



The Voice of
Adult Learning

NATIONAL FET LEARNER FORUM ANNUAL SYNTHESIS REPORT 2019

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ABBREVIATIONS

CDETB	City of Dublin Education and Training Board
CETB	Cork Education and Training Board
CMETB	Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board
DDLETB	Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board
DEASP	Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DETB	Donegal Education and Training Board
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
ETB	Education and Training Board
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
FET	Further Education and Training
GRETB	Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board
HEA	Higher Education Authority
KCETB	Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board
KWETB	Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board
LCETB	Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board
LMETB	Louth and Meath Education and Training Board
LOETB	Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board
LWETB	Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board
MSLETB	Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
TETB	Tipperary Education and Training Board
WWETB	Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board

ORGANISATIONS

AONTAS

AONTAS is the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation, a membership organisation representing adult education educators, providers, learners, and other stakeholders. AONTAS is committed to advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to access quality adult learning opportunities throughout their lives, and promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning. AONTAS supports learners, particularly those most educationally disadvantaged, to engage in lifelong learning, and advocates for more inclusive and accessible national education policy. AONTAS achieves these aims through research, communications and advocacy. Our work is aimed at working towards an inclusive, learner-centred lifelong learning system that enables adults to have a transformative learning experience.

SOLAS

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, 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.

Education and Training Boards

Education and Training Boards (ETBs) are statutory authorities for FET in Ireland, along with other responsibilities, such as youth work and a range of other statutory functions. Education and Training Boards manage and oversee secondary schools, further education learning institutions, multi-faith community national schools and a range of adult and further education centres delivering education and training programmes. Education and Training Boards are active in local communities through the provision of training and education programmes delivered in training centres, colleges and other educational settings. Education and Training Boards aim to reach as many potential learners as possible, and

to make a real difference to the lives of the people that engage in FET. This dedication and care remains at the core of the Education and Training Boards sector, which engages nationally and internationally, while maintaining education at a local and community level.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Learners

We would like to thank all the learners who took part in the National FET Learner Forum in 2019. Each adult learner generously offered their time and shared their voice with the aim to create a more inclusive, improved, and democratic FET sector. Without their contributions, this project would not be possible. For this, we appreciate and thank you for your efforts.

SOLAS and the European Social Fund

The National FET Learner Forum is a partnership project between AONTAS, SOLAS and ETBs across the country. SOLAS, in collaboration with AONTAS, initiated the project as a key action of the 2014–2019 Further Education and Training Strategy and, since 2016, has funded AONTAS to host Learner Forum events and develop reports after events take place. The project is co-funded by the European Social Fund (ESF), as part of the ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014–2020. The ESF is the European Union’s main financial instrument for supporting employment and promoting economic and social cohesion in EU member states. This project could not occur without the support of the Government of Ireland, via SOLAS, and the European Social Fund.

ETB (Education and Training Boards)

The National FET Learner Forum is a collaborative project between AONTAS and Education and Training Boards across Ireland. The Forum could not take place without each Education and Training Board taking the time to recruit

learners to participate. To the Education and Training Boards who hosted events in 2019, we thank you for your continued support of this project and your continued commitment to listening to learners and acting on their recommendations. Each Education and Training Board nominated a Key Contact person(s) who aided in the delivery of each event. Key Contacts play a key role in organising and supporting each event. Thank you for giving your time to help deliver these events and your continued commitment to this project.

The National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group

We would like to thank the National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group. This is a group of stakeholders consisting of two learner representatives, a Director of Further Education and Training 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 Education and Skills (DES). We thank you for your guidance and recommendations to continue the successful expansion of the Forum. You are a vital part of the success of this project.

The National FET Learner Forum Academic Expert Group

We would also like to thank the Academic Expert group. This group is made up of experts in learner voice from Ireland and Europe. Their expertise provides the academic foundation to the project. We would like to extend our gratitude for their support and commitment to this project. Their guidance ensures that this research continues to develop in a rigorous and meaningful way.





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report brings together findings from the 2019 National FET Learner Forum. In 2019, the Forum held 13 regional events and one national event. Each event resulted in the production of a report that was sent to participating Education and Training Boards and SOLAS to help inform ongoing planning. This report synthesizes the findings from these 14 event reports. Regional events were held at the following Education and Training Boards:

- Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board, 25th March 2019
- City of Dublin Education and Training Board, 14th October 2019
- Cork Education and Training Board, 6th March 2019
- Donegal Education and Training Board, 2nd April 2019
- Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board, 26th November 2019
- Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board, 9th October 2019
- Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board, 26th March 2019
- Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board, 21st March 2019
- Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board, 5th March 2019
- Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board, 25th November 2019

- Louth and Meath Education and Training Board, 20th March 2019
- Mayo, Sligo, and Leitrim Education and Training Board, 16th October 2019
- Tipperary Education and Training Board, 12th March 2019

The one-day national event was held in Dublin on 9th April 2019. These events brought together a total of **1001 learners** from **14 Education and Training Boards**. Learners came from **14 different FET programmes** and were enrolled in both full-time and part-time courses (47% from full-time programmes, 35% in part-time programmes, and 18% unknown).

At each of these events, learners responded to two overarching questions:

What was your experience entering Further Education and Training and

How has Further Education and Training met your needs as a learner?

The following table provides a high-level summary of responses to each of these questions. Findings are presented in order of frequency by which these recommendations featured in event reports. The maximum frequency for each recommendation is 14, representing the 14 events that took place over the course of the year. Topics that shared the same frequency are listed in alphabetical order. It should be noted this figure does not represent the number of learners who raised each issue, nor does it reflect the level of importance assigned to the topic by the learners who raised it; rather it is only a reflection of the amount of times the

recommendation was featured.

It is important to note that some of the topics highlighted in this report touch upon experiences or barriers learners faced before entering FET. These topics have been included to remain true to the

voices of learners at the event. While these may be beyond the capacity of individual Education and Training Boards to resolve, they can be used to capture a clearer picture of the challenges learners face in accessing Education and Training Board services.

WHAT WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE ENTERING FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING?		
TOPIC	FREQUENCY	STATEMENT
Advertisement	13	- Learners would like Education and Training Boards to diversify their advertisement and avoid depending on online advertisement
Experience Entering FET	9	- Learners had a positive experience when first entering FET
Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP)	6	- Learners would like Education and Training Boards to work collaboratively with the DEASP to ensure DEASP staff are clear on the available learning pathways and are supportive during the referral process into FET
Course Options	6	- Learners would like more course options available at their local Education and Training Board, particularly those necessary to complete a full major award
Course Information	3	- Learners requested clear and timely information on their courses, such as a course syllabus and timetables
Hidden Costs	3	- Learners would like to be provided with clear information on costs associated with courses before entering FET
Perceived Negative View of FET	2	- Learners would like FET to be promoted among secondary students
Recognition of Prior Learning	2	- Learners would like Recognition of Prior Learning processes to be expanded across all Education and Training Boards

HOW HAS FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING MET YOUR NEEDS AS A LEARNER?		
TOPIC	FREQUENCY	STATEMENT
Guidance	14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners who had accessed guidance services found them helpful and supportive – Learners would like better promotion of guidance services across all FET centres
Wider Benefits of FET	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Engaging with FET had wider benefits for learners, such as feeling more confident, building greater social networks, and improving overall wellbeing
FET Tutors	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners feel Education and Training Board staff and tutors promote an atmosphere of mutual respect, openness, and equality
Progression	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like clear and timely information on progression options available to help them in their future planning
Technology Skills	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like increased opportunities and support to improve their technology skills
FET Facilities	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like Education and Training Board facilities to be comfortable, functional, and accessible – Learners would like Education and Training Boards to provide up-to-date technology equipment and for all centres to have open WiFi access
Transport	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like transport grants to reflect the real cost of travel
Childcare	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like access to on-site childcare
Work Placements	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like support in finding relevant work placements
Assignments	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like timely information on deadlines and assignments – Learners would like courses and tutors to collaborate to ensure deadlines and assignments for various classes do not overlap
English Language Support	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like increased support with English language skills
Peer Learning	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners value the space for peer learning that is fostered in their FET courses

Resources for Learners with Learning Disabilities	2	– Learners with learning difficulties would like more access to assistive resources, software, and learning materials
Attendance	1	– Learners would like a more flexible approach to attendance that does not result in cuts to social welfare payments due to unforeseen absences beyond their control
National Framework of Qualifications	1	– Learners would like more information on the National Framework of Qualifications



INTRODUCTION

The National FET Learner Forum is a large-scale learner voice project that brings together learners from across the country to share their experiences in FET. The project is funded by SOLAS, the National FET authority, and was devised in line with the commitment of the SOLAS FET strategy. AONTAS has delivered this project since its inception in 2016. The first iteration of the FET Learner Forum brought 70 learners together at a one-day national event. As demonstrated in Figure 1 below, each year the Forum has seen significant growth, thanks to the inclusion of a series of regional events alongside an annual national event. The FET Learner Forum now captures the voices of over 1000 learners each year.

This growth is supported and guided by an Advisory Group and an Academic Expert Group. Each group commits to meeting four times a year and offers key advice on how the project should evolve. The members of each group are relevant stakeholders and experts in adult learning and learner voice. A complete list of the members of each group can be found in Appendices three and four, featured at the end of this report.

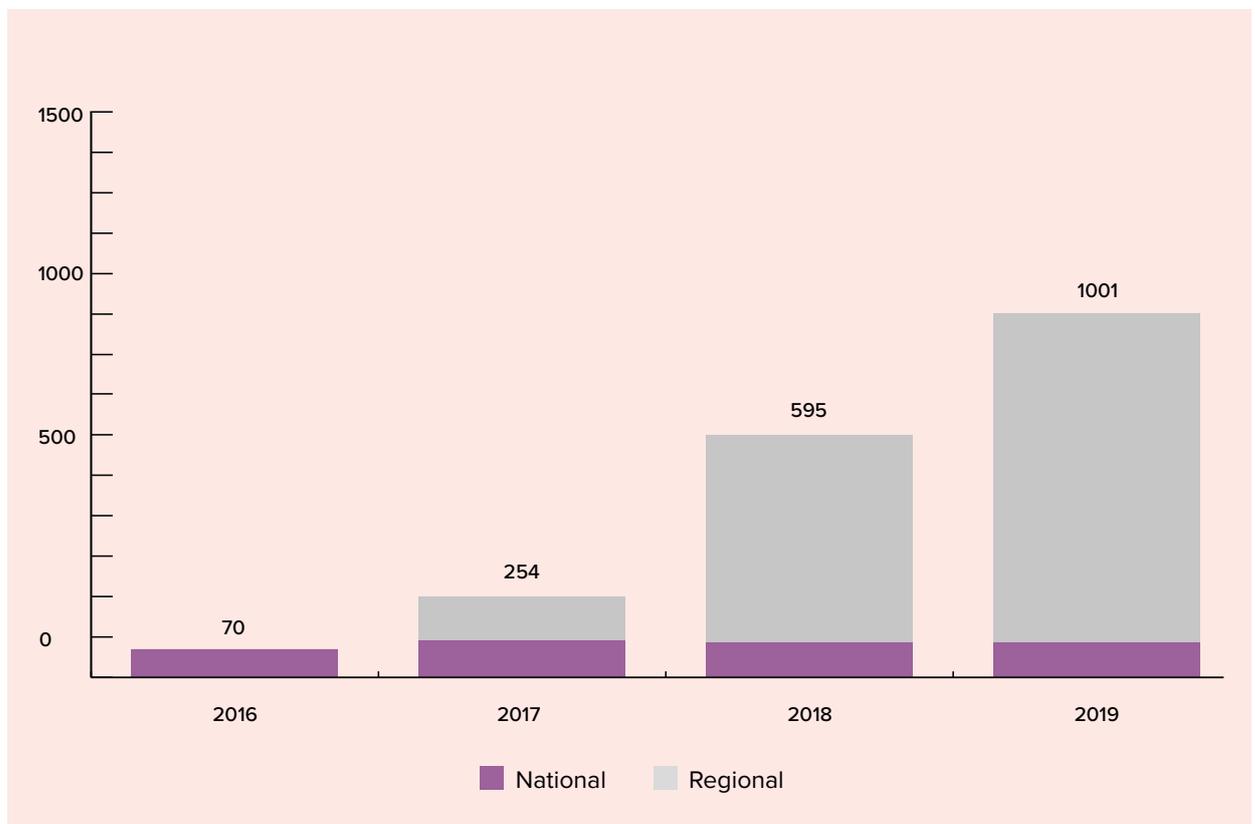


Figure 1 - National FET Learner Forum Participation

Report Contents and Structure

This report is made up of four key sections. They are as follows:

- Introduction
- Methodology
- Detailed Results
 - Discussion Findings
 - Survey Results
- Conclusion

In addition to this core report, the appendix features complete reporting on all participant and survey data. These include:

- Appendix 1 – Learner Totals by Education and Training Boards
- Appendix 2 – Learner Totals by Quarter
- Appendix 3 – Members of the Advisory Group
- Appendix 4 – Members of the Academic Expert Group
- Appendix 5 – Introduction Sheet
- Appendix 6 – Learner Information Sheet
- Appendix 7 – Survey
- Appendix 8 – Survey Results
- Appendix 9 – Voluntary Information Results
- Appendix 10 – Evaluation Form
- Appendix 11 – Evaluation Form Results
- Appendix 12 – Communications and Promotion Reporting
- Appendix 13 – Learner Reactions to the Event



A YEAR IN NUMBERS



1001

Learners



470

Full-Time Learners



355

Part-Time Learners



107

Hours of Discussions



13

Regional Reports



902

Evaluations Analysed



957

Surveys Analysed



4

Advisory
Group Meetings



4

Academic Expert
Group Meetings



14

Forum Events Held

METHODOLOGY

The overall aim of the National FET Learner Forum is to provide a safe and inclusive space in which each learner can share their experiences freely. All group discussions are administered by trained facilitators and all learners are given the opportunity to share their thoughts through group discussions, one-to-one conversations with facilitators, and a learner survey. To ensure these events are delivered effectively, each stage of the project can be broken down into three key phases.



