



The Voice of
Adult Learning

LEARNERS' VOICES ACROSS IRELAND

NATIONAL FET LEARNER
FORUM REPORT, 2022-2023

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Riailtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

SOLAS
learning works

ABBREVIATIONS

AHEAD	ASSOCIATION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS AND DISABILITY
DFHERIS	DEPARTMENT OF FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE
ESRI	ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE
ETB	EDUCATION AND TRAINING BOARD
FET	FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING
NALA	NATIONAL ADULT LITERACY AGENCY
PLC	POST LEAVING CERTIFICATE
QQI	QUALITY AND QUALIFICATIONS IRELAND
SOLAS	AN TSEIRBHÍIS OIDEACHAIS LEANÚNAIGH AGUS SCILEANNA, THE FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING AUTHORITY

CONTENTS

Abbreviations	2
Organisations	4
Acknowledgements	6
A Year in Numbers	8
Executive Summary	9
Best Practice in Further Education and Training Boards	10
Learner Recommendations	14
Project Overview	26
The National FET Learner Forum – Learner Voice Expansion in AONTAS and Beyond	32
Capacity Building in Learner Voice	32
Detailed Results	36
Areas Working Well	36
Areas for Improvement	46
Survey Findings	58
Conclusion	79
Bibliography	80
Appendices	81
Appendix 1: Members of the National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group	81
Appendix 2: Members of the National FET Learner Forum Academic Expert Group	82
Appendix 3: Survey and Results	83

ORGANISATIONS

AONTAS

AONTAS are the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation. We are a membership organisation representing adult education educators, providers, learners, and other stakeholders. AONTAS' vision is for a world where the pursuit of learning for all adults is valued, equal, and strengthens communities. We advocate for empowering adult learning that drives social equality, justice and collective action across the island of Ireland. AONTAS support learners, particularly those most educationally disadvantaged, to engage in lifelong learning, and advocate for more inclusive and accessible national education policy. AONTAS achieve these goals through research, communications, advocacy, and capacity building. Our work is aimed at building 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 the funding, coordinating, and monitoring of Further Education and Training provision in Ireland. Its mission is to support the development of a sector that is innovative, flexible and responsive to the needs of learners and employers. Its vision is to create a Further Education and Training sector that delivers quality education, training and skills to enable learners to succeed in the labour market and thrive in society. The core principles of SOLAS are:

- ensure there is robust intelligence to inform the planning, funding and design of new and existing FET provision;
- maintain a central focus on standards and quality in FET, including excellence in programme development and the ongoing professional development of the FET workforce;
- promote innovation and fund provision that meets identified needs;
- add value by fostering collaboration across the FET sector, sharing learning and empowering delivery organisations; and
- 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.

Education and Training Boards

Education and Training Boards (ETBs) are the 16 statutory authorities for FET in Ireland. Along with other responsibilities, such as youth work and a range of 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. In this way, Education and Training Boards seek to make a real difference to the lives of the people they serve. Such responsiveness continues to be the hallmark of the Education and Training Boards sector, looking outward nationally and internationally, while servicing education and training locally and individually.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Learners

We would like to thank all the learners who took part in the National FET Learner Forum in the academic year 2022-2023. It is your voice that is at the centre of this project. Each adult learner generously offered their time and shared their voice. Your feedback will further the aim of creating a more inclusive, improved and democratic FET sector in the future. For this, we appreciate you and thank you for your efforts.

SOLAS

The National FET Learner Forum is funded by SOLAS. The National FET Learner Forum is borne out of SOLAS' commitment to listening to and responding to the needs of learners through a key action in the 2014-2019 FET strategy (SOLAS, 2014), and remains relevant in the 2020-2024 FET Strategy, which states, "we must continue the work of the FET learner forum in securing qualitative feedback at national and regional level on FET" (SOLAS, 2020, p.57). Since 2016, SOLAS have funded AONTAS to host Forum events and publish reports. This project would not exist without their continued support, and we thank them for their collaboration throughout this year.

Education and Training Boards

Education and Training Boards across Ireland are vital partners in the Forum project. The events could not take place without Education and Training Boards recruiting and supporting learners to participate in the events that AONTAS host. Their openness to receiving the feedback from learners through these reports is also a cornerstone of the project. We thank the Education and Training Boards who collaborated on this project in the academic year 2022-2023, as this partnership was crucial to the success of the Forum project. We thank you for your continued collaboration and your commitment engaging with and taking action on learner recommendations.

The National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group

The National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group is a group of external stakeholders who provide invaluable cross-sectoral advice and consultation on the project. The group consists of two learner representatives, and representatives from SOLAS, Education and Training Boards Ireland, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Without their guidance, the project would not be able to successfully expand as it has over this academic year. We are particularly grateful in relation to the return to in-person events, and the development of the FET Learners as Leaders Programme.

The National FET Learner Forum Academic Expert Group

We would also like to thank the Academic Expert group. The group consists of experts in learner voice from Ireland and further afield. Their research expertise helps to maintain a solid academic foundation to the project. We thank them for their support and commitment to meaningful learner voice processes, which continue to underpin our work.



A YEAR IN NUMBERS

The National FET Learner Forum 2022-2023: A Year in Numbers



3,508
Learners



12

Regional
Events



12

Regional
Reports



12

Education and
Training Boards



102

Focus Groups



2,569

Survey Responses

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents findings from 12 regional events of the National FET Learner Forum held across twelve Education and Training Boards between November 2022 and May 2023. These Education and Training Boards were:

- Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board
- Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board
- Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board
- Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board
- Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board
- Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board
- Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board
- Louth and Meath Education and Training Board
- Tipperary Education and Training Board
- Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board
- Cork Education and Training Board
- Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board.

Each of these events was held in person. We conducted paper and online learner surveys throughout the year. These events brought together 3,508 learners from 12 Education and Training Boards, with 2,569 survey responses.

The findings contained in this report reflect the key issues affecting FET learners in the past academic year. This year, our focus group and survey questions reflected our interest in additional contextual factors such as the mental health and wellbeing of learners, and encompassing their accommodation and financial situations. The overall report illustrates some of the key problems facing these learners as they pursue education, as well as some of the holistic benefits of Further Education and Training.

Best Practice in Further Education and Training Boards

In this section, the report showcases examples of best practice. During the 2022-2023 academic year, learners spoke about many different areas that are working well. AONTAS have taken this opportunity to share some of these examples and congratulate the Education and Training Boards for this provision.

Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board – Tutors

- Learners at Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board shared how their tutors helped to instil a sense of confidence and capacity in them. Learners appreciated in particular that their tutors helped them to realise how knowledgeable and capable they were, and that teaching was done in the context of an atmosphere of mutual respect and knowledge-building. This exemplifies what educational theorist Paolo Freire refers to as the “co-creation” of knowledge between learner and teacher. As one Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board learner explained:
 - "It's just such a relaxed [way of] learning. We all contribute to the class, but ultimately, he instigates us to bring out of us what we probably wouldn't even have thought that we could know. It's brilliant."
- Learners also explained how the patience shown by their tutors and the one-on-one support they were able to avail of was crucial to their success in their courses, with one learner explaining:
 - “If you're really bogged down, your tutors will take the time and they will go through everything with you. And I think that's a massive support to anybody.”
- Notably, tutors were praised for their teaching skills, kindness, and generosity in 11 of the regional reports for the academic year 2022-2023.

Cork Education and Training Board – Atmosphere

- Learners shared how the atmosphere of respect and inclusivity at Cork Education and Training Board helped them thrive in their learning. The atmosphere was one where learners felt important, and that their voices were heard. This was a notable departure from the atmosphere some learners had previously encountered in schools or other educational spaces, where they felt they were not treated like adults. The learning atmosphere at Cork Education and Training Board, which emphasises equality among staff and learners, was a marked improvement, and learners’ satisfaction with this atmosphere emerged strongly in the focus group discussions. One learner explained:
 - “Everyone is treated the same, they make us feel equal and welcome. They accept you for who you are.”

Another learner echoed this, stating:

- “Everyone is included where we are, doesn't matter if you have a disability or you speak a different language – it's very inclusive.”
- This atmosphere of inclusivity was highly valued by learners at Cork Education and Training Board.

Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board – Mental Health Support

- At Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board, learners felt that they could access mental health support, such as counselling appointments, with ease. Learners had a solid understanding of how to access this support, and shared how it helped them in their learning journey. As one learner explained:
 - “We have two psychologists. You can usually go and see them whenever they want to see you, or you can go and see them whenever you want. Just to have a chat one-to-one. I can trust them.”

Another learner echoed this, stating:

- “If we needed it, we had the counsellor...he's there to help us. You'd know he's there.”

Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board – Additional Support

- Learners at Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board shared how they benefitted from additional, wraparound supports provided by the Education and Training Board on top of the learning support offered by their tutors. This included additional, one-to-one supports for people with learning disabilities, assistance with digital device loans, and information on how to access mental health supports. In particular, learners praised the “Active Inclusion Support” system, with one learner describing it as “invaluable.” They explained:
 - “In my first year I was really the technophobe. I was full of fears and all sorts of difficulties, and I was really wary about social media and everything. And I never had a smartphone or anything. So, when I started my first word processing [class], I knew I needed a bit of extra help – all those in the class were just more in the world of technology than I was. So, I said it to my tutor, straight away, no problem, and again through the Active Inclusion Supports, I used to get an extra hour a week. And it was a great space for me to get rid of those nerves and realise I can do this. But it was up in my head. It was more of a mental, psychological... I was coming in full of whatever. So, because I got the extra space, it was an invaluable hour. [It] really helped.”

Another learner echoed this, stating:

- “There’s a few things in my campus; there’s AIS, which is Active Inclusion Supports. So [it] kind of covers, if you want a loan of a laptop, or if you want some counselling, or if you want specific learning, you’ve a problem with reading or writing, or whatever. And you apply for that, and that was there.”
- Learners said that they were offered support on digital skills, learning disabilities, digital device loans, and mental health, all through the centralised hub of Active Inclusion Supports. Through the focus group discussions, it emerged that learners found this to be an accessible and highly beneficial system.

Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board – Adult Guidance Service

- Multiple learners at Kilkenny at Carlow Education and Training Board spoke about the positive experiences they had with the Adult Guidance Service. Learners shared how they felt the service was well-advertised and accessible, and explained the difference it made to their learning experiences. As one learner shared:
 - “I’ve been to the Carlow Adult Guidance Centre. I felt I could go there to get help. I actually think the staff is absolutely brilliant. I could not recommend it enough.”
- Another learner felt that the Adult Guidance Service provided clear information on what course options were available, citing their positive experience with the service as a key reason they had started their current course:
 - “I was surprised, in a way, by how lovely they were. That’s why I came here to [my place of learning], because I had options given to me and [they] explained what paths I could take being a mature student.”
- Another learner echoed this, sharing that their interaction with the Adult Guidance Service was invaluable to their progression through their course, stating,
 - “I suppose the guidance that I’ve been given, I definitely wouldn’t be anywhere without it.”

Tipperary Education and Training Board – Learner Voice

- Learners from Tipperary Education and Training Board shared how the Student Council made a difference to their experience of learning. Learners felt that this was an important channel through which they could express their views and be heard by staff, and a number of learners expressed that they felt heard and that their voices had an impact on their learning experience. The Student Council was also seen by learners as a source of connection and mental health support, with one learner noting:

- “We have a Student Council which is great for support, for mental health as well.”

Another learner echoed this, stating;

- “The environment in the classroom has meant that we have the confidence to use our voice more, which can actually contribute to other people learning more in the course.”

Learners in Tipperary Education and Training Board shared how they felt empowered to use their voices, with another learner describing how;

- “Having the courage to pick up the phone and call the ETB to try and get on to a course is a really big thing for a lot of us here, especially those of us who left school early. And now we are talking in this group. I don’t think a lot of us would have been able to do that before.”

LEARNER RECOMMENDATIONS



This **Learners' Voices Across Ireland** report is a collection of data (i.e. learner voice) from individual Education and Training Boards across Ireland

Each individual event becomes a '**Regional Report**'



The merging of these reports provides us with a national view of learner experiences, the quality of programmes, and recommendations for the future planning of the FET sector

The frequency table shows us how often this issue or experience was highlighted in Education and Training Boards across Ireland



This point was raised by learners and noted in **1 ETB Regional Report**



This point was raised by learners and noted in **2 ETB Regional Reports**

As described in the above graphic, in order to convey the breadth of learner experiences, recommendations have been broken down into areas working well and areas for improvement and are displayed in the order of the frequency with which they appear in the reports. The maximum frequency for each recommendation is twelve, as there are twelve regional reports for each Education and Training Board where regional events took place over the course of the year. It is important to note that a frequency of '12' does not mean that a topic was raised by twelve learners, or that it emerged in discussions twelve times. Rather, it means that the topic emerged as a recommendation in each of the twelve reports that we produced this year. The topic of tutors, for example, was raised as a positive aspect of FET learning by learners such that it appeared in 11 out of the 12 reports we produced in the Academic Year 2022–2023. This approach is also supported by thematic coding in the analysis stage, whereby the frequency at which a topic arises in a focus group directs how the researchers' group and direct their analysis (Lawrence and Tar: 2013).

Throughout the seven years of the Forum project, AONTAS has seen marked improvements by Education and Training Boards based on recommendations from learners. This is illustrated in the fact that, although "mental health" has been raised as an area for improvement by learners over consecutive years of the project, this year mental health is one of the most commonly occurring "Areas Working Well" identified in the research. Learners have responded well to the expansion of mental health supports, such as counselling services, in Education and Training Boards. While the below "Areas for Improvement" includes topics in which many Education and Training Boards have made great strides, their reporting and frequency remain important in order to show a comparative and nationwide picture of FET provision.

AREAS WORKING WELL		
TOPIC	FREQ.	Learner Feedback
Tutors	11 out of 12 ETBs	– Learners found tutors instrumental in improving their confidence and supporting their learning
Atmosphere	10	– Learners benefitted greatly from the atmosphere of respect and equality across Education and Training Boards
Wider Benefits of FET	9	– Learners appreciated the wider benefits of FET, such as increased confidence and the opportunity to make new friends
Mental Health	9	– Learners were pleased with the mental health support they were able to access through their Education and Training Boards. Learners also shared how taking a FET course had a positive impact on their mental health

AREAS WORKING WELL		
TOPIC	FREQ.	Learner Feedback
Peer Learning	7	– Learners across Education and Training Boards shared how they learned in a collaborative manner with their peers
Learning Support	6	– Learners felt that they could access learning support, such as support with literacy, numeracy, and digital skills, from Education and Training Board staff
Information and Communication Technology	6	– Learners were appreciative of the digital skills support, training, and device access they availed of through their Education and Training Boards
Learner Voice	5	– Learners found learner voice to be an essential part of their learning experience and were glad to report that this was well supported across a number of Education and Training Boards
Course Content	5	– Learners enjoyed the interesting content of their courses
Hybrid Learning	4	– Learners were satisfied with the option to participate in hybrid learning
New Skills	3	– Learners enjoyed the new skills they had developed as a result of taking their courses, including digital skills, public speaking, studying, and increased confidence
In-Person Learning	3	– Learners welcomed the return to in-person learning following the COVID-19 pandemic
Guidance Service	3	– Learners benefitted from the Adult Guidance Service
Diversity	3	– Learners valued diversity and were glad it was promoted in their Education and Training Boards
English for Speakers of Other Languages	2	– Learners taking courses in English for Speakers of Other Languages enjoyed their courses and praised their tutors

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT			
TOPIC	FREQ.	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
English for Speakers of Other Languages	8 out of 12 ETBs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners taking courses in English for Speakers of Other Languages are enjoying their courses and would like more hours in class if this is possible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is significant demand for classes in English for Speakers of Other Languages. Offer more class hours to those taking English for Speakers of Other Languages where this is possible Consider hiring more tutors to teach classes in English for Speakers of Other Languages in order to meet the demand Expand other opportunities for English language skills development through peer learning and informal social gatherings, such as coffee mornings Consult ESOL learners on the different ways they would like to develop their English language skills outside of accredited courses
Course Scheduling, including Class Hours	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners would like to be informed of course timetables, including any changes, far in advance of their courses commencing. Additionally, there are some courses for which learners would like more hours in class to be made available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase the lead-in time for communicating information about course acceptance and course changes Consult learners on their preferred course hours for courses with low contact hours

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT			
TOPIC	FREQ.	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
Facilities	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like facilities, including on-site parking, heating in buildings, canteen availability, up-to-date computers, and accessibility aids, such as lifts, to be reviewed and updated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Conduct review of status of facilities across centres, identifying which areas need upgrading – Implement learner consultation when planning facilities review – Conduct needs assessment/inquiry into the accessibility of facilities for learners with disabilities – Ensure all learners have equal access to functional, up-to-date facilities that meet their learning needs
Assessment	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like more frequent feedback from their tutors on how they are performing in assessments. Additionally, learners specified a preference for a variety of assessment methods, including practical and written examinations in addition to continuous assessment. Finally, learners would like assessment deadlines to be spread out more evenly so as to minimise academic pressure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Review assessment procedures with a view to diversifying assessment methods for certain courses where appropriate – Implement learner feedback when devising assessments – Consider learner workloads and deadlines when deciding on assessment deadlines, and ensure communication between different course coordinators so as to minimise competing deadlines

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT			
TOPIC	FREQ.	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
Learning Environment	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners highlighted difficulty with their learning environments in a number of ways. For some taking hybrid learning courses, their at-home learning environment was unsuitable. For others attending their courses in person in centres, they found that group dynamics among learners were challenging – Learners expressed a wish to be treated as mature adults across their centres 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Consider which aspects of the learning environment at home, such as lack of suitable workspace or digital devices, may be an impediment to learner success, and help to mitigate these where possible by continuing to provide device loans and dedicated study spaces in centres – Consult learners on how tutors and Education and Training Board staff can best manage learner group dynamics in order to maximise cohesion and inclusion and minimise exclusion

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT			
TOPIC	FREQ.	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
Mental Health	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like to see mental health supports expanded, particularly in the areas of access to counselling appointments, visibility of mental health supports, and flexibility around attendance and deadlines for learners who are suffering from a mental health issue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Consider hiring more counsellors to provide appointments to learners – Continue raising awareness of mental health issues among Education and Training Board staff and learners – Expand the advertisement of the mental health support services currently available through Education and Training Boards – Expand the provision of mental health education and resourcing for learners, delivering resources such as mindfulness and yoga classes, and stress-management techniques – Conduct needs assessment in relation to mental health supports for FET learners
Transport	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Some learners struggled with unreliable or unaffordable transportation to their courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Expand financial support offered to learners for travel, including fuel allowance and public transportation – Link with local and public transport services and organisations, such as TFI Local Link to expand access to colleges of Further Education and other FET centres across Ireland

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT			
TOPIC	FREQ.	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
Work Experience	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners shared how they experienced difficulties finding a work experience placement and would like more support from their Education and Training Boards in organising this. Additionally, learners would like work experience placements to be more regulated, with more oversight by their Education and Training Boards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Implement a review of work experience procedures in Education and Training Boards – Link with local employers to support learners in locating and commencing their work experience placements – Expand the guidance and assistance offered to learners in securing their own work experience placements – Incorporate cultural sensitivity and an awareness of the barriers faced by learners from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in accessing work experience placements into work experience procedures
Course Content	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like course content to be current and practical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Review course curricula and update in line with latest information – Tailor courses to current employment practices to prepare learners for the labour market

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT			
TOPIC	FREQ.	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
Negative Perception of FET	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like Education and Training Boards to help counter negative attitudes towards FET in schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Liaise with schools to counter negative attitudes towards FET – Work with schools to promote FET as a viable educational option compared with higher education – Expand the advertisement of FET courses within secondary schools
Information and Communication Technology	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like the computers they use for their courses to be up-to-date and fit for purpose. Learners would also like more training in digital skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Undertake review of ICT facilities across ETBs and update hardware where necessary – Continue the provision of device loans to learners – Provide training in digital skills to learners who request this – Expand the advertisement of digital skills support and device loans that are available to learners
Childcare	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – For some learners, a lack of affordable childcare was a barrier to their learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Increase provision of on-site childcare in FET centres – Increase financial support given to learners to help meet childcare costs – Expand the provision of hybrid and part-time courses, which are often more suitable for learners with childcare responsibilities'

