

An Action Plan for

SOLAS

(An Seirbhísí Oideachais Leanúnaigh Agus Scileanna)

The new Further Education and Training (FET) Authority



A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S

Message from the Minister for Training and Skills, Ciaran Cannon TD

Ireland's further education and training system faces major challenges at a time of severe economic crisis. The unprecedented level of unemployment - 14.8% of our labour force is unemployed – has resulted in significantly increased demand for education and training. More and more people are seeking to upskill or reskill in order to enter or re-enter the labour market and the need to upskill those who have lost their jobs has become obvious to us all. The Government is re-inventing Ireland's economy so that it is competitive, sustainable and provides opportunities for all to secure employment. The State has a fundamental role in this challenge and there is a particular need to respond with activation measures that provide clear and purposeful pathways to employment, either directly or via further and higher education and training.

Earlier this year, the Government published '*Pathways to Work*' a blueprint to increase the employability of job seekers and to encourage them to be more active in their efforts to find work. This fundamental reform will move the social protection system from one of passive income support to a focus on actively enabling unemployed people to get back to employment, training or education as soon as possible. In tandem with the commitments made in *Pathways to Work*, the Government has decided to radically reform and restructure the Further Education and Training system so that it can enjoy restored public confidence, provide courses that are relevant to learners, industry and society.

As part of this ambitious agenda, the Government is undertaking a two-pronged approach to reform the Further Education and Training sector. On the one hand, FÁS is being disbanded. Its services are being divided between the Department of Social Protection's National Employment and Entitlements Service (which happened at the beginning of this year) and the 16 new Education and Training Boards. On the other, a new Further Education and Training Authority, to be known as SOLAS, is to be established to oversee funding and policy direction for the Further Education and Training sector.

SOLAS is being tasked with building the identity and values of a world-class, integrated further education and training system. People must have confidence that the further education and training system can deliver the right opportunities for them and SOLAS, with the new network of Education and Training Boards delivering quality further education and training programmes, will generate this confidence.

The Government tasked the SOLAS Implementation Group, which I chair, (see Appendix A for terms of reference and membership) to draft an Action Plan for the establishment of SOLAS. Over the last year, the Implementation Group has focussed on the key actions that should be taken to establish SOLAS as part of the reform of the FET sector. The Implementation Group has also focussed on the requirement to maintain continuity of provision while also pursuing a path towards transformation. This document sets out that path.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of the Implementation Group for their contributions and commitment to the work of the Group. I am very grateful to each of the members for their valuable input. Their dedication and commitment to the task of preparing the SOLAS Action Plan now paves the way for the creation of a further education and training

system which we can all be proud of. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank all of the officials in the various agencies and Government Departments, including the VECs and FAS, for their detailed and invaluable work in the background, which contributed to the production of this Plan. The work of establishing SOLAS, together with the necessary legislation and other arrangements, is only starting but I am confident that this Plan will provide a solid basis for all of the arrangements that will be required from this point onward.

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Glossary of Terms

FET	Further Education and Training
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
ETB	Education and Training Board
FÁS	An Foras Aiseanta Saothair, the National Training Authority
SOLAS	An Seirbhísi Oideachas Leanunaigh agus Scileanna, the Further Education and Training Authority
SIG	SOLAS Implementation Group
Intreo	National Employment and Entitlements Service
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
DSP	Department of Social Protection
DES	Department of Education and Skills
SLA	Service Level Agreement
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
LMETF	Labour Market Education and Training Fund

Why SOLAS?

The Further Education and Training sector has grown in an uncoordinated way without strategic direction. There is great potential in the sector that has not been unlocked because of this lack of strategic direction. This is a time of great challenge for Ireland and a world class Further Education and Training Sector will help us get back on our feet and back to work through upskilling for the jobs and society of tomorrow. SOLAS will bring that strategic direction to the sector and enable and empower the new Education and Training Boards to deliver better quality further education and training for our people.

Overview

Both SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards require legislation to enable their establishment. It is envisaged that both these pieces of legislation will be progressed so that the Education and Training Boards can be established in early 2013 followed shortly thereafter by the establishment of SOLAS.

On a phased basis, SOLAS will then transfer former FÁS training centres to their local Education and Training Board, with the last training centre being transferred no later than the end of 2014. Arrangements will be put in place during 2013 to facilitate the transfer of funding for Further Education and Training to SOLAS in 2014. All of this means that the institutional arrangements for an integrated further education and training sector will be fully in place by the end of 2014.

Alongside this, the Department of Social Protection is rolling out the National Employment and Entitlements Service, INTREO. They envisage that this will be completed by the end of 2014 as

What will SOLAS do?

The **SOLAS Vision** will be to *build the identity and values of a world-class integrated Further Education and Training system.*

Its **Mission** will be to *give people opportunities to transform their lives through integrated Further Education and Training, provide businesses with talented people who have the right skills and anticipate and respond innovatively to national and international changes, including in labour markets.*

Its **Functions** will be to *manage, co-ordinate and support the delivery of integrated Further Education and Training by Education and Training Boards, to monitor delivery and provide funding based on good data and positive outcomes and to promote Further Education and Training provision that is relevant to individual learner needs and national skills needs. This includes the needs of business and future skills needs.*

Introduction

The State is investing significant resources in further education and training (FET) programmes – more than €900m is being spent this year alone on the provision of 270,000 places to enhance the education and skills levels of many of our citizens. A very wide range of programmes is on offer serving a variety of purposes for diverse groups of learners. Some are designed to assist young people make the transition to the workplace, some provide basic literacy and numeracy skills to disadvantaged adults while others are aimed at upskilling those at work. Many programmes are designed for those who have lost their jobs and need upskilling or reskilling to re-enter the labour market.

Unlike many other OECD countries, and for more than a generation, further education and training have developed as a twin-track system in Ireland so courses and programmes have grown organically and in an uncoordinated fashion over the past few decades. Programmes are provided by many different organisations – FÁS, Vocational Education Committees (VECs), community groups, secondary schools, private bodies etc.

However, definitions of education, intelligence and skills are converging in the 21st century and the historic distinction between education and training is no longer valid. In addition, the economic challenges facing the country demand that the various strands of policy and provision be realigned to achieve a more efficient and effective service and to bring coherence to the fragmented system. This was why the government decided last year to set up a new Further Education and Training Authority called SOLAS (An Seirbhísi Oideachas Leanunaigh Agus Scileanna).

SOLAS will play a key role in Ireland's economic recovery through the creation of a world class further education and training sector. The unemployed, particularly the long term jobless, will be the priority group for support. But a revitalised FET sector must promote access for all learners who wish to avail of programmes – the unemployed and the employed, school leavers as well as early school leavers, those with disabilities, job changers and those who want to pursue particular interests through part-time learning.

The SOLAS Implementation Group (SIG) was established by the Government to develop an Action Plan for SOLAS. It considers that the following key principles must inform the development of SOLAS and the new integrated FET sector:

- **Learner Centred:** The needs of learners will be paramount. Courses must provide them with the skills they require to play an active role in society and in the labour market. Care must be taken to ensure that provision remains client driven and does not become inflexible or irrelevant due to a lack of momentum. Insofar as possible, courses should be available at a time and place that suits the learner.
- **Outcomes based:** Every effort will be made to ensure that learners benefit from taxpayer investment. The development of appropriate measurement and data collection systems will be a key task for SOLAS. Learner feedback and data on placement in work or further education will give providers the necessary information to help ensure they are best directing their efforts to meet the real needs of learners.

- **Clear Strategic Direction:** Policy, which will remain a matter for the Minister for Education and Skills, must be evidence based which will, in its turn, allow for the appropriate prioritisation of scarce resources. SOLAS will play a significant role in this respect by proposing a strategy that is consistent with this policy. Through its research and advisory functions SOLAS will provide a key input to the development of policy as the further education and training sector evolves.
- **Integrated and Co-ordinated:** The oversight and funding roles of SOLAS will provide a unique opportunity to achieve integration and co-ordination across the FET sector in a number of ways. Firstly, it will enable elimination of unnecessary duplication and the promotion of collaboration between providers. Secondly, SOLAS will provide a vehicle for greater co-ordination with the National Employments and Entitlements Service (Intreo) in relation to the unemployed and greater co-operation with the higher education sector to facilitate progression to third level. Finally, it will provide a central point for co-operation between the FET sector and bodies such as the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) and employer organisations.

SOLAS cannot complete the reform the Further Education and Training sector on its own. Success will depend, to a large extent, on other institutional reforms being undertaken by the Government. Chief amongst these is the amalgamation and rationalisation of the 33 VECs into 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and the disbandment of FÁS.

The SOLAS Implementation Group has identified the key principles and issues that need to be addressed. The detailed implementation will need to be developed within an overall implementation architecture that is linked with the establishment of the ETBs. The Department of Education and Skills is putting such architecture in place.

VECs are being rationalised to bring scale and critical mass to their management and administration as well as generate efficiencies. In future the ETBs will be managing the delivery of all publicly funded FET in addition to maintaining their other functions in schools, adult education and youth services across the country.

Through integration and co-ordination of policy and provision, we can ensure that the skills supply is of optimum quality so that we can fill the jobs of tomorrow and ensure Ireland's greatest resource, its people, will be able to access world class further education and training opportunities provided by the State.

