

Evaluating Further Education and Training Expenditure:
Strategic Pilot Initiative Report



List of Abbreviations

ADS	Administrative Datasets
CE	Community Employment
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CRS	Central Records System
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DSP	Department of Social Protection
EGFSN	Expert Group on Future Skills Needs
ESCO	European Skills, Competencies, Qualifications and Occupations
ESF	European Social Fund
ESRI	The Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
FAR	Funding Application Request
FÁS	An Foras Áiseanna Saothair -Training and Employment Authority
FE	Further Education
FET	Further Education and Training
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IoT	Institute of Technology
ISCED	The International Standard Classification of Education
LLL	Lifelong Learning
MIS	Management Information System
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NSS	National Skills Strategy
PAYE	Pay As You Earn
PES	Public Employment Service
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate course
PLSS	Programme and Learner Support System
PPPDB	Post Primary Pupils Database
SLMRU	Skills and Labour Market Research Unit
SOLAS	An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna – Further Education and Training Authority
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
VTOS	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme

Chapter 1

Background and rationale for the Pilot

The Education and Training Act 2013 established SOLAS to manage, co-ordinate and support the delivery of an integrated Further Education and Training strategy by the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The Act requires SOLAS *‘to assess whether or not training bodies, and other bodies engaged in the provision of further education and training programmes, to whom moneys have been advanced under section 21, perform their functions in an economic, efficient and effective manner’*.

A total of €634m was allocated through SOLAS for further education and training in 2016. DES allocated additional funding in the order of €180m for FET relating to PLC teacher pay and to Cooperation Hours. FET places funded by SOLAS and made available by ETBs were available to approximately 340,000 beneficiaries in 2016 of which 240,000+ started in 2016. Circa 60% of those who engaged in FET programmes in 2016 are individuals who require introductory level courses / supports (up to level 4 on NFQ or equivalent) to assist them with progression back to employment over a longer timeframe.

SOLAS has published three annual service plans in 2014, 2015 and 2016. The FET service planning for 2016 was the second year of a three-year cycle in developing the new planning and funding model. The 2016 FET Services Plan provides information on how the FET sector is working to implement the FET Strategy 2014-2019 and how the sector is meeting the needs of an improving economy. It provides details on 22,000+ courses across 28 lines of provision, current and planned beneficiaries of FET provision, grants and grantees. Tangible examples of how the FET sector benefits the learner, enterprise and the community are also provided within the service plan.

The SOLAS experience over its first three years of operation has confirmed that the FET sector is a complex education and training ecosystem. ETBs can operate individually within the broader education environment. They are heavily influenced by locality and practices and ‘ways of doing things’ that have evolved over many years. Each ETB catchment has a unique labour market demographic, business/industrial profile and a set of different student demands and supports. ETBs have been effective in delivering for their students. In that context the ability to adjust targets and make them specific to individual ETBs increases fairness, transparency and acceptability within the system. Specifying different outcomes for different providers is also more effective in meeting local employer and learner needs.

Furthermore, the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019 proposed a new ‘strategic input/outcomes-based’ funding model for FET. The Department of Education (DES)-led FET Strategy Implementation Plan committed SOLAS to introduce the new funding framework over the lifetime of the Strategy.

In light of these requirements SOLAS is currently formulating suitable performance indicators which are intended to measure the extent to which those bodies, which it is funding, perform their core functions effectively and efficiently.

A strategic planning and funding approach is a prerequisite to meet the high expectations of SOLAS and the ETB sector to offer flexible, responsive education and training that better meets the needs of students, communities and enterprises. The new model will reflect learner and employer needs as well as Government priorities, including literacy and numeracy, lifelong learning agenda and the targets set out in the National Skills Strategy 2025.

At this juncture the proposed framework is expected to incorporate core ETB funding and adjustments to core funding based on certain weightings such as demographics, programme purpose and objectives and achievement of target outcomes. If it is to work properly the current number of 28 programme types¹ for FET also needs to be streamlined. In that regard SOLAS is proposing a simplified topology that will link FET funding streams (Exchequer /National Training Fund/ESF) with NFQ levels and with the official purpose(s) of that provision.

An internal scoping exercise has been conducted by SOLAS to identify what a funding model might look like and potential implications arising for the FET sector. It emerged from this exercise and confirming best practice, that targets set by SOLAS ought to be ETB-centric and evidence-based including counterfactual impact evidence. ETB-centric means that in principle SOLAS will not formulate one set of national targets that each ETB must achieve. Rather each ETB will according to its capacity contribute to the overall achievement of national targets.

SOLAS will agree appropriate contributory targets for each ETB. Some ETBs will contribute more than others in that regard and this will be a feature of the new funding arrangements. The reason is that this approach facilitates adjustments to reflect and take into account conditions over which the ETB has no control, such as different socio-economic profiles within individual ETB catchment areas, different FET learner profiles, different levels and type of unemployment and different types and scale of industry and occupations.

National and local targets will still have to be informed by evidence. SOLAS is working to develop a data infrastructure to enable it to access appropriate evidence, including in the longer term, counterfactual impact evaluation, in support of the new funding model. Even where it is possible to establish FET programme outcomes, the success or value of any education or training programme cannot be judged by reference to employment and progression outcomes alone. There is also an obligation to ensure that the data infrastructure and evaluation mechanisms can capture less tangible impacts for a significant

¹ Such as PLC, Traineeship, Community Education, Literacy/Numeracy, Specific Skills, VTOS, Youthreach, ITABE, BTEI etc.

cohort of learners who initially may engage in FET for reasons other than direct progression to employment. Important less tangible effects might include increased self-confidence or feeling more positive about employment prospects.

Purpose of the strategic pilot

The SOLAS /ETB strategic pilot initiative was conceived and initiated in 2015. The pilot was intended to provide insights in three key aspects of a strategic input / outcomes based funding model. The three aspects were; a) to inform the development of an appropriate strategic planning framework for FET in Ireland; b) to inform the outcomes-based target setting approach of SOLAS; to test the feasibility of tracking FET learners after they completed their course to establish impact; c) subject to the success of the test to develop appropriate counterfactual impact evaluation tools for FET.

The insights gained would contribute to a more effective way of funding FET than the present system. This new funding approach would be expected to deliver better experiences and better outcomes for all FET learners irrespective of their starting point, their status, background or previous experience.

Furthermore, the pilot provided the opportunity to undertake impact and outcome evaluation of the FET provision. Both evaluations involve the assessment of the intervention effects of the FET programme, but at different timelines. Impact evaluation is concerned with the assessment of the immediate effects while outcome evaluation is concerned with measuring the longer-term effects of the FET programme (one year plus). Both tracking and counterfactual impact evaluations are essential to the integrity and fairness of the new SOLAS funding model.

Chapter 2

Overview of the Pilot

It was decided to proceed with the pilot with three ETBs in early 2015. The three ETBs were Cork ETB, Laois/Offaly ETB and Donegal ETB. They were selected to reflect the diversity of both provision and location of FET providers and to ensure appropriate support and resources from SOLAS to the pilot. SOLAS set about arranging separate meetings in March/April 2015 to brief each of the three ETBs on the pilot initiative framework, its purpose and objectives.

The pilot consisted of a series of 'strategic conversations' with each of the three ETBs with the ultimate aim of incorporating the learning from the pilot into the 2017/2018 annual service planning exercise. A supporting 'strategic toolkit' was developed by SOLAS to facilitate the process. See Graphic 1 and Graphic 2 below for a summary overview of the underlying approach of the strategic pilot and the main tools available to support the strategic planning aspect of the pilot respectively.

