

Consultation on the establishment of SOLAS



Irish Business and
Employers Confederation

Submission to the
Department of
Education and Skills

January 2012

Policy Area One - How we manage, fund and administer FET

1. How can we use funding and administration structures to improve outputs and outcomes?

The Further Education and Training sector (FET) needs a clear vision and strategic direction, with the identification of specific objectives, as a starting point. As part of these objective-setting exercise, the 'outputs and outcomes' can be identified. A significant opportunity to redefine FET will be missed if this project scope is limited to a transition programme for merging VECs and FÁS, and an ill-defined aspiration to 'improve the customer experience'.

Our goal should be a FET system which targets support for individuals and employers where it is needed most, and allows colleges and providers to deliver the excellent service we must have as we move towards a sustainable vision of a high-skills, high-employment, high-productivity nation. While FET obviously has a critical role in helping jobseekers to re-enter the labour market, it also has a key role in upskilling and reskilling workers whose companies are continuously adapting to a challenging and ever-changing business environment. Lack of clarity around these economic and social objectives of FET provision will result in an ineffective use of resources.

System governance and the role of SOLAS

SOLAS itself should play a key role in establishing this strategic direction. The Agency's Service Level Agreements should align the strategies of the Local Education and Training Boards (LETBs) with national priorities. It should also agree Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) against which LETTB performance will be measured and funding decided (see below).

The issues of 'quality' and 'connectedness' are at the very centre of the redesign and reconfiguration of the FET system. Therefore SOLAS will also face particular challenges in ensuring inter-agency collaboration – particularly with the National Employment and Entitlements Service (see below) and Qualifications and Quality Assurance Ireland (QQAI). The consultation paper acknowledges the importance of links with SOLAS. However IBEC would argue that this connection should be formalised through legislation rather than relying on framework service level agreements/protocols which have not worked in the past.

There also appears to be a lack of clarity around responsibility for provision of guidance and counselling – the 'glue' that will hold the public employment service and the FET system together. The NEES implementation plan suggests that NEES will conclude a Framework Service Level Agreement/protocol with SOLAS setting out training requirements, terms and conditions under which clients will be referred to providers of training, and the required standards of service and reporting. SOLAS will arrange for the delivery of training

programmes via State (e.g. VECs) and via private sector providers. However guidance counselling expertise currently appears to be more heavily concentrated in the education and training system. The consultation documentation discussed the drafting of 'formal protocols for LETBs and local NEES offices' around guidance. Protocols, particularly across different government departments, have not worked in the past. Responsibility for jobseeker guidance and counselling should be located in one service (the NEES)

It is also essential for Ireland's future development that its quality assurance structures and processes are trusted both nationally and internationally, and that the confidence of students and prospective employers in the FET system is maintained. There should be a close relationship between SOLAS and Qualifications and Quality Assurance Ireland (formalised through legislation and with representation on each's agency's board) in relation to monitoring and evaluation of FET and in ensuring consistency of standards nationally. SOLAS should also support and reinforce the work of QQAI through its funding role.

As the OECD has pointed out¹, there is an inevitable tendency for vocational programmes rooted in education institutions to develop their own dynamic, independent of the world of work and unresponsive to rapid change in the needs of the economy. To ensure that the FET system is not 'supply-driven', it is critical that the business community is strongly represented on the SOLAS board.

Coherent framework

IBEC has already made a submission on the Education and Training Boards Bill, 2011 to the Select Sub Committee on Education and Skills. However, given the importance of the LETDs to the success of this project, we wish to reiterate some of the points that we raised. All too often, the reconfiguration of institutions and policy rhetoric at national level bear little relationship to what is happening on the ground. It is important that the LETBs will have the capacity to:

- adopt standards and systems of accountability that will ensure quality and continuous improvement in FET provision by embedding a more robust and systematic process of evaluating programmes and service providers;
- construct effective mechanisms for engaging employers in FET provision;
- ensure that the FET sector provides individuals with the right mix of skills and competences for the labour market, in particular generic transferable skills that support occupation mobility and lifelong learning, along with the occupationally specific skills that meet employers' immediate needs;
- collate, analyse and use data on labour market outcomes in a manner that improves organisational performance;

¹ Learning for Jobs. OECD Reviews of Vocational and Education Training. Ireland (2010)

- play a key role in the development of regional networks which include employers, public employment services, enterprise development agencies and higher education institutions by providing clearer and better local education pathways.

