

This article explores the concept of wellbeing as an essential contributor to learners' progression in further education and training. It positions learner supports at the heart of the learner experience, drawing on principles of societal and economic reform that are illustrated in learner supports and engagement.

### Introduction

The transition to tertiary education can be difficult for many learners, and the personal investment required can take its toll. An essential part of any good education system, therefore, is support for learner wellbeing. Wellbeing is important at every stage of learners' educational progression, and this has been further highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Education is not an end in itself. It benefits learners, contributes to a better society, and is an investment in the country's economic future. It is therefore important to have policies, procedures, and systems in place to underpin and support learner engagement, retention, and progression.

The pandemic abruptly changed the educational landscape for learners. The traditional supports that learners relied upon, involving face-to-face interaction, vanished overnight. Their connections with tutors and teachers were interrupted. The start of the pandemic brought many questions into sharp focus for learners and providers as they transitioned to emergency remote learning, such as access to devices, internet connection, and suitable study areas.

### ETBI study

To ascertain the impact of Covid-19 and emergency remote learning on further education and training (FET) ETB learners, Education & Training Boards Ireland carried out a comprehensive study capturing the lived experience of 2,500 full-time and part-time FET learners (ETBI, 2021b). This study is important because it provides not only insights into the lives of learners during lockdown but also valuable information on the effectiveness of ETB responses, which can feed into future policy development.

The study gave a voice to learners, who explained the difficulties they faced during lockdown in their own words. These included developing competencies in planning work, focusing on

# Putting Wellbeing at the Centre of the Learner Experience

Looking forward as we progress in our educational landscape



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coursework, self-motivation, and maintaining a study/life balance, all against a backdrop of losing out on interaction with other learners and the isolation of learning alone.

Some learners highlighted the advantages of remote online learning:

*I was able to work on my course at my own pace and had some choice in the times I did the work.*

Others missed the interaction:

*It's not the same when you are not in class. I learn more from other people face to face.*

Historically, the FET sector has always had a learner-centred approach. This continued to be a key feature of the sector's response to the pandemic. ETBs and FET sector staff showed great dedication and agility during the pandemic and showed their ability to reach out and support the most vulnerable members of their communities.

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They adapted to the new normal by switching to video communication platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom, and they used many other methods, such as telephone and email, when requested by the learner. These approaches allowed for the continuity of teaching and learning support and were welcomed by the vast majority of learners.

The study found that most learners (92%) were satisfied with access to the platforms, resources, and support and with the accessibility facilitated by ETB tutors and trainers during this period. Many said their sense of belonging was diminished and felt keenly the loss of social interaction with teachers, tutors, and other learners.

Maintaining staff wellbeing is a prerequisite to ensuring learner wellbeing. To support ETB staff, ETBI has hosted webinars focusing on supporting staff wellbeing through a crisis. Participants were given an opportunity to reflect on how we experience and respond to crises and were given tools to help emotional regulation. As Robert Glazer wrote (see Glazer, 2019, 2020):

*If we don't put ourselves first, then everyone we come across tends to get a suboptimal version of us. To be at our best – for ourselves and others – we need to make sure we are living in a way that leaves us happy, healthy, and rested.*

### Lessons learned

Looking at the lessons learned during the pandemic, what is required to successfully transition from in-person to online learning? What skills will FET learners need in order to benefit fully from on-site as well as online domains in the future? How can we enhance learners' wellbeing by bringing a sense of belonging and supporting the skills required to maintain engagement, to keep an open mind and a willingness to learn?

Further education and training continues to evolve, and it is important that learner supports remain at the heart of this transformation. Positioning learners at the centre will allow them to become partners, fully engaged stakeholders whose voice is heard and acted upon. When learners take a central role, it becomes an empowering tool for them, where learning is not a passive activity but rather a process guided and fully supported by them.

Coherent learner-centred support structures have been identified as a key feature in the Vision for Tertiary Education (ETBI, 2021c), the position paper published by the directors of the Further Education and Training Forum. This paper identified the need for a centralised framework of support services to underpin FET provision, improve learner engagement, and provide a holistic approach to learner supports.

The post-pandemic period, with the return to on-site learning, should be used as an opportunity to develop a new approach to learner engagement: How can we maximise engagement and support face-to-face interaction by engaging with learners through digital platforms in a meaningful way?

The survey yielded insights into the supports available to the learners, the supports most commonly used, and those most effective in helping learners adjust to the new learning environment. Hence, there is an opportunity to further improve learner support services by expanding those that learners found especially useful. Supports that helped learners feel more positively about their experience included:

- *ICT Device Scheme*: a government initiative to lend devices to students in exceptional financial need. Simply having a device was a lifeline for many learners: ‘receiving a device from the centre was a game-changer,’ said one respondent.
- *1-2-1 Literacy, Numeracy, and Language Support* were particularly appreciated by two vulnerable groups: those for whom English is a second language and those whose literacy and numeracy skills are not so well developed.
- *Library*: ETBI is continuing to enhance a digital library for the FET sector that is a central one-stop shop for guides, tutorials, and resource access. The library also houses a health and wellbeing section for both learners and staff.

Learner wellbeing is not a stand-alone issue that can be looked at in isolation. It is influenced by many strands underlying learner engagement, such as accessibility, teaching practice, communications, flexibility, and supports. The research shows that the absence of supports – including easy access to online learning platforms and resources – negatively affected learners’ experience and wellbeing. The findings make it clear that learners have certain expectations of their courses, and that if these are not met, then wellbeing can be affected.

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One of the key issues identified by the learners in the study was the sense of belonging, and how the move to emergency remote learning had negatively impacted on their feeling of being connected. The further education and training sector prides itself on providing a sense of community. Small class sizes and strong engagement give learners a feeling of being part of a supporting collective and community of FET learners.

### What comes next

To support the FET community, ETBI has organised a schedule of events, seminars, and webinars that will aim among other things to support the health and wellbeing of staff and learners. The first webinar in this series will explore anxiety among FET learners and staff embarking on an academic course, coupled with returning to centres in person, and will provide strategies and techniques to tackle this.

The seminars will provide insights into the nature of change and the inherent disorientation that it brings. It will outline valuable strategies to support the sector by enabling learners to navigate their journeys throughout the demands of an academic year. These initiatives all contribute to supporting the learner experience and therefore learner wellbeing.

These are interesting times. The response to the pandemic, the FET College of the Future vision (ETBI, 2021a), and the ongoing work of the ETB sector all culminate in a fantastic opportunity to place learner wellbeing at the centre of the learner experience.

The developmental trajectories of the FET learner and sector are hugely dependent on wellbeing in its meaningful integration in learning and teaching. Societal and global crises, while presenting barriers to education worldwide, teach us to engage the learner voice to inform an FET system that fosters support and innovation throughout the FET tertiary experience for learners and communities.

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