

**Submission to the Department of Education and  
Science**

**on**

**The Establishment of a new Further Education  
and Training Authority SOLAS**

**From**

**The Society of St Vincent de Paul**

**Social Justice and Policy Team**

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## **Introduction**

The Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP) welcomes this opportunity to input our views on the establishment of a new Further Education and Training Authority to be named SOLAS. As the largest charity of social concern and action operating in Ireland the Society of St Vincent de Paul views education as a key enabler out of poverty, social exclusion and a life time of limited potential. We view access to, retention in and progress throughout the various cycles in education in the wider holistic frame and not just as a means of securing employment. We see education as a critical social good which must be made available to all to ensure that each individual can reach their potential and contribute their human and social capital within their communities and personal lives.

We are very keenly aware that it is mainly the lower socio-economic groups who make up the early school leaver cohort, thus damaging their life chances and potential. Currently 20% of students leave secondary school before the Leaving Certificate, with 4% leaving before the Junior Certificate. Becoming a lone parent is also closely associated with low levels of educational attainment. One quarter of women with lower second level qualifications have become never-married lone mothers by their mid-20s, compared with less than 15% of those with Leaving Certificate qualifications and just 3% of graduates<sup>i</sup>. 47% of lone parents under-35 years of age have Junior Certificate education only<sup>ii</sup>.

Leaving school early has a very negative effect on a young person's literacy and numeracy levels, chances of securing work and their quality of life. Early school leavers are much more likely to remain unemployed for longer and end up in low paid jobs if and when they are available.

We submit our views on the establishment of a new Further Education and Training Authority SOLAS fully cognisant of the fact that low paid jobs for either early school leavers or weak academic performers have disappeared leaving this cohort more vulnerable to unemployment and an uncertain future. We welcome the recognition of the need for an integrated approach to this until now fragmented sector.

## **Profile of those requesting help from the SVP**

The majority of requests for help received in our offices across the country come from households with children, in particular those headed by a lone parent. In the first half of 2011, 12% of calls for help came from foreign nationals. Three quarters of the households requesting help in our offices are reliant on a social welfare payment, with means tested payments such as the One Parent Family Payment, Jobseekers Allowance and Disability Allowance featuring strongly. SOLAS must be developed so that the education and training supports which are provided are accessible for these vulnerable groups – lone parents, qualified adults and foreign nationals. Lone parents in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment, qualified adults and many migrants do not appear in the Live Register statistics, and SOLAS must meet the needs of all learners and not just those who are on the Live Register.

### **SVP experience of education**

Many of the 10,300 SVP voluntary members and 600 staff across the country run projects and initiatives to enhance poorer students' experience of education. We help children, young people and non-traditional learners to access pre-school and early education; assist them with the costs of participating in both primary and secondary school; and fund further and third level students to upskill and continue their education.

A survey of SVP Conferences spending over €5,000 on education-related activities in 2009 revealed that 90% of respondents provided assistance to students with third level and further education. 38% of the courses which SVP helped learners to access were Post Leaving Certificate courses and courses/training at FETAC Levels 5&6. Our members work hard to attract and support these students to see the worth of staying in or returning to education to gain a qualification. It is often an uphill process, overcoming problems of low expectations and self-esteem. Therefore we see the potential of this new body SOLAS to create opportunities for learners to have their educational and training attainment enhanced in relevant ways which will create better long term outcomes at both an individual and societal level.

### **Defining what SVP means by learner**

Ensuring the participation of learners from lower socio-economic groups and other disadvantaged groups will be the critical litmus test of SOLAS. We set out our submission deliberately using the word 'learner' as our preferred noun for this wide, varied group of people from differing backgrounds, social classes and with varying degrees of formal training and education.

We do not differentiate between terms such as the unemployed, job seekers and 'other learners' as the consultation paper terms the last group. Throughout this submission we use the word learner in the widest possible context, that of a person seeking to enter or re-enter an education or training setting in order to gain a qualification and improve their educational attainment. We are very clear that in many instances these learners are not currently and may never have been on the Live Register. All learners must have equal access to the education and training supports provided by SOLAS. Indeed, changes being phased in for the One Parent Family Payment, whereby lone parents will have to seek employment, education or training when their youngest child is 7, point to the importance of ensuring that SOLAS caters for the needs of all learners, and not just those who are currently on the Live Register or currently seeking employment.

### **Policy Area 1: Administration and Funding of FET**

As the establishment of SOLAS will be a complex and challenging merging of various functions, bodies, cultures and differing organisational dynamics, SVP sees it as imperative that a very clearly understood set of values and principles are clearly enunciated as the central building block of this new agency.