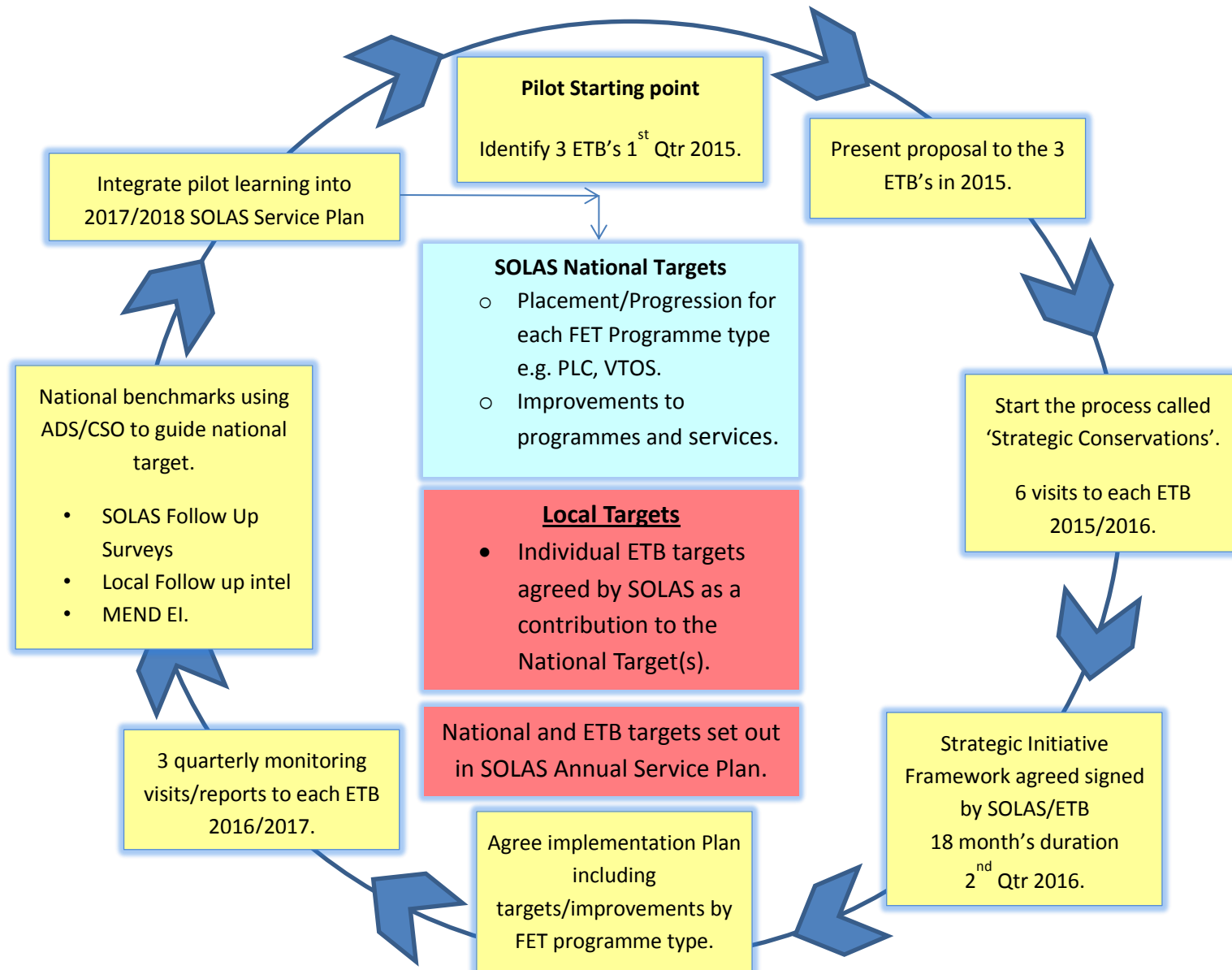
Mitigating Risk

To avoid the risk of overwhelming the sector, two fundamental SOLAS commitments to reassure the ETBs involved in the pilot were agreed. Firstly, the pilot was conducted under safe funding conditions. Currently FET providers plan their FET provision and budgeting process to support their provision to a fixed grant allocation set by SOLAS. This approach continued during the pilot. In practice this meant that in the event that agreed targets were not achieved there would be no risk of losing any SOLAS funding as a result. The pilot would identify where targets were at risk and where the potential for funding adjustments might come into effect in the new arrangements.

When the new funding model is in place, it is anticipated that providers will still separately budget to finance their planned provision to their overall allocation. However, the allocations will in future be developed not by the historic costs but using a calculation that incorporates, among other criteria, achievement of output and outcome targets.

Secondly, the ETBs involved in the pilot would conduct their service planning exercise as normal with one important variation. The commitments agreed with the three ETBs as part of the pilot would be incorporated as appropriate into their annual service planning exercise with SOLAS. This meant that the existing and evolving work practices and process could be leveraged rather than opening up the prospect of a further cache of systems and documentation to be managed. The impact of the strategic pilot began to emerge in the 2016 funding submissions to SOLAS of the three pilot ETBs, for example in plans to develop /offer new courses.

Graphic 1: Overview of Strategic Pilot Initiative



Graphic 2: Strategic Planning - Inputs Toolkit



NSS 2025 and FET
Strategy and
associated Detailed
Implementation Plan.



SOLAS Services Annual
Planning Parameter
Guidelines.



ETB Proposal
Document
(feasibility of actions).



SOLAS/ETB Strategic
Agreement.
*(See Appendix A
below for extract)*



ETB Catchment Area
Stats/Profiles - presentation to
ETB by SLMRU.
ETB 'estimates' of outputs and
outcomes submitted to SOLAS
as part of funding application.



SOLAS/ETB Strategic
Agreement
Implementation Plan.
*(See Appendix B below
for extract)*



Skills Identification
EGFSN / Other
Reports.

Regional Skills Fora
and other local ETB
employer networks.



SOLAS/CSO tracking
exercise
Presentation to each
of three ETB re their
Outcomes - by SOLAS
SLMRU.

The Strategic 'Inputs' Approach

Four 'inputs' formed the basis of the strategic planning input toolkit. A more strategic lens could then be placed over existing and planned future provision of the ETB. The first 'input' consisted of an examination by ETBs of high-level 'direction setting' policy initiatives and identifying the FET commitments within them and how these might be better progressed as part of the pilot. This exercise was conducted jointly with SOLAS. Policy examples include; Action Plan for Education, The FET Strategy; The National Skills Strategy; The Action Plan for Jobs; Pathways to Work; Regional Skills Fora; Local Community Development Plans.

Secondly, the three ETBs were apprised of key labour market statistics from a national and the local ETB perspective. This was conducted under the direction of the SOLAS SLMRU. This 'input' included;

- Employment by sector
- Employment by occupation
- Employment by level of education
- Employment by age
- Largest employers – medium to large businesses
- Demand: PES vacancies
- Demand: job announcements
- ETB Live register figures
- Demand: job announcements
- Supply: unemployment by occupation
- Supply: unemployment by sector
- Supply: unemployment by education
- Supply: PES job seekers by gender
- Supply: PES job seekers by age
- Supply: PES job seekers by education
- Supply: PES job seekers by education
- Supply: PES job seekers by occupation
- Relevant reports: *National Skills Bulletin, Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply 2014, Vacancy Overview, Regional Labour Markets Bulletin, Occupational Employment Projections, the new National Skills Strategy 2025.*

The ETB was then apprised of 'skills demand' from a national and local ETB perspective by SLMRU for their consideration. This third input included the following elements;

- SOLAS data with regard to measurements in respect of the expansion demand, replacement demand and turnover rate associated with every occupation for each of the eight national planning regions.
- SOLAS data with regard to on-going skills monitoring needs at a local level though comprehensive analyses of the qualifications and competences of job-seekers and the qualifications required by local employers. Both public sector vacancy and job-

seeker data and live register data, together with vacancy databases from the private sector systematically analysed by SMLRU was made available.

- National employment by occupation forecasts identifying the future volume of expansion demand over a 5-year period undertaken following the medium-term review conducted every 2-3 years by the ESRI.
- Annual apprentice registration forecasts that provide critical information on which to plan future apprentice training capacity.
- A presentation of the results of recent SLMRU Follow-up surveys of participants who completed training programmes and the results of the recent PLC evaluation conducted by the ESRI and the progression outcomes /findings contained in these reports.
- Data held in ETB files pertaining to programme information submitted to DES (when VECs were in situ and more recently to SOLAS) in respect of placement and progression estimates.

As a final input SOLAS committed to initiate a two-phased exercise to evaluate the impact and outcomes of FET. The first phase would test the feasibility of a model for the systematic evaluation of the major destination outcomes (i.e. employment; progression; unemployment) of participants on all SOLAS funded FET programmes. SOLAS would prioritise participants who completed education and training courses in each of the three pilot ETBs and would establish their destination/status at three points in time as follows; within four weeks of course completion; at a 6 month point in time; at a 12 month point in time –following completion of their course. The exercise involved using and linking administrative datasets held in the CSO (Revenue; Social Welfare Payments Database; Post Primary and Higher Education Student Database and the SOLAS Client Services System).

