



LEARNER VOICES ACROSS IRELAND

The National FET Learner Forum Report,
2025–2026

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Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

SOLAS
learning works



“LEARNER VOICES ACROSS IRELAND”

2025-26: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The AONTAS Learner Voices Across Ireland Report 2025-26 outlines adult learners’ views on their experiences of Further Education and Training (FET) for the academic year 2025 to 2026. The report reflects 2007 contributions from FET Learners who shared their voice in the National FET Learner Forum. The Forum comprised of a nationwide series of learner surveys and focus groups conducted in collaboration with 9 Education and Training Boards.

“Learner Voice” lies at the heart of the present report. Learner Voice empowers adult learners by offering appropriate ways of listening to their concerns, interests and needs to develop educational experiences better suited to those individuals. What adult learners communicate via the Forum can now inform the decisions of class representatives, educators, course organisers, funders, civil servants and politicians.

The 2026 Report shows a highly regarded FET system based on supportive teaching and learning relationships and practices that facilitate learner confidence, participation, and development. However, key findings also illustrate continued barriers faced by learners, including the cost of participation, inaccessible transport as well as inconsistent supports for mental health and work experience. The report’s most important findings are outlined below:

Wider Benefits of FET

“This education makes my heart beat, brings light into my life, and lets fresh air into my lungs” (Learner Forum participant).

Forum participants consistently highlight the wider benefits of lifelong learning. 70% of learners report increased self-confidence after participating in FET.

Teaching and Learning

Forum participants express high satisfaction with Teaching and Learning across all programmes, most notably with the Opportunity to Take Part in Class (93% net satisfaction). Learners praise their tutors for creating a welcoming space within the classroom.

Community Education learners express remarkably high satisfaction with Teaching and Learning, including Opportunity to Take Part in Class, Feedback on Coursework and Course Content (all 100%).

Course Provision

Forum participants appreciate the range of available FET courses. They propose increasing course provision, notably English for Speakers of Other Languages and Adult Literacy classes.

Pathways

Forum participants across different programmes express some dissatisfaction with existing work experience support, notably PLC learners (52%) and Youthreach learners (62%) as well as learners impacted by their financial situation (50%), learners in international protection (51%) and learners with a long-term illness or disability (56%).

Learners propose increasing guidance counselling and creating better links between ETBs and employers to improve learners' work experience opportunities and pathways to employment.

Mental Health Support

41% (n = 396/960) of learners state that they experience stress, anxiety, or depression. 27% (n = 255/959) report that this affected their ability to learn or study.

Forum participants express some dissatisfaction with existing mental health supports, notably PLC learners (41%) and Youthreach learners (51%) as well as learners impacted by their financial situation (43%) and learners with a long-term illness or disability (50%).

Learners propose enhancing the availability of counselling services and ensuring flexibility around assignments and deadlines.

Disability Access and Support

In 17 out of 20 questions concerning their FET experience, learners with long-term health issues, illness or disability report lower net satisfaction than their peers in the overall survey cohort.

Learners would like to see enhanced disability access to ETB buildings and facilities as well as increased SNA support.

Buildings and Digital Inclusion

Forum participants report centre-specific upgrade requirements for ETB buildings, including canteens and kitchens, classrooms, and toilet facilities as well as social spaces for shared interaction and quiet spaces for study.

Learners would like to see enhanced access to laptop and device loan schemes.

Voice – Opportunity to Raise Issues

Forum participants highlight the necessity of Learner Voice mechanisms to provide feedback to their ETB and to offer learners “more of a say” in shaping the decision-making agenda.

Cost of FET Participation and Financial Support

“I do not have enough money so I have to choose whether to eat or not. The stress of not knowing if I will have enough money to make it through two weeks... This affects how well I do in school as I spend time worrying about that and being hungry” (Learner Forum participant).

24% (n = 215/905) of learners state that their financial situation impacts their ability to learn or study. Learners propose increasing financial supports, including meal and travel allowances.

Transport

22% (n = 108/484) of learners are not satisfied with the availability of public transport to and from FET centres and work experience. 27% (n = 124/466) are dissatisfied with the current level of financial support for travel.

Learners would like to be able to use local public transport to access their centre, to match class schedules with local bus times and to provide shuttle buses to centres where needed.

About AONTAS

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.

You can read the full “Learner Voices Across Ireland” report on our website: www.aontas.com



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 CEO Deirdre McDonnell for the organisation's ongoing collaboration with AONTAS and its continued support of the National FET Learner Forum.

Education and Training Boards

AONTAS would like to acknowledge each of the nine Education and Training Boards who collaborated on the National FET Learner Forum in the 2025/26 academic year.

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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; **Laura Flynn**, Quality and Qualifications Ireland; **Garrett McCord**, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; **Alan McGrath**, SOLAS; **Margaret Murray**, National Adult Literacy Agency; **Jennifer Osborne**, Quality and Qualifications Ireland; **Paula O'Shea**, Adult Learner, Cork College of FET, Mallow Centre; **Andrew Pyne**, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science 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**, Local Global Institute and North-West University; **Fergal Finnegan**, Maynooth University; **Ted Fleming**, Teachers' College, Colombia University; **Peter Lavender**, University of Wolverhampton; and **Stephen O'Brien**, University College Cork.

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AONTAS owes special thanks to our panel of independent facilitators. Their invaluable role in facilitating focus-group discussions at each regional forum ensures that every learner feels welcome and encouraged to share their voice. Thank you to Andy Battell, Caitríona Ruane, Catherine Callanan, Cora Lambert, Dervla King, Geraldine Foley Butler, Geraldine Howe, Helen Mortimer, Julie Griffiths, Louise Burns, Lucy Deering, Mairead Mahon, Margaret Scollan, Margo Hayes, Matt Crofton, Mieke Neven McMahon, Philomena Carroll, Richard Fongkong-Foran, Riona Rochford, Sharon Fongkong Foran, Trisha Wilkinson, Una Buckley and Vincent Kenny.

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FOREWORD

Learners are experts in their own educational experience, and this national report gives us the opportunity to listen to the voices of people in FET right across the country. I want to thank every learner who gave their time and trusted us with their experiences. Your voices matter, and we have a responsibility to listen and act.

Partnership is essential for the success of the Learner Forum. Huge thanks to the Education and Training Boards across the country and the tutors, staff, volunteers, managers and leaders who support learners every day and whose cooperation makes the National FET Learner Forum possible. My sincere thanks also to SOLAS, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, and Education and Training Boards Ireland. We are very fortunate to have real commitment across policy and practice levels. The Forum represents a sophisticated and sustained example of systematic engagement with Learner Voice. Few countries can point to an example of ongoing democratic action like this in adult education. Massive thanks to AONTAS Research Team for their continued commitment to meaningful Learner Voice and to building an adult education sector with learners at the heart of it.

To me, this report reflects an opportunity to celebrate the success of FET. Learners describe education that builds confidence, creates community and gives them hope for the future. 70% report increased self-confidence and more than half have a more positive outlook on their future following their experience of FET. Importantly, for learners who had negative experiences of school, FET has provided them with respectful relationships, caring tutors and an environment where they feel supported and respected. I love this woman's view of education: "It makes my heart beat, brings light into my life, and lets fresh air into my lungs." The report findings concerning Community Education are extraordinary. Community Education learners expressed perfect satisfaction with the Opportunity to Take Part in Class (100%), Course Content (100%), Feedback on Coursework (100%), Learning Support (100%), and Access to Technology (100%). These findings are worth celebrating. You can't deny the value and impact adult education has on people's lives.

The research also gives us the chance to examine who can access and fully benefit from these opportunities and who can't. Social development barriers remain the most consistently reported obstacle across our Learner Voice research. Learners describe unaffordable transport, inadequate meal and travel supports, childcare difficulties and unequal access to digital resources. It is unacceptable that supplementary travel and meal allowances are so low. This research indicates that equal opportunity is a myth. Learners who can't afford transport, access childcare or fund day-to-day participation costs do not have an equal opportunity to learn. Furthermore, I suspect the stress faced



by those in class with financial struggles is impacting their ability to retain information, think critically or participate properly. We must remove the barriers outside the classroom to protect the quality and experience of learning in FET.

A lack of funding in ESOL is a significant issue and this is reflected in the report findings. Learners are asking for more courses, more class hours and clearer opportunities to progress. There is also a call for more access to guidance, information on supports available, and the opportunity to connect socially outside of class. Work placement is an ongoing challenge particularly impacting groups such as learners struggling with their financial situation (50%), learners in International Protection (51%) and learners with a disability (54%). Learners have shared concrete recommendations to help us work together in improving this situation, such as “enhancing access to structured training partnerships between ETB/FET centres and local employers”.

One of the most powerful functions of Learner Voice is creating spaces where individual experiences become collective evidence and where that evidence can influence institutional and national decisions.

Learner Voice cannot end with listening. If we ask people to share their experiences, we have a responsibility to demonstrate what changes as a result. It must be an ongoing practice visible in the culture and systems of each institution. If people participate and thrive in education, we all benefit.

At a time of growing inequality, misinformation and social division, education is more important than ever. Adult and community education creates spaces where people build confidence, relationships and belonging, engage critically with the world around them and participate in their communities. It is part of the social and democratic infrastructure of our country.

This report demonstrates the enormous value of FET while giving us a clear roadmap for where change and increased funding is needed. I hope we can take pride in and celebrate what learners tell us is working well, address the inequalities outlined, and most importantly, turn their voices into action.

Thank you to everyone involved!

Dearbháil Lawless
AONTAS CEO



REPORT OVERVIEW

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

AONTAS partnered with the following 9 Education and Training Boards to host the National FET Learner Forum 2025–2026:

- Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board
- Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board
- Mayo, Sligo, and Leitrim Education and Training Board
- Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board
- Cork Education and Training Board
- Kerry Education and Training Board
- Tipperary Education and Training Board
- Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board
- Donegal Education and Training Board

During the 2025/26 academic term of the National FET Learner Forum, 711 learners participated in 84 focus groups. 1296 learners completed the accompanying survey. Learner Forum participants 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	84	8	711
Survey			1296
Learner Voice Contributions			2007

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 opportunity to take part in class, communications and course content (**Table 2**).

Survey Item	Net Satisfaction
Opportunity to Take Part in Class	93%
Communications	89%
Course Content	88%

Table 2. *Highest Net Satisfaction Scores.*

Learner Forum participants expressed lowest net satisfaction with travel support, meals support and the availability of public transport (**Table 3**).

Survey Item	Net Satisfaction
Availability of Public Transport	37%
Meals Support	35%
Travel Support	22%

Table 3. *Lowest Net Satisfaction Scores.*

The report develops actionable insights into the FET learner experience by coding participants’ qualitative contributions to focus group discussions and identifying primary themes or issues arising. Learners’ primary suggestions concerning how their FET experience could be improved are listed below (**Table 4**).

“What learners say they would like to see happen next” interests and involves a diverse range of stakeholders, including AONTAS, SOLAS, ETBs, and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) as well as multiple government departments and 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.

Theme	What Learners Say They Would Like To See Happen Next
Course Provision	Course Availability. Increase available course options and enable greater learner voice on nature of course provision. English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL). Increase the number of courses, class hours, and pathways to higher NFQ Levels available to ESOL learners. Adult Literacy. Increase course provision and range of courses available to Adult Literacy learners. Course Scheduling. Consider course-specific proposals on class timetabling, break times, and scheduling of work experience placements. Equipment and Resourcing. Consider learner proposals to reduce costs and enhance access to necessary course equipment and learning materials.
Teaching and Learning	Teaching and Learning. Consider learner proposals to use group activities and discussion to enhance classroom participation and peer-to-peer learning. Consider use of diverse learning materials, including audio and visual formats, to foster learner engagement. Curriculum. Review course-specific learner proposals to improve curriculum, learning materials, and time allocations. Assessment and Feedback. Diversify assessment methods, clarify assessment briefs, and ensure adequate time between assignments to enable learners to implement tutor feedback.
Pathways	Guidance Service. Enhance guidance support services to meet the needs of all FET learners. Work Experience and Work-Based Learning. Enhance the information and support available to FET learners seeking to secure work experience placements. Enhance access to structured training partnerships between ETB/FET centres and local employers. Review timelines for work experience to ensure good alignment with other course elements, including Garda vetting requirements.
Learner Support	Mental Health Support. Enhance the availability of mental health counselling services in centres. Enhance flexibility around assignments and deadlines for proposals. Disability Supports. Enhance the availability of in-class assistants and support workers for learners with disabilities and additional needs.

Theme	What Learners Say They Would Like To See Happen Next
Enabling Themes	
Buildings and Facilities	Enhance canteen or kitchen facilities. Consider centre-specific learner proposals to upgrade ETB buildings and classrooms, including upgrading of toilet facilities. Ensure FET centres offer both social spaces for shared interaction and quiet spaces for study. Disability access. 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 Inclusion	Enhance access to laptop and device loan schemes.
Communications	Enhance the visibility of equitable access to FET by communicating the full range of supports available to learners, including learning supports, financial allowances, counselling, and disability services. Provide clear information on entitlements to learners.
Learner Voice	Support the development of Learner Voice groups and councils.
Social Development and Adult Learning	
Cost of FET Participation and Financial Support	Increase financial supports to mitigate the costs of FET participation. Expand and enhance provision of the FET student card. Youthreach and Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) programmes. Consider how best to ensure and communicate equity of payment levels within courses, acknowledging fairness concerns expressed by learners aged between 16 and 18 years of age.
Travel Support	Enhance travel and fuel allowances.
Public Transport	Enhance learner capacity to avail of public transport to access their centre. Consider provision of an ETB shuttle bus service or aligning class schedules with local bus service times.
Meal Allowances	Increase meal allowances and provision of subsidised food.
Childcare	Increase provision of childcare supports.

Table 4. *Learner Proposals: What Learners Say They Would Like To See Happen Next.*

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

Dr Thomas Murray
AONTAS Head of Research
October 2026



AONTAS Recommendations

1. Invest in Further Education and Training to realise goals of inclusion and skills development.
2. Reform Learner Supports and introduce an FET Learner Assistance Fund.
3. Extend the Fund for Learners with Disabilities across all FET provisions.
4. Support the development of Learner Voice groups and councils and increase provision for Learner Voice capacity-building for staff and learners.

AONTAS Reflections

The findings presented in the Learner Voices Across Ireland Report illustrate the excellent, overwhelmingly positive experience of many FET learners on their programmes. 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.

At the same time, however, the report calls attention to inconsistent and unequal learner experiences across programmes and regions. It shares the voices of those learners whose experience has been characterised by marginalisation and struggle. These voices include the learner who withdraws because they cannot secure a work placement or the learner who enjoys her FET course but cannot progress because she cannot travel to a nearby city. These voices include the disabled learner who finds at his local FET centre inaccessible 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 government level and in civil society to ensure an equitable education system.

AONTAS' current advocacy highlights some specific areas for action. Our Pre-budget Submission 2027 calls on Government to invest in learners, improve financial supports, expand access to inclusive education and recognise community education as a vital public investment that delivers benefits for individuals, communities, and society (AONTAS, 2026a).

The Positive Impact of FET

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

The Learner Forum proposals here offer an opportunity to enhance FET's positive impact by amplifying the peer-to-peer opportunities for social interaction and socialisation. Learners propose the provision of social spaces and canteen facilities as well as social and community-building events. Social and community-building events, notably those promoting cultural exchanges between learners, could provide opportunities for positive connection between all learners. Recent anti-migrant protests and the spread of online disinformation illustrate the importance of adult education and community-building for social cohesion and democratic life.

Enabling Learning and Development

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

Learner Forum participants clearly appreciated diverse aspects of FET **course provision** and, in numerous cases, sought to ensure their wider availability. The Report highlights FET's vital role in providing ESOL courses to migrant learners and the central role of these courses in enabling their further learning, employment, community life, and integration into society.

70% of survey respondents reported an increase in self-confidence as one of the primary benefits of undertaking Further Education and Training.

“

They've helped me believe in myself ... building your awareness of your own capabilities

PLC learner

”

AONTAS note with concern that the Report records a consistent, widespread, and significant unmet learner demand for ESOL provision. These findings follow Budget 2026 and the end of temporary funding for ESOL. ESOL funding has since reverted to its pre-2022 core allocation of €4.2 million (Lawless, 2026). The present research supports an increase in the number of courses, class hours, and NFQ Levels available to ESOL learners.

Supporting FET Learners

The Report demonstrates Learner Forum participants' varying levels of satisfaction with diverse supports and services available through their Education and Training Board.

Learners expressed dissatisfaction around varying levels of support to undertake **work experience** and to progress to employment. Moreover, learners that face socioeconomic disadvantage or report a disability express particularly low satisfaction with work experience support. In this context, AONTAS welcome the recognition of guidance supports in the 2026–2030 FET Strategy and its underlining the importance of “further develop[ing] advice and guidance services for learners of all backgrounds” (SOLAS, 2026, p. 22). However, the present Report indicates that more remains to be done to ensure that all learners are fully supported to gain the most out of their work experience and successfully transition to employment where desired. Strong consideration should be given to Learner Forum proposals to increase guidance supports available to learners and to enhance structured partnerships between ETBs and employers to ensure accessible and equitable work experience placements and subsequent employment opportunities.

Several learner cohorts report challenges in accessing **digital resources**. Learners who report that their financial situation affects their ability to learn, as well as Irish Travellers and Asian or Asian Irish learners, express particularly low satisfaction with digital inclusion. Learners on ESOL and Community Education programmes also indicate that they are underserved in terms of access to digital resources. These findings suggest that work remains to be done to ensure that funding to support digital infrastructure and laptop or device loan schemes is sufficient and continues to meet the needs of all learners, especially those who should be key beneficiaries of Reach Funding.

What is holding FET learners back?

The most frequent challenges impacting learners relate to the wider wraparound supports necessary to maintaining ongoing participation in their courses and in mitigating structural inequalities and disadvantage. Learners consistently identify constraints on additional supports as ongoing challenges: from financial supports to supports for meals or travel or wider childcare provision and support. Income inadequacy remains a challenge for many across Irish society (Social Justice Ireland, 2026) and **financial barriers are the most consistently reported obstacle to FET participation across AONTAS Learner Voice research**. It is in this context that learners call for increased financial supports and the expanded provision of the FET student card to support their participation in learning.

Throughout the report, learners highlight the challenges they face in accessing their courses due to inadequate public transport and frequently call for enhanced local provision of transport to and from their course.

Supplementary allowances for travel and meals have not been increased since 2002 (AONTAS, 2026). Learners point to the need for improved travel allowances and to the need for cross-departmental collaboration to enhance the provision of local public transport to provide access to and from their courses. Learners further underline the importance of financial meal supports and subsidised canteens in facilitating their ongoing participation.

The lack of childcare provision impacted learners' participation in their courses, particularly lone parents and migrant women, underlining the need for increased provision of affordable childcare and financial supports to assist learners in covering costs.

Enhancing Learner Voice Groups and Councils

Having used their voices, 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”. For some learners, taking part in the National FET Learner Forum (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 NFLF 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.

Learners have consistently voiced concerns about the effectiveness of existing learner representative structures and the closing of the feedback loop. The main issues cited are a lack of clarity on what happens to their views on an ongoing basis, and a lack of evidence that their feedback leads to action and change. Established structures are sometimes perceived as tokenistic, and not something that will lead to meaningful changes for learners.

“I think people are reluctant to use them [class representatives]. Because really are you going to be listened to? ... you know, because I don't think they'll get anywhere ... I think it's very much for show. 'We're including the students' and everything, but at the end of the day it's to make the ETBs look good.”

Learners would like to see more regular and frequent opportunities for feedback, rather than once-off experiences at the start or end of term. This would be made possible by strengthening their class and learner representative structures, providing multiple ways to hear from learners throughout the term.

“Create safe open spaces for learners to provide anonymous feedback on their course over a consistent period – allowing regular feedback opportunities rather than one chance at the very start of the course.”

Meaningful learner voice engagement should be viewed as an ongoing practice, rooted in the culture and systems of each institution.



AONTAS Regional and National Reports are a rich resource for Learner Voice groups and class representatives as they incorporate the views and proposals 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 resolving 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 coordinates the county's Local Link service).

Another positive example relates to access to the FET student card. In recent years, Learner Voices groups in three ETBs lobbied for the provision of student cards for FET learners, equivalent to those provided to learners in Higher Education. These ETBs have now partnered with the International Student Identity Card association (ISIC) to issue recognised student ID cards to registered full-time FET and PLC learners. However, there is still a gap in provision for learners on short and part-time courses.

AONTAS welcome the FET strategy and its recognition of the need “to support and progress learner-focused initiatives, including student-union style structures” (SOLAS, 2026, p. 21). The present research supports 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.

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 focused 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 of 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): Karyn Farrell, Dr Thomas Murray (Head of Research), Dr Eve Cobain, Dr Philip Finn, and Aisling Meyler.



Members of the National FET Learner Forum Facilitator Panel.

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 an FET sector that delivers quality education, training, and skills to enable learners to succeed in the labour market and thrive in society.

Learner Voice and the National FET Learner Forum are long-established elements of SOLAS' strategic vision for the sector. The 2014–2019 FET strategy committed SOLAS to listen to and respond to the needs of learners (SOLAS, 2014). The 2020–2024 FET Strategy recommitted 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). “Creating Futures”, the FET Strategy 2026–2030 now commits SOLAS to placing learners “at the heart of decision-making by strengthening the learner voice throughout the system” (SOLAS, 2026, p. 21).

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.

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 will continue to be in future. The SOLAS FET Strategy 2026–2030 explicitly recognises a goal to “place learners at the heart of decision-making by strengthening the learner voice throughout the system” (SOLAS, 2026, p. 21). It further recognises the importance of enhancing learner “representation on Boards, Councils and other governance structures” (SOLAS, 2026, p. 21).

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 2025–26 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 2007 learner contributions during the 2025/26 academic year and more than 16,000 adult learners to date. The NFLF represents one of the few, sustained national-level learner engagement mechanisms in European adult education. Over many years, AONTAS has contributed to European-level dialogue on participatory education, including as National Coordinator for the New European Agenda for Adult Learning (AONTAS is the only non-governmental organisation 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.

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.

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 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 participation 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 voices, 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 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 emphasises 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 as a collaborative, transformative process, not a transaction (Lynch, 2023).

The benefits of Learner Voice are many (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.

The National FET Learner Forum

AONTAS partnered with the following 9 Education and Training Boards to host the National FET Learner Forum 2025–2026:

- Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board
- Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board
- Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board
- Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board
- Cork Education and Training Board
- Kerry Education and Training Board
- Tipperary Education and Training Board
- Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board
- Donegal Education and Training Board

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.

AONTAS subsequently provided each participating Education and Training Board with a detailed National FET Learner Forum regional 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 will continue 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.

Research Scope

The NFLF report offers an independent and qualitatively rich insight into learners' views on and satisfaction with their experience of FET. At the same time, in some instances, additional contextual understanding available to local stakeholders (including other FET learners) may be required to establish the full context for a learner's statement.

The scope of the present research is limited in at least three important ways. Firstly, Learner Forum attendance is capped at 100 participants. Practical limitations underpin this decision, including resource constraints, available venues and room size, and the audibility of focus group discussions for recording. Secondly, time constraints and the focus group format (in comparison with one-to-one interviews) inevitably limit learners' discussion of topics in depth, and further limit facilitators' capacity to probe for specific details. Thirdly, AONTAS do not have direct access to the total FET learner population and rely on participating ETBs to distribute the learner survey. While effort is made to ensure a wide range of course and level representation at the Learner Forum, learner participation is voluntary, and some groups and levels remain better represented than others.

Learner Voice and Future Decision-Making

The present NFLF report is action oriented. The report authors code all instances where learners articulate explicit suggestions or proposals based on their experience of Further Education and Training. The report includes all explicit learner proposals that apply to a primary theme. Relevant learner proposals are outlined at the outset of each chapter.

AONTAS recognise that “What Learners Say They Would Like to See Happen Next” interests and involves a diverse range of actors, including AONTAS, SOLAS, ETBs, DFHERIS, and other state agencies. Individual learners may raise aspects of their learning experience that are outside of the remit of the Education and Training Board, including issues beyond its capacity to influence. Among the factors or supports identified by learners in this report as enabling or hindering their capacity to engage in FET, funding, transport, childcare, and home learning environments are all determined by wider social development and political choices in Ireland (Social Justice Ireland, 2025; Glanton, 2023). Moreover, AONTAS recognise that FET learning environments are complex and subject to financial, legal, and professional norms and constraints that may not always be visible to learners. Further research may be required to establish the full context for a learner's statement.

AONTAS believe that Learner Councils, situated within and collaborating with their Education and Training Board, are well positioned to offer further Learner Voice and to deepen contextual understanding among stakeholders where needed. AONTAS support the development of Learner Councils as an appropriate mechanism for FET learners to help clarify, refine, and support the implementation of NFLF insights. Working in partnership with ETBs, AONTAS stand ready to support learner participation and self-advocacy at a regional level and to advocate for adult learning at a national level.

2. LISTENING TO ADULT LEARNERS: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the National FET Learner Forum participants' profile and demographics. The chapter also outlines learners' stated motivations for taking their course.

Data Collection

Data Source	No. of Focus Groups	Average No. of Participants per Focus Group	Total No.
Focus Groups	84	8	711
Survey			1296
Learner Voice Contributions			2007

Table 2.1. *Summary of Research Data.*

AONTAS conducted research into learner experiences of Further Education and Training in nine regions. This mixed-methods study uses both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Qualitative findings are derived from the contributions of 711 focus group participants. Learners were pre-assigned to a focus group according to their QQI level. Participants were asked: (i) “What has been working well in your course?”, (ii) “What has not been working well in your course?”, and (iii) “What changes would you make to improve your learning?” All focus group conversations were audio-recorded by Dictaphone. The Research Team used Google Colab software to transcribe the recordings and reviewed same for accuracy.

The report authors documented and analysed all FET learner contributions to the NFLF. Forum participants' spoken word has been reproduced verbatim. In some instances, light editing of quotations occurred for the sake of clear and concise communication. 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 2.2.**



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 2.2. *Glossary of Programme Acronyms.*

Quantitative research findings are drawn from a survey of 1296 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 cross-checked 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 2, "Survey Representation".

Survey Data Cleaning and Quality Control

The Research Team collated all regional survey data sets into a single, national data set. The team then reviewed all learner survey responses as part of a standard process of data cleaning and quality control. Manual checking ensures that our database consists of only high-quality, reliable data.

Two team members reviewed an initial dataset with a total of 1296 survey responses. They performed a series of checks as part of quality control:

- **Speed Check:** 150 responses were completed in under 5 mins, the median time of completion being approximately 15 mins.
- **Attention Check:** Respondents were asked the following multiple-choice question mid-survey to gauge alertness: "To make sure you're paying attention, please select 'Disagree' below". 188 respondents provided an answer other than "Disagree".
- **Incomplete Responses:** 184 cases contained too many skipped answers or non-responses. They fell among the c.15% of respondents with the highest number of skipped answers.

The Research Team collated and reviewed 206 responses that did not meet one or more of the above quality checks. Two team members identified 32 cases where there were grounds for retaining the survey response. These responses were retained based on a reasonable assessment that the respondents' literacy level or English language competence had made the survey more challenging to complete fully. The team excluded 174 survey responses (c.13% of the initial dataset). The final dataset consisted of 1122 responses.

Participant Profile

711 learners took part in the Learner Forum focus group events. They represented FET programmes from NQF Level 1–6, unaccredited courses, and courses whose levels were unknown. Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) learners formed a relative majority of focus group participants.

1122 learners responded to the Learner Forum survey. Most survey respondents were full-time learners (61%, n = 610/1002), representing programmes from NQF Levels 1–6, unaccredited courses, and courses whose levels were unknown. Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) learners formed a relative majority of survey respondents (**Figures 2.1 and 2.2**).

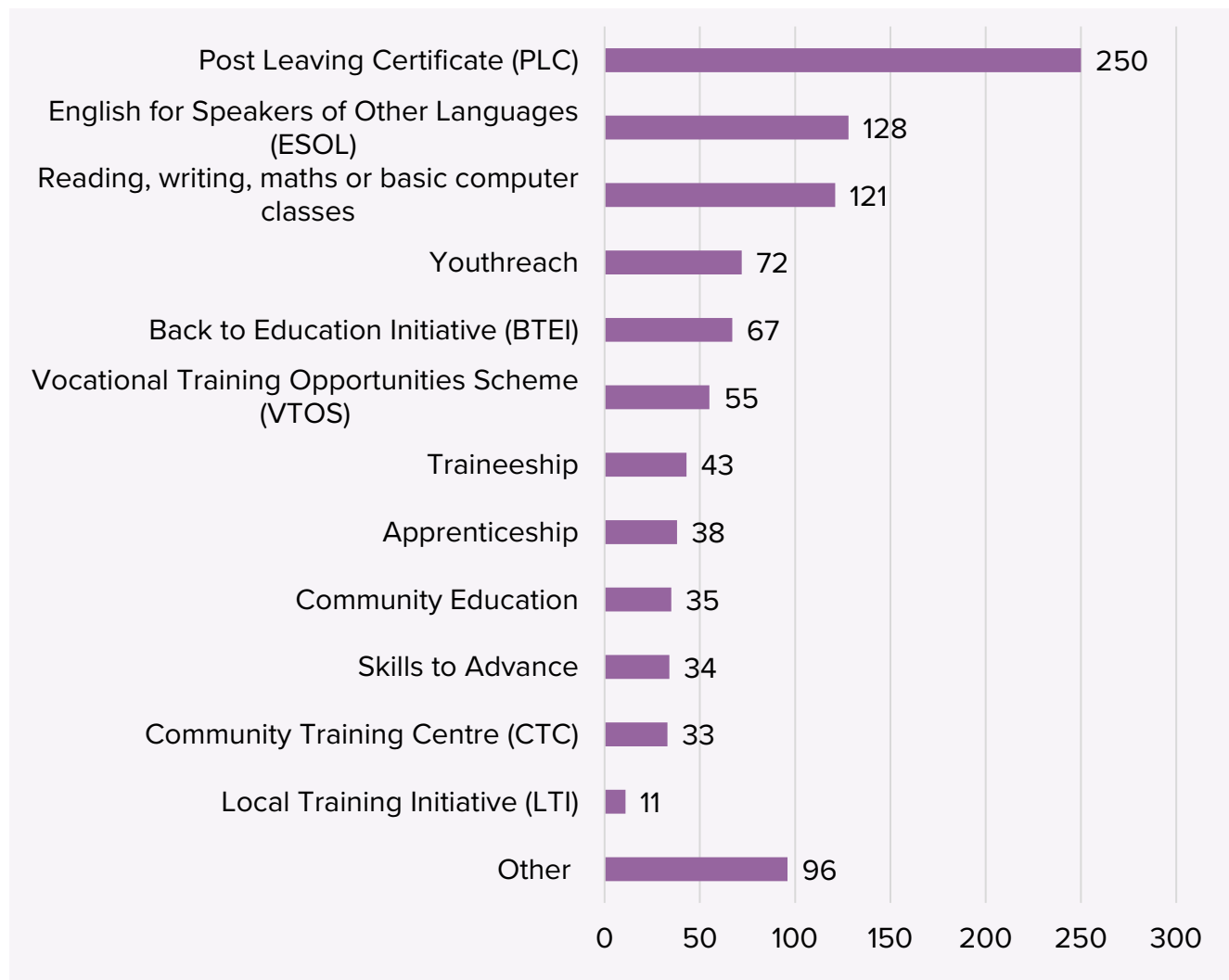


Figure 2.1. Course or Programme Title.

