



The Voice of
Adult Learning



I'M A FET LEARNER

Celebrating learner voice
from the National FET
Learner Forum





*"Everyone has different experiences. I enjoyed hearing their stories."
- National FET Learner Forum participant 2019*



*"It was good to hear that we were all in the same boat and had the same fears before we went back to education."
- National FET Learner Forum participant 2019*



*"I enjoyed listening to the other (people's) experience and talking to them about mine."
- National FET Learner Forum participant 2018*

*"I liked talking to everyone and feeling involved as a group."
- National FET Learner Forum participant 2018*



"Everyone had the opportunity to talk and listen to different concerns."- National FET Learner Forum participant 2018

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FOREWORD

AONTAS

The National FET Learner Forum has evolved since 2016, as a one-day national event where learners could share their voice and reflect on ways to improve the Further Education and Training (FET) sector to the largest mixed methods learner voice project in Europe in 2020. In the context of the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the FET Strategy, the Forum provides key insights into the FET learner experience at a national level, challenging us to create an inclusive FET sector where everyone has an opportunity to participate in a quality educational programme across the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). However, as this booklet demonstrates, whilst learner-informed policy is vitally important, in AONTAS our approach to learner voice is more than just about gaining feedback. Through facilitated discussions and deep engagement, we strive for a transformative learner voice experience which builds learners' confidence, agency and capacity to shape their education provision. It is learner voice for change, at a personal, local and national level. This 'I'm a FET Learner' booklet gives a clear sense of an emerging FET learner identity, the power of learning and the responsibility we have to listen, respond and act for educational equality. The Forum creates an open space for learners to share their insightful views of FET, which in turn is intrinsically linked

to their lived experiences, this booklet brings a number of those wonderful stories to life.

Niamh O'Reilly, CEO, AONTAS

SOLAS

SOLAS is delighted to support this exciting new publication which highlights the voice of learners across FET. Since SOLAS and the ETBs were formed in 2013, we have worked closely with AONTAS in ensuring that the learner voice influences strategy and the nature of provision across FET. A key mechanism in this regard was the development of the National FET Learner Forum, with the development of more regional approaches and more focus across different settings empowering learners across Ireland. The learner voice has played a central role in shaping the next ambitious FET strategy, 'Transforming Learning'. It's central ethos is that FET should be for everyone and be available in every community across Ireland. Its learners reflect the diverse and vibrant society in Ireland, and we have to use their incredible experience to inspire others to join in a FET journey which can take you as far as you want to go. This booklet demonstrates exactly that, and I would like to say thanks to all the learners who contributed, and to AONTAS for pulling together such an accessible and insightful publication.

Andrew Brownlee, CEO, SOLAS

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)

The initiative to celebrate annually the voice of learners in Further Education and Training (FET) settings is to be commended. I have been able in the past to participate in the event and it is a shame that this year we cannot meet in person and hear the voices.

AONTAS has done a great service in producing this booklet so that we can gain an insight into the journey of learners as represented in the writing here. The act of learning depends so much on relationships being built so that the learner experiences the excitement and challenge that change them as people. Learning is a dialogue, an exchange that allows interaction and growth. There is an intensity in the experience that needs to be spoken or written for learning to be truly consolidated. This booklet captures that really well. The impact of ETB literacy services, guidance services, Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), Back to Education Training Initiative (BTEI) and other provision is notable in the stories. The distinctions among the services are invisible because for learners the relationship with tutors and coordinators is in focus. That openness to listening and allowing learners speak and write with encouragement features in the stories. I am grateful to all who wrote these pieces and to those who helped them prepare over months or years for this public statement of achievement.

For the learner, it is obvious that the capacity to write in this booklet was based on a continual process of planned work, questions and answers, discussion of ideas, redirection and praise that ended in a finished piece as worthwhile as these pieces have become.

Paddy Lavelle, General Secretary, ETBI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

QQI welcomes the publication of this booklet, which illustrates the empowering impacts for Further Education and Training (FET) learners of participating in opportunities to outline, and provide feedback on, their learning experiences through mechanisms such as the National FET Learner Forum, the regional FET Learner fora and the AONTAS Learners as Leaders peer mentoring programme.

QQI considers the learner voice to be a critical component in ensuring the quality of education and training. QQI's Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines (2016), which are applicable to all providers of education and training, emphasise a holistic, provider-wide approach to quality assurance and the importance of embedding a quality culture, "... where all of a provider's staff and learners are involved in quality assurance, and in which quality is accepted as a responsibility for all to improve upon". An effective system of quality assurance should therefore be inclusive of all

stakeholders and include a continuous focus on self-evaluation, improvement and enhancement. As core stakeholders, it is important that structures and opportunities for authentic and meaningful learner input and feedback form a fundamental component of these systems.

Given the significant diversity of FET provision, and in the backgrounds and learning experiences of FET learners, the task of capturing and responding to these is complex and requires multiple mechanisms to systematically capture the learner voice at all levels and across all activities and service types. Such mechanisms are essential to ensuring continuous improvement in FET provision and, as demonstrated in the stories outlined in this booklet, can also have significant developmental and knowledge benefits for learners in their confidence and capacity to engage with, and effect change within, other spheres of their lives.

Cliona Curley, Interim Chief Executive, Quality and Qualifications Ireland

ORGANISATIONS

AONTAS

AONTAS is the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation, a membership organisation representing adult education tutors, providers, learners, and stakeholders. AONTAS is committed to advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to a quality service for adult learners throughout their lives, and promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning. AONTAS supports learners, particularly educationally disadvantaged learners, to engage in lifelong learning, and advocates for more inclusive national education policy. AONTAS achieves our goals through research, communications and advocacy. Our work is aimed at working towards an inclusive, learner-centred lifelong learning system that enables adults to have a meaningful learning experience.

SOLAS and the European Social Fund

Established in 2013, SOLAS (The Further Education and Training Authority, An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna), is the State Organisation responsible for funding, planning and coordinating Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland. Its mission is to fund, co-ordinate and monitor a range of FET provision to ensure economic and social wellbeing and to play its part in progressing, influencing and supporting the development of a FET sector that

is more responsive to the needs of learners and employers, is innovative, flexible and demand-led. Its vision is to achieve a well-recognised FET sector, valued for its quality and for delivery of education, training and skills that enables learners to succeed in the labour market and thrive in society. The core principles of SOLAS are to

- ensure there is robust intelligence to inform the planning, funding and design of new and existing FET provision;
- focus on adding value by fostering collaboration across the FET sector, sharing learning and empowering delivery organisations;
- promote innovation and fund provision that meets identified need;
- be open to new ideas, proactive in seeking out evidence of ‘what works’ in FET and ensure that the learner experience is at the centre of decision-making; and
- maintain a central focus on standards and quality in FET, including excellence in programme development and the on-going professional development of the FET workforce.

SOLAS, along with the European Social Fund, fund the National FET Education and Training Learner Forum.

Education and Training Boards

Education and Training Boards (ETBs) are statutory authorities which have responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. ETBs manage and operate second-level schools, further education colleges, multi-faith community national schools and a range of adult and further education centres delivering education and training programmes.

ETBs are active in local communities through the direct provision of training and education programmes delivered in training centres, colleges and other training and educational settings. In this way, ETBs seek to make a real difference to the lives of the people they serve. Such responsiveness continues to be the hallmark of the education and training boards sector, looking outward nationally and internationally, while servicing education and training locally and individually.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Learners

We would like to thank each of the ten learners who shared their stories as part of this booklet: Innocent Iroaganachi, Noeleen Watson, Liam Shortall, Noel Hanrahan, Nancy Poynton, Daniel Kenny, Imani Tutu, Una Buckley, Kevin Hanly and Niamh Becton. Each learner generously shared their time and personal experiences to help others see the benefits of participation in lifelong learning and the power of sharing learner voice. Each of these unique stories is a testament to the impact of lifelong learning and the value of learner voice. As their stories illustrate, many of these learners have overcome significant barriers to participate in adult education and each has shared their story in the hope of inspiring others to engage in education and share their voices as well. We commend the learners featured in this booklet for their generosity and openness.

Education and Training Boards

National FET Learner Forum events would not take place without the support and dedication of Education and Training Board staff who promote the event, recruit learners to attend, and action the changes learners raise in Forum meetings. The culture of learner voice that has grown, and continues to grow, in FET, is due to their ongoing support and commitment to learner voice. We thank all participating Education and Training

Boards for working with AONTAS on this project and inviting us into your centres to meet with such wonderful learners, whose journey toward FET learner voice began in the open classrooms that Education and Training Boards build and cultivate.

The National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group

We would like to thank the National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group. This group consists of two learner representatives, a FET Director and representatives from SOLAS, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP), the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). Their support of the National FET Learner Forum helped to shape the experience each of these learners had on the project. We thank each Advisory Group member for their continued support.

The National FET Learner Forum Academic Expert Group

We would also like to extend our appreciation to the Academic Expert Group members: Koen De Pryck, Fergal Finnegan, Ted Fleming, Paula

Flynn, Peter Lavender and Stephen O'Brien.
This group is made up of European and national learner voice experts. The Academic Expert Group has consistently helped to ensure that our work remains robust and authentic to learner voice. Their contribution has ensured that learners continue to deepen their engagement with this Forum and other AONTAS work. Thank you all for your continued support of this project.



