

AONTAS Information Referral Service

Outcomes and Findings

January-April 2014

Introduction

Although some progress has been made, Ireland still has a substantial challenge in improving the skills of the adult population. Clear targets for improving the skills of adults are outlined in the National Skills Strategy 2020¹ which was published in 2005. A progress report from the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs in April 2014 found that 15% of the current workforce had lower secondary education or less².

Findings from the OECD Survey on Adult Skills (PIAAC)³ data in October 2013 show some improvement from the IALS⁴ survey of 1997 but are still a cause for concern in Ireland. According to the survey **17.9%** or about **1 in 6** Irish adults are at or below level 1 on a five level literacy scale. Ireland ranks **15th** out of **24** participating countries. **25% or 1 in 4** Irish adults score at or below level 1 for numeracy compared to just over **20%** on average across participating countries. This places Ireland **18th** out of **24** countries.

Ireland does not compare well with other European countries when it comes to adult participation in lifelong learning⁵. The most recent Eurostat figures compiled by the European Commission indicate a participation rate of **7.1%**, below the average participation rate in Europe of **9%**, and well below our UK counterparts. In Scandinavian countries such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark where their education systems have a strong reputation, participation in lifelong learning is particularly high, on average **30%**.

Finding the right information is difficult

Access to clear information has long been an issue for adults returning to education. The multiplicity of programmes and agencies along with lack of clarity about social welfare entitlements, or simply knowing where to start can be overwhelming for adults thinking about returning to education. These factors may be compounded by personal issues such as lack of confidence, or negative experiences of the formal education system.

Over the past number of years, there has been an increased focus from the government of the role of adult education and training in helping people who are unemployed to return to the labour market. Meanwhile, a significant reform agenda underway in the further education and training sector has seen the establishment of a number of new agencies, including SOLAS (the new Further Education and Training Authority) and the 16 Education and Training Boards following the abolition

¹ <http://www.skillsstrategy.ie/>

² Available from http://www.skillsireland.ie/media/Statement_of_Activity_2013-Publication.pdf

³ The Programme for International Assessment in Adult Competencies (PIAAC) is an international survey of adult skills conducted in 24 countries under the direction of the OECD. Research in Ireland was conducted by the CSO. Further information is available at <http://www.cso.ie/en/surveysandmethodology/education/piaac/>

⁴ The International Adult Literacy Survey, for more information see <http://www.nala.ie/resources/international-adult-literacy-survey-results-ireland>

⁵ See <http://www.nala.ie/resources/international-adult-literacy-survey-results-ireland>

of FÁS, the former State Training Agency. New Intreo services are being established nationwide by the Department of Social Protection to offer a 'one stop shop' service to people who are unemployed, and to help them find employment, education or training. Work on integrating the delivery of further education and training has been underway for the past two years, and this has culminated with the launch of the first ever national Further Education and Training Strategy on May 12th 2014. All of these changes are designed to provide a state of the art service for adult learners but while the co-ordinated systems are being developed, access to accurate information as well as assistance in making the right choices of programme have been identified as key barriers for adult returners.

AONTAS Information Referral Service

AONTAS provides an information referral service to support adults wishing to return to education and training. Both direct and referral information on adult education and training opportunities and supports are provided through its telephone and web-based service. The work is supported by our information booklet 'What Next' which was reviewed and updated in 2013. The service was enhanced in 2013 by the development of a new website www.onestepup.ie, a Freephone Helpline 1800 303 669 and an interactive online calendar of learning events. The One Step Up campaign is funded by the European Commission as an initiative which promotes the renewed EU Agenda for Adult Learning.

This report provides information about the experience of adult learners in Ireland in accessing education and training activities based on the data gathered from the referral service. Telephone queries via the Helpline are documented and analysed, while basic profiles from those who complete a simple, online wizard tool are collated and analysed, and provide useful insights into people who are returning to education.