If the first phase proved successful, then development work on the second phase could proceed namely, the scoping of how SOLAS could conduct counterfactual impact assessments. After careful consideration of the above inputs a ‘call’ was made by each of the three ETBs and agreed by SOLAS on the appropriate targets and actions to be undertaken as part of the pilot. This included for example, developing more relevant courses, achieving higher rates of placement into employment, better retention levels, increased efficiencies etc.

Agreed inputs (e.g. new courses), outputs (e.g. certification rates) and outcome targets (e.g. employment) were then set out in a Strategic Expectations Agreement in respect of each of the three ETBs. This was signed by the SOLAS Executive Director and the CEO of the ETB. A quarterly progress report template was developed and initiated by SOLAS to monitor progress in implementing commitments set out in each of the three Strategic Agreements. The third quarterly progress report is expected to be submitted by the three ETBs to SOLAS in July 2017. An extract from a Strategic Agreement and an extract from a Quarterly Progress Report are outlined in Appendix A and Appendix B respectively.

Chapter 3

Results of the Pilot

Long-range planning assumes that the economic, social and educational environment is stable. Strategic planning assumes that organisations can respond effectively to a disruptive, dynamic and changing environment. Strategic planning therefore attempts to distil a process of consideration and evaluation of the past, present and future into a 'set of calls' in respect of key investment priorities and improvements.

In the pilot context strategic planning refers to a process to develop soundly based FET strategies and to apply and translate this strategic thinking into a set of actions/commitments, taking into account the funding allocated to SOLAS and the ETB. These commitments will then be set out in a Strategic Agreement with SOLAS and be mirrored in annual ETB funding applications to SOLAS. The aim of this approach is to support continuous improvement in programmes and services through the annual service planning process.

The results of the pilot can be grouped under three areas;

- Strategic Planning capacity (the 'Calls' made)
- Target setting
- Feasibility testing on tracking FET programme impact at ETB level (Phase 1)
 - Counterfactual Impact Evaluation of FET provision (Phase 2).

The commitments or 'calls' as laid out the three Strategic Agreements support the view that the approach adopted (Strategic 'Inputs', Strategic Framework Agreement, Quarterly Progress Reports) is leading to more relevant and better quality 'in-demand' FET programmes and services. This has been achieved without any disruption in programmes /services and is to be commended. This improvement can be demonstrated in three ways. Firstly a range of new courses were initiated and/offered in 'in-demand' occupational areas. Examples include;

- Level 5 & 6, Computer Systems and Networks
- Accounting Technician
- Hospitality
- Hotel Front Office Operations
- Sport and Recreation
- Financial Analysis
- Digital Media Training
- Business Admin
- Industrial Automation
- MedTech (for employees).

Secondly, restructuring of some existing provision was initiated to improve the quality of programmes and service on offer. Examples include;

- 'Quality Office' established to project manage QQI QA requirements
- Exam procedures and structures reviewed
- Best practice guidance initiated at three key times of programme delivery namely, the beginning, mid programme, and at the end of the programme.
- A national programme of Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) was initiated with the Irish Defence Forces
- The number of accredited community education courses has increased
- Resources were allocated to better administer and quality assure the collection and inputting of required data in respect of community education.
- New curriculum and attendance policies implemented within Youthreach centres.

Thirdly, restructuring of some existing provision was initiated to improve operational efficiencies in support of the new strategic direction;

- New PLC management structure initiated at ETB level including the integration /linkage of small PLC providers within a larger provider campus
- Reduction of the volumes of one-to-one literacy and numeracy provision in parallel with an increase in group tuition classes in literacy and numeracy in line with the DES implementation plan in respect of the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.
- Introduction of short introductory activation support programme 'Exploring Options' in conjunction with DSP to enable better course matching of DSP clients to FET courses.

Target Setting

SOLAS and the ETB sector recognises that targets may be helpful in setting focus and 'direction of travel' for FET to progress government priorities and targets. National targets for the FET sector are already set out through many government policies including the Action Plan for Education, the National Skills Strategy, the Action Plan for Jobs, 'Pathways to Work', the Apprenticeship and Traineeship Action Plan and the Comprehensive Employment Framework for People with Disabilities. For example, the National Skills Strategy 2025 include the following;

	Target
REDUCE THE PERCENTAGE OF 18-24 YEAR OLDS WITH AT MOST LOWER SECONDARY EDUCATION AND NOT IN FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING	TO 8%
FACILITATE THE PROVISION OF NEW APPRENTICESHIP AND TRAINEESHIP REGISTRATIONS BY 2020	TOTAL OF 50,000

Most FET-related targets set out in national policy initiatives require disaggregation to local level, together with some clarification of the individual roles national agencies, regional providers and others will play in their achievement. Furthermore there are no national targets for aggregated performance in job placement or progression. SOLAS intends linking available targets set out in Government policy and in its second Corporate Plan 2017-2019 (to be finalised shortly) to inform targets set by SOLAS for the ETB sector overall as well as targets for individual ETBs.

To guide target setting within the pilot process ETBs and SOLAS used ‘estimates’ of programme outputs (certification, retention) and outcomes (placement, progression to HE) as set out in annual SOLAS services plans. These estimates are imprecise and tentative. Yet they have value insofar as they highlight a level of uncertainty surrounding the capacity to collect robust data and the quality of the data collected. They also provide a useful guide in terms of where the range of targets to be considered initially, ought to lie. Other sources were drawn upon, such as recent and past Follow-Up Surveys of training course participants², the recent PLC evaluation conducted by the ESRI on behalf of SOLAS, past studies by DES on Youthreach, past FE Returns to DES made by ETBs (formerly VECs) and the recent Employer Survey of HE and FET.

SOLAS is of the view that the target setting process was undertaken by ETBs in a constructive and transparent manner. The targets agreed meet the main criteria for target setting namely, specific and not estimates, stretching, measurable (subject to SOLAS linking to a range of administrative datasets), achievable, acceptable, measurable and direction setting. Examples of targets set out in the Strategic Agreement (2016/2017) include;

- Increase the PLC placement to employment rate to 50%
- Increase progression to employment to 59% for SST courses
- Increase Traineeship certification rates for the full award to 70%
- Increase retention rates on pilot BTEI courses to 85%
- Increase certification rates (full award) for Culinary Skills by 5%
- Increase Family Learning provision from 4% to 6% of all planned activity in this area
- Establish an Employer Liaison Office to support placement in employment.

² Conducted by FÁS every two years since the mid-1990s and approximately every 18 months by SOLAS since its establishment.

Feasibility Test - Tracking FET learners (Phase 1)

The purpose of the feasibility test was to investigate outcome events up to 12 months³ after a participant completes a FET course.

A separate report was presented to each of the pilot ETBs. This report investigated participant outcomes from the SOLAS-funded full time FET programmes provided by each of the three pilot ETBs for the year 2012. This timeframe was the most recent year in which data was available from all of the datasets held in the CSO⁴.

Outcomes were measured using new welfare benefit claims, new employments, or enrolments in further education/training. Two cohorts from each ETB were studied; 1) those persons relating to certain courses forming part of a 'Pilot cohort' evaluation, and 2) all persons finishing a course provided by that ETB that had the aim of progression to employment/further or higher education, i.e. the 'Total Cohort'. The latter exercise proved to be the more reliable as the larger numbers significantly reduced the margin of error on the outcomes. The outcome results from each of the three ETBs were broadly similar.

The 'Total Cohort' information presented in this report relates to the largest of the three pilot ETBs. It acts as an example of the possibilities opened up to SOLAS in the terms of improving independent evaluation of FET outcomes at national and local ETB level. In addition it demonstrates how it might enable SOLAS work in setting appropriate targets in relation to placement and progression outcomes. Depending on sample size it also opened up the possibility of evaluating the impact of each of the existing 28 FET programme types such as 'PLC', 'Traineeship'. Further work is needed to enable course by course evaluation within each programme type e.g. a software developer course in Dublin under the Traineeship banner.