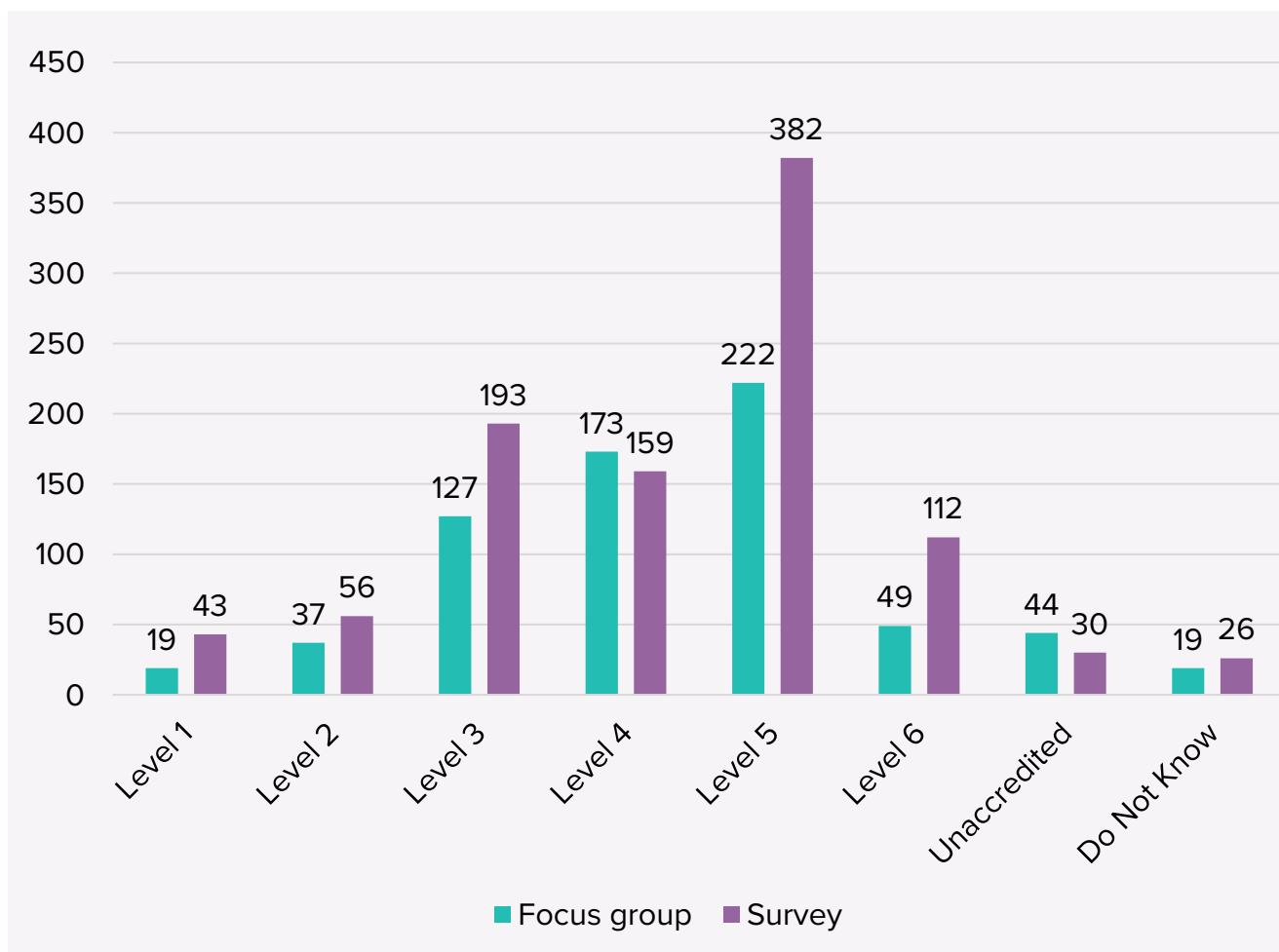


Figure 2.2. Learner Representation by NFAQ level.

The most represented age group of learners was 18–24 year olds (37%, n = 368/1000) (**Figure 2.3**).

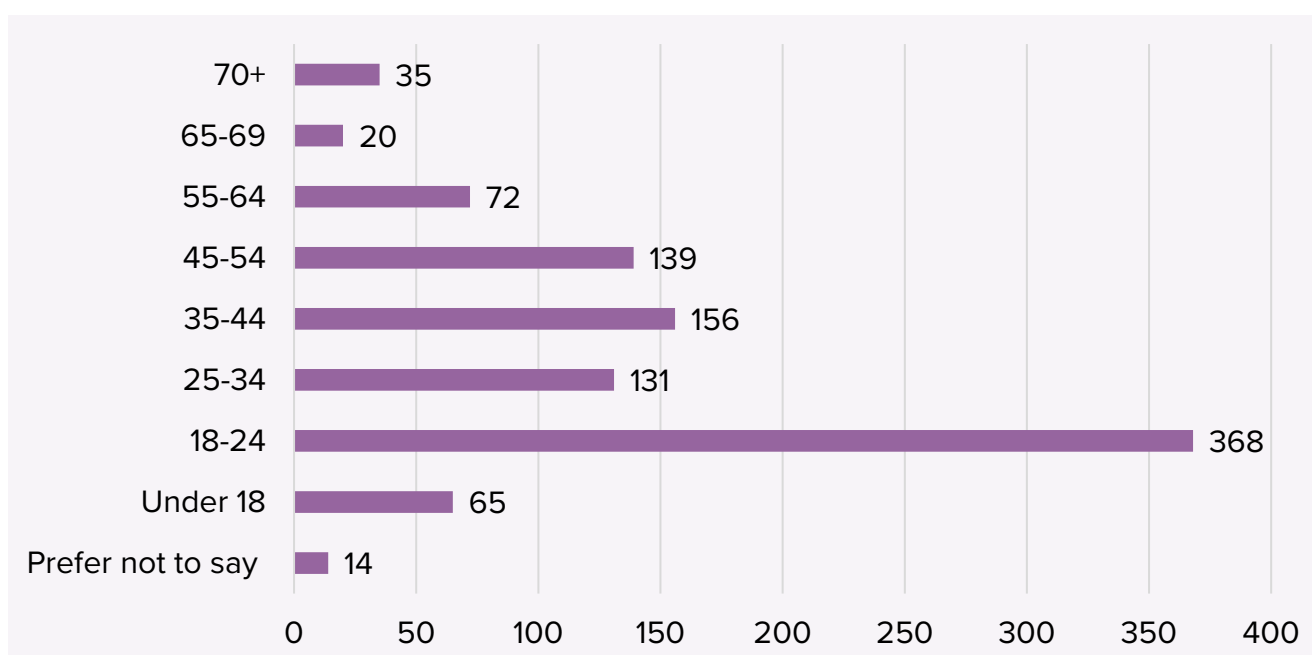


Figure 2.3. Forum Participants' Age.

Most survey respondents were female (66%, n = 664/1008) (**Figure 2.4**).

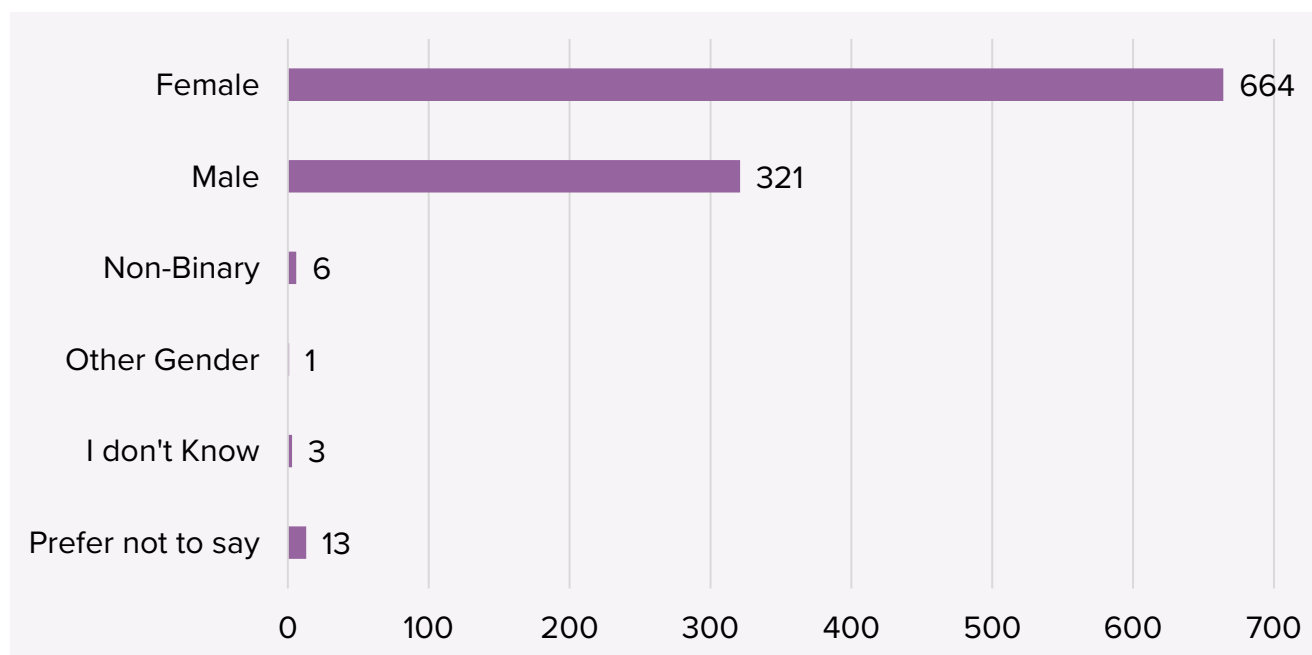


Figure 2.4. *Forum Participants' Gender.*

Of those who reported information on ethnicity in the survey, the majority identified as White Irish (57%, n = 573/1011). Learners had the option to tick more than one ethnicity (**Figure 2.5**).

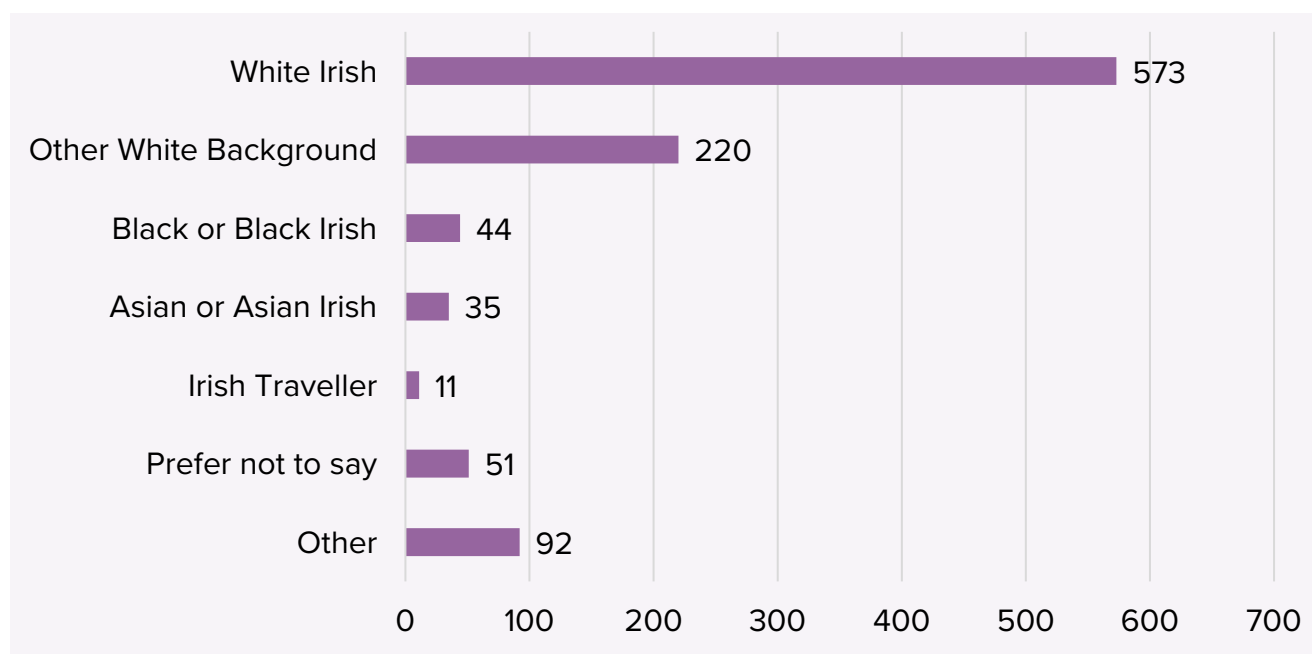


Figure 2.5. *Forum Participants' Ethnicity.*

In terms of prior educational attainment 42% (n = 455/1095) of survey respondents reported achieving Leaving Certificate, adult learning course or similar (NFQ Levels 4 and 5). 9% (n = 102/1095) reported a prior level of education lower than Junior Certificate (**Figure 2.6**).

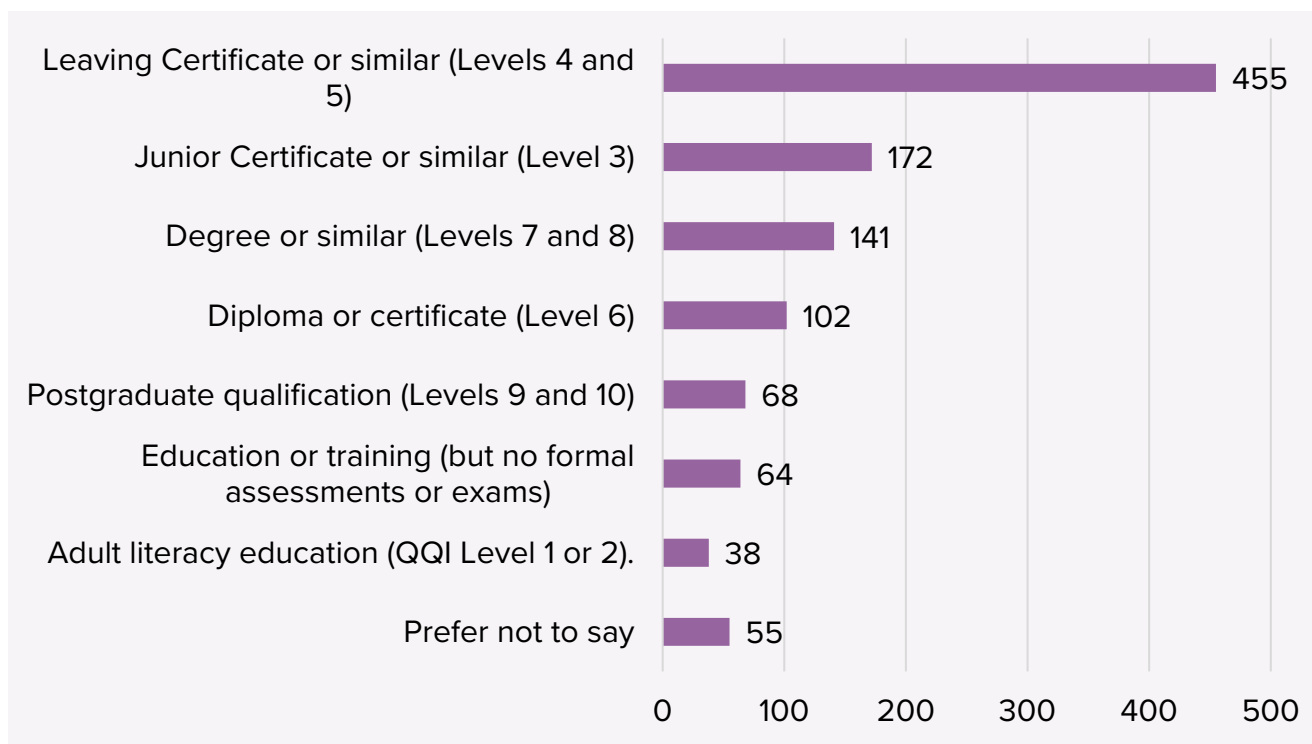


Figure 2.6. *Participants' Educational Attainment.*

In terms of employment status, 38% (n = 378/1008) of survey respondents reported being unemployed. 10% (n = 105/1008) reported being in full-time employment with an additional 20% (n = 204/1008) engaged in part-time employment (**Figure 2.7**).

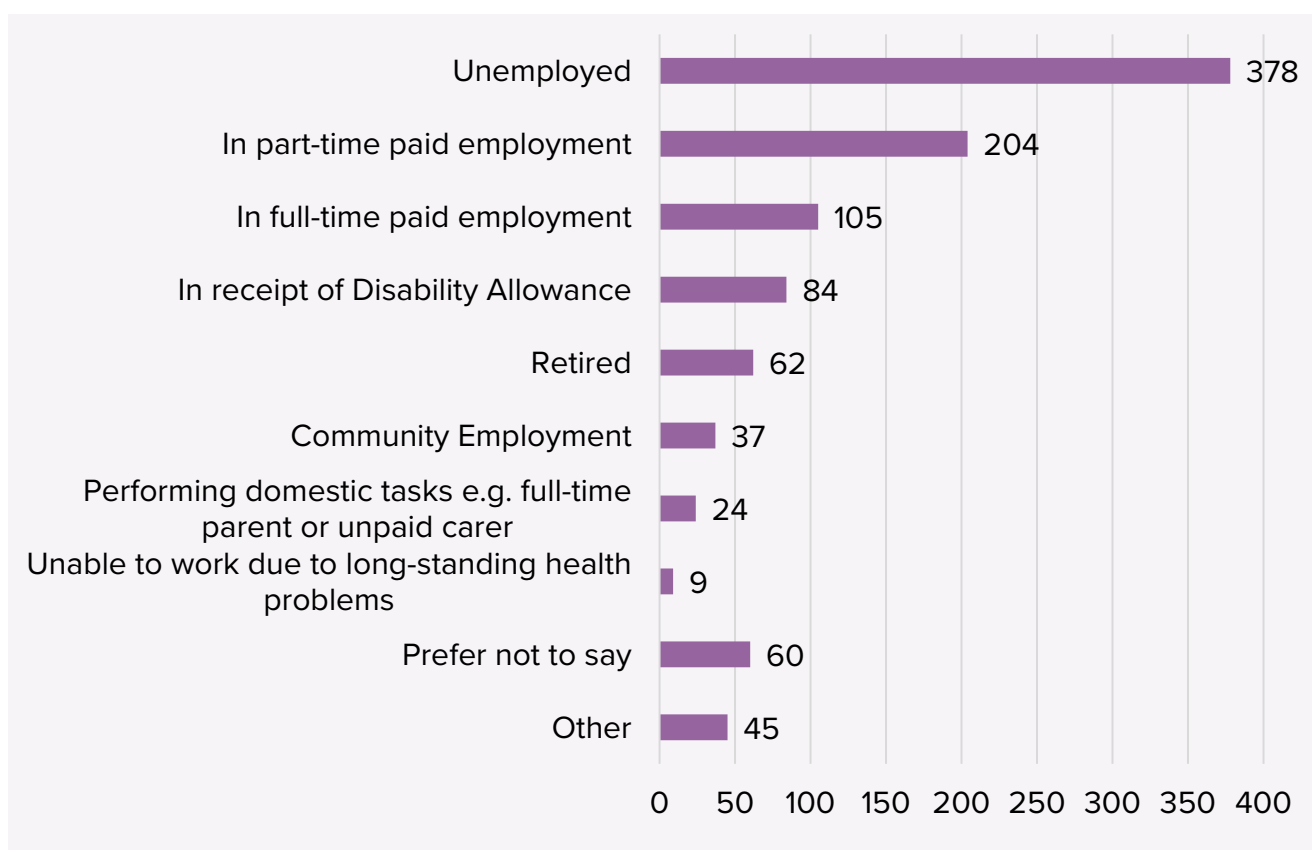


Figure 2.7. *Participants' Employment Status.*

Thematic Analysis

The report aims to strike a balance between offering a rich and detailed insight into learners' views on FET and arriving at a set of actionable insights capable of being incorporated into strategic decision-making.

During thematic analysis, the report authors examined and coded the focus group transcripts in line with a set of closed or pre-defined codes. The full Codebook for Qualitative Data Analysis is available in Appendix 3 of this report. For each regional forum, a codebook of learner quotations was organised according to theme and arranged under three main column headings in line with the research questions (i.e. Working Well, Not Working Well, and What Learner Wants to See Happen Next). 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.

The Research Team subsequently identified the most significant patterns emerging from the data. This selection of “primary themes” was informed by three fundamental considerations:

- Firstly, at regional report level, the report authors identify as “primary” only those thematic 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 five or more forum participants.
- Secondly, in developing the national report, the Research Team collated a table of learner proposals from all nine regional NFLF reports and subsequently identified the most frequently recurring proposals under each primary theme. By identifying the most common proposals across all regional reports, the Research Team selected priority areas for discussion in the report.
- Thirdly, the report's selection of primary themes is informed by the priority survey respondents afford them. The three highest and three lowest items of net satisfaction indicated in the learner survey are included as primary themes.

Learner quotes on priority themes were then collated in a single Learner Voices Across Ireland codebook.

Finally, throughout the research process, the report authors considered principles of social justice, feminism, equality, diversity, partnership, and social inclusion. This reflects AONTAS's ethical commitment to seek to address social exclusion, marginalisation, and other social barriers impeding educational access.

3. COURSE PROVISION

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

Theme	What Learners Say They Would Like To See Happen Next
Course Provision	Course Availability. Increase available course options and enable greater learner voice on nature of course provision. English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL). Increase the number of courses, class hours, and pathways to higher NFQ Levels available to ESOL learners. Adult Literacy. Increase course provision and range of courses available to Adult Literacy learners. Course Scheduling. Consider course-specific proposals on class timetabling, break times, and scheduling of work experience placements. Equipment and Resourcing. Consider learner proposals to reduce costs and enhance access to necessary course equipment and learning materials.



Learner Motivations

Learners reported a variety of reasons influencing their decision to participate in a course or programme (**Figure 3.1**). Learners could select more than one reason in response to this question.

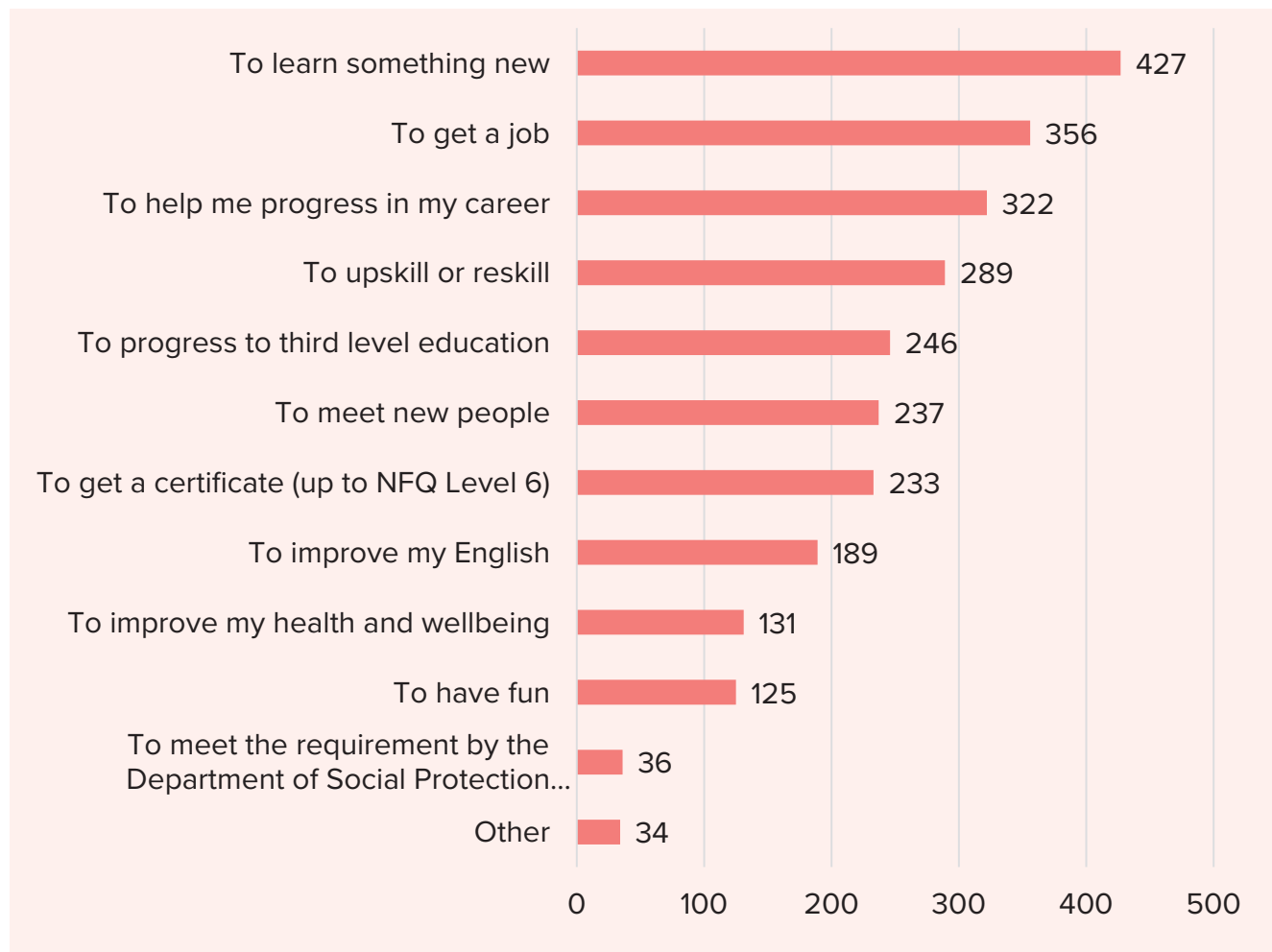


Figure 3.1. Responses to “What were the reasons for taking your course?”

The primary motivation to enrol in a FET course was the desire “To learn something new” (43%, n = 427/1004).

Even the fact that we’re learning Irish ... people used to say to me, “you know, you should take a break” ... but it is activating your brain. Any subject like that that you do.

Adult Literacy learner

I know this seems really trite that I’m just doing a smartphone course ... but when I first got a smartphone ten years ago an eight-year-old showed me how to use it and said “this is wasted on you”, so it’s lovely ten years later to try and learn how to access this and use it properly.

Adult Literacy learner

If you want to be more educated ... you’d be surprised how quick you can learn.

Community Education learner

Learners also expressed motivations “To get a job” (35%, n = 356/1004) and “To help me progress in my career” (32%, n = 322/1004). Focus group participants shared their diverse reasons for beginning their course:

It's a new opportunity to start again, because I have a career. I am an IT professional. This is an opportunity to learn what I want. Because a few years ago I chose a career, but it's not what I want ... you know? So I learned here in Ireland, it's never too late to start again.

CTC learner

I plan to improve my English for work in pharmacy. I have pharmacy education in Ukraine.

ESOL learner

I would like something better. For my kids. It's my responsibility. I want a good future for them.

VTOS learner, migrant

I went with the one in Portlaoise specifically because they have children's nursing and they're one of the very few that do one for children. Normally, it's general everywhere and I wanted to do nursing because I, myself, would have some medical issues, so I just wanted to help people the way the nurses helped me.

Pre-Nursing learner

Forum participants recognised the wider benefits of lifelong learning and reported taking their course to meet new people (24%, n= 237/1004) and to improve their health and wellbeing (13%, n = 131/1004).

It's getting me out of the house too and meeting new people.

Adult Literacy learner

My wife passed 48 months ago. I needed to get back into a routine.

VTOS learner

You can definitely find more people [and] create a really big atmosphere ... where you can like study together, work together, hang out together ... it's really easy.

PLC learner

Chatting together and getting involved in something, it's very important for men's mental health.

Community Education learner

It's nice to meet with other people, because we are really isolated... I have two special needs kids, so this is my place to go, to vent and see people and to get out.

Spanish and Irish learner

It's really good for us to socialise and integrate because we have quite a big group of Ukrainians and a big group of local people from Dunhill community who come to us. It's a little bit hard sometimes to understand each other but we are doing it for near three years and people start to understand each other non-verbally and share a tradition.

Community Education learner, migrant

I suppose I'm in the active retirement ... and I think it's very necessary for our age group.

Community Education learner

This education ... makes my heart beat, brings light into my life, and lets fresh air into my lungs.

BTEI learner, migrant

Studying there helps me not to give up or lose heart, as these courses require discipline to keep moving forward.

ESOL learner, migrant



Course Provision

Learner Forum participants appreciated diverse aspects of existing FET course availability. They highlighted the diverse range of FET courses offered and the increased personal attention they received through smaller class sizes:

You can go and inquire about courses and what's coming up. They will do lots of different courses ... and they're free.

Adult learner, course unknown

There's smaller classes so it's better to learn The hands-on classes, most of us prefer, instead of sitting in a second secondary school not really learning much and teacher not paying attention to you.

Youthreach learner

[In a previous course] I am not understanding because this is big [many] people in the class, but now in the [current course] no big people, maybe 12, 13, 14.

ESOL learner

It is good craic. There's 14 in our class. Everybody kind of just gathers together ... whenever you're in the class you mix together, you become friends.

Apprenticeship learner

It's a very different vibe from secondary school ... The lecturers are still in a position of authority, I suppose, but it doesn't really feel like it because you can call them by their first name. You can just chat to them outside of class.

PLC learner

The college I'm in, it fosters community. I feel like instructors are a lot more hands-on and they're a lot more approachable than in other education, you know? I feel like you do build a bit of an actual relationship and they actually will be there to help you.

VTOS learner

Learners reported unmet needs for course provision and proposed **increasing the provision of FET courses**, notably **English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)** and **Adult Literacy**.

Current ESOL learners consistently report insufficient in-class hours and would like to see provision of more class hours and courses at different levels:

We need more English lessons. We have English lessons only once per week. It's not enough.

VTOS learner

*[Learner 1]: With our class they said that maybe they won't have Level 3 next year. We are afraid if it's true because two days is not enough ...
[Learner 2]: Yes, you're right. I think that five days could be perfect for us because we are beginning in a new language. [Facilitator]: Would you agree with that? [Learner 3]: I agree. I think we need more lessons for Level 3, speaking practice.*

ESOL learners

We need Level 3. We have Level 1 and 2 but no Level 3.

ESOL learner

Adult Literacy learners would also like to see an increase in the quantity and range of courses and class hours:

[Facilitator]: Now you said something about it was two days and it's now only one. Why is that? [Learner]: Because the funding, I think. Well that's what we were told, it could be to do with the funding, I don't know. [Facilitator]: And if there were two days, would you like two days? [Learner]: Oh, yeah, yeah, we'd come back to them, yeah.

Adult Literacy learner

I'd like to do more courses. I want to do something new.

Adult Literacy learner, reported disability

[We need] more courses at lower levels during day hours.

Adult Literacy learner

More courses on technology, Smartphone. Life Skills at lower levels.

Adult Literacy learner



Learners expressed a range of course-specific and centre-specific scheduling proposals concerning class timetabling, break times, and scheduling of work experience placements. Learners highlighted the need for scheduled breaks across the day and timetabling that is sensitive to learners' energy levels. These proposals often expressed an underlying need to accommodate adult learners' life circumstances, including work and care responsibilities:

They let us know last minute [when a class is cancelled]. They changed the day of the course ... One girl had to quit the course ... during the middle of it ... one girl had to quit the course because she was working.

Adult learner, course unknown

[Learner 1]: Can courses be put on earlier ... for people who find it difficult to get [to it] in the winter. [Facilitator]: Earlier in the evening is what you're saying? [Learner 2] Earlier in the day. [Learner 1]: It's up to the group.

Adult Literacy learner

Not knowing when our next course is starting. The uncertainty of that. If it's going to be in the same day ... because we're carers, we really need to know because everything is down to a very fine schedule because we're not there to care for the child.

BTEI learner

We're so busy. We don't get a break ... it's three hours, from seven to ten on a Monday night ... and it's full on.

Dog Grooming learner

[Learner 1]: I would prefer to go 9am to 4pm. We can't go do anything after 4.30. It's too late after that. [Learner 2]: Especially like in winter, where it's so dark.

Youthreach learner

We should move the maths classes to the start of the day. Because on Mondays we have maths at the beginning and everyone feels that they focus better rather than leaving it towards the end of the day.

PLC learner

Some FET learners proposed reviewing the scheduling of work placements to so that all required training is completed in advance of taking up their placement, to assist all learners in accessing placements:

The individuals that we'd be working with, they'd be prone to challenging behaviour. We do work experience before doing the training ... so if something happened, you have to run out of the room, or you have to get yourself out of that situation ... One of the main training sessions we do [Prevention and Management of Aggression and Violence] [is] to help us deal with situations of challenging behaviour but that's not done until towards the end. It should really be done well before your work experience.

PLC learner

We were sent to do work placement before even doing Care Skills ... It would be better to do it beforehand so that we know better what to do.

Healthcare Assistant learner

[Learner 1]: They should make work experience stretch around the year, because there's like 20 students or something applying for the same spot. There's only ever going to be like four [places available]. [Learner 2]: Or stagger it throughout the year, so it's like, group A does the semester one ... [group B] after Christmas.

PLC learner

Finally, Learner Forum participants highlighted the value of being able to access quality **equipment** as part of their FET experience:

We got our very good wetsuits, hiking shoes, boots, the buoyancy aid. If we finish the course, we keep them.

Yoga Teacher and Outdoor Wellbeing learner

The equipment we have, like the chisels and hammers and things like that. They're quite expensive. They're like 150 euro just for one chisel. We have three of them. And they're provided. They're provided at the end of the course. They'll be giving them to us. I bring them home most days of the week and do a bit at home, dressing stone and stuff.

