FET Learners and Mental Health in Ireland: Identifying Supports

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FOREWORD

At Jigsaw, the National Centre for Youth Mental Health, we know that the mental health and wellbeing of young people defines their life experiences and impacts their ability to explore and grow as they become flourishing adults in society.

Participating in education and having a sense of belonging and connection to community are both strong protective factors for mental health. Further education and training (FET) can provide both of these.

However, it is also clear that the prevalence of mental health difficulties may be higher for young people in FET than in other tertiary education settings.

In 2022–2023, AONTAS included a "Wellbeing" section in their learner surveys and also held a mental health-specific focus group for the first time. The data from these actions inform this report. Jigsaw welcomes this focus, which is needed in the sector as learners in FET are under-represented in the data on mental health in tertiary education.

At this point, it is vital to acknowledge the existing work done and support provided by those working in FET when it comes to learner mental health and wellbeing. This is reflected in the comments and feedback highlighted in this report, where staff are often identified as being invaluable sources of support for FET learners. At Jigsaw, we regularly highlight the importance of having "One Good Adult™" in a young person's life and this may often be a tutor or teacher.

We also recognise the introduction, by ETBI, of the FET Learner Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework earlier this year, as another positive step toward a stronger central focus on learner mental health and wellbeing within the FET sector.

The recommendations in this comprehensive report by AONTAS map strongly to this Framework and mirror what Jigsaw understands to be evidence-based approaches to supporting and promoting mental health and wellbeing. Jigsaw has significant experience in supporting both staff and students in educational settings and the findings in this report echo what we find from our own practice and research, including My World Survey 2.

I would like to thank AONTAS, and in particular Laura Lovejoy, for valuing Jigsaw's input into this report and for their continuous advocacy for learner voice. We look forward to a continued partnership into the future.

Carrie Budds

JIGSAW
Young people's
health in mind

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Term	Definition
Health promotion	The process of enabling people to increase control over and improve their health (Health Promotion Glossary, BNQ 9700-800, Okanagan Charter, OUCHA).
Mental health	A state of wellbeing in which the individual realises their own abilities, can reasonably cope with the stresses of life, can live, study, and work well, and is able to make a contribution to the community (World Health Organization, 2023).
Mental health difficulties	A spectrum of concerns that can range from distressing temporary symptoms to a wide range of mental health disorders and illness affecting one's mood, thinking, behaviour, or physiological responses.
Social determinants of health	The conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. These circumstances are shaped by the distribution of money, power, and resources at global, national, and local levels. The social determinants of health are mostly responsible for health inequities — the unfair and avoidable differences in health status seen within and between countries (World Health Organization, 2023).
Trauma-informed practice	Trauma-informed practice is an approach to health and care interventions which is grounded in the understanding that trauma exposure can impact an individual's neurological, biological, psychological and social development.
Self-care	Self-care is the ability to proactively enhance our health by building resilience and preventing ill-health. It has a preventive focus. It is a process whereby a person engages in practices and activities that promote their sense of wellbeing.
Protective factors for mental health	Elements which are seen to prevent or reduce the risk of developing mental health difficulties.
Risk factors for mental health	Elements which are seen to increase or exacerbate the risk of developing mental health difficulties.

INTRODUCTION

This report is developed from findings gathered through the National FET Learner Forum, a large-scale annual research project designed to capture the educational experience of learners in Further Education and Training (FET) nationwide. The National FET Learner Forum uses multiple methods for engaging with learners across FET, including surveys and focus groups. The Forum, which is funded by SOLAS, is delivered by AONTAS in collaboration with Education and Training Boards across Ireland and is designed to ensure that the views of FET learners continually inform policy. This report presents findings and policy recommendations specifically relating to learner mental health, garnered through focus groups and the wellbeing section of a learner survey administered by AONTAS in the academic year 2022-2023.

About AONTAS

AONTAS are the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation. We are a membership organisation representing adult education educators, providers, learners, and other stakeholders. AONTAS' vision is for a world where the pursuit of learning for all adults is valued, equal, and strengthens communities. We advocate for empowering adult learning that drives social equality, justice and collective action across the island of Ireland. AONTAS support learners, particularly those most educationally disadvantaged, to engage in lifelong learning, and advocate for more inclusive and accessible national education policy. AONTAS achieve these goals through research, communications, advocacy, and capacity building. Our work is aimed at building an inclusive, learner-centred lifelong learning system that enables adults to have a transformative learning experience.

KEY FINDINGS

Overall

- Peer support was crucial to forming social connections and protecting learners' mental health.
- Tutors were cited as an invaluable source of mental health support to learners.
- Taking part in a FET course had a positive impact on mental health, as it offers opportunities for forming new relationships, healing past negative experiences with education, developing a routine, and building self-confidence through accomplishment. As the research of the National FET Learner Forum dating back to 2017 shows, the emotional and interpersonal benefits of taking a course are one of the most frequently occurring "wider benefits" of FET cited by learners in the focus groups.

Survey

The following are the key findings on learner mental health and wellbeing emerging from the National FET Learner Forum survey, taken by 2,569 learners, for the Academic Year 2022–2023:

Mental Health

- 55% of learners (944 out of 1,720 who answered the survey question) say that they experience stress, anxiety, or depression
- 37% of learners (607 out of 1,646 learners who answered the question) say mental health problems affect their ability to learn or study
- When asked, "What would help to support your mental health?" 23% of responses indicated "mindfulness classes" (548 out of 2,422 responses). 22% of the total responses indicated that "flexibility around assignments and deadlines" would help (531 responses). 21% of the responses selected "increased financial support" (501 responses), and 19% of the responses indicated that "appointments with a counsellor or qualified specialist" would help to improve mental health (472)

