

COVID-19 FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING (FET) LEARNER REPORT

DEVELOPED AS PART OF THE
NATIONAL FET LEARNER FORUM

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CONTENTS

Introduction	5
Executive Summary	6
Recommended Actions	8
Participant Profile	10
Key Findings	14
Learner Engagement	14
Home Environment.....	16
Teaching and Learning	20
Assessment	23
Progression.....	25
Conclusion	28
Works Cited	29
Appendices	30
Appendix 1: Learner Survey	30
Appendix 2: Learner Survey Data Tables	39

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Learner Representation by Education and Training Board in the Virtual Forum and Learner Survey.....	10
Figure 2: Learner Representation in the Survey by Course Level on National Framework of Qualifications.....	11
Figure 3: Learner Representation in the Survey by Age Group.....	12
Figure 4: Learner Representation in the Survey by Gender.....	12
Figure 5: Learner Representation in the Survey by Employment Status.....	12
Figure 6: Learner Representation in the Survey by Target Cohorts.....	13
Figure 7: Learners Engaged in Learning during COVID-19.....	14
Figure 8: Learner Satisfaction with the Level of Engagement Provided by their ETB.....	15
Figure 9: Modes of Communication between ETB and Learner.....	16
Figure 10: Devices used to Complete Coursework.....	17
Figure 11: Spaces where Learners Complete Coursework.....	18
Figure 12: Learners with Childcare Responsibilities.....	18
Figure 13: Learner Response to changes in Daily Structure.....	19
Figure 14: Learner Motivation to Learn during COVID-19.....	19
Figure 15: The use of Digital Platforms in FET Courses.....	20
Figure 16: Learner Responses to Assessment Information.....	23
Figure 17: Learner Responses to the Fairness of Alternative Assessments.....	23
Figure 18: Learner Responses to Progression Support.....	25
Figure 19: Learner Preference to Return to Face-to-Face Instruction.....	26

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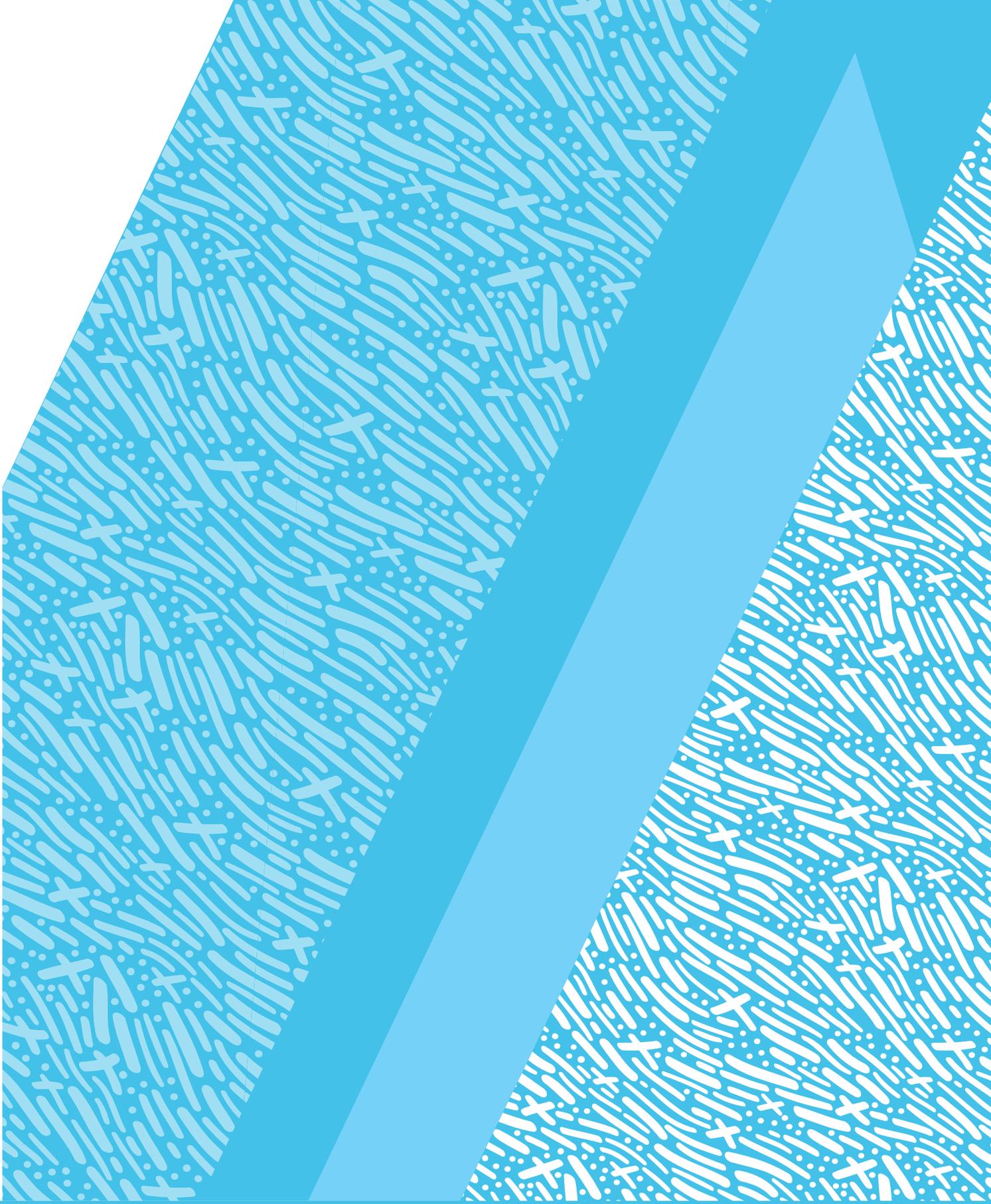
Thank you to SOLAS and the European Social Fund (ESF) for funding the National FET Learner Forum from which this work developed.

About AONTAS

AONTAS is the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation. As an umbrella body committed to advocating and lobbying for the development of a quality service for adult learners and promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning, AONTAS works on behalf of its 400+ strong membership, regarding the membership as a key resource which provides the organisation with a grassroots, authentic understanding of adult and community education practice and learner perspective. The membership profile comprises a rich mix of statutory, voluntary and community organisations involved in the provision of further education and training, as well as individuals who are deeply involved in and committed to the concept and practice of lifelong learning.

List of Abbreviations

ETB	Education and Training Board
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
FET	Further Education and Training
HE	Higher Education
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
USI	Union of Students in Ireland





INTRODUCTION

This report is developed from findings gathered through a Further Education and Training COVID-19 learner consultation by AONTAS between April and June 2020. This learner consultation built upon AONTAS' learner voice work through the National FET Learner Forum, an annual learner voice project designed to capture the educational experience of learners in further education and training across Ireland ([AONTAS FET National Learner Forum](#)). The National FET Learner Forum provides a range of methods for engaging with learners across FET, enabling authentic engagement and the sharing of views in a supportive environment. This project, which is funded by SOLAS and the European Social Fund, is delivered in collaboration with the sixteen Education and Training Boards across Ireland.

In order to capture the experiences of adult learners in Further Education and Training during COVID-19 restrictions,

this research deployed two approaches to learner engagement: virtual focus group discussions (held via online video platform Zoom, herein referred to as the Virtual Forum) and a Learner Survey (delivered online). The findings from both of these virtual focus group discussions and survey data are presented in the Key Findings section of this report. The data compiled in the Learner Survey can also be found in Appendix 2 featured at the end of this report.

Listening to all voices, particularly those least heard in policy, is central to our work in AONTAS. This report captures the experiences of FET learners during COVID-19 in order to identify issues impacting learners and ways they can be addressed in order to mitigate educational disadvantage.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following tables represent key findings and themes emerging from this study. Full details for each theme can be found in the Key Findings section of this report.

	FINDINGS	FUTURE FOCUS AUTUMN 2020
Learner Engagement	Learner engagement remains high and learners are clear on how to continue their learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Blended approaches to supporting learner engagement in the longer term – Enabling peer support communities
	FET tutors are “going the extra mile” for learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Provide additional learner supports to help tutors continue to support learner needs
	Phone and postal communication are more common modes of communication for learners on lower NFQ level courses and in vulnerable learner groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Specific outreach supports are required to enable engagement with FET learners
Home Environment	Access to devices remains a challenge, particularly for Traveller and Roma populations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Make IT devices available and improve internet access for learners – Specifically focus on the needs of vulnerable groups, Travellers and Roma populations
	Reliance on mobile phones to complete course work is higher for younger learners and those on lower-level courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Make IT devices and access to internet a priority focus for learners on lower NFQ courses and younger learners
	Travellers, Roma, and learners in direct provision centres need access to appropriate learning spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Make learning spaces available for target learner cohorts
	Childcare poses a unique challenge for learners during COVID-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Childcare supports are required for flexible, supported remote learning
	Learners are struggling to maintain the motivation to learn and struggle with the lack of daily structure, particularly those with a disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Introduce induction courses on remote learning contexts
	Learners are struggling with mental health and wellbeing, with Travellers, Roma and learners in direct provision at greater risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Mental health and wellbeing supports should be integrated across all courses

Teaching and Learning	The use of digital learning platforms in FET remains mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Invest in Continuous Professional Development and appropriate digital learning platforms across FET courses – Provide learner supports in the use of online Learning Management Systems
	Learner satisfaction with online learning decreases on higher-level courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Consider remote/blended learning models and mixed approaches for courses at NFQ levels 5 and 6
	Learners are confident in their digital skills and ability to learn online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Digital support is required for learners aged 55 and older
	Learners are enjoying the flexibility offered in self-directed learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Promote methods for effective engagement in flexible digital learning opportunities in FET
	Learners miss the immediate and ongoing feedback provided in traditional classrooms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Consider potential for an element of on-site/blended learning – Develop guidelines to promote interactive teaching methods in digital learning – Onsite learning opportunities for disadvantaged learners
Assessment	Learners miss peer-to-peer learning and social interaction with classmates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Consider online peer communities, mentoring and peer induction models
	Learners are happy with alternative assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Include clear information regarding assessment and expectations for online assessment at the start of the course
	Learners appreciate the options available to them when submitting graded assignments	
	Learners would have liked greater clarity on their work placements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Provide work placement updates as soon as possible
Progression	Learners feel supported to progress onto another course next year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Provide support to navigate progression across FET and HE as applicable
	Learners want a return to face-to-face learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Consider potential for an element of on-site/blended learning

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Based on the findings presented in the Executive Summary above, and outlined in the Key Finding section below, the following recommended actions are suggested to support learners to continue learning in Further Education and Training within a COVID-19 context in autumn 2020:

- **Devices:** As remote learning continues, allocation of devices should prioritise learners in need, particularly Traveller and Roma populations, along with learners on courses where access to laptops and computers are lower. Focus should also be placed on supporting learners on lower-level courses on the NFQ, where dependence on mobile devices is higher.
- **Digital Skills Training:** Provide learners with more opportunities to receive instructions on how to use digital platforms such as Zoom, Moodle and Microsoft Teams. There should be a specific focus on those over 55 years. Also provide FET tutors with opportunities to receive training in these digital platforms.
- **Mental Health:** Invest in the provision of digital and in-person mental health support services for learners who are struggling or at risk (implement a fund to pay for counselling sessions via Zoom or in-person for learners who are struggling). Integrate mental health and wellbeing across all FET courses.
- **Blended Learning:** Develop guidelines to promote interactive teaching methods in digital learning. Prioritise the return to on-site learning for learners who face the greatest challenges working from home (eg Travellers, Roma, learners in direct provision, etc).
- **Learning Space:** Make spaces available for learning, especially for Traveller and Roma Learners.
- **Learner Supports:** Establish peer communities for learners and mentoring, in addition to general learner engagement supports and outreach.
- **Induction:** Provide clear information on remote assessment expectations, work placements and progression options.