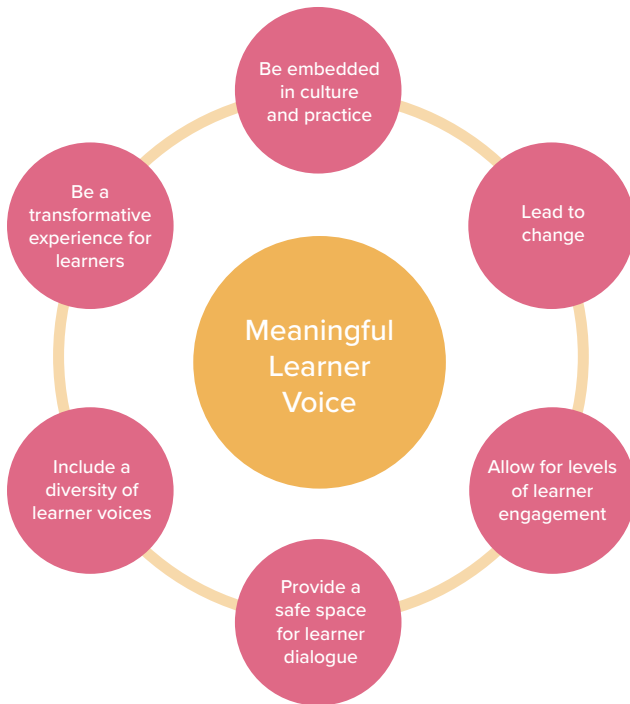
INTRODUCTION

This publication captures the experiences of ten Further Education and Training (FET) learners who participated in the [National FET Learner Forum](#) over the course of its existence from 2016 to 2020. The purpose of this booklet is to capture the individual impact of the Forum according to learners who have taken part. For many, the Forum is a stepping stone to further, deeper learner voice engagement. This is important because the Forum is designed to capture not only a multitude of learner voices, but importantly provide a platform for the voices that are least heard. This is evidenced in the feedback provided by learners who participate in the Forum with over two-thirds of participants (79%) stating that the Forum was the first time they had been asked to share their educational experiences (AONTAS Annual Synthesis Report, 2019).

All the learners who have volunteered to participate in this booklet have deepened their learner voice engagement since their participation in the Forum in a variety of ways. As these stories illustrate, learner voice processes are not just about gathering feedback. Creating a space where learners feel valued has been a core part of the project. Each learner has volunteered to share how their experience participating in the National FET Learner Forum fits into their broader learner voice journey. Through these stories we hope to share some of the broader, transformative impacts of the Forum as told through the voices of those who have taken part.

WHAT IS LEARNER VOICE?

AONTAS believes that learner voice must be multi-facilitated process. The Forum is an important example of learner voice, but it is just one piece of the process. To be successful learner voice must:



These processes cannot happen without support and collaboration from partners and a clear investment in learner voice. Ireland has benefited from seeing this support at the national and local levels, evidenced through the work of SOLAS and Education and Training Boards across the country.

We arrived at this framework, not only from our learning, but from the significant literature on learner voice that has helped shape this project. Learner voice is grounded mainly in the concepts of democracy and equalitarianism (Fielding, 2004 and 2010). The belief is that open and honest conversations between learners, teachers, and policy makers create a level of understanding and respect that can ensure educational systems are working for all those involved. The building of this culture takes effort. As Laura Lundy (2007) asserted, learner voice needs four key elements to ensure that it moves beyond a tokenistic exercise and becomes a system of meaningful engagement, these four key ingredients being space (a safe and inclusive space for learners), voice (facilitated to allow free expression), audience (a clear indication of who is listening), and influence (examples of action taken from the voice gathered). Paula Flynn (2017) expanded on this concept even further calling for a sustainable structure to ensure that learner voice processes move beyond temporal forms of engagement and become embedded cultural practices. Without these processes in place, the danger is that learner voice could become nothing more than a “tokenistic gesture” and eliminate the key individual transformative elements of learner voice processes that help define its value (Robinson and Taylor, 2007).

The one common theme streaming throughout all of these works is the focus on the learner as central to all learner voice theory. As Walker and Logan (2008) outline, learner voice needs to be a transformative process whereby it “empowers learners by providing appropriate ways of listening to their concerns, interests and needs in order to develop educational experiences better suited to those individuals.” These concepts can all be seen at the heart of the Forum objectives. The Forum aims not only to gather learner feedback for direct action and change, but to be a positive, transformative experience for each learner taking part. The aim of this publication is to provide a platform for learners to articulate just what this experience has meant to them.



THE HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL FET LEARNER FORUM

The [2014-2019 FET Strategy](#) called for the creation a learner Forum to “systematically benchmark learner’s views and satisfaction with their FET programme on an on-going basis” (Department of Education and Skills, 2014). Given AONTAS’ long history working in the area of learner voice, it was tasked with delivering the project, and has done so in collaboration with key stakeholders such as SOLAS and local Education and Training Boards since its inception in 2016. AONTAS set about developing a large-scale learner voice project that took a mixed methods approach to capturing learner voice. Informed by both an academic expert group, who ensured the project remained vested in robust research practice and meaningful learner voice engagement, and a project advisory group made up with key stakeholders including SOLAS; Education and Training Boards Ireland; the FET Directors Forum; the Department of Education and Skills; and NALA, who helped ensure the project remained connected and responsive to current policy developments.

The National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum started in 2016 as a one-day national event with 70 learners taking part. Over the course of the past four years, the Forum has grown into a series of regional and national events, reaching over 1,000 learners a year. As you can see from Figure 1 on the following page, this number keeps growing. To date the project

has grown into one of the largest learner voice projects in Europe, being cited as an exemplar of learner voice practice.

This project employs a mixed methods approach, placing rich qualitative data gathered from learners at the heart of all reporting. It also uses large-scale quantitative data sets obtained from surveys and learner profile data to ensure the project remains inclusive and representative of the sector. At each event, learners engage in one-hour long focus group discussions where they share their experiences in FET. These discussions are audio recorded, transcribed, and analysed for reporting. This qualitative data is then combined with survey data gathered from each participant at every event. Each event generates one report that is sent to a participating Education and Training Board. Evidence for each of these reports is compiled and then published in two annual reports: an Annual Synthesis Report and a Learner Report. The infographic featured on page 17 captures what this process looks like to date.

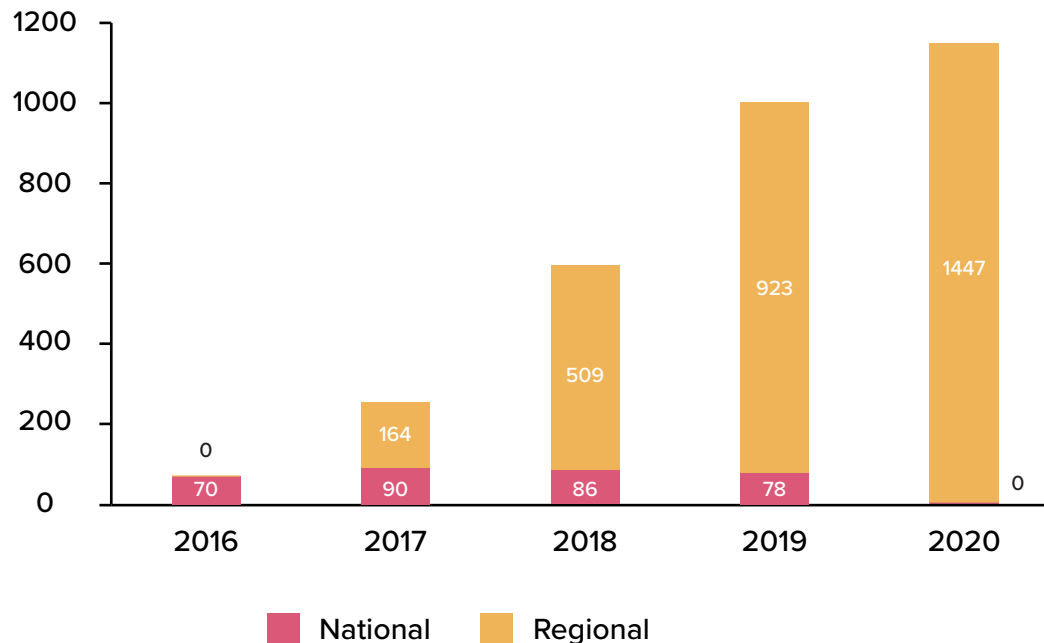


Figure 1 - National FET Learner Forum attendance to date

Adapting to the COVID-19 Pandemic

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the National FET Learner Forum has moved online. Since April 2020, we have been holding meetings virtually and increasing our survey reach to ensure learner voice helps to inform the FET sector through this unprecedented time of educational change. By hosting open-call virtual events and two Education and Training Board-specific events, as well as reaching over 900 learners

through our COVID-19 Learner Survey, AONTAS published the [COVID-19 Further Education and Training \(FET\) Learner Report](#). AONTAS is using the recommendations and experiences shared by learners through this report to ensure learner voice informs efforts to mitigate educational disadvantage during the COVID-19 restrictions. AONTAS is also continuing to host virtual Forum events with Education and Training Boards for the remainder of this year and aims to reach more learners than ever in the 2020/2021 academic year.

