



## NATIONAL ADULT LEARNER FORUM POLICY 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.*

## PREFACE

*“Learner voice is about listening as concerned partners, coherent contributors, and equal agents of change...It enables learners to practice the same levels of social responsibility and personal freedom that they are given in other aspects of their lives... and embraces the responsibility that learners have in shaping their own education, therefore promoting relevant skills for the future.”<sup>1</sup>*

Ireland is leading the way in making a commitment to learner representation at both a national and regional level, providing learners with an opportunity to shape future policy decisions that affect their learning. There have been a number of welcome developments in this area in recent years resulting in the first learner representation on a national board as well as regional representation on Education and Training Boards (ETBs). At national level, following the establishment of the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Board in November 2012, the then Minister for Education and Skills designated two positions for adult learners. Two years later, in June 2014, each of the 16 regional ETBs, were also required by law to include learner representatives nominated by AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation and NALA (National Adult Literacy Agency).

Throughout the development of the Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2014-2019, SOLAS committed itself to listening to, and consulting with, learners in FET. A long-term commitment to this consultative approach was contained in the Strategy’s objectives, namely:

***“Respond to the needs of learners” (Strategic Objective 3.1)***

1. Learner Engagement Research – Future Lab – Leila Walker and Ann Logan 2008, Pg. 6.



which identified the establishment of a National Adult Learner Forum as an action. This development places learners at the centre of the FET service, recognising the value of their contribution and offering them an opportunity to shape the policy decisions that are made in the future.

## FOREWORD

This policy-focussed report documents the outcomes of the first ever National Adult Learner Forum, held on 26th February 2016. This historic first coming together of adult learners to directly influence FET policy in the form of a national forum coincided with the day of the General Election and the centenary of the Easter Rising. Coincidentally, the Forum was held in the round room of the Mansion House, the venue of the first meeting of Dáil Éireann, adding an extra special sense of occasion for learners who welcomed and acknowledged the opportunity to actively contribute and shape policy in the new FET landscape.

AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, has built a wealth of expertise in adult learner voice initiatives over the years and prepared comprehensively for the development of the first National Adult Learner Forum. Over the course of 2015 and 2016 we worked extensively with key stakeholders: including one-to-one meetings, focus groups and a National Learner Engagement Seminar in April 2015, which sought to build on local level knowledge in order to identify key approaches for developing a broadly representative, meaningful learner Forum. The National Adult Learner Forum Advisory Group was established to support the Forum and through wide-ranging representation has resulted in a highly successful first Forum meeting.

Outcomes from all discussion sessions held at the Forum were analysed and the themes arising were aligned with the five strategic goals of the SOLAS FET Strategy (2014 – 2019) with a view to informing policy and complementing SOLAS’ quantitative data infrastructure. This

report outlines the recommendations FET learners from across a range of FET programmes collectively identified, including challenges regarding information, awareness and access to FET and the importance of learner support and a holistic adult guidance service. Details of such vital information are expanded upon in this report and will support policy makers to develop a responsive, learner-centred FET Service.

A special word of thanks to all the learners who participated at the Forum event, for whom we have also produced a companion piece to this report that documents the National Adult Learner Forum event in detail. Sincere thanks to all ETBs for nominating learners, to all stakeholders for supporting this work and to the contributors, facilitators and note takers who made the day possible. Finally, thanks to SOLAS for committing to this vital work and for their support in writing this report. Going forward we will engage with the newly appointed FET Directors in each ETB in order to further expand the representation of all FET learners from across Ireland.

To end on a quote from a learner who participated at the 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, AONTAS**

## EXECUTIVESUMMARY

- » This report summarises the learner views expressed at the National Adult Learner Forum. It aims to inform policy and complement SOLAS' quantitative data infrastructure by providing qualitative insights from FET participants.
- » Participants were engaged in SOLAS funded FET programmes which included, PLC (Post-Leaving Certificate Courses), VTOS (Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme), BTEI (The Back to Education Initiative), Apprenticeships and Youthreach.
- » Common themes arising from the learner discussions at the Forum include: challenges regarding information, awareness and access to FET; the importance of support; rural disadvantage; the role of FET practitioners; and the wider benefits of FET.
- » Information and guidance were identified as key supports in assisting learners to source suitable education and training options. Learners reported a need for clear and concise information along with guidance before, during and after accessing FET.
- » Participants accessing FET through Employment and Support Services identified a number of potential improvements including regular training for front line staff and clear information on the FET options that are currently available.
- » Regional differences were evident; learners in rural areas noted a significant challenge in accessing transport, along with limited variety in the course options available to them. Wi-Fi availability and quality was also noted as a barrier to participation.
- » Significant positive outcomes for learners were reported as a result of attending FET courses including an improvement in personal wellbeing; confidence and development; increased social inclusion and integration; and improved mental health.
- » Recommendations for improvements to the FET service in the future include: more comprehensive guidance with clear and concise information for learners on FET options and an increase in tailored supports for those with more complex circumstances. Others recommended that FET should be promoted more widely.

