

## **Presentation to the Further Education and Training Colloquium**

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Good morning. I would like to thank Helen, Stan and all the members of the FET National Forum for the invitation to come here and speak to you today about the Council's work and how it interacts with Further Education.

I would like to begin on a note of celebration.

For the first time in the history of the State, since 28 January 2014, we have a fully registered teaching profession covering primary, post-primary and including further education. We also have, for the first time in the history of the State, a full provision of programmes of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) that have been professionally accredited spanning these three sectors.

I would like to commend all the providers here today who are running programmes accredited by us, including Further Education, and to thank you for your engagement with our review process. I think that a particular hallmark of Initial Teacher Education provision in the Further Education sector is the open spirit of collaboration that is very evident amongst you

all. This can provide a good exemplar for providers who work in the primary and post-primary teacher education space to follow.

We in the Council have also overseen significant progress in the regulations relating to the registration of Further Education teachers. Those regulations are in place since 2009 and are currently under review. But it is important to note that since April 2013, all new applicants for registration for Further Education must have a minimum of a Level 8 degree. They should also have an ITE qualification, or if not, complete one within 3 years. I know that there are some concerns about this, especially in terms of future implications. I will come to those in a moment. But for now, let's acknowledge the enhancement of standards that both the Council and HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) have overseen for teaching and learning in Further Education in the last few years.

With all this to celebrate, you may well be asking – why are we here? Why is the Council here? We have a strategy for the FET (Further Education and Training) sector up to 2019. There are programmes of ITE in place, and a review of regulations is in place.

But we all know that it's not as simple as that, and that there are some fundamental questions that we need to air and discuss if we are to make the most of the future that we alone can create, together. These questions include:

1. Why do we have an education system? What is its fundamental purpose?
2. What role should Further Education play in that system? What role does it currently have? How can we bridge the gap between the two?
3. What role will teaching and learning play in this shifting dynamic in Further Education? What relationship should there be between the processes and skills of teaching and learning on the one hand, and the content, skills and understanding we expect them to impart and / or nurture?

Of course, this last question brings us back to number one. For the purposes of today's discussions, I will be brief in setting out my understanding of these questions.

- Education should be first and foremost about teaching and learning. Everything else should support and enhance these processes.
- Teaching and learning should be focused on the needs of the learners. Such needs should be identified in the here and now, with one eye fixed firmly on the future.
- Teaching only happens when those being taught have learned. Teaching is a complex and demanding process that requires a high level of skill.

- All of us who care about the learner have something to offer them in their journey of learning. We need to work out together how we can work best together.
- The scale and pace of change that we have seen in the last 200 years is such that we cannot be sure of how our society will look, feel and conduct itself in the future. But we also know from our history that this will all be up to us – the decisions we make and how we make them. We will need a diversity of backgrounds, skills and talents to enable us to do our best to shape that future society together, in the best interests of those who have yet to come.

You may agree or disagree with these statements, in whole or in part. But I hope they give you a clear sense of where I am coming from today, and where I think we should go, and how we should travel.

In the context of these questions, I would like to give you some sense of what the Teaching Council is and does. I would like to set out our understanding of the strategic landscape for Further Education. I am going to talk about that tension between the “what”, the “how” and the “why” – industry expertise and knowledge, teaching and learning and flexibility of provision, and the need for all of us to clarify why we are here and what we are trying to do. I would then like to explore what this might mean in practical terms for how we talk about teaching and learning, and teacher and learner. And therein lies the key message that I would like to book end my presentation with. We all need to talk better together about Further Education – what we think it means, what it

should mean, and how it ties into the bigger picture – at the local, regional and national level. And to do that, we need to make space and time to support teachers' learning.

### **Strategic background**

Notwithstanding all this progress, the Council is grappling with a number of issues of strategic importance in the Further Education sector. We are currently in this space, but there are a number of tensions emerging that do not, to our mind, have any clear answer. I will touch on them throughout this presentation, but we have been engaging with SOLAS and sectoral representatives to inform and refine our own thinking and understanding. In collaboration with the Department of Education and Skills (DES), SOLAS, ETBI, members of the FET Forum and others, we want to bring maximum strategic clarity to this sector, especially the Council's relationship to it, while at the same time allowing it to evolve in a dynamic and flexible way.

Such a statement may seem odd in light of the fact that SOLAS already has a strategy for the Further Education and Training sector. But the very fact that we in the Council talk about FE, and almost everyone else here talks about FET, and then Europe talks about VET, is a microcosm of the complexities of the issues we are talking about! There is a strategy there, and that is great. But I think that SOLAS acknowledges that there are a number of issues that need to be teased out between our two organisations, the DES and other stakeholders. Put simply, the Teaching Council wants to join the dots.

