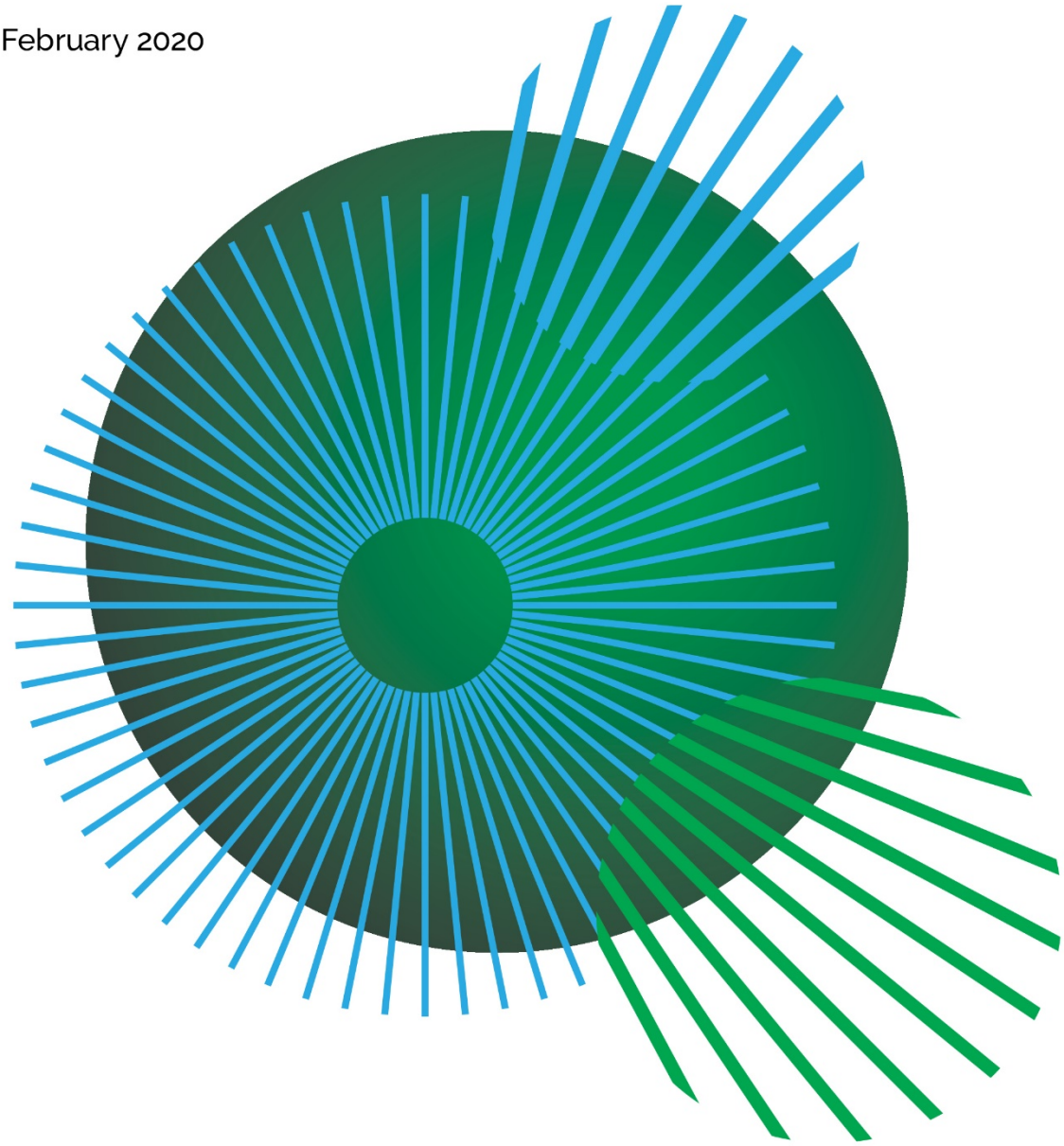
Evaluation of Specific Skills Training

Submitted to SOLAS

Prepared by Indecon International Economic Consultants

February 2020



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Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations

AEGI	Adult Educational Guidance Initiative
AEGS	Adult Educational Guidance Services
ATET	Average treatment effect on the treated
Certification rate	The percentage of beneficiaries on accredited courses that achieve certification, either QQI full or component awards and/or other awarding body (non-QQI) awards, in the year
CETS	Childcare Employment and Training Support
CIE	Counterfactual Impact Evaluation
Completion rate	Percentage of retained learners/beneficiaries who finish courses in year
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DEASP	Department of Employment and Social Affairs
DES	Department of Education and Skills
ERM	Extended regression model
ESF	European Social Fund
ETB	Education and Training Board
FET	Further Education and Training
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IPWRA model	Inverse-probability-weighted regression-adjustment model
JLD	Jobseekers Longitudinal Dataset
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NSS	National Skills Strategy
NUTS	Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics - is a geocode standard for referencing geographic subdivisions for statistical purposes
PSM model	Propensity score matching model
SOLAS	State organisation with responsibility for funding, planning and co-ordinating FET in Ireland
SST	Specific Skills Training

Executive Summary

Introduction and Background

This report is submitted to SOLAS by Indecon International Economics Consultants ('Indecon'). The report represents an independent evaluation of the Specific Skills Training (SST) programme. The purpose of this evaluation is to generate policy-relevant knowledge concerning the appropriateness, conduct and impacts of SST, and its effectiveness in terms of achieving national policy objectives.

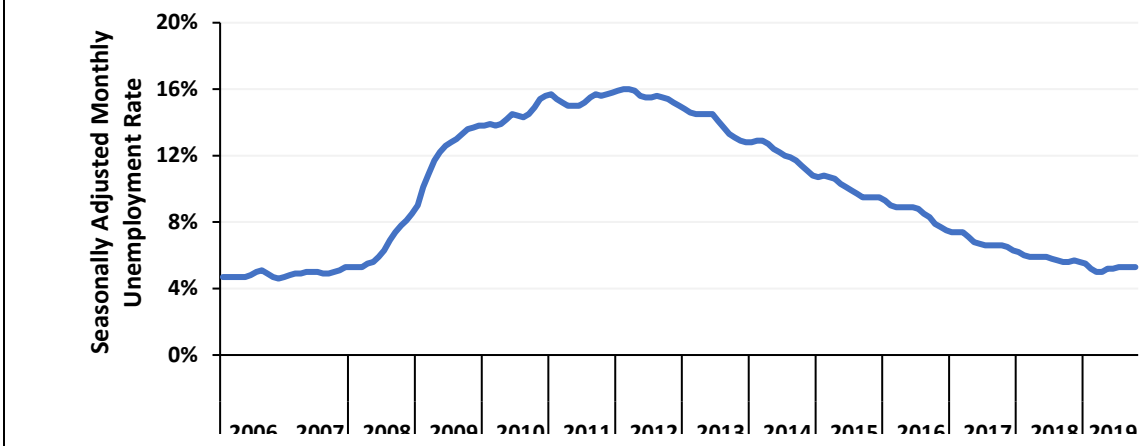
Specific Skills Training (SST) courses are designed to provide learners with a range of employability related skills and formal vocational qualifications to facilitate those entering the labour market for the first time and for people wishing to update or acquire new skills. Specific Skills Training is situated within the overall suite of vocational training programmes for unemployed/job-seekers funded by the European Social Fund via the Department of Education and Skills/SOLAS and provided by the ETBs, under the ESF activity banner 'Skills Training for the Unemployed'. Specific Skills Training (SST) was initially delivered by FÁS, and since 2014 has been delivered by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). SST courses can vary in duration from three to nine months in duration. The courses primarily concentrate on a combination of technical and generic skills to improve learners' future employment prospects. Specific Skills courses are provided at different levels (usually NFQ Levels 4-6 or equivalent).

Indecon has applied a methodological approach which was designed to triangulate evidence from a range of sources. The evaluation process included a programme of engagement with stakeholders, including new primary research among programme providers and learners. There were some limitations on available evidence as the programme is largely contracted out. The evaluation however entailed the completion of new econometric research to empirically assess the impact of SST on employment outcomes of participants via counterfactual impact analysis.

Wider Labour Market Context

The labour market has undergone dramatic changes over the last two decades. Following the economic recession, unemployment rose sharply, reaching approximately 16% in early 2012, before steadily declining towards pre-recession levels. An important issue is whether the changes in the labour market have been reflected in the level of participants on courses, including SST courses. However, the scale of increase in unemployment following the onset of the recession made providing sufficient courses challenging.

Seasonally Adjusted Monthly Unemployment Rate (2006-2019)

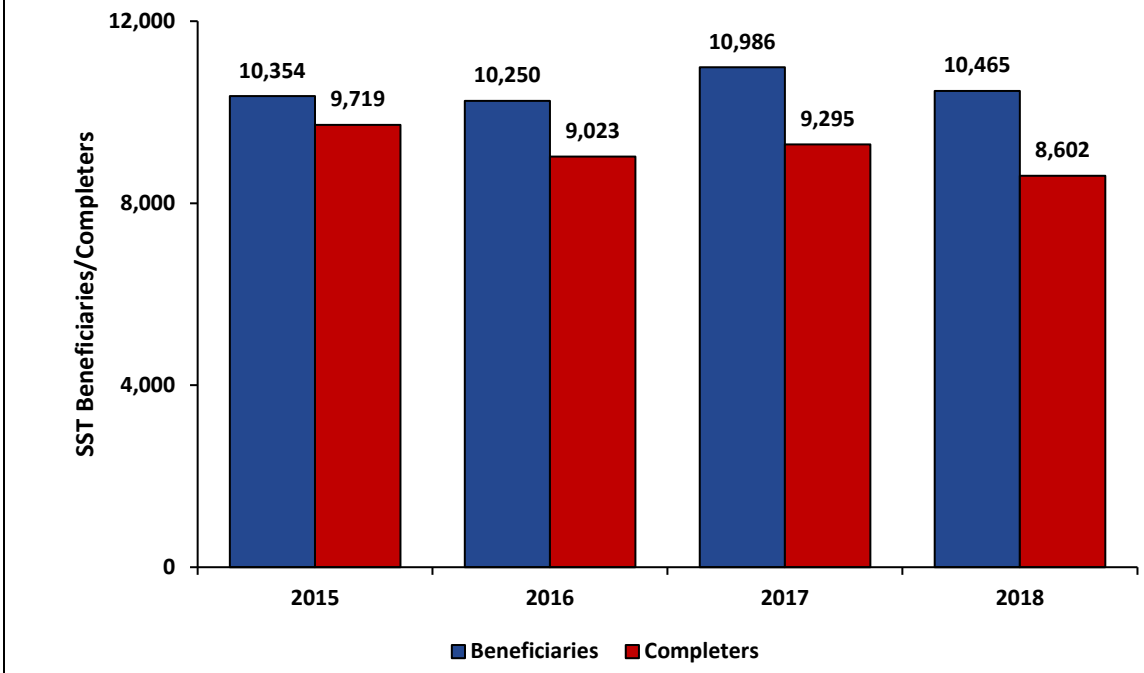


Source: Indecon analysis of CSO data

Programme Access, Profiling and Targeting

The evaluation examined the profile of learners who participate in the programme. The number of beneficiaries was broadly stable over this period, while the numbers who completed their course fell to 8,602 from 9,719 in 2015.

Number of SST Beneficiaries and Completers (2015-2018)



Source: SOLAS
Note: 'Beneficiaries' are the number of learners who partake in an SST course at some stage in the calendar year on a full-time basis. 'Completers' refers to the numbers who complete a course, whether they achieve certification or otherwise.

A majority of SST participants were unemployed at the start of their course. When missing data is excluded, over one-in-four (77.6%) were unemployed. Of those that were unemployed, just under half of these were long-term unemployed, as defined as being unemployed for 12 months or more.

Principle Economic Status of SST Learners (2018)

	Including Missing Data	Excluding Missing Data
Employed	6.2%	7.6%
Unemployed	63.2%	77.6%
Student/Trainee	5.3%	6.5%
Other	6.8%	8.4%
Missing data	18.6%	-
Total	**100%**	**100%**

Source: SOLAS

Half of SST learners had a Leaving Certificate or other Level 4 or 5 qualification prior to beginning their course. The other half of participants was evenly divided between those who had lower educational levels (Junior Certificate qualification or lower), and those that had higher levels of qualification. For those with low levels of educational attainment, literacy or numeracy issues may act as a barrier to participation.

Highest Level of Education Attained by SST Learners (2018)		
	Percentage of SST Learners	**Percentage of SST Learners (Excluding Missing)**
Primary level and below	6.1%	8.4%
Junior/Inter/Group Certificate NFQ Level 3 and Transition Year	13.1%	18.3%
Levels 4 and 5	35.8%	49.8%
Certificate Level 6 and Level 7 Diploma	8.4%	11.6%
Bachelor's degree	5.9%	8.3%
Professional / Postgraduate	2.5%	3.4%
Doctorate or Higher	0.1%	0.2%
Missing Data	28.1%	-
Total	**100%**	**100%**
Source: SOLAS		

A number of barriers to participation were identified by learners, including the distance needed to travel to access courses, the financial supports made available to learners, as well as a lack of awareness of courses on offer. ETB Senior Management deemed literacy and numeracy levels of students as a potential barrier to entry.

The most common referral routes to SST were self-referral after seeing an advertisement, through a website, or hearing about SST in the media (40.4%), while the second most common was after being referred by their Local Employment Service or Intreo office (33.6%).

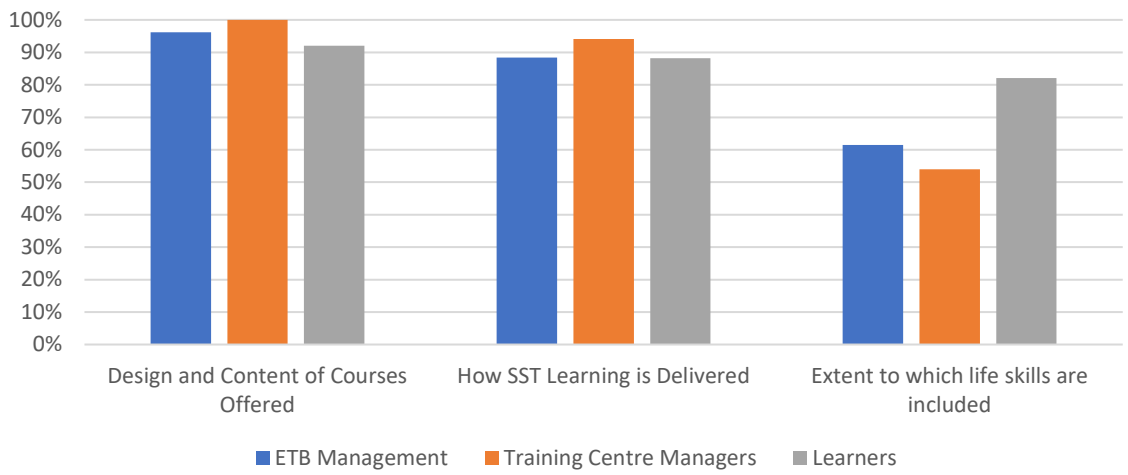
Programme Design, Content and Delivery

The delivery of SST courses is either through Short Courses (three to four months) which usually lead to minor awards, or Long Courses of up to nine months. SST courses are available for enrolment throughout the year. While courses are provided through ETBs, actual course delivery is predominantly contracted, which can allow for more flexible deployment.[1] There are a range of courses available covering hard and soft skills, including: Business Administration; Computer Applications and Office Skills; Construction; Door Security and Guarding Skills; Healthcare; IT; Logistics; Manual and Computerised Payroll and Book-keeping; Manufacturing; Maintenance Skills Technology; Retail Skills/Sales; Sports and Recreation; Technical Employability Skills; and Warehouse Operations.

Respondents to Indecon's surveys indicated positive views on the design and content of the SST courses offered. A majority also deemed the manner of delivery of courses (e.g., lectures, project-based etc.) to be appropriate, as well as the extent to which life skills are included in SST courses.

[1] https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/national-training-fund-expenditure-report-2018.pdf

Percentage Respondents who Reported that Aspects of Course Structure, Delivery and Design/Content were 'Very Appropriate' or 'Appropriate'



Source: Indecon survey

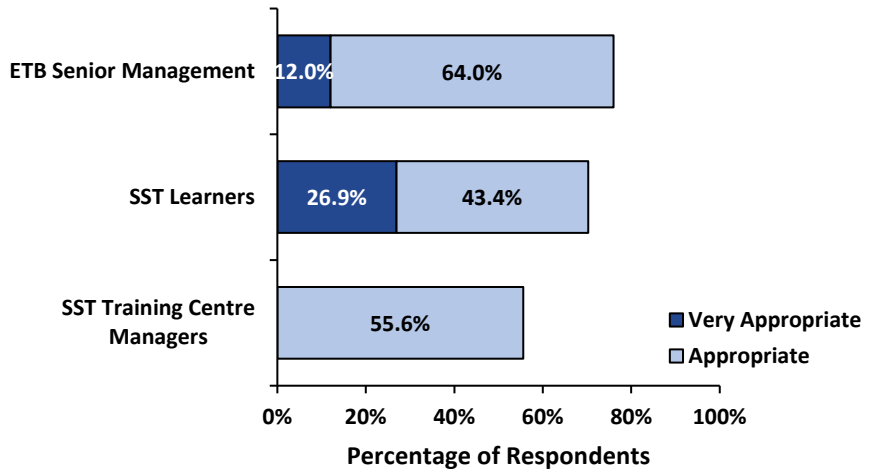
One issue identified by Indecon was that around 30% of course participants did not complete their course. The national completion rate in 2017 was 71.6%, an increase from 67.7% the year before. There are also marked disparities between completion rates across the country, though differences in certificate rates are far more pronounced. While the national average for certification was 45%, the rate ranged from a low of 5.5% to a high of 65.9%. Expressed as a percentage of those who completed, some ETBs achieved a close to 100% certificate rate, while for others only a minority of those who completed an SST course achieved a certificate.

Participants in SST can avail of financial supports that are generally available to FET learners. All courses are free, and a FET training allowance may be paid to learners who take part in SST depending on which, if any, social welfare benefit they are in receipt of. The rates set are in most cases equal to their existing social welfare benefit. Support rates for accommodation and meal allowances are shown below. Course participants can also receive a travel allowance of up to €32.60 per week, the rate of which depending on how far they must travel. Participants may also qualify for the Childcare Employment and Training Support (CETS) scheme, which can provide full-time, part-time or after-school childcare places.

Course Participant Accommodation and Meal Allowances		
	€/DAY	€/WEEK
Maximum Rate Payable	€13.98	€69.90
Meal allowances	.80c	€4.00
Source: http://kerryetbtrainingcentre.ie/support/travel-allowances-full-time-and-part-time-courses/		

Stakeholder's views on whether the levels of financial supports were appropriate showed some differences but for most of those surveyed financial supports for learners were seen as appropriate.

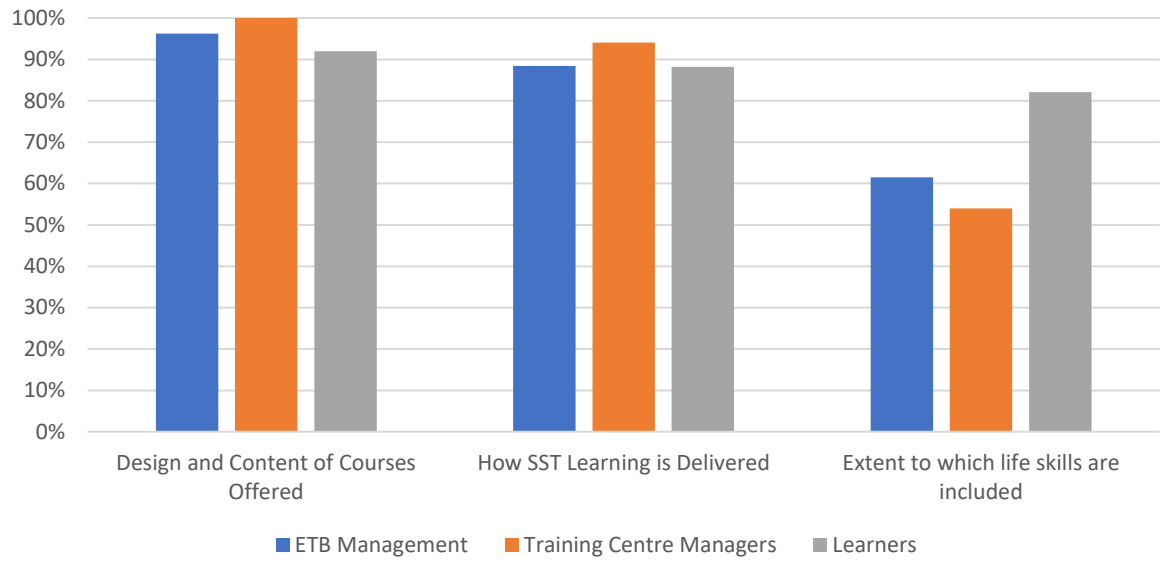
Views on Financial Supports for Learners



Source: Indecon surveys

One of the important goals of SST is to provide learners with the appropriate technical and/or generic skills to improve their future employment prospects. A majority of each of the stakeholder groups were positive on the key aspects of SST courses.

Percentage Respondents who Reported that Aspects related to Labour Market and Employers were 'Very Appropriate' or 'Appropriate'



Source: SOLAS surveys

Evaluation of Programme Outcomes

Indecon's Counterfactual Impact Evaluation examined the impact of SST on labour market outcomes via a comparison of labour market outcomes for programme participants and a matched control group of similar non-participants. These models find a statistically significant positive impact of SST on the prospect of being in employment one year on from a given completion month for six of the eight quarters analysed. Two variants of the model are reported below, though both show similar results. The estimates suggest an increase in the probability of employment ranging from 3.5% to 5.6%. The evidence however suggests that there is a lower impact on those who have been long-term unemployed.

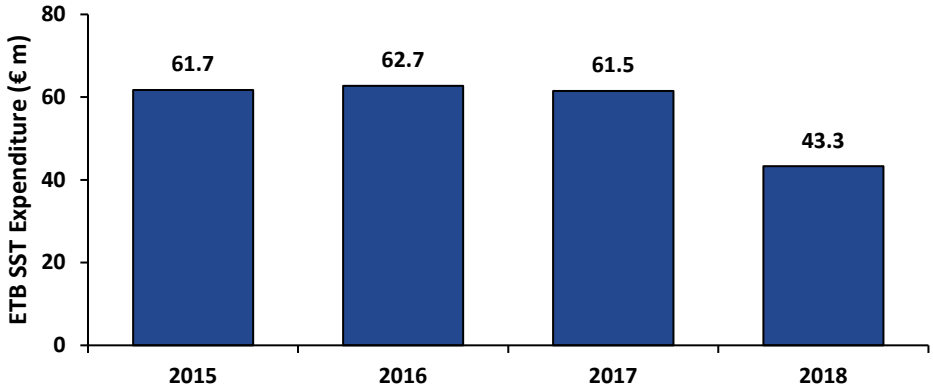
Baseline Model Findings of SST Participation on Employment Probability					
	Variant 1: Unadjusted Missing Values			Variant 2: Adjusted Missing Values	
Learner Cohort	Coefficient	P-Value	Learner Cohort	Coefficient	P-Value
2015 March	-0.001	0.917	2015 March	0.008	0.329
2015 June	0.012	0.122	2015 June	0.021	0.001
2015 September	**0.042**	0.000	2015 September	**0.045**	0.000
2015 December	**0.035**	0.000	2015 December	**0.038**	0.000
2016 March	**0.043**	0.000	2016 March	**0.043**	0.000
2016 June	**0.045**	0.000	2016 June	**0.039**	0.000
2016 September	**0.056**	0.000	2016 September	**0.047**	0.000
2016 December	**0.051**	0.000	2016 December	**0.037**	0.000
Source: Indecon analysis. Note: Coefficients in bold are statistically significant at the 5% level. Findings are for Indecon's Inverse Probability Weights Regression Adjustment (IPWRA) models.					

There may also be other potential benefits and the Indecon survey suggests that SST had provided learners with the foundation to assist them to progress to a higher-skill level and boosted their confidence and self-esteem. Evidence of the benefit of training to learners was also seen in the survey of employers, with a large majority stating that they agreed (55.9%) or strongly agreed (29.4%) that SST had helped to provide learners with jobs or apprenticeships. They also deemed there to be benefits in terms of boosting self-esteem, provision of formal qualifications and boosting entrepreneurial skills, amongst others.

Resourcing of Specific Skills Training Provision

Following three years of relatively stable expenditure (from 2015 to 2017), there was a reduction in SST expenditure from €61.5 million in 2017 to €43.3 million in 2018. This constitutes a decline in expenditure of 30% between 2017 and 2018. The evidence also shows a 24% decline in the cost per participant.