Housing

- 18% of learners are living in rented accommodation (355 out of 1,920 learners who answered the question)
- 30% of learners live with family and do not own the home they live in (594 out of 1,920 learners who answered the question)
- 48% of learners who are renting stated that they find it "difficult" or "somewhat difficult" to pay their rent (639 out of 1,322 learners)
- 24% of learners say that their living situation affects their ability to learn or study (456 out of 1,901 learners who answered the question)
- 29% of learners say that their living situation causes them stress, anxiety, or worry (495 out of 1,731 learners who answered the question).
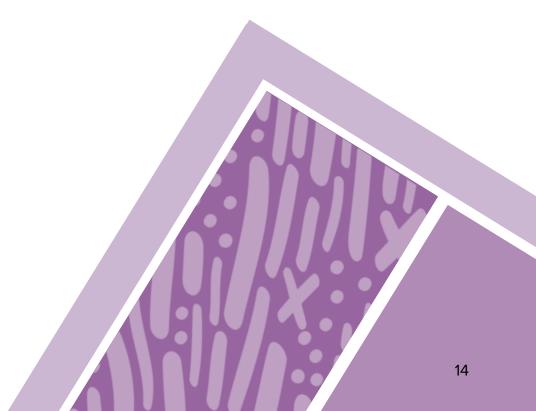
Focus Groups

Mental health was raised as an "Area Working Well" in 9 out of 12 of the Education and Training Boards that AONTAS conducted focus group events with in 2022–2023 and was raised as an "Area for Improvement" in 5 out of the 12 Education and Training Boards we consulted with in 2022–2023. AONTAS' forthcoming Learners' Voices Across Ireland Report (previously titled the Annual Synthesis Report) (2023), which represents the views of 3,508 learners who participated in the National FET Learner Forum in 2022–2023, found that learners were overall pleased with the mental health support they were able to access through their Education and Training Boards, and also that taking a FET course had a positive impact on learners' mental health. However, it is clear from the research learners would like to see mental health supports expanded, particularly in the areas of access to counselling appointments, the visibility of mental health supports, and flexibility around attendance and deadlines for learners who are suffering from a mental health issue. The ensuing report provides detail, context, and recommended policy actions related to these core findings.

The following table provides the key qualitative recommendations relating to mental health arising from the 103 focus groups conducted with learners in the academic year 2022–2023:

Areas Working Well		
Topic	**Finding**	**Evidence**
Peer Support	Learners shared how they turn to each other for informal emotional support.	"I know in the odd class, we almost have a chat. It's almost like therapy, you just have a chat... get to know each other sort of in some way." "I think everybody has a mind that's full of different, you know, situations in your mind. You can handle situations differently at different times. So, I think it's good to have somebody to talk to or a group to talk to and discuss your feelings."
Tutors	Learners felt that their tutors were open and respectful regarding mental health issues.	"I think they're very respectful where I am." "Our tutor would be very open to discussion."

Areas Working Well		
Topic	**Finding**	**Evidence**
Mental Health Benefits of FET	Learners appreciated the wider benefits of FET, such as increased confidence and the opportunity to make new friends.	"[the course] gives you purpose - what you need to get up in the morning." "It's got me out and meeting people again. It got me out from the house. I was at home for the last few years." "This course has done a huge amount for my confidence and my anxiety."
Formal Mental Health Supports	Learners were pleased with the mental health supports they were able to access through their Education and Training Boards.	"We have two psychologists. You can usually go and see them whenever they want to see you, or you can go and see them whenever you want. Just to have a chat one-to-one. I can trust them." "The counsellor in my place is great and as far as I know, everyone really likes him and we can go into him regularly."
Atmosphere of Openness around Mental Health Difficulties	Learners shared how their tutors and Education and Training Board staff demonstrated understanding and sensitivity when it came to learners' mental health.	"I think they're pretty much great with that. Because I just recently had a situation… nobody was pressuring me to do something for school. And everybody was very nice asking how things were, is everything okay?" "[My tutor] can spot if I'm in a bad place, and he'll organise for me to go and speak to somebody." "There are things like the mental health week that really promote positive mental health and providing the SafeTalk workshop."

Areas Working Well		
Topic	Finding	Evidence
Self-care Resourcing	Learners were pleased that they had opportunities to learn more self-care and stress management through courses and classes offered through their Education and Training Boards; more learners would like access to these kinds of classes.	"As time goes on, I notice my energy levels are dropping and stuff and it's my own ability to take some time out for self-care... But I have to give it to the tutors and stuff. They noticed... They said, 'right, we're going to do a meditation at the end of class,' and stuff like that, so they're brilliant in that way... They're brilliant at helping you manage." "I started with a wellbeing course and I gained the confidence from that to keep on going on my education journey. I felt it was a risk going into it but now I see it as an opportunity."

Areas For Improvement		
Topic	**Finding**	**Evidence**
Awareness around Mental Health Difficulties	Learners found that attitudes to mental health varied across centres. Learners would like a more open atmosphere around mental health and more consistently across different places of learning. Overall, there was inconsistency across Education and Training Boards' provision of both formal and informal mental health support to learners.	"It was kind of, wasn't really mentioned. It might have even been just brushed over. It wasn't specifically signposted, so I think… they need to up the game a bit there." "I know some centres would have a mental health week, or kind of posters, and other ones are very different when it comes to that. I know where we are… it's just not mentioned at all."
Counselling	Learners felt that access to one-on-one psychological counselling was inconsistent across different places of learning, and they would like to be able to access this support when needed.	"In our centre there are not any psychologists or other supports… I saw only posters. It's general information about women's mental health, about abuse." "I think we need somebody who can work with us. Somebody who can work in an education centre, like a psychologist, and we can directly share our feelings with him or with her."
Promotion and Advertisement of Mental Health Supports Available	Learners would like mental health supports to be better advertised, particularly during course inductions, so they know where/whom to go to if they are experiencing a problem.	"I think it would probably be a good way, as part of the general induction into a course, to just have [mental health support] mentioned there." "Rather than people having to bring it up individually and say, 'I need this support,' to just, if it was said to everyone in the class, like the tutors said, 'by the way, if you need to talk to a counsellor, here's the phone number, here's the email address.'" "I have heard before… that people might not even find out that there's a counsellor available until they actually start having an issue and then they bring it up to their tutor."

