

# DIGITAL LITERACY IN ADULTS

## FIT Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills.

8<sup>th</sup> November 2019

### 1. FIT's Experience

1.1. **FIT Impact.** FIT [www.fit.ie](http://www.fit.ie) is a non-profit and registered charity which has developed and delivered a wide range of training programmes, over the last 20 years, addressing the need for digital skills from digital literacy and inclusion to associate professional levels:

- FIT in collaboration with FÁS and VECs and, latterly SOLAS and ETBs, has facilitated 18,500 job seekers to access quality ICT training of which over 14,000 have secured employment. 4,000 job seekers are currently participating in FIT programmes.
- Since 2015 FIT piloted apprentice style IT Associate Professional programmes. Building on the success of the pilot, in 2018 FIT rolled out national apprenticeships in Software Development and Network Engineering followed by Cybersecurity in 2019. Today over 90 employers are engaged with 200 apprentices employed between them.
- FIT has developed and delivered digital literacy programmes with support from the EU, the Department of Communications, Climate Action & Environment (and its predecessors) and SOLAS since 2007. Over **30,000 people in total**, across every county in Ireland, have benefitted by receiving digital literacy training in FIT programmes.

1.2. **FIT Innovation.** FIT has a track record of developing digital inclusion programmes and this approach has been endorsed by its active board of leading IT companies as a manifestation of their CSR objectives, and a recognition of people benefiting as potential users of their digital products and services. Examples of successful projects:

- The PADD (Pedagogy for Addressing the Digital Divide) project demonstrated a low cost, widely accessible mechanism for achieving IT literacy across the whole community and the concept was mainstreamed in national programmes.
- MyIT was developed to allow learners with literacy, language and numeracy gaps to gain practical competency in digital tasks, such as booking tickets online, setting up an e-mail account, and finding information on the internet.

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- Migrant ICT developed resources which combined digital literacy with gaining proficiency in the English language.
- The Seniors projects developed a protected social networking website to provide older people with a safe space to learn how to participate in an online community.
- FIT for Farmers was a project that FIT designed and delivered in Northern Ireland which upskilled farmers with the basic digital skills which are increasingly necessary to operate efficiently in the agriculture sector.
- FIT and AIB collaborated on a project to train their 'non-liner' customers on how to use banking online. The initiative which was delivered on AIB premises had a good take up by older customers who were pleased to avail of a friendly and suitably designed introductory programme.

1.3. **Digihubs and Digiclubs.** FIT has long been an advocate for the deployment of Digihubs and Digiclubs to support the development of at-risk or disadvantaged communities and has supported their implementation in both the Republic and Northern Ireland. The key feature of this model is that it goes beyond training in basic digital skills. It addresses a more fundamental issue which is a lack of understanding of the benefits of the digital world and a lack of confidence in relation to being able to access it as a means of participation, access to services and as a mechanism to communicate aspiration and needs – digital citizenship / inclusion. It does this by engaging and immersing people in a welcoming, relevant and informal digital experience with peers, where they are facilitated to discover what interests them and encouraged to take charge of their own learning journey. The Digihubs are designed to engage the interests of the participating groups and can look and feel very different when addressing the needs of different cohorts e.g. older people, young people, migrants/refugees.

1.4. **Digital Literacy and Community Capacity Building.** FIT is an advocate and activist for the development of communities and views its digital literacy and inclusion activities in that context. FIT has facilitated the investment of many millions of euros into communities by developing and proposing projects attracting funding from the private sector, foundations, EU and the Irish Government. In the great recession the climate for public investment in communities changed and FIT was witness to a steep reduction in funding for community-based initiatives and in parallel a visible reduction in the levels of social capital in those communities experiencing growing disadvantage and worsening social problems. Projects such as *BenefIT* and Digital Skills for Citizens funded by the Dept of Communications, Climate Action and Environment provided a constant glimmer of hope and connectivity during these difficult times.

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FIT continues to facilitate investment in communities by recycling the funding it receives from the DCCA&E Digital Skills for Citizens initiative into communities through its support for community groups in the delivery of the training programmes. These initiative train local trainer provide some funding for local facilities and equipment thereby sustaining a local digital infrastructure.

With improved economic circumstances it is timely to consult with communities, assess the levels of digital disadvantage/ alienation that need to be addressed and reshape a public investment plan which builds back social capital and capacity in affected communities. In this context digital literacy and inclusion strategies can play a useful and significant part in combating social problems and exclusion and empower communities to actively shape a better future. This approach can harness powerful engagement, energy and resources within communities, including voluntary efforts, which matched with impactful public investment could turn around the downward pattern of recent years in a cost effective and sustainable manner. The return on investment is significant; effective digital inclusion, growing social capital, reduced isolation, a gateway to lifelong learning, improved employability, better parenting skills, social cohesion, engagement of youth-at-risk and civil participation, access to online service and support services for the elderly etc. With services from ever more government departments becoming accessible online through MyGovID, the benefits of digital literacy are increasingly needed and more critical than ever. We should aim for a less divided society facing a transforming digitalised world with confidence and the capacity to benefit.