Phase 1: Planning

AONTAS and Education and Training Boards work collaboratively to plan and execute each FET Learner Forum event. To begin this process, AONTAS contacts an Education and Training Board and invites them to co-host a regional event. After a suitable date and location is selected, each partner then promotes the event to all learners currently engaged in a FET course at the participating Education and Training Board. A breakdown of learners by each Education and Training Board is presented in Figure 2.

The project aims to include a diverse cohort of learners, to ensure that a wide range of views are documented and that a multitude of learner experiences are considered in future policy planning. To ensure this diversity is represented, each Education and Training Board is asked to provide AONTAS with an aggregated list of learner totals based on programme.

Figure 3, featured on the following page, shows the total learners by FET programme. Figure 4, which features on page 20, shows the breakdown of learners by full-time and part-time programmes.

In the survey learners also voluntarily provided additional information on their personal background including age, gender, highest academic level, whether they were a member of an underrepresented group, their employment status and whether or not they had been asked to share their views on FET previously. Figures 5.1 to 5.6 (pages 20-1) show the responses to these questions.



Figure 2 - Learner Participation in the National FET Learner Forum by Education and Training Boards

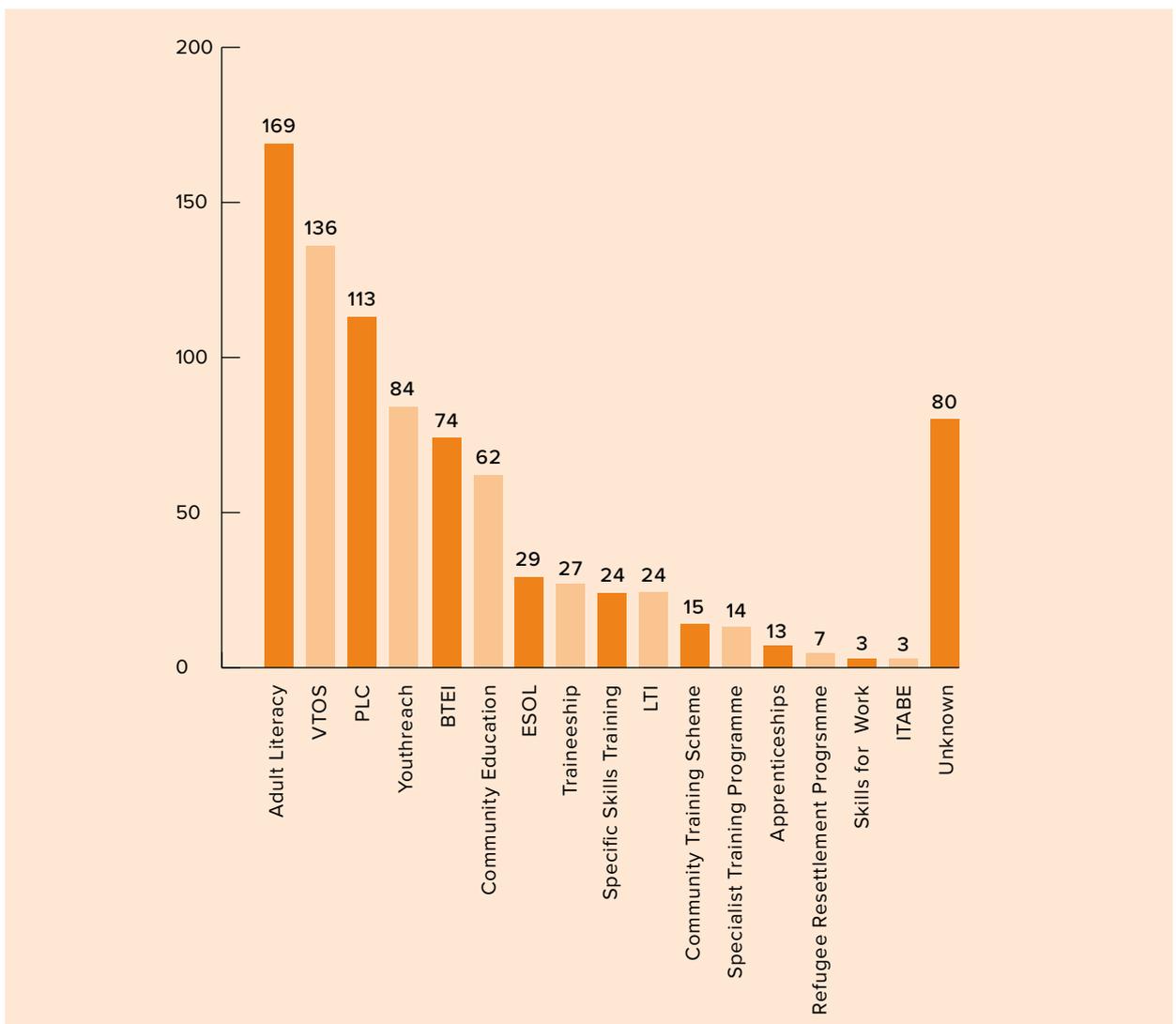


Figure 3 – Learner Participation in the National FET Learner Forum by Programme

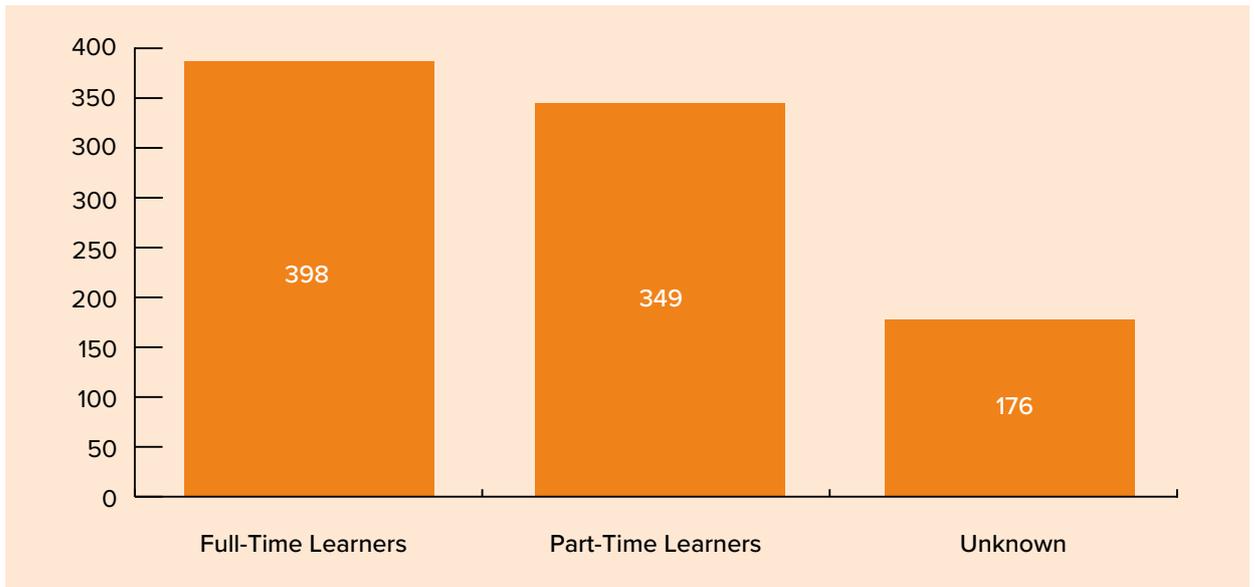


Figure 4 – Learner Participation in the National FET Learner Forum by Full-Time and Part-Time Programme Participation

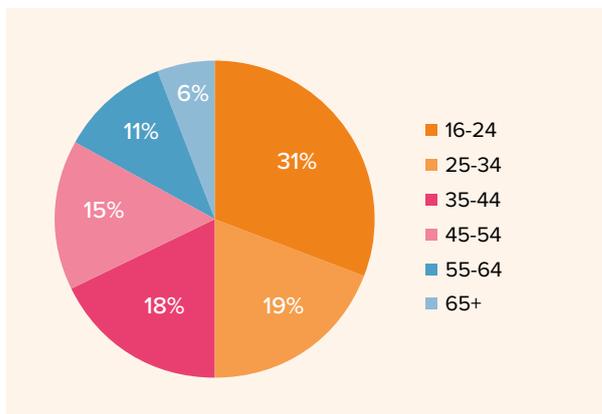


Figure 5.1 – Learner participation by age

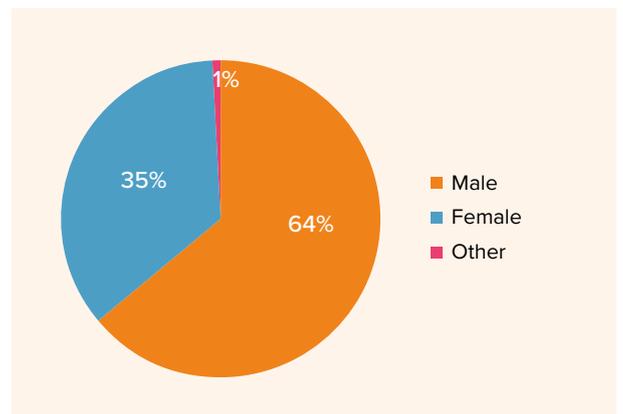


Figure 5.2 – Learner participation by gender

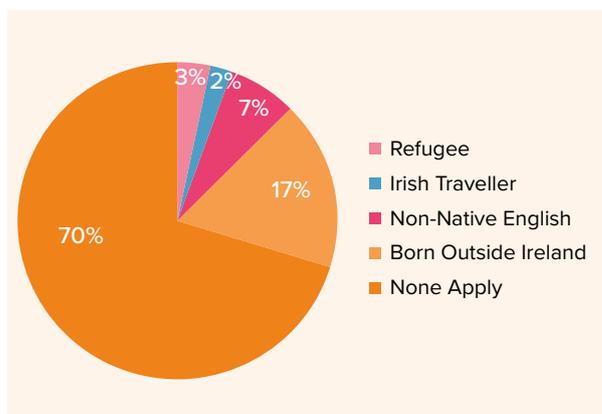


Figure 5.3 – Learner participation by underrepresented group

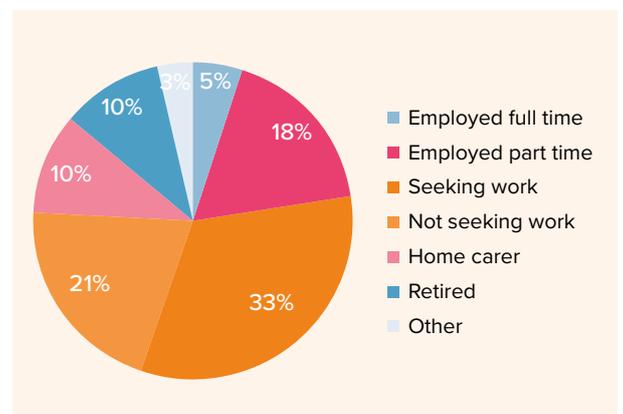


Figure 5.4 – Learner participation by employment status

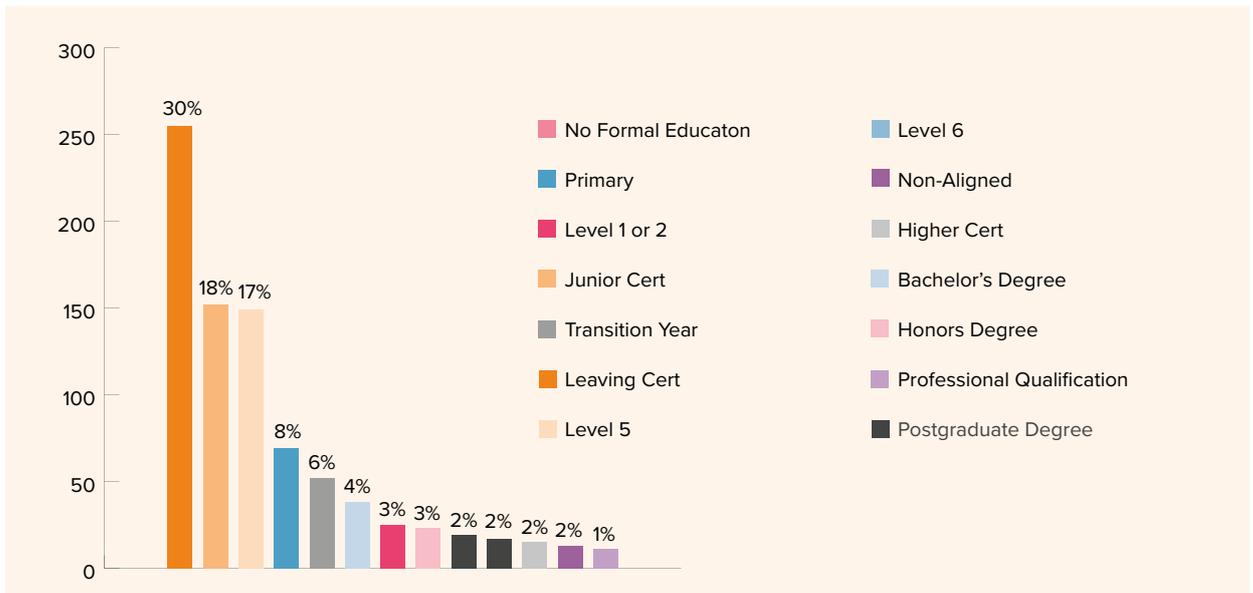


Figure 5.5 – Learner participation by employment status

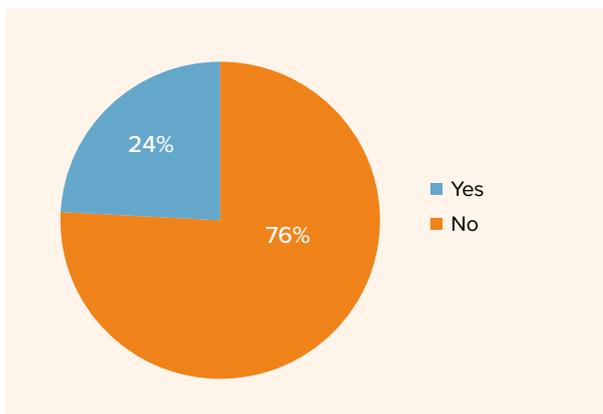


Figure 5.6 – Responses to the question “Have you been asked your opinion on your FET course before?”

