

Learner Support in Further Education and Training: Towards a Consistent Learner Experience

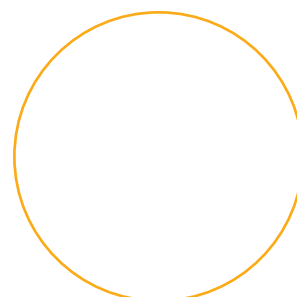
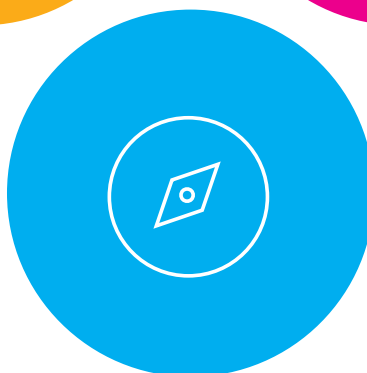
Position Paper



Acknowledgments

This position paper and the accompanying framework guide were developed as part of the Fostering Inclusion priority of developing and providing Consistent Learner Supports in Further Education and Training (FET), contained within Future FET: Transforming Learning - The National Further Education and Training Strategy.

They were developed with the oversight of the Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)-SOLAS Learner Support Programme Board. Acknowledgments are given to the enormous contribution made by the ETBI-SOLAS Learner Support Programme Board, whose commitment to improving these, through rigorous feedback, dialogue and engagement immensely strengthened the work produced. A full list of organisations and individuals represented on the Board can be found in the Appendices (Appendix 2) of this document. We also acknowledge the FET practitioners from across the Education and Training Boards (ETB) network who took the time to prepare and submit case studies which portray such rich examples of learner supports being provided in the sector. A special word of thanks is extended to the SOLAS Learner Support Team who compiled the publication and worked collaboratively with the sector throughout.



Foreword

It is with great pleasure that we present this position paper and the accompanying framework guide for Learner Support in Further Education and Training. FET is uniquely placed to take learners as far as they want to go and has an exceptional record in reaching diverse communities and providing inclusive education and training. An important stepping stone towards further embedding inclusiveness in the FET sector, this body of work – A Learner Support Framework – builds on our sector's ambitious Transforming Learning Strategy. It is a clear statement and recognition that FET is widely available and enhanced learner supports are a vital enabling factor for delivering effectively on the key aspects of FET provision, directly contributing to the aims of the sector and the key targets – to widen participation, create pathways, and promote lifelong learning.

This work builds a common understanding of 'Learner Support' in FET and will contribute to empowerment at local ETB level, primarily by aiming to enable and facilitate flexibility and agility regarding support provision. The framework is enhanced by several case studies demonstrating how different types of supports are being provided across the sector and showcasing the progress already being made by FET practitioners in delivering for their learners.

This work is the result of a cross-sectoral co-operation, with SOLAS working closely with the Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) and, with key inputs being garnered from FET practitioners, it reflects the impact that learner supports have on improving and enhancing the learner experience in FET. SOLAS and ETBI are delighted to bring this vital resource to the sector and would like to extend thanks to everyone who gave their time to contribute to its development.



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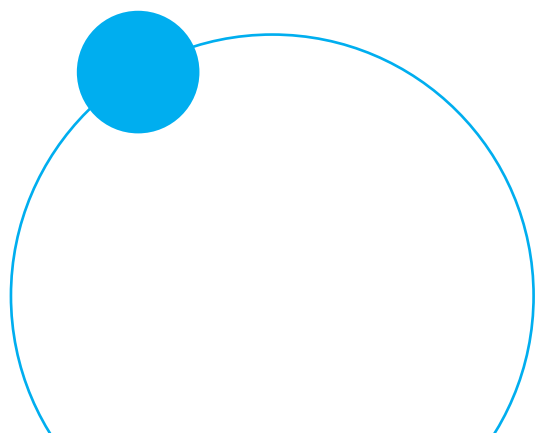
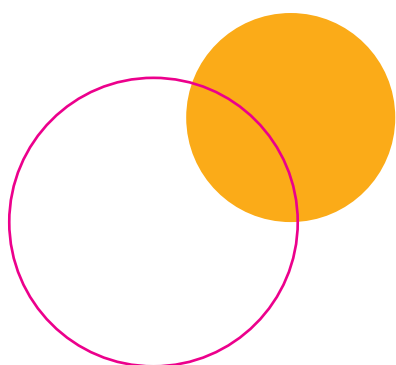


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Introduction

SOLAS aims to foster an inclusive learning environment for all learners¹ in the Further Education and Training (FET) sector by supporting, and working closely with key stakeholders and partners, first and foremost with Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI). SOLAS sees consistency of learner supports as a strategic priority – a priority that was set in response to feedback received from the FET sector through a variety of fora. This is articulated in “Future FET: Transforming Learning – The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy (2020 – 2024)”, (hereafter “the FET Strategy”) which sets ‘Consistency of Learner Supports’ as one of four key priorities under the Fostering Inclusion Pillar, as depicted in Figure 1.

To address this priority, the FET sector has aimed to develop and put forward practical proposals for enhancing the availability and consistency of learner supports. It is envisaged that such proposals would be facilitated and resourced through existing devolved budgeting mechanisms, which can be complemented and enhanced with the current arrangements and ongoing developments regarding the administration of the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD).

This work builds on existing sectoral achievements, acknowledging that innovative approaches are already in planning and development, or in place at a local level, many of which were highlighted by ETBs in the ETBI *Learner Support Research Report*. This paper presents examples of sectoral achievements in this regard, where ETBs are taking steps to enhance learners’ experience of FET. In this paper, the ‘learner experience’ is understood to encompass everything the FET sector has to offer - interactions, opportunities, and support systems - and involves the academic, social, cultural, and personal aspects that shape the overall experience.

¹ The term ‘Learner’ will be the primary term used throughout this document; however, it is considered to also encompass/refer to those who consider ‘Student’ as the appropriate term for the nature of their FET participation and engagement. Furthermore, at the time of publication, proposals are under consideration to rename the ‘Fund for Students with Disabilities’ (FSD), referred to on this page and throughout the document, as the ‘Fund for Learners with Disabilities’ (FLD) within the FET sector. While the Position Paper will refer to the Fund For Students with Disabilities (FSD), this should be considered to equally denote/refer to the Fund for Learners with Disabilities (FLD).

SOLAS, for its part, in continuous collaboration with the FET sector, has produced a number of relevant resources, guides/guidelines and tools/toolkits, which can contribute to the goal of delivering on learner supports and achieving and ensuring a consistent learner experience. SOLAS will continue to support ETBs to embed the range of good practice guidelines already produced and available to the sector, aiming to aid access, participation, retention, learning, progression, and success for all learners in FET.

Existing knowledge and assets in FET provide a good structural foundation from which to build. However, to deliver on this strategic priority, it is deemed that a more focused approach, underpinned by a shared understanding, would be beneficial. Thus, this position paper outlines the approach to promoting and enhancing consistency of learner supports across FET. The approach has been formulated in a collaborative manner, enhanced by sectoral input and experiences, as outlined further below.

How the position paper and framework was developed

An initial proposal was drafted by SOLAS and subsequently the ETBI-SOLAS Learner Support Programme Board worked on the further development of this proposal and the framework, with the aim to develop a common understanding and agreed way forward for the sector. The process included detailed sectoral inputs, provided by ETB representatives and FET practitioners via the ETBI-SOLAS Learner Support Programme Board. This two-step process has enriched the position paper and framework and enhanced the sectoral guidance with practical examples of good practice in the provision of Learner Support across the ETB network. In addition, the approach is consistent with the new funding model and associated allocations for learner supports.

A note on terminology

We recognise that terminologies matter. While this position paper is focussed on the needs of all learners, we are conscious of the effects of “labelling”, especially in relation to learners with additional needs as a result of a disability. This position paper is guided by the ‘NDA Advice Paper on Disability Language and Terminology’ (National Disability Authority (NDA), 2022), and will interchangeably use the terms ‘person with a disability’ and ‘disabled person’, reflecting both the ‘person first’ and the ‘identity first’ approach.

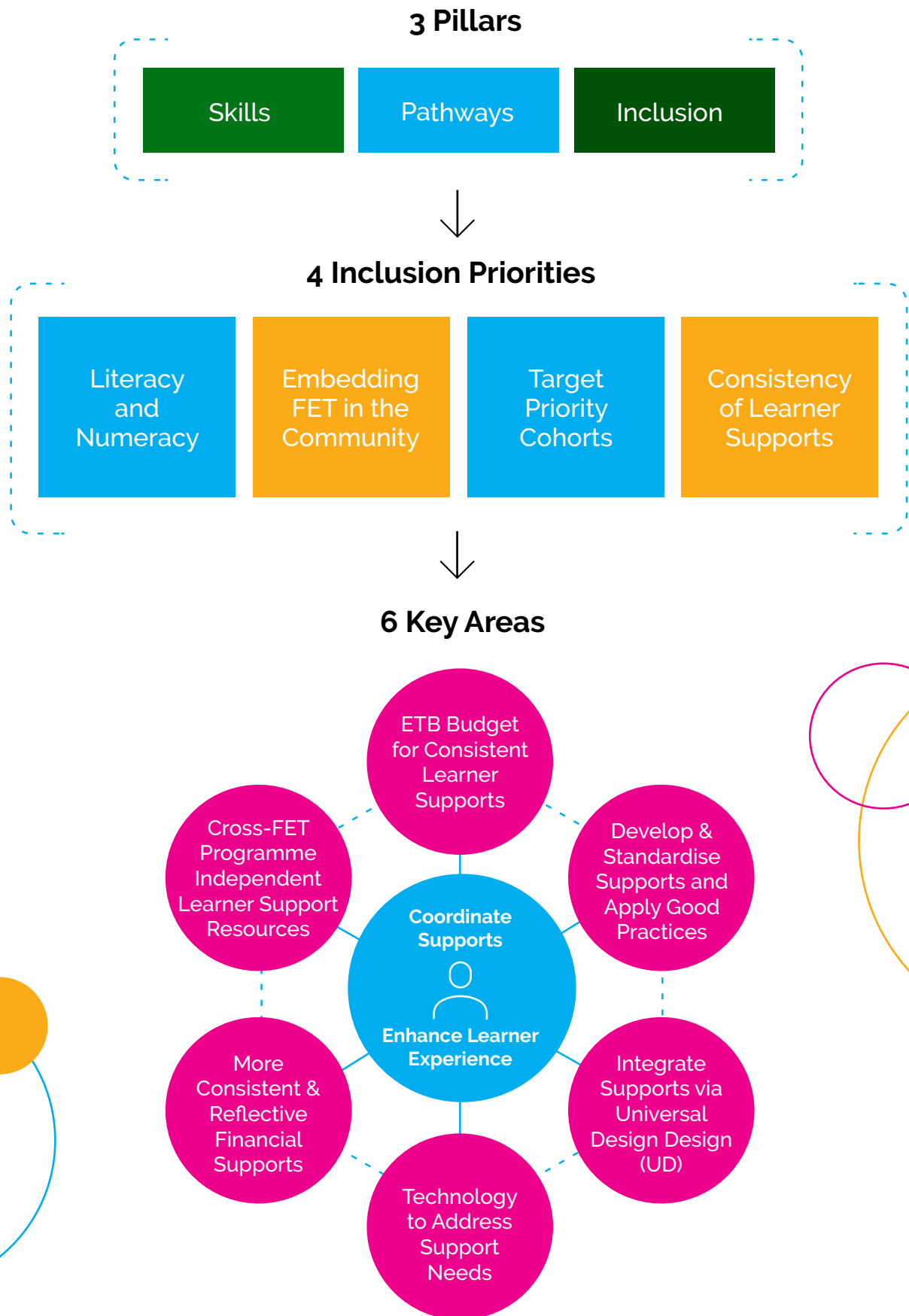


Learner Support Towards Reaching a Shared Understanding

Learner Supports in the FET Strategy

The issue of learner supports features prominently in the FET Strategy. The Strategy outlines the key areas deemed necessary to deliver on 'Learner Support' (Figure 1). It has been put forward that enhanced learner supports were an enabling factor for delivering effectively on the relevant aspects of FET provision, and therefore directly contributing to the aims of the sector and the FET sectoral targets set out in the FET 'System Report' (SOLAS, 2022), across the range of identified themes, in particular Fostering Inclusion and Widening Participation, Creating Pathways and Lifelong Learning.

