

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS AGUS SCILEANNA

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Dé Máirt, 17 Nollaig 2019

Tuesday, 17 December 2019

The Joint Committee met at 3.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

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|------------------------|-------------------|
| Thomas Byrne, | Maria Byrne, |
| Catherine Martin, | Robbie Gallagher, |
| Tony McLoughlin, | Lynn Ruane. |
| Hildegarde Naughton, | |
| Jan O'Sullivan, | |
| Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire. | |

I láthair / In attendance: Deputy Declan Breathnach.

Teachta / Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

The joint committee met in private session until 3.57 p.m.

Dundalk Institute of Technology and SOLAS: Chairpersons Designate

Chairman: I remind members and witnesses to turn off their mobile phones because they interfere with the sound system and make it difficult for the parliamentary reporters to report the meeting. They also impact on television coverage and web streaming. The second item on our agenda is engagement with Mr. Paddy Malone, chairperson designate of the governing body of Dundalk Institute of Technology, and Mr. Sean Aylward, chairperson designate of SOLAS. I also welcome Ms Nikki Gallagher, who is accompanying Mr. Aylward. All the witnesses are very welcome.

The purpose of this part of the meeting is to have an engagement and to allow members of the committee to discuss with Mr. Malone and Mr. Aylward their visions and priorities for the short to medium term and any challenges facing their respective bodies and the people whom they represent. On behalf of the committee, it is my pleasure to welcome Mr. Malone and Mr. Aylward. The format of this part of the meeting is that I will invite the witnesses to make brief opening statements of three minutes each. These will be followed by engagement with members of the committee. The witnesses will then have the opportunity to respond.

Before we begin, I draw the witnesses' attention to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2) (l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the Chair to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

I advise the witnesses that any opening statement they have made to the committee will be published on the committee website after the meeting.

I remind members of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

This is an opportunity for us to engage with both of our witnesses in public session. I call on Mr. Malone to make his opening statement.

Mr. Patrick W. Malone: I thank the Chairman very much for inviting me to attend today. I have already circulated my CV so I will not laboriously read through what members already have before them. It is boring enough. I am an accountant by profession. I was born in Dundalk. I did my bachelor of commerce degree and then trained with Arthur Andersen, which was the largest accountancy firm in the world at the time. I, therefore, have a good grounding in procedures and large companies. I specialised in taxation, which I will come back to in a few minutes. After qualifying, I stayed in Arthur Andersen for a year to pick up some experience. I then worked in the construction industry for two years in Dundalk at which point I was headhunted and asked to get involved in a medium-sized practice in Dublin, which I did. As part of that, I worked on the audit of a large insurance company that collapsed in the 1980s. It

will not take a genius to work out what company I am talking about. At 24 years of age, I was the one who wrote the report that caused that company to collapse. I did it because I was able to prove to everyone's satisfaction that my report was correct. That was despite the fact three other accountancy firms had audited the company in the previous 18 months on behalf of the Department so I have a forensic way of looking at and reading things if I have to. That created a lot of challenges for me with other people and I have proven I can stand up to being bullied and whatever else. I do not like to do that but I can do so if I have to.

I bought a practice in 1989, which was based in Drogheda, and I ran it while my father was running his practice in Dundalk. When he died, I merged the two practices and brought everything together in Dundalk. The practice is wide and diverse. I deal with everything from small operations to some large companies because of my taxation work. I have considerable experience, therefore, in the accountancy and business world. I have been president of Dundalk Chamber of Commerce and I have had various posts since 2000 relating to that. As president of Dundalk Chamber of Commerce, I worked in schemes with the then Department of Industry and Commerce and DkIT to advance accountancy students in DkIT to work with the accountancy profession in Dundalk. I also contacted DkIT, brought it on board and got it actively involved on the board of Dundalk Chamber of Commerce. To this day, there has been no break in service between Dundalk Chamber of Commerce and DkIT working together for the business community in the area. I feel strongly about that. I have also lectured on tax in DkIT on a part-time basis. As part of the brief on what I have done in recent years, including addressing committees similar to this, I have been responsible in part, or have been the lead, in producing four reports on cross-Border issues and the various economic circumstances in the area. The first report was done with Louth County Council and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council in 2010. The second report was for the Joint Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation in its discussion on an all-island economy. The third report was for Project Ireland 2040.

In the submission for Project Ireland 2040, I was the only one out of more than 300 submissions who called for the recognition of the Border corridor, which is the M1 from Drogheda and Dundalk to Newry. I am glad the Government listened to what I suggested and it is now in Project Ireland 2040. The DkIT is ideally placed to maximise the advantage of the M1 corridor. There are 2.3 million people within an hour's drive of Dundalk and Drogheda. O'Connell Street in Dublin can only claim that 2 million people are within an hour's drive of it. Belfast has 1.5 million within an hour's drive and Cork has 500,000 within an hour's drive. Dundalk and Drogheda can reach a significant area because both Dublin and Belfast are in their proximity. That is a unique situation. DkIT's role is to maximise the advantage it has in the region. The submission I made on the M1 corridor showed I talked about the region and not just about Dundalk. I am not Dundalk-centric but I see the whole region. That region is as defined by DkIT, namely Louth, Meath, Monaghan and Cavan. I feel strongly that the M1 corridor is the route to take forward but it also needs integration between the DkIT and business.

