



The Voice of
Adult Learning



LEARNER VOICES ACROSS IRELAND

The National FET
Learner Forum
Report,
2024-2025

NOVEMBER 2025

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Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

SOLAS
learning works



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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 former 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 ten Education and Training Boards who collaborated on the National FET Learner Forum in the 2024–25 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, Columbia University; Peter Lavender, University of Wolverhampton; and Stephen O'Brien, University College Cork.

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FOREWORD

I am delighted to present the “Learner Voices Across Ireland” 2024–2025 report. This research reflects the experiences of thousands of learners across the country and would not be possible without the commitment of our partners in the Education and Training Boards, including dedicated tutors, staff, and senior managers who make Further Education and Training (FET) the transformative and inspiring sector it is today.

We are hugely grateful to SOLAS and DFHERIS who prioritise Learner Voice in policy and help us to both lead international best practice and provide a platform to those whose voices are often seldom heard. Our fantastic colleagues in ETBI always give their time, guidance, and genuine support. Special thanks to the AONTAS Team for their continued passion in capturing Learner Voice in a meaningful and empowering way, and most importantly to every single learner that took the time to share their experiences and perspectives, thank you. We hope this report reflects your voice and it creates the changes you and others need on your learning journey.

This research matters because independent evidence is essential. It helps us demonstrate the impact of FET, ensures learners’ perspectives are listened to and documented, and it gives us a national picture for future planning.

FET transforms lives, this is evident, and FET is an essential part of Irish society. Learners have reported exceptionally positive experiences, with 93% satisfied with opportunities to take part in class, 90% valuing the communication they receive from their centre or ETB, 89% recognising the high standard of teaching, and 86% praise the learning supports available. This reflects the dedication of staff, the quality of provision, and the commitment of ETBs.

The benefits of adult learning go far beyond certification, and this is reflected in the research. Self-confidence has once again topped the list of wider benefits. This might seem “fluffy” to some, but people need confidence to speak up or ask questions in class, to make friends or integrate in a new community, to apply for jobs or new courses, and to believe in their own ability. Improved wellbeing, better health, and a deepened sense of belonging also rate highly on the wider benefits scoring. It’s encouraging for the long-term too as learners feel more



optimistic about the future, including their ability to apply for higher education and employment. FET is achieving its goals.

Yet there are challenges, and we must pause, reflect, and take action to address these. Meal support (49%), availability of public transport (51%), and childcare (55%), a persistent barrier, especially for women are some of the items that scored low on satisfaction rates. Furthermore, the research tells us that learners with disabilities, people on apprenticeships, and those living in IPAS centres have lower satisfaction rates than their peers. Learners that are marginalised in society also face additional barriers such as accessing work placement, for example. While these statistics are helpful, please take the time to read more in-depth perspectives shared by learners in the report. To create change, we must look beyond numbers and ask why? Also, while it is difficult for local providers and ETBs to address broader structural issues, we can learn from innovative practices, advocate for prioritised funding, and call on the Government to consider cross-sectoral responses in solution to issues like childcare and transport.

This report also includes learner stories to showcase the wonderful people involved in adult learning, to understand what worked for them, and to remind us how lucky we are to work in this field. “I learned about internet banking and how to transfer money from account to account. I also learned about online booking and online shopping. We opened Revolut accounts and learned how to use the Wallet on our phones.” Nouna Eiffe from Bray Adult Learning Centre described how her new knowledge has given her independence and the importance of the positive relationship she has with her tutors.

Learners have shared their suggestions for the future, they’d like to see more social events and activities, increased guidance services, and solutions for ongoing barriers like transport, among others. This tells us that they recognise the importance of social connection in education, they value guidance and the need to support this service, and we should take practical steps to make education accessible, particularly in rural areas.

I hope that you will listen carefully to the voices of learners in this research, utilise the evidence as a roadmap, and create an action plan. While it tells us that FET is essential and it is making a significant impact, we must learn from the challenges, make improvements, and prioritise those most in need.

Adult education is the greatest tool for creating positive social change. .

Dearbháil Lawless

AONTAS Chief Executive Officer

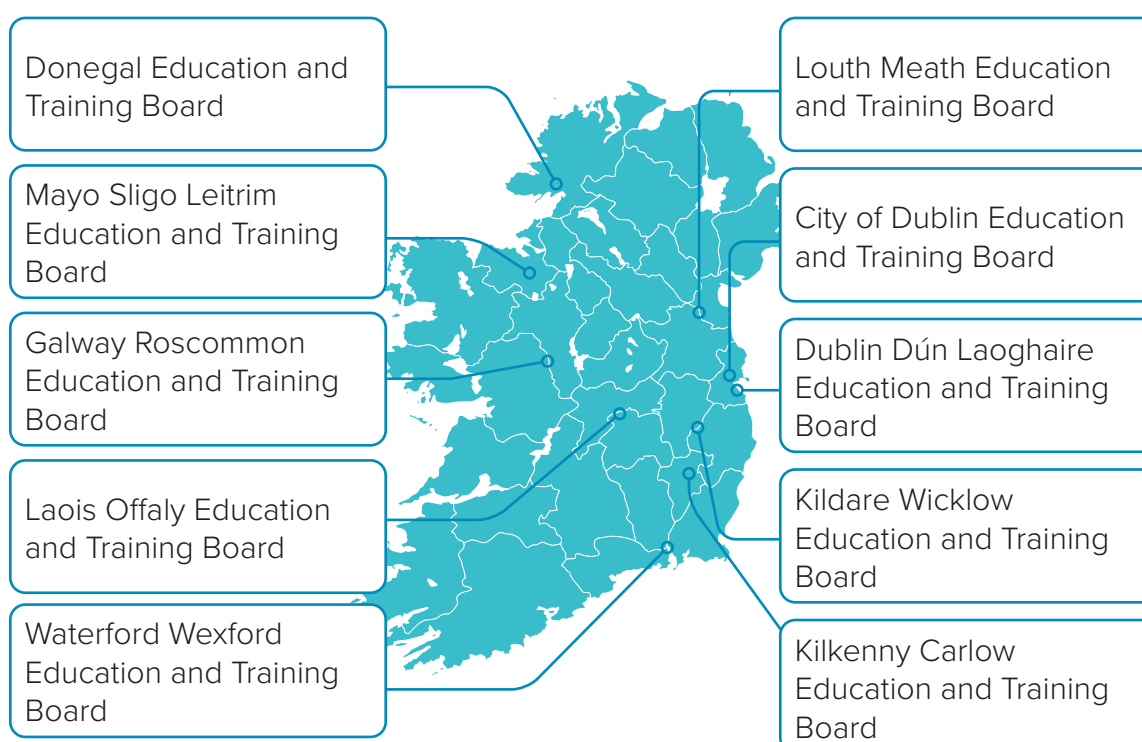


REPORT SUMMARY

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 10 Education and Training Boards to host the National FET Learner Forum 2024–2025:



778 learners participated in 98 focus groups during the 2024–25 academic term. 1858 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**).

Data Source	No. of Focus Groups	Average No. of Participants per Focus Group	Total No.
Focus Groups	98	8	778
Survey			1858
Learner Voice Contributions			2636

Table 1. *Summary of Research Data*

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:

Survey Item	Net Satisfaction
Opportunity to Take Part in Class	93%
Communications	90%
Tutor Feedback	90%

Table 2. *Highest net satisfaction scores*

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

Survey Item	Net Satisfaction
Financial Support	54%
Availability of Public Transport	51%
Meals Support	49%

Table 3. *Lowest net satisfaction scores*

Learner Forum participants reflected on how their FET experience could be improved. Their primary suggestions are listed below (**Table 4**).

Theme	What Learners Say
WELCOME, BELONGING and INCLUSION	Respect Continue to cultivate an atmosphere of respect and inclusion for and among learners. Community and Connection Host more social events and extracurricular activities outside of class hours to support community integration and relationships. Strong inclusion may involve undertaking specific, additional steps to recognise and include specific learner cohorts, including measures articulated by learners with disabilities and migrant learners in this report.
BUILDINGS AND FACILITIES	Accessible and Inclusive Buildings Enhance available buildings and facilities for FET provision. Upgrade classroom and toilet facilities in some centres. Enhance disability access to buildings and facilities. 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. Digital Transition Introduce laptop loan schemes where unavailable. Enhance Wi-Fi and digital equipment in some centres. Canteen Enhance access to affordable canteen facilities and/or self-catering spaces with adequate kitchen equipment for learners to utilise. Transport 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. Review introduction of a dedicated ETB minibus service to facilitate transportation to some centres.
COMMUNICATIONS	External and Internal Communication Diversify advertisement of FET courses, highlighting wider benefits of adult learning. Enhance internal communication of all supports and services available to FET learners.

Theme	What Learners Say
COURSE PROVISION	Quantity Increase the quantity of course options and the number of class hours offered. Increase the quantity of courses and class hours for ESOL provision. Scheduling Diversify course schedules to include more morning and evening classes. The latter is particularly important to FET learners with childcare needs. Staffing Increase teaching staff numbers to meet course demand. Take steps to minimise the impact of staff turnover on course provision.
TEACHING AND LEARNING	Curriculum and Assessment Update course curricula, learning materials and equipment used by learners. Offer longer timeframes for assignment completion. Teaching Methods Consider how best to vary teaching methods, including using diverse audio-visual content and practical learning activities.
CREATING PATHWAYS	Guidance Services Increase resourcing of guidance support services to meet the needs of the learner population. Pathways Facilitate learner progression by enhancing availability of and access to FET courses at higher NFQ Levels. Enhance communications with relevant industries and HEIs to clarify and support learner pathways. Work Experience and Work-Based Learning Enhance access to structured training partnerships between ETBs/FET centres and local employers. Share a database of employers willing to provide learners with work placement opportunities. Facilitate regular class trips to course-related workplaces. Communicate guidelines to employers and FET learners to ensure learners access and undertake placements relevant to their course work.

Theme	What Learners Say
LEARNER SUPPORT	Learner Support Consider how best to enhance individualised support to learners. Highlighted areas of need include digital literacy, study techniques, and time management. Disability Support Enhance disability learner support through provision of physical copies of assignment briefs, and a common, accessible online platform for submitting assignments. Increase SNA support.
WRAPAROUND SUPPORT	Finance Enhance financial supports, particularly in the context of learner challenges with the cost of meals and travel for learning. Mental Health Increase the quantity of counselling support available. Consider introduction of a dedicated ‘quiet room’ in centres. Support provision of mindfulness classes. Ensure flexibility around assessment deadlines.

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

“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
November 2025

AONTAS: ABOUT US

AONTAS are the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland, founded in 1969 and passionately working ever since to make education equal and accessible for all.

Backed by our robust research and focussed community work, we advocate and lobby for quality education for all adults and raise awareness of the impact of adult learning on people's lives and on society. We work on behalf our members, who connect with all communities across the island of Ireland. Our members and adult learners inform all our research and campaigns for social change.

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.

Learn more at www.aontas.com

The AONTAS Research Team (L-R): Dr Philip Finn, Aisling Meyler, Karyn Farrell and Dr Thomas Murray



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 FET 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 continuing “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. ETBs 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.

Members of the National FET Learner Forum Facilitator Panel.



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The National FET Learner Forum (NFLF) 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 is responsive to the needs of adult learners today and continues to be in future. The SOLAS Future FET 2020–24 Strategy explicitly recognises the Forum’s role: ‘Learner participation on relevant governance, strategic and decision-making structures within FET is paramount to a future successful learner-centred approach’ (SOLAS, 2020). UNESCO (2016) identifies democratic participation as a core principle of lifelong learning systems. Its recommendation on adult learning and education highlights the importance of involving learners in shaping the structures that affect them.

The present chapter discusses the nature of the project, including both learner and ETB partner perspectives on the 2024–25 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.¹

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 2636 learner contributions during the 2024–25 academic year and more than 14,000

1. In this report, ‘learners’ and ‘adult learners’ are used interchangeably to refer to all participants engaged in Further Education and Training. A minority of FET participants are under the age of 18.



adult learners to date. The NFLF represents one of the few, sustained national-level learner engagement mechanisms in European adult education. In recent years, AONTAS have contributed to European-level dialogue on participatory education, including as National Coordinator for the New European Agenda for Adult Learning. (AONTAS is one of only two Non-Governmental Organisations in Europe with this role). The Forum thus contributes both to national objectives and to broader, international debates on participation, inclusion, and democratic engagement in adult learning systems.

AONTAS value social justice, feminism, equality, diversity, partnership, and social inclusion, aiming to ensure adult learning is recognised and supported to empower individuals and communities. Fostering these democratic values in and through adult education acquires renewed urgency today. In a context of increasing social polarisation and individual isolation, authoritarian challenges to social inclusion and diversity increasingly feature in our communities and society. The National FET Learner Forum has never been more relevant. Within Ireland's adult learning system, the NFLF represents a formally recognised space for FET learners to examine common problems together and to transform their learning environments. Importantly, the NFLF fundamentally normalises adult learner involvement in policy- and decision-making. Insofar as adult learners are empowered in practice, the NFLF recognises and supports 'democratic learning', the learning that flows from participating in constructing and maintaining a common life together (See Biesta, 2016, p. 104).

The 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, trained 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.

AONTAS utilise Learner Voice reports as a vital evidence base to influence national policy. 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 Boards. At the conclusion of NFLF events for the academic year, the Research Team collates all regional report findings and publishes an overarching, synthesis report: **Learner Voices Across Ireland**. Diverse stakeholders have highlighted how Forum insights have influenced policy discussion and changes to practice, notably facilitating resource allocation during the Covid-19 pandemic and the involvement of learners in ETB policy development.

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 (Murray and Brennan, 2023).

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, NFLF 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.

By sharing their experience, NFLF participants learn about disparities in FET provision across a region, as well as areas where provision may not meet learners' satisfaction.



The National FET Learner Forum

A total of 10 National FET Learner Forum events took place between October 2024 and April 2025. 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 pastries 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. An overview of learner views on and satisfaction with participating in the NFLF is available in Appendix 1 of this report.

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

Data Source	No. of Focus Groups	Average No. of Participants per Focus Group	Total No.
Focus Groups	98	8	778
Survey			1858
Learner Voice Contributions			2636

Table 1.1 *Summary of Research Data*

AONTAS conducted research into learner experiences of Further Education and Training in 10 regions. This mixed-methods study uses both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Qualitative findings are derived from the contributions of 778 focus group participants. Learners were pre-assigned to a focus group according to their NQF 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.

The report authors documented and analysed all FET learner contributions to the NFLF; it reproduces learner contributions verbatim. Where editing has occurred for the sake of clear communication, this has been light and transparent. Where possible, the authors tag learner voice quotations with relevant demographic identifiers and programme titles. A glossary of programme title acronyms used in the report is provided in **Table 1.2**.

Programme Title	
BTEI	Back to Education Initiative
CTC	Community Training Centre
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
LTI	Local Training Initiative
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
VTOS	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme

Table 1.2 *Glossary of Programme Acronyms*

Quantitative research findings are drawn from a survey of 1858 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.”

The research team crosschecked and verified all dataset calculations. Survey questions and data, including all disaggregated learner satisfaction scores, are available in Appendix 2 of this report. A note on the NFLF survey dataset’s representativeness of wider FET participation levels is available in Appendix 3.

Thematic Analysis

During thematic analysis, the report authors coded the focus group transcripts and identified patterns emerging from the data. At the outset of the academic year, the research team engaged in the open coding of focus group transcripts, reviewing 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 choices for validity. For each regional forum report, the Head of Research cross-checked transcript analysis with facilitator notes for validity.

While focus group conversations were wide ranging, the report authors identify as ‘primary’ only those areas working well or needing improvement that featured across multiple focus group discussions (i.e. two or more focus groups) and/or had been raised by four or more participants in the same focus group. The report’s selection of primary themes is further informed by the priority survey respondents afford to them. Particular attention is afforded to instances where learners articulate explicit suggestions or proposals (“What Learners Say They Would Like to See Happen Next”). The research team collated a table of learner proposals from all 10 regional NFLF reports and subsequently identified the most frequently recurring proposals under each primary theme.

Finally, throughout the analysis, the report authors considered principles of social justice, feminism, equality, diversity, partnership, and social inclusion. The research team identified specific learner groups for detailed comparative analysis based on current advocacy initiatives at AONTAS seeking to address social exclusion, marginalisation, and other social barriers impeding educational access.



CHAPTER 2

The Adult Learner and FET

Chapter 2 provides an overview of NFLF participants' demographic profile and outlines learners' stated motivations for undertaking their FET course.

Participant Profile

778 learners took part in the Learner Forum focus group events. They represented FET programmes from NFQ Levels 1–6, unaccredited courses, and courses whose levels were unknown. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners formed a relative majority of focus group participants.

1858 learners responded to the Learner Forum survey. Most survey respondents were full-time learners (66%, n = 1114/1695), representing programmes from NFQ Levels 1–6, unaccredited courses, and courses whose levels were unknown. Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) learners formed a relative majority of survey respondents (**Figures 1 and 2**).

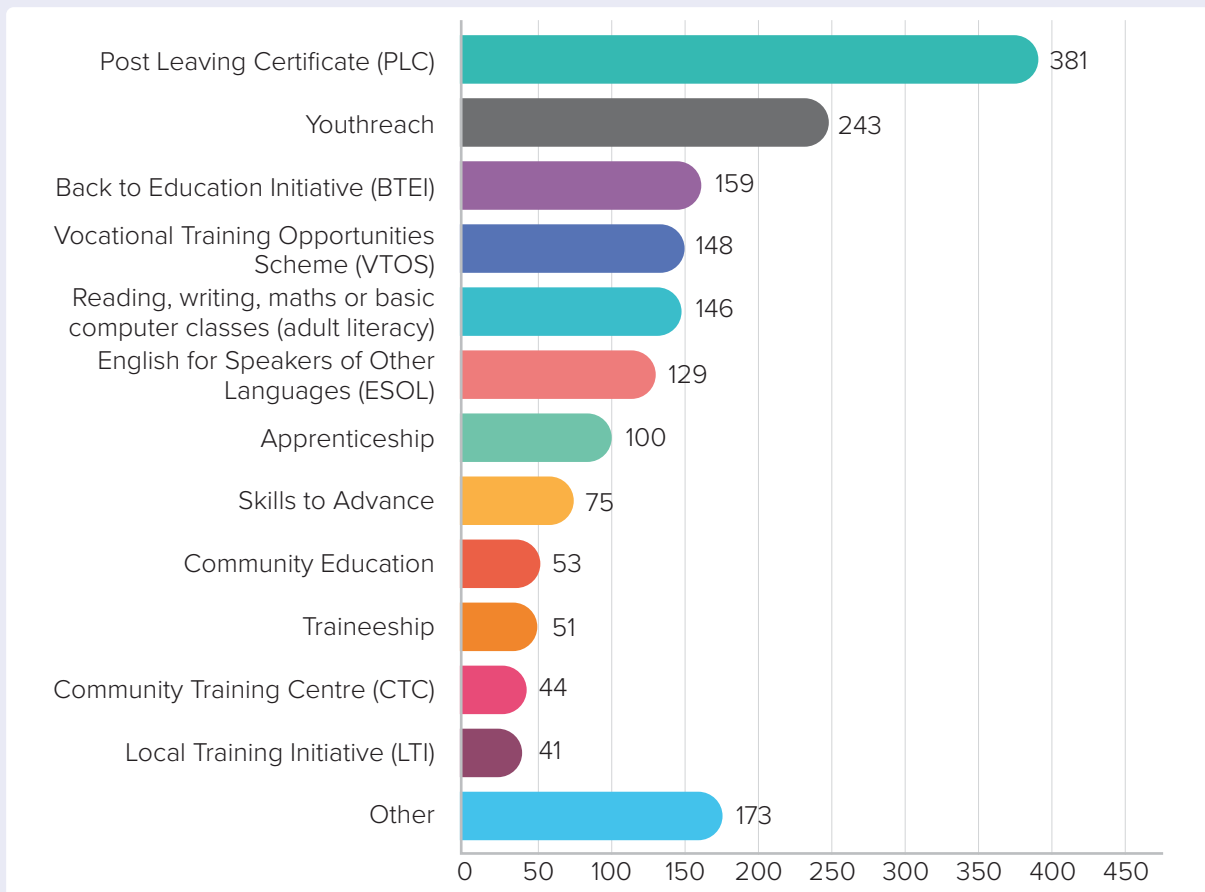


Figure 1 – Course or Programme Title

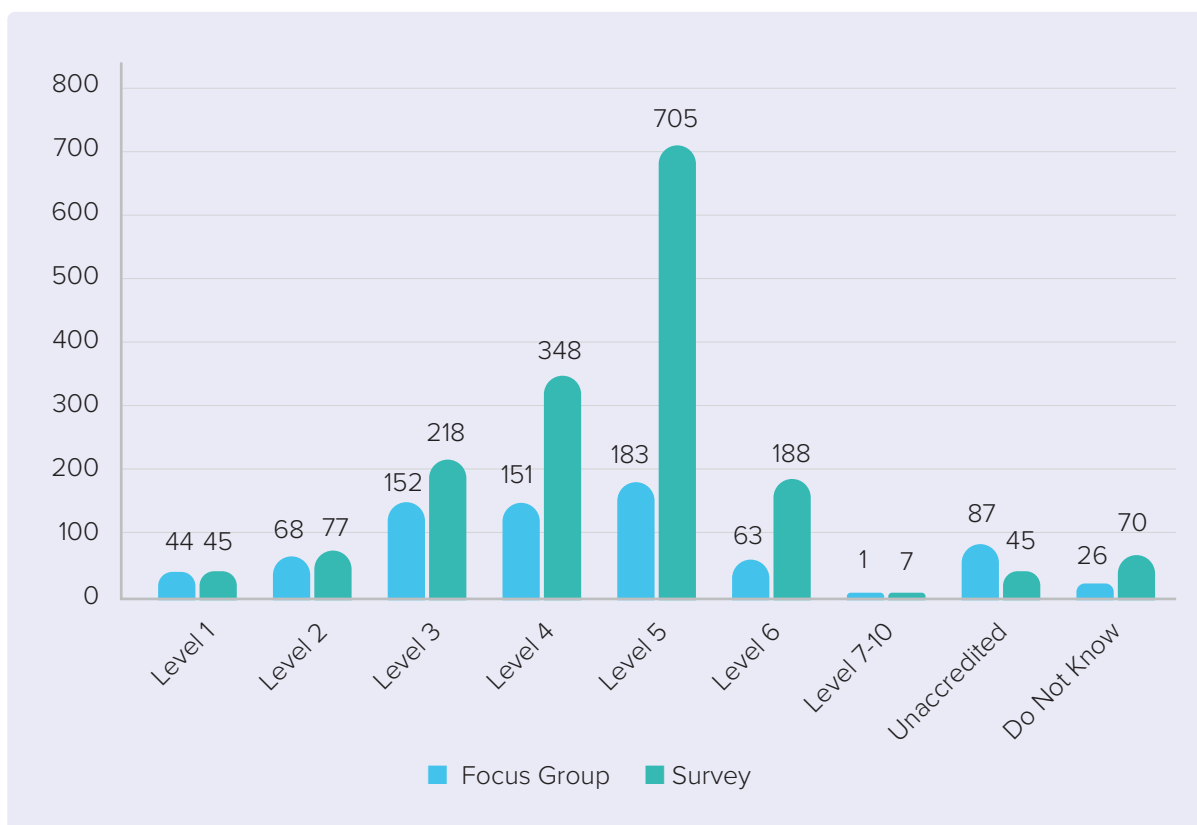


Figure 2: Learner representation by NFQ level

A comparison of the NFLF survey respondent profile with the national FET learner profile is available in Appendix 3 of this report.

The most represented age group was 18–24 year-olds (37%, n = 682/1846) (**Figure 3**).

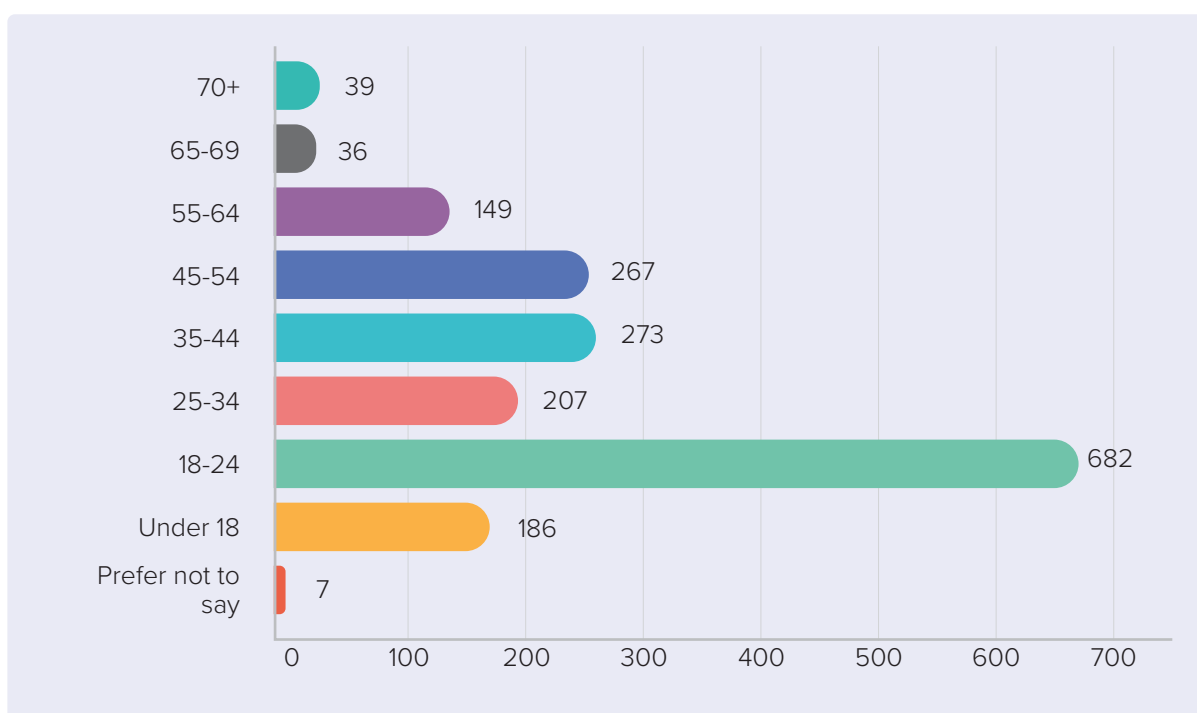


Figure 3: Forum Participants' age

Most survey respondents were female (66%, n = 1211/1845) (**Figure 4**).

