



INOUE Submission on the Further Education and Training Bill 2013

Introduction

The INOU welcomes the publication of this Bill and believes the establishment of SOLAS and the roll-out of the local Education and Training Boards offers a timely opportunity to provide good quality and appropriate education and training courses to unemployed people and other people of working age distant from the labour market.

However, the organisation is concerned at the definition of 'further education' used in the Bill as we are keenly aware through our own work and that of our affiliates of the positive role played by community, developmental and adult education. In particular the role these forms of education play in drawing adults back into education for whom primary or secondary education was far from a constructive or fruitful experience.

The correlation between employment and educational status is well established. The lower a person's educational status, the stronger the probability is that they will be unemployed for longer time periods; and if they secure work that it will be in poorly paid and precarious employment.

Ireland not only faces a significant unemployment challenge but it also faces a challenge of creating sufficient and sustainable employment. At present Ireland is attracting in work for which we have insufficient workers with the right skill set. Clearly this is an issue for the educational system overall but further education and training also has a role to play. In particular, if unemployed people and others distant from the labour market are to acquire the right skill set to gain access to emerging employment opportunities; and to build up their educational qualifications and access the higher education courses that could lead to better paid employment.

This submission will focus on the sections in the *Further Education and Training Bill 2013* the INOU regard as problematic and offers alternative or additional wording to address the issues identified.

Section 2: Interpretation

Defining Further Education and Training

- At present in Section 2 the *Further Education and Training Bill 2013* includes a functional description of ‘further education’ rather than a working definition. To capture the range of work that takes place under the broad umbrella of further education and training, this Bill must include a definition / an interpretation of FET that captures this reality. This is particularly important if the structural issue of joblessness is to be addressed. ‘Joblessness’ captures a broader range of people than the term ‘unemployed’ as it includes people who are living or parenting alone; have a disability; never worked; unskilled manual / service class; no educational qualification; and a combination of part or all of these¹. For many people living in such circumstances, adult, second chance and community education plays an important role in supporting them to participate and start to address their own socio-economic exclusion.
- In the SOLAS consultation it was noted that ‘learner centeredness’ *“is something that should be maintained right through the whole learning process, from engagement, to participation, to progression. It needs to be developed as a consistent model throughout the whole process i.e. learner centered processes and systems.”* (p5)²
- A lot of debate took place about how best to define FET and one working definition or potential interpretation that seeks to capture and address these issues is the following: *“FET is an optional alternative education and training channel for those who have completed their compulsory education (but including early school leavers) to move their lives forward (in terms of family, community and work) irrespective of their background, aptitudes, aspirations, prior educational experiences and aspirations. It is person centred; lifelong learning focused and accommodates diversity in all its forms.”* (p8)
- AONTAS in their response to this legislation proposed the following definition: *“Further education and training is seen as a key element of lifelong learning of equal importance to first, second and third level education. As such it should include further education and training provided for the purpose of obtaining an award within the meaning of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance(Education and Training Act) 2012 at a level not higher than Level 6³ specified in the National Framework of Qualification. It also includes other systematic and deliberate learning undertaken by adults in a wide variety of settings and contexts, both formal and non-formal, in particular community education.”*

¹ Research Briefing, December 2012, *Work and Poverty in Ireland, 2004-2010*, Dorothy Watson, Bertrand Maître and Christopher T. Whelan available <http://www.esri.ie/UserFiles/publications/2012-Workand%20PovertyBriefingweb.pdf>

² Quote from *Feedback from the SOLAS Consultation Process* published in June 2012 by DES

³ AONTAS notes *“With the caveat that we are also aware that some community education providers provide both access programmes/and/or outreach programmes at higher levels of the NFQ”*

➔ The INOU recommends the use of the above text as a definition of further education and training in this Bill.

