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CHILD AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTRE



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Identifying Innovative Models for Supporting Vulnerable Learners achieve Educational Progression; Early findings from an Evaluation of Social Innovation Fund Ireland's Education Fund

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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About the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre

The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (UCFRC) is part of the Institute for Lifecourse and Society at the National University of Ireland Galway. It was founded in 2007, through support from The Atlantic Philanthropies, Ireland and the Health Service Executive (HSE), with a base in the School of Political Science and Sociology. The mission of the Centre is to help create the conditions for excellent policies, services, and practices that improve the lives of children, youth, and families through research, education, and service development. The UCFRC has an extensive network of relationships and research collaborations internationally and is widely recognised for its core expertise in the areas of Family Support and Youth Development.

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01

Introduction



Social Innovation Fund Ireland (SIFI) was established by the Irish government in 2015 to fill a gap in funding innovation for the non-profit sector. Its mission is to provide growth capital and supports to the best social innovations in Ireland, enabling them to scale and maximise their impact. Recognising the persistence of educational inequality and disadvantage in Irish society, SIFI introduced the Education Fund in late 2017 as a way to confront this complex issue. The Fund was open to projects focused on improving educational outcomes for

those experiencing educational disadvantage, and which specifically supported learners to progress from levels 3–6 on the National Framework of Qualifications. Following a rigorous selection process, 10 projects were chosen as recipients of the Award (see Table 1 below). Eight are based in Dublin and two in Cork, while their impact reaches learners all over Ireland. Each offers a form of alternative education when compared to the mainstream system.

Table 1 - Details of the 10 projects funded under SIFI’s Education Fund

PROJECT	ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE BASE	DESCRIPTION
Trinity Access 21	Dublin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Trinity Access 21 (TA21) aims to transform the Irish education system and aspires to an education system that supports every young person in reaching their full academic potential. - Trinity Access 21 provides Deis schools with student and teacher training. Students are provided with one-to-one mentoring, group work, and team-based workshops. - The project works in a partnership with schools, communities, other education organisations, and businesses.
Aspire 2	Dublin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Aspire 2 aims to increase Deis school students’ prospects of completing the Leaving Cert and progressing to third-level education and apprenticeships. - The project provides students with group mentoring and work experience placement. - The programme established a collaborative partnership with several academic institutions around Ireland (i.e. UCD, CIT, UCC, TCD, and IT Tallaght).
Fast Track Academy	Dublin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fast Track Academy’s vision is focused on improving communities through youth education by using a whole-person approach. - The project focuses on developing social, behavioural and academic skills and conditions necessary to increase the number of young people transitioning to higher-level education. - It collaborates with IT Tallaght and other agencies in the community.
iScoil	Dublin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - iScoil provides innovative and flexible, online and blended learning for early school leavers. This model provides a safe environment where young people can reengage with education and access further education, training or employment opportunities. - One-to-one and online modalities of intervention are provided to each student based on their needs, interests, and abilities. - iScoil works in partnership with local agencies and youth services nationally.
Cork Life Centre	Cork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Cork Life Centre’s vision is to provide a unique and alternative environment for education for children and young people who have disengaged or are at risk of disengaging from mainstream education. - It provides an alternative, one-to-one and small group learning environment with wraparound service. - The Centre established links with numerous agencies and services in Cork City across the areas of business, academia, and health, and with local community groups.

PROJECT	ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE BASE	DESCRIPTION
An Cosán	Dublin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - An Cosán VCC seeks to empower women and men from disadvantaged communities across Ireland. - It provides an entry model of higher education and blended learning, face-to-face workshops, technology workshops, live virtual classes, offline individual and group work, collaborative peer learning, and communities of practice. - The programme partners with a wide range of community education organisations at local, regional, and national level.
Speedpak Enhanced Skills Traineeship (Speedpak)	Dublin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Speedpak Group’s vision is to provide industry work experience and training opportunities to people who are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET), transforming their lives through employment and greater job resilience. - It combines formal accredited training and work experience where the participant develops the job-seeking, work, and industry skills required to progress to employment. - This traineeship programme is delivered in a collaboration between the State, industry, community, and philanthropy.
Preparation for Education, Training and Employment (PETE)	Dublin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - PETE provides educational opportunities and support from those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. - The service provides participants with one-to-one support to build the confidence and skills to overcome personal challenges and participation in mainstream training. - PETE cooperates with numerous agencies and services across the areas of training and education, employment, ‘flanking’, and housing.
Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID)	Dublin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - TCPID’s mission is to enable people with an intellectual disability to develop their potential through a combination of lifelong learning and professional training. - The Centre provides learners with a high-quality higher-education programme, mentoring, work experience, and career guidance. - Key partners of the programme come from business, including companies and banks (e.g., Abbott, CPL, and Bank of Ireland).
Churchfield Community Trust	Cork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Churchfield Community Trust provides second chance at education and work experience at social enterprises for young people who have experienced alcohol and substance misuse. - It provides one-to-one counselling and group work interventions to participants. - The project works with a range of agencies, services, local authorities and academic institutions.