Figure 1. Learner Supports in FET – origins and key areas

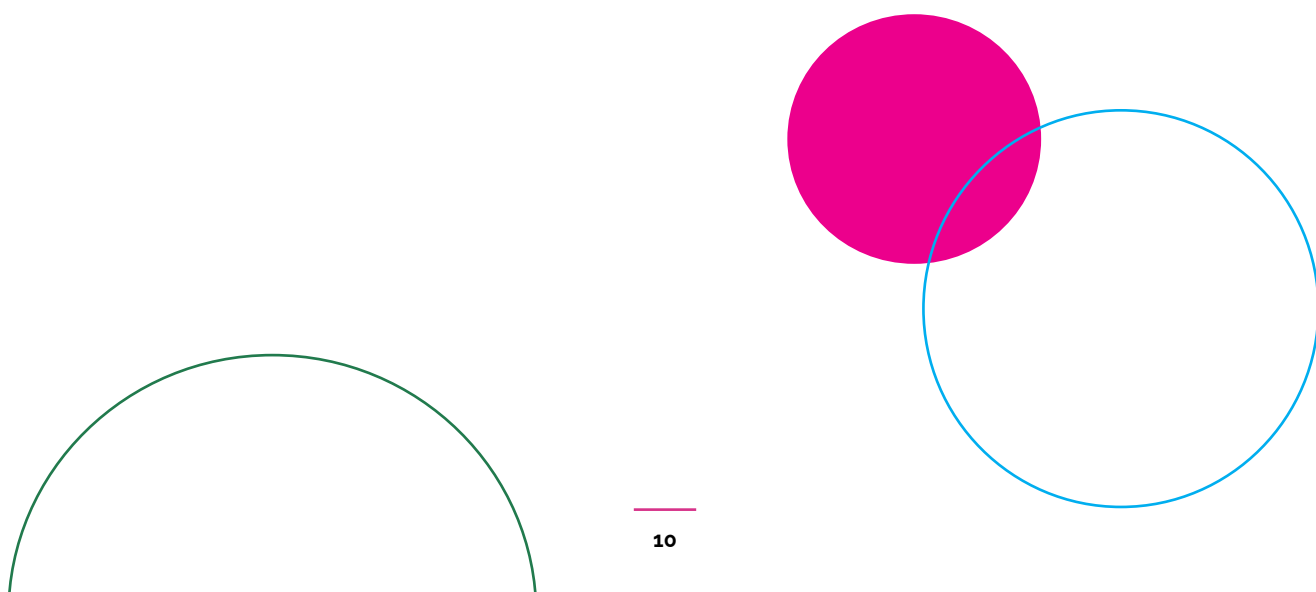


The FET Strategy set out and reiterated the sectoral position that relevant supports should be made available so to facilitate all learners, and fully reflect and take account of their diversity. In other words, the aim is to afford any individual, regardless of their background or formal education level, an opportunity to learn and develop. In practice, this amounts to a pledge to provide more consistent levels of necessary supports to learners.

The essence of the approach is to adopt a learner-centred ethos and to tailor both learning and supports so to meet the needs of learners, with consistent, integrated, and appropriate supports offered to all learners, in all FET settings. Thus, wherever possible the necessary supports should be available independently of the specific FET programme on which the learner is enrolled and engaged. This process can be aided by appropriate IT systems and, in line with the digital transformation and upgrading of infrastructure that is ongoing within the FET system, some of the supports can be IT-based.

The approach, as it will be outlined in more detail in subsequent sections, builds on the above and is coupled with relevant aspects of learner support pillars stemming from a quality assurance perspective, as well as the equality, diversity, and inclusion perspective. As such, it becomes central to the FET ethos, with the aim to improve the learner's connection to their programmes of study, to their ETB, and to their fellow learners, enhancing the consistency of the learner experience in FET, and making it easier for all learners to access FET, progress and succeed in their learning.

The main tenet of our approach to understanding 'Learner Support', is that this work should be aligned with wider sectoral ambitions pertinent to fostering inclusion, which includes meeting literacy and numeracy needs, targeting priority cohorts deemed in need of enhanced and tailored services and supports, underpinning and integrating supports through universal design, and establishing FET in the wider community.





Learner Support

Theory and Practice

A common understanding of what is meant by 'Learner Support' is useful, and indeed necessary, in order to both capture a broad range of supports and ensure their consistent availability and implementation across different programmes and settings.

We propose a broad conceptualisation of 'Learner Support', which includes, but is not limited to, supports for learners with disabilities. This broad conceptualisation would encompass a variety of learner needs, as well as services available and/or designed to address them. This would include supports and services offered by ETBs (e.g., access to guidance services, counselling, etc.) and supports available to FET learners via government departments, and public and not-for-profit/nonprofit agencies and bodies (e.g., social welfare system schemes and supports, higher education access schemes, pre-apprenticeship schemes, assessment of literacy and language-based needs, and learning differences and related and/or other issues – Dyslexia/Dyscalculia diagnosis, etc.). Furthermore, it includes measures taken by ETBs to promote equality, diversity, and inclusion within their institutions and initiatives which support learners regarding their health, comprising mental health and wellbeing. It encompasses initiatives that encourage engagement with the social aspects of learning, supporting the 'connectedness' of the learner.

By approaching and understanding 'Learner Support' in this way, we are acknowledging that learner educational needs, and needs relevant for successful engagement with education, occur and can be mapped, and met along a multidimensional continuum, from lower level and more generic in nature to more intensive high level or specific, from learning and academic related to social, emotional, and wellbeing related, and from short-term to long-term. Therefore, the response to these needs should also be offered along a continuum, including universal, or mainstreamed supports for addressing needs common to large numbers of learners, as well as individualised supports, for addressing more specific needs among a smaller subset of learners.

As identified above, learner supports can be universal and/or targeted, but, in either case, these supports should help learners and potential learners, to overcome barriers to access; to surmount obstacles to achievement and progression; and to flourish in the FET environment.

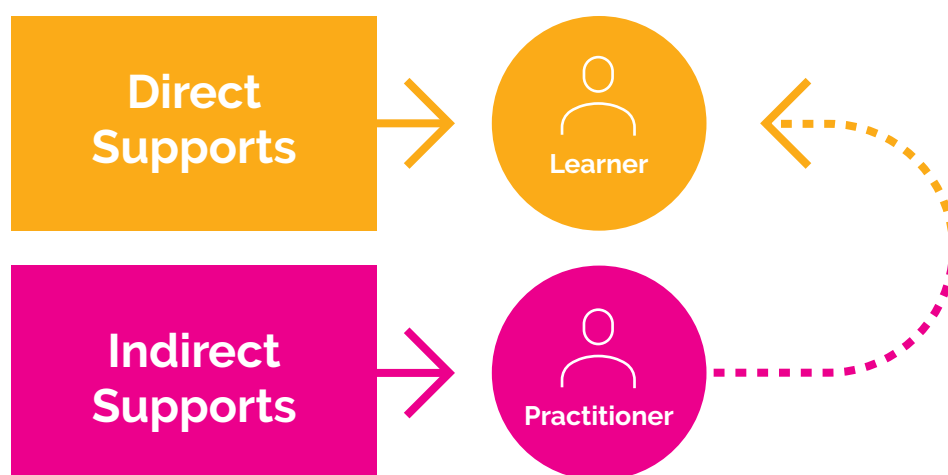
Universal supports refer to mainstreamed supports, which are made available to all learners. Such supports, if implemented effectively, are consistent by nature and may often be integrated into programmes and processes in a 'seamless' way.

Targeted supports refer to more focused supports that may be required by certain learners, with specific needs, in the short, medium, or long term. Ensuring the consistency of targeted supports requires a consistent approach to identifying needs and managing the process by which learners' needs are recognised, learners are made aware of the relevant supports, are facilitated to request, or apply for these if required, and are granted access to, and facilitated to avail of these supports.

Learners' needs for additional, targeted supports can arise from multiple sources or 'causes', such as specific learning difficulties and differences, as well as social, emotional, behavioural and wellbeing needs, or those 'causes' which may stem from life cycle events, such as bereavement, family issues or caring duties. Supports may also be required to facilitate learner progression. Targeted supports may necessitate a coordinated approach by FET practitioners, across the sector, and could require a staged intervention process.

Supports could also include critical group supports or supports delivered in a specific setting (e.g., "FET college community" supports, such as those that may be required in the event of a traumatic or critical incident that may occur within, and/or which profoundly affects, the local FET community or setting).

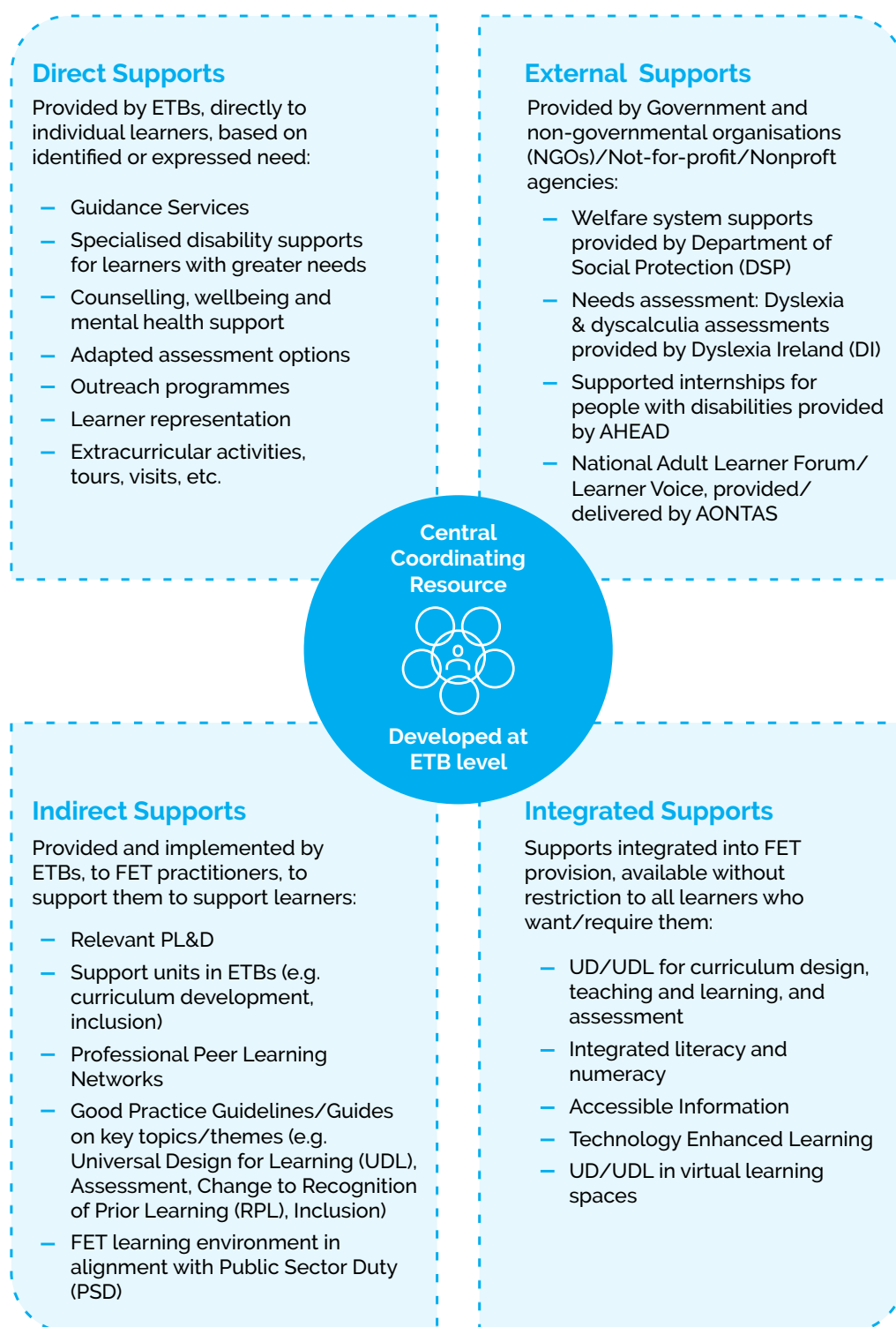
We also note a distinction between direct and indirect learner supports. Direct supports are those provided directly to learners, such as additional literacy and numeracy tuition, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) related supports, digital supports and core digital skills training, Irish Sign Language interpretation services and psychological support. Indirect supports are those provided to FET practitioners to assist them in identifying and addressing their learners' diverse needs, such as special education needs support services that practitioners can call upon when required, such as alternative curriculum development units, tailored Professional Learning and Development (PL&D) in relevant areas, professional learning networks and communities of practice, and guidelines/guides for good practice, aimed at promoting, diffusing and embedding good practice in the FET sector, with a particular focus on teaching and learning.



