

NATIONAL FET LEARNER FORUM ANNUAL SYNTHESIS REPORT 2020-2021

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ABBREVIATIONS

FET	Further Education and Training
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
AHEAD	Association for Higher Education Access & Disability

CONTENTS

Abbreviations	1
Organisations	3
Acknowledgements	5
A Year in Numbers	7
Executive Summary	8
Learner Recommendations	15
Project Overview	22
Report Contents and Structure	28
Methodology	29
Focus Group.....	31
Learner Survey.....	31
Research Limitations.....	32
Detailed Results	34
Areas Working Well.....	34
Areas For Improvement.....	41
Survey Findings	54
Survey Participant Profile.....	54
Satisfaction with Recruitment, Registration, and Induction.....	57
Satisfaction with Facilities and Services.....	58
Satisfaction with Teaching and Learning.....	60
Experience of Remote Learning during COVID-19.....	60
Vulnerable / Minority Groups.....	63
Conclusion	76
Bibliography	78
Appendices	79
Appendix 1: Members of the National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group.....	79
Appendix 2: Members of the National FET Learner Forum Academic Expert Group.....	80
Appendix 3: Learner Survey Questions and Responses.....	81

ORGANISATIONS

AONTAS

AONTAS is the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation, a membership organisation representing adult education educators, providers, learners, and other stakeholders. AONTAS is committed to advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to a quality service throughout their lives and promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning. AONTAS supports learners, particularly those most educationally disadvantaged, to engage in lifelong learning, and advocates for more inclusive and accessible national education policy. AONTAS achieves these 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 to:

- 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 on-going 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 2020-2021. It is your voice that is at the centre of this project. Each adult learner generously offered their time and shared their voice during an unprecedented year due to the advent of COVID-19. Your feedback will further the aim of creating a more inclusive, improved and democratic FET sector in the future. For this, we appreciate 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, they 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

The National FET Learner Forum is a collaborative project between AONTAS and Education and Training Boards across Ireland. The Forum could not take place without Education and Training Boards recruiting and supporting learners to participate in the events that AONTAS hosts. It is also them who consider and take on board the feedback of learners presented in the AONTAS reports. To the Education and Training Boards who hosted events in the academic year 2020-2021, your cooperation was crucial to the success of the Forum project. We thank you for your continued support and your commitment to listening to and acting upon learners' recommendations.

The National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group

We would like to thank the National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group. This is a group of stakeholders consisting of two learner representatives, a FET Director, and representatives from SOLAS, Education and Training Boards Ireland, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, the National Adult Literacy Agency, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Their guidance and recommendations to continue the successful expansion of the Forum is invaluable, and we are particularly grateful for their counsel on the adaptation of the Forum to continue throughout the

COVID-19 restrictions. They remain a vital part of the success of this project.

The National FET Learner Forum Academic Expert Group

We would also like to thank the Academic Expert group. The group consists of experts in learner voice from Ireland and further afield. Their expertise provides the academic bedrock to the project. We thank them for their support and commitment to this project. It is their guidance that allows this research to develop and expand in a rigorous and meaningful way.

A YEAR IN NUMBERS

The National FET Learner Forum 2020-2021: A Year in Numbers



2050
Learners



8

Regional
Reports



1

Purpose-Specific
Report



20

Virtual Events



8

Educating and
Training Boards



63

Focus Groups



1750

Survey Responses

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents findings from 18 regional events of the National FET Learner Forum held across eight Education and Training Boards between October 2020 and May 2021. These Education and Training Boards were: Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board, Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board, Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board, Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board, Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board, Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board, Cork Education and Training Board, and Louth and Meath Education and Training Board.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on in-person gatherings, the Forum consisted of virtual focus group events and online learner surveys. These events brought together a total of 291 learners from eight Education and Training Boards, with 1,707 survey responses. Previous to these events, the mechanisms of the Forum were utilised

immediately to support learners and Education and Training Boards following the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020. This report builds on our previous collaborative research with Education and Training Boards on the impact of COVID-19 on FET Learners. Earlier in 2020, several other Education and Training Boards hosted Forum events, and learners from 12 Education and Training Boards responded to the COVID-19 Learner Survey, as part of the COVID-19 Further Education and Training Learner Report (Dowdall, Farren, and Lovejoy, 2020).¹ As such, some of the Education and Training Boards who hosted events and took part in the learner survey opted not to host another Forum event in the 2020-2021 academic year. For 2020-2021, the National FET Learner Forum moved from a calendar year model to an academic year model. This decision was made in light of AONTAS' need to capture how learner experiences changed in the transition from the initial emergency COVID-19 period to a longer-term period

1 The COVID-19 FET Learner Report gathered the views of 959 learners, 59 through virtual Forum events and 900 through the COVID-19 learner survey, from the following Education and Training Boards:

- Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board
- City of Dublin Education and Training Board
- Cork Education and Training Board
- Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board
- Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board
- Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board
- Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board
- Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board
- Louth and Meath Education and Training Board
- Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board
- Tipperary Education and Training Board
- Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board

of blended learning. In order to support the Forum's aim of authentically reflecting the experiences of FET learners, it was decided that it would be beneficial to capture learner recommendations emerging from a full academic year of blended learning.

Key Findings:

Learners were grateful for support they received from their Education and Training Boards during the COVID-19 restrictions

- Education and Training Boards prioritised and supported learners' mental health and wellbeing during remote learning, and endeavoured to stay in touch with them using diverse communication methods
 - “The coordinator assigned a tutor to each class pod to check in with us once a week to see if we need any support. They also created drop-in classes, but they weren't mandatory”
- Learners benefitted from the provision of laptops by Education and Training Boards during the transition to remote learning, and from the digital skills support they received from Education and Training Board staff. Learners developed new skills (particularly digital skills) and gained confidence as a result of overcoming the challenges of remote learning
 - “I am glad that I got a loan for a laptop to help me with my course as I was doing everything on the phone”
- “I've learned a lot and have gained experience in using technology, word processing, how to work Teams, Moodle. I've learned a lot how to use new skills and tutors encourage us to be creative with our own work and encourage us to add things like photos and emojis to our work”
- The majority of survey respondents agreed that they were able to access the course they wanted (83%), felt supported to learn remotely (75%), had a comfortable and suitable space to learn remotely (72%), and had access to necessary IT devices and software (83%)

Learners struggled with remote learning and their mental health

- Learners found the remote learning environment challenging due to issues such as limited space, lack of suitable devices for learning, poor or unreliable internet access, isolation, and home caring or childcare responsibilities. This is despite some learners reporting that remote learning was more convenient and allowed for more flexibility.
 - “Broadband is problematic, and a lot of learners have not got internet. Money towards getting an internet connection, maybe like 20 euro, would help”
 - “I have four children and they are all at home, and all studying too. We just have to get on with it. We have to share phones and a computer, and just take turns”

- Learners pointed out that further supports were needed in the areas of mental health, digital skills and online learning, assessment, and progression
 - “I am struggling with my mental health as a result of this crisis”
 - “Getting the necessary software for our course took time and [it] was hard to get my head around the packages”
 - “Our course is very practical and hands on, but now that we are full-time online it really limits our opportunity to interact and practice our skills”
 - “The assessment sheets could use a bit of work. They are often left up to interpretation, which can make it difficult for first time learners or teachers of the module when needing to start and complete assessments”
 - “Hospitality has suffered hugely under COVID-19 and I feel this course cannot be taught successfully remotely. We managed but I feel we did lose out. Now I cannot think of looking for a job. It’s just not happening and that makes me feel a bit dejected by the whole experience”
- More than half of survey respondents agreed that they struggled with motivation or a lack of structure when learning online (54% of applicable responses), and that their mental health was affected by the current crisis (59% of applicable responses)
- Challenges related to remote learning increased in the academic year 2020-2021 compared to the initial COVID-19 emergency transition period
 - The number of agreeing responses on the enjoyment of learning at home decreased by 10 percentage points
 - The number of agreeing responses on struggling with motivation or a lack of structure increased by 15 percentage points
 - The number of agreeing responses on affected mental health increased by 27 percentage points

Learners living in Direct Provision particularly felt less supported to learn remotely and were disproportionately affected by a lack of motivation and mental health struggles

- These learners expressed:
 - “Lack of motivation to study, no study space, mental health rises etc.”
 - “This is too hard for us this moment because children [are] in the home and they are so bored”
 - “I can’t afford WiFi or a laptop so it’s kind of hard”
 - “I am living at the direct provisions centre and [there are] many distractions from roommates and kids”

- In survey statistics, compared to those who did not identify as a member of vulnerable or minority groups, learners living in Direct Provision were substantially less likely to feel supported to learn remotely (65% vs. 77%), were substantially more likely to struggle with motivation or a lack of structure (68% vs. 54%), and were substantially more likely to have their mental health affected (69% vs. 58%)

Traveller/Roma learners particularly struggled with accessing the course they wanted and with motivation or a lack of structure

- These learners expressed:
 - “I find it difficult to pay attention and get work done from home. There’s too many distractions and it’s very stressful when you can’t leave your house”
 - “It’s hard, but it’s especially hard for members of the Traveller community coming from a background where family members may not have attended school so they don’t have support or if they get stuck with something, e.g. not knowing how to use a laptop, they just get stuck. I have adapted to online learning but I know plenty of people including family who are struggling.”
- In survey statistics, compared to those who did not identify as a member of vulnerable or minority groups, Traveller/Roma learners were substantially less likely to have access

to the course they wanted (67% vs. 84%), and substantially more likely to struggle with motivation or a lack of structure (71% vs. 54%)

Learners who are non-native English speakers particularly felt less supported to learn remotely

- These learners expressed:
 - “Remote learning is difficult for studying languages. I prefer to be in a classroom.”
 - “I couldn’t have a chance to continue learning remotely concerning the same class I was doing”
 - “For many of us [it] is more difficult [to] study from home because we have children that need our attention and help”
- In survey statistics, compared to those who did not identify as a member of vulnerable or minority groups, learners who are non-native speakers were substantially less likely to feel supported to learn remotely (68% vs. 77%)

Learners who are lone parents particularly struggled with a comfortable and suitable space to learn and with access to necessary IT devices and software

- These learners expressed:
 - “It is good for me learning online as I have a child; this term is different as my child is home so trying to rebalance the structure all the time. I prefer in class where possible as it keeps the motivation going. That said, 2 lectures in particular are highly motivational”
 - “I am not very good with technology so I find using the computer to submit work very hard. I would rather print out my assignments and hand them in. I panic in case I cannot download and submit it properly”
- In survey statistics, compared to those who did not identify as a member of vulnerable or minority groups, learners who are lone parents were substantially less likely to have a comfortable and suitable space to learn remotely (62% vs. 75%) or have access to necessary IT devices and software (74% vs. 84%)

Learners with disabilities particularly struggled with motivation and a lack of structure and with their mental health while learning remotely

- These learners expressed:
 - “Mental health and wellbeing. Hard to do work in your own home, hard to switch on”
 - “I’m just so stressed all the time, trying to work, trying to learn, trying to remain optimistic that I am doing this for a good reason and it’ll be worth it by the finish”
- In survey statistics, compared to those who did not identify as a member of vulnerable or minority groups, learners with disabilities were substantially more likely to struggle with motivation or a lack of structure (60% vs. 54%) and to have their mental health affected (70% vs. 58%)

Learners born outside Ireland particularly lacked a comfortable and suitable space to learn remotely

- These learners expressed:
 - “I live in a rural area, so when we are online I have to drive into town and take our class in my car on the phone”
 - “It’s difficult to learn from home when you have small children”

- In survey statistics, compared to those who did not identify as a member of vulnerable or minority groups, learners born outside Ireland were substantially less likely to have a comfortable and suitable space to learn remotely (70% vs. 75%)

**“What I knew in
September and
what I know now
are completely
different. I’m more
confident now.”**



LEARNER RECOMMENDATIONS

The table featured below breaks down recommendations raised by learners across the regional events. These recommendations are based on learner experiences, primarily drawing from focus group discussions and supplemented by learner surveys. For ease, these recommendations have been broken down into areas working well and areas for improvement. The maximum frequency for each recommendation is eight, representing the eight Education and Training Boards that hosted regional events over the course of the year. For topics that shared the same frequency,

they are listed in the table in alphabetical order. It should be noted this figure does not represent the number of learners who raised this issue, nor does it reflect the level of importance assigned to the topic by the learners who raised it. Rather it is only a reflection of the amount of times the recommendation was featured across the eight regional reports. In addition, when reference to a course level is made in a topic, it does not mean that the topic is irrelevant to learners at other levels. It only means that the point was made more frequently from learners taking courses at these levels.

AREAS WORKING WELL		
TOPIC	FREQUENCY	STATEMENT
New Skills	8	– Learners were pleased with the new skills, particularly digital skills, they had developed as a result of remote learning
Tutors	8	– Learners felt tutors were helpful and supportive during the period of remote learning
Communication	7	– Learners felt that Education and Training Boards tried to stay in touch with them during remote learning and appreciated the diverse communication methods used, including email, WhatsApp, Zoom, phone call, and post
Device Access	6	– Learners benefitted from the provision of laptops by the Education and Training Boards during the transition to remote learning

AREAS WORKING WELL		
TOPIC	FREQUENCY	STATEMENT
Flexibility	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners, particularly those at levels 4–6, appreciated the flexibility afforded by online and remote learning and would like to see it continue as part of a blended learning model, which combines on-site and online learning
Mental Health and Wellbeing	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners, particularly those at levels 4 and 5, felt that Education and Training Board staff prioritised and supported learners' mental health and wellbeing during remote learning
Increased Confidence	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners developed more confidence as a result of overcoming the challenges of remote learning
Transition to Remote Learning	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners felt that the transition to remote learning was handled well by tutors and that Education and Training Boards adapted well to this sudden change
Blended Learning	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners enjoyed blended learning and wanted to see elements of this maintained after restrictions ease
Peer Support	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Peer support and contact was important to learners during remote learning
Teaching and Instruction Methods	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners found that diverse and engaging teaching and instruction methods had a positive effect on their online learning experience
Guidance	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners, particularly those at levels 5 and 6, benefitted from the Adult Guidance Services provided by their Education and Training Boards

AREAS WORKING WELL		
TOPIC	FREQUENCY	STATEMENT
Learning Materials	1	– Learners, particularly those at level 4, were satisfied with the provision of learning materials, including IT devices and hard-copy resources
One-to-one support	1	– Learners, particularly those at level 4, were grateful for the individual support they received during learning remotely

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT		
TOPIC	FREQUENCY	STATEMENT
Digital Skills	7	– Learners would like more support with digital skills, specifically how to access and use digital platforms and software
Face-to-Face Learning	7	– Learners miss face-to-face learning and would like a return to on-site learning as soon as possible
Internet Connectivity	6	– Internet connectivity remains a barrier for learners
Learning Environment	6	– Learners have found the at-home learning environment challenging, particularly learners with limited living space, device access, and home caring or childcare responsibilities
Peer Contact	6	– Learners miss peer interaction and would like more opportunities to interact with their peers socially online

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT		
TOPIC	FREQUENCY	STATEMENT
Professional Development	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like Education and Training Board staff to be supported with continued professional development training in the online platforms used for teaching and learning
Work Placement	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners were concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on work experience placements and would like information on the alternative options in place
Mental Health	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like more mental health supports put into place to address the impact of COVID-19 in FET
Assessment	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like assessment methods to be diversified given the COVID-19 context – Learners would like clear and timely information on assessment methods – Learners would like clear and timely information on assessment, alternative arrangements to be put in place where necessary, and would like assessments to be more evenly spaced out
Peer Learning and Support	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like increased opportunity for peer learning as part of their courses – Learners felt that they missed out on peer support during remote learning
Practical Learning	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners taking practical coursework, particularly those at level 5, missed the opportunity to practice their skills and would like to see more practical instruction as part of their courses

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT		
TOPIC	FREQUENCY	STATEMENT
Class Hours and Scheduling	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners expressed concern about covering course content in the online space, and would like to ensure that they complete coursework at the same pace as in-person learning – Learners found long days in front of a screen tiring and would like course scheduling to accommodate more breaks
Learners with Disabilities	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners with disabilities would like more digital skills support and increased advertisement of the disability supports available
Isolation	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners, particularly those at level 4, felt isolated from their peers and tutors during remote learning
Motivation	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners, particularly those at level 4, struggled with finding the motivation needed to learn remotely
One-to-One Supports	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners felt there is less opportunity to ask questions in the virtual space and asked for more one-to-one supports
Physical Learning Materials	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners, particularly those at level 6, would like access to physical, printed learning materials in addition to digital learning materials
Device Access	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lack of access to devices was a barrier, particularly for learners living in direct provision
Increased Course Options	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners, particularly those at level 4, would like to see more options for evening and part-time courses

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT		
TOPIC	FREQUENCY	STATEMENT
Learner Engagement	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners, particularly those at levels 1–3, felt that learner engagement and class participation had decreased during remote learning
Online Platform Maintenance	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners would like Education and Training Boards to ensure online platforms were updated and maintained in an organised and timely manner
Progression	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learners looking to progress to employment would like more support on future employment and further training opportunities available to them, particularly in light of COVID-19 – Learners would like clear and up-to-date information on their progression options

“Remote learning has afforded me the opportunity to keep in touch with colleagues and friends, for that I am forever grateful for being introduced to Zoom.”

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 shares this feedback with Education and Training Boards through developing reports based on learners' recommendations. This project is funded by SOLAS, the National FET authority, and was devised in line with the commitment of the SOLAS 2014-2019 FET strategy to "[s]ystematically 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 its expertise in learner voice, AONTAS was commissioned to deliver this project, and has done so since its inception in 2016. Figure 1 shows overall project growth since the project's beginning. The 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.

In response to the COVID-19 restrictions, from September 2020 the Forum moved online, with virtual focus group discussions and an online learner survey. This report builds on AONTAS' previous collaborative research with Education and Training Boards on the impact of COVID-19 on FET Learners. Earlier in 2020, several other Education and Training Boards hosted Forum events, and learners from 12 Education and Training Boards responded to the COVID-19 Learner Survey, as part of the COVID-19 Further Education and Training Learner Report (Dowdall, Farren and Lovejoy, 2020).² 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. Thus, the year of 2020 in Figure 1 covers up to August 2020, and the year of 2020-2021 captures the numbers from the academic year 2020-2021.

The growth of the Forum is supported and guided by the Forum advisory group and academic expert group. Each group generally meets four times per year. The members of each group are relevant stakeholders and experts in adult learning and learner voice. A complete list of the members of each group can be found in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2.

