# DITOGA

**Digital tracking of VET graduates via auto-analytics to enhance the quality and sustainability
of vocational and educational training programmes**

# National Report - Ireland

# Tracking of Further Education and Training in Ireland

## Context of Further Education and Training in Ireland

Further Education in Ireland currently offers over 25,000 courses organised by 16 Educational and Training Boards, with some 339,000 beneficiaries with an investment of over €647 million Euros.[1]

Some sixteen Education and Training Boards in Ireland (ETBs[2]) provide further education and training (FET) to typically over 330,000 adults annually; much of this targeting disadvantage, those with low basic skills and those seeking a second chance at education and training. Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) programmes offer education and training to 33,748 school leavers and adults – ultimately providing access to employment and/or third level education. Self-financing evening classes, covering a very wide range of subject areas, cater to for some 50,000 adults annually.

The establishment of sixteen Education and Training Boards (see below) on Monday July 1st, 2013, marked an historic event in Irish education. These new statutory education authorities, formed from the aggregation of Ireland's 33 Vocational Education Committees (VECs) and the integration of the 16 FÁS Training Centres (the then Training and Employment Authority), are the vehicles for the delivery of coordinated education and training programmes across Ireland for decades to come.



Education and Training Boards (ETBs) in Ireland

The establishment marked the start of a transformation process which seeks to more clearly align education and training provision with nationally agreed priorities and strategies. ETBs continue to maintain and grow both first level (community national schools) and second level (258 schools and colleges) provision, and work with SOLAS[3] (which was established by the Further Education and Training Bill 2013) to meet the skills needs of jobseekers and other learners through a range of further education and training programmes, as well as apprenticeship training programmes.

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[1] Taken from the homepage of the SOLAS website at www.solas.ie at the time of writing 3-Dec-18.
[2] For further information on the organisation and structure of ETBs, see www.etbi.ie
[3] For further information on the organisation and role of SOLAS, see www.solas.ie

The role of SOLAS in FET is to fund, plan and co-ordinate a wide range of training and further education programmes. The delivery of these programmes is co-ordinated through a number of partners and stakeholders, ETB's being by far the largest of these partners.

## The Development of a National Course and Learner Platform

A significant milestone in the development of FET provision in Ireland began in 2014, with the initial data specifications being devised by SOLAS for the creation of a single national information technology system for FET. At that time, SOLAS commenced initial scoping and development of a national FET programme database system, a national FET programme calendar scheduling system and a national FET learner database referred to as the Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS). In a strategic policy document entitled *"Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019"* by SOLAS on page 89 it was stated that:

> "*The inconsistency and lack of data has serious implications for FET policy and practice and needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.*
>
> *Firstly, it impacts negatively on decision-making at all levels of FET (Department of Education and Skill, teacher/trainer, provider, ETB, SOLAS).*
>
> *Secondly, it fails to support learners in their education and training choices since they are unable to obtain full information on the range of possible courses open to them. Thirdly, it fails to adequately support a range of policy makers who rely on FET and creates a barrier to effective evaluation.*
>
> *Finally, it militates against efforts by FET institutions 'on-the-ground' to align their provision with local as well as national skill needs of the economy and works against any attempt to measure socio-economic or value-for money impacts of FET/ETBs at individual, local or national levels*."

Against this objective the PLSS system was introduced by SOLAS and ETBI in early 2016, as web based secure system to allow FET provider to schedule courses and manage learners. For the first time in the story of the state a single learner and course platform was available to schedule course and to manage learners on courses.

This implied that over time, a rich source of learner data would be available. Not only did PLSS allow the collection of data in relation to learner participation on courses, but it also has the facility to consistently record learner *outcomes* for the first time across the entire further education and training landscape on a national basis.

## Categories of Outcome on PLSS:

When a learner is being "finished on course" on PLSS, a number of drop down menus appear to gather learner outcomes. The first of these related to the completion status of the learner in question. The operator selects the appropriate option from the drop-down menu to record to what extent the learner completed the course. In the case where the "Early Finisher" option is selected, a further drop-down then appears to ascertain the reason for this early finishing on the course. The operator then selects as appropriate the reason for the learner finishing early.

Once this data has been entered for the learner the PLSS system then continues to ask what the "completion outcome" for this learner was.

This variable allows only on choice of outcome for each learner, as the drop-down options are mutually exclusive.

The operator then chooses from the following drop-down menu to record the then (if known) "completion outcome" for this learner.

Again, only one option can be chosen as these learner outcomes are also mutually exclusive.

The final two variables in relation to a learner finishing on a course on the PLSS system gather certification information in relation to the learner.

Firstly, the general information in relation to if the learner had achieved a level of certification, and finally the type of the certification in question:

In the cases where either the option of "fully certified" or "partially certified" is chosen, the operator is then afforded a further drop-down menu to record the type of the certification award.


