

EXPLORE



The quarterly magazine from AONTAS, the National Association of Adult Education



CELEBRATE LEARNING 4 - 8 FEBRUARY 2008



- » ***Celebrate Learning and nominate your group for a STAR award!***
- » ***Where now for the Right to Learn campaign?***
- » ***New Minister for Lifelong Learning, Seán Haughey, outlines his plans for adult education and lifelong learning***
- » ***Mainstreaming Quality - Natasha Bailey on the benefits of using the Quality Assurance Framework***



Note from the Editor

Hello and welcome to this seventh issue of *Explore*!!

My name is Niamh Farren and I joined AONTAS in August 2007 as the new Communications Officer.

This issue of *Explore* looks to the past, but also very much to the future. Berni Brady considers the immediate challenges and opportunities for the adult education sector in the wake of the general election and the AONTAS Demand your Right to Learn Campaign. Niamh O'Reilly outlines how the new Community Education Network builds on the past work of the Training Links Programme. It was also timely for us to meet with the newly appointed Minister of State, Seán Haughey, and he outlines his vision for the sector over the coming months in an interview with Adele McKenna.

Autumn sees plans for next year's Adult Learners' Festival in full swing - the dates have been scheduled for February 4th - 8th, so put them in your diaries now!! In keeping with last year's event, the STAR awards ceremony will showcase teamwork and award recognition, and is sure to be one of the high points of the festival. You have until October 19th to submit nominations for initiatives which you feel deserve an award. AONTAS has also recently undertaken some research on the issue of part time fees in third level education, and you can read more about that research in the policy section of this edition.

Elsewhere, we feature a unique outreach adult education course currently making waves in Tallaght. AONTAS's Jennifer Gunning gives us her personal perspective as a student who recently returned to education on this particular course. Natasha Bailey talks us through the mainstreaming phase of the Quality Assurance Framework, and how the framework can be of benefit to women's community education groups. Adele McKenna looks at recent changes to the further education sector in Northern Ireland. And of course there are plenty of updates on our learner networks, and members.

I would also like to take this opportunity to wish Martina Quinn, former Communications Officer with AONTAS, the very best of luck in her new position. I look forward to continuing her work, and exploring the challenges and successes of adult education and lifelong learning across the country. As always, please feel free to contact me to discuss any issues, events or initiatives that you feel should be included in future issues, on 01 406 8220, or 087 911 0569, or by email nfarren@aontas.com.

Also don't forget to check both websites, www.aontas.com, and www.adultlearnersfestival.com over the coming months.

Bye for now,

Niamh Farren
Communications Officer
AONTAS

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One of the winners of last years STAR awards - 'The Certificate in Contemporary Living' with Dr Hugh Brady

Celebrate Learning - Nominate your project for a STAR Award

Are you involved with or aware of an adult learning initiative that you think makes a difference? Then why not nominate it for a STAR award? The STAR awards were established to 'showcase learning and award recognition'. Nominated projects can involve initiatives, resources or group work. Projects can be nominated by adult learning organisations, community and voluntary groups, the private sector, government agencies, statutory bodies and non-governmental organisations.

The project nominated should demonstrate a commitment to any of the following: personal fulfillment, social change, active citizenship, environmental sustainability, cultural and intercultural awareness and knowledge, skills development, personal development, human rights education, community development, community regeneration, health and well-being and employment in related fields. Nominated projects should emphasise partnership, teamwork, and demonstrate a learner centred approach.

Contact AONTAS for more information and a nomination form and send it back to us no later than 5pm on October 19th. Or you can fill out a nomination form online at www.adultlearnersfestival.com.

Adult Learners' Festival 2008 Local Links Event

Preparations for the Adult Learners' Festival 2008 are now well underway with a new steering committee in place and working closely with AONTAS staff to ensure that next year's event creates even more awareness about adult education. Over the summer staff at AONTAS have been in touch with adult education organisations around the country to talk to people interested in acting as local 'links' for next year's event. The success of the first festival can be attributed to the energy and enthusiasm of everyone who participated, but particularly those who acted as local link co-coordinators. They helped to organise adult education events locally, promote and generate enthusiasm about the festival, and we hope to further develop this

work second time around. This year we're bringing together all of the local links on September 19th for a day at the Royal Dublin Hotel. This event will run from 11 am until 3pm, and will give you the opportunity to meet up with other 'links' active in your own area and around the country, and allow us to explain how AONTAS staff members will support you in the lead up to and during the festival. We'll be providing those attending with a useful resource pack which includes anything from posters to a resource booklet for using the media. During the day, Damian O'Broin from Ask Direct will give some practical tips on how you can promote your group's activities using a variety of media in the lead up to the festival. If you are willing to act as a local 'link' in your area and would like to attend this event please contact us for more information. Contact us on 01 406 8220, or mail@aontas.com.

The Adult Learner Journal 2008 Call for Papers

AONTAS is currently calling for papers for the Adult Learner 2008: The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education. Papers submitted on or before Friday, 5th October 2007 will be considered for inclusion in the publication. To view or download the full version of the call for papers, including a style guide for contributors, please visit the latest news section of the website www.aontas.com. For further information please contact Adele McKenna, Policy/Research Support Worker on (01) 406 8220 or e-mail: amckenna@aontas.com. Copies of the 2007 Journal are available from the AONTAS office. Contact Ciara Murphy, Information Support Worker.

AONTAS Learner Network

Learners are at the heart of the work of AONTAS. The views of adult learners are imperative to our lobbying work and we continually endeavour to reach adult learners from basic adult education courses, third level to community education and beyond.

To create methods of communication with learners we have developed learner networks that act as a medium for dialogue with, and between, learners. Learner networks were first started in 2006; one for mature students and two for men in community education were established. Further networks will be created and developed over the course of the strategic plan 2007-2010.

Learner Networks will:

- Be an action driven forum for learners;
- Give learners the opportunity to meet each other in their area;
- Share experiences with each other;
- Facilitate and empower learners to take action on issues that affect them;
- Use the information obtained to feed into the policy work of AONTAS and ensure we are responsive to the needs of learners;
- Feed into the policy work of the member organisation;
- Share information on policy at national level.

