

**Evaluation of the 2014 Skillnets Training  
Networks Programme, ManagementWorks,  
JSSP and the Finuas Programmes**

**Report for**

**Skillnets**

**October 2015**

## Executive Summary

### Introduction

Skillnets is funded through the National Training Fund, which is allocated by the Skills Development Division of the Department of Education and Skills. The Department issues an annual allocation letter which sets out policy and administrative issues for Skillnets to adhere to with the key target of:

- *“training and related services will be provided to 40,000 persons, or to an increased equivalent in training days (232,000) for 2014. Of this total figure, Skillnets training and related services will be provided to 8,000 unemployed or part-time workers, or to the equivalent in training days (55,000)”*

Skillnets are also tasked to:

- *“target its training towards areas suggested as appropriate by Government Policy and the ongoing evidence-based analysis by Forfas and the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs”.*

Skillnets offers a suite of Programmes targeted at achieving these high level goals and this evaluation considers the specific issues regarding the following Programmes:

- Training Networks Programme
- Finuas Networks Programme
- Job Seeker Support Programme
- ManagementWorks Programme

To deliver the evaluation, the following activities were undertaken:

- 12 Skillnets staff interviews
- 9 Stakeholder interviews
- 11 Network visits, at which there were:
  - 11 Network manager interviews/interactions
  - 11 Network promoter interviews/interactions
  - 56 Company interviews/interactions
  - 42 Trainee interviews
  - 4 trainer interviews
- 5 Further trainer/training organisation interviews
- a desk review of policy, strategy and guidance publications
- 12 e-surveys – 5308 responses

This approach was taken to support a qualitative as well as a quantitative view of Skillnets to reflect that the objectives of Skillnets are both high volume of trainees and courses, and high quality in line with industry demand.

Throughout the report the figures shown are based on actual responses and no extrapolation of figures has been undertaken.

## Performance

To add context to the overall approach taken by Skillnets in delivering across a number of different Programmes, the figures in the table below reflect the overall delivery against the targets set by the Department of Education and Skills (DES). Although this report breaks down the figures by individual Programme the composite figures shown below are the figures that Skillnets are measured against.

### Skillnets overall delivery against DES targets

	DES Target	Actual number	Performance against DES target
<b>Trainees :</b>			
Employed	32,000	39,591	124%
Unemployed	8,000	6,858	86%
Total – trainees	40,000	46,449	<b>116%</b>
<b>Training days :</b>			
Employed	177,000	232,844	132%
Unemployed	55,000	58,686	107%
Total – training days	232,000	291,530	<b>126%</b>

The figures show that Skillnets have delivered significantly above target in both the number of trainees participating in the Programmes and the number of training days that have been delivered.

## Training Networks Programme

The Training Networks Programme (TNP) is the flagship programme for Skillnets and is where the greatest level of investment is made. The fact that the total spend target and the actual amount spent are so close demonstrates that tight management control is imposed both out in the Networks and centrally by Skillnets. €17.885M was expended from a budget of €17.918M and to be within €33k of a spend figure of €18m is impressive.

The matched funding figure achieved of €9.4m is significant in its own right. This is a substantial amount of private funding being attracted to support public investment. The fact that the figure is 4% above target is testament to the regard that the TNP Programme is held in and the value that companies perceive it offers. This of course also maximises value for money to the public purse.

Skillnet Networks offers places on training courses to unemployed people where possible. Feedback shows that this is an area of Network activity that takes up a large amount of time. With the economy recovering and unemployment levels falling, the numbers of unemployed people being attracted to infill on courses has fallen behind the target set by some 16%.

The 'training days' figures are obviously influenced by the number of trainees involved and the types and delivery models of the training that is in demand by employers. As a demand driven Programme, maintaining a balance of number of trainees and number of training days is not a simple task and Skillnets and the individual Network managers deserve recognition for the management of this.

Companies that fed back said that, without Skillnets, half the training would probably not have happened and 86% of companies would have found training of a similar quality hard to find. In addition to that, 97% of respondents to the questionnaire think that the employer input/focus helps Skillnets to deliver a better training service for businesses. Other feedback includes:

- 95% of companies agree or strongly agree that the training is of a high quality
- 91% of companies agreed or strongly agreed that 'a satisfactory training service' was offered to meet their employee needs
- 80% of respondents fed back that they are now more likely to train staff in the future
- 85% agree or strongly agree that Skillnets (TNP) is likely to enhance the long-term performance of their business

Businesses also fed back that many had been able to recruit staff as well as increase turnover and profitability as a direct result of training undertaken through TNP. The feedback given by both employed and unemployed trainees reflected high levels of satisfaction with the Programme.

### Finuas Networks Programme

The Finuas Networks Programme (Finuas) supports specialised training in the international financial services (IFS) sector. There are close similarities to the TNP and these were reflected by similar levels of management control leading to positive results and high levels of satisfaction from employers and trainees.

Companies fed back that the top two objectives being achieved through the Finuas Programme were:

- Finuas training presented a cost-effective option, by 100% of companies
- tackle skills shortage or skills gaps in the company, by 100% of companies

Key findings include that all respondent companies believe that Finuas training was of high quality and that Finuas has provided a satisfactory training service for employees, and more than 3 in 4 companies believe that Finuas has made training easier to access:

- 100% of companies agree or strongly agree that Finuas training was of high quality
- 100% of companies agree or strongly agree that Finuas has provided a satisfactory training service for employees
- 86% of companies agree or strongly agree that Finuas has made training easier to access

Finuas was also credited with delivering significant business benefits:

- decreased costs within the business, realised by 50% of companies
- improved processes, realised by 44% of companies
- improved customer care, realised by 44% of companies

Feedback from trainees also demonstrated high levels of satisfaction. 88% of all employed and unemployed trainees stated that Finuas training was relevant and high quality. They said that the training received helped with new challenges or job developments and that they are now more likely to access additional training in the future.

## Job Seekers Support Programme (JSSP)

The JSSP is designed exclusively for unemployed people, with programmes specifically tailored to the needs of this group of trainees based on needs identified by companies operating in a particular sector or region, and including a work placement component.

42 Networks delivered JSSP in 2014 which entailed running 297 courses. There was also input of €177k from matched funding from the private sector. The performance figure in attracting unemployed people to the Programme is very good. This is a programme that focuses on meeting demonstrable demand from industry and the availability of unemployed people, and in under these circumstances JSSP has been forecast, planned and delivered well.

Trainees were asked for their views on the programme and almost 60% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Skillnets training has got them on the road to employment, with 85% finding the training both relevant and of a high quality.

Many employers view the ability to see job-seekers in a training environment as an excellent way to assess their ability to work for them. 45% of trainee respondents now have a new job or are self-employed because of JSSP which reflects a satisfying level of job progression for Skillnets.

## ManagementWorks Programme

ManagementWorks is designed to help SME companies to improve their business performance by providing a range of subsidised, tailored programmes which are supported by professional business mentors. The purpose is to assist companies to grow in terms of their sales, output and employment.

Responses from companies indicated that without ManagementWorks, 83% would not have undertaken the training in 2014. 92% of companies also reported that without ManagementWorks, it would have been difficult to access training of a similar quality elsewhere in 2014. Other company/trainee findings include:

- 94% agree that ManagementWorks training was of high quality
- 85% agree that ManagementWorks has made training easier to access
- 84% agree that ManagementWorks is likely to enhance the long-term performance of their business

The business benefits that ManagementWorks delivers came through very strongly from respondents with:

- improved processes, realised by 75% of companies
- improved customer care, realised by 66% of companies
- improved staff morale/ staff retention, realised by 63% of companies

Other business impacts were also achieved with 46% of respondents have already recognised decreased costs within their business with a further 28% anticipating cost reduction in the future. Over 50% of trainees feel their company have or will be recruiting and over 70% anticipate increasing turnover and/or profitability either already or in the future.

These figures are particularly encouraging and it could be assumed that the management discipline of ensuring value for money is working its way through to evaluating bottom line benefits.

## Network view

Network managers and Network promoters were all sent questionnaires about their view of Skillnets Programmes and their role in the management and delivery of them. The hard figures show them to be very positive about the Programmes and during interviews a large measure of pride surfaced about the success and impact that they were having. There were a number of comments made about potential changes and improvements both strategically and operationally but these were put forward for further thought and discussion rather than for immediate action. The reason for this being that the overwhelming view of Skillnets is that it is not broken. Rather the opposite as it is a very high volume set of programmes that are delivering high levels of quality – and meeting the needs of over 10,000 employers and 40,000 trainees.

Network managers agreed that:

- the programme meets demonstrable business need - 98%
- business feedback highlights the programmes high quality – 96%
- improvements in the economy make work-based training even more important – 89%
- work-based training is a key economic driver – 95%

42% agreed that the training of job-seekers should remain a priority for Skillnets. Many fed back that the numbers should be considered in line with wider economic demand.

The Network Promoters are similarly positive with agreement on:

- the programmes meet demonstrable business need – 98%
- businesses often develop working relationships through the programme – 87%
- improvements in the economy have made work-based training even more important – 94%
- Skillnets is playing an important role in developing a workforce to meet the economic challenges ahead in Ireland – 98%
- Skillnets is an important development support tool for businesses to increase their competitiveness – 98%

Although the role of promoter is seen as time consuming, it is also a satisfying one. One of the issues coming through is a desire for more opportunity to play a role in the future strategic development of Skillnets.

## Other Stakeholders

The stakeholders that contributed to the evaluation are similarly positive about the impact that Skillnets has on the economy and they widened this out to highlight the role that Skillnets also plays in its support for Government policy and initiatives.

Stakeholders reflected on the success that had been quickly delivered to support unemployed people by Skillnets but questioned whether the current levels of support for the unemployed should be maintained now that the economy was recovering and unemployment levels were reducing.

A number of challenges were raised, but these were not put forward as problem areas they were raised more as opportunities that would require a continued focus to maintain the current high standards.

## Trainers

Trainers were interviewed as they provide a key element of the Programme – high quality and relevant training. The 'training community' is an economic entity in its own right with colleges, universities, Institutes of Technology and private training providers all servicing the training demand from businesses through Skillnets. The level of funding that Skillnets puts into the economy is augmented and matched by levels of private sector funding that are significant for the education and training industry.

Trainers were hugely positive about the way that the networks worked with them. The common view was that the networks were totally committed to the work that they were doing and that working with/for the networks was both stimulating and rewarding.

The involvement of job-seekers in courses was seen as a valuable use of what otherwise might be 'lost space' in courses. There were no negative comments about job-seekers being involved, with positive comments about the effort and drive that job-seekers often brought with them to courses.

The majority of trainers commented that the demand driven ethos of Skillnets meant that the delivery of the courses was a more pleasurable experience. They also commented on the high level of interest that companies took in the setting up and preparation of courses and often wanted feedback on how the course was progressing. This level of interest was welcomed by trainers and they felt that it added value to their courses.

Some of the trainers (mostly the smaller, independent ones and/or sole traders) felt that they may not have survived the harshest times of the recession had Skillnets not been operating.

## Conclusions

The overall view of Skillnets is of a system that works - and adds value to a range of people and organisations in a myriad of ways. The way that Skillnets is described by those in the system and the many stakeholders is of a virtuous circle that links policies and strategy with operational delivery.

On an operational basis, Skillnets programmes deliver against targets. However it is at a strategic level that Skillnets excels. Skillnets works with government and its departments and throughout the business development infrastructure in a myriad of ways. This support is greatly admired and the level of goodwill that this has generated should not be underestimated. The key reason that Skillnets has been able to build and maintain partnerships is because of the fit that Skillnets has across economic policy in Ireland.

In this evaluation businesses were asked to indicate numbers against recruitment, turnover and profits that they felt were attributable to the benefits of training through a Skillnets Programme. As this is a volume programme, the figures are relatively crude, but even in this format they demonstrate that impact can be measured. The responses from our surveys alone show:

- 341 people were recruited by businesses that they say are attributable to their involvement with TNP and ManagementWorks (77 responses from companies representing 10.9% of responses)
- increased turnover of around €8m in companies that they say is attributable to participating in TNP and ManagementWorks (26 responses from companies, representing 3.7% of responses)
- increased profit levels of €1.2m in companies that they say is attributable to TNP and ManagementWorks (18 responses from companies, representing 2.3% of responses)

- 223 job-seekers found employment following TNP (Job-seeker) and/or JSSP and 103 went into self-employment, representing 34.6% of respondents

The Skillnets Programmes offer significant value for money:

- Attracting matched funding from the private sector of over €10.5m
- Obtaining best value prices for training courses
- Supporting job-seeker training at minimal cost to public funds

Skillnets and its programmes also deliver a range of spill-over benefits. Spill-over benefits are those benefits that are achieved although they are not directly targeted or necessarily even anticipated. These include:

- SME's staff go back with 'good practice' ideas from larger company staff
- Jobseeker trainees are an excellent recruitment option for businesses
- Joint business initiatives arise from spending time with other network businesses
- Multinationals work in partnership with 'rivals/neighbours'
- Skillnets is a real attraction for FDI
- Skillnets is a 'rapid response' to job-loss blackspots
- The 'smarter economy' would be much more difficult to live up to

## Recommendations

This evaluation highlights a set of skills development programmes that are delivering high volumes very successfully. The programmes may not always be seen as perfect, but there is broad agreement that they are working and so the recommendations that emerge from this evaluation should be seen as issues for consideration:

- the target numbers for job-seekers should be reviewed
- review the important role of the Network managers
- consider ways of getting more strategic input from Network Promoters
- Consider more focussed evaluations on specific programmes/activities to demonstrate impact



## 1 Introduction

Skillnets' key role is the promotion and facilitation of work-based training and up-skilling as key elements in sustaining Ireland's national competitiveness and economic recovery, with the following high level goals:

- to maintain and increase participation by enterprise, particularly SMEs, in relevant learning activity that benefits the competitiveness of enterprise and the employability of the workforce
- to support learning in growth sectors by enabling enterprise to make the most of the available human capital in the workforce in pursuit of a sustainable growth path
- to provide meaningful support to job-seekers, in an enterprise context, which provides opportunities to enhance their chances of gaining employment
- to contribute to the development of national enterprise and labour market activation policies

Skillnets offers a collaborative front to companies to engage with like-minded companies and training providers to develop skills and expertise to ensure skills keep track with the needs of their business. This report presents an evaluation of Skillnets with the purpose of:

- ensuring that the objectives and outcomes of Skillnets are being met at Network, Programme and training activity levels
- answering whether Skillnets is proving to be effective through identifying the value add to stakeholders
- demonstrating whether Skillnets represents value for money through an impact assessment, considering both hard and soft outputs
- considering the future skills support requirements of training programmes and mechanisms in Ireland

Skillnets offers a suite of Programmes targeted at achieving these high level goals and this evaluation considers the specific issues regarding the following Programmes:

- Training Networks Programme
- Finuas Networks Programme
- Job Seekers Support Programme
- ManagementWorks Programme

### 1.1 Method of work

The method of work taken has been to mix volume of response with quality of response. This was achieved through undertaking a series of face to face interviews and Network visits to understand the responses behind the figures held by Skillnets centrally, allied to a volume response via a series of electronic surveys.