Impact of the Forum at regional and national level

Findings from the 2017 National FET Learner Forum were included in the Progress Review of the FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2018). At a 2018 conference organised by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, SOLAS CEO Andrew Brownlee (then Executive Director of Strategy and Knowledge) linked regional Forum findings directly to improvements in FET implemented at the local level (AONTAS, 2019). In 2020, the Forum findings were used by Quality and Qualifications Ireland to reflect on Teaching, Learning, and Assessment during COVID-19 (QQI, 2020). The FET Strategy for the period 2020-2024 acknowledges the work of the National FET Learner Forum in “securing qualitative feedback at national and regional level on FET” (SOLAS, 2020, p.57). Recently, AONTAS has been working with Education and Training Boards and Quality and Qualifications Ireland to support the training of learners, many of whom have participated in the National FET Learner Forum, in more representative roles, such as representatives of Education and Training Board governance structures and as learner representatives in quality assurance review processes. The National FET Learner Forum’s influence on FET policy and place in the new FET strategy is a testament to the clear and measurable policy impact of a learner voice project.

National FET Learner Forum in Numbers to Date



5

Years



3304

Learners



39

Events



252

Hours of Discussion



4

Learner Reports



28

Regional Reports



4

Annual Reports



19

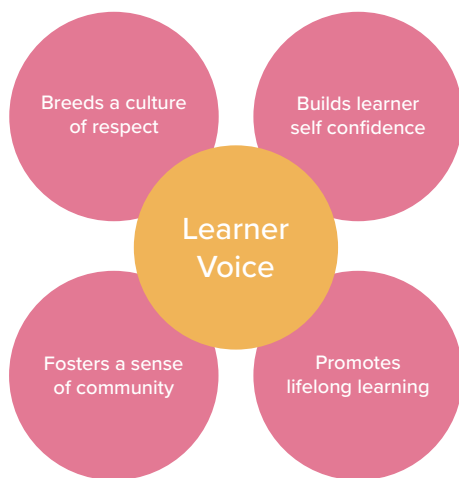
Advisory Group Meetings



8

Academic Expert Group Meetings

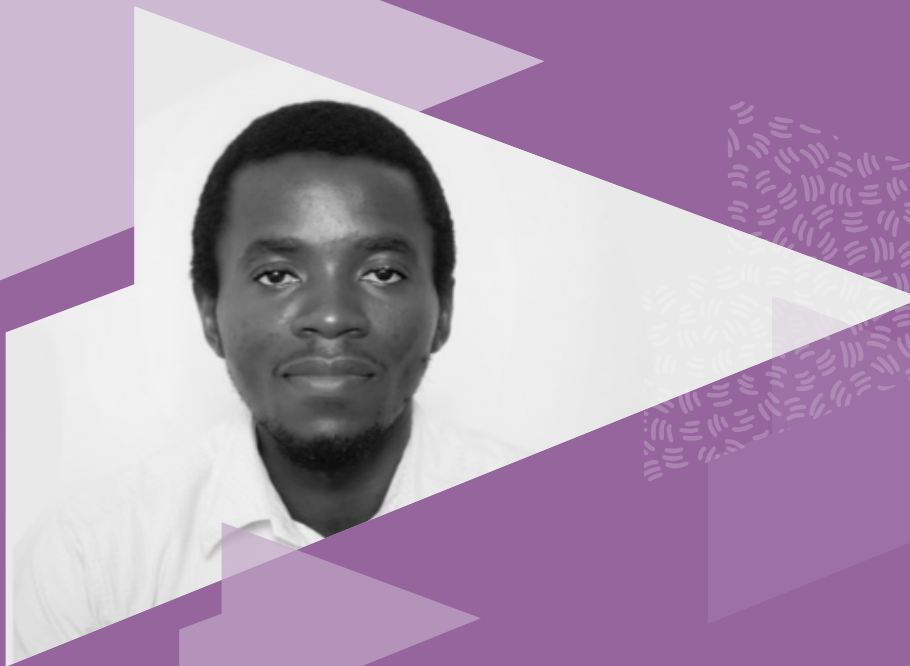
THE VALUE OF LEARNER VOICE



There is a growing and deepening culture of learner voice within FET in Ireland. This is clear from the new [FET Strategy](#), which has increased its references to learner voice and reasserted its commitment to keep learner voice at the heart of FET provision (SOLAS, 2020, p.57). These commitments are important because they help to ensure that FET remains learner-centred and that learner voice is valued as a critical evidence that can inform the future of FET provision. The National FET Learner Forum has played a key part in this process by “providing a space for the voices which are the least often heard at the policy table” (AONTAS, 2019, p.152).

AONTAS as well has continued to deepen its commitment to learner voice, making learner voice for action one of its three strategic goals in AONTAS’ new [Strategic Plan](#) (AONTAS, 2019). As part of this work, AONTAS has expanded its learner voice work by establishing a Learners as Leaders Programme (as part of the European Agenda for Adult Learning Project), developing a learner newsletter featuring quarterly learner stories, establishing learner representative positions on our Board, having learners work with stakeholders on all learner project advisory groups, and including learners as keynote speakers at policy events.

The focus of this booklet, however, is on the continued impact of participating in the National FET Learner Forum on learners themselves. Through each learner story, this publication takes a look at the National FET Learner Forum as a stepping stone to sharing voice in other areas. As the stories show, these are learners who started off sharing their voice as part of the National FET Learner Forum, and have since gone on to share their voices in influential ways in their local communities and in the spheres of adult learning and activism. For the learners we feature in this booklet, being heard at the policy table through the Forum was a turning point and helped build their capacity to share their voice as a FET learner.



"Being a learner is opening me up to changes, through which I am discovering my true self and, most importantly, building my self-confidence."

Innocent Iroaganachi

Place of Learning: Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board

Course: Nursing Studies Level 5

Innocent first attended the National FET Learner Forum Regional event in Limerick in February 2020. It was at this event that he signed up to the Learners as Leaders Peer Mentoring Programme. He has since gone on to be involved in several learner voice activities with AONTAS, including sharing his learner story on our website and in the learner spotlight section of our learner newsletter. He is also participating in training to become a QQI learner representative.

I felt when I applied for asylum, “am I stopping my education?” What I used to hear was that when your case is decided by the government, only then can you go ahead with your education. But when I came down to meet some of the tutors and Immigrant Support officials, they introduced us to the ETB centre in Ennis and Miltown. They told us that there were courses that we were entitled to do, irrespective of our asylum status. So, you don’t have to just wait. I just felt “oh. That’s a good thing. I’m not losing out entirely.”

When I was offered accommodation in Miltown Malbay, I felt indifferent, because it was in a remote area. Coincidentally, the day I arrived, there was a welcome gathering for the residents at The Central Hotel - an emergency accommodation centre at the community hall along the Main Street. We had some refreshments, and dancing, people from the community came around in their numbers to give us a warm welcome.

Even though I had some past experience sharing my voice and had my writings published previously, when it came to sharing my voice now, I had my reservations. I was dealing with some personal distress and I was concerned by the overwhelmingly negative publications about the direct provision system in Ireland. Thus, I was disoriented and uncoordinated, to the extent that I even decided to take a long break from writing. But experiencing the welcome from Miltown residents offered some relief my distress. As much as I felt glad about the endless positivity, a part of me desired to see these positives be made known to the wider public.

Having joined the ETB centre, I enrolled for classes in creative writing and a few other personal development courses, all to keep my mind busy. The tutor and other learners in the class were instrumental in my decision to start writing again. When the tutor introduced the topic of *finding your voice*, I felt concerned because I did not see the positives. I took it upon myself to share my experience and let people know that in the midst of whatever challenges asylum seekers are facing in Ireland, there are communities and people that are doing their best to give comfort to those who are seeking asylum. So that was how I began writing my stories, especially in Miltown. The community has been so helpful. Writing became a way for me to go house to house (in the form of published writing) thanking everyone in Miltown. Later, RTÉ came down to Miltown in commemoration of the 20 years since Direct Provision was established in Ireland and did an interview with me. I also began sending my stories for publication to *The Clare Echo* and *The Clare Champion*. I was able to share that:

Being a learner opened me up to changes, through which I am discovering my true self and, most importantly, building my self-confidence.

February 2020 was the first time I attended the National FET Learner Forum. When the tutors told us about it, they explained that it is a gathering where learners themselves are more like the people who are taking charge. It provides an

avenue for FET providers to hear from us and know our feelings, such as the challenges we are experiencing in our centres, and ways to address them. This was what encouraged me to go.

One of the benefits of taking part in the Forum, would be getting feedback from other people. Going to that event, I was able to understand that people have different stories deep down within them, not just relating to academics. Some fellow learners shared challenging experiences. They described how becoming a learner had assisted them, through the support from tutors and fellow learners, to overcome challenges. It contributed a whole lot for me, knowing about fellow learners' stories.

As a person, one of the things that has contributed to who I am today, has been listening to people tell their own experience and learning from it. The Forum provided the opportunity for me to hear and share in people's joy, in their challenges, and put myself in their shoes.

