



NATIONAL FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING (FET) LEARNER FORUM ADVISORY REPORT - 2017

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ABBREVIATIONS

AEO	Adult Education Officer
BTEI	Back to Education Training Initiative
DEASP	Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
ETB	Education and Training Boards
FET	Further Education and Training
HE	Higher Education
LTI	Local Training Initiative
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
NFLF	National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum
NFQ	National Frameworks of Qualifications
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
PLSS	Programme Learner Support System
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
VTOS	Vocation Training Opportunities Scheme



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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 500 strong membership and regards them 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. Since its foundation in 1969, AONTAS has a long track record of supporting adult learners, practitioners and providers. It has played a pivotal role in advocating for the recognition of adult learning as a key pillar of the education service and lifelong learning as a whole, contributing to policy development and making a case for sustainable funding.

SOLAS

SOLAS is the State Organisation responsible for funding, planning and coordinating Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland. Its mission is to fund, coordinate 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
- 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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

LEARNERS

The most important people to acknowledge in this piece of work are the learners. They gave their time and energy to this project. They shared personal stories and experiences that helped give meaning and context to the recommendations that follow. The important role they have played in helping pave the way for a better educational experience for future FET learners cannot be understated.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING BOARDS

A special thank you must also be given to Cork Education and Training Board (ETB), Galway and Roscommon ETB, and Tipperary ETB. Each of these ETBs helped to organise the first regional NFLF events. Their commitment to the promotion of learner voice reflects a

wider commitment to learner growth. We appreciate the time and support they provided in welcoming us to their ETBs and letting us work directly with their learners.

THE ADVISORY GROUP

We would also like to thank the National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group, which consists of representatives from SOLAS, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, the National Adult Literacy Agency, and the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed, as well as two former adult learners. Their guidance and recommendations along the way helped the NFLF expand in a meaningful way. This research is largely possible through their continued support.



INTRODUCTION



This publication developed from the second annual National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum (NFLF). NFLF brings together learners from across the FET sector to ask their views on FET services across Ireland. While it began as one national event, it has recently expanded to include a series of regional fora. The project, which is funded by SOLAS and delivered by AONTAS, developed directly from the FET Strategy 2014-2019. Objective 3.1.2a called for the 'establishment of a Learner Forum to collect feedback from learners on the effectiveness of FET provision.'¹ For the past two years, AONTAS has been delivering on this objective and expanded this work to reach even more learners at the national and regional

level so that SOLAS and all other engaged stakeholders involved in the implementation of the FET Strategy can hear the voices of an increasing number of learners across Ireland.

The 2017 NFLF consists of a national event held in Dublin and three regional events organised with Cork ETB, Galway and Roscommon ETB, and Tipperary ETB. At each of these events, learners share their thoughts on FET services. These learner statements are documented, analysed, and consolidated for the purposes of reporting. The core recommendations you will find in this document have been derived from these statements.

1. SOLAS, FET Training and Education Strategy, 2014 – 2019 (2014), available at <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Further-Education-and-Training-Strategy-2014-2019.pdf>.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key findings and recommendations are presented in two primary sections - **areas working well** and **areas for development in the FET sector**. The areas for development section is divided further into an additional four subsections. These subsections are presented as phases in accordance with learner engagement in FET. These four phases consist of pre-FET engagement, initial entry into FET, course development, and course completion. In instances where learner recommendations align with current FET objectives already in place, recommended actions have been linked to these objectives.

**Learner statements featured in bold show a repetition of topics identified during the 2016 event.*

AREAS WORKING WELL IN Further Education and Training

TOPIC	LEARNER STATEMENT
Assessment	Alternative forms of assessment (ie portfolios) are a positive development used for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).
Guidance	Guidance services interaction were positive and helpful.
Peer Support	FET courses facilitated intergenerational and cross socio-economic engagement. Interaction with peers helped curb feelings of isolation and being left behind in the learning process.*
Skill Development	Courses increase employability.*
Staff Support	Many tutors went 'above and beyond' in their support of learner development. Administrative staff were supportive to students engaging in courses.
Wider Benefits	Courses increase learner confidence.*

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT IN FET



PHASE 1: PRE-FET ENGAGEMENT			
TOPIC	LEARNER STATEMENT	RECOMMENDED ACTION	CONNECTION TO FET STRATEGY
Clear and Accurate Information	Eliminate jargon and acronyms from Further Education and Training advertising*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> eliminate jargon and acronyms in Further Education and Training advertisement - refer to all programmes and services by their complete names and use plain language 	<p>Objective 5.1.1a</p> <p>According to FET Strategy Objective 5.1.1a SOLAS will 'lead the development, roll-out and evaluation of a communications campaign to promote the standing of FET.' While delivering on this objective SOLAS should consider these recommended actions.</p>
	Increase forms of FET advertisement*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> diversify and increase Further Education and Training advertisement (ie FET Fairs, radio promotions, local newspaper advertisements, open house days, etc.) continue to deliver information packs on FET at employment fairs, expos, etc. 	
	Increase forms of FET advertisement*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> make explicit in all advertising the particular entry requirements for a given FET course so that learners know what level of education/training is required 	
	Ensure the names of courses are not too repetitious or confusing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ETBs and FET providers should use course titles that are reflective of content, distinguishable from each other, and easy to understand 	
Referrals	Learner interactions with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) can be counterproductive to learner success, with inconsistent information being shared with learners and learners being directed and/or forced into classes that did not meet their needs*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ETBs and the DEASP should regularly share information on course requirements to ensure learners are receiving accurate and up-to-date information on FET DEASP should enact a customer service charter for supporting learners who are referred to FET courses that is based on an individual and flexible approach 	<p>Objective 4.4.2a</p> <p>According to FET Strategy Objective 4.4.2a the DEASP will 'examine the relationship between participation rates and income supports.' As part of this examination, the DEASP has pledged to explore ways to further promote the value of FET. When developing these new practices, the DEASP should consider these recommended actions.</p>
	The dependency on the Fetchcourses.ie as a substitute for guidance is a particular barrier to learners, especially those with clear limited IT skills or an unclear educational plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ensure learners who require additional guidance support or an alternative to Fetchcourses.ie are accommodated appropriately if a learner is unclear on what courses they need or would like to take, they should be referred to the Adult Guidance and Information Service within the Educational Training Board 	

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT IN FET



PHASE 2: INITIAL ENTRY INTO FET			
TOPIC	LEARNER STATEMENT	RECOMMENDED ACTION	CONNECTION TO FET STRATEGY
Preparation Materials	Across and within ETBs an inconsistent amount of information is shared with learners at the start of courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in line with quality assurance procedures outlined by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), Further Education providers should ensure they have a policy guaranteeing learners will receive information at the start of each course that outlines course objectives, types of assessment, and course timelines 	<p>Objective 2.1.2a</p> <p>According to FET Strategy Objective 2.1.2a ETBI will 'enable an effective education and training needs identification, matching and support service is available for all learners who require it.' When delivering on this objective, ETBI should consider this recommended action</p>
Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)	Offer varied forms of assessment to learners upon completion of a course and ensure the implementation of an effective Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> drawing from examples of good RPL practice in Europe, ETBs should look to broaden RPL processes in line with QQI procedures learners would like the opportunity to showcase prior learning through portfolios and/or project-based assessments, and have these materials accepted as a form of RPL 	<p>Objective 2.1.3a</p> <p>According to FET Strategy Objective 2.1.3a, QQI will lead on 'the national DES approved RPL strategy, enable the development and implementation of a QQI approved RPL system for FET programmes.' When delivering on this objective, QQI should consider these recommended actions.</p>