It should also be noted that some direct supports are external, i.e., can be, and are being provided by sectoral partners, such as government departments and agencies, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs)/not-for-profit/nonprofit agencies.

The broad nature and sheer array of supports outlined above makes a strong case for setting up and developing a coordinating resource at the ETB level, one of the main aspects of our proposed approach (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Learner Supports categories by type, source, and degree of integration



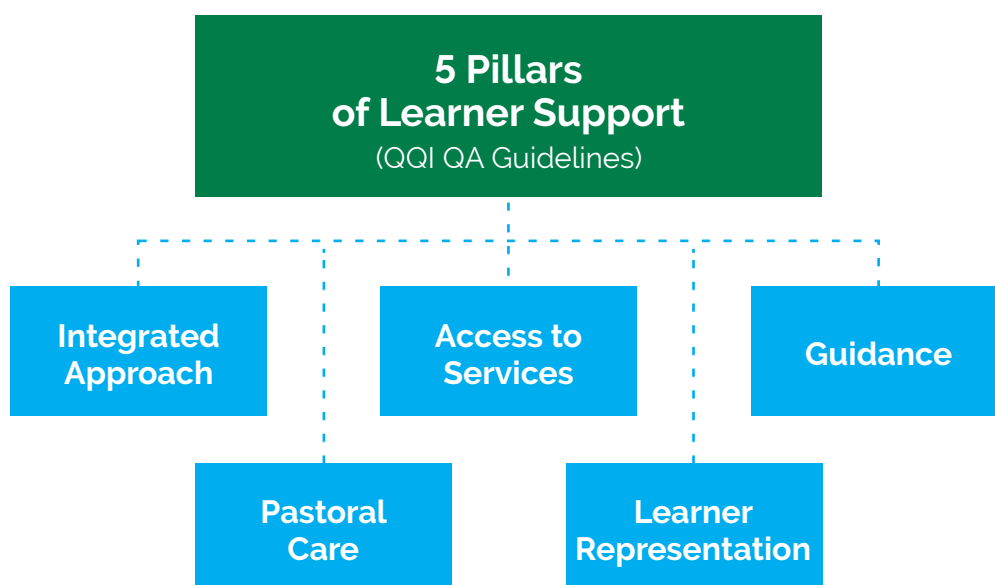
In reaching a proposed shared understanding of 'Learner Support', some existing works and associated publications related to the area of 'Learner Support' in the Irish FET sector were reviewed and are briefly outlined in the following sections.

Quality Assurance Guidelines and Key Learner Support Structures

Quality and Qualifications Ireland's (QQI's) Core Statutory Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines for providers of higher, further, and English language education and training are to be used by providers when designing, establishing, evaluating, maintaining, reviewing and renewing their QA policies and procedures, and as a basis for the approval (by QQI) of providers' QA procedures.

These guidelines list Learner Supports as one of eleven main areas to be addressed in providers' QA procedures, with Section 7 devoted exclusively to the theme 'Supports for Learners'. Furthermore, the guidelines recommend an integrated approach from the perspective of the learner, emphasising the need to update and expand learning resources as necessary to reflect up-to-date approaches and learner needs, as identified through feedback on teaching and learning, while ensuring the suitability of the resources available to learners via regular monitoring. Finally, the guidelines recommend that five specific learner supports, or support structures, referred to as *pillars*, be put in place. These are presented in Figure 3.²

Figure 3. Learner Support Pillars in QQI QA Guidelines



Source: QQI (2016) Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for use by all Providers.

² The Guidelines are elaborated upon in Appendix 1. QQI Learner Support Pillars.

Our broad conceptualisation of Learner Support is consistent with QQI's Core QA Guidelines. It should be noted that setting and monitoring FET providers' QA requirements remains the exclusive remit of QQI. SOLAS' understanding and conceptualisation of Learner Supports (and their consistency) is in part drawn from the standards and requirements set by QQI. SOLAS' key priority areas within the theme of consistency of learner supports, specified in the FET Strategy, and visualised in Figure 1, provided earlier in this paper, are consistent with SOLAS' role and remit, as laid out in the Further Education and Training Act 2013 (*revised 2020*) (*2013 FET Act*). Therefore, SOLAS' understanding focuses on the need to support, facilitate, and resource FET providers to deliver on this area of significant strategic importance.

Learner Support - Same Term, Different Meaning?

In aiming for greater consistency in the learner experience, it was important to determine what FET practitioners and relevant organisations consider learner supports to be.

Learner Support and ETB Self Evaluation Reports

There appeared to be a good deal of variation in the perception and understanding of 'Learner Supports' among ETBs. This became evident from the Executive Self-Evaluation Reports (ESERs), produced by all sixteen ETBs, in line with QQI Quality Assurance Guidelines³ and summarised in QQI's 2018 report 'Quality in Irish Further Education and Training'.⁴ Although the ESERs revealed some common themes, not least a shared and discernible commitment to the provision of services that are responsive to the needs of learners, a divergent understanding of learner supports was also apparent, inferring from the reports viewed through different lenses (e.g., direct vs indirect, mainstreamed vs specialised supports). Inconsistency in the availability of learner supports across service types and different programmes and locations was a common theme identified in QQI's ESER summary report.

Inferring from the ESERs, ETBs' focus tended to be on direct learner supports, although this has been changing. Some ETBs included mainstreamed supports (e.g., Universal Design [for Learning] (UDL) implementation), while others focused on specialised supports, targeted at specific individuals (e.g., reasonable accommodations) and/or specific cohorts or groups (e.g., supports for people furthest from the labour market or for people with disabilities).

³ ESERs stemmed from the QQI QA Guidelines.

⁴ QQI. (2018), Quality in Irish Further Education and Training 2018. To view, [click here](#).

General, universal support services (e.g., guidance services) are sometimes referenced as learner supports but often placed in a different category, deemed part of the general 'learner experience'. It should be noted that ETBs have recognised the inextricable link between the availability of supports for learners and the overall learning experience.⁵

The evidence of this apparent variability in the understanding of 'Learner Supports' provided an additional impetus to develop this position paper, which set out to examine in greater detail and provide the basis for the conceptualisation of *Learner Support*, to promote and provide for shared understanding of the term, or the concept, and to set the foundation and approaches for moving forward, towards a consistent and enhanced learner experience.

Learner Support in the ETBI Learner Support Research Report

A mapping of learner supports services available to FET learners undertaken by ETBI (ETBI Learner Support Research Report) gathered some data in relation to 'Learner Supports' available within ETBs and classified these supports into the following categories:

1. Programme (programme-based)
2. Guidance, Health, and Wellbeing
3. Work Experience and Employment
4. Information and Communication Technology (ICT)
5. Financial

The main findings highlight that some supports remain programme-based (e.g., psychological supports are in place for Community Training Centres (CTCs) and Youthreach, and not available to the wider cohort of FET learners), while other supports, such as induction, ICT device schemes, and guidance supports are in place and available for FET learners generally, or *universally*, i.e., are offered by all ETBs, across the board.

⁵ QQI. (2019). Quality in Irish Further Education and Training. To view, [click here](#).

Reflecting on, and responding to the learner needs, some programmes or learning opportunities and associated supports are also offered by all ETBs, namely family literacy and associated one-to-one support (in the form of literacy and numeracy supports).⁶ At the same time, some supports that would benefit all learners (e.g., open learning centres, study centres/learning hubs) were not available across the board.

Finally, the sector is aspiring to increase the present offering regarding learner supports, indicating both the scope and the recognition of a need to do more in this area. In this vein, the report identified additional supports that ETBs would like to extend, and make more widely available to learners, namely:

- Health and wellbeing supports such as psychological assessments across FET and the expansion of the complement of online wellbeing supports
- Learning supports such as open learning and study centres, as well as accessibility related supports
- Employment and employability focused supports including vocational mentoring and coaching
- ICT support, including Eduroam access, and an ICT scheme that included mobile devices

The report recommends that learner supports should be available on a more consistent basis across FET programmes and services, in line with, and focused on, the needs of learners. Furthermore, building a scaffolding of supports, or “wraparound” supports across the areas, or across the five stated categories can be done in a targeted or focused manner, with the most distanced, vulnerable learners deemed to merit the greatest support/number of supports. Such an approach could provide opportunities for the extension of these supports across all programmes and sections of FET, to ‘follow’ the learner, as learners progress along their pathways, and is entirely consistent with our proposed approach, which is outlined in the section below.

⁶ This at the same time illustrates the difficulties regarding classification of supports.



Learner Support **Proposed Approach Towards a Consistent Learner Experience**

Working towards ensuring a greater consistency in the 'learner experience' is central to implementing a learner-centred approach, which promotes and supports diversity, equality, inclusion, fairness, and wellbeing. Across all FET settings and programmes, in every learning context, learners should be supported to realise their potential, with the focus on learning and progression.

We propose an approach to ensuring consistency of 'Learner Support' that promotes learning for all, is based on a proactive, integrated, and early intervention approach (i.e., identifying needs and taking action before these needs are reflected in learners' progress and achievement), and be universally available/mainstreamed wherever possible so that specific diagnoses are not required for accessing and availing of supports that are needed by, and beneficial for, a broad base of learners. In other words, these supports, and associated approaches would be beneficial for all learners.

In line with QQI Core Quality Assurance Guidelines, and as outlined above, we also propose a broad conceptualisation of 'Learner Support', which includes, but is not limited to, supports for disabled learners.