Areas For Improvement		
Topic	**Finding**	**Evidence**
Trauma-informed Support	Some learners, particularly those who are refugees or international protection applicants, have suffered trauma. These learners would like the impact of trauma on their learning to be recognised, and would like access to one-on-one support, such as appointments with a qualified counsellor.	"Now a lot of people from Ukraine… tried to live here, build new life, go to courses, study something. But I know because I speak with people, a lot of people have deep in their soul, in their mind, big problems about war and about all these situations. It's difficult for them. About future… people can't understand what should they do. And maybe if someone, maybe a psychologist or other person, maybe can help them."
Mental Health/ Self-Care Education	Learners would like the opportunity to receive more instruction in self-care and would like to attend mindfulness classes and to learn about stress management.	"I think it would be good if we could get some information, basic information, about mental health and emergency situations, about what we can do with that, with stress, with panic attacks." "Art therapy… you can draw, but it's to help you for mental health, for you [to feel] calm, relax, focus."

Summary of Recommended Policy Actions

These recommended areas for policy expansion and development arise from the key qualitative and quantitative findings on learner mental health from the National FET Learner Forum in 2022–2023. These recommendations are expanded upon in the discussion section of this report, beginning on page 23.

- Expand access to appointments with counsellors, focusing on availability of appointments and affordability of sessions. Consider linking with local counselling centres that provide low-cost counselling
- Advocate for further increases in travel allowances for learners and link with local transport services, such as TFI Local Link, to expand access to transportation for those living in rural areas and at risk of isolation
- Increase the integration of mental health awareness education and self-care into curricula, with a view to offering learners the opportunity to learn stress management skills, emotional coping strategies, and self-care techniques such as yoga and meditation
- Continue to encourage tutor awareness of and openness around mental health difficulties (however, learners have shared that, overall, tutors are a key source of mental health support)
- Continue to invest in professional development for teaching staff, who are often key to intervening in learners' mental health difficulties
- Target marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities and refugees, through site visits and advertising campaigns, to better facilitate their participation in adult education and their access to social support and formal mental health services through FET
- Continue to encourage the cultivation of cultural sensitivity among staff to better support learners from ethnic minority backgrounds in accessing mental health support
- Increase the advertisement and promotion of available mental health supports within FET colleges and on websites.

METHODOLOGY

Between November 2022 and June 2023, AONTAS ran 12 ETB-specific learner surveys, gathering 2,569 responses. This report presents only the findings from section 7 of the learner survey: Your Wellbeing. The Wellbeing section was added to the survey in November 2022, with the support of the National FET Learner Forum's Advisory Group and Academic Expert Group, and consists of 9 questions related to learners' housing, financial situations, mental health, and overall wellbeing.

During the academic year 2022–2023, AONTAS also conducted 103 focus groups in total with 12 Education and Training Boards across Ireland. The mental health findings of this large-scale project, which looks at learners' overall experiences in Further Education and Training, have been incorporated into this report.

In addition to these 12 ETB-specific surveys, AONTAS held a mental-health specific focus group with one Education and Training Board, attended by 13 learners, in March 2023. In order to protect the identities of the learners involved, the name of this Education and Training Board is not provided. The additional qualitative findings emerging from this focus group are presented as part of the table of qualitative recommendations in the Introduction above.

Learner Participation by Course and Level

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. Learners participating in the focus groups were taking a range of courses, including Post Leaving Certificate courses, Adult Literacy courses, and Youthreach.

The learner survey is also a data source for the QQI levels and programmes of learners taking part in the National FET Learner Forum project. While level information is gathered in both the survey and focus groups, programme information is gathered only through the learner survey. From the learner survey, the programme most frequently represented in the 2022–2023 academic year was Post Leaving Certificate courses (422 learners), followed by Back to Education Initiative (275) and then Adult Literacy Groups (204). In terms of course levels, learners came from a range of different levels, with the most common being Level 5 (1,110).
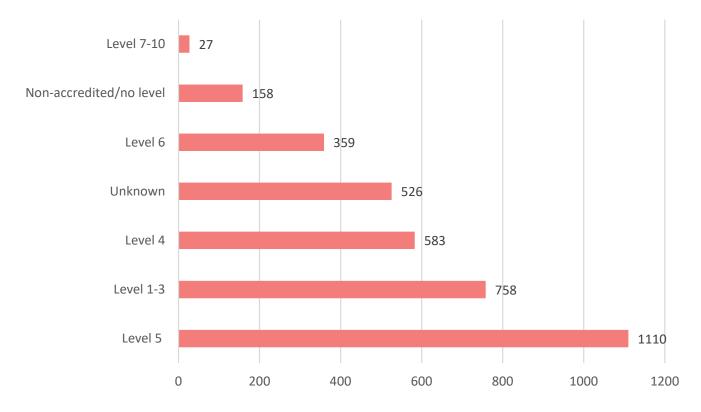

Figure 1. Learner Participation by Level

MENTAL HEALTH AND
FET: AN OVERVIEW

This report captures the experiences of FET learners with their mental health to identify how mental health impacts learning and how these issues might be addressed. The report also provides a review of existing research on the mental health of FET learners in order to contextualise this research and provide a rationale for its inclusion alongside the broader project of the National FET Learner Forum.

