

SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority

In July 2011 the Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn T.D., announced the establishment of a new Further Education and Training Authority called SOLAS (Seirbhísí Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna).

The new authority which will operate under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills will co-ordinate and fund the wide range of training and further education programmes around the country. It will fulfil a role for the further education and training sector similar to that exercised by the Higher Education Authority for higher education institutions. It will draw on its own expertise and that of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs to help identify skills gaps, examine weaknesses and duplication in existing provision and link courses more closely to both the needs of the individual and the labour market. SOLAS will ensure that further education and training programmes provide jobseekers and other learners with the new skills needed for the new jobs in Ireland's 21st century labour market, as outlined in the National Skills Strategy. FÁS the National Training Agency will be disbanded.

In advance of the passing of the relevant legislation by the Oireachtas, FÁS will be renamed SOLAS on an administrative basis as soon as possible. As a first step, SOLAS will take responsibility for all those FÁS staff and premises not being transferred to the Department of Social Protection as part of the restructuring already underway. Over time, FÁS Training Centre premises and most FÁS regional staff will be transferred to the VECs. Further education and training programmes will be integrated within the new VEC structures and it is intended that the learner will be at the centre of the change process with a clearer focus on outcomes and progression for learners and stronger links to the labour market. This will strengthen the role of the reformed VECs in their local communities. Adult education is included under the broad umbrella of further education with particular emphasis on programmes giving people a headstart onto the qualifications framework. Current FÁS headquarters staff in corporate support functions and senior headquarters and a number of senior regional Training Services Division management will remain as the staff of SOLAS.

SOLAS will champion a greater emphasis on generic, transferable skills including people-related skills, thinking and problem-solving skills and digital literacy skills. It will be underpinned by stronger quality assurance, occupational standards, international benchmarks and course content reviews.

To ensure a smooth transition to the new arrangements the members of the Board of FÁS, who were recently appointed, have been invited to serve out their terms as members of the SOLAS board. Mr Micheal Moriarty, General Secretary of the Irish Vocational Education Association has also been appointed to the Board for the period to January 2015.

An Implementation Group has been established, chaired by the Minister of State with responsibility for Training and Skills, Ciarán Cannon T.D. Membership will include the Department of Education and Skills, FÁS and the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA). The Implementation Group has met twice so far and is working on a Draft Action Plan which will be available later on this year. Key stakeholders will have an opportunity to respond to this plan.

Participants on current FÁS and further education courses will not be affected by the establishment of SOLAS and will continue their courses under the new authority. AONTAS will create an opportunity for initial discussions about SOLAS at its conference on Community Education on November 17th 2011 and will use the outcomes of the conference to inform a position paper in response to the draft implementation plan.