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT IN FET



PHASE 3: COURSE DEVELOPMENT			
TOPIC	LEARNER STATEMENT	RECOMMENDED ACTION	CONNECTION TO FET STRATEGY
Attendance	Strict attendance policies that penalise learners by reducing social welfare payments for missing class due to illness and childcare need to be reassessed as they serve as a deterrent to class enrolment (It should be noted that learners believe a penalty for unexplained excessive absences is appropriate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> review the terms and conditions governing payment of FET allowances to reduce or eliminate financial penalties laid on learners who are legitimately absent due to illness or parental responsibilities ensure policies in place are designed to support the retention and progression of learners 	<p>Objective 4.4.2a</p> <p>According to FET Strategy Objective 4.4.2a the DEASP will 'examine the relationship between participation rates and income supports.' As part of this examination, the DEASP has pledged to explore ways to further promote the value of FET. When developing these new practices, the DEASP should work cooperatively with SOLAS to consider these recommended actions.</p>
Guidance	Increase guidance services to support course selection, progression and career development*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> guidance support should be available before, during, and after engagement with FET 	<p>Objective 3.3.2a</p> <p>According to FET Strategy Objective 3.3.2a, ETBI will 'provide career management skills to learners on FET courses'. In order to develop these skills, ETBI will have a guidance strategy in place that supports learners through entry, engagement, and conclusion of their FET courses. In order to deliver on this goal, ETBI should consider this recommended action.</p>

PHASE 3: COURSE DEVELOPMENT

TOPIC	LEARNER STATEMENT	RECOMMENDED ACTION	CONNECTION TO FET STRATEGY
Job Placements	Job placement, while immensely beneficial, can be difficult to locate - learners had a tough time finding employers willing to take them on for job placement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • build stronger relationships between ETBs and employers to increase job placement opportunities for learners in their area • provide learners with a list of employers in their field who accept job placement learners • explore new ways to better support learners who are unable to locate a job placement 	Objective 1.2.1c According to FET Strategy Objective 1.2.1c, ETBI will 'develop local course design processes to reflect direct employer involvement in ITN, curriculum development, pilot and evaluation to meet the needs of employers, learners, jobseekers and priority cohorts.' Job placement with local employers is a step toward achieving this aim. To ensure these placements are carried out in an effective and meaningful way, ETBI should consider these recommended actions.
National Frameworks of Qualifications Supports	It is difficult to transition from NFQ Level 1-3 courses to NFQ Level 4 and above, because there is a large difference in the level of supports offered to learners at these levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensure that learners understand the course requirements and assessments associated with each course, and are aware of the supports available to them • provide additional supports for learners transitioning from Level 3 to Level 4 courses 	Objective 3.2.3a According to FET Strategy Objective 3.2.3a, ETBI will work to 'ensure effective CPD is in place to support responsive and industry led programme development.' As part of this plan, ETBI has outlined a series of tutor professional development actions. When delivering on these tutor professional development plans, ETBI should consider these recommended actions.
Scheduling	Increase diversity of options in FET courses (ie part-time, evening courses, and summer scheduling) Provide meaningful financial supports for learners enrolled in part-time, evening courses, or summer courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increase the availability of summer, evening, and part-time courses • offer financial aid (ie fee waivers, childcare costs, etc.) for non-full-time courses, as the creation of a lifelong learning culture in Ireland requires the support of flexible part-time learning 	Objective 2.1.1b According to FET Strategy Objective 2.1.1b, SOLAS and ETBI will work collaboratively to 'enable the development of appropriate FET interventions and specific supports to address the findings of the research' produced from the Barriers Report (2017). Two of the barriers to success were cost and English language skills. When developing strategies to alleviate these challenges, SOLAS and ETBI should consider these recommended actions.
	More class time for learners completing an ESOL course*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increase class time for ESOL courses 	
Student Supports	FET providers need to offer more wide ranging support structures for learners in the area of mental health*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increase mental health support amongst FET learners by ensuring that key staff have access to information on mental health providers at FET centres 	Objective 2.1.1b According to FET Strategy Objective 2.1.1b, SOLAS and ETBI will work collaboratively to 'enable the development of the appropriate FET interventions and specific supports to address the findings of the research' produced from the Barriers Report (2017). Two of the barriers to success were mental health and childcare. When developing strategies to alleviate these challenges, SOLAS and ETBI should consider these resolutions.
	Increase childcare support*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FET centres should explore flexible childcare options. Depending on the size and needs of the community in which a centre exists, this may change the way support is provided across the country 	

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT IN FET



PHASE 4: COURSE COMPLETION

TOPIC	LEARNER STATEMENT	RECOMMENDED ACTION	CONNECTION TO FET STRATEGY
Progression to Higher Education	There are too few course options for learners who want to progress to higher level education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increase places reserved for FET learners in Irish Higher Education Institutions 	Objective 3.5.1a According to FET Strategy Objective 3.5.1a, QQI will develop 'existing/new pathways to and within higher education are formalised and mapped for learners'. When mapping out this pathway, QQI should consider these recommendations.
	There is a lack of clarity on the processes and supports available to learners transitioning to higher education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • develop a clear mapped trajectory for learners who want to transition to higher education • provide supports for learners transitioning from FET to higher education 	



PROJECT OVERVIEW

This project is a testament to the important role learner voice plays in building a world-class Further Education and Training programme in Ireland. Learners offer valuable first-hand insight into the delivery of FET service. Their experience and knowledge can therefore help foster effective innovation in the sector that will improve services for future FET learners.

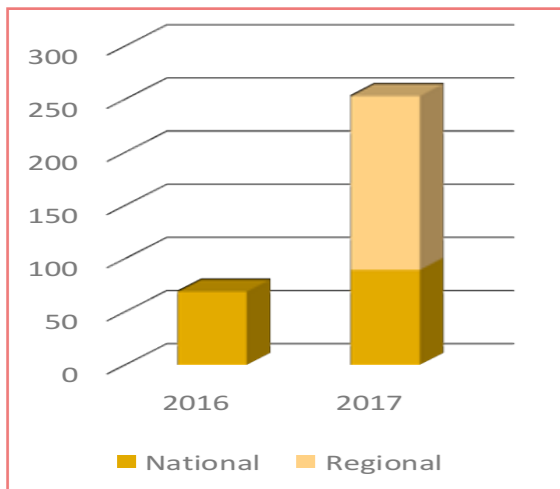


Chart 1.1: Learner Participation in the NFLF

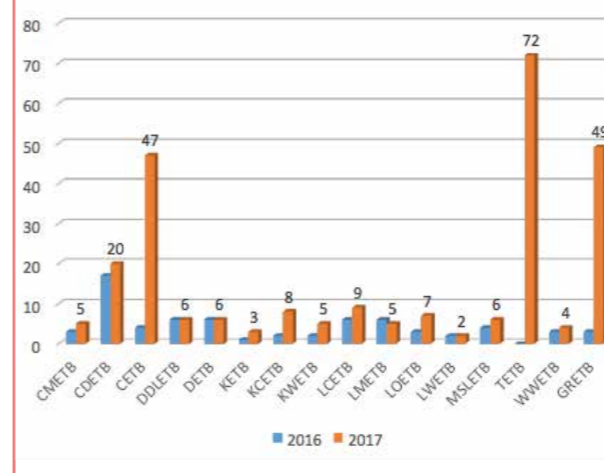
This year marks a period of significant growth in the NFLF. As you can see from Chart 1.1 featured to the left, learner involvement in the project saw a 263% increase. This expansion can be attributed largely to the implementation of NFLF regional fora. With the support of Galway and Roscommon ETB, Cork ETB, and Tipperary ETB, AONTAS was able to launch the first NFLF regional events. A total of 164 learners participated in these fora, which alongside the 90 learners participating at the national event, brought the total learner engagement in 2017 to 254 learners.

