



NATIONAL ADULT LEARNER FORUM
LEARNER REPORT 2016

Speak Today, Shape Tomorrow



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Captures the collective views from learner discussions at the National Adult Learner Forum which took place on the 26th February 2016.

INTRODUCTION

SOLAS

SOLAS is the Further Education and Training Authority in Ireland. They work with Education and Training Boards (ETBs) to support the development of appropriate Further Education and Training (FET) programmes across Ireland.

AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

AONTAS is a voluntary membership organisation and we believe that all adults in Ireland have a right to quality learning throughout their lives. We also promote the value and benefits of adult learning. Learners are at the centre of our work and we know that their experiences provide important information which should be used to help change the services and policies which affect their learning. AONTAS regularly consults learners to find out about their experiences of these services, because of this SOLAS has tasked AONTAS to create a National Learner Forum.

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The National Adult Learner Forum

The Further Education and Training (FET) Act 2013 established SOLAS as the national FET authority. The act led to the closure of FÁS, while 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) replaced the 33 Vocational Education Committees (VECs). A five-year strategy and implementation plan has been developed for the provision of FET. SOLAS operates under the guidance of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) with the 16 ETBs they coordinate and fund a wide range of FET programmes.

SOLAS carried out a range of consultations when developing the five-year FET strategy and has previously partnered with AONTAS to ensure that learners had a say in the development of the FET Strategy. SOLAS made a commitment to the learner voice by including **Strategic Objective 3.1: “Respond to the need of learners”** in the strategy. Under 3.1.2a it states that AONTAS will act as the lead organisation to establish a National Learner Forum in 2016 and annually thereafter.

The National Adult Learner Forum is a platform for learners who are currently in FET to come together and have a unique opportunity to influence the FET service based on their needs.

The forum is also a key objective in the AONTAS Strategic Plan 2015-2018, “Learning- A Lifetime’s Work”. AONTAS, in collaboration with key stakeholders, will establish the forum to collect feedback from learners on the effectiveness of FET provision.

FOREWORD

This report documents the outcomes of the first ever National Adult Learner Forum event, held on 26th February 2016 in which you were a participant. This historic event brought FET learners together for the first time, allowing them an opportunity to directly influence FET policy. The national forum coincided with the day of the General Election and 100 years since the Easter Rising. The forum was held in the Round Room of the Mansion House, Dublin. The venue also held the first meeting of Dáil Éireann, adding an extra special sense of occasion for learners.

Outcomes from all discussion sessions held at the forum have been gathered and the feedback was lined up with the five strategic goals of the FET Strategy (2014 – 2019). Two reports were produced to cater for the wide audience who are interested in the feedback carried out at the forum event. This report has been created specifically for you and other learners who attended the forum and it provides an overview of the outcomes and captures what happened at the event in February 2016. A complementary policy report was also published.

AONTAS and SOLAS would like to acknowledge and thank you and every other learner for attending the National Adult Learner Forum in 2016. We appreciate and acknowledge the

huge effort each of you made to attend the forum which was an entirely new experience. The constructive views and feedback on the FET service will now be heard at national policy level and will make a difference to the service in the future.

Also, a sincere thanks to all ETBs for nominating a fantastic range of learners to attend the first forum event, without these strong working relationships we would not have secured such a diverse range of learners to attend on the day. Going forward we look forward to engaging with the newly appointed FET Directors in each ETB in order to welcome a new range of FET learners from across Ireland.

To end on a quote from a learner who participated at the 2016 Forum:

To think that events like today can help shape the future for so many people makes me very proud to be part of it.

Niamh O'Reilly, CEO of AONTAS

What Learners said about the Day:

“
I enjoyed meeting new people, expressing my opinion, being listened to and I was made feel important.
”

“
I enjoyed the wide variety of experiences & people from different backgrounds.
”

“
I think it was brilliant and I am very proud and grateful to have been given the opportunity to take part in it. It's all a life changing experience that I wouldn't change for anything.
”

“
I enjoyed the atmosphere a lot & meeting all these people with their unique stories.
”

“
Meeting people and telling my story - made me realise that my story is important.
”



THE NATIONAL ADULT LEARNER FORUM 2016





Goal 1: Skills for the Economy

The aim of this goal is that Further Education and Training (FET) courses will give you the necessary skills to help you get a job.

