



## **SOLAS Response to the LSRA Section 33 Consultation on Admissions Policies of Legal Professions**

**February 2021**

### **Introduction and Context**

SOLAS is the statutory authority for Further Education and Training (FET) with responsibility for funding, co-ordinating and monitoring of FET provision across Ireland. SOLAS welcomes the opportunity to respond to the public consultation on the LSRA Section 33 admissions policies of legal professions. As the statutory authority in Ireland for Further Education and Training, our vision is that Further Education and Training (FET) continues to be recognised for the significant contribution it makes for learners, in every community throughout Ireland and that the FET system is empowered to deliver for the future, for the evolving needs of learners, the economy and society. We are aware of existing pathways already in place within FET in the area of legal professions and we believe there is the potential to further explore this over the course of the new national *FET Strategy: Future FET Transforming Learning 2020-2024*.

We acknowledge that written submissions will be reviewed prior to a report to the Minister for Justice on the admission policies of the legal professions by 30 April 2021. We note that the LSRA is interested to hear from those who are directly involved in the provision of legal services as well as from employers, state agencies, non-governmental bodies and other organisations and individuals who deliver and use legal services. For the context of this response, SOLAS are highlighting various aspects of FET delivery and matters pertaining to this, as opposed to providing commentary on our own experience of legal services. We note also that the LSRA is interested in views on whether there are any potential developments which are external to the legal sector (e.g. economic, social or technological) which might impact on admissions to the legal professions and the availability of the services of solicitors and barristers at a reasonable cost. Although our comments below do not reflect on the reasonable cost elements posed in this context, we do provide some commentary in relation to FET provision in the current economic and social environment.

### **FET Pathways into Legal Professions**

Within FET a number of routes already exist for learners for provision in legal studies, including in pre-university business law and legal administration. In 2019, there were almost 1,000 learners who enrolled in this provision, with a completion rate of 88.5%. Although further analysis would be required in order to determine overall outcomes for this cohort of learners, including progression rates to higher education and employment, we do have evidence to suggest that participation in FET has significant positive outcomes.

In recently published research<sup>1</sup> by SOLAS, which was completed in partnership with the Central Statistics Office on learner outcomes of Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) provision, 64% of 2014/2015 graduates from labour market programmes secured substantial employment in 2016, with 27% progressing onto a higher level degree programme in Higher Education within the same field of learning. Of the same cohort, 16% were in both higher education and substantial employment within 12 months of PLC completion.

Between 2017 and 2019, it is estimated that overall employment outcomes from FET provision grew by almost 9 percentage points. A recent CSO report<sup>2</sup> found that 62% of 2016 graduates with major awards were in substantial employment in the first year after graduation and that among the apprentices who qualified in 2014, 80% were in substantial employment in the second year after qualification, up from 53% for those who qualified in 2010.

SOLAS is aware that participation in FET can support individual learners to progress to higher education. FET graduate Stephanie Thompson, who recently shared her education journey at the launch of the *National FET Strategy: Transforming Learning 2020-2024* and was later profiled in national media highlighted how FET provided her with a pathway to her current career. Although Ms Thompson left school early, before completion of the Junior Cert, she later enrolled in a PLC course. Ms Thompson finished the PLC course with full distinctions and was offered her first CAO choice, an honours degree in law at Carlow Institute of Technology. She then went on to undertake a Master's in comparative criminology and criminal justice at Maynooth University. Not only has Ms Thompson progressed to working as a researcher at the Department of Law in Maynooth but she has also been successful as a recipient of the John and Pat Hume Doctoral Award from Maynooth University receiving a fully funded scholarship to undertake a PhD,

### **National FET Strategy: Future FET Transforming Learning 2020-2024**

The national FET Strategy sets out an ambitious vision to transform FET over the period 2020-2024. A core element of the strategy relates to pathways, and in particular the commitment to ensure FET is simplified in order to offer clear pathways *into* FET, *within* FET and *from* FET, encouraging and facilitating ongoing engagement at all stages of people's lives and careers. Although legal provision is relatively small across the FET system currently, given that over 200,000 unique learners are choosing to enrol in FET annually, we feel this is an area that could benefit from greater focus, particularly in progression routes at Level 5 and Level 6 as pathways into higher education.

Given the current economic uncertainty as a result of the ongoing impacts of the Pandemic and the potential legal complexities arising from Brexit, there may be scope to explore the legal provision offerings within FET. The overall FET system response to the Pandemic is a national Government initiative, 'Skills to Compete' which is also being supported by the Department of Social Protection. This initiative, which is aimed at helping citizens impacted by the Pandemic is focused on three key areas:

1. Transversal skills development to help employability
2. Building the digital capabilities now required for almost every job
3. Specific Level 4-6 courses targeting growth sectors and occupations

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/c0e31abee7/plc-outcomes-report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-feo/furthereducationoutcomes-graduationyears2010-2016/>

Skills to Compete which commenced last year will continue to be rolled out over 2021. Already it is evident that provision in legal studies is an area which Education and Training Boards have in place as part of their Skills to Compete portfolio. It may be helpful to provide additional data on this in due course to determine if perhaps pathways or progression options that may be viable could be further defined with information made available to potential graduates and learners.

### **Research and Analysis into the National Skills Landscape**

The Skills and Labour Market Research Unit in SOLAS report annually on national skills as well as undertake research and analysis across the wider national landscape. This includes the publication of an annual skills bulletin which references national skills shortages at occupational level. In 2019 the skills bulletin reported little employment growth in legal and security occupations over the five years examined with no evidence in the analysis of difficulties sourcing candidates<sup>3</sup>. However, given the current economic landscape, the 2020 report focused on the impact of Covid at occupational level. Although legal and security occupations were not referenced as occupations particularly affected, it is acknowledged that barristers, judges, solicitors & related professionals may have been impacted by the lack of commercial activity during COVID-19-related restrictions<sup>4</sup>.

We are therefore unclear if any skills or supply issues now exist within legal professions. It could be of benefit to further establish this and potentially review provision on offer in legal studies, either within the Skills to Compete initiative or across other potential provision available across the FET system. Equally if any barriers to progression were to be established, it may be advantageous to explore options pertaining to these to determine solutions that FET may be able to cater for.

### **Communications and Promotion of Good Practice**

There is in place very strong and vibrant campaigns to promote the standing and attractiveness of FET, including the *ThisIsFET* and the Government led *TheRightCourse* campaigns. We would welcome any opportunities in which we could continue to promote FET as a pathway to legal professions, such as Ms Thompson's story as highlighted above. SOLAS would also be keen to explore any particular pathways or case studies that could be featured as part of our national campaigns to showcase good practice in the area of FET in the legal sector.

### **Conclusion**

SOLAS welcomes the opportunity to respond to this public consultation on the LRSA Section 33 admissions policies of legal professions. We would be happy to engage further with the LRSA on any of the elements in our response.

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<sup>3</sup> [national-skills-bulletin-2019.pdf \(regionalskills.ie\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [national-skills-bulletin\\_2020.pdf \(solas.ie\)](#)