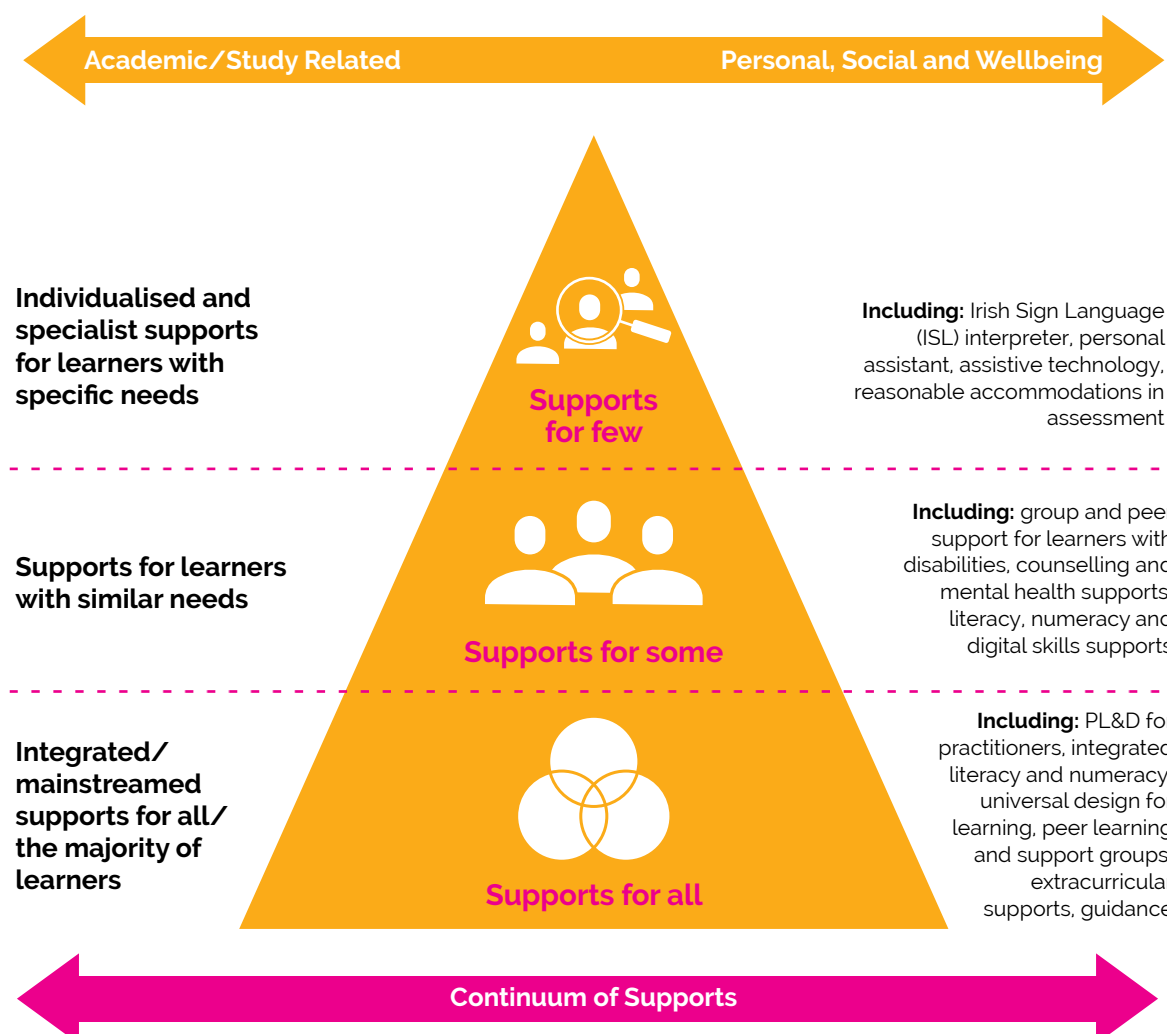
It is recognised that the delivery of consistent learner supports should be based on a consultative and collaborative approach, with flexibility and latitude afforded to FET practitioners to act in a timely and effective manner when additional needs are identified.

It should also be acknowledged that a learner's journey through FET is just a segment of their overall educational experience. It would therefore seem beneficial to enhance linkages with other parts of the education system, the wider system of government supports, and with local community services, with the purpose of providing learners with continuous supports, thus facilitating seamless transitions throughout their lifelong learning journey and associated pathways.

As noted above, the FET Strategy recognised and clearly referenced the need to support learners in a consistent manner. Aligned with this strategic direction and in line with statutory QA requirements outlined in the previous section, and consistent with the ongoing developments regarding the implementation of ETB level FET Learner Charters⁷, the FET sector is already providing a broad range of supports to its learners. Figure 4 introduces a proposed approach for FET, which will be discussed further.

⁷ FET Learner Charters are being incepted/adopted/in place within several ETBs, typically outlining commitments relating to the level and quality of service. They set out and progress the understanding between the learners and their ETBs, including their respective expectation and responsibilities. Indeed, some ETBs conceptualise and articulate it as 'Customer Service' and the commitments are applicable across the spectrum of ETB services including post-primary education.

Figure 4. Learner Support – gradients and categorisation in terms of level and scope⁸



From our perspective the main aim is to ensure that learners are supported on their journey through FET; that this process, from their perspective, appears seamless; that they are not unduly 'labelled'; and that the delivery of needed supports occurs in an effective, efficient and timely manner. To illustrate the above, we can take the case of integrated literacy and numeracy supports.

⁸ Based on, and adapted from, the model put forward by the Department of Education in relation to the "Continuum of Supports" in educational settings. See NCSE Website: [The Continuum of Support \(Primary\) | National Council for Special Education - CPD and In-School Support \(sess.ie\)](https://www.ncse.ie/our-work/special-education/cpd-and-in-school-support)

Where such supports are integrated into the programme, any learner on the programme in need of these supports has those needs addressed in a way that is effective, timely and proactive. Thus, integrating literacy and numeracy supports into wider FET provision, from the learner perspective, amounts to seamless support that, once in place, requires no additional administrative effort by the provider and, by extension, no effort to access by the learner. As these supports are integrated into the programme, any learner identified as requiring them gains immediate access to them, and avails of these. The ongoing efforts in the sector to integrate and embed learner supports are already evident.⁹ (Case Study 1)

Case Study 1

Integrated Learner supports provided to apprentices within the Regional Skills Training Centre (Louth and Meath ETB)

This case study focuses on the essential learning supports provided by the Adult Learning Service (ALS) in Dundalk to Phase 2 Apprentices in the Regional Skills Training Centre (RSTC), and how these supports have developed and have been added to the menu of supports currently provided.

The ALS is free and confidential service, featuring 1-to-1 and small group classes, for anyone who wishes to improve their basic literacy, numeracy, or IT skills in a supportive environment. The work in RSTC has been greatly enhanced by the linkage with the Support to Apprenticeship Group (SAG) network which is facilitated by ETBI. This working group brings together the learning support structures that support apprentices in the ETBs across the country. The sharing of learning and resources has greatly accelerated the provision in the RSTC. The tutors use the Trade specific workbooks developed and shared by members of this group. Microsoft forms assessments developed for Maths assessments in Carpentry and Joinery and Electrical classes are also used.

The key factors which have allowed this service to develop are good communications between all the stakeholders and most importantly the learning support provided is specific to the needs of the apprentices. The provision of these supports needs to be efficient and timely as the phase 2 apprentices only have 14 weeks (about 3 months) in the Centre to complete their phase. For those who require learning supports it can be the difference between progression to the next phase of their apprenticeship or re-sitting exams.

⁹ This case study illustrates the efforts made by ETBs and the FET practitioners to mainstream learner supports and the work required and undertaken 'behind the scenes' to achieve this; it also illustrates the fluid nature of some supports, and that classification, as outlined in Figure 4, is not always straightforward or 'neat'.

The conceptualisation of 'Learner Support' as outlined above is in line with the understanding of 'continuum of support', whereby learners' educational needs include academic, social, personal, and emotional needs, as well as needs associated with physical, sensory, language and communication difficulties.

This approach recognises that FET plays an important role, not only by providing individuals with employability or academic skills but also aiming to provide learners with opportunities to develop personally, to support sustainable communities and improve overall quality of life.

These additional facets of FET and engagement with FET relate to self-awareness and identity, confidence and wellbeing, societal (re)engagement and social cohesion, integration and inclusion.

Thus, learner needs are considered in context, which in turn should enable FET providers, in their settings to identify and respond to learners' needs in a flexible way. It is also aligned with the principle that those learners with the greatest level of need should have access to the greatest levels of support (Figure 4).

The conceptualisation of *Learner Support* and the approach espoused by SOLAS and the sector in reaching a shared understanding in this regard is in line with the principles underpinning the design of public services in Ireland.¹⁰ Thus, the overarching aim is to place the learner at the forefront of provision and deliver learner-centric solutions. The approach is empathetic, with the key building block being the aim to understand and meet the needs of learners.

The approach is driven by learner needs, with the focus on delivering the outcomes that meet these needs, while seeking to provide a seamless experience through ensuring both consistency and continuum. Furthermore, knowledge sharing is recommended, and the strong sectoral input has been a feature in developing the approach. Finally, it aims to deliver on the value proposition in terms of enhancing the overall learner experience and value proposition for the FET learner.

¹⁰ As outlined in *Designing our Public Services: Design principles for Government in Ireland*, prepared by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Click on the link to access: [Design in Gov Final](#)

As an agency of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), SOLAS is tasked with planning, funding and monitoring FET provision. SOLAS is keen to see the continuation of, and building on the approach that is largely already effectively in place. This means that QA requirements, including learner supports, are set and monitored in collaboration between ETBs and QQI, with the added feature that SOLAS will encourage, facilitate and resource ETBs to marshal and utilise the relevant resources and deliver consistent supports to their learners. In addition to this, SOLAS will also support enhanced information gathering and data collection, as appropriate, on learner supports, as well as the consistency of their availability.

It is proposed that this approach could be progressed and sustained through annual SOLAS - ETBs funding processes and mechanisms¹¹ via supporting the formation and development of a central 'Coordinating Learner Support Resource' in each ETB. The resource, among other things, would coordinate, promote, and ensure consistency of learner supports across each ETB's provision and catchment area. The sharing of learning, and promoting the diffusion of good practices to enhance learner success, could also be recommended through cross-ETB networks.

This approach is deemed appropriate because of ETBs' proximity to learners, which facilitates accurate and timely identification of needs, as well as effective distribution and deployment of dedicated resources where, in some cases, ETBs may need to allocate the personalised budget directly to the learner.

From a resourcing perspective, the general approach is based on the broad principle of devolved or delegated budgeting and is therefore consistent with the broad FET sector funding system, as it has evolved and is already in place.

Furthermore, the emphasis is on utilisation of relevant funding streams and integration, on marshalling these, and creating and exploring synergies. There are several existing funding streams that could be marshalled and directed towards establishing and resourcing a central consistency of learner support resource in each ETB. These are elaborated upon in a later section on FET system funding.

¹¹ Annual funding and priorities are set and agreed between SOLAS and ETBs. The approach to distributing the funding to ETBs involves two initial steps: (1) The issuing of Planning and Funding Parameters and Requirements to the ETBs, setting the guidelines and conditions for funding during the year; and (2) An initial planning letter for each ETB, outlining the overall money available and its purpose, and inviting funding allocation requests (FARs) in return. To obtain SOLAS funding, ETBs must compile and submit a FAR annually - the FAR process is a bid process in which the ETBs submit projected expenditure for the forthcoming year.

Learner Supports in FET

Financial Support

Learners may find that they need supports to assist them to manage financially during the period of their study. Indeed, financial considerations are a key aspect of making a commitment to engage in a programme of learning. While FET offers many different types of programmes, often flexibly, part time, and at the weekends, as well as online, which can allow FET learners to “fit” programmes around their working and personal lives, it is important to note that learners on certain types of FET programmes, and depending on individual circumstances, may be eligible for direct financial or income supports such as:

- Access to the Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) grant for learners in full-time approved Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses
- FET training allowances and/or the retention of social welfare payments on certain FET programmes
- Other supports/subsidies - FET Learners may be eligible to apply for support to National Childcare Scheme (NCS), financial support to help families with their early learning and childcare costs

Employment and Guidance Supports

Learner transitions from FET into employment are one of core elements of the work of the FET sector and an important part of the journey of many FET learners who are gaining knowledge and skills that enhance their employability. As such, several supports provided to learners are designed to assist them to navigate their pathways through the available education and training options, and the labour market, thus aligning the options with the individual learner’s personal strengths, aims and ambitions. We propose that the existing supports provided in this area, as subsequently highlighted in this section, continue to be prioritised and made available to FET learners as they progress on their individual pathways into and through FET.

