

# NATIONAL FET LEARNER FORUM

## 2021 - 2022 LEARNER REPORT



**etbi**  
Education & Training  
Boards Ireland  
*Boird Oideachais &  
Oiliúna Éireann*



**Rialtas na hÉireann**  
Government of Ireland

**SOLAS**  
learning works

# ABBREVIATIONS

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<b>ETB</b>	Education and Training Board
<b>FET</b>	Further Education and Training
<b>QQI</b>	Quality and Qualifications Ireland

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# ORGANISATIONS

This Report is written by AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation. The National FET Learner Forum project is delivered in partnership with SOLAS and ETBs across Ireland. Please contact [mail@aontas.com](mailto:mail@aontas.com) if you have any queries.

## AONTAS

AONTAS are the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation, a membership organisation representing adult education educators, providers, learners, and other stakeholders. AONTAS are committed to advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to a quality service throughout their lives and promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning. AONTAS support learners, particularly those most educationally disadvantaged, to engage in lifelong learning, and advocate for more inclusive and accessible national education policy. AONTAS achieve these goals through research, communications, advocacy and capacity building. Our work is aimed at building an inclusive, learner-centred lifelong learning system that enables adults to have a transformative learning experience.



## SOLAS

Established in 2013, SOLAS (The Further Education and Training Authority, An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna), is the State Organisation responsible for the funding, coordinating, and monitoring of Further Education and Training provision in Ireland. Its mission is to support the development of a sector that is innovative, flexible and responsive to the needs of learners and employers. Its vision is to create a Further Education and Training sector that delivers quality education, training and skills to enable learners to succeed in the labour market and thrive in society. The core principles of SOLAS are to:



- Ensure there is robust intelligence to inform the planning, funding and design of new and existing FET provision;
- 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;
- Promote innovation and fund provision that meets identified needs;
- Add value by fostering collaboration across the FET sector, sharing learning and empowering delivery organisations; and
- 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.

## *Education and Training Boards*

Education and Training Boards (ETBs) are the 16 statutory authorities for FET in Ireland. Along with other responsibilities, such as youth work and a range of statutory functions, Education and Training Boards manage and oversee secondary schools, further education learning institutions, multi-faith community national schools and a range of adult and further education centres delivering education and training programmes. Education and Training Boards are active in local communities through the provision of training and education programmes delivered in training centres, colleges and other educational settings. In this way, Education and Training Boards seek to make a real difference to the lives of the people they serve. Such responsiveness continues to be the hallmark of the Education and Training Boards sector, looking outward nationally and internationally, while servicing education and training locally and individually.



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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## *Learners*

We would like to thank all the learners who took part in the National FET Learner Forum in the academic year 2021-2022. It is your voice that is at the centre of this project. Each adult learner generously offered their time and shared their voice during the past year. Your feedback will further the aim of creating a more inclusive, improved, and democratic FET sector in the future. For this, we appreciate and thank you for your efforts.

## *SOLAS*

The National FET Learner Forum is funded by SOLAS. The National FET Learner Forum is borne out of SOLAS' commitment to listening to and responding to the needs of learners through a key action in the 2014-2019 FET strategy (SOLAS, 2014), and remains relevant in the 2020-2024 FET Strategy, which states, "we must continue the work of the FET learner forum in securing qualitative feedback at national and regional level on FET" (SOLAS, 2020, p.57). Since 2016, they have funded AONTAS to host Forum events and publish reports. This project would not exist without their continued support, and we thank them for their collaboration throughout this year.

## *Education and Training Boards*

The National FET Learner Forum is a collaborative project between AONTAS and Education and Training Boards across Ireland. The Forum could not take place without Education and Training Boards recruiting and supporting learners to participate in the events that AONTAS hosts. It is also them who consider and take on board the feedback of learners presented in the AONTAS reports. To the Education and Training Boards who hosted events in the academic year 2021-2022, your cooperation was crucial to the success of the Forum project. We thank you for your continued support and your commitment to listening to and acting on learners' recommendations.

## *The National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group*

We would like to thank the National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group. This is a group consisting of two learner representatives, a FET Director, and representatives from SOLAS, Education and Training Boards Ireland, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, the National Adult Literacy Agency, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Their guidance and recommendations to continue the successful expansion of the Forum is invaluable, and we are particularly grateful for their counsel on the return of the Forum to in-person focus group events. They remain a vital part of the success of this project.

## *The National FET Learner Forum Academic Expert Group*

We would also like to thank the Academic Expert group. The group consists of experts in learner voice from Ireland and further afield. Their expertise helps provide academic rigour to the project. We thank them for their support and commitment to this project. It is their guidance that allows this research to develop and expand in a meaningful way.

# INTRODUCTION

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## What is the Forum?

The National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum is a nationwide learner voice project aimed at ensuring learner voice remains central to FET. AONTAS deliver this project in collaboration with SOLAS and local Education and Training Boards. The project began in 2016 with a one-day national event, and has grown into a series of regional events and a national event each year, reaching over 1000 learners annually. In 2020, the Forum moved online due to COVID-19 restrictions, with Education and Training Boards hosting multiple online events. In the academic year 2021–2022, the Forum continued with online focus group events before moving back to in-person events in March 2022.

