



NATIONAL FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING LEARNER FORUM 2018 LEARNER REPORT



ABBREVIATIONS

CDETB	City of Dublin Education and Training Board
DDLETB	Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board
DEASP	Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DETB	Donegal Education and Training Board
ESF	European Social Fund
ETB	Education and Training Board
FET	Further Education and Training
GRETB	Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board
KCETB	Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board
KETB	Kerry Education and Training Board
LWETB	Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board
MSLETB	Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
NFLF	National Further Education and Training Learner Forum
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RPL	Recognition of Prior
WWETB	Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board

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ORGANISATIONS

AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

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 almost 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.

SOLAS

Established in 2013, SOLAS (The Further Education and Training Authority, An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna), is the State Organisation responsible for funding, planning and coordinating Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland. Its mission is to fund, co-ordinate and monitor a range of FET provision to ensure economic and social wellbeing and to play its part in progressing, influencing and supporting the development of a FET sector that is more responsive to the needs of learners and employers, is innovative, flexible and demand-led. Its vision is to achieve a well-recognised FET sector, valued for its quality and for delivery of education, training and skills that enables learners to succeed in the labour market and thrive in society. The core principals of SOLAS are to:

- ensure there is robust intelligence to inform the planning, funding and design of new and existing FET provision;
- focus on adding value by fostering collaboration across the FET sector, sharing learning and empowering delivery organisations;
- promote innovation and fund provision that meets identified need;

- be open to new ideas, proactive in seeking out evidence of ‘what works’ in FET and ensure that the learner experience is at the centre of decision-making; and
- maintain a central focus on standards and quality in FET, including excellence in programme development and the on-going professional development of the FET workforce.

Education and Training Boards

Education and Training Boards (ETBs) are statutory authorities which have responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. ETBs manage and operate second-level schools, further education colleges, multi-faith community national schools and a range of adult and further education centres delivering education and training programmes.

ETBs are active in local communities through the direct provision of training and education programmes delivered in training centres, colleges and other training and educational settings. In this way, ETBs seek to make a real difference to the lives of the people they serve. Such responsiveness continues to be the hallmark of the education and training boards sector, looking outward nationally and internationally, while servicing education and training locally and individually.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Learners

We would like to start by thanking all the learners who participated in National FET Learner Forum events. It is your voice that serves as the foundation of this project. Each participating learner volunteered their time and shared their voice to help build a more democratic, inclusive, and improved FET system. Your stories and experience will help improve the experience for learners entering FET after you. For this, we thank each of your efforts.



SOLAS and the European Social Fund (ESF)

The National FET Learner Forum is a partnership project between AONTAS, SOLAS and ETBs across the country. SOLAS, in collaboration with AONTAS, initiated the project as a key action of the 2014-2019 Further Education and Training Strategy and, since 2016, has funded AONTAS to host Learner Forum events and develop reports after events take place. The project is co-funded by the European Social Fund, as part of the ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014-2020. The ESF is the European Union's main financial instrument for supporting employment and promoting economic and social cohesion in EU member states. This project could not occur without the support of the Government of Ireland, via SOLAS, and the European Social Fund.

Education and Training Boards (ETBs)

The National FET Learner Forum is a partnership project between AONTAS and ETBs across the country. To the ETBs who volunteered to host regional events this year, your commitment to listening to learners in your ETB is evident through your continued support of this project. We appreciate the time and efforts you put into organising these events.

Each ETB nominated (a) Key Contact(s) who helped to deliver these events. Without their support and coordination these events would not be possible. We would like to thank you for your continued support of this project and the promotion of learner voice in your ETB.

Advisory Group

We would like to thank the National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group. This group consists of two former learners, a FET Director and representatives from SOLAS, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP), the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and the Department of Education and Skills (DES). Their guidance and recommendations along the way helped this project expand in a meaningful way. This research is largely possible through their continued support.

Academic Expert Group

We would also like to extend our appreciation to the Academic Expert Group. This group is made up of European learner voice experts. Their input provides an intellectual framework to the project. We would like to thank the Academic Expert Group for their guidance and commitment to this project.

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This report brings together findings from each of these events. It provides an overview of what learners said at each 2018 Forum event, by showcasing the most common recommendations that appeared in each of the 2018 reports.



What is the Forum?