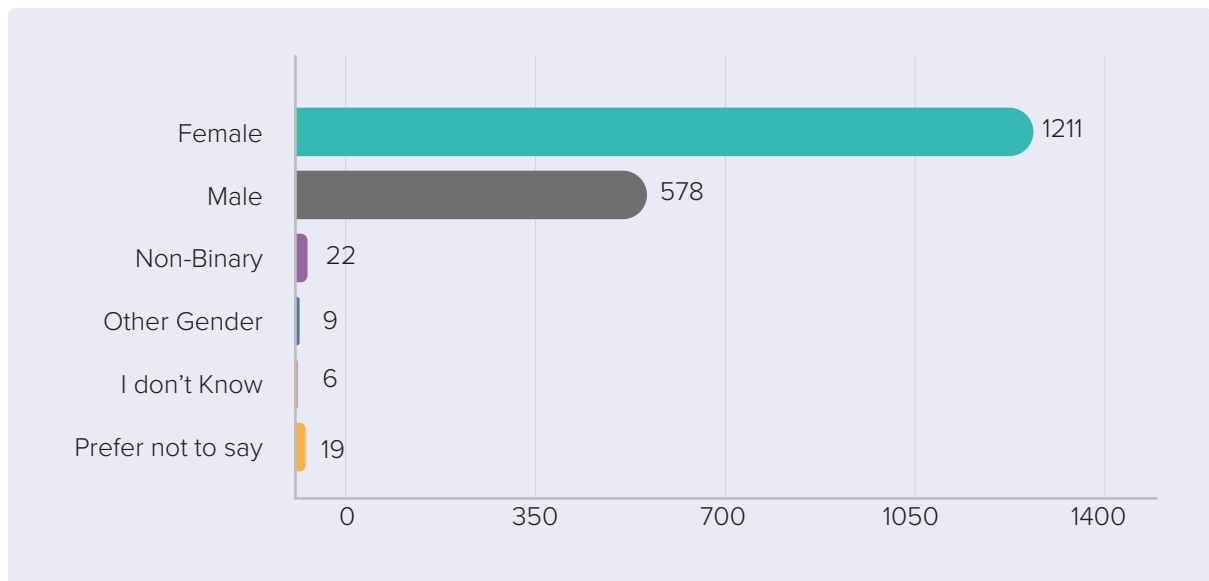


Figure 4 – *Forum Participants' Gender*

Of those who reported information on ethnicity in the survey, the majority identified as White Irish (60%, n =1116/1846). Learners had the option to tick more than one ethnicity (**Figure 5**).

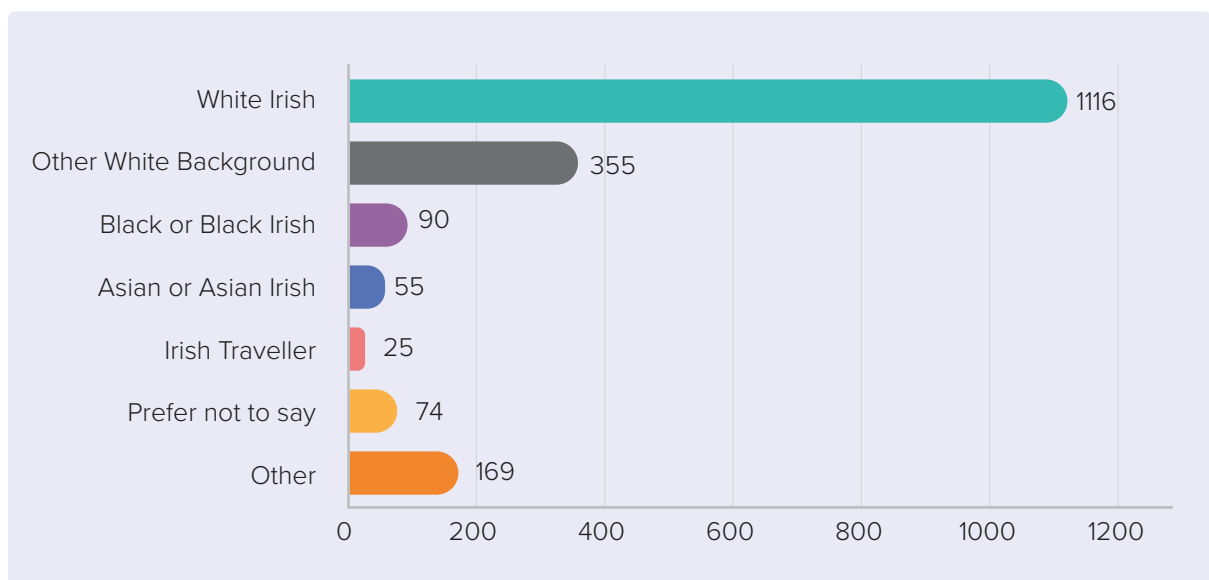


Figure 5 – *Forum Participants' Ethnicity*

In terms of prior educational attainment, 44% (n = 810/1843) of survey respondents reported achieving Leaving Certificate, adult learning course, or similar (NFQ Levels 4 and 5). 9% (n = 175/1843) reported a prior level of education lower than Junior Certificate (Figure 6).

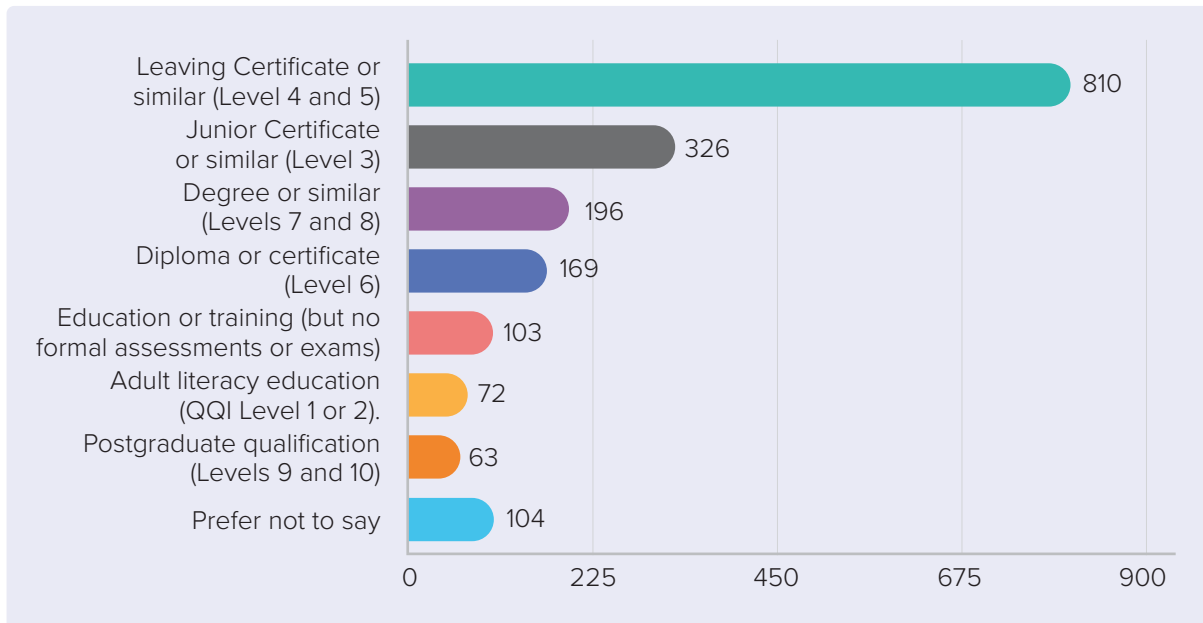


Figure 6 – Forum Participants' Educational Attainment

In terms of employment status, 38% (n = 710/1845) of survey respondents reported being unemployed, 12% (n = 226/1845) reported being in full-time employment, with an additional 22% (n = 408/1845) engaged in part-time employment (Figure 7).

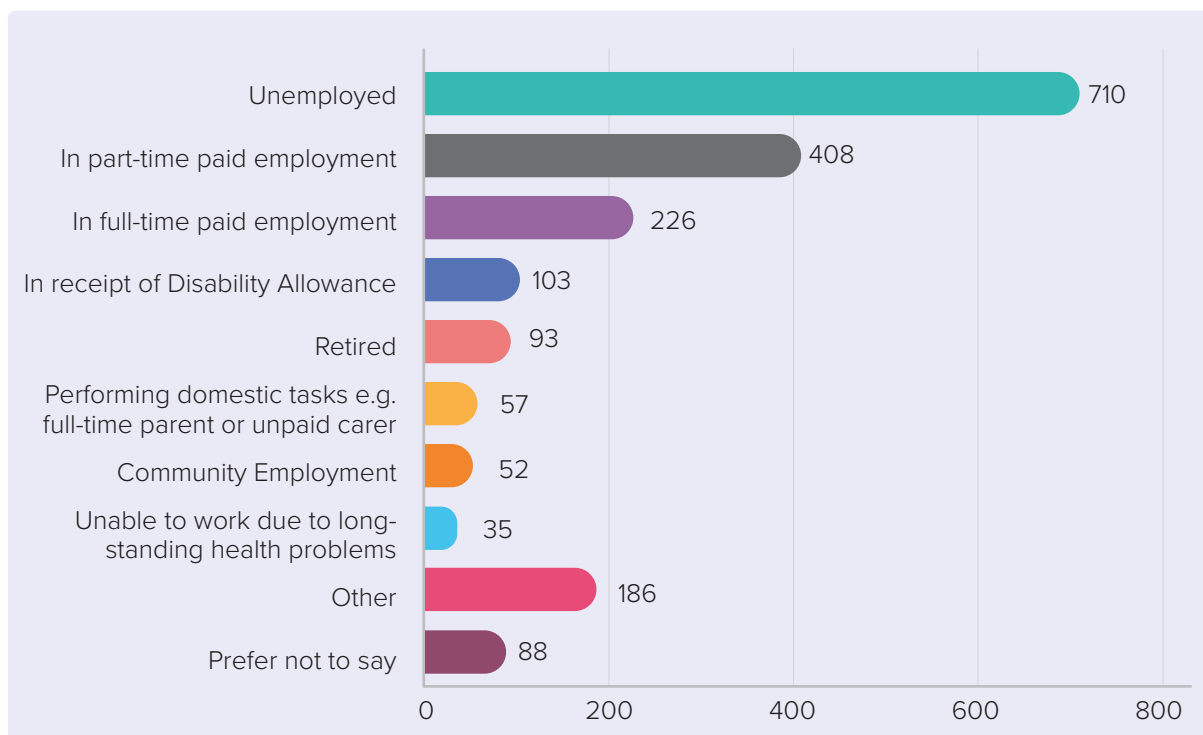


Figure 7 – Forum Participants' Employment Status

Learner Motivations

Learners reported a variety of reasons influencing their decision to participate in a course or programme (**Figure 8**). Learners could select more than one reason in response to this question.

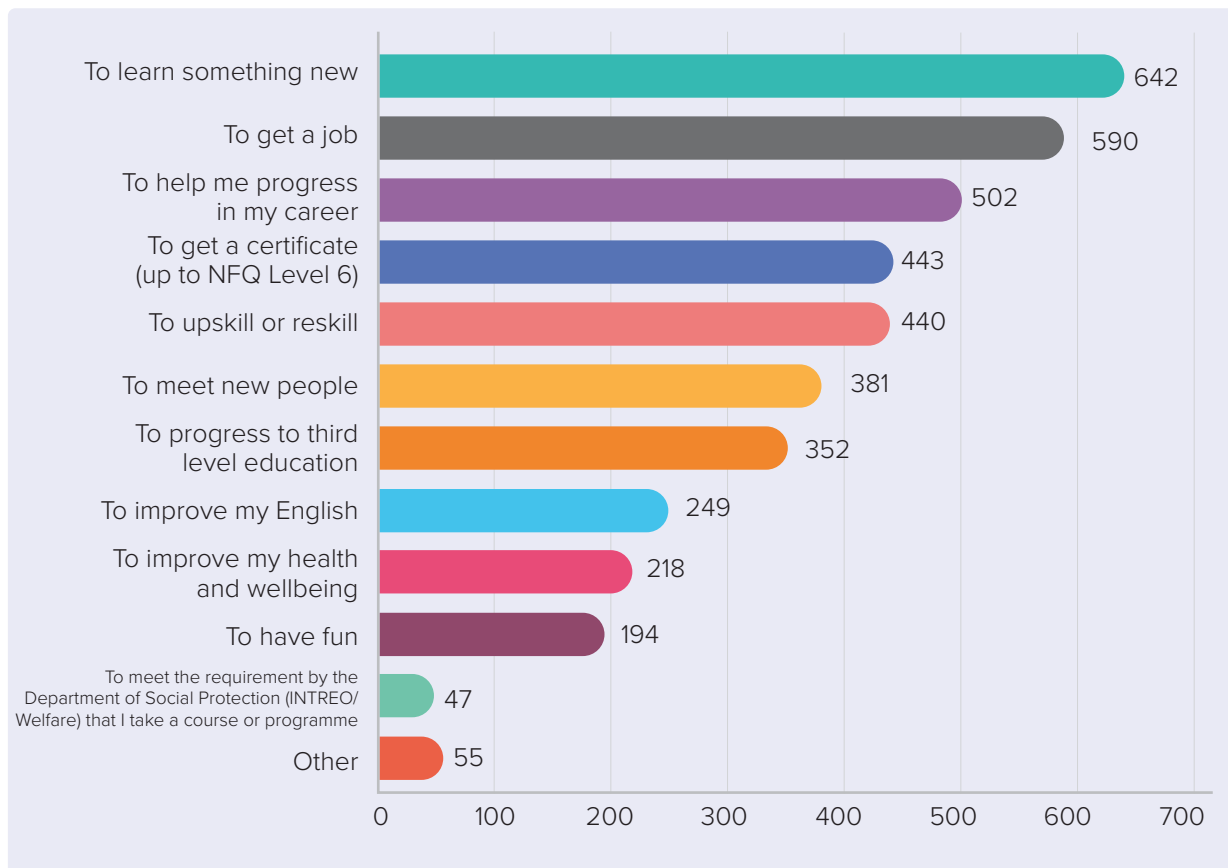


Figure 8 – Responses to “What were the reasons for taking your course?”

The primary motivations to enrol in a FET course that learners reported are: “To learn something new” (40%, n = 642/1604), “To get a job” (37%, n = 590/1604), and “To help me progress in my career” (31%, n = 502/1604). Focus group participants shared their diverse reasons for beginning their course:

I am 54 years of age and it's getting harder to let others read and write for me. It is embarrassing. That's why I went back. I couldn't even write a shopping list, but now I can.

Adult Literacy learner

So I had a job in the printing industry, like a graphic designer. But here I didn't find a job because it's really a different environment. So, I decided to really change my career. So, I decided to do something like animation, multimedia, something like production.

BTEI, migrant learner

I was working in construction for 20 years. I was made redundant in 2019. I struggled to see what I wanted to do, but then I talked to myself, like, what I could do, and it would be to help somebody. So, I just thought to myself, 'I'd go for that'. And now I think it's the best decision I've ever made.

BTEI learner

I hope next year I will study in college. It is very nice idea. My diploma is Ukrainian diploma because I studied in university. Maybe my life is changed. Because all my life, I don't work – I don't want [to work in a kitchen] – wash[ing] dishes and preparing sausage. I don't want [it].

ESOL, migrant learner

Significantly, Forum participants also recognised the wider benefits of learning. They reported taking their course to meet new people (24%, n= 381/1604) and to improve their health and wellbeing (14%, n = 218/1604):

I come from a background of addiction. Coming into recovery, it was all about what happens next. So I joined an organisation called [name of addiction service] and they are linked in the ETB. The access to all the training programs is there. They form a massive part of recovery. It gives us that distraction but also gives us a chance of a future, a future away from our past but a future that is full of opportunities.

BTEI learner

I was sitting there doing nothing [at home] and I said, 'Here, I'm going to do something' ... And then I joined the Women's Shed about three years ago and now you can't find me anywhere because I'm always gone somewhere.

Community Education learner

I have a young fellow with special needs, Down syndrome. So it was really kind of everything was going into him. I was at home one-on-one with him all the time and I wasn't going out at night or evenings or whatever. And just when I heard about this [course] then and he was getting older and older, I said, 'Oh, you know, it's a little bit of mammy time'.

Community Education learner

CHAPTER 3

Course Provision

Chapter 3 outlines learners' experiences of course provision, and the wider benefits of FET.

Course Provision

Learner Forum participants provided feedback on diverse aspects of course provision. Learner Forum participants appreciated the wide range of FET courses offered and the increased personal attention they received through smaller class sizes:

You can follow a different path. Not just a traditional (one) ... for a young person or even a middle-aged person who wants to change ... how many options there are, it is literally lifelong learning if you want to. There's so much out there. Because I have a lad now who's doing the Leaving Cert so it's great to know that he has other options. Takes pressure off, you know.

Community Education learner

The childcare group is so small. There's only about eight of us so you get a lot of one-on-one time.

VTOS learner



Learners reported unmet needs for course provision and recommended increasing the provision of FET courses, notably in Community Education, Apprenticeships, and Basic IT literacy classes:

[Learner1] I'd like if there was more courses available; culinary, bakery skills; horticulture would be alright as well. [Learner 2] I'd like a basic cookery course.

Adult Literacy learner

*[Facilitator] You finish in June and when do you come back?
[Learner 1] I don't know, it just depends on your waiting list, it's all backlogged. [Learner 2] Some of us only had to wait a year for our second phase but there's a couple of us who are waiting a couple of years.*

Apprentice

They should do those things [separate IT classes] for mature students as well. Like if you need support with technology [or] anyone who doesn't know how to do that sort of thing can go to that sort of thing.

PLC learner

Learners would also like to see an increase in the quantity of courses and class hours for English for Speakers of Other Languages. Notably, this proposal featured in eight out of ten regional reports, indicating how the demand for ESOL courses far exceeds current course provision. Current ESOL learners consistently report insufficient in-class hours on their existing programmes and would like to see provision of more courses at different levels and more class hours:

- ➔ We learn only two days in a week. And I would like to learn five days in a week, every day full time.
- ➔ All week I can speak English only Monday. Only one day Monday is really too little. All week I don't speak English, only Monday. Because bank holiday is Monday we miss class.
- ➔ I would like if the course went on longer, so we didn't have to get through so much of it so quickly.
- ➔ In our education centre we have professional courses full-time, but we don't have English course full time. I would like to go every day because I noticed my level grow when I visit two lessons, and if it will be five lessons maybe it will be faster.
- ➔ I would like more classes with different Levels.

Learners expressed a need for flexible scheduling of course provision to accommodate adult learners' life circumstances, including work and care responsibilities. Learners with children highlighted how course scheduling benefitted them when it facilitated their management of life responsibilities:

The times that the classes are on at, it's like ten 'til about three, so it's a perfect time for me when the kids are in school.

BTEI learner

The timing is good; I can bring my children to school and then go to my course. It is good for single parents.

ESOL, migrant learner

[Facilitator] When do you know where the next phase of your course will be? [Learner] You don't know where you're going to get, it could be a bit different to the course you've done previously, it could be down the country ... down to Kerry or somewhere like that, you don't get to pick. You get a month's notice or two weeks.

Apprentice

Learners reported a lack of tutor staffing as a key issue impacting their learning experience:

[Learner 1] Sometimes they cut the day short while we're in school because lack of staff. Staff will go home and stuff and then they don't have enough people for all of us so they'll just send us home like really last minute. [Facilitator] How much notice? Like an hour? [Learner 2] Less than an hour even.

Youthreach learner

There seems to be a lack of tutors or teachers at the moment ... There's not a lot of funding being put in ... and there are a lot of good tutors that could be availed of only for this funding has been cut. They had very popular classes and this time around they weren't able to get the funding to apply.

Community Education learner

Each time we've been down there – four times now – it's been a different instructor each time ... each instructor has their own way of doing things, so you go to do it the way you were just taught the last time and then you're getting that instructor does it a different way. I just had no motivation to do that, going in and doing a job and getting told, oh, that's the wrong way.

Apprentice

The Wider Benefits of FET

Forum participants identified a variety of wider benefits associated with attending their adult learning course or going to their centre. Survey respondents could select more than one reason when answering this question (**Figure 9**).

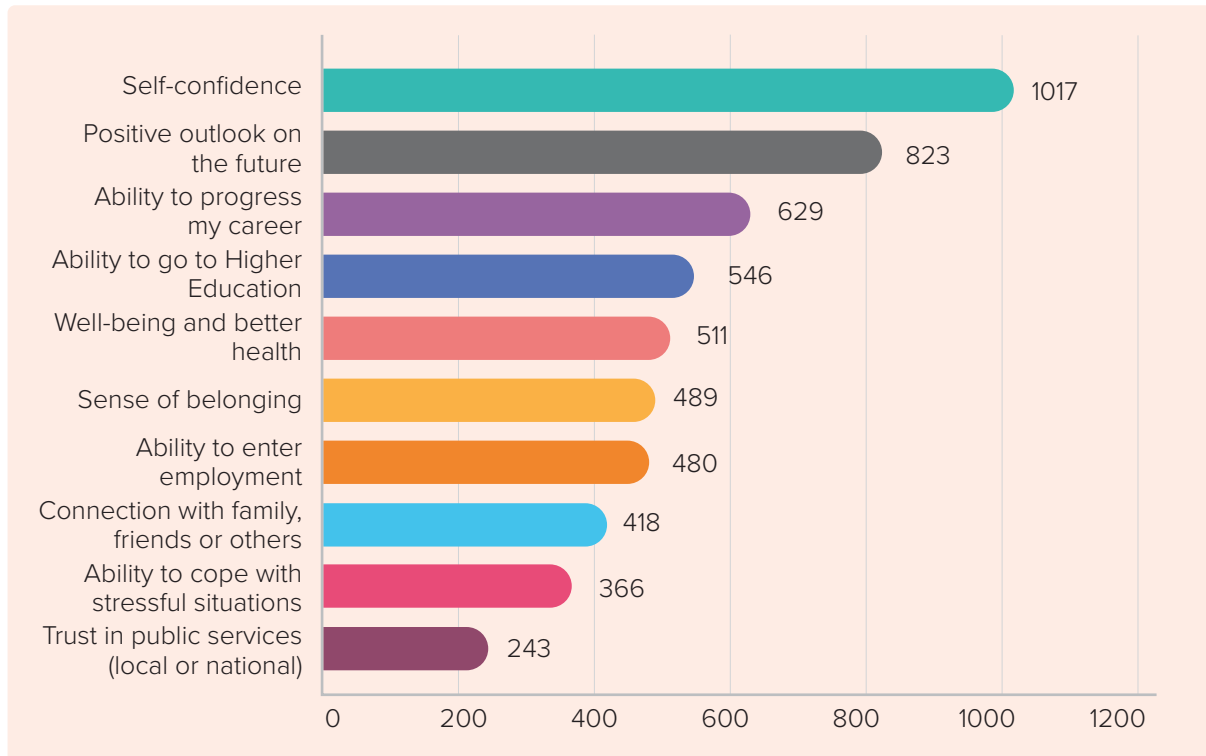


Figure 9 – Responses to “During your time in your adult learning course, have you experienced an increase in any of the following?”

Learners widely recognised the positive impact of their FET experience. Survey respondents reported an increase in self-confidence (65%, $n = 1017/1572$) and a more positive outlook on the future (52%, $n = 823/1572$). Focus group participants described these positive impacts as follows:

I never got an A in my life, and I got an A in History. I will never forget it. I really wanted to tell everyone. It wasn't to brag. I wanted to scream that I got an A, and I never got one before in my life.

Community Education learner





I love the feeling of being able to show my potential, to show what I'm able to do because I know what I'm capable of. And for so many years I under-sold myself as if I was nothing, but I know that I have much more potential.

BTEI learner

Focus group participants further outlined how their FET course facilitated professional development and employment:

The connections I made there, I made with a lot of industry people. So now I have a full-time career, well not full-time, but I'm freelance on many rosters. I work in [a radio station] as a broadcast sound engineer. I do a lot of my own work, gigs around the city, doing sound for gigs. That's connections I made through people my teachers knew.