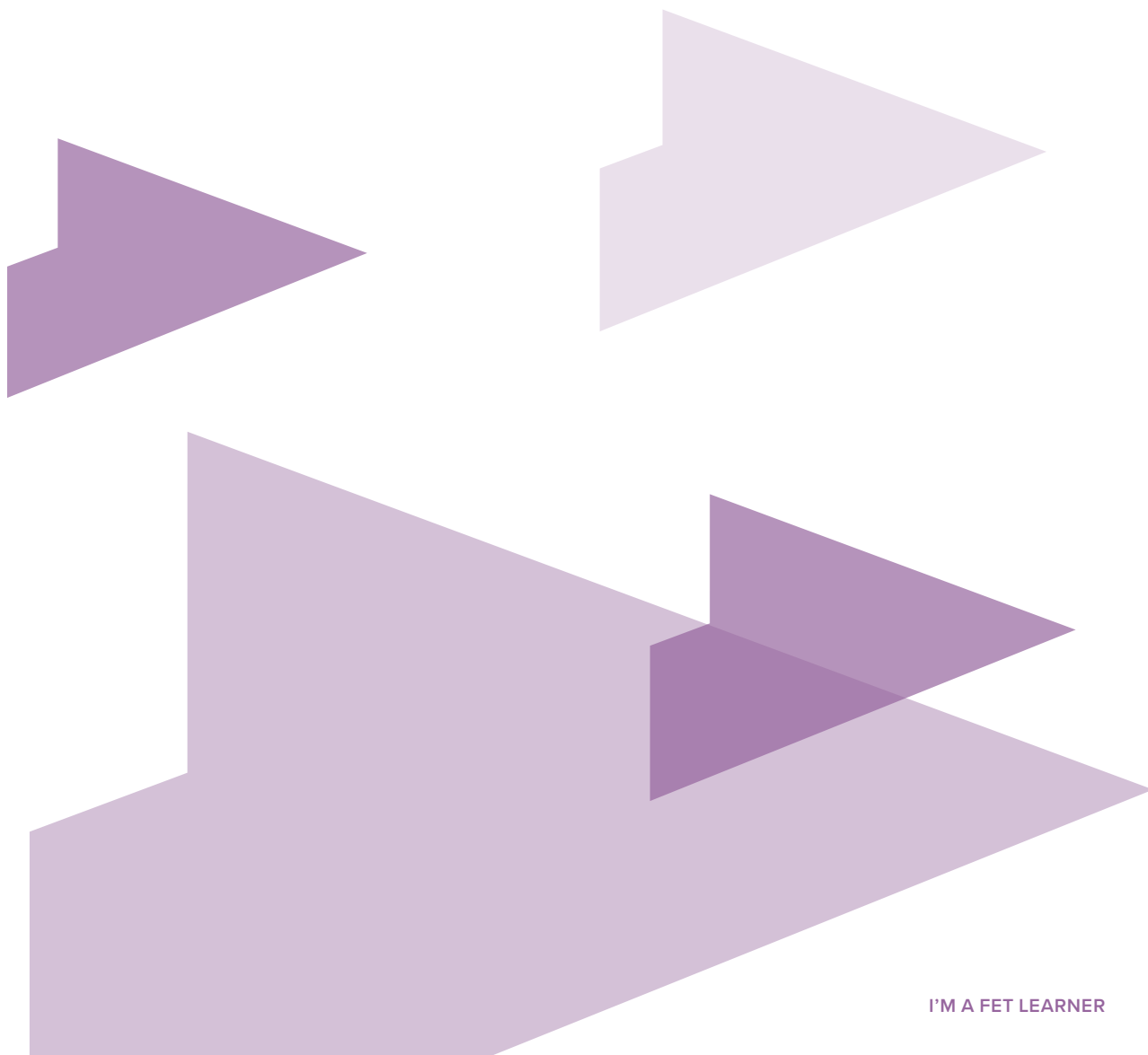
At first, I was thinking "I hope I don't go there and I'm the only person from a different background," but that was not the case. The Forum provided an avenue for me to know people of different cultural background, to know about the progress they have made amid uncertainties in their lives.

Being a learner, the Forum also provides the opportunity where you get to know about challenges, the progress that has been made, and improvements that need to be done.

I would see learner voice as a feedback channel to make improvements. Aside from that, I would see it as creating awareness on various levels of the progress that has been made as well as the impact such progress is having on learners. It contributes to informing the tutors as well as those who are managing the various centres.

After the Forum, I have gone onto other experiences that have allowed me to further share my voice. I have participated in AONTAS' Learners as Leaders Programme, trained as a peer mentor, and recently trained to serve as a Learner Representative for QQI on the ETB Quality Assurance Review Panels.

I definitely would give it up for the ETB tutors in Miltown and Ennis, as well as the officials of Clare Immigrant Support Centre, who on many occasions, had to make sure that the additional learning and training needs of asylum seekers in Clare were provided. They do not just shove you out and say, “you don’t have a say in this.”





*"My experience
might help somebody
else go back into
education."*

Noeleen Watson

Place of Learning: Kildare and Wicklow
Education and Training Board

Course: Online Skills Hub and Skills to
Advance

Noeleen attended the first National FET Learner Forum event at the Mansion House in Dublin in 2016. Since then, she has gone on to become a learner representative and has been involved with a number of AONTAS projects and events. She currently serves as a learner representative on the National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group. She did a reading of her poem, "First Steps", at the AONTAS Lifelong Learning Summit in November 2019.

I was at the first National FET Learner Forum event at the Mansion House in 2016. I actually co-facilitated one of the workshops in the afternoon. I think that was one of the first workshops I facilitated anywhere actually. I remember I was able to partake in the discussions around the table. It was in the Mansion House in Dublin and I had never been there before. It's stunning, absolutely stunning. At the time, I would have finished my graphic design course and now doing single module courses, the likes of Level 5 Psychology and Level 5 Intercultural Studies. I decided to attend the National FET Learner Forum because it was for AONTAS and I love partaking in anything AONTAS asked me to because you always come back feeling so enriched! Even if you're only there as an attendee, you still come back meeting amazing people, probably people you would never meet on a normal day.

I would have been nervous about doing the workshop in the afternoon because I had never co-facilitated a workshop before. Sometimes I would be very nervous when you're partaking in the discussions because I would be sitting there thinking "oh I don't have anything to say" or "I don't know all the acronyms or how everything is set up".

It is a great opportunity to bring your story and your experience to the table and you cannot learn that out of a book. There's no acronym for your story – it is what it is.

After the Forum, I stayed in touch with AONTAS. I went on speak at the OneStepUp.ie launch and AONTAS' Annual General Meeting. I think it is important for learners to share their voice on their own experience with education. I went back into education in 2010, because of where I was in my life. I didn't think it was important to others, but then I remember when I shared my experience for OneStepUp.ie and I thought:

My experience might help somebody else go back into education.

I think from that point of view, it's like an acknowledgement that you really changed your life with education and you could help somebody else go back into education. It is hard but it's not that hard. To me it's very important for the learner to acknowledge this fact.

There are people making policies and things like that, but if they don't hear the learner voice, they're not on the ground, they're not really getting real life experiences.

Prior to this, I had no confidence at all. I was coming out of a difficult marriage and was broken inside. In 2012, I met this man who was teaching us about restorative practices. And he said, "Noeleen go and plan to do something like abseiling off a cliff and you'll never fear anything

again.” Now I didn’t do any of that, but every time somebody asked me to do something, I would just say yes. So, when AONTAS asked me to do the video for OneStepUp.ie, I just said yes. And then I was asked would I speak to home school liaison officers who had just finished their training, I just said yes. And then I spoke at the Maldron Hotel in Tallaght. I didn’t even know what I was to speak on and I remember there was 70 people in the room, but I just stood up and spoke. I spoke about my journey, home school teachers, and going back to education. I was asked then to go back to Roslyn Park in Sandymount to share my story. I only had five minutes to speak and there was over 200 people there. The Minister for State was also there. I shared my story and I said that for years I thought I was a nobody.

The Minister for State came up to me afterwards. He came over and he shook my hand and I thought to myself “even though I only spoke for five minutes, to me I felt as though I touched a part of him.” Whereas he wouldn’t hear those stories if it wasn’t for the learner or whoever was speaking at that event.

When you have a learner speaking, there’s never a sound in the room, and people are just blown away by whatever that story is, and that’s what I love to do.

I think the biggest thing I’ve done is last year at the 2019 National FET Learner Forum event in Croke Park, I got up and I read a poem I wrote. I

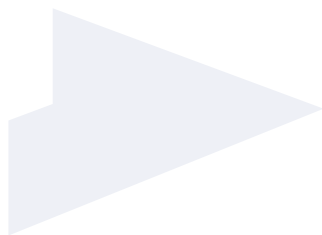
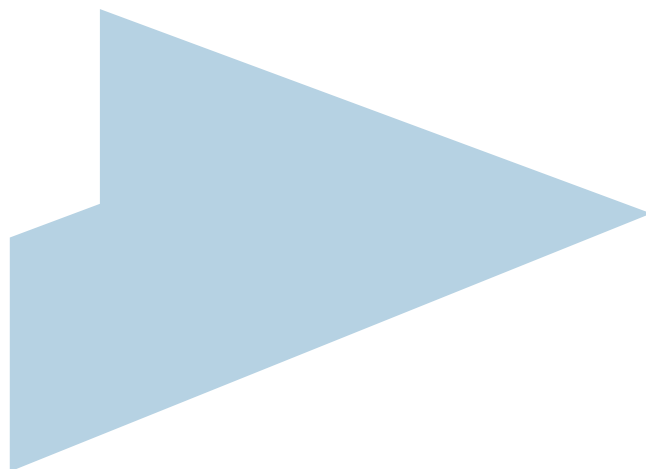
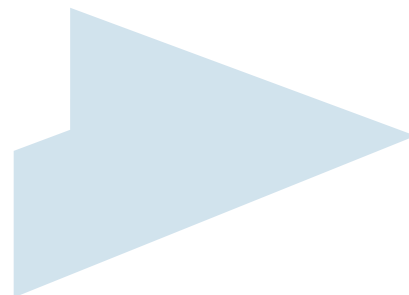
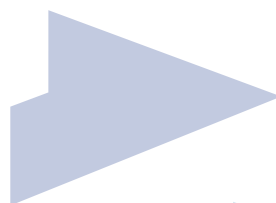
just thought to myself “who can say they’ve read one of their own poems at Croke Park?” So that is how I share my voice. I do a video now every day on Facebook and sometimes on Instagram. I pick an Angel card or I read a poem every week. And a neighbour who hadn’t been out of her house since the whole lockdown, while there was the break between lockdowns, said to me “listening to your video every day has kept me going through the lockdown.” So, you’re still sharing your voice and you’re still bringing a little bit of lightness to somebody’s day.

