



**etb**

Bord Oideachais agus  
Oiliúna Dhún na nGall  
*Donegal Education and  
Training Board*

# **FET Student Voice Forum Report 2020**

## **Donegal Education and Training Board Vision**

Excellence in the delivery of a quality, learner-centred education and training service.

## **Donegal Education and Training Board Mission**

To promote, provide and support accessible and inclusive education and training which enables young people and adults to empower themselves to reach their full potential in a safe and caring environment.

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## **I. CONTEXT**

As the Vision and Mission statements make clear, Donegal Education and Training Board's Further Education and Training (FET) Service Quality Assurance (QA) system must have the needs and experiences of students at its heart. Donegal Education and Training Board's FET Service is in the process of developing an integrated QA system to support the achievement and maintenance of this goal and to meet the core QA guidelines issued by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). Informing and consulting students across the FET Service programmes of education and training is necessary for the planning, evaluation and review phases of the quality cycle in the integrated QA system. In this context, the inaugural Donegal Education and Training Board FET Service Student Voice forum event was held at the Radisson Hotel in Letterkenny on Tuesday 11 February 2020.

Over one hundred students from across the FET Service attended the forum, which was designed to gather information from them about their experience of Donegal Education and Training Board's FET Service.

Among the actions taken by the Government of Ireland to address the COVID-19 pandemic, schools, colleges and training centres were closed on 12 March 2020, and staff were subsequently required to work remotely. Although the circumstances surrounding the pandemic subsequently became a dominant feature of national life, and the mitigation measures implemented had serious implications for the quality assurance of Donegal ETB services, they were not foreseen when the Student Voice forum took place. Therefore, all information gathered at the forum relates to the normal provision of Donegal ETB services, with education, training and assessments taking place in designated Further Education and Training (FET) centres, without practices such as physical distancing.

## II. FORMAT AND METHODOLOGY

Although attendance was affected by adverse weather conditions, 105 (of the 135 invited) students took part.

The forum was first addressed by Donegal ETB's Adult Education Officer (AEO), Charlie Gorney, and the Director of Further Education and Training, Cróna Gallagher. Two graduates of further education programmes, Christopher McEleney and Sheila Leeper, then described their experiences of being FET students and commented on what they had gained.

Following these addresses, attendees were led through a series of activities over two sessions. These were aimed at gathering feedback from students regarding their experiences of various aspects of Donegal Education and Training Board's FET Service provision.

The twelve topics covered by the activities were:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. Teaching and Learning                  | 7. Donegal Education and Training Board's Student Voice Policy and Procedure |
| 2. Resources and the Learning Environment | 8. The ETBI Student Charter  |
| 3. Personal Experience                    | 9. Communications and Information  |
| 4. Pastoral Care                          | 10. Inclusion and Diversity  |
| 5. Student Support                        | 11. Work experience  |
| 6. Student Hub                            | 12. Challenges   |

Having completed the activities, the students were asked to participate in an anonymous survey, which was carried out with the online interactive presentation tool, Mentimeter. Paper versions were provided at each table for anyone who did not have a laptop, tablet or smartphone, or preferred not to participate online. The survey was designed to gather information about the students' experiences and opinions of Donegal Education and Training Board's FET services and of the forum event they were attending. The questions asked were:

1. How did you find out about your course?
2. Do you feel you were on the right course?
3. Did Donegal Education and Training Board's FET Services support you in making the right choice of course?
4. Please rate your experience with Donegal Education and Training Board's FET Services.
5. Please give suggestions on how we can improve Donegal ETB's FET Services.
6. Today's event was designed to capture your voice! Please rate how effectively this was done.
7. Please give suggestions on how we can capture the Student Voice in the future.
8. What courses would you like the FET Services to offer in the future?
9. Which mode of delivery best suits your needs?
10. Do you prefer the term 'student' or 'learner'?
11. Would you recommend Donegal Education and Training Board's FET services to a friend?

All raw data was subsequently recorded on spreadsheets, using Microsoft Excel. Conducting a survey through Mentimeter automatically generates spreadsheets containing the responses entered online; the responses submitted on the paper versions of the survey were added to these spreadsheets.

