

INOU Submission: SOLAS FET Strategy 2025-2029



February 2025

Introduction

The Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOUE) welcomes the invitation to make a submission to the SOLAS FET Strategy 2025-2029.

The INOUE is a federation of unemployed people, unemployed centres, unemployed groups, community organisations and Trade Unions. The INOUE represents and defends the rights and interests of those who want decent employment and cannot obtain it. We promote and campaign for policies to achieve full employment for all. We also campaign for an acceptable standard of living for unemployed people and their dependents. The organisation has over 190 affiliated organisations and 600 individual members. We provide a range of training for people who are unemployed and organisations working with people distanced from the labour market; we provide a welfare rights information service, primarily by telephone, by participating at in-person events; we analyse and discuss with our membership relevant Government policies; undertake advocacy work; and work with a wide range of other organisations on issues of common concern.

Our submission will be shaped by the three themes highlighted in the consultation process, while also highlighting the context in which unemployed people find themselves in, and how the FET sector plays a vital role in communities and the prevention of long-term unemployment and distancing from the labour market.

Key to the success of the future Strategy is alignment with existing national policy. These include:

- *The National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance (2024-2030)*
Aims to promote lifelong career-management skills and lifelong career mobility.
- *Adult Literacy for Life (2021-2031)*
Reducing the number of adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy by 2030, with ETB's highlighted as a key provider of supports.
- *Pathways to Work (2021-2025)*
Focus on reduction of long-term unemployment and targeted supports for those distanced from the labour market.
- *Roadmap for Social Inclusion (2020-2025)*
Aiming to improve employment services, specific provisions to support socially excluded groups access training and education support and reduce poverty in households.
- *The Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (2024-2030)*
Aims to increase the numbers of Travellers and Roma participating in FET.
- *Action Plan for Disability Services (2024-2026)*
Aims to support alternative pathways for people with disabilities to further education and training.

The newly published Programme for Government "Securing Ireland's Future" sets ambitious goals in certain areas of FET, including an additional 12,500 apprenticeships by 2030, an apprenticeship action plan for 2026-2030, and increased provision of "green skills" courses¹.

¹ [gov.ie - Programme for Government 2025 - Securing Ireland's Future](https://www.gov.ie/en/programme-for-government-2025-securing-ireland-s-future/)

EU policy is underpinned by the EU Pillar of Social Rights, in which has a target of 60% of all adults participating in training every year, with Ireland having a target of 64% by 2030².

The INOU also continues to monitor trends in education and training activation programmes targeted towards those on the Live Register.