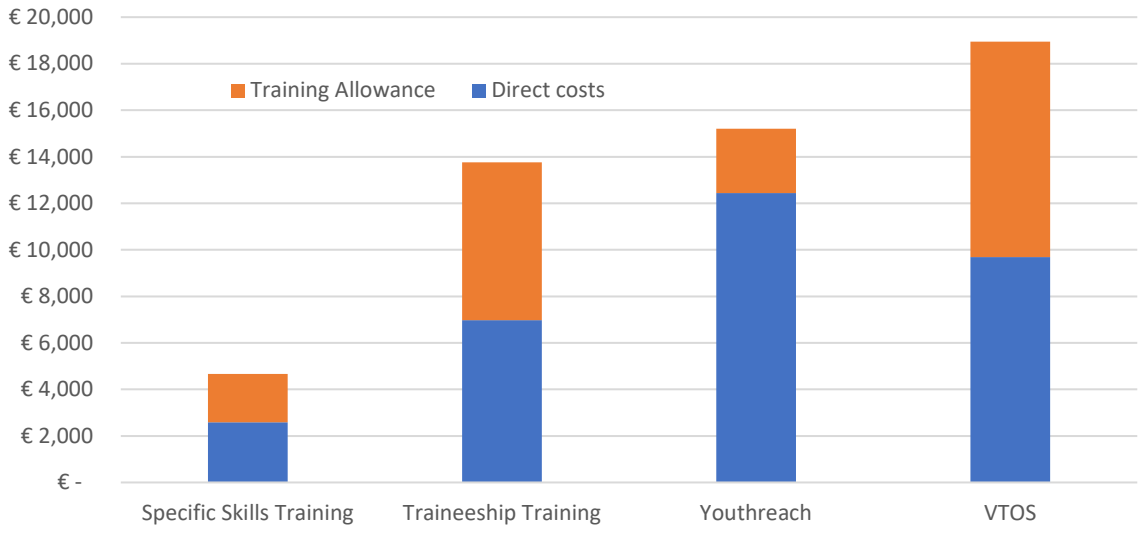
Expenditure on SST Provision (2015-2018)



Source: SOLAS SST Expenditure Data, 2015-2018

A comparative analysis of a number of other programmes is presented in the figure below. This shows that SST Courses cost on average just in excess of €4,000, compared to €14,000-€19,000 for alternatives such as traineeships, Youthreach or VTOS. The differences in costs of alternative programmes is likely to reflect different durations, levels of student ability and level of teaching inputs.

Costs of Provision per Beneficiary, 2018



Source: Indecon analysis of SOLAS data

Note: Number of beneficiaries is calculated as an average of number of starters in 2017 and 2018. Figures for VTOS training allowance relate to both Core and Dispersed, figures for direct costs relate to VTOS Core only.

Conclusions

The key conclusions from Indecon's evaluation of SST provision are set out in the table below.

Summary of Main Conclusions from Evaluation	
1.	**SST training is consistent with the National Skills Strategy and Pathways to Work, which places a strong emphasis on ensuring that Ireland has a well-skilled and adaptable labour force and the need to increase the employment focus of activation programmes.**
2.	**There has been a fall in the number of SST completers in recent years, though the number of beneficiaries has remained broadly unchanged.**
3.	**A high proportion of those on SST courses were unemployed prior to starting their course, half of whom were long-term unemployed.**
4.	**Learners, Training Centre Managers and Employers all report strong benefits to learners from participation in SST.**
5.	**Indecon's Counterfactual Impact Assessment indicates that there is a positive impact on SST learners from participation in the course on the likelihood of a learner finding employment. The impact on those long-term unemployed however appears less.**
6.	**The cost of SST per beneficiary is relatively low compared to a number of other comparable programmes.**

Policy Recommendations

Based on the detailed analysis and assessment undertaken, Indecon has identified a number of recommendations to enhance the impact and cost effectiveness of the programme as provided below.

Recommendations arising from Evaluation
1. SST training should be maintained
SST training plays an important role in Ireland's training landscape. The courses are linked with specific skills, and are targeted at those who are unemployed and in need of upskilling. Indecon's Counterfactual Impact Assessment indicates that there is a positive impact on SST learners from participation in the course on the likelihood of a learner finding employment. Further, learners, Training Centre Managers and employers all report strong benefits to learners from participation in SST. SST training is provided at a lower cost to many other Further Education and Training programmes.
2. Ensure relevant employer engagement and work placements
Respondents to Indecon's surveys indicated that SST courses were appropriately designed to meet employers' skill needs; maintain links with employers; and provide quality of work experience. This is important in ensuring that SST remains aligned to national policy goals as set out in the National Skills Strategy and other documents. While national policy, as evidenced by the Action Plan on Apprenticeships and Traineeships, is to be expand these programmes, the relatively shorter duration of work placement in SST may be more suitable for certain sectors where employer engagement is difficult to secure.
3. Ways to enhance SST outcomes for Long Term Unemployed should be investigated
The lower impacts of SST on employment outcomes of those who were long-term unemployed suggest the merits of investigating ways of focussing supports on this group. Indecon's Counterfactual Impact Assessment suggests that SST appears to have the largest impact on those who have spent the lowest percentage of time on the Live Register in the preceding five years and, those who have spent the longer periods on the Live Register have lower employment probabilities.
4. Literacy and numeracy supports should be strengthened
ETB management and staff identified learning difficulties including numeracy and literacy of potential learners as a barrier to participating in SST. Further, a significant minority of both ETB Management and Training Centre Managers deemed the current supports in place to be inadequate. While acknowledging the significant investments made in this area since the publication of the Department of Education and Skills White Paper on Adult Education in 2000, continued focus on this area remains appropriate. SOLAS should review the existing support levels, with a view to ensuring that these are adequate.
5. Improvements in Data collection needed
Priority should be given to drive continued enhancement of data to inform evaluation of SST courses. Additional evidence is needed on the outcomes for learners. This should focus on making available enhanced micro-level data of learners' educational attainment levels, course attendance and duration, as well as employment and other progression outcomes. This will include of data such as that collected by the Revenue Commissioners, SOLAS's own student records, HEA student records, the QQI awards database and other data. This could assist in targeting resources on the most effective courses, and provide a rigorous basis for assessing the adequacy of levels of progression to employment, further training or education, or other outcomes.

Overall Conclusion

This report sets out an evaluation of the SST scheme to generate policy-relevant knowledge concerning the appropriateness, conduct and impacts of SST; and to learn about the appropriateness of the current policy on SST and its effectiveness in terms of achieving its policy objectives. The conclusions show that, while valuable, this scheme is reducing in size. However, SST still has a role to play for supporting the unemployed in returning to work or progressing on to further training or education.

1 Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

Indecon International Economics Consultants ('Indecon') is a leading firm of research economists. Following a competitive tendering process, Indecon was appointed by SOLAS to undertake an evaluation of the Specific Skills Training (SST) programme. The purpose of the evaluation is to generate policy-relevant knowledge concerning the appropriateness, conduct and impacts of SST, and assess the appropriateness of current policy on SST and its effectiveness in terms of achieving its policy objectives.

1.2 Background

Specific Skills Training (SST) has been available for over 20 years, delivered initially by FÁS and since 2014, by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). Specific Skills Training is situated within the overall suite of vocational training programmes for unemployed/job-seekers funded by the European Social Fund via the Department of Education and Skills/SOLAS and provided by the ETBs, under the ESF activity banner 'Skills Training for the Unemployed'. This activity also includes a number of other vocational training programmes such as Traineeships and Local Training Initiatives. The different types of vocational training programmes and their respective target client groups are a response to particular client training needs within budget allocations.

Specific Skills courses are provided at different levels (usually NFQ Levels 4-6 or equivalent) and in a wide range of subject areas including:

- Construction;
- IT;
- Sales;
- Manufacturing;
- Logistics; and
- Healthcare.

SST courses concentrate on high-level technical skills and soft skills (e.g., communications, teamworking, career planning). SST courses can vary in duration from 3-4 months full-time and up to nine months full-time. Some SST courses primarily concentrate on imparting a combination of technical and generic skills relevant to employment. Others provide a combination of generic and foundational skills to assist individuals so they can progress to higher-level full-time skills training where employment is the expected destination.

1.3 Scope of Evaluation

The overall objectives of this evaluation are to generate policy-relevant knowledge concerning the appropriateness, conduct and impacts of SST; and to learn about the appropriateness of current policy on SST while assessing its effectiveness in terms of achieving its policy objectives. As per the terms of reference, this comprehensive evaluation entails the following specific components:

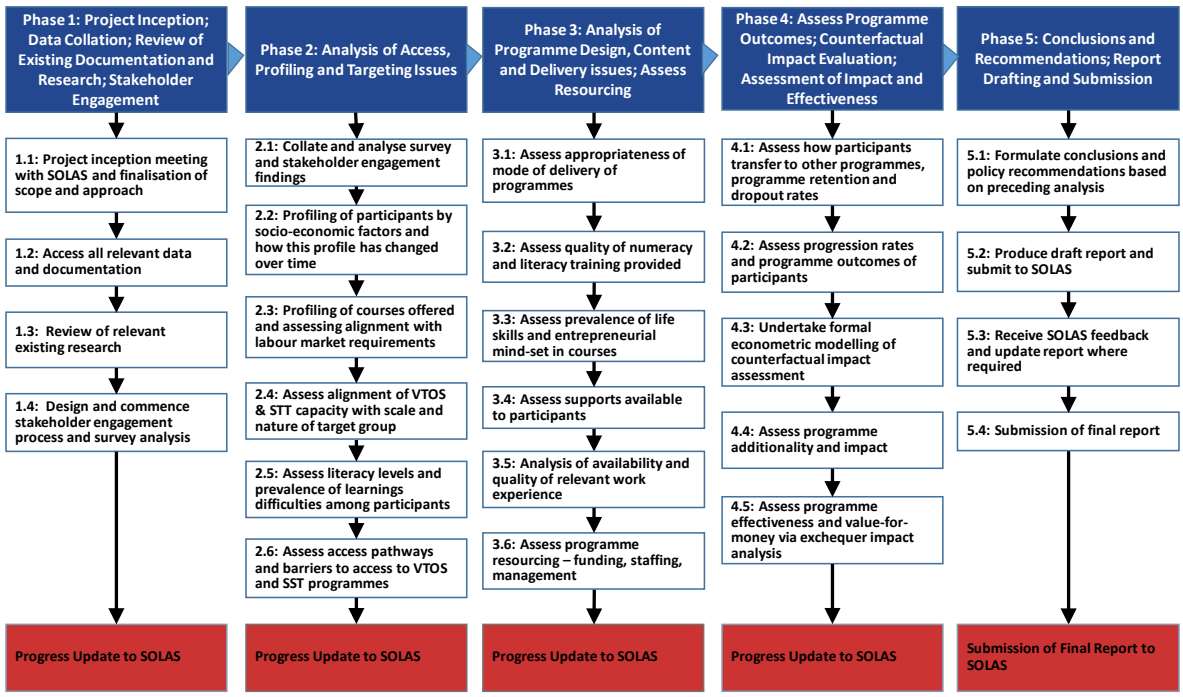
- Assessment of learner access, the profile of learners, and the targeting of the SST programme;

- An analysis of aspects of programme design, content and delivery;
- An analysis of SST programme outcomes, including: levels of retention, transfer and progression of learners; and rate and quality of labour market activations. The evaluation also includes a statistical/econometric counterfactual impact evaluation of the extent to which desirable outcomes occurred for participants due to their engagement in Specific Skills Training provision; and
- An analysis of the resourcing of SST.

1.4 Methodological Approach

Indecon has applied a methodological approach to delivering on the key evaluation requirements set out by SOLAS. A summary description of this approach is presented in the next figure, which highlights the phases and work tasks undertaken during the evaluation process. Our approach triangulates evidence from a range of sources to ensure that our findings and recommendations are robust and provide a solid basis for policy conclusions. Our approach involved stakeholder engagement via meetings with key representative bodies as well as new empirical survey research of programme participants. An additional element of our approach was a review and subsequent analysis of existing relevant documentation and data from SOLAS and other data sources. A key element of our methodological approach was the completion of new econometric research to empirically assess the impact of SST on employment outcomes of participants via counterfactual impact analysis.

Figure 1.1: Overview Description of Methodological Approach to Evaluation of SST



Source: Indecon

Indecon's methodology involved an integrated approach, which formulated policy conclusions based on evidence from:

- Stakeholder engagement;
- New empirical survey evidence. This included responses from 48 ETB managers, 19 training centre managers, 34 employers and 409 learners;
- Data analysis of existing datasets;
- Review of documentation and existing research; and
- Detailed econometric counterfactual impact assessment.

1.5 Report Structure

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- Section 2 discusses the wider policy and labour market context;
- Section 3 contains an analysis of access to SST and the profile of SST learners;
- Section 4 evaluates SST programme design, content and delivery;
- Section 5 analyses labour market progression and other outcomes;
- Section 6 contains an Employment Impact – Counterfactual Impact Assessment;
- Section 7 investigates the resourcing of SST; and
- Section 8 contains Indecon's conclusions and recommendations.

1.6 Acknowledgements and Disclaimer

Indecon would like to acknowledge the assistance provided by SOLAS and a wide range of other stakeholders in preparing this report. In particular, we would like to thank Andrew Brownlee, Alan McGrath, Justin Sinnott, Aoife Walshe, Selen Guerin and David Healy. We would like to thank all ETB staff, learners, employers and others who participated in our surveys, and for the members of the project advisory group and others who helped disseminate the surveys on our behalf. In addition, Indecon would also like to thank all of those who participated in our stakeholder engagement, including Hugh Geoghegan of the Department of Education and Skills; the National Centre for Guidance in Education; Enterprise Ireland; Andrina Wafer of Quality and Qualifications Ireland; Louise Kavanagh and Ryan McKay of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection; Peter Rigney of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions; and Owen O'Donnell and Sharon Browne of Kerry Education and Training Board. Indecon would also like to thank all members of the project advisory committee, including Terry McCann, Dublin and Dún Laoghaire ETB; Olivia Kennedy Murphy, Tipperary ETB; John Kearney and Marie Traynor, Cavan and Monaghan ETB; Mary Hickie, City of Dublin ETB; Paul Patton Limerick and Clare ETB; Martha Bolger, Kilkenny and Carlow ETB; Eileen McPartland, Liberties College; Anne Higgins, Galway and Roscommon ETB; Maureen Conway, City of Dublin ETB; Charlie McGeever, Tipperary ETB; Stephen Goulding, Kerry ETB; and Ray Murphy, Louth Meath ETB. The usual disclaimer applies and responsibility for the analysis and findings in this independent report remains the sole responsibility of Indecon.

2 Wider Labour Market and Policy Context

2.1 Introduction

In this section Indecon first provides an overview of Specific Skills Training (SST), and later places the programme in the wider context of the Irish labour market and of national policies such as the National Skills Strategy 2025 and the Further Education and Training Strategy.

2.2 Overview of SST

Specific Skills Training (SST) has been provided for over twenty years and was initially delivered by FÁS. Responsibility for SST was transferred to ETBs (Education and Training Boards) on their formation in 2014. SST courses can vary in duration from 3-4 months (Short Courses) and up to nine months (Long Courses) on a full-time basis. SST is provided by the ETBS under the European Social Fund (ESF) activity banner 'Skills Training for the Unemployed', which is within the overall suite of vocational training programmes for unemployed/jobseekers funded by the European Social Fund via the Department of Education and Skills and SOLAS. Specific Skills courses are provided at different levels (usually NFQ Levels 4-6 or equivalent) and in a wide range of subject areas aimed at meeting the needs of industry,[2] including:

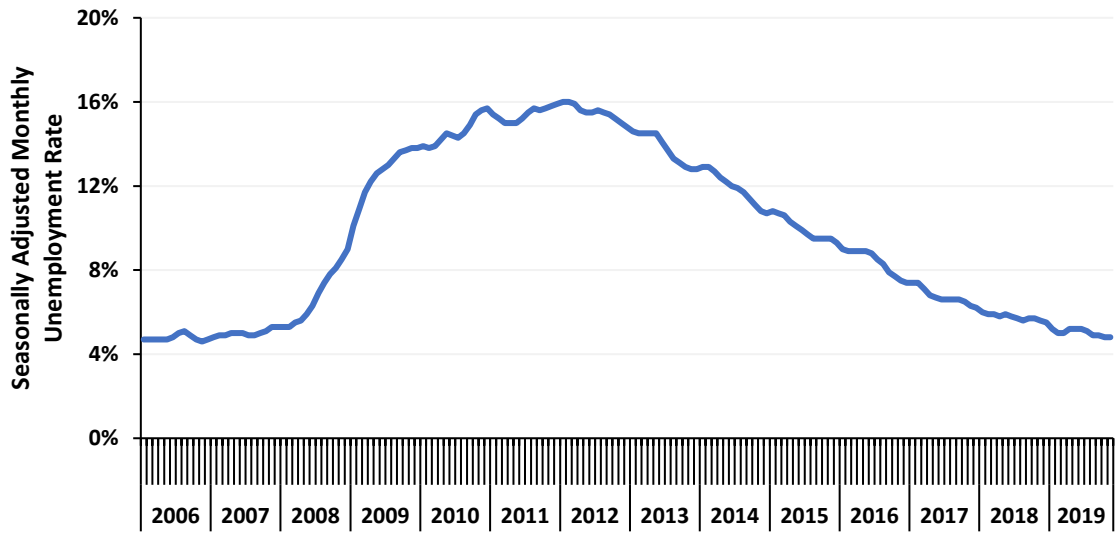
- Business Administration;
- Computer Applications and Office Skills;
- Construction;
- Door Security and Guarding Skills;
- Healthcare;
- IT;
- Logistics;
- Manual and Computerised Payroll and Book-keeping;
- Manufacturing;
- Maintenance Skills Technology;
- Retail Skills/Sales;
- Sports and Recreation;
- Technical Employability Skills; and
- Warehouse Operations.

[2] https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Further-Education-and-Training-Strategy-2014-2019.pdf

2.3 Trends in the Irish Labour Market

The labour market has undergone dramatic changes over the last two decades. Following the economic recession, unemployment rose sharply, reaching approximately 16% in early 2012, before steadily declining towards pre-recession levels. Seasonally adjusted monthly unemployment fell below 5% in 2019 for the first time since the economic recession.

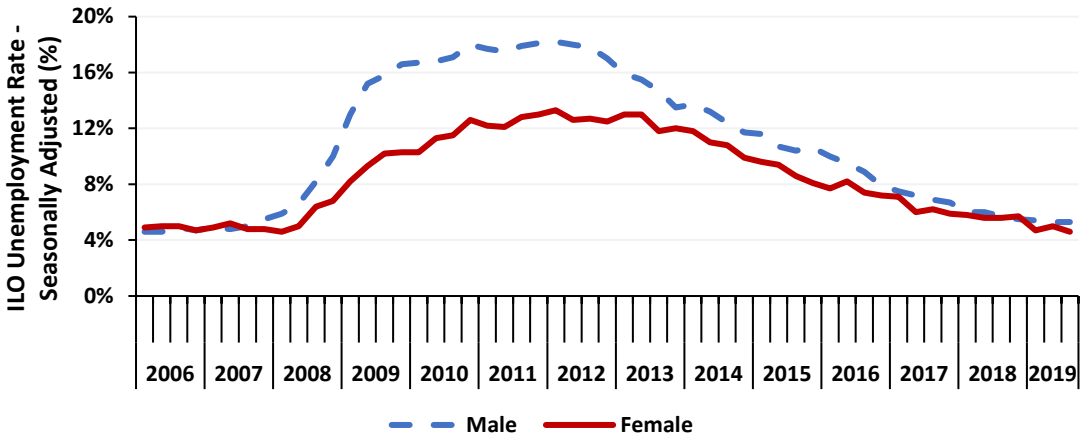
Figure 2.1: Seasonally Adjusted Monthly Unemployment Rate (2006-2019)



Source: Indecon analysis of CSO data

There were differences in unemployment rates by gender, as outlined in the figure below. While unemployment rates were similar for men and women prior to the recession and are currently at similar levels, a gap merged during the recession with a far higher unemployment rate for men.

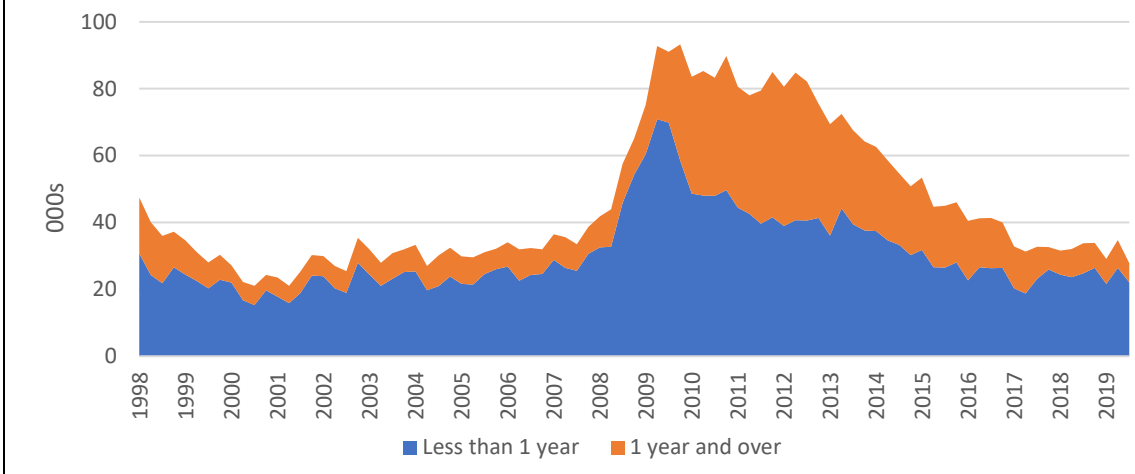
Figure 2.2: Seasonally Adjusted ILO Unemployment Rate by Gender (2006-2019)



Source: Indecon analysis of CSO data

The number of young people who are unemployed has also fallen. Figure 2.3 below shows that following the spike in short-term unemployment among young people from 2008-2010, the numbers long term unemployed rose sharply and remained elevated until 2013. Since then, total unemployment among this cohort have returned to pre-recession levels.

Figure 2.3: Numbers Aged 15-24 Who Are Unemployed (1998-2019)



Source: Indecon analysis of CSO Labour Force Survey data

Indecon's analysis of Census data shows that a higher percentage of the population in 2016 (39.6%) had some level of further or higher education when compared with 2011 (36.2%). The following table shows that one in six of people aged over 15 and not currently in school or university had their highest level of education as upper secondary, while over half had a higher level of qualification.

Table 2.1: Number of Persons Aged 15 and Over by Highest Level of Education Achieved (2011-2016)

	2011		2016	
	Number	**Percentage**	**Number**	**Percentage**
No Formal Education	42,387	1.2%	52,214	1.4%
Primary	414,509	11.5%	334,284	8.9%
Lower secondary	499,489	13.8%	449,766	12.0%
Upper secondary	601,498	16.7%	573,643	15.3%
Technical/vocational/advanced or higher certificate	565,744	15.7%	607,201	16.2%
Bachelor's degree	493,278	13.7%	568,410	15.1%
Postgraduate diploma/degree/Ph.D.	246,714	6.8%	312,866	8.3%
Currently in School/University	408,838	11.3%	427,128	11.4%
Not Stated / Other	336,205	9.3%	429,801	11.4%
Total	**3,608,662**		**3,755,313**	

Source: Indecon analysis of CSO Census data

The following table presents the breakdown of those in employment and in unemployment by their highest education level attained, as of 2019 Q3. Those who achieved a level of education of higher secondary or below account for almost half of the unemployed, compared to 34.7% of those in employment. Almost 40% of those in employment had a third-level honours degree or higher, compared to approximately 25% of those in unemployment.

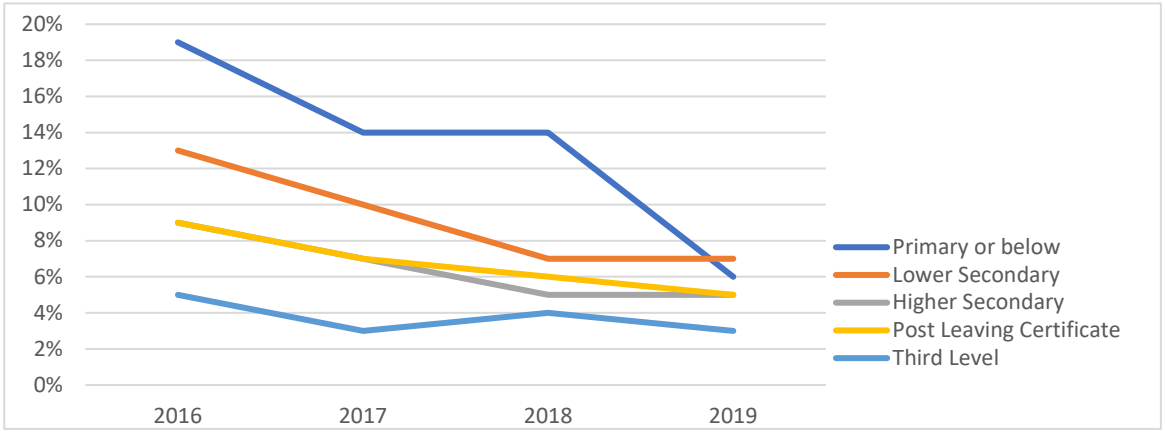
Table 2.2: Employment Status by Highest Level of Education Achieved (2019 Q3)

	In Employment		Unemployed	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Primary or below	59.2	2.6%	6.4	5.2%
Lower secondary	195.6	8.7%	19.1	15.4%
Higher secondary	526.0	23.5%	35.5	28.6%
Post-secondary non-tertiary	310.2	13.8%	21.3	17.2%
Third level non-honours degree	242.0	10.8%	10.4	8.4%
Third level honours degree or higher	846.4	37.8%	31.3	25.2%
Other/not stated	62.4	2.8%	..	..
All levels of education	**2,241.9**		**124.0**	

Source: Indecon analysis of CSO Labour Force Survey Data
Note: the total for unemployed persons does not include "other/not stated" as this figure is not reported by the CSO.