The learning obtained from the networks will also be used in all levels of our strategic plan: policy, promotion, practice, partnership and organisational development. Issues raised will be fed directly into our policy work and learners will have the opportunity to contribute to focus groups for other organisations e.g. FETAC. The profile of adult learners will be raised through media work with learners. The views of learners relating to the content and delivery of courses will be shared with provider organisations and tutors. Links with other organisations and key agencies will also be developed during the course of the learner network.

Updates on the outcomes of the meeting will be disseminated through the AONTAS ebulletin, website and *Explore*. We are eager for learners or tutors to contact us so that we can make this work truly country-wide which represents learners from all backgrounds and areas. The next learner network is planned for mature students in the autumn, however if you are interested in being part of one in your area don't hesitate to contact Niamh O'Reilly on noreilly@aontas.com or call 01 406 8220 or leave a message on our website.

We believe that the interests of learners are best served by those who have a direct experience of adult learning in Ireland: the learners themselves.

AONTAS Membership Update

Adding to the membership of AONTAS we are delighted to welcome the following 16 new organisations: Kilcullen Area Services, Equal Ireland, The Adult Learners Forum, Ballinasloe Local Learning Centre, Kingscourt Local Learning Centre, Emyvale Local Learning Centre, Longford Local Learning Centre, Roscommon Higher Education Local Learning Centre, Four Roads Local Learning Centre, Portarlington Local Learning Centre, Letterkenny Local Learning Centre, Eolach.ie, Community Training & Education Centre, Archangel Training Academy, An Bradán Feasa and South West Kerry Family Resource Centre.

13 individual members have also joined AONTAS: Vera van der Velden-Lyons, Teresa Gonzalez, Cara McGinley, Noleen Kavanagh, Jasmin Storan, Janet Keegan, Mary McCabe, Cathal McManus, Maria Nolan O'Connell, Sheila O'Driscoll, Delwen Giles Bowler, Michael Abiola-Phillips and Mohammad Hamidur Rashid.

AONTAS has currently revamped its membership pack so if you are not already a member and wish to join please contact out Membership Development Officer, Niamh O'Reilly, 01 4068220 or apply online at www.aontas.com

ATTENTION MATURE STUDENTS

Come along to the AONTAS Mature Student Network Meeting

Benefit from the opportunity to:

- Network with other learners in your area;
- Learn how to get your issues heard;
- Work together and take action to improve the service for mature students in Ireland;
- Find out what's happening in adult education today.

Date: Thursday 15th November 2007

Time: 10:30-14:00

Venue: Teacher's Club
36 Parnell Square West
Dublin 1

For further information and to book a place at this event please contact Niamh O'Reilly on:

01 406 8220 or email: noreilly@aontas.com



Joe Murdiff, Catherine Heaney and Stephen Flitton at the final Training Links Seminar in May 2007

AONTAS Community Education Network

AONTAS has always championed community education, its ethos and methodologies, and fought for its recognition and appropriate funding. However, the landscape in which community education exists is ever-changing as it responds to the needs of the community and its learners.

A number of noteworthy observations were made during the AONTAS Strategic Plan 2007-2010 consultation process, such as, the integrative nature of community education for new communities and the fact that active citizenship is topical but has always been central to the ethos of community education. A broader debate on the context in which community education operates is needed and this must be carried out separately because of its ethos and its specific funding needs, including the need for pre-development work and outreach work to be recognised and funded. Community education groups also brought to our attention that their views must be expressed and fed into the work of AONTAS in a more defined way and in a space that made constructive dialogue possible.

As such, AONTAS responded with the new development work of creating a Community Education Network. The aim is to build a network of individuals involved in community education that will act as a means for lobbying and media work. The network will be open to AONTAS members and will build on the work of the training links project by encouraging its participants to join.

There are a number of purposes for the Community Education Network:

- To act as a representative body for community education;
- To strengthen the influence of community education groups in AONTAS;

- To work on lobbying initiatives locally and, through AONTAS, nationally;
- For media and publicity work and to promote the meaning and value of community education
- To strengthen the capacity of our community education members;
- To act as an identifiable space in which the smaller community education groups can participate;
- To act as a space for exchanging information and for networking;
- To act as a space for dialogue on community education;
- As a starting point to initiate a broader debate on the definition of adult and community education;
- As a method of linking in with relevant external agencies.

This work leads on from the Training Links Programme and will be supported and directed by a steering group that encompasses representatives from: women's community education, men's community education and family resource centres. We intend to work together to create a space for discussion and importantly an action-focused network that will meet the needs of the community education sector and will act as a body to represent its voice. The Network is just starting and we anticipate that it will grow and develop in response to the groups involved and the shifting needs of the community education sector. We welcome all community education groups from the AONTAS membership to become a part of the Network.

To find out more about this work contact Niamh O'Reilly at noreilly@aontas.com, phone 01 406 8220 or send in a query to mail@aontas.com.

Where Now for the Right to Learn?

In the aftermath of the general election 2007, and the appointment of a new government, Berni Brady considers the challenges and opportunities for the adult education sector.

Introduction

In January 2007 at the closing ceremony of the first national adult learner festival AONTAS launched its pre-election campaign. Entitled Demand your Right to Learn, AONTAS revisited ten key election demands made before the general election of 2002. The purpose of the exercise was to monitor progress during the five years of the coalition government and to identify areas which had not been addressed. Seven years on from the publication of the first White Paper on Adult Education, Learning for Life, much progress has been made in some key areas. In particular the roll-out of initiatives such as the Back to Education Initiative, the National Adult Literacy Programme and the

"It must be acknowledged that adult and community education is now recognised as playing a key role in embedding lifelong learning in the culture and practice of education and training in modern Ireland."

