Opening Statement

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Statement to the Joint Committee on Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

13th November 2025.

Chair, members of the committee,

Thank you for this opportunity. AONTAS brings learners, educators, providers and civil society organisations together to drive social change. For more than 55 years, we have campaigned for an equitable learning system with our members across the island of Ireland. Championing adult and community education as a vital tool for social justice, equality, inclusion and democracy.

With thanks to SOLAS and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. AONTAS meets with learners across the country to find out about their experiences in the National FET Learner Forum.

The Further Education sector is vital. The construction of this building and others like it requires stonemasonry, plumbing, electricity, carpentry, heating, and painting. Skills achieved through FET. While the world transforms at a rapid rate, it is FET that leaps forward to meet the needs of our infrastructure, and future employment. It also upholds Ireland's social contract by supporting people that have been marginalised by unmet literacy needs, poverty, trauma, or discrimination.

AONTAS' vision for the future of apprenticeships is informed by international best practice, and learner voice research data.

Most importantly this vision calls for apprenticeships that are accessible to all, regardless of gender, age, geography, or socio-economic background. They must reflect the diversity of our society and offer real opportunities for those furthest from education and dignified employment.

Recommendations:

1. **Provide guaranteed work-placements and employer access, particularly for apprentices that face discrimination or have less social capital.**

Without access to employers, the apprenticeship model or completion of mandatory work placement in many PLC courses is not possible. Our latest learner voice report highlights this issue and provides an example of a learner having to send 80 emails to employers before they could access a 60-hour placement.

2. **Improve the financial supports available to apprentices by increasing wages and providing additional funding for equipment, transport, and emergency supports.**

36% of apprentices said their financial situation affects their ability to learn, and this is supported by findings in the National Apprenticeship Office report. Apprentices and other learners miss class sometimes because they can't afford transport.

3. **Provide co-ordination managers to co-ordinate placements, services, and stakeholders. Prioritising suitable placements for apprentices within commuting distance and offer flexibility where possible.**

Geographic inequality is a barrier. Many apprentices face long commutes or must relocate to access training. This has a knock-on impact on transport and meal costs. Some apprentices have reported sleeping in their vans. This issue also disproportionately creates barriers for people with caring responsibilities, most of whom are women, and learners with disabilities. Local provision, mobile training units, and blended delivery can offer flexibility. Co-ordination managers can also support service referrals and information on mental health, financial aid, and childcare. Apprentices consistently report lower satisfaction levels in these areas, compared to their peers.

4. **Pilot delegated authority for Education and Training Boards or shared awarding partnership between ETBs and Higher Education Institutions and undertake curriculum reviews.**

Apprenticeships and vocational training must be relevant, responsive to employer and sectoral needs, and innovative. This authority would enable ETBs to design, validate, and

adapt programmes locally reducing administrative delays and improving responsiveness and skills relevance. It can also help build the profile of FET, enable increased curriculum reviews, and address apprentices' concerns on industry standards.

5. Develop a 'Social Value Procurement Policy'; make social value scoring mandatory in all public tenders and increase employer investment in apprenticeships.

In learning from Northern Ireland, we can require service providers commitment to key priorities in the delivery of new contracts. Including hiring apprentices, employee diversity, training provision, ethical and sustainable goods and services, and climate impact measures. More employers should provide relevant equipment, mentoring, and increased investment for apprenticeship programmes.

In closing, FET and apprenticeships should be a first-choice pathway. Achieving this requires enabling policy, employer investment, wider government support, and the removal of class bias and linear thinking in our expectations of who an apprentice is and how they should be educated. FET is for everyone, and we have a duty to facilitate lifelong learning and inclusive apprenticeships.

AONTAS is ready to support you with this work. Our Learner Voice model offers a clear pathway to ensure that apprentices are not just recipients of policy, but co-creators of it - as the saying goes, those closest to the problem, are closest to the solution.

Together, we can build an apprenticeship system that is inclusive, equitable, and empowering for all.