



The Voice of  
Adult Learning



# LEARNER VOICES ACROSS IRELAND

NATIONAL FET LEARNER  
FORUM REPORT, 2023-2024



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland

**SOLAS**  
learning works

Prepared by Aisling Meyler, Karyn Farrell, Dr. Laura Lovejoy and Dr. Thomas Murray



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# FOREWORD

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The *Learner Voices Across Ireland* report provides a vital lens into the experiences, aspirations and needs of adult learners in Further Education and Training (FET). At a time when lifelong learning is more crucial than ever, this report serves as a cornerstone for stakeholders, policymakers, and educators to better understand the evolving landscape of adult education in Ireland. With contributions from over 1,700 learners across the country, the insights captured in this research offer a comprehensive, authentic perspective on what is working well and where improvements are needed within FET.

Central to this report is the power of the learner voice—a principle that has been championed by the National FET Learner Forum since its inception. The Forum offers an invaluable space for learners to share their experiences, articulate their needs, and influence the policies and practices that shape their education. Listening to these voices is not just an ethical imperative but a strategic one. It highlights the importance of ensuring that learner voices are not only heard but are meaningfully incorporated into the decision-making process. This collaboration is key to developing a learner-centred system, where individuals' lived experiences shape the future of education. The Forum's role, alongside ETBs and other key partners, is invaluable in supporting a learner voice that is independent, credible, and responsive to the realities of adult learners today.

The *Learner Voices Across Ireland* report underscores the significance of AONTAS, Ireland's national adult learning organisation, in championing this learner-centred approach. With a long-standing history of advocating for adult learners, AONTAS has once again demonstrated its commitment to advancing the learner voice through rigorous research. This report is the culmination of extensive consultation and data collection, combining focus groups and a national survey that collectively captured the contributions of 1,716 learners in 2023-2024. The research is grounded in the theory of Learner Voice, ensuring that both the data collection and analysis processes reflect best practices in inclusive research, making the findings more credible and actionable for stakeholders.

Collaboration between ETBs, SOLAS, DFHERIS and other FET stakeholders has been pivotal to this process. ETBs are at the front lines of adult education and have been instrumental in shaping the learner voice agenda. Their input, alongside the contributions from learners themselves, helps to create a more holistic understanding of the opportunities and challenges in the current system. This ongoing partnership not only strengthens the learner voice but also ensures that the findings from this report are actionable and aligned with national policy objectives.

The *Learner Voices Across Ireland* report highlights many successes in FET, with 91% of learners expressing satisfaction with their class participation and the interview process before course commencement, as well as the availability of guidance and advice when first contacting their ETB or learning centre. These successes highlight the effectiveness of the teaching and learning approaches employed by ETB staff, as well as their commitment to and professionalism in welcoming adult learners into FET programmes. The report also identifies areas for improvement, particularly in the provision of mental health support (69%) and additional services such as transport

and childcare (66%). These findings resonate with broader trends in adult education and serve as a reminder that while significant progress is being made, there is still work to be done to fully meet learners' needs. This provides actionable insights for policymakers and educators alike.

Stakeholders, from policymakers to ETB staff, will find in these pages not just data, but a roadmap for how to enhance their services in ways that directly address the needs and aspirations of learners. Ultimately, this report is a testament to the importance of placing learners at the heart of educational policymaking. A remarkable 99.9% of respondents reported positive experiences with the National FET Learner Forum, illustrating the empowering impact of being truly heard. For stakeholders, this report is not only a call to action but also an opportunity to continue working to co-create a more inclusive, supportive, and dynamic FET system that meets the needs of learners today and in the future.

In conclusion, *Learner Voices Across Ireland* offers a unique and indispensable resource for anyone invested in the future of adult learning in Ireland. It reaffirms the critical role of learner voices in shaping FET and calls on all stakeholders to engage with the findings to create an education system that is responsive, inclusive, and equitable for all. As we move forward, may the findings of this report guide us in shaping an adult education system that is truly responsive, transformative, learner-centred, and prepared for the opportunities and challenges ahead.

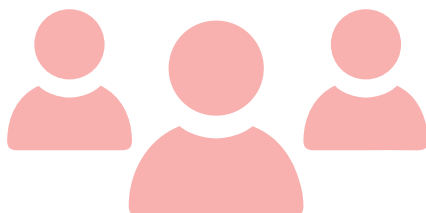
**Dr Joseph Collins**

**Director of Further Education and Training, ETBI.**

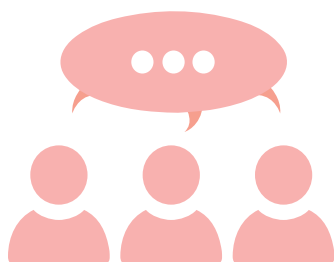
# A YEAR IN NUMBERS

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## The National FET Learner Forum 2023-2024: A Year in Numbers



**1,716**  
Learner Contributors



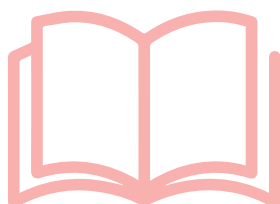
**686**  
Focus Groups Participants



**1,030**  
Survey Responses



**9**  
Regional  
Events Boards



**9**  
Regional  
Reports



**9**  
Education and  
Training Boards

# REPORT SUMMARY

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The National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum is a Learner Voice project designed to bring together adult learners from across Ireland to ask their views on their FET experience. The purpose of the Forum is to ensure that FET meets the needs of adult learners today and continues to do so in future.

AONTAS are responsible for delivering the National FET Learner Forum. We work in partnership with each of Ireland's 16 Education and Training Boards to host regional focus group events and to issue an accompanying learner survey. At each Forum, trained AONTAS facilitators support focus group participants to reflect on their experiences in Further Education and Training. Learners discuss three primary questions: (i) "What has been working well in your course?", (ii) "What has not been working well?", and (iii) "How could your course experience be improved?". The accompanying learner survey supports participation and offers additional insight into FET learners' views and satisfaction.

AONTAS partnered with the following 9 Education and Training Boards to host the National FET Learner Forum 2023-2024:

- City of Dublin Education and Training Board
- Donegal Education and Training Board
- Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board
- Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board
- Cork Education and Training Board
- Louth and Meath Education and Training Board
- Kerry Education and Training Board
- Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board
- Tipperary Education and Training Board

686 learners participated in 86 focus groups during the 2023-24 academic term. 1030 learners completed an accompanying survey. Learners represented a broad range of levels and courses offered by each of the participating Education and Training Boards.



**Table 1. Summary of Research Data**

<b>Data Source</b>	<b>No. of Focus Groups</b>	<b>Average No. of Participants per Focus Group</b>	<b>Total No.</b>
Focus Groups	86	8	686
Survey			1030
Learner Voice Contributions			1716

Learner Forum participants expressed differing levels of overall or net satisfaction with diverse aspects of their experience of Further Education and Training. In each instance, the Net Learner Satisfaction percentage results from a calculation whereby the percentage of survey respondents selecting ‘dissatisfied’ is subtracted from the percentage of respondents indicating ‘satisfied’. Learner Forum participants expressed highest net satisfaction with the following areas:

**Table 2. Highest net satisfaction scores**

<b>Survey Item</b>	<b>Net Satisfaction</b>
Opportunity to take part in class	91%
Interview process before course	91%
Guidance and advice available when first contacting the ETB or centre	90%

Learner Forum participants expressed lowest net satisfaction with the following areas:

**Table 3. Lowest net satisfaction scores**

<b>Survey Item</b>	<b>Net Satisfaction</b>
Mental Health Support	69%
Additional support (e.g. support with transport, childcare, meals)	66%
Availability of public transport	37%

Learner Forum participants reflected on how their FET experience could be improved. For brevity, their primary suggestions may be summarised as follows:

**Table 4. Summary of what learners say they would like to see happen next**

Theme	What Learners Say
<b>IMPACT OF FET</b>	<p><b>Personal Development/Connection with Others</b></p> <p>Host social events outside of scheduled course hours to enhance opportunities to connect with other learners. This might take the form of introducing coffee breaks into class schedules or offering extra-curricular activities.</p>
<b>WELCOME, BELONGING and INCLUSION</b>	<p><b>Respect</b></p> <p>Continue to cultivate an atmosphere of respect and inclusion for and among learners. Social inclusion may involve undertaking additional steps to recognise and include specific learner cohorts – notably those based on gender, race, disability, or Youthreach status.</p>
<b>BUILDINGS AND FACILITIES</b>	<p><b>Transport</b></p> <p>Enhance learner capacity to avail of public transport to access their centre. This may involve provision of a local shuttle bus service or aligning class schedules with local bus service times.</p> <p><b>Canteen</b></p> <p>Learners seek a space for lunch with their peers that provides healthy food. Enhance access to affordable canteen facilities and/or self-catering spaces with adequate kitchen equipment for learners to utilise.</p> <p><b>Digital Transition</b></p> <p>Introduce laptop loan schemes where unavailable. Upgrade IT hardware and software. Improve WiFi / internet access.</p> <p><b>Accessible and Inclusive Buildings</b></p> <p>Ensure that any FET learner who needs to, including those with disabilities, mobility issues, or other physical needs, can access their centre, on par with all other FET learners. Introduce sensory rooms to facilitate neurodiverse learners.</p> <p><b>Equipment and Facilities</b></p> <p>Upgrade outdated laboratory facilities and course equipment where necessary.</p>

Theme	What Learners Say
<b>COMMUNICATIONS</b>	Enhance advertisement of FET courses, highlighting wider benefits of adult learning. Enhance internal communication of all supports and services available to FET learners.
<b>COURSE PROVISION</b>	<p><b>Quantity</b> Increase the quantity of course options and the number of class hours offered. Increase the quantity of courses and class hours for ESOL provision. Diversify course schedules to include more morning and evening classes. The latter is particularly important to FET learners with childcare needs.</p> <p><b>Staffing</b> Increase teaching staff numbers to meet course demand. Take steps to minimise the impact of staff turnover on course provision.</p> <p><b>Employment and Professional Development</b> Ensure clear progression pathway to employment-ready qualification on relevant courses. Develop partnerships between ETBs and local public/private sector employers to support work experience opportunities and future employment pathways. Drawing on their understanding of Sweden's model, learners proposed that employers contribute to the cost of their vocational education and training.</p>
<b>TEACHING AND LEARNING</b>	<p><b>Tutors</b> Recognise and celebrate the exceptionally positive feedback concerning tutors' professionalism, teaching standards, and commitment to learner wellbeing, participation, and support.</p> <p><b>Assessment and Feedback</b> Continue to use diverse assessment methods. Offer longer timeframes for assignment completion. Simplify language used in assessments.</p> <p><b>Work Experience and Work-Based Learning</b> Enhance the guidance and support available to FET learners seeking to secure work experience placements. Offer flexibility on timeframes for work placement completion where learners face extenuating circumstances. The above is particularly important for apprenticeship learners, learners encountering regulatory barriers to undertaking placements in healthcare settings, and migrant learners unfamiliar with the local labour market.</p>

Theme	What Learners Say
<b>WRAPAROUND SUPPORT/ CONSISTENT LEARNER SUPPORT</b>	<p><b>Finance</b> Secure enhanced financial supports to mitigate the costs of FET participation. Increase allowances. Introduce student cards for all FET learners to alleviate the cost of travel. Implement a student hardship fund.</p> <p><b>Mental Health</b> Introduce and/or expand existing counselling services, including offering more sessions.</p> <p><b>Guidance</b> Ensure guidance services are enhanced and resourced to facilitate the availability of guidance counsellors to learners when needed. Learners would welcome enhanced attention to career planning during courses and clear progression pathways upon course completion.</p>
<b>PATHWAYS</b>	ETBs and HEIs to enhance communications to clarify pathways and to support transitions from Further Education to Higher Education.

“What learners say they would like to see happen next” interests and involves a diverse range of stakeholders, including AONTAS, SOLAS, Education and Training Boards, DFHERIS and other state agencies. AONTAS support the development of Learner Councils as an appropriate mechanism for FET learners to help clarify, refine, and support the implementation of Learner Forum findings.

The present report is a vital resource for all stakeholders seeking to ensure Further Education and Training responds to the needs of adult learners today and in the future. AONTAS welcome all opportunities to discuss this report’s findings and to support the enhanced implementation of Learner Voice in adult education nationwide.

**Dr. Thomas Murray,**  
**AONTAS Head of Research**  
**October 2024**







# AONTAS: About Us

AONTAS are Ireland's National Adult Learning Organisation. We are a non-profit, membership organisation representing adult education providers, educators, learners, and other stakeholders. Our vision is for a world where the pursuit of learning for all adults is valued, equal, and strengthens communities. Our mission is to advocate for empowering adult learning that drives social equality, justice, and collective action across the island of Ireland.

AONTAS support learners to engage in transformative lifelong learning, particularly those learners who come from under-resourced communities and have experienced the most marginalisation in our society. We advocate for more inclusive and accessible national education policy and for the right of all adults across the island of Ireland to quality learning. AONTAS work to achieve these goals through research, communications, advocacy, and capacity building. AONTAS are responsible for delivering the National FET Learner Forum.

The AONTAS Research Team ensures that the organisation has a strong evidence-base for advocacy and informs national policy and practice in the field of adult and community education.



The AONTAS Research Team (L-R): Karyn Farrell, Dr. Thomas Murray, Aisling Meyler, and Dr. Laura Lovejoy.

## Partner Organisations

### SOLAS

Established in 2013, SOLAS (The Further Education and Training Authority, *an tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna*) is the State organisation responsible for funding, coordinating, and monitoring 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 National FET Learner Forum is a long-established element of SOLAS's strategic vision for the sector. The 2014-2019 FET strategy committed SOLAS to listen to and respond to the needs of learners (SOLAS, 2014). Similarly, the 2020-2024 FET Strategy recommits SOLAS to 'continue the work of the FET Learner Forum in securing qualitative feedback at national and regional level on FET' (SOLAS, 2020, p.57). SOLAS funds AONTAS to deliver the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum and to publish accompanying research in regional and national reports.

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING BOARDS

Education and Training Boards (ETBs) are the 16 statutory education authorities with responsibility for Further Education and Training in Ireland. Education and Training Boards are the driving force of education and training in the local community, with pathways for every learner across Early Education, Community National Schools, Post primary Education, Further Education and Training, Apprenticeships and Traineeships, Youth Services, Outdoor Education Services and Community Education Services.

Education and Training Boards are vital partners in the National FET Learner Forum. ETBs play a crucial role in advertising the Forum, supporting learner participation, upholding independent research, and engaging with subsequent report findings. ETBs' openness to encouraging and listening to Learner Voice is foundational to the National FET Learner Forum.

## Confidentiality

The present Learner Voices Across Ireland report collates results from all regional events of the National FET Learner Forum held over the 2023/2024 academic year. The report does not identify individual ETBs in its analysis, findings, or recommendations.



Members of the National FET Learner Forum facilitator panel.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## FET Learners

AONTAS would like to thank all adult learners who participated in the National FET Learner Forum. You generously gave of your time and experience to advance the improvement of FET for all. Your voice is at the heart of this project. Thank you for sharing it.

## SOLAS

We thank SOLAS and its CEO, Andrew Brownlee, for the organisation's ongoing collaboration with AONTAS and its continued support of the National FET Learner Forum.

## Education and Training Boards

AONTAS would like to acknowledge each of the nine Education and Training Boards who collaborated on the National FET Learner Forum in the 2023-24 academic year.

We particularly thank the many individual FET Directors and ETB staff members who worked with the Research Team to organise Forum events and ensure learner participation. Further thanks to all those who participated in subsequent discussions concerning Learner Forum report findings. Your commitment to collaboration helps make the Forum possible and Learner Voice meaningful.

## The National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group

Our National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group comprises project stakeholders from across the Further Education and Training sector in Ireland and offers invaluable cross-sectoral advice and consultation. Thank you to Colin Cummins, Education and Training Boards Ireland; Marie Mattimoe, Quality and Qualifications Ireland; Bríd McGlinchey, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; Alan McGrath, SOLAS; Margaret Murray, National Adult Literacy Agency; Majella O'Callaghan, Department of Social Protection; Paula O'Shea, Adult learner, Cork College of FET, Mallow Centre; Andrew Pyne, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; Louise Quinn, Department of Social Protection; and Aoife Walsh, SOLAS.



## The National FET Learner Forum Academic Expert Group

Our Academic Expert Group gathers international academic expertise in Learner Voice and Lifelong Learning practice and research to advise on the project's design and development. Thank you to Sarah Coss, Maynooth University; Koen De Pryck, Vrije Universiteit Brussel; Fergal Finnegan, Maynooth University; Ted Fleming, Teachers College, Colombia University; Peter Lavender, University of Wolverhampton; and Stephen O'Brien, University College Cork.

## National FET Learner Forum facilitators

AONTAS owes special thanks to our panel of independent facilitators. Their invaluable role in facilitating focus-group discussions at each regional forum ensures that every learner feels welcome, included, and encouraged to share their voice. Thank you to Andy Battell, Philomena Bourke Carroll, Una Buckley, Louise Burns, Catherine Callanan, Kevin Coffey, Matt Crofton, Lucy Deering, Geraldine Foley Butler, Sharon Fong-Kong Foran, Richard Foran, Julie Griffiths, Margo Hayes, Geraldine Howe, Vincent Kenny, Dervla King, Cora Lambert, Mairead Mahon, Mary McAnulty, Helen Mortimer, Mieke Neven, Ciarán Ó Mathúna, Paula O'Shea, Aoife Prendergast, Caitriona Ruane, Margaret Scollan, Riona Rochford and Patricia Wilkinson.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

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The National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum is a Learner Voice project designed to bring together adult learners from across Ireland to ask their views on their FET experience. The purpose of the Forum is to ensure that FET meets the needs of adult learners today and continues to do so in future. The SOLAS Future FET 2020-24 Strategy formally recognises the National FET Learner Forum and its role in supporting Learner Voice and a learner-centred model of education.

The present chapter discusses the nature of the project, including both learner and ETB partner perspectives on the 2023-2024 Forum and the significance of Learner Voice. It further outlines key questions for research, as well as considerations related to data collection, analysis, and research limitations.

## AONTAS and the National FET Learner Forum

AONTAS are responsible for delivering the National FET Learner Forum. We work in collaboration with SOLAS and with each of Ireland's 16 Education and Training Boards to host regional Learner Forum events, to issue an accompanying learner survey, and to build capacity among learners for self-advocacy in Further Education and Training.

The National FET Learner Forum was founded in 2016. The project answered the call of the 2014-2019 FET Strategy for the creation of a forum to “systematically benchmark learner’s views and satisfaction with their FET programme on an on-going basis” (SOLAS, 2014). The Forum has since grown into a series of regional and national events, engaging over 1700 learner contributions during the 2023/2024 academic year. The project is one of the largest of its kind in Europe and cited internationally as an exemplar of Learner Voice practice.

Each National FET Learner Forum offers all learners a safe space to share their voice, one where all voices are respected. At all times, AONTAS aim to create inclusive learner spaces, to enable the free expression of views, to listen to learners, and to facilitate stakeholders to act upon learners’ expressed views. Learner participation is entirely voluntary. No Education and Training Board staff or representatives attend discussion groups. Independent facilitators, organised by AONTAS, support focus group participants to engage in dialogue, to reflect on their experiences in Further Education and Training, and to share their ideas and proposals.

The AONTAS Research Team records and transcribes all learner contributions. The accompanying learner survey provides additional insight into the adult learner experience. AONTAS analyse the resulting data and compile a regional report for the participating regional Education and Training Board. At the conclusion of National FET Learner Forum events for the academic year, the Research Team collates all regional report findings and publishes an overarching, synthesis report: ***Learner Voices Across Ireland***.

## Listening to Learner Voice

The National FET Learner Forum centres the concept and practice of “Learner Voice”. Simply stated, Learner Voice positions learners as partners in the educational process rather than the objects of policy and pedagogy (Dowdall, Sheerin, and O’Reilly, 2019). Partnership in the educational process is demanding. On the one hand, Learner Voice requires learners to play a more active role in their education. On the other, it requires established institutional and policy stakeholders to become “more attentive, in sustained or routine ways, to what students want to say about their experience of learning” (Hargreaves, 2004, p.7). Partnership further enjoins educational policy to support mechanisms that engage a diverse range of learners and enable a sustainable response to learner voices (Flynn, 2017).

In theory and practice, Learner Voice emerges from long-standing values of democracy, equality and empowerment in adult education and further seeks to extend those values beyond the classroom into institutional and policy-making domains (Fielding, 2004; 2010). In doing so, Learner Voice mirrors models of “bottom-up” participation in other areas of civic life, including citizen assemblies, participatory budgeting, and participatory social policy (Arnstein, 1969; Beresford, 2016). Learner Voice does not position learners as service users or customers but as vital participants in co-creating lifelong learning, alongside educators, support staff, managers, and policymakers. Education is understood as a social good, not a product, and a collaborative, transformative process, not a transaction (Lynch, 2023).

The benefits of Learner Voice are many, consistent, and well-documented. For the individual, Learner Voice is not a simple or singular act but engages deeper questions of identity, agency, aspiration, and meaning making. A forum offers participants a shared space to self-actualise, to develop authentic reflection and to access new insight (McLeod, 2011). National FET Learner Forum participants consistently highlight the personal development and self-esteem associated with speaking openly about their programmes and sharing their views with others in a facilitated group discussion. Most important is learners’ recognition that their ETB is listening and wants to listen to them (Dowdall, Sheerin, and O’Reilly, 2019). While ETBs’ invitation to dialogue and listening matters to all adult learners, it may be particularly important for those whose negative views on education have been constructed through long-term experience of marginalisation, silence, or indifference in mainstream provision.

For the educational institution, Learner Voice fosters improved, egalitarian relationships between learners, educators, and other stakeholders. Enabling learners to be influential partners in their own learning increases meaningful engagement in education. Conversely, institutional failure to engage with learners is shown to underpin learner disillusionment and disengagement (Walker and Logan, 2008). The Forum’s greatest strength comes from its ability to engage the voices of learners who are not traditionally heard in alternative formal structures or representational models (Dowdall, Sheerin, and O’Reilly, 2019). Participants consistently evidence this heightened engagement in post-event evaluations by highlighting the benefit of the Forum as a space where they learn more about local FET provision, including previously unknown courses, supports, and progression pathways.

Finally, by offering adult learners an opportunity to make their recognitions and misrecognitions known, Learner Voice is a site where the personal intersects with the political (Fleming, 2021). Learners' lived experience engages questions of power and decision-making over pedagogy, policy, and resources. By sharing their experience, National FET Learner Forum participants learn about disparities in FET provision across a region as well as areas where provision may not meet learners' satisfaction. During Forum discussions, participants may come to reframe their "private troubles" as "public issues" (Mills, 1959). Equally, Forum participants learn about how to make changes to the educational process and develop capacities for communication, collaboration, and advocacy. The National FET Learner Forum invites learners to take up Learner Voice positions in their Education and Training Boards and encourages further capacity building along these lines.

## The National FET Learner Forum 2023/2024

A total of nine National FET Learner Forum events took place between November 2023 and April 2024. Prior to each event, AONTAS and the participating Education and Training Board collaborated to maximise learner participation. Each Education and Training Board issued invitations and provided relevant information to FET learners attending diverse programmes across a range of further education and training colleges. AONTAS also promoted the Forum widely through our social media channels.

On the day of each Forum event, AONTAS staff welcomed all learners on arrival, provided participants with an information pack, and directed them to their pre-assigned facilitator and discussion group. Eligible participants were also provided with travel expenses. Refreshments such as tea, coffee and biscuits were available throughout the morning and a light lunch was provided after the event. Together, these practical measures enhanced learner participation and facilitated a welcoming atmosphere for all.

The FET Learner Forum began with an introductory presentation, welcoming learners to the event and outlining the Forum's purpose and agenda for the day. Representatives from the participating Education and Training Board welcomed learners and discussed the value of the Forum and learners' participation. Dr. Thomas Murray, Head of Research at AONTAS, introduced the focus group questions and outlined the role of Learner Voice in enhancing FET at regional and national levels.

Learners divided into their focus groups for facilitated, small group discussions over a one-hour period. All focus group discussions were facilitated in line with the AONTAS facilitator handbook guidelines. After the focus groups concluded, the Head of Research convened a meeting of all facilitators to identify key issues raised by learners. All facilitator notes were subsequently received within five working days.



## Learner Views on the Forum

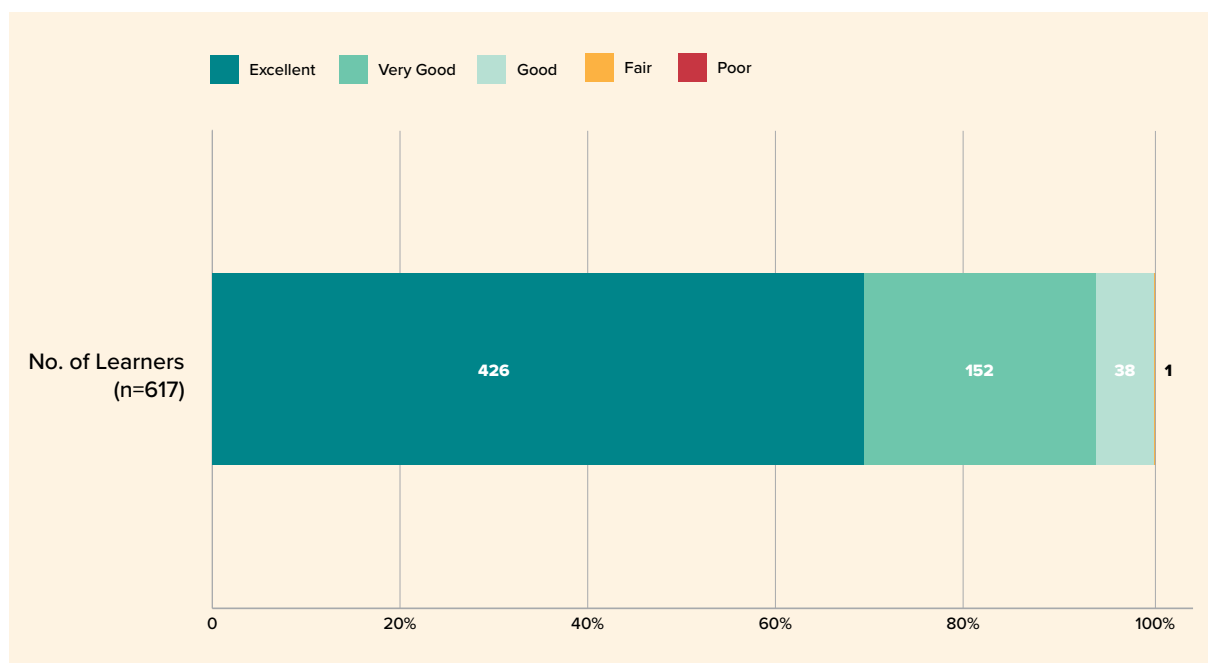
AONTAS invite Learner Forum participants to complete an evaluation after the event. This tells us what they thought about the event, what they enjoyed, what they would like to change and something they learned.

617 learners in attendance at the nine regional forums submitted an evaluation form. This represents a response rate of 90% (n = 617 / 686 total participants).

When asked what they thought about the National FET Learner Forum, 99.9% of respondents (n = 616/617) considered their experience to be a positive one with 69% describing their forum as 'excellent' (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

**Participant Evaluation of FET Learner Forum. Responses to 'What did you think about this event?' (Multiple choice question, n = total responses)**



The select comments below are representative of learners' experiences. They further underline the benefits of the National FET Learner Forum and listening to Learner Voice.

### Something I enjoyed

The most cited aspects of the Forum that learners enjoyed were as follows: engaging in focus group discussion, sharing experiences, and the welcoming and inclusive atmosphere.

Participants praised their group facilitators' welcome and support, and highly valued having their voices heard and respected. Learners enjoyed meeting new people from different courses, backgrounds and cultures, and commented on how diverse the Forum events were. Participants felt comfortable and respected in an open and safe environment, and further found the social aspect of the day to be hugely important.

It was a safe space to raise any concerns, and I felt that I was listened to.

In my group everyone had the same experience and same difficulties. This mutually supports us.