While the recovery from the economic recession can be seen in unemployment rates across the different education levels since 2014, those cohorts with lower levels of education continue to have a high level of unemployment. The following figure shows that 6-7% of the population aged 25-64 with a lower secondary education or below are unemployed, compared to 3% of those in the labour force with a third-level honours degree. However because of lower absolute numbers, those with an educational level of lower secondary or below comprise of only one in four of the unemployed. This in part reflects the high rate of school completion in Ireland.

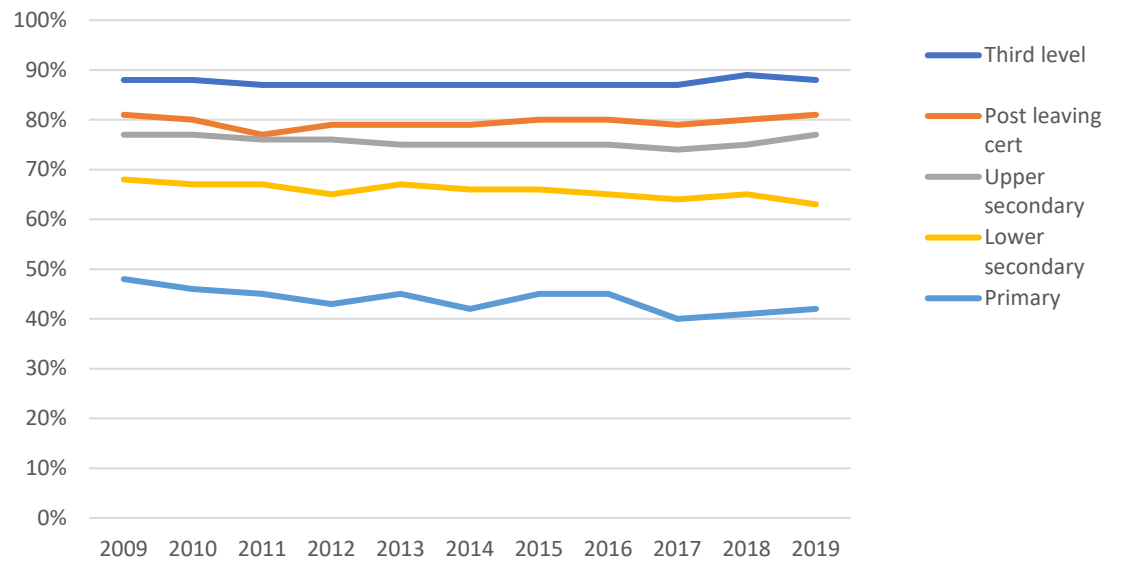
Figure 2.4: ILO Unemployment Rate by Level of Education Aged 25-64 (2014-2019)



Source: Indecon analysis of CSO Labour Force Survey data

Education levels are related to participation rates as well as unemployment rates, with those with lower education levels less likely to participate in the labour force. Those with a lower secondary education or below have the lowest participation rates, with less than 50% of this cohort participating in the labour force in 2019. Figure 2.5 below shows the participation rate for the population aged 25-64, an age range which would exclude a large majority of those still in formal education.

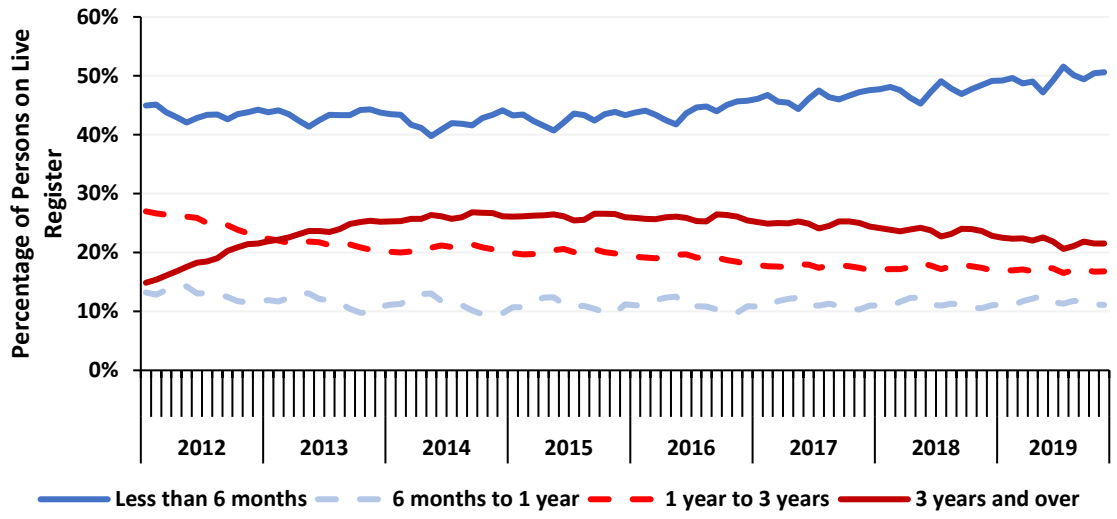
Figure 2.5: ILO Participation Rate by Level of Education, Population Aged 25-64 (2009-2019)



Source: Indecon analysis of CSO Labour Force Survey data

The following figure shows that approximately half of those on the Live Register have been there for less than six months. This is an increase from approximately 40% in 2014. Whilst there are a greater percentage of those on the Live Register for shorter durations, the second largest cohort is amongst those who have been on the Live Register for three years or more. The overall number of people in this cohort has declined by almost 40% since the beginning of 2012, but their proportion of the total has increased from 15% to 22%.

Figure 2.6: Breakdown of Those on Live Register by Duration (2012-2019)



Source: Indecon analysis of CSO Live Register data

Having discussed national trends, it is also important to recognise that different regions of Ireland have had different experiences since the economic recession. Dublin has the lowest unemployment rate of any region in Ireland, as of 2019 Q3 as shown in the following table. Each region has experienced a decline in unemployment rates since 2013.

Table 2.3: ILO Unemployment Rate by Region (2013-2019)

Region	2013 Q3	2015 Q3	2017 Q3	2019 Q3
Border	12.4%	8.7%	6.5%	5.4%
Midland	17.2%	14.6%	9.3%	5.3%
Mid-West	16.5%	12.4%	8.2%	4.8%
South-East	15.0%	10.3%	8.2%	7.3%
South-West	12.3%	9.3%	6.4%	5.1%
West	14.4%	11.7%	7.2%	5.0%
Mid-East	16.8%	9.4%	6.3%	6.1%
Dublin	10.9%	8.3%	6.3%	4.5%
State	**13.7%**	**9.9%**	**6.9%**	**5.2%**

Source: CSO Labour Force Survey data
Note: Based on NUTS 3 regions

While there have been increases in the participation rate in regions such as Dublin and surrounding regions since 2013, the Mid-West region has seen participation rates decrease from 63.8% to 59.0%, whilst there have been slight declines or stagnation in other regions. This may indicate a higher level of latent under-employment in these regions. However, differences in age-profile and other characteristics are also likely to influence participation rates in different regions of the country.

Table 2.4: ILO Participation Rate by Region (2013-2019)				
Region	**2013 Q3**	**2015 Q3**	**2017 Q3**	**2019 Q3**
Border	59.0%	62.5%	61.8%	58.1%
Midland	58.0%	58.7%	57.4%	58.7%
Mid-West	63.8%	63.2%	61.7%	59.0%
South-East	59.3%	60.4%	60.4%	59.1%
South-West	64.0%	62.1%	61.8%	61.4%
West	63.2%	59.7%	61.0%	62.4%
Mid-East	64.8%	63.6%	63.2%	65.0%
Dublin	63.3%	63.8%	64.8%	66.2%
State	**62.6%**	**62.4%**	**62.4%**	**62.5%**
Source: CSO Labour Force Survey data ***Note: Based on NUTS 3 regions***				

2.4 National Policy Context

An important aspect of this review is to examine the continued relevance of the objectives of SST within the evolving policy context, specifically in relation to the development of Further Education and Training (FET) and lifelong learning. These are discussed in this section. While there are a number of relevant policy documents, these are generally quite high-level, and do not explicitly set out the role of SST within the broader context of the FET landscape. Further, none of these key national policy documents contain explicit policy recommendations in specific relation to SST, other than to conduct and publish this present evaluation.

National Skills Strategy 2025

The overarching Government policy in relation to workforce and skills development is set out in the National Skills Strategy 2025 (NSS), which was published in January 2016.[3] The strategy aims to support the development of a well-educated, well-skilled and adaptable labour force, and to create and sustain a strong pool of talented people of all ages living in Ireland. The overall aims of the National Skills Strategy are outlined in the programme's six objectives, namely:

1. Education and training providers will place a stronger focus on providing skills development opportunities that are relevant to the needs of learners, society and the economy;
2. Employers will participate actively in the development of skills and make effective use of skills in their organisations to improve productivity and competitiveness;
3. The quality of teaching and learning at all stages of education will be continually enhanced and evaluated;
4. People across Ireland will engage more in lifelong learning;
5. There will be a specific focus on active inclusion to support participation in education and training and the labour market; and

[3] 'National Skills Strategy 2025', Department of Education and Skills, January 2016. See: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf.

6. To support an increase in the supply of skills to the labour market.

It is particularly notable in the National Skills Strategy that four of the programme's six objectives specifically reference relevance to the labour market. The strategy includes a target of 50,000 apprenticeships and traineeships places to be provided over the period 2016-2020. SST is identified in the National Skills Strategy in a list of further education programmes, and the strategy does advocate for specific skills training to be provided to individuals on the Live Register to meet the needs of industry at local level.

Statement of Strategy, Department of Education and Skills

The Action Plan for Education[4] sets out the priorities for the Department of Education and Skills for the year and sits within the wider action plan as set out in the Department's Statement of Strategy. The Departments goals can be summarised as follows:

1) We will shape a responsive education and training system that meets the needs and raises the aspirations of all learners;
2) We will advance the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage and learners with special educational needs in order to support them to achieve their potential;
3) We will equip education and training providers with the skills and support to provide a quality learning experience;
4) We will intensify the relationships between education and the wider community, society and the economy; and
5) We will lead in the delivery of strategic direction and supportive systems in partnership with key stakeholders in education and training.

The action plan also contains a focus on expanding workplace learning, particularly through the expansion of apprenticeships and traineeships in Ireland, as set out "Action Plan to Expand Apprenticeship and Traineeship in Ireland 2016-2020". SST is only referenced in the Action Plan in relation to the commitment to undertake the present evaluation.

Pathways to Work

The goal of the Pathways to Work strategy is to ensure that as many jobs as possible go to people on the Live Register. The Pathways to Work plan for 2016-2020 and the annual Action Plan for Jobs[5] contain a series of actions which are grouped under a number of strands as follows:

- Strand 1: Enhanced engagement with unemployed people of working age;
- Strand 2: Increase the employment focus of activation programmes and opportunities;
- Strand 3: Making work pay – Incentivise the take-up of opportunities;
- Strand 4: Incentivise employers to offer jobs and opportunities to unemployed people; and
- Strand 5: Build organisation capability to deliver high quality services to unemployed people.

[4] Action Plan for Education 2019, Department of Education and Skills

[5] https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Action-Plan-for-Jobs-2018.pdf

Strand 2 specifically relates to activation programmes and sets the goal of increasing the employment focus in these programmes. SST is referenced in the strategy, which states that short-course specific skills training and other approaches have been shown to be effective in enhancing individual employability.

Further Education and Training Strategy

The Further Education and Training Act 2013 stipulates that SOLAS must, every five years, prepare and submit a strategy in respect of further education and training to the Minister for Education and Skills. The first strategy was developed for the period of 2014 – 2019, the next strategy will cover the period 2020 – 2024 and will set out a transformative vision to further steer the FET system to evolve in a more agile way, effectively responding to the needs of the economy and of society. The Strategic Goals from Further Education and Training Strategy (2014-2019)[6] are as follows:

- Skills for the Economy – The aim of this goal is that FET will address current and future needs of learners, jobseekers, employers and employees and will contribute to national economic development;
- Active Inclusion – The aim of this goal is that FET provision will support the active inclusion of people of all abilities in society with special reference to literacy and numeracy;
- Quality Provision – The aim of this goal is that FET will provide high quality education and training programmes and will meet appropriate national and international quality standards;
- Integrated Planning and Funding - The aim of this goal is that FET provision will be planned and funded on that basis of objective analysis of needs and evidence of social and economic impact; and
- Standing of FET – The aim of this goal is to ensure a valued learning path leading to agreed employment, career developmental, personal and social options.

The goal of an integrated FET planning model was intended to ensure that the relevant employment led provision, including SST, is informed directly by employers; reflects and responds to emerging labour market challenges; and is under-pinned by an effective system of labour market intelligence and data infrastructure. There is an emphasis in the strategy of the potential for a mismatch of skills levels and jobs and that people can be in jobs that don't require their level of education. In this regard, the strategy emphasises that FET work-based learning such as apprenticeships and traineeships, as well as other FET programmes incorporating an in-company period, represent an important mechanism for the FET sector to respond to the specific skill needs of companies, especially SMEs. The overall aim as stated in the strategy is to increase the development and roll-out of effective work-based learning models.

A brief description of SST is provided in the strategy, and outlining the types of courses, typical levels of accreditation of those courses.

[6] https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Further-Education-and-Training-Strategy-2014-2019.pdf

SOLAS Corporate Plan 2017 – 2019

The SOLAS Corporate Plan 2017-2019[7] sets out SOLAS's goals, objectives, vision, mission, and core principles for the three years of the plan. A new corporate plan is currently in development. The goals are as follows:

1. FET provision is aligned with the labour market and learners' employability and lifelong learning needs;
2. FET provision is equitable and inclusive, reflecting Government policies;
3. FET provision is strategic, responsive, effective and efficient;
4. FET planning and funding is supported by evidence and aligned with the FET Strategy;
5. The FET sector is highly valued as a route to employment, progression and lifelong learning;
6. The SOLAS organisation is effectively equipped to carry out its mandate;
7. SOLAS continue to provide essential services to key stakeholders.

These goals underpin targets such as an increase in 10% in the numbers of learners securing employment after undertaking a relevant FET course, an increase in 10% in the number of learners progressing to other FET courses or higher education, and a 10% increase in the rate of certification on courses primarily focused on social-mobility skills development that is transversal in nature. SST is only referenced in the SOLAS Corporate Plan in relation to the commitment to undertake this present evaluation.

2.5 Summary of Key Findings

A summary of the key findings from this section can be found below:

- Specific Skills Training (SST) was initially delivered by FÁS, and since 2014 has been delivered by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). SST courses can vary in duration from 3-4 months and up to nine months on a full-time basis. Courses primarily concentrate on imparting a combination of technical and generic skills to learners in order to increase their future employment prospects.
- SST courses are provided at different levels (usually at Levels 4-6 on the National Framework of Qualifications or equivalent) and in a wide range of subject areas aimed at meeting the needs of industry, including business administration, computer applications and office skills, construction and IT.
- The labour market has undergone dramatic changes since 2006. Following the economic recession unemployment rose sharply, reaching approximately 16% in early 2012, before steadily declining towards pre-recession levels.
- Education levels are related to participation rates, as well as unemployment rates, with those with lower education levels less likely to participate in the labour force. Those with a lower secondary education or below have the lowest participation rates, with less than 50% of this cohort participating in the labour force in 2019. Unemployment and participation rates have also changed over time on a regional basis

[7] http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/SOLASCorporatePlan.pdf

- National policy, as set out in the National Skills Strategy and Pathways to Work, places a strong emphasis on ensuring that Ireland has a well-skilled and adaptable labour force and sets out a need to increase the employment focus of activation programmes.
- While SST is intended to provide skills that are relevant to the labour market, greater emphasis in recent years is being placed on apprenticeships and traineeships. The National Skills Strategy includes a target of 50,000 apprenticeships and traineeships places to be provided over the period 2016-2020.

3 Programme Access, Profiling and Targeting

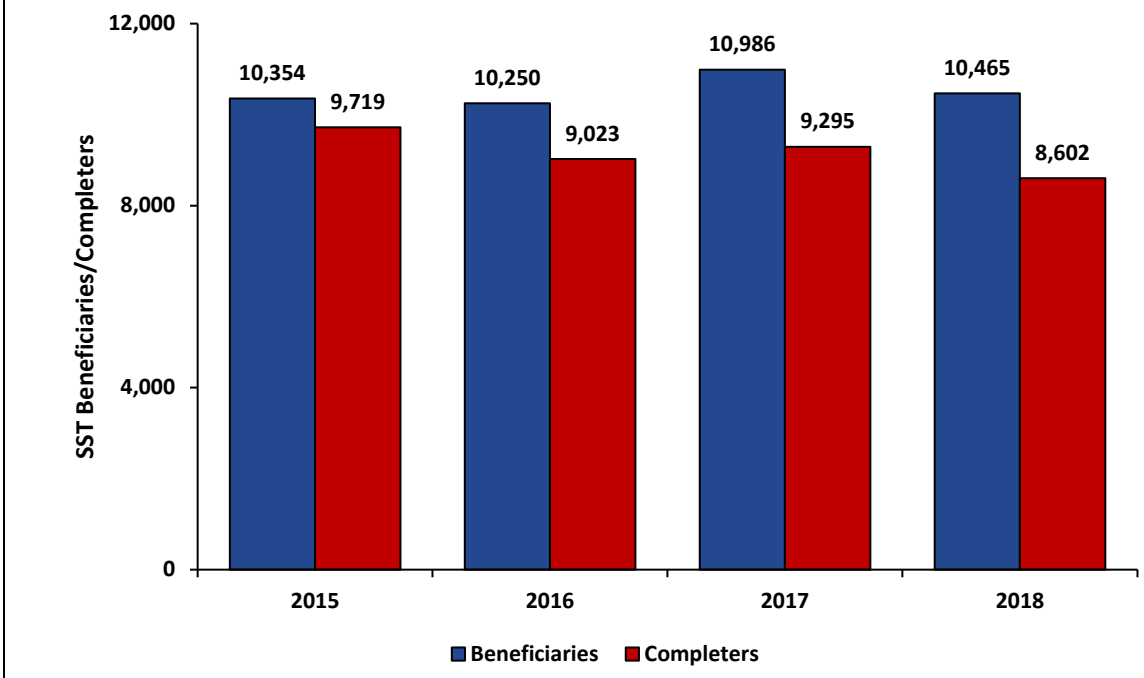
3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an analysis of the socio-demographic profile of SST participants, and the trends in participation witnessed in recent years. It also examines potential barriers to entry and dropout rates for potential and current participants.

3.2 Profile of Learners

The following table shows the number of SST beneficiaries and completers since 2015. The number of beneficiaries fell slightly in 2018 figure to just over 10,000. The number of completers has also declined over that time, from 9,719 in 2015 to 8,602 in 2018.

Figure 3.1: Number of SST Beneficiaries and Completers (2015-2018)



Source: SOLAS Further Education and Training Services Plans
Note: 'Beneficiaries' are the number of learners who partake in an SST course at some stage in the calendar year on a full-time basis. 'Completers' refers to the numbers who complete a course, whether they achieve certification or otherwise.

Over this period, there has been an expansion of apprenticeships and traineeships. This is in line with the Action Plan to Expand Apprenticeship and Traineeship in Ireland 2016-2020, with the aim to expand places to (cumulatively) 50,000 as discussed in Section 2.4 above. The target for 202 is for 9,000 apprenticeships, of which over one in three would be new apprenticeships, and 5,000 traineeship places. This aims to establish work-based learning as a core contributor to skills

development, employment and economic growth.[8]Both apprenticeships and traineeships involve significant amount of work-based training, while SST is based entirely on formal learning, albeit focussed on topics of direct relevance for employment. The table below shows that the number off apprenticeships and traineeships has grown from 5,467 in 2015 to 8,716 in 2018. This rise contrasts with the decrease in the number of SST beneficiaries of 2,618 over the same time period.

Table 3.1: Number of Starters

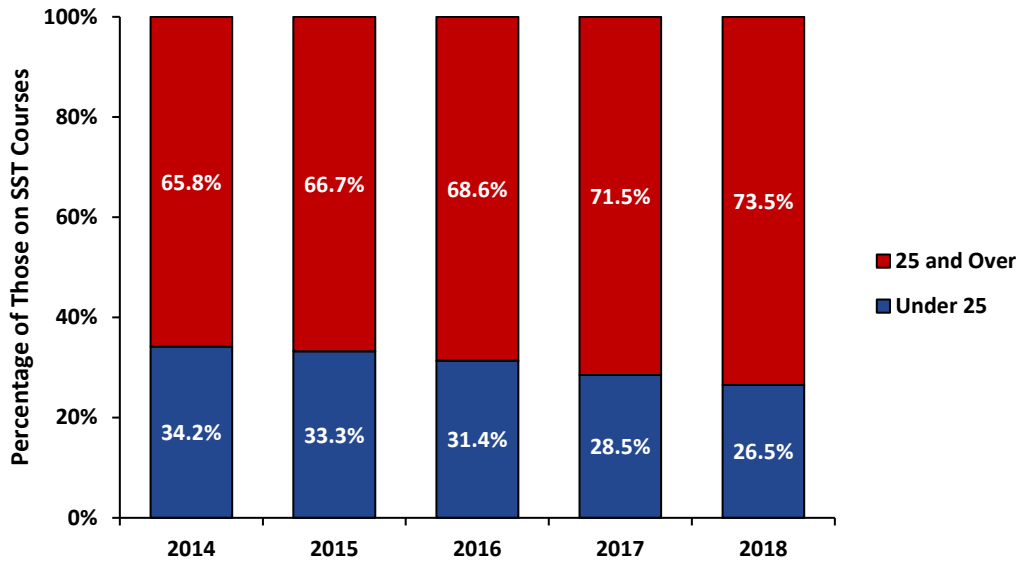
Year	Apprenticeships	Traineeships	Total
2015	3,151	2,316	5,467
2016	3,821	2,321	6,142
2017	4,843	1,770	6,613
2018	5,648	3,068	8,716

Source: SOLAS. Apprenticeship and Trainee Starters

Note: Apprenticeships are also employees.

The percentage of SST learners aged under 25 has fallen since 2014. In 2014 34.2% of SST learners were under the age of 25, compared to 26.5% of learners in 2018. As such, the typical SST learner has become older in more recent years. This is despite the fact that youth[9] unemployment in Ireland has fallen by less proportionately since the recession than older age categories.

Figure 3.2: Percentage of SST Learners Aged Under 25 (2014 - 2018)



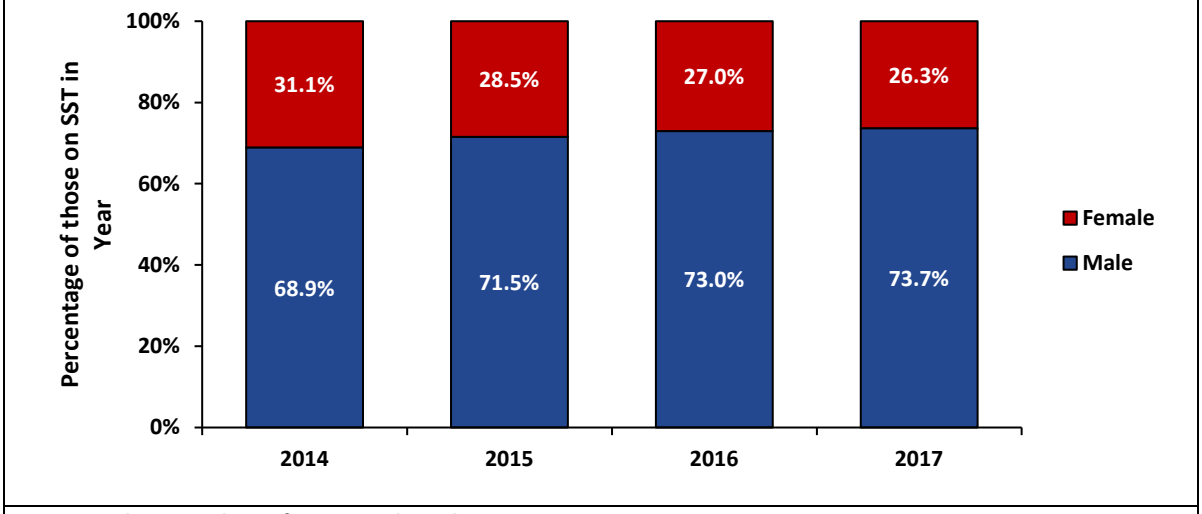
Source: Indecon analysis of SOLAS and JLD data

[8] "Action Plan to Expand Apprenticeship and Traineeship in Ireland 2016-2020".

[9] Defined as age 20-24

Most SST learners are male, with this percentage increasing over time. In 2014 just over two-thirds of SST learners were male (68.9%), whilst in 2017 almost three-quarters (73.7%) were male. This can be compared to new apprenticeships where 29% are female, though craft apprenticeships are predominantly male.[10]

Figure 3.3: Gender Breakdown of SST Learners (2014 - 2017)



Source: Indecon analysis of SOLAS and JLD data

As shown in the following table, the vast majority of learners who undertook SST courses between 2014 and 2017 were Irish. Between 81.9% and 85.3% of learners in each year were Irish, with those coming from the EU (excluding the UK) accounting for approximately 10% each year.

