# FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

## Learners as Leaders Handbook

*Prepared by Kalianne Farren, Dr Laura Lovejoy and Órla Mannion*

September 2023

AONTAS
The Voice of Adult Learning

SOLAS
learning works

Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

# CONTENTS

# ORGANISATIONS

This Handbook is written by AONTAS. The National FET Learner Forum project is delivered in partnership with SOLAS and ETBs across Ireland. Please contact **mail@aontas.com** if you have any queries.

AONTAS is the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation, a membership organisation representing adult education tutors, providers, learners, and stakeholders. AONTAS are committed to advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to a quality service for adult learners throughout their lives, and promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning.

AONTAS support learners, particularly educationally disadvantaged learners, to engage in lifelong learning, and advocates for more inclusive national education policy. AONTAS achieve our goals through research, communications, and advocacy. Our work is aimed at building an inclusive, learner-centred lifelong learning system that enables adults to have a meaningful learning experience.

Established in 2013, SOLAS (The Further Education and Training Authority, An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna), is the State Organisation responsible for funding, planning and coordinating Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland. Its mission is to fund, co-ordinate and monitor a range of FET provision to ensure economic and social wellbeing and to play its part in progressing, influencing and supporting the development of a FET sector that is more responsive to the needs of learners and employers, and is innovative, flexible and demand-led. Its vision is to achieve a well-recognised FET sector, valued for its quality and for delivery of education, training, and skills that enables learners to succeed in the labour market and thrive in society.

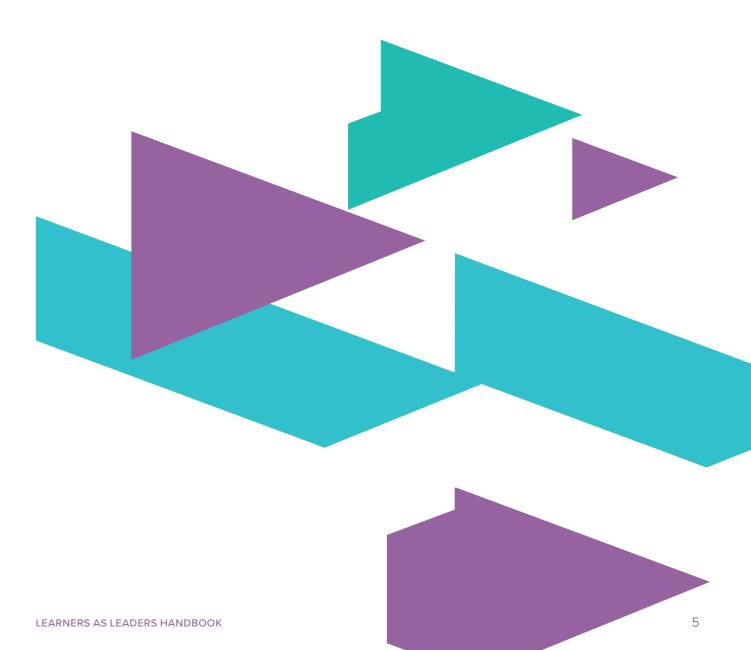The core principles of SOLAS are to:

- ensure there is robust intelligence to inform the planning, funding and design of new and existing FET provision;

- focus on adding value by fostering collaboration across the FET sector, sharing learning and empowering delivery organisations;

- promote innovation and fund provision that meets identified need;

- be open to new ideas, proactive in seeking out evidence of 'what works' in FET and ensure that the learner experience is at the centre of decision-making; and

- maintain a central focus on standards and quality in FET, including excellence in programme development and the on-going professional development of the FET workforce.

  SOLAS funds the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum.

Education and Training Boards (ETBs) are statutory authorities which have responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. ETBs manage and operate second-level schools, further education colleges, multi-faith community national schools and a range of adult and further education centres delivering education and training programmes.

ETBs are active in local communities through the direct provision of training and education programmes delivered in training centres, colleges and other training and educational settings. In this way, ETBs seek to make a real difference to the lives of the people they serve. Such responsiveness continues to be the hallmark of the education and training boards sector, looking outward nationally and internationally, while servicing education and training locally and individually.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## Learners

We would like to thank the learners who have taken part in the National FET Learner Forum and FET Learners as Leaders programme to date. We would particularly like to thank the Cork Education and Training Board Learners' Voices Group, who generously gave their time to contribute to this handbook. Learner voice is at the heart of AONTAS' work. We hope this handbook will lead to more opportunities for learners to share their voice and take part in meaningful, impactful learner voice structures in FET.

## Education and Training Boards

We would like to thank the Education and Training Boards who have taken part in the FET Learners as Leaders capacity building programme. We would particularly like to thank Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board and Cork Education and Training Board, who first collaborated on FET Learners as Leaders, and contributed to this handbook. Thank you for your support of this project and your clear commitment to authentic learner voice.

## Quality and Qualifications Ireland

We would like to thank Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) who have shown committed support to the FET Learners as Leaders project. QQI is an independent State agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland. They are also responsible for carrying out the Inaugural Review of Quality Assurance in Education and Training Boards, which was the catalyst for the development of the FET Learners as Leaders capacity-building programme and this handbook. Thank you for your invaluable support in advising on the development of the programme and encouraging participation from Education and Training Boards.

## The National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group

We would like to thank the National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group. This group consists of a learner representative, and representatives from SOLAS, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP), the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). Their support of this expansion of the Forum and their continued guidance is invaluable to the project.

## The National FET Learner Forum Academic Expert Group

We would also like to extend our appreciation to the Academic Expert Group members: Koen De Pryck, Fergal Finnegan, Ted Fleming, Sarah Coss, Peter Lavender, and Stephen O'Brien. This group is made up of European and national learner voice experts. The group has continued to ensure that authentic learner voice remains at the heart of the Forum and into this new branch of the project.

# INTRODUCTION

*The National FET Learner Forum is a large-scale national learner voice project, gathering the experiences of FET learners. The project was developed from the call of the 2014-2019 FET Strategy for the creation of a learner Forum to "systematically benchmark learner's views and satisfaction with their FET programme on an on-going basis" (SOLAS, 2014).*

Given AONTAS' long history of working in the area of learner voice, the organisation was called upon to develop and lead the project in collaboration with key stakeholders such as SOLAS and Education and Training Boards. AONTAS set about developing a large-scale learner voice project that took a mixed methods approach to capturing learner voice.

The Forum began as a one-day national event with 70 learners taking part. Over the course of the past 6 years, the Forum has grown into a series of regional and national events, reaching over 3,500 learners during the 2022/2023 academic year, making it one of the largest learner voice projects in Europe. The project is often cited as an exemplar of learner voice practice.

One of the key aims of the Forum is to create further opportunities for participatory learner voice engagement for the learners who take part. The FET Learners as Leaders programme was developed in the service of this aim. FET Learners as Leaders is a capacity-building

programme aimed at empowering learners to be self-advocates in Further Education and Training. The programme builds learners' capacity for communication, collaboration, representation, problem solving, and advocacy to prepare them to take up learner voice positions in their Education and Training Boards. The project was borne out of the inclusion of learners on the panel component of main review visits for Quality and Qualifications Ireland's inaugural review of Quality Assurance of Education and Training Boards.

Due to our expertise in learner voice, AONTAS was contacted by Quality and Qualifications Ireland and Education and Training Boards to collaborate on equipping learners for these visits. This handbook and the subsequent capacity-building programme represent an expansion of the National FET Learner Forum and the longstanding learner voice collaboration between AONTAS and Education and Training Boards.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the National FET Learner Forum moved online. Between April 2020

and January 2022, we held meetings virtually and increased our survey, ensuring learner voice helped to inform the FET sector through this reimagining of FET provision. This unprecedented period made the importance of listening to and responding to learners clearer than ever, and the knowledge and feedback gathered during this period informs this work. With the help of the National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group and Academic Expert Group, this handbook has been developed to support the exemplary work being done by Education and Training Boards and to ensure that learner voice and implementing learner feedback remains central in FET planning. We hope that this handbook will be an informative guide on how to maintain, strengthen, and expand the clear commitment to learners and authentic learner voice processes in Education and Training Boards across Ireland.