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT			
TOPIC	FREQ.	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
Communication	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like clear and timely communication on acceptance to courses, course expectations, and curricula 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Review communication processes for informing students of course offers, curricula, and assessment deadlines – Use multiple, varied communication channels, such as phone, letters, email, and text messaging, to inform students of course offers and share curricula – Provide clear and accessible information on course costs and workload to learners in advance of course commencement
Financial Support	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like more financial support to help cover the cost of meals, transport, childcare, and learning materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Review allowances given to learners to determine if they are meeting the costs associated with taking a FET course
Advertisement	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like to see diversified and expanded advertisement for FET courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Expand advertisement of FET courses through a range of methods, including websites, radio, television, and newspapers – Ensure that advertisements for FET reach a diverse audience of learners

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT			
TOPIC	FREQ.	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
Learning Support	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners benefitted from the additional learning support they received, however, learners would like more individualised support, particularly with literacy, numeracy, and completing assignments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Continue to offer more one-to-one support for learners with learning disabilities – Conduct needs assessment to determine the level of need for additional supports for learners with, for example, dyslexia and dyscalculia
Tutors	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like tutors to take a consistent approach in terms of communication about coursework, feedback to learners, and treating learners with respect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Facilitate greater communication between tutors in order to ensure a consistent approach – Consult learners on whether they feel they are treated with respect and equality by their tutors

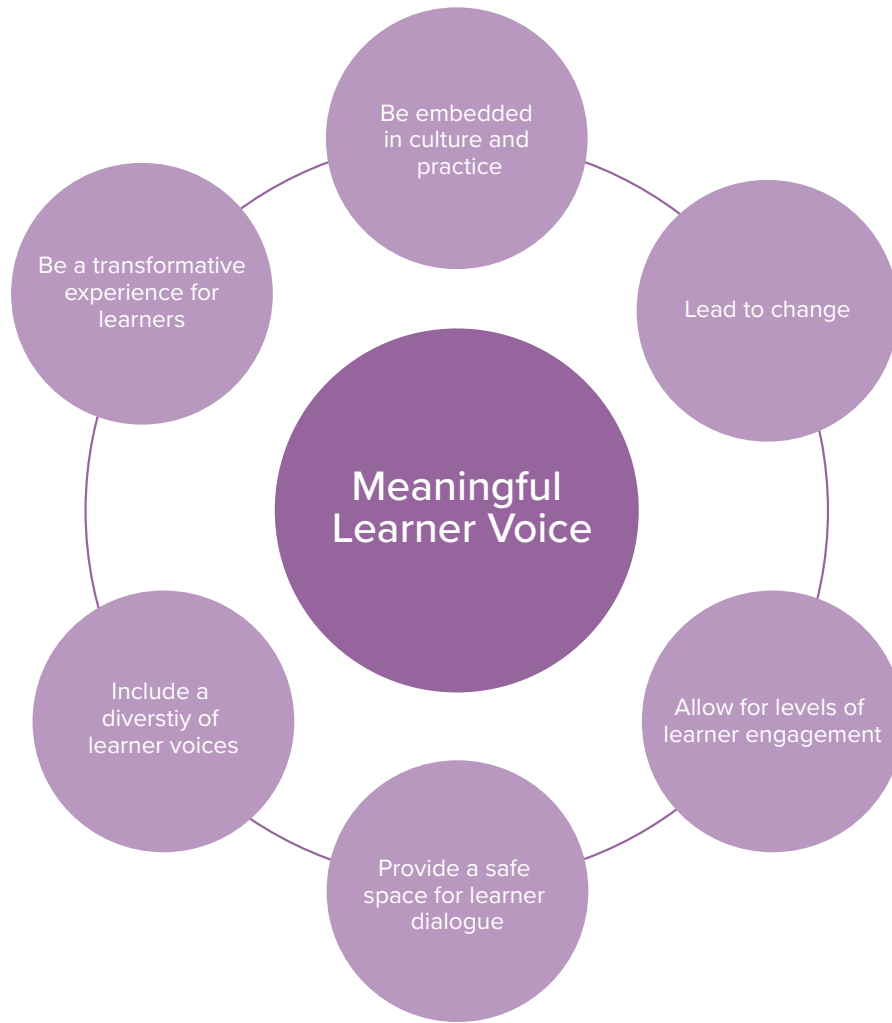


PROJECT OVERVIEW

The National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum is a large-scale learner voice project, bringing together adult learners across the country to share their experiences in FET. AONTAS then share this feedback with Education and Training Boards by developing reports based on learners' feedback and recommendations. This project is funded by SOLAS, the National Further Education and Training authority, and was devised in line with the commitment of the SOLAS 2014-2019 FET strategy to "systematically benchmark learners' views and satisfaction with their FET programme on an on-going basis through the establishment of a Learner Forum and appropriate Learner Surveys" (SOLAS, 2014, p.137). The Forum remains relevant in the 2020-2024 FET Strategy, which states, "we must continue the work of the FET learner forum in securing qualitative feedback at national and regional level on FET" (SOLAS, 2020, p.57).

Due to our expertise in learner voice and our position as a national advocacy organisation, AONTAS were commissioned to deliver this project, and have done so since the project's inception in 2016. **Figure 1** shows overall project growth since the project's beginning. The National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum began in 2016 as a qualitative project and a one-day national event representing 70 learners from different Education and Training Boards. It has since developed into a mixed-methods, regionally-focused project, which holds Education and Training Board-specific regional events each year.

Within AONTAS, this project is led by a team of qualified researchers with experience in mixed methods research and primary data collection. The project is underpinned by emancipatory learner voice theory, and the core belief that learners are best placed to recommend improvements to their educational experience. The growth of the Forum is supported and guided by the Forum Advisory Group and Academic Expert Group. Each group meets four times a year, on average. The members of each group are relevant stakeholders and experts in adult learning and learner voice, including staff in SOLAS, Education and Training Boards, DFHERIS, educators, and academics. A complete list of the members of each group can be found in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2.



This report builds on AONTAS' previous collaborative research with Education and Training Boards, which includes learner experiences in FET from 2016–2020 and research on the impact of COVID-19 on FET Learners. In 2020, AONTAS published the COVID-19 Further Education and Training Learner Report (Dowdall, Farren and Lovejoy, 2020). After this, to capture a full academic year of learning during COVID-19 restrictions, the Forum moved from a calendar-year model to an academic-year model in September 2020. The year of 2022–2023 captures the Forum's numbers from the Academic Year 2022–2023, with events spanning between November 2022 and May 2023.

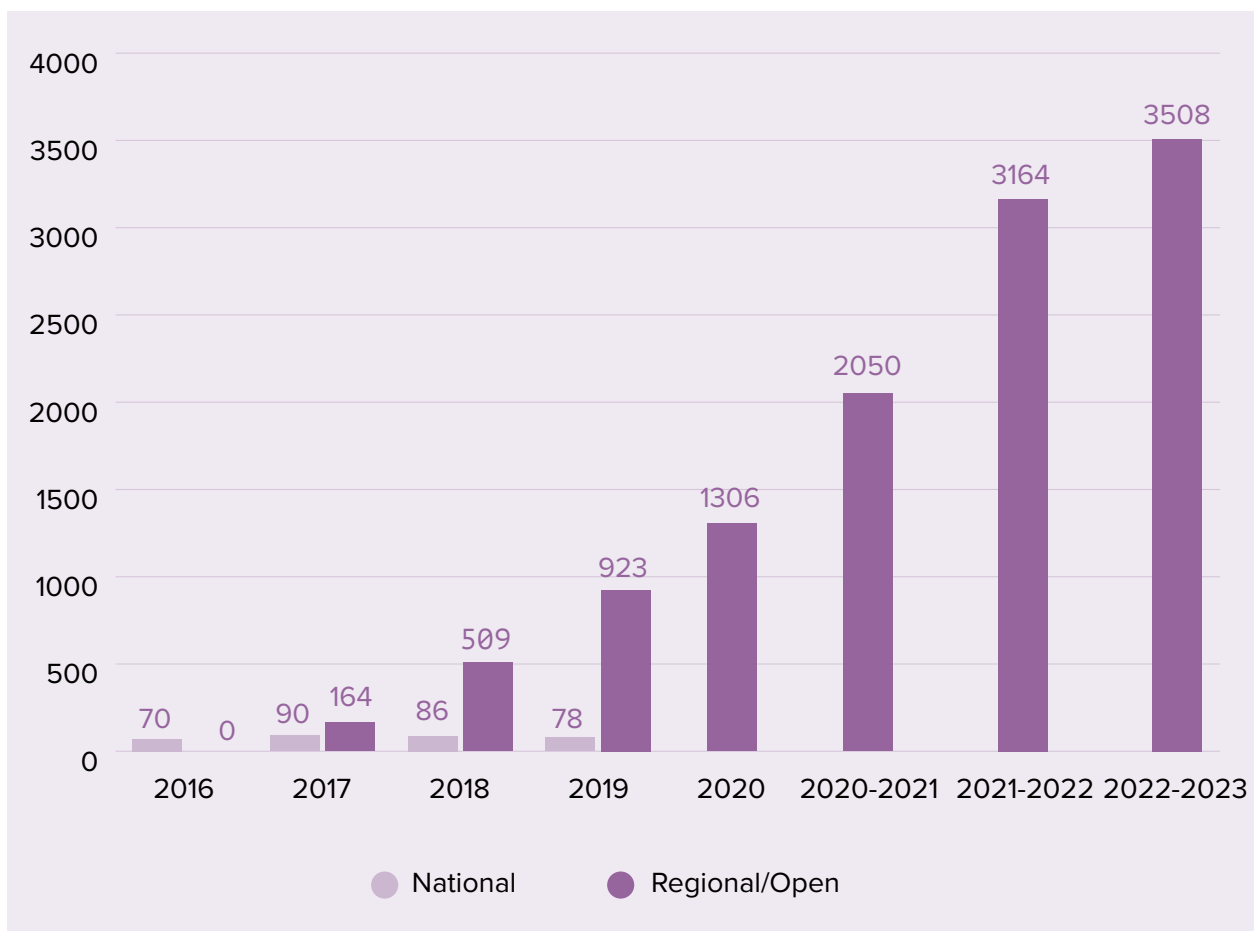


Figure 1: National FET Learner Forum participation

This project is funded by SOLAS. AONTAS and SOLAS work collaboratively on the high-level planning of this project. The delivery of this project is conducted in partnership with Education and Training Boards. They promote the events in their regions, recruit learners for each event, and support their participation. Often, a representative from each Education and Training Board also opens each Forum event. AONTAS take responsibility for the regional-level reporting of this project, through developing a report after each regional event and sending it to the relevant Education and Training Board. A Learners' Voices Across Ireland Report (previously known as an Annual Synthesis Report) and a Learner Report are also developed each year by AONTAS, with input and support from SOLAS. AONTAS hosted 12 regional events in partnership with 12 Education and Training Boards between November 2022 and May 2023. These were:

- Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board, 29th November 2022
- Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board, 6th December 2022
- Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board, 8th February 2023
- Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board, 21st February 2023

- Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board, 22nd February 2023
- Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board, 28th February 2023
- Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board, 1st March 2023
- Louth and Meath Education and Training Board, 22nd March 2023
- Tipperary Education and Training Board, 28th March 2023
- Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board, 30th March 2023
- Cork Education and Training Board, 26th April 2023
- Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board, 3rd May 2023

The Forum reached a total of 3,508 over the course of the academic year November 2022–May 2023, with 939 focus group participants and 2,569 survey responses. This report represents a synthesis of findings from all of the regional events this academic year.

The reports from the regional events have been shared with Education and Training Boards, SOLAS, and other relevant bodies, such as the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). At each event, there was an average of 9 learners per focus group and an average of 214 responses for a learner survey per participating Education and Training Board. The total learner participation per participating Education and Training Board can be found in **Figure 2**.

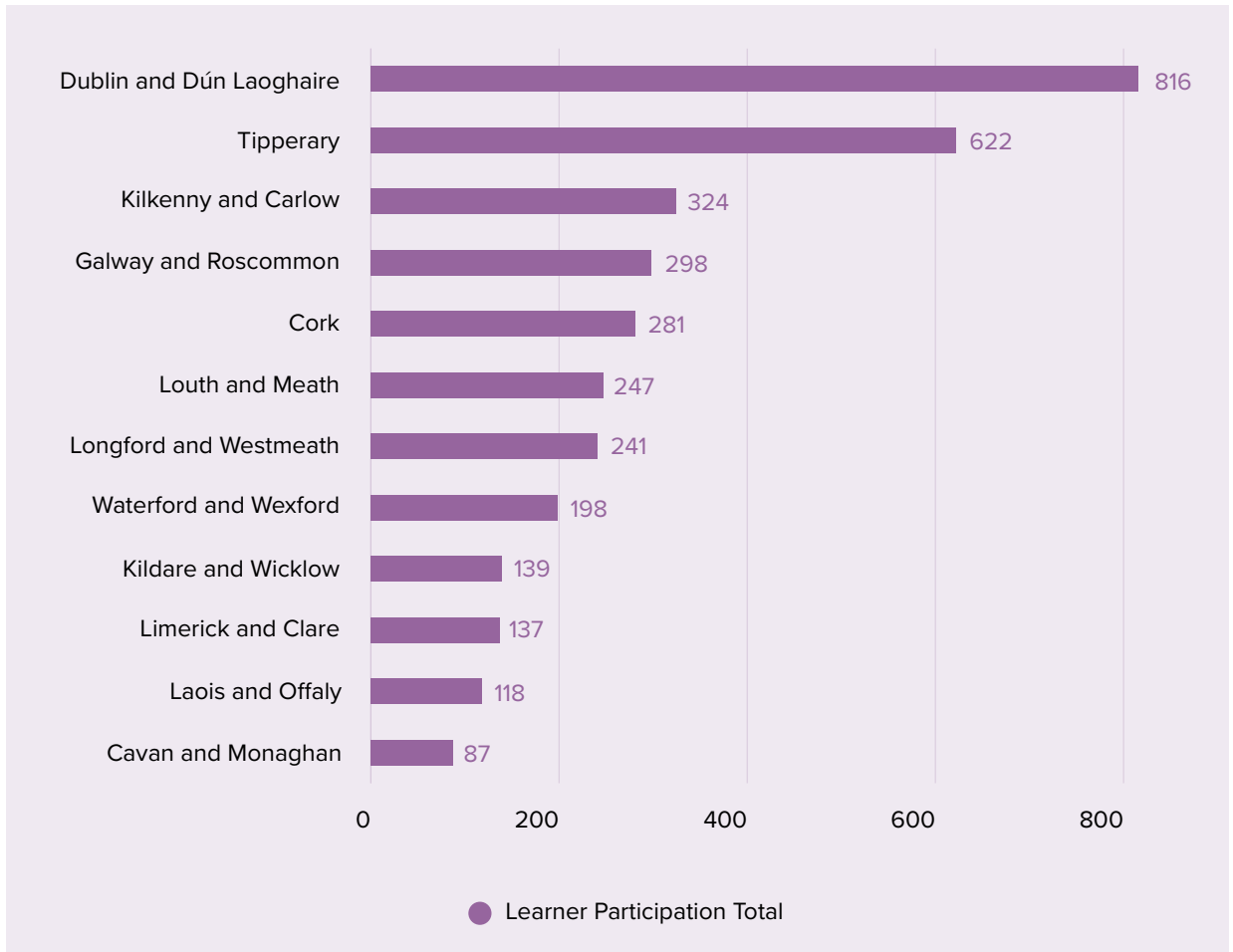


Figure 2: Learner participation in the National FET Learner Forum per participating Education and Training Board

The Forum aims to include a broad and 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. Education and Training Boards made efforts to recruit a representative cross-section of learners, from a broad range of programmes and levels. Level information is gathered in both the survey and focus groups. Programme information is gathered through the learner survey. **Figure 3** presents the total number of learners per programme. The most frequent programme represented was Post Leaving Certificate courses (422 learners), followed by Back to Education Initiative (275) and then Adult Literacy Groups (204). **Figure 4** shows the summary of learner participation by course levels. Learners came from a range of different levels of courses, with the most common being Level 5 (1,108). Note: 525 learners did not answer the question on their level in the learner survey. The level of these learners has been recorded as “Unknown.”

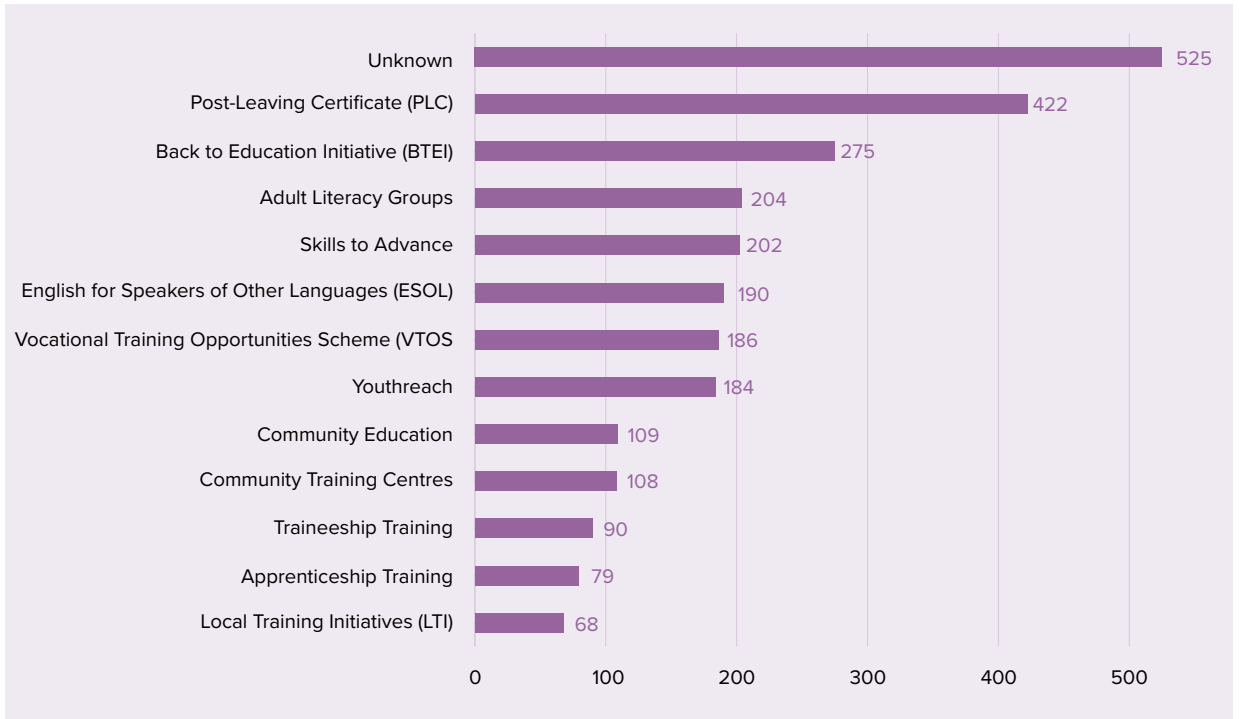


Figure 3: Learner representation by programme or course

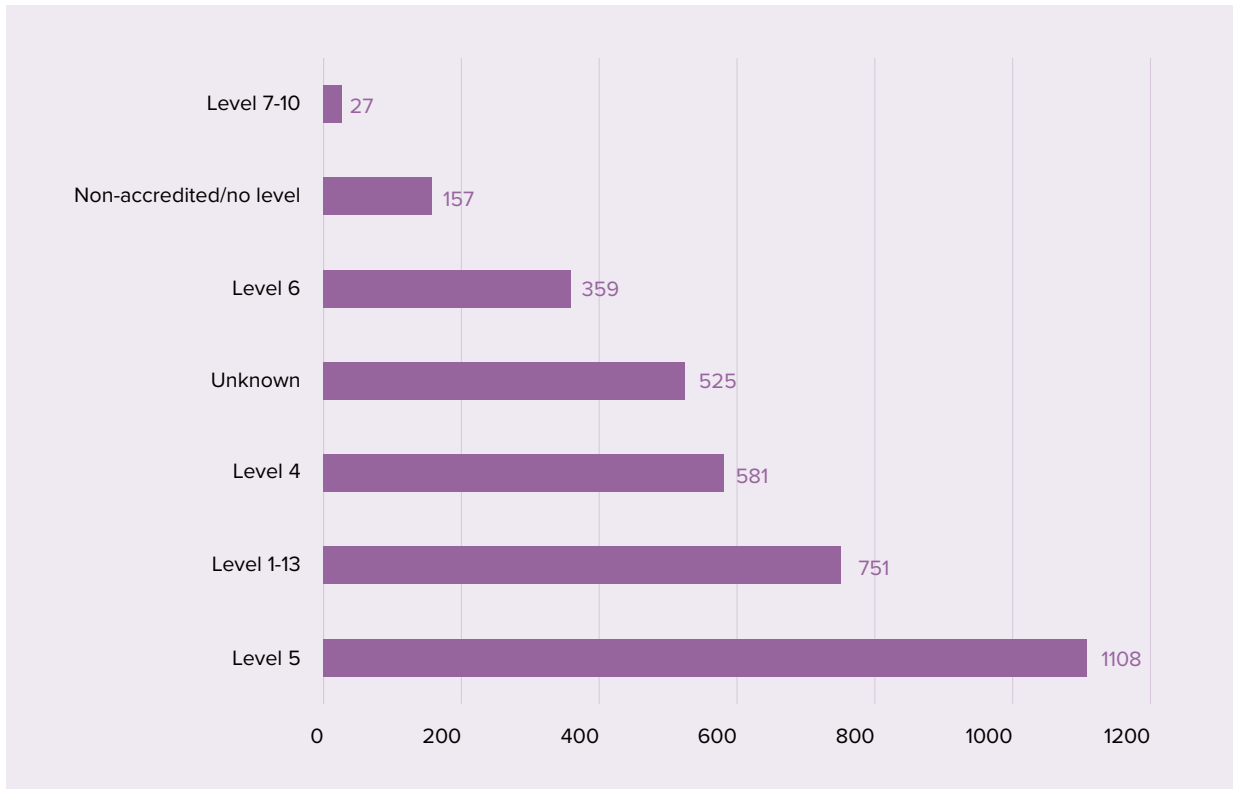


Figure 4: Learner representation by course levels

The National FET Learner Forum – Learner Voice Expansion in AONTAS and Beyond

Beyond sharing the views of thousands of learners with Education and Training Boards, the Forum project has expanded greatly since its inception in 2016. Learner voice initially harnessed through the Forum is at the heart of all AONTAS advocacy and communications work. Further capacity-building programmes and initiatives developed through the Forum have created meaningful and authentic opportunities for learners to represent and advocate for themselves and other learners at a national level. Below are some of initiatives developed from or connected to the Forum that strengthen AONTAS' work and learner voice for action in the Irish FET sector. Much of this work is completed in partnership, and with thanks to the Education and Training Boards.