One success DkIT has had is WuXi Biologics, which is the latest Chinese company to invest in Dundalk. Some 76% of its intake so far has come from that M1 corridor region. We are positioned strongly but we need an institute that can grow into a technical university that can stand on its own two feet. While we have a large population beside us, we also have the threat of National University of Ireland, Maynooth, NUIM, and Dublin City University, DCU, on one side and the University of Ulster and Queen's University Belfast on the other side. That is both an advantage and a negative but I see it as an advantage overall.

Chairman: As there are two distinct areas, it is important we deal with each stakeholder

individually. I will take questions from members, starting with Deputy Thomas Byrne.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I welcome Mr. Malone to the meeting and I thank him for his service in agreeing to do this job. As I understand it, these jobs are not paid. It is a labour of love and I know Mr. Malone has a love for his town and his region. That is an important starting point and I welcome that.

I see DkIT as a pre-eminent education provider, as will most people. I do not see it as being in competition with NUIM or DCU but as providing an education for the people of the four counties Mr. Malone has mentioned. We need to make sure an appropriate range of courses is available in DkIT for the region. The vision of people such as Patrick Hillery and Donogh O'Malley had when these institutes of technology, ITs, or regional colleges were set up originally was to make sure people had somewhere to go in their local area and to ensure the education was of a high standard. Following on from education, we see research and other things happening, such as links with business. I do not see business as the be-all and end-all of an education facility. It is much broader than that. Business is an important part and third level institutions in general are important economic drivers in their areas that should be maximised to the best advantage but they are institutes of education first and foremost. It is always important for us to remember education is good in and of itself, at whatever level people take it up. I want that vision to continue.

I met the president of DkIT last week and it was a productive meeting. I spoke to Mr. Malone outside just now about it but as a Deputy in the region, with a special interest in DkIT having had family members attend there, I look forward to working with him and Mr. Mulvey as a public representative in the area in whatever way I can. I wish Mr. Malone well. I do not have any questions for him. His good reputation goes before him in the region and I welcome him to the job.

Chairman: Before I let Senator Gallagher in, I need to excuse myself because I have a question coming up in the Dáil Chamber. I ask for a volunteer to take the Chair. Will Deputy McLoughlin take the Chair?

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: I propose Deputy Thomas Byrne to take the Chair.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Deputy McLoughlin gave out to me the last time.

Chairman: Deputy Naughton will take my place while I am putting a question in the Dáil.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton took the Chair.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I welcome Mr. Malone. I was impressed by his presentation. He has gathered a wide range of skills in his life to date and I am hopeful he will bring the expertise he has gained into his new role as well. I am impressed that rather than talking about Dundalk singularly, Mr. Malone talked about the region. As someone who represents Monaghan and Cavan, that is important to people in the neck of the woods I come from.

On that point, could he explain the extent of the current relationship between DkIT, Monaghan Institute and Cavan Institute? Where does Mr. Malone see that role and what room is there to expand upon that relationship that will be mutually beneficial to all the citizens who live within that corridor that was mentioned earlier? What changes would he like to make to the current set-up in DkIT? Where does he see room for expansion and where does he see potential risk going forward?

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I wish Mr. Malone the best. I was impressed with his presentation. He is clearly well qualified for the position and, like previous speakers, I acknowledge a regional view was taken and a cross-Border view was also taken, which is important and welcome given the location of DkIT. He identified that there is a less than optimal number of students crossing the Border from the North to study in DkIT. Can he elaborate on that? Are there any plans to address that? A number of issues with the DkIT have come to our attention. I appreciate Mr. Malone is the chairperson designate and not the president but there are two issues I want to address. One is the balloting for industrial action in DkIT in recent times. Can Mr. Malone offer any observation on whether there is progress on that issue and if positions of the union representatives and the management of DkIT are coming closer together? The transition to a technological university is also going to be a key issue for DkIT. Many other institutions have already made applications. It is going to be a big change for them. From the perspective of DkIT, how far along is the process? How does Mr. Malone intend to support DkIT and encourage that process along?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): Will I keep going? I call Senator Maria Byrne.

Senator Maria Byrne: I welcome Mr. Malone and thank him for his presentation. What thoughts and plans does he have as he takes up his position? I read his CV and listened to what he had to say. He brings a great deal of experience to the role. He spoke about the region. I am a firm believer in the region. I would like to hear Mr. Malone's thoughts on how he would like to see DkIT developing.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: Mr. Malone is welcome. I was going through his CV and I was very impressed. I have one or two questions. Mr. Malone mentioned the M1 corridor and North-South relations. Will he elaborate on that aspect? What direction or vision does he have for DkIT, and for the students and businesses it serves in the area? If Mr. Malone is as successful in this as he has been with Dundalk FC, he will be very successful indeed. I am a great supporter of Sligo Rovers, but I have seen Mr. Malone's track record in recent years. I wish him well in his new position.

Deputy Declan Breathnach: I am not a member of the committee, but I thought it important to come along to welcome Paddy Malone because I have known him for many years. He is taking on a role in which I wish him well. DkIT has more than 5,000 students and 500 staff. As others have stated, the institute makes a great contribution not only to north Leinster but also to south Ulster. We have 1,400 students qualifying every year from the various faculties, including engineering, humanities, business, informatics, creative arts and health and science. Mr. Malone referred to WuXi Biologics. More than 90% of DkIT graduates remain within the region. That provides a powerful injection of fresh talent, energy and motivation to enterprise and the community in general.

