



Research Report

Exploring Drivers of Back to Education Allowance Employment Outcomes

Prepared for: Department of Social Protection

Prepared by: BMG Research

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Executive summary

The Department for Social Protection (DSP) commissioned BMG Research to conduct a study on the negative drivers of poor employment outcomes of the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) scheme.

The research was undertaken with a number of audiences including participants who had undertaken courses as part of the BTEA scheme, case officers who supported the administration of the scheme, education providers who delivered the courses, and employers.

Method

The research comprised a qualitative approach and involved 56 in-depth telephone interviews with a range of participants who had undertaken a second level course between 2010 and 2014 and were in receipt of BTEA. 15 in-depth qualitative interviews also took place with case officers who were involved in administering and recommending participants for BTEA and 3 in-depth telephone interviews took place with employers. Further, 4 online focus groups were undertaken with education providers. This fieldwork took place between November 2016 and February 2017.

Summary of findings

Participants

- Prior to engaging with the BTEA scheme, most participants had completed a Leaving Certificate. Work experience between leaving school and engaging with the BTEA was mixed, with some suggesting they progressed to an apprenticeship programme and others secured employment in an area of interest. The recession, redundancy, or lack of interest in a job were common reasons why participants faced unemployment before engaging with BTEA.
- The majority of participants (71%) who took part in the qualitative interviews reported that they were not currently working, whilst around three in ten (29%) were in employment (either working full-time or part-time). A higher proportion of females (31%) reported being in employment compared with males (28%) and more participants aged 18-24 were in employment (31%) than in unemployment (8%).
- The key motive for participants to return to education was to improve their chances of securing a job and thus considered obtaining a qualification as an effective way to achieve this. Additional factors included the desire to up-skill or to secure opportunities for further education, and influence from friends or family.
- Awareness of the BTEA scheme came through the DSP for most participants. Others became aware through word of mouth, their local Social Welfare Office, Intreo, Citizens Information, or via online searches.
- Many participants described being optimistic about the BTEA scheme and generally described their experience as positive. Many depicted the course as a great way to improve their employment prospects, valued the financial support and networking opportunities available, and, above all, valued the achievement of obtaining a qualification and the positive impact of participation on their personal development.

Study to explore the drivers of negative employment outcomes of participants on the Back to Education Allowance Scheme

- Several participants described their understanding of the BTEA as being a programme to enable them to up-skill and gain a qualification and to improve their confidence and chances of employment. Older participants were more likely to hold the view that the BTEA provided them with a second chance to gain a qualification and achieve their career goals.
- In terms of expectations, many participants had the ambition to complete their course and gain employment whilst some aspired to progress to further education or achieve the qualifications required to attend university. A few expected their course to support them in identifying potential progression routes. Although several participants felt their expectations had been met, some were disappointed by the amount of funding they received and felt additional support could have been made available to them (for example, with travel costs).
- Varied views were expressed on the administrative process. Some respondents reported that it was easy and straightforward to apply whilst others described the completion of the application form as time-consuming though they, too, generally had a good understanding of the process.
- Participants had undertaken courses in a number of different areas including business studies, arts, childcare, computing, social studies, and beauty and health studies. Most chose their course as it either related to their previous employment history and/or academic experience, it was an area of interest, or it was recommended to them as available in their local area. Views on particular elements of the course were:
 - Many participants were positive about the course content and reported that it widened their choice of options and opportunities for employment. Some particularly enjoyed the work experience element of the course.
 - The teaching method was perceived to be of a high standard by most participants. Good explanation of the course, use of clear language, and delivery of the course in an interactive way was the common experience of participants.
 - Interaction with teachers and providers was perceived to be good and they used positive descriptors such as 'approachable', 'helpful', and 'encouraging' to convey their views.
 - Although some participants had not completed the course, respondents were generally positive about their experiences with many reporting that they achieved what they set out to.
- Several participants demonstrated awareness of career guidance opportunities, reported they had used it, and rated it as useful. Support was provided in 10 to 30 minute one-to-one sessions with guidance counsellors and generally entailed support with developing CVs and interview skills, providing access to online services, and advice on applying for further education.
- Overall, undertaking a course funded by the BTEA had positively impacted most participants who took part in the research. Most suggested the course achieved what

they hoped it would achieve. Those who had discontinued their course reported reasons such as limited transport links and additional costs such as book fees.

- Although participants were highly positive about the BTEA scheme, a number of challenges were described which included adjusting to a college environment (mainly amongst older participants), sufficiently preparing for exams, affordability of transport and course equipment, commitment to the course leading to limited social and personal time and, for some, struggling with particular modules of courses.
- Mixed views were expressed by participants about the challenges faced in securing work. Those who had undertaken courses in beauty, childcare, or business were more likely to suggest they secured work. Others reported that they were under-qualified for advertised jobs relating to their course or held the perception that limited numbers of jobs were available.
- Many participants reported a very positive relationship with the DSP and case officers. Positive descriptors such as 'helpful' and 'easy to liaise with' were used to describe their views and several were thankful for the support offered to them. A few felt the support was inadequate and would, for example, have valued more hours with their case officer.
- Overall, participants were generally positive about their experiences of undertaking their BTEA-supported course. However, in line with the challenges faced and to improve the scheme going forward, a number of suggestions were made which included:
 - Providing an additional allowance to make the scheme more affordable, particularly amongst those who described the financial impact of the scheme as being a barrier to completion.
 - Due to travel cost limitations and the perception of lack of courses available in participants' local areas, it was recommended that the DSP liaise more closely with education providers to better meet the course preferences of participants.
 - Raising awareness of the scheme and its benefits through, for example, advertisements in schools.
 - Amending the eligibility criteria to allow those who could benefit but do not meet the eligibility criteria (e.g. not on jobseekers allowance) to improve their employment prospects.
 - Additional feedback from teachers with individuals' progression (e.g. through further one-to-one support or additional mentoring hours).

Case Officers

- Case officers reported that they had a varied range of roles and responsibilities which include reviewing applications, approving/disapproving applications, interviewing and screening participants, and encouraging and supporting individuals to enter education and seek employment.
- Many case officers' understanding of the BTEA scheme objectives was that its central function is to up-skill and enhance participants' existing skill set by completing

a course which is of interest and is in line with their career plans. As with participants, a few case officers believed the scheme provides second chance education for people who have been unemployed for a long period of time.

- Case officers expressed a range of different views on the effectiveness of the BTEA. Many believed the scheme was valuable and that its objectives have been met. Reasons given for this view were that it leads participants into secure employment, offers opportunities in areas of deprivation, and supports participation in courses which lead to jobs. A few, however, suggested that the scheme was not effective for reasons such as the rigidity or, conversely, the leniency of its eligibility criteria or, looking at its outcomes, the volume of participants who remained on social welfare payments after completing the course.
- In terms of participation, case officers identified BTEA participants as having a range of ages, an equal split of genders, mainly Irish ethnicity, and as typically having been unemployed for 3 months or more, and as being in possession of a junior certificate or leaving certificate.
- The factors that case officers would typically consider when accepting or rejecting participants on a course included the eligibility criteria, participants' level of motivation, and their potential employment opportunities.
- When asked about the number of cases which case officers managed, most found this difficult to estimate but, however, usually suggested that it was about 20 to 30 cases at any point. Case officers reported limited engagement with participants during the application stage and suggested that only a few would contact them for support or advice on how to complete the application form online.
- Most case officers were unaware of any changes over the period of the scheme. The minority that were able to recall changes mentioned the removal of financial support (e.g. book allowances and travel fares) and the eligibility criteria now being stricter (which they saw as preventing potential participants who had strived to better their education from taking part). More positively, case officers reported that there is now greater involvement from case officers in supporting participants' decision making processes as to the courses they choose to undertake.
- In terms of participants' personal progression plans, some case officers agreed that these were a good indicator of participants' likelihood of securing a job. However, others reported that, even if the progression plan is clear, participants need to be motivated in order for it to be effective. Essentially, participant time inputs, effort, and commitment are key contributing factors which ensure the progression plan is valuable.
- Many case officers were unable to report whether or not SLO participants completed their courses and reported that this was due to the lack of available statistics and limited contact with participants whilst they undertook their course.
- Case officers identified a number of advantages and disadvantages of the scheme. Advantages were highlighted as comprising the degree of financial support available to participants, the qualifications, suiting their different interests and career ambitions, which participants were able to achieve, the opportunity to up-skill which may

increase their employment prospects, and social benefits in terms of improving participant confidence and motivation. The key perceived disadvantage was the absence of a system to follow up with participants upon completion of the scheme. This resulted in case officers being unable to establish whether or not participants have found employment and often, thus, unable to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the scheme.

- Case officers reported a number of views on the reasons for poor employment outcomes. These included lack of motivation from participants, limited support whilst on the scheme and subsequently, and labour market conditions impacting the ability of participants to find work.
- Based on the above perceptions, case officers suggested a number of improvements which could be made to the scheme to improve poor employment outcomes. These included better communication between case officers, education providers, and participants to identify completion or dropout rates, better knowledge of course availability in order to enhance the offer to participants, ensuring courses are better suited to participants' skills, needs, and career ambitions, and providing additional support (for example, childcare support to parents who are unable to attend courses during particular times of the day).

Education Providers

- The seniority of education providers who took part in the online focus groups varied and included course co-ordinators, full-time teachers, and principals.
- The key motive of education providers for getting involved with the DSP and the BTEA scheme was the ambition to provide support and improve opportunities for those who aspired to go back to a learning environment. Additional factors included their previous experiences of working in FE colleges and teaching second-level courses, general interest in the 'return to work' education sector, and advocacy of the scheme's principles and objectives.
- Education providers reported that their level of involvement during the administrative stage was generally limited. Those who reported that they had some form of involvement typically offered advice to participants about the subject and modules in which they were interested in order to help them make an informed decision. Others mentioned that they reviewed CVs or interviewed applicants in order to assess how well they met the eligibility criteria.
- Most education providers also noted that they were generally unable to distinguish BTEA participants from others on their courses. Those who *were* able to make a distinction noted that this was because they were directly informed by the participant during the interview stage, upon payment of fees, or in one-to-one meetings.
- For those who were able to make any distinction between the characteristics of those on BTEA and other courses, most observed that BTEA participants were generally more motivated, enthusiastic about finishing the course, and keen to improve their knowledge. Some also mentioned better attendance in classes. It was also observed, however, that, although BTEA participants were generally good, some were not always suited to the course or lacked interest in the course.

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- In line with case officers' views of BTEA's objectives, education providers generally understand BTEA as a programme to up-skill individuals who are keen to improve their pathway to employment.
- Education providers were mostly in agreement that the objectives of the BTEA scheme have been met and perceived the programme as being vital to give participants better access to education and the job market. However, some held the view that the eligibility criteria can be too stringent and difficult for participants to understand.
- When describing the BTEA programme many positive words were used such as 'useful', 'helpful', 'relevant', 'valuable' and 'important'. However, it was also noted that some BTEA participants also lack direction and require additional support.
- Views of the effectiveness of the BTEA scheme were mixed. Some providers were positive and suggested that the financial support enables wider opportunities for learners, increases social mobility, and improves learning whilst others noted that the affordability of the course can deter individuals from completing the course and that the programme could be better delivered if there were more support of participants with course fees, travel costs, and childcare and delivery of course which were better aligned with market demand.
- Education providers generally described participants' engagement and attitude towards their courses as positive. They were seen as often motivated to study and to achieve their career ambitions. However, it was recognised that motivation and progression varied and was very much dependent on individuals' personalities
- Most providers reported that support was offered to participants whilst on-course, including learning support and guidance and pastoral support in terms of counselling and emotional support to those who faced difficulties due to personal circumstances.
- Education providers reported differing views on their contact with case officers. Some suggested that contact was limited and could be improved, whilst others reported engagement at different levels of frequency and intensity.
- Providers offered a range of support to participants upon completion of the course. This included supplying references for work, welcoming participants to return and discuss their potential future options, offering guidance services as well as group sessions and one-to-one advice and mentoring sessions.
- Education providers outlined a number of advantages and disadvantages of the BTEA. As with case officers, a key benefit was the basic effect of BTEA support as a funding stream which enabled participants to access education and develop their skills and employment prospects. Additional benefits were increased experience, social engagement, opportunity for participants to achieve a qualification, and improvements to their confidence and motivation levels. The perceived disadvantages were reported as being the absence of financial support to cover specific course-related costs and the stringent eligibility criteria.
- Many education providers reported limited feedback from employers or participants on completion of the course. Some observed that they do not have the resource to

maintain contact with employers. The minority that do have this contact suggested that the feedback is generally positive.

- Providers identify a number of key challenges they face when delivering second-level courses which include lack of resources (for example, access to computers and teaching space often being limited), lack of financial support (a consistent finding throughout this report), and challenges in relation to courses (for example, inability for level 5 students to complete a different level 5 course due to the requirement to demonstrate progression).
- When probed on reasons for poor BTEA employment outcomes, some providers were unable to think of any reasons. Those that did outline reasons reported that participants may have not secured work due to lack of employment opportunities in the job market or in specific locations or to the lack of guidance, counselling, and learning support for participants.
- In terms of improvements to the BTEA scheme, education providers suggested offering additional financial support to participants to cover basic course costs, extending the VTOS support for second-level courses, introducing a more individually-tailored approach to select high-quality candidates during the 'eligibility' process, and permitting learners to re-skill at the same level of prior qualifications .

Employers

- Employers were generally motivated to engage with DSP as they recognised skills shortages in their sectors or in the wider economy or have been involved with the DSP for a number of years.
- Generally, employers' understanding of the scheme is that it seeks to up-skill individuals and to support them back into work; and perceived the BTEA scheme positively.
- One employer held the perception that some candidates who are put forward for interview do not always have the appropriate skills or experience for the role and can sometimes lack motivation.
- Employers reported that they recruit individuals into various roles and levels within the business. Those who are recruited from the Live Register would typically apply for entry level roles. One employer noted that these individuals would usually be involved in unskilled jobs whilst another held the perception that BTEA participants generally secure temporary or administrative roles.
- In terms of recruitment, employers suggested that they look for a reasonable level of education but that the candidates' attitude and appetite for work is more important.
- Employers also offer comprehensive training both in-house and external depending on their job role.
- The overall view of the BTEA scheme amongst employers is that it is successful in providing support to individuals. However, the underlying challenge is to find candidates with the right skill sets and for participants to secure employment in the right companies and in line with their career ambitions.

- One employer suggested that poor BTEA employment outcomes may have resulted from lack of preparation for interviews, participants' poor attitude to work, and their lack of motivation compared with other candidates.
- In terms of recommendations, it was suggested that more engagement between DSP and employers to explore methods of improving poor employment outcomes is needed.

Conclusions and implications

The research concludes that two hypotheses may explain the key finding of the 2015 impact evaluation of BTEA that employment outcomes for BTEA SLO participants were worse than those of a control group of unemployed people who did not participate in BTEA. These hypotheses are:

- **Hypothesis 1:** that BTEA SLO participation had characteristics such that, on average, it reduced participants' employability.
- **Hypothesis 2:** that the previous evaluation was not able to control for unobserved or confounding factors which were relevant to employability; and, particularly, that the levels of motivation in respect of employment, at the point of choosing to enter BTEA provision or not, differed between participant and non-participant groups.

Some research findings do **not** support **Hypothesis 1**. Thus, BTEA participation was seen by participants as valuable and stimulating. Administration was not onerous or inefficient. Case officers and education providers were strongly supportive of the schemes' objectives.

However, a number of other findings suggest that aspects of BTEA may not have been helpful to employability and thus tend to **support Hypothesis 1's** proposition that the scheme may not assist or may hinder progression into work. The main ones are:

- There are no available statistics on BTEA course completion rates but research interviews and discussions suggest non-completion may have been significant
- Work experience, which may be particularly valuable in promoting employability, was an infrequent component of BTEA courses
- Engagement of employers with the BTEA programme was infrequent or absent
- BTEA SLO courses may have delivered skills which were not greatly in demand in local labour markets
- Inconsistent selection procedures for courses may have led to participation by learners who had low employability levels for which BTEA SLO courses could not sufficiently compensate
- There was no continuity of focussed support and monitoring of BTEA participants nor even maintenance of an information system to record their progress through study and into subsequent employment or not
- The intermediate qualifications delivered by BTEA SLO courses may be at a level which has limited labour market value

In respect of **Hypothesis 2** – concerning possible differences between participants and non-participants which were not accounted for in the 2015 impact evaluation of BTEA – *this* study did not include a non-participant comparison group. However, three possible areas of difference between the two groups were considered: in respect of motivation to find work; in respect of levels of social and personal disadvantage; and in respect of levels of literacy and numeracy.

Thus, in this research, participants universally expressed strongly positive motivations towards employment. Some participants had found work and were in employment. Others reported persistent through unsuccessful efforts to find work. These findings **tend not to support Hypothesis 2** in that they suggest BTEA participants were not deficient in respect of motivation and they may not have differed from non-participants who had been observed to have a higher rate of entry into employment.

However, in **support of Hypothesis 2**, it can be argued that there is a difference in motivation to enter employment which is *inherent* in the decision to study on a BTEA course rather than to seek work directly without studying as did non-participants.

Further, *expressed* motivations towards finding employment may, in some cases, have concealed actually reluctance to seek work ; or work motivation may have been quite selective, geared to accepting only certain jobs and/or minimum wage levels (such as those which delivered a substantial income advantage over welfare benefit).

It was also observed that many participants saw the principal benefits of BTEA participation as social ones – making new friends and contacts in a supportive college environment – rather than of advancing employability; and some case officers were concerned that some BTEA participants were motivated by the allowance itself rather than by desire to find work.

The social, domestic, and personal disadvantages of some BTEA participants were also recognised in this research as being considerable and may, on average, have exceeded those of non-participants. And the basic literacy and numeracy skills of some participants were low. Again, it is possible that these were, on average, lower than those of non-participants.

Overall, it is suggested that both hypotheses are likely to have been at least partially true and, in combination, contributed to the relatively weak employment outcomes of BTEA SLO participation. If this is the case then a range of possible policy implications includes:

- **Improve information** on the progression of BTEA students through and after their courses in order to better understand completion rates and to identify potential drop-out students early.
- **Improve liaison between case providers and education providers** such that BTEA students are consistently identified as such while on their courses, are given particular mentoring and support to reduce drop-out, and are given particular guidance and assistance to help them find work at the end of their courses.
- Continue to **tighten, and make more systematic, the initial processes by which ‘suitability’ criteria for BTEA support are assessed** by case officers and during which personal progression plans are drawn up.

- Encourage education providers to **increase the use of work experience** in course curricula and to otherwise emphasize the practical, directly work-related elements of courses; and encourage participants towards entry into courses which have these features.
- Stimulate linkages between case officers, education providers, and larger **employers** in particular localities with an aim that employers become directly involved in course design and begin to use courses on which BTEA students participate, as a reliable source of potential candidates.
- **Create relationships with businesses in Ireland more generally** to better identify the qualifications they need in order to recruit, and with education providers to ensure that there is more concordance between BTEA-supported provision and real job prospects.
- Encourage **closer engagement between employers, the Department of Social Protection, and education providers at a local level**. This could provide better opportunities for participants upon obtaining their qualification. Additionally, there is also the need to improve the status of unemployed people in order to improve the roles into which they are typically recruited.
- To reduce drop-out rates, **re-introduce or initiate additional support costs** into BTEA, including the consideration of the restoration of the SUSI maintenance grants to TLO BTEA recipients, in order to lower the cost to students of participation incurred by lengthy travel-to-study distances, childcare needs, or the purchase of books or other course materials.
- To further reduce non-completion and to increase post-course employment rates, introduce conditional or **incentive payments for providers** related to outcomes in terms of completion, award of qualification, and/or post-course entry to stable employment.
- Introduce **more stringent selection of suitable students** (those most clearly able to complete a substantial course and best positioned by virtue of circumstances, aptitude, and motivation to find and maintain a job) – with those who are not selected for BTEA being diverted to other provision focussed on improving employability by attention to literacy, numeracy, soft skills, personal presentation, and CV and interview preparation.
- **Re-balance BTEA between second level and third level provision** such that third level attainment becomes the predominant objective of BTEA

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

As one of the three strands of the Back to Education Programme (BTE), the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) is a non-statutory second-chance education scheme for jobseekers, lone parents, and people with disabilities who are currently in receipt of certain social welfare payments. The purpose of BTEA is to provide educational opportunities for individuals who wish to pursue second level or third level courses of education. The Second Level Option (SLO) enables study to be undertaken provided it leads to Quality & Qualifications Ireland (QQI) qualifications up to level 6¹ and the Third Level Option (TLO) enables study to be undertaken to QQI qualification level 8. Unemployed people can benefit from the programme as the BTEA allows them to participate in a course of education whilst allowing them to continue to receive an income support payment.

In order to qualify for the BTEA, individuals must be aged over 21 and have been in receipt of a qualifying social welfare payment as well as being accepted onto a qualifying course. For second level courses in particular, individuals must have been receiving a qualifying social welfare payment for at least 3 months (78 paid or credited days of unemployment); for third level courses this must be at least 9 months.² People who have been awarded a statutory redundancy payment and are entitled to one of the qualifying social welfare payments can access this support immediately or within one year of their redundancy payment. The age requirement does not apply to people aged 18 to 21 who have been out of formal education for at least two years and in receipt of a qualifying payment; or people aged 18 who are in receipt of a specific disability payment.

From the perspective of people in receipt of a Jobseekers payment, the overarching objective of the BTEA is to raise educational and skills levels to enable individuals to obtain better access to emerging labour market needs.³ In line with the Government's activation strategy, the scheme aims to provide a pathway back to employment for people who may otherwise become long term unemployed⁴.

The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) conducted an impact evaluation to investigate the effectiveness of the BTEA scheme between 2013 and 2015 in assisting jobseekers to progress to employment. The evaluation compared the employment outcomes of unemployed people who undertook a second (SLO) or third (TLO) level course in education under the BTEA scheme in 2008, with the employment outcomes of unemployed people who, conversely, did not undertake such courses. Results indicated that unemployed individuals who took up a course of education in 2008 were less likely to be in employment compared to previously unemployed people who did not take up such a course. After controlling for individuals who exited the course to continue education, the results continued

¹ It should be noted that the vast majority of participants on the 'second-level option' on BTEA attend further education courses, primarily Post-Leaving Certificate courses (PLCs)

² http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/social_welfare/social_welfare_payments/back_to_education/back_to_education_allowance.html

³ www.welfare.ie

⁴ <http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Back-to-Education-Allowance-Scheme.aspx#1.1>

to surprise researchers, revealing that individuals who commenced the BTEA course were 38% less likely to be in employment and 30% less likely (in June 2014) relative to those who did not take up the course⁵.

Thus, BMG Research was commissioned by the Department of Social Protection (DSP) in September 2016 to conduct a qualitative study to explore the drivers of negative employment outcomes of participants in receipt of BTEA.

1.2 Research objectives

The overarching aim of the study was to explore and understand the drivers of continuing negative employment outcomes (to 2015) by examining if and how BTEA's stated objectives were being met whilst also accounting for changes in scheme eligibility and administration that may have affected the negative outcomes at the time. The primary focus of the project was on second level option (SLO) courses. However, some participants who had progressed to third level (TLO) courses also made reference to these higher level courses. Additional research objectives included exploring:

- differing and competing perceptions of scheme objectives amongst participants, case officers and/ or education providers
- experiences of participating in, delivering, or administrating the BTEA scheme
- individual characteristics including labour market histories and/or personal circumstances
- employer perceptions of BTEA participants and views of the scheme
- labour market dynamics

The research aims to deliver robust insights to inform the evaluation of the BTEA scheme and deepen DSP's understanding of its effectiveness.

1.3 Approach

A qualitative approach was taken in order to meet the aims and objectives of the research and included a range of inputs, including:

- **In-depth interviews with participants:** In-depth telephone interviews were undertaken with participants who had completed a second-level course and were in receipt of BTEA to explore their individual views and experiences of the BTEA scheme.
- **In-depth interviews with case officers:** Telephone interviews took place with case officers to understand their overall views of the BTEA scheme including scheme objectives, administration, processes, and their level of engagement with BTEA participants.
- **Online focus groups with education providers:** Online focus groups were undertaken with education providers to understand their views of delivering further education and training/ second chance education at second level. This also included exploring whether education providers were able to distinguish those in receipt of BTEA from non-BTEA fellow participants.