Summary of Key Findings

From the period January-April 2014 the number of calls to the information service was **186**, a rise from **70** in the same period last year. The launch of the One Step Up Freephone helpline and website www.onestepup.ie last September has had a huge impact on the volume of calls and emails received. **2847** user profiles have been gathered from the One Step Up website between January and April 2014 which has resulted in the collection of rich data on service users. The service has also engaged in a follow-up exercise with a sample of service users with a view to determining how local supports and services are meeting learners' needs.

The data from both the Freephone Helpline and the user profiles for One Step Up has been compiled and yields the following information (some of the data collected through the Freephone Helpline is more comprehensive):-

- Equal numbers of male and females used the Freephone Helpline. This varies month to month but on average it is around **51:49** female to male ratio. In previous years there were significantly more females contacting the service
- A higher proportion of people identified themselves as being from urban areas, with the urban: rural ratio being **71:29**

- **41%** of callers to the Freephone are currently unemployed comparing closely with the user profiles on One Step Up which found that **42%** were unemployed (of these **66 %** were Long-term Unemployed)
- **28%** of callers to the Freephone were currently employed (Full time/Part time) which was less than the **40%** of users from One Step Up.
- **8%** of callers to the Freephone helpline reported having no formal qualification as their current level of education with **21%** having the Junior Cert or equivalent, **34%** having their Leaving Certificate and **34%** of people having achieved a third level qualification
- **44%** of callers to the Freephone were looking for specific courses again comparing closely with the user profiles on One Step Up which found that **42%** were looking for courses
 - *The most popular courses identified by the Freephone Helpline were Health/Fitness/Beauty, Computers/IT, Healthcare, Languages (includes English) and Accounting/Business/Finance*
- **16%** of callers were looking for more general advice on returning to education compared to **23%** of the user profiles on One Step Up
- The main barriers to education identified by callers to the Freephone Helpline include **a lack of information** and **a lack of suitable courses**
- Both the Freephone helpline and the website have a nationwide reach. So far this year calls have been received from people in **23** counties across Ireland and the website is being used by people in every county
- The age profiles gathered from the One Step Up User profiles showed that **50% of people were between 35-65 Years**, **24% were 18-25 Years**, **23% were between 25-35 Years** and **0.02% were between 65+ Years**

Follow Up Study Sample

A follow-up survey has been conducted with a sample of 10% of callers to the helpline to see how they were getting on. Callers were asked what service they contacted and whether they found what they were initially looking for. They were also asked what they were currently doing. The aim of this exercise was to determine whether the supports and services are meeting the learner's needs.

- Callers contacted various services including **ETBs, Qualifax, Intreo/Local Employment Services, Private Providers, Partnerships and NALA**
- Of the proportion of people that we contacted **48%** of people found what they were looking for **52%** did not
- Some of the main reasons why people did not find what they were looking for were **a lack of funding, no suitable courses available to them, no places left on their preferred course or they were offered a different option than what they originally wanted.**

Here are some Case Studies to illustrate our findings

Case Study 1

Person 1, a female contacted the Information service last year looking for information regarding funding options for a course. She and her husband are both long term unemployed and they moved their young family from Cavan to Dublin in order to have more training and education options. She was looking for funding options to continue with her education as she had left school with a Junior Certificate. Through the information service she received information regarding the Back to Education Allowance, She applied for it and her application was successful. She is now in receipt of the Back to Education Allowance and has completed a FETAC level 5 course. She is hoping to progress on to third level this September.

Case Study 2

Person 2, a male aged 45 contacted the Information service looking for information on where he could sit his Leaving Certificate. He had already achieved a third level qualification but needed the Leaving Certificate to gain entry into a Paramedics course; he also wanted to do his Leaving Certificate to improve his self-esteem and to set a good example to his children. He was referred to his local ETB and he contacted them to enquire about Leaving Certificate subjects in English, Maths and History but instead was offered was a FETAC Level 3/4 in Maths or Level 5/6 in Childcare. He felt disheartened that he could not access his preferred course in his local area.