# WHAT IS LEARNER VOICE?

## Learner Voice and its Value

Fundamentally, learner voice is the process of including learner experience in education. AONTAS has relied on multiple definitions of learner voice for the foundation of the National FET Learner Forum and this handbook. David Hargreaves (2004) defines learner voice as:

*"How students come to play a more active role in their education...as a direct result of their [educators] becoming more attentive, in sustained or routine ways, to what students want to say about their experience of learning."*

Allowing learners to be influential partners in their own learning increases learner investment in education, increases meaningful engagement in learning, and provides the foundations for improved, egalitarian relationships between learners, educators, and other stakeholders. Leila Walker and Ann Logan (2008) name learner disengagement and disillusionment among the ramifications of institutional failure to engage with learners on their education processes. They conclude that, "[W]hen people have a voice and an influence on decisions and outcomes they are more likely to participate and also to learn through participation." Fundamentally, learner voice recognises learners themselves as best placed to communicate their needs and recommendations for their learning experience, and that their voices should be given equal value, access, and influence to those of other education stakeholders.

## Methods and Practices for Meaningful Learner Voice

Learner voice is a multifaceted process that requires clear and supportive structures to ensure meaningful engagement. The settings and conditions necessary for successful learner voice engagement have been well documented. In the foundation of the National FET Learner Forum, AONTAS was influenced by the Laura Lundy (2007) framework of participation, and adapted this children's rights-based model while maintaining the core components of "voice, space, audience, and influence." Paula Flynn (2017) expanded on this framework further, highlighting the need for an

*"embedded culture of listening" and, "a strategy to support a sustainable structure and response to student voices."*

These two conditions are crucial to ensuring learner voice structures are successful, replicable processes, and that engagement with learner voice is non-tokenistic (Robinson and Taylor, 2007). AONTAS has created its own framework, influenced by the above theories, which expands upon the basic requirements for learner voice to ensure meaningful, representative and successful engagement:

## Learner Voice as Transformative

Empowerment should be a foundational aim of all learner voice engagement. Learner voice theory is inextricable from theories of democracy and egalitarianism (Fielding, 2010). The process of sharing one's voice should not be reduced to the singular act, but should be understood as a process of self-actualisation, realisation and empowerment. Julie McLeod (2011) describes the process as "not simply speech; it can mean identity and



Meaningful Learner Voice

- Be embedded in culture and practice
- Lead to change
- Allow levels of learner engagement
- Provide a safe space for learner dialogue
- Include a diversity of learner voices
- Be a transformative experience for learners

agency, or even power, and perhaps capacity or aspiration; it can be the site of authentic reflection and insight." While learner voice itself is a process, when it is a successful and positive experience for learners, it can also be a jumping-off point for wider engagement in education, community, and society. Equality and respect are also highlighted as a key outcomes of successful learner voice engagement, with Lawrence Angus, Barry Golding, Annette Foley and Peter Lavender (2013) asserting that:

*"promoting, recognising and acting on learner voice, particularly the voices of disadvantaged and marginalised students, can help to provoke the kind of social, economic and political reform that can result in a more democratic society in which social justice and equality can prevail."*

## Learner Voice in FET

Since the formation of SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards in 2013, AONTAS and SOLAS have worked collaboratively to ensure learner voice remains at the heart of FET (AONTAS, 2020). Objective 3.1 of the 2014-2019 FET strategy called for the establishment of a learner forum to,

*"Systematically benchmark learner's views and satisfaction with their FET programme on an on-going basis."*

It also set out potential programmes for incorporating learner voice into FET, including

"annual national and local learner voice surveys, best practice provider-learner involvement strategies and learner panels" (SOLAS, 2013).

This clear commitment to incorporating learner voice into FET structures on the part of SOLAS, ETBI, and Education and Training Boards across Ireland is the foundation of the collaboration and support on the National FET Learner Forum project. It is these subsequent initiatives that AONTAS hopes to support through the FET Learners as Leaders capacity-building programme.

# LEARNER VOICE CULTURE

## Introduction

Learner voice culture in Education and Training Boards is the process of creating an environment in which learner voice is a respected and central component, and considered of equal value to other stakeholders such as staff and management. Further Education and Training is already known as a sector that recognises the diverse prior experiences learners have had when they arrive or return to learning. The harnessing of the rich experiences of learners and their current experiences of learning is facilitated through ensuring the environment in which they learn is one where they feel respected, equal, and valued.

This section will detail the elements of the culture of an Education and Training Board or institution that create the conditions for effective, authentic learner voice structures. It will discuss how to introduce learners to the concept of learner voice and learner voice culture from the outset of their learning journey, and discuss how creating a positive, supportive environment paves the way for a strong learner voice culture, using examples from learners gained through the National FET Learner Forum. In doing so, it will outline concrete, practical means of showcasing the commitment of Education and Training Boards to hearing the voices of learners, so that structures for gathering learner voice can be developed.

## What Needs To Be in Place?
### Support

Further Education and Training is already known for being a supportive educational environment, welcoming learners at all stages of life and educational attainment. Support is a crucial element for many learners returning to education, many of whom may have been away from education for a long period, or may have had a negative prior experience of learning. Fundamentally, learners are more likely to be engaged and invested in their learning, if they are learning in a supportive institution. Furthermore, if learners feel supported, they are more likely to have a positive experience and to be invested in their course.

Across Education and Training Boards, there are many methods and services in place to ensure learners feel part of a supportive environment and institution before applying, during enrolment, and for the duration of their course. Below are some practical examples of ways in which Education and Training Boards have supported learners, shared through the National FET Learner Forum, 2019-2021:

– Education and Training Boards can reach out to local post-primary schools, community groups, and other potential liaisons to create links between them and local FET centres

– Prospective learners can avail of one-to-one meetings before enrolling on a course to discuss whether a course is right for them, based on criteria such as their interests, goals, and prior educational attainment

– Learners can be signposted to available academic supports, such as additional literacy, numeracy and digital literacy services, and guidance counselling. Learners should be encouraged to avail of these services where needed

– Learners can be signposted to various wraparound services including; transport, childcare, mental health services, and grants or financial supports

– At inductions, learners should be made aware of student facilities available to them including; parking, canteen, library services, printing services, and social space.

## Diversity

Further Education and Training is one of the most diverse learner communities across the education sector. The diversity of the learner population is a testament to the accessibility of FET, and the efforts made to ensure learners can engage with FET at a level that suits their needs, regardless of their background. FET's diversity is its wealth, and a meaningful learner voice culture in FET necessitates diverse engagement. Below are a few examples of how to encourage diverse participation, shared by learners through the National FET Learner Forum:

– Creating links with local groups representing learners that are underrepresented in FET, such as migrant support groups, people living in direct provision, Travellers and Roma, groups for disabled people, and groups for lone parents

– Provide information on the services available that remove barriers to accessing a course, such as financial supports, childcare, and transport

– Including one-to-one supports on how to enrol on a course for those with English as an additional language and those unfamiliar with the Irish education system

– Ensure disability supports are widely available and advertised, and inform prospective learners of the supports available to them, including English language supports, and numeracy, literacy, and digital literacy supports.

## Communication

Clear and effective communication is consistently highlighted by learners as an important aspect of taking a course. It shows learners that they can have confidence in their Education and Training Board, that their time is valued, and that their Education and Training Boards would like them to be fully informed and involved in all aspects of their FET experience. Through the National FET Learner Forum Annual Synthesis Report 2020-2021, learners highlighted the value they placed on good communication, and expressed their gratitude for the prompt communication they received and the diverse methods used by Education and Training Boards to remain engaged with learners. Examples of good communication gathered from Forum recommendations include:
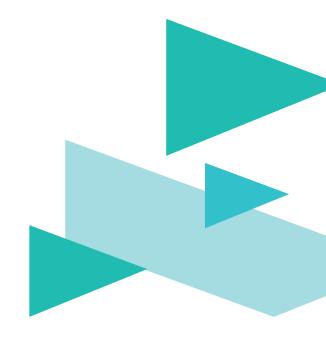
### Pre-admission

– Information and documents on courses, prospectuses, and application forms should be available online on Education and Training Board websites before the beginning of each academic year

– Information and support on how to apply for grants and other available services such as laptop loan schemes should be made available to learners before beginning their course

– Information on materials needed and any costs that are associated with a course that may arise throughout the year should be made available at the beginning of their course

– Support on how to fill out application forms should be offered to learners when they express interest in a course.