⁵ <https://www.esri.ie/publications/an-evaluation-of-the-back-to-education-allowance-2/>

- **In-depth interviews with employers:** Telephone interviews took place with employers in Ireland to understand their views on the negative drivers of the scheme in securing employment and whether employers were able to distinguish between those who were in receipt of BTEA and other candidates.

1.4 Methodology

The following section outlines the approach that was taken to explore the drivers of negative employment outcomes with all participants involved in the research.

1.4.1 In-depth interviews

BMG Research undertook **56 in-depth qualitative interviews** with a range of **participants** who had undertaken a second level course between 2010 and 2014 and were in receipt of BTEA.

Fifteen in-depth qualitative interviews were also undertaken with **case officers** who were involved in administering and recommending participants for BTEA and **3 in-depth qualitative interviews** took place with **employers**.⁶

These in-depth interviews were undertaken between the 22nd November 2016 and 7th February 2017 by qualitative researchers from BMG Research. All interviews were undertaken over the telephone and lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes.

At the start of the interview, participants were assured that any comments made or verbatim quotations used in the report would be anonymous and would not be attributed to named individuals. They were also told that the interview would be audio-recorded (unless they objected to this) and the file would be stored securely at BMG.

Topic guides for the participant, case officer, and employer interviews were designed by BMG in conjunction with DSP and are appended to this report (Appendices A, B and D). Topic guides were used to ensure that the interviews remained focused on the main areas of importance whilst allowing flexibility to pursue emerging lines of enquiry.

1.4.2 Online focus groups

In addition to the in-depth telephone interviews, four online focus groups were conducted between Monday 5th and Wednesday 14th December 2016 with education providers, using an online platform called VisionsLive. VisionsLive is a straightforward and visually appealing platform which allows both moderators and participants to conduct free-flowing conversations, explore specific participant's responses more explicitly in a private 'instant messages' window and allow the use of visual stimulus exercises using a whiteboard facility. Upon confirmation of taking part, participants were sent an email outlining the time, date and link to join the discussion.

Each online focus group was led by two independent researchers from BMG Research and lasted approximately 90 minutes. At the beginning of each focus group, participants were informed about confidentiality and assured that responses remain anonymous and any quotes used in report writing would not be attributed back to named individuals. All participants

⁶ Please note the findings of employers are based on a very small sample size as the employers who were approached to take part in the research reported limited knowledge of the BTEA/BTEA participants.

were introduced to the discussion with a short warm-up introduction, detailing the purpose of the research and were then asked to introduce themselves and the college/ organisation they work in.

The topic guide for the groups was tailored specifically for education providers and is appended to this report (Appendix C). During the groups, various stimulus activity was used to engage with participants and further explore their views and opinions of the BTEA scheme using the platform’s interactive whiteboard.

1.4.3 Recruitment

As the initial step in the recruitment process, DSP sent notification letters to potential participants, case officers, and education providers to inform them of the purposes of the research and that it was being delivered by BMG Research. Following this, participants were recruited via telephone by BMG’s dedicated qualitative recruitment team using contact details provided by DSP. During the recruitment stage, potential participants were provided with an outline of the research aims and objectives, and details of what the in-depth interviews or online focus groups would involve. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of the research, and their permission was also sought to audio-record the interviews. All ‘booked’ participants were then sent a confirmation email prior to their appointment to confirm the full details of the interview/online focus group discussion and to identify a senior contact at BMG for them to contact if they had any concerns or queries.

1.4.4 Profile of participants

In total, 74 participants took part in an in-depth telephone discussion. A breakdown of the profile of respondents is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of respondents in in-depth interviews

Type of depth interview	No. of participants	Cohort	Gender	Age group	Office/ County	Employment status
Participant	56	x15 2008-2012 x15 2012-2014 x17 2014 x4 Momentum x5 Near End	x16 female x40 male	x8 18-24 x26 25-34 x9 35-33 x11 45-54 x1 55-64 x1 60-64 x1 65+	x40 Dublin x5 Galway x5 Kerry x4 Westmeath x1 Longford x1 Louth	x16 employed x40 unemployed
Case Officer	15					
Employer	3					

A sample of 27 education providers took part in the online focus groups. A breakdown of the profile of participants is provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Profile of respondents in online focus group

Focus group	No. of participants	Location	Gender
Online focus group 1	7	x6 Dublin City ETB x1 VSCCS	x4 female x3 male
Online focus group 2	7	x5 Longford and Westmeath ETB x2 VSCCS	x4 female x3 male
Online focus group 3	7	x7 Kerry ETB	x5 female x2 male
Online focus group 4	6	x6 Momentum	x5 female x1 male

1.4.5 Analysis of qualitative data

A ‘grounded theory’ approach to analysis was undertaken whereby all themes and findings reported against the key areas of interest emerged ‘organically’ through the in-depth interviews themselves rather than through hypothesis testing – thus making the overall findings more robust and grounded in the experiences and views of participants.

To achieve this, once the interviews were completed and transcribed, they were analysed using a thematic framework analysis approach. This approach comprised an analysis grid (in Microsoft Excel), which enabled the classification and interpretation of qualitative data.

Firstly, the key themes and topics arising from the interviews were identified from the topic guide and an initial review of a selection of transcripts. Each of the key themes and topics were then translated to a column heading in an Excel grid, with each row within the grid representing an individual case. Researchers analysed each transcript individually, by extracting relevant data from the interview and summarising it into the appropriate cell within the grid. Verbatim quotes were included alongside the summaries where possible.

Once all of the feedback had been received, researchers reviewed and analysed the information within the final grid: a series of thematic tables of qualitative responses representing all the individuals who had participated in the research. Researchers read horizontally across the grid to obtain a full understanding of each individual’s views and experiences, and read vertically down the grid to gain an understanding of the commonality of particular views in relation to each of the themes, as well as observing any differences between the participant types. Where particular themes and commonalities emerged between participants these were included in the report. The views of individual participants are only included where they have had a very different experience to others to highlight specific instances where things have gone well or not well.

1.4.6 Note on the interpretation of qualitative research and data

Qualitative interviews and focus group discussions can provide an understanding of what people think, need, want and care about – and can explore the reasons behind those views. The researcher guides the interviewee through a series of topics (agreed beforehand with

the client), but in a less structured way than with a quantitative (survey) questionnaire. Findings may emerge from interviews and focus group discussions which the researcher and client had not previously considered. These can be identified and explored.

It is the researcher's job to ensure that all of the client's questions are answered and that every interviewee has an opportunity to express his or her point of view. It is, however, important to note that, in some cases, due to the limited time available and to ensure a positive interview experience, priority sections of the topic guide were highlighted to ensure detailed responses were obtained around the topic area.

It should also be remembered that participants may hold views that are based on incorrect information. It is the researcher's role to explore and report participants' perceptions, not necessarily to correct any misunderstanding or incorrect perceptions.

Further, when considering findings from the interviews or focus group discussions, it is important to note that they are not based on quantitative statistical evidence; and, when reporting the findings, terms such as 'several', 'some', 'many', 'most', and 'a few' have been used to reflect the relative frequency of responses.

Quotes have been included in the report (in italics) to provide illustration of the views and experiences reported (both those that were more common, and minority views). These quotes are verbatim and were selected for inclusion in the report on the basis that they explain or highlight an issue more succinctly or clearly than would a paraphrase of the response in the body text.

1.5 Report structure

Following this introduction the report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 2** explores views and perceptions of the BTEA scheme from **participants** who took part in a second level course and were in receipt of BTEA;
- **Chapter 3** examines the views and perceptions of **case officers** in the BTEA scheme and explores areas such as their views of the administrative process, perceptions of the courses, perceived relationship with education providers, and the outcomes of the programme;
- **Chapter 4** explores **education providers'** understanding of the BTEA scheme and perceptions of the schemes effectiveness;
- **Chapter 5** outlines **employers'** views and opinions of BTEA;
- **Chapter 6** includes **conclusions and consideration** of the research findings.

2 Participants: research findings

This section outlines participants' personal experiences of taking part in a second-level course funded by the BTEA. It highlights their motivations to go back into education, their awareness of the BTEA, and the impact the course had on their employability prospects.

2.1 Participant background

2.1.1 Education experience

Prior to engaging with the BTEA scheme, most participants had completed a Leaving Certificate (referred to as Leaving Cert). Subsequent to completing a Leaving Cert they had either pursued a college course (this typically included Information Technology (IT), social care and beauty therapy) or an apprenticeship programme (mainly construction-related in the areas of bricklaying, plumbing, or electrical work). Having started on these courses/apprenticeships, completion of the programmes varied. Some suggested they progressed to employment and further down the line faced redundancy or were affected by the recession whilst others made the decision to discontinue their college course, typically due to lack of interest. Following these events the period in which participants then engaged with the BTEA scheme varied between 2 years and up to 15 years (this is dependent on individual experiences).

"I left school at 17 and worked as a legal secretary... from 9:30am to 6pm in two different legal offices...I was made redundant about three years ago." (Female, 45-54, Cohort 2014)

"I started an apprentice as a maintenance fitter. I did that for fourteen and a half years. Then I got into the golf business, I was working for a big golf company. I worked there for eight years as assistant and then manager. In 2008 with the recession, the company went into liquidation. Then I wasn't working, I was doing bits of jobs, part time stuff. Then in 2012, there wasn't much work on with the recession, so I decided to go back to education." (Male, 45-54, Cohort 2012-2014)

Additionally, a few participants also mentioned completing their education in England or other foreign countries where they achieved their qualifications before moving to Ireland and engaging with a course funded by the BTEA.

"I've got O-levels that I got in England, whilst in England I went onto further education, actually did catering. After catering I changed and I started to work in retail, and went into cash offices... I worked up to when I had my daughter, which is fourteen years ago... When I left England to go to Ireland, I then got work with KPMG doing the health repayment scheme. I was lucky enough to get onto a computer course, which updated my skills, and then I went onto Back to Education business course, which I enjoyed. (Female, 45-54, Cohort 2008-2010)

Primary and secondary school experiences were mixed for participants but most reported poor experiences of secondary school due to the lack of interest in studying or difficulty in understanding the curriculum which led them to discontinue their education.

"I hated school, so that's why I went into the construction business" (Male, 35-44, Cohort 2008-2012)

"When I went to secondary school it was like a child prison. I mean it was like you were branded one thing in that school. It was just a constant battle between teachers and pupils." (Male, 35-44, Cohort 2014)

Those who were more positive associated their experiences with accomplishing an award whilst at school, achieving their leaving certificate, or generally finding the range of subjects interesting.

"It was grand. I got a good result in my leaving cert." (Male, 25-34, Near End)

"I was always pupil of the year. I wasn't bullied. It was great." (Male, 35-44, Cohort 2012-2014)

A few were ambivalent in their view of school. One mentioned being uninterested in school as a child but had returned to education at a later stage in their career. Another enjoyed school but struggled to perform well in exams.

"Secondary school was a good experience. I went to school in Dublin, did my Junior Cert and Leaving Cert in the same school but didn't do too well in my exams in secondary school, so hence I went and got an electrical apprenticeship. Overall it was an okay experience." (Male, 25-34, Cohort 2014)

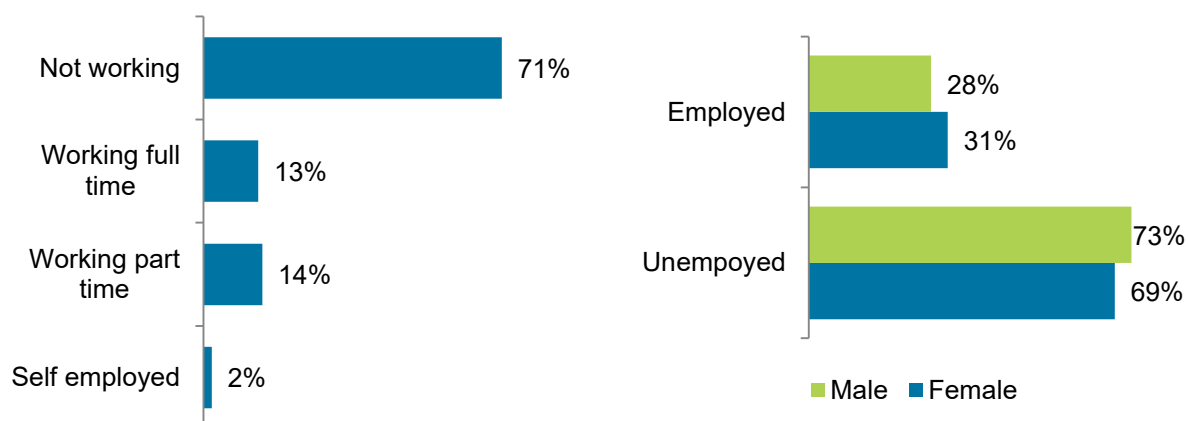
2.1.2 Work experience

Participants were asked to describe their current employment status. These findings have been quantified based on the feedback from the in-depth interviews and the demographic information provided in the participant database from the DSP.

Seven in ten (71%) participants reported that they were not currently working while around three in ten (29%) were in employment. 13% of those in employment were working full-time, 14% were working part-time and 2% were self-employed.

In terms of gender, of those interviewed, a higher proportion of females said that they were in employment (31%) compared with males (28%).

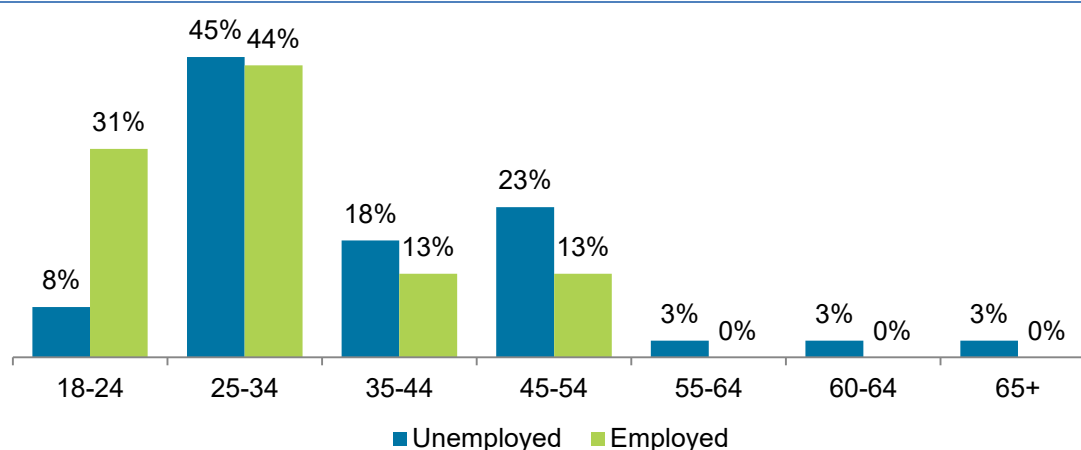
Figure 1: Participant's employment status and employment status by gender



Sample base: 56 participants - Male (40), Female (16) - Status as of December 2016

In terms of age, the profile of participants in employment varied between the ages of 18 and 54 whilst those unemployed varied between 18 and 65+. A higher proportion of participants aged 18-24 were in employment (31%) than were unemployed (8%). On the other hand, more of those aged 35 to 54 were unemployed (41%) rather than employed (26%).

Figure 2: Participant's employment status by age group



Sample base: Unemployed (40), Employed (16) - Status as of December 2016

The previous work experience of those who were currently unemployed varied amongst participants. For example, some had entry level jobs (e.g. clerical or assistant roles in retail or childcare on a temporary basis) whilst others had been involved in manual jobs such as forklift drivers or factory work. A few noted the difficulty with trying to get employment, for example:

"I've been trying to get jobs, but no one's given the opportunity. I've been trying hard." (Male, 18-24, Cohort 2014)

The roles of those who were currently in employment also varied across sectors including childcare, working in hotels, hairdressers, or within a family business. Most suggested they sourced these jobs through employment agencies.

2.1.3 Motivations to go back into education

Participants were motivated to go back in to education for a number of reasons but the key motive was to improve their chances of securing a job. Some were frustrated with their prospects of securing employment as, despite seeing a number of advertisements and applying for jobs that were linked to their experience, they were refused by employers. They therefore considered obtaining a qualification as an effective way to improve their chances of employability.

"I was looking for work...I wasn't able to find anything, it was very difficult to find anything...I wanted to get an extra qualification for myself." (Male, 25-34, Near End participant)

Beyond the general imperative to 'secure a job', participants mentioned a number of additional reasons for returning to education which are summarised as:

- To fulfil career goals and ambitions which were hindered in their youth as education was then unaffordable or they were unaware of the options available to them.
- To up-skill and gain a qualification in an area of interest in order to increase the number of employment opportunities available to them.
- To secure opportunities for further educational progress, particularly for those who were ambitious to achieve a degree level qualification.
- The scheme had been recommended by friends, family or others to encourage them to get a qualification or by those who had successfully secured employment from the scheme as a participant.
- To generally improve their status as a job seeker.

A few older participants also highlighted that they had had restricted opportunities to get an education in their youth and that BTEA provided them with the opportunity to gain an education which they could use to support their family in the future.

Additionally, many participants made reference to the recession and the impact this had on the economy and employability in Ireland and suggested that BTEA was an opportunity for them to focus their experience into a specific area in which they would build their career.

2.2 Overall views of BTEA

2.2.1 Awareness and experience of the BTEA support

Most participants became aware of the BTEA scheme through the Department of Social Protection. They were informed about the scheme when visiting the department for guidance and support on seeking jobs or income support.

Others became aware of BTEA through word of mouth, with most of these saying that their friends or family had recommended the programme having previously been a part of it and having successfully secured employment. Additional sources of awareness were through the local Social Welfare office, Intreo (Integrated employment and support service), Citizens Information, recommendations from tutors during open days at colleges, or from online search.

Several participants mentioned that they were optimistic about the scheme when they initially became aware of it and, when researching further, either online or face-to-face, considered it to be a good opportunity to improve their personal development and to provide a path to employment.

"I thought it was a great opportunity for people who have ability and knowledge, desires to work in a company, and to integrate in society." (Female, 25-34, Cohort 2012-2014)

Participating on a course funded by BTEA was generally described as a positive experience by those who took part. Participants depicted the course as a great way to improve their employment prospects and valued the financial support that was provided through the scheme.

"My experience of the course is really positive. I wouldn't have been able to go to college (third level course) without the Back to Education Allowance because I'm not in contact with my parents. I wouldn't have been able to pay rent. I would have been unhappy in retail because there's not much room for progression. It's great to be able

to be challenged and hopefully have better job prospects that are a little bit more challenging afterwards." (Female, 25-34, Cohort 2014)

"I loved doing the course; it was a great way of meeting other people as well. It was a good way of getting to know people in the area and finding out more about the jobs available locally, and if I could carry on with the education." (Female, 45-54, Cohort 2008-2010)

Networking opportunities and ability to meet new people was considered a great advantage of the scheme; particularly as some had now become good friends. However, the key benefit of being a participant on the course was the qualification they achieved on completion and the impact it had on their personal development. They acknowledged that although the course may not guarantee employment, it provided them with qualifications that could be used in the future.

"BTEA gave me qualifications I didn't have, and it's great, I can always fall back on those qualifications" (Male, 25-34, Cohort 2014)

"Very important experience, and a good investment in me as such, because it helped me then to go on into Central Statistics Office, and be confident about using new applications, and software, and things like that" (Male, 60-64, Cohort 2012-2014)

One participant in particular was extremely positive about their experience and outlined how being part of the BTEA scheme enabled them to progress to degree level, a qualification they felt they would not have otherwise achieved, and to secure employment.

Although participants were positive about the BTEA and the course, a few maintained that additional support should be provided to cover travel costs since, as there were limited course options in their area, they were required to travel further than anticipated to pursue the course of their choice.

However, two participants had a negative view of the scheme and suggested that they did not continue as they found the course difficult and that the teaching style did not meet their needs. An older participant also felt they were not well suited to be undertaking a course with younger students.

"I think I would have preferred to be put in a group of mature students rather than in with a load of seventeen, eighteen-year-olds because they had completely different mind-sets." (Male, 45-54, Cohort 2014)

2.2.2 Understanding and expectations of undertaking a course using the BTEA

Participants were asked to explain what they thought BTEA was for. Almost all participants reported that their understanding of the BTEA scheme was that it would enable them to up-skill and gain a qualification and to improve their confidence and chances of employment. Older participants described the scheme as a course for mature students which offered the chance to go back into education whilst others had the understanding that the BTEA was to give individuals a second chance to change their occupation.

"Back to Education Allowance is for someone who would want to get their life in a better place, to make their life better, to learn, to go and get a job." (Male, 18-24, Cohort 2008-2012)

Study to explore the drivers of negative employment outcomes of participants on the Back to Education Allowance Scheme

A few participants conveyed their understanding of the BTEA scheme as providing individuals with a pathway to education regardless of their educational and social background. They also linked this to the public policy aim to reduce unemployment in Ireland.

When discussing the purpose of the scheme, most participants agreed that this was clearly explained by their case officer and, particularly, that they found the income support useful. As mentioned above, some participants expressed the importance of the allowance as that, without it, they would not have been financially able to undertake the course.

Some participants independently sought more information on the scheme by researching online and talking to others as they were not assigned a case officer or believed their case officer did not explain the purpose sufficiently.

In terms of participant expectations, most had the ambition to complete the course and gain employment. Some aspired to progress to more advanced education and to achieve the qualifications required to attend university.

Some participants did not have any expectations but having completed the course felt the scheme greatly benefited their personal development.

"It's made me grow a lot. It's definitely been a great help to me." (Male, 35-44, Cohort 2012-2014)

A few also reported that they attended the course to explore and clarify their career options and interests whilst others perceived it as a good opportunity to develop and improve their English writing and speaking skills.

Whilst participants had positive expectations of their course, there were mixed views on whether these expectations had been met. Those who felt their expectation had been met were positive because they had either achieved a qualification or award and others, particularly those who were employed, reported that they secured more interviews with employers after completing the course.

"I've basically discovered what I'm interested in, which I thought was impossible at one stage after working as an electrician." (Male, 25-34, Cohort 2014)

"I didn't really have high expectations, because I'd never used it before. I didn't think it would be that great, and then, in the end, it turned out to be brilliant." (Female, 18-24, Cohort 2014)

Those who did not feel that their expectation had been met were particularly disappointed by the amount of funding they received and felt they could have benefited from additional incentives from the department to support them.

"I was getting the same amount of money I was sitting at home, where they should have easily given me more money for books and encourage people to do this, but they don't" (Male, 45-54, Cohort 2012-2014)

2.3 Views and opinions of the course(s) undertaken

2.3.1 Administrative process

All participants were asked about their experiences of the administrative process associated with the programme. A wide range of responses were offered.

Several participants believed the administrative process was easy and straightforward and did not report any issues. A few reported that the online form was time consuming to complete.

Participants had a good understanding of the application process which typically involved completing an online form and, if successful, they were invited to a group meeting where they were provided with more information about the BTEA scheme.

"Northside Partnership, they gave you an awful lot of options. They gave you all the courses that were available to me, and I just picked. You have to apply for them and get accepted, but it's very, very easy" (Male, 45-54, Cohort 2012-2014)

When responding to this interview question, they referred to the teachers and the process of reporting absences or late attendance. They generally felt comfortable speaking with their course leader and described them as 'understanding' and 'approachable'.

A few participants believed that the process was lengthy and the application form could have been made simpler, particularly for non-Irish participants where there was a slight language barrier.