Adult Education Guidance Initiative have led to a much greater participation in adult and community education. The development of such programmes inevitably creates further demand, which is a positive for the sector but which will require sustained investment in order to make lifelong learning a reality. In the new partnership agreement, Towards 2016, launched earlier this year the government has made a commitment to lifelong learning and has identified a number of actions designed to support it. Among these are a commitment to build on the programmes mentioned above and to provide new programmes to support the language needs of migrant workers and family literacy. All of this is positive and a huge improvement since AONTAS first campaigned for the three Rs, recognition, resources and representation ten years ago. Revisiting this campaign after three general elections where has adult and community education got to now?



Berni Brady in the lead up to the General Election 2007

Recognition

It must be acknowledged that adult and community education is now recognised as playing a key role in embedding lifelong learning in the culture and practice of education and training in modern Ireland. Lifelong learning has been a key underpinning theme in myriad government policy documents and reports in recent years. The main focus for this development is sustaining a strong economy, maintaining competitiveness and upskilling the workforce which is a priority for government. Of equal importance however, but less well recognised, is the development and support of a strong civil society. While the government by establishing the Taskforce on Citizenship in 2006 has recogn-



Election Candidates at the launch of the AONTAS 'Demand your Right to Learn' campaign during the Adult Learners Festival earlier this year

ised the need for attention to this area, its understanding of civil society is in my opinion somewhat limited, concentrating primarily on the two Vs, voting and volunteering. While both activities are of the utmost importance to a healthy civil society, deeper questions need to be explored about the nature and understanding of citizenship itself, and the key role of adult and community education in promoting participation, equality, social justice and democracy needs to be encouraged and supported. In the early nineties community education and development were to the forefront in engaging with people in their own localities, facilitating spaces for dialogue and critical analysis of decision-making processes affecting the lives of participants and empowering them to become activists in their own communities and society as a whole. In the current economic context, with the increasing emphasis on skills-based education and training and a particular kind of accountability, spaces for such activities have been eroded. Community groups in particular have been beleaguered by the difficulties of short term funding, late arrival of funding, micro-accounting for tiny amounts of money

and the lack of resources for planning and capacity building. Fresh attention needs to be paid to the potential of community education; in particular in the development and promotion of active citizenship and this aspect of its work needs to be recognised and actively supported.

Resources

Resources for the adult and community education sector have improved in the last ten years with the implementation of the recommendations of the White Paper. However they have remained relatively static for the past three years as a proportion of the overall education budget. Currently they stand at just over 2% of that budget. Successful programmes are finding it difficult to develop and expand their services. An example is the Adult Education Guidance Initiative started as a pilot programme in 2000 and extended nationwide by 2007. This service has proved itself to be well run and efficient, and one which has for the most part been well integrated into the local adult and community education service. It has increased the demand for information and guidance services well beyond its original target groups. Yet it received only €1m in 2007 for expansion. This sum, which is the equivalent of the government spend on the storage of the ill-fated electronic ballot boxes, is wholly inadequate for building the capacity of a much needed service and must be addressed as a matter of urgency in the proposed budget for 2008. This is just one example, but feedback from AONTAS members indicate that many other programmes report similar experiences.

AONTAS called for a cumulative investment of 1% per annum of the total education budget for adult education bringing it to 10% by the year 2013. This would be money

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Dr Hugh Brady, Minister Seán Haughey and Mr John Ryan at the AONTAS Adult Learners Festival

"There is a strong consensus in the sector that the lack of local and national co-ordinating structures has been a consistent weakness in the development of a coherent service."

well spent and would have a long term impact on not just the economy but also on levels of poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion. Evidence is there to support this. Forty years on from what was seen as a high risk strategy of introducing free secondary education, it is generally acknowledged that investing in the nation's young people has been a key factor in the growth of the Celtic Tiger economy. So why not do it for everyone. Research has already shown the benefits of education across a range of areas such as health, social participation, reduction in crime and so on.

Third Level Fees

A key demand of the AONTAS pre-election campaign was parity of esteem for part-time adult learners in higher education through the abolition of fees. AONTAS is particularly pleased with the announcement by An Taoiseach at the 2007 ICTU conference that:

'a new scheme will commence this Autumn, aimed at alleviating the fees in public institutions for part-

time courses at third level, for those at work who have not previously pursued a third-level qualification' AONTAS sees this as a direct result of its years of campaigning for parity of esteem for part-time students since third level fees were abolished for full time students. Of crucial importance also is that the scheme will provide for recognition of prior experience and students will be able to accumulate modular credits. Flexible delivery, flexible attendance times, flexible learning supports and courses leading to awards at levels 6 and 7 in the National Framework of Qualifications has been promised. AONTAS has developed a position paper on the issue of third level fees which has been presented to the Minister of State, Mr Seán Haughey, for consideration and will be monitoring developments closely.

Other Resource Demands

The AONTAS campaign called for the introduction of a capital spend for adult and community education and we have been assured by Minister Haughey at a meeting in July that the Department is examining this in the planing for the 2008 budget. Another key development has been the opening up of the Back to Education Initiative to include people on low incomes who will no longer have to pay fees from September 1st 2007. AONTAS also demanded that the childcare allowance currently provided on adult and further education programmes should be doubled from its current rate of €63.50 per week. This rate has not changed since the introduction of the scheme in 1998. AONTAS will continue to lobby for this increase in the context of the 2008 budget.

Representation

In its first pre-election campaign ten years ago AONTAS outlined the need for representation of the voice and issues of the adult and community education sector at both local and national level. There is a strong consensus in the sector that the lack of local and national co-ordinating structures has been a consistent weakness in the development of a coherent service. The service grew in a very organic way and has suffered from the fragmentation that is the result of competing for scarce resources and from the consequent territorial thinking and practice of an array of providers. The White Paper attempted to address these issues through its recommendations for the establishment of a National Adult Learning Council and local adult learning boards. The National Adult Learning Council, established in 2002 on a non-statutory basis provided the first national forum for a wide range of stakeholders and was seen as a major step forward for the sector. A national co-ordinating structure had been called for by the first report on adult

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education, the Murphy Report in 1973 and ten years later in the Kenny Report on lifelong learning. However the progress was short-lived when the Council was effectively abolished in 2003 with no real explanation or feedback to its members. A review of the functions of the Council by the Department of Education and Science has never been released despite repeated requests. One would have to question the existence of such a review four years on. Yet as funding comes into the sector and programmes have begun to be embedded within it there is now more than ever a great need for a co-ordinating structure. There is an onus on the Department to bring together the stakeholders to negotiate a practical solution to the lack of joined up thinking which has been the bane of adult and community education sector for many years.