Table 3.2: Nationality of Those on SST Courses (2014-2017)

	Ireland	UK	EU 13	Rest of EU	Rest of World
2014	81.9%	3.1%	1.3%	10.0%	3.7%
2015	85.3%	1.2%	1.3%	8.7%	3.5%
2016	82.2%	4.0%	1.2%	8.6%	3.9%
2017	83.6%	3.6%	0.9%	8.4%	3.5%

Source: Indecon analysis of SOLAS and JLD data

The following figure shows a regional breakdown of those on SST courses in each year. The percentage breakdown of those on SST courses is similar to the percentage breakdown of the overall population, with the two statistics generally within a number of percentage points of each other for each region. The percentage of learners on SST courses in the Mid-East and West has fallen year-on-year, whilst there have been consistent increases in the Midlands region. The South-West region had

[10] https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_education_and_skills/reports/2019/2019-09-25_report-on-hearings-relating-to-the-uptake-of-apprenticeships-and-traineeships_en.pdf

been accounting for a falling percentage of SST learners but a large increase in the number of learners in Kerry reversed that trend, with the region becoming the second largest in terms of SST learners.

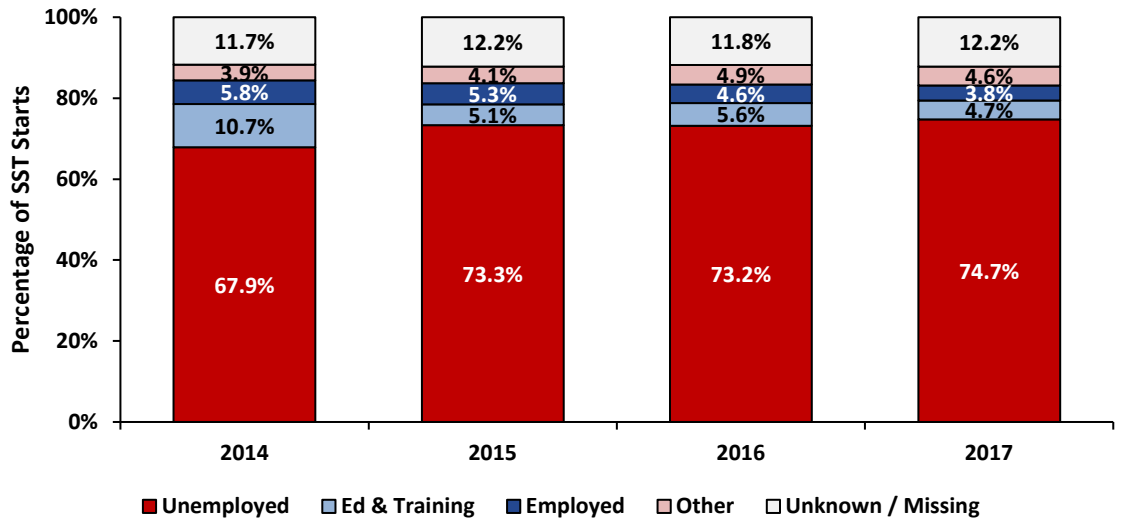
Table 3.3: Regional Breakdown of Those on SST Courses (2014 - 2018)						
	2014	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**Overall Population**
Border	7.2%	10.2%	12.9%	11.7%	11.6%	8.3%
Dublin	27.7%	26.9%	26.4%	28.0%	24.4%	28.3%
Mid-East	12.3%	12.0%	11.3%	11.1%	10.1%	14.5%
Midlands	4.4%	5.4%	6.0%	6.7%	8.9%	6.1%
Mid-West	11.5%	12.7%	13.6%	13.5%	10.7%	9.9%
South-East	8.2%	8.3%	8.6%	9.4%	7.4%	8.9%
South-West	16.9%	13.5%	12.4%	11.0%	19.4%	14.5%
West	11.9%	10.9%	8.8%	8.5%	7.7%	9.5%
Source: Indecon analysis of SOLAS, JLD and CSO Census data						

Half of SST learners had a Leaving Certificate or other Level 4/5 qualification prior to beginning their course. Around one in four had a lower qualification (Junior Certificate qualification or lower), while most of the remainder had higher qualifications, including at degree level.

Table 3.4: Highest Level of Education Attained by SST Learners (2018)		
	Percentage of SST Learners	**Percentage of SST Learners (Excluding Missing)**
No Formal Education or Training	3.4%	4.7%
Pre-Primary/Primary Education	2.7%	3.7%
Primary level and below	***6.1%***	***8.4%***
Junior/Inter/Group Certificate NFQ Level 3 and Transition Year	13.1%	18.3%
Leaving Certificate/ A Levels/LCA	24.0%	33.3%
PLC/Certificate Levels 4/5	11.8%	16.5%
Levels 3, 4 and 5	***48.9%***	***68.0%***
Certificate Level 6 / Other non-NFQ aligned FET	5.7%	7.9%
Diploma NFQ Level 7	2.7%	3.7%
Certificate Level 6 and Level 7 Diploma	***8.4%***	***11.6%***
Ordinary Bachelor Degree	2.7%	3.7%
Honours Bachelor Degree	3.3%	4.6%
Bachelor Degree	***5.9%***	***8.3%***
Professional / Post Graduate	2.5%	3.4%
Doctorate or Higher	0.1%	0.2%
Missing Data	28.1%	-
Total	**100%**	**100%**
Source: SOLAS		

A consistently high proportion of those on SST courses between 2014 and 2017 were unemployed at the start of their SST course. In 2017, almost three quarters of those starting their SST course were unemployed, 3.8% were in employment, whilst 4.7% were in some form of education or training. This is shown in Figure 3.4.

Figure 3.4: Status at Beginning of SST Course (2014 – 2017)



Source: Indecon analysis of JLD data
Note: Individuals may have started more than one course in a given year. Their status at the beginning of each start has been included and thus the percentage are based on the total number of SST starts.

Separate data from SOLAS for 2018 shows a similarly high proportion of SST learners were unemployed prior to commencing their course. There may be some difficulties in comparing the previous figure with the following table as the sources are different, and the level of unknown/missing data varies between the two sources.

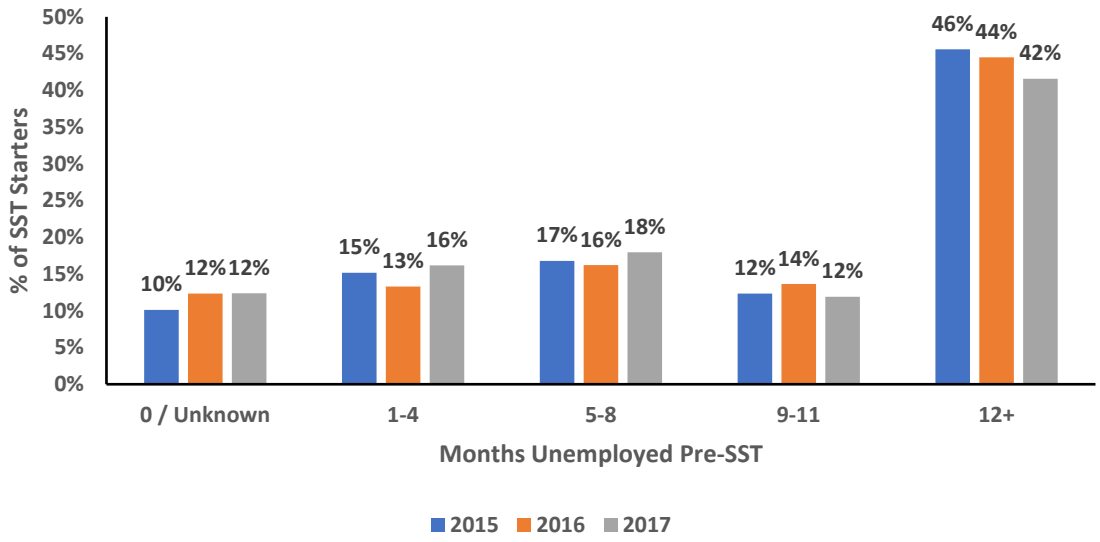
Table 3.5: Principle Economic Status of SST Learners (2018)

Employed	6.2%
Unemployed	63.2%
Student/Trainee	5.3%
Other	6.8%
Missing data	18.6%
Total	**100%**
Source: SOLAS	

We also obtained further insight into the employment histories of learners upon admission to SST via analysis of the JLD. The following figure illustrates the proportion of SST starters in the years from

2015 to 2017 divided by their length of time unemployed in the preceding 12 months. While there is a considerable proportion of individuals who are recorded as unknown prior to SST, of those for whom the JLD contains data, the most common length of time unemployed prior to undertaking SST is 12 months or more. We note that the JLD does not contain information on disability allowance and we theorise that a significant portion of the unknowns in the below figure are those who were on disability allowance prior to beginning SST.

Figure 3.5: Length of Time Not Employed Pre-SST



Source: Indecon analysis of JLD

The following table presents additional analysis of JLD data with regards to the average length of time without being in employment prior to SST. Overall, excluding those with unknown statuses prior to undertaking SST, we find that the average number of months not in employment out of the preceding 12 months prior to SST in 2017 was 8.9.

Table 3.6: Average Length of Time Without Employment Prior to SST

		2015	2016	2017	Overall
Average Months Unemployed Pre-SST	Including 0 / Unknowns	8.2	8.1	7.8	8.1
	Excluding 0 / Unknowns	9.1	9.3	8.9	9.1

Source: Indecon analysis of JLD. Number of learners captured is 25,442 (including 0/unknowns), or 22,511 (excluding 0/unknowns).

3.3 Reasons for Undertaking Course

Indecon asked SST participants why they had decided to apply for SST. The two most common answers were that they had decided to apply after seeing an advertisement, via a website, or hearing about SST in the media (40.4% in total); and after being referred by their Local Employment Service or Intreo office (33.6%). The following table also shows that a significant minority (16.7%) indicated that SST was recommended to them by a friend or family member.

Table 3.7: Views of SST Participants on Their Decision to Apply for SST

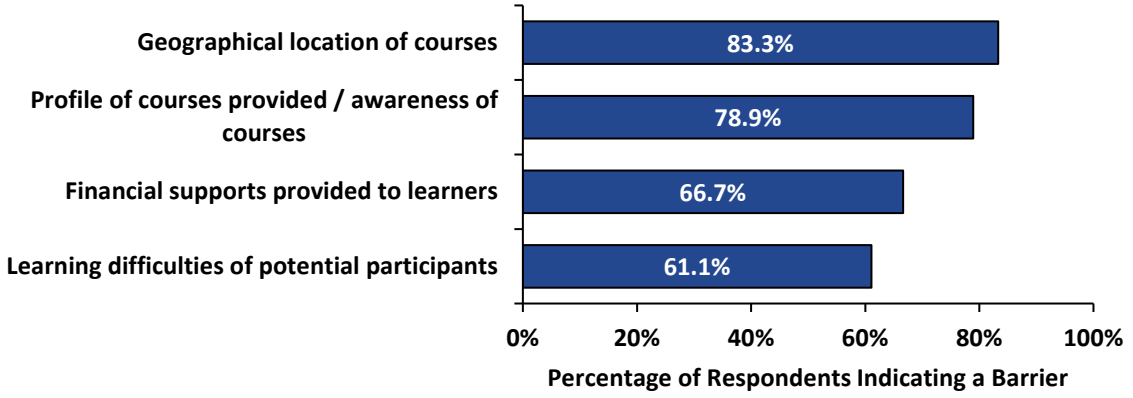
	Percentage Respondents
Decided to apply after seeing advertisement/their website/hearing about SST in the media	40.4%
I was referred by my Local Employment Service or Intreo office	33.6%
Was recommended to me by a friend, family member	16.7%
Was recommended by Education and Training Board or by school/teacher	7.1%
I attended a Specific Skills Training Open Day	4.4%
Other	2.7%
I attended a Specific Skills Training Sample Course with my Education and Training Board	2.0%

Source: Indecon analysis of Confidential Survey of SST Participants
Note: Percentages do not add up to 100% as respondents were able to select more than one response.

3.4 Barriers to Entry

Indecon asked SST Training Centre Managers and participants on their perceptions of the barriers to learners accessing SST. A majority of Training Centre Managers indicated that the geographical location of courses, profile of courses, financial supports and learning difficulties were barriers to accessing SST.

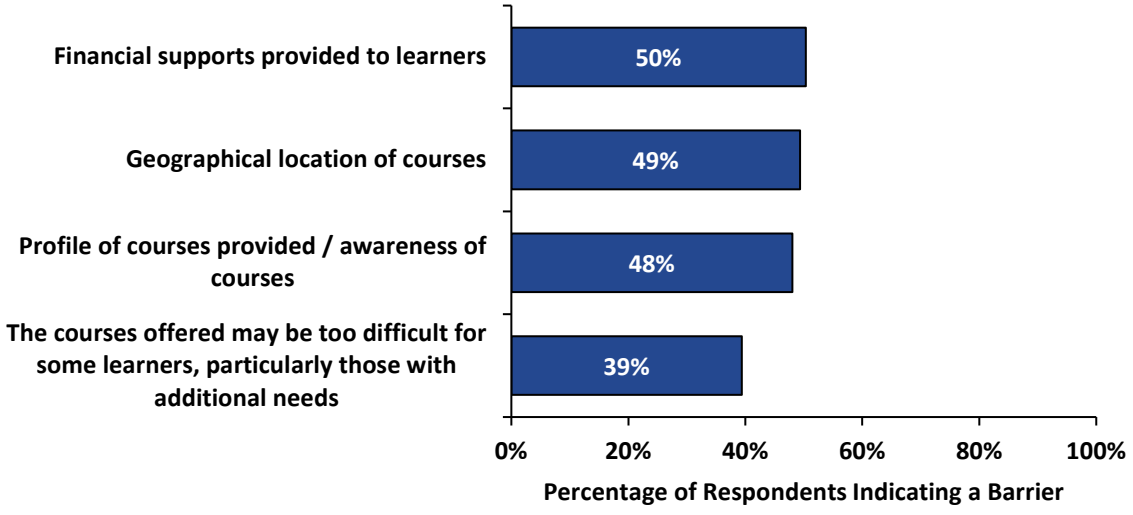
Figure 3.6: Views of SST Training Centre Management on Barriers to Learners Accessing SST



Source: Indecon survey of SST Training Centre Management

SST participants also acknowledged a range of barriers including financial supports, geographic location, awareness and perceived course difficulties for some learners.

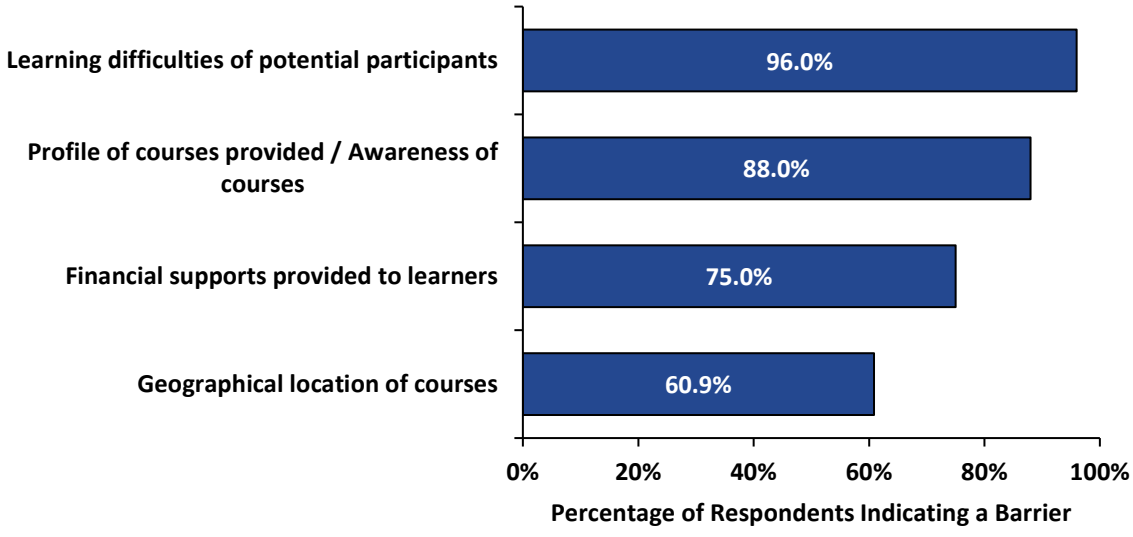
Figure 3.7: Views of Participants on Barriers to Accessing SST



Source: Indecon survey of SST Participants

ETB Senior Management also highlighted learning difficulties and literacy levels as important barriers to accessing SST.

Figure 3.8: Views of ETB Senior Management on Barriers to Accessing SST



Source: Indecon survey of ETB Senior Management

3.5 Retention and Dropout Rates

Around seven of ten SST learners who commence a course go on to complete it, though not all of these completers achieve a certificate at the end of their period of study. The retention and certification rates for 2015-2017 are shown in Table 3.8 below. In 2017 those who commence an SST course, less than half achieved a certification.

Table 3.8: SST Retention and Certification Rates

	2015	2016	2017
Participants	13,693	14,310	13,805
Of which			
Completers	73.8%	67.7%	71.6%
Certification	56.0%	53.0%	45.0%
Source: SOLAS			

There is disparity between completion rates across the country, though differences in certification rates are far more pronounced. The rate of completion and certification across ETBs in 2017 is illustrated in Table 3.9. There is some disparity in the completion rates across different ETBs, with a low of around only 50% of course participants completing SST in some regions, to a high of around 80% in others. The standard deviation of completion rates, a measure of the extent of differences in rates between ETBs, was 10.6%.

The differences in certificate rates between ETBs, calculated as the percentage of participants who started an SST course and went on to achieve a certificate, is much more pronounced with a standard deviation of 18.0%. While the national average rate of certification was 45%, this ranged from a low of 5.5% to a high of 65.9%. Expressed as a percentage of those who completed, some ETBs achieved a close to 100% certificate rate, while for others only a minority of those who completed an SST course achieved a certificate.

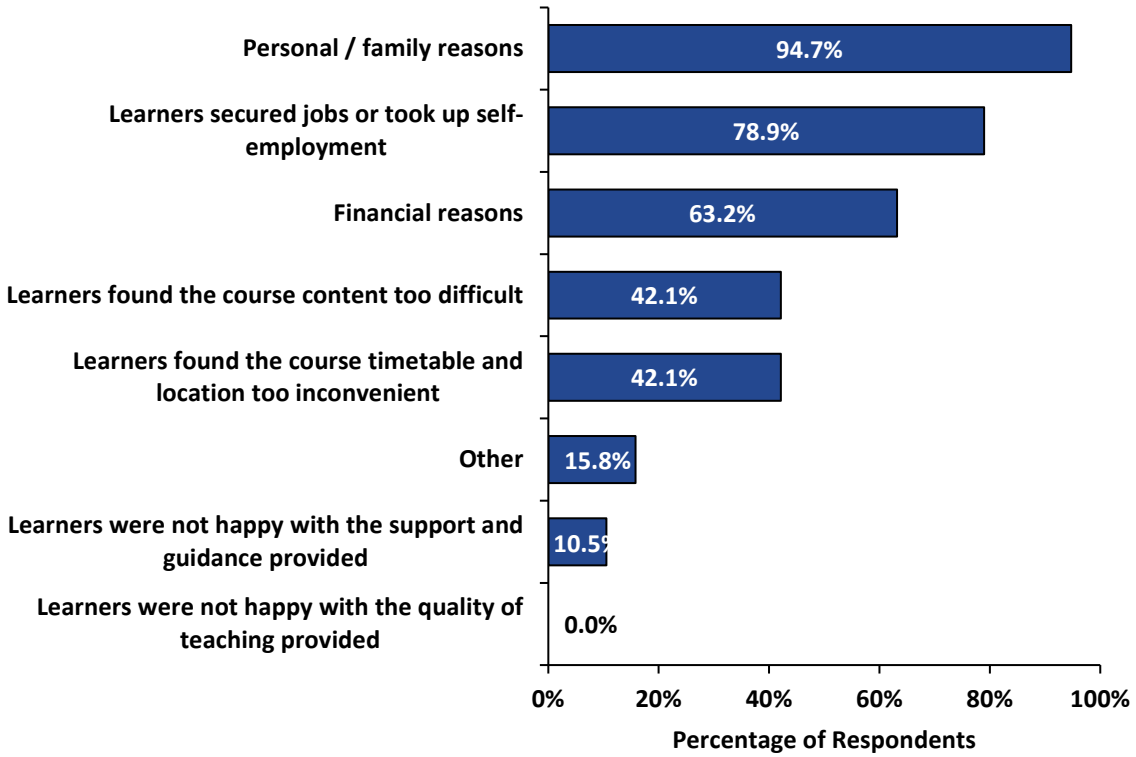
Table 3.9: SST Retention and Certification Rates 2017 across ETBs

	Completion Rate	Certification Rate	
		% of all Participants	% of completers
National	71.6%	45.0%	62.8%
Standard Deviation	10.9%	18.5%	27.4%
Source: SOLAS[11]			

[11] Indecon requests SOLAS to check underlying data if possible, specifically the completion rates for Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim look unusually low.

When asked about their views on the reasons for learners not completing their courses, the vast majority (94.7%) of SST Training Centre Managers indicated that personal/family reasons were one of the key reasons for learners not completing their course. Over three-quarters of respondents also stated that learners securing employment or taking up self-employment were other reasons for learners not completing their course. Just under two-thirds indicated that financial reasons were a factor, whilst less than half indicated that they believed the learners were finding the courses too hard, or the timetable/location too inconvenient.

Figure 3.9: Views of SST Training Centre Managers on Reasons for Learners Not Completing Course

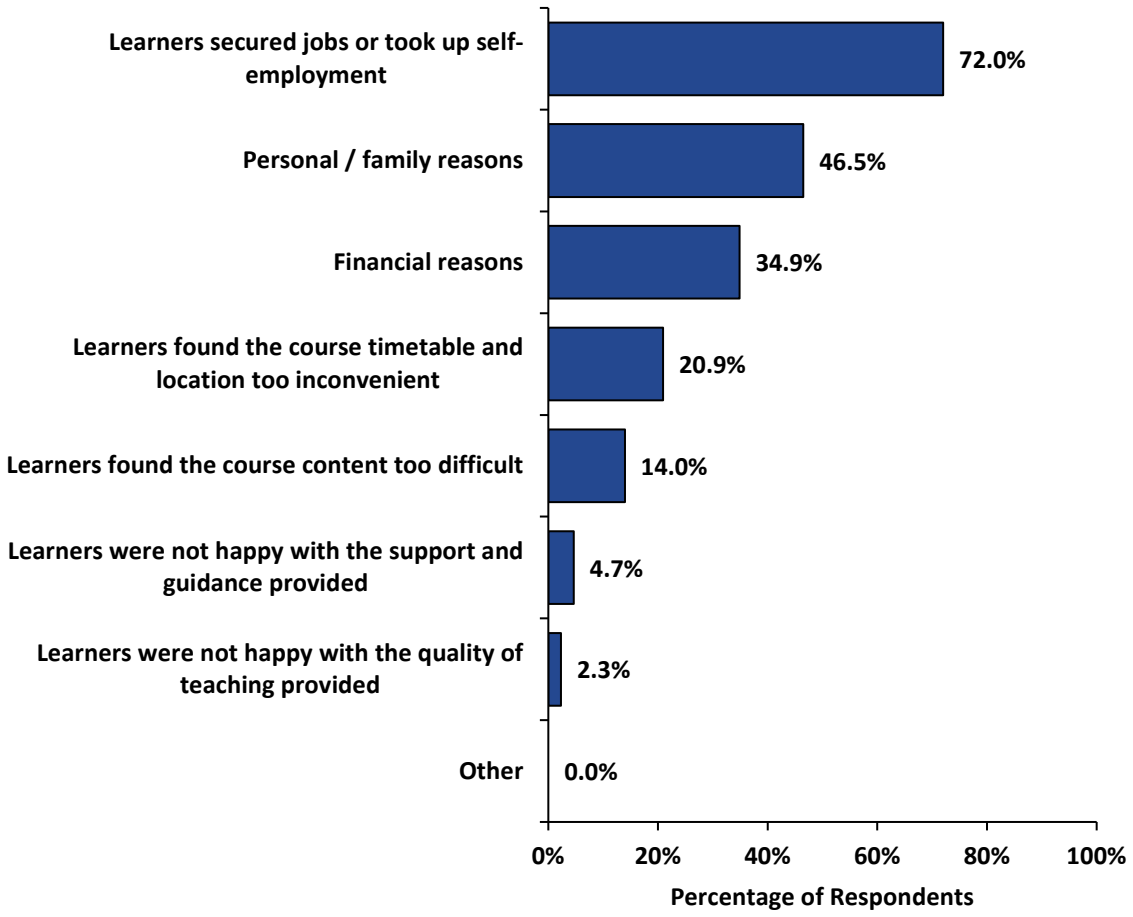


Source: Indecon survey of SST Training Centre Management

ETB Senior Management's top three reasons for learners not completing their course were the same as the SST Training Centre Managers, as follows:

- Learners secured employment or took up self-employment;
- Personal/family reasons; and
- Financial reasons.