Learner Voice

The National FET Learner Forum Learner Newsletter

The National FET Learner Forum learner newsletter is an AONTAS publication designed for Adult and Community Education learners. The newsletter advertises National FET Learner Forum Events, other events and opportunities for learners, and shares stories from adult learners on their experience returning to education and the positive impact it has had on their lives.

Learner Stories

Learner stories from those who have taken part in the Forum are also shared on the AONTAS website at <https://www.aontas.com/learner-stories/>, to promote the benefits of adult learning to potential learners and to promote the great work of Education and Training Boards and other membership organisations.

Learner Voice in Advocacy Submissions and Campaigns

AONTAS ensure that the voices of learners are heard by high-level stakeholders and decision makers by including learner recommendations and quotations arising from the Forum in all AONTAS submissions and publications. Similarly, communications campaigns regularly draw on learner recommendations and learner quotations from the Forum to ensure our work is learner-led and authentic.

Lifelong Learning Research

In acknowledgement of the decrease in FET participation among certain cohorts, AONTAS undertook a mixed methods research piece on those not engaging in learning during COVID-19. This project aimed to propose clear, evidence-informed recommendations at an institutional and national level to mitigate the ongoing issue of the exacerbation of educational disadvantage arising from COVID-19 across the tertiary education system, specifically for marginalised learners. AONTAS commissioned a survey from the Learning and Work Institute, which had 1,042 respondents, aged between 17 and 64 years. This survey found that several factors positively influence whether people can take part in learning at any stage in their lives. These factors, which mean that people are more likely to participate in learning, include having a job, living in Dublin, having higher levels of education, being older when they left

formal education (that is, not leaving school early), having a job that is classed as higher-skilled, and being relatively young. Considerations for practice and policy were detailed for the following learner groups arising from eight focus groups: lone parents, learners with intellectual disabilities and physical health issues, learners affected by addiction, learners affected by imprisonment, older adult learners (65+ years), and migrant learners. For further information on these findings, [read our Lifelong Learning Participation Research report](#).

Capacity Building

FET Learners as Leaders Programme

AONTAS are now working with individual ETBs to expand Learner Voice structures in their centres, supporting, for example, the establishment of Learner Councils or working groups. Several of these structures have already been set up. The Tipperary Student Council, through Tipperary ETB, seeks to create positive change for adult learners and improve experiences and outcomes. In March 2023, AONTAS delivered a training workshop to the members of the Tipperary Student Council on understanding advocacy, identifying issues and solutions, and planning an advocacy campaign.

A second training session took place in April 2023 with Cork ETB and their Learner Voices Group. As part of the AONTAS training, we offer guidance on how to better understand ETB structures, how to make change happen within these structures, and how to plan for next steps. The key to each session is connecting with the participants' own experiences and previous knowledge.

Learner Voice Training for Education and Training Board staff

AONTAS are now providing training to staff from individual ETBs to expand Learner Voice structures in their centres. The two-hour training explores the foundations, practice and rationale of Learner Voice work and why this needs to start with the staff on the ground. The focus is on a whole-organisation approach where all staff have a part to play in creating an environment in which Learner Voice is a respected and central component.

The aim of the workshop is to provide ETB staff with the tools and practical supports necessary to develop Learner Voice as a process that is embedded in Further Education and Training and in their everyday work. Participants will explore the many ways, formal and informal, in which learners can share their views and experience of learning at their ETB, with a view to improving structures and services for everyone.

The content of this training is designed to empower ETB staff to respond to learners' needs through the establishment of organised structures, for example the establishment of Learner Councils. Organised structures are vital to successful Learner Voice engagement: staff will gain practical insights into getting started with this work in their own centres and how to make change happen within these structures. The goal is to encourage and facilitate more learners to return to and stay in Further Education and Training.

Training sessions include practical, theoretical and experiential components, connecting with the participants' own experiences and building on their existing knowledge in a practical, accessible and manageable way. Each session ends with an affirmative action section, with colleagues and facilitators working together to identify a number of priority actions, and to put a timeline in place for their implementation.

For further information on this work, [visit the Learner Voice Training section of our website](#).

Learners Speaking at National Events

AONTAS believe that learners who attend a Forum event should be provided with public-speaking opportunities to share their views on their educational experiences. Learners who have taken part in the Forum have spoken at events at regional, national and international level, organised by AONTAS and by other organisations.

Learners on Representative Structures

Education and Training Boards across Ireland have been making great strides in integrating learners and learner voice into their representative and organisational structures. Through the FET Learners as Leaders programme and wider consultative processes, AONTAS have provided training and advice on how to maintain and expand learner voice processes across Education and Training Boards.

Learners as Facilitators

Another goal of the Forum is for AONTAS to offer professional opportunities for learners to be involved in the project. In 2021, AONTAS developed “Learners as Facilitators”, a programme for learners to become trained, paid facilitators at Forum events. Through the project, we support learners to work as freelance facilitators at Forum events, strengthening the authentic, learner-led aims of the project. In 2022, AONTAS brought three new facilitators, who were trained as part of the programme, on board as facilitators with the National FET Learner Forum. Their work facilitating focus group discussions among learners is reflected in this report.

If you or your learners are interested in any of the above opportunities, please email forum@aontas.com for more information.



DETAILED RESULTS

This section compiles findings gathered from learners across the regional events as detailed in the Executive Summary. Learner recommendations are broken down into two key sections: **Areas Working Well** and **Areas for Improvement**. Each area is developed by topic. The order in which each topic is introduced is based on the frequency outlined in the Learner Recommendations table featured at the start of this report.

This section uses learner quotes throughout to represent the learner experience as authentically as possible. While some of the points raised in this section may be beyond the capacity of the Education and Training Board to fix, they have been included to remain true to learner voice and give a broader image of the overall experience learners have in FET. All comments have been anonymised to allow learners to speak freely. In order to be inclusive, “they” has been used throughout this report in place of “s/he” to refer to learners in the singular form.

Areas Working Well

Learners across a range of levels appreciated their **tutors (11)** for their kindness and availability and the support they provided to learners. In particular, learners benefitted from their tutors’ abilities to instil confidence in them and to foster a collaborative, mutual learning atmosphere founding on equality. Learners cited the tailored, one-on-one support they received from tutors as key to their educational success and self-belief. Tutors were available and approachable, and, overall, learners felt empowered to ask questions. They also felt that tutors created an atmosphere where by each learner could learn at their own pace. As one learner shared, “The teacher is very experienced and knows what's inside the slides and we can ask anything during the presentation.” Another learner supported this, stating:

“The person teaching us, she noticed that there was quite a few people that were struggling a bit and then she said, 'oh, I'll help you.' You know? She was willing to work at our pace, so she was willing to change the way she was teaching us. So that was definitely a big help.”

The value tutors brought to the educational experience was noted by other learners from a range of courses and levels, with one learner remarking, “If one has a question, she'll explain it and you don't feel embarrassed or under any pressure to ask a question. She's very knowledgeable.” Overall, learners shared how they felt that tutors have been crucial to their feeling welcome and supported in their courses. They would like to see their tutors be provided with the necessary resources and professional development opportunities to continue to support learners. The centrality of tutors to learners’

positive experiences in adult education has recurred as a finding through the National FET Learner Forum since the project's inception in 2016. Through each consecutive year of the National FET Learner Forum, learners have highlighted the instrumental role teaching staff play in facilitating learners to engage with adult education in a meaningful way. Relationships of support between tutors and adult learners are routinely shown to be a core part of learners' success in Further Education and Training, as tutors are invaluable sources of stability, support, and encouragement. Furthermore, positive relationships with adult education tutors can provide a healing experience for adult learners with prior negative experiences in school. The finding that tutors are the most successful component of the FET experience for adult learners supports the expansion of an adult education ethos of care and solidarity that prioritises the professional development and wellbeing of teaching staff as well as learners. As such, it is recommended that teaching staff in Further Education are supported professionally and financially to continue their outstanding work with adult learners.

Learners praised the atmosphere (10) in their Education and Training Boards for a variety of reasons. Learners across a range of levels, programmes, and Education and Training Boards cited an atmosphere of respect and trust as a reason for enjoying their courses. In particular, learners compared the atmosphere at their Education and Training Boards to school favourably, feeling that they were now treated with more respect. As one learner explained, "in secondary school, I never had fun while learning. Definitely not. And now it's like a totally different vibe altogether. It's much more relaxed." Another learner from a different Education and Training Board expressed a similar sentiment, stating:

"School was a very toxic environment. Like, if you couldn't keep up with everyone else then you were kind of made to feel like, 'well why don't you know this like everyone else knows it?' But that's just because everyone learns at a different pace and learns in different ways. You're not made to feel like that in [my programme]...Everyone's understood. I feel like it's kind of a place that you're listened to and your needs are met kind of respectfully, like a person. It's the first time like I've actually felt safe in a learning environment."

The positive and welcoming atmosphere experienced by learners was not only recognised in comparison to school or other educational environments. Learners from a range of programmes shared how they felt Education and Training Board staff went out of their way to make everyone feel respected, welcomed, and included. As one learner explained, "Everyone is included where we are, doesn't matter if you have a disability or you speak a different language – it's very inclusive." Another learner echoed this, stating, "Everyone is treated the same. They make us feel equal and welcome. They accept you for who you are."

Finally, learners also felt relieved that there was a lack of pressure and over-focus on academic achievement. As one learner explained, “when it comes to that relaxed environment, nobody's feeling judged.” Learners would like to see this supportive atmosphere continue.

A number of learners shared how they valued the wider benefits (9) of FET in the focus group discussions. Learners shared how they decided to take their courses for a range of reasons outside of obtaining a qualification or preparing for future employment, such as getting out of the house, building a routine, developing self-confidence, and making new friends. Wider benefits included increased confidence, structure in one's life, making new friends, and developing more social skills. These additional benefits were seen to add significantly to learners' positive experiences in their courses and had a demonstrable impact on their wider lives. In some cases, taking part in a FET course had a positive impact on learners' mental health, and learning was a form of self-care.

As one learner explained, “At this stage of my life, where I've worked all my life, I see this course as 'me time.'” Another learner shared, “I'm learning how to communicate with people more, my social skills are improving and I'm getting lots of presentation skills.” Taking part in FET was also vital in helping to build social connections and a sense of community for migrants. As one learner explained:

“I moved to Ireland only last September and the course has made me feel like I belong somewhere.”

Another learner explained how their course played a role in personal development, sharing:

“It was educational, it was informative, but we developed – it was kind of like you went in not knowing things, but you came out knowing more about yourself.”

Learners would like Education and Training Boards to continue to acknowledge that there are many reasons for taking a FET course and many benefits of FET, which include social and psychological reasons, in addition to upskilling and employability.

Learners were happy with the attitude towards **mental health (9)** and the associated supports on offer through their Education and Training Boards. There were a number of mental health positives highlighted by learners across Education and Training Boards. Learners referred to formal supports, such as access to psychological counselling appointments, initiatives to raise awareness, such as campaigns on mental health, and informal supports, such as the openness shown by their peers and tutors. Learners felt particularly supported to take care of their mental health when their tutors showed

sensitivity and flexibility when it came to assignments, attendance, and deadlines. As one learner shared:

“I think in our centre about mental health and wellbeing, they’re always open. Like if you need extra time for the assignment, if you’re struggling, if you’re under stress, they are kind of open to give you extra time, or if you’re working, you’re okay to come maybe like later, or go earlier.”

Another learner echoed this, highlighting the role tutors play in caring for learner wellbeing and raising awareness about self-care: “I have to say, the teachers would make everybody feel welcome and... one particular teacher is asking, '[how was] the weekend, how is everybody today?', and she goes around the room, and checks that everybody’s doing well. And there is great support for people’s wellbeing, from all the teachers. You can’t learn if you’re not well in yourself either.”

Learners who availed of counselling services found these beneficial, with one learner explaining, “Talking to a psychologist, we have two psychologists. You can usually go and see them whenever they want to see you, or you can go and see them whenever you want. Just to have a chat one-to-one. I can trust them.”

In addition to counselling services, course coordinators, and tutors, learners cited their peers as important to their mental health. One learner shared:

“They were great. My tutors were there for us for anything. Not just about work stuff, but there for anything. Mine phoned me just to make sure I was all right.”

Finally, learners also expressed how taking part in their FET courses had a positive impact on their mental health, with one learner stating, “This course has done a huge amount for my confidence and my anxiety,” and another learner sharing, “this has been my best year yet.”

Learners have enjoyed positive mental health benefits through taking their FET courses in a number of ways, and would like these to continue. As the Areas for Improvement section of this report shows, learners would like to see mental health support expanded, and in particular would like more opportunities to take part in courses on positive mental health and self-care, such as mindfulness classes. Learners would also like to see access to psychological counselling expanded. There is some disparity of service provision and advertisement of mental health support between regions, and this has emerged in the research as an issue that learners would like to see rectified.

Learners shared how they enjoyed learning in a collaborative and supportive manner through **peer learning (6)**, with fellow learners providing a vital source of encouragement to one another in the classroom. Learning from others was seen to have a positive impact not only on learners' understanding of the course material, but played a key role in developing knowledge and awareness of other cultures, something learners across Education and Training Boards clearly valued. One learner explained:

"We have a very broad range of ethnicities and stuff in ours. There's people from Nigeria, parts of Asia, Poland, all stuff, so you're getting completely different perspectives of how people were raised and how their views formed and stuff. And I enjoyed it. I find it very easy to learn in settings like that where I'm listening."

Learners also shared how they helped each other with course materials, with one learner noting, "I was doing my course a year before others joined so I am able to teach them a lot of what I've learned which I like doing and it also helps the teacher." The sense of camaraderie among learners was a significant aspect of peer learning. The comments from learners in the focus groups exemplify the social benefits conferred by peer learning. Learners would like Education and Training Boards to continue to recognise the value of peer learning in Further Education and Training.

A number of learners expressed their satisfaction with the additional **learning support (6)** they availed of through their Education and Training Boards. In the focus group discussions, learners highlighted the various forms of learning support they were able to access, which included support with literacy, numeracy, and digital skills. This support was seen as invaluable, and greatly facilitated their learning journey, contributing to their overall feelings of confidence. As one learner shared:

"We have a girl in our course who gets on very well but struggles with writing assignments. Once she let them know this, there was a whole group of people coming in to help her, so it's great."

Comments such as this highlight the collaborative and supportive environment fostered by the Education and Training Board staff. Learners also emphasised the individualised learning support they received from their tutors. Some learners shared how this support bolstered their confidence, explaining how, if they encountered difficulties with course material or completing assignments, they felt that their tutors would devote the time and effort to helping them. As one learner acknowledged, "If you're really bogged down, your tutors will take the time and they will go through everything with you. And I think that's a massive support to anybody." Learners hoped that their Education

and Training Boards would continue to prioritise the provision of comprehensive and individualised learning support, noting that it contributes not only to the upskilling and employability of learners but also to their overall well-being and personal development. By ensuring that learners with a range of needs can access learning support, Education and Training Boards can continue to foster a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

Learners who engaged with Education and Training Boards expressed their satisfaction with the overall access to information and **communication technology (6)**, including access to digital devices and digital skills training. The provision of digital skills support and the availability of devices significantly impacted their learning experiences. One learner, for example, highlighted the value of the computer loan scheme, stating:

"The computer loan scheme, it definitely relieved a lot of anxiety. They're always available and it's very accessible, and that was really good for people who couldn't afford or just couldn't get hands on a computer."

This initiative highlights the efforts made by Education and Training Boards to ensure that learners have the necessary tools to engage with digital learning, helping to alleviate barriers to digital poverty and exclusion. Learners also acknowledged the importance of acquiring computer skills that they could use in their wider lives outside of their courses, noting in particular the independence these skills brought. As one learner shared, "Well, the computer skills for me [are important]. One of my daughters is still at home, and the first year, I had her help for everything. But now I can manage it on my own." Another learner reported, "It's brilliant... I know how to write an email now." Learners would like to see initiatives such as the computer loan scheme and training in online platforms such as Microsoft Teams continued throughout Education and Training Boards, as the provision of such free digital skills support was key to their autonomy and confidence in their learning experiences.

Learners across various Education and Training Boards emphasised the significant role of **learner voice (5)** in shaping their educational experiences, reporting the valuing and promotion of learner voice across a number of centres and colleges. Learners recognised the value of active participation and engagement, highlighting how their voices were respected and encouraged by Education and Training Board staff. As one learner expressed:

"The teachers are learning as well as the students are. If you bring up something, [they'll say] 'oh yeah, I haven't heard that, let me research that.' You're learning with them as well."

This collaborative and inclusive approach fostered an environment where learners felt valued and empowered, and were treated as active contributors to their own learning and the learning of others. Learners noted how their voices had an impact on their peers. As one learner shared, "The environment in the classroom has meant that we have the confidence to use our voice more, which actually can contribute to other people learning more in the course." Learners also shared how their voices were taken into consideration by tutors, who then delivered content based on what learners had requested. There was a clear pathway for the expression of learner voice and a resultant impact in the form of the course syllabus. As one learner explained, "You can suggest what you want to learn. And then the next session, she'll get through it... We talk about whatever's bothering us that we want to do." Finally, learners expressed how, in using their voices, they were seeing the benefits of advocating for themselves: "Whereas I've learned now do speak up and if you do, it could help somebody else as well. You're not slow just because you're not getting something."

Learners across a range of courses shared how they enjoyed the stimulating and interesting **course content (5)** they engaged with as part of Further Education and Training. Some learners shared how they found the content of their courses balanced in terms of accessibility and challenge. Course syllabi were designed in such a way as to make courses both interesting and manageable for learners. As one learner shared,

"The way the course is designed as well, it's not boring. It's challenging, but it flows along evenly."

The varied nature of the course content was another aspect of their courses that learners valued. They appreciated opportunities to blend theoretical learning with practical experience, with one learner explaining, "I love how varied the course is. There's a theoretical element blended so nicely with the outdoors part, which is a real incentive to put what we are learning into practice at home. It's so interesting. I wish I could do the course ten times over." The combination of theoretical learning and hands-on experiences allowed learners to understand the course concepts more deeply and to apply their newfound knowledge in real-life situations, enhancing their overall learning experience. The positive reception of the course content underscores the significance of taking learner preferences into account when devising course curricula. Learners would like Education and Training Boards to continue to prioritise the development of interesting and manageable, learner-centred course content.

A number of learners expressed their satisfaction with the option to participate in **hybrid learning (4)**. The flexibility afforded by this approach was particularly beneficial to learners who had jobs, parenting responsibilities, or other at-home commitments. As one learner shared:

"I think a combination of face-to-face and online is good as well working because you have the opportunity to be flexible if you're doing a part-time job or something. You can do it in your own time, so I think a combination of both is good."

