

The Importance of Listening to the Learner Voice in FET

Introduction

Learner voice is a concept in education which recognises that learners should influence the education system and be valued as partners throughout design and decision-making. Research increasingly suggests that when learners shape their own education, we see benefits for learners, educators, the institution, and the education system (Davies & Yamashita, 2007).

The move towards a learner-driven culture recognises that learners are part of a community, and the best way of empowering communities is to listen to them and act upon their views. When people have a voice and an influence on decisions and outcomes, they are more likely to participate and thereby to learn. They can be more active in their learning and shape their own outcomes (Walker & Logan, 2008).

Purpose of adult education and learner voice

It can be helpful to consider what the purpose of adult education and learner voice is. The Irish adult education system has an interesting history and is understood differently by different people. Community education is deeply rooted in feminist and working-class social movements (Connolly, 2010). At the same time, some programmes concentrate on vocational education and prioritise skills and employment.

In 2014, the Economic and Social Research Institute found that most stakeholders viewed FET as addressing both social inclusion and labour market agendas. This is reflected in key policies, including the Programme for Government (Government of Ireland, 2020), and the 'Future FET' strategy (SOLAS, 2020). State agencies including SOLAS and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) have learner voice representatives on their boards.



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This article explores the concept of learner voice in adult education, highlighting its importance in allowing learners to shape their educational experiences and decisions. It looks at learner voice initiatives, both local and national, in the further education and training sector, and it illustrates the value of partnerships in fostering meaningful learner involvement.

However, in adult and community education programmes underpinned by social-justice values, learner voice is often viewed as an activity that creates representative opportunities for people from marginalised communities (McLeod, 2011). It is a space to listen to the voices of the 'seldom heard' (Tangen 2009; Flynn, 2013). Angus et al. (2013) argue that 'the voices of disadvantaged and marginalised students can help to provoke the kind of social, economic and political reform that can result in a more democratic society in which social justice and equality can prevail' (p.572).

Lundy's (2007) model for voice informs the practice of the FET Learner Forum. She argues that space must be provided to express views, voice should be facilitated, views must be listened to, and contributions must be acted upon, as appropriate. While there are diverse intentions and understandings at play in the sector, learner voice is vital in improving the learner experience and the quality of programmes, and it contributes to democracy.

What's happening across FET?

The FET sector has seen significant growth in learner voice activities recently as a result of the National FET Learner Forum, under 'Future FET' (SOLAS, 2020). This Forum is led by AONTAS and delivered in partnership with the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). A grassroots approach is used to ensure that FET policy continues to respond to learners' needs. The Forum has reached thousands of learners since its launch.

The project consists of a national event and a series of regional events held at ETBs across Ireland each year. Adult learners' experiences are shared with SOLAS and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science to ensure change from the ground up. Nationally, organisations such as the National Adult Literacy Agency and AHEAD also contribute to learner voice. Some ETBs have facilitated learner voice councils or groups; others undertake learner surveys. A diverse array of learner voice activities takes place locally across adult education provision.

The importance of partnership

The Forum has enabled adult learners to influence FET policy in a structured way for the first time in Ireland. This evolved through the development of the SOLAS FET Strategy (2014–2019), as a commitment was made to listen to, and consult with, learners in FET. This commitment is exemplified in the strategy's objective to 'respond to the needs of learners', which identified the establishment of a National FET Learner Forum as an action.

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Local initiatives are happening across the ETBs, such as the 'My Voice, My Choice' initiative developed by Waterford and Wexford ETB with support from South East Technological University (SETU). The initiative shows an inclusive approach to engaging learners with intellectual disabilities in higher education. Learners were registered to FET programmes at QQI levels 2 and 3, and their classes were delivered on the SETU Waterford campus. Learners could engage in relevant QQI programmes while having a university experience. This initiative reflects the importance of including learners in decisions about where they feel they belong and where they want to learn.

Considered as a continuum, learner voice, at one end, is about keeping learners informed on how decisions are taken. At the other end, it focuses on learner empowerment, where decision-making about education is negotiated and shared with learners (Walker & Logan, 2008). Learners are offered greater opportunities to have their voices heard, affect outcomes, and bring about change.

Where to next?

ETBs remain well-positioned to facilitate local learner forums and councils while working with AONTAS as part of the National Learner Forum. Internationally, the 'Voice of the Learner 2.0' project is in development between AONTAS and CINOP (an education consultancy and research institute) and the ABC Foundation (an advocacy group that supports people with literacy). The aim is to develop a learner voice model that can be replicated across Europe (AONTAS, 2024a), offering new opportunities to examine and evolve our learner voice practices in Ireland.

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Influencing, inspiring, and shaping the direction of FET in Ireland



On 27th November 2024, up to 100 adult learners from Dublin met at the Maldron Hotel in Tallaght for a regional National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum meeting. The event provided a platform for learners to share their experiences and contribute to the future direction of further education and training in Ireland.

The National FET Learner Forum is a collaborative initiative involving AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation; SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority; and local Education and Training Boards.

Every year, thousands of learners from across Ireland participate in the forum, sharing their educational experiences and insights.