



# NATIONAL FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING LEARNER FORUM 2017 LEARNER REPORT



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## ORGANISATIONS

### AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

AONTAS is the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation. As an umbrella body committed to advocating and lobbying for the development of a quality service for adult learners and promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning, AONTAS works on behalf of its 500 strong membership and regards them as a key resource which provides the organisation with a grassroots, authentic understanding of adult and community education practice and learner perspective. The membership profile comprises a rich mix of statutory, voluntary and community organisations involved in the provision of further education and training, as well as individuals who are deeply involved in and committed to the concept and practice of lifelong learning. Since its foundation in 1969, AONTAS has a long track record of supporting adult learners, practitioners and providers. It has played a pivotal role in advocating for the recognition of adult learning as a key pillar of the education service and lifelong learning as a whole, contributing to policy development and making a case for sustainable funding.

### SOLAS

SOLAS 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, 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 principals of SOLAS are to ensure there is robust intelligence to inform the planning, funding and design of new and existing FET provision; to focus on adding value by fostering collaboration across the FET sector, sharing learning and empowering delivery organisations; to promote innovation and fund provision that meets identified need; to 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 to 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.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### Learners

The most important people to acknowledge in this work are the learners like you. Each participant gave their time and energy to the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum. Learners shared personal stories and experiences, and developed the recommendations that follow. It is important to note that without these stories, the recommendations made to policy makers would not have the same impact. Learner stories are proof that these issues matter and deserve consideration. Participants like you should know that your efforts have helped pave the way for an even better experience for future Further Education and Training learners.

### Education and Training Boards

A special thank you must also be given to the staff and learners at Cork ETB, Galway and Roscommon ETB, and Tipperary ETB. Each of these ETBs helped to organise the first regional National Further Education and Training Learner Forum events in autumn 2017. Their commitment to the promotion of learner voice reflects a wider commitment to learner growth. We appreciate the time and support they provided by welcoming us and letting us listen to their learners.



### The Advisory Group

We would also like to thank the National Further Educational and Training Learner Forum Advisory Group. Representatives from the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP), the Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOUE), SOLAS, the National Adult Literacy Organisation (NALA), as well as two adult learners all are a part of this group. They provided support to this project throughout the year. Their commitment to the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum and to promoting learner voice has allowed this project to expand.

# INTRODUCTION

## Who is this report for?

This report is designed for learners who gave their time and energy to this project. We want you to know that your voices have been heard. While not all learner recommendations can be implemented overnight, please know that these recommendations have started an important dialogue about how to improve the Further Education and Training in Ireland.



## What is the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum?

The National Further Education and Training Learner Forum is a series of events that bring together learners from across the country

to ask their views on Further Education and Training courses. This marks AONTAS's second year organising the Forum. The project, which is funded by SOLAS and delivered by AONTAS, is part of a larger strategy to bring learners into the Further Education and Training review and planning process. For the past two years, AONTAS has worked directly with learners across the country to gather information on what is working and what can be improved in the Further Education Training sector. The responses to these questions have been recorded and turned into this Learner Report. In 2017, one national forum was held in Dublin, and three regional events were held at Cork ETB; Galway and Roscommon ETB; and Tipperary ETB.

## How does the National Further Education and Training Forum work?

At each event, learners break into small groups and answer two key questions:

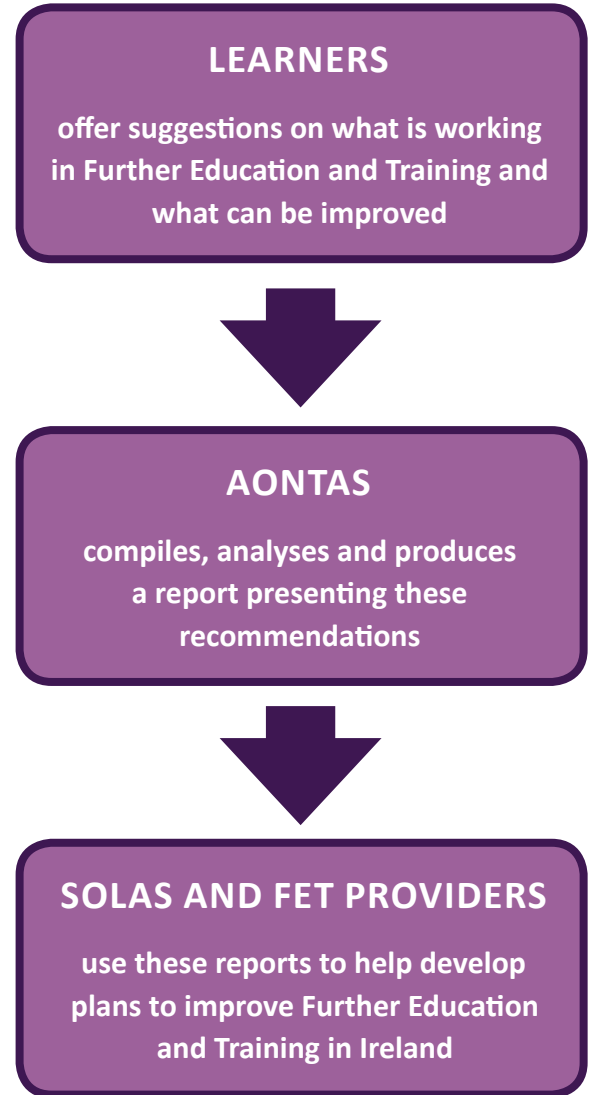
*Question 1:* What was your experience entering Further Education and Training?