This flexibility not only allowed learners to effectively manage their time but also, crucially, reduced travel expenses and time spent commuting. The implementation of hybrid learning is one adaptation from the pandemic period that learners would like to see continue.

Hybrid learning was particularly welcomed by learners with disabilities and parenting/caring responsibilities, as it afforded them the opportunity to minimise time spent commuting or otherwise traveling, and to learn from the comfort of their own homes. As one learner explained, "On a real personal level, I have an underlying condition. [Hybrid learning] works really well because I can manage. I'm not sitting in traffic every morning."

While learners acknowledged the social benefits of in-person learning, they recognised that hybrid learning offered a more balanced approach for certain individuals. They highlighted the importance of continuing to offer this option where possible, considering the diverse needs and circumstances of learners. Learners would like Education and Training Boards to continue to offer hybrid learning options on courses where this is suitable.

Learners were pleased with the **new skills (3)** they had developed as a result of taking their courses. These new skills extended beyond core course content, and were applicable in learners' wider lives. Newly developed digital skills, for example, enabled learners to use technology in their wider lives with more confidence. As one learner acknowledged, "It gives me the courage to fiddle with the phone a bit more." The courses learners took through their Education and Training Boards enabled them to develop greater overall computer literacy and digital skills, which in turn boosted their independence. As another learner shared:

"Definitely computers. I went in there barely knowing how to type, you know, and [with] our teacher then, I'm flying away with it."

Learners also highlighted the development of valuable life skills, including public speaking, studying skills, new social skills and increased confidence. The increased confidence gained through their courses extended beyond the classroom, positively impacting their personal lives. As one learner noted, "Positives are, I can make friends here." Learners also developed greater time-management and self-motivation skills through taking their courses. One learner explained, "Since starting my course, I'm getting out of the house a lot more and even going to the gym now."

The development of these new skills beyond the core course content highlights the value of Further Education and Training beyond employability and upskilling, illustrating how taking part in a course can be a holistic experience in personal growth.

Focus group discussions highlighted how learners embraced the return to **in-person learning (3)** after the challenging period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Learners expressed the benefits of in-person learning, noting that it provides a sense of structure and routine, brings them into social contact with peers, and allows for greater access to individualised learning support from their tutors. As one learner stated, "I like in-person because it's very good. We can share life experience, and it's interactive." Learners valued the opportunity to engage with their peers directly, sharing their experiences in an interactive social setting. As one learner emphasised, "You're getting out and you're being with other people." Being physically present with fellow learners fostered the sense of being part of a learning community.

Learners who accessed the **Adult Guidance Service (3)** found it to be an invaluable resource in their learning journey. Guidance counsellors within the college provided learners with personalised support and assistance, helping them to plan their next educational steps or consider future employment options. For some learners, this service was well-advertised and accessible. As one learner explained:

"We have guidance counsellors in the college. All you have to do is send them an email and they'll arrange a one-on-one with you in college or on Teams, or whatever you want to do."

This ease of access was welcomed by learners. Another learner praised the Adult Guidance service, stating, "I've been to the Adult Guidance Centre. I felt like I could go there to get help. I actually think the staff is absolutely brilliant. I could not recommend it enough." Overall, learners who mentioned the Adult Guidance Service found it to be of value in directing their next steps.

Learners valued the **promotion of diversity (3)** within their Education and Training Boards, highlighting it as an important component of their overall educational experience. The presence of a diverse learner population and the opportunity to socialise with individuals from different backgrounds were seen as positive and enriching for learning. As one learner emphasised:

"It's great to have the diversity of age in the centre because the older generations can bring life experience and maybe different kinds of social skills into the classroom. We're more likely to strike up a conversation, and then that gets everyone going."

Learners enjoyed meeting others of different age groups and cultural backgrounds through their courses, and appreciated the exchange of perspectives and knowledge that occurred as a result of the diverse learner population. Additionally, learners celebrated the international group dynamics and cultural exchange within their classes. One learner shared, "It's about the international group, and we have cookery days to introduce your national food to other students. It's good." Learners acknowledge the efforts of their Education and Training Boards in promoting diversity and inclusivity, with one learner noting, "We have a lot of inclusivity. You can meet people from all kinds of places, and it is great." Learners would like Education and Training Boards to continue promoting pro-diversity spaces and opportunities for cross-cultural exchange.

Learners taking courses for **English for Speakers of Other Languages (2)** enjoyed their learning experiences and expressed appreciation for their tutors, noting that the benefits derived from these courses extended beyond the acquisition of language skills. In particular, learners found that their English classes offered opportunities to meet new people, make friends, and settle into a new place. The cultural and social aspects of their classes was particularly valued. As one learner shared:

"We visit museums and national galleries where teachers and guides can speak only English. We can speak English because there are many students with different nationalities. It gives us real communication skills."

Another learner expressed, "I like this course because it's a new experience for me. And I always speak English now." Learners praised their tutors for their kindness and patience, acknowledging the crucial role their tutors played in putting them at ease. This was particularly significant for learners who were refugees or were seeking international protection due to conflicts in their home countries. Although learners taking courses in English for Speakers of Other Languages enjoyed their courses, it is worth noting that the "Areas for Improvement" section of this report highlights the demand for increased course hours among ESOL learners, despite their overall enjoyment of the classes.

Areas for Improvement

The research findings from focus groups highlight the significant demand for classes in English for Speakers of Other Languages (8). Learners taking ESOL courses express a strong desire for Education and Training Boards to offer more class hours, recognising the need for increased contact time to make progress in learning the English language. As one learner explained,

"We arrived a few months ago from Ukraine, and we have to improve our English and take our knowledge and our skills. But unfortunately, we have an English class just three hours a week. It's nothing."

Another learner echoed this sentiment, stating, "Four hours of training... little practice... one meeting a week with a teacher not enough." Across eight different Education and Training Boards, learners consistently expressed their dissatisfaction with the limited number of course hours, sharing how it hindered their development of crucial English language skills. These learners emphasised the need for more teaching hours, with one learner stating that they had access to, "Very few lessons... very few teaching hours." The current allocation of three hours per week is perceived as inadequate by many learners, with learners expressing that they forget material in between classes. While learners enjoy their English classes, there is evident demand for increased course hours among ESOL learners. ESOL learners would like Education and Training Boards to consider this feedback and explore the possibility of providing additional class hours to accommodate their learning requirements.

The research findings from focus groups highlight learners' desires for improved **course scheduling (7)**, including class hours, and improved communication of course timetables. Learners expressed their frustration with unstable timetables and the lack of advance notice regarding any changes. One learner stated, "I just find that a bit annoying. We don't have a stable timetable - the timetable changes." Additionally, learners voiced their concerns about the duration and structure of certain courses. Some learners felt overwhelmed by long class hours without breaks, expressing that it was challenging to maintain focus for extended periods. As one learner explained, "It seems to me at this stage of my life to hold my attention for four hours, it's asking a lot of me...Four hours is a long time." Learners would prefer their course hours to be broken up into more manageable chunks to support better concentration and engagement. Learners also highlighted the need for courses to be longer in duration, especially when faced with complex subject matters. One learner expressed the difficulties faced in short-duration courses, particularly in terms of receiving sufficient support from tutors. They shared:

"A lot of us in the class struggle with algebra, but it seems that the tutor just doesn't have enough time allocated so she can't always help us. She is great, and she will always try to come back to us, but the sheer volume of work that needs to be done in the space of time granted is just not enough."

Learners emphasised the importance of having enough time to engage with course material and ask for learning support where needed. Learners expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of part-time options for certain courses, voicing their concerns that the lack of part-time options unfairly impacted learners with disabilities. As one learner shared:

"[Not having a part-time option] affects people with disabilities; you're not getting, it's like not fair that you're getting pushed aside, let's say, most times, and like people who have disabilities who want to do this can only do part-time."

Learners call for Education and Training Boards to consult them more frequently when planning and communicating course curricula and schedules. They would also like part-time course options to be expanded, and would like increased lead-in time for information about course acceptance and changes, as well as the opportunity to provide input on preferred course hours, especially for courses with limited contact hours.

Across the focus groups, learners expressed their desire for reviewed and updated **facilities (7)** in their places of learning. Learners from different Education and Training Boards identified specific areas that require attention, including on-site parking, heating in buildings, canteen availability, up-to-date computers, and the physical accessibility of buildings for those with disabilities. The impact of facilities on learners' experiences was evident in the focus group feedback. One learner expressed the challenges they faced due to limited accessibility, stating:

"There's no elevator there. And I have a disability... and I stopped doing the course because I wasn't able for this up and down stairs."

Another learner highlighted the lack of a suitable space for breaks, stating, "If you want to go and have lunch or something, there's nowhere to go." A lack of canteen space was highlighted by a number of learners. Parking availability emerged as another issue,

with learners voicing concerns about the limited affordable parking options and time restrictions. As one learner shared, "There is no parking. So, you have to pay. And you have to park on the street. And the issue is that the class for us, maximum parking, is three hours. So, you either have to go back out or you have to tag...There is limited parking in the village."

In addition to these physical facility needs, learners also emphasised the importance of having up-to-date computers that meet their learning needs. One learner stated, "[It would be] better if you have more powerful computers... Because that course which we are starting needs more powerful computers." Learners welcome the opportunity to participate in consultations with Education and Training Boards during the planning of facility updates and improvements.

Learners would like to see improvements in how **assessments (6)** are managed across Education and Training Boards. In particular, learners expressed the need for more frequent feedback from tutors regarding assessments. They emphasised the importance of receiving sensitive individualised feedback in a private context, to minimise comparisons among peers. One learner shared their experience, stating:

"I find it very hard when the tutor is giving back assignments and she gives individual feedback to everyone in the room. I don't understand why she can't have a chat with you at the back of the room instead of telling everyone how you did. There are a few people in the class that have their Leaving Cert, and they're the high achievers, whereas some of us haven't, and we're the ones getting low grades. I honestly have felt like just leaving the class because of it."

Learners also shared how they would prefer to choose from a variety of assessment methods that cater to different learning styles and abilities, advocating for the inclusion of practical and written examinations, as well as continuous assessment. Additionally, learners highlighted the need for better planning and communication of assessment deadlines. In particular, learners called for deadlines to be spread out more evenly to minimise academic overwhelm from multiple competing deadlines. One learner suggested the need for improved time management in how assignments are planned, stating, "Maybe some time management...in how they plan the assignments." Learners also spoke of the importance of communicating the nature of assessments and course expectations to learners in advance of them starting a course. One learner explained how they were surprised to learn of the nature of their course assessment and how this was particularly difficult for them as a dyslexic person: "I thought there would be a lot less. I'm quite dyslexic, so [when] somebody says 'I want a 1,000-word essay' I'm going 'What?!'" Learners would like Education and Training Boards to review their assessment practices and consider implementing changes that address the different needs and preferences of learners. This includes providing more frequent and individualised

feedback, offering a diverse range of assessment methods, and ensuring assessment deadlines are well-distributed.

Learning environment (5), both at home and in centres, emerged as a significant concern for learners. Learners highlighted the challenges they faced in their learning environments. For some learners, the at-home environment was unsuitable. As one learner explained:

“[At] home, I struggle to do it at home because I don’t know, I just feel like uncomfortable in my house like it’s just, if I sit down there’s something else to be done over in a corner.”

Some learners noted difficulties with group dynamics in-person, explaining how the social dynamics of the environment impacted their learning experience. These learners expressed a desire for a more inclusive learning environment. One learner shared their experience, stating, "I just felt that some of us who didn't have as much work experience as others in the group were kind of just expected to know as much, and when we were doing group work, all of them just ploughed on ahead, and the rest of us were just working on our own." In addition to these challenges, some learners highlighted a lack of resources and access to study materials both at home and in their centres. One learner stated, "The thing is, I didn't have any books, there was no library, there was nothing solid. I didn't have a room where people could study. I have no internet at home." Overall, learners experienced a number of concerns in relation to their at-home and in-centre learning environments. Learners would like their Education and Training Boards to help provide an environment conducive to learning where possible.

Learners would like to see an expansion of **mental health (5)** supports within Education and Training Boards, particularly in relation to access to counselling appointments, visibility of mental health supports, and flexibility surrounding attendance and deadlines for those dealing with mental health issues. Learners shared how they would like education about self-care to be further incorporated into course curricular or extra-curricular activities. As one suggested, "Well, the girls said about mindfulness. We don't really have anything like that, so I think something like that maybe once a week or something like that." Learners also emphasised the value of counselling support, highlighting the absence of dedicated counsellors within some Education and Training Boards. Comments from learners highlighted discrepancies in the provision of mental health counselling across different Education and Training Boards and centres. One learner explained, "There was some [counsellors] years ago but they're not there now as far as I know...Every college should have that. A counsellor."

Learners acknowledged the mental support provided by their tutors, who often go above and beyond, but would not like a disproportionate amount of responsibility for learner mental health to fall on their tutors. As one learner explained:

"The tutors are fantastic, but they can't do everything, so it would be really good if we all had access to a counsellor because if we feel better, we learn better."

Overall, learners would like to see expanded access to counselling appointments through their Education and Training Boards, a continuation of awareness-raising campaigns such as Mental Health Week, increased awareness of learner mental health issues among Education and Training Board staff, and more opportunities to learn stress-management and self-care through their learning, for example through meditation, yoga, or mindfulness classes.

Learners continue to face challenges with unreliable or affordable **transport (5)** options when attending their courses. The lack of public transport was a major concern for learners, with one learner pointing out, "there's just not enough public transport to get you there." This issue particularly affected learners who did not drive or have family members available to provide transportation. The limited availability of courses in certain areas compounded the problem, with another learner highlighting, "It would be great if they could expand some of the courses to other areas. There seems to be a lot of courses available in certain areas and very few in others which means there is a difficulty in accessing these, especially when the public transport can be so bad." The unavailability of local transport particularly affected learners who lived in rural towns, with one learner explaining:

"I live in [a rural town] and it's about half an hour to get here but the buses, it's a horrible time, I can either be here two hours early or like an hour late, there is no in between."

To address these transportation challenges, learners expressed a desire for expanded financial support, including fuel allowance and public transportation assistance. Additionally, learners called for Education and Training Boards to collaborate with local and public transport providers to improve access to colleges of further education.

Some learners expressed difficulties in securing **work experience (4)** placements and desired increased support from their Education and Training Boards in organising them. Learners emphasised the need for more regulation and oversight of work experience placements by their Education and Training Boards. They found the process stressful, with one learner stating, "It just takes away from everything else. I just find it stressful." Additionally, some learners on lower QQI level courses expressed a desire to have the opportunity to participate in work experience, with one learner sharing, "I wish to have this possibility to go in a company and see how it's working...but we don't have it at my level." Balancing work experience with other commitments was challenging

for some learners, as highlighted by a learner juggling full-time work and parenting responsibilities, who stated, "I work full time, so to try and fit in the work experience into working life, and I have a three-year-old as well, so it's pretty hectic." Overall, learners would like more support from their Education and Training Boards in researching, securing, and commencing their work experience placements. Additionally, learners on lower QQI levels would like the opportunity to take part in work experience.

Learners expressed a desire for **course content (4)** to be current and practical, highlighting the need for relevant information that reflects changing industry needs. As one learner stated, "I'd say like some of our curriculum is really outdated because the need is...is like changing." Another learner echoed this sentiment, saying:

"It's a bit outdated...I got a list of woodworking tools...a lot of these tools, if you went into an apprenticeship and stuff like that, you wouldn't use. So, I didn't really see the use in learning about stuff that I wouldn't have...that aren't used anymore."

Learners would like Education and Training Boards to review course curricula to ensure content that is up-to-date and aligned with current industry practices.

Learners would like Education and Training Boards to help address the **negative perception of Further Education and Training (3)** in post-primary schools. Some learners felt that Further Education and Training was not viewed as a viable educational option, especially in comparison with higher education. One learner emphasised the importance of showcasing alternative educational pathways, stating, "I feel like school's not as important as it's made out to be, and it needs to be shown that there are other ways other than school. School is like asking every animal to climb a tree. Everyone learns differently, everyone wants to learn different skills or something. It didn't make sense to me." Another learner highlighted the negative perception of Further Education and Training among school-leavers, explaining:

"I was talking to a friend after Leaving Cert. We'd finished, and it was a year after, and he asked what am I doing now. I said 'a PLC course.' And he was kind of like, 'aw really?' It was like, there's this association that... it's not college. You're not doing a proper college course."

Learners would like Education and Training Boards to continue to challenge these misconceptions by promoting the value of FET as a viable educational pathway in secondary schools.

During focus group discussions, learners emphasised the importance of having up-to-date **information and communication technology (3)** hardware and training for their courses. They highlighted the role of digital skills in completing assignments and navigating online platforms. One learner expressed their frustration with online platforms such as Teams, stating, "We also find things like Teams doesn't work awful well, especially up where we are." To address these concerns, learners would like Education and Training Boards to review their ICT facilities and training options, with a view to updating hardware and expanding digital skills training where possible. As one learner stated:

"I think [for] anybody that would come in to adult education... probably an IT course would be very handy because of doing the assignments and Moodle. You know, Teams and even like the Harvard referencing. That can be stressful."

Affordable **childcare (2)** emerged as a significant barrier to learning, as some learners struggled to find accessible options within their financial means. One learner highlighted this issue, sharing:

"Even if there was support with that...They're only giving me €340 a week, so I wouldn't be able to pay for it. So, I don't know what I'm going to do."

To provide context, Pobal's Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report 2020–2021 found that the average weekly cost of full-day childcare in Ireland in 2020–2021 was €187, with prices exceeding this in Dublin, compared with other areas. Another learner expressed, "I ask for support, I have this support, but I can't find childcare because they are all busy... For me, it will be easier to go and take more courses [if I have childcare]. I would like to have this opportunity." To address this issue, learners would like the provision of on-site childcare to be increased in FET centres. Additionally, an increase in financial support provided to learners would help to cover childcare costs.

Clear and timely **communication (2)** regarding course acceptance, expectations, and curricula emerged as a key concern for learners in the focus groups. Learners expressed frustration when assignments and essential information were unexpectedly introduced or not provided in a timely manner. One learner described their experience, explaining, "[The tutor] just sprang an assignment on us... and we didn't even know it." Another learner shared a similar sentiment, stating, "It's drip-fed; the information for the questions that we need to do is drip-fed as well." Learners would like Education and Training Boards and tutors to improve communication processes, in particular reviewing and streamlining the communication channels used to inform students about course offers, curricula, and assessment deadlines.

Learners expressed a need for increased **financial support (2)** to help cover the cost of meals, transport, childcare, and learning materials. Some learners found the current allowances inadequate, particularly in light of rising living costs and the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. One learner expressed the need for more financial support, stating:

"[We would like] more supports financially, in the sense of the cost of living and COVID and everything. I would have been in a better position two years ago to pay the €250 but not now I wouldn't."

Learners would like Education and Training Boards and the Department of Social Protection to conduct a review of allowances to determine if they are adequately meeting the costs associated with taking FET courses.

Some learners recommended diversified and expanded **advertisement (2)** of FET courses. These learners explained the importance of FET reaching a diverse audience and expanding the current scope of advertising. One suggestion was to use varied methods such as websites, radio, television, and newspapers to promote FET courses. As learners explained, expanding the advertisement of FET courses through multiple channels could help ensure a broader reach. One learner remarked:

"I just by chance saw the advertisement. So, I don't think it's advertised enough."

Learners specifically suggested local radio stations, with one learner stating, "I think the radio – [name of local area] Radio, whatever – if someone came on sometime before September, whenever you go to register, I think they should come on. And I think that'd be very good for everybody because loads of people listen to the radio."

These learners hope that, by expanding advertising methods, the visibility and accessibility of FET courses can be improved.

Learners acknowledged the benefits of the additional **learning support (2)** they received, but expressed a desire for more individualised assistance, particularly in areas such as literacy, numeracy, and completing assignments. One learner highlighted a lack of individualised support and sufficient time on course material, stating, "Sometimes I just feel like some teachers rush through classes. Like, you could say 'I need help,' but they don't want to [help you]." Another learner expressed their need for additional support, saying:

"I would like to have additional support with essay writing because English is not my first language and I'm struggling with essays."

Learners would like Education and Training Boards to continue offering one-to-one support for learners with learning disabilities and additional learning needs. Learners would also benefit from needs assessments to determine their level of need for additional supports, especially for learners with dyslexia and dyscalculia.