Skills to Advance learner

However, some learners also described issues and shared concerns around accessing necessary equipment and resources to complete their courses. Learners identified a need for greater funding to enable them to access these resources:

[The centre] has done nothing but support me [but] they're not being supported at all. We need products.

Community Education learner

I do think they need a little bit more funding ... all of the supplies except for the paper and stuff, our teachers actually supply themselves out of their pockets. Like that model Titanic, our cultural studies teacher bought that herself and like there's Rubik's cubes, there's puzzles ... she buys all of them herself. Everything has to be printed on double back. You've got to ration it.

Youthreach learner

Our woodwork teacher supplies most of the things. They buy most of the wood from their own pocket ... They barely have enough wood to get all of us to pass our projects. If somebody else joins the centre as of right now they won't be able to do the subject. There's not enough material ... something as simple as varnish, there's not enough money to supply the varnish so [tutor] has to buy it.

Youthreach learner

There's always a resource problem ... I do feel very sorry for the administrators out there because they were always struggling for resources and whether they are able to run the courses or not.

Community Education learner

Learners also made recommendations around how their centres could provide better access to equipment that would benefit them during their course:

Because our course is yoga, [we do] paddle boarding. We should have a lot of hours ... but to buy it is pretty expensive. It would be great to just rent it ... in the college.

PLC learner

Equipment, even using it on the weekends or in the evenings. I understand it's expensive, but you probably can let us keep it. It would be nice if they did. If it's signed up to you, you could be responsible for the damage that you're liable for.

VTOS learner

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 3.2**).

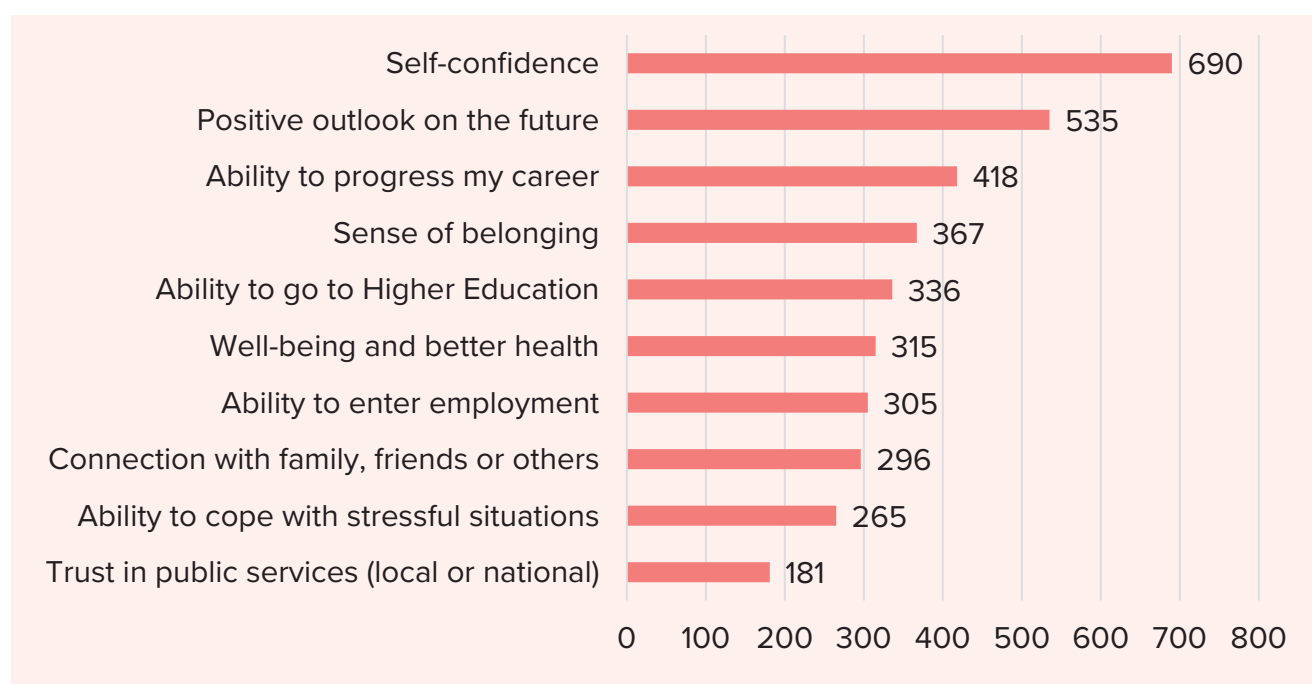


Figure 3.2. Responses to “During your time in your adult learning course, have you experienced an increase in any of the following?”

Learners widely recognised the positive impact of their FET experience. Survey respondents reported an increase in self-confidence (70%, n = 690/988) and a more positive outlook on the future (54%, n = 535/988). Focus group participants described these positive impacts as follows:

They’ve helped me believe in myself ... building your awareness of your own capabilities.

PLC learner

I used to be someone who was a complete shut-in. Like I wouldn’t leave my house for months on end, right? And up until October I was having a really rough time. So once I got in the door and I got working, things generally just went up from there. It was hard at first, but it was just a very slow, gradual thing of changing my sleeping schedule around, getting used to talking to people again. Like I wasn’t able to do that in secondary school because there was 500 people, right? And it was just too much.

Youthreach learner

I always felt left out because I wanted to be able to read ... if I get a message on my phone now I can read it no problem. I can get where [I] want to go to. I can fill tax forms in.

Adult Literacy learner



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

After I finish this course, I can go onto university to study. I will do a Level 6 at [university] for cheffing.

LTI learner

The certificate you get can be used worldwide. I also like how many additional things they added to the course, because obviously you've got a diving instructor license, but they also give you your VHF license, your dive and coxswain license, your powerboat license. You also become a first aid instructor, and you do emergency oxygen provider.

VTOS learner

Last semester I did Physiotherapy Assistant Theory and I'm absolutely engrossed in it and I'm doing the practice now. I've realised with this award, there'll be so much more open to me.

PLC learner



Learner Story: *Kitty Meehan*

Course: Dog Grooming, NQF Level 5.

Place of learning: An Tóchar Adult Education Centre, Causeway, Co. Kerry

I'm doing Dog Grooming Level 5 in our local Adult Education Centre in Causeway. It's part-time, which I like as it's just one evening a week, and four Saturdays. It's a good mix of theory and practice and we are actually working with dogs.

It's a small class – only seven in total. Two of us are in the older age group and the rest are young but we all get along, and our instructor is lovely. We have a lot of fun but there's also a lot to learn. We have to do a portfolio and to take photographs and videos of our work.

We have projects and assignments to do throughout the course where we have to describe our work process in great detail. We've learned loads of interesting things, even about the diseases that transfer from animals to humans, but also from dogs to humans, like Lyme's disease. I love it.

The An Tochar centre is actually located where I used to go to school. I didn't finish school at the time as I just wanted to go to work. I started working in offices and then I got married and my children came along. My oldest boy was very premature, so I had to stay at home to care for him. After ten years I decided to go back to work again. I worked in telecommunications but then I had to give that up because I had arthritis and I can't sit for too long.

After doing a CE scheme I started back into doing courses like wages, payroll, and office administration. When they finished, I signed up for a two-year part-time Level 5 Art and Design course in our local centre. I was really delighted to do this as I missed out on art as an opportunity in school. I did the course with my son, who was in his late 30s. He has autism and deafness but he's very artistic as well. We covered things like drawing, painting, and Batik, and we both did Level 6 in Photography too. But my favourite of all was ceramics. I just loved working with clay. The whole process of ceramics is so satisfying. Even though I never got the satisfaction of doing it when I was young, over 40 years later I was able to come back and do it. Discovering your ability to do something new is lovely.

They have all kinds of courses in An Tóchar. There's healthcare, garden horticulture, and nutritious cooking which I just finished a few weeks ago. The tutor was a nutritionist and she worked with the seasons, incorporating the food of the seasons into what we cooked.

I also started Chair Pilates which was really beneficial for my arthritis. They were all short courses but really good. I like doing anything that's practical.

In 2015, the ETB started running drama courses at night. I signed up with both my son and daughter. We did it for about three years and put on a whole lot of productions in the school. I loved acting and singing. It was fabulous.

I'm so happy to have had the opportunity to do all these things. There's a fear at first because you don't know if you can do it but it's good to push and challenge yourself. There is so much satisfaction in doing different courses. It's something to look forward to every week, and the distraction is good. I'm a carer for my son and though he's very independent, it can be challenging sometimes.

I like the teamwork and getting to meet different people. We hit it off straight away because we're all in the same boat and interested in the same things. It's nice to work with likeminded people. You make friends and it's lovely.

I'd really encourage people to see what courses are on in their ETB. I feel lucky that there are so many here and they're mainly free, especially for people on social welfare or with medical cards. It's really fantastic.



4. TEACHING AND LEARNING

Chapter 4 focuses on learners' experiences of teaching and learning.

Theme	What Learners Say They Would Like To See Happen Next
Teaching and Learning	Teaching and Learning. Consider learner proposals to use group activities and discussion to enhance classroom participation and peer-to-peer learning. Consider use of diverse learning materials, including audio and visual formats, to foster learner engagement. Curriculum. Review course-specific learner proposals to improve curriculum, learning materials, and time allocations. Assessment and Feedback. Diversify assessment methods, clarify assessment briefs, and ensure adequate time between assignments to enable learners to implement tutor feedback.

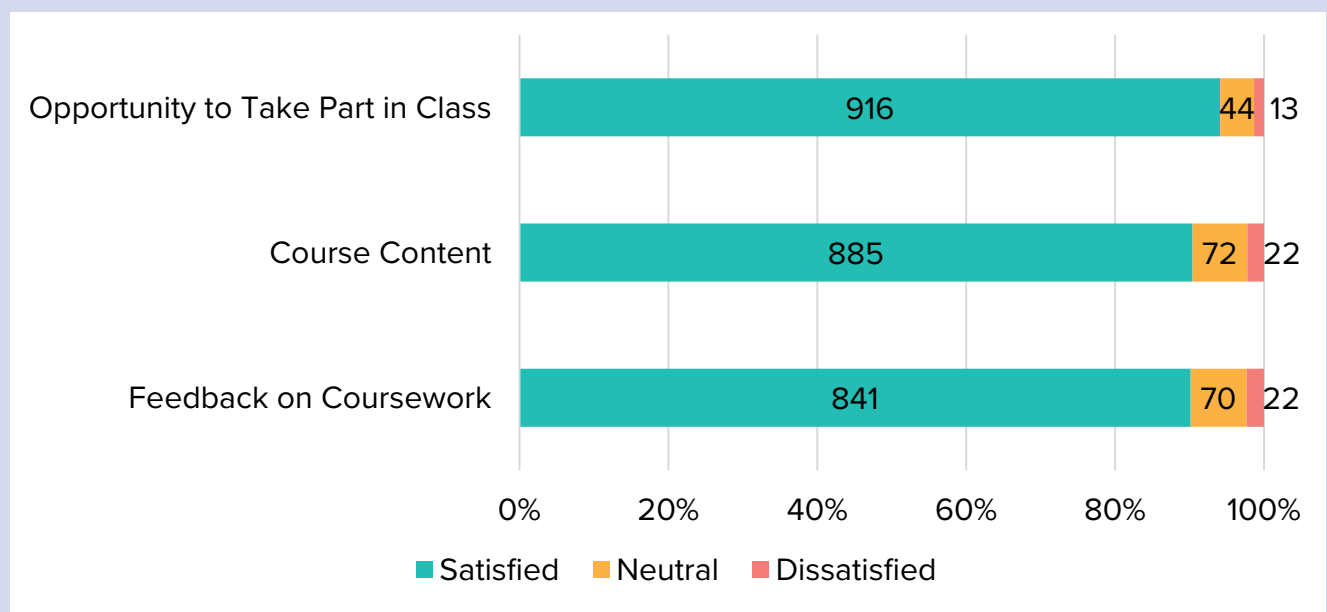


Figure 4.1. *Learner Satisfaction with Teaching and Learning.*

Teaching and the Role of Tutors

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 subject knowledge and industry experience:

The tutors are really well trained. They know what they're saying, they know their course, they know their modules, and they know how to teach effectively.

Youthreach learner

The tutors have industry background as well as the knowledge ... For us, obviously what we want is to go forward ... They have just an abundance of experience and knowledge and advice.

Traineeship learner

Learners also praised their tutors' capacity to listen to individual learner needs and to respond in ways that supported their confidence and self-belief:

They [tutors] listen a lot. They are very good at explaining things ... I get confused pretty easily, but they're very good at clearing things up ... I feel very able to ask ... I'm actually generally pretty awkward ... when it comes to at least asking things for myself ... So it's just, it's handy for me that they make me feel comfortable.

PLC learner

The teachers are very keen for me to do my best, and they are helping me to trust myself again. They want the best for me. Since coming here, I am believing in myself now.

BTEI learner, Ukrainian migrant

My teacher is so inclusive. All the time if I ask them to explain to me, to help me with something, they're so helpful. They're helping all the time. [If] I can't understand something properly they will understand what is needed.

PLC learner, migrant



Finally, learners praised their tutors' evident care and support for their wellbeing:

We have a coordinator and everyone ... knows where her door is. She is so open to everyone. You can just come and say, "Could you help me?" ... I have problems outside, in my family, and I came to her and she helped me. I have problems with some statement, and she helped me ... I know that she can solve everything.

PLC learner

The staff, the instructors, all the people that are in there, they're dedicated to helping the students achieve. It's incredible how much support that they give you.

PLC learner

You can ask teacher not just about subjects ... I can ask my teacher about everything as well.

ESOL learner

You have the option to stay afterwards ... there is one tutor that's always there until four o'clock ... So if I'm struggling with any of the subjects on my course, I would stay on the Monday afternoon and work with her.

Applied Social Science 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. While some learners identified participation as a challenge, they spoke positively about their classroom as a welcoming and supportive learning environment. Learners highlighted how tutors facilitated peer-to-peer learning and used multiple means of engagement to encourage learners to participate:

I think the tutors are all very student-centric, and they acknowledge that everybody has different ways of learning.

Traineeship learner

She's kind ... And so it's really working because I feel like – it's not pressure, nothing like that – but when I [am] relaxing, she's like, "Wake up". So she keeps on pushing us to be better every single day.

ESOL learner

Sometimes we play different games ... It helped us to communicate with our classmates.

VTOS learner



They have a lot of different ways when you want [a] change, maybe more speaking or more listening or more writing, they can give you this opportunity for you to do different. Like the games, or you can go outside.

Traineeship learner

The tutors are very supportive. In the class group discussion, they help us to build confidence. I have much more hesitation to speak in English. It's not easy to express ourselves, but the tutor helps us to speak in a confident manner.

ESOL learner

Some learners further indicated that they disengaged when such opportunities to participate were absent:

There's no "What do you want to make? Or what do you want to learn?" ... You can't really choose. It's the same thing for the last two years or the last 20 years.

Youthreach learner

Some teachers just read off the power points ... and they write like giant paragraphs. So that's not fun.

PLC learner

When asked what they would like to see happen next, learners proposed specific steps to facilitate more classroom engagement. Learners highlighted the importance of multiple media for representation and expression, particularly the use of audio-visual technologies:

If they have a video, or even I find if they have photos, it [could] help break up [the class] you know? ... instead of just reading what's up on the board.

PLC learner

For Spanish like going to watch a movie ... visual, practical learning.

Spanish and computers learner

You can have videos like recordings of [assessment instructions], then it will be easier.

BTEI learner

Learners further highlighted the importance of group discussion and activities, including learning from each other:

Learning from each other is so valuable. The ETB could encourage more collaborative projects and group discussions. This would not only enhance our understanding but also help us develop teamwork skills.

BTEI learner

Because we have participants of different ages, of different experiences ... I believe that group work will help people to find same points, to be more confident ... to realise that not everyone is an expert.

PLC learner

Now we have a lot of boring assessments, we need to write a lot every day. And sometimes we would like ... more action, [to] relax, play a game.

VTOS learner

Curriculum

Survey respondents reported a high satisfaction regarding course content (88%). Focus group participants outlined their experience of their course curriculum in more depth. Learners highlighted the stimulating and varied nature of course content and valued the opportunity to develop specialised knowledge:

The subjects are more varied. In secondary school you'd have like English and that'd be just a bunch of topics, but you don't really get into depth in them. For us [now] ... we can go a lot more in depth.

PLC learner

It covers many techniques, many styles, many subjects in art.

BTEI learner

So the good thing is we have learned from this course a lot of things. Especially teamwork. We have studied diversity and equality. We have learned a lot with our English. We have ... communication skills.

LTI learner

While many learners found their experience of curriculum and assessment to be positive, this was not the experience of all learners. In particular, learners described issues relating to overlap in course content or outdated material:

[There's] a lot of overlap from different modules ... The tutors [are] not corresponding with each other and you're like "We actually did this in a different module". People found it was a waste of time because we're just doing this again.

BTEI learner

One of the first modules you do, you're learning from a book that's telling you about Word 97. While [we're] using the 2016 version, which is still ten years old.

**Legal and Medical Office
Administration learner**

I do think that some of our subjects are a bit pointless. Like the Communications ones and that kind of thing. They don't apply to what we're going to do in the future, so we just find them a bit pointless. And they just take up the same amount of time that we could be spending on something else.

PLC learner

Focus group participants made specific requests to review their programme, to assess the continued relevance of course curricula and to include specific subjects or new topics:

I would have a review of the syllabus ... There's overlap where there's not the communication [between tutors].

BTEI learner

Bring back "Mechanics".

Youthreach learner

If we had more practical classes, we'd have confidence. Just basically practical stuff about people, children that are not coping ... what type of games they should be doing and how we should tackle a situation.

PLC learner

A science course would be nice.

Youthreach learner

We need to add more lessons about work in [Microsoft] Office, like Excel, because it's really useful for work.

VTOS learner

You need to be taught how to use it [Artificial Intelligence] ethically ... It should be taught as a tool.

VTOS learner

Assessment and Feedback

Survey respondents reported high levels of satisfaction with feedback on course work (88%). Focus group participants outlined their experience of curriculum and assessment, highlighting the positive impact of multiple means of assessment:

We were given a yearly timetable of all of the briefs that we would be approaching and we're hitting those targets and you know what to expect so you're not stressing. I think that was a really good addition. We didn't have that last year.

PLC learner

They gave a couple options of formats that they were willing to accept the work in, which felt really welcoming to me. I like writing reports, that's how my brain works, but I know that's not a universal thing and I've never been in an environment where it was just straight out of the gates, you didn't have to go and quietly be like "Hey, that's not how my brain works!"

VTOS learner

[Learner]: Getting an assignment for the first time is daunting, so it's nice to get little assignments to be able to finish after a day or two. [Facilitator]: Which is a fantastic sense of achievement. [Learner]: It's the best feeling in the world.

Adult Literacy learner

While some learners described their positive experience of assessment, others described challenges relating to the volume and timing of assessment, as well as unclear information provided around assignments:

For our first assignment we had three months to do it ... then the second, we had two weeks to do it when it was the same level of work ... we were on placement too.

PLC learner

We are definitely over-assessed for a Level 5 course. For example, there is 1500 to 2000 word assessments every two weeks in our course ... You're double loading up on that during work placement as well.

PLC learner

The assessment is actually not so bad when you can actually make sense of the brief ... they're very convoluted. So it's trying to understand the question that's the hard part. [Tutor] expects it done within an hour; I'm normally sitting in front of the laptop for two to three hours.

BTEI learner

When asked what they would like to see happen next, learners proposed that the volume of assessment be reduced, assignments be well-spaced, and assessment briefs be clear:

They can cut that down to one assessment per module, like an assignment ... or maybe an exam per module, rather than like two big assignments. That's 22 assignments! It's massive assignment work and it's very repetitive.

PLC learner

I think if you were informed that "It [exam] would be the following week; it would be like this ..." That would be more comfortable.

BTEI learner

Simplify instructions for assessments.

BTEI learner

Learners also suggested that their programme should contain more varied approaches to assessment:

Include more group-based assessments.

Traineeship learner

They used to have practical assignments to do like nappy changing, bottles ... And I know we all think it should be reintroduced.

PLC learner

The above illustrates how Learner Voice may illuminate learner experience of teaching and training as well as offer practical, learner-centred solutions to such issues arising as classroom participation, curriculum development, assessment, and feedback. The present research supports the continued incorporation of Learner Voice in decision-making to enhance teaching and learning for learners.





Learner Story: *Amanda Keenan*

Course: Maths, NQF Level 4.

Place of learning: Monaghan Adult Education Centre

I returned to education after working in a business in Monaghan for ten years. In 2018 I was diagnosed with cellulitis. I was in and out of hospital receiving IV antibiotics and had to rest up for nine weeks. Eventually I had to withdraw from work.

I did not know what corner to turn with no job and no money, but I knew someone would point me in the right direction. I was told about the Tús scheme, so I approached them asking how this worked. They explained that I would have to work 19.5 hours a week but then they mentioned doing courses like First Aid and Health and Safety. At first, I thought that's not for me. But then I thought that it would do no harm doing these courses. I was still young and decided to give it a go. Why not? I had nothing to lose.

I completed the courses and to my surprise, I really enjoyed them. As time rolled on, I joined the CE Scheme. Andrea and Julita were two lovely people to approach. They explained to me that the CE scheme works like the Tús scheme, but this time there were more courses. I was scared at first looking at the list right in front of me. I couldn't take it all in.

I was confused! It was like I was having an anxiety attack. The sweat started rolling down my forehead and the shaking started. I asked "what am I supposed to do? What if they put me on a course I don't want? What if it's too hard?" Question after question went through my head. But they sat me down and discussed all my options with me and I settled myself.

When I was more at ease we agreed that I would try a computer course with Tracey. Tracey spoke about the course and told me how there is loads of help out there to do lots of different courses. I completed my computer course and I felt overwhelmed. I had no interest in school, yet I had completed something on my own. I enjoyed it with the help of the CE scheme and Tracey, my wonder woman.

In one of the courses I had to do an assignment. Once I heard the word assignment I froze. I had never achieved one of these before but Joan, my tutor, was so helpful. I will never forget her for having the patience and understanding she showed me throughout that course. She talked me through it, showed me where to get the information and helped me put it together.

From that day on I have completed many different courses and am still studying. I have just completed a 12-week Level 4 Maths course. The thing I have learnt is that anybody can do a Maths course at any level: it's supposed to be the hardest subject at school but if you get the right tutor (which I did), it can be interesting working with numbers and solving problems. The course can be overwhelming and exhausting at times but I got through it and am delighted that I did. It has helped me to understand myself better, knowing I can push myself to that point. I want to reach and just go for gold. Anyone can do courses. There is loads of help out there for everyone to achieve their goals.

I want to thank the staff of Cavan and Monaghan ETB: Andrea and Julita from the CE scheme and Pauline that kindly accepted me onto the Tús scheme from the very beginning. Also, my tutors Tracey and Joan.

All I can tell you is to stay positive, believe in yourself and aim for what you want. It is a learning curve but that is what life is all about. After four and a half years of studying and completing courses, I am still learning – so if I can do it, anyone can.



5. PATHWAYS

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

Theme	What Learners Say They Would Like To See Happen Next
Pathways	Guidance Service. Enhance guidance support services to meet the needs of all FET learners. Work Experience and Work-Based Learning. Enhance the information and support available to FET learners seeking to secure work experience placements. Enhance access to structured training partnerships between ETB/FET centres and local employers. Review timelines for work experience to ensure good alignment with other course elements, including Garda vetting requirements.

Learners shared their experience of accessing a range of ETB supports and services. Most survey respondents expressed satisfaction with same (**Figure 5.1**).

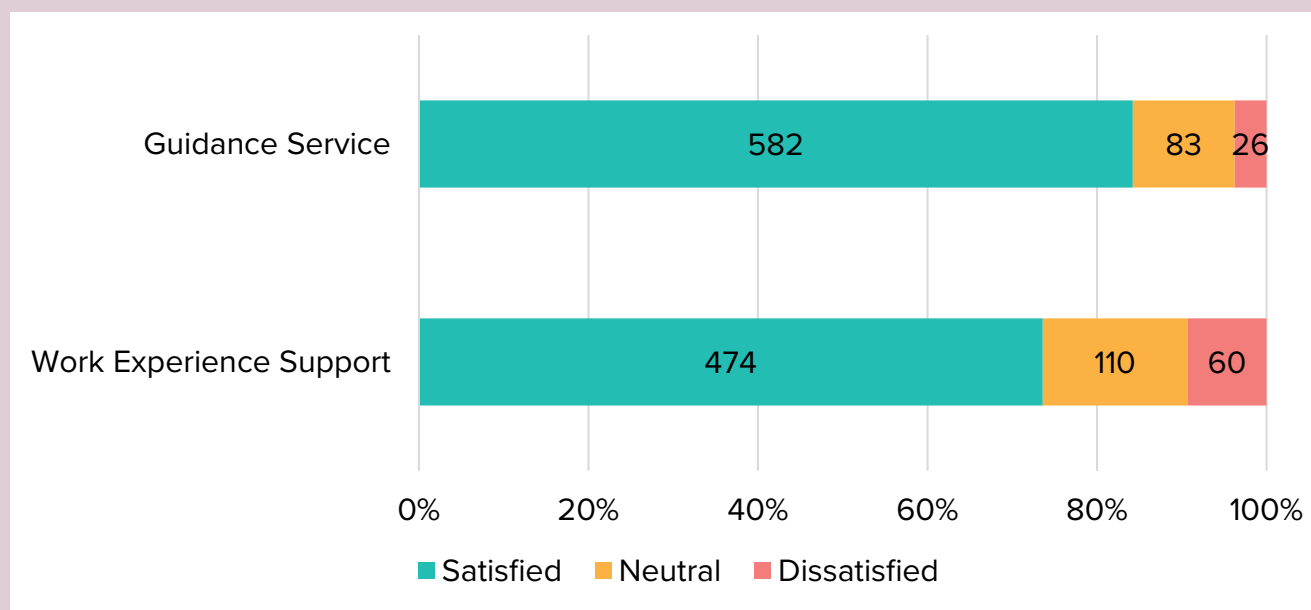


Figure 5.1. *Learner Satisfaction with Guidance Services and Work Experience Support.*

86% (n = 880/1023) of learners stated that they are clear on what other FET courses are available to them, while 82% (n = 801/981) reported being clear about what Higher Education / Third Level courses are available to apply for. 75% (n = 741/985) reported being clear about employment opportunities available to them. The foregoing indicates some room for improvement in relation to guidance supports regarding future employment pathways (**Figure 5.2**).

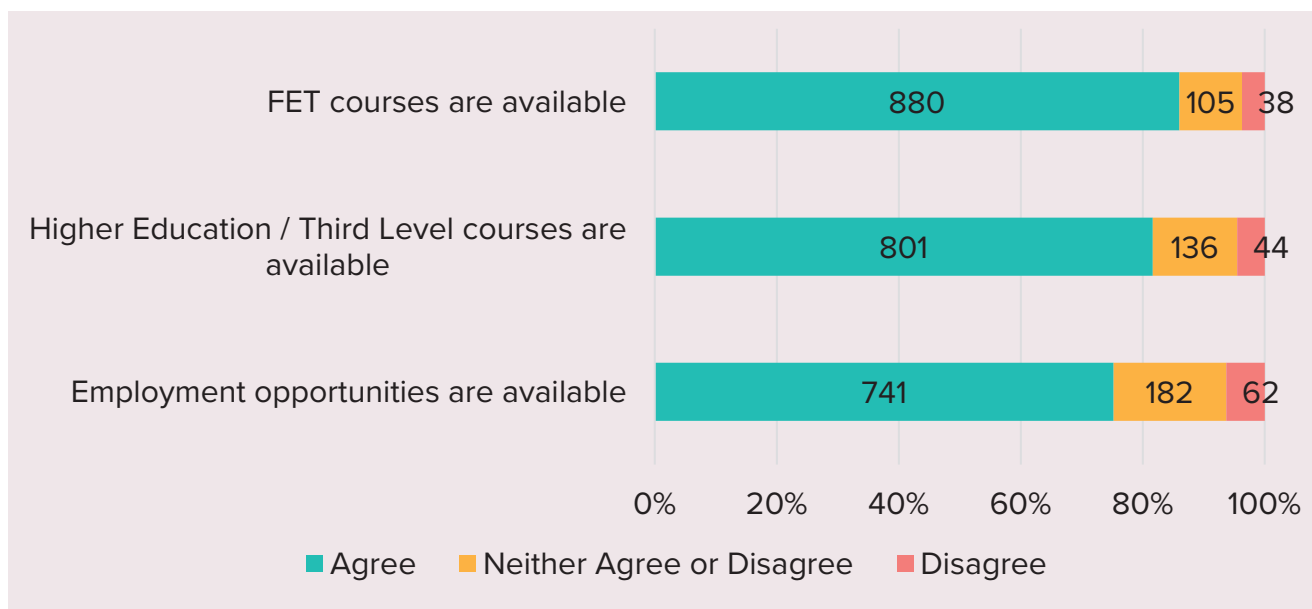


Figure 5.2. Responses to “I am Clear About the Pathways Available”.

Guidance Services

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 and preparation for the employment market or further learning:

For us it was kind of mandatory that we speak to a guidance counsellor because it was free And I had my own career guidance. [Facilitator]: And it was helpful? [Learner] It was really helpful. It really gave me the opportunity to broaden out where I want to go next.

Animal Care learner

So far with the guidance counsellor we've had a conversation about what kind of courses to go for and filled out my CEO application ... she assisted me with the resources I need and informed me what is required to get a distinction.

PLC learner

Sometimes you get a job counsellor in, who will help you see where your future is going basically. And for a lot of people that really helps.

Youthreach learner

Learners also identified under-resourced provision of guidance counselling support. The lack of readily available guidance supports in some centres limited learners' opportunity to engage with counsellors and to plan their learning and employment trajectory:

We don't have any guidance counsellor facilities and we need to reapply to CAO. We have no guidance with that. We have no idea where we can progress to.

PLC learner

I sent an email off to them [FET centre], regarding career support but I wanted it to be anonymous. It's something that I didn't really want to approach someone in the college about. I sent an email from my college email and my personal email but I never got anything back.

VTOS learner

The guidance counsellor came in and said they'd take people individually. But that never happened. They have one down in [names other location], not in our actual building.

CTC learner

When asked what they would like to see happen next, learners proposed increasing the availability of on-site guidance counselling to support learners at critical stages in their learning journey:

It's ok for me that the guidance councillor is down the town and not in our actual building [because] I drive but they should have him on site.

CTC learner

Maybe when you go in, before you start you [should] have a mandatory session with a guidance counsellor.

VTOS learner

Learners also suggested inviting guest speakers to provide information and advice about progression options:

I think within our course they should have people coming in towards the end to have a talk about what you can do ... It's all kind of yourself. We don't really have a guide to tell you where you should go.

PLC learner

[Facilitator]: when you talk about inviting guest speakers to [help] students to explore their opportunities, is that to do with work experience or just in general? [Learner 1]: In general ... what courses to do ... after. [Learner 2]: It would also give students the opportunity to speak with local businesses about the type of work they do.

PLC learner



Work Experience Support

Learner Forum participants highlighted the benefits of gaining work experience as part of their course and appreciated when centres offered comprehensive support to secure their placements. Where work placements were particularly difficult to access, learners appreciated the provision of alternative, in-centre work experience opportunities:

We have 150 hours of work placement and they give us a list. The main tutor contacted everyone there and just sent out students.

PLC learner

The work experience, an artist came into the PLC course and did two weeks with us during class times. And we did an animation, we had an animator come from [company]. [We did] a project that is similar to something they do there. So we had to develop a zine and then turn that zine into something under animation.

PLC learner

Trying to find work placement for art is next to impossible. But this year there's someone coming in to do the work experience in the classroom. And we've not set it yet but it is such a relief. It's not panicking about trying to find work.

PLC learner

Learners identified a diverse range of challenges when it came time to secure a work experience placement to meet course requirements:

They just told us we were supposed to get our work placement. They never gave us a list of places we could apply to. So some people left the course because they couldn't find work placement. You can't pass the course if you don't have placement.

PLC learner

They don't help you find work experience and it's really hard, especially in the animal care field. I had to go [outside Ireland] to get my hours in. That kind of sucks.

PLC learner

Out of just 19 of us, there's only one person who was fully confirmed that they have a [work experience] place. We're all finding it very hard to find a place. People are sending emails, showing up at the doors for CVs, and we're just not getting anywhere ... there's only four places in Portlaoise hospital ... and with the RTE investigation that came out, nursing homes in Portlaoise really don't want to take it.

PLC learner

I must be honest ... Some spaces are not welcoming migrants ... That is the reality we're facing.