Defining training bodies

- The INOU was also struck by the definition of a ‘training body’ contained in this section: it appears to refer to the to-be-dissolved Vocational Educational Committees only; yet the word ‘education’ is notable by its absence. In the Action Plan for SOLAS the vision underpinning it is described as one “*to build the identity and values of a world-class integrated Further Education and Training system*”⁴ (p5). To that end it would be important to ensure that the law underpinning these developments demonstrates a stronger sense of an integrated approach when defining / interpreting provision. In particular if Ireland is to move away from the often polarizing and unhelpful training v education debate.
- To address the educational, employment and social exclusion challenges facing Ireland demands a well resourced education + training approach: well capable of responding to local needs underpinned by a supportive national framework. Surely then the ‘*training bodies*’ should be known as ‘*education and training bodies*’?
- To that end it is equally odd that there is no mention of SOLAS in the *Education and Training Boards Bill* and how it relates to the ETBs and their work. Yet reference is made to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in ETB Bill Section 10 (j) and the role / relationship with regard to youth work services.
- Concerns have been raised with the INOU that if there are not clear lines of communication and accountability; if there are not clear lines of who is actually responsible for delivering for whom and how, that provision on the ground will not be sufficient to meet the variety of needs amongst the unemployed and others distant from the labour market.
- Community and voluntary sector organisations play an important role in the provision of FET and in particular to hard-to-reach groups who are distant from the labour market. If the wider issue of ‘joblessness’ is to be properly addressed then this work should be acknowledged in any definition of education and training bodies.

➔ The INOU recommends that there should be a consistency of terms / language used in the FET and ETB Bills; and that the role of community and voluntary sector training providers should be included in any definition of ‘education and training bodies’.

⁴ "An Action Plan for SOLAS (An Seirbhísí Oideachais Leanúnaigh Agus Scileanna) The new Further Education and Training (FET) Authority" published by DES November 2012

Section 7: functions

- In Section 7 (1) (b) community and voluntary sector FET providers should be included in the list of organisations / bodies to be consulted. This is particularly important for three reasons: (i) the potential local employment opportunities with the C&V sector, for example, child and other forms of care; (ii) to build on the expertise and learning within the C&V sector; and (iii) to ensure a focus on addressing issues of socio-economic exclusion.

➔ The INOU recommends that the community and voluntary sector training providers should be included in the list of bodies to be consulted under Section 7 (1) (b).

Section 9: further education and training strategy

- Section 9 (4) commences with "*An tSeirbhís shall*" and lists those with whom SOLAS will be obliged to consult as the Ministers for Education and Skills; Social Protection; and Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation.
- This is in marked contrast to Section 9 (5) which commences with "*An tSeirbhís may*": yet the very people and organisations SOLAS may or may not consult with include the very people and organisations SOLAS will need to deliver a responsive, integrated and first class service.
- In the SOLAS Action plan it states "*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.*" (Paragraph 38, p21) For SOLAS to deliver on this in reality will require on-going consultation and engagement with a wide range of actors involved in FET both its design and delivery.
- Included in the list of people / organisations to be consulted in Section 9 (5) are "*other FET programme providers*" or "*any other person as it considers appropriate*". Again in the interests of consistency and to ensure that consultation with those organisations working with the most marginalised are not overlooked, it would be important that community & voluntary sector organisations are named specifically in this section.

➔ The INOU recommends that the community and voluntary sector training providers are included in the list of bodies to be consulted under Section 9 (5) and that this section commences with the words "*An tSeirbhís shall*".

Section 10: Membership of An tSeirbhís

- For further education and training to develop in an holistic and inclusive manner, it will be important that the SOLAS board consists of members who can contribute to the development of the sector based on their own wide range of expertise and knowledge. The learning needs of unemployed people and other people distant from the labour market are varied: some people need specific training programmes to allow them access to particular jobs; others require personal / community development approach to facilitate them to address broader educational needs before moving on to more work orientated education and training.
- For further education and training provision to live up to its full potential requires people on the board of SOLAS who can bring an understanding of the sector: its variety; its strengths; its weaknesses. In particular it would be important that members have an understanding of the contribution FET can and does play in addressing socio-economic and other forms of exclusion.
- Further education and training are part of a continuum, a continuum that an ever changing labour market will require people to enter, leave and re-enter over their life time. The significant changes underway in the FET sector cannot just be viewed in the light of the challenges currently facing this state but in light of the challenges that are emerging over the medium to longer term. Members of the board must be able to contribute to the articulation and realization of such a vision.

➔ The INOU recommends that membership of An tSeirbhís should also be informed by the members ability to contribute to the realisation of SOLAS vision *“to build the identity and values of a world-class integrated Further Education and Training system”*.

For further information please contact:

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