The following section provides the rationale for the inclusion of a wellbeing section in the learner survey and the development of this purpose-specific report on learner mental health. As the largest learner voice research project in Europe, the National FET Learner Forum has heard from thousands of learners each year since 2017 and has a record of developing actionable policy recommendations arising from learners' perspectives. Through our surveys and focus groups each year, we identify the key issues facing learners in FET, focusing specifically on barriers to accessing and participating fully in education. The barriers that have emerged through the Forum over the years have often centred on material factors which impede people's access to education; questions of financial resourcing and access to childcare and transportation have arisen in multiple annual reports. Another key emergent factor noted by the Research Team at AONTAS was mental health and its place within FET. One of the most frequently highlighted benefits of FET, as described by learners themselves, is the positive emotional and interpersonal impact of taking a course. Through our research, we have found that learners choose FET not only to pursue a qualification and improve their employability, but because of the personal benefits afforded, which often encompass positive mental health. Learners at risk of marginalisation, for example those with disabilities, older learners, single parents, those living in poverty, those with disabilities, and those who did not thrive in the tradition school environment, have shared how they found a sense of belonging, friendship, and renewed confidence through participating in their FET courses. It has become clear, through the six years of the National FET Learner Forum and the thousands of learners we have consulted, that taking part in FET yields significant mental health benefits for learners. The mental health benefits often hinge on the positive and mutually respectful relationships fostered between peers and learners/tutors within FET. By far the most frequently occurring "Area Working Well" in our reports over the past six years, tutors are repeatedly praised by FET learners for the valuable and reciprocal relationships they can foster, which facilitate learning and good mental health.

The positive mental health benefits of FET notwithstanding, it became noticeable during the pandemic period in particular, that learners were increasingly reporting that they experienced mental health difficulties. These difficulties in some cases impeded their abilities to engage with learning. Our research indicated that the level of support learners were able to access for these mental health difficulties varied significantly across programmes, centres, and Education and Training Boards. Some learners in focus groups reported having access to free psychological counselling through their Education and Training Boards. Other learners shared how their tutors provided informal mental health support by demonstrating care and sensitivity towards learners' emotional needs in and outside of the classroom. With the disparity in the provision of mental health support across ETBs in mind, and the well-documented negative mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic across society, the

Research Team wanted to explore in more depth the state of FET learners' mental health, and the supports on offer. The desire to present a picture of FET learners' mental health needs, and to indicate areas for development in terms of supports thus provides the rationale for the inclusion of the Wellbeing section in our learner survey and the development of this report.

Another important factor in considering the mental health needs of those in FET specifically is the unique vulnerabilities of this learner cohort compared with the general population and with students in Higher Education. Research on the mental health of learners in Further Education and Training conducted by Marie Rooney in 2015 suggests not only that mental health difficulties are "becoming more commonly disclosed and discussed in Ireland," but that "the FET learner population may have particular vulnerabilities." Rooney suggests that mental health difficulties may even be more prevalent among FET learners than other learner cohorts and the general population. Providing an overview of the nature and prevalence of disclosed mental health difficulties among FET learners, Rooney suggests that "it is likely that there will be some learners with mental health problems in every FE class group" (2015, 3). If this was true in 2015, then the COVID-19 pandemic constituted a further burden on the mental health of an already potentially vulnerable learner population. The pandemic represented a period of worsening mental health for many people, including students. Research on learner and student mental health that has emerged since the COVID-19 crisis in 2020, for example, reflected a significant increase in mental health problems related to the social isolation wrought by the pandemic, illustrating that any pre-existing mental health concerns which have impacted FET learners may have increased since the COVID-19 crisis.

Additionally, even though there is reason to believe that FET learners are more vulnerable in terms of their mental health than the general population or those in Higher Education, the mental health of FET learners has received comparatively less attention. A 2019 study on the wellbeing of learners in colleges of Further Education (School of Psychology, University College Dublin, 2019), for example, noted that "much less is known about the wellbeing of students attending [colleges of further education] compared with third-level institutions." The study of 288 learners from colleges of further education found that "almost half of our participants had a chronic health condition, and these students are not doing as well as their peers either physically or psychologically, suggesting that they may be in need of additional support" (2019, 8). 43% of respondents to the study reported that they suffered from depression, and 53% reported anxiety disorders (2019, 4). The authors of the study, however, note that one of the limitations of the study is its small sample size. Nonetheless, the findings are indicative of the level of mental health distress among Further Education learners in Ireland, and are consistent with other, similar studies, including AONTAS' research through the National FET Learner Forum.

Similar findings about the mental health needs of those in Further Education are borne out in research conducted by Jigsaw and University College Dublin. The My World 2 (2019) survey, containing responses from over 19,000 young people, included 658 learners from Youthreach, colleges of further education, and young people with a disability. Compared with a previous survey in 2012 (My World Survey), the 2019 study recorded a worsening of the mental health of young people. One of the study's key findings was that "young people from seldom heard groups [which includes those in further education and training] showed a particular vulnerability with heightened anxiety and suicide attempts" compared with age-matched peers.

The mental health of young people is undoubtedly of concern when considering the broader picture of mental health and FET. Youthreach learners, one of the "seldom heard" groups surveyed as part of the My World 2 study, represent a comparatively modest proportion of the learners taking part in the National FET Learner Forum. In the academic year 2022–2023, for example, 184 out of the 3,508 learners AONTAS consulted were enrolled in Youthreach programmes. Nonetheless, the mental health and wellbeing issues facing Youthreach learners and young people are of concern when considering the overall picture of FET learner mental health and support needs in Ireland. 20% of the learners who took part in focus groups and surveys as part of the National FET Learner Forum in 2022–2023 were in the 18-24 year-old age group. An evaluation of the Youthreach programme by ESRI (Smyth et al., 2019) found that a significant portion of learners encountered a considerable prevalence of emotional, psychological, or mental health challenges, coupled with limited familial support or instances of adverse trauma. Around one in six young individuals are from a Traveller background, while 8% are lone parents, 14% have encountered issues with the criminal justice system, and 6% hail from a migrant background. Additionally, prior to joining Youthreach, many learners reported negative school experiences, often describing a gradual or voluntary exclusion process (Smyth et al., 2019, pp.55-57). These factors all potentially constitute stressors which may contribute to mental health difficulties or disrupt other factors which may protect against mental health distress. The survey also found that protective factors that mitigate poor mental health, such as confidence, self-esteem, and resilience, have declined among young people in the period 2012–2019. Bearing this in mind, the unique vulnerabilities experienced by Youthreach learners, and learners from other programmes in FET, place them at greater risk of experiencing mental health problems.