PLC learner

It's a qualification that can boost my career. It's very, very in-depth. When we are done with this course, we are going to be very good healthcare professionals. It's recognised, so it's something that is very valuable and can add value to our working experience.

BTEI learner

In Portugal, I work the homecare but I don't have English for working for care [in Ireland] ... I have one test in college. If I pass the test, I make new course for working with children.

LTI learner

Forum participants proposed that FET could better support their course's positive impact on professional development by facilitating regular, employment-related day trips:

It was only one trip so far this year, and the fund had been cut... it was a trip where you go to like a nursery, and you see how they work in a nursery ... there should be one every term or two a term to ... places where you would get a job. So if you go there, show your face, see how they do it, that's where you probably will end up eventually, as a worker, to start off.

PLC learner

CHAPTER 4

Teaching and Learning

Chapter 4 focuses on learners' experiences of 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 10**).

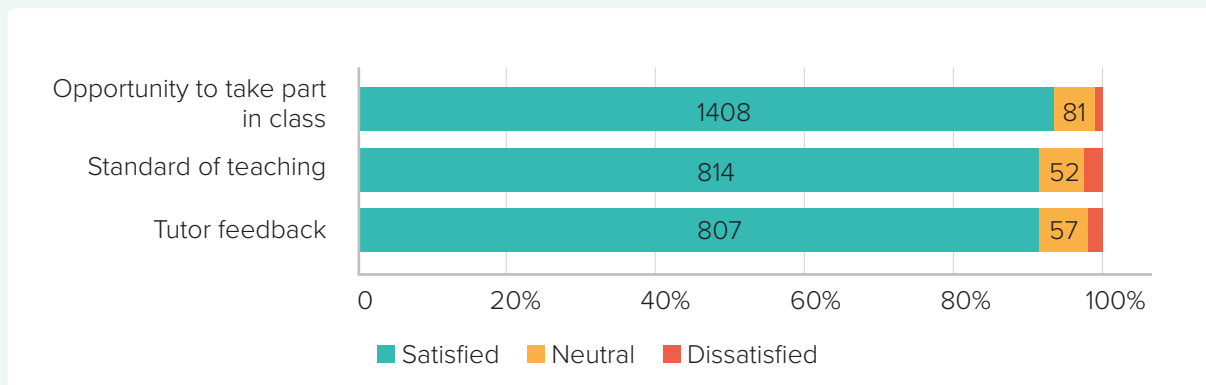


Figure 10 – Learner Satisfaction with Teaching and Learning

Teaching and the Role of Tutors

Survey respondents reported high levels of satisfaction with the overall standard of teaching they received (89%). Learner Forum participants provided specific feedback on the particularly important role of tutors in their experience of FET. Focus group participants praised their tutors for their enthusiasm, passion, knowledge, and patience which renewed their love of learning and facilitated a sense of belonging previously absent from mainstream education:

The tutors and staff have been exceptional in their support, encouragement, and tutoring. The encouragement and opportunities I have received will forever be appreciated. It has rekindled my love of learning and education, a gift that cannot be bought.

VTOS learner

Our tutor, they're so enthusiastic, it just pours out of them. All of the subjects just pour out, so we get the feeling as well. They passed it on.

Community Education learner

It's so important to have a relationship with people that are teaching you. In school, I don't know if anybody else had this but I felt like I was treated like a robot. I went into Youthreach and it was completely different. In school, they don't care about you. They don't take the time to do the work with you.

Youthreach learner

While Learner Forum participants overwhelmingly 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 requested greater understanding from tutors as to their individual needs and diverse life situations:

[Learner] Four people have already left. Two of the boys [who left] I thought were very, very targeted in class just for being there. [Facilitator] Targeted by who? [Learner] By teachers. Like one of the young lads could have had his jacket on and he'd get given out to. They were always sent down to the office like if they didn't look at them [tutor] when you're talking to them and sent home very easily.

Youthreach learner

There's one tutor we have and they're very strict ... If you take a mental health day or if you can't make it to college for one day, they will follow up and then say it in front of the class. [If] you need to go to the restroom, they will say it in front of the class ... so they're very insensitive about that type of thing so that's what I'd change.

PLC learner

I understand our class has a wide range of age groups, whatever else, and everyone's learning abilities are totally different, I understand that, but don't put the whole class down to being younger than we are.

PLC learner

I find when it comes to teaching here, the teachers they can talk too fast. For us (migrant learners), it's too fast and hard for us to catch.

BTEI, migrant learner

Opportunity to Participate in Class

Survey respondents reported a high satisfaction regarding the opportunity to take part in class (93%). Forum participants outlined their experience of class participation in more depth. Learners highlighted how tutors cultivated a welcoming space within the classroom in which they felt safe and empowered to participate:



[Tutor] says, no question is too stupid. Just ask it. You never feel like that in their class. You never feel you can't ask a question. You can ask them anything.

**Community
Education learner**

It feels like we're kind of leading it in a way. It starts at the beginning where [tutor] will ask how your week was, and then we kind of go from there and everybody'll ask questions or participate in it ... Maybe [name of peer learner] will say something or the other girls will say something and we learn from that, from their experience ... so it feels like we're tutors.

CTC learner

Learners identified participation as a challenge but also spoke positively about how this supportive environment facilitated peer-to-peer engagement and a willingness to assist other learners in the classroom:

A lot of the classes are very like self-motivating. Like you have to like get yourself to do it. And I struggle with that. I'm like, 'Oh well I'm just going to sit on my phone if I don't have to do it'.

Youthreach learner

Students are very helpful as well. If we are stuck, we help each other during the course, no matter where we are from, you know, but yeah, it's very helpful now.

VTOS learner

Everyone is encouraging ... and everyone helped in the class. If you were stuck on something, the feedback from everyone in the class was great. And you were never made to feel stupid. If I thought, well, I can't do that others can be explain or someone else will say something to you.

Community Education learner

Learners identified good tutor facilitation as a key enabling factor for successful group work and learning:

Our tutor is very, very good but what happens often, we're discussing history or anything at all, and there are a lot of students who like to interrupt all the time ... There's a middle ground. There's too much interruption entirely and then there's also a chance to say something, ask something. That's fine, but it's when it becomes too much interruption.

Community Education learner

In my class, we are quite rowdy people, and I believe the tutors should start stepping up more to saying, 'Hey, get down to work instead of fooling around' ... It's kind of affecting you, like they're distracting us when we're trying to work.

PLC learner

Creating conditions for mutual trust was viewed as particularly significant where courses covered sensitive topics, requiring learners to understand and respect confidentiality:

We have a few students who have come straight from Leaving Cert. We're doing a lot of our subjects that are very personal and very heavy. You're having discussions, you're learning from people's experiences. They're not mature enough ... coming out of school dealing with addiction studies or dealing with care support and special needs assistance and stuff like that. The confidentiality within our class was completely broken. It was broken by a young student who really just didn't have a grip on what she was saying outside of the class. It was actually having a huge impact. So that made the other learners withdraw. They were afraid to share [their] experience because you didn't know if someone on the street was going to come up and say, 'I heard what you said'.

PLC learner

Curriculum and Assessment

Survey respondents reported high levels of satisfaction with tutor feedback (90%). Focus group participants outlined their experience of teaching and assessments in more depth. Learners highlighted the positive role of stimulating and engaging learner-centred teaching and assessment methods:

The teaching methods they're using are more involved and more hands on and it works better.

Apprentice

[Learner] We have a lot of laughs. Sometimes we sing. [Facilitator] Do you learn songs? [Learner] Yes ... It's very funny ... Many times we have play for long words. [Facilitator] Like a game? [Learner] Yes, game ... It's very funny ... and music and videos and conversation. Many many time we have conversation.

ESOL learner

We do different things as well, so eventually we have a PowerPoint presentation tomorrow and then another time we'll be doing a podcast and get marked on that so it's very very interesting in that sort of sense and we do voiceovers on PowerPoints as well so it's not just the one thing all the time sending in a word document.

PLC learner

While many learners found teaching and learning to be positive, this was not the experience of all learners. Some focus group participants made specific requests to review outdated curricula and learning materials:

We should add more subjects like history and like science.

Youthreach learner

Some of the modules are very outdated. We're learning stuff from 2005, 2010, 2015 ... Even yesterday we were doing stuff from ten years ago. I've mentioned this before at a board meeting, but they need to update the curriculum, basically. And even the teachers are 100% on board with this. They're frustrated, but they have to teach.

BTEI learner

We need updated notes ... they are good, but it's quite outdated, like they've been there for a long time ... Even the books, they're about 20 years old! [The tutor] might tell you in class, "Scribble that out and write the updated version on top of it". It always references the old regulations.

Apprentice

The theory books are outdated ... the regulations are changing all the time. And these are books from 20 years ago or something, 2010. And if we're in class now, you're reading the book ... You start reading what's actually said in the book. You go into the test and you're wrong.

Apprentice

The engines that we're working on [are] from the '90s. Newer engines have a lot more electrics to them ... My engine won't turn, it's seized solid like because the thrust washers are worn out in it ... so instead of going back to a garage and being like yeah that's tight, they [apprentices] don't know, they haven't worked on a good engine. So I think we should be working on good engines.

Apprentice

Some focus group participants highlighted a less than positive experience due to feeling overburdened by assessments. When asked what they would like to see happen next, learners suggested using more continuous assessment while spacing out assignments to allow time to take tutor feedback on board before the next assessment:

We have to do three assignments per module ... We could get it at the start of one week and then we could have to do it by the end of the week. So, they're giving us a short time to do it, and it has to be like seven or eight pages long.

PLC learner

I think some of the assignments are very close together. You have one and you're just finished setting up another one. Sometimes you can just be struggling for time.

PLC learner



I'd like to see more ongoing assessments, if you want, rather than doing major projects at one go ... continuous assessments ... Instead of doing everything at one time. You know, you have to have it done, you know, a deadline and then when you have several projects together, it gets very stressful ... it's the same work, not saying give us less work.

Programme/course unknown

Finally, learners highlighted the importance of varied teaching and learning resources in enhancing the accessibility of their course and facilitating their learning. This might include the provision of handouts to take home, the use of audio-visual technologies in class or more practical learning activities to complement theory:

[Learner 1] I would like to know how they [professionals] do it. Even the training, the dogs, they are very interesting. Our obedience classes are actually very interesting modules. But it's all theory. [Learner 2] Even for the grooming as well there should be more practical. Every Monday they do [but] I think that should be at least two times per week, two days per week.

PLC learner

When you are in the class and you are learning something like on Instagram you are there and you have so much fun, but when I go to do it another time, I'm not so sure what I'm doing. I would love to have some written notes to take away.

Adult Literacy learner

I would like information through modern technologies [rather than books and handouts] because it could be easy to understand information, audio and video. Maybe I would like to see some presentations.

VTOS learner

Give us more time in the workshop. If we had like the whole day of a Friday in the workshop instead of doing two hours or whatever it is on a Friday and then in the workshop the rest of the day. So instead of theory on a Friday morning 40 minutes just send us into the workshop for the whole day of Friday. It's only four hours like on a Friday.

Apprentice

CHAPTER 5

Creating Pathways

Chapter 5 documents Learner Voice concerning FET pathways and progression routes, work experience support, and guidance services.

Learners shared their experience of accessing a range of ETB supports and services. Most survey respondents expressed satisfaction with same (**Figure 11**).

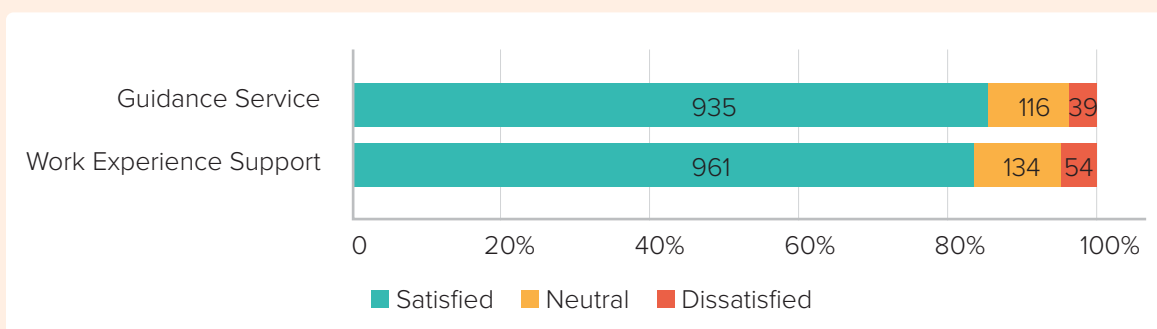


Figure 11– *Learner Satisfaction with Guidance Services and Work Experience Support*

Pathways

Focus group participants outlined their experience of pathways in more depth. They held mixed views on their available pathways within and beyond FET. Some learners had positive experiences related to these pathways:

I can go on and do a Level 6 or you can work your way up as a teacher ... once you have a Level 5 you can work in a creche setting. If you do a Level 6 you can be a room leader in a room. You can go further on then to become a teacher, you could actually be a teacher in it like where we are now and teach the course.

BTEI learner

They bring us on trips. [The] last trip we went to was to the [name of university] where they showed us different courses we could take. Before that we have been to the Apprenticeship Centre. We have been to Institutes of Technology. We have had people from different backgrounds come in and tell us about their stories ... to show us different paths we can go on.

Youthreach learner

Some learners reported less than positive experiences in relation to FET pathways due to the lack of clarity on their progression options after completing their course:

There's no more Levels in [name of centre]. It's Level 3 and that's it. If you want more, you have to go to [name of city].

Adult Literacy learner

The progression of things too, I wouldn't hear that much, you know, where you can go further. We don't really hear much about that either, you know, in the courses.

BTEI learner

[Learner] We were told that [when] you finish the course, you'll go on to a PLC and you'll get Back to Education when you're doing the PLC ... now we're being told that we can't do that and now it's a whole situation. I think people should have mentioned stuff like that in the beginning instead of telling us, 'You know, this is how it's going to go'.

Youthreach learner

Learners with a disability highlighted a specific challenge when pursuing pathways from FET to Higher Education:

You know the DARE scheme for if you have a learning difficulty or a disability? That doesn't transfer over from Level 5 to Third Level. It gets disregarded. Say someone has really bad dyslexia, they get points reductions in the Leaving Cert, and they don't meet the requirements. They go on to Level 5, but they're still expected to get eight distinctions ... that [access] doesn't cross over [to Third Level].

PLC learner, living with a disability



When considering how learner progression could be enhanced, learners recommended increasing the provision of FET courses at higher NFQ Levels as well as clarification on entry requirements to Higher Education courses:

I study in [name of centre] ... We study on the Fifth Level ... it will be great if now [name of centre] will be Sixth Level ... But for me not good with just [the course being provided] in [name of town]. It [has] very bad local transport ... But better will be in [name of centre] because [it is a] very good destination and I am a lone mother.

VTOS, migrant learner

Mak[e] it clear about getting five distinctions to get into Third Level education.

PLC learner, Access to Higher Education certificate

Progression with the craftsman scaffolding card to let industry know what it takes to be a craftsman scaffolder and not just seen as an advanced scaffolder with little experience.

Apprentice

Better transparency when it comes to pathways, advancing your education and so forth ... If it was actually highlighted a bit better what pathways we could actually take to actually increase the various different Levels to a good 5, 6, Level 8 and so on.

BTEI learner, accessing education via recovery programme

Work Experience Support

Focus group participants outlined their views of Work Experience support in more depth. Learners highlighted the benefits of gaining work experience as part of their course and appreciated when centres offered comprehensive support as they sought a work placement position:

As part of our course, we have two days of placement working in an Early Years Centre so I think it's really good to get experience working as well as learning all the theories of it. It definitely helps having two days to work on that.

Trainee

We do the 60 hours of work experience with a choice that we either get locally through [local business] or [local business]. [Facilitator] So, you get signposted to a work experience placement. You don't have to go out looking for somewhere yourself? [Learner] Yeah, you get signposted. You get a lot of support with it. You get a letter as well to cover with insurance as well.

VTOS learner

Focus group participants highlighted specific challenges with respect to securing work placement experience. Learners reported difficulties in obtaining work placement positions due to a limited number of providers and competition with university learners and workers within their sector:

I sent out then at least 80 emails to try and get that work experience, the 60 hours. I got about 79 replies of just 'no'. And for me, I'm already dejected I'm not working. I'm going around up and down begging to get this module completed, get those 60 hours. And it's getting 'no', 'no', 'no', 'no'.

VTOS learner

[Learner 1] I think for the healthcare course as well, there isn't a great selection of places to go in and do your work placement because you're kind of in competition with the nursing staff and with nursing students too. [Learner 2] They would get picked over the ETB [learners].

Trainee

When asked what they would like to see happen next, learners recommended that ETBs partner with public and private sector employers in more formal or structured ways to support FET learners' work experience opportunities and future employment pathways. Learners recommended further communicating guidelines and standards to both employers and learners to support meaningful work-based learning:

I think that the centres need more connections with employers all around Ireland that can provide work placement. It's very, very hard. I think it was the hardest thing to find that employer willing to offer me the chance to do my work experience there.

VTOS learner

I think it would be a good thing for the ETB to do if they could get a list [of work placement providers].

VTOS learner

I was in the accounting firm for two weeks and they were like, we genuinely don't know what to show you ... They didn't have a guideline of what we needed, to show us, or what we needed to do.

PLC learner



They did mention work experience but there's been no talk of it yet, because they kind of have like a little timetable layout of what the months will look like, and stuff, and the work experience was meant to happen. It probably should be more transparent.

LTI learner

Guidance Service

Focus group participants outlined their experience of the Guidance Service in more depth. Where their FET centre offered guidance counselling services learners highlighted the support and knowledge offered by counsellors and praised their assistance with Third Level applications, grants, and preparation for the employment market or further learning:

Every Monday we have this person [who] comes in and she helps with college applications, and they'll do mock interviews with you for jobs ... they'll tell you what grants and stuff you can be applicable for as well in college ... I'm doing a Level 4, they'll still get me to apply for a course that will take like a Level 5 because I'll have work experience on top of it.

CTC learner

We do [have] a guidance counsellor. They're in there two, three days a week ... they try to meet with everyone once, and if you need to meet them again, you can email them ... they're all really, really approachable people. They all genuinely care.

VTOS learner

We have a very good guidance teacher. They explain everything they taught us. We have talks online today from different universities, Atlantic Technological University, from Ireland, Scotland, the UK. They do come and give us talks. There is an open day on this Friday.

PLC learner

Focus group participants outlined under-resourced provision of guidance counselling supports which limited learners' opportunities to engage with counsellors to plan their learning and employment trajectory:

They [guidance counsellor] [are] not on site though, we have to request for him to come down. I think the advocates [guidance counsellor] that go through the centre, ... 10, 12 years ago, the centre might have one each. Nowadays it could be one to five centres.

VTOS learner

I think we used to have a guidance counsellor, but we don't have one now. [Tutors] do a bit on colleges before you leave so you can talk to them about it.

Youthreach learner

I get the impression that maybe the guidance department in our college might be a little bit overwhelmed. Because everyone is supposed to have an appointment at least once with the guidance [counsellor], and they were supposed to meet us all before midterm. And no one in my group has met [a] guidance [counsellor].

PLC learner

When asked what they would like to see happen next, learners suggested increased provision of guidance counselling to guide learners through their learning and employment options as well as utilising guidance counsellors to provide support with work experience placements:

We don't have a guidance counsellor with us, so it would be really helpful if we had someone with us. I guess, guide us where we can go afterwards. I know there's people in our school that know they want to do something, but they don't know where to go ... I think a lot of students think about the future a lot, that's where a lot of the anxiety comes from, where their future is going to be.

Youthreach learner

They [guidance counsellors] should be utilised in terms of trying to access that work experience for the people. I think it's something they should be doing. So the advocates have a role in terms of working with the learners and employers, they've got their finger on the pulse, they should be able to access the work experience.

VTOS learner

CHAPTER 6

Learner Support

Chapter 6 outlines learners' experiences of diverse support services offered by or sought from their Education and Training Board.

Learners shared their experience of accessing a range of ETB supports and services. Most survey respondents expressed satisfaction with same (**Figure 12**).

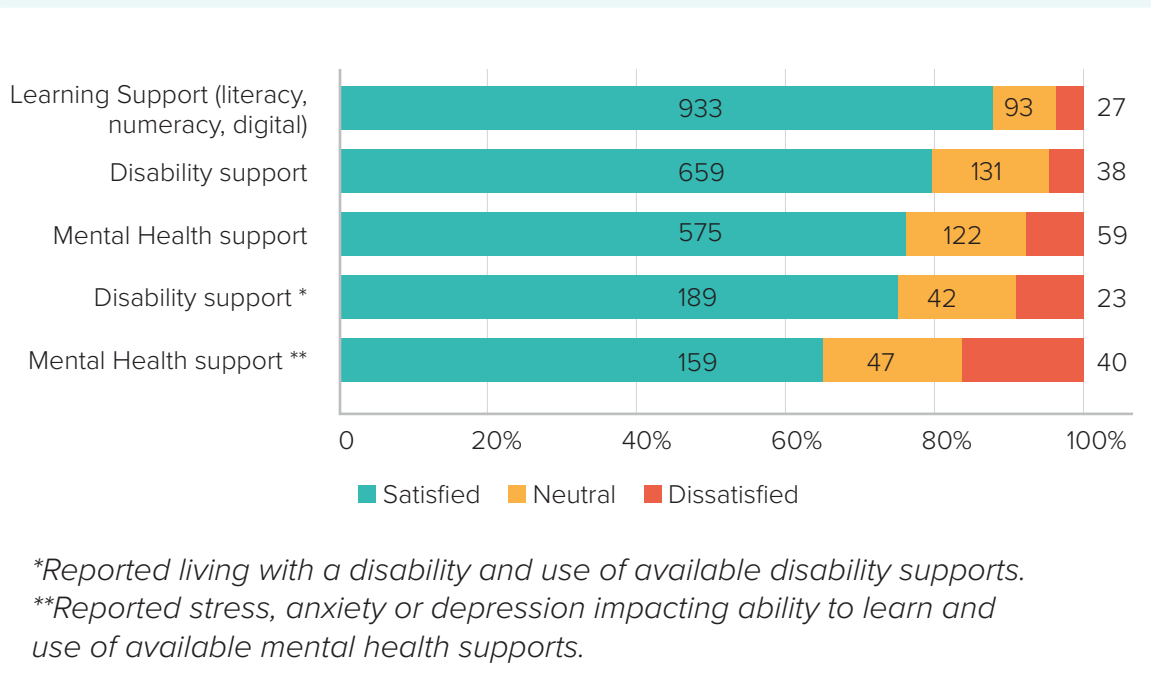


Figure 12 – Learner Satisfaction with Learning, Disability and Mental Health Supports.

Learning Support

1053 survey respondents reported that they used learning supports. Of this cohort, 89% (n = 933/1053) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with learning supports.

Focus group participants outlined their experience of learning support in more depth. Learners highlighted the importance of the availability of additional learning supports and the benefits of these for their courses and with their assignments:

We've also got support facilities. So for example, if students are obviously struggling to learn, we've got facilities where there's a teacher there that will help them out with whatever they're struggling with, help them draw up a plan on how to achieve what they want to achieve, and how to get from point A to point B in a clear way.

PLC, migrant learner

We get directed learning one-on-one if you need it. If the teachers or the tutors see us struggling, they kind of pull us for one-on-one.

Youthreach learner

[Learner 1] They [tutor] have a class about how to write an assignment and then when we're doing a computer review, they would show us the correct layout of an assignment. So there is that, there is a lot of support that way. They give three hours on a Monday or two hours on a Monday for support. [Learner 2] Individual support? [Learner 1] It can be one to one if you want to.

VTOS learner

Our supports are really nice because we have these QR codes throughout the building that you can book an appointment at any time that you want, that you're comfortable with. And it's so, like I've been in there, and it's so confidential. It's a nice space.

PLC learner

Focus group participants outlined room for improvement regarding the lack of or inadequate individual learning supports as key issues hindering their learning:

I struggle with Maths now and they just be like "Oh! Just try it". But that's what I struggled with in my old school. So, then they'll just push it and then I get thick because I can't do it.

Youthreach learner

We were told when we went into college, that there would be supports. They're available for people that had difficulties in, say, certain modules like computers ... but there seems to be a massive time lapse from the time that they apply until the time that they get any news back of when they're getting these supports. And for whatever reason, there's no feedback on this either.

VTOS learner

[Learner] She [another learner] told us that basically she found it very hard, this particular module, and she found that she felt like she mightn't be able for it, but she wasn't able to say that, so she found she couldn't say it in class. [Facilitator] The person dropped out? [Learner] Yeah.

BTEI learner

When asked what they would like to see happen next, forum participants suggested enhancing the availability and communication of individual learning supports. This might take the form of providing general workshops on time management, studying, and learning techniques as well as more particular supports tailored to specialised courses:

Maybe at the start of the year, there could be a workshop on how to do time management, studying techniques, learning techniques just to assist the students who are not so familiar with doing that.

VTOS learner

Possibly more support for students doing more specialised courses. I couldn't get as much help as I do programming and the supports person was lacking in knowledge in that area. I however understand why this is the case though as finding someone like that is extremely difficult.

PLC learner, living with a disability

We were told there would be an additional Maths class for all students who wished to take one ... nothing ever came of it. This left me in an extremely awkward spot when it comes to college courses and the Maths requirements ... I am shocked at how little care seemed to be given to the matter. Additional classes for college requirements should not be a last-minute consideration that falls through with zero communication.