## **The Teaching Council**

I appreciate that some of you may not have heard of the Council before, or if you have, you may not know much about us.

The Council is the professional standards body for teaching in Ireland. We have a dual mandate in law to promote and regulate the profession of teaching. We were established on a statutory basis in 2006 under the provisions of the Teaching Council Act 2001.

Our remit touches on almost every area that a person experiences after they say – I want to be a teacher. We advise the Minister on entry criteria to programmes of ITE. We review and accredit those programmes of ITE. This is quite a significant function because without our professional accreditation, the graduates of any of those programmes could not become registered teachers. And since 28 January last year, all teachers must be registered in order to work in recognised schools and be paid from public funds. Since September 2012, we are responsible for the procedures and criteria for the induction and probation of newly qualified teachers. This provision does not apply currently to teachers in the Further Education sector. We have been piloting a new model for induction and probation called Droichead, the Irish-word for bridge. The key hallmark is that the Newly Qualified Teacher is supported, guided and advised by experienced fellow professionals in the reality of the school environment before they are recommended for full registration. This dynamic is not a million miles away from that of the Further Education sector, in the sense of the apprenticeship approach to nurturing future

professionals. In the near future, we will have the function of accrediting programmes of teachers' learning or Continuing Professional Development (CPD). To this end, we are currently drafting a national framework for CPD. We aim to have this completed by March of next year. And by the end of this year, we hope to see the Fitness to Teach process commenced.

We know that there is keen interest in this area of CPD or teachers' learning in the Further Education sector, particularly in light of SOLAS' strategy. We are engaging with SOLAS about this issue to align our approaches as much as we can. From the Council's point of view, ongoing learning is both a right and a responsibility of teachers. We need to make sure that teachers' learning gets the space and time it needs so that they can engage in reflective practice and collaborate with each other in sharing the fruits of that reflection.

### **Clear goal – but questions, questions...**

So to recap on the Council's goal, we want to work with national organisations in helping to join the dots in the context of a clear, strategic vision for Further Education. SOLAS has set that out in the Strategy for 2014-2019, but we as a Council are seeking to clarify our place in that strategic landscape. In that sense, we want to work with others in enhancing the quality of the teaching and learning experience in the sector, and allow it the flexibility to continue to evolve in a dynamic way.

*Great, you may say – so what's the problem? What's so complicated about that?*

Truth is, this simple clear goal masks a myriad of inter-related questions, that all stem from the tensions that emerge in the dynamic between the “how” and the “what” of teaching and learning. They are like grinding tectonic plates that are still establishing a sustainable pattern of how to relate to each other. We see it in many aspects of the education system. In Further Education, they seem to play out in the relationship between industry expertise and knowledge on the one hand and the skill of good teaching on the other. And under these plates we have the swirling magma of the “why” – to what end are we doing all this? Is the primary purpose of Further Education and Training to educate or to train? Is it to ensure that people can secure the next available job, or that they have the skills and knowledge to secure and maintain employment over a period of time? Are we all here for all of the above i.e. it is not a simple conflict between education and training? There are no simple answers to these questions that would help us answer “why”, but we should try and answer them. That’s why we’re here today, that’s why the FET Forum has been established.

Like magma itself, the “why” is a contested space. The more contested it is, the more the plates grind and grate. If we can achieve some degree of consensus about the fundamentals of our education system, the other issues will be easier to address.

This contestation of “why” can also be seen in questions such as - Are we teaching our learners so that they can get the next job on the list? Or are we teaching them to explore a variety of opportunities, and create opportunities of their own? Are these aims mutually exclusive? Where

does this learning occur? Where should it occur? And crucially – what is everyone bringing to the table to help and support that learning? And are we all aware of what everyone else is bringing? If we are, what are we doing to get the maximum leverage out of it for the benefit of those we are teaching?

### **What is Further Education?**

One of the biggest challenges I feel the Council faces here is the apparent lack of consensus and clarity within the sector about what Further Education is.

You'll notice that I keep on talking about Further Education, rather than Further Education and Training – the Council would have a difficulty with the concept of training in referring to any learning process, from the point of view of teachers' professionalism! I remember the head of a Further Education college – who may well be here – giving out about the fact that Further Education is defined as what it is not – it's not post-primary and it's not third level. I asked the obvious question – what is Further Education? – and half an hour later was none the wiser! We cannot agree on what we call this learning space (FE, FET, VET), AND there seems to be a remarkable lack of consensus about what we mean when we use those terms. And that has to be related to the diversity of the cohort of learners that Further Education serves, as noted by SOLAS in the Strategy for 2014-2019. I think that the "mainstream" system is also serving the needs of a diverse student cohort, both in terms of socio-economic disadvantage and the broader aspect of inclusive education.

