far this year.

Progress has been made in implementing the Review of Pathways to Participation in Apprenticeship which has impacted positively by creating more diversity in apprenticeship; ensuring information on apprenticeships is available via a new website; the promotion of apprenticeship for all through Generation Apprenticeship; and introducing pre-apprenticeship provision. However, we need to build on this progress and just like all other learning opportunities, access, diversity, and inclusion remain essential within the national apprenticeship system. The Action Plan for Apprenticeship includes a significant number of actions which will accelerate the number of women apprentices, those with disabilities, and other under-represented groups. A dedicated equity of access committee is being established to advise the National Apprenticeship Office in this work. A first step is already underway with introduction of a gender-based bursary for eligible apprenticeship employers.

Of the current live population of 24,035 apprentices, 640 or 2.45% have self-declared a disability. As it is a self-declaration process this data may be an underestimation. The female apprentice population has grown substantially in recent years and now stands at over 1,500, although more needs to be done to address barriers to entry. A broader range of programmes in a wide array of industry sectors means there are increased options for all who are interested in starting an apprenticeship. In addition to construction, electrical and engineering-related apprenticeships, we now have a vibrant suite of apprenticeship programme in areas that include tech, bio pharma, financial services, healthcare, hospitality, and manufacturing. Apprentices can achieve qualifications at Levels 5-10 on the National Framework of Qualifications and the national apprenticeship system provides multiple lifelong learning opportunities where people can complete advanced apprenticeships as part of their career progression or as a means of changing career.

Fostering Inclusion is one of three pillars in the *Future FET – Transforming Learning*, the national FET strategy. SOLAS has published national system reports as well as a series of specific reports on priority learners, one of which includes information on FET learners who self-declare if they have a disability. In 2018, the first year of this report, 8,644 learners declared a disability, in 2019 this had increased to 13,098. Since the onset of the pandemic in 2020, the numbers of learners from priority cohorts have decreased but this is beginning to change this year as overall participation in the FET system increases.

SOLAS has commissioned an independent evaluation of Specialist Training Provision for Persons with a Disability, which is offered across the FET system. This evaluation which initially got underway in 2019 and which was delayed as result of the pandemic is now set to continue in 2022. The review will consider many aspects of this provision, including the outcomes for learners who participate. It is anticipated this review will be completed by the end of 2022.

I hope that this provides a brief overview of the work ongoing in FET and on apprenticeship with regard to people with disabilities and employment. I would like to thank the Committee for their time today and look forward to further discussion on this matter.

ENDS