I wish Mr. Malone well for the future. His new role will be a big one in the context of seeking technological university status and developing research, innovation and teaching. I have come here to endorse Mr. Malone as somebody whom I have known for a lifetime. I know his total commitment, not only to Dundalk but also to the wider

region. He referenced the region several times in what he had to say, including in respect of his contribution to the county development board and, in particular, regarding the M1 corridor. That is a crucial part of the role DkIT can play in developing our region. I wish Mr. Malone well in working with the President and the staff of DkIT. Colleges are struggling at present to

decide their direction. We all accept that technological status is important. There is a major contribution to be made in the context of cross-Border co-operation. I wish Mr. Malone well also in getting that co-operation from the board and the politicians who will serve on the board, as well as businesses across the region.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: I thank Mr. Malone for his presentation. The big issues have been raised by others. I add my voice on the cross-Border issue in particular. The geographic location and history of DkIT indicates that there has been co-operation, along with Letterkenny Institute of Technology which has a similar relationship with the North. My question concerns Brexit. It is probably going to go through, considering the results of the British general election. Talks are also ongoing regarding getting the Stormont Assembly up and running.

My understanding is that in the North there are two departments with responsibility for education because higher education comes under the remit of a different department from primary and second level education. Assuming that the assembly gets up and running, will DkIT, under the leadership of Mr. Malone, be engaging quickly with Northern Ireland and the assembly to ensure that the kind of relationships built up can continue? Discussions are underway concerning who pays if students from the North come South or *vice versa*. In general, there will be issues regarding British students because of Brexit, but as I understand it they will not cause too much difficulty. What are Mr. Malone’s thoughts on those issues and engaging north of the Border in the new context we are likely to see in the next few months?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I also wish Mr. Malone well. Many of the questions I wished to ask related to Brexit and they have been well formulated by my colleagues. Mr. Malone can answer the questions in any order he wishes.

Mr. Patrick W. Malone: First, I will pick up on what Deputy Thomas Byrne said. He made an important point. My father believed in education for the sake of education. The education he gave me was much broader than a narrow business focus. That was the case to such an extent that when I wanted to follow in his footsteps and be an accountant, he would not allow me to study any accountancy subject when I was in secondary school. I got that view of education from my father and I have continued the same process with my children. I agree completely with Deputy Byrne on that.

Turning to the question about Monaghan, my situation is that while the Minister indicated he was appointing me in July, the first meeting I was able to attend, for various reasons, was only three weeks ago. I have only recently been able to come up to speed on this topic. The problem we have is that neither Cavan nor Monaghan is feeding into DkIT in the way that was envisaged. This is evident from the statistics. That is why I made reference to Maynooth University and DCU. People from the Cavan and Monaghan area, particularly the southern parts, are heading towards DCU rather than DkIT. We are well aware of that challenge and we have begun to address it.

The new plan being drafted envisages the establishment of outreach programmes in Cavan town and Monaghan town and the initiation of blended services by using Skype and other methods of engaging with students in the Cavan and Monaghan area. We do not have to physically move everybody to the same spot anymore. We need to get our heads around how education can evolve over the years so that it is not a case of a classroom situation. That is happening and DkIT is well positioned in the process because one of the great advantages it has is what is referred to as the Carroll Building. That was bought by the Government in 2004 or 2005 and the interior was completely renovated. Another €20 million was spent on it and if anyone here

is ever going through Dundalk, I strongly recommend stopping and going to have a look at the building. It is an incredible feat. It is the only building on the island of Ireland constructed in the 20th century that is considered worthy of world architectural importance. Busáras and similar buildings did not make it. The building is so important that if it needs to be cleaned someone has to come from the National Museum to supervise it. The building works as media centre, however, and it gives us the facilities to reach out beyond the campus. We have the technology to do that and it is already in place. The draft plan refers to that.

The draft plan also envisages contact with Northern Ireland and dealing with cross-Border matters. We have a problem in that area and it is a big one. It is one I have been campaigning on for nearly 20 years, and Deputy Breathnach will be aware of it. I am referring to the CAO's attitude towards A levels. A student in Newry will pursue three or four A levels. The ranking for that is 150 points, which means that if that student in Newry gets three A1s in her or his A levels, she or he will only get 450 points. Such a result will not get that student into half the colleges that it should do in the South. I am talking not only about Dundalk but elsewhere as well. The closed attitude towards looking to Belfast or the British mainland in education must be shifted. That is a challenge for DKIT. Ten years ago, as president of Dundalk Chamber of Commerce, I got Newry Chamber of Commerce to bring final year students from secondary schools in the area to DKIT to show them the institute. That has been done on an *ad hoc* basis since then. I intend to repeat it in Newry and large towns in the area to make them aware of DKIT. When one talks to people from Newry, Newcastle, Banbridge or elsewhere in south County Down, it becomes apparent that they do not know what DKIT is. We need to get that message across. When I first became involved in DKIT it had fewer than 80 students from Northern Ireland, which is 10 km from the campus. Today, it has approximately 250 students from Northern Ireland. However, we have 400 Chinese students who have travelled halfway around the world to attend DKIT. There is something odd about that. Those Chinese students are paying full whack but, as Deputy Jan O'Sullivan pointed out, students from Northern Ireland will not be asked to pay full whack. It has been settled that Brexit will not have an impact in that regard.