The 2017 national event, which is captured in Image 2.1 featured below, took place on 7th April 2017 in Croke Park, Dublin. The sixteen ETBs from across Ireland each nominated learners to participate in this event. A complete breakdown of participants in the NFLF according to ETB can be found in Chart 1.2 featured on the following page.



Image 2.1: The National FET Learner Forum at Croke Park, Dublin

Chart 1.2: Learner Participation in the NFLF by ETB



- CMETB - Cavan and Monaghan
- LMETB - Louth and Meath ETB
- CDLETB - City of Dublin
- LOETB - Laois and Offaly
- CETB - Cork
- KETB - Kerry ETB
- DDLETB - Dublin and Dún Laoghaire
- LWETB - Longford and Westmeath
- DET - Donegal
- MSLETB - Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim
- KCETB - Kilkenny and Carlow
- TETB - Tipperary
- KWETB - Kildare and Wicklow
- WWETB - Waterford and Wexford
- LCETB - Limerick and Clare
- GRETB - Galway and Roscommon

Regional events were held on three different dates in the autumn of 2017. The first one took place at the Galway and Roscommon ETB in Tuam (Galway) on 6th November 2017. The second event was with Cork ETB and occurred in Bishopstown (Cork) on 7th November 2017. The third and final event was with Tipperary ETB and was held in Thurles (Tipperary) on 10th November 2017.

This chart also includes regional participation, explaining the above average representation of learners from Galway and Roscommon; Cork; and Tipperary. As you will note, some ETB participation rates remain lower than others. For this reason, part of the planning for 2018 regional events, includes hosting regional events at these ETBs to help entice further engagement with the NFLF in the future.



METHODOLOGY

This project is a large-scale qualitative piece of research designed to assess learner feedback on FET provision year over year. It is framed on a concept of learner voice as defined by the Learning Skills and Improvement Service ‘Talking Learner Voice’ Report. This report describes learner voice as ‘the involvement of learners and potential learners in shaping the learning opportunities that are available to them’ and defines learner consultation as ‘seeking views of learners and providing feedback on any decisions taken.’² For the NFLF, AONTAS works directly with SOLAS and Education Training Boards (ETB) across the country to deliver this project, with ETBs nominating learners to participate in the NFLF. Each participant was a learner actively enrolled in a SOLAS funded FET course in 2017. Therefore, it should be noted that the scope of this research does not stretch to learners who have not enrolled in, dropped out, or completed a FET course. In order to truly gauge barriers faced upon entry into FET and upon completion of a FET course, further voices would need to be heard. Effort was made to recruit a representative group of learners drawn from programmes across the FET sector. A complete breakdown of learners according to programme can be found in the Chart 1.3, featured on below.

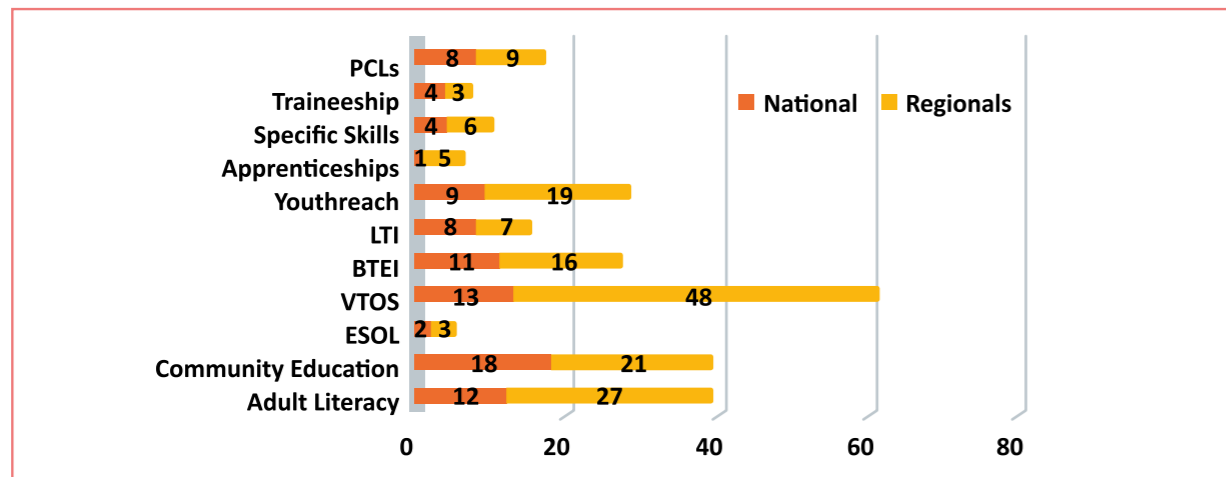


Chart 1.3: NFLF Participation by Programme

These programmes reflect learners from both full-time and part-time provision. A complete breakdown of learners by full-time and part-time courses can be found in Chart 1.4 to the right.

Terminology used in this report, as much as possible, reflects the current systems and structures in place in the FET sector. It should be noted that in some cases learners were unclear on recent terminology and therefore may have referred to organisations or terms no longer

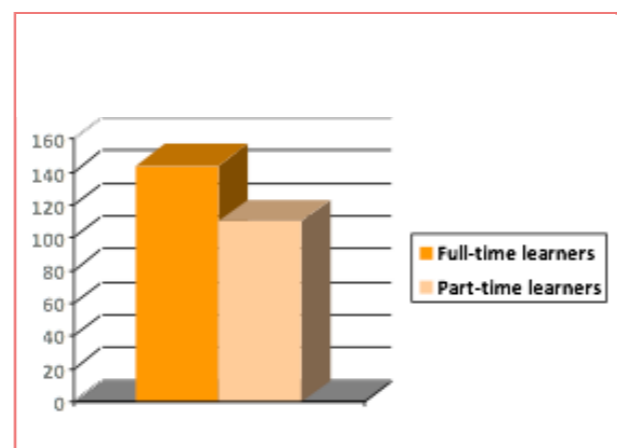


Chart 1.4: NFLF Participation by Full-Time and Part-Time

in place (ie FÁS or DSP). In order to maintain the authenticity of learner voices, facilitators adopted this terminology during discussions. Where elements of relevant conversations have been used as exemplars, an explanatory note has been incorporated. With events taking place at the national and regional level, some small differences in methodological approach were applied. The differences are detailed below.

NATIONAL EVENT METHODOLOGY

The national event was defined by its celebratory atmosphere, with learners invited to Croke Park for the day to hear a series of speakers and engage in learner voice activities prior to providing their views on the FET service.³ Learners heard from a number of stakeholders and SOLAS staff, including the Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton, TD, and SOLAS CEO, Paul O’Toole. Before breaking into discussion groups, learners also heard from motivational speaker, John Lonergan, who communicated the importance of each learner’s return to education. This event, developed from a learner voice framework, created an environment in which learners felt valued and were thereby more willing to openly share their views. Of the 107 learners nominated by ETBs, 90 learners took part in the event. A complete breakdown of the nomination returns through attendance can be found in Table 2.2 featured in the appendix of this report.

For the purposes of this research, learners were then split into heterogeneous groups of approximately ten to fifteen learners. Every effort was made to ensure these groups contained a diverse ETB and FET programme cohort.

Each group was asked to answer the following questions:

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

After these conversations were complete, learners changed groups. For this session learners broke into groups organised specifically by FET programme. The following question was then posed to these groups:

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

Both conversations were administered by facilitators and learner responses were recorded by separate note takers.

REGIONAL EVENT METHODOLOGY

Regional events were a more concise and intimate process, with each ETB delivering two sessions over the course of a half day. Learners were randomly selected to participate in either the first or the second sessions. AONTAS made every effort possible to ensure learners felt as valued for their input as those who participated in the national event. Learners were then randomly divided into groups of approximately ten to answer the same questions posed at the national event. Unlike the national event where groups were divided by programme for the second question, learners remained in the original random grouping for both questions one and two.

