



Equality and Inclusion in Apprenticeship Programmes- Briefing Document

AONTAS Briefing Document for the Joint Committee on Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 13th November 2025.

About AONTAS

AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, was founded in 1969 and has worked passionately ever since to make education equal and accessible for all. Backed by robust research and community engagement, AONTAS advocates for equality of access to adult and community education and raises awareness of its transformative impact for individuals and society.

The National Further Education and Training Learner Forum

The National FET Learner Forum (NFLF), facilitated by AONTAS, funded by SOLAS, enables learners to share experiences and shape FET policy. Since 2016, over 15,000 learners have participated. In 2024–2025, apprentices comprised 5% of respondents (100/1,858), highlighting both positive outcomes—like increased confidence and optimism—as well as ongoing challenges.

Key Recommendations

Across the last three years of the National FET Learner Forum (2022-2025), apprentices have consistently voiced the following three themes for improvement:

1. **Enhance financial support:** Low wages and the high costs of participation impact negatively on apprentices' participation, experience of and satisfaction with their FET course. 36% of apprentices report that their financial situation affects their ability to learn or study. This compares with 24% of the total survey group (AONTAS, 2025: 88).
2. **Enhance the local availability of apprenticeship courses:** Apprentices report high waiting lists for courses and a lack of local availability of apprenticeship programmes. In some cases, learners report travelling long distances to attend their course, resulting in increased costs for learners in terms of travel, meals, and accommodation. Lack of local availability and associated high costs exclude non-traditional learners and negatively impacts the sustainability of participation.
3. **Review and update equipment and curriculum:** In some instances, apprentices expressed strong demand to update course equipment and curriculum where they perceived them to lag contemporary practice or workplace standards (e.g. Electrical Apprenticeship, ICT, Coding and Programming).

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National FET Learner Forum Survey Data 2024-2025

Statistical Evidence

Apprentices made up 5% (n = 100/1858) of the total number of learners who responded to the 2024-2025 National FET Learner Forum survey. While this is a statistically small cohort, it amplifies discussion already held in the Joint Committee on Further and Higher Education, as well as National Apprenticeship Office survey findings. Findings from the 2025 NFLF report highlight both the positive outcomes and the persistent challenges faced by apprentices. Importantly, **61% of apprentices reported increased self-confidence** as a result of their course and **58% reported a more positive outlook on their future**. However, several key challenges were identified.

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Apprentices report a lower net satisfaction than that of their peer group across all five of the learner support survey items (Table below). 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) (AONTAS, 2025: 90, 91).

% Net Satisfaction

	Mental health support	Travel support	Meal support	Financial support	Childcare support
Apprentices 2025	63%	38%*	25%*	42%*	48%
All learners 2025	68%	55%	49%	54%	55%

Learner Quotes - Focus Groups

The NFLF includes over 100 focus groups each year, gathering further data on learner experiences in FET. The apprentice learner quotes below are from the 2024-2025 NFLF and highlight the challenges many are facing.

The Need for Enhanced Financial Support: "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" (AONTAS, 2025:69).

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Consideration of Geographical Challenges: “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” (AONTAS, 2025:28).

Accommodation Struggles: “[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” (AONTAS, 2025:77).

The Need for Updated Equipment: “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” (AONTAS, 2025:36).

Curriculum Review: “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” (AONTAS, 2025:36).

International Best Practice

Switzerland - Case Management (co-ordination) and coaching

Switzerland’s vocational education and training (VET) system uses case management to support at risk youth by co-ordinating schools, career services, social services and employers. This ensures tailored guidance to prevent drop-out and promote successful qualification completion, complemented by mentoring and remedial support.

Germany- Employer support

German employers are central to the dual apprenticeship model, offering structured training and financial support for apprentices. They participate in curriculum development, assessment, and certification through chambers of commerce and crafts, which oversee training quality and administer final exams. Smaller employers can access support for training from financial incentives and public support schemes to encourage employer participation.

Finland- Work-based learning

Finland mandates flexible work-based learning through training agreements and apprenticeships that can be tailored to each apprentices needs. Stackable modules, and open timeframes support learner progression in line with the development of their

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competencies over time. Employers and trainers jointly supervise and assess learners, with workplace experience forming a key part of the final qualification.

Northern Ireland- Social value scoring in procurement

Northern Ireland's public procurement policy requires 10% social value weighting in tenders, promoting employment, skills, ethical supply chains, climate action, and well-being. This can support apprenticeships by encouraging organisations to invest in training as a strategic advantage in public contracts.

Further Reading:

OECD (2025), *Vocational Education and Training Systems in Nine Countries*, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training, OECD Publishing, Paris,
<https://doi.org/10.1787/1a86eb6c-en>.

Northern Ireland Executive (2025) Social Value is a Mandatory Part of the Public Procurement Landscape in Northern Ireland. For more information see: [Social Value - Integrating social benefits into public contracts](#).

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