**ICT Skills Conversion Programme**

ICT Skills Conversion Programme (Joint programme name: Springboard+)

| Ireland |

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Main responsible body

Department for Education and Skills/Higher Education Authority (HEA)

Stakeholders

The stakeholders involved in the 'Action plan for jobs' initiatives are: Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Forfar); the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform; the Department of the Taoiseach; the Science Foundation Ireland; Enterprise Ireland; IDA Ireland; the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources and the Irish Payment Services Organisation (IPSO). The ICT Skills Conversion Programme is a short/medium term measure of the Higher Education Authority (HEA), within the ICT Action Plan, to develop a sustainable domestic supply of high quality ICT graduates. It offers an intensive NFQ level 8 higher diploma ICT skills conversion programme by higher education providers in partnership with industry. The Action Plan has a target of doubling the output of high quality computing graduates from undergraduate programmes between 2012 and 2018, with the HEA, who's role is also to report output figures on the programme's progress.

Funding

Funding source is Higher Education Authority and Department of Education and Skills. They funded approximately €4m in two funding years (2012 and 2013), about 800 places each year. The 6,471 places now on offer represent an investment of €27,438,000 from the National Training Fund, with co-funding from the European Union under the European Social Fund, as part of the ESF Programme for Employability, inclusion and Learning 2014-2020. Since 2011, over €134m has been allocated to Springboard+ providing for over 35,000 places.

Intended beneficiaries

Upskilling and reskilling NFQ Level 8 jobseekers/undergraduates with cognate/numerical skills and underlying aptitude for programming.

3 PROCESSES

Use of labour market intelligence

INFORM DECISIONS ON COURSE FUNDING/PROVISION

INFORM CAREER-MAKING DECISIONS OF STUDENTS
Graduates who do not have an existing background in ICT are offered to partake in the free course, which has a strong emphasis on the practical elements of the sector. The course teaches the fundamentals (either over a 1 year full-time programme, or a 2 year part-time), and then students have the opportunity to apply these skills to a 12 week industrial placement. The policy goal is achieved through ensuring access to valuable work experience, as well as skills training in a sector that has been identified as being in need.

**Financial schemes**

Services are free, and income support can still be retained while on the course. Although participation in the programme does not create any entitlement to receive an income support payment from the Department of Social Protection (DSP), the DSP agreed that unemployed people who had been in receipt of income support for at least three of the six months preceding entry to a course are still eligible to retain their income support as part of a bespoke version of the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) scheme. The approval of the Department of Social Protection to this arrangement was critical to facilitating participation of unemployed graduates in the conversion programmes.

**Frequency of updates**

Every three years the instrument is assessed based on the success of graduates. If areas of improvement are noted, the model is then adapted. In 2017, the model was also updated to become more flexible and inclusive.

**Development**

Following the evaluation of phase 1, phase 2 in 2013 was agreed, but adapted using feedback from participants, providers and industry partners on provider tendering and application management systems, course application process, structure of the programme, information and marketing of courses, and arrangements for income and other supports for participants. Input was also given from the Expert, i.e. Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN), Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland. This informed a number of changes, specifically: increased emphasis on the provision and quality of work placement opportunities, a requirement for stronger industry supports, and a revision of the skills areas targeted to include software development and data analytics. Then, as part of Springboard+ 2017, homemakers were allowed to apply for the first time, and more part-time ICT conversion courses were offered to encourage flexibility and prevent dropouts (which was identified as the biggest problem in 2014s evaluation).
Barriers
No stated barriers

Success factors
The commitment to funding and collaboration of various stakeholders (Government, education and training providers and businesses) has led to the success of the instrument. The output of computer graduates in Ireland had increased by 25% in 2013 over the last two years, and a doubling of graduate output was predicted to be achieved by 2015 - three years ahead of the Action Plan target of 2018.

Monitoring
The rate of employment following the course, dropout rate, pass/fail rate, employer/participant feedback. Evaluations are carried out by the governing bodies involved.

Innovativeness

**VERY INNOVATIVE**
By combining with the part-time scheme Springboard to form Springboard+, the overall scheme has been made more accessible for learners. Under this initiative, sectors with identified skills needs are targeted, and courses are provided in ICT, manufacturing, entrepreneurship, hospitality and financial services.

Evidence of effectiveness
The instrument has a high impact, as it links with other industry-led programmes. Offering 768 places countrywide per year. The benefits have exceeded expectations, which has resulted in the instrument (under Springboard+) being continued. When the initiative was first introduced in 2011, unemployment was at 15%. Unemployment has now dropped to 6.8% and over 200,000 more people are at work than in 2012. High level of withdrawal from programmes (for various reasons such as finding employment, experiencing financial difficulty, personal, etc) has proven costly, based on the cost of funding for each trainee, as well as the loss of opportunity for the individual. Measures to address and improve this have been outlined in the evaluation report, such as extra guidance for students and the consideration of additional financial support.

**SUSTAINABILITY**
**Engagement of stakeholders**
The HEA carries out evaluations to promote engagement and improvement, whilst also measuring the instruments progress. These evaluations include: detailed online reporting by ICT skills and Springboard course providers on academic and employment-related outcomes for participants; surveys of graduates and continuing students; focus-group meetings and interviews with employers and course providers; and data scans of the Live Register status of graduates and of continuing students by the Department of Social Protection.

**Transferability**
EASILY TRANSFERABLE
There is nothing specifically unique to Ireland in the development of the programme. The programme has recognised a key skill demand (for ICT specialists) and then marshalled training providers to equip people with the skills that industry requires.

**Sustainability**
The initiative will continue as part of the ESF Programme for Employability, inclusion and Learning 2014-2020 and the joint Government-Industry ICT Action Plan 2014-2018, so is expected to continue.