ID	Task Name	2011				2012				2013				2014				2015				2016			
		Qtr 1	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	Qtr 4	Qtr 1	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	Qtr 4	Qtr 1	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	Qtr 4	Qtr 1	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	Qtr 4	Qtr 1	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	Qtr 4	Qtr 1	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	
1	Government Decision to Establish SOLAS			■																					
2	Transfer of FAS Employment Services and HSE Community Welfare Officers to Department of Social Protection				■																				
3	SOLAS Consultation Process Complete					■																			
4	Approval of Heads of SOLAS Bill					■																			
5	Publication of SOLAS Action Plan						■																		
6	Establishment of QQI							■																	
7	Publication of ETB and SOLAS Bills								■																
8	Passage of ETB and SOLAS Legislation								■	■															
9	SOLAS Established									■															
10	Commencement of VEC Rationalisation Process									■															
11	Development of FAS-VEC joint FET plans commenced										■														
12	QQI Publishes new guidelines for quality assurance											■													
13	Draft Service Level Agreements Published												■												
14	Transfer of FAS Training Centres to the Local ETBs commences													■											
15	Publication of FET Strategy														■										
16	Publication of Learners Charter															■									
17	VEC Rationalisation Complete																■								
18	At least 6 FAS Training Centres Transferred to ETBs																	■							
19	Completion of Rollout of Intreo																				■				
20	Completion of transfer of FET funding from DES to SOLAS																					■			
21	Completion of transfer of FAS Training centres																						■		

Chapter 1 Background

SOLAS – one part of a major programme of reform

- SOLAS is an integral part of a wider programme of institutional reform that is being undertaken to give effect to the Government's activation agenda. It is required in order to integrate the FET sector and give strategic direction to that sector. An integrated FET sector will be able to generate better education and training opportunities which will upskill our population and equip them for the economy and society of tomorrow.
- SOLAS will be setting the agenda for FET. It will be working with Intreo to ensure unemployed people can access the right FET opportunities and will drive the integration of FET to create a world class FET system.
- However, the other elements of the programme of reform are equally important. SOLAS will not be delivering FET programmes – the new network of ETBs will be delivering these programmes. SOLAS will not be referring unemployed people to FET programmes – Intreo will be working hand-in-hand with ETBs and SOLAS to ensure unemployed people can access the right programmes. SOLAS will not be solely responsible for quality assuring ETB FET – the QQI will set the quality assurance agenda. It is important to remember these reforms are interdependent and inter-related.

1. Ireland's further education and training system faces major challenges at a time of severe economic crisis. The high level of unemployment - 434,200 individuals on the Live Register, over 188,117 (43%) of whom are on the Live Register for a year or longer – has resulted in significantly increased demand for education and training. More and more people are seeking to upskill or reskill in order to enter or re-enter the labour market
2. SOLAS is being tasked with building the identity and values of a world-class, integrated further education and training system. The decision to establish SOLAS will see far-reaching changes to the FET sector on a scale not seen since the establishment of VECs in 1930. People must have confidence that the further education and training system can deliver the right opportunities for them and SOLAS, with the new network of Education and Training Boards delivering quality further education and training programmes, will drive this agenda forward.
3. As Ireland strives to restore its economic well-being, it's crucial that we ensure the social investment we are making in education is relevant to people's needs and helps assist our economic recovery. The State has a fundamental role in this challenge and there is now a particular need to respond with measures that provide clear and purposeful pathways to employment or to further and higher education and training. Earlier this year, the Government published *Pathways to Work* a blueprint to increase the employability of job seekers and to encourage them to be more active in their efforts to find work. As part of this commitment, the Government has decided to radically reform and restructure the

Further Education and Training system so that it can enjoy restored public confidence, provide courses that are relevant to the needs of school-leavers and the unemployed and that will help people develop as individuals and recover from the economic and social crisis of recent years.

4. Given our significant resource constraints there is also need to avoid unnecessary duplication and inefficient use of scarce resources. We must make sure that our people – in particular, the unemployed and long-term unemployed, can access the right course at the right time. We must ensure that the courses we fund are in line with national needs – at the right levels and in the right fields of learning to meet the needs of learners and business. We must ensure that we collect the right data on outputs and outcomes so that we can make better evidence-based policy decisions. We must ensure that we listen to our learners and our staff and use their valuable input appropriately in making decisions. Labour markets are not static and alongside ensuring we have minimum levels of provision we must ensure that the quality of that provision – how it matches individual and national skills needs – is at optimum levels.
5. In order to achieve this vision in the FET sector, we need to be able to bring a strategic direction to the entire sector. Across the sector, parallel, organic development has meant that the FET sector has not realised its full potential both as part of our educational and economic strategies. We need to ensure that FET can play a more dynamic and coherent role to ensure that learners are given educational and training support to progress, whether that is to employment or to other education and training. If we can achieve this, we can make a real and lasting difference to people's social and economic wellbeing.
6. In July 2011, having considered this matter, the Government decided to integrate the delivery of FET under the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) that will replace the existing 33 VECs. It believes that an integrated service will be both the most efficient, from a value-for-money point of view, and the most effective, from an outcomes and quality point of view. This will involve transferring FÁS Training Division – comprising some 800 staff - to the ETBs.
7. SOLAS will be tasked with ensuring the provision of 21st century high-quality FET programmes which are integrated, flexible, value-for-money and responsive to the needs of learners and the requirements of a changed and changing economy. SOLAS will not simply be a rebranded FÁS. Perhaps the single biggest change is that SOLAS will not deliver programmes itself – once the restructuring is complete, its key function will be to provide strategic oversight and funding to what will be the main deliverers of FET: the ETBs. In turn, the ETBs will have responsibility for managing training contracted to private, public and not-for-profit providers, in their catchment areas, to complement and enhance their own provision. The former employment service functions of FÁS have already been transferred to the Department of Social Protection (DSP) and will form part of the new National Employment and Entitlements Service.

Establishment of the Education and Training Boards

8. The Education and Training Boards Bill 2012 is a significant piece of legislation which, in tandem with the establishment of SOLAS, will bring about an integrated Further Education

and Training sector. The Bill was published on 5th October 2012 and completed Second Stage in Dáil Éireann on 17th October 2012. It has been referred to the Select Committee for Committee Stage.

9. With the passing of the legislation, the process of formally establishing the new Boards will commence. The process of identifying the new CEOs of the 16 ETBs is now complete and they are setting about planning their new roles with a determination to make them succeed. As with the SOLAS Action Plan, the immediate priority is to maintain day-to-day service delivery during this transition period.

The National Employment and Entitlements Service (Intreo)

10. The role of FET in activating the unemployed has always been important. Unemployed people already participate in FET in significant numbers and as part of the 2011 Jobs Initiative additional resources were allocated to the sector specifically to address the needs of the long-term unemployed. In February 2012, the Government announced in *Pathways to Work* that it was radically changing its approach to dealing with the unemployed. This is in order to ensure that they will be provided with appropriate advice, support, education and training to take advantage of new job opportunities as the economy recovers. The ambition is to develop a new approach to engagement with people who are unemployed which meets international best practice and which can be compared favourably with similar systems anywhere in the world.
11. Under the Intreo model, the DSP will engage with and provide supports (such as work placement or job search assistance) to each person currently unemployed to increase their prospects of securing a job. The DSP will focus on the long-term unemployed with a view to ensuring that 75,000 will move into employment by end 2017. The DSP will reset the relationship with employers, with more and better contact to ensure they have access to and are offered the right candidates to fill full-time vacancies. The DSP will also explore contracting with the private sector as a means of complementing its own resources in areas such as job matching and job placement. With *Pathways to Work*, customers will be asked to complete a profile questionnaire when they register with the DSP so their case worker can assess the Probability of Exit (PEX) from unemployment during the subsequent 12 months and put the right supports in place. The aim is to target help at those who most need it.
12. The implementation of the Intreo model commenced with the transfer of over 700 FÁS staff from FÁS Employment Services to the DSP in January 2012. A project team was established and four new “one-stop-shops” are being established in 2012 on a pilot basis (Parnell Street, Dublin; Sligo, Tallaght and Arklow) where the Intreo model, including the PEX, is being used.
13. In terms of the involvement of the Department of Education and Skills (DES), SOLAS and ETBs in implementing *Pathways to Work*, an Inter-Departmental Programme Board has been established which involves stakeholders and co-ordinates activities across the wider public service. The board is chaired by the DSP and includes representatives of the DES, Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Public Expenditure and Reform, Taoiseach and the Director General of FÁS/SOLAS. The activation agenda, including the Intreo/SOLAS

relationship, will be a standing item on the agendas of the Management Board of the DSP and Management Advisory Committee (MAC) in the DES. The DSP has a representative on the MAC of the DES. A DSP representative will be on the SOLAS Board. There has been active engagement with the stakeholders (including, in particular, employers) of the DSP/Intreo and the DES/SOLAS as services continue to develop.

14. Interim protocols to enable a standard framework for the referral of unemployed people to further education programmes were circulated to welfare offices and VECs. This framework complements the existing referral protocol between DSP offices and FÁS training programmes and will enable further education to play a more active part in activation.