SVP suggests that equality of educational access, participation and outcome should be central to all aspects of how SOLAS operates. We believe that a high and real level of community participation is key to the success of SOLAS and hope that engagement and consultation with communities will occur so that the training and education that SOLAS will provide is appropriate and meets the learning needs of those it seeks to help.

SVP welcomes the acknowledgement that a simplified and integrated funding and administration system will yield efficiencies and better quality outcomes for learners. We do not intend to comment extensively on the administrative and funding element of the consultation paper as we know that there many examples of good practice in this area. In particular we note how the NQAI managed the complex task of inclusive stakeholder management through emphasising a transparent approach.

We consider the following important:

- Flexibility of programme delivery must be a key feature of how the Local Education and Training Boards (LETBs) are configured. Programme delivery must reflect the needs of learners. For example, the caring responsibilities of all parents, and in particular lone parents must be catered for in the delivery of programmes. This may necessitate the provision of programmes on a part-time basis, provide options for distance learning, and should recognise that parents must plan their own learning around their child's school day and the availability of childcare and after-school care.
- SVP members have noted the importance and value of the Childcare Employment and Training Support Scheme (CETS) which recognises the need to provide childcare to enable parents to take up education and training opportunities. This programme is managed by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, which is another stakeholder in the administration and funding of FET in Ireland. Supports for childcare are central to allowing parents to participate in FET.
- Funding to LETBs must be allocated on the basis of their capacity to provide adequate adult literacy and numeracy courses and their ability to demonstrate that they attract retain and can show student progression through the courses they engage with.
- Service Level Agreements must ensure that learner feedback is incorporated into course evaluations.
- While SVP acknowledges that VECS and FAS currently provide the bulk of FET programmes we know that there is scope for private providers to offer a variety of relevant courses to meet the needs of specific target groups. SVP asks that private providers must be accredited and must demonstrate their ability to deliver the specific courses required. Feedback from previous participants on programmes provided by private providers must also be taken into consideration.

- SVP believes that software and IT systems must be robust and compatible across the entire SOLAS spectrum
- It will be important to ensure that relevant information about the needs and experiences of learners accessing FET is available to SOLAS so that tailored supports and guidance can be made available to those learners.
- All learners should be able to access user-friendly information on the various FET options, delivery mechanisms and locations open to them
- SVP realises that real time information on programme delivery will be very useful but that this longitudinal approach while important will not yield very immediate results and requires appropriate data collection methods
- Create autonomy for management to enable them to be able to incentivise and motivate their staff to deliver the commonly shared outcomes

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

##### **Improving literacy and numeracy**

Many of those who would benefit from accessing FET have few formal qualifications. These are learners who want to access the world of education via the access and foundation route. Often this is via a PLC course, a foundation level course and in many instances it can be a more informal developmental course which may be their first experience of any type of adult learning in a community setting. Given that one in four people in Ireland has a significant literacy problem it is vital that literacy and numeracy is embedded into the range of courses to be provided by LETBs.

A fifth of the labour market, approximately 384,000 people, have less than a Level 4 qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), with 117,600 of this cohort attaining only primary level education or less.

##### **We consider the following important:**

- Accurate real time data and information on the cohorts that SOLAS seeks to serve is critical. In particular the LETBs must have up to date information on the education and training requirements of those in their catchment area. We suggest the optimal use of the CSO data on educational attainment, for example the numbers of people who have less than a Level 4 qualification on the NFQ, is used to design appropriate courses. The consultation paper refers to the information which is available from the Live Register on the profile of potential learners. SVP would like to reiterate here the importance of having this information about other potential

learners, in particular those in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment and Qualified Adult payments. This information should be made available by the National Employment and Entitlements Service.

- Consulting with all relevant stakeholders at a local, regional and national level is vital to ensure that SOLAS and more regionally the LETBs know what need they should be seeking to meet. It is the experience of SVP that very often training and education can be provided in localised settings, particularly in marginalised communities and this is a key component of accessing hard to reach learners. SVP sees the appropriate provision and accreditation/recognition of basic skills courses within community education as a hugely important element of SOLAS. Community education providers play an invaluable role in facilitating access to hard to reach groups. All partnership companies, and local development agencies should be involved as they are often in possession of a very critical resource – an effective conduit into the cohorts SOLAS wants to reach out to due to their location, relationships and activities. Real consultation with these stakeholders will reap rewards for SOLAS and must be a modus operandi of the body from the outset to instil trust.
- SVP welcomes the intent to strive for an appropriate balance between occupation specific and generic skills building which SVP actively supports. We believe both types of courses must include innovatively designed modules on literacy and numeracy to upskill learners.