## 2. Policy Terrain for Digital Literacy

- 2.1. **National Digital Strategy.** The Department of Communications, Climate Action & Environment (DCCA&E) published the National Digital Strategy "Doing more with Digital" in July 2013. The focus of the NDS is to help Ireland to reap the full rewards of a digitally enabled society. The Strategy is in the process of being updated and the new Strategy seeks to support and shape the impact of technology for good and manage the transformation in an inclusive and citizen centred way. Launching the public consultation in Oct. 2018, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar said: "Digitalisation has brought huge benefits for individuals, businesses, and communities across Ireland, but it also presents challenges."
- 2.2. **Digital Skills for Citizens.** The National Digital Strategy, Strand 2 – Securing More Citizen Engagement set an objective of halving the number of non-liners i.e. by 288,000 people. To support this a scheme - Benefit 4 (now called Digital Skills for Citizens) provides funding for training of citizens at multiple locations across Ireland.

Citizens within the following groups are targeted to receive this digital literacy training:

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- Age profile 45+
- Farming communities
- Small business owners (<10 people)
- Unemployed persons
- Persons with disabilities, and
- Disadvantaged groups.

FIT is one of 12 organisations who receive funding to provide this training. FIT partners with local community organisations throughout Ireland who deliver the training with FIT's support.

The department (DCCA&E) is currently piloting the extension of this scheme to HSE employees who would benefit from digital literacy skills training. Similar initiatives in time could be considered for other public service employees, low skills workers, those underemployed, people in the home and those experiencing isolation in whatever form.

2.3. **FET Strategy.** One of the five strategic goals of the FET Strategy 2014-2019 is Active Inclusion. The aim of this goal is that FET provision will support the active inclusion of people of all abilities in society with special reference to literacy and numeracy. This gives scope for actions to increase digital literacy as it becomes an ever more important gateway to full participation in our modern society. There is an imminent opportunity, through the development of the FET Strategy 2020-2024, to advance policy which places more explicit priority on addressing digital literacy to support active inclusion in an increasingly digitalised world.

2.4. **Skills to Advance.** The Department of Education and Skills provides funding, in the period 2019/2021, via SOLAS for the Skills to Advance scheme which is to enable targeted support for vulnerable groups in the Irish workforce, those who have lower skills levels and who need more opportunities to advance in their working lives and careers, to sustain their employment and to avoid displacement or to avail of emerging job opportunities. The policy also supports small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) who need some assistance to invest in and develop their workforce to adapt to changes in work practices, technology and markets. The scheme is implemented through Skills to Advance programmes delivered by the 16 Education and Training Boards based throughout Ireland.

SOLAS launched the Innovation through Collaboration Call 2019 as part of the Skills to Advance policy initiative. This fund will provide Education and Training Boards (ETBs) with an opportunity to bid for additional funding to enable a major step-up in innovation in employee development.

These schemes could play a significant role in upskilling employees with low or no levels of digital literacy.

2.5. **EU Approach.** EU policy is reflected in recommendation adopted by the Council on Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning. The Recommendation identifies eight key

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competences needed for personal fulfilment, a healthy and sustainable lifestyle, employability, active citizenship and social inclusion:

- Literacy
- Multilingualism
- Numerical, scientific and engineering skills
- Digital and technology-based competences
- Interpersonal skills, and the ability to adopt new competences
- Active citizenship
- Entrepreneurship
- Cultural awareness and expression

Digital and technology-based competences are seen as central to inclusion and this is becoming more essential in both our civic and economic domains as the impact of digitalisation increases.

**2.6. Benchmarking Ireland.** How well is Ireland doing with regard to digital literacy compared to its peers? The OECD's Survey of Adult Skills, a product of the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), assesses adults' (16-65 year-olds) proficiency in three key information-processing skills: literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments. According to the OECD these are "key information-processing skills" that are relevant to adults in many social contexts and work situations, and necessary for fully integrating and participating in the labour market, education and training, and social and civic life.

The survey defines problem solving in technology-rich environments as "using digital technology, communication tools and networks to acquire and evaluate information, communicate with others and perform practical tasks". It focuses on "the abilities to solve problems for personal, work and civic purposes by setting up appropriate goals and plans, and accessing and making use of information through computers and computer networks". This definition could be seen as a practical description of digital literacy put in terms of how it benefits a person.

Ireland is shown to be a laggard in this benchmarking study of 33 countries, falling below the OECD average in the area of "problem solving in technology-rich environments". Although the data was collected in 2012 there is no evidence that Ireland has since caught up or surpassed the average performance of participating countries. In ranking terms Ireland came 21<sup>st</sup> with 20 countries outperforming our country with Sweden and New Zealand in pole position and disappointingly, EU peers such as England, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands ahead of Ireland.