***The recommendations arising from the first Forum are grouped according to the five strategic goals of the SOLAS FET Strategy 2014 – 2019.***

## 01 INTRODUCTION

This report summarises the feedback from the first National Adult Learner Forum event which was attended by 70 FET learners who had been nominated by their ETBs. The event, which took place on Friday 26<sup>th</sup> February 2016 in the Mansion House, Dublin, encouraged learners to share their personal experiences of the successes and challenges of the FET service.

This report captures the collective views from learner discussions at the Forum as qualitative data under the five strategic goals of the SOLAS FET Strategy (2014 – 2019) with a view to informing policy and complementing SOLAS' quantitative data infrastructure.



### Development of the FET Strategy

In 2013, SOLAS, the Further Education and Training (FET) Authority, began developing a five-year strategy and implementation plan which aimed to improve the FET sector. SOLAS drew on both quantitative and qualitative data to inform the new plan, such as the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) report and a range of consultative processes including, with AONTAS' support, a learner-only workshop. A recognition of the value of learners' contributions, coupled with learners' expressed desire to continue to influence

the implementation of the strategy, laid the foundations for a National Adult Learner Forum. Adult learners also requested that they continue to be consulted. As such the strategic objective 3.1 'Respond to the need of learners' was included in the FET Strategy. Under 3.1.2a it states that AONTAS will act as the lead organisation in establishing a National Adult Learner Forum in 2016, and that the Forum will be an annual event.

## AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation

As the 'voice of adult learning' AONTAS places learners at the heart of its work in the belief that learner experiences provide crucial first-hand information that informs the development of the services and policies which affect their learning. Over the last number of years AONTAS has gained expertise in this area by developing an extensive learner strategy, organising and facilitating learner events and focus groups and supporting representation of adult learners on regional and national boards. AONTAS has provided various platforms for learners to come together and discuss their experiences of adult learning including the barriers and issues that arise.

AONTAS is equally committed to the establishment of the National Adult Learner Forum and as such it is included as a key objective in its Strategic Plan 2015 - 2018, Learning - A Lifetime's Work, namely:

***“Plan, implement and support in collaboration with the ETBs, an Adult Learner Forum to contribute to the SOLAS FET strategy and to support adult learners to bring their views and issues to the attention of SOLAS, providers, policy and decision makers”.***



## Changes in the Sector

The Education and Training Boards (ETBs) Act was signed into law in May 2013 and this provided for the dissolution of the 33 Vocational Education Committees (VECs) and the establishment of 16 ETBs. Following the implementation of the FET Act in July 2013, the training function of FÁS was transferred to the ETBs with the aim of bringing local and regional coherence to the delivery of FET. The Further Education and Training Act also established SOLAS, as the State Organisation with responsibility for funding, planning and coordinating FET in Ireland. SOLAS operates under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and, in conjunction with the 16 ETBs, is responsible for the integration, coordination and funding of a wide range of FET programmes.

The aim of the ETB and FET Acts is to provide for the better coordination and delivery of FET and to develop a world-class integrated FET system in Ireland. These Acts are the foundation for the FET Strategy (2014-2019), which provides a detailed framework for the continued development of an integrated FET sector. The aim of the Strategy is to deliver a high quality learning experience that will lead to better outcomes for all those who engage in FET, whilst supporting the Government's economic and social priorities.

Lead partners involved in the implementation phase of the FET Strategy include SOLAS; Department of Education and Skills (DES); Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI); Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI); Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (DJEI); Higher Education Authority (HEA); AONTAS; and Department of Social Protection (DSP).

