

Transformational Opportunities for Adult Education

The Further Education and Training Strategy and the implications for adult education and training

The ongoing structural reforms in further education and training (FET) and the implementation of SOLAS policies present an exciting phase in the transformation of FET in Ireland. Connecting a broad range of adult education and training programmes together under the umbrella of FET in Education and Training Boards (ETBs) involves a fusion of differing principles, philosophies, and practice approaches.

This article considers this transformation from an adult education perspective, identifies the contribution that adult-centric principles and philosophies have made in addressing barriers for adult learners, and considers how to bring the best of this contribution forward into the revised model.

The adult-centric programme embraces a philosophy and ethos (hereinafter referred to as values) that tends to the entire person, and addresses the psychological and social aspects to overcome dispositional, situational, and institutional barriers to facilitate access, participation, and progression in learning. Adult education programmes developed and evolved in response to a range of needs, including educational disadvantage caused by barriers to lifelong learning. Cross (1981) noted three major barriers for adult learners: having little confidence in their ability to learn and succeed, or having a sceptical mindset about opportunities (dispositional); lack of support for their own development (situational); and barriers of cost, timetabling, location, lack of pathways, and the type of curriculum, teaching, and assessment processes (institutional).

An adult-centric programme takes cognisance of the major difference between adult learners and second-level students, by building on adults' motivation and their desire to participate and succeed. A second difference is



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The ongoing structural reforms in further education and training (FET) and the implementation of SOLAS policies present an exciting phase in the transformation of FET in Ireland. Connecting a broad range of adult education and training programmes together under the umbrella of FET in Education and Training Boards (ETBs) involves a fusion of differing principles, philosophies, and practice approaches. This article considers this transformation from an adult education perspective.

a strengths-based approach used by practitioners to counteract the dispositional barriers created by earlier negative experiences of formal education. The adult-centric practitioner leverages learners' intrinsic motivation and catalyses their strengths, thus cultivating learning and growth in confidence. This creates optimal conditions for learners to benefit from the learning and progression opportunities afforded by FET. Progression and inclusion in FET requires the retention and expansion of responsive and flexible adult-centric values in any FET reform to enhance the learning experience and outcomes for adult learners.

The landscape for adult learners is undergoing transformation as the FET Strategy implementation processes strive to harmonise provision and pathways. Harmonisation is a challenge because three distinct strands have evolved and come under the umbrella of FET. The adult education programmes currently on offer in FET, delivered by the ETBs, evolved as predominantly adult-centric and voluntary. These combine part-time and full-time options, including Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), Back to Education Initiative (BTEI), English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), Adult Literacy Schemes, and Community Education, as described in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2022* (Craddock & Burke 2022).

In the main, eligible participants qualify for free fees due to their social welfare status or low levels of formal educational qualifications. Post-Leaving Certificate Courses (PLCs) developed primarily in second-level school settings as a progression route for students, and are underpinned by that value system. Other full-time options such as Local Training Initiatives and contracted training evolved from FÁS training provision, funded under a labour-market activation agenda, with adults mandated to attend. In some instances, this continues to retain the value system of training. These three strands of FET provision differ tacitly in their value systems and approaches.

Concerns about eroding adult-centric values in a climate of rationalisation and neoliberalism were raised when the first FET Strategy was being prepared nearly 10 years ago (Murray et al., 2014), and concerns remain. We can now see the impact of the two FET Strategies on adult education in ETBs. While all programmes can be learner-centred, not all programmes are adult-centred. There are still opportunities to embed adult-centric values at funder and provider level, and at teaching and learning level (practitioner and learner).

At funder and provider level, Strategic Performance Agreements (SPAs) are made with each ETB, outlining how they will achieve the strategic aims of Creating Pathways, Fostering Inclusion and Building Skills (SOLAS, 2020). However, absent from the structure of the SPA is any requirement to describe shared values or of the processes by which goals and targets will be achieved (Brennan & O'Grady, forthcoming).

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The existing method to collect data, Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS), while able to provide reliable information to the funder, is restrictive in that there is an overemphasis on achieving qualifications to the detriment of the requirements of meaningful engagement and participation. The gap in recording the achievement of softer skills is acknowledged, and opportunities to extend it are being explored (SOLAS, 2020, pp. 26, 53). It is also the theme of *The Adult Learner 2022* (AONTAS, 2022).

At organisational level, new roles and associated contracts and conditions are emerging. This could be a welcome development for practitioners who have hitherto been in very tenuous arrangements. New contracts for practitioners in adult education do not require a particular amount of Professional Learning and Development (PLD) points. Neither does annual renewal of Teaching Council registration. This is a wasted opportunity for maintaining and creating adult-centric practices that require knowledge and reflection.

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At teaching and learning level, harmonisation of FET offerings needs to align with adult-centric values in the teaching and learning environment (Brennan & O'Grady, forthcoming). The type of setting is a critical aspect in ensuring adult-centric values. Careful consideration needs to be given to appropriate selection of venues in any harmonisation process. While all learners will be able to reap the benefit of applying these values, not all adult learners are able to benefit from second-level and training type provisions and settings. At curriculum level, there is a risk that learning outcomes could be dominated by the cognitive and psychomotor domains and corresponding assessment, to the exclusion of the affective domain. Being adult-centric requires that a curriculum attend to the affective domain. It is essential that time be allocated to facilitate the processes that will underpin progression for educationally disadvantaged adults (Brennan & O'Grady, 2022).

The absence of specific values being identified in SPAs can be addressed by SOLAS restructuring the format of the SPA and thereby asking each ETB to specify the values; staffing, contracts, and Teaching Council registration renewal need to reflect a requirement for practitioners to engage in ongoing continuous professional development; and PLD offerings need to provide a space for practitioners to reflect on adult-centric values in curriculum development and assessment, and how they model lifelong learning themselves as they are part of a learning organisation.

Settings and environment need to be checked that they are addressing barriers to participation for adults. Adult learners are willing to offer their opinions on what works for them and what inhibits their participation and can be active partners in co-constructing this knowledge about the environment. The under-use and neglect of formative assessment (QQI, 2018) needs to be addressed to maximise its potential.

Addressing the neglect of the affective domain in curriculum development and provision means challenging the normative power of the status quo to undo the over-prioritisation given to cognitive and psychomotor objectives. Measures addressing affective needs, while valuable, are add-ons rather than being integrated into curriculum as they have been by adult-centric practitioners before the transition to FET: their adult-centric classroom experience and models of good practice should be leveraged to be shared and extended rather than eroded. What gets measured matters. Both *The Wider Benefits of Learning* work in Community Education led out by the ETBI Inclusion Unit, and research on psychological capital (Brennan & O'Grady, 2022), offer scope to capture and report on relevant data on PLSS.

Adult-centric values align with the strategic values of FET. We believe that prioritising and making these values explicit across all FET programmes will yield desirable outcomes for learners, practitioners, providers, and funders and will support the realisation of policy objectives.

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