METHODOLOGY

Due to the public health restrictions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, AONTAS held meetings of the National FET Learner Forum online via Zoom. These meetings took the form of virtual discussion groups that were open to all Education and Training Board learners. AONTAS contacted Education and Training Board staff, specifically key contacts who had previously been involved in the organisation of regional National FET Learner Forum events, to invite learners to participate in these events. Learners were provided with an information pack that explained how to take part in these virtual discussion groups and what to expect on the day. AONTAS also held two ETB specific events. These events were open only to learners completing a course at the designated ETB. For open events, learners could respond via their Education and Training Board, or to AONTAS directly through our social media promotion of these events. Learners who agreed to take part in these discussions were also provided with an email consent form confirming that they consent to taking part in the event. Virtual discussions were not recorded.

During these meetings, learners were moved into smaller breakout rooms (sized 4-5 learners per discussion) where hour-long facilitated discussions were held. AONTAS held seven meetings of the Virtual National FET Learner Forum. Five of these events were open events in which learners from every Education and Training Board could participate; 15th April, 29th April, 13th May, 20th May and 28th May. Two of these events were

Education and Training Board specific: Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board held on 9th June and Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board held on 12th June.

In addition to these Forum events, AONTAS also launched a COVID-19 Learner Survey. This survey, which was open online from 3rd June 2020 to 12th June 2020, collected 900 learner responses. The survey was open to all learners taking an accredited or non-accredited course funded by an Education and Training Board or delivered by a Community Education provider. Learners were asked at the start of the survey to identify where their course was taking place so a separate report for Community Education providers could be generated. ([AONTAS 2020, Community Education COVID-19 Learner Focus Group and Survey](#)).

This learner consultation is being completed alongside other key studies being released as well, mainly The Union of Students in Ireland's National Report on Students and COVID-19 (2020), AHEAD's ([Creating Inclusive Environments in Education and Employment for People with Disabilities](#)) COVID-19 Learning from Home Student Survey (2020), and The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning's report, ([Reflecting and Learning: the move to remote/online teaching and learning in Irish higher education, 2020](#)). Throughout this report, where information is linked to results found in these studies, it has been highlighted.

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

A total of 959 learners took part in this research, 59 through Virtual FET Learner Forum events and 900 through participation in the Learner Survey. At the beginning of each Virtual Forum event and at the start of the Learner

Survey, learners were asked to provide their Education and Training Board affiliation (Education and Training Boards Ireland). The breakdown of learners according to Education and Training Board can be found in Figure 1 below:

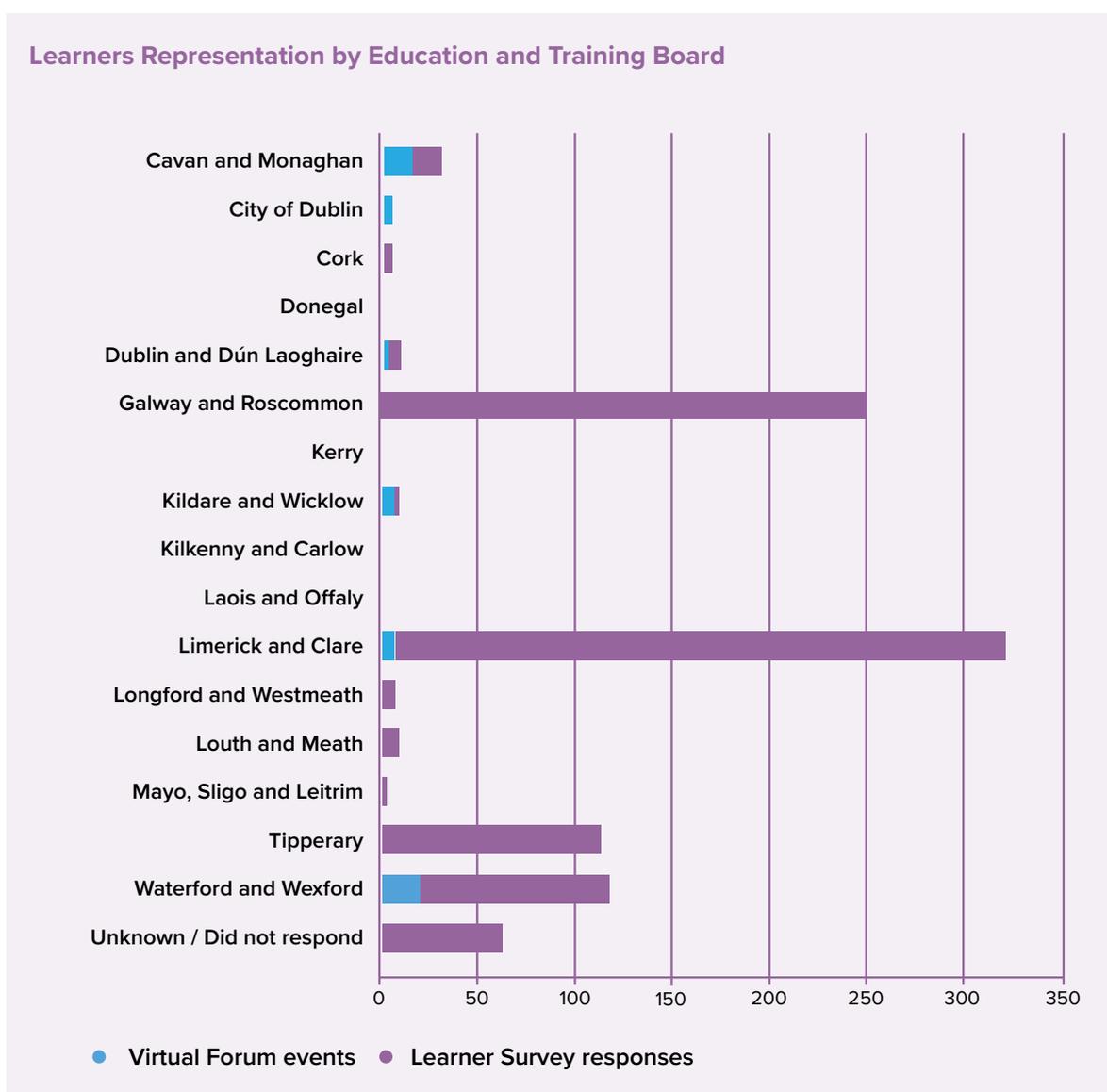


Figure 1: Learner Representation by Education and Training Board in the Virtual Forum and Learner Survey

Learners came predominantly from four Education and Training Boards [Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board (33.9%), Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board (26.2%), Tipperary Education and Training Board (11.9%), and Waterford and Wexford Education Training Board (12.3%). The next highest responses were from Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board (3.3%) and Louth and Meath Education and Training Board (1.1%), with all other Education and Training Boards with lower than 1% response rates. The response rates are most reflective of participation in the Learner Survey. The four Education and Training Boards with the highest return rates promoted the Learner Survey as part of their learner COVID-19 consultation and received reports with results generated specifically to inform the work of their Education and Training Board. The two Education and Training Boards that held regional Forum events (Waterford and Wexford Education

and Training Board, and Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board) also received reports combining their Learner Survey findings with information gathered in Virtual Forum events.

For the Learner Survey, participants were asked to voluntarily provide further details on their course and personal information to give insight into barriers faced by particular cohorts. Table 2, featured below, captures the breakdown of learners by course level according to the National Framework of Qualifications ([Quality and Qualifications Ireland](#)). As you can see, the highest level of participation on the Learner Survey came from learners on Level 5 courses (45.9%), followed by Level 4 (17.2%), Levels 1-3 (14.8%), and Level 6 (8.2%). 12.4% of learners selected “not applicable” and 87 learners did not answer the question.