AONTAS hosted seven regional events and six virtual events in partnership with ten Education and Training Boards between October 2021 and May 2022:

- Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board, 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> October 2021
- Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2021
- Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board, 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> February 2022
- Cork Education and Training Board, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2022
- Tipperary Education and Training Board, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2022
- Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board, 5<sup>th</sup> April 2022
- Louth and Meath Education and Training Board, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2022
- Donegal Education and Training Board, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2022
- Mayo, Sligo, and Leitrim Education and Training Board, 28<sup>th</sup> April 2022
- Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board, 5<sup>th</sup> May 2022.

The Forum reached 3,164 learners over the course of the academic year October 2021 to May 2022, with 588 focus group participants and 2,576 survey responses. This report presents an overview of the findings from across all regional events this academic year.

## How the Forum Works

For both learners and Education and Training Boards, there are three steps to the Forum:



## ***Step 1: Learners Discuss***

At each Forum event, learners are divided into small groups and are asked to answer three questions:

- *Question 1:* What has been working well in your course?
- *Question 2:* What has not been working well in your course?
- *Question 3:* What recommendations do you have to improve services for learners for next year?

These discussions are recorded by dictaphone. The recordings are listened to and transcribed by members of the AONTAS Research Team, who identify the recommendations made by learners. The recommendations that come from the learner discussions are used to write AONTAS' regional reports. An online survey is also shared with learners at the end of each event. This survey is open to all learners from their Education and Training Board, not just the learners who were at the event. All sections of the survey are voluntary and participants may complete or skip any sections they wish. In 2021–2022, the survey had questions on:

- Course and Programme
- Recruitment, Registration and Induction
- Facilities and Services
- Teaching and Learning
- Learner Demographics.

## ***Step 2: AONTAS Reports***

After each event, AONTAS bring the information provided in discussions and through the survey together, and create a 'synthesis' report that is sent to both SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards. This report is a summary of all the findings shared in each of the regional event reports. Topics raised by learners are presented according to the frequency with which they featured in the regional reports. To provide context, a series of learner quotations then follows this summary.

## ***Step 3: SOLAS and ETBs Receive Information to Make Changes***

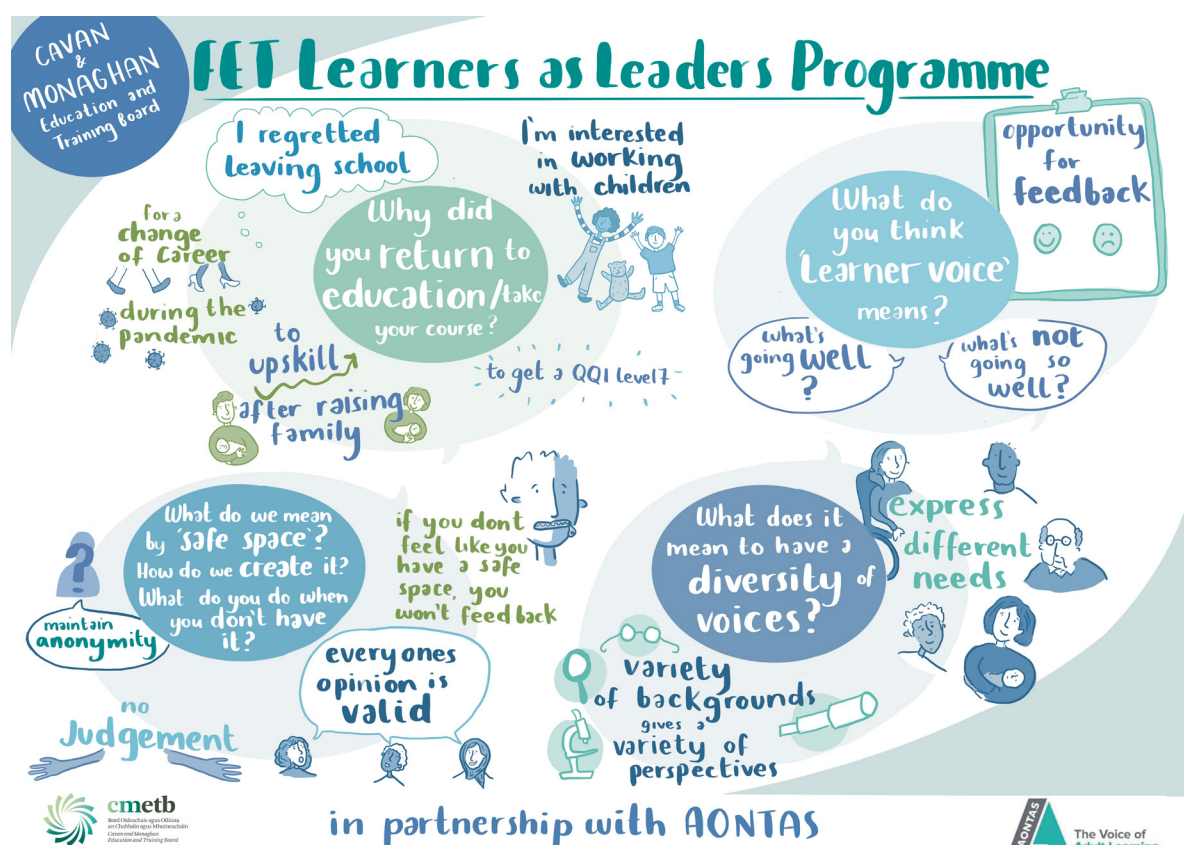
SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards use these reports to better understand learners' experiences and to improve the experiences of learners entering FET. They use these reports to help ensure learner needs remain at the heart of future FET policy, and to help with future planning for the next year.