### Good Communication During Course

– Learners should be made aware of how to access the various supports available to them, such as guidance or digital skills support

– Learners should be asked about their preferred method of communication (text, WhatsApp etc.) and efforts to communicate with learners through this method should be accommodated as much as possible

– Important dates such as midterms, dates for assessment, and exams, should be shared with learners with good notice

– Changes to class schedule, delivery, or disruptions to class should be communicated to learners as soon as possible

– Details of extra-curricular events such as Coffee Mornings should be shared with learners

– Learners should be made aware of how to contact their tutors, and the timeframe within which they should expect a response

– Learners should be encouraged to set up a course group online or on a messaging service such as WhatsApp, where they can ask questions and learn from their peers.

## Encouraging Learner Engagement

As well as providing support to learners, learners should also be empowered to become active partners in their own learning. This involves encouraging learners to fully engage not only with their coursework, but with all aspects of teaching and learning. If a learner feels like an equal, valued stakeholder in the learning process, they are more likely to feel comfortable expressing their views on teaching and learning. The following was shared by learners through the National FET Learner Forum, as examples of ways in which learners felt like respected, equal partners in teaching and learning in their Education and Training Board or institution:

- Encouraging learners to ask questions in the classroom and lead discussions on course work

- Asking learners what style of teaching they find most effective

- Giving learners the opportunity to share learning gained in prior educational experience, the work place, or through life experience, when they are in the classroom

- Giving learners the opportunity to choose what sections of course work they wish to spend more time on or revisit

- Where possible, giving learners a choice between methods of informal assessment, for example choosing between assessment via presentation, project work, or written assignment

- Encouraging learners to self-evaluate and self-correct work they have done

- Where possible, study skills courses should be made available to learners, and learners should be encouraged to develop their independent learning skills through coursework and assessment

- Library and study services should be made available to learners where possible, and learners should be encouraged to practice independent learning while supported by these services.

**Example:** During induction or early in the academic year, Education and Training Boards can also invite a learner who has completed their course to join an induction or training session during the first week of a course. This learner could speak to the new cohort about their experience of their course, with the opportunity for learners to ask questions to the graduated learner. This will provide an insight, but also show the value that the Education and Training Board holds towards learner voice and the learner experience.

## Peer Engagement

Fostering an active learner community within an Education and Training Board is another important means of creating a strong learner voice culture. The social aspect of FET is one raised continuously through the National FET Learner Forum, where learners cite 'making friends' and 'socialising' as both a reason and benefit of taking their course. Learners will thrive in an environment where they feel supported and empowered by their peers. Allowing peer learning to flourish and creating opportunities for learners to informally engage with their peers paves the way for more structured mechanisms to enable them to share their experience of learning. Peer learning is also beneficial when considering creating more formal structures such as course reps or learner working groups, as discussed in section 3. Below are some means of encouraging peer engagement and a thriving learner community, shared by learners via the National FET Learner Forum:

- Group discussions and the opportunities to learn from peers should be included by tutors and course coordinators in course and class schedules

- Group assignments can form part of informal assessments, and learners should be encouraged to avail of facilities and services such as computer rooms, library services, and study spaces to complete group work

- Learners should be encouraged to set up groups on social media or via messaging apps, for coursework and social engagement

- Learners should be encouraged to use social spaces in centres and institutions to engage socially with peers

- Where possible, learners should be encouraged to engage in extracurricular group activities and social events with their peers, which in some cases could be facilitated by the Education and Training Board or institution, for example coffee mornings or book clubs.
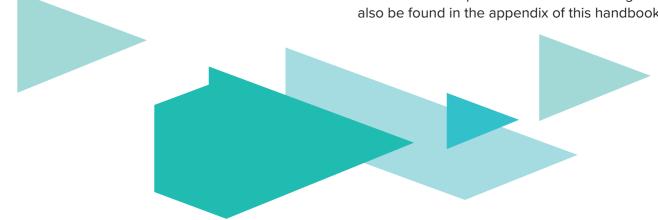
## Transparency and Accountability

Transparency is a core component of creating a culture where learners feel comfortable sharing their opinions and views. The practice involves Education and Training Boards operating in such a manner that allows learners to be aware of actions, structures, and decision-making processes that take place, decided by management and governance. It also involves Education and Training Boards being open and willing to engage with issues that arise within their organisation. Seeing their institution or Education and Training Board willingly acknowledge areas that could be improved upon, take ownership of decisions, and provide satisfactory explanations to queries, shows learners that they are in an environment where it is acceptable and encouraged to point out issues, and that their issues will be considered and acted upon where possible. This will showcase the willingness of Education and Training Boards and Institutions to respond to challenges and engage in positive dialogue with learners as equal stakeholders.

- Learners can be informed of past recommendations from former learners that have been acted on as examples of positive engagement and resolution between learners, staff and management

- Copies of National FET Learner Forum reports can be offered to learners to share recommendations that have been raised by learners in the past

- Copies of evaluation reports could be made available to learners upon request

- Decisions made at management level that may affect learners could be shared with learners periodically, through tutors or Education and Training Board communications.

## Embedding Culture – Learner Voice Training and Presentations

A strong learner voice culture requires willingness and active engagement from learners, practitioners, staff, and management alike. Through the National FET Learner Forum, learners widely praise their tutors and Education and Training Board staff for being available and supportive to learners, with many also sharing that their tutors are very open to suggestions and feedback from learners. This pre-existing open environment is an exemplary position to create a strong learner voice culture. However, while many staff already engage in creating an open culture, they may not be fully versed in the concept of learner voice, the various theories that underpin it, and how it grounds the work they have already done. Tutors, staff, and management should be provided with professional development opportunities to learn more about learner voice, learner voice in FET, and building a strong learner voice culture in Education and Training Boards. AONTAS can support the provision of this training, to help staff better understand learner voice, to cultivate a culture of learner voice, and conduct discussions with learners on the place and importance of learner voice in the classroom, institution, and within their Education and Training Board.

Learners can also be introduced more formally to the concept of learner voice, with presentations or discussions which AONTAS can facilitate. These can be conducted alongside the above efforts to create a supportive atmosphere for learners. There are benefits to including information on learner voice from the point of application or induction. Learners can enter their course knowing that they have parity of esteem in their community of teaching and learning. Examples of structures for learner voice presentations and trainings can also be found in the appendix of this handbook.

# LEARNER VOICE STRUCTURES

Alongside fostering a culture of learner voice, creating organised structures to gather learner experience is vital to successful learner voice engagement. These structures should allow for diverse levels of participation in learner voice activities, and range from individual to representative feedback, to ensure every learner has an opportunity to feed back their experience at a level that is comfortable for them.

The nature of Further Education and Training poses challenges to implementing some of the traditional learner representative roles seen in other educational spheres, such as higher education. These include the shorter duration of many FET courses, the diverse demographic of learners, the part-time component of some courses, and the fact that FET learners are often returning to education while juggling family, work, and other responsibilities. Thus, having multiple means of engaging with learner voice will allow learners to choose from a variety of informal to formal learner voice activities, ranging from accessible, individualised feedback structures, to the National FET Learner Forum or other group activities, to representative structures that allow access to decision making processes within institutions and Education and Training Boards.

Comprehensive learner voice structures should allow centres and Education and Training Boards to:

- gather experiences

- identify problems

- find solutions

- make changes.

Different levels of learner voice engagement allow for various combinations of these aims to be achieved. Below, these have been broken down into individual, group, and representative levels of engagement. To ensure learner voice structures are expansive and build capacity, clear links and opportunities for progression should be created between levels, allowing learners to engage in deeper learner voice engagement should they wish.