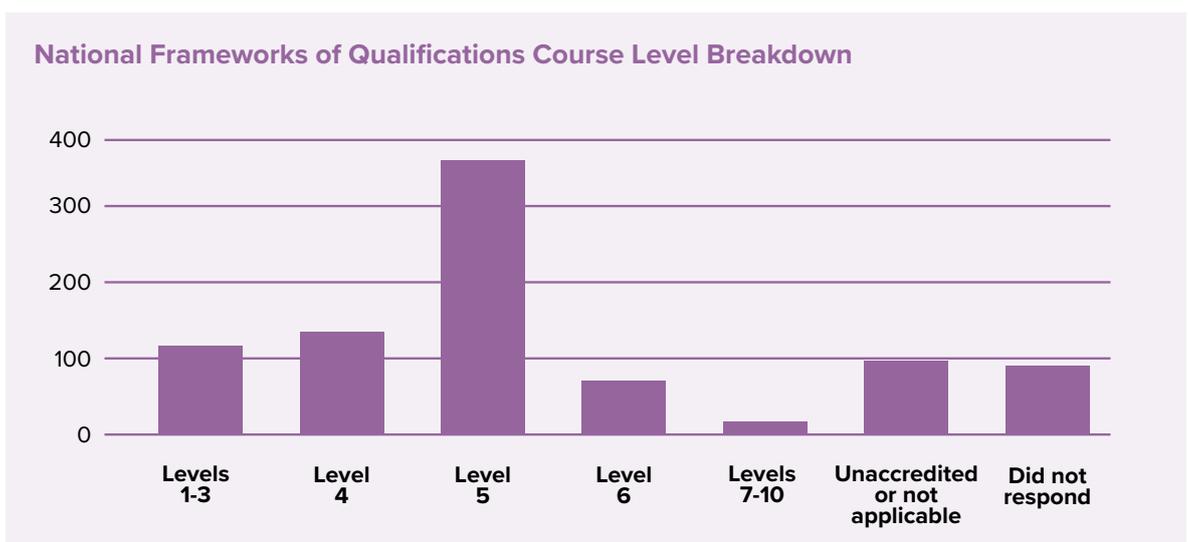


Figure 2: Learner Representation in the Survey by Course Level on the National Framework of Qualifications

At the conclusion of the survey, learners were asked to provide information on their age group, gender and employment status. Since this was a voluntary part of the survey, a number of

learners skipped this section, resulting in a significant unknown category. The breakdown for each, according to the total voluntary responses given, are featured in Figures 3-5 provided below.

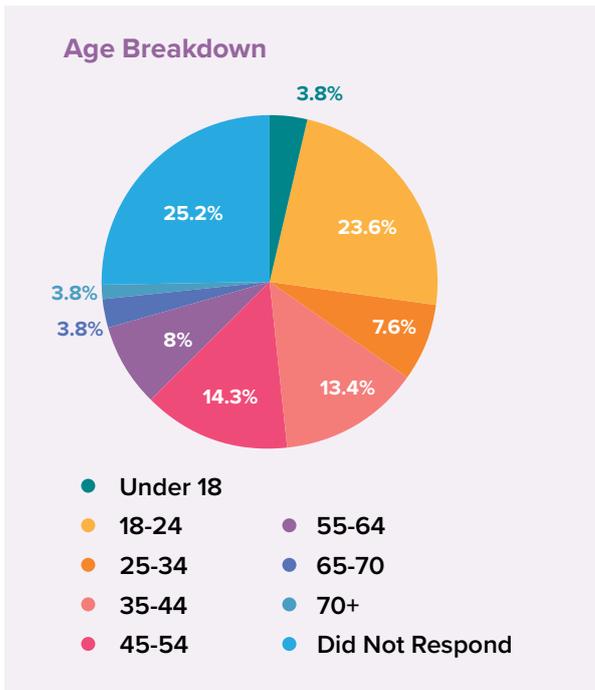


Figure 3: Learner Representation in the Survey by Age Group

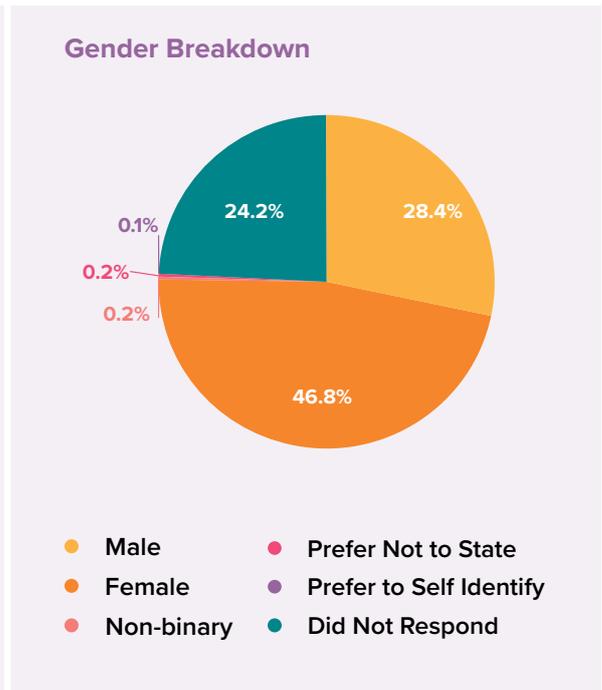


Figure 4: Learner Representation in the Survey by Gender

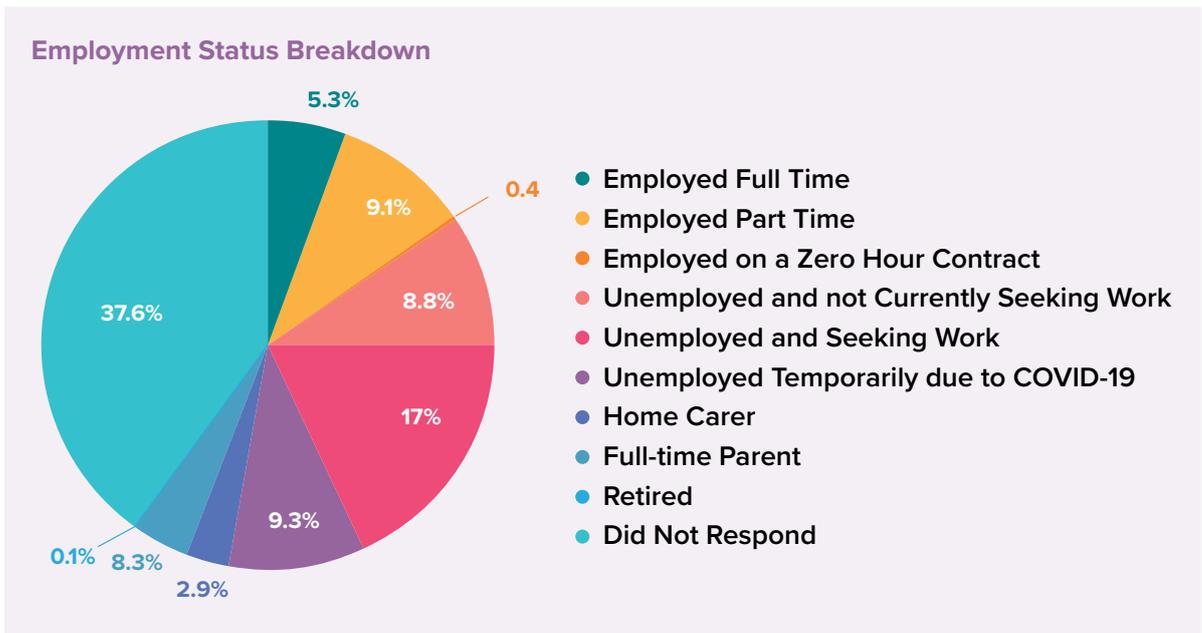


Figure 5: Learner Representation in the Survey by Employment Status

As you can see from Figure 3, the largest age group was learners aged 18-24 (23.6%), followed by learners aged 45-55 (14.3%) and learners aged 35-44 (13.4%). There was a higher percentage of female learners who completed the survey (46.8%) than male learners. The majority of learners (35.1%) identified as unemployed, either temporarily due to COVID-19 job loss (9.3%) or from previous unemployment. Of this group, 17% identified as currently seeking employment.

A number of learners also voluntarily identified as being from one of the learner target groups identified through the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation reaching Target Groups through Community Education (AONTAS, 2018), the National Access Plan (Higher Education Authority, 2018) and the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Learner Cohorts paper (AONTAS, 2020). Figure 6 below shows the numbers of learners featured who identified as being from these groups in the Learner Survey. Where particular

trends relevant to each group emerged through the Learner Survey, additional information according to the responses provided from these groups has been included in the Key Findings section.

It should be noted that this research represents the experiences of only those learners who had the appropriate means to engage, which includes having access to appropriate devices, the time to engage, and familiarity with the Zoom platform. This research illustrates some of the barriers to continuing successful learning during COVID-19, but it does not represent learners who faced barriers to participation in digital forms of consultation such as virtual focus groups and the online survey. The option of printed surveys was offered but none were requested. As such, one of the limitations of this research is that unknown numbers of learners were unable to participate because of a lack of access to the technology and resources necessary, a lack of digital skills, or a lack of access to the time and space necessary to participate.

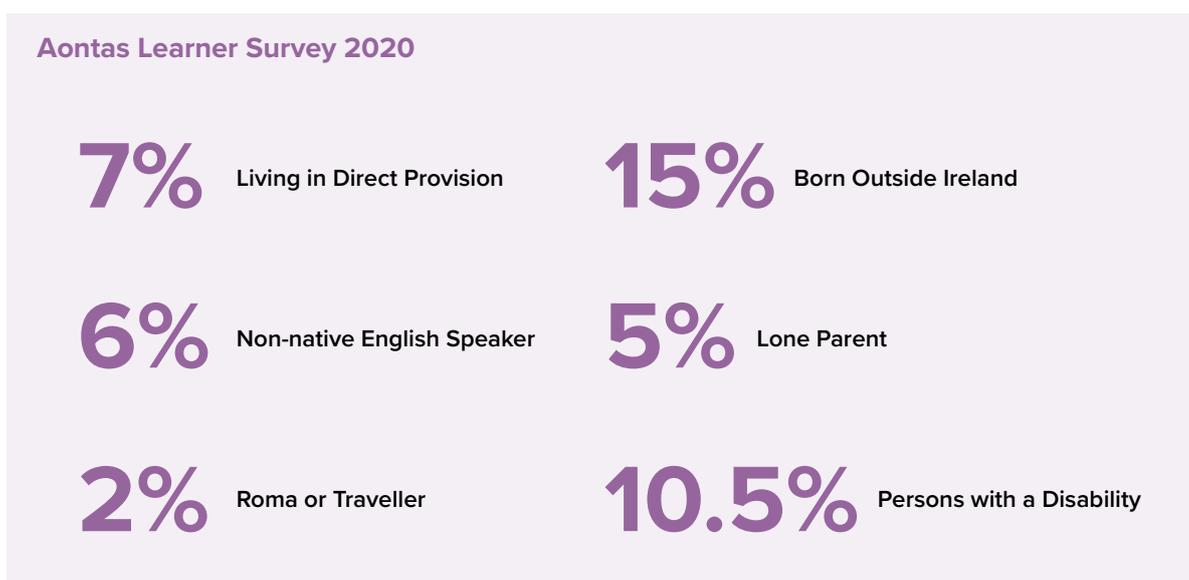


Figure 6: Learner Representation in the Survey by Target Cohorts

KEY FINDINGS

The Key Findings section is broken down into four sections: 1: Learner Engagement, 2: Home Environment, 3: Teaching and Learning, 4: Assessment and 5: Progression. Each section is then subdivided into key themes or trends identified from the Learner Survey and Virtual Forum findings. Each of these themes were used to develop the Executive Summary featured at the start of this report. The information is broken down into further population cohorts only when significant trends relevant to that cohort emerged in Learner Survey responses. Evidence gathered from Virtual Forum events feature largely through the learner quotations provided in this section. To distinguish from written responses provided by learners on the Learner Survey, the source of the quotation is always provided. Where information trends or themes in the Key Findings section link to studies completed by external organisations or bodies, this information has been included to provide a broader context to the findings.