Figure 3.10: Views of ETB Senior Management on Reasons for Learners Not Completing Course

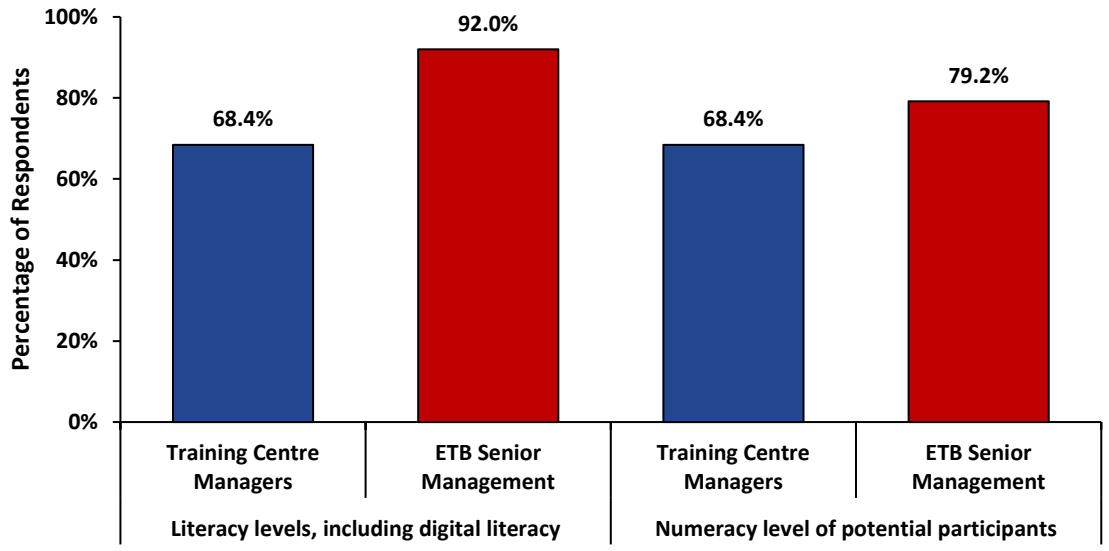


Source: Indecon survey of ETB Senior Management

3.6 Literacy and Numeracy Levels

In this section, we analyse the prevailing literacy and numeracy levels of SST participants. Figure 3.11 presents the views of SST Training Centre Managers and ETB management with regards to whether they view literacy and numeracy issues as potential barriers to entry for SST participants. Among both Training Centre Managers and ETB management, most respondents indicated that both literacy and numeracy are potential barriers. 92% of Senior Management indicated that literacy levels were a barrier to entry for SST courses.

Figure 3.11: Views of SST Training Centre Managers and ETB Management on Whether Literacy and Numeracy Represented Barriers to Potential Learners



Source: Indecon survey of SST Training Centre Managers and ETB Management

3.7 Summary of Key Findings

This chapter assessed the socio-demographic profile of SST participants, and discussed barriers to entry, and dropout and certification rates. The key findings from this chapter are as follows:

- The number of beneficiaries was broadly stable over this period, while the numbers who completed their course fell to 8,602 from 9,719 in 2015. The number of beneficiaries of apprenticeships and traineeships has grown from 5,467 in 2015 to 8,716 in 2018[12]. The National Skills Strategy includes a target of 50,000 apprenticeships and traineeships places to be provided over the period 2016-2020.
- The typical SST learner is over age 25 and male. The age profile has become older in more recent years, with the percentage of learners over the age of 25 growing from 65.8% in 2014 to 73.5% in 2018. This is even though youth unemployment in Ireland has fallen by less proportionately since the recession than unemployment at older age categories.
- Half of SST learners had a Leaving Certificate or other level 4/5 qualification prior to beginning their course. Around one in four had a Junior Certificate qualification or lower, which in turn may indicate potential difficulties with literacy and/or numeracy among SST participants.
- A consistently high proportion of those on SST courses between 2014 and 2017 have been unemployed at the start of their SST course, with almost three quarters of those starting their SST course in 2017 unemployed. On average, participants were unemployed for nine of the previous 12 months.
- The two most common reasons for undertaking the course, as identified through Indecon's survey of SST participants, were that they had decided to apply after seeing an

[12] https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Action-Plan-Expand-Apprenticeship-Traineeship-in-Ireland-2016-2020.pdf

advertisement, website, or hearing about SST in the media (40.4%); and after being referred by their Local Employment Service or Intreo office (33.6%).

- In terms of barriers to entry, the majority of SST Training Centre Managers indicated that the location of courses was a barrier to entry, with the profile and awareness of courses also highlighted. The financial supports awarded to learners and the geographic location of courses were the most common responses provided by participants. ETB Senior Management deemed learning difficulties of students to be a barrier to entry to SST courses.
- Almost three out of every ten learners do not complete their studies. For ETB Senior Management and SST Training Centre Managers personal reasons and the learner leaving to take up employment were the most common reasons for non-completion.
- Surveys of both Training Centre Managers and ETB management indicate that both literacy and numeracy are potential barriers to participation in SST. 92% of Senior Management indicated that literacy levels were a barrier to entry for SST courses.

4 Programme Design, Content and Delivery

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter we consider the programme design, the content of the courses provided and the nature of the programme delivery.

4.2 Programme Design and Content

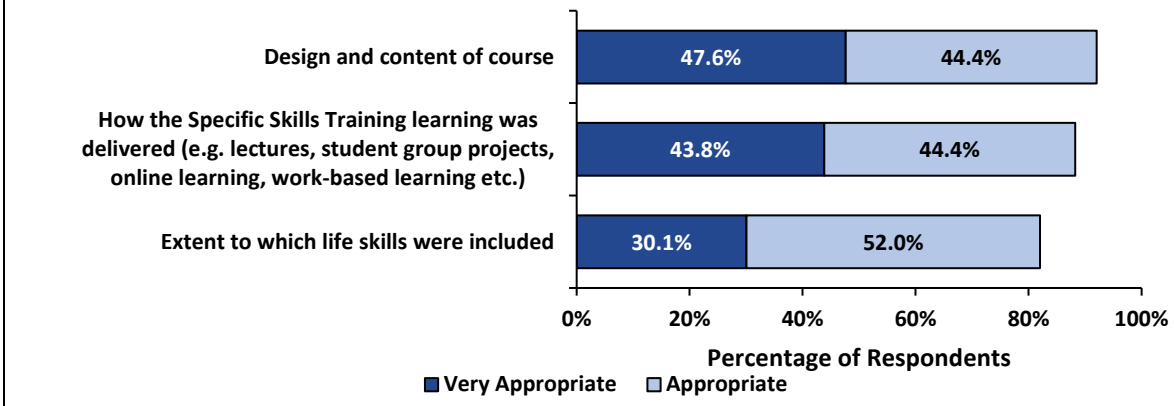
SST offers a range of courses covering hard and soft skills including: Business Administration; Computer Applications and Office Skills; Construction; Door Security and Guarding Skills; Healthcare; IT; Logistics; Manual and Computerised Payroll and Book-keeping; Manufacturing; Maintenance Skills Technology; Retail Skills/Sales; Sports and Recreation; Technical Employability Skills; and Warehouse Operations. Courses are available for enrolment throughout the year. Course delivery is predominantly commercially contracted, which can allow for more flexible deployment.[13]

As part of the new primary research undertaken for this evaluation, Indecon sought the views SST learners, SST Training Centre Managers and ETB Senior Management with regard to the appropriateness or otherwise of key aspects of SST course design, structure and delivery. These include:

- Overall views on how SST is delivered;
- The overall design and content of SST courses; and
- The extent to which 'life skills' are reflected in course design and provision.

The following figure presents the views of SST learners on the course structure, design and content. Their views suggest that the design content and delivery of SST courses was either appropriate or very appropriate.

Figure 4.1: Views of SST Learners on Aspects of Course Structure, Delivery and Design/Content

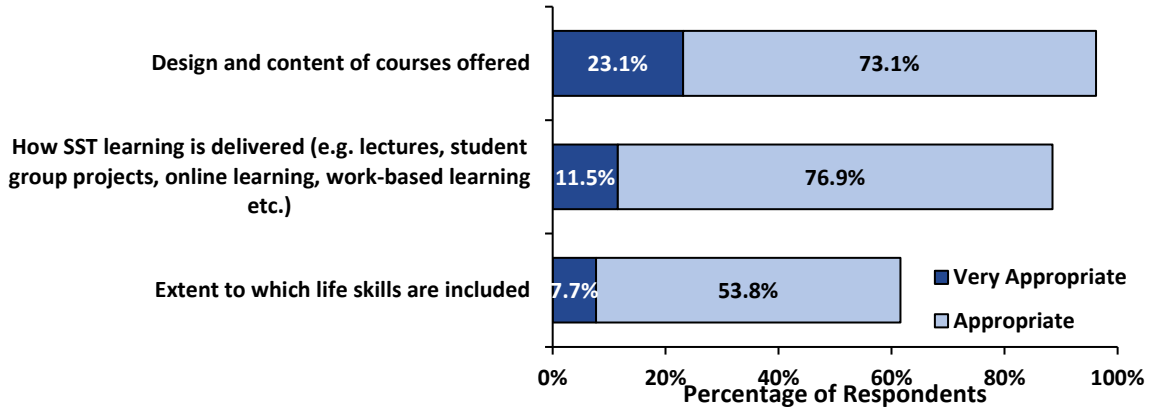


Source: Indecon survey of SST Learners

[13] https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/national-training-fund-expenditure-report-2018.pdf

ETB managers also indicated possible views on course structure, delivery and context. However, of note is that even higher percentages of learners felt these aspects were very appropriate.

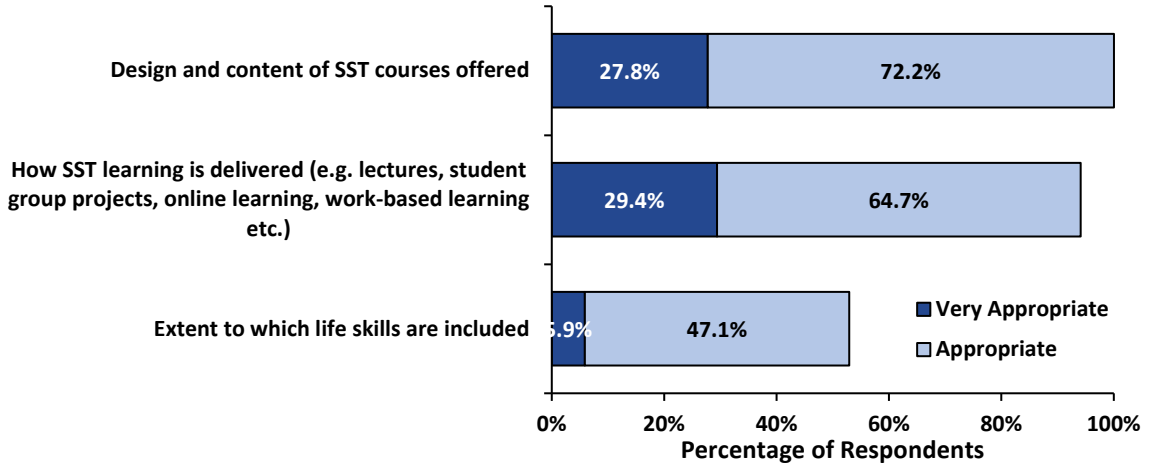
Figure 4.2: Views of ETB Management on Aspects of Course Structure, Delivery and Design/Content



Source: Indecon survey of ETB Management

SST Training Centre Managers held similar views on the appropriateness of the design and content of the courses as well as the delivery of SST learning.

Figure 4.3: Views of SST Training Centre Managers on Aspects of Course Structure, Delivery and Design/Content



Source: Indecon survey of SST Training Centre Managers

A number of survey respondents, both in terms of learners and providers, stated that they believed that the course content needed to be updated to remain relevant.

4.3 Provision of Financial Supports to Learners

Participants in SST can avail of supports that are generally available to FET learners. All courses are free, and a FET training allowance may be paid to learners who take part in Specific Skills Training depending on which, if any, social welfare benefit they are in receipt of.[14] The rates set are in most cases equal to their existing social welfare benefit. Learners may also be able to avail of a range of other supports. The rates for accommodation and meal allowances are shown below in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Course Participant Accommodation and Meal Allowances		
	€/DAY	€/WEEK
Maximum Rate Payable	€13.98	€69.90
Meal allowances	€0.80	€4.00
Source: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/A-Strategic-Review-of-Further-Education-and-Training-and-the-Unemployed.pdf		

Course participants are also allowed to receive a travel allowance, the rate of which depends on how far they must travel. The rates of payment are shown in Table 4.2. If a course participant is in receipt of a travel allowance, accommodation allowances are not payable.

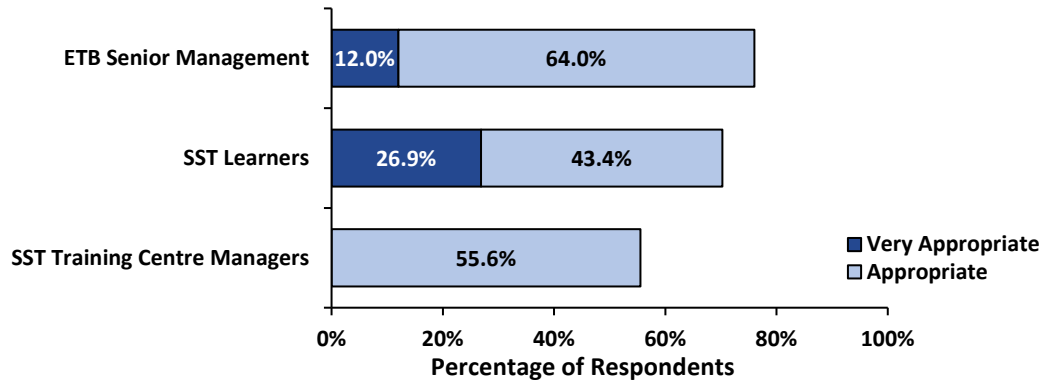
Table 4.2: Course Participant Travel Allowance	
Distance Travelled	**Rate Per Week**
5 – 8 kilometres	€4.60
8 – 16 kilometres	€11.90
16 – 32 kilometres	€17.60
32 – 48 kilometres	€21.60
48 – 64 kilometres	€27.70
64 – 80 kilometres	€32.60
Source: http://kerryetbtrainingcentre.ie/support/travel-allowances-full-time-and-part-time-courses/	

Course participants may also qualify for a subsidised childcare place under the Childcare Employment and Training Support (CETS) scheme, which can provide full-time, part-time or after-school childcare places. The CETS scheme is managed by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) via the City and County Childcare Committees.

Stakeholders were asked the appropriateness of financial supports, with the results presented in Figure 4.4. ETB Senior Management and SST learners both had high percentages of their respective cohorts indicating that financial supports for learners were either very appropriate or appropriate.

[14] https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/vocational_education_and_training/fas_training_courses.html

Figure 4.4: Views on Financial Supports for Learners



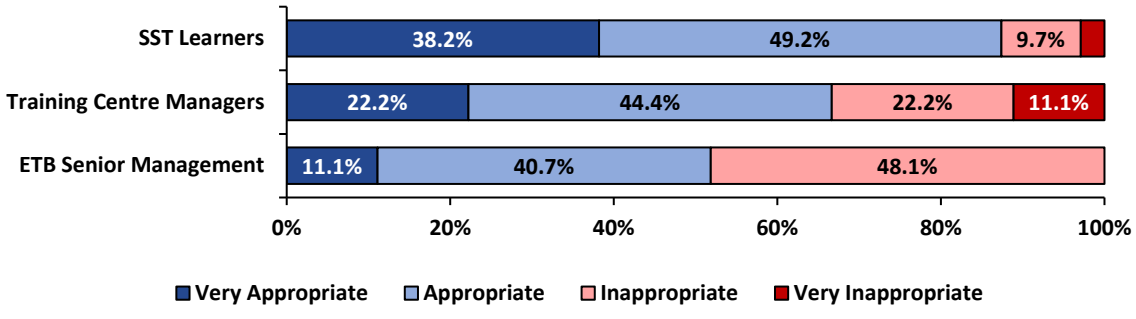
Source: Indecon surveys of ETB Senior Management, SST Learners and SST Training Centre Managers

4.4 Provision of Literacy and Numeracy Supports for Learners

ETBs correctly view integrated literacy and numeracy support as an important feature of their programmes.[15] This is reflected in the objectives in the FET Strategy (2020-2024) which highlights the importance of public awareness, initial assessment, certification and integrated provision, and there is awareness that ETBs that integrated literacy and numeracy can also help providers increase retention and success rates. A common approach to integrating literacy and numeracy by ETBS involves the delivery of standalone classes alongside the programme. Providers felt this model was particularly effective for learners on FET programmes at Level 5/6 where only a minority of students may require support. Most ETBs reported that tutors provided one-to-one additional support to learners.

The following figure presents the views of stakeholders on the supports available to learners in the areas of literacy and numeracy. Almost 90% of SST learners indicated that the literacy and numeracy supports were either very appropriate (38.2%) or appropriate (49.2%). The majority of SST Training Centre Managers and ETB Senior Management also deemed the supports to be appropriate, though a significant number on both cases thought the supports were not appropriate.

Figure 4.5: Views of Literacy and Numeracy Supports for Learners



Source: Indecon surveys of ETB Senior Management, SST Learners and SST Training Centre Managers

[15] http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/Integrated%20Literacy%20and%20Numeracy%20Final%20Report.pdf

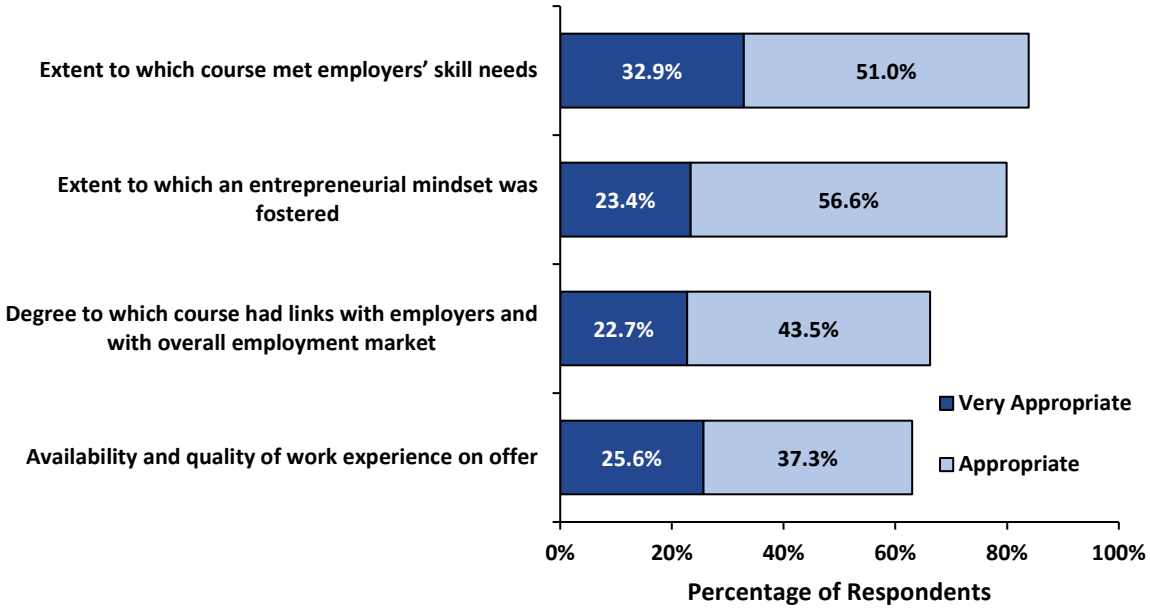
4.5 Work Experience and Labour Market/Employer Impacts

National policy, as set out in Section 2.4, places a high level of importance on ensuring that training is relevant to the needs of employers. Ensuring this fit with employers needs can be achieved through work placements which are typical as part of the course, while also maintaining links with employers to ensure training is relevant. While national policy, as evidenced by the Action Plan[16], is to be expand apprenticeship and traineeships, the relatively shorter duration of work placement in SST may be more suitable for certain sectors where employer engagement is difficult to secure. While significant progress has been made in expanding apprenticeships, progress was running around one year behind plan in late-2019[17], with low numbers at the outset of programmes.

The following figure shows that views of SST learner on the appropriateness of the design of SST courses and the linkages between the labour market and their SST course. Most respondents indicated that SST courses were designed appropriately in each of the following areas:

- Extent to which course met employers' skill needs;
- Extent to which an entrepreneurial mind-set was fostered;
- Degree to which course had links with employers and overall employment market; and
- Availability and quality of work experience on offer.

Figure 4.6: Views of SST Learners on Aspects of Appropriateness of Programme Design – Labour Market and Employer Aspects



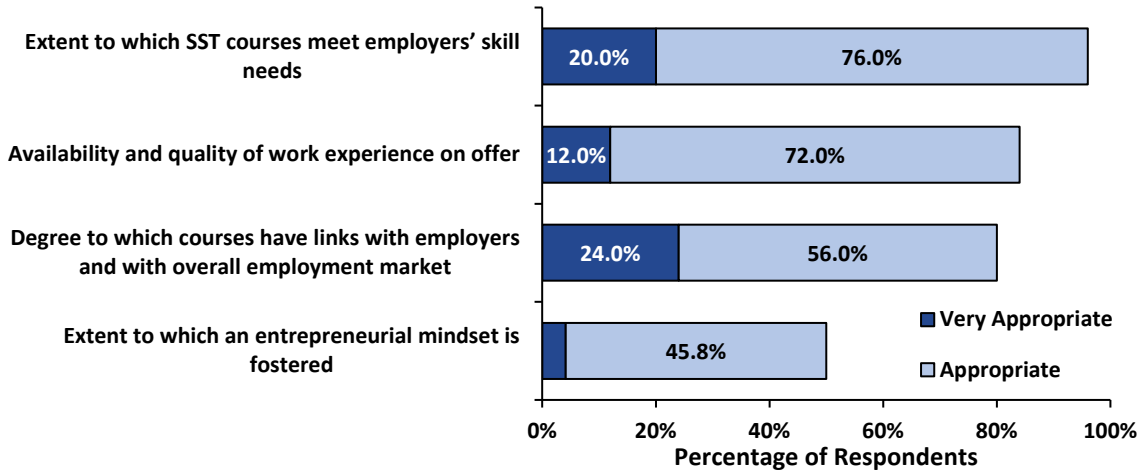
Source: Indecon survey of SST Learners

[16] Action Plan to Expand Apprenticeship Traineeship in Ireland, 2016-2020.

[17] Joint Oireachtas Hearing on Education and Skills – Report on hearings Relating to the Uptake of Apprenticeships and Traineeships.

Senior Management also had positive views on the availability and quality of work experience on offer, as well as the degree to which courses are linked to employers and the wider employment market. As discussed above, links with employers can include everything from understanding the needs of local employers, to arranging placements of SST learners directly with employers.

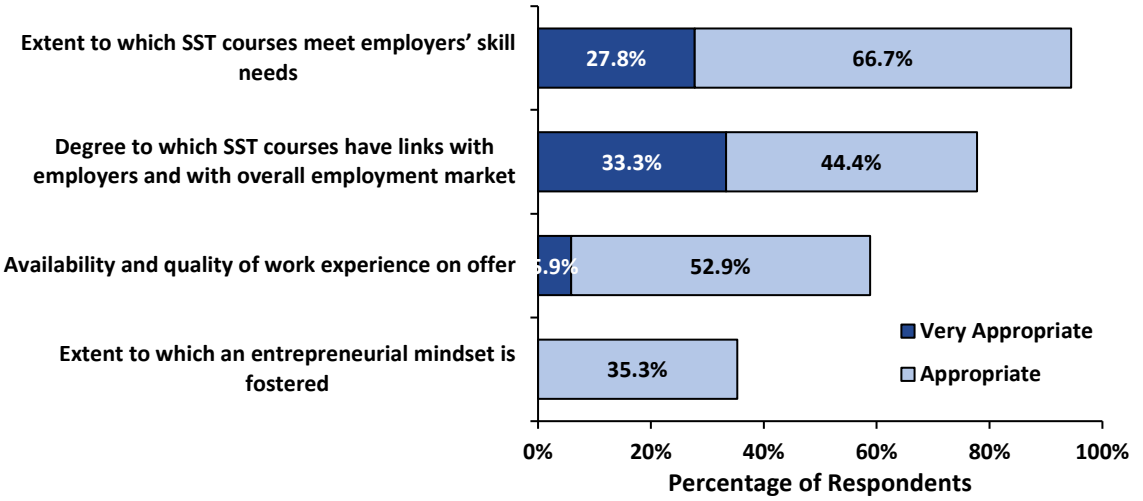
Figure 4.7: Views of ETB Management on Appropriateness of Programme Design – Labour Market and Employer Aspects



Source: Indecon survey of ETB Management

SST Training Centre Managers provided similar views to ETB Senior Management on the alignment of SST courses with the labour market.

