



The Voice of
Adult Learning

Submission to the Consultation on the Action Plan on Apprenticeship 2026 - 2030

AONTAS - the National Adult Learning
Organisation

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About AONTAS

AONTAS are the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland, founded in 1969. Backed by our robust research and focused community engagement, 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 do this work on behalf of our members and adult learners who inform our research and campaigns for social change across the whole island of Ireland.

1. Summary of Submission

This submission draws on National FET Learner Forum data (Farrell et al., 2025; Meyler et al., 2024). The National FET Learner Forum is a series of events taking place across Ireland, which facilitate adult learners to share their experiences of learning. This is the basis of our advocacy work and is used to ensure further education and training policy is responding to the needs of the learners themselves. It is run by AONTAS in partnership with Education and Training Boards, funded by SOLAS. These insights are supplemented with research on apprenticeships, and policy insights. Evidence shows persistent inequalities in apprenticeship participation, and learner experience. Our position is that **apprenticeships should be inclusive, representative, flexible, and a genuine first choice pathway for all learners**, including adult returners, career changers, and learners facing educational or socio-economic barriers.

AONTAS proposes six priority actions to strengthen social inclusion, improve learner experience, and system responsiveness. These are:

1. **Review apprentice wages and financial supports** to support completion and widen access.
2. **Ensure access to comprehensive wraparound supports**, aligned with wider FET provision.
3. **Establish case management supports and mobile learning opportunities** to support apprentices facing geographical, practical, and socio-economic barriers.
4. **Review and modernise curricula, equipment, and NFQ levels**; apprentice voice should be a key driver of this system development.

5. **Pilot flexible apprenticeship delivery**, including modular, blended, and part-time options.
6. **Ring fence funding for independent community education providers** supporting pre apprenticeship pathways.

2. Background and Rationale

While the national apprenticeship system has expanded significantly in recent years, participation remains deeply uneven and does not reflect the diversity of Ireland's population. Evidence from the National Apprenticeship Office shows persistent and substantial underrepresentation of women, older learners, disabled learners and people from disadvantaged backgrounds, indicating that barriers to access remain entrenched.

Only 8% of current apprentices are women, and just 12.8% are over the age of 31, despite ongoing efforts to broaden participation (National Apprenticeship Office, 2025a; 2025b). Furthermore, although the National Apprenticeship Office now reports data on ethnic diversity, no analysis has been conducted on whether the apprenticeship population reflects the demographic profile of Irish society, leaving a critical equity gap unexamined (National Apprenticeship Office, 2025b). HEA statistics (2024) further show that only 18% of apprentices between 2021 and 2023 came from disadvantaged backgrounds, underscoring the limited reach of current measures to promote social inclusion. Collectively, these findings show that apprenticeship participation does not mirror Ireland's diversity, and that stronger, systemic interventions are urgently needed

Recent national data reinforce the value of apprenticeships, with 61% of apprentices reporting increased self-confidence and 58% reporting a more positive outlook (Farrell et al., 2025). However, these benefits coexist with consistent challenges: apprentices report lower satisfaction with supports, high personal costs, outdated curricula, and long travel distances to training centres, issues that are especially acute for rural learners and those balancing work, caring responsibilities, or financial pressures (Farrell et al., 2025; Meyler et al., 2024). Addressing these structural barriers, will allow apprentice learners cohort to be more representative of Irish society

The forthcoming Action Plan on Apprenticeships represents a critical opportunity to address these inequities by placing learner experience, particularly for the underrepresented groups

at the centre of policy design. To ensure the next strategy delivers a system that is equitable, accessible, and inclusive, the following six priority actions are recommended. These actions aim to widen participation, improve learner experience, and ensure apprenticeships play a meaningful role in advancing social mobility, gender equality, and regional development.

2. Key Issues & Six Core Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Review of apprentice wages, allowances, and financial supports, and consideration of:

- Indexing accommodation, meal, and travel allowances to cost-of-living
- Introducing hardship/emergency supports
- Sector specific grants for low pay apprenticeship programmes
- Expanding bursaries for women and disadvantaged learners

Recent research has revealed that 36% of apprentices report that financial pressures negatively affect their ability to learn, compared to 24% of the wider survey population (Farrell et al., 2025). Learners report struggling to afford travel, accommodation, meals, fuel and childcare, with some allowances not updated in 20 years (Farrell et al., 2025; Meyler et al., 2024). Apprentices in low paid sectors (e.g., hospitality) report being unpaid during training phases, forcing them to take on extra jobs which impacts on their learning experience (Farrell et al., 2025:69).