"I remember spending four or five hours on the application. From that, there was a day long group interview process" (Male, 25-34, Cohort 2008-2012)

2.3.2 Views of taking part in a course

Participants had undertaken courses in a number of different areas including:

- Business studies
- Arts
- Childcare
- Computing
- Social studies
- Mechanical Engineering
- Beauty e.g. hairdressing and makeup
- Sports
- Health studies

These course options are in line with the top ten disciplines pursued by Jobseekers and OFPs as outlined in the Back to Education Annual Report, 2105/2016. Additional courses undertaken by participants in this research outside of these disciplines include Mathematics, Youth Studies, and Agriculture.⁷

⁷ As noted above the vast majority of participants on the 'second-level option' on BTEA attend further education courses, primarily Post-Leaving Certificate Courses (PLCs)

Most participants reported that the course they undertook was either their first choice or closely aligned with their first choice. Most chose the course as it related to their previous employment history and/or academic experience or was an area they were generally interested in.

"I chose the course because it was interesting, you did English, you did history, sociology. Doing this course, it opened different avenues for different universities"
(Male, 45-54, Cohort 2012-2014)

Some courses were recommended based on what was available in their local area and in line with their skills and experience. A few also took the course that was recommended to them after reviews with their case officer.

Participants were asked to outline their views of different elements of the course they undertook including their opinions on course content, the teaching method, interaction with their teachers and/or providers and their overall perceptions of the delivery of the course. The findings of each of these elements have been summarised below.

Course content

In most instances participants were very positive about the content of the course they undertook with some suggesting that it widened their choice of options and opportunities for employment. Many described the course content as 'helpful', 'detailed' and 'interesting' and believed they developed a wider understanding and knowledge of the subject area.

"Yes, it was a very good course. None of the modules were too lengthy. They were all relevant. It's a fairly new course. It's relevant to today's marketplace. It does line up with a third level. It's the equivalent of the first year in a third level course." (Male, 55-64, Cohort 2012-2014)

A few said that their course involved practical elements including work experience. Participants were particularly positive about this. They believed it developed their understanding of the course and enabled them to apply their skills in a 'real-life' working environment.

However, other participants held the view that not all modules were applicable to them and some courses were too lengthy and could be delivered within six months.

The feedback on course content was linked to attendance in that two participants highlighted that being part of a heavily theory-driven course resulted in a high proportion of participants discontinuing the scheme, particularly during the first year. They suggested that a course schedule for the full duration of the scheme would have been useful to set individuals' expectations.

"We had a really, really high dropout rate on that course. We started off with a hundred-and-something, and on the final day of the third year, there were only about seven or eight people there for the final exams. The reason for that is, they didn't tell us obviously until afterwards, but they do all the theory in Year 1. Anyone that's not genuinely, genuinely interested is going to get so bored by the theory they're going to be dropping out after Year 1." (Female, 25-34, Cohort 2008-2012)

Teaching method

The teaching method was perceived to be of a high standard by most participants. They found that teachers explained the course well and used clear language that made the modules easy to follow and understand. In line with the comments about dropout rates during the course, the most prominent aspect of the teaching method was explaining and delivering the course in an interactive way.

Participants strongly praised their teachers in that they explained the course content well and felt they really went out of their way to support them.

“You can’t fault any of the teachers. They’ve had Oscars and awards. It’s a very successful school.” (Male, 35-44, Cohort 2012-2014)

Role play was also considered an important aspect, supporting participants’ understanding of the subject area.

“It was all basics; the nursing classes showed us what we’d have to do, did lots of role-play with us. It definitely helped me, because I went straight onto it, so I felt like I had a bit of an upper hand.” (Female, 25-34, Cohort 2014).

Interaction with teachers and/or providers

Many participants were positive about their interaction with teachers and course leaders and described them as ‘approachable’, ‘helpful’, and ‘encouraging’. They generally held the opinion that the teachers were knowledgeable about the subject matter with a few commenting on their high level of experience. Some suggested that they built a good relationship with their teacher and did not hesitate to speak with them about any challenges they faced throughout the course.

Some praised the one-to-one session support their teachers provided them with outside of the classroom to help them improve the areas in which their understanding was weaker or where they felt some lessons had not been clearly explained.

“Obviously, sometimes you might be a bit lost and you pick them up on something. They all go out their way to help you. They’d never tell you to go away. I’ve met loads of people that went to Ballyfermot College and not one of them has a bad word to say about it.” (Male, 35-44, Cohort 2012-2014)

One older participant was positive about the teaching style and the fact they were on a course with individuals of a similar age. They described the lessons as being interactive and could relate well with the course leader in terms of sharing previous education and work experience.

“The course tutors were all absolutely wonderful, they were very helpful and understanding, and they realised they were dealing with mature students and they were just wonderful.” (Female, 45-54, Cohort 2008-2012)

Outcomes of the course

Although it was recognised that a number of individuals had discontinued their course, participants were generally positive about their experiences with most suggesting that they achieved what they set out to. Almost all the participants reported that they achieved a qualification as a result of taking part in the second-level course and were optimistic about their employment prospects. Most said that they were extremely committed to the course

and reported very few absences. They felt their qualification had enhanced many opportunities for them.

"I got my qualification and now I'm getting two to two and a half days a week work."
(Female, 45-54, Cohort 2014)

"Yes, I got my qualification. I was happy enough. Got what I wanted." (Male, 25-34, Cohort 2014)

A couple of participants who were coming towards the end of their course were confident that they would secure employment on completion. One participant in particular was positive about finding a job as a junior accountant.

"I think I'm nearly there. I'll be confident to go and start as a junior accounts person in an accounts company." (Female, 35-44, Near End participant)

A few reported that they had not completed their course but were satisfied with the level of information and knowledge they had gained to that point.

For those who progressed to a third level course, this was also funded under BTEA. Again, it was suggested that this was straightforward to apply for and generally followed on from the course they undertook at second level. Several participants reported their current status as being unemployed while they waited to progress into further education and/or were undertaking a Third Level Option (TLO) course.

Participants were asked whether they felt that their fellow students had the same or similar experiences and came from the same background as them. Most suggested that their peers' experiences were similar i.e. if they were doing a hairdressing or construction course the participants had a similar education or work background. However, it was observed that the demographic composition of course participants was mixed, with people being of varied ages, genders, and social backgrounds. One particular factor was that those from a foreign country found it difficult to liaise with Irish participants due to the language barrier.

"They're more from different countries, they weren't English-speaking students, and they were foreign students. Everybody had different culture and background."
(Female, 25-34, Cohort 2012-2014)

Younger participants held the perception that mature students were more knowledgeable and found the course easier to understand whilst mature students themselves preferred being in a class with similar aged participants as they enjoyed sharing their experiences.

Interestingly, given the age range of participants, most were generally positive about their fellow students and suggested that they built some good relationships and supported each other throughout the course.

"I know some of them that were much older than me. They were very nice. I'd interact with them all. Everyone helped each other." (Female, 18-24, Cohort 2014)

In terms of fellow students' progression upon completion of their second-level course, most said that their peers took different routes but, broadly, the majority of their classes successfully progressed to a third-level course or went into employment.

Interestingly, one participant held the view that the younger students of the class progressed to employment but mature students were unsuccessful in achieving this. They reported that

older individuals struggled in the course as they had limited academic experience and were sceptical that employers would consider them for junior positions.

"I didn't meet anybody from the course afterwards, but it's always the younger type of people that got jobs from these courses." (Male, 45-54, 2008-2012)

2.3.3 Awareness and usefulness of career guidance

Awareness of the availability of career guidance was high amongst both employed and unemployed participants, with only a small number of participants reported that they were unaware of this.

In many cases, participants who were aware of the availability of career guidance reported that they had used it and rated it as highly useful. The support involved one-to-one sessions lasting between 10 and 30 minutes with guidance counsellors and included the following:

Advice on applying for further education: some participants were interested in developing their academic career and suggested that the guidance counsellors were useful in supporting them to apply for third level courses and providing information on how to progress to degree level.

"Excellent, she couldn't be helpful enough. I'd never applied for university in my life, so we had to go through the course that was relevant to me and the CAO" (Male, 45-54, Cohort 2012-2014)

Support with developing a CV and interview skills: it was reported that careers guidance was really useful in providing participants with information and support on CV writing skills and tips on good interview techniques. This would include advice on how to emphasize their education and work experience and to provide examples of the skills they had achieved thus far.

Providing access to an online service: a few participants mentioned that their guidance counsellor signposted them to an online service which enabled them to download documents that they could use for CV and interview preparation.

Informing individuals on their future career prospects: Participants particularly valued the advice and support they received from their guidance counsellor on how to progress from the second level course. This would include information on possible third level courses and a broad idea of the types of sectors in which jobs may be open to them. Some suggested that they were torn as to the directions in which their career might go and, therefore, found this additional support to be important to their decision-making.

"Very good. Very patient. I was confused about whether to do music or something to do with science. She sat down and we had a conversation." (Female, 25-34, 2012-2014)

Those who reported that they were unaware of the career guidance suggested, however, that they had support networks included their teachers or family and friends.

2.4 Views on the impacts of taking part in a course funded by BTEA

2.4.1 Impact of the course

Undertaking a course funded by the BTEA had positively impacted most individuals who took part in the research. Many were positive about the outcomes of the course and reported

that they had successfully progressed into employment or continued on to a third level course. In line with participants' expectations of achieving the qualification they set out to gain, most suggested that this was achieved and that they obtained a level 5 or 6 upon completion of the second-level course.

Lack of interest in various modules, limited transport links and in some cases additional costs such as fees for books were some of the reasons why a few participants discontinued their courses.

Meeting new people was considered the most enjoyable element of being part of a course for most participants.

Depending on the type of course which participants undertook, some reported that they enjoyed the practical elements. For example, an individual who had taken a recreation course particularly benefited from the balance of interactive components which included being involved in outdoor activities for three days a week and applying the theory element twice a week.

"I suppose what I enjoyed most is how outdoors it was. Learning a lot, doing all the theory on it." (Male, 35-44, Cohort 2012-2014)

Some participants had the opportunity to complete work experience during their course. This was considered enjoyable as it enabled them to broaden their social skills and network with like-minded individuals.

In addition to this, some participants enjoyed the variety of modules in their course and suggested that the college environment had a relaxed atmosphere.

The least enjoyable factor of the courses was reported as the text-based theory element. Some suggested their course had a high volume of assignments and felt it could be more discussion-based. A few non-Irish participants were discouraged and felt that having a language barrier made the course more difficult and impacted their performance in exams.

"The worst was when I didn't really understand, the questions in the exam, or if I didn't get something right..." (Female, 18-24, Cohort 2014)

2.4.2 Challenges during the course

Participants were asked to describe any challenges they faced whilst on their BTEA courses. Responses were mixed with around half of those interviewed suggesting that they did not face any challenges. The biggest difficulty for those who reported challenges was familiarising and adjusting to a college and study environment having been out of work for a sustained period of time. This finding mainly emerged amongst mature participants (those aged 35+). On the other hand, a few participants struggled with the classroom dynamic and felt having a class of mixed age groups disadvantaged them.

"Most of the students on my course were nineteen, twenty. I felt tutors are used to talking to them, and I felt I was being talked down to, and I challenged it and got myself disciplined" (Female, 25-34, Cohort 2012-2014)

A number of additional challenges were mentioned and are summarised as:

- Difficulty with writing essays and meeting stringent deadlines.
- Sufficiently preparing for exams.

- Struggling with different modules of the course.
- Commitment to the course leading to the lack of social and personal time.
- Affordability of transport and course equipment.
- Younger participants finding it difficult to keep their learning pace in line with that of mature students.

Costs were a clear challenge for most participants. They believed that, although the allowance provided financial support for the course, they struggled with the affordability of additional costs such as transport and resources such as books and equipment.

"I had to work out that money for travel, if I was going to Maynooth I had to get a train and a bus, I had to pay for that. If I needed a book, I had to pay for that." (Male, 25-34, Cohort 2008-2012)

"Trying to get money to pay for the fuel to get to the course and back again. Travelling expenses, that was the most challenging." (Male, 25-34, Momentum participant)

As previously noted, a language barrier was an obstacle to non-Irish participants' performance in exams. They felt that if there was more support with their English writing and speaking skills they might have gained higher results.

"Just that my English was bad. If my English was better, I would have been able to get higher results. Really, I did enjoy that course." (Male, 18-24, Cohort 2008-2012)

2.4.3 Challenges in securing work

There were mixed views on the challenges which participants faced in securing work after completing their course. The responses were varied depending on the type of course which individuals had undertaken. For example, participants who had completed a course in beauty, childcare, or business reported that there were a lot of opportunities available. For some, liaising with recruitment agencies upon completion of the course proved to be valuable in securing work quite rapidly.

However, others held the perception that they were under-qualified for jobs related to their course and, therefore, found it difficult to secure employment. These respondents suggested that jobs were often advertised as requiring a degree-level qualification and, therefore, they were not eligible to apply. Where participants had applied for jobs, lack of feedback or frequent refusals became demoralising and, thus, they lacked motivation to continue searching for jobs.

"I have applied for many jobs, but they never reply to you. When they reply, I don't see why I don't get the job. They do not explain. It's hard to understand how to improve things when you don't know why you don't get jobs." (Male, 18-24, Cohort 2008-2012)

Some held the view that there are limited jobs available that relate to the skills they had obtained and felt the lack of practical work experience during the course held them back from securing work.

2.5 Experiences of taking part in a BTEA funded course

2.5.1 Views on relationship with DSP and DSP case officers

Participants were asked to summarise how they felt about their experiences of dealing with the DSP and DSP case officers in relation to their course. Most reported a very positive relationship both with the department and with case officers and felt their experience in this respect was positive. Many described them as 'helpful', 'easy to liaise with' and 'communicated with them in an efficient manner'.

"I am very grateful for that woman because I wouldn't have known about the engineering access without her. It was a positive experience with both the case officer and DSP." (Male, 35-44, Near End participant)

"I think that the staff in the Dublin office are so amazing...I still remember them even though it was years ago" (20)

Several participants strongly praised their case officer and were very thankful for their support. These participants felt that the case officer helped to guide them on to the right course and to develop a good understanding of what they hoped to achieve.

"Very good. He helped me definitely a lot. Definitely thanks to that person, I am now where I am, and so I am very, very grateful" (Male, 45-54, Cohort 2012-2014)

"I wouldn't have found the course without her. I felt very appreciative towards her." (Male, 45-54, Cohort 2014)

However, a few felt that support was inadequate and would have valued a few more hours with their case officer prior to starting their course. Two participants were dissatisfied with their experience of dealing with the case officers and felt, having been assigned to more than one, that they were receiving inconsistent messages. This impacted their motivation to continue to the course due to the degree of uncertainty about what the course required.

"One person wanted me to do one thing and another wanted me to do another thing...there should be more correspondence between the two instead of having the actual person doing all the running around." (Female, 25-34, Cohort 2014)

One participant in particular did not build a good relationship with their assigned case officers and did not consider them to be supportive or helpful.

"It didn't feel like they were there for you, it was just their job to do it." (Male, 18-24, Cohort 2012-2014)

2.5.2 Summary of overall experience on the course and of BTEA

Overall, despite these challenges, participants were positive about their experience of undertaking the BTEA-supported course. They felt that they had benefited from the programme in many ways but the key advantage was in relation to their personal development. Most reported that the scheme had motivated them to go back into education, increased their confidence, and that they felt more mature in their approach to employment.

"Definitely wonderful, so I feel more confident, more knowledgeable definitely, and I don't need to be so much worrying about finding myself on the market" (Male, 45-54, Cohort 2012-2014)

A number of additional **benefits** outlined by participants are summarised below:

Ease of applying: The limited barriers in accessing and applying for the scheme led participants to feeling comfortable and gave them confidence in progressing their application for the course. The additional support from the DSP and case officers was also described as encouraging.

Better prepared for interviews: The course had encouraged participants to be better prepared for interviews. The support provided with CV-writing by course leaders and career guidance had increased individuals' confidence to attend interviews. One participant noted the benefit of having secured a reference to recommend their experience.

Ability to network: A key benefit amongst participants was building relationships with others on the course, networking, and meeting like-minded people. They felt it increased their social ability and enabled them to share their experiences with those who had a similar social background or work experience.

"I think it's a really good thing to have available for people. It prepares people well. Some people have social problems; just meeting people is a positive experience for them. I found that with some classmates who seemed to flourish from it, so it's a positive thing." (Female, 35-44, Cohort 2008-2012)

Access to funding: The BTEA funding was critical in allowing participants to take the second-level course and most suggested that they would not have successfully completed the programme without it. Some were extremely grateful and felt the funding provided them with a second opportunity to study and better themselves.

Better doing something than nothing: Some participants reported that being part of the BTEA and attending classes was a better use of their time and helped them to achieve something valuable. Some considered themselves to be lucky to have had the opportunity to take part in the scheme.

"I think overall it was positive...It gave me something to do in the day. I felt like I was a part of something..." (Male, 45-54, Cohort 2014)

Ability to return to education regardless of age: The scheme was received well amongst older participants as allowing them to take part in a programme that enabled them to progress their education and increase their skills regardless of their age.

"It made me feel that there is something out there for someone of my age. It may not lead to a job, but at least it leads to the use of my brain and educating myself. All in all, it's been a very enjoyable and fulfilling experience." (Male, 65+, 2012-2014)

"Really valuable because, even if you're a little bit older, 36 or whatever, 35, you can still go and do something." (Male, 45-54, Momentum)

In contrast, some participants reported **drawbacks** of the scheme, mostly related to their courses rather than to the allowance itself. Thus, a few described the course as 'stressful' and 'challenging' due to the volume of work that was required outside the classroom. The requirement to study and complete assignments reduced their quality of life at home as they had limited time with their families and some had difficulty arranging childcare.

"There's a lot of work to be done outside of the course. A lot of people may think by going onto the course, you'll do the course, go home and that'll be it, it won't be, there's a lot of stuff outside of the course" (Female, 25-34, Cohort 2012-2014)

Additionally, a few participants held the view that the eligibility criteria to take part in a course funded by BTEA were too stringent. They felt the scheme limited those who were not receiving a social welfare payment but were ambitious and interested in achieving a qualification.

"Not being able to qualify if you're not on the dole. The only thing I found with it was that, for people who wanted to do it, you have to stay on the dole for a year, on social welfare, and it's not fair if you can't really afford it. Anyone who has just gone back on social welfare for whatever reason, that's the only thing I found that people are struggling with." (Female, 45-54, Cohort 2014)

Overall, despite these drawbacks, almost all participants reported that they would recommend the BTEA scheme to their friends and family. The scheme was considered to be a great opportunity for individuals to enhance their skills and improve their employability prospects regardless of age, social welfare status, and family composition.

"I think it's a great opportunity, and if they have skills, ability and ambition, and this goal, they have to go to do it, because it's challenging and hard, in my case, with two kids, but I feel happy at the end. I was first thinking, because of my English, I'd fail the first year, but I went through all the exams and didn't fail. So, I was happy. (Female, 25-34, Cohort 2012-2014)

"I thought it was great. It was very helpful and I'm very glad that I got a qualification out of it." (Male, 18-24, Near End participant)

"It's absolutely brilliant. I would recommend this to anybody who feels like their life is going nowhere." (Male, 45-54, Momentum participant)

In line with this, the BTEA scheme and support provided by the DSP and case officers was found to be extremely valuable, not only for participants' personal development but also in relation to their career. A number of reasons were identified which included increasing confidence and self-assurance in securing a job, improving academic skills to help gain a qualification, and having an opportunity to learn and increase their knowledge in an area of interest. One participant who had secured employment was particularly positive about the BTEA and described it as a life changing experience:

"I went back to college, I have a degree, I have a master's degree, I have a good job now, I've got a job for life, I've a secure future. Personal development, I mean, personal respect" (Male, 25-34, Cohort 2008-2012)

The importance of BTEA enabling and supporting participants to change their careers into areas they were ambitious about pursuing was also considered invaluable.

"Really happy with the progress. I've gone from just a floor layer, a bricklayer or whatever on a building site to, like, a coding game maker that's teaching kids how to make games." (Male, 35-44, Cohort 2012-2014)

A couple of participants commented that their experience had been valuable but were disappointed having not secured employment due to the perceived lack of jobs available.

2.5.3 Improving BTEA support for second-level courses

When asked whether there were any improvements that could be made to the scheme or in relation to participants' experiences of undertaking a course at second-level, it was clear that participants believed, as above, that the scheme was beneficial and rewarding. Some were unable to identify any improvements. However, others suggested a number of ways in which the scheme could be enhanced. These are summarised below.

The financial impact of the scheme was a clear barrier to progression for some participants. This was in relation to transport costs for travel to college and to paying for resources such as textbooks or materials required for the course. Participants recommended that DSP provide an additional allowance to make the scheme more affordable. A few referenced re-introducing the book allowance (which was previously available but had been recently omitted from the scheme) to help those who struggle to buy additional materials to support the learning element of the course.

"There's a certain expense involved in getting to college, and being there, and all of that. So, you know, there should be an allowance paid to cover those costs." (Male, 35-44, Cohort 2014)

Travel cost limitations also link in to participants' perception of the lack of courses available in their local vicinity. Some held the view that they had limited course options available in their local area. They also reported the need for more work placement opportunities within the course and having a wider choice of course options related to sectors and occupations where jobs are available. The DSP could consider liaising more closely with education providers to better meet the demand for courses which participants wish to undertake and to identify learning and training which is more clearly in line with employment opportunities in Ireland.

There is a clear need to raise awareness of the BTEA scheme. Most participants reported that they became aware of the allowance and the course through word of mouth and, although this was evidently an effective marketing method for them, participants suggested that there should be more general awareness of, and information on, the scheme. Some recommended advertising the scheme in schools to inform young people of the different options available to them. In terms of information, it was deemed important to better advertise and highlight the benefits of the scheme, particularly for potential mature students or those who have been out of education for a longer period of time as they are likely to be unfamiliar with, and possibly resistant to, a college environment.

"A 'bit more advertising, and letting people know what's there. Once people go and look for it, there are no barriers." (Female, 25-34, Cohort 2008-2012)

"To maybe make people more aware of it. A lot of people don't know it's an option. Some people feel like they can't do it, but most people would benefit from it." (Male, 25-34, Momentum participant)

Another suggestion was to relax or amend the eligibility criteria. There was a perception that there are many people who are seeking ways to improve their employment prospects but have limited support available to them and the eligibility criteria of the scheme limit these people from taking part.

"Just that it should be, ultimately, about people who want to do it, who are maybe not on the dole that long, and couldn't get it. There are so many young people, and older

Study to explore the drivers of negative employment outcomes of participants on the Back to Education Allowance Scheme

people, who are out there, who want to go back into education, but they actually can't afford it. They might have lost their job, and then they have to be unemployed for over a year, waiting." (Female, 45-54, Cohort 2014)

"I feel like this is what took two years of my life. For me to get back into education, you had to be unemployed for two years or something like that. That shouldn't be there, keeping people from doing things, there shouldn't be these limits...you can't put restriction on something good. Education is good, why have restrictions for it?" (Female, 25-34, Cohort 2012-2014)

Finally, providing more support whilst on the course and more feedback from teachers with individual progress was considered important. Having more one-to-one support or additional mentoring hours to discuss individual's challenges or difficulties with the course was suggested as an effective way to improve the course. Interestingly, in line with the findings outlined in this report, it was also suggested that the dynamic of the classrooms could be improved by ensuring individuals of similar ages and work experience are grouped together.

3 Case officers: research findings

In this chapter, case officers' views and opinions of the BTEA scheme are set out. The chapter highlights case officers' key roles and responsibilities, their engagement with participants, their perceptions of the administrative process, and their recommendations on improving the scheme's employment outcomes.

3.1 Views of the BTEA scheme

3.1.1 Key roles and responsibilities

Case officers were asked what their key roles and responsibilities were in relation to the BTEA scheme. Case officers reported a largely consistent set of varied roles and responsibilities. These are summarised below:

Reviewing applications: The majority of case officers suggested that their role involved the review of incoming applications forms. This involved checking whether participants are eligible for the BTEA scheme using the eligibility criteria that are set out by the DSP (outlined in section 1:1).

“My role would be when applications come into the office, we have to check eligibility for somebody, whether or not to qualify, that they have enough eligibility.” (Case officer)

Approving/disapproving applications: Whilst reviewing the applications, many case officers indicated that a major part of their role involved approving or disapproving participants' entry on the BTEA scheme. Approval and disapproval outcomes would be based on a range of factors such as the eligibility criteria, individuals' goals and motivation levels, their views on employment prospects after course completion, and their reasons for selecting their course of choice.

