



**QFI**

Quality and Qualifications Ireland  
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

# MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN THE FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING AUTHORITY (SOLAS) AND QUALITY & QUALIFICATIONS IRELAND (QFI)

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## 2020-2023

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## NOTE

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This 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.

## INTRODUCTION

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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. Both agencies will continue their commitment to work together in this second Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the period 2020-2023; as successor to the original MoU 2016 to 2019 as areas of mutual interest continue to exist and develop.

SOLAS and QQI are committed to the achievement of the key system strategic and operational objectives identified in the Future FET: Transforming Learning -The Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy (2020-2024). SOLAS and QQI are also 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 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 which will also extend to collaboration with other strategic stakeholders such as industry and employers.

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 Future FET: Transforming Learning - The Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy (2020-2024);
- Future Jobs Ireland;
- The National Skills Strategy 2025- Ireland's Future; Societal and tertiary education scope, interface this to trade, enterprise, employment (not mentioned in MoU)
- Pathways to Work Strategy 2020-2024;
- The management framework agreements which SOLAS and QQI respectively have with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
- 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 implementation and use of the NFQ as national policy on qualifications, is strengthened by the 2019 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (amendment) Act. As the national reference point for the development, delivery, assessment and certification of qualifications, the NFQ enhances the quality, reputation and recognition of further education and training qualifications offered in Ireland. The Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ) is a public repository of quality assured

qualifications that are included within the NFQ. It will be available to users of qualifications including, learners, regulators, funders, credential evaluators (national and international) and employers.

- European and other international developments in the areas of skills and qualifications;
- The Comprehensive Employment Framework
- The increasingly widespread acknowledgement of the value that can be derived from carrying out regulatory roles collaboratively.
- Project Ireland 2040, the government's plan for investment in public infrastructure

## PURPOSE AND SCOPE

This MoU 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 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 a qualifications authority, awarding body and a 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 an independent State agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland. It has a wide range of functions supporting higher education and further education and training.

Its role includes promoting, maintaining and developing the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), a 10-level framework for the development, recognition and awarding of qualifications in Ireland. This includes the role of the National Academic Recognition Information Centre NARIC Ireland, providing advice on Irish qualifications in Ireland in addition to providing advice on the recognition of Irish qualifications abroad.

QQI also has responsibility for approving (validating), monitoring and reviewing programmes offered at a variety of further and higher education and training institutions. These programmes lead to qualifications (QQI awards) listed in the NFQ, which are recognised internationally.

In line with its remit as a quality assurance agency, QQI monitors and periodically reviews the effectiveness of providers<sup>1</sup> quality assurance procedures.

### Intersection of SOLAS and QQI Roles

The roles of SOLAS and QQI are complementary. Moreover, there is a potentially synergistic relationship in the context of delivering the *Future FET: Transforming Learning The Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy (2020-2024)* and the *QQI Statement of Strategy 2019-2021* in conjunction with the Education and Training Boards together with other important stakeholders such as learners, enterprise, employers, and other social partners.

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.

<sup>1</sup> Provider refers to any college or institution offering programmes leading to awards included in the NFQ.

## COMMITMENTS AND ASSOCIATED ACTIONS

SOLAS and QQI have reflected on areas of common interest between the organisations. Under three key commitments which have been agreed for the period [to 31st December 2022]. The first commitment is to;

1. *Coherence of approach* refers 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.
2. *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.
3. *Partnerships for enhancement* considers how we can jointly support, in conjunction with the sector and stakeholders, 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 and communicating on a continuous basis, as specified below.

### Associated actions which refer to annual routine actions:

1. The organisations will exchange information regarding the reporting and meeting schedules that are agreed in consultation with the ETBs and other stakeholders.
2. QQI and SOLAS will share corporate plans with each other.
3. 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).
4. SOLAS will keep QQI informed of the development and on-going implementation of funding streams aimed at aligning education and training with enterprise requirements.
5. A nominee from each organisation will be identified to ensure that communication and information is exchanged on a timely basis between the organisations.
6. The Chief Executive of each organisation will be invited to meet with the Board of the other on an annual basis.
7. The senior management teams of the organisations will meet on an ongoing basis to update each other on developments.
8. The full management teams of the organisations will meet on at least an annual basis to update each other on projects, potential collaborations, research and developments.
9. 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

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, learning pathways and transfer and progression across the Tertiary Education system 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. In particular to

- collecting, utilising and sharing data, in collaboration with further education and training providers in the first instance and with other stakeholders such as Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), other national bodies, agencies and government departments. QQI will utilise the data produced by the SOLAS to satisfy itself, within the process of annual dialogue and periodic review, of its institutional data requirements where possible.
- the review of ETBs and in recognition of the legislative role for SOLAS in the QQI obligation under Section 27 to consult with SOLAS before issuing guidelines or review procedures for ETBs.
- access transfer and progression (ATP). SOLAS and QQI will 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 ATP across the Tertiary Education system is a shared concern of SOLAS and QQI<sup>2</sup>.