The funding for this project is supported by SOLAS. AONTAS and SOLAS work collaboratively on the high-level planning of this project. The delivery of this project is also supported by Education and Training Boards. They promote the virtual events in their regions, recruit learners for each event, and support their participation. Often, a representative from the participating Education and Training Board also opens each virtual Forum event. AONTAS takes responsibility for the regional-level reporting of this project, through developing a report

² As outlined in the executive summary, the following Education and Training Boards took part in the COVID-19 FET learner report, via learners taking part in a virtual Forum event, or completing the COVID-19 learner survey:

- Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board
- City of Dublin Education and Training Board
- Cork Education and Training Board
- Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board
- Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board
- Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board
- Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board
- Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board
- Louth and Meath Education and Training Board
- Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board
- Tipperary Education and Training Board
- Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board

after each regional event and sending it to the relevant Education and Training Board. An Annual Synthesis Report and a Learner Report are also developed each year by AONTAS, with input and support from SOLAS. AONTAS hosted 18 regional events, in partnership with eight Education and Training Boards between October 2020 and May 2021:

- Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board, 23rd and 28th October 2020 (morning and afternoon events)
- Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board, 8th, 9th, and 10th December 2020
- Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board, 12th January 2021 (morning and afternoon events)
- Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board, 9th and 10th February 2021
- Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board, 25th and 26th February 2021
- Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board, 2nd and 3rd March, 2021
- Cork Education and Training Board, 9th and 11th March, 2021
- Louth and Meath Education and Training Board, 18th and 20th May, 2021



Figure 1: Learner representation at the National FET Learner Forum by year

The Forum reached a total of 2,050 learners over the course of the academic year October 2020 – May 2021, with 300 focus group participants and 1,750 survey responses. This report represents a synthesis of findings from across all regional events this academic year reaching 1,998 learners. The remaining 52 learners (nine from learner focus group and 43 from a learner survey) engaged with the Forum via purpose-specific events on the subject of adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy at the request of SOLAS to inform the Adult Literacy, Numeracy, Digital Literacy Strategy Consultation (AONTAS, 2020, Appendix 1). As these learners shared their views for the purposes of the consultation, their feedback is not included in this report.

The reports from the regional events were shared with the relevant Education and Training Board, SOLAS, and other relevant bodies, for example 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 36 learners

and an average of 213 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. In the entire academic year, there were 291 participants in the events and 1,707 responses in the surveys.

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. Figure 3 presents the total number of learners per programme. The most frequent programme represented was Post-Leaving Certificate (528), followed by the Back to Education Initiative (244) and then by the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (178). Figure 4 is the summary of learner participation by course levels. Learners came from all different levels of courses, with the most common being level 5 (1,036).

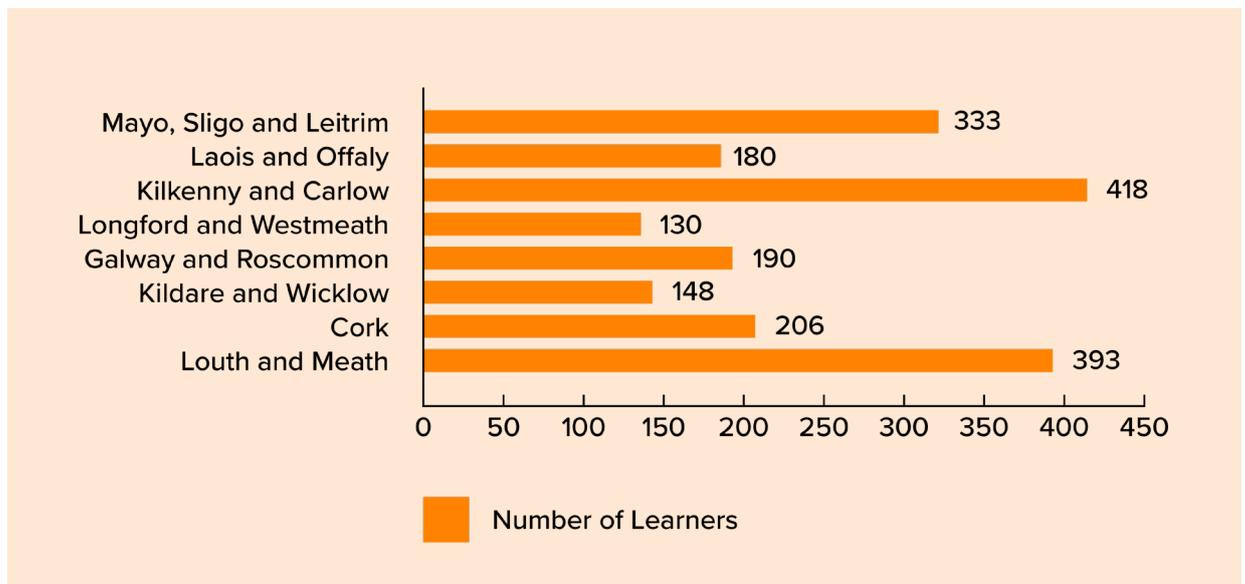


Figure 2: Learner participation in the National FET Learner Forum by participating Education and Training Board

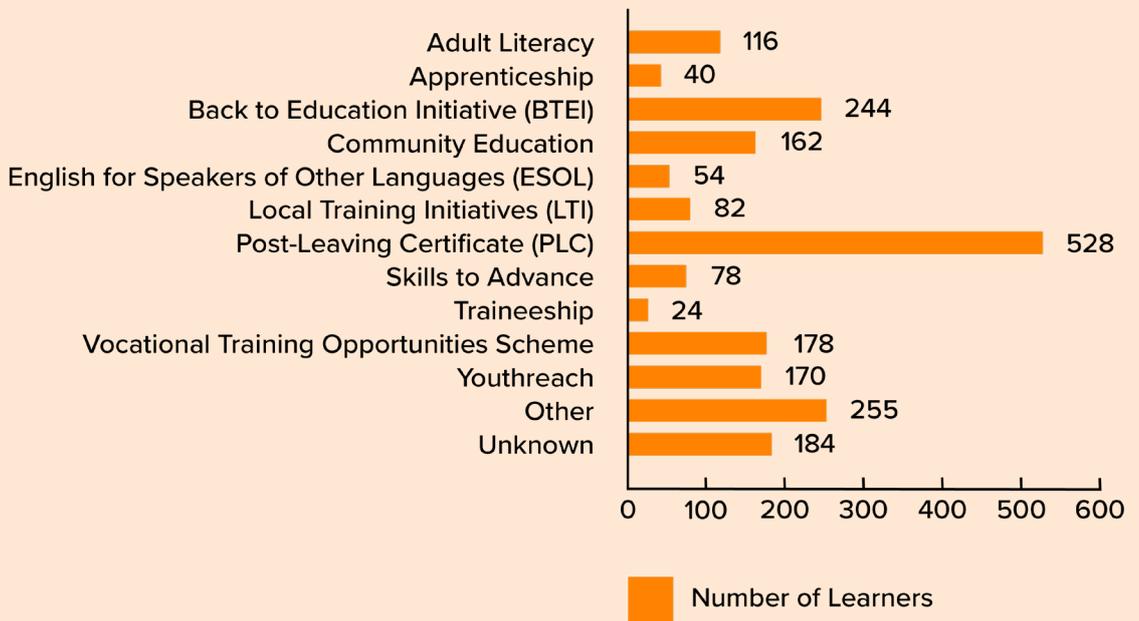


Figure 3: Learner representation at the National FET Learner Forum by programme or course

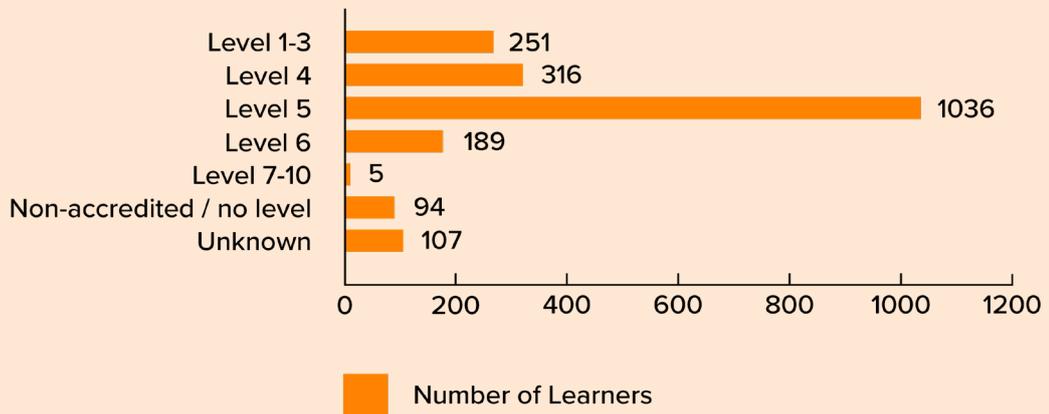


Figure 4: Learner Representation at the National FET Learner Forum by course levels

“You could ask for help if you needed extra classes online. I asked for Maths and the tutor did one to one classes with me.”

REPORT CONTENTS AND STRUCTURE

This synthesis report reflects a summary of all the results gathered from the regional Forum events throughout the 2020-2021 academic year. The report is made up of three key sections. They are as follows:

1. Methodology

2. Detailed Results

- Areas Working Well
- Areas for Improvement

3. Survey Results

- Survey Participant Profile
- Recruitment, Registration, and Induction
- Facilities and Services
- Teaching and Learning
- Experience of Remote Learning during COVID-19
- Vulnerable Learner Cohorts

In addition to this core report, the following appendices are included:

- **Appendix 1** – Members of the National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group
- **Appendix 2** – Members of the National FET Learner Forum Academic Expert Group
- **Appendix 3** – Learner Survey Questions and Responses

METHODOLOGY

Before COVID-19 (2019)



Learners Engage Locally

- Learners meet face to face in their own locality
- 1 event per Education and Training Board held per year, with an average of 70 learners at each event



Learners Participate in Focus Groups

- Learners broken into small groups for discussion
- 1 hour discussion, with an average of around 9 learners per group



Learners Complete a Survey

- Learners complete survey in person with support if needed

During COVID-19 (2020-2021)



Events Move Online

- Online events using Eventbrite and Zoom
- 2 or 3 events per Education and Training Board held per year, with average of around 16 learners per event



Learners Discuss in Virtual Focus Groups

- Virtual breakout rooms used for discussions
- 1 hour discussion and 15 minutes for introduction to survey, with an average of 5 learners per group



Learners Complete an Online Survey

- Online survey is usually open for 2 weeks
- Learners complete surveys independently (with a possibility of receiving support remotely), paper copies supplied if needed

The key aim of the National FET Learner Forum project is to ensure that learners are given a safe space to share their voice and that all voices are respected. Participation at these events is voluntary. While the Forum is a national project, a series of regional events are held in an effort to reach a diverse and representative group within the FET sector. The project implements a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis to capture learner voice effectively. In 2020, the methodology of the project changed to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, learners participated in physical events (one event per Education and Training Board), with an average of approximately 70 learners (based on the figures from 2019). In these physical events, learners were broken into small groups (typically groups of approximately nine learners) for facilitated discussion. Learners were also provided with a survey questionnaire in person, with one-to-one support on how to complete the survey.

The onset of the pandemic resulted in a transition to online, virtual events. In these virtual events, to maximise learner participation learners were able to choose between two to three events per Education and Training Board (see Table 1). The events were held via the online platform, Zoom. Learners were broken into small groups (an average of five learners per group) for facilitated discussion, via Zoom's Breakout Room function. Learners were also provided with a link to an online learner survey, whether they participated in a virtual event or not; those who participated in a virtual event had an opportunity to have one-to-one support filling in the survey during the event, while those who did not participate in a virtual event were welcomed to contact AONTAS for such support if needed.

Education and Training Board	Event dates		
Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim	23/10/2020	28/10/2020 (AM)	28/10/2020 (PM)
Laois and Offaly	08/12/2020	09/12/2020	10/12/2020
Kilkenny and Carlow	12/01/2021 (AM)	12/01/2021 (PM)	
Longford and Westmeath	09/02/2021	10/02/2021	
Galway and Roscommon	25/02/2021	26/02/2021	
Kildare and Wicklow	02/03/2021	03/03/2021	
Cork	09/03/2021	11/03/2021	
Louth and Meath	18/05/2021	20/05/2021	

Table 1: Breakdown of National FET Learner Forum events by Education and Training Board and date

Focus Group

After registering at an event, each learner received a digital preparation pack detailing what to expect at the event before participating. At the start of each virtual event, AONTAS delivered a short presentation to provide context for the day by introducing the National FET Learner Forum to learners and explaining the role learner voice plays in FET policy at national and regional level. In many of the virtual events, learners were also welcomed by a representative from their Education and Training Board.

Then, learners were put into (where possible) level-specific breakout rooms of typically four or five learners per group. Only learners, trained facilitators, and AONTAS staff members (for administrative reasons) were put into the breakout rooms. A total of 60 discussion groups were held across all regional events over the course of this academic year, reflecting 60 hours of discussion. Discussions were led by a facilitator who posed the following questions:

1. “What has been working well in your transition to remote or class-based learning during COVID-19?”
2. “What has not been working well in your transition to remote or class-based learning during COVID-19?”
3. “What changes would you make to improve learning for next year?”

Facilitated discussions lasted for one hour. Discussions were not recorded. After the events, facilitators shared notes from the discussions with AONTAS staff, who synthesised the points to provide findings and recommendations.

Learner Survey

In collaboration with Education and Training Boards, AONTAS developed an online learner survey, both for learners who attended and those who could not attend the virtual events. A hard copy of the survey was also made available on request. The survey remained open for a sufficient length of time for learners to complete it – typically for two weeks after an event, but longer or shorter if requested by an Education and Training Board, or in case a sufficient number of responses (at least 100 responses) were not reached within this timeframe. The questions and responses to the survey can be found in Appendix 3 of this report.

Summary of Learner Supports and Expanded Means of Engagement

Broadening Learner Engagement



Chat



React



Speak



Listen

Encouraging Diverse Participation



Focus Group
Component



One-to-one
Support

Alleviating Digital Barriers



Technology
Support



Paper Materials



Phone Calls

Research Limitations

The National FET Learner Forum aims to be accessible to all learners. In keeping with this ethical principle, AONTAS wanted to ensure that these events were as inclusive as possible. AONTAS staff offered technical support to registered learners on an individual basis, and provided instructions for registering via Eventbrite and joining Zoom calls in all preparation materials. However, we are aware that, by having the ability and means to attend an online event, learners had already overcome some barriers to participation. Learners who face challenges with device access, WiFi,

and digital skills may have been unable to register for or attend an online event. Thus, we recognise that the points of view represented in this report encompass only those of learners who had the digital skills and access necessary to take part in online events and an online survey. Additionally, some FET programmes were not featured in the 2020-2021 academic year project. Learners from all programmes were invited to take part, but as participation was voluntary, some programmes had a higher representation than others.

“The online lectures have been fantastic and the use of multi-media has been great. It’s been the full package. A mixture of this with some face-to-face classes also would be fantastic.”

DETAILED RESULTS

This section compiles findings gathered from learners across the regional events. 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 showcase 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

Across the regional events, learners were pleased with the **new skills (as featured in 8 regional reports)** they developed as a result of remote learning. This was cited as a “silver lining” to online and blended learning. Learners gave examples such as new or improved digital skills, organisation skills, independent research skills, and public speaking skills. One learner shared, “It’s helped us to be more organised – you just had to be,” while another echoed, “I learned to be more independent. There was no one there to motivate me to do assignments so I learned to be more reliant on myself.” In particular, learners felt far more

confident in using digital platforms compared to the pre-pandemic period. One learner shared, “I feel I’ve gained new skills especially around online stuff.” Another learner echoed this, stating that remote learning had “opened up new opportunities.” These statements were echoed by another learner, who shared:

“I’ve learned a lot and have gained experience in using technology, word processing, how to work Teams, Moodle. I’ve learned a lot about how to use new skills and tutors encourage us to be creative with our own work and encourage us to add things like photos and emojis to our work.”

In particular, learners at levels 1–3 felt that they increased digital skills as a result of remote learning. One learner stated, “it was difficult learning online at first and getting used to Microsoft Teams, but the more I have done it the more I’ve improved.” Greater familiarity with digital devices benefitted learners’ lives, allowing them to use the internet to keep in touch with family and friends during COVID-19. As one learner surmised:

“Remote learning has afforded me the opportunity to keep in touch with colleagues and friends, for that I am forever grateful for being introduced to Zoom.”

Learners at levels 5 and 6 in particular felt they were well supported in developing the digital skills necessary to learn online. These learners reported that their tutors and Education and Training Boards provided the necessary devices, software, and instruction methods to stay engaged in online learning. As one learner explained:

“When I went back to do the course full-time, I wouldn’t have been that computer literate. The tutors and participants knew that this was going to happen and they brought us up to speed very quickly. We got extra tuition in what to do to go onto Teams, how to download, how to send stuff off, like attachments.”

Learners appreciated additional training support for digital platforms from their Education and Training Boards. They found this support helped them to stay engaged and participate in their learning remotely. A learner shared how:

“At the very beginning when we were all brought in for induction, we were asked did we need help with anything. They organised three or four sessions with this computer man. He gave us great help.”

In short, learners appreciated the development of new skills as a result of remote learning and would like Education and Training Boards to continue supporting such development.

Tutors (8) were consistently credited for going “above and beyond” to support learners. Learners appreciated tutors’ efforts to ease the transition to remote learning and mitigate the challenges and disadvantages of learning during COVID-19. They shared how their tutors were communicative, available, supportive, and understanding. One learner commented, “our teachers have to be commended. They have been so available to us.” Another learner stated, “our tutor goes out of her way to ensure that anyone who may be struggling gets one-on-one time as much as possible.” A different learner mentioned, “for me, being out of the workplace for a long time, I found technology difficult at first but my tutors were extremely patient and supportive.” The support of tutors was one of the biggest factors contributing to learners’ continued engagement with remote learning. This is consistent with the survey finding that 75% of responses agreed with the statement, “I feel supported to learn remotely,” and 93% of responses indicated satisfaction with staff support.

For learners who moved to remote learning during the early period of the pandemic, having previously engaged with in-person learning with their tutors helped to ease the transition. As one learner in a focus group explained:

“It was a shock to make the transition to online learning and the fact that we had been together for those first months of the course did make it easier to go to online teaching – we knew each other and we knew our tutors.”