“When applicants apply for it, just approving or declining them in line with their personal progression plan.” (Case officer)

“They need to demonstrate why they want to do it and what kind of work they think it will get them.” (Case officer)

One case officer reported that it was rare for them to reject any applications. They saw each application as an opportunity for an individual to develop and progress their skills and development by completing the course.

“I didn't reject any. I certainly went through them, and what I saw was an opportunity for people to progress their self by doing the course.” (Case officer)

Interviewing and screening: A few case officers mentioned that following a review of applications, participants who met the eligibility criteria would be invited to attend an interview. The interview involved a discussion that centred on the participant's application form and suitability for the BTEA scheme's second level option.

“I interviewed clients and screened them to see if they were suitable candidates for second-level options, SLO. I'd refer them to the college they were interested in.” (Case officer)

“At present, when somebody makes an application for Back to Education, the file will come down to me. I would have a look at it, and I either recommend it or not based on the information that’s provided in the application.” (Case officer)

Encouraging and supporting people to enter education and find work: Two case officers identified their role as encouraging people to enter education through the BTEA scheme; for example arranging a one-to-one session to discuss their aspirations in more detail. They saw education as an opportunity for participants to enhance their skills and maximise their chances of securing employment.

“Encouragement for people to take up education.” (Case officer)

“Well it was to support people so that they find work through education and training. If they improve their skills then eventually they are more likely to find work in the future.” (Case officer)

3.1.2 Understanding of the BTEA scheme objectives

Many case officers believed that the objective of the scheme was to up-skill and enhance participants’ existing skill sets by completing a course of their choice that was in line with their career plans. Some emphasised the importance of participants receiving financial support whilst completing a course, as without this they would not be able to re-enter education due to financial constraints.

“Well, initially it’s to enable people to go into full-time education to hopefully improve their chances of getting into the workforce and having a career. The scheme financially supports them by giving them an income.” (Case officer)

Most case officers believed that, by enhancing participants’ skill sets, the scheme aimed to increase the employment prospects of people who have been unemployed for a long time. They felt the scheme would enable participants to develop skills in an area in which the participant wishes to find employment and, thus, maximise their chances of securing employment and developing a sustainable career.

“It’s progression for our client. It’s to help them get the knowledge and the skills that they would require in order to find employment in certain industries.” (Case officer)

“That education will lead them to sustainable employment.” (Case officer)

A minority of case officers observed that offering participants career guidance and support in selecting the correct course was another key objective of the scheme. They worked with participants to consider whether their employment prospects on completion of the course that they had selected would be increased.

“To get people onto the right courses, bearing in mind the kind of jobs that are out there, and that the courses that they’re doing are very relevant to what’s needed in work wise.” (Case officer)

A couple of case officers mentioned that the scheme aimed to provide second chance education for people who have been unemployed for a long time, to return to education, to gain a qualification, and to improve their chances of finding employment.

“It was set up initially as a second chance opportunity for people to return to education and get a qualification.” (Case officer)

3.1.3 Effectiveness of the scheme

Case officers reported a range of views on the effectiveness of the scheme. Many believed that **the BTEA scheme was valuable and that its objectives were met**. The reasons for this are summarised below.

The scheme leads participants into secure employment: A few case officers reported that, in their experience, the scheme was successful in meeting its objectives as many participants managed to secure employment. They identified the financial support as a key element which facilitated participants' engagement and success in gaining employment. The course enabled participants to acquire valuable skills which led them to secure work experience or part-time employment which improved their chances of securing employment.

"My understanding is it has been worthwhile. Where people got the back to education, they progressed very well... I met people after my duties in assigning them to courses. I was delighted to find out how well they were doing. Without having done the back to education, they most likely wouldn't have got the jobs that they got." (Case officer)

The scheme offers opportunities in areas of deprivation: A few case officers believed that the scheme was effective as it gave people from areas that were high in poverty, the opportunity to afford and enter education. As a result this enhanced their employment prospects and facilitated them to build a sustainable career.

"The area we work in is a designated area of need. Poverty is a barrier to education, so the payment gives them access to education." (Case officer)

They emphasised the importance of financial assistance, as most participants would not be able to afford full time education without it.

The scheme supports participation in courses which lead to employment: A couple of case officers suggested that the scheme was effective as they ensured that the courses that participants were encouraged to take were in line with market demand and thus improved employability. They worked collaboratively with education providers and employers to assess whether there was a demand for jobs and skills in the areas in which participants wished to pursue a course. They also suggested that participants are encouraged to apply for courses that have a vocational element or those that are likely to lead to employment.

"The courses that customers are asked to apply for are ones that have a vocational aspect to them. So, the courses that people are doing would be courses that ultimately would lead to employment in the future. So that could be anything from childcare through to special needs assistance. Courses, ultimately, that will end up with people getting back into work again." (Case officer)

"I would always say to the people, if they're thinking about third level and committing to years on a course, I would always say to them, 'Will there be employment for you at the end of that course? Will you get realistic employment out of it?' That's the main aim from it. That is their career path that they're interested in doing it but the main focus for me is that they come off social welfare payments and will get a job at the end of it." (Case officer)

On the other hand, **some case officers believed that the scheme was not effective** and the objectives were not wholly met for the following reasons:

Rigidity in eligibility criteria: A few case officers believed that the scheme was no longer effective as the guidelines were too stringent. They suggested that having a strict eligibility criteria does not give people a fair chance to start the scheme and better their lives and improve their employment prospects. For example, those who had completed prior education should be permitted to retrain in another field that they desire at the same level.

“The objective in social welfare is to help everybody, and not discriminate against anybody, and to give everybody a fair whack at getting their lives back on track. Especially for people of 50, they’re still young people, they might want to retrain. Just because they have reached a level 8, it doesn’t mean to say they can’t go back and do a level 5. It depends on a person’s financial circumstances. Once they’re on social welfare, they’re our problem, and now we’re telling them they can’t actually go back and retrain.” (Case officer)

Leniency in eligibility criteria: In contrast to the above, a couple of case officers mentioned that the scheme was not effective as applications are assessed with “too much leniency.” As a result, individuals are offered the course without a meeting or discussion regarding their application, choice of course, and ambitions about their future following the course. In some cases, this posed the risk of accepting participants who were solely driven by financial payments whilst on the course.

“At the moment I don’t think it is. They need to look at it harder and be stricter with the applications, especially with the second-level ones.” (Case officer)

“I think, because it’s completely free, I sometimes feel people do it because it’s the easy option. It’s seen as a full-time course, some of them will provide childcare, you get your payments, and maybe get some extra more.” (Case officer)

Participants remained on welfare payments: One case officer believed that the scheme was ineffective as most of the participants they dealt with remained on social welfare payments and did not secure employment after completing the courses.

“I don’t believe it’s effective considering the money that’s being paid out. I think the idea behind the scheme is quite good, but I don’t believe that enough people who have gone through it and paid money into it have left welfare.” (Case officer)

3.2 Case Officer views on the administrative process

3.2.1 Participant personification

The following table summarises the key features that case officers identified BTEA participants as displaying.

Participant characteristics		Summary
Welfare	Jobseekers allowance One parent family allowance	Most participants were in receipt of job seekers allowance. A couple of participants mentioned they received the one-parent family allowance.
Age	Young people Under the age of 25 School leavers Middle age participants Older people	Some case officers suggested that participants tended to be young people under the age of 25, and those who were early school leavers. A few case officers mentioned that participants tended to be of a middle or older age (35-50 years), some of whom were ambitious to change their career.
Gender	Equal split of genders More women	Most case officers suggested that participants were typically an equal split of men and women. However a couple suggested that their caseload would predominantly include women.
Ethnicity	Mainly Irish Few Polish	The majority of case officers suggested that participants were mainly Irish. Only a small minority were Polish or of other immigrant backgrounds.
Duration of unemployment	SLO- 3 months TLO- 9 months	SLO participants tended to be unemployed for a minimum of 3 months, whilst TLO participants were typically unemployed for a minimum of 9 months. <i>(NB: The TLO is a subsequent progression route after a participant has taken up the SLO course in the time period of interest).</i>
Education History	Leaving Cert Junior Cert Foreign qualifications	Participants entering the scheme had a varied education history. Most tended to hold a Junior Certificate. Some had a Leaving Cert and those from outside Ireland tended to have foreign qualifications equivalent to these qualifications.
SLO participants	Vocational Younger and school leavers Change courses and less committed Literacy issues Unclear about career	SLO participants were different in profile compared to TLO participants. They tended to hold vocational qualifications and were likely to be early school leavers. A couple of case officers described them as less committed and likely to change courses. A minority of case officers suggested that the participants had literacy issues and tended to be unclear about their career.
TLO participants	Higher education background Complete degree courses Career plan Higher paid jobs	Most case officers suggested that TLO participants tended to hold a higher education background and may have completed a degree. Some mentioned that participants tended to have a career plan, and were more likely to secure higher jobs after completing the course. <i>(NB: The TLO is a subsequent progression route after a participant has taken up the SLO course in the time period of interest).</i>

3.2.2 Decision-making factors in accepting or rejecting participants

Eligibility criteria: The majority of case officers suggested that the key factor which determined their decision to accept applicants on to the scheme was whether they met the eligibility criteria. The case officers considered a range of factors in line with the eligibility criteria e.g. over the age of 21, in receipt of social welfare payment for at least 3 months (for SLO).

“Following the guidelines. We would be checking the eligibility to see how many days that they have signing, you know, they need a required amount of days for second and third level.” (Case officer)

Motivation levels: Many case officers suggested that the motivation of the applicant was also an important factor which influenced their decision to accept or reject their applications. They expected applicants to be highly motivated and ambitious in terms of their career plans and progression following the course. A couple of case officers mentioned that this was important in order to ensure that participants were not solely motivated by the financial support and would not discontinue with the scheme or seek another training programme.

“A lot of it comes down to the customer coming in. If they have approached me and said, ‘I’d like to do this course,’ really the self-referral is probably the most important part. A customer will come in and say, ‘I have an idea of what I want to do, and can you help me achieve my goals?’ That would be the most important part. A person actually comes in and makes a self-referral.” (Case officer)

Employment opportunities: Some case officers mentioned that it was important to consider the employment opportunities that the courses selected by the participants would present. They carefully reviewed the participant’s interests and assessed whether the scheme would be suitable for them in providing development and opportunities for employment.

“If I feel that it’s a development for them and there is an opportunity for employment out of it, then I will be recommending it.” (Case officer)

Two case officers said that they would also assess whether the participant’s choice of career was realistic and closely aligned with their existing experience. For example, if a participant wished to pursue a career in IT then they would require foundation knowledge in mathematics.

“If somebody wanted to do BOC therapy or something like that, they have to have a science background. It has to be a sensible choice. They have to have done a science subject for certain things... If they want to go into IT, they need maths.” (Case officer)

3.2.3 Management of participation cases

Some case officers found it difficult to estimate how many cases they managed. However, of those who did remember, most tended to manage from 20 to 30 cases each. Some managed up to 40 cases. Between a team of case officers, they tended to manage from 100-200 cases.

“I suppose I could manage about twenty. I’m not sure in the office I’m working in, how many goes through the full office.” (Case officer)

“It’s quite hard, because some of them go ahead and some of them don’t. I suppose, maybe, 100.” (Case officer)

Many case officers reported that contact tended to be limited with participants during the application stage, as there was no requirement to intervene at this stage. However, some cases officers were in contact with participants on their caseload between 2 and 4 times whilst they completed their application in order to offer support through the process, for example, exploring whether the applicant was eligible to apply for the scheme. Subsequent to acceptance on the scheme, case officers tended to arrange follow-up meetings with participants for further discussion. For those who applied, a few months before the course start date, meetings would be arranged every 6 to 8 weeks in order to maintain contact and keep their personal progression plan updated. Lastly, two case officers suggested that they would personally contact applicants who were rejected for the scheme to explain the rationale for their decision. Once the participants started the scheme, contact was discontinued.

“If they’re on my caseload, I would generally be meeting with them, you know, every six weeks.” (Case officer)

“We would see them up to August in the summer, where they come in and ask, are they eligible for the course. It’s for them to proceed with what they have to do, and to have that done.” (Case officer)

Most case officers suggested that, during the application process, participants do not tend to contact them regarding any queries. Of those who did, contact tended to concern their application form or logging on and was more common with older participants. Some applicants made contact if they had problems with their payments or entitlements. Some case officers had an open door policy and offered their contact details to participants so that they could be contacted as and when necessary. On average most case officers tended to offer 20 to 30 minutes for appointments and interviews.

“They have my work mobile, email address and I have an open-door policy. They can come to a session or see me in the afternoons. Generally, I’d see them for a quick question. They can text, email or phone me.” (Case officer)

3.2.4 Programme changes

Many case officers suggested that they and participants were unaware of the changes over the period of the scheme. As a result they were unable to comment on how participants may be impacted. However, for those who did identify changes, views on their impacts are summarised below.

Removal of financial support: A few case officers suggested that limiting financial support was perceived negatively by participants as they were unable to afford the costs that were associated with studying such as buying books and travel fares. One case officer mentioned that participants were expected to pay a lump sum of two hundred Euros for their student registration fee and was not affordable by all.

“The big problem is the student registration fee. You have to pay a couple of hundred Euros, and a lot of our clients wouldn’t have a lump sum to pay when they are offered their place in college. Our department used to pay a cost of education allowance, and since 2009 it has been done away with. I’m sure that was purely for financial reasons but they should really look at bringing it back...to go to school or college is expensive,

to buy books is expensive. You have to travel there, bus fares are expensive, and we're getting them nothing extra.” (Case officer)

Another case officer mentioned that participants were no longer eligible to receive job seekers allowance whilst working up to 20 hours per week. This was seen as a disadvantage as it removed the ability for the participants to work, earn additional money, and afford to pay for costs associated with studying on the scheme.

“They've changed the rules where if you're a full time student, you could work up to twenty hours a week and this wouldn't affect your jobseekers payment. You are given the maximum payment. That's gone, and now you're assessed on that and you'd lose money accordingly. They're not good incentives for people.” (Case officer)

Greater involvement of case officers: A few case officers mentioned that the greater involvement of case officers in choosing the course of study had proven to be positive. Participants appreciated the ability to have a personal discussion with case officers. They also valued the fact that case officers were able to expose them to an array of the options that were available to them and encouraged confidence amongst those who felt incapable of, or insecure about, re-entering education.

“They're dealing with a case officer, and discussing different options with them, maybe they might have thought that education wasn't for them, but you can show them different ways of going about it. You can open their minds more and reassure them. It shows them there's a lot more help out there for them, and it also shows them that there are more ways than a straight line into education.” (Case officer)

Eligibility criteria: A small number of case officers suggested that the strict eligibility criteria used to select participants prevented people who could genuinely benefit in their education and career from engaging with the scheme. One case officer mentioned that the rules are constantly changing with the scheme, which poses difficulty for participants who may be eligible one year but not the next.

“Suddenly rules change and they find themselves not eligible for the scheme. I think it was earlier on last year when they made the changes, but in years gone by they did make them in the summer months, which left people in an awkward place because the rules weren't the same for them.” (Case officer)

3.3 Views on the outcome of the BTEA scheme

3.3.1 Impact of participants' personal progression plans

Case officers had mixed views on the impact of the personal progression plan. Some agreed that the progression plan was a good indicator of participants' likelihood of securing a job at the end of the second-level course. However, a few case officers emphasised that the progression plan should be clear and that participants also need to be motivated in order for it to be effective.

“Should be a good indicator, if it's a good progression plan, and if there is a requirement to do further education and they get that, it should certainly enhance their chances of getting work at the end of it.” (Case officer)

On the other hand, some case officers mentioned that they were unsure of whether the plan was a good indicator. A couple of case officers expressed the view that the progression plan

is a good tool to plan their career and gives them a structure to follow to achieve their goals but does not necessarily determine their likelihood of securing a job. Other factors such as the amount of time and effort participants commit to applying for jobs were perceived as stronger predictors of employment.

A range of views were reported by case officers on the subject of whether the course met the participant's needs and whether it was in line with their personal progression plan. Many case officers suggested that they were unable to comment or assess whether the scheme met participants' needs as they did not maintain contact with them during the course or upon completion. Therefore they had no facility to obtain feedback.

"They don't feed back to us whilst on the course. They have a review in January to see if they're still on the course but other than that, there's no communication." (Case officer)

A small number of case officers felt that the course did not always meet participants' needs as, in some cases, participants discontinued with the scheme. In line with findings from BTEA participants, case officers reported that individuals were likely to discontinue the scheme if it was not deemed suitable or did not meet their expectations. They may not have been suited to the scheme for various reasons such as difficulty in studying for the course or struggle in adjusting to an educational environment.

"In some cases it does, in other cases it doesn't. I've had people that have dropped out of courses because they weren't suitable, or the scheme wasn't what they expected it to be." (Case officer)

"In some cases people find the course difficult and found the study environment difficult. Some people drop out. Depends on how much time was put in by the individual." (Case officer)

A few case officers suggested that as participants took a course of their own choice, they were likely to be motivated and progress to finding employment. They reported that the feedback received from employers was positive and suggested that they were impressed with participants' skills. In some cases, employers had progressed participants to further education. Another case officer believed that participants' needs were met as courses were delivered to a high standard.

"From the feedback that I've got from clients that have gone on courses...they've been very happy with it. A lot of them have got employment out of it or are progressing further by going on to their second or third year." (Case officer)

A minority of case officers suggested that SLO participants tended to have an idea or plan of the type of job that they would hope to secure following the course and they would commit to the scheme for at least nine months. In comparison, however, TLO participants were viewed as more ambitious, having a clearer vision of their future plans and aim to occupy more financially lucrative careers.

"I think the people who are looking to do second level courses generally have a particular job in mind. Typically it's childcare or healthcare assistants, so they have a particular job in mind. Those jobs typically tend to be minimum wage, or roughly in that area. The people, again, who look to do third level, have a clear idea of where they want to go, and their ambitions, financially, tend to be a higher." (Case officer)

3.3.2 Case officer views on course outcomes

The great majority of case officers were unsure whether all SLO participants completed all elements of the course. They reported that this was due to the lack of available statistics and limited contact with participants whilst they were on the course.

“Once they go on the courses, unless they’re an individual client of our own, we don’t know what happens.” (Case officer)

Some case officers had the perception that the majority of participants on the SLO completed all or at least 70% of the elements of the course. Whilst a few others suggested that a low proportion (10%-12%) of participants would complete all elements of the course. Reasons for discontinuing the course were identified as family issues, that the course was not right for them, that the course was perceived as too long, or that they felt their age was a barrier.

“Sometimes, if they come back to us again, on social welfare, as case officers, there would be a certain number of drop-outs or whatever, through family tragedies, family circumstances.” (Case officer)

“People drop out because it’s a long course, they already know what they’re doing, and someone felt they were too old to be there, so people drop out for various reasons but they drop out early, before Christmas.” (Case officer)

After completing the course, case officers reported that participants are supported in various ways. These are outlined below:

Help them find work: Many case officers suggested that after successfully completing the course, participants would return or be followed up and be offered support to aid them in finding employment. Most of these case officers offered informal sessions to participants, and support to them with preparing a CV, developing interview skills, and searching and applying for jobs. Other case officers stated that course providers would often put participants in touch with prospective employers directly, or signpost participants to the employer engagement team who would support them with finding employment.

Support them to find other courses: Some case officers mentioned that they would support participants to find a third level or a different course. This was most commonly the case for those who had expressed an interest and desire to progress to a higher level/third course in their personal progression plan or in their last year of the SLO course. They would also have needed to demonstrate progression in the SLO course to be encouraged towards a higher level course.

Modify personal progression plan: Some case officers tended to modify the participant’s personal progression plan to reflect their updated career or study plans, as they saw it as a rolling document to be continuously reviewed and updated. A few case officers tended to formulate and work from a wholly new plan. A minority of case officers stated that they rarely modified the plan.

Nearly all case officers were unsure of the proportion of participants who found employment subsequent to the SLO course, as they did not maintain contact with the participant and, thus, the information was unavailable. Most case officers did not receive feedback from employers as they had limited or no contact with them.

One case officer suggested that up to 80% of their case load found employment whilst, in contrast, another two case officers estimated that a very low number of participants managed to secure work. One case officer mentioned that they received feedback from two different employers, and their feedback was generally positive.

“That’s a bit of a hard one, in the climate we’re in. It’s a low number; I wouldn’t say it’s any more than 35% maybe.” (Case officer)

Many of those who did not find work returned to the scheme, in which case they would revisit the participant’s progression plan. Case officers highlighted that the following reasons were predictive of unemployment:

- Discontinued or performed poorly due to dislike for the course;
- Discontinued due to the perception that college is not suitable for them;
- Discontinued with the course due to personal issues e.g. family problems;
- Lack of employment opportunities in the sector at the time;
- Poor interview performance.

3.3.3 Perceived advantages and disadvantages of the BTEA support

Overall case officers were mainly positive towards the BTEA support and outlined the following **advantages**.

Financial support: Most case officers were in favour of the financial support that was offered to participants who were involved in the BTEA scheme. Many believed that, without this support, participants would not have the opportunity to enter education and improve their career, especially because many have existing financial difficulties. It enabled them to become financially independent whilst at college.

“A lot of them wouldn’t be able to do it without the Back to Education. A lot of them are under very severe financial stress, and the only way they could do any study is through Back to Education.” (Case officer)

Qualifications: Some case officers reported that the vast range of courses made the scheme more accessible and was suited to different people’s interests and career ambitions. The availability of vocational courses taught at lower levels was also noted as an advantage as they were perceived to give participants the confidence in their ability to complete it and progress to higher level courses and employment.

“They are more vocational and teach at a lower level. Quite often someone might start with one of those. Say they want to do a Level 5 or Level 6 but they don’t have the capability behind them. We might suggest they do a course with the Education and Training Board, which would be pitched maybe at Level 3, Level 4. It gives them the confidence to do it. To be quite honest, some of those courses are great, and a lot of them are vocationally orientated so they are geared at getting people into a job.” (Case officer)

Employability: Some case officers mentioned that, by completing qualifications, many participants had the opportunity to develop their knowledge and update their skill set. This in turn increased their employment prospects. A couple of case officers emphasised that the scheme gave older people, who already had valuable experience, a second chance and the

confidence to study and develop their careers by gaining a qualification regardless of their age.

“It gives them an opportunity to up skill. It’s the whole, ‘it’s never too late.’ Especially a lot of our customers who would be 35 to 55. It’s something they don’t even think about. They could have been working in a sector that’s declining and not know what to do. They may have lots of experience but not a particular qualification” (Case officer)

Social value: A few case officers expressed the importance of the social benefits that the scheme offered to participants. They suggested that participants’ confidence and motivation increased through meeting other people on the scheme, networking, learning new skills and knowledge and gaining a valuable qualification. After completing the scheme, case officers reported that participants felt a sense of personal achievement which would present them with wider opportunities.

“I think even in confidence building, as well, because some of them, they go on into second-level education, and they’re surprised at themselves, that they achieved it, and it makes them more motivated.” (Case officer)

Some case officers did not see any **disadvantages** in relation to the scheme. However, those who did identified the following points:

Administration: A few case officers perceived the absence of a system to follow up with participants after the scheme as a significant drawback. They were unable to validate whether they found employment and evaluate how effective or useful the scheme was. Similarly a few case officers reported that there was no system in place to monitor attendance and progression of participants whilst they were on the course. Two case officers highlighted challenges with time pressure to review and approve applications. In some cases a shortage of staff placed pressure on a small number of case officers to review/approve a high volume of applications.

“The department is short on staff so there is additional pressure on the staff within the department to get the applications approved within a certain amount of time. That is one of the main challenges is the time constraints and the admin staff.” (Case officer)

Eligibility criteria: Two case officers mentioned that the scheme’s stringent eligibility criteria prevented people who would genuinely benefit from accessing education and improving their career. One case officer made the point that some young people may struggle at school which hinders their achievements. After leaving school they are left with no option to consider the scheme as they do not qualify for it as an early school leaver and have insufficient jobseeker status.

