



**etbi**

Education and Training  
Boards Ireland

*Boird Oideachais agus  
Oiliúna Éireann*

# ETBI Submission to the National Access Plan 2022 to 2026 Consultation.

## Contents

Introduction .....	2
ETBI .....	2
ETBs .....	2
ETB Post Primary Schools.....	3
ETB Further Education and Training Provision.....	3
Barriers to Participation, Access & Progression in FET.....	5
ETB FET Sectoral Response .....	7
Vision for equity of access to further and higher education in Ireland 2022-2026 .....	7
Priority Target Groups .....	7
Supporting Target Groups.....	10
Funding programmes.....	11
Pre-entry and post-entry activities/initiatives outside of the FET and HE Sector.....	12
Mainstreaming/A whole of education approach .....	13
Pathways between further education and training and higher education.....	13
Covid-19 challenges.....	14
Recommendations .....	15
Appendix 1: Services and supports available to FET learners in ETBs during COVID -19 .....	17

## Introduction

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) and its members Education and Training Boards (ETBs), as the largest providers of education and training in the state, welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of the next five-year National Access Plan (NAP) 2022-2026. This sectoral submission represents the views of ETBs, highlighting areas of importance regarding the development of the NAP 2022-2026. ETBI hopes that the observations and recommendations provided in the sectoral submission will support the attainment of equity of access to further and higher education, rooted in principles of equality and social inclusion.

## ETBI

Under the Education and Training Boards Act 2013, ETBI is defined as:

*‘An association established to collectively represent education and training boards and promote their interests, which is recognised by the Minister for the purposes of this Act.’*

The mission of ETBI is to act as a central resource for the ETB sector, providing, procuring, and coordinating a range of support services which are most appropriately and efficiently delivered at national level. ETBI’s vision is to be an effective organisation that represents and promotes the development of the ETB sector by providing innovative and quality support services to meet the needs of ETBs and other stakeholders in the rapidly changing world of Irish public-sector education and training.

## ETBs

ETBs are statutory local education authorities governed by the Education and Training Boards Act 2013. Sixteen ETBs across Ireland have responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. ETBs have responsibility for second-level schools, further education colleges, community national schools and a range of further education and training centres delivering education and training provision.

ETBs plan, provide, coordinate, and review the provision of education and training, including education and training for the purpose of employment, and services ancillary in its functional area. ETBs also support the provision, coordination, administration, and assessment of youth work services in its functional area. The ETB sector is the leading provider of education and training in the state, active in local communities through the direct provision of training and education programmes in training centres, colleges and other training and educational settings. ETBs seek to make a real difference to the lives of the people they serve and continue to respond in a proactive and dynamic way to the needs of the communities that it serves.

## ETB Post Primary Schools

There are currently 246 post-primary schools under the patronage of Education and Training Boards (ETBs). There are 16 ETBs in total who manage post primary schools according to their geographic location. The ETB provides a range of services to schools including financial, human resource, building, ICT, governance support as well as educational planning support. ETBI's Post-Primary Schools Directorate have an overall vision of prioritising inclusivity and diversity in supporting equity of access to FET and HE for its student cohort. This aspiration recognises that each student has different circumstances which requires the allocation of specific and sometimes exact supports and opportunities to reach an equal outcome.

## ETB Further Education and Training Provision

As outlined in the FET Strategy, 'Future FET: Transforming Learning: The National Further Education and Training Strategy 2020 – 2024', the majority of SOLAS funding invested in FET is channelled through ETBs. ETBs deliver FET provision either directly or via a network of contracted training or community education and training providers in response to the needs of their respective regions. The SOLAS FET Strategy 2020-2024 categorise FET programme provision as focusing on the following skill development areas:

- 'Foundational', prioritising transversal skill development and encompassing programmes including Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital (ALND) Skills; English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE).
- 'Bridging', prioritising the skills needed to bridge the gap between foundational learning and accessing vocational education and training including Youthreach, Community Training Centres, Back to Education Initiative and Skills for Work
- 'Vocational' skill development, encompassing Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) provision, VTOS, Skills to Advance and work-based learning include traineeships, apprenticeships, and specific skills training; concerned with facilitating progression to higher education and direct generation of employment outcomes.