VTOS learner

I am terrible at computers. I need someone one-to-one.

Adult Literacy learner



Learner Story 1

Name: Gerry Rogers

Place of learning: Westport Adult Education Centre, Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim ETB

I'm learning computers and working with a tutor on reading and writing to improve my dyslexia. I've struggled with it all my life. Spelling doesn't mean a thing to me. It is just a concept that my brain doesn't grasp.

There was no support in school and I was considered "thick" because I struggled with reading and writing. I remember one particular teacher saying to me, "You've got a good mind, but a lazy brain". That was how things were in the '60s. It was just a matter of going in there and getting out at the other end.

But subjects like woodwork I loved, as well as discussions and debates, but as regards the written word, it terrified me. It still does today. If somebody tells me to write something down, or puts a pen in my hand, I can feel my heart pounding and my hands tighten. After 71 years, it's still there after all this time: that feeling of panic. Pure panic.

I was diagnosed with dyslexia when I was in my 40s. I always had an idea that there was something wrong – I just couldn't get the concept of spelling. It's like a piece missing, like that department is closed to me. I could practice spelling ten words today for two hours and tomorrow, if I pick up my pen, I wouldn't be able to remember one of them.

I've been coming to Westport Adult Education Centre for about a year, working with Clare to improve my spelling a bit and to lower my fear. I found it very good because she understands the situation. When we're working with somebody that understands where you're coming from, it makes it a lot easier.

I met Clare one evening when I was out with my wife and she told us that she was a teacher at the college. She said she worked with people with dyslexia and told me to pop in. So, I took my courage in my hands and went in. With that first step in the door came absolute panic. I could feel my heart pound and I could hardly get a word out. It was like all the old feelings of walking into a classroom. It took me a few weeks to get over the fear but, with Clare and Colette, my tutors, I've been totally honest about the situation. I'm not trying to hide anything from them, and they've been very good and very helpful.

I found it to be a worthwhile experience because I like to write a bit myself about how I feel. Before, I used to write stuff but I couldn't ever show it to anybody in case they would laugh about it. I'm at a stage now where

I'll even take courage in my hands and reply to my kids' messages by text rather than ring them. Before I never would do that. I wouldn't risk embarrassing them as well as myself.

I spent my life hiding the fact that I was dyslexic, avoiding doing paperwork of any kind. I was in sales, I drove machinery, I had a fencing company, and my wife and I had a café for six years. Anything that was public facing but didn't involve writing or spelling. It made me adaptable and also quick on my feet: I'd always have an answer ready or an excuse like forgetting my reading glasses to get out of reading situations.

I'm quite resilient and I'm a problem solver. I take challenges as an opportunity. There's always a way. You just need to make your imagination bigger.

These days there's a greater understanding of dyslexia but because I grew up in a time when there wasn't, it still stays with me. Two of our children are dyslexic but we picked up on it early and it hasn't been the same issue for them in their lives or careers. The same with my granddaughter – she's at university and studies history. It just goes to show you the difference if the support is there from the beginning.

For me, I believe dyslexics live in the shadows. We shelter ourselves. We never come out in the open. We're always on the edge. We need to realise that we have a voice. We have a right to stand in the sunlight and it's OK not to be good at something.

We should also learn and take advice from people who find it easy.

Disability Support

254 survey respondents reported that they used disability services and supports. Of this cohort, 74% (n =189/254) expressed satisfaction with disability supports.

Focus group participants outlined their experience of disability support in more depth. Where their FET centre offered assessment accommodations, accessible technology, printout supports, or SNA support, learners recognised and valued these interventions:

The student support also got me a device, like I got this device from the school to help during our classes, it amplifies the sound more, so it makes it a bit easier for me to follow up with what is being done in the classroom.

PLC learner, hearing impaired

For assessment, we are doing a recording so it's much easier. We don't have to sit and write or use any technologies because I don't like it. It's much easier to just speak and have a recording.

ESOL learner, visually impaired migrant

[Learner] I get support off the SNA teacher in the college. [Facilitator] Is that helpful? [Learner] Oh, they're brilliant ... fantastic. Like if you go into them and say, "Listen, I have an assignment coming up and this is where I'm stuck", they won't do it for you, but they'll show you where to go and ... they put you on the right path. They just say it in a way that you understand.

PLC learner

Focus group participants outlined the lack of disability support services or limitations on accessing same:

Disability support services were offered to me but they did not follow through with my requests. Communication between support services and students needs to improve drastically.

PLC learner

It's not that big of a centre, but it's not even got an SNA. I think there should be an option for like an SNA or an extra helper in every class.

CTC learner

In our course, learner support is for those who are under 25, but because I'm 27, I couldn't get it.

Vocational Training learner

When asked what they would like to see happen next, learners suggested the provision of hard copies of assignments and ensuring the use of accessible online technologies for learning and for submitting assessments. Learners further recommended providing SNA support as well as removing age criteria for accessing support services:

So, like, I say, "Okay, give myself an hour. If I open the laptop, I can do this." But when you read the brief, no, I prefer something fancy like hard copies of paper, for example. You know, something simple, break it down for me as much as you can.

BTEI learner

There should be easier ways to turn in work, because some assignments are kind of written differently, so, like, for some assignments the brief will be up on Teams and you can attach the documents to a brief, that's easy. For some [others], it's not uploaded, it's like emailed to you, so you can't do it the same way. I feel like every assignment should be done the same way to make it work.

BTEI learner

I was advocating for them to remove the age requirement so that anyone, regardless of what age you are, gets that four-hour a week learner support.

Vocational Training learner



Learner Story 2

Name: Finian Ready

Place of Learning: College of FET, Kilkenny



I attended the Kilkenny and Carlow ETB National FET Learner Forum in March. My facilitator said that I had an interesting story to tell and encouraged me to share my experience.

I have a learning difficulty but am very independent. First, I did my Junior Cert with the National Learning Network in Kilkenny. I'm now doing Media Studies Level 5 at the College of FET in Kilkenny. It's a one-year course and very interesting because I'm learning about how newspapers are produced as well as radio production and communications. We also do event production.

Media Studies appealed to me as I have a blog called Finian's House for people with learning disabilities. I organise outings for them and make videos, recording the stories that they tell me about their education backgrounds, and sometimes the difficulties they had making friends in school.

In college we cover all aspects of media and I get some practical experience in a radio station. I work on reception sometimes, and I also do the weather live on air on Community Radio Kilkenny City. The support I get from my college and from the radio station is absolutely amazing. The station manager supports people like me with disabilities to get employment. Even if you have a disability yourself, nothing should stop you from learning new things in life.

I have learned so much on my course but the one thing I struggle with is Microsoft Teams. It can be stressful for people with disabilities. I prefer to be given things in hard copy. I know it's not good for the environment, but I find it easier to follow the brief that way.

But we have good learning supports in college. I have access to an SNA and am given extra time to do my assignments. If I'm stuck with an assignment, my SNA will come over and she'll break down the brief even more for me. She's great craic too.

I'm proud of myself as a person with a disability getting an education and getting a Level 5 cert. I was overwhelmed with happiness when I got through the interview and got onto my course. I love college life. It's fun and I never want to leave. As a proud person with a disability, I thought this would never happen to me. I am honoured to get a Level 5 under my belt.

Counselling Service and Mental Health Support

When asked to describe their physical health and mental wellbeing,

- **24%** (n = 345/1412) of survey respondents reported same as poor to fair.
- **26%** (n = 374/1412) stated they had a long-term health issue, illness, or disability.
- **51%** (n = 715/1414) stated that they experience stress, anxiety or depression, while
- **13%** (n = 178/1414) said they would prefer not to answer that question.

When asked if stress, anxiety, or depression affected their ability to learn or study,

- **31%** (n = 434/1411) of learners reported that it did.

756 learners reported that they use mental health supports. Of this cohort,

- **76%** (n = 575/756) were satisfied with mental health support.

The survey invited learners who stated they experience stress, anxiety, or depression to select from among several suggestions as to what might support 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: appointments with a counsellor (242 responses), flexibility around assignments and deadlines (239), mindfulness classes (213 responses), and increased financial support (194 responses) (**Figure 13**).

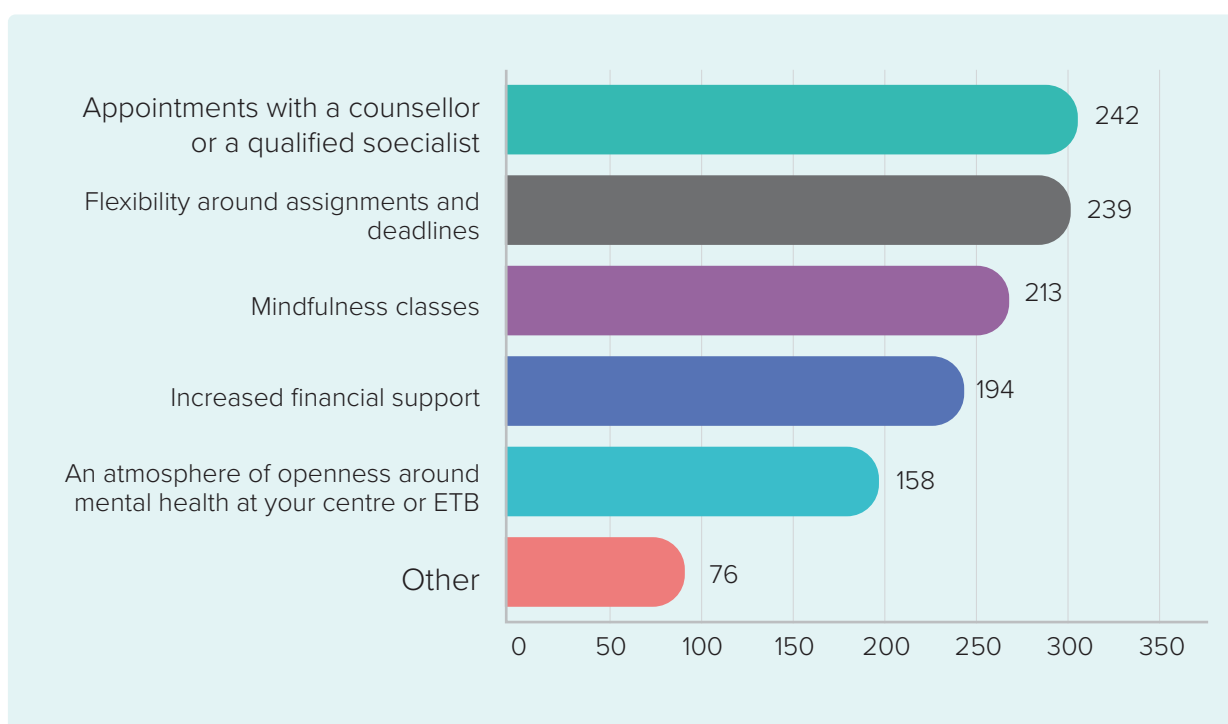


Figure 13 – Responses of Those Who Stated They Experience Stress, Anxiety, or Depression to, "What would help to support your mental health?"

Focus group participants outlined their experience of mental health support in more depth. Learners recognised and valued the provision of mental health supports such as counselling and activities related to enhancing wellbeing in their centres:

If you're struggling, you can go and talk to our coordinator, and she can set you up with counselling sessions with a licensed therapist ... They'll put us in contact with someone, and we get like six free visits. It's one of the first things that they tell you when you go in to discuss joining the centre.

Youthreach learner

I've a better sense of myself now because to be fair I was on a bad one in the head when I was a second year [in secondary school] but now in the actual course there's a sensory room, there's a counsellor and so on. There's everything there, shifting my mindset.

BTEI learner

We have a counsellor, and you can talk to them about whatever ... we have a mental health week. We do workouts, meditation, colouring mindfulness. We had a dinner for our whole centre. We cooked it. It was a kind of social thing.

Youthreach learner

Focus group participants outlined a shortage of counsellors or non-existent services as key issues hindering their learning:

[Facilitator] If you were feeling bad, or if you were feeling bad outside of school, is there someone in the centre that you can go and talk to? [Learner] No, no one in our centre.

Community Education learner

[Learner] In [name of centre] we do have a counsellor, I think it's just one. When you're trying to book a place she's always booked up. [Facilitator] And is that for mental health counselling or is it for career guidance counselling? [Learner] I think she's a bit both.

PLC learner

Learners highlighted the inadequacy of quiet rooms provided in their centres:

Our [quiet] room is filled with books, it's filled with computers and to be honest, yes, there's a lot of hustle and bustle in that room.

PLC learner

When asked what their centre or ETB could do to improve its services and supports, learners proposed increasing the quantity of counselling support available, providing mindfulness classes, and ensuring a dedicated 'quiet room' in all centres. Learners further suggested that FET centres consider enhanced flexibility around assessments and deadlines as part of enhancing learner mental health:

Introduce a guidance counsellor or therapist into the centre.

**Youthreach
learner**

I really appreciate the fact that I have therapy at this moment, I really like my therapist, I'm a little bit upset ... that we have only short-term therapy with her when I obviously need long-term therapy.

**PLC learner, living in IPAS accommodation
and reporting stress**

If our place could have something like a 'Zen zone', that would be great cos some of the lads hate the computer so when we're doing that work, for them to be able to go out of the class and have a break in something like that would be very handy.

Apprentice

The deadlines are flexible, and teachers are very kind, so I would say this institute is the best place for support anyone can ask for.

Learner living in IPAS accommodation

I would love to have a mindfulness session every week. It would be very helpful to have a break from the study and have a breather. I would like to know more about support for students who experience stress or anxiety

**Course
unidentifiable**

CHAPTER 7

Enabling Themes

Chapter 7 outlines learners' views of and satisfaction with the wider factors that enable FET provision.

This includes communications and information provision, as well as the opportunities available to learners to raise issues. It further involves consideration of digital inclusion as well as the buildings and facilities hosting and enabling FET provision.

Communications and Information Provision

Learners expressed a range of views about ETB communications. Learners first found out about their FET course through a wide variety of channels. 41% (n = 654/1598) of survey respondents heard about their course through a friend or family member (**Figure 14**).

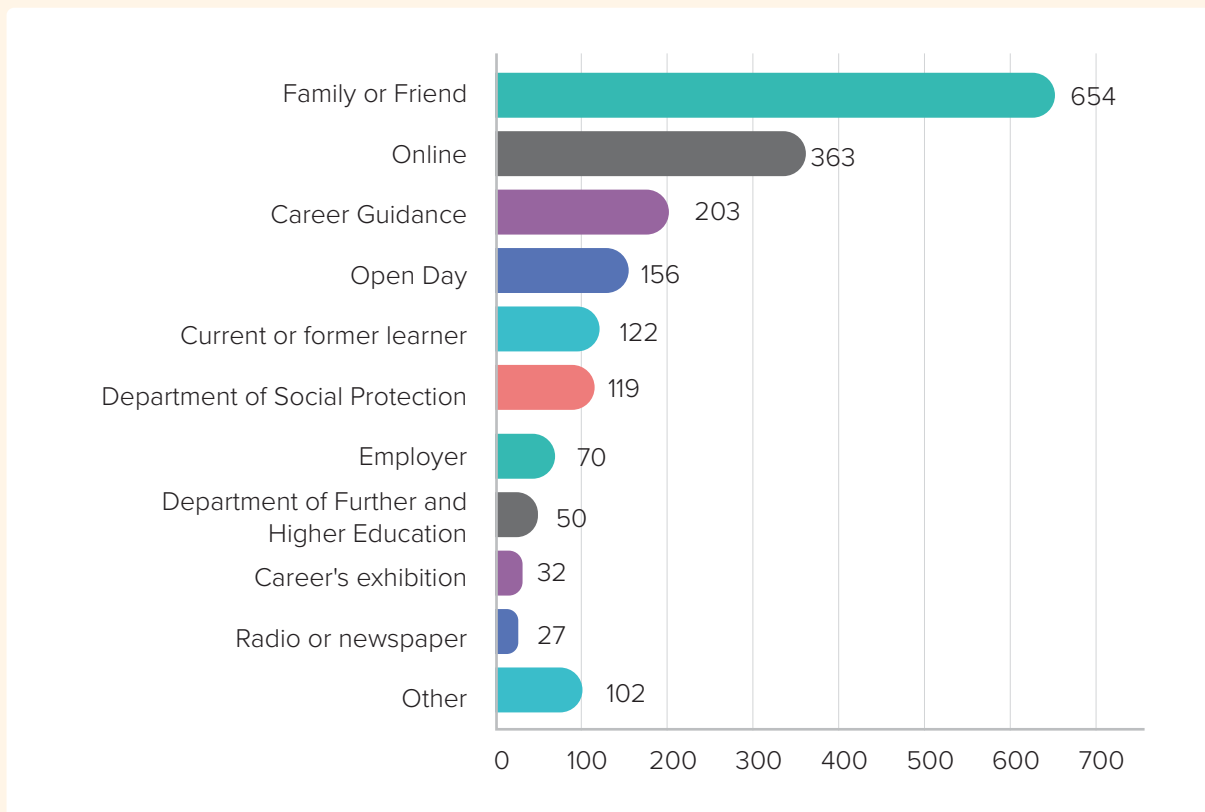


Figure 14 – Responses to “Where did you first find out about your course?”

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. 73% (n = 946/1303) of survey respondents reported not receiving any information from their ETB or centre about childcare support (**Figure 15**).

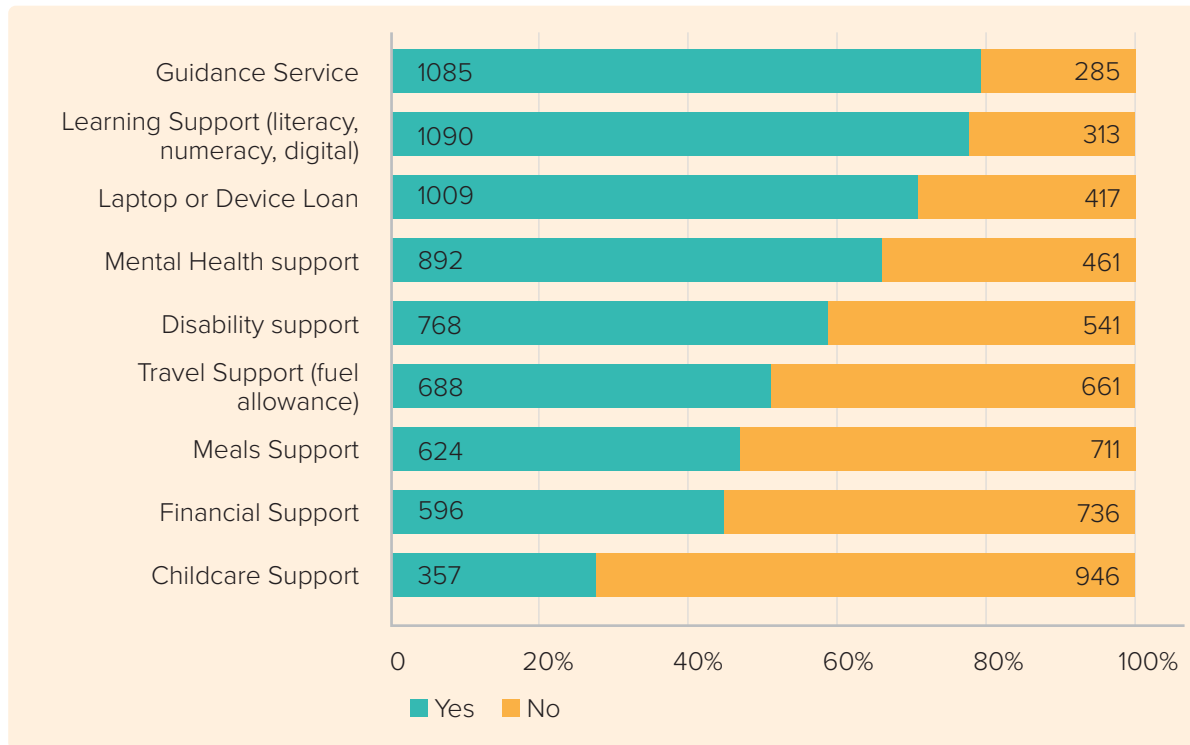


Figure 15 – Responses to “Did you receive any information from your centre or ETB about the availability of the following supports and services?”

Learners expressed their overall satisfaction with communications at their ETB. Most survey respondents expressed satisfaction with communications, the website for their centre or ETB, and information provision concerning supports and services (**Figure 16**).

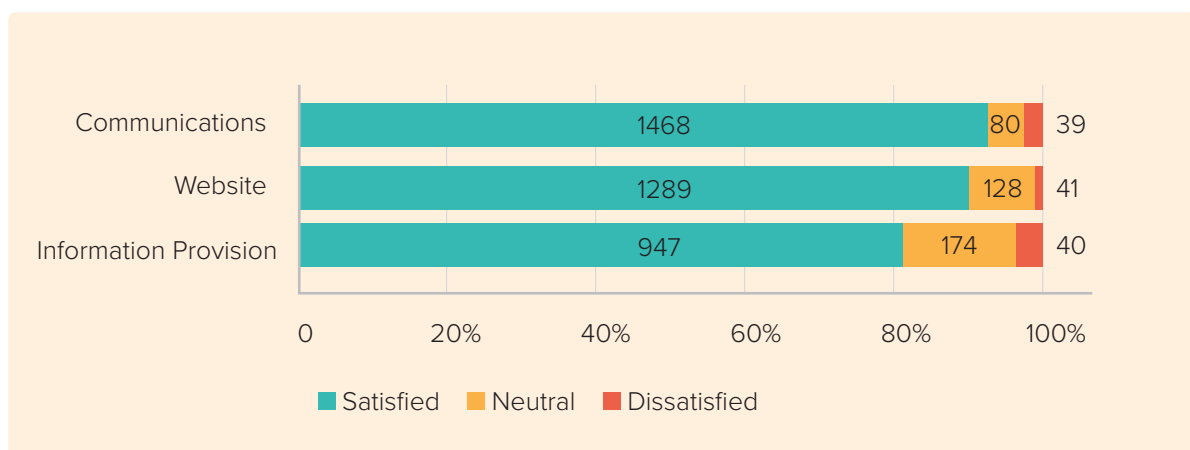


Figure 16 – Learner Satisfaction with Communications

Focus group participants outlined their experience of ETB communications in more depth. Learners highlighted the benefits of good communications with staff and tutors for accessing services and managing course requirements:

In [name of centre] now, the coordinator ... their office is just inside the door ... If you have a problem, go a little bit early, they'll always talk to you for about five, ten minutes ... they give you information about things if you need to find out about something.

Adult Literacy learner

The teachers are good at being contactable. If you've missed something or you're not in, you can contact them on Teams, and they'll get back to you straight away. And also, if they're not going to be in, they'll send you a message so that you're not travelling all the way in so that's important.

VTOS learner

Focus group participants outlined room for improvement regarding communications with centre administration, particularly in relation to finding information about courses online and beginning their course. When asked what they would like to see happen next, learners suggested the diversification of course advertisement channels to include more accessible media and local outreach:

[Learner 1] I missed one month of studying because I didn't get a notification about it starting. I didn't get an SMS and that is how they tell you. I get the SMS now but before, no. [Learner 2] I had a similar experience but fortunately for me, the teacher gave me handouts so I could catch up.

Adult Literacy learner

I registered online and I got a Google link that was like, 'fill in the dates that you were available'. It only let you pick one though, and then I didn't hear anything ... after a month, I rang, and the office was like, 'You just haven't been showing up, this is your fault.' I thought they were really snippy with me ... other people I talked to were like, 'I had the same problem'.

PLC learner

When I was looking for the childcare course, I was on the webpage I would have typed in childcare as a keyword. It doesn't actually register anymore because the courses are called ELCs (Early Learning Care) ... So, it's not known ... It was like only by chance [that] I actually managed to get to someone that I found out that was only in my old school. I struggled to find courses.

[Facilitator] Any idea where they should advertise? [Learner 1] Maybe online, you think most people find it online, TikTok maybe. [Learner 2] Going to school is probably what they need to do physically, going to school so that the young kids or those who are coming up get more involved.

If it was advertised more. Go to the shopping centres and have it displayed there. We only found out through the local library, and I barely found them because the leaflets, they had them stuck away where you couldn't really see them.

Community Education learner

Learners further highlighted a need for detailed course information upon enrolment and suggested more comprehensive inductions to outline course scheduling, structure, content, expectations, and requirements:

It would help to outline specific course expectations, potential risks, and key program details to avoid any surprises. Some students, especially in Level 6, faced unexpected requirements, such as conducting surveys or interviews outside of school. For students not comfortable with such activities, this information would be valuable beforehand to avoid later challenges.

Learner living with a disability and mental health issues



[Learner 1] Last week, it was registration day ... when it comes to taking more modules – you know, we took maybe three or four modules, and then most of us, we end up dropping it down because it will be too much. So, if you address from the beginning, can you take two? [Learner 2] Are you saying maybe explain more clearly how much work is involved? [Learner 1] Yes, yes. Because we take more modules ... I took three modules and at the end of the day, I have to go to work and then most of us, we end up dropping it.

Learners highlighted a need for enhanced communication of available services and supports:

Check in with learners at intervals to ensure they are getting the supports they require throughout their learning journey.

Trainee, experiencing stress, anxiety or depression

Giving more detailed information about the services and supports for learners.