“Especially young lads who find it very hard to actually concentrate, and don’t study, when they leave school, they find it very hard to know what they want to do. The year they leave school, they don’t qualify for Back to Education because they actually have one or two years left, it just means there’s a time delay for them to do something.” (Case officer)

Lack of personal development support: One case officer felt that support to enhance participants’ personal development was limited as the scheme was not sufficiently

vocationally-oriented. Other courses, such as levels 3 and 4 with the Education and Training Board, would gear people towards securing a job by offering stronger support on interview skills and CV preparation. The BTEA scheme was seen to be more focused on delivering the course material and not offering much student support in this respect.

“We might suggest they do a course with the Education and Training Board, which would be pitched maybe at Level 3, Level 4...To be quite honest, some of those courses are great, and are vocationally orientated so they are geared at getting people into a job. Those courses have a huge element of personal development, interview skills, CV preparation. That would be the advantage of those kinds of education courses over ones from the Back to Education. Back to Education is really about delivering the course material. I'm not sure if there's as much student support.”
(Case officer)

3.4 Perceived improvements and recommendations

3.4.1 Views on poor participant employment outcomes

As highlighted in the report produced by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI)⁸, participants who undertook SLO learning under the BTEA scheme were less likely to secure employment compared to individuals who did not take up such a course. Case officers were asked for their views, based on their engagement with the scheme, as to what would explain why these counter-intuitive findings may have occurred.

Case officers reported a range of reasons which, in their view, may explain the findings. The key factors are summarised as lack of participant motivation, limited support on the scheme, and overall market conditions.

Lack of motivation: Case officers suggested that participants' lack of motivation and passion to secure employment and to study on the course could influence their performance and success rate in securing employment.

A few case officers suggested that motivation levels may be hindered for participants who come from a family environment where unemployment is a norm. Thus, they might enter a cycle of unemployment and not place importance in focussing their efforts on finding work.

A few case officers found that some participants (especially those who were young) tended to have social and personal issues that may have affected their confidence and ability to find work. One case officer suggested that, in the past, participants may have been motivated by the payments that the scheme offered and not necessarily motivated to find work afterwards.

Another case officer indicated that participants may not value the support that they received from the scheme as they lacked the fundamental motivation that is needed to secure a job afterwards.

“Sometimes when someone gets something too easily, they don't appreciate it as much as someone who struggles to get there, maybe family, it could be a number of things, if generations have been on Jobseeker's. This generation may go to college because they have support from the BTEA, but if there's no motivation to get a job after it, the education isn't going to help them.” (Case officer)

⁸ <https://www.esri.ie/publications/an-evaluation-of-the-back-to-education-allowance-2/>

Support offered on the scheme: Participants may have lacked guidance and support during the scheme which could have led to a lack of future direction. One case officer added that, due to a lack of clear guidance, the course that some participants chose to study may not be geared towards employment and, thus, lacked value.

“Maybe nobody to direct them, some of the courses that people do may not lead to employment, it’s very hard to slot them into certain areas. Unless there’s good career guidance, courses might not be very valuable. All courses I think are valuable anyhow, but with a view to employment, they might not be greatly geared towards employment.” (Case officer)

Market conditions: Market conditions were perceived to impact employment outcomes as case officers reported that some participants may have studied courses that did not guarantee or enhance work opportunities. One case officer emphasised that education providers encouraged participants to complete any course without necessarily considering whether the qualifications achieved would lead to employment.

“The educational providers are educational-based. They feel that sometimes, no matter what course people do, it’s still useful for them, as a person, but we don’t need necessarily better-educated people. What we want is more employable people. People are doing courses in theatre studies. To get a job in the theatre, in Ireland, not only would you need to be phenomenally talented, but there are so few jobs there.” (Case officer)

A couple of case officers suggested that a lack of work experience or relevant work experience may explain poor employment outcomes amongst participants. They suggested that employers sought relevant experience as well as qualifications. Thus although they may have acquired qualifications, if they were lacking in work experience this may have acted as a barrier from an employer’s perspective. One case officer added that relevant experience can be difficult to find, especially for younger people.

“A big, kind of, challenge for anybody coming out of education, is to try and get experience, to get work. It’s virtually impossible to get. The day of voluntary work or somebody taking you on to get a bit of experience is gone; employers are very reluctant to do that anymore for various reasons. With the younger age group, maybe a lack of having work experience, any kind of work experience or even relevant work experience, might be a factor.” (Case officer)

3.4.2 Improving BTEA support for course participants

When asked whether there were any improvements that could be made to the scheme, it was clear that there was potential for development. Based on their experience, case officers suggested a range of recommendations in relation to the courses, to communication, to the application process, and to support. These are summarised below.

Courses: In order to prevent the risk of participants discontinuing with the course, case officers suggested that courses could be improved by ensuring that participants are better suited to them. One case officer suggested that the courses could be promoted earlier in the year to give participants the best opportunity to think about them thoroughly.

Further, some believed that the courses should all aim to maximise employment opportunities. This could be achieved by offering more work experience as part of courses.

One case officer believed that the courses were too classroom-oriented and theory-based. Others suggested that the scheme should diversify the range of courses available to better target the jobs market and, for example, make post-graduate options available to participants who already have degrees but are unable to find work.

“I would like a greater work experience aspect to it... I think some of the courses, as I say, are too classroom-based and are a lot of theory. From my point of view, where I’m increasing employability, I’d like to see a larger focus on that. Rather than the education aspect of it.” (Case officer)

Closer monitoring by, and involvement of, case officers during the course was also perceived as an area of improvement as they lost contact with participants and their progress after the application process. One participant also suggested that limiting the number of years that participants are permitted to participate on the scheme would prevent them from repeating the same course.

Communication: Communication was another aspect of the scheme that many case officers felt could be improved. Some believed that communication with course providers was very limited, which meant that information on course attendance, drop-out rates, and participant progression was never fed back. Case officers also expressed the importance of more interaction with participants after completion of the courses, in order to assess whether they had managed to secure employment and, if they hadn’t, they could offer support to tackle difficulties in finding work.

“More communication with the third level institutions, or the course providers, where we get more feedback in relation to attending courses, dropout rates, courses that the course providers are providing.” (Case officer)

Application process: In order to improve the application process, case officers suggested that it would be useful to have more knowledge on the nature of the courses to which they could direct participants in order to enhance the support that they could offer. Additionally a few reported that one-to-one meetings with a case officer should be an essential part of the application process in order to identify the best recommendation. For applicants who are unsuccessful in securing a place on the scheme, case officers suggested that the option of an appeals system should be made available to them.

“If we have a better idea of all the courses available, and the nature of them, we might be able to direct customers towards the most suitable courses for them.” (Case officer)

“If somebody doesn’t agree with the decision that the department has made, there’s no right to appeal system for them. We find we have difficulty wondering what we should do then, if it comes back to us it’s usually back to the same case officers who would have been involved in it initially, to make a decision.” (Case officer)

Support: In terms of support, case officers reported that it would be useful for participants to have childcare facilities such as after-school crèches. Others suggested that it would be

valuable to reinstate the education grant that was previously available to participants.⁹ This would help support those who have existing financial problems with costs that they incur as a result of the course.

“Childcare would be another issue. People with children trying to access affordably childcare can prevent them taking up a course... is a financial implication if they can't afford it. It is an issue as well especially in rural areas if they can't find a crèche to enable them to take up a course.” (Case officer)

⁹ It has been noted by the Department of Social Protection that the cost of education grant to participants with children is being reinstated from September 2017. An annual grant of €500 will be payable.

4 Education providers: research findings

This section reports the findings from the online focus groups held with education providers. It describes their perceptions of the scheme, their views on the profile of participants who take part in the courses, and their recommendations for improvements to the scheme.

The findings derive from discussions with providers from the following four locations, Dublin City ETB, Longford and Westmeath ETB, Kerry ETB and Momentum support.¹⁰ It also includes views from three participants who are involved in Voluntary Secondary and Community and Comprehensive Schools (VSCCS).

4.1 Profile of education providers

4.1.1 Career in education provision

The level of experience of education providers who took part in the online focus groups varied and included co-ordinators, full-time teachers and principals. Their length of time in education provision ranged between 9 and 20 years with, of course, those in more senior positions having worked in the sector for a longer period of time.

In terms of relevance to the BTEA scheme, some had experience of working as guidance counsellors or adult tutors. However, most had previously taught in a further education college. A few had experience of working in recruitment and one participant mentioned that they had previously worked with Job Seeker Support and was responsible for the recruitment and management of candidates.

4.1.2 Motivations for being involved in the further education and training sector

Education providers were asked what their reasons were for getting involved with the DSP and the BTEA scheme. Responses varied across the groups but the general motive was the ambition to provide support and improve opportunities for those who aspired to go back to a learning environment. Other reasons given are summarised below.

Previous experience: Some suggested they had previous experience of working in FE colleges and teaching second-level courses. There was also the perception that colleges provide a wider range of courses and programmes to teach such as post-leaving certification, VTO and BTEA.

Interest in the sector: Some education providers were involved in adult education as they found it interesting and personally wanted to contribute to supporting those who wish to better their education. Others were generally interested in education and wanted specifically to support routes into second-level courses.

Advocacy of the scheme: Some, particularly those who had experience of working in education provision for a longer period of time, suggested that they got involved in the scheme based on recommendations from others who had previously been involved in teaching courses with BTEA participants. They reported receiving positive feedback such as

¹⁰ Momentum is a Government initiative under Pathways to Work which provides free education and training projects for up to 6,500 long-term unemployed jobseekers - <http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Courses-for-the-Unemployed.aspx>

higher attendance amongst BTEA students, better contribution towards lessons, and a good work ethic and attitude towards the course.

4.1.3 Awareness of the BTEA scheme

Prior awareness of the BTEA scheme was generally high amongst education providers with almost all reporting that they had heard of BTEA before getting involved, either by recommendation from other providers or from liaising with the DSP.

4.2 Administrative process

4.2.1 Level of involvement during the administrative stage

The level of involvement during the administrative stage was generally limited amongst education providers. This was not specific to BTEA as most reported no differences in the eligibility criteria between BTEA and other further education students in their college.

“We are not asked specifically about their performance, or progression. We record them like all other students. Many of our more mature students progress to HE.”
(Education provider)

College Principals have the overall responsibility of overlooking those who join the college. However the administration is commonly delegated to a course co-ordinator.

Those who had some form of involvement at the administration stage tended to engage with potential participants by offering advice about the subject and modules to help them make an informed decision about the course they should take. Some were involved in the recruitment stage whereby they would review participant CVs or interview applicants to assess how well they fitted the eligibility criteria. One education provider highlighted their responsibility for advertising, recruiting for, and budgeting for the BTEA.

A few education providers were contacted by the DSP to confirm students are registered on to the course or to validate the application process.

Those who were involved in checking the eligibility criteria would identify participants' academic performance and previous education and work history. However, the candidate's welfare status would not be identified unless the participant directly conveyed this information.

4.2.2 Overall views of the quality of participants on second-level courses

Education providers were asked for their views on the quality of participants who took part in second level courses. In line with their limited involvement during the administrative stage, most participants across the focus groups reported that they were generally unable to identify BTEA participants amongst others on the course and also do not generally seek to find this information. Those who were able to make a distinction tended to find this out if the participant has directly informed them:

- During the interview stage
- Upon payment of fees on registration
- During a one-to-one/ mentoring session.

Others make a distinction when receiving a letter of approval of the course from the social welfare officer or if queried by the DSP as to whether the student is in full time attendance.

Education providers who deliver Momentum courses were under the impression that all participants were funded by the BTEA as the courses they offer are exclusively for jobseekers. Further, another provider of Momentum courses said that they are able to make a distinction as they gather this information at recruitment events and keep a record of the details in a database.

“If you relate to the Momentum project during the recruitment phase of the project the BTEA form had to be completed at the recruitment event at the DSP offices in conjunction with the provider before been waitlisted so therefore I knew who was in receipt of it or entitled to be in receipt of it.” (Education provider)

Having identified those in receipt of BTEA, education providers were asked if they identified any differences between participants on the courses they deliver. Motivation was considered a key difference in that BTEA participants tended to be more enthusiastic about finishing the course. They were also deemed to be more focussed, to have a wider range of life/work experience, to be keener to improve their knowledge and to up-skill, and to have better attendance in classes.

“Any adult who qualifies for BTEA generally makes good use of it and hopefully having come through guidance understand that this is their second chance at education and wish to fully utilise.” (Education provider)

Age and experience was also mentioned by education providers from Dublin City ETB as a key identifier of BTEA participants. Other factors included their status; for example, if they were a school leaver, long-term unemployed, or seeking a career change.

One education provider argued that the quality of BTEA participants was generally good. However, some were more keen to learn whilst others were not always suited to the course and, therefore, became uninterested in the programme. Ensuring that participants' previous education or work history is aligned to the course they undertake was identified as an area in which to reduce the number of participants who discontinue the programme.

“The quality of participants was good; many were suited to the programme and were interested in learning. However, others were not suited or interested.” (Education provider)

“Participants were good, and had a satisfactory academic history and work experience. However in round 2 participants ability was much lower and they had a range of problems.” (Education provider)

Further, it was also noted that some BTEA participants tended to have a limited educational background, required additional support outside of mainstream lessons; and there was a concern that a few were on the course solely for the welfare payment.

“It is important that DSP work with the client to ensure that they are following the right path and are not taking a course to maintain payments.” (Education provider)

4.3 Views and perceptions of the BTEA scheme

4.3.1 Views of BTEA objectives and role

Education providers' understanding of BTEA's objectives was similar to that of case officers. Most understand it as a programme to up-skill individuals who want to improve their pathway into employment.

"My understanding is that it was offered to the unemployed to help them to up-skill and complete all elements of the training contract they signed up for to help them return to the workforce and come off BTEA payments long term." (Education provider)

Some were under the impression that the BTEA scheme was solely to provide a social welfare payment to learners who were regularly attending a course. This finding was consistent amongst Momentum providers.

"My understanding is it helps candidates retain social welfare payments and take up place on an educational programme." (Education provider)

"In the context of Momentum, which is all I can speak for, the intention seems to be to act as a payment mechanism for income continuance while on the programme and nothing further." (Education provider)

Providers were in agreement across the focus groups that the objectives of BTEA have been met. The programme was often described as vital in giving participants access to further education and training to allow them to better access the job market.

However, an education provider delivering the Momentum programme held the view that the objectives are only met for those who have successfully engaged in the programme, have achieved their qualifications, and have returned to work with more advanced skills.

Some held the view that the criteria for BTEA participation are too stringent and not uniformly applied by the DSP. For example, some reported that the criteria can be difficult for individuals to understand which results in them missing the deadline when applying for their allowance.

A few education providers observed that some people are ambitious about returning to education but unable to fund themselves outside of the course fees. This leads to frustration and disappointment amongst those who have been offered the course but are unable to continue as they cannot finance travel or resource costs.

It was also suggested that Momentum courses should not be a part of the BTEA programme as the goal of getting participants back into employment is not always achieved after completing the level six course. It was suggested that participants should be encouraged to obtain major awards or continue to degree-level qualifications with more support for those who are ambitious to be self-employed.

"I don't think the goal of getting them back to employment can always be immediately achieved after successfully completing a level 6 course. I think progression to attain a major award should be rewarded/ encouraged instead and/or those setting up their own companies should be also nurtured rather than a sole requirement to go straight to the workplace. Many participants we have at that level are new to digital and

require further training before the jobs market would entertain them.” (Education provider)

Education providers from Dublin City ETB took part in a short stimulus exercise using the online whiteboard facility. They were asked to select specific words or phrases that they would use to describe BTEA and the reasons for choosing these words. On the whole, positive words were used, including ‘supports job prospects’, ‘useful’, ‘helpful’, ‘relevant’, ‘valuable’ and ‘important’. Although these words and phrases were used in a positive context, there was a clear message from these providers that BTEA participants lack direction and need more support to successfully complete the scheme.

“These students want to progress, mostly to HE for further study and they need a programme like this but they also need more support than they are currently getting. It’s very hard having to ask them for course charges and exam fees. It definitely lacks direction as nobody has the responsibility or is given the resources to support them.” (Education provider)

“In so far as the BTEA scheme affords the student the opportunity to return to education it is useful. The question refers to BTEA supports. I am not sure the current state of BTEA could be classified as support. In effect all that happens is that DSP give the person the permission to spend their own money on attending a course.” (Education provider)

Education providers had mixed views of the effectiveness of BTEA across the focus groups. Some were positive and suggested that the financial support provides wider opportunities for learners, increases social mobility, and helps individuals improve their learning and education. The programme was also described as being ‘critical’ to making a difference to those who get on to the scheme and consider it a ‘key support’ to secure employment.

“The BTEA gives students the opportunity to return to education and without this they would not be able to do that. It is a key support.” (Education providers)

However, affordability of the course was an area of concern amongst a number of education providers. It was reported that although payment of course fees was a big help to participants, they were disadvantaged by the lack of extra funding or learning support. Some felt the BTEA scheme was less beneficial when comparing with programmes such as VTOS and SUSI as these also offered financial grants. The BTEA system was also described as ‘too rigid’ in that it does not provide any financial help to cover travel costs or childcare and thus results in a number of people discontinuing the course.

“BTEA did not assist with travel or other expenses, it was just a mechanism to prevent learners having to sign on weekly for payments. There is no support attached to the payment mechanism from DSP, by support I mean any human back-up.” (Education provider)

“It’s frustrating because when a course was called to start, the induction phase of the programme was tied up with visits to the DSP to transfer clients over to the BTEA allowance whilst on a training programme. It also didn’t cover any travel allowance for participants.” (Education provider)

Many education providers highlighted the need for more financial rewards for BTEA participants to encourage progression and improve employability. An education provider who delivers Momentum courses observed that they voluntarily reported the status of learners to

the DSP on a bi-monthly basis in order to inform them of those who discontinue the course. However, in return, they received very little communication or engagement from the department.

In terms of usefulness of BTEA, again, there were mixed views amongst education providers across the focus groups. Those in Kerry ETB were more positive about the programme and suggested that the scheme offers critical support to those returning to education.

“I know people who availed of it, who otherwise would not have been able to afford taking up a course, very necessary support.” (Education provider)

“It’s more than useful, it’s imperative to a lot of learners returning to education.” (Education provider)

On the other hand, a number of education providers from Dublin City ETB held the view that BTEA entails a number of barriers which discourage participants from getting on to the course such as age and length of time receiving job seekers payments. Another view concerned the number of schemes, of which BTEA is one, which are on offer: it was suggested that the schemes should be combined as they do not have any identifiable differences.

“One overall scheme would be easier. We just use up lots of public funds paying to administer these schemes.” (Education providers)

4.3.2 Views on delivering second-level courses

Education providers were asked to describe their overall experience of conducting courses at second level. Responses were varied. Some participants described their experience as positive whilst others suggested a number of ways in which the second-level courses could be better delivered.

Positive responses were remarkably consistent with most of these providers describing second-level courses as ‘rewarding’. They enjoyed teaching individuals who aspired to improve their skills and who were highly motivated to improve their chances of employment. Teaching mature students with a range of experiences and life-skills also contributed to providers’ positive experiences in delivering the second-level courses.

“It’s always nice to have mature students in a group - it adds different life experiences to any discussion.” (Education provider)

“Teaching adults in particular is very rewarding and allows you to build very positive relationships with these students.” (Education provider)

In contrast, two providers who delivered Momentum courses observed that participants on second-level courses were more demanding than expected and reported participant retention as a key challenge. They also highlighted difficulty with ensuring participants remained focussed on the course.

“It was heart breaking and a huge amount of work had to be put in to it from a providers view to get the participant on the right track.” (Education provider)

As highlighted throughout this report, there is a widely held view across participants, case officers, and education providers that there is a need to better support participants at

second-level with course fees, travel costs, and childcare. However, in addition, it is important for these programmes to be delivered in response to market conditions.

“Having to provide FET programmes which are responsive to the needs of the labour market within the funding model of a post-primary school has been increasingly frustrating, particularly in recent years. As a sector we are keen to respond to these needs but are being restricted by a not-for-purpose system.” (Education provider)

Whilst education providers hold different views about second-level courses and participants receiving the BTEA funding, most were in agreement that the BTEA is useful in supporting individuals into employment.

“It is a useful funding mechanism and is a supportive step on their way to get a job, further training and it looks after students who are not eligible for other funding options.” (Education provider)

Although noted by fewer providers, it was observed that the scheme is useful in that it provides learners with a social welfare payment whilst on a training programme. However, it was also observed that those who are motivated and committed to improving their employment prospects will secure employment regardless of the welfare payment.

Some education providers considered that the scheme is less effective as it focuses specifically on improving employability whilst the number of number of participants who are inspired to continue their education is generally higher than those who wish to pursue employment after a level 5 or 6 qualification.

“I think that a lot of my BTEA go into social care/pre nursing type courses and the progression to degree level is the most important goal for them.” (Education provider)

Additional arguments for weakness in the scheme, as noted in earlier chapters, concern lack of financial support which decreases completion rates and courses not being closely aligned or linked to participants’ skills, thus impacting interest and reducing retention. An education provider recommended revisiting the criteria and support offered to SLO participants.

“On the whole, another payment, which took into account the costs associated with travel and work placement would have allowed more people to participate, more people to continue on the programmes, and ultimately have more people return to employment.” (Education provider)

4.4 Analysis of participant motivations and attitudes towards second-level courses

4.4.1 Participant engagement and attitude towards courses

Participants’ engagement and attitude towards the courses was perceived positively by most providers. Students were generally seen as motivated to study and to seek to achieve career ambitions. In line with their views on delivering second-level courses, education providers viewed the course as a stepping stone and as an opportunity which enabled progression. Two providers observed that gaining confidence led to an increase in motivation.

“In the main they are very motivated as they see either a career progression or a pathway to college.” (Education provider)

“Some whose motives are not so clear may gain confidence during the course and this leads to increased motivation.” (Education provider)

However, a few providers made the point that motivation and progression depended on the individual student and their personality. Two providers believed that mature students were significantly more motivated in their engagement with the course and tended to be more focussed and clear about their career goals.

“Generally students are quite motivated and engaged sometimes more so the mature learner who has returned to education. Generally students have researched the course well again this is more so with mature students.” (Education provider)

Although students were generally perceived as having a positive attitude towards their courses, providers reported that many had personal, mental health, and social issues which impeded their progress and performance on the course. Participants found it challenging to cope with the academic and financial demands of the course alongside psychological difficulties and problems in their personal lives. A lot of the time, these factors acted as a barrier to completing courses successfully.

“Many students face personal and family issues alongside academic challenges and the financial challenges of taking a course add to the difficulty in engaging and completing them.” (Education provider)

4.4.2 Level of support provided to participants

Education providers offered a range of support to students whilst they studied on the course, as summarised below:

Learning: Many providers offered learning support and guidance to students as required throughout the course. They supported students with their assignments and course work. They also supported them with other academic needs such as improving literacy, numeracy, and provided learning support and guidance more generally. Support was delivered using a range of methods such as one-to-one support, workshops, and group guidance. Some providers referred students to a designated learning support team who specialised in supporting learners with special education needs such as learning disabilities

“Ongoing one to one weekly learning support is available. Group guidance also takes place and workshops.” (Education provider)

“In terms of learning support if a student’s discloses a disability/learning need they are put in contact with student support team in the early stages of the course.” (Education provider)

Pastoral: Pastoral support was a significant function of providers. It was reported that many students displayed mental health and personal problems such as depression, addiction, and financial and family difficulties which impacted their progress and performance on the course. Many staff members volunteered their time to offer counselling and emotional support, although this was not necessarily a formal part of their role, in order to encourage success and to increase learner confidence. A few providers reported that they would refer vulnerable students to the care team to support them through the course. Others reported that formal counselling was limited but it was common for them to offer pastoral support.