Across all levels, tutors were considered vital to learners’ success when transitioning to and continuing their courses remotely.

Learners appreciated the timely **communication (7)** they received from their Education and Training Boards and the diverse communication methods used. Overall, learners felt that Education and Training Boards were responsive, stayed in touch with learners, and helped support learners by using a variety of communication methods, including email, WhatsApp, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, phone calls, and post. One learner described tutors as being particularly, “great about keeping in touch with us during lockdown.” Another learner reported that they had been told, “don’t sit in silence – get in touch.” Learners found ongoing check-ins helpful. One learner shared how:

“The coordinator assigned a tutor to each class pod to check in with us once a week to see if we need any support. They also created drop-in classes, but they weren’t mandatory.”

Learners appreciated their Education and Training Boards checking in on them during this period, and would like to see these efforts to maintain contact with learners continue.

Through the Forum, learners praised their Education and Training Boards for providing support with **device access (6)**. They shared how they had benefitted from laptops loaned to them from their Education and Training Board, and felt that they would not have been able to continue learning without this support. One learner mentioned, “I received a laptop on loan from my centre and it was an absolutely massive help.” A survey respondent echoed this, stating:

“I am glad that I got a loan for a laptop to help me with my course as I was doing everything on the phone.”

For many learners, device access was organised quickly and efficiently, with one learner stating, “we were sent home with laptops that very first day.” Another learner shared, “When I applied for the course my laptop was broken. With losing my job, I couldn’t afford to buy a new one.” Consistent with this discussion

finding, 83% of survey responses agreed with the statement, “I have access to necessary IT devices and software.” Learners felt that the provision of digital devices was crucial to their continued learning and would like to see it expanded across all levels and Education and Training Boards.

Although the transition to remote learning was abrupt and exacerbated many of the barriers to education, learners, particularly those at levels 4–6, appreciated the **flexibility (5)** of online learning and felt that it allowed them to learn at their own pace. One learner shared, “I love the online teaching. It suits my temperament and lifestyle.” Another learner expressed:

“I get more done with theory than I would have done in the classroom. You can pick when you want to do the work, and focus and work when it suits you. At home, sitting in front of computer after an online tutorial, I tend to stay and do the work.”

Another learner explained, “not travelling means I am not wrecked all the time and I am not using petrol.” These were seen as some of the unforeseen benefits of learning remotely.

Learners, particularly those at levels 4 and 5, felt that their **mental health and wellbeing (4)** were acknowledged and prioritised by their Education and Training Boards. These learners reported that their tutors were aware of mental health

difficulties among learners as a result of COVID-19, and felt that Education and Training Board staff checked in with them and reminded them to take care of their mental health. Learners were happy that check-ins from their tutors covered, “welfare – not just tutorials,” and felt that personal circumstances during COVID-19 were, “acknowledged and respected – 100%.” Another learner stated, “They are constantly checking in and telling us to go out for walks. They tell us: ‘Don’t be on the screen all day every day.’”

Another learner echoed this, stating:

“If we have had a tough day, we can tell the coordinator, talk to them about life in general. If you’re struggling, it doesn’t feel like there’s a massive pressure to get assignments done.”

Learners also expressed how doing their courses had benefitted their mental health. One survey respondent wrote:

“If I did not do this course, I could have suffered very badly with my mental health. It was a good choice of a course, as it helps us all to be able to do recovery from mental health.”

Learners were grateful for this support during an often-difficult period of restrictions, and would like to see the acknowledgement of learner health and wellbeing continue.

Increased confidence (3) was cited by learners as a benefit to learning remotely. Learners at levels 1–3 felt that participation in their FET courses helped them to overcome prior negative learning experiences and develop their confidence. As one learner at levels 1–3 shared, “The entry level courses have been so valuable for me. They have shown me that I’m not as stupid as I was told.” Another learner remarked, “you feel younger learning new things every day!” Learners at level 5 also cited increased confidence in their learning abilities. One level 5 learner shared:

“What I knew in September and what I know now are completely different. I’m more confident now.”

Taking a course increased learners’ self-confidence, which in turn had a wider positive impact on their lives.

More generally, learners appreciated the support given by Education and Training Board staff in the **transition to remote learning (3)**. They felt that the preparation and approaches taken in moving to online learning helped to mitigate some of the difficulties of learning at home. As one learner explained, “the tutors had everything covered due to the preparation they did beforehand to get us all up and running.” Tutors also supported learners in developing their digital skills in particular which made the transition

period easier. As one learner shared, “before we got online, in one week, my teacher taught us how to use Microsoft Teams.” These learners also noted how tutors supported those who struggled to get online during the transition period, with one learner explaining,

“If we don’t understand online, they send us a worksheet to our home. It’s good.”

Support to transition to remote learning helped learners feel equipped and prepared to continue their courses online

Learners, particularly those at level 6, felt that **blended learning (2)** worked well and would like to see a continuation of “live” classes, with smaller numbers, in future. They appreciated the diversity of instruction offered in this model, and felt components should be maintained after restrictions are lifted. One learner stated:

“While I felt very comfortable in the face-to-face classes as they were more interactive, online has been very successful for me also. It’s great that we can still view things and get advice. I would like a combination of both types of class.”

Another learner echoed this, remarking:

“The online lectures have been fantastic and the use of multi-media has been great. It’s been the full package. A mixture of this with some face-to-face classes also would be fantastic.”

Overall, learners felt satisfied that their Education and Training Board was adhering to COVID-19 safety guidelines, including social distancing and keeping windows open. This allowed these learners to feel safe attending in-person classes in addition to remote learning.

Peer support (2) was important to learners during remote learning. Engaging with their peers online during restrictions helped learners with feelings of loneliness. As one learner explained:

“I would have had little interaction or have spoken to anyone for over the last five months if I had not had online classes – online courses are great for people’s wellbeing.”

Another learner described how they had been given a learning “buddy” for support during remote learning. Such a peer support structure was an important antidote to the isolation caused by remote learning, and learners hoped to see these supports continue in future.

Learners found that challenges to learning remotely were eased by effective and diverse **teaching and instruction methods (2)**. They were grateful that their tutors were willing to adapt the pace of classes to suit learners' needs, with one learner stating, “They will go over everything and are very patient.” Another learner surmised:

“The teachers have done brilliantly in what is an unusual situation for everyone.”

Diverse teaching and learning media, such as Zoom classes, recorded video segments, and the posting of assignments in case learners did not have a printer, also made classes and coursework engaging for learners. These efforts led to learners describing the transition to remote learning as “work[ing] perfectly,” and they felt that these high standards of teaching helped to mitigate some of the difficulties of learning at home.

Learners, particularly those at levels 5 and 6, benefitted from accessing **Adult Guidance Services (1)**. Learners felt this support played an important role in their overall success, particularly during COVID-19, and were grateful to have the service available to them. Guidance staff were described as very helpful and supportive, with one learner explaining that the guidance counsellor “would point you in the right direction, give her professional opinion,” and a different learner stating, “you know you can talk to her, she’s always there in the background.” As another learner shared:

“The career guidance has been exceptional. I ring her and she is there. She took so much time to help me come up with a plan for my future. I can’t express how grateful I am. She helped me get on the course. Before I started this course, I had lost my job. It was February, just before COVID-19, and I was so lost, until I spoke to her.”

This open culture within guidance services made it invaluable to learners during COVID-19.

Learners, particularly those at level 4, were satisfied with the provision of **learning materials (1)**, including not only IT devices but also other materials. As a learner in a focus group discussion mentioned, “personally I’ve found I’ve had everything. When this all started, they gave us a folder with pencils and everything.” A different learner agreed:

“I was offered a laptop, but I didn’t take it because I have my own. They gave us art folders, stationery packs. There’s nothing really that the Education and Training Board can do to make things more accessible.”

This helped learners feel prepared to learn remotely, and they were very appreciative of this support.

Level 4 learners in particular also praised the **one-to-one support (1)** that was available to them from tutors, which they credited with improving their online learning experience. One learner explained:

“You could ask for help if you needed extra classes online. I asked for Maths and the tutor did one to one classes with me.”

Another learner shared how their tutor offered extra support without them having to seek it out, explaining, “I got

a lot of support and sometimes, without even knowing that I needed it, a tutor would spot something.” Other learners shared, “If you need Maths support you can ask for it,” and “you are given support from day one.” Learners were appreciative of these supports and found them to be of great benefit when learning remotely.

Areas for improvement

Learners across multiple levels would like continued support with the **digital skills (7)** necessary for them to engage with online learning. Using software and digital learning platforms remains a barrier for some learners. As one learner expressed, “getting the necessary software for our course took time and [it] was hard to get my head around the packages.” Another learner felt that, “a crash course at the start on technology would have helped.” Learners requested more support and training with digital platforms. One learner admitted, “I found it hard to use Zoom, I was afraid to ask for help but I found a way.” Another learner explained:

“[Microsoft] Teams was hard to get my head around. I’ve even forgotten about it since Christmas! I find myself constantly searching for emails and notes. It’s not so user friendly. A lot of us found it to be a difficult package.”

With remote learning likely to continue in some capacity, learners requested continued digital skills support so they can fully engage online.

Learners shared how they missed **face-to-face learning (7)**. They felt the lack of interaction with their tutors and peers and shared how some aspects of face-to-face learning could not be replicated online. A learner expressed, “online is good, but I miss the sharing and company of the group.” Another learner stated, “I miss the smiles and talking without masks.” In a survey comment, a learner wrote:

“I very much appreciated the opportunity to continue my course online during COVID-19 but I very much missed the social aspect and hands on experience of learning in the classroom as part of a group.”

Learners felt particularly disconnected from their peers when they did not share the video function on the devices. As one learner described:

“I don’t like talking to a series of squares when they don’t turn their cameras on. It makes interaction really difficult when you can’t see their faces.”

It was noted that “people’s energy levels seem to be down online” and that “face-to-face [learning] is much more effective.” Although learners understand that returning to face-to-face learning depends on COVID-19 restrictions, they would like to go back to on-site activity as soon as possible. In the survey data, 35% of applicable responses disagreed with the statement, “I enjoy learning at home.”

Internet connectivity (6) remains a barrier for learners across multiple levels. One learner described how the cost of WiFi was a barrier to some learners:

“Broadband is problematic, and a lot of learners have not got internet. Money towards getting an internet connection, maybe like 20 euro, would help.”

Learners also explained the impact of poor internet connectivity on their learning. One learner remarked, “poor broadband connection can hinder our classes at times.” Some learners were able to access recordings of their classes, which was helpful if they were unable to fully engage due to connectivity issues. Learners suggested that recording online classes be expanded across Education and Training Boards and FET courses, so they can return to their lesson if they were unable to attend it due to connectivity issues. Missing out on classes due to a poor internet connection was a particular concern for learners on courses with attendance requirements. One learner explained, “if you have bad internet at home, you might fail on attendance.” Learners would like acknowledgement of connectivity issues and awareness of the

difficulties faced by learners who have either poor or no broadband.

The **home learning environment (6)** impacted on learners taking courses remotely. One learner remarked, “Being all the time in the house is difficult. I can’t wait to be able to travel about freely.” In particular, family caring responsibilities made it difficult for some learners to learn while at home. While some felt that being at home meant it was easier to manage and schedule childcare, for others their learning was significantly disrupted. As one learner explained:

“I have four children and they are all at home, and all studying too. We just have to get on with it. We have to share phones and a computer, and just take turns.”

Another learner mentioned, “I learn more in a quiet classroom than at home with a baby and housework!” with another learner agreeing, “I had to work in my bedroom and I have a little brother who is really loud.” Learners with home caring responsibilities or living with young children asked for flexibility and understanding from their Education and Training Board when caring obligations interfered with class assignments.

Learners shared how they missed **peer contact (6)** as part of taking their course. They felt that it was more difficult online to stay connected and socialise with their peers. These learners would like more opportunities to connect with their peers as part of their remote learning. One learner explained:

“Physical contact with each other was something we all missed. We did keep in contact virtually but it’s not the same.”

Another learner echoed this, stating, “Class interactions are very important. This doesn’t happen when we are online.” Learners who chose to take their course for social reasons were particularly affected by the transition to remote learning. These learners felt that online interaction was not the same as peer contact in physical classes. As one learner shared, “[the decision to take my course was] as much for social interaction as it was for learning and moving online hindered that.” This was echoed by the fact that 16% of survey respondents indicated they took their course “to meet new people.”

Learners recommended **professional development (6)** opportunities for tutors teaching remotely. Learners explained how staff struggling with digital teaching and learning platforms affected their ability to learn. One learner gave an example, stating:

“I can see that one instructor is really struggling with [Microsoft] Teams. One day it took her an hour and a half to set up the class in the morning and even though that was a once-off, you can see that she is very uncomfortable with it.”

This was echoed by another learner who remarked, “some of the tutors might need a bit of technical support themselves.” A particularly important point was the issue of attendance in online classes. One learner shared:

“You’d be showing up and in the waiting room for Teams, but they’d never admit you, never realise you were waiting, so you’d end up missing class.”

This was particularly frustrating, as learners could have their allowance docked for missing their online class, despite their efforts to attend. A learner explained, “that is annoying and you get marked absent and you get docked pay.” Learners would like continued

professional development opportunities to be made available to tutors, particularly in the area of digital skills.

Learners, particularly those at level 5, had mixed experiences with finding alternatives to **work placements (6)** that were affected due to COVID-19 restrictions. Some learners were given suitable alternative options to work placement modules, with one learner explaining, “Work placement was not able to happen as it was to be community-based and it was closed down due to lockdown. I was offered an extra module, which was a good alternative.” Nonetheless, learners expressed frustration that they were missing out on a core component of their course, with one learner sharing:

“We all had placements set up and then of course everything closed. Hospitality is so hard hit by this pandemic. That was so disappointing and there was nothing that could be done about that. Cookery is about preparing and sharing food – that is not possible virtually.”

Confusion around work placements and planned alternatives was also challenging for learners at the beginning of remote learning, with one learner requesting, “there needs to be proper allowance made for the fact that some people won’t be able to get work experience. What is the alternative for them?” Learners were also particularly concerned about how missing out on

placement would affect their progression, with one learner stating:

“We are missing out on the skills demonstrations (from last semester) and work experience modules. If we miss these is our qualification affected? Are we going to get them?”

Learners looked forward to a return to work placements as soon as possible, and in the event that work placements could not go ahead, learners requested that Education and Training Boards provide clear and timely information on the alternatives to work placement that are available to them.

Learners shared how their **mental health (5)** declined as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. In focus group discussions, learners described their mental health difficulties in the past academic year. One learner explained how they had suffered from a lack of motivation, stating:

“We’ve lost out on study time. We don’t have the same motivation.”

Other learners linked mental health difficulties with their ability to learn, with one learner stating, “when our mood is low, we can’t study. It’s difficult.” Since the beginning of the transition to remote learning, learners’ mental health difficulties have increased. Findings show an increase in learner mental

health difficulties compared with the initial emergency period of COVID-19. In the findings of the COVID-19 Further Education and Training Learner Report (Dowdall, Lovejoy, and Farren, 2020), 32% of learners agreed or strongly agreed that their mental health was affected by the crisis. In the learner survey for the academic year 2020-2021, this figure increased to 59%. Learners would like to see more advertisement of mental health services and more mental health support provided.

Issues around **assessment (4)** scheduling and information were raised by learners. They would like deadlines to be spaced out so that learners are not overwhelmed with multiple competing deadlines. One learner suggested, “each module only giving one assignment at a time and for each assignment to be well explained” would help learners to complete assessments. Learners would also like tutors to provide clear information on assessment schedules and expectations. A learner expressed:

“The assessment sheets could use a bit of work. They are often left up to interpretation, which can make it difficult for first time learners or teachers of the module when needing to start and complete assessments.”

Another learner pointed out they received conflicting information on whether they had completed the modules necessary to receive their qualification:

“I was eventually told that it was up to the learner to figure out what are the compulsory modules at level 4! This makes it so much harder to overcome the barriers of going back to education in the first place.”

Learners would also like assessment methods to be diversified. Level 4 learners in particular asked for more options for “continuous assessment, and not just exams,” for more blended learning as part of the assessment, and for digital and paper forms of assessment to be integrated into their courses.

Peer learning and support (4) were seen as not being replicated in an online learning environment. Learners believed that missing out on the opportunity to learn from their peers had a negative effect on their learning. One learner stated:

“I do like online classes but I miss seeing people and practicing together. My teacher knows it’s difficult – he tries to make it easier.”

Another learner agreed, summarising, “reciprocal learning is missing.” Learners taking English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses felt particularly affected by the lack of peer learning. One learner shared, “I miss learning and talking in the class with other learners, it really helps me to improve.” These learners looked forward to returning to the classroom as soon as it is safe to do so.

Learners, particularly those at level 5 and those taking practical courses, expressed concern about the impact of COVID-19 on **practical learning (4)**. Learners expressed disappointment at missing out on opportunities to practice their practical skills while learning remotely. Online learning meant they were unable to engage with the practical elements of their courses, with one learner explaining:

“Our course is very practical and hands on, but now that we are full-time online it really limits our opportunity to interact and practice our skills.”

For some learners, the transition to online learning changed the content of their courses. One learner expressed, “it’s all theory now and it’s completely different.” Another learner on a practical course explained, “we can do our own bits at home, but it’s not the same as being in the classroom.” Learners were also concerned about the implications of missing practical learning for progression. Learners described how “changes to assessment” and “increased workload” made them feel concerned about their progression options. One learner in a focus group discussion explained:

“The course I’m doing, there would be a practical content, which has been totally missed this year. What we’re anxious to do, is that there would be a second year modelled on the content. The main part of the course would have been missed because it was field work.”

While these learners acknowledged that challenges to practical learning were an unfortunate consequence to remote learning, they looked forward to resuming the practical aspects of their courses as soon as possible.

With regards to **class hours and scheduling (3)**, learners, particularly those at level 5, felt that long class hours made it difficult for them to engage with online learning. Learners felt that schedules were designed for in-person learning and did not necessarily suit online learning. One learner explained:

“Our schedule was originally designed around a hybrid model and then changed to fully online. I feel like the schedule is not fantastic for that. We’ll have some days with three hours in a row, then a little bit of time, then three hours in a row.”

These long hours meant little time for assignments and created an additional pressure during the challenging time of remote learning. One learner argued:

“The days online are so long. You’re expected to be on there from nine to four and then on top of that submit assignments, but where do you find the time for the assignments? In the evening, after a whole day at the screen?”

