

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS, BREISOIDEACHAS AGUS ÁRDOIDEACHAS, TAIGHDE, NUÁLAÍOCHT AGUS EOLAÍOCHT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE

Déardaoin, 10 Nollaig 2020

Thursday, 10 December 2020

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 11.30 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 11.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Rose Conway-Walsh,	Aisling Dolan,
Carol Nolan,	Eileen Flynn,
Jim O'Callaghan,	Rónán Mullen,
Pádraig O'Sullivan,	Fiona O'Loughlin,
Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire,	Pauline O'Reilly.
Aodhán Ó Ríordáin.	

Teachta / Deputy Paul Kehoe sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: An apology was received from Deputy Alan Farrell. I remind members to please ensure their mobile phones are switched off for the duration of the meeting as they interfere with the broadcasting equipment even when on silent mode. Members and witnesses are requested to use the hand sanitisers and the wipes provided to clean their seats and desks, specifically if they are sharing seats or desks.

The minutes of the meeting of 3 December 2020 were circulated in advance of today's meeting. Are they agreed to? Agreed.

Effects of Covid-19 on Further Education and Training: Discussion

Chairman: On behalf of the committee, I welcome Mr. Andrew Brownlee, CEO of SOLAS, Ms Cróna Gallagher, director of further education and training with Donegal Education and Training Board, representing Education and Training Boards Ireland, ETBI, and Ms Carol Hanney, CEO of City of Dublin Education and Training Board.

Our witnesses are with us today to discuss the very important issue of the effects of Covid-19 on further education and training, specifically admissions and reopening of colleges and training centres, delivery of courses, funding and future reforms. The format of the meeting is that I will invite Mr. Brownlee to make a joint opening statement on behalf of SOLAS and the ETBI, which followed by Ms Hanney. This will be followed by questions from members of the committee. As witnesses are probably aware, the committee will publish the opening statements on the website following the meeting.

Before we begin, 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 of the Oireachtas or an official either by name or in any such way as to make him or her identifiable.

The witnesses should note that they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the presentation they make to the committee. This means they have an absolute defence against any defamation action for anything they say at the meeting. However, they are expected not to abuse this privilege and it is my duty as Chairman to ensure this privilege is not abused. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in relation to an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks, and it is imperative that they comply with any such direction.

Ms Gallagher is giving her evidence remotely from a place outside the parliamentary precincts of Leinster House. As such, she may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as a witness who is physically present. She has already been advised of this and may think it appropriate to take legal advice on this matter.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in any such way as to make him or her identifiable or it, or otherwise engage in speech that may be regarded as damaging to the good name of a person or entity. Therefore, if a member's statement is potentially defamatory of an identifiable person, I will ask them to discontinue.

I call on Mr. Brownlee to make his joint opening statement. He will be followed by Ms Hanney. Mr. Brownlee has five minutes and Ms Hanney has three minutes. The first questioner is Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan, followed by Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh.

Mr. Andrew Brownlee: On behalf of SOLAS, the ETBI and the ETBs, I thank the Chairman and the joint committee members for the opportunity to speak to them on further education and training, FET. SOLAS has responsibility for funding, planning and co-ordinating 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 an individual’s background or formal education level, and a learning pathway to take individuals as far as they want to go. It currently serves a base of around 200,000 learners every year.

The year 2020 has been unprecedented and challenging for FET. Our ways of working and 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 of 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 and the ETBs was to ensure learners were protected and that they could continue to access learning and support. This meant making online opportunities available during the period when FET facilities were closed, with swift and effective modifications to learning delivery and alternative assessment approaches put in place in accordance with quality standards. The core aim across SOLAS and the ETBs was to ensure the learner was protected and they could continue to access learning and support. This meant making online opportunities available during the period when FET facilities were closed, with swift and effective modifications to learning delivery and alternative assessment approaches put in place in accordance with quality standards; opening up eCollege, our FET online learning portal, and offering digital and other online courses free of charge to any learners who wished to avail of them; supporting the development of skills initiatives by ETBs to meet Covid-related challenges in areas like infection control and remote working; and strong continued engagement with vulnerable learners through regular telephone contact, issuing of learner packs and access to devices. Adult guidance services also remained open via online and telephone access.

On funding was front-loaded 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 reopen, additional funding of €5 million was allocated to support compliance with public health requirements and €5 million 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. Savings may even occur due to the lockdown period for FET facilities. An €8 million 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 reopening of and admission to FET facilities. Implementation guidelines were produced by Education and Training Boards Ireland in consultation with key stakeholders and they set out measures to reopen and safely deliver teaching and learning activities. This included managing and minimising the risk of Covid in FET settings and controlling outbreaks should they occur. In common with higher education, there was a focus on facilitating lab-based and practical learning, which cannot be delivered effectively on line, including apprenticeships. However, there was also acknowl-

edged meant that small-group learning in areas such as adult and community education, literacy and numeracy and youth reach could proceed on-site, given the needs of those learners.

While the restrictions throughout the year have had an impact on ETB capacity to deliver FET, overall admissions across courses have remained strong and are approaching 2019 levels, while varying across different types of provision. The moves to online flexible learning opportunities facilitated a ramp-up of workforce upskilling under Skills to Advance. 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 practical skills courses has declined due to the closure of training facilities for a period and limited capacity on reopening.

The crisis also created a moment of opportunity for FET. At the beginning of 2020, we were on the cusp of launching our new five-year strategy for the system, Transforming Learning, which set out an ambitious reform agenda for the system. FET can offer opportunities to many people with many different needs but it is currently too complex and has too many programmes. We need to simplify pathways to ensure all learners understand they can progress within FET and into exciting jobs or 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 change the hearts and minds of the communities they serve.

The strategy is built across three pillars: building skills, fostering inclusion and facilitating pathways. It also identifies some key enabling themes: modernisation of staffing and structures, digital transformation, a learner-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 those left unemployed are able to find a pathway back to sustainable work. Under the July stimulus, we are also co-ordinating an apprenticeship incentive scheme for employers and rolling out an upskilling programme in support of the national retrofitting plan.

I hope 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 thank the committee members for their time and look forward to the discussion.

Ms Carol Hanney: On behalf of the City of Dublin Education and Training Board, CDETb, I thank the Chair and the joint committee members for the opportunity to contribute.

CDETb has a very broad range of services including second level schools, youth services and Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, as well as delivering a large and extensive FET provision. We run full-time courses in our FET colleges and centres and a varied range of part-time courses through those centres and also through our adult and community education services.