Figure 4.8: Views of SST Training Centre Managers on Appropriateness of Programme Design – Labour Market and Employer Aspects



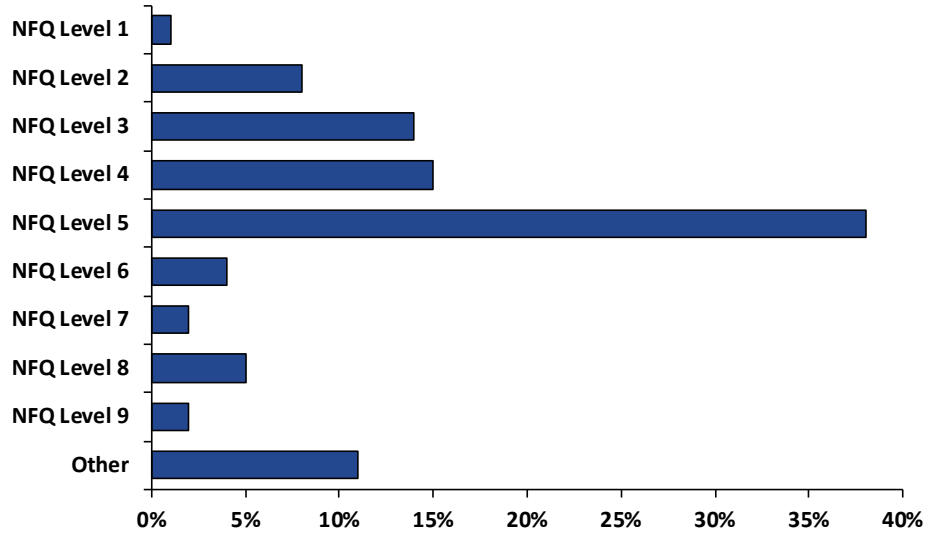
Source: Indecon survey of SST Training Centre Managers

4.6 Guidance Provided on Course

The new FET strategy places a focus on the simplification of the existing system so as to offer clear pathways into, within and from FET, encouraging and facilitating ongoing engagement with learners.The framework for adult career guidance is primarily within the remit of the Adult Educational Guidance Initiative (AEGI), which is provided by the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). SOLAS is responsible for funding FET Adult Guidance Services. Career guidance in Post Leaving Certificate colleges is delivered through the post primary guidance allocation model. Some participants in FET will also have had engagement on career issues and options with DEASP's Intreo service.

The Adult Educational Guidance Services (AEGS) operate through ETBs, and provide career and education information, one-to-one guidance and group guidance, with the aim of helping adults who wish to return to education and training or are already registered on an FET programme. The target groups[18] include individuals who may have engaged with a number of support services and education providers, including SST. Figure 4.9 shows that the AEGS is focussed primarily on NFQ Levels 3-5, with these levels representing more than two out of every three cases handled.

Figure 4.9: NFQ Education Category of AEGS Clients, 2017



Source: Quantitative and Qualitative Report of the Adult Educational Guidance Services.

The services provided through AEGS are underpinned by the following principles:

- Learner/Client centred;
- Confidentiality;
- Impartiality;
- Equal Opportunities;

[18] As set out in the Adult Education Guidance Initiative.

- Accessibility;
- Transparency; and
- Empowerment.

Individuals in FET can avail of career guidance from the Adult Educational Guidance Services (AEGS) provided by the ETBs, whose work includes:

- The provision of guidance services to individuals and groups in the FET sector;
- Collaboration with Government departments and agencies to strength referral protocols and guidance provision;
- Fostering links with employers and LEOs, as well as with managers and members of Regional Skills Fora; and
- Participating with local ETBs in a range of community-based programmes to develop supports for clients and the community.

The AEGS supports the following target groups which were identified by the Department of Education and Skills in their Operational Guidelines 2012 for the Adult Guidance Initiative (AEGI):[19]

- *"Adults and young people aged over sixteen years who left school with low or no formal qualifications or low literacy levels.*
- *The unemployed, particularly the priority groups identified as part of the Government's activation agenda.*
- *The long-term unemployed and those at risk of becoming long-term unemployed, especially those over fifty years of age.*
- *Those not in work but not eligible to be on the Live Register.*
- *Those in the workplace with basic skills needs."*

The Operational Guidelines set out the overall objectives of the AEGI with the overall aim to "*offer a guidance service to adults which includes impartial adult education information, one-to-one guidance and group guidance, which will help people to make informed educational, career and life choices."* [20] The other objectives are to ensure there is integrated and inclusive adult educational guidance counselling, available at all stages (including pre-entry and pre-exit) and that services be offered free of charge to target groups which include the above and disadvantaged men and women, lone parents, those with caring responsibilities, travellers, homeless people, substance misusers, ex-offenders, people with disabilities, people for whom English is not their mother tongue and former residents of designated education institutions and eligible family members.

A review of PLC guidance provision more generally found that just over one-third of PLC students accessed career guidance supports. The average adequacy score reported by PLC students who accessed career guidance support was 2.8 within a range of 1 to 4 (1=not at all, 4=to a great extent). A more fundamental review of career guidance was undertaken recently by Indecon for the Department. Career Guidance in Ireland has a very wide scope, and the new FET Strategy 2020-2024 references the work on building knowledge of FET across the network of school guidance counsellors, and says that this needs to be developed further.

[19] http://www.aegai.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/17Oct-The-Role-of-the-AEGS.pdf.

[20] https://www.ncge.ie/sites/default/files/AEGI_Operational_Guidelines_2012__FINAL.pdf

4.7 Summary of Key Findings

This chapter assessed the appropriateness of the programme design, the content of the courses provided and the nature of the programme delivery. The summary of key findings from this chapter is as follows.

- SST offers a range of courses covering hard and soft skills. Courses are available for enrolment throughout the year, and delivery is predominantly commercially contracted which can allow for more flexible deployment.
- Most respondents to each of Indecon's survey streams indicated that they felt that the design and content of SST courses were appropriate or appropriate. This was 92.0% of learners, 96.2% of ETB Management, and 100.0% of Training Centre Managers.
- Participants in SST can avail of supports that are generally available to FET learners. All courses are free, and a FET training allowance may be paid. A majority of ETB Senior Management (76%), learners (70%) and Training Centre Managers (56%) felt that financial supports for learners were appropriate or very appropriate.
- In terms of numeracy and literacy supports, most SST learners highlighted the value of these supports, with nine out of ten reporting that these were appropriate or very appropriate. However, the level of agreement on this is lower among providers, with two-thirds of training centre managers and half of ETB Senior Management reporting supports as appropriate or very appropriate, though a significant number thought the supports were not appropriate. The FET Strategy (2020-2024) highlights the importance of public awareness, initial assessment, certification and integrated provision.
- Respondents reported positively on the impact of SST with regard to employment. Learners indicated that SST courses were designed appropriately/very appropriately in meeting employers' needs (84%); fostering an entrepreneurial mind-set (80%); and links with employers (66%). Strong levels of agreement were also reported by providers.
- The Adult Educational Guidance Services (AEGS) operate through ETBs, and provide career and education information, one-to-one guidance and group guidance, with the aim of helping adults who wish to return to education and training or are already registered on an FET programme. AEGS is focussed primarily on NFQ Levels 3-5, with these levels representing over two out of three of cases handled.
- Career Guidance in Ireland has a very wide scope, and the new FET Strategy 2020-2024 references the work on building knowledge of FET across the network of school guidance counsellors, and also places a focus on the simplification of the existing system of programmes to offer clear pathways to learners.

5 Evaluation of Labour Market Progression and Other Potential Benefits

5.1 Introduction

In this section, Indecon assesses the progression rates of SST training participants and the qualitative evidence regarding potential benefits of SST.

5.2 Labour Market Progression

The following table shows that almost half of 2016 learners had progressed to employment. The survey was of learners who completed their studies in Q1 2016, and the interviews were conducted in May-June 2017, over 12 months subsequently. Of those who did have employment, four in five were in full time jobs.

Table 5.1: Status of Learners, 2016	
	% of Learners
Employed	49%
Of which:	
Full-time	*39%*
Part-time	*10%*
Other	*1%*
Unemployed	35%
Student	9%
Inactive/Other	7%
Source: SOLAS Follow-Up Survey	

In understanding whether those who progressed to employment would have secured this job without completing their SST course, Indecon has examined the views of SST participants. Over a quarter of respondents indicated that they deemed it highly likely (11.3%) or fairly likely (15.5%) that they would have been offered a job in the absence of the SST course. This suggests that there is some "deadweight" present, in other words one of the key intended outcomes of the programme (i.e. finding a job) would have happened anyway in the absence of SST. However, most respondents said that it was not very likely (21.8%) or not at all likely (32.4%) that they would have been offered the job in the absence of the SST course. Such deadweight is common to programmes such as SST. It is possible that while learners would have found employment in the absence of SST, that the course helped them find better employment.

Table 5.2: Employed SST Participants' Views on the Likelihood of Being Offered Their Job had they not Completed Their SST Course	
	Percentage of Responses
Highly Likely	11.3%
Fairly Likely	15.5%
Not Very Likely	21.8%
Not at All Likely	32.4%
Don't Know	19.0%
Source: Indecon analysis of Confidential Survey of SST Participants	

The findings of Indecon's survey of SST Training Centre Managers regarding the destination of learners is shown below. This suggests that 35% of participants who were not previously employed, progressed directly to employment. A further 10.5% returned to employment or moved to self-employment. It should be noted that Training Centre Managers reported to knowing about most candidates, so these findings should be considered in light of SOLAS's own follow up survey as reported above.

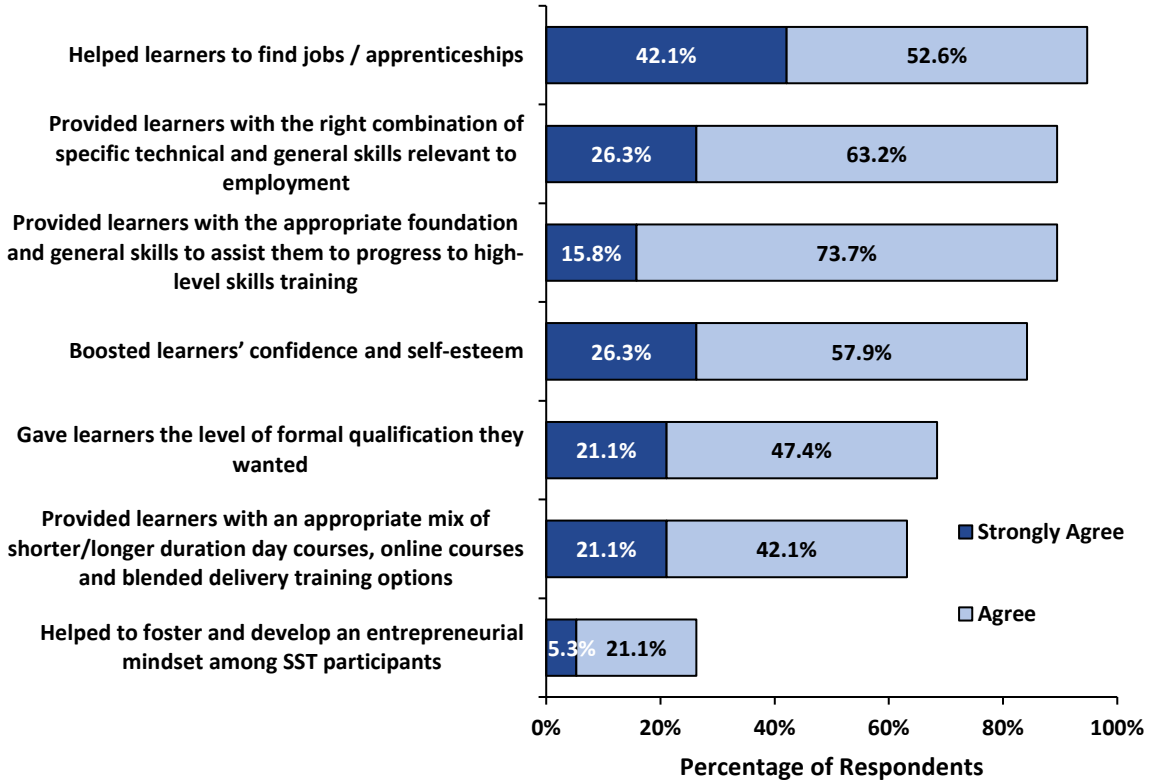
Table 5.3: Survey of Training Centre Managers regarding SST Completers in 2017 by Destination of Learner	
	% of 2017 SST Completers Whose Outcome is Known
Directly to employment (not previously employed)	35.0%
Returning to employment or self-employment	6.8%
Directly to self-employment (not previously self-employed)	3.7%
CE Scheme	0.9%
Other Voluntary	0.6%
Employment	***47.0%***
Apprenticeship	8.3%
Post-Leaving Certificate course	8.2%
Other education/training course	11.9%
Further Education or Training	***28.4%***
Unemployed (previously employed/self-employed)	***12.0%***
Finished Early	12.6%
Source: Indecon survey of SST Training Centre Management ***Note: SST Training Centre Management did not know the destination of 64% of SST completers.***	

5.3 Benefits of SST

In addition to estimating the employment impacts of SST, it is useful to consider the views of SST Training Centre Managers, learners and employers on the potential benefits of SST.

The following figure shows that almost 95% of Training Centre Managers who responded indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed that SST had helped learners to find jobs/apprenticeships. This finding is supported by other analysis conducted as part of this evaluation, including the limited extent of deadweight as reported by learners themselves (see Section 5.2), as well as the Counterfactual Impact Assessment as reported in Section 6. They also stated that SST had helped to provide skills relevant to employment; provided learners with the foundation to assist them to progress to a high-skill level; and boosted their confidence and self-esteem. The least positive outcomes were with respect of fostering an entrepreneurial mindset.

Figure 5.1: Views of SST Training Centre Management on Benefits of SST for Learners

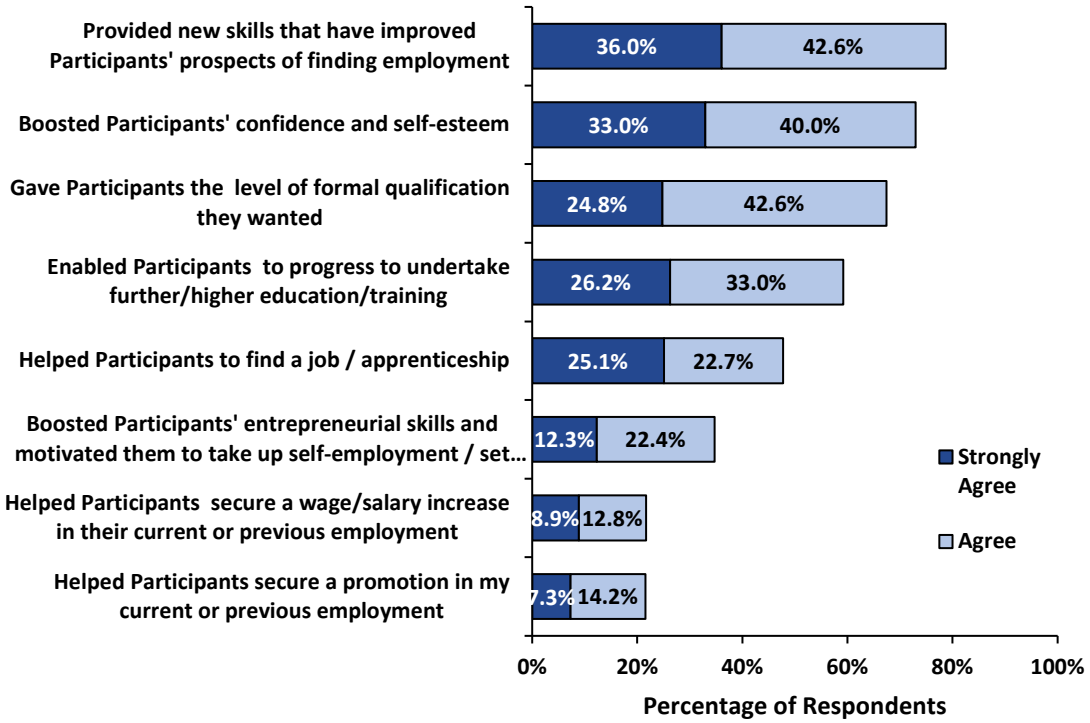


Source: Indecon survey of SST Training Centre Management

Whilst nearly each respondent to the SST Training Centre Manager survey indicated that SST had helped learners find jobs and apprenticeships, the following table shows that around a half of learners felt that SST had helped them find a job or apprenticeship. Most respondents did however agree that SST provided them with new skills which would enhance the prospects of finding a job, increased

their self-confidence, given them the level of formal qualification they wanted and enabled them to progress to further/higher education. The result may reflect the fact that many of the respondents to this survey may only have very recently completed their courses, so may not have had sufficient time to find employment.

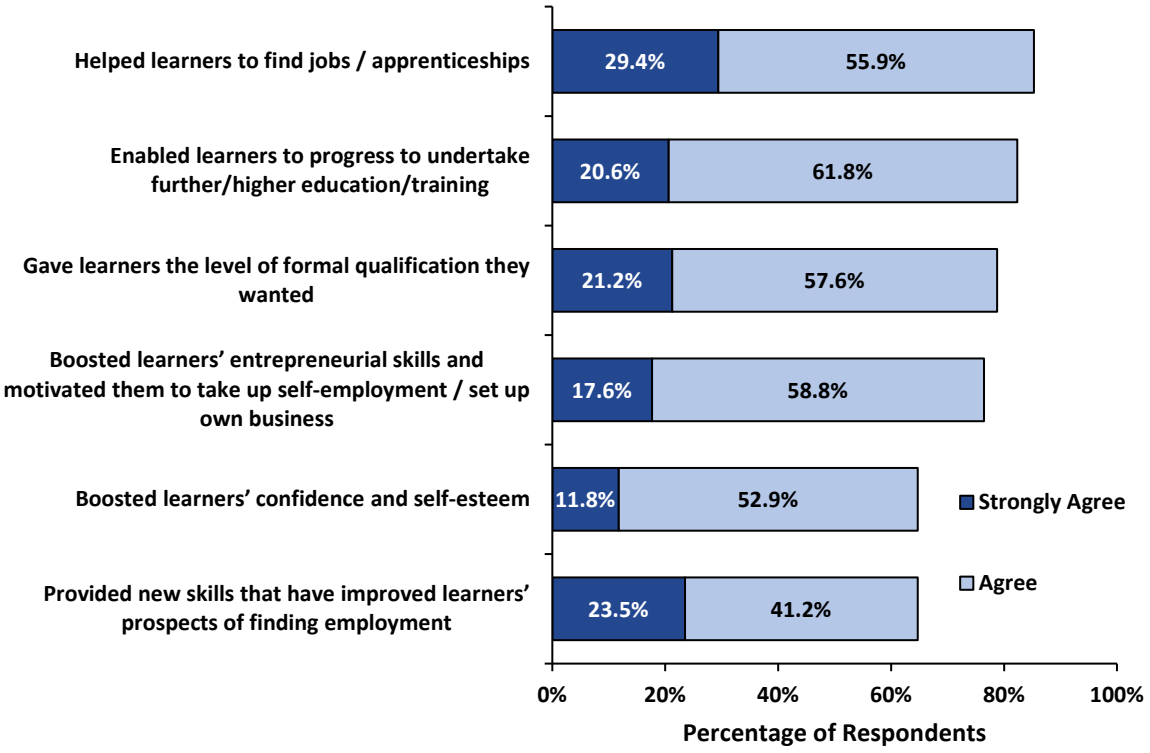
Figure 5.2: Views of Participants on Benefits of SST for Learners



Source: Indecon survey of SST Participants

Indecon also surveyed employers as part of this evaluation. A large majority of employers stated that they agreed (55.9%) or strongly agreed (29.4%) that SST had helped to provide learners with jobs or apprenticeships. They also deemed there to be benefits in terms of boosting self-esteem, provision of formal qualifications and boosting entrepreneurial skills, amongst others. A minority of SST participants agreed that SST learning had boosted their entrepreneurial skills and motivated them to set up their own business, suggesting differences in the views of learners and employers, as well as Training Centre Managers.

Figure 5.3: Views of Employers on Benefits of SST for Learners



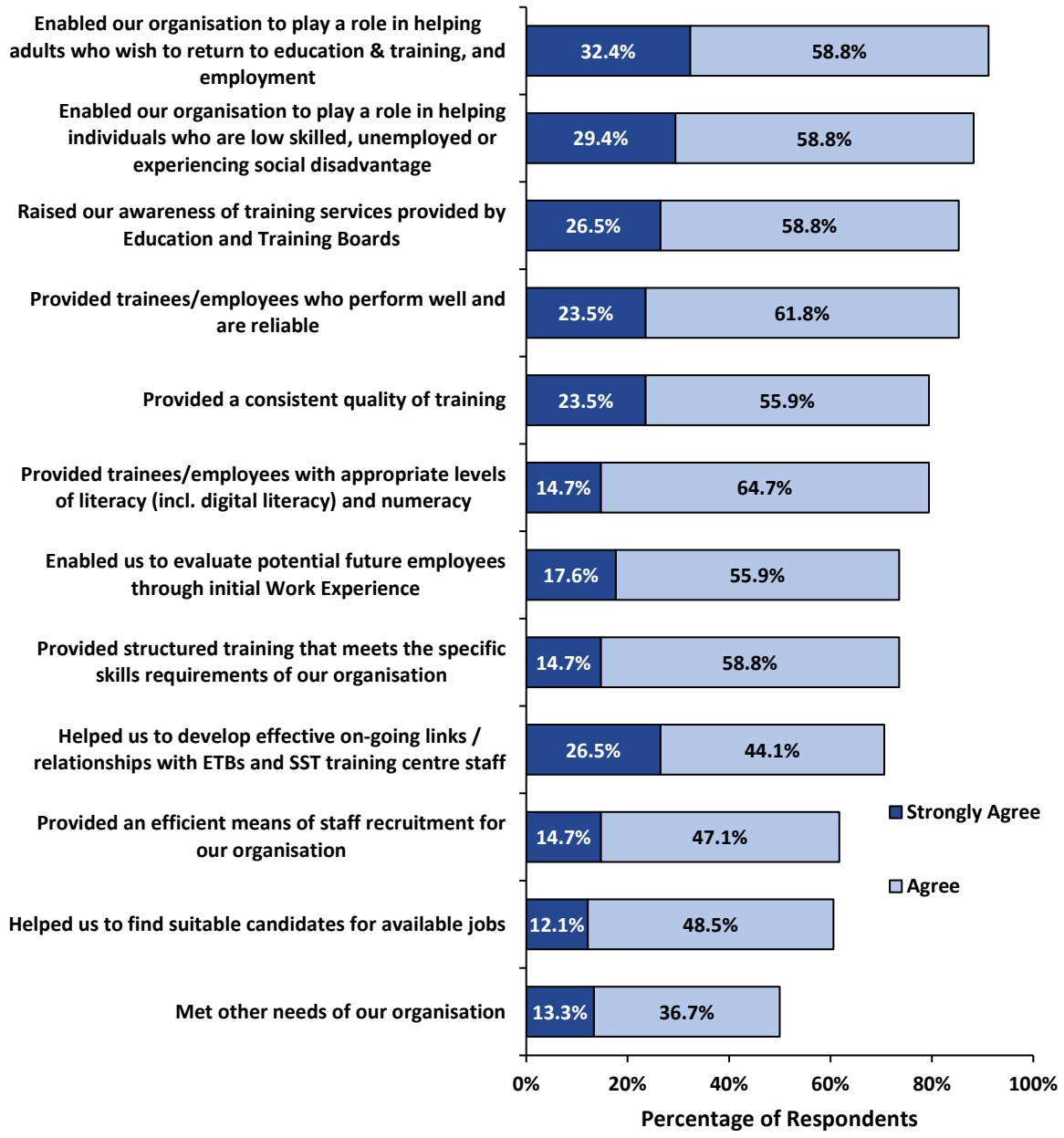
Source: Indecon survey of Employers

The following figure outlines the views of employers on the benefits of SST for their organisations, as gleaned from Indecon's survey of employers. The main benefits, according to employers, were that:

- SST had enabled them to play a role in helping adults who wish to return to education and training, and employment (agreement of 91.2% of respondents);
- Enabled them to play a role in helping individuals who are low skilled, unemployed or experiencing social disadvantage (88.2%);
- Raised awareness of training services provided by ETBs (85.3%); and
- Provided trainees and employees who perform well and are reliable (85.3%).

Over 85% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that SST had each of the above benefits, as per the following figure.

Figure 5.4: Views of Employers on Benefits of SST for Their Organisation



Source: Indecon survey of Employers

5.4 Summary of Key Findings

In this section Indecon assessed the progression rates of SST training participants and presented the findings of Indecon's econometric modelling of the employment impact of SST. The key findings of this section are as follows:

- Indecon's survey of SST participants indicated that over a third of respondents had secured employment having not previously been employed, approximately 10% secured other forms of employment, whilst 28.4% had progressed to other training, further education or to higher education. As such, while the aim of SST is to provide learners with a range of employability related skills and formal vocational qualifications to facilitate entry to the labour market, for a proportion of learners, further education is required.
- Training Centre Managers and Employers responded positively on the impact that SST had on learners. Training Centre Managers reported that SST had helped to provide skills relevant to employment; provided learners with the foundation to assist them to progress to a high-skill level; and boosted their confidence and self-esteem.
- Learners also reported positively on the employment impact of training. Most stated that SST provided them with new skills which would enhance the prospects of finding a job (94.7%), increased their self-confidence (84.2%), given them the level of formal qualification they wanted (68.5%) and enabled them to progress to high-level skills training (89.5%).
- A large majority of employers stated that they agreed (55.9%) or strongly agreed (29.4%) that SST had helped to provide learners with jobs or apprenticeships. They also deemed there to be benefits in terms of boosting self-esteem, provision of formal qualifications and boosting entrepreneurial skills, amongst others.

6 Employment Impact – Counterfactual Impact Assessment

6.1 Introduction

An important element of Indecon's evaluation of SST is a Counterfactual Impact Evaluation (CIE) undertaken using SOLAS administrative data and the Jobseekers Longitudinal Database (JLD). This CIE aims to estimate 'what would have happened' to SST participants had they not participated in the programme. The primary objective of the CIE is to assess the impact of SST on labour market outcomes via a comparison of labour market outcomes for programme participants and a matched control group of similar non-participants from the Live Register using a range of quantitative methods. In this section Indecon first outlines the data used by Indecon in this CIE, before presenting our methodological approach and the key findings from the modelling.