Meath Education and Training Board; Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board; Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board; Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board; Donegal Education and Training Board; City of Dublin Education and Training Board; Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board; Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board; Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board; and Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board. These events ranged in size from 49 to 103 learners and reached a total of 923 learners over the course of the year. A complete breakdown of the size and dates of each event can be found in Appendix 1.

Each invited learner received a preparation pack detailing what to expect at the event before participating (Appendix 8). Upon arrival, learners were asked to give consent to participate in learner discussions, which are audio recorded for later transcription. Additional optional consent for photography was also taken. Learners were then assigned a number at random to identify their discussion group. A representative from the Education and

Phase 2: Execution

Events took two forms: regional and national events. Each had a slightly different structure and execution process. As such, each is described separately in the sections that follow.

2019 Regional Events

AONTAS administered 13 regional events in 2019 with the following Education and Training Boards: Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board; Cork Education and Training Board; Tipperary Education and Training Board; Louth and

Training Board welcomed learners and introduced AONTAS, who then provided context for the day by giving a short presentation to introduce the National FET Learner Forum and explain the role learner voice plays in FET policy at the national and regional level. Learners were then divided into groups, with an average of ten learners per group. Each group is assigned a trained facilitator who posed the following 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?

Facilitated discussions lasted one hour. At the conclusion of these discussions, learners were allocated an additional ten minutes to respond to a brief survey collaboratively designed by SOLAS and AONTAS. This survey (Appendix 7) and its results (Appendix 8) are included in the appendices featured at the end of this report.

2019 National Events

The national event was held on 9th April 2019 at Croke Park, Dublin. This event brought together 78 learners from 14 different Education and Training Boards from across the country, along with another 50 invited guests that included FET staff and key stakeholders. Similar to the regional events, invited learners received a preparation pack outlining what to expect on the day.

Prior to the event, learners were assigned two different groups for each of the two one-hour discussions. Learners also heard from a number of speakers and performers, including a panel discussion on learner voice. The event featured SOLAS CEO, Andrew Brownlee; Tipperary Education and Training Board Director

of FET, Eileen Condon; Cork FET learner, Michael Cross; Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Learner, Conor Eustace; Irish Business and Employers Confederation (Ibec) Senior Education and Innovation Policy Executive, Claire McGee; Minister for Education and Skills, Joe McHugh Teachta Dàla; Director of Strategy, Research and Evaluation SOLAS, Alan McGrath; and adult learner and keynote speaker, Kevin Hanley. Parallel to learner discussions, one policy discussion also took place between Academic Expert Group members and policy makers from SOLAS, the Department of Education and Skills (DES), the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI).

You can view a video highlighting the day's event [here](#).

Phase 3: Reporting

Reports are constructed by transcribing and analysing each learner discussion. Over the course of this project 107 hours of learner discussions were captured. You can find a complete breakdown of these discussions in Figure 5 featured on the following page.

Findings from each discussion are used to identify key topics raised by learners at each event. These key topics form the body of the report, while quotations from learners are used provide the detailed findings for each identified topic.

At each event, learners were also given a short survey. This survey can be found in Appendix 7. The data tables for each corresponding survey question can also be found in Appendix 8. Due to the limited ability of each learner to participate in the surveys, these findings are presented separately. At the Dublin and Dun Laoghaire regional event, additional surveys were provided to learners to complete who could not attend the event.

Research limitations

The National FET Learner Forum is designed to allow learners who are actively engaged in FET courses to have the opportunity to share their views on how their experience in FET could be improved. With 1001 learners participating over the year, the participant population is large and aims to engage a broad demographic of learners in FET. To

participate in the Forum, learners had to be actively enrolled on a SOLAS funded course. While learners were asked to reflect on barriers they faced in accessing their course, it should be noted that by nature of being actively engaged, these learners would have seemingly found a way to overcome these challenges.

Event	Total Hours of Group Discussion Captured
Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board	7
City of Dublin Education and Training Board	8
Cork Education and Training Board	7
Donegal Education and Training Board	8
Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board	8
Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board	10
Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board	6
Laois and Offlay Education and Training Board	6
Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board	7
Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board	7
Louth and Meath Education and Training Board	7
Mayo, Sligo, Leitrim Education and Training Board	6
National Event	15
Tipperary Education and Training Board	5
Total	107

Figure 5 – Hours of Recorded Discussion by Event

DETAILED RESULTS

Discussion Findings

The following discussion findings are presented by under subheadings for each of the two overarching questions posed at Forum event. Under each subheading topics are presented in the order in which they appear on the key findings table. The total frequency for each topic is recorded in parenthesis next to the bolded topic as it is introduced. The information that follows is taken directly from the transcribed learner discussions that took place at each event. For all recommendations that featured in previous years, a parenthetical reference to the previous years' reports is provided at the end of the sentence first introducing the topic.

What was your experience entering Further Education and Training?

FET **advertisement (13)** again, featured as a key issue for FET learners (AONTAS, 2018, 2017, 2016). Many learners reported first hearing about their course through word-of-mouth referrals. While this method speaks to the positive experience of learners in FET, it potentially limits the reach of information about FET options of learning. Some learners reported hearing about their FET course through other sources, such as online, through referrals from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection Services (DEASP), and in print advertisement; yet many learners felt there was still not enough diversity in the forms of advertisement used by Education and Training Boards. Learners raised concerns about an over-dependence on word-of-mouth referrals, with one learner explaining, "I found out about my course

through one of the lads who did it the previous year. I'd have never known about it. I think it wasn't advertised very well." Other learners felt that FET was well advertised online, but cautioned against an over-reliance on online advertisement. As one learner explained:

"The [adverts] used to be in the local newspaper, they're not in the local newspaper anymore. I wasn't on the internet all the time before, not everyone would be on the websites."

Learners recommended that Education and Training Boards increase and diversify forms of local and print advertisement to engage potential learners who may not find out about courses online or through word of mouth.

The majority of learners stated they had a positive **experience entering FET (9)**. The admissions process was seen as accessible and learners felt welcomed throughout. As one learner explained, "when you first go through those doors, you're so welcomed. The minute I walked in, I felt I was wanted there." Education and Training Board staff were credited with creating this welcoming atmosphere, and it was felt staff had a vested interest in helping learners access the right course for them. As one learner explained:

“The course coordinators are excellent. When you go in to find out information they really explain the situation to you and they check with you to see if the course is what you want to do.”

Another learner echoed this, stating, “when I went in there, they were friendly. They took their time to talk to you and find out what you wanted to do and where you wanted to go. They’re supportive all the time.” This positive initial experience in FET made learners feel prepared and excited to begin their course.

Learners who accessed their courses via referral through the **Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) (6)**, similar to previous years, had mixed experiences with this process (AONTAS, 2018; 2017). Some found the process and DEASP staff supportive and encouraging when providing information on available courses, with one learner stating, “I spoke to someone in the social welfare and they were so good, they gave me all the options. I never thought I could do it before that.” Other learners felt that the required delay in accessing a course while receiving Jobseeker’s Allowance was potentially discouraging. As one learner explained:

“I seem to have been hit back by social welfare. They said, ‘you can’t go on this, you can’t go on that.’ You’ve to be so many months unemployed before you’re entitled to go on a course, which I think is very discouraging. It’s very maddening really.”

Learners reported that they were concerned about a potential change or decrease in their social welfare entitlement as a result of taking a course. One learner explained that s/he “had to sign on to the social welfare before you went on the course, but then you didn’t know how much you were going to get.” Learners also felt that the DEASP was primarily focused on placing potential learners in employment, rather than encouraging them to engage with FET. Learners would like local DEASP and Intreo staff to work collaboratively with Education and Training Boards to ensure staff are informed of the education options available to potential learners, understand the value of adult education, and provide clarity on the requirements and benefit entitlements for learners engaged on a FET course.

While most learners were able to access the course they were wanted, others spoke of the need for increased **course options (6)** at their local Education and Training Board (AONTAS, 2017; 2016). Some learners were not able to get onto their preferred course due to a limited number of spaces. As one learner explained, “I’m really interested in photography, but when I got there all those classes were full.” In cases such as these, learners would like popular courses to have additional times added once they have reached capacity, if a demand for the course remains. Other learners reported a lack of higher-level courses available to learners at a local level. This meant that learners were not able to get the courses they needed to complete their major awards in their local Education and Training Board. As one learner explained:

“I know some of the other students in the college did not have modules run or experienced difficulty getting into the modules they need in order to get a major award. You have to have a major award to work in some areas. That is something that needs to be looked at. If you are going in for the major award, you should have the courses there.”

Another learner echoed this statement, stating: “If there were a criticism I’d have, it’s that the amount available to you at a local level is quite limited.” Learners were positive about their experiences in FET and for this reason wanted further opportunities to engage with a diverse range of courses in their local community.

While most learners had a positive and welcoming experience entering FET, some learners felt they did not receive comprehensive **course information (3)** at the beginning of their course (AONTAS, 2017; 2016). These learners reported that their course syllabus, schedule, or learning objectives were not made available to them or were not provided in a timely manner. As a result, learners felt unprepared for their courses, with one learner stating, “I had no idea what I was going into. I was going to a course, as far as I was concerned, on the basics. I went in completely blind.” Another learner remarked, “I feel you’re just kind of put on certain courses. We’re not given the information. What is actually involved in that course? You don’t realise that there is so much work.” To address this issue, learners would like to receive clear and accurate information from their Education and Training Board before they begin their course.

Other learners spoke about what they described as **hidden costs (3)** of taking their FET course as being a barrier (AONTAS, 2018). These costs were those associated with their course for materials or extra external qualifications such as First Aid or Garda Vetting. Not knowing these costs at the onset of their course resulted in unforeseen financial burdens for learners, with one learner stating, “we had three extra classes that we had to take, one of them was €85, one was €35 and these are all extra costs in the middle of the course.” Another learner echoed this sentiment, stating:

“It [the syllabus the learner received] had information down on kits and funding and exams, but when it came down to it we’re not supplied with a kit. It could be €300, we have to go buy everything. There’s a lot of stuff that we have to buy. You’d be talking hundreds.”

Learners would like clear, timely, and finalised information before they engage with FET, including any extra costs they may encounter during the course, so they can make an informed decision when considering taking a course and can prepare for any upcoming expenses.

Some learners raised concerns about the **perceived negative view of FET (2)** and felt that this may deter potential learners from taking a course. Learners felt this perceived negative view was particularly prevalent for learners in secondary schools, preventing them from considering FET as a potential progression option, with one learner explaining, “when I was in secondary school, we had people from the army come in and talk about it, but we never had any learners come in to tell you

this [FET] is actually an option.” Another learner who had progressed directly from secondary school to FET spoke about how this perceived negative view of FET made them reticent to engage with the course on to which they were accepted. Learners believed that FET was a valuable and transformative educational option, and suggested that secondary school would be a good place to promote to value of FET. This would increase access for learners in secondary education and challenge negative stereotypes associated with FET.

When asked about the **Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) (2)**, learners expressed interest in seeing these processes expanded (AONTAS, 2018; 2017). A lack of awareness and inconsistency in RPL processes in FET has been highlighted in other sources as well such as QQI and ETBI’s, ‘Recognition of Prior Learning in Irish Further Education and Training (FET) (2017). Some learners were satisfied with the informal process by which their prior experience was applied, with one learner stating, “When I went in, they did ask me about my prior learning and experience. They recommended me to do Level 4 and I was happy with that.” However, other learners would prefer a more formal RPL process be introduced. One learner explained, “I was directed to a course based on my length of time out of school. Now I’m loving it but it is a bit too easy.” S/he further elaborated that the RPL process should be “more assessment based.” Another learner echoed this, stating, “I think I could have gone in at a higher level, maybe 5 or 6.” Learners recommended that formal RPL processes be expanded across the FET sector to ensure they are placed in a course and at a level that best suits their needs and abilities.