IBEC's major concern centres on the proposed composition of the LETBs and their ability to connect the different elements of the education, training and employment service/labour activation system

- Business and employers – it seems extraordinary that boards, with overall responsibility for providing individuals with the right mix of skills and competences, would not have very strong representation from the business community. Apart from the local labour market intelligence that business representatives bring, they would also provide a specific perspective on the type of employability skills that can be developed through the curriculum in the earlier stages of the school system.
- Higher education institutions – FET has an important function in providing access and progression routes for individuals to continue their studies at institutes of technology or universities. The boards could bring the FET and the higher education sectors together in a way that has not happened to date.
- National Employment and Entitlements Service (NEES) –the personal progression plans that NEES draws up will entail referral to a vocation training or education programme under the aegis of the education and training boards. Unless these programmes deliver outcomes, many NEES clients will remain out of work and disappointed. No doubt, there will be attempts to address this through inter-agency/cross departmental protocols, but these are no substitute for agencies cooperating on the ground at a local level. The proposed education and training boards provide an opportunity to enhance this cooperation.

Broader stakeholder engagement through enhanced board representation is not a sufficient condition to achieve the type of effective regional education and training clusters that are needed to underpin this strategy. But it is a necessary condition.

2. Is there a particular funding model which works best?

Lessons can be learned from international examples of funding models in this sector. What is clear is that the model needs to be transparent, simple, equitable and accountable. The model must encourage and support training providers to deliver against the Department's strategic priorities and must be financially stable enough to deliver against the plans for the sector. Yet, in addition, there needs to be sufficient flexibility to respond to new issues and opportunities.

As the National Economic and Social Council recently pointed out²:

Much has been and is happening to overcome inertia in education and training systems and to increase their relevance to labour market developments and their responsiveness to learners' needs. Where necessary, producer interests have to be named and challenged. Filling course places legitimately benefits institutions and their staff but, if the courses do not demonstrably advance unemployed people's best interests, it is fair to question the value for money being achieved and even to suspect a degree of collusion in 'massaging' the unemployment figures. By contrast, deepening the dialogue between the worlds of education/training and work and increasing the speed and effectiveness with which providers respond to the current high unemployment levels enhances in a major way the credibility of what is offered and the level of enthusiasm for the National Skills Strategy.

3. How can we better measure value for money?

It is essential that there is an increased emphasis on data collection, policy evaluation, programme cost and the monitoring of participant outcomes in terms of their progression to further education, training or employment. The manner in which individual schemes function as effective pathways to further education, training or employment opportunities needs to be more clearly demonstrated. The *Forfas Review of Labour Market Programmes*, 2010, and the *Evaluation of the Labour, Market Activation Fund*, (LMAF) 2010 Final Report, PA Consulting, provide useful examples in this regard.

A culture of evaluation connected to goals and objectives which emerge from the strategy and the national targets needs to be fully embedded and developed within SOLAS and the providers it deals with. SOLAS should be subject to a performance review by the Department of Education and Skills in line with the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2011.

Care also needs to be taken to ensure that when measuring value for money that we are clear regarding the outputs that constitute success. It is possible that different measures will be required to reflect different types of training. For example, participation rate and completion rates may be most appropriate when dealing with literacy or numeracy³.

The funding and planning mechanisms need to be underpinned by data, which is shared across all participants in the sector. Similarly a set of "SMART" indicators must be introduced to improve performance management. Clear targets need to be set for providers with respect to the funding received. Similarly, levels of funding for the various

² Supports and Services for Unemployed Jobseekers. Challenge and Opportunities in a Time of Recession. National Economic and Social Council. August 2011.