The National FET Learner Forum is a series of national and regional events that bring learners from participating Education and Training Boards (ETBs) across the country together to ask their views on FET. This is the third year the Forum has been delivered and since its launch it has reached 919 learners. The project, which is funded by SOLAS and the European Social Fund, is delivered by AONTAS. The Forum is part of a national strategy that brings learners' voices into the FET review and planning process.

This year, the Forum had significant growth. 595 learners shared their voice through one NFLF national event in Croke Park, Dublin, and nine NFLF regional events. The regional events were held at the following ETBs:

- City of Dublin ETB
- Donegal ETB
- Dublin and Dún Laoghaire ETB
- Galway and Roscommon ETB
- Kerry ETB
- Kilkenny and Carlow ETB
- Longford and Westmeath ETB
- Mayo, Sligo, and Leitrim ETB
- Waterford and Wexford ETB

How does the National Further Education and Training Forum work?

Besides the planning of each event, there are three simple steps involved in the Forum.

Step 1: Learners Discuss

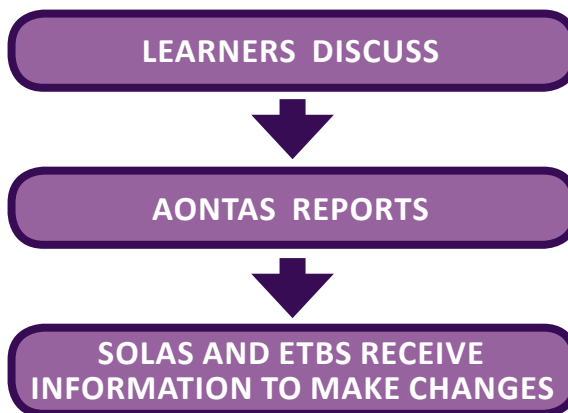
At each NFLF event, learners break into small discussion groups and answer two key questions:

Question 1: What was your experience entering Further Education and Training?

Question 2: How has your Further Education and Training programme met your needs as a learner?

These discussions are recorded for reporting purposes. At the end of each event, learners also answered a short questionnaire that asks specific questions on the following topics:

- transportation
- FET advertisement
- information received about FET courses
- previous learner recommendations
- engagement with learners' ETB
- course assessment



Step 2: AONTAS Reports

After each event, AONTAS creates a report for SOLAS and the participating ETBs. AONTAS analyses the responses to discussion questions and surveys. These findings are then broken down into two categories: areas working well and areas for improvement. These categories are described in a longer detailed findings section that uses learner voices to explain each area. These reports are sent to participating ETBs and SOLAS.

Step 3: SOLAS and ETBs Receive Information to Make Changes

SOLAS and ETBs use these reports to gather insight on learners' experiences in FET. They use learner recommendations to improve FET service moving forward.

LEARNER RECOMMENDATIONS

There were 10 learner forum events in 2018, held in different locations across the country, resulting in a total of 76 hours of learner discussion. At each event learners discussed 'areas working well' and 'areas for improvement'. The tables below are a summary of the results from all 10 events. Each topic is assigned a number, which represents the number of learner forum events where each topic was raised. The highest possible number is 10, as there were 10 events in 2018. These numbers do not represent the importance learners assigned to different topics but they help us to see what topics were raised by learners at multiple events around the country. Topics that were raised at an equal number of events are listed in alphabetical order.

It is important to note that some of the issues raised by learners are outside the control of ETBs, including issues related to job seekers' payments, Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection policies, travel and accommodation allowances, and attendance policies in European Union funded programmes such as adult literacy. Although ETBs do not have the power to make changes on these issues, they have been included in this report to remain true to the voices of the learners who raised them.

AREAS WORKING WELL

AREAS WORKING WELL		
TOPIC	FREQUENCY	STATEMENT
FET Tutors	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners feel FET tutors and ETB staff promote a culture of respect, equality and fairness that helps make ETBs an open and welcoming space for learners • Learners believe FET tutors go above and beyond in supporting individual learner development
Transformative Learning	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners feel that their courses have increased their confidence, expanded their everyday skillset, and improved their overall wellbeing
Employability	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners believe FET courses increase employability and earning potential
Guidance	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners who used guidance services found these supports very helpful
Peer Learning	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners believe that peer learning is a positive and well-received aspect of FET learning as it plays a valuable role in fostering a positive learning community