Subsequently, a team of researchers from the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre at NUI Galway were appointed as external evaluators of the Education Fund. Over the three years of this study, the evaluation will investigate the extent to which practices and process utilised by awardees can serve as models of excellence in overcoming inequality in education. Using a robust

research and evaluation methodology, the evaluators will address this by specifically identifying the ‘gold standard’ from among the 10 projects. This will mean identifying which projects best support their students to progress from QQI levels 3–6 and which projects have a proven potential, worth scaling.

This document is an EXECUTIVE SUMMARY and is extracted from a larger report, detailing the work conducted by the evaluators during year 1 of the Education Fund (December 2017 to December 2018). The larger report is largely contextual, setting the scene for the evaluation of the Education Fund to come. Nevertheless, it does provide some early evaluation data, with the depth and range of data continuing to grow over the next two years of the research. Both the full report and this Executive Summary will be of interest to anyone interested in finding an innovative solution to educational inequality in Ireland. This includes professionals involved in direct educational provision, social innovators, researchers, policymakers, parents, and the general public.

The main purpose of this document is to highlight the key learning from the work undertaken by the researchers over the last year. The information that follows is presented under a set of headings, each relating back to the agreed evaluation framework, as discussed later on. We would encourage you to read the full report to get a more complete understanding of these key emergent themes.

02

LEARNERS PERCEPTIONS OF THE BENEFITS OF BEING INVOLVED WITH THESE PROJECTS



- Using data gathered from one-to-one discussions between the researchers, the project staff and the learners, it was found that the 10 programmes differ in the way they are structured, their position in relation to the mainstream education system (i.e. placed inside or outside the mainstream education system, or in a community setting), length of time the programme is provided (i.e. from few weeks to 2-years) and the age with whom the projects work (youth or adults).
- Data also revealed that the 10 projects provide a flexible and non-hierarchical approach to education, are student-centred, and base their work on a needs-led approach to learning.
- The value of being involved for the learners is illustrated in Figure 1. These range from projects being perceived as sanctuaries to the projects providing alternative ways of learning.

Figure 1 – Benefits as perceived by the learners



03

ASSESSING THE 'SOFT-SKILLS' OF THE LEARNERS – A BASELINE



At the initial meeting held with Awardee Projects, SIFI and the evaluation team, the concept of 'soft skills' emerged. The hypothesis was that to successfully support a participant to secure a QQI level 3–6 qualification, Projects often needed, first of all, to help participants bolster their soft skills. For awardees, these non-cognitive soft skills were concepts such as a sense of worth, belonging, or self-esteem. It was strongly suggested by the awardees that the evaluation should capture this data and in doing so provide solid evidence for their hypothesis. By Christmas 2018, the first round of data collection was completed with 7 of the 10 projects. Data were gathered using a set of standardised measures, which focussed three areas, personal development skills, social inclusion skills, and social and employment skills. The main findings were as follows:

- In terms of the demographic data:
 - A total of 182 participants from 7 projects participated in the first round of the data collection with an equal number of males and females (Males n= 89; 49.4%; Females n= 91; 50.6%) participating.
 - The mean age recorded from participants was 23.5 years (SD = 12.782) with the range of ages found to be 57 years (13 to 70 years old). The largest grouping was the 17-18 age category, accounting for 42.5% (n=77). One quarter of participants fell into the 13-16 age category (25.4%, n= 46) with a further one quarter fitting into the 26+ category (24.3%, n= 44). The 18-25 age category was the smallest grouping (7.7%, n= 14) in the sample.
 - 84.6% (n=154) identified themselves as Irish.
- **Personal Development Skills** – Two thirds of respondents had normal levels of self- esteem, while 17% were below the average. For well-being, participants' levels were slightly higher than the norm, and higher as it relates to engagement and relationships. However, well-being as related to their accomplishments was lower than the norm. In terms of resilience, participants' overall level was slightly lower than the norm, particularly in terms of peer support and psychological caregiving. Nevertheless, resilience levels relating to education and personal skills were higher for participants than the norm.
- **Social Inclusion Skills** – Participants were on par with established norms relating to academic engagement, while their sense of belonging and self-confidence was slightly lower than the norm. In terms of inclusion, more than 9 in every 10 participants stated that they enjoyed attending their respective SIFI project.
- **Social and Employment Skills** – More than 9 in every 10 participants stated that their respective projects were helping them improve their self-confidence, become a well-balanced person and acquire new skills.

04

CLUSTERING OF THE 10 PROJECTS TO SHARE AND DEEPEN LEARNING



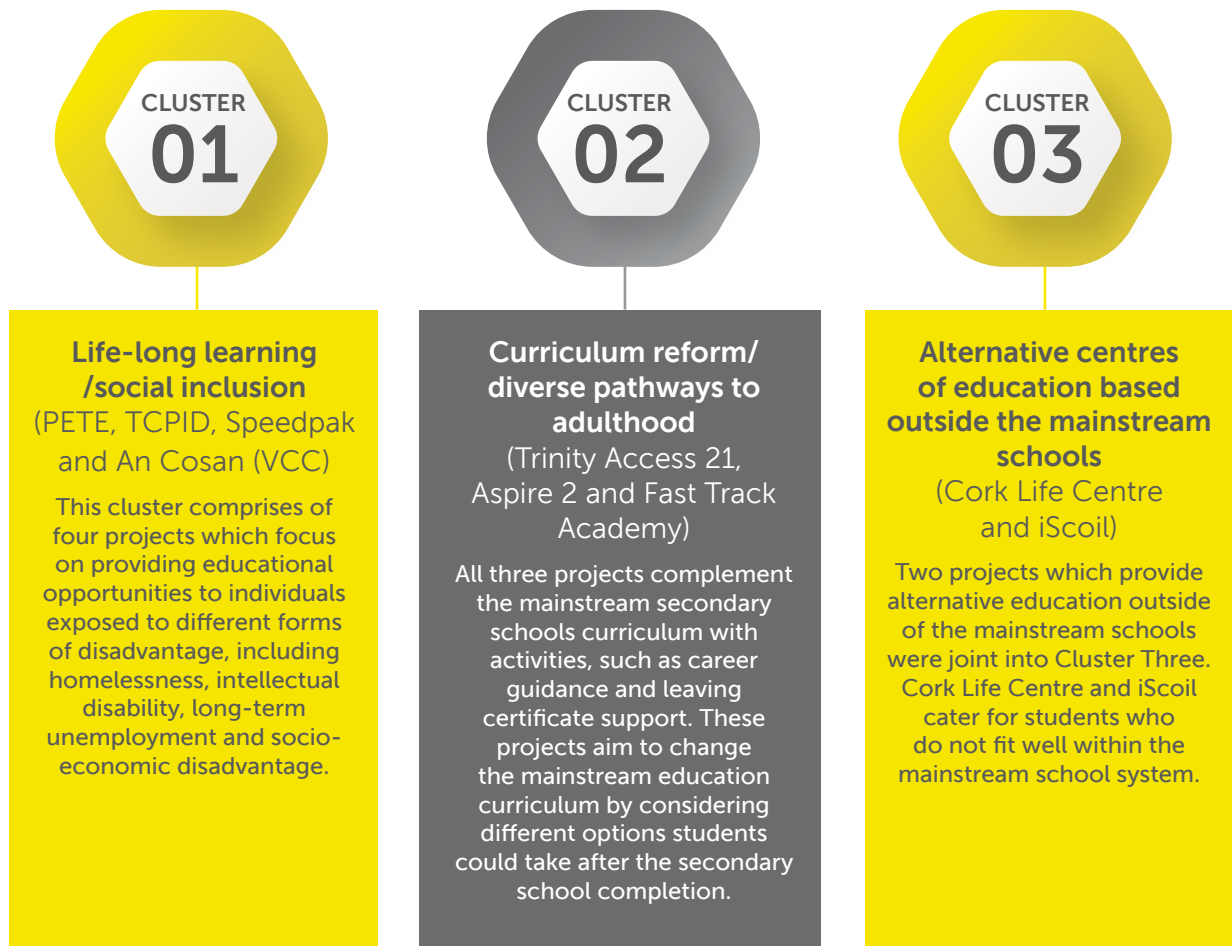
In the documentation issued by SIFI calling for evaluators for the Education Fund, they suggested clustering awardees together to share learning specific to their focus. Documentary analysis (Bowen, 2009) was conducted by the researchers on the project models across four elements: vision, aims, and objectives; activities;¹ positionality towards the mainstream education system; and participants’ age. As a result, three clusters (presented in Figure 2) were developed

