

Memorandum of Understanding between the
Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS)
and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

2016–2019



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

SOLAS

An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna
Further Education and Training Authority

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Introduction

It is in the interests of the further education and training sector, as well as of the Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS) and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) that, as two national agencies, the organisations work together to ensure the coordination and complementarity of their activities. To that end, this Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signals the organisations' joint commitment to working together, and in partnership with the further education and training community. In doing so, it is intended to optimise the quality of the learning experience and the outcomes for all learners who engage with SOLAS funded further education and training provision and services. The MoU also aims to support the efficiency, effectiveness and strategic impact of those learning outcomes.

In the wider policy context, both SOLAS and QQI are committed to the achievement of the key system strategic and operational objectives identified in the *Further Education and Training Strategy (2014-2019)*. In this regard, cooperation between the two organisations will strengthen their joint capacity to fully enable the collective advancement of the reform agenda for further education and training in partnership with the sector.

In addition, this document reflects the common cause of both organisations to renewing and strengthening the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) for the

enhancement of education and training in Ireland and its outcomes for learners, enterprise and communities. This is particularly the case in its reflection of the elements of learning outcomes, standards, assessment, teaching and learning, and access, transfer and progression which are centrally important to QQI, SOLAS, further education and training providers and learners. Particularly valuable is the concept underpinning the NFQ of 'successful participation' on the part of learners. This is an overarching aim which effectively captures the motivation for the series of inter-connected commitments and associated actions featured in this MoU.

This MoU also recognises the benefits of ensuring that the staff and board members of both organisations have a full understanding of the complex interrelationship between the roles of SOLAS and QQI and the possible synergies and efficiencies that can be realised; particularly with respect to engagement with SOLAS funded providers. This understanding will be fostered through the implementation of the MoU, which will embed inter-agency cooperation into the governance and day-to-day operations of the organisations.

Influences on this MoU

It is important to acknowledge that this MoU has been devised within the broader policy context of the further education and training environment in Ireland. In brief, some of the influences on the formulation of the MoU, and those that will equally inform its implementation, include:

- The legal and regulatory responsibilities of QQI and SOLAS as set out in legislation (and summarised in the Appendix to this document) and reflected in the organisations' strategic visions and plans;
- The leadership responsibilities assigned to both organisations within the *Further Education and Training Strategy (2014-2019)*;
- The high degree of commonality between the FET stakeholders with which SOLAS and QQI interact;
- The Action Plan for Jobs;
- The National Skills Strategy;
- Pathways to Work;
- The management framework agreements which SOLAS and QQI respectively have with the Department of Education and Skills (DES);
- The changing further education and training landscape;
- The importance, from a national perspective, of maintaining the independence of QQI as a quality assurance agency and of SOLAS as a funding agency;
- The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), and how it can be used to support the advancement of a number of the activities carried out by both organisations, in partnership with further education and training providers, to enhance the delivery and outcomes of the education and training sector;
- European and other international developments in the areas of skills and qualifications;
- The New Apprenticeship system;
- The Comprehensive Employment Framework;
- The increasingly widespread acknowledgement of the value that can be derived from carrying out regulatory roles collaboratively.

Purpose and scope

This MoU between QQI and SOLAS provides an agreed framework for cooperation and communication between the two organisations in the interests of the further education and training sector as a whole. As indicated above, it has been developed in the context of the relevant statutory provisions, national strategies, and government policies. It also has due regard for the *Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies*. The MoU is not a legally binding agreement or contract, and it is not exhaustive in its identification of the two organisations' responsibilities. It does not preclude the identification and implementation by the organisations of additional objectives and actions—indeed, in the spirit of the MoU, it is anticipated that further areas of collaboration will be identified subsequent to its agreement. SOLAS and QQI will ensure that the MoU is published to their websites. They will also ensure that all relevant members of both organisations are familiar with the content of the MoU and that all dealings between the two organisations and with other named parties are conducted in a manner that is consistent with its objectives.

The primary role of SOLAS is as funder of further education and training. In this regard its engagement with QQI relates to QQI's role as awarding and quality assurance body of the provision that SOLAS funds. However, SOLAS also acts in the role of provider in a limited context. In terms of scope, while this MoU acknowledges the important relationship between QQI and SOLAS in the situation of SOLAS as a provider of education and training, this MoU does not extend to including the particulars of this engagement. However, in these circumstances, it is acknowledged that QQI's awarding and quality assurance roles and responsibilities apply to SOLAS. Cooperation and sensitivity between SOLAS and QQI in this regard has the potential to ensure that accountability and quality improvement of the further education and training system go hand-in-hand.

