

**FAS EMPLOYMENT SERVICES QUALITATIVE SURVEY 2001
SUMMARY**

**A qualitative assessment of the services provided to unemployed persons by FAS
Employment Services**

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1. Introduction and Methodology

1.1 Introduction

FÁS provides employment services through its network of 56 Employment Services Offices throughout the country. One of the principal client groups of the FAS Employment Service is unemployed job seekers. These are persons who typically register at their local FAS Employment Services Office, are interviewed, and then referred to jobs or other training/employment options.

Under the National Employment Action Plan process, all persons on the Live Register for 6-9 months are also referred to FAS Employment Services.

This report summarises the principal findings of a qualitative research exercise conducted on behalf of FAS by Weafer & Associates Research & Consultancy Ltd. The primary objectives of the research were:

- to receive feedback from persons who have been through these processes,
- to understand and assess the quality of services provided to unemployed registrants by FAS Employment Services, and
- to evaluate to what extent, if any, the service met individuals' needs.

1.2 Methodology

FÁS identified four areas for inclusion in the project: Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Sligo. A focus group was conducted with registrants in each location, with a total of 30 participants recruited by Weafer & Associates from lists provided by FAS. In-depth interviews were also carried out with 36 registrants in each location. Nine FÁS staff, with direct experience in the Employment Services, were also interviewed. While the views expressed were not statistically representative, they nevertheless provided some important insights into the operation of the FAS Employment Service.

Fieldwork was conducted in the three-month period September – November. Weafer & Associates presented a report to FÁS in December 2001.

2. The Views of Registrants

2.1 Overall Expectations and Perceptions of FÁS

Overall views of FAS varied according to the individuals concerned, with most people generally positive towards, or at least uncritical of, FAS and the individual staff they met. Others were more critical of the assistance they had received from FAS. The group with the most positive attitudes comprised those who had been successful in getting on a course of their choice; apprentices, candidates with disabilities and their parents, graduate students and young adults with a good educational background. Conversely, those with the most negative views included the older, long-term unemployed and young persons with little or no educational qualifications.

The overall expectation of FAS is that it is an organisation that will provide training and, possibly, employment. However, many of the respondents had quite low expectations of FAS, in terms of its capacity to secure suitable employment or a prompt place on a training course. Accordingly, they are reasonably satisfied when they encounter staff who show a genuine interest in their needs and who promise to help them look for work and/or get on a course.

Unfortunately, the gap between initial satisfaction and the more long-term performance of the service in securing employment or a relevant course can lead to frustration over time. Most appeared not to expect too much, and were not unduly upset when the service didn't deliver.

2.2 Overall Impressions of FÁS Employment Services

When asked for their overall impressions of the Employment Services, respondents gave a variety of positive and negative comments. Below are some of these comments:

Positive Comments

- Many felt better coming out of the interview, feeling '*something was going to happen*'. Someone had taken the time to listen to them and made useful suggestions.
- FAS courses are perceived to offer a real advantage in finding employment, especially IT and computer courses. Accordingly, it is a real bonus to be accepted on to a course of your choice.
- A FAS qualification is recognised around Europe, particularly for apprenticeships but, increasingly, for computer courses also.
- It helped some candidates get what they felt they needed e.g. a job, a place on a course, to make a decision to return to education and/or generally reconsider their options: '*What more could they do. I know they are there if I need to go back.*'

Negative Comments

- The majority of candidates who had applied to FAS for a training course felt they had to wait too long for a suitable course. Furthermore, many of them expressed a definite sense of uncertainty regarding placement on a course, with many waiting over six months without knowing if they would get on a course. This leads to anxiety and frustration for many respondents: '*You are only told six weeks before the course begins if you have a place.*'
- There is a perceived need for more definite career guidance for young school leavers, particularly those without any qualifications/certification. Some of the younger candidates said they had returned to their old schools to get career advice when they didn't receive it from FAS. Others would have liked any form of assistance, other than being told to work in catering or go back to school.
- There is little or no follow-up contact for candidates who are not referred from the Department of Social Welfare. The general opinion was that the FAS staff were very helpful on the day but that the service was let down by the lack of contact or follow-up since the interview: '*You are left sitting around for months waiting for FAS to contact you. I don't know what happens after the interview. Do FAS ring employers or what?*'

2.3 The Registration Process

The review of the registration process focused on two aspects: the completion of the registration form and the interview.