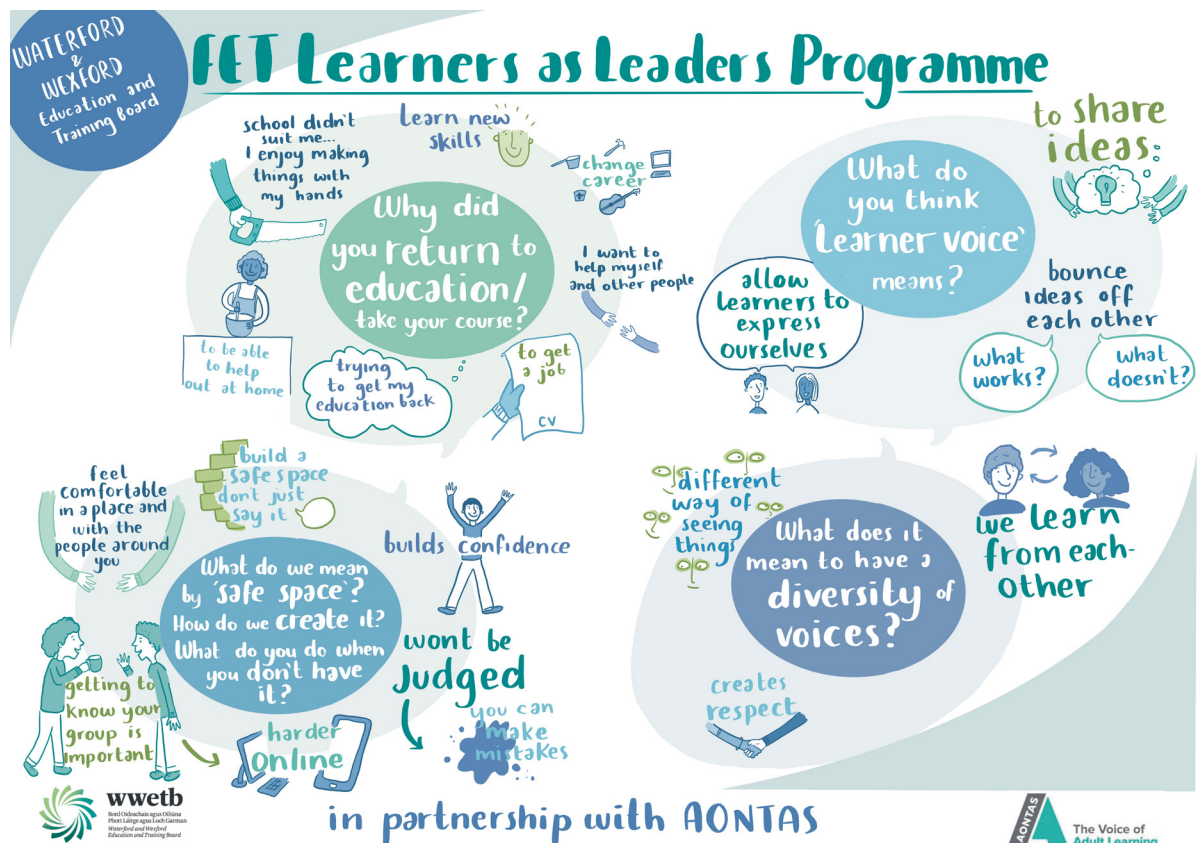
## FET Learners as Leaders Programme

The remaining 217 learners reached through the Forum this year took part in the first full academic year of the Further Education and Training (FET) Learners as Leaders programme. The programme is a collaborative project delivered by AONTAS in partnership with Education and Training Boards. The programme was developed to support learners with the learner panel component of the Inaugural Review of Quality Assurance in Education and Training Boards undertaken by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).

The content is designed to empower learners to become learner voice advocates and participate in leadership roles within their Education and Training Board, by building their capacity in advocacy, representation, public speaking and team work in order to become empowered self-advocates. During the two sessions, AONTAS led presentations, group discussions and role-playing exercises. Representatives from each Education and Training Board also delivered two information sessions on learner voice in their respective Education and Training Board event and they outlined how they prepared for their Inaugural Review.



Graphic Harvest representing discussion of learner voice with Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board, 15<sup>th</sup> October 2021



Graphic Harvest representing discussion of learner voice with Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board, 19<sup>th</sup> October 2021

The programme began in April 2021, with sessions collaborating with Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education Training Board, and Cork Education and Training Board. This academic year, AONTAS partnered with eight Education and Training Boards to deliver the programme to 217 FET learners across levels 1-3, levels 4-6, learners in apprenticeship or employment-based courses, and learners in representative positions:

- Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board, 11<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> October 2021
- Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board, 15<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> October 2021
- Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board, 19<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2021
- Tipperary Education and Training Board, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> January 2022
- Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board, 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> February 2022
- Louth and Meath Education and Training Board, 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> February 2022
- Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board, 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> March 2022
- Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board, 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> April 2022