However, some learners, particularly those at levels 1–3, suggested that increased class hours for online classes could help ensure learners were covering the same amount of material they would in the physical classes. They felt that online classes progressed more slowly than in person, and they were not able to advance at the same rate. One learner explained,

“We do not get as much done online as we do in class. More [classes online] would be better.”

Learners felt that increased hours could help bridge the gap between the online and in-person learning experience. One learner stated, “I hope I get to finish my course in the centre. More college would mean more experience.” These learners hoped that more class time would be made available to learners to keep them progressing at the same rate

as they would in their centres, until they can return to the classroom. Thus, there were mixed opinions on the right amount of class hours and scheduling among learners, depending on their course or programme. Learners suggested a review of class hours and scheduling across FET courses, to ensure classes are meeting the needs of learners.

Learners with disabilities (3) would like more disability supports to be available, and particularly those at level 5 felt that, while their tutors were available and supportive, “there is a need for improvement with learning supports” for learners with disabilities and learning difficulties. One learner shared that although they discussed their learning disability with the tutors, they felt it was not “acknowledged or understood.” Learners would like there to be greater acknowledgement of learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, and for additional learning supports, such as notes on course content, to be provided to learners. Learners would also like information on the disability supports available to be more widely shared, with one learner concluding, “these supports need to be visible.”

Survey comments and focus group discussions indicated that learners with disabilities, particularly those at levels 1–3, would like the accessibility of their courses and centres to be improved. Although learners understood the necessity of COVID-19 restrictions, remote learning had been particularly challenging for learners with disabilities. In a focus group discussion, one learner mentioned that they missed, “getting out of [their] environment.” There were, however, other concerns with building facilities and supports that pre-dated the COVID-19 restrictions. In survey comments, one learner expressed the need for greater accessibility, writing:

“Be mindful of disability and access needs so that classes are at ground floor level where appropriate as lifts aren’t always in order.”

Other survey comments from learners at levels 1–3 suggested that their Education and Training Board, “make the website easier to navigate through different chapters,” and improve accessibility by, “mak[ing] the writing bigger.” Similar issues around the accessibility of online learning materials were highlighted in AHEAD’S “Learning from Home During Covid-19: A Survey of Irish FET and HE Students with Disabilities” (2020), which found that 27% of the respondents taking a FET course disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “My lecturers/teachers have considered accessibility in the online learning materials they are providing me with” (p.16).

Learners with disabilities, particularly those at levels 1–3, would also like more “fun” and “creative” courses and supporting technologies. One learner in a focus group discussion stated that, although tutors were aware of their learning needs, they would like more opportunities to participate in the “fun” aspects of learning. The survey indicated that learners with disabilities, particularly those at levels 1–3, would like greater access to technologies which can support them with their learning. One survey respondent requested that their Education and Training Board:

“Broaden technology aimed at disabilities. Keep updating resources in line with new technologies.”

These extra supports would allow learners with disabilities to fully engage with their courses when learning remotely.

The lack of face-to-face learning and peer contact meant that learners, particularly those at level 4, struggled with **isolation (2)** during the COVID-19 restrictions. They found it more difficult to stay connected during remote learning and felt separated from their tutors and peers. Tutors were highly supportive and communicative. One learner shared, “I can confidently say every one of them [their tutors] have tried.” Nonetheless, learners found the period isolating. One learner in a focus group discussion explained:

“A big effect is the big amount of time people have during the day. You have all this free time. You’re not going to classes, you’re not chatting with your friends.”

This was echoed in a survey comment:

“Remote learning has had a negative effect on my mood as I don’t get to leave the house and I don’t speak with many people which leaves me feeling alone.”

Learners appreciated the support staff provided to them so far, and would like this kind of support to be expanded further.

Finding the **motivation (2)** to learn remotely was a struggle for learners. A combination of factors such as isolation from their peers, distractions in home

learning environments, and long days in front of screens, made it difficult to maintain motivation. As one learner shared:

“I find it really hard with online learning to stay interested in it. My attention goes quite quickly.”

Another learner echoed this, stating, “I’ve always found I need to be in the place to understand things,” while another learner felt that:

“The social environment you have around you in a classroom makes you more attentive. With the online classes, you’re kind of just staring at the screen.”

In a survey comment, a learner wrote, “even simple tasks have seemingly become harder due to the lack of motivation and melancholy this year.” While this may be outside of the scope of the Education and Training Boards to address, acknowledgement of learners’ difficulties remaining focused and motivated when remote learning would be welcomed by learners.

Learners missed **one-to-one support (2)** in the classroom. In their classrooms, learners could ask questions and receive individualised feedback and support, and this was hard to recreate online. As one learner requested:

“More one-to-one time would be great. As adult learners we are all different kinds of learners coming from different backgrounds. We need the extra interaction time and personal feedback.”

Learners requested that the structure of online classes allow for more one-to-one support and personal feedback where possible.

Learners would like access not only to digital learning materials but also to **physical learning materials (2)**. They shared how they often found it easier to read from books or printed pages, rather than off a screen, with learners sharing, “I am easily distracted, and I find reading off a computer so much more difficult than reading from a book,” and, “paper is easier for me. I like turning the page.” Learners reported inability to access key learning materials such as textbooks and printed resources due to COVID-19 restrictions. Learners also found it difficult to learn remotely without access to printers. As one learner admitted, “there are no printing facilities available. I feel better when I print out my assignments and read them. That is what I am used to.” Although course materials were made available online, learners would like physical printouts of course materials to be posted to them in addition to online

resources. Printing course materials at home was costly, and learners would like their Education and Training Board to address this by printing materials and posting a copy of textbooks to them.

While learners recognised the efforts their Education and Training Boards had made to supply learners with devices, some learners, particularly those in Direct Provision, did not benefit from this and did not have adequate **device access (1)**. The lack of devices meant learners either had to complete their coursework in a less ideal situation (e.g., a phone or a shared laptop) or could not continue their course. One learner shared:

“I’m in Direct Provision and when COVID-19 started I was moved to [a new place] so that really set me back. I couldn’t go online with my tutor because I had no laptop. I didn’t do much when I left [the previous place] in May. I think I’ll have to start again with the ETB in [the new place].”

Learners, particularly those at level 4, would like **increased course options (1)** from their Education and Training Board. In particular, they would like more part-time and evening courses. One learner suggested that their Education and Training Board, “offer night classes three or four nights a week.” In another survey comment, a learner asked that the Education and Training Board:

“Offer more part-time courses so you can complete multiple courses.”

Another learner echoed this, commenting that it would be, “good to have more options for learners and more courses.” Learners felt that more course options would allow learners to further benefit from adult learning.

A change in **learner engagement (1)** in remote learning was noted by learners, particularly those at levels 1–3. There was a decline in learner attendance and it was more difficult to engage directly with the tutor during online classes. One learner mentioned that it was easier to engage in discussions with multiple people when in the classroom. Engagement during online learning was a particular issue for learners learning English as a Second Language. One learner explained:

“In the classroom the discussion, it would be different. You can’t talk to three people online; it will be too confusing.”

Another learner found that learners muting themselves and turning off their cameras had a negative effect on class atmosphere, arguing:

“A lot of people muted themselves, turned off the camera and just listened. I would always turn on my camera no matter how I looked. So breakout rooms could be a problem, they would just sit back and let you do all the talking.”

These learners requested that course content and structure be reviewed to facilitate learner engagement with tutors and fellow learners in the online setting.

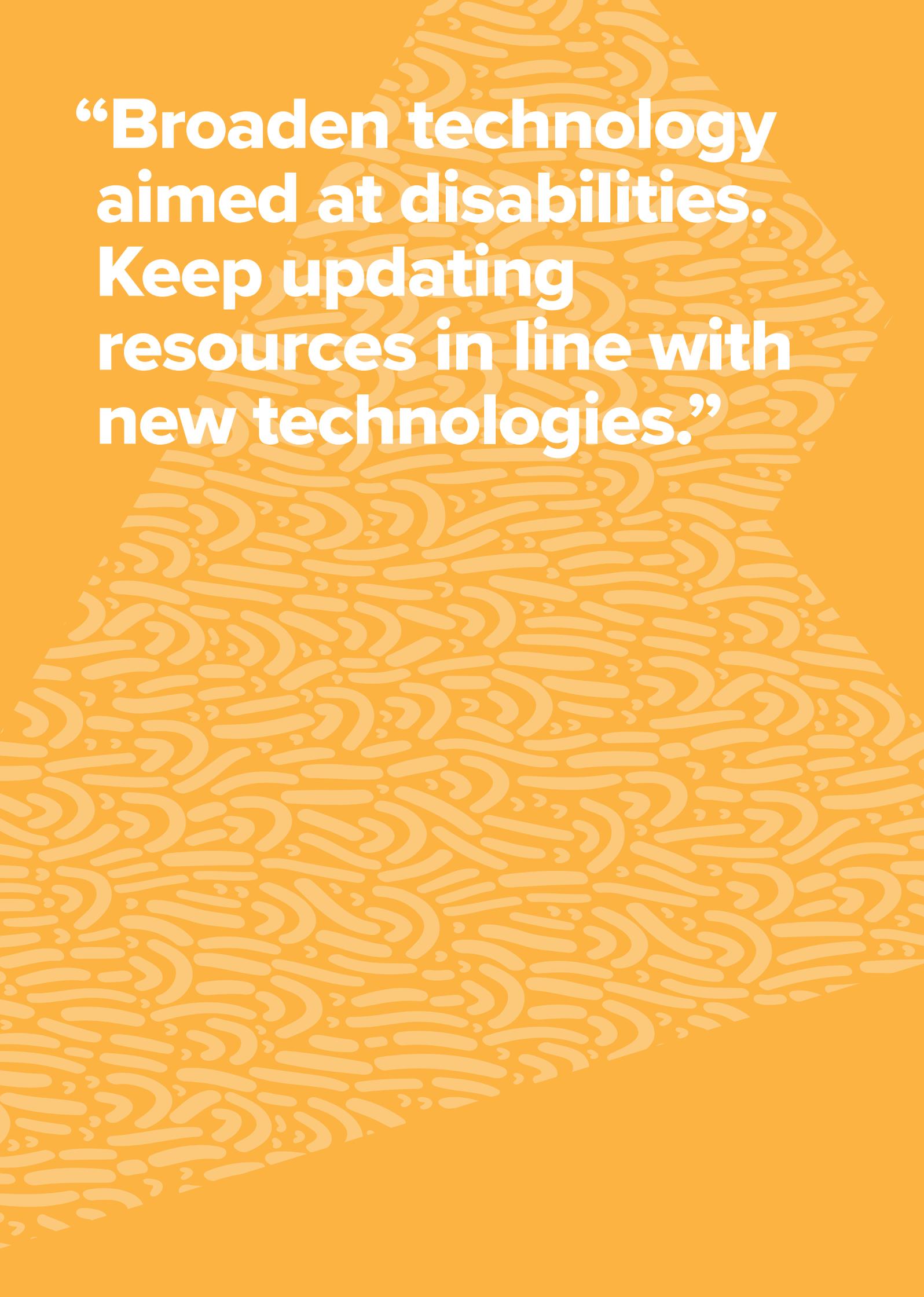
Learners had mixed experiences with regards to **online platform maintenance (1)** on their courses. For some learners, their Moodle (an online learning platform) was updated regularly and in an organised manner, which helped them with their assignments. One learner added, “In Moodle everything is updated and we get extra information there too.” However, this was not consistent for all learners across FET, with one learner admitting, “our Moodle is handled badly, it is messy and it’s not used correctly by [their tutor].” Another learner reported, “I’m not so satisfied with how the Moodle was operating, it was not reliable and I had difficulty with assignments.” Learners suggested professional development opportunities be given to tutors on how to use and populate Moodle pages, and that their course pages be updated regularly, so that learners can access materials needed for their course work.

Learners, particularly at level 5, were concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on their **progression (1)** options, and would like clear and timely information on these options. Progression to employment was a concern for many who hoped to use their course to find new work opportunities. For example, learners training in industries affected by COVID-19 felt their job prospects were negatively affected, and expressed uncertainty about how to progress. As one learner shared:

“Hospitality has suffered hugely under COVID-19 and I feel this course cannot be taught successfully remotely. We managed but I feel we did lose out. Now I cannot think of looking for a job. It’s just not happening and that makes me feel a bit dejected by the whole experience.”

Learners suggested that Education and Training Boards offer educational and career advice to learners whose industries and career prospects have been affected by COVID-19. One learner called for “more support moving forward. Not quite sure what the college can do about this but maybe help us think about how to continue learning.”

Learners, particularly those at level 4, had mixed views on progression supports available to them. While one learner stated that they felt that job supports were available, another expressed that they felt there were “no career supports as such.” Overall, learners recognised the great value in having these supports and would like to see increased advertisement of progression supports available across FET, alongside the expansion of supports across all FET programmes and courses.



“Broaden technology aimed at disabilities. Keep updating resources in line with new technologies.”

SURVEY FINDINGS

This section presents findings from the learner surveys that the National FET Learner Forum conducted alongside focus group events. A total of eight learner surveys were conducted. The total number of survey participants amounted to 1,707. The first subsection summarises basic information such as the total number of survey participants across programmes, their course levels, where learners heard about their courses, reasons for taking courses, and the demography of learners. The next subsection summarises the level of satisfaction with recruitment, registration, and induction, with facilities and services, and with teaching and learning, at learners' programmes or centres. Then, the report discusses learners' experiences and views of remote learning in the context of COVID-19. Finally, it focuses specifically on the experience and views of remote learning in vulnerable and minority groups.

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 full-time learners than part-time learners (1,033 vs. 630). In terms of age groups (see Figure 5), the 18-24 age group was most common (463). Nonetheless, there were over 100 learners represented in each of the following age groups: 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, and 55-64 (180, 218, 223, and 123 respectively). Meanwhile, there was a relatively small number of participants from the remaining age groups of under 18 and 65+ (70 and 39 respectively).

With respect to gender, the majority of respondents were female (951), with the number of male respondents being 348 (see Figure 6). There were five learners who identified as non-binary, 16 who preferred not to state their gender identity, and four who preferred to self-identify.

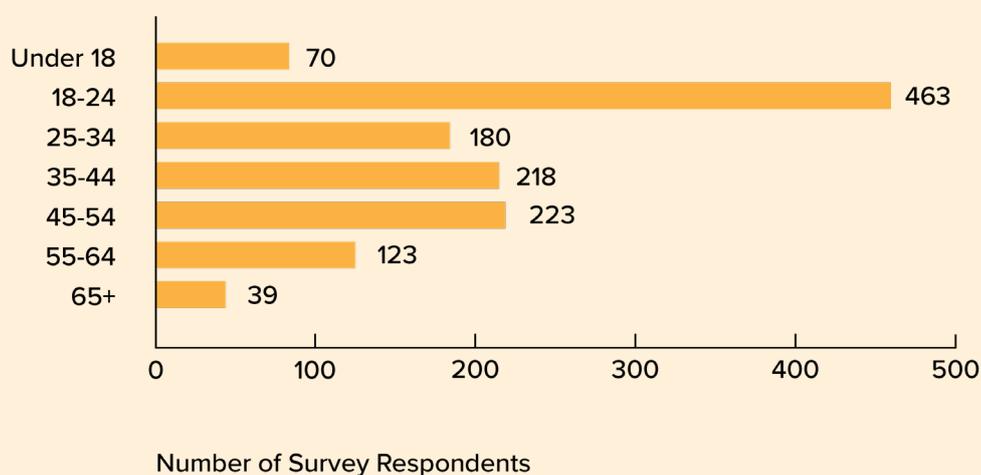


Figure 5: Learner representation by age groups

Figure 7 presents the number of learners with respect to membership of a vulnerable or minority group. A respondent could select more than one category. The largest number of these groups consisted of those who were born outside Ireland (211), followed by those who were living in Direct Provision (144).

Figure 8 summarises the number of respondents with respect to employment status. The largest number of respondents came from those who were unemployed and seeking work (343). This was followed by those who

were employed part-time (228) and then by those who were unemployed and not currently seeking work (198).

Finally, Figure 9 presents reasons for taking courses; survey participants could choose more than one option. The most frequent reason was, “to upskill or reskill” (680 responses), followed by, “to get a job” (512 responses), “to get a certificate” (440 responses), and, “to progress to third level” (419 responses). Importantly, 270 learners indicated that the reason for taking their courses was, “to meet new people.”