One of the reasons for focussing on the qualitative side is to try and go beyond numbers and outputs, and find out more about the quality and impacts that the Skillnets suite of Programmes supports. To support this the work undertaken comprises:

- 12 Skillnets staff interviews
- 9 Stakeholder interviews
- 11 Network visits:
  - 11 Network manager interviews/interactions
  - 11 Network promoter interviews/interactions
  - 56 Company interviews/interactions
  - 42 Trainee interviews

- 4 trainer interviews
- 5 Further trainer/training organisation interviews
- a desk review of policy, strategy and guidance publications including:
  - IFS2020: A Strategy for Ireland's International Financial Services sector 2015-2020
  - The Further Education and Training Strategy, 2014
  - The Action Plan for Jobs, 2015
  - Pathways to Work 2015
  - National Competitiveness Council : Ireland's Competitiveness Scorecard
  - National Competitiveness Council : Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge
  - Regional Labour Markets Bulletin 2013\* and 2014\*
  - National Skills Bulletin 2013\* and 2014\*
  - Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply: Trends in Education and Training Outputs 2013\* and 2014\*
  - Guidance for Higher Education Providers on Current and Future Skills Needs of Enterprise: Springboard 2014\*
- **\*Publications by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs**
- 12 e-surveys – 5308 responses:
  - TNP Network Managers 56
  - TNP Network Promoters 53
  - TNP employers 571
  - TNP employed trainees 3193
  - TNP Jobseeker trainees 492
  - Finuas Network Managers 3
  - Finuas Network Promoters 3
  - Finuas employers 53
  - Finuas employed trainees 276
  - Finuas Jobseeker trainees 39
  - JSSP trainees 451
  - ManagementWorks trainees 138

The networks visited were:

- Waterford Chamber Skillnet
- ITAG Skillnet
- PharmaChem Skillnet
- ICT Ireland Skillnet
- HPSU Skillnet
- Innovation & Lean Sigma Skillnet
- Positive2Work Skillnet
- Taste 4 Success Skillnet
- IBEC Retail Skillnet
- Animation Skillnet
- FDI Skillnet

Organisations of stakeholders interviewed were:

- Skillnets board (2)
- Dept. of Education & Skills (2)
- Department of Social Protection
- Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation
- IDA Ireland
- IBEC
- Chambers Ireland

### 1.1.1 Skillnets staff interviews

Key members of staff in Skillnets who have had responsibility for the setting up and operation of the specific programmes that come under the 'Skillnets umbrella', and those currently managing the projects on an operational basis were interviewed face to face to enable the evaluators to understand operational issues. Interviews were semi-structured in nature, to ensure consistency while also allowing room to probe particular areas in depth, and to cover their full range of issues of interest.

This information was of significant value in being able to understand some of the issues that were raised during subsequent interviews, particularly with Networks.

### 1.1.2 Stakeholder interviews

Skillnets is clearly an integral part of the education and skills environment in Ireland. Skillnets offers an operational and strategic role across many different areas along-side employer organisations, economic development agencies, government departments and affiliated short term working groups considering skills requirements.

The stakeholder interviews were aimed at discovering the perceived value that Skillnets brings, not only through the organisation and funding of training interventions, but also in terms of bringing their knowledge to bear in a range of both practical and strategic ways.

### 1.1.3 Network visits

The best way to discover how a programme – or programmes – is performing is to fully understand the different ways that they can be delivered. Skillnets offers a range of different operational delivery models – for example: local area, sector specific, nationwide delivery and discipline specific.

By selecting a wide range of different mechanisms and then speaking directly with the players in their own environment, a fuller understanding of the issues was expected to emerge.

### 1.1.4 Trainer interviews

A key component in developing skills are the trainers that are commissioned to deliver training by the Networks. To gain a perspective of how they perceive the Programmes and the value of the Skillnets approach, trainers were interviewed as part of the Network visits and a series of telephone interviews were also carried out.

### 1.1.5 Desk review

The desk review was an ongoing part of the review to enable an informed view to be taken regarding the fit and relevance of Skillnet activity against National and Regional objectives.

### 1.1.6 Surveys

Whilst the face to face interviews undertaken offer real insight and bring the Programmes 'to life' it is important to offer all participants at least the opportunity to comment on the Programmes. To achieve this, a series of electronic surveys were set up and distributed to companies and individuals. This volume approach offers up a series of figures that could not otherwise be brought together for an initiative that is so large. Throughout the report the figures shown are based on actual responses and no extrapolation of figures has been undertaken.

## 1.2 Background and context

### 1.2.1 Funding

Skillnets is funded through the National Training Fund, which is allocated by the Skills Development Division of the Department of Education and Skills. The Skills Development Division, through SOLAS, ETBs and Skillnets, funds and monitors the provision of further education and training programmes for individuals who are seeking to avail of further vocational education and training opportunities in order to enhance their employment prospects and to enable them to acquire accredited qualifications. The key activities of the Division are:

- support and advise on skills development policy, education and training
- promotion of measures delivered by ETBs, Skillnets and other training providers, to address existing or future skills needs
- allocation of resources, including the National Training Fund.

The Department issues an annual allocation letter which sets out policy and administrative issues for Skillnets to adhere to with the key target of:

- *“training and related services will be provided to 40,000 persons, or to an increased equivalent in training days (232,000) for 2014. Of this total figure, Skillnets training and related services will be provided to 8,000 unemployed or part-time workers, or to the equivalent in training days (55,000)”*

### 1.2.2 Future skills needs

Skillnets are also tasked to:

- *“target its training towards areas suggested as appropriate by Government Policy and the ongoing evidence-based analysis by Forfas and the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs”.*

Skillnets have a strong track record both today and in the past of supporting the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs. This is demonstrated by the introduction of Finuas as a direct result of an Expert Group on Future Skills Needs report in 2007, to support the financial services sector to maintain Ireland's position as a top international financial services centre through investment in the specialist skills and expertise of its workforce. In 2014 Finuas contributed to the development of the IFS 2020 strategy which was launched in 2015.

Skillnets also take a proactive approach in supporting 'priority sectors' by ensuring that there is facility to develop solutions to changing circumstances in the demand for specialised training. This includes support through financial investment by Skillnets in:

- The Future Skills Needs Programme (FSNP)
- The New Certified Programme Development Programme (NCPD)

The FSNP and NCPD include Industry-Academia collaboration and the provision of flexible innovative learning methodologies which are aligned with identified training needs.

The strategic intent of the FSNP programme was to facilitate networks to design new programmes to up-skill current and future employees in priority sectors, and thus increase the competitiveness of member companies, sustain and increase market growth, maximise exports, enhance employment opportunities for job-seekers and to enable companies within the sectors to make a significant contribution to the national economy. Similarly, the NCPD programme addressed the needs of other more traditional sectors.

During 2014, 13 new courses in the priority sectors of ICT, life sciences and food & drink were developed by networks. This was at a combined cost of €268,000, with €209,000 via grant aid and the balance via matching funds from industry. Under the NCPD, there were a total of 17 courses developed at a total cost of €215,000, with €159,000 via grant aid and the balance also via matching funds from industry.

### 1.2.3 Policy drivers

**The Further Education and Training Strategy** was published in 2014 <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Further-Education-and-Training-Strategy-2014-2019.pdf> and continues to pursue the priorities that are contained in the Action Plan for Jobs and the 'Pathways to Work' strategy – which are the priorities that Skillnets has supported and continues to support. The key context for Skillnets is the emphasis on the need for enhanced engagement with employers to ensure responsiveness of education and training providers to fast-changing needs. Included in the strategy regarding this is the statement:

- *“the enterprise-led model of Skillnets is instructive in this regard”*

The Irish Governments **Action Plan for Jobs** <http://www.djei.ie/publications/2015APJ.pdf> has been updated each year since its launch in 2012. The action plan pulls together the activities of several initiatives, programmes and organisations with the over-arching objective to 'create the environment where the number of people at work will have increased by 100,000 by 2016 and will have reached 2.1m people by 2020.' Now in its fourth year, the Action Plan for Jobs (APJ) process continues to have an impact:

- almost 80,000 more people are at work since the launch of the first Action Plan for Jobs in 2012
- indigenous exports and foreign direct investment are at all-time record levels
- Irelands competitiveness ranking internationally has climbed to 15th
- the rate of unemployment has declined from a peak of 15.1 per cent at the start of 2012 to below 10.6 per cent at end 2014

In the 2015 list of actions, Skillnets are responsible for 2:

- enhance industry input to programme content, provision of work placements and promotion of ICT programmes as part of the implementation of Skillnets ICT Conversion Programmes (7)
- promote and support development of the Skills to Work brand to increase awareness of reskilling options for jobseekers. (19) (in partnership with others)

As part of the annual allocation letter, the Department instructed Skillnets to prioritise actions in the Action Plan for Jobs 2013 and 2014.

**Pathways to Work** was first launched in 2012. It is a strategy covering a four year period (2012-2015) designed to reverse the dramatic rise in the numbers of unemployed jobseekers on the Live Register that took place during the Great Recession. It is designed to complement the Action Plan for Jobs as part of a twin-pronged approach to tackling the jobs crisis that emerged in the final years of the last decade. The Action Plan for Jobs is focused on stimulating employment growth; Pathways to Work on making sure that as many as possible of these new jobs, and other vacancies that arise in the economy are filled by people from the Live Register.

### 1.2.4 Partnerships and protocols

Skillnets works across related areas of Government strategies, policies and action plans. To ensure as strong a partnership as possible, Skillnets has protocols with the Department of Jobs Enterprise and Innovation (DJEI) and the Department of Social Protection (DSP).

The Skillnets protocol with DJEI has the objective of providing a structured mechanism to enable engagement with the LEOs in a coordinated manner. The protocol will lead to wider collaboration at both a network and national level. This is important because as part of a reform of the system of supports available to micro and small enterprises, the new system of Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) were established by the Government in April 2014. The network of 31 LEOs replaces the previous County Enterprise Boards and will support a pathway into a range of mentoring, training and management development programmes offered by other agencies, including Skillnets.

The protocol between Skillnets and DSP provides a framework to develop a closer relationship between staff within both organisations, through establishment of more structured links at national and local/divisional/regional levels. Importantly, the protocol's aims include:

- increasing and maintaining mutual awareness of the services and supports offered to the unemployed through Skillnets and DSP, via the Intreo network
- raise awareness of enterprise-led opportunities available to jobseekers through Skillnets and enabling referral of jobseekers to training provided by Skillnets
- facilitating access by unemployed people to relevant and useful further education and work placement/internship opportunities as part of their progression pathway
- coordination of efforts in delivering recruitment events such as job-fairs, etc.

## 2 Training Networks Programme

The Training Networks Programme (TNP) is the flagship programme for Skillnets and is where the greatest level of investment is made. The other Programmes are complimentary to TNP and so many of the comments made and feedback given, particularly by businesses, reflect on the whole Skillnets initiative but are reflected in this section.

To add context to the overall approach taken by Skillnets in delivering across a number of different Programmes, the figures in Table 2.1 below reflect the overall delivery against the targets set by the Department of Education and Skills (DES). Although this report breaks down the figures by individual Programme the composite figures shown below are the figures that Skillnets are measured against.

**Table 2.1: Skillnets overall delivery against DES targets**

	DES Target	Actual number	Performance against DES target
<b>Trainees :</b>			
Employed	32,000	39,591	124%
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Total – trainees	40,000	46,449	<b>116%</b>
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Employed	177,000	232,844	132%
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Total – training days	232,000	291,530	<b>126%</b>

The figures show that Skillnets have delivered significantly above target in both the number of trainees participating in the Programmes and the number of training days that have been delivered.

### 2.1 TNP Performance

The performance of the networks are closely monitored. The table below sets out the performance against stretch targets and comment on each element is covered in this section. While a small number of internal stretch targets were not met, overall, the performance is very positive in meeting the Department of Education and Skills targets.

**Table 2.2: TNP performance by spend**

	Delivered	Budget	Performance
Spend	€17.918m	€17.885m	100%
Matched funding	€9.4m	€9.065m	104%

Figures provided by Skillnets

**Table 2.3: TNP performance by activity**

	Delivered	Target	Performance
Number of companies in Networks	10,033	8587	117%
Employed trainees	37,115	33,559	110%
Unemployed trainees	3,964	4,730	84%
Employed training days	202,833	225,404	90%
Unemployed training days	10,352	14,761	70%

Figures provided by Skillnets

### 2.1.1 *Number of companies in Networks*

The target of 8,587 companies as a total membership of the various Networks was comfortably exceeded with 10,033 companies involved. One of the issues that was often raised throughout this evaluation was the issue of marketing and branding. Whilst there may be some areas that require 'fine-tuning' to ensure that appropriate targeting takes place to meet Skillnets and Government priorities, these figures demonstrate that companies continue to support Skillnets in good numbers.

### 2.1.2 *Spend*

The fact that the total spend target and the actual amount spent are so close demonstrates that tight management control is imposed both out in the Networks and centrally by Skillnets. To be within €33k of a spend figure of €18m is impressive.

### 2.1.3 *Matched funding*

The matched funding figure achieved of almost €10m is significant in its own right. This is a substantial amount of private funding being attracted to support public investment. The fact that the figure is 4% above target is testament to the regard that the TNP Programme is held in and the value that companies perceive it offers. This of course also maximises value for money to the public purse.

### 2.1.4 *Employed trainees*

Employed trainees remain the backbone of the TNP Programme and the figure set as a stretch target has been exceeded by 10%.

### 2.1.5 *Unemployed trainees*

Skillnets offers places on Network training courses to unemployed people. Feedback shows that this is an area of Network activity that takes up a large amount of time. With the economy recovering and unemployment levels falling, the numbers of unemployed people being attracted to infill on courses has fallen behind the stretch target set by some 16%. Nevertheless, Skillnets did achieve the overall unemployed target set by the Department of Education & Skills (D/ES), to train a specified number of unemployed trainees or deliver in excess of 55,000 unemployed training days in 2014. It should also be taken into account the economic circumstances with Skillnets ramping up in 2012 and 2013 to help tackle the high unemployment figures. The unemployment register is now falling and these figures reflect this.

### 2.1.6 *Employed training days*

The 'training days' figures are obviously influenced by the number of trainees involved and the types and delivery models of the training that is in demand by employers. As a demand driven Programme, maintaining a balance of number of trainees and number of training days is not a simple task and Skillnets and the individual Network managers deserve recognition for the management of this.

### 2.1.7 *Unemployed training days*

The unemployed training days figures have dropped in line with the numbers of unemployed trainees. Whilst not meeting a stretch target is disappointing, changing economic circumstances and the demands for specific training types are more the reasons for this shortfall rather than an underperformance by the Programme. As referred to above, this outcome should be viewed in light of Skillnets overall achievement of the unemployed target set by D/ES.



## 2.2 Company Feedback

Questionnaires were sent out to 4813 companies from a list of member companies provided by Skillnets. A total of 571 responses were gathered.

**Table 2.4: Respondents by company size**

Company size	Number of Respondents	%
1-10	213	38%
11-49	114	21%
50-249	108	19%
250+	119	21%
Total	554	

**Note: 554 companies provided information on their company size and 17 skipped the question. Figures do not total 100% due to rounding.**

The information provided by these questionnaires is supplemented by feedback received from companies during visits made to eleven Networks:

- Waterford Chamber Skillnet
- ITAG Skillnet
- PharmaChem Skillnet
- ICT Ireland Skillnet
- HPSU Skillnet
- Innovation & Lean Sigma Skillnet
- Positive2Work Skillnet
- Taste 4 Success Skillnet
- IBEC Retail Skillnet
- Animation Skillnet
- FDII Skillnet

The Networks were selected by Frontline on the basis of: geographic location across Ireland, discipline specific, both local and national Networks and sector specific. The information and insight given was particularly useful in understanding key issues.