## FET Learner Participation by ETB

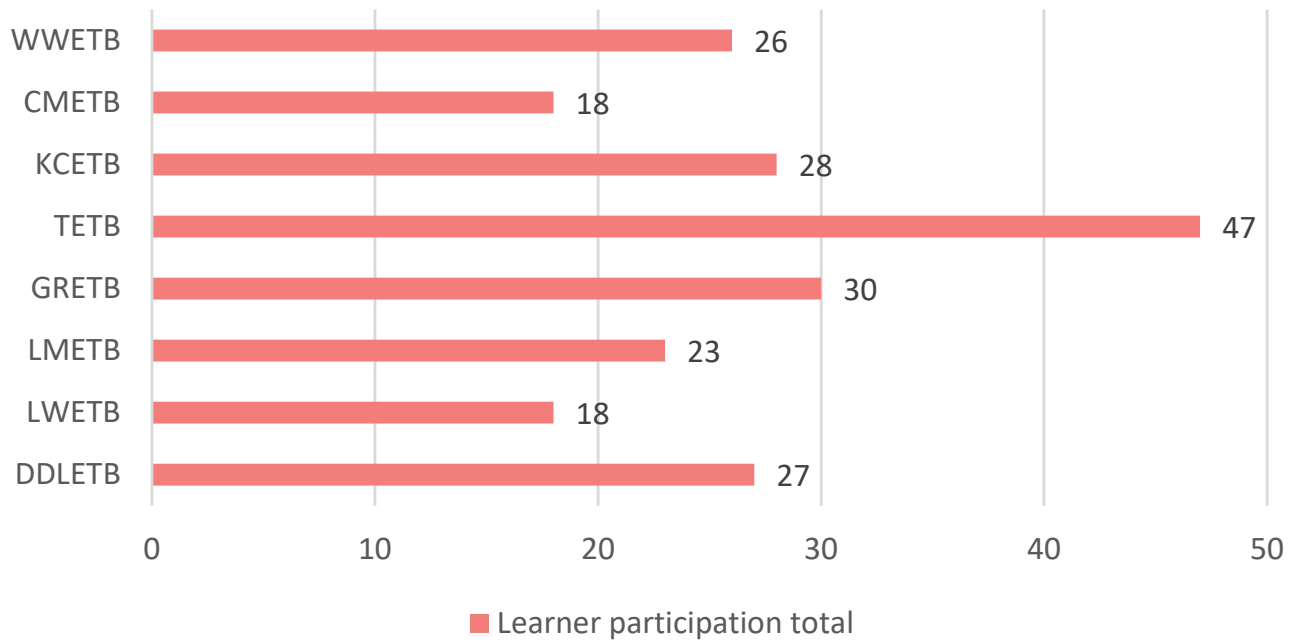


Figure 5. Learner representation by Education and Training Board

This year, AONTAS will expand the project as part of the National FET Learner Forum, and continue to partner with Education and Training Boards to create and expand meaningful learner voice representative structures. We aim to reach more learners than ever in the 2022-2023 academic year, and support FET learners in engaging with and advocating for solutions to the issues facing them and their fellow learners.

# LEARNER RECOMMENDATIONS

The table below is a summary of the recommendations raised by learners across the regional events. These are based on learner experiences from focus group discussions with additional information from learner surveys. These recommendations are divided into areas working well and areas for improvement. The maximum possible frequency for each recommendation is '10', as there are ten regional reports, one for each Education and Training Board where regional events took place over the course of the year. It is important to note that a frequency of '10' does not mean that a topic was raised by ten learners, or that it emerged in discussions ten times. Rather, it means that the topic emerged as a recommendation in each of the ten reports that we produced this year. The topic of tutors, for example, was raised as a positive part of FET learning by learners, and it appeared in eight out of the ten reports we produced in the Academic Year 2021–2022.

Areas Working Well		
Topic	Frequency	Learner Feedback
Tutors	8	Learners found tutors attentive and patient
In-person Learning	7	Learners felt that being back in the classroom was better for the learning and social aspect of their courses
Mental Health Supports	7	Learners appreciated the mental health support they received from their Education and Training Boards
Digital Skills	6	Learners appreciated the digital skills they gained through taking their courses
Wider Benefits	6	Learners cited the wider benefits of FET, including making new friends and building confidence
Blended Learning	5	Learners felt that blended learning worked well and appreciated the flexibility that it allows
Device Access	5	Learners were appreciative of the support in accessing digital devices they receive from their Education and Training Boards
Peer Learning	3	Learners found peer learning to be an essential part of their learning experience
Guidance and Progression	2	Learners were generally clear on their progression options and felt supported by their Education and Training Boards to progress to further education or employment

Areas Working Well		
Topic	Frequency	Learner Feedback
Health and Safety Measures	2	Learners were satisfied with the Health and Safety Measures taken by their Education and Training Board
English Language	1	Learners, particularly those at levels 1-3, appreciated the English language skills they developed through taking their course
New Skills	1	Learners enjoyed the new skills they had developed as a result of taking their courses, including digital skills, public speaking, studying, and increased confidence
Online Learning	1	Learners enjoyed the benefits of online learning, including flexibility and reduced travel expenditure

Areas for Improvement			
Topic	Frequency	Learner Feedback	Recommendations Made to ETB
Transport	5	Learners experienced challenges with the cost and availability of transport to their centres	<p>Take transport difficulties into account, particularly on courses where penalties apply for lateness or non-attendance</p> <p>Consider a scoping exercise to identify transport needs and costs for learners in your ETB</p> <p>Consider transport options, such as supplying bus services for learners, particularly for areas where bus services are unreliable</p>
Communication	4	Learners would like to be informed if they had been accepted onto their course or if there are any changes to their class schedule in an accessible and timely manner	Increase the lead-in time for communicating information about course acceptance and course changes
Progression	4	Learners would like more precise information on educational and employment options after completing their courses	<p>Provide further information on learner career and education progression from the beginning of the year</p> <p>Request that guidance counsellors give an overview of options to all learners on a programme-by-programme basis</p> <p>Dedicate one class per semester to discussing progression options and specific learning outcomes</p>