### III. OUTCOMES

#### Topic 1: Teaching and Learning

Most of the students' comments were very positive, with many referencing the excellent or very good standard of teaching and learning in their centres and the high standard of resources available. The teachers/tutors/instructors were regarded as friendly and supportive by a majority of students.

Among the negative comments were the lack of feedback, complicated and badly written assessment briefs, work placement concerns, and some modules/courses being too long in duration.

#### Assessments

Overall, the students were content with the mixture of assessments and exams in most courses, and felt they represented a good indication of the student's ability.

A number of students commented on the module assessment briefs, stating that they were outdated and difficult to understand. They also sought fewer exams and assessments throughout the duration of the course.

More notice of assessments and a more structured timetable for assessments and exams were also cited as improvements that are required.

More guidance on referencing and a shorter waiting period for assessment results was requested.

Students requested access to the Bookkeeping software application so they could use it at home.

#### Teaching and Learning Recommendations

- *Improve formative and summative assessment feedback*
- *Review course length, make time taken to complete a course comparable across the service*
- *Improve facilities – access to computers, general facilities*
- *Review and improve assessments briefs – poorly worded, complicated, outdated*
- *Improve the organisation of placements*
- *Better organisation and preparation for exams*
- *More individual one to one support for students at the beginning of the course required*

#### Topic 2: Resources and the Learning Environment

While many students were content with the availability of resources, there were many recommendations for additional resources across all FET centres. There is a disparity in the availability of resources between different centres. For example, canteen facilities were complimented in some centres, but reference to lack of canteen facilities was made in relation to other centres.

#### Resources and the Learning Environment Recommendations

Classrooms are among the facilities that require improvement. Rooms were described as cramped, while visibility in relation to the whiteboard/projector and a lack of library resources were noted as aspects of the learning environment that need attention.

- *FET Services to offer higher level course by not having to go to LYIT*
- *Improve information regarding progression options*
- *Add bicycle parking - need racking for safety*
- *Classrooms too cold*
- *Poor smoking area*
- *Not all classrooms have windows*
- *Improve access to Guidance Service*

### **Topic 3: Personal Experience**

There was an overwhelmingly positive response from the students regarding their personal experience. It is clearly evident that the majority of students regarded their experience as positive or very positive. Many students referenced the supportive environment and friendly welcoming atmosphere and other aspects such as an increase in confidence, self-esteem, social aspects, make new friends, integration with society and diverse environment.

There were several comments regarding the fact that many students had gained new friends and new relationships while undertaking their course. From observation of the feedback and students' perceptions, it is evident that the social connection (making friends) aspect of the course is just as important as the teaching and learning aspect.

#### **Personal Experience Recommendations**

Areas for improvement regarding personal experience include difficult assignments, lack of progression, and boredom in class.

- *Improve teaching and learning to meet individual needs - some students find a course demanding and others find the same course too easy with a slower than desired pace.*
- *Improve assignment schedules so there is no overlap or grouping of assignment hand in dates.*

### **Topic 4: Pastoral Care**

Overall, there were a large amount of very positive comments. These include: healthy environment for physical and mental wellbeing, very good personal experience, staff are extremely friendly and helpful, increase in confidence among students, brilliant guidance, support of SUSI grant, students respected by teachers, motivated to progress, positive supportive environment, students empowered, brilliant support and guidance from tutors.

#### **Pastoral Care Recommendations**

It is clear there are a number of issues which may impact on students throughout the time they attend their course. While it is evident that teachers/tutors/instructors generally deal with these issues adequately, in some cases the students require additional support that they feel is not always readily available. These include issues with home balance, childcare, learning difficulties, illness/sick leave, challenge of course, pressure of assignments, workload, stress, homesickness, financial difficulties, transport, progression options, lack of guidance, finding work placements and a general lack of support overall.

- *Review support at programme/course level to assess where it needs to be improved*
- *Improve classroom management - I feel that conflict between students needs to be taken more seriously.*
- *Review assessment schedules so students are not put under pressure with grouping of submission dates.*
- *Improve organisation of work experience - Work experience restricts further education - should have designated work placements.*
- *Improve Guidance in PLCs*

### **Topic 5: Student Support**

There were positive comments regarding the excellent support provided by teachers/tutors/instructors. It is apparent from the range of comments that the teachers/tutors/instructors are approachable and provide a variety of supports outside the teaching and learning environment, such as mental health and financial advice. Many teachers/tutors/instructors provide these valuable supports to students outside structured class times.