One of the important questions to ask up front is what would happen if Skillnets did not exist? The response from companies is that without Skillnets half the training would probably not have happened and 84% of companies would have found training of a similar quality hard to find.

In addition to that, 97% of respondents to the questionnaire think that the employer input/focus helps Skillnets to deliver a better training service for businesses.

## 2.3 Company objectives

Companies were asked what they wanted to achieve through participating in the TNP. Almost inevitably the top two reasons came out as giving companies the ability to tackle skills issues - and tackling them in a cost effective way. Although cost came out as an important objective, TNP did not emerge as being as cost sensitive as may have been expected. Companies put significant resource into the training costs and it seems that it is the whole package of supports to source and co-ordinate training that is valued. What is of interest is the relatively high percentage of companies that saw cost-reduction in their business as being an objective. Although this is a normal company desire, it is significant because it perhaps reflects the general business caution that exists as the economy moves out of recession.

**Table 2.5: Company objectives**

Objective	met
Tackle skills shortage or skills gaps in the company	97%
Ease difficulty in recruiting people with the skills sets required	56%
Reduce costs in the business	78%
Drive up competitiveness	90%
Skillnets TNP training presented a cost-effective option	98%
Tackle administrative and technical difficulties in sourcing relevant training	94%

Feedback suggests that training and people-development are now higher up the agenda than in the past. The fact that 'recruitment difficulties' are lower as an objective than might be expected at a time of economic recovery – albeit slow – appears to back this.

One factor that did emerge was the role that the Networks and TNP now had in taking the burden away from companies in trying to source relevant, high quality and cost effective training in a way that they felt they could not deliver themselves.

## 2.4 Company opinion on Skillnets

As TNP is the original and largest Programme delivered, the term Skillnets was used to garner company opinion on how the whole training infrastructure worked for them rather than focus on a Programme name. The results shown below in Table 2.6 are very encouraging with no area flagging up potential problems or difficulties.

**Table 2.6: Company opinion on Skillnets**

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Skillnets has made training easier to access	2%	1%	7%	46%	44%
Skillnets training was of high quality	2%	1%	2%	46%	49%
Skillnets has provided a satisfactory training service for employees	2%	1%	6%	49%	42%
Skillnets saved me management time	2%	4%	19%	41%	34%
Based on my engagement with Skillnets, I am now more likely to train staff in the future	2%	2%	16%	47%	33%
Skillnets is value for money	2%	1%	6%	44%	47%
Skillnets is likely to enhance the long-term performance of our business	2%	1%	12%	48%	37%

Key points to take from this feedback are: 95% of companies agree or strongly agree that the training is of a high quality. Many companies commented that this was down to 'experience of getting it right' and the fact that companies keep a close watch on the training delivered and the results delivered by their staff 'post-course'.

91% of companies agreed or strongly agreed that 'a satisfactory training service' was offered to meet their employee needs which reflects the high satisfaction levels from companies during the Network visits – where Network Managers were often referred to as being like having an 'internal training section'.

One of the reasons for using public funds to support training is because there is a perception that companies do not value the benefits of investing in training highly enough. With 80% of respondents feeding back that they are now more likely to train staff in the future it could be strongly suggested that TNP is now actively supporting this investment to happen.

The most significant figure is that 85% agree or strongly agree that Skillnets (TNP) is likely to enhance the long-term performance of their business. At a time that the Irish economy is fighting back, this is the type of figure and response that builds business confidence for the future.

## 2.5 Business benefits

An evaluation in early 2015 of a Programme in 2014 must take cognisance that benefits may not flow through until sometime in the future. In recognition of this, respondents were invited to comment on benefits they may have experienced already, and benefits that they anticipated in the future thanks to TNP and the results are shown in Table 2.7

**Table 2.7: Business benefits**

	No	Yes, already	Yes, in the future
Staff morale/retention	16%	71%	13%
Improved customer care	26%	57%	17%
New product development or product improvement	49%	31%	20%
Improved production	34%	49%	17%
Access to new markets	60%	19%	21%
Increased exports	80%	9%	11%
Improved processes	16%	63%	21%
Decreased costs within our business	28%	47%	25%
Increased sales	50%	30%	20%

The first two benefits shown – staff morale/retention and improved customer care - are high and these are significant business benefits that are often not taken into account as they reflect upon 'softer' aspects of business. The next four benefits will not be relevant to all businesses and these should be viewed in terms of different businesses achieving different benefits in line with the type of business and market that they are in.

The greatest area of business benefit, alongside the increase in 'staff morale' is in the area of improved processes. It can be assumed that this is generated not only on production lines but also in the process of doing business. When taken alongside the 72% of businesses that have either decreased costs already or anticipate a reduction in the future there is a trend to ensuring that any gains made in sales or market share are not neutralised by having 'sub-par' systems. This thinking is in line with a lower figure – of around 50% that have or anticipate increased sales.

## 2.6 Spillover benefits - businesses

The most illuminating aspect of meeting companies whilst visiting Networks is the added value that this brought in terms of additional, or spillover benefits that being part of a Network brings. Examples include:

- SME's – their staff go back with 'good practice' ideas that larger company staff give them. There were many examples given ranging from the implementation of very small detail to complete strategic re-thinks
- although businesses were not entirely convinced of having jobseeker trainees at first, having job seekers on courses is now viewed by many businesses as an excellent recruitment option
- companies gave examples of joint business initiatives arising from spending time with other Network businesses, these included marketing and branding approaches and in two instances, businesses had merged

## 2.7 Wider spillover benefits

Wider benefits are not restricted purely to the businesses involved with Skillnets, as there is anecdotal evidence that there are other positive outcomes taking place:

- in one instance, Skillnets was referred to as a 'rapid response' to job-loss blackspots and specific examples were given
- companies strategically observed that the 'smarter economy' would be much more difficult to live up to without Skillnets. An example given is that there are many businesses operating in 'traditional areas' that are now managing-in good, modern practices in technology to market and sell their products
- there are some excellent examples of major multinational businesses working together in Ireland. They perceive that their real competition is with their 'sister' plants (the same company operating in other countries) – whilst working in partnership with 'neighbours' (rival companies in term of product) supports the case for further investment in Ireland by their offshore parent company
- a number of Networks commented that Skillnets is a real attraction for FDI with IDA regularly showing prospective investors how they can get the 'right people and skills' both now and on into the future

## 2.8 Economic impact

Economic impact is normally calculated through an assessment of jobs created and/or safeguarded and the level of Gross Value Added (GVA) to the economy attributable to a specific intervention. Training is viewed as an area with economic impacts that are 'hard to measure' for businesses. To test this, businesses were invited to comment on these key indicators as shown below in table 2.8.

**Table 2.8: Impact**

	No–	Yes, already–	Yes, in the future–
Recruitment of staff	66%	14%	20%
Increased turnover	52%	20%	28%
Increased profits	47%	20%	33%

These figures are particularly heartening, as much for the fact that businesses had considered measuring the impact of training almost as much as the figures themselves. The figures show that over a third of respondents had recruited or anticipated recruiting staff because of the benefits coming from training through TNP. This is a very high and welcome figure.

If the 14% recruitment figure was considered to be jobs created and extrapolated across the 9,000 participating businesses, then this alone would be a major impact.

Over half of the businesses had enjoyed or anticipated increased profits attributable to participating in TNP with just under half incurring or anticipating increased turnover. A higher profit than turnover figure is unusual – but can almost certainly be put down to the drive by many businesses to cut costs as an objective of the training undertaken as shown in tables 2.2 and 2.4 of this section. There were a number of businesses that were interviewed who said that they tried to keep track on the difference before and after a training intervention so that they could ensure value for money. A wide variety of different ways were used, reflecting the disparate range of types of businesses and markets involved with TNP.

Whilst there was no one way that emerged as a preferred way of evaluating training, there was an acceptance that such investments should be measured if at all possible – with simplicity being the key.

A further difficult area for training evaluation is in the area of putting actual figures against impact. If impact is to be evaluated in the future, then the figures in table 2.9 demonstrate that impact can be measured with real figures provided by businesses.

**Table 2.9: Economic impact**

	Responses	A figure given	Positive (but not used)	Actual numbers
Recruitment of staff	54	44	Nil	222
Increased turnover	30	9	13	€1m
Increased profits	29	5	14	€200k

The figures above are very strong and almost certainly understated. The positive (but not used) column reflects turnover or profit figures given as a percentage and so have not been included in the right hand column which only contains actual figures provided by businesses. These right hand column figures are given by businesses as the difference that is attributable to the impact that TNP has had.

To extrapolate these figures into programme-wide figures for increased turnover or GVA would not give accurate or defensible figures. What these figures provide however are an indication that some businesses do measure the impact that this form of training offers them and that these figures could be used to demonstrate economic impact in the future. However, this would best be achieved through evaluating TNP with a small selection of individual networks so that accurate figures could be calculated using more in-depth information to measure changes in turnover/profitability that are directly attributable to TNP.

Skillnets fed back that since inception they have had a strong focus on evaluation of training, with mandatory post-course evaluations expected from all trainee participants i.e. Kirkpatrick evaluation model Levels 1 and 2, which measure both reaction and learning retention. Skillnets has also encouraged further evaluations up to Level 4 to measure Business Impact, and also some Level 5 Return on Investment case studies, time and resources permitting.

## 2.9 TNP – employed trainees feedback

A questionnaire was sent out electronically to all employed trainees that had undertaken TNP. The list was provided by Skillnets and 3,193 responses were received. Employed trainees were asked to rate their level of agreement with the following statements, based on their engagement with the Skillnets Training Networks Programme and the responses are shown in table 2.10.

**Table 2.10: Employed trainees view of Skillnets**

Answer Options	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I am now more likely to access additional training in the future	2%	2%	16%	53%	27%
Skillnets provided training to help with new challenges in my job	2%	2%	11%	58%	27%
Skillnets has enabled me to maintain my competitive edge	2%	3%	23%	52%	20%
Skillnets has kept me up to date with new developments in my industry	3%	8%	28%	43%	18%
Skillnets training helped me to maintain my current position at work	4%	9%	31%	40%	16%
Skillnets training received was relevant and of high quality	2%	1%	9%	54%	34%

The feedback given by respondents to the questionnaire is very positive – and where there has been any dissatisfaction it generally is around a specific trainer where there has been a clash of personality or their style has not suited the trainees preferred method of learning. The comments added by trainees to the questionnaire reflect the general ‘feel-good factor’ that came through at the network visits when talking to trainees. Some comments that sum up the overwhelming view are:

- *“the thing I like most about the Skillnet network is the fact that the network will work with its members to design training for member’s needs”*
- *“I found my training at Skillnets to be highly beneficial in my work. I certainly came away feeling I was armed with a new confidence in my ability to carry out my work more efficiently”*
- *“the training programme of Skillnets has opened our minds and also career opportunities in future”*
- *“after each Skillnets Training course I bring the notes on the course into work. On several occasions these notes have helped solve a query for both myself and other staff. They have been very valuable”*

Whilst the overall response can only be seen as positive, there were also a few comments that raise issue to be addressed or reflected on:

- *“as much as I enjoyed the training I would recommend that people doing the course should be either working in the industry, or interested in doing so. The class was far too big and some of the students were only attending in order to keep their social welfare benefits.as a result they were disruptive in class and made it very difficult for both tutor and students”*
- *“it took a very long time to get a receipt for a large amount of money which I paid to ‘a network’ for a course I was doing it took months and I only received it after I complained when I was sent an invoice to pay it again”*

It should be viewed in perspective that the comment about disruptive students is an opinion and is not one that came up very often. The more common view that came over is that unemployed students added value to courses by being able to take a fresh view – and they brought with them a positive, ‘something to prove’ attitude.

These negative comments are not the only ones, but they highlight the fact that this is a high volume programme and there will be some instances that require strong management input to keep things on track.

## 2.10 Employed trainee benefits from TNP

Trainees were then asked whether the training supported by the Skillnets Training Networks Programme had led to personal benefits and the response is shown in table 2.11 below:

**Table 2.11: Benefits of TNP for employed trainees**

Answer Options	Response Percent
New responsibilities at work	35%
Promotion	7%
New job	7%
Full-time training course in Further Education	1%
Full-time training course in Higher Education	2%
Part-time training	7%
Access to new opportunities	34%
Increased confidence	67%
Self-employment	6%

The range of benefits that are shown in the table reflect what you would hope to find after almost all successful training interventions. The highest figure of 67% is against 'increased confidence' and this is something that not only the trainees mentioned, but many employers mentioned this as well. One employer remarked that many of his staff were mature and had not been back into education since school and were originally apprehensive about undertaking training. The increase in employee confidence was something he felt he could almost touch with some employees and their contribution to the company rose steeply.

Some of the trainees had specifically targeted courses with their 'next steps' firmly in mind and 7% of respondents had achieved a promotion following training. A further 35% had found new responsibilities at work and a number of them suggested that this was progress towards promotion.

3% of trainees decided to enter further or higher education following training and some commented that the training had given them a taste for learning and a better idea of what they would like to do in the future that was more suited to their talents and aspirations.

### 2.10.1 Trainee satisfaction

The view of training by trainees is all about the relevance of the training and whether they had a positive experience. Overall the vast majority of trainees seem to be satisfied that they have had both. The point that should be taken on board regarding TNP is that this has not happened by accident.

Companies tell their network the training that is required by their staff – which ensures relevance. Because the networks have built expertise in specific areas they know the 'right' trainers to meet requirements – thus the likelihood of a positive experience, delivered by a well-respected trainer. In addition to this, companies fed back that they recommended trainers and also monitored the views of their employees which adds another level of quality monitoring to the process. **Note: all training activity is subject to procurement.**

There were a few grumbles but generally they already seem to have been addressed. The most important thing to take into account in a high volume programme such as TNP is not the fact that something has gone wrong – but the action that is taken to rectify any mistakes or problems.

## 2.11 TNP – job seeker trainee feedback

'Job-seekers' were the issue that was raised most often in the course of this evaluation. To elicit their own view a questionnaire was sent out to which 492 responses were received.

The age range of trainees profiles a client group with 65% of trainees being between the ages of 35 and 54. Based on employer feedback, it is likely that the main reason for this is the experience and previous skills/knowledge required to be able to fit comfortably into demand led training courses predominantly for employees.

**Table 2.12: age range of job-seeker trainees**

Age group	No.	%
18-24 years old	27	6%
25-34 years old	76	16%
35-44 years old	172	35%
45-54 years old	145	30%
55-64 years old	64	13%
65-74 years old	5	1%

**Note: not all respondents gave their age. Figures do not total 100% due to rounding.**

Job seeker trainees were asked to rate their level of agreement with the following statements, based on their engagement with the Skillnets Training Networks Programme with the responses shown below in table 2.13.

**Table 2.13: Job seeker trainees view of Skillnets**

Answer Options	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Skillnets TNP training has got me on the road to employment	7%	11%	37%	30%	15%
Skillnets TNP training provided training in a specific industry	4%	8%	21%	43%	24%
Skillnets TNP has kept me up to date with new technologies and trends	6%	8%	24%	41%	21%
Based on my engagement with the Skillnets TNP, I am now more likely to access additional training in the future	5%	6%	19%	46%	24%
Skillnets TNP training has given me valuable industry experience	6%	12%	30%	33%	19%
Skillnets TNP training received was relevant and of high quality	4%	3%	9%	48%	36%
Skillnets TNP has made me more aware of wider opportunities	5%	5%	24%	43%	23%

The feedback figures in the table show generally high levels of satisfaction with the majority of figures significantly higher on the right hand side of the table. However, there were a number of negative comments made which need to be taken into account.