"The success of any campaign lies in the capacity of the organisation to work consistently towards clear goals, to ensure members use their expertise and power at a local level and to maintain the momentum on a continual basis."

Departmental Structures

In its pre-election campaign AONTAS sought the retention of a Minister with a specific responsibility for adult and community education but who would have a stronger brief and a cross-departmental focus. The current appointee, Minister Seán Haughey is Minister of State with responsibility for Lifelong Learning and his brief straddles two departments, Education and Science and Enterprise, Trade and Employment. AONTAS views this a good start for developing coherent policy for the sector although other departments such as Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Social and Family Affairs, Justice, Equality and Law Reform all play a key role in supporting various programmes in the broad arena of lifelong learning. Hence the need for co-ordination of policy and funding at a national level.

Looking Ahead

AONTAS has been encouraged by the response to its campaign in that it attracted the attention of all political parties and commitments have been made by the current government both within the partnership agreement and in relation to other issues such as third level fees. However the success of any campaign lies in the capacity of the organisation to work consistently towards clear goals, to ensure members use their expertise and power at a local level and to maintain the momentum on a continual basis. At its AGM on May 10th 2007, AONTAS adopted an ambitious strategic plan developed as a result of a broad consultation with its members and other key stakeholders. This plan which has five clear objectives centred on Promotion, Policy, Practice, Partnership and Organisational Development is designed to guide the work of the organisation up until the end of 2010. Through its work under the auspices of this plan AONTAS will continue to campaign for the development of, and investment in the adult and community education service throughout the life of the current government.

*Berni Brady,
Director AONTAS, July 2007*

Bringing Adult Education into the Community

An example of adult education in Tallaght showcases what can be achieved through partnership and a little bit of imagination.

A Stepping Stone

Later this year, over twenty community activists, adult literacy tutors and other adult education practitioners in the Tallaght area will gain Certificates in Adult and Community Education from NUI Maynooth, without having to leave their own community. The course is the result of collaborative work between the Tallaght Partnership through their Education Co-ordinator, Deborah Brock, and the VEC County Education Facilitator Michelle O'Donovan. As Deborah explained 'the two of us got together to talk about it, and we realised that we both knew tutors working in adult literacy, paid tutors who have the skills, and years of experience, but don't have the theory and a recognised qualification in this area. So there was a gap there. From our perspective, we wanted to see if we offered something that addressed that gap, would it work?'

Deborah and Michelle began to research the various options for an accredited course that might bridge that gap. Tallaght Partnership has always shown a strong commitment



Deborah Brock, Adult Education Co-ordinator with Tallaght Partnership, with Jenny Gunning, Administration Support Worker with AONTAS

to adult education, and recently ran a certified course in community development and leadership skills. This new certificate course in Adult and Community Education builds on that experience, but also aims to cultivate lifelong learning within tutors and potential tutors themselves. 'We decided that the Maynooth module suited our organisation, and was what we were looking to deliver. We're not here to deliver an alternative degree programme, but rather to provide a stepping stone for people that is accessible

for them and which offers them progression opportunities either in university or within their own organisations. They can also get credits, which they contribute towards other university courses', says Deborah. The setting of the course was also important - all three modules are delivered in Tallaght as opposed to an academic setting. According to Deborah 'it's a lot more accessible for people, because they are already living here, in Tallaght, and may also have work commitments. The course is delivered once a week, it's a long enough night for people with work commitments, 7 to 10 pm, but it feels a lot more achievable this way. Some of the people we interviewed for the course have been out of education for a while, so coming here is not as daunting, as opposed to going to university. I think it works from that point of view.' Accessibility also means ensuring that the course is financially affordable for participants, and so the

"We are not here to deliver an alternative degree programme, but rather to provide a stepping stone for people that is accessible for them and which offers them progression opportunities either in university or within their own organisations."

Partnership has provided substantial funding for the initiative. Course modules themselves are delivered at the offices of Tallaght Partnership.

Course Content

The course content combines the theory behind adult education along with some of the more practical skills. The three modules include the psychology of adult and community education, group work, and the philosophy of adult education. Deborah is keen to point out how community development informs the delivery of all three modules. 'By philosophy we mean enabling the students to develop their own philosophy and their own sense which they can bring into their own work. We all have that philosophy in how we approach things, and this course is about further developing that.' Students explore how adults learn, but also get the chance to develop their group work skills. 'By group work, we don't just deal with group dynamics' she says. 'They will also develop the skills needed to actually go out and facilitate groups, and possibly design programmes that apply to their own work. We want as much as possible that people actually get the opportunity to develop practical skills in this area. During the coursework, they get the opportunity to deliver presentations, and they also get to deliver a session.'

Returning to learn

One of the challenges of adult education is that some students may have been out of education for quite a while. The initiative has addressed this issue in a number of ways. Deborah explained how participants on the course were selected. 'We did very informal interviews with people. We were clear with people about what the course entailed, that it was certificate level, that it wasn't diploma or higher

"We have a mixture of people who have Masters degrees in other areas but don't have the experience in this particular area. On the other hand we have people that are working in the field who have the practical experience but don't know what to do with it."

degree level. We gave a very honest idea of the commitment involved, and what would be expected during the year. We interviewed thirty two people, and gave places to twenty three, who started the course in January.' In fact, different levels of age and experience really add to the dynamic in the class. 'We have a mixture of people who have Masters degrees in other areas, but don't have the experience in this particular area. On the other hand, we also have people that are working in the field, who have the

"The course incorporates a unique study skills element, which helps students to get into the right frame of mind in preparing their assignments."

practical experience, but don't know what to do with it. For example we have some people involved in community work, but who want to go on to work as tutors in adult education. Some people are working in the drugs area, or as special needs assistants while others are part time tutors.' The tutors delivering the modules really enthuse the students and bring out the best in them, and the course also incorporates a unique study skills ele-

ment, which helps students to get into the right frame of mind in preparing their assignments.

