



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

2nd November 2021

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 on Leaving Certificate Reform with reference to Further and Higher and Education, Vocational Options and Career Paths.

SOLAS is an agency within the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and is the statutory authority for Further Education and Training (FET). We have responsibility for funding, coordinating and monitoring of FET provision across Ireland and we are also the statutory authority for apprenticeships. 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. School leavers are a significant part of this provision including circa 30,000 students on Post Leaving Certificate courses and over 20,000 on apprenticeship programmes in 2020.

SOLAS very much welcomes the Government's commitment to reform of the Leaving Certificate and Senior Cycle education, and the resulting focus on improving access and pathways into all forms of tertiary education for people in Ireland.

Currently over 70% of second level students in Ireland choose to enter Higher Education directly after their Leaving Certificate. It is our belief however, that a proportion of these students would be better suited to a technical or vocational route, where they could really develop their creativity or technical skills. Key to achieving this is providing the opportunity

to learn about further education and training courses and apprenticeships at the point where decisions are being made on their future learning pathways post-secondary school.

In response to this, I am delighted to confirm that, for the first time, 2022 CAO applicants will be able to get information and apply for Further Education and Training courses and view Apprenticeship options via a link from the Central Applications Office (CAO) website when it opens this Friday. This means that all of a school leavers' options will be available to them on one single platform. This is a significant step towards improving pathways and will bring a focus on all the opportunities available for students.

More work is needed however in order to achieve the ambition of having an integrated and inclusive tertiary education system. Together with Education and Training Boards and other FET Stakeholders, we are one year into the implementation of the ambitious Further Education and Training Strategy, Future FET; Transforming Learning 2020 – 2024 (the FET Strategy). The FET Strategy sets out a clear strategic roadmap for the FET system which centres on the three core pillars of Building Skills, Fostering Inclusion and Creating Pathways. In the context of Leaving Certificate reform, the pillar of Creating Pathways has specific relevance in terms of school leavers entering into the FET system.

The lack of exposure to vocational learning and lack of vocational options in junior and senior cycles is highlighted as a barrier to school leavers developing an interest in FET. This finding was reinforced through our engagement with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and was underscored in the SOLAS formal submission to the public consultation on the reform of Senior Cycle. International approaches suggest a potential role for FET in offering modules and tasters of vocational courses to second-level students where existing teaching resources do not have the required technical experience available. The potential for apprenticeship taster offerings as part of Transition Year is currently being tested with some schools. The scale of this collaborative practice has the potential to be further expanded, due to the significant advantage of the ETBs operating many second-level schools. This could facilitate piloting of any new approaches and potentially support earlier interventions to inform future learner pathways to FET. Furthermore, it provides a basis to

consider the introduction of offerings of Level 5 and Level 6 modules as an integrated part of the Senior Cycle.

All-of-system career guidance is also vital for successful reform. The FET Strategy outlines this, building on the independent report commissioned by the Government on career guidance. SOLAS and ETBs work closely with both the Institute of Guidance Counsellors and the National Centre Guidance in Education to ensure their members are equipped with the latest information on Further Education and Training options and we look forward to continuing to work with them to further improve timely access to information on FET options.

As a general principle, it is important that FET is promoted as a valid and smart potential destination from the earliest stage within schools. SOLAS has launched successful national campaigns in recent years to build awareness around FET and apprenticeship options which are vital to ensure that ETBs can compete on an equal footing in terms of choices for progression by school leavers.

In conclusion, as the FET Strategy and relevant cross Government policy and engagement to date demonstrates, there is real possibility now for ambitious reform for the wider system and the Leaving Certificate programme. This reform and the other key actions outlined in the FET strategy together will deliver tangible change that better serves both the needs of the learner and also the country as a whole - in terms of directly tackling labour and skills shortages and supporting the achievement of national goals and challenges such as Future Jobs, Climate Change and Project Ireland 2040. Continuing to build and strengthen pathways from secondary school to FET is a key strategic objective for SOLAS and the wider Further Education and Training Sector. Vocational options in TY and Senior Cycle, reform of the CAO and continuing to work with guidance professionals are key to unlocking this growth.

I hope that this provides a brief overview of the SOLAS views on matters related to reform of the Leaving Certificate. I would like to thank the Committee for their time today and look forward to further discussion on this matter.

Thank you.