³ NALA (March, 2011). *A literature review of international adult literacy policies*. NALA/NRDC

categories of service users needs to be identified clearly and where possible economies of scale should be achieved.

Training and education providers should produce annual reports regarding the targets and their achievement based on the agreed goals of the programmes. How these targets feed into national targets regarding literacy, numeracy, the attainment of one NFQ level or the implementation of the National Skills Strategy should also be captured.

4. What criteria or requirements should be included in Service Level Agreements?

The agreements should cover both policy and implementation matters, including:

- How national priorities for FET are to be implemented by the LETBs and the coherence of the Board's strategic plan with those priorities;
- The development and agreement of KPIs and assessment of the performance of Boards against them:
- Employment outcomes;
- Access, transfer and progression outcomes;
- Sharing and mainstreaming good practice;
- Collecting and analysing data on FET so that it can better inform and advise the Department of Education and Skills;
- Ensuring an appropriate balance between demand and supply with due regard to the maintenance and enhancement of quality;
- Analysing and funding of infrastructural requirements;
- Leading the process of analysing and forecasting demand for FET, taking particular account of the labour market and evolving skills needs;

5. How can we ensure an appropriate mix between public and private provision?

SOLAS could extend the model used by the Labour Market Activation Fund which aimed to support nearly 7,000 unemployed people to gain new skills to return to employment or educational opportunities. The fund targeted less-skilled individuals and those formerly employed in declining industries such as construction, retail and manufacturing. A competitive tendering programme delivered the potential for innovative and cost-effective labour market interventions and the final evaluation report identified positive outcomes.

Future FET programmes should be based on the principle that 'public money should follow consumers rather than suppliers'. This involves a shift from the state providing Exchequer resources to providers (public, private and not-for-profit) who then offer courses to unemployed individuals and to a situation in which public funding is channelled directly to unemployed individuals, who then utilise their purchasing power to select a course from a

range of potential providers. NESC has highlighted the Dutch Individual Reintegration Agreements (IROs) which allow individuals, in conjunction with competent and independent advisors, to choose which providers and programmes receive public funds on their behalf to help them. The IROs are considered to have improved outcomes for clients and to have led to the adoption of a more client-focused service by providers. They appear to work better for people who were relatively recently in work and have a better educational profile than the long-term unemployed.

6. How can we improve our IT systems in an integrated way while avoiding the risks associated with big IT infrastructure projects?

The risks associated with large infrastructure projects are usually more closely associated with human resource and cultural factors than the technology itself (see below).

Policy Area Two: How do we decide what courses to deliver?

1. What information does SOLAS need to inform the delivery of courses and how can it access that information?

NESC has pointed out:

The origins of the various educational and training initiatives and differences in how they are funded has contributed to a situation in which they tend to function as a series of parallel programmes. Consequently there needs to be a fundamental shift away from this overt programmatic focus towards a more co-ordinated approach in which the emphasis is on how the various programmes and schemes can collectively provide flexible mechanisms that facilitate individuals to access the FET opportunities that will enable them to gain employment.

A complete review of the entire suite of programmes being offered and funded by the Department of Education and Skills is required to ensure that they are responding to specific relevant needs, successfully meeting those needs, have measurable outcomes, avoid unnecessary duplication and are achieving value for money.

However, we also acknowledge that further education makes a range of contributions to individuals from skills development, a second opportunity for education as well as various personal development benefits especially for individuals who are unemployed, socially excluded or disengaged and these all need to be taken into account when deciding what courses to deliver. The particular needs of people with disabilities, people with mental health difficulties and others who are marginalised, including people who are long-term unemployed must be fully considered in the development of courses.

There is a range of research data available to SOLAS to draw upon to inform the delivery of courses which includes reports produced by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN), the FAS Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU), the CSO and the Economic and Social Research Institute.