The mental health of young people in Ireland more generally is also a growing concern. In 2020, for example, the National Educational Psychological Service stated that, "In essence the known level of mental health difficulties across young people in Ireland is already concerning (c. 33%)" and that, "the evidence reviewed suggests that the pandemic will likely lead to an increase in anxiety and stress across the whole population… for [some] this anxiety will be heightened and traumatic, and for a broad range of sometimes inter-related and compounding reasons that include the impact of personal or family illness, bereavement, worry about vulnerable family members exposed to the virus due to another family member's job, and financial stress, amongst others" (2020, p.2).

In the above paper the National Educational Psychological Service noted that the increased stress on the general population was likely to exacerbate existing mental health challenges for vulnerable young people, including students, during the pandemic period, and these findings are supported by additional research conducted by AONTAS, AHEAD and the Union of Students in Ireland during the pandemic period. AHEAD's data, for example, shows that the number of students diagnosed with mental health conditions engaging with disability support services in Higher Education rose by almost 500% in 9 years (from 378 in 2008/09 to 2,217 in 2017/18 – a 487% rise) (AHEAD, 2020). The Union of Students in Ireland also conducted a survey on students' experiences during COVID-19 restrictions, and found, in relation to mental health, that "Over a third (33.94%) of students feel that their mental health is worse as a result of COVID-19" and "Over half (50.14%) of students are relying on informal supports to improve their mental health" (USI, 2020, p.8).

Young people made up approximately one third of enrolled FET learners in Ireland in 2020, with 53,973 learners under the age of 25 in 2020 (SOLAS, 2020). Other demographics in FET include older adults (17% aged 55+), immigrants and refugees (22% from countries outside of Ireland), those with disabilities (7.5%) and those who were unemployed upon starting their courses (30.5%) (SOLAS, 2020). 26.9% of learners had an upper secondary education or lower in 2020 (SOLAS, 2020). These groups, due to a range of factors, which include lower levels of literacy, higher levels of educational disadvantage and poverty, and non-native level English speaking, are at higher risk of poor mental health than the general population. Overall, FET learners have less economic security and lower prior levels of education than those in Higher Education. These forms of disadvantage have a significant bearing on mental health. The pre-existing higher mental health risk factor for FET learners, combined with the documented negative psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students and learners, means that, in 2023, FET learners as a group are particularly vulnerable to mental health difficulties. Pre-existing disadvantage and stressors in areas such as immigration status, English language ability, poverty, and previous access to education, combined with the decline in protective factors in the mental health of young people (Jigsaw, 2019) and the psychologically damaging social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have arguably left those in FET more vulnerable than ever to mental health difficulties. As such, it is important to document their experiences and highlight, in their own words, ways they might be better supported through their engagement with the FET system.

Taking part in education has a range of mental health benefits. Through our research with the National FET Learner Forum, it is clear that for many learners, their courses have a mitigating effect on social disadvantage, isolation, and poor mental health. Many learners at risk of isolation, for example, report their enjoyment of the social and personal benefits of Further Education and Training, such as making friends, building a routine, developing self-confidence, and overcoming prior negative experiences with education. As such, there is a strong role for Further Education and Training to play in supporting the mental wellbeing of its learners.

Multiple AONTAS annual synthesis reports have highlighted the ongoing issue of learners' mental health needs, noting its recurrence as a topic over several years of the National FET Learner Forum. The recurrence of mental health as an area for improvement highlighted by learners through the National FET Learner Forum is relevant to learners across all age groups, not just young people. From our research with thousands of learners through the AONTAS National FET Learner Forum, we know that the level of mental health distress experienced by FET learners is at least equivalent to that of Higher-Level students. Mental health has been raised as a problem and potential barrier to successfully completing an educational course in FET by learners through the Forum for several concurrent years, recurring as a topic in our research reports dating as far back as 2017. Our 2017 National FET Learner Forum Advisory Report, for example, found that "FET providers need to offer more wide-ranging support structures for learners in the area of mental health." Our Annual Synthesis Report 2020-2021 found that 59% of respondents said their mental health had been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and that learners "would like more mental health supports put in place."

Mental health difficulties among FET learners were particularly exacerbated during the pandemic period, with learners reporting feelings of isolation, disconnectedness, and low motivation when their learning was conducted entirely remotely. In 2020, the AONTAS Research Team published our COVID-19 Learner Report, which presents a comprehensive

view of adult learners' experiences of FET during the pandemic. One of the report's key findings was that learners struggled with mental health and wellbeing during COVID-19, with Travellers, Roma and learners in Direct Provision at greater risk. The research shows that 48% of learners from the Roma or Traveller community, 43% of learners living in Direct Provision, and 42% of learners with a disability struggled with mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the post pandemic period, most recently in the academic year 2022–2023, our survey results still show that some vulnerable learner cohorts were more likely to experience mental health difficulties. 53% of learners living in social housing, for example, stated that they experienced "stress, anxiety, and depression" (68 out of 129 learners). 41% of learners living in rented accommodation say that their living situation causes them "stress, anxiety, or worry" (123 out of 298 learners).