The variety of people I encountered at the event with different backgrounds and personalities and with interesting opinions and suggestions.

I felt my voice was heard and that our shared views will make a difference.

It was well set up and the room had a nice vibe with likeminded people. It was relaxed and I feel like people had a good experience.

Our facilitator was excellent and made us feel comfortable.



### Something I would like to change

When asked what they would like to change, Forum participants raised several areas for improvement. Firstly, one issue raised consistently was the length of focus group discussions. Learners at each Forum event said they would have liked more time dedicated to group discussion and the sharing of experiences.

Secondly, some learners commented that they had not received sufficient advance notice or information about the event, and similarly expressed a desire to be fully informed about what will happen to their views afterwards. Learners proposed that the Forum should close the feedback loop by including a section where they can understand what ETBs have done in response to earlier forums.

Finally, learners referenced noise levels at several Forum events. Large numbers occasionally made it difficult for some participants to hear one another and to participate fully on the day.

Have examples of how these sessions have contributed to changes historically.

I feel that the idea is great, but it needs to be at ground level. This should be available to every student in their college, rather than having a one-off opportunity to discuss issues.

It was too loud, and I was forced to speak loudly. I couldn't hear the facilitator.

Slightly more time to discuss issues and solutions.

I wish I knew a bit more – signing up was very last-minute for me.

## Something I learned

When asked what they had learned at the event, Forum participants most frequently provided answers related to learning something new about their ETB, including hearing about new courses and opportunities or the variety of supports available in their region.

Participants clearly enjoyed peer learning and the sharing of ideas and experiences with fellow learners. Others similarly noted how inclusive the FET community is, and better realised the huge diversity of learners in FET from all age groups and backgrounds. Finally, learners in attendance noted that realising their ETB was open to hearing student feedback was one of the best things they learned at the Forum.

The possibility that what I have fed back could contribute to change and improvement.

There are so many opportunities in various centres. I realise how valuable our own centre is and how important it is to share our positive experiences with prospective learners.

Such an event helped me to understand the structure of making changes to the educational process.

Adult Education is so important, especially to rural Ireland, and age is no restriction to learning.

Education is changing people's lives. Even if they missed out on education all of their lives, it's never too late.

I am pleasantly surprised that management in the ETB cares about improving the education process by talking to students.

Welcoming  
Different Cultures  
Respected  
Nice staff  
Small group conversations  
HAVING Inclusive  
OUR VOICES  
HEARD  
AND Welcoming  
Different Backgrounds  
RESPECTED  
Sharing our experiences  
Meeting new people  
Inclusive  
Heard  
Opportunity to talk about courses  
Food  
Travel Vouchers  
Merchandise  
Well-organised  
Facilitators  
Meeting new people

## Together for Learner Voice: Partner Perspectives

The National FET Learner Forum sees AONTAS and Education and Training Boards work together to empower adult learners across Ireland. ETB representatives provided the following quotes at each forum event. Each contribution highlights the significance and value of Learner Voice for our collaborative partners:

“Today is about making sure that CDETb learners get to have their say in how their courses and centres are run. This is your chance to impact, influence and improve your experience with your ETB. We want to make sure we are meeting your needs and will support you in your learning. We need you to be part of decision making in your classrooms and centres. We will make sure your voice is being heard at every level of the organisation.”

Sneha Sarcar, Learner Support and Engagement Officer, City of Dublin ETB.

“We are delighted that there is such huge representation across Donegal FET Service, from all our service providers ... It is so important for us to hear your views, your experiences and your opinions.”

Joanne Whitelock, FET Quality Assurance Support Officer, Donegal ETB.

“There is a longstanding relationship with MSLETB and AONTAS working closely together. It’s important that you know you are part of a bigger learning organisation. An external body like AONTAS, working on Learner Voice, adds strength to the process, and independence.”

Ann McNamara, Assistant Manager, Mayo Sligo Leitrim ETB.

“Learners, this is your opportunity to give your feedback on your courses and education, and to have your voice heard and listened to. This Forum will help us to understand what we are doing well, to make positive changes, and to have learner voice at the centre of what we do, informing our practice in Further Education and Training provision in WWETB. We will take feedback from this very important annual event and from the AONTAS regional report and will use it to make plans for supports and services that enhance WWETB learning opportunities.”

Rosalind Threadgold, Access and Inclusion Officer, WWETB.

“We are here today to make sure that learner voices are really heard, right across the FET sector and not just at Cork ETB. It is vital to hear what the issues are for learners and to give you a platform to voice those issues. Putting these challenges to us as providers is critical to identify what the solutions should be. Today is not a once-off event but a series of events. A voice heard once is just noise, but as part of a conversation is heard many times.”

John Fitzgibbons, FET Director, Cork ETB.



“LMETB’s Further Education and Training provision is continuously trying to listen and improve our ability to respond to learner needs. Today’s event is a powerful example of ‘Learner Voice’, where those who learn, not just those who teach, influence the educational experience.”

Kelvin Harvey, Adult Education Officer, Louth and Meath ETB.

“The insights shared by our learners are incredibly valuable. They help us shape our future plans and strategies. Knowing what to do well enables us to keep doing it for future students, while also identifying areas where we can make improvements. Your feedback is crucial in ensuring that we continue to provide quality education and training at Kerry ETB.”

Aoife McCormack, Quality Assurance Manager, Kerry ETB.

“We like to use the acronym of VOICE when thinking about today’s event.

V = Voice: amplifying learner voices and encouraging you to have your say

O = Opinion: your opinion matters to us

I = Independence: we are dependent on your feedback to keep us real. Your input today will be completely independent from CMETB, and you have the freedom to express your voice in an independent way

C = Clear communications: We will be accountable to you on your feedback. We have adopted a You Said, We Did approach to taking on board your feedback. This time next year, we will be able to tell you what we did with what you said.

E = Enjoyment. We hope you enjoy engaging today with your fellow students.”

Dympna McCarron, Director of Quality Assurance, Cavan and Monaghan ETB.

“The National FET Learner Forum is a fantastic opportunity for Tipperary ETB FET students in many ways. It is an opportunity to look at where they are now, and it also sows the seed for future self-development. The Learner Forum gives the students an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and to come together to look at how their future educational environment can be enhanced. We look forward to working with the students that participated in the Learner Forum and we look forward to hearing the recommendation from the Forum and hope that those who are interested engage in the Learner Voice through the Tipperary FET Student Council.”

Ciaran Kennedy, Community Education Facilitator for Wellbeing, Tipperary ETB.

## Capacity-Building for Learner Voice

Since its inception in 2016, the National FET Learner Forum has recorded and shared the views of thousands of FET learners across Ireland. In recent years, AONTAS have sought to build on the success of the Forum and develop new capacity-building programmes to promote Learner Voice. Since 2020, AONTAS have been working with staff and learners in Education and Training Boards (ETBs) across Ireland to develop Learner Voice as a process that is embedded in Further Education and Training (FET). **The Learner Voice model is now being taken up by ETBs across Ireland.** These initiatives have created meaningful, authentic opportunities for FET learners to represent and advocate for themselves and fellow learners at local, regional and national levels. Further information is available at the Learner Voice Training section of our website: <https://www.aontas.com/learner-voice/learner-voice-training>.

### Learner Voice Training: staff champions

Structure and organisation are vital to successful Learner Voice practice. AONTAS work together with ETB staff to develop and embed Learner Voice structures, such as Learner Councils in local FET centres. AONTAS offer training and guidance to ETB staff and helps shares best practice in Learner Voice at a national level. As Ireland's National Coordinator for the New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEAAL), AONTAS have expanded our Learner Voice Training provision. In 2024, AONTAS piloted continuous professional development sessions for staff in five ETBs. In 2025, this capacity-building initiative will be extended to staff in a further eight ETBs.

### Learner Voice Training: learner leaders

AONTAS offer workshops and training for learners on leadership, advocacy and action planning, with the aim of empowering learners to share their views and tell their own stories. Voicing their experience and sharing feedback on their courses and interactions with their ETB can be integral to learners creating positive change, both for their own experience of learning and for those who come after them. This process can help identify important issues and ways to address them, fostering a learning environment that has been co-created by both learners and staff.

### Learner Stories

AONTAS encourage participants in the National FET Learner Forum to share their Learner Story on our website. Learner Stories promote the benefits of adult learning to potential learners and highlight the role of Education and Training Boards and other membership organisations in supporting learners to engage in adult education. To read some recent contributions, visit the Learner Stories section of our website: <https://www.aontas.com/learner-stories/>





## Research Questions

The overarching aim of the National FET Learner Forum is to ensure that FET meets the needs of adult learners today and continues to do so in future. To that end, the AONTAS research team seeks to address the following research questions:

1. In their experience of FET, what do participants identify as working well?
2. What do participants identify as needing improvement?
3. What do participants suggest with respect to future FET provision?

## Research Ethics

All participants in the National FET Learner Forum receive a full account of the project, its aims, and methods of data collection, storage, and usage. Focus group participants are provided with an information sheet and consent form. AONTAS researchers talk participants through the information sheet and consent form on the day. All participants in this research provided informed written consent to partake in research and to have their focus group discussions audio-recorded. Participants were further informed of their right to withdraw at any stage if they so wished.

AONTAS use photos from the National FET Learner Forum event for the purposes of reporting, future promotion of the Forum, and/or other AONTAS work. Forum participants give their express consent to allow AONTAS to use their image for these reasons. Learners may also take part in the event but decline to be photographed.

## Data Collection

**Table 1.1 Summary of Research Data**

Data Source	No. of Focus Groups	Average No. of Participants per Focus Group	Total No.
Focus Groups	86	8	686
Survey			1030
Learner Voice Contributions			1716

AONTAS conducted research into learner experiences of Further Education and Training in nine regions. This mixed-methods study uses both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Qualitative findings are derived from the contributions of 686 focus group participants. Learners were pre-assigned to a focus group according to their QQI level. Participants were asked: (i) “What has been working well in your course?”, (ii) “What has not been working well in your course?”, and (iii) “What

changes would you make to improve your learning?” All focus group conversations were audio-recorded by Dictaphone. The research team used Google Colab software to transcribe the recordings and reviewed same for accuracy. An overview of Learner Voice contributions is available in Appendix 1 of this report.

Quantitative research findings are drawn from a survey of 1030 Education and Training Board learners. The online survey remained open to learners for two weeks before and after the event. Learners also had the option of completing a paper copy of the Learner Survey at the event or to return same by post. The survey contains both open and closed questions covering diverse aspects of the FET learning experience. To measure learners’ satisfaction with different aspects of learning, the survey uses closed questions with responses based on a Likert scale (“Very satisfied,” “Satisfied,” “Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied,” “Dissatisfied,” and “Very dissatisfied”). Hereafter, for brevity of presentation, the answers “Very satisfied” and “Satisfied” are aggregated to the category “Satisfied”; the answers “Dissatisfied” and “Very dissatisfied” are aggregated to the category “Dissatisfied.” Select survey questions and data, including all disaggregated learner satisfaction scores, are available in Appendix 2 of this report.

## Thematic Analysis

The report authors documented and analysed all FET learner contributions to the Forum. The report reproduces learner contributions verbatim. Where editing has occurred for the sake of clear communication, this has been light and transparent.

During thematic analysis, the report authors coded the focus group transcripts. In qualitative research, open coding means carefully reading the focus group transcripts and identifying the topics, or “codes,” that come up. This helps us, as researchers, to discover patterns emerging from the data which can then be used to understand the wider picture. In the open coding process, the team initially reviewed a sample of transcripts to generate a list of themes, codes, and sub-codes. All transcripts were subsequently analysed in line with this set of closed or pre-defined codes. The report authors worked independently and cross-checked coding for validity. Finally, the Head of Research cross-checked transcript analysis with facilitator notes for validity.

The Learner Voice Overview table in Appendix 1 presents a representative sample of learner quotations from the focus groups of the National FET Learner Forum. While focus group conversations were wide ranging, each regional report includes as ‘primary’ only those areas working well or needing improvement that featured across multiple focus group discussions (i.e. 2 or more focus groups) and/or had been raised by three or more participants in the same focus group. The Research Team compiled all Learner Voice overview tables from each of the 9 regional reports into a single Learner Voice Overview Table. For brevity and concision, the report authors then reduced the large number of themes and quotations presented, eliminating all themes generating fewer than 18 learner comments. In general, all the ‘primary’ themes presented in Appendix 1 are those that received a high number of learner comments across multiple regional forums. An exception was made only where a topic reflects a rights-based or minority issue, one that may not be expected to generate comments from many learners. The report’s selection of primary themes is further informed by the priority survey respondents afford to them.





Throughout the analysis, particular attention is afforded to instances where learners articulate explicit suggestions or proposals. The report includes all explicit Learner Voice proposals where these apply to a primary theme.

## Research Scope and Limitations

The National FET Learner Forum aims to support the voice that is unheard and to facilitate a deeper understanding of participants' 'lived experience' of FET provision (Dowdall, Sheerin, and O'Reilly, 2019). The Forum enables participants to find other learners with similar opinions and experiences, encouraging them to grow in confidence and to voice their views. The present report seeks to draw out the Learner Voice, describe the lived experience of the issues facing learners, and articulate a necessarily learner-centred account of FET provision to policy makers. These aims impose clear boundaries to the research process and attach limitations to the research findings.

Firstly, Learner Forum attendance is capped at 100 participants. Practical limitations underpin this decision, including resource constraints, available venues and room size, and the audibility of focus group discussions for Dictaphone recording. Participating ETBs recruit focus group participants and distribute the survey. While effort is made to ensure a wide range of course and level representation at the Learner Forum, learner participation is voluntary, and some groups and levels remain better represented than others. Survey findings are based on a relatively small sample of the total number of FET learners engaging with a regional Education and Training Board annually. By implication, the research findings cannot automatically be taken to be representative of wider learner experience in an ETB region. Further research, including wider learner consultation, may be required to establish the research report's representativeness.

Secondly, the report's primary data consists of learner focus group transcripts supplemented by learner survey responses. Learner Forum discussions frequently cover a broad range of issues. Given more opportunity to shape the research agenda than a one-to-one interview or a survey, learners may well raise issues that are of greater concern to themselves. The research team examines all recorded learner statements and includes statements according to the explicit criteria listed above. The team provides as much contextual information as possible with each learner statement. Time constraints and the focus group format (in comparison with one-to-one interviews) inevitably limit learners' discussion of topics in depth, and further limit facilitators' capacity to probe for specific details. In keeping with the project's research ethics, contextual detail is intentionally limited only where omission protects participants' anonymity. By implication, contextual understanding available to local ETB stakeholders and/or further research may be required to establish the full context for a learner's statement.

Thirdly, AONTAS recognise that FET learning environments are complex and subject to financial, legal, and professional norms and constraints that may not always be visible to learners. However, analysis of contextual data concerning FET provision, including policy, pedagogy, and stakeholder behaviour, falls outside the scope of Learner Voice research. By implication, the present report cannot establish the truth or fairness of participants' subjective claims, or the practicability of their

proposed changes to FET provision. Individual learners may raise aspects of their learning experience that are outside of the remit of the Education and Training Board, including issues beyond its capability to influence. While acknowledging this limitation, the report presents learner voice statements faithfully and without judgment. Contextual understanding available to local ETB stakeholders and/or further research may be required to establish the accuracy of participants' statements and to enhance the applicability of report findings.

Finally, the proposed changes arising from the Learner Forum are, by their very nature, not clear-cut (Dowdall, Sheerin, and O'Reilly, 2019). AONTAS encourage stakeholders to view this limitation of Learner Voice research as a potential strength. Learner Voice suggestions are an invitation to curiosity and further dialogue. They are intended "to provoke conversations and debate rather than proffer a conclusion" (See Tierney and Clemens, 2011, p. 99). "What Learners say they would like to see happen next" interests and involves a diverse range of actors, including AONTAS, SOLAS, Education and Training Boards, DFHERIS and other state agencies. AONTAS support the development of Learner Councils as an appropriate mechanism for FET learners to help clarify, refine, and support the implementation of Learner Forum findings. Working in partnership with ETBs, AONTAS stand ready to support learner participation and self-advocacy at a local level, and to advocate for adult learning at a national level.

## Structure of Report

The following report outlines the findings and learning generated through the nine regional FET Learner Forums. The work falls into seven chapters. Chapter 2, "The Adult Learner and FET", provides an overview of learners' profile, motivations, pathways into FET, as well as the reported impact of FET. Chapter 3, "FET Access and Inclusion", documents participants' reported experience of FET with respect to inclusivity and belonging, communications, buildings and facilities, and digital transition. Chapter 4, "FET Provision and Services", presents learners' perspectives on course provision and on teaching and learning. It also outlines learner experiences of diverse support services offered by or sought from their Education and Training Board. Chapter 5, "Critical Issues", documents FET learner perspectives on factors impacting their capacity to access and engage in FET. These include accommodation, mental health and financial supports. Chapter 6, "What FET Learners Say", presents a summary of what learners say is "working well" or "needing improvement", and what they would like to see happen next. The final chapter concludes the report with a set of recommendations arising.





## 2. The Adult Learner and FET

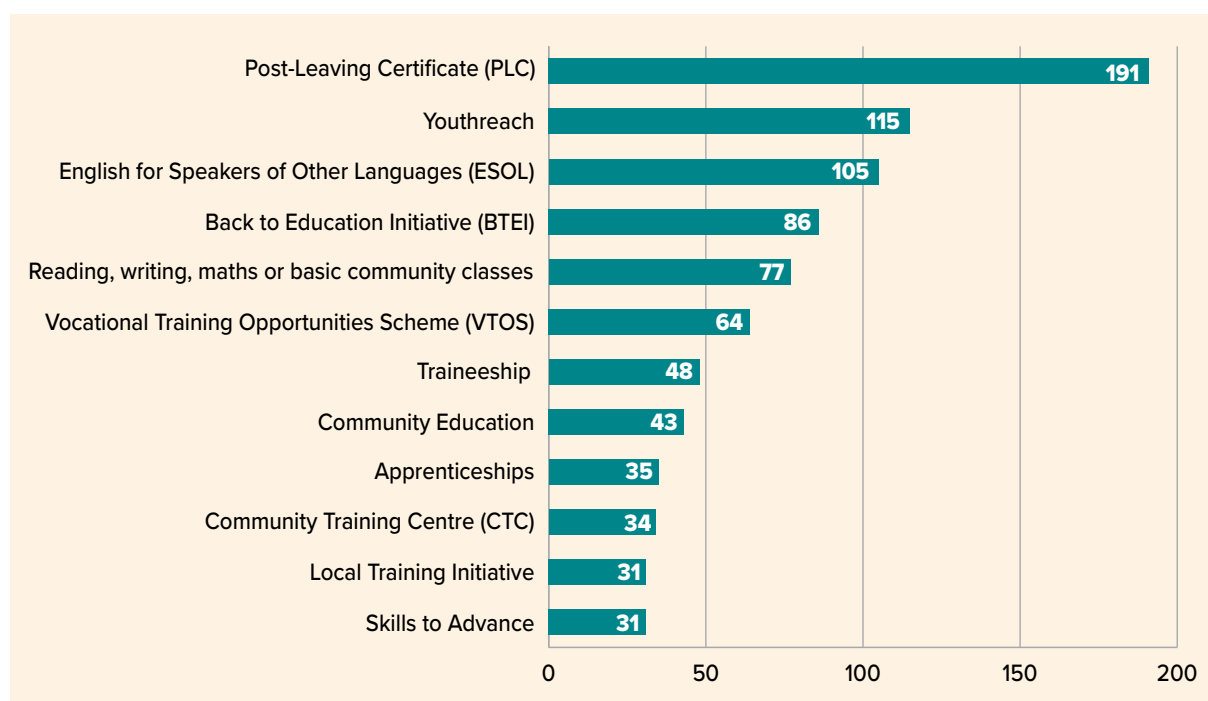
Chapter 2 provides an overview of the National FET Learner Forum participants' profile and demographics. The chapter outlines learners' stated motivations for taking their course. It documents Learner Voice concerning FET pathways and progression routes, as well as the reported impact of FET.

### Participant Profile

686 learners took part in the Learner Forum focus group events. They represented programmes from levels 1–6, unaccredited courses, and courses whose levels were unknown. English as a Second Language (ESOL) learners formed a relative majority of focus group participants.

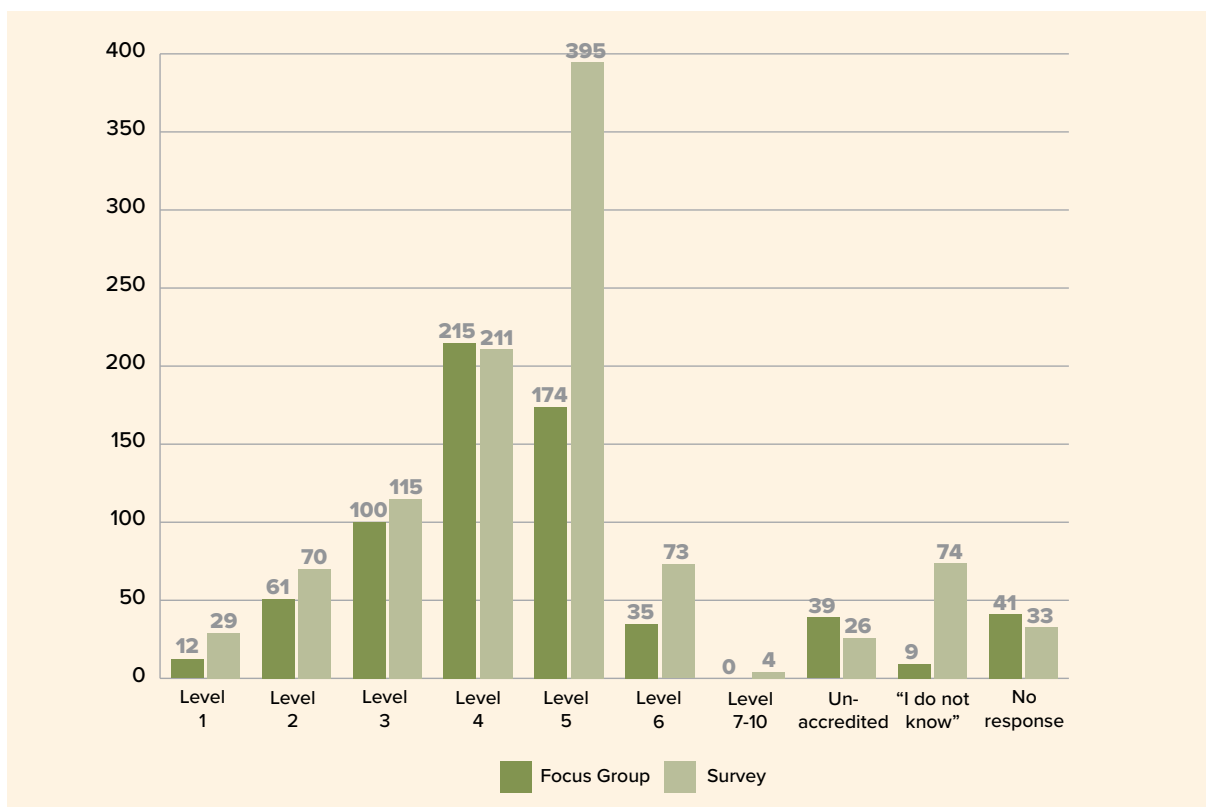
1030 learners responded to the Learner Forum survey. Most survey respondents were full-time learners (65%, n = 616/952), representing programmes from levels 1-10, unaccredited courses, and courses whose levels were unknown. Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) learners formed a relative majority of survey respondents (**Figures 2 and 3**).

**Figure 2**  
**Course or Programme Title**



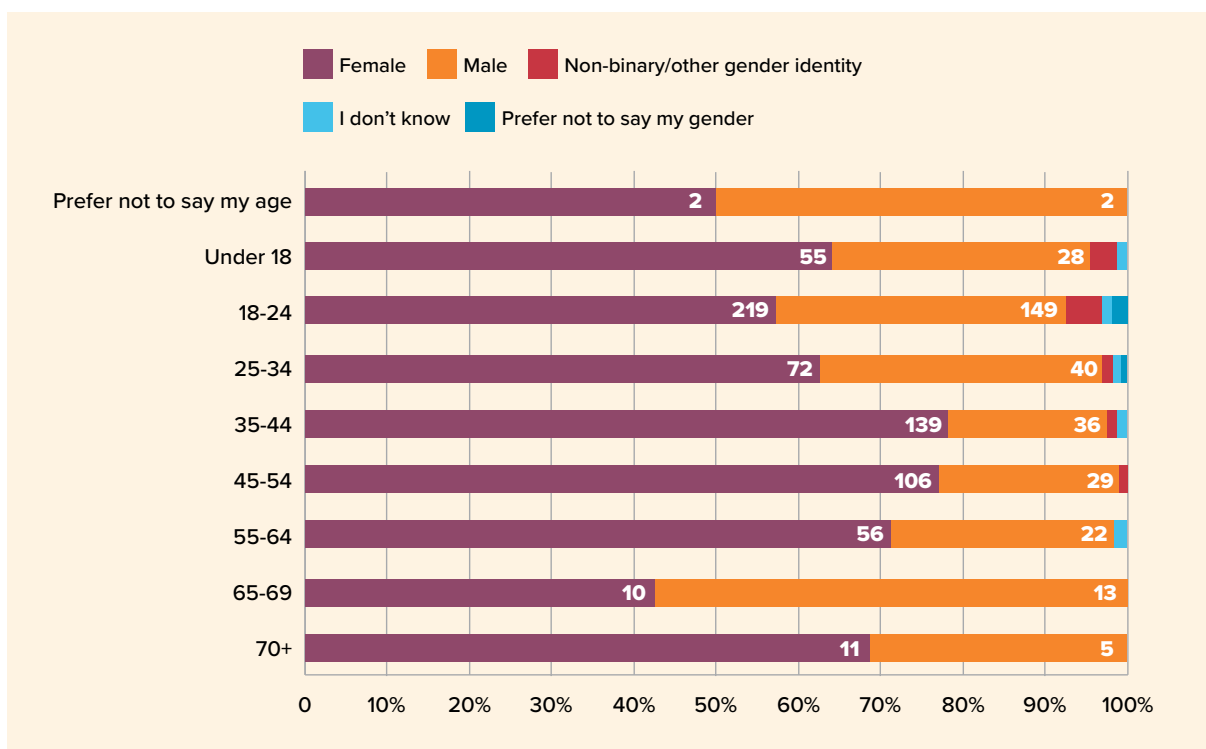


**Figure 3**  
**Learner representation by NFQ level**



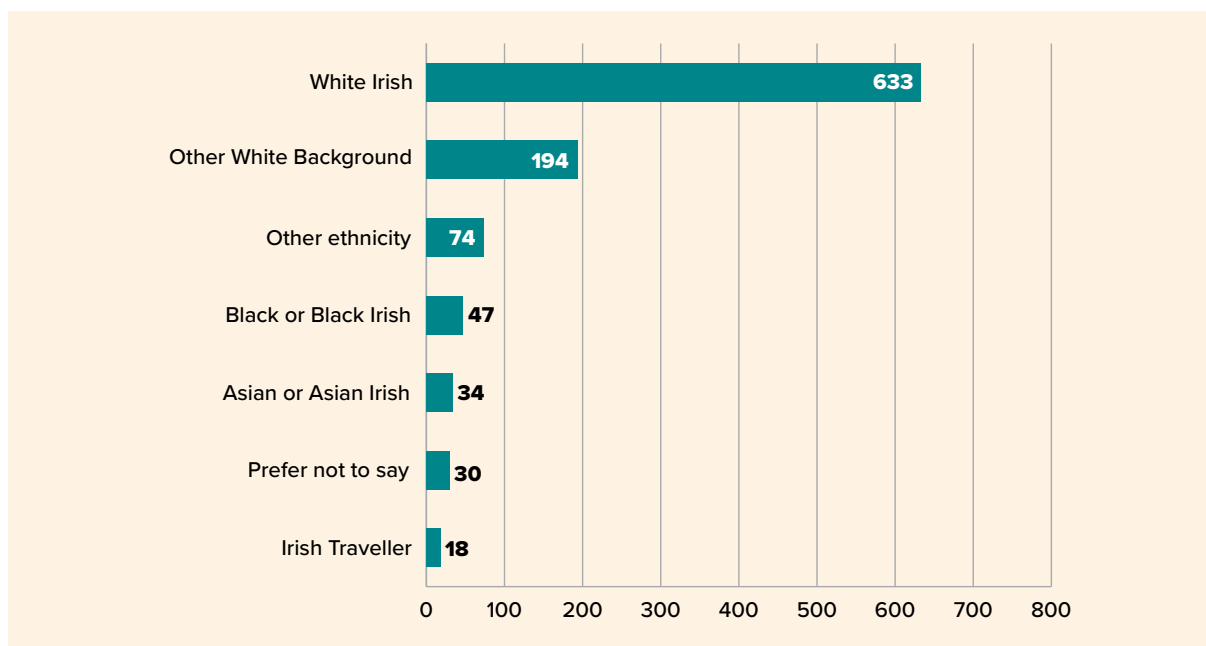
Turning to the demographic profile of Learner Forum participants, the majority of survey respondents were female (66%, n = 670/1022). The most represented age group among learners were 18 to 24-year-olds (38%, n = 386/1022) (**Figure 4.1**).

