



## National Adult Learning Organisation

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### **Fees Issue for the AONTAS Community Education Network**

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Not-for profit education providers should not pay QQI fees, they cannot be viewed in the same light as private providers because:

- They attract the most hard to reach learners
- They are already underfunded and engage in education provision that is unprofitable for private providers as it requires extra supports e.g. outreach and learner supports
- It will further disadvantage learners who are least likely to engage in accredited learning which is counterproductive to achieving national policy agendas regarding upskilling, particularly for the unemployed and those at the lower levels of the NFQ.
- Funding for community education groups generally covers contact hours only therefore there are no extra funds available for fees. In addition, much of the quality assurance or validation work is carried out through voluntary hours by organisations.

SOLAS has committed itself to developing a Further Education and Training system which is learner centred. The aspiration to create a seamless system in which access, transfer and progression onto the National Framework of Qualifications a reality is laudable. However it is important to recognize the need for a diversity of FET provision which ensure that those individuals who are most distanced from the education system are supported to engage. With this backdrop the role of community education comes to the fore, it has a history of effectively engaging the most hard to reach through its approach: outreach work, the non-threatening, welcoming environment; the learner supports; the specific learning methodology; and its location in, and knowledge of, the community. Learners who do not participate in courses delivered by statutory providers, or who may require the kind of provision that is unprofitable to private providers, can take the step back into learning through community education.

One of the most important developments in recent times has been the ability of community education providers to offer accredited courses which allow learners to take that step towards achieving a full award, to progressing to further accredited learning and ultimately secure employment. To take the regressive step of charging fees for accredited courses (through the validation process/certificates) is a false economy as those who will be most affected are the most disadvantaged learners in FET.

For example: Disadvantaged learners with the lowest level of qualifications are the main cohort of community education learners. The attraction of community education is its strength for engaging learners, however it is one of the most underfunded the FET system. Community Education providers are already struggling to provide a service to their community and learners. To propose a fee to an underfunded part of FET which attracts the most hard to reach learners is effectively a form of double disadvantage.

From a learners' perspective, in order to support their ability to participate in accredited learning, their first step back is the most crucial. Community education, and minor (component) awards from level 1-5, allow learners to make the transition to accredited learning and act as the building block for further accreditation attainment.

## The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training Act 2012, Section 80)

The fees determined by QQI are governed by a set of principles, including:

3.9 Fees will be set at a level that is sustainable both for QQI and for the education and training sector.

**Fees in Section 80 of the 2012 Act specifies the fees: they are unsustainable for community education**

3.11 The determination of fees will have regard to the nature, type and mission of providers and the programmes they offer.

3.13 Exemptions and waivers may be provided for in specified circumstances.

**The education and training sector is diverse, the voluntary sector (in this regard, community education) is far less resourced than other parts of the FET system however it engages in provision for attracting the hard to reach who would not otherwise engage with statutory sector/private providers.**

**With respect to these principles we would call on the voluntary sector to be considered exempt from fees due to the hard to reach learners it engages with, the majority of whom have not achieved Upper Second Level Education through formal education. These second chance learners are also specific target groups for education and training/activation: long-term unemployed, lone parents who would not normally engage in formal education due to previous negative experiences. In relation to fees this means that the community education provider cannot pass on the fee cost to learners, unlike private providers.**

### QQI Schedule of Fees – October 2013

Section 1.1 Fees for the submission of quality assurance procedures for approval in respect of new providers (Section 80 (a))

**The introduction of fees for Quality Assurance approval for new providers is prohibitively expensive at 5000 euro. There is no differentiation between the kinds of providers (voluntary/private) or the size of the organisation and the associated fee. We call for no fee for community education providers.**

Section 1.2 Fees for an application for validation of a programme (Section 80 (e))

Regarding fees for an application for validation of a programme. Further education and training programmes for a major award will be 2000 euro per programme for a minor (component) award (or less than 50% of the credit value of a major award) it will be 1000.

**This fee is prohibitively expensive for community and voluntary groups. The provision of minor (component) awards, which community education often provides, is the stepping stone for learners who have been most distanced from accredited education. This needs to be supported so that learners can progress at their own pace in order to achieve a full award (either in community education or in a statutory provider). Furthermore, most community education organisations contribute voluntary hours to this process. We call for no fee for community education providers.<sup>1</sup>**

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### Section 1.2.2 Fee for the devolved validation process

The fee in respect of programmes validated under the devolved validation process will be charged at 50% of the standard fee. **This fee is prohibitively expensive for community and voluntary groups. We call for no fee for community education providers.**

### Section 1.3 Fee for the review and continuing validation of a programme (Section 80 (f))

Fee for providers of Higher Education and Training *and* Further Education and Training programmes. A charge of €1,500 will apply to the first programme, with an additional fee of €500 for each additional programme, subject to a maximum of €5,000 for each suite of programmes reviewed in a single programmatic review event.

**There is no differentiation between higher education or further education. There is no differentiation between statutory, voluntary or private provider. This fee is prohibitively expensive for community and voluntary groups. We call for no fee for community education providers.**

### Further points outside the fees schedule document:

In recent news (December 2013) from QQI it stated that fees are yet to be determined for shared programmes, e.g. a number of providers are applying to access shared programmes developed by ETBs, Fáilte Ireland and/or consortia of providers and this will incur a fee.

**The sharing of programmes between community groups and Education and Training Boards (ETBs) should not attract a fee.**

*In summary, the issues of QQI fees are not about providers but its impact on learners. If community education providers cannot afford to provide accredited courses it will have a significant impact on their learners who are the most marginalised. This detrimental effect on learners will cause a regression in the accreditation attainment of hard to reach groups; less will take that step onto the National Framework of Qualifications which is contrary to national FET policy priorities. The result being exclusion from accessing accredited learning rather than widening participation.*

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