Actions under this goal include a new Apprenticeship System and Career Traineeships which have been developed by SOLAS and the ETBs.

The Government has also put in place a number of initiatives such as Intreo centres, JobBridge and JobsPlus to support people into employment.

Learner Feedback

Despite the significant developments within this area, learners at the forum suggested improvements that could be made to enhance their experience of accessing support services, which in turn would allow them to successfully gain skills in order to secure future employment.

Guidance

When asked what they thought was working well within the FET service, learners highlighted the value of guidance before, during and after they accessed a course.

A significant number of learners who accessed the Adult Guidance Services stated that they were extremely useful in providing them with appropriate information on their education and training options. They said that this service encouraged and supported them to take the first step back to education and choose suitable options for progression.

Overall learners agreed that services like this play an important role in the FET system, especially for someone who may have been out of formal education for a long time or who is accessing the FET service for the first time.

RECOMMENDATION:

1. *Ensure every learner has access to adequate guidance services before during and after accessing FET services.*



Accessing FET as an unemployed person

A number of participants at the forum were accessing FET through Employment Support Services and when asked what was not working well within FET they suggested a number of improvements that could be made in this area which include: ensuring that staff within these services have suitable training and clear information on the FET options that are currently available. It was also stated that services could do more to encourage people to return to education. Many identified that education is the missing link for them get a job and relevant FET options should be actively promoted. Some learners also expressed a concern about being placed on courses that did not suit their individual needs.

If you are unemployed, education is the missing link towards employment and this needs more promotion.

A dedicated person or desk for education at every social welfare office to help explain options and fill out forms.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2. Increase communication between Employment Support Services and key FET stakeholders at local level so staff have clear, up-to-date information on the FET options available locally.***
- 3. Improve the customer service experience for learners by providing a greater range of options to choose from and ensuring they are properly matched to courses that suit their specific needs.***
- 4. Establish protocols for interacting with clients to ensure every person who accesses Employment Support Services is provided with clear, concise and relevant information that caters for their needs.***



Goal 2: Active Inclusion

The aim of this goal is that Further Education and Training (FET) courses will support all learners to develop skills to allow them to fully participate in society.

Learner Feedback

Wider Benefits of FET

Learners at the forum talked about the importance of sharing their experience which includes:

- Improved personal wellbeing
- Improved confidence and development
- Increased social inclusion and integration
- Improved mental health

At the forum it was noted that FET provided a supportive space for learners to grow in confidence which greatly improved their general well-being, including their mental health. They also said it had a positive effect on their general attitude and behaviour which resulted in a greater ability for learners to mix with their peers and express their opinions in class.

Learners stated that this increased confidence had also transferred into their family life with a number of participants noting that their experiences encouraged their children to take an interest in their own education.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

5. *Promote the wider benefits associated with FET to learners, eg personal development.*
6. *Encourage social inclusion and integration by providing social spaces for learners in all FET centres to interact outside the classroom.*
7. *Use FET centres to disseminate information about health promotion strategies, eg mental health awareness campaigns.*



My confidence encourages my children to be confident; they are now surrounded by education which encourages them.

When specifically asked about what could be improved in FET a number of participants highlighted the importance of using ‘Plain English’ when providing information or advertising FET opportunities. For example, course/centre brochures should avoid using jargon or academic text. This would also support the recommendations that were made on guidance.

Voices are being heard, they are being listened to which in turn gives the learners confidence and a sense of empowerment and belonging.

Access to FET

Adult learners lead very busy lives and often juggle studies with family life. A number of

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 8. Standardise all information on SOLAS funded programmes into Plain English documents.*
- 9. Provide information on general rights for learners including specific information on the entitlement of learners in their funded programme, and information on the new structures in the FET service.*

learners at the forum were stay at home parents who were not in receipt of a social welfare payment. This group faced other barriers to participation in FET as they were not eligible for certain programmes and/or supports, especially those which required participants to be on a social welfare payment. As there is no independent funding to support them to participate in FET this meant that they had less opportunities and choices to learn.