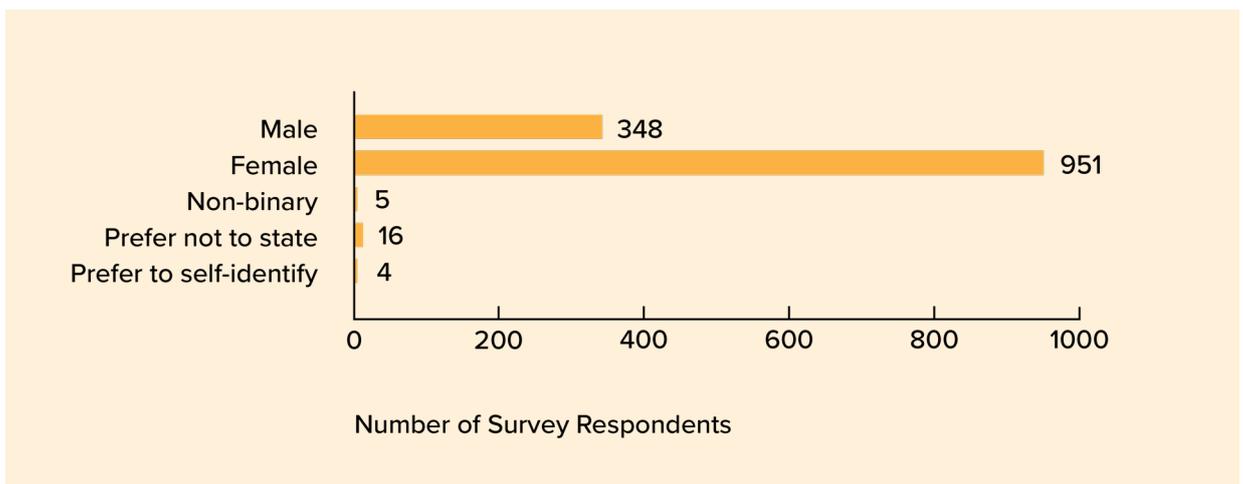


Figure 6: Learner representation by gender

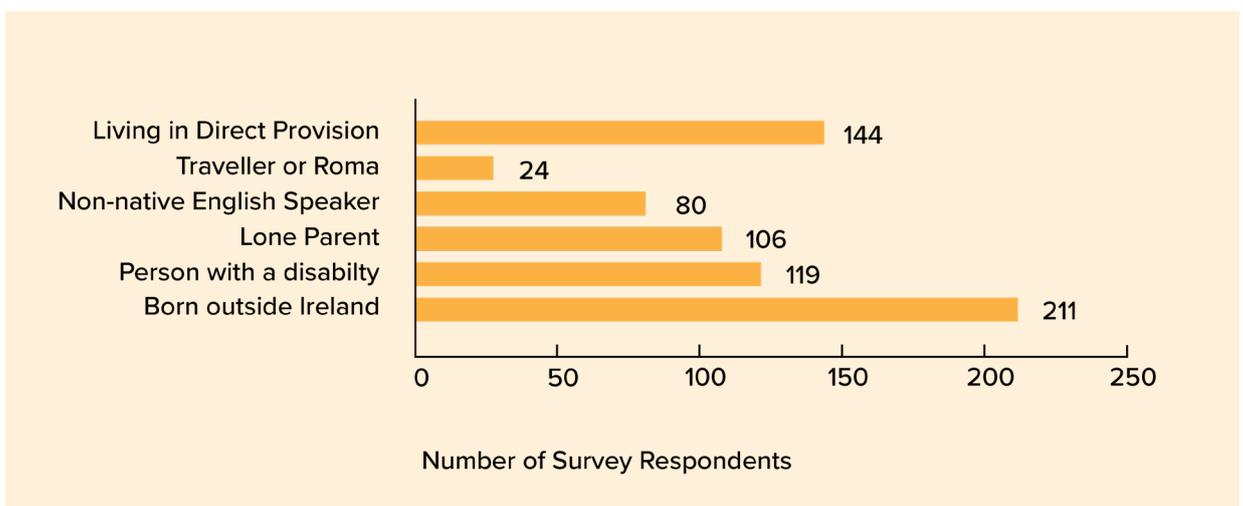


Figure 7: Learner representation by vulnerable/minority groups

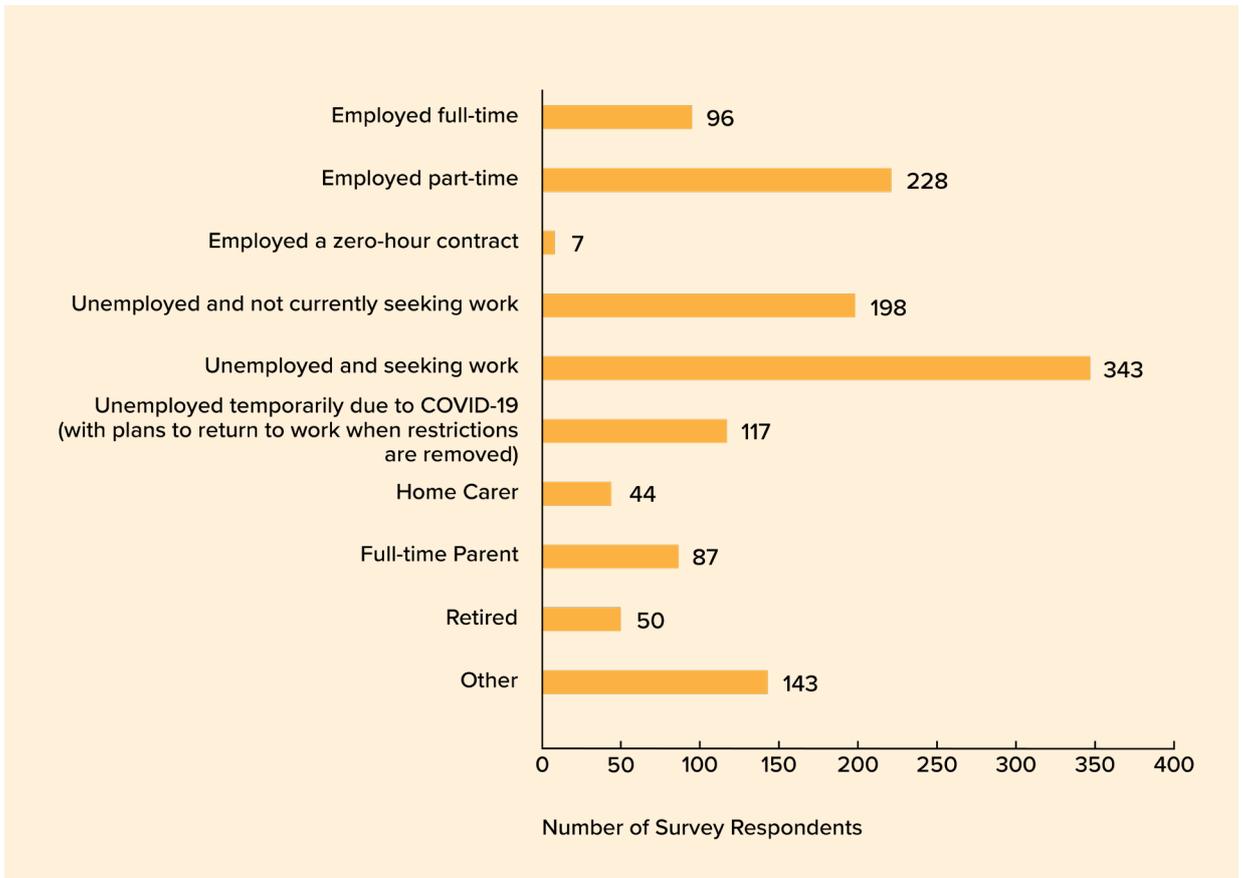


Figure 8: Learner representation by employment status

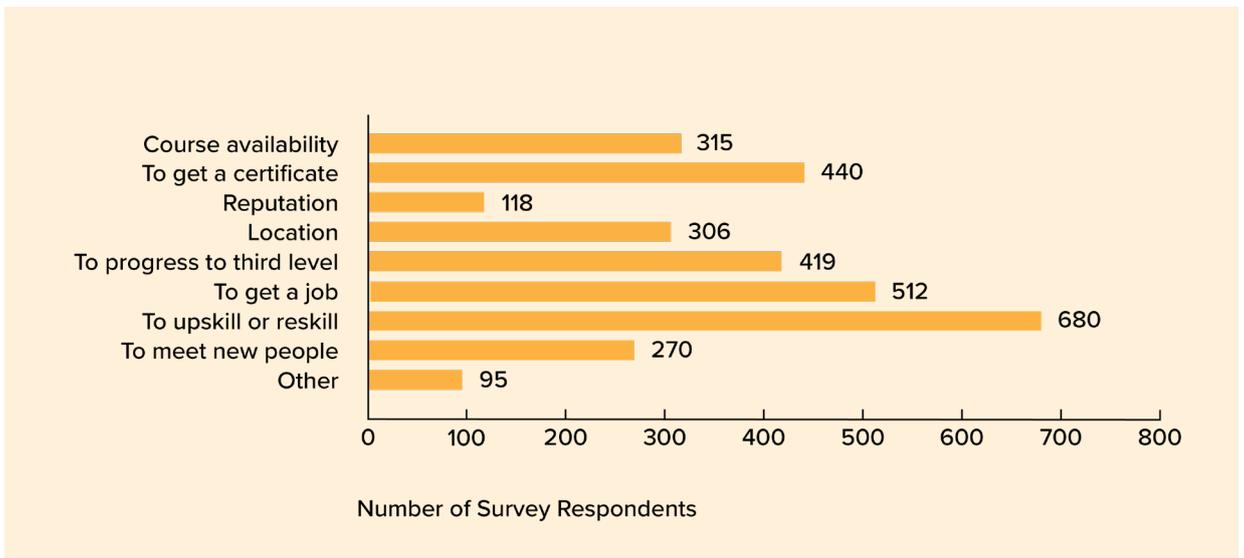


Figure 9: Learner representation by reasons for taking courses

Satisfaction with Recruitment, Registration, and Induction

This subsection summarises survey findings with respect to the level of satisfaction with recruitment, registration, and induction. 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.

Learners were satisfied with recruitment, registration, and induction across every aspect, as indicated in Figure 10. For example, 92% or 1,356 out of 1,466

applicable responses indicated that learners were satisfied with the overall induction and registration process. Yet, several free-text comments from survey participants suggested that Education and Training Boards could increase the advertisement of their courses, so that more people would be able to benefit from them. One learner wrote:

“Advertising more for the public to be more aware of courses in [their] local area with [the Education and Training Board], as some people do not realise there’s so much to offer with many courses taking place that they could attend with suitability and so much to offer out there.”

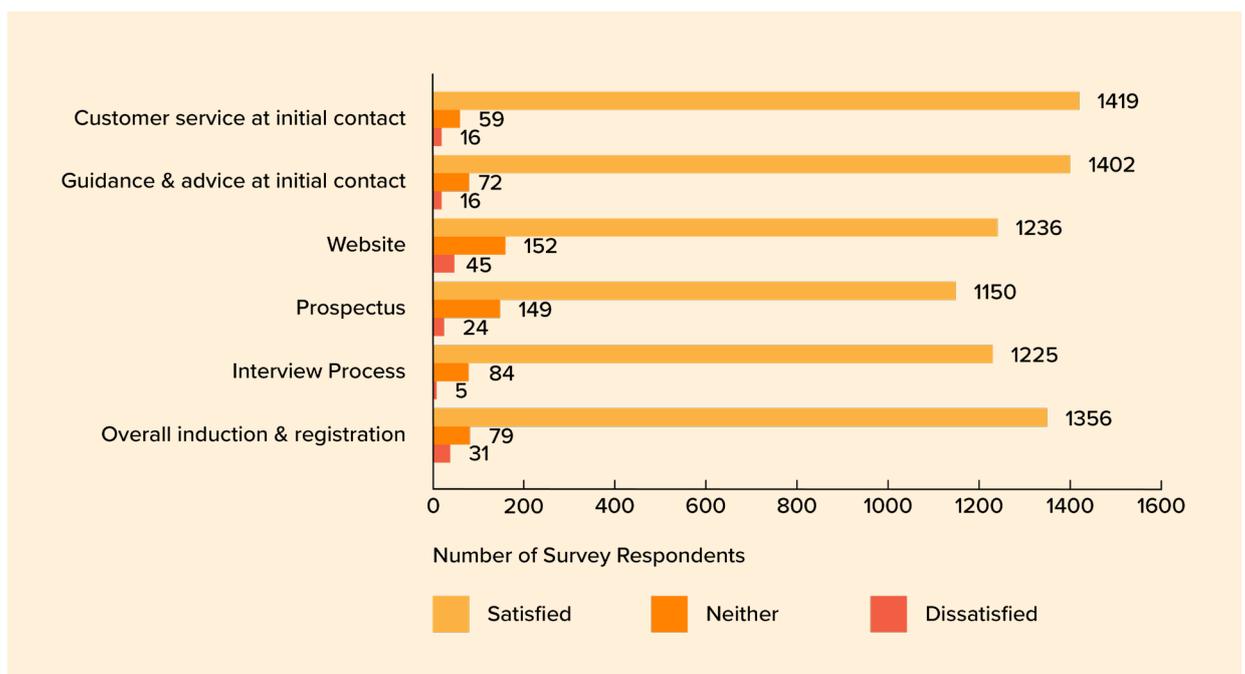


Figure 10: Number of survey responses to the questions about the level of satisfaction with different aspects of recruitment, registration, and induction

In addition, free-text comments also pointed out that communication from their centre or Education and Training Board could be improved. One respondent wrote, “Communicate about course commencement dates for the student to be better prepared such as those who need childcare.” Another mentioned:

“Let the students know before the interview what the course fees (outside the admin) are, i.e. books, equipment, etc. are needed. It’s quite a shock to be hit with equipment and materials list when you get in and these cost 100’s.”

Satisfaction with Facilities and Services

Survey participants were satisfied overall with facilities and services (see Figure 11). For example, 90% or 1,201 out of 1,337 applicable responses indicated that learners were satisfied with the classrooms of their centres. There were a few aspects with which the survey participants expressed lower levels of satisfaction. A lower satisfaction level was observed in disability services (74%, or 707 out of 959 applicable responses), car parking (75%, or 843 out of 1,119 applicable responses), canteen / food and drink facilities (69%, or 686 out of 994 applicable responses), and sports and recreation facilities (52%, or 337 out of 643 applicable responses).

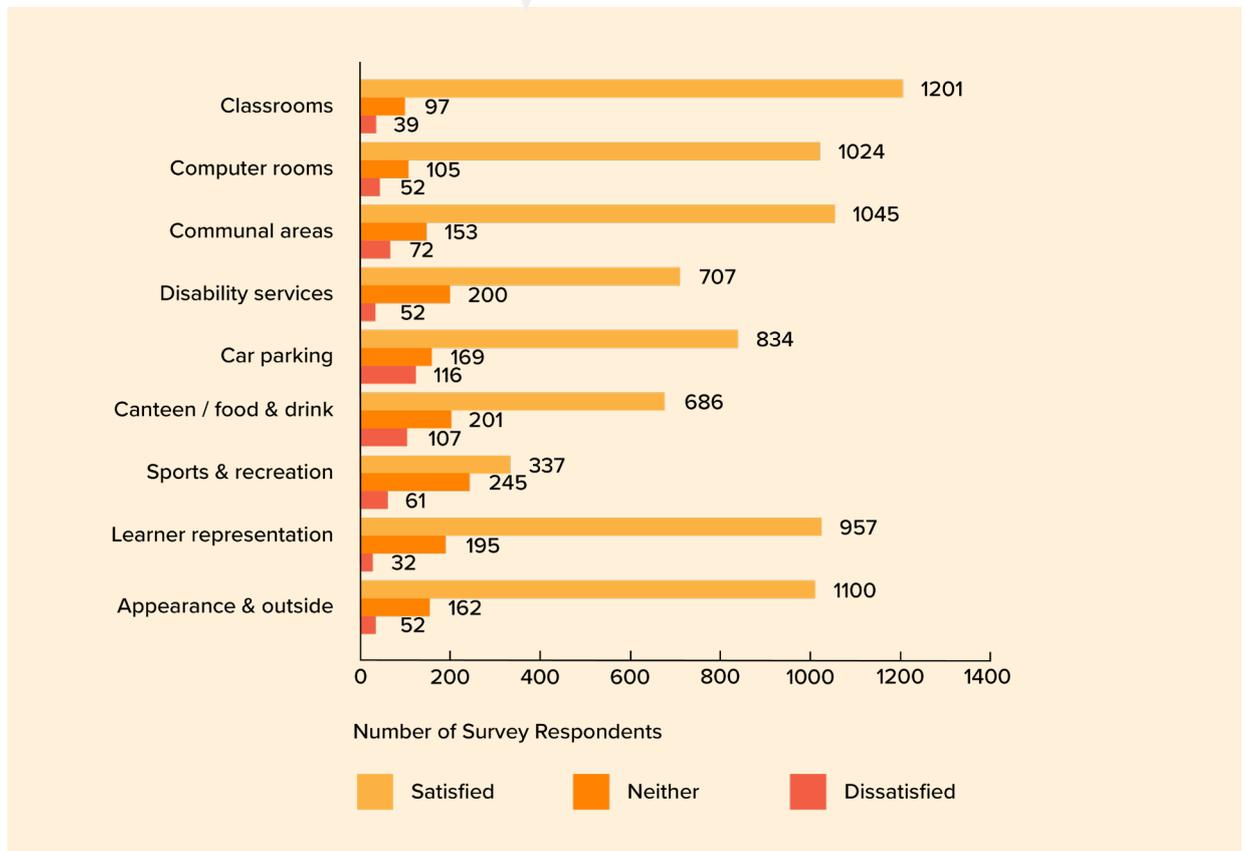


Figure 11: Number of survey responses to the questions about the level of satisfaction with different aspects of facilities and services

Free-text comments gave some insight into the reasons for these lower satisfaction levels. With respect to disability services, issues around accessibility were highlighted by some learners. One respondent commented, “Need to be more accessible to wheelchairs.” Another wrote, “Anybody that was in a wheelchair was unable to go up to the canteen on their break because there was no way for them to get upstairs.”

Regarding car parking facilities, several respondents pointed out the lack of, or limited availability of parking spaces. This had both practical and financial implications for learners. One respondent commented, “Sometimes I have to park far from the main doors even if it was raining, as there are not really enough parking spaces.” Another wrote, “Carparking is a big problem; there is no space. Paid parking is not acceptable on low incomes.”

In terms of canteen / food and drink facilities, respondents referred to little or no available space to consume food and drink, the lack of options, and the lack of facilities. For example, one respondent mentioned, “Canteen area could be bigger as some classes overlap at breaktimes. This can cause overcrowding and potential hazards.” Another respondent wrote:

“Due to COVID-19, learners have not been granted access to the centre’s common room or use of the fridge, kettle etc. For me personally, this has been extremely difficult as I deal with health problems and diet restrictions and the takeaway food options in the surrounding areas are not the best.”

While these issues might be specific to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were also possible issues beyond that. One respondent mentioned, “food is expensive for something small like a sandwich being €4. More options on menu.” Another stated, “There needs to be a proper canteen. The soup was out of a packet and it tastes of salt only.”

Finally, with respect to sports and recreation facilities, the availability thereof was an issue. One respondent requested, “Allowance of the college gym to be open to all if possible after COVID-19 guidelines start to ease.” Another wrote, “[The website] said your leisure facilities such as the gym are accessible to all students. Hoping to use them I was told only the sports groups can.” This miscommunication issue relates back to the point about communication in the previous subsection.

Satisfaction with Teaching and Learning

Survey participants were satisfied overall with teaching and learning (see Figure 12). For example, 91% or 1,200 out of 1,312 applicable responses indicated that learners were satisfied with the learning resources of their courses or centres. A lower satisfaction level was observed in disability supports (72%, or 573 out of 793 applicable responses). This relates back to the point on disability services already discussed with respect to facilities and services.

In addition, free-text comments suggest that there were multiple dimensions of ICT issues. These included ICT support, outdated equipment, more computers and devices, and unstable WiFi. For example, one learner wrote, “More training on the ‘how to do things’ piece in relation to online learning/remote learning which is new to us.” Another said, “Lack of access to cameras and other equipment has proven difficult with distance learning during lockdown.” It was also stated by another learner:

“I now have a loan of a laptop from my centre, but there were problems with computers and printers when we were in class, so I suppose an update of equipment would help.”