Learner living in IPAS accommodation, experiencing stress, anxiety or depression

Opportunity to Raise Issues

76% (n = 1034/1364) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with the opportunities available to them to raise issues at their centre (Figure 17).

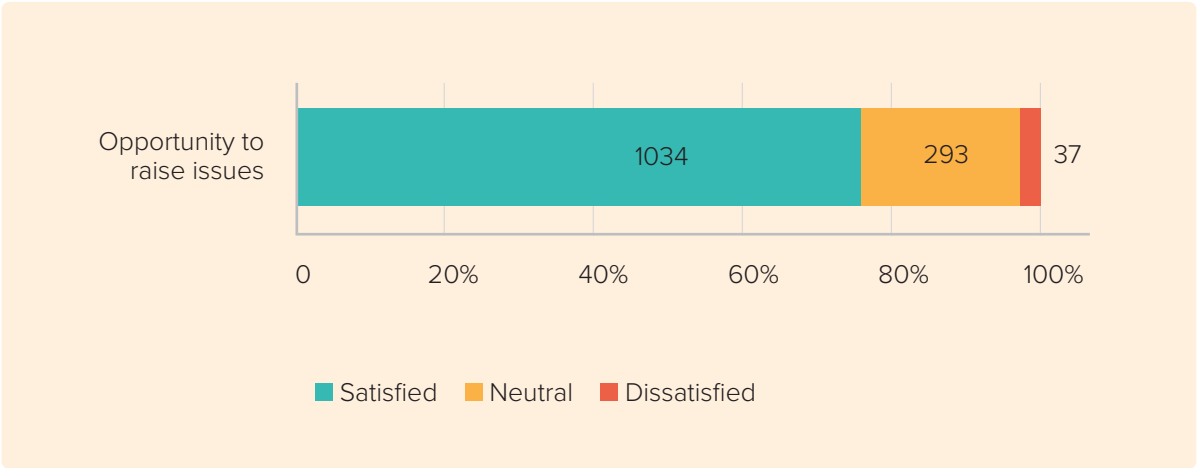


Figure 17 – Learner Satisfaction with Opportunity to Raise Issues

Learner Forum participants discussed opportunities to raise issues in their centre and to have their voices heard by ETB staff and tutors. Learners highlighted when they felt that that their input was valued:

Your voice is heard.

Community Education learner

I feel like when there is something ... that isn't beneficial, like we do mention it to the coordinator and they do sort it out ... We're on the student council, me and [name of learner] are part of the student council so we go from class to class every week saying like, does anybody have any opinions of that, or if anything needs to be changed.

Youthreach learner

We get plenty of time to kind of give our ideas, which is lovely. We get plenty of input into the class.

Focus group participants outlined some less than positive experiences in attempting to raise issues and have their voices heard within their centres:

We got a Maths teacher and a Physics teacher. They're just not meeting the needs at all for the class. They're just chatting, telling us random stories ... They're not teaching at all. I brought it up to the vice-principal last week and they said, 'Look, you just have to talk to them. I can't do anything. It's the college's policy' ... I talked to [the tutor]... two weeks ago. Last week, barely any improvements.

PLC learner

I think for me some of the teachers treat us like we are five years old and talk down to us ... Our accounts teacher likes to think that we're five and they teach us like we're kids ... I just don't like that at all and I've said it numerous times. ... [I'm the] class rep ... I've said it to our main coordinator and I may as well be wasting my time.



Learner Story 3

Name: Gabriele Morkunaite

Place of Learning: College of FET, Kilkenny



I'm doing a one-year media studies course at QQI Level 5. I heard about it while I was in another full-time course with the National Learning Network in Kilkenny – a NFQ Level 3 Employability Skills course, as part of the Rehabilitative Training program. The instructors taught us things like basic life skills, and about health and wellbeing. We also learned about nutrition and about better things you can eat. I got a lot of benefits from this course.

My Media Studies course is pretty broad with modules like Film and Radio Production. We learn a lot about the theory of film itself, but we also get to use filming equipment. It's really fun. Currently we're doing an assignment and actually making a film so it's definitely a big learning experience. I would definitely recommend this course.

On a personal level, you make a lot of friendships as well. When you meet classmates, you know you'll have a nice bond with them. Those are two benefits that I've gotten from the course.

Our lecturers are very supportive and we have two SNAs on standby as well. We get additional supports if we need help throughout our class, and also with our assignments throughout. I find that's very helpful. I do feel overwhelmed sometimes but knowing that I will get supports helps.

The only thing I'd change is our timetables: I would like if they were kept up to date. Our timetables have sometimes gotten changed around from when we started last year in September. When you're a person who likes routine, it can be difficult if it changes.

While I was at the National Learning Network they had a Student Council. I wanted to put myself out there to improve my confidence and independence, so I applied to be on it to advocate for other learners. I thought it was a great opportunity, and I got a lot of benefit from it. I was the PRO, which stands for Public Relations Officer. I wrote the monthly newsletters to update students in the centre on upcoming events or trips, or if there were guest speakers and talks coming up. I kept everyone updated on what was going on. The other students also came to us with their feedback and comments or complaints.

I am now a member of the Student Council in the College of FET, Kilkenny. There are representatives from all the different classes – we take feedback from students in our class and address any complaints. Additionally, I am one of two students who are board members as representatives of the college.

Digital Inclusion

91% (n = 1271/1404) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with access to technology at their centre. 86% (n = 743/861) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with laptop or device loan support at their centre (**Figure 18**).

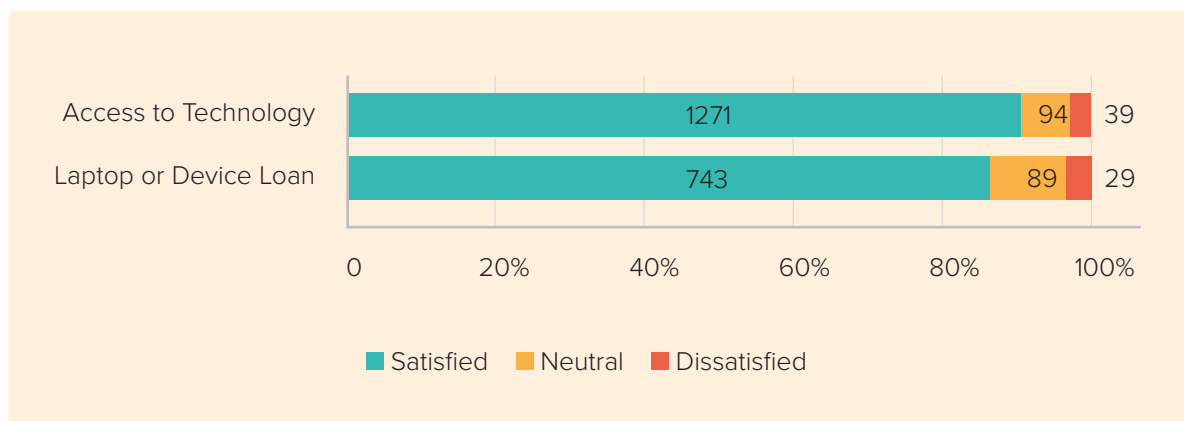


Figure 18 – Learner Satisfaction with Digital Inclusion

Focus group participants appreciated laptop loan schemes, the provision of on-site hardware and software necessary to their learning:

We were given all laptops, and I was going to buy Microsoft Office and the team said, 'Don't. We'll set you up and we're giving you an email address and we've got all that.' Everything was given to us.

For the students that didn't have a device, they were given a device by the college itself. You can also rent out ... you can also borrow drawing tablets from them. I borrow drawing tablets from them specifically for the animation.

PLC learner

Focus group participants outlined unmet digital access needs due to a lack of laptop provision and inadequate on-site hardware and WiFi connectivity:

In the VTOS ... in three of the classes, there's computers or laptops but in the rest, there isn't so you're often just sitting there without a laptop. There aren't enough and we need them.

VTOS learner

There is a loan program, [but] the priority is given to second years for finishing assessments. [There are] people on my course in particular that don't have access to a computer at home. And 75% of our course would be computer-related.

VTOS learner

Computers and printers aren't working properly, and Wi-Fi is terrible.

BTEI learner

When asked what could be done to improve digital inclusion, focus group participants suggested the expanded provision of laptop loan schemes, updating existing hardware and software, and enhancing learning supports for using computers:

I would like it if they (ETB or centre) could lend us laptops.

Update software on the computers as the computers are very slow. Better broadband connection.

VTOS learner

We're going online – for very old people, that haven't got a clue ... there's nothing, our courses or anything can't really help. It would be nice for you that you can go somewhere to ask a person, 'Can you help me with this?'

Adult Literacy learner



Learner Story 4

Name: Nouna Eiffe

Place of Learning: Bray Adult Learning Centre



I am doing a part-time Digital Skills course. I go to classes one day a week on Thursdays in Bray and Wicklow Adult Learning Centre. This is my first course and I'm looking forward to doing more. I am originally from South Sudan but have lived in Ireland for over 20 years. I live in Bray and I love it as it is so multicultural.

I attended the Kildare and Wicklow National FET Learner Forum last October in Athy where I had the chance to share my experience of my course with other learners.

It was my daughter-in-law who encouraged me to take part in this course and I'm so happy that she did. Without her, I would not have known about this programme.

I wasn't sure about it at first and it felt a little intimidating. When I arrived at the centre I was roaming around outside the door. I wasn't sure if I wanted to go in. I was thinking "do I really want to do this? and should I cancel?" I was outside for 15 minutes. Eventually I walked in and I found Joanne, the manager of the centre, and she was so welcoming. From the way she welcomed me, I immediately felt more relaxed. Joanne was so nice and went through all of it with me, like filling in the form, and encouraging me. I'm delighted that I met somebody like her.

The course is very interesting and very practical. I learned about internet banking and how to transfer money from account to account. I also learned about online booking and online shopping. We opened Revolut accounts and learned how to use the Wallet on our phones.

We have done quite a lot so far. We've been using WhatsApp, Facebook and Messenger and have also learned how to use Chat GPT. Sometimes we use laptops in the college but most of the time we are using our phones. We learned how to use Google Maps and how to find directions. We've learned some really useful life skills so far and they are really handy for me.

Now with these new skills, when I go out shopping, I know how to use the Wallet on my phone. And with shopping online – I don't need to rely on other people any more. I can just do my own. I know how to book hotels now, and how to book my own holidays.

My tutor Susan is really brilliant. People ask question after question but she is so patient and just awesome. She is great with the elderly, and with

younger people. She is so attentive to each of us. She works one-to-one with all of us which is very good. I personally am so happy to have her as my tutor. I hope in the year to come that I have her again. She was so welcoming when I joined the class, and I felt that she was the right person to teach me this course. If there is a word beyond brilliant to describe her, that's what I would say.

I would definitely recommend this course to people. It is very useful and I believe there are so many people out there who would love to learn digital skills but maybe they don't have the opportunity. I think courses should be better advertised. Lots of information is now on online but not everyone is online, or able to find the right websites. You need to know where to look. I would not have known about my course if it wasn't for my daughter-in-law. I think there are people in my community who are not aware of the range of courses out there.

I think more advertisement is needed. Apart from the websites, sometimes physical posters are helpful, like having information in the local shops.

I hope there are more grants and more funding so that AONTAS and the ETBs can continue to support people like me.

Buildings and Facilities

Learners expressed a range of views about buildings and facilities. Learner Forum participants welcomed the provision of both hospitality and recreational facilities to support learners' opportunities for rest, wellbeing, and social interaction outside of class times:

There's games and stuff, a free class, canteens, there's a football table, there's an ice hockey table in there.

It's pretty big ... like six or seven classrooms, there's a games room with pool tables ... there's one room where we have trees growing up the wall and stuff like that, like a green room ... for plants and stuff like that ... it's very informal, it has an informal and cosy feeling.

Youthreach learner

Where hospitality or recreational facilities were unavailable or insufficient in some centres, learners recommended their introduction or improvement:

If the weather is nice, maybe that you could have benches to sit outside at the side ... On the good days and the mornings and stuff like that.

We should have an outdoor chill out area.

I'd like if we could have a chill out area where we can listen to music or something.

Youthreach learner

Focus group participants outlined room for improvement and recommended upgrading works in relation to some centre buildings, ranging from general maintenance and heating to classroom and toilet facilities:

Our building is actually really run down. The wood is coming off the windows. Some windows don't close. In our art room there's literally black mould growing and it's because there's holes in the roofs. There's no foam insulation around windows and stuff. It doesn't hold heat. There's actually a plant from the outside that's grown into our art room.

Youthreach learner

In some of the classrooms the heating systems are not working properly, I reported it to the coordinator who said they will deal with it but in future. They need to do the assessment because, during winter, if the place is too cold people decide not to come to class. So they just need to do a quarterly quality assessment to make sure that everything is okay.

VTOS learner

[Learner 1] We need to upgrade the toilets. [Learner 2] There's mould all over our toilets. [Learner 1] We don't have a toilet seat. [Learner 2] They have mould on doors. [Learner 3] We don't even have proper classrooms. We have a boardroom and a computer room ... We don't have proper classrooms.

Youthreach learner

There's no locks in the bathrooms.

Traveller learner



Finally, in some centres, learners voiced concerns about disability accessibility and recommended improvements to buildings and facilities to address same:

I broke my leg last year and I couldn't go to class for like weeks. When you go in ... there's two classrooms there at the stairs and two classrooms at the top of the green box ... I had to like crawl up the stairs for example. Our toilets, you wouldn't fit a wheelchair through there.

Something like a tactile map. For example, when a student with visual impairment can look at it, I mean touch it, and to understand with perhaps with someone's else help, 'Where is the school?', 'Where is the toilet?' That is most important.

**Adult learner,
visually impaired**

I'd like there to be more toilets and that they're accessible as well.

Community Education learner

CHAPTER 8

Social Development and Adult Learning

Chapter 8 documents Learner Voice on wider social development in Ireland impacting FET learners' capacity to access and engage in FET.

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.

Cost of FET Participation and Financial Support

24% (n = 326/1359) of all survey respondents report that their financial situation affects their ability to learn or study. Learner Forum participants consistently raised the issue of financial costs associated with participating in FET. Where courses were free or affordable with financial support, learners appreciated the positive benefit for their learning. Conversely, where financial supports were absent or insufficient, learners highlighted the challenges they faced:

A big plus for me is free education. We don't pay anything for our study and it's so big gift for us.

Migrant learner

[Name of centre] does Erasmus as well ... You do work placement in Spain. So, two weeks, a little mini-Erasmus. I'm doing it in the animal centre over there. We went to an animal shelter there last week and we're going to Crufts in Birmingham in March. We don't have to pay for any of it either.

PLC learner

I have only the support of BTEI and I can't work as I lose my payment. It makes it very tight during the winter. Sometimes I can't afford petrol to go in. The teachers also recommend required books that cost money and to use a laptop during class time sometimes and I only have my phone so it's a challenge (Adult learner, unemployed, living with a disability and experiencing stress, anxiety or depression).

A loan of a laptop, the college stopped doing this this year. I don't qualify for any support or social welfare payment so have no access to working on assignments outside of the college day. I don't have the financial resources to purchase a laptop. It's stressful when you want to present a good level of work to get a distinction, but you only have a limited time to work on assignments.

PLC learner, experiencing finance-related stress

Apprenticeship learners highlighted the financial challenges associated with low or non-existent apprenticeship wages. Attending their course full-time effectively prevented some learners from earning an adequate living:

The biggest problem I have is the way SOLAS structure the apprenticeship. There's only one pathway to complete it ... It's full-time. [If it were part-time] it would be much more achievable ... Your first-year salary as an apprentice is below minimum wage ... [Facilitator] And in terms of funding, then, do you fund it yourself? [Learner] Yes. For the first two years, I have to support myself from the savings.

I'm a Commis Chef in ETB apprenticeship. No one in my class gets paid. I have to work outside of my hours of the course. Th[is] affects my study as I can't come in sometimes because I don't have the money, and I see others in apprentices getting paid for the course and it's not fair on us.

When asked what they would like to see happen next, apprentices suggested raising their wages or introducing part-time pathways to enable learners to take on additional work elsewhere:

There should be some part-time options or some other way. It's full-time ... [if it were part-time] it would be much more achievable for someone in and out of the apprenticeship. [facilitator] You'd be able to work full-time as well, right? [Learner] Yes, exactly.

*[Facilitator] Your companies, are they good for support?
[Learner] They could pay better ... I feel like the apprentice wage should be higher.*

Learners who were required to provide doctors' certificates when absent wondered if there was an alternative way of recording their absence which wouldn't cost them, while others suggested the implementation of student ID cards to reduce costs:

We would like to have [a] student card to help with transport but I think we can't get this because we are part-time students.

With the ID card, you can access a lot of things, but we don't have the school ID card.

Adult Literacy learner

I feel the method of recording absence is unfair. If I was one hour late to class, it is recorded as four hours. Sometimes students are genuinely sick, but you are required to bring in a sick certificate. This can cost up to €60 from a doctor, and I just don't have the money. I just wonder if there could be a different way of doing it that would be less penalising on the students.

PLC learner

66% (n = 696/1057) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with the current level of financial support available (**Figure 19**).

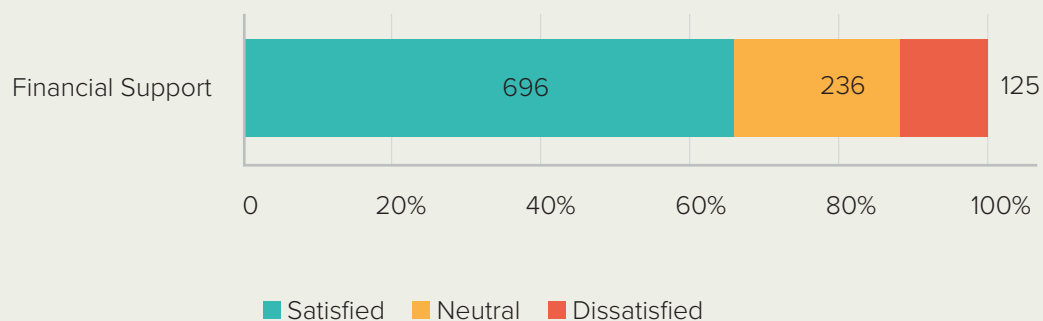


Figure 19 – Learner Satisfaction with Financial Support

Some learners highlighted the benefits of financial supports which enhanced their learning opportunities and facilitated their ongoing participation:

I'm getting a little bit of funding because I came out of full-time employment. So even just to be able to just get your training payment that's a massive help because you wouldn't be able to do the course without it.

Trainee

You can apply for some money help if you are in need ... it is small, but it is very useful ... I was applying for my children who were very sick at that moment, and I bought a lot of vitamins for them, so even in this, [name of ETB] helps us.

Some learners suggested that current financial supports were insufficient. This was especially true of Youthreach and Apprenticeship learners:

I come to school every day and I do not have a job. I only rely on the €30.80 they give me every week to come to school every day and get my personal things. I come to school on an empty stomach just to save money.

Learner living in IPAS accommodation

[Learner 1] The allowance you get if you live away from home, they haven't updated that in 20 years. [Learner 2] I know, I get four euro for lunch. [Learner 1] We're getting the same amount as the people were getting 20 years ago doing an apprentice, which is not matching the price of things now.

[I] was unable to have the SUSI grant due to already doing a Level 5 and had my disability [welfare payment] taken off me due to means assessment so had no income coming in halfway through the course. Could not find other things I could apply for to help with costs.

PLC learner

I'm only 17 so I get the same €49, like I do have to do the same work but they [learners 18 and above] get €240.

Youthreach learner

When asked what they would like to see happen next, Youthreach learners recommended increasing financial supports:

[Learner] I want them to give us more money. [Facilitator] How much do you want? [Learner] As much as they can give me, like ... the government makes lots of money and they can't give more to the people that need it ... Ireland is one of the richest countries in the world. Where's all the money going? I get paid 45 quid a week. It's a bit hard to live off that.

It should be the amount paid more as you get older. When you're 16 you're getting, and I'm 17, I'm still getting that €49 like ... because then when you're 18 you're getting 240 or whatever.

Pay the under 18s more because €45 isn't enough a week.

Public Transport and Travel Support

Both the availability of public transport and the current level of travel support feature as primary areas of dissatisfaction raised by FET learners in the National FET Learner Forum 2024/2025. 68% (n = 567/835) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with the current level of travel support (e.g. fuel allowances) available. 68% (n = 753/1110) expressed satisfaction with the current availability of public transport (**Figure 20**).

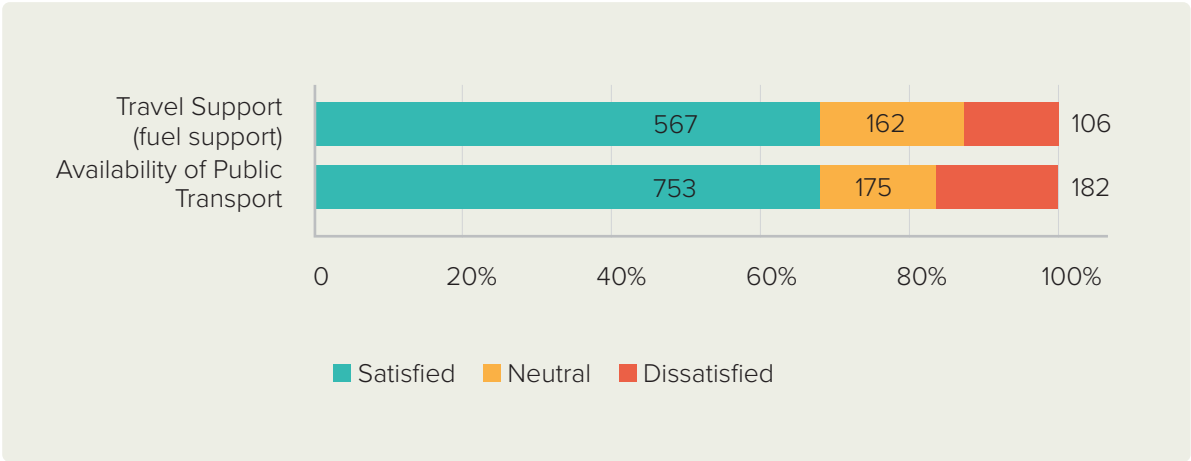


Figure 20 – Learner Satisfaction with Public Transport and Travel Support

Learners in one ETB appreciated the learner-centred approach taken by the ETB to ensure many could avail of the shuttle bus service which brought them to and from their centres, free of charge. This helped to address issues such as unreliable or non-existent public transport in rural areas:

We have free bus over and back, to and from the centre, we get picked up at the old post office in [name of town] just beside the hotel there and then we get dropped there every evening. It's completely free then for us students.

I think [at] [name of town where centre is] – like at the start of the year they went around to see who was getting buses. And then I think they got onto the bus company and asked could they run a second service because there were so many people.

Learner Forum participants outlined dissatisfaction with local public transport to their centre and shared how they struggle to meet the cost of transport to attend their course. Learners described its impact on their ability to attend class and on their mental health. Some described instances of hitch-hiking or paying for taxis as an alternative to a non-existent public service:

The reason why I do miss class sometimes is because maybe at times I don't have money for transport.

Adult Literacy learner

Lack of money towards transport causes stress and worry.

PLC learner, experiencing financial and living situation challenges

There's a few people in my class who need a bus. But there's no private bus ... so they have to leave class 10, 15 minutes early every day to go to the bottom of the road and get a bus.

[Learner] We don't have transport at the moment, because we live outside [name of town] and we used to have transport from village to city to study, but at the moment they say it's no chance. [Facilitator] So how do you get to school? [Learner] Sometimes thumbing. [Facilitator] Hitching? [Learner] Yeah, hitching sometimes. Sometimes we go by taxi, but it's so expensive because one-way costs €18.

If you want to go to study in [name of centre] training centre, you need a car because you won't be able to get there by transport ... public transport. It goes only twice a day through this village and the time doesn't fit to the classes.

Learners suggested that their centres establish links with local bus services or provide their own private buses to learners living in areas with a lack of public transport:

A lot of the private buses are used by Local Links so maybe the colleges could link in with them.

If you're in the like of anything even more rural ... there's no bus route or anything out there so I think even adding like another bus to the fleet, I suppose would probably be beneficial for other students.

There used to be a minibus that brought us to things like the farm last year but that's stopped, so now when we go to places, like trips outside of school, we have to get taxis.

Youthreach learner

ETB can get their own bus to help us, the students.

Adult Literacy learner, migrant

When considering measures to improve supports for transport costs, learners suggested the introduction of free travel for FET learners as well as increasing travel allowances. Some learners further suggested that flat rate travel allowances should be reviewed to consider the actual distances that learners had to travel:

If we're going to encourage more people to avail of adult education, I think it might be some kind of free travel. Or even for people who are coming into the country and want to avail of it, just to make sure that they have free travel and are able to get to it.

Community Education learner

[Learner] They need to update the pay for travel ... I'm traveling an hour in every morning and back and I get €20. You wouldn't get two days' diesel for that. [Facilitator] What do you think it needs? [Learner] I'd say it goes by how far you live away so if you're traveling an hour each way probably 50 euros. That would still not cut it but it would be more fair.

Apprentice

[Facilitator] Is the allowance given based on so many cents per mile or just a flat €20 per week? [Learner] They have that cent per mile. When you look at what's the distance between you and the centre, [the] calculations are quite dubious because ... I have an hour ride by car, but we got the same amount of travel allowance [as someone taking a 20-minute journey] ... It's not enough to cover the price of petrol.