Skill	Learner Numbers
<b>Foundation Skills (NFQ Level 1-2)</b>	100,000
<b>Bridging Skills (NFQ Level 3-4)</b>	40,000
<b>Vocational Skill (NFQ Level 5-6)</b>	60,000

Table 1: Numbers of unique FET learners participating in each category (Future FET: Transforming Learning The National FET Strategy 2020 – 2024 p24)

ETB FET provision is committed to Public Sector Duty, specified in the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014, as a statutory obligation on public bodies, in the performance of their functions, to have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and protect human rights of staff and service users. The Equal Status Acts 2000-2018 ('the Acts') prohibit discrimination in the provision of goods and services, accommodation and education. They cover the nine grounds of gender, marital status, family status, age disability, sexual orientation, race, religion, and membership of the Traveller community. In addition, the Acts prohibit discrimination in the provision of accommodation services against people who are in receipt of rent supplement, housing assistance, or social welfare payments.

ETB FET provision implements the aims and objectives of national policy and strategy with respect to learner access, transfer and progression; sustainable and equitable economic and social development, the digital divide, the gender divide, securing outcomes for young people and the inclusion of minority, vulnerable and marginalised communities, including:

- QQI Policy Restatement 'Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression in Relation to Learners for Providers of Further and Higher Education and Training' (2015)
- European Skills Agenda 2020 2025
- Transforming Our World - 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
- Digital Education Action Plan for 2021-2027: Resetting Education for the Digital Age
- The National Youth Strategy 2015-2020
- Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025
- The Further and Higher Education Roadmap Government's Strategy contained in 'Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 Ambition, Goals and Commitments'
- National Skills Strategy 2025
- Action Plan for Education 2021
- National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021
- National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021
- National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030
- National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019

Achievements within ETBI FET Directorate strategic area of Active Inclusion 2020/2021 include: the facilitation of networks and working groups to advance the active inclusion remit across FET; the development of focused supports for cohorts of FET learners with diverse needs including Adult Safeguarding policy & procedures; strengthening literacy, numeracy and digital skills support across FET Provision including participation in the transnational Erasmus+ Project called Check In, Take Off (CITO), an app designed to enable adults to assess their core literacy, numeracy and digital needs and skills; and the integration of mental health

and well-being learner supports across FET. ETBI has further collaborated with SOLAS on the following research reports:

- Guidelines for Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in FET
- Initial and Ongoing Assessment of English Language Competency of Migrant Learners in FET at Levels 1-3
- Intellectual Disabilities in Adult Literacy
- Family Literacy Practice in ETBs – Guidelines, Case Studies & Recommendations
- Assessing Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ Levels 4-6 in ETBs
- Good Practice in Integrated and Standalone Numeracy Provision at Levels 1-3
- Initial and Ongoing Assessment of Adult Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ levels 1-3 - Guidelines, Toolkit and Research Report

### [Barriers to Participation, Access & Progression in FET](#)

The SOLAS Report ‘Barriers to Further Education and Training with Particular Reference to Long Term Unemployed and Other Vulnerable Adults’ (2017) adopts the following headings in outlining barriers experienced by diverse groups of FET learners. It is important to note that these barriers are also experienced by learners in accessing the apprenticeship system and access to employers and apprenticeship opportunities.

**Motivational/Dispositional Barriers** including age, mental health, low confidence/self-esteem, negative educational experiences and/or familial disengagement with education, Lack of community and social supports, a negative view of FET and a lack of fundamental skills (ICT, literacy, numeracy). FET Schools Directorate notes that in terms of the socio-cultural context of post-primary students, particularly those coming from a disadvantaged socio-economic group, barriers relating to study skills and the need for appropriate and supportive guidance and information provision are prominent.