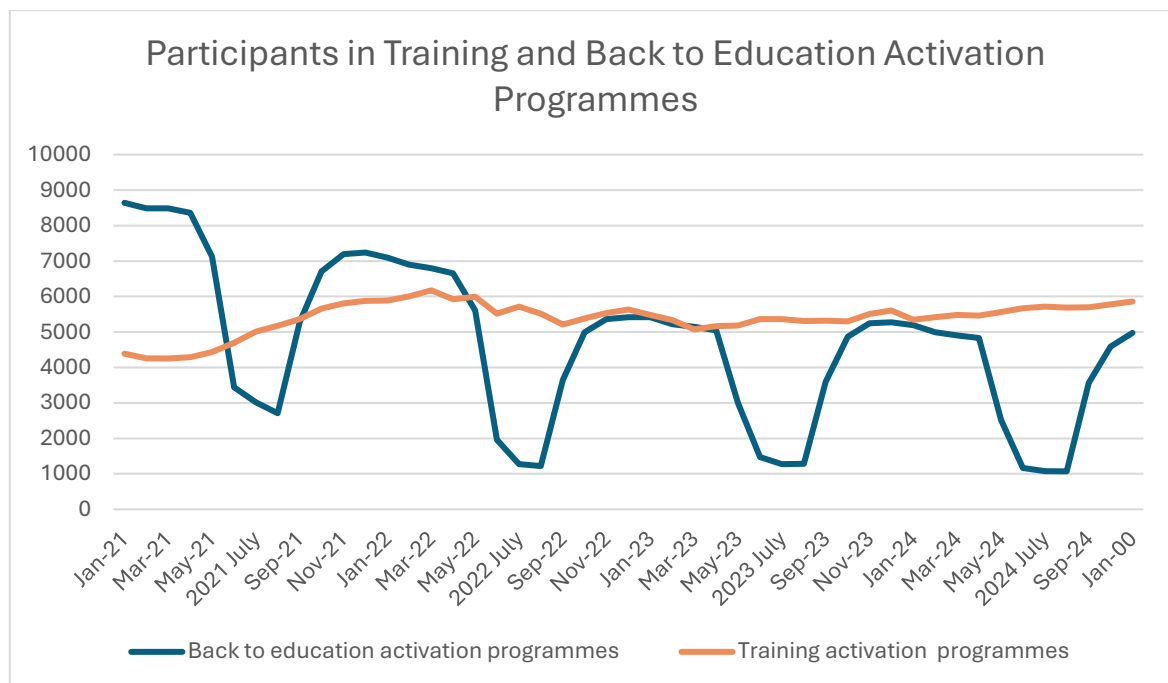


Figure 1 Activation Programmes. Source: CSO

The graph shows different participation rates of people in activation programmes for education and training for those who were on the Live Register. From March 2021 to March 2024, the participation of people in back to education programmes has declined by 42%, while training activation programme participation decreased by only 4% in the same period.

Given the range of skills people entering, re-entering and seeking to move to more sustainable employment require, it would be important to support unemployed people and others distanced from the labour market to engage in meaningful education and training options, and for SOLAS to prioritise this action in its strategy.

Theme 1: Delivering on Ireland’s Skills Needs

Ireland’s skills needs continue to increase with increased labour market tightness and demand for digital and green skills; alongside this, there is a high risk of job losses with the incoming transition of generative AI and automation, with 31% of jobs in Ireland currently exposed to generative AI³; job destruction of up to 5.5% is estimated in the EU27⁴. There is therefore an opportunity for the FET Strategy to drive this provision of training to reduce skills mismatch and ensure people can adapt to increasingly complex work tasks.

² [European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan - European Commission](#)

³ OECD (2024), Job Creation and Local Economic Development 2024: The Geography of Generative AI <https://doi.org/10.1787/83325127-en>

⁴ CEDFOP (2024) [Digital skills ambitions in action - Publications Office of the EU](#)

While addressing this need, there should be targeted approaches to ensure national upskilling and reskilling via FET is provided using an approach of proportionate universalism, i.e. resourcing and delivering at a scale and intensity according to the degree of need. The INOU is concerned that lifelong learning is more likely to be engaged in by workers already in high-skilled employment, while people who are distanced from the labour market are less likely and find it difficult to avail of FET that meets their aim of finding sustainable employment.

Decision making in the resourcing of FET underpinned by data including skills and demographic forecasting, will enable SOLAS to provide services to people most at risk of social exclusion, in regions with the highest skills shortages. In this regard, this will ensure that “FET can be a pivotal driver of equality and inclusion, ensuring access to education for all”. A “skills transformation” is required for Ireland to compete at an international level; this transformation should drive increased economic equality and social inclusion, rather than exacerbate existing inequality.

The OECD skills report confirms the INOU’s position that FET must be flexible and balanced to the variety of needs of learners⁵; vocational skills and transferable workforce skills are key and FET is an end goal for many participants further from the labour market; while education and pathways to avail of higher education is important, enforcing the pathways into FET itself for people furthest from the labour market is essential. Further recognition by employers and the public sector of FET is required, for graduates to receive parity of esteem with higher education peers.