To me that’s so important that there are people there to receive your story and that you have the courage to share your story. It just blows me away.

When you have not had a voice all your life, your voice is important. I attended the AONTAS AGM in May 2019 and wrote the poem called *Voice*. It was inspired by the learners sharing their voice. I didn’t have a voice, full stop in my life at all, so to hear now that you have an actual learner’s voice, and that, when you speak, you can tell people about your journey through education, tell them about your journey through life to get you through education, to me, it just blows me away. You have people that will sit and listen to you, hear your ups and downs, and that there’s people in suits listening to you.

I remember at the original Forum, we were told of all the people from SOLAS there, and I thought "isn't it a wonderful thing that policy makers are listening to just ordinary people saying that they're struggling with money, or they're struggling with childcare, or that they're struggling even with themselves to get them into class?" To me it's so important that there are people there to receive your story and that you have the courage to share your story.

I just love being a part of these events and I just feel AONTAS has been a huge help in my journey to be more confident, to help other women get back their life, and it's so important that you can be real to them. To me, AONTAS is there representing everyone, whatever age, it's very inclusive and I'm so glad that I'm part of that journey.





"I think it's important that learners' opinions are used to shape the future of education and courses. It is also important that what is teased out is also the intangible benefits of education."

Liam Shortall

Place of Learning: Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board

Course: Level 5 Business with Tourism (2020)

Liam attended the regional National FET Learner Forum event for Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board in March 2019 and went on to attend the National event in Croke Park in April 2019. Since then, he has shared his learner story with AONTAS through the Learner Spotlight feature in our learner newsletter. Liam has also taken part in the Learners as Leaders Peer Mentoring Programme and has undergone training with QQI to become a learner representative.

I was nominated to go to a regional Learner Forum early in 2019 in Limerick and later to the National FET Learner Forum event, which was held in Croke Park in April of 2019. As someone who loves Gaelic Games and Irish history, it was brilliant. I was delighted to be nominated by the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) coordinator. I felt that I was being sent for a good reason because the coordinator knew that I wouldn't be shy about speaking up about the issues that would be important to myself and my fellow learners. This started my involvement with AONTAS and I am glad to see that there is such an organisation in existence.

On a personal level, attending these events was also part of the learning process.

When I was younger I might have shied away from something like that. I wouldn't have wanted to speak in a group or wanted to be controversial. But, I didn't want to attend the Forum simply to smile and nod. I wanted to hear positive things, of course, but I also wanted to raise a few issues as well. I think this has been beneficial to me. The certificates I completed in Microsoft Excel, Bookkeeping, and Business Administration at Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board have set me on a more positive path. I wanted to share this experience. I think it's important that learners' opinions are used to shape the future of education and courses. It is also important that what is teased out is also the intangible benefits of education.

Think for a moment about the person who has got into a good routine. They might have been 6 months out of work, they met new people, they met likeminded people, they had a reason to get up in the morning and, whether they got a certificate or not, in the end they had a sense of achievement or self-esteem. Those things don't show up on any government balance sheet so to speak. The learner voice process highlights those other important benefits of education.

It's vital that education helps people return to work and gives them the skills needed, but the learner who simply feels a sense of achievement is as important as the learner who transitions straight to a full-time job thanks to their studies. Well done to both! I enjoyed the sense of achievement and camaraderie at my centre. This is such an important feature in Further Education and Training. It was very interesting to listen to the various stories about what learners hoped to achieve and what their reason was for returning to education. So many people were dealing with barriers. I could discuss some of these at the Learner Forums.

While I was at my Education and Training Board Centre, there was a workshop on Active Citizenship.

I know myself that being involved in adult education and AONTAS has caused me to think a bit more about the world around me and the way things are done.

I have always felt it was important to vote but I have become more interested in local causes and politics. I was at general election hustings in Ennis in January. I had an opportunity to meet some of the candidates and speak about education. I've also joined the Irish National Organisation for the Unemployed (INOUE) and become a branch member, where I've had an opportunity to talk at Zoom meetings about the important things that affect people who are unemployed. I shared my own experience and provided feedback. The INOUE, like AONTAS, advocates on behalf of people and makes submission to the Government. The word "voice" is quite important because my experience would be that there's a lot of people who have gone back to education for various reasons, but some people would be coming from a vulnerable situation, perhaps from a vulnerable socioeconomic group or from a learning difficulties perspective. It is people like this who could say that their voice is being denied in society.

The word voice is quite striking – it's not for nothing that it's called "learner voice." Everyone's voice is as important as everyone else's, and I think that, for so many people, for various reasons, their voice has been, and still is, muted over the years. Education can be a route away from that muted voice. Knowing that learners are listened to and they can have input into their own education is so important.

Through AONTAS, I completed the Learners as Leaders peer mentoring programme. In the future I may have opportunity to assist a fellow learner. I would be delighted to help out. It's important to keep the education process going. The last few years and, more so with COVID-19, have reminded me to engage in and enjoy my own hobbies and interests. I am currently completing local history and genealogy courses in Ennis at the moment.

I think that every Euro that is spent on education now is an investment. It's an overdue spend, but it's an investment in us all, it's an investment in society. And I think that we're only at the start of mentioning the importance of positive mental health. I mentioned there the intangible benefits of education including self-esteem, good routine, making friends and thinking for yourself.



"I had the confidence to tell my story in front of strangers in a way that I hadn't verbalised before. There was something about the day, something about the people, something about the situation."

Noel Hanrahan

Place of Learning: Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board

Course: Level 4 Word Processing, Level 5 Social Studies

Noel attended the regional National FET Learner Forum event for Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board in February 2020. Since then, he has joined the Learners as Leaders Peer Mentoring Programme and has shared his learner story on our website and as part of the Learner Spotlight section of our Learner newsletter. Noel also participated in a virtual focus group discussion as part of the Virtual National FET Learner Forum in the Spring of 2020.

Initially I didn't know anything about AONTAS and I'd never heard of SOLAS. I was going to attend the National FET Learner Forum and it was simply nice to be asked to do something. I thought it'd be a great day but I genuinely didn't know what to expect.

At the Forum itself, things ran through my head like "well if I'm asked to tell my story, what will I say and what will I not say?" But I spoke more about personal things than I thought I might, and I got a round of applause. That was a real boost, because they were strangers to me at the time. I just went with the way I felt.

I felt valued, I felt listened to. In most of my life that hasn't necessarily been the case, so it was just great. It was really good. Very, very positive.

Leading up to the Forum, I had completed a confidence class and I was still in the middle of a personal effectiveness class, so I hadn't had any real opportunity to discuss the new great effects of this new world of learning on me. The Forum really was a big deal. It wasn't a day out with the lads or anything like it. It was professional, everybody felt valued, there was no discrimination. There was really a *joie de vivre* around the place. Everyone that was there, tutor or student, had their story. It's a feeling that I hadn't really had with a large group of people before that event.

In all my classes, from my initial confidence classes to personal effectiveness, I would bring a level of nervousness with me. But it decreased as time went on, because I fought it. I deserve to be free of these constant nerves about things that there's no need to be nervous about.

I've taken a lot of the pressure off myself. I'm far more genuinely relaxed. And so much of that has come from attending events like the Forum and talking to AONTAS, and continuing my courses.

Prior to this, I felt that having an addiction was my full identity. I had to find this other outlet through education, something emotionally very enriching. It was just great.

My very first course I thought, "I'll do it and just see what happens, but I'll only do one course." I didn't understand at all the connection with good learning and good education, because my experiences hadn't been good for various reasons. It is quite humbling to learn so much at this stage in life about such fundamental things, but far more than that I'm just delighted that I'm here to learn.

I had the confidence to tell my story in front of strangers in a way that I hadn't verbalised before. There was something about the day, something about the people, something about the situation.

I think it may come at different times for different people, but at some stage if someone continues in adult learning, to make the adult learning experience all that it can be, I think sharing is vital.

Adult education is the key to the changes I have made in my life. I've met so many people, I've been able to explore my own intelligence, and listen to other people.

I never knew the true depth of the effect of a good education. I was never introduced or I never grasped that it's a much bigger thing than simply words on paper. It's almost only secondary to food and water to live well.

So, for people making decisions, they need to be reminded of these intrinsic little things that link everything together. It isn't just "education." What it does for mental health and all forms of health, also has to be considered. It spreads goodness through society. It's a more holistic view.





*"I celebrate the fact
that I am who I am. It
has got me to where
I am now."*

Nancy Poynton

Place of Learning: Longford and
Westmeath Education and Training Board

Course: Level 6 Supervisory
Management, currently B.A. Professional
Social Care Practice

In 2019, Nancy attended the Higher
Education Authority and National Forum for
the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning
in Higher Education Student Success
Symposium. Nancy was one of four learners in
attendance who had participated in FET and
had progressed to Higher Education.