The issue of availability of childcare was highlighted. Learners noted that childcare options, facilities and funding could be improved in order to support them to continue in FET. Learners said there was little information and awareness on available childcare options.



Learners called for childcare facilities and supports within FET centres.

RECOMMENDATION:

10. Increase childcare supports for learners that need it most and make information on these supports readily available for adult learners.



There is not enough information on childcare availability/options.



English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Access to FET

Some learners at the event were doing English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses. Participants on ESOL courses said they were not getting enough course hours.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 11. Provide more teaching hours and supports for ESOL learners.*
- 12. Due to the complexity of managing classes with such diversity, ESOL tutors require support in terms of smaller class sizes so they can best cater for each learner's needs.*



Time constraints affect the class especially when students don't understand English.





Goal 3: Quality Provision

The aim of this goal is that Further Education and Training (FET) will provide high quality education and training programmes for learners.

Actions in Goal 3 include the establishment of the National Learner Forum, which is being led by AONTAS.

Learner Feedback

Guidance

The theme of guidance was popular throughout the event. Learners continued to highlight the importance of the Adult Guidance Services. This service was viewed as essential in providing appropriate, relevant information to the learner which in turn supported and encouraged progression after completing a course. Learners felt guidance should be provided before, during and after a course to aid this progression and provide ongoing support when required.

RECOMMENDATION:

13. Provide guidance for learners before, during and after their FET programme, including clear explanations of what is expected of them during their particular course; what the course requirements are; what skills / qualifications they will gain; and what opportunities may be available to them upon completion of the course.

Peer and FET Practitioner Support

When participants were asked what was working well in FET, the majority of learners gave positive feedback on the quality of their learning environment. Learners noted peer support as a positive of FET – something that they felt was encouraged within the FET centres. Participants highlighted the benefit of classes which mixed a range of ages and life experiences. It was noted that this, along with an intercultural mix, introduced an additional



level of learning and understanding which led to a more inclusive learning environment.

Learners at the forum also highlighted the important role of FET practitioners or teachers/tutors in the learning process who provided a supportive, inclusive learning environment. Learners said that a trusting relationship between them and their tutor was a great benefit. Learners also said that tutors helped to create a positive learning environment which helped change learners negative thoughts of education based on their previous experiences at school. Learners said that the level of support and engagement from their tutors was invaluable and helped them to finish their course and move on to something else.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 14. Promote peer mentoring within FET provision to support independent learning.*
- 15. Review class-size limits to avoid overcrowding in classrooms.*

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 16. Ensure learners are provided with sufficient levels of support from FET practitioners.*
- 17. Allocate resources for local, regional and national awareness-raising campaigns. This should include open days for specific courses, where learners can meet the FET practitioners and have their questions answered in advance of completing the registration process.*
 - Local campaigns will have most effect if they focus on settings that are regularly accessed by local community members, ie GAA clubs, GP surgeries, libraries, local media outlets, local websites, etc*
- 18. Establish a mentoring programme, whereby adult learners that have completed a specific FET course will mentor a new learner on the same course.*



Goal 4: Integrated Planning and Funding

The aim of this goal is that Further Education and Training (FET) courses will be planned and funded to cater to your needs.

SOLAS have launched the new Further Education and Training Course Hub (FETCH) website which allows learners to access information on over 4,000 Further Education and Training opportunities throughout the country.

Learner Feedback

Learners highlighted the value of progression within and from FET and recognised that there is a large range of FET opportunities and routes available. It was also noted that access courses provide a great foundation of learning and helped learners slowly integrate into a learning environment. The challenges of accessibility to FET for adults in rural areas were also identified at the forum.