To aid progression and ensure learner needs are met, there is a dedicated Adult Education Guidance and Information Service (AEGIS) in each ETB that provides guidance to FET learners and potential learners. Guidance and information are also available to apprentices and trainees through the training centre network. The AEGIS works to encourage adult learners to gain additional perspectives, to re-evaluate their existing strengths, abilities, and skills, as well as looking at ways to develop new ones. Some FET learners will also have had engagement on careers issues and options with the Department of Social Protection's (DSP) Intreo service (see section Supports in the Broader Environment).

Guidance services are also available in Youthreach and Community Training Centres (CTCs). In addition, personal counselling, advocacy, and psychological support services are available to young people on these programmes. The advocacy service provides a network of full-time advocates whose role is to support Youthreach participants in decision-making, referral, progression, and placement. Advocates are also instrumental in organising work experience and monitoring students on work experience.

The Further Education and Training Course Hub (FETCH courses: [Home - FET Course Hub \(fetchcourses.ie\)](https://www.fetchcourses.ie)) provides an online portal for FET learners and potential FET learners to search a comprehensive database of available FET courses. The site provides information on what FET can offer, and on areas such as grants and allowances, the Central Applications Office (CAO) and information on apprenticeships.

FET is also available to those in employment through the Skills for Work and the Skills to Advance initiatives. In addition, [SOLAS' eCollege](https://www.solas.ie) - The National Online Learning Service for Further Education and Training offers very flexible and user-friendly online learning, ideal for those wishing to study at their own pace and reconcile study with their work and life commitments. It operates on a continuous intake basis and offers fully online learning opportunities leading to certification.

ETBs are linked with the Network of Regional Skills Fora, as part of the Government's National Skills Strategy, providing an opportunity for employers and the education and training system to work together to meet the emerging skills needs of their regions.

Academic and Study Related Supports

Supports that provide learners with information, skills, and tools they need to maximise their academic performance, often referred to as 'on-course supports', are also recognised as a vital feature of the sectoral approach for achieving and delivering a more consistent learner experience. These include providing access to facilities like study rooms, tutorial groups, peer support groups, online learning platforms/Change to Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) such as "Moodle", academic writing and research supports. These types of supports are linked with integrated curriculum supports, such as literacy and numeracy, as already discussed.

Learner Supports Reflecting Different Needs

We recognise that some learners will have different needs that may impact on how they can engage with FET. It is important that, where possible, we as a sector focus on the positive elements of what each student can bring to their programme, harnessing their strengths, in keeping with the stated ethos of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). However, we must also recognise there are steps that can be taken to ensure that learners who have different needs are accommodated and supported accordingly.

As part of ongoing work and progress in the sector relating to embedding the principles of Universal Design for Learning, the aim is to make as many supports as "mainstream as possible", as outlined in the "supports for the many" section of the aforementioned 'Learner Support Pyramid'.

However, as outlined in Case Study 2, it is critical that a learner support framework that seeks to enhance the learner experience, must also retain capability to provide "supports for the few", with flexibility to respond to learners with specific individual needs.

Case Study 2

Ameliorative learning supports adopted for a visually impaired FET student (Louth and Meath ETB)

This case study outlines the ameliorative actions adopted by Louth and Meath ETB FET provision to assist a visually impaired learner navigate the teaching and learning environment of a part-time QQI level 5 course the learner was undertaking with the ETB.

The Louth and Meath ETB Learning Support team identified several barriers such as navigating around the FET centre which the team responded to with providing orientation around the campus and the learner practicing navigating the route selected by the learner and team.

In response to the challenge the learner faced regarding accessing learning materials, the FET Learner Support Officer selected and used Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software to convert the reading materials to accessible content for the learner. OCR works by recognising text in scanned documents and images and can convert a physical paper document, or an image into an accessible electronic version with text. The benefits of converting the material with the OCR software for the learner meant that the learner has engaged with the material successfully, appreciating the adaptations and alternative format of the material.

The Social and Cultural Aspects of the Learner Experience

We recognise that a positive learner experience when engaging with FET is more readily achieved when a learner feels at ease within the course of study and the learning environment. As such, supports which focus on and engender the personal sense of connection, and those which mitigate feelings of isolation, exclusion or marginalisation are also important.

The sector aims to provide FET environments that are open and inclusive to a diverse range of cultural backgrounds across the learner and staff community. Supports and local initiatives aimed at increasing access from diverse groups, such as linkages with local cultural organisations and representative groups are important in this regard.

Case Study 3

Implementing the Public Sector Duty (SOLAS)

In 2021, SOLAS began its journey to work towards implementing the Duty. A working group was formed with fifteen staff from ten units in SOLAS and engagement with the Senior Leadership Team began. The working group developed five equality and human rights benchmarks that have emerged as part of its Implementation Plan using a values-led approach, developing a series of objectives and outcomes to embed the Duty in its processes.

To date, the Public Sector Duty Working Group in SOLAS have:

Completed an assessment of the Human Rights and Equality issues relevant to its functions and purpose.

Developed an action and implementation plan to address the issues identified.

Delivered the "Engaging with Diversity" series of seminars, available for all SOLAS staff, for each of the grounds of discrimination covered under the duty.

Developed a communications plan to promote achievements and record progress on the implementation of the Duty.

SOLAS continue to work to embed the Duty through working groups, annual work plans, and progress reports, made accessible to the public. SOLAS report on progress, achievements and key moments made to advance the Duty in their annual reports, policies, corporate plan, and wider strategic plans, while the working group continue to guide, develop, and monitor the successful implementation of the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty.

More information is available at this link: [SOLAS and The Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty](#).

Equality Diversity and Inclusion

As part of Equality and Human Rights legislation¹² all public sector bodies are bound by what is known as the "**Public Sector Duty**". As part of this duty, all public sector bodies, including those involved in the delivery of FET provision, must take steps to *Assess, Address and Report* on Human Rights and Equality issues that affect service users (in our case learners). This activity should

¹² Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act. The identified groups for the Duty are: those groups under the grounds of gender, civil status, family status, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, religion, and membership of the Traveller community.

be undertaken across the nine grounds of discrimination set out under the legislation. Case Study 3¹³ outlines work undertaken by SOLAS in this regard, while ETBs are also working to implement the Public Sector Duty.¹⁴

Our proposal suggests integrating into the approach the foundational elements of equality, inclusion and diversity. The availability of staff Professional Learning and Development programmes in relation to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) is important in this context, given the role these programmes play in ensuring the FET practitioners are confident in taking steps to ensure the learning environments they provide and engender are conducive to inclusive practice.

A key element of the social and cultural aspects of the learner experience are the supports that can be considered “extracurricular”, in that they relate to the learner’s personal and social wellbeing, as outlined in the gradients and categories in Figure 4. While recognising that partaking in social activity additional to course requirements should never be compulsory, we propose that the sectoral approach should recognise learner ‘connectedness’ as a key feature. The importance of this is emphasised especially within the context of dealing with critical incidents such as traumatic or emergency events (Hobfall et al, 2007). The above is also relevant in the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic (and subsequent recovery) and the impacts this had on the FET community. As such, supports which connect learners to their fellow learners, their learning programmes, and their institutions should be facilitated and encouraged. As part of this, it is recognised that social events, such as day trips, cinema nights and other similar activities are valuable contributors to fostering welcoming environments that are inclusive and promote the wellbeing of FET learners. Coupled with appropriate academic and study supports, social, cultural and wellbeing aspects all contribute to the sense of ownership of learning and the perception of overall learner equality.

In line with the aims of the FET sector to work towards delivering on the vision of the ‘FET College of the Future’, with associated investments in infrastructure across the ETB network, this approach encourages the provision of social spaces for learners to interact, such as breakout rooms, tea and coffee areas, and specifically designed inclusive spatial environments. These types of social spaces all form part of the continuum of supports identified below in Case Study 4.

13 As part of its assessment, SOLAS also considered issues under an additional ground relating to “socio- economic status/background”, broadly encompassing those at risk of poverty and social exclusion, including working class people, people experiencing rural disadvantage, and ex-offenders.

14 See, for example, [Limerick & Clare ETB Public Sector Duty Action Plan \(lcebt.ie\)](#)

Case Study 4

Inclusive Spaces Project (Cork ETB)

This initiative by Cork ETB's Active Inclusion Support Services involves two aspects: an assessment of the physical learning environment, and the provision of staff awareness and strategies for inclusive spaces. Five environmental factors are considered during the assessment: sensory, communication, emotional, social and the physical environment. Staff surveys and short videos have been produced to further assist the process.

Led by Universal Design for Learning principles, a comprehensive and integrative assessment of four centres has taken place. Many of the resulting recommendations are currently being implemented. Other more long-term recommendations are likely to require additional investment.

Staff and learner surveys have included questions around spatial environments, sensory challenges, and on specific learning needs. Assistive and diagnostic tools for learners will be rolled out to learners who identify a requirement. Centre Managers have access to a new digital Padlet which is being used to monitor and evaluate the process and provide a repository for useful resources. Cork ETB is linking with and availing of support from Trinity College Dublin and Shine (national mental health organisation) who have expertise in this area.

The next phase of the project will see a rollout to the Youthreach centres, further development of resources for staff to be incorporated on Padlet, and the identification of appropriate Professional Learning and Development opportunities for staff around classroom interactions as well as neurodiversity. It is also proposed to introduce the use of Virtual Reality for smaller centres that cannot provide a suitable relaxation space for learners.

Health and Wellbeing

It is recognised that supporting learners' overall health and wellbeing are critical aspects of the overall learner experience.

Equally, the health and wellbeing of staff in the sector, including FET practitioners, must be viewed in parallel with learner wellbeing. Brewster et al (2021) note that learner wellbeing and staff wellbeing should be considered and viewed as intrinsic and interconnected.

We support the view that learner and staff wellbeing should be approached as "one" with initiatives, policies, and an overall workplace culture conducive to wellbeing and embedded within the whole institution to support positive wellbeing outcomes of the whole community of both learners and staff.

ETBI, in partnership with Jigsaw, has launched the FET Learner Mental Health and Wellbeing Accreditation Initiative. This initiative forms part of the "Framework for FET- Learner Mental Health and Wellbeing" (ETBI, 2023) and aims to recognise the work of staff and/or learners in relation to mental health. As part of this, submissions from FET providers are currently being sought which showcase good practice in the promotion of positive mental health for all learners, and the creation of learning environments which promote positive mental health and wellbeing. Some examples of good practice in relation to mental health are already available. (Case Study 5)

Furthermore, the 'ETB Outdoor Education and Training Provision Strategic Framework' (ETBI, 2021) outlines the benefits which outdoor education centres can bring in relation to the mental health and wellbeing.

Case Study 5

Psychological services supporting the wellbeing and mental health of learners and staff (City of Dublin ETB)

The City of Dublin ETB Psychological Service focuses on supporting the wellbeing and mental health of learners and staff, as good mental health and wellbeing are 'both enablers of learning and outcomes of learning'. Supporting learners, requires support for staff, as there is a reciprocal relationship between staff and learners' wellbeing.

The City of Dublin ETB service delivery uses the Continuum of Support, which targets the All, Some and Few learners and staff. One of the main means of coordinating this continuum of support is through Learner Support Teams, which CDETb have helped to establish in centres over the years. Some elements of the service delivery along this continuum include:

- Response to Critical Incidents (All),
- Professional Learning Networks (Some),
- Targeted Individual supports (Few).

The 'My World Survey 2 - The National Study of Youth Mental Health in Ireland' captured the views of over 19,000 young people in relation to mental health and wellbeing. Among other items, it noted the importance of young people having access to high level of support from a 'special adult' (One Good Adult®) which was an important factor in young people's wellbeing.

Thus, increasingly, it has been recognised that the educators have an important role to play in this area. An example of integrated supports, that include an element of mental health and wellbeing support, is given in Case Study 6. This example outlines a workplace learning setting with a multi-layered and collaborative approach to supports which, over time, developed an added focus on mental health and mental health promotion. It highlights the importance of tailoring interventions to positively impact the outcomes for learners, via creating supportive environments and a positive culture.