- *"all the courses seem to be booked or get cancelled ...a centralised training programme enrolment would be better rather than emailing providers who never respond or do and say the training was cancelled or over-subscribed"*
- *"found course was too advanced"*
- *"I did not receive any notification of further training in Irish media. Felt a lack of follow up. Though perhaps this is because there was none."*
- *"theory should be combined with practical application in real company not only examples or case studies"*
- *"didn't get any job placement"*



These are only a selection of the type of comments that represent a dissatisfaction with their experience. It should be noted that work placement is not part of TNP and trainees may have built their own assumptions on this. Although there are a high number of similar comments, the positive comments and figures are in the significant majority. This would indicate that although there are issues, the programme is still delivering a positive experience for the majority. Some positive feedback includes:

- *excellent service. Always good value for money. Trainers are consistently expert in their fields*
- *I was very grateful to have got this opportunity. I was very pleased with the course and it has helped me with my new career goals*
- *Skillnets offered me training. I have to say the training was exceptional. I was well impressed, but more importantly, well trained*
- *I thought that the course I attended was of a very high standard and well presented*

Trainees were then asked whether the training supported by the Skillnets Training Networks Programme led to personal benefits, with the outcomes shown in table 2.14 below:

**Table 2.14: Benefits of TNP for job seeker trainees**

<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>
New job	21%
Self-employment	11%
Full-time training course in Further Education	4%
Full-time training course in Higher Education	4%
Part-time training	11%
Access to new opportunities	38%
Increased confidence	58%
Positive outlook for employment future	46%

As this section focusses on benefits there was only positive feedback and some of the comments that reflect the majority view are shown below:

- *"I have started a new job in a small company and although not employed specifically because of the skills on the course, I am now using what I learned to help the company who have limited/older knowledge on the subject. Doing the course has definitely benefited me, in that I believe my employer has seen greater value in me because of this extra training"*
- *"overall, training was very worthwhile and a springboard to self-employment. Thank you"*
- *"the training program has made it possible for me to continue keep up to date with relevant aspects of my profession"*
- *"they offer a wide range of appropriate and relevant training interventions. The networking makes further contacts and work possible"*
- *"the training I was offered was of direct relevance to the growing distilling industry in Ireland and in fact aided me secure a full time permanent role in this industry. The course administrators are extremely knowledgeable and helpful. A very positive experience"*

The comment below is included as it backs up the positive side of TNP but then makes what seems a valid point about job-seekers, with regard to focussing on them and their circumstances:

- *"I found the course I undertook in web design absolutely invaluable. I had been unemployed for a while, and despite going to university (which at the time seemed a guaranteed route to employment), I lacked any real technical skills necessary to gain employment. After a lot of research, I found a three-month course for 2-3 days a week which opened so many doors for me. I can't say enough about how useful I found it, and it definitely steered me in the right direction. I'd be happy to chat further about it, and I hope this grabs the attention of whoever funds training for job seekers. For the majority of unemployed people, the prospect of a night-course is ridiculous. You sit at home all day doing nothing, so why not fund more short-term full time courses for people that want to get back into the workforce"?*

## 2.12 Summary

The Training Networks Programme is a mature programme that is meeting objectives and delivering results. The TNP is a high volume programme, but the very positive feedback from the key recipients of the benefits provided through TNP - businesses and of course trainees - reflects a very high quality programme.

The 'training days' figures are obviously influenced by the number of trainees involved and the types and delivery models of the training that is in demand by employers. As a demand driven Programme, maintaining a balance of number of trainees and number of training days is not a simple task and Skillnets and the individual Network managers deserve recognition for the management of this.

The programme attracts significant matched funding of €9.4m which enables a total budget for training of €18m. Despite this volume and the volatility of the market it serves the programme is well managed and is delivered almost exactly to budget, thus maximising value for money to the public purse.

### 3 Finuas Networks Programme

The Finuas Networks Programme (Finuas) supports specialised training in the international financial services (IFS) sector. Finuas commenced in 2009 and includes three networks which develop and deliver new training in the areas of banking and capital markets, investment management, insurance and specialist professional services to the sector.

Finuas funded training is available to businesses and employees that are directly involved in, or provide professional services to the international financial services sector. A number of places on some programmes run by Finuas networks are also available to job-seekers.

In 2014, Finuas contributed to the development of IFS2020, launched in 2015, which is the Government's Strategy for Ireland's International Financial Services Sector. The Finuas Programme subsequently secured 2 actions within IFS2020.

#### 3.1.1 Major objectives for the Finuas Networks Programme

A number of specific objectives have been identified for the initiative. These are:

- to promote an enterprise-led approach to learning within the international financial services sector through the establishment of Finuas networks where groups of enterprises can develop strategic answers to their joint training needs
- to develop the skills of existing staff and expand the pool of high value, specialised and market-appropriate skills within the industry
- to increase the supply and mix of current training and education provision and create flexible learning opportunities
- to make available new or revised industry-specific course materials, programmes, modules and awards that are aligned to identified business/market needs
- to enable strategic high level education provision, to be newly created or updated, in line with industry developments and provide opportunities for specialisation
- to put in place a flexible process, which can respond rapidly to industry changes or developments
- to create value-added training by promoting best international practice within the training, including impact measurement, benchmarking and strategic approaches to learning and development
- to support job-seekers in updating their skills, networking and increasing their employability through industry-led training

### 3.2 Performance

**Table 3.1: Finuas performance by spend**

	<b>Delivered</b>	<b>Budget</b>	<b>Performance</b>
Spend	€1.581m	€1.669m	95%

**Figures provided by Skillnets**

In addition, €857,559 of matched funding was attracted to Finuas.

**Table 3.2: Finuas performance by activity**

	<b>Delivered</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Performance</b>
Number of companies in Networks	226	247	91%
Employed trainees	1,482	1,197	124%
Unemployed trainees	99	169	59%
Employed training days	16,719	1,3571	123%
Unemployed training days	831	1,084	77%

### 3.2.1 *Number of companies in Networks*

The stretch target of 247 companies as a total membership of the various Networks was not quite met with 226 companies involved.

### 3.2.2 *Spend*

Similar to the TNP, the Finuas Programme has executed tight management control to ensure that the actual spend is within budget. The target budget was €1.669m and the actual delivered budget was €1.581m leaving a budget tolerance of 5%.

### 3.2.3 *Employed trainees*

Similar to the TNP, employed trainees represent the key target group for the Finuas Programme. The target of 1,197 has been exceeded by 24% to an actual delivery of 1,482 employed trainees.

### 3.2.4 *Unemployed trainees*

The stretch target of unemployed people for the Finuas Programme was missed by 41%, having delivered 99 with a target of 169 trainees. Feedback suggests that support for a greater number of unemployed trainees in previous years was due to the high levels of well qualified 'recession casualties' in the financial services sector. The surge in the economy has removed this client group and the Finuas networks now have to discover a new client group – which may not exist in the numbers required to meet similar targets. This observation needs to be viewed in light of the fact that Skillnets did achieve the overall unemployed target set by the Department of Education & Skills.

### 3.2.5 *Employed training days*

In line with the target number of employed trainees, the number of actual training days delivered is also above target by 23%. The financial services sector is re-inventing itself and the scope to up-skill and re-train is significant. Finuas is playing an important role in supporting these changes to happen.

### 3.2.6 *Unemployed training days*

The knock-on impact of a below target number of unemployed trainees in the Finuas Programme has led to the number of actual training days delivered for unemployed people also being below the set stretch target.

## 3.3 **Finuas – company feedback**

Questionnaires were sent out to 100 companies from a list of member companies provided by Skillnets for the Finuas Programme. A total of 53 responses were gathered.

Of the 53 company responses received, there was relatively even distribution among those with 1-10 employees (31%), 11-49 employees (27%) and 50-249 employees (28%). A smaller proportion, 14% employed in excess of 250 employees.

### 3.4 Company objectives

Companies were asked what their objectives were in becoming involved with Finuas, and whether these were met with the feedback shown in table 3.3 below.

**Table 3.3: Company objectives**

Answer Options	Objective met
Tackle skills shortage or skills gaps in the company	100%
Difficulty in recruiting people with the skills sets required	36%
Reduce costs in the business	77%
Drive up competitiveness	81%
Finuas training presented a cost-effective option	100%
Tackle administrative and technical difficulties in sourcing relevant training	93%

**Note: Not all companies answered whether an objective was/was not met hence the figures not totalling 100%**

Similar to the TNP, the top two objectives reported as being achieved through the Finuas Programme were:

- Finuas training presented a cost-effective option, by 100% companies
- tackle skills shortage or skills gaps in the company, by 100% of companies

Tackling skills shortages has been an issue in the recent past and Skillnets has been widely recognised and acknowledged as supporting a sector that is in transition. Conversely, the lowest figure concerns difficulty in recruiting people with relevant skillsets and this is almost certainly linked to the lower numbers of well-qualified people that previously attended courses.

### 3.5 Company opinion on Finuas

Companies were asked to rate their level of agreement on how the Finuas Networks Programmes worked for them. The results shown below in Table 3.4 are again very positive, with no area flagging up potential problems or difficulties.

**Table 3.4: Company opinion**

Answer Options	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Finuas has made training easier to access	2%	Nil	12%	61%	25%
Finuas training was of high quality	Nil	Nil	Nil	78%	22%
Finuas has provided a satisfactory training service for employees	Nil	Nil	Nil	79%	21%
Finuas saved me management time	Nil	6%	33%	47%	14%
Based on my engagement with Finuas, I am now more likely to train staff in the future	Nil	9%	35%	39%	17%
Finuas is value for money	Nil	2%	18%	54%	26%
Finuas is likely to enhance the long-term performance of our business	2%	Nil	22%	51%	25%

Key findings include that all respondent companies believe that Finuas training was of high quality and that Finuas has provided a satisfactory training service for employees, and more than 3 in 4 companies believe that Finuas has made training easier to access:

- 100% of companies agree or strongly agree that Finuas training was of high quality
- 100% of companies agree or strongly agree that Finuas has provided a satisfactory training service for employees
- 86% of companies agree or strongly agree that Finuas has made training easier to access

In addition, 33% of companies indicated that without the Finuas Programme, they would 'not' or 'probably not' have undertaken the training in 2014. 69% of companies also report that without the Finuas Programme, it would have been 'somewhat' or 'very difficult' to access training of a similar quality elsewhere in 2014.

Feedback from Finuas companies includes:

- *"Helps meet specific requirements within a company. Courses are more tailored to the company needs"*
- *"I think that employer focus helps to drive the training schedule towards knowledge gaps in the industry where employers may want to focus on increasing the industry knowledge. This also assists with generally increasing the expertise within Ireland and improves competitiveness"*
- *"The training has helped to broaden the knowledge of all staff in the company which will improve the quality of service which we provide to current and future clients and will help to drive the business forward"*
- *"We have had a very successful relationship with the Finuas Network for a number of years now, and the benefits are many; however the level of administration associated with distributing, collecting and forwarding feedback forms is very time consuming and I feel excessive"*

### 3.6 Business benefits

While it is recognised that an evaluation in early 2015 of a 2014 Programme may be too soon to capture the full range of potential benefits achieved for the Finuas Programme, companies were invited to comment on benefits that they may have experienced already, and benefits that they anticipated in the future as a result of support they received from the Finuas Programme. The results are presented in Table 3.5.

**Table 3.5: Business benefits**

Answer Options	Yes, already	Yes, in the future
Decreased costs within our business	50%	18%
New product development or product improvement	19%	29%
Improved processes	44%	22%
Improved production	38%	13%
Improved customer care	44%	24%
Access to new markets	11%	24%
Increased exports	12%	3%
Increased sales	15%	9%
Staff morale/retention	63%	8%

**Note: Not all companies answered whether a business benefit had already been achieved or was anticipated in the future hence the figures not totalling 100%**

Similar to the TNP, the primary benefit cited by companies as already realised is staff morale/ staff retention, reported by 63% of companies. The next three greatest areas of business benefit already achieved are:

- decreased costs within our business, realised by 50% of companies
- improved processes, realised by 44% of companies
- improved customer care, realised by 44% of companies

Feedback from Finuas companies includes:

- *“We provide more training than we would without funding”*
- *“While we would have engaged in some training we may not have done so much. The discount through Finuas is very beneficial”*
- *“We are currently booking more generic Finuas courses as they compare very favourably with other courses in terms of cost and value for money”*

### 3.7 Spillover benefits - businesses

The TNP networks were seen as being a real support to the IDA drive to attract inward investment to Ireland. The following comment reflects that it is a similar story with the Finuas networks regarding a wider contribution to ‘Ireland PLC’:

- *“I have a global Training role and get to see what other locations offer. Finuas is something that we can bring up with Global Management on a regular basis when we are discussing new opportunities that helps to provide a small but important factor to differentiate Ireland from other locations”*

### 3.8 Economic impact

Economic impact is normally calculated through an assessment of jobs created and/or safeguarded and the level of Gross Value Added (GVA) to the economy attributable to a specific intervention. Training is viewed as an area with economic impacts that are ‘hard to measure’ for businesses. To test this, businesses were invited to comment on these key indicators as shown below in table 3.6.

**Table 3.6: Impact**

Answer Options	No	Yes, already	Yes, in the future
Recruitment of staff	78%	6%	16%
Increased turnover	68%	13%	19%
Increased profits	56%	21%	23%

Although the figures are not demonstrating a high expectation of economic impact, the fact that 44% of companies that responded have either increased profits or anticipate an increase in the future because of support by Finuas is very positive.

### 3.9 Finuas – employed trainees feedback

A questionnaire was sent out electronically to all employed trainees that had undertaken Finuas training. The list was provided by Skillnets and 276 responses were received.

Employed trainees were asked to rate their level of agreement with the following statements, based on their engagement with the Skillnets Finuas Networks Programme and the responses are shown in table 3.7. The results are very positive, with no single area presenting issues.

**Table 3.7: Employed trainee feedback**

Answer Options	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Based on my engagement with Finuas, I am now more likely to access additional training in the future	2%	1%	18%	59%	20%
Finuas has provided specific training to help with new challenges/ developments in my job	2%	3%	2%	60%	23%
Finuas has enabled me to maintain my competitive edge	2%	5%	22%	53%	18%
Finuas has kept me up to date with new developments in my industry	2%	11%	26%	46%	15%
Finuas training helped me to maintain my current position at work	3%	12%	32%	41%	12%
Finuas training received was relevant and of high quality	2%	1%	9%	63%	25%

Key findings include that more than 3 in 4 of all employed trainees believe that Finuas training was relevant and high quality, training received helped with new challenges or job developments and that they are now more likely to access additional training in the future:

- 88% of employed trainees agree or strong agree that Finuas training received was relevant and of high quality
- 83% of employed trainees agree or strong agree that Finuas has provided specific training to help with new challenges/ developments in their job
- 79% of employed trainees agree or strong agree that as a result of their engagement with Finuas, they are now more likely to access additional training in the future

Feedback from Finuas employed trainees included:

- *“Training was provided at a very high standard. I learned a tremendous amount and was really pleased with how the course went”*
- *“The training I completed, help with my day to day job also. Very pleased I got the opportunity to do this course”*
- *“I have used Finuas several times over the past year and am extremely grateful for the assistance and benefits that they have provided”*
- *“I think the learning teaching and assessment training provided are of great assistance to any tutor or lecturer who works for (name withheld)”*
- *“I believe the support of Finuas has been invaluable in my current role. The training I received was relevant, well presented, and hugely beneficial”*
- *“Very good course with lecturers with real life experience and credentials”*



### 3.10 Employed trainee benefits from Finuas

The top three personal benefits cited by employed trainees were increased confidence (73%), access to new opportunities (43%) and new responsibilities at work (34%). Perhaps more importantly, Finuas has led to a new job (10%), a promotion (10%) and setting up their own business (3%).