- Cluster 1 - Life-long learning/social inclusion
- Cluster 2 - Curriculum reform/diverse pathways to adulthood;

- Cluster 3 - Alternative centres of education based outside the mainstream schools.

These three clusters will be used years 2 and 3 of the evaluation to guide the various elements of the implementation and to allow commonalities, differences and shared learning to be generated.

Figure 2 – Project Clusters



¹ Other data based on sections of participation, referral process, type of intervention, theory, methods, and manual intervention was provided by the projects. Due to insufficient information provided in these sections, this data was not analysed.

05

**EDUCATIONAL
INEQUALITY AND
THE MAINSTREAM
SCHOOLING
SYSTEM IN
IRELAND**



A core focus for the research team during year 1 was to contextualise the study by reviewing the academic literature, policy and legislation relating to the formal education system in Ireland. It was possible to identify four defining phases of development within the system, stretching from Independence to now. Phase One describes the development of an education system underpinned by a theocentric approach; Phase Two developed as a result of the OECD Investment in Education Report in the 1960's; Phase Three focussed on policy responses to educational inequalities since the 1990s and Phase Four identifies developments in the mainstream education system in contemporary Ireland. Some specific points of note are as follows:

- In the 1990s, a myriad of education policy initiatives designed to target a broad range of problems in the education system, ranging from preschool to adult education were introduced. This marked a more proactive level of State intervention in education.
- The DEIS Programme (2005) was introduced to provide supports to schools with high concentrations of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018: 2). DEIS policy is grounded on the belief that every child and young person deserves an equal chance to access, participate in, and benefit from the education system (DES, 2005: 15).
- Some positive outcomes in Irish education today are: lower rates of early school leavers, high participation rates in higher education, a narrowing gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools in literacy and numeracy.
- However, there is a well-established connection between social and educational inequalities in Irish society. Parental social class has a major impact on students' progress in education. Educational inequality persists in particular among students from disadvantaged areas and lower socio-economic backgrounds, other ethnic groups and people with disabilities.
- Social-class divisions are also prominent in higher-education with progression rates to higher education of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds at 14% in 2013.
- Increased ethnic segregation is another aspect of educational inequality recognised in Irish schools today. Academic support for migrant students is limited to a certain amount of language support and restricted resources being provided for teachers' training (Darmody et al., 2014). Targeted support at state and school level is required. A summary of some of these key points are shown in Figure 3

Figure 3 – The Contemporary Irish Education System in Numbers



Students

7,572

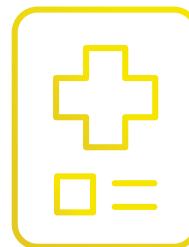
out of total cohort of 261, 832 registered students, exited the education system before completing the Leaving Certificate (DES, 2016)

84.4%

was retention rate to the Leaving Certificate of the students attending DEIS schools. The gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools has reduced to 8.5% for the 2010 cohort (DES, 2017)



Retention Rates



62%

In 2017, approximately one third of the students in non-DEIS compared to 62% of students in DEIS schools were from medical card holding families (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018)

Increased Rates of Medical Card Possession

Only 14%

of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds progress to higher education. Comparatively, more than half of young people from middle-class backgrounds between the ages of 15-34 obtaining a third level qualification (OECD, 2017).