Five key strategic goals are outlined in the Strategy:

### **Goal 1:**

Skills for the Economy

### **Goal 2:**

Active Inclusion

### **Goal 3:**

Quality Provision

### **Goal 4:**

Integrated Planning and Funding

### **Goal 5:**

Standing of FET

## 02 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Methodology

Learners were seated at round tables at the Forum. Each table formed a focus group where facilitators helped structure the dialogue using a number of questions designed to assist learners to articulate their experiences of FET. Learners drew from their own experiences and the experiences of their peers.



The methods used to collate information in the report captures the opinions and feedback of a broad range of FET learners during these group discussions at the event. Learners were asked to discuss their experiences of FET under the following guiding questions:

- ✓ What is working well in the FET service?
- ✓ What is not working well in the FET service and how it can be improved?

Learner feedback was treated as qualitative data and analysed to identify key findings and recommendations that can be used to shape future policy decisions. It is important to note that feedback does not correspond to individual responses and in turn reflects the combined

experiences of learners who, at the time, were engaged in SOLAS funded FET programmes.

Themes arising from the learner discussions at the Forum include: challenges regarding information, awareness and access to FET; the importance of support; rural disadvantage; the role of FET practitioners; and the value of the wider benefits of FET.

***The resulting analysis of learners' responses identified recurring themes which, for the purpose of this report, were aligned with the strategic goals contained in the FET Strategy.***



### Goal 1: Skills for the Economy

Goal 1 is underpinned by the development of a National Skills Strategy<sup>2</sup> (NSS) for Ireland which has been informed by the FET Strategy and guides the recently established Regional Skills Forums. Other developments include protocols between ETBs and the Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) to establish structured links to support the provision of information for enterprise development. A new Apprenticeship System and Career Traineeships have also been developed by SOLAS in conjunction with the ETBs in sectors including: hospitality, engineering and horticulture.

Under Pathways to Work 2012-2015, the Government outlined a comprehensive reform of the State's approach to help unemployed jobseekers return to work. This has included the rollout of Intreo centres, JobBridge and JobsPlus. The Action Plan for Jobs and Pathways to Work initiatives prioritise the stimulation of employment growth while working to ensure employment vacancies are filled by people who are on the Live Register. Both initiatives incorporate the needs of the unemployed into national policy. Furthermore, the implementation of Intreo – which offers a single point of contact for all employment and income supports – commenced in January 2012.

#### 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<sup>3</sup>

*The importance of adult guidance has been well documented. At national level the importance of a guidance process which is inclusive of the pre-entry, entry, ongoing and pre-exit stages is outlined in the AEGI Guidelines (2012).<sup>4</sup>*

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 proportion of learners who had accessed the adult guidance services stated that they were extremely useful in providing them with appropriate information on their education and training options. They identified that this service encouraged and supported them to take the first step back to education and to identify suitable options for progression.

Overall there was consensus that services like this play a vital role in the FET system, especially for someone who may have been out of formal education for a considerable time period 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.***

2. [http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub\\_national\\_skills\\_strategy\\_2025.pdf](http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf).

3. SOLAS FET Strategy Strategic Goal 1: Skills for the Economy. Strategic Objective 1.2: Provide an integrated guidance service to improve the matching of people to the most suitable and relevant learning opportunity.

4. [http://www.ncge.ie/uploads/AEGI\\_Operational\\_Guidelines\\_2012\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.ncge.ie/uploads/AEGI_Operational_Guidelines_2012_FINAL.pdf).



### Accessing FET as an unemployed person<sup>5</sup>

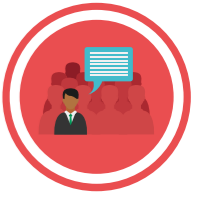
A number of participants at the Forum were accessing FET through Employment Support Services and when asked what was not working well within FET they identified a number of improvements that could be made in this area which include: ensuring that front line staff within these services have adequate training, protocols 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 to secure employment 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.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

2. *Increase communication between Employment Support Services and key FET stakeholders at local level so that 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.*



5. SOLAS FET Strategy Strategic Goal 1: Skills for the Economy. Strategic Objective 1.1: Develop a coordinated mechanism (using and building) on existing arrangements) to engage with industry at national, regional and local level (including local SMEs in particular and other key stakeholders) to ensure alignment of FET with local, regional and national skills demand and labour market intelligence to ensure ongoing relevance and quality of FET provision.



