



An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna
Further Education and Training Authority

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Mr. Richard Bruton TD
Minister for Education and Skills
Department of Education and Skills
Marlborough Street
Dublin 1

Date: 8th June, 2016

Re: Statement of Strategy for Education and Skills 2016 – 2018

Dear Minister Bruton

I refer to your call for consultation in respect of the new strategy referenced above.

I would also like to thank you for meeting with me and the SOLAS Chief Executive, Paul O'Toole, at such an early stage in your new role as Minister for Education and Skills.

At that meeting we provided an overview of the work of SOLAS since its formation and what has been achieved so far, in a relatively short period of time. We believe that SOLAS is well placed to increase its contribution to both Further Education and Training (FET) and the wider education agenda in the coming years. In this context, the Programme for Government references the part Higher Education can play in promoting creativity and entrepreneurial capacity in students and in meeting the skills needs of the future. We concur with this and respectively suggest that FET will also play its part in achieving these goals.

SOLAS, as an agency of your Department, has regular opportunities to engage with and contribute to the strategy development process as a matter of course and will play its full part in this context. Additionally, the Board agreed that it would be worthwhile and appropriate that I communicate a number of its perspectives regarding the priorities that you listed in the call for consultation.

In keeping with the points made by you at our meeting, SOLAS is committed to developing an evidence based approach to its funding of FET, with clear, measurable, targets inbuilt in this process.



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FET Goals

The two 'pillar' goals of the FET Strategy are:

- Skills for the Economy
- Active Inclusion

These goals are intended to link the need to develop skills that enterprises require with the need of learners to have a path forward, regardless of their starting point. This linkage is a key objective and core value of FET and the FET strategy.

Skills in the context of Further Education and Training are a combination of technical and process skills together with transversal skills such as problem solving, communication and teamwork.

The Board is conscious that the needs of enterprises are constantly evolving and that the future skills formation of learners must encourage their capacity, either as part of the workforce or as potential recruits, to adapt and grow their capabilities. It equally recognises that as far as possible, no-one should be left behind. We are committed to these principles in the programmes that SOLAS funds.

Priorities

SOLAS believes that it makes a significant contribution to a number of these priorities through its existing work and that this contribution can be enhanced as the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 - 2019 continues to be implemented. Specifically the following priorities, referenced by you, are relevant to our work:

- Tackling Disadvantage
- Promoting Excellence and Innovation in Schools
- Promoting Creativity and Entrepreneurial Capacity in Students
- Making Better use of Educational Assets within Communities
- Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future

With reference to these priorities, SOLAS offers the following perspectives for consideration in framing the new Strategy for Education and Skills:

Priority	Comments
Tackling disadvantage	<p>The diversity of FET contributes significantly to this priority and offers a wide choice of valuable opportunities, irrespective of the nature of the learner's disadvantage.</p> <p>High quality guidance, individual learning programmes, clear progression routes and sustained supports for learners, which are tailored to the specific nature of their disadvantage, should be in place, as required. SOLAS is undertaking a review of barriers to engaging in FET which will inform future policy.</p> <p>The plethora of different schemes with different rules and supports should be rationalised.</p>
Promoting Excellence and Innovation in Schools	<p>This priority applies equally to FET as it does to other parts of the education system. It needs to be recognised that this culture already exists in FET provision, but can be enhanced through the professional development of FET teachers, tutors and instructors, engagement with industry and appropriate use of funding mechanisms.</p>
Promoting Creativity and Entrepreneurial Capacity in Students	<p>Again this priority applies to FET. It is already a feature of many programmes but can be enhanced through innovative course development and supported through initiatives like the new strategy for Technology Enabled Learning.</p>
Making Better use of Educational Assets within Communities	<p>Significant elements of current further education and training provision already take place outside of the traditional academic year, for example training centres have programmes running throughout the year and also provide evening training. There may be scope to extend this and a review of current utilisation could be initiated through the ETBs.</p>
Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future	<p>This is a significant area of focus for SOLAS. The organisation reconfigured its organisational structure in 2015 to place an emphasis on skills formation through its Skills Development Division. This division is heavily involved in supporting the development of new apprenticeships and piloting the development of a new approach to career traineeships.</p> <p>Engagement with enterprise will be a critical enabler to drive progress here and the full implementation of the National Skills Strategy and the accompanying National Skills Council and Regional Skills For are essential.</p> <p>The improvement in the economy affords the opportunity to increase the focus on up-skilling the workforce as well as providing opportunities for re-skilling and initial skills. Reflecting the point made previously on the diversity of choice offered by FET, the sector is well placed to contribute to this goal.</p>

Investment

The new Programme for Government is rightly ambitious regarding an enhanced contribution from Further Education and Training (among other areas of state policy) to bettering the lives of people. This ambition is reflected in the further education and training Strategy and the work of SOLAS, the Education and Training Boards and other priorities.

To realise this ambition requires greater investment, either through additional resources or prioritising existing funding. SOLAS suggests the following priority areas for further investment:

- A dedicated capital funding stream for Further Education and Training
- Professional development of FET teachers, tutors and instructors
- High quality guidance
- Programme development such as apprenticeships and traineeships
- Learner supports
- Information and other support systems
- Research and evaluation
- Quality Assurance

The SOLAS executive will be available to clarify or expand on any of the perspectives outlined above.

As conveyed to you in my letter of 9th May, 2016, the Board of SOLAS would welcome the opportunity to discuss the future of Further Education and Training with you.

Yours sincerely



Patrick Delaney
CHAIRMAN