**Table 3.8: Trainee benefits**

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
New responsibilities at work	34%	72
Promotion	10%	21
New job	10%	20
Full-time training course in Further Education	2%	4
Full-time training course in Higher Education	2%	4
Part-time training	7%	15
Access to new opportunities	43%	91
Increased confidence	73%	153
Self-employment	3%	6

In real terms, for the 209 Finuas employed trainees who provided information to this question set, 47 trainees have either sourced employment, become self-employed or gained a promotion in their current workplace. In addition, almost 3 in 4 have left the Finuas Programme with increased confidence and almost 1 in 2 believe that they now have access to new opportunities. This indicates that the Finuas Programme is both delivering tangible employment outcomes for employed trainees in addition to immediate softer outcomes for many additional trainees.

### 3.11 Finuas – jobseeker feedback

Questionnaires were sent out to 58 Finuas jobseekers from a list provided by Skillnets for the Finuas Programme. A total of 39 responses were gathered.

Finuas jobseekers were asked to rate their level of agreement with the following statements, based on their engagement with the Skillnets Finuas Networks Programme and the responses are shown in table 3.9. On the whole, results are positive, although a number of Finuas jobseekers indicated that communication could be improved with regard to keeping them up to date with new technologies and trends.

**Table 3.9: Finuas job-seeker feedback**

Answer Options	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Finuas training has got me on the road to employment	3%	13%	36%	33%	15%
Finuas training provided training in a specific industry	Nil	3%	16%	39%	42%
Finuas has kept me up to date with new technologies and trends	8%	23%	26%	33%	10%
Based on my engagement with Finuas, I am now more likely to access additional training in the future	8%	16%	11%	39%	26%
Finuas training has given me valuable industry experience	10%	15%	19%	38%	18%
Finuas training received was relevant and of high quality	3%	13%	8%	45%	31%
Finuas has made me more aware of wider opportunities	3%	15%	13%	41%	28%

Key findings include that more than 3 in 4 of all unemployed trainees believe that Finuas training was industry-specific, relevant and high quality, and that Finuas has made them more aware of wider opportunities:

- 81% of jobseekers agree or strongly agree that Finuas training provided training in a specific industry
- 77% of jobseekers agree or strongly agree that Finuas training received was relevant and of high quality
- 69% of jobseekers agree or strongly agree that Finuas has made them more aware of wider opportunities

Feedback from Finuas jobseekers includes:

- *"...was able to secure Fund Accounting internship with a company, thanks to Finuas training, it really helped at the interview"*
- *"It was a very useful and valuable experience for me and the confidence and experience helped me to get a full time job I dreamed for. Thank you very much"*
- *"The course undertaken was very worthwhile and pertinent in the current climate. The lecturing and content was of a high standard"*

### 3.12 Jobseeker benefits from Finuas

The top three personal benefits cited by jobseekers were having a positive outlook for future employment (67%), access to new opportunities (46%) and a new job (21%). In addition, Finuas has helped 12% of jobseekers to set up their own business.

**Table 3.10: Job-seeker benefits**

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
New job	21%	7
Self-employment	12%	4
Full-time training course in Further Education	3%	1
Full-time training course in Higher Education	6%	2
Part-time training	6%	2
Access to new opportunities	46%	15
Increased confidence	61%	20
Positive outlook for future employment	67%	22

In real terms, for the 33 jobseekers who provided information to this question, 1 in 3 jobseekers (11) are now employed – 7 have found employment and an additional 4 have become self-employed. In addition, 2 in 3 of jobseekers have left the Finuas Programme with increased confidence and a positive outlook for future employment. This indicates that Finuas is both delivering tangible employment outcomes for jobseekers in addition to immediate softer outcomes for many additional jobseekers.

### 3.13 Summary

The Finuas Networks Programme (Finuas) supports specialised training in the international financial services (IFS) sector. There are close similarities to the TNP and these were reflected by similar levels of management control leading to positive results and high levels of satisfaction from employers and trainees.

100% of companies fed back that Finuas training presented a cost-effective option, and 100% said Finuas helped tackle skills shortage or skills gaps in their company.

Key findings include that all respondent companies believe that Finuas training was of high quality and that Finuas has provided a satisfactory training service for employees. 86% of companies agreed or strongly agreed that Finuas has made training easier to access

Finuas was also credited with delivering significant business benefits through decreased costs within the business, improved processes and improved customer care, realised by almost half of all respondent companies.

Feedback from trainees also demonstrated high levels of satisfaction. 3 in 4 of all employed and unemployed trainees stated that Finuas training was relevant and high quality. They said that the training received helped with new challenges or job developments and that they are now more likely to access additional training in the future.

## 4 Job Seeker Support Programme

The JSSP is designed exclusively for unemployed people, with programmes specifically tailored to the needs of this group of trainees based on needs identified by companies operating in a particular sector or region. The programme was launched in 2010 with the aim of up-skilling jobseekers in an enterprise-based environment in order to increase their chances of finding employment. Importantly, the JSSP includes formal industry-specific training as well as a work placement component. The JSSP is fully funded, primarily through the National Training Fund (although private sector companies also co-invest in JSSP). The main aims and objectives of the JSSP are:

- assist member companies, particularly SMEs, to develop a talent pool of skilled people for the purposes of recruitment
- increase employability by training the unemployed to re-enter their previous sector of employment or transfer into alternative sectors
- boost employment opportunities by providing unemployed people with accredited training wherever possible
- blend training with workplace experience so as to embed the learning and give the unemployed access to employers

### 4.1.1 Eligibility

The eligibility criteria to attend courses run under the Job-seekers Support Programme (JSSP) is dependent on an individual being unemployed, meeting Job-seekers Eligibility Criteria and fulfilling any one of the criteria listed below:

- unemployed for more than 12 months OR
- at Level 5 or less on the National Framework of Qualifications OR
- are under the age of 35 OR
- formerly employed in the construction, manufacturing and retail sectors OR
- seeking entry to the ICT sector

### 4.1.2 Trainee Education Level and Length of unemployment on joining Programme (2014)

The figures in Table 4.1 and 4.2 show the education levels of trainees on entering JSSP and the length of time that they have been unemployed. A third of new trainees have a level 8 qualification or above, and this Programme recognises not only the personal and social element of unemployment but also the opportunity that this high skill/knowledge level offers the economy for the future.

**Table 4.1: JSSP Trainee Level of Education**

Level	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
%	1%	1%	7%	16%	17%	15%	10%	21%	11%	1%

Figures provided by Skillnets

Skillnets estimates that one half of JSSP trainees in 2014 had been unemployed for over 12 months. What should be taken into account is that despite lengthy periods of unemployment, these trainees have demonstrated not only the desire to undertake training but have also shown an employer led Programme that they have skills to offer. When you consider the skills levels and the length of time unemployed shown in these two tables together, it demonstrates the fit of the JSSP Programme with both economic and societal development.

**Table 4.2: Unemployment prior to JSSP**

Year of joining live unemployment register	1990-2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
%	10%	4%	5%	14%	30%	37%

Figures provided by Skillnets

## 4.2 Programme performance

**Table 4.3: JSSP performance by spend**

	<b>Delivered</b>	<b>Budget</b>	<b>Performance</b>
Spend	€3,004m	€3,025m	99%

In addition, €177 of matched funding was attracted to JSSP.

**Table 4.4: JSSP performance by activity**

	<b>Delivered</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Performance</b>
Unemployed trainees	2,795	2,859	98%
Unemployed training days	47,503	45,506	104%

42 Networks delivered JSSP in 2014 which entailed running 297 courses. The performance figure in attracting unemployed people to the Programme is very good. This is a programme that focuses on meeting demonstrable demand from industry and the availability of unemployed people, and under these circumstances JSSP has been forecast, planned and delivered well.

## 4.3 Profile of JSSP Jobseekers

Courses aimed at tackling unemployment are often targeted at younger people. The fact that the majority of courses are more suitable for those with experience or qualifications means that the profile for Jobseekers on JSSP is higher with over half (55%) of the respondent jobseeker trainees aged between 25 and 44 as shown in table 4.5 below.

**Table 4.5: Jobseeker by age band**

<b>Age group –</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Number</b>
18-24 years old	12%	54
25-34 years old	33%	145
35-44 years old	25%	111
45-54 years old	22%	98
55-64 years old	8%	34
65-74 years old	1%	1
Total		443

**Note: Not all trainees answered this question and the % figures are rounded**

There were more males (54%) than females that replied to the questionnaire.

## 4.4 Trainees views

JSSP trainees were asked to rate their level of agreement with a series of statements, based on their engagement with the Skillnets Job Seekers Support Programme. 451 responses were received from a list provided by Skillnets

Table 4.6 JSSP trainees views

Answer Options	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Skillnets training has got me on the road to employment	6%	12%	23%	35%	24%
Skillnets training provided training in a specific industry	4%	4%	13%	47%	32%
Skillnets has kept me up to date with new technologies and trends	6%	10%	20%	43%	21%
Based on my engagement with Skillnets, I am now more likely to access additional training in the future	4%	7%	17%	44%	28%
Skillnets training has given me valuable industry experience	6%	7%	26%	36%	25%
Skillnets training received was relevant and of high quality	4%	5%	7%	46%	38%
Skillnets has made me more aware of wider opportunities	3%	8%	19%	45%	26%
The work placement received was of a high quality	12%	9%	25%	29%	25%
The work placement was relevant to the training programme	10%	6%	24%	33%	27%

### 4.4.1 The road to employment

Almost 60% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Skillnets training has got them on the road to employment.

- *“Career Coaching for me was the greatest benefit as it really equipped me with the updated cv skills and interview skills which I found invaluable and it was delivered in an extremely high level”*
- *“overall, I think the Skillnets Program was good, it got me back into the workplace. Thank You”*
- *“through Skillnets I revamped my CV. Meeting with the advisor to discuss interviews & my CV layout & wording is now fantastic. For me the best part of the course”*
- *“there was nobody I could discuss with after the course. I would still like to speak with somebody regarding a job”*

In discussing JSSP with employers, these figures are not surprising as many employers view the ability to see job-seekers in a training environment as an excellent way to assess their ability to work for them. It was described by one employer as “a three month interview”.

### 4.4.2 Training in a specific industry

Job-seekers access JSSP through a range of sources. Suitable JSSP trainees are also targeted by networks, often working in conjunction with the Department of Social Protection and employment support agencies as well as looking for specific training opportunities themselves.

The many comments about relevance to specific sectors is summed up by:

- *“Training absolutely relevant to industries requirements! Keep up the good work!”*

#### 4.4.3 *New technologies and trends*

Again, the ability to train in areas that is close to market in technology terms is recognised as a great asset by JSSP trainees and one comment that reflects this is:

- *“Keep up the good works and send latest updates and trends”*

#### 4.4.4 *Access additional training in the future*

Many trainees view JSSP as a route to employment. One or two described the way that they knew what they wanted to do and had a 'hit-list' of the programmes that they wanted to train in that would make them more attractive to prospective employers.

#### 4.4.5 *Industry experience*

There were some who felt that there was a lack of industry experience, and the comments concerning this are noted in section 4.4.7 below. It should be noted that not all trainees on JSSP were looking for industry experience as many feel they already have this and what they were looking for was the relevant skills to take back into a sector they already knew relatively well.

#### 4.4.6 *Relevant and high quality training*

The overwhelming view is that the training that is provided is both relevant and of a very high standard indeed.

- *“Training was beyond superb. Twenty five years in training business and never had a better experience”*
- *“Both trainers were more than helpful and continue to be. Their tireless enthusiasm towards any business ideas is more than reassuring. I could not speak more highly of their expertise given. Their administration coaching continues to keep me focused on getting to the course and their realistic down to earth advice allows all our group to drive forward. 10/10”*
- *“Absolutely great experience, recommend it highly”*

#### 4.4.7 *Work placements*

The majority of JSSP trainees were satisfied with their work placements:

- *“I would like to say that Skillnets offered me the opportunity to become social media savvy which is life changing. I have enjoyed the training, it has increased my confidence and job prospects. I still have a way to go but I am on a better path now”*
- *“The Trainers and Facilitators I have met are professional and knowledgeable in their areas. They work very hard to ensure learners receive the best results possible and are always available to answer queries and provide support via phone or email in between classes. Thanks to them for everything!”*
- *“I participated in a course on Lean manufacturing. It was extremely useful in assisting me to achieve a Masters in Business (I completed 2 x Thesis in Lean despite not having studied it in college, just through Skillnets) and as a result of achieving my Masters secured a very good job”*

- *"I did certificate in aviation through Skillnets. This was completely a new field to my experience and it gave me a confidence to do Bsc in Aviation management and pilot studies in DCU this year. Thank you Skillnets"*
- *"The training I received from Skillnets (the ability to build and manage my own website) helped me overcome what I had perceived as the main barrier to setting up my business"*
- *"The professionalism with which I was dealt with and the attention given to me was exemplary."*
- *"I am now self-employed, and would love to avail of further training opportunities, should time allow it. I would have no hesitation in recommending the Galway branch of Skillnets to anyone"*
- *"The course I did was on eBusiness and was hugely beneficial to me as it was very practical. Although we had work to do at home, we covered a lot during class and got plenty of practice. I was so impressed with this course that I have recommended it to others"*

The one area where there was a higher level of dissatisfaction was with work placements and a number of comments were made regarding this:

- *"The actual training course provided was excellent. However the additional support was of little value. I got no work placement and the support in terms of direct support was of little value, it was very difficult to engage with them in terms of my needs. I was particularly annoyed that I felt someone was being paid to provide a service and they did not provide it"*
- *"I had an issue with work placement. Most of the places I applied for work placement required insurance, which Skillnet couldn't provide therefore I couldn't get in. I tried with personal insurance but the employer wouldn't accept it. For future reference if you require students to do work placement, get the adequate insurance, so they are actually able to do it"*
- *"My own work placement employer was very decent to me, the company covered all my expenses and showed a lot of flexibility. Without these advantages and for financial reason I wouldn't have been in a position to finish off the Programme"*
- *"Enjoyed the course, learned a lot. Tried to gain work placement through skillnets as we were made aware that it was available. After repeated attempts to contact via email the relevant administrative staff I received no response and found my own. I would have appreciated the opportunity to gain experience within a company. Other than that, great experience"*

Network managers express an ongoing challenge when trying to meet JSSP placement requirements and perhaps this is an area that requires increased resources if it is to be delivered to the same high standards as the rest of the programme. It should however be noted that although a high number of negative comments were made, this was from a response of 21% who disagreed that the work placement was of a high quality and 16% that disagreed that the work placement was relevant to their training.