Consistency in communication about coursework, feedback to learners, and treating learners with respect emerged as important in terms of learners' expectations of **tutors (2)**. Learners' views on their tutors were overwhelmingly positive, as this report's Areas Working Well section illustrates. Tutors were highlighted as an area working well in 11 out of 12 Education and Training Boards, and learners spoke of their tutors' kindness, patience, and expertise. However, there was some inconsistency across Education and Training Boards in the ways learners reported being treated by their tutors. Some learners expressed the view that their tutors did not treat them like mature adults, with one learner explaining, "there's a certain teacher we have, twice a day one of the weeks, she would give out to you if you miss a class, even if you're sick or something... That's hard at times [when tutors] speak to you like that." Another learner echoed this, stating, "You're just kind of treated like a child." Learners requested a unified approach in communicating coursework-related information and providing feedback on assignments. Some learners, for example, found that feedback was lacking, with one learner remarking, "We use Teams to work on assignments... we don't get actual feedback for what we did, we just throw in an assignment and never get [any] feedback." Others felt that tutors did not give them sufficient time to grasp new material being taught in class, and that a tutor's attitude resulted in learners dropping out of a course, with one learner sharing, "The lack of support from [the tutor]. We started with 22 in our course and we're left with seven or eight on a good day. Most of them – a few of them left because of [the tutor] – because they just did." To address these concerns where they are present in a minority of cases, learners would like their Education and Training Boards to facilitate greater communication between tutors to ensure a consistent approach. Learners would also be consulted to gauge whether they feel they are treated with respect and equality by their tutors.



SURVEY FINDINGS

This section presents findings from the learner surveys that the National FET Learner Forum conducted alongside focus group events. A total of twelve learner surveys were conducted. The total number of survey participants amounted to 2,569. The first subsection summarises basic information such as the demography of learners, their gender, employment status, ethnicity and reasons for taking their course. The next subsection summarises the level of satisfaction with teaching and learning resources, and with supports provided, at learners' programmes or centres. Finally, it focuses specifically on the views of services and supports offered by the ETB and overall experiences of their course across certain comparative groups.

The following table provides a break-down of the key findings arising from the twelve combined Learner Surveys, with learner recommendations aligned with each topic.

KEY FINDINGS	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
Advertisement of courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners felt that there is not enough knowledge about the availability of courses and suggested that advertisement of courses should be diversified to ensure a larger number of potential learners are made aware of what is on offer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in varied advertisements, such as print and digital, to showcase the courses on offer Develop a regional campaign strategy including school visits, promotional materials, social media and local media advertisements
Website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners would like the ETB and FETCH websites to be updated to reflect what exactly they will be learning, so they can make informed decisions about what course to choose and are prepared for starting their course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update the Education and Training Board website and work with SOLAS to review the FETCH website with the view to ensuring both are accessible and provide current and relevant information

KEY FINDINGS	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
Transport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like more assistance with accessing reliable, affordable transportation to and from their centres, and for additional routes to ensure access to courses in other centres, if possible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Consider a scoping exercise to identify transport needs and costs for learners in Education and Training Boards. Consider transport options, such as supplying bus services for learners, particularly for areas where bus services are unreliable
Information on supports offered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners responding to the survey were unaware of certain supports available to them and requested that advertisement on various platforms could help increase their access of what is on offer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Provide learners with clarity on how to access supports, such as mental health and disability supports and ensure that advertisement of these supports is delivered on various platforms
Social outcomes resulting from engaging in FET	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners experienced notable increases in social outcomes, such as an increase in their sense of belonging, as a result of engaging with their course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Use statistics on the social outcomes of those engaging in courses to represent the positive impact and experience of FET as part of an advertising campaign

<p>Services and supports</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learners appreciated the learning supports, mentoring and key working support, the guidance service, and the laptop or device loaning schemes. Some learners shared that mental health, additional, and disability supports were not consistent across the ETBs - Learners would like supports to be implemented equally across all FET centres, as they feel the additional support would benefit their learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consider expanding supportive facilities such as sensory rooms in all centres across the Education and Training Board - Develop mental health services that are accessible to all FET learners. Build upon existing mental health supports, which are well-received by learners and will lessen the pressure on tutors to provide informal mental health support - Engage with learners with ADHD, dyslexia, and other learning disabilities to ensure they receive sufficient support to help them complete their assignments. Engage with the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) and other services to identify suitable supports. Include learning needs analysis as part of initial induction for learners
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Survey Participant Profile

One of the strengths of the Forum is its ability to capture a diverse cohort of learners within FET. The demography of survey participants is summarised below. There were more part-time learners than full-time learners (1,231 vs. 1,152). In terms of age groups (see **Figure 5**), the 18-24 age group was most common (28%, n = 700/2,519).

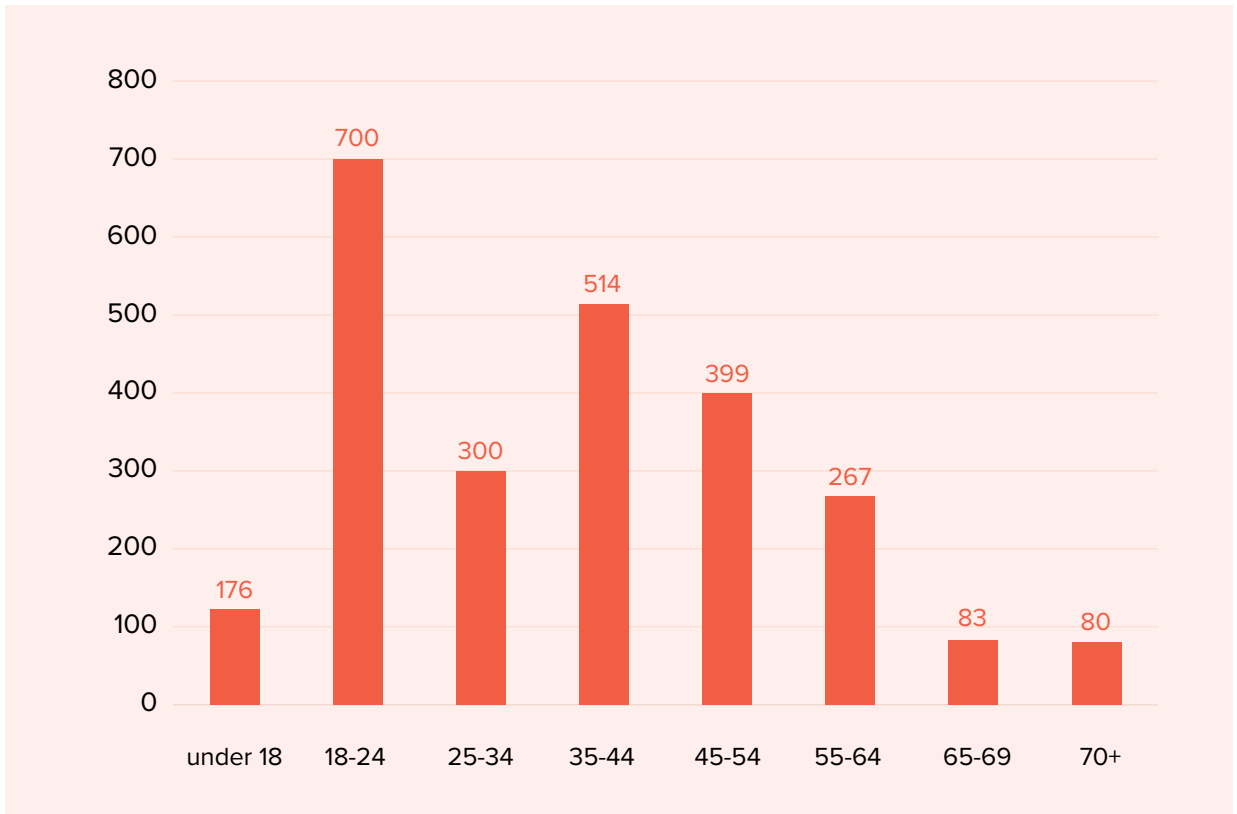


Figure 5: Learner representation by age group

With respect to gender, the majority (65%, n = 1,599/2,444) of respondents were female (see **Figure 6**). There were 28 (1%) learners who identified as non-binary, and 19 (< 1%) who preferred not to state their gender identity.

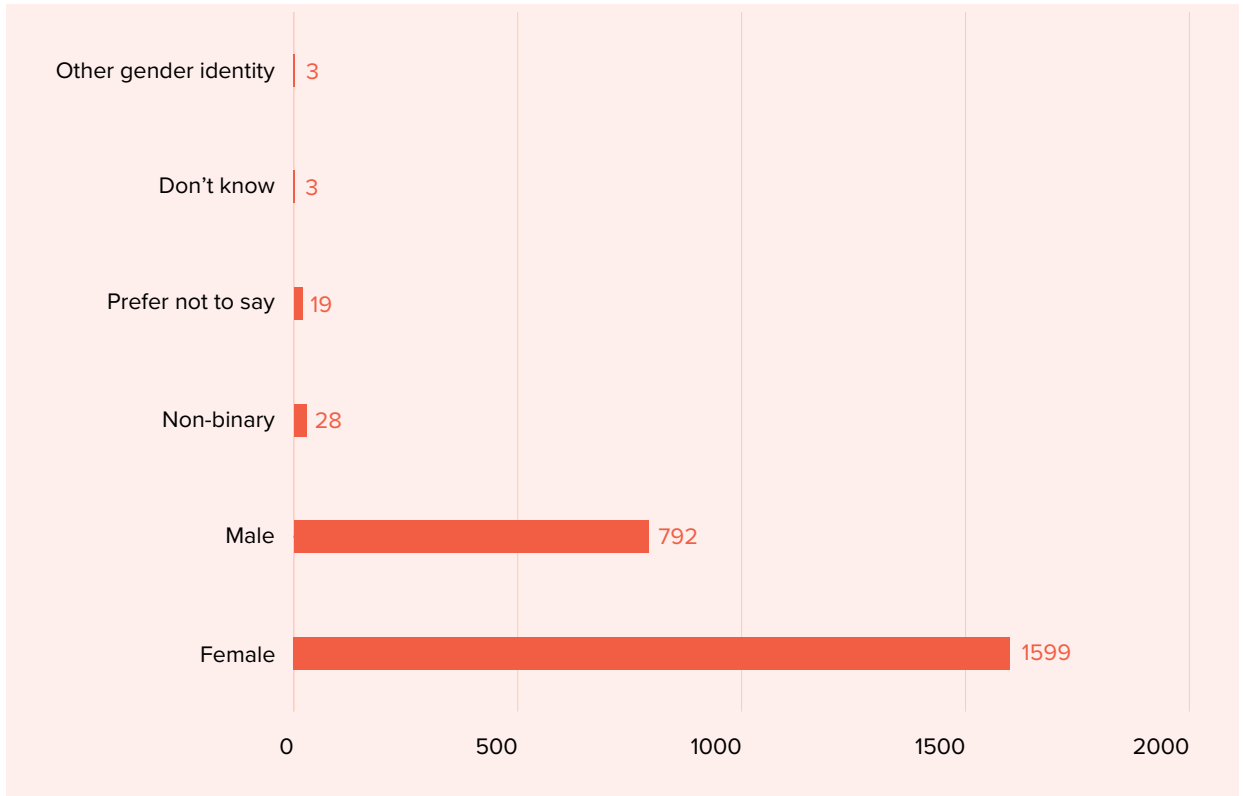


Figure 6: Learner representation by gender

Figure 7 presents those who reported information on ethnicity. The largest number of those groups was White Irish (66%, n = 1,697/2,576). This was followed by Other White background (18%, n = 462/2,576), Black or Black Irish and Asian or Asian Irish (both 4%, n = 104/2,576). Notably, those representing minority ethnicities make up 34% (n = 879/2,576) of survey respondents.

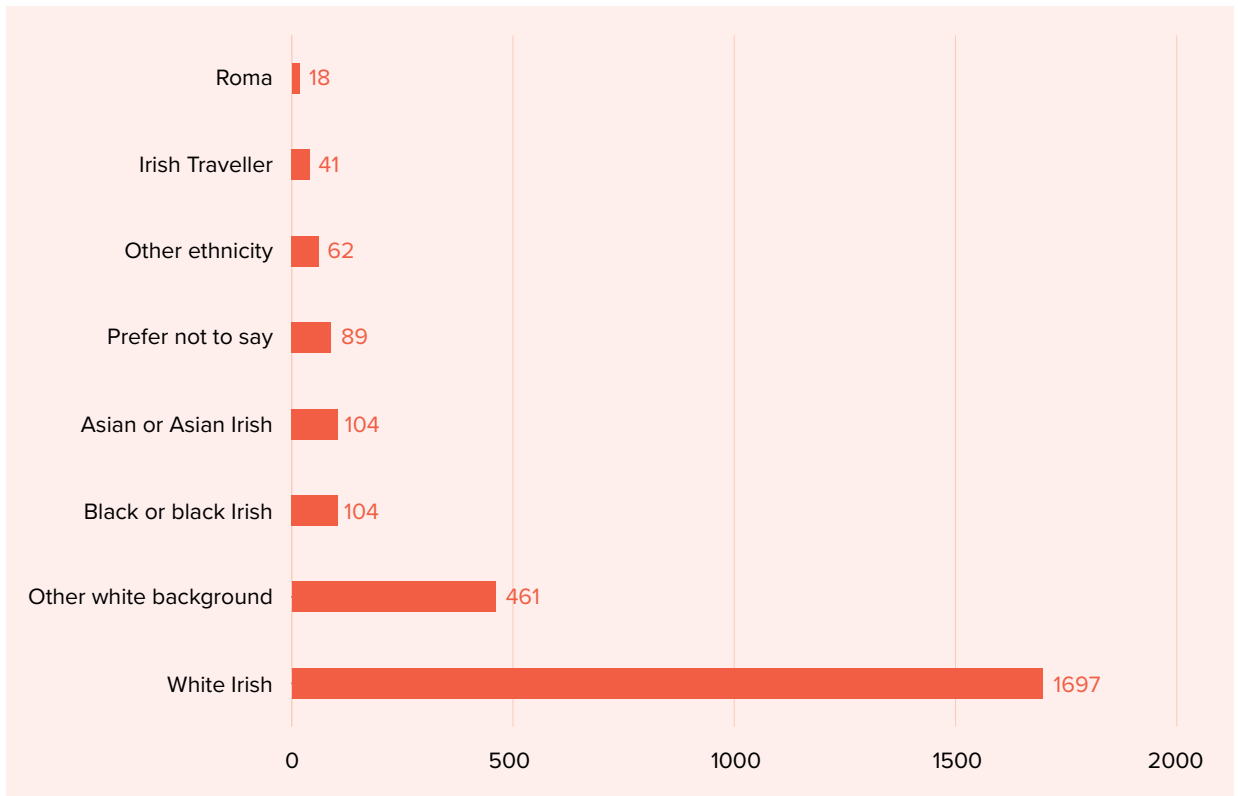


Figure 7: Learners' ethnicity

Figure 8 summarises the number of respondents with respect to employment status. The largest number of respondents came from those who were in full-time education (40%, n = 1,033/2,556). This was followed by those who were in part-time employment (16%, n = 407/2,556) and then by those who were in full-time paid employment (10%, n = 249/2,556).

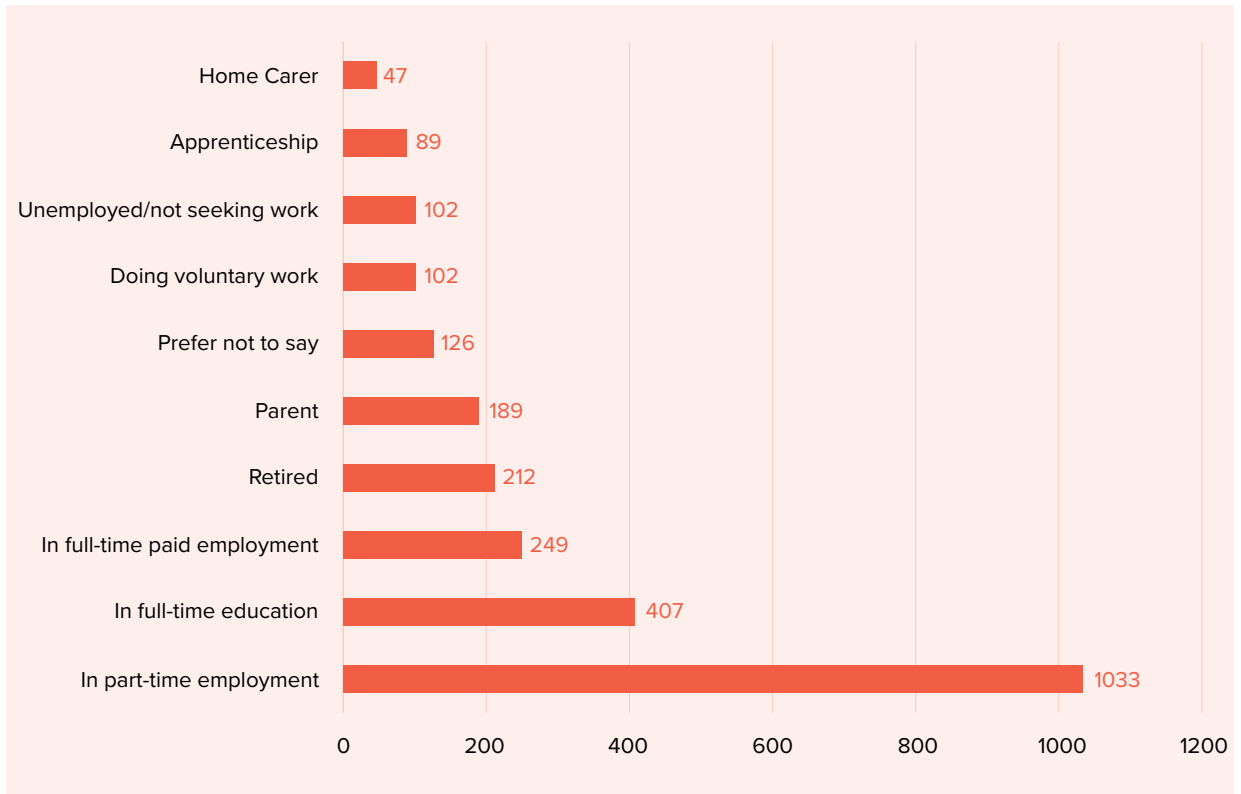


Figure 8: Learner representation by employment status

Figure 9 summarises the number of respondents with respect to their highest level of education completed. The largest number of respondents had their Leaving Certificate or equivalent/Levels 4 or 5 (41%, n = 1,031/2,531). This was followed by those who had their Junior Certificate or equivalent/Level 3 (15%, n = 391/2,531).

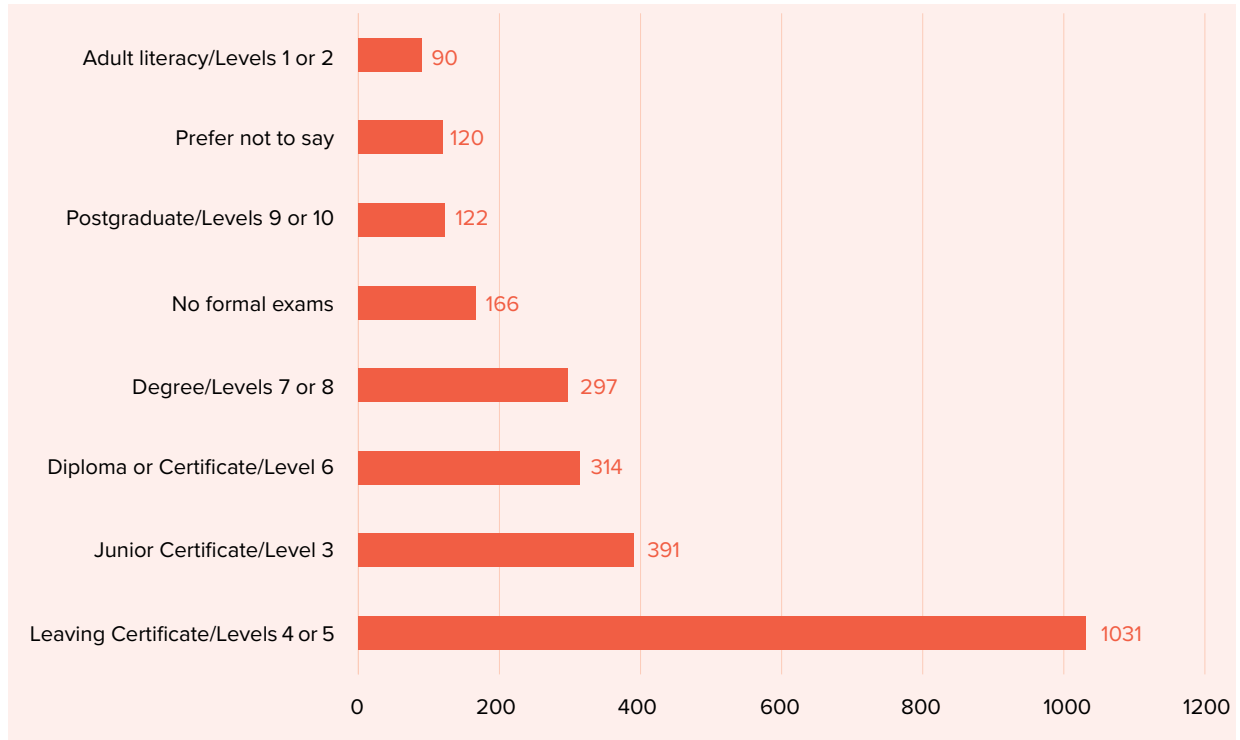


Figure 9: Responses to “Before starting this course, what was the highest level of education you completed?”