#### **Student Support Recommendations**

There were a few critical comments regarding the lack of assistance for students who required additional support (literacy etc.). There was also a reference to ‘shaming techniques’, which may suggest a need for greater sensitivity in dealing with additional supports within the classroom, and an area where further training may be required for teachers/tutors/instructors.

There was a request for emergency facilities such as showers/ a washing machine within centres for students to utilise.

### **Topic 6: Student Hub**

There were many useful suggestions on what could be included in the Student Hub.

- *Access to all results (exams, assessment)*
- *Possible jobs available to field of study, preparation for employment*
- *Support - forum, chat - contact fellow students*
- *Deadlines, assignments due, exam dates/holidays*
- *Policies and procedures*
- *Particular criteria for course eligibility/Course fee structure*
- *Student links to vouchers/savings/discounts*
- *Student welfare/Financial advice and support/ Mental Health*
- *List of Donegal Education and Training Board social clubs/events that current students organise and setup*
- *Bus timetables and discounts to help students get to their courses.*
- *Progression - courses coming up*
- *Open days listed and information on all days coming up*
- *After course guidance*
- *Student accommodation list*
- *Access to emergency services*

## Topic 7: Donegal Education and Training Board's Student Voice Policy and Procedure

Some positive attitudes towards the Student Voice Policy and Procedure were evident in the responses to this activity. Students agreed on the importance of policy and procedures and some clearly felt they were listened to and that quality assurance obligations were being met. Many students agreed that their requests were followed up on and their concerns were addressed. The Student Council was mentioned as a good voice for students.

A large majority of the comments took the form of constructive criticism and suggestions for improvement. Unsurprisingly, the responses with the greatest frequency concerned Donegal Education and Training Board finding effective ways to listen to FET students and respond to their needs.

Among the critical responses submitted are remarks that are not necessarily about the Policy and Procedure itself, but nonetheless provide some indication of what students would like to see improved.

### Student Voice Policy and Procedure Recommendations

Recommendations related to the Student Voice Policy and Procedure were among the responses with the greatest frequency:

- *Introduce a Students' Union/Council within programmes*
- *Ensure changes/requests followed up on if requested and fed back to students*
- *Adopt different ways to listen to students' voice*
- *Carry out course and module evaluations on a regular basis*
- *Make sure there is a consistent approach across the service – students get a different experience in different centers*
- *Improve access to Guidance service*
- *Make support services accessible to all students*
- *Improve feedback for results - not all results are issued to students*
- *Review appeals process - appeals timeframe not always practical e.g. results not back in time to allow for progression*
- *Improve communication - clear path on lines of contact. Publish outcomes of student feedback. Listen – Review – Action – Communicate response*

## Topic 8: ETBI Student Charter

A broad range of good practices were cited in the student comments, such as guidance, good planning of up-to-date courses, additional supports and Donegal Education and Training Board delivering what was outlined. All students were happy with what is currently in the ETBI Student Charter. Most found Donegal ETB's Mission Statement comprehensive and relevant. However, it appears there may be areas in which plainer language could be used, as some students do not understand what fair and transparent assessment is. There may be too much within the document, or it could be introduced at different stages, to avoid overloading students. Support that was indicated in the registration form was not followed up on in one case.



- *Registration form allows to include additional supports required*
- *Extra support as indicated in registration form could be good to receive was not received (e.g. with payroll course - maths support through e.g. one extra hour of math tuition)*
- *Good planning of course/Happy with exams and assessment process/very approachable staff*
- *Fast paced delivery can be a challenge to tutor on the learning*
- *Good peer support*
- *Donegal Education and Training Board are very good at planning and delivering up to date courses*
- *Students feel that Donegal Education and Training Board is delivering what is outlined in the ETBI Charter e.g. supports - can speak to coordinators, other students, or the Guidance Service.*
- *The induction of setting up class ground rules - cover this part of the charter*
- *All of what is in the charter is relevant and should be included*
- *The mission statement sums it up*
- *Student Charter is comprehensive and covers all points well*
- *Can be 'overloaded'. Too much for one document*
- *It states expected behaviour - maybe obvious but clear.*
- *Maybe if parts of it can be introduced at different stages at beginning of course and agreed.*
- *2nd paragraph - focus on needs - more emphasis here e.g. state everyone doesn't learn the same way - varied resources, needs, - states, techniques hands on, more presentations, as opposed to listening to lectures.*
- *Mention different abilities*
- *What does fair and transparent assessment and examination mean?*
- *More definitive information on finance allowances etc.*
- *Wrong information provided on numerous occasions*

### **Topic 9: Communications and Information**

This activity comprised four questions aimed at gathering information on how well Donegal Education and Training Board communicates with FET students and how the organisation can improve in this area.