**Figure 4.1**  
**Forum Participants' age and gender**



Of those who reported information on ethnicity in the survey, the majority identified as White Irish (61%, n =633/1030) (**Figure 4.2**).

**Figure 4.2**  
*Forum Participants' ethnicity*



In terms of prior educational attainment, 45% (n = 456/1016) of survey respondents reported achieving Leaving Certificate, adult learning course or similar (Levels 4 and 5). 10% (n = 104/1016) reported a prior level of education lower than Junior Certificate. In terms of employment status, 42% (n = 559/1316) of survey respondents reported engaging in full-time education.

## Learner Motivations

Learners reported a variety of reasons influencing their decision to participate in a course or programme (**Figure 5**). Learners could select more than one reason in response to this question.

**Figure 5**  
**Responses to “What were the reasons for taking your course?”**



The primary motivations to enrol in a FET course are the desire “To learn something new” (39%, n = 340/876), “To get a job” (37%, n = 327/876) and “To help me progress in my career” (29%, n = 257/876). Focus group participants shared their diverse reasons for beginning their course:

“This was me returning to education after 28 years. I was working full-time for that period of time. I was made redundant after 19 years on my last job. So, it was a big step to... make a decision to come back as an adult student learner.”

“I like to learn.”

“I went [to the course] because I didn’t know how to use the computer... to find out how to use the mobile phone.”

“It’s a very good hands-on experience before you go into industry and get a job; you’re actually learning the stuff.”

“I like having the classes. It’s more of a discussion. It’s more about your opinion than anything.”

“I was a doctor in Ukraine and if I want to work in Ireland, I need to pass IELTS exams.”

“I’m a graphic designer, but if I want to work with [an] Irish team, I need to understand everything correctly and maybe sometimes speak with customers.”

Focus group participants recognised the wider benefits of lifelong learning, and reported taking their course to meet new people (23%, n=201/876) and to increase their self-confidence (22%, n = 190/876):

“To just get up and be able to go down there... Just some place to go, even if you never participate that day... And you just sat there listening. It’s like community, really. Like community, like you make new friends.”

“It’s a new lease of life for me because I was very ill up to four years ago. I find it absolutely rewarding.”

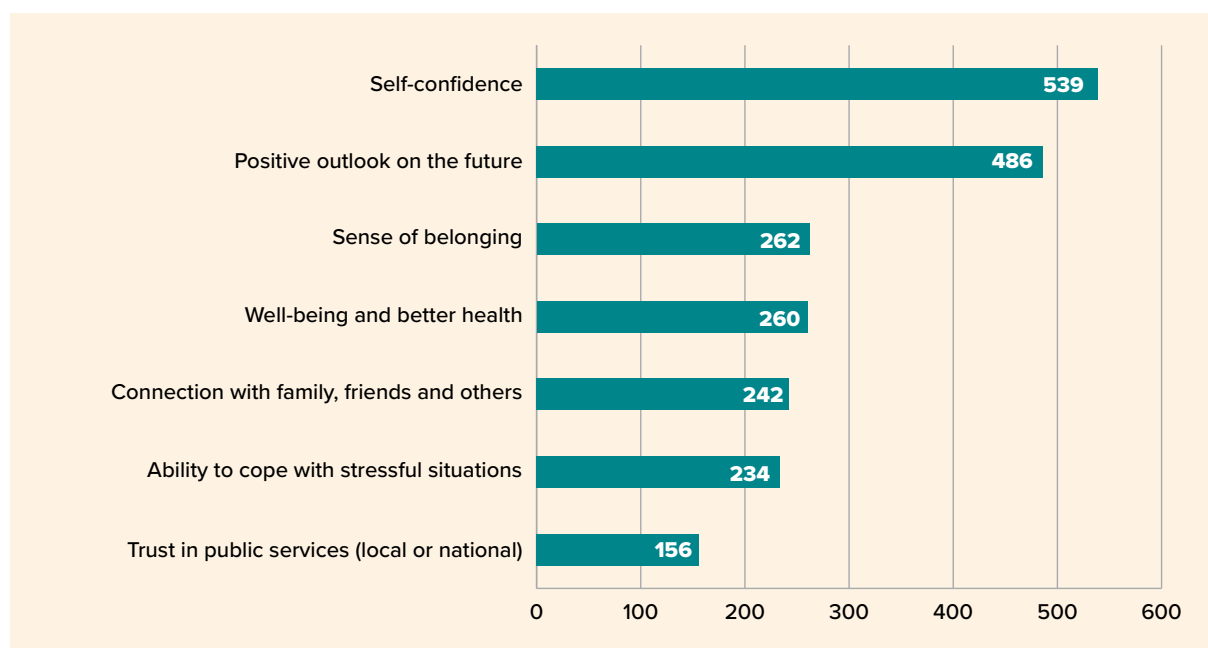
“It [the course] improved a lot for my view on what I can do, and what I can get, and what can I achieve. It has been a really, really good, positive experience for me, which I’m really grateful for.”

## The Positive Impact of FET

Forum participants identified a variety of positive impacts associated with attending a course or going to their centre. Survey respondents could select more than one reason when answering this question (**Figure 6**).

**Figure 6**

*Responses to “During your time in your adult learning course, have you experienced an increase in any of the following?”*



Learners widely recognised the positive impact of their FET experience. Survey respondents reported an increase in self-confidence (64%, n = 539/840) and a more positive outlook on the future (58%, n = 486/840). Focus group participants described these positive impacts as follows:





“It’s [the course] given me confidence as I’m mixing with all different age groups.”

“You feel like there’s kind of a career path opening up. You see, you’re more hopeful about the future.”

“It’s definitely a positive [when] you’ve a routine. The same times and activities every day definitely helps.”

“You’re actually getting paid to do something that you’re learning... that all adds to your employability or your lifestyle or your mental health.”

**Focus group participants also outlined how their FET course supported the development of important social connections:**

“It’s meeting people, it’s interaction, it’s forming friendships. It’s absolutely a very social thing. For me it’s very social. For a lot of us there, it would be our outlet, our main outlet. It gets us out, yes, very much so.”

“I have to say this [course] is the best thing I ever did. I’ve met lovely people... and I have a purpose.”

**When asked to consider what could be improved in these areas, focus group participants explained how sometimes the language used in educational materials can feel alienating and can affect learners’ confidence:**

“I lacked confidence in myself. I can’t do this. I’m too old. And then the language was like ‘the brief. You know the brief’. What is the brief? What is the submission?... All the language of being back in education.”

**Forum participants further outlined how their FET centres could better support their sense of belonging and social connections by facilitating social spaces and opportunities to socialise:**

“[O]nce again, those optional social opportunities to help foster the student community. Even if they held an outside of class hours coffee morning or maybe a study meeting where you can come together and help each other with the assignments. Have a coffee, chat, you know what I mean? If that’s just facilitated...”

“I get lots of benefits, like my confidence and communication skills which were very low... I felt shy to talk with someone. And when I get the placement, I talk with everyone and I make a good connection with them.”

“We have a pool table. We have a table tennis as well, and a hall... and that is a meeting space where people can play the games.”

## Pathways

Forum participants held mixed views on their available pathways within and beyond FET. Where learners felt that ETB staff and tutors provided them with clear explanations of their learning and employment pathways, this was positively appreciated:

“Everything’s been going well for me. We’ve had a couple of learner-tutor meetings and during those meetings they’ve gone out to actually ask you what your thoughts are for your career and they’ve actually taken the time to ask you what kind of places you’d be thinking of going afterwards.”

Learners expressed an unmet need for ETBs and HEIs to enhance communications and to clarify pathways in order to facilitate learners’ progression from Further Education to Higher Education:

“I think universities and the Education Training Boards should kind of communicate between each other... so students can actually progress into different courses.”

“There’s nowhere else to go [after level 5] ... I don’t think I’m ready yet [to go to university], but that’s probably a confidence thing.”

“We need level six. And when we finish level five, we don’t know where to go. Yeah. No level six in this... There is not level six. We need level six.”





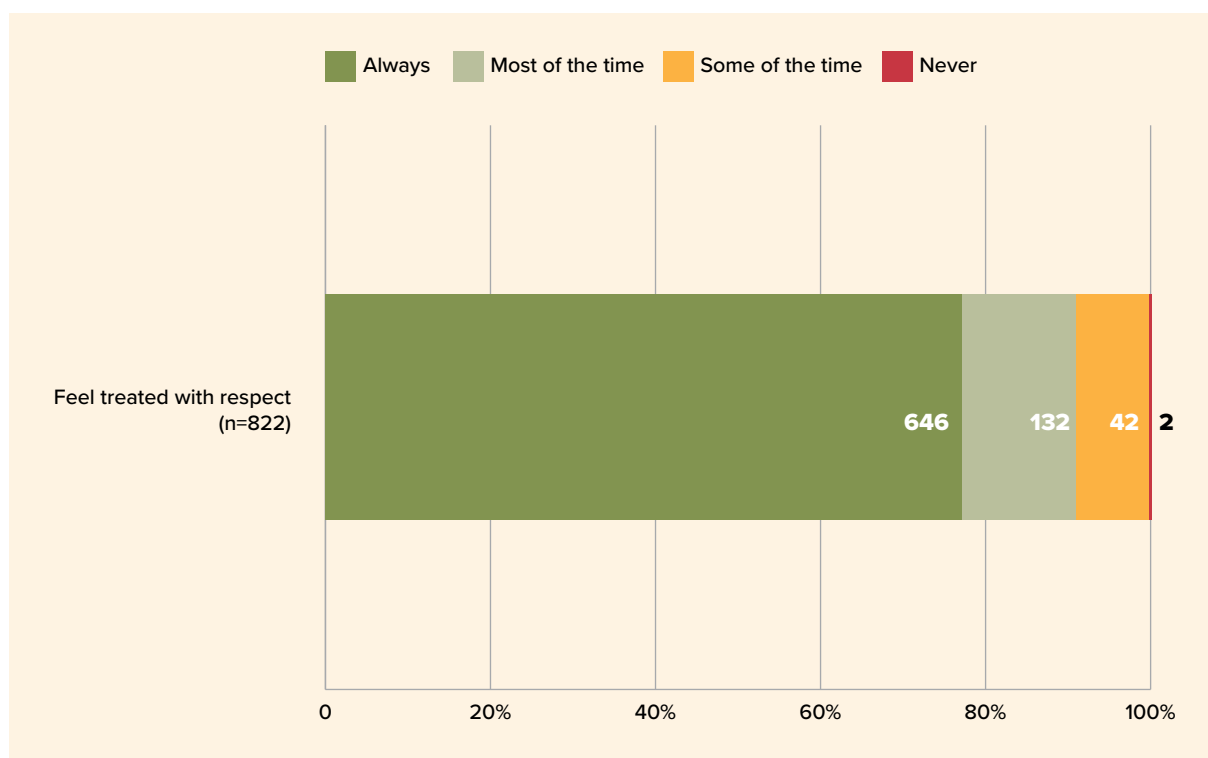
# 3. FET Access and Inclusion

Chapter 3 documents Learner Voice with respect to FET learners' experiences of access and inclusion. It begins by outlining participants' sense of welcome, belonging and inclusion in FET as well as their views on ETB communications based on their experience of accessing courses, programmes, and supports. The chapter further details Learner Voice with respect to the buildings and facilities hosting and enabling FET provision as well as regional supports for digital inclusion and transportation.

## Welcome, Belonging and Inclusion

Learner Forum participants felt that ETB staff and tutors treated them with respect (Figure 7).

**Figure 7**  
*Responses to “Do you feel that you are treated with respect by the staff and tutors in the ETB?”*



Forum participants shared several ways in which their Education and Training Board made them feel welcome and included. Learners observed the positive differences between FET and past, negative experience of mainstream education, highlighting the vital role of mutual respect between tutors and students:

“There’s a great deal of respect for the tutors and respect from the tutors as well. That’s the part, I suppose, having that mutual respect.”

“They’re not treating you like a child. I think there’s a bit more respect between teachers and students [compared to school].”



Focus group participants also felt that respectful communication between peers was prioritised, and that this contributed to a welcoming atmosphere in their ETB:

“All the women that are there... we’re very like-minded and there’s a great connection between us... everybody seems to have the courage and the safety and feel safe... the overall goal would be of effective communication [and] would be open, direct, honest, clear [communication] with respect for oneself and others – that’s basically the core of the programme.

While most FET learners felt treated with respect by ETB staff and tutors, this was not the experience of all learners. Some focus group participants noted that ETB staff and tutors did not always treat them with respect and emphasised a need for greater sensitivity towards learners:

“I’ve been spoken to quite disrespectfully by tutors that are younger than me. I don’t like it.”

“Because sometimes people mightn’t be having a good day or sometimes people are... There is a lot of people, a lot of anxiety in... everywhere in our group, and I think they [staff] need to be just sometimes a little bit more sensitive and aware of that.”

Importantly, focus group participants also highlighted the need for learners to be respectful towards one another:

“There’s respect for teachers but not always for each other. Some people seem to forget that we’re all here for the same thing. There are some groups don’t engage and some that clash. There’s groups there and it does feel clique-ish.”

Learners stated that everyone in the educational environment should remain aware of difference, and foster respect for and between participants, regardless of these differences:

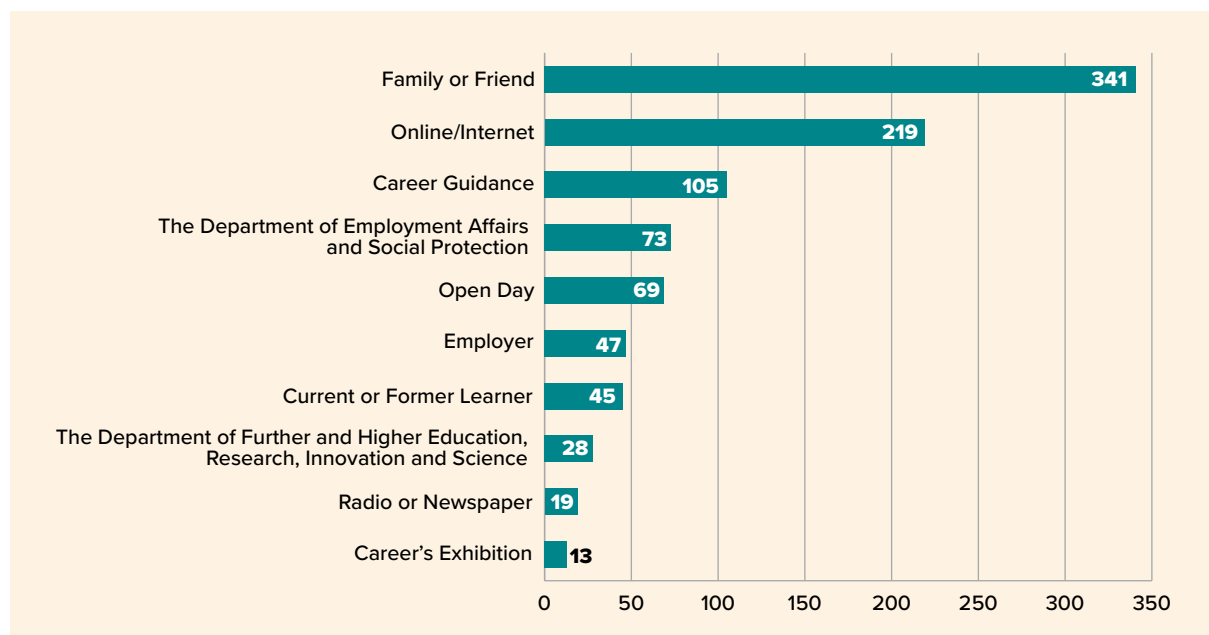
“I think in an educational environment when you have a mixed, varied people, there should always be respect. But it comes both ways. Students respect the facilities, the teachers and the staff. There should be respect on all levels.”

“I suppose the encouragement from the teachers and the kind of, they accept everybody regardless of what walk in life they’ve come from, or who’s young or old, or maybe, you know, whatever... everyone is treated equally, really. I just think, I hope that continues. It doesn’t matter if you’re 60 or 20.”

## Communications

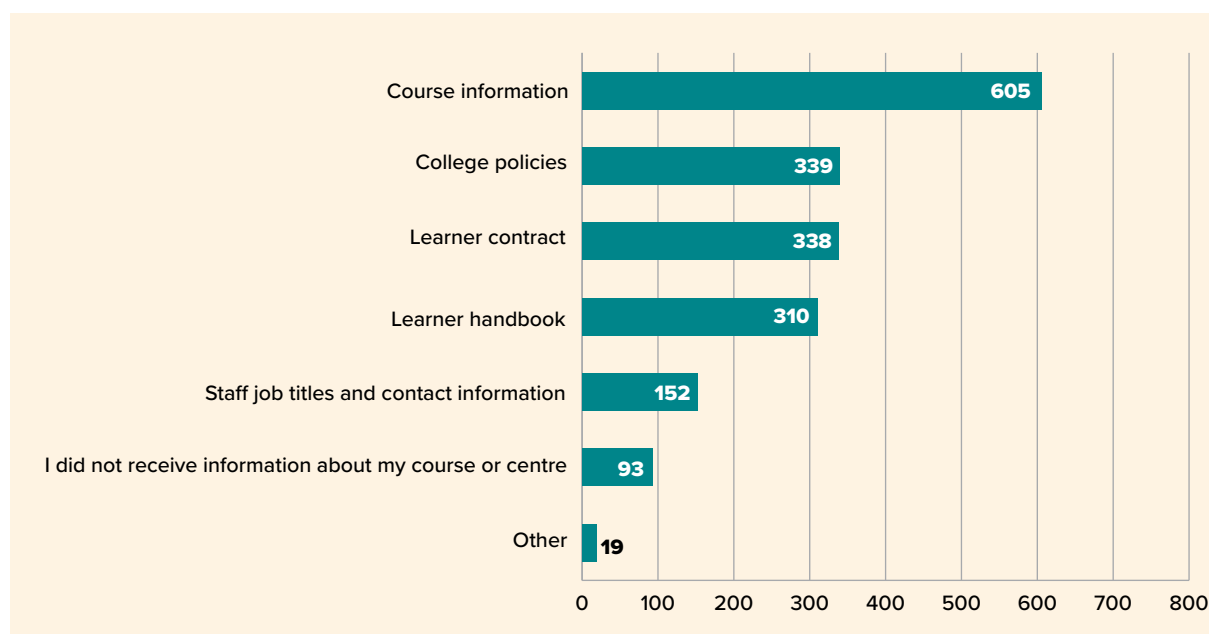
Learners expressed a range of views about ETB communications. Learners first found out about their FET course through a wide variety of channels. 39% (n = 341/871) of survey respondents heard about their course through a friend or family member (Figure 8).

**Figure 8**  
Responses to “Where did you hear about your course?”



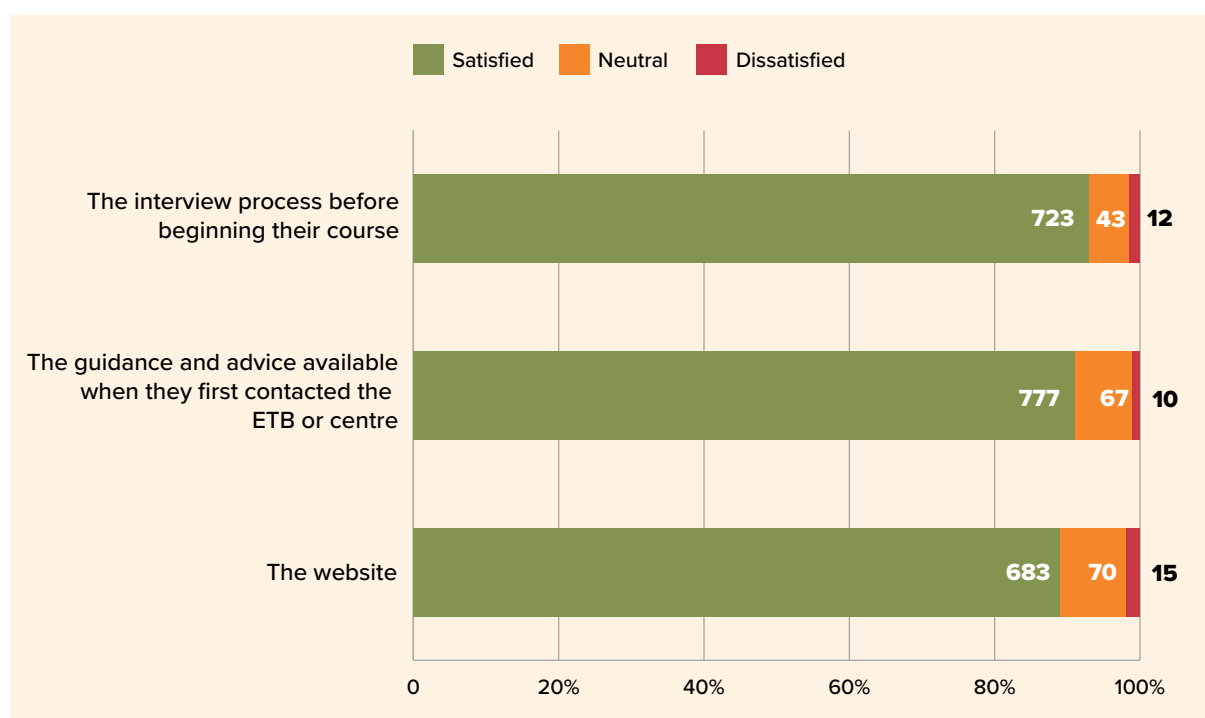
70% (n = 605/860) of survey respondents reported receiving course information during registration and induction. 11% (n = 93/860) reported not receiving information about their course or centre (**Figure 9**).

**Figure 9**  
Responses to “Did you receive a digital or paper copy of the following information about your course or centre?” Please tick all the relevant boxes



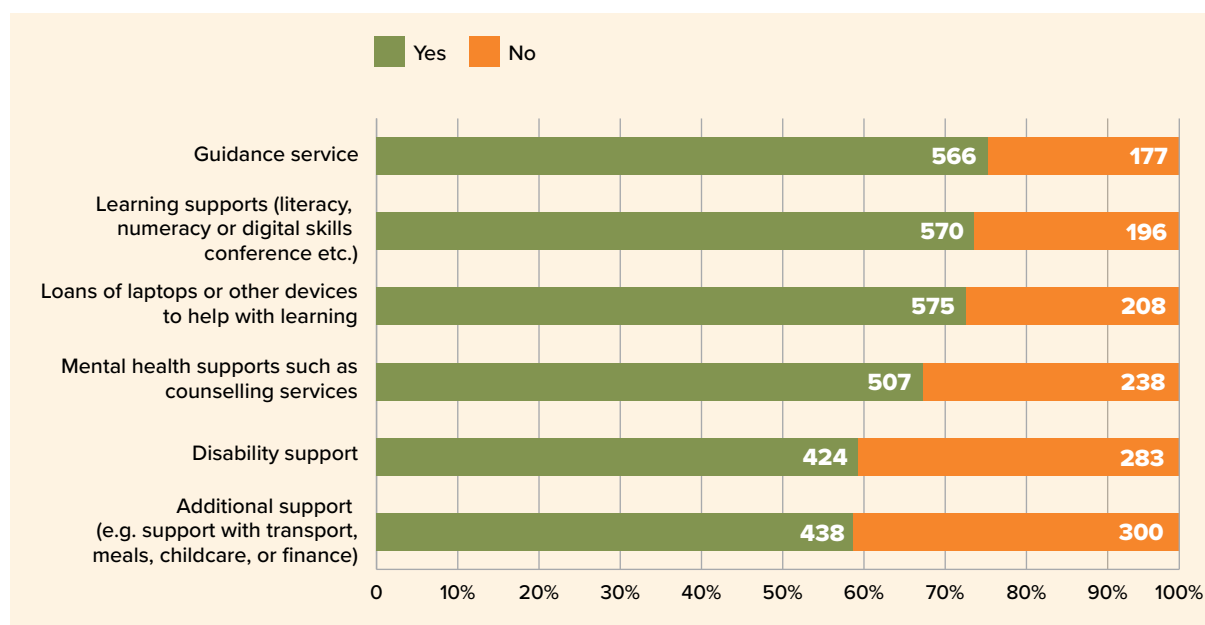
Learners expressed their overall satisfaction with communications at their ETB. Most survey respondents expressed satisfaction with the **interview process** before beginning their course, the **guidance and advice** available when they first contacted the ETB or centre, and the **website** for their centre or ETB when looking for a course or programme (**Figure 10**).

**Figure 10**  
**Satisfaction with regards to communications**



Most survey respondents stated that they received information from their centre or ETB about the availability of a range of supports and services. However, the survey highlights potential gaps in communications and/or available support services. 41% (n = 300/738) of survey respondents reported not receiving any information from their ETB or centre about additional support (**Figure 11**).

**Figure 11**  
**Responses to “Did you receive any information from your centre or ETB about the availability of the following supports and services?”**



Focus group participants outlined their experience of ETB communications in more depth. Learners highlighted the importance of word of mouth and local advertisement in introducing them to their courses:

“I’m in a women’s group in the town on a Friday. There was some people there that had been there last year and they said to us, ‘Why don’t you put your name down for it?’”

“I was long time looking for an [English] course for me but it’s very expensive. You have to drive somewhere. It was nothing around... and I got the message from the school, my kids’ school. The ETB organized a course for everyone so I applied. I am [now in] second year of the English course.”

At the same time, focus group participants acknowledged the limitations of course advertising being overly reliant on word of mouth from friends and family:

“I heard about it from a friend of mine, but otherwise I wouldn’t have found it anywhere. It was after years and I lived quite near it and I never knew what it was. It was just somebody I knew was going to the classes. I don’t see it advertised that much.”

Learners recommended the diversification of course advertisement channels to include more accessible media and local outreach through schools, churches, and community centres. Learners further saw the potential for ‘After School’ programmes in primary schools to support parents to participate in adult education:

“I wish there was more outreach because I never thought I was able to go into the course...I only got it through a recommendation from my friend. That was when I was 21. And I dropped out of school at 17. So, I could have... I could have went in earlier.”

“If AONTAS or [the] ETB had an infographic or video that local people could use for their course.”

“I often say that advertising... There’s such a [number of] people that miss all that because they can’t [go online]... maybe some kind of a newsletter from the centre or something, and mass leaflets, you might see it on a mass leaflet, that age group that I’m talking about.”

“If we could concentrate on trying to get the adult education that we’re privileged to have into the primary schools, whereby maybe you could have an after school for the children and mom could do something.”

When asked to suggest how communications could be improved, Forum participants highlighted an unmet need for the clear communication of all additional services available through their ETB. Learners observed that they were not always aware of the additional supports that were available through their ETB:

“Never heard of a counsellor. Never heard of one.”

“I don’t know if I have one [disability support person in centre].”

“I didn’t receive any information on childcare costs.”

“I sent her [previous guidance counsellor] many emails, but she never responded to me... I needed the career guidance in the beginning.... and the door was always locked. I don’t know why.”