6.2 Data Sources

The data made available to Indecon for the purposes this econometric analysis is primarily drawn from the JLD. Additional data and information were also provided by administrative datasets for SST provided by SOLAS to the Indecon team. The JLD contains data for individuals in both the treatment (SST learner) and control groups (non-SST learner) while the administrative datasets contain only information related to the treated individuals.

The JLD is a dataset maintained by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection which tracks social welfare claims and employment histories of individuals over time. It covers any individual who made a jobseeker or one-parent family claim since 2004. It brings together data from a number of other key administrative data sources.

The JLD contains variables which display or can be used to derive individuals' gender, age, marital status, nationality, previous occupation, employment and unemployment histories (including the timing, duration and number of employment episodes), unemployment training history (type, duration and number of episodes), benefit type, number of child dependents and geographic location. A unique but fully anonymous ID number is also included as a variable allowing the anonymous tracking of individuals over time.

The SOLAS administrative datasets contains detailed information for each of the treated individuals (i.e., those individuals that took part in SST). The SST administrative data was limited to those individuals who took part in the programmes between 2015 and 2017. The administrative datasets contained variables including:

- Start and finish date of programme participation;
- Whether or not the individual completed the programme;
- The ETB in which the individual undertook the course; and
- Details on the type of programme undertaken.

This dataset was merged with the JLD by Indecon using a shared unique identifier for individuals.

It should be noted that while the combined JLD and administrative datasets provide a rich dataset in terms of employment history and other socio-economic factors, there remain a number of weaknesses in this combined dataset. A key limitation of the JLD is that it does not contain any data on the education level of individuals. This is an important issue given the role of education in

determining employment prospects. The absence of this variable is something which our modelling approach has attempted to account for.

A further limitation of the JLD is that individuals who emigrate or leave the labour force entirely will not be captured in the JLD. Similarly, any engagement by individuals in the black economy is not captured by the JLD. It is also important to note that that people may be in receipt of government payments that are not captured in the JLD (e.g., disability payments).

Finally, there is also a trend in the JLD for increasing numbers of missing observations in later periods. This is potentially due to a lag in the ability of the administrative data underlying the JLD to be updated sufficiently quickly to reflect the more recent outcomes. This issue however is evident from our analysis in which models estimating the probability of employment for those completing programmes in 2015 generally have a higher baseline percentage of employed individuals in both the treatment and control groups than those models analysing programme participants in 2016.

6.2.1 Defining Outcome Variables

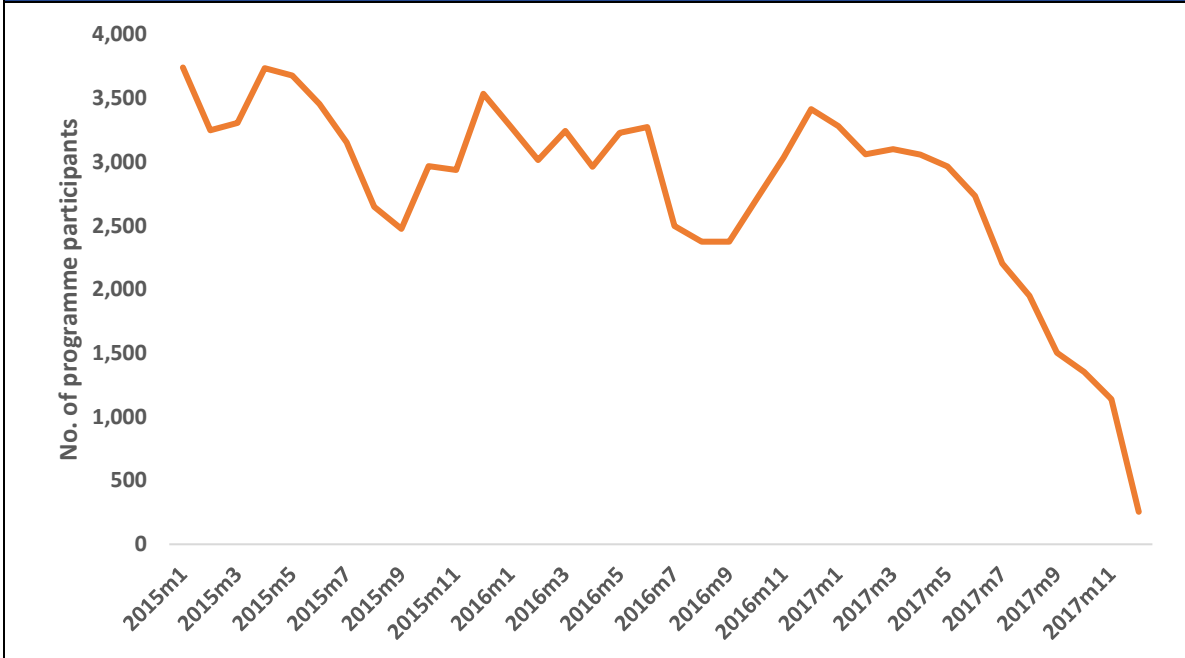
An important aspect of any counterfactual impact analysis is defining outcomes. It is important to evaluate treatment effects (participation in SST in this case) sufficiently after the treatment has been completed (course completion in this case) but not so long as to where treated individuals (SST participants) might experience regression to their mean pre-treatment outcome probabilities. To take account of these factors we defined outcome variables (i.e., employment status) to include outcomes at six months, one year and two years on from a given month/point in time. The outcome variables are coded identically to the status variable and report the status of an individual the relevant period of time after a given month.

Our preferred outcome variable is employment, that is to say, the individual is employed (Y=1), and zero otherwise. In our main results presented subsequently, 'employed after one year' is the focus of the analysis. It may be important to test the sensitivity of the analysis to various issues in the data, as well as the sensitivity to the definition of outcome. Therefore, we defined an alternative outcome as 'not unemployed', which is coded as 1 if the individual is not in receipt of a welfare payment/is not on the Live Register, and zero otherwise, one year on from the given month. We have also undertaken sensitivity analysis of the baseline model findings to an outcome defined as employment status six months on from a given point, rather than one year on as specified in the baseline model.

6.2.2 Defining Treatment

The following figure illustrates the trends in the monthly programme participants for SST between 2015 and 2017. The number of SST programme participants has decreased over the course of 2017 relative to the earlier years.

Figure 6.1: SST Programme Participants Over Time



Source: Indecon analysis

In our modelling we have undertaken a range of models using alternative treatment definitions. The treatment definitions have been informed by the nature of the SST programme and we have ensured that the findings of our modelling are reasonably robust to alternative treatment definitions.

For SST we have undertaken analysis which defines treatment in a number of manners including:

- Any individual with at least three months of SST in the previous 12 months is defined as treated;
- Any individual who completed SST in the previous six months is defined as treated;
- Any individual who completed SST of a duration of 3-6 months in the previous six months is defined as treated; and
- Any individual who completed SST of a duration of 0-6 months in the previous six months is defined as treated.

This range of different treatment definitions seeks to ascertain the potential differential impacts of SST in different circumstances including whether a participant completed the course or not and whether courses of different durations have different impacts on labour market outcomes.

The models are run on a quarterly basis. Thus, treatment is defined on a pooled basis from the three months within each quarter. This quarterly pooling ensures sufficient observations for each iteration of the model. The following table illustrates the number of treated individuals in each quarter for our two main treatment definitions for SST. As is to be expected, the first definition has more observations.

Table 6.1: Number of SST Treated Individuals – Quarterly		
Treatment Definition:	**Min 3 months in previous 12**	**Completion within previous 6 months**
2015m3	3,331	1,878
2015m6	4,873	3,922
2015m9	6,196	3,987
2015m12	6,485	3,208
2016m3	6,407	3,025
2016m6	5,818	3,553
2016m9	5,806	3,411
2016m12	5,792	2,767
Source: Indecon analysis of JLD		

It should be noted that we remove from the potential control group all those individuals who have been treated (i.e., taken part in SST in the past), or will be treated (i.e., will undertake SST in the future). The model findings are robust to the inclusion of these individuals in the sample nonetheless.

While the SOLAS administrative data does contain information on individuals undertaking SST programme in 2017, we limit our econometric analysis to those individuals who participated in SST in 2015 or 2016. We do this for the reasons discussed previously with regards to the increase in missing values in the JLD in more recent months. For those undertaking SST in 2017, examining their employment outcomes one year or even six months later will rely on having outcomes recorded in the JLD in 2018. The significant number of missing values for statuses in 2018 means that the data is not suitable for meaningful analysis.

6.3 Modelling Approach

In this section we discuss our approach to the statistical modelling exercise. The suite of modelling approaches can be thought of as consisting of matching, weighting, or adjusting outcome predictions to control for treatment selection bias. There are a wide variety of matching and/or weighting techniques possible, and our approach in this evaluation is largely empirical and one of sensitivity analysis, as well as our experience and expertise with the various modelling approaches.

The selection of models depends on a researcher's judgment about what the best balance is between a variety of factors, but most fundamentally efficiency and potential bias/violation of the assumptions. Our starting point for model selection follows some of the recommendations of the recent literature, including Imbens (2007), Caliendo (2005), Caliendo (2011), Drucker (2013) and Hubner (2015). Propensity score matching (PSM) is a widely used technique and it is suggested that this is a natural starting point for when the outcome model is unknown. Imbens et al. (2008) and other authors suggest the use of 'double robust' models, such as inverse probability weights with regression adjustment (IPWRA).

Following testing, our preferred approach is to use the IPWRA model as our headline model. The main rationale for the choice of primary model is two-fold. First, the IPWRA model allows for controlling

both the treatment and outcome models for covariates, and there are seemingly sufficient prior expectations that both outcomes and treatment selection may in part depend on some of the available covariates, such as location, prior labour market histories, etc. Secondly, the IPWRA model has the property of being double-robust with respect to specification bias of either the outcome or treatment probability models. We also estimated a variety of PSM models as a robustness check, and broadly, the statistical significance and qualitative and quantitative differences were small, while there was some variation naturally based on model selection.

With regards to these variables, we conducted primary logistic regressions on outcomes and treatment, and considered the statistical significance and explanatory power of the models, as well as other factors such as pseudo-R-squared measures of fit. These tests examine the contribution of each of these variables to the overall explanatory power of the models.

Labour market histories such as the last five years' percentage of time spent in unemployment or most recent year's percentage of time in employment are likely proxies for labour market participation and ability, such variables that might impact outcome and/or treatment. The rationale for splitting these was to create non-collinear explanatory variables considering long- and short-term labour histories. The long-term variable may proxy for long-lived characteristics versus short-term labour market outcomes. Additionally, the prior expectation that long periods/high percentage of unemployment might be of greater importance than the more recent history of actual employment. Models are run using both continuous and categorical versions of these variables.

Eligibility is also a relevant control variable. Eligibility is an administratively defined concept. While SST is technically open to those in employment, it is largely undertaken by those who are unemployed. As such, to improve matching, we constructed and included in our analysis an eligibility variable. We include a dummy variable which is coded as 1 if the individual was unemployed at any point in the preceding six months. We note eligibility is a point-in-time specific variable and refers to the potential starting point in time of the SST programme. We weight-on/match-on both eligibility and percentage of time employed in the previous year as control variables. Thus, eligibility is a variable that was used as a control in the treatment model, and it is specific to the point in time of the analysis. We also undertake versions of our modelling in which we limit the potential control group to those individuals who are coded as 1 for the relevant eligibility variable for SST.

6.4 Findings of Counterfactual Impact Evaluation Modelling

The relevant policy variable for our analysis is the Average Treatment Effect on the Treated (ATET). For our baseline models, Indecon has developed and defined outcomes as status of "employed" one year from a given date. Regressions are run quarterly, for a specific month-year date, that is to say, every three months, with a 'lookback' period prior to the month-year. For each of the outcome variable in question, the ATET can be formally written as:

$$ATET = E(\Delta|x, D = 1) = E(y_1|x, D = 1) - E(y_0|x, D = 1)$$

where y_1 is the outcome for those individuals who have been treated (participated in or completed) in SST while y_0 is the outcome for these same individuals should they not have partaken in the relevant programme. D is the variable for participation in the programme, while x is the collection of independent variables outlined previously.

After weighting/matching and estimation, it is then possible to compare the outcomes between the treatment and control groups. This can be represented as:

$$ATET = E(\Delta|p(x), D = 1) = E(y_1|p(x), D = 1) - E(y_0|p(x), D = 0)$$

The first term refers to the differences in outcomes. This term may be biased. The second term uses the differences in outcomes for the control group to eliminate this bias.

The ATET estimator can then be written as:

$$ATET = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i\epsilon[D=1\}} [y_{1,i} - \sum_{j} w(i,j) y_{0,j}]$$

Each treated observation i is matched to j control observations. In this estimation $y_{1,i}$ represents the outcome for the treated individual, i. $y_{0,j}$ represents the employment outcome for the matched unit or units j. w is the weighting applied, where the weights depend on the matching or weighting estimator.

Thus, in our analysis of SST the ATET represents the additional probability of moving from unemployed (immediately prior to the commencement of the relevant programme) to employed status, one year after completion of a programme, which is the relevant policy variable given the objectives of the SST programme as labour market activation tool.

Baseline Models

Our preferred baseline modelling approach is the IPWRA model. It should be noted here that we undertook the majority of our analysis on random sub-samples of the full JLD. In each of these sub-samples we included 100% of the treated individuals for SST and then a random selection of the untreated individuals in the JLD. The results are robust to changes in the random sample. The results reported below for the baseline models were run on a random sample of 33% of the full JLD and 100% of the relevant treated individuals for SST.

The following tables report the findings of the preferred IPWRA models run on a quarterly basis for SST participants between 2015 and 2016 with treatment defined as have undertaken at least three months of SST in the preceding 12 months. The outcome variable is whether or not the individual was employed one year on from the month in question. We report the findings for the models in which missing data in the JLD are excluded from the analysis (i.e. employment status unknown) and identical models in which we code missing data as zeros (assuming that a missing implies that the individual is not employed).

shows the findings for the IPWRA models. These models find a statistically significant positive impact of SST on the prospect of being in employment one year on from a given month for six of the eight quarters analysed. The IPWRA models provide estimates of the increase in probability of employment range from 3.5% to 5.6%, somewhat higher estimates of the benefits of SST participation than the PSM models (not reported below) which had estimates ranging from 2.7% to 5.0%. However, the fact that different modelling approaches result in similar ranges of positive outcome gives confidence in the results.

Table 6.2: Model Findings of SST Participation on Employment Probability					
	Model Variant 1: Unadjusted Missing Values			Model Variant 2: Adjusted Missing Values	
Learner Cohort	Coefficient	P-Value	Learner Cohort	Coefficient	P-Value
2015 March	-0.001	0.917	2015 March	0.008	0.329
2015 June	0.012	0.122	2015 June	0.021	0.001
2015 September	**0.042**	0.000	2015 September	**0.045**	0.000
2015 December	**0.035**	0.000	2015 December	**0.038**	0.000
2016 March	**0.043**	0.000	2016 March	**0.043**	0.000
2016 June	**0.045**	0.000	2016 June	**0.039**	0.000
2016 September	**0.056**	0.000	2016 September	**0.047**	0.000
2016 December	**0.051**	0.000	2016 December	**0.037**	0.000
Source: Indecon analysis. Note: Coefficients in bold are statistically significant at the 5% level. Findings are for Indecon's Inverse Probability Weights Regression Adjustment (IPWRA) models.					

As discussed in the preceding sections, we also undertook similar modelling analysis for alternative definitions of treatment as a form of sensitivity analysis. The following tables outline analysis based on treatment being defined as completion of the SST programme in the preceding six months. This definition of treatment aims to capture whether there is a differential impact between just undertaking a portion of an SST programme and those who complete the entire programme.

Table 6.3 shows the results for both the PSM and IPWRA models with this alternative definition of treatment and when matching is done with a hard match on eligibility. It can be observed from both model specifications that the estimates for the benefits of SST completion are higher compared to the similar model based on SST participation. This suggests that there is an additional benefit to completing the course relative to just participating in one but not completing it. The improvement in employment probability ranges from 3.2% to 7.9% with this model specification.

This model specification is our preferred design. We believe that this model design provides the best match between the treated and control groups and thus the best indication of the impact of the programme.

Table 6.3: Model Findings of SST Completion on Employment Probability					
	Model 1: PSM			Model 2: IPWRA	
Learner Cohort	Coefficient	P-Value	Learner Cohort	Coefficient	P-Value
2015 March	**0.034**	0.024	2015 March	**0.036**	0.003
2015 June	**0.032**	0.003	2015 June	**0.033**	0.000
2015 September	**0.058**	0.000	2015 September	**0.068**	0.000
2015 December	**0.075**	0.000	2015 December	**0.079**	0.000
2016 March	**0.059**	0.000	2016 March	**0.059**	0.000
2016 June	**0.069**	0.000	2016 June	**0.073**	0.000
2016 September	**0.069**	0.000	2016 September	**0.063**	0.000
2016 December	**0.055**	0.000	2016 December	**0.061**	0.000
Note: Coefficients in bold are statistically significant at the 5% level.					
Source: Indecon analysis					

We have subjected our baseline models to a range of checks including testing of covariate balance, falsification tests and the validity of the overlap assumption. Covariate balance tests assess the impact of the matching step in terms of the differences between the means of the covariates in the treatment and control groups pre- and post-matching. The difference between the raw and matched standardized differences can be interpreted as the change from using the matched subsample. The results of these tests for our models suggest that the covariates are reasonably well balanced in the matched data.

A common practice as a test of model validity is to undertake falsification tests. We subjected our main modelling approaches from the analysis to some of the common falsification tests. We conducted such a falsification test on a random sample of the data with all treated observations and 33% of the JLD. The results showed statistically insignificant treatment effects in all cases. We also undertook sensitivity analysis with regards to alternative definitions of the outcome variable. The alternative outcome definitions are:

- ‘Not unemployed’, which is coded as 1 if the individual is not in receipt of a welfare payment/is not on the Live Register one year on from a given month, and zero otherwise; and
- In employment six months on from a given point.

While the model results for the ‘not unemployed’ outcome variable are less robust than the baseline model findings, the results for employment six months following programme completion are aligned with the findings of the baseline model. Given that the ‘not unemployed’ outcome variable contains a range of potential outcomes, it is perhaps unsurprising that the findings are less unambiguous for this outcome.

Extended Regression Models

Extended regression models (ERMs) aim to account for endogenous covariates, sample selection, or non-random treatment assignment in econometric models. There is, theoretically, reason to believe that the baseline models outlined previously may suffer from these issues given the nature of the programmes being studied and the data utilised. The presence of these endogeneity issues, sample selection or non-random treatment assignment violate the assumptions underlying the baseline models and may lead to biased estimates of the impact of the programmes in question. These issues may thus invalidate the findings of the baseline models. As such, it is important in ensuring the robustness of our modelling we test for the presence of these issues and the implications for the model findings and policy conclusions.

The presence of any of these issues may lead the models to provide biased estimates. With this in mind, the Indecon team undertook supplemental modelling using these extended regression models to both diagnose and correct for these potential issues. Undertaking this correction is important to ensure the robustness of the modelling conclusions and policy implications.

The models estimating the impact on employment of participation in SST programmes were tested for the presence and implications of the issues mentioned above; endogenous selection, endogenous treatment and endogenous covariates. Our preferred modelling approach is the model specification based on a hard-matched control group on what we term 'eligibility' for the programme and with treatment defined as having completed an SST course in the preceding six months. The extended regression analysis was undertaken on a random sample including all those who participated in SST and 145,000 randomly selected other individuals in the JLD.

The modelling was undertaken in an iterative fashion for each quarter during 2015 and 2016, as was the case for the baseline analysis. Models were run to test for the presence and implications on estimated ATET of endogenous selection, endogenous treatment and endogenous covariates individually for each quarter. The main extended probit model is specified with similar covariates as those included in the baseline PSM and IPWRA models. For the treatment and selection models we have also included these same covariates. For the endogenous covariates model, the model requires an instrumental variable for the endogenous variable. In our case, we treat the variable for the percentage of time on the Live Register in the preceding five years as the endogenous variable. Following testing of a range of variables in the database, we chose the duration of the preceding unemployment episode as an instrument in our analysis. This variable was correlated with the endogenous time_lr variable but uncorrelated with the outcome variable as is thus judged to be an acceptable instrument.

In testing for the implications of endogenous selection, the initial models showed correlation between the errors in the selection models and the outcome models for all quarters.

When testing for endogenous treatment, the correlation between the error terms in the treatment model and the outcome model are insignificant for all quarters. The models test for the presence and impact of an endogenous covariate in the outcome model also indicate that the errors in the covariate model and the outcome model are correlated. The initial analysis suggests that the appropriate model should account for endogenous selection and covariates but should model treatment as exogenous.

Controlling for endogenous covariates and selection while assuming exogenous treatment leads to estimates of the ATET for SST programme completion of between 2% and 5%. The model from which the below findings are reported includes an interaction between treatment and all the covariates in the outcome model. It should be noted that the model findings are robust to excluding this

interaction. These findings suggest that the endogeneity issues were leading the baseline models to slightly overestimate the impact of the programme. However, the findings remain positive and significant for all quarters.

Table 6.4: Extended Regression Model Findings for SST		
Learner Cohort	ATET Coefficient	P-Value
2015 March	**0.020**	0.017
2015 June	**0.027**	0.000
2015 September	**0.045**	0.000
2015 December	**0.049**	0.000
2016 March	**0.032**	0.000
2016 June	**0.039**	0.000
2016 September	**0.031**	0.000
2016 December	**0.030**	0.000
Note: Coefficients in bold are statistically significant at the 5% level. Model incorporates endogenous covariates and selection with exogenous treatment. ***Source: Indecon analysis***		

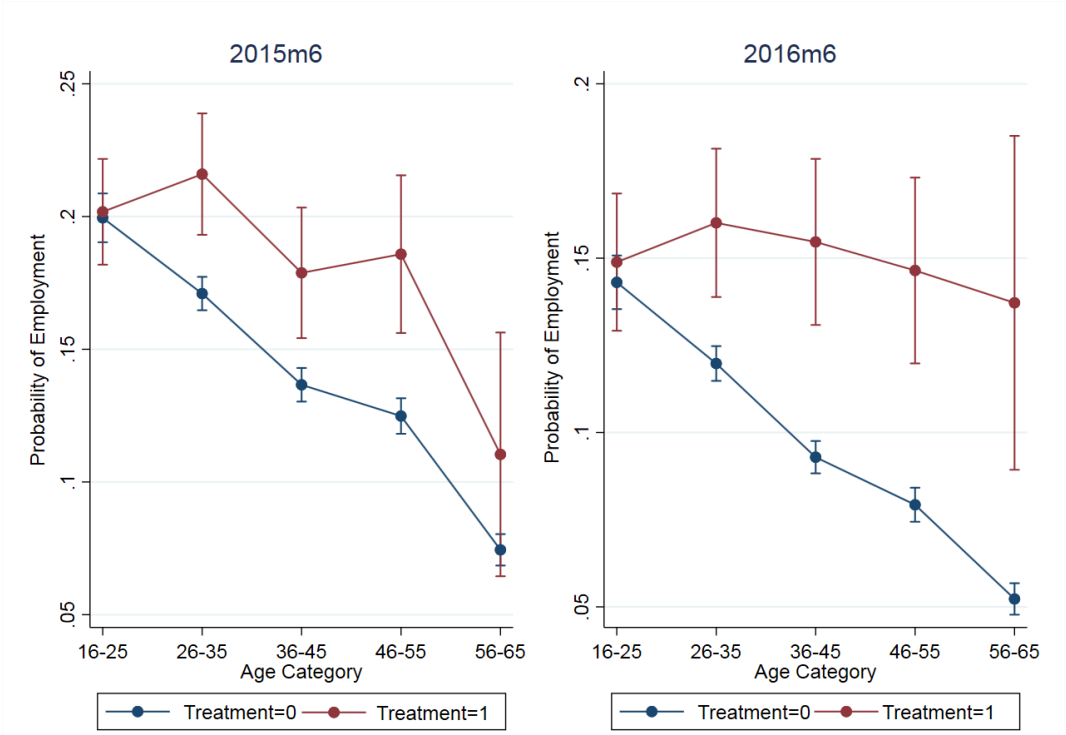
The extended regression model generally supports the findings of the baseline models in terms of finding a small and significant benefit of completing SST. As with the baseline models, as a model diagnostic and robustness check, we subject the extended regression model to a falsification test. This undertakes the model specifications reported in Table 6.4 with a randomly assigned treatment variable. These models give a statistically insignificant finding in all iterations. This provides reassurance that the main model findings are identifying a genuine underlying effect.

Analysis of Population Sub-sets

To further explore the impacts of SST on different subsets of individuals who participated in the programme, Indecon undertook additional analysis to assess whether or not there was evidence of the benefits of SST varying between particular subgroups. This was done by estimating the marginal effects of programme participation on different baseline employment probabilities for the different levels of the relevant categorical variables included in the model.

The following figures illustrate graphically the differential between treatment and control groups for SST by age category. We present below the findings for 2015m6 and 2016m6. The findings for these two months are indicative of the trend across all iterations of the model. It can be observed that the benefits of completing SST are similar for almost all age categories. Although the difference for the oldest age group in 2015m6 is not statistically significant.