“They are motivated and engaged but many suffer with personal problems such as depression, addiction.” (Education provider)

“No formal support provided for Career advice or Counselling. Teachers offer support on an ongoing basis until conclusion of the courses in May.” (Education provider)

4.4.3 Relationship with DSP case officers

Providers reported varied views on their contact with DSP case officers. Some suggested that contact was limited and could be improved as they had a lack of involvement with them, especially once the course had started.

“Communication between DSP and providers could be a lot better” (Education provider)

A few providers suggested that the case officer’s engagement varied, with some being interested in learners’ progression and others less so. One education provider noted that location was also a factor that underpinned variation in case officers’ engagement. Some providers proposed that relations and communications with case officers should be improved, in that they could be more actively engaged with participants and providers during the course in order to grasp a greater understanding of learners’ progression.

“DSP engagement was hugely varied from actively disengaged to very interested. We reported learner progression to local DSP bi monthly, some asked to no longer receive the information and some were delighted to receive the information.” (Education provider)

“DSP relationship...varied by location. Some were clearly very engaged with their clients and knowledge able of their career path. Others did not appear to know the clients that they were proposing for our course.” (Education provider)

Some providers reported that they had contact with case officers at different levels of frequency or intensity. A few suggested that most of their contact occurred at recruitment fairs. Some reported that they maintained contact with case officers voluntarily through various means such as email, Facebook, and text communication to discuss job opportunities for learners. Others worked closely with case officers and had regular contact with them by attending local meetings in college, meeting with them during college registration, and visits to their offices. Their relationship was usually described as positive. Two providers said that they worked collaboratively with case officers to develop a greater understanding of learners’ needs. However, this was limited.

“I have attended meetings with local cluster where we all try to understand each other’s perspective and experience and gain greater understanding of student needs. This has been very helpful.. DSP staff, also come to college during registration days to speed up process.”

4.5 Views on the outcomes for BTEA participants

4.5.1 Support provided to BTEA participants

On completion of the course, the support offered to participants by providers was varied. Many providers suggested that support was provided on an ad hoc basis. Providers would supply references and welcome students to return and discuss their options and encourage

them to continue with education. They would also send information regarding vacancies following contact with employers.

“If any employer contacts us in relation of a position we will send that out to all learners who have completed.” (Education provider)

“On an ad hoc basis it would usually be the result of relationships built up with staff. Past students will always be supplied with references from the college if requested by them. Also, we welcome them back to discuss their options and encourage them to continue in education if the opportunity presents itself.” (Education provider)

Other providers delivered a range of structured support, where they would offer guidance services by arranging CV and interview preparation and employer workshops. A few providers also offered group sessions, telephone support, and one-to-one advice and mentoring sessions. Two providers helped participants to network with employers and to secure work experience in order to enhance their employability. Momentum-run programmes had a requirement to provide support six months' post-course support to learners.

“We provided group sessions, phone support, one to ones and advice and mentoring.” (Education provider)

“6 months of support were a requirement for Momentum - post course support workshops/jobs clubs/CV training.” (Education provider)

One participant suggested that they did not have the resources to offer support after courses finished and said that they would like support from the government to implement a formal system to support college leavers.

“We would very much welcome support from the state to put a system in place to support students who have left the college.” (Education provider)

4.5.2 Perceived benefits and disadvantages of the BTEA scheme

Providers identified key benefits and disadvantages of BTEA.

As with case officers, one of the major **benefits** that providers identified in relation to the scheme was the basic effect of BTEA support for participants. Most suggested that the funding stream enabled students to access education and develop their skills which allowed them to progress to further education or enter employment. Providers emphasised that many participants would not have had the opportunity to access education and enhance their skills without the scheme as they would not have had the money.

Providers also raised the importance of the social and psychological impacts of the scheme. It was reported that many participants gained self-confidence in their ability to learn and enter employment. They had the opportunity to gain experience, engage socially, make new friends, and achieve a certificate, all of which contributed to enhanced confidence. For mature students, participating on the scheme was a life-changing experience as it gave them a second chance to learn and achieve their ambitions.

“Over my years in Adult Guidance we have encounter many individuals who have availed of BTEA. These people would not have engaged in returning to education if there was no BTEA option (financial support).” (Education provider)

“Like most mature students, it is often a life-changing experience. This is usually second chance education for them and it is usually a very empowering experience.”
(Education provider)

In terms of **disadvantages**, some providers suggested that the absence of financial support to cover costs associated with the course such as, travel, meals, book purchase, and childcare was a disadvantage. Two providers also mentioned that they should have more access to the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS).

Further, a few providers perceived the stringent eligibility criteria as being a disadvantage. The six-to-nine month qualifying period for the scheme was viewed as being too lengthy as it prevented people who can genuinely benefit from access to education.

“It is a shame that people must be on the live register for 6 months before being eligible to obtain this support excellent prospective students often leave when they are turned down for BTEA as they have no means of returning to education without it.” (Education provider)

“Nine months qualifying period for third level is a bit long, especially for those who have only had a temporary job.” (Education provider)

4.5.3 Employer feedback

Many providers reported that they did not receive any feedback on subsequent employment as contact was limited with employers and with participants after they completed their courses. Some noted that they do not have the resources to maintain contact with employers. However, some providers did maintain contact with former students who have given feedback that their course served a key role in preparing them for employment. A few providers suggested that they received positive feedback from work experience providers.

“We really don’t get that information, just feedback from unpaid work experience. Some of our students would gain employment from their work experience, but once they have started work, we don’t hear from the employer.” (Education provider)

“Contacting employers on such a scale is very resource intensive and currently we don’t have such resources. We do however keep in regular contact with former students.” (Education provider)

A minority of providers, who did have contact with employers commented that the feedback received was generally very positive. Employers had reported that participants were suited to the positions and were well-equipped with the appropriate level of training and skills. This was attributed to the training they received on the course. Many participants were retained and employed by work experience providers as they were impressed with the skills which these BTEA participants demonstrated.

“Feedback is always excellent from employers and generally they report that the students are well prepared and able for the positions they have secured. This is most likely due to the skills training they receive.” (Education provider)

“Employers are generally very happy with our students and as previously mentioned are retained by their work experience providers.” (Education provider)

4.5.4 Perceived challenges in delivering second-level courses

In delivering second-level courses, providers identified a number of key challenges that they faced. These are summarised below.

Resources: Many education providers reported that lack of resources caused challenges in delivering the course. Access to computers, teaching space, course materials, and other learning equipment was often limited. The absence of administrative support and counselling services posed challenges as it increased providers' workloads. They were expected to balance several tasks concurrently in order to ensure that learners had the support they required in order to complete the course successfully and that the course was delivered appropriately. Additionally, two participants noted that there were limited resources for learners with special education needs (SEN).

Funding: A consistent finding throughout the report is the lack of financial support for childcare and travel. Some education providers also perceived these factors as a challenge. In some cases, this affected participants' attendance and progression on the course. Course registration fees were also identified as a barrier for students limiting access to the scheme.

"While the BTEA is talked about as a support, there are still too many barriers for students to get onto a course, e.g. how can I gather up a course charge of €4-500 if I am unemployed? I can only fill in a form seeking the allowance after I have gained entry to the course! There is no support to cover the course charge." (Education provider)

Courses: A few providers described challenges in relation to the courses. The inability for level 5 students to complete a different level 5 course with BTEA due to the requirement to demonstrate progression was perceived as a challenge, especially for those who wanted to change their career path and one provider suggested that, apart from PLC and VTOS courses, there are limited options available to level 5 students and, therefore, believed that the PLC sector could be better utilised.

"Outside of the PLC and VTOS there are very few options for people at level 5. The PLC sector could be better utilised... we need to be able to offer new courses to meet demand in the health care, medical and engineering sectors." (Education provider)

4.6 Perceived improvements and recommendations

4.6.1 Views on poor participant employment outcomes

When asked for their views as to why participants' employment outcomes were poor, some providers were unable to think of any reasons that may explain the findings. However, others put forward various hypotheses.

Some providers suggested that participants may not have been able to secure work due to the lack of employment opportunities available in the job market or particular geographic locations. Another provider suggested that, as the study took place during the recession period, there was a national increase in unemployment which may have led to poor employment outcomes. They also mentioned that progression to a higher course of study was disregarded in the study.

“Because it was done in the middle of a recession when there was 15.5% unemployment rate nationally and they did not measure progression within FE or HE in the study.” (Education provider)

A few felt that a lack of support in guidance counselling and learning support may have led to poor employment outcomes for participants. This may have affected their confidence and mental health well-being which, in turn, could have impacted their performance and success in completing the course.

“There is a need for more support in Guidance Counselling Learning support.” (Education provider)

One provider mentioned that a lack of collaboration between DSP case officers and employers could have also led to the results, as fewer opportunities may have been presented to participants. Another provider added that the BTEA scheme was fundamentally designed to return people to education and not employment; and the scheme needed to have worked in partnership with employers (as with Momentum) in order to see an improvement in employment outcomes.

“Because a return to education does not equate a direct return to employment. For this to be so, learning at this level needs to be linked to employers as with Momentum.” (Education provider)

4.6.2 Improving BTEA support for second-level courses

Providers were asked to express their views on how BTEA support could be improved for second-level courses. Their views focussed on three overarching factors, comprising financial support, eligibility criteria, and course design.

In light, as above, of challenges associated with funding, many providers suggested that participants should receive financial support to cover basic course costs, such as travel, laptops, and childcare allowances. It was argued that better financial support would increase participants’ engagement on the courses and, in turn, would improve their prospects for employment. Additionally, one provider recommended extending the VTOS support for second-level courses. This would give colleges oversight as to the learners for whom they could provide guidance or placement support. This could also facilitate their employment progression.

“At the very least, provide some financial support for basic course costs. Preferable, rationalise the plethora of funding schemes.” (Education provider)

“Extend the funding model and VTOS supports to this group, give the colleges oversight of who they are and give guidance and work placement support to help these students achieve the progression or employment they desire.”

“Give computer allowance to allow access to a laptop!” (Education provider)

Some providers suggested that, rather than the current, standardised, eligibility criteria, a more individually-tailored approach should be adopted to select high-quality candidates. A few providers also proposed that the criteria need to be made clearer; and that the scheme should be made more accessible to potential users by raising public awareness of its existence. They added that fewer schemes should be available, with a greater focus on enhanced support.

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“A more individually tailored approach to criteria for better candidates.” (Education provider)

“Clear criteria for all potential users- make it accessible. DSP do a public information campaign on these supports.” (Education provider)

Lastly, a small number of providers argued that the scheme should permit learners to re-skill if they want to change their career focus, as opposed to up-skilling. They also observed that qualifications should be relevant to the current economic climate and not out-dated. One provider recommended that the scheme should aim to encourage progression to higher education courses in order to develop participants' skills to a higher level, which would consequently aid their employment prospects and opportunities.

“My recommendation would be to allow students to re-skill as opposed to simply up skill and not to put too much emphasis on older qualifications that may not be relevant in the current economic climate.” (Education provider)

5 Employers: research findings

The following case studies summarise the findings from three employers who took part in the research. Specifically, these case studies set out employers' views of BTEA in relation to their motivations for engaging with DSP to recruit jobseekers, their understanding and usefulness of the BTEA scheme, and the impact they believe BTEA has on their business and the local/wider economy.

Case study 1 – Chairman and former employee of a leading supermarket chain

Motivation to engage with DSP to recruit jobseekers

The employer is the former employee of a large retail services chain in Ireland and has been involved with the DSP for many years. They were motivated to engage with the DSP as they recognised skills shortages in certain areas of their business and within the wider economy.

Understanding and effectiveness of the BTEA scheme

The employer's understanding of the BTEA scheme is to get people back into work. They held the view that the scheme is helpful. However, based on previous results, they do not believe it is the best way to encourage individuals into work. They note that although support is provided through the allowance and during the course, it does not always lead to them securing employment in the right sector. Their perception is that candidates in receipt of a social welfare payment were viewed negatively amongst employers in the industry and although this is now improving, it is an area that needs to be improved.

"I think there's a perception they're given the worst jobs available and in the last five or six years, maybe there's a gap in between where that would have been less of an issue. The perception of people being on schemes under the Department of Social Protection would be viewed as negative."

The employer also observed that the candidates put forward for interviewing by the DSP do not always have the appropriate skills or experience for the role and lack motivation.

"I would question priority. One of the big issues is why does that department get involved? They send you a bunch of people to interview, and it's not always a smart selection."

However, the employer believes the BTEA scheme is improving with, for example, better communication with employers. The key area to improve employment outcomes is to improve the

Business approach to recruitment and training

The employer reported that they recruit individuals across various roles and levels within the business but that those recruited from the Live Register would typically be applying for entry level roles such as sales assistants. In terms of recruitment criteria, they look for a reasonable level of education but more importantly assess the candidate's attitude, appetite for work, and willingness to thrive in the role. The employer noted that a successful candidate should also have the ability to interact with others, be flexible in their attitude, time efficient, and have a good record on absence. The recruitment process would typically involve an application stage followed by a face-to-face interview. For more senior roles, two face-to-face interviews would take place.

In terms of training, the employer pointed out that the organisation has a very comprehensive approach to training which includes specialist skills training, general skills training, and on-the-job training.

The employer reported they are generally unable to identify if candidates have been part of a course supported by the BTEA unless they specifically mention this during the interview process.

Impact of BTEA on employer's business, on participants and on the local/wider economy

The employer's overall view is that the BTEA scheme is successful in providing support to individuals. However, the underlying predicament is finding employment in the right companies. Generally the employer holds the view that other social welfare schemes provide better results.

"I think it helps, but I'm unclear and unsure that the help is relative to the investment made by the state. Other back-to-work schemes might have been better. Things like Job Plus."

The employer queried the reasons why participants of the BTEA have previously had poor employment outcomes when in the past 5-7

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perception some employers may hold with regards to unemployed people.

years there was maximum employment in Ireland. They mentioned this may be down to the individual's approach to work.

It was suggested that more engagement and input is required between the DSP and employers to explore ways to improve employment outcomes as part of the scheme's evaluation.

"I think to, you know, build on what you were doing, to get the research right, engage with the employers more actively. Use some of the contacts and schemes to get more input directly from employers, make the department a place that employers will want to go to, not the other way around, the service quality of the department to the employer."

Case study 2 – Responsible for social policy in the largest and most active business organisation in Ireland

Motivation to engage with DSP to recruit jobseekers

The employer is an employee of one of the largest business organisations in Ireland. They have a broad range of businesses which include those in ICT, catering and hospitality, financial services, and retail.

The employer is also a member of the Labour Market Council which is an advisory body that comprises employers, employer representatives, trade union representatives and policy specialists. They have been involved with DSP since the Labour Market Council was established three to four years ago and their role involves advising the department on Pathways To Work. This includes specific programmes such as BTEA.

Understanding and effectiveness of the BTEA scheme

The employer's understanding of BTEA's objective is that it aims to up-skill individuals to make them more employable.

In their opinion, they do not agree that this objective has been met, based on previous labour market outcomes and the lack of guidance within the scheme. They note that, for the scheme to be successful, they advise the DSP to look at skills provision and the courses which individuals are pursuing during each year of study and how closely these are matched to employers' needs. The employer generally had a negative view of the BTEA scheme due to the following;

- Lack of understanding of the programme in terms of the labour market.
- Perception that there is a limited relationship between the education system and the social welfare system.
- Lack of guidance and clarity on how individuals' experience is assessed, their educational achievements and distinguishing between those that pursue employment, further studies or an internship.
- Perception that candidates are not aware of the range of employment opportunities or sufficiently prepared for interviews.

Employer's approach to recruitment

The employer mentioned candidates' attributes are key within their recruitment criteria. These attributes include work attitude, soft skills, levels of numeracy, and specific work experience. They note that the recruitment process differs between SMEs and large businesses as SMEs commonly invite individuals to a face-to-face interview based on referrals; whereas large organisations typically have a longer recruitment process and involve, for example, the completion of an online psychometric test before the interview stage.

It was also outlined that employers are unable to identify the proportion of individuals who are on a welfare payment such as BTEA unless they personally disclose this information. Although, for the employer, the type of study and the individual's skills are deemed more important than the social support they receive.

Impact of BTEA on employer's business, on participants, and on the local/wider economy

The employer expressed the view that understanding the labour market is critical to improving employment outcomes in Ireland. They believe there is a need to have better engagement mechanisms between the Intreo service and employers and much closer engagement between the social welfare and education providers at a local level. The concern is that currently individuals are taking up courses and funding demand is high but not enough jobs available. The employer also highlighted the need for increased awareness of BTEA amongst employers in the wider economy. They observed that some employers currently hold the perception that those who are on a social welfare scheme primarily have lower qualifications and, therefore, employers typically recruit them as temporary staff.

"I know the BTEA has a small higher education constituency as well, but it's primarily people with lower qualifications. We've been trying to highlight this, because those that did engage with it have been pleasantly surprised."

Case study 3 – Employer is a billion dollar revenue company in Ireland and the UK

Motivation to engage with DSP to recruit jobseekers

The employer is the regional managing director of a customer service business providing food, facilities and property services to a broad range of clients in healthcare, business and industry, education, and retail. They employ approximately 15,000 people in Northern Europe of whom 5,000 are in Ireland.

The employer has been liaising with the DSP and other government agencies for many years and is also a member of the Labour Market Council. They suggested that they have a good relationship with the DSP and from an employer's point of view, try to participate in various programmes to support education and reduce unemployment.

Raising awareness of the schemes, streamlining the process for acquiring candidates, and supporting the selection and recruitment of candidates were identified as key benefits of being involved with the DSP. The employer described the department as being very active, better organised within the last 12 months, and perceived that there has been more focus and momentum of the leadership within the department.

Understanding and effectiveness of the BTEA scheme

The employers understanding of the scheme's objective is that it provides skills to individuals while they are on the Live Register to enable them to take up employment. They generally had a positive view of the effectiveness of BTEA and believe it offers a variety of programmes which can be tailored to the roles available in various businesses. Their perception was that those who have been on a course funded by BTEA are typically more skilled and engaged than those who have come through other routes.

However, the employer also held the view that there is a lack of awareness of the scheme amongst small and medium sized organisations and that the scheme is not metric or target driven.

Business approach to recruitment and training

The employer explained that they liaise with the DSP and hire unemployed jobseekers through the Live Register. As a business, they are unable to identify if a candidate or employee has been in receipt of BTEA unless they disclose this information during the recruitment process.

Candidates are employed into service or supervisory roles which would typically involve food and beverage, or into non-skilled jobs. The eligibility criteria for these roles would require a certain level of education (e.g. Junior Cert), work experience, either part-time or full-time, in an associated role but, above all, they look for an individual's attitude and willingness to work but then offer training to build their skills.

"We have a high level of customer contact or client contact. You're looking for friendly, outgoing, personable people. Specifically, I'm looking for somebody who is willing to work. That could be of any age, so it is irrelevant whether they come in at eighteen or fifty. If they show the commitment towards either educating themselves, or better themselves or work, they will rank ahead of anyone who hasn't done anything to better themselves."

The organisation's recruitment process involves completing an application form to assess the candidates reading and writing ability followed by telephone screening and a face-to-face interview. The employer suggested the process is relatively quick and typically takes seven to 10 days before an offer is made.

The employer reported that their organisation has a broad training programme and both internal and external training is offered to employees. All employees are provided with basic training and offered management training as they progress in the role. In terms of those hired through the Live Register; the employer suggested that they retain around 25% of employees who typically progress to management level.

Impact of BTEA on employer's business, on participants, and on the local/wider economy

Overall, the employer suggests that the BTEA scheme has been moderately successful for their business and the wider economy as it has provided more opportunities during what was described as 'a very difficult environment' for unemployed people and for employers trying to source the right talent.

The employer believes that poor employment outcomes may have resulted from lack of preparation for interviews, the individual's attitude and approach to work, and lack of motivation versus other candidates. The employer suggested that it is the departments' responsibility to provide the additional

support to individuals to ensure they apply for appropriate jobs and are prepared for interviews.

In terms of recommendations, the employer suggested the need for a more targeted approach and the promotion of greater awareness of the scheme. They suggested that the DSP should focus on targeting small and medium businesses to increase the availability of jobs. They believe this could be done by liaising with the FSA or providing incentives such as subsidised wages to encourage employers to hire new recruits.

6 Conclusions and implications

The overarching aim of this research was to explore and understand the drivers of continuing negative employment outcomes (to 2015) of the BTEA scheme. The views and opinions of those who were participants or who were involved in administering and delivering the course at second-level have been described. Overall, the research found that most participants, case officers, and education providers conveyed a positive experience of being involved in BTEA. A summary of the conclusions derived from the research in relation to each of the research objectives is outlined below.

6.1.1 Differing and competing perceptions of the scheme objectives

The research found that perceptions of the purpose of the scheme were consistent across participants, case officers, education providers, and employers. All understand the objective to support participants' prospects for employment by providing them with an opportunity to up-skill and gain a qualification. The key descriptor was 'a pathway to employment'.

Although there were similar views on the scheme's objectives, the different audiences had conflicting views on the effectiveness of these objectives and the extent to which they had been met. As expected, participants aspired to complete all elements of the course and, although this was achieved for most, a few discontinued their course with financial support being the main barrier to completion.

Case officers and education providers had varied views on the effectiveness of BTEA. Some believed that its objectives had been met as the scheme led participants to secure employment based on skills they acquired as a result of their course. It presented opportunities in deprived areas and supported those who may have otherwise not secured employment without financial support. Case officers also reported that the courses were in line with employment demand i.e. delivered in line with the number of jobs available in specific sectors.

Despite the value of the scheme, research findings strongly suggest a key driver of ineffectiveness is the matching/vetting process for approving course participants, once basic eligibility criteria are met. A lack of financial support was also identified as a key contributor of poor employment outcomes. As well as financial support, the lack of psychological support (in the form of funding to deliver counselling) was an area of concern raised by education providers.

6.1.2 Views on eligibility and administration that may have affected previous negative drivers of the scheme

The administrative process was considered by participants to be easy and straightforward. They generally had a good understanding of the application process and what was required. They also felt supported by the DSP, case officers, and teachers if they had queries when applying.

As expected, case officers were heavily involved in the administrative process whilst education providers had limited contact with participants or the DSP during this stage.

Case officers had varying views on the eligibility criteria; with some seeing them as 'too rigid' and 'stringent' whilst others suggesting they were 'too lenient'. In line with this, some

education providers, having been involved in completing their own eligibility checks for students wishing to participate on a course, reported that this was too complex and that some participants lose the opportunity to take part in courses that they are interested in pursuing.

6.1.3 Individual characteristics including labour market histories and/or personal circumstances

Most participants who took part in the research were currently not in employment, were aged between 18 and 54, and predominantly male. In terms of previous educational history, most had completed their Junior Certificate and progressed to a college of further education to participate in courses such as IT, social care, and beauty. Most participants conveyed poor experiences of secondary school and lacked interest in education or faced difficulties in understanding the curriculum. Amongst other reasons, improving the chances of employment was the key motive to return to education.

Although unable to be definitive, most case officers reported that the profile of participants on second level courses tend to be in receipt of a jobseekers payment, varied in age, were predominantly women, and had acquired a Junior Certificate or Leaving Certificate. Education providers distinguished BTEA participants amongst others on their courses as being older and generally more enthusiastic in the classroom.

Case officers and education providers had similar views on individuals' personal circumstances. Given frequent disadvantaged backgrounds, financial support was seen as the most influential factor in retaining individuals on the course. Childcare commitments were also identified as a contributor to the drop-out rate as older participants in particular faced difficulties in paying for childcare in order to attend a course.

6.1.4 Experiences of participating, administering or delivering the BTEA scheme

Findings suggest that, overall, participants, case officers and education providers have had positive experiences in their involvement in the BTEA scheme.

When comparing experiences of participants across the different cohorts, it is clear that most praised the scheme and were overwhelmingly positive about the impact it has had on their personal development. Participants were particularly positive about their teachers, the format in which the course was delivered, the additional careers guidance they received, and the ability to meet new people across different ages and backgrounds on the course.

Although generally positive, case officers had varied views on the administration of BTEA. There was uncertainty about the impact of progression plans as, despite being perceived as a good tool to plan participants' careers and goals, they did not always secure employment. A key finding from the case officer interviews concerns their lack of information on the number of participants who complete their courses. The limited relationship between case officers and education providers is a clear area for consideration by the DSP.