How has Further Education and Training met your needs as a learner?

For learners who had accessed **guidance (14)** services while on their course, the experience was positive (AONTAS, 2018; 2017; 2016). Those who had done so praised the guidance services and guidance staff as patient, supportive and knowledgeable. One learner remarked:

“You come in with a list of questions and they don’t even need to turn on their computers to have all the answers. All the grants and everything. They know their stuff.”

Learners who accessed guidance services seeking support in progressing onto employment or another course found the services very helpful, with one learner explaining, “I wasn’t sure and now I’m sure, now I know what I want and I know where I want to go. It’s actually given me to confidence to move on.” Guidance was seen as a valuable part of learners’ educational experience.

There were, however, mixed reactions to guidance availability among learners overall. Some learners had not yet needed to access guidance services, but had been made aware of the available supports. As one learner explained, “[the guidance counsellor has] made herself known to us and obviously the door is open if we want to talk to her.” For others learners, while they may have received informal guidance from tutors or other Education and Training Board staff, they were unaware of any official guidance services available to them in their centres. Others did not know how to access guidance services or did not know they were available in their centre.

As one learner explained, “I think you have to book, she only comes every two weeks. No one knows about it.” These learners were enthusiastic about the prospect of accessing guidance and felt they could benefit greatly from this service. Learners thought the service would be helpful for both learners who are taking a course for the first time, and for learners looking to progress to another course or into employment. One learner remarked, “That would have been a help actually, if you could go in and chat to somebody who would ask you what you wanted and what you did - to help you choose a course. That would be a good idea.” Another learner explained:

“It would be nice to see a guidance counsellor to see how far you’re coming along and where you’re going. When you have so many courses done, where do you go from there? I think that [guidance] is needed.”

As guidance was such a positive aspect of the FET experience for many, learners would like comprehensive information on how to access these services. They would also like to see access to guidance services made available to all learners, by expanding guidance services across centres and Education and Training Boards.

The majority of learners spoke very positively about the **wider benefits of FET (13)** (AONTAS, 2017; 2016). Many felt that engaging with FET had increased their confidence levels and given them a renewed sense of belief in their own abilities. As one learner explained, “I feel not just more confident, but capable of doing proper life things. It’s like a reminder that ‘yes, you are capable of doing this’.”

This was particularly important to learners who had a negative experience with their previous education. These learners found that taking their course had transformed their views on learning and education, with one learner explaining:

“For me it was healing the relationship with learning, because school can be very traumatic for people because you’re getting force fed stuff that you don’t want to learn. It’s very empowering to go back and learn something that you’re actually interested in and you want to pursue. So it changes your relationship with education.”

The expansion of social networks and creating a sense of community was another wider benefit of FET mentioned by learners. This facet of FET features prominently in SOLAS’ ‘Future FET: Transforming Learning the National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy’, which recognised supporting social cohesion as one of the main aims of the FET sector (SOLAS, 2020). Socialising and making friends through taking a course combatted social isolation and improved learners’ mental health. As one learner stated:

“Mental health is a big thing. I notice in the course that there’s a lot of people that are isolated and disconnected from community, particularly in winter. So I think it’s really beneficial to your mental health to be in an environment with people like that with people

every day, and the friendships that are built. We're all great friends in our course, really like a little family."

Increased self-confidence and social skills also led to transversal skills that learners could apply to their everyday lives. These included improved communication skills, team-working skills, and increased cultural awareness. As one learner explained, "I learned a lot by communicating with different people from different backgrounds and cultures." Another learner echoed this sentiment, stating, "I think it opens you up to so many people from different walks of life and I think it opens your mind to a whole load of new things, new experiences." Learners gained unexpected positive experiences through engaging with a FET course, and could see how these experiences were having a positive impact on their lives.

Similar to previous years, **tutors (11)** once again were praised for their role in creating a positive atmosphere in FET (AONTAS, 2018; 2017). Learners described tutors as "supportive", "patient" and "just wonderful". Learners particularly appreciated how tutors provided individualised support for learners. These experiences mirror findings of the, 'Making A Difference' A Student View of Excellent Teaching' report by the National Forum for Teaching and Learning, in which learners credited the personalised approach of tutors as a key factor in their success in higher education as well (HEA, 2019). As one learner explained:

"The tutors are very good. I'm not just saying that – they are very supportive. You can go to them and say 'I'm having a bit of a struggle with this' and they'll say 'right. No problem at all. We'll go through it again."

This sentiment was echoed by many learners, with another stating:

"If you have difficulty you just go to them and there's no rush with you, they just take in what you say and they just try to resolve it. It is good like."

For many learners, support from their tutors went further than the classroom and course content. Tutors were praised for going above and beyond their duties to help learners. As one learner explained, "If you're having a problem with anything, even something not directly related to the course, they will do their best to help you." Other examples given included tutors providing extra support on assignments outside of class hours and providing guidance to learners looking to progress onto other courses. Many received support not only from the tutors working on the courses that learners were enrolled on, but from other tutors in their centres as well. As one learner explained: "Even the teachers who do not teach us in our centre are so helpful. They are so supportive. They are all really good." Learners appreciated the feeling of mutual respect fostered between tutors and learners. As one learner explained, "I like the relationship between the teacher and the pupil. They don't think they're any better than us, we're all on the same level."

Learners credited this relationship with the open and approachable nature of the tutor-learner relationship. As one learner explained, “I just feel like we are on the same level and we’re treated like adults, I feel very comfortable asking for questions and help.”

Progression (11) also featured widely in discussions (AONTAS, 2017; 2016). There were, however, mixed reactions this topic from learners. Many learners reported that they were aware of the progression options available to them and felt their course had prepared them to progress onto another FET course, a higher education course, or into employment. Some of these learners had clear directions in mind, and reported that taking their course had broadened their horizons and led them to consider progression options they never would have considered previously. As one learner explained, “I never saw myself going back to third level, but now after doing this, I’m looking at going back next year.” Another learner echoed this statement, explaining, “I’ve already thought of a couple more things I can do from the course, so it really broadens your horizons.” These learners appreciated the support they had gotten from tutors, guidance services and other Education and Training Board staff in exploring their progression options.

Throughout the discussions, some learners expressed an interest in progressing after their course, but cited a number of barriers they felt stood in their way. Some learners had not been supplied with information on progression, so were not aware how to proceed after their course. As one learner shared, “I’m not fully informed about my options and I don’t think I would be supported to progress, maybe in my second year that might change.” Another learner echoed this statement, and suggested that guidance services be tasked with supporting learners to progress, stating:

“I feel coming up to the end of this course, I have a Level 5. What do I do next? Nobody has given me really any guidance as to my progression route and I’m an older student so I feel I’ve put a lot of money into something and I don’t know what I’m going to get out of it.”

Some learners wanted to progress into higher education, but felt unclear about how to do so or unable to do so because of a lack of supports. There were a number of reasons given for this. Some learners expressed concerns about available funding and eligibility for grants should they progress on to higher education, with one learner suggesting:

“Make it clear about what you’re entitled to because some people are talking about grants and some people are talking about back to education allowance, and you don’t know which to apply for and which is which.”

The Department of Education and Skills has highlighted additional funding and flexible supports for FET learners wishing to progress on to higher education as a consideration in their ‘Transitions Reform Working Paper’ (2020), suggesting plans to help address these concerns are already underway.

There were also learners who simply could not progress due to a lack of progression options in their local area, or because they had commitments such as child or home caring responsibilities that prevented them from progressing. As one learner

explained, “there’s guidance. They’ll tell you about what course you can do next, but that’s no good to me because it’s in [the city] and it’s not feasible for me to drive up and down to [the city] every day.”

Learners recommended that learners be equipped with the information they needed to progress and expanding guidance services to include comprehensive information on progression, particularly information on funding and grants available to learners. As one learner explained, “I think the Education and Training Board [should] link the courses up. They need to think about the following level to see about the higher level. There is no continuity of the courses.” Learners would also welcome Education and Training Boards working collaboratively with local higher-level institutions to provide clear pathways for learners wishing to progress on to higher education.

Learners had mixed opinions on their technology skills and the **technology support (9)** they received through FET (AONTAS, 2018). For many learners, taking a FET course had improved their technology skills. As one learner stated, “It’s been fantastic for me. I never had a laptop or anything like that so now I’ve got a laptop and I can do almost anything on it” Another learner also shared a similar feeling, stating, “my IT skills and my computer skills were okay, but they weren’t brilliant. They’ve drastically improved since I’ve started the course.” Learners were glad of this improvement as it had a wider positive effect on their lives. For example, learners were able to better communicate with their family members over the internet, with one learner explaining,

“I have family members abroad and wanted to communicate with them. Now that I am confident with email and WhatsApp, it is giving me hope and confidence. It used to cost me hundreds on post. It has given me an opening.”

While learners welcomed opportunities to improve their technology skills, some learners felt they needed increased technology support in order to fully engage with their learning right from the start. In some cases, learners stated that they were not made aware of the technology skills that would be needed for their courses. This was seen as easily rectifiable, with one learner explaining:

“One of the biggest things is, before you go on any of these courses, you really need to have computer skills and it just doesn’t exist for everybody. You should be asked if you have the computer skills before you go on the course.”

Other learners raised concerns about the frequency and quality of the IT support they received, with one learner stating, “We just had an hour [at the beginning of the course] for computers, that’s not going to teach anyone enough [about computers/IT].” Other learners felt that their time dedicated to IT support was not being used for its proper purpose. As one learner described: “We’ve a computer class on a Friday morning and we don’t do anything in it, it’s being used to do assignments. We’re not learning.” Learners

would like to be made aware of the IT skills required for taking their course at the beginning of the year and would welcome regular and comprehensive IT support throughout their course.

In discussions, some learners raised concerns about **FET facilities (7)** (AONTAS, 2018; 2016). Similar concerns were raised by learners in the NALA Student Development Fund Annual Report, in which students from three centres reported that their centres needed updating (NALA, 2020, p.13). A lack of IT resources was highlighted for some learners, who reported that there were not enough computers in their centres. As one learner remarked:

“I think they expect you to have your computer and printer at home as well. There is no study room with spare computers and printers unless you’re willing to stay there after hours in the evening. There is one tiny [room], I think it’s got seven computers in it, for the whole college to use. I actually had to go out and buy a laptop. If I didn’t, I probably wouldn’t be able to actually get my work done. In the college, the computers aren’t accessible for you to do that work on. There’s not enough of them.”

Other learners had access to computers but felt that they needed updating, with one learner explaining, “our computers are just slow and they’re prone to break. That gets in the way of doing computer-related work.” Other IT related problems reported by learners included access to WiFi and

printing services. Some centres did not have reliable WiFi access or had WiFi that was not compatible with learners’ devices. This detail is notable given the recent finding of the National Forum for Teaching and Learning’s, ‘Irish National Digital Experience (INDEX) Survey’, which found that one in five learners enrolled in Irish higher education institutions did not have access to reliable WiFi (HEA, 2020, p.49). As one learner explained, “we have no WiFi access so even if you have a laptop, you can’t do research.” Another learner expanded on the impact of this challenge by explaining: “if you brought in your own laptop you can’t access the internet or even the printer.” For some learners, a lack of printing facilities available in their centre paired with the need to print materials for class resulted in unforeseen costs, with one learner explaining, “we have no printing facilities. I just bought ink there last week; 70 euro it cost me.” Learners would like increased numbers of up to date IT and printing resources available in their centres and for WiFi services to be available and compatible with learners’ devices across all FET centres.

In some cases, limited access to free parking facilities posed a challenge. Learners who drove to their courses could not always avail of free student parking. In some cases, parking was also limited, which resulted in learners paying for ‘pay and display’ public parking. As one learner explained, “there is no student parking here. There is a car park over there, but you have to pay for it and it would cost you a fair bit. The staff parking does take up a fair bit of space.” They recommended on-site learner parking to be made available free of charge.

While most learners were satisfied with the facilities at their centres, some learners cited issues with heating, natural lighting and a lack of non-classroom space for learners. As one learner explained, “The

building itself, because it's a warehouse, you can see your breath in it; it's cold. We need to find a new place that will give us rent at a reasonable rate which is ridiculous, instead of just throwing in heaters." Another learner remarked, "My centre is in a very inconvenient location, it's in the back of a business park. You are kind of stuck inside seven hours a day with no real way to get outside unless you want to smoke, which I picked up just to see the sun." Creating a comfortable and appropriate learning space would have a positive effect on learners' experience and well-being.

Transport (6) was also highlighted as a barrier to accessing a FET course (AONTAS, 2018; 2016). This was broken down into two issues: the cost of transport and access to transport. Learners described transport costs as "prohibitive", and maintained that travel grants did not cover the real cost of travel, with one learner explaining, "I get €17.50 travel allowance per week. I wish I got more in travel expenses, that's all. It's €50 in and out every week." Other learners required a travel grant but were not eligible for one, due to their course being part time. As one learner explained:

"There are learners coming (from a nearby town) and I think it's lousy, they have to pay themselves to get in here every day. For these learners, it costs them €40 to come to their course every week. It's part time so they don't get travel allowances."