**Economic Barriers** include social welfare entitlements, childcare, and transport in addition to costs associated with course attendance and materials. A recent ETBI Submission to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science Public Consultation on Review of Student Grant Scheme - SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland), 2021 identifies the following economic barriers to FET learners in PLC Colleges, VTOS, Training, Employment and Part-Time Provision:

- Inequitable distribution of financial supports across FET & Higher Education (HE)
- Learners are unable to apply for additional materials and expenses which cannot be met via SUSI
- Learners must apply for grant funding in respect of every year and in respect of non QQI award qualifications

- Learners who are not in receipt of social welfare support cannot access funding support from SUSI
- Insufficient meal, travel and accommodation allowances
- Learners who are not entitled to DSP/training allowances do not receive Out of Pocket Expenses
- An equitable and comparative SUSI grant is not available to learners accessing Training Centres , if not in receipt of training payment
- Lack of reimbursement for employed people on leave for educational purposes.
- Lack of financial supports for part-time learners. Childcare support is not currently available to participants on part-time programmes.

Post-primary learners face similar economic barriers with respect to the rising costs associated with accessing and attending further and higher education. Decisions on course choice and institute selection are influenced not by quality and content but on proximity and potential travel and accommodation costs. Furthermore, ETB Schools Directorate acknowledges the enormous potential to continue with the adjustments required in responding to COVID-19 in terms of blended and alternative methods of engagement addressing, easing some of the financial burdens associated with accessing FET and HE.

**Organisational Barriers** include the need for clear direction regarding the strategic development and role of FET. Further organisational barriers concern access, meaningful work experience placements, quality and accreditation, staff professional development, eligibility requirements, flexible delivery, and the relevance of courses on offer. Understanding and addressing barriers with respect to retention and progression is essential in sustaining equity. A recent ETBI publication 'Vision For Tertiary Education', 2020 further highlights the need for flexibility with respect to programme time, type and delivery. This report also emphasises a requirement for a unified rather than a uniform system of transitions/progression opportunities, covering all ETB FET L5 and L6 award holders while retaining what is already there and building on it. Post-primary students face similar barriers in terms of HE access requirements, specifically a limited progression route for the Leaving Certificate Applied cohort

**Informational Barriers** include the need for accessible and clear information in addition to strong career guidance/course matching and increased needs assessments.

## ETB FET Sectoral Response

Following a consultation with the sector the following findings and recommendations are presented in accordance with the themes/questions identified in the Consultation Paper:

### Vision for equity of access to further and higher education in Ireland 2022-2026

The central vision of the new [FET Strategy 2020-2024](#) *'is that FET is for everyone and will serve as a major driver of both economic development and social cohesion'* (p5). The strategy states that 'FET will provide pathways for everyone. It will empower learners to participate fully in society and to become active citizens and drive vibrant and diverse communities' (p36). In realising this vision, and its core values of 'lifelong learning, social justice, active citizenship and economic prosperity', this plan identifies fostering inclusion as a strategic priority.

This strategy (p.44) understands inclusion as *'unconditional positive regard for all people'*. FET must be readily available to all and accessible by all, regardless of location, culture, background, language, disadvantage, or disability. FET provision must facilitate equity and equality of participation in and outcomes from education. In fostering inclusion, the strategy endorses the success of target cohorts, rooting FET in the community, embedding consistent learner supports and strengthening adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills. FET resources and opportunities must be targeted at those who are most educationally disadvantaged. In this regard, cohorts including learners with a disability, learners with mental health difficulties and new migrants in FET are emphasised.

In terms of overall vision for equity of access to FET and HE in Ireland, this submission supports the vision outlined in the new FET Strategy; an understanding rooted within the broader context of the role of education and training in society, reflective of a commitment to education and training as a basic human right in addition to its role in securing meaningful employment for the learner. The need to reflect the diversity of Irish society across FE and HE provision is of paramount importance.