When the virus hit in late February and early March, we had to move very rapidly from on-site to online delivery. We were faced with the challenge of communicating, educating and training in a very different way. We moved to remote delivery through email, text and phone, and to Zoom, Teams, Webex or other platforms for group communication.

The big staff challenges were availability of devices and the need to rapidly upskill in online

teaching. Initially, teachers, tutors and instructors generally used their own devices, which in many instances were shared with other family members. Students were operating on various devices and many were merely working on their mobile phones. Over the first few months, the ETB was only able to loan a small number of devices to very needy students.

We had to ensure that we continued to deliver education and training programmes, assessments were held, standards and quality maintained and as many students as possible could obtain their qualifications. We worked with Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI, and made an early decision to move from examinations to assignments where possible.

Our student body is very diverse at FET level. We have full-time students at levels 5 and 6 and we also have more hard-to-reach students involved in literacy and other programmes. The learner ability to work online therefore differed greatly. We were fortunate that teachers were already involved in technically enhanced learning and many were also already using different platforms, such as Moodle, in their teaching. We are very happy that by late May almost all our students had gained their awards. However, there was a difficulty in skills-based training in the apprenticeship area as remote instruction and assessment were problematic.

As we approached summer and planned for September, we concentrated on staff professional development in online teaching. We were also involved in recruiting online and in preparing schools, colleges and centres for reopening. Fortunately, we received grants towards minor building works, the purchase of personal protective equipment and the purchase of devices for learners. One of the new challenges for September and October was establishing a relationship with students as we expected to be back online within a few weeks. We were fortunate in that we were able to have person-to-person contact at the beginning of the academic year, which was positive in terms of inducting students. Because of 2 m distancing, they did not attend every day in the normal way but they had a chance to meet each other and their teachers and tutors. Now, at level 5, we are still seeing some students, especially those involved in practical courses or in small group activity, which is necessary to mitigate disadvantage.

We have advanced dramatically in the past eight or nine months and our use of IT in the virtual classroom or in the face-to-face classroom has been transformed. We now have to interrogate what has happened. We have to pick up the pieces but we also have to build on the massive advances we have made as educators. We documented what happened from March to June in a report entitled, Informing the Future, which we are now analysing.

We are upskilling people in FET and the skills needed are constantly changing. We are undergoing another transformation of our society. The world of work is changing dramatically and we, as educators, have to be able to adapt and respond quickly and effectively.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the witnesses for their presentations. I put the issue of the €250 payment to students and what was allocated in this regard to the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, the other day. Do the witnesses believe that full-time FET students should have been supported through that in terms of the reimbursement of the €250?

Mr. Andrew Brownlee: I thank the Deputy for her question. It is a different situation because there is a €3,000 student contribution fee in higher education. The fees for further education and training are minimal. There are small fees of, I think, €200 for PLC provision so the rebate does not apply to the same extent in FET or apprenticeships. We have some apprentices currently with institutes of technology or technological universities and I believe the €250 applies to them in respect of their fees. I can check that further for the Deputy. In terms of general

further education and training, fees are very low or minimal and it would not apply.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I would appreciate if Mr. Brownlee could do that. It is important when anything is announced that there is fairness in it across the board and that people who should be included in schemes are not excluded. I am concerned about what we are doing to attract new apprentices because we are not meeting the targets. I am also concerned about what might happen next year. I welcome the incentive for employers. There are a few different elements. There is the incentive for employers. There is also simplification of the process so people can see clear pathways, and I am glad Mr. Brownlee identified that. The clearer we can make things in that regard, the better. In terms of the relationship with the employers, does Mr. Brownlee think the incentive is enough to get more employers on board? We have not reached the target for the number of employers for courses- I believe there are 58, particularly practical courses.

Mr. Andrew Brownlee: I agree with the Deputy. The area of employer support must be examined. There is a new action plan for apprenticeships being developed and that would be one of the core areas of focus. It is obviously the responsibility of our parent Department, but we are closely feeding into that. There should be more parity of esteem in terms of how employers are supported between the craft apprenticeships and some of the new apprenticeships. At present, off-the-job training for the craft apprenticeships is fully funded by the State. That is not the case for the new apprenticeships. That is an area that must be looked at in the new apprenticeship action plan.

The incentive scheme has made a difference. We were a little behind earlier in the year, approximately 40% year on year, because we could not open the training centres and run the apprenticeship programmes. The gap is down to 20% because we are catching up and ramping up now. The new apprenticeship registrations are now on a par with last year after catching up, but we need more action and fairness in terms of how we deal with employers. We have made good progress in recent years, from approximately 3,000 employers taking on apprenticeships to more than 6,000, but there is a long way to go. I admit that, and we are working with our parent Department to put an action plan in place that will deliver on that.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: What concerns me as well is that, with regard to the practical subjects that are conducted in higher level education, there does not appear to have been the same shutdown in that area as there was with the craft apprenticeships. In terms of the capital that is needed to ensure there are enough physical spaces and physical infrastructure, what needs to be done to increase the capacity?

Mr. Andrew Brownlee: The Deputy is correct. During the initial period of lockdown, higher education was closed for the same period. We reopened apprenticeships in September and all the practical and laboratory-based courses that further education and training, FET, offers were up and running, but I take the Deputy's point. We fed information into the Department, as has the Higher Education Authority, HEA, on additional capital investment, essentially to expand the capacity for apprenticeship provision during this period in which we need to catch up, but we also must expand. That is not the only answer. We must look at how parts of apprenticeships can be delivered online. I do not believe it all necessarily has to be in the workshop setting. We also must use competency assessments, where appropriate, to verify the skills of the apprentices and allow them to progress. That is the way to do it as well.

Ms Carol Hanney: To return to the first question, many of the 2,016 plus apprenticeships, the new ones such as an auctioneering apprenticeship which we started in the City of Dublin

Education and Training Board, built on the relationships the education and training boards, ETBs, already had with employers. We have extensive relationships with employers. That is happening as well. In terms of the delivery of practical courses, across the entire FET sector we are delivering practical courses as far as possible. There must be social distancing and so forth, but we are doing it quite well within the restrictions in which we are operating.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I welcome Ms Hanney, Mr. Brownlee and Ms Gallagher. Mr. Brownlee attended the WorkEqual event and we appreciate that he was involved in that a month or so ago. I recall meeting him through that.