Areas for Improvement			
Topic	Frequency	Learner Feedback	Recommendations Made to ETB
Work Experience	4	<p>Learners want clear information on their work placements, including possible employers who will accept them for work placement</p> <p>Learners asked for a more practical emphasis in their courses to prepare them for work placements</p>	<p>Provide further options for work experience in courses and start this from induction</p> <p>Link with local enterprises to broaden work experience options</p> <p>Implement a support process for learners experiencing difficulty finding a work placement</p>
Advertisement	3	Learners would like courses to be better advertised so that more potential learners have the opportunity to take a course	Invest in varied advertisements, such as print and digital, to showcase the courses on offer
Course Scheduling	3	Learners felt that unsuitable or clashing class times impacted on other prospective learners deciding to register for a course. Learners also experienced fatigue from spending long hours in front of a screen	<p>Revise online course schedules to avoid long hours in front of a screen, where possible</p> <p>Implement regular breaks for online courses to avoid learner fatigue</p> <p>Review timing of courses with a view to increasing participation, particularly for learners with children or other caring responsibilities</p>

Areas for Improvement			
Topic	Frequency	Learner Feedback	Recommendations Made to ETB
Learning Environment	3	Learners would like changes to the physical learning spaces of the centres and the culture of learning	<p>Expand learning hubs, libraries and classroom study spaces for learners</p> <p>Offer flexibility around hybrid or blended learning</p> <p>Offer opportunities for learners to develop digital skills and self - directed learning</p> <p>Offer support in the form of device loans to learners where possible</p>
WiFi	3	WiFi was a barrier for learners, both at home and in centres	<p>Implement a review of WiFi services in FET centres</p> <p>Engage with HEAnet (heanet.ie) and use the ETB centre as a WiFi hotspot</p>
Facilities	2	Learners would like centre facilities including bathrooms, canteens, and storage spaces to be updated	<p>Invest in and undertake a review of the physical learning centres to implement learner recommendations including bathrooms, canteens, storage, ventilation and disability access</p> <p>Use the regional recommendations for capital investment support from SOLAS or DFHERIS</p>



Areas for Improvement			
Topic	Frequency	Learner Feedback	Recommendations Made to ETB
Information on Supports Available	2	Learners would like more information on financial and mental health supports	<p>Provide learners with information on the supports available to them at the start of the Academic Year</p> <p>Ensure consistent promotion through channels including a dedicated website page, a notice board within each centre and a support component of the induction process for each programme</p>
Mental Health	2	Learners asked for greater access to dedicated mental health supports such as counsellors	<p>Request funding for additional mental health counsellors in order to meet demand</p> <p>Ensure that there are designated mental health support staff outside of their tutors to support learners with mental health difficulties</p>
Additional Supports	1	<p>Learners expressed some confusion around the supports available to them and which staff members to approach with regards to availing of supports.</p> <p>Learners would like clarity on how to access supports, such as mental health and disability supports</p>	<p>Increased provision and visibility of additional supports such as financial support and learning support</p> <p>Provide information on support staff and their duties to learners through the website and a student noticeboard</p>

Areas for Improvement			
Topic	Frequency	Learner Feedback	Recommendations Made to ETB
Apprenticeship Placements	1	Learners on Apprenticeship courses would like to be assigned to locations that are more convenient in terms of hours spent travelling	Review assignment process for apprenticeship course placements so that learners can attend placements closer to their homes  Request additional funding to cover costs for transport to ensure engagement and completion of courses
Class Hours	1	Learners asked for more class hours in their courses	Review course schedule with a view to providing more classes to meet learner demand, particularly for those learning English as a Second Language  Provide more options for evening and part-time courses, particularly for level 4 courses
Course Content	1	Learners found some of the content of their courses to be outdated or lacking in terms of relevance – learners asked for increased choice of modules on their courses	Request a module review to ensure information is relevant and interesting for learners  Include learners as part of any new consultation processes
Digital Skills	1	Learners benefitted from the crucial digital skills support they received during remote learning and would like this support to continue	Continue to offer more training in digital learning platforms for learners, including non-accredited workshops

Areas for Improvement			
Topic	Frequency	Learner Feedback	Recommendations Made to ETB
English as Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Learners	1	<p>Learners asked for additional English language support alongside their courses</p> <p>These learners would also like their learning environment to be welcoming and inclusive</p>	<p>Be mindful of the challenges learners who speak English as an additional language face, including translating for other students</p> <p>Consider workshops on inclusion and inclusive methodology to foster a more inclusive environment</p> <p>Provide ESOL learners with information on additional courses or online activities to support their learning engagement</p>
Feedback	1	Learners were unsure of where to give feedback to their Education and Training Board on their learning experience	<p>Provide learners with more information on the formal feedback structures in place in their Education and Training Boards</p> <p>Consider standardising feedback mechanisms across FET provision</p>
Financial Support	1	<p>Learners suggested revisions to the financial support they receive through taking their courses.</p> <p>Learners found unexpected costs of their course a challenge</p>	<p>Undertake cost analysis of courses and request additional costs for learners within ETB budget</p> <p>Establish regional working groups to monitor the cost of living</p>