Upon a recommendation of the NFLF Advisory Group, AONTAS also delivered a short survey card to learners at these regional events. AONTAS designed these questions based on topics raised at both the 2016 and 2017 national events.

2. Learning and Skills Improvement Service, ‘Talking Learner Voice’, available at <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130802111124/http://www.lsis.org.uk/sites/www.lsis.org.uk/files/LSIS%20-%20Talking%20Learner%20Voice%20A4.pdf>, pp 5-6.

3. For further explanations of the importance of environment setting in learner voice events, please see Robinson, C and Taylor, C (2007). ‘Theorising Student Voice: values and perspectives. Improving Schools’ as quoted in Leila Walker and Ann Logan (Futurelab), ‘Learner Engagement: A review of learner voice initiatives across the UK’s education sectors’ (2008), available at <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/FUTL80/FUTL80.pdf> p.5.

The questions were as follows:

Question 1: Transportation

Has transportation (access to a car or public transit) ever kept you from participating in Further Education and Training OR made it difficult to participate in Further Education and Training? (Yes/No)

Question 2: Tutor Availability

Has a course in which you are or have been registered been cancelled, had the start day delayed or had classes cancelled because teachers and/or tutors were unavailable? (Yes/No)

Question 3: FET Advertisement

How did you first hear about the availability of Further Education and Training courses? (Word of Mouth/Radio Advertisement/Other Government Service (Intreo), Sign or Poster Advertisement/TV Advertisement/Other)

Question 4: Finding Information

When looking for information at the time you first registered and since starting your course have you been able to easily find the information you are seeking? (Yes/No)

Each question left space for respondents to fill in additional information if desired. The responses to these surveys are incorporated into the regional section of this report. A full breakdown of survey responses can be found in the Appendix in Tables 2.3 - 2.7.

DETAILED FINDINGS

This section is broken into three key sub-sections. The first reflects the totality of information gathered from NFLF participants at the regional and national events and is presented in alignment with the core five strategic goals of the FET Strategy to complement wider SOLAS research and data. The second section is an overview of findings according to each programme. The third and final section is an overview of findings from regional events.

FINDINGS ACCORDING TO FET STRATEGY GOALS

GOAL 1: SKILLS FOR THE ECONOMY

FET will address current and future needs of learners, jobseekers, employers and employees and will contribute to national economic development.

There was a common belief among learners that their time in FET courses had increased their employability skills. A lot of these skills were identified as part of their core, transferable skill set, such as increased confidence and motivation. As one learner described, 'This [FET course] is learning for life and ongoing learning.' Courses that offered integrated work experience received significant praise from learners for their skill building.

Referral for some learners into FET courses came from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP). These learners often expressed feelings of disappointment in this experience, citing negative interactions with DEASP staff, inconsistent information, and a lack of flexibility with individual learner needs. Learners called for a stronger link to be forged between ETBs and the DEASP to help address these concerns. Learners also believed that an individualised approach to course enrolment, or the development of an individual action plan that connects learner needs with a FET plan, would allow learners to maximise the benefit of FET engagement.

Learners also expressed concern with the unforgiving penalty of reducing benefit allowances for FET course absences. While learners agreed that a reduction in payments for excessive absences from courses was an effective punitive measure to incentivise consistent course engagement, many argued the current policy did not take into account justifiable absences. For example, childcare and illness related absences were not excused and could cause both educational and monetary penalties. Learners believe a more flexible approach to this policy would eliminate these areas of concern and reduce levels of anxiety around course participation.

GOAL 2: ACTIVE INCLUSION

FET provision will support the active inclusion of people of all abilities with special reference to literacy and numeracy.

While learner motivation for completing a FET course depends predominantly on the course taken, there was a common expression of active community engagement once learners were enrolled in a FET course. As one learner stated, 'the most important thing for me is integrating with the community.' Learners described social inclusion in terms of promoting intergenerational exchange, enabling diverse socio-economic integration, and combatting rural isolation.

While many learners praised FET for its accessibility, learners also pointed out that this vast landscape, in some instances, posed a challenge to learning. FET encompasses learners with a broad range of abilities. For many learners initially entering FET, course expectations can be daunting. This was a particular barrier in full-time courses, where learners felt the disparity in skill levels contributed to individual apprehension about falling behind. For many, language and IT skills were an obstacle. As one learner described, 'assuming that learners have IT skills is a mistake.' Learners believed stronger initial informal assessment structures to gauge learner abilities and individualised instruction would help alleviate these issues. Such processes could more accurately identify pre-requisite skills learners may enhance before entering their course, thus allowing tutors to tailor curriculum to individual learner needs before issuing standardised class assignments.

Parents cited that one of the major reasons for returning to education was to set a strong example for their children. One learner described this by stating, 'making a better life for my kids is my ultimate goal – I want them to look up to me.' Parents, nevertheless, stressed the importance of childcare supports for learners. For many, childcare for children who are too old for crèche (eg 12-14 years old) was not provided. In centres where childcare was available to learners, individuals reported stronger retention rates. One learner described the success of the service by stating, 'Childcare support was vital for me. I couldn't have done it otherwise.' Learners asked that similar measures be put into place at all FET centres.

GOAL 3: QUALITY PROVISION

FET will provide high quality education and training programmes to meet appropriate national and international quality standards.

Tutors prevailed as the key determinate of individual learner success. Learners stressed that many tutors go above and beyond in their support of learner development. One learner described tutors as, 'always ready to listen to me.' This active listening fostered individualised instruction and communicated an investment in student growth. One-to-one tutoring was the most effective measure in place to support learner growth. Nevertheless, learners were aware that tutors were being

stretched thin. Learners would like to see more tutors employed to maintain smaller class sizes to ensure individual learner needs are met.

While tutor support at NFQ Levels 1-3 was positive, many learners stated that these supports dropped drastically during the transition to Level 4 courses. Learners argued this rough transition did not allow for the gradual supports learners required for success. Many believed an integrated support strategy framed around gradual skill progression would help alleviate this rough transition.

Learners stressed that mental health was an area that needed further support structures. While learners praised the role that FET played in increasing their overall mental health and well-being, many still stated that FET providers should do more to support learners affected by mental health. One learner, for example, suggested ETBs promote 'Mental Health Week with guest speakers.' The learner further suggested providing resources on Mind your Mind or teaching coping mechanisms.

GOAL 4: INTEGRATED PLANNING AND FUNDING

FET provision will be planned and funded on the basis of objective analysis of needs and evidence of social and economic impact.

Processes in place for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) were seen overall as positive. Learners, however, noted levels of inconsistency in how RPL was assessed. In some instances, learners reported frustration with a complete lack of RPL being used at their ETB. The use of portfolios to showcase learner abilities was a supported measure.

Learners pointed out that many learners were part of the workforce and were using FET to upskill. These learners stressed the importance of offering part-time courses, particularly night courses, to allow for a work and learning balance. This call was echoed by learner parents who argued that increased part-time and summer course modules would allow for greater flexibility in childcare.

Learners did raise concern about the disjointed practices in place between further education and higher education. In some instances, learners reported that they were required to repeat courses they had completed in FET again once they began higher level education, while others argued that their local FET provider did not offer enough feeder courses into higher education. Overall, learners called for a stronger transitional strategy to be developed to support learners who desired to use FET to transition into higher education.

Differences between rural and urban environments shaped learners' ability to participate in FET courses. For instance, transportation had the greatest impact on rural areas, where learners relied on public travel. One learner aired frustration at this barrier for its impact on progression, stating 'I could go and do the Leaving Certificate, but there is no travel for me to get to the closer college.' Other learners indicated that it was travel costs that prevented them from accessing FET courses. In response to this, learners have requested access to student travel cards.