I was on the board of the Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board as a councillor for a year. I was very surprised as a councillor and a person. I worked in third level but I had no idea of all that ETBs do until I sat on that board and realised the width and breadth of what they do. Funding for FET is €800 million, if I understand it correctly, and there are 25,000 courses. There is a great deal of funding going into the sector. I remember I had many questions at the time about communication. Obviously, people are busy doing everything, but communication is key to ensuring people are aware of what is available and especially of what the sector is doing.

My question is on communication in SOLAS and the different areas in the ETBs. How much has been dedicated to communication to ensure engagement with career guidance counsellors in secondary schools to tell them about the courses that are available and to deal with the factor that university is not the only option and that there are other options? There is also the issue of industry liaison with ETBs to ensure there is an immediate response to industry. We have lost jobs in my constituency. We were lucky recently to win jobs in Castlerea and in the medtech sector, but I come from an area where Bord na Móna just transition and retrofitting are happening. Where is the tie-in? I do not know the retrofitting courses that are available. People are trying to upskill very fast, but it takes a year or two years to complete the courses. Who are the industry liaisons in each of the ETBs and how active are they?

I will conclude with that, but I compliment the witnesses on the eCollege being opened. Again, I refer back to communication and people being aware that it is available.

Mr. Andrew Brownlee: I will start with the general questions and I will hand over to Ms Hanney and Ms Gallagher on the specific questions on the ETBs.

First, I agree. How we communicate it has been a big focus for SOLAS over recent years and certainly since I became CEO in September 2019. We have done a significant amount of work with the Institute of Guidance Counsellors, the National Parents Council and the Irish Second-Level Students' Union to try to build awareness of FET and apprenticeship opportunities. I believe we are getting a higher profile and people are starting to have those conversations when discussing post-second level choices, but there is a long way to go and it requires concerted investment. We have to change the hearts and minds of parents, their children and the guidance counsellors. The guidance counsellors are registered teachers and they probably come from a higher education background and pathway. We must show them what is on offer in further education and training and apprenticeship.

There is also a job of work to be done with the schools. We talk a great deal about school league tables and all the focus is on the CAO. We must do more work to develop vocational options and pathways in schools, whether that is giving an apprenticeship taster in transition year programmes or delivering FET modules as part of the senior cycle, which should be a big

issue to consider as the senior cycle is reviewed. It would expose students to those vocational and technical experiences. Some of the single-sex schools do not have the teaching capability to offer the types of technical and vocational options needed to expose a wider base of people.

Senator Aisling Dolan: Would the witnesses consider an ETB liaison person to deal with secondary schools in particular regions? Does that exist?

Ms Carol Hanney: I accept what the Senator is saying about communication. We often say ourselves that we are too busy doing it to tell people we are doing it. It is an area we must work on more. We have an industrial liaison division in our ETB, which is quite a new departure in the past year and a half. In addition, our individual colleges all have liaison with industry. Much of it is through work experience because all our FET students do work experience. We have significant connections there, built up very often by the heads of departments or the people who are running the different courses. We have guidance counsellors in the FET colleges who liaise with guidance counsellors at second level. We also have open days in all of the colleges. About four years ago, we started doing what we called FET Expo, a one-day exhibition of everything that we offer across FET in the ETB.

Senator Aisling Dolan: Is that just in Dublin?

Ms Carol Hanney: As far as I know, most of the other ETBs have liaison officers as well. It is quite a new departure. As well as that, we are part of the regional skills fora and we attend IBEC events. We have different ways of communicating.

Senator Aisling Dolan: What is the difference between teachers and trainers in an ETB?

Ms Carol Hanney: Teachers are generally recognised by the Teaching Council, whereas trainers are generally people who would have been in the training centres. We also have tutors in the adult education service. However, we refer to all of them as teachers.

Chairman: Ms Gallagher wishes to contribute in on this point.

Ms Cróna Gallagher: It is a challenge for ETBs, as has been said, because of the diversity of our provision. We work at levels 1 to 6 on the national framework of qualifications, NFQ, so our provision is very diverse, as are our learners. We are very conscious that our communication is probably not what it needs to be. Most ETBs have a communications officer. We are working a good deal on social media to promote our offerings to the public.

In the last year, each ETB has set up a liaison committee between schools and FET services. Those committees have probably not done as much as they should have done or have wanted to do because of Covid-19. They each have guidance counsellors, principals and FET managers and aim to expand knowledge of FET services within schools. Many individual things are happening within schools but there are formal committees now in each ETB to promote FET within schools as a real option for school leavers.

On industry liaison, every ETB now has an enterprise engagement team with at least one officer working in that team, although in many cases there is a full team. One of the good things about the past months has been that our industry engagement has skyrocketed. Industry has seen the ETBs as being able to be flexible and adaptable and to provide courses which meet its needs in areas such as infection prevention and control, digital sales and media, leadership and so on. Industry has been very positive about our engagement with it.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I thank Mr. Brownlee, Ms Gallagher and Ms Hanney. I really appreciate their joining us over video link. Mr. Brownlee mentioned €5 million provided to help with public health, €5 million provided for technology, and a further €8 million provided in the final quarter. He also mentioned the measures in the July stimulus for apprenticeships. From the witnesses' contributions, there does not appear to be an issue with finance, which is really positive. I am glad they feel supported by the Government.

I note the point made about the impact on the sector being a lasting one. What will that impact be? Will the further education and training organisations be able to deal with it or are they looking for further measures to do that?

Mr. Andrew Brownlee: On the finance issue, further education and training is funded differently from higher education. Higher education depends on international student fees and the €3,000 student contribution that Deputy Conway-Walsh mentioned. We are funded on a year-to-year basis so there is not a gap to fill. ETBs are almost 100% publicly funded so they can adapt and adjust to the changing circumstances. There is no operational finance issue and we have been very careful and at pains to stress to the ETBs that funding is available if they need more to support Covid-related costs.

On the lasting impact, when we launched the strategy we made a point of pushing the idea that FET needs to be for everyone. It is not just something for the marginalised of society. Of course, that is a critical role but it is not only for school leavers who want a technical education. It has to be relevant for everyone throughout their lifetimes and careers. That means making it smaller, more flexible and accessible in online formats, while allowing people to build up credits independent of time.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: The kind of flexibility Mr. Brownlee mentioned was a point I was about to raise. How flexible is the system currently? The economic plan will come out shortly. How flexible is the technical education sector in terms of being able to deliver what society requires, namely, a move to green industry and green jobs? Perhaps there will also be less of a reliance on tourism. A shift needs to take place. How flexible is sector with regard to that shift?