Learners recommended that all additional supports, including external services, be clearly communicated during induction:

“If they can give us like maybe a brochure...[T]hey can just help us to know what [the ETB] can give, what you can access...”

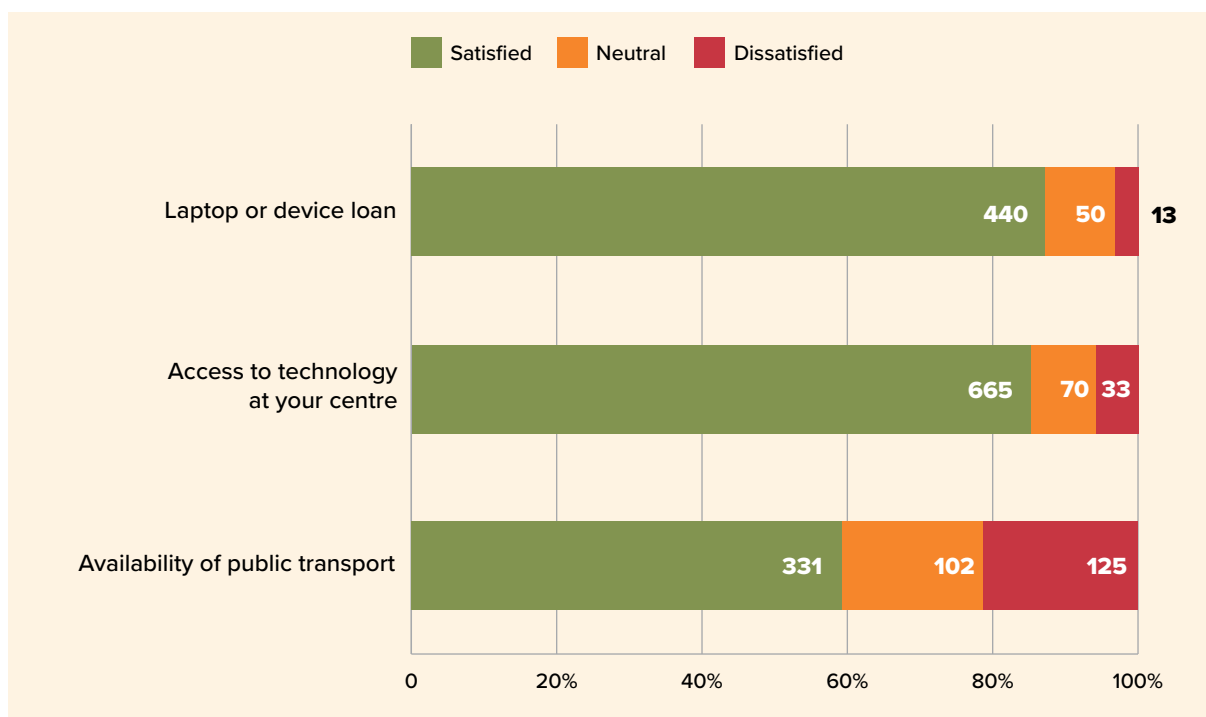
“Something that might be nice is just with the ETB, say like first week or first day doing induction... it would be very good for students if they got pointed in the direction of like a gym... there’s no real partnering with any other outdoor or external... If it would be possible to partner with someone and get people a discount. It would be great to meet mental health [professionals].”

“Within the Centres, what should start is every learner inside there should know what they’re entitled to. They don’t know that there’s other people like guidance counsellors there. They don’t know that there’s literacy people there to help them out, one to one. They don’t know that when they’re with you. If they know that from the word go, I think it opens up the whole world to everyone.”

## Buildings and Facilities

Learners expressed a range of views about buildings and facilities, including the accessibility of their centre by public transport, and the availability of technology and digital support (**Figure 12**).

**Figure 12**  
*Satisfaction with regards to facilities and resources*



Learner Forum participants welcomed the provision of both hospitality and recreational facilities to support learners' opportunities for rest, well-being, and social interaction outside of class times. Focus group participants detailed their satisfaction with their centres' learning spaces, highlighting the provision of canteen facilities and social spaces where these were offered:

"Great facilities. We've got an amazing canteen and we get free tea and coffee. We get amazing service."

"We have a pool table. We have a table tennis as well, and a hall... and that is a meeting space where people can play the games."

"It's very clean, very well equipped with all the computers and the projectors."

Conversely, where social spaces, canteen facilities, or learning spaces were absent or unsuitable, learners highlighted significant issues arising as a result:

"The space is tricky. Technically you're staying in the one classroom the whole day and not getting to go to the point. Sometimes the windows don't want to open or anything like that so it gets stuffy so most students would just end up trying to leave for like 10 minutes to try to go outside."

“There’s no place to have your lunch... [Our tutor] literally bought a microwave out of her own pocket so that we could heat our food and then [our tutor] had to buy heaters for the place.”

“We need a new pool table and new pool cues for a wee chill out spot.”

In some FET centres, focus group participants reported a lack of physical accessibility and recommended building improvements to accommodate wheelchair users:

“It’s the building... it has no wheelchair accessibility... the corridors are too tight for wheelchairs and the toilets aren’t accessible either.”

“[W]e are allocated two rooms and one of them is on the third floor... But we have a couple of ladies who can’t walk. Can’t get up the stairs. And one of them has a problem with her [mobility]. This year we haven’t seen her at all. That’s very sad. And they’re asking and asking for something to be done.”

## Digital Inclusion

87% (n = 665/768) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with access to technology at their centre (**Figure 12**).

87% (n = 440/503) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with laptop or device loan support at their centre (**Figure 12**).

Focus group participants highlighted the success of laptop loan schemes, the provision of on-site hardware, and the provision of learning software in their ETBs:

“Your laptops were provided if [you] didn’t have them.”

“The room that I go to has computers in excess and if we need extra, we just go to another room that isn’t being used. It’s also rentable laptops as well. You are made aware of these resources, so it’s not an issue for me.”

“They offer the Office 365; I think it’s paid for... We don’t pay for it.”

However, some focus group participants explained that they had unmet digital learning needs, describing the difficulties of computer-based learning for some:

“I finished university in Iraq without [a] computer. When I came here for level one [English] the teacher [said], ‘Could you open this link for learning English?’ [It was] very difficult for me.”

“I was made redundant after 37 years but we went in then and my IT skills wouldn’t be... they weren’t modern. So the course, there’s lots of typing and all. I could have done with an IT course before I’d done the course... I find that part a little bit difficult.”

When asked what could be done to improve digital inclusion, focus group participants made the following suggestions:

“If they arrange a small part, once in a week, [to] teach us Excel and Word... we can contribute to our studies by learning Word and Excel.”

“That’s the only support... all of us need... We all have issues with [digital skills]. But I think we should have at least one class timetabled in a week at least for that because it’s very stressful. It’s stressing me to the hilt. I want to smash my laptop some days because I can’t do it. I try and get my daughter to help me. She lives in a different country. I’ve tried to get friends of mine. They can’t.”

## Transport: Challenges and Solutions

The availability of public transport features as the primary area of dissatisfaction raised by FET learners in the National FET Learner Forum 2023/2024.

22% (n = 125/558) of survey respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the availability of public transport when travelling to and from their FET course. While 59% (n = 331/558) expressed satisfaction, this was the lowest satisfaction score recorded across all areas surveyed.

Overall, focus group participants shared broadly negative experiences of using local public transport to access their FET centre and outlined the ways in which unreliable, infrequent, and unaffordable transport impacted their learning. Learners emphasised the lack of frequent and reliable public transport in their area:

“When it’s hard to get to your course, like the weather is crazy and you have to walk in about one hour... So, transport is another reason to do with the [people] leaving [the course]. It’s just too difficult to put yourself there.”

“If I had access to transport I could level up on my courses, but I cannot reach the other centres.”

“Sometimes the buses are really unreliable. So there is a transport issue. If you miss the bus, there is not another bus for 3 hours or 4 hours.”

Learners further emphasised the cost of transport:

“I get the bus... it’s 15 euro each way and I only get 30 euro a week... That’s all I’m entitled to unless I claim off the government some allowance. I was told to leave the course by the INTREO office to sign on so as to change my situation. I’d lose the course if I did that... they don’t exactly care.”

“[You can’t get] Local Link...so I have to get a private bus and for me, my private bus is €50 a week.”

“No travel allowance. I’ve always got 20 euro a week.”

“Travel cost is 100 euro for 1 week. I receive 27.50 per week.”

When asked to consider how travel to and from their FET centre could be improved, focus group participants sought to enhance learner capacity to avail of public transport to access their centre. This might involve their FET centre’s provision of a local shuttle bus service or their centre’s taking steps to align class schedules with local public transport links:

“[I would suggest having a] local bus link...low cost.”



“Provide free college transport between campuses and for all field trips, rather than expecting students to find and finance their own way there.”

“Most students have their class finished at 4pm. But there is a bus that goes only at... 3.30pm. So, I have to leave my class early... Is there a way to...make a collective request to the bus station?

“Your bus that comes – it comes just 15 minutes too late. Could you maybe shift that back 15 minutes earlier?”

To alleviate the cost of transport, focus group participants recommended the provision of student cards or student leap cards to all FET learners to enable them to avail of public transport discounts:

“Can we get a student ID? You can get a reduction [in costs on certain services].”

“I don’t know if we do, but I think we definitely should get student cards.”

“It’s [a student card] a big saving for me... The saving is enormous because I know the fares can be huge. 56 is something for the train... but it’s only something like 26 as a student. It’s a huge saving. I have family up and down, and I have to go up and down. They didn’t have this course anywhere. Because you can use it on the bus as well, or anywhere you are in the country. The bus is only 8 euros or something for the student card.”

Learners travelling by car to their FET centre recommended the provision of free or discounted on-site parking:

“The deal made with a local car park was very helpful at the start of the year, I was disappointed the car park chose to suspend the deal in January, it made it more difficult to attend.”

“After the amount that we’re paying the school for our courses, we think they could afford at least some kind of discounts [for] the park[ing]. And not even free parking, but some kind of discount on nearby parking facilities.”

Finally, apprentices impacted by the rising cost of fuel recommended an increase in the fuel allowance:

“More travel allowance. Due to the price of the diesel.”

“Increase transport/fuel allowances as they are getting less each year when the cost of transport is increasing.”

“The fuel money could be more as price of fuel is rising.”

In summary, National FET Learner Forum participants reported significant transport challenges when accessing their FET centre and conveyed a range of potential solutions to these challenges that merit close consideration by all stakeholders in FET.



## 4. FET Provision and Services

Chapter 4 focuses on FET provision and services. It outlines learners' experiences of course provision, teaching and learning, and diverse support services offered by or sought from their Education and Training Board.

### Course Provision

Learner Forum participants provided feedback on diverse aspects of course provision. Across regional forums, learners highlighted the wide range of FET courses offered and further appreciated smaller class sizes where these were available:

"There's a huge range of courses. The range is amazing."

"Shortly after my retirement, I just walked in. I was kind of blown away with all the different courses on offer."

"I like the ratios from tutor to student. It's not very over-saturated so you have time to talk to your tutors and instructors individually... They are not fighting for time.... you get to know them a lot better and it's very individualised, all the training and feedback."

"There are low numbers, which is helpful because it's quite a demanding course, and each student requires a lot of attention from the teachers, so low numbers is important. It opens your mind when you have one to one learning rather than bigger class sizes in mainstream school."

"It was just really different, small classes and everything."

Focus group participants, however, observed that this positive experience was not always the case. Learners reported that the range and level of FET provision was insufficient where courses had been withdrawn or had long wait times to access them:

"Courses are being withdrawn from some campus. It doesn't make sense... There's tension at all levels. Teachers and students all feeling uncertainty [about courses moving]."

"I suppose the only bad thing about the whole [course], probably since COVID, is just the waiting time. Like we've been waiting a long time to get into this... I think it's meant to be six months. It's been about two years."

Notably, learners reported that the significant demand for ESOL courses far exceeds current course provision. Moreover, current ESOL learners reported insufficient in-class hours on their existing programmes:

"When it comes to English, we need more tutors because sometimes people come to learn and the classes are full."

"In English course, we have something like 30 people in the class and it is too big."

Focus group participants recommended increasing the provision of FET courses and the number of class or contact hours offered. Similarly, learners proposed diversifying course scheduling options to include morning and evening classes. This would offer more flexible learning opportunities to parents with childcare needs as well as learners seeking to combine part-time work and study. Learners further recommended the hiring of more tutors to support increased and flexible course provision:

“I would say maybe modules could be more packed - like a day, not spread over the week. Let’s say on Tuesday we have four modules and then on Wednesday we have two modules in the morning and then two modules in the evening. So pretty much half of the day is disappearing somewhere, you know. So that would be helping more for working people who are combining work with studies.”

“If the course is always at the same time of the day, it will be easier organise childcare.”

“I would, like everyone else, like a bit of variety of levels and I also think there could be variety in course subjects.”

Focus group participants highlighted specific challenges with respect to securing work placement experience. A diverse range of FET learners highlighted these challenges, including Apprenticeship learners, learners encountering regulatory barriers to undertaking placements in healthcare settings, and migrant learners unfamiliar with the local labour market. Learners recommended that ETBs partner with public and private sector employers to support FET learners’ work experience opportunities and future employment pathways:

“We need help with getting placements.”

“If there was more relationship with potential employers, it would be helpful.”

“I would like to see, for us people, engineers, even like seeing companies, high-end engineering companies, to know what kind of work they’re getting at.”

“For someone like me, I’m new here so it’s quite difficult (to source work experience). I don’t know where to go, I don’t know how far the place is, even if I’m searching online - that’s why I just end up calling randomly.”

“I think our college could cooperate with some of the hotels to get us ready for work placement. Because it was time consuming, and it was difficult to go to every hotel.”

Drawing on their understanding of Sweden’s model of vocational education, one focus group further proposed that employers contribute to the cost of their training:

“If somebody came and said, ‘Ok, you have a chance [of employment], after you finish your course’, I would just go for it... In Sweden they create courses where they really have a need ... they say if you do this course, you get jobs like this, and that will be the salary. It’s very clear... The course will only be offered if there is enough employers. But the employers will still pay for the courses because they need people. That would be very important.”

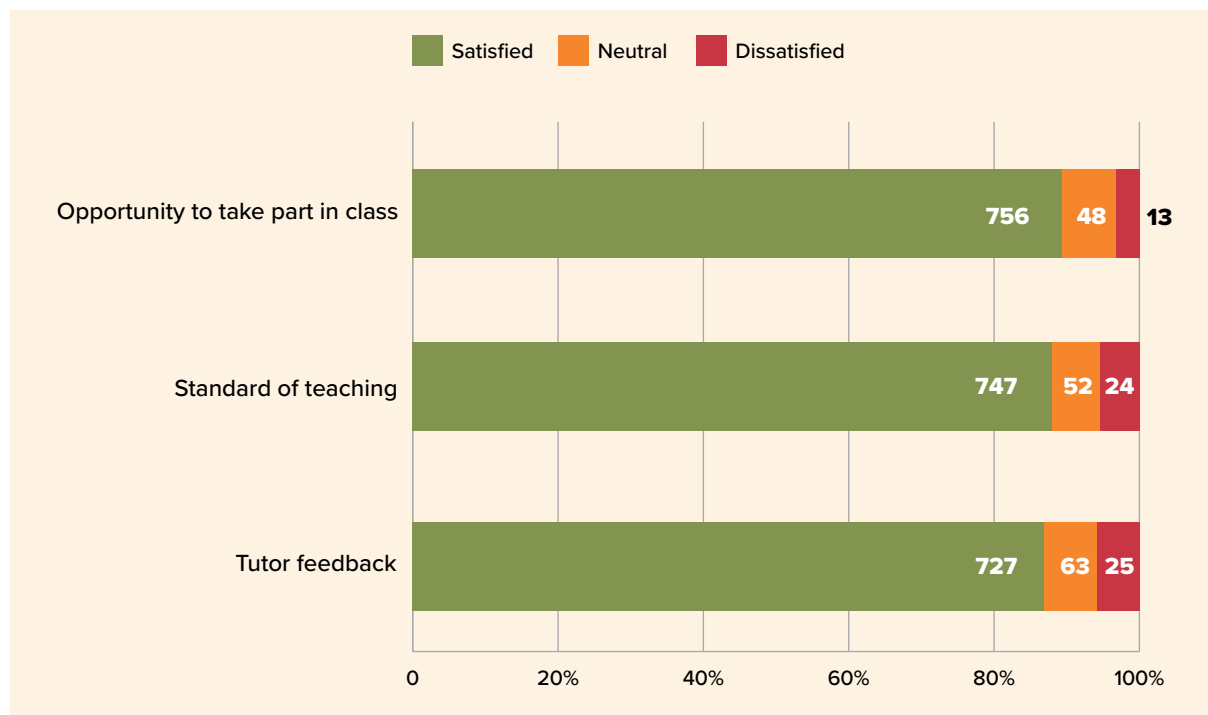




## Teaching and Learning

Learner Forum participants provided feedback on diverse aspects of teaching and learning. Large majorities of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with their opportunities to participate in class, the standard of teaching on their course, and tutor feedback (**Figure 13**).

**Figure 13**  
*Satisfaction with regards to teaching and learning*



Focus group participants spoke positively about multiple aspects of teaching and learning. Learners highlighted the role of stimulating curricula and the benefits of continuous assessment. Learners further highlighted the inclusion of practical, on-site learning as offering new and unexpected opportunities:

“Our teacher ... tells us about Irish saints ... and holidays ... about history events. They’re really interesting.”

“The continuous assessment methods that they use... it’s better. Because in secondary school if you miss out on a class or you’re covering a topic, you’re basically never going to catch that up again.”

“You get shots at stuff that you haven’t done before. You might have never done one before on a site. It opens up a couple opportunities for you nearly.”

When asked what could be done to improve their experience of teaching and learning, Learner Forum participants noted the stress that competing assignment deadlines can create for some learners. Learners proposed that FET centres should continue to use diverse assessment methods while offering longer timeframes for assignment completion and simplifying the language used in assessments:

“Maybe just some of the assignment [deadlines]... they could be expanded maybe a bit longer because for the briefs it takes time to fill out everything.”

“The way they word it [assignments]... if they made the words more simple, instead of using these words, and we’re asking the tutor, what does that mean? I couldn’t understand what the connection was between these questions that they were asking and the work I was actually doing.”

“If they state what they want us to write [on assignment briefs] in cleaner terms. Well, the National Literacy Association, they have a huge thing about plain language... They should let the people in the centre of their classes to write the course... ‘For next year, I would suggest, instead of saying that, say this.’”

Additionally, focus group participants also highlighted the difficulty and stress of combining study with work and work experience. Learners proposed that FET centres should enhance the guidance and support available to FET learners seeking to secure work experience placements:

“It makes no sense doing the two-month work experience at the end of the second year when you’re fully qualified to do everything anyway... it deters people from doing the second year [in Outdoor Activity Instructor course].”

“The downside then is that this year our work experience was one day a week spread out over a few months instead of doing block of two weeks here and two weeks there. So it’s kind of dragging from January to the end of April to get our 150 hours in. Which is a bit of a nuisance.”

“So apart from the course and stuff, I also do my work experience. And I also work. So, I don’t really have time to do my assignments and stuff. Sometimes I’m too tired to work on my assignments. The assignments [are] not all easy - you can’t finish them.”

“It’s only for a few days but it’s all crammed. It seems to be full day, intense. Yeah. It’s stressful.”

“There’s an awful lot dropping out. There’s two groups and there was 13 and 12 and I’d say there’s probably most days about six in my group. So, I think the workload is more than they kind of expected coming in and they were just going to do a bit of makeup.”

## The Role of Tutors

Learner Forum participants provided specific feedback on the particularly important role of tutors in their experience of FET. Learners praised tutors for their patience, availability, and kindness. Learners further saw tutors as instrumental to their self-confidence as well as their academic success:

“What I have now, it’s unbelievable. They make you want to learn. They (tutors) (care about) you - your interests. You’re a person. You’re a human being. You’re not stupid, you’re not dumb. You know what I mean? It’s absolutely amazing.”

“If you have the right interaction with your tutors, it will get you more interested in the course. You’ll see everything get better.”



“At the beginning of the year we got to do classes to what learning styles to do best and our teacher then changed how she taught classes based on what works [for each of us].”

While Learner Forum participants broadly shared positive experiences of their tutors, this was not the experience of all learners. Learners emphasised the importance of mutual respect in the tutor-learner relationship and highlighted times where this had broken down. Learners further suggested ways this relationship could be formally recognised and supported in their FET centre, including through enhanced opportunities for Learner Voice:

“I came today because there’s a lot of feedback I want to give and I’m a mature student and I just find the tutors, even towards me, some of them, I find them quite disrespectful. I don’t feel like we’re listened to.”

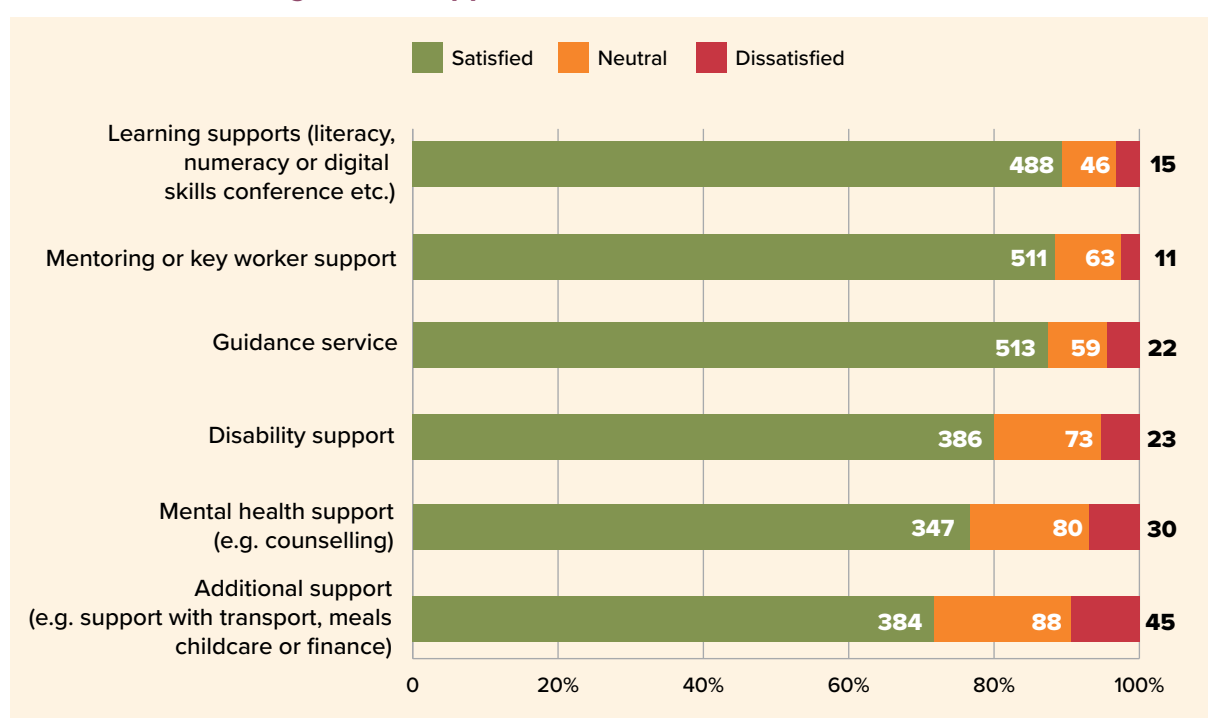
“There’s been a formal complaint put in about a bunch of the teachers because... it’s bad... between commenting on weight and... calling people stupid.”

“[The learner contract signed at induction was more about the way we hold up our end instead of how they hold up their end... We were focusing on our responsibility and not on their [tutors’] professionalism. So for us, we constantly hold up the deal of coming in and being punctual and stuff. But I wish there was a bit more professionalism in terms of tutors.”

## Support Services

Learners shared their experience of accessing a range of ETB supports and services. Most survey respondents expressed satisfaction with same (**Figure 14**).

**Figure 14**  
*Satisfaction with regards to support*



52% (n = 401/771) of survey respondents reported experiencing stress, anxiety, or depression. 457 learners reported that they use mental health supports. Of this cohort, 76% (n = 347/457) were satisfied with mental health support.

482 survey respondents reported that they used disability services and supports. Of this cohort, 80% (n = 386/482) expressed satisfaction with disability supports.

Focus group participants provided mixed feedback about supports and services offered by the Education and Training Board. Learners praised the Adult Guidance service and learning support services where these were available and availed of:

“There is [support]. Like for me personally... You know like if you have any problems with the spellings, if it’s dyslexia or anything.”

“I found the guidance counsellor was really good too. She helped me fill out all the CAO and all the other things. They can be a really good resource to have on campus.”

“The first day we arrived, I saw people in my class that were living with disabilities. They’re very much supported. They’re at the time of induction. We know where to go. If we need to point in one direction, they’re great.”

Focus group participants also highlighted some areas for improvement in relation to supports. Learners reported that some support services were under-resourced or unavailable when learners wished to access them:

“My teachers are good, but they don’t have the facilities to support me.”

When asked for their suggestions on how support services could be improved in their ETBs, focus group participants recommended the expansion of existing well-received services to facilitate their availability to learners when needed. Learners highlighted the need for enhanced guidance counselling services:

“There’s a guidance counsellor in our college, but she’s normally very busy because she’s the second manager as well. She’s busy so she doesn’t really talk much. It would be nice to have that sit down.”

“I wish there was a timeline that they help you plan of what you’re doing, what you want to do, what can you achieve. I think it would be better instead of just finishing it up and being like, ‘What do I do now?’”

“You need to assess where you’re going from there and what you’d like to do. There should be someone in the centres capable of sitting down and talking to you and telling you what you can do or what you can’t do.”

Learners further recommended expanding learning support services:

“What I’m proposing is that at least we should start with someone in each ETB, which is 16 ETBs around the country. They should be trained up by the Dyslexic Association. There should be 16 people trained up for each ETB. They should be overseen by the ETBI.”

“Because maths is quite a demanding subject, you do need somebody to give you the one-to-one, especially if you have dyslexia.”



## Childcare

Learner Forum participants raised the issue of lack of childcare and its effect on their studies. Focus group participants outlined the pressure and stress of caring for children and the difficulties this presented for participating in their courses:

“I have some problems with childcare because we have this course twice a week and the schedule is different. Once it’s in the morning, it’s ok because children are at school but another one is in the afternoon and I need to pick up my children. Sometimes there is nobody to pick them up so I’m not able to come every time.”

“I do know there was two girls in our Youthreach...and they had children and now they just don’t want to come back. Because they have to take care of the child... they only gave them like six weeks and then said, ‘Oh, if you’re not back in six weeks, you’re off the road after having the child’.”

“I just walk [my children] from school to school, from college to school. Every day is a challenge... I have three [children]. Last year I had three different schools. And I [am] just jumping from one school to another [because I can’t get childcare].”

Where their FET centre offered financial support towards childcare, learners recognised and valued this intervention:

“They [the centre] do offer child support.”

When asked how their ETBs could support them to take part in their courses, parents suggested the provision of flexible course scheduling as well as on-site childcare facilities:

“[We would like] more options in the morning time [for parents].”

“Childcare in the centre. [A creche in the centre] would make life easy for people.”

“Creche facilities.”



# 5. Critical Issues Impacting Adult Learning

Chapter 5 documents Learner Voice on factors impacting FET learners' capacity to access and engage in FET.