However, local demand is more likely to be anticipated through intensive interaction between education/training providers and the world of work . The requirement is not to predict demand in detail. It is that FET providers should stay in close contact with industry to identify emerging skill requirements so that they can (i) build appropriate content into their education provision, (ii) have appropriate content ready to build into education and training courses as demand materialises, (iii) provide stand-alone modules to give existing and aspiring employees the skills they require to move into the new roles as they emerge

In addition, liaison with employer bodies like IBEC, sectoral bodies and other government agencies is essential. There should be regular sharing of information with all professional bodies and representative bodies in order to gain a clear picture of the needs arising across all sectors and the activities currently underway so that duplication and gaps are identified. This has been undertaken previously by the sector but not in a systematic manner. This is why strong business representation on the LETBs is required (see above).

2. How can SOLAS encourage the design of new courses for the jobs of tomorrow?

The level of administration procedures required when designing, piloting and delivering a new course are quite prohibitive. They make the process cumbersome to the point that by the time the course is ready for roll out, the interested organisations may well have made their own arrangements and will not participate in the programme.

SOLAS need to work effectively with all stakeholders including those outside education and training if their goals are to be achieved. It is essential that employers are consulted at the design and implementation phases of new programmes to ensure best fit with their requirements. Work placements are an significant feature of the most effective FET courses (the FAS Traineeships are often cited in this regard). However close links with employers will required to widen the scope of occupations covered by this type of programme.

The development of employability skills are also important given the limitations of medium term labour market forecasting and given that “many of the jobs in 2015 and most of the jobs in 2030 do not currently exist and cannot be foreseen”⁴,. All FET programmes should have a strong employability skills focus. These are skills required not only to gain

⁴ *Expert Group on New Skills for New Jobs – report prepared for the European Commission (February 2010)*

employment, but also to progress within an enterprise. Learning not just tied to instruction but the development of critical thinking and self directed learning are important requirements in the workplace.

Two examples of where this has been successful regarding employment based learning or conversion of skills for employment are provided by the Skillnets and the Springboard models. The collaboration of industry and providers to design programmes that address specific skills gaps or upskill qualified individuals in related areas where employment is likely to be available, has been extremely well received by individuals, training providers and employers alike. The match between the industry needs and the training provided by Skillnets has an established, record while early feedback on Springboard is positive.

3. How can SOLAS encourage the appropriate provision of basic skills courses and provide for the important role of community education?

Raising the literacy and numeracy skills of Irish adults should be an urgent priority for employers, Government and society given that economic recovery in part depends on capitalising on the full potential of the people living and working in Ireland. Those with low skills are the most at risk of unemployment, as evidenced since the start of the economic crisis. Raising their skills levels is essential as their next employment often means a move from manual work to the service sector, which may demand higher literacy and technology skills. Cedefop research shows that in 1996, 31% of the workforce required only low skills but by 2020 this figure will fall to 18%.

Recent statistics indicate that a fifth of the labour force (383,800 people) has less than a level 4 qualification while 117,600 have attained primary level or less⁵. Early school leavers do not necessarily have basic skills problems, but there is a positive association⁶. To encourage the provision of basic skills development, SOLAS should develop an adult literacy and numeracy strategy to integrate literacy and numeracy skills throughout their further education programmes from levels 1 to 6.

4. What role can IT systems play in this? How can we improve our IT systems while avoiding the risks associated with big IT infrastructure projects?

It is important that the information gathered on further education participants is centrally located to reduce unnecessary administration delays and to standardise the tracking of learner's progress. Data collected on clients of NEES or LETBs should be shared within an IT system accessible to staff in both locations. This would also enable the gathering of information regarding skills gaps and needs, successful or unsuccessful outcomes of programmes and trends which could inform policy and delivery going forward.

⁵ CSO (Q3, 2011). Table S9a.

⁶ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS, 1997), pp53.

In addition, a centralised website of all programmes and providers in this sector should be available for learners to consult and review. This would offer easy to access, clear and concise information for individuals considering engaging or progressing within further education. This would not replace or take away from the need for expert guidance for individuals which would be accessed directly. A model such as the Directgov website in the UK (www.direct.gov.uk) which captures not only the education and training, online careers advice in addition to a helpline but also the employment opportunities and the benefits available while attending training and education or while looking for employment, might be a useful model.