## 4.5 Benefits to trainees

Trainees were asked whether they felt that the training supported by the Skillnets Job Seekers Support Programme led to personal benefit as shown in table 4.7 below:

**Table 4.7 Benefits to trainees**

Answer Options	Response Percent
New job	31%
Self-employment	14%
Full-time training course in Further Education	3%
Full-time training course in Higher Education	7%
Part-time training	9%
Access to new opportunities	41%
Increased confidence	54%
Positive outlook for employment future	49%

45% of respondents have a new job or have become self-employed because of JSSP, compared to 40.8% in 2012 and 46.9% in 2013

## 4.6 Summary

The JSSP is designed exclusively for unemployed people, with programmes specifically tailored to the needs of this group of trainees based on needs identified by companies operating in a particular sector or region, and including a work placement component.

42 Networks delivered JSSP in 2014 which entailed running 297 courses. There was also input of €177k from matched funding from the private sector. The performance figure in attracting unemployed people to the Programme is very good. This is a programme that focuses on meeting demonstrable demand from industry and the availability of unemployed people, and in under these circumstances JSSP has been forecast, planned and delivered well.

Trainees were asked for their views on the Programme and almost 60% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Skillnets training has got them on the road to employment, with 85% finding the training both relevant and of a high quality.

Many employers view the ability to see job-seekers in a training environment as an excellent way to assess their ability to work for them. 45% of trainee respondents now have a new job or are self-employed because of JSSP compared to 40.8% in 2012 and 46.9% in 2013.

## 5 ManagementWorks Programme

ManagementWorks is designed to help companies to improve their business performance by providing a range of subsidised, tailored programmes which are supported by professional business mentors. The purpose is to assist companies to grow in terms of their sales, output and employment.

ManagementWorks was established under the Government's Action Plan for Jobs 2012. The network was established to address the need to enhance the level of management capability of small and medium sized firms which was identified in the report of the Management Development Council in 2010. In 2014 ManagementWorks was managed via the TNP and Finuas Networks.

The aims and objectives of ManagementWorks are:

- Develop the management capability of SME firms with a particular emphasis on owner managers with a view to protecting and growing employment as a result of improved business performance
- Build engagement with management development activity amongst firms with no history of in-vesting in management development
- Provide a progression path in management development to owner managers of small firms wishing to engage in their own development
- ManagementWorks programmes also meet the thematic areas of the TNP programme. Given the focus on the owner manager of the firm, ManagementWorks offers a solution which underpins all of the themes which are more focused on the employed learner rather than the owner manager.

### 5.1 Performance

**Table 5.1 Performance by spend**

	<b>Delivered</b>	<b>Budget</b>	<b>Performance</b>
Spend	€1.98m	€1.968m	101%

**Figures provided by Skillnets**

In addition, €525,650 of matched funding was attracted to ManagementWorks.

**Table 5.2 Performance by activity**

	<b>Delivered</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Performance</b>
Employed trainees	994	841	118%
Employed training days	13,292	11,880	112%

#### 5.1.1 Spend

The ManagementWorks Programme was delivered for €1.98m, marginally above its allocated budget of €1.968m. As Skillnets are able to vire budgets this over-spend was funded through the overall programmes budget. The fact that targets for both employed trainees and employed training days were well above the target figures would suggest that good value for money has been achieved.

#### 5.1.2 Employed trainees

The fact that ManagementWorks significantly exceeded the target number of trainees is testament to a programme that is held in high regard. The variety of programme that ManagementWorks offers a range of options that attract people to a tailored version of what they want.

### 5.1.3 Employed training days

The training days target was also well above target having delivered 13,292 employed training days. One comment that was made regarding this was that with the economy picking up, management time was again at a premium and a number of companies and their employees were electing to opt for shorter, sharper courses to fit with their work commitments. This view can be contested however by this figure and also by Skillnets figures that show that participation rates on 4 Diploma courses outstrip the previous year.

## 5.2 Trainee Feedback

The assumption is that trainees may also be owner/managers of businesses but for the purposes of this evaluation all respondents are termed trainees as their views are sought as participants of the programme.

Questionnaires were sent out to 675 ManagementWorks trainees from a list of participants provided by Skillnets. A total of 138 responses were gathered, with three quarters of them coming from respondents employed by businesses with under 50 employees.

**Table 5.3: Company size**

Number of employees	Response Percent	Response Count
1-10	43%	58
11-49	32%	43
50-249	18%	25
250+	7%	9
<b>Total</b>		<b>135</b>

**Note: Not every respondent completed this question**

Immediately positive is that 83% of companies indicated that without ManagementWorks, they would not or probably not have undertaken the training in 2014. 92% of companies also reported that without ManagementWorks, it would have been somewhat or very difficult to access training of a similar quality elsewhere in 2014. This provides a strong message that ManagementWorks has played an important role in delivering business benefits for companies supported through the Network.

## 5.3 Trainee objectives

Trainees were asked what they wanted to achieve through participating in the ManagementWorks Programme and if these objectives had been met or not met. Similar to the TNP and Finuas Programmes, the top two objectives reported as being achieved through ManagementWorks were:

- ManagementWorks training presented a cost-effective option, by 97% of trainees
- tackling skills shortage or skills gaps in the company, by 95% of companies

**Table 5.4: Objectives**

Answer Options	Objective met
Tackle skills shortage or skills gaps in the company	95%
Difficulty in recruiting people with the skills sets required	40%
Reduce costs in the business	71%
Drive up competitiveness	93%
ManagementWorks training presented a cost-effective option	97%
Tackle administrative and technical difficulties in sourcing relevant training	87%

The two business driven objectives (reducing costs and driving up competitiveness) came out with relatively high figures for a programme that was delivered in 2014 which of course gives little time for effects to kick in. Whilst driving up competitiveness is normally quite high, it is more unusual for a management development programme to have such a high incidence of cost reduction – both as an objective and as an objective that has been met. This is reflected later in this chapter when considering the impacts of the programme.

#### 5.4 Trainee opinion on ManagementWorks

Trainees were asked to rate their level of agreement on how the ManagementWorks Programme worked for them. The results shown below in Table 5.5 are very positive, with no area flagging up potential problems or difficulties.

**Table 5.5: Opinion on ManagementWorks**

ManagementWorks:	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
ManagementWorks has made training easier to access	1%	Nil	14%	58%	27%
ManagementWorks training was of high quality	2%	1%	3%	53%	41%
ManagementWorks has provided a satisfactory training service for employees	1%	3%	14%	54%	28%
ManagementWorks saved me/ my company management time	2%	5%	23%	38%	32%
Based on my engagement with ManagementWorks, my company is now more likely to train staff in the future	2%	5%	22%	42%	29%
ManagementWorks is value for money	3%	4%	12%	49%	32%
ManagementWorks is likely to enhance the long-term performance of our business	2%	5%	8%	44%	40%

Although all of the figures demonstrate a programme that is working, the key findings are that trainees believe that ManagementWorks training is of a high quality, ManagementWorks has made training easier to access, and that ManagementWorks is likely to enhance the long-term performance of their business:

- 94% of companies agree or strongly agree that ManagementWorks training was of high quality
- 85% of companies agree or strongly agree that ManagementWorks has made training easier to access
- 84% of companies agree or strongly agree that ManagementWorks is likely to enhance the long-term performance of their business, with 41% of these - the joint highest figure – strongly agreeing this

One issue that arose in interviews was the availability of courses all over the country. Although a common comment in some regional areas is the lack of training/employers etc. that is local, ManagementWorks was praised on a number of occasions for being widely available in regional areas.

Some comments from ManagementWorks participants included:

- *“The training gave very practical hints and tips that I use in business. The completion of these programmes has given me greater business confidence”*
- *“Providing regionalised training is a massive benefit”*
- *“The mentoring element was particularly useful in helping me to get things done on time as in all the years of business I have only had my customers to answer to but with facts and figures expected regularly, I had to be up to date with my information about what I was doing to achieve my goals”*

## 5.5 Business benefits

While it is recognised that an evaluation in early 2015 of a 2014 Programme may be too soon to capture the full range of potential benefits achieved for the ManagementWorks programme, trainees were invited to comment on benefits that they may have experienced already, and benefits that they anticipated in the future as a result of support they received from ManagementWorks. The results are presented in Table 5.6.

**Table 5.6: Business benefits**

Answer Options	Yes, already	Yes, in the future
Decreased costs within our business	46%	28%
New product development or product improvement	41%	31%
Improved processes	75%	18%
Improved production	53%	20%
Improved customer care	66%	16%
Access to new markets	22%	31%
Increased exports	13%	15%
Increased sales	42%	31%
Staff morale/retention	63%	16%

Similar to the Finuas and the TNP, the main benefits cited by trainees as already realised for their companies are:

- improved processes, realised by 75% of companies
- improved customer care, realised by 66% of companies
- improved staff morale/ staff retention, realised by 63% of companies

Supporting comments made by ManagementWorks trainees include:

- *“without Skillnets I would not have had the opportunity to receive this training - the value of which is already evident for the company”*
- *“I enjoyed my participation and my project work has already been implemented into everyday practice and I am hoping this will in turn achieve cost savings”*
- *“the course was of great benefit to me personally and to the future prospects of the company and to all that work here”*
- *“I thought the training was excellent. The trainers were both very interested in my business - they both texted and emailed me out of hours with ideas, introductions etc. It was an excellent programme - the one-to-one mentoring was particularly good”*

Although not the highest figure, it is again interesting to note that 46% of respondents have already recognised decreased costs within their business with a further 28% anticipating cost reduction in the future. The positive figures for cost reduction are marginally above the figures for an increase in sales which perhaps reflects the still cautious approach being taken by many businesses as the move out of recession continues.

## 5.6 Economic impact

Economic impact is normally calculated through an assessment of jobs created and/or safeguarded and the level of Gross Value Added (GVA) to the economy attributable to a specific intervention. Training is viewed as an area with economic impacts that are 'hard to measure' for businesses. To test this, trainees were invited to comment on these key indicators relating to business and economic impacts as shown below in table 5.7:

**Table 5.7: Impacts**

	No	Yes, already	Yes, in the future
Recruitment of staff	48%	24%	28%
Increased turnover	27%	31%	42%
Increased profits	23%	24%	53%

These figures are particularly encouraging and it could be assumed that the management discipline of ensuring value for money is working its way through to evaluating not just the time and cost of training but also the benefits that work their way to the bottom line. Over 50% of trainees feel their company have or will be recruiting and over 70% anticipate increasing turnover and/or profitability either already or in the future.

The recruitment figure is especially strong because this is not based on merely recruiting a member of staff – who may have come through a training programme and filled a vacancy, but these can justifiably assumed to be jobs created to meet the specific requirements of a business following a strategic or operational change, supported by a ManagementWorks trainee driven initiative.

**Table 5.8: Economic impacts**

	Responses	Figure given	Positive but not used	Actual Figures
Recruitment	37	33	Nil	119
Turnover	30	17	8	€6.782m
Profits	27	13	11	€971k

Figures are strong across the board, with one-half of all trainees reporting that their company has already, or will in the future, recruit additional staff, increase their turnover or increase their profits as a result of the training supported by ManagementWorks:

Each of these figures evidences the valuable support that the ManagementWorks Network offers to support business growth and development. If the figures for jobs created, increased turnover and increased profits were extrapolated across the full number of participating companies for the ManagementWorks network, this would represent a considerable impact. Even if only the respondent figures were used, the increase in profits of almost €1m is significant for a programme of this size.

## 5.7 Summary

ManagementWorks is a flexible programme with a wide geographic spread and is clearly meeting its objective to assist companies to grow in terms of their sales, output and employment. There is tangible evidence of this coming from the companies themselves with 46% having already recognised decreased costs within their business and a further 28% anticipating cost reduction in the future. Over 50% feel their company have or will be recruiting and over 70% anticipate increasing turnover and/or profitability either already or in the future.

These figures are particularly encouraging and much of this can be directly related to the high quality of the training provided. It can also be assumed that the management discipline of ensuring value for money is working its way through to evaluating bottom line benefits regarding training interventions.

## 6 Network View

Questionnaires were sent out to all network managers seeking their views on the issues surrounding the Skillnets programmes and the way it operated. Responses were received from all 56 network managers involved in TNP and all 3 of the network managers that delivered Finuas... As 3 is a low sample size, the Finuas responses have been rolled up with the rest of the network manager responses in this section.

### 6.1 View of Skillnets

**Table 6.1: View of Skillnets**

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The programme meets demonstrable business need	Nil	Nil	2%	34%	64%
Business feedback highlights the programmes high quality	Nil	Nil	4%	39%	57%
Our networks have become a hub to many business support organisations	Nil	5%	18%	25%	52%
The programme has a high recognition rate with industry	2%	Nil	18%	41%	39%
The training of job-seekers should remain a priority for Skillnets	9%	31%	18%	29%	13%
Improvements in the economy have made work-based training even more important	Nil	Nil	11%	44%	45%
Skillnets is an 'easier-sell' to businesses with the economy improving.	Nil	7%	25%	57%	11%
Skillnets is flexible enough to meet and support changes in the economy	Nil	11%	16%	50%	23%
Skillnets needs to change to reflect and support changes in the economy	Nil	13%	23%	45%	20%
Work-based training is a key economic driver	Nil	Nil	5%	43%	52%

**Note: Some rows will not add to 100% because of rounding**

The responses in Table 6.1 above reflect the opinions offered up during interviews and conversations held during network visits by the evaluators. Skillnets and the programme(s) delivered are very well respected by network managers and this is demonstrated by the incidence of particularly high figures in the positive, right hand columns.

The main area where there is some concern is in whether the focus on job-seeker support is at the 'right' level. This should not be seen as a negative point but as a view on whether the changing economy now needs a changing perspective on the way that Skillnets can offer the best value to the Irish economy.



Comments around this issue that reflect this viewpoint are:

- *“Working with jobseekers has been very rewarding to date, but with the economy improving it's less important and the quality of jobseekers out there is not as good as it was 2 years ago. Skillnets going forward should primarily focus on enterprise led training, as it has done so successfully since 1999”*
- *“With the improving economy and the many new facilities for Job Seekers such as Momentum, JobPath etc, it would be better for Skillnets to concentrate their resources on training for private sector companies in a growing economy, and for the other services to provide for Job Seekers”*
- *“The Skillnets model as a whole should look beyond the JSSP model now and move with the changing trends of business as the economy picks up to assist companies in innovation, entrepreneurship, strategy and growth”*
- *“With regard to supporting and training job seekers, as the economy improves and the pool of available and willing job seekers reduces, Skillnets Ltd must renegotiate targets with the DES. We believe it is important to continue to support job seekers into training and using our networks knowledge and links with industry. The current process will likely need to be reviewed given the recovering economy. Also, the setting of individual job seeker targets as a function of employed trainee targets in the TNP - is no longer appropriate and a better methodology needs to be identified”*

## 6.2 Network manager role

The role of the network manager is a varied one and one that requires a range of skills and abilities. Based on views that were given during visits to individual networks, there is no one way that was identified as being the 'right or best' way to manage a network.

Different network promoters and steering boards had different perspectives on what was required from the role of network manager, but the core skill required in the view of a majority of stakeholders spoken to was a strong work ethic. The level of work needed to satisfy the monitoring requirements takes up a great deal of time and this was consistently brought up as an issue. However, the flexibility that the programmes and the networks have – which is a massive strength of Skillnets – means that it is difficult to suggest a way to avoid the high level of record keeping and checks that are currently in place. One comment that reflects a general view in the networks is:

- *“It would be really helpful to see PSM in a role other than Auditor and actually be able to spend time with Network Manager to see any anticipated areas that may need correction rather than wait for mistakes or errors made and to be only seen at compliance visits”*

Skillnets offer Network Managers an extensive Professional Development Plan (PDP) programme throughout the year, which included 19 events during 2014, ranging from mandatory plenary events to optional or elective workshop or cluster sessions. Some network managers and promoters felt that a Certified Diploma in Network Management (or mentoring programme) could be reinstated as part of the PDP programme.