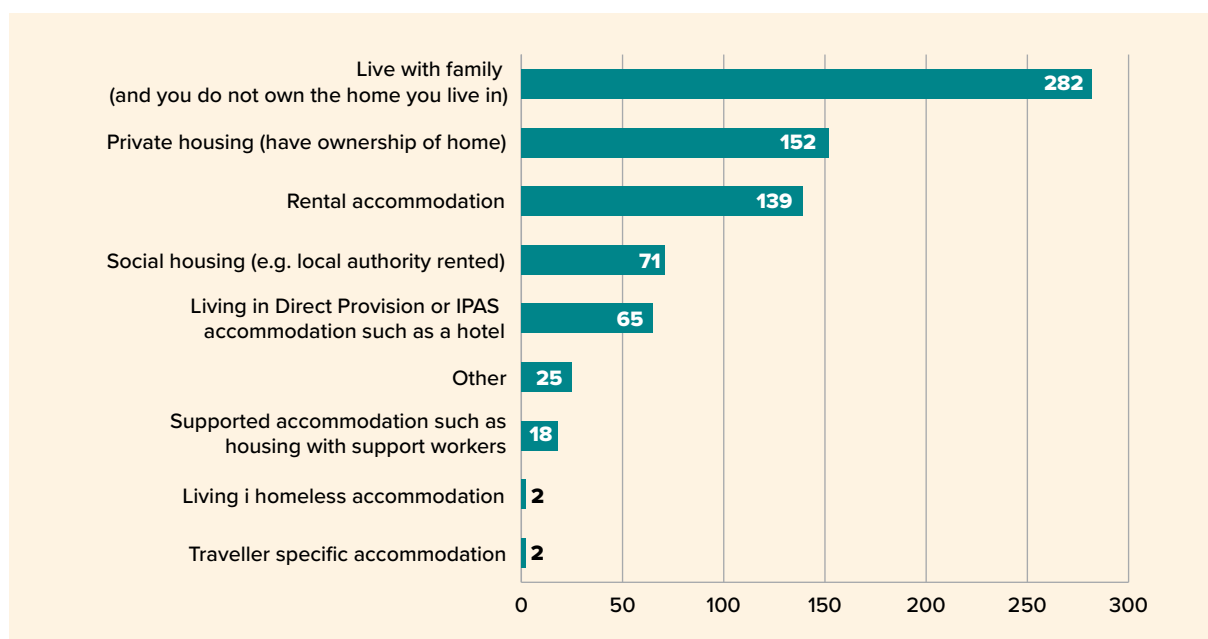
In the academic year 2022-2023, AONTAS amended the National FET Learner Forum survey to introduce specific questions on accommodation, physical and mental health/wellbeing, and financial supports.

The selection of these topics for inquiry builds on previous Forum findings and on consultation with diverse stakeholders. Learners themselves have consistently highlighted these critical issues in Irish society and the need for policymakers to recognise and mitigate their impact on adult learning.

## Accommodation

Learner Forum participants expressed diverse perspectives on accommodation and its impact on adult learning. When asked to describe their current accommodation or living situation, 37% (n = 282/756) of survey respondents reported living with family (Figure 15).

**Figure 15**  
*Responses to, "How would you describe your current accommodation or living situation?"*





78% (n = 409/522) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with their home learning environment. Of learners who are renting, 27% (n = 156/568) stated that they find it difficult or somewhat difficult to pay their rent.

24% (n = 184/757) of survey respondents stated their current accommodation or living situation affects their ability to learn or study.

27% (n = 202/757) said that their living situation causes them stress, worry, or anxiety. 14% (n = 109/757) stated that they would prefer not to answer this question.

Learner Forum participants reported how challenging housing issues impacted negatively upon their learning:

“You’re not going to get any more on the accommodation allowance but also, it’s not available. Realistically, we’re in one of the biggest housing crises Ireland’s ever seen. There’s students that were sleeping in their cars in the car parks at the colleges. It’s truly awful... there’s less accommodation for students in every other course everywhere... It’s a very distressing issue.”

Learners living in direct provision shared various challenges they faced in relation to their housing:

“Because I’m living in sharing house, it’s noisy and busy all the time which doesn’t let me study at home.”

“We are three people living in one small bedroom and there is no opportunity to study at night and morning because of noisy environment.”

“No safe free calm space to work on my assignments.”

Learners proposed that housing allowances be increased to match the true cost of accommodation. Learners further suggested that their ETB could support learners to source accommodation that accepted the accommodation allowance in their locality:

“It’s [accommodation allowance] the very same money as 10 years ago. And now rent has risen so many times...It’s 600% more than before. It should be an increase of rent in our ring [Housing Assistance Payment catchment].”

“Even accommodation. 70 euro. You wouldn’t get much for 70 euro anyway for accommodation. Just a small amount. Basically, we’d double that.”

“If they [the ETB] could put it out there in the community that accommodation is required, to hold [it], and to have a list of accommodations that are willing to accept the allowance.”

## Physical and Mental Health/Wellbeing

When asked to describe their physical health and mental wellbeing, 24% (n = 185/770) of survey respondents reported same as poor to fair.

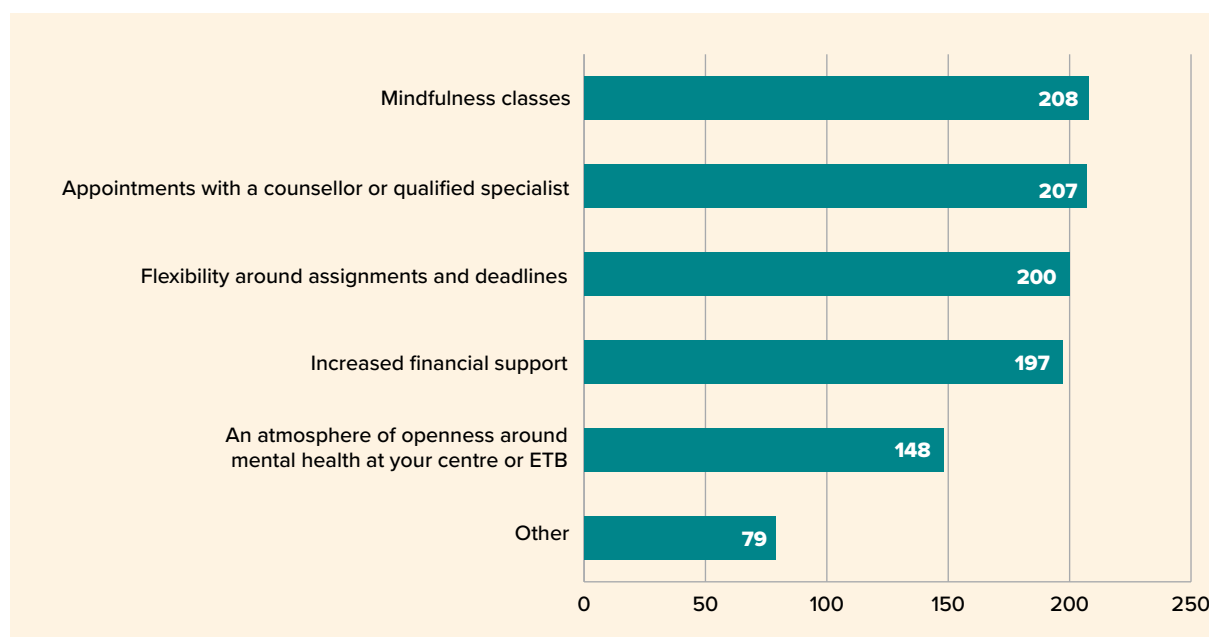
26% (n = 199/772) stated they had a long-term health issue, illness or disability.

52% (n = 401/771) stated that they experience stress, anxiety, or depression, while 14% (n = 112/771) said they would prefer not to answer that question.

When asked if stress, anxiety, or depression affected their ability to learn or study, 35% (n = 269/762) of learners reported that it did.

The survey invited learners to select from among several suggestions as to what might support them with their mental health in the context of their course. Respondents could choose more than one option. Four suggestions emerged as leading proposals with approximately equal support: mindfulness classes (208 responses), appointments with a counsellor (207 responses), flexibility around assignments and deadlines (200) and increased financial support (197 responses) (Figure 16).

**Figure 16**  
Responses to, “What would help to support your mental health? Please select all that apply”



Focus group participants spoke positively about their experience of mental health services and supports where these were available:

“I’d say the way [our programme] takes care of mental health is pretty good compared to school and stuff. Like they take it seriously.”

“We have a counsellor that comes in two times a week, I think that is really, really good. I think it helps with everyone’s mental health. We get a chance to leave the kind of classroom setting and just kind of speak our own minds in a private area and it’s good.”

Learners shared experiences related to areas for improvement around mental health service provision in FET and in the attitudes of some staff at the centres:

“Because sometimes people mightn’t be having a good day or sometimes people are... There is a lot of people, a lot of anxiety in... everywhere in our group, and I think they [staff] need to be just sometimes a little bit more sensitive and aware of that.”



“There’s free counselling advertised on the website, but it’s only limited to six sessions.”

“It’s [mental health] a very hush-hush topic. It’s not spoken about much and when it is it’s usually spoken about with a tinge of disgust.”

When asked what would improve their mental health and wellbeing, learners provided several suggestions, with particular focus on improved access to counsellors, an increase in events highlighting awareness regarding mental health, and improved attitudes towards mental health issues within their centres:

“We have a counsellor, but I think we need more hours because there’s so many of us, and she’s only there like three hours a week.”

“I’d be 50/50. I know we had our mental health day or something like that but I think there needs to be a bit more than a day and make people aware of all the stuff. We had somebody to come in and talk to us and it was really, really good.”

“[O]ffer people free counselling. Make it unlimited.”

“If there’s just one day somebody (counsellor or psychologist) is coming in. It would be a good idea to bring someone in because I think people would be very slow to come forward with any problems.”

“Definitely a more open approach to mental health issues in my centre.”

“Better training for staff to be mindful of what they say.”

## Financial Support: Challenges and Solutions

Learner Forum participants underlined the costs of FET participation and indicated that a lack of financial support impeded both current and prospective learners’ capabilities to take part in Further Education and Training. Focus group participants noted and appreciated instances where their FET course was affordable and/or financial assistance was in place to support their participation:

“I think it’s very good because it’s no cost. Because I know many people from Mexico, Chile. They have to pay expensive schools for learning English...For us, it’s freedom. It’s great.”

“I think keep them free. My courses are free. If you start charging people or if you’re looking to monetize these courses or whatever then you’re going to kill it because the goal should be education and not for profit.”

“They’ll [the course providers] buy certain amount of products for your hair to be done within the month... we get our hair washed for free, we can get our hair dyed for free, we can get it cut for free.”

Equally, focus group participants noted the difficulties in meeting the costs associated with adult education and the uncertainty surrounding eligibility criteria and age restrictions on financial grants:



“My friend, she registered on UX design, but she doesn’t have computer... [The ETB] said ‘We don’t have laptop and we can’t help’. So, she... just left. It’s for example, it’s a special program. And it’s difficult if you don’t have a computer.”

“I’m doing Business here at the college. I also just finished my internship. And I’m not sure if I’m going to be able to do it... I’m not sure. I’m not eligible to get the SUSI grant.”

“[I’m doing] the exact same thing [as him] ... and I’m getting paid more. You have to be finished up around [age] 21... Say if you just turn 21 in the summer, if you finish up in December, you’re fine. But it’s anywhere, it was 16 to 21, but they started a program this year where 15-year-olds could join if they wanted to leave school, but they don’t get paid or anything.”

**Learner Forum participants highlighted a shared need for improved financial supports and further shared the impact of perceived inconsistencies in social welfare rules and payments:**

“The social welfare support around returning to college as a mature student is quite difficult and you don’t get any other financial support.”

“The majority of us just came out of school [but] you have to have a record of social welfare to get the payment from the college.... [We’re] not able to get a job outside because we’re in full time courses and not able to get the payment because we have no background social welfare. [You have] to go out of school three months to get it.”

“Your social welfare is changed to the training benefit, so it’s paid through the college. [However] the social welfare don’t register that you’re still getting a payment. So for the double payments and the fuel allowance we’re not entitled to it but we’re still in full-time education. You’re kind of being punished for it. And you see everyone in the class going, ‘Double payment now’. It’s serious. The cost of living doesn’t stop for us. Whereas everybody else gets it but we don’t get it. It’s still hitting us the same way.”

“I don’t get paid at all. I have four kids, I go into college every day and I do not get paid because I was not on a social welfare payment. And if I had signed on for a social welfare payment, which people said to me, I would just sign on or whatever. But there’s a fine line there because you have to sign on to a social welfare payment to say you’re job seeking. You have to do it. I was told it was supposed to be 9 months or something beforehand. I mean it wasn’t realistic. I couldn’t job seek. I was at home. I had small children. You’d be under pressure because they’d be sending you to appointments... There should be something else done. There should be some sort of other way.”

**Learners recommended the provision of enhanced financial support to mitigate the costs of FET participation. The proposed forms of financial support vary according to learners’ circumstances and region.**

**We have already outlined two such proposals: the introduction of student cards for all FET learners to alleviate the cost of travel and the increase in the fuel allowance for eligible FET learners.**



Beyond transport, learners also recommended increased subsidies and support services for essentials such as meals and accommodation:

“[We need] an increased subsidy for rent, food, transport etc.”

“You should be able to get both [travel and accommodation] allowances.”

“Change the Housing Allowance to 100 euro [per week].”

Moreover, learners highlighted costs directly associated with their learning and would welcome increased support:

“I was a doctor in Ukraine and if I want to work in Ireland, I need to pass IELTS exams. There is an exam, and you [have] to pay maybe 500 euros... So, if they can help us about this.”

“Well, if they send me a [tool] list, I need it. They should be paying something towards it.”

Learners further proposed revisiting the eligibility criteria for established financial supports and payments:

“Up the under 18s pay, too big of a difference.”

“By not just helping students who have medical card or collecting SUSI or social welfare but also helping students who fend for themselves and support them too because in a way those who aren’t collecting anything deserve something.”

Finally, learners proposed the introduction of a student hardship fund:

“We were just saying there should be more of a student hardship fund or something in the college because there is that once a year, but it’s means tested.”

## Supporting Inclusion: Comparing Learner Experiences

The National FET Learner Forum engages a wide variety of demographic groups within Irish society. AONTAS identified specific groups of FET learners for further analysis (Table 5.1). Our selection of FET Learner Groups was informed by prior research and policy analysis, anticipated advocacy needs, as well as social justice and educational equality considerations. To varying degrees, the following cohorts consist of individuals that are disproportionately at risk of poverty or marginalisation in Irish society and that experience high levels of educational inequality. In keeping with the research limitations outlined in Chapter 1, it should be recalled that the sample size of each FET Learner group is small relative to the wider population of FET Learners. Further research is required to establish the generalisability of the following findings.

**Table 5.1 LET Learner Groups as a percentage of survey respondents**

<b>FET Learner Group</b>	<b>% of Survey Repondents</b>
<i>Programme Groups</i>	
Levels 1 – 4	43%
Back to Education Training Initiative (BTEI) learners	10%
Traineeship learners	6%
<i>Social Groups</i>	
Living with long-term health issues, illness, or disability	26%
Living in Direct Provision or IPAS accommodation	9%
Irish Travellers	2%

The analysis compares FET learner experiences across a limited range of variables. A first set of variables provide a sense of the social inequalities and challenges facing learners, and include those related to health and well-being, including accommodation and mental health considerations. A second set of variables relate to FET learners' course experience, including feeling respected by ETB staff and tutors as well as satisfaction with learner supports. The latter coincide with those survey items about which Learner Forum participants expressed lowest net satisfaction: (a) availability of public transport; (b) additional support (e.g. support with transport, childcare, meals); (c) mental health support; (d) disability support. The third set of variables concern the positive impact of Further Education and Training, with particular emphasis on increases in self-confidence and in well-being.

### **Social Inequalities and Barriers to Learning**

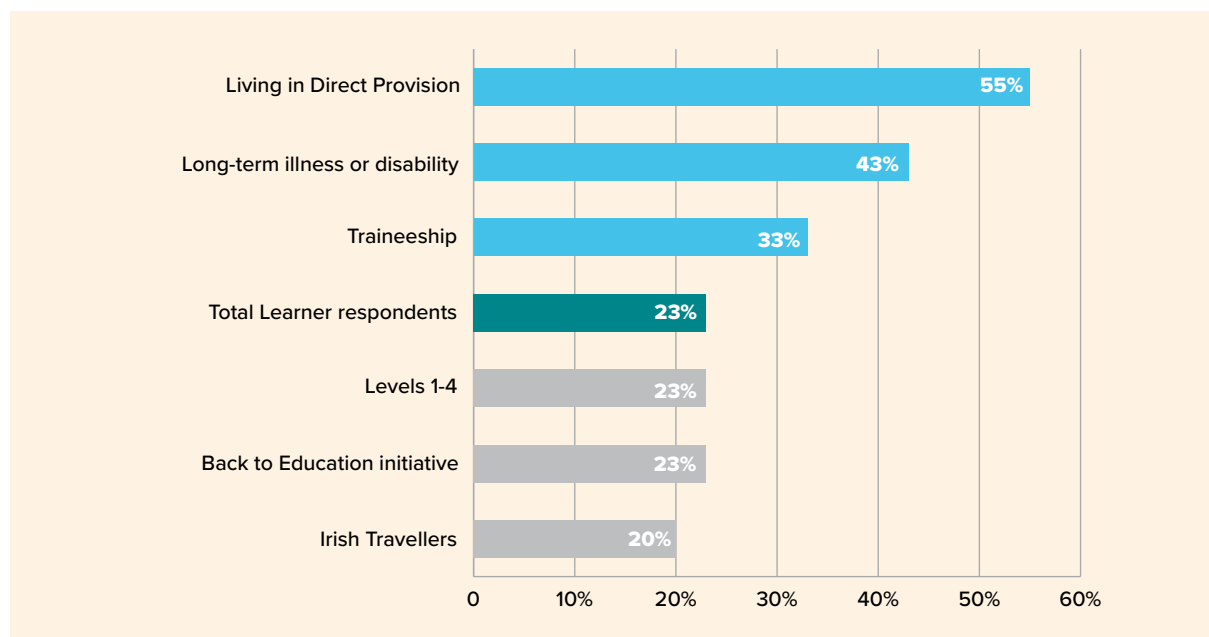
FET Learner Forum participants share differential access to resources, which enables learners to avail of Further Education and Training in relatively more or less successful ways. Significantly, FET learners enjoy different levels of prior educational attainment. 47% (n = 199/422) of learners undertaking Levels 1-4 had previously attained a Junior Certificate or lower qualification before starting their course. This compares with 26% (n = 268/1016) of the total survey respondent group. Moreover, differences in FET learners' accommodation, health, and well-being, produce significant and predictable impacts on learners' capabilities to pursue learning and achieve their full potential.

### **Health and Well-Being**

Learners living in Direct Provision or IPAS accommodation, learners with long-term health issues, illness, or disability, and Traineeship learners report experiencing higher than average levels of poor mental and physical health. Notably, 55% of learners living in Direct Provision or IPAS accommodation reported poor to fair health compared to 23% of all Learner Forum participants (**Figure 17**).

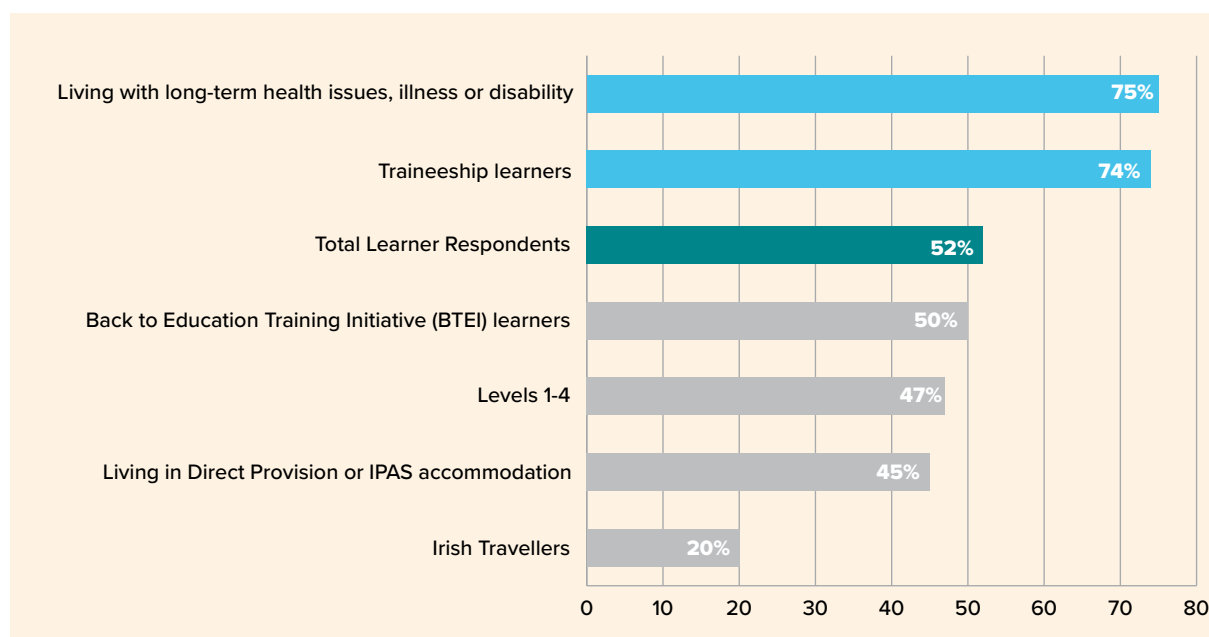


**Figure 17**  
Self-reported 'poor' to 'fair' mental and physical health ratings by select FET Learner groups



75% (n = 147/195) of survey respondents with a long-term illness or disability and 74% (n = 31/42) of Traineeship learners reported experiencing stress, anxiety, or depression. This compares with 52% (n = 401/771) of the total survey respondent group (**Figure 18**).

**Figure 18**  
Reported experience of stress, anxiety or depression by select FET Learner group



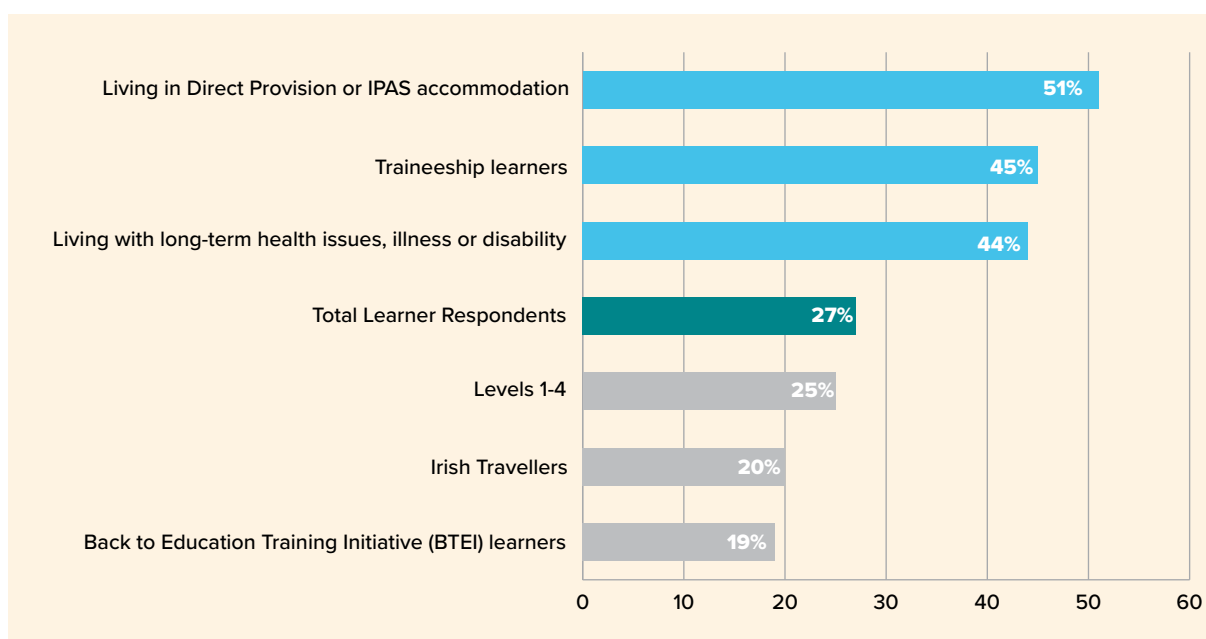
When asked does stress, anxiety or depression affect their ability to learn or study, 43% of Traineeship learners (n = 18/42) reported that it did. This compares with 27% (n = 20/74) of the total survey respondent group.

## Accommodation

Learners living in Direct Provision or IPAS accommodation, learners with long-term health issues, illness, or disability, and Traineeship learners report experiencing higher than average levels of stress because of their accommodation situation. 51% (n = 33/65) of those living in Direct Provision, 44% (n = 86/194) of those with a disability, and 42% (n = 19/42) of Traineeship learners said that their accommodation situation causes them stress, anxiety, or depression. This compares with 27% (n = 202/757) in the overall group (**Figure 19**).

**Figure 19**

*Reported experience of stress because of accommodation by select FET Learner group*



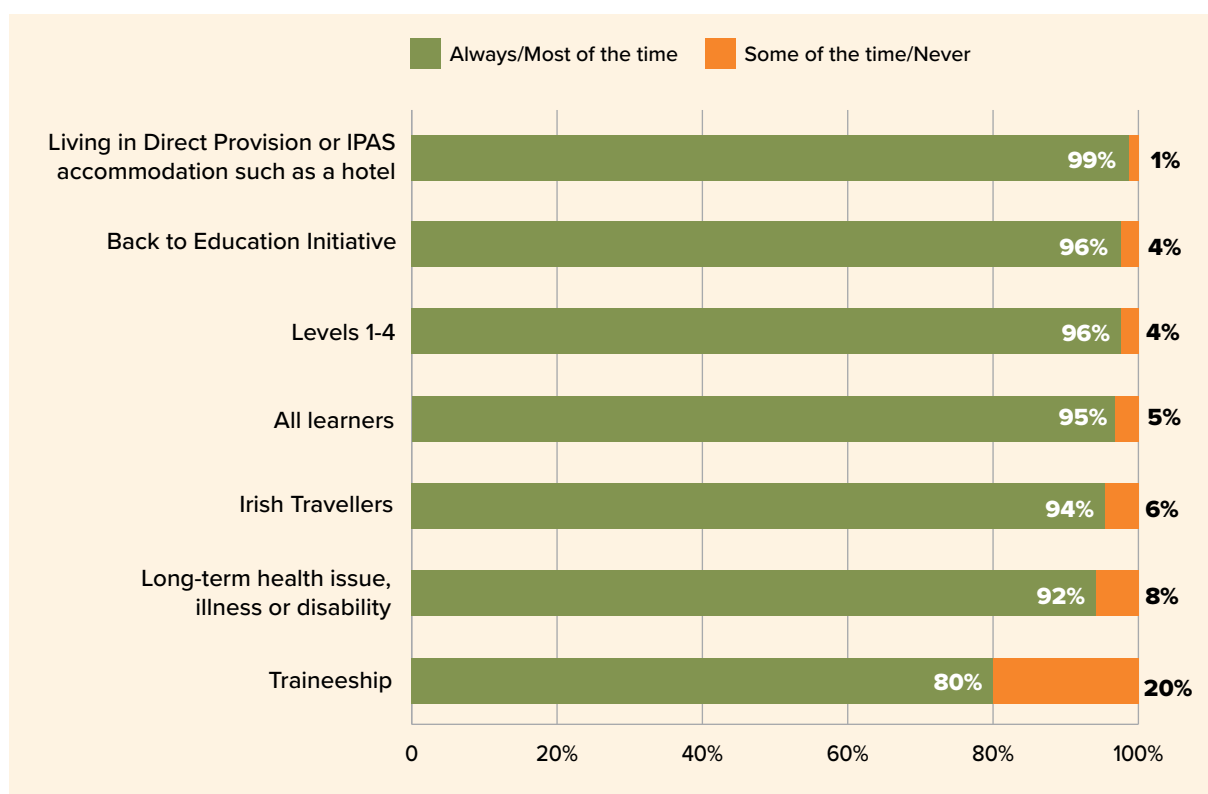
Similarly, if living in rented accommodation, 50% (n = 18/36) of Traineeship learners and 34% (n = 500/157) of those with a disability struggle to pay their rent. This compares with 28% (n = 156/568) of the total survey respondent group.

49% (n = 32/65) of those living in Direct Provision, 40% (n = 17/42) of Traineeship learners, and 30% (n = 58/194) of those with a disability stated that their living situation affects their ability to learn. This compares with 24% (n = 184/757) of the total survey respondent group.