Mr. Andrew Brownlee: We are very flexible. Education and training came from delivering shorter and focused courses to meet industry needs. The gap - this may relate to the Senator's question on finance - is in investment in digital infrastructure and ICT to bring many of these offerings online. We are very committed to green skills. FET learners can be agents for change and we are looking at how we can embed green skills modules in every single FET course. That is part of the strategy.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: What percentage of the 200,000 learners are engaged in green skills training at the moment? Does Mr Brownlee know the figure off the top of his head?

Mr. Andrew Brownlee: We have courses on sustainable development, retrofitting and all of those types of areas but I do not have the numbers off the top of my head. Embedding green skills in every course is part of the plan. That has not happened yet but I will get the numbers for the Senator.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I do not mean to interrupt but I am conscious of time. I appreciate the detail Mr. Brownlee is giving to the committee. Courses such as auctioneering were mentioned. When Mr. Brownlee refers to embedding green skills in every course, is he also re-

ferring to courses that may not necessarily look green having a green and sustainable element?

Mr. Andrew Brownlee: Yes, that is the ambition. It is in our strategy and the programme for Government.

Ms Carol Hanney: It is in our colleges and our culture. It may not necessarily be on the course but it may be creating a green culture within education.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: Another key issue for the Government is literacy. Ms Hanney mentioned that we have approximately 500,000 functionally illiterate people in the country. Is there capacity to strengthen literacy? I know the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has given a commitment to examine what we can do in that area.

Ms Carol Hanney: Literacy is an area that has probably suffered a little during the lockdown because people with literary difficulties are harder to reach. They are also the people who may not have digital skills. Digital literacy is also a serious problem and one that we are addressing. Literacy is something that we are addressing all of the time. We are always getting better at it but it is more suited to person-to-person delivery, particularly at the initial stages.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: That is a challenge at the moment.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I thank the witnesses who are very welcome. I will start on the literacy issue because it has been a feature of the presentations the Minister, Deputy Harris, has made to committee. He has also made public comments on the need to tackle the issue of adult literacy. I would like to hear the perspectives of our witnesses on how effectively we can do that.

As has been said, 17.9% of the adult population is functionally illiterate. How can educators be agents of change in that regard? I am interested in Ms Hanney's comment on how one-to-one teaching is going to be much more advantageous in that. There will be issues overcoming Covid related restrictions in that respect.

On the issue of how Covid has affected the ability of the ETBs to deliver their services, the digital divide was mentioned. I have spoken to a number of second level principals, who spoke about the lack of knowledge on the part of policymakers of the digital divide. It is not about access to broadband; it is about access to devices that can be utilised. A principal told me that 60% of her student body could only access the work through their smartphones.

I have some more general questions. What have we learned from this period? As is often said, a good crisis should not be wasted. I worry that we will move beyond this crisis, feel that we have survived this period and look to the future, hoping that things will go back to exactly where they were previously. We all have a responsibility to learn from the deficiencies that have been exposed by this health crisis. Lessons were learned from the financial crisis a number of years ago, and structures were put in place. I hope the same will happen across education.

The issue of funding has been mentioned by the witnesses and I take those comments on board. Do they believe there is something deeper, more profound and more structural that the education system can react to in learning from what Covid has exposed? If so, what would that be? We are all collectively trying to empower everybody in this country to maximise their capabilities, and the services provided by the organisations represented here today are key to that. I have a profound worry that, as with the financial crash, there is a feeling that things would

be great if we could only get back to the good times. However, for many people working in education and society, and for those I have mentioned with lower literacy levels, things were not so great before. What can we learn from this experience to ensure that if we ever face this issue again, we will be in a much better position to survive it, and so that the education sector can thrive?

Ms Carol Hanney: On the issue of literacy, people with literacy difficulties are very often hard to reach. We reach people through our apprenticeships and the further education and training colleges. We realise that people need literacy help. Therefore, it is not just the traditional literacy that we talk about in the adult and community base - it is right across the board. We also reach people through English for speakers of other languages, ESOL, courses. During the crisis, this was probably an area in which it was more difficult to reach people. That highlights how important it is that people have access to some forms of digital literacy. There is the issue of training people. As the Deputy said, it is not just about the devices; it is also about people being able to use the devices. That is one of the challenges in our modern society.

On what we learned during the crisis, we learned that it is surprising what people can do when they have to do it. Teachers were telephoning and emailing people. Often they were just telephoning people, talking to them and talking them through their crises. Those with literacy difficulties often have other difficulties and coming back to deal with those difficulties is quite a challenge for them. We learned a great deal during the crisis. We advanced in our own digital literacy as educators and we learned that we can do much more online than we thought could do. That does not mean that face-to-face contact has been replaced, because that is really important. However, now we have an additional resource that we can use both for those with whom we have face-to-face contact and for those with whom we do not have that contact.

Ms Cróna Gallagher: On what we learned, Ms Hanney talked about the amount of work that was done in respect of upskilling the digital capacity of staff. All of the education and training boards engaged in a piece of research undertaken by Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI, to see how we modified our teaching, learning and assessment during the crisis. The findings of that research were very interesting. We found that there is absolutely no replacement for face-to-face learning and people definitely want that. We also found that even people working at the lowest levels on the national framework of qualifications, NFQ, are interested in doing part of their courses online. That came as a bit of a surprise to us. We have learned that there is a place for online learning in every course.

Without sounding complacent, ETBs have recognised, primarily through our engagement with industry, that the world of work is changing and the future of work is going to be very different. People will have five or six jobs in their lifetime, and nobody will go into a job and stay there for the rest of their life. Industry has been telling us that we need to facilitate people to develop a range of skills, including good communication skills - both written and oral - and digital skills, and also transferable or transversal skills like decision-making and problem-solving. We have been trying to build the development and acquisition of those skills into our courses. The FET colleges are very well placed to do that because we operate in very small learner groups. That way, the teacher, tutor, or instructor can facilitate the development of those skills within the learner groups. We have recognised that we are on the right track there.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank the witnesses for their presentations. The need for more tradespeople was raised at a select committee meeting on 8 November 2020. How do the witnesses propose to expand apprenticeships to meet the needs of the economy in the future? That is an area that is of huge concern. We are significantly behind in comparison with countries like

Germany, where more value is placed on apprenticeships and they are viewed as craftsmanship. What ideas are in place and have targets been set for expanding apprenticeships in the future? I am also interested in hearing more about the apprentice incentive scheme for employers. How does that scheme work?