There was a disparate view on networking between network managers, because although there are network managers that meet on a regular basis and are very positive about the value that this gives, there is also a view that the time taken to travel for a networking meeting could be better spent 'actually doing the job rather than talking about it'. The reason behind this view predominantly came from those having to travel to meetings.

The visits to networks enabled a first-hand glimpse of the commitment that network managers have for their role. When gripes or negative comments surfaced regarding specific issues, they were always tempered with an overwhelming positivity of the programme as a whole and their involvement within the Skillnets environment.

Specific views were sought from network managers about their role and Table 6.2 below sets out the responses given.

**Table 6.2: View of network manager role**

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Links with other support organisations has increased the reach of our Network?	4%	4%	27%	41%	25%
Businesses want to join our Network and we can accommodate them	Nil	2%	11%	53%	35%
Increased work-based training enhances the long-term performance of our network	Nil	2%	9%	46%	43%
Businesses find we are available to discuss ideas or issues	Nil	2%	4%	41%	54%
We feel rewarded as a Network when we meet targets	7%	14%	27%	29%	23%
We are able to meet the demand for training from businesses at present	2%	11%	7%	59%	21%
Businesses in our Network find that Skillnets programmes meets their needs	Nil	Nil	4%	54%	43%
Our Network has capacity for growth that would support the economy	Nil	2%	2%	46%	50%
Our Network receives sufficient information, communication and support from Skillnets	Nil	2%	16%	47%	35%

Again, the findings are positive with the main area of potential concern being around the perceived reward – or lack of reward - for network managers.

The big positive for both Skillnets and the Irish economy is the 96% figure suggesting that networks have capacity for growth to support the economy. How this growth could be managed is unclear, however, the positive and willing response to this question demonstrates a desire to continue the good work, quoting one network manager – “somehow or other because its worth it”.

### 6.3 Network promoters

As well as being instrumental in strategic and operational Network activity, the network promoters are also key stakeholders. They were all sent a questionnaire regarding their view of the Skillnets Programmes and their role as a network promoter. 56 Promoters fed back in total. A number of promoters were also interviewed as part of the visits made to specific networks.

### 6.3.1 View of programmes

Table 6.3 sets out the view that network promoters offered regarding the programmes delivered. Both TNP and Finuas responses are rolled up in these responses.

**Table 6.3: Promoters view of Programmes**

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The programme meets demonstrable business need	Nil	Nil	2%	42%	56%
Business feedback highlights the programmes high quality	Nil	Nil	4%	43%	53%
Businesses often develop working relationships through the programme	Nil	Nil	13%	42%	45%
The programme fits with business expectation	Nil	2%	2%	49%	47%
The programme has a high recognition rate with industry	Nil	2%	17%	36%	45%
Improvements in the economy have made work-based training even more important	Nil	Nil	6%	32%	62%
Skillnets is playing an important role in developing a workforce to meet the economic challenges ahead in Ireland	Nil	2%	Nil	36%	62%
Skillnets is an important development support tool for businesses to increase their competitiveness	Nil	Nil	2%	40%	58%

The positive response accurately sums up the feedback that was also given in interviews. Some of the comments given may appear negative, but the feedback given was that whilst everything was not exactly as they may have wanted it, they could normally see the reasons for things and overall the programmes - and the whole Skillnets framework in fact - were very good indeed.

The area where there was a minor blip in positivity was with the recognition rate with industry, but although this is worth testing further, the comments made were with a view to a different marketing and branding approach to target a wider set of companies. Comment – or perhaps an inference - was also made regarding whether the companies currently involved with Skillnets were comfortable with the status quo and had little interest in attracting more businesses thus potentially making Skillnets a more competitive environment for the available support – although the significant turnover of businesses involved with Skillnets on an annual business would argue against this.

One thing that was not covered in the questionnaire – but the promoters wanted to comment on - was the involvement of job-seekers. Whilst there is a view from the promoters that the target figures for job-seekers should be reduced, there is an acknowledgement that companies in many of their networks have benefitted from job-seekers coming through very positively as recruits.

The majority of the comments that were made by promoters in response to the questionnaire tended to come in the form of suggestions and a selection of these that are representative of promoters views are:

- *“with the pick-up in the marketplace and a resultant potential shortage of skills/staff with specific skills, in different employment categories, the role of Skillnets in supporting these focused training initiatives has become even more important”*

- *“more funding for Skillnets Ltd. from Government would be welcome. It is a proven model”*
- *“the Skillnets Model is dynamic, responsive and is incredible important for upskilling in Industry. Very constructive relationships are built amongst companies and indeed between industry in academia. As we move towards the development of really strategic 2 year, expensive programmes, it becomes very difficult to offer these programme because of the matching requirements. The matching model need to adapt to the changing requirements of industry and the future skills needs of same”*
- *“Skillnets training is crucial to the support of this sector”*
- *“we would feel that Skillnets does not ds enough in terms of broader media engagement”*
- *“while we feel Skillnets' TNP is a very valuable contribution to training, we continue to encounter problems - even as we emerge from our economic difficulties - with negotiating release for trainees to attend courses during working time. We would welcome any initiative from Skillnets that further addressed the benefits of training and encouraged companies to take a positive view of releasing their staff”*

The last comment above is testimony that whilst the programmes are working, there is a long way to go to change attitudes regarding the benefits of training and the importance of investing time in skills development.

Regarding jobseekers they said:

- *“the focus on providing compulsory free training for the unemployed paid for by matching from Network members is a mechanism not supported by the financial support provided to members (averaging 20%) and in the case of some networks it is not even appropriate due to nature of the industry and the disconnection with any need to train unemployed people as a means for accessing work in the industry. The training of the unemployed should be managed by the existing specialised agencies set up for that purpose or if Skillnets insist on training the unemployed then it should be optional for appropriate networks and not compulsory for all networks”*
- *“the unemployed numbers can be challenging at times. While this is rewarding when it is achieved, we often find that a lot of energy goes into this with smaller return”*
- *“the funding rate for small business owners should be increased in rural areas of Ireland. The jobseeker element in the TNP project is not feasible and should be reviewed as the JSSP project is delivering in this area”*
- *“the economic environment has changed significantly in the last 12 months or so. We no longer see a need for JSSP as far as we are concerned, but we anticipate a need for more training for our qualified members in order that they can compete for the better quality jobs on offer”*

### 6.3.2 View of the role of promoter

Confirmation that promoters are positive about Skillnets in general and their role in particular is demonstrated by the responses shown in table 6.4.

**Table 6.4: Promoters view of role**

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The role of a Network promoter is a satisfying one	Nil	2%	12%	60%	26%
The role of a Network promoter is a time consuming one	2%	11%	26%	40%	21%
As a Network promoter I feel that I have strategic influence with Skillnets policy	6%	18%	21%	40%	15%
Businesses find we are available to discuss ideas or issues and develop solutions using the programme	Nil	Nil	5%	53%	42%
Smaller companies are well represented in our programme	Nil	8%	4%	37%	51%
Businesses want to join our network and we can accommodate them	Nil	Nil	11%	56%	33%
Our network receives sufficient information, communication and support from Skillnets	Nil	6%	4%	50%	40%

Two of the areas that stick out are the 61% who feel that the role of promoter is a time consuming one. The feedback given suggests that it is time consuming – but very worthwhile and in many cases rewarding. The commitment of promoters was particularly evident in the face to face interviews.

The other area surrounds a view from around a quarter of all promoters that they do not feel that they have strategic influence with Skillnets. Whether they should have strategic input is the first question, but the experience and commitment that promoters have would indicate that they will almost certainly have something of value to add to the Skillnets thinking.

Some of the comments appear initially negative, but they should again be taken within the context of the very positive figures in the tables 6.3 and 6.4. A selection of the views of promoters include:

- *“in general being a Skillnet network is a very rewarding experience for us”*
- *“at times there can be a lack of consistency in approach from Network support managers, this is very confusing for the network and it's members”*
- *“there is limited proactive interaction from Skillnets. Also, Promoters are rarely brought together as one group. This means there is potentially a lot of overlap and duplication in Skillnet Programmes that if promoters met could be avoided or economies/benefits could be achieved if promoters worked together”*
- *“there is a distance between network member companies and Skillnets...We rely completely on Network Managers for all updates in relation to what is happening”*

## 6.4 Summary

Network managers and Network promoters are very positive about the programmes and during interviews a large measure of pride surfaced about the success and impact that they were having. There were a number of comments made about potential changes and improvements both strategically and operationally but these were put forward for further thought and discussion rather than for immediate action. The reason for this being that the overwhelming view of Skillnets is that it is not broken. Rather the opposite as it is a very high volume set of programmes that are delivering high levels of quality – and meeting the needs of over 10,000 employers and 40,000 trainees.

Although the role of promoter is seen as time consuming, it is also a satisfying one. One of the issues coming through is a desire for more opportunity to play a role in the future strategic development of Skillnets. 98% of both Network Managers and Network Promoters agreed that the programmes meet demonstrable business need.

## 7 Stakeholders

Skillnets has a wide range of stakeholders across government departments and its agencies, business support organisations and employee representative bodies. Nine stakeholders – some of them also board members of Skillnets were interviewed as part of the evaluation to test the 'bigger picture' of how Skillnets has an impact.

### 7.1.1 Stakeholders interviewed

Terry Hobdell	Fencing & Railings Ltd.
Paul O'Brien	Dept. of Education & Skills
Brendan McGinty (Chairman)	IBEC/Stratify
Caitriona Bracken	Department of Social Protection
Marie Bourke	Forfas/ EGFSN
Raymond Bowe	IDA Ireland
Anne Forde	DES
Tony Donohoe	IBEC
Ian Talbot	Chambers Ireland

Although the focus is the evaluation of the 2014 Skillnets Programmes, stakeholders often wanted to explain the journey that Skillnets has taken and the ways that it should evolve in the future to continue to add value to the Irish economy in strategic ways.

## 7.2 High level objectives of economic development in Ireland

Skillnets was introduced as an employer led, skills needs driven initiative. This is seen as its fundamental purpose and remains a key part of 'what Skillnets is'. However, stakeholders were also quick to point out that the flexibility and adaptability that Skillnets has demonstrated over the last 7 years in particular has benefitted the wider social as well as economic requirements of the country.

The main points made regarding the Skillnets contribution to Ireland's high level economic development were around:

- the focus on being demand led works particularly well. Employers were best placed to recognise the skills requirements that would increase competitiveness and their views were being 'listened to and actioned on' by Skillnets
- the support given to 'raise the bar' in terms of delivering a smarter economy – even in more traditional sectors - was seen as being a key factor for Ireland to drive out of the recession, and Skillnets are thus a major player
- the high numbers of SMEs that were involved in training for the first time is thanks in good measure to Skillnets
- the high numbers of 'mature employees' that were now finding themselves as trainees for the first time in their lives – lifelong learning - is another factor that Skillnets has supported
- the contribution that the availability of Skillnets makes towards making Ireland attractive to potential Foreign Direct Investment and also to re-investment by existing inward investors is very important
- the practical solutions that the 'flexibility of Skillnets' has been able to support during very difficult times regarding large scale employment lay-offs has been of great importance both socially and economically
- Skillnets and the associated networks are able to add significant value in developing skills solutions and policy
- the existence of Skillnets allows specific sectors to be targeted for support (particularly in sectors with high growth and international prospects that the Government would like to see supported)
- employers pay a relatively high percentage of the training costs for their own staff which boosts the spend for the education and training sector

- Skillnets has been able to add another 'string to the bow' in supporting a more even approach to economic development across all regions in Ireland

In other parts of this report and during 'site interviews' these factors also emerged, usually in the shape of practical examples given by companies and networks.

### 7.3 Support for Jobseekers

The involvement of Jobseekers within the Skillnets portfolio of programmes was predominantly positive and raised a wide breadth of opinion. For some, the introduction of an unemployment programme was initially viewed as being beyond the remit of Skillnets, but all stakeholders now recognise that the introduction of a jobseekers 'approach' had paid a number of dividends over a number of difficult years for Ireland's economy.

The advantages were given as:

- companies may have been initially sceptical about the introduction of a series of unemployment pathways, but the way that jobseekers had been managed, screened and selected has meant a 'win-win' scenario for trainees and employers
- in this regard, stakeholders pointed out that a number of employers now viewed Skillnets as their core recruitment route because of the exposure that they had to trainees on programmes
- Skillnets has been able to provide a solution – or at least a support – to large scale redundancy situations
- Skillnets as an organisation had gained great kudos for supporting the drive against the terrible affliction that high unemployment is

There is also a view that whilst there is room for Jobseekers within the Skillnets programmes, the time is right to review the volume of Jobseeker places that are made available. The reasons given for this are:

- that the employment figures are improving and there is less need
- as the economy continues to improve, funding would be better allocated to train employed people to support a drive out of recession
- that to keep Jobseeker numbers up to the present levels would mean greater involvement with the 'harder-to-help' which could have a potentially negative effect on company attitudes on the value of Skillnets

When asked if Jobseekers should be removed entirely from Skillnets there was little, if any, enthusiasm for this. The strategy being developed by SOLAS was mentioned as covering a more comprehensive strategy for unemployed people to access training, but the view regarding Skillnets is that Jobseekers have added value to the programmes, and the only major issue now was the volume of places available to Jobseekers in the future.

### 7.4 The key challenges associated with Skillnets

The key challenges were not agreed upon by all stakeholders, but the ones that emerged more often were:

- delivering more for less, year on year
- maintaining the right profile
- international recognition
- attracting companies to join networks
- the cost of flexibility – and compliance
- supporting 'think tanks'



Surviving cuts in real term funding while providing the evidence to government of the need to support business has been a critical challenge for Skillnets. This has been overcome through a strategy of involving key players in information activities, sharing participant's responses and showing value for money for Government, business and trainees.

One of the issues that a number of stakeholders raised was the pressure being put on Skillnets and then in turn networks to keep delivering more and more whilst the budget was not rising pro rata. It was felt this was well managed, but there would come a point when the constant rise would slow down and that this should be taken into account now to avoid any 'surprises'.

The profile of Skillnets is a subject on which a number of the stakeholders had differing views, with some feeling Skillnets was not marketed hard enough. The reasons for this are that Skillnets maintains a relatively low-key profile, however, it is popular and succeeds in gaining a good intake of employers, trainees and jobseekers. Skillnets are seen as delivering benefits – at low cost to the public purse – and provide a platform to demonstrate success stories. The Skillnets team were praised for their work in achieving and maintaining a profile that befitted the role that they carried out.

Skillnets is not something that every country delivers. In fact according to stakeholders, very few countries have models that work in this way. Skillnets are regularly visited by curious foreign delegations that are impressed by what is achieved. The challenge here is an extension of the profile issue in how to ensure that Skillnets is recognised as being a 'best practice approach' by other countries and promoting this in Ireland.

