



The Voice of  
Adult Learning

# NATIONAL FET LEARNER FORUM ANNUAL SYNTHESIS REPORT 2021-2022

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Ríaltas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland

**SOLAS**  
learning works

# ABBREVIATIONS

**FET**

**QQI**

**AHEAD**

Further Education and Training

Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Association for Higher Education

Access & Disability

# CONTENTS

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<b>Abbreviations</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Organisations</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>A Year in Numbers</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>9</b>
Best Practice in Further Education and Training Boards	10
<b>Learner Recommendations</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Project Overview</b>	<b>26</b>
The National FET Learner Forum – Learner Voice Expansion in AONTAS and Beyond	31
FET Learners as Leaders Programme	33
<b>Detailed Results</b>	<b>38</b>
Areas Working Well	38
Areas For Improvement	45
<b>Survey Findings</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>79</b>
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

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## 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

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## Learners

We would like to thank all the learners who took part in the National FET Learner Forum in the academic year 2021-2022. It is your voice that is at the centre of this project. Each adult learner generously offered their time and shared their voice during a time of transition from remote to blended and in-person learning. Your feedback will further the aim of creating a more inclusive, improved and democratic FET sector in the future, and your participation in the “FET Learners as Leaders” programme paved the way for continued learner representation in Education and Training Boards. For this, we appreciate and thank you for your efforts.

## SOLAS

The National FET Learner Forum is funded by SOLAS. The Forum is born out of SOLAS’ commitment to listening to and responding to the needs of learners through a key action in the 2014-2019 FET strategy, and remains 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

Education and Training Boards across Ireland are vital partners in the Forum project. The events could not take place without Education and Training Boards recruiting and supporting learners to participate in the events that AONTAS hosts. Their openness to receiving the feedback from learners through these reports is also a cornerstone of the project. We would like to express our gratitude to the Education and Training Boards who collaborated on this project in the academic year 2021-2022. This partnership was crucial to the success of the Forum project. We thank you for your continued collaboration and your commitment to engaging with and actioning learner recommendations.

## The National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group

The National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group is a group of external stakeholders who provide invaluable cross-sectoral advice and consultation on the project. The group consists of two learner representatives and representatives from SOLAS, Education and Training Boards Ireland, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, the National Adult Literacy Agency, Quality and Qualifications Ireland, and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Without their guidance, the



project would not be able to successfully expand as much as it has over this academic year, particularly in relation to the return to in-person events and the development of the "FET Learners as Leaders" programme. For this, we extend our heartfelt thanks.

## **The National FET Learner Forum Academic Expert Group**

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

# A YEAR IN NUMBERS

## The National FET Learner Forum 2021-2022: A Year in Numbers



**3164**  
Learners overall



**10**  
Regional  
Reports



**7**  
In-Person  
Events



**6**  
Virtual Events



**10**  
Education and  
Training Boards



**58**  
Focus Groups



**2576**  
Survey Responses

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This report presents findings from ten regional events of the National FET Learner Forum held across eight Education and Training Boards between October 2021 and May 2022. These Education and Training Boards were: Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board, Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board, Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board, Cork Education and Training Board, Tipperary Education and Training Board, Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board, Louth and Meath Education and Training Board, Donegal Education and Training Board, Mayo, Sligo, and Leitrim Education and Training Board, and Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on in-person gatherings, the Forum consisted of virtual focus group events in the autumn and winter, before moving to in-person focus group events in the latter part of the Academic Year. We conducted paper and online learner surveys throughout the year. These events brought together a total of 3,164 learners from ten Education and Training Boards, with 2,576 survey responses.

The findings contained in this report reflect several key issues affecting FET learners in the aftermath of COVID-19 and the return to in-person and classroom-based learning. We were particularly interested in capturing the experiences of learners from marginalised or vulnerable demographics who face additional barriers to education. These include migrants and refugees, and those living in direct provision, persons with disabilities, lone-parents, and members of the Traveller community. The report illustrates some of the key problems facing these demographics as they pursue education, as well as some of the benefits of Further Education and Training for these groups.

## Best Practice in Further Education and Training Boards

In this section, the report showcases examples of best practice. During the 2021-2022 academic year, learners spoke about many different areas that are working well. AONTAS has taken this opportunity to share some of these examples and congratulate the Education and Training Boards for this provision.

### Tipperary Education and Training Board - Mental Health Access

- Learners praised staff for visiting classrooms every week advertising the mental health supports available to all learners at Tipperary Education and Training Board. Learners appreciated the fact that they did not have to search for a counsellor themselves. This process of searching in itself is a barrier for marginalised people accessing support who may distrust services (Parsell et al., 2019). As one Tipperary Education and Training Board learner shared:
- “Our course coordinator is always coming around to our class reminding us of the mental health supports, that the guidance counsellor is there for us. It’s really really good.”

### Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board - Additional Supports

- Learners spoke highly of the additional learning supports they received from Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board, in particular in the subjects of literacy, numeracy and

digital literacy. Learners were grateful for the role staff and tutors played in identifying their need for additional supports. One learner in Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board explained:

- “I was showing signs of dyslexia. They showed me how to read the words and gave me support. Now I know, which is good because I was bullied in school for it.”

Another learner echoed this, stating:

- “I have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; I had trouble reading and writing and then I went to (their centre) and they taught me a lot with that. They sent me to different kinds of one-to-one classes and helped me with writing out sentences and all that.”
- This personalised system of supports was appreciated by learners, who found it helped them to engage with content and build knowledge of their courses.

### Donegal Education and Training Board - Guidance Counselling Access

- Learners spoke of the benefits of to the approach taken by the guidance counsellor in Donegal Education and Training Board. The guidance counsellor goes to each classroom highlighting their service and inviting learners to talk about what their needs are. As one Donegal Education and Training Board learner shared:

- “You can talk to the guidance counsellor about anything. He comes to get you and talk to you one-on-one. He is laid back about it also, though. He's not too up in your face. Sometimes people say they don't want to talk to him and that is fine too.”

## Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board - Advice on Progression Options

- Learners said that they were advised on career paths, other FET courses, and third-level education courses as part of their progression plans. The guidance service helped them understand which courses suited their skills and interests and where they could apply to next. This was seen as more practical and individualised than at post-primary, as one learner shared:
- “I found that when I said my interests, they pointed me towards different options that were good for me. In school I had my three subjects that I was good at and they put me on a programme that wasn't good for me because they needed to fill the numbers. Whereas Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board said 'oh, you're interested in this? Here's how to go and do it.'”
- One Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board learner also shared how easy it was to access information on their progression options:
- “I didn't even have to ask. Literally my tutor came up to me and said, 'there's this course starting at the end of the month. You may want to sign up for it.'”

- The visibility and strength of the adult guidance services was seen as highly beneficial to learners in their planning.

## Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board – Tutors

- Learners felt that tutors went above and beyond to support them throughout the year, particularly as they transitioned from remote to in-class learning. Learners felt that their tutors were supportive and as available as possible during remote learning and the transition back to in-person learning. One learner described their tutor as “really supportive,” while another learner felt that “tutors were generally well-organised.” Learners said that their tutors had helped to set them up for success, with one Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board learner explaining:
- “We have excellent tutors; they answer every question and give us the emotional support we need to excel.”
- Learners from Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board praised their tutors for their commitment, supportive nature, strong teaching skills, and availability.

**“I was able to  
have my voice  
heard and felt  
understood”**



# LEARNER RECOMMENDATIONS



This **Annual Synthesis Report** is a collection of data (i.e. learner voice) from individual Education and Training Boards across Ireland

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



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

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



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



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

As described in the graphic on the previous page, in order to convey the breadth of learner experiences, the recommendations have been broken down into areas working well and areas for improvement and are displayed in the order of the frequency with which they appear in the reports. The maximum possible frequency for each recommendation is ten, as there are ten regional reports for each Education and Training Board where regional events took place over the course of the year. It is important to note that a frequency of '10' does not mean that a topic was raised by ten learners, or that it emerged in discussions ten times. Rather, it means that the topic emerged as a recommendation in each of the ten reports that we produced this year. The topic of tutors, for example, was raised as a positive aspect of FET learning by learners such that it appeared in eight out of the ten reports we produced in the Academic Year 2021–2022. This

approach is also supported by grounded theory and thematic coding in the analysis stage, whereby the frequency at which a topic arises in a focus group directs how the researchers group and direct their analysis (Lawrence and Tar, 2013).

Throughout the seven years of the Forum project, AONTAS has seen marked improvements by Education and Training Boards based on recommendations from learners. This was clearly illustrated during the period of remote learning, where learners praised Education and Training Boards, tutors, extra supports, device access, and communication, among other areas, as vital to the continuation of their courses. While the below "Areas for Improvement" include topics in which many Education and Training Boards have made significant improvements, their reporting and frequency are important to show a comparative and nationwide picture of FET provision.

AREAS WORKING WELL		
TOPIC	FREQUENCY	Learner Feedback
<b>Tutors</b>	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Learners found tutors attentive and patient</li> </ul>
<b>In-Person Learning</b>	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Learners felt that being back in the classroom was better for their learning and the social aspect of their courses</li> </ul>
<b>Mental Health Supports</b>	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Learners appreciated the mental health support they received from their Education and Training Boards</li> </ul>
<b>Digital Skills</b>	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Learners appreciated the digital skills they gained through taking their courses</li> </ul>
<b>Wider Benefits</b>	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Learners cited the wider benefits of FET, including making new friends and building confidence</li> </ul>

AREAS WORKING WELL		
TOPIC	FREQUENCY	Learner Feedback
<b>Blended Learning</b>	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners felt that blended learning worked well and appreciated the flexibility that it allows</li> </ul>
<b>Device Access</b>	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners were appreciative of the support in accessing digital devices they receive from their Education and Training Boards</li> </ul>
<b>Peer Learning</b>	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners found peer learning to be an essential part of their learning experience</li> </ul>
<b>Guidance and Progression</b>	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners were overall clear on their progression options and felt supported by their Education and Training Boards to progress to further education or employment</li> </ul>
<b>Health and Safety Measures</b>	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners were satisfied with the Health and Safety Measures taken by their Education and Training Board</li> </ul>
<b>English Language</b>	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners, particularly those at levels 1-3, appreciated the English language skills they developed through taking their course</li> </ul>
<b>New Skills</b>	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners enjoyed the new skills they had developed as a result of taking their courses, including digital skills, public speaking, studying, and increased confidence</li> </ul>
<b>Online Learning</b>	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners enjoyed the benefits of online learning, including flexibility and reduced travel expenditure</li> </ul>

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT			
TOPIC	FREQ.	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
<b>Transport</b>	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners experienced challenges with the cost and availability of transport to their centres</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Take transport difficulties into account, particularly on courses where penalties apply for lateness or non-attendance</li> <li>- Consider a scoping exercise to identify transport needs and costs for learners in Education and Training Boards</li> <li>- Consider transport options, such as supplying bus services for learners, particularly for areas where bus services are unreliable</li> </ul>
<b>Communication</b>	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners would like to be informed if they have been accepted onto their course or if there are any changes to their class schedule in an accessible and timely manner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increase the lead-in time for communicating information about course acceptance and course changes</li> </ul>
<b>Progression</b>	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners would like more precise information on educational and employment options after completing their courses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide further information on learner career and education progression from the beginning of the year</li> <li>- Request guidance counsellors give an overview of options for all learners on a programme-by-programme basis</li> <li>- Dedicate one class per semester to discussing progression options and specific learning outcomes</li> </ul>

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT			
TOPIC	FREQ.	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
<b>Work Experience</b>	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners want clear information on their work placements, including possible employers who will accept them for work placement</li> <li>- Learners asked for more practical emphasis in their courses to prepare them for work placements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide further options for work experience in courses and start this from induction</li> <li>- Link with local enterprises to broaden work experience options</li> <li>- Implement a support process for learners experiencing difficulty finding a work placement</li> </ul>
<b>Advertisement</b>	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners would like courses to be better advertised so that more potential learners have the opportunity to take a course</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Invest in varied advertisements, such as print and digital, to showcase the courses on offer</li> </ul>
<b>Course Scheduling</b>	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners felt that unsuitable or clashing class times impacted on other prospective learners deciding to register for a course. Learners also experienced fatigue from spending long hours in front of a screen</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Revise online course schedules to avoid long hours in front of a screen, where possible</li> <li>- Implement regular breaks for online courses to avoid learner fatigue</li> <li>- Review timing of courses with a view to increasing participation, particularly for learners with children or other caring responsibilities</li> </ul>

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT			
TOPIC	FREQ.	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
<b>Learning Environment</b>	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners would like changes to the physical learning spaces of the centres and the culture of learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Expand learning hubs, libraries and classroom study spaces for learners</li> <li>- Offer flexibility around hybrid or blended learning</li> <li>- Offer opportunities for learners to develop digital skills and self-directed learning</li> <li>- Offer support in the form of device loans to learners where possible</li> </ul>
<b>WiFi</b>	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- WiFi was a barrier for learners, both at home and in centres</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Implement a review of WiFi services in FET centres</li> <li>- Engage with HEAnet and utilise the ETB centre as a WiFi hotspot</li> </ul>
<b>Facilities</b>	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners would like centre facilities including bathrooms, canteens, and storage spaces to be updated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Invest and undertake a review of the physical learning centres to implement learner recommendations including those about bathrooms, canteens, storage, ventilation and disability access</li> <li>- Utilise the regional recommendations for capital investment support from SOLAS or The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science</li> </ul>

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT			
TOPIC	FREQ.	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
<b>Information on Supports Available</b>	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners would like more information on financial and mental health supports</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide learners with information on the supports available to them at the start of the Academic Year</li> <li>- Ensure consistent promotion through channels including a dedicated website page, a notice board within each centre and a support component of the induction process for each programme</li> </ul>
<b>Mental Health</b>	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners asked for greater access to dedicated mental health supports such as counsellors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Request funding for additional mental health counsellors in order to meet demand</li> <li>- Ensure that there are designated mental health support staff outside of their tutors to support learners with mental health difficulties</li> </ul>
<b>Additional Supports</b>	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners expressed some confusion around the supports available to them and which staff members to approach with regards to availing of supports</li> <li>- Learners would like clarity on how to access supports, such as mental health and disability supports</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increased provision and visibility of additional supports such as financial support and learning support</li> <li>- Provide information on support staff and their duties to learners through the website and a student noticeboard</li> </ul>

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT			
TOPIC	FREQ.	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
<b>Apprenticeship Placements</b>	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners on apprenticeship courses would like to be assigned to locations that are more convenient in terms of hours spent travelling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Review assignment process for apprenticeship course placements so that learners can attend placements closer to their homes</li> <li>- Request additional funding to cover costs for transport to ensure engagement and completion of courses</li> </ul>
<b>Class Hours</b>	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners asked for more class hours in their courses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Review course schedule with a view to providing more classes to meet learner demand, particularly for those learning English as a Second Language</li> <li>- Provide more options for evening and part-time courses, particularly for level 4 courses</li> </ul>
<b>Course Content</b>	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners found some of the content of their courses to be outdated or lacking relevant information</li> <li>- Learners asked for increased choice of modules on their courses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Request a module review to ensure information is relevant and interesting for learners</li> <li>- Include learners as part of any new consultation processes</li> </ul>

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT			
TOPIC	FREQ.	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
Digital Skills	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners benefitted from the crucial digital skills support they received during remote learning and would like this support to continue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Continue to offer more training in digital learning platforms for learners, including non-accredited workshops</li> </ul>
English as Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Learners	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners asked for additional English language support alongside their courses</li> <li>- These learners would also like their learning environment to be welcoming and inclusive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Be mindful of the challenges faced by learners who speak English as an additional language, including translating for their fellow language speakers</li> <li>- Consider workshops on inclusion and inclusive methodology to foster a more inclusive environment</li> <li>- Provide ESOL learners with information on additional courses or online activities to support their learning engagement</li> </ul>
Feedback	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners were unsure of where to give feedback to their Education and Training Board on their learning experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide learners with more information on the formal feedback structures in place in their Education and Training Boards</li> <li>- Consider standardising feedback mechanisms across FET provision</li> </ul>

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT			
TOPIC	FREQ.	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
<b>Financial Support</b>	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners suggested revisions to the financial support they receive</li> <li>- Learners found unforeseen costs of their course a challenge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Undertake cost analysis of courses and request additional costs for learners within ETB budget</li> <li>- Establish regional working groups to monitor the cost of living</li> </ul>
<b>Learning Community</b>	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners found it harder to feel part of a learning community as a result of remote and blended learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consider formal structures to help learners stay connected, such as learner voice groups, WhatsApp groups, and Zoom meet-ups</li> <li>- Consider implementing group learning activities into course pedagogy, such as project work, to give learners the opportunity to engage with and learn from peers</li> </ul>
<b>Learner Materials</b>	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners, particularly those at levels 4 and 5, found that the briefs they receive are often unclear, and are not supplied in reasonable time to complete their assignments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Review learning materials, such as briefs and module descriptors, at the start of the year, and ensure these materials are clear and accessible</li> <li>- Implement guidelines on when learners should receive briefs based on assignment deadlines</li> </ul>

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT			
TOPIC	FREQ.	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
<b>Learning Support</b>	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners, particularly those with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Dyslexia, expressed difficulties accessing learning support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Engage with learners with ADHD, dyslexia, and other learning disabilities to ensure they receive sufficient support to help them complete their assignments</li> <li>- Engage with the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) and other services to identify suitable supports</li> <li>- Include learning needs analysis as part of initial induction for learners</li> </ul>
<b>Negative Perception of FET</b>	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners would like greater promotion of FET at post-primary school level</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Invest in greater promotion of FET courses at post-primary school level</li> <li>- Develop a regional campaign strategy including school visits, promotional materials, social media and local media advertisements</li> <li>- Utilise learner voice to represent the positive impact and experience of FET</li> </ul>