Figure 10 presents reasons for taking courses; survey participants could choose more than one option. The most frequent reason was, “To learn something new” (876 responses), followed by, “To upskill/reskill” (742 responses), and, “To help progress my career” (739 responses).

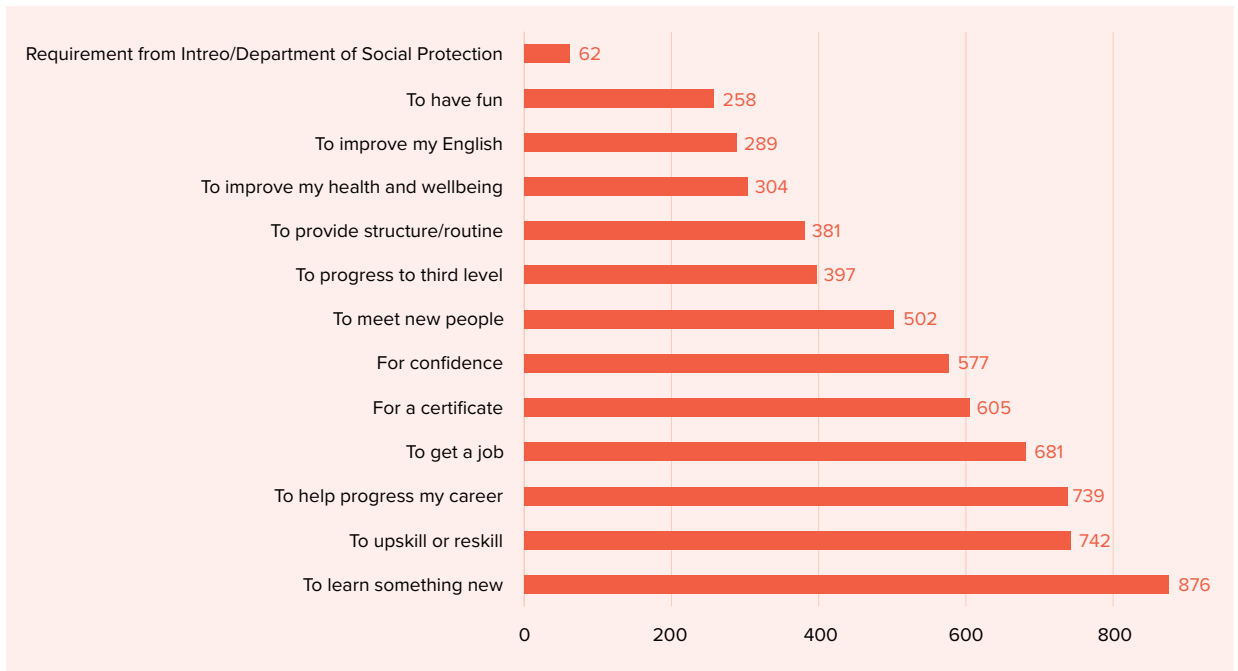


Figure 10: Learner representation by reasons for taking courses

As outlined in **Figure 11**, learners identified a variety of positive impacts associated with attending a course or going to their centre. Learners were allowed to select more than one reason in response to this question. The main impact was an increase in “Self-confidence” (1,457 responses). The second most common impact was a “Positive outlook on the future” (1,209 responses). This was followed by an increase in a “Well-being and better health” (694 responses).

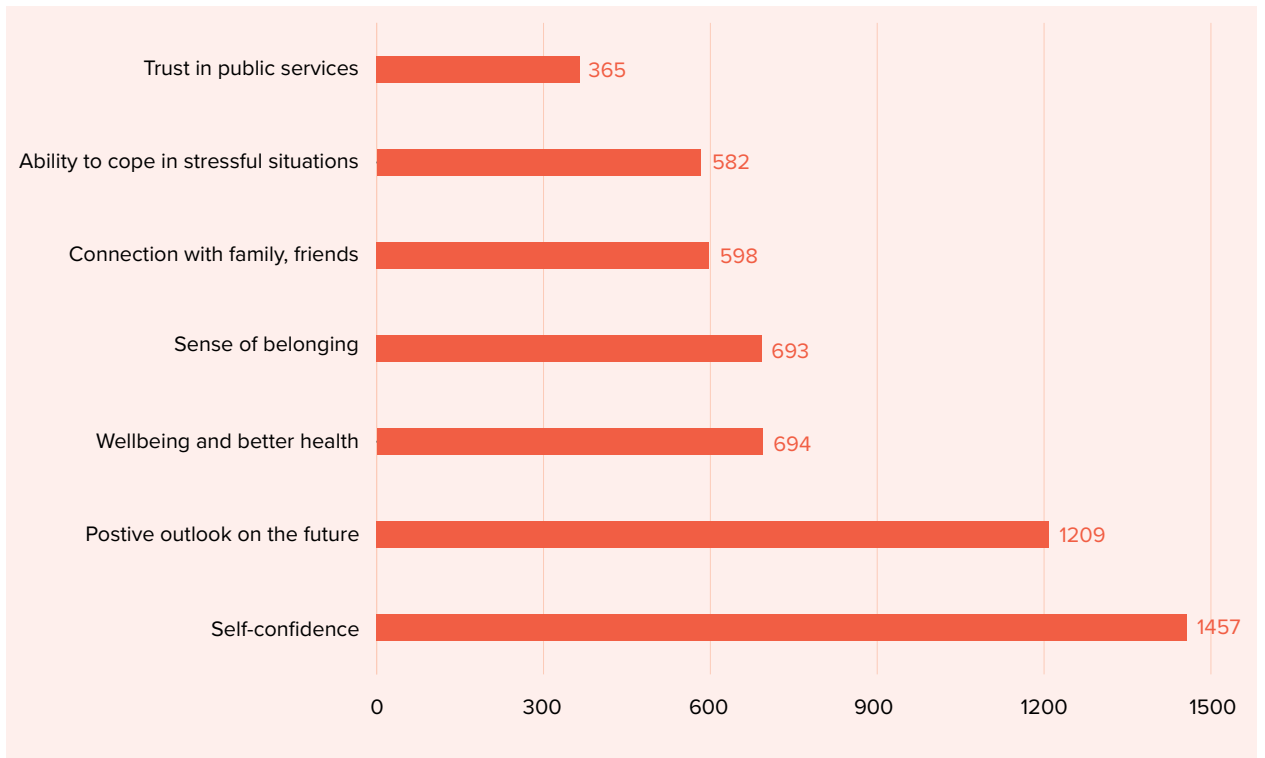


Figure 11: Responses to “During your time in your adult learning course, have you experienced an increase in any of the following?”

A note on the Learner Survey methodology

The survey used a scale of five levels of satisfaction (“very satisfied,” “satisfied,” “neither satisfied nor dissatisfied,” “dissatisfied,” and “very dissatisfied”) to measure learners’ satisfaction with different aspects of learning. Hereafter, for the brevity of presentation, the answers, “very satisfied” and “satisfied,” are aggregated to the category, “satisfied”; the answers, “dissatisfied” and “very dissatisfied,” are aggregated to the category, “dissatisfied.” The disaggregated results are available in Appendix 3. There are several questions in the survey which ask a respondent to ‘select all that applies’ where they have a choice to select more than one answer. This can result in a discrepancy in the number of survey respondents highlighted at the top of the table with the summed total of the figures within that table.

Learners’ experience at the beginning of the course

As highlighted in **Figure 12**, the majority of learners who answered the survey expressed satisfaction with the guidance and advice when they first contacted the ETB or centre and with the interview process before beginning their course. Answers to the question, “How satisfied were you with the website for your centre or Education and Training Board, when you were looking for a course or programme?” were more varied, with 11% (n = 220/1,939) stating they were dissatisfied or providing a neutral response. In addition to these more varied responses about the websites advertising the courses, several free-text comments from survey participants suggested that Education and Training Boards could increase the advertisement of their courses more generally, so that people would be able to benefit from them, particularly for those in the wider community who may have online accessibility issues. As one learner suggested in response to the open-text survey question, “What could your centre or ETB do to improve its registration and introduction to the centre or ETB?”, the Education and Training Board could, “Advertise courses and eligibility for these [as] not everyone is online.” Another learner elaborated on the benefits of advertising Further Education and Training nationally as it could alert more people to further education opportunities. This learner suggested that:

“[The] ETB and what it has to offer is not widely known to many people. A national advert to make people aware of its existence might help.”

In addition to suggestions to advertise more widely, learners in the open-text comments on the survey also recommended improvements and updates be made to the ETB websites and the FETCH website. As one learner in the survey shared about the FETCH website:

“[The] website is a bit confusing as some of the courses are duplicated and the codes on the courses don't necessarily always match up with the actual course.”

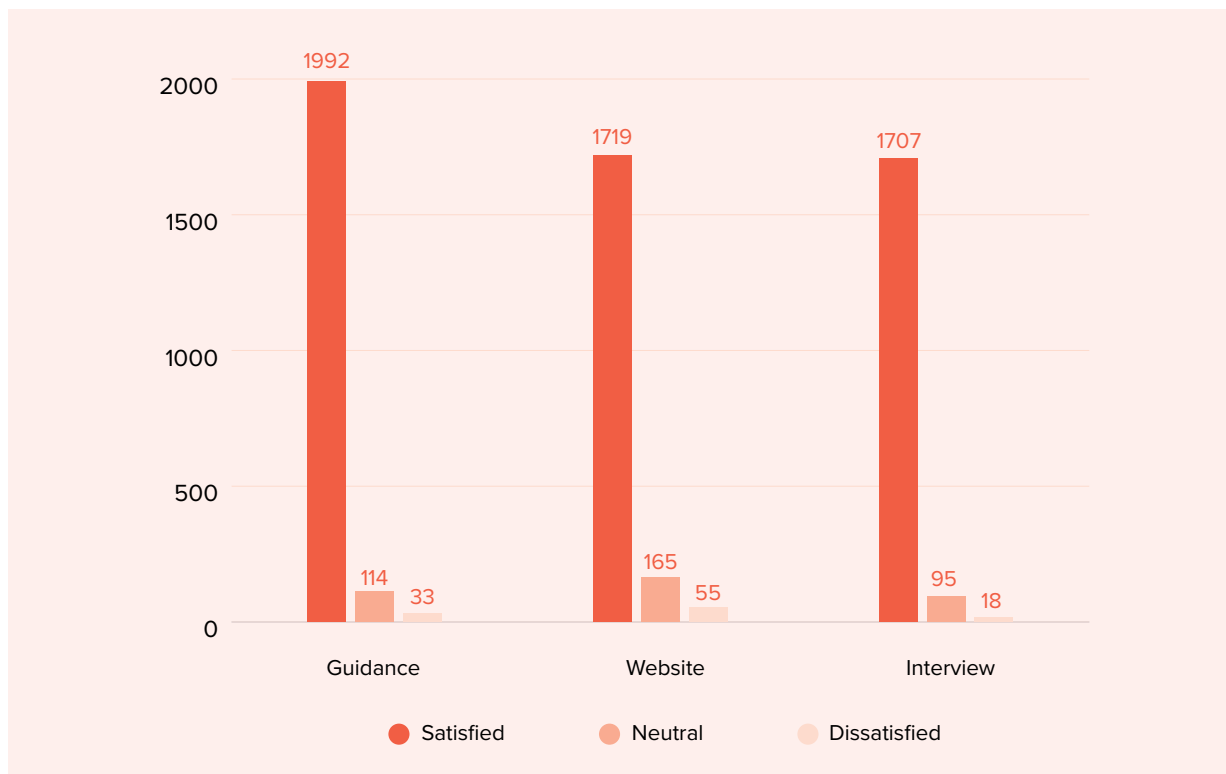


Figure 12: Satisfaction with regards to learner experience at the beginning of the course

Access to Teaching and Learning Resources

When learners were asked about how teachers communicated feedback and about the standard of teaching on their course, the majority expressed satisfaction. When asked about their home learning environment however, 16% (n = 232/1,448) provided a neutral or dissatisfied response. The majority of students expressed satisfaction about the opportunities to participate in class and about the access to technology at their centre. Learners indicated they would like to see an improvement to the availability of public transport in their locality, with a notable 35% (n = 468/1,326) of learners expressing dissatisfaction or neutral responses to that particular question (see **Figure 13**). There were also several free-text comments making a wide range of suggestions with respect to blended learning to alleviate challenges associated with the home learning environment. These suggestions included increasing the loaning of laptops for learners who do not have their own, ensuring that all courses have hybrid options available and to, “Allow students to use computers on [their] day off...as not everyone has Internet access at home or a quiet environment”. There were several open text comments in the survey relating to travel and transportation costs. For learners going to centres in more rural areas and who did not have access to public transport, there were numerous requests for an increase in transport allowances. One learner shared the challenge trying to access their course when:

“No transport money [is] given to students... three days up and down paying fuel for [the] car from [our] own pockets without having jobs.”

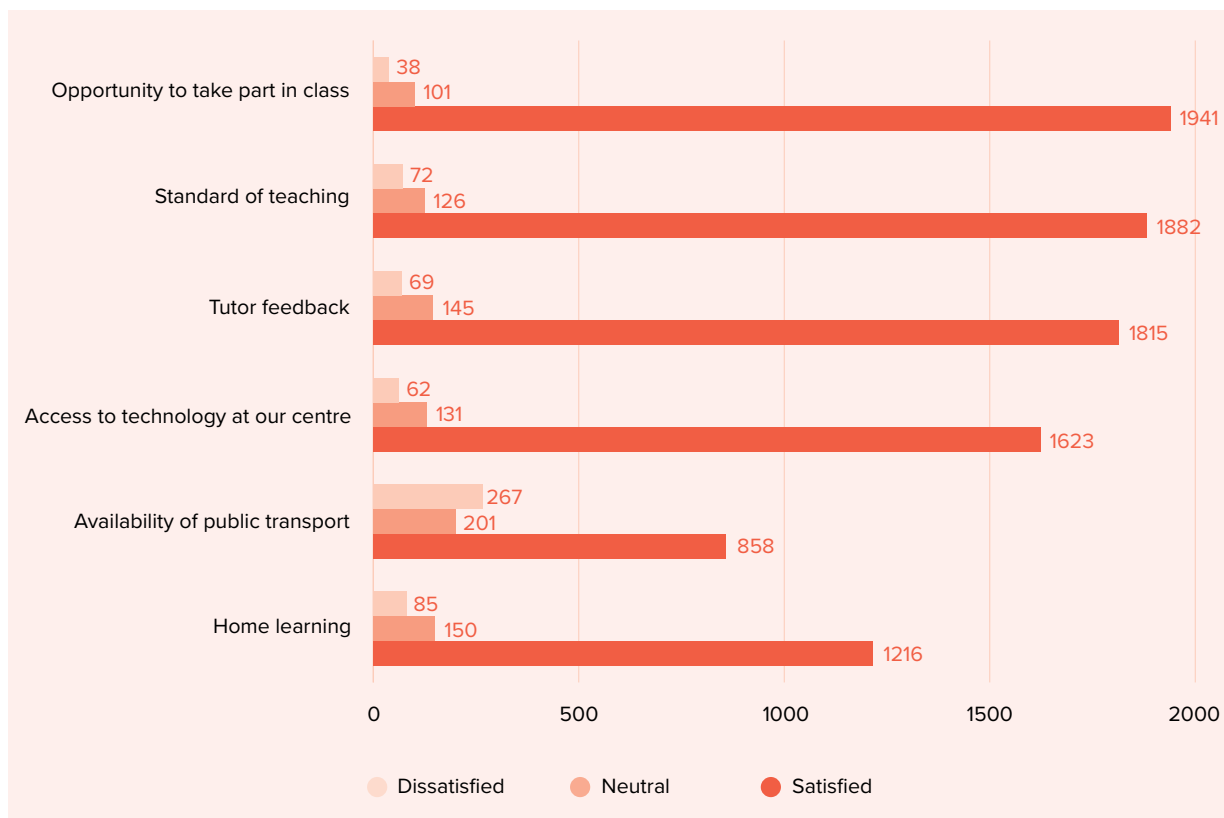


Figure 13: Satisfaction with regards to teaching and learning resources

Supports

Learners responded to a series of items under the general questions, “Did you receive any information from your centre or ETB about the availability of the following supports and services?” Overall, the majority of learners received information about supports and services available to them from their centre or ETB. Notably, learners were not well informed about the following supports: 54% (n = 973/1,793) of learners did not receive information about additional supports, such as transport, meals, childcare or finance; 46% (n = 839/1,837) did not receive any information about mental health supports; and 50% (n = 894/1,779) did not receive any information about disability supports available through their centre or ETB (see **Figure 14**).

There were several open text comments in the survey relating to the lack of awareness of what supports are in place and the need for information to be made accessible to learners from the time of induction. As one learner shared:

“I didn’t know we had help with counselling/physiological help. And I [didn’t] know we had help with transport and meals.”

Another learner suggested the ETB, “Openly advertise supports available - maybe create a leaflet to give to all students during induction.”

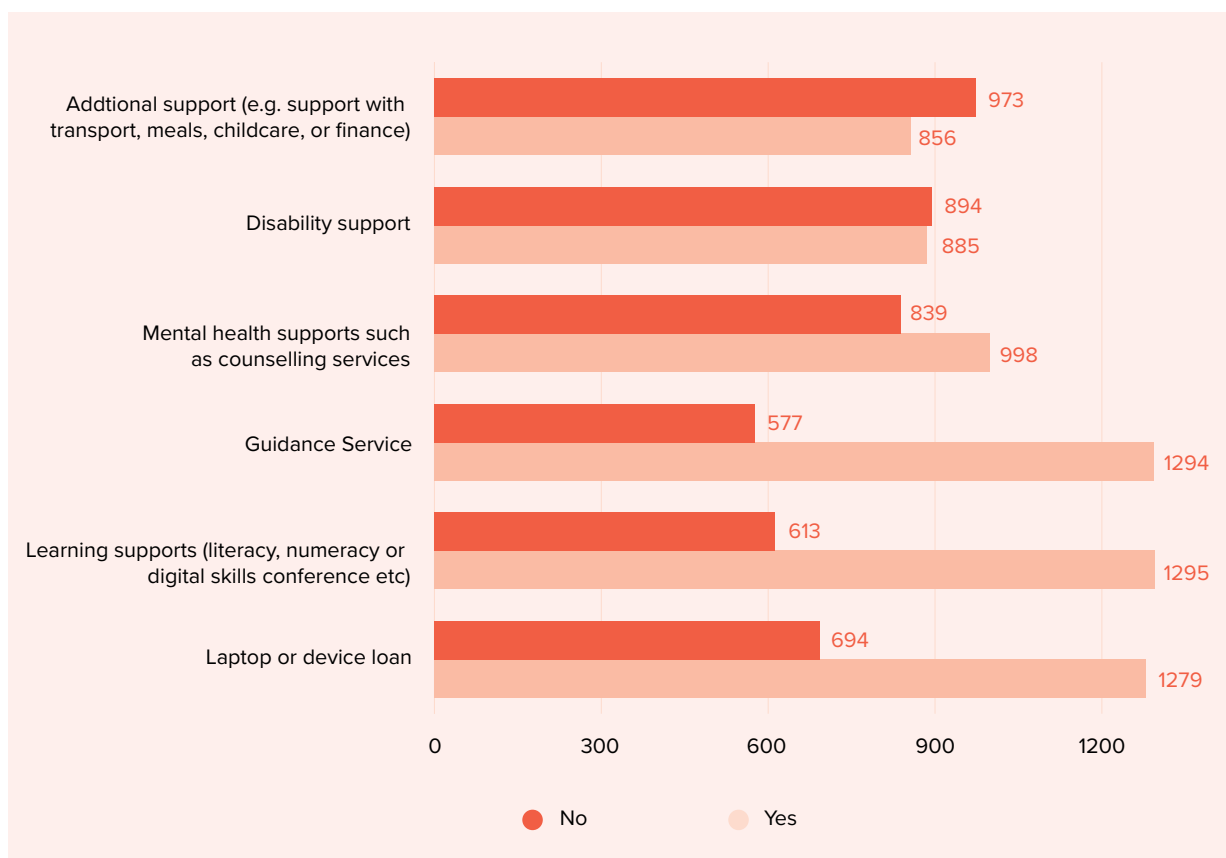


Figure 14: Responses to “Did you receive any information from your centre or ETB about the availability of the following supports and services?”