Roles

SOLAS role

The functions of SOLAS are to, prepare and submit to the Minister a strategy in respect of the provision of further education and training; to manage, co-ordinate and support the delivery of integrated Further Education and Training by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs); to monitor delivery and provide funding based on reliable, good quality data and positive outcomes; and to promote Further Education and Training provision that is relevant to individual learner and national skills needs. This includes the requirements of business and future skills needs. SOLAS is also the statutory regulator of established and new apprenticeships.

SOLAS funding will clearly demonstrate a commitment to further strengthen the further education and training sector in order to secure the right skills and active inclusion, for learners, employers and communities to succeed, at a cost that delivers value for money for the taxpayer.

QQI role

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is the statutory quality assurance body for further and higher education and training. It is also an awarding body and is responsible for maintaining the NFQ and for developing and monitoring the implementation of access, transfer and progression policies. As an awarding body its role is to ensure that programmes leading to its awards are designed to deliver on their objectives and meet the standard of the level at which they have been included in the NFQ. In its external quality assurance role its

responsibilities are to monitor and review programmes and providers and to make recommendations for their further development. In doing so, it engages evaluators and peer reviewers with national and international experience. At a system level QQI will synthesise the findings of external reviews when they have been rolled out across the sector; conduct themed reviews across a number of providers where considered beneficial; and facilitate the exchange of good practice across further education and training.

Intersection of roles of SOLAS and QQI

The roles of SOLAS and QQI are complementary. Moreover there is a potentially synergistic relationship in the context of delivering the *Further Education and Training Strategy (2014-2019)* and the *QQI Strategy Statement 2016-2018* in conjunction with the Education and Training Boards.

SOLAS and QQI share a common aim to enhance the relevance, quality, coherence, and performance of the further education and training sector in order to ensure that it delivers on its intended outcomes for the benefit of learners, enterprise and communities. Likewise, both aim to minimise the bureaucratic burden placed on the Education and Training Boards. To achieve this the resources and expertise of both organisations will need to be leveraged for the benefits of providers and learners. QQI and SOLAS intend to achieve this in an open and transparent manner in partnership with providers and other stakeholders.

Commitments and associated actions

In developing this MoU SOLAS and QQI have reflected on areas of common interest between the organisations. In doing so, three key commitments have been agreed by QQI and SOLAS for the period [to 18 December 2019]. The first commitment is to *coherence of approach*. The actions under this commitment refer to how the organisations will be cognisant of each other's roles and responsibilities and will refer to the outputs arising from the fulfilment of the independent legislative functions of the other. The second commitment is to the *alignment of activities* between the organisations. The actions here indicate the active engagement that will take place between the organisations to avoid duplication of effort or contradictions in our work. The third commitment is to *partnerships for enhancement*; considering how we can jointly support, in conjunction with the sector, improvement and enhancement opportunities. These three commitments are discussed further below.

1. Commitment to coherence of approach

Within the context of this MoU, SOLAS and QQI are seeking to identify themselves as statutory independent organisations operating under the auspices of the same Government department; as collaborating organisations with shared and complementary aims; and as organisations whose actions impact upon an external environment, both public and private, of which they must be cognisant. In this regard, the following actions are designed to ensure that the two organisations are sharing information on a continuous basis. They will do so through routine exchange of key documentation and communications issued; sharing the dates on which significant engagements are anticipated with further education and training providers; and ensuring that the CEOs of both organisations meet with the opposite Board and that the senior management teams meet periodically, as specified below.

Associated actions:

- i. The organisations will exchange information regarding the reporting and meeting schedules that are agreed in consultation with the ETBs.
- ii. QQI and SOLAS will share corporate plans with each other.
- iii. A copy of any system level communication by either organisation will be forwarded to the Chief Executive of the other organisation and to the appointed liaison person for dissemination (see below).
- iv. SOLAS will keep QQI informed of the development and on-going implementation of funding streams aimed at aligning education and training with enterprise requirements.
- v. A nominee from each organisation will be identified to ensure that communication and information is exchanged on a timely basis between the organisations.
- vi. The Chief Executive of each organisation will be invited to meet with the Board of the other on an annual basis.
- vii. The full senior management teams of the organisations will meet on an annual basis to update each other on developments.
- viii. The organisations will actively seek to identify where information and communication should be extended to other parties in the interests of national coherence and consistency.