Areas for Improvement			
Topic	Frequency	Learner Feedback	Recommendations Made to ETB
Learning Community	1	Learners found it harder to feel part of a learning community as a result of remote and blended learning	<p>Consider formal structures to help learners stay connected, such as learner voice groups, WhatsApp groups, and Zoom meet-ups</p> <p>Consider integrating group learning activities into course pedagogy, such as project work, to give learners the opportunity to engage with and learn from peers</p>
Learner Materials	1	Learners asked for increased clarity in the briefs they receive, and for briefs to be supplied in good time in order to complete their assignments	<p>Review learning materials, such as briefs and module descriptors, at the start of the year, and ensure these materials are clear and accessible</p> <p>Implement guidelines on when learners should receive briefs based on assignment deadlines</p>
Learning Support	1	Learners expressed difficulties accessing learning support, particularly those with ADHD and dyslexia	<p>Engage with learners with ADHD, dyslexia, and other learning disabilities to ensure they receive sufficient support to help them complete their assignments</p> <p>Engage with the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) and other services to identify suitable supports – include learning needs analysis as part of initial induction for learners</p>

Areas for Improvement			
Topic	Frequency	Learner Feedback	Recommendations Made to ETB
Negative Perception of FET	1	Learners would like greater promotion of FET at secondary school level	<p>Invest in greater promotion of FET courses at secondary school level</p> <p>Develop a regional campaign strategy including school visits, promotional materials, social media and local media advertisements</p> <p>Use learner voice to represent the positive impact and experience of FET</p>
Professional Development	1	<p>Help ensure tutors are up-to-date on digital learning platforms such as Zoom, Teams, and Moodle.</p> <p>Learners expressed concern that tutors took on too much responsibility for supporting learner mental health</p>	<p>Offer ongoing professional development opportunities to staff to ensure tutors are up-to-date on digital learning platforms</p> <p>Invest in tutor wellbeing as well as learner wellbeing</p> <p>Ask tutors and staff for their feedback on this issue and their recommendations for improving staff and learner support</p>

# WHAT DID LEARNERS SAY?

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

## Areas Working Well

### Tutors

“I was terrified of attending the courses, but with the help and support of my teacher, I’m starting to enjoy it, and surprised myself.”

“On a personal level if I struggle with something in there, I can go to my tutor and tell them what aspect of the course I’m struggling with and they will always, straight away, help me sort something out.”

“The tutors are probably the best teachers I’ve ever had in my life in terms of respect and being able to have the craic as well as being very good at teaching.”

“The teacher knows that you are all knowledgeable and isn’t looking down on you.”

## In-person Learning

“I much prefer to be in class, my course does not lend itself to Teams – it needs the practical side and I need to be in class with my tutors. I am glad to be back.”

“It was helpful to start online, but when we finally went to the actual centre I enjoyed it more than I expected to. Having more hands-on experience and communicating in person is rather important in the industry.”

“It’s really hard to keep focus working from home. There are so many distractions. I just feel like you are not prepared to work in the real world if you are studying from home.”

“It’s harder to reach out [remotely] because you feel like you’re disrupting their day. Whereas when you’re in the centre you can ask questions and you’re not disrupting them.”

“I learn more in class than online, and in class you can have the craic with the teachers and with the other students.”

## Mental Health Supports

“[The] teacher in our school is great on mental health, always supporting us.”

“We have counsellors that come in twice per week for anyone who wants one-to-one therapy. Our centre is really mental health orientated.”

“I know you can talk one-to-one with our coordinator if you’re experiencing any kind of issue. You can speak with each other and try and work around it. Our course coordinator is very much open-minded on that side of things.”

## Digital Skills

“We were all set up on Teams. We were shown how to get in, get out, how to share screens, the basics. That is imperative.”

“I really benefitted from being set up on Teams by the tutor. It was seamless. I wouldn’t have managed any other way. I was really grateful for that.”

“I learned new computer skills – before coming here I had sent four emails in my life. I learned loads of computer skills last year.”

“I can help grandchildren with homework, FaceTime, Snapchat with those abroad.”



## Wider Benefits

“It gives you a sense of confidence and belief in yourself really. I think everyone has skills out there they don’t realise they can do.”

“My course makes me feel like I am contributing to society – it gives me something more meaningful to do with my time.”

## Blended Learning

“I like both types of learning. I like being at home and going in and would like if this continued.”

“Blended learning should be brought in, even outside of COVID-19; some people have to care for people at home, they might have poor mental health, they might only have one class in the day and shouldn’t have to travel to class. The list of good reasons is endless.”

“I liked doing one day in class and one day at home because, you got set up in the class, and then you could use the time you gained at home to work.”

“I think it’s positive that it’s changed because you have the option of working from home as well if you want.”

## Device Access

“Every effort was made to ensure learners had access to all the necessary virtual resources and [the ETB] also provided laptops [that] where needed.”

“I was provided with a laptop. Having that was brilliant – I would not have been able to do the course without it.”

## Peer Learning

“You get so many different ideas from people. You’re inspiring each other to do different things in different ways.”

“We are sharing our ideas and opinions. Whatever I get from you is an added knowledge and advantage.”

## Guidance and Progression

“I had a nice experience with the career guidance officer. I heard it mentioned this service was available and e-mailed them and made an appointment, I sent my CV in advance and at the session I got advice about what to highlight and things that I had forgotten to include.”

“You can talk to the guidance counsellor about anything. He comes to get you and talk to you one-on-one. He is laid back about it also, though. He’s not too up in your face. Sometimes people say they don’t want to talk to him and that is fine too.”