Information relating to cohorts in respect of the three ETBs was provided to SOLAS in late July 2016. To complete this 'tracking' task, administrative datasets made available by the Administrative Data Centre (ADC) of the CSO. This data access permitted the following main participation outcomes to be analysed:-

1. *Seeking Employment*
Source: Central Records System (CRS) of the Department of Social Protection (DSP).
2. *Making other Welfare claims (non-jobseeking)*
Source: Central Records System (CRS) of the Department of Social Protection (DSP).
3. *Gained Employment*
Source: Annual P35 Returns to Revenue Commissioners

³ In order to ensure sufficient coverage, the start date was moved back in time until all outcome events could be investigated.

⁴ When looking at the individual data flows available from the ADC it was found that the Post Primary Database data was the limiting factor. The most recent data is from 2013 (for academic year 2013/14). This constraint meant that the starting point for this evaluation was people completing a course of study in 2012.

4. *Back in further training/education*

Sources: Participant records from SOLAS/FÁS; Participant records from the Higher Education Authority (HEA); Participant records of the Post Primary Pupils Database (PPPDB) from the Department of Education and Skills (DES).

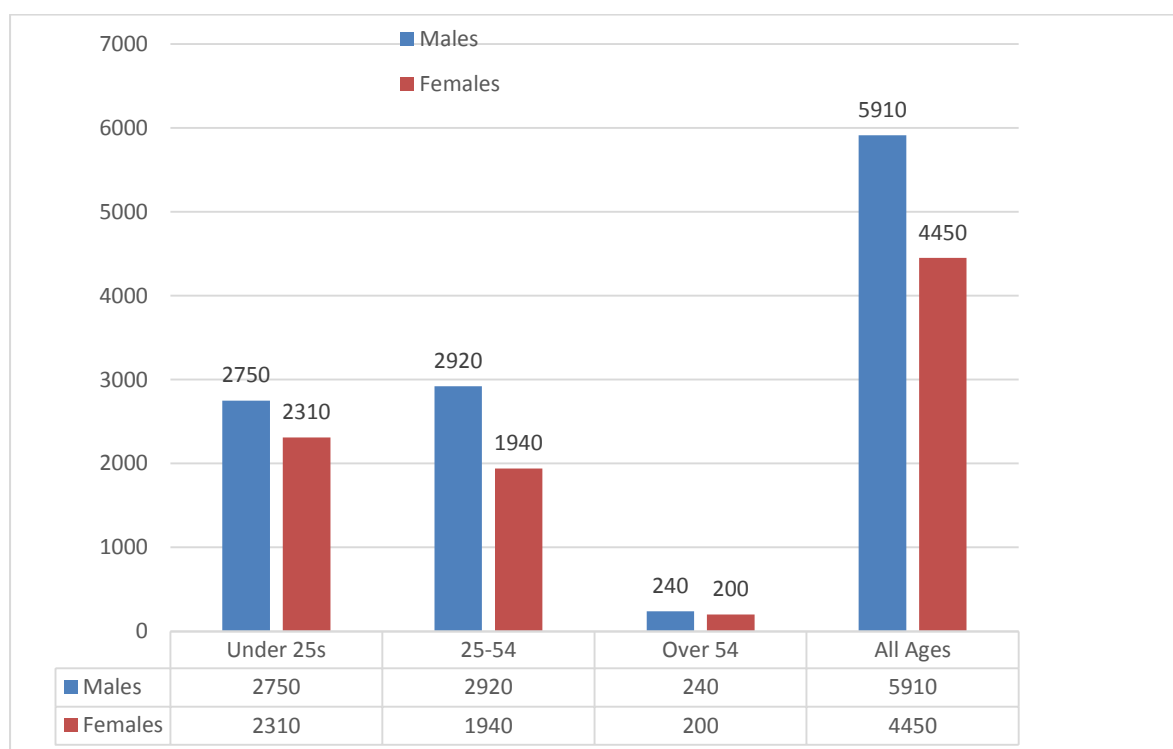
It was not possible in this instance to access data which would identify if participants became self-employed after completing the ETB’s programmes. Again, SOLAS is examining ways of capturing this type of information in the future.

Three measures were used to study participant outcomes in this report; a) a short term measure to record the situation of participants in the first **4 weeks** following course completion, b) a **6 Month Point** in time– a medium term measure to record the situation of participants 6 months after course completion, c) a **12 Month Point** in time– a longer term measure to record the situation of participants 12 months after course completion.

Analysis of Outcomes in 2013 using a cohort from the largest pilot ETB

A cohort of 10,360 individuals completed their course in the ETB in 2012 (see Appendix C for details of courses within the cohort sample). The courses encompassed 11 broad ISCED fields of learning (see Appendix D for details). The gender profile of the cohort is presented in Graphic 3 below.

Graphic 3: Age and Gender of Sample Cohort

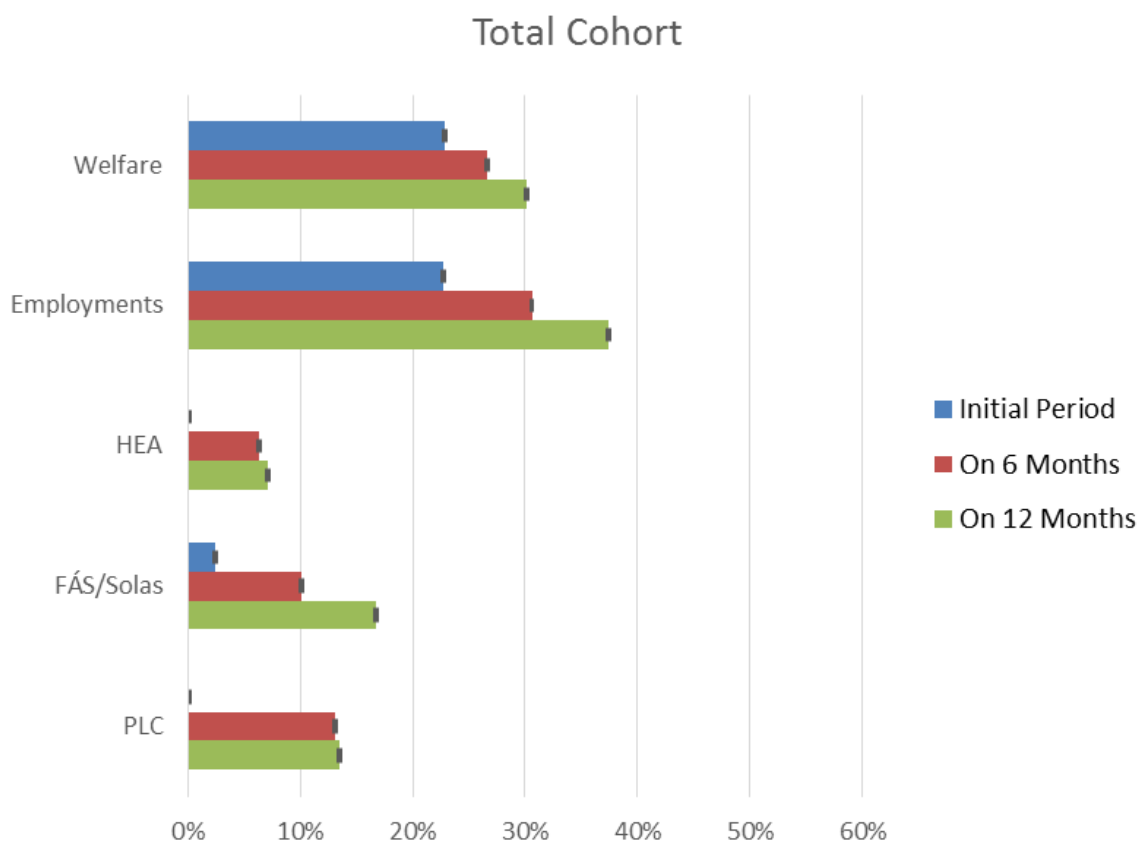


Impact and Outcomes from the Sample Cohort

The following charts give an overview of the results as measured by ‘welfare claimant’, ‘employments’, ‘progression to HE’, ‘to FET’ (to training and to PLC). They show the percentage of participants who had new events of various types (in terms of welfare, employment, progression etc.) in both the Initial Period and at 6/12 months points in time since completing a programme provided by the ETB.