### Goal 2: Active Inclusion

Goal 2 states that FET provision will support the active inclusion of people of all abilities with special reference to literacy and numeracy. Under this goal, the National Literacy and Numeracy Advisory Committee was established in January 2015 and is progressing actions outlined in the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy Implementation Plan. NALA and ETBI are continuing to work closely with SOLAS and a National Literacy and Numeracy Awareness campaign took place in September 2016 .

#### Learner Feedback

#### Wider Benefits of Further Education and Training

The wider benefits of FET have been well documented in research. Learners at the Forum were keen to stress the importance of sharing their experience of improved personal wellbeing; confidence and development; increased social inclusion and integration; and improved mental health.

At the Forum it was noted that FET provided a supportive space for learners to grow in confidence which greatly impacted their general well-being including their mental health. It was also reported to have 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 had encouraged their children to take an interest in their own education.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

5. *Promote the wider benefits associated with FET to learners, e.g. 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, e.g. mental health awareness campaigns.*

#### Information and Awareness<sup>6</sup>

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 regarding FET opportunities. For example, course/centre brochures should avoid the use of jargon or academic text. This would also support the recommendations that were made on guidance.

6. SOLAS FET Strategy Strategic Goal 2: Active Inclusion. Strategic Objective 2.2: Devise and Implement a strategy to promote literacy and numeracy across FET.

**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.*

**Access to FET<sup>7</sup>**

Adult learners have very busy lives and often balance a number of commitments with their studies, including family. A proportion of participants at the Forum were stay at home parents who were not in receipt of a social welfare payment. Such participants encountered additional barriers to participation in FET as they were not eligible for certain programmes and/or supports, especially those which required that participants be in receipt of a social welfare allowance. The absence of independent funding to support their participation in FET restricted their choices and opportunities to learn, especially for the many who expressed a strong interest in becoming active in the labour market in the future.

The broader issue of availability of childcare was highlighted specifically in relation to FET. Learners noted that childcare options, facilities and funding could be improved in order to support them to continue in FET. Furthermore

7. SOLAS FET Strategy Strategic Goal 2: Active Inclusion. Strategic Objective 2.1: Ensure that FET serves the needs of priority cohorts identified by DSP including LTU people, young people, lone parents etc., and that these individuals are guided, supported and matched to the most appropriate/ suitable FET programmes and services.

8. SOLAS FET Strategy Strategic Goal 2: Active Inclusion. Strategic Objective 2.1: Ensure quality of opportunity and access to FET and equal treatment of learners by identifying strategies to address psychological, social and economic barriers to participation of groups experiencing socio-economic exclusion/distance for the labour market.

there was a general lack of information and awareness towards childcare options that may be currently available. Onsite childcare facilities and childcare supports for learners was called for at the Forum.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

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

**English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)<sup>8</sup>**

Some participants at the event were currently engaged in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses. Participants on ESOL courses voiced concerns around the lack of course hours available to them.

**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.*

**Goal 3: Quality Provision**

Enhancing the quality of FET provision is a major goal of the five-year FET strategy. The focus on quality and excellence is one of SOLAS' key aims. In order to develop and maintain a high-quality FET system for learners Goal 3 focuses on identifying the needs of learners; excellence in programme development; the reform of guidance systems and the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) framework for FET providers.

Goal 3 also includes the establishment of the National Adult Learner Forum, which is being led by AONTAS. A Customer Charter is being developed by ETBI, while QQI are working to ensure that existing pathways to and within higher education are formalised and mapped for learners. SOLAS and QQI are working with ETBs, Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) and universities on a project to map progression pathways within specific regions and clusters.

The National Adult Learner Forum event on the 26th of February was a key action under Goal 3. The questions asked of learners at the Forum looked at informing and improving the quality of provision that is offered within SOLAS funded FET Programmes.

**Learner Feedback****Guidance**

The themes of Guidance recurred throughout the event. As mentioned previously, when asked what was working in FET a large number of participants at the National Adult Learner Forum highlighted the importance of the adult

9. SOLAS FET Strategy Strategic Goal 3: Quality Provision. Strategic Objective 3.1: Respond to the needs of learners: Review priorities and criteria for engaging independent FET service supports and providers.