GOAL 5: *STANDING OF FET*

Ensure a valued learning path leading to agreed employment; career developmental; and personal and social options.

Ensuring learners effectively access the pathway to FET, requires that learners are aware of how to access courses. In both discussions and surveys, word of mouth prevailed as the primary way in which learners discovered their FET course. Surveys indicated 59% of people first discovered their course by word of mouth. When referring to programmes and services connected to FET, some learners used terminology no longer in place. For example, a number of learners referenced interactions with FÁS and did not always understand the connection of SOLAS to the FET sector.

Learners argued that a stronger investment in FET advertisement needed to be implemented. Key to the success of this advertisement campaign had to be a commitment to plain language, meaning the elimination of jargon and a reduction of acronyms. Learners who were simply referred to the Fetchcourses.ie website by guidance, DEASP, or another contact, found this referral particularly unhelpful. Access to a website is useful for a person who knows what they need and therefore knows what to search for on a website. Access to a website is often not helpful for someone seeking FET education service for the first time after years outside of traditional education, or for someone with low digital literacy skills. As one learner described, 'you could be all day and all night on the FETCH courses website looking and looking; and unless you know what you're looking for or where to look, it is quite difficult to find.

Learners praised courses that integrated work experience into their course. They believed this practice provided them with valuable first-hand experience that would increase their employability. Learners, nevertheless, expressed concern about courses that required learners to seek this course placement on their own. Learners argued that many employers were reluctant to take on FET learners and, in some instances, learners stated they felt discriminated against based on their age.

REGIONAL FINDINGS

CORK ETB

Learners indicated a strong presence of grassroots information exchange in relation to FET courses. Both previous learners and tutors were the strongest advocates of FET enrolment. While the majority of learners in Cork heard about their FET course by word of mouth, a number of learners also pointed to the Cork Independent as an effective forum for advertisement.

Reasons for entry into courses were varied. Some cited work, while others pointed to general interest in an active lifestyle. Nevertheless, a number of students expressed a sense of relief that the leaving certificate was not a determinant to FET engagement; this shows the importance of FET as an alternative path to education from the historical focus on higher education. Learners stated they were unaware of this prior to taking a course and believe that it should be a key focus when promoting FET learning.

FET centre and ETB staff received praise for their role in supporting learner growth. Tutors, as one learner described, the reason for completing a course. Another learner elaborated on this point by describing how the tutor was, 'actually down at your own level ... she'll instruct you on a personal level, one to one, which is absolutely great.' Learners explained how this ethos was seen throughout the entire staff. Administrative officers were described as supportive and caring, with learners praising their willingness to help with CV development and information requests. Learners stressed the importance of participation in courses on their overall well-being. One learner even stated, 'I feel healthier since I came back here.' This feeling was clearly a product of the positive atmosphere fostered in Cork centres by staff and current learners. There was a strong

sense of community engagement underlining the success of Cork ETB programmes.

GALWAY AND ROSCOMMON ETB

The obstacle and benefits associated with rural learning were a core feature of the Galway Roscommon ETB dialogue. Transportation, for example, played a greater part in the Galway learner discussions than in other locations, with 46% of survey respondents in Galway indicating that transportation was a barrier to access FET courses. Transportation was a particular barrier to learners who were not able to enrol in the course they desired, because it was not offered in their local area. One learner described how s/he could not take a childcare course because s/he could not make the commute to the centre where the course was being offered.

Isolation, in particular rural isolation, was a common theme. Many learners claimed that prior to course enrolment, they felt apprehensive about re-entering education due in a large part to a fear that they may be the only one who fell behind. However, once learners moved past this fear, they claimed courses played an important social function. These courses introduced learners to a community of individuals in similar situations. As one learner described, 'I learned I was not alone.' Nonetheless, these learners reiterated the importance of communicating this impact, as it would motivate other potential learners afraid of taking this first step.

There was a clear effort to promote computer literacy, particularly among rural populations. Learners recognised the importance of these skills and appreciated the investment in these courses. One learner described how s/he missed significant advances in IT because s/he was working. S/he now wanted to increase his/her skills to maintain contact with their family in England.

TIPPERARY ETB

A number of learners in Tipperary cited job and economic factors as being the main reason for entering FET. These learners expressed a strong desire to develop skills that would increase their employability. These learners, however, reiterated a desire to have further career guidance supports to help achieve this goal. Learners also stressed the importance of FET learning in increasing confidence in themselves, with a number reflecting on their past struggles in traditional education. As one learner stated, 'FET isn't a second chance, it's a first.'

One of the greatest barriers to accessing FET in Tipperary was awareness of the services being offered. A higher than average proportion of Tipperary learners discovered their FET course by word of mouth, with 73% of survey respondents selecting this measure. The lack of awareness around FET learners was captured in one learner's statement that s/he lived a short distance from his local training centre, but did not know what the building was until s/he was referred to the courses. Learners also claimed that their interactions with the DEASP were inconsistent.

PROGRAMME FINDINGS

COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Community education participants stressed the important role community education played in bringing learners back into learning. For many, community education was the first learning experience they had since their formal education (often several years previously). Participants described their programme as giving confidence, encouragement, and purpose to life.

The current PLSS system was raised as a potential

threat to the welcoming environment offered at community education centres. Learners did not feel comfortable handing over their PPS number to enrol in a course. As one learner described, 'they know too much about you with your PPS number.' This barrier, some felt, could prevent learners from completing a course. Others stressed the importance of using plain language and avoiding government jargon in publications designed for learners. Learners stressed that community education groups service some of the most disadvantaged learners, therefore it was essential that all communications be easily accessible to learners of all language and literacy abilities.

LOCAL TRAINING INITIATIVE (LTI)

Learners welcomed the work experience offered in many LTIs. The relationship learners were able to build with employers and peers was seen as playing an important role. They believed these networks offered long-term support for career development.

A number of learners, however, pointed to informational barriers that existed between their programmes and ETBs. For many learners it was difficult to find information on QQI awards and the National Qualifications Framework. They also pointed to the difficulties they faced in engaging with INTREO centres. Many learners left confused about what courses they should be taking and felt in a panic to enrol in something quickly out of fear they may lose necessary financial support. While learners wanted to take advantage of courses, they wanted their experiences to be meaningful and aligned with their life needs. They wanted their interactions with INTREO to acknowledge these individual needs, allowing learners to feel less like numbers that fill course quotas and more like people with unique experiences, skills, and employment potential. As

one learner stated, 'No one wants to be linked to payments or statistics.'

TRAINING (INCLUDES APPRENTICESHIP, TRAINEESHIP, SPECIFIC SKILLS TRAINING)

Learners enrolled in these programmes believed strongly in the skills they have developed as part of their education. They felt training programmes offered practical choices that fit their needs. Learners also highlighted the wider benefits of this learning, describing how training programmes allowed them to gain confidence and self-esteem.

At the national event discussion, no one participating in these programmes used a support service to gain access to their programme and instead relied on online research. There is very little understanding about the NFQ framework and how courses lead to an award. Learners felt that more available information and meetings with guidance would be beneficial to inform their FET progression. Learners also described the difficulty in locating work placements, which are a requirement of their education. They believed stronger relationships between ETBs and local employers would help this issue.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES SCHEME (VTOS)

VTOS learners identified various pathways to VTOS courses, with each exposing an individual barrier. For learners who discovered VTOS courses on their own, they claimed there was a limited amount of information available. Prior to their enrolment, they were unclear on how their course enrolment would affect their progression, particularly into higher education. For instance, some learners were confused by similar types of courses with similar names (ie: Pre-Nursing; and Healthcare). These courses,

however, cover different modules that affect learners' progression. Learners stated there was not enough awareness around the intricacies of the complex education system, resulting in this confusion.