Third Level Education



06

**THE POTENTIAL
FOR ALTERNATIVE
EDUCATIONAL
APPROACHES
TO ADDRESS
EDUCATIONAL
INEQUALITY AND
DIVERSITY**



Following the review of the formal system, the research team began examining alternative approaches to education. Some of the top educational performers around the world (i.e. Finland, Singapore and Canada) have recognised the relevance of alternative approaches of education, including student-centred approach to learning in their education policies. Moving away from results- and competition-focused education toward a holistic approach providing education opportunities to all young people has been advocated within these systems.

- The key characteristics of alternative education are: small-size classes focusing on innovative and experiential learning; one-to-one interaction between teachers and learners; less hierarchical and bureaucratic environment based on more equal relationships between teaching staff and students.
- Two different perspectives to schooling, *Youth at Risk* and *Learning Choice*, based on fundamental difference to how schools approach students and their vision(s) on education evolved in alternative provision of education. *Youth at Risk* is associated with last-chance and remedial-focus programmes attempting to change young people's behaviours (Raywid, 1990). *Learning Choice* primarily addresses the need for schools to change and recognises several factors in students' disengagement from learning, including low socio-economic status, family situation, social and gender issues, cultural and ethnic barriers, mental health issues, and learning difficulties (McGregor et al., 2015).
- Experiences from other jurisdictions, in particular from Anglo economic and cultural sphere (i.e. the USA, the UK and Australia) show that alternative education has its origins in the progressive movement and the equity programmes. However, in the last decades the policy followed the neo-liberal agenda and promoted youth at risk approach within the alternative education. A focus on competition and grades has been at the core of this policy development.
- In these settings, alternative education has been used as a response to normative, mainstream education, to cater for young people who do not fit within the system or are from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (i.e. 'flexi schools' or second-chance schools in Australia).
- Germany has introduced some concepts of alternative education, such as student-centred learning and personalisation of learning within mainstream schools. Policy developments in this area have been introduced after average performance in the PISA survey in 2000 (Sliwka and Yee, 2015; Sliwka and

Kopsch, 2018), which revealed the lack of support provided in German schools for pupils from migrant and low socio-economic backgrounds. Since then, policy has acknowledged a slow recognition of issues of diversity in education. Student-centred learning and personalisation of learning, are now officially recognised in German schools. Policy documents encourage other alternative practices, such as close professional collaboration and a working-together approach between teachers and students (Sliwka and Klopsch, 2018).

In short, the five benefits of alternative approaches to education are:

- (1) There are improvements in attendees' numeracy and literacy skills and positive engagement with assessments and exams.
 - (2) Students improve their engagement with studies, attendance rates, and disruptive behaviour through these programmes.
 - (3) Students develop aspirations and future pathways to education and work in these settings.
 - (4) Students reported increased self-esteem, well-being, and resilience levels.
 - (5) Community engagement and pro-social behaviour have been strengthened through alternative programmes of education.
- (Te Riele et al., 2017)

07

**SOCIAL
INNOVATION
AND SOCIETAL
CHANGE?**



Corresponding with the SIFI's role in the area of social innovation, the final element undertaken by the researchers was to examine the nature of social innovation and its link to societal change.

- Social innovation is attracting increased attention among policymakers in Europe and globally for its potential capacity to overcome societal challenges and social demands. It involves both new ideas and collaborations to address social needs in a more effective manner. It refers to a process of providing innovative solutions to pressing social issues. This approach has never been used in Ireland before and challenges old ways of thinking about persistent social problems.
- Social innovation provides for a process by which responses to social needs are developed, implemented, evaluated for effectiveness, and scaled up. The most useful construct is to view social innovation as a 'collaborative concept' that creates space for multidisciplinary and multi-actor discussion.
- Social innovation offers the most useful construct with which to assess the capacity for change proffered by philanthropic intervention. This form of philanthropy adopts a public policy orientation and seeks engagement with the State.