There were also several free-text comments making a wide range of suggestions with respect to the organisation of programmes and modules, such as increasing module options,

allocating more time for teaching and assignments, and further opportunities for hands-on learning. In particular, the point about hands-on learning was one of the main limitations associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Experience of Remote Learning during COVID-19

The survey asked learners how much they agree with statements about their remote learning situation during the pandemic. It used a scale of five levels of agreement: “strongly agree,” “agree,” “neither agree nor disagree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree.” Here, for the brevity of presentation, the answers, “strongly agree” and “agree,” are aggregated to the category, “agree”; the answers, “disagree” and “strongly disagree,” are aggregated to the category, “disagree.” See Figure 13. The disaggregated results are available in Appendix 3.

Responses indicate that many learners expressed positive views on several aspects of remote learning:

- Were able to access the course they wanted even during remote learning (83%, or 1,096 out of 1,316 applicable responses)
- Felt supported to learn remotely (75%, or 973 out of 1,306 applicable responses),
- Had a comfortable and suitable space to learn remotely (72%, or 950 out of 1,313 applicable responses), and
- Had access to necessary IT devices and software (83%, or 1,086 out of 1,314 applicable responses).

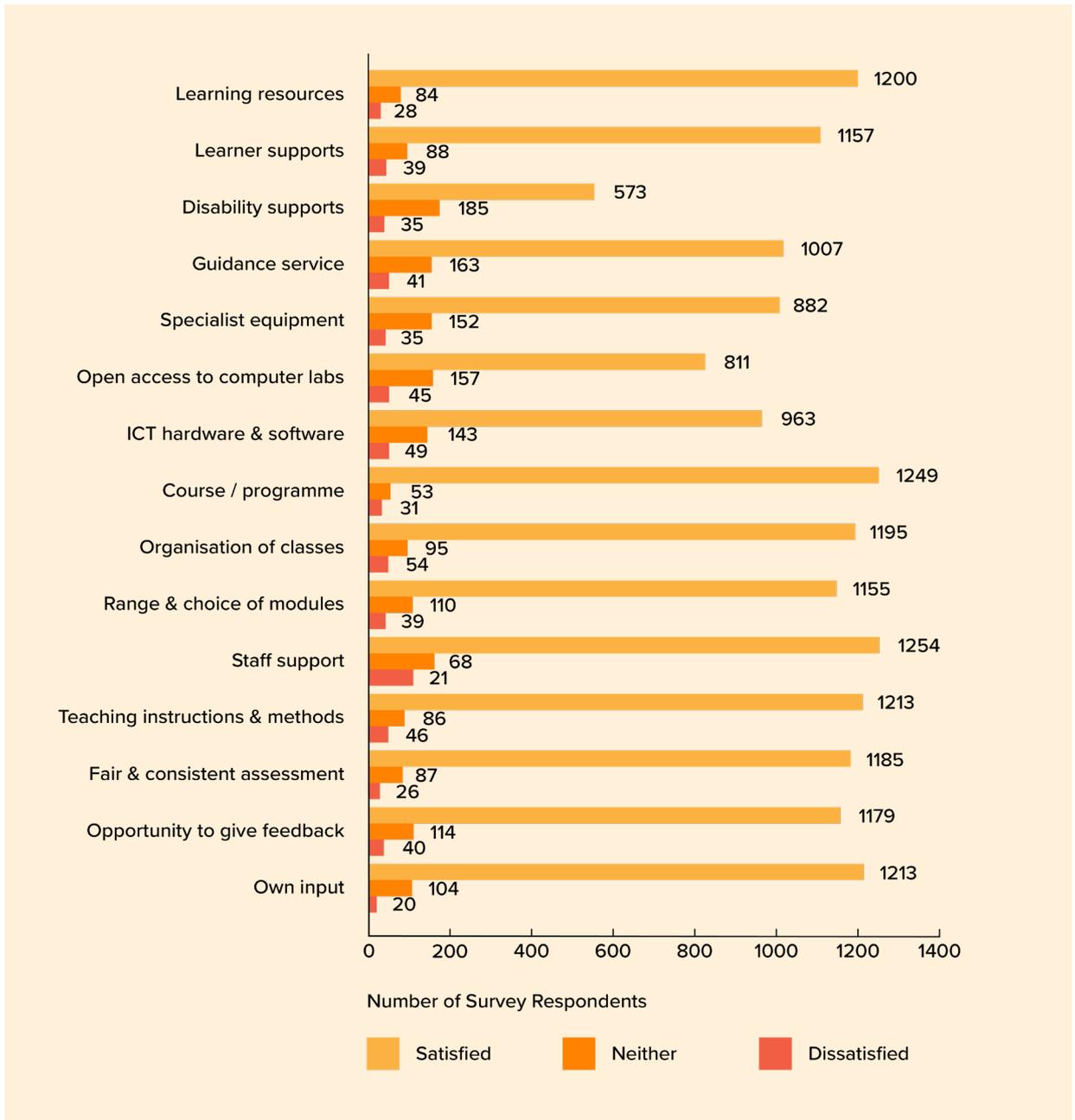


Figure 12: Number of survey responses to the questions about the level of satisfaction with different aspects of teaching and learning

A survey respondent stated, “In relation to online learning, the lockdown was beneficial for me. Studying from home has enabled me to complete the course because my neurological disorder progressed and I could not attend classes if they were in person.” Another mentioned, “It has been difficult to get used to online learning at the beginning and not being able to meet

my classmates; however, after getting comfortable and confident with online learning, it suits me a lot better and is so much easier for me.”

Yet, fewer responses agreed with the statements, “I enjoy learning at home” (40%, or 533 out of 1,330 applicable responses). Furthermore, 35% of responses (460 out of 1,330 applicable

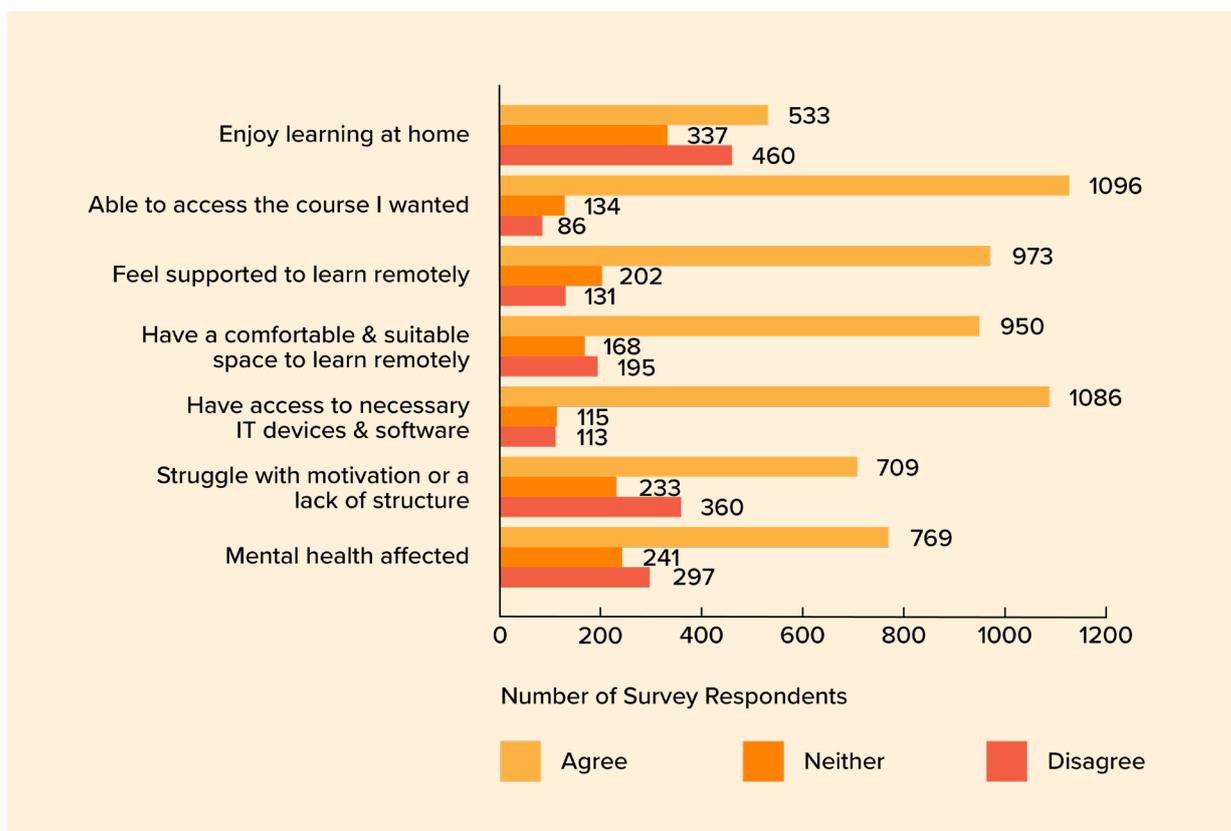


Figure 13: Number of survey responses to the questions about the level of agreement on statements about COVID-19 and remote learning

responses) disagreed with the statement. Corresponding to this low level of the enjoyment of remote learning, more than a half of responses agreed with the statements:

- “I struggle with motivation or a lack of structure when learning online” (54%, or 709 out of 1,302 applicable responses), and
- “My mental health has been affected by the current crisis” (59%, or 769 out of 1,307 applicable responses).

A survey respondent wrote, “I am learning computer skills and whilst I am using my limited knowledge to keep up online there is nothing like a classroom to compare, debate and question. I find it hard to remember my course time, and finding this whole new way very depressing.” Another said, “It hasn't been the easiest

to stay motivated and to keep on top of the work given to us, but my teachers have been extremely understanding and supportive when it was needed.”

When compared with survey data from June 2020, the findings with regard to motivation and mental health issues presented a growing concern for many respondents (Dowdall, Lovejoy, and Farren, 2020). The proportion of learners agreeing that they enjoy learning at home decreased by 10 percentage points from the previous period of the pandemic, with 50% or 359 out of 718 applicable responses from the June 2020 survey, compared to 40% or 533 out of 1,330 applicable responses from this academic year's surveys. Learners reporting struggling with motivation or a lack of structure when learning online increased by 15 percentage points, with 39% or 262 out of 678 applicable responses from the

June 2020 survey, compared to 54% or 709 out of 1,302 applicable responses from this academic year's surveys. Finally, learners reporting that mental health had been affected increased by 27 percentage points, with 32% or 216 out of 682 applicable responses from the June 2020 survey, compared to 59% or 769 out of 1,307 applicable responses from this academic year's surveys.

Vulnerable / Minority Groups

Given the significance of the experience of remote learning during COVID-19, the survey responses to the questions about the level of agreement on statements about COVID-19 and remote learning were disaggregated by vulnerable and minority groups: those living in Direct Provision, Traveller or Roma, non-native English speakers, lone parents, persons with a disability, and those born outside Ireland. The comparison was made between the responses from those who did not identify as any of these groups and the responses from each of these groups. To summarise the findings in advance, compared to learners who did not identify as any of these groups:

- Learners living in Direct Provision particularly felt less supported to learn remotely and were particularly affected by a lack of motivation and mental health struggles
- Traveller and Roma learners particularly struggled with accessing the course they wanted and with motivation or a lack of structure
- Learners who are non-native English speakers particularly felt less supported to learn remotely

- Learners who are lone parents particularly struggled with a comfortable and suitable space to learn and with access to necessary IT devices and software
- Learners with disabilities particularly struggled with motivation and a lack of structure and with their mental health while learning remotely
- Learners born outside Ireland particularly lacked a comfortable and suitable space to learn remotely

The next section provides more detailed results for each of these vulnerable and minority groups.

First, the distribution of applicable responses from those who did not identify as any of the vulnerable or minority groups is summarised in Figure 14 (note that Figure 13 was the distribution of all applicable responses from the entire set of respondents including both those who did not identify as any of the vulnerable or minority groups and those who did). Then, from Figure 15 to Figure 20, the distribution of applicable responses per vulnerable or minority group is presented. Based on the number of applicable responses presented in these figures, the percentage of agreeing responses to the total applicable responses to each question was calculated per group. This percentage serves as the standardised measure that enables comparison between those who identified as one of the vulnerable or minority groups and those who did not identify as any of these groups. These percentages for each of the vulnerable and minority groups are presented in Table 2 to Table 7.

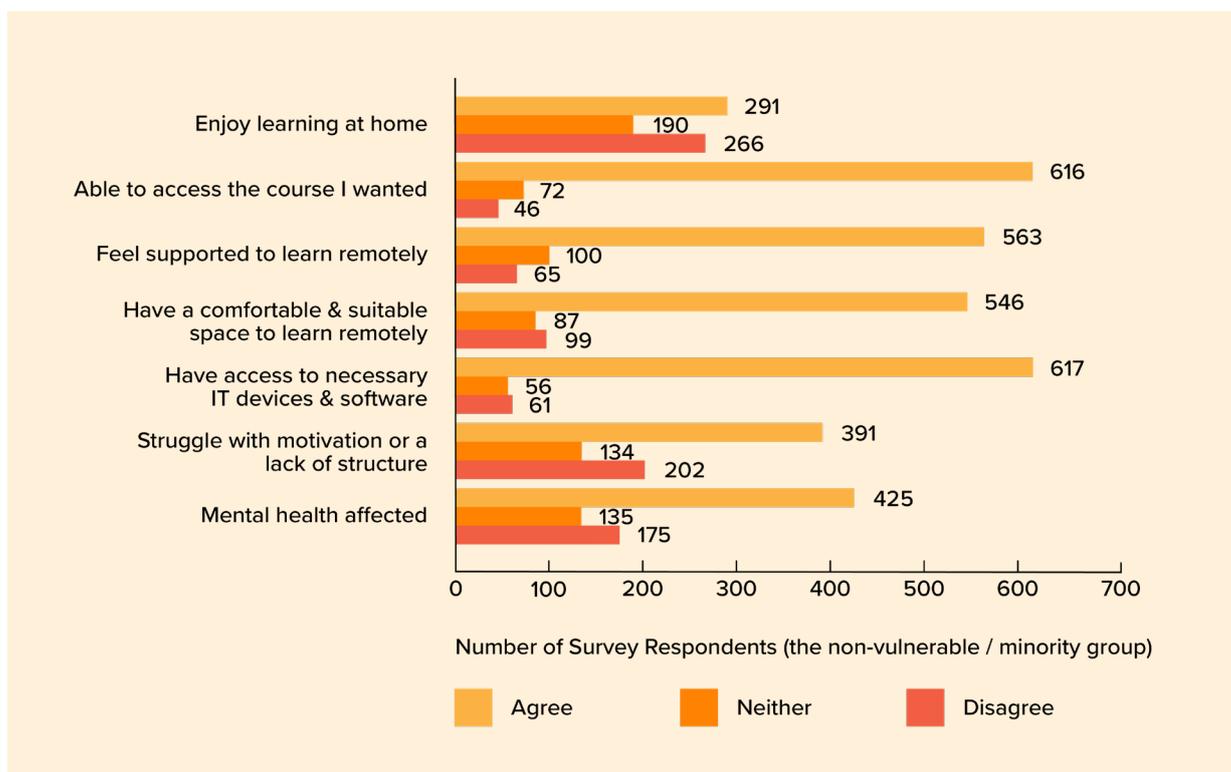


Figure 14: Number of survey responses to the questions about the level of agreement on statements about COVID-19 and remote learning, by the respondents who did not identify as any of the vulnerable/minority groups

With respect to respondents who identified as those living in Direct Provision, compared to those who did not identify as any of the vulnerable or minority groups, they were substantially less likely to feel supported to learn remotely (65% vs. 77%), to have a comfortable and suitable space to learn remotely (67% vs. 75%), and to have access to necessary IT devices and software (76% vs. 84%). In addition, they were substantially more likely to struggle with motivation or a lack of structure (68% vs. 54%) and to have their mental health affected by the crisis (69% vs. 58%) (see Table 2).

Survey comments further contextualised some of the difficulties these learners faced. One learner referred to the “[l]ack of motivation to study, no study space, mental health rises etc.” Another learner similarly stated, “learning online is very hard to do and lacking on motivation.”

The lack of ICT devices or the internet was also mentioned. One learner wrote, “I can’t afford WiFi or a laptop so it’s kind of hard.” Another learner referred to a similar point: “It’s very bad and has made me repeat my course due to not being able to access computers.” Even if a laptop was available, it was sometimes insufficient for a family situation, as one learner pointed out, “I have to share one laptop with my wife and we are both studying the same course.”

The home learning environment was pointed out as an issue. One learner stated, “you may not get the help you need when you are learning from home” and “I am living at the direct provisions centre and [there are] many distractions from roommates and kids.” Childcare responsibility was mentioned by another learner: “This is too hard for us this moment because children [are] in the home and they are so bored.”