Access and FET

Learners said that they want to be consulted about the planning of courses in order to provide a variety of choices that suit their needs. It was also mentioned that eligibility criteria for some courses is creating barriers to accessing FET, such as age restrictions and/or length of time on the live register.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 19. Strive to provide consistent course choice and availability across Ireland, where feasible.*
- 20. Review the eligibility criteria for FET courses, particularly in relation to age restrictions and length of time unemployed.*



RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 21. *Provide assessments before a course begins to assess each learner's level and ensure they are placed in an appropriate class grouping.***
 - *Provide inductions for learners before entering a course***
 - *Facilitate learners to switch between programmes (eg BTEI and VTOS) if it emerges that they are unsuited to their original selection***
- 22. *Ensure that locations where FET is provided meet the legal requirements in terms of disability access and health and safety (including fire regulations).***
- 23. *Ensure learning environments are equipped with the necessary facilities and resources for both FET practitioners and learners, and that courses are offered in settings that are accessible for adults.***
- 24. *Develop more e-solutions for learning, such as Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).***

Planning FET in Rural Ireland

Learners at the National Adult Learner Forum highlighted the challenges of rural disadvantage in Ireland. They specifically mentioned limited course choice and frequency in rural areas as well as further distances to travel to access centre. This resulted in additional expense for the learner. Learners in rural areas raised concerns regarding Wi-Fi. This is an important issue but is not one that can be addressed by the FET Strategy, this needs to be looked at in terms of the National Broadband Plan.



RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 25. Undertake a review of gaps in FET provision in rural centres, with a view to increasing the availability and frequency of adult learning programmes, where feasible.**
 - *The review should include a focus on the locations of rural centres, with the aim of ensuring centres are accessible by public transport, where feasible*
 - *Where necessary, provide travel allowances for rural learners and other learners who may require extra support with travel*
- 26. Ensure all FET centres are equipped with appropriate learning resources for learners.**
- 27. Ensure good working internet connectivity in FET Centres.**

Additional Points:

Resources

Resources were noted as a key support for learners in FET and were essential for successfully completing a course. IT resources such as dedicated computer rooms were identified as important for learners to access and complete course work. Some learners also said that their centre buildings did not provide an adequate space for them to learn. Peer support was identified as a positive part of returning to FET and learners said they would like more spaces in their centres to meet and socialise with their peers.

Travel Allowances

Learners at the forum event spoke a lot about the supports that they needed in order to access a course. Although travel expenses mostly affected rural learners it was also mentioned as an issue for urban learners. Both groups said that limited public transport options, greater costs and limited travel allowances as barriers to accessing their FET courses.



Goal 5: The Standing of FET

The aim of this goal is to ensure that Further Education and Training (FET) is valued as an option for learners and that it will lead to good employment, career and personal options for you.

A number of developments have taken place, with the aim of highlighting FET as a valuable option for learners. This includes the launch of the [Fetchcourses.ie](https://www.fetchcourses.ie) website which promotes the wide range of FET courses available to learners.

Learner Feedback

Standing of FET

Learners that took part in the National Adult Learner Forum event are currently accessing SOLAS funded FET programmes and noted the benefits of returning to education and training. Learners felt the lack of visibility of some centres limits FET reach and means that FET is not a considered option compared to other formal education settings.

A number of learners also said that they were not clear about the recent changes in the sector including the dissolution of the VECs and FÁS, the creation of ETBs, SOLAS, and QQI and the respective roles of these new organisations. This left them unsure about who was providing courses and most importantly where to get information.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 28. Standardise all information on SOLAS funded programmes into readily accessible, Plain English documents, with a specific focus on explaining new structures in the FET service (eg SOLAS, QQI, and ETBs).***
- Make information available in a range of local settings, eg libraries, GAA clubs, GP surgeries, etc. in order to reach as many prospective learners as possible.***

EVENT

The National Adult Learner Forum Event

The first National Adult Learner Forum took place on Friday 26th February in the Mansion House, Dublin. Through the nomination process, 80 learners were nominated by each ETB and by a number of community education centres across Ireland.

70 learners attended the forum to discuss their achievements and challenges in Further Education and Training (FET) and have their say on the FET service.