Learners responded to a series of items under the general question, “How satisfied were you with the following supports?”. Learners expressed satisfaction with supports relating to the learning supports, mentoring and key working support, the guidance service, and the laptop or device loaning schemes. There were more varied responses when it came to some other supports, with dissatisfied or neutral responses to the survey questions relating to additional supports (27%, n = 252/936), disability support (29%, n = 310/1,082), and mental health support (23%, n = 224/979) (see **Figure 15**).

Free-text survey comments gave some insight into the reasons for these lower satisfaction levels. As one learner shared:

“I am dyslexic and I have ADD and could have used some extra help throughout the year, even just some one-on-one time with a teacher to help me understand the work.”

Numerous comments suggested that learners found the hidden cost of accessing their course challenging, driving learners to, “wish there are some supports about childcare and transportation.” Another learner suggested the ETB should:

“Try to help all the students with financial support...I don’t have enough even to cover my daily food.”

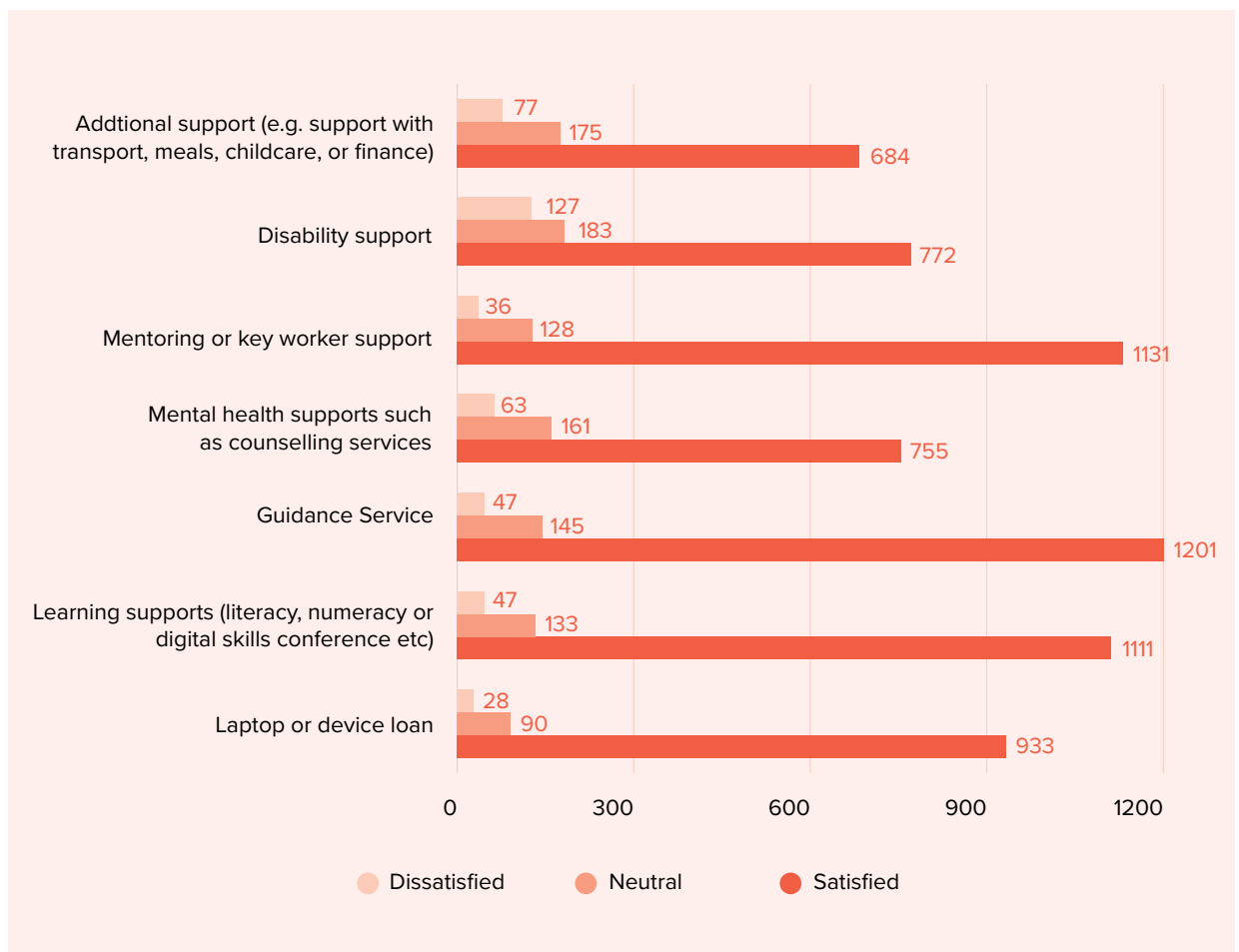


Figure 15: Satisfaction with regards to support

Comparing Experiences of FET Between Certain Groups

Those who responded to the learner survey represent a large variety of groups. As highlighted above, those representing minority ethnicities make up 34% (n = 879/2,576) of survey respondents. In terms of age groups, the 18-24 age group was the most common (28%, n = 700/2,519). In terms of accommodation, those survey respondents who were living in Direct Provision made up 1% (n = 25/1,921). While this figure is low, the experiences of these groups in FET is worthy of comment, as national statistics reveal a 12% increase in enrolments to FET from outside the EU between 2021 and 2022 (SOLAS, 2022). Black or Black Irish learners make up just 4% (n = 104/2,576) of survey respondents. Regardless of this lower proportion of Black or Black Irish learners represented in the survey, their experiences are important to comment on, especially given the recent data from Black and Irish/Black Inclusive Curriculum Surveys, which found that Black focus group participants reported receiving lower grades than their white peers and that teachers inappropriately offered them English language support (Black and Irish, 2021). Youthreach learners make up 9% (n = 185/2,120) of the overall course respondents. An evaluation of the Youthreach programme by the ESRI highlighted that this group had experienced post-primary school as a 'spiral of negativity', and so, a brief comparative for this cohort's experience within FET was deemed worthy of exploration (Smyth et al., 2019, pp. 186). It should be noted that the sample sizes of each of these groups is small in this survey, and therefore these findings are not generalisable. Further research is needed in this area to ensure a larger sample from each of these groups can speak to their experiences of FET.

The survey responses to the questions about the level of agreement on statements about the supports offered to learners, the health and wellbeing of learners, as well as experiences of certain aspects of their courses through their Education and Training Board courses are disaggregated by the following groups: those living in Direct Provision, those under the age of 24, Youthreach learners, and those who identified as Black or Black Irish.

To summarise the findings in advance:

- Learners living in Direct Provision, Black or Black Irish learners, learners aged between 18-24 felt less respect from their tutors or ETB staff than those in the overall housing group, the overall age group, and White Irish learners
- Learners living in Direct Provision, Black or Black Irish learners, learners aged between 18-24 and Youthreach learners all reported having worse physical and mental health than the general learner population
- Learners in Direct Provision felt more stress relating to their living situation, experienced more stress, anxiety, and depression, yet felt less satisfaction with disability supports provided by the ETB than those in the overall housing group
- Learners living in Direct Provision and Black or Black Irish learners received less information on supports and services offered by their ETB than their peers in the overall housing group and White Irish learners

- Youthreach learners reported greater levels of satisfaction with services, felt more respected by their tutors and ETB staff, and received more information about services and supports than their peers in the 18-24 group
- Learners from the Black or Black Irish group, learners living in Direct Provision, and Youthreach learners experienced greater social outcomes as a result of engaging with their courses than their peers in the White Irish, the overall housing group, and the overall age group.

A notable number of learners reported having between poor to fair physical and mental health (23%, n = 461/1,965), while 29% (n = 511/1,754) stated they had a long-term health issue, illness or disability. When looking at the health ratings of each comparative group, those from the Black or Black Irish group reported having worse health than the White Irish group. Those in Direct Provision reported greater levels of poor to fair health, while those in the overall housing group, and those in Youthreach, notably reported having substantially worse mental and physical health in comparison with those in the 18-24 year old group and those across all ages (see **Figure 16**).

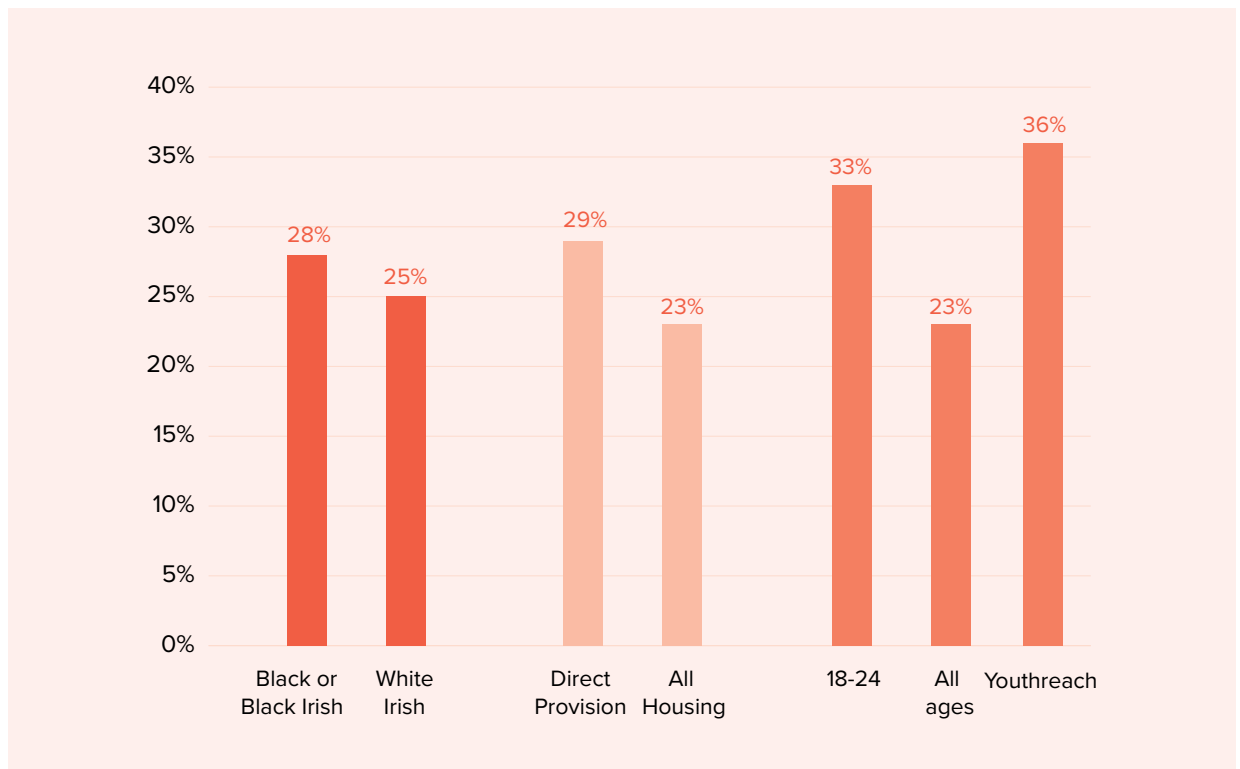


Figure 16: Poor to fair mental and physical health ratings reported by Black and Black Irish learners, White Irish learners, learners living in Direct Provision, learners from the overall housing group, Youthreach learners, 18-24 year old learners, and learners from the overall age group

Despite these lower health ratings, Black or Black Irish learners experienced greater social outcomes as a result of engaging with their courses than their White Irish peers, those in Direct Provision reported greater social outcomes than those in the overall housing group, and those in Youthreach reported having substantially better social outcomes, in comparison with those in the 18-24 year old group and those across all ages. As respondents could choose multiple answers to this question, the graph below indicates what percentage of the respondents selected this choice, and so the total will often be higher than 100%. For example, 45% (n = 82/184) of Youthreach respondents stated that they have experienced an improvement in their wellbeing and better health as a result of taking their course, while 36% (n = 67/184) stated that they experienced an increase in connection with family or friends, and 32% (n = 59/184) experienced an increase in their sense of belonging (see **Figure 17**).

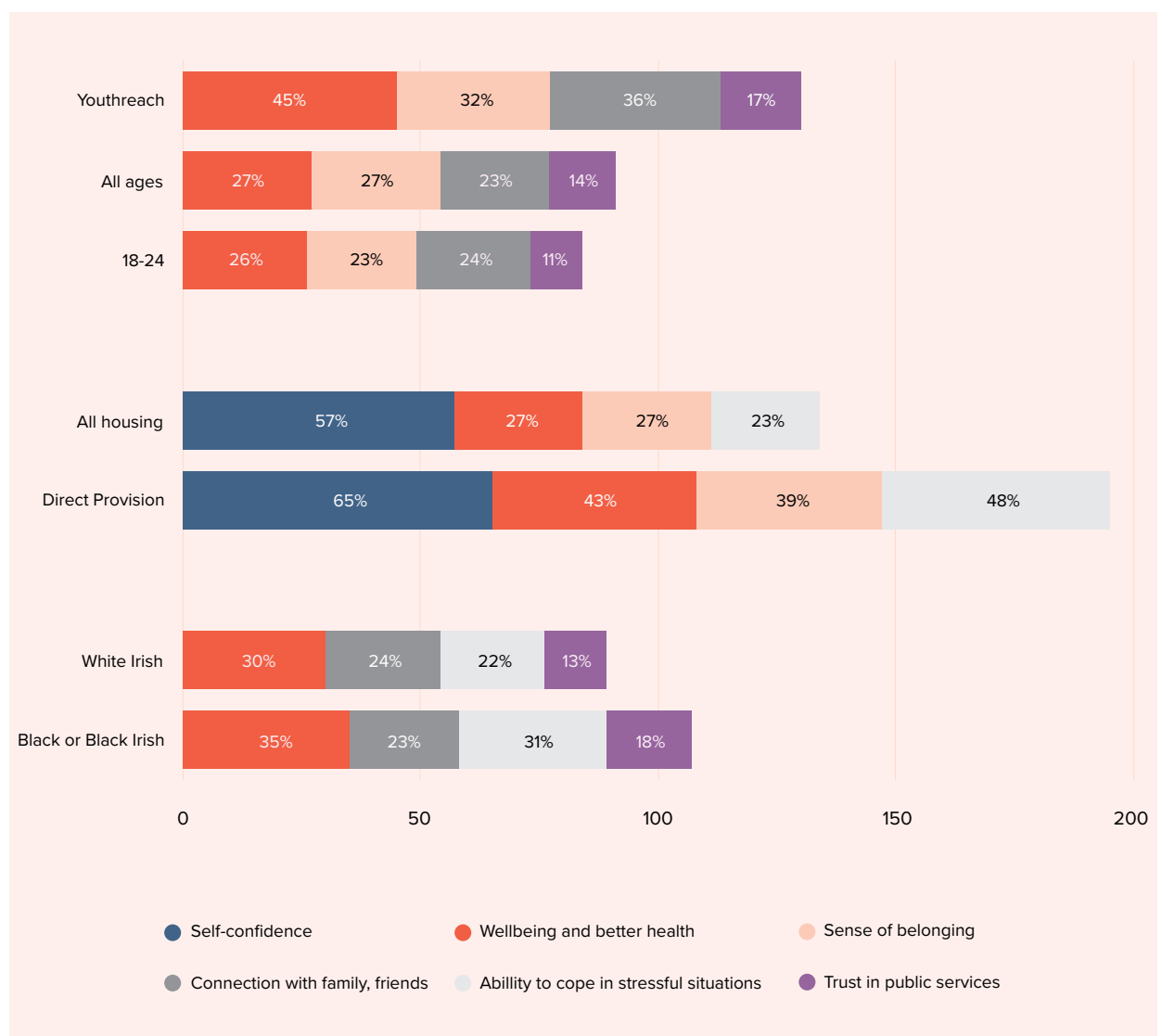


Figure 17: Responses to “During your time in your adult learning course, have you experienced an increase in any of the following?” from the following groups: Black or Black Irish, White Irish, learners living in Direct Provision, learners from the overall housing group, Youthreach learners, 18-24 year old learners, and learners from the overall age group

As noted above, when learners were asked about the standard of teaching on their course, the majority expressed satisfaction. Comparing those who identified as Black or Black Irish with the White Irish group, the former experienced lower levels of satisfaction with regard to the standard of teaching, expressing 11% (n = 7/66) lower satisfaction levels while those in the White Irish group provided a 10% (n = 137/1,407) lower satisfaction response. Similarly, those who identified as Black or Black Irish reported a 9% (n = 6/64) lower satisfaction level with the opportunity to actively take part in class, whereas those who identified as White Irish reported a 7% (n = 93/1,409) lower satisfaction level. Notably, 11% (n = 7/65) of those who identified as Black or Black Irish stated they either never feel respected or feel respected sometimes by tutors or ETB staff whereas 5% (n = 66/1,413) of those in the White Irish group stated they experience this lower level of respect by tutors or ETB staff (see **Figure 13**). In survey comments, learners provided more details. One Black or Black Irish learner provided a stark suggestion regarding equal treatment for all learners, regardless of race or ability:

“Treat students with respect. Treat everyone equal even if they’re black or find it hard to do assignments.”

Regarding information on various supports and services received through their ETBs, those who identified as Black or Black Irish fared worse than those who identified as White Irish. Those from the Black or Black Irish group received information on the following: laptop or device loan (52%, n = 34/65); mental health supports (44%, n = 27/61) and disability support (38%, n = 20/52). Those from the White Irish group received the following information on the same supports and services provided by the ETBs: laptop or device loan (65%, n = 864/1,329); mental health supports (53%, n = 654/1,237) and disability support (48%, n = 570/1,183). Survey comments from those in the Black or Black Irish group indicated some of the consequences of not being made aware of certain supports available:

“I didn't get any support... I wish I knew there was a support of laptops as I have been using my friend's one.”

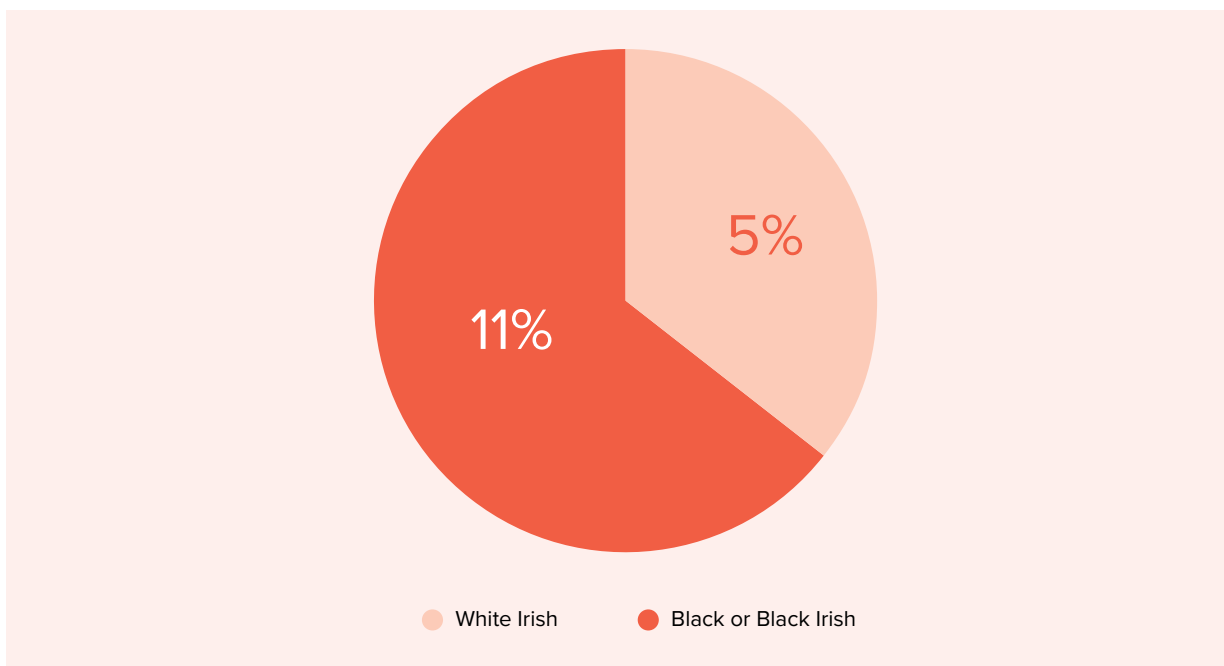


Figure 18: Black or Black Irish and White Irish Responses to, “Do you feel that staff and tutors in your centre or ETB treat you with respect?” Percentages of those who responded ‘Never feel respected’ or ‘Sometimes feel respected by tutors or ETB staff’.