AREAS WORKING WELL

AREAS WORKING WELL		
TOPIC	FREQUENCY	STATEMENT
Social Integration	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Learners feel that FET plays an active role in combating isolation and promotes equality, making it an important vehicle of social integration
Individualised Learning	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Learners argued that the smaller class sizes and individualised instruction provided by FET tutors promote learner success
IT Skills	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Learners believe FET courses improve IT skills, which improves overall life experiences
Word-of-Mouth Referrals	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">A number of learners found their course through a referral from a family member or friend and current FET learners would recommend their course to a friend

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT		
TOPIC	FREQUENCY	STATEMENT
Work Placements	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ETBs should provide learners with a list of local employers willing to take on work placement learners • ETBs should support learners on a work placement by: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) developing a work placement agreement, where applicable and where it is possible to do so, between the learner, employer and ETB that clearly outlines the responsibilities of each party 2) ensuring learners are filling roles on their work placements in order to gain necessary skills 3) ensuring work placement supervisors are trained in, and uphold, the values of FET
FET Facilities and Environment	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure facilities in ETBs are functional and accessible • Provide the most up to date software and equipment to relevant courses in each ETB • Address any disparities in facilities and physical environment between FET centres
National Framework of Qualifications Awareness	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners would like ETBs to promote awareness of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) framework and its connection to learner pathways in FET.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

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TOPIC	FREQUENCY	STATEMENT
Progression	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide learners with information available on all progression routes available after completion of a course (ie employment options, access to higher education, other FET courses, etc) and provide guidance supports to learners seeking these pathways • Increase funding and pathways for FET learners into higher education
Recognition of Prior Learning	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broaden Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes that allows learners to receive formal validation of their previous skill set, which in turn, allows them to access courses more relevant to their individual needs
Additional Course Cost	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide learners with an estimate of all costs required for course materials (ie iPad insurance, uniforms, etc) at the start of a course
Course Scheduling and Types of Courses	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure courses are assigned as early as possible • Increase the amount of flexible courses made available to learners (ie non-accredited learning, part-time learning, etc)

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT		
TOPIC	FREQUENCY	STATEMENT
DEASP	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ETBs should work collaboratively with the DEASP to promote: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Learning Pathways: provide clear access routes and timelines for course enrolment 2) Informed-learner choice: refer to a FET course that meets their individual needs 3) Retention: clear on information required to complete a FET course
Travel and Accommodation Allowances	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a new system for travel and accommodation allowances so that 100% of learners' travel and accommodation costs are covered while they are studying on a FET course
Advertisement	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diversify and increase forms of advertisement, while ensuring all information is linked and up to date (examples of further advertisement include delivering a public taster course; increasing local newspaper and radio advertisements; adding information into parish newsletters; and implementing a learner ambassador programme)
Attendance	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners would like a more flexible attendance policy that does not result in cuts to their social welfare payments for uncertified absences beyond their control
English Language Supports	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase the amount of time allocated to English language support

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

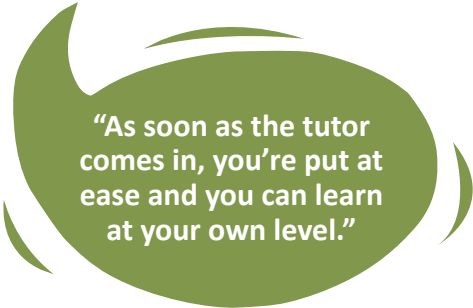
AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT		
TOPIC	FREQUENCY	STATEMENT
Technology	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase the use of non-digital classroom resources and ensure learners who need support using required digital resources receive it before assignments begin• Ensure learners are well supported during virtual learning
Childcare	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reduce barriers for parents entering FET by increasing childcare supports and increasing more flexible course options

WHAT DID LEARNERS SAY?

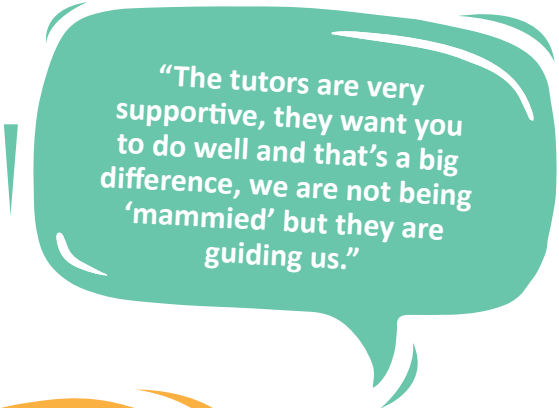
All of these categories come from statements provided by learners. Featured below is a sample of some of the quotations used to form each category.

