

Overview Paper on the Individual Learner Plan for Community Employment Participants. An Innovation in identifying, recording and reporting on individual learner activities & preparation for progression. Official Paper

FÁS, Irish National Training & Employment Authority

Introduction and Background

As the National Training and Employment Authority of Ireland, FÁS anticipates the needs of, and responds to, a constantly changing labour market which employs over 2 million people.

Through a regional network of 66 offices and 20 training centres, FÁS operates training and employment programmes; provides a recruitment service to jobseekers and employers, an advisory service for industry, and supports community-based enterprises.

FÁS' Corporate Strategy sets out the strategic direction taken by the Authority and outlines the action that it will take to progress the Strategy under a number of high priority goals. These goals cover areas such as services for jobseekers and the unemployed, workforce development, labour market policy, social inclusion, equality and diversity, and customer service.

The Community Services division within FÁS provides a range of services in co-operation with different community groups. These consist of a range of flexible training and employment programmes (such as Community Employment) that focuses on the integration/re-integration into the labour market of long-term unemployed and other marginalised people. They also include Job Clubs, Supported Employment, Job Initiative, Community Training Centres, Local Training Initiatives, Special Training Providers, Special Initiative for Travellers and National Drug Strategy Initiatives.

The FÁS Community Employment Programme (CE) was launched in 1994, with the objective *to assist long term unemployed persons to prepare for work opportunities in the open labour market*. It specifically focuses on re-integrating the long-term unemployed (one year or more) into the Labour Market. This client group includes people with disabilities, lone parents and members of the travelling community.

CE involves a part time work placement with an employer/sponsor on a community-based CE programme. CE operates in both urban and rural areas of disadvantage and is by far the biggest programme of its kind in Ireland. Participation on CE lasts for one year with the possibility of extending this to two or three years under defined criteria. Further time on CE is available for those of 55 years of age or over. There are 1,231 CE programmes involving approximately 23,000 disadvantaged learners. Participants on CE are drawn from the Live Register (unemployed) and consequently often represent those at greatest risk of marginalisation from society, work and learning.

Through participation on CE in a supportive, community work-based environment, participants can regain their confidence and acquire the necessary competencies to successfully re-enter the active labour market. CE plays an important role in helping to realise equality and inclusion for many who find themselves disadvantaged. The Irish labour market has grown significantly in recent years. This has resulted in the participation of a large number of immigrant workers in many sectors of the Irish economy, with a particular impact for those with low levels of qualifications and early school leavers seeking employment.

Training on Community Employment

While CE was initially introduced as a community work-based environment programme, it was regularly reviewed and following recommendations from a major review in 1998 increased training for participants was recommended. In addition to daily involvement in project work providing valuable work experience for CE participants, re-integration into an increasingly competitive labour market required a more focused, individualised training response. Combined with an increasingly disadvantaged participant profile and developments at national and EU level, the need for a high support approach to address individual learning has been recognised.

Even though individual needs were being identified and training interventions were provided, these tended to be on a group basis. This form of intervention is common to many training programmes. However, a more focused individual approach was identified as being critical. To meet this need a new Individual Learner Plan approach was developed, starting in 2004 and piloted in FÁS CE, from early 2006, and is designed to track and record an individual's learning progress from programme entry to exit. The management of participant development and progression is a key task for all CE Supervisors who are responsible for implementation of the person-centred approach of the Individual Learning Plan (ILP).

With the introduction of the ILP the emphasis on training for CE participants has been significantly increased over the past number of years. This training focus is on personal and social skills and work-related skills development. All participants engage in drawing-up an individual training plan for the duration of the participation on the programme. Progression to work or further training is actively promoted.

Policy Background

This focus on individualised learning reflects EU and Government policy on lifelong learning, the FÁS Statement of Strategy, individual aspirations for development and the changing skill demands of the market place. An influence in this regard is the Lisbon Strategy, which is about making Europe the most competitive economy in the world by transforming it into a knowledge-based economy by 2010. The objectives of the Lisbon Strategy are: full employment; improved competitiveness; up-skilling/lifelong learning for all; stronger social inclusion and cohesion.

The development of a lifelong learning society is a stated national and European policy. Lifelong learning has been defined by the European Commission as:

"all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective"

Lifelong learning is concerned with all phases and forms of learning from pre-school to post-retirement. As a national organisation, FÁS has a mission of promoting a more competitive and inclusive knowledge-based economy, in alliance with its stakeholders, by enhancing the skills and capabilities of individuals and enterprises. The context provided by the development of a lifelong learning society and accessibility for all should inform the nature, development and implementation of appropriate training interventions. A key characteristic is the centrality of the learner within formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences. This is important because of the way in which knowledge, skill and competence impact on citizens' life opportunities.

Re-Focusing Training on Individual Learner Needs on CE

Beginning with the identification of learning needs at induction, through to project and progression skills development, this new approach addresses the personal, social, vocational and specific work-related skills needs of each participant.

