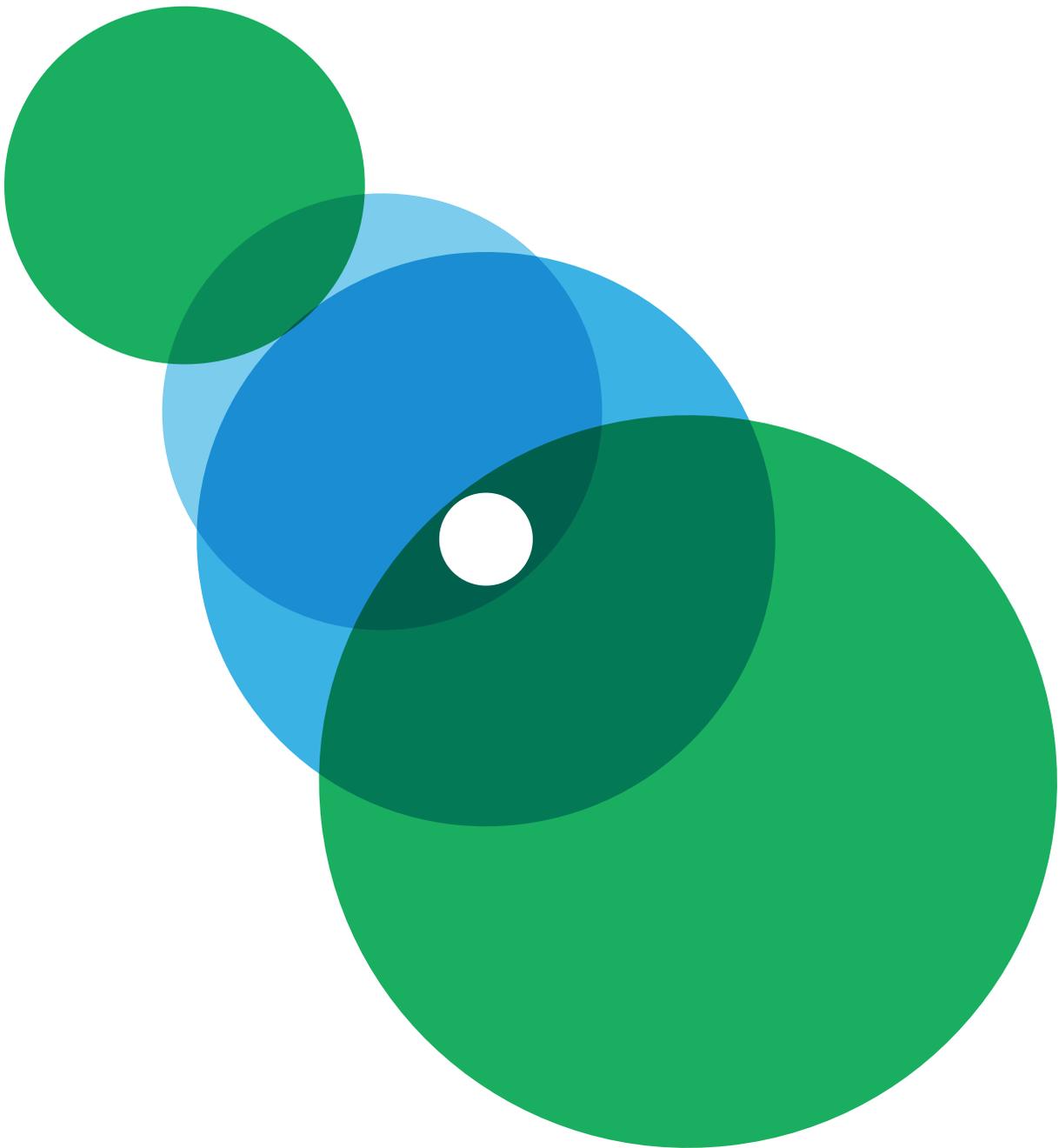


# SOLAS Response to the Findings of the Evaluation of The National Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) Programme

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November 2017





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# Section 1

## National Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) Evaluation

### 1.1 Introduction

In May 2014, the Minister for Education and Skills launched a five-year *Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 - 2019* outlining the vision for provision of further education and training in the state for the duration of the strategy. The overall aim of the strategy is to develop,

"A world-class integrated system of further education and training in Ireland, which will promote economic development and meet the needs of all citizens."

Within the document there are five strategic goals, which are underpinned by a number of objectives. The Strategy Implementation Advisory Committee (SIAC), chaired by the Department of Education and Skills (with SOLAS being a member of this Committee and providing the role of Secretariat) ensures the effective implementation of the Further Education and Training Strategy and guides and supports FET partner bodies in the delivery of the Strategy's Detailed Implementation Plan. Goal 4 of the Strategy; *Integrated Planning and Funding*, commits SOLAS to evaluate the effectiveness of all current FET provision.

See <http://www.solas.ie/docs/FETStrategy2014-2019.pdf> for the full text of the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 – 2019.

### 1.2 Rationale for the PLC Evaluation

Action 4.4 of the FET Strategy Detailed Implementation Plan commits SOLAS to organise and conduct a schedule of evaluations of the following FET provision over the lifetime of the FET Strategy:

- PLC
- Youthreach
- VTOS
- BTEI
- Specific Skills Training and Traineeship.

The specification for the independent evaluation of the PLC Programme was endorsed by the Department of Education and Skills in March 2015. A SOLAS-led PLC Evaluation Oversight Group was established to advise SOLAS on data collection, methodology, reporting and interpretation of findings. The membership of this group is attached at Appendix 1.

In August 2015 following a competitive tendering process, SOLAS commissioned the ESRI to conduct an independent evaluation of PLC provision and to present its report to SOLAS in 2016. In November 2016 the findings of the ESRI evaluation were presented to the Oversight Group followed by submission of the final report to SOLAS. The ESRI report was considered by SOLAS with a view to making recommendations to improve the PLC programme in consultation with DES.

Based on the agreed recommendations arising from the evaluation, SOLAS will devise a programme improvement plan for implementation including performance indicators and timelines. SOLAS will incorporate the appropriate agreed recommendations into the SOLAS/ETBI Annual FET Service Planning Guidelines and Parameters documents to inform annual ETB/PLC planning processes.

### 1.3 Purpose and Expected Outcomes of the Evaluation of PLC Programme

The purpose of the PLC evaluation was to generate policy-relevant knowledge concerning the appropriateness, conduct and impacts of PLC provision; to learn about the appropriateness of current policy on PLC provision and the effectiveness and efficiency of the PLC programme.

The ESRI was requested to provide specific information for consideration by SOLAS regarding the PLC provision and to make suggested recommendations where appropriate to SOLAS for its consideration. (See Appendix 2 for details).

### 1.4 The PLC Programme in Context

In 1977 the European Social Fund provided funding for the establishment of pre-employment courses in over 120 schools. These courses targeted post junior cycle students and aimed to provide social, general and technical education combined with work experience. The courses were initially confined to vocational and community/comprehensive schools. In 1984, they were redeveloped as Vocational Preparation and Training (VPT) courses, VPT1 and VPT2, and were extended to secondary schools. The structure of the programmes comprised vocational studies, work experience and general studies.<sup>1</sup> In 1985 a second year was added to the courses, and VPT2 courses became commonly known as Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses.

Today the Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) is a full-time programme for young people who have completed their Leaving Certificate and adults returning to education as well as unemployed individuals wishing to upskill. The courses combine general education, vocational training and opportunities for work experience, or work practice over one academic year. PLC courses generally lead to Major awards made by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) at NFQ Level 5 or NFQ-Level 6.<sup>2</sup>

The PLC programme currently offers in the region of 2,500 courses in over 60 subject areas (e.g. IT, Business, Childcare, Hairdressing) through 160+ approved centres with 90%+ of provision provided by the ETBs (many in former VEC colleges) and a number in voluntary secondary schools and community and comprehensive schools (VSSCCS). Total enrolments in PLCs as reported by DES for the academic year 2014/2015 was 33,089. In relation to the DES Post Primary Database, data is captured once a year based on those who started a PLC programme rather than those who finished or achieved Major awards. Consequently, it is one of the most significant full time vocational education programmes in terms of enrolments and budget.

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<sup>1</sup> NESC (1993). *Education and Training Policies for Economic and Social Development*. Dublin: NESC.

<sup>2</sup> Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) 2013. Available: <http://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Further-Education-and-Training/Post-Leaving-Certificate-PLC-Programme/>. Last accessed 21st Oct 2014.

## 1.5 Aims and Objectives of the PLC Programme

### 1.5.1 Conditions of Approval – aim and objectives

The aim and objectives of the PLC programme as set out in the *PLC Conditions of Approval* document<sup>3</sup> are as follows:

The Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) Programmes is a self-contained whole-time learning experience designed to provide successful participants with specific vocational skills to enhance their prospects of securing lasting, full-time employment or progression to other studies.<sup>4</sup>

The research conducted as part of this evaluation indicates that the programme has developed multiple aims over the past 30 years. The initial emphasis was to 'provide vocational training for young people to bridge the gap between school and work'. However, over time, the PLC programme also developed as a route to higher education.

Since 1996, under the Higher Education Links scheme, places on 'selected' courses in the Higher Education Institutions were allocated on the basis of attainment by candidates on PLC courses. A review of this sector suggested that PLC courses provide an important progression route to higher education. The vast majority of entrants to the PLC programme from second-level schools have achieved the Leaving Certificate, although many 'older' entrants to the programme have not successfully completed second-level.

Over more recent years a third purpose has evolved; it could be termed 'socially inclusive' in emphasis. The nature of this inclusiveness contains a number of elements such as providing learning opportunities to keep young school leavers and older unemployed persons engaged and thus keeping them closer to the labour market and prepared for work when employment prospects improve. This aim is also a feature of other FET programmes. It also enables young people to avail of space and time to transition to more mature adulthood and to make more informed choices regarding career and employment and higher education options.

### 1.5.2 Conditions of Approval – approval process

The *PLC Conditions of Approval* (II)<sup>5</sup> details the approval process in establishing a new PLC course as follows:

#### Approval process

- In approving courses SOLAS has regard to ensuring appropriate provision on a geographic basis. Providers must include a Labour Market Justification (LMJ) with applications for all new courses, showing:
  - How the course provision meets with Government policy
  - What particular skill gaps or areas of skills growth, both locally and nationally, the course will address
  - Specific data and information on progression options, local agreements with employers, information on outcomes for previous learners.

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3 See Appendix 3.

4 Post Leaving Certificate Programme, Conditions of Approval, SOLAS (2015).

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5 See Appendix 3.

PLC Course components and recommended durations are set out in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

Area of Study	Annual Hours	% of Time
Vocational Studies	400-480	50-60%
General Studies	160-240	20-30%
Preparation for Work/Work Experience	160-240	20-30%

In relation to certification, the existing *Conditions of Approval* specify that all courses must lead to an appropriate Full/Major Award at NFQ Levels 5 or NFQ level 6. Courses that lead to awards by other awarding bodies included in NFQ can be offered once there is a need for such courses.