Brexit is the elephant in the room. I wish I had a pound for every time I have misspoken on Brexit through the past three years, whether on local radio or to international organisations. It has become a significant problem. It is infesting all aspects of life along the Border, as Senator Gallagher is probably aware. Everything one touches is affected by Brexit, and education and DKIT are no different in that regard, even though we do not have many students from Northern Ireland.

Opportunities as well as challenges will arise from Britain leaving the EU, as we must accept it will. A significant amount of research funded by Horizon 2020 and other EU programmes requires the involvement of an English-speaking university. Oxford, Cambridge and other British universities are being removed from such programmes, which offers an opportunity to universities and technical third level institutes in the Twenty-six Counties. There will be changes in research carried out in a European context. Since the Brexit process began in 2016, Queen's University Belfast has been unable to fulfil certain research jobs because it was only able to guarantee up to 2020 or 2021. There are opportunities. I do not wish to profit from the problems being experienced by Queen's or Ulster University. I would prefer to work collaboratively with them.

On the 2040 plan, I addressed Queen's University Belfast on what the 2040 plan could mean for the island of Ireland. I have been critical of the 2040 plan since it was published even though, as a member of Louth County Council pointed out to me, it contains sections on Brexit

and the M1 corridor. The feedback on the 2040 plan is a closed loop. There are three regions in the Twenty-six Counties and they can feed into the national plan, but there is nothing to allow direct feedback on it from Belfast or Stormont. It is possible that such feedback is gathered indirectly. Louth County Council and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council signed a memorandum of understanding allowing for co-operation between them on various matters. I signed it on behalf of Dundalk Chamber of Commerce and Deputy Breathnach also signed it. It was the first such memorandum between two local authorities in different jurisdictions within the EU. It has worked well and allowed Newry, Mourne and Down District Council to feed in its views on the 2040 plan. There is a gap in that regard. I do not wish to deal too heavily with the 2040 plan.

I refer to the M1 corridor, which forms part of the plan. I approached Drogheda Chamber of Commerce and Newry Chamber of Commerce with the idea that the M1 corridor would be a single homogenous unit from Drogheda to Newry. They both bought into it. It would not be defined on a county border basis. Although it is to be hoped that County Louth will lead and drive it, it will involve counties Monaghan, Meath, Armagh and Down. The idea behind it is to advertise the region as a whole. One of the problems with being a Border county is that people tended to plan up to the Border such that by the time one got to Drogheda, it was already dissipating, by the time one got to the next town, Dunleer, it was almost dead, and by the time one got to Dundalk, it was dead. We did not see the benefits and we suffered in that regard.

I trained in Andersens in the late 1970s and was exposed to much international business. The only IDA business to come to the Dundalk region in the period between 1974 and 1994 was Heinz. It came to the area because its chief executive, Mr. Tony O'Reilly, knew that Dundalk was not El Paso. I do not like using that term but do so to emphasise my point. The region must be sold as a region. If I try to sell Dundalk or Drogheda, it will not work. We must get across the message that it is a region.

Cross-Border co-operation is of great importance. I have spoken to people in Queen's, Newry and Warrenpoint about the 2040 plan and the idea of looking North and South. I have also discussed it with Newry Chamber of Commerce. The Belfast Region City Deal, which is about to be launched, extends to the Border. We need to see an integration between it and the M1 corridor. I strongly believe that there should be integration between all aspects of the two projects. I have a bee in my bonnet about it.

DKIT is at the centre of this process. There are 2.3 million people within an hour's drive of Dundalk or Drogheda, whereas there are only 2 million people within an hour's drive of Dublin. We have three airports and the fastest broadband in Ireland, with speeds of 1 GB compared with an average speed of 250 MB in the IFSC. We have everything going for us. We can take the pressure off Dublin and allow for expansion in the region. There is more zoned land in the area than anywhere else. Many required aspects are geared up for expansion. DKIT has the capacity to be the lead partner in it. I hope I have addressed all questions on Brexit and not flogged it too much.

On technical university status and industrial relations, the industrial action is an operational matter, not a strategy matter and, as such, is not a problem directly for the board. Of course, the board must address our strategy regarding technical university status. The president took considerable time over making that call. The commitment from the governing body based on the draft plan, which will be approved in January, is to go for technical university status. As such, we will have to merge with another organisation and consideration has been given to the identification of a suitable partner. Technological University Dublin, which is already up and

running, has been suggested. My personal opinion is that our joining it would be like sticking something onto a much bigger element and would not work. Limerick IT and Athlone IT were also suggested but they are being funded possibly to link up and create what is being referred to as Shannon technical university. DKIT is nowhere near the River Shannon. The third involves Letterkenny IT, Institute of Technology Sligo, Dundalk and the Border counties. That goes back to tapping into the potential that Brexit offers from the point of view of students wanting an EU education as well as the research funding available in respect of EU projects. I do not have a closed mind to the first two options, but I know where most work would have to be done. A decision has not yet been made. That is the challenge we have. There was some talk of staying where we are, but if we do, we die. We will move on and go in that direction. We envisage servicing a wider area. There will be technical problems relating to delivering education in two jurisdictions where there are different ways of looking at things. There has already been co-operation with Queen's and Ulster University. It is a matter of working out what must be done and then addressing it to the Oireachtas, the Department or elsewhere if necessary and stating that we wish to do this and that it is good for everyone. The more collaboration there is between universities, the broader the education, as Deputy Thomas Byrne stated, and the greater the variety. That opportunity is in front of us.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I thank Mr. Malone for his reply. I invite Mr. Aylward to make his opening statement.