AREAS WORKING WELL IN FET

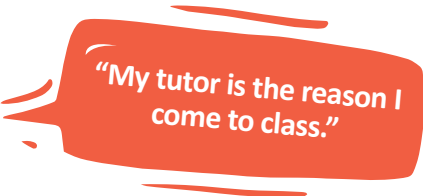
FET Tutors



"As soon as the tutor comes in, you're put at ease and you can learn at your own level."



"The tutors are very supportive, they want you to do well and that's a big difference, we are not being 'mammied' but they are guiding us."



"My tutor is the reason I come to class."



"The tutors and the students are amazing."

Transformative Learning

"It was definitely positive. It's good for your own personal being. It makes you more confident."

"I think they should recognise the invaluable contribution to the wider environment, because it's so good for people's mental health, physical health, and general wellbeing. Plus if you think of a child looking at their parents as role models, learning becomes a path for life not just academic levels."

"An excellent facility to help a person in their personal development."

"It helps with mind, body, and soul."

Employability

"Our tutor will bring us to local employers. There are a few other lads there now. He brings you up and introduces you to people."

"When I came here to Ireland, I had no choice. I could not speak English and the first time I worked, I was a cleaner because what can you do if you can't speak? Later on, I went and I started to speak a little more and more....Now I can work with people, with the customers, and now I can find a really good job which I like."

Guidance

"It helped, just sitting down and asking what you did and how it benefited you. They asked if there were any obstacles that were in your way previously, and brainstormed ways to avoid them."

"Our career guidance would be able to help us on our course."

"The course is good for networking. There's loads of different car manufacturers out there and some I am not used to working on, but the lads down in my class, they would know. If I'm ever stuck with a problem, I can ring them. It helps you get the extra bit of information if you are stuck."

"The thing about adult education is everybody learns from each other so even the tutors are learning. It's not like the teacher telling you what to do."

Social Integration

"Well that is the benefit for me as an older person. Just being in the classes with younger people."

"It is perfect, it is brilliant, it's excellent, I love it. It's easy to join the course. I got a chance to link my education in my country with my previous education in Europe. I now have the community experience."

"I will include myself in social integration because, as a foreigner, it was a way for me to practice English and to learn more and to meet people from other countries and start to have a little web of people."

"You're getting integrated into the community. You feel part of something."

Individualised Learning

"It is because they have English classes one-to-one for people who English isn't their first language. Like for example one of our students came in September directly from another country, with her school only learning a little English. She is flying in. There is computer support that is one-to-one, there is two or three in the class for basic word processing like literally from turning on the computer, they can't do that. So there is great support there."

"There's no one leaning in over your shoulder demanding this, expecting that. You're free to do it at your own pace."

"She makes you feel like you're the only one who could do that."

IT Skill Development

"I could not use computers but I can do a fair amount on it now."

"I enjoyed meeting new people and being able to use my computer."

Word-of-Mouth Referrals

"My course is great and I really enjoyed it. I would recommend it to friends."

"A friend gave me the information leaflet."

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT IN FET

Work Placements

"Everybody was really deflated because we had no help looking for work experience. You were basically just left to find whatever you could to cover the 70 hours."

"If the college would have some sort of agreement with certain workplaces so that every year the college says, 'Would you mind taking on our students?', as opposed to this, 'Oh you need work experience. Best of luck.'"

"The centre we think should sort out work experience for us"

"At least have a list of places that took people the previous year."

FET Facilities and Environment

"It is important to have a computer room so if you want to go in and practice, there is one there that you could go in without needing a tutor or someone there."

"It just makes you not as excited to learn or go in everyday because there is no atmosphere. There is no personality."

"Improve the canteen."

National Framework of Qualifications Awareness

"I don't know. Actually can I bring this qualification to the European Union?"

"I find any time I look at the wheel I just get more and more confused. What used to be Level 4, is it still at Level 4 or what? The stuff I used to know six years ago, is it still the same Level? They changed it and upgraded it."

Progression

"Maybe there could be some access, say to third-level education."

"I know I want to go and do a community education degree, but I don't know where to start. I don't know what I'm meant to do."

"If you could be recognised for your prior skills to progress on or into another job that would be important."