### Priority Target Groups

In 2019, there were 179,058 learner enrolments across FET with 131,097 learner completions and 86,847 learner certified completions (FET Facts and Figures 2019, SOLAS (2019)). The diverse profile of FET learners indicates the need to respond to a wide range of marginalised learners, many of whom regard FET as their only means of obtaining an education and training. For example, in terms of socio-economic status, in 2019, 45,177 (30.8%) of learners had a lower secondary education or below when enrolling in a FET course, and 31.3% of learners were unemployed prior to enrolment, while 26% were employed. The remaining 42.7% of learners were inactive prior to enrolment and of those learners who were unemployed, 40% were long-term unemployed. The Review of Pathways to Participation in

Apprenticeship (SOLAS, 2018) highlights a lack of apprentice profile data for example, with respect to the ethnicity of apprentices. In this regard, the collection of meaningful FET learner profile data is essential in monitoring and evaluating the participation of underrepresented groups across FET.

Recommendations concerning relevant target groups include but are not limited to: persons with a disability; early school leavers; the unemployed; migrant communities; members of low-income families; carers; members of the Roma and Traveller community; mature students; women and girls. Those not in receipt/eligible for state financial assistance, cohorts not currently accessing education, and specific groups of existing FET learners for example Youthreach and VTOS learners and unemployed adults accessing part time or full time FET programmes for over one year were also identified. In supporting the participation of vulnerable groups, this submission supports the adoption of positive and holistic measures/targets, for example a proposed bursary for all apprenticeships payable to employers when the gender balance/participation is less than 20% male or female.

Table 2 below identifies FET programme categories and learner numbers for 2019 including Community Education provision, much of which helps to develop core or foundational skills in local, non-traditional learning environments, which offer a crucial access touchpoint in engaging marginalised learners. Community education is a critical aspect of FET provision incorporating initiatives developed to serve the needs of localities, often in partnership with local organisations, in collaborating on tailored responses to learner needs, utilising the expertise, resources and established relationships with potential learners. ETBI's report 'Vision for Tertiary Education', 2020 (p.12) outlines how Community Education takes place in community settings outside of the formal sector and places a strong emphasis on individual empowerment and community development as a way of reducing education and social disadvantage. Because community education is taking place in varied community settings (offshore islands, for example) and is often unaccredited, it can be relatively 'eclipsed' in comparison with more formal, certified on-site or campus-based learning. Yet approximately one quarter of FET part-time provision consists of community education (which increases to just under 50% if literacy/numeracy provision is included).

Table 2 presents adult literacy, numeracy and digital (ALND) skills provision, which also plays a crucial role in supporting access and inclusion. In addition, Specialist Training is provided to learners requiring more intensive support than would be available in a non-specialist training environment, for example learners with disabilities. Features of Specialist Training includes additional training duration; adapted equipment; transport arrangements; enhanced programme content and an increased trainer to learner ratio. In collaboration with local community groups, ETBs provide flexible Local Training Initiatives (LTIs) programmes, designed to provide opportunities for learners who are unable to participate in other training opportunities for personal, social or geographic reasons.

Table 2: Programme categories and learner numbers for 2019.

	Programme Category	Learners
<b>Full-time</b>	Blended Training	523
	Bridging and Foundation Training	554
	Community Training Centres	2,708
	Justice Workshop	218
	Local Training Initiatives	2,956
	PLC 7	47,884
	Specialist Training Providers	3,212
	Specific Skills Training	8,389
	Traineeship Employed	667
	Traineeship Training	4,756
	VTOS Core	5,016
	Youthreach	4,581
<b>Part-time</b>	Adult Literacy Groups	25,356
	BTEI Groups	22,030
	Community Education	33,046
	ESOL	12,265
	Evening Training	12,812
	FET Cooperation Hours	3,053
	ITABE	1,585
	Other Funding	2,556
	Refugee Resettlement	693
	Skills for Work	3,884
	Voluntary Literacy Tuition	749

	Recognition of Prior Learning	226
	Skills to Advance	2,881

Table 2: Programme categories and learner numbers for 2019.