Case Study 6

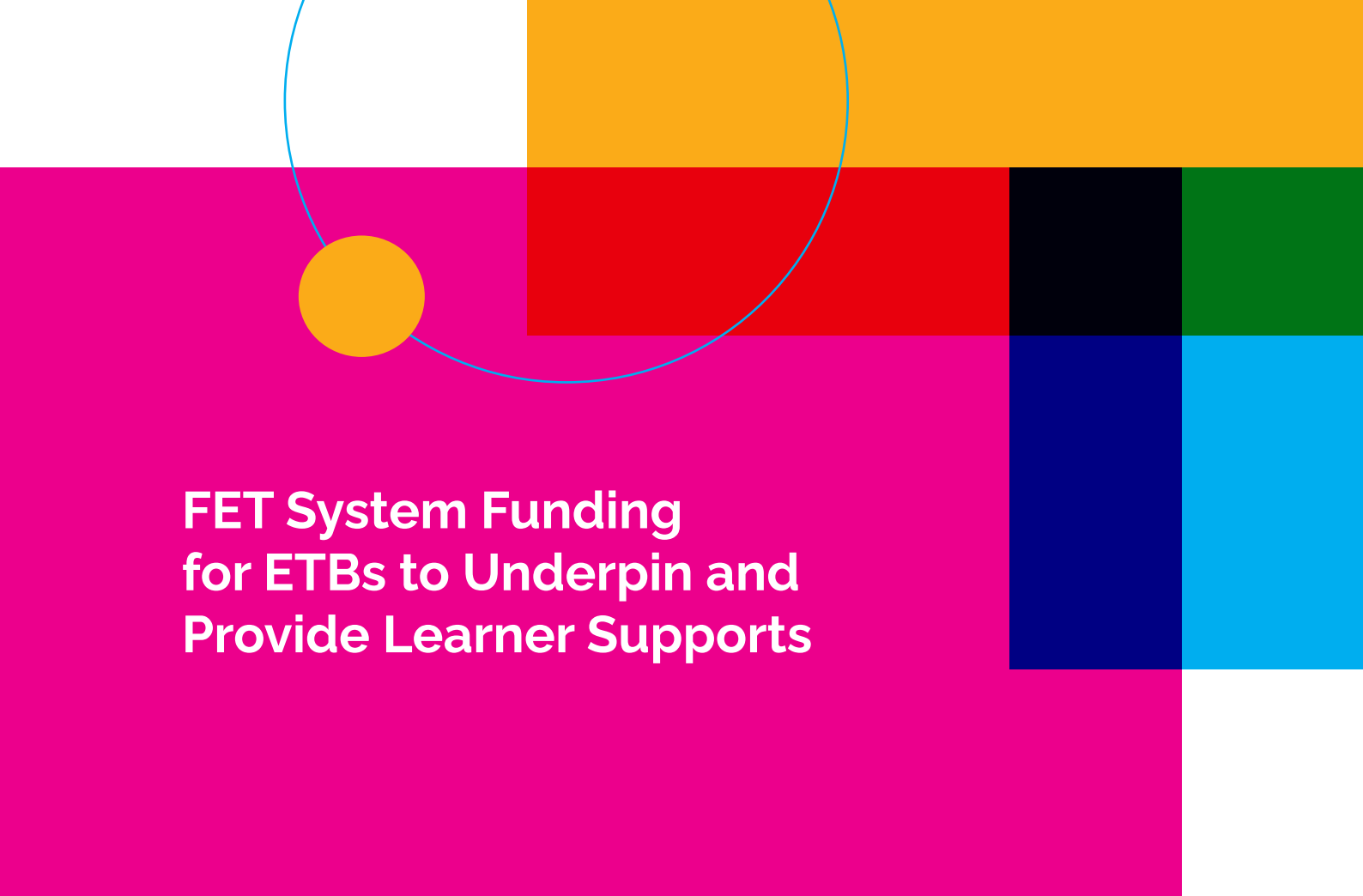
Additional Supports for Apprenticeship (Waterford and Wexford ETB)

Waterford and Wexford ETB commenced the process of developing a seamless Additional Support Service for Apprenticeships in 2019, initiated by seconding an Adult Literacy Officer (ALO) to interweave supports to complement Phase 2 of apprenticeship in the Training Centre and to work with employers in addressing the needs of apprentices.

The issues identified included challenges around learning differences and better managing this in the classroom, occasional missed diagnosis and missed opportunities, difficulties with the maths and language specific to the trade and also co-existing difficulties such as time management, self-organisation related (e.g. task prioritisation, goals setting, and achieving those goals in a systematic way) coupled with anxiety and other mental health difficulties. The service has been enhanced over time and in 2021 included the addition of Mental Health Support Services. Overall, key elements that ensured the success of this Additional Support Service included:

- 1.** Promotion of the service in a positive way, with the aim of reducing stigma
- 2.** Assessment – Universal (designed with a Universal Design lens) and targeted
- 3.** A Mental Health Support Service – promotion of thematic events as well as counselling
- 4.** Professional Learning and Development - particularly around learning differences
- 5.** Dedicated spaces – The Pod and Hub
- 6.** Technologies – specific to the challenges presented
- 7.** Having a Universal Design Champion
- 8.** ALO 'sitting within' the Services to Business Unit and connected to employers and Senior Training Advisors

Waterford and Wexford ETB's ongoing aim is to ensure that all apprentices have the opportunity to succeed and reach their full potential regardless of presence of disability or otherwise and learning preferences, in line with a social model of [understanding] disability, as well as a human capital approach.



FET System Funding for ETBs to Underpin and Provide Learner Supports

Available Funding

SOLAS issues Overarching ETB Funding Requirements (annually), with each ETB making a submission setting out proposed FET provision during the year, with funding subsequently allocated following system-wide assessment. As noted in the previous section, there are a number of existing funding streams that could be directed towards establishing and resourcing a central consistency of learner support resource in each ETB. Thus, in the first instance, from 2022, 1.6% of the overall ETB budget has been top sliced for directing towards the specific area of 'consistent learner supports'. However, several other FET funding streams extended to ETBs, or some elements of these, could also be directed to this area. The table below shows how these funding streams have evolved from 2021 through to the 2023 funding periods.

Table 1 Funding underpinning the development of Learner Support coordinating resource at ETB level

Based on 2021 ETB Funding Parameters		Based on 2023 ETB Funding Parameters	
% of Grant	Focus Area	% of Grant	Focus Area
1.0%	Providing improved supports to learners.	1.6%	For consistent learner supports, access to internal/ external psychological supports, provision of FET information to FET learners.
1.0%	Improved supports for QA systems and course curriculums.	1.0%	Improved supports for QA systems and course curriculums.
0.75%	Improving delivery of FET provision and services.	0.75%	Improving delivery of FET provision and services.
0.75%	Implementing Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) strategies.	0.75%	Support to implement ICT improvements.
0.2 - 0.5%	Management and administration of supports.	0.2 - 0.5%	Management and administration of supports.
0.5%	Providing learners with internal and/or external psychological supports.	0.15%	Promotion and advertising activities.
0.3%	Providing information to learners on supports, services and FET provision.		

The combined allocations highlighted, when amalgamated, make up circa 4.45% - 4.75% of each ETB's overall grant in 2022/2023. The 'Improving delivery of FET provision and services' allocation, amounting to circa 0.75% of each ETB's individual grant, matches the 'Support to implement ICT Improvements' allocation, which also amounts to circa 0.75% of the overall grant.

In each case, a certain proportion of the overall ETB grant could be allocated to a specific focus area, all of which are relevant to ensuring consistency of [providing] learner supports. There would seem to be sufficient scope for ETBs to explore potential synergies, including regarding utilisation of technology, for promoting, progressing, and ensuring the consistency of learner supports.

The funding streams outlined above are in addition to the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) and the SOLAS managed REACH Fund (both elaborated on subsequent pages). Thus, in addition to this already sizeable sum of funds, which could be deployed for increasing the consistency of learner supports at an ETB level, additional funds are, and/or will be made available for ETBs to grant specialised, individual supports to eligible learners under the Fund for Students with Disabilities.

Considering all the above, SOLAS has already embarked on the road of providing both scope and flexibility to the FET sector/ETBs by enhancing the proportion of ETBs' budgets that can be allocated to improving the consistency of learner supports and enhancing the learner experience.

Students with Disabilities

Although the provision of consistent learner supports encompasses more than supports for people with a disability, SOLAS is aware of the views that, with regard to supports for disabled people, resources and funding for FET should be enhanced and, in so far as is practically possible, aligned with provision at other education levels (i.e., secondary and higher education). A brief analysis of ETB Funding Allocations returns suggested that supports for people with disability across FET are diverse and that some guidance would be beneficial. However, there are some indications that universal supports are increasingly being provided.

Fund for Students with Disabilities

The purpose of the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) is to provide funding to higher and further education institutions to assist them in offering supports and services to eligible students with disabilities, so that they can participate on an equal basis with their peers. Thus, the Fund aims to ensure that students can participate fully in their academic programmes and are not disadvantaged by their disability.

The section of this Fund allocated for FET learners was previously administered by the Higher Education Authority (HEA). Administration of the section of the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) allocated to the FET sector was transferred to SOLAS in the 2020/21 academic year, bringing this resource under the FET umbrella for the first time. It has been proposed that each ETB would receive, and manage the distribution of, an FSD funding allocation to the Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) schools/colleges in its catchment area, in line with FSD guidelines. SOLAS has already explored

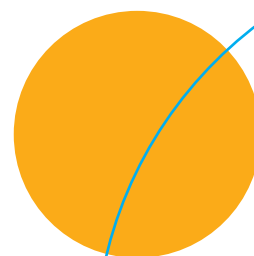
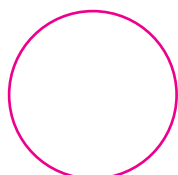
how this Fund could be distributed in a devolved manner, via individual ETBs. While the administration of this scheme in FET could differ somewhat from its former administrative arrangement in the Higher Education (HE) sector, the conditions/criteria remain broadly the same as before, in line with relevant guidelines. In 2023, work began within the sector to increase the accessibility of FSD for FET learners and in 2024 consideration will be given to broadening the scope of programme eligibility for FSD to make it an option available to more learners across the FET system.

Supports in the FET sector available through the FSD include academic/learning support, assistive technology equipment and software, supports for deaf or hard-of-hearing persons, examination supports, non-medical helpers and transport supports primarily for learners with physical/mobility difficulties or learners who are blind/visually impaired.

The REACH Fund

The REACH fund (formerly the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage fund, MAEDF) is designed to address educational disadvantages which may be experienced by learners and has a particular focus on supporting the engagement/re-engagement of learners in the community. It provides funding to support educationally disadvantaged learners in accessing and participating in community education. This fund was initially designed to support the most disadvantaged learners throughout the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and was first made available in 2020 when €5.8 million was awarded to 507 community education projects funded through the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The projects funded included supporting online learning, connecting communities, and providing social supports to the most disadvantaged.

In recognition of the challenges experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic and its adverse impact on participation in adult learning for the disadvantaged, a further €6.8 million was granted under REACH/MAEDF in 2021. Just under €6.6 million was made available through the ETBs for 629 projects. In addition, funding of almost €0.25 million was awarded in response to applications for initiatives in the Voluntary Secondary and Community and Comprehensive Schools.



The four categories eligible for consideration under the fund in 2021 included:

1. Digital technologies - Supply of devices where/when deemed to be a barrier to learning
2. Learner assistance fund – to help where appropriate with costs
3. Out-reach and/or Mentoring - to assist with re-engagement with learners
4. COVID-19 Recovery Exceptional Circumstances

The third iteration of REACH places a strong focus on community education as a mechanism to continue to support and engage with disadvantaged learners. As such, it tackles adult literacy issues and supports and enables re-engagement with education and provides this support in digital-first ways that meets the complex needs of the learners. Furthermore, there is a focus on enabling the investment in building the digital infrastructure of providers and their capability to ensure that online learning/blended learning can be delivered in a way that addresses learners' needs.¹⁵

Supports in the Broader Environment

A wide range of resources are already available to assist the FET sector in providing and improving consistency of learner supports. In addition to the supports already provided directly to learners by ETBs, significant supports are available to FET learners, directly and/or indirectly, from external sources, such as Government Departments, public and not-for-profit/nonprofit agencies and bodies, in turn utilising Government funding to extend various supports.