Mr. Andrew Brownlee: We covered some of this at the start of the meeting. We now have 58 apprenticeship programmes covering a whole range of new areas, as well as the traditional craft areas. There is a need to further ramp up apprenticeships. There is a target of having 10,000 registrations per year by the end of the programme for Government. Last year, we had 6,400 registrations so if we really focus, we can deliver on the target. As the Deputy alluded to, the key to this development is employers. There cannot be an apprentice without an employer who is willing to take on that apprentice. The number of employers engaging in the scheme has gone from 3,000 to over 6,000 in the last few years, but we need to go much further. It needs to be part of the normal business practice across a much wider range of employers. We need greater parity of esteem in respect of funding the off-the-job costs for new apprenticeships as well as the craft apprenticeships. Funding for these costs is available for the craft apprenticeships at the moment. We need to look at incentivisation schemes.

On how the incentive scheme works, it works very simply, which is part of the beauty of the concept. Essentially, the scheme provides an employer with €2,000 for taking on an apprentice and if the apprentice is kept on for a year, the employer gets a further €1,000. It has worked very well and is simple to understand. The scheme has been running for a few months and we have already received applications for around 1,900 apprentices from over 900 employers. It has really helped us to catch up because we had to close down some of the training facilities during the lockdown period. We were lagging behind but it has helped us to stabilise the numbers and catch up a bit in terms of the numbers of apprentices. We should look at continuing this along the line as a much wider package of employer supports.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I thank our guests for coming to the committee today. In his statement Mr. Brownlee said there had been a decline in the number of apprenticeships, obviously because of the lockdown. Can Mr. Brownlee give some detail for what apprenticeships have declined and what percentages are we talking about? What is the SOLAS plan to try to get these numbers up again?

Mr. Andrew Brownlee: Due to the effect of training centres being closed, we lost three or four months. It was primarily in the craft apprenticeship area because this is what the further education and training centres deliver. The latest figure for this year’s registrations - to the end of November - is 4,700. This is down about 20% on where we were at the end of November last year. Earlier this year we were 40% behind, so there has been a bit of a catch-up there. I am pleased to say that the new apprenticeships have got back on track and the numbers are on par with 2019. We have stabilised it and we are catching up.

On the question of what we are doing to address it, there are three things. One, as we said earlier, is that we are trying to get additional capacity in our training centres so we can take on additional numbers. We must keep to social distancing requirements and so on, which is a constraint. The second aspect is that we are trying to move some of the apprenticeships’ curriculums online. Up to now it has all been workshop-based but there are definite elements that can go online. The third thing is around those apprentices who have the competency to progress beyond the phase. We are introducing competency-based assessments to allow them to progress at a faster rate.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I thank Mr. Brownlee. My next question is for Ms Hanney. Is it important for the City of Dublin Education and Training Board to try to get more students back onto campus and is the board working towards that?

Ms Carol Hanney: It is important. On the last point, most of the newer apprenticeships went online in March and those apprentices would have done their exams in the summer. On the question of getting students back on campus, we have some students back who are engaged in practical courses and we have some students back for small group learning. This is to mitigate disadvantage, and there are some students who want to come into the buildings because they do not have the facilities at home. Our different colleges are addressing that in different ways, depending on their student body and the size of rooms. If a room is bigger, one can fit more people in. In most of our colleges we are trying to have face-to-face contact with students at some stage, perhaps once a week. At the end of September and into October we were lucky to have face-to-face contact with students. We have continued that to a certain extent.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: If it is being done online is it difficult to try to look after the student who falls behind? Do colleges find that the needs of the students who need extra help can be lost if it is simply online?

Ms Carol Hanney: It is difficult but the teachers are exceptionally dedicated. They ring the students and chase them up if assignments do not come in. It is more difficult, depending on the circumstances of the student who is learning online. We are very lucky in that we spent a good amount of money on devices. We got funding also from SOLAS for devices and we bought an extra 1,400 that we have distributed to students. This has helped them a lot. Again, it is about distributing the devices and teaching the students to use them.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: Will Ms Gallagher give us her own experience in trying to get students back on campus, and does she think it is an important objective?

Ms Cróna Gallagher: Yes, absolutely. As Ms Hanney has said, we have quite a few students back. All the practical apprentices are back and the lab-based and practical elements of other courses are back. The specialist training programmes, the vulnerable students, all the Youthreach centres and all the literacy services are back in centres with the 2 m social distancing. We have also rented additional premises and taken care of the needed health guidelines to make sure we are complying.

It is important to say that there is a national stakeholder group made up of SOLAS, Education and Training Boards Ireland, the staff representatives, and so on. That group has been very good because we have been able to agree at a national level for the sector what will happen at each level of the restrictions. As we are able to move in a concerted way across the whole sector, every ETB is doing more or less the same thing with regard to who they have back. Obviously there are small differences within that, but by and large we have been able to agree who will come back. There is no doubt that everybody would like to be back. The staff would like everybody to be back. As Ms Hanney has said, the staff have absolutely gone the extra mile on this in keeping in touch with students. It came out in the QQI research that while students feel there are a lot of difficulties, they feel very well supported.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I thank the witnesses.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I thank all of the representatives for being here today. It is much appreciated. My first question is for the City of Dublin Education and Training

Board and for Education and Training Boards Ireland. The ETBs are responsible for youth work and it seems to me that the pandemic has been especially challenging for young people. Social outlets are closed down and even the schools were closed down for extended periods. Part-time employment opportunities are not available. It is really profound. At the same time that was happening a lot of youth work had to be restricted. To be fair, this has recently scaled up significantly and I am aware that ambitious plans for expansion at the Cork ETB have continued. Will the witnesses comment on the challenges presenting in the youth work sector? I believe it is very important at this time.

My next question for SOLAS and the ETBs is around the back to education allowance. In my experience, the payment is restrictive because it requires the person to have been unemployed for a certain period of time. This requirement prevents people on low incomes, in short-term unemployment or in underemployment from accessing training courses and apprenticeships or from choosing a new trade. I would like to have a comment on that.

My next question is for SOLAS on a point I brought up with the Minister, Deputy Harris, recently. The picture is quite varied but there are some publicly funded bodies that have not really engaged as they should in terms of taking on apprentices. I will not get into naming any of them, but while some universities and public bodies take on apprentices to develop skills, there are others that do not. I believe the local authorities have improved a bit in that regard. There is huge scope there now and especially as employment within local authorities and public bodies expands.