Learner Engagement

Learner engagement remains high and learners are clear on how to continue their learning

The majority of learners who completed the survey (77.3%) remained engaged in online learning through COVID-19 restrictions. Learners responded positively to the statement, “I am clear on how to continue my learning during COVID-19”, with 43.1% of the 800 respondents selecting strongly agree, 40.8% selecting agree, 10.2% selected neutral, 3.6% selecting disagree, and

Learner Still Engaged in Learning during COVID-19

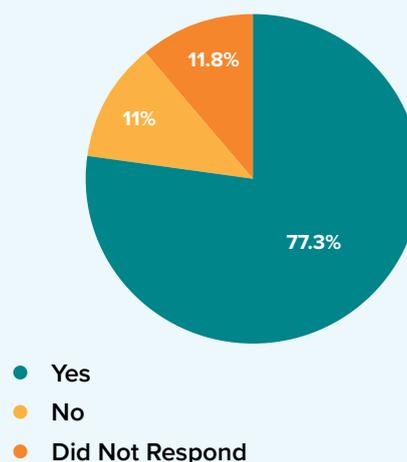


Figure 7: Learners Still Engaged in Learning during COVID-19

1.9% selecting disagree. The majority of learners (79%) felt their individual needs were being met and 85% felt supported to succeed. This was similar for learners who participated in Learner Forum discussions, where all but two learners stated that their courses remained active either through online or remote instruction. Learners described Education and Training Boards playing an active role in maintaining this engagement, with one learner explaining:

“Something they said from the very start is that they want to keep up that contact, and they really have gone above and beyond to do that.”

Learners who were not currently engaged in their courses cited reasons such as not having “the correct software, hardware and internet connection” or indicated that after they were finding it “hard to learn and concentrate at home when there’s no tutor or classmates there.” In one instance, through the Virtual Forum, a learner had indicated that his/her course had simply stopped because the tutor did not have access to WiFi in his/her home. While the learner indicated the Education and Training Board had been in touch about the course, a resolution the issue was never determined, with learners being advised that the class would have to continue the following year.

FET Tutors are “going the extra mile” for learners

The majority of learners surveyed (79.9%) were happy with the level of engagement they had received from their tutors. Tutors were seen as crucial to the success of online learning, with one learner explaining:

“It’s not just any tutor that can bring us through this remote learning experience – it’s a tutor that we know, and that we know has our back and that we can call on any time.”

Another learner echoed this sentiment by saying, “I can’t fault my tutors. From day one it was a case of ‘what can I do for you and when can I do it?’” Learners saw tutors as adapting to their needs. As one learner at a Forum event shared, “I took time off because of mental health. The tutors stayed in touch and they

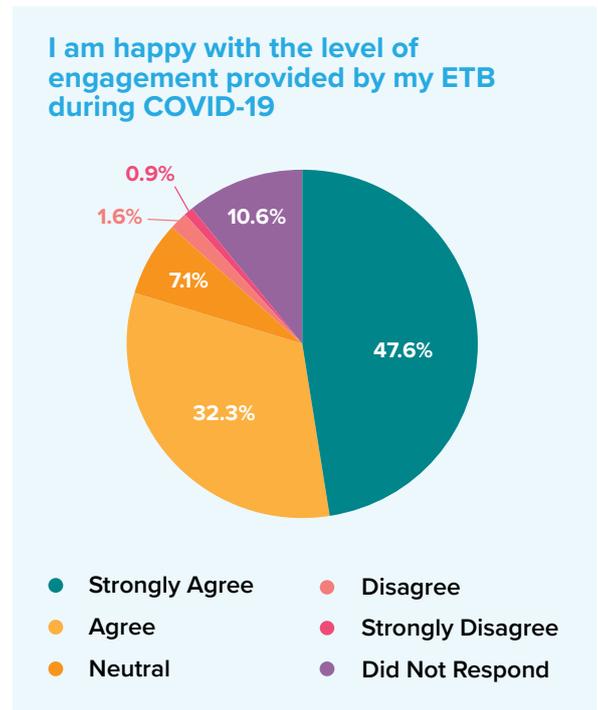


Figure 8: Learner Satisfaction with the Level of Engagement provided by their ETB

were like ‘there’s no rush getting back to it. Take your time.’” The availability and support offered by tutors to FET learners is also reflected across higher education, with 60% of respondents to the USI survey either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement “I had opportunities to engage with my tutor” (USI 2020, p. 10).

Phone and postal communication are more common modes of communication for learners on lower-level courses and in vulnerable learner groups

Email was the primary form of engagement with learners (82%), followed by online video calls (46%), phone (44%), via text message or WhatsApp (38%) and post (21%). Of the learners who selected ‘other’, delivery of materials directly by the tutor was the most common (5). Results showed a relationship between course levels and modes of communication, with

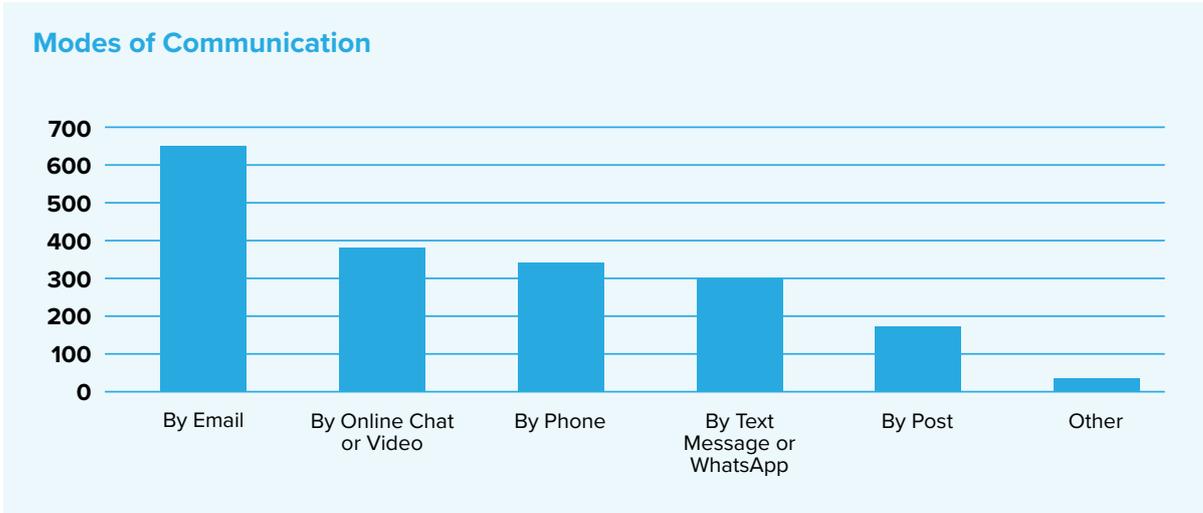


Figure 9: Modes of Communication between ETB and Learner

learners on higher-level courses being more likely to correspond with their tutor by email than learners on lower-level courses. For instance, 91% of learners on Level 5 courses engaged via email, compared to 84% on Level 4, and 72% on Levels 1-3. Learners on Level 4 were more likely to have their work mailed to them by post (40.3%), followed by learners on courses Levels 1-3 (25.7%), and Level 5 (16%).

Phone communication was highest among Traveller and Roma populations (74%), followed by community education learners (67%) and learners in direct provision (50%). It appears that FET learners benefitted from greater communication than students in higher education, as the USI report indicates that only half of students surveyed felt that their college provided them with timely and efficient communication about the move to online learning, and one of the report’s key recommendations is that institutions should put in place more regular communication with students (USI 2020, p. 6).

Home Environment

Access to devices remains a challenge, particularly for Traveller and Roma populations

Of the learners who identified as members of the Traveller or Roma community, 52% reported not having access to a laptop to complete their coursework. 68% also indicated they relied on a mobile phone for their learning. This was higher than the overall survey population that saw 16.5% of the 723 respondents indicated that they did not have access to a laptop or computer and 13.6% relying on mobile phones to complete their assignments.

For learners who did have access to a device, 20.4% indicated that the device was shared. One learner stated, “we have only one laptop and three children using it.” Another learner made a similar statement writing: “not having laptop has been difficult. I’ve had to share my daughter’s phone.” Both the survey and Forum discussions revealed Education and Training Boards made a significant effort to connect learners with devices when a need was identified, particularly

Devices used to complete coursework

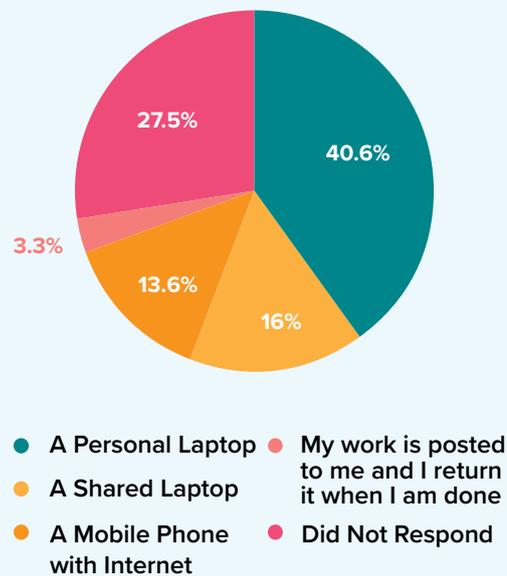


Figure 10: Devices used to complete coursework

with learners completing higher-level courses. Of the 16.5% of learners who did not have access to a laptop or computer to complete their learning during COVID-19, 23.3% of them were offered a laptop by their Education and Training Board. These learners largely were on accredited courses, with 40% of learners on Level 5 courses offered a laptop compared to 18.8% of learners on unaccredited courses. Education and Training Boards made a particular effort to support learners in direct provision centres, with 50% of learners in direct provision indicating that they had been offered a laptop by their Education and Training Board provider compared with 33% of the entire learner survey population.