Education providers were generally very positive about their experiences of delivering second-level courses with some suggesting that they felt personally privileged to support ambitious people back into employment. Those who delivered Momentum courses had varying views with a few suggesting that as vocational programmes can be more demanding, BTEA participants required additional support to remain focused on their courses.

6.1.5 Employer perceptions of BTEA participants and views of the scheme

Overall, the findings from the small number of employer interviews suggest that there are different views on the effectiveness of the BTEA scheme. Although the scheme is perceived to be effective in supporting individuals into employment, there is some scepticism around how well this is achieved.

The key finding amongst employers was the need for BTEA-funded courses to match labour market needs; and for case officers and education providers to understand/know these needs, in order to improve future employment outcomes. Thus the key point is that courses in many cases were perceived by employers as not being labour-market relevant.

6.1.6 Labour market dynamics

As outlined by employers, BTEA participants are typically hired into entry level roles including sales workers, general clerks, care workers and elementary roles (waiters, catering assistants) but also into some more highly skilled occupations (such as IT professionals) with the opportunity to progress further through on-the-job training. The research findings have shown that these roles need to be closely aligned to labour market dynamics i.e. in line with the types of roles employers are recruiting at particular points in time.

Mismatch of qualifications/qualification levels achieved through BTEA courses and limited experience in relation to employer requirements have resulted in a number of participants struggling to secure employment upon completion of their BTEA courses.

6.2 Discussion and implications

This research was stimulated by the observation, in the impact analysis of the BTEA SLO scheme undertaken in 2015 by the Economic and Social Research Institute, that SLO participants had worse employment outcomes than a matched group of unemployed people who did not undertake a BTEA-funded SLO course.

The research reported here was designed to investigate the possible factors which led to this finding.

There are two possible hypotheses as to why it occurred:

- The first, **Hypotheses 1**, is that BTEA SLO participation had characteristics such that, on average, it reduced participants' employability.
- The second, **Hypothesis 2**, is that the previous impact evaluation, using administrative data to compare participants with a matched control group of non-participants, could not, because of limited information on the two groups, actually control for some unobserved or confounding factors. A particular sub-theme of this hypothesis is that the **motivations** of participants and non-participants in respect of employment intentions and aspirations were different at the point when the choice to enter a BTEA course or not was made.

These two hypotheses are not either/or propositions. It is quite possible that they interacted to produce the negative finding on outcomes, with the participant group being, on average, intrinsically less employable than the non-participant group in ways which the impact evaluation could not spot; and then participation itself not being a sufficiently powerful or useful experience to counteract this effect or even having a negative impact which further reduced the average employability of participants.

The research throws light on the two hypotheses. **Hypothesis 1**, that participation had an average negative effect on employment outcomes, is considered first.

It might theoretically have been the case that course participation was so badly organised or delivered as, at this simple level, to have little or even negative impact on employability. In fact, this study has shown that BTEA participation had many positive characteristics. The courses which BTEA-supported learners undertook were often seen by participants as valuable and stimulating. The administration of BTEA was not seen as unduly arduous or inefficient by any of the stakeholder groups which took part in discussions. The objective of the programme, essentially to act as a pathway into employment for unemployed people, was universally and clearly recognised. Participants' awareness of this objective and their expectations of course outcomes were generally not inaccurate or misconceived. Case officers and education providers were generally committed to getting the best outcomes for their clients and students. Courses, at worst, offered benefits to participants in social terms and in building 'soft' skills, including the development of self-confidence after months of educational and economic inactivity. The potential value of a 'second chance' education, particularly for mature students, was widely recognised.

These factors would **tend to negate Hypothesis 1** by showing that course participation had many positive aspects.

However, a number of negative aspects of participation, which are likely to have limited the impact of the BTEA scheme or, at worst, allowed it to reduce the employability of

participants, were also observed by the research. These factors can be regarded as **supportive of Hypothesis 1**.

Firstly, administrative information on course outcomes and completion rates of BTEA courses is poor. It is not known what proportion of learners failed to complete their courses or completed their courses but were not awarded a qualification. This lack of administrative information was reflected in this study. It was evident that neither case officers nor training providers had other than anecdotal information on the rates of completion/non-completion of courses. Non-completion was, however, recognised in discussions with education providers and some participants themselves observed that drop-out was frequent, particularly in the first year of courses.

Several explanations for observed non-completions were given. They included:

- Wrong choices of courses which proved to be of little interest to participants or modules within courses which participants thought lacked relevance to their work aspirations.
- Too many ‘theory’ components of courses and/or an absent or limited work experience element.
- The requirement for a substantial out-of-college, out-of-hours requirement to complete course work or assignments, which, particularly if the participant had domestic responsibilities, was too arduous.

However, the most frequently advanced reason for drop-out was that of supplementary costs – for fees for books and support materials, for travel (particularly if home-to-college distances were lengthy), and for childcare.

The general point is that some part of the negative findings of BTEA’s post-participation employment rate may lie in non-completion, in so far as a further proposition is valid: that is, that pursuing and failing in an educational experience extends the effective unemployment period, perhaps de-motivates people, and, thus, reduces the likelihood of re-entering employment.

A second negative aspect of BTEA provision, again supporting Hypothesis 1, is that of its relationship to local job opportunities and to vocational content of courses. This research offers several insights into this:

- There was no or little systematic linkage of courses with local employers who were largely not engaged for example, in course curriculum design or offering work experience or being linked to students on completion of their courses
- Course officers were able to guide learners into particular courses and could do so with a background of general knowledge of local economies but, in some instances, case officers were aware of their limited knowledge of specific job opportunities or were aware that some course choices might not be well matched to local labour market demand – a circumstance which some participants also found to be the case when they came to look for work when they finished their courses.

Thirdly, the process by which participants were assessed for suitability for BTEA support was inconsistent. Case officers varied in the proportions of applicants who they judged as suitable or not and there did not appear to be either a consistent procedure for applicants

going through the application process or a consistent set of criteria, beyond the basic eligibility criteria, for screening out applications who lacked the attributes for successful course performance and completion and for subsequent entry into employment – these attributes including motivations, personal qualities, social and domestic circumstances, and basic skills, including literacy and numeracy. The consequence may have been that some course participants did not, on entry, have the qualities and characteristics which employers seek and that, even after course participation, the persistence of these limitations made return to work difficult.

Fourth, this issue may have been compounded by the lack of continuity of support to participants through the BTEA process. Essentially, case officers managed the procedures which allowed participants to start their courses, education providers delivered those courses, and, following participation, there was no systematic support from either case officers or providers to assist participants into work or to monitor or support their progress in work.

Throughout this process, linkage between case officers and education providers was either absent or informal and sporadic. Case officers did not systematically monitor the progress of participants whilst they were on their courses. Education providers did not distinguish BTEA-supported participants from other students on their courses and did not know which of their students were BTEA-supported unless the students themselves informed them of this. The result was that BTEA participants received the providers' usual pastoral care and assistance with job application requirements (such as CV preparation and interview techniques) but not any particular support – this in circumstances in which case officers recognised the frequently difficult domestic circumstances and lifestyles of participants and in which some participants would have valued more on-course support than they received.

Essentially, it seems that BTEA participants were launched on to their courses but thereafter, apart from receiving the usual levels of support which educational institutions offer, were largely on their own as far as their future progress was concerned; there being no systematic information on their achievement (including, as above, on whether they completed their courses) or on their entry to work or otherwise and no systematic support tailored to their special needs and circumstances.

A fifth and last issue, tending to support Hypothesis 1 (that BTEA participation was not, on average, helpful or was detrimental to employability) concerns the question of the 'currency value' of study and qualifications which BTEA SLO courses deliver.

A proposition is that such intermediate level study and achievement, particularly if it does not include much or any work experience, does not, in many cases, confer much or any advantage when people look for work. This might be the case if employment is, to a degree, polarised between lower level employment (for which personality and attitudes allied to some basic literacy or numeracy or IT ability is more important than formal qualifications) and higher level employment (for which possession of a degree is a 'first sift' requirement for recruiters). There is also a competitive element involved. BTEA participants were seeking to enter a jobs market which is already well-populated with people who already hold the same or higher qualifications as BTEA SLO participation generates – and, perhaps crucially, have better employment histories and more work experience.

Essentially, it may be the case that some BTEA SLO participants fell into a gap. Seeking lower level jobs, these people found that their qualification was not particularly relevant and

its value was undermined by other factors related to length of time since previous employment or personal circumstances or attributes. Seeking higher level jobs, they found that they were out-competed by applicants with the same or better qualifications and with more continuous and better work experience.

The research found some evidence for this proposition. Some participants reported that their new qualification didn't appear to carry much weight when they applied for jobs or was irrelevant to local jobs on offer; and one large employer explicitly made the point above, that for routine jobs they required successful applicants mainly to have the right personal qualities not particular qualifications and, for those successful applicants, they would then supply all the specific training that the jobs required.

Turning to **Hypothesis 2**, this hypothesis is that the 2015 impact evaluation was unable to control for some differences between participant and non-participant groups despite careful matching of the groups on all available administrative data; and, particularly, that there were motivational differences between participants and non-participants at the point where people chose or not to study with BTEA support.

Three factors concerning this hypothesis were identified in the research relating to:

- Participant and non-participant motivations
- Personal and social circumstances
- Literacy and numeracy

In relation to the first of these, motivations, it is obvious that the earlier impact evaluation could not, by definition, control for the difference that participants chose a route towards employment involving a reasonably lengthy period of study whilst non-participants (if not content to remain unemployed) looked directly for work. It might be implied that this difference, in itself, indicates a stronger orientation towards employment amongst the latter group which may go some way towards explaining the negative impact evaluation findings.

This research, however, produced further insights into the proposition.

On the one hand, **contrary to the hypothesis**, BTEA participants who were interviewed universally reported that they were motivated by employment aspirations both when they took up the BTEA offer and when they left their courses.

However, **in support of Hypothesis 2**, such assertions might be expected. It is inherently unlikely that people who were previously, and were still at the time of the research, supported by public funds (first to study on the BTEA scheme and then as job seekers) would explicitly say that they had no wish to work. Or, as a more positive refinement of this point, it may be that participants who did not enter employment after BTEA study, were genuinely interested in gaining employment but, as discussed earlier, could not get into the jobs to which they aspired, and would not take less congenial lower level jobs, particularly if these jobs paid wages which gave only minimal income advantage over welfare receipts.

Bearing on this issue, this research makes a number of other observations. Interviews with some participants revealed that they saw the principal benefits of their participation as increasing their social confidence, making new friends, enjoyment of being at college, studying a subject of interest, 'getting out of the house' and doing something structured and purposeful, and, inferentially, perhaps preferred the status of studying at college above that

of being on welfare benefits. For such students, eventual entry to employment might have been a secondary motivation. Administrative statistics show a significant minority of BTEA SLO participants progressed to higher level study via the BTEA Third Level Option as had some participants in this research. Again it may have been the case that, for a minority of BTEA participants, it was studying and student life rather than entry to employment which was the predominant objective of participation.

Alternatively, some case officers were concerned that for some participants, part of the scheme's attractiveness was the financial support provided through BTEA rather than a strong concern to increase employability. This view may be supported by the research finding that the value of the BTEA support was reduced by course registration fees and the costs of travel, childcare, and books and materials, apparently having an impact on some participants' drop-out from and non-completion of courses.

Turning from the motivation issue, the 2015 impact evaluation used administrative data to capture age, gender, broad area of residence and so on. It did not, however, capture people's backgrounds, family and social circumstances, and the values associated with those characteristics. Interviews with case officers and education providers suggested that participants often had quite disadvantaged backgrounds and sometimes had disruptive home circumstances, involving use of drugs and alcohol.

It is not known whether the control group in the counterfactual analysis (those who did not enter BTEA supported study) differed in these respects but it may be that there were significant differences in background and circumstances to the disadvantage of BTEA participants.

Simply, whilst the counterfactual analysis controlled for 'external' or 'structural' factors as far as possible, it could not control for 'internal' factors specific to peoples' circumstances, personalities, and outlooks. This study itself could not make this implied contrast between 'BTEA' and 'non-BTEA' unemployed people (since the latter were not part of the research); but it does as, above, show that there was some disadvantage amongst BTEA participants which may, hypothetically, have been lesser amongst the non-participants with whom they were compared in the counterfactual study.

Finally, the 2015 impact evaluation was not able to control for possible literacy and numeracy differences between participants and non-participants. This study, as above, could not observe such differences since non-participants were not interviewed. However, it did observe that some participants struggled with the 'theoretical' part of courses and with written assignments. Immigrant participants also reported some problems with English language in studying for their qualifications. As with the 'motivation' and 'disadvantage' factors above, no direct comparative evidence is available but it remains possible that participants had some comparative disadvantage in basic skills which contributed to the negative findings of the impact evaluation.

In summary, the table below sets out the principal features of the preceding discussion:

Table 4: Summary of research findings’ evidence in respect of Hypotheses 1 and 2

	Hypothesis 1: BTEA participation did not, on average, increase employability and may have reduced it	Hypothesis 2: there were differences between the participant and non-participant groups in the 2015 impact evaluation study which could not be identified but which differentially affected the comparative employability of the two groups, particularly in respect of motivation at the point of choice to enter BTEA-supported study or not
Research findings which did <i>not</i> support the hypothesis	In general, BTEA objectives were clearly recognised and supported by all stakeholders. Administration was effective. Courses were enjoyable and participants saw benefits from participation	Participants universally expressed positive motivations towards employment and many reported persistent efforts to find work
Research findings which <i>support</i> the hypothesis	<p>Statistics are not available but course non-completion may have been significant</p> <p>Work experience was an infrequent component of courses</p> <p>Engagement of employers with courses was low or absent</p> <p>BTEA courses may have delivered skills and knowledge in areas and subjects which were not greatly in demand in local labour markets</p> <p>Inconsistent selection procedures for courses may have led to participation by learners who had low employability levels for which BTEA courses could not sufficiently compensate</p> <p>There was no continuity of</p>	<p>No direct comparison with non-participants in BTEA was possible> However, the factors below, which the 2015 impact evaluation could not measure, may possibly have been to the disadvantage of the participant group.</p> <p>There may be a difference in motivation to enter employment which is inherent in the decision to study rather than to seek work directly without studying</p> <p>Expressed motivations may, in some cases, have concealed reluctance to seek employment; or may have been selective ones geared to accepting only certain jobs and/or certain minimum wage levels</p> <p>The social, domestic and</p>

	<p>focused support and monitoring of BTEA students nor even maintenance of an information system to record their progress through study and into subsequent employment or not</p> <p>The intermediate qualifications delivered by BTEA SLO courses may have been at a level which had limited labour market value</p>	<p>personal disadvantage of some BTEA participants was considerable</p> <p>The basic literacy and numeracy skills of some participants were low</p>
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The research findings' evidence thus supports the supposition that the relatively poor outcomes of BTEA SLO participation derive from a combination of operational characteristics of BTEA, which weaken its power to increase employability; and of unobserved differences between the participants and non-participants which earlier statistical analysis could not capture.

The exact influence of each of the various factors involved, as set out in the table above, cannot be measured. However, some implications of their collective effects are evident and, a number of changes to BTEA delivery might, in consequence, be considered:

- **Improve information** on the progression of BTEA students through and after their courses in order to better understand completion rates and to identify potential drop-out students early.
- Alongside this, **improve liaison between case providers and education providers** such that BTEA students are consistently identified as such while on their courses, are given particular mentoring and support to reduce drop-out, and are given particular guidance and assistance to help them find work at the end of their courses.
- Continue to **tighten, and make more systematic, the initial selection processes** in which 'suitability' criteria for BTEA support are assessed by case officers and during which personal progression plans are drawn up.
- Encourage education providers to **increase the use of work experience** in course curricula and to otherwise emphasize the practical, directly work-related elements of courses; and encourage participants towards entry into courses which have these features.
- Stimulate **linkages between case officers, education providers, and larger employers** in particular localities with an aim that employers become directly involved in course design and begin to use courses on which BTEA students participate as a reliable source of potential candidates.
- **Create relationships with businesses in Ireland more generally** to better identify the qualifications they need in order to recruit, and with education providers to ensure that there is more concordance between BTEA-supported provision and real job prospects.

- Encourage **closer engagement between employers, the Department of Social Protection, and education providers at a local level**. This could provide better opportunities for participants upon obtaining their qualification. Additionally, there is also the need to improve the status of unemployed people in order to improve the roles into which they are typically recruited.
- To reduce drop-out rates, **re-introduce or initiate additional support costs** into BTEA, including the consideration of the restoration of the SUSI maintenance grants to TLO BTEA recipients, in order to lower the cost to students of participation incurred by lengthy travel-to-study distances, childcare needs, or the purchase of books or other course materials.
- To further reduce non-completion and to increase post-course employment rates, introduce conditional or **incentive payments for providers** related to outcomes in terms of completion, award of qualification, and/or post-course entry to stable employment.

Implementing such changes would obviously increase the direct and administrative costs per BTEA student. Off-set of increased costs per student might be achieved by reducing second level BTEA student numbers to stay within a fixed or reducing total budget for the programme, possibly by:

- **More stringent selection of suitable students** (those most clearly able to complete a substantial course and best positioned by virtue of circumstances, aptitude, and motivation to find and maintain a job) – with those who are not selected for BTEA being diverted to other provision focussed on improving employability by attention to literacy, numeracy, soft skills, personal presentation, and CV and interview preparation.
- **Re-balancing BTEA between second level and third level provision** such that third level attainment becomes the predominant objective of BTEA.

7 Appendix A: Participant topic guide

Introduction and briefing

Introductions:

- Moderator to introduce themselves and BMG Research
- Note that the participant should have received a notification letter from the Department and that if they have any questions, they can email [dedicated mailbox address], phone [dedicated phone line] or go to www.welfare.ie/surveys.
- By law, your answers are totally private and confidential. They can't affect any current or future claim you might have with the Department in any way.
- Thank them for agreeing to take part in the discussion and that their views are really appreciated.

Overview of the research:

The purpose of our discussion today is to explore with you your views and experiences of the BTEA scheme. We will be discussing your overall experience of the scheme and your views on the course(s) that you took as well as any improvements you feel should be made to the scheme. This will help the Department of Social Protection (DSP) to understand what's working, and what's not, so that they can improve the BTEA scheme.

Note for moderators: Make clear to the interviewer that the BTEA is a scheme/ income support, not a programme as such. It can be described as money paid by DSP to take part in a course of the participant's choice with vetting and support from DSP case officers.

Confidentiality: All information you provide will be treated confidentially. We will not identify any individuals or disclose the personal details of those who take part. Your responses will be treated in the strictest confidence as observed by best practice standards. (As a follow-up you can mention that these are determined by the Market Research Society, if asked).

- We're interested in getting your views and opinions, whatever they may be, so the more open and honest you can be the better.
- Anything you say can't affect any current or future claim you might have with the Department in any way.
- BMG can only use your answers for the purpose of this research. Information from every participant taking part in this research will be put together –it will not identify any individual.
- Quotes from our discussions may be used in the research report as a way of bringing the findings to life. However these quotes would not identify any individual. This is in line with the Market Research Society Code of Conduct.
- There are no right or wrong answers: it's just your views or opinions that count.

This interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes depending on the nature of your responses

If the person asks about Data Protection, how did you get my details or related questions, moderator can respond: The Department can contact customers for research purposes once other requirements in the Data Protection Acts are met. BMG are contracted agents of the Statistics Unit of the Department for this research. This means they're just acting on behalf

Study to explore the drivers of negative employment outcomes of participants on the Back to Education Allowance Scheme

of the Department under a contract which ensures complete confidentiality. By law, your answers are totally private and confidential – they can't affect any current or future claim you might have with the Department in any way.

Recording: we would like to audio-record the discussion for the purposes of accurately capturing all the information you share with us. The audio will be used for analysis purposes only and will not be shared with anyone outside of BMG research.

Provide opportunity for respondent to ask any questions.

Seek permission to audio-record. Switch microphone on. Once switched on, confirm that the audio-recorder is on.

Warm Up (2 minutes)

- Could you start off by confirming your name, age and the location of where you live?

Participant background (2 minutes)

- Could you begin by briefly describing your education and work experience so far?
- What is your main status right now?
 - Working More than 30 hours/ full-time
 - Working between 19-30 hours/part-time
 - Working between 10-18 hours/low hours
 - Working Less than 10 hours
 - Self-employed
 - Not working

Overall experience of participating on a course funded by the Back to Education Allowance (10 minutes)

- What were your experiences like in primary or secondary school?
- What kind of work experiences have you had? *Moderator to probe what types of employment, frequency/sustainability of work and/or of unemployment*
- Tell me a little bit about how you decided on the particular course that you wanted to do? *Moderator to establish how did you hear about it, what help did you get from DSP or from others, etc.*
- Overall how would you describe your experience of participating on a course funded by BTEA? Why do you say that? *Moderator to establish if negative/positive experience*
- How did you initially find out about BTEA? What did you think when you heard that it was available? *Moderator to explore if other income supports were looked at, views on the level of supports provided by BTEA*
- What motivated you to go back to education? And to then look to get the BTEA allowance? Why do you say that? *Moderator to explore if they were encouraged to join or advised by someone else*
- When applying, how easy or difficult was it to complete the form and notify the DSP? *Moderator to explore if participants knew where to apply and how to access the forms*
- What do you think the BTEA is for? *Moderator to explore whether participants see it as an opportunity for second-chance education, for improving employment prospects, etc.*

- Did your case officer clearly explain to you what the BTEA was for and what things you had to do to continue to get it? How useful did you find the income support provided by BTEA?
- What did you find particularly interesting about participating in a course? Would you have done this if BTEA hadn't been available? *Moderator to probe for examples*
- Were there any elements of receiving BTEA that didn't work for you? What were these?
- What were your expectations, if any, when participating on a course using the BTEA? *Moderator to probe what participants hope to achieve*
- Do you feel these expectations were met? Why/Why not?

Quality of provision (10 minutes)

- When did you start on a BTEA funded course? When did you finish?
- What course did you take, and at which school/college/centre?
- Was the course you did your first choice of course?
 - If not, what course did you originally want to do?
 - If yes, what were your reasons for choosing this course?
- How easy or difficult was it to apply for the course? Why do you say that?
- How did you find the administrative processes? *Moderator to explore how often they signed in, did they need to notify regarding absences, how comfortable they were talking to teachers regarding any difficulties*
- Did you go on to a third-level course funded under BTEA? [if yes, repeat above questions]
- Thinking about the course(s) you have taken at second-level only, what are your views and opinions of the following? *Moderator to ask for each course in turn.*
 - Course content e.g. entry requirements, length of course, the qualification it would lead to, interest in the course subject, possible job prospects, part/time full time course
 - Teaching methods e.g. use of clear jargon and understanding of the subject matter, teaching style i.e. interactive/ verbal/ written, teaching style i.e. too quick, difficult to understand.
 - Interactions with teachers/providers: e.g. did they feel they could talk to the teachers? Did they feel that their teachers were knowledgeable/had lots of experience?
 - Delivery of the course e.g. did they achieve what they wanted to, what qualifications they obtained, their level of commitment to completing course
- Thinking about the course(s) you have taken at second-level, did you feel that your fellow students had the same sort of experiences, or came from the same background, as you?
- Do you think your fellow students, when the course was finished, did the same sort of things as you did? *Moderator to probe awareness, if any, of differences in expected outcomes*
- What support, if any, did you receive from providers to participate in the course(s)? Was this satisfactory? Why/Why not?
- Were you aware of the career guidance within the school/ college/ centre?
 - If aware, did you use any of the services provided by career guidance?
 - How useful was this? (*Moderator to explore usefulness of scale of 1 – 5 with 1 being not very useful and 5 being very useful*)

BTEA scheme outcomes (5 minutes)

- Did you complete all of the elements of the course(s)?
 - What did you enjoy most about the course? What did you enjoy least about the course? Why?
- Did you achieve the qualifications that the course led towards? If not, why not?
- Did you continue to search for a job whilst you were on the course? Why/Why not?
- Were you involved in any other schemes or experiences whilst receiving BTEA? What were these?
 - In what way, if any, do these schemes compare to the BTEA scheme? *Moderator to probe for examples and identify if more/less useful*
- How impactful do you think the scheme has been in helping you to progress to employment, if you have?
- What do you feel you achieved from participating on a course funded through BTEA? *Moderator to probe for examples*

Challenges of the BTEA scheme (5 minutes)

- What, if any, challenges did you face whilst on the course funded through BTEA? E.g. obtaining the qualifications, understanding of the course *Moderator to probe for examples*
- What if any, challenges or obstacles have you faced in securing work since finishing the course? *Moderator to probe for examples*
 - What do you think has made it difficult to secure work? Why is that?
- Have you secured work in full time employment at any time since finishing the course? What as and when?

