

Interim Report of Review of Senior Cycle Education

SOLAS Submission November 2019

1.0 Introduction

SOLAS are pleased to make a formal submission in response to the *Interim Report of Review of Senior Cycle Education* (the review) to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). We welcome the review and also the publication of the report. We have several comments below relating to the main themes, ideas and emerging perspectives detailed in the report, in the context of the Further Education and Training system in Ireland. In addition we wish to acknowledge the public engagement process undertaken by the NCCA and the delivery of the national conference, which we were delighted to have been involved in.

2.0 Background and Context

SOLAS is the statutory authority responsible for planning, funding and co-ordinating Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland. Our vision is for FET programmes to be recognised for their demonstrable benefits for learners, enterprise and communities, where FET is valued for its effectiveness and quality, playing an integral role in helping Ireland to achieve its ambition of the best education and training service in Europe. SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) were created in 2013 when the national training service was brought together with VEC-governed further education provision.

SOLAS is charged with a range of responsibilities including:

- Supporting the development and implementation of further education and training strategy
- Funding of the FET system to maximise the impact of state investment
- Overseeing the development and implementation of the Strategic Performance Agreements between SOLAS and each Education and Training Board (ETB) which set out 3 year plans to further embed a strategic and integrated FET system
- Statutory responsibility for the apprenticeship system
- Analysing the labour market and identifying and anticipating key skills needs, and
- Promoting the standing of Further Education and Training

Under the Further Education and Training Act 2013, SOLAS must propose a strategy for the development of FET every 5 years to the Minister for Education and Skills. The first strategy was published in 2014. For the next five year period the new FET strategy will continue to build on the success and the positive impacts being delivered for learners, for employers and for our communities all across the country. It is therefore an opportune time to consider how best to progress shared aims and outcomes, where relevant for learners progressing to FET from senior cycle education, and also to review the mechanisms and opportunities whereby we can ensure there is both early and meaningful engagement for students on all the potential benefits and pathways that FET can offer.

Currently we know approximately 30% of students' progress to FET annually following completion of senior cycle. Although this represents around 20,000 young people, in the main these students choose to either commence a statutory apprenticeship or progress on to a PLC College. This may be higher if more students were able to experience or have access to targeted guidance on more integrated opportunities which incorporate the overall FET system. We are aware of many examples of specific and pro-active good practice in schools, through which careers and potential employment opportunities in apprenticeship, traineeship and wider FET form key components of the education experience over the period of the senior cycle. This may also be a way to improve the current gender imbalance in areas such as apprenticeship by exposing more females to routes and pathways of this kind. We really welcome the strong support evidenced in the review for enhancing provision for students who wish to transition from senior cycle education to apprenticeship, traineeships and further training and employment.

FET can offer flexible and specific training and education opportunities for school leavers, across a range of subjects and levels, all across the country. For example there are currently over 70 traineeship programmes that have been developed by Education and Training Boards in areas including creative arts, media, digital technology, construction, finance and healthcare. Many traineeships are 6-12 months in duration and offer students the opportunity to experience training with an employer for at least 30% of the duration of the course and generally offer a qualification at levels 4-6 on the Irish NFQ. Apprenticeships offer students an opportunity to achieve an award from Levels 5-9 on the NFQ and also mean a student enters the work place as all apprentices are employed from day 1. Under the banner of Generation Apprenticeship, apprenticeship options span a broad range of twenty-first century industry sectors which include construction; engineering; hospitality; ICT, logistics, biopharma and finance.

The publication of the the *National Employer Survey 2018*¹ evidenced that overall satisfaction rates of employers of FET graduates was 84%, the satisfaction rate for higher education graduates was 86%. In the survey FET graduates scored highest for working effectively with others at 89%, effective verbal communication at 85% and working effectively on their own at 85%, pointing towards the job-readiness outcomes for FET learners. The future world of work will require an embedded lifelong learning commitment for all staff and their employers and so it is also in this context we should consider FET in any reform of senior cycle education.

3.0 Themes for Consideration

We would like to provide further detail on some areas for review and possible consideration for the future, building on the context outlined above. We have grouped these under three main themes; skills, pathways and inclusion. These broad themes represent the key emerging pillars in the new Further Education and Training Strategy for Ireland for 2020 - 2024 and map appropriately to many sections and emerging areas in the review.

3.1 Skills

The core purpose of senior cycle education as defined in the review is to help every student towards fulfilling their potential. It is outlined that the educational experience at senior cycle equips students for diverse and sustainable futures so that they can embrace full, active citizenship and participation in society and the economy as they make the transition to life beyond school. In this context skills play a central role, as is the case within FET.