While learners appreciated the effort to connect them with devices, some expressed concern about their ability to use the device effectively, with one learner in Forum discussions explaining,

‘it’s all well and good having the equipment, but the problem is knowing how to use it.’ This was echoed by another learner who described needing help from his/her daughter to figure out how to use the computer for his/her course.

When asked what could be done to make remote learning attractive to learners next year, increased access to devices and strong WiFi was a common response given by learners on the online learner survey. As one learner summarised, learners will need, “to have good internet, a good device and the skill and knowledge to work it.” Another learner echoed this statement, saying that learners needed:

“The tools and skills to learn online, for example a laptop, good WiFi (Internet-connectivity), the right applications and a good learning platform.”

Mobile phone usage is higher for younger learners and those on lower level courses

Younger learners were more likely to use their mobile device to complete their course work, with 58% of learners under the age of 24 indicating that they kept in touch with the Education and Training Board and completed their coursework on their mobile device. Learners on Levels 1-3 courses had a higher population of learners to whom this applied, with 32% selecting mobile phone as their primary form of engagement. This figure dropped to 27% of learners on Level 4 courses and 6% on Level 5 courses. The highest population, however, was among

learners who identified as taking a community education course, with 36% of learners on community education courses indicating that they rely on a mobile phone with internet for their learning. This was confirmed by similar studies conducted specifically on community education learners, where each found that reliance on a phone for mobile data was a barrier for learners (AONTAS, 2020, p. 8).

followed by Travellers and Roma (4.4%). The suitability of work spaces was also a problem raised in USI’s survey, in which a majority of respondents indicated that their performance at college had worsened as a result of COVID-19 and cited unsuitable work spaces as a significant reason for this change (2020, p. 12).

Travellers, Roma, and learners in direct provision centres need access to appropriate learning spaces

Childcare poses a unique challenge for learners during COVID-19

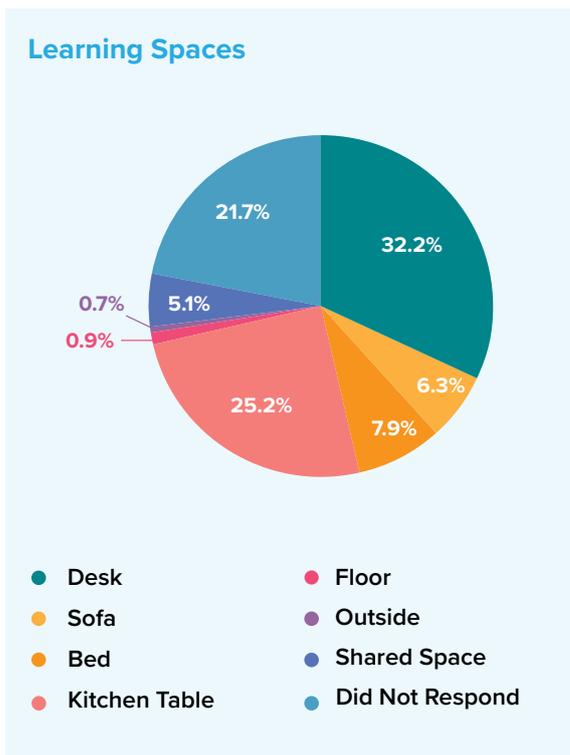


Figure 11: Spaces where learners complete coursework

Learners largely completed their work on a desk (32.2%) or at a kitchen table (25.2%). Of the learner population completing their coursework in a bed (7.9%), on a sofa (6.3%), on a floor (5.1%), the most common group was people living in direct provision (14.7%),

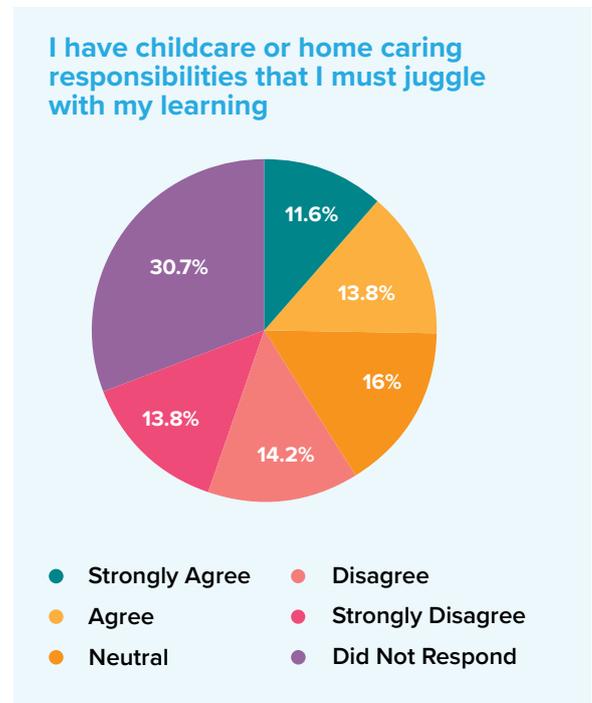


Figure 12: Learners with Childcare Responsibilities

On the survey, 25.3% of survey respondents indicated they were juggling childcare or other home caring responsibilities with their learning, a challenge identified most commonly by women (45%), followed by learners in direct provision (42%). Parents who were now supporting their own children’s school work found they had to balance this role with their own learning. As one learner at a Forum event explained: “I am more worried about my children’s

homework. My focus is there now.” This barrier was similarly identified in the AHEAD survey report, where 52% of learners with disabilities cited distractions/demands at home including childcare and other dependents as the biggest challenge relating to learning at home during COVID-19 (AHEAD 2020, p. 5).

Learners are struggling to maintain the motivation to learn and with the lack of daily structure, particularly those with a disability

The lack of structure and the motivation to learn were raised through Forum discussions. The survey responses revealed this was particularly challenging for learners with a disability, with 47% of learners with a disability answering either strongly agree or agree to the statement “I struggle with a lack of structure to my day” and 39% answering similarly in response to the statement, “I struggle to find the motivation to learn.” These responses were higher than the overall population where 29.5% of learners indicated they agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. These responses echo those in AHEAD’s research, in which 67% of respondents chose “lack of structure to my day and motivation to learn” as the largest challenge to learning from home (AHEAD 2020, p. 25).

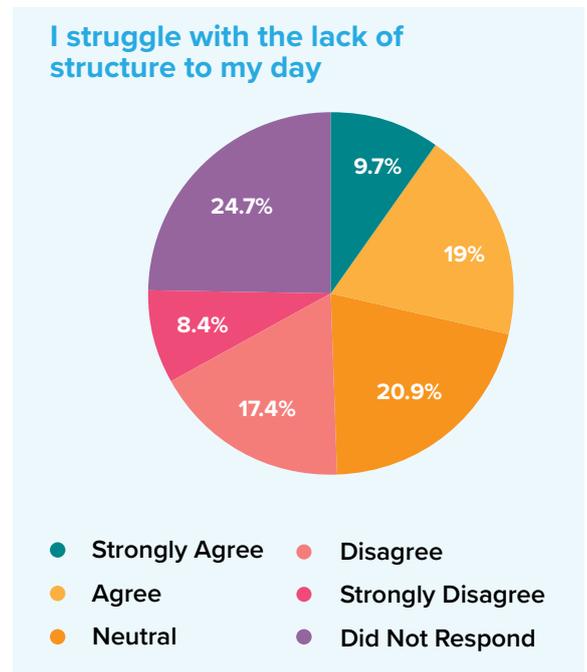


Figure 13: Learner response to change in daily structure

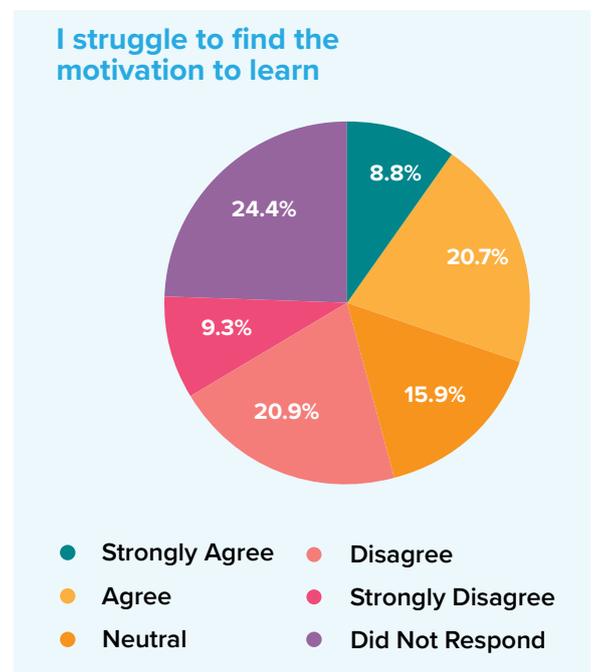


Figure 14: Learner motivation to learn during COVID-19

Learners are struggling with their mental health and wellbeing, with Travellers, Roma, learners in direct provision, and learners with a disability at greater risk

The disruption to learning routines caused by the transition to remote learning was a challenge for some learners. For Travellers, Roma, learners living in direct provision and learners with a disability, reports of increased mental health struggles were evident, with 48% of learners from the Roma or Traveller community, 43% of learners living in direct provision, and 42% of learners with a disability struggling with their mental health because of this crisis, compared to an overall average of 32%. The information reported on learners with disabilities echoes the findings from AHEAD and USI, which found that students with disabilities have been particularly impacted by the lack of structure resulting from remote learning and have suffered from related mental health challenges (AHEAD, 2020, p. 13 and USI, 2020, p. 11, and 17). AHEAD found that learners who have the highest percentage of negative reaction (disagree or strongly disagree) to the statement “I am coping well with learning from home” are those with a mental health condition (67%) (AHEAD 2020, p. 15).