There was an email sent through the coordinator of the community centre in Mullingar and the coordinator put my name forward to attend the National FET Learner Forum because I was one of the adults from the Level 5 who ended up going to college. She asked me, would I be interested in attending the event and I said I would. It was a great day. The theme of it was trying to figure out what could be done to encourage adults to go back to higher education and how society, the government, lecturers, and everybody can take a different step in approaching how to reach the older generation. Each table had a facilitator and we were throwing out ideas about how things could be easier for adults, for instance more understanding of the struggles adults have with maturity, with families, and with income. There was a focus on being able to give supports to people that need supports.

Everybody had their own ideas and it was a successful day. I was actually really honoured to take part in it, honoured that I was even mentioned.

Previously, I was in college in America and I left college because I didn't understand what was going on. It was only years later that I was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). I just didn't get it, and I had trouble organizing myself. So, when I left school, I left out of frustration at the age of only 18. Years later, as a mature adult, I realised "I wish I had more education." And that was something that

always bothered me. It was always in the back of the head that I felt unfulfilled because I didn't finish college. So, in Ireland here I decided to go back to college. I started with FETAC Level 5 and I was just so worried that I wouldn't be able to keep up. I had great support from the tutors and then I went into Level 6. They offered me a place on a Level 6 Supervisor Management Course. I finished that and 2 days later I was fully employed. It was after the Level 6 that I was diagnosed with ADHD. Some people say that they don't like to be labelled, but when I got the diagnosis, everything made so much sense in my life. I knew why I found things difficult and now understood that I had a different way of learning.

I did very well on the Levels 5 and 6 – I got over 17 distinctions between the two courses – and it opened the doorway to college for me.

I was so nervous and frightened about college, thinking: "Can I do this? Do I know what I'm doing?" I have to say it has been a wonderful, wonderful experience. I've had great structural supports for my learning needs. I'm actually on the last work experience placement. I am currently finishing my degree in Professional Social Care Practice. I can't explain what a wonderful experience it's been and the great supports I have had.

If I didn't have my family supporting me, I wouldn't have been able to do it as well as I did. Presently, I feel so complete. I feel so happy and proud of myself. When I left college, there was always that feeling that I left something unfinished because I didn't succeed. And it's just a privilege to get a second chance. Not many people can get a second chance to redo something that they regret. But that's the best thing about adult education. The government funding, the part-time courses, and the child-friendly environment provide the flexibility learners need. There are so many opportunities and there are so many ways to go back to education. Years ago, the attitude was "if you don't understand something just go with the flow, keep your head down, say nothing." That attitude is gone now a days. The more questions you ask, the more it broadens your mind. There's no guilt, there's no shyness.

I shared my experience of my diagnosis with ADHD with other learners. I had a few conversations with some of the others who attended and they were just like "very good, fair play to you." They actually commented that I spoke very openly about it. And I do.

I celebrate the fact that I am who I am. It has got me to where I am now.

I find that education is so different currently, because there are just so many supports that are tailored to us as individuals. Through educational research and talking to other people about it, that's what has strengthen the supports. The

more you talk about something, the more it's studied, and researched. This in turn provides more knowledge and help for adults. I think it is important for learners to share their voice. For someone who is ready to go back to education, listening to positive stories helps them and it reinforces the idea of returning to education. I have once or twice gone back to do a QQI programme or motivational talks with the classes to let them know what to expect and how taking my course affected me. It improved my life and what career opportunities I have received. Every now and then I would go back in and have a chat – just an informal chat. I have some friends that have said to me "I've never seen anyone so excited about education." But now my friends have also gone back to learning.

Learner voice is very important, because as a learner you've gone through the system, you know what's expected. And I think it's very contagious – when people see how wonderful the experience of going back to school is, it gets people thinking "well maybe I could do that."

And to see how well somebody has progressed through the years is really important. I think it's also important for students, especially for mature students that need that little bit of extra support, I think it's important for them to have a voice.



"I love trying to get my voice out there for Further Education and Training, because school wasn't for me, but since I've been in the ETB, I've just excelled."

Daniel Kenny

Place of Learning: Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board (Gorey Youth Needs Group) and Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board

Course: Level 5 Traineeship, Barbering

Daniel attended the National FET Learner Forum event in Croke Park in 2019. He speaks about the importance of learner voice on the video of the [event](#). Daniel has also taken part in training to become a learner representative with QQI.

I had never heard of the National FET Learner Forum before but when I arrived, I was surprised at how well it was run and all the work that they were doing to get learner voice out there. My coordinator was contacted by a member of the AONTAS staff asking for us to take part. My coordinator talked us through it and said the opportunity was there if we wanted to go, so we went with it. He explained that it was an opportunity for us to be heard rather than other people to tell our story, so it was interesting for all of us to go up and see what it was. I'm glad I went because it was a really good event.

When I first went up I wasn't too nervous but when I realised the size of the event, I was a little bit nervous. Everybody up there was great. Everyone was really welcoming because it was a new event for everyone.

It was a lovely atmosphere. There were people of all ages, from people who were 18 to people who were in their early 70s, and they were all really excited to share their voice as well.

For me it was very rewarding to go up and share my voice, but it wasn't only my voice – it was kind of everybody in the area of adult education. We were just lucky enough to go and share it in the Forum, but everybody around me felt the same way. It was rewarding for everyone.

I have been to some meetings with Wexford Local Development and other organisations where they have been requesting funding trying to help different people and showing different branches of what people can do. I went to one near Wexford town, where it was more like a board meeting rather than the Learner Forum so it was really official with everyone at the table. But the Forum was probably the first time I got to share in a relaxed setting, in my way of wanting to share it.

I had never done an interview or anything like that, so it was a new experience but it was good to get a start. I plan to do more things like that in the future. I love doing things like that and I love trying to get my voice out there for Further Education and Training, because school wasn't for me, but since I've been in the ETB, I've just excelled.

I have done two QQI courses and I received "Student of the Year" on both of them. I'm now in my third course. I'm going to get my third student of the year as well.

I did a Level 4 Pathways to Employment course. It was a pilot programme at the time. From the moment I walked in the door all the students and coordinator were so relaxed. It was like a friend talking to you rather than a teacher and that's what really benefited me. The problem with

school was the way in which teachers talk to you. They sometimes take advantage of their power dynamic, but in the Local Training Initiative (LTI) and the ETB everyone is equal. The coordinator and the student can have a normal conversation. There is no power between the two and that is what is really helpful for me and helped me settle in. After that, I did a level 5 in Sports and Recreation in Gorey that was also through an LTI. I had met some of the tutors when I was in Courtown and when I went up again it was just so relaxed and so easy going. At the moment, I am in Bray Institute of Further Education and I am doing a QQI Level 5 in Barbering. This is what I really want to do because I'd seen the gap in the market in the first lockdown.

For me, learner voice is about getting your voice out there. It's how you want things to be done and how you feel about things. It's really personal because it's not just anybody's voice, it's your voice. You are the learner, you are the one in the course, you are the one going and doing the work and for somebody to want to listen to that I think is really amazing.

I think it is very, very important for learners to share our opinions because we are the ones who are learning and maybe not all of us learn the same,

so it is best to get our opinion on how we want to learn. For me I probably learn best working with my hands and some other people learn better by looking at a book all the time, but we don't know those differences until we speak up. I think it is very important to talk about even the types of modules and courses that are available. The people high up do not realise what the people on the street actually need unless we are the ones speaking up. In my area there is a lot of unemployment and not many barbers, so that is why I have to travel up to Bray for my course. If a lot of people got their voice up, there may be another barbering course set up locally. I think it is important for people to speak up to say what is needed and what is important to them personally.

Where I did my first course there was a youth club that was run in the same Centre and it was run by the Gorey training initiative. I volunteered there for nearly two years and that was because the course had given me so much confidence. I learned how to work with people; you're dealing with parents and kids who may have social issues and some are quite confident and bold as can be, so you really see different dynamics of people and it really helped me learn to work in a group especially.

The training initiatives I have done have completely change of my life. I did not know what I was doing before I began. I'm from a very rough area of Dublin and not many people from there make it that far. When I moved to Wexford and started doing the training, it changed me as a person and it made me into the person I am today.

If you told me three or four years ago that I would be the way I am today, I would have laughed and said that it is not possible. Going through the training initiatives with the coordinator and the people I have worked it has honestly changed me for the better. Now I am always looking forward.

Even now, I am only after starting the barbering course, but now I am looking forward to having my own business and having my own barbershop. It is always teaching me to look forward and take every opportunity that comes up because you do not know when it is going to come back around. I love learning now through the training initiative. It's a different way of learning; you can have a bit of a joke a bit of a laugh with the tutors who are your friends, and at the end of the day you're getting your work done and you have the end goal in sight.



"You meet different learners from all over Ireland and you get to share experiences together."

Imani Tutu

Place of Learning: Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board

Course: Level 5 Legal Studies, currently Masters in International Commercial Law at University of Limerick

Imani attended the first ever National FET Learner Forum event in 2016, and was an ESOL learner at the time. His learner story featured in our 2016 booklet of learner stories entitled *I'm an Adult Learner*. Since 2016, Imani has progressed through QQI levels 4 – 5, an undergraduate degree from University College Cork, and is currently undertaking a Master's degree in International Commercial Law at the University of Limerick. He has shared his story on many platforms and was featured in the *Irish Times* in 2018.

I was at the first National FET Lerner Forum in 2016 representing Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board. When the adult literacy organiser asked me did I want to attend, I did not have any doubts. I came to Ireland in 2014 and I had never really been to Dublin before, so when she told me about the event, I said yes straight away.

The experience was amazing. It was the best experience of my life. I wish I could go back to that day.