### 1.6 Funding

During 2014 there were 32,544 PLC places available at an estimated direct cost<sup>6</sup> of €169m<sup>7</sup> (SOLAS, 2014). Direct costs per PLC student have been estimated at €5,200 per annum. The Department of Education and Skills continued to fund the PLC Co-Operation Hours Provision (Teacher Pay and Student Capitation). Approximately 95% of PLC places were located within the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) approved sector during 2014, with the remaining 5% of places offered by Voluntary Secondary and Community and Comprehensive Schools.<sup>8</sup>

### 1.7 External Environment

The PLC evaluation was also conducted in the context of an economy which is now in recovery. The data that was collected referred to two periods in time; the recession period (2010) as well as the recovery period (2012 to 2015). Unemployment continues to decrease and more people are finding work, mostly in full time employment. While high levels of long term unemployment persist, the rate of youth unemployment decreased from 31% in 2012 to 15.1% in October 2016.

In addition, on-going economic and social policy initiatives, wider public service reforms, including education also provided a backdrop to the evaluation exercise. Government policy initiatives, such as the *Action Plan for Jobs 2016*, the *Pathways to Work 2015*,

<sup>6</sup> Excludes any capital cost allocation

<sup>7</sup> This consists of an estimated €150m for PLC teacher costs, €4m PLC standard student caption and €15m in grant support to PLC students.

<sup>8</sup> In terms of the FET sector as a whole, in 2011 VECs provided full and part time programmes. Full time programmes include PLC, Vocational Training Opportunity Scheme (VTOS), and Youthreach. Part time programmes provided by the VECs are: Back to Education Initiative (BTEI), Community Education, Adult Literacy, Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE), and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). In 2012, FÁS vocational training included apprenticeships, traineeships, specific skills training, and vocational training. These courses vary by duration (see McGuinness et al., 2014 for a complete discussion).

the DSP-led *Youth Guarantee/Youth Employment Initiative*, the new *National Skills Strategy 2025* and the *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019*, incorporate many commitments made by the education sector including SOLAS and the ETBs to support their successful implementation.

New Department of Education and Skills-led national and regional skills identification architecture has been established as set out in the new *National Skill's Strategy 2025 – Ireland's Future*. The projected skills needs of the economy are clearly set out in the new strategy. PLC provision has a central role among other things, in contributing to the successful implementation of the education reforms, policy and strategy initiatives relating to FET outlined above.

### 1.8 Studies Carried Out to Date Relevant to the PLC Programme

A series of important studies, which have informed the research specification for the PLC Programme evaluation, have already been carried out over the last number of years including:

- Report to the Steering Group of the PLC Review (McIver, 2003)
- The Post-Leaving Certificate Sector in Ireland: A Multivariate Analysis of Education and Employment Outcomes (Watson *et al*, 2006)
- Learning for Jobs. OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training: Ireland (Kis, 2010)
- A Strategic Review of Further Education and Training and the Unemployed (NESC, 2013)
- Leaving School in Ireland (McCoy, 2014).

## 1.9 The PLC Evaluation Research and Consultation Process

SOLAS in managing the evaluation of the national PLC programme with the support of the Economic and Social Research Institute, adopted a consultative and evidence-based approach. Some of the key issues to be addressed included the following:

- Profile of current PLC programme provision
  - Disaggregated over course type and geographical location
- Analysis of the views of PLC providers on provision.
- Profile of PLC participants including:
  - Descriptive information on PLC students compared to other leavers
  - Preliminary descriptive analysis of outcomes for participants
  - Estimates of progression rates
  - Counterfactual estimate for PLC learners.
- Assessment of learner experiences
  - Access to relevant work experience and skill formation, take-up of learner supports, reflections on guidance process and quality of experience.

A four strand approach was agreed by SOLAS as follows:

- (i) Desk-based research based on
  - Analysis of administrative PLC enrolments data from DES
  - Analysis of QNHS data.
- (ii) Comprehensive survey of PLC college and school principals
  - Using a SOLAS/ESRI developed questionnaire and accessed through a confidential ESRI web link
  - Contacting all providers.
- (iii) Comprehensive survey of learners
  - Using a SOLAS/ESRI developed questionnaire and accessed through a confidential ESRI web link and /or direct contact
  - Survey sample drawn from DES Post-Primary Pupil Database in 2010, with information collected on the status of leavers for years 2010, 2012 & 2015
  - Survey included subjective and objective outcomes in both 2012 and 2015. Outcomes relate to employment history – occupation, job quality, earnings, etc. Subjective outcomes relate to reflection on education pathways, satisfaction with labour market status and expectations

- (iv) Consultation research workshops with key stakeholders organised and conducted by SOLAS with ESRI support
  - A series of SOLAS-led consultation workshops, including a dedicated workshop for the CEOs of ETBs, were held over four days from 23rd to 26th February 2016 inclusive, with over one hundred and seventy in attendance.

### 1.9.1 Challenges with the Research

The ESRI experienced substantial challenges during the fieldwork in relation to both the Survey of Leavers and the Survey of Principals. With regard to the Survey of Leavers, a low response rate coupled with missing information on key variables such as leaving certificate points and wages were significant challenges in the initial stages of the research to achieve a statistically significant sample size. The potential factors that may be linked to these issues included inaccurate address information, migration, and the timeframe.<sup>9</sup> A total of 1,220 leavers participated in the survey.

Initially a relatively low response rate was also a feature of the Survey of PLC Principals. The close off date for the survey was extended in order to maximise the response rate, and in the end 110 Principals responded (70% response rate). The total PLC enrolments reported by the 110 responding Principals was 26,911. The total enrolments in PLC as reported by DES for 2014/2015 was 33,089. The response rate, therefore, in terms of coverage can be estimated as 81%. SOLAS is uncertain at this stage why the response rate was not higher given the critical importance of a successful PLC sector for learners, employers and the taxpayer.

The ESRI submitted the evaluation report to SOLAS in December 2016. A presentation of the initial findings in February 2016 at the consultation workshops and a second presentation to the Oversight Group in November 2016 provided early indications of the success or otherwise of the programme. SOLAS considered the evaluation findings over the period December 2016 – January 2017. These findings are set out in Section 2.

<sup>9</sup> The survey sample was drawn from the DES Post-Primary Pupil Database and comprised individuals who left school following the Leaving Certificate (or equivalent) in 2009 and PLC leavers who left the programme in 2010.



# Section 2

## Key Findings

### 2.1 Desk-based Research

Summary of Key Findings from the Desk-based Research	
—	A substantial amount of heterogeneity in the regional distribution of PLC places exists. Also, the structure of provision does not appear to be reactive to economic change.
—	PLC provision has remained relatively static and does not appear to be highly responsive to changing labour market conditions.
—	Young people from disadvantaged regions, who have the highest risk of unemployment, do not have higher than average access to vocational education programmes.
—	Heavy emphasis is placed in the areas of early childhood care and education, community and health services, and hairdressing.
—	There is substantial oversupply in provision of courses aimed at particular occupations.
—	It is unclear in many instances that the emphasis of provision coincides with labour demand.

#### 2.1.1 Awards/Enrolments

An analysis of DES enrolments data indicated that 83% of awards achieved by PLC students are QQI while 17% are non QQI. Based on QNHS data, there does not appear to be a large demand for sub-degree qualifications produced by the FET sector.

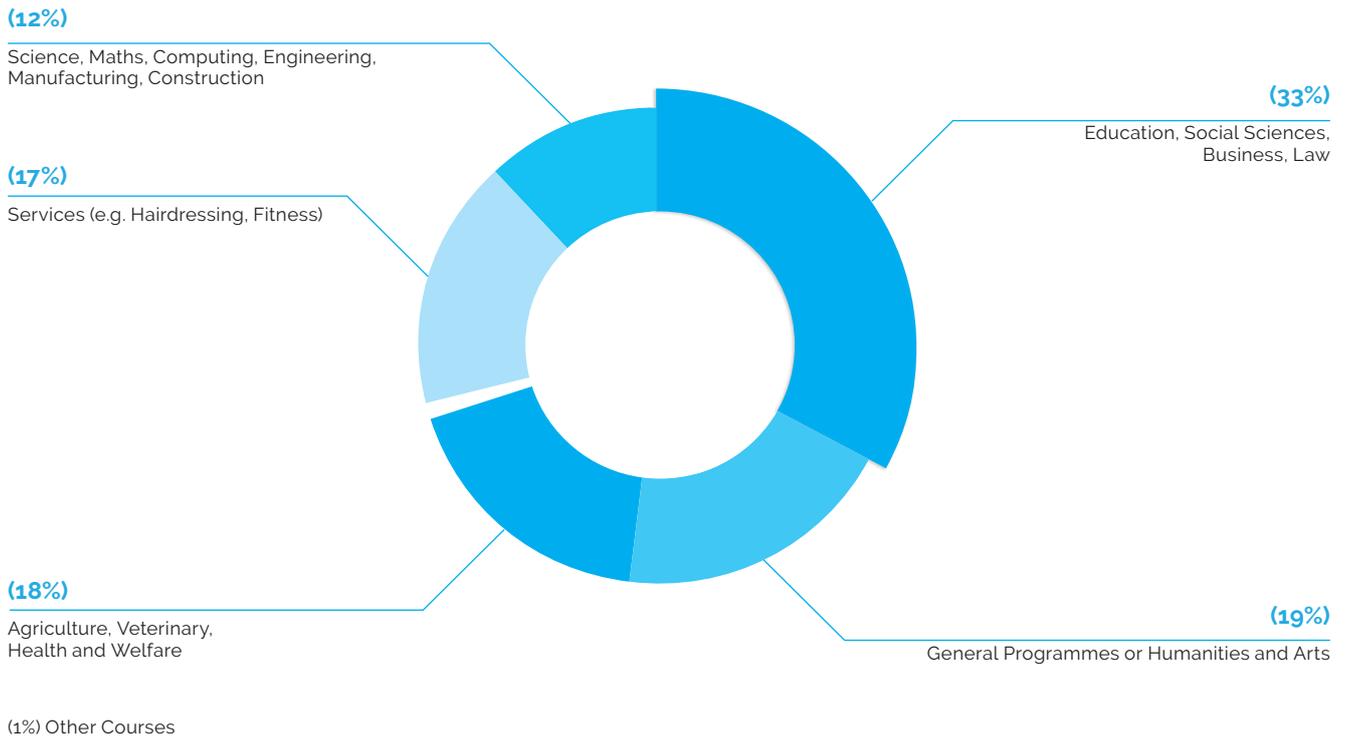
The distribution of PLC enrolments is uneven across the country and follows no discernible pattern. Also, the structure of provision does not appear to be reactive to economic change and labour market needs. The way in which different parts of the FET sector developed organically to serve different purposes has also had significant implications for the current nature of provision.

Some counties have fewer PLC places than other counties using the comparator of their county population as a percentage of the national population as their benchmark ratio. Other counties have more PLC places given their comparatively lower population density. In addition, the level of PLC enrolments by county is independent of the poverty deprivation index 2011/2012.<sup>10</sup>

PLC enrolment levels in broad subject areas remained fairly static over the period 2008-2012, a period of the financial crises and an unprecedented rise in the unemployment rate from 6% in 2008 to just under 15% in 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Hasse Practchke. For example, the Pobal HP Deprivation Index is a series of deprivation indices developed by Trutz Haase and Jonathan Pratschke and funded by Pobal.