Teaching and Learning

The use of Learning Management Systems in FET remains mixed

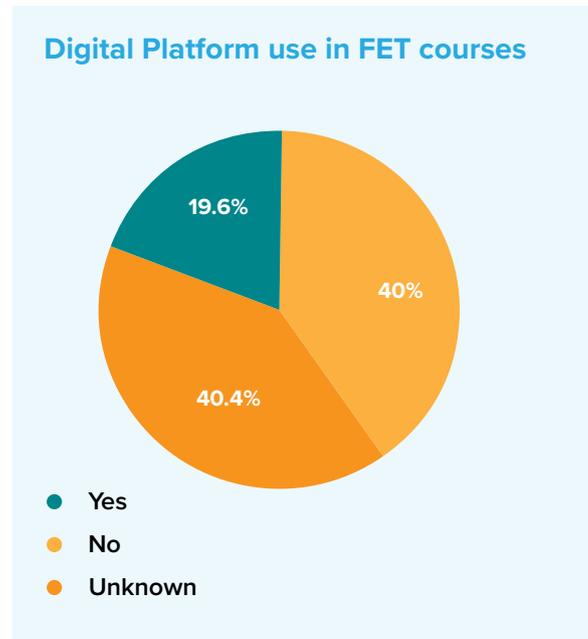


Figure 15: Digital Platform use in FET

Less than half (40%) of the total survey respondents indicated that a Learning Management System or digital learning platform was in use in their course. The most common Learning Management System cited was Moodle (27), followed by Microsoft Teams (23) and Google Classroom (12). A number of learners indicated that their courses were using digital meeting platforms such as Zoom (19) to meet virtually for courses.

In the Forum discussions, learners had similar experiences, with a mix of classes using online digital platforms. One learner reported that their course had moved onto a Learning Management System (e.g Moodle), but because s/he did not know how to use the platform, s/he was unable to engage in this aspect of the course.

Learners stated that further support in learning how to navigate these sites would have been helpful, but acknowledged that the quick transition to online learning meant that providing this support was difficult. They made a point to praise tutors who were making an extra effort to support learners who could not navigate online learning.

Learner satisfaction with online learning decreased at higher level courses

Learners had mixed reactions about the experience of learning from home, with 39.9% of learners stating they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I enjoy learning from home,” 18.4% choosing disagree or strongly disagree, and 21.4% choosing neutral. Learner satisfaction declined at higher-level courses, with 71% of learners on Levels 1-3 indicating they enjoyed learning at home compared to 39.6% on Level 5.

Learners are confident in their digital skills and ability to learn online

Learners felt confident that they had the digital skills required to complete their learning online. 76% of survey respondents felt they had enough digital skills to engage effectively in digital learning. Confidence in the ability to engage with learning was higher among younger learners, with 78% of learners under the age of 24 stating they have the digital skills they need to learn online compared to 66% of learners aged 55 and older.

Through discussions, learners shared that improving their digital skills was a “silver lining” to learning online, with one learner explaining:

“If I want to move forward I have to engage with the technology, so it’s given me a push and that’s not a bad thing.”

It should be noted, however, that all learner responses were gathered through online submission. Therefore, learners who did not have enough skills to engage in online learning may have similarly been unable to complete this survey. In Forum discussions, some learners indicated they had in fact struggled with online learning, with one learner admitting, “it’s really been weighing on me, how am I going to get all this work done on my own?”. Another learner shared how s/he had never used a laptop before and was anxious about her/his ability to complete the work to the same standard as in a classroom setting.

The majority of learners also believed their tutors had strong enough skills to effectively teach online, with 81% choosing strongly agree or agree in response to this statement, 16% choosing neutral, and 3% choosing disagree or strongly disagree. However, in discussions one learner shared that one of his/her modules had “come to a standstill” as the tutor did not have to digital skills to continue the course online. In discussions and through survey responses, some learners indicated they wanted to see tutors have more access to support to teach online. As one learner stated:

“I think our tutors probably had more difficulty than we realise.”

Learners are enjoying the flexibility offered in self-directed learning

When learners were asked the question, “what is working well in the new remote learning context?”, self-directed learning and flexibility emerged as common topics. The ability to “carve out your own time in your day” and “work your learning around your other commitments” were seen as benefits to the flexibility offered in online learning. In Forum discussions learners also described receiving “packs” of learning materials that allowed them to keep working when restrictions first came into place. These learners enjoyed the flexibility offered in this approach, as they could move through the materials at a pace that met their needs.

Learners also felt some of their independent learning skills had increased as a result of learning online. Researching skills, in particular, were mentioned as a benefit of learning from home. As one learner explained:

“I am forced to find the answers more on my own where in a classroom I can ask the teacher, so I guess at home you have to solve the problem alone.”

Other comments from learners linked these newfound skills to increased confidence in their learning abilities, with one learner stating, “I have gained confidence in trying to work problems out when they arise and pushing myself to figure out a task I’m stuck on.” Learners were happy to see themselves rise to the challenge of adapting to online learning in times of COVID-19.

Learners miss the immediate and ongoing feedback provided in traditional classrooms

The ability to answer questions, understand explanations and receive one-to-one support were a common topics in Forum discussions. One learner described being unclear whether or not s/he was on the right track, stating, “it’s hard to know if everyone is keeping on and on the same page.”

Learners made similar points in the Learner Survey, sharing that the pace of the class is difficult to gauge in an online setting. As one learner explained, “I miss the immediate resolution of questions and problems. In a classroom you can ask questions there and then, whereas on the internet you can’t, because you do not want to lose (disrupt) the flow of the lesson being taught.”

Learners miss peer-to-peer learning and social interaction with classmates

During Forum discussions learners regularly discussed how much they missed seeing their classmates. Digital learning was described as “lonely” and “impersonal.” The absence of peer learning was a common theme in these discussions, with one learner explaining:

“We learn more from class discussions and social interaction than anything else. The interaction is part of the learning, so this needs to continue somehow.”

Similarly, in the survey a learner wrote that they missed, “learning from each other and not just from the tutor, learning from everyone’s experiences.”

Even beyond peer learning, learners missed the social interactions and exchanges that were facilitated in face-to-face classroom settings. Writing in the survey, one learner stated:

“I miss the interaction with others. Meeting new and like-minded people who potentially can become friends. Having a classroom of people helps make that connection to others. I miss the feeling of inclusion and being a part of something.”

Learners described missing time spent with their classmates outside of class. One learner stated they missed “the catch up and chat with a cup of coffee at break time”, while another learner missed “mixing with my classmates after class and just having a chat and a laugh.” Engaging in a course had social benefits for learners that were greatly missed during the restrictions.

Assessment

Learners were happy with alternative assessments

Overall, learners were happy with the way in which their assessments were handled during the restrictions. Through the survey, 52.6% of learners indicated that they had been informed of any alternative assessments in a timely manner, 52.9% indicated they felt confident in their ability to complete the assessments put in place, and 50% of learners felt their alternative assessments were fair. Through the Forum discussions

Alternative Assessment Information

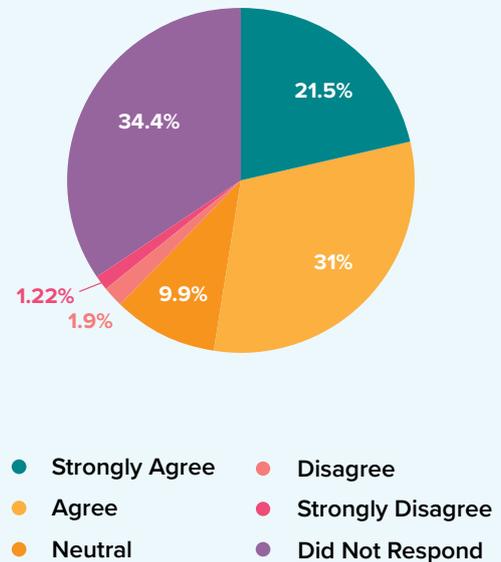


Figure 16: Learner Responses on Assessment Information

Assessment Fairness

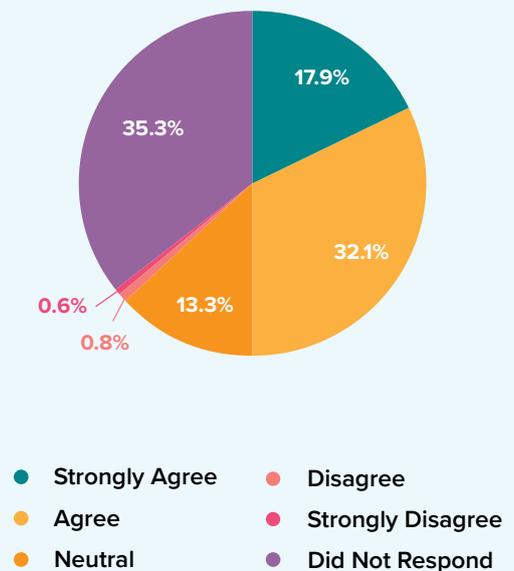


Figure 17: Learner Responses on the Fairness of Alternative Assessments

learners reported that they appreciated the efforts that their tutors had made to accommodate their needs around alternative assessment. As one learner explained, “we were given the option of an assignment instead, and I think that worked quite well.”

Learners who did not feel the assessments put into place met their needs pointed to the change in expectations as the most common reason. This meant that some learners felt they did not do as well in these alternative assessments as they would have in a traditional setting, with one learner remarking, “I only had one exam left and I really wanted something to show for this year.” Revised exam briefs and online classes dedicated to at-home exam preparation were offered to some learners, who found them very helpful. It was recommended that these supports be expanded to all learners taking at-home assessments to help them know what to expect and to prepare for them accordingly. Responses to the statement “I feel the assessments in place will prevent cheating” were the most mixed, with 42.9% of all learners who took the survey agreeing with this statement.

Learners appreciate the options available to them when submitting graded assignments

During Forum discussions, learners praised the various options available to them on how to receive and submit graded assignments. Learners were able to receive and submit work via online platforms, emails and post. One learner was able to screenshot work on their phone and send it to their tutor. Supports were also offered over the phone and via WhatsApp.

Learners would have liked greater clarity on their work placements

Through Forum discussions, learners expressed concern about work placements regularly. While some had been offered alternatives to their work placement, others were uncertain about alternative arrangements. As one learner explained, “I don’t see how it’s going to work, but we also haven’t been given a concrete plan instead, so I feel a bit in the dark.” Another learner who was scheduled to go on a work placement in the next year of his/her course expressed concern that, if this year’s cohort of learners are delayed in doing their work placement, there may be a “knock-on effect” for his/her class next year. Updated information on whether or not work placements will go ahead in the future are required; and, if they will not go ahead, information on what alternative arrangements will be made, would be welcomed by learners looking to complete their courses and progress to their next course.