Amalgamation of the qualifications bodies

15. The amalgamation of HETAC, FETAC and the National Qualifications Authority into the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is provided for in the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012. QQI was established in November 2012. FETAC's relationship with FÁS, the VECs and registered private education and training providers will pass to QQI and the new Authority will develop its own policies and criteria on quality assurance, programme validation and awarding over time. QQI will therefore be a key stakeholder in the new FET structures.

Action Plan on Jobs

16. The Government also published its *Action Plan on Jobs* which envisages the creation of a net new 100,000 jobs by 2016. The Plan outlines a range of actions that are being taken across Government in order to deliver on this commitment. The education and training sector has an important role to play, in fulfilling the National Skills Strategy targets, and thereby delivering the requisite number of skilled people to fill those jobs. The *Pathways to Work* approach is trying to ensure that as many of these new jobs are filled from the large numbers of people who are unemployed. SOLAS will have a major role to play in strategically aligning the significant resources being devoted to FET to that we can upskill, as appropriate, unemployed people to fill those new jobs. This task will also require SOLAS to develop new goals and objectives as well as metrics to measure progress.

The challenge for SOLAS

17. Taken individually, these are all massive challenges. FET in Ireland has developed without an overarching identity, unlike higher education. It is a dynamic sector, often at the cutting edge of pedagogical and androgical research and development. SOLAS is being charged not just with making the administration of FET more efficient and effective but with creating an awareness of the value and power of FET as an agent both of personal and social development as well as economic growth.

Chapter 2 Current Provision

FET – a massive sector full of diversity

- We invest some €900 million every year to provide almost 270,000 places in a range of part-time and full-time FET programmes. The learners include significant numbers of unemployed people, school leavers, early school leavers or adults returning to education or training. The over-riding objective of FET is to allow people to progress –to employment or further or higher education or training – and many thousands of learners succeed every year in doing that.
- In spite of restrictions on human and financial resources, the FET sector has responded to the increase in unemployment and the need to upskill our population by collectively increasing participation. The sector is constantly changing and is often at the cutting edge of education and training policy. There is massive potential within the sector to provide better opportunities to more people and through integrating the sector under ETB management with strategic direction from SOLAS we will unlock that potential.

18. Currently, there is annual investment of some €900 million in FET. Some 270,000 places are being provided in part-time or full-time FET. There are some 450 centres (from large stand-alone Post Leaving Certificate colleges to FÁS training centres to Youthreach centres) where formal FET courses are delivered and many hundreds of other large and small centres where a range of formal and informal courses are delivered in atypical modes to different cohorts of learners. Some 9,000 staff are employed to deliver many thousands of courses from Level 1 to Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) as well as courses accredited internationally. Courses are delivered all year round, during the day, in the evenings, at weekends, full-time and part-time.

Further Education

19. The DES allocates funding to VECs and some post primary schools to provide a range of full-time and part-time programmes. The principal objectives of the measures and programmes funded by the DES in the area of FE are:
- To meet the needs of young early school-leavers
 - To provide second-chance education for people who did not complete upper second level, and
 - To provide vocational preparation and training for labour market entrants and re-entrants
20. In 2012, there were over 180,000 learners in a range of full-time and part-time programmes. Total investment was some €450 million.

21. Full-time further education programmes are:

- **Post Leaving Certificate (PLC)** for learners over 16 years of age who have completed the Leaving Certificate (LC) or equivalent or who are adults returning to education. It is designed to assist participants to upskill or re-skill for entry or re-entry to the labour market. Courses are generally of one year's duration at NFQ Levels 5-6. 2012 provision of around €170 million, 32,688 places.
- The **Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)** was introduced in late 1989 to provide second chance education/training courses of up to two years duration for people who are 21 years of age or over, and who are at least six months unemployed. Participants receive a training allowance in lieu of their Social Welfare payment as well as travel and meal allowances and can access childcare and guidance supports. Tuition, books and materials are provided free of charge. 2012 provision of €80 million, 6,000 places.
- **Youthreach** provides two years integrated education, training and work experience for unemployed early school leavers without any qualifications or vocational training who are between 15 and 20 years of age. Individual action plans for learners are agreed and developed over their time in the centre. 2012 provision of €70 million, 3,700 places.

22. Part-time programmes are:

- The **Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)** provides a range of part-time options across the full suite of Further Education programmes and it is free for adults with less than upper second level education. Target groups include adults with disabilities, lone parents, early school leavers, unemployed, travellers, ex-offenders, homeless and people with literacy difficulties. Participants can access guidance and childcare supports. 2012 provision of €23 million, 30,000 participants;
- **Adult Literacy (AL)** for adults with specific needs in basic skills areas and includes English as a Second Language (ESOL) provision, 2012 provision of €30 million, 55,000 participants.
- **Community Education (CE)** providing informal and non-formal education for hard-to-reach adults, 2012 provision of €10 million, 56,000 participants;

23. Supports provided for Further Education learners include;

- The Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI) which provides nationwide guidance for learners before, during and after they participate in BTEI, Adult Literacy, Community Education or VTOS programmes;
- Eligibility for participants in Youthreach, VTOS, or BTEI for low-cost childcare under the Childcare in Education and Training Scheme (CETS), operated by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA).

24. Further Education programmes are delivered in a large number of centres across the VECs. There are 193 approved PLC centres. 21 of which are standalone centers like Ballyfermot College of Further Education, for example and 50% of PLC is delivered in such standalone

centers while approximately 8% of PLC places are delivered by the community and comprehensive or voluntary secondary school sector and all of that is mixed-provision, i.e., PLC alongside second level on the same campus. Part-time further education can be delivered in dedicated adult education centres or outreach settings, like community centres. There are just over 105 Youthreach centres (in every county except Leitrim) and 115 VTOS centres nationwide.

FÁS Training

25. In 2012 training activity for 81,500 unemployed people is planned by FÁS with total investment of just over €430 million. This includes planned interventions for up to 6,500 longer-term unemployed persons during 2013 under the new Labour Market Education and Training Fund (LMETF), which will be managed by FÁS.
26. The early identification of skill needs – through national and international research, FAS staff in training centres, direct contact with employers and other stakeholders as well as independent surveys commissioned by FAS - is reflected in the FÁS training provision for 2012.
27. FÁS provides a range of training programmes which includes the following:
 - Training for the unemployed
 - Evening courses
 - Online learning and blended learning
 - Apprenticeship training (including redundant apprentices)
 - Training for early school leavers
 - Training for people with disabilities
28. A summary of the programmes is set out below.
 - **Training for the unemployed** range from basic programmes like Bridging Foundation to more advanced skills-based Traineeship programmes. The 2012 provision of €175 million is in respect of 40,000 places.
 - **Evening courses** are designed to give a flexible response to the specific skills needs of job ready individuals who require training interventions with certification to assist them to re-enter the labour market. Evening courses are also available to fee paying clients who are employed and wish to upskill for personal and professional development and also to unemployed clients. The 2012 provision of €6 million is in respect of 20,000 places.
 - **Online learning and blended learning courses** are designed to give a flexible response to the specific skills needs of job ready individuals who require training interventions with certification to assist them to re-enter the labour market. Online courses are available free of charge to unemployed clients. The 2012 provision of €3.6 million is in respect of 12,000 blended learning places. Blending learning involves tutor support
 - **Apprenticeship Training** is a demand-driven, workplace and classroom, educational and training programme for employed people aimed at developing the skills of the

apprentice to meet the needs of industry and the labour market. In 2012 the FÁS provision for training apprentices in employment is €36.5m. This provides for 1,235 apprentices to complete Phase 2 of their apprenticeship in FÁS Training Centres and for 3,888 apprentices to complete Phase 4 and 6 in IOTs. In addition FÁS provides support for redundant apprentices to allow them complete their apprenticeship through the Redundant Apprenticeship Placement Scheme (RAPS). The 2012 RAPS provision of €11.3 million is in respect of 2,260 places.

- **Training for early school leavers** primarily aged between 16 and 21 is funded by FAS under the Youthreach umbrella in Community Training Centres (CTCs) which are independent community-based organisations. The 2012 provision of €43 million is in respect of 3,550 places in 2012.
- **Training for people with disabilities** is provided by specialist training providers such as the National Learning Network (NLN). Where appropriate, FÁS directs clients with disabilities to mainstream training provision. The 2012 provision of €54 million is in respect of 3,400 places.

29. At an organisation level, a number of key initiatives have recently been implemented or are currently underway to improve the labour market relevance of FÁS training, protect the quality and integrity of this training and strengthen risk management, governance and internal control arrangements with regard to funding, accountability and transparency. These initiatives include:

- A new training strategy including the introduction of an approach based on career clustering to meet identified current and emerging labour market and skills needs;
- A new Training Standards System to ensure consistency in the implementation of quality standards related to training and assessment on all FÁS course provision;
- More streamlined contractual arrangements with regard to the funding of training provision provided by private training contractors on behalf of FÁS;
- Systematic development of adult course curriculum and assessments to meet the requirements of FETAC Common Awards System (CAS);
- Development of new courses to meet emerging labour market and skills needs in the areas of services, ICT, medical devices, food, biopharma occupations and green energy;
- Systematic review of apprenticeship curriculum has commenced;
- Implementation of a range of initiatives for redundant apprentices;
- Piloting of a new computerised curriculum and assessment content management system;

30. All new training programmes and the re-development of existing programmes to meet the FETAC CAS are being targeted to existing and future skills needs of the Irish economy. This is being done by gathering labour market information on skills needs at local, regional, national and international level. The Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) in FÁS - which enjoys strong links with the EGFSN – as well as employers, industry representatives and development agencies are central to the success of this approach. This information continuously feeds into programme and curriculum

development, minimising the time lag between the identification of a need and implementation of a training solution.