**The top five fields of learning for PLC enrolments were:**



The top PLC courses by enrolment were:	
Early Childhood Care and Education	
Nursing Studies	
Business Studies	
Sport and Recreation	
Community and Health Services	
Office Administration	
Information Technology	
Art	
Hairdressing	

These nine courses accounted for almost half of the PLC enrolments in 2011/2012.

### 2.1.2 QNHS Data

In order to estimate the composition of demand for newly qualified vocational labour for workers aged between 15 to 24 years, QNHS (2012) data was used to identify occupations where the majority of workers were educated to a sub-degree level. The data showed that approximately 60% of this cohort<sup>11</sup> found employment in the following seven Standard Occupational Classifications (SOCs):

- Sales and retail assistants, cashiers and checkout operators
- Waiters and waitresses
- Childminders and related occupations
- Bar staff
- Hairdressers, barbers, beauticians and related occupations
- Cleaners and domestics
- Kitchen and catering assistants.

The research also found the number of PLC enrolments in community and health services was over four times the number of jobs available in that category. PLC enrolments in early childhood care and education was also four times the number of available jobs, and enrolments in hairdressing were over twice the number of available jobs under that occupational category. SOLAS, however, acknowledges that the oversupply may not necessarily be a cause for concern. Learners may have enrolled on these courses as a means to progression to HE or to fulfil a social inclusion/lifelong learning need.

## 2.2 Comprehensive Survey of PLC Principals

Summary of key Findings from the Survey of Principals	
—	Teacher and tutor qualifications: 45% Arts and Social Sciences, 22% Services, 19% STEM and 14% Agriculture.
—	PLC provision was viewed as fulfilling a range of roles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific labour market entry, lifelong learning and progression to HE all appear to have equal weight.</li> </ul>
—	Decisions around course provision and closure tend to be heavily driven by student demand with less weight given to employer requirements, government objectives or national forecasting.
—	Higher levels of employment progression are also associated with a higher (lower) share of employment (progression) focused courses. <sup>12</sup>
—	There is an inverse relationship between rates of progression to HE reported by providers and the ratio of students to teaching staff.
—	The majority of colleges/schools offer a comprehensive range of student supports.

<sup>11</sup> Derived using QNHS Survey Q2 2012 microdata (CSO). Individuals aged 15-24 who qualified in the last year (2011/2012) with a Leaving Certificate or PLC qualification, and who commenced their job with their current employer in the last year (2011 or 2012).

<sup>12</sup> This suggests that there is some degree of trade-off between the emphasis on employment and progression in colleges, which directly impacts on student outcomes.

### 2.2.1 PLC Enrolments

One hundred and sixty principals of colleges and schools who are registered to deliver PLCs were contacted to participate in the research and 110 responded. This equates to almost 70% of all providers and 81% in terms of coverage based on the enrolment data provided by principals compared to total enrolment data provided by DES. Based on college/school type, 54% of ETB School principals responded, 26% of ETB College principals responded, 16% of VSSCCS principals responded and 4% of respondents were listed as "Other". This group describe themselves as a stand-alone provider or a mix of the other types.

The average number of students reported by principals varied considerably depending on the college/school type. The average number of students in an ETB college was 706. In an ETB school it was 105, and in a Voluntary secondary/community/comprehensive school offering PLC courses, it was 74. Colleges/institutions describing themselves as "other" reported an average number of students as 274.

Just under half of all PLC principals reported that PLC enrolments remained stable over the past five years. Thirty three percent (33%) of providers reported that enrolments had decreased while 22 % reported an increase in numbers.

Over two thirds of PLC principals indicated that they had the capacity to increase enrolments to some extent, and just less than one quarter reported that had a 'great capacity' to increase enrolments. The remainder reported little or no capacity to increase enrolments. The vast majority of PLC providers reported that they accepted all PLC applicants.

### 2.2.2 Profile of Teaching Staff Qualifications

The reported distribution of teacher and tutor staff qualifications by subject area by PLC principals showed the following breakdown in five broad subject areas as follows:

- General Programmes or Humanities and Arts (23 %)
- Education, Social Sciences, Business, Law (22%)
- Services (e.g. Hairdressing, Fitness) (22%)
- Science, Maths, Computing, Engineering, Manufacturing, Construction (19%)
- Agriculture, Veterinary, Health and Welfare (14%)

This structure is likely to be a constraint in responding to existing and future changing needs.

### 2.2.3 Student Supports

A comprehensive range of supports available to students was reported by principals. The percentage of colleges offering specified supports are as follows:

- Career guidance 93%
- Class tutor supports 86%
- Learning supports 84%
- Counselling 75%
- Disability services 61%
- Disability supports 57%
- Financial supports 41%
- Students union 39%
- Childcare 18%.

### 2.2.4 Reasons for Setting up/Closing PLC Courses

The factor reported as being the most influential in establishing a new PLC course was '*to meet the demands of students*'. This was followed closely by the factor '*meeting the demand for workers in the local labour market*' and by the factor '*there are staff with relevant skills in the college*'.

With regard to closing PLC courses, the factors reported as being the most influential were '*falling enrolments/undersubscribed*' followed by '*course does not meet demands of students*'.

In summary, decisions around course provision and closure tend to be heavily driven by student demand with less weight given to employer requirements, government objectives or national forecasting.

### 2.2.5 Progression Pattern of PLC Leavers as reported by the Principals

The progression patterns of PLC leavers as reported by principals show that 33% go directly to employment, 47% either remain in FE or progress to Higher Education with 12% becoming unemployed. The remaining 12% were reported as entering apprenticeships or categorised as 'other'.

### 2.2.6 Drivers of Outcomes of Leavers (PLC Survey of Principals)

Using a (multivariate model), the main drivers influencing outcomes of leavers is the orientation of PLC colleges. Colleges that reported an emphasis on employment reported relatively more students going into employment and fewer students progressing to HE. Colleges that reported an emphasis on progression to HE reported relatively more students progressing to HE and fewer students going directly into employment. An inverse relationship was also shown to exist between rates of progression to HE, as reported by principals, and the ratio of students to teaching staff.

### 2.2.7 Reported Purpose of PLC Courses

Colleges reported the purpose of PLC as having multiple roles. The main purpose was stated as provision of general education followed by entry to employment and to facilitate social inclusion. Progression to higher education, entry to specific

occupations and the facilitation of life-long learning were ranked slightly lower.

### 2.2.8 Employer Engagement and Work Experience

Approximately 50% of principals indicated that staff met with employers up to once per year, while the remaining 50% reported more than three meetings per year. Work experience and job placements were reported as discussed at the majority of meetings with employers while 77% of principals indicated that all learners took part in work experience.

### 2.2.9 Provider Perspectives on Future Challenges

The most frequently mentioned challenge, mentioned by over 50% of providers related to lack of funding, lack of capital investment, the approach to teacher allocation and lack of CPD for teachers. Duplication of courses and competition between providers across the HE and FE sectors was also cited as a significant challenge. The situation is reported to be further exacerbated by the improving employment situation.

## 2.3 Comprehensive Survey of Learners

Summary of Key Findings from the Survey of Learners	
—	Relative to the LC group, PLC learners are more likely to be female, are on average 6 years older and are less likely to come from higher socio economic groups.
—	The majority of PLC leavers are in the 200-400 points bands while the majority of the LC group (most went on to HE) are in the 300-500 bands.
—	Approx. 70% of learners undertook work experience during their PLC studies.
—	Their primary objectives in completing the PLC course was (i) get a place on an HE course (39%) and (ii) employment (39%).
—	Relative to the HE group, PLC learners are less likely to report getting what they planned on leaving school, report lower dropout rates, and more likely to report regret with chosen pathway (no statistical effect).
—	There are positive impacts on employment prospects, progression to HE and possibly earnings.
—	Skill formation rate of under skilling appears to be high for PLC participants who went directly into the labour market.

### 2.3.1 Learner Sample Details

The overall sample size of the learner survey was 1,220 of which 573 had taken a PLC course and 647 had a Leaving Certificate only.

Just under 63% of PLC students were female (48% for Leaving Certificate students). The average age of PLC students when contacted by the ESRI in 2015 was 31 years (24+ years for LC students).

It is notable that PLC participants who subsequently progressed to HE were typically from more highly educated backgrounds than their counterparts who did not make this transition. The same distinction applies in relation to Leaving Certificate performance: learners who subsequently progressed to HE show higher points attainment than those who did not progress.

The majority of PLC students described their relationships with other students, teachers and administrative staff as supportive and considerate during their course.

In terms of subject area over 55% of the PLC learners participated in programmes leading to awards in Education, Social Science, Business and law, Agriculture, Veterinary, Health and Welfare.

### 2.3.2 Reasons Reported for PLC Study and LC Points Achieved

Just under 40% of PLC students reported that getting a place on a Higher Education Programme was the primary objective of PLC study, a further 39% 'to get a job right away after the course'. Just over 18% of students reported 'personal development' as the main objective of PLC study.

Over 40% of PLC students reported that PLC study opened up opportunities in the IoTs, 24%+ in Irish Universities, 8%+ in UK Universities and just under 10%+ in 'other institutions'. Approximately 30% of PLC students reported that they did not participate in work experience as part of the PLC studies although work experience is a compulsory element of the PLC programme. Over 90% of PLC students were in the CAO points range of 1-400, with 62% split even in two bands, namely 201-300 points (31%) and 301-400 points (31%). Seventy eight percent (78%) of LC students who did not take FE courses were in the points range 201-500 with over 48% of LC students who did not take FE courses in the 401-600 points range.

### 2.3.3 PLC Drop-out Rates

The reported drop-out rates for PLC were just under 16% for the first PLC course and 18% for those who took a second PLC course. This compares to 22% and 20% respectively for those who took Higher Education courses. The main reasons cited for drop-out from PLC courses in descending order of frequency were: *course not as expected, course content, got a job, did not like college, financial difficulties*.

### 2.3.4 Life Goals and Satisfaction Rating

Learners who completed Further Education only, reported the lowest satisfaction rating regarding achievement of post-school plans and goal realisation compared to those with Leaving Certificate only, Further and Higher Education and those with Leaving Certificate only, those with Further and Higher Education only and those with Higher Education only. Less than 40% of those with FE only felt they achieved their plans. This was the highest dissatisfaction rating from the four categories followed closely by those who had Further and Higher Education.<sup>13</sup>

### 2.3.5 Guidance

Some specific issues emerged from the research in relation to career guidance. Ninety three percent (93%) of principals reported that career guidance is available in their colleges and schools. In the Learners' Survey, respondents were asked to indicate whether they had accessed a range of student supports during the course of their PLC and HE studies. Just over one third of PLC students accessed career guidance supports, somewhat less than the figure for HE students (39%). The average adequacy score reported by PLC students who accessed career guidance support was 2.8 within a range of 1 to 4 (1=not at all, 4=to a great extent). Relative to the HE group, PLC learners are less likely to report getting what they planned on leaving school and are more likely to report regret with their chosen pathway. This raises the question as to whether there is a correlation between the career guidance they availed of and the influence it had on their chosen pathway. Dissatisfaction levels with career guidance counselling supports at second level were high for all pathway groups.

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<sup>13</sup> Responses were divided into four categories as follows: Respondents without Further Education or Higher Education, Respondents with Further Education only, Respondents with Further and Higher Education, Respondents with Higher Education only. Respondents were asked to select from three options regarding taking the same pathway again as follows: Yes; To some extent; No.