Progression

Learners feel supported to progress into another course next year

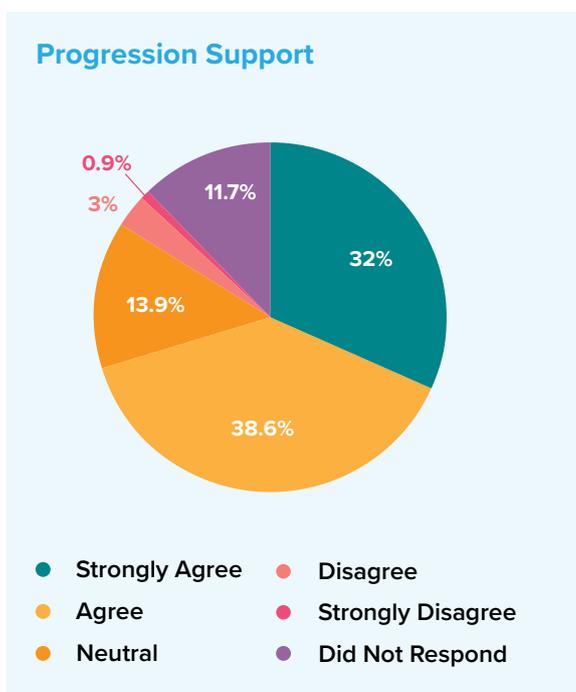


Figure 18: Learner Responses to Progression Support

Through the survey, 70.6% of learners indicated they feel supported to progress onto another course. The highest figures in response to this question came from learners from Roma or Traveller populations (89.5%) and learners on Levels 1-3 courses (87.3%). This figure decreased slightly for learners on Level 5 courses (80.2%). 68% of learners also reported feeling clear on their progression options after completing their current course.

67% of learners who responded to the statement on progression indicated that they would continue digital learning next year if COVID-19 restrictions remain in place or are reintroduced. Through discussions, learners explained that they had mixed feelings about progressing onto another course in September due

to COVID-19, either in a classroom or online setting. One learner stated that s/he would consider deferring for a year if remote learning were to remain in place. This was echoed by other learners, with one learner stating of online learning, “it is okay for now, but not the longterm.” Other learners felt that taking a course online from the beginning would be harder than moving to an online setting having already gained a foundation in the classroom, with one learner explaining:

“For me it would almost be impossible. If I were starting out on a new course in September and under these restrictions, I don’t think it would work for me. It’s okay for now because I know the tutor and I know my group but if I was starting a new course in September I wouldn’t be able to manage the remote thing.”

Other learners cited health concerns, such as having an immune-compromised family member, as a reason to defer for another year if courses return to the classroom. Learners suggested a blended learning method could be introduced, reaching a compromise between classroom and online learning. Learners could attend classes online but also meet up with other learners regularly and, if needed, schedule one-to-one appointments with tutors. With this method, learners could still interact with their classmates and could receive academic support while attending classes remotely.

Learners want to return to face-to-face learning

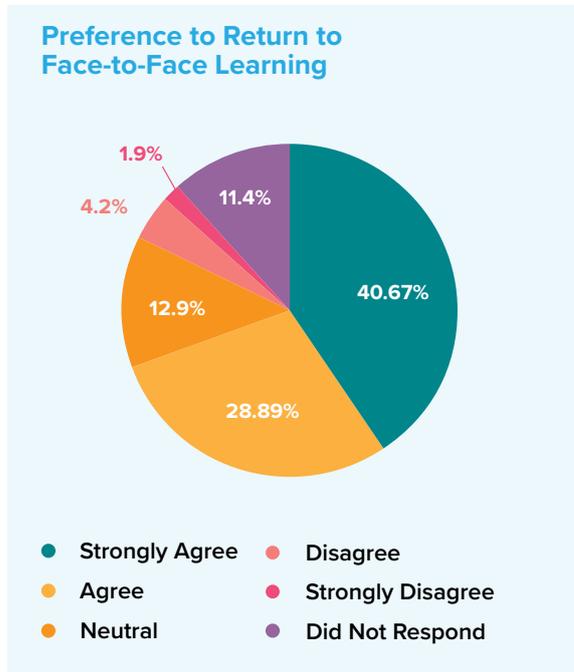


Figure 19: Learner Preference to Return to Face-to-Face Instruction

A significant majority (69.6%) of learners would prefer to return to the classroom as it was before COVID-19. The desire to return to the traditional classroom experience was higher among Traveller and Roma populations, where 84.3% indicated they would prefer to return to face-to-face learning. Most learners (55.4%) indicated they would continue learning online in September if restrictions remain in place. This percentage increased to 79% for learners aged 55 or older. Since part of this group falls into a higher risk health category, the desire to continue learning remotely may relate to this group’s health risk.

Learners would like to see expansion of the use of digital platforms if there is a return to remote learning in the autumn

Although the continuation of remote learning in the autumn would not deter learners from continuing in their courses or beginning new courses, learners would like specific accommodations in place to facilitate more successful remote learning. One learner commented that they were “looking forward to the expanded use of (digital platforms) to enable peer to peer learning.” Only 40% of the total learners who took part in the survey reported that they used a digital platform such as Moodle, Microsoft Teams, or Zoom during COVID-19 restrictions. Learners would like the use of these platforms to be expanded. Learners would also like to see tutors supported in developing their skills teaching online. As one learner commented, “some teachers had excellent ways of teaching us through digital learning, others did not and it was sometimes difficult to understand what exactly they wanted us to do.” Greater familiarity with digital platforms among learners and FET staff would improve learners’ experience of remote learning in the autumn.

CONCLUSION

Overall, learners were satisfied with the level of support they have received from their tutors and Education and Training Boards during the transition to remote learning. Learners felt that tutors went above and beyond in their support and availability to learners. Learners felt that, although face-to-face learning is preferable, tutors have made online learning work well given the significant limitations. Several provisions, such as more training in digital skills, increased financial supports to enable learners to purchase devices, and increased mental health supports, would improve FET learners' experience of remote/online learning in the next academic year. The period of remote learning so far has also provided learners with opportunities to develop skills in new areas. Yet, online learning cannot fully replace face-to-face learning, and often the social and emotional aspects of adult learning have the greatest impact on learners' lives. As one learner concluded:

“It’s the intangible things that people learn. They are the best investment. I hope that is remembered when we go back.”

When the results of AONTAS' COVID-19 learner survey are compared with similar studies on the impact of COVID-19 on learning across further and higher education, it seems that FET learners may benefit in some areas compared

to higher education learners, namely in the level of contact they have had with tutors during remote learning. However, learners and students experienced similar problems across all educational levels and sectors. Most notably, learners and students in all the studies cited above have faced increased mental health difficulties as a result of COVID-19, and learners overall prefer face-to-face instruction to online learning. AONTAS' learner consultation has found that, while learners were overall satisfied with the support they received during the transition to remote learning, learners who suffered from economic disadvantage prior to COVID-19 (namely those in Traveller and Roma and direct provision groups) found these disadvantages to be exacerbated by COVID-19, specifically in relation to their need to access and/or purchase new technology in order to continue their learning. These findings reinforce similar findings in studies across higher education which have found that financially disadvantaged learners have particularly suffered from barriers to accessing resources during the transition to remote learning. The recommendations in this report offer some suggestions as to how these existing educational disadvantages, exacerbated by COVID-19, may be mitigated moving forward into next year. It is important to note that in this time of rapid changes to education, it is essential to continually listen to learners to ensure that learner voice remains at the heart of the future of FET.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Learner Survey

Background

Q1: Education and Training Board

	Please tick (✓) if applicable
Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board	
City of Dublin Education and Training Board	
Cork Education and Training Board	
Donegal Education and Training Board	
Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board	
Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board	
Kerry Education and Training Board	
Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board	
Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board	
Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board	
Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board	
Louth and Meath Education and Training Board	
Mayo, Sligo, and Leitrim Education and Training Board	
Tipperary Education and Training Board	
Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board	

Q2: Course Programme or title (eg PLC, Community Education, VTOS etc).
Please write:

Q3: Course Level (if on an accredited NFQ/QQI course)

Levels 1-3	
Level 4	
Level 5	
Level 6	
Levels 7-10	
non-accredited or non-applicable	

Learner Engagement

Q4: Are you still engaged in your course during COVID-19? If no, please explain.

Yes	
No	

Q5: How has your centre/tutor been in touch with you since the closure of your centre? Please select all that apply.

By Email		By Text Message or Whatsapp	
Online or by Video Chat		By Post	
By Phone		Other (please specify below)	

Please read the following statements on Learner Engagement and tick the response that best represents your views on the statement. (Please tick (✓) one response for each statement).

Learner Engagement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q6: I am happy with the level of engagement I have received from my tutor.					
Q7: I am clear on how to continue my course learning during COVID-19.					
Q8: I feel my individual learning needs are being met.					
Q9: I feel supported to succeed during this time.					
Q10: I am clear on my progression options after completing my course.					

Q11: I feel supported to progress after my course is completed.					
Q12: I still am in regular contact with my classmates.					
Q13: I feel collaborative or peer learning is a part of my course.					
Q14: I would prefer to return to my classroom as it was prior to COVID-19.					
Q15: Any other comments on Learner Engagement:					

Training and Learning

Q16: Are you currently using a digital platform in your course?
(e.g. Moodle, Blackboard, etc).

Yes	
No	

Please read the following statements on teaching and learning and tick the response that best represents your views on the statement. (Please tick (✓) one response for each statement).

Teaching and Learning	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q17: I have enough digital skills to engage effectively in digital learning.					
Q18: I have been provided information on how to use the digital learning platforms used by my course.					
Q19: My tutor has strong enough digital skills to effectively teach online.					
Q20: My digital lessons are engaging and effective.					
Q21: I am confident in the skills I am gaining through my digital learning.					
Q22: I would continue digital learning next year if COVID-19 restrictions remain in place or are reintroduced.					

Q23: Any other comments on Teaching and Learning:

Please read the following statements on assessment and tick the response that best represents your views on the statement. (Please tick (✓) one response for each statement).

Assessment	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q24: I was informed about any alternative assessment arrangements in a timely manner.					
Q25: I feel confident in my ability to complete the alternative assessments in place.					
Q26: I feel the assessments in place will prevent cheating.					
Q27: I feel the assessment in place are fair.					