Increased use of technology was the clearest theme to emerge from the responses to these questions, although there were also responses that indicated a desire for more face-to-face interactions, as well as some suggestions for dealing with specific circumstances. Google Classroom, for example, was commended, but it could also be overwhelming at times for some students.

It is evident that communication methods vary between centres and programmes, with different centres utilising different methods to suit their needs. Overall, there was a general consensus among students on the methods of communication that worked well, with communication through media/digital forms cited as the most preferred options. These include: Email, Google classroom, social media, WhatsApp, Facebook, text and Twitter.

However, traditional methods, such as by letter, phone, face-to-face and FET events, were also quoted as important methods of communicating information to students. In particular, guest speakers and facilitation by FET staff of workshops/sessions on progression routes were regarded as beneficial.

The lines of communication with teachers/tutors/instructors and coordinators were praised and all students felt comfortable approaching staff.

Course Induction was commended for its impact on team building and the Student Forum was cited as a good means of meeting students from other courses. End-of-week and end-of-course reviews were acknowledged as very beneficial to those students who had experienced them.

Overall, Donegal Education and Training Board's ethos was thought to be well communicated in a positive manner, with students feeling proud that they were completing a course with the ETB's FET Service and stating that they felt 'heard' as students.

There were positive comments regarding the excellent support students receive from teachers/tutors/instructors. It is apparent from the range of comments that teachers/tutors/instructors are approachable and provide a variety of supports outside the teaching and learning environment, such as mental health and financial advice. It is clear that many tutors/teachers/instructors provide these valuable supports to students outside structured class times.

### **Communication and Information Recommendations**

Various recommendations emerged from this activity, which included keeping various pieces of information updated. Current centre contact details were requested by students, and communication in multiple languages would be useful for speakers of other languages.

- *Improve exam process - Update assessment/exam timetable. Email notification 2 weeks in advance*
- *Improve Course Calendar - too slow to update*
- *Communication in multiple languages*
- *Introduce Google classroom to all courses*
- *Improve student feedback and evaluations - Ensure evaluations from each course taking place and acted upon*
- *Improve access to IT and Wi-Fi*
- *Introduce a Student council / Student Rep / Student platform*
- *Improve information on progression pathways*
- *More access to Guidance*
- *More online courses*
- *Introduce a student handbook*
- *Ensure contact details are kept up to date - date contact numbers for students - 1 central phone number issued at beginning.*
- *Gmail accounts for all students.*
- *Be able to contact tutors more easily – phone or email*
- *Make the website easier to navigate*

### **Topic 10: Inclusion and Diversity**

Overall, the student comments were very positive, with many groups complimenting the great support that is provided to students and the good job Donegal Education and Training Board's FET Service does with inclusion and diversity. The safe environment was listed by three groups as an important aspect of their course and overall experience.

A few groups stated that inclusion and diversity or equality and diversity should not need to be explained or taught in the modern world. Others stated that there is room for improvement.

Regarding LGBT students, there were a few positive comments, but others mentioned that misunderstanding occurs due to lack of education.

### **Inclusion and Diversity Recommendations**

- *Continued education around LGBTQ+ for staff and students*
- *Planning for key themes at points during the year across all programmes which include Equality, Diversity and other themes that are of importance to students.*

### **Topic 11: Work Experience**

There was a broad consensus among students concerning the advantages of work experience. Learners acknowledged the benefits of having work experience as part of every course. Some found it easy to secure work placement, while others had difficulty.

The theory aspect of the work experience module was described as boring and repetitive. Garda vetting was a challenge in some cases. Other issues cited include difficulty getting work experience, fuel allowance, lack of guidance, lack of a possible placement list, the need for early planning for work experience, placement providers needing to be checked for suitability, and lack of workplace visits in some centres.