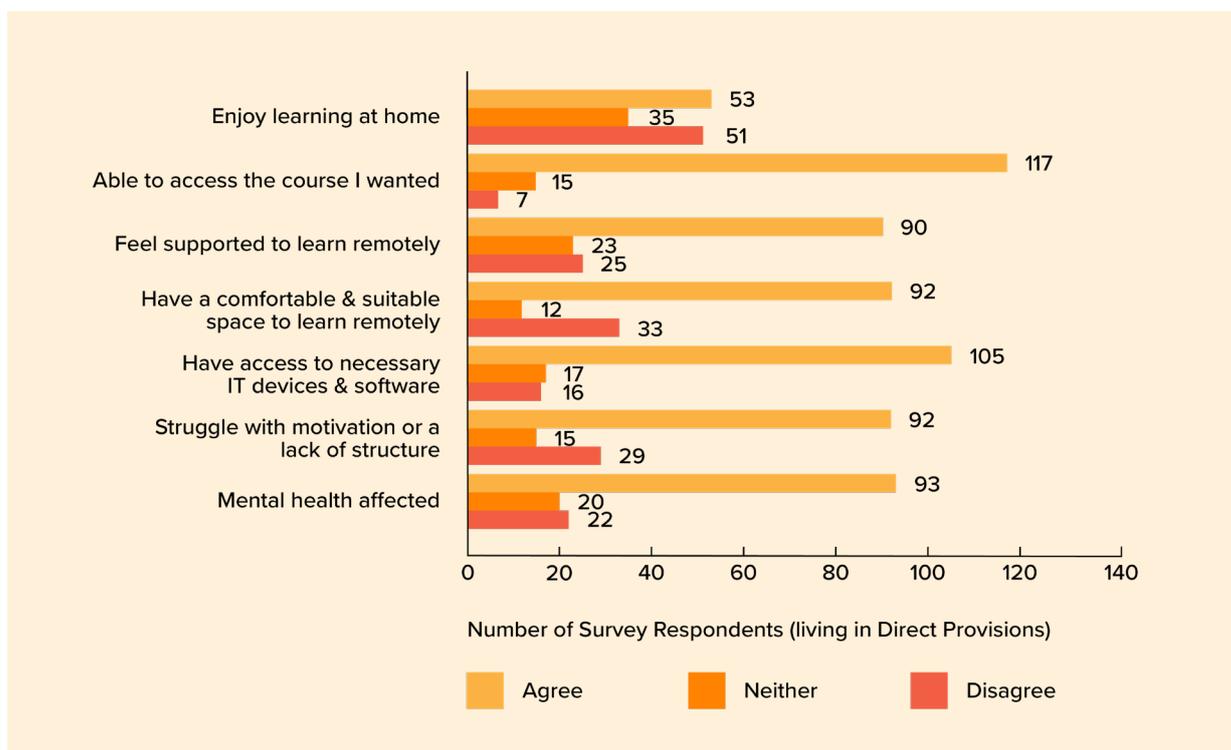


Figure 15: Number of survey responses to the questions about the level of agreement on statements about COVID-19 and remote learning, by the respondents who identified as those living in Direct Provision

	Living in Direct Provision % who agree	Non-vulnerable/ minority group % who agree
enjoy learning at home	38%	39%
able to access the course I wanted	84%	84%
feel supported to learn remotely	65%	77%
have a comfortable & suitable space to learn remotely	67%	75%
have access to necessary IT devices & software	76%	84%
struggle with motivation or a lack of structure	68%	54%
mental health affected	69%	58%

Table 2: Comparison in the percentage of agreeing responses to the total applicable responses to the questions about the level of agreement on statements about COVID-19 and remote learning, between the respondents who identified as those living in Direct Provision and those who did not identify as any of the vulnerable or minority groups

As for respondents who identified as those from Traveller/Roma communities, compared to those who did not identify as any of the vulnerable or minority groups, they were substantially less likely to have access to the course they wanted (67% vs. 84%), to feel supported to learn remotely (71% vs. 77%), to have a comfortable and suitable space to learn remotely (67% vs. 75%), and to have access to necessary IT devices and software (75% vs. 84%). In addition, they were substantially more likely to struggle with motivation or a lack of structure (71% vs. 54%), and to have their mental health affected by the crisis (68% vs. 58%) (see Table 3). It should be noted, however, that the sample size was significantly smaller than other cohorts (24 respondents) so these findings come with greater uncertainty than in the other groups.

Survey comments gave further details on some of these difficulties. One learner commented, “I find it difficult to pay attention and get work done from home.

There’s too many distractions and it’s very stressful when you can’t leave your house.” A different learner wrote:

“It’s hard, but it’s especially hard for members of the Traveller community coming from a background where family members may not have attended school so they don’t have support or if they get stuck with something, e.g. not knowing how to use a laptop, they just get stuck. I have adapted to online learning but I know plenty of people including family who are struggling.”

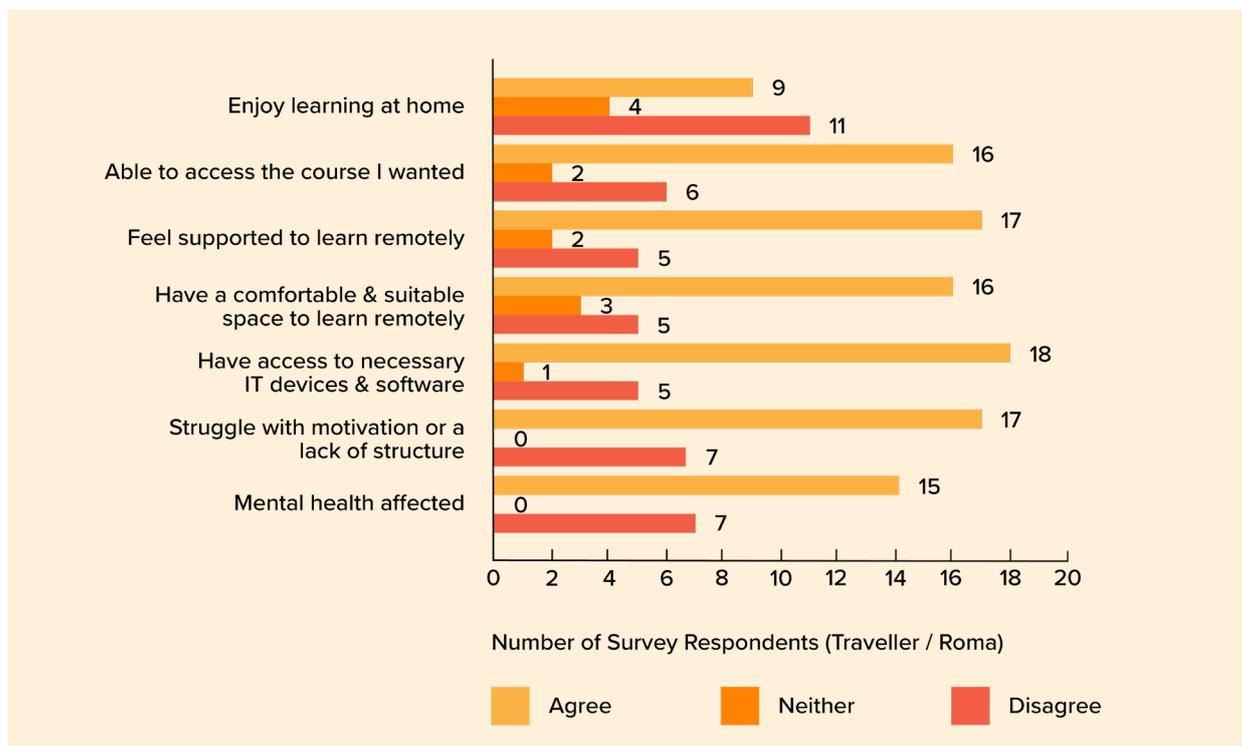


Figure 16: Number of survey responses to the questions about the level of agreement on statements about COVID-19 and remote learning, by the respondents who identified as Traveller/Roma

	Traveller/ Roma % who agree	Non- vulnerable/ minority group % who agree
enjoy learning at home	38%	39%
able to access the course I wanted	67%	84%
feel supported to learn remotely	71%	77%
have a comfortable & suitable space to learn remotely	67%	75%
have access to necessary IT devices & software	75%	84%
struggle with motivation or a lack of structure	71%	54%
mental health affected	68%	58%

Table 3: Comparison in the percentage of agreeing responses to the total applicable responses to the questions about the level of agreement on statements about COVID-19 and remote learning, between the respondents who identified as Traveller/Roma and those who did not identify as any of the vulnerable or minority groups

In terms of respondents who identified as non-native English speakers, compared to those who did not identify as any of the vulnerable or minority groups, they were substantially less likely to have access to the course they wanted (78% vs. 84%), to feel supported to learn remotely (68% vs. 77%), and to have a comfortable and suitable space to learn remotely (67% vs. 75%). Meanwhile, they were substantially more likely to enjoy learning at home (46% vs. 39%) and less likely to struggle with motivation or a lack of structure (42% vs. 54%) (see Table 4).

In survey comments, learners provided more details. One learner commented, “Remote learning is difficult for studying languages. I prefer to be in a classroom.” Another learner stated, “I couldn’t have a chance to continue learning remotely

concerning the same class I was doing.” A different learner mentioned, “For many of us [it] is more difficult [to] study from home because we have children that need our attention and help.” The need for more support and time was pointed out, as one learner wrote, “I need help with a device to complete my online classes and assignment,” and another stated, “more time needed.”

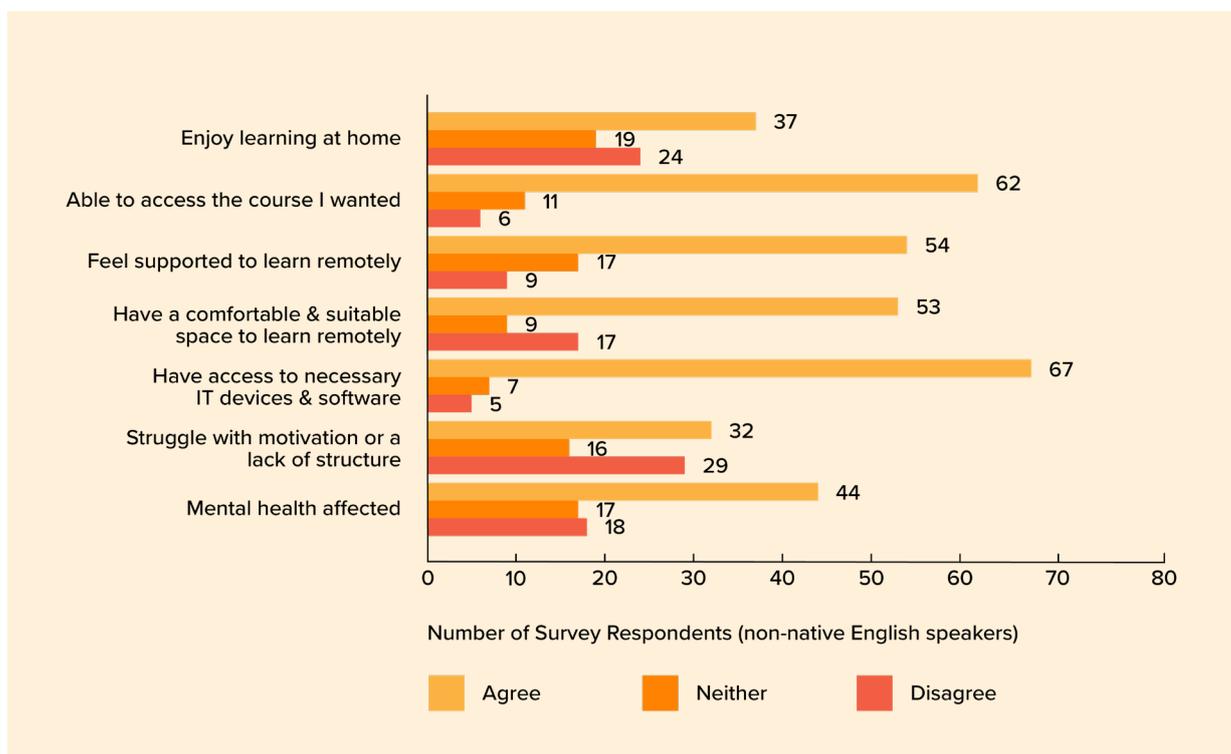


Figure 17: Number of survey responses to the questions about the level of agreement on statements about COVID-19 and remote learning, by the respondents who identified as a non-native English speaker

	Non-native English speaker % who agree	Non-vulnerable/ minority group % who agree
enjoy learning at home	46%	39%
able to access the course I wanted	78%	84%
feel supported to learn remotely	68%	77%
have a comfortable & suitable space to learn remotely	67%	75%
have access to necessary IT devices & software	85%	84%
struggle with motivation or a lack of structure	42%	54%
mental health affected	56%	58%

Table 4: Comparison in the percentage of agreeing responses to the total applicable responses to the questions about the level of agreement on statements about COVID-19 and remote learning, between the respondents who identified as a non-native English speaker and those who did not identify as any of the vulnerable or minority groups

With respect to respondents who identified as lone parents, compared to those who did not identify as any of the vulnerable or minority groups, they were substantially less likely to have access to the course they wanted (79% vs. 84%), to feel supported to learn remotely (70% vs. 77%), to have a comfortable and suitable space to learn remotely (62% vs. 75%), and to have access to necessary IT devices and software (74% vs. 84%) (see Table 5).

Survey comments contextualised these difficulties. One learner wrote, “I am not very good with technology so I find using the computer to submit work very hard. I would rather print out my assignments and hand them in. I panic in case I cannot download and submit it properly.” A different learner commented, “Motivation is more difficult as there are more distractions at home.”

Childcare responsibility stood out as one of the major difficulties. One learner stated:

“It is good for me learning online as I have a child; this term is different as my child is home so trying to rebalance the structure all the time. I prefer in class where possible as it keeps the motivation going. That said, 2 lectures in particular are highly motivational.”

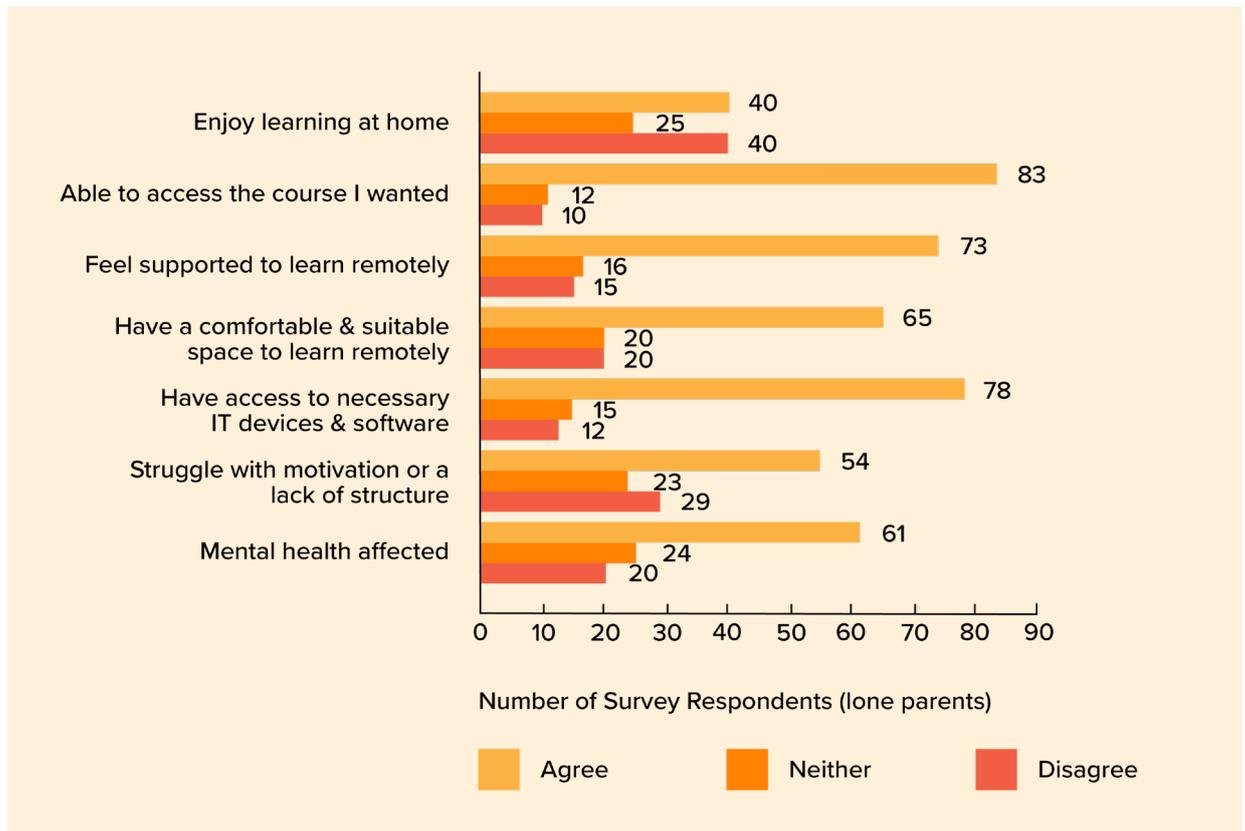


Figure 18: Number of survey responses to the questions about the level of agreement on statements about COVID-19 and remote learning, by the respondents who identified as a lone parent

	Lone parents % of agree	Non- vulnerable/ minority group % of agree
enjoy learning at home	38%	39%
able to access the course I wanted	79%	84%
feel supported to learn remotely	70%	77%
have a comfortable & suitable space to learn remotely	62%	75%
have access to necessary IT devices & software	74%	84%
struggle with motivation or a lack of structure	51%	54%
mental health affected	58%	58%

Table 5: Comparison in the percentage of agreeing responses to the total applicable responses to the questions about the level of agreement on statements about COVID-19 and remote learning, between the respondents who identified as a lone parent and those who did not identify as any of the vulnerable or minority groups

Another agreed, “So hard to learn when you have [a] son with autism.”

According to the data, lone parents were as likely, on average, to have their mental health affected as those who did not identify as any of the vulnerable or minority groups. Survey comments gave greater detail. One learner referred to, “mental and emotional fatigue.”

Another wrote:

“[Learning during COVID-19 is] not a good experience. I have break down sometimes. Very daunting sometimes but still learn about it. Because you are always with the computer which I can use in the future.”

A different learner also mentioned, “I hate [Learning during COVID-19] as I have no escapes like sports or hanging with friends so I never get to relieve stress fully.”

As for respondents who identified as having a disability, compared to those who did not identify as any of the vulnerable or minority groups, they were substantially less likely to feel supported to learn remotely (72% vs. 77%), and were substantially more likely to struggle with motivation or a lack of structure (60% vs. 54%) and have their mental health affected (70% vs. 58%) (see Table 6).

Survey comments provided further details. One learner wrote, “It is hard to learn online; it is better to be with the tutor in class.” Another learner mentioned, “It’s just very isolating working online and it’s hard sometimes to be motivated.” A

different learner commented, “I’m doing a one day a week course and I find it difficult to motivate when I go home and have to learn by myself.”

The difficulty in remote learning contributed to mental health issues. One learner stated, “Mental health and wellbeing. Hard to do work in your own home, hard to switch on.” Another commented, “I’m just so stressed all the time, trying to work, trying to learn, trying to remain optimistic that I am doing this for a good reason and it’ll be worth it by the finish.”

Issues related to their home learning environment were also mentioned: “I don’t have my own desk so I have to use the kitchen table, so I feel kind of in the way of the rest of my family.” Another learner commented, “I really miss going into the centre. It was literally the only 2

hours of the week I had to myself. I have 2 children, one of whom has special needs and I am his carer.”

As well as challenges related to learning remotely, concerns about COVID-19 itself were also raised. One learner wrote:

“It is often difficult to focus on online classes, as it feels more like watching a movie or YouTube video, than attending a class. It is also sometimes difficult to focus learning in person, as I am worried about potentially picking up the coronavirus while in the centre.”