In terms of the programme categories and learner numbers presented in Table 2, this submission recognised the importance of assessing representation of groups across a range of strata including NFQ level, subject areas, part time/full time provision so as to understand where target cohorts are overly represented and where there are persistent issues in terms of retention and progression.

### Supporting Target Groups

In line with the recent FET Strategy, ETBs recognise the necessity of consistent and integrated learner supports in enabling any individual, regardless of background or formal education level, an opportunity to learn and develop. Learner supports are essential in mitigating the barriers to engaging in FET. The provision of FET learner supports at a national standard, addressing existing barriers and on a par with supports provided at higher education is key. Financial, academic, mentoring, transport and student welfare supports are essential in this regard. The development of learner support structures and resources for example disability and literacy support staff/dedicated Access Officers within the FET structure is further prioritised. Inclusive teaching and learning practice is an essential learner support as is The ETB Adult Guidance Service providing impartial information, advice and support to learners engaging in FET provision or who wish to return to education and training.

ETBs strive to ensure that learner supports are aligned with the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework; ‘a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn’ <https://www.ahead.ie/udl>

The UDL framework advocates for a continuum of learner supports provided at the following levels:

- Level 1 – Support for all for example counselling, teaching, and learning supports and career guidance.
- Level 2 – Support for some learners with similar needs for example ESOL learner supports, disability support services, ALND skills provision
- Level 3 – Support for a few for example a needs assessment from specialist services and assistive technology
- Level 4 – Support for the individual for example the use of a Personal Assistant, a reader or scribe during examinations.

In subscribing to the UDL framework the learning experience and outcomes for ‘all’ students are improved with the provision of cross FET learner support structures enabled. This allows

movement away from a targeted approach that signals out specific cohorts as 'in need' and breaks the link with specific programmes and standalone delivery.

### Funding programmes

Equitable financial supports are a key characteristic of consistent and integrated learner supports, which should be available to all FET and HE Learners. Current funding programmes supports should be standardised across FET for example FSD, laptop loan schemes, financial aid, guidance and information. In addition to the financial support system being complicated system for learners to navigate, the same financial supports do not exist for FET learners as HE learners. Furthermore, the need for increased financial supports for economically disadvantaged learners is evident. Flexible funding mechanisms should be considered, which would allow ETBs to target local needs and the importance of resourcing data gathering around learner profile. With respect to post-primary provision fewer financial supports are available to DEIS school learners progressing to FET as opposed to HE, which negatively impacts on learner progression.

Part-time education and training options for adult learners is a key feature of FET provision. This delivery format offers learners flexible day, evening, on-line and blended opportunities to build knowledge, skills and confidence to gain recognised qualifications on the National Framework of Qualification (NFQ) at Levels 1-6. Part-time provision comprehends a diverse cohort of learners including those in employment, long and short term unemployed, early school leavers, new migrants, travellers, people with disabilities, ex-offenders and women returners. In 2019 there were over 170,000 learner enrolments in Further Education and Training Programmes of which 56% were enrolled on part-time programmes. In addition, over 120,000 of those enrolled were over the age of 25. This are remarkable statistics considering that no financial support scheme was in place. Learners can also avail of non-accredited courses which focus on the wider benefits of education, and which set out to intentionally address issues in relation to marginalisation, community and personal development, and active inclusion.

Part-time provision supports the development of foundational, bridging, and vocational skills. Adult Literacy programmes provide learners with the core skills necessary to progress to FET. Community Education offers a steppingstone back into education, and Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) programmes provide learners with opportunities for accreditation at Levels 4, 5, and 6 on the NFQ. While learners participating in community education and adult literacy courses are engaged in education programmes which support the development of basic, transversal, and foundational skills, these programmes are fundamental in meeting the strategic priorities of fostering inclusion, facilitating pathways, and building skills.