### **Work Experience Recommendations**

- *Consistent approach to planning across the service – policy, work placement visits, regulations and expectations, suitability of work placements.*
- *Equality of access for students across the service*
- *Clear guidance for staff, students and placement providers of the requirements and expectation for work placements*

### **Topic 12: Challenges**

Learners face an assortment of challenges when undertaking a FET course, starting at the course selection and application stage. These include the stress and anxiety of returning to education, usually after a substantial period away from it, stress caused by exams and assignments, and worry regarding social interaction with others. There are also the day-to-day practical challenges of work/life balance, time management, childcare, travel, accommodation (if moving to undertake the course) and additional financial implications.

It is apparent that many students are concerned about their social skills, meeting new people and making friends. Many comments across all programmes/provision mentioned that meeting new people and making new friends was a challenge and this issue was cited in nearly all feedback remarks.

Finding work placement was also a concern for many Level 5 students, as was apprehension regarding their ability to do assignments and exams. The comments suggest that confidence and self-esteem are issues that many students struggle with when undertaking a course.

## Challenges Recommendations

- *Consistent approach to induction to equip students with the skills required to participate in learning*
- *Improve information regarding travel and accommodation*
- *Improve support for students living away from home.*
- *Improve study support – students are better equipped to complete exams, assessments etc.*

## Mentimeter Survey

Many of the comments submitted indicate that Donegal Education and Training Board’s FET service is viewed positively by students.

- *Excellent service. Great centre, always warm and very welcoming. Good teachers.*
- *Great organization*
- *Happy with service, I feel well enough looked after. Look forward to coming back before I leave.*

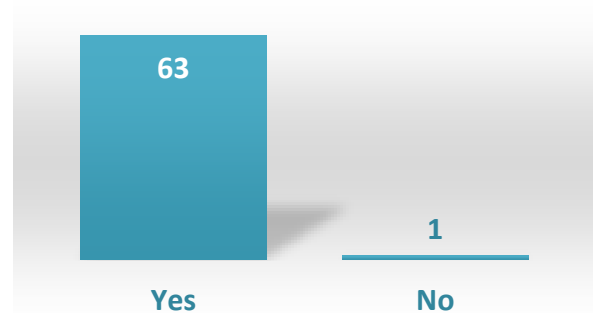
### Question 1: How did you find out about your course?

The nature of this question meant that coherent themes emerged quite clearly. These are summarised in the table below.

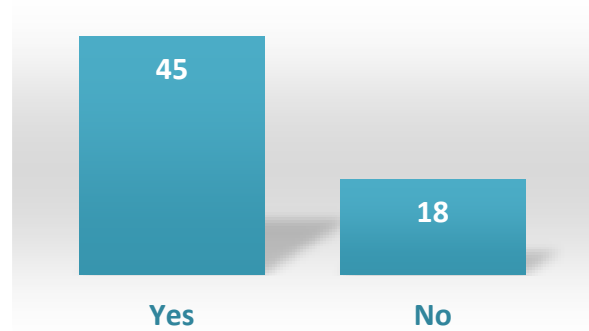
<b>Total number of responses</b>	<b>100</b>
Word of mouth excl. teachers, tutors, guidance, talks in school	35
Teachers, tutors, guidance, talks in school	19
All online media	32
Social media	10
All offline media	15
Booklet	4
Newspaper/Newsletter	8

Radio	2
Unspecified offline media	1
Employer/Work	7
Social welfare/ Jobs Club	3
Family Resources Centre	1
All FET/ETB sources	18
Online (website/fetchcourses.ie)	9
Offline (training fairs, ETB centres, etc.)	9
(FET fair event)	2

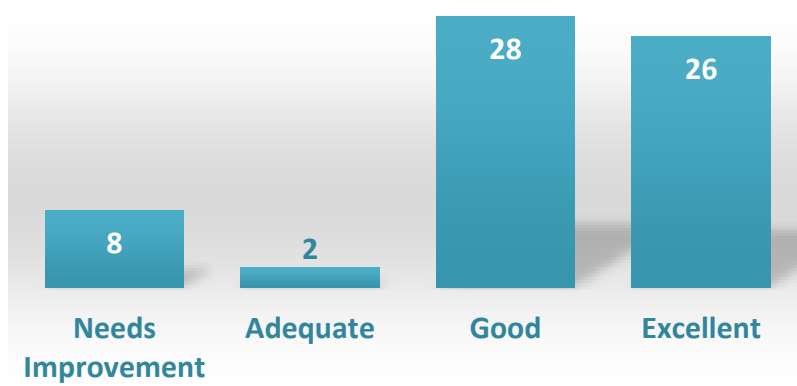
### Question 2: Do you feel you were on the right course?