31. VECs have continued to develop their range of part-time and full-time further education programmes. Participation levels have increased year-on-year despite pressure on finances and human resources; for example, enrolments in Level 5 and 6 programmes provided under the PLC programme have increased 20% while funding has increased by less than 10%. To maintain the quality of provision, with the involvement of both DES and stakeholders, new operational guidelines for part-time further education programmes catering to 130,000 learners with low skills were published earlier this year and guidelines on how further education can best meet enterprise skills needs were also published. These guidelines will provide a national framework for the delivery of these important programmes and help focus them on areas of skills needs. VECs have developed a range of new awards at Levels 1, 2, 3 and 4 to comply with the requirements of FETAC's new CAS and are developing new awards at Levels 5 and 6 as well.

Chapter 3 Consultation

The consultation process

- The formal consultation process illustrated how important the FET sector is to those who work and those who participate in it, as well as the wider community. Over 150 written submissions were received and there was huge interest in the information seminar.
- Through the consultation process, stakeholders told us that they wanted SOLAS to be **learner centred**. They said that SOLAS would need to **consult and communicate**. And they highlighted the central importance of good **management knowledge systems**.
- The SOLAS Implementation Group agrees that these are important elements that should inform the development of SOLAS and they will be the pillars of the FET Strategy that SOLAS will draft on its establishment. The Strategy will set out the vision for the FET sector in response to needs and opportunities for the short, medium and long term.

32. The scale of the transformation process outlined in Chapter 2 is highly ambitious. It involves the fundamental restructuring of 39 organisations (33 VECs, 4 qualifications bodies, FÁS and the DSP) into 19 new bodies (16 ETBs, SOLAS, Intreo and QQI). Altogether, it will require three new pieces of primary legislation. Almost 9,000 staff are employed by the organisations involved. Ahead of formulating this Action Plan, the Implementation Group decided to embark on a thorough consultation process with all stakeholders in the Further Education and Training system.
33. A significant consultative and familiarisation process was essential to the implementation plan. Cultural differences arising from the different developmental pathways taken by FÁS and VECs in the evolution of training and further education provision needed to be explored in order to encourage the meeting of minds essential to the success of the project. Some of the differences expressed were more perceived than real although perceptions that training was merely concerned with a narrow set of skills related to a very specific industry need and that further education had limited relevance to the world of work were still evident. This is despite the significant evidence of the efforts made in training provision to address the need for personal core skills development and in further education to address the needs of industry.
34. Feedback from the consultation process and from other stakeholders illustrates that while both the FET strands of provision have much in common with each other, they have built their own traditions and organisational cultures. In developing its training provision, FÁS has rightly focussed on preparing trainees for the world of work and has focussed on

delivering labour market outcomes. In developing further education, VECs have taken a broader view, informed by their activity in second level education, and focussed on educational outcomes, as much as labour market outcomes. Both approaches have their strengths and in order to build a world class FET system, we will need the best of both. This means that the process of integration must be built on communication, not just between the sectors but with stakeholders as well. SOLAS will be responsible for setting the agenda in that regard and enabling and empowering staff in a new integrated sector to build a common set of values, informed by SOLAS's strategic direction.

35. In December 2011, the DES published a SOLAS Consultation Paper, which is available on the DES website (www.education.ie). This arranged the issues into four policy areas and posed a number of questions around which stakeholders were invited to structure their responses. 150 stakeholders made submissions (see Appendix D for a summary). The submissions were reviewed and a summary was presented to invited stakeholders at an information seminar held in March 2012. A summary of the day's proceedings are available on the DES website (www.education.ie). The main findings of the March 2012 seminar were as follows:

- Stakeholders pointed to the need for a focused research and development function within SOLAS to support the delivery of flexible responses to stated needs. There was an emphasis on valuing positive outcomes but they warned that basing funding decisions entirely on outcomes, without regard to the profile of participant, might result in “cherry picking”. Whatever Service Level Agreements (SLAs) are concluded needed to take account of these issues.
- Private, e.g. non-ETB provision, is complementary to ETB provision, but robust links to ensure continuity of service delivery for the learner are required. Such linkages can only be established through consultation and communication and this needs to happen at national and local levels. Non-ETB provision can address specialist or sectoral needs so this needs to be linked with existing ETB provision.
- In guiding and supporting learners, consultation and communication is vital. There are different needs – those of early school leavers or those with disabilities - that need to be balanced, say, with those of the labour market and those of individual learners. A learner-centred focus and a consistent framework for quality assurance should underpin these needs.
- Stakeholders agreed on the fundamental importance of guidance. Frontline staff needed the requisite skills and there needed to be better links between welfare services and education and training services as well as more outreach provision. Stakeholders debated the issue of the “where” in the context of a perceived need for a ‘one stop guidance shop’ and many said current provision was too fragmented. At the same time, it was noted that the “one size fits all” might not be appropriate because learners were individuals with different levels of need.

- Stakeholders uniformly said that the current system of income supports and allowances was too complex and needed to be streamlined and rationalised.
- Modern Management Information Systems (MIS) were definitely required – or as stakeholders coined it, Management Knowledge Systems. Course and learner databases were required, both to support learners, and for SOLAS and ETBs, to enable proper analysis. It would also inform the forecasting of future skills needs which would, in turn, feed into the development of SLAs. Better MIS could facilitate analysis and feedback (from learners and providers), while respecting data protection needs and minimizing duplication of data collection.
- Suggestions were made around establishing a web-based “one stop shop” for data collection in respect of FET. Existing databases could be linked or even merged with such a facility and a review of current data collections undertaken, in order to rationalize them, to increase efficiency and prioritise resources for frontline provision. Fundamental to the success of such an initiative was training staff in how to get the most out of the system.
- Stakeholders agreed that there needs to be standards around staff qualifications in the FET sector with a more organised programme of Continuous Professional development (CPD) to follow. There needs to be a skills audit. Stakeholders emphasised the need for communication with VEC and FÁS staff in relation to the vision for SOLAS, along with a need for transparency and honesty to secure buy-in from the staff. Suggestions included:
 - An e-Bulletin Board for staff to include updates on policy discussions and decisions made;
 - A monthly newsletter for all staff;
 - Staff consultation days;
 - Using existing VEC and FÁS staff networks for updates and consultation

36. These considerations formed the backdrop to the development of this Action Plan.

Chapter 4

SOLAS - the Organisation

The vision of SOLAS will be to:

Build the identity and values of a world class integrated FET system

The mission of SOLAS will be to:

- Give people opportunities to transform their lives through FET
- Provide businesses with talented people who have the right skills
- Anticipate and respond innovatively to national and international changes, including in labour markets

The main functions of SOLAS will be:

- to manage, co-ordinate and support the delivery of FET by ETBs.
- to monitor delivery and provide funding based on good data and positive outcomes.
- to promote FET provision that is relevant to individual learner needs and national skills needs. This includes the needs of business and future skills needs.

37. There is a range of stakeholders in the FET sector. Most important are the learners who avail of FET courses. Ultimately, while SOLAS will not, in most cases, deal directly with these learners, their needs will be its primary consideration. SOLAS will deal directly with three key stakeholders - the DES, the ETBs and Intreo – as well dealing directly and indirectly with a range of representative and sectoral bodies representing employers, trade unions and unemployed people. This is not an exhaustive list and SOLAS will ensure that communication and consultation is a cornerstone of its activities.
38. SOLAS will be a high performing organisation by becoming an effective and respected leader and contributor to the provision of high quality, relevant, FET opportunities to learners which will enhance their personal development and capacity to gain or regain employment. While the determination of policy for the FET sector will be a matter for the Minister for Education and Skills, the core objective of the establishment of SOLAS is to strengthen the FET sector. Within that, SOLAS will have three strategic objectives:
- Leading and co-ordinating the change management process of integrating FET institutions and programmes;
 - Co-ordinating and managing the funding and performance management of FET programmes;
 - Leading the modernisation of FET programmes to ensure that they are focussed on the lifelong needs of learners, especially jobseekers, and are flexible and relevant to the needs of the labour market.