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT			
TOPIC	FREQ.	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
<b>Professional Development</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Help ensure tutors are up-to-date on digital learning platforms such as Zoom, Teams, and Moodle</li> <li>- Learners expressed concern that tutors took on too much responsibility for supporting learner mental health</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Offer ongoing professional development opportunities to staff to ensure tutors are up-to-date on digital learning platforms</li> <li>- Invest in tutor wellbeing as well as learner wellbeing</li> <li>- Ask tutors and staff for their feedback on this issue and their recommendations for improving staff and learner support</li> </ul>

**“I enjoyed the ability  
to speak freely  
about my time in  
further education”**

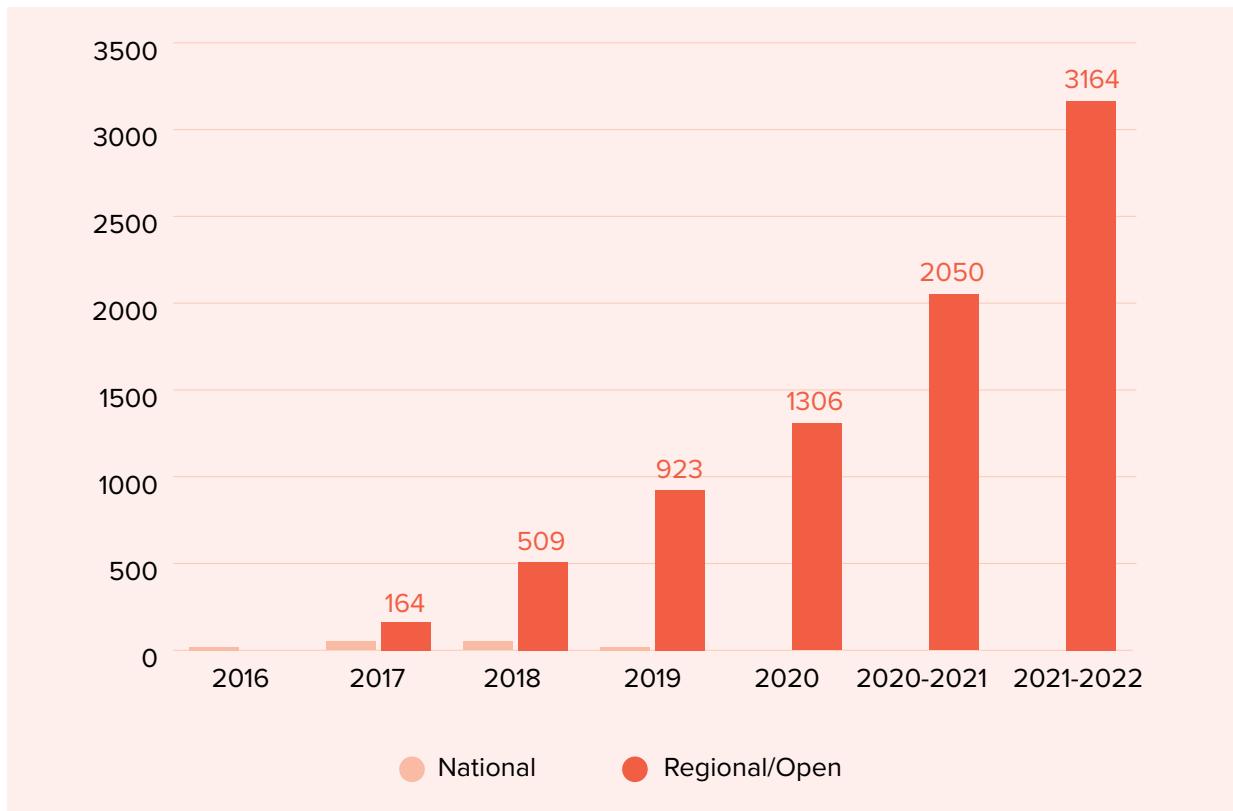


# PROJECT OVERVIEW

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 by developing reports based on learners' feedback and recommendations. This project is funded by SOLAS, the National Further Education and Training authority, and was devised in line with the commitment of the SOLAS 2014-2019 FET strategy to "[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 and its position as a national advocacy organisation, AONTAS was commissioned to deliver this project, and has done so since the Forum's inception in 2016.

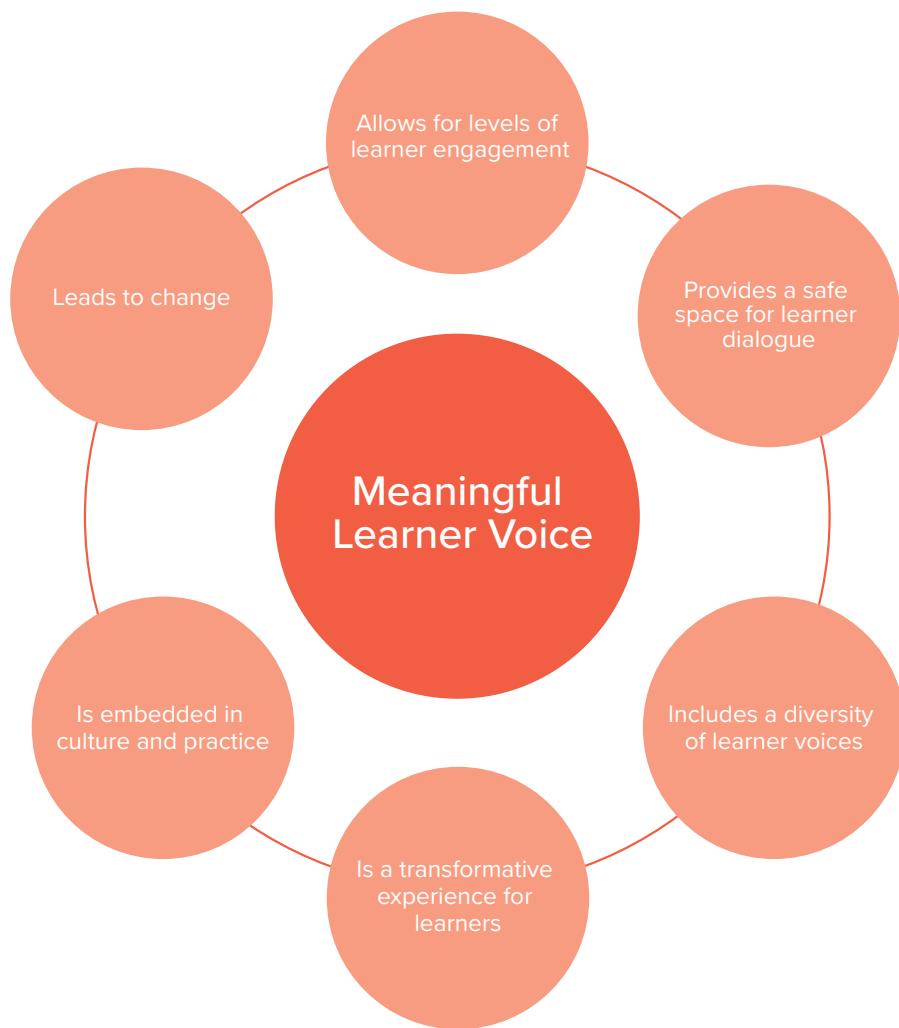


*Figure 1: National FET Learner Forum participation*

Figure 1 shows overall project growth since the project's beginning. The National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum began in 2016 as a qualitative project and a one-day national event representing 70 learners from different Education and Training Boards. It has since developed into a mixed-methods, regionally-focused project, which holds Education and Training Board-specific regional events each year.

Within AONTAS, this project is led by a team of qualified researchers with experience in mixed-methods research and primary data collection. The project is underpinned by emancipatory learner voice theory and the core belief that

learners are best placed to recommend improvements to their educational experience. The growth of the Forum is supported and guided by the Forum Advisory Group and Academic Expert Group. Each group meets four times a year, on average. The members of each group are relevant stakeholders and experts in adult learning and learner voice, including representatives from SOLAS, Education and Training Boards, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science, educators, and academics. A complete list of the members of each group can be found in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2.



In response to the COVID-19 restrictions, in September 2020 the Forum moved online, with virtual focus group discussions and an online learner survey. In March 2022, the Forum returned to in-person focus group events. This report builds on AONTAS' previous collaborative research with Education and Training Boards, which includes learner experiences in FET from 2016–2020 and research on the impact of COVID-19 on FET Learners. In 2020, AONTAS published the COVID-19 Further Education and Training Learner Report (Dowdall, Farren and Lovejoy, 2020). After this, to capture a full academic year of learning during COVID-19 restrictions, the Forum moved from a calendar-year model to an academic-year model in September 2020. 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 year of 2021–2022 captures the numbers from the Academic Year 2021–2022, with events spanning October 2021 and May 2022.

AONTAS and SOLAS work collaboratively on the high-level planning of this project. The delivery of this project is conducted in partnership with Education and Training Boards. They promote the events in their regions, recruit learners for each event and support their participation. Often, a representative from the Education and Training Board also opens the Forum event. AONTAS takes responsibility for the regional-level reporting of this project, through developing a report after each regional event and sending it to the relevant Education and Training Board. An Annual Synthesis Report and a Learner Report are also developed each year by AONTAS, with input and support from SOLAS. AONTAS hosted seven regional events and six virtual events in partnership with ten Education and Training Boards between October 2021

and May 2022. These were:

- Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board, 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> October 2021
- Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2021
- Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board, 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> February 2022
- Cork Education and Training Board, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2022
- Tipperary Education and Training Board, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2022
- Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board, 5<sup>th</sup> April 2022
- Louth and Meath Education and Training Board, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2022
- Donegal Education and Training Board, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2022
- Mayo, Sligo, and Leitrim Education and Training Board, 28<sup>th</sup> April 2022
- Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board, 5<sup>th</sup> May 2022.

The Forum reached a total of 3,164 learners over the course of the academic year October 2021–May 2022, with 588 focus group participants and 2,576 survey responses. This report represents a synthesis of findings from across all regional events this academic year.

The reports from the regional events have been shared with Education and Training Boards, SOLAS, and other relevant bodies, such as the Department of Further and Higher Education,

Research, Innovation and Science, and Quality and Qualifications Ireland. At each event, there was an average of ten learners per focus group and an average of 257 responses for a learner survey

per participating Education and Training Board. The total learner participation per participating Education and Training Board can be found in Figure 2.



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

The Forum aims to include a broad and diverse cohort of learners to ensure that a wide range of views are documented and that a multitude of learner experiences are considered in future policy planning. Education and Training Boards made efforts to recruit a representative cross-section of learners from a broad range of programmes and levels. Figure 3 presents the total number of learners

per programme. The most frequent programme represented was Post-Leaving Certificate (346), followed by the Back to Education Initiative (269) and then by Skills to Advance (182). Learners came from all of the different levels of courses, with the most common being Level 5 (1018).



Figure 3: Learner representation by programme or course

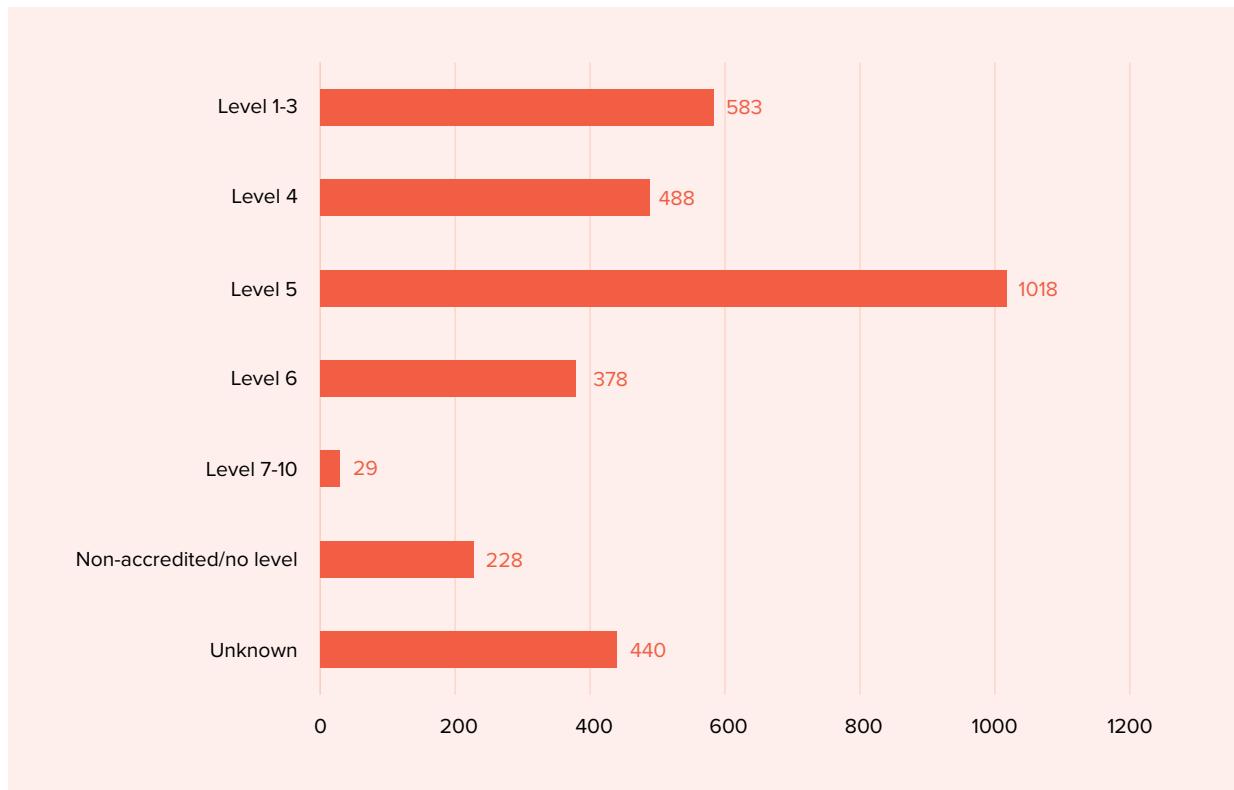


Figure 4: Learner representation by course level

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

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

### Learner Voice

#### The National FET Learner Forum Learner Newsletter

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

#### Learner Stories

Learner stories from those who have taken part in the Forum are also shared on the AONTAS website, to promote the benefits of adult learning to potential learners and to promote the great work

of Education and Training Boards and other membership organisations. The 'I'm a FET Learner' booklet, a compilation of testimonies from learners for whom the Forum was a jumping off point for more public speaking and representative opportunities, was also published in 2020.

#### Learner Voice in Advocacy Submissions and Campaigns

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

#### Lifelong Learning Research

In acknowledgement of the decrease in online FET participation among certain cohorts, AONTAS is undertaking a mixed-methods research piece on those not engaging in learning during COVID-19. This project is designed to propose clear, evidence-informed recommendations at an institutional and national level to mitigate the ongoing issue of the exacerbation of educational disadvantage arising from COVID-19 across the tertiary education system, specifically for marginalised learners.

## Capacity Building

### FET Learners as Leaders Programme

Please see the below section on the FET Learners as Leaders programme.

### Learners Speaking at National Events

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

### Learners in Representative Structures

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

### Learners as Facilitators

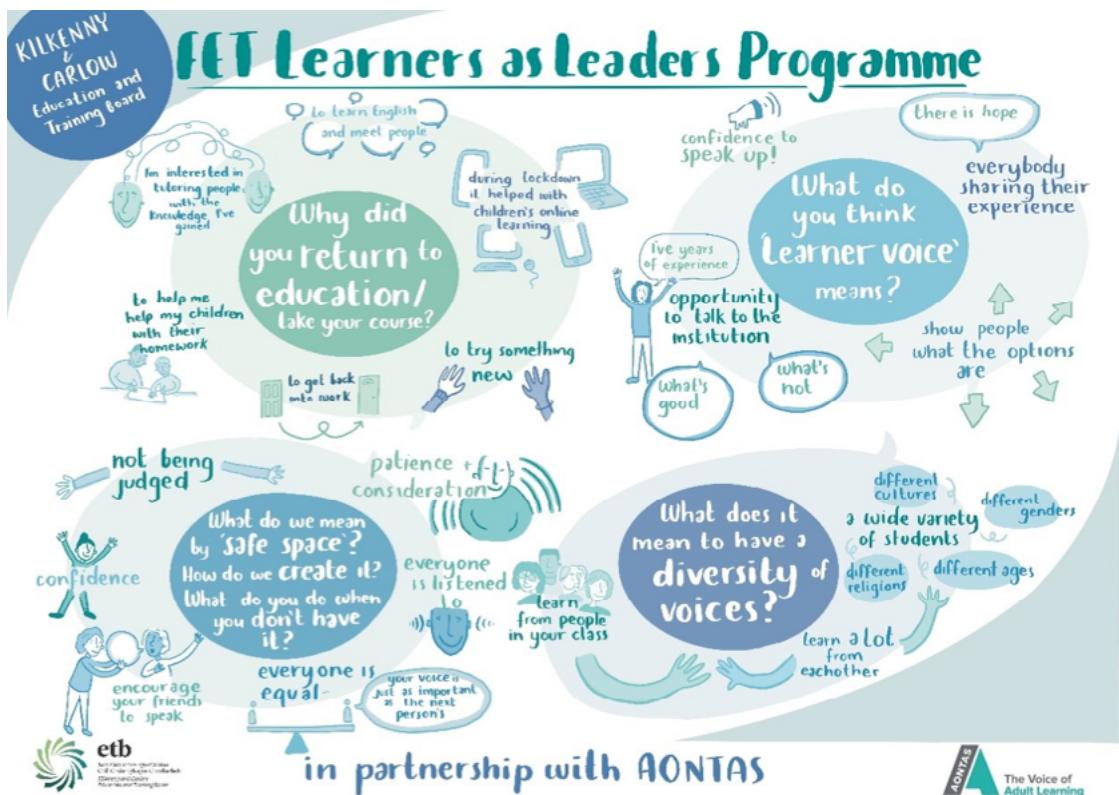
One of the final goals of the Forum is for AONTAS to offer professional opportunities for learners to be involved in the project. In 2021, AONTAS developed “Learners as Facilitators”, a programme for learners to become trained, paid facilitators at Forum events. Through the project, learners are working as freelance facilitators at Forum events, strengthening the authentic, learner-led aims of the project.