*Question 2:* How has your Further Education and Training programme met your needs as a learner?

At the regional meetings, learners also answered a short survey card that asked specific questions on the following topics:

- transportation
- tutor availability
- advertisement of Further Education and Training services
- access to information in Further Education and Training courses

The responses to these questions have been recorded, compiled, and turned into key learner recommended actions.



# LEARNER RECOMMENDATIONS

AONTAS analysed all conversations that took place at the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum. The results were used to produce the following recommendations. Key findings and recommendations are presented in two primary sections – areas working well and areas for development in the Further Education and Training sector. The areas for development section is presented in phases in accordance with learner engagement with Further Education and Training services. These four phases consist of pre-Further Education and Training engagement before people enter a course, initial entry into Further Education and Training when learners start a course, course development learners experience during the course, and course completion after learners leave the course.

\*Learner statements featured in bold show a repetition of topics identified during the 2016.

AREAS WORKING WELL IN FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING	
TOPIC	LEARNER STATEMENT
Assessment	Alternative forms of assessment (i.e. portfolios) are a positive development used for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).
Guidance	Guidance services interaction were positive and helpful.
Peer Support	Further Education Training courses facilitated intergenerational and cross socio-economic engagement. <b>Interaction with peers helped curb feelings of isolation and being left behind in the learning process.*</b>
Skill Development	<b>Courses increase employability.*</b>
Staff Support	Many tutors went 'above and beyond' in their support of learner development. Administrative staff were supportive to students engaging in courses.
Wider Benefits	<b>Courses increase learner confidence.*</b>

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT IN FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING



PHASE 1: PRE-FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING ENGAGEMENT		
TOPIC	LEARNER STATEMENT	RECOMMENDED ACTION
Clear and Accurate Information	<b>Eliminate jargon and acronyms from Further Education and Training advertising*</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>eliminate jargon and acronyms in Further and Education Training advertisement - refer to all programmes and services by their complete names and use plain language</li> </ul>
	<b>Increase forms of Further Education and Training advertisement*</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>diversify and increase Further Education and Training advertisement (i.e. Further Education and Training fairs, radio promotions, local newspaper advertisements, open house days, etc.)</li> <li>continue to deliver information packs on Further Education and Training at employment fairs, expos, etc.</li> </ul>
	Promote that Further Education and Training is open to all learners, even those without a Leaving Certificate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>make explicit in all advertising the particular entry requirements for a given Further Education and Training course so that learners know what level of education/training is required</li> </ul>
	Ensure the names of courses are not too repetitious or confusing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Education and Training Boards and Further Education and Training providers should use course titles that are reflective of content, distinguishable from each other, and easy to understand</li> </ul>

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT IN FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING



### PHASE 1: PRE-FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING ENGAGEMENT

TOPIC	LEARNER STATEMENT	RECOMMENDED ACTION
Referrals	<b>Learner interactions with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) can be counterproductive to learner success, with inconsistent information being shared with learners and learners being directed and/or forced into classes that did not meet their needs*</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ETBs and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) should regularly share information on courses available and course requirements to ensure learners are receiving accurate and up-to-date information on Further Education and Training</li> <li>Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) should enact a customer service charter for supporting learners who are referred to Further Education and Training courses that is based on an individual and flexible approach</li> </ul>
	The dependency on Fetchcourses.ie as a substitute for guidance is a particular barrier to learners, especially those with limited IT skills or an unclear educational plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ensure learners who require additional guidance support or an alternative to Fetchcourses.ie are accommodated appropriately</li> <li>if a learner is unclear on what courses they need or would like to take, they should be referred to the Adult Guidance and Information Service within the Education and Training Board</li> </ul>

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT IN FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING



