



Tuesday, 27th February 2024

Opening Statement by Andrew Brownlee, CEO of 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 update you on implementation of recommendations outlined in the report 'North/South Student Enrolment in Tertiary Education'.

SOLAS is the state agency responsible for Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland. Our vision is to power the potential of individuals, communities and enterprise through lifelong learning and workforce transformation. In recent years we have led an ambitious FET Strategy [Transforming Learning](#) and driven change across the FET system – providing easier access; simplified pathways; a consistent learner experience; and a stronger identity. This has led to unprecedented growth and demand for FET, with the learner base growing by some 17% from 2022 to 2023. Indeed, we know that one in ten adults in Ireland – around 423,000 people – were engaged in apprenticeships, our construction skills schemes or other FET activity last year. Our message has been strong and consistent - FET is for everyone, regardless of your level of formal education. It is available in every community in Ireland and will offer you a valuable and recognised pathway to take you as far as you want to go.

Recommendations contained in the Joint Committee report specifically tasked the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and SOLAS with the promotion of cross border student enrolment. Since we last briefed the Committee in February 2023, we have progressed significant collaborations with partners in Northern Ireland to support the growth of FET and to encourage a more seamless cross-border flow of students.

Developments include:

- Engagement with the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland to discuss further education - sharing learning from our approaches and exploring opportunities to develop stronger links between both systems.
- The development of a new network that brings together further education providers both North and South – six regional colleges in Northern Ireland along with Education and Training Boards (ETBs). A meeting of the network took place in Enniskillen last November at South West Regional College, with a follow up conference scheduled for March.
 - SOLAS and the ETBs are also part of the College Alliance - a network that brings together further education leaders in Ireland, Wales, Scotland, England and Northern Ireland to share ideas and good practice.
- We are also working with South West Regional College and North West Regional College in Northern Ireland to support us to increase short-term capacity for the delivery of Phase 2 craft apprenticeship training.

- The Advanced Manufacturing Pathways Schools Project is a cross border initiative led by Louth & Meath ETB and South West Regional College. The initiative aims to encourage school students to consider careers in manufacturing and engineering via FET and apprenticeships.
 - It also gives teachers the opportunity for upskilling in key areas of advanced manufacturing technologies, with a network of support and collaboration across schools. Their students also gain access to learning about new technological advancements.
- Progression of the first all-island apprenticeship for accounting technologists – this is based on a new occupational need identified by the professional body Accounting Technicians Ireland (ATI), working with Open University as the coordinating provider in the North and Technological University of the Shannon in the South.
- A range of skills initiatives by the North West Regional Tertiary Cluster, involving Donegal ETB, Northwest Regional College, Atlantic Technological University and Ulster University, with recent work including a focus on electric vehicles.

There is also potential for greater cross-border links around community education. SOLAS supports AONTAS, the adult learning organisation which works on an all-island basis, who published the first Northern Ireland community education census in September 2023. This research details the immense contribution and impact adult education has on communities, individuals, and society, but also highlights some of the challenges that the sector is facing. SOLAS is committed to supporting collaborative initiatives like these, that provide important opportunities to share best practice, build knowledge and enhance partnership links between North and South.

There have been incredible strides made in tertiary education development. To provide more accessible pathways from Further Education to Higher Education, SOLAS and the HEA co-developed a range of programmes that support a learner to commence a course in an ETB and continue in a HEI to obtain a degree. 23 courses commenced in September, across 11 locations and 5 fields of provision. There is potential to explore this model further from a cross-border perspective.

The recent announcement by Government of €800m for Shared Island investment priorities includes funding for pilot programmes focusing on educational underachievement. Initiatives like these are vital to help strengthen the links between North and South - increasing collaboration, sharing innovation, and creating additional pathways and opportunities for learners. The developments noted above offer a platform to develop proposals in response to the fund. SOLAS will support ETBs in working with regional colleges in Northern Ireland to progress this forward.

In summary, we have made some important progress in developing and building partnerships between the North and South and this should provide a solid foundation for increasing student enrolments in the future.

I hope that this provides a brief update on the recent developments in North/South collaboration around Further Education and Training. I would like to thank the Committee for their time today and look forward to further discussion on this matter.

ENDS