That's one reason why I believe that Further Education and mainstream schooling have a lot to teach each other, through professional collaboration.

We need a much greater degree of strategic clarity, to be developed by the Department in collaboration with SOLAS, ourselves, ETBI and other stakeholders, as to what constitutes Further Education and how each of us should collaborate with each other in it. I am not talking about a one-size fits all approach, I am simply calling for greater clarity on ways of working that has the buy-in of the key players. I'm talking about a more stable "why", a greater degree of consensus of the important role Further Education has to play in our society and how it can most effectively fulfil that role. We have been meeting with SOLAS and representatives of the sector in an attempt to inform and refine our understanding of the sector, and thus far all the engagements have been very helpful in that regard.

### **Teaching and learning, teacher and learner**

So where do we start? Or who do we start with?

We start with the learner, the person who has come to us to make some improvement, some progress in themselves, so as to achieve a particular goal, hopefully one they have chosen themselves. They come to us from a particular background, with personality traits and ways of thinking and doing and learning that will influence how they engage with us and what we offer them by way of programme. We are here today to explore the

person who mediates all of that for the learner. And the first issue that arises – to my mind – is what we call that “mediator”.

For the Council, the default answer will be “teacher” – the person who leads the learning process; the person who learns about the learner, and teaches them with a complex set of pedagogical skills, all at the same time. For many of you, however, the answer will be a little more complex than that. For starters, you have teachers, you have tutors, and you have industry or business experts. Each brings a particular skill set, and knowledge set, that has something important and unique to offer the learner. I understand that many in the Further Education sector are afraid that the ultimate outcome of the Teaching Council’s work is that this flexibility of provision will ultimately be squeezed out. They are afraid that everyone who stands up in front of a group of adult learners in a Further Education setting will have to be a qualified teacher – or they’re out.

I’ll be honest – the Council has a very strong line on the importance and quality of the teaching process. It is something that is very exacting and demands a highly-developed set of skills, attitudes and dispositions. For too long, some people have held the view that if you can do nothing else, you can always teach. Such an attitude displays a shocking level of ignorance of the complexity of teaching, and more importantly, does a huge dis-service to the learning needs of our learners. So from our point of view, the “leaders of learning”, in a Further Education setting, should be registered teachers.

But I'll be equally direct in saying that that does not mean that the tutors and industry experts of today cannot be involved in the learning process. The Council wants to maintain the space for the teacher to exercise their professional judgement in identifying those areas where they do not have the requisite knowledge or expertise, to find those people that do, and to work with those people in ensuring that the learners have an opportunity to access that knowledge and make their own of it.

Believe it or not, this reflects the situation in primary and post-primary. In schools all around the country, teachers invite in sports coaches and drama companies, all experts in their fields, to help support students' learning in particular areas. The teacher as the qualified professional retains responsibility for the leadership of learning, and the students gain new insights into a particular skill or area of knowledge.

### **Who is learning? What are their needs?**

Based on our discussions to date, the nub of the strategic challenge we are facing appears to be – how can we ensure that the needs of all learners are met, maintaining the flexibility that allows engagement with industry expertise while enhancing the quality of teaching on an ongoing basis? Of course, this raises other questions such as - Who defines those needs of the learners? What voice do they themselves have?

The reason I am focusing so much on the “how”, on the teaching and learning, is that this process in Further Education cannot be just about

upskilling. If it was, as the head of one Further Education college told me, the unemployment crisis would be solved long ago. When a learner comes to us with a particular need, any of us who has been in that situation knows that there is always so much more going on behind the scenes. We may not need to know all of it, but we do need to have some kind of deeper understanding of it if we are to do our job properly. Such are the complexities of teaching!

The gap between intention and impact is all too human, but the methods of filling that gap so often appear to forget this fact. A system that focuses narrowly on pure metrics e.g. numbers who have returned to the labour force in a given period of time, will fall into this trap. So a particular programme designed for a specific purpose may well be cutting edge and in tune with industry norms. But it is difficult to overestimate the challenges that those delivering or teaching that programme will face when engaging with the people who attend the course. More than any other profession, teaching is focused on the future well-being of others. It is not just about fixing or addressing a particular difficulty in the here and now. It is about empowering people to become active participants in society, to contribute to the creation of a new future.

The context for this may be even more urgent than we realised. Pasi Sahlberg the Finnish educator has said that based on current trends, there will simply not be enough jobs to meet the projected growth in population in the near and medium term future. The obvious conclusion he draws is that many of the next generation will have to create their own opportunities.

