



Society of St. Vincent de Paul

**AN EVALUATION OF NFQ LEVELS 3 & LEVEL 4
FET PROVISION, INCORPORATING BACK TO
EDUCATION INITIATIVE**

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SVP Social Justice and Policy Team

Report to Indecon International Economic Consultants

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Contact Information:

Marcella Stakem

Research and Policy Officer

Society of Saint Vincent De Paul

91-92 Sean MacDermott Street

Dublin 1

Marcella.stakem@svp.ie

Tel: 01-884 8225

Introduction and SVP Perspective

SVP is Ireland's largest charity of social concern and action. The Society's mission is to provide friendship and support to those experiencing poverty and social exclusion, to promote self-sufficiency and to work for social justice.

SVP has long been of the view that education is the ultimate enabler out of poverty and for decades many of its members have, and continues to be, actively involved in supporting people, at all stages of the life cycle, to access education. We therefore welcome the evaluation of Further Education and Training Provision at NFQ Levels 3 & 4, incorporating The Back to Education Initiative.

It is SVP members experience that learners who decide to pursue a Level 3 or Level 4 FET course do so for varied reasons, they may wish to reskill, find employment, gain confidence or pursue higher education opportunities. Often, members report that those learners have overcome substantial barriers from personal and social perspectives to make profound changes in their own lives via the medium of education. They are usually on the margins of education, work and society.

It is important to note that the clients SVP members support back into education are not a homogeneous group. SVP members support lone parent women, Travellers, migrants, young adults, older people living alone and people with a disability or long-term illness. They have usually left school early, and/or working part-time in low -paid or precarious employment, and/or unemployed or have no third level qualifications. They have a range of needs which require a variety of supports in order for them to access education.

Many of them are experiencing some form of discrimination due to negotiating an uncertain transition from school to the world of work or study and victims of multiple structural injustices in terms of their family income, race, gender, and perceived educational achievement.

Barriers SVP clients experience accessing Level 3 & Level 4 courses:

The main barriers and constraints faced by households SVP support relate to finance, transport, availability of provision, and their knowledge and awareness of the options available to them.

There is an issue around the amount and nature of Information, Advice and Guidance available to Learners wishing to access a Level 3 or Level 4 course. This was a consistent theme echoed by SVP members from all over the Republic of Ireland at an SVP Education Gathering held in May 2019. For

example, there are many people living in both rural and urban areas who are not aware of the courses ETBs provide in their area. The 2016 and 2017 National Learner Forum reports also state this is a recurring issue that needs to be addressed.¹

SVP are aware of some course providers who have excellent links with family resource centres, youth clubs, Youthreach, schools, Intreo offices, childcare committees, local employers etc. However, this is not the case in all areas as was highlighted at the Education Gathering. Where there are strong links, it allows people hear about courses and supports available in their community, often from a setting which they are already accessing and have built positive relationships with, for example, a local youth club. As a result, they are more likely to explore educational options.

Further consultation should be initiated with the Education Training Boards Ireland (etbi) to establish how links between local ETBs and all the stakeholders in a Learners education can be strengthened and a level of consistency established. This would ensure all potential students are receiving the same level of service and support while wishing to access a Level 3 or Level 4 course.

Learners accessing Level 3 or 4 FET courses do require specific, individualised support to determine the most appropriate course for them. This is to ensure people receive the advice and support suitable to their particular needs, interests and circumstances. Learners require not only information and advice on a course, but also, advice, information and guidance on financial costs involved, childcare entitlements, transport costs and availability etc. SVP members report that the amount of information required to take up a course is significant for clients who have complex needs. It can be burdensome for those people to access all this information from a variety of sources. Therefore, it is important that Adult Guidance Services and DEASP/Intro staff can facilitate individual sessions. Also, learners should not have to access all of the required information online. International evidence suggests that an integrated range of interventions involving the use of technology combined with guidance is likely to be an effective mechanism for career information.²

A report published by SOLAS in 2017 highlighted that for many prospective learners, there was much confusion and lack of awareness for learners around costs, grants and entitlements. For example, due to the complexity of the social welfare system, prospective learners had encountered perceived economic barriers to taking up a FET course. Hidden costs, confusion surrounding entitlements and a lack of eligibility for grants/welfare supplements prevented some individuals from doing courses.³

¹ https://www.aontas.com/33869-AONTAS%20NALF%20Policy%20Report_August_2019.pdf
https://www.aontas.com/48390-AONTAS%20NALF%20Policy%20Report_August_2019.pdf

² <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/indecon-review-of-career-guidance.pdf>

³ *ibid*

SVP members have stated that Level 3 and Level 4 courses are in the vast majority of cases relatively inexpensive or free if on social welfare, however, the hidden costs involved can be a barrier for a person to continue in their chosen course. Two examples provided by members illustrate this issue. A Conference in the West region supported a person doing a Level 4 Communications course, it was free to apply, however, the learner had to do a module on work experience. As she lived in a rural area, the cost of transport to attend her place of work experience was prohibitive. She received financial assistance from SVP which ensured she could continue in her course. She has since gained employment from the same employer. If it were not for SVP assisting her, she would not have been able to continue in her course and thus receive an offer of paid employment.