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.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

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<sup>9</sup>**

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 adult learning environment. A trusting relationship between the learner and FET practitioner was identified as hugely beneficial. FET practitioners were also identified as fundamental in creating positive learning environments which helped change learners' initial negative perceptions of education based on prior experiences at school. Learners spoke highly of the quality of their FET practitioners describing the level of support and engagement as invaluable to their success in FET which in turn aided their progression through programmes.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

14. *Promote peer mentoring within FET provision to support independent learning.*
15. *Review class-size limits to avoid overcrowding in classrooms.*
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, i.e. 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 integrated FET Services Plan 2016 sets out national FET provision. Current pieces of work include the development of an outcome-based funding model by SOLAS in conjunction with ETBs. An evaluation of the PLC programme provision was conducted by ESRI on behalf of SOLAS. SOLAS have recently launched the new Further Education and Training Course Hub (FETCH) website which will allow learners to access information on over 4,000 Further Education and Training opportunities throughout the country such as Post-Leaving Cert courses, the latest traineeships and back to education initiatives.

Fetchcourses.ie is one part of an information technology system the Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS), a joint initiative between SOLAS and the ETBs. The other elements are the National Programme Database and the National Course Database. The three databases will collectively provide an integrated approach to collection of key data on Further Education and Training Programme outputs, outcomes and performance.

#### Learner Feedback

When looking at future integrated planning and funding of the service, international research also notes that accessibility to FET requires provision that helps overcome time constraints plus family commitments<sup>10</sup>. This is in keeping with learners' views from the Forum regarding timings, online options and childcare supports.

The challenges of accessibility to FET for adults in rural areas were also identified at the Forum - national research has also highlighted this issue. For example, according to a CEDRA report for Teagasc, rural dwellers aged 25+ have lower participation rates in lifelong learning and informal learning, with rates of 17% in rural areas which is 60% lower in comparison to the 27% participation rate in urban areas.<sup>11</sup>

Learners highlighted the value of progression within and from FET and recognised that there is an extensive range of FET opportunities and routes available. It was also noted that access courses provide a great foundation of learning and helped the most disadvantaged learners slowly integrate into a learning environment.

#### Access and FET

Learners expressed a desire 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.*

10. Eurydice Report Adult Education and Training in Europe: Widening access to Learning Opportunities p.10.

11. Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas Research Report (2013). [http://www.agresearch.teagasc.ie/rerc/CEDRA/CEDRA\\_Research\\_Report.pdf](http://www.agresearch.teagasc.ie/rerc/CEDRA/CEDRA_Research_Report.pdf).



#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

20. *Review the eligibility criteria for FET courses, particularly in relation to age restrictions and length of time unemployed.*
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 (e.g. 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 expanding offerings from ecollege with QQI accredited courses.*

12. SOLAS FET Strategy Strategic Goal 4: Integrated Planning and Funding. Strategic Objective 4.3: Sustain funding (to be reviewed annually) for programmes which focus on social inclusion.

#### Planning FET in Rural Ireland<sup>12</sup>

Learners at the National Adult Learner Forum highlighted the challenges of rural disadvantage in Ireland. Specifically mentioning limited course choice and frequency in rural areas coupled with further distances to travel to access centre, which resulted in additional expense for the learner. Learners in rural areas raised concerns regarding Wi-Fi. Internet is essential for learners but goes beyond 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<sup>13</sup>

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 crucial in order for learners to access and complete course work. Some learners also expressed a concern that centre infrastructure was not fit for purpose and did not provide adequate spaces to learn. Peer support was identified as a positive element of returning to FET and learners expressed a wish for adequate spaces within their learning environments in order to meet and socialise with their peers.



13. SOLAS FET Strategy Strategic Goal 4: Integrated Planning and Funding. Strategic Objective 4.1: Implement a new integrated FET planning model to ensure relevant learner centred, flexible and employment-led provision with a clear focus on reducing duplication and overlap of provision. The process to take account of government priorities e.g. 'Pathways to Work', 'Action Plan for Jobs', 'Youth Guarantee'.

14. SOLAS FET Strategy Strategic Goal 4: Integrated Planning and Funding. Strategic Objective: 4.4: Examine the range of social welfare payments and training allowances association with FET provision to determine apparent disincentives and anomalies which could impede participation in FET provision.

