



1st March 2022

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

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 issues around the future funding model for higher education, including development of apprenticeships.

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. It 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. ~~It is~~[We are](#) currently working with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Higher Education Authority to establish a jointly managed National Apprenticeship Office.

The issue of future funding for higher education cannot be separated from the issue of support for further education and training (FET) and apprenticeship. Currently over 70% of school leavers in Ireland choose to enter higher education directly as their future pathway. While our high levels of higher education participation serve as an attribute which enhances Ireland's global reputation, there is now a case for a more balanced tertiary system with an enhanced role for further education and apprenticeships, in line with most other international systems.

Transforming Learning, the Future FET Strategy, sets out a clear roadmap for development of the system which centres on the three core pillars of Building Skills, Fostering Inclusion and Creating Pathways. In addition, the Strategy includes a core group of enabling themes to support and underpin the vision and strategic targets of the Future FET agenda. The Strategy has the capacity to both enhance and transform what is already a very exciting system, supporting around 200,000 unique

learners on an annual basis, primarily through the network of 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) across Ireland.

Within the pathways pillar, it seeks to build the contribution of FET by building greater links between school and FET, within FET and from FET to HE. One of the big early priorities was to make school leavers more aware of further education and apprenticeship options alongside HE choices at CAO decision time. For the first time this year, a link was available from the CAO website which allowed them to explore all of the potential pathways. To date, around 35,000 linked to either apprenticeship or further education and training information as a result of visiting the CAO website, which we hope will lead to increased demand for these options. It should not be seen as an either/or scenario between FET and HE, as there is also potential to build on some already strong links between the two systems to establish more consistent pathways and explore co-development and co-delivery of programmes by FET and HE providers. Indeed there is evidence that for a cohort of school leavers, having the foundation of a FET experience prior to entering higher education significantly increases their chances of completing their degree.

In apprenticeship, there have been very encouraging signs in 2021 of increased interest in 25 craft and 37 new apprenticeship opportunities. There were over 8,600 new registrations during the year, with an overall apprenticeship population of 24,212 in December, far outstripping pre-pandemic levels in 2019, and an encouraging sign in seeking to meet the National Apprenticeship Action Plan target of 10,000 per annum in 2022.

Of course, the pandemic had a significant impact on craft apprenticeship provision, with HE and FET facilities closed for 9 of the first 15 months and the system only able to return to full capacity from September 2021¹². This created a significant waiting list at the end of the summer of last year, but an emergency action plan has been put in place, with 7,000 [apprentices](#) already back in [off-the-job](#) training and the vast majority scheduled to be back by the end of this year. The emergency plan included a blended delivery model which allowed us to move to 3 intakes a year rather than 2 for Phase 2 apprentices; capital investment and more instructors to expand capacity across Phases 2, 4 and 6; and ~~fasttracking~~[fast-tracking](#) the Phase 7 qualification period. Continuing to expand capacity remains a critical priority of SOLAS - not only to ensure that new registrants are able to access off-the-job training in a timely manner, but also to ensure that capacity exists to meet the significant national challenges around Housing for All and Climate Action.

It is also important that funding remains available across both FET and HE to develop new ideas for apprenticeships. While the apprenticeship system has developed significantly since the first action

plan was launched, there is scope for more higher education institutions to become involved in development of programmes. There also still exists major untapped potential in developing further apprenticeship programmes across FET.

I hope that this provides a brief overview of the issues with regard to the higher education funding model that are relevant to further education and training and apprenticeships. I would like to thank the Committee for their time today and look forward to further discussion on this matter.

ENDS