2. Commitment to alignment of activities

The roles of QQI and SOLAS intersect very directly in relation to the crucial issue of the sustainability of further education and training provision. They are equally jointly concerned regarding the maintenance and enhancement of quality in an equitable system which is responsive to the diverse learning needs of a wide-range of learners as well as to the emerging skills needs of employers. To this end, SOLAS and QQI are committed to working together to contribute to a whole-of-education and training and whole-of-government approach to the strategic development of policy and practice in further education and training.

In order to advance the coherence of approach to the strategic development of further education and training in Ireland referenced in the first commitment, SOLAS and QQI will align their actions at an operational level where appropriate. This will support the mutual complementarity of the organisations' policy-development, and data-collection and data-analysis functions. It will also aid the development of a coordinated approach to improving learner access, transfer and progression within further education and training and to higher education. To support the achievement of this objective, SOLAS and QQI will seek to align the organisations' approaches to collecting and utilising data, in collaboration with further education and training providers, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) and other parties.

SOLAS and QQI will also mutually support each other in the fulfilment of the organisations' distinct and connected responsibilities in the areas of access, transfer and progression. Fostering a coherent approach to enhancing access, transfer and progression in further education and training and between further and higher education and training is a shared concern of SOLAS and QQI. QQI has statutory responsibility for determining policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression in relation to learners and for monitoring the implementation of procedures for access, transfer and progression by providers. Cooperation between the two organisations taking into account the funder and provider status of SOLAS is therefore imperative to ensure equity of access and to enhance progression pathways. In fostering the alignment of activities across these areas, and others, the organisations will ensure that there is a shared understanding of the language and definitions used.

Further details of how the actions below associated with alignment will be addressed, will be included in an annual work plan agreed by the organisations.

Associated actions:

- i. The two organisations will consult with each other as they individually develop the annual reporting models that will be applied to the ETBs. This will enable both organisations to arrive at solutions that leverage the data capabilities available and to reduce the data requirements burden on ETBs and on both organisations (taking into account data protection and other requirements).
- ii. Where available and appropriate, QQI and SOLAS will share provider and award data and SOLAS will include QQI in the list of organisations with which data is shared under the terms and conditions for data-collection from further education and training providers.
- iii. The organisations will consult with one another in the development of policy and of mechanisms and infrastructure to support policy-implementation.
- iv. The organisations will consult and agree text on references to the other in published form which are actionable or which entail interpretations of each other's policy positions.
- v. QQI will consult SOLAS when developing policy relating to access, transfer and progression. SOLAS will actively promote and encourage all SOLAS funded further education and training providers to facilitate lifelong learning by developing appropriate access, transfer and progression procedures, in accordance with QQI policy.
- vi. The organisations will exchange information, as appropriate, in the event that either party has cause to undertake an investigation of a provider or its activities.
- vii. QQI will provide assistance to SOLAS in the recognition and comparability of international qualifications if requested.
- viii. The organisations will collaborate in the production or commissioning of research that addresses questions of mutual interest.

3. Commitment to partnerships for enhancement

The enhancement of the quality of teaching, instruction/ tutoring and of the learning experience is a central concern of SOLAS, QQI and further education and training providers. As a result, SOLAS and QQI are committed to working in partnership with further education and training providers, ETBI and other parties, and to developing the quality improvement activities of the organisations in accordance with policy and sector developments, identified national requirements and developing practice internationally. SOLAS and QQI are also committed to increasing efforts to share their learning from engagements at a European and international level.

The establishment of structured joint engagement by the organisations with key stakeholders has the potential to facilitate the coordination of the work of SOLAS and QQI, as well as providing an opportunity for sectoral input into organisational developments. How this can be achieved will be explored with ETBI in the first instance. The organisations will also communicate and collaborate with further education and training providers and ETBI on a routine basis, and will engage jointly with other stakeholders (including other funders, state agencies, government departments, enterprise representatives, and international bodies) when considered appropriate and helpful.

Some specified actions to support the third commitment of partnerships for enhancement are indicated below.

Associated actions:

- i. The organisations will collaborate with the ETBs, ETBI and other parties in the identification of quality improvement objectives.
- ii. SOLAS and QQI will discuss with ETBI how best periodic joint engagement with the Education and Training Boards could be achieved in order to support continuous engagement on developments aimed at strengthening the sector.
- iii. The organisations will work collaboratively with the ETBs and ETBI to establish how to effectively interpret and utilise outputs, including data, produced at a provider and sector level in order to inform quality and quality enhancement activities.

iv. QQI will continue to partner with SOLAS and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in the survey of employers.

v. QQI and SOLAS will individually and collaboratively share Irish further education and training policy and practice with international delegations and visitors.

vi. QQI and SOLAS will seek to establish means through which international experiences and learning can be shared with each other and with the sector.