##### Travel Allowances<sup>14</sup>

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

##### Stakeholder Engagement

Although developments have been made in order to make FET services more cohesive, learners at the Forum expressed a continuing need for stakeholders within FET, including service providers, to continue to come together in the integrated planning of future courses and supports. Learners also suggested that stakeholders continue to communicate changes/developments being made in the sector.



## Goal 5: The Standing of FET

The SOLAS Communications and Branding Strategy was approved by the Board of SOLAS and has been rolled out under Goal 5: The Standing of FET. A number of other developments have taken place, with the aim of highlighting FET as a valuable option for learners. This includes the launch of the Fetchcourses.ie website which promotes the wide range of FET courses available to learners. The current emphasis within the FET Strategy is focussed on meeting the skills needs of the economy and increasing active inclusion.

### Learner Feedback

#### Standing of FET<sup>15</sup>

*It is important to note that a number of significant developments have been made to increase the Standing of FET since the Forum event took place in February 2016.*

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 expressed a lack of clarity on 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 (e.g. “FETAC”) 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 (e.g. SOLAS, QQI, and ETBs).**

**- Make information available in a range of local settings, e.g. libraries, GAA clubs, GP surgeries, etc. in order to reach as many prospective learners as possible.**

<sup>15</sup> SOLAS Strategic Plan Strategic Goal 5: Standing of FET. Strategic Objective 5.1: Plan and conduct a comprehensive communication campaign to raise awareness of the benefits of FET with enterprise, learners and more generally.

## 03 CONCLUSIONS

The establishment of the National Adult Learner Forum means that for the first time a formal structure exists through which adult learners in Ireland can influence the policy decisions that affect them. This development has been hugely important as research increasingly suggests that when learners are engaged in shaping and leading their own learning and education this can result in benefits for all learners, educators, the institution and the education system as a whole (e.g. Davies et al 2007). This first meeting of the Forum pointed to a range of areas that FET learners believe need attention but also appreciation.



Going forward, AONTAS will continue to engage with Forum participants who expressed interest in engaging in learner voice activities, from sharing learner stories to representation work at national and European level as appropriate. The National Adult Learner Forum Advisory Group has been expanded to include key stakeholders such as the DSP and two adult learners (one male and one female).

AONTAS is committed to further developing the National Adult Learner Forum over the course of the FET Strategy (2014-2019), by expanding its reach through greater regional learner engagement activities and improving representation by engaging with the new FET Directors in each ETB. Furthermore, future reporting developed for both policy makers and learners in readily accessible reports

will capture the learner voice in line with national policy and also encapsulate learner contributions from the day. AONTAS will continue to support SOLAS by providing learner perspectives on a range of policy areas, where appropriate.

Learners at the Forum identified key areas for consideration as outlined in this report and AONTAS will disseminate the outcomes of this report to the Strategic Implementation Advisory Group (SIAC) of stakeholders who support the implementation of the FET Strategy. Over the course of the FET Strategy the National Adult Learner Forum will grow and progress in order to enhance and complement other actions outlined in the Strategy, and contribute to the development of a world-class integrated FET system in Ireland.

## 04 THANKS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

AONTAS welcomes the inclusion of the proposed action of establishing a National Adult Learner Forum in their Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2014-2019. Furthermore, SOLAS' financial and strategic support has been vital to the successful establishment of the Forum.

AONTAS and SOLAS would like to thank the National Adult Learner Forum Advisory Group<sup>1</sup> and the National Adult Learner Forum Focus Group for their dedicated work in guiding and developing the Forum. Their knowledge and valuable perspective ensured the Forum was a representative, inclusive and meaningful event.



Furthermore, we would like to thank all practitioners involved who helped source and nominate a fantastic range FET learners from across all ETB areas in Ireland. We are very appreciative of the time and support all practitioners gave to the National Adult Learner Forum which ensured that it was a successful event for all.



We would also like to thank everyone who took part in the National Adult Learner Forum event including speakers, workshop coordinators and assistants, facilitators and rapporteurs and the exhibitors. Their time and commitment was essential for helping us to create an engaging event.

Finally we would like to thank all of the learners that took part in the first National Adult Learner Forum. Their 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. We hope that being a part of this event will encourage learners to continue to use their voices within their own communities.

***“Speak today, Shape tomorrow”***

<sup>1</sup> The National Adult Learner Forum Advisory Group comprised of members from the following: ETBI, NALA, SOLAS, AEOA, INOU and DES.

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