Learners at the forum represented a variety of SOLAS funded FET programmes and this ensured a good spread of urban and rural participants to capture the broad spectrum of learner experiences. Learners had their say on the FET service through group discussions, sharing their stories, creative workshops and feedback forms. Learners also got the opportunity to hear speeches from AONTAS and SOLAS but also other adult learners who shared their stories to encourage those in attendance to speak about their experiences as learners in FET.

Here are some highlights of the speeches shared with attendees of the forum:

Niamh O'Reilly – AONTAS CEO



AONTAS carried out various background work in preparation for the forum. Key priorities that learners, practitioners and stakeholders wanted from the forum was:

- Meaningful representation
- To identify models of best practice of learner voice
- The forum built from the ground up

AONTAS will work hard to develop the forum and ensure that these priorities are met, however these priorities can only be successful with the help of learners. AONTAS believes it is vital for learners' to share their own learner story as it has the power to affect change on both personal and social levels, such as encouraging another person back to education or influencing FET policy based on learners views.

The National Adult Learner Forum's slogan embodies the power of the learner voice and aims to encourage learners to use their voice to affect change: *"Speak today, Shape tomorrow"*

Una Buckley – Adult Learner

For many adult learners, we did not have the chance to take the conventional route through education. We took the long and winding road or 'scenic route' back to education. But I am proof that it can be done! I have now completed a degree in All Hallows and graduated last December. I proved you don't need a super brain you just need the will and desire to do it. I finally obtained my 'deferred dream'.



Alan Hand – Adult Learner, Laois and Offaly ETB

There has been a quiet revolution going on around the country in the field of adult education. Adults the length and breadth of this country are going to their local ETBs, they're putting their names down for courses, they're looking at their options. Adults are not taking their situations lying down, they're upskilling, they're getting new qualifications and they're preparing themselves for future employment opportunities.

"There's an old Irish phrase and it goes like this: Beidh an lá eile againn ag an aonach, which means we'll have another day at the fair- essentially a second chance."



Joan Clarke – Adult Learner, Galway and Roscommon ETB

I was too scared to go to college because I thought I would fail, just like I had failed at school. Some colleges supply interpreters for deaf students but that doesn't happen all the time because of lack of funding. I went to Galway & Roscommon Education and Training Board (GRETB) and did a community education course which supplied interpreters for deaf learners. All the learners in my group were deaf and I really enjoyed the course.



“ *I feel like I have a place in life and a journey to begin.* ”

Christy Kenneally – Guest Speaker

I wonder what people said to you when you said: “I’m going back to education”...of course we should not say going back, we should say, going forward. I suspect you may have heard some version of one of the following: “why bother?”, “Why go to the trouble?” or “Where do you think this is going to take you?” This misses the point, the real answer has to be: “I am doing this for myself, I am doing this for me.”

“The learner is somebody who lifts their wings, where the wind will take them nobody can say, but the adventure is everything when it comes to learning.”



Workshops

The workshops used different learning styles and creative practices to encourage learners to use their voice to share their learner story. The workshops used alternative ways to vocalise and verbalise the learner experience and encourage meaningful discussion amongst learners.

The four workshops at the forum were based on the following learning styles:

Workshop 1: Reading and Writing Skills: Creative Writing

Workshop 2: Kinesthetic Skills: Arts and Crafts

Workshop 3: Visual Skills: Media Skills

Workshop 4: Auditory Skills: Public Speaking



NEXT STEPS

It is important to note that this is the first year of the National Adult Learner Forum which is included in the FET Strategy 2014-2019. The forum will develop and become more representative throughout its lifetime.

SOLAS and AONTAS are working towards ensuring the forum is representative of all FET learners in order to build and maintain a strong level of feedback on the FET service. This will help ensure learners are supported with the best policy and practice.

The new appointment of FET Directors in each ETB plays a pivotal role for the future of the forum, offering greater access to a wide representation of FET learners in SOLAS funded programmes. SOLAS and AONTAS will develop a strong link with the new FET Directors in order to inform them of the work and enhance representation at future forum events.

**THANK YOU
FOR SHARING YOUR VOICE**





SOLAS

An tSleibhís Oideachais Léarnúnaigh agus Scileanna
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