Figure 6.2: Differential Effects of SST by Age Category



Source: Indecon analysis

Indecon also examined the differential effects of SST by gender. The differences between males and females are not statistically significant. This lack of differential impacts between genders is evident in all iterations of the model, indicating that the programme does not have differential effects by gender.

We also examined the evidence for differential effects by region. While there was some variation between the regions in terms of employment probabilities, these differences are not statistically significantly different in either of the years.

Finally, we examined the differential impact of SST programme completion on employment probabilities for individuals with different amounts of time spent on the Live Register in the preceding five years. SST appears to have the largest impact on those who have spent the lowest percentage of time on the Live Register in the preceding five years. As would be anticipated, those who have spent the longer periods on the Live Register have lower employment probabilities both in the treatment and control groups.

The extended regression modelling undertaken has thus largely confirmed the findings of our baseline modelling. Having examined the presence of endogenous selection, treatment and covariates and controlled for their effects when present, there remains a small but statistically significant positive effect of completing SST on employment probabilities one year one from completing the programme, relative to an appropriately matched sample.

6.5 Summary of Key Findings

The following summarizes Indecon's key findings from its Counterfactual Impact Assessment:

- Indecon's Counterfactual Impact Evaluation assessed the impact of SST on labour market outcomes via a comparison of labour market outcomes for programme participants and a matched control group of similar non-participants. This examined the impact of SST 12 months following completion of the course.
- The results suggest a positive impact of SST on the prospect of being in employment 12 months following course completion, with an increase in probability of employment range from 3.5% to 5.6%.
- The analysis was conducted using a number of different econometric modelling techniques and timelines, to ensure the robustness of the results. The fact that different modelling approaches result in similar ranges of positive outcome gives confidence in the results, and the overall positive impact of the programme.
- The impact identified by Indecon does not vary significantly by gender or region. However, the impact is lessened amongst those who had been on the Live Register longer prior to undertaking their SST course, as SST appears to have the largest impact on those who have spent the lowest percentage of time on the Live Register in the preceding five years.

7 Resourcing of Specific Skills Training Provision

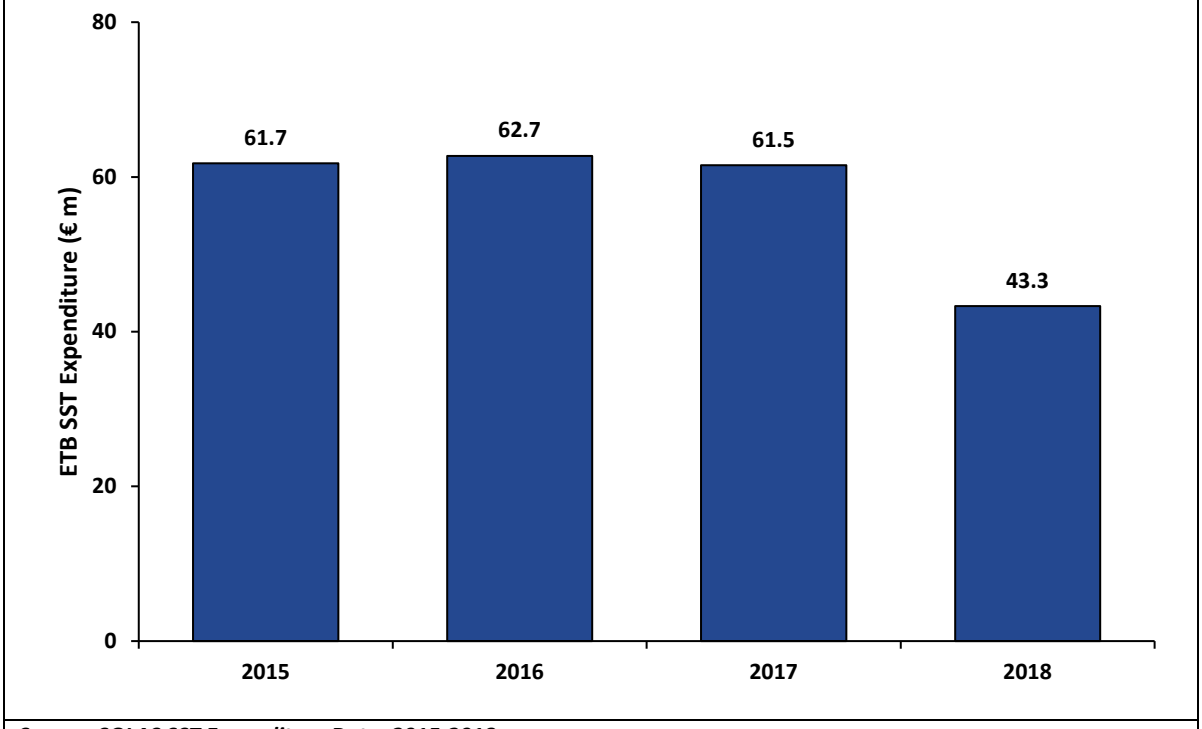
7.1 Introduction

In this section, Indecon presents the level of expenditure on SST, the views of the different survey cohorts on the level of funding, and staff development and training.

7.2 Expenditures on SST

The following figure shows that following three years of relatively stable expenditure (from 2015 to 2017) there was a reduction in SST expenditure from €61.5 million in 2017 to €43.3 million in 2018. Overall expenditure declined by 30% between 2017 and 2018.

Figure 7.1: SST Expenditure (2015-2018)



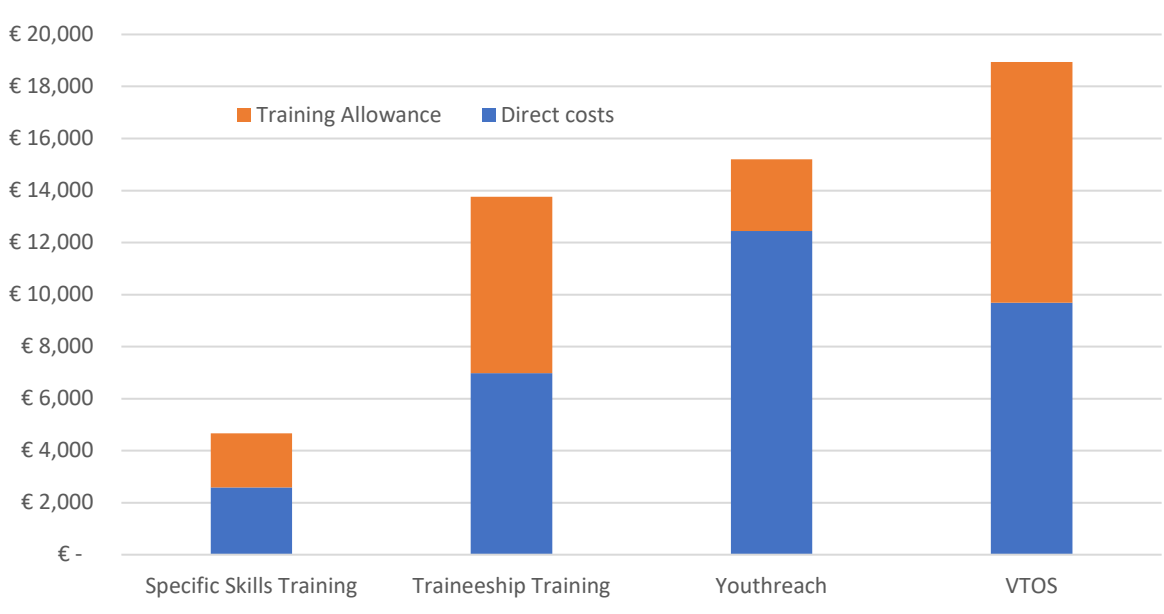
Source: SOLAS SST Expenditure Data, 2015-2018

Indecon presents the expenditure per SST learner in the following table to examine the unit cost per beneficiary and per completer. This shows a decline in the cost per beneficiary from €4,455 in 2017 to €4,141 in 2018. The cost per completer also declined.

Figure 7.2: Expenditure per SST Learner (2015-2018)				
	2015	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**
ETB Expenditure (€m)	61.7	62.7	61.5	43.3
Beneficiaries	13,693	14,310	13,805	10,456
Cost per Beneficiary (€)	4,506	4,382	4,455	4,141
Completers	10,106	9,683	9,887	7,488
Cost per Completer (€)	6,105	6,475	6,220	5,782
Source: Indecon analysis of SOLAS data ***Note: 2018 completers figure based on 2017 completers as a percentage of beneficiaries***				

A comparative analysis of a number of other programmes is presented in the figure below. This shows that SST Courses cost on average just in excess of €4,000, compared to €14,000-€19,000 for alternatives such as traineeships, Youthreach or VTOS. The differences in costs of alternative programmes, is likely to reflect different durations, levels of student ability and level of teaching inputs. Whilst SOLAS data suggests employment outcomes are similar for Short and Long courses, there may be differences in the profiles of participants which would need to be taken into account.

Figure 7.3: Costs of Provision per Beneficiary, 2018



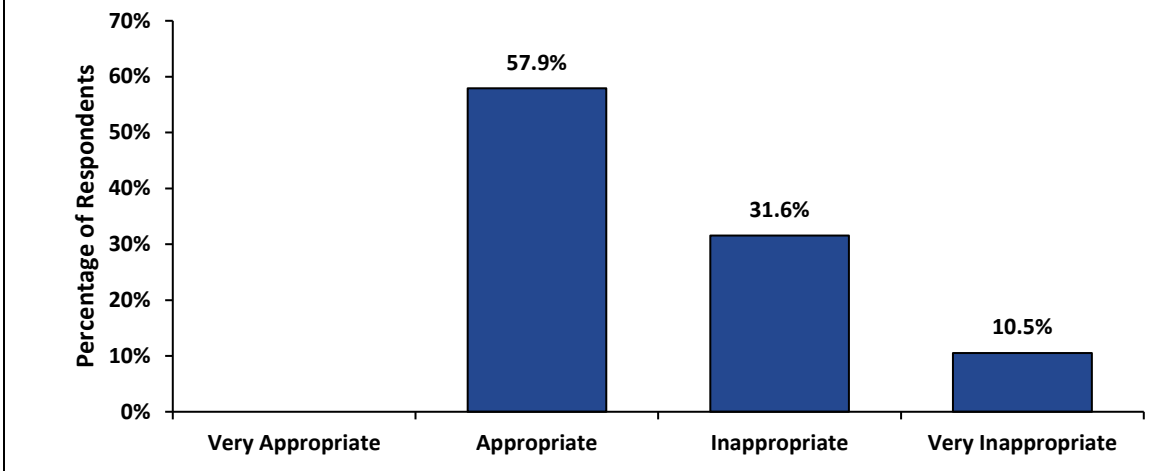
Source: Indecon analysis of SOLAS data

Note: Number of beneficiaries is calculated as an average of number of starters in 2017 and 2018. Figures for VTOS training allowance relate to both Core and Dispersed, figures for direct costs relate to VTOS Core only.

7.3 ETB Perceptions on Resources Allocated to SST

The majority of Training Centre Managers deemed funding for staff delivering SST was appropriate (57.9%) but a significant percentage felt that level of funding was not appropriate. This is shown in Figure 7.4 overleaf.

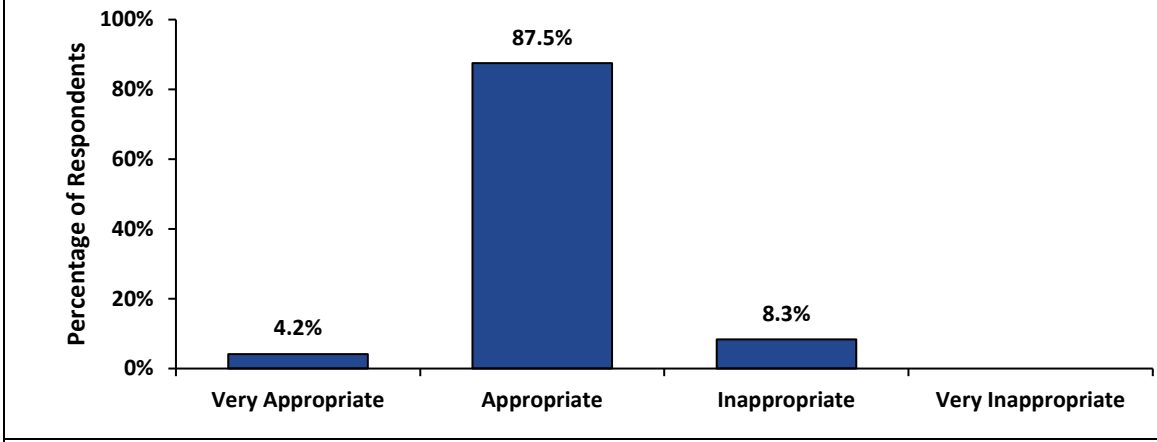
Figure 7.4: Views of SST Training Centre Managers on the Appropriateness of Funding for Staff Providing SST



Source: Indecon survey of SST Training Centre Management

ETB Senior Management in general believed the level of resources provided for the programme was appropriate.

Figure 7.5: Views of ETB Senior Management on the Appropriateness of Aspects of Funding for Staff Providing SST



Source: Indecon analysis of Confidential Survey of ETB Senior Management

In terms of capital funding for SST, there was a wide variety of views. Indecon however understands approximately half of respondents consider the level of funding appropriate, while half consider it inappropriate. There is currently a project to establish, at a high level, the condition of all buildings used for Further Education and Training and this should inform future decisions on what level of capital investment may be required. The new FET strategy commits SOLAS to work with the Department of Education and Skills, ETBs and other providers to agree a future approach to capital development in FET.

Figure 7.6: Views on Appropriateness of Capital Funding for SST Development

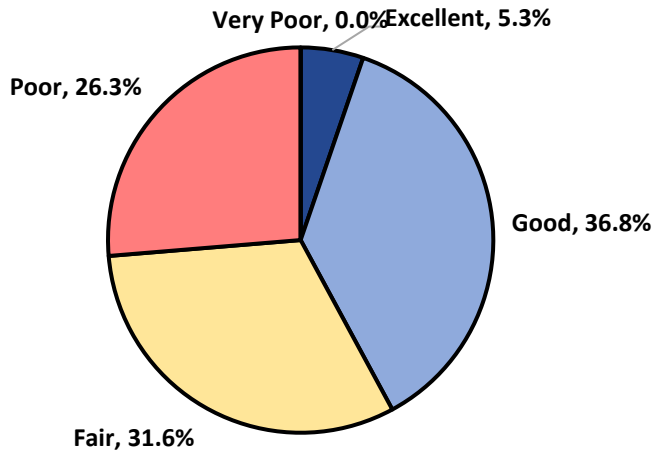
	Very Appropriate	Appropriate	Inappropriate	Very Inappropriate
SST Training Centre Managers	0.0%	42.1%	21.1%	36.8%
ETB Senior Management	4.3%	47.8%	43.5%	4.3%

Source: Indecon analysis of Confidential Survey of ETB Management and SST Training Centre Managers

7.4 Assessment of Staff Development and Training Supports

One issue examined as part of our analysis is the level of staff development opportunities and training supports available to teaching staff. The following figure shows that whilst 42.1% of SST Training Centre Managers deemed there to be excellent or good staff development and training supports provided and a further 31.6% rated support as fair.

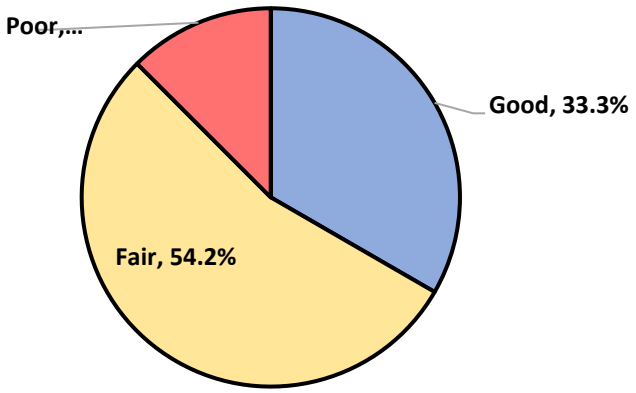
Figure 7.7: Views of SST Training Centre Management on Staff Development and Training Supports Available to Teaching Staff



Source: Indecon survey of SST Training Centre Management

Most ETB Senior Management also judged the level of staff development and training supports available to SST teaching staff to be good or fair.

Figure 7.8: Views of ETB Senior Management on Staff Development and Training Supports Available to Teaching Staff



Source: Indecon survey of ETB Senior Management

7.5 Summary of Key Findings

The following summarises Indecon's key findings in the area of the resourcing of SST:

- Following three years of relatively stable expenditure there was a decline in SST expenditure from €61.5 million in 2017 to €43.3 million in 2018. This constitutes a reduction in expenditure of 30% between 2017 and 2018. In 2018, there was also a decline in the cost per beneficiary from €4,455 to €4,141.
- A comparative analysis of a number of other programmes shows that SST Courses cost on average just in excess of €4,000, compared to €14,000-€19,000 for alternatives such as traineeships, Youthreach or VTOS. The differences in costs of alternative programmes is likely to reflect different durations, levels of student ability, and level of teaching inputs.
- The majority of respondents to Indecon's survey of ETB Senior Management and SST Training Centre Managers deemed funding to be appropriate.
- In terms of capital funding for SST, almost half of survey respondents considered the level of funding appropriate, while half considered it inappropriate. There is currently a project to establish, at a high level, the condition of all buildings used for Further Education and Training.
- ETB Senior Management and SST Training Centre Managers were both positive about the teaching and support staff supports in providing the SST programme in terms of meeting learners' needs.

8 Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

8.1 Introduction

This report represents an independent evaluation of the Specific Skills Training (SST) programme. The purpose of this evaluation is to generate policy-relevant knowledge concerning the appropriateness, conduct and impacts of SST, and its effectiveness in terms of achieving national policy objectives.

8.2 Conclusions

The key conclusions from Indecon's evaluation of SST provision are set out in the table below.

Summary of Main Conclusions from Evaluation	
1.	**SST training is consistent with the National Skills Strategy and Pathways to Work, which places a strong emphasis on ensuring that Ireland has a well-skilled and adaptable labour force and the need to increase the employment focus of activation programmes.**
2.	**There has been a fall in the number of SST completers in recent years, though the number of beneficiaries has remained broadly unchanged.**
3.	**A high proportion of those on SST courses were unemployed prior to starting their course, half of whom were long-term unemployed.**
4.	**Learners, Training Centre Managers and Employers all report strong benefits to learners from participation in SST.**
5.	**Indecon's Counterfactual Impact Assessment indicates that there is a positive impact on SST learners from participation in the course on the likelihood of a learner finding employment. The impact on those long-term unemployed however appears less.**
6.	**The cost of SST per beneficiary is relatively low compared to a number of other comparable programmes.**

1. SST training is consistent with the National Skills Strategy and Pathways to Work, which places a strong emphasis on ensuring that Ireland has a well-skilled and adaptable labour force and the need to increase the employment focus of activation programmes.

The overarching Government policy in relation to workforce and skills development is set out in the National Skills Strategy 2025 (NSS), which was published in January 2016. The strategy aims to support the development of a well-educated, well-skilled and adaptable labour force, and to create and sustain a strong pool of talented people of all ages living in Ireland. The Pathways to Work plan for 2016-2020 and the annual Action Plan for Jobs sets the goal of increasing the employment focus in activation programmes. Pathways to Work states that short-course specific skills training and other approaches have been shown to be effective in enhancing individual employability. The forthcoming FET strategy covering the period 2020 – 2024 will set out a transformative vision to further steer the FET system to evolve in a more agile way, effectively responding to the needs of the economy and of society.

2. There has been a fall in the number of SST completers in recent years, though the number of beneficiaries has remained broadly unchanged.

The number of SST completers fell over the course of the 2015-2018 period, though the number of beneficiaries has remained broadly unchanged. This fall comes against the background of a fall in unemployment, which may have resulted in learners entering into employment before their course was completed. The labour market has undergone dramatic changes over the last two decades. Following the economic recession, unemployment rose sharply, reaching approximately 16% in early 2012, before steadily declining towards pre-recession levels. Seasonally adjusted monthly unemployment fell below 5% in 2019 for the first time since the economic recession.

3. A high proportion of those on SST courses were unemployed prior to starting their course, half of whom were long-term unemployed.

A consistently high proportion of those on SST courses between 2014 and 2017 were unemployed at the start of their SST course. In 2017, almost three quarters of those starting their SST course were unemployed, 3.8% were in employment, whilst 4.7% were in some form of education or training. The most common length of time unemployed prior to undertaking SST is 12 months or more, which accounts for around half of all those who are unemployed prior to commencing their course.

4. Learners, Training Centre Managers and Employers all report strong benefits to learners from participation in SST.

Almost half of SST learners (2016 cohort) had progressed to employment, four out of five of which were in full time jobs. Most learners said that it was not very likely or not at all likely that they would have been offered the job in the absence of the SST course. Around one in three were unemployed, Learners also reported positively on the employment impact of training. Most learners stated that SST provided them with new skills which would enhance the prospects of finding a job, increased their self-confidence, given them the level of formal qualification they wanted and enabled them to progress to high-level skills training. Training Centre Managers and Employers responded positively on the impact that SST had on learners. In particular, they viewed SST as providing skills relevant to employment; providing learners with the foundation to assist them to progress to a high-skill level; and boosting confidence and self-esteem.

5. Indecon's Counterfactual Impact Assessment indicates that there is a positive impact on SST learners from participation in the course on the likelihood of a learner finding employment. The impact on those long-term unemployed however appears less.

Indecon's Counterfactual Impact Evaluation assessed the impact of SST on labour market outcomes 12 months following completion of the course via a comparison of labour market outcomes for programme participants and a matched control group of similar non-participants. The results suggest a positive impact of SST, with an increase in probability of employment ranging from 3.5% to 5.6%. The fact that different modelling approaches resulted in similar ranges of positive outcome gives

confidence in the results. SST appears to have the largest impact on those who have spent the lowest percentage of time on the Live Register in the preceding five years. As would be anticipated, those who have spent the longer periods on the Live Register have lower employment probabilities both in the treatment and control groups.

6. The cost of SST per beneficiary is relatively low compared to a number of other comparable programmes.

A comparative analysis of a number of other programmes shows that SST Courses cost on average just in excess of €4,000, compared to €14,000-€19,000 for alternatives such as traineeships, Youthreach or VTOS. The differences in costs of alternative programmes is likely to reflect different durations, levels of student ability, and level of teaching inputs.

8.3 Policy Recommendations

Based on the detailed analysis and assessment undertaken, and the main conclusions arising from the evaluation, Indecon has identified a number of recommendations. These are set out in the table below.

Recommendations arising from Evaluation
1. SST training should be maintained
SST training plays an important role in Ireland's training landscape. The courses are linked with specific skills, and are targeted at those who are unemployed and in need of upskilling. Indecon's Counterfactual Impact Assessment indicates that there is a positive impact on SST learners from participation in the course on the likelihood of a learner finding employment. Further, learners, Training Centre Managers and employers all report strong benefits to learners from participation in SST. SST training is provided at a lower cost to many other Further Education and Training programmes.
2. Ensure relevant employer engagement and work placements
Respondents to Indecon's surveys indicated that SST courses were appropriately designed to meet employers' skill needs; maintain links with employers; and provide quality of work experience. This is important in ensuring that SST remains aligned to national policy goals as set out in the National Skills Strategy and other documents. While national policy, as evidenced by the Action Plan on Apprenticeships and Traineeships, is to be expand these programmes, the relatively shorter duration of work placement in SST may be more suitable for certain sectors where employer engagement is difficult to secure.
3. Ways to enhance SST outcomes for Long Term Unemployed should be investigated
The lower impacts of SST on employment outcomes of those who were long-term unemployed suggest the merits of investigating ways of focussing supports on this group. Indecon's Counterfactual Impact Assessment suggests that SST appears to have the largest impact on those who have spent the lowest percentage of time on the Live Register in the preceding five years and, those who have spent the longer periods on the Live Register have lower employment probabilities.
4. Literacy and numeracy supports should be strengthened
ETB management and staff identified learning difficulties including numeracy and literacy of potential learners as a barrier to participating in SST. Further, a significant minority of both ETB Management and Training Centre Managers deemed the current supports in place to be inadequate. While acknowledging the significant investments made in this area since the publication of the Department of Education and Skills White Paper on Adult Education in 2000, continued focus on this area remains appropriate. SOLAS should review the existing support levels, with a view to ensuring that these are adequate.
5. Improvements in Data collection needed
Priority should be given to drive continued enhancement of data to inform evaluation of SST courses. Additional evidence is needed on the outcomes for learners. This should focus on making available enhanced micro-level data of learners' educational attainment levels, course attendance and duration, as well as employment and other progression outcomes. This will include of data such as that collected by the Revenue Commissioners, SOLAS's own student records, HEA student records, the QQI awards database and other data. This could assist in targeting resources on the most effective courses, and provide a rigorous basis for assessing the adequacy of levels of progression to employment, further training or education, or other outcomes.

8.4 Overall Conclusion

This report sets out an evaluation of the SST scheme to generate policy-relevant knowledge concerning the appropriateness, conduct and impacts of SST; and to learn about the appropriateness of the current policy on SST and its effectiveness in terms of achieving its policy objectives. Indecon analysis suggests that SST still has a role to play for supporting the unemployed in returning to work or progressing on to further training or education. Refinements to the programme are however required to enhance its effectiveness and impact.