The Registration Form

The form was regarded as too inquisitive for some and not probing enough for others. Older long term unemployed candidates felt it was just another way for the State to collect confidential information. Conversely, others felt that the questions relating to Third Level education and non-academic experience were inadequate. It was felt that more emphasis should be placed on matching skills and life experiences than with the perceived focus on basic education qualifications and functional skills.

The Interview

Most interviews lasted approximately 10-15 minutes and, in general, most persons, especially those with relatively low expectations of FAS, were quite satisfied with the experience. Conversely, the older, long-term unemployed and younger persons with low formal education were most critical of the interview and its impact on their lives. These are the groups who tend to be most in need and with the least options available to them. Their skill levels and/or age tend to impede their progress in getting suitable employment or placement on a suitable training course.

2.4 Suggested Improvements to the Process

Registrants made a number of suggestions for the improvement of the Employment Service, some of which are set out below:

1.	A shorter questionnaire, combined with more relevant questions and an in-depth interview with a focus on structured career guidance, should be provided automatically for everyone who contacts FAS. This would help candidates choose the most appropriate career option – <i>‘Help people get the right job, not just any job’</i> .
2.	Provide candidates with a variety of ways in which information on employment and related areas can be accessed. Don’t assume that everyone is computer literate or even literate.
3.	Provide more courses, in high demand areas, with shorter waiting periods and give candidates a more definite commitment on their likelihood of getting onto a course within a given time period. If possible candidates should be offered a guaranteed place on a course, even if this means their placing a deposit that is only refundable upon completion of the course. Courses should always be completed even when the majority of candidates ‘fall out’. The reason for the fall out should be monitored to ensure the course is providing what candidates need and expect.
4.	Promote FAS in colleges and second level schools. Tell students what to expect from FAS and deliver that service.

3. The Views of FÁS Staff

3.1 Overall Perceptions and Experiences

In general most of the staff were very positive towards their jobs and the overall service they provided. This was particularly the case where a Quality mark was also in place. Staff appeared to have genuine pride in their work and a genuine interest in registrants, albeit with real frustrations with certain aspects of their work.

A number of staff commented on the changing context of their work and client base, which they felt was due to the improved economic and social circumstances associated with the ‘Celtic Tiger Economy’. While the economic upturn has improved the employment prospects of many people in Ireland, there is also a higher percentage of problematic clients using FAS services e.g. long term unemployed, people with disabilities, Travellers and refugees/asylum seekers.

The increasing number of job changers has also changed the workload of FAS staff. This group tends to have different needs to the more dependent marginalised groups that have traditionally used FAS services.

The link with social welfare has also caused some difficulties with some staff questioning the use of limited resources dealing with people, many of whom are resentful, fearful or anxious when they are told to contact FAS.

3.2 Perceived Difficulties

When staff were asked to indicate what, if anything, ‘puts most pressure’ on them in the course of their work, the most frequently cited pressures were:

• The long and indeterminate waiting lists for training courses
• The volume of people using the service, combined with inadequate staff numbers and space in some locations
• Employment Services are often perceived as the solution to everyone’s problems rather than a ‘gateway’ to a solution
• The exaggerated earnings of the ‘Celtic cubs’, leading to high unrealistic wage expectations
• Demand for ‘glitzy’ computer courses – there are not enough of these courses available
• The constantly evolving IT systems within FAS
• When the system is not flexible enough to meet clients’ needs and there is nothing the individual staff member can do about the situation.
• The increasing difficulties of meeting the needs of marginalised groups.