Additional resources, produced by the SOLAS Learner Support, Data Analytics and Skills and Labour Market Research Units are also available to inform the sector and assist FET practitioners in delivering more consistent learner supports. Many of these 'SOLAS sponsored'¹⁶ resources have been developed in conjunction with the FET sector and its practitioners are therefore well placed to utilise them, and indeed by doing so have already themselves become a valuable resource at the local level.

¹⁵ The REACH fund is the successor to the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF) which was renamed as the REACH Fund in 2022. The REACH Fund builds on the success of MAEDF and is intended to address educational disadvantage which may be experienced by learners.

¹⁶ Perhaps of most relevance here are those resources produced by the SOLAS Learner Support Unit.

The following subsections provide a brief overview of the existing resources and supports, with some illustrative examples.

FET Programme Specific Supports

There are also FET programme specific supports already in place. Regarding the Youthreach programme, the Advocacy Service, a network of full-time advocates whose role is to support participants on the Youthreach programme in decision making, referral, progression and placement, is a programme-specific support for learners. Thus, the overall role of the Youthreach/CTC Advocate is to support participants on the Youthreach/CTC programme in decision-making, referral, progression and placement. Advocates are instrumental in organising work experience and monitoring learners while on their work experience.

The "Guidance, Counselling and Psychological Service in Youthreach and Community Training Centres" is the main learner support used for the provision of counselling for young people on these programmes.

Not-for-Profit/Nonprofit Agency Supports

SOLAS provides funding to several agencies and bodies that provide relevant supports to learners.

An example is funding provided to Dyslexia Ireland (DI), which supports a programme of dyslexia identification for learners who require it. In the absence of a public adult assessment service, the assessments provided by DI to adult learners/potential learners at risk of disadvantage, enable their engagement with the FET sector and facilitate their progression.

A positive additional outcome of this funding and the corresponding work undertaken has also been identified - the new adult assessment model offers low-cost assessment for all adults, including heavily subsidised assessment for disadvantaged adults, while assessment of need (AON) training for FET practitioners is building the FET sector's capacity to effectively identify needs at the individual level and provide supports at the point of need. Learners are able to get their dyslexia identified, in turn enabling them to fully recognise their needs and subsequently access appropriate supports.

Government Supports

Substantial supports are made available to FET learners via different Government Departments. For example, the Intreo service (the Public Employment Service - PES), provided and administered by the Department of Social Protection (DSP), provides a single point of contact for all employment and income supports and services to anyone in need of income support, to those job seeking, and seeking to upskill, by providing guidance, advice and assistance, including a number of ways to support upskilling and return to education. At the same time, employers can access the Irish and European Public Employment Service for free and can avail of financial and accessibility support and grants. Thus, Intreo offers practical, tailored employment services and supports for both jobseekers and employers.

ETB Connectedness to Local Services

In addition to the role of Government and NGO supports outlined above, ETBs are empowered and encouraged to 'tap into' local and community-based services. A key benefit of the dispersed delivery model of the overall ETB network and within the FET delivery structures of individual ETBs, is the opportunity to, and ability of each ETB and its FET practitioners to connect and interact with local communities and local community services.

There are many potential sources of supports and opportunities to connect, such as family resource centres, libraries, community education providers, local development (partnership) companies, connected digital hubs, Intreo offices, as well as specific NGOs and not-for-profit/nonprofit organisations. These links can allow ETBs to potentially fulfil a role as a contact and engagement point for individuals requiring supports and provide appropriate signposting to services in relation to issues learners are experiencing from academic, social, through to personal, health and wellbeing related.

Nurturing such local connections and harnessing the specific expertise of members of both 'communities of place' and 'communities of identity' can be a catalyst for the development of further supports and tailored provision within ETBs which better meets the support needs of learners while contributing to greater access, and to more diverse and culturally aware learning environments. (Case Study 7)

Case Study 7

Creating Links and Networks - Traveller Education Training Programme (Cork ETB)

Creating Links and Networks is an aspect of the active inclusion programme run by Cork ETB, with the aim to increase engagement by learners from the Traveller Community.

Several women from the Cork Traveller Visibility Group (TVG) had recently completed a Level 7 diploma in leadership with University College Cork. Some of these graduates had expressed an interest in both mentoring training and train the trainer courses to further improve their facilitation skills and confidence. A level 6 Train the trainer, evaluation and delivery course was established in the FET Campus in Bishopstown, and 18 learners enrolled.

All staff involved in this training completed a 3-hour Traveller Cultural Awareness Training session, which is tailored for educators. The course ran once a week for 12 weeks and all 18 Traveller women completed the course and received their awards. Technology, financial and facilitator supports were put in place during the training. Active Inclusion team members also joined the class to support the learners during their assignments.

Learner feedback was excellent, with one learner describing how three of her family members had now enrolled on a FET course following her very positive experience.

Some of the learners intend to use the training to set up a transition programme, working with the parents of Traveller children from 5th class to 2nd year to support them in continuing their education and in transitioning from primary to secondary education. There are plans to run a pilot in St. Aidan's and St. Mark's [Community Colleges] as part of the Supporting Travellers and Roma (STAR) programme.

SOLAS Sponsored Resources

Currently Available Resources and Supports

Good Practice Guidelines/Guides and Toolkits

In addition to setting relevant inclusion related funding parameters, which reflect international, EU, and national policies and legislation, SOLAS has put in place another supporting pillar for ETBs implementing consistency of learner supports – by producing several relevant good practice guidelines/guides (including toolkits where appropriate) on inclusive and supportive practice in FET, aimed at aiding FET practitioners and promoting learner access, progression, and success. These resources, which the SOLAS Learner Support Unit has coordinated or sponsored the development of, are already available to FET practitioners.¹⁷

The resources include good practice guidelines and toolkit on screening and assessment of literacy and numeracy at National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) levels 1-3 and levels 4-6; good practice guidelines for family literacy practice in ETBs; good practice guidelines for initial assessment of English language competency for migrant learners through ESOL provision; and good practice guidelines on Universal Design for Learning. Research has also been undertaken on the nature of standalone and integrated numeracy provision in ETBs, providing a basis for the future development of good practice guides.

To follow up on the use of existing guidelines, research was also undertaken on the implementation of 'Guidelines on the Inclusion of People with Intellectual Disabilities in Adult Literacy Services' (2018), which include illustrative case studies from a number of ETBs.

¹⁷ Reports can be accessed at the SOLAS Online library by clicking [here](#).

Table 2. SOLAS Learner Support Unit - Guidelines/Guides and Toolkits

– Good Practice Guidelines and Toolkit on Initial and Ongoing Assessment of Adult Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ Levels 1-3
– Guidelines, Background Report, Toolkit & FAQs on Assessing Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ Levels 4-6 in ETBs
– Family Literacy in Practice in ETBs - Guidelines, Case studies and Recommendations
– Initial and Ongoing Assessment of English Language Competency of Migrant Learners in FET-Research Report, Guidelines, and Toolkit
– Implementation of Guidelines on the Inclusion of Learners with Intellectual Disabilities in Adult Literacy Services - Background Report & Case Studies
– Good Practice in Integrated and Standalone Numeracy Provision and Levels 1-3 - Background Report, Guidelines, and Recommendations
– UDL for FET Practitioners: Guidance for Implementing Universal Design for Learning in Irish Further Education and Training

SOLAS Data Analytics FET Cohort Reports¹⁸

The SOLAS Data Analytics Unit has produced a series of 'FET in Numbers' data reports focused on different priority cohorts.

These reports look at FET engagement among cohorts at risk of social exclusion, such as learners with disabilities and members of the Traveller and Roma communities.

They present, in a user-friendly, straightforward visual form, key statistics on these cohorts of FET learners, including certification rates, labour market status, including employment, and educational background. These reports provide a useful reference point for analysing the needs of priority cohorts.

¹⁸ Reports can be accessed at the SOLAS Online library by clicking [here](#).

Table 3. SOLAS Data Analytics 'FET in Numbers' Cohort Reports

1. Traveller Community
2. Roma Community
3. Learners with Disabilities
4. Lifelong Learning

SOLAS Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU)

SOLAS (SLMRU) has built relevant structures and expertise in relation to anticipation and early identification of skill needs through national and international research, as well as independently commissioned surveys. The outputs are used as resources to inform education and training provision, and to support the learners' decision-making process regarding their education and career choices and can be leveraged to inform stakeholders such as guidance services, an important support for all learners.¹⁹

The network of Regional Skills Fora has been established, supported by SOLAS and Department of Education and Skills/Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. FET Information and Guidance Service providers can avail of this resource as well, in their interaction with learners nationwide, to inform and underpin their guidance for learners before, during, and after they participate in various FET programmes. This service also supports the provision of quality FET information, and guidance services to people aged 16 and over.

Table 4. SOLAS SLMRU publications on the demand and supply of skills

– Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply
– Vacancy Overview and Difficult-to-fill Vacancies Survey
– National Skills Bulletin (annual/quarterly)
– Lifelong Learning Report

¹⁹ Reports can be accessed at the SOLAS Online library by clicking [here](#).

Learner Supports Coordinating Resource

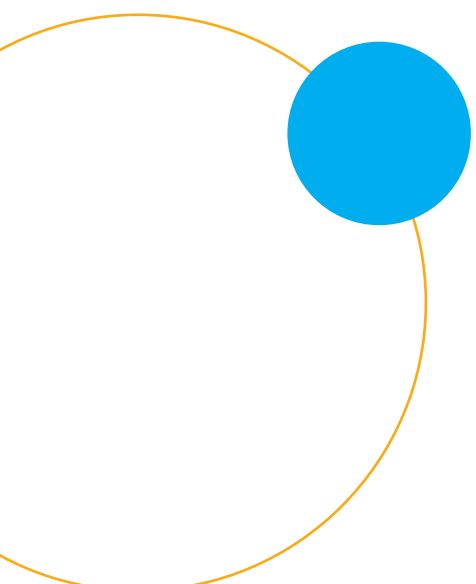
It is proposed that a central 'Learner Support' or 'consistency of learner supports' resource is established and/or developed within each ETB. The rationale stems from an apparent necessity to adopt a more systematic approach to the identification of learner support needs, as well as for greater integration regarding the delivery of learner supports. Thus, it is envisaged that this resource could act as a central point of reference for learner supports information and services, linking learners to available supports provided by the ETB, Government Departments and agencies, not-for-profit and nonprofit and/or community and voluntary sector organisations.

In addition, this resource could support FET practitioners to enhance, and deliver greater consistency of learner experience by, for example, locally championing the adoption of Universal Design Principles in providing Learner Supports, organising Professional Learning and Development and/or standardising good practices by embedding available good practice guidelines/guides (including utilisation of toolkits as/where applicable and appropriate). This resource could also support ETBs and FET practitioners to engage in networking with peers across the FET sector, even lead on this activity, in order to identify and explore synergies and facilitate shared learning and promotion and adoption of good practice, including providing consistent learner supports and promoting learner success, a requirement which has already been put forward to ETBs within the planning and funding process.

This coordinating resource could also support SOLAS' aims to develop IT-based learner support resources and apply greater use of technology for addressing learners' support needs, as well as assisting SOLAS to meet its monitoring remit by gathering and providing relevant information and data on learner supports. One of the purposes of this resource, in line with sectoral and SOLAS' commitment to integrate/mainstream supports via Universal Design, would be to move beyond the traditional approach to providing disability supports, where learners must obtain diagnosis to access specific individual supports, to a model where universal supports are mainstreamed, in line with the proactive approach, while at the same time individual supports are provided based on identified specific needs, whether the root cause of that need is a disability or otherwise.