The error bars⁵ show the effect of the requirement to protect the identity of individuals in the data. Given the volume of learners in this cohort (10,000+) the margin of error is not significant in this instance.

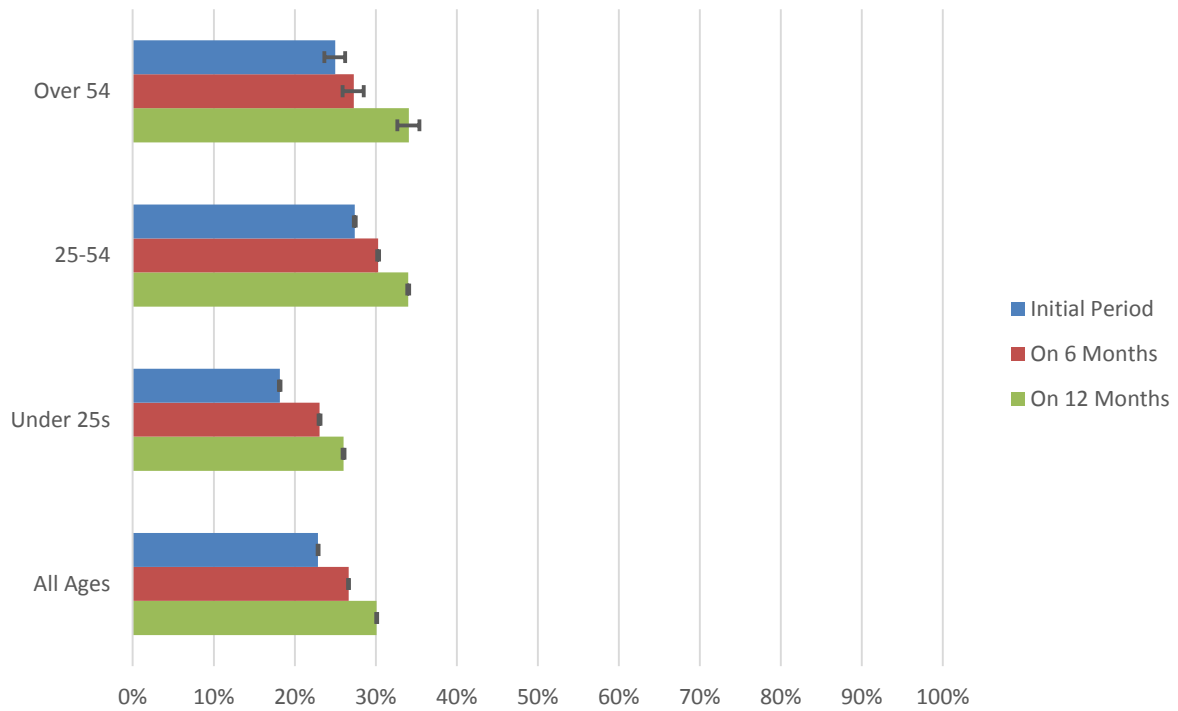
Graphic 4: Overall Outcomes Total Cohort Cork ETB



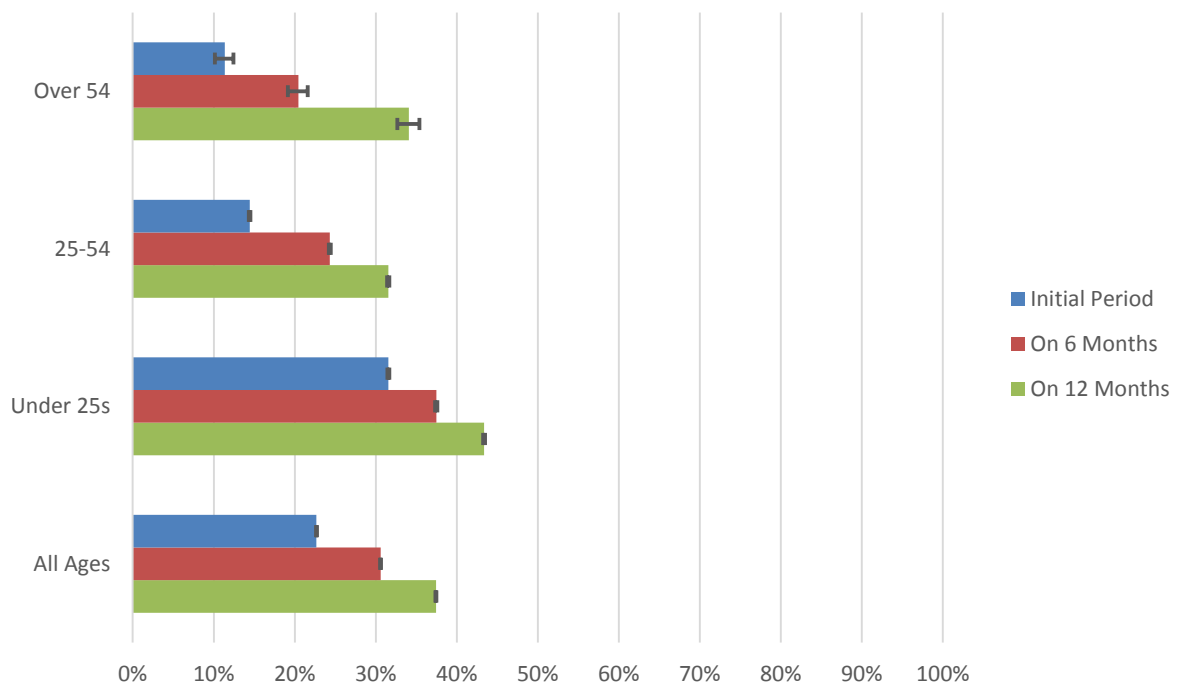
⁵ Barely visible black bars at end of the right side of coloured bars.

Graphics 5, 6 and 7 demonstrates the results (welfare, employment, progression) broken down by age groups of the participants.

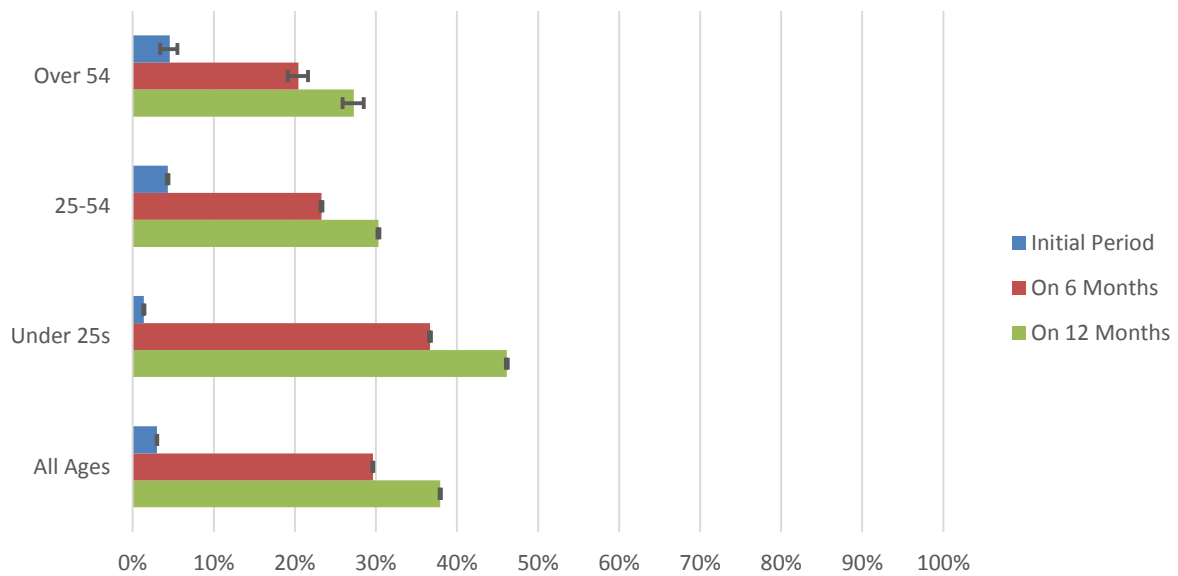
Graphic 5: Welfare Claims - Age Groups - Percentages of Participants making new Claims (CRS data; all Claim types).