39. To achieve these objectives, the transfer of the FÁS training function to the ETBs must be completed. The complexities of this task in the context of the establishment of the ETBs and other major changes have been adverted to already. As progress is made on the transfer of the training functions the SOLAS organisation can be gradually built to the shape required to discharge the functions outlined above. The transfer of FÁS training to the ETBs will enable the latter to co-ordinate the further education and training provision at local level. FET provision must reflect national and local skills needs and be designed to meet the differing requirements of different learners. In this regard, the ETB role in managing contracted training will be important to ensure that specific needs can be met on a flexible basis. Contracted training has been shown to provide benefits in enabling the provision of diverse further education and training courses to meet a variety of needs within flexible timeframes. The Labour Market Activation Fund (LMAF) which ran in 2010 and 2011 is one example of such contracting. The Labour Market Education and Training Fund (LMETF) which is currently being progressed builds on the experience of the LMAF. Best practice on the use of contracted training should continue to be developed in the best interests of learners. Through its research function and through building connections with the EGFSN and Intreo, SOLAS can inform the development of relevant courses to meet these needs.
40. SOLAS, through its strategy, will spell out how it intends to achieve these key objectives, outputs and outcomes, how performance matches up against the objectives and report to the Minister on what has been achieved and where further improvements are needed. The strategy will be supported by an annual plan which will outline its proposed activities for the coming year.

SOLAS Interim and Final Structure

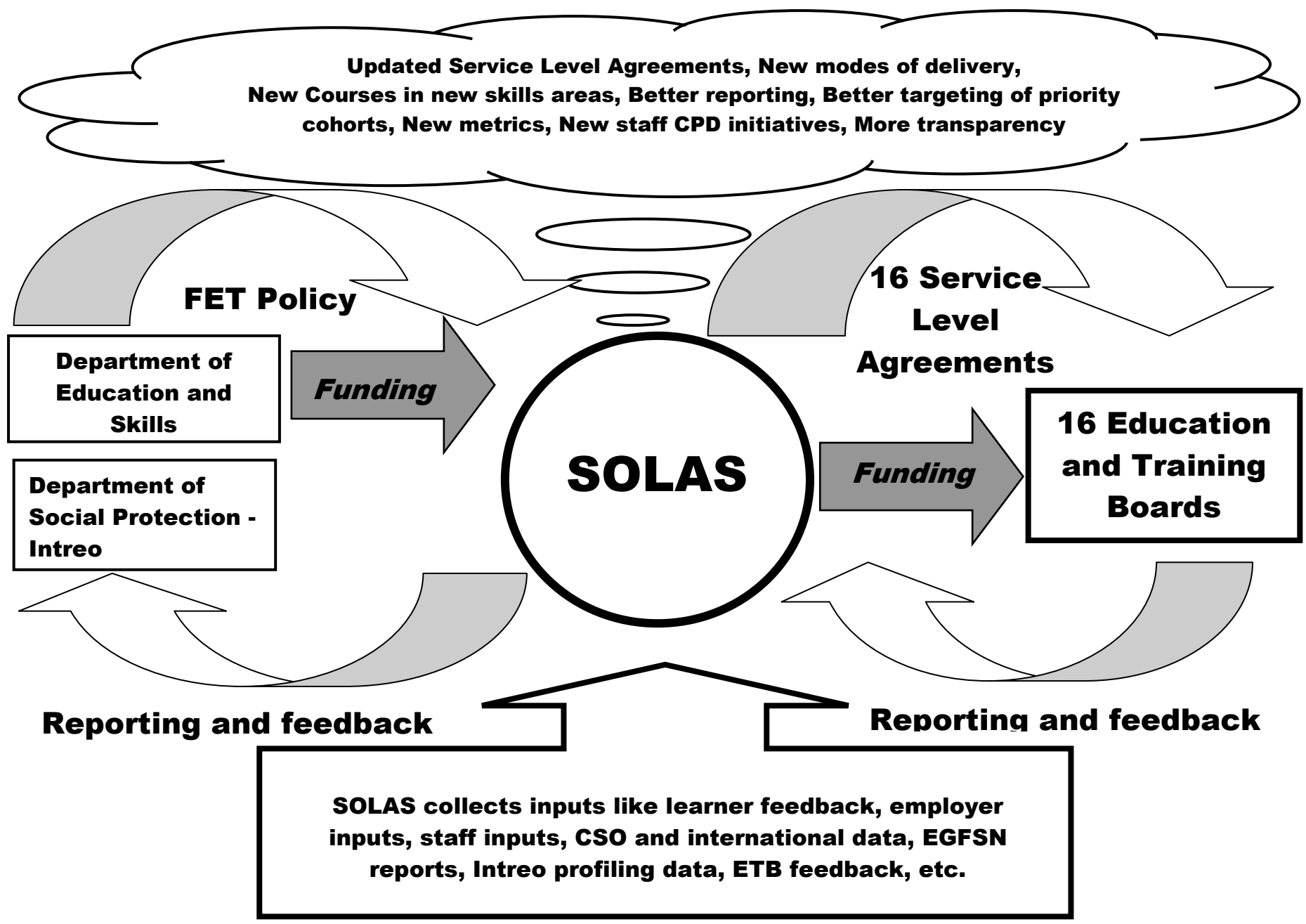
41. SOLAS will operate four divisions during the transition phase. (See Appendix C for more detail on SOLAS functions.) They will be designed and operated to ensure that continuing operational requirements will be met during the transition period while preparing for its final configuration. Following transition, SOLAS will be re-configured into three divisions to reflect its future role. The diagram below illustrates the proposed relationships between SOLAS, the DES and the ETBs.

Interim Configuration

- FET Policy and Strategy (incorporating interim business planning, national programmes and interim quality assurance)
- ETB Services (incorporating interim programme and curriculum development needs)
- Corporate Services
- Operations and ETB Transfers

Final Configuration

- FET Policy and Strategy
- ETB Services
- Corporate Services



Relevance of Courses

42. If SOLAS is to be successful and make a difference it, along with the ETBs, must enhance the outcomes for stakeholders. We have already referred to the lack of co-ordination and duplication in the FET sector. We have referred to the need to ensure that courses are relevant to the needs of learners and business. SOLAS will provide the oversight and support mechanisms not only to address the issues of co-ordination and duplication but also to address the relevance of courses, the cost effectiveness of provision and the measurement of outcomes. These are areas which have received insufficient attention in the past notwithstanding the efforts of course providers and funders.
43. In drawing up its annual plan, SOLAS will consult with relevant stakeholders, which will include input from each ETB on the previous year's activities and potential local needs. This will assist SOLAS in establishing the demand for provision at different levels or for different cohorts. SOLAS will then conclude annual SLAs with each ETB to meet that demand. There will be regular formal two-way communication between SOLAS and ETBs on activity during the year so that plans may be adjusted.
44. While on the one hand, it must be recognised that many people benefit from FET provision in ways that do not include employment, for many people, FET is a way of upskilling to enable entry or re-entry to the labour market. Even FET provision that does not directly prepare the participant for the labour market, e.g., basic skills courses, enable participants to build core and generic skills which will, in turn, enable them to participate in courses at higher levels that are designed to enable entry or re-entry to the labour market. It should be recognised that core and generic skills like literacy and numeracy are vital 'building blocks' for success at higher levels in education and training but also for success in employment. In addition it must be recognised that it is precisely the core and generic skills of communication, team working and critical thinking that form a significant part of many courses that are vital to success in the jobs of tomorrow where flexibility and lateral thinking are so important (See Appendix E for a sample "FET Classification").
45. In accordance with *Pathways to Work*, the DES is establishing a consultation process involving Intreo, SOLAS and other stakeholders such as the HEA and the EGFSN in relation to the development of education and training programmes to meet the needs of those on the Live Register as well as national skills needs. In the context of stakeholder relationships, the input and involvement of employers will be integral to the success of FET provision and to SOLAS. Employer input into the type and nature of courses will be vital so that course provision can anticipate and respond to the needs of the labour market. In addition, employers can provide placements, internships and work experience as part of accredited courses, which can only enhance the value of the course and the potential for participants to get employment. The important role of ETBs in engaging with stakeholders at local level to bring a local dimension to course development is of key importance and SOLAS will be in a position to support that work.
46. In the context of ever-changing demands and the priority being attached to the needs of the unemployed, the profile of the supply of participants will be vital. This means that SOLAS's role in liaising centrally with Intreo and in facilitating and co-ordinating local liaison between ETBs and local Intreo offices is very important. FET provision must at

once seek to meet national skills needs as well as individual learner needs – at every level. As part of ongoing work (detailed in the next chapter), the roles of Intreo, SOLAS and ETBs in providing guidance and advice to unemployed people in choosing options to help them get back into a job are being discussed to ensure that unemployed people can avail of the most and best opportunities as quickly and as smoothly as possible.

Functions of ETBs

47. It is envisaged that the new ETB Bill will be both an enabling and reforming legal instrument. By replacing the existing 9 Vocational Acts with one new Bill it will provide a much greater coherence to regulation of this sector. Modernising the statutory framework and language will better reflect their current and developing functions, aid practitioners in this area and ensure the newly named bodies are fit for purpose. It will also dovetail with the reform of the training sector and the establishment of SOLAS.
48. Currently VECs' duties are rooted in "continuation" and "technical" education set out in the earlier legislation along with some more general provision in the Vocational Education (Amendment) Act 2001. The ETB Bill provides for overarching objectives and specific functions including the establishment of schools, centres for education and other education and training settings; the provision of education and training in those settings; provision of education and other supports to institutions other than education and training board facilities; cooperating with other education and training establishments in each board's functional area; and provision of training on behalf of bodies which fund training. These heads in the Bill reflect the proposed establishment of SOLAS and the delivery by ETBs of training previously provided by FÁS. The function in relation to establishing and maintaining schools will provide statutory underpinning for a VEC to be a patron of a primary school but only where the Minister recognises such a school under section 10 of the Education Act, 1998.
49. ETBs will continue to be enabled to co-operate with other organisations in the joint performance of their functions and share resources with other education service providers (e.g. joint patronage of a school) on the basis of agreement between the parties. It is not coercive on the other education or training service provider.