## Individual Learner Voice Engagement

Individual learner voice engagement is the means through which one learner can share their individual feedback. This is seen as one of the entry-level means of feeding back, as it is usually one learner sharing their own personal experience. There are many means of gathering individual learner experiences. Some common methods already in use in Education and Training Boards include:

- Giving feedback to a tutor or staff member, or an office hour or 'drop-in centre' structure

- Writing feedback in an email or 'suggestion box' structure

- Filling out a course or centre evaluation

Here are some factors to bear in mind when considering the uptake and efficacy of individual learner feedback:

## Accessibility

This is one of the most important factors to consider when designing entry-level feedback structures. Much of this work is done when creating a learner voice culture in Education and Training Boards and institutions, whereby learners are made aware that they have an active role to play in their learning, and that their opinion is valued and welcomed. Besides this, there are a number of practical considerations to be taken on board when creating an accessible feedback structure:

- Information such as office hours, emails, staff contact details, and places to send feedback should be supplied to learners

- Extra supports should be put in place for learners who may face barriers to sharing their experience, such as learners with limited English language skills, literacy skills, or digital literacy skills

- Feedback structures should be well advertised to learners, be that through introduction from tutors and staff, email, or paper advertisement in centres

- Where possible, learners should be given ample time to fill out paper feedback, such as evaluation forms

- Learners should be made aware of other learner-led means of raising feedback, such as whether their course has a class rep, or whether there is a learner representative on boards of councils in their Education and Training Board or institution.

## Anonymity

As previously detailed, transparency around learner feedback is crucial both in learner voice culture and structure. Learners should be able to provide anonymous written feedback to Education and Training Board staff. When feedback is received, learners should be given a clear indication of how and where the information they provided will be used. In the case of a learner providing verbal feedback to a member of staff, staff should ask learners whether they are comfortable with this information being shared with other relevant staff members and, if so, whether they would like to remain anonymous.
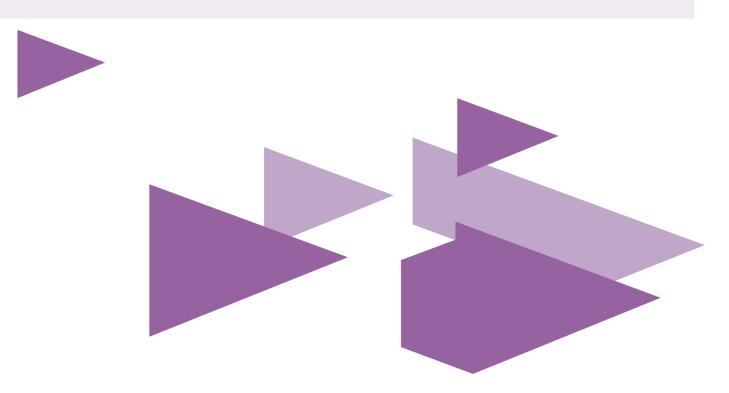
## Informality

For learners who are not familiar with the process, providing feedback, be it positive or critical, may be a daunting process. Through the Forum, learners who praised their Education and Training Boards communications appreciated the relaxed nature in which tutors and staff engage with learners, and that they can speak to their tutor or member of staff about an issue or a concern in an open and honest manner, in a setting in which they are comfortable. Learners should be reassured that feedback need not be an official, formal process. Instead, they should feel free to share their experiences in an ad-hoc manner and be assured that, where requested, this feedback will still be passed on and acted upon. Informal feedback processes should be paired with clear boundary setting for tutors and Education and Training Board staff, as detailed in the 'Learner Voice Supports' section below.

## Methods for Gathering Written Feedback from Learners

1. Decide on the method you will use for gathering feedback from learners. This will depend on the needs of the cohort of learners, and the type of information you would like to gather. For instance, learners with limited literacy or digital literacy may benefit from a suggestion box, while other learners may appreciate an email address where they can share their views. Some of the means of gathering written feedback from learners include:

– **Surveys:** surveys can be done in both paper and online form, meaning they are an accessible and efficient way of gathering information from learners. When they are well shared and advertised, surveys can yield a large amount of responses. However, they are best suited to gathering quantitative information: attention should be paid to the length of surveys and the frequency that they are shared with learners to avoid 'survey fatigue'

– **Suggestion box:** a suggestion box placed in a room or centre allows for a more informal means of gathering learner feedback. It is also less prescriptive than a survey, so can be a source of qualitative information. However, the information is received sporadically, so this method is not suitable when trying to gather large amounts of information, or to compare learner experiences in different classes or centres.

2. Decide how often the feedback will be reviewed, be that weekly, fortnightly, monthly etc... This can be decided by the person tasked with the review and their workload.

3. Decide how the information will be collated. This can be done on an Excel sheet or similar software.

4. Decide who the information will be shared with in the institution. This could be a member of management, a board, or, if applicable, a learner voice representative/group who then represents these interests further.

5. Decide how and when to feedback to learners on the responses/outcomes of their feedback. This can be done by tutors in classrooms, or by newsletter or email. This is an important step in reassuring learners that their views are respected and considered by their Education and Training Board or institution.

6. Once the above decisions have been made, inform learners of the means available for sharing feedback. Communicate to them how often the feedback will be used, where the information will go, and when and how they will feed back. This information can be communicated to learners in their classes, and learners can be periodically reminded of the methods for feedback and how to access them.

## Group Learner Voice Engagement

Following individual learner feedback, group feedback is the next structure where learners may wish to share their views. This is the form of learner voice engagement conducted by AONTAS via the National FET Learner Forum. The group participation component, structured environment, and the clear actionable outcomes that arise from each Forum event all contribute to the fostering of a learner community in Education and Training Boards and institutions, a key component of a thriving learner voice culture. Below, the benefits of the structure and the Forum, and particularly the group discussion component, are detailed for both learners and Education and Training Boards.

## National FET Learner Forum Events

The Forum is a large-scale mixed methods research project. The events bring learners from across respective Education and Training Boards to share their experience in FET and their views on their course. Events primarily consist of a focus group, where learners speak to trained facilitators about what is working well in their learning experience, what could be improved, and what recommendations they would have going forward. As a means of gathering learner voice, the Forum has a number of advantages:

– **Gaining context for relevant issues**
Through the Forum, learners share their experiences with learners on different courses and in different centres. Issues or observations learners have about their own experience are placed in the context of a wider Education and Training Board structure, allowing learners to further understand the nature of their experience as one unique to their class, course or institution, or one that is prevalent across a respective Education and Training Board.

– **Gaining insight from other learners**
Learners will also hear a variety of unfamiliar experiences or issues from their fellow learners. Hearing the views and experiences of other learners may alert learners to issues they were not aware others were facing, and issues that may arise on other courses. This could in turn equip the learner with a more rounded view of the FET experience that could be advantageous when engaging with learner voice activities in their own course.

– **Sourcing resolutions**
The Forum is primarily a means through which learners share their experience in FET, however, this is not to say that learner discussions are problem-focused. Learners also come to the Forum with positive feedback and share examples of best practices and solutions that were found to address issues in their class, course, or centre. Learners can then bring these solutions and examples back to their peers, tutors, or Education and Training Board staff, to see whether they would work in their own learning context.

– **Fostering a wider learner community**
As previously mentioned, the diverse nature of FET provision means that learners are often not aware of the experiences of learners outside of their own course or centre. This is particularly true with the advent of blended and remote learning which has seen many learners attend at least a portion of their classes online, removing them from the classroom and centre environment. Taking part in a Forum event provides the space for learners to engage informally with their peers and places the learner in a wider learning community within their Education and Training Board.

– **Encouraging further engagement**
We know that, for many learners, the Forum is the first time they have been asked their opinion about their FET course. However, for many, the experience is an encouraging one, and some learners go on to take on more structured, representative roles with AONTAS and in their Education and Training Board. AONTAS' I'm a FET Learner booklet details how learners who have attended the Forum have gone on to engage in deeper learner voice activities, such as speaking at AONTAS events and international conferences. Learners who have represented their Education and Training Board at Forum events have also been supported to take part in further learner voice activities, such as working groups or learner representative structures. This year, Education and Training Boards also used the Forum as a means of informing learners of the opportunity to represent their Education and Training Board in the main visits of the Quality and Qualifications Ireland inaugural review process. Thus, the Forum is a way of informing learners of opportunities to continue to engage with further learner voice activities within their Education and Training Board.