I hope that Mr. Brownlee of SOLAS will not mind me being a little parochial, and I brought up this point with the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins also. Some years ago the painting facilities in Cork were closed and one cannot now do a painters' apprenticeship in Cork. Anecdotally, I am aware there is demand. I was stopped not terribly long ago by a man in Blackpool Shopping Centre whose daughter wanted to do a painting apprenticeship and who was not keen on travelling to Dublin for it. This also affects Kerry, Waterford and the surrounding areas. It is not just about the traditional painting skills; there are also the decorative painting skills for restoration, heritage and marbling and gilding. It also has implications for people who might want to work in building sets for the theatre and film industry. We will always need painters. It is a durable trade and adaptable for a wide range of arenas. Will Mr. Brownlee go back and engage with the Cork ETB and with the people who had previously provided the courses to see if they can be re-established in Cork?

Ms Carol Hanney: I will take question on youth services. Yes, we fund youth services in the city of Dublin. It has been very challenging for youth services because in the first lockdown the youth services were making every effort they could to try to keep in contact with young people. Again, a lot of the contact was on phones, but they are now going back to delivering a service that is more like what they delivered before. It is, however, quite curtailed.

Another aspect of the youth services involves training young people in how to deal with a crisis, wearing their masks and so on, so it plays a very important part. We have also been linking our second level schools with the youth services in order that they can work together. We ran an infection prevention and control course through one of our colleges, Coláiste Íde, and we offered that to our youth service personnel to allow them to upskill in that area.

On the back to education allowance, we do not have a say as to who gets it. There are other options. If people cannot get the allowance, we steer them towards courses on the vocational training opportunities scheme, other grants that may be available, for example, SUSI grants,

etc.

Mr. Andrew Brownlee: I will pick up on the back-to-education initiative. The Deputy makes a fair point. We are evaluating the initiative at the moment in conjunction with Indecon, which is carrying out an independent evaluation. It is important that we feed in those types of views. We are finding that it is a problem at present with the PUP because there is a massive base of, hopefully short-term, unemployed people who might benefit from reskilling and upskilling. Ensuring that they are eligible for focused, longer-term or maybe even full-time education and training is an issue we need to look at in the context of the back-to-education initiative.

I agree with regard to trying to open up apprenticeships to a much wider base of public sector bodies. There is mention of that in the consultation document in the context of the development of the action plan on apprenticeships. We have worked with different parts of the public sector to try to embed it but I totally agree with the Deputy and we will ramp up our work on that. We will engage with Cork ETB on the painting apprenticeship. There is a real issue with the wet trades. The appeal of a four-year apprenticeship programme in those types of trades seems to have diminished, maybe because they are not as regulated as some of the other areas like electrical apprenticeships, and so painters can almost move into more informal training arrangements for their staff. There is definitely an issue around the wet trades. I will raise it with Cork ETB but we do need to do something, perhaps around the future length of apprenticeships or how we deliver them to try to make inroads into trades like painting and decorating in the future.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I will make a brief point and I do not require a response to it. I wish to flag an issue in terms of youth work about which we need to be conscious. Youth work has an important role to play in integration. I have come across communities that are more diverse than they would once have been and there have been issues and tensions among young people. I do not need a response but we need to be conscious of that issue because youth work can play a valuable role in dealing with that.

Chairman: Deputy Ó Cathasaigh is not here. I call Senator Flynn.

Senator Eileen Flynn: I thank the ETB for coming in to meet with us today. As a qualified youth worker, I believe youth work is a different form of education and it can give young people the tools to keep themselves and others around them safe. During this pandemic, young people have been getting much of the blame for spreading the virus so I echo the point about how important it is to educate our young people. I came through the ETB system and I am a graduate of Ballyfermot College of Higher Education. I studied pre-nursing and absolutely loved it. As a Traveller woman, it gave me that sense of belonging. In Ballyfermot college there were people who were deaf or visually impaired and who had extra supports like note-takers and interpreters. This is the most important question I have. We are talking about literacy skills and people who cannot even get access to the college because of their literacy skills but there are also people in college who are blind or deaf and who need that intense learning support while in the class. As a student who came through it I know what it is like and it is the loveliest atmosphere in the world. How are those adults and young people getting through the system in the middle of this pandemic?

People using their mobile phones was mentioned. Has the ETB spoken to students who have been using their mobile phones over the past number of weeks and months? What was that impact for those young people? We also spoke about the digital divide. What kind of an

impact has that had on students? A few weeks ago, young people in the ETB in Donegal did not have access to do their courses online and were not allowed to do them online. I am bringing that issue up here today. It is a requirement that universities do their courses online but it is not even an option in some cases for students in the ETB. What measures need to be put in place so that people can have the option to do online learning within the ETB?

Our ETBs and further education institutions should be treated with equal respect to our universities. From my own personal experience, I know how valuable they are in society, and for young Traveller men especially because they create apprenticeships. I have worked around the table with the ETB. I give the witnesses credit for the work they have done to date.

Ms Carol Hanney: The Senator mentioned young people. Young people are afraid. They are not all out partying. They are afraid and we see that in our schools and colleges.

Regarding people with disabilities, we try very hard to give people with disabilities the same opportunities as everyone else. We are funded to help people who have disabilities, who use sign language, etc. During Covid, some people with disabilities were affected more than others, depending on what their disabilities were. It was probably not as serious for those with physical disabilities, as long as they were not sight-related or something. They had different experiences but in all our colleges and centres we would have kept up very close contact by phone and so on with them.

The Senator asked about young people using their phones. They are used to using their phones but we discovered that they did not know how to do a lot of things on their phones and we had to teach them that as well. There is a digital divide in society for young people and also older people, particularly for our community in adult education. Older people suffer very much in that area as well because they do not use IT at work. We are dealing with those people as well. I mentioned already that we distributed IT devices to people but it is a real concern.

As regards delivering courses online, we moved everything online immediately. We moved anything that could be moved online there and even for some of the practical areas we did them through videos, Zoom, Teams, etc. We are working on developing blended learning. We have some courses already but we also have to work with QQI to get validation for the awards and to have the programmes accepted.

Ms Cróna Gallagher: If I could come in on the learner supports, as Ms Hanney said, a lot of effort was made to keep in close contact with vulnerable learners and students with a disability during the pandemic. While our learner supports within ETBs are good in particular areas they are not consistently applied across every single course. We are looking very closely at that at the moment and we are looking at the whole area of the universal design for learning whereby students will be facilitated according to their level of need and everybody will have a certain level of supports right across the whole spectrum.