Informing Future Initiatives

Ongoing evaluation from a number of perspectives generates feedback from students and tutors, but will also inform future similar initiatives. Deborah summarises the key questions of the evaluation. 'We want to see if it is beneficial to those participating, is it beneficial to the community. Does it really do what it set out to do? Michelle is also involved in the evaluation - it's a partnership approach between the two of us. It's like anything you do. We need that evaluation in order to inform the direction that we take next year.' Those involved in the delivery of adult education initiatives are clearly at the centre for her vision of the sector. 'In the area of adult and community education, it's important to offer more courses to people and give them several options, so they can say; I work in this area, I believe in the notion of lifelong learning, I can see my own opportunities and myself doing this certificate in Tallaght and then going on to do a degree. I can even go back and do a Masters in this area.'

For more information on the Certificate in Adult and Community Education, contact Deborah Brock, Education Co-ordinator at Tallaght Partnership on 01 466 4233.

My experience of the Certificate in Adult & Community Education

By Jennifer Gunning

Albert Einstein rightly said “Education is what remains after one has forgotten everything he learned in school”. In July 2005 I made the move from the private sector to AONTAS, a move which I could never have imagined would have got me back to a classroom, never mind picking up another book to study. After all I am one of those who have almost forgotten everything I learned in school! Little did I know I would be embarking on a voyage that would take me to a destination known in local circles as “Career”. The first challenge for me when I came to AONTAS was the amount of abbreviations and acronyms people used in their daily conversations in this sector, so over the summer of 2005 I came to grips with these by reading as much as I could and soaking up the wealth of information within the walls of AONTAS. As my role developed in AONTAS I felt I was gaining an understanding and a good knowledge of many of the practices in the area of adult education. However I also felt I wanted to develop a deeper understanding of the theories behind the practice.

As part of my role in AONTAS I provide information to adult learners thinking of returning to adult



education and I also work with the Community Education Facilitators on their Training and Support Programme. I guess you could say I have the best of both worlds! As the months went by in AONTAS I became more and more enamoured with the work of the organisation, so much so that I should take my own advice and I decided to pursue a course myself in the area of Adult and Community Education. I thought that by doing a course in something I found so interesting it wouldn't be as difficult to go back to studying. It would also be of great benefit to me in my work. I explored a number of options; however I wanted to find a reputable course that I would be able to pursue

while doing my job. Then in November last year I heard a rumour that the Certificate in Adult and Community and Adult Education was being run in Tallaght Partnership and was accredited by Maynooth University. This was a terrific opportunity as the course was being run on my doorstep and I could still use all the facilities in the University and get a student card, which of course comes with an added bonus of cinema discounts! In December 2006 I did an interview and was thrilled when I found out I was successful in obtaining a place. In doing this course I hoped to obtain a deeper understanding of how adults learn. I wanted to learn how to apply philosophies of adult and community education into teaching practice and to see what it's truly like to adopt a flexible and creative approach to education.

Although I hadn't been out of education system for too long I was for some reason very nervous about going back

"This was a terrific opportunity as the course was being run on my doorstep and I could still use all the facilities in the university and get a student card."

to study and really began to question myself and my abilities. Like so many others when I left school I was unsure of what area I would like to work in and even when I came out of college I was still confused but this time it felt so different. The first night of the class I was really eager to commence the course but at the same time I was quite anxious. I was sure that my fellow learners would be more familiar with content of the course and the practices involved; for some reason I was sure I was out of my depth. I had real fears about expressing myself in the larger group. The thought of baring weakness in front of my fellow students really scared me, but the thoughts of admitting my strengths also terrified me. However most of these were shelved when I met the tutors and the group of learners; all of us were in the same boat and our tutors were so supportive and stressed the importance of the diversity of the group and the range of skills and experiences we each brought to the course.

As the months are going by I'm becoming more aware of how I am gaining in confidence speaking in front of the larger group. Our tutors through various exercises helped us identify how we act in a group and now I am more conscious of how I express myself and always try to make a contribution. Last term I really enjoyed the group work aspect of the course and found that when assignment time came around the class pulled together, formed strong friendships and supported each other so that nobody got left behind. Assignments so far haven't been too testing. Although they are challenging they compliment the work I do in AONTAS and vice versa. Informal study groups were set up and we often look forward to a Saturday discussing our theorist friends. Over the course

"Education doesn't end when you leave school, college or get a job, it's a voyage that never ends and continues throughout your life, it's rewarding and at times hard but at the end of the day it's a voyage that's worth taking."

people were so open to sharing their ideas and inputting into each other's work. I found this really encouraging and it differed so much to the competitive atmosphere that would kick in around exam and assignment time when I was previously studying in college. I really benefit from the open discussions which follow on from learning about different theorists; these allow us to formulate our own philosophies and connect with other people perspective's whilst all the time through conversation strengthening our own opinions. Everybody's opinion is both welcomed and valued. This time round I am ready to learn and I'm already thinking about what is next for me. I guess you could say I have caught the lifelong learning bug.

Reflecting on the course to date, I have made not only connections but a great group of friends. I am comfortable and confident being a participant and I believe that was achieved because I feel at ease in an Adult Education Programme. I have now developed a new skill and I have gained the confidence to use this skill not only within AONTAS, but also within other groups that I am involved in within my community. I am finding it of real benefit to me in the work I do with AONTAS as

my critical reflection skills have definitely improved. I am also developing a deeper understanding of how adults learn and now find myself in a position to apply the theories of adult and community education to the work I practice for AONTAS on a daily basis. The course has been of real benefit with regard to research skills, facilitation skills and presentation skills and I only hope to improve on what I've learned to date. I think that everyone coming into this sector or already involved in adult and community education would benefit from taking part in a course like this. I count myself lucky to have had the opportunity to have been able to find my niche and to have support from my colleagues at work to achieve my potential. Unlike my previous experience of college I now look forward with excitement to having 3 hours each Tuesday night to network and interact with the class and learn from not only the course content but also from my fellow classmates.