### PHASE 2: INITIAL ENTRY INTO FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

TOPIC	LEARNER STATEMENT	RECOMMENDED ACTION
<b>Preparation Materials</b>	Across and within ETBs an inconsistent amount of information is shared with learners at the start of courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>in line with quality assurance procedures outlined by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), Further Education providers should ensure they have a policy guaranteeing learners will receive information at the start of each course that outlines course objectives, types of assessment, and course timelines</li> </ul>
<b>Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)</b>	Offer varied forms of assessment to learners and ensure the implementation of an effective Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>drawing from the example of good RPL practice in Europe, Education and Training Boards should broaden Recognition of Prior Learning processes</li> <li>learners would like the opportunity to showcase prior learning through portfolios and/or project-based assessments and have these materials accepted as a form of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)</li> </ul>



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT IN FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING



### PHASE 3: COURSE DEVELOPMENT

TOPIC	LEARNER STATEMENT	RECOMMENDED ACTION
<b>Attendance</b>	Strict attendance policies that penalise learners by reducing social welfare payments for missing class due to illness and childcare need to be reassessed as they serve as a deterrent to class enrolment (It should be noted that learners believe a penalty for unexplained excessive absences is appropriate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>review the terms and conditions governing payment of Further Education and Training allowances to reduce or eliminate financial penalties laid on learners who are legitimately absent due to illness or parental responsibilities</li> <li>ensure policies in place are designed to support the retention and progression of all learners</li> </ul>
<b>Guidance</b>	<b>Increased guidance services to support course selection, progression and career development*</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>guidance support should be available before, during, and after engagement with Further Education and Training</li> </ul>
<b>Job Placements</b>	Job placement, while immensely beneficial, can be difficult to locate – learners had a tough time finding employers willing to take them on for job placement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>build stronger relationships between Education and Training Boards and employers to increase job placement opportunities for learners in their area</li> <li>provide learners with a list of employers in their field of learning who accept job placement learners</li> <li>explore new ways to better support learners who are unable to locate a job placement</li> </ul>

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT IN FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING



### PHASE 3: COURSE DEVELOPMENT

TOPIC	LEARNER STATEMENT	RECOMMENDED ACTION
<b>National Framework of Qualifications Supports</b>	It is difficult to transition from National Framework of Qualifications Level 1-3 courses to National Frameworks of Qualifications Level 4 and above, because there is a large difference in the level of supports offered to learners at these levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ensure that learners understand the course requirements and assessments associated with each course and are aware of the supports available to them</li> <li>provide additional supports for learners transitioning from Level 3 to Level 4 courses</li> </ul>
	Increase diversity of options in Further Education Training courses (i.e. part-time courses, evening courses, and summer scheduling)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increase the availability of summer, evening, and part-time courses</li> </ul>
<b>Scheduling</b>	Provide meaningful financial supports for learners enrolled in part-time, evening courses, or summer classes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>offer financial aid (i.e. fee waivers, childcare costs, etc.) for non-full-time courses, as the creation of a lifelong learning culture in Ireland requires the support of flexible part-time learning</li> </ul>
	More class time for learners completing an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increase class time for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses</li> </ul>

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT IN FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING



### PHASE 3: COURSE DEVELOPMENT

TOPIC	LEARNER STATEMENT	RECOMMENDED ACTION
Student Supports	Further Education and Training providers need to offer more wide-ranging support structures for learners in the area of mental health*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increase awareness of mental health support amongst Further Education and Training learners by ensuring that key staff have access to information on mental health providers at Further Education and Training centres</li> </ul>
	Increase childcare support*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Further Education and Training centres should explore flexible childcare options. Depending on the size and needs of the communities in which a centre exists, this may change the way support is provided across the country.</li> <li>provide information on childcare options, grants and schemes available to learners</li> </ul>

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT IN FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING



### PHASE 4: COURSE COMPLETION

TOPIC	LEARNER STATEMENT	RECOMMENDED ACTION
Progression to Higher Education Scheduling	There are too few course options for learners who want to progress to higher education from Further Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increase places reserved for Further Education and Training learners in Irish Higher Education Institutions</li> </ul>
	There is a lack of clarity on the processes and supports available to learners transitioning to higher education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>develop a clear mapped trajectory for learners who want to transition to higher education</li> <li>provide supports for learners transitioning from Further Education and Training to higher education</li> </ul>





# LEARNER VOICES FROM THE NATIONAL FURTHER EDUCATION TRAINING LEARNER FORUM

## The National Event

On 7 April 2017, 90 learners representing the 16 Education and Training Boards from across Ireland came together to discuss Further Education and Training in Ireland. This event, along with the regional events, make up the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum. Here are some of the examples of learner ideas that were raised at the Forum:



## Why is Further Education and Training Important?

'The most important thing for me is integrating into the community.'

'I am making a better life for my kids. My ultimate goal - I want them to look up to me.'

'English was not my first language. Now my writing skills have improved.'

'In the next few years, my kids are going to be heading to college. I don't want to be left alone not knowing what to do. Now I get a chance to learn and do what I love.'

'I feel I am getting a real chance to re-educate myself. To upskill myself.'