## Health and Safety Matters

“Everything is in order, all the regulations are there; seating, wipes, everything. The rules are followed one hundred percent.”

“They said at the start of the class, ‘if you feel more comfortable wearing a mask, you can. If you feel more comfortable sitting alone, you can.’”

## English Language

“I learned the computer and English as well. When I came to this country I couldn’t introduce myself. Now I have started full-time working this year. I think I have improved my English since I came to this country and started learning with [my] Education and Training Board.”

“I am learning English every day. When I came here I had no word of English.”

## New Skills

“I can now multitask with children and be on time. I like to be organised and my computer skills have improved.”

“I have learned updated job-seeking skills. You can’t get enough practice for job interviews.”

“Especially with people who have been out of education for a long time or maybe going to job interviews, computers are great. It’s a great refresher. We have done spreadsheets and all.”

## Online Learning

“It’s just so completely changed the landscape of learning. It’s amazing. It [online learning] in some ways completely broadens the whole horizon of learning.”

“I would have never had anything to do with the computer [before], so it has given me a lot of confidence. I would have never seen myself sitting here.”

## Areas for Improvement

### Transport

“I have to drive to the centre because there is no public transport. It is expensive and the funding you get for it is not enough at all.”

“I don’t live close to centre, live rural, and I am ill. So [I am] dependent on lifts morning and evening. It can be hard to manage at times. I have to wait on in centre longer to wait on lift. There used to be buses previously, but not now.”

“Transport is a big issue. I have to travel two hours on the bus every day. It’s expensive but it [the learner’s transport grant] often doesn’t cover it. I am also quite rural and because of a limited timetable, I will often miss a bus and then have to wait hours.”

“If transport’s not there it’ll make people drop out of courses.”

## Communication

“I was never told I had a place, as such. Instead someone rang to tell me the starting date/time, and I said, “Oh I have a place then?” and that was how I knew.”

“Better communication of information – sanitary products and toiletries are free if you go to a co-ordinator. Not a lot of people know this. More people should be given the information – more accommodating and more sharing of this info.”

“I feel that some of my modules aren’t what they said they were – they were a bit misleading so it would be good if they were a bit more explicit in what was in the modules.”

“The course is really assignment heavy and I don’t think that was communicated well enough at the start of the year.”

## Progression

“I only just found out two days ago that there is a scholarship option to go onto the degree programme. The career guidance counsellor only told one person in my class about this. Everyone should be told about this. I don’t know if I’ll go onto do the degree because it might be too late to apply now.”

“I would have liked to talk to someone, a career guidance person, about the overall aim of the course.”

## Recognition of Prior Learning

“[I] need more advice on career choices, and what’s available for my age group – 65 [and] for my qualifications already taken. [I need] help with getting a job in my field.”

## Work Experience

“I thought the options were very narrow. This (work placement) is not what I want to work in.”

“I was under the impression we were going to get real work experience with regional companies that needed the skilled workers, that we were supposed to be doing this course to fill a needed skills shortage! I’m left deflated afterwards.”

“I do think they should organise work experience or work placement for all the courses then people might be able to get something like work out of it in the future. In my course they don’t, which is a pity because it would be good to get out into the real world and see what the work is really like”

“We should be offered work experience to help us decide what job we might like after school is finished.”

## Advertising

“More should be done to advertise courses, especially to Leaving Cert students to give them more options for further learning.”

“They didn’t really mention anything in school about it. I don’t remember them talking about PLCs or apprenticeships or anything like that.”

“Have an open day/advertise on TV/radio, the need for the service in the local community. Some people aren’t able to access computers.”

## Course Scheduling

“Everyone is very helpful, but three hours is very long in front of a screen. Shorter time would be better.”

“The structure of the course can sometimes be confusing. New people joining at different times means sometimes we are repeating some of the work.”

## Learning Environment

“I’m not really in the position where I can really do my course from home because I live with six other people. Some of them work from home and I know that people have that kind of living situation where they actually can’t be in the class and kind of engage properly.”

“Sitting in your room for an hour at a time, there is no way not to get distracted after three or five hours.”



## WiFi

“I live in the bog lands, where WiFi is difficult. Internet would dip in and out, [it] was really hard to get a stable connection. If my brother was using the connection to do his course it was even harder if we were both online at once, but we muddled through.”

“If my connection is bad then I get behind and that is stressful. I’m not very good with technology. I want to get the work in on time but when there is a problem with technology, I find that very hard.”

## Facilities

“The parking needs to be upgraded as there isn’t enough parking for all students and teachers on busy days.”

“My college has no canteen for students. We have to eat outside in the cold. We need a new canteen and we need new prefabs as the building is old and there is not enough space.”

## Information on Supports Available

“Inform students at the start of the year what supports are available. I only received supports from my tutor because I told her in advance of starting that I had mental health issues.”

“Have booklets maybe on what support is offered to students staying in direct provision.”

“I think the supports are available if you go and ask but I think that information should be made available on things like notice boards and that.”

## Mental Health

“An awful lot of that [mental health support] would fall back on your tutor and it would depend whether your tutor is good at communicating or good with people in general.”

“We do have a psychologist in the centre but it is hard to get an appointment with her.”

## Additional Supports

“I’ve to get a train and a bus to get to class and I haven’t gotten any help with this and it is really hard, you know, to save money.”

“That’s why there’s so many young people dropping out of college after a year or two – the expense of it. They’re trying to keep cars going, they’re trying to pay rent.”