PLC learner

Focus group participants also described challenges related to Garda vetting:

In order to make work practice in our creches we [are] supposed to have Garda vetting, so it's like police clearance. From our country, the police clearance, it's available only for three months. So whenever we are going to the course, we should bring another paper. Each one is like 25 euro, which is quite a lot.

PLC learner, migrant

The Garda vetting issues [put] people off a lot because it took so long to come. You have to have a certain amount of hours in your practical in the setting. Now we're at the end and people don't have the hours.

PLC learner

We were delayed because we couldn't start on time. We needed to do the activities with the children. We couldn't do that because we didn't have the Garda vetting.

BTEI learner

When asked what could be done to improve their work experience, FET Learners proposed enhancing the information and support available to FET learners seeking to secure placements, including access to structured training partnerships between ETB/FET centres and relevant employers:

[Facilitator]: In terms of work experience, does the centre, the college give you a list of places where you might go? [Learner]: They can give you a list of places but it's up to you to contact them. They don't facilitate nothing and I think that's a big failure. They should have some partner, "We have some students we can send you".

PLC learner

I feel like there needs to be a system where maybe [the] ETB can be sponsored in a way by certain groups. Then you're guaranteed. You know you can go there instead of taking a shot in the dark.

PLC learner

I think there must be a form of relationship between these companies and the centre where they would know this year, for this month, there's going to be people coming into your company for placements.

PLC learner

Maybe FET courses have to have some contract with some organisation [so] that their students can go to the work placement ... because we are foreigners ... It's not difficult for Irish students to find a job. It's very difficult for Ukrainian students ... [Facilitator]: Is it that you think the colleges and employers could link better? [Learner]: Yes, I think so.

VTOS learner, migrant

[Learner 1]: when we're going into the classroom, there's a banner with all the different careers that are available. But we've never even run through them. [Learner 2]: You've not met anyone in the lower parts of the industry, as in the jobs you would do when you started ... [Learner 1]: And we need to run through the actual jobs that you could do. We didn't even get that.

CDFTV learner

Learners suggested beginning the Garda vetting process prior to course commencement. Learners also reported that the current system disproportionately impacts migrant learners and proposed reducing the burden of obtaining police clearance from the same country multiple times:

From the first day you go in and sign up for the course ... it [Garda vetting] should all be processed. Because there's no point in going to a course ... when you're not even Garda vetted.

BTEI learner

[Police clearance from home country] The teacher said it's from ETB, so they can't do anything about it ... [However] we did not go into that country from the time ... for the last two years. Why we should bring the Garda vetting [from home country] whenever we are applying for the permission to go for the practice?

PLC learner, migrant



6. LEARNER SUPPORT

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

Theme	What Learners Say They Would Like To See Happen Next
Learner Support	Mental Health Support. Enhance the availability of mental health counselling services in centres. Enhance flexibility around assignments and deadlines to proposals. Disability Supports. Enhance the availability of in-class assistants and support workers for learners with disabilities and additional needs.

Mental Health Support

When asked to describe their physical health and mental wellbeing, 23% (n = 221/970) of survey respondents reported same as poor to fair. 25% (n = 235/951) stated they had a long-term health issue, illness, or disability.

41% (n = 396/960) stated that they experience stress, anxiety, or depression. When asked if stress, anxiety, or depression affected their ability to learn or study, 27% (n = 255/959) of learners reported that it did.

Learner Forum participants shared their mental health experiences and challenges, including issues associated with stress, anxiety, and depression, and outlined how their mental health could negatively impact their participation and learning:

I struggle heavily with motivation, due to my depression. This, particularly recently, has caused me to put off doing assignments until the last moment, which causes me stress and can negatively impact my quality of work. Due to my mental health conditions, I have missed a lot of classes. This has impacted my learning and ability to keep up with coursework.

PLC learner

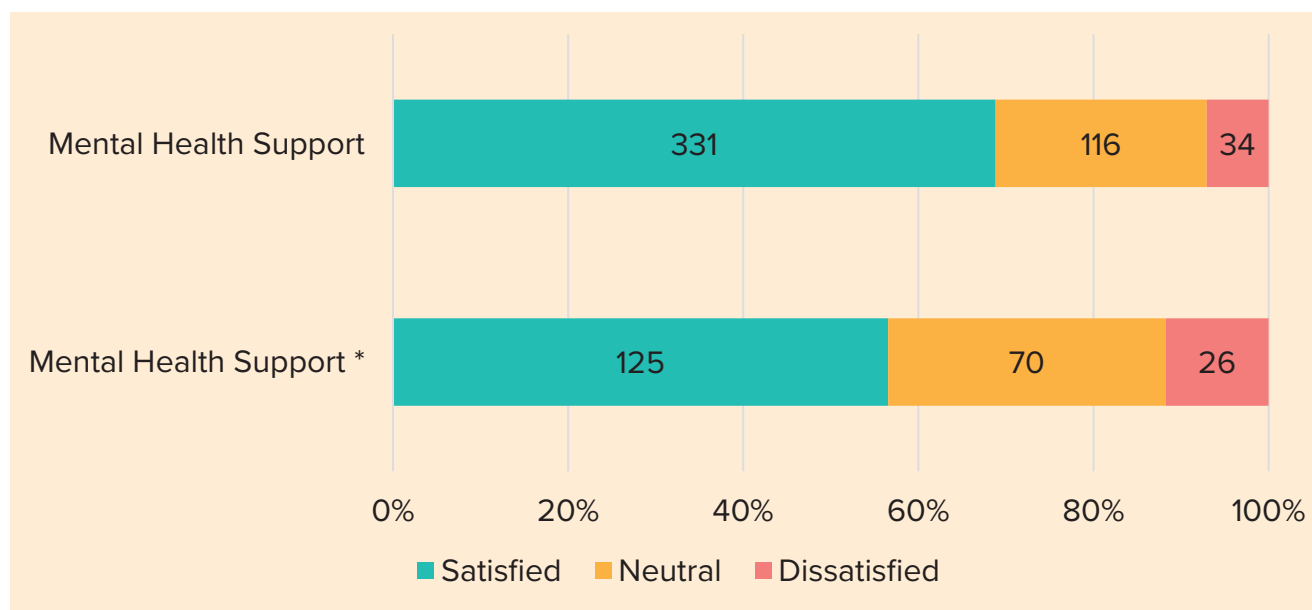
[It] takes me longer to get in the head space to do assignments, have to constantly try to control anxiety and panic attacks in class.

PLC learner

I get very tired. I find it hard to concentrate so therefore have trouble remembering. I am in constant pain again causing difficult to concentrate. I get overwhelmed when dealing with deadlines.

VTOS learner

Learners shared their experience of accessing mental health supports. Most survey respondents expressed satisfaction with same (**Figure 6.1**).



**Reported stress, anxiety, or depression impacting ability to learn and use available mental health supports*

Figure 6.1. Learner Satisfaction with Mental Health Support.

481 learners reported that they use mental health supports. Of this cohort, 69% (n =331/481) were satisfied with their mental health support while 7% (n =34/481) were dissatisfied.

221 learners reported that they experience stress, anxiety or depression and use mental health supports. Of this cohort, 57% (n =125/221) were satisfied with mental health support while 12% (n =26/221) were dissatisfied.

Focus group participants outlined their experience of mental health support in more depth. Where their FET centre offered readily accessible mental health supports, such as counselling services, learners recognised and valued this provision:

They've got their own counselling office ... So if someone finds it difficult or it triggers a memory from when they were younger they can speak to someone and get counselling for it. I've done that before ... I had eight sessions with a counsellor.

Personal Care and Fine Art learner

[Learner 1]: They [counsellor] ... come in every Monday and Thursday ... They'll come up and ask you every week or two if you want to have a chat or not. [Learner 2]: But if they [counsellor] don't have the time for you, they'll put you in the book and they'll make sure you're the next person when they have the free time.

Youthreach learners



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

We don't have a counsellor, we're looking for one ... and there's a period of time, like from the start of the year to now [early February] where there hasn't been one. I know a lot of students that have problems with their mental health. And not having anyone to talk to, especially an adult that knows what they're talking about, is really putting a strain on them.

Youthreach learner

We don't have a counsellor ... we could have done it online or something, but like have it where we go into a room and like talk on the laptop, but nobody wants to do it like that.

Youthreach learner

We have one [a counsellor], but no one can ever find them. It's like Houdini. I tell you now: brother's like a magician.

PLC learner

It's not enough, like, it's you have to go looking for them. You have to wait until you're feeling stressed or in crisis and then you have to search for them.

Apprenticeship learner

The survey invited learners to select from among several suggestions as to what might support them with their mental health in the context of their course. Respondents could choose more than one option. Among respondents who stated that they experienced stress, anxiety, or depression, the most selected proposals were flexibility around assignments and deadlines (160 responses) and appointments with a counsellor or qualified specialist (135 responses) (**Figure 6.2**).

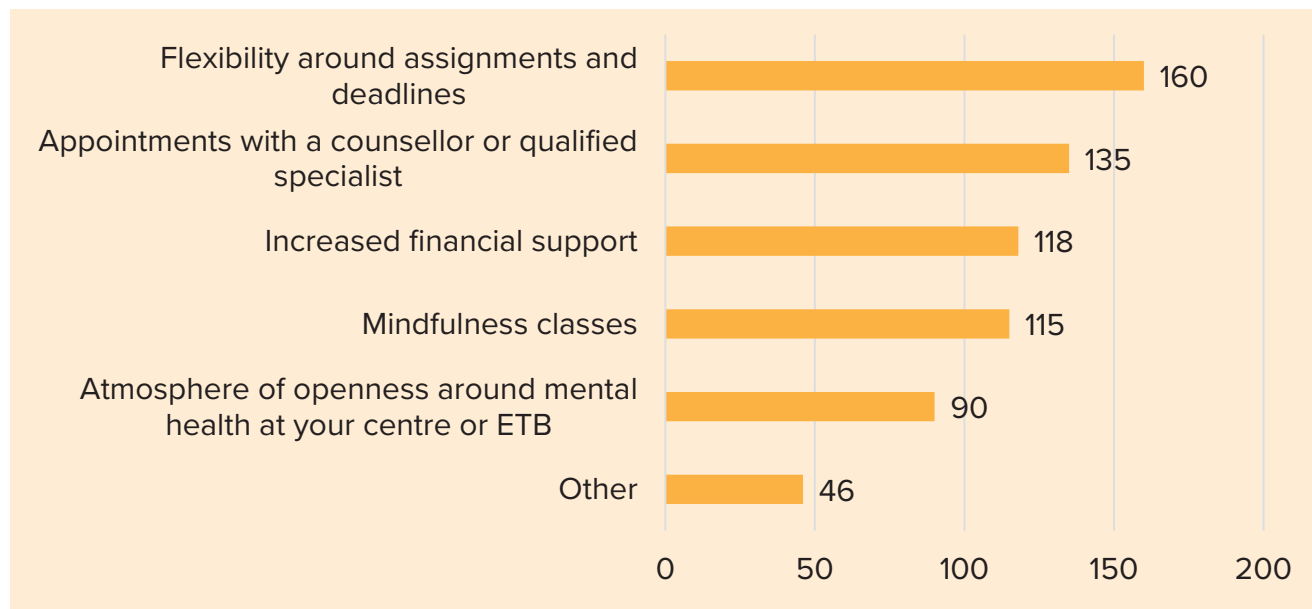


Figure 6.2. Responses of Those Who Stated They Experience Stress, Anxiety, or Depression to, “What would help to support your mental health? Please select all that apply”.

When asked what their centre or ETB could do to improve its services and supports, focus group participants similarly proposed increasing the level of counselling support:

Have a counsellor in more often.

CTC learner

[Learner 1]: You need a counsellor in school every day of the week ... [Learner 2]: If you're going through shit, like, you know?

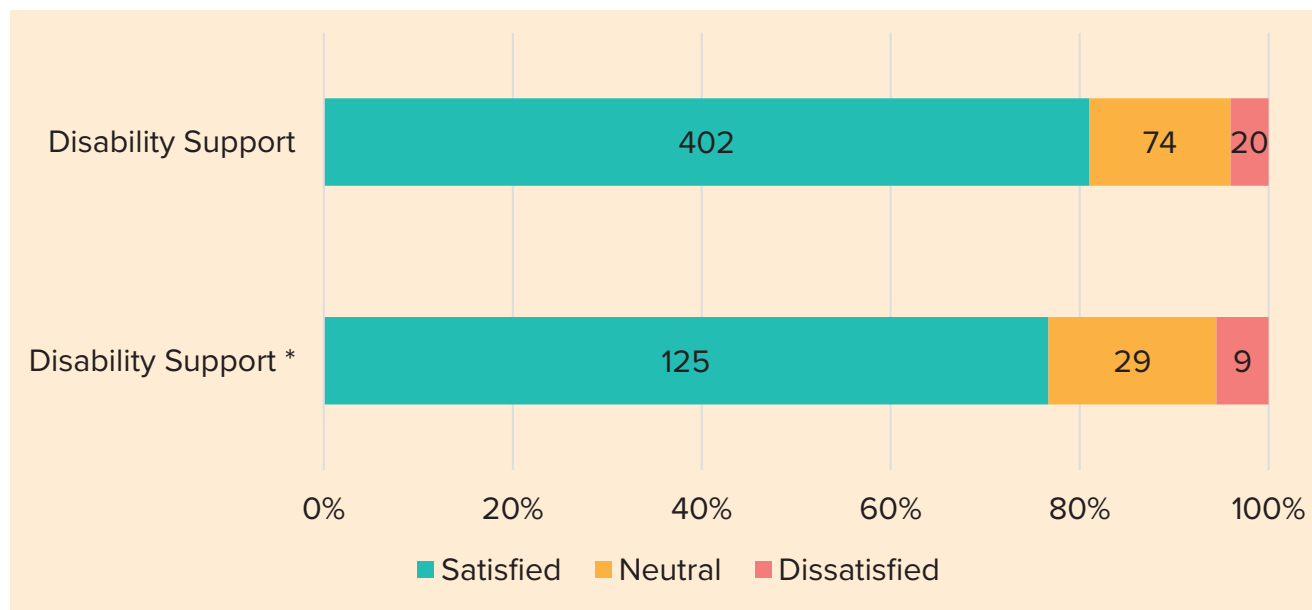
Youthreach learners

It'd be nice if we could go down to someone and just say, “Can I speak to you for a minute?”

Adult Literacy learner

Disability Support

Learners shared their experience of accessing disability supports. Most survey respondents expressed satisfaction with same (**Figure 6.3**).



**Reported living with a disability and use of available supports.*

Figure 6.3. Learner Satisfaction with Disability Supports.

496 survey respondents reported that they used disability services and supports. Of this cohort, 81% (n = 402/496) expressed satisfaction with disability supports, while 4% (n = 20/496) expressed dissatisfaction.

170 learners using disability supports reported that they were in receipt of Disability Allowance or had a long-term health issue, illness, or disability. Of this cohort, 76% (n = 130/170) were satisfied with disability supports, while 6% (n = 10/170) reported dissatisfaction.

Focus group participants outlined their experience of disability support in more depth.

Where their FET centre offered SNA support, learners recognised and valued this support and intervention:

I have a PA for physical health issues ... Like an SNA ... sometimes when you are disabled getting support and stuff can be very, very difficult. I would say it was not difficult at all. They wanted to help us in the process of doing this ... very supportive, very helpful, so kind about it. A lot of information was given, just the supports, for me anyway, have been very helpful.

Applied Social Studies learner

Learners with dyslexia also valued the availability of accessible materials and assessment accommodations:

So I'm dyslexic and I have a form that I can attach to my assignments. I think it's a spelling and grammar waiver. I just think they kind of give you a little bit of leverage in that kind of way.

PLC learner

I actually really like that they provide me with stuff, like I have dyslexia. I can't say it properly, but they provide me with yellow paper. It helps with people who have dyslexia ... with reading and stuff and I have autism too. They provide me with, like, sensory stuff as well. I get a specific timeout at times to leave the room so if it does get loud, I can leave.

Adult learner, course unknown

Focus group participants outlined the lack of disability support services or difficulties in accessing same:

I was diagnosed with autism at a very young age. I was promised resources to help, and I got none of that at all at [my former centre]. Like we were promised to have a scheduled meeting, and I never got the chance to do so. And if there were any [supports], I would have to walk to [different part of centre] which is an hour walk away from where I was at.

Youthreach learner

There are two people [classroom assistants] but we never see them. They're never in our room.

PLC learner

There's no help for spelling, or say someone is autistic or has ADHD. There's no real help. You can go and advocate for yourself and get help, and they will let you advocate for yourself. I don't think anyone is really aware of any help.

Youthreach learner

I'm dyslexic, I was like, I've been marked down on my punctuation and grammar. When I asked them, they said it's on the brief about how it's marked. I told them I had dyslexia over the summer and they said they'd give me help but it's literally just in Communications they say "It's in the brief".

PLC learner

When asked what they would like to see happen next, learners suggested increased employment of in-classroom assistants and support workers to meet learners' diverse needs:

To employ more people focused on supports for different needs e.g. autism, ADHD. To create a variety of different supports would also be useful.

Community Education learner

I do think there should be more classroom assistants. [The classroom assistant] last year ... tried to go to as many people as [they] could, but wasn't able to get to everyone.

PLC learner

Some people are struggling with writing so I think sometimes it would be good to have a support ... another ... not a teacher but a support.

Customer Services learner

Try help the students with learning support such as an SNA for ones who don't understand certain assignments.

PLC learner

I'd like to see more levels of support for people with disabilities. I suppose this year we kind of feel like that people who need one-to-one support in the classroom, we haven't been told "no, you can't have it", but we've kind of been told "do you need that one-to-one support?" I just feel like lots of our lads, like [learner name], are very independent and they can do all these courses themselves. Some of our lads just need that one-to-one support in the classroom, we'd like to see more of it.

Community Education learner



7. ENABLING THEMES: BUILDINGS, FACILITIES AND DIGITAL INCLUSION

Chapters 7 and 8 outline learners’ views of and satisfaction with the wider factors that enable FET. The present chapter concentrates on the buildings and facilities as well as the digital inclusion measures that help create and sustain FET learning environments.

Theme	What Learners Say They Would Like To See Happen Next
Buildings and Facilities	Enhance canteen or kitchen facilities. Consider centre-specific learner proposals to upgrade ETB buildings and classrooms, including upgrading of toilet facilities. Ensure FET centres offer both social spaces for shared interaction and quiet spaces for study. Disability access. Ensure that any FET learner who needs to, including those with disabilities, mobility issues, or other physical needs, can access their centre, on par with all other FET learners. Introduce sensory rooms to facilitate neurodiverse learners.
Digital Inclusion	Enhance access to laptop and device loan schemes.

Buildings and Facilities

85% (n = 823/972) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with the buildings and facilities at their centre (**Figure 7.1**).

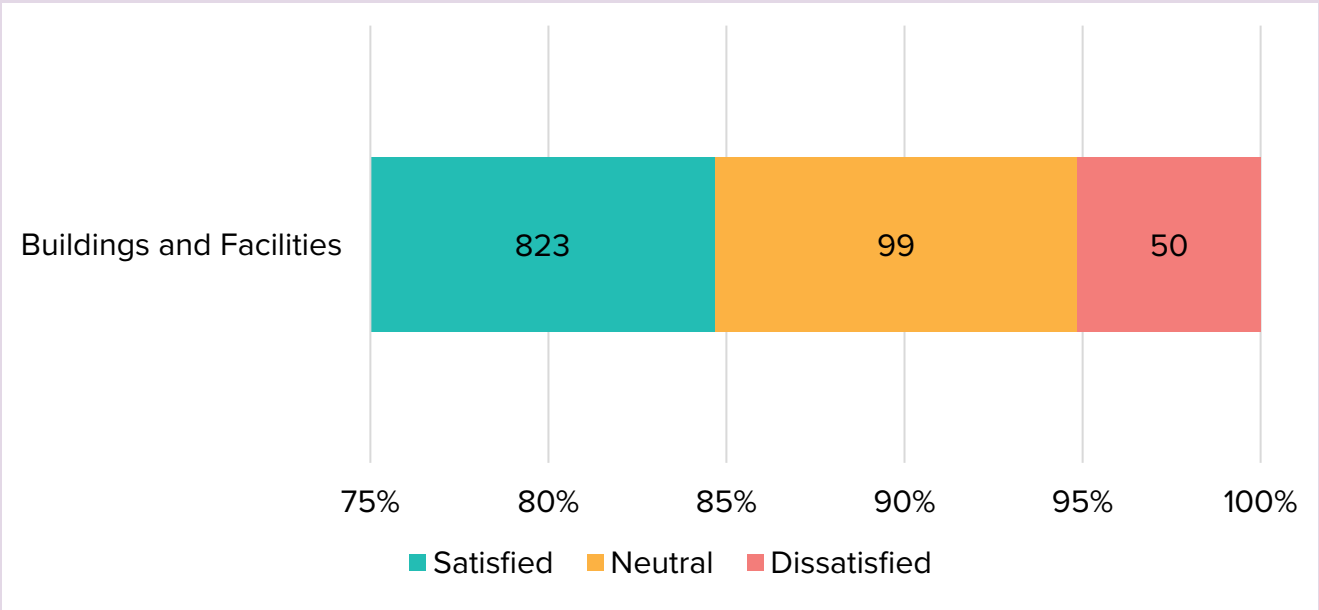


Figure 7.1. Learner Satisfaction with Buildings and Facilities.



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:

[The canteen] it's a good price ... it makes it much more doable. I think if we didn't have the canteen, it would be more difficult to go.

Traineeship learner

Our college [is] located in [a] very nice, beautiful place and a few years ago it was renovated, and we have [a] very good ... kitchen. Everyone has a place where they can study and it's comfortable.

PLC learner

In [centre], there's a floor that has computers, so if you want to stay after class ... on that floor they have the giant size games like connect four and jigsaws and everything that you can take out and everybody gets involved ... and it gets everyone chatting.

BTEI learner

We have a gym, a sports hall, we have outside facilities ... We're based in a secondary school. We use their sports hall, but then we got free membership for the gym down the town too.

PLC learner

Many focus group participants outlined room for improvement regarding their centre's canteen and kitchen provision, toilets, and study spaces and recreational facilities:

They could give us plastic [utensils] ... it's basic. You need to take a cup for your tea, and you have to bring it from your home.

ESOL learner

You can't eat your own food if you bring it because you can't heat it.

Traineeship learner

[Learner 1]: For us, like we don't have a canteen to eat. [Learner 2]: Yeah [neighbouring FET centre] doesn't have a canteen either.

PLC learners

Our men's toilet doesn't have a working sink or a tap. We have no locks on our doors. We have no mirror, no hand dryer, no towels. The toilet itself is leaking, the seat's broken.

Youthreach learner

We don't really have a chill-out space. We have bean bags but where they are is really cold.

Youthreach learner

[Our centre] does not have a library ... It would be nice to have the library to study at because home environment isn't always conducive.

Special Needs Assistant learner



When asked how to improve their centre's buildings and facilities, learners proposed enhancing provision of canteen and kitchen facilities for preparing food and beverages as well as upgrading toilet facilities:

Canteens would be a great service to include.

Adult learner, course unknown

There should be like a kettle and a microwave and like a table so you can prepare your food or anything. But they could use that room and put a load of them in there so that when you're on a break you have somewhere to go to just do work or something.

PLC learner

We brought it [lack of canteen] [up] at the student council meeting and they said they used to have one but people weren't using it ... but if you could choose a food option, so the company knows [what is needed] ... in my secondary school we used this company ... and you can put credit into it [app on phone] and they order it and know exactly how much to have of everything.

PLC learner

[Learner 1]: I think canteens are important too for just everybody to come together. [Learner 2]: For social space instead everybody sitting out in their cars. [Learner 1]: Like then you've got the chance to speak to people. Like in class, say if you just don't know anyone or you have no friends, and you're, like, yeah, I'll talk to people at the break but there's nowhere. It's important that we get a decent canteen.

CTC and PLC learners

Have decent bathroom facilities and a proper canteen accessible to students.

BTEI learner

Bathroom toilets and kitchen needs to be cleaned more often.

Adult learner, course unknown

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

We only have a family room. There's nowhere to go if you just want some place where you could take a break and relax or chill out for half an hour or something. Maybe they could put in a room for a pool table? We have a load of spare rooms.

CTC learner

There should be like a room for students to be able to go like study or something. There's like small booths in the corridors, but they're very limited. There's barely places to sit ... A lot of people end up using the booths and they don't do work there ... They get food from the canteen and eat there.

PLC learner

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

Have free rooms for people with ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder] to be alone in case of shutdowns ... a reliably free space to go to – not just during lunch.

PLC learner

I see there's a lot of stairs. So if anybody has mobility [issues] ... because I see a lot of people there, [including] young people with bad, way of getting up and down stairs, so a lift would be a good thing.

Adult learner, course unknown

Digital Inclusion

90% (n = 718/795) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with access to technology at their centre, while 4% expressed dissatisfaction (n = 35/795).

86% (n = 453/524) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with Laptop or Device Loan support at their centre, while 4% expressed dissatisfaction (n = 23/524) (**Figure 7.2**).

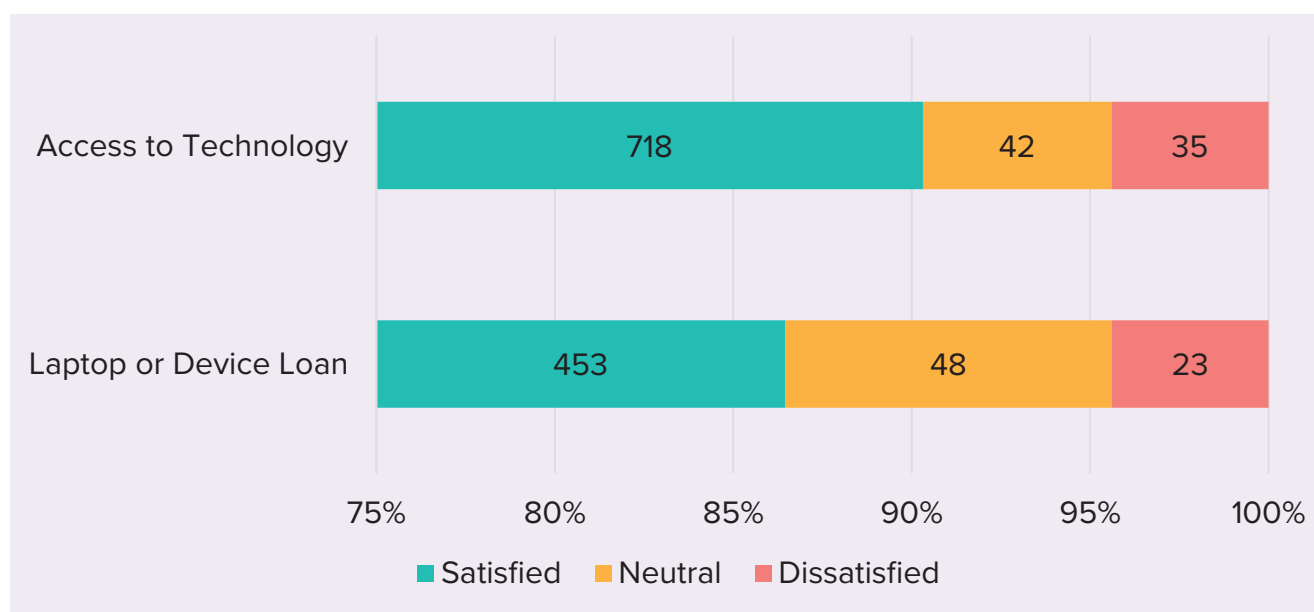


Figure 7.2. Learner Satisfaction with Digital Inclusion.

Comparing learners by programme, several learner cohorts expressed low net satisfaction with Access to Technology, notably ESOL learners (23% lower than the overall learner population).

Comparing learners by demographic, several learner cohorts expressed low net satisfaction with Laptop and Device Loan, notably learners who report that their financial situation affects their ability to learn (18% lower than the overall learner population) and Irish Travellers (11% lower). For Asian or Asian Irish learners, satisfaction with Laptop or Device Loan (53%) and Access to Technology (61%) are both lower than the satisfaction scores of White Irish learners (81% and 89%). Learners in international protection also indicate comparatively lower satisfaction with Laptop or Device Loan (74%, compared with 82% overall) and Access to Technology (70%, compared with 86% overall).

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

We were eligible to apply to get a laptop as well. We didn't have to buy our own one. And we have the computers in the college as well.

PLC learner

There's plenty of laptops and PCs ... We've got cabinets distributed around the campus. And you just take a laptop when you need it.

PLC learner

They actually have a computer room that you can use any time you want ... and if you've any issues, like working with Microsoft or Word or, you know, Teams, OneDrive or anything like that, you know, like [there's] someone on hand to help.

PLC learner

[Learner 1]: There's a lot of computer rooms. [Learner 2]: There's also computers in the hallway anyway, so if one of the rooms is being used you can just use one in the hallway.

Adult learner, course unknown

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

[Learner]: There's ones [laptops] I know that people can get from the office but there's only so many of them and some of the teachers use them as well ... I think it would be like 20 laptops for the whole school. [Facilitator]: And of the laptops that are available, like the 20 laptops, can you take them home? [Learner]: No.

PLC learner

[Learner]: In some parts of the building it [the internet] works worse than others. [Facilitator]: So it actually just restricts what you can do for school work? [Learner]: Sure we work only on our laptops. There's no paper. [Facilitator]: That's a big one. So what happens if you can't actually use your laptop? [Learner]: You just use your data on your phone ... you're paying for that data. [Facilitator]: And do you end up paying more for your phone bill because of that? [Learner]: Yeah. I do anyway.

PLC learner

Most of the assignments are done on computers ... some of the software is outdated.

Adult learner, course unknown

Not only the components but the software they're using. Like say downstairs I've seen a few of them have Windows 11 and upstairs where the business courses are mainly, they're Windows 10 ... And a lot of the workshops that come in, they'll ask you to sign in using your personal details. It's a bit dodgy.

Office Administration learner

[Learner 1]: At the start of this year it took me a month to get logged in to like Moodle and all that. I couldn't do any assignments really. [Facilitator]: And why was that? [Learner 1]: The authenticator app on your phone. It asked me for a code but every time I went to go onto it there was no code coming up on the phone. [Learner 2]: We had that problem in ours as well and nobody can log in on their phone because of it.

Adult learner, course unknown

Some of the computers are too old and out of storage to run all educational system and software properly. This can be improve[d].

PLC learner, Asian or Asian Irish

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

If we could get a loan of one [laptop] for the course, and then give it back.

BTEI learner

[Facilitator]: You have a Microsoft tablet instead of a laptop? [Learner]: It's just too small. [Learner 2]: I think they should have given us an actual laptops.

VTOS learner

The computers are very old [laptops] ... It could be on 50%, it would die.

PLC learner

I am okay with handling a computer and stuff. But I prefer the course to start from explaining all the technical stuff, because lots of people got stuck at the beginning. Because we have assignments on Teams and you have to deal with all that. Not everybody's up to date with their IT skills.

PLC learner

Maybe you could help arrange the temporary loan of a laptop or tablet for online classes at home.

ESOL learner

Provide access to printing, lend laptops.

ESOL learner, International Protection Applicant

Lend laptops, provide access to printing.

ESOL learner, Asian or Asian Irish learner



8. ENABLING THEMES: COMMUNICATIONS AND VOICE

Chapter 8 outlines learners’ views of and satisfaction with more of the wider factors that enable FET. This chapter focuses on communications and the opportunities available to learners to raise issues at their local FET centre or Education and Training Board.

Theme	What Learners Say They Would Like To See Happen Next
Communications	Enhance the visibility of equitable access to FET by communicating the full range of supports available to learners, including learning supports, financial allowances, counselling, and disability services. Provide clear information on entitlements to learners.
Learner Voice	Support the development of Learner Voice groups and councils.

Communications and Information Provision

Learner Forum participants expressed their overall satisfaction with communications and information provision at their ETB or FET centre. Most survey respondents expressed satisfaction with communications and their ETB’s or centre’s website (**Figure 8.1**).