The challenge was to meet the individual needs of disaffected learners. Four components were identified as being part of the process

1. Learner involvement – The learner is supported by the supervisor to play an active part in identifying their learning needs and formulating a career path. They also engage and agree the training options.
2. Choice of learning area – The learner can choose an area which interests them. A bank of modules already existed which can provide a wide range of choice for each learner with various project and portfolio methods for recording achievement
3. Achievements – Early and regular charting of their achievements. This provides encouragement to progress. The modular structure of the training and the certification system facilitates success at regular intervals for the learner.
4. Recognition – The recent National Framework of Qualifications added value to the awards obtained. It also provided new national awards built on existing and previous awards.

In recognition of the needs of marginalised participants on CE, dedicated training interventions have been developed by FÁS, including the Core Skills Programme. This programme is designed to address the personal, social and career planning needs of individuals and includes such core work and life skills as planning, communication, teamwork and quality awareness. In addition, the Return to Education initiative, run in conjunction with the Vocational Education Committees, is available for those participants with poor literacy and numeracy skills. Certification is available on both programmes. A more structured and planned approach to project work and external work experience is a critical feature of this re-focused individualised approach.

As the participant progresses in confidence and capability, she/he moves onto specific skills training. Such skills are directly related to open labour market opportunities, including self-employment, and promote access to further training and development in such sectors as: Catering, Child Care, Construction, Distribution, Information and Communications Technology, Horticulture, Office, Personal Care, and Transport.

Within the context of an overall quality assurance drive throughout FÁS Community Services, this individualised response is designed to support continuous improvement in FÁS client services and ensure a satisfactory/consistent return on investment.

Achieving Quality Assured and Certified Learning Outcomes

With the European and national objective of moving towards a 'lifelong learning society', in which learners will avail of learning opportunities at various stages throughout their lives, the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act was enacted in 1999. Following from this Act, three new organisations were established in 2001 – the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) and two new awards Councils, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC). The main task of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland since its establishment has been to develop a national framework of qualifications. Support for individualised/learner-centred learning is the hallmark of the Act, with its focus on individual access, transfer and progression towards accredited and quality assured learning. This promotes a vision of learning, the development of which will be facilitated by the national framework of qualifications. It provides for the recognition and valuing of all learning irrespective of when, where or how it is achieved.

The framework aims to maximise the use of awards for a variety of purposes, ranging from accessing further learning opportunities to employment. The new Framework will drive the movement towards a knowledge society and lifelong learning, thereby enhancing social development and economic competitiveness. In addition, the further development of learning opportunities will also be affected by this emerging vision.

The National Framework of Qualifications is defined as *“The single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards.”*

The Framework comprises ten levels, with each level based on specified standards of knowledge, skill and competence. These standards define the outcomes to be achieved by learners seeking to gain awards at each level. The ten levels will accommodate awards gained in schools, the workplace, the community, training centres, colleges and universities, from the most basic to the most advanced levels of learning. Learning achieved through experience in the workplace and in community work or other non-formal settings will also be recognised in awards.

Recognising the opportunities provided by the Act, FÁS developed an additional vocational based route for progression for disadvantaged learners. It has proposed a number of new Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) Awards relevant to CE participants. These include the following FETAC major awards:

- Level 3 Certificate in Personal and Social Employment Skills;
- Level 3 Certificate in Vocational Employment Skills;
- Level 4 Certificate in Applied Employment Skills;
- Level 5 Certificate in Specific Employment Skills.

The new Awards recognise the need to develop the knowledge, skills, know-how and competence of each learner to assist progression into further training and education and work through accredited learning. For many disadvantaged participants, the opportunity to acquire accredited qualifications may represent the first and only recognised certificate ever attained. In addition, the option to get on the ladder of qualifications, at their own pace, has become a reality for formally disenfranchised learners. As part of this development process it is important to create a range of learning and award options for learners. These award options allow learners to engage or re-engage with the learning process. They are made up of a large number of modules, particularly at level 3. While some of these modules are core, the majority are optional and allow a learner to choose and develop their personal and social skills. There are 250 modules currently available and this number will continue to grow. As a learner moves from level 3 upwards the options become more occupational and career focussed, by which stage the learner will already have achieved successful outcomes.

The Individual Learner Plan (ILP)

The previously stated, developments and circumstances led to the development of the Individual Learning Plan (ILP). The development of the new ILP was undertaken in consultations with key stakeholders and based on current best practice and represents a systematic quality assured approach to the identification and recording of individual participant learning needs. This new mechanism to promote and capture individual learner needs was initially piloted in three FÁS regions and had a national roll-out to 22,000 learners in September 2006.

The Plan is both a document, and a process. As a document, the ILP sets out a profile of the individual learner development needs both in relation to project skills training and more significantly progression training. This involves the identification of individual personal, career and work goals. Personal goals can include reading, writing and/or core skills development in addition to vocational and specific skills training programme aiming for a FETAC or other recognised award. This puts the learner at the centre of the process and defines the key role of the supervisor in assisting CE participants to improve and prepare for opportunities to progress into work or further work-related training. In addition, career planning and exit strategies form part of the Plan.