This resource may be supported through the existing SOLAS-ETB annual funding arrangements, as previously outlined. ETBs are afforded a considerable scope and latitude regarding the establishment and funding of this resource. As previously outlined, in principle, a total of 4.45% - 4.75% of an ETB's overall annual budget (made available to ETBs) could be utilised for providing and ensuring consistency of learner supports, a part of which could be directed towards establishing and maintaining this central coordinating resource.

This type of approach should align with future transition towards any new arrangements that may be incrementally implemented as part of the published FET Funding Model Review in the coming years.²⁰ In particular, the recommendations to streamline the number of FET funding programmes and the proposed integration of 'Learner Support' funding into the "core funding pot" to become available to ETBs should, when fully realised, lead to a simplified environment for implementing more consistent learner supports.



²⁰ Further Education and Training Funding Model Review – Final Report by the Independent Expert Panel (SOLAS, 2022)



Conclusion

In line with its core functions, laid out in the FET Act, and as further outlined in the FET Strategy, SOLAS works, and will continue to work, to deliver on the 6 key areas of consistency of learner supports identified:

1. Cross FET/FET programme independent learner supports and associated resources.
2. ETB FET budget for consistent learner supports.
3. More consistent and reflective financial supports.
4. Developing and applying good practices and standardisation of supports.
5. Integration/mainstreaming of supports via Universal Design.
6. Technology resources utilisation to address learners' support needs.

Utilising the above as the starting point, and in line with the ETBs' QA requirements, set and monitored by QQI, we have conceptualised Learner Support in a broad sense, with learner supports including, but not limited to, individualised supports for people with a disability. We recognise that supports are provided along a continuum and can assist learners not only with their academic engagement, but also in related personal, social, and financial issues.

Thus, the 6 key areas are enhanced in our proposed approach by adding this emphasis on supports that contribute in a positive way to the personal and social circumstances of both learners and FET staff, as well as supporting their and health and wellbeing.

The case studies presented bring real life examples of the variety of supports already being provided along the continuum and should help to form the basis of good practice, in conjunction with other existing resources such as the SOLAS published sectoral good practice guides. These are useful starting points for those involved in coordinating or delivering learner supports within ETBs to draw from.

Overall, funding and associated guidelines are consistent with, and reflective of national and EU inclusion and equality policy and legislation, and this is reinforced through the annual planning and funding process, providing the overall funding framework. In practice, the provision of learner supports by ETBs will be resourced by marshalling and streamlining relevant existing and evolving funding streams which, in line with broad principles of devolved budgeting, can be utilised effectively by ETBs at the local level. Furthermore, aligned to the latter, the transfer of the FET segment of Fund for Students with Disabilities from the HEA to SOLAS, with possibilities for expanding the availability of the FSD beyond PLC programmes to a wider range of FET provision, currently being explored and developed, may aid in providing more consistent financial supports to learners.

Significant progress towards underpinning and establishing an ETB budget, i.e., at an ETB level, for consistency of learner supports has also already been made, in line with the proposed integration of 'Learner Support' funding into the "core funding pot". Funding amounting to a total 4.45% - 4.75% of an ETB's overall annual budget has already effectively been made available for this purpose. The aim of this approach is to progress towards a Consistent Learner Experience and to both enable and facilitate flexibility and agility at the local level while at the same time avoiding being unduly prescriptive. An emphasis on coordination was placed so to develop and maintain collaborative relationships and explore synergies. This approach is in line with that espoused by SOLAS (and indeed ETBs) in putting in practice and utilising SOLAS sponsored resources, themselves developed in conjunction with and now fully *owned* the FET sector. These include resources such as good practice guidelines/guides, whereby the resources are provided to the sector, namely FET practitioners, to be utilised and embedded in their practice – first and foremost in teaching and learning, but increasingly extending beyond classroom. In doing so, the FET practitioners become the key resource at local, ETB level. Thus, this position paper and its accompanying framework guide endorse effectively the same broad approach.

As elaborated upon, while ETBs have considerable scope to establish and fund this resource, SOLAS will, in principle, support the founding and development of a central, co-ordinating learner supports resource within each ETB, which could act as a central point of reference for 'Learner Support' information and services, aiming to deliver an enhanced learner experience, on more consistent basis.

It is envisaged that this resource could support practitioners to deliver on consistency of learner supports, through working with them to: organise relevant PL&D, promote mainstreaming of supports and a universally designed model of support provision, network with peers across the FET sector, apply and embed good practice guidelines and guides to diffuse and standardise good practices, support the development and provision of cross-FET (FET programme independent), learner supports as appropriate, and utilising technology as an enabling factor for addressing learners' support needs.

One of the purposes of this resource, in line with SOLAS and the FET sector's commitment to integrate/mainstream supports via Universal Design, would be to move beyond the traditional approach viewing learner support as primarily disability supports, to a model where universal supports are mainstreamed, where providers are pro-active in approach, and where supports are recognised to cover personal, social and wellbeing elements and extend beyond the classroom.

Through these established and emerging avenues, mechanisms, and resources, SOLAS will continue to support the FET sector to deliver on this important strategic priority of the current FET Strategy (2020 – 2024).

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Appendices

Appendix 1. QQI Learner Support Pillars

Integrated Approach to Learner Supports

The range of learning resources and learner supports is as coherent and integrated as possible:

- There are procedures in place to ensure that all resources are fit for purpose and accessible.
- Learners are informed about the full range of services available to them.
- Learners are surveyed annually for their overall impression of learning resources and learner supports.
- Learner perspectives about the sufficiency and quality of learning resources and learner supports are listened to.

All learning resources and learner supports are responsive to:

- (i) the needs of the programme
- (ii) programme review and other evaluation activities
- (iii) deliberative or decision-making processes requiring feedback on learner support
- Different learner support/resource units benefit from networking with each other to ensure a coherent approach.
- Resources and supports are promoted actively to ensure that learners are aware of their existence.
- Learner resources and supports are benchmarked against standards.

Pastoral Care

The learning environment includes pastoral care supports provided by staff for learners. This includes both pastoral (which refers to the emotional and personal support for the general wellbeing of learners) and educational care, such as tutors, mentors, counsellors, and other advisors. *The Code of Practice for Provision of Education and Training to International Learners (QQI, 2015)* is complied with where applicable.

Access to Services

The adequacy and effectiveness of all academic and other support services related to the programme of education and training are regularly reviewed, such as:

- Library, information and computing services and access to same.
- Learner support services (both academic and non-academic).
- Administrative services.
- Technical services.
- Premises servicing and maintenance services.
- Services aimed at communicating the provider's mission and operations to learners, potential learners, other providers, employers, professional and training bodies and the general public.
- Other support services relevant to provision.
- Support and administrative staff are appropriately qualified and have opportunities for professional development (PD).
- The needs of a diverse learner population (mature, part- time, employed, international, as well as learners with disabilities) are considered when planning and providing learning resources and supports.

Learner Representation

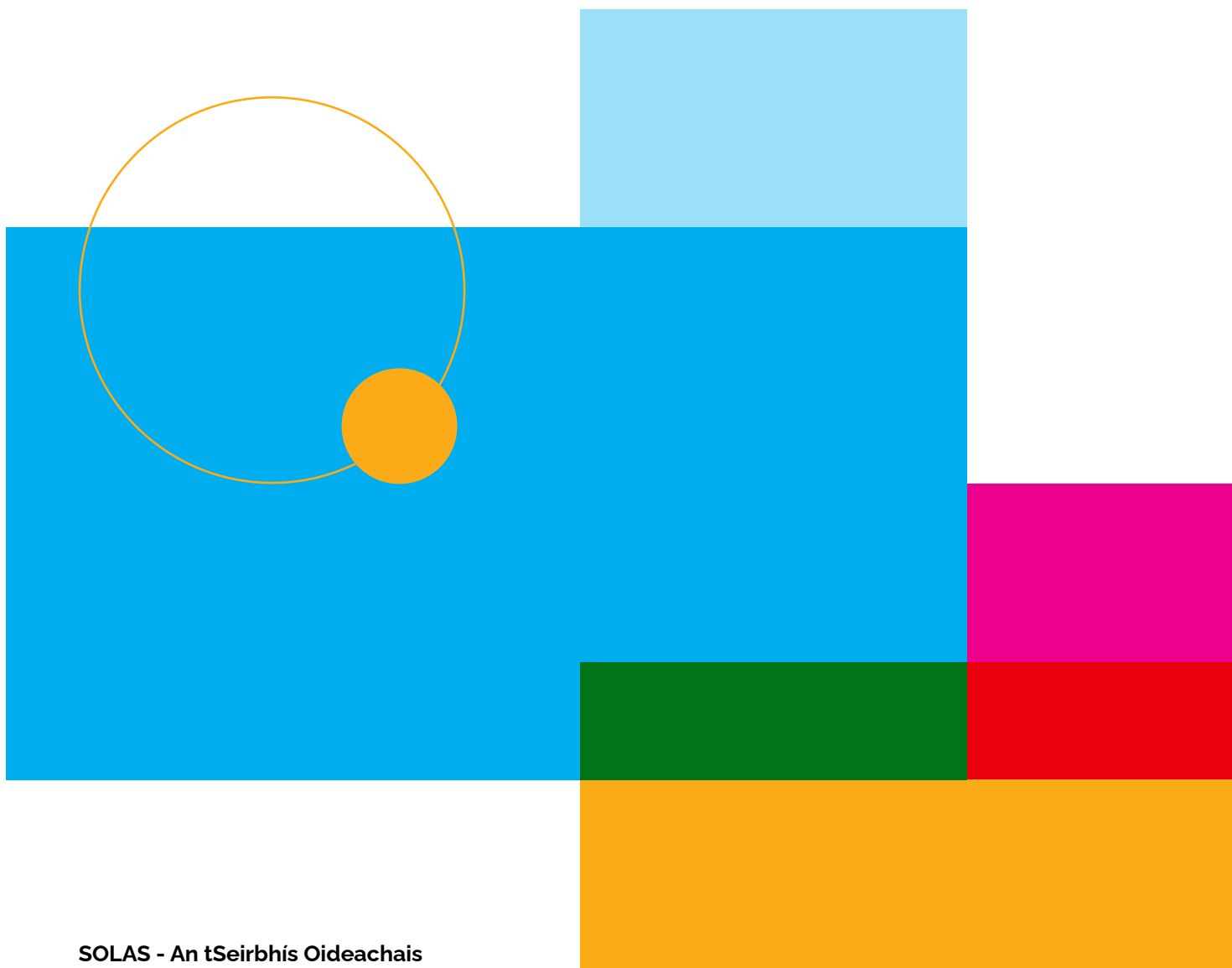
There are mechanisms for learners to make representations to the provider about matters of general concern to the learner body.

Guidance

Necessary guidance services are provided to learners on programmes as appropriate. Accurate and relevant information on the programme, which includes details on potential career pathways, is provided to learners prior to their enrolment on the programme.

Appendix 2. ETBI - SOLAS Learner Support Programme Board Membership

Name	Role	Organisation
Paul Patton (Chairperson)	Director of Further Education & Training (FET)	Limerick Clare ETB
Roisin Doherty	Director of Learner Support	SOLAS
Blake Hodgkinson	Director of Further Education & Training (FET)	City of Dublin ETB
Ken Seery	Director of Further Education & Training (FET)	Kildare Wicklow ETB
Fergus Craddock	Inclusion Unit Manager	Education and Training Boards Ireland
Dr Joseph Collins	Director of Further Education & Training (FET)	Education and Training Boards Ireland
Ciaran O'Brien	Director of Further Education & Training (FET)	Donegal ETB
Martha Bolger	Director of Further Education & Training (FET)	Kilkenny Carlow ETB



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