Learners responding to the survey shared their views on housing and mental health. 58% (n = 14/24) of learners living in Direct Provision stated their living situation affects their ability to learn or study, whereas 24% (n = 453/1868) of those from the overall housing group experienced this impact (see **Figure 19**). When asked if they experienced stress, anxiety or depression, 70% (n = 14/20) of learners living in Direct Provision and 55% (932/1,682) from the overall housing group reported that they did. When asked about disability supports, 36% (n = 4/11) of those in Direct Provision provided a neutral or dissatisfied response. In the open text comments, one learner in Direct Provision shared how stress impacts on their ability to learn or study, stating, “[I’m] too stressed to remember things, [I’m] unable to focus.” The lower satisfaction in relation to disability supports for the overall housing group was 29% (n = 298/1,028). 8% (n = 2/24) of those in Direct Provision stated they either never feel respected or feel respected sometimes by tutors or ETB staff whereas 4% (n = 82/1,907) of those in the overall housing group stated they experienced this lower level of respect by tutors or ETB staff.

Regarding information on various supports and services received through their ETBs, those who were living in Direct Provision fared worse than those in the overall housing group. Notably, learners living in Direct Provision were not well informed about the following supports when compared to the overall housing group: 39% (n = 9/23) of learners in Direct Provision received information about additional supports, whereas 47% (n = 823/1,746) of the overall housing group did; and 29% (n = 6/21) of those living in Direct Provision received information about disability supports available through their centre or ETB, whereas 49% (n = 815/1,671) of the overall housing group did. When asked what their ETBs could do to improve services and supports in the survey, a learner living in Direct Provision requested the ETB “Keep the students informed about the services available to them”.

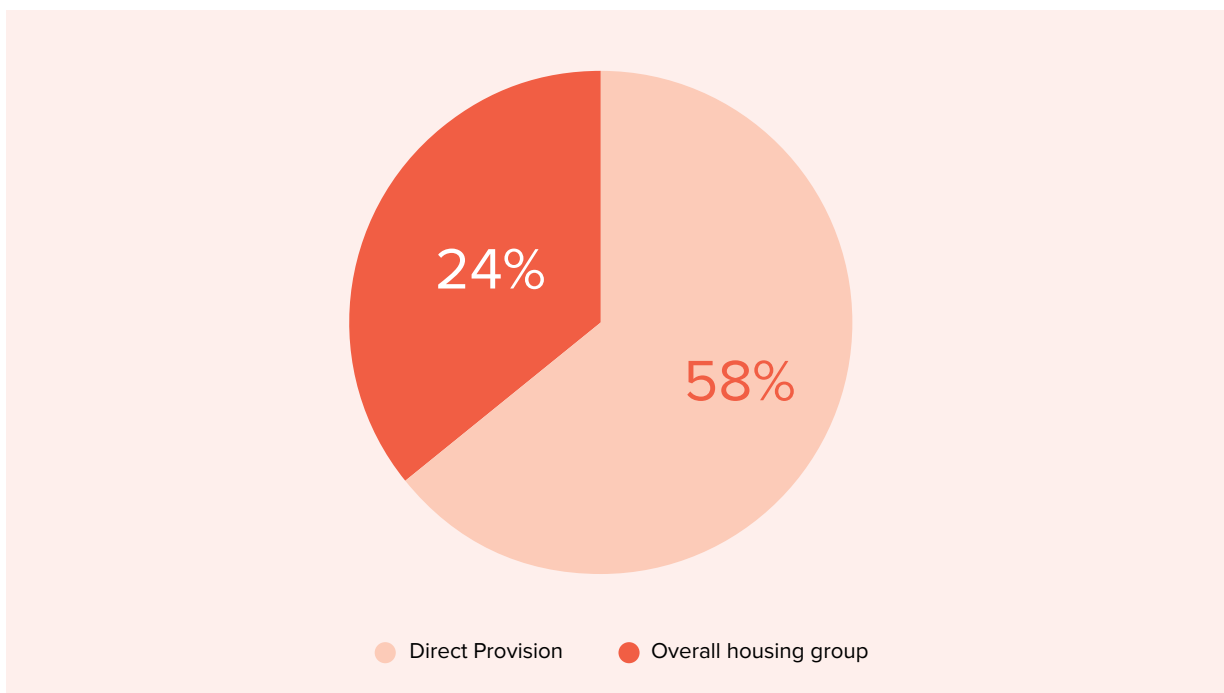


Figure 19: Responses from learners living in Direct Provision and those from the overall housing groups to “Does your living situation affect your ability to learn or study?”

As noted above, when learners were asked about the standard of teaching on their course, the majority expressed satisfaction. Comparing those in the age range of 18-24 with the learners of all ages, the former experienced lower levels of satisfaction with regard to the standard of teaching on their course, expressing 16% (n = 84/539) lower satisfaction levels while the average age group provided a 10% (n = 198/2,068) lower satisfaction response. However, when looking at the satisfaction levels of Youthreach learners on the same issue, just 8% (n = 14/174) expressed a lower satisfaction level. Those learners aged 18-24 reported a 10% (n = 58/569) lower satisfaction level with the guidance or advice received when they first contacted their centre or ETB, whereas learners across the average age reported a 7% (n = 145/2,122) lower satisfaction level. When looking at the satisfaction levels of Youthreach learners regarding the same issue, just 6% (n = 10/174) reported having lower levels of satisfaction.

8.5% (n = 46/540) of those learners aged between 18-24 stated they either never feel respected or feel respected sometimes by tutors or ETB staff, whereas 4% (n = 92/2,075) of those across an average of ages stated they experience this lower level of respect by tutors or ETB staff. Youthreach learners felt more respected by their tutors and ETB staff than their 18-24 year old peers, with 6% (n = 11/173) stating they experienced lower levels of respect. The higher levels of respect felt by Youthreach learners was reflected in the survey comments. One learner shared the impact of being treated with respect by their tutors:

“Going into a new school was going to be scary no matter what, but Youthreach made it as comfortable as possible.”

The survey comments from those aged between 18-24 indicated a notably different experience with regards to feeling respected by their tutors or ETB staff. As one 18-24 year old learner shared when asked what their centre or ETB could do to improve their course:

“Stop treating students as if this is second-level schooling, you are meant to be preparing for third-level/life, not age-regressing the students into fear of attendance, assignments and teachers themselves. You are meant to be helping these students become well-rounded and educated adults, not age stunted and unprepared for the fact that third-level and the world will not be checking their every move in the way second-level teaching and [name of organisation] do.”

Notably, Youthreach learners were more informed about the following supports when compared to the learners aged between 18-24: 86% (n = 137/159) of Youthreach learners received information about additional supports, whereas 56% (n = 276/494) of the 18-24 year old group did; 87% (n = 141/162) of Youthreach learners received information about mental health supports, whereas 64% (n = 317/494) of the 18-24 year old group did; and 84% (n = 141/167) of Youthreach learners received information about learning supports available through their centre or ETB, whereas 73% (n = 364/501) of the 18-24 year old group did (see **Figure 20**).

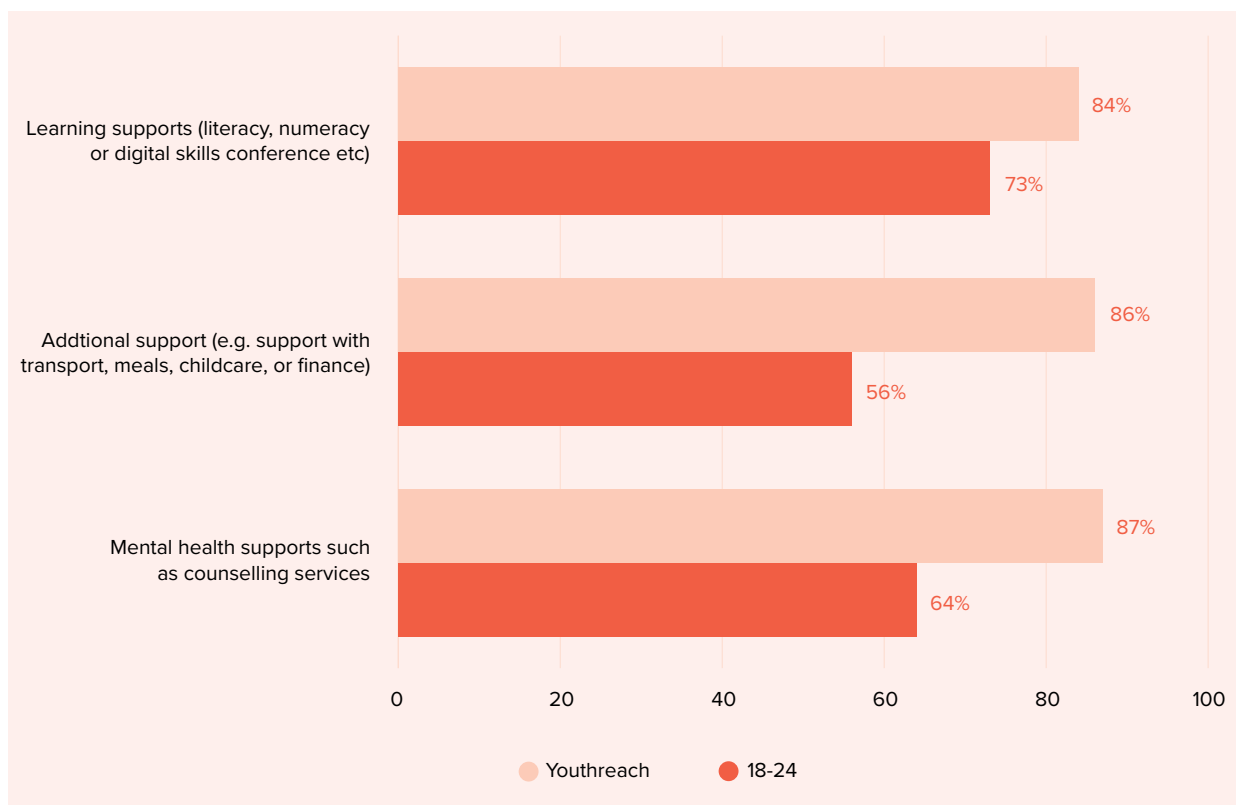


Figure 20: Responses from Youthreach learners and learners from the 18-24 group to “Did you receive any information from your centre or ETB about the availability of the following supports and services?”



CONCLUSION

This report presented the findings from 12 regional events of the National FET Learner Forum held across 12 Education and Training Boards between November 2022 and May 2023. It found that learners were grateful for support they received from their Education and Training Board throughout the academic year. Learners felt that their tutors' kindness, patience, and individualised support helped to create a welcoming and supportive atmosphere at their centres, which helped to improve their confidence and, in turn, supported their learning. Learners appreciated the wider benefits of FET, such as the structure and routine it provided, and the opportunity to make new friends and meet people from different backgrounds. Learners were pleased with the mental health support they were able to access through their Education and Training Boards. Learners shared how taking a FET course had a positive impact on their mental health. These benefits from learner discussions were also reflected in the learner survey, where a notable number of respondents reported an increase in their self-confidence and an improved positive outlook towards the future as a result of engaging with their course. However, some learners shared that mental health provision was not consistent across all Education and Training Boards and requested that mental health counsellors are introduced into all centres to ensure all learners who want to access this service can do so.

Learners highlighted some difficulties they experienced which impeded their ability to participate as fully as they would like in their courses. Although some of these issues may be beyond the scope of the Education and Training Boards to fix, we consider it important to share what learners have said to highlight the truth of their experience and the context in which they are learning.

Learners taking classes in English for Speakers of Other Languages are enjoying their courses and would like to attend more classes and have more opportunities to develop their English language skills, where possible. Learners taking courses where work experience is a requirement would like the opportunity to begin their work experience placements earlier in the academic year where possible, so there is less pressure to accumulate their hours. Additionally, learners shared how they found it difficult when multiple assessment deadlines occurred close together, and expressed their wish for deadlines to be spaced out more evenly. Learners experienced challenges concerning the facilities in their centres and would like to see an increase in car parking availability, for lifts to be updated to ensure greater access for learners with disabilities, and for heating and canteens to be instated across all centres. Some learners would like the negative perception of FET to be addressed through a national advertising campaign, demonstrating the often life-changing impact it can have on an individual. These learners want others in their community, particularly younger people who may be experiencing difficulties in secondary school, to be made aware of the benefits of FET courses. This point was supported by the findings in the survey that looked at the experience of Youthreach learners, which showcased the outstanding supports, encouraging atmosphere, and positive tutor relationships that the programme has to offer.

Learners were affected by insufficient funding to meet their travel needs, and cited long traveling distances, irregular public transport timetables, particularly in rural communities, and the rising cost of fuel as barriers to their educational success. Learners would like support from the Education and Training Board, or other governmental departments, such as the Department of Transport, with meeting these costs. These difficulties voiced by learners were echoed by the survey findings, which highlighted a notable 35% experiencing lower satisfaction with the availability of public transport.

Learners living in Direct Provision, Black or Black Irish learners, those aged from 18-24 and Youthreach learners reported lower rates of physical and mental health than the general learner population. Some of these groups experienced less satisfaction in terms of services and supports and less respect from tutors and ETB staff, yet these learners experienced greater social outcomes as a result of their engagement with FET. While FET cannot be seen as a remedy to poorer health ratings, the findings from the National FET Learner Forum 2022-2023 have demonstrated that FET can be a beacon of light, ensuring a sense of belonging and contributing to increased self-confidence and better social connections for more marginalised groups in our society.

The National FET Learner Forum has captured both the benefits of the FET experience and suggestions on how to improve FET for learners in the future. It has also 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.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Members of the National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group

Name	Affiliation
Paula O'Shea	Learner Representative
Margaret Murray	National Adult Literacy Association
Bríd McGlinchey	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
Shauna Dunlop	SOLAS
Aoife Walshe	SOLAS
Majella O'Callaghan	Department of Employment Affairs and Social Welfare
Laura Flynn	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Colin Cummins	Education and Training Board Ireland

Appendix 2: Members of the National FET Learner Forum Academic Expert Group

Name	Affiliation
Dr. Koen DePryck	Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Dr. Fergal Finnegan	Maynooth University
Dr. Ted Fleming	Columbia University
Dr. Peter Lavender	University of Wolverhampton
Dr. Stephen O'Brien	University College Cork
Dr. Sarah Coss	Maynooth University

Appendix 3: Survey and Results

In the questions where learners were able to choose more than one option, the sum of all responses could exceed the total number of entered responses and/or survey respondents.

Course/Programme and Level

Course or Programme Title (2,117 responses)			
Adult Literacy	Apprenticeship	Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)	Community Education
204	79	275	109
Community Training Centre (CTC)	English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)	Local Training Initiative (LTI)	Post-leaving Certificate (PLC)
108	190	68	422
Skills to Advance	Traineeship	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)	Youthreach
202	90	186	184

Course Level (if on an accredited NFQ/QQI course) (2,382 responses)						
Level 1-3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7-10	Non-accredited /no level	Don't know
478	489	907	281	23	122	162

Are you a full-time or part-time learner? (2,380 responses)	
Full-time	Part-time
1230	1150

Recruitment, Registration, and Induction

Where did you hear about your course? (Please select all that apply)

(2,391 responses) (1,951 respondents)

Career Guidance	Careers Exhibition	Current or Former Learner	Employer	Family or Friend	Online/ Internet
97	188	144	100	704	635
Open Day	Radio or Newspaper	The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection	The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science		
171	60	222	70		

What were the reasons for taking your course? (Please select all that apply)

(6,413 responses) (2,202 respondents)

I wanted to learn something new	To have fun	To get a certificate	To progress to third level	To get a job	To upskill or reskill	To progress in my career
876	258	605	397	681	742	739
To meet new people	Required by the Department of Social Protection	To improve my English	To improve my health and wellbeing	To increase my confidence	To provide structure or routine	
502	62	289	304	577	381	

When you contacted your centre for the first time, how satisfied were you with the guidance and advice you received? (2,166 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I did not receive guidance or advice
1,336	626	113	19	14	58

How satisfied were you with the website for your centre or ETB, when you were looking for a course or programme? (2,185 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I did not visit the website for my centre or ETB
1,013	706	165	35	2	246

How satisfied were you with the interview process for your course or programme? (2,187 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I did not have an interview for my course
1,099	608	95	11	7	367

Access to Teaching and Learning Resources

How satisfied are you with your home learning environment (a comfortable and suitable learning space, access to the devices you need for your learning, being able to learn without distractions)? (2,024 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I do not learn at home	I do not have a safe environment to learn at home
664	552	150	63	19	551	25

How satisfied are you with the physical learning resources (for example, textbooks, stationery, specialist tools, and equipment etc.) at your centre? (2176 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
397	461	201	160	107	755

How satisfied are you with the access to technology at your centre? (for example, computers, printers, specialist software, and equipment etc.) (2,050 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
1,021	602	131	42	20	234

How satisfied are you with the way your tutor assesses and gives feedback on your work? (2,094 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
1,217	598	145	48	21	65

How satisfied are you with the standard of teaching on your course? For example, is your tutor knowledgeable and do you feel they explain things well? (2,085 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
1,310	572	126	50	22	5

How satisfied are you with the opportunity to actively take part in your class? (2,086 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
1,276	665	101	21	17	6

Your Experience of Services and Supports at your centre or ETB

How satisfied were you with the below supports you received from your Education and Training Board?

Laptop or device loan (2,010 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I did not use this support
651	282	90	14	14	959

Learning supports (2,009 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I did not use this support
684	427	133	21	26	718

Guidance service (2,012 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I did not use this support
717	484	145	29	18	649
Mental health support (for example, counselling) (2,011 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I did not use this support
449	306	161	34	29	1032
Mentoring or key worker support (1,993 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I did not use this support
720	411	128	20	16	698
Disability support (2,004 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I did not use this support
427	345	183	79	48	922
Additional support (e.g. support with transport, meals, childcare, or finance) (2007 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
384	300	175	41	36	1,071
How satisfied are you with the way the information on supports and services was made available to you? (113 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I did not use this service
34	29	7	7	3	33

How would you describe your current accommodation or living situation? (1,889 responses)

Rental accommodation	354
Supported accommodation	26
Social housing (e.g. local authority rented)	186
Traveller-specific accommodation	10
Private housing (have ownership of home)	574
Live with family (do not have ownership of home)	641
Living in hotel or other 'short-term' accommodation	75
Living in Direct Provision	23

If living in rented accommodation, do you find it difficult to meet the cost of your rented accommodation? (1,319 responses)

Yes	No	Somewhat
387	680	261

Does your living situation affect your ability to learn or study? (1,899 responses)

Yes	No
455	1,444

Does your accommodation or living situation cause you stress, anxiety, or worry? (1,921 responses)

Yes	No	Prefer not to say
495	1,235	191

How would you rate your overall wellbeing including your physical and mental health? (1,962 responses)

Excellent	Very good	Good	Fair	Poor
341	485	675	358	103

Do you have any long-term health issue, illness or disability? (1,960 responses)

Yes	No	Prefer not to say
510	1,243	207

Do you experience stress, anxiety, or depression? (1,955 responses)

Yes	No	Prefer not to say
942	784	229

Does stress, anxiety, or depression impact your ability to learn or study? (This includes factors that may affect your experience of learning new information e.g. concentration, or your engagement with the course e.g. attendance) (1,956 responses)

Yes	No	Prefer not to say
604	1,038	314

What would help to support your mental health? Please select all that apply (2,340 responses)

Appointments with a counsellor or qualified specialist	471
An atmosphere of openness around mental health at your centre or ETB	371
Mindfulness classes	537
Increased financial support	504
Flexibility around assignments and deadlines	457



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