**Certification Award**

QQI Major
QQI Special Purpose/Supplemental Awards
QQI Component Award
Other Award
QQI Major and Other Award
QQI Special Purpose/Supplemental Award and Other Award
QQI Component Award and Other Award

This then completes the learner data recorded at the stage where the learner is "finished" on their course on the PLSS system.

The introduction of this national system of recording learner outcomes for all FET courses, resulted in several varying and evolving practices in relation to the collection of learner outcomes and the "tracking" of FET graduates.

## Provider led FET graduate "tracking" processes

With the advent of the ability to systematically record learner outcomes on a single national learner platform, several provider-level "tracking" process quickly emerged:

### 1. Collection of learner outcome data at the point of completion of the course

This practice is where any available data at the time of the learner completing their course is entered, on or very close to, the point of the learner finishing on the programme. Although a widely used process, it has an obvious immediate disadvantage: there may be few learners at the course end stage who have secured employment or indeed a further or higher education of training course.

In many cases a time period might need to elapse to allow a more accurate recording of the outcome for learners, who may, at the time of the course end, be in the process of still applying for employment, or a further or higher education or a training course.

This effect is particularly prevalent where the course term is that of an academic year, such as with Post Leaving Certificate courses (PLCs), who follow an academic year. Often at the end of May or early June, the learn outcomes may not be clear until perhaps the following September, when many of the further and higher education courses begin.

### 2. Ad hoc collection of FET Graduate outcomes

Many FET providers also collect FET graduate outcome via a number of lesser used "ad hoc" data collection methods. These include gathering of learner follow up data at such events as graduation ceremonies, where the certificate recipients are asked to update their economic status on arrival

to the ceremony. Other providers use their websites to encourage past learners to provide updates.

At best, the return in terms of data gathering from such methods is modest and can often lack consistency in the type and quality of data gathered. Furthermore, it has been the experience of this writer that ETB's generally do not have a consistent standard operating procedure for FET graduate tracking. Even within ETBs, there appears to be significant variation in the timing, methods and type of information sought from FET graduates by providers. Within colleges and training centre there also appears to be variation in the motivation of individual teachers and instructors to engage in follow up processes with their own class learners. While some are very motivated to learn of the outcome of past students and learners, other are perhaps less so.

### 3. Local Follow-up surveys after the course has ended

Many providers engage in either telephone, postal — or more recently — email surveys of their past learners within a few months of the course end date. While this method can gather some valuable learner outcome data, the consistency of approach can vary from provider to provider. Likewise, learners can be sometimes difficult to make contact with, either by telephone or by email or written letter, with the result that response rate can sometimes be low, and the volume of outcome data be relatively low in terms of the overall number of target learners. According to a SOLAS 2018 document entitled "*Setting the Baseline for Strategic Funding and Planning Agreements*" the author Selen Guerin indicated the following:

*". . . it is not always straightforward to track learners after they leave a course. SOLAS has conducted a pilot study with 3 ETBs (Cork, Lois Offaly and Kerry) for a similar exercise to track FET learners after course completion. The success of the pilot study has given support to this exercise and to a much broader study on outcomes evaluation of the FET Learners. Even though the 'best' estimates can be provided by the ETBs with regards to graduate outcomes, the data is not consistently available on all learners for each program by each ETB. In other words, the data is incomplete, and can be unreliable as the information is collected from the learner and cannot be verified."*

Likewise, it was also noted in the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019, published by Department of Education and Skills SOLAS that: [4]

*"The data infrastructure around FET is weak, particularly by international standards. There is a bewildering myriad of FET data; a multiplicity of data-gathering systems across FET; a lack of*

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[4] Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2014-2019, SOLAS www.solas.ie

*systematic data collection and analysis of FET data at national (and local) level; and limited use of data in decision making at all levels."*

This statement is certainly borne out by the diversity and range of FET learner data collection as evidenced both within and across ETBs nationally.

## National Surveys

SOLAS, the State Organisation with responsibility for funding, planning and co-ordinating Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland has a specific unit within it which is responsible for Skills and Labour Market Research. The Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) ——

> "*publishes research and reports that facilitates development and review of policy and practice in the further and higher education sectors as well as other related sectors. The SLMRU also manages the National Skills Database and provides labour market data and analysis to the Education and Training Board sector (e.g., in support of the joint SOLAS/ETB annual business planning exercise)."[5]*

The SLMRU publishes regular labour market reports on a range of labour market skills and economic trends, particularly around further education and training trends, challenges and developments. Many of these reports are in conjunction or for the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) and are referred to as National Skills Bulletins[6] Historically a number of these publications would be based around survey reports on the "tracking" of FET graduates and evaluation of specific FET programmes, for example the SOLAS Research Series Number 61 entitled "Evaluation Of PLC Programme Provision"[7] published by the Economic and Social Research Institute, in association with SOLAS.