[Learner] Travel allowance could be better. [Facilitator] Yeah, so do you have far to travel? [Learner] about 35, 40 minutes and then I get €20 a week then ... that's just driving ... like €20 per week does not get you far.

Accommodation and Home Learning Environment

Learner Forum participants expressed diverse perspectives on accommodation and its impact on adult learning. When asked to describe their current accommodation or living situation, 41% (n = 567/1384) reported living with family (Figure 21).

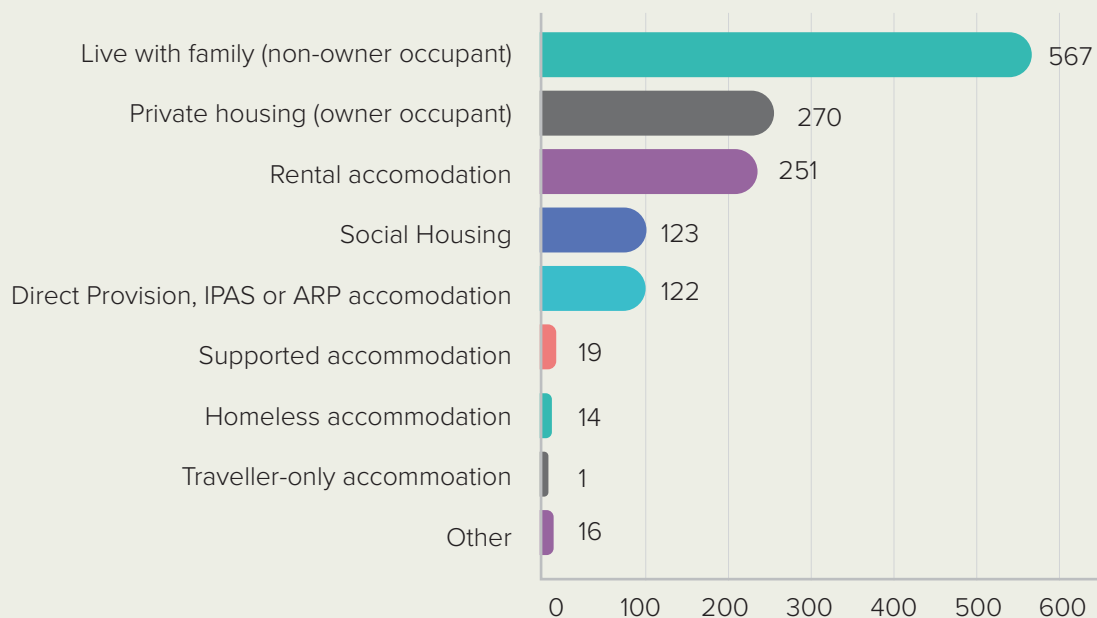


Figure 21 – Responses to “How would you describe your current accommodation or living situation?”



84% (n = 877/1048) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with their home learning environment (**Figure 22**).

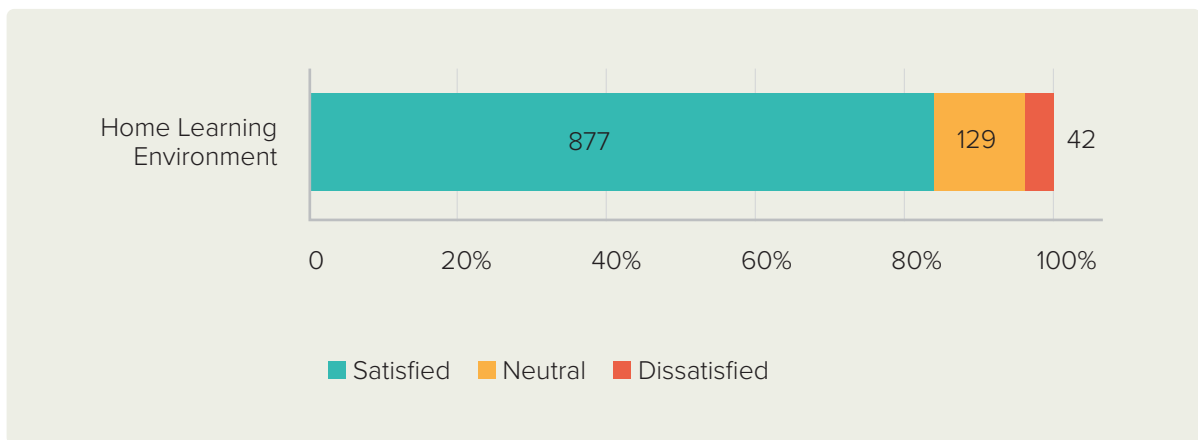


Figure 22 – Learner Satisfaction with Home Learning Environment

20% (n = 276/1407) of survey respondents stated their current accommodation or living situation affects their ability to learn or study. 21% (n = 278/1299) said that their living situation causes them stress, worry, or anxiety.

Focus group participants outlined accommodation challenges and how their home learning environment often hindered their learning:

Accommodation is extremely costly, and moving is not viable. With daily responsibilities, and being stuck at one place, it is difficult to have paths open to education.

PLC learner, experiencing stress, anxiety or depression

I live in the same room with my whole family, so it's very stressful and disruptive.

Migrant learner, experiencing stress, anxiety or depression

Hard to concentrate or read in a not conducive environment.

People coming from Cork and Galway. Some people came down once or twice and then just ... dropped out. To get accommodation down there as well is very hard, like to stay down there. Recently now there is more B&Bs, when we were first going down, like there was really only the one B&B. One of the lads were actually staying in this hotel, paying serious money.

Apprentice

These learners highlighted the impact of living in a direct provision centre or living with a host family under the ARPS (Accommodation Recognition Payment Scheme) was having on their learning and mental wellbeing:

I constantly worry about where I will live tomorrow. I am unable to plan my future. I also struggle with proper nutrition. I can only cook and eat when it doesn't interfere with the host family. It is also difficult because this family barely communicates with me. I feel like a ghost. All my interactions with people are through my teachers and fellow students.

I'm sharing the room with three other girls and we only have bed to do my classes.

We were in one hotel in Kilkenny for three or four months. It wasn't proper rooms for the learning.

I live in government housing ... I was relocated twice from the start of the study year ... I need two hours travel to college and two hours back and in traffic time it's more than two hours. It's really affected my study because I come home exhausted ... I like the subject of what I'm doing but I don't have ... my power ... I don't have resources to make my homework ... I'm mentally struggling so it's double kill.

When asked what they would like to see happen next, learners recommended increasing accommodation allowances and financial supports:

The pay we get for accommodation, we need more. Getting €70 per week and most of the accommodation is at least €100 per week ... I pay €550 a month on accommodation.

Apprentice

[There] should be some grants for people in order to help with accommodation. Yes, we are paid by our employers but that varies due to employer and [the] cost of travelling or overnight accommodation is astronomical.

Apprentice, experiencing stress due to living situation

Childcare

Childcare features as a primary area of dissatisfaction raised by FET learners in the National FET Learner Forum 2024/2025. 63% (n = 342/539) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with the current availability of childcare (**Figure 23**).

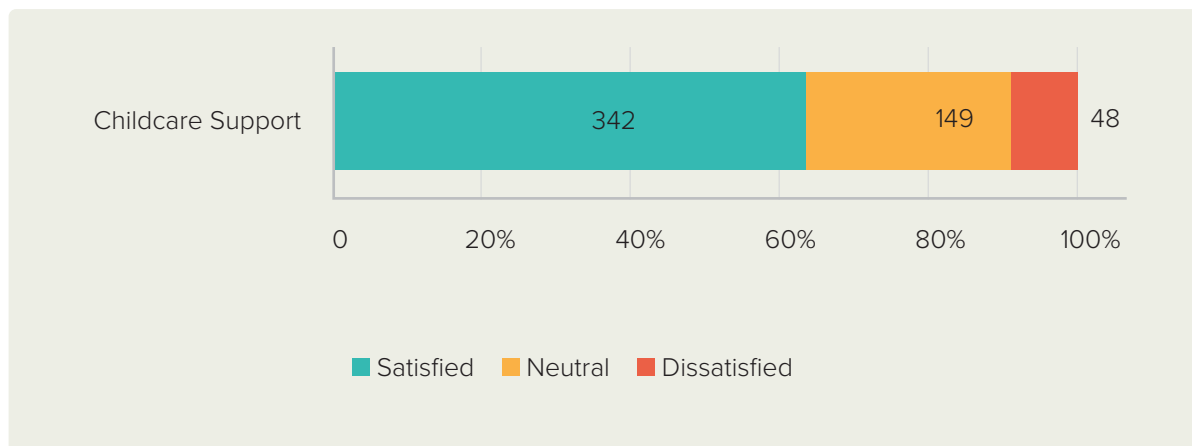


Figure 23 – Learner Satisfaction with Childcare Support

Learner Forum participants identified how a lack of available or affordable childcare created challenges and impacted their course participation, including their ability to engage with work experience:

[Two years ago] I do the exam, and I pass the interview, and I receive the letter like, 'okay, you enrolled'. [They said] you can apply for a national scheme for your kids and for childcare but when childcare no help me ... I lost my space because I don't have childcare. And I lost my opportunity two years ago.

Migrant learner

A lot of courses, if you are not employed, you're entitled to some compensation for childcare. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case for myself. So, I had to pay for childcare which has been a challenge.

BTEI learner

I had to drop work experience this term because my biggest challenge was childcare. I have to pick my son up at 2:20. Childcare facilities are completely full. He's on the waiting list. The centre has been very good and adaptable, allowing me to come in the mornings. We're pencilled in for work experience on Fridays. But that's the day where I can catch up with the classes that I'm missing in the afternoon.

VTOS learner

Focus group participants highlighted how the lack of childcare facilities impacts on learners who are lone parents and those with migrant backgrounds:

There is not enough spaces in the childcare facility ... it's a kind of challenge to me too, because I'm always worrying ... my husband had to cut his community development course short ... He has to sacrifice for me to attain my own qualification ... So that while I'm in college, I'm in school, he is looking after the child and the other one is in school, so there is someone to pick him up when he comes back.

Migrant learner

One of us is really having problems with her course because she's alone. She's a single mom. So, she tries to enroll the child [in childcare] because in that building there is a place to [have your children]. But there's no space.

PLC learner



When asked what could be done to improve services and supports, learners suggested increased childcare provision at their centres as well as more flexibility from tutors with respect to balancing course work with home life:

I think if they're trying to encourage people to go back to education, then they need childcare. It's one of the main things that they should have. Because it's the only thing that is stopping some people from going back to education. Many people have families [to help out] but I don't have any family here ... people who go back to education, they have the nanny or the auntie ... So it's just a matter of financing for us.

Migrant learner

They could get mothers at home if there was a little creche in the centre.

Community Education learner

Maybe more of a flexibility toward home life. I feel like sometimes teachers, they give you loads, and it's like, right, obviously I'll just have no life. Like, if they communicated with each other, like, 'take two assignments off here to make space so I don't have to do another [assignment at the same time]'.

PLC learner

Meals Support

Meals support features as a primary area of dissatisfaction raised by FET learners in the National FET Learner Forum 2024/2025. 64% (n = 537 / 833) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with the current availability of meals and food allowances (**Figure 24**).

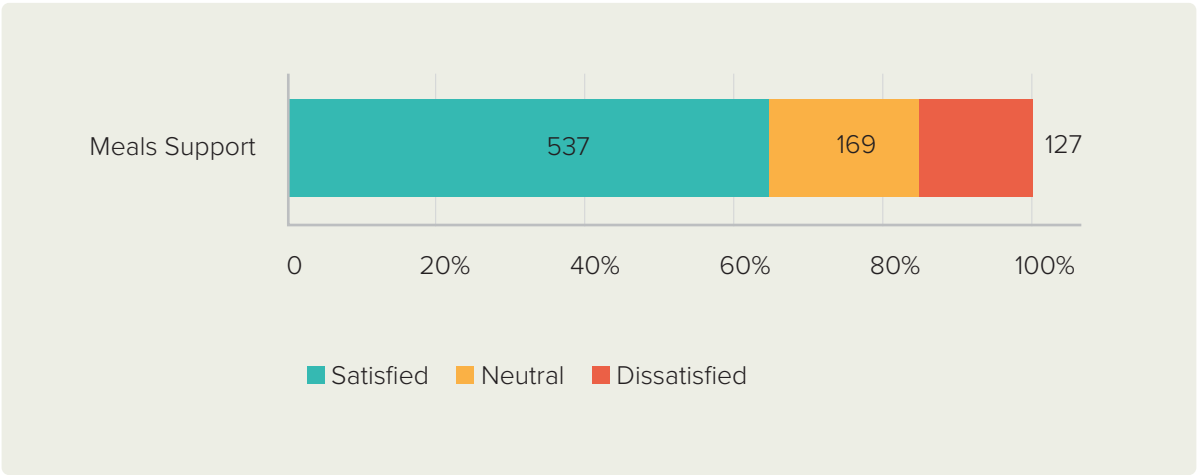


Figure 24 – Learner Satisfaction with Meals Support

Where their FET centre offered canteen options that catered to their needs, learners recognised and valued these supports and interventions, while others praised their centres' free or subsidised meals where these were available:

I enjoy the fact that we have a really open cafeteria where we have a lot of options. We have very nice canteen ladies that will always hear our opinions. I requested sweeteners because I'm diabetic, ... and the next day, one of the canteen ladies came to me and was like, 'Here you go, that's the sweeteners for you there'.

PLC learner

[Learner] I like the canteen because I serve the food. The food's free. For breakfast and lunch.

Focus group participants outlined a lack of space in their canteens, forcing some learners to eat in their cars, while other learners highlighted how they had no canteen space at all:

It's just a room where there's hot water. No canteen. They don't supply food for us. There's a toaster. If you bring a loaf of bread, you can make toast.

It is impossible to find somewhere to sit [in the canteen]. We had to go to people's cars and just sit there for our lunch. The seating area, the way they tried to do it, it was just a large table and they were trying to get everyone to talk ... wanting everyone to interact but no one's going to do it.

PLC learner

Learners further highlighted the costs associated with meals as negatively impacting their learning experience:

We get €4 a week on meals. We'd spend more money like going off to Tesco across the road than we would on anything.

Traveller learner

The food is really expensive. It's 50 cent for a tea bag. You have to pay for hot water as well.

PLC learner

Some students did not have money to eat ... stay hungry ... I know them personally and they don't complain.

We get four euros a week for lunch ... so [for] anybody who isn't working it is more difficult.

[Learner 1] The allowance you get if you live away from home, they haven't updated that in 20 years. [Learner 2] I know, I get €4 for lunch. [Learner 1] We're getting the same amount as the people were getting 20 years ago doing an apprenticeship, which is not matching the price of things now.

Apprentice

When asked what they would like to see happen next, learners suggested the following to help improve their canteens and measures to improve meal supports:

More space and maybe something for people to eat if they're hungry and they've come to have food.

The canteen is very expensive. Considering students are on a lower end financial scale, prices should be considerably lower.

PLC learner

The Youthreach in our centre, they get chicken rolls and burgers, and we don't get any food. Anyone who is not part of Youthreach don't get food, so I'd like to see us getting some food too.

VTOS learner



CHAPTER 9

Fostering Inclusion

Chapter 9 documents Learner Voice with respect to FET learners' different experiences of access and inclusion.

It begins by outlining participants' sense of welcome, belonging, and inclusion in FET.

Welcome, Belonging, and Inclusion

Learner Forum participants felt that ETB staff and tutors treated them with respect (**Figure 25**).

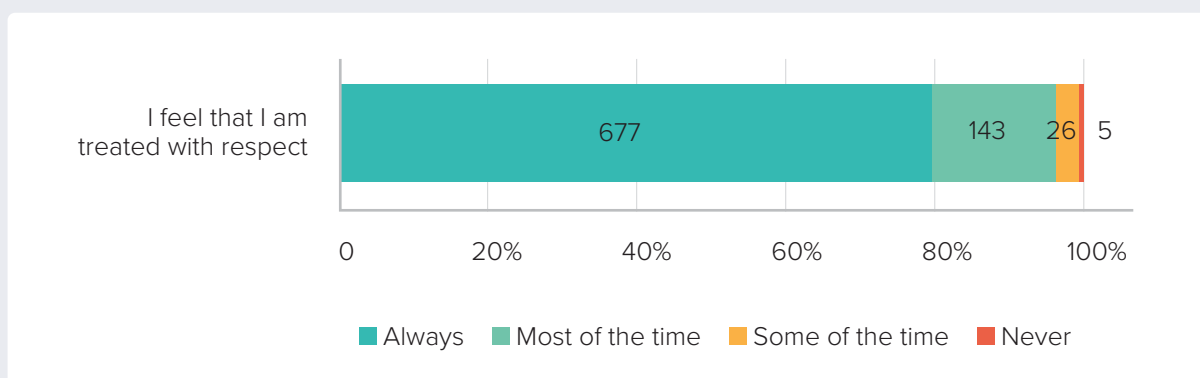


Figure 25 – Responses to “Do you feel that you are treated with respect by the staff and tutors in the ETB?”

Forum participants shared several ways in which their Education and Training Board made them feel welcome and included. Learners praised the welcoming and inclusive atmosphere in their centres, describing it as akin to a family. Migrant learners and mature learners appreciated the opportunities that FET provided for social inclusion and integration within the community:

I feel like we are a small family ... when I go to [name of centre] I go to have some rest and have fun, to have chats with my friends ... it's a very nice cosy atmosphere.

Visually impaired learner, living in IPAS accommodation

You can sit in the class with young girls, grannies, and we're all equal. Nobody is kind of excluding you from conversation ... everybody encourages you ... this is very healthy society when all ages [are] respected in the education.



In our group we have students from all over the world and it's very interesting to meet new people, to discuss about mentality, food, traditions, and it's very interesting to get to know new other people, other culture[s]. And, you know, after when we come out after classes, we could meet in the city our classmates and every year it's become more and more people who you know and, like, [your] social circle becomes bigger and bigger.

ESOL learner

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 perceived a lack of respect in their centres in relationships with some tutors, other learners shared concerns that admissions policies allowed certain learners to display incitement to hatred, while LGBTQ learners highlighted instances of homophobic language as key issues hindering their learning:

When I first came down, I didn't really get on with the instructor. I felt not targeted, but I was kind of an easy scapegoat.

[Learner 1] They let anyone in. Yeah, they let a Nazi in once. He was a full-blown Nazi. They wore a swastika. He kept on, like, you know, giving a disturbance and they eventually kicked him out.

Sometimes I'll hear different slurs being said, like the F slur. And we do have a lot of queer students in our school, so it's hurtful to hear this. But I don't feel like it's addressed the same as any other slur. I feel like it's just kind of dismissed as ... like, it's kind of just part of their vocabulary.

LGBTQ learner

Learners with disabilities reported a lack of adequate supports for facilitating their full inclusion through learning:

But for me though, there's not enough courses for me to do, for people with disabilities ... there's not enough, not even courses but social things for people with disabilities either.

Learners would like to see the development of clubs, societies, and extracurricular activities to increase interactions across FET and enhance a sense of community:

[There needs to be] more inclusion for people with disabilities and learning difficulties.

Try to get more mature learners. I really enjoy learning and mixing with younger students.

We don't have any societies or clubs in our college. So, you really don't get a great chance to know people outside of your course because it's just no real opportunity ... I think it would be a great benefit because you really only get to socialize at break during classes and before in between classes and that's again people who are in your class.

Migrant learner

Migrant learners further suggested increased English language activities to support community integration:

We need more classes, or only together with the local people. Maybe a conversation with ... discussion on the local problems with people.

ESOL learner

I would love some more English language classes, separate to my computer class. I know this would be very helpful for me to integrate more.

Finally, learners suggested enhancing a sense of belonging and social connections by developing recreational spaces and opportunities to socialise:

I wish there would be a group like this so I could be involved [in] more than just our class but from the whole centre ... to meet new people.

Visually impaired learner, living in IPAS accommodation

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 9.1**). Our selection of FET Learner Groups was informed by prior research and policy analysis, anticipated advocacy needs, and social justice and educational equality considerations. To varying degrees, the following cohorts consist of individuals who are disproportionately at risk of poverty or marginalisation in Irish society and who experience high levels of educational inequality. 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.

FET Learner Group	Total Number of Respondents	% of Survey Respondents*
Levels		
Levels 1 – 4	687	37%
Levels 5 – 6	893	48%
Programme Groups		
Apprentices	100	5%
Community Education	53	3%
Social Groups		
Living with disabilities**	374	20%
Living in Direct Provision or IPAS accommodation	122	7%
Over 65 years old	75	4%

* All figures expressed as a percentage of total survey respondents (n = 1858).

** Refers to learners who reported Living with Long-Term Health Issues, Illness or Disability

Table 9.1. FET Learner Groups as a Percentage of Survey Respondents

The analysis compares FET learner experiences across a limited range of variables. A first set of variables provides a sense of the social inequalities and challenges facing learners and includes those related to accommodation, finances, and mental health.

A second set of variables relates to FET learners' course experience and satisfaction with learner supports. This coincides with those survey items about which Learner Forum participants expressed lowest net satisfaction: (a) mental health support; (b) transport support; (c) meal support; (d) financial support; (e) childcare support; and (f) availability of public transport.

The third and final set of variables concerns the positive impact of Further Education and Training, with particular emphasis on increases in self-confidence and learners' outlook on the future.

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. Before starting their FET course, for 50% of learners undertaking Levels 1–4 ($n = 342/687$) and 33% of learners living with disabilities ($n = 122/374$) the highest level of education completed was a Junior Certificate or lower-level qualification. This compares with 27% of the total survey respondent group ($n = 501/1843$). Moreover, differences in FET learners' accommodation, finances, and mental health produce significant, predictable impacts on their wellbeing and capability to pursue learning successfully on their own terms. These findings resonate with a wider sociological literature on the long-standing relationship between class privilege and educational inequality in Ireland (Share, Corcoran, and Conway, 2012: 171–5).

Accommodation

Learners living in Direct Provision or IPAS accommodation such as a hotel, learners living with disabilities, learners and learners in Levels 5–6 report experiencing higher than average levels of stress because of their accommodation situation. Notably, 44% ($n = 49/112$) of those living in Direct Provision or IPAS accommodation such as a hotel, and 30% ($n = 101/339$) of those with disabilities said that their accommodation situation causes them stress, anxiety, or depression. This compares with 21% ($n = 278/1299$) in the overall group (**Figure 26**).

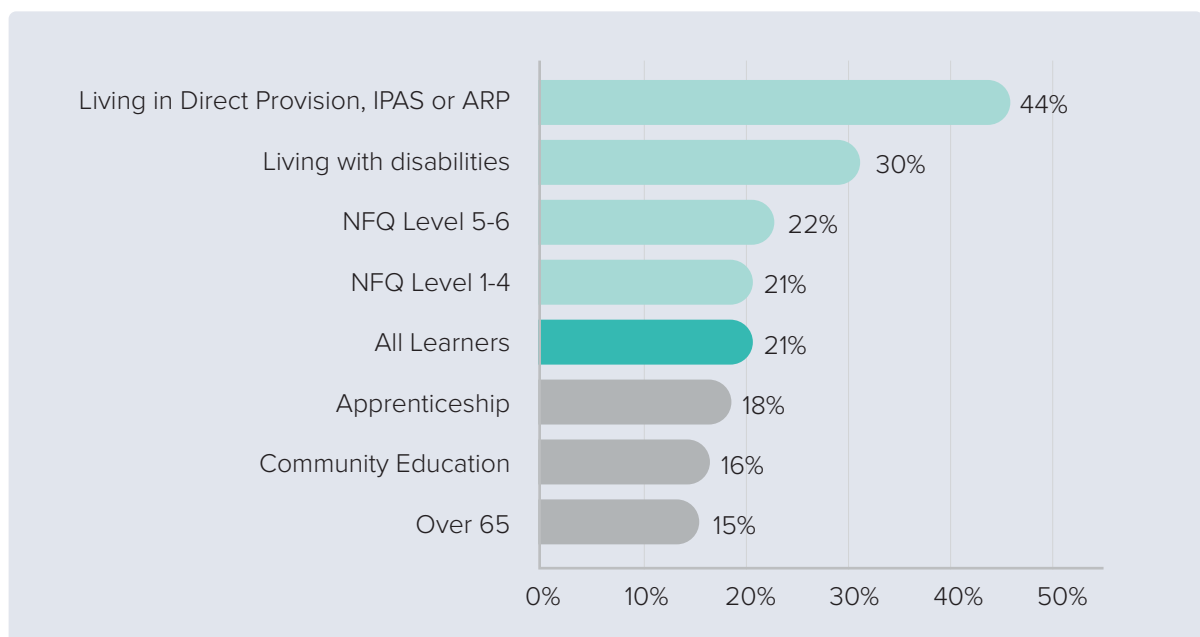


Figure 26 - *Reported Experience of Stress due to Accommodation by Select FET Learner Group*

38% (n = 45/119) of those living in Direct Provision or IPAS accommodation and 24% (n = 89/370) of learners living with disabilities stated that their living situation affects their ability to learn. This compares with 20% (n = 276/1407) of the total survey respondent group.

Financial Situation

24% (n = 326/1359) of all survey respondents report that their financial situation affects their ability to learn or study. This figure increases to 29% for those living with disabilities, 29% for learners taking Levels 5–6, 36% for apprentices, and 39% for those living in Direct Provision or IPAS accommodation (**Figure 27**).