Those interested in the above opportunities can email [forum@aontas.com](mailto:forum@aontas.com) for more information

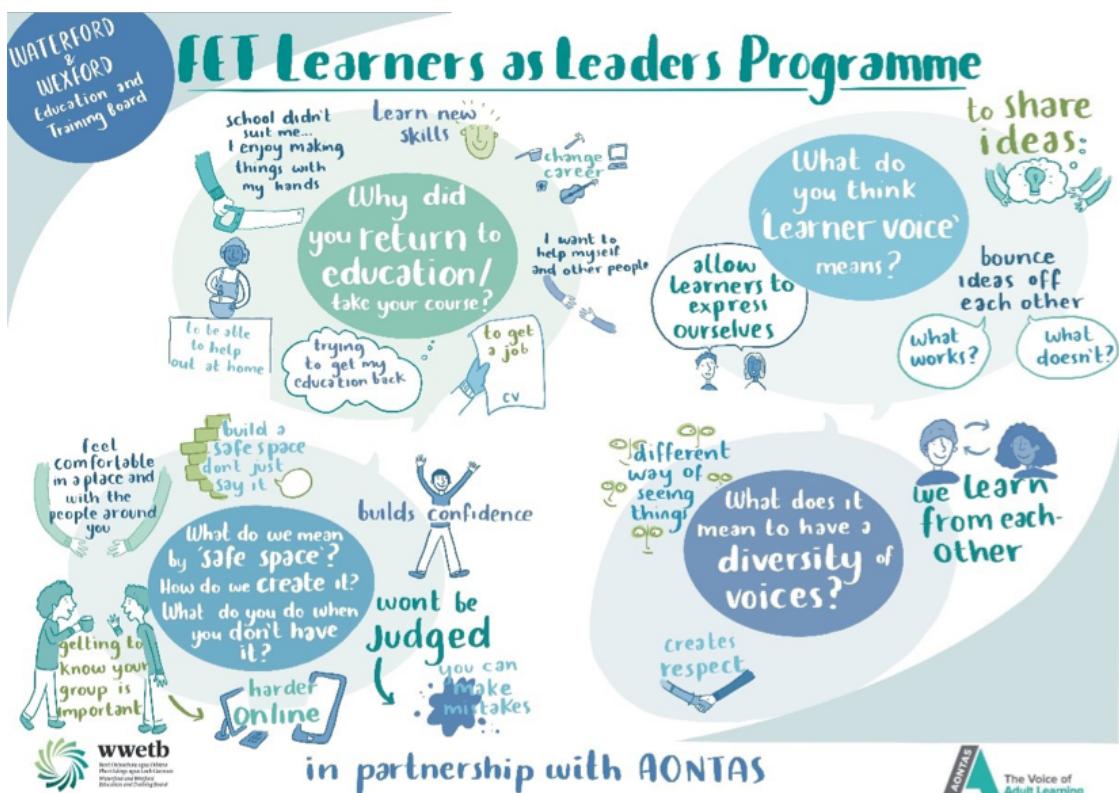
## **FET Learners as Leaders Programme**

A further 217 learners reached through the Forum this year took part in the first full academic year of the Further Education and Training (FET) Learners as Leaders programme. The programme is a collaborative project delivered by AONTAS in partnership with Education and Training Boards. The programme was developed to support learners with the learner panel component of the Inaugural Review of Quality Assurance in Education and Training Boards undertaken by Quality and Qualifications Ireland.

The content is designed to empower learners to become learner voice advocates and participate in leadership roles within their Education and Training Board, by building their capacity in advocacy, representation, public speaking and team work, in order to become empowered self-advocates. During the two sessions, AONTAS led presentations, group discussions and role-playing exercises. Representatives from each Education and Training Board also delivered two information sessions on learner voice at their respective Education and Training Board events and they outlined how they prepared for their Inaugural Review.



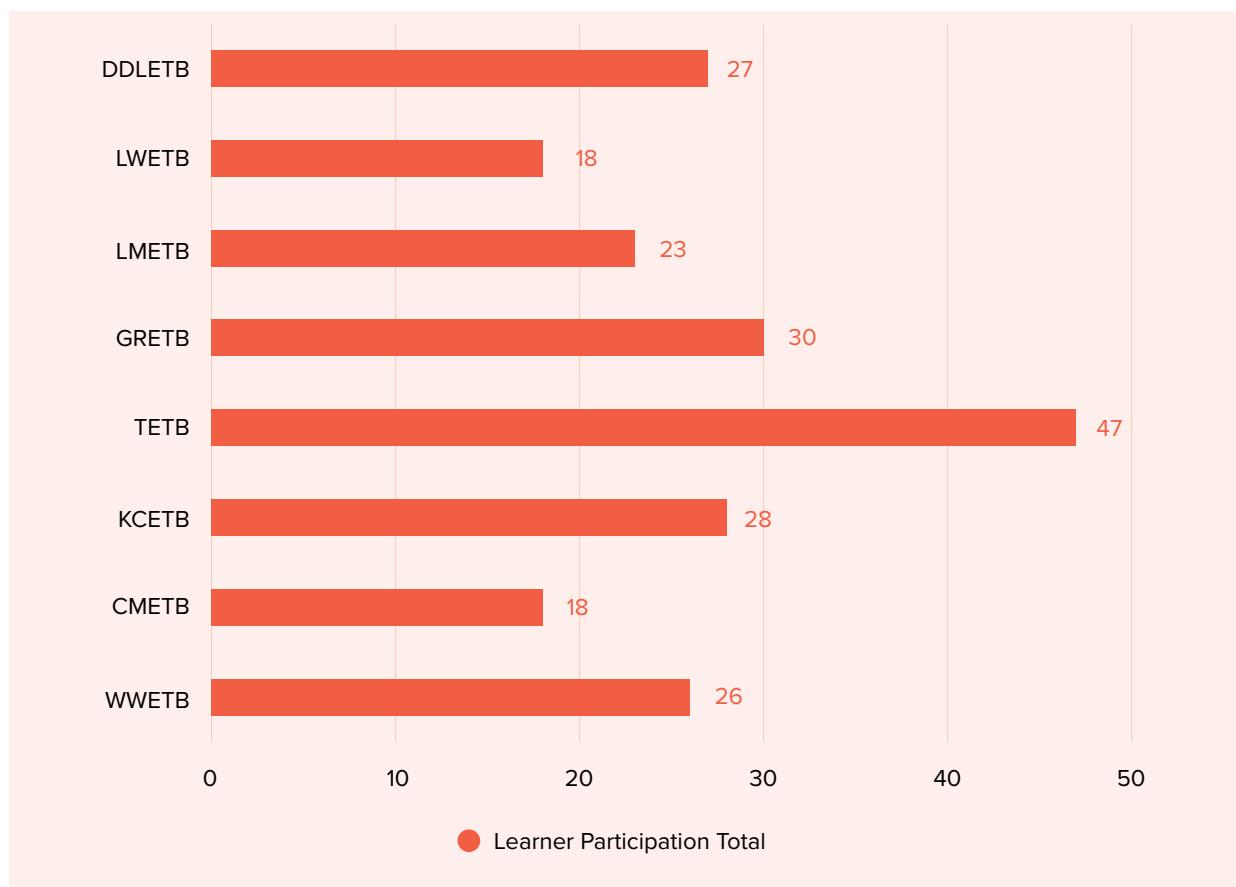
Graphic Harvest representing discussion of learner voice with Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board, 15th October 2021



Graphic Harvest representing discussion of learner voice with Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board, 15th October 2021

The programme began in April 2021, with sessions collaborating with Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education Training Board, and Cork Education and Training Board. This academic year, AONTAS partnered with eight Education and Training Boards to deliver the programme to 217 FET learners across levels 1-3, levels 4-6, learners in apprenticeship or employment-based courses, and learners in representative positions:

- Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board, 11<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> October 2021
- Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board, 15<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> October 2021
- Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board, 19<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2021
- Tipperary Education and Training Board, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> January 2022
- Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board, 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> February 2022
- Louth and Meath Education and Training Board, 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> February 2022
- Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board, 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> March 2022
- Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board, 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> April 2022.



*Figure 5: Learner representation by Education and Training Board*

This year, AONTAS will expand the project as part of the National FET Learner Forum, and continue to partner with Education and Training Boards to create and expand meaningful learner voice representative structures. We aim to reach more learners than ever in the 2022-2023 academic year, and support FET learners in engaging with and advocating for solutions to the issues facing them and their fellow learners.

**“I enjoyed meeting new people and telling them what my difficulties are was easy, and listening to other people’s stories really helped me”**



# DETAILED RESULTS

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

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

## Areas Working Well

Learners across all levels praised their **tutors (8)** for being available and supportive to them during their courses. In particular, learners cited the atmosphere of respect generated by tutors, patience, and the availability of tailored, one-on-one support as reasons for their satisfaction with their tutors. Tutors’ willingness to go “above and beyond” to help learners made learning much more accessible and enjoyable. As one learner shared, “We have excellent tutors; they answer every question and give us the emotional

support we need to excel.” Another learner supported this, stating:

*“On a personal level if I struggle with something in there I can go to my tutor and tell them what aspect of the course I’m struggling with and they will always straight away help me sort something out.”*

This sentiment was echoed by other learners from a range of courses and levels, with one learner remarking, “I was terrified of attending the courses, but with the help and support of my teacher, I’m starting to enjoy it, and surprised myself.” Overall, learners felt that tutors have been key to their success in their courses. They would like their tutors to be provided with the necessary resources and professional development opportunities to continue to support learners.

Many learners enjoyed the return to **in-person learning (7)** for a variety of reasons. Learners shared how they felt the return to in-person learning facilitated improved learning opportunities through increased access to their tutors and peer learning, the ability to avail of tailored and individual learning support, and the wider benefits of FET, including meeting new people and making friends. One learner explained how being back in the classroom facilitated the social aspect of learning as well as suiting their learning

style better, stating, “I learn more in class than online, and in class you can have the craic with the teachers and with the other students.” Learners taking practical courses agreed that learning in person was better for them, with one learner sharing that:

***“It was helpful to start online, but when we finally went to the actual centre I enjoyed it more than I expected to. Having more hands-on experience and communicating in person is rather important in the industry.”***

For some learners, being in person meant that they were more likely to reach out to their tutors for support. As one learner explained, “Meeting up face-to-face lets you iron things out and address stuff that maybe you didn’t have the confidence to ask in the (online) class.” In-person learning also supported the maintenance of routine for learners for whom this was important, with one learner noting, “I much prefer going into class cause there’s more of a routine. If restrictions came back, it would be really hard.” Learners felt that in-person learning facilitated many of the positive aspects of learning, including social connections, routine, and learning support.

Learners who had availed of the **mental health supports (7)** on offer through their Education and Training Boards praised these services. Learners referred to both formal supports such as counselling services, and the atmosphere of support and acceptance around mental health difficulties among Education and Training Board staff. Learners shared how they felt that there was an atmosphere of openness around mental health difficulties, with one learner sharing:

***“I know you can talk one-to-one with our coordinator if you’re experiencing any kind of issue. You can speak with each other and try and work around it. Our course coordinator is very much open-minded on that side of things.”***

Other learners echoed this, with one stating, “We have counsellors that come in twice per week for anyone who wants one-to-one therapy. Our centre is really mental-health oriented.” Many learners felt that their Education and Training Boards were proactive in reaching out to them and offering support with mental health. One learner gave an example:

***"We have a girl in our class who is getting a support plan put in place for her because she has been struggling and not been attending that much – that's through the student support system – and then we have a class WhatsApp group and we can support her through that – even telling her that we are all struggling too."***

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

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

Learners have clearly benefited from these mental health supports and would like them to continue. However, as the Areas for Improvement section of this report will show, many learners were unaware of the mental health supports available to them and need more signposting in order to benefit from these supports. There is a disparity of service

provision and clear information between regions, an issue that learners would like to see rectified.

Across different levels, learners repeatedly shared how they were pleased with the new **digital skills (6)** they had developed through taking their courses and with the support they received from their Education and Training Boards in building these skills. Learners shared how the digital skills development necessitated by the move to remote and blended learning will benefit them in other areas of their lives. As one learner remarked, "What I have learned from September to Christmas has given me computer skills that I didn't even know I had." Another learner explained, "I can help grandchildren with homework, Facetime, and Snapchat with those abroad." Learners also felt that the training they received in digital skills was effective. One learner shared, "We were all set up on Teams. We were shown how to get in, get out, how to share screens, the basics. That is imperative." Another learner agreed, stating:

***"I really benefitted from being set up on Teams by the tutor. It was seamless. I wouldn't have managed any other way. I was really grateful for that."***

Overall, learners are pleased with the new transferable digital skills they have developed and the support they have received in developing these skills. Learners would like more opportunities to improve their digital skills and to see digital skills training continue as part of future courses.

Many learners brought up the **wider benefits (6)** of FET in focus group discussions. Learners cited reasons other than obtaining a qualification or employment for taking their courses. These wider benefits, which included increased confidence, routine, and making new friends, added significantly to learners' enjoyment of their courses and, in some cases, were the primary reasons for taking a course. As one learner explained, "My course makes me feel like I am contributing to society – it gives me something more meaningful to do with my time." Another learner echoed this, stating, "I was applying for jobs and not getting anywhere, so being on a course gave me a sense of purpose and allowed me to try out something different." Learners across different courses and levels shared how their FET courses had helped them to build their confidence, with one learner explaining:

*"It gives you a sense of confidence and belief in yourself really. I think everyone has skills out there they don't realise they can do."*

Another learner stated, "My self-confidence improved, and my interpersonal skills really improved." Learners would like Education and Training Boards to be aware that there are many reasons for taking a FET course and many benefits of FET, and these include social and psychological reasons in addition to upskilling and employability. They felt these intangible benefits should be promoted to potential FET learners.

Although learners enjoyed the return to in-person learning, many learners also benefitted from **blended learning (5)**, citing its flexibility as a key reason it suited their learning. Learners felt that blended learning worked best, with learners having the option of attending a combination of in-person and online learning. As one learner stated, "I like both types of learning – I like being at home and going in and would like if this continued." For learners with childcare or other home responsibilities, blended learning was a particularly attractive option. One learner explained:

*"Blended learning should be brought in, even outside of COVID-19; some people have to care for people at home, they might have poor mental health, they might only have one class in the day and shouldn't have to travel to class. The list of good reasons is endless."*

Another learner stated, "I liked doing one day in class and one day at home because, you got set up in the class, and then you could use the time you gained at home to work." Overall, learners across all levels and courses felt that blended learning is successful and would like the option to continue for those who wished to avail of it.

**Device access (5)** was raised by learners as a positive aspect of learning with their Education and Training Boards. A laptop loan scheme was availed of by many learners who reported its success and

efficiency. For some learners, accessing a laptop for free through their Education and Training Board made the difference between them continuing their course or dropping out. As one learner explained:

*"I love that they gave us a laptop. I would not have been able to do it without the laptop. I have four children and they are all in school and need to use computers and my wife is doing a course. If I did not get the laptop it would [have] been very difficult."*

Other learners agreed with this, with one learner remarking, "I was provided with a laptop. Having that was brilliant – I would not have been able to do the course without it." Another learner echoed this, stating, "Last year because we went totally online I had a laptop from the school on loan, we didn't have a computer in the house so I wouldn't have been able to do it." Learners felt that the laptop loan scheme was highly successful and would like to see this kind of device access service continue into the return of in-person learning.

Learners shared how **peer learning (3)** was a crucial aspect of their engagement with their courses. Learners explained how they formed supportive learning networks with their peers and found their peers an invaluable source of learning and support throughout their courses. One learner shared how they had benefitted from "the help of your classmates - bouncing ideas off each other, asking questions." Another

learner agreed, stating, "You get so many different ideas from people. You're inspiring each other to do different things in different ways." This was true for learners across different levels and courses. Learners felt that the return to in-person learning facilitated greater opportunities for peer connection and learning. As one learner remarked:

*"It was a lot easier to collaborate with other students. Because we are art students we work together on a lot of stuff. [Being in person] made it a lot easier."*

This sentiment was echoed by another learner, who explained, "I much prefer the in-class learning experience. It allows for better interactive opportunities with other students." Learners greatly value peer learning and would like their Education and Training Boards to recognise and facilitate this moving forward. They would like classroom pedagogies to incorporate peer learning opportunities such as group learning into learning plans.

Learners who had availed of the **guidance and progression (2)** support services on offer through their Education and Training Board reported positive experiences with these services. The Adult Guidance Service was praised by those learners who had accessed it. One learner shared their experience with the Adult Guidance Service in their centre:

***"I had a nice experience with the career guidance officer. I heard it mentioned that this service was available and emailed them and made an appointment. I sent my CV in advance and at the session I got advice about what to highlight and things that I had forgotten to include."***

Another learner shared how the atmosphere in their centre was a welcome departure from post-primary school, and explained how the Adult Guidance Service helped them to plan their next educational steps:

***"I found that when I said my interests, they pointed me towards different options that were good for me. In school I had my three subjects that I was good at and they put me on a programme that wasn't good for me because they needed to fill the numbers. Whereas [my] Education and Training Board said, 'oh, you're interested in this? Here's how to go and do it."***

Learners also praised the Adult Guidance Service for the atmosphere of openness and flexibility. As one learner remarked:

***"You can talk to the guidance counsellor about anything. He comes to get you and talk to you one-on-one. He is laid back about it also, though. He's not too up in your face. Sometimes people say they don't want to talk to him and that is fine too."***

The guidance and progression services are well-received by learners who have accessed them. However, as the Areas for Improvement section of this report will show, learners would like more extensive advertisement of these support services, as many learners were unaware of their existence or how to access them.