Quality Assurance arrangements

50. QQI will have a crucial role to play at a strategic level in relation to quality assuring FET in Ireland and SOLAS will have a close working relationship with it. QQI will be developing its vision for quality assuring education and training in Ireland and intends publishing guidelines in relation to this in Q1 2013.
51. In principle, the general view of the parties involved, with which the SIG agrees, is that ETBs will register under a single quality assurance agreement with QQI and will have QA responsibility for all FET they deliver. FÁS's current role in this will be devolved to ETBs. ETBs will be free to develop new programmes but SOLAS will co-ordinate this work. Any programmes developed by ETBs must be made available to every other ETB and must lead to awards that meet national and individual future skills needs, as set out by SOLAS generally, and/or within SLAs.

Chapter 5 Transition

The new arrangements

- FÁS Training Centres will transfer to ETBs on a phased basis, beginning in 2013 and will be completed by end-2014, at the latest
- Funding for all FET will be transferred to SOLAS for allocation to ETBs in 2014, informed by a handover process
- Quality Assurance arrangements will be maintained in parallel and transitioned to the new QA dispensation in consultation with QQI
- Intreo-SOLAS-ETB relationships will be formalised based on results from Intreo pilots and using learning from the phased transfer process
- Draft Service Level Agreements will be tested in 2013 for finalisation for 2014 funding allocations
- There will be engagement with employee representative organisations following dissemination of this Action Plan
- SOLAS will continue to pre-qualify providers for contracted training but ETBs will manage their own contracted training in their own catchment areas
- As appropriate, SOLAS will continue to have a role in national initiatives, such as the LMETF
- SOLAS will publish a Learners' Charter
- There will be reviews of a number of funding streams and programmes (such as co-operation hours and Youthreach) to inform the SOLAS FET strategy

52. It is envisaged that the SOLAS Bill will be published by end-2012 which would enable SOLAS be statutorily established early in 2013. As has been noted, the ETB Bill was published in the autumn and will be passed into law by early 2013. The full roll out of Intreo is not envisaged until end-2014. It is envisaged that while SOLAS will be statutorily established in 2013, the transformation process will be fully completed by end-2014.
53. In the case of three VECs (City of Dublin, Donegal and Kerry) there will be no change of boundaries as they become ETBs. The other 30 VECS will be involved in amalgamations involving two or three VECs in each case. The process of designating the CEOs for the new ETBs has been completed and new CEOs will be appointed to ETBs once the ETB legislation is passed. The designation of CEOs for the ETBs will facilitate commencement of planning. Issues ranging from payroll to facilities management and other back-office functions will require a range of solutions and the complexities of bringing cohesion to frontline services will pose their own demands. The resolution of all of the issues involved will require different timescales in different ETBs. This requires that we provide for a phasing of the transfer of the functions of FÁS to the ETBs. This has implications not just for the ETBs but for the time it will take for SOLAS to fully achieve its new organisational form and for the DES in relation to the pace of transfer of functions to FÁS.

54. Notwithstanding the complexities we consider that it is possible to make purposeful and speedy progress and to have the transformation process completed in a phased manner over a maximum timeframe of two years. A series of actions has already been taken to lay the foundation for the transfer and for the creation of SOLAS. We envisage further actions to advance the project further, even in advance of the passing of legislation with a further series of phased action following the commencement of the legislation. We have set a maximum timeframe of two years which is commensurate with the rollout of Intreo. We would hope, however, that the early transfer of functions to a number of ETBs will serve as a path finding exercise for others and that an acceleration will occur resulting in the completion of the transfer of functions within an earlier timeframe.
55. While all ETBs will have responsibilities for FET the geographical location of FÁS Training Centres is such that not all ETBs will be allocated a FÁS Training Centre while some will be allocated more than one. The following table shows how the Training Centres will be allocated:

ETB	Training Centres
City of Dublin	Ballyfermot, Finglas
City of Cork and County Cork	Cork
County Dublin and Dun Laoghaire	Baldoyle, Loughlinstown, Tallaght
Limerick City and County and Clare	Limerick (Raheen), Shannon
Donegal	Letterkenny, Gweedore
Kerry	Tralee
Tipperary	-
Wexford and Waterford	Wexford, Waterford
City and County Galway and Roscommon	Galway
Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim	Ballina, Sligo
Cavan and Monaghan	-
Louth and Meath	Dundalk
Longford and Westmeath	Athlone
Laois and Offaly	Mount Lucas
Kildare and Wicklow	-
Kilkenny and Carlow	-

56. A significant amount of work has been done by CDVEC (and the VECs in Cork) with FÁS to plan for the transfer of the training centres in those areas. A pragmatic approach is being taken with a recognition that a range of flanking measures will be required in due course to deal with a range of issues. The intention is to use the experience of CDVEC to inform and assist the transfer in other ETB areas. FÁS and both VECs in Cork have also carried out worthwhile preparatory work which will enable them to progress quickly following the amalgamation of the VECs in Cork.
57. The Implementation Group considers that, following the enactment of the legislation, the transfer of FÁS functions to ETBs should be rolled out progressively with early movers

being City of Dublin ETB, Donegal and Kerry (where there are no boundary changes) and . Cork. The SIG considers that the target should be to transfer at least 6 of the 19 training centres in 2013 with the balance following as early as possible in 2014, with a deadline of end-2014.

58. During the transition period, it is proposed that the current level of support provided by FÁS to its training centres should be maintained. These services embrace the following areas:
- Finance
 - ICT
 - Quality Assurance
 - Programme / Curriculum Development
 - Human Resources ‘Core System’
 - Apprenticeship Services
59. Advice will also be available as required to ETBs regarding the training centres on HR, legal and communication matters. On transfer of the training functions and accompanying resources to each ETB, a clear distinction will be made between the corporate responsibility for these areas - which will be that of the ETB - and the operational support which SOLAS will provide to each ETB. Existing FAS IT supports will continue to be provided over the interim period. It is important to ensure the apportionment of staff as fairly as possible reflects the complex balance of responsibilities and functions arising under the new arrangements.

Continuity of Provision

60. Chapter 2 outlines the nature of current provision. Under *Pathways to Work*, the FET sectors are committed to providing 269,500 places. It is essential that the needs of learners for FET places continues to be met in the transition period. The SIG also considers that even in advance of the completion of the transfer of functions, collaborative actions can be taken that will not just maintain provision but will improve it in the interest of learners. Specifically, in 2012 VECs and FÁS will consult on proposed 2013 education and training provision. The results of these consultations will be published on the web. This will not only provide a greater level of information to clients in a co-ordinated way but will provide a basis for achieving greater integration/co-ordination and removal of duplication as the transfer of functions advances.
61. As outlined in Chapter 2, FÁS has continued to reform its provision to enhance the relevance of courses to clients and the labour market. This work should continue in relation to 2013 provision. Forfás, at the request of the Department, developed Guidelines for the Alignment of Further Education Programmes with the Skills Needs of Enterprise. These guidelines were circulated by the DES to all VECs to facilitate the alignment of provision in the manner that might best meet the employment aspirations of learners. This work should be continued by the VECs. The relevance of courses to the needs of business and the needs of learners will be a key component of service delivery.

The Phased Process

62. The timeframe for transferring FÁS Training Centres to ETBs has been set out above. However, the transfer of the Centres is just one aspect of the transfer of functions. Other key areas that require actions are:

- Arrangements for training services to ETBs with no Training Centre
- Quality Assurance arrangements in context of establishment of QQI
- Arrangements for transition of further education funding to SOLAS
- Operation of contracted training
- Collaboration with Intreo
- Preparation of Draft Service Level Agreements
- Engagement with representatives of staff in FÁS and VECs
- Development of Output measurements
- ICT and infrastructure

The Technical Advisory Group (TAG)

63. FÁS and the IVEA, representing VECs, have been working together in a Technical Advisory Group (TAG). The TAG reports to the SIG and has been examining a range of issues (see Appendix B for list of membership and topics) and identifying possible solutions to challenges that arise as part of the transition process. The work of the TAG has been invaluable in assisting the SIG recommendations. The manner in which FÁS and the IVEA effectively continue to inform the implementation process will be determined in the development of the implementation architecture referred to in the introduction to this plan.

Services to ETBs without training centres

64. ETBs will have responsibility for all publicly funded FET but 5 ETBs will not have a full training centre in their catchment area. In seeking to meet individual learner need, within the resources available, ETBs will be able to either refer the learner to a neighbouring ETB that has a training centre and can offer the relevant course, or seek to provide the relevant course by ‘contracting out’. The decision to refer to another ETB or contract out will take into account factors such as convenience for the learner, relevance to national skills needs and overall resources available. It will also require consultation with the Intreo on the basis that the unemployed, in particular the long-term unemployed, are a priority group. SOLAS will provide support to each ETB to enable this to occur.