### 2.3.6 Counterfactual Impact of PLC Provision

The treatment group consisted of 421 PLC leavers. This excludes the cases where LC points data was not available. The treatment group was sub-divided into those who progressed to HE, those who did not progress to HE, those who took general PLC courses and those who took job specific PLC courses. The control group consisted of 577 LC learners, some of whom went straight to HE and some who went directly into the labour market.

Analysis of data from the learner survey shows that PLC learners are 27% more likely to progress to HE than LC holders who enter the labour market directly. Those with more general type PLC qualifications are even more likely to progress to HE than those with job specific PLC qualifications.

In terms of employment outcomes, PLC learners were on average 16% more likely to be in employment in 2015 compared to direct labour market (LM) entrants. Those with job specific PLC qualifications were circa 24% more likely to be in employment in 2015 than direct labour market entrants. For the year 2012, there were no significant differences in employment outcomes between the two groups. In terms of job quality for those in employment, no significant differences were found between the treatment group and the control group in relation to job satisfaction and degrees of underskilling or overskilling. With regard to the wage impacts of PLC participation. The research found little evidence of variations in earnings by level of acquired education, not surprising given the early stages of the employment career.

### 2.3.7 Degree of Underskilling

A significant degree of underskilling<sup>14</sup> was reported by respondents with PLC qualifications who entered the labour market. Just over one third of PLC leavers reported that they are underskilled and a further 15% reported that they were severely underskilled. This data was captured by asking respondents to compare their acquired skills and knowledge to that required for their current job.

Just over three quarters of PLC learners participated in a work experience programme as part of their course. Additional insights were gained through their responses to a range of questions regarding employability, work related knowledge and skill formation. One quarter of PLC learners reported that they acquired work related skills either 'never' or 'very little' during their course of study. A third reported that learning on their course did not contribute to their employability and 37% rarely, if ever, gained the opportunity to combine classroom-based learning with workplace experience while on their PLC course. Responses in relation to industry placement or work experience were less positive as 37% indicated that they never or rarely gained such opportunities while on their PLC programme.

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<sup>14</sup> Based on responses to a question in the Learner Survey asking learners to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 the extent to which their job demands more skills and knowledge than they can actually offer, where 1 is 'not at all' and 5 is 'to a very great extent'. A response of 4 or 5 is deemed to be consistent with underskilling and a response of 5 is deemed to be consistent with severe underskilling.

## 2.4 Consultation Workshops

### Summary of Key Findings from the Consultation Workshops

- A number of positive elements of the PLC programme were cited, which include:
  - High rates of employment and progression to HE
  - Responsive to learner demands in terms of provision
  - Positive student experiences with high satisfaction rates.
- A number of negative elements of the PLC programme were cited which include:
  - Mismatch between supply and labour market demand with many instances of oversupply
  - High proportion of courses without employment outcomes
  - High proportion of students not engaging in work experience
  - Staffing structures including contracts of indefinite duration.
- A number of potential areas for improvements to the programme were cited, which include:
  - CPD for teaching staff
  - Guidance
  - Standardisation of progression pathways to HE
  - QQI award structures and award options
  - Employer links
  - Funding and the need for capital investment
  - Teacher contracts.

### 2.4.1 Overview

The first workshop was for the CEOs of the 16 ETBs exclusively and was held in ETBI Piper's Hill. Eleven CEOs attended. The remaining three workshops were held in the Department of Education and Skills Clock Tower Building. One hundred and sixty participants attended the Clock Tower workshops, which was in line with intended target level of participation<sup>15</sup>. The ESRI made a comprehensive presentation on their initial findings from the desk based research, the survey of PLC college/school principals and the learner survey.

The workshop participants were asked to consider and present their views on the ESRI initial findings in relation to the following themes:

- Geographic spread of PLC courses nationally
- Capacity of PLC provision to respond to changes in the economy and labour market
- Range of fields of learning covered by PLC
- Demand from employers for PLC graduates (sub-degree qualifications)
- Aim of the PLC programme
- Factors influencing introduction of new courses and termination of others
- Teacher and tutor qualifications
- Constraints in responding to future needs.

The views expressed on each of the themes and suggested improvements to the PLC programme are summarised in Appendix 4.

Participants were also asked to comment on what they regarded as positive and negative elements of the findings and to suggest improvements to the PLC programme based on these findings.

Certain recurring issues were emphasised in the feedback across a wide range of the themes. These issues included: teacher contracts, the second level model in which the programme operates, subject matter expertise, the 'cap' on PLC places, funding for equipment, and curriculum and award constraints. The views expressed on the above themes are outlined in Appendix 3 as well as the suggested improvements to the programme.

### 2.4.2 Positive Aspects of PLC

The consultation workshops identified many positive aspects of the PLC programme including high progression and employment rates; large percentage (31%) of PLC learners achieved between 301-400 CAO points (based on the results of the Learner Survey) which indicates that PLC was a first choice for many students; the range of fields of learning on offer is responsive to learner demand; the diversity in age of PLC learners shows flexibility within the system; positive student experience with high satisfaction rates.

Providers at the workshops assert that PLCs have a track history and solid reputation of providing responsive, high quality PLC courses locally and that they are responsive to changing employment needs and have developed courses to meet current and emerging skills needs, e.g. gaming, multimedia, health care, science, culinary arts, etc. They also assert that PLC learners constitute in the region of 20% of the intake into universities and IoTs.

### 2.4.3 Negative Aspects of PLC

Negative aspects were also identified, including the operation of the PLC programme whereby particular second level operational models apply, namely, teaching contracts, teaching year and contact hours; a high proportion of students did not engage in work experience; mismatch between supply and labour market demand with oversupply in certain areas; additional supports required (childcare/transport); staffing structures/contracts of indefinite duration; proportion of courses without employment outcomes; limited links with employers; local IoTs/Universities reducing points and providing courses at level 5 and level 6.

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<sup>15</sup> Participants included: ETBs, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), Joint Managerial Body (JMB), SOLAS, National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE), Department of Education and Skills (DES), Department of Jobs Enterprise and Innovation (DJEI) and Department of Social Protection, Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER), EI, IDA, EGFSN, National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), Employer Bodies, Skillnets, Higher Education Authority (HEA), National Disability Authority (NDA), Department of Environment Community and Local Government (DECLG). (Note this list is not exhaustive).



# Section 3

## Policy Questions, Policy Options and SOLAS Recommendations to Improve PLC Provision

### 3.1 Synopsis of key findings / areas for improvement

Broadly speaking the findings confirmed a positive role played by the national PLC programme in providing educational opportunities for a diverse group of learners and in enhancing their access to employment and higher education. Overall learner satisfaction ratings with the relevance of course design and the quality of teaching was high.

In terms of progressing to higher education, the counterfactual impact results reveals that PLC learners are 27 per cent more likely to advance to higher education, relative to similar individuals who entered the labour market directly on completion of their Leaving Certificate. This impact is highly significant, with a stronger effect found for those PLC learners in more general rather than job-specific programmes. Thus, PLC courses appear to facilitate progression to higher education for a group of people who would likely not participate otherwise.

In terms of employment outcomes, the estimated counterfactual impact of PLC provision shows that PLC participants were 16 per cent more likely to be in employment relative to similar individuals who entered the labour market directly on completion of their Leaving Certificate. Again this is a significant impact.

In terms of its overall performance, the evidence shows that the PLC programme is doing well. Nevertheless, respondents highlighted key areas where significant improvements could be achieved. These were;

- Clarity around the orientation and purpose of specific courses
  - Greater responsiveness of job-specific PLC courses to changing labour market conditions in terms of the types of courses offered
  - The heterogeneity in the regional distribution of PLC places
  - The level of access of young people from disadvantaged regions, who have the highest risk of unemployment, who do not have higher-than-average access to PLC programmes
  - The lack of responsiveness to changing labour market conditions and shocks
- The pre-eminence of student-demand as the key influencer of course provision and closure with less weight given to employer requirements
  - A significant minority of learners who did not have an opportunity to engage in work experience as part of their PLC and the less than positive experience of many of those who did engage in work experience
  - The financial challenge constituting the single greatest difficulty for PLC students with greater caring responsibilities among the PLC group and restricting their employment opportunities
  - The high levels of dissatisfaction with guidance counselling supports at second level were high for all groups of leavers; this is a key factor in school leavers later regretting their post-school choices. The role of school-based guidance emerges as important in facilitating access to appropriate courses
  - Better employment effects for PLC learners in more job-specific, rather than general, PLC programmes.
  - Higher rates of underskilling among the PLC group (however these results need to be treated with some caution)
  - A number of legacy issue constraints, including:
    - the skillset of existing staff
    - relatively little input of information on skill gaps and employer demand into PLC provision
    - smaller institutions less likely to provide the full range of student supports and larger institutions operating under resource constraints relative to student numbers
    - scope to link smaller providers into local or regional networks, perhaps through the ETB, to facilitate access to specialist supports and to support engagement with employers
    - The issue of the appropriate level of funding to provide a varied learning experience and appropriate supports for a diverse group of learners, especially given that PLC courses are using a slightly enhanced second-level funding model that may not take adequate account of the range of facilities and supports required.

- Persistent difficulties, from the learner perspective, in the perceived status of PLC courses vis-à-vis higher education, which raise challenges in creating a valued pathway catering for a range of learners.

### 3.2 Implementation of the Recommendations

Subject to agreement with DES and in conjunction with its FET partners, SOLAS intends to lead, monitor and report on the implementation of the recommendations below. A PLC Programme Improvement Advisory Committee made up of key partners will be established to assist SOLAS in this work. A three-year timeframe 2018-2020 is envisaged to complete the work programme of the committee. SOLAS also intends to publish quarterly implementation progress reports commencing in quarter 1, 2018. These reports will incorporate updates on specific actions and targets following their review by the SOLAS Board, Department of Education and Skills, National Skills Council.

There are a number of recommendations highlighted below that have the potential to improve learner experiences and outcomes and secure a higher return on PLC investment in a relatively short timeframe ('quick wins'). As result they should warrant early attention by the Advisory Committee. Other recommendations will take longer to implement due to their complexity and may require further scrutiny. In that regard a number of considerations are pertinent:

- The first is the distribution of PLC places. The research was unable to establish a consistent rationale for the distribution of PLC provision. It is important to note that the ratios relating to the distribution of PLC places set out in the ESRI evaluation are presented on a county by county basis. This context predates the establishment of the ETB structure.

The ratios relating to PLC distribution presented in the research are expressed by share of total enrolments divided by population share. They allow an assessment of the extent to which PLC enrolments lie above or below the expected level given the county's population at that time (2008/09 and 2011/12). Specifically, a ratio greater than one indicates a higher density of enrolments relative to what might be expected for the given population. The ratios indicate that a number of ETBs, given their population size, would appear to have above the norm in terms of PLC places while others appear below the norm.

When county ratios are aggregated under the ETB structure, average ratios begin to converge more towards the norm.<sup>16</sup> In addition, when introducing a more broad-based lens of beneficiary numbers engaging in all NFQ or equivalent Level 5 and level 6 provision within an ETB<sup>17</sup> and referencing the recently published 2016 census population returns and 2016 SOLAS FARR returns for PLC and L5/L6 provision, the ratio<sup>18</sup> of L5/L6 beneficiary numbers to ETB population size converge across the ETB sector more towards the norm of 1.