3.3 Suggested Improvements

Improvements recommended by staff for the future development of Employment Services.

• More continuity between Training and Employment Services
• More training and staff to deal with the increasing demands of ‘new groups’ e.g. people with disabilities, non-nationals
• Ensure training centres are accessible to people with disabilities
• More basic, foundation training to cater for the needs of people with low education and literacy levels
• Less paperwork and bureaucracy

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, most of the respondents appeared to be quite satisfied with the quality of service provided by FAS. However, the lack of consistent follow-up tended to diminish their overall sense of satisfaction with the service with many respondents frustrated at the indeterminate delays in getting onto courses. Their overall sense of satisfaction was focused on the performance of staff on the day of the interview rather than with any subsequent performance.

Registrants who were more critical of the service included young people with low skill/educational levels who want to work or receive suitable training and those who are long-term unemployed. Many young unskilled registrants were frustrated at not receiving employment within weeks or even months of registering with FAS. The long-term unemployed were generally critical of FAS for reasons that had little to do with the quality of the service. Having to go to FAS, with the risk of losing their benefits, was an extra pressure most could have done without. They tended to resent FAS and associate FAS with the total social welfare process.

4.1 Recommendations

- The registration form should be shortened and simplified to include only those questions that are deemed to be relevant to the process. The experience of staff in using this form should provide useful indicators of what questions should be omitted in subsequent forms. The questionnaire should be completed as part of the initial interview, unless the registrant has a stated preference for self-completion. Registrants should be informed of the purpose of the form and the ultimate use of the information requested from them. The form should be expanded to include more non-academic and other relevant information e.g. management experience.
- More training courses, especially those in high demand, should be provided. Candidates should know within three months of applying for a particular course whether or not they have a place on the course. Each course could also reserve a minimum number of places for priority registrants. Any changes to the course should be notified to candidates during this ‘waiting time’. Registrants should be given comprehensive information on training courses, including details of course

content, the number of people who got employment from the last similar course, what form of employment may result etc.

- Registrants should not be made to feel they will be penalised for their past academic performance. If the emphasis is on training, there should be more foundation courses to facilitate people with low education and literacy levels to train for more 'employment useful' courses.
- Career guidance should be offered to every candidate attending for interview. For some of the more computer literate registrants, the provision of information on '*Career Directions*' will be sufficient, while, for others, a more personal touch will be required. In the long-term, more schools should be encouraged to make use of FAS' interactive multimedia careers database, '*Career Directions*', before the Junior Certificate in order to 'catch' early school leavers.
- Under the National Employment Action Plan process, all persons on the Live Register for 6-9 months are referred to FAS Employment Services. The present policy of directing most resources to people who fall into this category should be reassessed to ensure that those who are most interested in finding employment or training, who are outside of this category, receive a more flexible response. Some form of systematic follow-up or the provision of additional information should be incorporated into the process for all registrants.
- Information should not be provided exclusively through the medium of computers. Alternative media are required to facilitate the substantial proportion of people with literacy problems and those who experience difficulties with computers.
- The needs of registrants with disabilities should be addressed in practical ways, such as ensuring that all FAS buildings and those used for FAS training courses are accessible for people with disabilities.
- The Employment Services should be consulted in a more formal manner by the Training Division to ensure that training courses meet the needs of registrants as fully as possible. The Employment Services have most direct contact with registrants and are more likely to recognise emerging needs before any other group within FAS. Equally, any issues that arise during training should be made available to the Employment Services.
- A more flexible approach to issues that impact on the service provided by FAS should be facilitated wherever possible. For example, the waiting time before a disabled person receives an exemption for a training course from Social Welfare and the length of time a person has to be unemployed before being allowed to work in a Community Employment Scheme could be reduced to ensure suitable candidates are not excluded from participating in a training course or CE scheme respectively.
- The needs of staff should be investigated in a systematic and comprehensive way to facilitate the provision of adequate training and the implementation of changes staff perceive as necessary or desirable.