

# Towards the Development of a Community Education Framework

---

The development of a Community Education Framework offers the opportunity to record, reflect, and recognise the diverse nature of community education that exists across Ireland. This article explores the opportunities presented by the development of such a framework in amplifying the voice of diverse learners and the contribution the sector makes across broader further education and training provision.

## Introduction

SOLAS Future FET: Transforming Learning is the National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy for 2020–2024 (SOLAS, 2020). Its ambitious agenda is aimed at transforming learning over these five years in order to deliver a more strategic and integrated FET system.

The strategy cites the need for a Community Education Framework to align the sector with common FET requirements, such as collecting basic learner data, linking to learning pathways, and offering consistent learner support across the sector. The strategic position that community education holds requires consistency in supports to further grow and strengthen the bridge between the people hardest to reach in society and their engagement or re-engagement with a learning pathway into FET and beyond.

## Community education

A core strength and enabler of inclusive education practice in FET in Ireland is the availability of a network of opportunities in every community. Central to this provision is community education and its position in communities. It can offer a local, accessible, and welcoming gateway to explore learning opportunities towards achieving personal, social, and educational fulfilment and goals.

Storytelling is intrinsic to the community education experience, and the relationships nurtured by supportive, empathetic tutors create a space for learners' stories that empowers them to reach their potential. This is especially true of learners who experience significant barriers, exacerbated through their previous experience of formal education; connection with other learners is the reward underlining the decision of many to engage.



**Fergus Craddock**  
FET Inclusion Manager,  
Education and Training  
Boards Ireland



**Nina Burke**  
Project Manager, SOLAS

Research conducted in 2021 studied the role, contribution, and impact of Education and Training Board (ETB) FET provision and support services in community education in Ireland (ETBI, 2021). It illuminated a vibrant sector which not only contributed to the National FET Strategy but also ensured that community education could play a key part in supporting and advancing FET's evolving role in Ireland's social cohesion and development. Most importantly it empowered learners in their personal, social, and economic development. This is achieved through the diversity, inclusivity, and creativity that are commonplace in community education and that empower learners to 'develop personally, learn new things, shape our choices and create and inspire', as described in the FET strategy (SOLAS, 2020, p.16).

While all FET is characterised by learner-centred provision, community education can offer learners more flexibility through non-formal and informal approaches not provided for, or outside the requirements of, formal education settings. This is partly because while social exclusion and labour-market vulnerability are clearly linked, community education offers a gateway to raise awareness of progression pathways outside of activation policy and the employability agenda. And it is partly because community education is a developmental intervention designed, delivered, and funded with the community and voluntary sector as its key strategic partner.

Community education has strong links with community partners, which forms the bedrock of many initiatives. The trust and relationships established with these partners enable many marginalised and distanced learners to take the leap of faith required to engage in a programme and receive the necessary supports to address identified barriers. Common goals are shared between community education and community development, with community education key to achieving a range of beneficial societal outcomes, often in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage.

The variety in learners engaged in community education, as documented in case studies in the ETBI (2021) study, is mirrored by the variety of motivations to engage. These include creating connections, developing skills, enquiring about themes of social justice and active citizenship, and learning in a relaxed, non-formal environment. There is an inherent link with adult literacy, with community education serving as an important gateway for learners to develop skills. This is recognised in the Adult Literacy for Life strategy, which is due to be rolled out soon.

### Community education in the FET strategy

The critical role that community education plays in FET is outlined in the strategy, highlighting the sector's position in supporting participation and re-engagement in education and training, in particular for learners who are hardest to reach in society. The Community Education Framework will provide an opportunity to support consistency and mainstream the many innovative, community-based learning projects that exist.

---

At the same time it will support aligning the sector with common FET requirements, such as gathering basic learner data, linking to learning pathways, and offering consistent learner support. This alignment will enhance the partnership between the ETBs and the community education sector and help the sector develop its wide-reaching connectivity across communities in Ireland.

### Developing the Community Education Framework

Tasked with delivering on the FET strategy, SOLAS undertook the Community Education Framework project in early 2022. Its initial stages incorporated in-depth research. The 2021 report by ETBI provided extensive evidence on the sector, outlining the values underpinning community education and its distinguishing features (Figure 1), while also sharing the need for a consistent approach for all learner pathways in terms of FET resourcing, delivery, and supports.

Stakeholders in the community education sector were engaged with, to ensure that the SOLAS vision for the framework was communicated. A workshop hosted by SOLAS in July 2022 brought together around 80 stakeholders, including community education practitioners, government representatives, An Cosán, Aontas, and other community education partners. The primary objective was to discuss a definition for SOLAS-funded community education and the seven core principles identified in the strategy as a starting point from which to build a framework (Figure 2).

Opening the event was Andrew Brownlee, CEO of SOLAS, followed by Denis Leamy, CEO of Cork ETB. Two representatives of the Acorn Project, a community education partner in County Offaly, spoke at the event, providing insights from the perspective of a co-ordinator and a learner. The workshop facilitated in-depth conversations and extensive feedback. The event was closed by Nessa White, SOLAS's executive director of transformation.



**Figure 1: Key features of community education (ETBI, 2021)**

In keeping with the theme of collaboration, the next stage of the project was engagement with community education learners. Two online forums brought together learners from across the country. They followed a similar format to the workshop and allowed learners to contribute their voice, experiences, views, and visions for a Community Education Framework.

The collation of data collected from these stakeholder engagements, information sessions, workshop, and learner forums informed the next stage: writing a draft of the Community Education Framework. It is envisaged that a draft framework will be in place by the end of 2022, with further consultation workshops scheduled for early 2023.

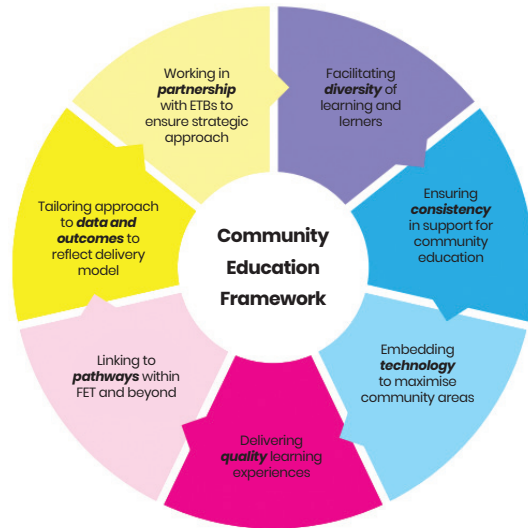


Figure 2: Community Education Framework: suggested principles (SOLAS, 2020)

## Conclusion

Developing a Community Education Framework offers an opportunity to record, reflect, and recognise the diverse nature of community education that exists across Ireland. The adaptability and flexibility that characterise the tailored approach in community education is built on a set of values that welcome and celebrate collaboration with learners and community partners. This will help ensure that provision is of the community, by the community, and for the community. Developing the Community Education Framework will amplify the voice of the diverse learners and, by extension, acknowledge the contribution that the sector plays across broader FET provision.

## REFERENCES

- Community Education Facilitators Association (CEFA) (2014) *Community Education and the Labour Activation Challenge*. Dublin: CEFA.
- Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) (2021) 'A study of the role, contribution and impact of Education and Training Board (ETB) Further Education and Training (FET) services on active inclusion in Ireland'. Dublin: ETBI.
- SOLAS (2021) *Adult Literacy for Life – A 10-year adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy*. Dublin: SOLAS.
- SOLAS (2020) *Future FET: Transforming Learning. The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy*. Dublin: SOLAS.