In summary, a total of 7 ETBs<sup>19</sup> offer L5/L6 provision to a volume of beneficiaries that approximates to the expected norm (a ratio of 1.0) or close to it given their population size. Three ETBs appear to offer L5/L6 provision that indicates a higher density of beneficiaries than the expected norm i.e. a ratio of between 1.0 and 1.5 times the norm. Six ETBs appear to offer L5/L6 provision that indicates a lower density than the expected norm (a ratio of between 0.5 and 1.0) namely, Kildare Wicklow, Tipperary, Laois/Offaly, Longford/Westmeath, Donegal, Louth/Meath. In that regard, it is worth noting that Kildare Wicklow ETB, Tipperary ETB and Laois/Offaly ETB did not receive a training centre<sup>20</sup> as part of the restructuring of FET.

At one half of the expected norm, Laois/Offaly ETB appears to have the lowest ratio (0.5) of beneficiaries engaging in L5/L6 FET given its population size. This approximates to one third of the ratio of the Cavan Monaghan ETB (1.5). Using an additional lens of the number of those at work in each ETB catchment area i.e. workforce jobs<sup>21</sup> as a proxy measure of the potential capacity of the ETB labour market to absorb their FET graduates including PLC graduates, the percentage of beneficiaries within each of the 16 ETBs engaging in L5/L6 provision is broadly in line with the size of the respective labour market they are servicing.<sup>22</sup>

16 A ratio of 1.0

17 All level 5 and level 6 courses such as apprenticeships, PLC, traineeships, specific skills courses, VTOS etc.

18 The national percentage of L5/L6 beneficiaries in each ETB divided by the 2016 population share.

19 Combining City of Dublin and Dublin and Dun Laoghaire ETBs as servicing the Dublin labour market.

20 Training centres typically offering primarily employment focussed courses at L5/L6 or equivalent under Specific Skills Training, Traineeship, Apprenticeship, Local Training Initiatives, Community Training Centres.

21 Number of those at work by county - source SOLAS SLMRU. The concept of employment (measured as the number of people in work) differs from the concept of number of jobs, since a person can have more than one job and some jobs may be shared by more than one person.

22 The figures for 'Those at Work' also includes occupations that require degree level or equivalent qualifications.

- The second consideration is improving access and equity. Whatever the eventual optimum distribution pattern of PLC places, one of the tasks of SOLAS will be to calculate the share of each major client group (e.g. under 25's with less than Leaving Certificate) who are participating in FET in each year by major programme in each ETB with a particular focus on PLC given its size, budget and reach within the FET sector. The results will form the basis of a SOLAS plan to create a more equitable distribution of client groups by major FET programme categories in each ETB.
- The third consideration relates to the function of PLCs. Where the ETB leadership regarded the primary objective of PLC provision was to prepare students for direct employment, better results were achieved when compared to colleges that considered progression to higher or further education or personal development as the primary objective. Where the ETB leadership considered progression as the primary function of PLC, better HE/FET progression outcomes were achieved when compared to employment outcomes. Given the sustained improvement in the labour market and the economy it is essential that there is a much stronger emphasis by ETB and PLC college leadership on improving the employment outcomes of **all** PLC courses.
- The fourth consideration is oversupply of certain PLC courses. SOLAS notes the apparent oversupply of PLC courses aimed at certain sectors such as Hairdressing and Care Assistants. In addition, it is not clear how useful the current labour market justification system is for approving new PLC courses. SOLAS research has the data to identify the jobs market for many of the occupations which are based on skills taught on PLC courses such as hairdressing and retail. It will be the task of SOLAS research to identify PLC provision which is above or below the volume of job opportunities which are available. This exercise can be done at regional level and approximate estimates can be provided for the local labour markets of each ETB.
- The fifth consideration relates to impact and funding of PLC in the context of improved strategic planning capability within SOLAS and the ETB sector. During 2018 SOLAS intends to introduce a new outcomes-based funding model on a phased basis for all full time FET provision. Given the importance and scale of PLC provision within FET, PLC will be incorporated into the first tranche to be brought under the new funding model.

SOLAS intends to set different performance targets for all FET provision within the context of sectoral targets set out in the SOLAS Corporate Plan 2017-2019 taking into account different client profiles and different purposes in respect of the types of education and training programmes offered by ETBs. Initially these targets will be based on independent research which provides data on the current labour market status of those who have exited education and training programmes at the beginning of last year – differentiating between programmes for disadvantaged learners and programmes for job-ready learners. From 2018 onwards, these targets will be continuously adjusted to reflect the results of the outcomes based model, taking account of the different client profiles and different local labour market conditions.

SOLAS is working to ensure a consistent framework for evaluation of the outputs and outcomes in respect of all FET programmes which relates impact to cost and which can act as a model for all of the various FET interventions. It should be based on a concept of 'added value' within a chain of progression. In that regard SOLAS is proceeding to develop an in-house capacity by building on the expertise in the SLMRU, to conduct evaluation of the impact of FET on an on-going basis. This can be achieved by utilising the PLSS<sup>23</sup> and Administrative Dataset platforms in the CSO and in particular applying Counterfactual Impact Evaluation (CIE) methods to establish value added of FET provision including PLC.

The results of CIE will form part of the decision making in respect of programme outcomes and associated funding arrangements. The SLMRU is currently seeking to establish overall national learner outcomes on an on-going basis for the different lines of full time FET provision (including PLC) in terms of welfare claims, employment and progression. To complement this work, SOLAS intends to develop a number of survey tools to capture more qualitative aspects of FET contributions such as the wider benefits of learning, learner and employer feedback, to better inform an understanding of the various quantitative datasets.

In a broader context, SOLAS research will have to establish why the outcomes from FET programmes particularly at level 5 and 6 which are apparently all 'job-specific' differ radically. The fact that general courses tend to have a higher unemployment outcome suggests that the determining factor is the type of education and training provided. However, the influence of course curricula and client profile on programme outcomes needs to be established (i.e. through regression analyses) so that a more relevant comparison of performance can be made.

<sup>23</sup> PLSS - Programme and Learner Support System consisting of a national learner data base, a national course database and a national course calendar.

- Finally the SOLAS/ETB strategic pilot initiative undertaken with three ETBs<sup>24</sup> over the last 18 months sought to develop a robust infrastructure to improve the strategic planning capacity of FET providers to better align their provision including PLC courses to the skill needs of employers. The pilot has assisted both SOLAS and the wider sector to formulate suitable initial performance indicators to measure the extent to which bodies that are funded by SOLAS perform their core functions effectively and efficiently.

The pilot provided the ETBs involved with an opportunity to demonstrate how they are delivering on the FET Strategy and related policy actions against agreed targets and timelines. Following on from the success of the pilot SOLAS will enter into Strategic Agreements with each ETB setting out actions, targets and timelines to be achieved by the ETB for its provision as part of the annual SOLAS funding allocation exercise. PLCs will be a core element of each SOLAS/ETB Strategic Agreement.

### 3.3 SOLAS Recommendations

#### Overarching Recommendation

- 1) Establish a SOLAS-led PLC Programme Improvement Advisory Committee, composed of PLC partners to agree, develop and implement a programme improvement plan including specific actions and associated target timelines based on these recommendations. The committee should be chaired by SOLAS with secretariat provided by SOLAS. The committee should meet and provide progress reports to the SOLAS Board and to DES on a quarterly basis.

#### Aim, purpose and definition of PLC

- 2) The existing *Conditions of Approval* refer to specific vocational skills preparation and vocationally oriented progression to other studies as the primary aim. This dual focus of PLC must inform all PLC courses on offer in the academic year 2018/2019 (excludes two year PLCs where the 2<sup>nd</sup> year commences in the 2018/2019 academic year).
- 3) Within the context of the 'cap' on PLC places and a sustained improvement in the economy and the labour market, there is need to readjust the balance between PLC provision that is job specific/sector specific<sup>25</sup>; PLC provision that is focussed on direct entry to higher / further education; pre-apprenticeship provision offered under the PLC banner. The size of the

re-adjustment will be determined by SOLAS in conjunction with DES and ETBs as part of the annual service planning process. A recommended guide in respect of PLC provision for the 2018/2019 service planning exercise is:

- A total of 500 places nationally to be allocated to pre-apprenticeship courses. The number of places allocated to each ETB for pre-apprenticeship courses is to be agreed with SOLAS within the context of the ETB's overall PLC 'Cap'.
  - 55% of the balance of the ETB's 'cap' to be allocated to job-specific/ sector specific employment focussed PLCs.
  - 45% of the balance of the ETB's 'cap' to be allocated to progression focussed PLCs.
- 4) In future, all PLC courses will re-submit their labour market justification to SOLAS every three years for review. The first submission is to commence in 2018 and should focus on job specific/ sector specific employment PLC courses.
  - 5) SOLAS reporting data on client profile by PLC programme outputs and outcomes must cover:
    - Intake profile,
    - Certification achieved,
    - Completion,
    - Placement and non-placement,
    - Progression.
  - 6) The PLC programme should be renamed given the diverse profile of students now enrolling on PLC courses, including those who have not completed the Leaving Certificate and those who do not enter the programme directly on completion of second level education.

#### Governance and delivery structure of PLC courses

- 7) Aspects of the current structures to be examined including governance, delivery and funding on an incremental basis to see how they can be improved.
- 8) Providers should also be required to offer PLC outside of the full-time mode of delivery. Within the full-time mode of delivery, providers will also be required to provide more flexible forms of provision, e.g. distance, blended and on-line. (Conditions of Approval and all relevant documents are to be modified accordingly).
- 9) The modes of delivery referred to above should be made available to learners on an all-year-round basis in all ETBs no later than September 2019.
- 10) Further analysis of small scale<sup>26</sup> PLC provision

<sup>24</sup> Cork ETB, Donegal ETB and Laois/Offaly ETB.

<sup>25</sup> An example of a job specific PLC is 'Hairdressing'. The primary aim of the course is to enable the student to qualify and work as a hairdresser. An example of a sector specific PLC is 'Construction Technology'. The primary aim of the course is to enable the student to secure employment in a range of potential occupations in the construction sector.

<sup>26</sup> Small scale refers to colleges with fewer than 100 students as implied in the ESRI Evaluation of PLC Programme Provision 2017.

should be carried out in the context of delivering improved resource utilisation, operational efficiencies, student supports and employer engagement.

- 11) ETBs and VSSCCS<sup>27</sup> providers should likewise agree mechanisms for collaborative planning, coordination and support for smaller provision within individual schools.