“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” (Farrell et al., 2025).

Furthermore, low pay and inadequate financial support for accommodation and travel reduces access for disadvantaged and rural learners, an issue that is amplified during the ongoing cost of living crises (Farrell et al., 2025; Meyler et al., 2024). The inequality of financial support between ‘Pre 2016 Craft’ and ‘New Apprenticeships’ must also be

addressed. Apprenticeships in Ireland are categorised as ‘craft’ (pre-2016) or ‘new’ (post-2016), and take two to four years to complete, earning a level five and upwards on the NFQ.

Craft apprentices receive a training allowance during off the job elements of their apprenticeships and typically take up to four years, funded by both the Exchequer and National Training Fund (NTF). This allowance varies with each phase and trade, in line with gross wage norms in that sector. New apprenticeships are minimum two years long and do not receive a training allowance from the State during their training (Department of Public Spending & Reform, 2019).

[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 Perspectives in Farrell et al., 2025).

Research has suggested that financial stress is undermining completion rates (McMahon, Spillane & Bradley, 2024) and there is an outstanding need to consider the characteristics of diverse learners when reviewing financial supports to ensure that apprenticeships are accessible to all (OECD, 2018). This review should be implemented in line with commitments outlined in the Programme for Government (2025).

Recommendation 2: Review wraparound supports across the FET sector to support consistent access as needed, ensuring parity with those available to HE and wider FET learners, including:

- Mental health services
- Academic/learning support
- Disability support
- Childcare funding

National FET Learner Forum (NFLF) findings show apprentices report lower satisfaction rates across all five support areas (mental health, travel, meals, finance, childcare) compared with

other FET learners (Farrell et al, 2025). This issue has also been highlighted in research which has shown that apprentices describe exclusion from campus supports available to other students due to the structure of their learning. This has critical implications for apprentices with prior negative experience of education (Bates, 2022). Ensuring the accessibility of wraparound supports is crucial for these apprentices who also face additional barriers not experienced by typical FET cohorts (e.g., travel to training phases, unpredictable placement schedules).

Recommendation 3: Establish case management supports and mobile learning

opportunities to support apprentices facing geographical, practical, and socio-economic barriers by:

- Establishing regional case managers to coordinate placements, access to resources and mobile learning opportunities.
- Improved regional coordination between ETBs and employers to better match local demand with provision.

CEDEFOP and the OECD (2021) emphasise that modern apprenticeship systems must include strong learner guidance and coordinated support structures to ensure equitable outcomes in apprenticeship programmes. The establishment of dedicated case managers to assist apprentices in navigating practical barriers and coordinating placements would provide an essential layer of support within the apprenticeship system (CEDEFOP & OECD, 2021). This action can add value to apprentice experience building on the role of Apprenticeship Manager which is operationalised in some consortia led programmes (McManus, Peck & Vickery 2022).

“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 Perspectives in Farrell et al., 2025).

Learners navigating apprenticeship programmes must manage long distance travel, short notice scheduling, high costs, and limited accommodation options, all of which contribute to participation gaps, especially in rural areas (Farrell et al., 2025). Evidence from the 2025

National FET Learner Forum shows that apprentices also frequently report limited local availability of programmes. These challenges result in significant personal expense and stress which may disproportionately affect women, carers, and learners with disabilities, who face additional barriers to mobility and participation (Meyler et al., 2023; Farrell et al., 2025). These challenges are reflected in NAO (2025b) data showing long waiting lists and restricted regional provision.

Introducing a national case management approach would help apprentices secure placements, accommodation, access disability and other supports. This support could facilitate timely communication on phase progression and resolve placement issues early to support retention. Such a model would directly align with DFHERIS commitments to reducing regional inequalities and promoting an inclusive apprenticeship system.

Recommendation 4: Review and update curricula / NFQ levels to ensure relevance and parity of esteem by:

- Updating equipment and learning materials
- Alignment with contemporary industry standards
- Reviewing and elevating craft apprenticeships NFQ Level where appropriate
- Ensuring apprentice voice is integrated into curriculum reform through collaboration with AONTAS

NFLF data (Farrell et al., 2025; Meyler et al., 2024) and research (Bates, 2022) reflect strong learner dissatisfaction with outdated equipment, materials, and misalignment between workplace learning and classroom curricula.