Graphic 6: Employment - Age Groups - Percentages of Participants with new Employments (P35 data).

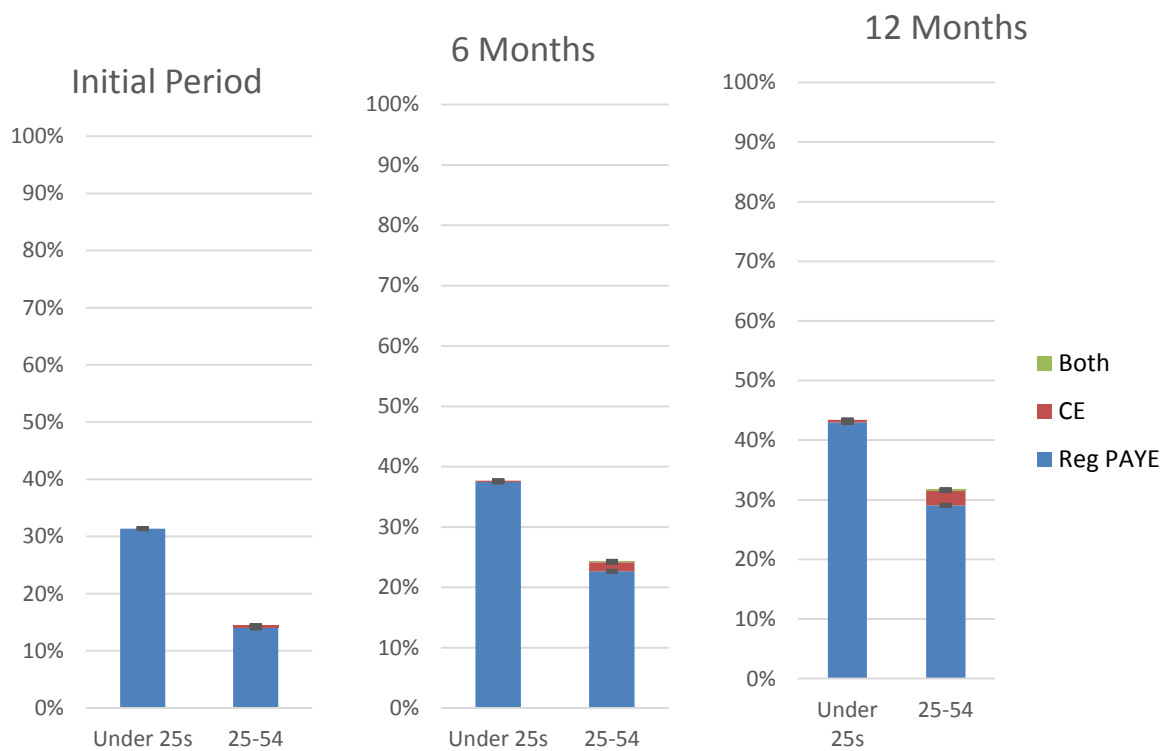


Graphic 7: Further Training/Education - Age Groups - Percentages of Participants newly enrolled in further Training/Education (SOLAS/FÁS, HEA and PPPDB data).



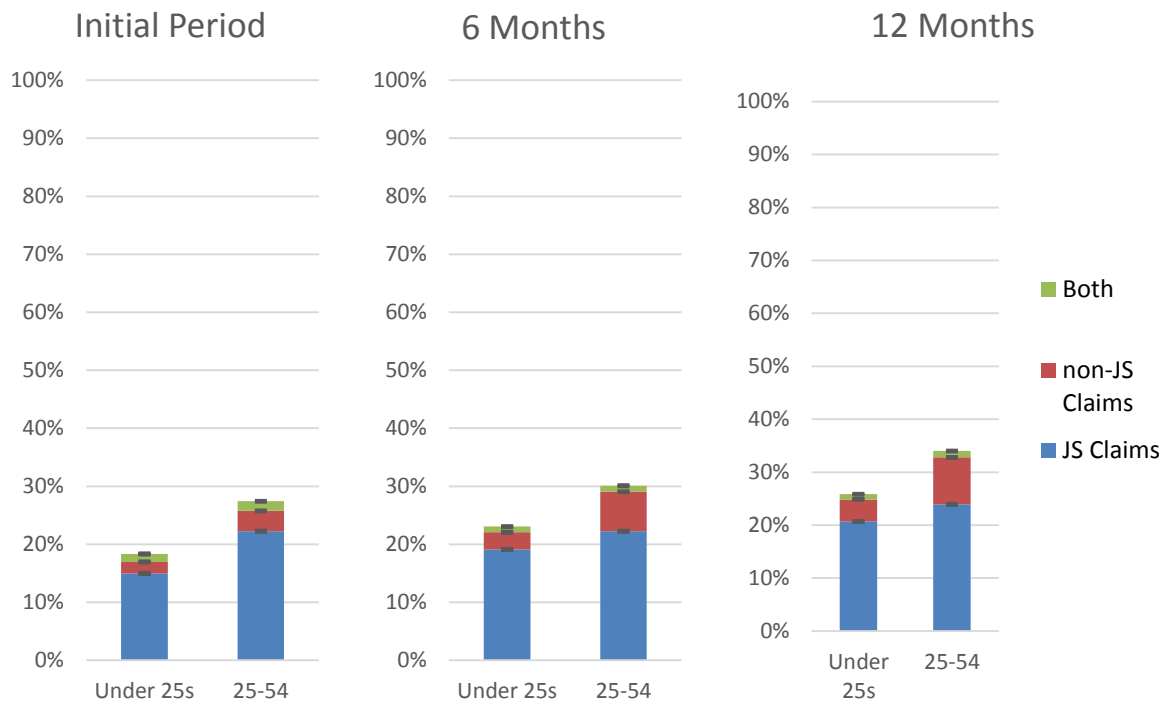
Graphics 8 shows more detail about new employments as found in the Revenue’s P35 data (PAYE) at the initial period and then at the 6 month and at the 12 month points in time. CE Scheme employments are not shown.

Graphic 8: Employment - Percentage of Participants with new Employments (P35 data) - Age Groups



Graphics 9 shows more detail about new claims as found in the DSP CRS Database again at the initial period, and at the 6 month and at the 12 points in time. The claims were divided into Jobseeker and non-Jobseeker type events.

Graphic 9: Welfare Claims - Percentage of Participants making new Welfare Claims (CRS data) - Age Groups.



Summary Observations on the Strategic Pilot Exercise

The results of the test in respect of the tracking of FET learners after course completion at different points in time clearly demonstrate that it is feasible. SOLAS with the support of the CSO have been able to track thousands of FET learners at three points in time after course completion. The success of this feasibility test across three ETBs opens up the possibility of following the progression of all 300,000+ learners that engage in FET each year.

The tracking results themselves are an important by-product of the exercise but it must be remembered that an eclectic sample mix of FET provision across the ETB was used and that as noted above the primary purpose of some of this provision would not be expressly employment related. Nevertheless the sample provides a much stronger evidence-based indicator of the impact of FET provision provided at ETB level on the status of learners. A noticeable trend and one that was replicated across the three pilot ETBs is the improvement in employment outcomes along the 12 month timeline. This raises the importance of measuring both the impact (immediate effect) and outcomes (longer term impact) of FET provision. The results also indicate that the rate of increase in employment outcomes for individuals under 25 years of age increases at all three points in time.

The test results indicate that the increasing rate of improvement in 'employment' outcomes is greater than the increase in 'welfare' status over the 12 month period. Slowing down the rate of increase in welfare status while at the same time increasing the rate of employment status is one of the main aims of the new SOLAS strategic planning and funding arrangements. The project highlighted both the usefulness and limitation of using CSO-based administration data of this type. Overall there are very significant insights that have emerged in terms of conducting counterfactual impact assessment of FET to which we now turn.

Evaluating FET provision - Counterfactual Impact Evaluation of FET provision (Phase 2)

The case for undertaking counterfactual impact evaluation of FET is strong. It is based on the need to collect evidence and determine whether policy objectives have been met and, ultimately, whether the resources were used efficiently. These answers then feed back into the design and implementation of future FET interventions and budgetary decisions.