Two years ago I had very little knowledge of Adult and Community Education and now today I have learned so much, I have gained in confidence and it's something I really enjoy doing. When I look around the class I really feel this sector is the place I want to build my career. This course has become so positively enmeshed in every aspect of my life that both family members and friends have began to comment on a new me, especially when I say "I think I may stay home tonight; feet up, tea in hand reading the Pedagogy of the Oppressed". The biggest realization for me throughout my experience is that education doesn't end when you leave school, college or get a job, it's a voyage that never ends and continues throughout your life, it's rewarding and at times hard but at the end of the day it's a voyage that's worth taking.

The Overhaul of Further Education in Northern Ireland

In the first of a two part article, Adele McKenna looks at the recent overhaul of the Further Education sector in Northern Ireland and the implications for the 225,000 learners attending FE colleges each year.

Towards a New Strategy for Further Education

The Department of Employment and Learning has recently introduced a new strategy for Further Education in Northern Ireland, entitled *Further Education Means Business*. The document, which outlines the Strategy, establishes the vision for Further Education (FE) in Northern Ireland and details each of the 12 projects which make up the programme. The strategy places FE “at the heart of lifelong learning in order to strengthen economic and workforce development, to enhance social cohesion and to advance the individual’s skills and learning”.

Developing a New Structure

The 12 projects are structured as follows: Essential Skills refers to supporting adults who wish to improve their literacy and numeracy skills; provision is free. Reform of vocational qualifications refers to the replacement of the existing National Qualifications Framework with a new Framework for Achievement, which it is hoped, will be simpler and more accessible. A Vocational Enhancement Programme will involve collaboration between FE colleges and post-primary schools to ensure all 14-19 year olds have access to high quality vocational education. The Higher Education (HE) Project within the Programme will review the future delivery of HE through FE colleges. The aim of the e-learning project will be to develop a baseline provision for e-learning and to develop capacity within the FE sector. Taken forward through the Skills strategy, the Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance Strategy will enhance the support given to young people and adults.

Of the remaining projects which make up the new FE strategy in Northern Ireland, the project which proposed the total restructuring of the sector had the potential to impact most severely on the 225,000 learners attending FE colleges every year. The reshuffle has already taken place, with the 16 existing colleges; spread across 47 campuses, amalgamated into six new area-based ‘super’ colleges on the 1st August this year. The six new colleges are Southern

Regional College, North West Regional College, south West College, Northern Regional College, South Eastern Regional College and Belfast Metropolitan College. Those responsible for the merger were eager to point out that it would be business as usual in the sector while this shake up was taking place and that college provision would continue as normal. Only time will tell if the restructuring of the sector has been successful. In conjunction with the restructuring of the sector, the Governance of the sector has also been overhauled, with the recruitment of new Chairpersons and Principals for the six new colleges.

The final four projects, outlined below, have been deemed “most important” among the 12 projects which make up the strategy. The curriculum project will ensure that the curriculum offered in colleges will focus on the needs of the economy and prioritise the skills needs locally and regionally. The aim of the project is to ensure that colleges strike a balance between meeting the needs of employers and the needs of individual learners. The project will integrate the skills of problem solving, team work and ICT into the wider curriculum and will promote enterprise culture as a core component in the education of 16 to 19 year olds.

FE Support for Economic Development refers to the role FE colleges can play in supporting employers in local and regional economic development, deemed “*crucial to Northern Ireland’s future economic prosperity*”. This project is based on a vision of the FE sector as the main component in providing the skills needed to “attract foreign investment into NI...and as the breeding ground for tomorrow’s

“This strategy places FE ‘at the heart of lifelong learning in order to strengthen economic and workforce development, to enhance social cohesion and to advance the individual’s skills and learning.’”

"It is envisaged that the Access Project would put external supports in place, through partnership with other education and training organisations to encourage excluded groups to develop occupational skills."

young entrepreneurs". This project will ensure FE colleges revamp, promote and market the supports they can provide to employers, as effectively as possible, such as enhancing productivity, competitiveness, business creation and product development.

The Learner Access and Engagement Project will devise a policy framework for collaboration between colleges and other education and training organisations, in order to increase access for those who would otherwise be reluctant to make use of conventional FE provision, for example socially excluded and marginalised groups. It is envisaged that the Access Project would put external supports in place, through partnership with other education and training organisation to encourage these excluded groups to develop occupational skills.

Key Priorities for the Strategy

The final project in the programme has developed a new, fully integrated funding model for the FE sector which encompasses the main principles of transparency, simplicity, equity and accountability. The structure of the funding model encourages the colleges to deliver services in line with the new changes to the sector.

Undoubtedly, Northern Ireland's new strategy for the Further Education Sector offers many positive opportunities for growth and development within the FE sector, as well as for learners, communities and businesses in Northern Ireland. Greater collaboration between the six new 'super' colleges will mean greater choice for students

"Greater collaboration between the six new 'super' colleges will mean greater choice for students and will ensure a more efficient use of resources."

and will ensure a more efficient use of resources. These larger colleges will also be better placed to respond to the changing needs of business and industry through skills provision and business development.

However, the strategy also raises cause for concern. While one of the key outcomes of FE Means Business is "to strike the right balance between college provision that supports employers and the economy, and provision that supports social inclusion", the strategy may appear decidedly imbalanced to some readers, driven, for the most part by purely economic concerns and heavily influenced by the demands of the labour market in Northern Ireland. The aim to increase access to the FE sector for groups traditionally reluctant to participate in learning seems to pay mere lip service to improving social inclusion, particularly as the motivation behind it is to develop the occupational skills of the socially excluded, in order to service the needs of the labour market and the economy. The value of learning, for learning's sake and the importance of the further education sector as a vehicle for personal and societal growth appears to go unrecognised in FE Means Business. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the title!

"The value of learning for learning's sake and the importance of the further education sector as a vehicle for personal and societal growth appears to go unrecognised in FE means business."