Learners shared how they were satisfied with the **health and safety measures (2)** taken by their Education and Training Boards, specifically with regards to preventing the spread of COVID-19. Learners explained how adherence to health and safety regulations made them feel safer and less at risk in their classrooms. As one learner explained:

***"Everything is in order. All the regulations are there; seating, wipes, everything. The rules are followed 100%."***

Other learners shared how their personal preferences were considered, with one learner remarking, "They said at the start of the class if you feel more comfortable wearing a mask, you can. If you feel

more comfortable sitting alone, you can." Other learners felt that blended learning enabled greater risk mitigation, explaining, "not being in five days a week I feel limits any risk. It helps me feel safer." Learners would like adherence to health and safety regulations to continue in order to promote a safer learning environment.

Improved **English Language (1)** ability was raised by learners as a benefit of taking their courses. These learners appreciated opportunities to practice their English with tutors and peers in their centres. One learner stated, "I am learning English every day. When I came here I had no word of English." Another learner agreed, stating, "I, too, am learning English and it is great." Learners shared the benefits these increased language abilities had on their wider lives, with one learner explaining:

*"I learned the computer and English as well. When I came to this country I couldn't introduce myself. Now I have started full-time working this year. I think I have improved my English since I came to this country and started learning with [my] Education and Training Board."*

Learners would like to receive more opportunities to practice their English language skills through increased course hours or dedicated social spaces such as coffee mornings.

Learners described the **new skills (1)** they had developed as a result of taking their courses. These skills were outside of the core skills taught on their courses and were unexpected additional benefits. For example, one learner explained that:

*"I can now multitask with children and be on time. I like to be organised and my computer skills have improved."*

Another learner shared, "I have learned updated job-seeking skills. You can't get enough practice for job interviews." Confidence was also cited as a new additional skill, with one learner remarking they had gained confidence when, "we did presentations and you'd be speaking in front of other students. I found that a big help." Learners would like to continue to develop a range of additional new skills in addition to the core training they receive through their courses, and for this benefit to be promoted to potential learners.

Some learners found **online learning (1)** particularly appealing for a variety of reasons. These included increased digital skills, greater flexibility, reduced commuting costs, and personal health and safety. As one learner shared:

*“It’s just so completely changed the landscape of learning. It’s amazing. It [online learning] in some ways completely broadens the whole horizon of learning.”*

Another learner agreed, stating, “I would have never had anything to do with the computer [before], so it has given me a lot of confidence. I would have never seen myself sitting here.” These learners would like online learning to continue to be offered as an option for those who benefit from it.

## Areas for Improvement

**Transport (5)** was the most frequently occurring area for improvement brought up by learners who took part in the focus groups. Learners across a range of different levels and courses spoke of the difficulties they faced accessing transport to go to and from their centres. These difficulties included the cost, unreliability, and absence of local transport, particularly in rural areas. The lack of reliable transport affected learners from vulnerable demographics, such as lone parents and persons with disabilities. One learner explained,

*“I don’t live close to centre, [I] live rural, and I am ill. So [I am] dependent on lifts morning and evening. It can be hard to manage at times. I have to wait on in my centre longer to wait on a lift. There used to be buses previously, but not now.”*

Another learner stated:

*“Transport is a big issue. I have to travel two hours on the bus every day. It’s expensive but it (the learner’s transport grant) often doesn’t cover it. I am also quite rural and because of a limited timetable, I will often miss a bus and then have to wait hours.”*

Other learners explained how a lack of reliable transport affected learner attendance and course completion, with one learner sharing, “Transport can make the difference between somebody showing up for a course or not.” Another learner agreed, stating, “If transport’s not there it’ll make people drop out of courses.”

One way in which Education and Training Boards could support learners with the issue of transport is to advocate for increased travel allowances. As one learner explained, “It's twelve euro a day so it all adds up. I get thirty quid extra but that's already spent by mid-week. It helps a bit but it doesn't cover it.”

In some cases, learners were completely reliant on lifts from family members or taxis to travel to and from their centres. This is a significant burden on learners' time and expenses, and impacts their ability to learn effectively. Where possible, learners would like Education and Training Boards to raise the issue of transport with the relevant local authorities and to see if more frequent and reliable public transport can be organised, particularly for learners living and studying in rural Ireland.

Learners from different Education and Boards shared their frustrations with what they saw as inconsistent **communication (4)** regarding their courses. Learners shared that there was significant uncertainty regarding the content of their courses, start dates, offers of places, and information on locations. This encompassed information such as whether or not attendance would be in person or online, whether or not learners had been officially offered a place on the course, and when the course was expected to start. One learner explained:

*“I was never told I had a place as such. Instead someone rang to tell me the starting date and time, and I said, 'Oh I have a place then?' and that was how I knew.”*

Another learner expressed how they would like sufficient notice of centre closures, stating, “[There are] centre closings for staff meetings and stuff, but [they] don't give us enough notice. [We] travel in to find out that day that they are closing early.” Other learners requested more information on what their courses would entail, with one learner asking for:

*“More specific [information] on what level the courses are, what the duration is, and the at-home expectation of the amount of work.”*

Another learner requested that Education and Training Boards “Hold proper interviews and not just a phone call. A proper interview would give more details about what the course would involve.”

Learners found the uncertainty around their courses challenging, with one learner explaining:

*“The biggest flaw is the uncertainty - not knowing the exact times we'll be returning to full days. When we were doing work from home on the computer it was hard to find a device as I didn't have a phone. But the centre gave me a laptop to use after a while.”*

Learners felt that clearer and more timely communication from Education and Training Boards would help to mitigate some of this uncertainty, and requested that Education and Training Boards communicate information about courses in advance of registration, upon registration, and throughout the year.

Confusion and uncertainty about **progression (4)** options, whether educational or professional, was raised by learners from a number of different Education and Training Boards. These learners were unsure what options were available and who they could talk to about it. In some cases, learners were unaware of their local Adult Guidance Service, and were unsure of how to apply for further courses or to prepare themselves for the job market upon completion of their training. One learner expressed uncertainty about the purpose of their course in relation to employment opportunities, stating, “I would have liked to talk to someone, a career guidance person, about the overall aim of the course.” Another learner asked that their Education and Training Board provide “relevant information [on employers] for your students to contact or have open days for students to visit them and get [a] realistic opportunity.” This was echoed by another learner, who shared:

**“[I] need more advice on career choices, and what's available for my age group – 65 - [and] for my qualifications already taken. [I need] help with getting a job in my field.”**

Although learners who had accessed Adult Guidance services were satisfied with the information and support they received, learners from four different Education and Training Boards did not feel sufficiently informed of their progression options upon completing their courses. These learners would like more outreach from their Adult Guidance services and more practical, employment-focused outreach from Education and Training Board staff.

Learners across a range of courses and Education and Training Boards raised concerns about how the **work experience (4)** component of their courses is organised. They felt that they did not receive sufficient support from their Education and Training Board in identifying and planning work experience opportunities and placements. One learner explained:

**“We have to find our own work experience in a field we are interested in. I couldn't find it and was told I can just try and find it in a different area but that isn't what I want to do.”**

Learners found that their work experience options were limited and were not practically-focused. As one learner stated:

*"I was under the impression we were going to get real work experience with regional companies that needed the skilled workers, that we were supposed to be doing this course to fill a needed skills shortage! I'm left deflated afterwards."*

Another learner agreed, stating, "I thought the options were very narrow. This (work placement) is not what I want to work in."

Learners felt that the lack of suitable work experience options and the lack of practical skills-focused placements could be mitigated by Education and Training Boards working more closely with local employers to help facilitate connections between local employers and trainees. As one learner suggested, "Education and Training Boards [could make] partnerships with the companies to ensure they would get the access they need." Overall, learners taking practical courses are eager to take part in relevant work placements to prepare them for industry work, and would like their Education and Training Boards to facilitate them more in this.

More course hours for learners taking courses for **English for Speakers of other Languages (4)** was requested through the focus groups. While these learners enjoyed their courses, they felt that they did not attend classes often enough to improve their English language abilities as much as they would like. As one learner explained:

*"I told my friends we maybe need more hours because we go to school weekly on Wednesday – only one day. Just three hours a week. We can't get two days or three days. It would be good for us. By next Wednesday maybe we would forget some [of what we've learned]."*

This was echoed by another learner, who stated, "I think there needs to be more English language supports. There should be optional English classes and for those of us who don't need it, we could do an alternative class." Another learner explained how, "I brought my friend to join (the centre) and his English wasn't really very good and he left because there wasn't enough English support." English language learners would like more support and specifically more class hours made available to them.

Learners felt that the **advertisement (3)** of FET courses could be diversified, and would like to see advertisement expanded outside of digital forms. Many learners reported hearing about their courses through word-of-mouth, and they felt that more potential course applicants could be reached if there were greater visibility of different forms of advertisement, such as print media and flyers, in local communities. One learner explained, "it's almost scary how random it was that I became aware of these opportunities. Keep up the advertisement presence in the general community." Another learner raised how an over-reliance on digital forms of advertisement

had the potential to exclude some factions of the community, stating:

***“Have an open day, advertise on TV and radio. [There is a] need for the service in the local community. Some people aren’t able to access computers.”***

Learners also raised the issue of the lack of promotion of FET in post-primary schools and would like to see more advertisement of FET courses to post-primary school students. As one learner suggested:

***“More should be done to advertise courses, especially to Leaving Cert students to give them more options for further learning.”***

Overall, learners would like to see more diverse, community-focused forms of FET advertisement.

**Course scheduling (3)** was cited as an impediment to learning by learners across different Education and Training Boards. For these learners, the key issues were long, unbroken hours in front of a screen when participating in blended learning, and courses scheduled at unsuitable times. For example, one learner explained, “Everyone is very helpful, but three hours is very long in front of a screen. Shorter time would be better.” Other learners with childcare responsibilities shared how

school schedules meant they could not participate in certain courses:

***“There is another course I want to do but the time does not suit me. I have to pick up my daughters. It doesn’t suit mothers. If they want us to do the course they have to pick a time that suits mothers or people with kids.”***

Learners also found it confusing when course materials were repeated due to staggered enrolment dates for learners, with one learner explaining, “The structure of the course can sometimes be confusing. New people joining at different times means sometimes we are repeating some of the work.” Learners would like course scheduling to be revisited, with adequate breaks, the schedules of parents and course content in mind.

Learners shared how the at-home **learning environment (3)** posed difficulties for some. There were issues of shared spaces, suitable devices, equipment such as suitable tables and chairs, distractions, and a lack of movement. One learner shared how, “Sitting in your room for an hour at a time, there is no way not to get distracted after three or five hours.” Another learner explained that, “having small kids made it hard online.” Another learner explained how taking their course remotely affected their motivation, stating, “Personally, online, I wasn’t doing well because I had no motivation to be at home on the computer.” Another learner shared how this affected their mental health, stating:

***“You can get low moods at home just sitting on the computer.”***

There are a variety of learning options which suit different learners. As the Areas Working Well section illustrates, some learners benefit from the flexibility of learning from home and find online learning convenient and exciting. Other learners find learning from home isolating and distracting. Learners would like these different experiences to be taken into account by their Education and Training Boards when designing course syllabi.

**WiFi (3)** was an issue that affected learners both at home and in their centres. Problems with WiFi were particularly prevalent among rural learners. As one learner explained:

***“I live in the bog lands, where WiFi is difficult. Internet would dip in and out. It was really hard to get a stable connection. If my brother was using the connection to do his course it was even harder if we were both online at once, but we muddled through.”***

Poor WiFi connectivity at home created stress for learners, with one learner remarking:

***“If my connection is bad then I get behind and that is stressful. I’m not very good with technology. I want to get the work in on time but when there is a problem with technology, I find that very hard.”***

Other learners shared how they experienced difficulties with the WiFi in their centres, with one learner stating, “there is a lovely I.T. system and great computers but the WiFi is very slow.” Another learner agreed, noting, “sometimes the WiFi isn’t great here [in the centre]. Internet and connectivity, sometimes it’s very slow.” Learners would like Education and Training Boards to be aware of internet connectivity issues learners face when learning from home, and for Education and Training Boards to work to increase WiFi strength and reliability in centres.

Some learners felt that they did not receive enough **additional supports (3)**, such as financial support and help with meals and transport, through their Education and Training Boards. Learners shared how the allowances they received did not cover the actual cost involved in taking their course, and how this placed a significant financial burden on them. One learner explained, “I’ve to get a train and a bus to get to class and I haven’t gotten any help with this and it is really hard, you know, to save money.”

Another learner agreed, stating:

**"That's why there's so many young people dropping out of college after a year or two - the expense of it. They're trying to keep cars going, they're trying to pay rent."**

The areas where learners felt they lacked support also included help for those with learning disabilities and additional learning needs. Some learners felt there was nowhere for them to go to seek extra help with reading, writing, or assignments. One learner shared, "For people with dyslexia there's not enough support or help." Another learner echoed this, noting, "It's very difficult to get support for ADHD." Learners felt that this lack of support resulted in more people dropping out of their courses, with one learner explaining, "In my course a lot of the younger learners dropped out because there wasn't enough support for them with their assignments." Learners would like Education and Training Boards to conduct a review of the supports available and consider allocating more resources to these areas. Learners would also like Education and Training Boards to communicate more frequently about the additional supports that are available. As the section on 'supports available' below will illustrate, in some cases, learners were not informed of the supports available to them and how to access them.

Some learners reported that they would like to see the on-site **facilities (2)** in their centres updated. They cited canteen

facilities, toilet accessibility, and parking as specific areas that need updating. Some learners felt that their canteen spaces were not fit for use, with one learner asking that their Education and Training Board "upgrade the canteen. It's old and run down." Other learners reported not having access to any canteen space at all. One learner stated:

**"My college has no canteen for students. We have to eat outside in the cold. We need a new canteen and we need new prefabs as the building is old and there is not enough space."**

The inaccessibility of toilets, particularly for disabled learners, was also raised as an issue. One learner requested that their Education and Training Board "Make the toilet more accessible for the likes of disabled people." Learners would like their Education and Training Boards to conduct a review of centre facilities and to upgrade them with learner needs and accessibility as a priority where needed.

Although learners who engaged with the various supports available through their Education and Training Boards were satisfied with them, a number of learners reported not being aware that such supports existed and, as such, requested more information on the **supports available (2)** to them. Learners shared how they were unaware of designated support personnel such as disability officers. One learner explained:

*"For me I didn't know there was a disability officer until just recently. I didn't know who to approach. If I had known about the disability officer I would have gone to them. There are officers there from a mental health point of view and for physical needs, whatever, but we haven't met them and we need to put faces to names. It would be nice [to meet them] at the beginning of the academic year."*

Learners also shared how they only received access to supports because they specifically requested it. One learner stated that Education and Training Boards should "inform students at the start of the year what supports are available. I only received supports from my tutor because I told her in advance of starting that I had mental health issues." Learners would like information on the supports available to be distributed to all learners at the start of the year so that learners are informed and know where to go if they need to access support.

Learners shared that they experienced some difficulties accessing the **mental health (2)** supports in their Education and Training Board. They cited long waiting lists and insufficient capacity to meet demand for mental health counselling, with one learner explaining, "we do have a psychologist in the centre but it is hard to get an appointment with her." Other learners shared concerns that too

much responsibility for learner mental health support fell on tutors. While they appreciated the support they received from tutors, they felt that this was unfair to their tutors. Additionally, some tutors were not well suited to providing this kind of support. As one learner stated:

*"An awful lot of that [mental health support] would fall back on your tutor and it would depend whether your tutor is good at communicating or good with people in general."*

Learners would like Education and Training Boards to consider hiring more on-site counsellors and to ensure that formal, structured supports are in place to alleviate the burden on tutors.

Some learners felt that their **course content (2)** was not relevant and needed to be updated. One learner explained:

*"Even the communications module and stuff, it's like they're talking about 10 years ago."*

Another learner agreed with this, remarking, "a lot of the modules need updating." Learners would like course content to be reviewed and updated where necessary to ensure it is up to date with present-day developments in the subject.

**Apprenticeship placements (1)** were a source of significant frustration for learners who had been assigned to training centres very far away from their homes. The allocation system, they explained, resulted in long commutes, heavy fuel costs and, in some cases, relocation. A learner explained:

*“When they assign you to where you’re going it’s a terrible system. Let’s say there’s a man from Galway and he’s up in Limerick. I know people that are from Galway that are sent to Athlone. I live right beside Athlone and I am sent to Galway.”*

Another learner agreed with this, stating, “It’s random. You could be thrown anywhere.” Learners would like the system of apprenticeship placement allocation to be reviewed so that learners can be assigned to centres in their counties and/or closer to their homes.

Learners would like more support with **digital skills (1)**, specifically with online learning platforms such as Teams. One learner shared:

*“I couldn’t get onto the online classes, so I just gave up on it and tried to do the work on my own. I just couldn’t figure out how to use the Teams. We had someone come in and show us how to use it this year. But last year I couldn’t use it at all.”*

Another learner remarked, “Online learning is what I have done and it is challenging, most especially the technical aspect.” Learners would like ongoing training in digital platforms to ensure they are able to fully engage with all aspects of their course.

Learners would like **learning materials (1)**, specifically course syllabi and assignment breaks, to be more accessible and to be given in good time. Learners expressed frustration with unclear and “abstract” briefs, with one learner remarking:

*“We were meant to have a brief from them before we completed each assignment, but he left them to the last minute. If we had the brief for the assignments at the start of the year we would have had it done.”*

Another learner echoed this, noting, "I think some of the briefs we get are fairly abstract and you don't know what they want you to do." Learners would like tutors and course coordinators to develop and distribute clear and accessible briefs far in advance of assignment deadlines.

A **negative perception of FET (1)**, particularly in post-primary schools, was raised by learners as a barrier to deciding to take a FET course. They felt that FET was not portrayed as a viable educational option and was denigrated when compared to higher education. As one learner explained, "The teachers look down on it [FET]. If you're doing an apprenticeship, they say 'no, you have to do the CAO.'" Another learner supported this, stating,:

**"You're pushed too much in secondary school to do college. You're nearly looked down on for doing an apprenticeship."**

Learners would like Education and Training Boards to partner with post-primary schools to help change the negative perception of FET and encourage more potential learners to pursue FET courses.