Donegal ETB was mentioned. I can revert to the Senator about that course. I believe she said it was a Youthreach learner who could not access it. There were national agreements about what programmes would be put online. Youthreach is back, but I can check out the issue and engage with the Senator separately if she likes.

Senator Eileen Flynn: It was a practical course, but people did not have the option to do it online. They wanted me to raise the issue.

Ms Cróna Gallagher: I understand. That is right - the practical courses were not available

for some time. However, all of them are back now.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I was following the debate in my office with great interest. I do not necessarily want to repeat what has been said, but I wish to focus on two matters. The question of literacy has been mentioned. Last year, I met Ms Helen Ryan of the National Adult Literacy Agency, NALA. I was shocked by some of the statistics on literacy that she presented to us. For example, Ireland is ranked 17th out of 24 countries for literacy and 18th for numeracy. One in six adults has problems reading and understanding everyday items such as bus timetables and medical prescriptions. Without doubt, low literacy rates cost and strong literacy rates pay. The cost of low literacy levels to the individual, communities and society is significant. We should see this as a priority. Literacy promotes equality. When I speak about literacy and numeracy, I also mean digital literacy. Recent months - it has been nearly a year now that I think about it - have proven that.

I would be interested in knowing the witnesses' thoughts on how we can help narrow the gap. Their organisations are in a unique position to work with bodies like NALA. In terms of social exclusion and inequality, this is the main issue. I was a primary school teacher in a disadvantaged area many years ago and ensuring literacy was the main element I tried to get right. That 18% of adults are lacking literacy skills is shocking in a country that prides itself on its education. I would be interested in knowing what support we could provide.

It is not surprising that fewer people have opted for apprentices in recent months, but it is a concern because the numbers were low beforehand. This was due to a lack of parity of esteem between university learning and earn-as-you-learn apprenticeships. Two years ago, only 2% of people taking up apprenticeships were women. Last year, that increased to 4%. How do we address that?

I wish to ask about the return to campuses. My nephew started in the University of Limerick this year. He was lucky that his course required him to be on campus for part of it. Students could engage with one another in the learning curve, albeit in limited ways. Two young guys in the flat beneath his are doing the same course and they find that working together in a group is beneficial and helpful, even when much of the work is done online. Trying to allow a return is important.

My final point is one I make whenever I have the opportunity. It relates to people with disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, accessing further and higher education. It is important and we need to do everything possible to ensure everyone has that opportunity.

Chairman: I ask the Senator to give the witnesses an opportunity to respond.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: That is it from me.

Mr. Andrew Brownlee: I will lead with the questions regarding the approach at national level. There is work to be done under the ten-year strategy on literacy and numeracy, including digital literacy. That the Senator mentioned NALA was important. It does fantastic work and made available a large amount of online and telephone resources during the summer to keep people engaged. The ETBs also do fantastic work, but none of this will solve the literacy problem. As part of the new strategy, we need a cross-government, cross-society and cross-economy approach that involves libraries, healthcare, childcare, local authorities and digital broadband. Such an approach has been missing.

For apprenticeships, parity of esteem is critical. We need to take three actions, the first of

which is embedding vocational pathways in second level schools. This means transition year taster programmes and modules from further education and training, FET, colleges being part of the senior cycle. Obviously, there is a great deal of work to be done in terms of guidance and convincing parents. We need to examine the CAO decision point and the question of how to get apprenticeships and FET on the table when parents are talking to their kids about options, given that the CAO process is wholly focused on going to a university or institute of technology.

Access for people with intellectual disabilities is an important priority. We fund an initiative through Trinity, which links with FET colleges. We will focus on this priority.

Chairman: Does Ms Hanney wish to reply briefly?

Ms Carol Hanney: We approach the issue of literacy through community education and our colleges and training centres. Sometimes, people come to us with literacy difficulties but who are taking different courses. It is then that we address the literacy difficulties.

The Senator mentioned the issue of women in apprenticeships. We are involved in a professional software developer apprenticeship in Liberties College that is geared towards female students. Most new apprenticeships have equal female representation among students.

Regarding intellectual disabilities, we are involved in a programme with the Central Remedial Clinic. We also fund the National Learning Network, which is involved in the education of people with disabilities. In all of our schools and colleges, we aim to be as friendly as we can to people with disabilities. Sometimes we have access difficulties in respect of people who are physically impaired, but we otherwise make every effort we can to include with people with disabilities and provide them with extra support.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I welcome the witnesses and thank them for their presentations and submissions. We have had many contributors from the education side in recent weeks, but it strikes me that we are getting into particularly important territory with the witnesses' presence today. We are discussing an area where issues of disadvantage most arise and the importance of practical skill-based education. These are the areas where on-site education is crucial and online education can be much more challenging.

I will first ask an overview-type question. What are the lessons of this time for the post-pandemic world? We see the importance of online education, but is it not fair to say that we are also seeing its limitations in a significant way? Are the limitations of online education likely to stay with us? Are there bridges that we just cannot cross? I have often stated that the concept of blended learning has been something of a pill-sweetening phrase because it masks the reality that, in many cases, there is no on-site learning at all in colleges and that the experience has limitations. I would be grateful to get the witnesses' overview thoughts on this matter. On the subject of apprenticeships, I am conscious that when I worked in the former Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown, which is now part of TU Dublin, I saw the great contribution of apprenticeship within the college. I refer to the remarks of Deputy Nolan. I remember being in County Kerry and meeting journeymen from Europe. They were young, newly qualified apprentices wearing very elaborate costumes. They were spending several years going around having completed their training. The practice goes back to medieval times. It struck me that there was a pride in their craft and their trade which was reflected in that tradition. Although I am very much among those who welcome the advent of technological universities, is there something missing in the way we approach and regard apprenticeships? Has the tendency to move to degrees and the university label for everything caused a problem that needs to be ad-

dressed? Sin ceist eile.

To return to the issue of online learning and on the subject of SOLAS and the FET online learning portal, is there potential in that? Are there things that have been learned through it from which other participants or the Department of Education itself can benefit? Are there areas in which the knowledge and craft of all of that can be spread into other sectors?