The Learner Database element of the PLSS has now been fully rolled out to all ETBs and from mid-April 2017 is being used by all ETBs, except for apprenticeship. Because the learner database is just beginning to be populated, trend data is not currently available. Figures are expected to change as education and training providers continue to populate the database with learner data throughout the year. Additional variables currently available include 'course title', 'field of learning category' (ISCED), 'start date', 'provider'.

Given that context, SOLAS can now proceed to develop an in-house capacity by building on the expertise in the SLMRU, to conduct evaluation of the impact of FET. This can be done by utilising **the PLSS and ADS platforms** and in particular applying counterfactual impact evaluation (CIE) methods to establish value added of FET provision. In that regard the SLMRU is currently seeking to establish a picture of the overall national outcomes in terms of welfare claims, employment and progression for all full time FET programmes.

To complement the work above, SOLAS intends to develop a number of survey tools to capture more qualitative aspects of FET contributions such as the wider benefits of learning, learner and employer feedback.

In respect of the measure of the counterfactual, SOLAS has access to the unique identifier of each respondent in the Quarterly National Household Survey. This allows SOLAS to identify movements in the labour market including movements from unemployment and inactivity to employment by age and level of qualification and gender. With this information, SOLAS will continuously benchmark the transition of specific groups of unemployed persons on SOLAS funded FET provision into employment, against the movement of the total unemployed into employment with these same characteristics, and for the same reference period. Using this technique, SOLAS will be able to provide a broad estimate of the extent to

which SOLAS funded active labour market measures are improving the employment prospects of specific groups of unemployed.

Issues identified by the pilot

Confidentiality issues

Legally ETB's are treated as companies by the CSO for the purpose of conforming to the data protection legislation. Therefore the agreement of the three ETBs was sought by SOLAS - and granted - with regard to sharing their student data as part of the pilot initiative. SOLAS is exploring issues of confidentiality that emerged as part of the test when the numbers in a particular programme /course are at certain 'low' levels where linking individual learners to courses might become possible.

Access to verified data

Measuring inputs and outputs⁶ is broadly speaking within the control of the agencies/providers. Currently SOLAS collects data with regard to FET provision through annual statistics and surveys and the FAR and increasingly through the PLSS. Information on type of courses, calendaring of courses, enrolment level, completion rates, persistence (drop-out), certification rates are available. Best 'estimates' are provided by ETBs with regard to progression (to other FE, training, HE, employment, back to original status). Information is also collected on the participant profile (gender, age, economic status, highest educational attainment).

However, the data is incomplete - being not returned or unknown - in respect of differing proportions of participants, depending on the FET programme. Also, it often relies on collecting data from the person, rather than by verification against another database, so quality cannot always be assured.

At this juncture it is not possible to independently track in a verifiable manner what happens to a learner once they have completed their course. It is even more difficult to establish a causal link between the outcome for the participant and labour market/employment impact and their participation in the course. In order to fully implement a robust outcomes-based funding model, access to verified learner's employment status data is necessary. A change in legislation may be required in order to facilitate such data sharing by Revenue with SOLAS.

⁶ Such as number of learners on a course, completion rates, numbers certified.

Aligning FET provision to employer's skills need

The pilot also underscored the need to relate FET provision more directly to the profile of business sectors operating in Ireland and their skill needs. The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 'Fields of Learning' is the reference classification for organizing education programmes - including FET - and related qualifications by levels and fields of education. Being able to classify FET using ISCED is particularly useful to compare and benchmark further education and training from both a national and international perspective using different official datasets.

However ISCED has a significant limitation for the direct classification and assessment of competences and qualifications of the participants in educational /training activities. This is because the educational/training programmes an individual has participated in or even successfully completed are, at best a first approximation to the skills and competences he or she has actually obtained. That is, there is no direct and consistent comparison to the education /training programme undertaken and the competencies and skills imparted.

To glean a deeper insight into the relevance of FET provision for employers and of the skills and competencies imparted to learners two further classification systems are being incorporated by SOLAS into the PLSS to complement ISCED. The first is ESCO⁷. It was developed to help education and training systems and the labour market to better identify and manage the availability of required skills, competences and qualifications. Employers can use it to define the set of skills, competences and qualifications their vacancies require when they are developing a job description. Education and training institutions can use it in curriculum development and assessment. Organisations including QQI, SOLAS and FET providers such as ETBs coordinating, developing and/or awarding qualifications can use it to express the learning outcomes of their qualifications and to reflect emerging skill needs.

The second is the SOLAS 'Skills Cluster' classification of FET courses (see Appendix E). This SOLAS classification system has significant potential to enhance communications to a wide and diverse audience in respect of how the national economy is currently structured and expected to develop and, thus, to provide learners, parents and trainers/educators with a framework within which to make their decisions⁸. It will allow SOLAS in the first instance to establish the nature and volume of FET provision that is being provided to meet skill needs related to discrete sectors of business. In due course SOLAS will be in a position to evaluate FET relevance in terms of the nature and level of placement into employment of learners on a sector by sector basis.

⁷European Classification of Skills/Competences, Qualifications and Occupations - a European Commission 2020 initiative.

⁸A STRATEGIC REVIEW OF FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING AND THE UNEMPLOYED, A review undertaken for the Department of Education and Skills by Dr. John Sweeney (2013).

Chapter 4

Learning from Pilot and Next Steps

Learnings and insights from the strategic inputs approach of the pilot will be systematically integrated on phased basis into the 2017/2018 service planning exercise; inform further development and installation of a strategic inputs and outcomes-based funding model; enable the linking of FET provision and its evaluation more directly to the profile of business sectors operating in Ireland and their skill needs using 'skills clusters'.

2017/2018 Service Planning

A number of aspects of the existing SOLAS funding application request system (FAR) used by ETBs are being enhanced. These enhancements can be summarised as follows;


- Support documentation provided by SOLAS to ETBs in relation to the funding allocation request system will be amended to meet the new requirements of the evolving strategic inputs model.
- The 'Approach to FET Planning' document will now incorporate three new elements namely, 'Strategic Approach to Planning', 'ESF Reporting' and 'Grant and Grant Assurance'.
- The SOLAS Funding Parameters and Requirements Guidelines document will incorporate the following four new elements; National and Regional/ETB Targets, FET provision categorised under an occupational skills cluster, ESF Reporting, Grant Assurance.
- The FAR 3 Element will now reflect the Strategic Goals, Targets and Actions material captured in the Pilot, "Strategic pilot" documentation.
- The SOLAS Funding Application Request Database (Provision and Funding) is now integrated with the PLSS and also contains 'estimated' Input, Output and Outcome variables for ETB provision.
- FET provision will be summed up and grouped at course level e.g. Childcare, by Full-time, Part-time, by Programme, by Skill Cluster, by NFQ, etc.
- A new front end "Target Table" for FAR is being considered that will allow targets to be inputted under each programme type e.g. PLC, Traineeship.
- Introduction of a more streamlined classification of FET provision based on the primary purpose/target cohort of the provision e.g. full time employability courses aimed at job seekers, part time courses aimed at re-engaging adult learners.
- A new MIS on the PLSS Learner Database will be developed to give multi lens views on the reporting of FET provision on a 'Monthly', 'Quarterly', 'Annual' Basis.
- A proposed new target table in the **Database Element** of the new FAR system is evolving on the lines of Table 3 below;


Table 3: Example of a Proposed Table of Targets

Programme Target Table	INPUTS		OUTPUTS			OUTCOMES		
	Utilisation	Retention	Completion	Certification	Employment	Progression HET	Progression FET	
Apprenticeship	95%	95%	95%	95%	98%	0%	0%	
Post Leaving Certificate (PLC)	95%	85%	90%	90%	60%	20%	10%	
BTEI	90%							
Community Training Centres	90%							
Specific Skills Training	95%							
Traineeship Training	95%							
Voluntary Literacy	70%							
VTOS Core	85%							
Community Education	80%							

Note: While each ETB will have the facility to set targets in the FAR system against FET programme type (e.g. PLC, VTOS), SOLAS is proposing to introduce this gradually. In that regard SOLAS is proposing to use a traffic light system against each input, output and outcomes target.

Green  is intended to represent a target that will be introduced and achieved within a three year time frame (cool target).

Amber  is intended to represent a target that will be introduced and achieved within two years (moderate target).