## Respect and Learner Supports

Most respondents across all groups reported that they felt treated with respect by ETB staff and tutors always or most of the time. Notably, when asked if they felt that ETB staff and tutors treated them with respect, only 80% (n = 36/45) of Traineeship learners stated that they felt this way 'always' or 'most of the time'. This compares with 95% (n = 778 / 822) of the total survey respondent group (**Figure 20**).

**Figure 20**  
**Select FET Learner group responses to the question, “Do you feel that staff and tutors in your centre or ETB treat you with respect?”**



The selected FET Learner groups reported a mixed range of satisfaction with critical learner supports concerning: (a) availability of public transport; (b) additional support (e.g. support with transport, childcare, meals); (c) mental health support; (d) disability support (**Table 5.2**).



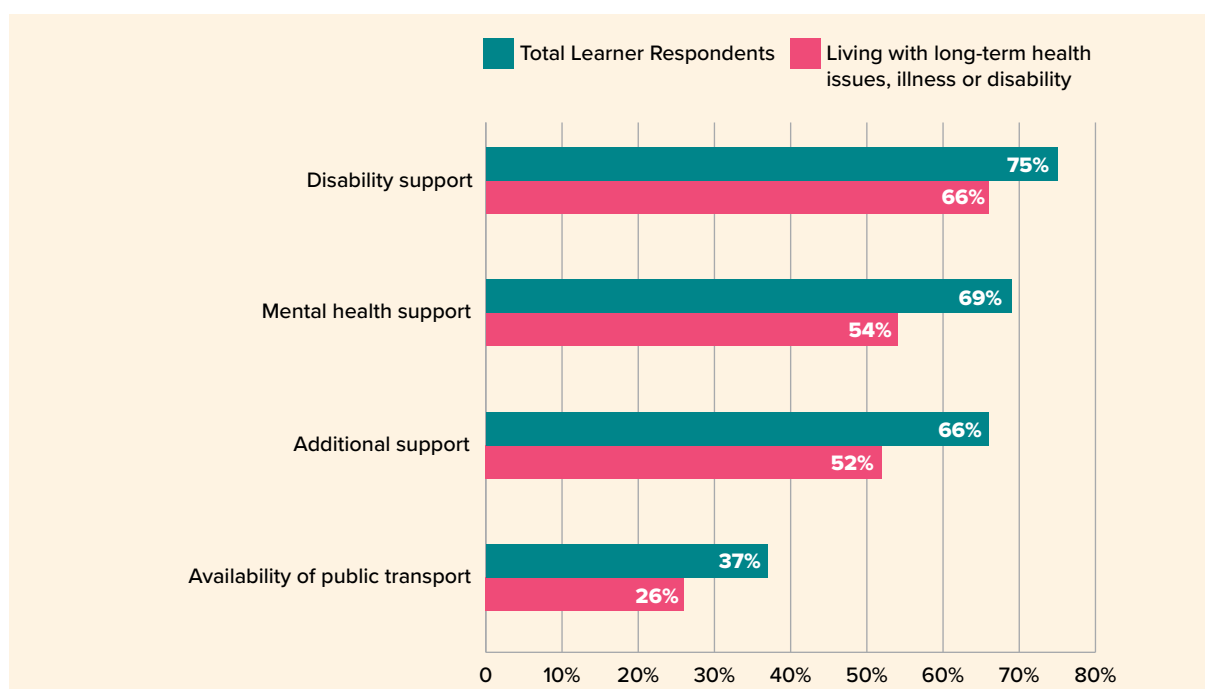
**Table 5.2 Net satisfaction with learner supports by FET Learner group. Scores marked with an \* indicate a lower net satisfaction score than that of the total learner group**

	% Net satisfaction			
	Availability of public transport	Additional support	Mental health support	Disability support
<i>FET Learner Group</i>				
Levels 1 – 4	49	73	76	78
Back to Education Training Initiative (BTEI) Learners	40	<b>65*</b>	75	81
Traineeship learners	<b>28*</b>	70	68	76
Living with long-term health issues, illness or disability	<b>26*</b>	<b>52*</b>	<b>54*</b>	<b>66*</b>
Living in Direct Provision or IPAS accommodation	<b>5*</b>	<b>64*</b>	72	88
Irish Travellers	77	71	85	71
<b>All Learners</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>75</b>

The most striking finding from this analysis is that FET Learners living with long-term health issues, illness or disability report a lower net satisfaction than that of their peer group across all four of the learner support survey items (**Figure 21**).

**Figure 21**

*Comparison of net satisfaction with learner supports between learners living with long-term health issues, illness or disability and total learner respondents*



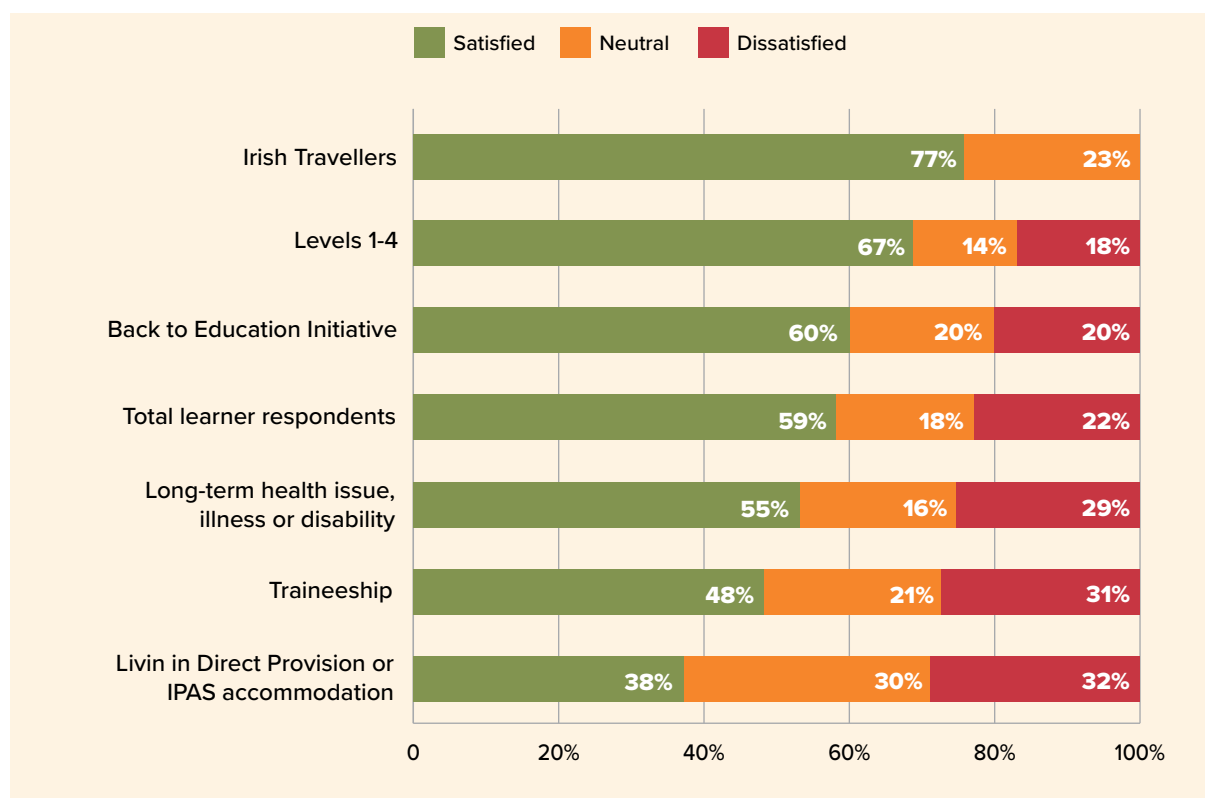


There are strong grounds for believing that the current level of FET learner support is not meeting this group's needs. FET Learners living with long-term health issues, illness or disability report a lower net satisfaction with mental health support (54%). This compares with 69% net satisfaction expressed by the total survey respondent group. Moreover, FET Learners living with long-term health issues, illness or disability report a lower net satisfaction with disability support (66%). This compares with 75% net satisfaction expressed by the total survey respondent group.

The availability of public transport features as the primary area of dissatisfaction raised by FET learners in the National FET Learner Forum 2023/2024. Among the groups selected for analysis, FET Learners living in Direct Provision or IPAS accommodation report just 5% net satisfaction with availability of public transport. This compares with 37% net satisfaction expressed by their peers. This denotes the widest divergence in satisfaction with learner support experience. Learners living with long-term illness or disability (26%) and Traineeship learners (28%) also report lower net satisfaction with availability of public transport than their wider peer group (**Figure 22**).

**Figure 22**

*Satisfaction with availability of public transport reported by select FET learners*

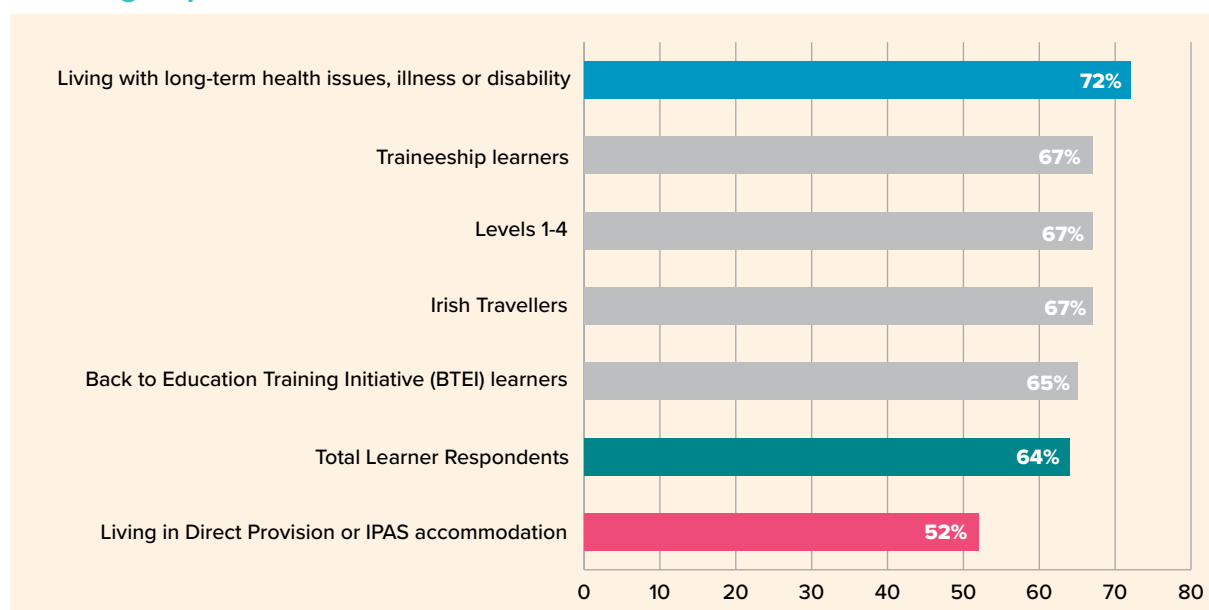


### Positive Impact of FET

Learner Forum participants identified a variety of positive impacts associated with their Further Education and Training.

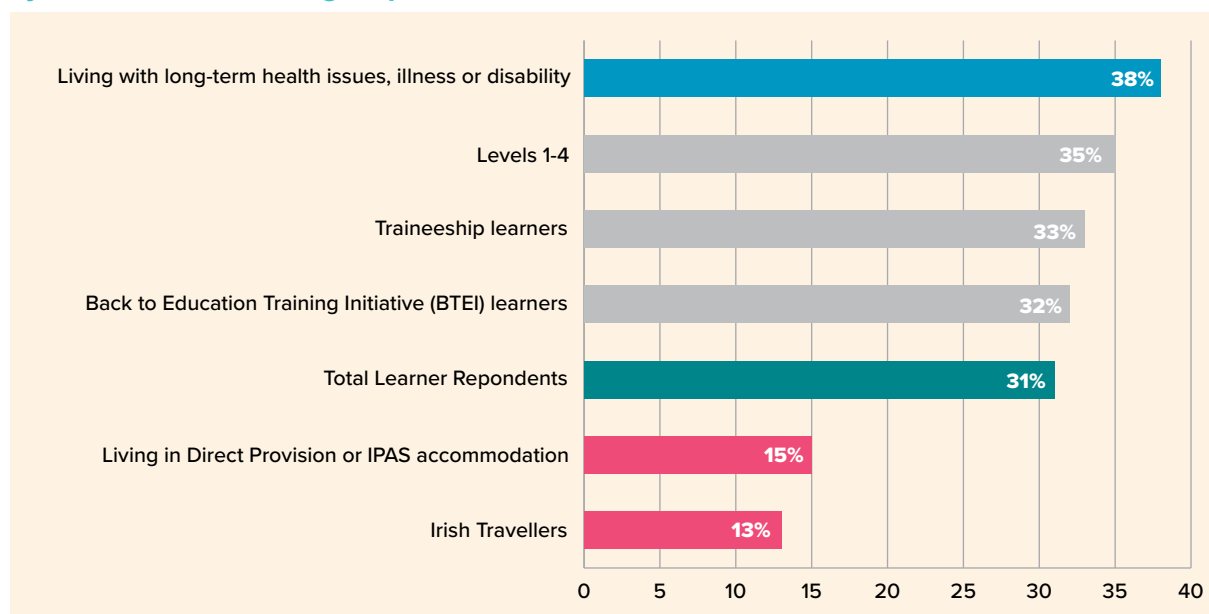
64% (n = 539/840) of all survey respondents reported an increase in self-confidence. In five of the six groups selected for analysis, a higher percentage of respondents reported experiencing this positive impact. This reported impact is notably greater among learners living with long-term health issues, illness, or disability (**Figure 23**).

**Figure 23**  
Increase in confidence as a result of taking their course reported by select FET learner groups



31% (n = 539/840) of all survey respondents reported an increase in well-being and better health. In four of the six groups selected for analysis, a higher percentage of respondents reported experiencing this positive impact. Again, this reported impact is notably greater among learners living with long-term health issues, illness, or disability (**Figure 24**).

**Figure 24**  
Increase in well-being and better health as a result of taking their course reported by select FET learner groups



However, the positive impacts of Further Education and Training are not equally experienced. Learners living in Direct Provision or IPAS accommodation report experiencing these increases in self-confidence or well-being and health in proportionately lower than average numbers. Moreover, they report the lowest increases in self-confidence. Irish Travellers report the lowest increases in well-being and better health.



## 6. What FET Learners Say

This chapter presents a summary of Learner Forum participants' views on and satisfaction with their Further Education and Training. It outlines what learners say is working well and what they say needs improvement. The final section presents what learners say they would like to see happen next.

### Learner Satisfaction

Learner Forum participants expressed differing levels of overall or net satisfaction with diverse aspects of their experience of Further Education and Training (Table 6.1). In each instance, the Net Learner Satisfaction percentage results from a calculation whereby the percentage of survey respondents selecting “dissatisfied” is subtracted from the percentage of respondents indicating “satisfied”.

**Table 6.1 Net Learner satisfaction scores**

Survey Item	Net Learner Satisfaction
Opportunity to take part in class	91%
Interview process before course	91%
Guidance and advice available when first contacting the ETB/ centre	90%
Standard of teaching	88%
Website	87%
Tutor feedback	86%
Learning support (e.g. literacy, numeracy, digital skills)	86%
Laptop or device loan	85%
Mentoring or key worker support	85%
Guidance Service	83%
Access to technology at your centre	82%
Disability Support	75%
Mental Health Support	69%
Additional support (e.g. support with transport, childcare, meals)	69%
Availability of public transport	37%



## What Learners say is working well

Learner Forum participants highlighted several areas to be working well in their experience of FET.

### Impact of FET

Learners described a range of benefits they experienced through taking part in their courses, including increased **confidence**, better **wellbeing and mental health**, and more **social connections**. Learners also cited **improved academic and personal development** and the benefits of having a routine as positives of their courses.

The positive impact of FET also extended to learners' families and communities, as they **challenged stereotypes** about age and learning and developed **new digital skills** which fostered greater connections with others.

Learners shared how their course helped them to **meet new people and to make friends**. Social gatherings and events with other learners also helped to create a space conducive to learner wellbeing.

### Welcome, Belonging, and Inclusion

Focus group participants highlighted the specific role of FET in promoting **inclusion** in Irish society and in creating an atmosphere of welcome and belonging in adult learning.

Learners stated how they felt **mutual respect with tutors** and described the atmosphere in their course as fun, in contrast to earlier negative experiences with education. Some learners stated how, for example, they felt **trusted** by the staff in FET and described the atmosphere in their course as being akin to a supportive family.

Learners shared how the **diversity** of the student body, in terms of age and ability, helped them to feel welcomed and at ease in their environment. Learners with a migrant background appreciated how their tutors introduced cultural knowledge exchange into their lessons, while others commended the social events outside of class hours which supported their integration into the local community.

### Communications

Forum participants recorded a high level of net satisfaction with both the interview process before their course started and the **guidance and advice** available when first contacting their ETB or centre. Interestingly, in subsequent focus group discussions, learners did not discuss these experiences of first contact with their local FET provider in more depth. It seems plausible, however, that ETBs' and FET centres' initial outreach and communications to onboard FET learners contributed to learners' experiencing that atmosphere of welcome, belonging, and inclusion outlined above.

### Teaching and Learning

Forum participants described how they benefit considerably from their tutors' skills, kindness, high standard of teaching, commitment, and openness. Learners felt that they were **supported by their tutors**, could learn at their own pace and, where needed, receive individualised learning support.

Learners described an atmosphere of **openness and patience** around asking questions in their classrooms. Learners further appreciated in-class discussion opportunities facilitated by tutors. Learner Forum participants shared how they benefitted from the diverse teaching methods employed by tutors. Learners also appreciated the encouragement and opportunities their tutors gave them to participate in class, instilling confidence and a sense of belief in their abilities.

Migrant learners shared how their tutors supported a welcoming atmosphere in FET by demonstrating empathy with their current life situations and past challenges in their countries of origin. Migrant learners further highlighted the patience shown by some tutors to support their learning, adjusting their pace to ensure everyone in the class could participate equally and meaningfully.

## What Learners say needs improvement

In their experience of FET, Learner Forum participants highlighted several areas as needing improvement.

### Buildings and Facilities

Learner Forum participants across a range of different levels and courses spoke of the difficulties they faced **accessing transport** to go to and from their centres. These difficulties included the cost, unreliability, and scarcity of local transport. Learners highlighted a lack of financial support for public transport, particularly in the context of recent cost of living increases. Learners noted the absence of student card provision to offset public transport costs. Private car users also highlighted how there were insufficient car parking spaces, and a lack of subsidised parking close to their centres.

Learners highlighted an unmet need for **canteen services** in their centres, with some centres lacking access to adequate dining spaces during lunch time and other centres lacking adequate canteen equipment such as microwaves and kettles.

Learners from a range of courses described the difficulties they faced **accessing digital skills and devices**. For some learners, a lack of up-to-date software and hardware is impeding their learning while other learners mentioned a lack of reliable WiFi which necessitated the use of their own cellular data to stay connected to the internet.

### Course Provision

Learner Forum participants expressed an unmet need for a variety of FET courses across different areas and levels. They further highlighted the **negative impact a lack of class hours** for certain courses on their learning. This was particularly relevant for ESOL learners and those who are migrants transitioning into a new career. Some learners felt that they did not have sufficient contact hours in their current courses. For ESOL learners, one or two hours of class time per week was limiting their development of crucial English language skills.

## Scheduling

Learner Forum participants shared challenges they faced in relation to course scheduling, such as **long days and a lack of sufficient break times** during class. Moreover, when course times do not match with bus times, some learners stated that they were unable to progress with their education. Finally, learners with child rearing responsibilities and those who were working full-time shared challenges relating to the lack of morning and evening course provision.

## Teaching and Learning

Learner Forum participants spoke about difficulties in **sourcing work placement**, and a lack of workplace progression. Migrant learners particularly were affected by this as a lack of structured work placement procurement from their ETB meant that learners relied on local connections to ensure placement, which migrant learners often did not have. Learners also highlighted **a lack of English courses** which are specific to the industries they hope to work in after they complete their courses.

Some learners reported experiencing **disrespect** from ETB tutors. Learners highlighted a need to establish mutual respect among all participants in the learning environment and proposed the co-creation of charters to be applied equally to tutors and learners.

## Wraparound Support

Learner Forum participants highlighted a lack of financial support for **public transport**, particularly in the context of recent inflation. They highlighted the absence of student card provision to offset public transport costs. Private car users also highlighted how the current fuel allowance did not meet the real cost of petrol.

Learners highlighted the costs of FET participation, including examination fees where required, **accommodation, meals, travel, and childcare**. Learners highlighted the limited financial support available and further stated that financial challenges associated with their course impacted significantly on their stress levels.

Learners highlighted a need for more advertisement of and outreach for **mental health** supports currently available through their ETB. Learners underlined the importance of mental health support and further highlighted a lack of awareness of same. Learners highlighted a need for more advertisement of and outreach for mental health supports currently available through their ETB. Learners underlined the importance of mental health support and further highlighted a lack of awareness of same. 35% (n = 269/762) of survey respondents reported that stress, anxiety, or depression affected their ability to learn or study.

## Learner Voice

Learner Forum participants highlighted an **unmet need** to exercise their voice on their Further Education and Training through an effective and meaningful feedback process. Where Learner Voice structures or class representatives are in place, learners have shared positive feedback. However, learners highlighted instances where they felt that existing channels for expressing their feedback were insufficient, or that their feedback was not adequately considered and/or acted upon.

## What Learners say they would like to see happen next

Learner Forum participants reflected on how their FET experience could be improved and what they would like to see happen next (Table 6.2). Their primary suggestions are as follows:

**Table 6.2 Summary of what learners say they would like to see happen next**

Theme	What learners say
IMPACT OF FET	<p><b>Personal Development/Connection with Others</b> Host social events outside of scheduled course hours to enhance opportunities to connect with other learners. This might take the form of introducing coffee breaks into class schedules or offering extra-curricular activities.</p>
WELCOME, BELONGING and INCLUSION	<p><b>Respect.</b> Continue to cultivate an atmosphere of respect and inclusion for and among learners. Social inclusion may involve undertaking additional steps to recognise and include specific learner cohorts – notably those based on gender, race, disability, or Youthreach status.</p>
BUILDINGS AND FACILITIES	<p><b>Transport</b> Enhance learner capacity to avail of public transport to access their centre. This may involve provision of a local shuttle bus service or aligning class schedules with local bus service times.</p> <p><b>Canteen</b> Learners seek a space for lunch with their peers that provides healthy food. Enhance access to affordable canteen facilities and/or self-catering spaces with adequate kitchen equipment for learners to utilise.</p> <p><b>Digital Transition</b> Introduce laptop loan schemes where unavailable. Upgrade IT hardware and software. Improve WiFi / internet access.</p> <p><b>Accessible and Inclusive Buildings</b> Ensure that any FET learner who needs to, including those with disabilities, mobility issues, or other physical needs, can access their centre, on par with all other FET learners. Introduce sensory rooms to facilitate neurodiverse learners.</p> <p>Equipment and Facilities. Upgrade outdated laboratory facilities and course equipment where necessary.</p>



Theme	What learners say
COMMUNICATIONS	Enhance advertisement of FET courses, highlighting wider benefits of adult learning. Enhance internal communication of all supports and services available to FET learners.
COURSE PROVISION	<p><b>Quantity</b> Increase the quantity of course options and the number of class hours offered. Increase the quantity of courses and class hours for ESOL provision. Diversify course schedules to include more morning and evening classes. The latter is particularly important to FET learners with childcare needs.</p> <p><b>Staffing</b> Increase teaching staff numbers to meet course demand. Take steps to minimise the impact of staff turnover on course provision.</p> <p><b>Employment and Professional Development</b> Ensure clear progression pathway to employment-ready qualification on relevant courses. Develop partnerships between ETBs and local public/private sector employers to support work experience opportunities and future employment pathways. Drawing on their understanding of Sweden's model, learners proposed that employers contribute to the cost of their vocational education and training.</p>
TEACHING AND LEARNING	<p><b>Tutors</b> Recognise and celebrate the exceptionally positive feedback concerning tutors' professionalism, teaching standards, and commitment to learner wellbeing, participation, and support.</p> <p><b>Assessment and Feedback</b> Continue to use diverse assessment methods. Offer longer timeframes for assignment completion. Simplify language used in assessments.</p> <p><b>Work Experience and Work-Based Learning</b> Enhance the guidance and support available to FET learners seeking to secure work experience placements. Offer flexibility on timeframes for work placement completion where learners face extenuating circumstances.</p>

Theme	What learners say
	The above is particularly important for apprenticeship learners, learners encountering regulatory barriers to undertaking placements in healthcare settings, and migrant learners unfamiliar with the local labour market.
WRAPAROUND SUPPORT/ CONSISTENT LEARNER SUPPORT	<p><b>Finance</b> Secure enhanced financial supports to mitigate the costs of FET participation. Increase allowances. Introduce student cards for all FET learners to alleviate the cost of travel. Implement a student hardship fund.</p> <p><b>Mental Health</b> Introduce and/or expand existing counselling services, including offering more sessions.</p> <p><b>Guidance</b> Ensure guidance services are enhanced and resourced to facilitate the availability of guidance counsellors to learners when needed. Learners would welcome enhanced attention to career planning during courses and clear progression pathways upon course completion.</p>
PATHWAYS	ETBs and HEIs to enhance communications to clarify pathways and to support transitions from Further Education to Higher Education.

## Good Practice in FET: Learner Perspectives

The National FET Learner Forum 2023-2024 considered a wide range of areas in participants' experience of Further Education and Training that they believed to be working well. The present section showcases these learner-highlighted examples of good practice. The purpose of this section is to show how FET learners recognise and acknowledge what is working well. Sharing these learner-centred insights into good practice may further enable shared learning and development across the FET sector. The following examples of good practice and supporting learner comments have been selected based on the Net Satisfaction Table and supported by corresponding analysis of focus group discussions and survey comments. All the Education and Training Boards that participated in the Forum are included.

### Teaching and Learning

Learner Forum participants at **Donegal Education and Training Board** and **Mayo, Sligo, and Leitrim Education and Training Board** highly rated their satisfaction with teaching and learning at their centres. Learners proposed that good practice in teaching and learning took the form of tutors' mutual respect for learners as well as their supportive approach to explanation, assessment and feedback:

“We have a good tutor and I listen to her, she’s explaining everything and she’s trying to make sure that everybody can understand what she’s trying to approach to the students to learn and she gives us a time to explain as well and we can express our feelings for what we think about, we learn about what we learned about what she’s explaining to us and she gives us a time to say if we don’t understand.”

“She [the tutor] is very kind [when] giving feedback, she’s very nice at giving the feedback in a positive way, and then she can give you extra bits or tell you how to fix it, which is great and very helpful.”

“With this course you don’t really get assignments to bring home – it’s all done in the classroom. I think that’s really great because then you have the constant support of your teacher if you need help with something or if you can’t answer a question you can ask about it. Whereas if you were bringing it home and you were stuck on something, there’s no one to ask.”

### Digital Transition

Learners at **Donegal Education and Training Board** and **City of Dublin Education and Training Board** highly rated access to technology as well as laptop/device loan schemes at their centres. Learner Forum participants highlighted how good practice in digital transition took the form of accessible laptop and device loan schemes, as well as corresponding digital skills support which helped to foster learners’ independence:

“I needed a laptop. [The ETB] helps me out with the laptop. They’ve been very kind.”

“She provide[s] us [with a] laptop if you don’t have one. So she provided us and also she created a Gmail account for ones who don’t have one and she also like showed where is everything located and if you have some problem you could easily just write to her and she will explain you once again. There was no problem.”

“But to learn to put things on the phone that you wouldn’t have seen us doing before. Because every time the phone gets updated thinking, ‘That’s double Dutch to me.’ And you’re afraid to touch anything in case it’s something that you... How to even download an app. We even know now how to use the Play store to download an app. WhatsApp - we done that.”

“The tutor...we were doing Zooming over COVID that time. It actually isn’t [hard].”