Mr. Sean Aylward: I am deeply honoured to have been offered the opportunity to serve as chairperson of SOLAS. I thank the committee for inviting me to set out my vision for SOLAS and further education and training in Ireland over the next five years. In short, my reason for appearing before the committee is my lifelong belief in the importance of realising everyone's human potential, that is, the capacity to achieve, inherent in every individual, irrespective of his or her initial life circumstances. Those of us who have been fortunate enough to build our lives and careers in this country know well the value of solid pathways to advancement. Building and maintaining those supportive, vocational pathways is the central mission of SOLAS. It is early days, especially in my case, but I have been impressed by how the new SOLAS chief executive and his executive colleagues have embraced the mission. My board colleagues, whom I met for the first time a few weeks ago, are also fully supportive of the strategic direction being adopted by the CEO and his team. I do not come before the committee with ready answers to all the challenges SOLAS faces. It is clear that fundamental issues have to be addressed. As chairperson, I will work with my board colleagues and the staff of SOLAS to ensure that the highest standards of governance will be maintained in achieving our objectives.

This is a pivotal time for further education and training, FET, in Ireland, as the committee members will probably know better than anyone. SOLAS and the education and training boards, ETBs, were established and reconstituted, respectively, in 2013 and the concept of an integrated FET system was set out at that juncture. SOLAS initially focused on setting up a good establishment and developmental approach. The immediate priorities in 2013 were setting up the organisation, getting the structures and relationships right, and embedding the systems and processes to support planning and funding in the field and the gathering of learner data. In turn, the first stab at a further education and training strategy 2014-19 was developed as what was intended to be an all-encompassing plan. It set out many complex and multiple stakeholder arrangements, five goals and 52 detailed actions. It was an ambitious and challenging agenda.

The year 2016 saw the launch of an action plan for apprenticeships and traineeships, as well as the agreement of national FET system targets with the Minister for Education and Skills. It

also involved the establishment of strategic performance agreements between SOLAS and the 16 ETBs. This was perhaps the breakthrough moment for SOLAS. It was the juncture at which a sense of the future direction in which the FET system needed to evolve began to emerge. The significant progress made over the lifetime of the 2014-19 strategy has put a really strong foundation in place for SOLAS to lead the system into an exciting and perhaps challenging new era, working closely in partnership with the ETBs and the other FET providers to deliver integration, reform and performance improvement. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of the partnerships that SOLAS has forged and will forge in the future. It is part of SOLAS's statutory responsibility to propose an FET strategy to the Minister every five years. The work to prepare the second strategy for the period 2020 to 2024 has produced an exciting draft and transformational vision for the next, critical phase of FET development. Its adoption is not far away, given that 2020 is rapidly approaching.

I was delighted to be put forward to chair the SOLAS board as the new strategy neared completion. It is an exciting time for SOLAS and the wider sector. I am impressed at the level of stakeholder buy-in to the ambitious vision for the future in this vital area of education and training. The new strategy will be based on a structure that goes to the core of FET, a sector that embodies and embraces diversity. Our learners in the sector come from all walks of life, are aged from 18 to 70 years and above, and span the globe in their places of origin. In 2019, there were learners in our system in various parts of the country from more than 180 countries, all of them taking part in FET courses.

Fundamentally, FET revolves around skills development, learning pathways and inclusion, and the system's future strategic priorities have been framed around those pillars. Nevertheless, there is a parallel focus by SOLAS on the main factors that should enable this, namely, staffing and structures, digital transformation, a performance and learner-centred approach, and investment in capital infrastructure. This will mean that over the next five years, the FET sector will be focused on simplifying the delivery landscape for its services for participants through: the development of an integrated FET college of the future, which will break down the existing divide between further education colleges and training centres; ensuring that communities can more clearly identify with their local FET facility, its diverse array of learning opportunities and wider afield; and a focus on the establishment of much clearer learning pathways, including developing potential links with second level and a more consistent transition approach to higher education, alongside a more modular and technology-driven approach to learning delivery, which will facilitate continual engagement with FET throughout the lifetimes and careers of the individuals who take part. There will also be a future need in the sector to create more space for flagship developments, which will help to change hearts and mind about the potential of FET for the development of their lives and careers.

On current staffing and structures throughout the country, there are concerns at SOLAS level about the need to break down rigidities in respect of HR, learner support and operational regulations, to facilitate cross-FET service delivery. Some of our structures may be somewhat traditional and rigid in the sector, and while this has to be explored delicately, I am sure that progress can be achieved with goodwill and full consultation with all the interests involved.

On systems and technology, we all need to acknowledge that the way we in Ireland work, learn, do business and interact with one another is fundamentally and rapidly changed, and that it has changed. It is clear that we, too, have to change the way learning is delivered and how data drive service delivery, and we need to develop shared financial and other systems to support more robust and efficient management approaches.