Social innovation approaches are:

- Open rather than closed when it comes to sharing and owning knowledge
- Multi-disciplinary and more integrated to problem-solving than the single-department or single-profession solutions of the past
- Participative and empowering of citizens and users rather than top-down and expert-led
- Demand-led rather than supply-driven
- Tailored rather than mass-produced, as most solutions have to be adapted to local circumstances and personalised to individuals.

(The European Commission, 2013: 9)

08

**ESTABLISHING
THE 'GOLD
STANDARD'
AMONG THE
EDUCATION
FUND AWARDEES**



Each of the informational components presented above relate back to an underpinning evaluation framework. The overall focus for the evaluation is to identify the projects most successful in supporting their participants to progress from QQI levels 3–6. This ‘gold standard’, evidence-based information will aid SIFI’s overarching aim of supporting the replication and scaling of the best projects from among the Education Funds. Evidence-based knowledge is ‘the competent and high-fidelity implementation of practices that have been demonstrated safe and effective’ (Chaffin and Friedrich, 2004: 1098).

As shown in Table 2 below, the evaluation framework contains a number of metrics and their associated research methodology, specifically designed to address

a set of core questions about the success of the projects. These questions are: What works? How well does it work? How long does it work? For whom does it work? In what settings does it work? It works compared with what? Why does it work?

The chosen methodology ranges from tracking the numbers of participants progressing (or not) to QQI levels 3–6 across each project, to exploring participants’ experiences with the projects, measuring the increase or decrease in participants’ soft skills, and applying a social-return-on-investment framework to understand the perceived value that participants have on the outcomes they achieve in their respective projects.

Table 2: Framework developed to evaluate the Education Fund

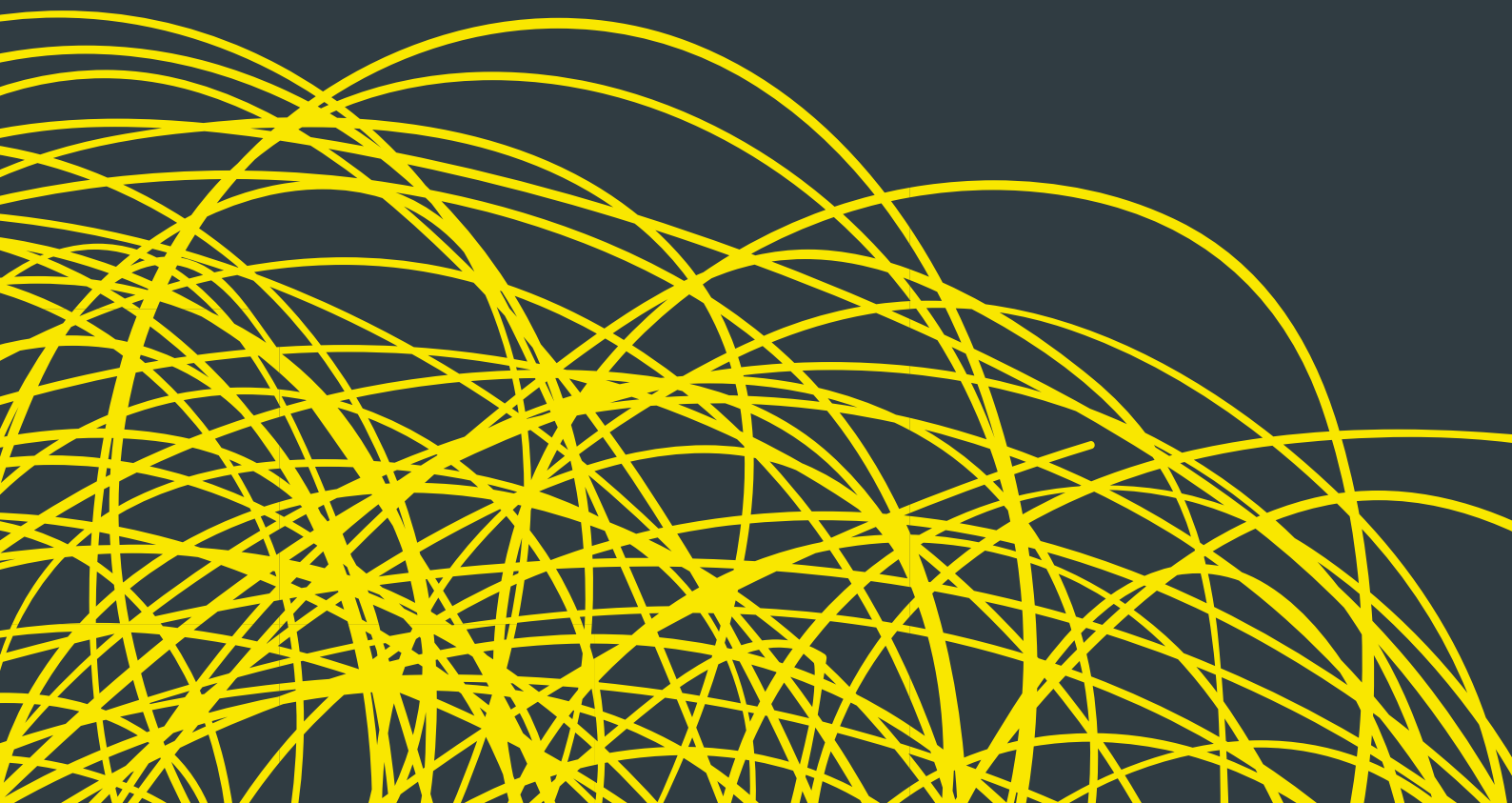
KEY QUESTION	METRICS	AGREED METHODOLOGY	WITH WHOM?
1. What works?	a. Track the number of participants progressing towards QQI levels 3–6 in all projects	Tracking system to capture numbers of students completing and dropping out by project	Project participants
2. How well does it work?	a. Measure the increase/decrease in the levels of participants’ soft skills	Standardised quantitative pre-, post- and follow-up data collection	Project participants
	b. Understand the lived experiences of a sample of participants	Real-time data collection	Project participants
	c. Apply a social-return-on-investment approach to determine which outcomes are most valued by participants	SROI framework	Projects and their participants
3. How long does it work?	a. Follow up with participants six months after they finish with the projects	Tracking system	Project participants
4. For whom does it work?	a. Investigate what patterns emerge based on socio-demographic participant data (age, gender, location, age, etc.)	Statistical tracking	Desk-based analysis
5. In what settings does it work?	a. Cluster the 10 projects to identify combined areas of learning	Clustering	Projects and their participants
	b. Formal write-up of the projects models, incorporating the theory of change for each project	One-to-one meetings with projects	Projects
	c. Developmental evaluation meetings with Projects – facilitate data-based assessments and decision-making in the unfolding and developmental processes of innovation	One-to-one meetings with projects	Projects