### Communications

Learners at **Kerry Education and Training Board** and **Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board** highly rated their satisfaction with communications at their centres. Forum participants highlighted how good practice in communications took the form of an accessible adult guidance service, successful course promotion on social media, and hosting open days at their centre. Good communications practice further took the form of advertising additional learner support services:





“We have online meetings with them [guidance counsellors] once every couple of weeks or once a week and they help you like apply for courses and help you with finances and stuff.”

“We have an amazing [guidance] counsellor. I didn’t think I needed to go see a counsellor about anything but I went and chatted to her just because they said ‘come and see’ and ... she’s been so helpful giving ideas and options.”

“It’s that open week for [the] ETB this week. So, they’re promoting lots of stuff. It’s all over Facebook.”

“They give you a form as well to make you aware of the services before you start the year... Just kind of with whatever they had available, you know, supports. Yeah... anything from disability, like facilities, mental health, anything to do with learning.”

### Mental Health Support

For Learner Forum participants from **Tipperary Education and Training Board**, good practice in mental health support combined provision of accessible mental health counselling service with mindfulness classes:

“We have a counsellor that comes in two times a week. I think that is really, really good. I think it helps with everyone’s mental health. We get a chance to leave the kind of classroom setting and just kind of speak our own minds in a private area and it’s good.”

“We did mindfulness... it’s fantastic... you can go in groups of four or two. It’s great for relaxation... Living in the moment.”

### Adult Guidance

Learner Forum participants at **Louth and Meath Education and Training Board** highlighted how good practice in adult guidance support consisted of a well-resourced and accessible adult guidance service. This played a key role in offering learners a clear understanding of their progression options:

“Our college is very good. The whole meeting is twice a week, so say for mature students who aren’t sure about going on to the online CAO. Meeting is twice a week for like CAO or even just career guidance or for counsellors that do meetings. We have a good career guidance as well.”

### Learner Voice

Learner Forum participants from **Cork Education and Training Board** and **Tipperary Education and Training Board** highlighted how good practice in Learner Voice took the form of creating Student or Learner Voice Councils and appointing class representatives. Learners further highlighted the enabling role of supportive ETB staff and tutors:

“We have like learner reps so if you’re having a problem with something or other in class or with learning, the learner reps are there. You can come to them. They’ll support you in going to the tutors to talk about it. I know when I first joined, I was too nervous to bring up some problems and it helped to have that opportunity to be able to have it brought up with someone else there.”

“They took it [feedback] straight on board... We’d tell our teacher and then she’d go to the manager of the community centre where we were and he took it all on board.”

“If we’ve ever raised issues in the campus, they take it on board and then... certain issues are followed up.”

“The one thing that I felt I really noticed after being out of education for a long time was how supportive the staff was.”



## 7. Conclusion

Learner Voices Across Ireland presents the findings of the National FET Learner Forum held across 9 regional forum events between November 2023 and April 2024. Below are the most significant findings from this report.

### Adult Learning and Social Inequality

#### What is Holding FET Learners Back?

**“It’s just too difficult to put yourself there.”**

National FET Learner Forum participant.

The National FET Learner Forum identified the following as particularly significant constraints on adult learners seeking to access, engage, and succeed in Further Education and Training:

- transport to and from FET centres and work sites (including public transport and allowances)
- constraints on additional supports (including finance, childcare, meals, and accommodation)
- constraints on disability supports
- constraints on mental health supports

The Forum’s selection of these areas reflects the embedded nature of structural inequalities in Irish society as well as more recent challenges arising from increases in the cost of living. The report sheds light on FET learners’ lived experience of these inequalities and their impact on the learning journey. In seeking to understand these inequalities and their impact, the report presents the voices of learners in specific groups marginalised by these same inequalities, including socio-economically disadvantaged learners, learners with disabilities, learners experiencing mental health needs, International Protection Applicants in Direct Provision, and Irish Travellers.

The report illustrates that among survey respondents:

- 52% reported experiencing stress, anxiety, or depression. This figure significantly increases for survey respondents with a disability (75%) and Traineeship learners (74%).
- 24% stated their current accommodation or living situation affects their ability to learn or study. This figure significantly increases for survey respondents living in Direct Provision (49%), Traineeship learners (40%), and those with a disability (30%).
- 41% reported not receiving any information from their centre about additional supports such as support with transport, meals, childcare, money, or costs.



The current 2020-2024 FET Strategy highlights inclusion and accessibility as fundamental to a successful system of Further Education and Training, enabling FET to achieve its goals of lifelong learning, social justice, active citizenship, and economic prosperity (SOLAS, 2020, 36). The present report indicates that some FET centre buildings require enhanced access for learners with disabilities. This finding resonates with the FET Strategy's recognition of building modernisation as a critical priority (SOLAS, 2020, 23). As the National FET Learner Forum demonstrates, design initiatives to support physical accessibility are called for and should be central to all future planning.

The 2020-2024 FET Strategy highlights the increased incidence of mental health distress among FET learners, particularly those at levels 1-3, and further notes the imperative to offer robust and consistent support mechanisms (SOLAS, 2020, 47). The National FET Learner Forum's requests for expanded mental health supports further align with ETBI's Learner Support Framework which identifies "counselling, wellbeing and mental health support" among proposed 'Direct Supports' (ETBI, 2024, 13) and its earlier proposal to offer counselling internally in FET centres where possible (ETBI, 2023).

#### AONTAS recommend:

- Increases in provision for financial support to FET learners.
- Increases in provision for additional supports, including support with transport.
- Increases in provision for mental health supports.
- Reviewing FET centres' buildings to support physical accessibility for all learners.
- Enhancing provision to meet the support needs of specific cohorts of learners identified in this report, including learners living with long-term illness or disability, learners living in Direct Provision or IPAS accommodation, and Traineeship learners.

#### Supporting FET Learners and Enabling Transformative Learning

**"If you have the right interaction with your tutors, it will get you more interested in the course. You'll see everything get better."**

National FET Learner Forum participant.

The National FET Learner Forum identified the following areas as working particularly well to enable adult learners access, engage, and succeed in Further Education and Training:

- interview process before course.
- opportunities to take part in class.
- guidance and advice available when first contacting the ETB or centre.
- standard of teaching.

The Forum's selection of these areas reflects learners' recognition of the positive contribution of Education and Training Boards, staff, and tutors, in both creating an atmosphere of welcome, belonging and inclusion in Further Education and Training and fostering a participatory learning environment with high teaching standards. Significantly, in contrast to the availability of wider public transport, finances, and support services, these areas are more firmly within Education and Training Boards' locus of responsibility and under their control.

The Report demonstrates the important role of tutors in learners' experience of Further Education and Training. Tutors' facilitation of learner participation, their standards of teaching, and their practices of feedback all contributed to learners feeling welcomed, respected, and supported in their learning. Learners with prior negative experiences of mainstream education, including early school-leavers, remarked on the comparatively more respectful relationship between tutors and learners that is characteristic of FET. Forum participants benefitted from and welcomed smaller class sizes and more individualised attention from tutors, as well as the opportunity to take part in class by discussing concepts and opinions. The Forum clearly illustrates that tutors are a highly valued component of a positive FET experience.

The 2020-2024 FET Strategy highlights that the English language support given to migrant learners in the FET system "is critical to helping migrants to integrate within communities and to secure and sustain employment" (SOLAS, 2020, 47). ESOL was the second most represented programme in the National FET Learner Forum 2023-24. The present report highlights FET's vital role in the provision of ESOL courses to migrants, specifically Ukrainian refugees (See also LCETB, 2022). However, the report also shows that ESOL learners seek a greater number of courses and class hours.

The 2020-2024 FET Strategy underlines the importance of clear employment or progression outcomes for vocationally focussed programmes, supported by the "development of consistent and structured work placements". The present report makes clear FET learner calls for partnerships between ETBs and employers to support work experience opportunities and future employment pathways. The report also illustrates that some groups of FET learners, notably migrant learners, are disproportionately impacted when access to work experience placements and future employment rests on 'word of mouth' and local connections more than structured opportunities.

#### AONTAS recommend:

- Increases in course provision in areas of high learner demand (including ESOL classes).
- Lowering teacher-student ratios to enhance learner participation and one-to-one tutor support.
- Enhancing structured relationships between ETBs and employers to support FET learners' work experience placements and subsequent employment opportunities.
- Facilitating the role of continuous assessment and flexibility around assignment deadlines in supporting marginalised learners.

## The Positive Impact of FET

**“I have to say this is the best thing I ever did.  
I’ve met lovely people... and I have a purpose.”**  
National FET Learner Forum participant.

The National FET Learner Forum underlines the very significant contribution of Further Education and Training makes to Irish society. The present report reflects the diversity of 21st century Irish society, shedding light on the views of a wide range of learners from different nationalities, age groups, and programmes. The report further illustrates how Further Education and Training is responsive to a diverse range of motivations, encompassing the pursuit of learning and academic development; enhancing employability and skills development; as well as personal development and social participation.

- 64% of survey respondents reported an increase in self-confidence as one of the primary benefits of undertaking Further Education and Training.
- 58% reported a more positive outlook on the future.

The recommendations here centre on enhancing FET’s positive impact by amplifying the peer-to-peer opportunities for social interaction and socialisation. Learners propose the provision of social spaces and canteen facilities as well as social and community-building events. Moreover, enhanced buildings and facilities may support learners in need of food and shelter while waiting on public transport, learners returning to education who may feel isolated, or migrant learners who are new to the local community. Social and community-building events, notably those promoting cultural exchanges between learners, could provide opportunities for positive connection between all learners. Recent events in 2023-24, notably the Dublin and Belfast riots, anti-migrant protests, and the spread of online disinformation, illustrate the importance of adult education and community-building for social cohesion and democratic life.

### AONTAS recommend:

- Enhancing the provision of social spaces and canteen facilities in FET centres.
- Increased provision of social and community-building events.

## Enhancing Learner Voice

**“Our views were taken into account.  
People and learners were made to feel valued.”**  
National FET Learner Forum participant.

### The National FET Learner Forum

The National FET Learner Forum is a unique tool for communication and democratic deliberation in Irish education. This report indicates the significant contribution that Learner Voice makes to FET learners and its potential to enhance FET.





The National FET Learner Forum has an important and valued role in offering FET learners the opportunity to share their experiences and to voice their opinions. Learner Forum participants consistently reported that simply realising their ETB was open to hearing their feedback was one of the best things they learned at the forum.

Learner Voice has a particularly important role to play amongst those who have constructed their understanding of education through long-term experience of exclusion, powerlessness, and silence. The vital role of FET in transforming rather than reinforcing adult learners' negative experiences of mainstream education is crystallised in FET learners' capacities, perhaps newly discovered, to be agents of change in their own lives and in their learning community. For one FET learner, Learner Voice supports "the possibility that what I have fed back could contribute to change and improvement."

Learner Forum participants consistently expressed a need to know what will happen to their views after the Forum. They further requested AONTAS to offer "examples of how these sessions have contributed to changes historically."

#### AONTAS recommend:

- Reviewing how best to 'close the feedback loop' in National FET Learner Forum events, including offering Learner Councils or class representatives an opportunity to participate and speak to local initiatives.

#### Learner Voice groups and councils

The National FET Learner Forum invites learners to take up Learner Voice positions in their Education and Training Boards and encourages further capacity building along these lines. AONTAS support the development of Learner Voice groups as an appropriate mechanism for FET learners to help clarify, refine, and support the implementation of Learner Forum findings.

AONTAS Regional and National Reports are a rich resource for Learner Voice groups and class representatives as they incorporate the views and recommendations of their peers in Further Education and Training.

Some ETBs with an established Learner Voice group (or Learner Council) already demonstrate a good practice approach by working in collaboration with learners to respond to learner feedback and proposals. Collaborating with Learner Voice groups to explore solutions to the issues raised in the Forum reports supports learner participation and helps close the feedback loop on the process.

Working in partnership with their ETB, Learner Voice groups and class representatives have much to contribute to the resolution of local, regional, and national challenges in Further Education and Training. This includes resource allocation issues identified by learners. To cite one recent and positive example, one ETB student council sought to address ongoing transport issues for FET learners by enabling its members to sit on both the local government Transportation Coordination Unit and the Public Participation Network (which coordinated a Local Link service). While Learner Voice groups may not yet control budgets, there is ample evidence of what is possible when learners and ETBs work together to problem-solve.

AONTAS welcome all opportunities to discuss and support Learner Voice initiatives.

### AONTAS recommend:

- Supporting the development of Learner Voice groups and councils.
- Increasing provision for Learner Voice capacity-building for staff and learners.

## Conclusion

The Learner Voices Across Ireland report provides rich insight into the views of FET learners at the 9 Education and Training Boards who took part in the National FET Learner 2023-2024. It documents in detail their satisfaction with their Further Education and Training experience, as well as their suggestions for future development.

The National FET Learner Forum illustrates the potential for transformative change that arises when we listen deeply to adult learners. The present report has shared a rich diversity of learner views and experiences. Its findings and recommendations have the potential to inform and inspire national policy and to secure improvements for all learners undertaking Further Education and Training.

What happens next clearly interests and involves a diverse range of actors, including AONTAS, SOLAS, Education and Training Boards, DFHERIS and other state agencies. Stakeholders may now choose to continue a developmental conversation with FET learners, to clarify context on learner feedback provided, and to implement solutions. AONTAS support the development of Learner Voice groups as an appropriate space to do so.

Learners have a vital role to play in shaping the future of Further Education and Training in Ireland. It is our hope in AONTAS that the *Learner Voices Across Ireland* report will be an essential resource for all stakeholders seeking to ensure Further Education and Training responds to the needs of adult learners today and in the future.

We welcome all opportunities to discuss the report findings in more depth.

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# Appendix 1: Learner Voice Overview

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The AONTAS Research Team documented and analysed all FET learner contributions to the forum. The table below presents a select overview of Forum participant feedback based on the results of this thematic analysis.

The table rows correspond to the themes or topics raised by learners in their focus group discussions and identified through the research team's subsequent coding process.

The table columns correspond to the key research questions, namely what learners believe to be 'working well' or in need of 'improvement' regarding their FET experience as well as what learners recommend for future development.

The table reproduces all learner contributions verbatim.

The table indicates NA or 'not applicable' where learners have not made an explicit comment or suggestion. The report authors identify as 'primary' only those areas working well or needing improvement that featured across multiple focus group discussions and/or had been raised by three or more participants in the same focus group. The report's selection of these 'primary areas' is further informed by the priority survey respondents afford to them.

The Learner Voice Overview table in Appendix 1 presents a representative sample of learner quotations from the focus groups of the National FET Learner Forum. While focus group conversations were wide ranging, each regional report includes as 'primary' only those areas working well or needing improvement that featured across multiple focus group discussions (i.e. 2 or more focus groups) and/or had been raised by three or more participants in the same focus group. The Research Team compiled all Learner Voice overview tables from each of the 9 regional reports into a single Learner Voice Overview Table. For brevity and concision, the report authors then reduced the large number of themes and quotations presented, eliminating all themes generating fewer than 18 learner comments. In general, all the 'primary' themes presented in Appendix 1 are those that received a high number of learner comments across multiple regional forums. An exception was made only where a topic reflects a rights-based or minority issue, one that may not be expected to generate comments from many learners. The report's selection of primary themes is further informed by the priority survey respondents afford to them.

Contextual understanding available to local ETB stakeholders and/or further research may be required:

- to establish the accuracy of participants' statements
- to establish the full context for a participant's statement
- to enhance the applicability of report findings

Education and Training Boards may choose to continue a developmental conversation with learners, to clarify context, and to implement solutions.

‘What Learners say they would like to see happen’ interests and involves a diverse range of actors, including AONTAS, SOLAS, Education and Training Boards, DFHERIS and other state agencies. AONTAS supports the development of Learner Councils as an appropriate mechanism for FET learners to help clarify, refine, and support the implementation of Learner Forum findings.

A full account of the aims, scope, and limitations of the research is available in Chapter 1.

Theme	Working well	For improvement	What learners would like to see happen
IMPACT OF FET			
Impact of FET: Personal Development – Wellbeing and Better Health, Connection with Others, Employment and Employability, Self-Confidence, and Positive Outlook	<p>You’re actually getting paid to do something that you’re learning... that all adds to your employability or your lifestyle or your mental health.</p> <p>It’s meeting people, it’s interaction, it’s forming friendships. It’s absolutely a very social thing. For me it’s very social. For a lot of us there, it would be our outlet, our main outlet. It gets us out, yes, very much so.</p>	<p>I lacked confidence in myself. I can’t do this, I’m too old. And then the language was like ‘the brief. You know the brief’. What is the brief? What is the submission?... All the language of being back in education.</p>	<p>[O]nce again, those optional social opportunities to help foster the student community. Even if they held an outside of class hours coffee morning or maybe a study meeting where you can come together and help each other with the assignments. Have a coffee, chat, you know what I mean? If that’s just facilitated...</p>
WELCOME, BELONGING and INCLUSION			
Welcome, Belonging, and Inclusion – Respect	<p>There’s a great deal of respect for the tutors and respect from the tutors as well. That’s the part, I suppose, having that mutual respect.</p>		

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	<p>They're not treating you like a child. I think there's a bit more respect between teachers and students [compared to school].</p> <p>All the women that are there... we're very like-minded and there's a great connection between us... everybody seems to have the courage and the safety and feel safe... the overall goal would be of effective communication [and] would be open, direct, honest, clear [communication] with respect for oneself and others - that's basically the core of the programme.</p>	<p>I've been spoken to quite disrespectfully by tutors that are younger than me. I don't like it.</p> <p>Because sometimes people mightn't be having a good day or sometimes people are... There is a lot of people, a lot of anxiety in... everywhere in our group, and I think they [staff] need to be just sometimes a little bit more sensitive and aware of that.</p> <p>There's respect for teachers but not always for each other. Some people seem to forget that we're all here for the same thing. There are some groups don't engage and some that clash. There's groups there and it does feel clique-ish.</p>	<p>I think in an educational environment when you have a mixed, varied people, there should always be respect. But it comes both ways. Students respect the facilities, the teachers and the staff. There should be respect on all levels.</p> <p>I suppose the encouragement from the teachers and the kind of, they accept everybody regardless of what's walk in life they've come for, or what's young or old, or maybe, you know, whatever... everyone is treated equally, really. I just think, I hope that continues. It doesn't matter if you're 60 or 20.</p>



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Social Inclusion - Disability	For example, last year, not to make this too personal, I got two new hips and a new knee. I was able to continue with these classes from being at home, where there were periods of time where I couldn't drive. So it wouldn't have been possible.	I have an SNA... I literally have a learning disability, and... he told me, and I quote, "That's not how you will learn. You will learn by doing it like everybody else." So yeah, that wasn't fun. No support.	(Learner with disability who is training to be a bus driver) I have my disability, but what I have is what I'm like... you have them (peer learners) make your team, to (help) make them more confident, make them more kind... say people who haven't got the confidence or they need full training, full help... Show them it's not all about getting good grades, or getting on to college, it's about being aware and trying to be kind to them, and meeting them halfway.
Social Inclusion – Race and Ethnicity	It could be different nationalities students and everyone is so equal with each other. No one's... disrespected, no one's turned away... It could be anyone that walks in the door and you're so welcome in the place and I think that's what we want more of and need more of.	Here, in Ireland, it's so hard to know that people are genuine. Honestly, it's very hard. Because you look at someone, they smile at you... It's just too hard to know if they're genuine or if they smile at me and secretly hate me. So no, I don't have Irish friends.	

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	<p>In this system in Ireland, it is very good for people from different countries who want to learn. I like it a lot. In Poland and in Ukraine, I saw a very different system and I saw some problems but not now.</p> <p>I'm looking for work placement and some people when you call them, you can just hear over the phone, like I used to work with customers over the phone so we can easily tell when someone is just like pure gatekeeping sure way.... some people will just tell you no, we don't do that here, we don't give you experience here, but it's a big company and I ask myself, who would not invite someone to work for them for free the whole month? I don't understand it.</p>		<p>It's (communication module) very frustrating, especially for people who don't have the first language. If they can convert that to social cohesion, if they can use that to make sure that we interact with each other and to know about each other's (way) of life or culture or what he or she believes in... Some of us are not from English speaking country, so we can use that (class time) to improve ourselves.</p>

Theme	Working well	For improvement	What learners would like to see happen
Belonging – Adult Learner Identity in FET	<p>It's just because I don't think a lot of people know enough about what goes on inside the door [of Youthreach].</p> <p>I mean, there's a big change from school... Much better. I love it.... The environment is completely different from the way of teaching [in school].</p> <p>This was me returning to education after 28 years. I was working full-time for that period of time. I was made redundant after 19 years on my last job. So, it was a big step to... make a decision to come back as an adult student learner. So, it was a daunting experience initially, but the teachers and facilitators made that... step very easy.</p> <p>It's definitely the culture. The culture, the atmosphere.</p>	<p>It wasn't for me, high school education. It wasn't something that suited me. I'm more of a practical worker, so going into hairdressing was easier for me. But now my past classmates think I'm just a random high school dropout.</p> <p>I'm the only one doing my course in the centre. I'm on my own doing the course. Before Covid there was other people doing it. But since Covid now I'm the only one doing it... It's the social aspect of the courses (I miss).</p> <p>There was such a bad stigma over our school right now. And it just kind of made me second guess if it was going to be good. But once I went in, it was so much different from what they told me. And I think that's what's also</p>	N/A

Theme	Working well	For improvement	What learners would like to see happen
	<p>It's really laid back and chilled. It's not like primary and secondary school... You actually are treated like an adult as opposed to a child.</p> <p>It's important to go back as an adult learner... some people's experiences of school mightn't have been very good so it's important to go back as an adult learner that you're comfortable, that if you did have a negative experience from childhood or maybe a young adult but you're not bringing that up, you're not getting triggers so it is the informal setup and the surroundings is very important. You find a safe space.</p>	<p>stopping other people as well from going.</p>	



Theme	Working well	For improvement	What learners would like to see happen
COMMUNICATIONS			
Course Provision – Advertisement of (including website)	<p>I'm in a women's group in the town on a Friday and there was some people there that had been there last year, and they said to us 'why don't you put your name down for it?' [Tutor] gives her class a WhatsApp group.</p> <p>I was long time looking for an (English) course for me but it's very expensive. You have to drive somewhere. It was nothing around... and I got the message from the school, my kids' school, the ETB organized a course for everyone so I applied. I am (now) second year of the English course.</p>	<p>I heard about it from a friend of mine, but otherwise I wouldn't have found it anywhere. It was after years and I lived quite near it and I never knew what it was. It was just somebody I knew was going to the classes. I don't see it advertised that much.</p> <p>Never heard of a counsellor. Never heard of one.</p>	<p>If AONTAS or [the] ETB had an infographic or video that that local people could use for their course. You know, maybe people could watch the video to see how do I submit an assignment or, you know, I'm sure that could be generic videos or infographics.</p> <p>I wish there was more outreach because I never thought I was able to go into the course...I only got it through a recommendation from my friend. That was when I was 21. And I dropped out of school at 17. So I could have...I could have went in earlier...</p>
BUILDINGS AND FACILITIES			
Facilities – Nature Of	<p>It's very clean, very well equipped with all the computers and the projectors.</p> <p>Great facilities. We've got an amazing canteen and we get free tea and coffee. We get amazing service.</p>	<p>The space is tricky. Technically you're staying in the one classroom the whole day and not getting to go to the point. Sometimes the windows don't want to open or anything like that so</p>	

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	<p>We have a pool table. We have a table tennis as well, and a hall... and that is a meeting space where people can play the games.</p>	<p>it gets stuffy so most students would just end up trying to leave for like 10 minutes to try to go outside.</p> <p>There's no place to have your lunch... [Our tutor] literally bought a microwave out of her own pocket so that we could heat our food and then [our tutor] had to buy heaters for the place.</p> <p>It's the building... it has no wheelchair accessibility... the corridors are too tight for wheelchairs and the toilets aren't accessible either.</p>	<p>We need a new pool table and new pool cues for a wee chill out spot.</p> <p>[W]e are allocated two rooms and one of them is on the third floor... But we have a couple of ladies who can't walk. Can't get up the stairs. And one of them has a problem with her [mobility]. This year we haven't seen her at all. That's very sad. And they're asking and asking for something to be done.</p>
Facilities – Location	<p>There's parking [at the centre].</p> <p>[Our] ETB... gave... us a classroom... It's a beautiful classroom - really bright space.</p> <p>It's (the centre) well maintained. Toilet's good.... that's the canteen... the catering room. It goes to the kitchen..., that's where you eat, the table. The food is really nice. Their curry's bangin'. Their pasta's so nice.</p>	<p>When it's hard to get to your course, like the weather is crazy and you have to walk in about one hour... So, transport is another reason to do with the [people] leaving [the course]. It's just too difficult to put yourself there.</p> <p>The only downside about the class is... the classroom itself... [T]he classroom did not have natural lighting.</p>	<p>Proper public transport links to the different places.</p> <p>(I)f they gave us somewhere else to sit (other than the canteen), I wouldn't mind. We want to have access to at least hot water.</p> <p>I've been trying to get (a sensory room)... I've been mentioning it to my teachers and stuff like that, and they've been meaning to do it, but they just haven't got the funding for it.</p>

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	We can't buy anything and have it in there... we're given €4 to buy us dinner, but that €4 is for the whole weekend.		
Facilities - Transport	<p>We're very lucky in our centre there's enough parking for everybody and then to travel - carpool.</p> <p>Thank God there is a bus. There is a bus because I'm in the countryside. Thank God, I'm so happy it's there.</p> <p>The location is really great, and the bus routes and stuff are really accessible.</p>	<p>[you can't get] Like, Local Link. You know like... So, I have to get a private bus and for me, my private bus is €50 a week.</p> <p>If I had access to transport I could level up on my courses, but I cannot reach the other centres.</p> <p>Sometimes the buses are really unreliable. So there is a transport issue. If you miss the bus There is not another bus for 3 hours or 4 hours.</p>	<p>More travel allowance. Due to the price of the diesel.</p> <p>Most students have their class finished at 4pm. But there is a bus that goes only at... 3.30pm. So, I have to leave my class early... Is there a way to... Make a collective request to the bus station?</p> <p>Your bus that comes - it comes just 15 minutes too late. Could you maybe shift that back 15 minutes earlier?</p> <p>After the amount that we're paying the school for our courses, we think they could afford at least some kind of discounters [for] the park(ing). And not even free parking, but some kind of discount on nearby parking facilities.</p>

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Digital Transition – Access to Ed Tech	<p>I haven't had issues with computers. I have one personally.</p> <p>The room that I go to has computers in excess and if we need extra, we just go to another room that isn't being used. It's also rentable laptops as well. You are made aware of these resources, so it's not an issue for me.</p> <p>They offer the Office 365; I think it's paid for... We don't pay for it.</p>	<p>Some of the equipment is just mad dated. Some of it doesn't work when you're doing your actual exam. When I was doing my first exam, one of the devices wasn't working and it was just showing up as a fault in the panel but there's actually nothing wrong with the way I done it.</p> <p>Internet connection is bad. We didn't have internet. We had to use our hot spots.</p>	<p>They should do it -upgrading the computers or the printers.</p> <p>The only thing I wish was maybe a bit more Wi-Fi over there so I didn't have to use as much data because it gets a bit expensive sometimes.</p>
COURSE PROVISION			
Course Provision – Quantity: Courses, Quantity: Classes, Quantity: Class Time	<p>There's a huge range of courses. The range is amazing.</p> <p>I like the ratios from tutor to student. It's not very over-saturated so you have time to talk to your tutors and instructors individually... They are not fighting for time.... you get to know them a lot better and it's very individualised, all the training and feedback.</p>	<p>In English course, we have something like 30 people in the class and it is too big.</p> <p>I suppose the only bad thing about the whole [course], probably since COVID, is just the waiting time. Like we've been waiting a long time to get into this... I think it's meant to be six months. It's been about two years.</p>	<p>When it comes to English, we need more tutors because sometimes people come to learn and the classes are full.</p> <p>I would say maybe modules could be more packed - like a day, not spread over the week. Let's say on Tuesday we have four modules and then on Wednesday we have two modules in the evening. So</p>

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	<p>Last summer we (had) summer intensive course. It's like you have English every day for hours. It was (a) very great experience (to) speak English every day.</p>	<p>I'm a graphic designer, but if I want to work with [an] Irish team, I need to understand everything correctly and maybe sometimes speak with customers. It's difficult for now. If I study just once per week, it's not enough. I need more time.</p> <p>Courses are being withdrawn from some campus. It doesn't make sense...There's tension at all levels. Teachers and students all feeling uncertainty (about courses moving).</p>	<p>pretty much half of the day is disappearing somewhere, you know. So that would be helping more for working people who are combining work with studies.</p> <p>If the course is always at the same time of the day it will be easier organise childcare.</p> <p>I would, like everyone else, like a bit of variety of levels and I also think there could be variety in course subjects.</p>
Course Provision – Scheduling	<p>The timetable is very good. It's good because it's fit in there. They have in the morning and I think they actually have a lot. It's good for people when they have kids so they come to us in the morning. Yeah, I think if we choose the time it's good for us, you know.</p> <p>(It's) not like school not every day nine to five, that some days we only have one or two classes. So it means that we can plan other things around that.</p>	<p>We have a very busy timetable. I'm in every day at nine o'clock. The only day I get off early is Friday at one.</p> <p>I want to find a job and again if I find a job I can't go into class. That's the problem I wanted to say because we don't have classes in the evening. We just have classes in the morning.</p> <p>I have some problems with childcare because we have this course twice a week and</p>	



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	And I have space to do other stuff rather than just being full on in school.	the schedule is different. Once it's in the morning, it's ok because children are at school but another one is in the afternoon and I need to pick up my children. Sometimes there is nobody to pick them up so I'm not able to come every time.	Also, it's not just the night courses, it's also for this as well. If people can't do it during the day, they should be at night.  More options in the morning time [for parents].
Course Provision - Staffing	(There's) lots of one to one with the teacher.	<p>We need level four. And they will say, we don't have funding for level four. And they'll say, we don't have the tutors for level four.</p> <p>We only have one full-time teacher in a centre of nearly 25 students. But because of the staffing issues we never ended up returning to previous subjects.</p> <p>It does kind of trickle down to us... you can't feel secure. So, if they [tutors] have job security... it makes us more secure.</p>	It's the case that the ETB (should) broaden their tutor panel.