Challenges for the Future

Also, while organisers have stated an intention to re-deploy staff whose jobs have been displaced during the restructuring, they also suggest that "at the moment it is not possible to say what impact the move to the new structures will have on jobs". In particular, concerns have been raised for FE college staff, who, until this year were providing courses at Levels 0 and 1. The new strategy commits to working with other educational and training organisations in the provision of these courses in future. Naturally, there is some anxiety around the displacement of these staff. The new strategy has also been criticised over the alleged lack of consultation with the Community and Voluntary sector regarding the new structure of the FE sector and the wider implications for other providers.

Mainstreaming Quality - Community Women's Education and the QAF

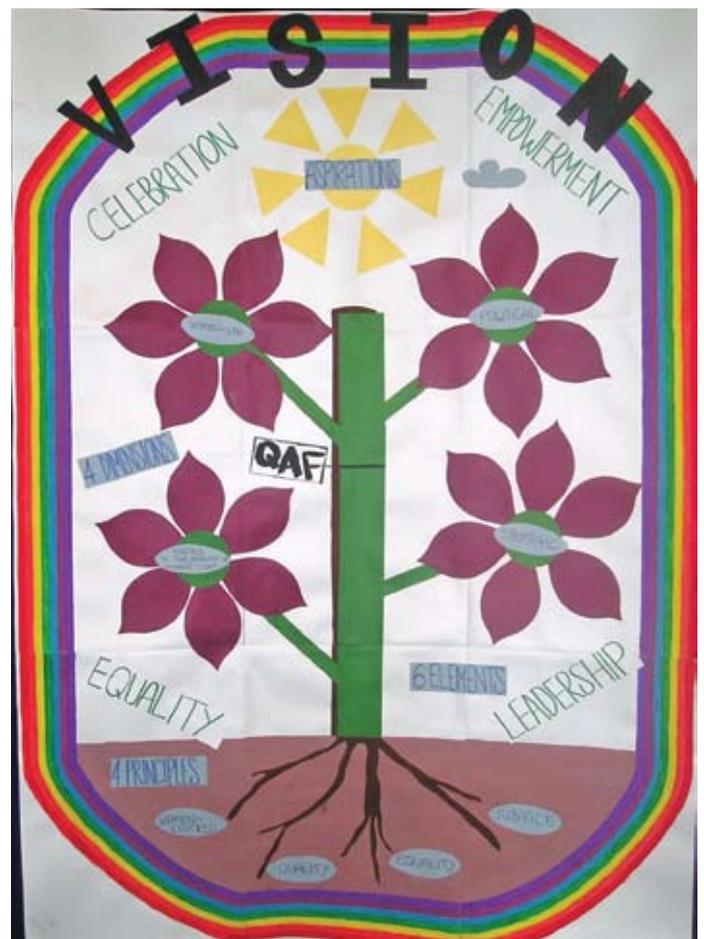
The Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) is now firmly back on the agenda of women's community education groups. Niamh Farren speaks to Natasha Bailey, about the challenges to mainstreaming the QAF, and how women's community education groups can get involved.

What is the Mainstream Project?

The last edition of *Explore* highlighted how AONTAS had been successful in securing €110,000 to initiate the mainstreaming of the Quality Assurance Framework following the experience of a successful pilot project which ran from 2003 to 2005. 'The mainstreaming phase sets out five objectives' explains Natasha, the consultant engaged earlier in April to progress work on the QAF. 'The first objective involves training sixty community leaders representing different AONTAS groups, in the QAF, and supporting them to lead their own groups to apply it in their own setting. AONTAS just has funding to do the first goal right now and I was contracted to do that work since April. Over May and June, I did some introductory workshops around the country - my job is to get the buzz going again, re-introduce the framework and take them through the process of using it. So far that has happened in an organic way.'

What Groups should use the QAF?

The framework itself is a tool originally developed to name the principles, vision, goals, dimensions and elements of practice that distinguish women's community education from other types of education. The framework was tested by five women's community education groups in different settings during a pilot project. 'Anything in the framework has been named by and developed by those groups actually doing the work', Natasha elaborates. 'They've developed it and tested that tool. The tool includes a visual tool of a flower- we know the framework is a system of interrelated



A pictorial representation of the QAF

elements - one part doesn't function without the other, and without the presence of all of those different elements, it is not women's community education.' She emphasises that the QAF can be used by just about any women's group. 'Some groups might be thinking, sure we're just running a social club once a week, that's not that political, we never really thought about it having a vision for women's equality, but when you sit back and think about it, that's exactly what its doing, and those groups are providing an essential progression path for women to lifelong learning. Say you want to move from being isolated in the home to moving into more mainstream accredited learning, you need something in there to get you through that transition.'

"When you sit back and think about it, these groups are providing an essential progression path for women to lifelong learning."



Community women's education groups in attendance at the launch of the Quality Assurance Framework

"They ended up with a scrapbook of their QAF - it's like an archive of their work, and it's a brilliant process for groups to work through."

How can the QAF benefit Community Women's Groups?

Natasha lists numerous examples of how groups have reaped the benefits of using the QAF. These include anything from using it to develop funding proposals to structuring presentations and talks about their work. 'It would have encouraged group esteem, the groups involved really named what they do, reflected on it and they've celebrated it during the process. Whereas FETAC and HETAC help you quality assure your programmes, the QAF helps you develop your overall organisational capacity, eg Longford Women's Link found it beneficial around their internal communication, and would ensure now that anyone coming into the organisation reads the Quality Assurance Framework. One group used it to help structure their evaluations, another used it for strategic planning.' Groups interested in getting involved will hear more about these practical examples during the workshops that Natasha is currently organising.

What is involved?

The major challenges for groups wishing to get involved in the framework are of course the availability of time and resources. The framework itself was born in an environment where the resources available to women's community education were on the decline. Gender equality was no longer seen as a priority, the work was not seen to be crucial or essential, with the result that groups active in the sector were forced to justify their activities and existence, and were often in direct competition with their counterparts for funding. Given that the QAF process involves a commitment of eighteen days, how would she persuade groups with fewer resources that this is a worthwhile exercise?