Learners in the 18-24 year-old age bracket were more likely to receive information on mental health supports, with only 36% of this age group reporting that they did not receive information on mental health supports, compared with a 45% average. Young people (aged 18-24), however, were more likely to report experiencing "fair to poor" overall physical and mental health compared with the general cohort, with 10% of these learners stating that their health was "poor" compared with a 3% average. Finally, those who are white Irish were more likely to report suffering from mental health problems compared with other ethnicities, with 60% of those who are white Irish stating that they experience "stress, anxiety, or depression," compared with 48% for those from other white backgrounds, 40% of those who are Black or Black Irish, 40% of those who are Asian or Asian Irish, 31% of those who are Roma, and 21% of Irish Travellers. Mental Health Reform noted in 2016 that there was "very limited evidence on the prevalence of mental health difficulties among people from ethnic minority groups in Ireland." The authors of the Ethnic Minority Guidelines report (2016) point to international research which illustrates that refugees who have resettled in Western countries are 10 times more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder than the general population (p. 2). However, researchers have concluded that adults from ethnic minority backgrounds in Western countries "access mental health services less than the majority population" (2016, p.2). Research by Cáirde in 2015 indicated that poor experiences with and mistrust of services was a reason for reporting of mental health difficulties and under-accessing health services among ethnic minority groups in Ireland (2015). research suggested that mainstream mental health services in are inaccessible to ethnic minorities for a number of other reasons, which include cost, stigma, and a lack of cultural sensitivity among mental health practitioners (2015, pp.28-29).

When it comes to the availability of affordable mental health services in education settings in Ireland, there is a disparity between the provision of free mental health counselling in Higher Education versus Further Education and Training. Many of Ireland's Higher Education Institutions, such as Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin, and the Technical University of Dublin, offer free appointments with a psychotherapist, regardless of the course or programme of the students. The provision of such services in Further Education varies across individual courses and ETBs. For example, learners taking Youthreach programmes may have access

to such services, but this is not the same for other programmes. The formal response to FET learners' mental health difficulties varies considerably across individual ETBs. However, the visibility of mental health as a cornerstone of education and wellbeing is growing. In 2022, for example, Limerick and Clare ETB published their "Learner Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework and Action Plan." As part of their plan, they include mental health and wellbeing awareness activities and "accessible mental health supports, one-to-one counselling and referrals" (Limerick and Clare ETB, 2022, p.18).

This research follows the publication of Education and Training Boards Ireland's FET Learner Mental Health Framework, launched in March 2023. We hope that this report acts in a complementary fashion to the recommendations outlined in the Mental Health Framework, and that the research findings presented in this report serve to strengthen the Framework's position on suggested developments in mental health awareness and support within FET over the coming years. The Framework's statement that mental health supports for FET learners are inconsistently applied and experienced is supported by the qualitative and quantitative findings of the National FET Learner Forum presented in this report. We hope that this report will add to the growing body of literature on the mental health of FET learners in Ireland, and bolster continued calls for increased provision of mental health support services across FE. As this report illustrates, mental health supports for FET learners are generally well-received where they have been accessed. However, there is significant inconsistency in terms of access to supports such as counselling appointments and also in terms of the advertisement and visibility of the services. This is due, at least in part, to resourcing constraints faced by Education and Training Boards. 45% of the learners we surveyed indicated that they were not informed of any mental health supports. This, combined with the finding that 55% of learners suffer from stress, anxiety, or depression, suggests that mental health supports in FET should be expanded, in line with the recommendations in the FET Mental Health Framework. As the Framework explains:

Despite the continued increase in Government spending on mental health and wellbeing supports in Further and Higher Education, the supports available to FET learners continue to be sporadic and inconsistent, in terms of programme, geographic location and support type.

As the Executive Summary and Recommended Actions in this report show, there are a number of areas for improvement, identified by learners themselves, that would help to support learners with their mental health.

It is important to note that, for the purposes of this report, "mental health" does not refer to the absence of diagnosable mental health conditions, nor do we view the experiencing of emotional distress as pathological. Through the focus groups and surveys administered, we attempted to understand, in learners' own words, if emotional difficulties impeded their ability to learn. The wording of the survey uses the terminology "stress, anxiety, or depression" and relies on the respondents' self-reporting of these experiences. We do not equate mental health difficulties or emotional distress with the diagnosis of conditions and consider feelings of sadness and stress to be within the normal range of human emotional experiences. We advocate for the expansion of mental health supports with a view to mitigating educational

barriers and widening participation in FET. Furthermore, we recognise and promote the positive mental health benefits of engaging in adult education.

The desire for self-resourcing expressed by learners in the focus groups and surveys we conducted indicates that learners are interested in learning coping skills and ways to manage stress and that they would like to be able to access this kind of learning through their Education and Training Boards. A demand for mindfulness and meditation classes, for example, became clear through the research. This type of resourcing is in line with what ETBI has identified in the FET Mental Health Framework as "level 1 supports," which promote "positive mental health and wellbeing for all FET learners." This type of support includes mental health and wellbeing activities which could be incorporated into FET programmes, and could specifically include relaxation, yoga, and meditation. The plans for such supports are in line with what FET learners themselves have expressed a desire for. One learner in a focus group, for example, shared, "Well, the girls said about mindfulness. We don't really have anything like that, so I think something like that maybe once a week or something like that." In our learner survey, 19% of learners said "mindfulness classes" would help them with their mental health.

One can also consider the mental health supports and interventions identified by learners themselves as protective factors for mental health. The My World Survey 2 (2022) identified a number of protective and risk factors for mental health. Protective factors are elements which are seen to prevent or reduce the risk of developing mental health difficulties. These included some social determinants of health such as coping strategies and social support, both of which are facilitated by greater access to education. Risk factors included exposure to stressors; learners have identified stressors such as rising fuel costs, lack of affordable rental accommodation, and lack of suitable living space, through the focus groups and surveys of the National FET Learner Forum. While some of the protective factors outlined in the My World 2 report, such as resilience and help-seeking, place the responsibility for wellbeing in the hands of the individual experiencing problems, other protective factors are connected to external supports social determinants of health. One such example is the importance of social support, which can take the form of informal, peer support and more structured, formalised mental health supports in educational settings.