Future gazing (5 minutes)

- Could you summarise how you feel about your experience of participating on a course funded through BTEA?
- Could you summarise how you feel about your experiences dealing with DSP and DSP case officers to get the BTEA?
- How valuable have these experiences been to your personal development and career? Why do you say that?
- On reflection, what worked well and what didn't, in getting access to the BTEA allowance? *Moderator to explore if views are negative or positive*
- Are there any improvements you would suggest that could be made to getting access to BTEA or to the income supports provided? What are these? *Moderator to probe for examples*
- Are there any improvements you would suggest in relation to your experiences in participating in a course at second-level? *Moderator to probe for examples in relation to general support; quality of provision; provider-specific improvements, etc.*

Wrap up

- Any final comments?
- Repeat assurances regarding confidentiality
- Thank and close

8 Appendix B: Case Officer topic guide

Introduction and briefing (2 minutes)

Introductions:

- Moderator to introduce themselves and BMG Research
- By law, your answers are totally private and confidential. They cannot be shared by the Stats Unit with anyone else or any other unit within DSP.
- Thank them for agreeing to take part in the discussion and that their views are really appreciated.

Overview of the research: BMG Research has been commissioned to assess the effectiveness of the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) scheme/support on behalf of the Department of Social Protection (DSP). At this stage, we are talking to a range of people involved in managing and delivering the programme. We're particularly examining issues around the BTEA second-level option.

The purpose of our discussion today is to explore with you your views and experiences of the BTEA scheme/support. We will be discussing your views on scheme objectives, administrative and monitoring processes, your engagement with BTEA participants and with education providers, what you think of the quality of the courses delivered and any perceived barriers to participant progression. This will help the DSP to understand what's working, and what's not, with respect to the BTEA.

Confidentiality: All information you provide will be treated confidentially. We will not identify any individuals or disclose the personal details of those who take part. Your responses will be treated in the strictest confidence as observed by best practice standards. (As a follow-up you can mention that these are determined by the Market Research Society, if asked).

- We're interested in getting your views and opinions, whatever they may be, so the more open and honest you can be the better.
- Anything you say can't be shared outside of the Statistics Unit with anyone else or any other unit within DSP.
- BMG can only use your answers for the purpose of this research. Information from every participant taking part in this research will be put together –it will not identify any individual.
- Quotes from our discussions may be used in the research report as a way of bringing the findings to life. However these quotes would not identify any individual. This is in line with the Market Research Society Code of Conduct.
- There are no right or wrong answers: it's just your views or opinions that count.

This interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes

BMG are contracted agents of the Statistics Unit of the Department for this research. This means they're just acting on behalf of the Department under a contract which ensures complete confidentiality. This means they cannot share any information with any other person or unit within DSP.

Recording: we would like to audio-record the discussion for the purposes of accurately capturing all the information you share with us. The audio will be used for analysis purposes only and will not be shared with anyone outside of BMG research.

Provide opportunity for respondent to ask any questions.

Seek permission to audio-record. Switch microphone on. Once switched on, confirm that the audio-recorder is on.

Warm Up (2 minutes)

- Could you start off by confirming your name, title and how long you have been involved in the delivery of the BTEA scheme?
- What are your key roles and responsibilities in relation to the BTEA scheme?

Overall perceptions of the BTEA scheme (5-10 minutes)

- How would you describe your overall experience of the BTEA scheme? Why do you say that? Moderator to explore positive/ negative perceptions.
- What is your understanding of the BTEA scheme's intended objectives?
- To what extent do you think these objectives are met? Why do you say that?
- Do you think the BTEA scheme is effective? Moderator to explore:
 - Do you think it has valuable aims and objectives? Why do you say that?
 - Thinking about your perceptions of BTEA, to what extent does this influence or impact your willingness to support potential BTEA participants? If not, moderator to explore whether type of course, participant characteristics or status impacted those that were approved for the course.
 - What obstacles or difficulties, if any, are there with the way BTEA is structured and administered?
 - What obstacles or difficulties, if any, are there with potential participants?
 - What obstacles or difficulties, if any, are there with the types of courses available?
 - What are your expectations of your and others' roles and responsibilities, particularly in interactions (if any) with education providers? Are these met?
- In your opinion, how useful do you think the BTEA scheme has been in supporting individuals into employment? Why do you say that?

Administrative process (10 minutes)

- What is your view on the administration of the BTEA scheme? Moderator to probe on the following:
 - How and who is it managed by? How many people are involved?
 - What is the level of demand for BTEA? Is this difficult or easy to manage? Why do you say that?
- Are there any ways in which you would change the administrative controls or monitoring to improve the administration process going forward? Moderator to probe for examples. Is there a 'typical' process for approving BTEA and if so what does it look like? Or, is this process different for every participant?
- Please tell me a little about the participants who want to get the BTEA? Moderator to probe on the following:
 - What social welfare payment they are on

- Age, gender, ethnicity, location etc
- Duration of unemployment
- Educational history
- Duration between leaving formal education and taking the course
- If there's a difference between those looking to go on second-level courses versus third level
- In what ways, if at all, has the profile of participants changed over time?
- How do you make a decision on which participants are able to go on to the course?
- Typically, how many cases do you manage during a given academic year? Moderator to probe:
 - Level of oversight, frequency of contact with participants
 - Do participants get in touch if they are facing problems with applying/ logging in?
 - Administrative burden/how much time they have with any one participant
 - Any targets to meet
 - Use of networks to gain more information on available courses, etc.
- To what extent do you think certain changes over the period of the BTEA scheme have had an impact on participants wanting to go on to the scheme? Moderator to explore the following impacts:
 - Removal of additional grants
 - Standardisation of payments
 - Greater involvement of DSP case officers in choosing the course
 - Being more closely monitored to ensure progression

Participant motivation, attitude and behaviours during the BTEA scheme (10 minutes)

- What, if any, support was provided by you or by education providers to participants during the course? Moderator to explore if case officers are aware of additional support provided by providers or teachers; whether case officers provided additional supports
 - What were the main elements of the support?
 - How long did the support typically last? I.e. during the course or continued after.
- How would you describe your relationship and involvement with education providers during the scheme? Moderator to explore whether there was regular contact, if there was a good understanding of the participant's progression and how they communicated throughout the scheme.

Participant's personal progression plan (5-10 minutes)

- Thinking in general about all jobseekers, how is interest in participating in second chance education through the BTEA described and developed in a personal progression plan?
- How would this be tailored, if at all, to those wishing to avail of second-level options specifically?
- How closely monitored are individuals against their personal progression plan?
- To what extent do you agree/disagree the personal progression plan is a clear indicator of participant's likelihood to secure a job at the end of the second-level course? Why do you say that?
- In your view, did the course meet the individual's needs and was it in line with their personal progression plan? Why do you say that?

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- To what extent does an individual's personal progression plan differ between participants on a second level course and those on others courses? Moderator to probe for examples of a typical case

BTEA scheme outcomes (10-15 minutes)

- Thinking specifically about those on the second-level courses, did participants complete all of the elements of the course? Could you estimate what proportion this was?
 - If did not complete, what proportion dropped out and what were the reasons for this?
- What generally happens when they complete a course? Moderator to probe on the following:
 - Do you work with them to help them find work
 - Do you support them to find a third level course
 - Do you support them to go on another scheme
 - Do you go back to the beginning and develop another/ modify the personal progression plan
 - Do jobseekers 'disappear' (i.e. move onto another social welfare payment, where activation isn't compulsory)
- What proportion of your clients availing of second-level BTEA would you estimate found work subsequent to their course?
- How does this compare with other participants in receipt of BTEA?
 - For those that didn't, why do you think they did not find any work?
- What feedback, if any, have you received from employers on BTEA participants that have been hired? Moderator to probe for examples
- In what way do you think participants have benefited from second chance education? How important was the receipt of the BTEA in that?
- In your view, what are the perceived advantages or disadvantages of the BTEA support compared with other educational supports?
- What, if any, are the key challenges to address in respect of the BTEA? Why do you say that? Moderator to probe
 - Suitability and effectiveness of the support
 - Issues around administration, monitoring
 - Case load or participant-specific challenges
 - Challenges relating to courses, education providers, etc.
 - Context or time-specific challenges (local employment conditions, availability/demand for suitable courses etc.)
- To what extent do you think the participants would have got equivalent jobs without being on the scheme? Why do you say that?

Future gazing (5 minutes)

- Overall, could you give a view on how successful you think the BTEA support has been? Why do you say that?
- On reflection, what works well and what doesn't with regard to the BTEA support?
- What are your views on why BTEA participants showed poor employment outcomes? Why do you say that?

- Finally, what recommendations or improvements would you make if this support was to be offered to participants in the future? Moderator to probe for examples

Wrap up

- Any final comments?
- Repeat assurances regarding confidentiality
- Thank and close

9 Appendix C: Education Provider topic guide

Introduction and briefing (5 minutes)

Welcome and thank you very much for taking the time to take part in this online group discussion – your views are very valuable to us! My name is [insert moderator name] and I will be your moderator, supported by [insert co-moderator name] both from BMG Research.

We'll give you a bit of background before we start.

BMG Research has been commissioned to understand the effectiveness of the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) scheme on behalf of the Department of Social Protection (DSP). At this stage, we are taking to a range of people involved in managing and delivering the programme, in DSP; and with you, education providers particularly in respect of delivering further education and training/second-chance education at second level.

The purpose of our discussion today is to explore with you your views and experiences of working in the further education and training sector, on delivering courses, (including quality of provision and course content), working with students availing of second-chance education and any perceived barriers to participant progression, specifically at second level. We're particularly interested in your views on whether participants receiving the Back to Education Allowance have different experiences, or are different from, from fellow participants in a course. We appreciate, however, that you may not always know if a specific participant is in receipt of the BTEA.

We will also be discussing your views on the BTEA support and how you work with DSP or potential participants in receipt of BTEA.

We really appreciate your time, insights and thoughts. It will help DSP to better understand what's happening so that the BTEA support can be improved.

To what extent are you able to distinguish between participants in receipt of BTEA and other participants on your courses?

The information gathered through this discussion will be confidential and individuals will not be identified in final reporting. The transcript will be used for analysis purposes only and will not be shared with anyone outside of BMG Research. We abide by the Market Research Society Code of Conduct therefore any quotes from the discussions for report writing will not identify any individual.

Our discussion today will end no later than [insert time]. There are no right or wrong answers: it's just your views and opinions that count.

Any questions about the research?

Please watch for questions that will be directed to you in this box during the study.

Questions that appear in this box should be answered by typing into the smaller box below. Please type in your responses and hit 'send' or return (no one sees what you write until you do this, but we may know you are writing). Don't worry if your response relates to a slightly earlier question – we'll either clarify with you or work this out – we know that some questions need pondering over and we'd rather you give us your feedback than not at all!

Practice – to familiarise respondents with the tools

- You will also be asked to do some exercises in the whiteboard. Let's practice with the tools!
- Please write your name by clicking on the A text tool and then type your first name or say Hi or Hello somewhere on the whiteboard.
- And then use the pencil tool to draw a circle round your name or what you have typed.
- Finally, click on the tool and put a tick next to your name.
- Great work!

You will see written responses of the other participants. If you see a response that sparks a thought of your own please feel free to comment. We do not expect everyone to agree. It is important to know your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing.

Do not worry about spelling or grammar and finally, I hope you enjoy taking part in the Group! Ok – let's begin! Now for your first question...

Warm Up (5 minutes)

- Could you begin by introducing yourselves, your first name, title and the organisation you work for?
- Tell me a little bit about your career in education provision. Moderator to probe providers' experiences, what educational sectors they have worked in, etc,
- Do you have a qualification in education or in a related field? If yes, what is this?
- When did you first become involved in the further education and training sector?
- What were your reasons for getting involved? What have you learned in respect of delivering courses and of participants, particularly at second level? Moderator to explore date they got involved, how and why they got involved, learning/reflection to date
- What are your key roles and responsibilities? Moderator to probe if they are involved in the design of the course; administrative responsibilities; interactions with participants, including career guidance
- What courses do you deliver?
- Are you aware of the Back to Education Allowance?
- How do you liaise with the Department of Social Protection in respect of potential participants, if at all?

Overall perceptions of the BTEA scheme (15 minutes)

- In what way, if any, are you able to identify if a participant is receiving the Back to Education Allowance?
- What, if any, are the differences between participants on the courses you deliver? If differences, is it possible to relate these to whether they are in receipt of Back to Education Allowance? Moderator to probe whether the administrative protocols around a DSP support, as versus a DES/SOLAS support, appears to influence engagement, attendance, etc.
- How would you describe your overall experience of conducting a course at second level? Why do you say that? Moderator to explore positive/ negative perceptions.
- What are your views of the effectiveness of the BTEA support? Why do you say that?
- Please tell me a little more about your views of the BTEA support. Moderator to explore:

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- Do you think it's useful for further education training/second chance education? Why do you say that?
- Do you think it has valuable aims and objectives? Please explain why
- Do you see any obstacles or difficulties? What are these?
- Have your views changed over time? In what way?
- Which of the following words or phrases would you use to describe the BTEA support? Please explain why you have chosen those words (Moderator to show STIMULUS 1)
- What is your understanding of the BTEA support's intended objectives?
- To what extent do you think these objectives have been met? Why do you say that?
- In your opinion, how useful do you think the BTEA support has been in supporting individuals into employment? Why do you say that?

Administrative process (10 minutes)

- What involvement, if any, do you have during the administrative stage of the course? E.g. eligibility criteria, academic performance, grades required etc
- What are your views on the quality of participants that took part in the course/ on BTEA support? Why do you say that? Moderator to explore academic history, other qualifications obtained, previous work experience
- To what extent do you think the changes over the period of the BTEA scheme have had an impact on participants wanting to go on to the scheme? Moderator to explore the following impacts:
 - Removal of additional grants
 - Standardisation of payments
 - Greater involvement of DSP case officers in choosing the course
 - Being more closely monitored to ensure progression

Participant motivation, attitude and behaviours while participating on a course and in receipt of BTEA (20 minutes)

- How do participants typically respond to attending your courses? Again, can you tell if there are differences with those who are in receipt of BTEA? Why do you say that? Moderator to explore if enthusiastic, reluctant, resistant, pressured etc
- Would participants discuss with you their reasons for going back to education and the support they used to do so, including BTEA? If so, what were the participants perceived level of interest in the BTEA scheme? Why do you say that?
- Using a scale of 1 – 5 (1 being very poor and 5 being excellent) how would you rate the quality of the second-level courses delivered? Why do you say that? Moderator to show STIMULUS 2
- Generally, thinking about the second-level courses/ courses you deliver, how motivated and engaged are participants? Moderator to probe on the following
 - Regular attendance
 - Interaction with their teachers
 - Course content i.e. interest in the course subject
 - Knowledge of the subject matter
 - Understanding of the course

- What, if any, support was provided to participants during the course? Moderator to explore if teachers provided additional one-to-one support, mentoring support, dedicated sessions
 - What were the main elements of the support?
 - How long did the support typically last? I.e. during the course or continued after.
- Are you aware of whether participants were provided with an individual personal progression plan by the DSP?
 - How were participants supported with their progression plan? Moderator to probe for examples
 - How important was this in identifying how well individuals were/ were not progressing? Why?
 - Were there any barriers in participant progression? What were these?
- To what extent was the participant's overall progress monitored (either formally or informally)? Moderator to probe for examples
- How would you describe your relationship and involvement with DSP case officers in respect of course participants, or in general? E.g. was there regular contact, did they have a good understanding of the participants progression

BTEA scheme outcomes (15 minutes)

If providers have indicated that they can distinguish participants in receipt of BTEA from other participants, ask them to answer the following questions from the perspective of BTEA participants. If they can't distinguish participants, ask them to respond in respect of all participants in second level courses.

- Did participants complete all of the elements of the course? Could you estimate what proportion this was?
 - If did not complete, what were the reasons for this?
 - If completed course, are you aware what they did next?
 - If aware, what did they do? Moderator to probe if participants informed them what they planned to do next.
- What proportion of participants would you estimate went on to the following:
 - Third level courses
 - Progressed to employment
 - Went back to unemployment
 - Did another second level course
 - Went on to do something else. Moderator to explore what this was.
- On completion, did you provide any support to participants to help them find work? What was this?
- What proportion of your participants would you estimate found work subsequent to their course?
- How does this compare with BTEA participants and other participants on the scheme?
 - For those that didn't, why do you think they did not find any work?
- What feedback, if any, have you received from employers on participants that have been hired? Moderator to probe for examples
- In what way do you think participants have benefited from the BTEA scheme?
- And are there any perceived disadvantages of being in receipt of the BTEA support?
- What, if any, are the differences in completion rates or academic performance between BTEA participants and other students?

Study to explore the drivers of negative employment outcomes of participants on the Back to Education Allowance Scheme

- In what ways do you think this influences employment outcomes? Why do you say that?
- To what extent do you think the participants would have got equivalent jobs without being in receipt of the BTEA support? Why do you say that?
- What, if any, were the biggest challenges of delivering a second-level course? Why do you say that?

Future gazing (10 minutes)

- Overall, could you give a view on how successful you think the BTEA support has been? Why do you say that?
- On reflection, what works well and what doesn't regarding the delivery of second level courses? Why do you say that?
- What would a 'successful' student look like to you?
- Do you think the BTEA support helps participants to achieve that success? Why do you say that?
- An earlier study of the BTEA support found that participants in second level courses in receipt of BTEA had very poor employment outcomes. In your opinion, why do you think this might be?
- What recommendations would you make if this support was to be offered to participants in the future? Moderator to probe for examples

Wrap up (5 minutes)

- Any final comments?
- Repeat assurances regarding confidentiality
- Thank and close

10 Appendix D: Employer topic guide

Introduction and briefing (2 minutes)

Introductions:

- Moderator to introduce themselves and BMG Research
- By law, your answers are totally private and confidential. They cannot be shared by the Stats Unit with anyone else or any other unit within DSP.
- Thank them for agreeing to take part in the discussion and that their views are really appreciated.

Overview of the research: BMG Research has been commissioned to assess the effectiveness of the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) scheme/support on behalf of the Department of Social Protection (DSP). At this stage, we are taking to a number of employers to understand the negative drivers of the scheme in securing employment. This will help the DSP to understand what's working, and what's not, with respect to the BTEA.

Confidentiality: All information you provide will be treated confidentially. We will not identify any individuals or disclose the personal details of those who take part. Your responses will be treated in the strictest confidence as observed by best practice standards. (As a follow-up you can mention that these are determined by the Market Research Society, if asked).

- We're interested in getting your views and opinions, whatever they may be, so the more open and honest you can be the better.
- Anything you say can't be shared outside of the Statistics Unit with anyone else or any other unit within DSP.
- BMG can only use your answers for the purpose of this research. Information from every participant taking part in this research will be put together –it will not identify any individual.
- Quotes from our discussions may be used in the research report as a way of bringing the findings to life. However these quotes would not identify any individual. This is in line with the Market Research Society Code of Conduct.
- There are no right or wrong answers: it's just your views or opinions that count.

This interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes

BMG are contracted agents of the Statistics Unit of the Department for this research. This means they're just acting on behalf of the Department under a contract which ensures complete confidentiality. This means they cannot share any information with any other person or unit within DSP.

Recording: we would like to audio-record the discussion for the purposes of accurately capturing all the information you share with us. The audio will be used for analysis purposes only and will not be shared with anyone outside of BMG research.

Provide opportunity for respondent to ask any questions.

Seek permission to audio-record. Switch microphone on. Once switched on, confirm that the audio-recorder is on.

Warm Up (5 minutes)

- Could you begin by introducing yourselves, your job title and explain your main responsibilities.
- Could you describe your business e.g. main products/services, age of business
- What approach does your business have to training?

Organisations role in respect of the BTEA scheme (10 minutes)

- Could you describe your business's engagement with the Department of Social Protection? When did you first become involved?
- What were your motivations to engage with Department in hiring jobseekers from the Live Register? *Moderator to probe on how their involvement came about, motivations for hiring jobseekers*
- In what way, if any, are you able to identify whether someone you are employing has completed a course through BTEA?

NB: If employer is unable to identify then inform the following questions reflect hiring/employing jobseekers from the Live Register who have participated in second-chance education.

- How do you liaise with the Department of Social Protection in respect of potential recruits, if at all?
- How many individuals have you recruited/ hired who have used the BTEA support/ from the Live Register who have participated in second-chance education?
- How were these individual(s) identified to you?
- What sort of roles are these individual(s) recruited into? e.g. administration, assistants
- What, if any, training is provided to these individual(s)? *Moderator to probe for examples*

Overall perceptions of the BTEA scheme (15 minutes)

- What are your views of the effectiveness of the BTEA support? Why do you say that?
- Please tell me a little more about your views of the BTEA support. *Moderator to explore:*
 - Do you think it's useful for providing individuals with the relevant skills for employment? Why do you say that?
 - Do you see any obstacles or difficulties? What are these?
 - Have your views regarding the support changed over time? In what way?
- What is your understanding of the BTEA support's intended objectives?
- To what extent do you think these objectives have been met? Why do you say that?
- In your opinion, how useful do you think the BTEA support has been in supporting individuals into employment? Why do you say that?

Administrative process (10 minutes)

- What is the eligibility criteria to secure employment in your organisation? E.g. academic performance, grades, years of work experience
- What skills/ qualities do you look for in potential employees? *Moderator to probe for examples*

- What does the recruitment process involve? E.g. online assessment, telephone interview, face-to-face interview. How long does the process typically take?
- What proportion of job seekers that come through having used the BTEA support/the Live Register are successful during the recruitment process? How does this compare with those that come through other routes? Why?
- Using a scale of 1-5 (1 being very poor and 5 being excellent) how would you rate the quality of individual(s) employed that have been in receipt of the BTEA support/completed the second-level courses? Why do you say that?
- How does this compare with those who have not been in receipt of the BTEA support/participated in the second-level course? In what way?

BTEA scheme outcomes (15 minutes)

- Generally, how well have things worked out with individual(s) who have been recruited that have used the BTEA support/ Live Register? *Moderator to probe on whether they are still employed/ become valued staff members/ had salary increases/ received promotions etc*
- To what extent do you think the support that individual(s) received on their course(s) was linked or tailored to securing jobs in your specific sector?
- How has your organisation benefitted from involvement with the Department for Social Protection and/ or the BTEA scheme? *Moderator to explore the following:*
 - Ease/ pace of recruitment
 - Ability to get skilled/ experienced staff
 - Finding individuals with good work ethic
 - Increasing business efficiency

Summary (10 minutes)

- Overall, could you give a view on how successful you think the BTEA support has been for the following: *Moderator to probe reasons why for each*
 - Your business
 - Your recruits
 - The local or wider economy
- Do you think the BTEA support helps participants to achieve that success? Why do you say that?
- An earlier study of the BTEA support found that participants in second level courses in receipt of BTEA had very poor employment outcomes. In your opinion, why do you think this might be?
- What recommendations would you make if this support was to be offered to individual(s) in the future? *Moderator to probe for examples*

Wrap up (5 minutes)

- Any final comments?
- Repeat assurances regarding confidentiality
- Thank and close

11 Appendix E: Glossary of terms

Word	Meaning
SLO	Second Level Option
TLO	Third Level Option
ETB	Education and Training Board
Intreo	Integrated employment and support service
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland

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