I enjoyed meeting other learners, staying in the hotel and the event. On the day we went into groups of five or six people and said where we were from and then shared a bit about ourselves. This was my first time sharing my experience and it was a nice one. I think it is really important to share learner voice.

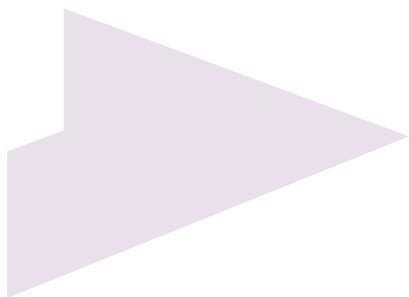
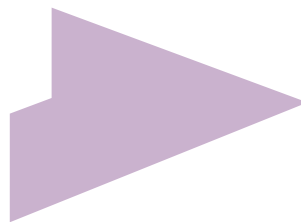
Your adult education centre may be small, but at the Forum you are part of something bigger. We are all learning through different paths, but we all have the same goal of getting our education, and learning from and supporting each other is a way of motivating each other.

At the 2016 event, I spoke to a nice woman for quite some time. At the time I didn't have a plan of doing law. I had wanted to go to university, but I did not have the encouragement. When I first came here, my friends told me there was no chance of me going to university or studying here, and that education in Ireland was really hard, so I was disappointed. But the woman told me, "You're doing the right thing, just keep going and you will get to university." I felt really good that day and I got something really important out of it.

After FET, I wanted to go to Cavan Institute. I needed a Leaving Certificate or to obtain a QQI Level 4 qualification. You could also go in as a mature student. I was not 23 yet, so I needed a QQI level 4 and I got it. I then did a QQI level 5 in Legal Studies at Cavan Institute. I then applied to the Central Applications Office (CAO) and I went to University College Cork (UCC). I am now doing my Master's International Commercial Law in the University of Limerick (UL). I am hoping to qualify as a solicitor.

Since the Forum I have spoken at the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) and I spoke to the Irish Times about my experience coming to Ireland and starting my education here.

These experiences would not have happened if I did not participate in the Forum; the experience with AONTAS and learner voice has been amazing. It was like my starting point and everything went well for me after that, so I am so glad that I participated.





*"A lot of changes
have happened by
putting the learner at
the centre."*

Una Buckley

Place of Learning: City of Dublin
Education and Training Board

Course: Level 6 Adult and Community
Education, Employed Skills to Advance

Una has been involved in learner voice work with AONTAS for many years. She attended the first National FET Learner Forum event in 2016 and has since gone on to facilitate discussions at National FET Learner Forum events. She has spoken at a number of AONTAS events including our Lifelong Learning Summit in 2019. Una's story is featured in the 2016 booklet *I'm an Adult Learner*. She is also a learner representative on the National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group.

In 2007 I started a night course on adult and community education, and there was an employee of AONTAS doing the same course. I had never heard of AONTAS and it was my first time going back to education in 30 or 40 years. Through them I became involved with AONTAS. The organisation gave me great self-confidence. They pushed you to things you didn't think you could do. It was always, "oh you're great, come on, you can do it!" I got to go the Forum and then was asked to be part of a learner group going to Edinburgh for the CONFINTA (International Conference on Adult Education), an international conference with learners from all over the world.

I met so many fabulous people from other countries over the years through learner voice and AONTAS. If you had told me before that I would be on live TV talking about adult education, or at conferences in Brussels, I wouldn't have believed you!

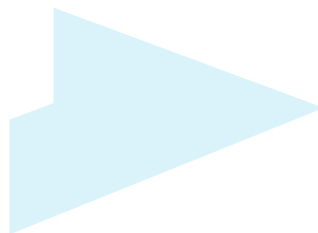
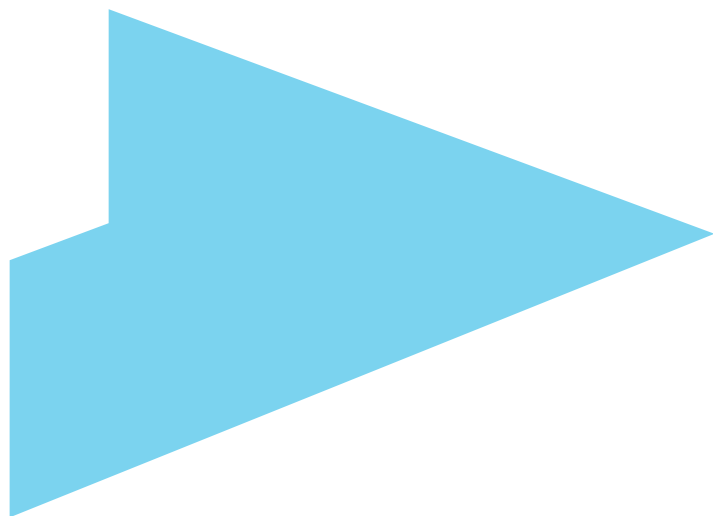
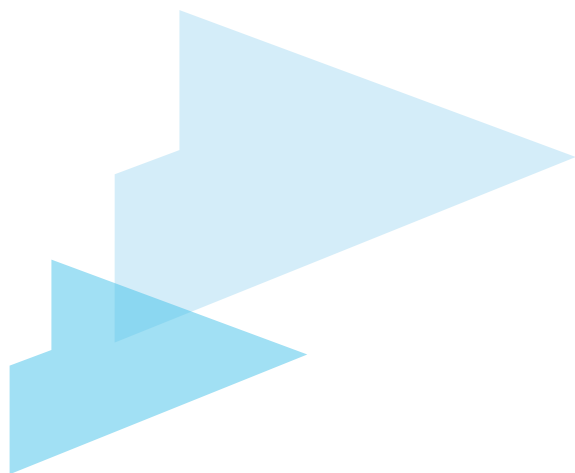
I was also the first in my family to go back to education and do all these things, and then my sister went back to college. You might not think you are influencing people, but it is important, even at a small level. If they see you are doing it they think, "you know, I could do that too."

For AONTAS it is all about learner voice and that really resonates with me. You have your voice, but it's very important that someone is listening to you. You have to be able to talk to the right people and get them to listen to you. That is why it is so important that learners are involved in their ETB. The people making decisions need to know that if you can't afford childcare or you can't afford basics, you cannot do a course.

It's important that different voices are included. Everybody has to be included; every voice from every background, whether it's easy to listen to or not. A lot of changes have happened by putting the learner at the centre.

Learner voice is important because before people didn't express their opinions, and the only way you can improve something is to talk about it. If you are asked for your opinion, it means you are valued and you are not just a number. For the people coming next, maybe you are going through something they don't have to go through and it can be fixed or improved. It is about making the road easier for those coming behind you.

It is like you are on a ladder, and you are a few steps up and you want to make it that bit easier for the people a few steps behind you. Someone going back to education is nervous going in the door, so it's about giving the confidence to people to say, "you are valued, you do have an opinion let's hear it."





"It was an honour to know that politicians at the highest level were listening to my interview and taking note of the things that I was saying."

Kevin Hanly

Place of Learning: Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board

Course: Level 6 Film and Television

As a learner with the National Learning Network's Cara Outreach Support, Kevin was a previous AONTAS STAR Award Winner. He was a keynote speaker at the AONTAS STAR Award Ceremony in 2018. He was then invited as the keynote speaker to the National FET Learner Forum National event in Croke Park in 2019. Kevin is a wonderful learner voice advocate and continues to share his experience across a variety of platforms including social media, blogs and radio.

I have been involved with various things with AONTAS over the last couple of years. It started when we won a STAR Award with the National Learning Network and that gave me the confidence to actually share my story. Going on radio and talking about my experience of education and the things that have helped me to be able to reach different milestones, it was great.

I was at the National FET Learner Forum event in Croke Park as a keynote speaker in 2019. It was an experience to share my progress from everything that I have been through. It was a good adventure to be involved with and I met a lot of incredible people who shared their stories. They spurred you on to achieve more.

Having people to listen to you and give you encouragement and to know that you are inspirational and that you gave someone a bit of hope who maybe didn't have hope, for me that was a good thing about the event.

In my speech at the National FET Learner Forum national event, I gave a bit of background of leaving school early then going to the National Learning Network for a couple of years, winning a STAR Award, and how I went to the Limerick College of Further Education doing TV and Film Studies for two years - doing Level 5 and Level 6. This was the year I passed my driving test as well, so there were a lot of things that I had achieved

that year. I spoke a lot about how at the start it took a lot of time and effort to achieve these goals. It was not overnight. One of my messages was that there were times at the start where I did not think I would be confident, able to talk in front of a crowd, or able to attend college.

I started at a slow pace but over time the bricks start going into place so that I would be able to succeed later in life. If you take it one step at a time, things can get better and everybody can learn. Even if you are not very good at reading and writing like I was, it is all about taking it one step at a time: small little goals.

I was very nervous about speaking that day. I had done one or two other events where you would talk in front of a crowd. You might get used to it, but it doesn't get easier. I was excited to show how I had changed and how I have achieved things as well. It goes very quickly - the lead-up is slow but all of a sudden when you are on stage with a microphone the time is over and all that build-up and stress kind of goes and you've done a good job. When people come up to you afterwards and say how well you spoke and the honesty, it does give me a bit more confidence that people are listening to me and gives me that bit of relief if that we can all succeed at something.

On the day, everyone was so honest and everyone was so kind. That gave me great confidence that people related to my experience and that it would help them as well. It was a lift for me that what I said meant something to a lot of people.