Despite the challenges faced by the sector, I am assured that the tools are there within SOLAS to change fundamentally the way that FET is viewed and valued in Ireland, in order that more and more people will recognise that FET can change their lives, allow them to develop themselves personally, engage with their communities and go as far as they want in life. It can also help people to re-engage with education and take the first steps in returning to work. When briefing myself for the role, I was impressed when I stumbled across a course for professional lorry drivers that has been developed in consultation with, and to a degree driven by, the industry in the Waterford-Wexford region. At that ETB, a group successfully completed a 29-week course, delivered at four locations. I was struck that the participants had an average age of 37 years, they were all unemployed at the time they signed up, and the vast majority of them completed the course and are successfully employed. It is a success story that illustrates all the points I made earlier about re-engaging, and the opportunity and pathway to future success the sector can deliver.

Another advantage of the FET sector is its flexibility. It is not tied to a rigid four-year academic experience. While many of us will have revelled in that experience, it is not for everybody. There are other options, and the time has come to champion and shine a spotlight on them. Given the committee's interest in apprenticeships, it is important to state that the direct routes that FET offers into solid careers are invaluable. What is truly unique about further education and training in this State is that it offers an opportunity to engage in learning in every community in Ireland, regardless of any previous levels of education. It puts in place a pathway to progress as far as any individual wants to go. The impact of further education and training is already transformative. However, I believe that with the strong direction set out in the new SOLAS strategy, which will shortly come before the committee, this sector can grow its profile and make a crucial contribution to the next critical phase of Ireland's social and economic development.

There are many other things I would like to say but I feel the hour is moving on so I will stop there. My further thoughts are set out in the written remarks I submitted in advance. I thank members for their attention.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: I welcome Mr. Aylward. I am very impressed with his CV and educational experiences over the years. I would like him to expand on a number of questions. How does he see his role with regard to growing apprenticeships, which he mentioned? He was appointed in 1999 and has had experience of engaging with offenders and the role of education in the Prison Service. Mr. Aylward might expand on that.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I thank Mr. Aylward for his presentation. He clearly has a wide range of experience to bring to the role. His presentation was very impressive with regard to the wide range of opportunities in the further education and training sector. The sector is now moving in a dynamic way, having gone through considerable changes in recent years. It has been an adjustment for many people working in the sector. From my own experience, I believe they have responded very well. If we are still here as a committee, we look forward to engaging with the strategy for 2020 to 2024.

I have great interest in the area of apprenticeships, having been involved in setting up the council. I understand the heavy goods vehicle course to which Mr. Aylward referred is an apprenticeship programme. I may be wrong. Perhaps Mr. Aylward will clarify. A wide range of new apprenticeships are being established. Is that likely to continue? Is there a continuum of new programmes that are likely to come on stream? Obviously, we also want to see an increase in the numbers taking up traditional construction apprenticeships because these skills will be

needed for the economy.

That brings me to an issue with regard to SOLAS's role. Mr. Aylward talked about the importance of everybody having the opportunity to develop their full potential, but SOLAS also has a role with regard to identifying skills that will be required in the economy in the future and matching those with individuals coming through training for the first time or returning to educational opportunities at different stages in their lives. I have just one question in that area. Mr. Aylward talked about flexibility. It is certainly a very flexible section. Obviously, we now have very high levels of employment in Ireland in percentage terms, but many of those who are at work are not highly skilled or qualified and they are often low-paid for that reason. I want to ask Mr. Aylward specifically about the opportunities for people to increase their level of skills or qualifications while holding down a job, which most people must do to survive. That is an area in which the further education and training sector can really play a positive role. I again thank Mr. Aylward for his presentation and I wish him luck.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I thank Mr. Aylward for his continuing service to the State. It is welcome that he is getting involved with SOLAS. I will not ask him questions. He is clearly qualified for the job and determining whether that is so is not our role anyway. For what it is worth, I will share some of my views arising from what we have dealt with in recent years.

The back-slapping about apprenticeships has to stop. There have been some improvements but they are coming from a low base. The challenge is monumental but it must be met. I am confident Mr. Aylward and the new chief executive can do so. That is no reflection on SOLAS. It needs Government direction and direction from society in general, which is not forthcoming. It needs to come from the media, which continue to publish college league tables with no regard whatsoever to apprenticeships, which are equivalent to degrees, as Mr. Aylward has outlined. A level 8 apprenticeship is equivalent to an honours degree and a level 9 is equivalent to a masters degree. There needs to be a change in direction. I do not know how this would be done. Should we call them apprenticeship degrees? I do not know but we need to do something different to give people the sense that the qualifications are exactly the same. We have to get on the page. I do not know what writer said that he or she would never encourage someone to do an apprenticeship until official Ireland's children were doing apprenticeships. People are still of the view that a college degree is required. Society in general has failed to change that perception. Mr. Aylward needs to take a radical approach. We are almost at the floor with regard to the number of apprentices this country is producing. Statements issued by the Department of Education and Skills have said the overall number of apprentices who ever qualified in Ireland is more than 100,000, which is a meaningless figure. The figures have improved but they need to improve dramatically.