"I am a native Irish speaker but you see I don't have a certificate for it. If I went for a job I would have to prove, you know the basic (level)."

Additional Course Cost

"Yes, but when you see materials fees you think well that's your uniform, whatever you need. So I had to spend another €250 that I didn't have."

"When we went in to pay the fees it says materials €200. And then when we got into class we were told that we had to buy a uniform that was €100. We had to buy our own knife sets which cost €100. Now we were given the option of a knife set or like a good one or you could go for the middle, so I went for the middle one - €150."

Childcare

"I can't pay someone four hours to look after my daughter."

"Yeah. Childcare would help."

Course Scheduling and Types of Courses

"My main worry was that for anybody who was slightly falling between the cracks, if you turned up on time for your class, but then suddenly there was a change and the class was cancelled. You only have a week of doing that before people start to not take it seriously. Then they'll go 'why bother turning up on time' and it's a crucial week, the first week, I think."

"I have participated in a non-academic course. It has been fantastic."

DEASP

“You feel you have to take one [a course], whether you’re ready for it or not.”

“They were trying to put me everywhere except where I wanted to go.”

Travel and Accommodation Allowances

“70 euro is given to cover accommodation, but I’m paying 125 for a house a week. And because I’m getting accommodation, I don’t get travel. So I have to pay for all this.”

“Because I’m on the bus route, I don’t get a travel allowance. But the bus passes at the time that’s earlier than the crèche opens, so I can’t get the bus. And then I can’t get travel allowance either.”

Advertisement

“I think it’s a little confusing with all the different branches to the whole system. You have ETBI, FET, SOLAS, AONTAS, so for me when I went online searching for options, there is a little bit of jargon in the phone calls.”

“Last year was the first time I ever received any information about it. So I didn’t even know any of these courses existed. I wasn’t informed that an alternative location might have been a better option for me.”

“I think there’s many, many people that maybe you’re not reaching who never go.”

Attendance

"I live out on a country road and it's really bendy and it's all downhill. We had proper snow. And we were snowed in and there was black ice all over the roads. We couldn't get in, I called in and said look I can't get in. And they still docked me money because the centre was open. And I physically can't get there. I was awake ready to go on this morning but I couldn't."

English Language Supports

"I would like more [English language] support. It is just you start something and then quickly finish."

"I would like more help with my English."

Technology

"You switch off once the earphones go in, you can't speak."

"Sometimes you feel a bit lost with the computer generation, you know you're trying to keep up with them. I can just about open a computer and go on to Google and see what's what and that's about the height of it, you know."

WHAT LEARNERS SAID ABOUT THE NATIONAL FET LEARNER FORUM

"I enjoyed listening to the other (people's) experience and talking to them about mine."

"I liked talking with everyone and feeling involved as a group."

"I enjoyed that everyone had the opportunity to talk and listen to different concerns."

"Great to hear about other learners' stories. Good opportunity to voice opinions."

"Friendly atmosphere, chance to get more information about learning and further education."

"The discussions. I realised that a lot of people are in the same boat as me."

"Everyone agreed with barriers, even though everyone was doing different courses."

"Focus groups were a good idea."

THE NEXT STEPS

What next?

The Forum will continue to work directly with learners in ETBs across the country to collect their perspectives. In 2019 we will aim to reach more learners, in more counties, and capture more learner voices than ever before. AONTAS will hold one national event and one regional event in each of the 16 ETBs across Ireland. By doing this, the NFLF will aim to capture the voice of 1,000 learners.



Why is this important?

Speak Today, Shape Tomorrow

Learners have an important perspective how Further Education and Training services work. They know directly what has worked for them and what has not. The information provided by one learner, when combined with the voices of others, can provide valuable research that can ensure Further Education and Training providers are doing all they can to meet the needs of the people they are trying to serve. Participants in the National Learner Forum therefore give valuable insight that must be considered. Every participant should walk away from the National Further Education and Training Forum feeling they made an important contribution to the improvement of Further Education and Training for future learners.



What you can do?

Get Involved

- Speak to your tutor about participating in the future

Promote the Forum

- Post on social media at #LearnerVoice or #FETLearnerForum
- Tell a fellow learner about the Forum

Stay Informed

- Sign up to our Learner Newsletter, which provides updates on Forum events - email Leah Dowdall at ldowdall@aontas.com to add your name to our list





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