A Learner was enrolled in a Level 3 Diploma in Personal Training. All of the fitness equipment required to complete the course was not provided by the course provider. Learners were expected to purchase some training equipment, this was not outlined at the beginning of the course. In this instance, the Learner concerned applied for a loan from the credit union to pay for equipment.

All costs should be clearly outlined at the onset of a course. SVP recommends that as well as guidance counsellors and Intreo having this information, it should be also highlighted on all guidance information websites under each specific course, for example on the Fetchcourses website. Any additional materials needed for a course should be kept to a minimum and provided by the course provider in most instances. In addition, an increase in transport allowances should be reviewed to ensure transport costs are not a barrier for anyone wishing to access education.

Many Learners find it difficult to source work experience where it is a requirement to complete the course successfully. The clients SVP support in most cases do not have links with employers in their community. They also find it extremely daunting to source work experience having already taking a significant and challenging step to begin a course. Sourcing work experience for Learners should involve the assistance and guidance of the course tutor to alleviate stress for the Learner.

Accessing quality, affordable childcare remains a challenge for many households in Irish society today. It is particularly burdensome and worrying for the households SVP support due to their limited incomes. Many are reliant on social welfare support or are in low paid employment such as childcare, homecare or factory work. The availability of community childcare is a major barrier for the clients SVP members support. It remains the most dominant issue facing households with pre-school children in particular, who wish to take up an education course or paid employment.

In 2018, SVP commissioned the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice to conduct research on the reality experienced by families with children whose income falls below that required for a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL). This is a standard which meets physical, psychological, and social needs at a minimum but socially acceptable level and is one below which nobody should be expected to live. It is titled 'Stories of Struggle'.⁴ In the research report parents emphasised the need for affordable childcare so that they could access further education and training courses with the view to gaining employment. Findings from the report state that there is a need for high quality, affordable and accessible childcare in order to mitigate the impact of income inadequacy and to help families to find a way out of income inadequacy.

“More women like me would work full- time if there was free or more accessible childcare, ...if there was a proper childcare scheme for low income families” (Stories of Struggle 2018).

Quality of learning experience, and the impact it has had

SVP members report that the supports for learners accessing Level 3 and Level 4 courses are positive. Supports to learners included learning supports such as literacy and numeracy and study skills, one-to-one tutoring, as well as more holistic supports including guidance counselling, advocacy, psychological support, accommodation for disability, low cost childcare, and financial support. However, members report inconsistencies in the availability of these supports across services.

There is also a need for better progression from Level 3 and Level 4 courses- either into work or further education opportunities. It was felt in some instances where members were supporting clients access education courses that the course was an end in itself. As stated previously, the Learners SVP support are not a homogeneous group. This also applies to what a person wishes to do after the course is nearing completion. Some wish to progress further and use the skills gained in employment or further education. There are also some who wish to use the course to improve their self-confidence and esteem and prefer not to explore other learning or employment opportunities.

⁴ https://issuu.com/svp15/docs/stories_of_struggle_-_full_report/1?e=25010855/64705710

SVP members have expressed disappointment in some instances whereby they contacted the course provider on behalf of clients and were assured they were further opportunities to progress after the course finished. This didn't materialise leaving the client and Conference members feeling despondent.

SVP members have pointed out the excellent and professional tutors who teach Level 3 and 4 courses. They feel tutors have a good understanding of the needs of people accessing courses and how to teach a course whereby Learner voices are heard and respected.

Concluding Remarks

The further education and training sector is very diverse. While this is certainly beneficial, it can be hard for potential students to navigate through the myriad courses and funding options. A lack of consistency across course providers in the level of advice and supports given is a worrying issue. This is the experience of SVP members wishing to support families and individuals back into education many of whom are experiencing poverty and marginalisation.

In addition, SVP members through their home visitation work highlight a number of policy gaps in the provision of NFQ Levels 3 and 4 education courses. The awareness of course options, the cost of transport and access to quality, affordable childcare remains a barrier for people accessing further education and training courses.

SVP applaud the transformative nature of education and understand the importance education can play in improving family circumstances. Whilst SVP members are complementary of the excellent variety of Level 3 and Level 4 courses and professionalism of tutors who teach them, there are consistent barriers and constraints that ensure there remains a significant portion of our population who are not receiving the benefits of which further education and training provision can provide.