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:

1. **Annual Reporting Models and approaches:** The two organisations will consult with each other as they individually develop the annual reporting models and periodic reviews that will be applied to the ETBs. This will enable both organisations to arrive at solutions that leverage the data capabilities and other resources available and to reduce the data requirements burden on ETBs and on both organisations (taking into account data protection and other requirements). For example, SOLAS will contribute to QQI's periodic review of ETBs through the provision of strategic and performance data and participate in briefing of review teams.
2. **Data sharing - provider, award and other data:** Where available and appropriate, QQI and SOLAS will share provider and award data and collaborate on protocols for data collection- defining courses, completion rates and collaborative data analysis in areas of mutual interest. 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. The organisations will also exchange information, as appropriate, in the event that either party has cause to undertake an investigation of a provider or its activities.
3. **Policy, referencing and other infrastructure:** The organisations will consult with one another in the development of policy and of mechanisms and infrastructure to support

<sup>2</sup> 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.

policy-implementation. Both 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.

4. **ATP, learning Pathways and other supporting policies:** QQI will consult SOLAS when developing policy relating to access, transfer and progression and learning pathways. 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.

5. **Qualifications and Recognition:** QQI (NARIC Ireland) and SOLAS will cooperate around the academic recognition and comparability of international qualifications. Both organisations will also seek to advance the interests of learners in Ireland by making good use of EU initiatives in the area of lifelong learning, skills and qualifications. In the context of the digital labour market, we will collaborate, where appropriate, on the implementation of European initiatives, for example, the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), Europass and the European, Skills, Competencies and Occupations (ESCO). In the context of legislative changes that will enable a wider range of awarding bodies to access the NFQ, QQI and SOLAS will work to identify awarding bodies and qualifications that meet the interests of learners in the public FET system.

6. **Research Projects:** The organisations will collaborate in the production or commissioning of research that addresses questions of mutual interest. Examples of collaborative projects might include but are not limited to:

- the Review of Levels 5 and 6 awards standards on the NFQ embracing the advanced certificate and the Higher certificate at level 6

- A number of data sharing projects to provide a more holistic view of the state of FET, which could be informed by quality assurance outputs and the increasing availability of learner and graduate tracking data.

- Exploring the scope for more defined work plans and initiatives as the need arises.

### 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.

SOLAS and QQI are committed to working in partnership with further education and training providers 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 including those around the NFQ and European Qualifications Framework. SOLAS and QQI are also committed to increasing efforts to share their learning from engagements at a European and international level.

SOLAS and QQI will discuss/explore with ETBs when and how collective joint engagement with the sector should be achieved in order to support systems level engagement on developments aimed at strengthening FET. The organisations will also 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:

1. **Quality improvement/enhancement objectives:** The organisations will collaborate with the ETBs and other parties referenced above in the identification of ongoing quality improvement and capacity building objectives.
2. **Joint engagement initiatives:** SOLAS and QQI will discuss how best periodic joint engagement with the ETBs could be achieved in order to support continuous engagement on developments aimed at strengthening the sector.
3. **Sharing best practice:** QQI and SOLAS will seek to establish means through which international experiences and learning can be shared with each other and with the sector and its wider stakeholders.
4. **Interpreting and utilising outputs:** The organisations will work collaboratively together and with the ETBs 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 with a focus on impact analysis.
5. **Survey contributions:** QQI will continue to partner with SOLAS and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in the survey of employers and other joint surveys as appropriate.
6. **International delegations:** QQI and SOLAS will individually and collaboratively share Irish further education and training policy and practice with international delegations and visitors and continue to support each other in this regard.

## APPENDIX: ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The full roles and responsibilities of SOLAS and QQI are available on their respective websites:

www.SOLAS.ie  
www.QQI.ie

## 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 1 January 2020 to 18 December 2022. 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.

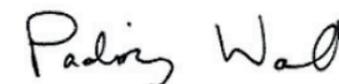
Signed on behalf of the Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS):



Andrew Brownlee, Chief Executive.

Date: 17 July 2020

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



Padraig Walsh, Chief Executive.

Date: 17 July 2020