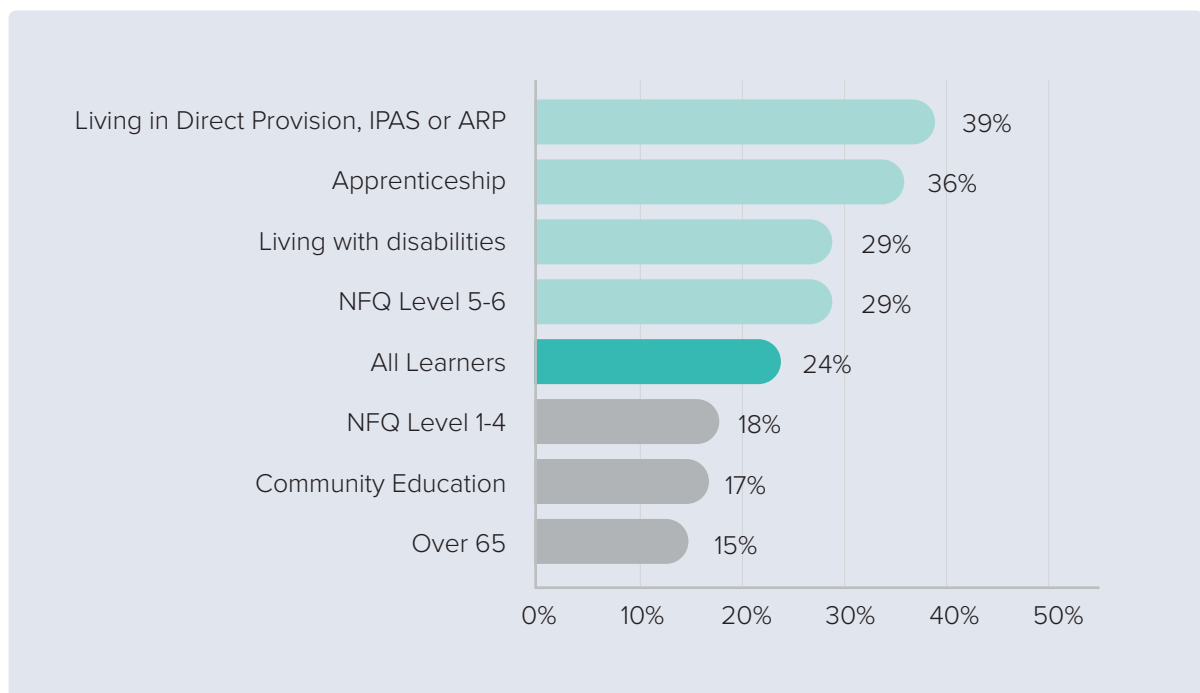


Figure 27 - *Reported Experience of Financial Situation impacting Ability to Learn by Select FET Learner Group*

Health and Wellbeing

Learners living with disabilities reported experiencing higher than average levels of poor mental and physical health. 39% (n = 144/374) of learners living with disabilities reported poor to fair health compared to 24% (n = 345/1412) of all Learner Forum participants (**Figure 28**).

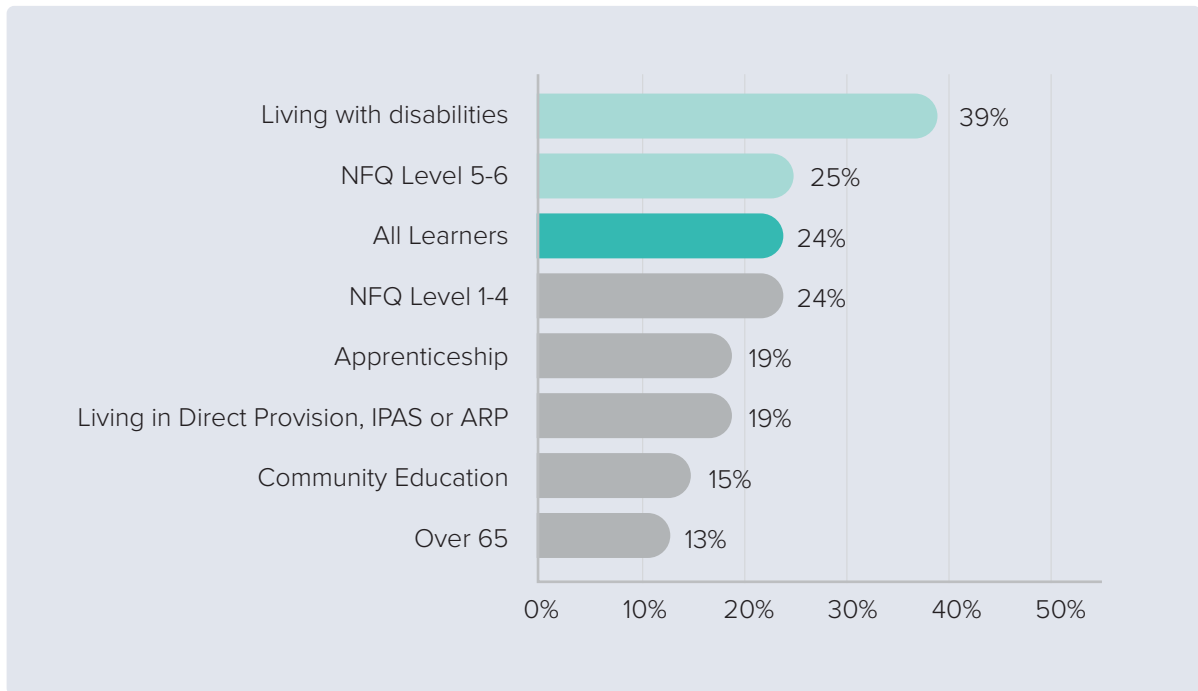


Figure 28 - Self-Reported 'Poor' to 'Fair' Mental and Physical Health Ratings by Select FET Learner Groups

77% (n = 287/374) of survey respondents with a disability reported experiencing stress, anxiety, or depression. This compares with 51% (n = 715/1414) of the total survey respondent group (**Figure 29**).

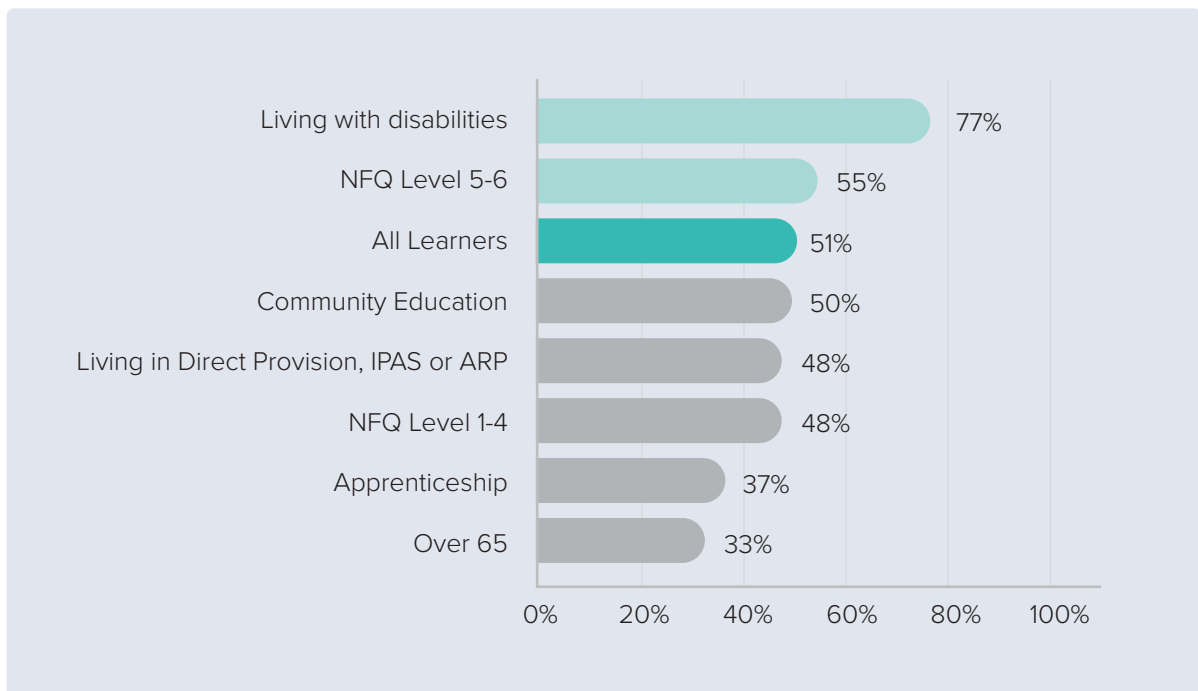


Figure 29 - Reported Experience of Stress, Anxiety, or Depression by Select FET Learner Group

When asked does stress, anxiety, or depression affect their ability to learn or study, 52% of learners living with disabilities (n = 193/374) reported that it did. This compares with 31% (n = 434/1411) of the total survey respondent group.

Satisfaction with Learner Supports

The selected FET Learner groups reported a mixed range of satisfaction with critical learner supports concerning: (a) mental health support; (b) travel support; (c) meal support; (d) financial support; (e) childcare support, and (f) availability of public transport (**Table 9.2**).

FET Learner Group	Total Number of Respondents					
	Mental health support	Travel support	Meal support	Financial support	Childcare support	Public Transport
Learners 1–4	78	62	66	71	69	53
Learners 5–6	62*	48*	32*	40*	44*	50
Apprentices	63*	38*	25*	42*	48*	60
Community Education	69	38*	44*	46*	77	42*
Living with disabilities	59*	46*	39*	50*	48*	49*
Living in Direct Provision or IPAS accommodation	85	41*	45*	62	44*	34*
Over 65	67	69	62	44*	44*	67
All learners	68	55	49	54	55	51

* Indicates a lower net satisfaction score than that of the total learner group

Table 9.2. Net Satisfaction with Learner Supports by FET Learner Group.

There are strong grounds for believing that the current level of learner support is not meeting all FET learners' needs. The most striking finding from this analysis is that both FET Learners living with disabilities and apprentices report a lower net satisfaction than that of their peer group across all five of the learner support survey items (**Figure 30**). The most notable differences here include apprentices' net satisfaction with meal support (24% lower than peer group), travel support (17% lower), and financial support (12% lower).

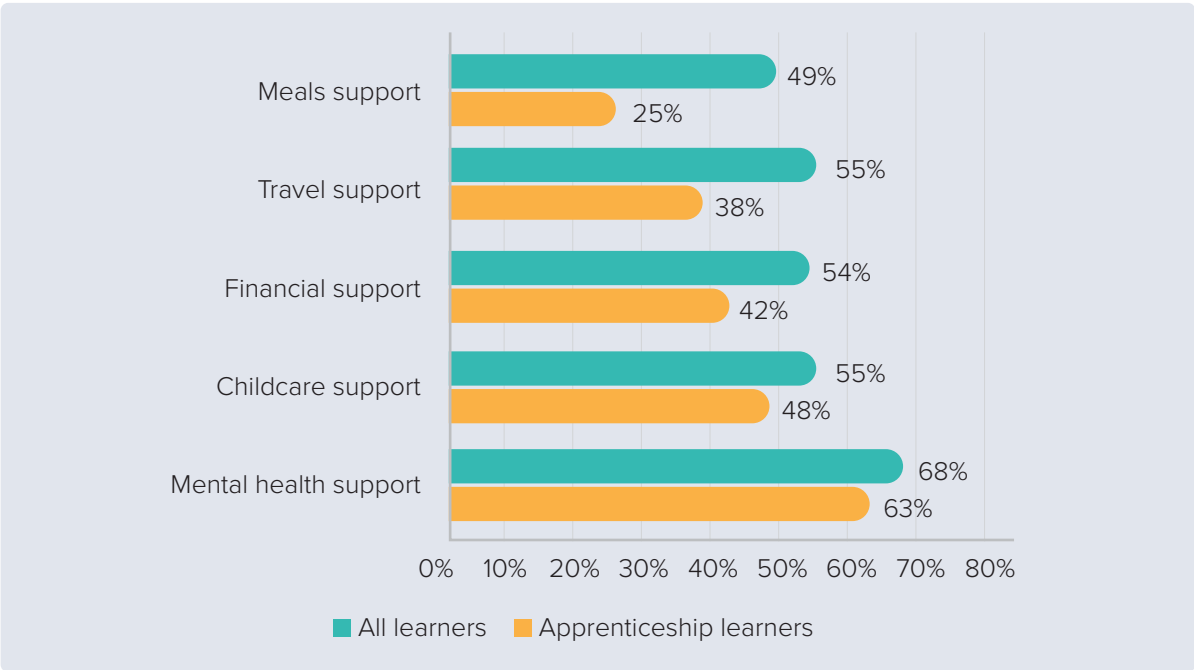


Figure 30. Comparison of Net Satisfaction with Learner Supports between Apprentices and Total Learner Respondents

FET Learners living with disabilities also report a lower net satisfaction than that of their peer group across all five of the learner support survey items (**Figure 31**). The most notable differences here include learners' with disabilities net satisfaction with meal support (10% lower than peer group), travel support (9% lower), and financial support (9% lower).

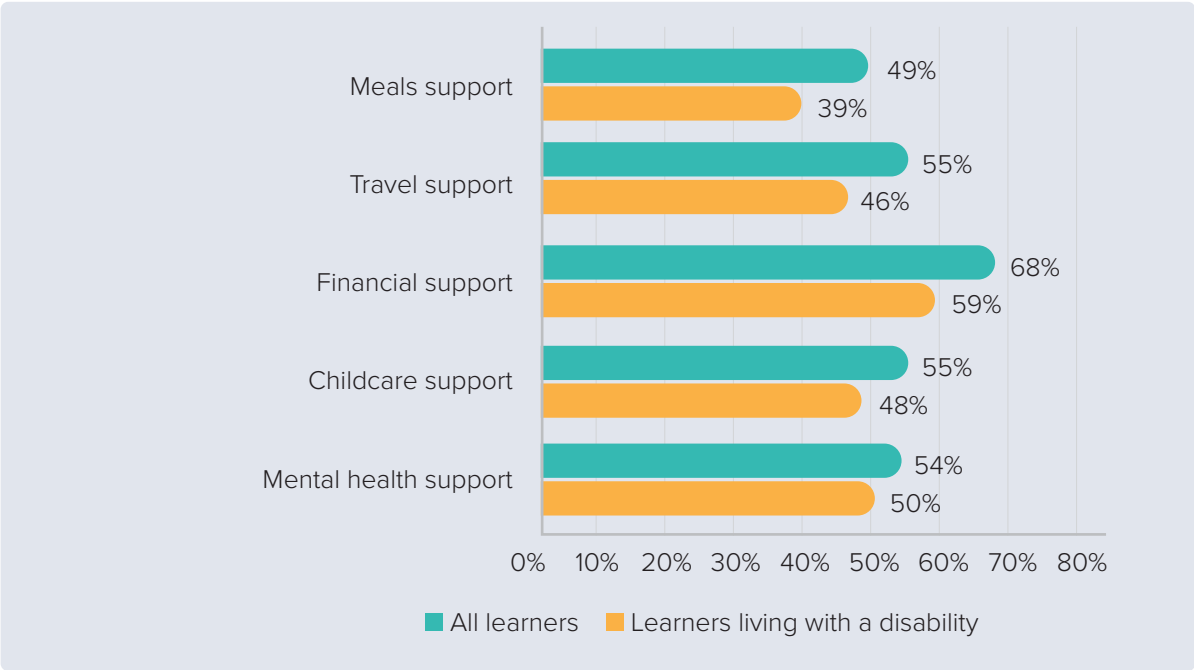


Figure 31: Comparison of Net Satisfaction with Learner Supports between Learners Living with a Disability and Total Learner Respondents

The Positive Impact of FET

Learner Forum participants identified a variety of positive impacts associated with their Further Education and Training. 65% (n = 1017/1572) of all survey respondents reported an increase in self-confidence (**Figure 32**).

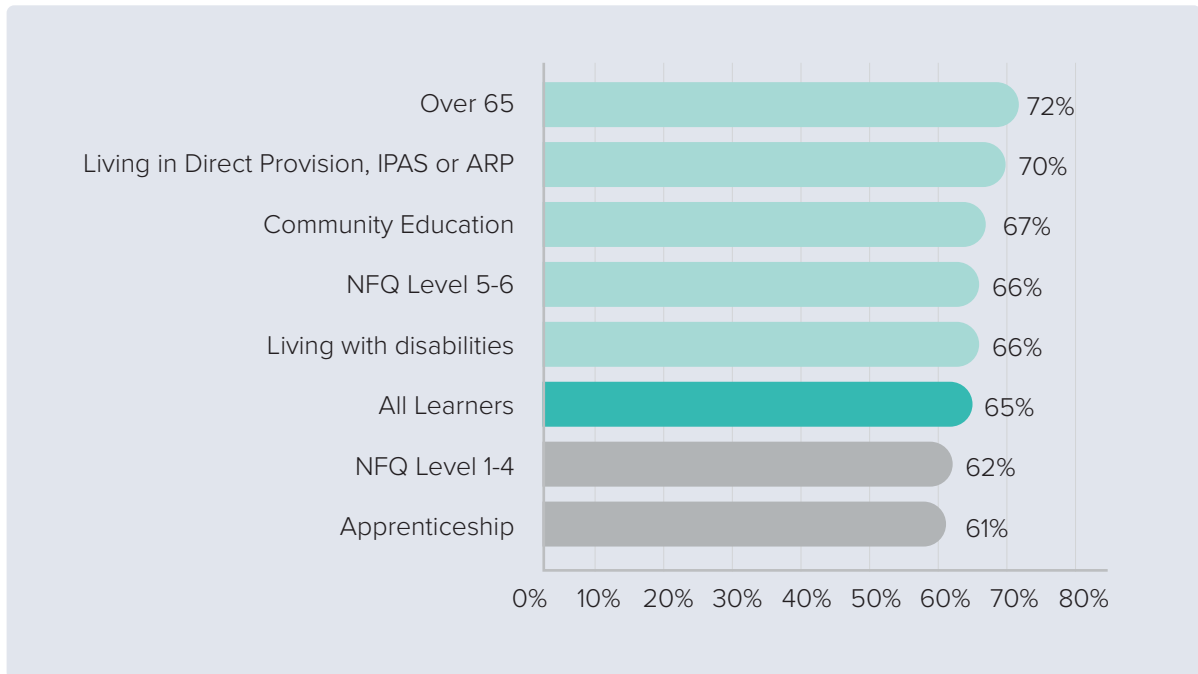


Figure 32 – Reported Increase in Confidence by Select FET Learner Groups

52% (n = 823/1572) of all survey respondents reported a more positive outlook on the future as a result of taking their course. In five of the seven groups selected for analysis, an equal or higher percentage of respondents reported experiencing this positive impact. This reported impact was greatest among learners taking Community Education courses (61%) (**Figure 33**).

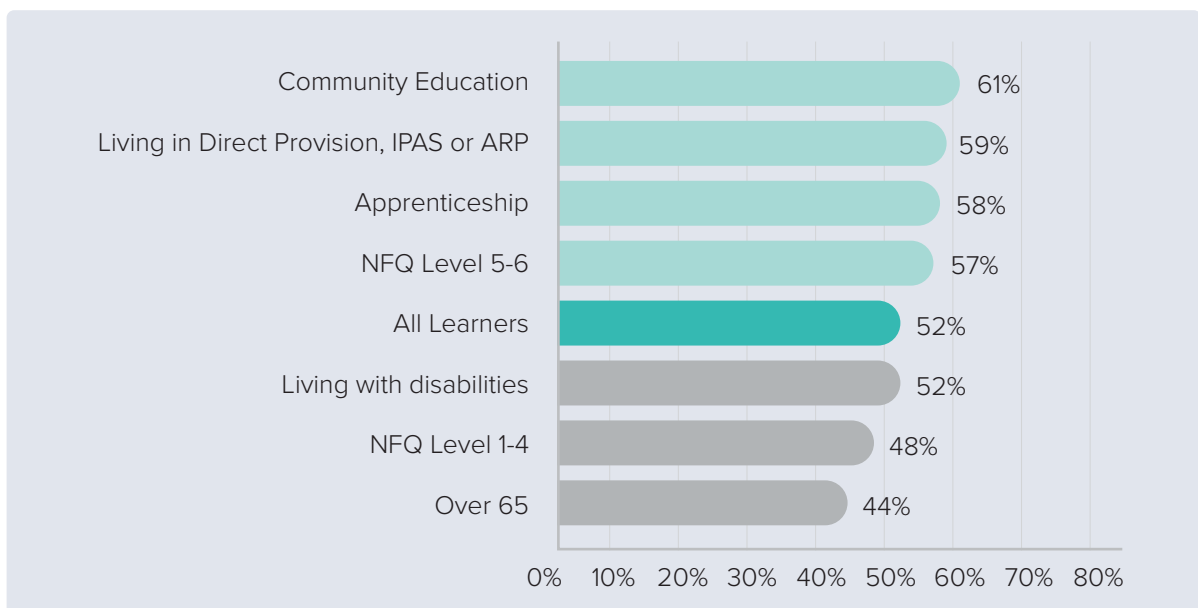


Figure 33 - Reported Increase in Positive Outlook on the Future by Select FET Learner Groups



A wide variety of factors may help account for why learners over 65, learners in Direct Provision or IPAS accommodation, and learners undertaking Community Education courses report such positive impacts of FET and often in higher numbers proportionately than their peers. While a full analysis is beyond the scope of the present report, Forum participants in these categories have emphasised the value of FET as means of combatting isolation, making friends, and creating community:

I lost my husband three years ago. It was then that I started going through the [ETB]. We were married just a year and he got sick. He was in a wheelchair for 24 years ... I found it very hard to get back on track. I was very saddened by what happened. The course itself and meeting people again, it helped me a lot. I can say nothing but goodness about the course and about people.

Learner over 65 years old

I'm on my own and I'm very happy I joined it three years ago and I have to say I really was made up. Because the loneliness when you're on your own is not great. I have family, but they come and go. I've met bundles of people now and it's just so great.

Learner over 65 years old

[As a result of going to the course] I am more independent, more confident. [It's] easier to understand the culture. It's easier to become part of Irish society.

Learner living in IPAS accommodation

I think I'm looking for jobs after this course. My son is from [name of city]. He learns, he plays [on the] football team and he grew up ... in Ireland. And for me it's very important now, integration [in] Ireland is very important.

Learner living in IPAS accommodation

It's not just the course, but it's also the other people that were on the course, the interaction, discussing their background, our backgrounds, our organisation. All of that is good mentally for us in addition to what we learned in the course. I just have so much goodness for community education in terms of what it's achieved giving people a second chance in life.

Community Education learner

We're just kind of a social group as well. We love times when we just drink tea and gab ... that's very nice ... just having the group to bounce off, to have somebody to talk to ... We do things but sometimes we just end up talking.

Community Education learner

These findings clearly underline the value of FET in supporting community and social cohesion. They further underline the importance of what learners themselves would like to see happen next: investment in the creation of extracurricular social activities, clubs, societies, and opportunities for community outside of formal classroom learning.

CHAPTER 10

Recommendations

This chapter presents a summary of Learner Forum participants' views on and satisfaction with their Further Education and Training. It outlines what learners say they would like to see happen next. Drawing on the report's most significant findings, we conclude with a set of key recommendations arising.

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 10.1). 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".

Survey Item	Net Learner Satisfaction
Opportunity to take part in class	93%
Communication from centre or ETB	90%
Tutor feedback	90%
Standard of teaching	89%
Access to technology at your centre	88%
Learning support (e.g. literacy, numeracy, digital skills)	86%
Website	86%
Laptop or device loan	83%
Guidance Service	82%
Home learning environment	80%
Support with work experience	79%
Information on supports and services	78%
Disability support	75%
Opportunity to raise issues	73%
Mental health support	68%
Transport support	55%
Childcare support	55%
Financial support	54%
Availability of public transport	51%
Meal Support	49%

Table 10.1 – Net Learner Satisfaction Scores

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 10.2**). Their primary suggestions are as follows:

Theme	What Learners Say They Would Like to See Happen Next
WELCOME, BELONGING and INCLUSION	Respect Continue to cultivate an atmosphere of respect and inclusion for and among learners. Community and Connection Host more social events and extracurricular activities outside of class hours to support community integration and relationships. Strong inclusion may involve undertaking specific, additional steps to recognise and include specific learner cohorts, including measures articulated by learners with disabilities and migrant learners in this report.
BUILDINGS AND FACILITIES	Accessible and Inclusive Buildings Enhance available buildings and facilities for FET provision. Upgrade classroom and toilet facilities in some centres. Enhance disability access to buildings and facilities. 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. Digital Transition Introduce laptop loan schemes where unavailable. Enhance Wi-Fi and digital equipment in some centres. Canteen Enhance access to affordable canteen facilities and/or self-catering spaces with adequate kitchen equipment for learners to utilise. Transport 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. Review introduction of a dedicated ETB minibus service to facilitate transportation to some centres.
COMMUNICATIONS	External and Internal Communication Diversify advertisement of FET courses, highlighting wider benefits of adult learning. Enhance internal communication of all supports and services available to FET learners.