The FET Mental Health Framework identifies social support as a cornerstone of promoting positive mental health and wellbeing among learners, and outlines a numbers of ways Education and Training Boards can facilitate mental wellbeing through organising outings, gatherings, and facilitating social spaces for learners. Our research indicates that learners would like more opportunities to connect and avail of social support like this in their places of learning. For example, through the focus groups, learners shared how they would like more spaces to mingle with others from different cultural backgrounds, and more dedicated time and space to build social connections within their colleges of further education. As one learner in a focus group explained, "I feel the missing part is the multiculturalism of the institution… Speaking about multicultural day, it's just like to have a cup of coffee and to discuss anything. We do not have the chance. We don't have anywhere to sit down and have a [cup of coffee]." Another learner shared, of the diversity of their classroom, "It's opened my mind. I'm more informed on different walks of life than I was in September, which I think really helped." Improving social cohesion and integration from learners from different cultural backgrounds is one way in which FET spaces can help strengthen the mental health of learners.

The research presented in this report bolsters Education and Training Boards Ireland's FET Learner Mental Health Framework, particularly in that the Framework recognizes that mental health exists on a continuum and emphasises the importance of early interventions and "level 1 supports." The Framework acknowledges that supporting mental health and well-being in Further Education and Training (FET) can act as a protective factor, while exposure to educational disadvantage may be a risk factor. The Further Education and Training Mental Health Framework outlines strategies to enhance mental health support provision within FET. These include importance of comprehensive mental health promotion, including awareness campaigns, staff training, and collaboration with external support services, combined with targeted interventions, such as specific programs to address stress management, resilience building, and social connectedness. The Framework also recommends the provision of one-on-one learner supports, including counselling.

The National FET Learner Forum's research echoes the framework's recommendations, highlighting the inconsistent availability of mental health supports in terms of programme, geographic location, and support type. Although learners who have access to supports appreciate them, a significant number of learners are unaware of how to access them. To address the mental health challenges experienced by learners, this report recommends a range of support areas identified by learners themselves. These Recommended Actions aim to reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors for mental health. Early interventions and prevention strategies are crucial to alleviate pressure on tutors and to provide support to learners at all levels of the mental health continuum. By further integrating mental health promotion, learner self-resourcing, and formal supports into the FET system, including curricula, Education and Training Boards can continue to widen access to and benefit from FET.

FET LEARNERS AND MENTAL HEALTH: WHAT LEARNERS SAID IN SURVEY COMMENTS

Learner Survey Comments:

"Mental health is a constant thing that some people struggle with and have to deal with every day. Resources to talk to somebody in the centre would be a great help in my opinion."

"Having a talk with a professional would help."

"Mental health counselling with a professional [would help]."

"Provide 1 to 1 low cost counselling services to students."

"Extended deadlines for assignments [would help]."

"Anxiety can cause difficulties, brain fog, challenges in group and in giving presentations."

"Stress from trying to pay rent makes me lose focus."

"Difficult to find place for concentration because in 1 room in hotel, 4 women are living."

"Advertise that help more with mental health as I did not know that."

"If accommodation is not secured, you are preoccupied with survival, not studying and meeting deadlines."

"The cost of driving to the centre has increased dramatically and the allowance one way simply does not cover the diesel consumption."

"Travelling to college and home is a struggle especially with the cost of travel."

"I think becoming more knowledgeable in the area surrounding mental health [would help]. Having weekly discussion on mental health and taking away any stigma of how I feel from one day to the next. Being open and supportive of other students and telling them how I had a tough day and then looking at ways that we can reduce anxiety when we see people struggling due to many things throughout the year."

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDED POLICY ACTIONS

Based on the findings presented in this report, the following actions are suggested to support learners experiencing mental health issues to continue in Further Education and Training. The expansion of counselling services across different programmes should be prioritised, as findings indicate there is significant demand for this service. Through this research, learners themselves have identified an unmet need which has also been identified in ETBI's FET Mental Health Framework, which recommends that Education and Training Boards, "offer counselling and mentoring services internally in FET centres, where this is possible." Our research shows notable disparity in the provision, accessibility, and visibility of counselling across Education and Training Boards and colleges of further education. Learners who access counselling services benefitted considerably from this support. However, other learners reported that they were either not informed of the availability of any counselling supports or that this support was not available to them. Our research indicates that there is demand among learners for greater access to counselling through their Education and Training Boards. 46% of learners surveyed stated that they did not receive any information on mental health supports (839 out of 1,837 learners who answered the question). 55% of learners say that they experience stress, anxiety, or depression, and 37% of learners say mental health problems affect their ability to learn or study. 19% of learners stated that "appointments with a counsellor" would help them to improve their mental health. As one learner in a focus group explained, "there was some [counsellors] years ago but they're not there now as far as I know. Well, they're gone. There should be counsellors. There used to be many years ago. I don't think they're there now. Every college should have that. A counsellor."

According to our research, meeting the cost of travel is a significant source of stress and worry for learners in FET. Increasing travel allowances would help to alleviate some of this worry and would allow learners to focus more on educational outcomes. Additionally, social inclusion and access to basic amenities are among the core social determinants of health (World Health Organisation, 2023), meaning that people with access to basic amenities and those who benefit from social inclusion are more likely to experience better health and wellbeing, including mental health. Access to places of learning, facilitated by affordable and reliable transport, is a cornerstone of social inclusion for learners from marginalised backgrounds, those in old age and living in rural areas, and those who have suffered from educational disadvantage. Improving access to travel for FET learners will not only improve educational participation for those at risk of isolation but will contribute to more positive mental health by expanding educational access. Taking part in adult education itself also contributes to positive mental health and wellbeing. Widening access to FET will help to protect the mental health of those involved, as self-esteem and confidence are considered protective factors in mental health, and our research shows that 26% of learners reported an increase in confidence as a result of taking their courses, while 22% report an increase in a "positive outlook on the future."