Red  is intended to represent a target to be achieved in the next planning cycle (so-called 'hot' target) - in this instance in 2018. Targets will be review by SOLAS on an annual basis and classified accordingly.

New Funding Arrangements

SOLAS has also decided to proceed with the next phase in the development and installation of a strategic inputs and outcomes-based funding model. This has been possible given the insights gleaned from the pilot, including the success of the feasibility test with regard to tracking learners using CSO-based administrative datasets, the successful on-going roll-out of the PLSS and the commencement of development work in respect of counterfactual impact evaluation of FET.

This work will encompass the following;

1. A new SOLAS funding model will be developed by SOLAS in consultation with DES for implementation across all 16 ETBs for installation in the 2018/2019 service planning exercise (estimated start date 3rd Qtr 2018).
2. A Strategic Framework Agreement will be signed by SOLAS with each of the 16 ETBs incorporating a set of commitments to be progressed in 2018 (and thereafter) and supported by a strategic inputs approach and associated toolkit.
3. In support of (1) and (2) above, SOLAS will develop national targets for installation in the 2017/2018 service planning exercise in respect of the following FET provision;
 - National Post Leaving Certificate Programme (PLC)
 - Specific Skills Courses
 - Traineeships including Career Traineeships
 - Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)
 - National Youthreach Programme, including Community Training Workshops (CTCs)
 - Local Training Initiatives (LTIs).
4. National targets to be achieved by the ETB sector overall will be set by SOLAS in consultation with DES in respect of;
 - Retention rates
 - Certification rates
 - Award rates including rates of achievement of full awards
 - Full award rates in specific sectors of business as set out in the SOLAS Corporate Plan 2017-2019
 - Completion rates
 - Priority cohort levels including persons with a disability
 - Placement into a job
 - Progression to HE
 - Progression to FET /other education / training
 - Transitions (back) to welfare status/unemployment/inactivity.

5. In support of (4) above, SOLAS will agree local ETB level targets as appropriate so that the overall SOLAS-set national targets for the ETB sector (on an aggregate basis) can be achieved.
6. SOLAS will agree an overall national ETB target (again supported by individual ETB-level targets) in respect of FET provision provided at NFQ levels 1-3 taking account of the relevant Government targets set out in the National Skills Strategy 2025, the Action Plan for Education and the SOLAS Corporate Plan 2017-2019.
7. SOLAS-set targets for the ETB sector overall and for individual ETBs will be applied via the annual SOLAS service planning exercise to all FET provision on a phased basis. Full time provision will be the primary focus in the early stages of this process. Part time provision with a primarily social inclusion/LLL (re)-engagement focus will be incorporated at a later stage in the target setting process. Such provision such as community education will require careful consideration by SOLAS in respect of the most appropriate targets taking into account its overall purpose and objectives in the context of the National Skills Strategy, The Action Plan for Education, the FET Strategy 2014-2019 and the SOLAS Corporate Plan 2017-2019.
8. To support the target setting work at (3), (4), (5), (6), (7) above, the SLMRU and the CSO have agreed in principle to enter into a partnership which will entail embedding a qualified data analyst for a continuous period of up to a year in the CSO offices. This will allow SOLAS, on a phased basis, to expand learner tracking to all 16 ETBs and to all FET as per timelines outlined above.

Finally it is important to note that SOLAS will work assiduously to progress the actions outlined above taking into account available resources. This will be a challenge. The development of a "Target Table" and automation of data within FAR is required so that the system is operational in a timely manner to support the 2017/2018 planning exercise.

An MIS on the Learner Database element of the PLSS also needs to be developed in a timely manner. The full establishment of the SOLAS Planning and Grant Assurance Units will also be required in support of the work programme.

APPENDIX A - Extract from Strategic Performance Expectations Agreement - ETB (A) Skills for the Economy

Description of new planned Improvements to PLC provision and services:

- Following the publication of the National PLC Review the **ETB (A)** PLC provision will be benchmarked in relation to the national findings.
- Commence a pilot tracking/survey of a sample of PLC students.
- **ETB (A)** is about to embark on a series of meetings with local IoT to discuss high level strategic planning and to progress a Memorandum of Understanding between IoT and **ETB (A)**. Progression pathways will be explored within this context.

As part of the MOU discussions, **ETB (A)** will table the topic of the number of places reserved for QQI Level 5 students progressing to Level 6/7 courses.

- **ETB (A)** will continue discussions with the University in relation to progression routes for PLC students.
- Begin the process of updating library/research facilities at Z College.
- For 2015/2016 school year Sport, Exercise & Recreation will be offered at a second location.
- Amend the provision in relation to the modules offered on major awards i.e. customer service, spreadsheets, Nutrition, Infection Control, Veneering and Marquetry.
- Schools offering PLC courses to engage in a PR campaign with support from **ETB (A)**.
- Convene meetings with Guidance staff of all 27 second level schools in order to better explain the PLC programme.

APPENDIX B

Extract of 'TARGETS' from Implementation Plan of ETB (A)

<i>PLC provision</i>		<i>SST</i>	
1. Increase retention rate to 90%	<i>Update</i>	1. Increase progression to employment to 59%	<i>Update</i>
2. Increase the progression rate to FET & HE to 25%	<i>Update</i>	2. Increase certification rates for the full award to 56%	<i>Update</i>
3. Increase the placement to employment rate to 50%	<i>Update</i>	3. Increase progression to FET/HE to 17%	<i>Update</i>
4. Sub-Strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Benchmark ETB (A) PLC provision in relation to the national findings of the PLC Evaluation ● Introduce a second Sports, Exercise and Recreation Course ● Conduct a PR campaign and information sharing around PLC provision and options and evaluate results ● Supply progression pathways information and case study to progress Action 3.5.1 in the FET Strategy being led by QQI an supported by SOLAS 	<i>Update</i>	4. Introduce pilot programmes in the following; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Introduction to Sport ➤ Financial Analysis ➤ Digital Media Training ➤ Tourism. 	

Appendix C

Total ETB Cohort - Composition of Participants and Courses

Training Type	Age Groups			Total
	<25	25-54	>54	
Apprenticeship	660	180	0	840
Bridging/Foundation	10	20	0	40
Community Training Centre	130	0	0	130
European & Other Initiatives	10	20	0	30
Evening Courses	190	1040	80	1320
Library Projects	0	40	40	80
Linked Work Experience	0	0	0	0
Local Training Initiative	120	40	0	170
On Line Learning	0	20	0	20
PLC	3180	1800	150	5120
RAPS2011	120	70	0	200
Return to Work	0	20	10	30
Specialist Training Provider	50	140	30	220
Specific Skills Long	410	1000	100	1510
Sponsored Training	10	180	10	210
Traineeship	160	270	30	460
Total	5,070	4,850	440	10,360

Appendix D

Composition of Courses Taken by Broad Field of Education

Broad Field of Education	Totals
00 - Generic programmes and qualifications	630
01 - Education	450
02 - Arts and Humanities	750
03 - Social sciences, journalism and information	330
04 - Business, administration and law	1,700
05 - Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	150
06 - Information and Communication Technologies	1,200
07 - Engineering, manufacturing and construction	2,160
08 - Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	280
09 - Health and Welfare	1,290
10 - Services	1,420
Total	10,360

Appendix E

Skill Clusters 2017	
Agriculture, Horticulture and Mariculture Skills	Health, Family other Social Services Skills
Animal Science Skills	Information Technology Skills
Arts & Craft Skills	Language Skills
Built Environment Skills	Management Skills
Business, Administration Skills	Manufacturing Skills
Core ICT skills	Media Graphics Communications Skills
Core Personal Skills	Natural Resources Skills
Engineering (Electrical) Skills	Research and Education/Training Skills
Engineering (IT) Skills	Sales & Marketing Skills
Engineering (Mechanical) Skills	Science and Technology Skills
Engineering (Transport) Skills	Security, Guarding & Emergency Services Skills
Engineering Skills	Skills Sampling, General Learning and Core Personal skills
Entrepreneurship Skills	Sport and Leisure Skills
Financial Services Skills	Tourism Skills
Food and Beverage Skills	Transport, Distribution & Logistics Skills
General Learning	Web Design & Development skills
Hairdressing, Beauty and Complementary Therapies Skills	