5. There are a range of other providers of FET programmes – what way should SOLAS and LETBs engage or deal with those bodies to ensure a joined-up approach?

There is important learning to be derived from the multiple provider model that was deployed across the Labour Market Activation Fund programmes. This involved third level institutions; VECs; community and voluntary organisations and private sector providers. The PA Consulting evaluation found that this provided the flexibility to provide tailored, responsive and market-focused interventions. Despite some concern from stakeholders at the involvement of private sector provision, there were notable successes arising from such programmes and there is a rationale for continuing to allow these providers to compete for activation funding on the basis of outcomes. The report identifies four main principles which should characterise the future of labour market activation:

- Assessment of Need – Providing locally based solutions that recognise the differing needs of different cohorts among unemployed people in tandem and demonstrate the demand for the targeted skills from local employers and validation of need by all other relevant stakeholders (e.g. DSP, community organisations, local authorities, education and training providers). The competitive funding approach on the basis of need ensures this.
- Engagement – Ensuring there is a clear, single access point for those experiencing unemployment to understand and apply to participate on an activation measure, with a central source of information available on all the opportunities that exist, the eligibility criteria and the benefits that would arise from engagement.
- Delivery – Deploying a multiple provider model for labour market activation measures that includes the public; community and voluntary; and private sectors to facilitate flexible, tailored, responsive and market-focused approaches that ensure that all interventions focus on a pathway to employable skills.
- Outcomes – Ensuring, as far as possible, a work-based component to the intervention or following the intervention, engaging local employers in provision, with a clear idea of the progression outcome and pathway to work for each

individual. Ongoing monitoring and support is critical to ensuring sustainability of such outcomes and tracking efficiency and effectiveness, which will allow the continual improvement of activation measure performance.

All of the resources available to the FET sector should be considered and utilised including the resources available in the non-statutory sector particularly the essential services and expertise provided by Specialist Training Providers (STPs) to support the needs of people with disabilities, people with mental health difficulties and others who are marginalised. This consultation focuses very much on the use of existing statutory services, and does not consider the contribution made by STPs or the very favourable outcomes that they achieve. Specialist Training Providers' individualised training programmes support many thousands of people annually to progress to further training and employment.

6. How can SOLAS encourage new programme delivery methods, like distance learning or online provision, and what courses can be appropriately delivered through such methods?

To meet the needs of diverse learners with diverse schedules, it is important that a range of programme delivery methods are offered. This will offer a range of benefits in terms of costs and flexibility of access, but will also require significant preparation in advance on behalf of those delivering the programmes. As important is the flexibility around when courses are delivered and examined – it does not always suit to have strict adherence to an academic year and so flexibility is also required in this regard.

A blended learning approach in particular has been found to be the most effective in terms of student engagement and learning. A blended approach involves a combination of face to face and online learning which can offer more flexibility to students in terms of when and how they learn while also not losing the benefits of having a teacher to support the learning. A distance learning option where learners can progress through self-directed programmes should be considered also for a range of courses and models such as NALA's www.writeon.ie distance learning portal could be used as an example of how this can be successfully implemented.

Certain courses will lend themselves to such methods of teaching while others will require greater face to face time particularly where students are new or returning to education after some time. It would be essential to engage the training providers in identifying programmes that may easily suit blended methods and attention will need to be given to any capacity building required of those delivering the training. The experience derived from the use of Bluebrick.ie in the recent Springboard initiative should also be utilised.

Policy Area Three: How we guide and support learners and potential learners in choosing the right course

1. **Do the benchmarks that the Group has set make sense?** Yes
2. **Are there others?** Yes
 - Literacy and numeracy needs should be taken into account
 - Any reasonable accommodations required need to be considered for people with disabilities or with mental ill-health.
3. **How can we simplify the system of eligibility criteria for different FET 'programmes' so that we minimise delays and differences, perceived or otherwise, in the administration of income support and participant allowances**

A useful example to consider is that of Springboard which had a number of eligibility criteria which included the need for interested individuals to have been in receipt of payments or credits from the Department of Social Protection for a number of months. With these criteria in place, Springboard was not receiving the expected levels of interest for courses. Upon removal of this condition a significant number of candidates successfully applied for the programmes. The demand and interest was clearly present for individuals hoping to convert their skills and re-enter the labour market.