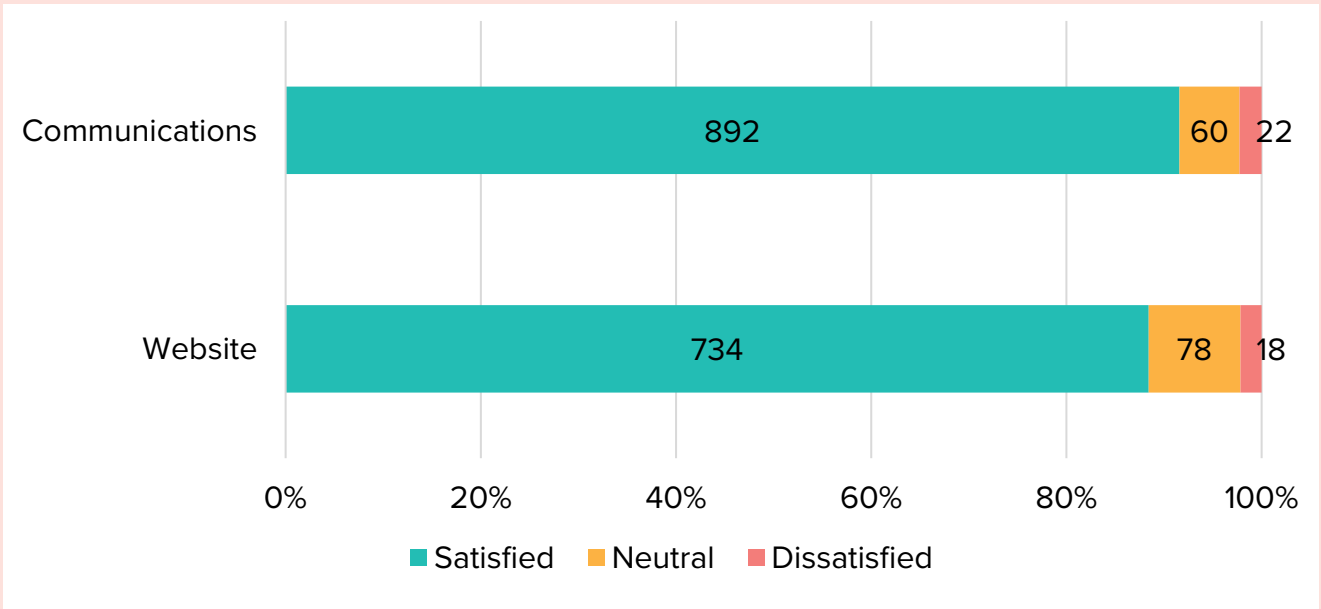


Figure 8.1. Learner Satisfaction with Communications.

Learner Forum participants reported receiving information from their ETB or FET centre about the availability of a wide range of supports and services. However, more than 50% of survey respondents stated that they did not receive information about fuel allowances, financial supports, meal supports, or childcare supports. 81% (n = 720/887) of survey respondents reported not receiving information about childcare support (**Figure 8.2**).

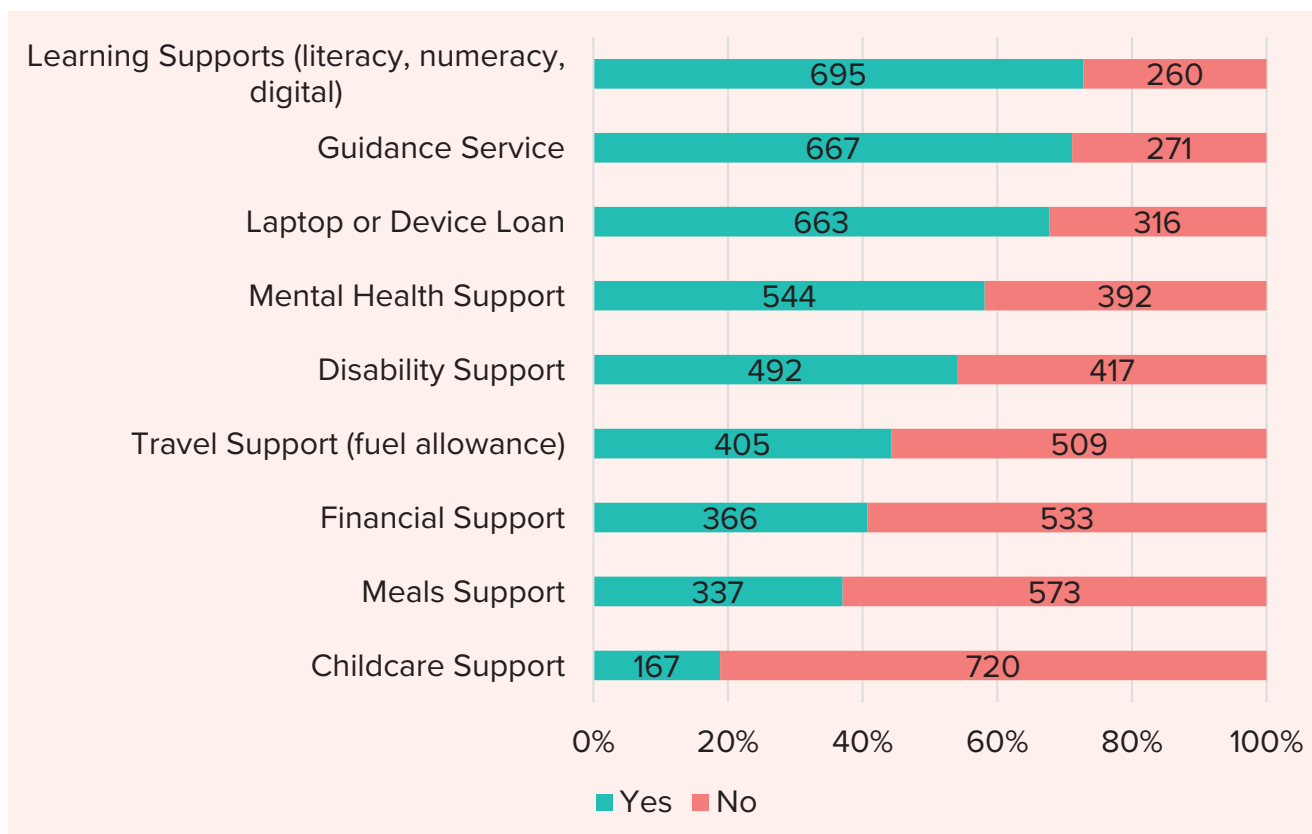


Figure 8.2. Responses to “Did you receive any information from your centre or ETB about the availability of the following supports and services?”

Learner Forum participants outlined their experience of ETB communications in more depth. Learners highlighted the importance of using diverse means to advertise what FET courses are available, including taster sessions, open days, and newsletters:

[Learner 1]: I do remember coming to a course where they said there was a talk from ETB where there’s a taster of course. And I thought that was fantastic. [Learner 2]: That’s the pre-apprenticeship so that you can find out what you want to do. [Learner 1]: I think that’s a wonderful course.

Adult learner, course unknown

I was kind of cracking up ... sitting in front of people. There was an open day for the ETB [and] that’s where I found out there about the course.

Traineeship learner

We have a newsletter that comes out every month that gives you all the details of all the class. The newsletter is brilliant.

Adult Literacy learner



Focus group participants outlined room for improvement regarding the advertising of FET courses. Some learners observed a need to move beyond promotion by word of mouth:

They're absolutely amazing courses, like really good ... And I wouldn't have had a clue, in school or anything, doing my degree, so I didn't even know what to ask. I had no idea it was there because I did economics in university and it was just ... it's completely different. It's like ten times better and I didn't even know about it.

VTOS learner

Publicity or advertising the course could be done a bit better because I only heard about it through my neighbour who did the course.

Skills to Advance learner

The courses are very badly advertised. A lot of it is word of mouth and you have to be in the circle to know about [it] ... Therefore women are talking to women and they're telling each other about what courses they are doing, but the men aren't because they're not doing the courses.

Community Education learner

Learners highlighted how their courses could be better advertised and promoted to ensure that they could be accessed by an even greater number of learners:

Share the information from centre to centre about what courses are on in each.

Adult Literacy learner

I never knew that there are courses for free and I live in Ireland for 20 years. That should be made clear because when you apply for a module, the wording says 200 euros per module. And I think when you're a low-income family, people are going to look at that 200 and think "No". Anytime I've applied it's been free when I've registered, but that's not made clear.

PLC learner

Now the TY classes in secondary school, they come in to us and they are kind of our students ... So that's good advertising for schools and kids know that places like this exist. But it's only TY coming to us, no other...

PLC learner

Opportunity to Raise Issues

81% (n = 545/671) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with the opportunities available to them to raise issues at their centre (**Figure 8.3**).

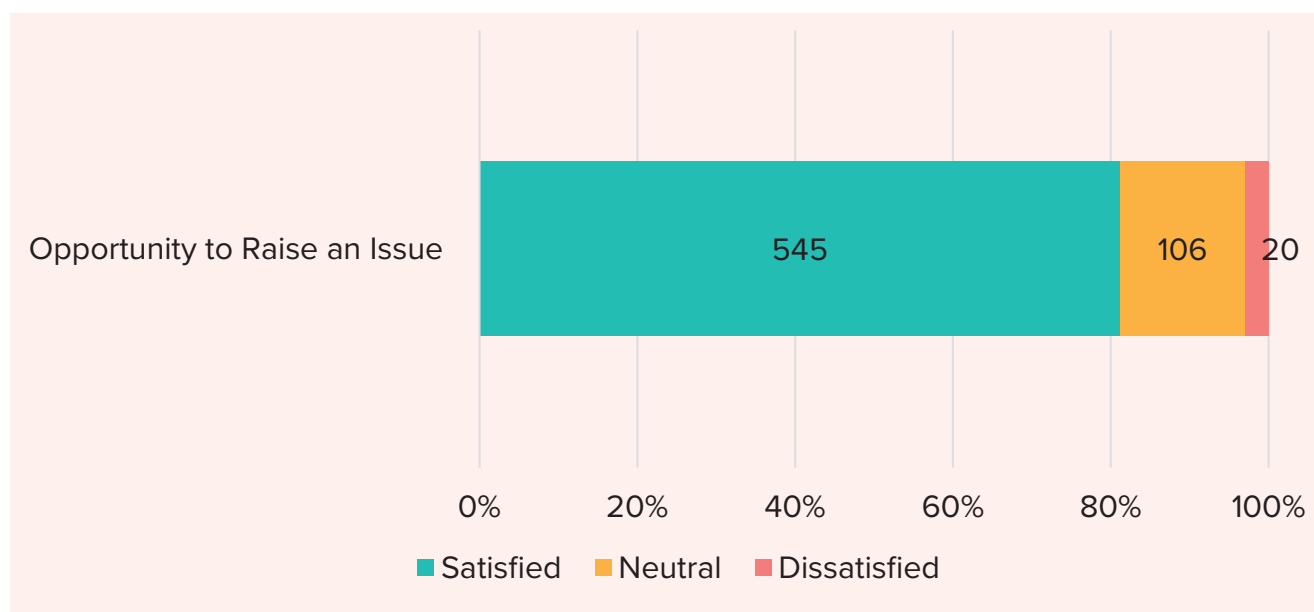


Figure 8.3. Learner Satisfaction with Opportunity to Raise Issues.

Net satisfaction with the opportunity to raise issues is lowest among 18–24 year olds (71%). This compares with 25–34 year olds (79% satisfaction) and 35–69 year olds (88% satisfaction).

Learner Forum participants discussed diverse opportunities for their voices to be heard by staff and tutors in their centres. Learners felt that their input was valued:

Learners can use their voice and share concerns. Learners and reps are listened to.

PLC learner

The Student Council, I found that to be a very positive experience for our centre, not only just me with socialisation, but I could bring up so many issues to [ETB representative] and they will help resolve them any way he can. Like I remember when I first started, we didn't have sanitary products in every bathroom, we didn't have deodorant anywhere either. And the minute I spoke a little bit about it to Student Council, they were so quick to do something about it. I think that's a really big positive experience.

CTC learner

I would say on the relationships with the teachers, there's a big level of respect ... It feels like everyone's equal and that really opens up opportunities for us to voice our issues and our opinions on things, and to have debates.

PLC learner

However, some focus group participants outlined negative experiences in attempting to raise issues and expressed scepticism about their voice making a difference:

I think people are reluctant to use them [class representatives]. Because really are you going to be listened to? ... you know, because I don't think they'll get anywhere ... I think it's very much for show. "We're including the students and everything". But at the end of the day it's to make the ETBs look good.

Adult learner, course unknown

I just think, I've gone to millions of these meetings and there's so much paperwork. I feel like everything is, "We're going to wait on number two and we're going to get number two's paperwork and number three and number four and number five". And by the time it comes around, there's nothing done. We have people that care, we have a principal that cares, we have teachers that care, but they're worn down as well.

Community Education learner

My experience of dealing with the ETB is that they hold these types of events ... And it's an opportunity for community group[s] and people who are involved to come along and give a voice to the community ... but when it goes on to the higher level it's kind of shut down.

Community Education learner

There's no help for spelling, or say someone is autistic or has ADHD. There's no real help. You can go and advocate for yourself and get help, and they will let you advocate for yourself. I don't think anyone is really aware of any help.

Youthreach learner

Learners proposed the creation and enhancement of Learner Voice groups. Learners viewed these spaces as necessary not just as a means of providing learner feedback to their ETB but as a mechanism to offer learners “more of a say” and enable them to shape the agenda for decision-making:

Create safe open spaces for learners to provide anonymous feedback on their course over a consistent period – allowing regular feedback opportunities rather than one chance at the very start of the course.

Adult learner, course unknown

Do you know the way they have committees, you know, student committees? Now I remember years ago, we had a committee [with] a chairperson, a treasurer, and a secretary, which was students ... I've seen committees now in National Learning and I've seen committees through college here in [my centre]. And I'd love to see it come back into the ETB again.

Adult Literacy learner

People do need generally more of a say, and it shouldn't be higher up people ... More of a lower down voice ... Maybe a meeting with tutors, even every six months. How are things going with learners? Events like this do help bring it up.

**Legal and Medical Office
Administration learner**

You see, the authorities, they see it as a straight line, but when you're in a community like us, when we get together, we see things that's not on their agenda ... That's what needs to be changed. They need to come out ... and meet these people and see what else is really going on.

Community Education learner



Learner Story: *Alan Quinn*

Course: Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)

Place of learning: Kickham Barracks, Clonmel, Co. Tipperary

I've just finished a 20-week Level 5 course on Black and White Traditional Photography. I've completed Digital Photography Level 4, Narrative Photography Level 5, Image Processing and Editing Level 5, learning how to use different editing tools. I love it. It's such a great hobby. I've found my niche in street photography. It captures a moment that will never be captured again.

I've been interested in photography since I was a kid. At our family functions, I was always behind the camera. My parents said I had a good eye. I had a Kodak 35-millimetre film camera and would get them developed in Jackson's chemist. The owner had his own development studio and would say, "Come on, I'll show you how it's done". That's where the interest came from. It's now becoming an obsession.

Growing up, I didn't have a great experience of education. I went to the De La Salle Christian Brothers and received more beatings than education. I was referred to as a fool, a dunce and was always seated at the back of the class. I left school at 13. I used to hate getting my school report. It always said that I could do better and was disruptive in class. All I was doing was asking questions.

I only lasted one year in secondary school and decided to start working. An advert in the Evening Press said a runner was needed for a building contractor with no experience necessary. It said, "good working conditions and must have a willingness to work hard". I showed up and Mr Clarke put me on a trial week.

Over the next while I got interested in woodwork. I said to Mr. Clarke "Michael, is there any chance of me getting an apprenticeship?" Because I hadn't even got my Group Cert (Junior Cert), this was a barrier. But he told me that if I got my Group Cert, I'd be the first one on the floor. So, for nine months, as well as working, I did night classes in five subjects. I got four B's and one C with a good mark in Woodwork and Mechanical Drawing.

The following week I went back to Mr Clarke. He brought me to the workshop with all the machinists and joiners and said "lads, we have a new apprentice. He starts on Monday morning". That was the proudest moment of my life. He pushed me, but sometimes we all need that little push.

In 1980 the building industry collapsed. I'd completed three years and nine months of my four-year apprenticeship but Michael Clark stamped my cards for the last three months. I was then a qualified junior carpenter.

But I never got to turn my hand to woodwork for over 40 years. I worked my whole life, and learned a lot of life skills but things changed in 2015. Due to my health, I retired from work and decided to go back into education.

I signed up for Woodcraft with Tipperary ETB in Kickham Barracks in Clonmel, and then English and Maths Levels 2 and 3. That was my road back into education. I felt nervous but the experience has been very positive. My tutors are absolutely brilliant – so understanding and helpful, and very thoughtful if I have any issues with learning. My Photography tutor said I was a visual learner, meaning I need to see the action before completing a task.

I like being a mature student as I'm not the only one. I feel part of a wonderful educational system, and fulfilled as well. My mental health has also improved.

Four years ago, I attended a Learner Voice Forum event with AONTAS and Tipperary ETB in Thurles where they were recruiting for a Tipperary Student Council. I volunteered and have been chairperson ever since. I am also on the PPN (Public Participation Network) Transport Coordination Unit.

The Student Council was nominated for a Star Award in 2024, which was a highlight. I was on the Learner Voice panel at the recent ENHANCE Learner Voice event in Dublin.

In future, I want to gain my full certification in photography, help others less fortunate than me, and become more active within the educational sector as the chairperson of the Tipperary ETB Student Council.



9. SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND ADULT LEARNING

Chapter 9 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.

Theme	What Learners Say They Would Like To See Happen Next
Cost of FET Participation and Financial Support	Increase financial supports to mitigate the costs of FET participation. Expand and enhance provision of the FET student card. Youthreach and PLC programmes. Consider how best to ensure and communicate equity of payment levels within courses, acknowledging fairness concerns expressed by learners aged between 16 and 18 years of age.
Travel Support	Enhance travel and fuel allowances.
Public Transport	Enhance learner capacity to avail of public transport to access their centre. Consider provision of an ETB shuttle bus service or aligning class schedules with local bus service times.
Meal Allowances	Increase meal allowances and provision of subsidised food.
Childcare	Increase provision of childcare supports.

Cost of FET Participation and Financial Support

69% (n = 402/581) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with the current level of financial support available, while 11% (n = 66/581) expressed dissatisfaction (**Figure 9.1**).

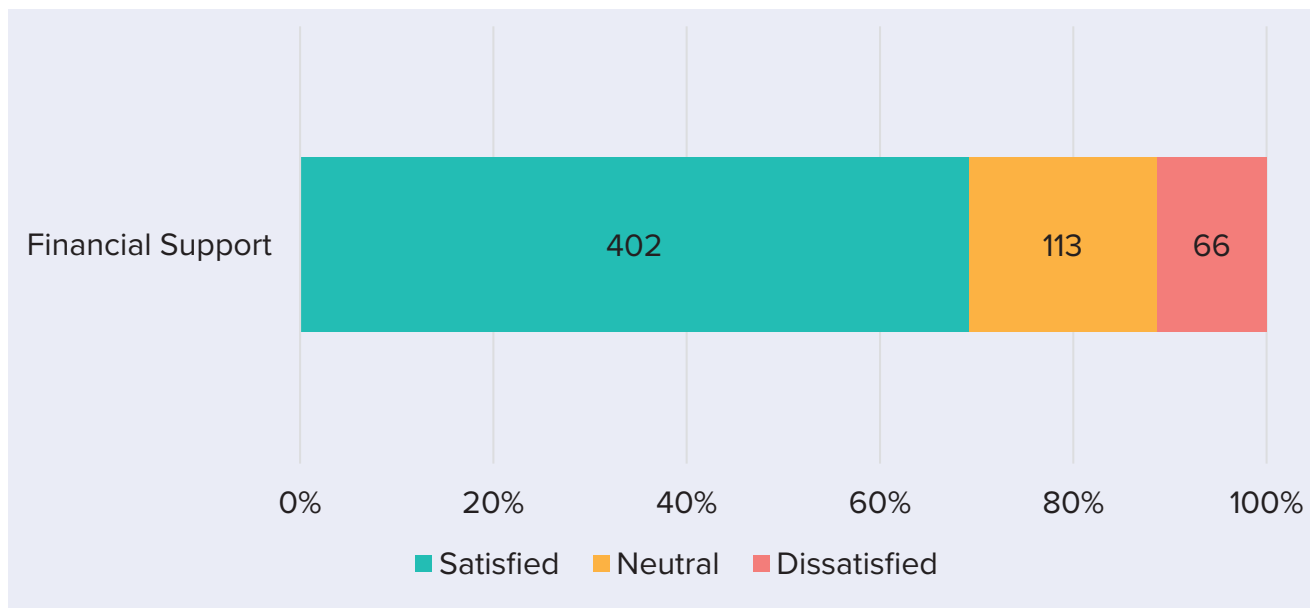


Figure 9.1. Learner Satisfaction with Financial Support.

24% (n = 215/905) of survey respondents stated that their financial situation impacts their ability to learn or study. Of this cohort, 55% (n = 84/153) expressed satisfaction with financial supports, while 22% (n = 34/153) were dissatisfied. Significantly, 62% (n = 130/211) reported experiencing stress, anxiety, or depression, while 15% (n = 32/211) stated that they would prefer not to say.

Comparing programmes, PLC learners (35%) and Apprenticeship learners (36%) reported the lowest overall net satisfaction scores around financial support.

Comparing demographic groups, non-binary learners (20%) and learners who indicated their “financial situation affects [their] ability to learn” (33%) reported the most negative experiences of financial support.

Learner Forum participants consistently raised the issue of financial costs associated with participating in FET:

The amount of funding the ETBs get from Europe ... some of my classmates ... if you take breakfast, lunch or whatever ... they're spending over a tenner a day in the canteen for the basics. For somebody who's not working ... that's a lot.

BTEI learner

If I quit the course right now, I'd actually be better off money wise than staying in here. Which is annoying like, yeah, because I kind of have the choice of ... alright well finish out the year and get your degree but have no money all year unless you can get a job. Which in our area is fucking hard like ... Like the whole entire reason I'm doing the course is because I couldn't get a job.

PLC learner

Where courses were free or affordable with financial support, learners appreciated the positive benefit for their learning:

As an American coming into the education system in Ireland I'm like wait, I don't have to pay you lots of money and I'm sorry, what? I get to learn and you're not going to make me pay? ... So that's always delightful.

**Advanced Outdoor Activity
Instructor learner**

You just can't get over that it's free. There's everything you could need. The lad who's teaching is exceptional. I've never done anything like this before. I can't believe we're even making something that I thought I could never do ... whatever you make, you take everything home.

Community Education learner

Focus group participants outlined how their current financial supports were insufficient:

So you know like 190 a week, where does that even get you? Nowhere ... Just the time to get there and to get back: I would never be able to work in the evenings ... A stressor of mine as well is the fact that it's not much of an allowance ... That's difficult to keep going in and to be losing money every single week. It's very hard to stay motivated to continue doing it, like when you feel the financial strain of getting there. It cost me a lot just to get there.

CTC learner

The course ... started on 26th January, and my benefit finished. And now I can't [get any] financial help ... I don't know where I can get financial help, you know. It's only payment, travel payment. It's so cheap, very cheap. And so this is few euros for me.

LTI learner, migrant

[The Guidance counsellor] had to get me signed up with SUSI. And don't get me wrong, something is better than nothing, but 90 euro for the month is nothing. I'm meant to live on 20 quid a week nearly. It depends on the parents' income, but at the same time my mother works less than 20 hours a week, she's on disability. A one-parent household, I don't have any brothers or sisters, I don't know, it should be more than 90 quid.

PLC learner



When asked what they would like to see happen next, learners proposed increasing financial supports to mitigate the costs associated with participating in FET, and further suggested introducing student cards for FET learners:

I recommend increasing financial support for students to meet their needs, helping to reduce their financial burdens and prevent psychological stress ... Allow them to focus better on their studies.

BTEI learner

One thing that I've always kind of wondered or just confused me a bit is can we get student cards? It's hard when we're students but we're not eligible to do student prices on anything. And then we're expected to pay adult stuff then and that's ... Especially when you're not getting paid like as well, you need the student deals, like you actually do.

PLC learner

We should be allowed a student card ... same level as UCC.

Adult Literacy learner

Youthreach learners highlighted what they felt as unfair differences in payments between those aged under 18 and those 18 years and older:

I just feel like it's way too big of a jump from 45 euro at 16 to 255 at 18. I don't feel like it's unfair but I feel like the people who are 17 should get a little bit of above. You're in school but you have to find a job or if your parents don't give you money you have to find a job.

Youthreach learner

A problem I have with the course is with the money. People who don't get full pay because they're not 18 ... you should start getting full pay.

Youthreach learner

These learners suggested increasing financial supports in staggered amounts according to age for learners between 16 and 18 years of age:

I think we should be getting more money. I feel like maybe 16 [year olds] should be getting like the 50–60 euro a week but then putting it up for 17. Because then like that's not fair going from 60 to straight on 200 and whatever it is when you turn 18.

Youthreach learner

You get 45 euro when you're 16, but then, I'd say 17, they should get about 100 or something, and then 255 when you're 18 so you learn to manage the money.

Youthreach learner

Travel Support

49% (n = 228/466) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with the current level of travel support (e.g. fuel allowances), while 27% (n = 124/466) expressed dissatisfaction (**Figure 9.2**).

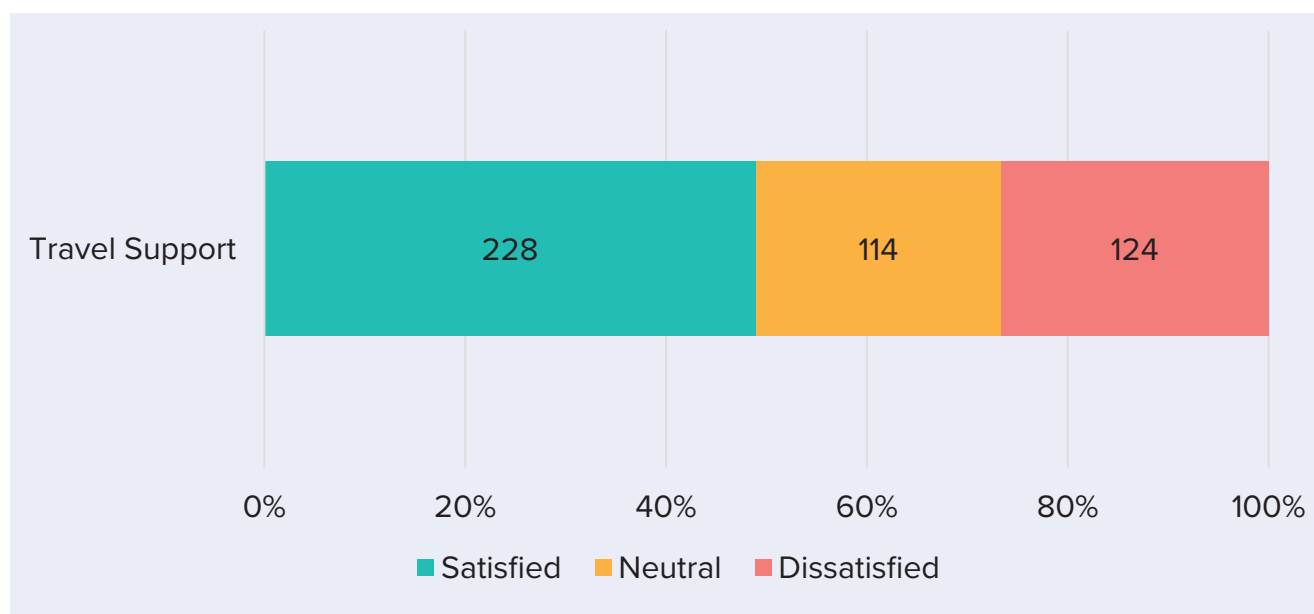


Figure 9.2. Learner Satisfaction with Travel Support.

Comparing programme cohorts, PLC (–7%) and LTI learners (0%) reported the lowest overall net satisfaction scores with travel support.

Comparing demographic groups, female learners report significantly lower levels of satisfaction with travel support than male learners (18% lower).

Learner Forum participants expressed dissatisfaction with financial supports for travelling to their centre and shared how they struggle to meet the cost of transport to attend their course:

So the bus costs 50 euros a week, and you're allowed 17.50.

CTC learner

It's [transport] expensive. It's 50 quid a week. We get like 20 quid [in travel support].

PLC learner

I travel 70 kilometres every day and I get 21 euro fuel, and that's a week. I think it's ridiculous.

Healthcare Support learner

I think the fare they give us for the bus isn't really enough ... for me, even with the student card. 4 euros to go, 4 euros to come back. That's 8 euros a day. And we get 20 euros [per week] for travel.

LTI learner

It is very expensive for me to commute to the centre. Last year I could use [the] Student Leap card, this year I was refused a Student Leap card.

ESOL learner

When asked what they would like to see happen next, learners suggested enhancing travel and fuel allowances. Any reviews to increase travel allowance levels, they advised, should better consider the actual distances that learners must travel:

Offer more for travel allowance. My allowance doesn't even cover a quarter tank of petrol for what it takes me to drive here five days a week.

Traineeship learner

I think that the centre needs better financial support for those who have to travel to courses.

CTC learner

More pay for learners who travel. It is only a 15 to 20 euro difference for those who'd have to drive an hour in and out every morning and I don't believe that's enough.

CTC learner

I would like the fuel allowance to cover the bus fare, at least more than halfway. I pay 45 euro to get to college for the week and only receive 25 euro.

Youthreach learner

Public Transport

59% (n = 285/484) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with the current availability of public transport, while 22% (n = 108/484) expressed dissatisfaction (**Figure 9.3**).

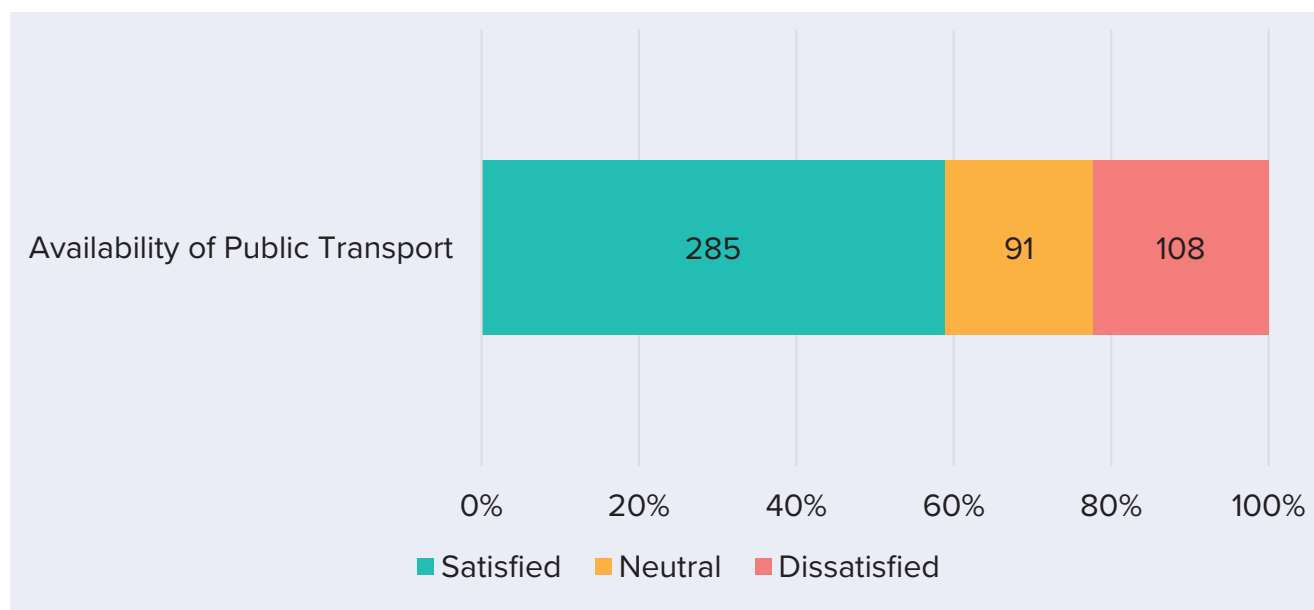


Figure 9.3. Learner Satisfaction with Public Transport.

Comparing programme cohorts, Apprentices (–10%) and Community Education learners (–7%) reported the lowest overall net satisfaction scores with public transport.

Comparing demographic groups, learners who indicated their “financial situation affects [their] ability to learn” (10%) and learners in Direct Provision (24%) reported the lowest satisfaction scores with public transport. Female learners report significantly lower levels of satisfaction with public transport than men (20% lower).

Learner Forum participants shared diverse experiences of public transport and travel. Where local public transport or similar forms of travel were offered, learners appreciated their provision. At one Education and Training Board, FET learners appreciated that they could avail of a shuttle bus service to bring them to and from their centres, free of charge:

It's probably the same for all the courses, we have a travel allowance. We have a bus that goes to the campus, which was brought in like two years ago. And I think that's brilliant as well, because you don't need to drive all the way up ... everyone that's in the campus can use that bus.