I do think learners sharing their voice is a very important issue because everyone learns differently. Some people learn through books and reading, or in a school or college environment. They pick it up quite easily and are able to get something quite quick. I find that it has to be practical; I have to be involved and see something to understand it. If no one shared and talked about their experiences of education or how they have learnt, we wouldn't be able to learn from the things that maybe didn't work so well. Things can get better. People need to see people who have found another path. Those stories will give them the confidence to succeed. To see that even the most successful people might have found school or education challenging, but they were able to find other ways, that has given me confidence as well.

After we won a STAR Award with the National Learning Network back in 2016 I emailed Today FM and I was on the radio with Anton Savage. I was talking about autism and how it was affecting me. I told them what was autism and different things like that. That was one of the big interviews

that I did and they also had me on my local radio show talking about my experiences and school. I talked about how things are different for people with autism. I also wrote blogs for Aslam (Ireland's National Autism Charity and Advocacy Organisation). I wrote a few blogs about Limerick College of Further Education. I wrote a few blogs over the summer about autism and living with autism during the difficult times of lockdown for Youth Work Tipperary Ability Programme. I share things on Facebook and Twitter as well and reach out to people on social media as well. I went on Tipp FM, as well, talking about the lockdown and how it is affecting me as a person with autism. I wrote a letter to the different politicians in Tipperary. One said he had heard my interview on Tipp FM and he wanted to say that it was great how I portrayed people with autism who are finding it challenging during this time.

It was an honour to know that politicians at the highest level were listening to my interview and taking note of the things that I was saying.

Every time I have shared something I have always gotten good feedback on my story. You might think if you write an email or go on the radio, things might not change, but if you do not try you will never know. You can change something small that could be huge for someone else. I feel passionate about different things and if there is something small that can be changed, I want to see that change.

It's all about speaking out. If none of us speak or share our views, then nothing gets changed. If we all do a little bit we can make a better society. It makes it a better place to live as well.

Learner voice should be the whole basis of education and the way education is run. At the end of the day people's voices are the strongest thing we have as humans and we should use it to our advantage. We should use it to change things. If we think things are hard or challenging we shouldn't be afraid to say we need help or to say "you know I need a bit more time" and people should take that on board. We shouldn't put pressure on people. It's not a race. People should be able to take it in their own time. We should listen to people because they have a story - they have ups and downs. When I spoke at the various events, if my voice didn't mean anything I wouldn't have been able to succeed.

For me, slowly but surely, things are changing and people are realising that people should be able to have education that listens to them. We need everyone's voice in an inclusive society. It gives confidence and belief to me going forward and I'm sure it does for other learners as well.





"If you're in any way inclined to go back to education, just do it. It's very different set up from school and it's very different from 30 years ago. It's very much learner led and the support network that tutors give you is unbelievable."

Niamh Becton

Place of Learning: Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board and Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board

Course: Level 6 Advanced Social Studies and Advocacy

Niamh took part in a Virtual National FET Learner Forum focus group discussion in Spring 2020. She has since signed up to the Learners as Leaders Peer Mentoring Programme and shared her story on our website and as part of the Learner Spotlight feature in our learner newsletter. Niamh has also recently undergone training with QQI to become a learner representative.

I'm involved in two ETBs: Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board and Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board. I did two courses at the same time last term: one on a Monday, which was a gardening course with Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board, and then another three days a week with Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board. Now I'm doing the Community Leader Programme with Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board. It's about how to become a community leader, how to motivate your community, how to identify a need, and how to make sure you address that need. I am also completing an Advanced Social Studies and Advocacy course with Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board. I'm also doing a parenting course with Lucena for parents with children who suffer from anxiety.

In addition to my course work, I'm involved with Newcastle Community Gardens. The aim of these Gardens is to unite residents from the area and our local Direct Provision Centres to come together to "Grow, Cook, Eat." I'm also involved with community groups in Wicklow that are taking measures to combat food poverty. We are putting a directory together and a forum about community groups that are trying to combat food poverty. We did a gardening course with Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board last year. We would do a lot of day trips and use the Garda community bus. One of our local Gardaí said, "I'd love to do something for families in direct provision." What came out of it was a family fun day. Listening and talking with the residents from direct provision, it became clear what they missed was growing food.

So, I said "hang on a second, you want to grow food, we have a garden group and community gardens, I think there is something here we can do." But COVID-19 put a spanner in the works. We are hoping to keep the garden going and keep people interested. We are also trying to establish a diverse community here in Newcastle. We are in the process of establishing a Food Hub here in Newcastle Community Centre with Food Cloud.

I was nervous about walking in the doors of the college initially, returning to education after 29 years since I sat my leaving cert was a big step. But the benefits, the confidence, and the life experiences that I've gained through college, I just thought "gosh, everyone needs to do this." If you're in any way inclined to go back to education, just do it. It's very different set up from school and it's very different from 30 years ago. It's very much learner led and the support network that tutors give you is unbelievable.

They get to know your personality, your needs, what your strengths and weaknesses are, and they're able to educate you through that. I don't have a good memory of school. I was always the underdog. I was always treated differently. But in FET, it didn't matter what age I was. They care about your life experiences and I suppose that's where I had the upper hand – I do have life experience going into this. I think my background in hairdressing helped me with that because I was always in touch with different age groups, so I knew how to relate to people. I thought "what can I take from hairdressing?" and I thought "my people skills." I'm able to talk to people and I love working in the community. I thought "I need to

retrain in something. I'm feeling better, I'm back on my feet. I need to be a part of the world again." I was ill for a number of years but with a change of medication and diet, I can now grow, cook, bake and make all my own food, hence the interest in food poverty.

I got involved in the Virtual Forum through Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board. They sent me an email asking if I was interested. I said sure.

It was lovely to talk to other learners at the Virtual FET Learner Forum. There's another guy, I think he was in Limerick, and a very similar story to me, and to know you're not alone which is great.

I never considered myself academic or book clever, but it didn't matter going back to education. You don't have to be "book clever." It's nice to actually get that recognition and it's amazing now what I can bring to a conversation. Working in the community, going on learner groups, going on video chats, it's more tapped into the academic world, which is lovely to be able to do, and to be proud to be able to do it. I've recently taken part in training to become a learner representative for QQI's Quality Assurance process. After attending the Virtual

Forum in June, I also shared my learner story on the AONTAS website as part of the Learners as Leaders Peer Mentoring Programme.

Learner voice for me is embracing the voice that I didn't think I had all those years. It's being that encouragement for someone else who doesn't think they are capable, who doesn't think they're academic, who doesn't think they have the brain to do it. It's to say, "You know what? You can!" All you need is dedication. It doesn't matter about your smarts. You'll get there and these people will support you when you get there. Don't be afraid of it – go do it. I look at the photograph of me walking through the doors of college, I'm thinking "I was terrified." But I'd skip through it now. I never would have thought of myself as having low confidence, but I see now that I did. Education is power. Knowledge is power. Whereas I had kind of a street education, now I have a formal education, and I can back up all these things I've started in my community.

Now I know what I'm doing. I'm combatting food poverty, I'm networking, I'm empowering women. It's brilliant to be able to do that. If someone has an idea, I'm like "we can do try do that. I know how to ask for that." It's being that voice for somebody else.

CONCLUSION

The learner stories featured in this booklet represent a range of different FET experiences and perspectives. FET has played a different role in each of these learners' lives, ranging from preparing them for future employment, to helping them to rebuild personal confidence, to settling into a new country and learning a new language. What these stories illustrate is that, it is not just the experience of taking part in a FET course that has transformed these learners' lives, but the specific experience of sharing their voice as a FET learner. Being heard in the context of adult education has taken on a special meaning. They have been invited to share their voice with an interested audience, and to see that sharing their voice has an impact not only on themselves, but on other learners and the wider educational community. It is clear from these stories that each learner has been an active participant in their community and their own educational journey, and this is part of why FET works for so many; learners feel equal, respected, and empowered to take charge of their education and their life.

AONTAS works to facilitate the sharing of learner voice in a range of ways outside of the National FET Learner Forum. Through the National FET Learner Forum, we have met and formed relationships with individual learners who have then gone on to speak about learner experience at AONTAS events, such as our [Lifelong Learning Summit](#) and [Policy Days](#). With the support of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, we were able to run our [Every Day I'm Learning Podcast](#) (2019) in collaboration with

NearFM. Our information referral service, [One Step Up](#), is a phone line where learners are free to ring up and speak directly to an AONTAS staff member about their concerns, hopes, and plans for entering education. Our EU projects also promote not just the value of adult learning, but the voices of learners as the experts on lifelong learning; the [Learners as Leaders Programme](#) builds learner capacity to act as leaders in their communities, training them and providing opportunities for sharing their stories, public speaking, and representation opportunities. Through the Learners as Leaders Peer Mentoring Programme, we have created a network for adult learners to act as mentors to those just starting out on their journey in education.

A key part of being an equal participant in education is the ability and opportunity to share one's voice as a learner, to speak up about what has worked well, what you would like to see improved, and what advice you can give others exploring education. The value of learner voice is much greater than this. It builds within learners increased self-confidence, breeds a culture of respect in FET, promotes the value of lifelong learning, and fosters a sense of community among FET learners. We hope that this booklet, does more than highlight the value of the Forum, but it serves more broadly as a reflection of the community-minded spirit of FET and the impact learner voice has not just on the individual learner, but on those who will hear these stories and benefit from the changes ushered in by learners who used their voice to help those that follow them.

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