Learners within this cohort are often the most disadvantaged and face a wide range of barriers to participation, like those experienced by learners attending full time courses, but

do not have access to funding mechanisms available to learners on full-time programmes. Part time programmes are frequently the only option for learners to participate in education and training as they juggle work and family life. A new student support model must be equally accessible to part-time and full-time learners. ETBI and ETBs welcome the inclusion of part-time provision in the review of the student support funding model. A future funding model which recognises the diversity and uniqueness of FET provision, and the profile of all learners must be a fundamental component of any new system.

#### Pre-entry and post-entry activities/initiatives outside of the FET and HE Sector

Recommended pre-entry and post-entry activities include targeted bridging and exit programmes for example access programmes developed collaboratively by FET and HE institutions. A widening of the HELS scheme to encompass PLCs and part time provision should also be considered. In addition to FET to HE transitions, other pathways should include DEIS schools to FET and HE. An important initiative in this context are Supporting DEIS Learners Transitions to FET Local Networks, established by ETBs to support collaboration in the development of practice and, the development of draft proposals, policies, procedures, information and resources in areas of supporting DEIS learners transition to FET. Further initiatives could include pre-entry courses and programme sampling and Summer Schools. Enhanced promotion including social/media campaigns targeting specific vulnerable cohorts, and increased awareness raising amongst the general public regarding learner supports available is further endorsed.

Sectoral feedback suggests that 'Access doesn't just happen at entry'. Accordingly, the development of networks and collaboration across schools, community organisations, FET and HE institutions and with external social inclusion initiatives is essential. Community collaboration and FET engagement with local development agencies including SICAP, LES, Traveller Interagency group, Age Action and HSE Social Inclusion is essential. As highlighted with respect to Community Education, community engagement plays an essential role in access and equity. ETBs have developed strong relationships with local communities, collaborating with local community groups including local resource centres, homework clubs, family support centres, Women's Projects, Men's Sheds, Active Age Groups, library partnerships, Pavee Point, local Traveller and Roma support groups, Exchange House and Parish Centres. More could be done in resourcing and supporting ETB staff to take on an outreach role, specifically around hard to reach groups. The implementation of the DFHERIS Mitigating Against Education Disadvantage Fund (MAED), which targets hard to reach groups through a community education approach in a more long-term and sustainable manner is further advocated.

### Mainstreaming/A whole of education approach

Mainstreaming access and equity across FET requires inclusive learner-centred teaching and learning practices and environments, adhering to the principles of UDL. This encompasses a commitment to understanding complex learner needs and contexts, for example around previous negative and traumatic experiences of education. The sector reiterates the need for standardised learner supports (academic, financial, transport, childcare, technology and internet access) and structures (dedicated support/access staff; supportive administrative environments), which would benefit all FET Learners. Further recommendations supporting a whole of education approach included the development of local ETB inclusion policy; high quality PD and collaborative initiatives for example a Widening Participation Committees including HE representatives and other relevant organisations.

As highlighted in the recent ETBI submission to the 10 Year Adult, Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Skills Strategy, cross-sectoral, inter-departmental/interagency approaches, collaborative partnerships and community engagement are essential in ensuring access and the provision of meaningful supports based on the needs of learners. ETBs prioritise links with national and local government departments statutory agencies and other stakeholder groups including NALA, DAI, HSE, DEASP, Local Development Companies, LEADER Partnerships, TUSLA, CYPSC, Social Services, CIC, SEN Organisations, Community Employment Schemes, TUS, MABS, Disability Agencies -DSI, INTREO, Direct Provision Centres. Creative partnerships with Corporate/Local Sponsors. Collaborative partnerships with employers and employees, schools, family resource centres and homeless services are essential.