Finally, learners would like their Education and Training Boards to help ensure there are continuous **professional development opportunities (1)** for tutors in the area of digital skills. Some learners felt that their tutors' lack of familiarity with digital platforms was an impediment to their learning. One learner shared:

**"While our tutors tried their best at times it felt like they were thrown into it and they weren't really helped. Like struggling with getting Teams to work or knowing how to set up a laptop or letting people in. It kind of felt like sometimes they were trying to figure it out. They were on their own."**

Another learner stated, "The classes dragged on a lot when they didn't need to. Say you'd have a class from ten to eleven but we're still trying to get the sound to work at ten thirty." Learners would like Education and Training Boards to offer ongoing digital skills training to tutors to help them feel more comfortable with the process, and in turn, create a more positive experience for learners.

**“The Forum event was informal which made it comfortable to share my experience”**



# SURVEY FINDINGS

This section presents findings from learner responses to the National FET Learner Forum learner survey alongside focus group events. A total of ten learner surveys were conducted. The total number of survey participants amounted to 2,594 which is an increase of 887 respondents from the previous academic year. The first subsection summarises basic information such as the demography of learners, their employment status and reasons for taking their course. The next subsection summarises the level of satisfaction with recruitment, registration, and

induction, with facilities and services, and with supports provided, at learners' programmes or centres. Finally, it focuses specifically on the experience and views of several supports and home learning among certain marginalised and minority groups.

The following table provides a breakdown of the key findings arising from the ten combined Learner Surveys, with learner recommendations aligned with each topic.

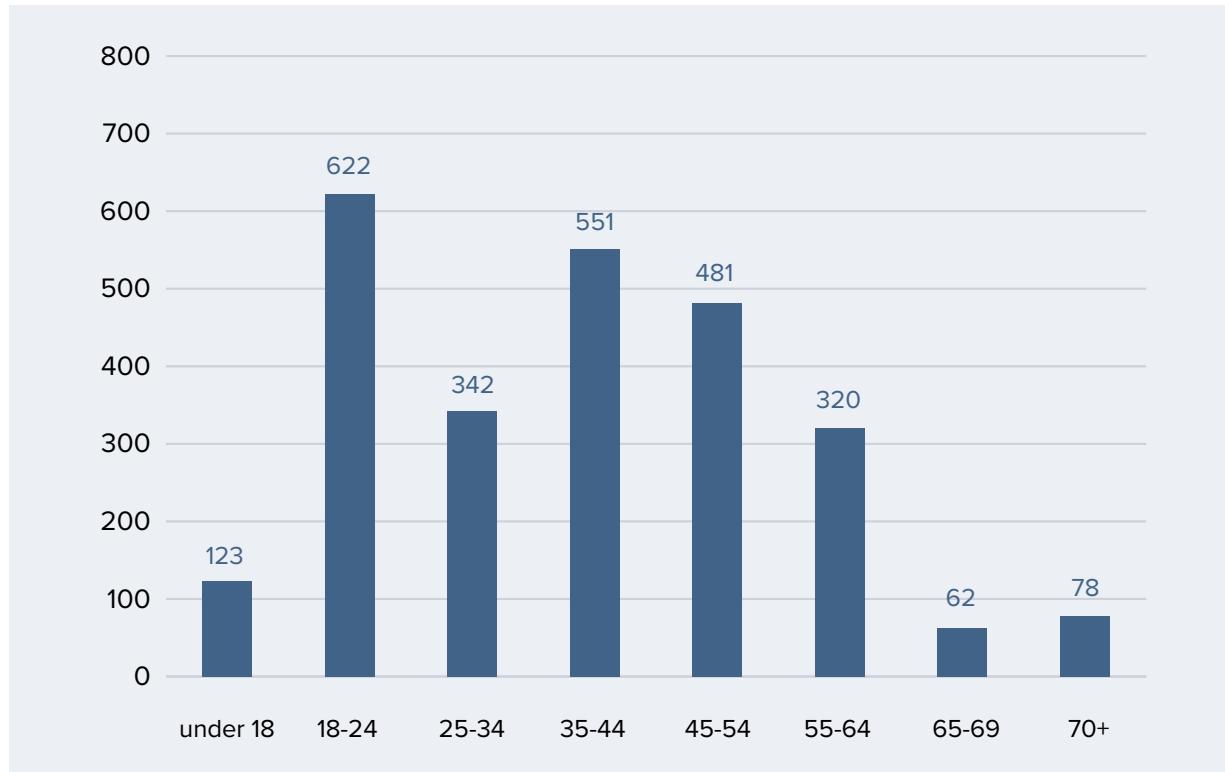
KEY FINDINGS	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
<b>Advertisement of Supports</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Learners responding to the survey were unaware of the supports available to them and requested that advertisement on various platforms could help increase their awareness of what is on offer</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Provide learners with clarity on how to access supports, such as mental health and disability supports and ensure that advertisement of these supports is delivered on various platforms</li></ul>
<b>Blended/Hybrid Learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Learners, particularly those with child and caring responsibilities would like the opportunity to engage in blended learning where possible</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Ensure that hybrid learning is resourced and promoted and that learners are equipped with devices and resources needed for successful blended learning</li></ul>

KEY FINDINGS	LEARNER FEEDBACK	RECOMMENDATIONS
<b>Centre Amenities and Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In survey responses, learners want the Education and Training Boards to be aware that facilities and amenities require updating</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Implement a review and enhancement of amenities and services at education centres including bathrooms, heating, storage, car parking, ventilation and canteen facilities</li> </ul>
<b>Cross-sectoral Supports</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners spoke of the challenges that act as barriers to their learning such as shortages in childcare and transport provision, but were also aware of the limits of the Education and Training Board in addressing these larger issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Education and Training Boards and the other relevant government departments should work collaboratively to review and enhance financial, transport, childcare, and mental health supports</li> </ul>
<b>Tutors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners spoke highly of their tutors, particularly with regard to their commitment, support and dedication and would like their tutors to be supported and their efforts recognised</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ensure tutors are equipped with resources and support needed to continue to support learners</li> </ul>
<b>Digital Skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners spoke of the benefits of additional digital skills acquired throughout their course and would like the Education and Training Board to continue promoting and supporting skills enhancement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Offer flexibility around hybrid learning</li> <li>- Offer opportunities for learners to develop digital skills and self-directed learning</li> </ul>

## Survey Participant Profile

One of the strengths of the Forum is its ability to capture a diverse cohort of learners within FET. The demography of

survey participants is summarised below. There were more part-time learners than full-time learners (1,049 vs. 963). In terms of age groups (see Figure 6), the 25-34 age group was most common (622).



*Figure 6: Learner representation by age group*

With respect to gender, the majority (1596) of respondents were female (see Figure 7). There were 21 learners who identified as non-binary, 24 who preferred not to state their gender identity, and six who preferred to self-identify.

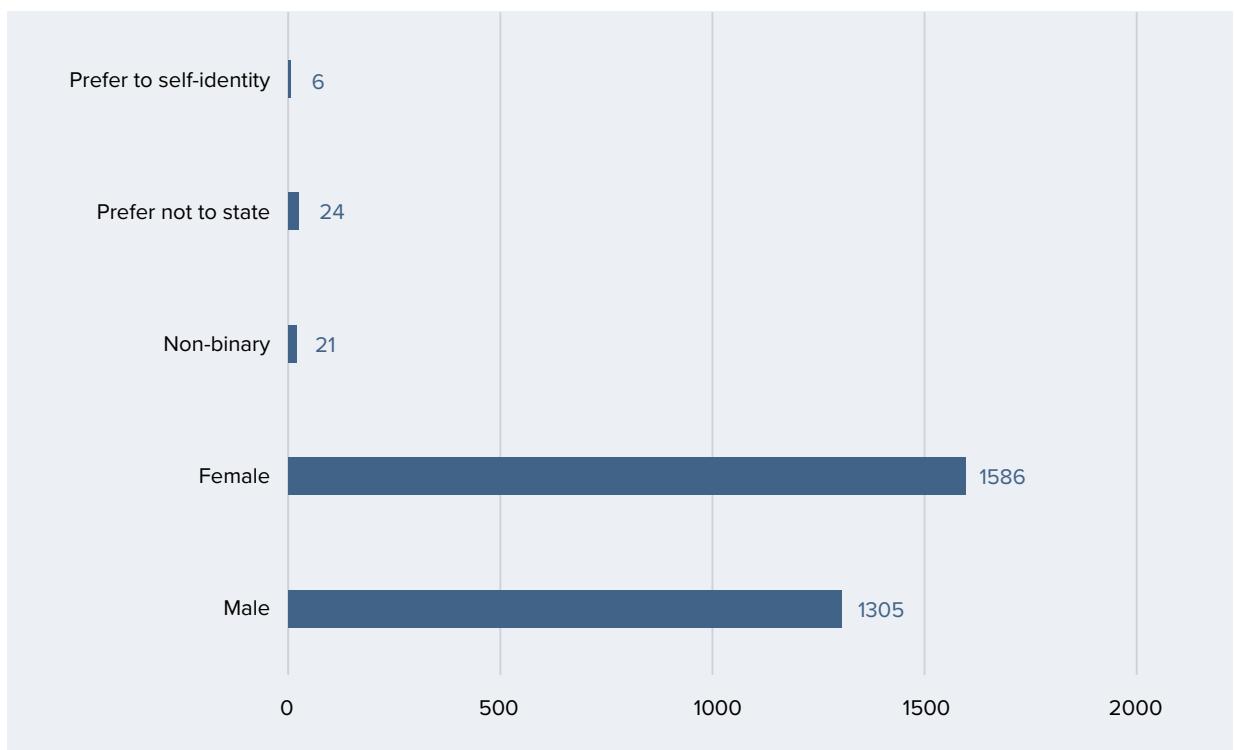


Figure 7: Learner representation by gender

Figure 8 presents the number of learners with respect to membership of a marginalised 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 (485), followed by those who were not native English speakers (212). Notably, those representing marginalised or minority groups make up 47% (or 1286) of survey respondents.

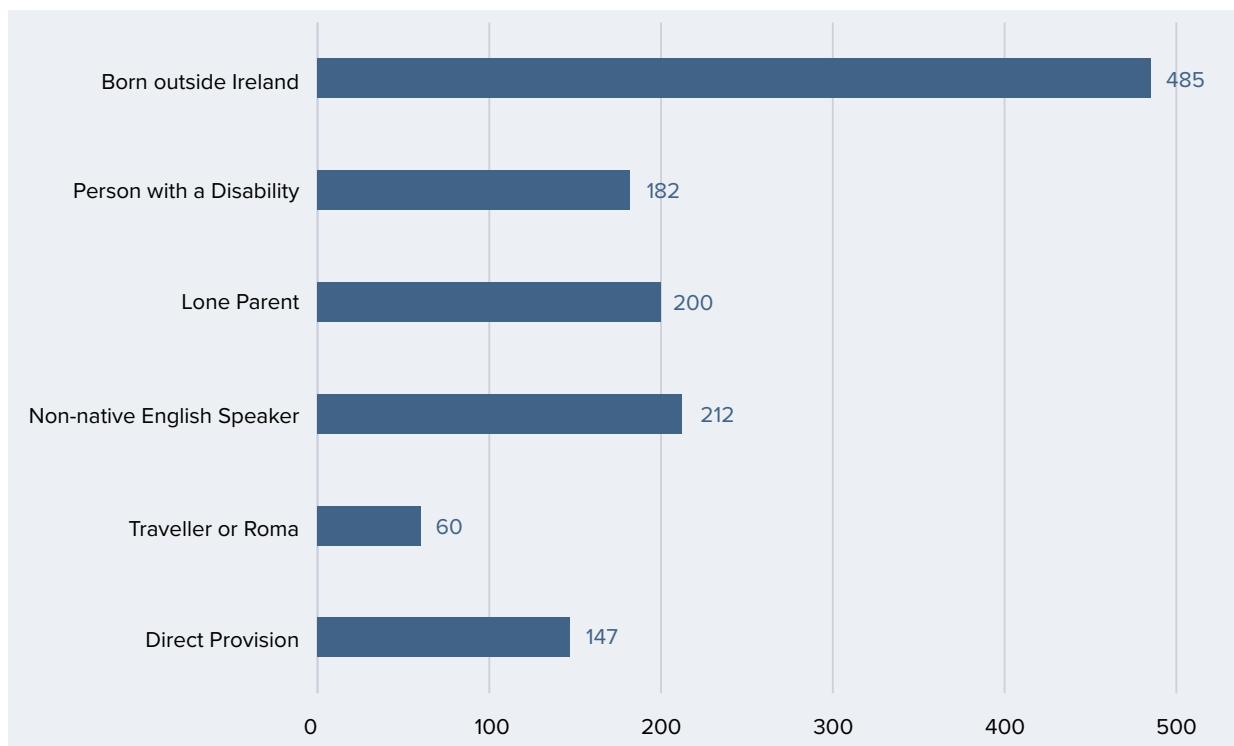
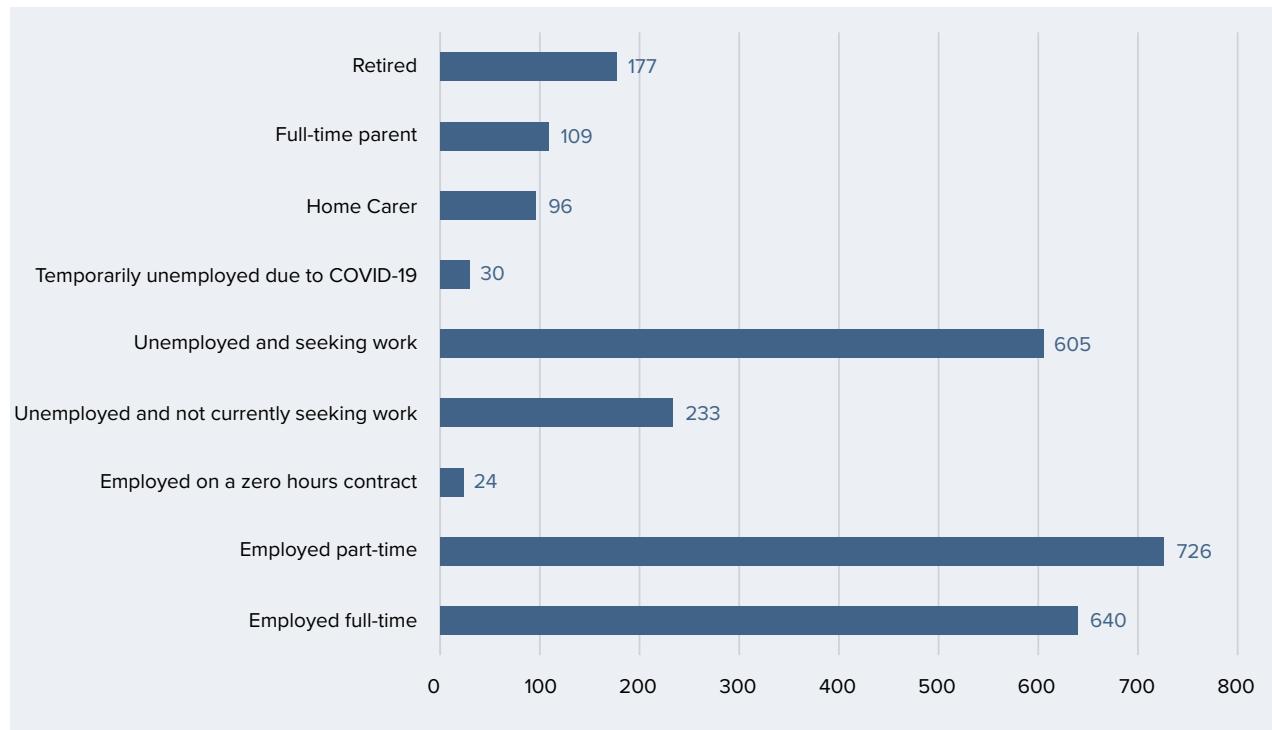


Figure 8: Learner representation by marginalised and minority groups

Figure 9 summarises the number of respondents with respect to employment status. The largest number of respondents came from those who were employed

part-time (726). This was followed by those who were employed full-time (640) and then by those who were unemployed and seeking work (605).



*Figure 9: Learner representation by employment status*

Finally, Figure 10 presents reasons for taking courses; survey participants could choose more than one option. The most frequent reason was, “to get a certificate” (547 responses), followed by, “to upskill/reskill” (521 responses), and, “to get a job” (362 responses).