Learners who were referred to VTOS, felt that the programme was not explained in advance of attending their first course. Learners provided a recommendation that information packs and fairs or expos would be useful resources to share information and create awareness about the VTOS programme.

Tutors in VTOS were described by learners as 'wonderful.' Learners explained that the support these tutors offered made a significant difference in their learning. They noted regrettably that a lack of tutors had a negative impact on their learning, with tutor absences resulting in learners being directed into study time in place of instructional teaching. One learner stated that the lack of replacement instructors resulted in prolonged course gaps. S/he detailed, 'we had no maths teacher for the first few months and there was no replacement teacher. The college was aware of this. We suffered as s/he had to drop out due to health reasons. We heard that the same tutor did 4 hours in another location and as a result we got no full award.' The staffing of additional tutors, learners believed would alleviate some of these issues.

POST LEAVING CERTIFICATE (PLC)

Once enrolled in a PLC course, learners felt they had good access to information. Learners in PLC reported having a solid awareness of QQI and the National Qualifications Framework, this being a notable difference from other FET programmes. Learners also felt their work was assessed in a meaningful and effective way, with personal feedback being positive and constructive. They appreciated the different teaching styles

implemented at PLC colleges and attributed these practices to their current success.

Learners in PLCs did, nonetheless, express concern over the observed dropout rate in their programme. Many claimed that classmates left the course because they had not been adequately informed about requirements for progression. Learners felt that access to guidance services prior to course entry helped curb this effect. Learners who had accessed guidance supports were much clearer on the expectations they needed to meet, whereas those who did not were seemingly more likely to drop the course. To avoid this, learners requested that each learner be directed to guidance upon initial enrolment into a PLC course.

PLC learners also expressed concern about pathways of progression. Learners stated that in some cases, these were not always clear or the courses being offered did not easily facilitate progression. As one learner described, 'sometimes the module on offer does not facilitate progression.' There was a belief that if more emphasis was placed on progression, course options could be designed to better foster this type of growth.

ENGLISH FOR SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES (ESOL)

Learners noted the support and encouragement they received by tutors and peers which helped them progress with their studies and gain confidence in their abilities. This support was important for a number of reasons. Learning a language as an adult is difficult and requires a great deal of courage. Also, for many learners new to this country, their connections in the community were limited. Engagement with tutors and peers became an important point of contact not only for learning, but also for social

integration. Learners also praised the work of their tutors, but they felt that often tutors were under pressure to complete an extensive curriculum in a short period of time. This pressure did not allow adequate time for tutors to offer additional supports to struggling learners. Learners only receive 12 hours of English lessons per week for 12 weeks. They feel they need more hours and longer courses to improve their language skills for employment and/or ongoing education since language acquisition requires more practical engagement time and consistent reinforcement. As one learner stated, 'there is no time on course to practice - tutors already have to deal with people on different levels needs support not available.' A suggestion was given that more effort be made to have volunteer ESOL aides supplement the work of tutors outside of class time. Furthermore, learners stressed the desire of ESOL learners to be able to move beyond language classes. ESOL Levels 1 and 2 are the only ESOL courses offered while in Direct Provision - learners communicated the desire of those in Direct Provision to progress onto higher-level language courses.

YOUTHREACH

For many learners, Youthreach was described as more accessible than school. The environment, practice, and course structure better prepares learners for college than the formal school system. They were very appreciative of the smaller class sizes and the use of continuous assessment.

Learners did state they felt there was a stigma attached to Youthreach that prevented schools and guidance counsellors from presenting it as a socially acceptable alternative option to secondary school. Learners believed combatting this stigma required better promotion of Youthreach as a valid alternative to secondary

school models. Learners suggested greater community engagement as an option. They pointed to charity work as a potential avenue to promote the positive work of Youthreach learners, with Youthreach learners volunteering at non-profit events in their area outside of course time.

The importance of Youthreach learners as a unique population was also discussed. Learners stated that some young people who engaged in Youthreach suffered from mental health, addiction issues, and learning disabilities. These were barriers that prevented their success in the traditional school setting, yet they were surprisingly under supported areas in their Youthreach programmes as well. Learners stated that centres needed to teach mental health coping mechanisms, offer further disability support, and provide further information on addiction related issues.

Environment also was a central part of the discussion. Many Youthreach programmes, learners noted, were hidden in hard to reach housing estates that could not always be accessed by public transport. Learners indicated through several discussions that many of these centres were impacted by poor infrastructure – centres were identified by learners as cold, dilapidated or falling apart.

ADULT LITERACY

Peer learning emerged as a common theme in literacy courses. For many, prior to course engagement, there was a prevailing feeling of isolation and intimidation when beginning a course. Once learners entered their course and began working with peers facing similar obstacles, this feeling dissipated and learners began to regain confidence in their skills.

Prior to entering a course, learners identified significant barriers faced when accessing information on courses. Information on programmes and courses was too complex, preventing learners from finding information on their own. Other learners cited differences in learner abilities upon entry into literacy programmes. A recommendation was given that learners should start at the same place and gradually work their way up through courses. In addition, several learners noted that they were not informed of the NFO. Some knew what programme they were on while others just progressed along and knew it was the next stage on from Level 3 or Level 4. More awareness and information is required to ensure learners understand the accreditation of the education they are receiving.

BACK TO EDUCATION INITIATIVE (BTEI)

Learners felt that BTEI courses met their immediate needs upon returning to education. As learners stated, returning to education through BTEI opened the door to different opportunities. Again, tutors were praised for their role in supporting learner development.

Interactions with the DEASP were described as being the most difficult. Learners spoke of how they were told their social payments would be stopped if they did not continue in employment, meaning for some learners they would need to leave education. They felt this was counterintuitive as people need social supports while attending education.

Learners were also asked if they had permission from DEASP to attend their course, which they described as condescending and unsupportive from the perspective of the learner. A learner in one facilitated discussion gave an example of this treatment by detailing their interactions with one

of the Job Path providers, Seetec. One learner described his/her interactions with Seetec by saying, ‘Seetec are like a dog with a bone.’ The metaphor was used to recall how Seetec eagerly sought to enrol the student in a course without questioning the learner about his/her individual needs. This was a quotation was then repeated several times by different learners in the group with some adding further examples of this impersonal approach. Learners felt that Seetec see them as profit points and therefore try and push them into education even if it may not be best for the learner, just to inflate their numbers.



OUTREACH

The success of the NFLF is directly tied to the awareness of learner voice and the promotion of NFLF events. Through a comprehensive communications strategy, that combined outreach in local and national press with social media promotion.

The NFLF reached an estimated audience of 325,000 people through print media outlets alone. This publicity came largely through an extensive publication coverage through regional print media. Articles were printed in 13 different regional papers across Ireland, including the *Laois Nationalist*, the *Clare Champion*, the *Southside People* and the *Roscommon Herald*. Regional output was augmented through online regional forums, which included the *Wicklow People* and the *Donegal Post*. Additionally, the national paper, the *Irish Independent*, profiled Wicklow and Kildare ETB participants at the NFLF in the regional section of their online platform.



Image 2.2: Media Coverage #Learner Voice

A complete table featuring a list of these publications can be found in the Appendix of this report, under the title Table 2.8.

The national event was also captured by a videographer and shared on YouTube. The video later became a resource for introducing learners to the NFLF at regional events. The event also was promoted on Twitter and Facebook through the **#LearnerVoice**, featured in images captured in shared across media sources. Promotion of this campaign is captured in Image 2.3 featured the right.

The national event also marked the public launch of the 2016 NFLF Public Policy and Learner Reports. In addition to the print copies circulated to key stakeholders and NFLF participants, digital access to these reports is possible on the AONTAS website.

