

## Amplifying Learner Voice: A National Framework for Collaboration in Education

Lindsay Malone, Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board; and Dearbhail Lawless, the National Adult Learning Organisation (Ireland)

Our practice emerged from a need to provide consistent national learner voice mechanisms that strategically benefited policy and practice, and recognised learners as a key stakeholder in Ireland. While providers had strong local initiatives to engage learners, there was no consistent framework to ensure learner voice was heard, valued, and acted upon across the entire system. At the same time, AONTAS, an equality-focussed representative body for the sector, campaigned for learner voice as a democratic action, particularly due to the diverse profile of learners in Further Education.

In 2014, SOLAS, the State Agency with responsibility for adult education, launched the first-ever Further Education and Training Strategy for Ireland (2014-2019). With an ambition to provide a national mechanism for learner voice, the strategy enabled our collaborative project by ‘systematically benchmarking learner’s views and satisfaction with their FET programme’ (SOLAS, 2014, p.137).

AONTAS organised the first National FET Learner Forum event in 2016. Providing an opportunity for learners to share their experiences, meet other learners and policymakers, and help us to improve future policy and practice. ETBs supported this one-day event by promoting the NFLF and facilitating learner attendance.

Over the years, this programme has developed into a collaborative national project between AONTAS and the 16 ETBs throughout Ireland.

Like any collaboration, the journey hasn’t been without its challenges and yet these tests have resulted in meaningful learning and a strengthened framework for learner voice.



Like any collaboration, the journey hasn’t been without its challenges and yet these tests have resulted in meaningful learning and a strengthened framework for learner voice.

The practice consists of a national learner voice framework. It includes:

- Structured learner forums at the local level, ensuring diverse perspectives feed into decision making. A Forum event consists of a presentation from AONTAS and ETB staff, small focus groups of up to approximately 90+ learners led by independent facilitators for confidentiality, and follow-up surveys.
- Shared tools, resources, and methodologies for gathering, analysing, and responding to learner feedback.
- Capacity building programmes for staff and learners to strengthen skills in facilitation, advocacy, and partnership.
- Regional and national research reports share learner recommendations, with the national report including data from regional reports.
- Learner representatives engaging in campaigns, representative groups, and local, national and international events.

Key stakeholders, including Government representatives, ETB staff, and academic experts, are involved at every stage through the project advisory group.

Learners themselves are central, shaping priorities and providing lived experience. AONTAS, as the national coordinator ensure consistency and alignment regionally, while ETBs showcase the value of learner voice locally by encouraging and facilitating meaningful engagement, and policymakers endorse and resource the practice, embedding learner voice into governance structures.

The model is underpinned by the values of democracy, empowerment, equality, and participation. Learning from experts in this space, such as Fielding (2004; 2010) in “deconstructing the assumptions of the present” and embracing dialogue to use practices that aim to “speak with, rather than for” students (p 295), Lundy (2007), Flynn (2017) and others.

Over time, the practice has evolved from isolated pilots into a national movement. Early forums focused on building trust and demonstrating impact. As momentum grew, ETBs collaborated with AONTAS regionally to co-create a national framework that would be replicated consistently and provide both regional reports and a national evidence base.

The outcomes are transformative. Learner voice is now a recognised pillar of policy and practice in Ireland. For example, this concept is named in the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy (2021) and the Community Education Framework (2024). ETBs conduct their own research and support learner voice groups or learner voice councils, with some having learners on their governing board.

We can identify learner motivations, barriers faced and overcome, and the impact of Further Education with annual ‘Learner Voices Across Ireland’ reports, and we share learner recommendations with policymakers and practitioners. Learner voice can influence curriculum design, support services, quality assurance, and policy development. The practice can strengthened relationships between learners, staff, and leadership, fostering a culture of partnership rather than consultation.

Its impact is felt nationally: learners feel listened to and supported, ETBs benefit from more responsive and innovative practices, and the education system as a whole becomes more equitable and learner centred. While there are areas for improvement, and the latest independent evaluation (Lehane and Devine, 2025) outlines next steps. This inspiring practice demonstrates that when partners work together strategically, learner voice is not just heard — it becomes a catalyst for transformation across Ireland’s education and training landscape.

Want to find out more?  
Contact **Lindsay Malone** at [Lindsay.Malone@kcetb.ie](mailto:Lindsay.Malone@kcetb.ie) or  
Dearbhail Lawless at [dlawless@aontas.com](mailto:dlawless@aontas.com)