The links with other labour market measures, such as JobBridge, should be streamlined. IBEC also supports the thrust of the Department of Social Protection's proposals for a Single Working Age Payment.

While much of the focus is being directed the unemployed, there is also an important cohort of individuals, currently in employment which is precarious or where skills are becoming obsolete. They also require upskilling or retraining also if they are to retain their jobs and the company is to remain viable or competitive. It is important that provision is made for this cohort. Economic returns for such investment accrue mainly in the medium to long term but it is essential that we treat it as a priority area for investment, even during this time of acute fiscal stress.

4. **How can we marshal our often fragmented system of referral and guidance into an integrated service while maintaining resources in critical areas?**

As suggested above, the provision of counselling and guidance services will be the determining success factor in the new system. Placement and counselling arrangements, should be integrated to ensure that the new employment service have enough resources to engage with unemployed clients systematically and not only with those who self-present. Employment service offices should be responsible for taking claim details, monthly signing-on, initial sanction decisions, as well job-search monitoring, employment counselling and

job-broking. In a climate of tighter resources, priority should be given to services that are capable of delivering on labour market objectives. As the OECD has pointed out⁷, a properly resourced employment service will more than repay the State's investment in terms of social welfare payment savings and increased tax revenue

5. Course placement based on course availability rather than participant needs or desires and continued delivery of courses that are not relevant to national skills needs.

There needs to be a clearer focus on outcomes and progression for learners and stronger links to the labour market within the FET sector. The role of guidance counsellors and the NEES will be essential in terms of referral and course placement in line with the needs assessment carried out on the participant.

It is essential that a full review of the types of courses being run, what objectives and needs they are meeting, the quality of the programme, the outputs of the programme and its overall value for money is assessed to ensure that sufficient numbers of relevant and effective courses are available. Similarly, tracking of service users and forecasting of needs will assist SOLAS in ensuring that the course availability matches the participants need and are relevant to national skills needs.

6. What do we need to do to ensure appropriate 'tracking' of learners between NEES and LETBs and between LETBs to minimise information gathering and maximise progression opportunities?

It would be important that the data collected on clients of NEES or LETBs can be shared within an IT system accessible to staff in both locations. This would facilitate not only greater efficiencies and a reduction in duplication of data, reduce the number of queries regarding eligibility and also enable appropriate tracking of learners and identify both progression opportunities and skills gaps. Using a model like the UK Jobcentre Plus which offers a 'one-stop-shop' experience for learners and job-seekers alike could encourage a greater focus on a return to employment and upskilling. This would also enable the gathering of information regarding skills gaps and needs, successful or unsuccessful outcomes of programmes and trends which could inform policy and delivery going forward.

Policy Area Four: How we manage and support our staff

⁷ Grubb D, S. Singh and P. Tergeist (2009), "Activation Policies in Ireland", OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers No. 75, www.oecd.org/els/workingpapers.

1. What kind of qualifications would be required of staff in the FET sector-pedagogical and otherwise?

Staff in the FET sector are diverse which matches the needs and range of service users. It would be important that all staff have an IITD or CIPD qualification to deliver training (qualified to deliver training, understand learner requirements etc.). Additionally, FET staff require appropriate professional development to support them in facilitating language and literacy in their courses.

Guidance counselling will be a key skill required in both the SOLAS and NEES frameworks. Business routinely uses sophisticated and relatively inexpensive profiling tools in its recruitment and staff development processes. These could be effectively utilised to improve matching between jobseekers and training and/or employment opportunities. IBEC would be pleased to discuss with the Implementation Group ways in which these might be introduced.

2. What kinds of skills would staff need, in terms of management, as well as delivering tuition?

Adult educators, require a range of skills including pedagogic and management expertise. These include:

- skills in diagnosing the educational needs of the individual;
- communication skills;
- knowledge of learning theories in practice;
- curriculum development and management,
- assessment – including initial, formative and summative assessment and accreditation processes,
- basic counselling / guidance skills,
- literacies development (for example, digital, family, literacy, numeracy).