4. For copies of these reports, please see AONTAS, ‘National Adult Learner Forum, 2016: Speak Today, Change Tomorrow’ (2017) available at <https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Learner-Work/NALF-Policy-Report-2016.pdf> and ‘National Adult Learner Forum, 2016 Learner Report: Speak Today, Change Tomorrow’ (2017) available at <https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Learner-Work/NALF-Learner-Report-2016.pdf>.

CONNECTIONS TO WIDER RESEARCH

The following table provides a selection of the wider links between NFLF findings and other FET related research.

PUBLICATION	
Deirdre Goggin, Phil O’Leary, and Irene Sheridan <i>Recognition of Prior Learning in Irish Further Education and Training</i> September 2017	
Summary	
This research, funded by QQI, was conducted at the Cork Institute of Technology. It combined outside research with interviews with AEOs across Ireland. The aim was to assess the current practices and procedures for RPL used in the FET sector.	
Topic	Connection
RPL	Stakeholders identified a lack of clarity in relation to RPL, the diverse abilities of learners, and a lack of educator support for development in RPL systems as being barriers to its successful implementation (33-4).

PUBLICATION	
Seamus McGuinness, Adele Bergin, Elish Kelly, Selina McCoy, Emer Smyth, Adele Whelan, and Joanne Banks <i>Further Education and Training in Ireland: Past, Present, and Future, ESRI Research Series No. 35</i> April 2017	
Summary	
This study conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute of Ireland (ESRI) was the first comprehensive study commissioned to review FET provision in Ireland. It combined a history of the Irish FET sector with a detailed breakdown of relevant FET statistics and interviews with key stakeholders.	
Topic	Connection
Advertising	The report stated that learners and school guidance counsellors did not understand the options available within FET (61). Stakeholders advocated for a rebranding of FET (62). The complexity of the system was also cited as a barrier to FET promotion (53).
Progression	Stakeholders described the stigma attached to FET, explaining that a number of people perceived FET as a sector catering to those who failed in school (39-40).

PUBLICATION	
Seamus McGuinness, Adele Bergin, Elish Kelly, Selina McCoy, Emer Smyth, Dorothy Watson, and Adele Whelan <i>Evaluation of PLC Programme, ESRI Research Series No. 61</i> January 2018	
Summary	
This report interviewed key focus groups including FET target groups, employers, and educators from Galway, Dublin and Cork to uncover the barriers individuals face when accessing FET courses. It should be noted that a significant difference between this report and the NFLF is that it did not include the voices of any active learners. FET target groups consisted only of learners who had never completed (26 individuals), dropped (12 individuals), or completed (4 individuals) a FET course.	

Topic	Connection
Guidance	While this report noted that many PLCs offered guidance supports to students, it noted that cuts to career guidance support has adversely affected student success (38, 56). Only 1/3 of PLC learners had access to career guidance during their course (120).
Progression to HE	This report highlighted the perceived biases against PLC courses as potential avenues to Higher Education (19). Those who progressed to Higher Education were most likely to do so upon advice and support from a guidance counselor, indicating that investment in guidance is key to supporting pathways of progression (90-1).

PUBLICATION	
Robert Mooney and Claire O’Rourke <i>Barriers to Further Education and Training with Particular Reference to Long Term Unemployed Persons and Other Vulnerable Individuals</i> July 17	
Summary	
This report interviewed key focus groups including FET target groups, employers, and educators from Galway, Dublin and Cork to uncover the barriers individuals face when accessing FET courses. It should be noted that a significant difference between this report and the NFLF is that it did not include the voices of any active learners. FET target groups consisted only of learners who had never completed (26 individuals), dropped (12 individuals), or completed (4 individuals) a FET course.	
Topic	Connection
Advertisement	In the Barriers Report, learners described how weak advertisement contributed to a general lack of awareness of FET services and programmes and a confusion among learners of the differences between FÁS and SOLAS (21, 28, 31, 33, 43, 54, 56).
Childcare	Participants in this report identified childcare as a prohibitive cost to access FET (19, 26, 27, 30, 37, 38, 43, 44, 50, 55)
Guidance	The report also called for an increase of guidance supports before, during, and after FET engagement (56).
Language	The Barriers report cited complex language and numeracy as an unnecessary obstacle to FET access, particularly for vulnerable communities such as learners with disabilities and learners with limited English language skills (17, 37, 54). The report exposed inconsistent practices among ETBs in regards to accessible information dissemination (57). It recommended website support tools, non-digital advertisements, and the elimination of acronyms and jargon (43, 54, 56). It called for teaching numeracy and language skills across curriculum courses (46, 52). It also highlighted the need to increase literacy hours for ESOL learners (17).
Mental Health	FET stakeholders and learners identified mental health as a barrier to FET entrance and completion. Many stakeholders suggested, as learners at the NFLF participants indicated, that FET plays a positive role in improving mental health (36, 40, 43). Nevertheless, the report also argued that FET courses needed to provide stronger mental health and disability supports for learners engaging in FET course (60).

Progression	The report argued that FET was not promoted as an alternative option for progression to Higher Education or employment (27-30, 50, 57). It attributed this to a lack of awareness of FET progression options, a lower value placed on FET courses, and a reluctance of school guidance teachers to present FET as alternate option to students (44, 51).
Transportation	Transport costs, the report stated, were another financially prohibitive factor (19, 37, 38, 55).

Progression	<i>The report argued that FET was not promoted as an alternative option for progression to Higher Education or employment (27-30, 50, 57). It attributed this to a lack of awareness of FET progression options, a lower value placed on FET courses, and a reluctance of school guidance teachers to present FET as alternate option to students (44, 51).</i>
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PUBLICATION	
NALA <i>A Review of Adult Numeracy and Policy in Ireland</i> 2017	
Summary	
This paper combines international and national research on adult numeracy. The national context examines current ETB practices for promoting numeracy development among adult learners.	
Topic	Connection
Instruction	The report recommended the development of a clear procedure for teaching numeracy skills across the FET sector (32).

PUBLICATION	
Marie Rooney <i>Well-being in the Further Education and Training Environment</i> December 2015	
Summary	
This publication was a resource guide created to help FET providers support learners suffering from mental health conditions.	
Topic	Connection
Mental Health	The report recommended the development of a clear procedure for teaching numeracy skills across the FET sector (32).

PUBLICATION	
Rose Ryan 'Supporting Progression from FET to Higher Education: Bridging the Gap' in <i>The Education Matters Yearbook</i> 2017	
Summary	
This article featured in the annual Education Matters Yearbook. Ryan serves as the Director of Access at Maynooth University and is the Chair of FET2HE Network. The article provides and overview of some of the findings the network has uncovered in relation to FET barriers in Ireland.	

Topic	Connection
Progression	Lack of information about progression options into Higher Education were described as a significant barrier in FET (277). There was a call for clear and transparent pathways from FET to Higher Education (278).

PUBLICATION	
Walk <i>Accessing Mainstream Training: Barriers for People with Disabilities 2015</i>	
Summary	
This report was a joint European Social Fund and Equality Mainstreaming Unit project. It combined global research with current Irish statistics to uncover some of the barriers individuals with disabilities face in the education.	
Topic	Connection
Advertisement	This report found that overly complex information about course navigation was a significant barrier to learners with disabilities (13, 19).
Transportation	Individuals with disabilities face significant barriers in accessing transportation that include the ability to make use of public transportation options and the ability to self-navigate. These can become prohibitive barriers to accessing educational opportunities (8, 19, 21).

CONCLUSION

These findings have been presented in a manner to best communicate the overall desires of FET learners based on their programme and area. This format was designed to allow FET providers to consider potential ways to improve FET service. The incorporation of these recommendations into FET planning is important because, as leading learner voice experts Taylor and Robison have described, ‘listening to learner voice alone is not sufficient, what happens to this information and what is done with it is also of great importance.’⁵ The transformation of learner recommendations into policy can, of course, take time. It is, nonetheless, important to let learners know their voices are valued and being incorporated into strategy planning. As the forum continues to expand in 2018, 2019 and hopefully beyond, it is the hope of AONTAS and other key stakeholders that the link between learner voice and policy action continues to become more and more clear.

