

Towards Consistent Learner Support in Further Education and Training

Lessons from other sectors

The newly published position paper 'Learner Support in Further Education and Training: Towards a Consistent Learner Experience' from SOLAS and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), and the accompanying framework, are very welcome documents. Our hope is that they will start a strong national conversation on what we want supports for adults in further education and training (FET) to look like.

The publications touch on many aspects of learner support, without getting lost in the sheer variety of educational settings that FET operates in. This article will not focus on guidance or disability supports, as both topics warrant separate treatment and we would be unable to do them justice here.

We are delighted across the sector to have the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) expanded to include all FET learners, but this will require significant increases in the associated budget. Similarly, while we want guidance to be uniform across all FET provision, the steps to achieve this are beyond the scope of this article. Instead, we will focus on the revolution in supports in post-primary, professional learning and development for staff, personal assistants, and overall student experience.

Importance of consistent supports

Consistent supports in FET are crucial. Some courses may be provided in multiple centres across the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). Different managers may emphasise different aspects of education, such as experience, wellbeing, or sports, but they have limited resources to create both the academic and social aspects of their college.



Blake Hodkinson

Director of Operations and Quality (FET),
City of Dublin Education and Training
Board

The recently published position paper 'Learner Support in Further Education and Training: Towards a Consistent Learner Experience', and its accompanying framework, present a valuable opportunity to reshape supports for adults in further education and training (FET) in Ireland. This article looks at the potential next steps on the journey.

Imagine a learner who attends a centre where the supports are less developed than they require, or perhaps more specialised. This learner might have had a better outcome at a college offering the same qualification in the same ETB but with differently designed supports. Every ETB needs to ensure that supports in each centre are as similar as possible, providing roughly equal opportunities for success.

Learning from post-primary

The introduction of the General Allocation Model (GAM) marked a sea change in student support in the post-primary sector in Ireland. For example, learners no longer had to be assessed to access supports; schools were allocated teaching hours and distributed them as the students required. As a principal managing a post-primary and FET college, I witnessed firsthand how evidence-backed approaches can transform schools and education delivery. We need a similar revolution in FET.

In Marino College, we changed the format of learning support by replacing a referral-only system to a drop-in support room.

Let's invite the inspectors who researched the GAM to share their knowledge and discuss what FET learner supports might look like. In Marino College, we changed the format of learning support by replacing a referral-only system to a drop-in support room. We redecorated the room and put in cool chairs and PCs. Teachers were in the room at dedicated times to help learners. They were led by a teacher who had recently completed a master's in Inclusion and Special Education.

These changes led to significant improvement in certification rates, from 60% to 82% for the long-term unemployed on the Back to Education Initiative courses in one academic year. This was universal design for learning (UDL) at its finest – it was not about being referred but about students seeking assistance. Sometimes it was on how to structure an assignment, where, with the right advice, the learner might not need to visit the support room again that year.

Staff professional development, and learning assistants

What qualifications should FET staff have to work in learning support? We have been driving professional learning and development across the sector, but what should we aim for in qualifications? Over the last 10 years, we have encouraged staff to engage in special and inclusive education, with some studying at diploma and master's level. In the City of Dublin, we teamed up with Trinity College Dublin to develop a certificate, diploma, and master's in Inclusion and Diversity for FET Practitioners.

We think ETBs are inclusive, but we need to unpack what inclusive really means and see how we can do more. The bigger question is what qualifications we

want staff to have to ensure consistency of learning support. We have been engaging heavily in UDL through AHEAD and University College Dublin, which has helped staff become more aware of the simple things we can do to improve the quality of the learning environment. As a sector, we feel there should be a conversation on what training or qualification will help us deliver the goal of consistent learner supports.

There is also the question of learning assistants for the few learners who need additional supports. ETBs do not currently have a staff category of personal assistant or special needs assistant-type grade that might aid students. ETBs have to contract in the service, which makes them vulnerable to not having supports in place when learners begin their journey. We need to discuss how a personal assistant for an adult should perform their role so that the learner's experience is enhanced but not dominated by the support.

Enhancing the learner experience

I'd like you to close your eyes and remember the best memory you have from college. For most of us, it is likely a sporting or cultural memory. From my college days, I have few fond memories of econometrics or microeconomics but dozens of rich kayaking memories. Without these sporting and cultural engagements, I might have faded from college.

As an ETB, we run an annual calendar of weekly events, such as a Zombie Run at Halloween, to enrich the learner experience. Learners from different courses become involved in the event, from event managers to beauty or music students, all raising money for charity. Focusing on the student experience in FET can help more learners achieve their goals by encouraging them to feel part of something bigger than just the qualification.

Focusing on the student experience in FET can help more learners achieve their goals by encouraging them to feel part of something bigger than just the qualification.

Conclusion

FET has a chance to make similar improvements to those made in post-primary education in providing learner support. We are in the fortunate position of being able to learn from their experiences and have a faster revolution. The following steps need to occur:

1. We need to have a national conversation to discuss what we want consistent supports to look and feel like across all FET settings.
2. We need to determine the qualifications we want to promote across the ETB sector to achieve consistent learner support.
3. We need to define the role of personal assistants across the sector and the qualifications we would like those staff to have.

4. We need to focus on the learner experience, including all cultural and sporting activities.
5. We should leverage the ground-breaking work of the post-primary inspectorate by arranging for them to share key insights from their national transformational journey, which will inform the FET changes.

REFERENCES

SOLAS and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) (2024a) 'Learner Support in Further Education and Training: Towards a Consistent Learner Experience. A Framework Guide'. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/acc9ed44ba/solas_framework_.pdf. Dublin: SOLAS.

SOLAS and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) (2024b) 'Learner Support in Further Education and Training: Towards a Consistent Learner Experience Position Paper'. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/564b3f2877/solas_position_paper_.pdf. Dublin: SOLAS.



Free Pre-University Programme for Mature Learners



Mary Immaculate College Limerick offers a free 24-hour certificate programme aimed at mature learners over the age of 22.

The programme runs over eight weeks and features core subjects including History and Philosophy, and skills in Academic Writing.

On successful completion of the programme, learners receive a Level 6 Special Purpose Award.

Dr Paul O'Brien, Coordinator of the PUP Programme, explains:

"We look forward to offering this programme to those in our communities whose educational experiences and opportunities in their earlier years may have been limited, and who wish to continue their education through creating a progressive pathway into university."

Classes take place in MIC Limerick, one morning per week, 10.00am to 1pm.

For further information contact rachael.finucane@mic.ul.ie