I look forward to the strategy with regard to the further education and training colleges. At the moment, their overall direction is a mishmash. They are all doing very good work individually but there is no shared direction. There seems to be a block on the construction of such colleges. I mentioned one in Dunboyne in my own constituency that is awaiting this strategy. There is effectively a block on the construction of colleges, the development of the sector, and the education it attempts to provide. They simply cannot cope with the numbers. That needs to change.

A fundamental change needs to be made with regard to developing new apprenticeships. The current system is essentially employer-led. A call is put out and employers or organisations are sought to put together apprenticeships. That will not work. We cannot continue with the low numbers coming forward. We need to put other pathways in place to develop new ap-

prenticeships. That is the only way numbers will actually increase. I put forward a proposal to start an apprenticeship scheme in the Oireachtas such as exists in the House of Commons. I ask the Oireachtas to copy and paste that scheme. I would love it if Mr. Aylward got involved with the Clerk of the Dáil and the Ceann Comhairle to look at the House of Commons scheme and get something similar off the ground here. There are a number of internship programmes in the Oireachtas but we could also have apprenticeship programmes in cooking, media, or other jobs that exist within the Oireachtas.

If we start doing that within the public sector, it will start to branch out into the private sector. People want to get with the programme. The public sector is not coming up to the mark with regard to the provision of apprenticeships. Some of the semi-State bodies do fantastic work in employing people and always have, but Departments need to get involved. Mr. Aylward's background and experience provide a real opportunity to get the public sector much more involved in the provision of apprenticeships so that the talk coming out of the mouths of Ministers, ourselves and others - I am including everyone in this - will be met with action. If the public sector sets an example, this will work. We need to champion apprenticeships. The media need to be involved as well. I urge the *Irish Independent*, *The Irish Times*, *The Sunday Times* and so on to consider how they could include apprenticeships in their league tables. It is not good enough simply to have an asterisk to say that other people do apprenticeships. Maybe SOLAS can provide some help in that regard. I do not know. The media would probably need assistance.

We are aware of another issue that the Minister of State, Deputy Halligan, highlighted. This is the issue of the world apprenticeship champions who contested the world apprenticeship games. They were given very little media coverage on RTÉ. That is a shame. I really hope the Minister of State's intervention will change RTÉ's approach and that they will be given a greater profile. We are delighted to have them here. They are such an example to everybody. The more examples we give, the more readily we can achieve a change in respect of apprenticeships, thereby changing our education system. It is really important to remember that we are starting from a very low base. The challenge ahead of Mr. Aylward is absolutely massive. If I can do anything to assist him, I will. That has to happen. The number of female apprentices is also shocking. It is the one part of society in which there is an absolutely unbelievable gender imbalance. It is unprecedented. I would love to see further action taken in that regard. I am sure it will be.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I echo the last point. The percentage of female apprentices last year was 4% and at some previous stage it was 2%. I commend Mr. Aylward. He seems entirely qualified for the position. His presentation was very impressive. Like Deputy Byrne, I will highlight a few areas. Many of the same themes were raised by Deputy Thomas Byrne. We had a very interesting engagement with the world skills participants. It was striking that these were world-beaters in their given trade or occupation but many spoke of the support or encouragement they received in their schools to pursue apprenticeships. That was not uniformly the case but they indicated that there was no great emphasis on apprenticeships in their schools and they were not really encouraged to pursue them. Third level institutions, universities, the technological universities and institutes of technology might do a bit more but is there scope for SOLAS and using the world skills participants as exemplars to go into schools and outline the potential? The number of apprenticeships is increasing in recent years, from about 6,200 to 12,000, but is still very low. The combined allocation for the national training fund and SOLAS has only increased by about 9%, which is not appropriate relative to the increase in apprentices. The number of different trades and occupations is much less than exists in some

European countries, where it is well into the hundreds. In Ireland the number is somewhere in the 40s.

I raised instrumentation with Mr. Andrew Brownlee when he was before the committee previously. It is a really attractive trade with a real shortage of workers. Many businesses, particularly pharmaceuticals, are crying out for them and it is great for the people who are currently in the trade but many more people could make a very good living at it.

I do not mean to be parochial, but I understand that it is not possible to do a painting apprenticeship in Cork now. One may serve one's apprenticeship in Cork but the classes or SOLAS element requires travelling to Dublin. This is causing people to pick other trades or discourage them from taking on painting. That might be more of an operational matter so if Mr. Aylward cannot respond, that is okay, but perhaps he can take a note and look into it. It is one of the big trades with countless people involved.

Mr. Sean Aylward: We have taken a careful note of everything that the members have said. My response will not be comprehensive but I will do my best. I will first touch on the role of the chairperson *vis-à-vis* the chief executive. I have served as CEO to a board in a number of capacities. I am clear in my own mind that it is up to the board and its chairperson to steer and provide direction and a bit of strategic vision, scanning the horizon, and for the executive and the CEO to do the rowing. That is not to say that the roles are not equally challenging but it is important that we do not blur them, nor would I want to. That probably means the committee will see much more of the CEO than me. However, I hope members are assured that I am prepared to give this all the time that it will take. I will try to be strategic in my input to the board and in dialogue with the executives who serve it.

