



10th December 2020

Statement by SOLAS CEO, Andrew Brownlee to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

On behalf of SOLAS, ETBI and the Education and Training Boards (ETBs), I would like to thank the Chair and the Joint Committee Members for the opportunity to speak with you today and discuss the effects of Covid-19 on Further Education and Training (FET).

SOLAS has responsibility for funding, planning and coordinating FET in Ireland. Through the 16 ETBs 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. It currently serves a base of around 200,000 unique learners every year.

2020 has been an unprecedented and challenging year for FET. Our ways of working, and our ways of accessing and engaging in learning, have fundamentally changed during the course of the year, and it seems increasingly likely that they will result in a permanent legacy and impact, even if the threat from COVID diminishes over time.

The initial changes happened virtually overnight, when the first lockdown was announced in March, closing all FET facilities with immediate effect. The core aim across SOLAS, ETBs and other FET providers was to ensure that the learner was protected and that they could continue to access learning and support. This meant:

- Making online learning opportunities available during this period where FET facilities were physically closed, with swift and effective modifications to learning delivery and alternative assessment approaches put in place in accordance with quality standards.
- Opening up eCollege, the FET online learning portal, and offering digital and other online courses free-of-charge to any learners who wish to avail of them.
- Supporting the development of skills initiatives by ETBs to meet COVID-related challenges, in areas like infection control and management through remote working.

- Strong continued engagement with vulnerable learners through regular telephone contact, issuing of learning packs, and access to devices. Adult guidance services remained open via online and telephone access. New NALA phone and online resources were also introduced for those with literacy and numeracy difficulties.

On **funding**, finance was frontloaded to ETBs and other FET providers to sustain operations through the initial period of lockdown. FET learners due to complete courses were guaranteed their allowances for the duration of the closure period. As FET facilities began to re-open, additional funding of €5m was allocated to support compliance with public health and social distancing requirements, and €5m to facilitate access to technology by learners. We have liaised on an ongoing basis with ETBs regarding their funding position, and indications are that allocations have been sufficient, and savings may even occur due to the lockdown period for FET facilities. An €8m fund for ETBs and community education providers has also been launched in the final quarter of the year to mitigate educational disadvantage as a result of COVID.

This has all helped to support a robust strategy for the re-opening of, and admission to, FET facilities. Implementation guidelines were produced by ETBI in consultation with key stakeholders, and they set out measures to re-open and safely deliver teaching and learning activities. This included managing and minimising the risk of COVID-19 in FET settings, and controlling outbreaks should they occur. In common with higher education, there was a focus on facilitating the lab-based and practical learning which cannot be delivered effectively online, including apprenticeship provision. However there was also acknowledgement that small group learning in areas like adult and community education, literacy and numeracy support and Youthreach could proceed onsite, given the needs of these particular learners.

While the restrictions throughout this year have had an impact on ETB capacity to deliver further education and training, overall **admissions** across courses have remained strong and are approaching 2019 levels, while varying across different types of provision. The move to more online, flexible learning opportunities facilitated a significant ramp up of workforce upskilling under the Skills to Advance initiative, with over 8,000 employees undertaking courses. PLC admissions have held up strongly in many parts of the country, while eCollege has drawn many new learners into FET. However participation on apprenticeship and other very practical skills courses has declined due to the closure of training facilities and limited capacity upon re-opening.

Yet the crisis also created a moment of opportunity for FET. At the beginning of 2020, we were on the cusp of launching a new 5 year strategy for the system, Transforming Learning, which set out an ambitious reform agenda for the system:

- FET can offer opportunities to so many people with so many different needs, but it is currently too complex, with too many programmes, and we need to simplify pathways to ensure that all learners understand how they can progress within FET and into exciting jobs or into higher education.
- We need to make FET easier to access, with clear and multiple entry points for all types of learners, and learning delivered in more flexible ways making full use of technology.
- There must be a more consistent learner experience, with the same levels of support and guidance on offer regardless of course and location.
- We must build a more powerful identity, developing consolidated, larger scale FET colleges of the future which can help to change the hearts and minds of the communities that they serve.

The strategy is built across 3 pillars: building skills, fostering inclusion and facilitating pathways. It also identifies some key enabling themes: modernisation of staffing and structures; digital transformation; a learner and performance centred approach; and focused capital development. Of course there is an immediate imperative for FET to lead the upskilling response as part of the recovery, and we are rolling out a Skills to Compete initiative to ensure that those left unemployed are able to find a pathway back into sustainable work. Under the July stimulus, we are also coordinating an apprenticeship incentive scheme for employers and rolling-out an upskilling programme in support of the national retrofitting plan.

I hope that this provides a brief overview of the response of the FET system to COVID-19 and the critical reform agenda it is now pursuing. I would like to thank the Committee for their time today and look forward to further discussion on this matter.

ENDS