KEY QUESTION	METRICS	AGREED METHODOLOGY	WITH WHOM?
6. It works compared with what?	a. Undertake a comprehensive review of the theoretical, policy, and legislative basis for education inequality in Ireland and internationally	Literature, policy and legislative review	Desk-based analysis and key informant interviews
	b. Undertake a review of the role of social innovation in systems change	Literature review	Desk-based analysis
	c. Collect data from internal and external stakeholders on their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of each project	Qualitative data collection	Internal and external stakeholders associated with each project
7. Why does it work?	a. A summative discussion using the data gathered from steps 1–6 above	Review of evidence to identify the gold standard Desk-based analysis and key informant interviews	Desk-based analysis

The research and evaluation team used a collaborative approach to design the evaluation framework. Taking the time to observe, listen, and consult on the various possibilities has been very beneficial. Developing relationships with the awardees from the start allowed us to stimulate their active engagement with the research and develop a fit-for-purpose evaluation framework. This need for space and time to develop the framework was fully supported by SIFI and marks a very positive departure from the traditional system, where funders use a pre-prescribed, off-the-shelf evaluation approach.

In terms of next steps, a number of other elements of the evaluation framework outlined above are being prepared for implementation at present. These will include the tracking the success of participants across each Awardee project, collecting the second round of soft skills data, beginning the process of collecting real time data from participants on the value of the Awardee project in their life and training Awardees for their engagement with a Social Return on Investment analysis. All of this data and any subsequent theoretical developments around systems change will be included in the end Of Year 2 Report, which will be available in Quarter 1 of 2020.







Further Information

If you would like to read the whole report, please visit our website:
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