Other learners gave examples of not being eligible for grants for travel if their centre is close to their home, but their work placement requires them to travel a longer distance. Learners would like travel

grants to be reviewed with the true cost of travel in mind and for travel schemes to be expanded to include part-time learners and learners on work placement.

For learners in rural areas, concerns were raised about the frequency and reliability of public transport. Those relying on public transport found it to be lacking and unreliable, with one learner explaining, "I think transport is a big problem. It's a one-year course and I'm 10 kilometres away in another town. If you don't drive, there's no way of getting there." Another learner echoed this statement, asserting:

"If you're rural, you're very restricted by transport. If you don't drive, some places there's no transport and it's not provided. More transport needs to be provided for rural areas mainly."

An example of good practice by an Education and Training Board was given in one Forum discussion, where the Education and Training Board provided a "local link" bus to bring learners to their centre at set times. This was shared as a possible solution to learners relying on public transport in remote areas.

For learners with younger children, the provision and cost of **childcare (5)** was a barrier (AONTAS, 2017; 2016). Learners who had access to free or affordable childcare on-site at their FET centre praised this service, with one learner describing it as a "lifesaver." However, this support was not universal, with one learner explaining, "there is a local crèche, but they only do babies to six, so if your kids are older, you know, there's nothing there for you." Other learners had recently lost on-site childcare and expressed frustration at the alternative childcare options. They explained that even if learners are eligible

for grants, the availability of childcare was still not ensured, asserting:

“There is Pobal funding for some crèches, but it’s for the whole area so you may not get your children into them. And then your class starts at 9:30 and you’re not funded until 9:25 so you have five minutes to drop them off and get to your course and you’re not allowed to be late.”

Learners who did not have access to childcare spoke of juggling their caring responsibilities with their education and how this balancing act was affecting their ability to progress, with one learner and mother explaining:

“I have to fit it into primary school finishing time. I’m doing Level 4 and the next level seems to be full time. I feel I could do more but like three of my kids have additional needs so I can’t have childcare as such but I could fit in more in school times. I’d like to go on to the next level but I can’t commit to the extra hours after primary school finishes.”

Learners maintained that providing flexible and affordable on-site childcare would be the ideal solution, and would combat one of the main barriers for women wishing to return to education. More broadly, learners would welcome assurance that childcare places for grant recipients will be available

in their locality. Where possible, learners would like class times and schedules to consider the childcare responsibilities of learners.

Learners had mixed experiences finding and completing **work placements (5)** (AONTAS, 2018; 2017). While many learners found their work placement very beneficial, with one learner remarking that s/he had “been offered a job through my work experience”, many expressed frustration at the difficulty in finding a suitable placement. This meant that learners would reluctantly accept placements that were not beneficial to their educational aims, with one learner explaining:

“The mentality is now we have to accept anything if we can’t get what we’re doing. So, like, I’m going to spend 60 hours stacking shelves; that’s not going to benefit me in any way at all. It’s defeating the whole purpose of studying what you’re doing for a year and then going back to doing what you did previously, but you don’t want to fail your course so you feel like you’ve no other choice.”

Learners felt that their Education and Training Board could play a more supportive role in the process of finding suitable work placements, with one learner summarising, “the hardest thing was that we had to find a work placement. It would be better if the school would organise that. It would be more formal, more beneficial.” They suggested a collaborative approach to finding work experience so learners could find a placement that provides meaningful practice in work relevant to their course.

Learners discussed how multiple **assignments (4)** with competing deadlines were resulting in a “work overload” for some learners. Learners reported they did not always receive enough notice of their deadlines and that deadlines for assignments from different modules often coincided, meaning they struggled to complete them. As one learner explained, “every assessment is 2,000 words plus. And we’re having two or three assessments at a time.” Completing a large amount of work in a small space of time meant learners felt they were not absorbing all the information and not submitting work reflective of their standard, with one learner explaining, “It’s the most work, most assignments. I’m getting the most assignments out of that class and I’m really not getting that much out of it.” Learners requested they be informed of their assignment deadlines with sufficient notice and that different tutors and modules collaborate to spread deadlines more evenly across the academic year.

For many learners, improving their English language skills was a benefit of engaging with a FET course, with one learner stating, “It has made me feel confident to speak English in front of people and read it.” Learners also felt this improved level of language had a positive effect on their lives, with one learner explaining:

“(If you have limited English) you don’t feel safe. You don’t feel safe if you don’t speak well. For example, before I didn’t go anywhere outside my town without my husband, because if I have a problem I can’t ask for help.”

While learners were glad that their English language skills were improving, some learners requested increased **English language support (2)** (AONTAS, 2018; 2017; 2016). One learner remarked “I’m doing a course but it’s only one day. I think one day is not enough. I think two or three days. I think we need more higher-level classes.” These increased supports were requested in the form of additional English classes alongside courses, as well as increased courses focused specifically on learning English as a second language. Similar findings to this can be found in the NALA Student Development Fund Annual report, which found that ESOL learners in particular would like more hours in class (NALA, 2020, p.9).

Learners greatly valued the role that **peer learning (2)** played in their courses (AONTAS, 2018). They felt that the inclusive environment paired with the strong bonds they made with their classmates meant that peer learning was a key factor in their learning experience, with one learner surmising:

“I’d say we’re all a support to each other. The group itself would be a big support. So basically, if I struggle with certain things, I’ll lean on a fellow learner and she will have no problem with helping me out. I find she’s great support for me. I could go to any of them and I have no problem knowing that they’re going to support me.”

The NALA Student Development Fund Annual Report echoed these findings, with learners in 29 centres reporting they were learning through others, either through group or peer learning (NALA, 2020, p.19).

Resources for learners with learning disabilities (2) was another barrier discussed through the Forum. Learners with additional support requirements, such as dyslexia and dyscalculia, were aware of tools or software that could assist their learning. They expressed frustration, however, at not being able to access these resources through their FET centre. As one learner explained:

“I feel they should have facilities for people with dyslexia. You can get computer software that will help you with all your assignments. There is a pen you can get. Now I can read, but there is a pen you can get to read it to you. Now I bought one and it was €250, but the centre should have one.”

Another learner explained how s/he used specialist software on a computer in their centre, but was not able to avail of this software at home and thus struggled to complete his/her assignments. Learners requested that these resources be made available to anyone who needs them and that they should also be available on learners’ home devices.

Learners expressed frustration at the strict **attendance (1)** policy on their courses (AONTAS, 2018). For some learners, arriving a few minutes late could mean they were not allowed in for the whole day, resulting in them missing a day of classes. This was seen as unfairly punitive, and learners felt it did not consider their busy lives and conflicting responsibilities, with one learner explaining, “You’re not allowed to be a minute late. As a mother who runs her own house, I get very annoyed at that.” In turn, learners whose social welfare

payments were linked to their attendance may be docked payment for missing days of class. Learners felt this did not consider unforeseen extenuating circumstances, with one learner explaining:

“I’ve three-year-old, and sometimes she gets off early or she’s sick. You still need that money [received for engaging with FET] to rent, buy food, look after your children. You can’t predict when you’re going to be sick.”

Learners requested a more flexible, understanding approach to attendance where learners would not be excluded from class or have their social welfare payments docked due to lateness or absence beyond their control.

When asked about the **National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (1)**, learners had mixed levels of understanding of what it was and how it was relevant to their course (AONTAS, 2018; 2017). While some had heard of it and were able to explain in detail how it applied to their course, others were unsure and some learners had not heard of it. As one learner stated simply, “I don’t even know what level I am on.” Other learners had experiences where a knowledge of their level would have been beneficial, with one learner explaining, “Any jobs you’re thinking of they say ‘what levels have you got?’ ‘What paperwork have you got?’” Learners felt that information on the NFQ would be beneficial for learners and would particularly aid their understanding of assessment and progression.



SURVEY FINDINGS

A total of 958 learners from National FET Learner Forum events completed the optional survey. Learners were first asked about their **reason for taking their course** (Figure 5). The most common response to this statement was “to learn a new skill” (562), followed by “to find work” (422) and “to meet new people” (361). In the corresponding comments to this question, learners included further reasons such as, “to progress along a different educational path” and “to develop my skills and pursue a career I am passionate about.”

less than 1% responding either “disagree” and “strongly disagree” (Figure 6.1). Overall, learners did not think their course were too difficult, with 4% of learners choosing “strongly agree”, 9% choosing “agree”, 26% choosing “neutral”, 38% choosing “disagree” and 23% choosing “strongly disagree” (Figure 6.2). Further, 52% of learners who responded to the statement, “I gained the skills I wanted from my course”, chose “strongly agree”, 35% chose “agree”, 1% chose “neutral”, 1% of learners chose “disagree”, and 1% chose “strongly disagree” (Figure 6.3).

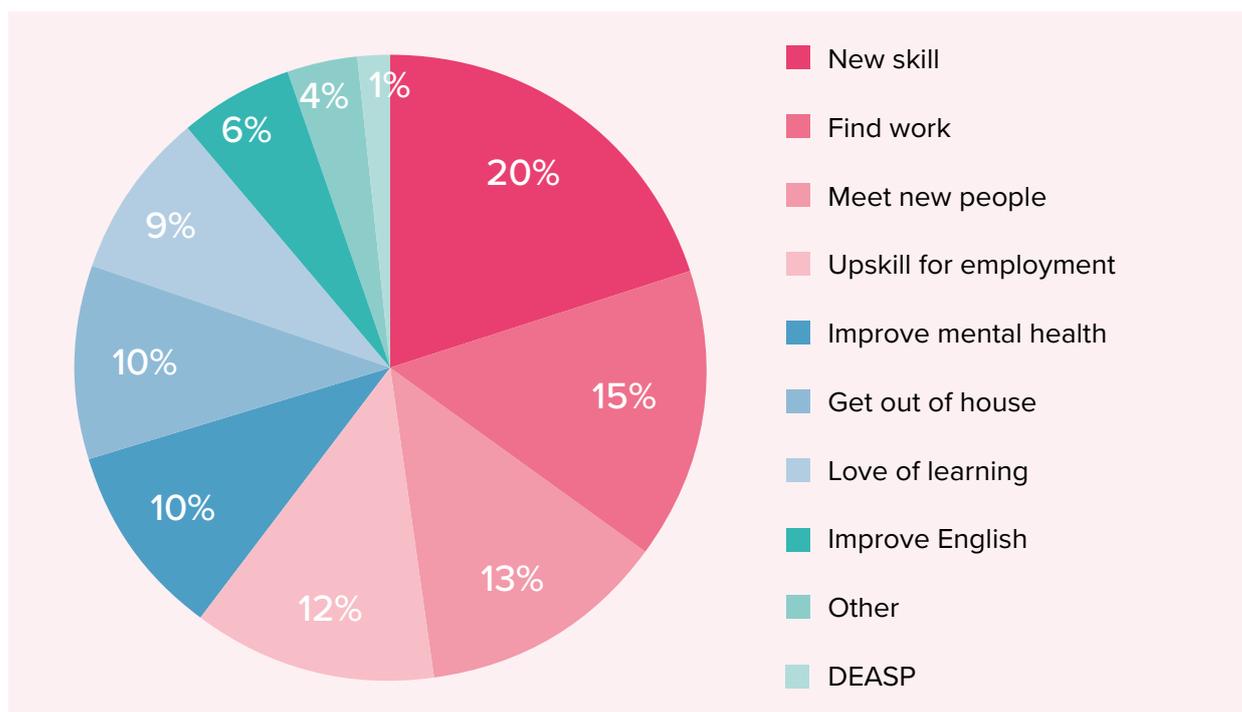


Figure 5 - Responses to the question “What was your reason for taking your course?”

Survey results showed that learners maintained high levels of **FET satisfaction** (Figure 6.1-6.3). Answers to the statement “I enjoyed my course” were overwhelmingly positive, with 68% choosing “strongly agree”, 28% choosing “agree”, 3% responding “neutral”, and

These findings are consistent with the FET experiences detailed by learners in the detailed results section of this report.

Results from the survey showed that the greatest **barriers** learners faced in accessing their course was a lack of

technology skills, with 11% of learners who responded choosing “strongly agree” and 24% choosing “agree” in response to the statement, “I need more support with technology” (Figure 7.8). This was followed by responses to the statement, “I need more literacy (reading and writing) support”, with 9% choosing strongly agree and 13% choosing “agree” (Figure 7.7). Learners also indicated that transportation costs were a barrier to them when accessing courses, with 12% of learners who responded strongly agreeing and 15% agreeing with the statement “Transportation costs required to get to class are too high” (Figure 7.10). Transportation costs may include public transportation fares, as well as individual fuel and car maintenance costs. These findings are echoed in the detailed results section of this report, where learners raised both the cost and reliability of public transport when accessing FET courses.

Finally, learners were asked about their understanding of the **progression options** available to them when they finished their course. These responses were mainly positive, with most learners who responded to the statement, “I am clear on how to progress from my course onto another FET course” choosing strongly agree (34%) or “agree” (38%) (Figure 8.1).

Similarly, positive responses were given in response to the statement, “I am clear on how to progress from my course onto a higher education course”, with 33% of learners who answered this question selecting “strongly agree” and 36% answering agree (Figure 8.2). Finally, a majority of learners felt their course would help them progress into employment, with 51% of those who responded choosing “strongly agree” and 34% choosing “agree” (Figure 8.3).