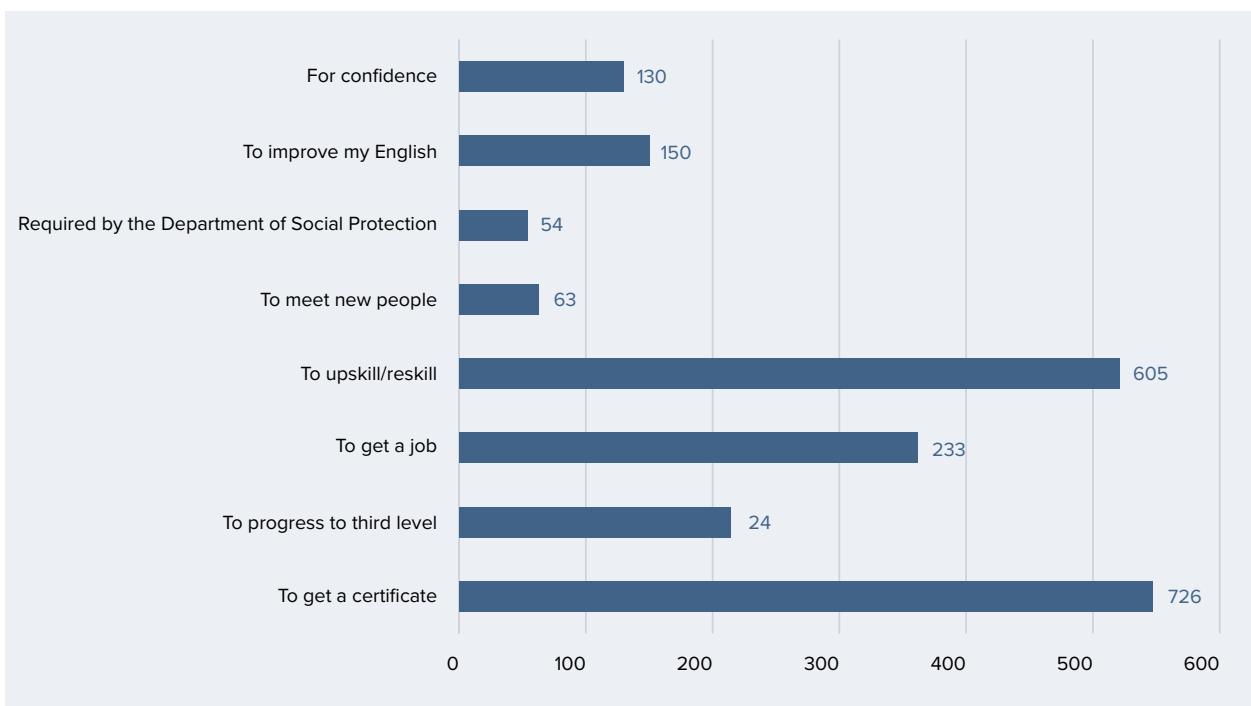


Figure 10: Learner representation by reasons for taking courses

## A Note on the Learner Survey Methodology

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

## Recruitment, Registration, and Induction

Learners were mostly satisfied with every aspect across recruitment, registration, and induction, as indicated in Figure 11. Answers to the question, “How satisfied were you with the website for your Education and Training Board or centre?” were more varied, with 13% (or 286 learners) providing neutral or dissatisfied responses. In addition to these more varied responses about the online advertisement of courses, several free-text comments from survey participants suggested that Education and Training Boards could increase the advertisement of their courses more generally, so that people would be able to benefit from them, particularly for those in the wider community who may have online accessibility issues. As one learner suggested in response to the open-text survey question, “What could your centre do to improve its registration and induction policies?”, “the Education

and Training Board could advertise better information regarding [a] course taking place. Some people aren't able to access computers." Another learner elaborated on the benefits of advertising Further Education and Training as a way of destigmatising these courses, promoting them as an alternative option for school leavers. This learner explained that:

**"FET is a bit looked down upon and it should be advertised to leaving cert(ificate) students as a buffer option before university. It helps you to realise what you might want to do."**

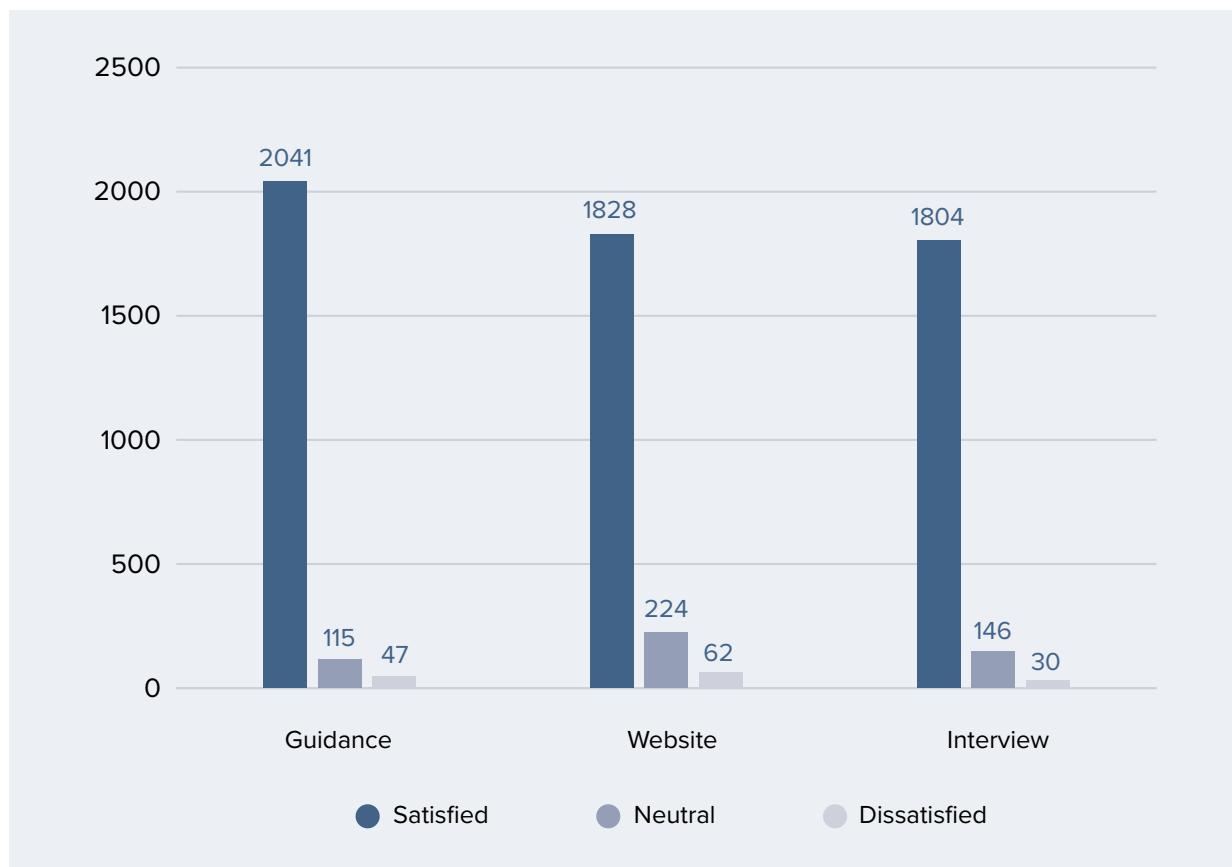


Figure 11: Satisfaction with regards to Recruitment, Registration, and Induction

## Centre Resources, Communication, and Participation

Survey participants were satisfied overall with centre resources, communication, and participation while accessing their courses. The majority of learners expressed satisfaction with the standard of teaching on their course, how they received tutor feedback, and the opportunities to participate in class. When asked about their level of satisfaction with technology learning resources, responses varied, with 12% or 234 learners stating that they were dissatisfied or providing a neutral response. Learners indicated they would like more of a choice of modules on their course, with 11% or

226 learners expressing dissatisfaction or neutral responses to that particular question (See Figure 12). There were also several free-text comments making a wide range of suggestions with respect to blended learning to alleviate challenges associated with the home-learning environment. These suggestions included allocating more time to focus on assignments and, as one learner highlighted, blended learning could provide, "more time to teach and learn the subject before assessments have to be written." With regards to physical learning resources, one learner requested that their Education and Training Board, "ensure that any training equipment needed is available," and that they provide further opportunities for hands-on learning.

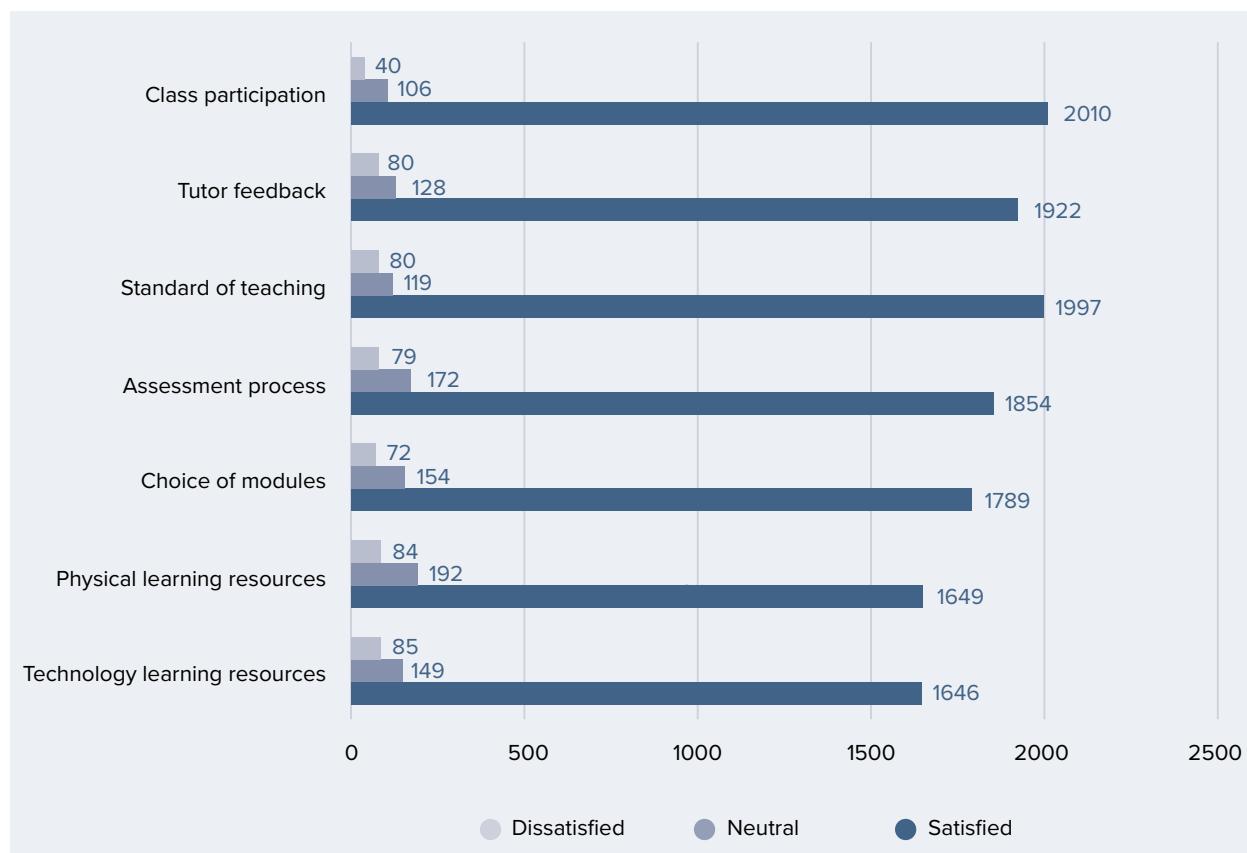


Figure 12: Satisfaction with regards to centre resources, communication, and participation

## Centre Amenities, Facilities, and Home Learning

Survey participants were satisfied overall with centre amenities and facilities (see Figure 13). For example, 90% (or 1649) of applicable responses indicated that learners were satisfied with the classrooms in their centres. There were a few aspects of learning with which the survey participants expressed lower levels of satisfaction. A lower satisfaction level was observed in their home learning environment (19%, or 284), car parking (22%, or 353), and canteen/food and drink facilities (34%, or 470). Free-text survey comments gave some insight into the reasons for these lower satisfaction levels. As one learner suggested:

*"I think the parking needs to be upgraded as there isn't enough parking for all student and teachers in busy days and I also think there should be a place within the college to get a sandwich or roll on breaks."*

Another learner concerned with the lack of ventilation, an issue particularly relevant in the context of learning during COVID-19, shared that, "I'd recommend the course to everyone I know but only if there was proper ventilation."

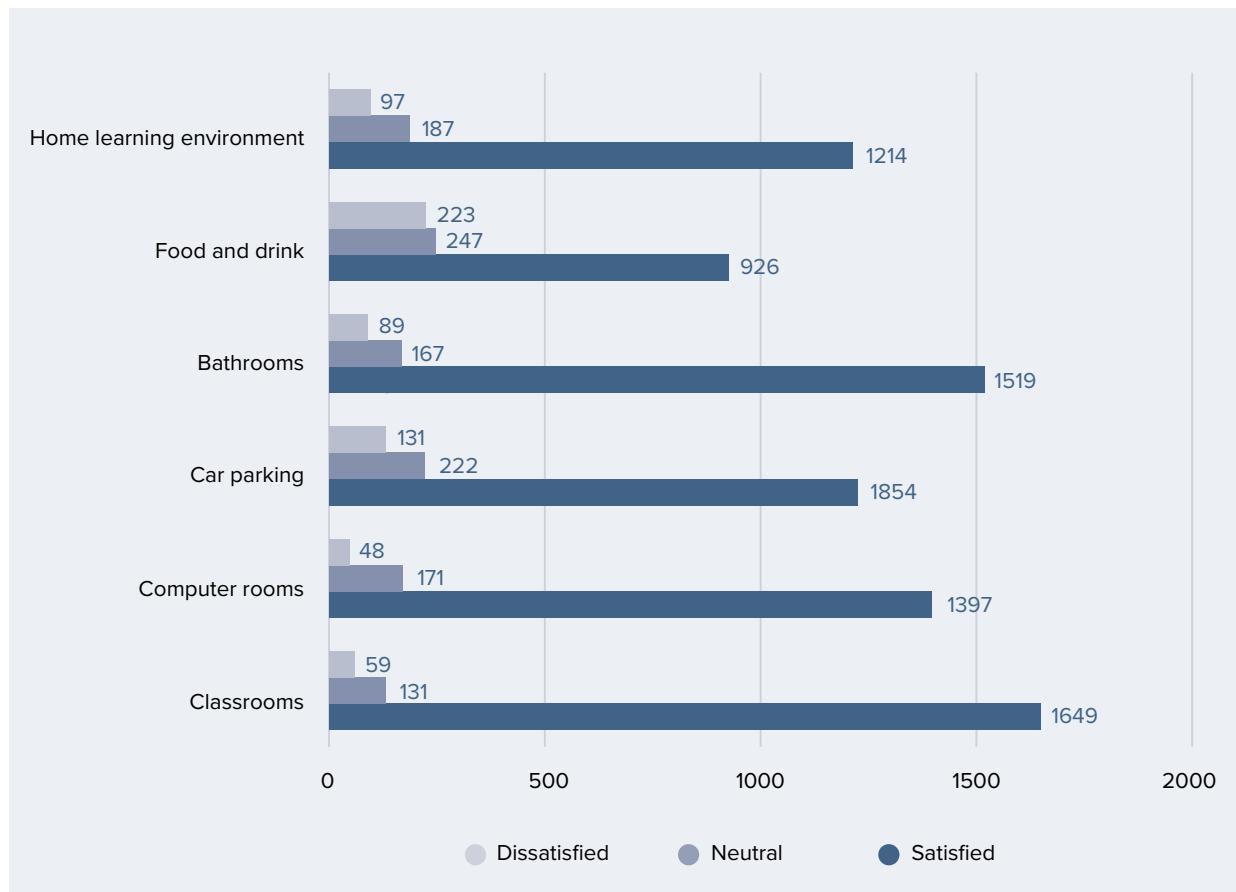


Figure 13: Satisfaction with regards to centre amenities, facilities, and home learning

## Supports

Learners responded to a series of items under the general question, “How satisfied were you with the below supports you received from your Education and Training Board?” Survey participants were satisfied overall with supports offered while attending their centres (see Figure 14). For example, 84% (or 1276) of applicable responses indicated that learners were satisfied with the support received regarding digital upskilling. There were a few aspects with which the survey participants expressed lower levels of satisfaction. For example, 21% (or 189) of learners gave a dissatisfied or neutral response with regard to disability supports. Overall, learners faced financial barriers to their learning, with dissatisfied or neutral responses to the survey questions relating to transport (21% or 203), meals (23% or 231), childcare (24% or 191), and general financial supports (23% or 251). Notably, learners expressed a lack of awareness regarding the option or availability of the following financial supports; transport (26% or 249 learners); meals (28% or 277 learners); childcare (35% or 274 learners) and; general financial supports (25% or 272 learners).

There were also several free-text comments reflecting these financial challenges associated with accessing their courses. In the context of the increasing cost of living which is having an impact on those accessing FET, another learner requested that their Education and Training Board and relevant governmental departments, “Make financial support for travel expenses more as its most people’s biggest struggle.” Several learners requested that supports available to them need to be highlighted in a timely manner at the beginning of the course to ensure they have the best experience possible when accessing their courses. One learner emphasised the need for their Education and Training Board to, “Inform students at the start of the year what supports are available.” Another learner echoed this, remarking that it would be in everyone’s best interests if the Education and Training Board, “Share their service with students and awareness of these services to the pupils.”