**Question 3: Did Donegal Education and Training Board’s FET Services support you in making the right choice of course?**



**Question 4: Please rate your experience of Donegal Education and Training Board’s FET Services**



**Question 5: Please give suggestions on how we can improve Donegal Education and Training Board’s FET services**

Themes emerged less clearly from this question. A few of the notable ones are listed in the table below.

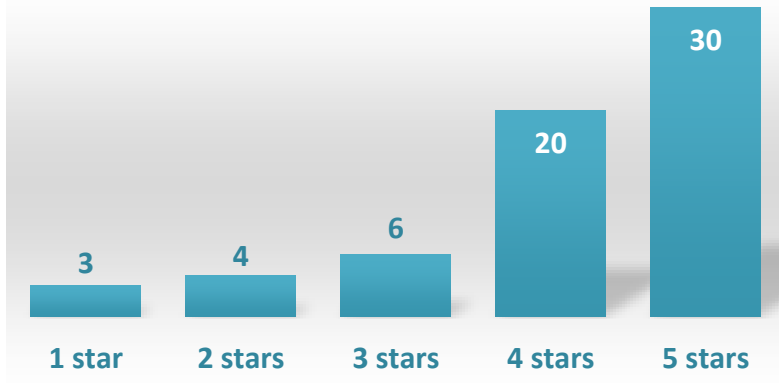
<b>Total number of responses</b>	<b>85</b>
More information	8
Better communication (to and from students)	8
More support, incl. guidance and financial	10

Specifically more money	3
Specifically more guidance	3
Teacher training / organisation	6
Online resources (incl. student hub)	5
More courses available in “local areas”	5

Other responses to this question included suggestions to:

- Update out-of-date module contents
- Provide access to IT resources (such as a computer and printer) outside class time
- Provide more short courses that run within school hours
- Provide more information on LGBT issues to Youthreach classes, in order to improve inclusion.

**Question 6: Today's event was designed to capture your voice. How effectively was this done?**



**Question 7: Please give suggestions on how we can capture the Student Voice in the future**

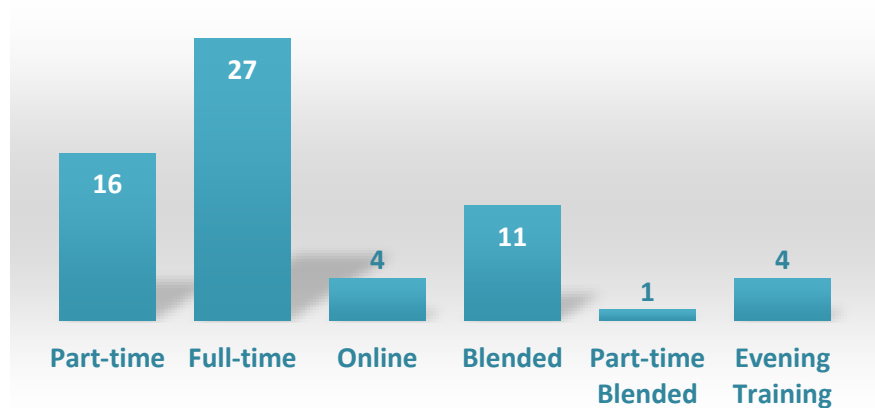
<b>Total number of responses</b>	<b>82</b>
More student forums	9
Online feedback (incl. surveys, social media feedback and Mentimeter)	17
Surveys (incl. online surveys)	23