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[5] Excerpt taken from http://www.solas.ie/Pages/ResearchAndPublications.aspx
[6] For more information on National Skills Bulletins, please refer to http://www.skillsireland.ie/publications/
[7] Evaluation of PLC Programme Provision, Research Series Number 61, Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin January 2018 ISBN 978 0 7070 0 0428 0. www.ersi.ie

## Recent Developments in FET Graduate Tracking

The first ever Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2014-2019[8] was published on the 12th May 2014 by the Department of Education and Skills and SOLAS. Within the this document a number of clear national targets for the FET sector nationally were outlined:

| Target | Target Description |
|--------|--------------------|
| 1. | 10% More Learners will secure employment from provision which primarily serves the labour market. |
| 2. | 10% more learners will progress to other further or higher education courses from provision which is primarily focused on this purpose. |
| 3. | 10% increase in the rate of certification on courses primarily focused on transversal (social mobility) skills Development. |
| 4. | 10% increase of adults, who are seeking FET level provision, engaging in lifelong learning interventions. |
| 5. | Increase of 10,000 learners per annum securing relevant qualifications in sectors where employment growth/skills needs have been identified." |
| 6. | Traineeship National Target of 19,000 (2016-2020) - 13,900 - (2018-2020) Commencements on Traineeship (Skill Clusters by Starters). |

Even from this summary of the six main FET strategy targets, an obvious challenge immediately arises. Given the diversity of method and content of FET tracking and outcome gathering across ⸺and even within ⸺Education and Training Boards, how then does one arrive at baseline values on which to base the improvements being sought by these targets? How can progress on these targets be accurately measured, given the variation in practices in gathering FET outcomes and in tracking FET graduates nationally?

When presented with this challenge SOLAS devised a strategy which used PLSS data records being "linked" anonymously to other administrative datasets:

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[8] Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2014-2019, SOLAS www.solas.ie

> *"The use of Administrative Data Sets is more powerful as it does not rely on subjective accounts of outcomes and more comprehensive than surveys as the coverage is universal and not just based on a sample. For example, in order to find out whether a learner has gained employment after completion of a course, we can search for that person in the Revenue datasets. If the learner has progressed and enrolled in higher education, then we will find his/her enrolment records in the HEA[9] dataset. Likewise, if the learner was unemployed, and went back to his original economic status, that information can be found and verified in the DEASP[10] datasets [11]*

Put simply, this solution uses a "personal identifier key" (PIK) in which an irreversible software algorithm renders the specific learner data as an unidentifiable string, which can then be used as a search term for retrieval of outcome data from the administrative datasets. Data in these administrative datasets are tightly controlled, restricted and secured under the Irish Governments Statistics Act, 1993.[12]

This system, even at its earlier stages of development sign-posted the way to a consistent, reliable and comprehensive method for the reporting of FET graduate outcomes. Furthermore, this method can also be used to link the PLSS learner data in this anonymised manner to Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) datasets[13], to ascertain levels of learner certification with similar reliability.

Furthermore, PLSS itself can already provide educational progression data on FET graduates, and does not require us to link PLSS with other administrative datasets.

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[9] For further information on the Higher Education Authority, refer to www.hea.ie

[10] For further information on Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) refer to www.welfare.ie

[11] "*Setting the Baseline for Strategic Funding and Planning Agreements*", SOLAS internal document by Selen Guerin, Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU), SOLAS August 2018.

[12] For detail of the Statistics Act 1993 refer to www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1993/act/21/enacted/en/html

[13] For more information on Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) refer to www.qqi.ie

## Conclusion:

With the variety of local provider methods for gathering FET graduate outcomes and feedback, there are great inconsistencies in method, type and extent of data gathered. Providers are seeking outcomes and feedback from their former learners at varying stages, using varying methodologies, gathering differing types of data, to greater or lesser effect.

The result of this approach is the data gathered is not consistent and can often rely unsubstantiated learner information regarding their economic, social welfare or educational status.

However, recent tested developments using anonymised key learner data and gleaning consistent and reliable data from administrative dataset, provides a firm footing for the gathering of FET graduate outcomes.

This approach ensures reliability and consistency of method and can provide a complete data set regarding FET graduate outcomes. Not only can it provide baseline data against which FET outcomes can be measured, but it can also provide regular reliable updates, for example year-on-year metrics comparable to the baseline values for the targets relating to 2018, 2019 and 2020 and beyond.

# Appendix 1

**Website Sources**

For information on National Further Education and Training (FET) Policy and Funding: www.solas.ie

For information on Education and Training Boards of Ireland (ETBI)  www.etbi.ie

For information on Education and Training Boards of Ireland (ETBI)  www.etbi.ie

For information on Higher Education Authority (HEA) www.hea.ie

For information on Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) www.welfare.ie

For the Statistics Act 1993 refer to www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1993/act/21/enacted/en/html

 For more information on Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) refer to www.qqi.ie

**References:**

*Setting the Baseline for Strategic Funding and Planning Agreements*, SOLAS internal document by Selen Guerin, Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU), SOLAS, Dublin, August 2018.

Evaluation of PLC Programme Provision, Research Series Number 61, Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin, January 2018 ISBN 978 0 7070 0 0428 0

*Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019,* published by Department of Education and Skills SOLAS Dublin, April 2014.