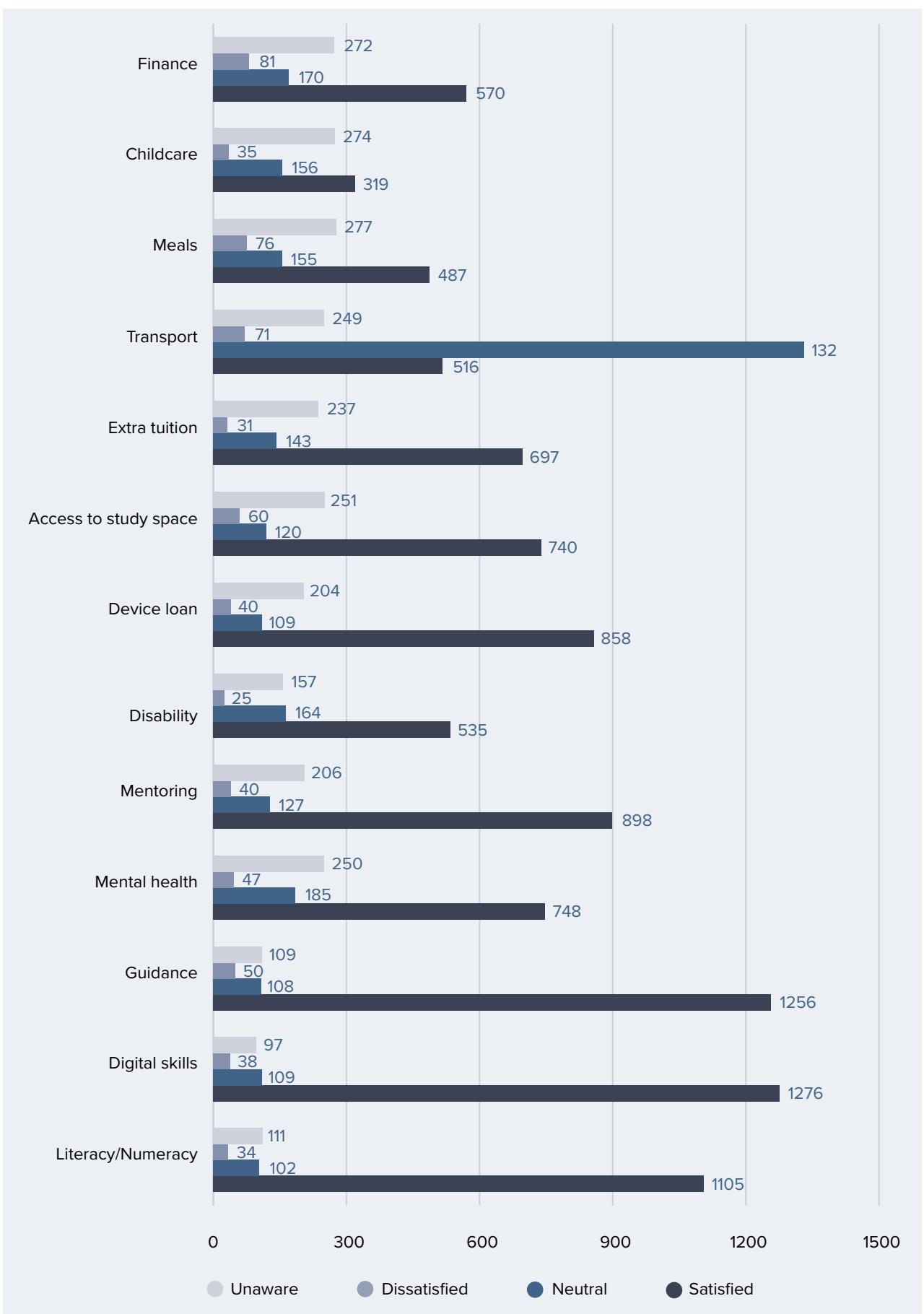


Figure 14: Satisfaction with regards to supports

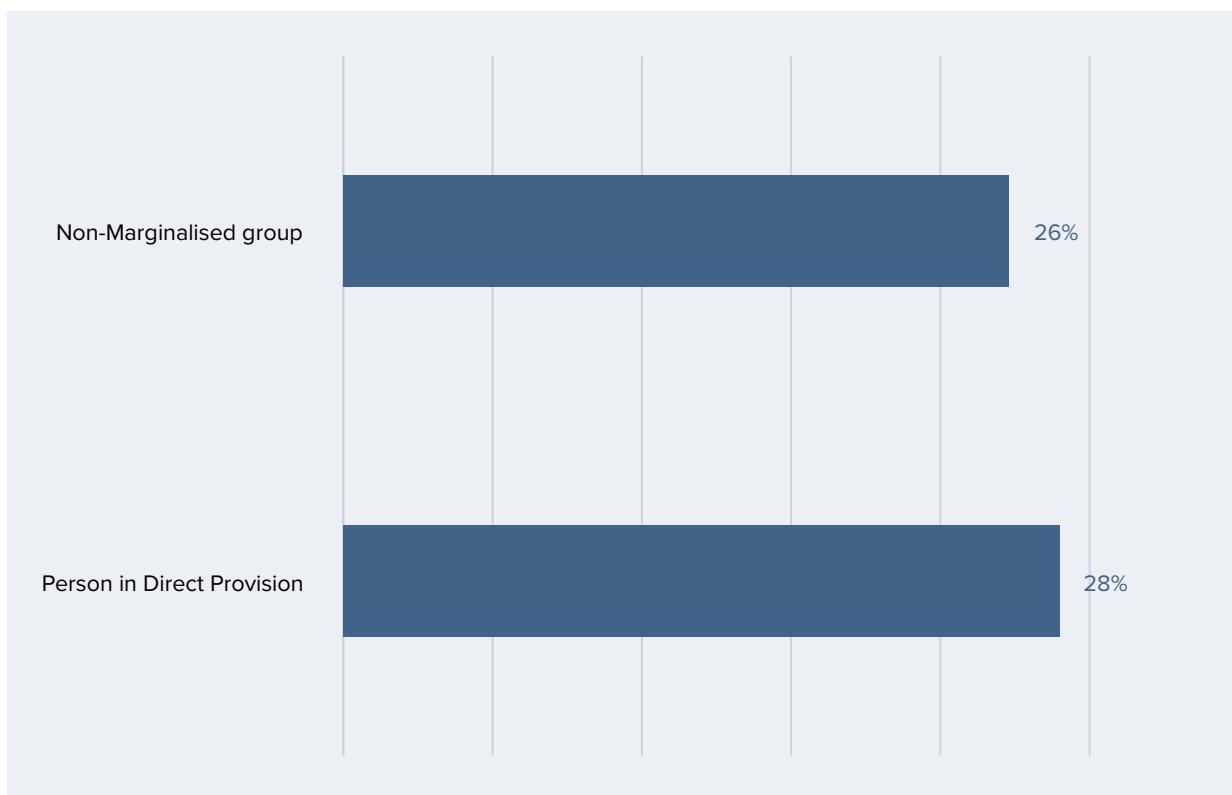
## Marginalised/minority Groups

As highlighted above, 47% (or 1286) of learners who responded to the surveys are from marginalised or minority groups. This figure is notable, as national statistics reveal a drop in Further Education and Training (FET) participation levels of approximately 25% by Travellers, 23% by women and a drop of 15% for people with disabilities, people aged over 50, refugees and international protection applicants during 2020, and further drops of learners from lower paid employment and working-class communities over the same period (SOLAS, 2021). As a result, the survey responses to the questions about the level of agreement on statements about the supports offered to learners through their Education and Training Board courses were disaggregated by marginalised 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. 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 satisfied with regards to both the financial support and childcare support provided
  - Learners with disabilities particularly felt less satisfied with supports in transport, meals and mental health
  - Learners who were lone parents were least likely to be aware of financial, mental health, childcare, meal or transport supports provided
  - Traveller and Roma learners particularly struggled with their home learning environment.
- As noted above, a significant proportion of survey respondents expressed a dissatisfied or neutral response to the survey question relating to financial supports (23% or 251). Comparing some of the marginalised groups with the non-marginalised group, those living in Direct Provision faced the most barriers, expressing 28% lower satisfaction with financial supports (see Figure 15). The non-marginalised group provided a 26% lower satisfaction response with regards to financial supports. Lone parents were the group who expressed the least amount of awareness (41%) of financial supports available. In survey comments, learners provided more details. One learner suggested that increasing financial grants could motivate other potential learners to take up a course, sharing that, “Maybe to entice more people to return to further education, a training allowance should be considered.” Survey comments indicated that those who are not entitled to financial assistance through governmental departments struggled to finance their courses and requested more support, with one learner commenting:

*"I got financial support as I was originally on jobseeker's benefit for nine months. I really appreciated that as you run out of money quickly when on social welfare. I am now on a zero hours contract paid hourly to be a home carer but no mileage given. It is very hard to make ends meet. I appreciate very much being able to access my modules through the BTEI (Back to Education Initiative) and I hope to earn more in the future when I have completed all modules."*

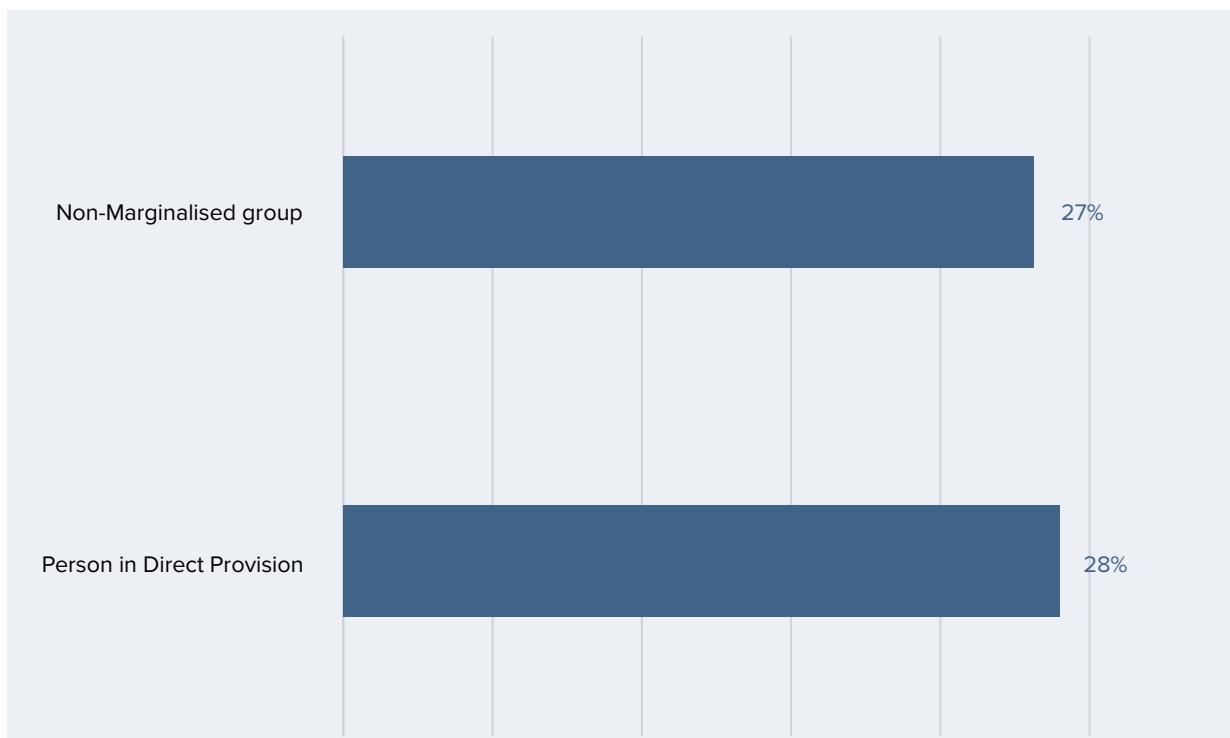
Another learner elaborated on this, requesting, "financial assistance for those not entitled to welfare."



*Figure 15: Lower satisfaction levels of those living in Direct Provision compared to the non-marginalised group with regards to financial supports received*

As noted above, a significant proportion of survey respondents expressed a dissatisfied or neutral response to the survey question relating to childcare supports (24% or 191). Comparing some of the marginalised groups with the non-marginalised group, those living in Direct Provision faced the most barriers, providing a less satisfied response of 28% with regard to childcare supports. The lower satisfaction response provided by the non-marginalised group was 27% (see Figure 16). Lone parents were the group who expressed the least amount

of awareness (51%) of childcare supports with their Education and Training Board. Survey respondents indicated that learners were struggling to manage both childcare or other home caring responsibilities with their learning and requested that their Education and Training Board “Provide more childcare support for people with pre-school children.” This request was echoed by several other survey respondents, with one learner calling on their Education and Training Board to, “Help people access childcare or extra family supports.”



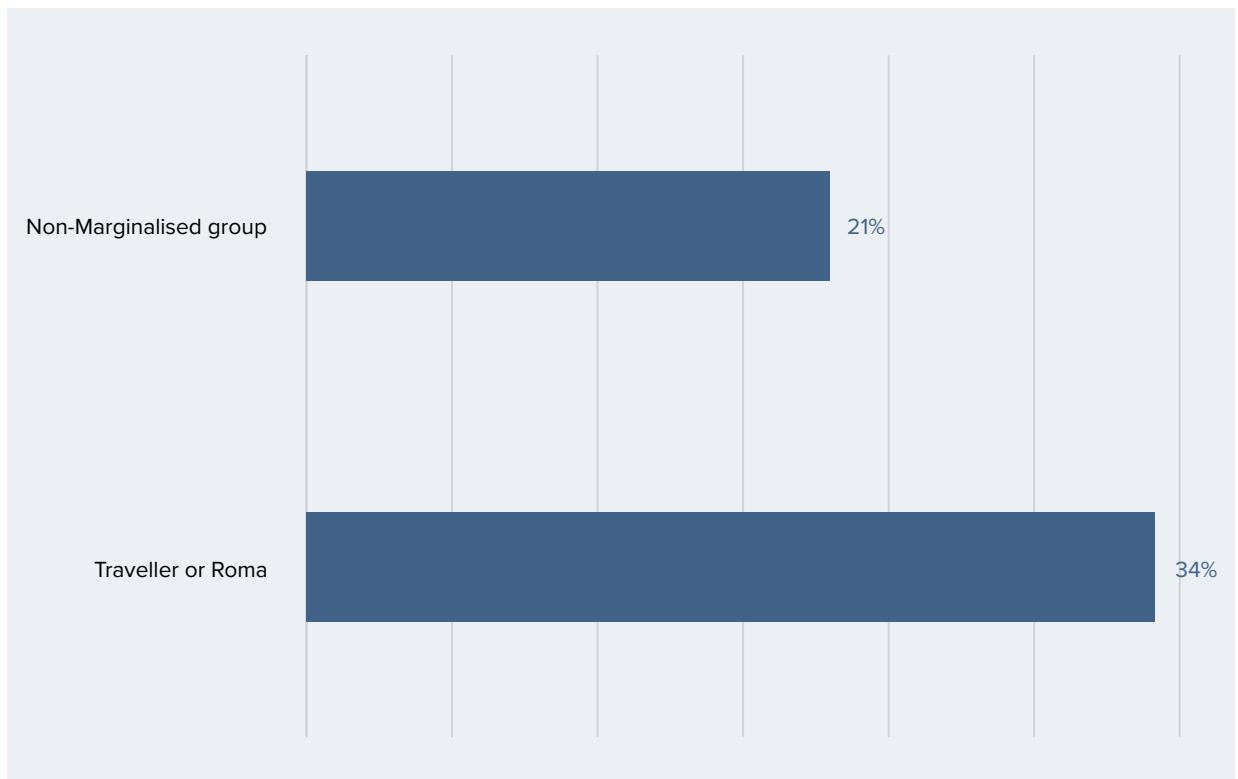
*Figure 16: Lower satisfaction levels of those living in Direct Provision compared to the non-marginalised group with regards to childcare supports received*

While a significant majority (81% or 1214) of learners expressed satisfaction with their home learning environment, there were several marginalised cohorts who did not have a comfortable and suitable learning space, which might include access to the devices they need for their learning, or being able to learn without distractions. Comparing some of the marginalised groups with the non-marginalised group, those from Traveller and Roma communities faced the most barriers, providing a 34% lower satisfied response with their home learning environment. In contrast, the lower satisfied response provided by the non-marginalised group was 21%. As one learner shared, “I live at home with my parents and the house is very noisy with no space to have a makeshift office. The centre can’t do anything to change that, its (sic) just my living conditions.” The need for blended learning options to alleviate these

challenges was highlighted by several learners, with one learner suggesting:

***"My course was blended - I hope post-pandemic you consider keeping either all or mostly online with some in-person courses. I couldn't have done the course I did in person 5 days a week, having it mostly online allowed me to do it."***

Another learner echoed this, requesting that the Education and Training board, “Possibly look at providing a blended approach to learning combining online and onsite.”