Case Study 3

Person 3, a male contacted the Information service looking for information regarding Springboard courses. He was referred to springboardcourses.ie where he found a suitable course in his local area. He is currently doing a Pharmaceutical/ Medical Device Course through Innopharma Labs and is due to finish by the end of May. He has thoroughly enjoyed the course and is hopeful that it will lead to future employment.

Case Study 4

Person 4, a female contacted the Information service looking to do a part time accounts technician course as she was recently made redundant. She was referred to her local ETB but was unable to get adequate funding for the course as she could only attend on a part time basis. They advised her to do a full time course but this does not suit her as she cannot afford childcare costs. She is currently looking for alternative options.

Conclusions

This first analysis of the information referral service highlights the urgent need for the strengthening and streamlining of supports and services to meet the needs of adult learners seeking entry to the labour market. The Further Education and Training Strategy launched by SOLAS in May 2014⁶ has identified this challenge and the need to align the needs of the labour market while taking account of the starting point of the learner. Those who are most distant from the labour market and

⁶ <http://www.solas.ie/docs/FETStrategy2014-2019.pdf>

education will require greater levels of time and support before they are in a position to access the labour market.

An interesting finding from the data shows that of the **15%** of visitors seeking information about basic skills online, **65%** were in employment. While research shows that adults who lack basic skills are obviously at a higher risk of longterm unemployment it must also be recognised that there is a basic skills deficit within the workforce which has to be addressed by work –based learning. This is critical in terms of addressing the education and training needs of those in low paid, low skilled employment, who may not have access to education and training, or who may not be in a position to support their learning financially.

It is clear from the volume of service users that there is a need for a central information point as well as more training and upskilling especially in the area of guidance, for staff responsible for assisting learners in making appropriate choices. The high numbers of people who are unemployed visiting our website and contacting us by telephone indicates an information deficit. A clear, co-ordinated approach is needed when it comes to promoting the variety of initiatives available.

A worrying trend from the helpline statistics was the high percentage (**34%**) of young people between **18 and 25 years** who were seeking information about basic skills including reading and writing. Young people with low skills are at a high risk of falling into long-term unemployment so it is of crucial importance that interventions such as the Youth Guarantee are fully implemented to address this issue at an early stage.

While the follow-up survey sample is at an early stage of development it is expected that it will yield some valuable data on how adult learners are served at a local level. The high percentage of callers (**52%**) who reported that they did not find what they were looking for is worrying. In particular it points to the lack of appropriate courses to meet the demands of learners. Even with the best intentions

The experiences of adults returning to education points to the clear need for joined-up thinking, good communication and strong working relationships among the personnel and Departments charged with delivering the service.