Theme	What Learners Say They Would Like to See Happen Next
COURSE PROVISION	Quantity Increase the quantity of course options and the number of class hours offered. Increase the quantity of courses and class hours for ESOL provision. Scheduling Diversify course schedules to include more morning and evening classes. The latter is particularly important to FET learners with childcare needs. Staffing Increase teaching staff numbers to meet course demand. Take steps to minimise the impact of staff turnover on course provision.
TEACHING AND LEARNING	Curriculum and Assessment Update course curricula, learning materials and equipment used by learners. Offer longer timeframes for assignment completion. Teaching Methods Consider how best to vary teaching methods, including using diverse audio-visual content and practical learning activities.
CREATING PATHWAYS	Guidance Services Increase resourcing of guidance support services to meet the needs of the learner population. Pathways Facilitate learner progression by enhancing availability of and access to FET courses at higher NFQ Levels. Enhance communications with relevant industries and HEIs to clarify and support learner pathways. Work Experience and Work-Based Learning Enhance access to structured training partnerships between ETBs/FET centres and local employers. Share a database of employers willing to provide learners with work placement opportunities. Facilitate regular class trips to course-related workplaces. Communicate guidelines to employers and FET learners to ensure learners access and undertake placements relevant to their course work.

Theme	What Learners Say They Would Like to See Happen Next
LEARNER SUPPORT	Learner Support Consider how best to enhance individualised support to learners. Highlighted areas of need include digital literacy, study techniques, and time management. Disability Support Enhance disability learner support through provision of physical copies of assignment briefs and a common, accessible online platform for submitting assignments. Increase SNA support.
WRAPAROUND SUPPORT	Finance Enhance financial supports, particularly in the context of learner challenges with the cost of meals and travel for learning. Mental Health Increase the quantity of counselling support available. Consider introduction of a dedicated ‘quiet room’ in centres. Support provision of mindfulness classes. Ensure flexibility around assessment deadlines.

Table 10.2 – *Summary of What Learners Say They Would Like To See Happen Next*

AONTAS Reflections on Findings

The primary theme of the Learner Voices Across Ireland Report is inconsistency: inconsistency across geography, programmes, and across the wider education system. On the one hand, the findings illustrate the excellent, overwhelmingly positive experience of many FET learners on their programme. Learners highlight the positive impact of learning not only for their academic development and employability but also for their self-confidence and personal development. Central here is the extremely positive role of tutors and ETB staff as well as the availability of quality supports for learning, wellbeing, guidance, and progression. The report further underlines the wider benefits of FET in supporting community integration and social cohesion.

On the other hand, however, the report shares the voices of those learners whose experience has been characterised by marginalisation and struggle. These voices include the learner who must send 80 emails to secure a work placement and

the learner who enjoys her FET course but cannot progress because she cannot travel to a nearby city. They include the disabled learner who seeks equality of learning conditions, including accessible buildings and facilities, as well as the migrant learner who seeks additional ESOL classes to facilitate their learning, employability, and community integration. If the present report shows the powerful impact of FET in Irish society, these inconsistent and unequal learner experiences remind us that more remains to be done at a Government and societal level to provide an equitable education system.

AONTAS' current advocacy highlights some specific areas for action:

- Diversification of course schedules in FET to include more morning and evening classes. The latter is particularly important to FET learners with childcare needs. In 2024, out of 1,860 Level 5 Major Award programmes listed on Qualifax, only 30, or 1.6%, are listed as part-time.
- AONTAS is currently campaigning for enhanced parity of esteem between FET and HE. This includes enhancing buildings and facilities as part of the FET estate. Capital expenditure and the FET College of the Future is a welcome change for learners and staff.

Learner Voice and Democratic Learning

AONTAS works to ensure adult learning is recognised and supported to empower individuals and communities. In doing so, we value social justice, feminism, equality, diversity, partnership, and social inclusion. Fostering these democratic values in and through adult education acquires renewed urgency today. Our society is undergoing rapid and profound change. We are compelled to recognise and address complex societal challenges such as rising inequality, racism, social polarisation, the climate crisis, and declining civic engagement. Authoritarian challenges to social cohesion, inclusion, and diversity increasingly feature in our communities and society. The National FET Learner Forum has never been more relevant.

Within Ireland's adult learning system, the NFLF represents a formally recognised space for FET learners to examine common problems together and to transform their learning environments. It is a vital mechanism for learner engagement, deliberation, and empowerment in Irish education. In a context of increasing atomisation, the NFLF offers FET learners the opportunity to share their experiences and to voice their opinions. In a context of growing threats to social cohesion, the NFLF supports the inclusion of marginalised groups and their active participation in civil society dialogue. Importantly, in a context of declining civic engagement, the NFLF fundamentally normalises adult learner involvement in policy and decision-making. The Forum is a space to strengthen community through participation. Insofar as adult learners are empowered in practice, the NFLF recognises and supports 'democratic learning', the learning that flows from participating in constructing and maintaining a common life together (see Biesta, 2016: 104).

FET learners appreciate the opportunity to use Learner Voice to share their experience of learning. Such opportunities are particularly important among those who have constructed their understanding of education through long-term experience of exclusion, powerlessness, and silence (Murray and Brennan, 2023). Forum participants consistently report that simply realising their ETB was open to hearing their feedback was one of the best things they learned by participating. Participants further report experiencing empowerment most strongly at an individual level, taking the form of enhanced confidence, new learning, or new relationships. Learner Voice thus helps transform rather than reinforce adult learners' often negative experiences of mainstream education. The NFLF suggests the possibility, perhaps newly discovered, that learners can be agents of change in their own lives and in their learning community.

Enhancing Learner Voice Groups and Councils

Having used their voice, FET learners want to be listened to. Learner Forum participants consistently express a desire to know what will happen to their views after the Forum. They further request that AONTAS and their ETBs offer and share 'examples of how these sessions have contributed to changes historically'. AONTAS is currently engaged in evaluating the NFLF and reviewing how best to 'close the feedback loop', including offering Learner Councils or class representatives an opportunity to participate in and speak at regional forum events.

For some learners, taking part in the NFLF and feeling heard, maybe for the first time, opens a possibility that they can take part and use their voice in other fora. 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 recommend supporting the development of Learner Voice groups and councils and increasing provision for Learner Voice capacity-building for staff and learners. AONTAS welcome all opportunities to discuss and support Learner Voice initiatives.

Conclusion

The *Learner Voices Across Ireland* report provides rich insight into the views of FET learners at the 10 Education and Training Boards who took part in the National FET Learner Forum 2024–2025. 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.

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

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APPENDIX 1:

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.

735 learners in attendance at the ten regional forums submitted an evaluation form. This represents a response rate of 95.5% (n =735/770 total participants).

When asked what they thought about the National FET Learner Forum, 99% of respondents considered their experience to be a positive one with 66% describing their forum as ‘excellent’ (**Figure 34**).

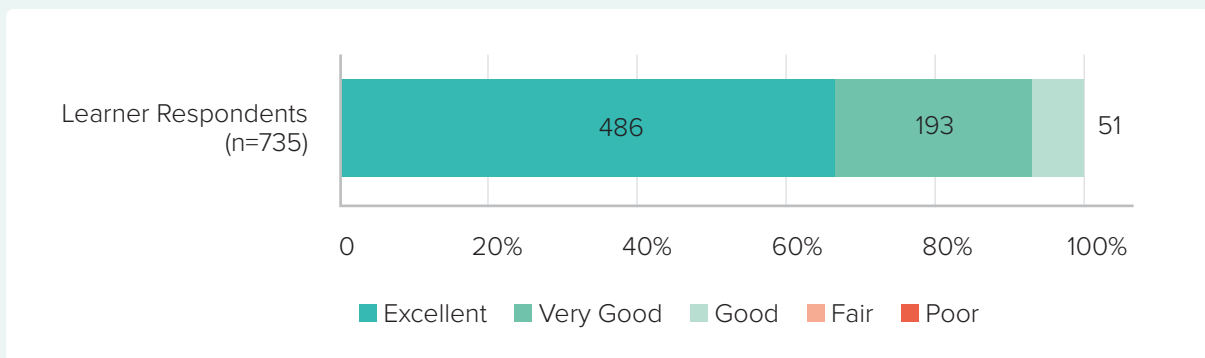


Figure 34 – Participant Evaluation of FET Learner Forum. Responses to “What did you think about this event?” (Multiple choice question, n = total responses).

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 aspect of the Forum that learners enjoyed was engaging in focus group discussions and having the opportunity to share their experiences with their peers.

They also valued having their voices heard and respected and meeting new people from different courses, backgrounds, and cultures.

Participants praised their group facilitators' encouragement, interest, and support, and the welcoming and inclusive atmosphere.

Learners also noted that they felt comfortable and respected in an open and safe environment. They referenced friendly staff, free merchandise, and nice venues and food as other positive aspects. Participants found the social aspect of the day to be hugely important and commented on how diverse the Forum events were. ESOL learners particularly enjoyed the opportunity to practice their English.

I enjoyed everything about the event: the building, the reception we got and the information. Tea and coffee was lovely and all of the staff were so friendly

I was delighted that I got to meet people my own age. There was loads to learn from other learners in different centres and everyone was very nice

Our facilitator was very nice and did a great job at making each individual feel heard and understood. Everyone was able to get their points across and there was lots of participation

I enjoyed being able to give feedback and felt as if my voice was being heard and appreciated

Very social, very friendly, and very well organised – a fun upbeat day

The positive atmosphere and friendly people. Everything was very well organised

Something I would like to change

When asked what they would like to change, Forum participants raised a few areas for improvement. One issue raised 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.

In relation to the focus group allocations, some learners said that they would prefer to sit at tables with their colleagues from their own courses. However, a similar number noted a preference for a greater mix of learners from different levels and locations.

Other learners commented on a lack of pre-event communication and that they had not received sufficient advance notice or information about the event.

Finally, a small number of 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.

I would prefer if the groups were only from the same courses

I would allow everyone to sit with friends from the same colleges in order for some people to be comfortable to speak up

More time is needed to share solutions

More time for discussions and for the survey

It would be interesting to mix students from different levels and locations

Something I learned

When asked what they had learned at the event, Forum participants most frequently provided answers related to peer learning and the sharing of ideas and experiences with their fellow learners.

The second most common responses related to how important their voices and opinions are. Realising their ETB was open to hearing student feedback was one of the best things they learned at the Forum.

Learning something new about their ETB was also frequently mentioned, including hearing about new courses and opportunities and the variety of supports available in their region.

Finally, participants referenced how inclusive the FET community is and better realised the huge diversity of learners in FET from all age groups and backgrounds.

I felt my voice was being listened to and that we as a group of learners can help shape the future of learning in our ETB

I learned that there is no age-limit to learning new things

The range of opportunities and pathways to Further Education and personal / career development

That students are cared for and their interests and desires are taken into account, and that supports are available

I got acquainted with the culture of other countries

The diverse amount of people using adult learning

Welcoming and inclusive environment
Facilitators
Well-run and well-organised
Meeting new people from different courses and cultures
Sharing our Staff Experiences
Merchandise
Focus group conversations
Having our voices heard and respected
Venue and food

APPENDIX 2:

Survey Data

The Adult Learner and FET

Are you a full-time or part-time learner? (1695 responses)

Full-time	581	Part-time	1114
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Course or Programme Title (1743 responses)

Adult Literacy		Apprenticeship		Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)		Community Education	
146		100		159		53	
Community Training Centre (CTC)		English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)		Local Training Initiative (LTI)		Post-leaving Certificate (PLC)	
44		129		41		381	
Skills to Advance	Traineeship	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)		Youthreach		Other	
75	51	148		243		173	

Course Level on NFQ (National Framework of Qualifications Framework) (1702 responses)

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7–10	Non-accredited/ no level	Don't know
44	77	218	348	705	188	7	45	70

What is your age group? Please tick the relevant box (1846 responses)

Under 18	18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54
186	682	207	273	267
55–64	65–69	70+	Prefer not to say	
149	36	39	7	

Please select the gender you identify as. Please tick the relevant box. (1845 responses)

Female	Male	Non-binary
1211	578	22
I don't know	Prefer not to say	Other gender identity
6	19	9

What is your ethnic group or background? Please tick the relevant box. (1884 responses) (1846 respondents)

White Irish	Irish Traveller	Other White background	Black or Black Irish
1116	25	355	90
Asian or Asian Irish	Prefer not to say	Other ethnicity	
55	74	169	

Highest NFQ Level of Education completed (1843 responses)

Education or training (but no formal assessments or exams)	Help with reading, writing, maths, and basic computer practice (adult literacy education) (Level 1 or 2)	Junior Certificate, Intermediate Certificate, adult learning course or similar (Level 3)	Leaving Certificate, adult learning course or similar (Levels 4 and 5)
103	72	326	810
Diploma or certificate (Level 6)	Degree or similar (Levels 7 and 8)	Postgraduate qualification (Levels 9 and 10)	Prefer not to say
169	196	63	104

Please describe your current employment status: Please tick all the relevant boxes (1958 responses) (1845 respondents)

In full-time paid employment	In part-time paid employment	Community Em-ployment	In receipt of Disability Allowance	Unemployed
226	408	52	103	710
Retired	Unable to work due to long-standing health problems	Performing domestic tasks e.g. full-time parent or unpaid carer	Prefer not to state	Other
93	35	57	88	186

**What were the reasons for taking your course? (Please select all that apply)
(4113 responses) (1604 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
642	194	443	352	590	440
To progress in my career	To meet new people	Required by the Department of Social Protection	To improve my English	To improve my health and wellbeing	Other
502	381	47	249	218	55

Course Provision

During your time in your adult learning course or programme, have you experienced an increase in any of the following? Please tick all the relevant boxes. (5522 responses) (1572 respondents)

Self-confidence	Wellbeing and better health	Connection with family, friends, or others	Positive outlook on the future	Sense of belonging
1017	511	418	823	489
Trust in public services (local or national)	Ability to cope with stressful situations	Ability to enter employment	Ability to progress my career	Ability to go to Higher Education
243	366	480	629	546

Teaching and Learning

How satisfied are you with the opportunity to actively take part in your class? (1505 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
873	535	81	8	5	3

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? (887 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
508	306	52	16	5	0

How satisfied are you with the way your tutor assesses and gives feedback on your work? (888 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
490	317	57	13	4	7

Creating Pathways

How satisfied were you with the supports you received from your Education and Training Board?

Guidance Service (1440 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
516	419	116	23	16	350

How satisfied are you with the supports from your centre or ETB to undertake work experience? (1491 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
529	432	134	41	13	342

Learner Support

How satisfied were you with the supports you received from your Education and Training Board?

Learning support (1436 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
538	395	93	18	9	383

Disability support (1431 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
227	159	73	17	6	311

Mental Health support (for example, counselling) (1432 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
175	172	80	20	10	337

Disability support - Reported living with a disability and use of available disability supports (369 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
108	81	42	15	8	115

Mental Health support - Reported stress, anxiety or depression impacting ability to learn and use of available mental health supports (429 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
81	78	47	21	19	183

How would you rate your overall wellbeing including your physical and mental health? (1412 responses)

Excellent	Very good	Good	Fair	Poor
228	356	483	250	95

Do you have any long-term health issue, illness, or disability? (1412 responses)

Yes	No	Prefer not to say
374	885	153

Do you experience stress, anxiety, or depression? (1414 responses)

Yes	No	Prefer not to say
715	521	178

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) (1411 responses)

Yes	No	Prefer not to say
434	745	232

What would help to support your mental health? (1917 responses) (1262 respondents)

Appointments with a counsellor or qualified specialist	362
An atmosphere of openness around mental health at your centre or ETB	283
Mindfulness classes	407
Increased financial support	334
Flexibility around assignments and deadlines	387
Other	144

Enabling Themes

Where did you hear about your course? (Please select all that apply) (1898 responses) (1598 respondents)	
Careers Exhibition	32
Career Guidance	203
Current or Former Learner	122
Employer	70
Family or Friend	654
Online/ Internet	363
Open Day	156
Radio or Newspaper	27
The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection	119
The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science	50
Other	102
Online/ Internet	363

Did you receive any information from your centre or ETB about the availability of the following supports and services?			
Supports or services	Yes	No	Total Responses
Loans of laptops or other devices	1009	417	1426
Learning supports	1090	313	1403
Guidance service	1085	285	1370
Mental health supports	892	461	1353
Disability support	768	541	1309
Transport or financial support with transport	688	661	1349
Meals or financial support with meals	624	711	1335
Childcare or financial support with childcare	357	946	1303
Support with money or costs	596	736	1332

**How satisfied were you with communications at your centre or ETB?
(1596 responses)**

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
952	516	80	22	17	9

How satisfied were you with the website for your centre or ETB, when you were looking for a course or programme? (1592 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
698	591	128	33	8	134

How satisfied are you with the way information on supports and services were provided to you? (1439 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
450	497	174	28	12	278

How satisfied were you with the opportunity to raise an issue at your centre or ETB? (1416 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
520	514	293	23	14	52

**How satisfied are you with the access to technology at your centre? (for example, computers, printers, specialist software, and equipment etc.)
(1482 responses)**

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
754	526	94	29	10	78

How satisfied were you with the supports you received from your Education and Training Board?

Laptop or device loan (1436 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
478	265	89	17	12	575

Social Development and Adult Learning

Does your financial situation affect your ability to learn or study? (1359 responses)

Yes	No
326	1033

How satisfied are you with the financial support offered to cover the costs of taking part in learning at your centre? (1427 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
370	326	236	43	82	370

How satisfied are you with travel support (e.g. fuel allowances)? (1436 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
283	284	162	62	44	601

How satisfied are you with the availability of public transport to your centre? (1495 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
342	410	175	129	53	385

**How would you describe your current accommodation or living situation?
(1383 responses)**

Rental accommodation	251
Supported accommodation	19
Social housing (e.g. local authority rented)	123
Traveller-specific accommodation	1
Private housing (have ownership of home)	270
Live with family (do not have ownership of home)	567
Living in homeless accommodation	14
Living in Direct Provision or International Protection Application accommodation such as a hotel	122
Other	16

How satisfied are you with your home learning environment (a comfortable and suitable learning space, access to the devices you need for your learning, being able to learn without distractions)? (1463 responses)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
490	387	129	32	10	392

Does your living situation affect your ability to learn or study? (1407 responses)

Yes	No
276	1131

Does your accommodation or living situation cause you stress, anxiety, or worry? (1299 responses)

Yes	No	Prefer not to say
278	858	163

**How satisfied are you with the support offered for childcare at your centre?
Please tick the relevant box. (1437 responses)**

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
187	155	149	22	26	898

How satisfied are you with the support offered for meals at your centre? Please tick the relevant box. (1436 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
260	277	169	79	48	603

Fostering Inclusion

Do you feel that you are treated with respect by the staff and tutors in the ETB? (851 responses)			
Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
677	143	26	5

Reported experience of stress because of accommodation by select FET Learner group					
	Yes	No	Prefer not to say	Total Responses	Yes as % of Total Responses
Levels 1-4	112	342	68	522	21%
Levels 5-6	152	445	89	686	22%
Apprentices	13	51	8	72	18%
Community Education	5	23	3	31	16%
Living with disabilities	101	192	46	339	30%
Living in Direct Provision, IPAS or ARP	49	48	15	112	44%
Over 65s	7	38	3	48	15%

Responses to, 'Does your financial situation affect your ability to learn or study?' reported by select FET learners.				
	Yes	No	Total Responses	Yes as % of Total Responses
Levels 1-4	101	449	550	18%
Levels 5-6	202	501	703	29%
Apprentices	29	51	80	36%
Community Education	7	34	41	17%
Living with disabilities	105	255	360	29%
Living in Direct Provision, IPAS or ARP	45	71	116	39%
Over 65s	8	44	52	15%

Self-reported 'poor' to 'fair' mental and physical health ratings by select FET learner groups.

	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent	Total Responses	Poor to Fair as % of Total Responses
Levels 1-4	45	92	196	151	85	569	24%
Levels 5-6	47	139	248	178	122	556	25%
Apprentices	2	14	36	18	14	84	19%
Community Education	1	5	15	12	8	41	15%
Living with disabilities	52	92	121	70	39	374	39%
Living in Direct Provision, IPAS or ARP	5	18	50	21	27	121	20%
Over 65s	2	5	16	22	11	56	13%

Responses to, 'Do you experience stress, anxiety, or depression?' by select FET learner groups

	Yes	No	Prefer not to say	Total Responses	Yes as % of Total Responses
Levels 1-4	272	221	78	571	48%
Levels 5-6	402	248	84	734	55%
Apprentices	31	39	14	84	37%
Community Education	21	20	1	42	50%
Living with disabilities	287	60	25	372	77%
Living in Direct Provision, IPAS or ARP	58	50	13	121	48%
Over 65s	18	34	3	55	33%

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

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Total Responses	Net Satisfaction
Mental Health							
Apprentices	11	19	7	4	0	41	63%
Living with disabilities	82	66	36	12	13	209	59%
All Learners	292	283	122	35	24	756	68%
Childcare							
Apprentices	9	10	11	0	3	33	49%
Living with disabilities	43	31	40	4	9	127	48%
All Learners	187	155	149	22	26	539	55%
Travel supports (e.g. fuel allowances)							
Apprentices	11	18	7	5	6	47	38%
Living with disabilities	74	67	50	24	12	227	46%
All Learners	283	284	162	62	44	835	55%
Financial supports							
Apprentices	12	22	10	2	9	55	42%
Living with disabilities	94	77	68	12	22	273	50%
All Learners	370	326	236	43	82	1057	54%
Meal supports							
Apprentices	8	14	16	4	6	48	25%
Living with disabilities	56	70	46	27	15	214	39%
All Learners	260	277	169	79	48	833	49%

Increase in self-confidence as a result of taking their course reported by select FET learner groups

	Yes	Total Responses	Yes as % of Total Responses
Levels 1-4	395	634	62%
Levels 5-6	539	817	66%
Apprentices	55	90	61%
Community Education	33	49	67%
Living with disabilities	242	369	66%
Living in Direct Provision or IPAS Accommodation	84	120	70%
Over 65s	46	64	72%

Increase in positive outlook as a result of taking their course reported by select FET learner groups

	Yes	Total Responses	Yes as % of Total Responses
Levels 1-4	302	634	48%
Levels 5-6	464	817	57%
Apprentices	52	90	58%
Community Education	30	49	61%
Living with disabilities	193	369	52%
Living in Direct Provision or IPAS Accommodation	71	120	59%
Over 65s	28	64	44%

APPENDIX 3:

Survey Representation

Quantitative research findings for the present report are drawn from a survey of 1858 Education and Training Board learners. A comparison of this NFLF survey data with the overall data for participation in Further Education and Training (Dulee-Kinsolving and Guerin, 2025) indicates broad representativeness across most areas.

The most significant difference relates to learners accessing part-time and full-time courses. 66% of respondents to the AONTAS NFLF survey are in full-time courses, while 34% are in part-time courses. This compares to 65% of learners in part-time courses and 29% in part-time courses according to SOLAS data on FET participation (**Figure 35**).

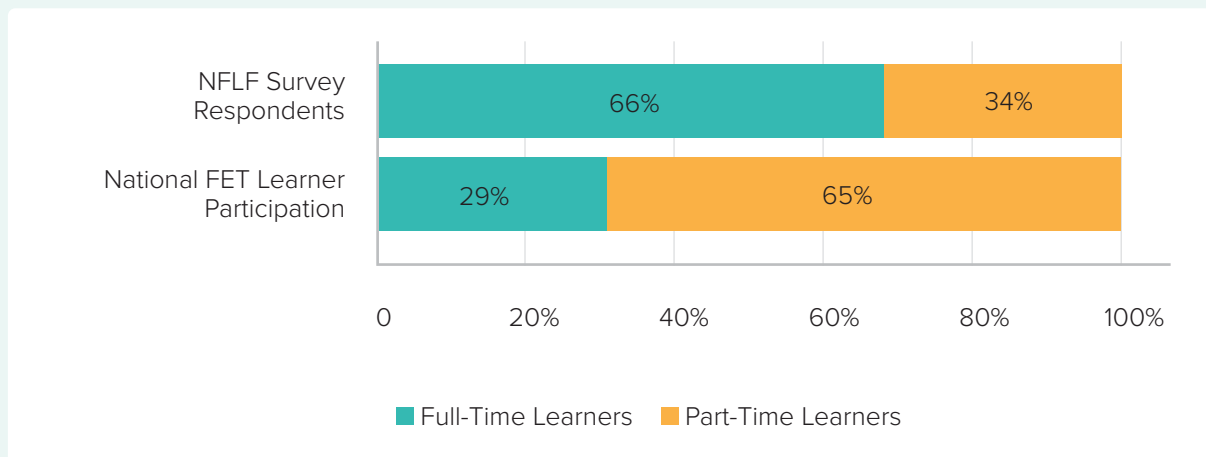


Figure 35 – Comparison of National FET Learner Profile and NFLF Survey Respondent Profile by Percentage of Part-time and Full-time Learners

This difference may be due to the time and travel commitments for Learner Forum participation which are absorbed within the daily attendance of full-time learners, but not necessarily part-time learners.

Representation of learners by individual programmes is broadly similar across both datasets. However, the AONTAS NFLF survey data suggests an under-representation of the voices of both Community Education learners and ESOL learners. 17% of learners in the SOLAS FET data are in Community Education, compared to 3% of respondents to the NFLF survey. 14% of learners in SOLAS FET data are in ESOL, 7% in the NFLF survey.



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