Advanced Outdoor Instructor learner

They've made it more accessible for people who might not have the money to drive quite yet.

Outdoor Instructor learner

Learners highlighted a lack of bus routes to their centre and infrequent services which did not align with their class timetables:

It's like half year we have a bus, half year not, half year we have a bus, half year not. For Ukrainian, it's really hard to achieve the place. Our tutor just give us lift by their own car but it's not really convenient and their car only eight people. If we see more than eight people, we agree who will stay home. People stay home, you know. It's a little bit making us sad.

Community Education, Ukrainian migrant

The bus is too late and we come after classes. I remember last year when I had a very important course, we need to attend in time. We come before the course one and a half hour in order to be there ... because if we stay the normal bus in time, we come after class after half an hour and the teacher [is] not happy.

ESOL learner

If anyone from [town name] wanted to access the training courses in [centre name] the Local Link refused to stop at the centre ... they'd have to walk 40 minutes back.

Community Education learner

There is no local transport system in [town name]. So it's very difficult for some people who are coming from far. They have to come first in city centre, then have to go to the Hub.

ESOL learner

They have a bus, but they'll only use it if there's a weather warning. But if it's lashing out of the heavens and there's no weather warning, you can just walk home.

CTC learner



When asked what they would like to see happen next, learners expressed a desire for their capacity to avail of public transport to access their centre to be improved. They suggested that their centres establish links with local bus services to ensure provision of a bus service or to align class schedules with local bus service times:

There was no bus at the right time. So because of that, I was not able to arrive ... I don't know how possible it is, but a collaboration of some sort with public services to try and make it that you will be able to join, even without the car.

Healthcare Assistant learner

Is there a possibility that [on] a designated day that Local Links could be used to do a certain amount of runs? Once a month or whenever ... Especially the winter because the loneliness kicks in in winter for 90%.

Community Education learner

Simply providing more Local Links ... I'm willing to pay even just to get out. It stops you; it keeps you isolated.

Adult Literacy learner

Meal Support

54% (n = 261/482) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with the current availability of meals and food allowances, while 19% (n = 90/482) expressed dissatisfaction (**Figure 9.4**).

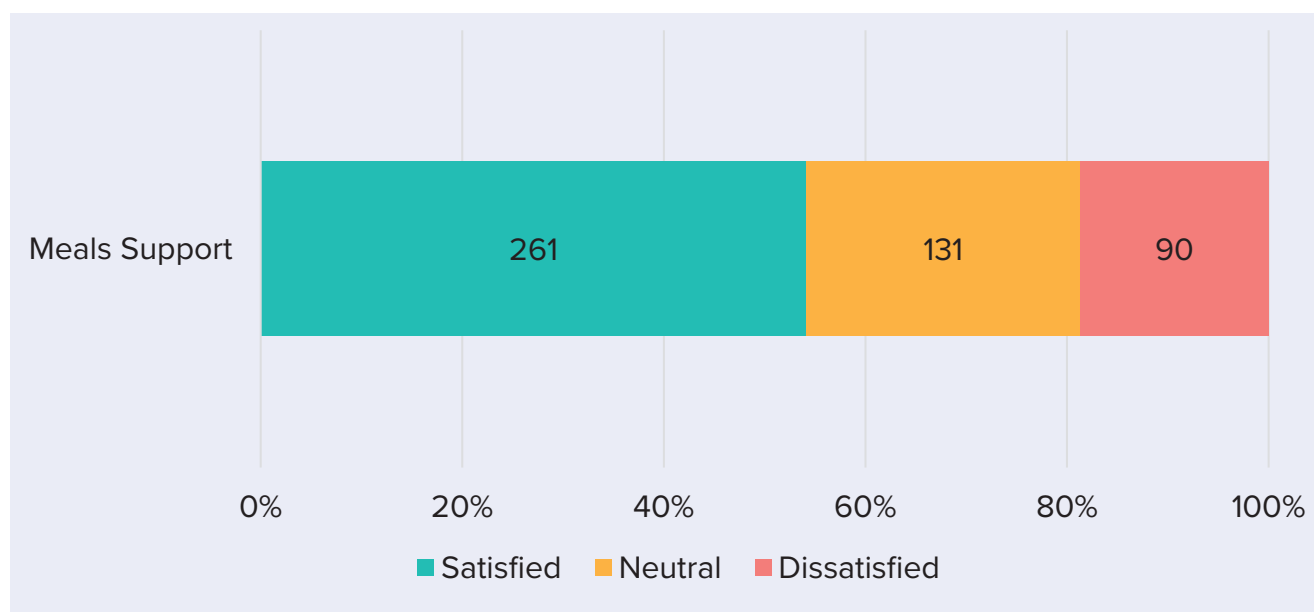


Figure 9.4. Learner Satisfaction with Meals Support.

Comparing programme cohorts, PLC (-4%) and BTEI learners (4%) reported the lowest overall net satisfaction scores with meal support.

Comparing demographic groups, female learners (31%) were significantly more dissatisfied with meal support when compared to their male counterparts (49%). Learners whose financial situation affected their ability to learn were also particularly dissatisfied with meal support (14%).

Where their FET centre offered canteen options that catered to their needs, Learner Forum participants recognised and valued these supports and interventions, including instances where centres provided free or subsidised meals:

In [centre name], someone subsidises the canteen, so it's cheap. I think it's a full, big, decent breakfast for five euro. Dinner is four euro. It's cheap.

Youthreach learner

[Learner 1]: It's free and it's four days a week ... but it's just half days. [Facilitator]: Is it decent quality? [Learner 1]: It's grand, yeah. I mean, it's well prepared. [Learner 2]: There's also like pot noodles, toast, oats, for free.

Youthreach learners

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

[Learner 1]: The money you spend on food! They raised the prices as well. It's gone up to seven ... well it's not too far, I suppose it's better than anywhere else ... But it's gone up to like seven or eight euro now. [Learner 2]: And you have to pay for like ketchup. [Learner 1]: And you have to pay for takeaway boxes as well. You have to either have food there or you can pay for the takeaway box.

PLC learners

We do have a vending machine ... but it's double the price of a store. So we have to walk 20 minutes to just get to the shop to have something.

Adult learner, course unknown

They give us four euro a week for food. It's not even that; it's three something.

Apprenticeship learner

You get four euro per week for your food allowance.

PLC learner

The meal allowance is only 4 euro per week which is less than the cost of any meal from the campus canteen.

Skills to Advance learner

When asked what they would like to see happen next, learners proposed increasing meal allowances. Similarly, learners also suggested the provision of subsidised food in canteens:

I think fuel money and meals per week should be more.

Adult learner, course unknown

Financial support for meals has to be increased because 80 cent per day is a really small amount.

VTOS learner

Increase travel allowance and lunch allowance.

BTEI learner

The canteen is incredibly expensive. Chicken curry and rice yesterday was 12 euro. That's crazy. It should be subsidised.

Adult learner, course unknown

Childcare

57% (n = 125/221) of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with the current availability of childcare support, while 14% (n = 30/221) expressed dissatisfaction (**Figure 9.5**).

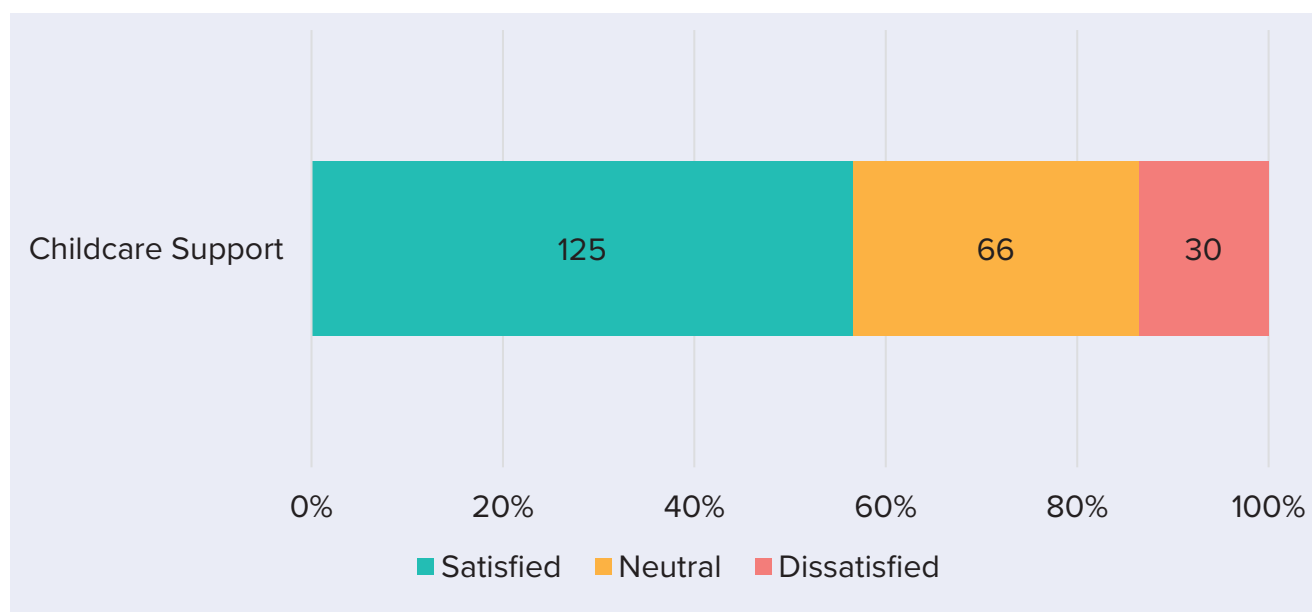


Figure 9.5. Learner Satisfaction with Childcare Support.

Comparing programme cohorts, BTEI learners (0%) and PLC learners (16%) reported the lowest overall net satisfaction scores with childcare support.

Comparing demographic groups, female learners (37%) were significantly more dissatisfied with childcare support when compared to their male counterparts (61%).



Learner Forum participants identified how a lack of available or affordable childcare created challenges and impacted their course participation:

I have two children, 10 and 4 years. They study in school almost 10 kilometres from [town] and take a school bus home at 3pm. I'm going there [course] until 4.20 and my neighbour helps me with one hour with my children.

Adult learner, course unknown

I have child with a disability, and I don't have enough support to deal with care and studying or working.

Skills to Advance learner

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

Previously I lived in another city, and we moved from it, not because we wanted, just because the government. We tried to find an apartment and pay for them. But it's impossible. It's very difficult. If you have children. If you have part-time job. Don't have a contract for a long time.

Adult learner, course unknown, migrant

[Facilitator]: What's your plan after? [Learner]: I don't think about that now because I have two kids. I don't have someone who can help me, and I need to plan how I can stay here. I need to find permanent job. I need to find good house for me and find a way to live.

Adult learner, course unknown

When asked what could be done to improve services and supports, learners suggested increased childcare provision and clearer information on existing supports:

Maybe if they offer you a place in some creches.

ESOL learner

Help with childcare support cost.

Adult learner, course unknown

Make financial supports available to part-time courses, we still need to travel and pay for childcare to be here.

BTEI learner

More information about support and allowance for child minder or travel.

Skills to Advance learner

I don't have any assistance or benefits, so I can't receive financial aid to study. Financial aid could be available to everyone who wants to restart their professional life; it's very difficult to support oneself financially as an adult with children and study full-time without any financial assistance.

LTI learner



10. SUPPORTING LEARNER INCLUSION

Chapter 10 documents Learner Voice with respect to FET learners' satisfaction with different aspects of their experience across different programmes and across different demographic groups.

The chapter focuses on learners' satisfaction with those themes or issues discussed in Chapters 3–8: Communications, Website, Opportunity to Raise Issues, Opportunity to take part in class, Course Content, Feedback on Coursework, Work Experience Support, Learning Support (literacy, numeracy, digital), Access to Technology, Laptop or Device Loan, Buildings and Facilities, Disability Support, Mental Health Support, and Guidance Service. Stakeholders typically view these aspects of the FET learner experience as most directly under the control or influence of the learners' centre or Education and Training Board.

The general approach has been to compare net satisfaction scores across programmes and demographic groups. The full table of demographic and programme comparisons is available in Appendix 4. Each section presents the highest and lowest areas of satisfaction for the cohort under analysis. It considers these areas relative to other cohort scores for the same theme before highlighting those areas where net satisfaction differs significantly from the overall total. By way of a caveat, 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 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 85% of Youthreach learners (n = 61/72) and 29% of learners living with disabilities (n = 67/235) the highest level of education completed was a Junior Certificate or lower-level qualification. This compares with 25% of the total survey respondent group (n = 274/1095).

Comparative analysis helps illuminate specific challenges for specific learner cohorts. Moreover, the following analysis underlines the urgency and importance of specific Learner Forum proposals and indicates that such proposals may be highly relevant to supporting specific programmes or demographic groups. Listening to learner voice in this way is intended to support access, inclusion, and participation in FET.

Finally, it should be borne in mind that learner satisfaction with broader, enabling supports, including financial and travel supports, are typically much lower across all programme groups and demographic groups examined. These comparative experiences have been considered in the chapter on Social Development and Adult Learning and highlighted where necessary. 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).



Comparing Programme Experiences

The National FET Learner Forum engages FET learners from across a wide variety of programmes (**Table 10.1**).

FET Learner Group	Total Number of Respondents	% of Survey Respondents*
Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC)	250	28%
English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)	128	14%
Reading, writing, maths or basic computer classes (Adult literacy)	121	14%
Youthreach	72	8%
Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)	67	8%
Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)	55	6%
Traineeship	43	5%
Apprenticeship	38	4%
Community Education	35	4%
Skills to Advance Programme	34	4%
Community Training Centre (CTC)	33	4%
Local Training Initiative (LTI)	11	1%
Full-time	610	61%
Part-Time	392	39%

*All figures expressed as a percentage of total survey respondents who provided information on their programme title ($n = 887$) and full-time or part-time status ($n = 1002$).

Table 10.1. FET Learner Groups as a Percentage of Survey Respondents.

The present chapter will examine the comparative learner experience of learners on the following four programmes: Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC), Youthreach, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and Reading, writing, maths classes or basic computer classes (Adult literacy). These groups represent the four programmes with the largest involvement in the National FET Learner Forum, measured by their learners' presence at Forum events and by their response rate to the survey. We have also chosen to examine Community Education because of its relevance to AONTAS members, including those in the Community Education Network (**Table 10.2**).

FET Learner Group	Total Number of Survey Respondents	Total Number of Forum Participants	Total
Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC)	250	184	434
English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)	128	78	206
Reading, writing, maths classes or basic computer classes (Adult literacy).	121	61	182
Youthreach	72	105	177
Community Education	35	41	76

Table 10.2. FET Learner Group involvement in Forum.

Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC)

PLC Learners expressed the highest net satisfaction with Opportunity to Participate in Class (87%), Website (85%), and Communications (83%). Learners spoke positively about the opportunity to participate in class:

If you bring up a barrier to them, they're willing to work with you to try and help figure it out ... They've got other options, and they always present you with all of those options, so I found it quite a supportive and engaging environment in that way.

PLC learner

They can tell when you're struggling ... even if you're not maybe confident enough to say it. They're all approachable and stuff. You can always go to them and they'll give you help there for the assignments ... all of our assignments we hand in draft. [Facilitator]: You find that useful? [Learner]: Oh, yeah.

PLC learner

The subjects are more varied. In secondary school you'd have like English and that'd be just a bunch of topics, but you don't really get into depth in them. For us [now] ... we can go a lot more in depth.

PLC learner

PLC Learners expressed lowest net satisfaction with Mental Health Supports (41%), Work Experience Support (52%), and Buildings and Facilities (66%). **Importantly, PLC learners expressed lower net satisfaction across every survey indicator than the overall learner population.** Compared to the overall survey group, PLC learner satisfaction with Mental Health Supports and Work Experience Supports is particularly notable (**Figure 10.1**).

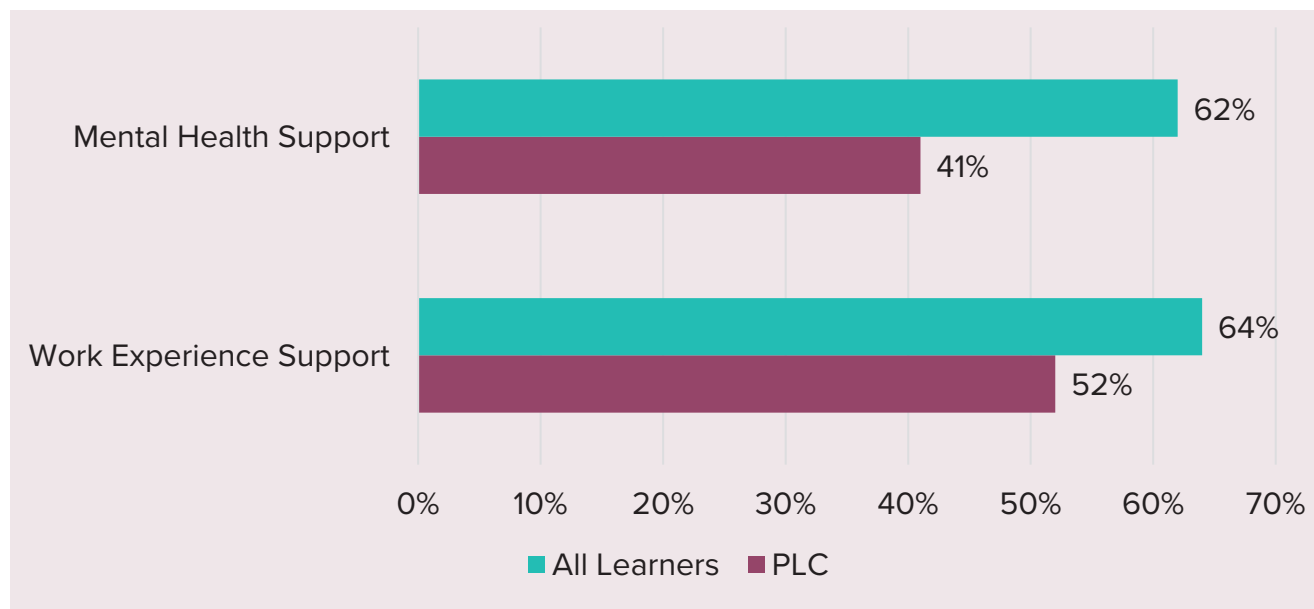


Figure 10.1. Comparison of Net Satisfaction with Mental Health Support and Work Experience Support between PLC and Total Learner Respondents.

PLC learners expressed dissatisfaction with the availability of mental health supports during focus group discussions:

We have one [a counsellor], but no one can ever find them. It's like Houdini. I tell you now: brother's like a magician.

PLC learner

Make counsellors more accessible.

PLC learner

Have more guidance people there or counsellors to talk to.

PLC learner

My mental health is supported thanks to having the option to meet a counsellor and flexibility provided.

PLC learner

Similarly, PLC learners also highlighted the need for improved supports for work experience and work-based learning:

They don't help you find work experience and it's really hard, especially in the animal care field. I had to go [outside Ireland] to get my hours in. That kind of sucks.

PLC learner

The Garda vetting issues [put] people off a lot because it took so long to come. You have to have a certain amount of hours in your practical in the setting. Now we're at the end and people don't have the hours.

PLC learner

PLC programmes are high stakes. They represent a vital form of state intervention for young adult learners seeking an alternative to or perhaps recovering from a negative experience of mainstream education. Moreover, work experience forms a central part of the overall PLC learner experience. This is the context for ensuring good support for mental health and well-functioning work experience. The above analysis indicates that both areas require immediate attention. It further supports Learner Forum proposals to enhance the availability and visibility of mental health counselling services and to enhance the guidance and support available to FET learners seeking to secure work experience placements.

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

ESOL Learners expressed highest net satisfaction with Buildings and Facilities (100%), Disability Support (96%), and Feedback on Coursework (96%). In focus group discussions, ESOL learners regularly highlighted the welcoming and inclusive atmosphere in their FET centre:

On the break we can have tea and coffee and ... our foods. We talk with other students from different groups.

ESOL learner

It's big and has a big window. It's fresh air. It's warm in the winter. It's good, we are comfortable.

ESOL learner

The thing that I like in the centre is the environment of community. We help each other and the teachers help us, especially because we are immigrants, most of us. We are immigrants and they help us in different ways. Not only in the study, in the class. They help us to grow.

Pathways learner

ESOL learners expressed lowest net satisfaction with Access to Technology (63%), Work Experience Support (65%), and Laptop or Device Loan (74%). ESOL learners' net satisfaction with Access to Technology is 23% lower than that of the overall group (**Figure 10.2**).

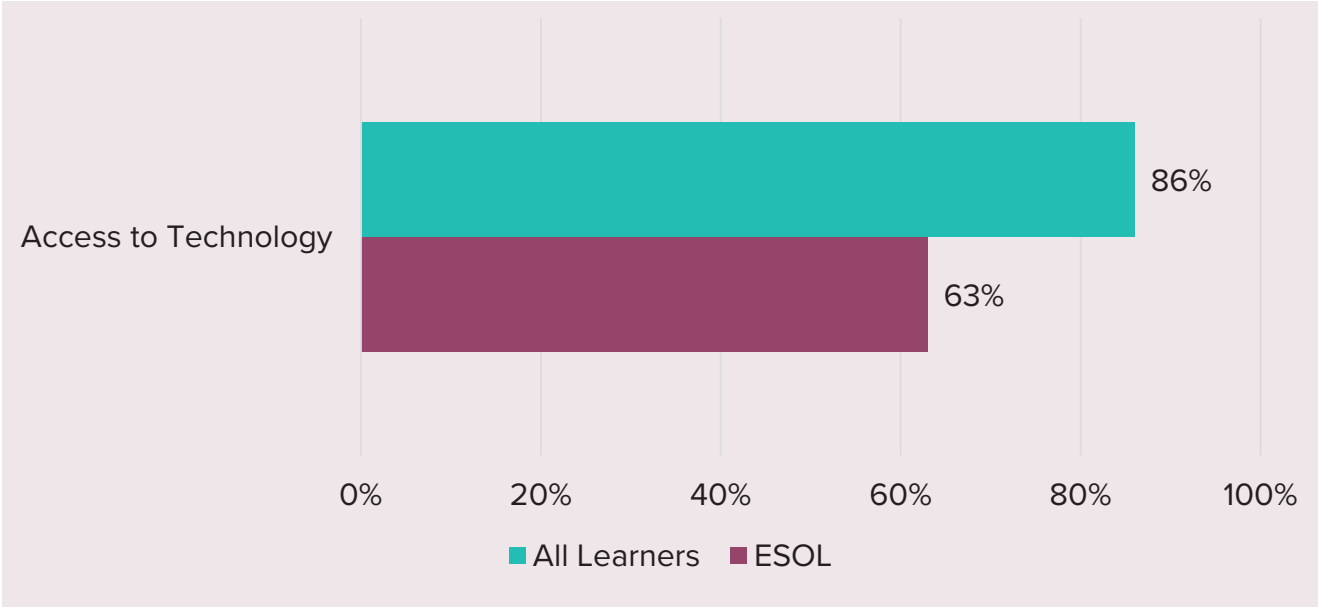


Figure 10.2. Comparison of Net Satisfaction with Access to Technology between ESOL and Total Learner Respondents.

Several ESOL learners highlighted the need for greater access to laptops, tablets, and printers:

Maybe you could help arrange the temporary loan of a laptop or tablet for online classes at home.

ESOL learner

Provide access to printing, lend laptops.

**ESOL learner,
International Protection Applicant**

ESOL learners viewed their integration into Irish society as closely tied to both improving their English language proficiency and securing employment. ESOL learners also commented on the need for greater support around work experience and progression to employment:

Give more information to find a job, to make a CV, to find career websites.

ESOL learner

They have to give opportunity to ... students to go to the store. In an internship manner. They work there, gaining experience in a real environment. It's like a work experience.

ESOL learner

I only have grammar in my English class. Not enough speaking. I want to stay in Ireland to get [a] job but my English is not good enough. I don't have enough opportunity to speak English.

ESOL learner

Finally, as previously indicated in Chapter 3, ESOL learners consistently highlighted the need for more courses, class hours, and pathways to higher NFQ Levels:

They have this course for beginners, like Level 3 courses ... When you got that certificate, I think that certificate doesn't matter [if] you have [it] or not. No one can accept that certificate for English ... There should be some value for that certificate. I am talking about if they are arranging our course. Their course certificate should have some value.

ESOL learner

There is a limit this year for us. We only have Levels 2 and 3 in the school. The course we want to do, Cambridge B1, is full and there are big waiting lists to get in.

ESOL learner

The above analysis supports Learner Forum proposals to increase ESOL course provision, to support digital inclusion, and to enhance the guidance and support available to FET learners seeking to secure work experience placements and progress to employment.



Reading, writing, maths classes or basic computer classes (Adult Literacy)

Adult Literacy learners expressed highest net satisfaction with Access to Technology (99%), Learning Support (literacy, numeracy, digital) (96%), and Feedback on Coursework (95%).

Compared to the overall satisfaction scores, Access to Technology (99%) appears particularly significant. Several Adult Literacy learners highlighted the benefits of accessing technology through their FET programme. Access to technology enabled learners to build their digital literacy and their confidence with further positive impacts on all aspects of their lives:

My laptop broke, and you're allowed to have a laptop for the whole year. That is a brilliant idea, do you know?

Adult Literacy learner

It's getting me more confident with the computers.

Adult Literacy learner

[Learner]: We do computers. [Facilitator]: And have you learned much on the computer? [Learner]: Yes, I do.

Adult Literacy learner with intellectual disability

I always wanted to learn to read a bit. I remember going to school in Dunmore as a child, but that didn't last too long ... I got no schooling really ... We've learned a lot now. How to read. I can read a phone message now, no problem.

Adult Literacy learner

Now I can open a computer. I can open an email. I couldn't do them things. Now, you know what I mean, I've done woodwork through the adult literacy, in the ETB, right ... I'm with the ETB a long time but I'm still learning.

Adult Literacy learner

While Adult Literacy learners expressed lowest net satisfaction with Work Experience Support (74%) and Mental Health Support (80%), these figures are higher than the satisfaction scores for the overall learner group. Adult Literacy learners highlighted the immense value of existing courses and indicated a need for greater provision in this area:

[Facilitator]: You said something about it was two days and it's now only one. Why is that? [Learner]: Because the funding, I think. Well that's what we were told, it could be to do with the funding, I don't know. [Facilitator]: And if there were two days, would you like two days? [Learner]: Oh, yeah, yeah, we'd come back to them, yeah.

Adult Literacy learner

The courses are always the same.

Adult Literacy learner with long-term illness or disability

The above analysis supports the Learner Forum proposal to increase adult literacy provision and the range of courses available to Adult Literacy learners.

Youthreach

Youthreach learners expressed highest net satisfaction with Access to Technology (93%), Opportunity to take part in class (91%), and Communications (88%). Learners felt that they were benefiting from access to technology:

We all have our own laptops.

Youthreach learner

Really awesome to have laptops, Microsoft 365, Canva ... and also being allowed to use our phones alternatively. Being allowed to bring our own tech too, like our own iPads etc.

Youthreach learner

Youthreach learners expressed lowest net satisfaction with Mental Health Support (51%), Guidance Service (57%), Website (62%), and Work Experience Support (62%). Compared to the overall survey group, Youthreach learner satisfaction with Guidance services and Mental Health Supports is particularly notable (**Figure 10.3**).

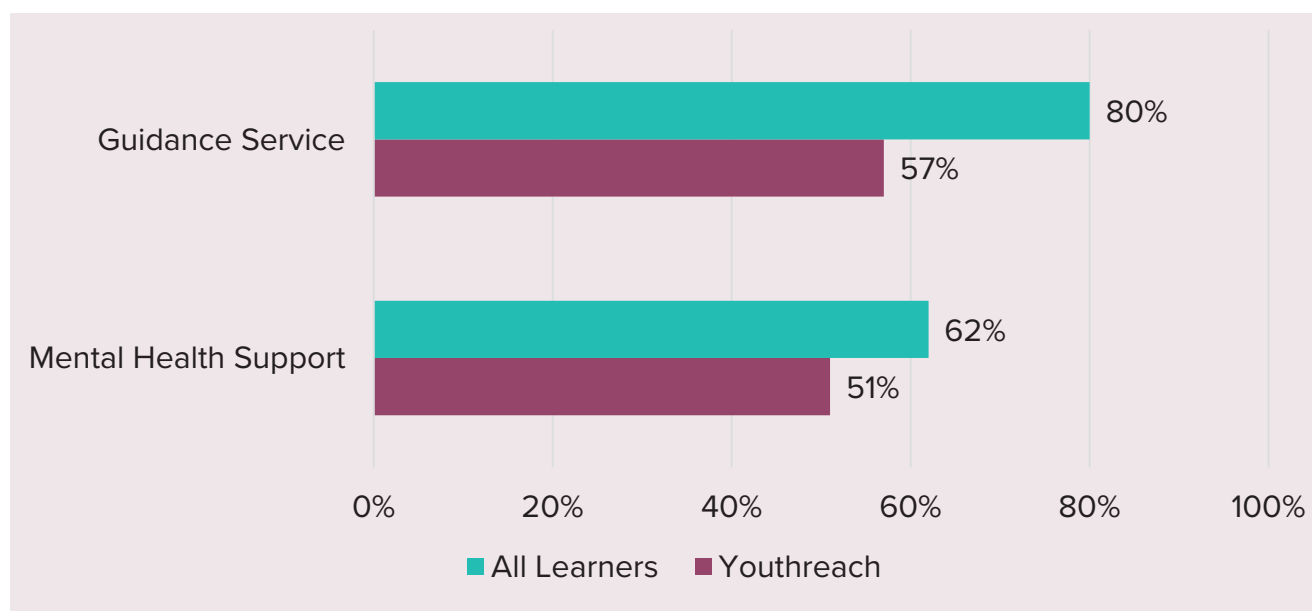


Figure 10.3. Comparison of Net Satisfaction with Guidance Service and Mental Health Support between Youthreach and Total Learner Respondents.

Several Youthreach learners highlighted issues with Guidance service availability in focus group discussions:

We need a new guidance counsellor.

Youthreach learner

We haven't met a counsellor. We've been waiting for a new one. It's meant to be February time now that we're meant to get a new one but we haven't got one yet.

Youthreach learner

We had a guidance counsellor come in once this year, but then she left and she's not coming back and we have to wait for a new one.

Youthreach learner

Mental health support represents the lowest satisfaction score among Youthreach learners. While Youthreach learners consistently highlighted the value of mental health support where it was available and working well, several Youthreach learners highlighted challenges in accessing support:

In my personal experience, [mental health counsellor] is fucking useless. In my experience, they're either too busy or like brushes you off, it's not intentional, but in my opinion, they're useless.

Youthreach learner

We don't have a counsellor, we're looking for one ... and there's a period of time, like from the start of the year to now where there hasn't been one. I know a lot of students that have problems with their mental health. And not having anyone to talk to, especially an adult that knows what they're talking about, is really putting a strain on them.

Youthreach learner

*[Facilitator]: Do you have access to a counsellor for things like mental health?
[Learner 1]: Yes but they're very busy (Youthreach learner).
[Learner 2]: It's the same counsellor we have.*

CTC learner

The above analysis supports Learner Forum proposals to enhance counselling and guidance services to all FET learners, while further indicating that these interventions may be of particular value to Youthreach learners.



Community Education

Community Education learners expressed remarkably high net satisfaction with Feedback on Coursework (100%), Opportunity to take part in class (100%), Course Content (100%), Learning Support (literacy, numeracy, digital) (100%), and Access to Technology (100%). Learner Forum participants were particularly impressed by the range of courses on offer within community education and noted the availability of flexible, part-time options as crucial to their participation:

I mean the variety of courses we can do is unreal.

Community Education learner

I was very surprised about hours of course because I have son with disability and I have carer's hours. And I can work or study just 18 hours a week. This course is on part-time and it's available for me.

Community Education learner

Learners praised the staff at their centre highly and described their surprise at discovering they could access such high-quality learning for free:

You just can't get over that it's free. There's everything you could need. The lad who's teaching is exceptional. I've never done anything like this before. I can't believe we're even making something that I thought I could never do ... whatever you make, you take everything home.

Community Education learner

They're doing the work voluntary. The tutors or the staff, which I think is great, because it's always given of their time, so that we can follow our passion.

Community Education learner

Learners also celebrated the unique learning culture within community education, which they felt was conducive to peer-learning and mutual growth:

I think the important thing for me is the camaraderie of the people who are on the course. Everyone feels in the same boat, people are very at ease with each other. We have a WhatsApp group where we share bits and pieces of information, if somebody finds something that might be used to the group that's shared ... The coffee break is as important ... I think it's part of the centre as a culture.