May 2014

www.aontas.com/information

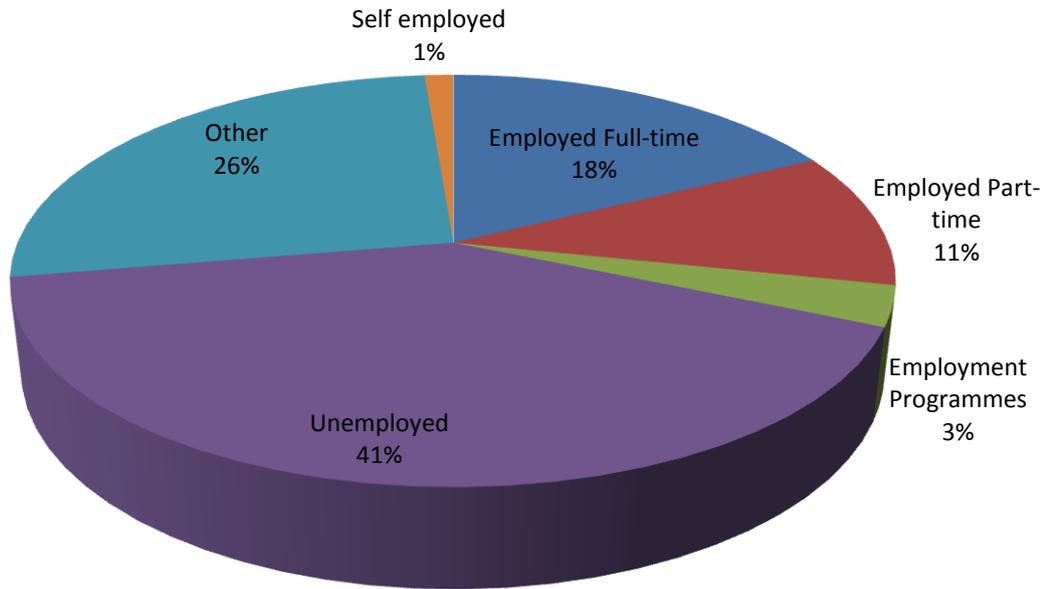
www.onestepup.ie

1800 303 669

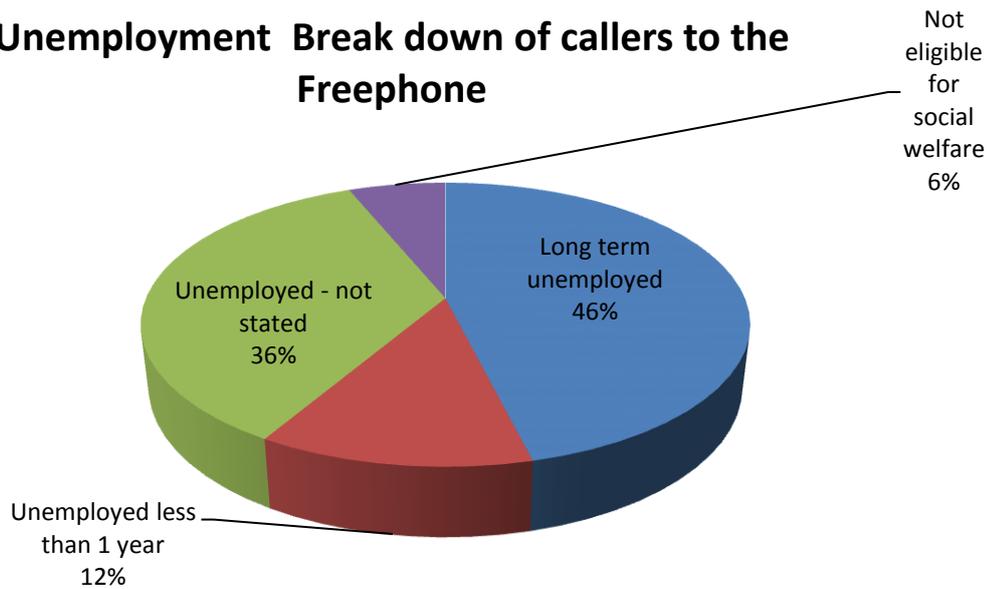
Appendix - Graphs

****Others includes the people who are not economically active (sick/disabled/retired and homemakers), learners and volunteers***