### **Geographic distribution, Planning and Organisation of Provision**

- 12) Planning of PLC provision should be co-ordinated and reorganised within ETBs and between regions (ETBs) and the VSSCCS sector in order to provide better overall alignment between supply and demand. An integrated approach to be developed to FET provision within the ETB catchment areas (to include IoTs, Skillnets provision, ETB training centres, regional skills fora data, etc.) is required. The distribution process will be co-ordinated at a national level by the SOLAS Planning Unit. This approach is to be implemented as part of the 2018/2019 SOLAS-led service planning process.
- 13) The geographic distribution of PLC places is to be reviewed in the context of the overall FET provision available to meet the needs and aspirations of learners in the ETB catchment areas. Population density and deprivation index will also be taken into account. The review will form part of the work of the Programme Improvement Advisory Committee within the context of the annual determination of approved PLC places (the 'cap') by DES.
- 14) SOLAS research is to continuously identify and monitor skills gaps including sub-degree job opportunities at regional level and disseminate data to ETBs to inform ETB planning more generally and PLC provision more particularly.
- 15) Each ETB should further develop mechanisms to ensure synergies of planning and co-ordination of provision within its region, with consideration given to nominating one lead college/PLC centre.
- 16) SOLAS research will identify the type of PLC provision that appears above or below the volume of available job opportunities so as to inform provision in line with the volume of job opportunities on a sectoral basis. ETB annual service plans / funding allocation requests submitted to SOLAS are to reflect appropriate adjustments to PLC provision.
- 17) Appropriate national performance targets will be set by SOLAS for job-specific/sector specific PLC provision; for PLC provision focussed on progression to further/higher education and for approved pre-apprenticeship courses provided

under the PLC banner. These targets will be set as part of the 2018 service planning process.

- 18) SOLAS funding for PLC provision in job-specific/sector-specific employment focussed PLCs where oversupply was identified in the research relative to available job opportunities in certain sectors of the labour market<sup>28</sup>, should be progressively reduced over the next three years. Account will be taken in respect of identified demand for new and replacement job opportunities, the relevant performance-related outcomes delivered by these courses and emerging skills forecasting data with regard to FET-related occupations in these sectors.<sup>29</sup>
- 19) With regard to PLC childcare provision, a comprehensive skills forecasting exercise in relation to a workforce strategy for the childcare sector is to be conducted and will underpin efforts to ensure that the sector can meet the demands being placed on it towards 2030. This strategy will inform the supply of PLC provision for ECCE sector.
- 20) SOLAS is to provide detailed data from the PLSS on outcomes at programme and ETB level together with other data on job openings to form the basis of a rolling three-year SOLAS plan on skills provision by ETBs including PLC. Initial data is to be available by 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter 2018.
- 21) PLC courses in areas of skill need identified in the new SOLAS Corporate Plan and through a range of national/regional intelligence sources such as EGFSN reports and regional skills fora will be a priority for SOLAS PLC funding in line with the requirements of the recovering economy.

### **Awards, Skills Formation, Quality Assurance and Curriculum Development**

- 22) All students on PLC courses must be offered the opportunity to engage in structured work experience. This applies to all current and future PLCs on offer from September 2017. In addition, learners on job-specific/sector specific PLCs must undertake a range of vocationally specific tasks and activities relevant to the course content as part of their work experience.
- 23) Sectoral norms should be established for the minimum duration and quality of work experience opportunities in programmes funded under the PLC Funding Programme taking cognisance of relevant award specifications.
- 24) In exceptional circumstances where a provider intends to offer a PLC programme leading to

<sup>28</sup> Such as 'community and health services', 'child care' and 'hairdressing'.

<sup>29</sup> This recommendation is based on the estimated ratio of enrolments to QNHS data on jobs. The QNHS occupations used for matching are as follows: childminders and related occupations, nursery nurses and assistants and play workers; care workers and home carers, nursing auxiliaries and assistants; hairdressers, barbers, beauticians and related occupations.

<sup>27</sup> Voluntary Secondary Schools and Community and Comprehensive Schools provide circa 2,000 PLC places.

a major award (or equivalent) that does not include a mandatory (as distinct from optional) work experience opportunity, the provider must demonstrate how the learner will achieve the necessary workplace skills and competencies.

- 25) In future all courses will lead to Full/Major awards at NFQ Level 5 or NFQ Level 6 or equivalent. Courses that lead to awards by other awarding bodies included in the National Framework of Qualifications can be offered once there is a need for such courses.
- 26) The amended certification requirements as outlined in the SOLAS 2015/2016 *Conditions of Approval* document (Appendix 3) should be leveraged by providers to ensure courses are more reactive to changing labour market conditions, regional skills fora and local employer skills needs.
- 27) A change in legislation is required to allow for inclusion of vendor/professional awards as components of certain CAS Major Awards in order to enhance the currency of PLC courses among employers. Pending any potential change in legislation, the inclusion of vendor/professional awards may be offered in parallel to QQI awards.
- 28) All providers must ensure that PLC learners receive an enterprise education/training input as embedded content within their PLC **or** as discrete certified components of their PLC **or** as a stand-alone entrepreneurship PLC. This is to apply to all current and future PLCs on offer from September 2019. The SOLAS commissioned study '*Best Practice in Entrepreneurship Education and Training in the Further Education and Training Sector*,' can be accessed at [www.solas.ie](http://www.solas.ie)
- 29) PLCs that explicitly target labour market entry must be demonstrated to be fit for that specific purpose (e.g. by validation). They are expected to provide learners with the technical or vocational knowledge, skills and competence required for employment in the target field.
- 30) Employer engagement and input must inform new course proposals and curriculum development for job-specific/sector specific PLC provision. This applies to all current and future PLCs on offer from September 2018.
- 31) All relevant FET partners should work together to reduce constraints around the programme development process (new award specifications) and the programme approval process (validation), so that programmes can be brought on-stream in a timely manner to respond to changes in employer skills needs. A report on progress should be published by mid-2018.
- 32) The use of PLC results as a basis for admission to HEIs via the Central Applications Office (CAO) imposes significant constraints on the QQI June certification results submission date. This results in compressed teaching and learning times

which may be impacting on curriculum delivery and major award success rates. All relevant partners in FET and transition to HE should work collaboratively to address this barrier with a view to having an agreed submission date in place for all PLC courses that commence in 2018.

- 33) Providers should ensure that the minimum intended programme learning outcomes (MIPLOs) of PLCs with the primary purpose of preparing learners for a specific occupation, require learners to demonstrate the competence to successfully complete the programme. A review of assessment techniques relating to occupation-specific PLCs, to include the use of competency-based assessments, should commence in 2018.
- 34) PLC colleges and schools, both ETB and non-ETB, should be supported to develop a framework for self-evaluation in line with best practice both nationally and internationally.

### CPD and Staffing

- 35) In the context of the FET Professional Development Strategy 2017-2019 <sup>30</sup> a comprehensive CPD programme for the PLC sector in respect of leadership development and to upskill teachers in emerging technologies and current work practices related to technical occupations should be agreed and implementation commenced in the first half of 2018. Upskilling and reskilling CPD should also take account of the distinctive elements associated with teaching, tutoring or training in the FET sector such as working with adults and delivering to a diverse learner base and across a wide range of settings.
- 36) The existing DES Post-Primary Redeployment Scheme for teachers should be examined as a potential mechanism to offer wider options for teachers employed within PLC programmes.
- 37) An appropriate staffing framework for technical, ICT and other support services necessary to ensure quality FET provision within the PLC programme should be agreed with DES in the first half of 2018.

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30 Goal 2, Objectives 2.4, 2.5 and 2.6

## Guidance and Learner Supports

- 38) The ETBI-led Framework for an Integrated FET Guidance Strategy (to be informed by the overall review of guidance) should also be progressed and must take account of the findings of the PLC Evaluation. The guidance strategy must ensure learners have access to relevant and accurate labour market and course information in addition to information on progression options to HE and FET from their particular course.
- 39) The research indicated that access and availability of appropriate learner supports was variable across PLC providers. A framework for appropriate learner supports to include supports for learners with disabilities to be developed in conjunction with relevant partners such as AHEAD and ETBI in 2018.

## Progression

- 40) Progression options for PLC learners to higher education institutions in vocationally cognate rather than more general routes need to be reviewed/developed.
- 41) There are a small number of SOLAS approved pre-apprenticeship courses currently provided under the PLC banner. SOLAS should, in collaboration with ETBI and its member ETBs and in consultation with employers, develop and expand new pre-apprenticeship programmes under the PLC banner to improve access for potential apprentices who may not meet specific entry requirements to enable them to access the full range of apprenticeships (both craft and new). Scoping and development work by PLC providers in respect of new pre-apprenticeships should commence immediately. Within the context of the 'cap' a number of PLC places is to be set aside for new pre-apprenticeship courses delivered under the PLC banner as part of the 2018/2019 service planning exercise and on an annual basis thereafter. This number will take into account the scale and nature of new apprenticeships coming on stream; targets set out in the DES Action Plan to Expand Apprenticeship and Traineeship; SLMRU apprenticeship forecasts; levels of new apprentice registrations covering traditional and new apprenticeships; progression rates from pre-apprenticeship programmes to apprenticeship. SOLAS is to retain responsibility for approving pre-apprenticeship programmes.

## Funding

- 42) To improve overall transparency and governance relating to PLC, consideration should be given to transferring responsibility and administration for all budgets for the programme from DES to SOLAS.
- 43) The FET sector does not have a dedicated capital budget. This issue needs to be resolved before the 2017/2018 service planning cycle commences. A dedicated FET capital budget should be established and administered by SOLAS.
- 44) SOLAS will prioritise the national PLC programme when introducing a new outcomes-based funding model. Arrangements for funding retention or loss where PLC programmes are not achieving SOLAS agreed output and outcome targets are to feature as part of the new funding arrangements and applied in instances where SOLAS-agreed improvement plans for the PLC course(s) in question have not delivered the anticipated improvement(s).
- 45) In conjunction with DES, SOLAS research to provide broad estimates of costs and benefits in respect of PLC provision over specifically defined reference periods (e.g. one year after exiting programme) to support decision making in respect of the new funding model.



# Appendix 1

## Membership of the Evaluation Oversight Group

- Fiona Hartley - Chair (SOLAS)
- Phil O'Flaherty (DES)
- Bryan Fields (SOLAS)
- Derek Walsh (SOLAS)
- John McGrath (SOLAS)
- Roisin Doherty (SOLAS)
- Christy Duffy (Longford and Westmeath ETB)
- David Treacy (City of Dublin ETB)
- John Kearney (Cavan and Monaghan ETB)
- Aidan Seery (TCD)
- Catherine O'Sullivan (ACCS)
- Helen Ryan (College of Commerce, Cork)
- Jenifer McKenzie (NCGE)
- John Burke (DPER)
- Sighle De Barra (DPER)
- Liz Carroll (ISME)
- Markita Mulvey (NAPD)
- Gerard Lum (King's College, London).