## For Education and Training Boards, the Forum provides:

**Collaborative organisational support**

AONTAS prides itself on the strong collaborative nature of the Forum project. The organisational and administrative requirements of organising and implementing mixed methods learner voice activities is a huge amount of work for an already busy staff to undertake. This role, paired with informing and recruiting learners for events is invaluable, but can also require a large amount of administrative time. Allowing AONTAS to support the organisation, administration, and running of events, as well as the subsequent analysis and reporting, can help reduce responsibilities placed on Education and Training Board staff.

#### – Independent, neutral oversight

A strong learner voice culture and structure in Education and Training Boards is the most effective way of ensuring authentic learner voice engagement. Such a culture also makes space for independent, externally conducted projects to gather learner voice. AONTAS and the Forum create a safe, facilitated, learner-only space, without tutors or staff, where learners are encouraged to speak freely and anonymously about their experiences. The feedback is then analysed by a neutral party with a strong emphasis on direct learner quotes and recommendations. This mechanism for anonymous feedback by an independent party is an advantage for learners and Education and Training Boards alike. Education and Training Board-led learner activities, combined with Forum activities, are exemplary means of gathering rounded, ethical, and authentic learner feedback. Embedding both forms of learner voice activity into Education and Training Board structures provides multiple means and levels of learner engagement.

#### – Expert research

As detailed in the introduction of this handbook, AONTAS was originally chosen to lead the Forum project due to its expertise in learner voice theory. Throughout the years of the Forum, AONTAS and Education and Training Boards have worked collaboratively and successfully to host large-scale, enjoyable participatory events for learners. AONTAS' strong qualitative and quantitative research skills then allow for high-quality analysis

to be included in the private reports returned to each Education and Training Board. This allows us to produce high-quality research reports to ensure learner voice can inform Education and Training Board policy.

#### – Ongoing and additional supports

As detailed above, AONTAS is dedicated to the idea of learner voice as an expansive process and sees the Forum as a path to other learner voice activities. The FET Learners as Leaders Quality Assurance review training and this handbook showcase our broadening role in supporting and enhancing learner voice engagement at Education and Training Board level. AONTAS is also available in a wider support capacity, to advise staff and management on learner voice structures, and provide training for learners seeking to take up roles in learner voice structures. Further information on these roles can be found in the Learner Voice Supports section.

#### – Providing a national perspective

The National FET Learner Forum is a multi-level learner voice project. It creates regional reports for each Education and Training Board collaborated with throughout the year. It also creates an Annual Synthesis Report, combining the findings of all the reports throughout the year. Through this report, AONTAS strives to showcase a national perspective of FET that can be used for advocacy aims such as funding requests, policy change, and calling for parity of esteem for FET alongside higher education in the Irish education landscape. We have seen how AONTAS reports, such as the COVID-19 Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Report, were developed to advocate for the needs of learners during an unprecedented year of FET provision. This would not be possible without the ongoing support of Education and Training Boards, who in turn are included in one of the largest national, learner-voice, evidence-based projects in Europe. Education and Training Boards are encouraged to contact a member of AONTAS staff for more information regarding collaborating on a Forum event.

#### – Representative Learner Voice

As well as individual feedback and group feedback structures, representative structures are an important component of building authentic learner voice processes. A nominated learner or learners representing the views of their peers at internal stakeholder level has advantages for learners and Education and Training Boards and institutions alike. Below, the advantages of learner representation structures, and the merits of some commonly-found representative structures in FET are detailed.

## Learner Representation

For learners, the benefits or taking part in a representative structure include:

#### – Shaping decisions

By becoming a representative, learners gain access and influence into the workings and decision-making processes of their institution, Education and Training Board, and the FET sector as a whole. They are a vital voice for learners as stakeholders and can ensure that the views and opinions of learners remain central to new decisions and policies.

#### – Engaging with peers

Learner representatives provide a valued support to their peers. By being conduits of the experience of their class, course or institution, they engage with learners, hear their concerns, and help relay these concerns them the appropriate member of staff to find a resolution.

#### – Building capacity

Through becoming a learner representative and receiving appropriate training from their Education and Training Board or institution, learners build on a number of capacities. These include soft skills such as communication, advocacy, public speaking, problem solving, and team working. Learners who have taken part in the FET Learners as Leaders programme have also reported gaining increased confidence and feeling respected as an equal partner in their learning. For learners seeking employment, the position and skills gained can also be used in an application process, or on their CV.

## For Education and Training Boards, learner representative structures can:
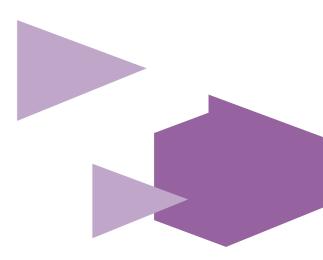
#### – Demonstrate parity

Learner voice in FET positions learners as equal partners in their own learning. Placing learners in positions with other stakeholders and in positions of influence can, provided they are supported and given appropriate training, demonstrate the commitment of an Education and Training Board to respecting learners' views and including them in decision-making processes.
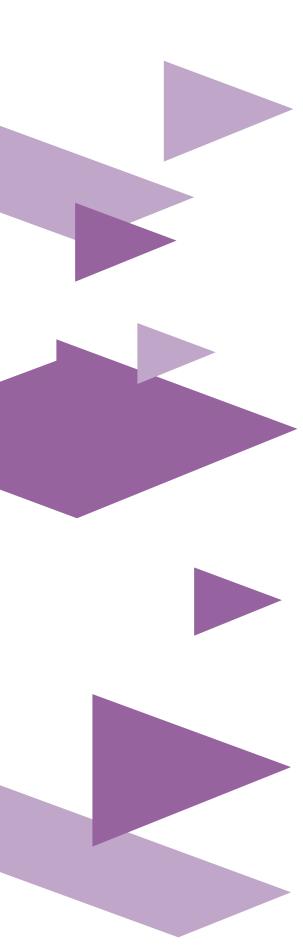
#### – Shape long-term evaluation

Learner representatives can engage with their peers, hear feedback in real time, and relay this feedback regularly. Education and Training Boards can combine continuous feedback with longer-term qualitative and quantitative data to assess new developments, gauge the success of previous initiatives, and implement changes to teaching and learning. Feedback from learner representatives can also be used to develop and shape further evaluations to ensure they capture authentic learner experience.

#### – Promote learner engagement

The creation of a learner representative structure can bring benefits to the wider learner community in an Education and Training Boards or institution. When learners consider themselves valued partners and have input teaching and learning decisions, they are more likely to engage fully and enthusiastically in their learning, which in turn improves the wider learning environment.

### Examples of representative structures:

**"Class Rep" structure**

A class representative or "class rep" is a learner who represents the views, issues, or recommendations of their class to tutors, staff, and the wider learning community. They are usually selected or nominated by the other members of their course. This structure is widely used in higher education, but it is also seen and can be positively implemented in FET. Class reps can be selected for both long-term and short-term courses, and can feed back to tutors and Education and Training Board staff in a formal and informal manner. In larger centres or colleges, a class rep group (consisting of the representatives from each class or course) can be developed, giving each class rep the space to share the experiences of their peers among a wider group. These groups should meet periodically with Education and Training Board staff or management to ensure the views of learners are being recorded.

**– A learner voice group structure**

A learner voice group structure consists of learners interested in engaging with learner voice activities within their Education and Training Board or institution. Rather than solely feeding back learning experience to a group, a learner voice group could also work more broadly on how to strengthen learner voice structures, how to improve learner engagement, or how to show learners their recommendations have been implemented. This structure does not have to rely on elected learners from each course or cohort, but should aim to include as diverse a cohort of learners as possible. The group would be advertised to learners at the beginning of an academic year, with interested learners invited to attend an introductory meeting on the function of the group and the responsibilities of learners involved. As the work of the group may include longer-term projects, the learners involved could be allowed to continue on in the group, should they wish, for a period after they complete their course.