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

SVP sees a sensitively conducted engagement with potential learners as very important. This engagement must transcend the securing of relevant data and information from the learner and should encompass a serious effort to understand their situation, their wishes and concerns, particularly if they have caring commitments. Care should be taken to ensure that learners are not required to furnish information about their educational/training attainment/interests/personal circumstances etc repeatedly, but that this information is gathered sensitively and at one point, and is then shared between NEES and SOLAS as appropriate. It will be important to gain a clear sense of where they realistically view themselves progressing to and to what desired outcome. An adult guidance service is necessary to help learners to find and complete the right course for them.

It will also be important to have a fair and consistently applied approach to ensuring learner's compliance and commitment to the stated pathway of action they may enter into. SVP would not view an enforced attendance at a particular course as a reasonable or productive approach to ensuring better educational outcomes. The requirement to seek education or training as a condition of continued receipt of a social welfare payment should not result in persons being compelled to attend a course which is not right for them.

The SVP notes that the interim protocols for the referral of unemployed people to further education programmes have been agreed and are set out in Circular 0076/2011. SVP remains concerned at the focus on the unemployed in this circular, as it is not clear that other learners such as lone parents who wish to enter FET will be prioritised under this interim protocol.

#### **Policy Area Four: How to manage and support staff**

While SVP acknowledges the challenges from an organisational development perspective for the various staff moving from their previous locations in the CWO, FAS and VEC settings we suggest that a strong outcomes focused approach is embedded across all the emerging agencies and providers at both an operational and strategic level to ensure that regardless of where staff are located that they are fully clear on what outcomes they are trying to achieve on behalf of those learners they are working to support.

A consistent approach to continuous professional development for all educators and trainers must be taken. We also suggest that all teaching staff within SOLAS have a strong understanding and competency in the teaching of adult literacy and numeracy as part of their skill set, and that the non-teaching staff are trained to have a deep understanding of the importance of quality literacy and numeracy across all SOLAS training.

While SVP sees that the LETBs will be responsible for the development, monitoring and support of staff, SOLAS itself should have an oversight quality role to play to ensure that all LETBs abide by the same quality standards.

#### **Conclusion:**

The Society of St Vincent de Paul looks forward to continued engagement with the Department of Education and Skills and the SOLAS implementation group on the transformation of the further education and training sector. In particular we look forward to contributing to the development of a three year strategy for SOLAS once it has been established. Given the increasing focus on activation for people of working age in receipt of social welfare payments, the development of FET in Ireland is most welcome. However, the needs of learners must be prioritised, and the wider value of education recognised for all, not only those who are currently on the Live Register or actively seeking employment. Some of the key points from our submission are outlined below.

- SVP understands learners as persons seeking to enter or re-enter an education or training setting in order to gain a qualification and improve their educational attainment. Learners may also be jobseekers but it is important to recognise that not all potential learners are currently job seekers, and that for many entering education and training is the first of many steps along the road to seeking employment.
- SOLAS must be developed so that the education and training supports which are provided are accessible for the broadest range of learners, including lone parents, qualified adults and foreign nationals. Lone parents in

receipt of the One Parent Family Payment, qualified adults and many migrants do not appear in the Live Register statistics, however SOLAS must meet the needs of all learners and not just those who are on the Live Register or currently seeking employment.

- Flexibility and responsiveness of programme delivery must be a key feature of how the Local Education and Training Boards (LETBs) are configured.
- Valuable supports which are already in place for learners, specifically the Childcare Employment and Training Support Scheme (CETS) and the adult guidance services provided by VECs should be retained by SOLAS.
- Equality of educational access, participation and outcome should be central to all aspects of how SOLAS operates.
- SVP recommends a very robust tracking system which clearly tracks outcomes so that future policy and programmes can be developed and promoted to learners based on evidence of what works.
- As distance learning becomes a more popular method of delivering courses, we are aware that many learners may not be able to afford the required ITC tools to access education and training opportunities. SVP is supportive of learners having a range of options to choose from in terms of accessing courses through distance learning, part-time, modular courses etc. SOLAS must ensure that all learners, regardless of means, can access the supports necessary to ensure their full participation in the education/training opportunity most appropriate to their own needs.

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<sup>i</sup> Fahey, T & Hannon (2010) Family Figures: Family Dynamics and Family Types in Ireland, 1986-2006

<sup>ii</sup> [www.combatpoverty.ie](http://www.combatpoverty.ie)