# Appendix 2

## SOLAS Considerations and Recommendations

### Specific information requested for consideration by SOLAS

1. An overview of current policy (2<sup>nd</sup> level, FET and Higher Education) affecting the PLC programme and implications for practice, for example:
  - a. How levels of participation in the PLC programme have changed over time, taking into account the various supports that learners receive, for example, student grants, back to education allowances, VTOS payments, etc.
  - b. How levels of participation in the PLC programme have changed over time taking into account broader socio-economic conditions, learner choice, relevance and accessibility, etc.
2. The profile of the PLC programme; course types, locations, appropriateness of course structure, etc.
3. The profile of participants, e.g. age; gender; previous education level and attainment; socio-economic background; take-up of learner supports; quality of the learner experience, for example:
  - c. The differential experiences of learners who enrol straight from school and older participants
  - d. The differential experiences of learners compared to their higher education counterparts, e.g. support available, placement opportunities, etc.
  - e. How the guidance process in the PLC programmes is operating
4. The links with the labour market: involvement with employers; use of occupational forecasting data, regional and local variations, for example:
  - f. The extent to which labour market intelligence is utilised to inform PLC practice and provision
  - g. The extent to which local employers are involved in the development and review of PLC provision
  - h. The extent to which current occupational forecasting meets the needs of the PLC programme
  - i. The extent to which learners can avail of relevant work experience while participating in the programme
  - j. How PLC learners fare when they enter the labour market
5. Programme outcomes: levels of retention; transfer and progression of learners; rate and quality of labour market activations, for example:
  - k. Factors influencing the extent of regional and local variations, e.g. structure of local economy, proximity of HEIs etc.
  - l. How PLC courses are kept aligned with changes in technology
  - m. How learners access the PLC programme
  - n. How do they transfer to other programmes
  - o. What the retention rates are
  - p. What the progression rates are on completion to employment, apprenticeship, further and higher education
  - q. Whether PLC graduates were impacted by the recession and if so, why and to what extent
  - r. How effective the Higher Education Links scheme is in providing access and advanced entry to higher education courses
  - s. How PLC graduates fare having progressed to higher education compared to second level school leavers
  - t. How PLC outcomes differ from SST courses and Traineeships that are aimed at the same labour market sector
6. The extent to which desirable outcomes would have occurred without the PLC provision.
7. Corroboration (or otherwise) of the findings and recommendations contained in previous PLC studies.
8. How effective the PLC programme is as a skill formation process, with particular regard to industry sectors that contribute to economic growth such as high value added manufacturing.
9. How relevant the "Conditions of Approval" are for PLC programmes.

# Appendix 3

## **Specific recommendations for consideration by SOLAS**

The evaluation will establish and then advance specific recommendations for consideration by SOLAS and, where appropriate, propose adaptations and or make recommendation for change with regard to:

- Improving the effectiveness of PLC provision to be informed by and respond to the changing dynamics of the national and regional, EU and wider labour markets
- The most effective structure for delivery of the PLC programme and to consider the feasibility of separating the PLC programme from the second level sector
- Ensuring that the PLC programme delivers better value for money in terms of outputs and outcomes, relevance to employer needs and the needs of long term unemployed and young people under 25 years
- Optimising progression to employment/self-employment
- Optimising progression to further study/higher education
- Optimising relevant work experience in PLC provision
- Optimising social inclusion/participation in terms of gender, age, educational attainment, under-represented groups
- Ensuring PLC policy remains effective and consistent
- Optimising the geographic spread and diversity of the PLC programme
- The appropriateness and value of PLC programme and relevant certification
- Supporting excellence in teaching and learning in the PLC programme
- Supporting CPD for PLC teachers
- Optimising the impact of expenditure on PLC programme quality.

## **Conditions of Approval**

1. Course approval does not carry forward from year to year. Providers must submit all courses they intend to run for approval regardless of whether they have previously been approved.
2. Appeals must be made by the provider in question within four weeks of the issue of the notification of approvals. Appeals received outside this timeframe will not be considered by SOLAS.

## **Participants**

3. Participants must be at least 16 years of age on commencing the course.
4. Participants may not repeat a programme.
5. Academic entry requirements should be appropriate to the award being offered and may include the Established Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), QQI/FETAC Level 4 Certificate or equivalent.
6. The terms of Department of Education & Skills Circular 0013/2011 in relation to the PLC participant contribution must be complied with.

## **Approval process**

7. In approving courses, SOLAS has regard to ensuring appropriate provision on a geographic basis and the necessary critical mass for delivery of a quality education service. Where provider(s) are seeking to run a course where the same or similar courses are already available in the area, each provider must demonstrate that sufficient demand exists for both courses. Providers are encouraged to co-ordinate provision locally to avoid duplication.
8. Providers must include a Labour Market Justification (LMJ) (see appendix D) with applications for all new courses. The LMJ must be concise and should show:
  - How the course provision meets with Government policy as set out in national policy documents, e.g., Pathways to Work, the National Skills Strategy, *Towards 2016*, Building a Smart Economy, the Expert Group on Future Skills publications, etc.

- What particular skills gaps or areas of skills growth, both locally and nationally, the course will address
  - Specific data and information on progression options, local agreements with employers, information on outcomes for previous learners (if applicable)
9. Where a provider receives approval for a particular course but does not run that course and subsequently seeks approval for that course again, the provider must explain the particular reasons why that course was not run.

### **Course Structure**

10. PLC courses must be full-time courses and the Department's requirements on the length of the school year must be met. The school year is at least 167 days as outlined in the Department of Education & Skills Circular Letter M29/95.
11. No new courses of more than one academic year's duration will be approved. Where a two-year programme is planned it should be proposed in the format of two one-year programmes leading to Major/Full awards at NFQ-Level 5 at the end of year 1 and NFQ-Level 6 certification at the end of year 2.
12. Courses of more than one year's duration that have been approved on a continuous basis in the past may only be approved as an exceptional measure where it is clearly demonstrated that the course cannot be completed within one year.
13. In general, the last day for enrolments should be 30th September of the year in question. Late applications must be submitted separately in accordance with database requirements.
14. Courses must be provided within existing accommodation and within the existing teacher allocation. It is the responsibility of the provider to ensure that specialist accommodation and equipment is provided for learners where necessary.

### **Course content**

15. Course components and recommended % time is as follows:

Area of Study	Annual Hours	% of Time
Vocational Studies	400-480	50-60%
General Studies	160-240	20-30%
Preparation for Work/ Work Experience	160-240	20-30%

16. Work experience placements should be relevant to course content. The placement should be supervised and arrangements for structured feedback from the learner and the employer should be made.

### **Certification**

17. All PLCs must lead to major awards at NFQ Levels 5 or 6, or equivalent. New programmes leading to awards at NFQ Level 6 (or equivalent) will only be funded under the PLC Funding Programmes if there is a demonstrated demand and evidence of lack of sufficient capacity on alternative programmes to meet that demand.
18. Courses that lead to awards by other awarding bodies included in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) can be offered once there is a need for such courses.

### **Quality Assurance**

19. Providers delivering courses leading to QQI awards or with other awarding bodies must be registered with the appropriate awarding body and comply with their awarding bodies Quality Assurance and course registration requirements.
20. SOLAS expects providers to comply fully with the requirements under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012.

## **Staffing**

21. The Pupil Teacher Ratio (PTR) for the PLC Programme is 19:1.

## **Reporting**

22. Providers must ensure that the "October returns", the annual PLC survey and the PLC Programme Participant contribution returns are completed accurately and within specified deadlines.
23. Accurate details of participants' employment status, especially the long term unemployed, must be included in the October returns.

The 2015 target for long term unemployed participation is the same as the 2014 target. For the purpose of clarity the definition for long term unemployed is, on the Live Register and in receipt of Unemployment Assistance, Unemployment Benefit or signing for credits for a continuous 312 days claim open.

24. Providers must complete the annual PLC survey fully and accurately including the progression data on learners. From time to time, SOLAS may seek other information from PLC providers, and providers should comply with any such requests in a timely fashion.
25. The payment of the enhanced PLC capitation grant is dependent on accurate and timely "October Returns" and on an accurate return on the number of learners who are exempt from the PLC participant contribution. Any delays in returning information in either of these returns may result in delayed payment of the PLC capitation grant. In particular, where returns in relation to the PLC participant contribution are not received, it will be assumed that all participants are eligible to pay the contribution, and the capitation allocation will be reduced accordingly.
26. Providers should ensure that participants provide their PPSN at the time of enrolment for inclusion in the "October Returns".

## **Records and Publicity**

27. Providers operating the programme must maintain adequate and separate records for programmes and participants, including:
  - (i) student enrolment records
  - (ii) socio – economic background
  - (iii) academic background
  - (iv) completion rates
  - (v) certification rates
  - (vi) reason for leaving of those who do not complete a course
  - (vii) employment and progression statistics
28. Written consent of the learner for the transmission of personal data to the SOLAS for statistical purposes should be secured (by a tick box in the application form).
29. The following text must be included prominently in all relevant publicity material, advertisements, information leaflets and application forms:

'Funded by the Irish Government and supported by the European Union.'

The appropriate logos of the Irish Government and the European Social Fund must be displayed on all programme information etc.

## **Partnerships**

30. The Programme is geared to improving the employment prospects of participants and/or enabling progression to other studies. Providers should maintain the highest level of co-operation and contact with State agencies in the labour market area, local employers, Higher Education providers and training agencies.

## **Guidance Service**

31. Guidance services should be provided to participants on the programmes.

## **Equality**

32. The provisions of relevant equality legislation must be complied with.

# Appendix 4

## Consultation Workshops

### Consultation Workshops - Thematic views expressed and suggested improvements to the PLC programme

#### **Theme 1: Geographic spread of PLC nationally**

The most common views expressed at the workshops on the geographical spread are as follows:

- This is mainly a legacy issue and can be explained by the historical build-up of numbers and is often driven by the need to re-orientate the school based on changes in second level enrolment numbers.
- Some colleges are turning people away because of the 'CAP,' which can limit expansion of provision while some PLC colleges have been taking increased numbers above the 'Cap'.
- Provision is often driven by teacher skill sets.
- Provision per county needs to be looked at in the overall context of what is being provided more generally in the county by way of further education and training, e.g. training centres, IoTs, etc. Some IoTs have developed Level 5 courses aimed at the same cohort as the PLC target group.
- Since 2010, there has been an improvement in the spread and rationalisation of courses. However, there is still a need for better coordination and planning.
- Access can be a problem in some rural areas (transport issues). Should we have large PLC centres localised or mixed provision?
- While the provision appears to be correct (per head of population) in the greater Dublin area, the spread is not proportional in the rest of the country based on population trends.
- A forecasting model such as that used for school provision should be considered for the allocation of places. It was suggested that the 'Cap' on places be reviewed to allow underserved areas to increase provision. ETBs need to internally review their allocation of places on a geographic basis and increase the flexibility in the use of buildings/ infrastructure, especially between PLC colleges/ schools and training centres.

#### **Theme 2: Capacity of PLC provision to respond to changes in the economy and labour market**

- The views expressed on the capacity to respond centred on the following issues:
- The system is based on a second level model, which cannot respond effectively to labour market needs.

- The academic year is restrictive. A continuous intake cycle is needed rather than the academic year model which currently applies.
- There is a significant lack of resources with regard to capital equipment.
- Teacher contracts, which are based on the second level model are an issue. Third level courses are not subject to this constraint. Currently, one year + one day contracts lead to a permanent contract. There is a need to acknowledge the need for different types of teaching and training staff. Contracts need to reflect this reality.
- Greater flexibility is needed in terms of curriculum design and the time taken to approve a course. A move towards delegated authority for award development would increase response time.
- Decisions to run courses are based on enrolment numbers only and cannot be labour market driven because of this.
- Greater links with industry are needed, and employers should be consulted more on skill shortages.
- Consideration should be given to the development of competency based centres in which employers would have confidence.
- The low pay rates that apply in certain occupations can act as a disincentive for learners to engage in certain courses.
- Requirements under Section 30 of the Teaching Council Act are negatively impacting on the capacity to recruit suitable teaching staff, especially in the high skilled industry areas.
- PLCs can break the cycle of educational disadvantage and unemployment for many individuals.
- PLCs may not be serving the needs of immigrants to allow them to integrate fully into Irish society.

