

# Digital Learning Research Summary

## Key findings from AONTAS research studies

AONTAS are the National Coordinator for the New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEAAL) in Ireland. This policy paper is part of the current, project ["Building Stable Roots in a Sustainable Learning Ecosystem"](#).

### Key Insights

ETBs essential work in digital inclusion  
The Learners' Voices Across Ireland study highlights the incredible work being done by ETBs in terms of digital inclusion

One-to-one support essential  
Groups that are marginalised or vulnerable benefit greatly from one to one or small group support for digital skills- this was highlighted particularly by older learners

Home learning environment  
Learners' home environment may provide an obstacle to learning online- particularly for vulnerable or marginalised group

## Supporting Digital Inclusion

The current New European Agenda for Adult Learning focuses on green and digital transitions - meaning that all members of our society can be well equipped to participate in and adapt to a world shaped by technology and climate change. This policy paper highlights key AONTAS research findings on digital learning.

The [Learners' Voices Across Ireland National FET Learner Forum Report](#), 2022-2023 highlighted the impact that ETBs are having in terms of digital inclusion. The vast majority of respondents to the survey said they were satisfied with the support they received, including digital support, as well as being

satisfied with the laptop or device loan scheme:

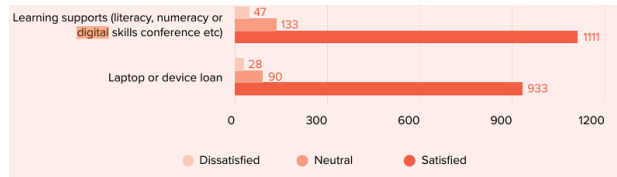


Figure 1: Satisfaction with regards to support (n=1200)

The laptop loan initiative highlights the efforts made by Education and Training Boards and SOLAS 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' Voices Across Ireland, 2023) 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.

*"Well, obviously if you had the computer and you could get on with what you are doing, that would make [home learning] easier."*

Focus group participant, *The Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland – a focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups* (2023) .p.21

## One-to-One Support

In many of the ETBs who took part in the National FET Learner Forum in 2022/23 learners noted the importance of one-to-one digital supports (n= 6 out of 12 ETBs this was mentioned numerous times in focus groups).

This quote demonstrates the impact of this support:

“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.”

([Learners' Voices Across Ireland National FET Learner Forum Report](#), p.11)

The [Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland – a focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups](#) (2023) also found that the need for one-to-one support-“One-to-one, practical I.T. skills training was perceived as crucial for marginalised and vulnerable groups. Without digital support, marginalised participants reported disengagement with education, specifically where course delivery assumed technology readiness among all learners,” (p. 5).

## Home Learning Environment

The [Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland – a focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups](#) (2023) also found that supporting learners in their home learning environment is a key enabler for participation of marginalised or vulnerable groups.

As a disabled participant in the study said: “I had to sit in three different places when they first started doing Zoom. I tried sitting in a chair in the sitting room. And then I tried to sit in my wheelchair. And then... I had to sit in the kitchen and wear headphones. And for when I was in the workshop, I was in the sitting room. I just had the iPad on a pillow.” (p.21)

The study also explored the barriers experienced by lone parents, a group which seemed to benefit from more online or hybrid options:

“Going on a Zoom class when you’ve got children at home is not ideal. But it’s certainly better than having to find childcare and leave them at home and go to college. But I think it’s very important to have in-class, physical learning, which could be done in the mornings.” (p.19)

## References

- Meyler, A., Lovejoy, L., & Swan, L. (2023). [Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland – a focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups](#). AONTAS.
- Meyler, A., Cobain, E., Farrell, K., & Lovejoy, L. (2023). [Learners' Voices Across Ireland National FET Learner Forum Report, 2022-2023](#). AONTAS

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