People looking for employment, particularly those who are long-term unemployed, face a number of barriers to accessing a job with their existing skillset. The changing world of work, with the twin transitions of digitalisation and climate adaptation, is increasingly leading to employers to focus on specialist high skilled jobs with increasingly higher standards to reach. People out of work have reduced social capital, with often lower educational attainment and little opportunity to strengthen their existing skills or learn new ones that will make them more ready to work. Further education and training offers opportunities to marginalised groups to upskill and prepare to enter (or re-enter) the world of work, and access work that is more likely to have better pay and conditions than job opportunities that are perceived as low skilled and / or precarious.

Existing programmes targeted for the long term unemployed to develop their skills are a core development for FET nationally. A key programme is the SOLAS full time training for unemployed people; while this programme is performing well, there should be examination of expanding this programme to people at risk of long-term unemployment, e.g. an early school leaver, or those in a role perceived as being low skill or in precarious work.

Targets for marginalised groups availing of FET with historically low unemployment rates is required, including disabled people, Travellers, Roma, one parent families, and households with low workforce intensity. These targets should be accompanied by financial resources in creating supportive and accessible FET that suits the needs of the learner.

⁵ [OECD \(2023\) Skills Strategy Ireland | OECD](#)

Actions to achieve these aims should include:

- A proportionate universalism approach to FET provision nationally. This should include equality-budgeting and targeted resources towards increasing participation of marginalised groups in FET.
- Decisions in resource allocation should be underpinned by up-to-date information on regional skill needs and towards communities and individuals who remain excluded from the labour market in order to drive development in disadvantaged areas.
- Implement increased access to FET for people at high risk of long-term unemployment, building on existing activation programmes, but also resource learning that focuses on personal and community development and presents learners with opportunities to address issues in their own lives.

Theme 2: Fundamentally Changing the Way We Deliver FET

The OECD Skills report calls on the FET system to ramp up activities to increase the cohesion between services and ensure access is at the heart of FET. To this end, disadvantaged people and those furthest from the labour market are a key group to prioritise and ensure they can access lifelong learning that meets their needs. FET must be flexible, adapted to the learner, with barriers eliminated alongside targeted intensive supports to those who need them.

Being a public body, SOLAS must report on the implementation of the Public Sector Human Rights and Equality Duty; the INOU welcomes the assessment exercise carried out⁶, and looks forward to seeing the inclusion of an action plan to address inequalities in the forthcoming Further Education and Training Strategy.

The INOU often supports people with limited knowledge and information available on the supports available to them, and their options of availing of FET while unemployed, and interactions with their existing social protection entitlements. Information gaps often lead to a lack of confidence and less informed decision-making, leaving people dis-incentivised to avail of FET. An 'open door' policy should be the norm across the public-facing services to effectively inform people of their options and to signpost to services effectively, with each staff member informed of the local services and FET programmes available in their locality.

The Public Employment Service and ETBs should have seamless systems that allow transitions for people that is underpinned by a holistic guidance system that centres the needs of the person looking to improve their skills and access quality jobs. It is essential that people can simply navigate these systems and are informed about their options, routes to progress, and how their personal circumstances will change, e.g. participating in further education while in a Community Employment Scheme.

FET should be underpinned by a comprehensive guidance system, with skilled employees to inform and support people looking to avail of FET that will improve their access to meaningful employment in their local area. This should be in partnership with the Public Employment Service and informed by the National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance.

⁶ SOLAS (2024) [Public Sector Equality & Human Rights Duty](#)

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) that is consistently applied nationally is required and will position FET both for learners and policymakers as an avenue to progress and develop a person's existing skillset. There is a need to highlight and enhance supports for RPL among jobseekers who are reskilling and transitioning between jobs, and those with lower educational attainment.

The provision of tailored FET offerings may be required in particular contexts, for example, in the training of Traveller primary healthcare workers. This should be provided to facilitate the formal recognition of people's existing knowledge and may be sector-specific; as part of this process community education and traineeships have important roles to play.

Underpinning these processes should be modern systems for monitoring and evaluating services and outcomes for learners. Services should be evaluated regularly in partnership with service users, with targeted aims to improve outcomes for learners including those with an educational disadvantage, from a marginalised group or those required additional needs.