Quality Assurance arrangements

65. The TAG is working with QQI to ensure that quality assurance arrangements can be maintained across the transition from FÁS and VEC provision to SOLAS-funded, ETB-delivered provision, and that this transition is in line with the strategic direction envisaged for quality assured education and training in Ireland, to be set out by QQI. During the transition, there will be maintenance of existing QA arrangements, as part of the phased process

Transfer of funding for FET to SOLAS and to ETBs

66. The end-goal of the Action Plan is that SOLAS will administer all DES FET funding to ETBs who will manage delivery of FET on a day-to-day basis. This process is contingent

on a range of interdependent processes, not least the establishment of the ETBs. In the light of the timing of the SOLAS legislation, FET funding for 2013 will by and large have to follow existing practices with VECs receiving their funding from the DES. However, the SIG recommends that the DES staff involved should be “shadowed” by relevant FÁS staff as a learning exercise in advance of transfer.

67. It is envisaged that the shadowing exercise will inform the handover process of transferring funding from the DES to SOLAS and then from SOLAS to ETBs so that SOLAS will be able to administer all FET funding to ETBs from 2014. During 2013, there will be discussions on the potential for a common funding mechanism for all FET. To enable SOLAS exercise its functions, it is essential to ensure that ETBs can provide SOLAS with timely and relevant financial information. This has implications for the conditions under which funding is allocated as well as for ICT infrastructure.

Operation of Contracted Training

68. This will incorporate the placing of contracts for training delivery with the private, not for profit and community sectors. The precise requirements to outsource these interventions will be identified on an annual basis by each ETB having regard to its own capacity and its agreed FET commitments with SOLAS. As outlined above, it is important to ensure the advantages and flexibility of contracted training are maintained under the new arrangements.
69. Each ETB will apply public procurement policy in respect of the acquisition of these interventions. This will entail public tendering and/or annual agreements in line with these policies and regulations.
70. SOLAS support will include:
 - Maintenance of a pre-qualified list of approved contractors to facilitate tendering by ETBs
 - General guidance on procurement and management of contracts
 - Policy advice and general support in respect of community training

Collaboration with Intreo

71. As outlined previously, arrangements have been put in place to ensure close linkages with the DSP and rollout of Intreo. These linkages should continue to inform the development of linkages on the ground. Interim protocols to enable a standard framework for the referral of unemployed people to further education programmes were circulated at end-2011. This framework complements the existing referral protocol between welfare offices and FÁS training programmes, and will enable further education to play a more active part in activation. So far, in addition to existing co-operation and collaboration under locally devised protocols, VECs have had formal discussions and liaison with their social protection counterparts under these arrangements. The further development of Intreo-SOLAS-ETB model of referral will be developed following review of the application of the interim referral protocols.

Draft Service Level Agreements

72. A working group is being established to produce a draft service level agreement between SOLAS and ETBs . As this will be linked to funding its practical effect will not fully impact until 2014. However, the early availability of a draft will allow for testing in 2013 in draft format for finalisation for 2014. The working group should in particular draw on the experience of the work currently being undertaken in CDVEC and Cork.

Engagement with representatives of staff in FÁS and VEC/ETBs

73. In order to achieve this timetable, staff will need to be transferred. While as noted above, it is important to maintain a balance, the transition process will still involve the transfer to ETBs of the order of 80% of FÁS staff. The remainder will be the staff of SOLAS. This will require substantive and meaningful engagement with individual staff and their representative organisations. This engagement will begin following publication of this Action Plan. .
74. The HR-IR TAG has completed a gap analysis of HR policies across VECs and FÁS as a key contributor to dealing with HR-IR issues in the context of engagement with employee representative organisations.

Development of systems for outcomes measurement

75. Establishing systems for the measurement of outcomes from programmes in which the State has invested significant funds will be a very important role for SOLAS. However, SOLAS will need to direct and co-ordinate data collections in order to enhance the nature and consistency of the data collected, and its analysis. While some improvements have been made in this area over the years it is generally acknowledged that much more needs to be done. The consultation process revealed that measuring the quality of a course is a complex issue. For some courses which are designed to enable participants gain employment, that outcome is a valid measure of success, but for other courses, which are designed to enable participants progress or build skills, those outcomes are valid measures of success. There are also the wider, societal benefits of all education and training to consider.
76. The measurement of outcomes will provide a basis for informing providers of the impact of the FET programmes they have delivered. Good data is the basis for all evidence-based policy making and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) provide a mechanism for measuring and benchmarking progress. Examples of KPIs might include numbers of participants, targets for progression and/or placement in employment (depending on the type of course), financial management and value for money or benchmarking provision internationally. Some progress has been made across the FET sector to improve and expand data collections nationally and internationally, Ireland is participating in the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies. Work is already underway, through the TAG and a working group, on data collection, including the measurement of the wider benefits of learning. The TAG has established a framework for the data that must be collected. A feasibility study will now be conducted to understand how SOLAS can co-ordinate that data collection so that the data can be used appropriately. SOLAS will be tasked with aligning VEC and FÁS resources that are currently engaged in planning and

research and development¹ so that they are co-ordinated and working together. The potential for a single course database and a course calendar is being examined.

77. Funding will be a key mechanism to achieve greater relevance and enhanced outcomes. SOLAS will adopt an approach to funding FET that has significant regard to outcomes. In having regard to outcomes, a performance-related funding model must balance a range of indicators and weight them according to the stated goals of the provision. For provision that is explicitly to upskill people for the labour market, progression to full-time or part-time employment would be a significant outcome, whereas for provision that was targeted at, say, young people not in education or training (NEETs), attendance, participation and progression to other education or training would be a more valued outcome.
78. Fundamentally, while different FET might have different objectives, SOLAS will develop the assessment of success on the basis what provision is achieving for whom and with what resources. The methodology for doing this will be worked out with stakeholders but will involve analysis of participation levels, outcomes (progression), feedback from participants and stakeholders at a local or regional level and evaluations or reviews. SOLAS will also benchmark progress internationally. Analysing this data in a holistic way will give a comprehensive outlook on value-for-money, a key metric given the scarce resources. The work currently underway in relation to data collection, course databases and learner databases will be used to inform funding decisions.

ICT and infrastructure

79. In the short term, the SIG is of the view that in order to maintain service across the transition period, generally ICT systems and other systems infrastructure will need to be maintained in parallel. There is already substantial work being done between DSP and FÁS in relation to case management ICT systems as part of the transfer of FÁS Employment Services to DSP. There will need to be significant systems analysis work done in the context of the VEC amalgamations to ensure continuity of service from an ETB perspective. Alongside this there will need to be significant systems analysis work as FÁS training centres transfer to ETBs and as SOLAS comes into operation. From a continuity of service perspective, this is a complex task but the work must also be undertaken with a view to longer-term solutions around shared services (such as payroll or HR or procurement) and to ensure appropriate access to case management systems across ETBs, Intreo and SOLAS.
80. There will be opportunities to gain efficiencies from the use of shared services, in relation to finances, HR and other administrative systems, but also in delivering integrated services to learners, during the transition phase. Decisions on shared services need to be considered in the context of the rationalisation of the VECs into ETBs and the wider remit of ETBs in the education sector as well as the need to integrate with Intreo case management services.

¹ Such as the FÁS Strategic Labour Market Research Unit, the FÁS Curriculum Development function, the VEC Further Education Support Service, VEC FE programme national co-ordinators, VEC CPD funding administered by the DES, etc.

81. The ICT TAG has been examining the operational issues involved in ensuring continuity and development of service. The work being done in the CDVEC pilot, as well as the Cork pilot, will also be used to inform decisions. To ensure quality management information systems, which will enable enhanced communication and consultation, as well as better evidence-based policy making, the SIG is recommending additional investment in the development of ICT services.

Other interim actions pending the establishment of SOLAS

82. SOLAS will publish a *Learners' Charter* which will outline basic rights and responsibilities for learners and ETBs so that learners can be sure of a consistent level of service nationwide. It will make provision for, amongst other things:

- Learners will have a right to make feedback on their participation in courses
- The publication of a summary of feedback received from learners on their participation in courses;
- The publication of a range of metrics for ETBs and SOLAS-funded providers on an annual basis;
- Provision for structured engagement with organisations representing learners and potential learners which would be fed into the policy-making process;
- Appropriate assessment of needs and efficient referral mechanisms.

83. The *Learner's Charter* will also reflect the benchmarks set out in the Consultation Paper:

- All ETBs will operate a consistent policy with regard to enrolment,
- All ETBs will publish their policies and an Equality Checklist;
- All learners should have a responsibility to engage genuinely and sincerely in whatever programme they are enrolled on;

Reviews of provision

84. In addition, there are a number of reviews to be produced. These are:

- A committee, comprising the DES, FÁS and IVEA will review the draft operational guidelines for Youthreach and produce draft guidelines for the delivery of Youthreach in Community Training Centres and VEC Youthreach centres on an integrated basis;
- The Prison Education Steering Group (PESG) is examining the recently conducted audits of prison education and draft operational guidelines for the delivery of prison education;
- The nature and extent of self-funded adult education (“evening classes”) delivered by VECs and co-funded, through allowances for Directors of Adult Education, will be reviewed by the DES, in the context of national and individual future skills needs;
- The NCSE is ‘mapping’ adult education for learners with disabilities and recently commissioned a literature and country review of what works best in the education and training of adults with disabilities. Building on these initiatives, the DES, FÁS and the IVEA will produce operational guidelines for the delivery of FET to learners

with disabilities. This will include a review of the administration of funding for disability organisations;

- Decisions will be required in respect of a number of functions currently undertaken by FÁS but which may be non-core to SOLAS. These include the operation of the schemes for Safepass, the Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS), the Quarry Skills Certification Scheme (QSCS) and the Film and Media training unit.