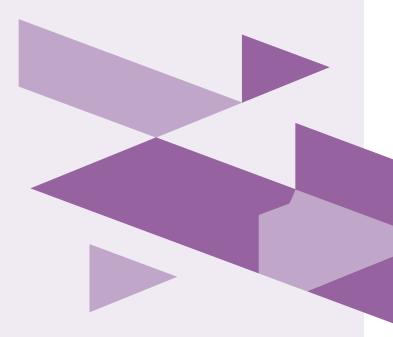**– Learner representatives on board and councils**

Learner representatives could also be given places on pre-existing institution or Education or Training boards or council structures, such as FET quality councils or pre-determined working groups or boards. Learners in these groups would be tasked with providing a learner perspective on teaching and learning, supports, progression, and other learner-relevant policies. Learners who nominate themselves or are nominated for these positions should receive ongoing support while in the role. Where possible, having two learners on a board or council may provide a level of peer support for learners taking up such positions. Other members of boards and councils should also receive training on how to engage with learner representatives in a supportive and productive manner.

### Getting Started: Setting Up a Learner Representative Structure

1. Decide upon the learner representative structure that best suits your institution / Education and Training Board. Decide which member of staff will oversee the group, and who the group will report to

2. Using this handbook as a guide, draw up a document detailing the role of a class representative. In this document, detail the benefits of becoming a learner representative, what the role entails, the supports that will be made available to learners, and the potential time commitment for learners

3. Decide upon the means through which this document will be shared with learners. The information can be shared with tutors or course coordinators to be fed back to learners. It can also be shared with other support services in institutions or Education and Training Boards, such as guidance counsellors

4. Communicate to learners the time frame for expressing an interest in becoming a learner representative and the member of staff who will act as the point of contact. Interested learners should be asked for permission to share their email or contact details with the point of contact

5. Once a group of learners has been identified, these learners can be contacted to undergo learner representative training. AONTAS provide this training through the FET Learners as Leaders programme, which will introduce learners to the concept of learner voice and the role of a learner representative. It will also build learners' capacities in communication, advocacy, teamwork, and representation, so that they can make an informed choice on becoming a representative. AONTAS can also provide training on an ongoing basis to learners, and provide guidance and support to both learners and Education and Training Board staff where needed

6. Once learners who wish to take part have been identified and trained, a preliminary meeting can be set up. The purpose of this meeting should be to introduce the learners to each other, to ensure they understand the role and its responsibilities.

### Questions that can be confirmed with learner representatives include:

– Are you happy for other learners in your class or course to come to you with issues?

– Are you happy for your email to be shared with learners?

– How often would you like to meet with this group?

– How would you like to engage with Education and Training Board staff or management to represent the issues of learners? For example, would you like to be given space to share feedback in boards or working groups? Would you like to feedback to the member of staff providing oversight to the group who can in turn share the feedback with management?

– How much staff oversight would you like in this group? For example, would you like a member of staff present at each meeting, or to attend a portion of each meeting, or to attend as requested?

– What supports do you need to take part in this group? If meeting online, do you have the necessary digital device to engage? Do you need access to printing? If travel is involved, can learners be provided with travel expenses?

# LEARNER TESTIMONY

Cork Education and Training Board Learners' Voices Group

*'I got so much out of Cork Education and Training Board that I wanted to give something back.'* **Tony**

We came to this ground in a lot of different ways. Some of us were very active in our local centres on committees, were class representatives, found out about the group through the AONTAS National FET Learner Forum, or were nominated by our tutors. We have a variety of backgrounds; some of us are literacy learners, some of us have a disability. We all wanted to give something back to Cork Education and Training Board.

*'It has to be learner-led, so we have autonomy but we also have structure.'* **Anna**

The group is made up of learners and four Education and Training Board staff. A member of staff serves as secretary and organiser for the group. It is important to have staff involved to make sure there is structure to the group and to keep it going. We wouldn't be where we are without their support.

We elected a chairperson, vice-chairperson and a secretary for the group. These positions are just for structure and to keep the conversation flowing. It is very democratic, everyone plays an equal role and everyone's voice is equally respected.

*'I think we're making a difference, and that's very rewarding.'* **Catherine**

We started talking just generally about what we could improve in our centres. First, we asked for disabled parking spaces to be made available, and it was done in a couple of weeks. It was very rewarding to see that we did have the power to make changes. We are working on the following items, like getting suggestion boxes in every centre, getting pictures of staff in centres so people know who to go to for support, and getting student cards for part-time learners. At the moment, we are working on developing plain-language briefs for all assignments. The Education and Training Board is very open to saying, 'We hadn't considered that' or, 'You've given us a new perspective on this'.

*'Our main aim is to be a messenger between learners and the Education and Training Board.'* **Paula**

The staff are so supportive of this group and want it to work. An email was sent out to all the centres explaining what the group is and what we do. We are arranging to meet with all the centre managers to introduce the group and explain what we do. We also set up an email address for the group where learners and staff can reach us. We work well with the Education and Training Board and we don't make massive requests; we try to make small changes. When we do make changes, that gives us a bit of credibility.

*'It's the people who are the quietest who may eventually have the best ideas.'* **Antoinette**

If a different group of learners wanted to make a group like this, they should make sure people are allowed to feel comfortable and not under pressure. They can just come and listen the first time, and see how things work. Them being there is enough and they don't have to come with all the answers to all the issues. People may be a bit overawed by the process, so make sure that the start is informal and everyone is welcomed and feels comfortable.

It's also important to know that you won't be solving big problems in every meeting, and that is fine. It's more important that we are working away in the background and are here when people need it. We are really proud of the work we do and what we have achieved. Education and Training Boards across the country would benefit from a group like this.

## Learner Voice Supports

As discussed in the previous section, learner voice structures are critical to the successful amplification and execution of learner voice at the heart of Education and Training Boards. However, complimentary supports must also be made available in order to provide the necessary foundation for these structures. Learner voice practices are a collaborative handshake between the voices of learners and the capacity of Education and Training Boards to instigate change, within a relationship of trust. To cultivate this relationship, it is important that Education and Training Board staff members are available to provide meaningful support to learners, which could be offered in some of the ways listed below.

**How to put this into practice:**

– Relationship-building exercises

– Creating safe and confidential spaces

– Clear expectations on learner voice involvement

– Appropriate signposting to internal and external supports

– Training opportunities for learner representatives

### Relationship-Building Exercises

The existence of an open and honest relationship between Education and Training Board staff members and learners is highly conducive to effective learner voice structures. Such a relationship can be encouraged and nurtured in a number of ways, primarily through the development of trust. This includes trust that any vulnerabilities that are shared will be treated with respect and appropriate levels of confidentiality, trust that feedback (once provided constructively) will not unduly affect any core relationships, and trust that learners are not sharing their feedback in vain and that the primary aim of the Education and Training is to receive feedback and employ it while curating a learner-centric approach to all of its endeavours. Following through on statements of action will play a crucial role in this. Trust must be built and developed over time, however there are key activities that can contribute to a healthy rate of development. Please see the exercises for examples of how to build trust:

### Activity 1: Pet projects

Ask each person within the group to spend one minute discussing their favourite hobby or passion, without stopping, for one (timed) minute

### Activity 2: Gratitude game

Each person gets allocated a random classroom/household item (a pen, a hairbrush etc.) by someone else in the group. The person who receives the item must pretend that it's been given to them as a gift, and within one (timed) minute, explain how grateful they are for it and why they think it's a lovely gift

### Activity 3: What just happened?

– Separate everyone into two or three groups

– Ask each group to pick five props

– Group A goes first, and asks everyone to look at them for two minutes

– Group B & C then close their eyes, while Group A asks five members of their group to put on their props