Q28: Any other comments on Assessment:

Home Environment

Q29: Do you have access to a laptop or computer to complete your work at home?

Yes	
No	

Q30: Did your Education and Training Board or centre offer a laptop or computer to you to complete your work at home?

Yes	
No	

Q31: What device do you use for your work?

A personal laptop (used only by you)	
A shared laptop (used by another member of your household)	
A mobile phone with internet	
My work is posted to me	

Q32: Do you have access to WiFi (internet connection) in your home?

Yes	
No	

Q33: Where do you complete your course work in your home?

At a desk	
On a sofa	
In a bed	
At a kitchen table	
On the floor	
Outside	
Are these spaces shared (used by others) or private (you can work undisturbed)? Please write shared or private.	

Please read the following statements on assessment and tick the response that best represents your views on the statement. (Please tick (✓) one response for each statement).

Home Environment	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q34: I can complete my course work without distraction at home.					
Q35: My internet connection is reliable.					
Q36: I feel comfortable in my learning environment at home.					
Q37: I enjoy learning at home.					
Q38: I have enough time to complete my course work at home.					
Q39: Any more comments on Home Environment:					

Barriers to Learning

Q40: What do you miss the most about your face-to-face interaction on your course?

Q41: What do you think has worked really well during the change to remote learning?

Q42: What would make remote learning more attractive to prospective learners starting a course next year?

Please read the following statements on barriers to learning and tick the response that best represents your views on the statement. (Please tick (✓) one response for each statement).

Barriers to Learning	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q43: There have been significant changes to the educational goals (e.g. learning outcomes) of my course/module.					
Q44: I have a disability and I feel my needs are being met.					
Q45: I need more one-to-one support from my tutor.					
Q46: I have childcare or home caring responsibilities that I must juggle with my learning.					
Q47: I struggle with a lack of structure to my day.					
Q48: I struggle to find the motivation to learn.					

Q49: My mental health is suffering because of this crisis.					
Q50: I lost employment during this crisis and am struggling financially.					
Q51: I am an essential worker and my working responsibilities have increased during the crisis.					
Q52: I have been impacted by health concerns related to the crisis that have prevented my learning.					
Q53: I have experienced bereavement during this crisis that has impacted my learning.					
Q54: Any other comments on Barriers to Learning					

Appendix 2: Learner Survey Data Tables

Learner Engagement

How has your centre/tutor been in touch with you since the closure of your centre? Please select all that apply. (815 responses)					
Word of Mouth	Radio	Government Service (Intreo)	Sign or Poster	TV	Other
25	3	10	11	2	48
How has your centre/tutor been in touch with you since the closure of your centre? Please select all that apply. (815 responses)					
By Phone	By Email	By Post	Online or by Video Chat (eg Zoom or Microsoft Teams)	By Text Message or WhatsApp	Other (please specify)
666	372	361	311	173	30
I am happy with the level of engagement my centre/tutor has provided during COVID-19. (805 responses)					
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
428	291	64	14	8	
I am clear on how to continue my course learning during COVID-19. (800 responses)					
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
345	326	85	29	15	
I feel my individual learning needs are being met. (804 responses)					
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
282	353	110	47	12	
I feel supported to succeed during this time. (802 responses)					
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
347	335	77	32	11	

I am clear on my progression options after completing my course. (796 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
265	356	117	52	6
I feel supported to progress after my course if completed. (795 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
288	347	125	27	8
I still am in regular contact with my classmates. (798 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
284	184	178	104	48
I feel collaborative or peer learning is a part of my course. (786 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
372	201	154	43	16
I would prefer to return to my classroom as it was prior to COVID-19. (797 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
366	260	116	38	17

Teaching and Learning

Are you currently using a digital platform in your course? (eg Moodle, Blackboard, etc).				
Yes		No		
360		364		
I have enough digital skills to effectively engage with online learning. (747 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
233	334	136	39	5
I have been provided information on how to use the digital learning platforms used by my course. (743 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
199	330	154	46	14
My tutor has strong enough digital skills to effectively teach online. (748 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
301	305	117	16	9
My digital lessons are engaging and effective. (738 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
192	308	182	42	14
I am confident in the skills I am gaining through my digital learning. (735 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
189	321	173	41	11
I would continue digital learning next year if COVID-19 restrictions remain in place or are reintroduced. (746 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
211	288	134	70	43

Assessments

I was informed about any alternative assessment arrangements in a timely manner. (590 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
194	279	89	17	17
I feel confident in my ability to complete the alternative assessments in place. (593 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
182	294	88	22	7
I feel the assessments in place will prevent cheating. (583 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
139	247	143	41	13
I feel the assessments in place are fair (582 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
161	289	120	7	5

Home Environment

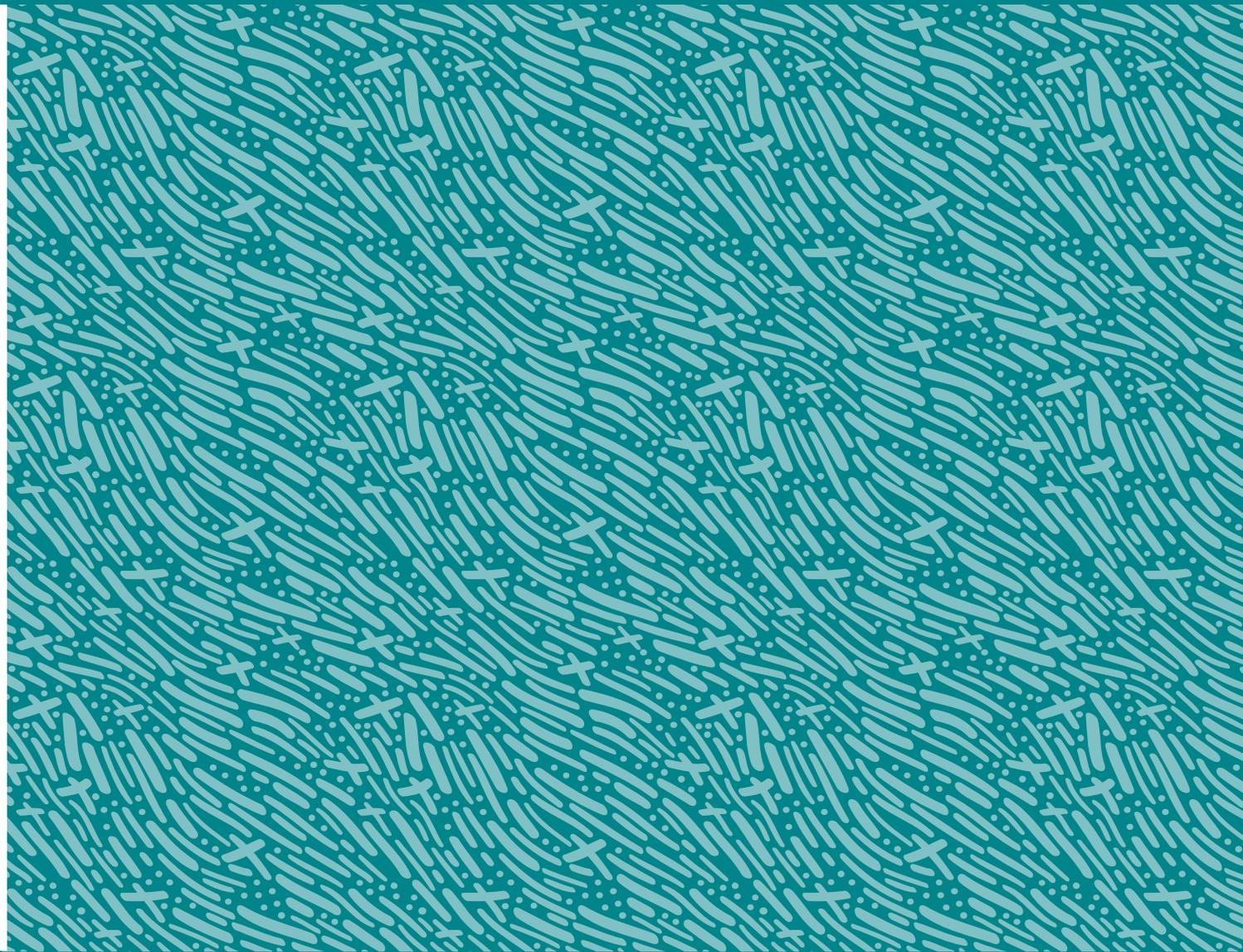
Do you have access to a laptop or computer to complete your work at home? (723 responses)				
Yes	No			
604	119			
Did your Education and Training Board or centre offer a laptop or computer to you to complete your work at home? (704 responses)				
Yes	No			
229	475			
I can completely my coursework without distraction at home. (712 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
143	268	150	99	52

What device do you use to complete your coursework? (706 responses)					
Personal Laptop	Shared Laptop	A mobile phone with internet	My work is posted to me		
356	144	122	30		
Do you have access to WiFi (internet connection) in your home? (718 responses)					
Yes			No		
377			41		
Where do you complete your work in your home? (582 responses)					
Desk	Sofa	Bed	Kitchen Table	Outside	Floor
290	57	71	227	6	8
My internet connection is reliable. (718 responses)					
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
172	301	126	80	39	
I feel comfortable in my learning environment at home. (716 responses)					
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
172	304	145	57	21	
I enjoy learning at home. (718 responses)					
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
137	222	193	113	53	
I have enough time to complete my coursework at home (712 responses)					
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
185	328	121	57	21	

Barriers to Learning

There has been significant changes to the educational goals (eg learning outcomes) of my course/module (665 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
88	228	234	83	32
I have a disability and I feel my needs are being met (558 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
36	92	262	84	84
I need more one-to-one support from my tutor. (665 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
60	152	219	175	59
I have childcare or home caring responsibilities that I must juggle with my learning. (624 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
104	124	144	128	124
I struggle with a lack of structure to my day (678 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
87	171	187	157	76
I struggle to find the motivation to learn (680 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
79	186	143	188	84
My mental health is suffering because of this crisis. (682 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
77	139	171	184	111

I lost employment due to this crisis and am struggling financially. (666 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
36	59	286	263	122
I am an essential worker and my working responsibilities have increased during the crisis (648 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
35	57	296	136	124
I have been impacted by health concerns related to the crisis that have prevented my learning. (663 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
26	72	291	161	113
I have experienced bereavement during this crisis that has impacted my learning. (659 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
19	62	315	143	120



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