#### **Theme 3: Range of fields of learning covered by PLC**

Respondents identified the following issues that influence the range of fields of learning covered by PLC:

- Teaching Council requirements are regarded as limiting the range of provision on offer.
- Provision is driven by staff capability rather than market needs in many instances.
- Student demand is also a factor which influences provision.
- STEM subjects are a major challenge for many

students, particularly for those who did not take these subjects in school. As a result, they need initial guidance on what will be expected from them before they take on these subjects at PLC level.

- The range of fields covered by PLC provision is more extensive than the survey indicates. Fields of learning do not always represent the complexity of provision.
- The same fields of learning are offered in PLC as in IoTs.
- The range of provision could also be influenced by policy issues such as the current requirement for FETAC qualifications for those working in childcare.
- A wider range of qualifications could be offered by utilising other awarding bodies (non QQI), which would also facilitate a move towards a shorter qualification period.
- QQI awards do not always reflect the skills that are needed in the labour market.
- Good PLC pathway linkages exist with IoTs but not really with employers (in the same way as the linkages that exist in apprenticeship).
- PLC s should focus more on technology-based sectors.
- Moving some PLC provision into training centres would improve integration of training centre resources with FE colleges and facilitate a broader range of provision.
- It should be acknowledged that PLC to HE progression routes and employment outcomes are not mutually exclusive.

#### **Theme 4: Demand from employers for PLC graduates (sub-degree qualifications)**

Based on the research findings, it is unclear in many instances that the emphasis of provision coincides with labour demand. This raises the question as to whether there is a large demand for sub-degree qualifications, e.g. PLC qualifications. A range of views were expressed by participants on the demand for PLC graduates by employers as outlined below:

- During the feedback session, it was pointed out that the term sub-degree is inappropriate and considered to be pejorative.
- The majority view is that there is a strong employer demand for PLC graduates.
- There is a large demand for PLC graduates. Level 7 and 8 qualifications are not always suited to employer needs and in many cases lead to over qualification.
- Opportunities for PLC will improve as the economy grows.
- Employer demand varies geographically; this is not reflected in the survey data.
- Replacement of old jobs will still be significant in the future as half of them will be in the mid to low skill categories – areas of particular relevance for FET.

- Meeting demand from employers only, can result in narrowly based courses, which restrict learner mobility.
- The issue of work experience (WE) during PLC courses is a concern. There are difficulties in getting work experience. Some kind of support infrastructure was suggested as a means to assist learners to secure WE.
- The PLC is an accessible form of education that can then lead to progression.
- It is also easy enough to tailor a PLC course to meet a particular need (easier than a degree level course).
- Employers are now looking for employees with Levels 5 and 6 qualifications, and this could reduce churn in the labour market.

#### **Theme 5: Aim of the PLC programme**

The main issues to emerge in the feedback are outlined below:

- Based on the learner survey results, the programme has changed over time to a progression model where 43% of learners regard it as a method of progression to HE and 36% regard it as a means to gaining immediate employment. The notion of progression to HE is a relatively new development in the aim for PLC. Social inclusion is also regarded as a very important aim of the programme and has become more so in recent years. The aims of PLC need to be kept broad.
- There is a mismatch between DES and DSP objectives for the programme – education/ activation into employment.
- The value of PLC and where it sits needs to be clarified.
- It is difficult to change the Aims. "*A broad brush approach is better*". There is a need to review the relevance of programmes. In many cases, labour market demand does not necessarily mean that learners will want to do courses that address these needs.
- There is a requirement to offer QQI awards and follow these award specifications even though they do not necessarily reflect the skills needed in the labour market. The UCD Horizons model would be a better option, but FET does not have the facilities to do this.
- Many students need further general education after leaving school, and this is provided by PLC. Many school leavers enrolling in PLC need another year to mature (especially if they have not completed a transition year). Students who undertake PLCs learn to take responsibility for their own work and to complete assignments and skills demonstrations. This improves their outcomes when they progress to higher education.

- IoTs are clamouring for agreement with PLC colleges to ensure a supply of Level 5 students for their courses. *"If we want a job market focus for PLCs, then there is a tension between these two supply issues"*.

### Theme 6: Factors influencing introduction of new courses and termination of others

The main influencing factors for course development and termination are set out below:

- Demand from companies to set up courses to meet a specific need can leave a college with a course, a teacher and no demand after the initial need is met. This is problematic.
- In some instances, it is possible to introduce a new course only when a staff member retires because of the nature of teacher contracts. Even though this can be the prompt to start a new course, it is also restrictive.
- The current practice is mainly based on student demand and existing student footfall rather than on labour market demand. This is the most significant cultural change required in this regard. The new DES Regional Skills Fora is seen as a positive measure to inform future course provision/development.
- There is a long development period in relation to new certification; it can take a few years to develop. This is another factor. Third party certification bodies such as CIDESCO are not QQI approved.
- There is little engagement with DSP in relation to new PLCs, and the DSP referral process introduces further complications.
- Getting a critical mass of students to engage in a new course can be difficult.
- The degree to which new courses can be introduced and others terminated is limited by a variety of factors such as the 'Cap' on places and second level teacher contracts, and the availability of course-specific physical resources can prevent or delay the introduction of new courses.
- Strategic partnerships with industry could be useful. There is a need to *"sweat the assets, through a combination of measures – employer resources and continuous intake"*.

### Theme 7: Teacher and tutor qualifications

The key issues to emerge from the feedback on teacher and tutor qualification are as follows:

- The requirements under Section 30 of the Teaching Council Act are seen as a major challenge.
- There is a need for more people from industry to be engaged in teaching: *"the system does not allow for the voice of industry"*. A new model to staff the teaching of PLCs is required. The core skills of teachers could be used and buy in subject matter expertise. It is very difficult to attract teachers for certain disciplines e.g. Nurses, Vets, Architects, ICT etc., who can comply with Teaching Council.

- There is a need for more teacher CPD. Former FÁS instructors cannot teach in FE colleges. This needs to be addressed.
- PLC Teachers are a mix of secondary school teachers and industry experts who in some cases are only qualified one level up from the level they are teaching. There is a need for both subject matter expertise and a minimum teaching qualification.
- History shows that teachers have always been flexible in relation to moving between disciplines. Very few are still working in their original fields. Funding would help in encouraging teachers to engage in CPD. Qualification allowances for teachers no longer exist.

### Theme 8: Constraints in responding to future needs

The feedback highlighted the following issues that act as a constraint in responding to future needs:

- Capital investment is a major constraint. Sharing facilities with training centres could assist in this regard.
- The current funding model for PLC, which is based on second level provision together with the second level teacher contract arrangement and the requirements of Section 30 of the Teaching Council Act, are impacting negatively on responsiveness.
- The failure of DSP referral protocol to function in terms of PLC is an issue.
- Decision making has been removed from college level to a central ETB level, resulting in a lack of responsiveness.
- Availability of accurate information on employer needs is an issue. On-going analysis is required based on longitudinal surveys. A lot of information available on employer's needs is not based on hard information. It is mostly based on round table discussions.
- Esteem of PLCs by parents and society is an issue. It is deemed to be largely a form of second chance education. *"A lot of FE students expect to progress to HE, is this realistic?"* There is a guidance issue in this regard.
- The successes of PLCs are not well advertised. Development of a Skills Passport for PLC learners should be considered.
- Level 6 HE awards and Level 6 FE awards are not seen as equal. The credit values are different for each. This needs to be addressed as it can impact on progression.
- Lack of childcare support for participants is a constraint. Support exists for other similar FET programmes but not for PLCs – *"hard to explain this away"*. Likewise, special needs are not funded adequately.
- IoTs develop Level 5 and Level 6 programmes when their own numbers drop. This has an impact on PLC provision.

- The limited award titles from QQI are also a constraint.
- The geographic spread within ETBs themselves is an issue. Transport infrastructure restricts access for some people.
- New QQI validation requirements will impact in a negative way on the desire to provide new programmes.
- The QQI brand is a concern as it is not widely recognised by employers in the same way as C&G, ITEC, etc.
- Until recently guidance training did not include FET provision. The focus was mainly on the CAO route.

### Suggested Improvements

A wide range of improvements were proposed based on the research findings and the direct experiences of the workshop participants. The most significant proposed improvements are outlined below:

- **CPD** - A comprehensive CPD programme to retrain teachers in other fields of learning is required. CPD should take three forms i) subject matter ii) pedagogy iii) and change of vocational area. The former FÁS approach could inform this process. A one year period for retraining over a 40 year career should be regarded as a worthwhile investment. The notion of moving teachers between provision types should be explored e.g. PLC, Youthreach, Adult Education. It must be recognised that many courses need teaching staff with vocational qualifications.
- **Contracts** - There is a need to look at the teacher contract to make it more appropriate to current needs in FET. A move away from the teacher allocation model to a pay/non pay model, to include administration and guidance services, which have now moved more towards mentoring, would be more appropriate. A review of the application of Section 30 of the Teaching Council Act to the PLC sector should also be undertaken.
- **Continuous Intake** - Break from the traditional school calendar. Continuous intake and other more flexible forms of delivery are required including modular provision.
- **Targets/Linkages** - Set national targets for progression and employment with improved industry links. Sectoral leadership on skills is an issue "There is no go to body for employers like CERT for liaison". A greater understanding of industry needs would assist in improving the provision. More detailed occupational profiles would assist in this regard.
- **Funding** - Develop an integrated funding model with student supports built in. The silo type model in use at the moment can include up to 17 different budgets across FET.
- **Awards** - There are restrictions imposed by QQI awards, such as the protracted time to validate awards. Recognition of industry/vendor qualifications within major awards would help to improve the provision. The QQI award in work experience only attracts 15 credits. This needs to be revisited in the context of credit value, how it is assessed, as well as employer and learner expectations about work experience.
- **Name of PLC** - Consideration should be given to changing the name 'Post Leaving Certificate' since many students have not completed a Leaving Cert. PLC is not one programme like the Leaving Cert and should not be described in this way. It is very diverse with different pillars within the programme. It needs to be rebranded.
- **Guidance** - There is a need for improved guidance, with an emphasis on adult guidance requirements in order to create a better awareness of what is on offer in the sector. A significant amount of PLC students do not come from second level. Guidance counsellors should be informed about FET provision as part of their training. Second level schools should be better informed on PLC provision – however, career guidance is not getting the support needed. Standard eligibility criteria are also needed for entry to the programmes.
- **Integration** - It should be recognised that there are cultural issues in the sector regarding the integration of further education and training provision - HR/IR issues.
- **Pathways** - Progression from FE to HE is overly complicated. This needs to be simplified. Some form of standardisation of progression pathways should be developed.
- **Structures** - A middle management structure was suggested together with dedicated staff for employer engagement and work placement/ experience.
- **Supports** - SUSI supports to PLC students do not equate to the support provided to 3<sup>rd</sup> level students. Notwithstanding a similar maintenance allowance, a 3<sup>rd</sup> level student will be supported for the full registration fee (€3000+), while a PLC student will be exempted from just the €200 Levy. A typical PLC course will have additional charges of €300-€500, which may mean that a PLC course will be more expensive for a SUSI grant recipient than a 3<sup>rd</sup> level course.
- **Social welfare recipients** - There are inconsistencies for social welfare recipients who choose a PLC course rather than a course in an ETB Training Centre or a VTOS course. PLC applicants are required to pay the course charges (less €200 Levy) while VTOS and Training Centre course applicants do not incur this charge.