## Apprenticeship Placements

“When they assign you to where you’re going it’s a terrible system. Let’s say there’s a man from Galway and he’s up in Limerick. I know people that are from Galway that are sent to Athlone. I live right beside Athlone and I am sent to Galway.”

“It’s random. You could be thrown anywhere.”

## Class Hours

“They [classes] don’t last long enough. It was two hours and now it’s gone back to three but by the time they go around to everyone the time is almost gone.”

“Another day would be of so much benefit. The teacher could only do as much as she can do. I’m not knocking her but maybe if we had an extra couple of hours or something like that.”

## Course Content

“Even the communications module and stuff, it’s like they’re talking about 10 years ago.”

“A lot of the modules need updating.”

“I will admit on the Level 2, on the cooking course, it’s quite advanced and I don’t feel I’m learning the basics. They’re kind of jumping ahead with it.”

## English for Speakers of Other Languages

“I think there needs to be more English language supports. There should be optional English classes and for those of us who don’t need it, we could do an alternative class.”

“It’s very difficult because one of the other girls doesn’t speak [English] at all and the other one speaks very slowly, so I have to translate. I have to listen to the teacher, I have to do my work. That is very stressful sometimes.”

“I told my friends we maybe need more hours because we go to school weekly on Wednesday – only one day. Just three hours a week. We can’t get two days or three days. It would be good for us. By next Wednesday maybe we would forget some [of what we’ve learned].”

## Feedback

“I don’t think it’s widely known and I was told to contact someone to meet in person or send an email. I just took it from there. I didn’t hear anything back from it, but I didn’t expect to.”

## Financial Support

“For people that are joining courses that are on the dole, up their money for doing it.”

“We have to pay for the antigen tests because the centre expects us to give negative antigen tests. I understand why for safety measures but it adds up to a lot of money.”

## Learning Materials

“We were meant to have a brief from them before we completed each assignment, but he left them to the last minute. If we had the brief for the assignments at the start of the year we would have had it done.”

“I think some of the briefs we get are fairly abstract and you don’t know what they want you to do.”

## Learning Support

“For people with dyslexia there’s not enough support or help.”

“It’s very difficult to get support for ADHD.”

## Negative Perception of FET

“You’re pushed too much in secondary school to do college. You’re nearly looked down on for doing an apprenticeship.”

“The teachers look down on it [FET]. If you’re doing an apprenticeship, they say ‘no, you have to do the CAO.’”

## Professional Development

“While our tutors tried their best at times, it felt like they were thrown into it and they weren’t really helped. Like struggling with getting Teams to work or knowing how to set up a laptop or letting people in. It kind of felt like sometimes they were trying to figure it out. They were on their own.”

“The classes dragged on a lot when they didn’t need to. Say you’d have a class from ten to eleven but we’re still trying to get the sound to work at ten thirty.”

# THE NEXT STEPS

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## What Next?

We were able to capture more learner experiences than ever in 2021 and 2022. These were reflected in our [National FET Learner Forum Annual Synthesis Report 2021-2022](#), which was launched in Wood Quay Venue, Dublin on 13th October 2022. We presented the findings and held discussion panels with FET learners and practitioners. We also shared the results with policymakers including Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science Simon Harris TD. Speaking at the launch, [Minister Harris said](#): “The report does a great job of highlighting the main challenges faced by FET learners in Ireland today, issues around transport, communications, progression, work experience – I’ve taken back what’s been highlighted to colleagues in my own Department and in the Department of Transport as well. The Forum will continue to work directly with learners in Education and Training Boards across the country to collect their perspectives, be that through online or in-person events. We also look forward to sharing and expanding Forum projects, such as the FET Learners as Leaders programme, and a training programme aimed at equipping learners to be empowered self-advocates in FET.

## Why is This Important?

### *Speak Today, Shape Tomorrow*

Learners have a crucial perspective on how Further Education and Training services work. They know better than anyone what has worked for them and what has not. The information provided by one learner, when combined with the voices of many learners, can provide valuable insight and recommendations that can help Education and Training Boards ensure they are doing all they can to meet the needs of the people they are trying to serve. Over the past academic year, we have highlighted the immense value of online focus group events for gathering learner voice. Focus groups provide a safe and open space for learners to share their experiences with one another in real time. The data gathered from these events captures learners’ voices directly and provides a different kind of insight into learner experience than student surveys can provide. The hour-long discussions provide only their own direct recommendations, but provide crucial context and additional detail to the survey data. This enables us to advocate more strongly for solutions that are more responsive to FET learners’ needs.

Participants in the National Learner Forum give valuable insight that must be considered. Each learner should feel they have made an important impact to the improvement of FET for future learners when they take part in a National FET Learner Forum event or complete a learner survey.

## What Can You Do?

### Get Involved

- Speak to your tutor about participating in future National FET Learner Forum events
- Join our FET Learners as Leaders Programme by contacting the team at [forum@aontas.com](mailto:forum@aontas.com)

### Promote the Forum

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

### Stay Informed

- Sign up to our Learner Newsletter, which provides updates on Forum events - email the team at [forum@aontas.com](mailto:forum@aontas.com) to add your name to our list



**Contact us:**

AONTAS  
The National Adult Learning Organisation  
2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street,  
Ranelagh, Dublin 6

T: 01 406 8220  
E: [mail@aontas.com](mailto:mail@aontas.com)  
[www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com)

Charity Reg: 6719  
Company Reg: 80958  
RCN 20013042



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