Community Education learner

Significantly, when describing their experiences, learners frequently uphold community education as an example of best practice in teaching and learning. This is underpinned by the exceptional satisfaction scores across a wide range of teaching and learning themes/areas.

While community education attracted largely positive comment with regards to teaching and learning, Community Education learners expressed lowest net satisfaction with Work Experience Support (53%), Mental Health Support (69%), and Laptop or Device Loan (69%). Compared to the overall satisfaction scores (82%), Laptop or Device Loan (69%) appears to be significant (13% lower). The above analysis supports the Learner Forum proposal to increase the availability of laptop loan schemes.

Comparing Demographic 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 based on gender, age, ethnicity, disability, citizenship status, and socioeconomic indicators. Our selection of these FET Learner Groups was informed by prior research and policy analysis, anticipated advocacy needs, and social justice and educational equality considerations. To varying degrees, some of 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.

Socioeconomic Indicators

FET Learner Group	Total Number of Respondents	% of Survey Respondents*
Unemployed	378	34%
Early School Leavers (No Levels, Levels 1–2)	102	9%
Financial situation affects my ability to learn or study	215	19%

* All figures expressed as a percentage of total survey respondents (n = 1122).

Table 10.3. FET Learner Groups as a Percentage of Survey Respondents.

Three categories of survey respondent were examined based on their socio-economic status: the unemployed, early school leavers and learners who reported that their financial situation affects their ability to learn or study. The unemployed and early school leaver groups both reported satisfaction scores broadly in line with those of the overall learner cohort.

The most significantly divergent group comprises of those who reported that their financial situation affected their ability to learn or study. This group's three lowest satisfaction scores are Mental Health Support (43%), Work Experience Support (50%), and Laptop or Device Loan (64%). Compared to the overall survey group, learners impacted by their financial situation report a notably lower satisfaction score across all three supports (**Figure 10.4**).

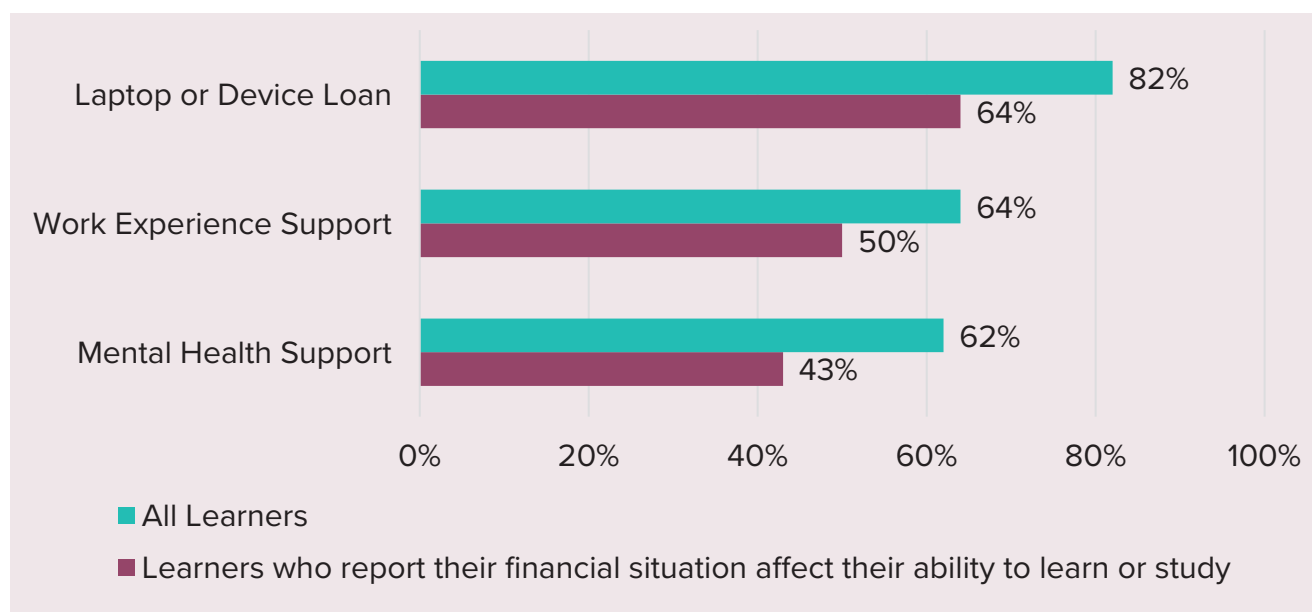


Figure 10.4. Comparison of Net Satisfaction with Mental Health Support, Laptop or Device Loan and Work Experience Support between Learners who report their financial situation affects their ability to learn or study and Total Learner Respondents.

Learners whose financial situation affected their ability to learn described their need for further support around work experience in focus group discussions:

Have ... backup resources for work experiences or set up it up before hand with arrangements with companies as a lot of companies may ignore students.

PLC learner

Help finding work experience as many employers prioritise school students instead of ETB.

Youthreach learner

This analysis supports Learner Forum proposals to increase the availability of laptop loan schemes and to enhance the guidance and support available to FET learners seeking to secure work experience placements. It suggests that these learner proposals may be particularly helpful for learners facing socioeconomic disadvantage.

Disability

FET Learner Group	Total Number of Respondents	% of Survey Respondents*
Long Term Illness or Disability	235	21%

* All figures expressed as a percentage of total survey respondents (n = 1122).

Table 10.4. FET Learner Groups as a Percentage of Survey Respondents.

For learners who report experiencing a long-term illness or disability, the two lowest satisfaction scores are Mental Health Support (50%) and Work Experience Support (56%). This is followed by Disability Support (71%) and Buildings and Facilities (72%). Compared to the overall satisfaction scores, this group's satisfaction with Mental Health Support, Work Experience Support as well as Buildings and Facilities appears particularly significant (**Figure 10.5**).

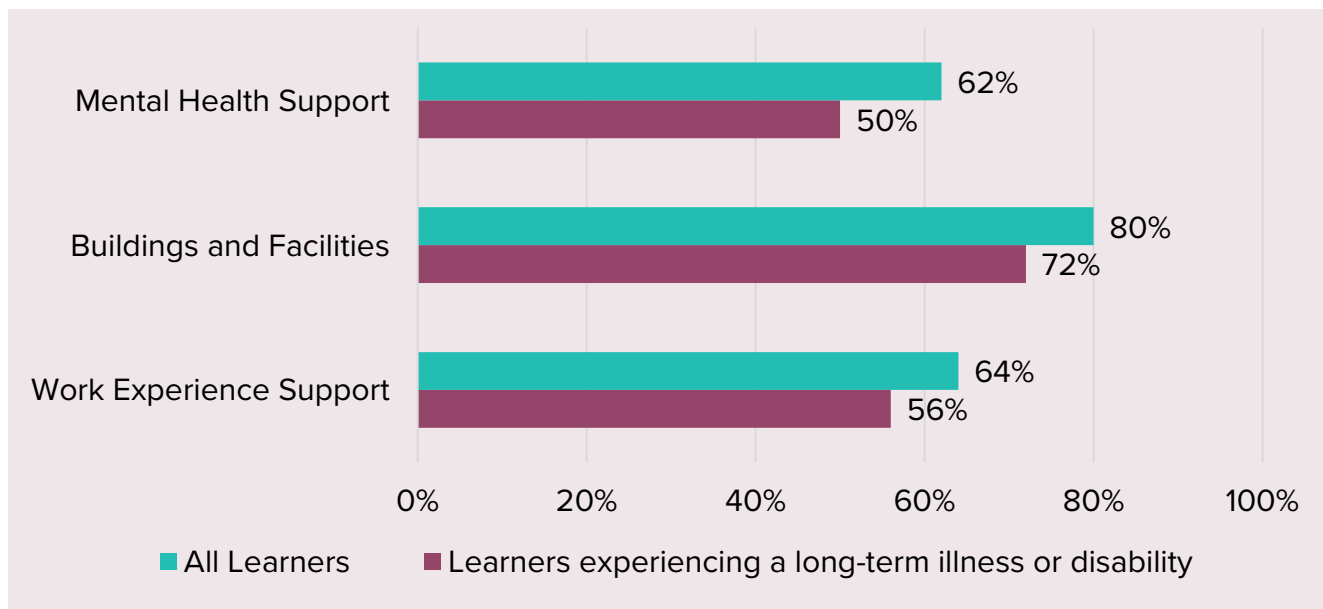


Figure 10.5. Comparison of Net Satisfaction with Mental Health Support, Work Experience Support and Buildings and Facilities between learners experiencing a long-term illness or disability and Total Learner Respondents.

Learners experiencing a long-term illness or disability reported significantly lower satisfaction than the overall population with both Mental Health Support and Work Experience Support. They described their needs as follows:

[Increase] mental health supports.

**CTC learner with
long-term illness or disability**

Better assistance with mandatory work placements.

**PLC Learner with
long-term illness or disability**

The ETB could develop a programme that would help students to get a work placement, particularly for students who may find getting a work placement to be difficult.

Community Education learner with long-term illness or disability

Learners with long term illness or disability also reported lower satisfaction with buildings and facilities. The following contributions illustrate the nature of their dissatisfaction:

Entrance door not automatic opening for wheelchair users, disabled toilets at other end of building, no wheelchair ramp at entrance, making users enter boundary through vehicle gates.

BTEI learner with long-term illness or disability

Wheelchair users – improve desks.

**PLC learner with
long-term illness or disability**

Need bigger rooms. Art room to be wheelchair accessible ... [ETB] should do a deal with taxis – give receipt and get your money back.

**Visual Art and Healthy Eating learner with
long-term illness or disability**

This analysis supports Learner Forum proposals to enhance the availability and visibility of mental health counselling services in centres as well as to provide increased support to FET learners seeking to secure work experience placements. Finally, it supports the proposal to 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.

Male, Female, and Non-Binary Learners

FET Learner Group	Total Number of Respondents	% of Survey Respondents*
Male	321	29%
Female	664	59%
Non-Binary	6	1%

* All figures expressed as a percentage of total survey respondents (n = 1122).

Table 10.5. FET Learner Groups as a Percentage of Survey Respondents.

The area of biggest difference when comparing male and female satisfaction scores is with Mental Health Support. Female satisfaction with Mental Health Support is 11% lower than their male counterparts (**Figure 10.6**).

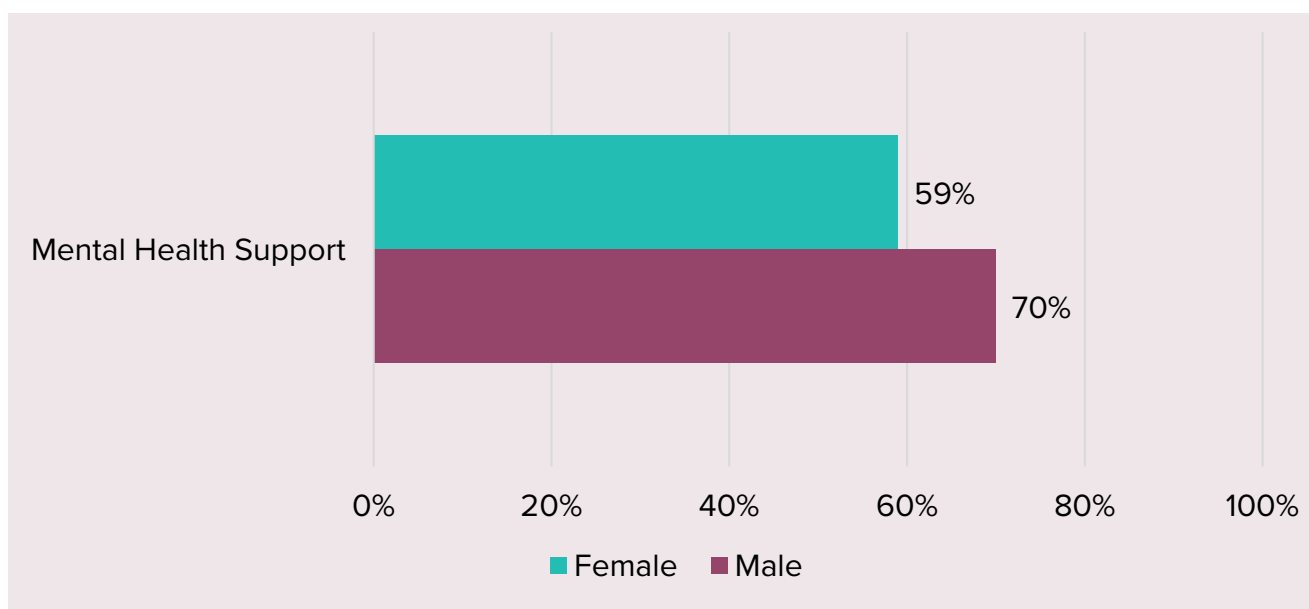


Figure 10.6. Comparison of Net Satisfaction with Mental Health Support between Female and Male Learners.

This analysis supports Learner Forum proposals to enhance the availability and visibility of mental health counselling services in centres. It suggests that this learner proposal may be particularly helpful for female learners.

While the number of non-binary survey respondents is small (n=6), their net satisfaction scores indicate the following themes or issues. Compared to the overall satisfaction scores, the areas of biggest difference are Buildings and Facilities (male 85%, female 79%, non-binary 17%) and the Website (male 82%, female 90%, non-binary 33%). Qualitative data to illustrate the reasons for these high differences is unavailable. There are grounds for further research with respect to non-binary learners. Provisionally, these satisfaction scores suggest additional grounds for considering Learner Forum proposals to enhance equitable access to FET.

Age Groups

FET Learner Group	Total Number of Respondents	% of Survey Respondents*
Under 18	65	6%
18–24	368	33%
25–34	131	12%
35–44	156	14%
45–54	139	12%
55–64	72	6%
65–69	20	2%
70+	35	3%

* All figures expressed as a percentage of total survey respondents (n = 1122).

Table 10.6. FET Learner Groups as a Percentage of Survey Respondents.

Compared to satisfaction scores in other age cohorts, Mental Health Support appears to be particularly notable (**Figure 10.7**).

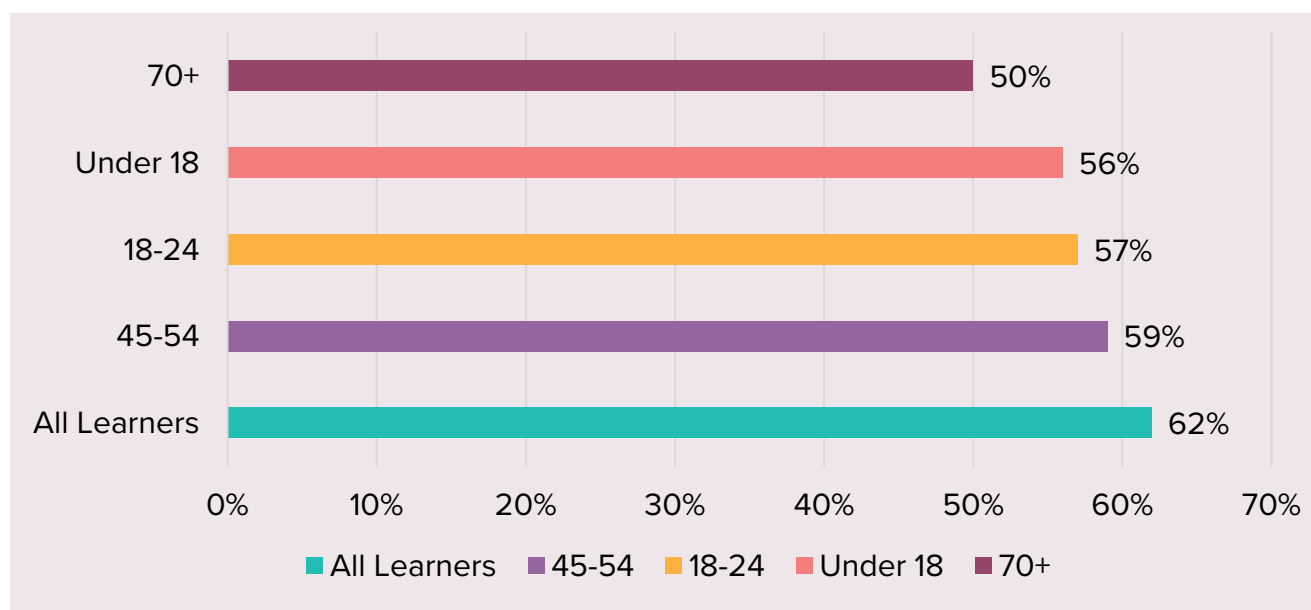


Figure 10.7. Comparison of Net Satisfaction with Mental Health Support between all Age Groups and Total Learner Respondents.

Satisfaction with mental health support is the lowest score recorded for under 18s, 18–24 year olds, and 45–54 year olds. 70+ year olds have the lowest satisfaction with mental health support among all the age cohorts.

The above analysis supports Learner Forum proposals to enhance the availability and visibility of mental health counselling services. The findings suggest that these recommendations would have a particularly beneficial impact for the age cohorts identified.

Ethnicity Groups

FET Learner Group	Total Number of Respondents	% of Survey Respondents*
White Irish	573	51%
Irish Travellers	11	1%
Black or Black Irish	44	4%
Asian or Asian Irish	35	3%

* All figures expressed as a percentage of total survey respondents (n = 1122).

Table 10.7. FET Learner Groups as a Percentage of Survey Respondents.

Four categories of survey respondent were examined based on their ethnicity: White Irish, Irish Travellers, Black or Black Irish and Asian or Asian Irish. Across many indicators, these groups reported satisfaction scores broadly in line with those of the overall learner cohort. One significant divergence identified concerns the digital inclusion of Irish Travellers and Asian or Asian Irish learners (**Figure 10.8**).

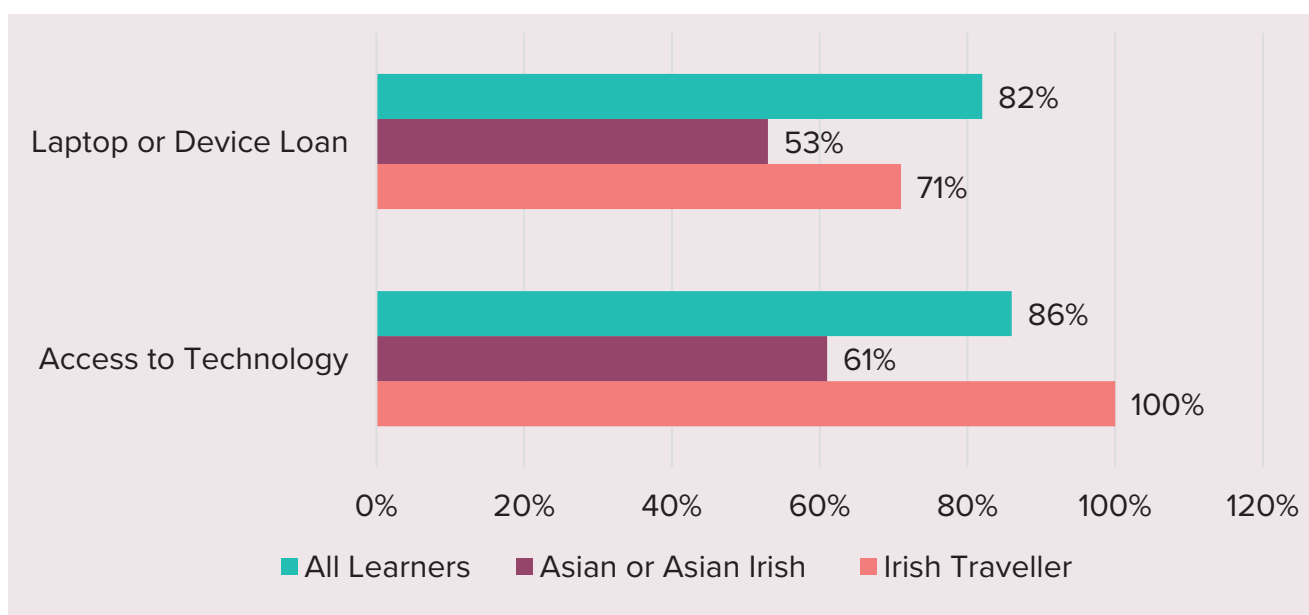


Figure 10.8. Comparison of Net Satisfaction with Laptop or Device Loan and Access to Technology between Irish Travellers, Asian or Asian Irish and Total Learner Respondents.

The lowest satisfaction score for Irish Travellers concerns Laptop or Device Loan (71%). These findings suggest that Travellers may have access to technology in their centre (which received a score of 100%) but do not have the same level of access to a laptop at home or to a laptop loan scheme. Similarly, the two lowest satisfaction scores for Asian or Asian Irish learners are Laptop or Device Loan (53%) and Access to Technology (61%). The following contributions illustrate the nature of their dissatisfaction:

Lend laptops, provide access to printing.

ESOL learner, Asian or Asian Irish

Some of the computers are too old and out of storages to run all educational system and software properly. This can be improve[d].

PLC learner, Asian or Asian Irish

The above analysis suggests that the Learner Forum proposal to enhance access to technology and to laptop or device loan schemes may be particularly helpful for Irish Traveller learners and Asian or Asian Irish learners.

Citizenship Status

FET Learner Group	Total Number of Respondents	% of Survey Respondents*
International Protection Applicants	79	7%

* All figures expressed as a percentage of total survey respondents (n = 1122).

Table 10.8. FET Learner Groups as a Percentage of Survey Respondents.

The three lowest satisfaction scores for learners in international protection are Work Experience Support (51%), Mental Health Supports (65%) and Access to Technology (70%). Learners in international protection also reported lower satisfaction with Laptop or Device Loan (74%). Compared to the overall satisfaction scores, Work Experience Support and digital inclusion support appear to be particularly significant (**Figure 10.9**).

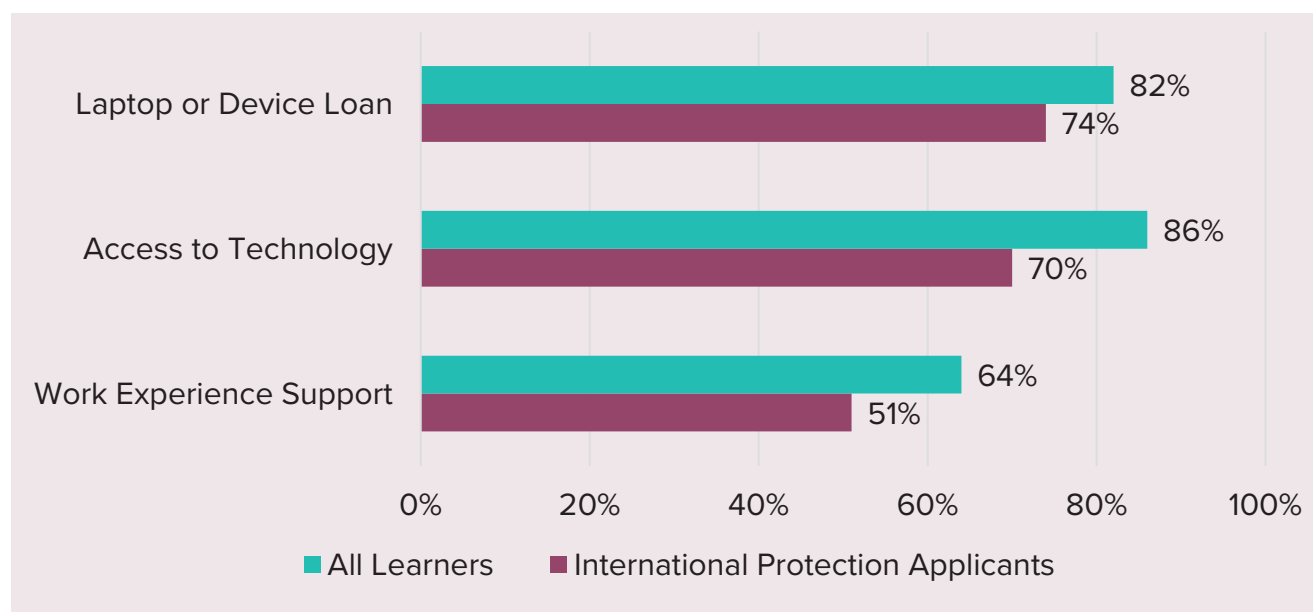


Figure 10.9. Comparison of Net Satisfaction with Access to Technology, Work Experience Support and Laptop or Device Loan between International Protection Applicant Learners and Total Learner Respondents.

The following contributions highlight the diverse challenges faced:

No help in finding work experience placement from college representatives.

PLC learner, International Protection Applicant

By helping students get work experience/placement instead of student going to search on their own and getting rejection.

**PLC learner,
International Protection Applicant**

They should introduce more and new courses and also help those who do not have the right to work to also participate in all courses available.

**ESOL learner,
International Protection Applicant**

I must be honest ... Some spaces are not welcoming migrants ... That is the reality we're facing.

PLC learner, International Protection Applicant

This analysis supports the Learner Forum proposal to enhance the guidance and support available to FET learners seeking to secure work experience placements and to increase the availability of digital inclusion supports such as access to technology and laptop loan schemes. It suggests that these proposals may be particularly helpful for learners in the international protection system.



CONCLUSION

This concluding chapter outlines AONTAS recommendations in response to the Learner Voices Across Ireland Report and the Learner Forum proposals identified. The Report ends with some closing reflections on how Learner Voice groups and capacity-building initiatives can help translate Learner Voice into action and system transformation.

AONTAS Recommendations

The LVAI Report, including the Learner Voice data gathered and the Learner Forum proposals arising, offers important insights into the FET learner experience and further demonstrates the need for advocacy and reform in several key areas. The present research supports the following recommendations:

1. Invest in Further Education and Training to realise goals of inclusion and skills development.

- The LVAI Report evidences the important work of Further Education and Training in supporting adult learning and skills development as well as social inclusion and wider benefits. The report amply demonstrates how highly FET learners across all ETBs esteem the important role of their tutors and support staff in ensuring their learning and wellbeing.
- The data gathered evidence a need to increase FET programme provision to meet learner demand. Specifically, the report records a consistent demand across ETBs for increasing ESOL and Adult Literacy class hours and course provision.

2. Reform Learner Supports and introduce an FET Learner Assistance Fund.

- The Learner Voice data evidence the need to improve a range of learner supports. Financial supports and travel allowances feature prominently here but so too do meal allowances, childcare provision, and availability of public transport.
- The LVAI Report evidences the need for a standardised, holistic, and supportive approach to work experience placement and pathways to employment. Learner Forum proposals call for increasing provision of guidance and information on employment opportunities, as well as for enhancing structured partnerships between FET centres and employers. The data indicates that such an approach will be of particular benefit to unemployed learners and learners with a disability.

3. Extend the Fund for Learners with Disabilities across all FET provisions.

- People with disabilities face an additional and often hidden cost of disability. Overcoming the disparity between learners with disabilities and their non-disabled peers requires investment in accessible public transport and enhancing access to FET centres as well as throughout buildings, including toilets, classrooms, and canteens. The Learner Voice data further evidence the cost of disability. The Learner Forum proposals arising concentrate on enhancing buildings and facilities to ensure disabled learners can access their FET centre on par with all other FET Learners.

4. Support the development of Learner Voice groups and councils and increase provision for Learner Voice capacity-building for staff and learners.

- The LVAI Report provides evidence of the value that FET learners place on being able to use their voice and raise issues whether within their ETB or FET centre or through participation in the National FET Learner Forum. It further indicates that important work remains to be done in terms of embedding Learner Voice in policy, including supporting Learner Voice group development and collaborative decision-making. AONTAS recommend supporting the development of Learner Voice groups and councils and increasing provision for Learner Voice capacity-building for staff and learners.

An overview of recent AONTAS advocacy to progress these recommendations with policymakers is available in Appendix 5 of this report.

Learner Voice and Democratic Learning

AONTAS work 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 (Social Justice Ireland, 2024; OECD, 2024). 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. It behoves us to listen when FET Learners tell us what will improve their experience of learning and, ultimately, create shared benefits of learning, skills development, and social inclusion for all. Acting on Learner Voice has never been more urgent.

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 for 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.

The Learner Voices Across Ireland report provides rich insight into the views of FET learners at the nine Education and Training Boards who took part in the National FET Learner Forum 2025–2026. 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 that Further Education and Training responds to the needs of adult learners today and in the future.

AONTAS welcome all opportunities to discuss the Report and its 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.

659 learners in attendance at the nine regional forums submitted an evaluation form. This represents a response rate of 93% (n = 659/711 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 63% describing their forum as ‘excellent’ (Figure A1.1).

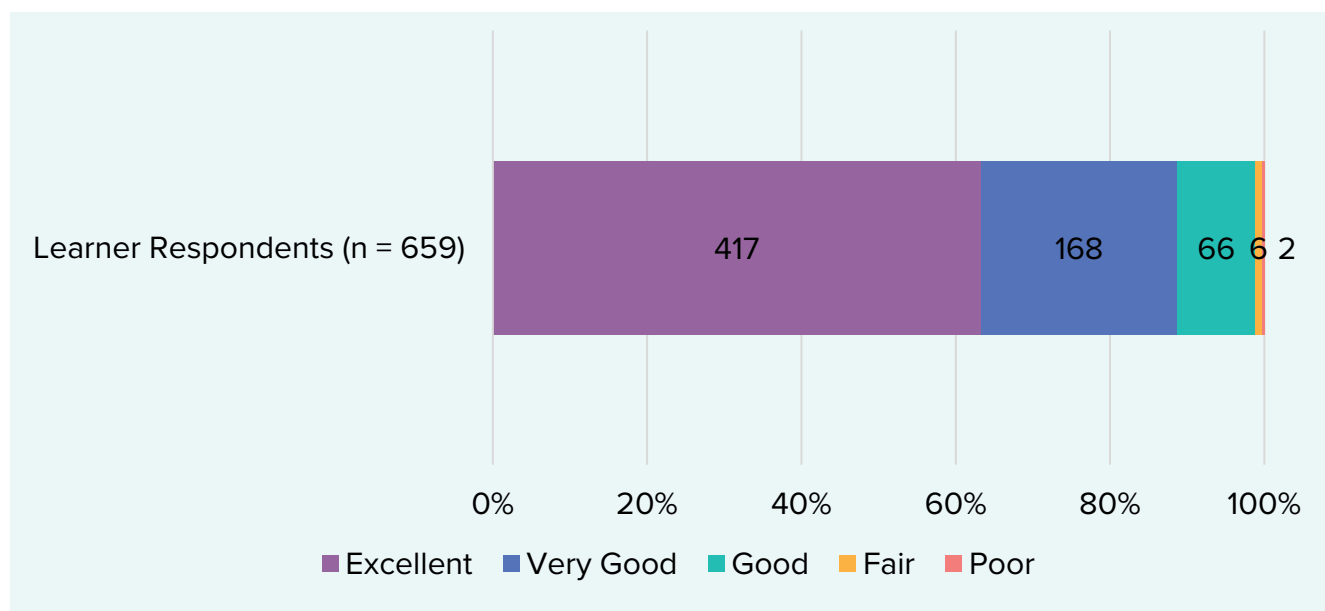


Figure A1.1. Participant Evaluation of FET Learner Forum. Responses to “What did you think about this event?” (Multiple choice question, n = total responses).

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

Something I Enjoyed

Several recurring positive themes emerged across all nine events. Engaging in the focus groups discussions was rated by 42% of participants as one of the most enjoyable parts of the day. Learners particularly enjoyed the interactions with other learners and the chance to share their experiences with their peers. They also valued meeting new people from different courses, backgrounds, and cultures, with comments reflecting on the diversity of learners represented at their tables, who were of all ages and cultures.

The welcoming and inclusive environment was frequently mentioned by learners, saying that they felt comfortable and respected throughout the process. Participants appreciated the accessibility of the event, and that the atmosphere was open, encouraging and friendly.

Focus group facilitators played a huge role in creating these safe spaces for learners and in ensuring all voices were heard at each table. Participants praised their group facilitators' encouragement, interest, and support, and how they ensured that everyone had a chance to talk and to give their opinions.

Another important aspect of the forum for learners was the opportunity to have their voices heard and to give anonymous feedback on their experiences of education. Being able to speak freely and without judgement was referenced on multiple occasions, and learners felt that the process ensured that their views were respected and taken seriously by their ETB.

They also 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. For many learners, the Forum is the first time they have the opportunity to connect with other learners from their wider ETB network.

"I liked being able to interact with learners from other centres, and also being able to air what could be done in order to make our learning experience more favourable."

"I appreciate the genuine concern about the wellbeing and happiness of students."

"I liked the friendly environment, learning about other FET courses, the supportive facilitator, the diversity of learners and the time given to each learner. I found it a very positive experience."