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TEACHING AND LEARNING			
Teaching and Learning – Applied or Practical Learning	<p>You get shots at stuff that you haven't done before. You might have never done one before on a site. It opens up a couple opportunities for you nearly.</p> <p>We've been out in the workplace already. It's much helped. Even when you're completing the assignment you can reflect back... Being fed all this information and then not being able to go out and do it... can be boring.</p> <p>It's a very good hands on experience so before you go into industry and get a job, you're actually learning the stuff.</p>	<p>How do I apply this theory to the practice? I don't see the relevance. Sometimes the relevance is not clear or not even practical.</p> <p>Because there's not enough teachers... the real practical aspect of it we are not doing. It is just assignment, assignment, assignment...</p>	<p>I'd want [to learn] about software now, because you want to be able to learn software to be able to use it in your design or whatever.</p> <p>I'd love if we had an option to do that kind of (practical) stuff or even different kinds of things that people would be interested in.</p>
Teaching and Learning – Assessment and Feedback	<p>I think they give a fair amount of time to do it. They give us time in class as well, like if they know we're under pressure.</p> <p>In my course, because I'm a single parent, they were very accommodating that I couldn't, when you get</p>		

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	<p>to level 6 in healthcare, there's 3000 word assignments, and I was just ready to say, I'd better not. They accommodated me by letting me do one of my assignments on a video, so I could explain everything. I found that very accommodating.</p> <p>It is still a lot better than school because it is not like a big exam. It is like a gradual build up to getting points and stuff and there is not as much stress.</p> <p>The continuous assessment methods that they use... it's better. Because in secondary school if you miss out on a class or you're covering a topic, you're basically never going to catch that up again.</p>	<p>It's only for a few days but it's all crammed. It seems to be full day, intense. Yeah. It's stressful.</p> <p>There's an awful lot dropping out. There's two groups and there was 13 and 12 and I'd say there's probably most days about six in my group. So, I think the workload is more than they kind of expected coming in and they were just going to do a bit of makeup.</p> <p>They've discontinued... the idea of doing exams. And while the majority of people, I think, are happy with that, or more than happy with it, there are a few people that would like to do exams.</p> <p>So apart from the course and stuff, I also do my work experience. And I also work. So, I don't really have time to do my</p>	<p>Maybe just some of the assignment [deadlines]... they could be expanded maybe a bit longer because for the briefs it takes time to fill out everything.</p> <p>One of the things that probably has to come from the top is that they do away with the assessments and do what they're trying to do with the Leaving Cert. They're trying to do more continuous assessment. The teachers know well what you're capable of and what you're not capable of. They know you for 2 or 3 years at that stage. This thing that you have to go in and put everything that you have in your head down in writing. Very daunting as you get older.</p> <p>The way they word it (assignments)... if they made the</p>

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		assignments and stuff. Sometimes I'm too tired to work on my assignments. The assignments [are] not all easy - you can't finish them.	words more simple, instead of using these words, and we're asking the tutor, what does that mean? I couldn't understand what the connection was between these questions that they were asking and the work I was actually doing.
Teaching and Learning – Critical Skills, including Digital Skills	<p>I went (to the course) because I didn't know how to use the computer.... to find out how to use the mobile phone. And everything is online now... it's great help.</p> <p>I'm doing assignments and I've never done an assignment ever. I didn't go to third level education... even how to do an assignment and how to research stuff. Just give me confidence and even to look up something that I wouldn't normally have looked at before.</p>	<p>I finished university in Iraq without [a] computer. When I came here for level one [English] the teacher [said] "could you open this link for learning English?" [It was] very difficult for me.</p> <p>I was made redundant after 37 years but we went in then and my IT skills wouldn't be... they weren't modern. So the course, there's lots of typing and all. I could have done with an IT course before I'd done the course... I find that part a little bit difficult.</p>	<p>That's the only support... all of us need... We all have issues with it. But I think we should have at least one class timetabled in a week at least for that because it's very stressful. It's stressing me to the hilt. I want to smash my laptop some days because I can't do it. I try and get my daughter to help me. She lives in a different country. I've tried to get friends of mine. They can't.</p> <p>If they arrange a small part, once in a week, [to] teach us Excel and Word... we can contribute to our studies by learning Word and Excel.</p>

Theme	Working well	For improvement	What learners would like to see happen
Teaching and Learning – Curriculum	<p>And you know, start at the very beginning and I don't feel stupid then. Because at the other places I just walked away because they were all so good. So everyone's learning from the beginning. And they're all at the same level. It's just very enjoyable. But you do need to go back to basics for every year.</p> <p>Our teacher... tells us about Irish saints... and holidays...about history events. They're really interesting.</p> <p>It's a kind of work experience program. It's great experience because she can see what's the problem in each person and she can teach and she can get different tasks.</p>	<p>Some of the theory is outdated. So, it needs to be updated.</p> <p>Our course is just six months... and we always have more time for more conversation, more reading, more listening. We focus on just listening. I want more grammar. Because it's not enough for us.</p> <p>We all gave up our jobs to commit to a year... we're here now, nearly towards the end of the four months left and really to specialise in an area where you're going to get employment... we have to all go and do extra courses now.... nobody is going to give us a job based on what we're getting. The course is (not) modernised... It needs to be up to industry. There's no salon that you go into these days that doesn't do</p>	<p>Maybe a few demonstrations and class activities where we got to actually apply our health and safety like safety reports and stuff like that.</p> <p>There's definitely at least one module that we shouldn't be taught for the basics anymore... the perming module... the chemicals are dangerous. I don't think we should be doing it. Most of our stylists don't think we should be doing it on such a small level... It's not even common anymore.</p> <p>I want to hear more information about Ireland, about the history of Ireland. About culture, about the news.</p>



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		eyebrows, like eyebrow lamination like waxing.	
Teaching and Learning – Tutors	<p>At the beginning of the year we got to do classes to what learning styles to do best and our teacher then changed how she taught classes based on what works (for each of us).</p> <p>What I have now, it's unbelievable. They make you want to learn. They (tutors) [care about] you - your interests. You're a person. You're a human being. You're not stupid, you're not dumb. You know what I mean? It's absolutely amazing.</p> <p>If you have the right interaction with your tutors, it will get you more interested in the course. You'll see everything get better.</p>	<p>I came today because there's a lot of feedback I want to give and I'm a mature student and I just find the tutors, even towards me, some of them, I find them quite disrespectful. I don't feel like we're listened to.</p> <p>There's been a formal complaint put in about a bunch of the teachers because... it's bad... between commenting on weight and... calling people stupid.</p>	<p>(The learner contract signed at induction) was more about the way we hold up our end instead of how they hold up their end... We were focusing on our responsibility and not on their (tutors') professionalism. So for us, we constantly hold up the deal of coming in and being punctual and stuff. But I wish there was a bit more professionalism in terms of tutors.</p> <p>Stop bullying people.</p>
Teaching and Learning – Standard of Teaching	<p>They break it down, they use simple language, and that's good.</p> <p>Our teachers... explain stuff in... a real-life situation.</p>	<p>Sometimes when we ask questions instead explaining to us the question that we have they say we're not paying attention. And sometimes I feel uncomfortable.</p>	<p>I think the tutors and the ETB need to meet beforehand, particularly when you have four tutors, to ensure that there is not overlap and repetition, that they</p>

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	I'm happy with most of them (tutors) because the ones I'm happy with are really practical about what they're teaching and they are good at it.	What is frustrating is that there is repetition within different modules. So it means that we feel as if we're wasting time. And sometimes we get conflicting information from the different tutors while we're doing that. And it's also replicated in our assignment papers and our exam papers...One of the tutors does not give support materials in their modules. And that's a problem for us.	all know what they're doing... but before the course starts.  We need the teachers to be on the ball and know their stuff and have a set plan.
Teaching and Learning – Work-Based Learning and Work Experience	For me it's been more than I expected to be honest. The teachers help you with whatever you need help with and... for work placements and stuff, they will help you get work placements.  [I]n fairness if people were struggling to find somewhere, the tutor was brilliant to try and reach out to her contacts and people she knew to facilitate.	I would like to see, for us people, engineers, even like seeing companies, high-end engineering companies, to know what kind of work they're getting at.  (Migrant learner): For someone like me, I'm new here so it's quite difficult (to source work experience). I don't know where to go, I don't know how far the place is, even if I'm searching online - that's why I just end up calling randomly.	If there was more relationship with potential employers, it would be helpful.  If somebody came and said ok you have a chance of employment after you finish your course, I would just go for it... ((I))n Sweden they create courses where they really have a need... they say if you do this course, you get jobs like this, and that will be the salary. It's very clear... ((T))he course will only be offered if there is

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	<p>The work experience... I learned a lot more about... what your choice of profession entails.</p> <p>For me, I done work experience back before Christmas but I'm doing it again this month and that's a positive change for me because I've been a stay-at-home mother and stuff and for me to kind of get a bit of confidence to get back out to doing something for myself.</p>	<p>The downside then is that this year our work experience was one day a week spread out over a few months instead of doing block of two weeks here and two weeks there. So, it's kind of dragging from January to the end of April to get our 150 hours in. Which is a bit of a nuisance.</p> <p>What was happening was... for a few on (beauty) therapy, if you were doing it (work experience) one day... you were going in and not actually doing anything, you were just doing the extra jobs that they needed on, like cleaning up the mess and all that.</p>	<p>enough employers. But the employers will still pay for the courses because they need people. That would be very important.</p> <p>Sometimes culture - like I don't know how to go there and put myself out there. I'm walking in - what do I say? [I don't know] whether it's correct, appropriate, or not appropriate. [It] would be nice to get some even cultural aspect of how to do that.</p>
WRAPAROUND SUPPORT			
Wraparound Support – Childcare	They (the centre) do offer child support.	I do know there was two girls in our Youthreach ...and they had children and now they just don't want to come back. Because they have to take care of the child... they only gave them like six weeks and then said, 'Oh, if you're	

Theme	Working well	For improvement	What learners would like to see happen
		<p>not back in six weeks, you're off the road after having the child.'</p> <p>I just walk (my children) from school to school, from college to school. Every day is a challenge... I have three (children). Last year I had three different schools. And I [am] just jumping from one school to another (because I can't get childcare).</p>	<p>Childcare in the centre. [A creche in the centre] would make life easy for people.</p>
Wraparound Support - Disability	<p>The first day we arrived, I saw people in my class that were living with disabilities. They're very much supported. They're at the time of induction. We know where to go. If we need to point in one direction, they're great.</p>	<p>There's only one sensory room. It's too small.</p> <p>I don't know if I have one [disability support person in centre].</p>	<p>I'm trying to get a change on the sensory room.</p>
Wraparound Support - Guidance	<p>I found the guidance counsellor was really good too. She helped me fill out all the CAO and all the other things. They can be a really good resource to have on campus.</p>	<p>I sent her (previous guidance counsellor) many emails, but she never responded to me... I needed the career guidance in the beginning.... and the door was always locked. I don't know why.</p>	<p>There's a guidance counsellor in our college, but she's normally very busy because she's the second manager as well. She's busy so she doesn't really talk much. It would be nice to have that sit down.</p>

Theme	Working well	For improvement	What learners would like to see happen
	[W]e have an amazing (guidance) counsellor. I didn't think I needed to go see a counsellor about anything but I went and chatted to her just because they said come and see and... she's been so helpful giving ideas and options.		I wish there was a timeline that they help you plan of what you're doing, what you want to do, what can you achieve. I think it would be better instead of just finishing it up and being like, 'What do I do now?'
Wraparound Support – Learning Support	<p>They're still actually trying to get me but they're giving me one-to-one support for the particular subject that I'm struggling a bit on.</p> <p>There is [support]. Like for me personally... You know like if you have any problems with the spellings, if it's dyslexia or anything.</p>	<p>I don't get (support with dyslexia). (I) remember putting it on the sheet - remember the stuff that we had to sign? You could tick boxes if you have stuff. I made it clear. I'm not good at spelling and all that stuff. Sometimes it holds me back.</p> <p>My teachers are good, but they don't have the facilities to support me.</p> <p>Because maths is quite a demanding subject, you do need somebody to give you the one-to-one, especially if you have dyslexia.</p>	<p>There's kind of an unconscious bias sometimes where, say you don't have any diagnosis of any learning disabilities but you might have an undiagnosed one, you are forced to do all of this work that you are saying again and again, you're not capable of and you're really struggling with. Whereas as soon as you might get that diagnosis, it's like a flick of a switch. It's the opposite. They're not pushing you at all and you're not learning. So in terms of the supports for those with learning disabilities, it really only kicks in once the diagnosis happens.</p>



Theme	Working well	For improvement	What learners would like to see happen
			<p>What I've found that I need a lot of support in, and we only got told about basically a few weeks ago, was computer skills. Like, for our course, we've to do case studies and stuff and I am not up to date on OneNote or these things. And Teams, I haven't used them before. And I even know people that work in IT and they don't even know about Teams or OneNote...</p> <p>So, everybody is struggling because we have to use that for all our case studies and everybody is struggling and we were offered one hour in the canteen on a Tuesday or a Thursday to speak with somebody from IT when we have class at that time anyway and a lot of our classes are practical. So, we need to kind of be in them.</p>

Theme	Working well	For improvement	What learners would like to see happen
			What I'm proposing is that at least we should start with someone in each ETB, which is 16 ETBs around the country. They should be trained up by the Dyslexic Association. There should be 16 people trained up for each ETB. They should be overseen by the ETBI.
Wraparound Support – Mental Health Support	<p>I'd say the way [our programme] takes care of mental health is pretty good compared to school and stuff.</p> <p>Like they take it seriously.</p> <p>We have a counsellor that comes in two times a week, I think that is really really good. I think it helps with everyone's mental health. We get a chance to leave the kind of classroom setting and just kind of speak our own minds in a private area and it's good.</p>	<p>Because sometimes people mightn't be having a good day or sometimes people are... There is a lot of people, a lot of anxiety in... everywhere in our group, and I think they [staff] need to be just sometimes a little bit more sensitive and aware of that.</p> <p>There's free counselling advertised on the website, but it's only limited to six sessions...</p>	<p>We have a counsellor, but I think we need more hours because there's so many of us, and she's only there like three hours a week.</p> <p>I'd be 50/50. I know we had our mental health day or something like that but I think there needs to be a bit more than a day and make people aware of all the stuff. We had somebody to come in and talk to us and it was really, really good.</p> <p>[O]ffer people free counselling. Make it unlimited.</p> <p>If there's just one day somebody (counsellor or psychologist) is coming in. It would</p>

Theme	Working well	For improvement	What learners would like to see happen
			be a good idea to bring someone in because I think people would be very slow to come forward with any problems.
Wraparound Support – Tutor (beyond classroom)	<p>They're always like, you know, on their lunch breaks printing extra stuff off and just doing extra work and if you need something you don't feel like a burden or anything like that. They just pull on and give you that extra help.</p> <p>And my class tutor emailed the girl that does the attendances for SUSI, explained to her I was having difficulties for personal reasons, and this morning I got an email from her saying 'not to worry about it, it's fine. Your SUSI's not affected. It's grand'.</p> <p>I remember one day... I was really down... I went down to the class. I just walked in, and the minute I walked in the door, the teacher knew. I</p>	N/A	N/A

Theme	Working well	For improvement	What learners would like to see happen
	<p>remember one day... I was really down... I went down to the class. I just walked in, and the minute I walked in the door, the teacher knew. She said, 'are you all right?' And I said, 'not really.' I said, 'I don't really want to be here.' She said, 'have a cup of tea.' And... within the hour, I was back to myself.</p> <p>He (tutor) transforms people as well.</p>		
Wraparound Support – Transport	<p>It's (student card) a big saving for me... The saving is enormous because I know the fares can be huge. 56 something for the train... but it's only 26 as a student. It's a huge saving. I have family up and down, and I have to go up and down. They didn't have this course anywhere. You can use it on the bus as well, or anywhere you are in the country. The bus is only 8 euros [with] the student card.</p>	<p>I get the bus... it's 15 euro each way and I only get 30 euro a week... That's all I'm entitled to unless I claim off the government some allowance. I was told to leave the course by the INTREO office to sign on so as to change my situation. I'd lose the course if I did that... they don't exactly care.</p>	<p>(I would suggest having a) local bus link...low cost.</p> <p>I don't know if we do, but I think we definitely should get student cards.</p>

Theme	Working well	For improvement	What learners would like to see happen
PATHWAYS			
Pathways to/from HE/Unified Tertiary Education Model	Everything's been going well for me. We've had a couple of learner-tutor meetings and during those meetings they've gone out to actually ask you what your thoughts are for your career and they've actually taken the time to ask you what kind of places you'd be thinking of going afterwards.	I think universities and the Education Training Boards should kind of communicate between each other to see what's on them with matriculation, so students can actually progress into different courses... for majority of colleges we need Maths for STEM for going into Mechanical Engineer, especially Level 8 courses.	I think universities and the Education Training Boards should kind of communicate between each other to see what's on them with matriculation, so students can actually progress into different courses.  If we could concentrate on trying to get the adult education that we're privileged to have into the primary schools, whereby maybe you could have an after school for the children and mom could do something.
CRITICAL ISSUES - ACCOMMODATION			
Accommodation (including cost)	NA	Even accommodation. €70 euro. You wouldn't get much for €70 anyway for accommodation. Just a small amount. Basically, we'd double that.  You're not going to get any more on	If they (the ETB) could put it out there in the community that accommodation is required, to hold (it), and to have a list of accommodations that are willing to accept the allowance.



Theme	Working well	For improvement	What learners would like to see happen
		the accommodation allowance but also it's not available. Realistically, we're in one of the biggest housing crises Ireland's ever seen. There's students that were sleeping in their cars in the car parks at the colleges. It's truly awful... there's less accommodation for students in every other course everywhere... It's a very distressing issue.	It's (accommodation allowance) the very same money as 10 years ago. And now rent has risen so many times... It's 600% more than before. It should be an increase of rent in our ring (Housing Assistance Payment catchment).
CRITICAL ISSUES - FINANCE			
Cost of FET participation	<p>I think it's very good because it's not cost. Because I know many people from Mexico, Chile, they have to pay expensive schools for learning English and get visas. For us, it's freedom. It's great.</p> <p>They'll (the course providers) buy certain amount of products for your hair to be done within the month... we get our hair washed for free, we can get our hair dyed for free, we can get it cut for free.</p>	<p>My friend, she registered on UX design, but she doesn't have computer... (The ETB) said 'we don't have laptop and we can't help'. So, she... just left. It's for example, it's a special program. And it's difficult if you don't have computer.</p> <p>I'm doing Business here at the college. I also just finished my internship. And I'm not sure if I'm going to be able to do it... I'm not sure. I'm not eligible to get the SUSI grant.</p>	<p>I was a doctor in Ukraine and if I want to work in Ireland I need to pass IELTS exams. There is an exam, and you [have] to pay maybe 500 euros... So, if they can help us about this.</p> <p>(We need and increased subsidy for rent, food, transport etc.</p>

Theme	Working well	For improvement	What learners would like to see happen
	<p>I think it's (the course) good value for money, I have to say.</p> <p>In Africa, we cannot go to college unless we are rich. We go to private colleges. But some of us are not that rich. We want to learn, we want to study but we cannot study. We don't have money. The Irish government... they take people to be very important. I just like it. I can learn anything I want.</p>	<p>[I'm doing] the exact same thing [as him]... and I'm getting paid more. You have to be finished up around [age] 21... Say if you just turn 21 in the summer, if you finish up in December you're fine. But it's anywhere, it was 16 to 21, but they started a program this year where 15-year-olds could join if they wanted to leave school, but they don't get paid or anything.</p>	
Wraparound Support – Finance	<p>It (getting paid through a traineeship) really helps a lot, especially when you leave school. You go into a course and you get paid from the course. It makes you feel more like an adult. You're going into the real world.</p>	<p>No travel allowance. I've always got 20 euro a week.</p> <p>The social welfare support around returning to college as a mature student is quite difficult and you don't get any other financial support.</p>	<p>We were just saying there should be more of a student hardship fund or something in the college because there is that once a year but it's means tested.</p> <p>Can we get a student ID? You can get a reduction (in costs on certain services).</p>

# Appendix 2: Survey Data

## Course/Programme and Level

Course or Programme Title (860 responses)			
Adult Literacy	Apprenticeship	Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)	Community Education
77	35	86	43
Community Training Centre (CTC)	English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)	Local Training Initiative (LTI)	Post-leaving Certificate (PLC)
34	105	31	191
Skills to Advance	Traineeship	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)	Youthreach
31	48	64	115

Course Level (if on an accredited NFQ/QQI course) (997 responses)									
Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7-10	Non-accredited/ no level	'I Do Not Know'	No Response
29	70	115	211	395	73	4	26	74	33

Are you a full-time or part-time learner? (952 responses)	
Full-time	Part-time
616	336

## Recruitment, Registration and Induction

Where did you hear about your course? (Please select all that apply) (1026 responses) (809 respondents)					
Careers Exhibition	Career Guidance	Current or Former Learner	Employer	Family or Friend	Online/ Internet
13	105	45	47	341	219
Open Day	Radio or Newspaper	The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection	The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science		Other
69	19	73	28		67

What were the reasons for taking your course? (Please select all that apply) (2502 responses) (876 respondents)						
I wanted to learn something new	To have fun	To get a certificate	To progress to third level	To get a job	To upskill or reskill	To progress in my career
340	91	225	168	327	233	257
To meet new people	Required by the Dept. of Social Protection	To improve my English	To improve my health and wellbeing	To increase my confidence	To provide structure or routine	Other
201	20	152	107	190	163	28

When you contacted your centre for the first time, how satisfied were you with the guidance and advice you received? (869 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I did not receive guidance or advice
515	262	67	4	6	15

### How satisfied were you with the website for your centre or ETB, when you were looking for a course or programme? (870 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I did not visit the website for my centre or ETB
373	310	70	13	2	102

### How satisfied were you with the interview process for your course or programme? (865 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I did not have an interview for my course
441	282	43	11	1	87

### Did you receive a digital or paper copy of the following information about your course or centre (1856 responses) (856 respondents)

Course information	College policies	Staff job titles and contact information	Learner contract	Learner handbook	I did not receive information about my course or centre	Other
605	339	152	338	310	93	19

## Teaching and Learning

### How satisfied are you with the way your tutor assesses and gives feedback on your work? (823 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
488	239	63	22	3	8



**How satisfied are you with the standard of teaching on your course?  
For example, is your tutor knowledgeable and do you feel they  
explain things well? (824 responses)**

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dis-satisfied	Dis-satisfied	Very dis-atisfied	Not applicable
517	230	52	19	5	1

**How satisfied are you with the opportunity to actively take part in your class?  
(820 responses)**

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dis-satisfied	Dis-satisfied	Very dis-atisfied	Not applicable
491	265	48	10	3	3

**Do you feel that you are treated with respect by the staff and tutors in the ETB?  
(822 responses)**

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
646	132	42	2

## Services and Supports at my Centre or ETB

**How satisfied are you with the availability of public transport to your centre?  
(827 responses)**

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dis-satisfied	Dis-satisfied	Very dis-atisfied	Not applicable
138	193	102	71	54	269

**How satisfied are you with the access to technology at your centre? (for example, computers, printers, specialist software, and equipment etc.) (810 responses)**

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dis-satisfied	Dis-satisfied	Very dis-atisfied	Not applicable
402	263	70	26	7	42

How satisfied were you with the below supports you received from your Education and Training Board?					
Laptop or device loan? (795 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dis-satisfied	Dis-satisfied	Very dis-atisfied	I did not use this support
297	143	50	12	1	292
Learning supports? (793 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dis-satisfied	Dis-satisfied	Very dis-atisfied	I did not use this support
319	169	46	13	2	244
Guidance Service? (792 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dis-satisfied	Dis-satisfied	Very dis-atisfied	I did not use this support
319	194	59	15	7	198
Mental health support? (for example, counselling) (794 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dis-satisfied	Dis-satisfied	Very dis-atisfied	I did not use this support
175	172	80	20	10	337
Mentoring or key worker support? (794 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dis-satisfied	Dis-satisfied	Very dis-atisfied	I did not use this support
310	201	63	6	5	209

Disability Support? (793 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I did not use this support
227	159	73	17	6	311

Additional support (e.g. support with transport, meals, childcare, or finance)? (792 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
199	185	88	29	16	275

How satisfied are you with the way the information on supports and services was made available to you? (791 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I did not use this service
245	286	76	12	9	163

## Critical Issues in Irish Society

How would you describe your current accommodation or living situation? (756 responses)	
Rental accommodation	139
Supported accommodation	18
Social housing (e.g. local authority rented)	71
Traveller-specific accommodation	2
Private housing (have ownership of home)	152
Live with family (do not have ownership of home)	282
Living in homeless accommodation	2
Living in Direct Provision or International Protection Application accommodation such as a hotel	65
Other	25

If living in rented accommodation, do you find it difficult to meet the cost of your rented accommodation? (568 responses)		
Yes	No	Somewhat
156	286	126

Does your living situation affect your ability to learn or study? (757 responses)	
Yes	No
184	573

Does your accommodation or living situation cause you stress, anxiety, or worry? (757 responses)		
Yes	No	Prefer not to say
202	446	109

**How would you rate your overall wellbeing including your physical and mental health? (770 responses)**

Excellent	Very good	Good	Fair	Poor
118	199	268	143	42

**Do you have any long-term health issue, illness or disability? (772 responses)**

Yes	No	Prefer not to say
199	475	98

**Do you experience stress, anxiety, or depression? (771 responses)**

Yes	No	Prefer not to say
401	258	112

**Does stress, anxiety, or depression impact your ability to learn or study? (This includes factors that may affect your experience of learning new information e.g. concentration, or your engagement with the course e.g. attendance) (762 responses)**

Yes	No	Prefer not to say
269	374	119

**What would help to support your mental health? Please select all that apply (1039 responses) (603 respondents)**

Appointments with a counsellor or qualified specialist	207
An atmosphere of openness around mental health at your centre or ETB	148
Mindfulness classes	208
Increased financial support	197
Flexibility around assignments and deadlines	200
Other	79



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