*Figure 17: Average satisfaction levels of those from Traveller or Roma communities compared to the non-marginalised group with regards to home learning environment*

In terms of respondents with a disability, compared to the lower satisfaction response of the non-marginalised group, they were substantially less likely to feel satisfied with access to mental health supports provided in their centre or by their Education and Training Board. Those with a disability faced the most barriers, providing a 25% dissatisfied or neutral response with mental health supports. The lower satisfaction response provided by the non-marginalised group was 20%. Lone parents were the group who expressed the least amount of awareness (34%) of mental health supports with their Education and Training Board. In the context of the Learner Survey, respondents indicated that their dissatisfaction with mental health services was regarding their lack of advertisement rather than a dissatisfaction with the supports provided. As one learner commented:

***"Before [a] learner starts a course in the further education department, a learner should be informed of any people that they could talk to if a learner has mental health difficulties or struggling personally outside of the learning environment."***

Another learner elaborated on this in the open text comments of the Learner Survey, requesting that, instead of relying on the good will of tutors, the Education and Training Board should:

*"Inform students at the start of the year what supports are available. I only received supports from my tutor because I told her in advance of starting that I had mental health issues. I didn't receive support from anyone else but her."*

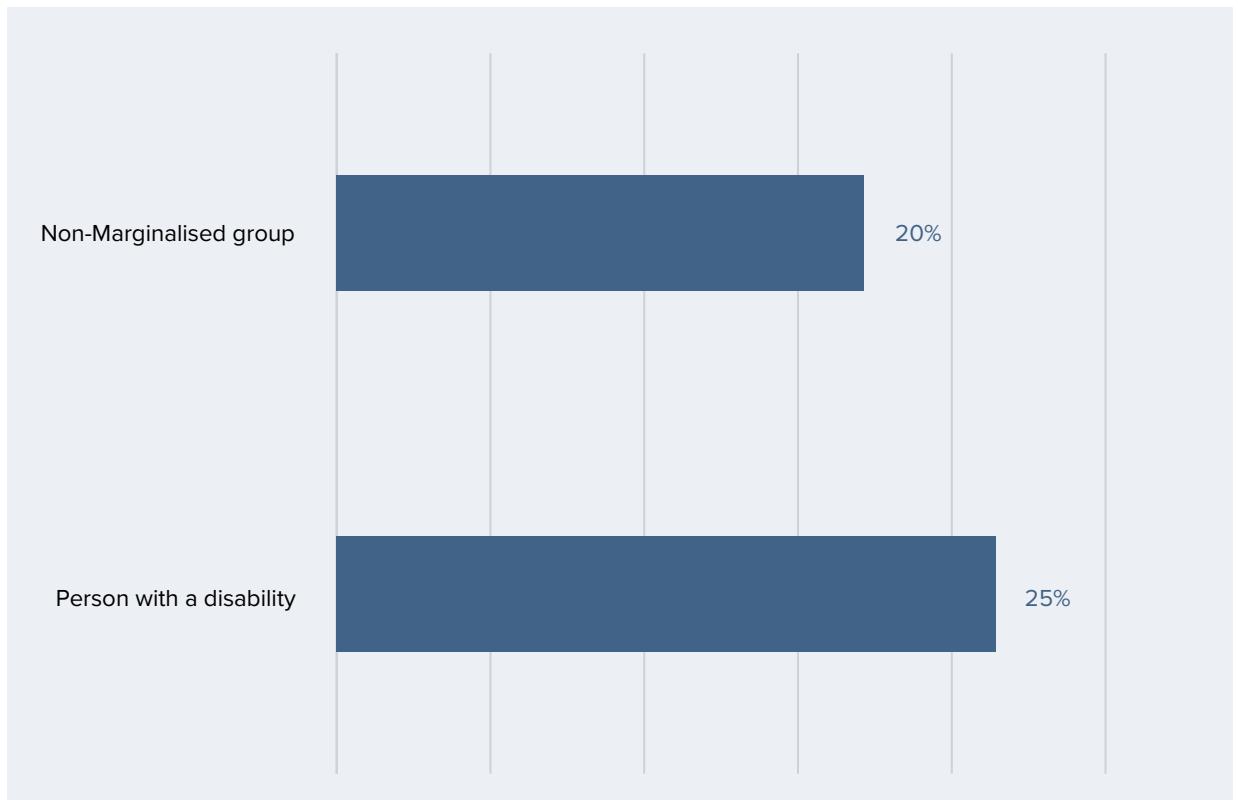


Figure 18: Lower satisfaction levels of those with a disability compared to the non-marginalised group with regards to mental health supports

As noted above, a significant proportion of survey respondents gave a dissatisfied or neutral response to the survey question relating to transport supports (21% or 203). Comparing some of the marginalised groups with a response from the non-marginalised group, those with a disability faced the most barriers, providing, on average, a 23% dissatisfied response to the question on transport supports. The lower satisfaction response provided by the non-marginalised group was 22% (see figure 19). Lone parents were the group who expressed the least amount of awareness (40%) of transport supports with their Education and Training Board. Numerous open-text survey comments indicated that learners have struggled to travel to their courses because of a rise in the cost

of fuel coupled with inadequate travel subsistence or provision. As one learner commented, "I think the travel allowances should be way more - the price of diesel and petrol is mental at the moment." Another learner requested that the Education and Training Board take:

***"A look at the amount of money for travel would be surely worth a look as it's more it's [...] costing in some places five times to six times more, than what we are getting."***

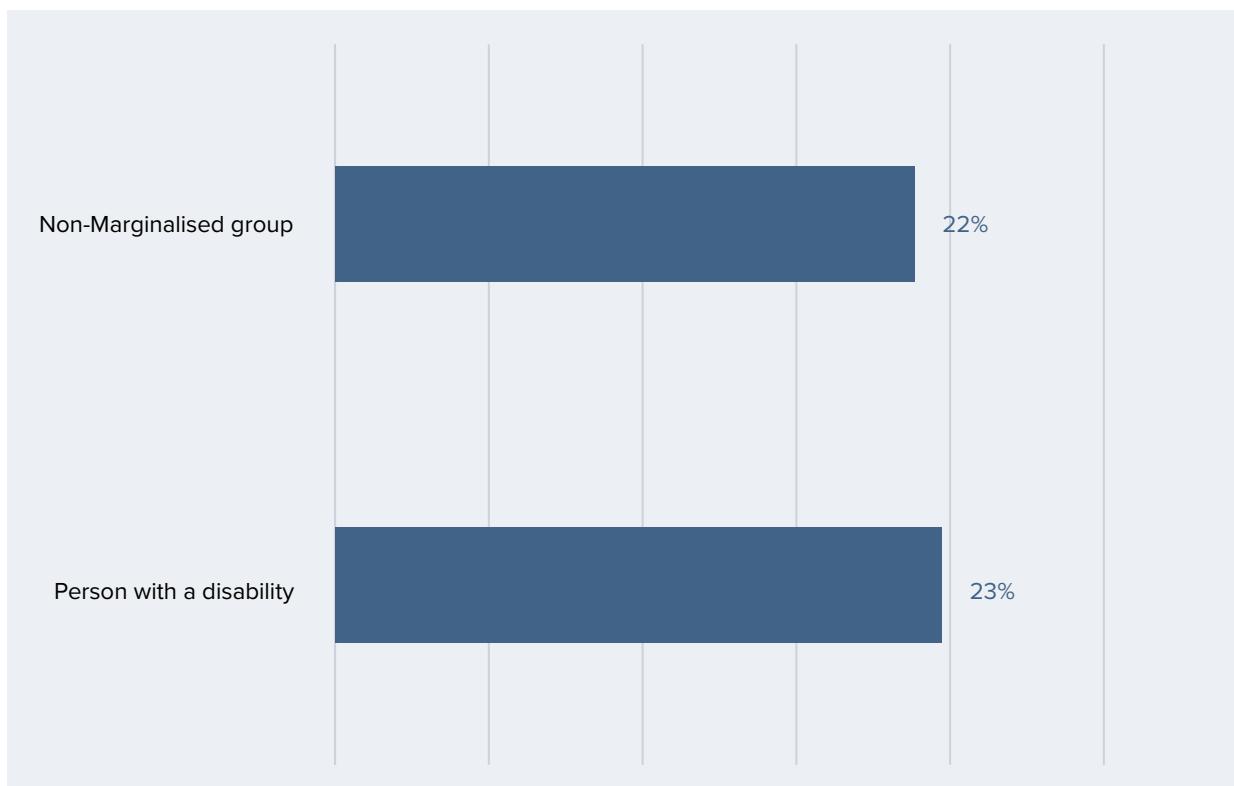
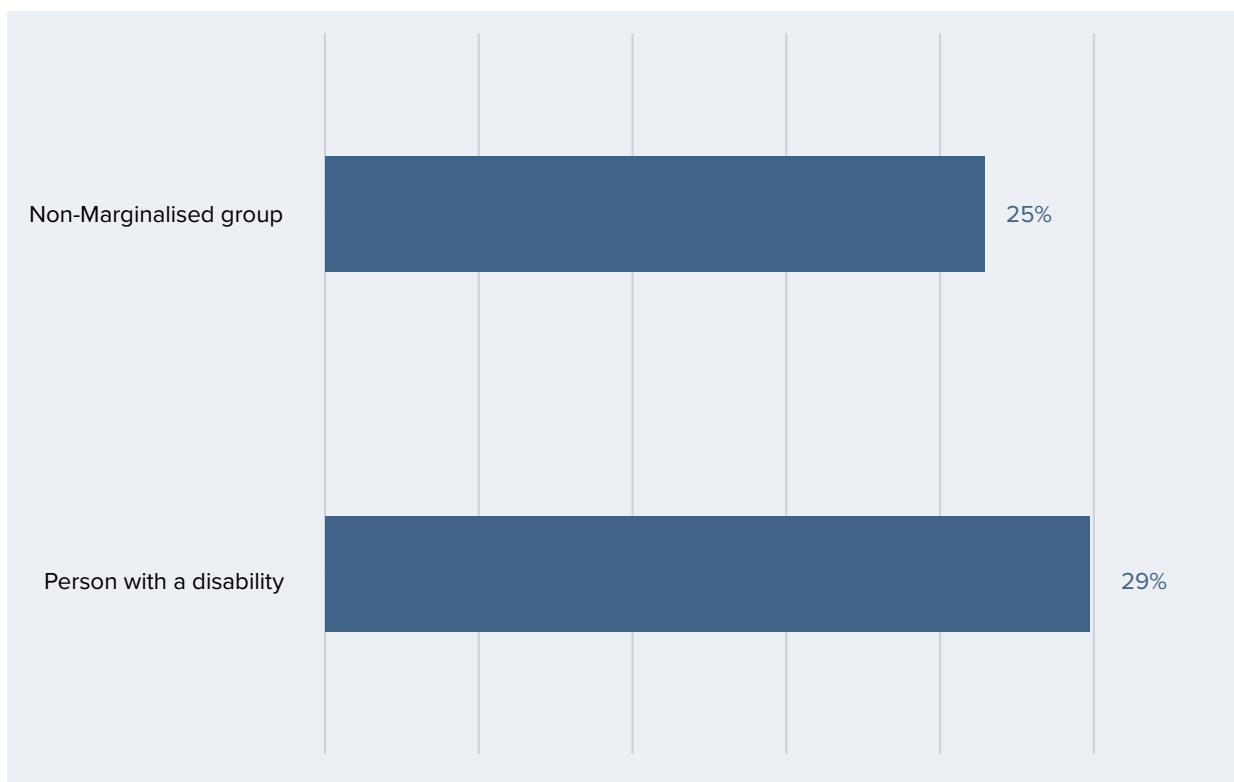


Figure 19: Lower satisfaction levels of those with a disability compared to the non-marginalised group with regards to transport supports

As noted above, less than half of all learners in the Learner Survey (49%) expressed satisfaction with the meal support they received. There were several marginalised cohorts who expressed dissatisfaction with the provisions related to meal support. Comparing some of the marginalised groups with the responses from the non-marginalised group, those with a disability faced the most barriers, providing a 29% dissatisfied or neutral response with support received for meals while attending their centres. The lower satisfaction response provided by the non-marginalised group was 25%. Lone-parents were the group who expressed the least amount of awareness (42%)

of meal supports with their Education and Training Board. Open text survey responses indicated that learners struggled to adequately feed themselves when accessing their courses, with one learner requesting the Education and Training Board and government departments implement, “Increases in weekly meal [...] allowances need to be made a priority as a four euro per week meal allowance is of little or no use whatsoever.” Several learners echoed this request, with one respondent maintaining that in the context of the increasing cost of living, “I think five euro for meal allowance a week is not satisfactory.”



*Figure 20: Average satisfaction levels of those with a disability compared to the non-marginalised group with regards to meals support*

**“Everyone was encouraged and allowed to express opinions”**



# CONCLUSION

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This report presents the findings from ten regional events of the National FET Learner Forum held across eight Education and Training Boards between October 2021 and May 2022. The research shows that learners were grateful for support they received from their Education and Training Boards throughout the academic year. They particularly enjoyed the return to in-person learning, as this brought more opportunities for peer learning and one-on-one learning support. Learners also appreciated the flexibility of blended learning, which suited those with children and home-caring responsibilities. They felt supported by their tutors and felt there was an atmosphere of openness around asking for help with learning at their Education and Training Board centres. However, learners would like staff to continue to develop their digital skills through ongoing professional development.

Learners taking courses in English as a Second Language benefit from these lessons and would like more opportunities to practice their English and would like an increase in course hours. These learners would also like to emphasise the importance of cross-cultural sensitivity and inclusivity in centres. Learners were also pleased with the new digital skills they had learned through their courses, and the wider benefits of Further Education and Training, such as improved routine, greater self-confidence, and

opportunities to meet new people. These points raised from learner discussions were also reflected in the learner survey. The majority of survey respondents agreed that they received satisfactory guidance within their course (82%), gained sufficient digital skills (84%), had access to necessary IT devices (71%), and were happy with the standard of teaching on their course (91%).

Despite these positive aspects of Further Education and Training, learners shared that they were struggling to cover the costs of their courses, which in turn had a detrimental effect on their learning. Learners were affected by insufficient funding to meet their travel needs, and cited long traveling distances, irregular public transport timetables, particularly in rural communities, and the rising cost of fuel as barriers to their educational success. Learners would like support from their Education and Training Boards, or other governmental departments, such as the Department of Transport, with meeting these costs. Some learners, particularly those from the Traveller or Roma communities, 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. The option of blended learning was suggested by many learners as a way to meet the needs of those who want to learn in their centres and those who found home learning more

convenient. These difficulties, voiced by learners in the focus groups were echoed by the survey findings: a lower satisfaction level was observed in car parking facilities at the centre (22%, or 353), and canteen/food and drink facilities (34%, or 470). These difficulties were particularly salient among learners who identified as a member of a vulnerable or minority group.

The National FET Learner Forum has both captured the benefits of the FET experience and offered suggestions on how to improve FET for learners in the future. It has also played a positive role in learners' experience within FET and shows that learners have a vital role to play in shaping the future of FET. The recommendations from this report have been shared with key stakeholders working in the field and will be used to shape FET policy.

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# APPENDICES

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

Name	Affiliation
Martha Bolger*	Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board
Una Buckley	Adult Learner
Colin Cummins	Tipperary Education and Training Board
Shauna Dunlop	SOLAS
Laura Flynn	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Sinéad Hickey	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
Finbarr Lane*	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
Siobhan McEntee*	Education and Training Boards Ireland
Roisín 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

\*Former member as of September 2022

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

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

## Appendix 3: Survey and Results

In the questions where learners were able to choose more than one option, the sum of all responses could exceed the total number of entered responses and/or survey respondents (1,707).

### Course/Programme and Level

Course or Programme Title (2010 responses)			
Adult Literacy	Apprenticeship	Community Education	Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)
136	99	120	269
Local Training Initiative (LTI)	English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)	Skills to Advance	Traineeship
50	85	182	47
Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)	Youthreach	Post-leaving certificate	Other (please specify)
138	139	346	179
Advanced Manufacturing Training Centre of Excellence	Community Training Centre	National Learning Network	Regional Skills Training Centre (RSTC) day-time courses
11	133	38	24
Regional Skills Training Centre (RSTC) Contracted Training day-time	Regional Skills Training Centre (RSTC) Contracted Training part-time		
8	6		

**Course Level (if on an accredited NFQ/QQI course) (2228 responses)**

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7-10	Non-accredited /no level
447	363	856	325	29	208	5	79

**Are you a full-time or part-time learner? (2296 responses)**

Full-time	Part-time
1023	1273

## 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
223	102	845	755	169
Employer	Open Day	Careers Exhibition	The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection	
152	74	19	259	

**Why did you choose to do your course or go to your centre? (Please select all that apply) (2041 responses)**

Required by the Department of Social Protection	To get a certificate	To improve my English	To improve my confidence	To progress to third level
54	547	150	130	214
To get a job	To upskill or reskill	To meet new people		
362	521	63		

**How satisfied were you with the guidance and advice you received when you initially contacted your centre? (2242 responses)**

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
1417	620	115	27	20	43

**How satisfied were you with the website for your Education and Training Board or centre? (2235 responses)**

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
1067	748	223	41	23	133

**How satisfied were you with the interview process for your course or programme? (2240 responses)**

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
1128	663	146	13	7	273

## Facilities and Services

**How satisfied are you with the access to technology learning resources (for example, computers, printers, specialist software, and equipment etc.) at your centre? (2181 responses)**

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
1097	640	148	53	22	221

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

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
980	658	191	59	25	263

**How satisfied are you with the choice of modules you could take on your course? (2177 responses)**

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
998	777	153	50	22	177

**How satisfied are you about the way you were informed about the assessment process? (2175 responses)**

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
1029	811	171	52	27	85

**How satisfied are you with the standard of teaching on your course? (2181 responses)**

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
1380	603	118	48	32	85

**How satisfied are you with the way your teacher/tutor/instructor assesses and gives feedback on your work? (2185 responses)**

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
1348	561	128	44	35	69

**How satisfied are you with the opportunity to actively take part in your class? (2184 responses)**

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
1338	658	105	21	19	43

## Teaching and Learning

<b>How satisfied are you with the classrooms in your centre? (2158 responses)</b>					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
989	670	131	44	15	309
<b>How satisfied are you with the car parking facilities at your centre? (2144 responses)</b>					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
729	492	219	75	56	573
<b>How satisfied are you with the canteen or food and drink facilities at your centre? (1693 responses)</b>					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
478	379	204	102	70	460
<b>How satisfied are you with your home learning environment (a comfortable and suitable learning space, access to the devices you need for your learning, being able to learn without distractions)? (2097 responses)</b>					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
632	549	181	55	38	642
<b>How satisfied are you with the bathrooms in your centre? (2148 responses)</b>					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
763	751	166	47	42	379

<b>How satisfied were you with the below supports you received from your Education and Training Board?</b>						
<b>Literacy or numeracy support (1973 responses)</b>						
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable	I was not aware of this support
641	476	104	18	16	607	111
<b>Digital skills (computer) support (1954 responses)</b>						
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable	I was not aware of this support
750	519	104	28	15	441	97
<b>Guidance Service (1941 responses)</b>						
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable	I was not aware of this support
723	516	108	31	18	436	109
<b>Mental health support (for example, counselling) (1916 responses)</b>						
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable	I was not aware of this support
427	319	184	31	16	689	250
<b>Mentoring or key worker support (1828 responses)</b>						
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable	I was not aware of this support
505	385	127	21	19	565	206
<b>Laptop or device loan (1909 responses)</b>						
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable	I was not aware of this support
552	303	109	24	16	701	204

<b>Access to study spaces (for example, learning hubs)? (1809 responses)</b>						
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable	I was not aware of this support
402	336	119	38	22	641	251
<b>Extra tuition or extra time in exams (1798 responses)</b>						
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable	I was not aware of this support
390	302	143	15	16	695	237
<b>Support with transport (1837 responses)</b>						
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable	I was not aware of this support
298	217	127	39	32	875	249
<b>Support with meals (1825 responses)</b>						
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable	I was not aware of this support
275	202	154	40	36	848	270
<b>Support with childcare (1817 responses)</b>						
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable	I was not aware of this support
186	132	156	20	15	1033	275
<b>Financial Support (1837 responses)</b>						
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable	I was not aware of this support
328	243	169	48	33	744	272

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