Based on our current system and structures, we have to ask - where will the entrepreneurs of the future come from, if we are too reliant on the needs and thinking of today's business leaders? Some will say that the very idea of teaching entrepreneurial skills is an oxymoron! By definition, an entrepreneur identifies a gap in the system, they break out on their own, and they invariably challenge received wisdom and current provision! I admit that I'm being a bit provocative here, and I'm happy to hear the thoughts of the business community who are represented here today. And I want to be clear in saying that even the entrepreneurs of the future need to know the nuts and bolts of establishing and running a profitable business. So this brings us back to that carefully balanced dynamic between the "how" and the "what", the ways of thinking and the reality that thinking reflects on, the teaching and learning on the one hand and the sector expertise on the other. I don't foresee a situation where it will ever be one or the other. And that's why the leaders of learning and the industry experts will always need to talk to each other and help each other. That's why on balance I think that the Council does have a role to play in Further Education, but we need to collaborate more effectively with other stakeholders, and them with us, in order to fulfil that role most effectively.

In this focus on addressing all the needs of the learner, and not just a particular skill set, it is no surprise that in the last two to three years, the well-being agenda is coming more and more to the fore. Regardless of what sector you happen to be teaching in, we are coming to realise that if

you are not “well”, in the deeper sense of that word, you will not learn – or you will not learn as much as you can. This is accepted in the cut and thrust of large private sector companies. Because for them, the poor management of people problems wastes time and therefore costs money – millions! So there are now programmes being snapped up in the private sector that teach managers how to nurture and develop professional relationships in a deeper, more authentic way – all in pursuit of Mammon’s bottom line! I am losing count of the number of articles in the Harvard Business Review that regularly focus on the human dynamics of running a business. This is not touchy feely, happy clappy stuff. Regardless of whether you work or not, or where you work, we are coming to understand one of Monty Python’s perhaps deeper truths – *we’re all individuals*. We’re all people at the end of the day. The sooner all that we do really acknowledges that in an ongoing way, the better for us all. The processes of teaching and learning in Further Education cannot be exempt from this.

### **What is an FE teacher?**

The more astute amongst you will have noticed that I haven’t nailed down the definition of a Further Education teacher. How do we define a Further Education teacher? From the Council’s perspective, teachers in the Further Education sector are looking for parity of esteem with primary and post-primary, which is perfectly legitimate. And I think that Further Education has a lot to offer the “mainstream” system. But in the same breath, the sector makes a plea for special treatment in terms of the qualifications requirements, and the pace at which they are

implemented. From a standards point of view, this is confusing territory for the Teaching Council. Summarised crudely, Further Education appears to be saying - We want to be the same, but we want to be treated differently. Given the structures of the system at present, this is understandable. But it is also very challenging. The pathway to a solution will probably be guided by the adage – progression, not perfection. In other words, I think that we will see greater convergence in the standards of teaching and learning in all sectors, including Further Education. But it will take time to get there. We need to understand where the sector is now, we need much greater clarity on where teaching and learning sits in it (a huge challenge) and then we need to insist on making gradual but persistent progress towards that goal. Slowly but ever so surely! The only hope we have of making that persistent progress is by walking together at the same pace.

## **Conclusion**

I opened this presentation by raising questions to get us reflecting on the fundamentals of our education system – why do we have an education system? What do we hope to achieve for the future through it? What is the place of teaching and learning in that system? I hope that the process of reflection you engage in as a result of today’s conference will help you find some possible answers to those questions.

I think we can agree that no matter what sector of the system we talk about, all of our efforts should be focused on the learner and the future they can create. They may well take account of where they have come

from and how they came to us, but our goal is to empower them to shape their own future in a spirit of well-being. We want them to be able and willing to work with others in shaping a better future for us all.

Further Education has as much of a role to play in that work as primary and post-primary. If we continue to do things as we have done to date, we will by and large continue to get the same outcomes. If we really want to make a significant breakthrough, we will all have to rethink how we do what we do, and how we engage with others. This is not about structures or structural change, although that can be important. I am talking about how we connect across those structures with each other. If we can enable real professional conversations across sectors, I really believe that the sky will be the limit for our society. As Paul Black once said,

*Put an idea to a teacher and you will get a response; put an idea to a group of teachers and it will explode.*

We have seen that with FÉILTE, our annual Festival to celebrate World Teachers' Day. Further Education has had a significant presence at that event. In fact, Youthreach formed their own network on foot of FÉILTE 2013.

So we have clear evidence that this enhanced professional collaboration can happen, does happen, and that it can have a great impact.

It ain't rocket science – it's about connecting, connecting again, connecting better.

We all need to have more professional conversations about what our learners want, what they need, what their aspirations are. We need to talk about how we can best work together to meet those needs and support them to fulfil those aspirations.

So ultimately, if you really want to secure the future of Further Education, and teaching and learning at the heart of it, you all need to create more space and find the time to talk – with teachers and with each other – to help innovation explode in the learning experience of our young people and adult learners.

Thank you for listening.

**Tomás Ó Ruairc**

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