## 3. Emerging Needs

3.1. **Vulnerable Employees.** One in three jobs in Ireland are at high risk (a probability greater than 70%) of being disrupted by the adoption of digital technologies. Much of the disruption, however, will result in changes to job roles and tasks performed by individuals rather than job losses. The report *Digital Transformation: Assessing the Impact of Digitalisation on Ireland's Workforce* (EGFSN, December 2018) estimates that disruption from the adoption of digital technologies. In this context 'digital literacy' can be seen as broader than the acquisition of basic digital skills, although this is a fundamental component. There is also a need for vulnerable workers to understand how workplaces, systems and practices are evolving in this age of digitalisation.

**Digital Divide.** Accelerating digitalisation in private and public service delivery is reinforcing and potentially increasing the digital divide in our society, between those who are digital natives and those who are digitally excluded by virtue of age, disability, education, income level, lack of broadband coverage and various forms of disadvantage. Further acceleration of digitalisation will be driven by rapid technology change such as Artificial Intelligence, Virtual Digital Assistance, Internet of Things, Digital Health, Cyber threats and Fintech developments. We need to ensure these technologies are an enabler for people - particularly for older people – as they can improve quality of life, address alienation give comfort and security – e.g. turn the heat/lights on, answer the door, purchase groceries online, make an appointment with a doctor / seek medical advice, communicate with family and friends seek help / assistance. However, those at risk of being on the wrong side of the digital divide need to be schooled / enabled in the advantages and capacity of digitalisation. The issue goes far beyond just ICT / keyboard skills if addressed with sufficient priority and resources will yield savings and benefits to the individual, society and the state.

3.2. **Key Principles:** In responding to the above we need to adopt key principles for the design and the implementation of successful digital literacy programmes for adults, which are well expressed in a paper by Athanassios Jimoyiannis, *Digital Literacy and Adult Learners (2015)* as:

- a) promote engagement through active and self-directed learning,
- b) use cross-thematic and authentic learning activities, and
- c) use purposeful and everyday life contexts to support adults learning and help them to build their digital culture and identity.

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## 4. Recommendations

1. **DIGI-COMMUNITY.** Develop a five-year investment strategy to build social capital in communities through digital inclusion initiatives, building on the experience of activists such as FIT and the needs articulated by disadvantaged communities whether they be neighbourhood related or defined by other factors such as age, education, disability or ethnicity. *Lead: Department of Education and Skills; Multi Department approach; Funding: multi dept. allocations.*
2. **DIGI-WORKFORCE.** Establish a targeted programme to upskill employees who are vulnerable due to their lack of digital literacy. *Lead: Department of Education and Skills; Multi Department and Agency approach (Depts., Skillnet Ireland, FIT, SOLAS, IBEC); Funding: National Training Fund.*
3. **DIGI-HUBS.** Embed a Digihub and Digiclub model as one of the strands in the DIGITAL COMMUNITY and DIGITAL WORKFORCE actions. *Lead: FIT; Multi Department steering group; Funding: Dept. of Education and Skills.*
4. **DIGITAL SKILLS OBSERVATORY.** Achieving a workforce and a community that is digitally literate goes hand-in-hand and the monitoring of progress is best judged in the round. A national DIGITAL SKILLS OBSERVATORY should be established to track progress, benchmark against peer nations and appraise stakeholders. *Lead: Department of Education and Skills; Multi Stakeholder participation; Funding: multi dept. allocations.*

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## Appendix 1 – FIT Board of Directors

1.	Hilary O'Meara	Accenture
2.	Geraldine Gibson	AQMetrics
3.	Adam Grennan	CISCO
4.	Jason Ward	DELLEMC
5.	Simon Murphy	Deloitte
6.	Niamh Muldoon	DocuSign
7.	Ed Taylor	Ebay
8.	Kieran Sweeney	eDot
9.	Brendan Davis	Fujitsu
10.	Aonghus O'hEocha,	GIRT Mobile
11.	Andrew Lennon	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
12.	Eimear Gunn	IBM Ireland
13.	Annette Soraine	Innovate
14.	Charlie Fitzgerald	LinkedIn
15.	Joanne Morrissey	Microsoft
16.	Joe Hogan	Openet
17.	Daragh MacAogain	PayPal
18.	Liam Ryan	SAP, Chairperson FIT
19.	Gary O'Callaghan	Siemens
20.	Maria Campbell	Sisk Healthcare
21.	Shane Kirwan	Skillsoft
22.	Una Fitzpatrick	Technology Ireland, IBEC
23.	Aengus McClean	Verizon Media
24.	Jennifer Kavanagh	Workday