The research has also shown that learners would like more opportunities to learn coping skills and ways to improve their own mental health, such as mindfulness classes, art therapy, and yoga. Our research findings support EBTI's plans to "Embed Mental Health and Wellbeing awareness into all FET programmes from induction through to completion" and to develop "a range of Mental Health and Wellbeing activities which could be incorporated into all FET programmes" (ETBI FET Mental Health Framework, 2023). This is also in keeping with Jigsaw's aim of mental health promotion through talks, workshops, and training which help to strengthen the capacity of young people to help care for their own mental health, in conjunction with formal and informal social supports. Furthermore, widening access to FET through the reduction of financial barriers is in line with the HSE's Mental Health Strategy, which acknowledges the importance of "Reducing structural barriers to mental health at a societal level – through initiatives to reduce discrimination, stigma, and inequalities and to promote access to education, meaningful employment, and provide support to those who are most vulnerable" (Barry et al., 2019, cited in HSE, 2022, p.13). Learners have also shared how they would benefit from increased openness around the discussion of mental health in their Education and Training Boards and would like to feel more comfortable in discussing their difficulties. Again, our research findings complement the FET Mental Health Framework's aim of creating "learning environments consistent with the promotion of positive mental health and wellbeing."

Adult education programmes matter when it comes to wellbeing, and the more challenging a person's circumstances, the bigger the potential impact. Participation in adult education itself demonstrably improves people's mental health and wellbeing, particularly when they are experiencing significant stressors. Our research shows that learners seeking asylum (those living in direct provision or in hotels), for example, reported a greater increase in their self-confidence, resilience, and general wellbeing as a direct result of taking their courses compared with the average. 43% of learners living in direct provision reported an increase in their wellbeing and health, compared with 27% across all groups. 39% of those living in direct provision reported an increase in a sense of belonging, compared with a 27% average, and 48% of learners living in direct provision reported an increase in resilience and an ability to cope with stressors, compared with a 23% average. People from marginalised backgrounds stand to benefit more from adult education, from an emotional point of view, than those from majority ethnic backgrounds. Bearing this in mind, site visits and the development of programmes tailored to the needs of learners living in direct provision and emergency accommodation would support higher enrolment of such learner cohorts and would contribute to improved mental health among these groups.

CONCLUSION

The recommended policy actions drawn from the research findings underscore the need for a comprehensive approach to supporting mental health and wellbeing among learners in Further Education and Training. Expanding access to appointments with counsellors has emerged as an important component in addressing learner mental health needs in the Further Education environment. Our qualitative and quantitative research highlights a demand for counselling services and illustrates the significant extent to which learners are experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression. The levels of emotional distress, as indicated by learners through the research, is evidently impacting their ability to learn and fully benefit from participation in FET. As such, the further integration of free or affordable counselling services into FET programmes, in alignment with the ETBI FET Mental Health Framework, is a recommended way to continually support learners' wellbeing.

Advocating for increased financial support, and specifically increased travel allowances for learners, is equally crucial. Our findings show that the financial burden of meeting transportation costs can hinder learners' ability to participate in their courses and can create significant worry, which negatively impacts their overall mental wellbeing. Enhanced travel support can foster increased social inclusion and improved access to education by facilitating those living in rural areas, those in poverty, and those at risk of social isolation, to take part in educational courses which, in turn, comprise strong social components and show demonstrable interpersonal benefits. The improved provision of affordable transport is therefore another step towards enhancing mental health outcomes for marginalised learners, and specifically those facing economic challenges.

Integrating mental health awareness education and self-care into curricula further aligns with ETBI's goal of nurturing learners' mental wellbeing through creating an atmosphere of awareness and support. Learners' self-reported desire for increased coping skills and wellness practices, such as mindfulness classes and art therapy, was, notably, the most popular learner recommendation for improved mental health. Examples of this kind of integration include the Women's Community Project Mullingar, which runs a yoga class for ESOL learners, and Threshold Recovery Training, which weaves mental health recovery into QQI-accredited programmes and workshops. These are but a few examples of the successful integration of mental health self-resourcing into Further and Community Education around the country.

Although learners frequently cite their tutors as invaluable sources of educational and emotional support, the continued raising of tutor awareness and openness around mental health difficulties will help to strengthen the already supportive learning environment for those in FET struggling with anxiety, depression, or stress. Creating spaces for open discussions and support-seeking within Education and Training Boards will be crucial in continuing to reduce stigma and in helping to ensure that learners feel valued and heard. Targeting marginalised groups, such as learners seeking asylum and those living in short-term accommodation, with tailored support, will help to mitigate the specific challenges they face, which may include; moving to a new country, having to reskill, having to learn a new language, and having to live in an unsuitable or crowded space. Additionally, learners seeking international protection or those with migrant status may enter the FET system with a

history of psychological trauma, which will undoubtedly have a bearing on their engagement with education. It is important, then, to recognise the unique experiences and needs of such learners, and also to acknowledge the immense personal value of taking part in education, which can often lead to the formation of crucial new relationships and social support networks for learners who have been displaced from or fled countries of origin. Our research findings have highlighted the profoundly positive impact of adult education for such learners.

Finally, it is intended that the recommended actions emerging from this research complement ETBI's FET Mental Health Framework and point to the need for a comprehensive approach to mental health that recognises the connections between Further Education, mental health, and overall wellbeing. By implementing these actions, FET can continue to build environments where learners' mental health is supported and prioritised, stigma is reduced, and access to support is readily accessible.

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