Actions to ensure this occurs include:

- This Strategy should illustrate how it will support SOLAS to fulfil its enactment of the Public Sector Human Rights Duty.
- Increased development of linkages between public bodies, including ETBs and the Public Employment Service, to ensure cohesion and seamless access to services for all potential users.
- Integrated guidance provision in FET to ensure people are informed of their options and their potential career opportunities.
- Improved provision of information on the options that are available to unemployed people, people employed in low skilled employment, and early school leavers, so they can assess their learning opportunities and improve their employment prospects.
- Improved integration and transition between the employment services and supports and education and training opportunities, opportunities that are meaningful for the learner and lead to better outcomes.
- Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) integrated nationally across all FET providers, with enhanced supports for jobseekers.
- The provision of tailored FET offerings, particularly to increase employment opportunities for marginalised groups.
- Robust data collection mechanisms and monitoring and evaluating processes to ensure SOLAS is responsive and places learners at the centre of its decision making processes.

Theme 3: Further widen participation by linking to communities and services.

As mentioned, the Ireland has committed to 64% of adults in Ireland participating in training by 2030 in the EU Pillar of Social Rights. Embedding skills policy as a priority for the government is key for Ireland to reach this target; SOLAS is a key driver that is well positioned to contribute to achieving this target.

The OECD Skills Report highlights the low cohesion between Governmental departments and lack of stakeholder involvement in the development and implementation of skills policy. It is now time that FET and skills policy implementation is evident in several Government departments and public services in partnership with SOLAS and ETBs. This will ensure participation and access to FET is improved throughout Ireland.

As discussed, public employment services (PES) are frontline services that should be informed and capable of promoting FET to their clients; informed guidance and supports to people to avail of FET within the PES system is an excellent way to ensure people can improve their skills and remain engaged in community supports, reducing their risk of being long-term unemployed. Further work is needed to ease the transition between these services, with proactive information and systematic data collection.

Lifelong learning continues to be dominated by people already in employment and with a higher educational attainment⁷. It is essential that SOLAS ensures that FET provision is accessible and attractive to people who are most marginalised and provides targeted supports to ensure that learner goals are achievable in their context. It is known that people who would benefit most from FET are often those who have lower participation rates; developments are required in order to reduce the barriers to access community-based FET via targeted supports and improved stakeholder engagement.

Participation of people furthest from the labour market is essential in ensuring they have the potential to access good quality jobs. Targeted initiatives to encourage the unemployed into supportive, accessible FET programmes is required. With unemployment at such low rates, improving the systems and pathways in place now and create a cohesive FET offering for people on the Live Register will serve to create a more robust system when unemployment rates may begin to increase again.

Addressing the barriers to participation and access to FET for people on the Live Register remains multi-faceted and intersectional. The community and voluntary sector are essential in this regard to address these issues, to work alongside public bodies including the ETBs. The community and voluntary sector have the knowledge and experience within communities to report on issues and provide solutions to ensuring FET is an attractive offering to those who are marginalised in communities and within society.

To this end, actions to take to widen participation in FET include:

- Ensure people in long-term unemployment and others distanced from the labour market participate in FET at similar levels to the majority population.
- Address the costs of participation in lifelong education and training and proactively provide information on affordable and accessible courses.
- Provide good career and educational guidance to support people to access the most appropriate course.
- Ensure there is good sign posting within and across the system so people of working age know where they can go to get the most appropriate supports and provision.
- ETBs to work in partnership with the community and voluntary organisations in their areas, to ensure supports are provided to address the known barriers to participation and improve student retention.

⁷ [lifelong-learning_report.pdf](#)

- Properly resource community groups in their work identifying and addressing the needs of people experiencing social and economic exclusion.
- Support the community and voluntary sector, an important entry point for people more distanced from the labour market, to play its part in supporting employment, education and training opportunities.
- Strengthened links with ETBs and the Public Employment services, including Intreo, the Local Area Employment Services, and the National Employment Services.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

For further information on this submission:

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