I will try to draw together some of the points raised by members. I spent nine years of my life working with prisoners. From the perspective of a civil servant, some were very high risk. At one point I was making decisions every day on what prisoner to release in what was a revolving door situation. It was a terrifying situation but I took a chance many times, as did my colleagues before and since, on prisoners who we felt had a chance and an offer of a start. No matter how damaged or how risky the proposition, if there was a chance of a start in life, either a place in a school, college or tech, or just working with somebody, we took that risk on behalf of Ireland Inc. and we were let down very few times. It is worth taking a chance on people. I was delighted when I came to SOLAS to discover that it already supports initiatives with prisoners, long before my advent. It has forged a particular link with one of our most challenged prison institutions, Mountjoy, where it has held TEDx talks and a choir with the prisoners. It is very interesting to see the people at HQ level making that symbolic involvement. There are impediments to people who have a criminal record getting jobs in civvy street. It is tough and every society wrestles with it. I do not want to anticipate the ongoing consideration on that box-tick issue, that people have to tick a box on a form if they have a criminal record which tends to knock them out of the park even if it was only a modest infraction. People are very scared of others with certain predilections but as a society there has to be room for redemption, they must be allowed to move on where ever it is possible and safe to do so. I would like to see more done on my watch on this.

On apprenticeships generally, the employer is the elephant in the room. Employers must be sold on the idea of hiring, paying and investing in a young person as their apprentice. In a recession, risks like that tended to be ducked or avoided. Now as skills shortages emerge, there may be technically full employment, or close to it, but there are still huge skill shortages. Employers are waking up and smelling the coffee, realising that this is a good strategy. More and more are

buying into apprenticeships. The Apprenticeship Council, led by the current CEO of the ESB, clearly is an important actor. I will sit down with that chairperson. The dialogue between the Apprenticeship Council and SOLAS is already well developed and cordial. Things can be done there. We have to work on it. We need more stellar examples such as those who came before the committee some weeks ago from the skills competition. They are the hope for the future. They have as much to offer as the people in prestigious college PhD programmes. They will make a great difference in the future and will help to build a new Ireland.

We are taking a pilot approach on some of the schemes. The short course whereby people qualify themselves as professional drivers is a 29-week course. It is not formally an apprenticeship. The way that employers have embraced it is very heartening. There are more programmes like that in the pipeline.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan mentioned the need for flexibility by an ageing workforce in order to hold on to their jobs and careers. An upskills programme is under way all around the country. Employers can see that their workforces will be challenged in the future and are engaging with it. That is a good programme and I would like to see more of it. It shows that at any age, one can learn and progress and that both employers and the ETBs and SOLAS are embracing this.

I have looked at the record, and I know that Deputy Thomas Byrne has often spoken of the social status and esteem in which apprenticeships are or are not held. Parity of esteem, as I believe the Chairman has put it, is needed. I would like to see an Ireland where the same gathering is around the CAO form as people look at options for apprenticeships. Perhaps the CAO form should be given a few more pages and we could level out the landscape. I know that is an independently managed structure but I would love to live in an Ireland where people and the recognised flagships in the system gave equal value to apprenticeship and traineeship opportunities. We need to broaden this out. Were the pages outlining how to apply for an apprenticeship on the same website, it might have a psychological effect. The penny might drop and we might see more middle class participation.

In the context of the capital programme in this area, there were years of recession - to quote the Bible, the years the locusts ate - but money has started to come back into the system. The Department of Education and Skills controls that capital budget. I would like to see an evolution whereby more responsibility for that capital budget might be vested in SOLAS. We have to earn that trust but I think it is the way to go, and it would be coherent and congruent with the other side of our funding operation. Clearly, a case has to be made to the Department. While I do not want to sour the view of anyone in Marlborough Street too soon, I would say to them and to anybody else that there is a logic to bringing the two together and putting in more money. However, I am not making any promises to the Deputy about Dunboyne as that is a process above my pay grade. I feel the State has to reflect within its investment in the sector a parity of esteem for this important technical branch of education.

I was intrigued about the reference to Oireachtas apprenticeships. I was thinking back to my very early days as a civil servant, carrying Jack Lynch's bag into a meeting in Strasbourg and other little moments.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: A good bag to carry.

Mr. Sean Aylward: Those are all of my anecdotes. I certainly cut my teeth a little bit working in the corridors of this building decades ago but I have never forgotten the formative experiences. I hope other young people will get that opportunity.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Aylward and my thanks to Deputy Hildegard Naughton for taking the Chair while I was in the Chamber. Since I returned, I have certainly got a sense of Mr. Aylward's vision for SOLAS and what needs to be done. I admire and respect that. As a committee, we have had many conversations, debates and engagements around reports on apprenticeships and the importance of further education. We would be at one with Mr. Aylward and he has an open door here in terms of the vision he has just articulated. Do the Deputies wish to come back in?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: No, they were very comprehensive answers.

Chairman: I wish Mr. Malone well in his upcoming role, which is very important for the students and staff of DkIT and their families and, as he rightly pointed out, for the region as well, given that this is not just about Dundalk. We will have the opportunity to engage further at a later stage. I wish Mr. Aylward well in his role. I also wish Ms Gallagher well. She keeps us very well informed of everything that is happening within SOLAS, which we welcome. We feel a lot of excellent work is being carried out and we want to help in whatever way we can. The committee will notify the Minister that it has had its engagement with Mr. Malone and Mr. Aylward. I thank them both for their engagement and their insights and I wish them every success in their roles. I wish everybody a happy Christmas and new year.

The joint committee adjourned at 5.03 p.m. *sine die*.