Mr. Andrew Brownlee: The Senator made a really good point on the issues of disadvantage and practical skills and how that works or does not work in an online setting. We stressed from day one that during restrictions, even level 5 restrictions, disadvantaged students must still be allowed come in to some extent in order to be supported in small, socially distanced groups and that practical skills training still has to be delivered on site. We got support for that approach. It is really important. It taught us that even with those types of offerings, there are opportunities to blend on-site learning with smaller, bite-size portions of online learning. That is part of the overall learning on this issue.

The Senator asked whether lessons have been learned for the wider education sector. I think the real opportunity here is to get away from the idea that education is something one does between the ages of 17 and 21 and it takes one into a job and one never needs to worry about it again. We need to use much more online flexible provision to make lifelong learning something with which people engage throughout their lifetimes and careers. We will need to continually upskill and reskill to meet the needs of the future world of work. That is the change and the opportunity we now have, partly as a result of Covid. We have seen what is possible. As the Senator noted, not everything is possible, but if we can break what we offer down into more accessible, bite-size chunks and offer it through models such as e-college, we will be able to get to everyone and create the kind of society and economy that we wish to have. That is the real lesson there. I do not believe that 67% of school-leavers going into higher education is the right balance for any kind of modern economy. We need more of those people to choose to go into apprenticeship and further education and training. That is something on which we are proactively working.

Ms Carol Hanney: Nothing will replace face-to-face learning. We will never say otherwise because face-to-face learning involves socialisation and people learning together. In particular when adults are learning, they learn from each other. There is growth from learning with other people and that can never be replaced. We are talking about enhancing online learning. We are talking about enhancing learning in the classroom and in adult education centres whereby material is put up online for people to go back to when they are in their homes. There is also the issue of offering online learning for people who cannot be present. They may be working and have young families and cannot get to a place of learning. Everything has its place, but I do not think we will ever have everybody learning online.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I apologise for being late. I have not yet mastered bilocation between here and the convention centre. I am interested in the comments of Mr. Brownlee on embedding the role of apprenticeships and possibly offering modules in transition year in secondary schools. I ask him to elaborate on that. Has SOLAS done a policy paper on the issue or has a pilot project been carried out or anything to that effect?

Mr. Andrew Brownlee: The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, is currently undertaking a full review of the senior cycle. SOLAS made a submission to that review on this issue. We have also signed a memorandum of understanding with the NCCA to explore how one might pilot those types of approaches. A few schools have been quite proactive

in that space and work quite closely with ETBs and local further education colleges or training centres to do things in that regard. There is a significant amount of potential there. It is in our strategy, so it is a commitment on our side. It is something that the Department of Education and the NCCA seem very open to considering. I think it is something that could quite easily be embedded in a much more integrated senior cycle approach, rather than continuing with the current approach whereby the leaving certificate applied route kind of pigeonholes people who are seen as less academic or more technically focused. We need a much more balanced approach to the leaving certificate. We have colleges that would be ready to offer those types of modules in a school setting if required.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: That is encouraging to hear. I would welcome that and be supportive of it.

In his opening remarks, Mr. Brownlee stated, “We must build a more powerful identity, developing consolidated larger scale FET colleges of the future which can help change the hearts and minds of the communities they serve.” I ask him to elaborate on that. I suppose he was speaking about rationalising existing colleges and possibly regionalising them. What is envisaged in that regard?

Mr. Andrew Brownlee: The one thing we must preserve at all costs is ensuring that FET is available in every community. When we talk about consolidation, we are not talking about taking facilities away from towns and villages across Ireland. In Dublin, for example, there are many really small further education colleges and there are also separate stand-alone training centres. Ms Hanney may wish to comment further on this issue. We need to bring those together into an integrated FET college of the future concept and make them larger in scale such that they offer learners much more of a college experience. There is real potential there. Places such as the Monaghan Institute and Carlow Institute of Further Education and Training are new examples of what an FET college of the future can look like.

Ms Carol Hanney: The City of Dublin ETB had some FET courses in second level schools, but we have now closed all post-leaving certificate, PLC, classes in second level schools. As such, our 11 second level schools are second level schools and our 14 further education colleges are further education colleges. We also have two training centres. Following on from what Mr. Brownlee has said, there is significant scope for us to amalgamate some of our further education colleges with our two training centres. We have an FE college and a training centre quite near to each other. There is significant scope there. Most of our FET colleges in the city are quite large but we are looking at ways of offering as large an FET college as we can in each area.

Ms Cróna Gallagher: To follow on from the comments of Mr. Brownlee, in the rural ETBs people are not concerned, but they are certainly dedicated to our services continuing in every part of the county. It may just be a matter of having more consolidated provision in larger towns.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: The witnesses may have already touched on the issues involved in my final question. That is the difficulty of coming in towards the end of the discussion. I refer to the opportunities and challenges posed by online learning. This question may have been knocked on the head in the witnesses’ previous comments. In certain modules, is any provision likely to come from the experience of facilitating fully online courses? In light of the roll-out of technology and devices for students, is it likely that increased online learning could be one of the consequences of the pandemic?

Ms Carol Hanney: There is already an e-college in SOLAS. We have been looking at running some blended courses. We ran a couple of such courses before lockdown. We are looking at running blended courses and I hope that, in future, we will run more online courses because there is no reason we should not. At this stage, I think we have got over a lot of the fear of online courses. Teachers have got over the fear of teaching online as well. There are different ways of teaching online. Some online teaching is very person to person. A person in a Zoom call can have a virtual classroom that works quite well. Some other online teaching is more distant. We are exploring and will explore all of the possibilities.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: The challenges will be getting devices to students. I know the Government has invested in rolling out a significant amount of money, but even as a percentage or ball park figure, could Ms Hanney estimate how many City of Dublin ETB students will be without a device this year?

Ms Carol Hanney: We got finance during the summer and distributed almost 1,400 laptops. We distributed a few hundred before that because we used other funding to try to source laptops for students who were unable to do their work. We also sourced dongles because Wi-Fi was a problem for a number of them. Full-time students are probably reasonably okay at this stage but there was a serious problem. Those devices are only loaned to them so they will be giving them back at the end of the year.

Chairman: I thank all the witnesses for coming before the committee today. The discussion has been very beneficial and informative for all members. I thank Ms Gallagher for joining us remotely and Mr. Brownlee and Ms Hanney for joining us in the committee room. The meeting is now adjourned until 10.30 a.m. on 17 December 2020 for a private session followed by a public session with Dr. Paul Downes, director of the educational disadvantage centre at the institute of education in Dublin City University, and the staff and students of Cork Life Centre.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.02 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Thursday, 17 December 2020.