3. What should be the nature and extent of the SOLAS role in managing and supporting staff?

While day-to-day management of staff is likely to be managed by the LETBs and their FET providers, SOLAS needs a strong role in the evaluation and quality control of the programmes provided in the sector. Suitable metrics should be in place to enable the measurement of targets and achievement of objectives. In addition, SOLAS should promote peer learning and disseminate examples of good practice in programme design, delivery, teaching methods and effectiveness to continuously foster a culture of improvement and best practice in the new organisation.

The scale of change being undertaken will be challenging for staff in the various bodies and they will require strong leadership and support from SOLAS. This change process offers an opportunity for SOLAS to set down clear structures and frameworks for the new entity.

NESC has highlighted the HR challenges posed by the reorganisation:

Qualitatively, major restructuring and redeployment is not always being experienced positively by staff (particularly in FÁS, and with the impact of substantial mergers between VECs still unclear) and, consequently, productivity and service improvements can lag behind institutional and operational changes.

The experience of business mergers suggest that the longer that uncertainty and a vacuum exists, the greater the damage to morale. In order to mitigate this, it is important to inform staff as soon as possible:

- What is the vision for the new organisation?
- What plans are in place and what are the timelines?
- Who is the appointed leader of this change management program?
- Who are the members of the change management team?

Final questions

1. What other things could SOLAS do to improve the customer service overall?

The greatest challenges with the change management process surround staff culture. Staff need to be consulted and involved in the new strategy to identify the areas where customer service may suffer through unforeseen gaps or oversights. Where necessary staff at various levels need to be provided with professional development to ensure the needs of the learners and the stated desire to improve “customer experience” is recognised as a strategic priority. A formal customer charter should be drawn up for SOLAS which outlines the standards that a service user should expect and the obligations on training providers in terms of delivery.

Given that service users may be experiencing low confidence levels due to their experiences with unemployment and other constraints it is essential that their experience with SOLAS and its providers is positive. This experience may make the difference between someone engaging fully with the system and transitioning back into employment or education, or joining the ranks of the long term unemployed.

A robust quality management system must be developed in respect of all aspects of FET activity and provision. The quality system could include provider self-assessment,

rigorous inspection by the new quality insurance regime, customer or service user feedback and, where relevant, employer feedback.

2. Should Youthreach and Community Training Centres be merged and should SOLAS continue to administer them?

- ☒ Merge.
- ☐ Do not merge.
- ☒ Solas should administer.
- ☐ Solas should not administer.

3. Should FET delivered in specialised or atypical outreach settings like prisons or care services be managed by SOLAS or another Department or agency?

- ☐ Should be managed by Solas.
- ☐ Should be managed by relevant agency.
- ☒ Depends on nature of provision.

Given the extra service required, certain specialisms may be necessary.

4. Any other comments?

Ireland's economic recovery depends on the skills and flexibility of its labour market. It is essential that the education and training system at all levels is aligned with future skills needs to ensure that we are in a position to fully capitalise on future opportunities. It is now widely accepted that the return to economic growth will be export led and based on improvements in productivity, and that the availability of skills and talent is essential to helping drive that objective, ensuring business and employment growth.

To cope with these demands, we need an education and training system that can react flexibly and adapt accordingly. Investment in education and training at all levels must remain a priority and those in the education and training system must ensure that what they offer is appropriate to the needs of the learner in advancing them to employment 'readiness'.

The further education sector should be at the core of lifelong learning to strengthen economic development, enhance social cohesion, and advance the skills and abilities of

individuals. The sector should aim to be recognised for its excellence in training standards, provision of training and guidance, and its performance outcomes.

IBEC and its members remain available to engage with the Department and SOLAS regarding the challenges faced and the opportunities that can be harnessed to ensure that our labour force are skilled and upskilled to help Ireland remain competitive and to foster capable talent for the road to recovery.

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