– Group B & C now have five minutes to identify the changes in Group A

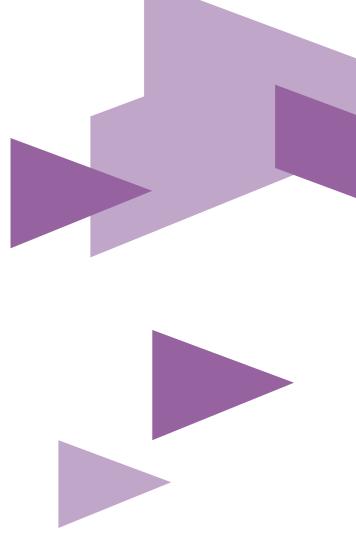– Each group takes a turn wearing different props

### Activity 4: Let's make our lives easier!

Ask each person to share one life hack they use on a daily basis that makes their life easier, whether that's an app they use to plan food shopping for the week or the best way to untangle Christmas tree lights

## Creating Safe and Confidential Spaces

Following the theme of trust within the previous section, creating a space for learners that feels safe, confidential, and respectful is one of the pillars upon which learner voice structures stand. Without the support provided in such a space, learners may feel withdrawn, reserved, and guarded in sharing their voices, particularly in a communal space. Creating such a space is a reflective and ongoing process. The diverse background of those participating must be considered, such as those who have previously had negative experiences within education or with communicating their experiences in the past. A constant ability to adapt the space as needed must be present, dependant on the group participating. And such a space, even with the best of intentions and preparation, should not simply be imposed on learners, but rather their review of the space and what makes them feel safe should be sought as the expert opinion, particularly in the design process, alongside the provision of accessible accommodations.

Below are guided tips on how best to create these spaces:

### Step 1:
**Ask the learners to create a code of conduct or set of rules that everyone will agree to while engaging in the learner voice practice**

– Asking learners to collaboratively put together a set of rules that will govern how each of the learners operates will allow the learners themselves to set the tone for the group's communication. It also gives learners the opportunity to voice any concerns they would like addressed in advance of engagement

### Step 2:
**Make sure necessary accommodations are provided**

– Be sure to check in with learners in advance of participation to ensure that they have everything they need to be enabled and empowered to engage with the learner voice practice

### Step 3:
**Acknowledge the diverse background of each participating learner**

– Each learner will have unique backgrounds and learning journeys and it is important to be mindful and respectful of this within a safe space, particularly if some learners are more vulnerable than others

### Step 4:
**Ask learners for feedback**

– Check in with learners at regular intervals to make sure that their needs are being met, that the space is operating with its intended objectives, and to see how the space may be evolving. If learners are not feeling safe, the space is not safe. The creation of a safe space should not simply be seen as a box-ticking exercise. While there are steps such as the ones we have provided, there is no fool-proof formula or template that applies to all circumstances, and the input and feedback of the learners is critical in ensuring the space's success

## Expectation Management

Before asking learners to engage in learner voice practices, it is important to be clear with learners on the level of involvement and time commitment that will be expected. Learner voice structures are meant to empower and enable learners to take ownership of their learning journey. However, if clear guidelines are not provided in advance, a misalignment in expectations may occur with negative consequences. For example, expectations of what can be achieved within learner voice structures should be outlined in advance, so if a request is made that is not feasible, there is no confusion as to why the request cannot be carried out. An overview of the true decision-making power should be discussed, alongside a clear idea of what is attainable as a group.

The specific objectives of a particular learner voice structure should be obvious. Additionally, if a learner is assigned a position such as 'learner representative,' clear boundaries and an outline of what the position entails should be heavily detailed. A voluntary position within this context should not become a second job, nor should it have an unreasonable workload assigned to it. On a more practical level, if certain items are needed for engagement, such as a laptop, access to Zoom, etc., the learners should also be informed of this in advance.

Similarly, the expectations of learners should be managed to avoid misunderstanding or disillusionment with their position or responsibilities. When informing learners of the decision-making processes of the Education and Training Board, it may be helpful to:

– Explain the various layers of consideration feedback will go through

– Explain the timeframe in which feedback can be considered, responded to, and implemented

– Explain that some decisions are beyond the control of the centre or Education and Training Board to fix

– Signpost the learner to the appropriate body to raise this issue with, should they wish to take the issue further.

## Appropriate Signposting to Internal and External Supports

If supports and resources are already available, it is vital that Education and Training Boards have clear signposting in place that makes these supports as accessible as possible to learners. The more supports that learners can avail of, the more positive progress will be made across a vast array of areas. Learners should also have readily available access to information that showcases the management structure within an Education and Training Board, and should be made aware of who to contact for various different queries and supports. Learners should never be out of pocket for their engagement with learner voice, and if resources are needed, signposting should also be made to inform learners as to how they can avail of such resources.

Appropriate signposting should also be made available for Education and Training Board staff, as learner voice engagement is a collaborative endeavour and reciprocal training should be provided and signposted so that everyone can collaborate and participate to the best of their abilities.

## Training Opportunities for Learner Representatives

While the provision of opportunities for learners to have their voice and experiences heard is vital for the democratic and learner centric expansion of Education and Training Boards, this is a practice that many learners may not have a large amount of experience in, or may not feel comfortable speaking and sharing publicly. The involvement of learners in their learner journey benefits both learners and Education and Training Boards alike, so providing training opportunities to build the capacity of learners to represent themselves would be of benefit for all involved. AONTAS offers a number of training opportunities:

– **National Further Education and Training Learner Forum**

The National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum is a large-scale project designed to ensure FET is actively engaging learner voice and creating policy that is responsive to learner needs. The Forum provides a platform for learner voice and offers feedback and a report to participating Education and Training Boards.

– **Further Education and Training Learners as Leaders**

FET Learners as Leaders is a learner capacity-building programme, aimed at equipping learners with the skills needed to become empowered self-advocates in their Education and Training Board. This project will build the capacity of adult learners to become leaders within FET through the structures of the National FET Learner Forum.

Learners will develop skills in public speaking, critical thinking, communication, mentoring, team-work, and advocacy. The initial aim of the project is to prepare learners for the main review visit of the QQI quality assurance reviews. The expansion of the project will equip them to take up learner voice positions in their Education and Training Boards. The project will also support Education and Training Boards in developing and maintaining meaningful learner voice structures, and develop cross-ETB training for learners in capacity-building skills.

– **Learners as Leaders**

Learners as Leaders is an informal learning programme designed and delivered by AONTAS that seeks to empower and create social change within the adult learning sector.

Training opportunities should also be put in place for Education and Training Board staff, so they can objectively facilitate and support learner voice structures and practices in a manner that is beneficial to all involved.

## Learner Voice Outcomes

It is crucial that learner voice is not expressed within a vacuum. It is not simply an exercise in public speaking or articulation for learners, but rather a vehicle of change they have taken ownership of, and are using to steer the direction of their learner experience. For learner voice practices to be authentic, feedback provided by learners within these settings must be validated and given weight by the receiving Education and Training Board, in the form of reflection, review, and affirmative action. In the section below, we have outlined how some of these actions may be carried out.

Putting this into practice:

- **Reflection:** Acknowledging immediate successes or concerns

- **Review:** Formal evaluation on learner voice practice

- **Affirmative action:** Creating and executing next steps

- **Addressing challenges.**

## Reflection:
### Acknowledging Immediate Successes or Concerns

Reflection is an initial key step in any evaluation or strategy-building exercise. Before diving in to creating a plan of action, it is important to reflect on and identify immediate successes or concerns that should be addressed as a priority. This reflection process could simply be meeting informally with learners and any participating Education and Training Board members of staff, to ask for their initial thoughts and feedback on how a learner voice structure was executed.

## Review:
### Formal Evaluation on Learner Voice Practice

Following an informal reflection session, the next step should be to initiate a formal review. This will involve the careful design of an appropriate evaluation. This evaluation design is up to the discretion of the hosting Education and Training Board; however, the use of key performance indicators (KPIs) is advised. KPIs can be decided in advance of the learner voice practice, and afterward used to measure the outcomes, successes, weaknesses, and areas that could be improved. The most critical aspect of any successful evaluation, however it is formatted, is the inclusion of feedback from the learners. A separate survey should be designed to be offered to the learners, in keeping with the values of learner voice. This formal evaluation should also include the opinions and experiences that were shared by learners within the learner voice structure.