¹ [http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/Irish%20National%20Employer%20Survey%20-%20Final%20Report%20\(3\).pdf](http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/Irish%20National%20Employer%20Survey%20-%20Final%20Report%20(3).pdf)

The commentary and descriptors of the various options available at senior cycle including the leaving certificate established (LCE), leaving certificate vocational programme (LCVP) and leaving certificate applied (LCA) as well as transition year (TY) evidence not only the differing levels of skills required for these choices but also the outcomes. This includes the well-established pathway from LCE to higher education through the central applications office (CAO). The low level of take up of LCA is evidenced, as well as a reported perceived stigma to this route, perhaps connected to the fact this qualification does not qualify for CAO points and therefore does not provide a direct pathway to higher education. The review points to very rich and positive experiences for those students choosing TY, in many cases the TY experience could adapt itself well to enabling access to FET opportunities within the remit of obtaining a broader base of skills in terms of personal and social development. This is further reinforced by the fact that one of the key benefits reported by students was access to work experience during TY. The LCVP which was designed to provide students with a leaving certificate with a vocational, work-orientated and practical focus is also similar to TY in that work experience as part of this qualification is reported as being very beneficial and in this case it does qualify for CAO points. It is interesting to note that this route is chosen by approximate 28% of students and could potentially be the starting point for the development of more vocational or technological options.

The flexible nature of FET provision alongside the agility to provide employment particularly in the context of the skills of the future should be integrated into any future modelling of senior cycle education. Future FET aims to provide clearer skills pathways for everyone, with greater flexibility and with potential access to more modular/bitesize and transferable skills options. We do acknowledge that teaching capability across many schools does not facilitate delivery of these options currently but we would like to suggest that this is discussed for the future. We also believe that vocational options need to be more embedded across the senior cycle rather than presented in the current frameworks, which may be perceived as essentially separate tracks.

3.2 Pathways

The Future FET Strategy which has learners at its heart seeks to ensure accessible and clear integrated pathways into FET. This includes from secondary level in a way that is not distinct or separate and may be acknowledged in some ways as a 'lesser' pathway to other choices such as higher education. FET needs to be an equally valid option for school leavers but this requires vocational interest, options and pathways at 2nd level. We believe there are 5 main steps to ensure clear pathways are made available:

- Balanced advice
- Full information
- Access routes
- Tasters and experience
- Vocational teaching

We would welcome an opportunity to discuss these ideas in more detail and the important role of career guidance in defined and informed pathways.

We are aware of international models that incorporate further education capability at secondary level to deliver vocational modules and apprenticeship taster programmes. We would like to suggest this is discussed and considered for how this could be perhaps piloted as part of the senior cycle reform across a diverse base of second level schools. This could involve a combination of blended delivery models and work-based learning.

3.3 Inclusion

SOLAS have just launched a new Further Education and Training campaign, ThisisFET - www.thisisfet.ie which really showcases FET graduates, their real life stories and the impact FET has had on their lives. The campaign across FET will build on and integrate other initiatives and promotions such as Generation Apprenticeship and Skills to Advance. As we continue this campaign we would like to ensure we can work in partnership with NCCA to further incorporate an inclusive approach to promotion and engagement. This flagship FET campaign which will run alongside the launch and implementation of the new FET Strategy will aim to increase knowledge and understanding about the careers and opportunities available through FET routes, for all learners. Some of the initial ambassadors featured in the campaign launch are now in successful careers in areas such as media and communications, fashion and textiles, restoration and stonemasonry, creative arts and design, animation and construction.

Many of the FET ambassadors by telling their stories not only clearly articulate the level of skill they have attained in their chosen area, but through their passion for their chosen career and vocation they will inspire others to choose FET routes. Many schools are choosing to take an integrated proactive approach to introducing a range of pathways options to students, including a focus on Generation Apprenticeship opportunities, providing students with opportunities to meet employers and to try out some work experience options. In March 2019 SOLAS, in partnership with the Higher Education Authority, the Department for Education and Skills supported World Skills Ireland to deliver the inaugural Ireland Skills Live event. This 3 day skills and apprenticeship showcase held in the RDS Dublin welcomed 15k visitors, the majority of visitors being students at secondary level who travelled with their schools to the event. By ensuring an inclusive approach to the further development of these initiatives and events, we hope we can support any reform of the senior cycle that can enable students to pursue their chosen futures through FET.

4.0 Conclusion

SOLAS would welcome an opportunity to further engage with NCCA on the areas detailed in our response. We hope you find our comments and suggestions for consideration helpful and we look forward to engaging with NCCA in the future.