**Question 8: What courses would you like Donegal Education and Training Board's FET Services to offer in the future?**

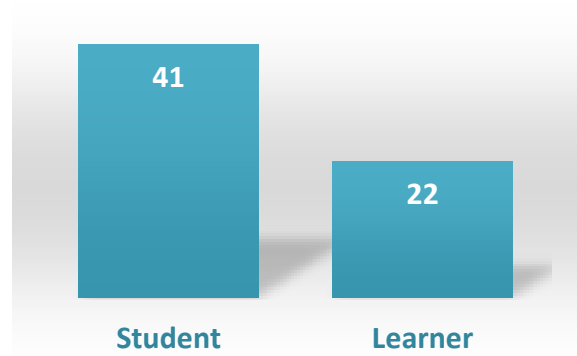
<b>Total number of responses</b>	<b>84</b>
Music (incl. DJ courses)	15
DJ courses	7
Art	3
Film / Photography	3

Writing	2
Languages	9
Computer course incl. Internet Safety/ Digital Citizenship	4
Sustainability	3

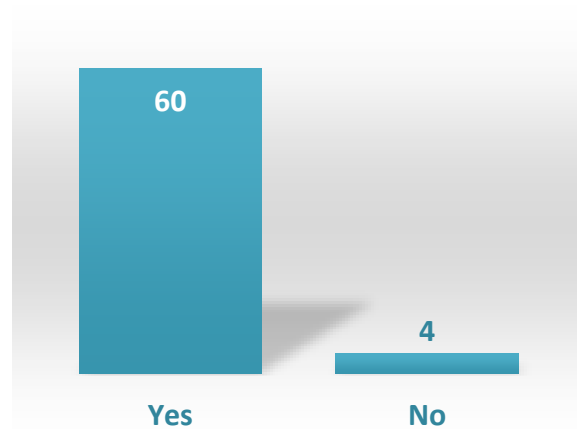
**Question 9: Which mode of delivery best suits your needs?**



**Question 10: Do you prefer the title Student or Learner?**



**Question 11: Would you recommend Donegal ETB's FET Services to a friend?**



### Higher Education

There were a small number of other responses to the Mentimeter questions which indicate that the respondents are interested in progressing to higher education. These included:

- *Do some degree courses, but at a slower pace than universities* (Question 5)?
- *Access courses to uni* (Question 8)
- *Higher level courses* (Question 8)
- *PLC courses that mirror uni* (Question 8)

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout their responses to the questions, FET students signalled their wish for a high-quality learning experience. Much of the large volume of feedback collected indicates that many students take considerable pride in completing an FET programme, but also that they have high expectations of Donegal Education and Training Board’s FET Service courses, staff and facilities, and they recognise instances when they feel that these expectations are not being met.

It is clear that students value opportunities to make their voices heard within the organisation, and the FET Service’s ability to communicate with and listen to its students at every level—in one-to-one interactions with staff, within programmes and within management—will be critical in implementing a strong, integrated Quality Assurance system and delivering the high-quality learning experience that students desire.

Two themes emerged strongly from the feedback concerning students’ general learning experience with the FET Service:

- **Student support**

Unsurprisingly, given the wide variety of potential difficulties identified in responses to the challenges activity, participants in the forum emphasised the importance of all types of support, from peer support and informal feedback from teaching staff to formal support structures such as the Guidance Service.

The QA policies and procedures that shape students’ overall learning environment and experience must be components in a system that maximises the opportunities for students to benefit from both formal supports offered by the organisation and the informal supports frequently provided by staff members and fellow students. Ensuring this will help to maintain the learner-centred education and student empowerment specified in Donegal Education and Training Board’s Vision and Mission statements.

- **Information**

The accessibility of information is somewhat linked to the question of student supports. For example, responding to the Pastoral Care activity, one forum participant remarked:

*Didn’t know the ETB provided guidance counselling—not aware.*

While the absence of information is clearly problematic, responses to the Student Charter and the Communication and Information activity indicate that some students also struggle with information overload.

It is evident that making information accessible to FET students when they need it requires flexible means of communication between the organisation and its students. Many students advocated increased use of digital technology to provide information, and the Student Hub



will represent a valuable innovation in this respect, but others expressed a preference for personal interactions.

Finding ways to make information available to students through a diverse range of channels (e.g. online, mobile phone, staff, FET service structures, printed material, events and inductions, etc.) is necessary to ensure the student empowerment envisaged in Donegal Education and Training Board's FET Service Mission statement is realised.