## Plan of Action:
### Creating Next Steps

Reflecting and reviewing content shared through learner voice engagement is only effective if a corresponding strategy is created that implements change.
Using the reflection piece, formal evaluation, and the experiences and opinions shared within the learner voice practice, a strategy should be formulated that combines each of these elements into a plan of action that can be executed.

Here are some tips on how to formulate a plan of action:

1. Identify your ultimate objectives and goals
2. Perform a SWOT analysis in relation to these objectives and goals (Identify the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats)
3. Using the results from the SWOT analysis, decide on different actions to address each of the SWOT areas
4. Create an estimated timeframe for achieving these actions and a method for tracking your progress
5. Think about how to ensure long term systemic change as a result of achieving these goals and objectives
6. Make sure to involve learners every step of the way.

Within a national forum event that AONTAS hosted during the summer of 2021, a participating ETB staff member was quoted as saying "it is dangerous to assume you know what your learners are thinking." This quote refers to the concern of complacency in assuming that the safe space you have offered your learners is working, that learners are happy and fulfilled, and that the only improvements needed are the ones that the Education and Training Board have identified. This complacency misses the richness of learner voice engagement, opens a blind spot to learner led improvement and the wonderful things that can happen when a line of communication is open within the right format, between Education and Training Boards and learners. The process of hearing feedback from learners and their experiences may occasionally offer challenges, but more importantly, it will always offer opportunities. Learner voice is a valuable process to engage with and is necessary to instil more democratic and socially equitable ideals within Ireland's Education and Training Boards.

**Addressing Challenges**

# EDUCATION AND TRAINING BOARD TESTIMONY

## Nuala Glanton, Adult Education Officer, Cork Education and Training Board

The AONTAS National FET Learner Forum events, in addition to evaluations and questionnaires, provided very useful feedback to Cork Education and Training Board on what worked well for our learners and what improvements were needed. However, John Fitzgibbons, Cork Education and Training Board Director of FET, identified that we needed to build on this feedback and listen more actively to learners' voices as "Learners are central to everything we do in Cork ETB." He decided to use learner feedback as the basis of the Cork Education and Training Board Learner Charter. At the AONTAS National FET Learner Forum in March 2019 (days before the first COVID-19 lockdown) learners were asked three additional questions:

*What do you expect from Cork Education and Training Board before you start a course?*

*What do you expect from Cork Education and Training Board when you are on a course?*

*What do you expect from Cork Education and Training Board when you have finished a course?*

The follow-up plan to have local learner fora in key locations was cancelled because of COVID-19 but in April 2021 I was asked to lead out on our first Cork Education and Training Board Learners' Voices Group meeting, incorporating Learners as Leaders training with AONTAS.

The support from AONTAS was really beneficial, it provided a link to a national platform and the training provided a structure for the group. The Lundy model for Learner Voice is something that the group have returned to in refining its terms of reference. It captures the importance of learners having a safe space to use their voice and the importance of having that voice listened to and acted on. In hindsight, it would have been better for the group to have met a few times to get to know each other and get a bit of experience before the training as it would have been more valued at that stage. The staff from AONTAS have been very helpful and encouraging to the group.

We started the group by asking centre managers if any of their learners would be interested in being part of a group and (with a few reminders) 17 learners from across Cork Education and Training Board centres attended the first session. Many of these learners had had a positive experience at the AONTAS National FET Learner Forum, which really helped. The group went through a "forming" stage, where some learners felt it wasn't for them and others wanted to join when they heard about it. Many learners felt that they had benefited hugely from their experience with Cork Education and Training Board and wanted to give something back.

The Cork ETB Learners' Voices Group is very much learner-led. They have elected a Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson and Secretary. The group is also supported by an administrator, Active Inclusion Officer and a Quality Assurance representative. The group identified several priority areas to work on, including:

- A poster for the Learners' Voices Group

- A student card for part-time Cork Education and Training Board learners

- Clear communication with learners, in plain language

- Training for learner representatives

- Suggestion boxes in centres.

They presented their proposals to John Fitzgibbons, Director of FET, in September 2021 and they were delighted when he accepted all of their suggestions. It validated the work that they had been doing. The group subsequently presented their recommendations online to all Cork Education and Training Board FET Principals and Centre Managers.

Going forward the group would like to see learners' voices represented in all Cork Education and Training Board decision making, including how learners are taught. For many Education and Training Board learners, the "chalk and talk" method did not work for them at second level, and the FET approach of learner-centred education, where the learners' experience is valued and they are active in planning their learning, works much better. The group would like to be seen as a messenger, both ways, between learners and Cork Education and Training Board, expressing learners' perspectives and sharing information.

# CONCLUSION

Learner voice has always been and remains at the heart of AONTAS' work as we strive towards our vision of educational equality for all adult learners. While the period of remote learning and move to virtual fora posed challenges for everyone, it also allowed AONTAS to consider learner voice as a process, and how we could support burgeoning and existing learner voice structures in Education and Training Boards. The expansion of the National FET Learner Forum to include the FET Learners as Leaders learner capacity-building programme was an important step in empowering and supporting learners to represent their views and share their experiences.

Education and Training Boards across Ireland continue to go from strength to strength in encouraging and providing opportunities to shape their learning experiences in their courses, centres, and at Education and Training Board level. We hope that this handbook serves as a helpful reference point for tutors and staff as they continue to develop and build on learner voice structures in their Education and Training Boards. As we return to in-person and hybrid FET provision, we look forward to supporting these initiatives and structures in any way we can. If you have any questions or would like more information on anything in this handbook, please free to contact Karyn Farrell, Learner Voice Project Officer, at kfarrell@aontas.com or Conor Thompson, Project Officer for Capacity Building, at cthompson@aontas.com.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

AONTAS. 2019. *Annual Synthesis Report* 2018 Available at: https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/AONTAS-Research/2018%20Annual%20Synthesis%20Report.pdf

AONTAS. 2019. *Strategic Plan 2019- 2022* Available at: https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Strat%20Plan/AONTAS%20STRAT%20PLAN-FINAL.pdf

AONTAS. 2020. *COVID-19 Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Report.* Available at: https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Learner-Work/AONTAS%20COVID-19%20Learner%20Report%20-%20Final.pdf

Department of Education and Skills. 2014. *Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019.* Available at:https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Further-Education-and-Training-Strategy-2014-2019.pdf

Fielding, M. 2004. *Transformative approaches to student voice: theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities*, British Educational Research Journal, 30:2, 295-311. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0141192042000195236

Fielding, M. 2010. The radical potential of student voice: Creating spaces for restless encounters. *The International Journal for Emotional Education.* 2(1), pp.61–73. Available at: https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/46603592.pdf

Flynn, P. 2017. *The learner voice research study: embedding student voices in education discourse, curricular construction and development.* Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Paula_Flynn/publication/324942944_The_Learner_Voice_Research_Study_Embedding_student_voices_in_education_discourse_curricular_co-construction_and_development/links/5aec2c86aca2727bc003f679/The-Learner-Voice-Research-Study-Embedding-student-voices-in-education-discourse-curricular-co-construction-and-development.pdf

Lundy, L. 2007. "Voice" is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal.* 33(6), pp.927-42. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01411920701657033

SOLAS. 2018. *Progress Review of the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 – 2019.* Available at: https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/fd331c2bf7/fet-review_final_10_5-7.pdf

SOLAS. 2019. *Future FET: Transforming Learning. The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020-2024.* Available at: https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf

Quality and Qualifications Ireland. 2020. *The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education A QQI Evaluation 2020.* Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/The%20Impact%20of%20COVID-19%20Modifications%20to%20Teaching%2C%20Learning%20and%20Assessment%20in%20Irish%20Further%20Education.pdf

Robinson, C. and Taylor, C. 2007. Theorizing student voice: values and perspectives. *Improving Schools.* 10(1), pp.5-17. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249752246_Theorizing_Student_Voice_Values_and_Perspectives

Walker, L. and Logan, A. 2008. *Learner Engagement: A Review of Learner Voice Initiatives Across the UK's Education Sectors.* Available at: https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/futl80/futl80.pdf

The Voice of
**Adult Learning**