The ILP is a working document which both structures and reports on the communications, planning, monitoring reviewing and evaluations of training and is the central focus of the

Supervisor's job and is completed in consultation with the learner, Sponsor/Project Development Officer and FÁS Officer.

Based on a dedicated web-based recording and reporting system, the ILP provides a direct communication system between the CE Supervisor and FÁS Officer. This ensures efficient use of resources, promoting networking between Supervisors and enhancing opportunities for participant development and quality assured, certified training for all learners.

In addition, the ILP also details all proposed and actual funding costs, in a convenient easy to use spreadsheet format.

Aims of the Individual Learner Plan

As an evolving working document, the Individual Learner Plan supports and provides a structure for the process of identifying and tracking individual training needs on an ongoing basis. It aims:

- To enable participants and Supervisors to identify the training and development needs of each participant, and reviewing participant progress;
- To provide a stage-by-stage structure for planning, implementing, reviewing and recording all of the learning activities undertaken by participants while on CE;
- To track training, development and expenditure on training;
- To document progression and certified learning.

Learning activities that enhance participants' future employment prospects include:

- Development of skills to carry out the work of the project to agreed standards;
- Training which improves social and personal and social skills, including support for literacy and personal development through the Return to Education Programme and Core Skills training;
- Provision of planned and structured accredited internal and/or external work experience;
- Specific skills training related to identified work options.

All of these structured and planned training opportunities are designed to enable participants to access a range of nationally recognised Awards (FETAC Level 3-6 or higher)

The Individual Learner Plan: Key Features

The Individual Learner Plan has been designed according to a recognised set of adult learning principles that direct the way it is used. These principles reflect the requirements of the EU Life Long Learning agenda; Award Council (FETAC) Specifications and FÁS QA Guidelines.

The Plan is designed to be:

- **Learner-centred** - the goals and training needs of the individual on CE are the main focus of the plan and these are identified through ongoing consultation by the Supervisor with each participant;
- **Supportive** - developing the Individual Learner Plan enables participants to clarify their goals and to develop a plan of action to reach these goals;
- **Flexible** - new learning activities can be included to accommodate new opportunities;
- **Accurate** - the Individual Learner Plan gives a stage-by-stage record of all learning opportunities that a participant on CE experiences during their time on the project;
- **User-friendly** - the Individual Learner Plan is a structured approach to identifying, planning, recording, implementing and monitoring the participant's training and development needs.

Framework of Training

Four interrelated phases can be identified within the development of the Individual Learner Plan

- Identification of Learner Needs, including Project Skills & Personal Skills Training, such as Return to Education and/or Core Skills;
- Planning for Progression including internal and external work experience;
- Specific Skills Training;
- Exit Planning.

During each of these four phases, the Supervisor, in consultation with the participant, undertakes the following cycle of activity:

- **Needs Analysis:** Identification of individual learning needs: existing skills, strengths, weaknesses, and ambitions;
- **Planning:** defining training opportunities and procuring (certified) learning opportunities;
- **Implementation:** procuring training and development opportunities, certified and non-certified;
- **Monitoring, Review & Reporting:** Review and record the impact of the training and development activities on the participant's progress, including feedback from training providers.

Implementation

The ILP was initially piloted in 27 CE projects across 3 regions early in 2006. Following this pilot and changes based on review and feedback, it was rolled out nationally from September 2006.

During the pilot phase questionnaires, focus groups and individual consultation took place with all stakeholders. Workshops were held for both FÁS staff and CE supervisors and sponsors. Concurrent with the pilot phase a supervisor development programme was also in development.

The main challenges faced were in relation to IT support, both of a technical nature and training for supervisors. A national helpdesk was established and technical training provided. This approach had the additional benefit of improving supervisors overall IT skills. FÁS community services staff and CE supervisors participated in a training programme; this involved over 1,700 people. In addition, Scheme sponsors attended briefing workshops.

The IT-based system runs alongside a paper-based system. Currently work is underway to develop a predominantly on-line system for community services programmes. Given the complexity of the ILP programme and its implementation it is being monitored to enable continuous improvement.

Information technology support was also provided, mainly in the form of a computer for every location and appropriate training. Secure access to the FÁS computer network was also provided.

Outcomes

Access to quality assured training and in particular to nationally accredited major awards at Levels 3, 4, and 5 on the National Framework of Qualification enables all CE participants to achieve certified learning which assists them to re-enter the workforce. This not only enhances their potential for work and further development but also, and more significantly for some, promotes self-esteem and motivation through recognition of effort in the form of national accreditation. It also benefits the learner in an equitable manner with a dedicated budget which gives them ownership and encouragement to progress their learning skills.

The ILP process is being adapted for use in other training initiatives for early school leavers, local training initiatives and specialist training provision and other programmes that are delivered by FÁS Community Services division throughout Ireland. It has the potential to be utilised in all aspects of both FÁS and other national training delivery programmes. As the key focus of national certification policy is the facilitation of the recognition of learner achievement the ILP process could also be used by the awards councils. Particularly as life long learning initiatives become part of a learner's career path, having a process that will continue to assist and record achievement will benefit learners, providers and award councils.