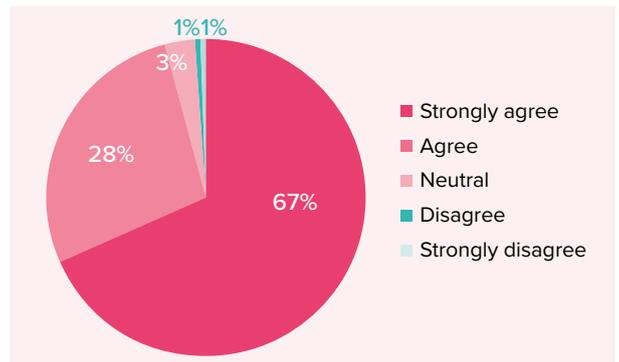


Figure 6.1 - Responses to the statement “I enjoyed my course”

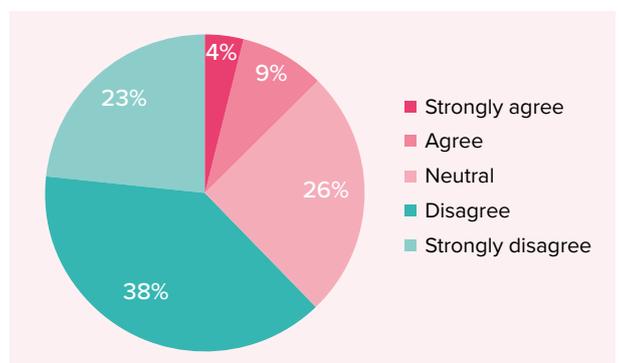


Figure 6.2 - Responses to the statement “My course was too difficult”

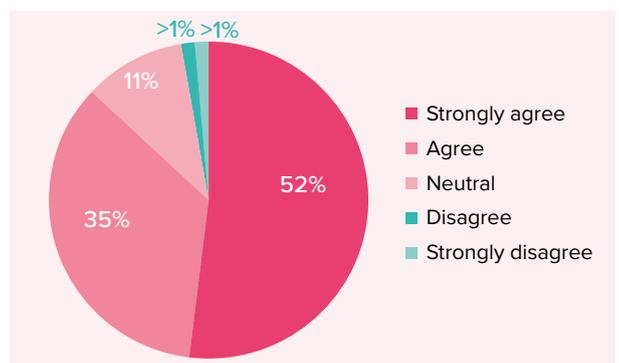


Figure 6.3 - Responses to the statement “I gained the skills I wanted from my course”

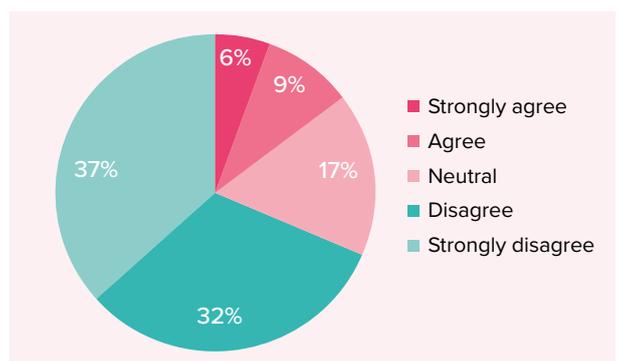


Figure 7.1 - Responses to the statement “I cannot afford my course”

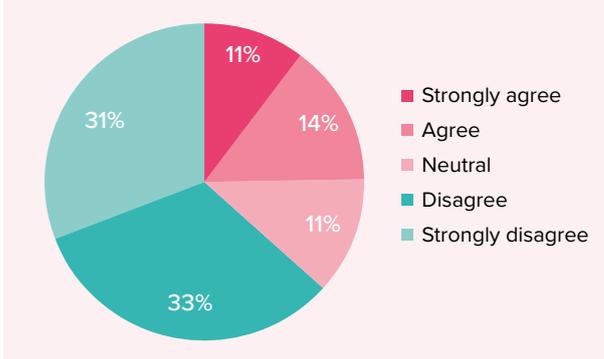


Figure 7.2 - Responses to the statement "The course I want is not available"

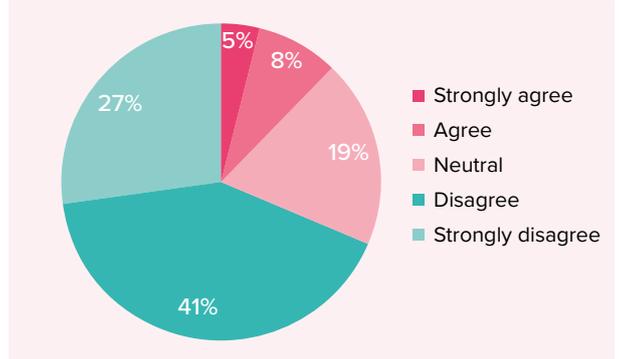


Figure 7.3 - Responses to the statement "My course takes up too much time"

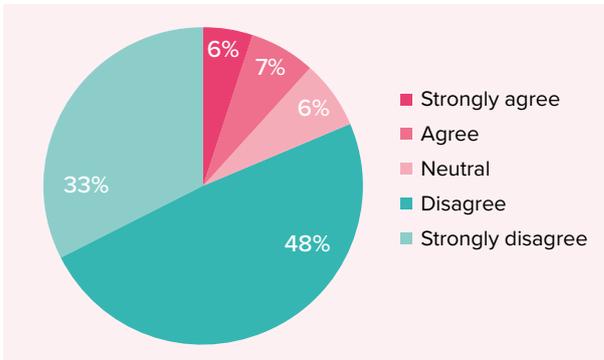


Figure 7.4 - Responses to the statement "I do not have home internet"

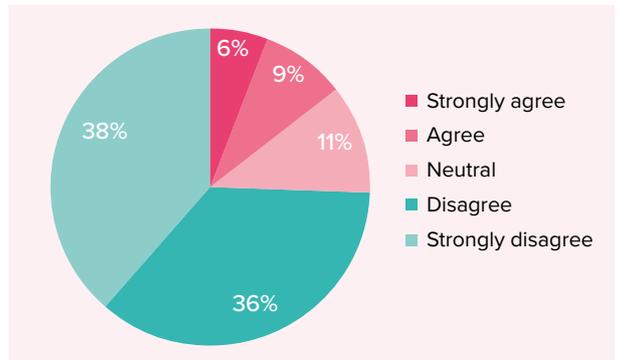


Figure 7.5 - Responses to the statement "I do not have enough resources to support my learning"

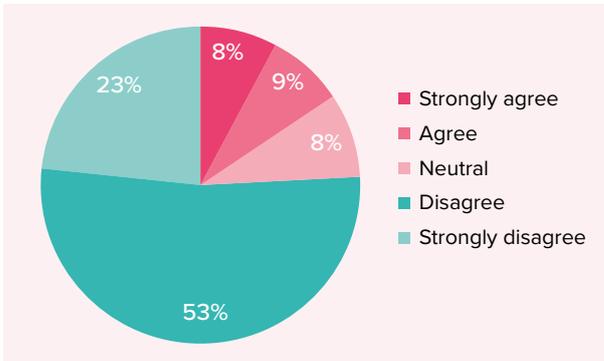


Figure 7.6 - Responses to the statement "I need more English language supports"

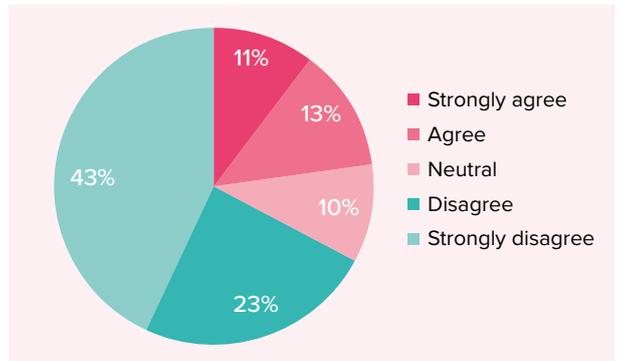


Figure 7.7 - Responses to the statement: "I need more literacy supports"

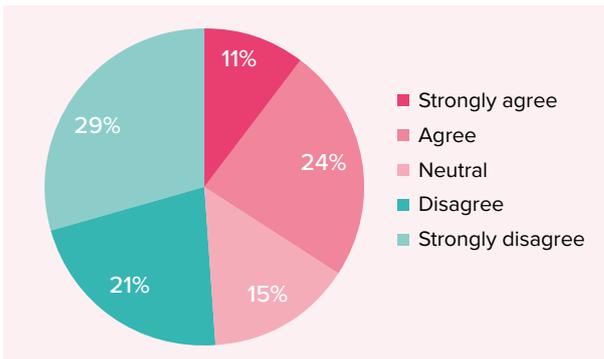


Figure 7.8 - Responses to the statement "I need more technology supports"

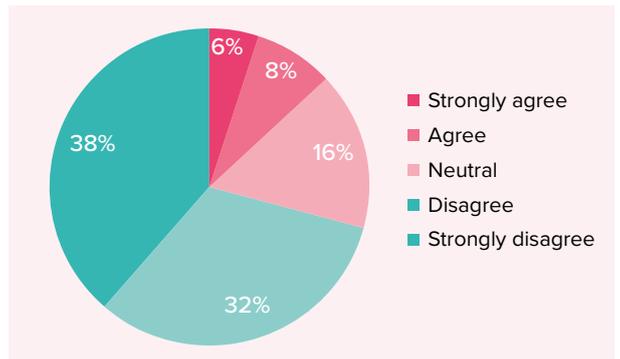


Figure 7.9 - Responses to the statement "I have home caring responsibilities that I must juggle with my learning"

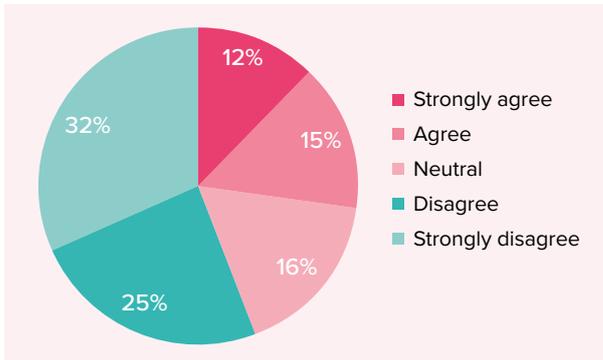


Figure 7.10 - Responses to the statement "Transportation costs required to get to class are too high"

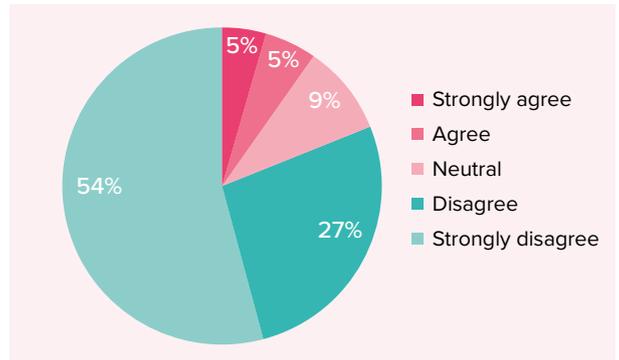


Figure 7.11 - Responses to the statement "I had to relocate to take my course and accommodation costs are too high in this area."

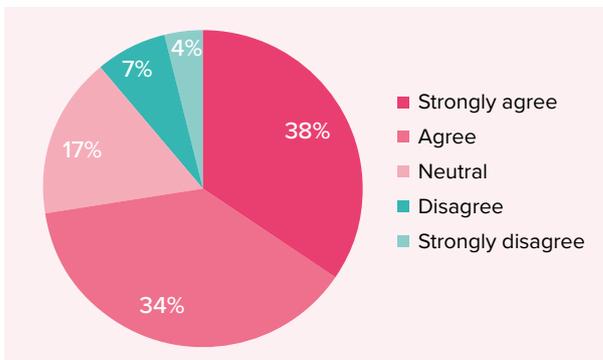


Figure 8.1 - Responses to the statement "I am clear on how to progress from my course onto another FET course."

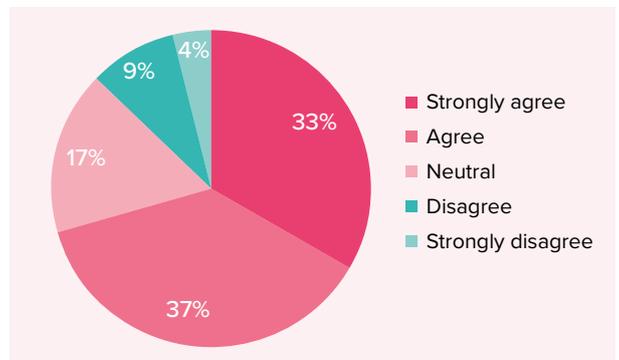


Figure 8.2 - Responses to the statement "how to progress from my course on to a higher education course".

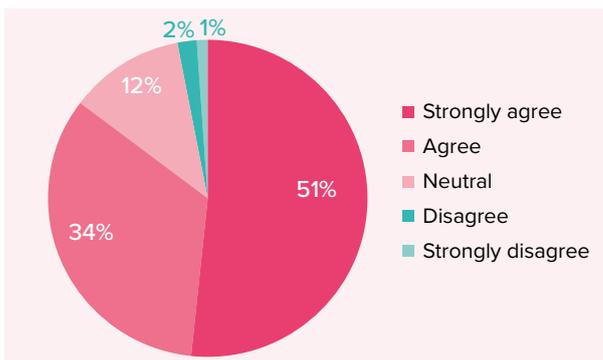


Figure 8.3 - Responses to the statement "I believe my course will help me gain employment".