Appendix A
SIG Terms of Reference

- to operate as a Steering Committee to oversee the process involved in the setting up of SOLAS - the new Further Education and Training Authority;
- to report to the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Jobs on progress with implementation of the Government Decision(s), initially in the Autumn of 2011, and on a regular basis thereafter as progress is made with the Action Plan;
- to draw up an Action Plan to implement the changes required, including the disbandment of FÁS; and
- to monitor implementation of the Action Plan and where milestones are not met to recommend remedial action.

Membership as at November 2012

- Ciaran Cannon TD, Minister for Training and Skills (Chair)
- Peter Baldwin, Brian Duggan, Seamus Hemenstall, Niall Monks (Secretary) – DES.
- Michael Moriarty and Pat Lavelle, Irish Vocational Education Association,
- Anne Vaughan, DSP
- Paul O’Toole, Conor Dunne and Fiona Hartley, FÁS
- Angela Flanagan, Office of An Taoiseach
- Ian O’Mara, Office of the Minister for Education and Skills
- Ed Brophy, Office of the Minister for Social Protection
- Peter Davitt, FIT Ltd.

Appendix B
Technical Advisory Group Membership

FÁS Transformation Team	Task Group	IVEA Transformation Team
Jim Coughlan	Chairpersons	John Ryan
Maria Walshe	Communications	Deirdre Keogh Cynthia Deane
Rod Tierney	Finance	Jack Lynch
Paul Bailey	Human Resources and Industrial Relations	Nessa Doyle
Brian Marsden	Information and Communications Technology	Colm McEvoy
Nuala McDonnell	Programme and Curriculum Development	Evan Buckley
Caitriona Murphy	Quality Assurance	Deirdre Keyes
Jasmina Behan	Research and Planning	Pádraig Kirk

Appendix C
SOLAS Functions

Policy and Strategy	SOLAS will contribute significantly to the development of FET policy. Specifically it will lead the preparation and evolution of a strategy for the sector in conjunction with its stakeholders. This will include policy for FET funding.
Research and Planning	Collection and collation of relevant labour market, employer, learner data and information. Analysis and insight of same at both national and regional level. Dissemination of resulting knowledge at both macro and operational level. Preparation and support of corporate planning in conjunction with stakeholders, including liaison with employers, industry and civil society organisations.
Programme Development	Complementary role to ETBs in the development of appropriate FET programmes and curricula. Development of specialised/technical programmes as required. Employer and stakeholder liaison.
Outsourced FET Provision	Support role to ETBs in sourcing FET interventions from the private, public and not for profit sector.
National Programmes	Development and implementation of certain programmes at national level where particular circumstances pertain. Currently the new Labour Market Education and Training Fund (LMETF) is an example. A further example is e-College which is operated at national level now but could, in time, be devolved to ETBs with SOLAS providing a support role.
ETB Liaison	This function will work in conjunction with ETBs in the preparation and implementation of their annual education and training plans for FET.
Corporate Services	Finance/ HR/ICT/Secretariat/Internal Audit/Facilities Management etc. This function will also have responsibility for managing FET funding and performance evaluation and review.
Intreo Liaison	Liaison with the new Intreo
Apprenticeship Administration	Management and coordination of apprenticeship - currently the subject of a review by the DES.
Communications	All external and internal communications.

Appendix D
SOLAS Consultation paper
Summary of responses

Funding and administration

- SOLAS must define its objectives and goals clearly, as well as defining the inputs and outputs and outcomes clearly too. Of these, outcomes was the most important. SOLAS should not just be about providing education and training for unemployed people, but for all, including those in employment. This should include provision for employers to refer their staff for continuous professional development.
- Service Level Agreements (SLAs) should be based on ETB strategic plans (perhaps 3 year education development plans) and there needed to be provision for consultation with relevant stakeholders, at a local level. SLAs should outline courses, target group, tutor/staff qualifications and development, duration, cost, reporting arrangements, QA, assessment etc.
- Funding should be linked to outcomes identified in the SLA. Funding administered by different Government departments for education and training should be integrated. Three main funding mechanisms were suggested:
 - ‘Global Budget’ funding for ETBs where ETBs decide on priorities in line with their plans and the SLAs and use private provision for specific purposes
 - ‘Core Funding’ provided to ETBs with SOLAS administering other packages or streams of funding on a competitive basis
 - All funding administered by SOLAS on a competitive basis.
- Private providers should be registered with SOLAS nationally to be entitled to tender for SOLAS funding and ETBs should agree SLAs with such providers.
- One national over-arching reporting system should be used and existing systems could be analysed for best practice with a bespoke system then designed. Access to technology (broadband) should also be considered.

What courses should be provided?

Educating for jobs of tomorrow is best guess, educating for life is more

- This could only be decided through consultation with employers, learner representatives/advocates, relevant stakeholder agencies (CSO, Forfas, EGFSN, Intreo, QQI, etc.) However, SOLAS should have a programme development unit researching and developing the most up-to-date relevant programmes and should carry out research into the effectiveness of emerging educational tools. Programmes need to be reviewed for relevance so that learner needs could be matched with labour market needs.
- Literacy and numeracy (core and generic skills to ensure mobility) should be incorporated into all FET programmes – or made available on a stand-alone basis where required using

ringfenced funding – and digital/media literacy should be embedded into course development. Community Education is very important for social inclusion and must be continued and non-accredited learning must be protected

How do we guide and support learners and potential learners in choosing the right course?

- All learners should have individual learning plans based on assessments, which would also ensure that learners could enrol on the right courses for them. These assessments should be carried out by qualified guidance staff and perhaps there should be a ‘one stop guidance shop’ for all learners.
- Entry criteria and entitlements should be streamlined, along with the administration of allowances, with additional supports such as rural transport and childcare made available. There needed to be a single client database for providers to help ensure that data didn’t need to be collected more than once and to enable appropriate data sharing.

Supporting and managing staff

- ETBs responsible for managing staff but SOLAS should ensure appropriate CPD (including appropriate pedagogical training) provided, Quality Assurance standards maintained, best practice shared appropriately and that the qualifications required were set appropriately etc. The requirement for skills diagnosing the educational needs of an individual, communication skills, knowledge of learning theories in practice, curriculum development and management, assessment, counselling, guidance, literacies development, and so forth, needed to be recognised.

How can SOLAS improve customer service?

- SOLAS should adopt a learner-centred approach, based on a Learner Charter. Programmes should be reviewed regularly (continuously) to ensure quality.

Youthreach/CTCs

- Youthreach and Community Training Centres offered a specialised service. Using a learner centred approach, they could be managed within the ETB network, which would help ensure maximum potential for progression, but this required further discussion and consultation. The co-operation hours scheme similarly could be managed within the ETB network and funded by SOLAS but required further consultation.

Appendix E

Sample FET Classification

A core distinction is between FET which is explicitly about “learning for jobs” where labour market outcomes are central in assessing its success, and FET which is principally about “learning for life” where outcomes other than labour market outcomes are the primary objective.

A study carried out for the EU required extensive consultation with the frontline professionals (‘adult learning professionals’) delivering every type of FET and adopted the following classification of their activities²

- Education aiming at providing qualifications for the labour market: **Vocational** adult education;
- Education aiming at providing basic skills (second chance) not directly related to the labour market: **Basic Skills** adult education;
- Education aiming at increasing social cohesion and citizenship: **Social Cohesion** adult education;
- Education aiming to increase knowledge in culture and art: **Cultural & Arts** adult education.

That FET activities have quite distinct objectives does not mean that they cannot or should not be assessed on the basis of what they are achieving, for whom and with what resources.

² Buiskool *et al*, 2010, *Key competences for adult learning professionals. Contribution to the development of a reference framework of key competences for adult learning professionals*. Final report for European Commission, DG EAC.

Table 1
2012 Job Placement/Work Experience Initiatives

Community Employment	22,300
Back to Work Enterprise Allowance Scheme	12,000
Back to Education Allowance Scheme	25,000
Jobs Initiative	1,300
Supported Employment	4,500
Job Clubs	7,800
Rural Social Scheme	2,750
TÚS	5,000
JobBridge	5,000
Total	85,650

Table 2
2012 Training and Education Places

FÁS/SOLAS places ³	75,000
Training Education Support Grant (TESG) ⁴	12,000
Skillnets	8,000
Labour Market Education and Training Fund	6,500
Further education places	180,000
Third level places	170,000
Springboard	5,900
Total	457,400

³ Currently funded through FÁS. On statutory establishment, these places will be funded through SOLAS. Includes ca. 40,000 full-time places

⁴ In 2012, these will be funded through the DSP