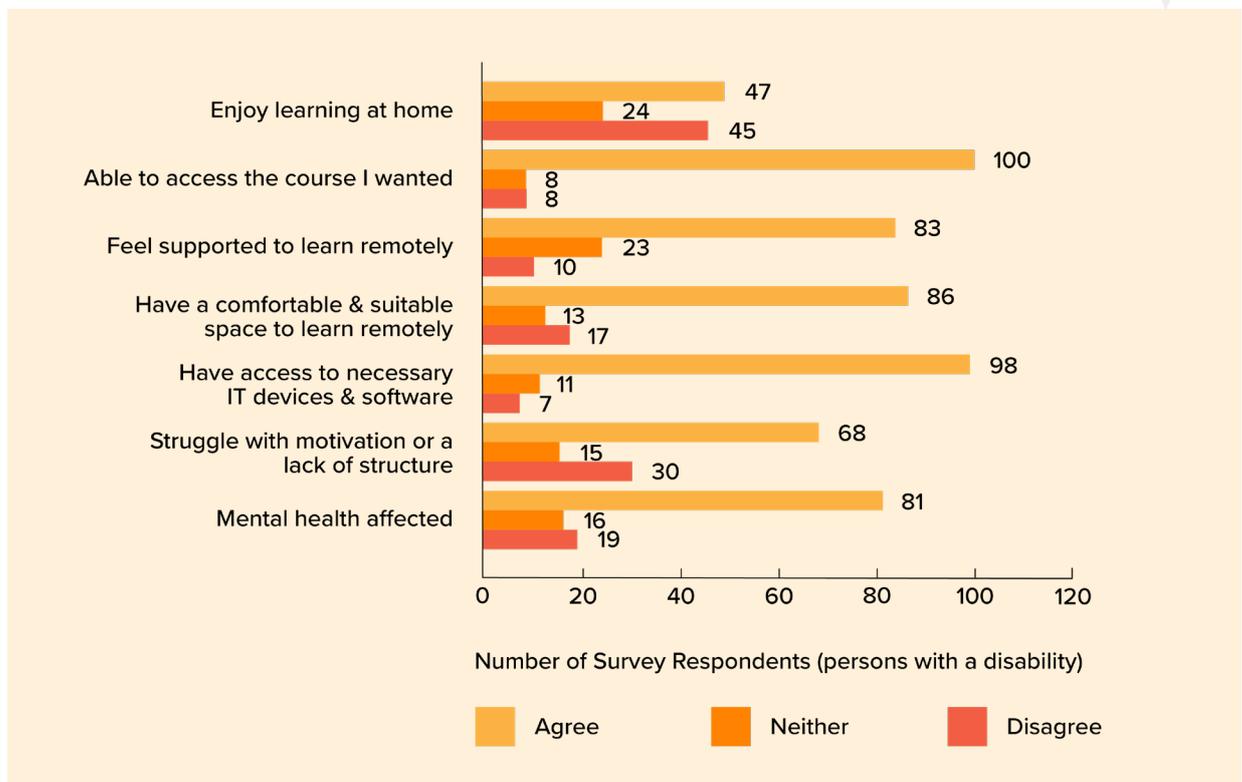


Figure 19: Number of survey responses to the questions about the level of agreement on statements about COVID-19 and remote learning, by the respondents who identified as a person with a disability

	Persons with a disability % who agree	Non-vulnerable/ minority group % who agree
enjoy learning at home	41%	39%
able to access the course I wanted	86%	84%
feel supported to learn remotely	72%	77%
have a comfortable & suitable space to learn remotely	74%	75%
have access to necessary IT devices & software	84%	84%
struggle with motivation or a lack of structure	60%	54%
mental health affected	70%	58%

Table 6: Comparison in the percentage of agreeing responses to the total applicable responses to the questions about the level of agreement on statements about COVID-19 and remote learning, between the respondents who identified as a person with a disability and those who did not identify as any of the vulnerable or minority groups

Finally, in terms of respondents who identified as born outside Ireland, compared to those who did not identify as any of the vulnerable or minority groups, they were substantially less likely to have a comfortable and suitable space to learn remotely (70% vs. 75%), were substantially more likely to enjoy learning at home (46% vs. 39%), were substantially less likely to struggle with motivation or a lack of structure (46% vs. 54%), and were substantially less likely to have their mental health affected (51% vs. 58%) (see Table 7).

In survey comments, greater details were given. One learner stated, “I live in a rural area, so when we are online I have to drive into town and take our class in my car on the phone.” Another stated, “It is challenging...[I] miss interact[ing] with others in class.” The difficulty learning online was pointed out. One learner said,

“It’s hard to do online classes because I don’t understand anything and it’s really hard when it comes to assignments.” This was echoed by another learner’s comment: “It’s hard to understand learning online. I needed [to] take time to understand the topic when [my] teacher dictated. I prefer [to] have handouts-copies so I can translate to my language.” A different learner also commented, “The online classes have been taking a toll on my mental health and I struggle to stay focused and motivated during online school.” One learner called for, “More support regarding mental health and at-risk people during the COVID-19 pandemic.”

More specifically, childcare responsibility was mentioned: “It’s difficult to learn from home when you have small children.” Another wrote, “It’s very hard to concentrate and the same time it’s

very hard to do work while home with [a] kid.” A different learner stated, “It was difficult to do course work while caring for a school aged and preschool aged child during lock down and I worry that I am very far behind.”

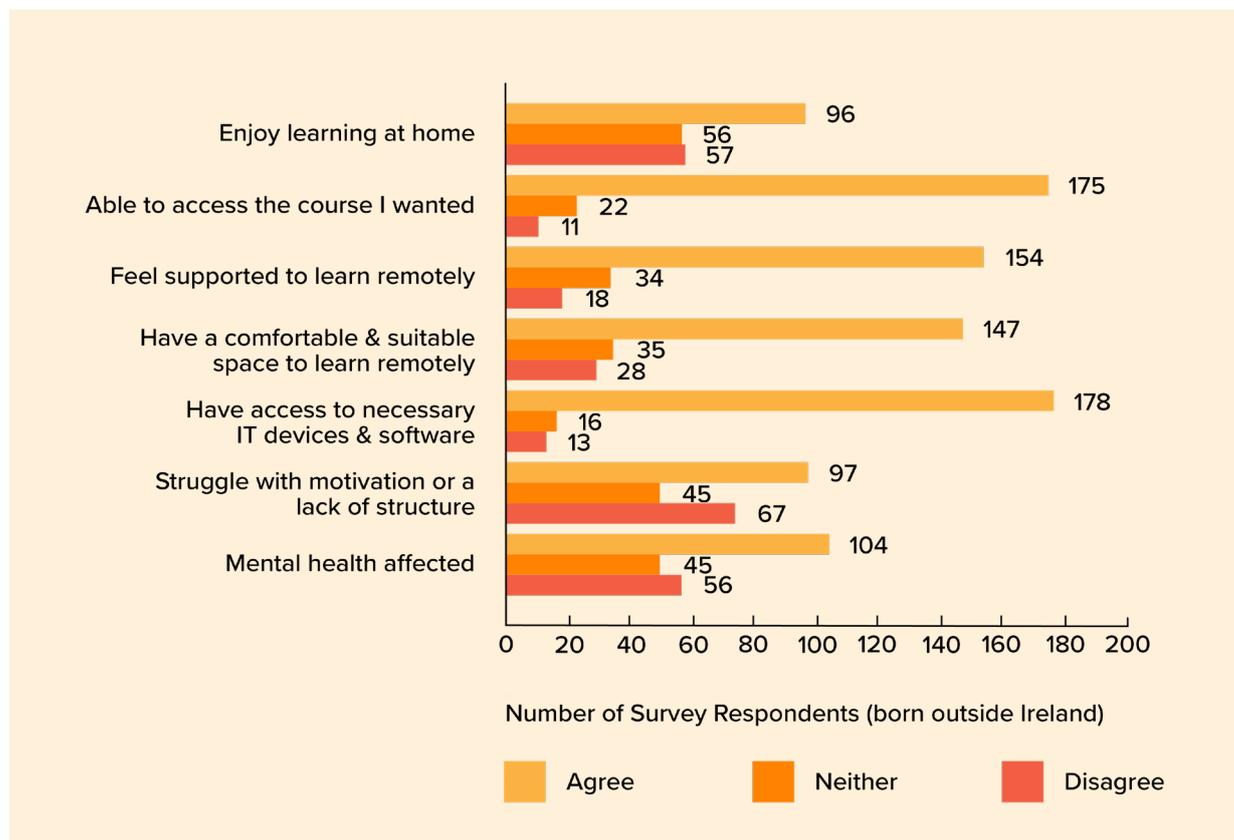


Figure 20: Number of survey responses to the questions about the level of agreement on statements about COVID-19 and remote learning, by the respondents who identified as those born outside Ireland

	Born outside Ireland % of agree	Non-vulnerable/ minority group % of agree
enjoy learning at home	46%	39%
able to access the course I wanted	84%	84%
feel supported to learn remotely	75%	77%
have a comfortable & suitable space to learn remotely	70%	75%
have access to necessary IT devices & software	86%	84%
struggle with motivation or a lack of structure	46%	54%
mental health affected	51%	58%

Table 7: Comparison in the percentage of agreeing responses to the total applicable responses to the questions about the level of agreement on statements about COVID-19 and remote learning, between the respondents who identified as those born outside Ireland and those who did not identify as any of the vulnerable or minority groups

“While I felt very comfortable in the face-to-face classes as they were more interactive, online has been very successful for me also. It’s great that we can still view things and get advice. I would like a combination of both types of class.”

CONCLUSION

This report presented the findings from 18 regional events of the National FET Learner Forum held across eight Education and Training Boards between October 2020 and May 2021. It found that learners were grateful for support they received from their Education and Training Board throughout the COVID-19 restrictions. Education and Training Boards prioritised and supported learners' mental health and wellbeing during remote learning, and made an effort to stay in touch with them during remote learning using diverse communication methods. Learners also benefitted from the provision of laptops provided by Education and Training Boards during the move to remote learning and from the digital skills support they received from Education and Training Board staff. Learners developed new skills (particularly digital skills) and confidence as a result of overcoming the challenges of remote learning. These points raised from learner discussions were also endorsed by the learner survey. The majority of survey respondents agreed that they were able to access the course they wanted (83%), felt supported to learn remotely (75%), had a comfortable and suitable space to learn remotely (72%), and had access to necessary IT devices and software (83%).

Despite these positive aspects, learners expressed that they were struggling with remote learning and that their mental health had been affected by the pandemic, which in turn had a detrimental effect on their learning. Learners found the at-home learning environment difficult, due to issues such as limited space and device and internet access, the feeling of isolation, and home caring

or childcare responsibilities, even though some learners mentioned that remote learning enabled more flexibility in their lives. Learners pointed out that further support was needed in the areas of mental health, digital skills and online learning, assessment, and progression. These difficulties voiced by learners were echoed by the survey findings: more than half of respondents agreed that they struggled with motivation or a lack of structure when learning online (54% of applicable responses) and their mental health was affected by the current crisis (59% of applicable responses). These difficulties were particularly salient among learners who identified as a member of a vulnerable or minority group.

Based on these findings, the key recommendations can be summarised as follows:

- Learners would like Education and Training Boards to continue to enhance supports for remote learning, including mental health, digital skills, device/ Internet access, and a suitable online substitute for practical coursework.
- Learners would like further opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction while using online platforms, even when face-to-face learning is not an option, to mitigate feelings of isolation.
- Learners would like Education and Training Boards to support assessment and progression, such as more flexible assessment arrangements and clearer guideline on work placements and progression, to ensure that the

difficulties of remote learning are minimised and concerns about next steps after finishing courses are mitigated.

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 moving forward.

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APPENDICES

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

Name	Affiliation
Martha Bolger	Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board
Una Buckley	Adult Learner
Shauna Dunlop	SOLAS
Laura Flynn	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Finbarr Lane	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science
Siobhan McEntee	Education and Training Boards Ireland
Roisin Morris-Drennan	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Margaret Murray	National Adult Literacy Agency
Louise Quinn	Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
Aoife Walshe	SOLAS
Noeleen Watson	Adult Learner

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. Paula Flynn	Dublin City University
Dr. Peter Lavender	University of Wolverhampton
Dr. Stephen O'Brien	University College Cork

Appendix 3: Learner Survey Questions and Responses

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 (1,707).

Course / Programme and Level

Course or Programme Title (1664 responses)							
Adult Literacy	Apprenticeship	Community Education	Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)				
100	30	139	233				
Local Training Initiative (LTI)	English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)	Skills to Advance	Traineeship				
64	45	73	22				
Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)	Youthreach	Post-leaving certificate	Other (please specify)				
164	138	491	217				
Course Level (if on an accredited NFQ/QQI course) (1641 responses)							
Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7-10	Non-accredited / no level
36	49	132	258	916	166	5	79
Are you a full-time or part-time learner? (1663 responses)							
Full-time	Part-time						
1033	630						

Recruitment, Registration, and Induction

Where did you hear about your course? (Please select all that apply) (1502 responses)

Career Guidance	Radio or Newspaper	Online / Internet	Family or a Friend	Current or Former Learner
236	44	513	582	178
Employer	Open Day	Career's Exhibition	The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection	
66	112	25	132	

Why did you choose to do your course or go to your centre? (Please select all that apply) (1513 responses)

Course availability	To get a certificate	Reputation	Location	To progress to third level
315	440	118	306	419
To get a job	To upskill or reskill	To meet new people	Other (please specify)	
512	680	270	95	

How satisfied were you with the customer service you received when you initially contacted your centre? (1511 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
1034	385	59	10	6	17

How satisfied were you with the guidance and advice you received when you initially contacted your centre? (1511 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
971	431	72	8	8	21

How satisfied were you with the website for your Education and Training Board or centre? (1506 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
718	518	152	39	6	73

How satisfied were you with the prospectus (information booklet) you received from your centre? (1494 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
665	485	149	16	8	171

How satisfied were you with the interview process for your course or programme? (1496 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
817	408	84	2	3	182

How satisfied were you with the overall induction and registration process for your course or programme? (1503 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
848	508	79	23	8	37

Did you receive the following information about your course and centre? Please select all the information you got below. (1504 responses)

Course information	College Policies	Learner Contract	Learner Handbook	I did not receive any of the above
1277	739	680	746	118

Facilities and Services

How satisfied were you with the theory rooms (classrooms) of the centre? (1433 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
673	528	97	30	9	96

How satisfied were you with the computer rooms in your centre? (1429 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
590	434	105	37	15	248

How satisfied were you with the communal areas (shared spaces such as corridors, reception, etc.) in your centre? (1440 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
525	520	153	54	18	170

How satisfied were you with the disability services in your centre? (1429 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
362	345	200	34	18	470

How satisfied were you with the car parking facilities at your centre? (1430 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
438	396	169	67	49	311

How satisfied were you with the canteen or food and drink facilities at your centre? (1427 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
355	331	201	73	34	433

How satisfied were you with the sports and recreation facilities at your centre? (1419 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
170	167	245	40	21	776

How satisfied were you with the learner representation at your centre? (1429 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
500	457	195	25	7	245

How satisfied were you with the overall appearance and outside grounds of your centre? (1438 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
563	537	162	39	13	124

Teaching and Learning

How satisfied were you with the learning resources used on your course or at your centre? (1360 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
713	487	84	17	11	48

How satisfied were you with the learner supports on your course or at your centre? (1355 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
701	456	88	23	16	71

How satisfied were you with the disability supports on your course or at your centre? (1352 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
305	268	185	20	15	559

How satisfied were you with the guidance service on your course or at your centre? (1348 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
601	406	163	32	9	137

How satisfied were you with the specialist equipment or resources on your course or at your centre? (1359 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
452	430	152	24	11	290

How satisfied were you with the open access to computer labs on your course or at your centre? (1352 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
468	343	157	29	16	339

How satisfied were you with the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) hardware and software available on your course or at your centre? (1352 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
526	437	143	39	10	197

How satisfied were you with the course/programme you undertook? (1343 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
833	416	53	18	13	10

How satisfied were you with the organisation of classes? (1353 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
704	491	95	43	11	9

How satisfied were you with the range and choice of modules? (1353 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
641	514	110	32	7	49

How satisfied were you with the staff support? (1353 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
866	388	68	16	5	10

How satisfied were you with the teaching instructions and methods used? (1351 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
765	448	86	35	11	6

How satisfied were you with the fair and consistent assessment? (1353 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
708	477	87	19	7	55

How satisfied were you with the opportunity to give feedback on your course? (1354 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
716	463	114	34	6	21

How satisfied were you with your own input to the course? (1354 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
652	561	104	12	8	17

COVID-19 and Remote Learning

How are your courses being completed at the moment? (1342 responses)

Remotely (online)	In my centre	Blended (a mix of online and at the centre)	Other (please specify)
935	133	232	42

Do you agree with the statement "I enjoy learning at home"? (1342 responses)

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
197	336	337	296	164	12

Do you agree with the statement "I was able to access the course I wanted this year"? (1337 responses)

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
536	560	134	59	27	21

Do you agree with the statement "I feel supported to learn remotely"? (1344 responses)

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
440	533	202	97	34	38

Do you agree with the statement "I have a comfortable and suitable space to learn remotely"? (1342 responses)

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
382	568	168	136	59	29

Do you agree with the statement "I have access to the necessary IT devices and software to complete my learning"? (1340 responses)

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
503	583	115	87	26	26

Do you agree with the statement “I struggle with motivation or a lack of structure when learning online”? (1342 responses)

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
308	401	233	250	110	40

Do you agree with the statement “My mental health has been affected by the current crisis”? (1342 responses)

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
357	412	241	220	77	35

Voluntary Demographic Information

What is your age? (1316 responses)

Under 18	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
70	463	180	218	223	123	39

What is your gender? (1324 responses)

male	female	non-binary	prefer not to state	prefer to self-identify
348	951	5	16	4

Would you identify as being from any of the following groups? Please select all that apply. (594 responses)

Living in Direct Provision	Traveller or Roma	Non-native English Speaker	Lone Parent	Person with a disability	Born outside Ireland (Where?)
144	24	80	106	119	211

What is your current employment status? (1278 responses)

Employed full time	Employed part time	Employed on a zero hour contract	Unemployed and not currently seeking work	Unemployed and seeking work
96	228	7	198	343
Unemployed temporarily due to COVID-19 (with plans to return to work when restrictions are removed)	Home Carer	Full-time Parent	Retired	Other (please specify)
117	44	87	50	143

Have you ever been asked about your experience in Further Education and Training before? (1302 responses)

Yes	No
583	719

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