

# The Social and Economic Impact of Further Education and Training

FET as a pathway that made a difference



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Further education and training makes a substantial impact on the social and economic landscape for citizens across Ireland. This article highlights six key themes that demonstrate this, underscoring why FET will have an even bigger part to play in the future.

As we look out at the landscape in Ireland in autumn 2020 through the virtual windows of our laptops and phones, in this rapid changing of culture as we know it – in our homes, our work and social environments, and how we plan and go about our daily lives – the potential impact of further education and training (FET) has never been greater.

Ireland has a rich history of transforming lives and communities through education. Who could forget the many wonderful stories in the tapestry of the FET system that we have proudly applauded as we acknowledge the tangible successes of learners on their journeys?

Highlights for me include the stories told by the mother who was now able to help her young child with his homework, the grandfather who completed a lifelong dream to obtain his apprenticeship in a career he had worked in for decades, and the young teenager who found a true passion for art and creativity after leaving school early. I think of them often. All of us know of a person who found that FET was the pathway that made a difference.

There is a huge story to be told across the island of Ireland on the social benefits of FET. The economic impact, less visible, is an area not yet fully explored and one which may take prominence in the challenges ahead for the social and economic decisions that will need to be made. In SOLAS, an organisation with an annual budget of €800 million and over 200,000 learners registering every year, of course we need to be able to articulate clearly the social and economic benefits of FET. So what do we know?

***Evidence clearly suggests there is an economic return on investment in FET.***

In the last few years, SOLAS has been building on previous social and economic pilot studies focused on Education and Training Boards, including recent additional research being conducted.

This material gives us an indication of the potential scale of the economic return, which will be outlined in additional communications before the end of 2020.

Independent evaluations have also been undertaken on FET programmes which, in many cases, link to positive findings on the broader outcomes of specific provision. National research published this year by the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) in SOLAS shows that those with FET level 6 qualifications had a higher share in employment than those with higher education level 6 or 7 awards.<sup>1</sup>

***FET is supporting learners to gain employment and strengthening the scope for graduates to obtain sustainable employment.***

In recently published research by SOLAS,<sup>2</sup> done in partnership with the Central Statistics Office, on learner outcomes of Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) provision, 64% of 2014/15 graduates from labour market programmes secured substantial employment in 2016, with 27% progressing to a higher-level degree programme in higher education in the same field of learning. Of that cohort, 16% were in both higher education and substantial employment within 12 months of PLC completion.

From 2017 to 2019, overall employment outcomes from FET provision are estimated to have grown by almost 9 percentage points. A recent CSO report found that 62% of 2016 graduates with major awards were in substantial employment in the first year after graduation,<sup>3</sup> and that 80% of the apprentices who qualified in 2014 were in substantial employment in the second year after qualification, up from 53% for those who qualified in 2010.

**There is a huge story to be told across the island of Ireland on the social benefits of FET.**

***Many learners continue their FET journey once they start, with many progressing to higher education. This indicates strong satisfaction with the content and delivery of provision; it also highlights learners' ambition and motivation to upskill.***

In 2017, 2,821 learners completed a level 4 FET course. Almost 1,100 of them then started another level 4 course, while 915 registered for a level 5 or 6 course. Some learners completed a level 4 course in their second instance: 102 out of 248 of the same learners did an additional level 4 course, while 45 began a level 5 course, and three began a level 6 course.

The high individual participation rate and the profiles of learners are further explored in the overall 2018 reports on the FET system<sup>4</sup> and in linked materials<sup>5</sup> which reference that more than 30% of learners in 2018 chose to participate in more than one type of FET provision.

***Independent analysis on a specific set of programmes in FET indicates that 88% of learners said participating in FET increased their confidence and self-esteem.***

SOLAS is committed to further analysis and research at a national scale on the tangible social benefits and impacts of learners participating in FET. As SOLAS implements and progresses the national *Further Education*

and Training Strategy: Transforming Learning 2020–2024,<sup>6</sup> in partnership with stakeholders and the Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, this will be a key area to further define and articulate. Recent measures and tools such as the SICAP distance travelled<sup>7</sup> methodology and the ongoing digital transformation in data and evidence-based outcomes infrastructure, which is now in place, will be key enablers in progressing this agenda.

**FET is contributing to the economic landscape in Ireland. It has a key role in supporting industry and employees at this critical time, when we also face the threats and opportunities of Brexit and the risks of automation.<sup>8</sup>**

The FET system has significantly advanced the skills required by industry. The number of qualifications awarded in priority skills sectors increased by 16% from 2017 to 2018, evidencing that FET is responding effectively and refocusing provision in areas of greatest regional and national need. In 2018, more than 40% of women learning in FET and 38% of men on certified courses were completing learning in critical skills areas for Ireland.

**“ The FET system has significantly advanced the skills required by industry.**

Apprenticeship registrations have increased substantially since 2015, growing from 3,153 to 6,177 by the end of 2019. Although the Covid-19 pandemic has had a substantial impact on FET across 2020, certain types of provision have increased, such as in Skills to Advance initiatives, which are directly benefiting employers and employees.

**The social impact of FET needs real recognition for learners who may benefit more substantially than others, due to their backgrounds or circumstances.**

A recent study by SOLAS on *Women in Further Education and Training*, which is near completion, indicates that in 2018 there were over 20% more female than male enrolments in the system across all age groups. The highest proportion of female learners who reported being engaged in home duties before beginning their FET course were aged 35–44.<sup>9</sup> In Ireland, the average age for first-time mothers is 31.3 years. This may indicate that FET is a platform to support the upskilling or return to the workforce of women with young families.

Around 50,000 learners choose to participate in community education annually, with increasing evidence of diversity in learners. The SOLAS FET system data reports for 2018 show the learner journeys for learners with a disability,<sup>10</sup> learners from the Traveller community,<sup>11</sup> and learners from the Roma community.<sup>12</sup> With the pending government ten-year strategy on literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy, it is likely that the social as well as economic benefits this could deliver will be a key outcome for success.

We don't yet know fully what the long-term impact of Covid-19 will be, but it is already substantial, with the more marginalised and underrepresented members of our communities potentially at much greater risk of longer-term negative impacts. Recent research that we completed in our Skills and Labour Market Research Unit, for example, highlights that non-Irish nationals may require additional supports to integrate fully into the labour market to ensure that their skills are adequately matched to employers' skills needs.<sup>13</sup> FET interventions may be part of the solution in achieving

this. The social impacts that FET can deliver should not be underestimated, given the current environment.

Significant qualitative outcomes are captured and reported by learners on the benefits of participation, including in the FET Learner Voice initiative, led by Aontas.<sup>14</sup> This project has never been more important than in 2020, when the learner voice must be at the centre of our decision-making. Finally, we must not forget the many social and economic impacts associated with lifelong learning. Participation in lifelong learning continues to increase in Ireland, as shown in the recently published SLMRU report: from 13% in Q4 2018 to 14.7% in Q4 2019.<sup>15</sup>

In conclusion, we already know a lot about the social and economic impact of further education and training, but equally we must commit to further exploring and evidencing outcomes for learners. We are at the cusp of defining the ‘normal’ in the ‘new normal’, and one thing we know for sure is that FET has an even bigger part to play in the new Ireland.

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## ENDNOTES

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There is no end to education. It is not that you read a book, pass an examination, and finish with education. The whole of life, from the moment you are born to the moment you die, is a process of learning.”

– Jiddu Krishnamurti