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 Perspectives in Farrell et al., 2025).

The learner experiences captured in AONTAS' NFLF data and research highlight the risk posed by outdated curricula to learner motivation, the legitimacy of the apprenticeship pathway and the reputational damage due to employer perceptions on learner skills (Bates,

2022; Farrell et al., 2025; Meyler et al., 2024). International evidence from CEDEFOP (2025) shows that modernising apprenticeship curricula significantly improves recruitment and participation. Following a national curriculum renewal in Norway, VET/apprenticeship enrolments increased by 46% between 2020 and 2025, demonstrating the strong impact of up-to-date, industry-aligned programmes on learner engagement.

The CSO (2020) highlights that while Irish apprenticeships now span Levels 5–10, traditional craft apprenticeships remain fixed at Level 6, despite significant increases in technical complexity. Given that the NFQ is designed to be updated to reflect actual learning outcomes (QQI) a review of NFQ levels in Irish apprenticeships is both timely and necessary.

Research also suggests that apprentices are underrepresented in curricula design with implications for the learning experience and inclusion (Bates, 2022). However, FET policy recognises the clear benefits of integrating learner voice into planning and governance processes (SOLAS, 2020; SOLAS, 2024; AONTAS, 2024). The views of apprenticeship must be considered in all reviews of processes and practices to ensure a responsive, inclusive apprenticeship system. As the facilitator of learner voice in the FET sector, AONTAS can play a key role in supporting the generation of insights and recommendations.

Recommendation 5: Pilot flexible apprenticeship delivery models (one year or multiyear pilot) that includes:-

- Part-time and modular options-time and modular options
- Blended learning
- Evening and weekend provision
- Satellite centres and mobile training units
- Optional accelerated pathways for experienced workers (RPL)

“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” (Apprentice Perspectives in Farrell et al., 2025).

Pilots should run for 1–3 years to generate an evidence base. This would be beneficial for adult learners who report that full-time, inflexible models and long training durations are challenging to engage with.

This is an important consideration as Ireland’s apprenticeship system remains primarily structured around young entrants rather than supporting adults who need to upskill or retrain. NAO (2025b) data shows that apprentices are still disproportionately young and male, which suggests that the current model does not meet the needs of adults who must balance work, family, and caring responsibilities. Learners consistently express a strong demand for more achievable, flexible options such as part-time, modular, or blended delivery, particularly those on low wages who cannot commit to full-time participation. Although the DFHERIS Skills Strategy emphasises lifelong learning, the existing apprenticeship structure limits opportunities for many adults who would benefit from vocational progression. International examples from Germany, France, Romania and Finland, and Lithuania illustrate flexible delivery models which can open pathways for adults and diverse cohorts to increase engagement (CEDEFOP, 2023 & 2025).

Recommendation 6: Ring-fence funding & protect independent community education providers (relevant where adult learners enter apprenticeships)

- This requires **ringfenced multiannual funding for independent providers** to maintain learner centred, flexible, community-based access pathways into apprenticeships.

The next action plan must consider the needs of diverse cohorts of learners who need informal, flexible preparation prior to undertaking an apprenticeship course if equity goals are to be achieved. Evidence from NFLF confirms many apprentices had negative learning experiences and would benefit from confidence building pathways prior to entering FET (Farrell et al., 2025). Independent providers have unique reach into disadvantaged communities, supporting pre-apprenticeship pathways while building capacity for learner progression through learner centred supportive practices (Cobain & Jackson, 2025). Given the profile of learners in this model of education, independent providers can be a crucial tool for expanding pathways to apprenticeships for women, older adults, and groups furthest from education, increasing diversity amongst the wider apprenticeship cohorts (NAO, 2025a; SOLAS, 2024; Doody, 2021).

4. Conclusion

Apprenticeships are central to Ireland's tertiary education system and the national skills agenda. For apprenticeships to fulfil their promise as a first choice, inclusive, and socially transformative pathway, DFHERIS must address the systemic barriers presented in this submission. By acting on these six evidence-based recommendations, DFHERIS can ensure Ireland builds a resilient, equitable, learner centred apprenticeship system fit for the next decade.

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