'It gave me a bit of confidence.'

'You can't quantify the value of education by economics - it leads to a happier society.'

## What is working well in Further Education and Training in Ireland?

'There is equality between the teachers and students.'

'My tutor is always ready to listen to me.'

'I had a fear of computers. Now I don't. I am determined to learn more. It is a huge help in life now that everything is online.'

'The classes are small so there is more time for everyone.'

## What could be improved in Further Education and Training?

### DEPARTMENTAL COOPERATION

'Some of the departments need to talk to each. You get different information from each.'

### PROGRESSION

'We want to be able to move on beyond here to a job. We need support to be able to do that.'

### THE FETCHCOURSES.IE WEBSITE

'You could be all day and all night on the Fetch Courses website looking and looking; and unless you know what you're looking for or where to look, it is quite difficult to find.'

### THE PERCEPTION OF YOUTHREACH

'People look down on Youthreach. It seems bad. I don't know where that perception is coming from. In schools there are people who are struggling. Youthreach could help them.'

### LANGUAGE

'Sometimes forms can be hard. I have to ask for help. Sometimes you need explanation.'

### ADVERTISEMENT

'There are so many people out there who are beating themselves up because they did not know about the college sooner. If you don't hear about it by word of mouth, you won't know it's there.'

### CHILDCARE

'When I started my course, my daughter was one. I had to get someone to watch her and wait until she was asleep to start my homework. Childcare would be a huge help for me.'

### TRANSPORT

'We only have one bus that we can take to class. We have to get up at 7 to get to town on time for class.'

## What did learners from Cork say?

'My tutor is great. She is actually down at your own level. She'll instruct you on a personal level, one to one which is absolutely great.'

'I feel healthier since I came back here.'

'It's not like being back at school. We are all adults and we are treated that way.'

## What did learners from Tipperary say?

'It is wonderful. It's the whole package – the environment, the tutor, everything.'

'FET isn't a second chance, it's a first.'

'You can use what you are doing here in other places.'

## What did learners from Galway say?

'This is not like school. We are all treated the same and we are being listened to.'

'Your course makes you feel more a part of the community than you did before.'

'You get away from isolation. You build up the courage to take that first step.'

# A PATH FORWARD

## What next?

The National Further Education and Training Learner Forum will keep growing in the future. The plan is to involve more learners, reach more counties, and record more learner voices than before. In 2018, AONTAS plans to hold a national event on 13 April 2018 and nine regional events across the country with the aim of meeting 650 learners across Ireland.



## Why is this important?

### *Speak Today, Shape Tomorrow*

Learners have an important perspective into how Further Education and Training services work. They know directly what has worked for them and what has not. The information provided by one learner, when combined with the voices of others, can provide valuable research that can ensure Further Education and Training providers are doing all they can to meet the needs of the people they are trying to serve. Participants in the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum, therefore give valuable insight that must be considered. Every participant should walk away from the National Further Education and Training Forum knowing that they made an important contribution to the improvement of Further Education and Training for future learners.



## What you can do?

### Get Involved

- If you have not participated in a National Further Education and Training Learner Forum event, speak to your tutor about participating in the future

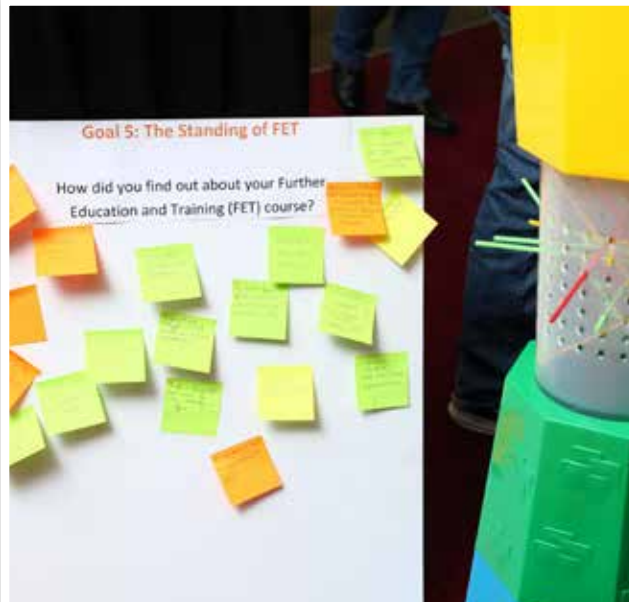
### Promote the Further Education and Training

- Post on social media #learnervoice or tell a fellow learner about the work being done at the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum
- share the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum video

### Share Your Details with AONTAS

- You can receive our Learner Newsletter which contains, updates on events, scholarships and travel opportunities. To receive this newsletter, please email Leah Dowdall, AONTAS Learner Advocacy Officer, at [ldowdall@aontas.com](mailto:ldowdall@aontas.com)





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