This report marks the close of the NFLF’s second year. While we should celebrate the accomplishments of the project thus far, it is also important that we reflect on some of the core principals underpinning the NFLF’s creation - the main one being a commitment to learner voice. As the most recent UNESCO report on lifelong learning and adult education has shown, further education must be an area of international focus given the current social and economic world climate.⁶ Ireland should be commended for implementing a plan that not only promotes lifelong learning, but also provides a platform for learner voices to be heard. This commitment represents a much broader acknowledgement of the role individuals play in discovering the best path forward for FET. This is important on a policy level, but also on a personal one because as learner voice experts Leila Walker and Anne Hogan argue, ‘learner voice is about empowering learners’.⁷ These recommendations are, after all, more than research; they are individual stories that together form a collective representation of FET experiences. As we set out on a new course in 2018, one that plans to reach even more programmes, areas, and learners across Ireland, we will continue to keep this core principal at the heart of our work. Learners should know that their voices are valued and they should feel empowered in the knowledge that their efforts have been incorporated into a broader commitment to progress FET forward in a meaningful way.

5. As quoted in Leila Walker and Ann Logan (Futurelab), ‘Learner Engagement: A review of learner voice initiatives across the UK’s education sectors’ (2008) available at <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/FUTL80/FUTL80.pdf>, p.5.

6. UNESCO, Global Report on Lifelong Learning and Further Education: The Impact of Adult Learning and Education on Health and Well-Being; Employment and the Labour Market; and Social, Civic and Community Life (3rd ed.), (2016) available at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002459/245913e.pdf>, p. 17.

7. Ibid.

APPENDIX

Table 2.1 2017 NFLF Participants by Programme

	GENERAL LEARNING AND LITERACY	COMMUNITY EDUCATION	SPECIALIST TRAINING PROGRAMME	ESOL	VTOS	BTEI	LTI	YOUTHREACH	APPRENTICESHIP	SPECIFIC SKILLS TRAINING	TRAINEESHIP	PLC
2017 Regional NFLF Totals	27	21	0	3	48	16	7	19	5	6	3	9
2017 National NFLF Totals	12	18	0	2	13	11	8	9	1	4	4	8
Overall 2017 NFLF Totals	39	39	0	5	61	27	16	28	6	10	7	17

Table 2.2 Nomination Process Return Rates 2016 and 2017

	2016		2017		PERCENTAGE INCREASE FROM PREVIOUS YEAR
	ETBs	6 each 96 total	ETBs	6 each 96 total	
National Event Learner Invite	CEN	2 each 12 total	CEN	2 each 20 total	60%
	TOTAL	108	TOTAL	116	7.41%
	National Event Total Learner Nominations	80	107		34%
National Event Learner Attendance	70		90		28.57%
National Event Rate of Return from Nominated Learners to Attendance	87.5%		84.11%		-3.39%
National Event Rate of Return from Invited Learners to Attendance	64.81%		77.59%		12.78%

Table 2.3 Regional Survey Card Totals

	TOTAL RESPONSES (INCLUDING BLANKS)	NUMBER LEFT BLANK
Galway	39	0
Tipperary	58	1
Cork	43	0
TOTALS	140	1

Table 2.3 Regional Survey Card Totals

ADVERTISING Further Education and Training						
How did you first hear about the availability of Further Education and Training courses?						
	Word of Mouth (friend, family, etc.)	Radio Advertisement	Other Government Service (Intreo)	Sign or poster advertisement	TV advertisement	Other (Please write) *
Galway	17	2	8	3	2	8
Tipperary	44	1	4	4	0	7
Cork	21	0	4	2	0	12
TOTALS	82	3	16	9	2	27
	colleague who had done the course (Galway) from office (Galway) I looked for the course (Galway) Facebook (Galway) FAS (Galway) FAS (Galway) I went for information (Galway) a friend told me about it (Galway) always of interest (Tipperary) ETB/Community (Tipperary) local paper (Tipperary) FIT (Tipperary) not enough advertisement (Tipperary)			email (Tipperary) online (Tipperary) open days (Cork) book in the door from counter (Cork) online (Cork) searched online (Cork) career counsellor (Cork) I called into centre to find what was available (C.A.L.P. Centre) (Cork) Newspaper (Cork) Newspaper (Cork) Ballincollig FAS Centre (Cork)		

*Answer to 'Other' Categories are featured in box below with parenthetical note as to which county the response was matched

Table 2.5 Regional Survey Cards (Transportation)

TRANSPORTATION						
Has transportation (access to a car or public transit) ever kept you from participating in Further Education and Training OR made it difficult to participate in Further Education and Training ?						
	Yes			No		
Galway	16			19		
Tipperary	11			43		
Cork	6			35		
TOTALS	33			97		
REASON	Transit fares are too expensive	No transit service	Cost of operating a car is too expensive	Commute to classes is too long	Too many transfers	Other (Please write) *
Galway	4	4	7	3	1	2
Tipperary	4	6	8	3	0	4
Cork	3	1	2	2	1	3
TOTALS	11	11	17	8	2	9
	I don't drive (Galway) parking and travel are too expensive and I cannot afford it (Galway) I wanted to do accounts only and it does not seem to be available (Tipperary)			I don't drive (Tipperary) No car (Tipperary) no bus service (Cork) distance to travel (Cork) distance to travel (Cork)		

Table 2.6 Regional Survey Cards (Tutor Availability)

TUTOR AVAILABILITY		
Has a course in which you are or have been registered been cancelled, had the start day delayed or had classes cancelled because teachers and/or tutors were unavailable?		
	Yes	No
Galway	6	28
Tipperary	4	49
Cork	5	32
TOTALS	15	109

Table 2.7 Regional Survey Card (Information Access)

FINDING INFORMATION				
When looking for information at the time you first registered and since starting your course have you been able to easily find the information you are seeking?				
	Yes		No	
Galway	26		6	
Tipperary	46		6	
Cork	28		5	
TOTALS	100		17	
REASON	Information is in many places (online, letters, etc.)	Information not shared by SOLAS	Information was not shared by ETB	Other (Please write) *
Galway	3	0	3	2
Tipperary	1	2	3	3
Cork	4	0	1	4
TOTALS	8	2	7	9
	when do you start (Galway) finding through the employment office (Galway) advertisement (Tipperary) wasn't informed at the time (Tipperary) information not shared by the DSP (Tipperary)		could not read (Cork) CCOC didn't know the answers or didn't have the information (Cork) only info available was on flyer - very minimal info (Cork) can be confusing to access (Cork)	

Table 2.8 Media Coverage Table

SOURCE	DATE OF PUBLICATION	PRINT OR ONLINE	ESTIMATED REACH
Roscommon Herald	25th April 2017	Print	9,185
New Ross Echo	25th April 2017	Print	6,384
Laois Nationalist	26th April 2017	Print	3,500
Southside People	26th April 2017	Print	60,000
Northside People West	26th April 2017	Print	45,000
Northside People East	26th April 2017	Print	53,000
Clare Champion	26th April 2017	Print	15,562
Bray People	19th April 2017	Print	5,736
Wicklow People West Edition	19th April 2017	Print	n/a
Wicklow People Arklow Edition	19th April 2017	Print	n/a
Wicklow People	19th April 2017	Print	n/a
Southside People	19th April 2017	Print	60,000
Northside People	19th April 2017	Print	53,000
Independent.ie	22th April 2017	Online	n/a
Wicklow People	22th April 2017	Online	n/a
Donegalpost.com	12th April 2017	Online	n/a
Donegalnow.com	12th April 2017	Online	n/a

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