CONCLUSION

Overall, learners had an overwhelmingly positive experience entering FET. They suggested increased and diversified advertisement for FET, so that more potential learners could have a similarly positive experience. There was a call to increase the course options available to learners to allow them to choose a course that best suits their interests and needs. Similarly, learners were largely satisfied with their experiences on their courses. This is seen in the survey results gathered from learners and in the detailed results section of this report, where learners detailed their positive experiences entering FET and the transformative effect that engaging with FET had on their lives. These transformative effects included increased confidence, communication skills, making friends, and gaining skills that improved their overall wellbeing. Tutors were highlighted by learners as playing a vital role in the FET experience, by cultivating a respectful supportive atmosphere, which facilitates other positive aspects of FET, such as peer learning.

Learners who were referred through the DEASP wanted to ensure that this process was supportive and that DEASP staff had a full understanding of the value of FET. There was a call for a flexible attendance policy that is understanding of learners' busy lives. Learners also wanted Education and Training Boards to provide clear and comprehensive course information, and an estimate of overall costs that are required for materials necessary for course completion at the beginning of a course. They also requested formal consideration be given to the learning they already completed before entering FET, through established RPL processes during the admissions process. Learner supports were at the core of some learner feedback, particularly as they related to transport, childcare, IT, English language, and learning difficulties. Learners would like transportation and childcare grants to be increased and wider access to these services be made available. Increased supports for learners with limited IT skills, English as a second language and learners with learning disabilities were seen as crucial to learners' success. Learners also wanted Education and Training Boards to work collaboratively with learners and employers to ensure they find suitable and supportive work experience.

For learners who availed of guidance services, these supports were working well and appreciated. Learners, however, would like guidance to be better promoted, and its availability to be expanded throughout FET centres. There was a call for clearer learner progression pathways, particularly into higher education. Learners also felt their understanding of progression would be aided by increased understanding of the National Framework of Qualifications.

Through the event evaluation form filled out by learners, learners also expressed that they enjoyed the events and that they appreciated the opportunity to “express how I feel and get my point across” and “hear other people’s different perspectives and experiences with further education.” The National FET Learner Forum has captured both the benefits of the FET experience and suggestions on how to improve FET for learners moving forward. It also has played a positive role in learners' experience within FET. Learners have a vital role to play in shaping the future of FET. The recommendations from this report have been shared with key stakeholders working in the field and will be used to shape FET policy moving forward.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Table 1 Learner Totals for Regional and National Events by Education and Training Boards

Education and Training Boards	Date	National	Regionals	Totals
LCETB	5th March 2019	13	54	67
CETB	6th March 2019	6	57	63
TETB	12th March 2019	5	59	64
LMETB	20th March 2019	0	102	102
LOETB	21st March 2019	5	49	54
CMETB	25th March 2019	8	59	67
KWETB	26th March 2019	2	66	68
DETB	2nd April 2019	6	71	77
GRETB	9th October 2019	1	92	93
CDETБ	14th October 2019	7	76	83
MSLETB	16th October 2019	4	65	69
LWETB	25th November 2019	0	103	103
DDLETB	26th November 2019	13	70	83
WWETB	National Event Only	8	0	8
Totals		78	923	1001

Appendix 2: Table 2 Learner Participation Totals by Quarter

Quarterly Totals				
	Full-Time Programme Totals	Part-Time Programme Totals	Unknown	Totals
	51	0	0	51
	31	12	14	57
	34	25	0	59
	35	16	51	102
	26	23	0	49
	16	32	11	59
	44	22	0	66
Q1 Totals	240	130	76	446
	26	45	0	71
	52	6	20	78
Q2 Totals	78	51	20	149
	0	0	0	0
Q3 Totals	0	0	0	0
	14	62	0	76
	63	0	2	65
	18	44	30	92
	14	54	35	103
	43	14	13	70
Q4 Totals	152	174	80	406
Overall Totals	470	355	176	1001

Appendix 3: Members of the National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group

Name	Affiliation
Una Buckley	Adult Learner
Eileen Condon	Further Education and Training (FET) Director, Tipperary Education and Training Board (TETB)
Liz Farrelly	Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP)
Siobhan McEntee	Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)
Ivica Milicevic	SOLAS
Roisin Morris-Drennan**	Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)
Margaret Murray	National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)
Jenny O'Connor	SOLAS
Madge Phelan	Department of Education and Skills (DES)
Rowena Watters	Adult Learner
Ross Woods**	Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

**All names featured in alphabetical order by last name*

***Ross Woods replaced by Roisin Morris-Drennan as of June 2019*

Appendix 4: Members of the National FET Learner Forum Academic Expert Group

Name	Affiliation
Prof. Dr. Koen DePryck	Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Dr. Toni Fazaeli	University of Wolverhampton and the Institute for Learning
Prof. Fergal Finnegan	Maynooth University
Prof. Ted Fleming	Columbia University
Prof. Paula Flynn	Dublin City University
Prof. Peter Lavender	University of Wolverhampton
Dr. Stephen O'Brien	University College Cork

**All names featured in alphabetical order by last name*

Appendix 5: Introduction Sheet

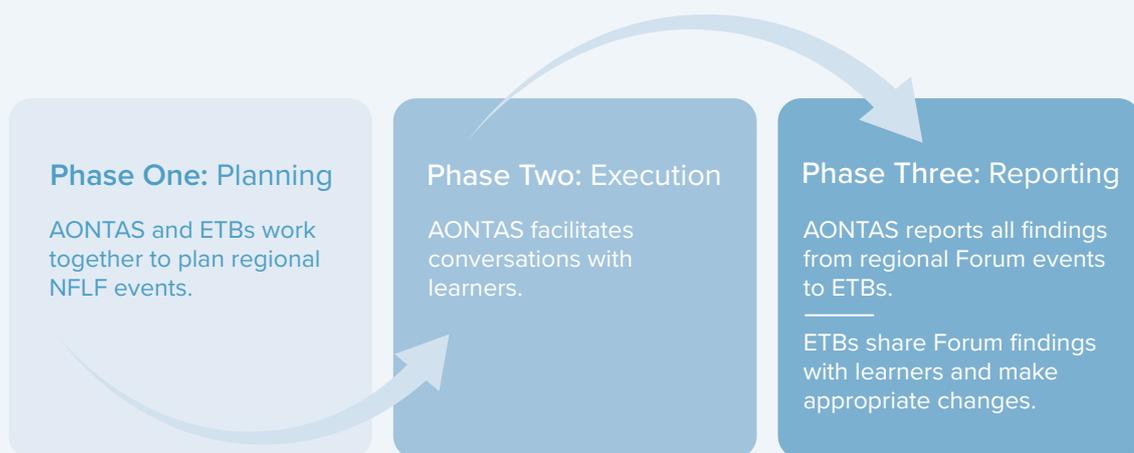
National Further Education and Training Learner Forum 2018

What is the National FET Learner Forum?

Throughout the development of the Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2014-2019, SOLAS, the National FET Authority, committed to hearing the voice of learners. **Objective 3.1 of the FET Strategy states policy will “to respond to the needs of learners”.** It was out of this objective that the National FET Learner Forum was created.

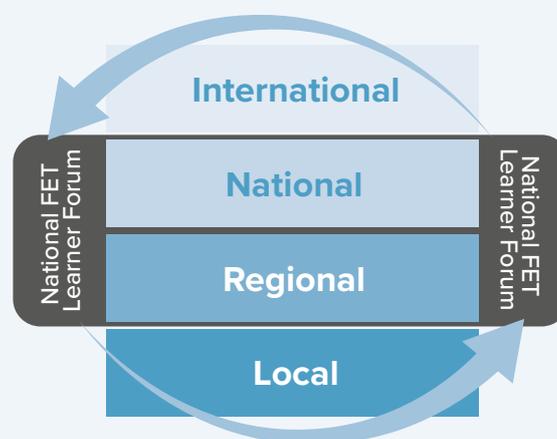
When it launched in 2016, the National FET Learner Forum brought together 80 learners from across Ireland. In 2018, we have expanded the Forum in an effort to reach even more learners. To date, we have reached 919 learners across the country. This effort has been achieved through the implementation of regional events. In 2019, we plan to host a regional event with all 16 Education and Training Boards and reach over 1,000 learners.

How does the Forum work?



What is the purpose?

The purpose of these events are to gather feedback at the regional level to help inform regional programme planning. These events, along with the feedback we get at the national level, is also used to inform the work of national agencies like SOLAS, QQI, and ETBI.



What are regional events like?

Regional events take place in a local hotel or at an ETB facility. AONTAS will accommodate the option that works best for the ETB. Depending on the time of year, regional events range in size from 50 – 80 learners.

The National FET Learner Forum Regional Meeting

Date:	
Time:	10:00am – 1:00pm
Venue:	
Sample Agenda	
10:00am – 10:15am	Registration/Tea, coffee and refreshments
10:15am – 10:45am	Introduction
	Welcome address – Education and Training Boards staff member
	Short presentation about the National FET Learner Forum project by AONTAS – AONTAS staff member
10:45am – 11:45am	Group Discussions (8-10 learners per group)
11:45am – 12:00pm	Questionnaires/Evaluations
12:00pm – 1:00pm	Lunch

What are the administrative requirements of an event?

AONTAS	The Education and Training Boards
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Organises the event – Provides all preparation materials – Covers any associated costs – Recruits trained facilitators to deliver learner focus groups – Transcribes all learner discussions and analyses all data – Develops a comprehensive report of all findings after the event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Appoints a key contact (staff member) to liaise with AONTAS leading up to the event – Selects a location for the event – Identifies learners to participate – Sends programme details on learners after an event takes place – Provides a speaker to welcome learners on the day

What should the Education and Training Boards staff do on the day?

On the day, the Education and Training Boards will only need to provide one staff member. If tutors and/or Education and Training Boards staff escort learners to an event, we would like them to be aware in advance that they will be kindly asked to leave the room when facilitated learner conversations begin. This is to ensure learners feel free to share their thoughts and recommendations.

What do Education and Training Boards receive for participating in this event?

- AONTAS will promote the Education and Training Boards's participation in a Forum event on social media and through the local press (a professional photographer will be on site – see our communications reach below).
- Within two weeks of an event, Education and Training Boards will receive survey results
- Within a three-month period, Education and Training Boards will receive a complete copy of the NFLF report (10-15 pages)
- Participation in the NFLF can be used as evidence of learner engagement in line with an Education and Training Boards's quality assurance

AONTAS Communications for Your Education and Training Boards

Last year, **6,508,123** people reached through our extensive communications work in 2018, which including our online platforms and media coverage. We also had **154 media** opportunities (106 print articles, 39 online articles and 9 radio interviews), across 21 counties with a combined reach of **4,112,120 people**.

- **National Coverage:** Reach of 2.4 million through 21 national media articles in 12 national media outlets
- **Local/Regional Coverage:** Reach of 1.7 million people through 134 articles in 63 local/regional media outlets in 21 counties – specifically promoting 15 Education and Training Boards areas

We want to support the great work you are doing in your Education and Training Boards not just during the Forum, but all year round. If there is anything we can do to promote your work, please let us know.

Appendix 6: Learner Information Sheet

The National FET Learner Forum			
Information for Learners			
PLEASE READ THIS INFORMATION CAREFULLY. IT EXPLAINS YOUR PARTICIPATION AND EXPENSE CLAIM FOR TRAVEL TO THE EVENT.			
Education and Training Boards	Date	Venue	Time
Contact: Leah Dowdall Email: XXX or Phone: xxx			
What is the Forum?			
<p>The National FET Learner Forum (NFLF) is designed to provide a platform for you to share your experience in FET. During the focus group, the facilitators will ask questions to encourage discussions and share ideas, so we can help improve the FET service. It is really important to note that there are no right or wrong answers. We want to hear about your own experiences with the FET service and get your honest feedback.</p>			
<pre> graph LR A((You Discuss)) --> B((AONTAS Reports)) B --> C((SOLAS and your ETB get information to make changes)) style C fill:#0070C0,color:#fff </pre>			
Learner Discussions			
At the focus groups there will be two questions asked:			
<div style="border: 1px solid #0070C0; border-radius: 15px; padding: 10px; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <p>“What was your experience of entering Further Education and Training?”</p> </div> <div style="border: 1px solid #0070C0; border-radius: 15px; padding: 10px;"> <p>“How has your Further Education and Training programme met your needs as a learner?”</p> </div>			

What You Need to Know													
Questions	Answers												
Do I have to participate?	No. Your participation is voluntary.												
Are my opinions anonymous?	Yes. All data collected will be anonymised before reporting. All personal details will be held on to for one year by AONTAS and then destroyed. It will not be shared with any outside bodies.												
Will the focus groups be recorded?	Yes. They will be audio recorded for reporting purposes.												
Will be photos taken at the event?	Yes. We will have you sign a release for photos. If you do not want your photo taken, you do not have to sign a release. Just let a member of staff know.												
How much information do I have to share if I take part in a focus group?	This is entirely up to you. You can share as much as you feel comfortable.												
<p>Travel Grant for NFLF Regional Meetings</p> <p>If you drive or take public transport to an event, you can receive travel grant. The grant will be paid on the day in cash. Grants are calculated based on the distance travelled to an event. You can see these calculations in the table below.</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Grant</th> <th>Distance</th> <th>Amount</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Grant 1</td> <td>0 – 60km roundtrip</td> <td>€10</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Grant 2</td> <td>60 – 120km roundtrip</td> <td>€20</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Grant 3</td> <td>+120km round trip</td> <td>€50</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Please note the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Each eligible nominated learner is assigned a grant based on distance travelled – The above grant will be paid on the day, at the event once the learner provides receipts – Proof of travel/receipts are a necessary requirement to receive the grant (grant amounts will be paid on distance and not on the amount shown on travel receipts) – Pictures of receipts/tickets can be taken if the learner requires it for further use (i.e. return tickets) – These grants cover travel only – no subsistence or accommodation is covered – Learners who travel on a bus organised by an Education and Training Board or who walk to an event will not receive a travel grant <p>If you have any further questions please contact: Leah Dowdall, AONTAS, Head of Research; Email: XXX Phone: XXX</p>		Grant	Distance	Amount	Grant 1	0 – 60km roundtrip	€10	Grant 2	60 – 120km roundtrip	€20	Grant 3	+120km round trip	€50
Grant	Distance	Amount											
Grant 1	0 – 60km roundtrip	€10											
Grant 2	60 – 120km roundtrip	€20											
Grant 3	+120km round trip	€50											

AONTAS – The National Adult Learning Organisation

AONTAS is a voluntary membership organisation and we believe that all adults in Ireland have a right to quality learning throughout their lives. We also promote the value and benefits of adult learning. Learners are at the centre of our work and we know that your experiences provide important information which should be used to help change the services and policies which affect your learning. AONTAS consults learners to find out about the learners' experiences of these services.