"It's brilliant that you care about our feedback. It sounds like it's important to the organization."

"Everyone's voices being heard, very kind and helpful supporting staff, a good environment and nice students to chat to."

"The friendly and relaxed atmosphere and good communication with wonderful people."

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 from their ETB centre.

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.

"Would prefer longer time for the discussion."

"I feel like I was with very young students and the questions being asked conflicted with my experience. I would prefer to sit with my own age group."

"Maybe rotating groups would be an idea so you hear more ideas and views."

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

"Better attention to mixing groups. Different types of individuals in the groups."

"Add an active game for the whole group."

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.

Other commonly cited 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 learned that my opinion is important, that they are willing to listen and to try to make change."

"I learned a lot about other courses in the area and the facilities available. Great opportunity to meet new people and I got a few great ideas."

"I learned about the supports available to FET learners and how our feedback can influence future policies."

"I learned how important adult education is and how good it is for all ages. I am in my 60s and didn't finish secondary school so I am delighted to meet so many likeminded others."

"I learned how beneficial it is to hold meetings with students from all disciplines."

APPENDIX 2.

SURVEY DATA

The Adult Learner and FET

Are you a full-time or part-time learner? (1002 responses)	
Full-time	Part-time
610	392

Course or programme title (983 responses)				
Adult Literacy	Apprenticeship	Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)	Community Education	
121	38	67	35	
Community Training Centre (CTC)	English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)	Local Training Initiative (LTI)	Post-leaving Certificate (PLC)	
33	128	11	250	
Skills to Advance	Traineeship	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)	Youthreach	Other
34	43	55	72	96

Course level on NFQ (National Framework of Qualifications Framework) (1006 responses)								
Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7-10	Non-accredited/ no level	Don't know
43	56	193	159	382	112	5	30	26

What is your age group? Please tick the relevant box (1000 responses)				
Under 18	18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54
65	368	131	156	139
55–64	65–69	70+	Prefer not to say	
72	20	35	14	

Please select the gender you identify as. Please tick the relevant box. (1008 responses)		
Female	Male	Non-binary
664	321	6
I don't know	Prefer not to say	Other gender identity
3	13	1

What is your ethnic group or background? Please tick the relevant box or boxes. (1026 responses) (1011 respondents)			
White Irish	Irish Traveller	Other White background	Black or Black Irish
573	11	220	44
Asian or Asian Irish	Prefer not to say	Other ethnicity	
35	51	92	

Please describe your current employment status: Please tick all the relevant boxes. (1008 responses)				
In full-time paid employment	In part-time paid employment	Community Employment	In receipt of Disability Allowance	Unemployed
105	204	37	84	378
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
62	9	24	60	45

Highest NFQ Level of Education completed (1095 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)
64	38	172	455
Diploma or certificate (Level 6)	Degree or similar (Levels 7 and 8)	Postgraduate qualification (Levels 9 and 10)	Prefer not to say
102	141	68	55

What were the reasons for taking your course? (Please select all that apply) (2625 responses) (1004 respondents)					
I wanted to learn something new	To have fun	To get a certificate	To progress to third level	To get a job	To progress in my career
427	125	233	246	356	322
To upskill or reskill	To meet new people	Required by the Department of Social Protection	To improve my English	To improve my health and wellbeing	Other
289	237	36	189	131	34

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. (3708 responses) (988 respondents)				
Self-confidence	Wellbeing and better health	Connection with family, friends, or others	Positive outlook on the future	Sense of belonging
690	315	296	535	367
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
181	265	305	418	336

Teaching and Learning

How satisfied are you with the opportunity to actively take part in your class? (973 responses)				
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
570	346	44	5	8
How satisfied are you that your course content has supported you to achieve your learning goals? (979 responses)				
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
507	378	72	13	9

How satisfied are you with the feedback you received on your coursework? (981 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I did not have my course work assessed
514	327	70	14	8	48

Creating Pathways

Guidance Services (991 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I do not require guidance services
328	254	83	19	7	300
If you undertook work experience as part of your course, how satisfied were you with the supports from your centre or ETB to help you find a work experience placement? (954 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I do not require supports for experience placement
261	213	110	43	17	310

I am clear on what other Further Education and Training courses are available (1023 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
363	517	105	31	7
I am clear on what other Higher Education / Third Level Courses are available (981 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
324	477	136	36	8
I am clear on what employment opportunities are available (985 responses)				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
297	444	182	52	10

What do you plan to do after this course? (1468 responses) (1053 respondents)		
Start employment	Continue in current employment	Voluntary Work
417	156	109
Continue in Further Education and Training	Higher education / Third Level	Other
423	304	59

Learner Support

How satisfied were you with the supports you received from your Education and Training Board?					
Learning supports (962 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I do not require any supports for learning
303	218	53	16	3	369
Disability supports (987 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I do not require services and supports for disabilities
207	195	74	16	4	491
Mental health supports (984 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I do not require mental health services
160	171	116	24	10	503

How would you rate your overall wellbeing including your physical and mental health? (970 responses)				
Excellent	Very good	Good	Fair	Poor
119	251	379	182	39

Do you have any long-term health issue, illness or disability? (951 responses)		
Yes	No	Prefer not to say
235	612	104

Do you experience stress, anxiety, or depression? (960 responses)		
Yes	No	Prefer not to say
396	404	160

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) (959 responses)		
Yes	No	Prefer not to say
255	513	191

What would help to support your mental health? (1389 responses) (900 respondents)	
Appointments with a counsellor or qualified specialist	239
An atmosphere of openness around mental health at your centre or ETB	228
Mindfulness classes	245
Increased financial support	267
Flexibility around assignments and deadlines	298
Other	112

Enabling Themes

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	663	316	979
Learning supports	695	260	955
Guidance service	667	271	938
Mental health supports	544	392	936
Disability support	492	417	909
Transport or financial support with transport	405	509	914
Meals or financial support with meals	337	573	910
Childcare or financial support with childcare	167	720	887
Support with money or costs	366	533	899

How satisfied were you that you received accurate course information at your centre or ETB? (1003 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I did not receive any course information or advice
544	348	60	8	14	29

How satisfied were you with the website for your centre or ETB, when you were looking for a course or programme? (994 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I did not visit the website for my centre or ETB
404	330	78	14	4	164

How satisfied were you with the opportunity to raise an issue at your centre or ETB? (1014 responses)						
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I did not need to raise an issue	Other
276	269	106	13	7	335	8

How satisfied are you with the access to technology at your centre? (952 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I do not require the use of technology learning resources
411	307	42	27	8	157

How satisfied are you with laptop or device loans at your centre? (966 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I do not require the loan of a laptop or other device
287	166	48	17	6	442

How satisfied were you with the buildings and facilities at your centre? (972 responses)				
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
411	412	99	41	9

Social Development and Adult Learning

Does your financial situation affect your ability to learn or study? (905 responses)	
Yes	No
215	690

How satisfied are you with the financial supports to cover the cost of taking part in learning at your centre? (985 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I do not require financial supports to cover the cost of taking part in learning
210	192	113	49	17	404

How satisfied are you with the financial supports for transport (e.g. fuel allowances)? (989 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I do not require financial support for travel to my centre
103	125	114	87	37	523

How satisfied are you with the availability of public transport to your centre? (952 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I do not require public transport to get to my centre
151	134	91	70	38	468

How would you describe your current accommodation or living situation? (908 responses)	
Rental accommodation	180
Supported accommodation	10
Social housing (e.g. local authority rented)	77
Traveller-specific accommodation	0
Private housing (have ownership of home)	156
Live with family (do not have ownership of home)	395
Living in homeless accommodation	1
Living in Direct Provision or International Protection Application accommodation such as a hotel, or ARP (accommodation recognition payment)	79
Other	10

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)? (918 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I do not have a suitable learning environment
303	303	124	24	7	157

Does your living situation affect your ability to learn or study? (952 responses)	
Yes	No
176	776

Does your accommodation or living situation cause you stress, anxiety, or worry? (960 responses)		
Yes	No	Prefer not to say
149	680	131

How satisfied are you support offered for childcare? (949 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I do not require childcare support
61	64	66	15	15	728

How satisfied are you with the financial supports for meals? (985 responses)					
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	I do not require financial support for meals
119	142	131	56	34	503

Survey Representation

A comparison of the 2026 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 (**Figure A3.1**).

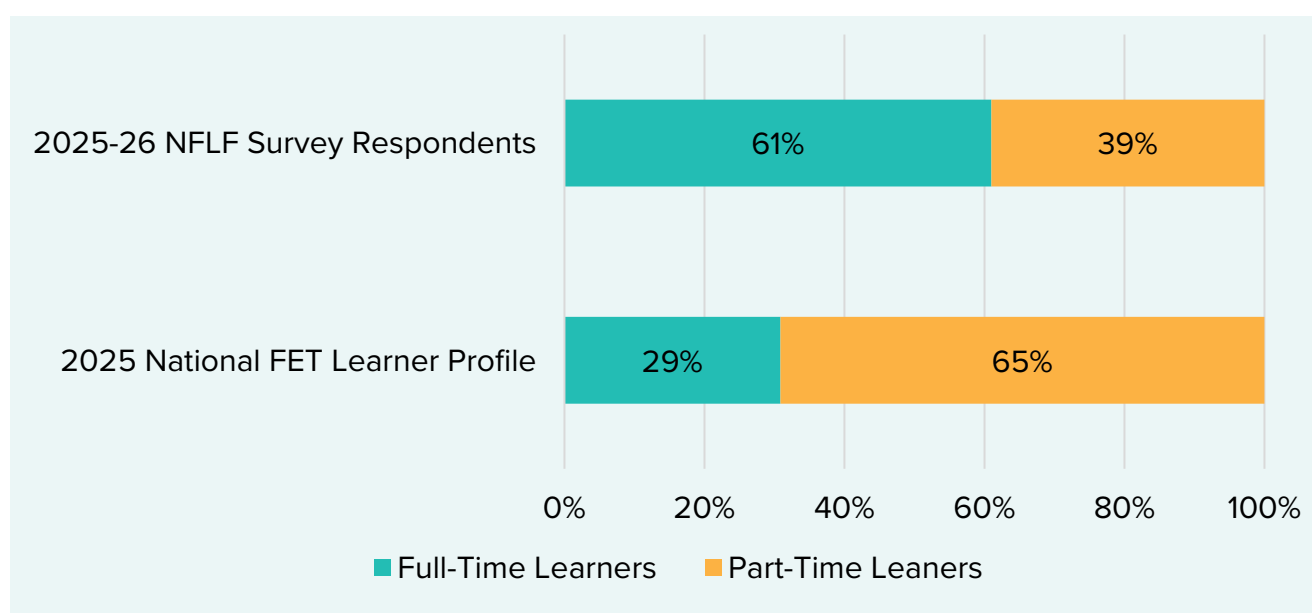


Figure A3.1. 2025-26 NFLF Survey Respondents Compared to 2025 National FET Learner Profile by Part-time and Full-time.

61% of respondents to the AONTAS NFLF survey are in full-time courses, while 39% are in part-time courses. This compares to 29% of learners in full-time courses and 65% in part-time courses outlined according to SOLAS data on FET participation. 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 a significant under-representation of Community Education learners. 17% of learners in the SOLAS FET data are in Community Education, compared to 3% of respondents to the NFLF survey. The comparison also indicates a slight under-representation of the voices of ESOL, BTEI, Adult Literacy, and Skills to Advance learners (**Figure A3.2**).

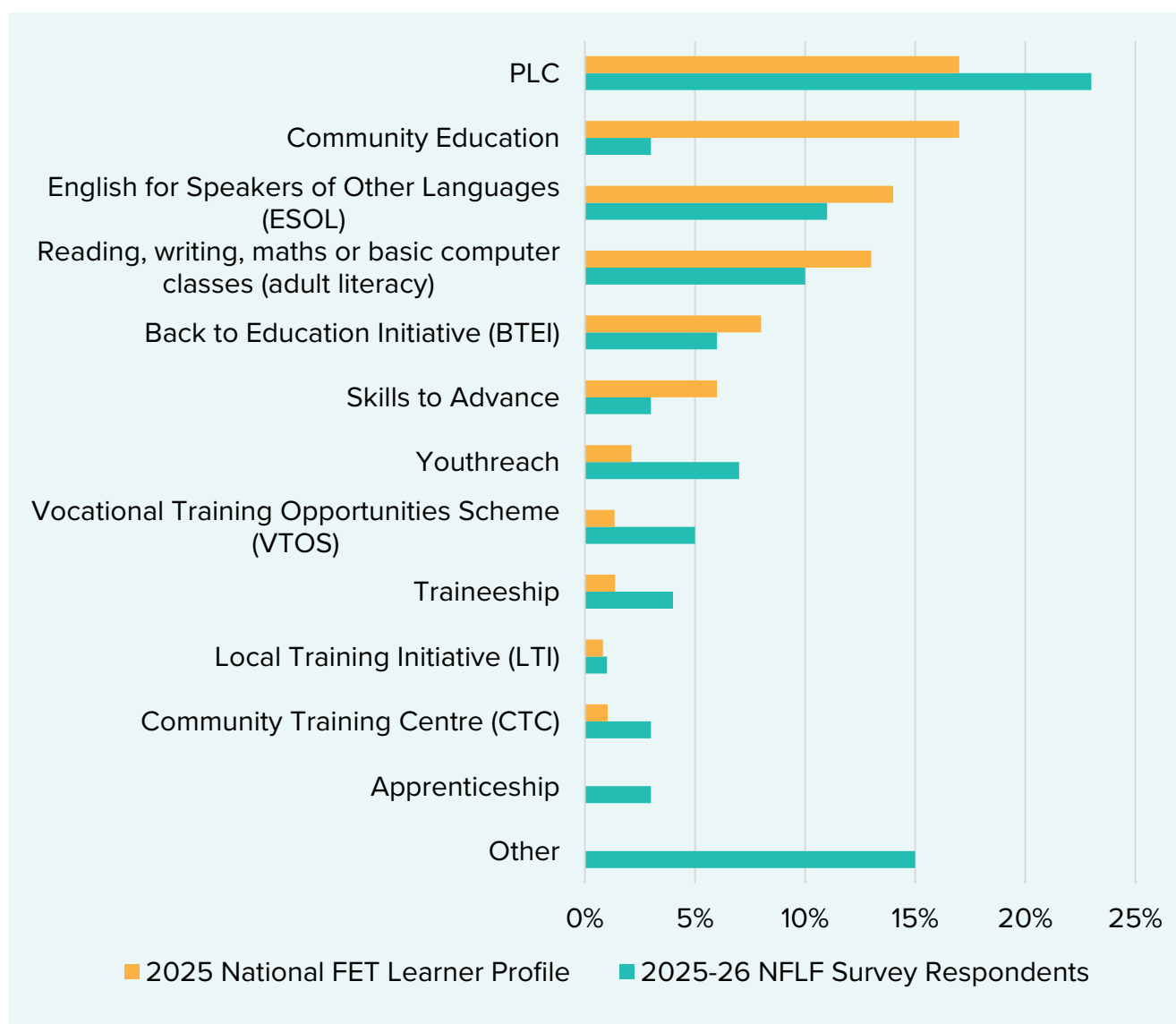


Figure A3.2. 2025-26 NFLF Survey Respondents Compared to 2025 National FET Learner Profile by Programme.

APPENDIX 3. CODEBOOK FOR QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Themes	
1	Course Provision and the Positive Impact of FET
1.1	Course Provision
1.2	Course Provision – Programme Specific
1.3	The Positive Impact and Wider Benefits of FET
2	Teaching and Learning
2.1	Teaching and Learning
2.2	The Role of Tutors
2.3	Opportunity to Participate in Class
2.4	Curriculum and Assessment
3	Creating Pathways
3.1	Pathways
3.2	Work Experience Support
3.3	Guidance Service
4	Learner Support
4.1	Learning Support
4.2	Disability Support
4.3	Counselling Service and Mental Health Support
5	Enabling Themes
5.1	Communications and Information Provision
5.2	Opportunity to Raise Issues
5.3	Digital Inclusion
5.4	Buildings and Facilities
6	Social Development and Adult Learning
6.1	Cost of FET Participation and Financial Support
6.2	Public Transport and Travel Support
6.3	Accommodation and Home Learning Environment
6.4	Childcare
6.5	Meals Support
7	Fostering Inclusion
7.1	Welcome, Belonging, and Inclusion
8	Critical Issues
	Issues include Digital Transition; The Future of Work; Demographic Change - Aging Society; Demographic Change - Migration, Diversity, and Intercultural Understanding; Green Transition and Climate Justice; Health and Well-being; Strengthening Citizenship and Democracy.

APPENDIX 4. COMPARATIVE LEARNER EXPERIENCE DATA

NFLF Net Satisfaction Table

Survey Item	Net Satisfaction
Opportunity to Take Part in Class	93%
Communications	89%
Course Content	88%
Feedback on Coursework	88%
Website	86%
Access to Technology	86%
Learning Support (literacy, numeracy, digital)	85%
Laptop or Device loan	82%
Guidance Service	80%
Buildings and Facilities	80%
Opportunity to Raise Issues	78%
Disability Support	77%
Home Learning Environment	76%
Work Experience Support	64%
Mental Health Support	62%
Financial Support	58%
Childcare Support	43%
Public Transport	37%
Meal Allowance	35%
Travel Support	22%

Comparative Programme Data

	No. of learner respondents	Communications	Website	Opportunity to raise issues	Opportunity to take part in class	Course content	Feedback on coursework	Work experience support	Learning support (literacy, numeracy, digital)	Access to technology	Laptop or device loan	Buildings and facilities	Disability support	Mental health support	Guidance service	Financial support	Meal allowance	Travel support	Childcare support	Public transport	Home learning environment
Overall		89%	86%	78%	93%	88%	88%	64%	85%	86%	82%	80%	77%	62%	80%	58%	35%	22%	43%	37%	76%
Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC)	250	83%	85%	68%	87%	82%	74%	52%	71%	79%	71%	66%	66%	41%	72%	35%	-4%	-7%	16%	39%	74%
English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)	128	92%	95%	94%	95%	94%	96%	65%	91%	63%	74%	100%	96%	91%	92%	71%	66%	13%	70%	10%	78%
Reading, writing, maths classes or basic computer classes (Adult literacy).	121	93%	93%	88%	95%	92%	95%	74%	96%	99%	94%	89%	87%	80%	93%	74%	76%	50%	47%	79%	86%
Youthreach	72	88%	62%	67%	91%	79%	84%	62%	64%	93%	86%	83%	72%	51%	57%	68%	61%	44%	63%	35%	52%
Back to Education Initiative (BIEI)	67	100%	87%	84%	93%	95%	98%	71%	83%	89%	93%	78%	65%	70%	89%	62%	4%	9%	0%	6%	85%
Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)	55	96%	92%	85%	94%	96%	94%	59%	93%	100%	69%	87%	84%	64%	88%	69%	36%	34%	45%	57%	65%
Traineeship	43	95%	94%	88%	98%	95%	95%	83%	86%	97%	96%	88%	95%	82%	91%	58%	34%	42%	29%	50%	80%
Apprenticeship	38	92%	66%	83%	92%	73%	83%	88%	79%	81%	94%	61%	67%	57%	76%	36%	50%	35%	67%	-10%	93%
Community Education	35	91%	78%	81%	100%	100%	100%	53%	100%	100%	69%	79%	94%	69%	93%	69%	27%	31%	38%	-7%	71%
Skills to Advance Programme	34	73%	69%	70%	90%	76%	93%	63%	75%	78%	71%	69%	67%	22%	71%	67%	9%	19%	25%	11%	78%
Community Training Centre (CTC)	33	94%	88%	81%	100%	97%	100%	95%	100%	92%	60%	86%	70%	72%	91%	79%	67%	64%	73%	53%	92%
Local Training Initiative (LTI)	11	100%	88%	88%	100%	100%	63%	75%	100%	100%	75%	90%	100%	100%	88%	56%	75%	0%	33%	14%	100%
Full-time	610	88%	85%	74%	91%	86%	85%	63%	78%	87%	80%	75%	74%	58%	78%	55%	30%	23%	42%	41%	72%
Part-Time	392	92%	89%	87%	95%	92%	94%	71%	93%	83%	84%	89%	86%	71%	86%	64%	50%	20%	42%	23%	84%

Comparative Demographic Data

	No. of learner respondents	Communications	Website	Opportunity to raise issues	Opportunity to take part in class	Course content	Feedback on coursework	Work experience support	Learning support (literacy, numeracy, digital)	Access to technology	Laptop or device loan	Buildings and facilities	Disability support	Mental health support	Guidance service	Financial support	Meal allowance	Travel support	Childcare support	Public transport	Home learning environment
Overall	1122	89%	86%	78%	93%	88%	88%	64%	85%	86%	82%	80%	77%	62%	80%	58%	35%	22%	43%	37%	76%
Male	321	89%	82%	80%	92%	88%	88%	66%	83%	90%	83%	85%	79%	70%	83%	61%	49%	36%	61%	53%	76%
Female	664	91%	90%	80%	93%	90%	89%	66%	86%	85%	81%	79%	78%	59%	82%	57%	31%	18%	37%	33%	77%
Non-Binary	6	67%	33%	50%	100%	100%	83%	40%	100%	100%	100%	17%	67%	100%	100%	20%	-80%	-80%	-50%	25%	83%
Under 18	65	93%	77%	81%	93%	90%	87%	77%	84%	98%	84%	91%	75%	56%	69%	69%	56%	55%	69%	44%	67%
18-24	368	87%	82%	71%	89%	85%	82%	60%	77%	83%	79%	71%	72%	57%	76%	53%	29%	16%	44%	37%	73%
25-34	131	90%	83%	79%	93%	85%	89%	83%	85%	84%	89%	77%	84%	68%	77%	68%	39%	35%	63%	45%	82%
35-44	156	91%	92%	88%	95%	91%	92%	69%	91%	80%	82%	92%	87%	77%	92%	56%	34%	26%	25%	34%	71%
45-54	139	93%	91%	86%	97%	95%	93%	60%	93%	92%	80%	85%	80%	59%	89%	50%	23%	11%	29%	25%	79%
55-64	72	94%	90%	89%	97%	95%	95%	67%	84%	89%	76%	87%	82%	71%	90%	67%	74%	31%	80%	37%	92%
65-69	20	100%	100%	91%	100%	100%	92%	50%	71%	100%	67%	88%	82%	75%	100%	80%	75%	75%	50%	60%	100%
70+	35	91%	100%	80%	92%	92%	92%	29%	87%	100%	89%	100%	88%	50%	73%	100%	57%	-25%	0%	100%	100%
White Irish	573	89%	83%	73%	92%	88%	87%	61%	84%	89%	81%	75%	74%	57%	79%	56%	33%	24%	35%	42%	78%
Irish Travellers	11	73%	80%	75%	100%	90%	89%	83%	100%	100%	71%	89%	75%	80%	100%	50%	40%	20%	40%	100%	89%
Black or Black Irish	44	92%	86%	82%	92%	95%	100%	75%	96%	86%	96%	92%	88%	72%	78%	47%	39%	32%	60%	41%	59%
Asian or Asian Irish	35	90%	84%	78%	84%	81%	77%	67%	94%	61%	53%	72%	83%	64%	85%	38%	27%	0%	-13%	39%	72%
Long Term Illness or Disability	235	84%	81%	72%	93%	83%	87%	56%	80%	82%	83%	72%	71%	50%	74%	57%	28%	15%	50%	32%	65%
In receipt of Disability Allowance	84	91%	80%	72%	89%	80%	83%	54%	75%	86%	84%	73%	73%	63%	83%	53%	29%	35%	63%	42%	69%
Learners in Direct Provision	79	88%	97%	88%	87%	88%	92%	51%	82%	70%	74%	96%	90%	65%	84%	71%	44%	42%	42%	24%	56%
Unemployed	378	90%	86%	82%	93%	91%	90%	65%	84%	86%	82%	82%	80%	63%	82%	63%	35%	28%	41%	41%	73%
Early School Leavers (No Levels, Levels 1-2)	102	92%	89%	85%	94%	89%	93%	76%	85%	89%	87%	86%	81%	65%	82%	78%	64%	52%	85%	67%	69%
Financial situation affects my ability to learn or study	215	84%	82%	66%	89%	80%	80%	50%	77%	77%	64%	68%	65%	43%	74%	33%	14%	-3%	21%	10%	56%

APPENDIX 5.

FROM VOICE TO AUDIENCE AND INFLUENCE: AONTAS ADVOCACY AND POLICY WORK

At AONTAS, advocacy is the intentional and collaborative effort to amplify and act upon the voices, experiences, and aspirations of adult learners. In our advocacy, we work with individuals and groups to challenge inequality, promote inclusive learning environments, and drive systemic change. When it comes to the National FET Learner Forum data, we do this by bringing the findings to the attention of multiple different Government departments and state agencies. AONTAS identify the **audience** (Government Ministers, civil servants, or TDs) and try to **influence** their decisions using the Learner Voices Across Ireland Report. The following are some recent examples of advocacy that drew on Learner Voice:

Learner Voices Shaping the New National FET Strategy

In May 2026, SOLAS and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science launched [*Creating Futures: The Further Education and Training Strategy 2026–2030*](#), the roadmap for FET over the next five years. One of the strategy's most significant commitments is to place learners "at the heart of decision-making" throughout the FET system. The strategy commits to embedding learner voice in governance structures, boards, and councils. [AONTAS recommended these actions](#) based on data gathered through the NFLF. These actions will move learner voice closer to where decisions get made.

The strategy's inclusion commitments reflect issues raised through the NFLF: targeted support for people with disabilities, lone parents, carers, older people, Travellers and Roma communities, and people in areas of concentrated disadvantage; universal design built into FET provision; and a commitment to join up learner payments and grants across Government departments and to signpost learners facing barriers like childcare, transport, and housing to the right supports.

FET Key to Tackling Poverty: Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2026–2030

June 2026 saw a significant policy development with the [launch of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2026–2030](#) by Taoiseach Micheál Martin and Minister for Social Protection Dara Calleary at the Social Inclusion Forum in Dublin's Aviva Stadium. The [strategy sets out 63 cross-government actions](#) spanning income supports, employment, housing, education, health, transport, and childcare and community supports, with a stated ambition to make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive Member States of the EU.

Using NFLF data and findings, AONTAS submitted to this policy consultation process last year, and consideration of adult learning participation rates has been integrated into this policy. This was a key issue identified in [AONTAS’ submission](#). The explicit reference to inclusion through the implementation of *Creating Futures: The FET Strategy for 2026–2030* is a hook for AONTAS to advocate for FET as a core mechanism of poverty reduction and social inclusion over the next five-year cycle. The strategy aligns nationally with the [EU’s first Anti-Poverty Strategy](#), published in May 2026.

Getting Learner Priorities into Apprenticeship Reform

In February 2026, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Further and Higher Education launched its [Report on Apprenticeships](#) and AONTAS’s recommendations, based on NFLF data, were reflected throughout. The final report calls for better access and supports for apprentices, curricula that keep pace with industry needs, local pre-apprenticeship programmes, and greater parity of esteem for apprenticeships within the wider education system. It also recommends targeted financial supports for groups that we know from NFLF data face barriers, such as people with disabilities. The report recognises the importance of universal design and co-designing programmes with learners, a direct reflection of AONTAS’s learner voice approach, and aligned with what learners shared during NFLF events.

National FET Learner Forum data was used in the following submissions:

Policy Submission	NFLF Themes	NFLF Reports Cited
Department of Transport Statement of Strategy (March 2025)	Reduce travel costs for groups at risk of disadvantage. Support collaborative planning of local community-based transport services.	Farrell, K., Finn, P., Meyler, A., & Murray, T. (2025) Learner Voices Across Ireland National FET Learner Forum Report 2024–2025. Meyler, A., Farrell, K., Lovejoy, L., & Murray, T. (2024) Learner Voices Across Ireland National FET Learner Forum Report 2023–2024.
Department of Social Protection: Pathways to Work Submission (September 2025)	Benefits of participating in FET for learners. Motivation to participate in FET to further career prospects. Importance of access to guidance and wrap-around supports, including support to access work placements.	Farrell, K., Finn, P., Meyler, A., & Murray, T. (2025) Learner Voices Across Ireland National FET Learner Forum Report 2024–2025. Meyler, A., Farrell, K., Lovejoy, L., & Murray, T. (2024) Learner Voices Across Ireland National FET Learner Forum Report 2023–2024. Meyler, A., Cobain, E., Budds, C., & Lovejoy, L. (2023) FET Learners and Mental Health in Ireland: Identifying Supports.

Policy Submission	NFLF Themes	NFLF Reports Cited
Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Science and Innovation: Tertiary Education Strategy (September 2025)	Benefits of participating in FET for learners. Importance of diverse routes into education pathways. Need for a review of financial supports.	Meyler, A., Farrell, K., Lovejoy, L., & Murray, T. (2024) Learner Voices Across Ireland National FET Learner Forum Report 2023–2024. Meyler, A., Cobain, E., Budds, C., & Lovejoy, L. (2023) FET Learners and Mental Health in Ireland: Identifying Supports. Meyler, A., Lovejoy, L., & Swan, L. (2023) Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland – A focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups.
European Commission: EU VET Strategy Survey Response (February 2026)	Barriers faced by learners farthest from education. The role of Learner Voice in developing inclusive education systems.	Farrell, K., Finn, P., Meyler, A., & Murray, T. (2025) Learner Voices Across Ireland National FET Learner Forum Report 2024–2025. Meyler, A., Farrell, K., Lovejoy, L., & Murray, T. (2024) Learner Voices Across Ireland National FET Learner Forum Report 2023–2024.
Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Science and Innovation: Submission to the Apprenticeship Action Plan 2026–2030 (February 2026)	Barriers presented by high participation costs and inadequate levels of supports reported by apprentices.	Farrell, K. Finn, P., Meyler, A., & Murray, T. (2025) Learner Voices Across Ireland the National FET Learner Forum Report, 2024–2025. Meyler, A., Farrell, K., Lovejoy, L., & Murray, T. (2024) Learner Voices Across Ireland National FET Learner Forum Report 2023–2024.
Department of Education: National Conversation on Education Early Childhood and School Age Care Survey (March 2026)	Access to affordable childcare as a barrier to participation in Further Education and Training.	Farrell, K. Finn, P., Meyler, A., & Murray, T. (2025) Learner Voices Across Ireland the National FET Learner Forum Report, 2024–2025. Meyler, A., Farrell, K., Lovejoy, L., & Murray, T. (2024) Learner Voices Across Ireland National FET Learner Forum Report 2023–2024.

Policy Submission	NFLF Themes	NFLF Reports Cited
Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Science and Innovation: The Annual Cost of Education Event – Financial Supports for Learners in FET (April 2026)	Inadequacy of financial supports including outdated levels and lack of consideration of the cost of education. Additional cost-related barriers including transport also highlighted in this submission.	Meyler, A., Farrell, K., Lovejoy, L., & Murray, T. (2024) Learner Voices Across Ireland National FET Learner Forum Report 2023–2024. Farrell, K., Finn, P., Meyler, A., & Murray, T. (2025) Learner Voices Across Ireland National FET Learner Forum Report 2024–2025.
Department of Social Protection: Cost of Disability Payment (April 2026)	Overview of NFLF data on net satisfaction rates with supports for learners with disabilities, including a focus on the additional cost of disability.	Farrell, K. Finn, P., Meyler, A., & Murray, T. (2025) Learner Voices Across Ireland the National FET Learner Forum Report, 2024–2025. Meyler, A., Farrell, K., Lovejoy, L., & Murray, T. (2024) Learner Voices Across Ireland National FET Learner Forum Report 2023–2024.
Department of Social Protection: Prebudget Forum Submission (May 2026)	Comprehensive overview of all cost-based barriers to participation in Further Education and Training drawn from NFLF data.	Farrell, K. Finn, P., Meyler, A., & Murray, T. (2025) Learner Voices Across Ireland the National FET Learner Forum Report, 2024–2025. Meyler, A., Farrell, K., Lovejoy, L., & Murray, T. (2024) Learner Voices Across Ireland National FET Learner Forum Report 2023–2024.
Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Science and Innovation: AONTAS Prebudget Submission 2027, Investment Where It Matters Most	Overview of cost-based barriers to participation with a call to increase supports for learners in general, and learners with disabilities in particular.	Farrell, K. Finn, P., Meyler, A., & Murray, T. (2025) Learner Voices Across Ireland the National FET Learner Forum Report, 2024–2025. Meyler, A., Farrell, K., Lovejoy, L., & Murray, T. (2024) Learner Voices Across Ireland National FET Learner Forum Report 2023–2024.

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