Some stakeholders highlighted the difficulty they perceived of utilising Skillnets for new companies trying to access emerging markets. The companies that Skillnets can support are typically existing, established businesses – with not as many innovative new starts that are often the businesses that are closest to entering emerging markets. More generally, some stakeholders voiced that there is still a challenge in getting small companies to engage. The question raised was around whether the commitment to train was not high enough in SMEs - and cost was mentioned – or whether it just too difficult for SMEs to join a network. (It should be noted in context that 93% of Skillnets training is with SME's).

The high level of compliance-related work that requires to be undertaken by Skillnets is now leading to some dissention from stakeholders. By and large, however, it is seen as necessary to allow networks the scope to deliver in the flexible way that they successfully do at present. Stakeholders were split fairly evenly on the level of compliance and the need for more flexibility and less risk-averse behaviours.

A challenge that is relished is the input that Skillnets gives across a plethora of think tanks and policy groups. Stakeholders highlighted many positive things regarding the input Skillnets gives to many fledgling initiatives and how the opinion and input of Skillnets is highly valued from operational input to strategic support at policy levels.

## 7.5 The Future

Some stakeholders expressed an interest in looking at regional versus sector specific networks to explore which works best and whether a national network that concentrates on specific sector requirements would succeed. However the majority of stakeholders felt that the balance currently being achieved through having a range of different delivery models for networks was a successful strategy in its own right.

Some stakeholders would also like to see more resources at the disposal of Skillnets, but with the proviso that they are linked to new and specific areas of work, like apprentices and/or emerging, future markets.



It is recognised that Ireland is moving into a better place with a recovering economy and there is a desire from stakeholders to ensure that Skillnets in-employment training is in the vanguard of support for this. Stakeholders would like to see Skillnets strengthening its in-employment training delivery, while at the same time also seriously considering taking on 'apprenticeships role', linking with the Apprentice Council to make sure the apprenticeships have the relevance to industry that is found in Skillnets provision.

## 7.6 Summary

The stakeholders that contributed to the evaluation are positive about the impact that Skillnets has on the economy and they widened this out to highlight the role that Skillnets also plays in its support for Government policy and initiatives.

Stakeholders reflected on the success that had been quickly delivered to support unemployed people by Skillnets but questioned whether the current levels of support for the unemployed should be maintained now that the economy was recovering and unemployment levels were reducing.

A number of challenges were raised, but these were not put forward as problem areas they were raised more as opportunities that would require a continued focus to maintain the current high standards.

## 8 Trainers View

A number of trainers were interviewed, both face to face and by telephone to assess the impact that Skillnets has on the 'training community' as an economic entity in its own right. The level of funding that Skillnets puts into the economy is augmented and matched by levels of private sector funding that are significant for the education and training industry.

Colleges, universities, Institutes of Technology and private training providers all service the training demand from businesses through Skillnets and it seems important to reflect on how they perceive the merits of Skillnets.

There was no trainer that was interviewed that only worked with one network. In every case the trainer was working with multiple networks and some said that they had been referred by one network to another.

### 8.1 Ease of working with Skillnets

Trainers were hugely positive about the way that the networks worked with them. The downsides that they mentioned most were around:

- cost – the networks negotiated hard to get the best price for their members
- constantly having to make competitive re-tendering bids for work – even after receiving 'fantastic feedback'
- paperwork – there was copious amounts

These were balanced and outweighed by the fact that this often became regular work that they did not have to trawl around the country to set up – thus negating the 'hit' on cost and re-tendering effort. Although they re-tendered, once they were known by the companies and the networks re-tendering became a more straightforward and less time-consuming process. It was also mentioned that much of the paperwork that they submitted (provided by Skillnets via networks) was of a good quality that they now used in their wider business.

The common view was that the networks were totally committed to the work that they were doing and that working with/for the networks was both stimulating and rewarding.

A point made by one or two trainers was that it would be easier to fill courses if they were able to use some of their own contacts to add to those brought forward by network managers. They accepted that this was not permitted but made the point anyway.

### 8.2 Job-seeker involvement

The involvement of job-seekers in courses was seen as a valuable use of what otherwise might be 'lost space' in courses. There were no negative comments about job-seekers being involved with positive comments about the effort and drive that job-seekers often brought with them to courses.

A number of trainers backed the point often made by network managers that one of the most time consuming aspects of Skillnets delivery (for network managers) was attracting job-seekers to the courses.

### 8.3 Demand driven

The majority of trainers commented that the demand driven ethos of Skillnets meant that the delivery of the courses was a more pleasurable experience. One trainer commented that the effort on some trainee faces was palpable!

They also commented on the high level of interest that companies took in the setting up and preparation of courses and often wanted feedback on how the course was progressing. This level of interest was welcomed by trainers and they felt that it added value to their courses. One mentioned that the course content on one occasion was amended (and they felt positively) by input from an employer who felt that they were able to update an element of a course as they had recently been exposed to what they perceived as good practice from a customer.

### 8.4 Follow on business

A number of trainers said that some of the businesses that they had come across through delivering courses for Skillnets were now clients in their own right with them. One larger educational institute stated that a number of companies had been introduced to them via Skillnets and that they were now working with them on projects that were beyond training activity.

### 8.5 No Skillnets

Some trainers felt that they would miss Skillnets (in business and financial terms) if it was not there, whilst others felt that they could make up any shortfall in a relatively short space of time.

What was viewed as a key factor regarding Skillnets is that they are almost always delivering the 'right' course to the 'right' people as the client group are 'vetted'. The fact that trainers do not have to spend as much time trying to market, promote and sell themselves was also seen as a business benefit of working with Skillnets.

To give a context however, those that said that they would not miss Skillnets had no response when invited to comment on why they delivered Skillnets courses at what they themselves described as 'knock down' prices if they could get better value for course delivery elsewhere.

Historically though, some of the trainers (mostly the smaller ones and/or sole traders) felt that they may not have survived the harshest times of the recession had Skillnets not been operating.

## 9 Conclusions

### 9.1 Skillnets overall

The overall view of Skillnets is of a system that works - and adds value to a range of people and organisations in a myriad of ways. The way that Skillnets is described by those in the system and the many stakeholders is of a virtuous circle that links policies and strategy with operational delivery. The result is a range of benefits across those involved with Skillnets:

- Government and associated Departments and Agencies
- Employers
- Trainees
- Job-seekers
- Trainers

#### 9.1.1 *Government and associated Departments and Agencies*

Benefit through:

- economic development through GVA and employment
- higher level skills to support a smarter economy
- a 'go-to' group that can support employment 'problems' at short notice
- a support tool to attract inward investment

#### 9.1.2 *Employers*

Benefit through:

- skills development mechanism that fits their needs
- recruitment tool
- increased competitiveness
- wider, 'spillover' benefits through being part of a network

#### 9.1.3 *Employed Trainees*

Benefit through:

- enhanced careers – supporting job security and mobility
- promotion of a sense of value and self-confidence
- promotions and wage increases

#### 9.1.4 *Job-seekers*

Benefit through:

- increased employability
- greater confidence and access to potential employment opportunities
- information to target jobs at 'right' level of ability

#### 9.1.5 *Trainers*

Benefit through:

- direct income – that previously was not there – and hard to replace
- access to wider training markets and clients
- fresh demand driven insight to update material
- support for the education and training sector in its own right

## 9.2 Performance

The performance of each programme is strong with targets invariably not only being met, but significantly exceeded. Because the figures for performance are so good, it tends to be the areas where targets are not met that stick out and this is failing to meet targets for unemployed trainees. The reasons for these figures emerged during the evaluation and are considered in their own right later in this section.

### 9.2.1 Programme management

The undoubted key to the performance levels being as good as they are overall is down to the close management of programme performance on an ongoing basis centrally by the Skillnets team. Whilst there are issues over the balance being achieved between the level of support for networks in driving up the quality of the programmes against the need for monitoring and compliance – in performance terms the programmes are well managed to meet the targets set by funders.

## 9.3 Partnerships and collaborations

Skillnets comes over as an organisation with a finger in everything related to skills development – and they are described as being good and willing partners to work with. Skillnet staff input to strategic and operational fora on a regular basis and manage to maintain a 'non-threatening' persona. This is an unusual scenario and one that is largely responsible for the longevity and strength of Skillnets as an organisation.

On an operational basis Skillnets programmes deliver against targets. However it is at a strategic level that Skillnets excels. Skillnets works with government and its departments and throughout the business development infrastructure in a myriad of ways behind the scenes. (for example with the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs). Skillnets has a level of knowledge that is regularly sought to support employment groups and fora as policy is developed. This support is greatly admired and the level of goodwill that this has generated should not be underestimated. The key reason that Skillnets has been able to build and maintain partnerships is because of the fit that Skillnets has across economic policy in Ireland.

The fundamental partnership for Skillnets is with the networks and consideration should be given to two areas.

- the first is regarding the link between network manager and Skillnets. Generally these appear to be strong relationships but this has to be continually worked on. Some network managers feel that the spirit of partnership is ebbing away and being replaced by a relationship driven by the need for monitoring as opposed to working together to drive up the quality of the service. There is a great deal of paperwork to cover and so the need for monitoring exists, but this should not be the only type of relationship that exists. The role of the network manager includes ensuring that paperwork is in order – but it must be emphasised that in no way is the role of network manager being undermined
- the second is finding out how to capitalise on the wealth of experience that exists in the networks – the promoters, chairs and board members as well as the network managers to add value to the existing Skillnets proposition and forward thinking strategy

## 9.4 Economic impact

Training is viewed as one of the more difficult areas of intervention to assess economic impact gained. In this evaluation businesses were asked to indicate numbers against recruitment, turnover and profits that they felt were attributable to the benefits of training through a Skillnets Programme. As this is a volume programme, the figures are relatively crude, but even in this format they demonstrate that impact can be measured. In face to face interviews and discussions with businesses, a number expressed the view that they now feel if training cannot be measured then they should not be spending valuable time and resource on it. From responses to the surveys:

- 341 people were recruited by businesses that they say are attributable to their involvement with TNP and ManagementWorks (77 responses from companies representing 10.9% of responses)
- increased turnover of around €8m in companies that they say is attributable to participating in TNP and ManagementWorks (26 responses from companies, representing 3.7% of responses)
- increased profit levels of €1.2m in companies that they say is attributable to TNP and ManagementWorks (18 responses from companies, representing 2.3% of responses)
- 223 job-seekers found employment following TNP (Job-seeker) and/or JSSP and 103 went into self-employment, representing 34.6% of respondents

Although very encouraging, particularly as the sample size is relatively small, the figures should be viewed with some caution. The figures represent both benefits to date and anticipated in the future and whilst these are both valid economic indicators, they have not been adequately separated to ensure validity. The figures should be seen as indicators of the potential impact that exists through the Skillnets Programmes.

## 9.5 Value for money

The Skillnets Programmes offer significant value for money. The satisfaction levels are high and value is obtained for the public purse through:

- attracting matched funding from the private sector of over €9m
- obtaining best value prices for training courses
- supporting job-seeker training at minimal cost to public funds

One area to consider is how to ensure that networks are not 'driven too hard' and that strong performance is rewarded in other ways than only by having targets increased when performance targets are achieved. Whilst not currently a major issue it could become a problem in the future if not well managed.

## 9.6 Spillover benefits

Skillnets and its programmes also deliver a range of spill-over benefits. Spill-over benefits are those benefits that are achieved although they are not directly targeted or necessarily even anticipated. These include:

- SME's – their staff go back with 'good practice' ideas that larger company staff give them
- Jobseeker trainees are an excellent recruitment option for businesses
- there is evidence of joint business initiatives arising from spending time with other network businesses
- multinationals compete with their 'sister' plants – working in partnership with 'neighbours' supports the case for further investment in Ireland



- Skillnets is a real attraction for FDI as it demonstrates to potential investors that Ireland can support both its short and long term employment and skills requirements
- Skillnets can provide a 'rapid response' to job-loss blackspots
- the 'smarter economy' would be much more difficult to live up to without Skillnets

These bullet point benefits largely arose through discussing issues with network managers, promoters, board members and the companies that make up the networks. There are many 'good news' stories and these should continue to be promoted.

## 9.7 Job seekers

The view is that job seekers have been a welcome addition as they have provided a recruitment route with obvious benefits for all. However, with positive changes in the economy, this is a time to review the volume of job-seekers that are sought for the Programmes and there are three reasons for this.

- the first is that, in the author's view, the experience, qualification levels and general job-readiness of job-seekers is lowering and to meet current targets would mean trying to fill courses with the 'harder to help' and those that are further from the job market. This could have a negative impact with both quality of training provision and thereafter the perceived value of Skillnets with employers
- the second reason is that with the economy moving forward, networks are anticipating developing their services to meet changing demand – which will require the time of network managers. A concern for networks is that the attraction and recruitment of job-seekers is already very time consuming and this would increase at a time when their original priorities are rising
- the third reason is arguably the strongest one in that the Skillnets offering will no longer be as good a match with the needs of the majority of those that now make up the unemployment register in Ireland. There are other Programmes that meet 'harder-to-help' job-seekers, and Skillnets should not be competing for the sake of meeting targets

## 9.8 Profile

There is a view that Skillnets and the programmes are not branded and marketed well enough. It is difficult to agree with this because the programmes are hitting and exceeding targets and the network managers response to the questionnaire show 80% feel the programme has a high recognition rate with industry, and 87% say that businesses want to join their network.

If there is an issue it is more to do with attracting unemployed people to the job-seeker element of the programmes – but this should only be covered following consideration of the role and level of jobseeker programmes in the future.

The profile of Skillnets as an organisation is a great strength because it is left to stakeholders and beneficiaries of Skillnets to make comment. Those comments are highly complimentary, and because Skillnets does not 'over-hype' its own activities it is viewed as non-threatening – allowing others to take their share of credit for a very good and highly effective system.

## 10 Recommendations

This evaluation highlights a set of skills development programmes that are delivering high volumes very successfully. Any issues that emerged that would suggest that any change is required were in a very small minority and more often than not, when they were raised they were often countered by the same people.

The programmes may not always be seen as perfect, but there is broad agreement that they are working and so the recommendations that emerge from this evaluation should be seen as issues for consideration

### 10.1 Jobseekers

The issue that came up most often revolved around the volume of places that were open for Jobseekers. Rightly, this is the province of the funding body but the recommendation regarding this is that the target for job-seekers is reviewed and potentially scaled back in line with market requirements.

### 10.2 Programme management

The management and delivery of the programmes is a great strength and for this reason it is worth visiting this when in a position of strength. Skillnets reputation is also in the hands of the networks and the value of the network managers role is worth re-visiting to ensure that the pressures being put on network managers is acknowledged in a spirit of partnership. This is suggested for consideration because of the changes in emphasis in the network managers role which will be required to meet changing economic circumstances and therefore the balance and volume of work required in the 'front-line'.

### 10.3 Strategic partnership

There is a wealth of knowledge and experience in the shape of the network promoters and chairs that appears not to be fully tapped into. This is a potentially powerful – and supportive - resource to which consideration should be given as to how to bring their strengths to bare in the most positive and strategic way.

### 10.4 Future evaluations

This evaluation has identified that economic impact is being delivered and can be measured. If a more nuanced or granular set of figures is desired from any future evaluations then the evaluation should be more focussed – potentially covering a handful of networks. This focus would enable a longer and more robust set of questions relating to attribution to the Skillnets programmes of employment, turnover and profit changes over a period of time with businesses. These figures would be precise and accurate and could then be extrapolated across the Skillnet infrastructure to demonstrate 'whole programme' impact.

## Frontline

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