

Psychological Capital

A critical component for FET success

Psychological resources in FET

Funding of Irish further education and training (FET) is driven by labour-market activation policies and prioritises courses linked to employability outcomes. This means that adult learners may successfully acquire a qualification yet lack the hope, agency, persistence, or confidence necessary to compete for and retain employment. While standard education practice accepts the predictive power of qualifications (Steadman, 1995), we argue that this exclusive focus does not fulfil desirable learner goals.

Personal skills and psychological resources are critical learning areas that should not be ignored. Previously, such resources were dismissed by many FET funders and providers as 'touchy-feely' approaches. However, psychological resources – in particular, psychological capital – are now empirically proven to be robust, reliable, and measurable predictors of desirable academic, career, and life outcomes (Brennan & O'Grady, 2022).

SOLAS (2020, p.28) alludes to the desirability of personal resources in terms of 'improved learner confidence, empowerment and engagement; increased appetite for additional study; community development; and enhanced societal engagement and integration'. Yet, at the time of writing, its data collection on the Programme and Learner Support Systems (PLSS) database concentrates exclusively on performance and progression, and it does not require Education and Training Boards (ETBs) to address these aspects in their strategic performance agreements.

These omissions fail to recognise, capture, or fund the development of psychological resources that are critical to maximising learner success over a lifetime. Current stakeholder work to address, capture, and measure the wider benefits of learning also appears to be limited to community education rather than encompassing the full gamut of FET provision.



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Qualifications are valuable as a critical outcome in education practice, based on their predictive power for learners' future. To leverage learner success, attaining qualifications must be combined with developing personal and psychological resources. This article highlights the potential of psychological capital as a robust framework for providers and practitioners to support measurable outcomes of learner success .

Measurement metrics reflect funding priorities, and inevitably FET providers submit their proposals and programme plans to SOLAS in alignment with their understanding of priorities and targets. This places a myopic focus on progression outcomes in the cognitive and psychomotor domains, which are embedded in FET curricula learning outcomes, and neglects the affective, psychological learning domain.

Tending to the psychological is thus neither guaranteed nor consistent but depends largely on individual ETB and practitioner values and resource allocation. Desirable models of transformative education are underpinned by a conscious focus on the psychosocial aspects of teaching and learning (Wells and Claxton, 2002; Baker et al., 2004; Illeris, 2009).

It is often assumed that all FET practitioners have this awareness and agency in their classroom planning and practice. However, many feel confined by the ostensible rigidity of Quality and Qualifications Ireland's (QQI) programme learning outcomes and do not recognise their agency to transcend these. This inconsistent FET process determines the quality and type of outcomes achieved.

There is an appetite among practitioners, providers, and funders to tend to the psychological learning domain. For example, a discussion on the need to widen definitions and measurement was the focus of the *Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education* (2022). A reliable development and measurement framework is now required, and psychological resources – specifically, psychological capital – can offer a robust and rigorous framework that has been successfully used in other countries.

Psychological capital

The idea of psychological capital, also known as PsyCap, originated in positive psychology and comprises four interconnected components: hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism, known as HERO.

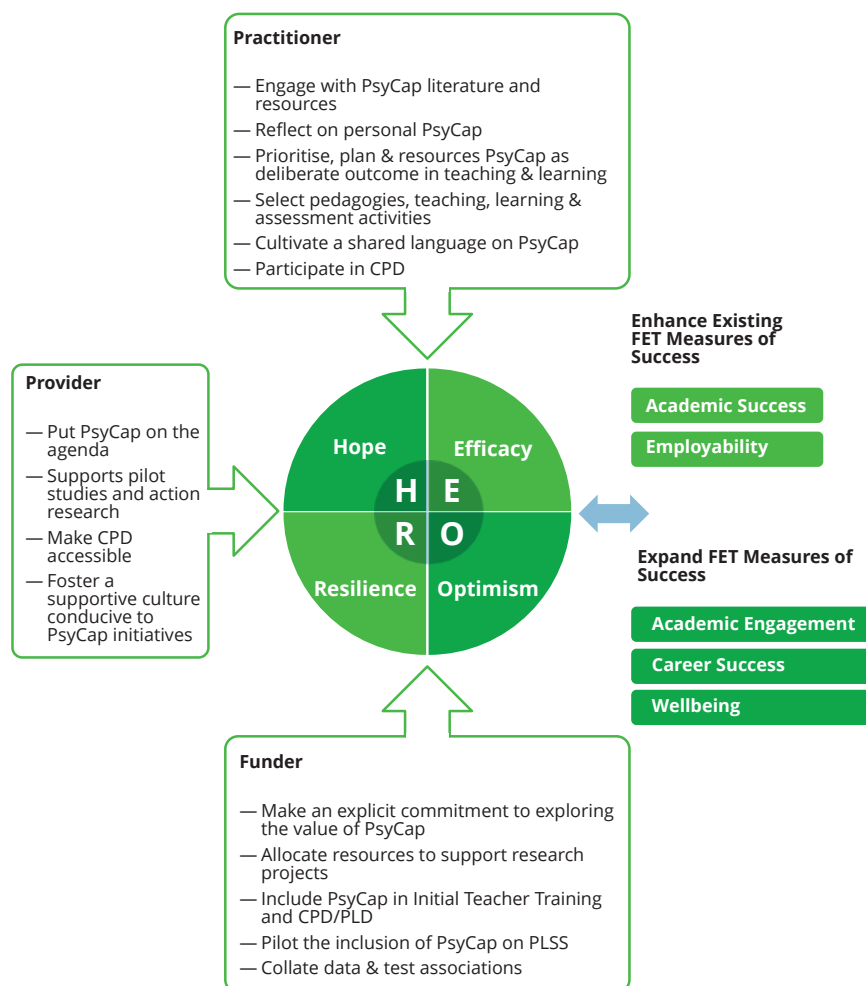
- » *Hope* has the two elements of agency and pathways. Agency means that a person has 'a sense of successful determination in meeting [their] goals', and pathways give 'a sense of [the individual] being able to generate successful plans to meet [those] goals' (Snyder et al., 1991, p.570).
- » *Efficacy*, also referred to as confidence in the literature, concerns a person's judgement of their own capacity to execute a task, achieve an outcome, or succeed at an endeavour.
- » *Resilience* is a person's capacity to adapt to challenging circumstances in their lives and essentially whether they can bounce back.

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- » *Optimism* is 'the current expectancy that positive outcomes will occur in the future' (Higgins et al., 2010, p.61); Brennan (2017, p.226) describes optimistic individuals as 'flexible, hopeful, motivated and persistent'.

PsyCap is a proven predictor of academic performance and engagement, flourishing, interdependent happiness, positive affect, employability, career success, and wellbeing (Brennan & O'Grady, 2022). Increasing international research and practitioner focus on PsyCap across educational levels means the topic has become part of the educational leadership discourse. It is malleable, has valid and reliable measurement scales (ibid.), and is aligned with FET strategic priorities. FET practitioners, providers, and funders need to work together to enhance the HERO in FET learners and staff.

The following diagram depicts areas of action, routes to action, and outcomes of action.



We call for FET stakeholders to advance and measure learners' hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism by using intentional interventions and to join the global community of research and practice in leveraging PsyCap for educational successes.

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