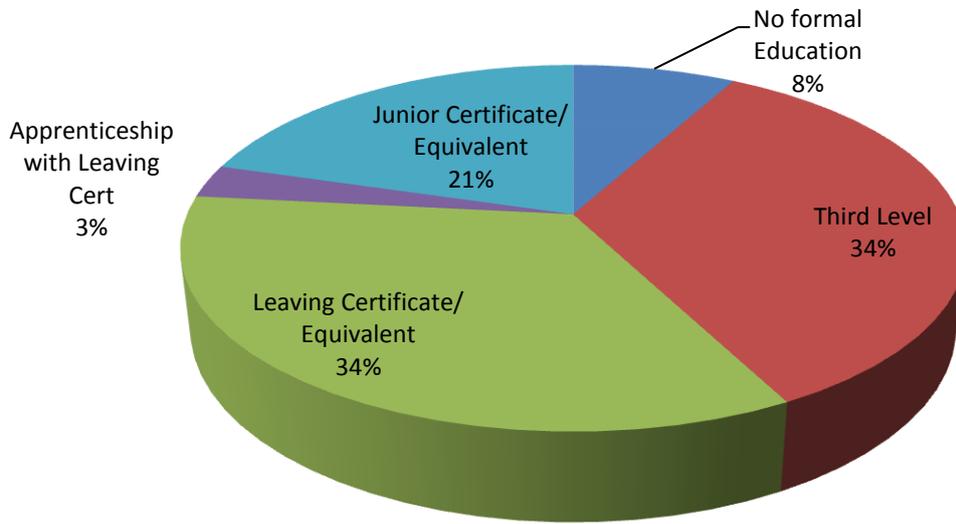
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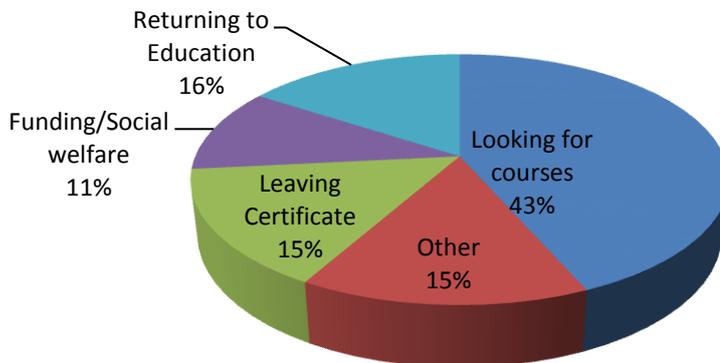
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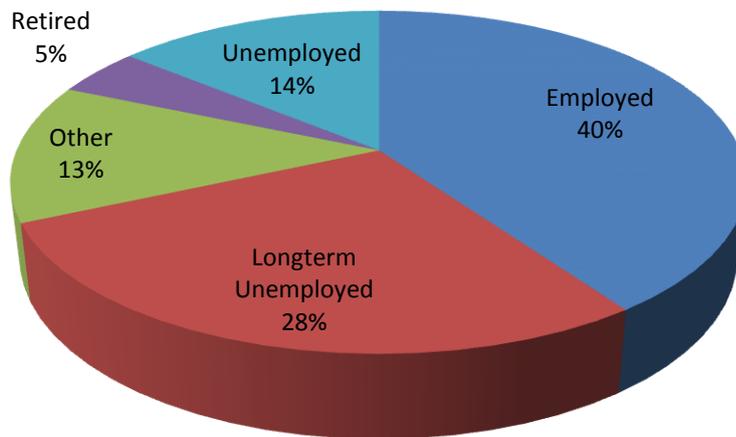
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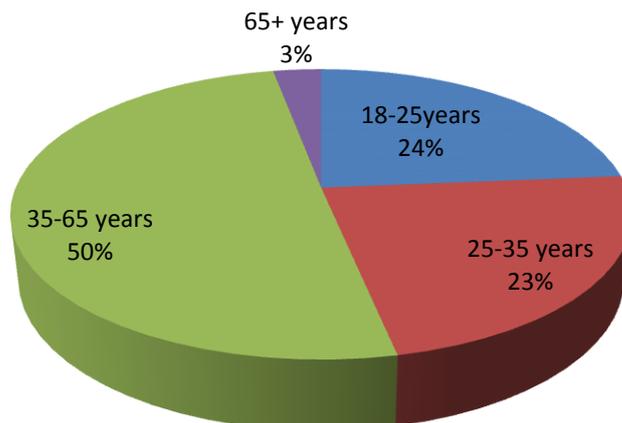
Nature of Query of callers to the Freephone



Employment Status of OSU Users



Age Profile of OSU Users



Nature of Query of OSU Users