Sign-off and review

This MoU is jointly signed by the Chief Executive Officer of SOLAS and the Chief Executive Officer of QQI, and it takes effect from the date on which it is agreed and signed by the two parties.

This MoU is intended to stand for the period 19 December 2016 to 18 December 2019. In the intervening period its currency will be kept under review. Any amendments required to ensure that it remains fit-for-purpose, and that it reflects the emerging priorities, roles and circumstances of the organisations, will be published by mutual written agreement.

Signed on behalf of the Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS):



Paul O'Toole, Chief Executive

Date: 19th December 2016

Signed on behalf of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI):



Padraig Walsh, Chief Executive

Date: 19th December 2016

Appendix: Roles and responsibilities

Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS)

The general functions of An tSeirbhís within the Further Education and Training Act No. 25 2013, shall be to—

- prepare and submit to the Minister a strategy in respect of the provision of further education and training in accordance with section 9;
- promote an appreciation of the value of further education and training, [2013.] [Further Education and Training Act No. 25.] 2013;
- consult with the Minister for Social Protection, the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation and employers from time to time for the purpose of determining which, or which classes of, further education and training programmes should be the subject of advances by An tSeirbhís in accordance with section 21;
- advance moneys to education and training boards and other bodies engaged in the provision of further education and training programmes as determined in accordance with paragraph (c);
- provide, or arrange for, the provision of training and retraining for employment and to assist in and coordinate the provision of such training by persons other than An tSeirbhís;
- assess whether or not education and training boards, and other bodies engaged in the provision of further education and training programmes, to whom moneys have been advanced under section 21 perform their function in an economic, efficient and effective manner;
- promote, encourage and facilitate the placement of persons belonging to such class or classes of person as may be specified by the Minister for Social Protection after consultation with the Minister in further education and training programmes that are funded, in whole or in part, out of public moneys;
- promote cooperation between education and training boards and other bodies involved in the provision of further education programmes;
- promote equality of opportunity in relation to the provision of further education and training;
- develop, and facilitate the development of, new and existing further education and training programmes including the establishment of systems designed to monitor the quality of the education and training concerned for the purpose of ensuring that those programmes serve their purpose;
- provide or assist in the provision of training to persons charged with the delivery of further education and training programmes in respect of which moneys have been advanced by An tSeirbhís under section 21;
- conduct, or arrange for the conduct of, research as respects any matters relating to the functions of An tSeirbhís;
- advise the Minister in relation to any matter connected with the functions of An tSeirbhí.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was established with the enactment of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012. It is the statutory authority for quality assurance and qualification recognition with a broad remit across education and training in Ireland. As per the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, the statutory responsibilities of QQI include:

- the promotion, maintenance, further development and implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ);
- advising the Minister in relation to national policy on quality assurance and enhancement in education and training;
- reviewing and monitoring the effectiveness of providers' quality assurance procedures;
- validating programmes of education and training, and reviewing and monitoring the validated programmes;
- establishing the standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners before an award can be made by the Authority or by a provider to which authority to make an award has been delegated;
- making awards, delegating authority to make an award, and reviewing and monitoring the operation of the authority so delegated;
- determining policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression in relation to learners, and monitoring the implementation of procedures for access, transfer and progression in relation to learners by providers;
- establishing a code of practice for the provision of programmes of education and training to international learners;
- authorising the use of the international education mark by a provider that complies with the code of practice;
- establishing, maintaining and developing a database providing information on awards recognised within the NFQ, programmes of education and training which lead to awards recognised within the NFQ, and any other programmes the Authority thinks appropriate;
- establishing and maintaining the register of awards;
- cooperating with international bodies on qualifications and quality assurance policies and their implementation and in particular
 - liaising with awarding bodies outside the State for the purposes of facilitating the recognition in the State of awards of those bodies, and
 - facilitating the recognition outside the State of awards made in the State;
- ensuring arrangements for the protection of learners are in place where learners have begun but not completed a programme of education and training where a provider ceases to provide the programme before completion; and
- assisting enrolled learners in finding alternative programmes of education and training where providers cease to provide a programme before completion.