### Pathways between further education and training and higher education

Sectoral findings concerning the development of coherent pathways between FET and HE highlight the need to design new or amend existing programmes that offer the best range of progression options. The importance of providing supported, agile and flexible programme options, both part time and full time, which enable progression was emphasised. In addition, the establishment of networks between Quality Assurance, FET and HE with regards to programme development and fields of learning is essential. The potential for the first year of HE to take place within FET settings, the provision of community-based FET and HE option is also recommended. While we endeavour to provide equity of access there should be consideration for a reverse protocol that can be looked at for those learners who progress to HE but cannot sustain their studies at this level. Development of a formal process which will link HE and FET in cases where a learner does not stay in HE. Workplace and study blended options at HE prioritising mature learners, learners from the Traveller and Roma community and learners with disability, a widening the HELS's programme within FET and a review of the quota system/ Co delivery options 1 + 2, 2+2 models of delivery are also recommended by the sector.

Stronger collaborative links and the development of networks between DEIS Schools, FET and HE, will strengthen the progression of FET learners. Strategic, evidence led formal relationships should be pursued between HE and FE, between ETBs and IOTs, and based on MOUs. Proactive measures need to be developed supporting access, transfer and progression from FET to HE, for example open days for students and learners and the co-delivery of Access Programmes. The sector prioritises integrated guidance and information systems, as well as awareness raising activities that share positive news stories demonstrating learner progression using online and social media platforms. Finally, a national framework for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) would enhance the recognition and accreditation of learning that has been achieved in a non formal or informal educational context. Thereby enabling pathways and the engagement of marginalised learners.

### Covid-19 challenges

Due to the diversity offered through FET provision, closed community spaces have hampered the delivery of community education provision. Challenges with respect to learner access to ICT/Broadband and technological equipment in addition to learner digital literacy and a disconnection from communities of learning essential for the health and wellbeing of learners are apparent. Reduced standards in academic work due to many students having missed out on two academic years, the lack of staff available to support learners and the impact of PUP payments on grant thresholds are further impacts. Changed learner priorities whereby in some cases immediate needs superseded educational needs have emerged. While the impact of COVID on further disadvantaging disadvantaged learners was emphasised, resulting opportunities for example the technology equity scheme, development of IT within FET, accessible online provision and an increased priority on broadband provision were also outlined.

A recent ETBI report 'Learner Supports Research Report' (2021) considered the services and supports available to FET learners in ETBs during COVID -19, presented in Appendix 1. A range of supports for learners are provided including customised learning supports on an individual/group basis, literacy and numeracy support, language support and supportive learning technologies to accommodate learners with disabilities. This report concluded that while ETBs are satisfied with the levels of support and services provided, they would also like to increase their offer of learner support.

Most ETBs confirmed that while psychological supports are in place for Community Training Centres (CTCs) and Youthreach, this support was not available to the wider cohort of FET learners. ESOL and ICT learner supports were robust and responsive, and all ETBs surveyed confirmed that induction, ICT Device loan scheme and one-to-one support in the form of literacy numeracy, support and guidance supports were in place and available for FET learners. With respect to equity and inclusion at post-primary level, the relevance of study

skills, mentoring, and pre-entry activities such as outreach, information, open evenings and pre course guidance throughout all senior cycle options engagement was highlighted.

Recommendations with respect to addressing the challenges brought on by COVID include the need to collaborate with local community development and local development initiatives to address issues of access, support and advocacy for vulnerable groups; to prioritise innovative delivery in addition to online provision for example outreach services, blended learning, distance learning for example posting learning materials, and telephone delivery; the provision of IT equipment; ICT CPD and the roll out of national broadband access in rural Ireland.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed for inclusion in the NAP 2022 – 2024:

1. A vision for equity of access rooted in theoretical perspectives that support education as a human right, and recognising a range of personal, social, cultural, economic and political benefits of learning provided through ETBs. in addition to employment. Aligned with the new FET Strategy, this submission understands equity and access as ‘positive regard for all people’, in tandem with prioritising the success of target cohorts
2. The target groups specified in the NAP should be diverse and include those that are excluded for varied reasons including socio-economic disadvantage, nationality and ethnicity or vulnerability due to homelessness. Furthermore, local ETB socio-economic contexts and learner profiles are varied, therefore, a definite list of target groups is impossible to construct. This submission suggests The Equal Status Acts 2000-2015 (‘ESA’) as a useful guide, which prohibits discrimination in access to and use of goods and services, accommodation and education on nine protected grounds: gender, marital status, family status, age disability, sexual orientation, race, religion, and membership of the Traveller community.
3. The collation of meaningful FET learner profile data, in line with GDPR requirements, is essential in monitoring and evaluating the participation of underrepresented groups across FET. The use of positive measures/ targets supporting the participation of vulnerable groups is further recommended.
4. The provision of consistent and integrated learner supports across ETBs will improve access and outcomes for all learners, not just target cohorts and support a whole of education approach. Such supports would include: inclusive teaching and learning, underpinned by a UDL framework; flexible programme times, type and delivery; structures and resources for example Access Offices.
5. Appropriate and supportive guidance and information provision is essential in addressing motivational/dispositional barriers including confidence and self-esteem

and familial disengagement with education. A fully resourced Adult Guidance Service is essential in supporting transitions into further education and training and in navigating the higher education systems.

6. Addressing obstacles in terms of financial supports including social welfare entitlements, childcare, and transport in addition to costs associated with course attendance and material will alleviate economic barriers.
7. The development of pre and post entry activities that prioritise interagency collaboration and community partnerships and include the strengthening of community education and outreach in engaging hard to reach learners.
8. Equitable resourcing for ETBs for FET access officers as part of the coordinated learner support structure.
9. The development of a unified rather than a uniform system of transitions/progression opportunities within FET and from FET to HE, reviewing the pathways in existence and building on those pathways. In this context, building on the ETB Local Networks Supporting DEIS Learners Transitions to FET is recommended.
10. In terms of the impacts of COVID, this report recommends renewed engagement with those learners that have been further disadvantaged, for example regularising the Mitigating Adult Educational Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF). Building on the opportunities created including increased access via blended learning is further endorsed. Allowing the MAED Fund be used by ETBs to support learners experiencing particular financial hardship and to support community groups who are accessing the most educationally disadvantaged in society will foster active inclusion and promote higher retention rates in further education and training.
11. The implementation of the recommendations to address economic barriers included in the ETBI Submission to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science Public Consultation on the Review of Student Grant Scheme.

This submission welcomes the development of the National Access Plan 2022-2026 and has made a number of recommendations to support equity of access to further and higher education, rooted in principles of equality and social inclusion. ETBI and the ETBs are receptive to future dialogue with the Department on this subject and are happy to participate in any process to assist with the development of the new plan.

## Appendix 1: Services and supports available to FET learners in ETBs during COVID -19

Adult Guidance Information Service	100%
Career Guidance for PLC	100%
1-2-1 Literacy and Numeracy support	100%
ICT Device Schemes	100%
Induction	100%
Family Literacy Programmes	100%
Psychological supports for CTC/ Youthreach	93%
Language Supports	93%
CV Preparation and Interview Preparation	93%
Technology Enhanced Learning	93%
Satisfaction surveys	79%
ESOL provision for parents	79%
Adult Education Counselling Service	71%
Grant Application Supports	71%
Disability Supports	71%
Learner Forums	71%
Work Experience link person	64%
Online Wellbeing Supports	57%
Learner equality and intercultural activities	50%
RPL Mentoring	50%
ESOL provision for learners affected by homelessness, addiction, in prison and in the workplace	50%
Open Learning Centres	43%
Library	43%
Study Centres / Learning Hubs	43%
Needs Assessments	43%
Learner Development Days	36%
Accommodation Assistance	36%
Other - Write In	36%
Vocational Mentoring and Coaching	29%
Psychological Assessments	21%
Childcare Supports	21%
Hardship Fund	21%