SOLAS

SOLAS is the Further Education and Training Authority in Ireland. They work with Education and Training Boards (ETBs) to support the development of appropriate further education and training programmes across Ireland.

Agenda

The National FET Learner Forum Regional Meeting

Date:	
Time:	10:00 – 12:00
Venue:	
Agenda	
10:00am – 10:15am	Registration/Tea, coffee and refreshments
10:15am – 10:45am	Introduction
	Welcome address – Representative from Education and Training Boards
	Short presentation about the National FET Learner Forum – Leah Dowdall, AONTAS
	Housekeeping
10:45am – 12:00pm	Group Discussions (10 learners per group)
12:00pm – 1:00pm	Lunch (Tea, Coffee, Sandwiches)

Appendix 7: Survey

Reason for taking your course.					
Which option best describes your reason for taking your course? (Please tick (✓) all that apply)					
<input type="checkbox"/> To find work	<input type="checkbox"/> To learn a new skill	<input type="checkbox"/> To upskill for my employment			
<input type="checkbox"/> To meet new people	<input type="checkbox"/> To improve my English language skills	<input type="checkbox"/> To improve my mental health			
<input type="checkbox"/> To get out of the house	<input type="checkbox"/> For the love of learning	<input type="checkbox"/> Required to by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP)			
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please list):					
Further Education and Training (FET) satisfaction					
Please read the following statements on FET satisfaction and tick the response that best represents your views on the statement. (Please tick (✓) one response for each statement).					
Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I enjoyed my course.					
I found my course content too difficult.					
I gained the skills I wanted from my course.					
Comments:					
Listed below are some issues that could arise when people plan to take a course. Did any apply to you? Please tick (✓) a selection for each potential barrier).					
Potential Barrier	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I cannot afford my course.					
The course I wanted is not available in my area.					
My course requires too much time.					
I do not have home internet access.					

I do not have access to enough resources to support my learning.					
I need more English language support.					
I need more support with support with reading and writing (literacy skills).					
I need more support with my technology skills.					
My home caring responsibilities prevent me from taking a course.					
Transportation costs required to get to class are too high.					
I had to relocate to take my course and accommodation costs are too high in this area.					
Any other challenges/comments (Please write in space below):					

Progression Options					
Please read the following statements on progression options and tick the response that best represents your views on the statement. (Please tick (✓) one response for each statement).					
Progression Options	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am clear on how to progress from my course onto another FET course.					
I am clear on how to progress from my course into higher education (Universities or Institutes of Technology)					
I believe my course will help me progress into employment.					
Comments (Please write in space below):					

Appendix 8: Survey Results

Table 5: Total Survey Responses	
Education and Training Boards	Total Responses
LCETB	52
CETB	56
TETB	52
LMETB	94
LOETB	48
CMETB	58
KWETB	64
DETB	71
National	50
CDETB	69
MSLETB	63
GRETB	90
LWETB	80
DDLETB	110*
Total	957

**This number of surveys is a combination of learners present at the event and additional surveys completed by learners who were unable to attend on the day*

Table 6

Question 1: Reasons for Taking Your Course	
Find Work	389
Learn a New Skill	528
Upskill for Employment	314
Meet New People	339
Improve English language skills	156
Improve mental health	260
Get out of the house	259
Love of learning	226
DEASP	39
Other	94
Total Responses	2604

Question 2: FET Satisfaction

Table 7.1

I enjoyed my course						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Totals
Totals	569	239	27	3	6	844

Table 7.2

I found my course too difficult						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Totals
Totals	30	68	202	298	183	781

Table 7.3

I gained the skills I wanted from my course						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Totals
Totals	418	280	88	12	10	808

Question 3: Barriers to Learning

Table 8.1

I cannot afford my course						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Totals
Totals	43	67	124	240	274	748

Table 8.2

The course I wanted is not available in my area						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Totals
Totals	81	107	85	233	250	756

Table 8.3

My course requires too much time						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Totals
Totals	33	62	144	311	207	757

Table 8.4

I do not have home internet access						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Totals
Totals	40	50	47	240	352	729

Table 8.5

I do not have access to enough resources to support my learning.						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Totals
Totals	46	66	80	285	264	741

Table 8.6

I need more English language support						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Totals
Totals	61	62	62	170	384	739

Table 8.7

I need more literacy support (reading and writing)						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Totals
Totals	82	96	77	176	319	750

Table 8.8

I need more support with technology						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Totals
Totals	83	182	114	163	222	764

Table 8.9

I have childcare responsibilities that prevent me from taking a course						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Totals
Totals	38	58	119	238	281	734

Table 8.10

Transportation costs required to get to class are too high						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Totals
Totals	92	110	120	185	241	748

Table 8.11

I had to relocate to take my course and accommodation costs are too high in this area						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Totals
Totals	31	34	61	179	364	669

Question 4: Progression

Table 9.1

I am clear on how to progress from my course onto another FET course						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Totals
Totals	262	289	131	58	30	770

Table 9.2

I am clear on how to progress from my course onto a higher education course						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Totals
Totals	250	276	131	70	30	757

Table 9.3

I believe my course will help me progress into employment						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Totals
Totals	396	266	90	17	6	775

Appendix 9: Voluntary Information Responses

What is your age?					
16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
262	129	164	151	94	48

Gender		
Male	Female	Other
293	530	5

Do you belong to one of the following groups?				
Refugee	Irish Traveller	Non-native Speaker	Born outside island of Ireland	None Apply
25	17	51	128	520

What is your highest level of education achieved to date?				
No formal education	Primary School	QQI Level 1 or 2	Junior or Inter Certificate	Transition Year
20	69	25	152	17

What is your highest level of education achieved to date?				
Leaving Certificate	QQI Level 5	QQI Level 6	QQI Level 1 or 2	Non-aligned course
255	20	69	25	152

What is your highest level of education achieved to date?				
Higher Certificate	Bachelor's Degree	Honours Bachelor's Degree	Professional Qualification	Postgraduate Degree
15	38	23	11	19

What is your employment status?						
Full time	Part time	Unemployed Seeking Work	Unemployed Not Seeking Work	Home Carer	Retired	Other
34	118	218	137	70	68	23

Have you been asked your opinion on FET before?	
Yes	No
187	590

Appendix 10: Evaluation Form

The National FET Learner Forum Regional Focus Groups Evaluation Form				
What did you think about this event? (please tick the relevant box)				
Excellent	Very good	Good	Fair	Poor

Please complete the following statements.

Something I enjoyed about this event is:
Something I would change about this event is:
Something I learned at this event is:

Get Involved with AONTAS!

If you would like to receive our **Learner Newsletter**, take part in the **Learners as Leaders Programme**, take part in future AONTAS events, or share your story with us, please tick the boxes below and fill in your details.

I would like to hear more about/get involved in the following activities/promotional work:

- Share Your Story on Social Media
- Participate in Events
- Participate in Learners as Leaders Programme
- Receive our Learner Newsletter
- All of the above

** By completing this section you are opting to provide this information to AONTAS for the purposes of the above stated information. AONTAS will not share any personal data with any third parties.

Name:
Education and Training Board (ETB):
Email:
Phone number:
Address: (only if email is not an option)

Appendix 11: Learner Reactions to the Event

At the conclusion of all Forum events, learners were provided with an evaluation form (Appendix 11). Between the 14 events, a total of 902 evaluations were collected and analysed. The evaluations demonstrate that overall, learners enjoyed their experience at Forum events. Of those who rated the event (902), 55% of learners rated it as excellent, 35% rated it as very good, and 9.5% rated it as good. Five learners rated the event as fair and one learner rated the event as poor.

Learners valued the ability to share their opinions and hear the opinions of others in a safe atmosphere through the Forum. As learners explained, they enjoyed “learning about other people’s experience and struggles about being able to speak about my views”, “being able to comfortably talk about problems and issues with our courses” and “sharing with people in a respectful environment”. These quotations speak to the valuable space for learner voice that is created for FET learners through the Forum.

The evaluations revealed other important benefits of the Forum. The National FET Learner Forum provides a unique opportunity for learners from across Education and Training Boards to discover new courses in their centres or in other centres and meet other learners they can relate to. Through learning about other courses, learners can discover further learning options that are available to them within their Education and Training Board and Further Education and Training. For example, one learner stated s/he had learned, “different things about different courses and how they work.” Another learner stated they had learned about “The different areas of learning and expansiveness of my Education and Training Boards.” Meeting other learners allowed learners to reflect on

their achievements and foster a sense of community within FET. One learner stated that one thing s/he learned from the event was, “that we all have different stories and backgrounds but we are all in the same boat” and another stated s/he learned that “FET caters for all ages and types of people who want to learn.” Learners appreciated how the Forum represents and celebrates a wide and inclusive cohort of learners, which lets learners know “that there is always an opportunity to continue in education, no matter what age or where you’re from.” Further evaluation results can be found at the end of this report (Appendix 13).

Appendix 11: Evaluation Form Results

Education and Training Boards	Total Number of Responses
LCETB	51
CETB	56
TETB	49
LMETB	94
LOETB	46
CMETB	57
KWETB	61
DETB	70
National	53
CDETB	69
MSLETB	66
GRETB	82
LWETB	60
DDLETB	88
Totals	902

What did you think about this event? (please tick the relevant box)						
	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor	Total Number of Responses
Totals	498	311	86	5	2	902

Appendix 12: Outreach and Communications

In order to support and promote the work of the National FET Learner Forum, to raise awareness of learner voice activities and the standing of FET and to encourage people to take up the learning opportunities available in Education and Training Boards, AONTAS implemented an extensive communications strategy across multiple platforms to maximise impact and reach in 2019.

To respond to the expansion of regional Forum events, AONTAS communications focused on locally targeted press releases, in collaboration with Education and Training Boards, to highlight these events. The Forum reached an audience of over 67,000 people through print and online local media coverage. 6 articles were printed in a range of local papers across Ireland from Kildare to Mayo.

See a full list of local media articles below:

REGIONAL NATIONAL FET LEARNER FORUM EVENTS

1. Tipperary, *Tipperary News*, 21st March 2019, **FET learners from Tipperary Education and Training Boards have their voices heard at National FET Learner Forum**, estimated reach: 11,000
2. Clare, *The Clare Champion*, 22nd March 2019, **Learners have their voices heard at regional forum**, estimated reach: 16,700
3. Louth, *Drogheda Independent*, 2nd April 2019, **Everyone's Voice Heard in Education Programme**, estimated reach: 6,853
4. Kildare, *Kildare Now*, 2nd April 2019, **FET learners from Kildare and Wicklow have their voices heard at National FET Learner Forum in Naas**, estimated reach: 13,000
5. Cavan, *The Anglo Celt*, 18th April 2019, **Adult learners make their voices heard at forum**, estimated reach: 11,692
6. Mayo, *Mayo Advertiser*, 8th November 2019, **FET learners speak at forum**, estimated reach: 8,564
7. In 2019, AONTAS saw significant growth in our online social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) with a following of over 11,000 people which extended our reach for NFLF activities. Forum events were promoted using the hashtag **#LearnerVoice** and this targeted content reached **almost 150,000 people**.
8. The national event was also captured by a videographer and shared on **YouTube, on our website**, and on our social media platforms. To date, the video has been viewed over 200 times on YouTube.
9. To further extend the reach of the Forum, AONTAS also shared information about the NFLF and learner voice activities through a dedicated learner e-bulletin. Four editions were distributed to over 400 learners in 2019.
10. Almost 37,000 people accessed our website **www.aontas.com** in 2019.



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