First of all, it is clear that the training process has been designed to be as accessible as possible. Workshops are organised regionally, so groups can expect to find one taking place in a location that suits. Two leaders from each group can participate, although where this is not possible, existing networking structures may provide opportunities for groups to share resources and trained leaders. Secondly, what may initially seem like a slightly daunting process which threatens to take valuable time from a particular activity or project can in fact lead to an intense period of

"One group used it to structure their evaluations; another used it for strategic planning."

reflection, strategic planning and celebration. This can have the added value of injecting the organisation with a new burst of energy and ideas. And although the workshops themselves require a commitment of twelve days over a six to nine month period, the additional six days of planning, debriefing, facilitating meetings take place at times that suit the organisation. Natasha outlines what anyone who signs up should expect. 'You come to a workshop once every six weeks. Each workshop trains you in a step in the quality assurance process. You come you get trained, you go out and you complete that part of the process. You come back, and debrief and you celebrate that step, you get trained in the next step. All the way up to the 6th workshop, where you review all of the work you have done, you look at where the gaps were, look at what you are going to do about that, and put together a quality assurance plan, to bring you up to the core practice level in the framework. There are dimensions to the work, there are elements within those dimensions. Core practices are those that any group can reach, regardless of funding.'

She cites the example of Amerge, in Donegal, in order to demonstrate how simple and yet effective the process can be. 'They ended up with a scrapbook of their QAF, it's like an archive of their work, and it's a brilliant process for groups to go through. Simply put, she sees the QAF as a tool which groups can use in 'achieving a vision for women's equality, and providing a space for women where they could foster their own self esteem, and work towards collective empowerment.'

The Mainstreaming Project: Main Objectives

- To train 60 leaders (two from 30 affiliate groups) to lead their groups through the quality assurance process and support those leaders as they help their groups to apply the framework.
- To ensure that the QAF becomes a self-directed process by writing and publishing a 'facilitator's guide' that groups can use by themselves to quality assure their work without support.
- To establish clear connections between FETAC and HETAC and the QAF.
- To constitute an independent women's community education quality assurance support structure that can award a quality stamp to those groups who have gone through the quality assurance programme.
- To identify and establish a sustainable funding programme for women's community education in Ireland.

What you can expect of the QAF Leader Training Programme:

- Creative use of lots of different types of methods and very few handouts. There are no essays to write or a lot of reading to do other than the QAF itself.
- Celebratory of the work that you do in the workshop and with your groups.
- Simple to engage with and very experiential. You do not need any prior training to get involved in this training programme except the confidence to participate and do some facilitation.
- Supportive of you. There will be no rushing and all questions will be answered. There will be space for mutual support between leaders to happen as well.
- Professional and empowering. Make no mistake, this training will assist you to develop your leadership and facilitation skills and increase your confidence which can be transferred to other areas of your life and work.

Women's Community Education Quality Assurance Leader Training Calendar September 2007 to December 2007

Dublin - Central

Workshop 1 - Tuesday October 23rd - 24th

Workshop 2 - Tuesday December 4th - 5th

Letterkenny, Donegal

Workshop 1 - Tuesday, October 9th - 10th

Workshop 2 - Tuesday November 20th - 21st

Limerick

Workshop 1 - Tuesday October 16th - 17th

Workshop 2 - Tuesday November 27th - 28th

If you are interested in the Quality Assurance Framework and would like an information pack, contact AONTAS on 01 406 8220, or mail@aontas.com.

Parity of Esteem Needed for Part-time Students

The following is an abstract highlighting AONTAS' stance on part-time fees taken from the first in a series of policy position papers developed by the Policy/Research Support Worker, in consultation with staff, membership and other relevant stakeholders.



Adele McKenna
Policy/Research Support Worker

AONTAS welcomes the commitments in the most recent Social Partnership Agreement to provide a dedicated fund *"to alleviate the fees in public institutions for part-time courses at third level by those at work who have not previously pursued a third level qualification"*. AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, has lobbied for the removal of fees and the introduction of maintenance supports for low income part-time students in higher education for over ten years.

In the run up to the election the issue of part-time fees received a lot of media attention, thanks in large part to AONTAS' pre-election campaign 'Demand Your Right To Learn' which is calling for parity of esteem for part-time learners in higher education. Under the current system full time students attending third level institutions avail of 'free fees' while

part time higher education students are required to pay.

In March and April 2007 AONTAS engaged in extensive consultation with staff, the membership and other relevant stakeholders including third level institutions and trade union representatives to inform a position paper on fees for part-time students in third level education. The main themes emerging from the consultation are outlined below.

Parity of Esteem for Part-Time Students

According to figures from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) 34,000 students were in part-time third level education in 2004. Part-time enrolment constituted 13% of all undergraduate enrolment and 31% of all postgraduate enrolment in 2004/5.

The practice of charging fees to part-time students has been largely condemned in the past. The European University Association has stated, *"The current system of charging fees appears to work against the stated national objectives to increase participation"*. Similarly, the OECD review position asserts that full-time and part-time students should not be treated differently.

AONTAS' recent consultation regarding charging fees to part-time students revealed unequivocal support from stakeholders for equality of treatment with their full time peers. *"You could argue that it is completely*

untenable to have free fees for full-time students and not have them for part-time students. There is no moral or other basis that you can argue against having free fees for part-time students. It would be socially more progressive than just giving it to full-time students".

It was also suggested that charging fees for part-time courses restricts opportunities for up-skilling within the workforce and therefore affects levels of income and participation in employment. In regard to this issue, AONTAS welcomes the commitments in the most recent Social Partnership Agreement to provide a dedicated fund *"to alleviate the fees in public institutions for part-time courses at third level by those at work who have not previously pursued a third level qualification"*. Potential earnings for those with a university level degree are 8-20% higher than those with non-tertiary education. This commitment will prove vitally important for improving employment opportunities for adults from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular.

"AONTAS recent consultation regarding charging fees revealed unequivocal support from stakeholders for equality of treatment with their full time peers."

"Potential earnings for those with a university level degree are 8-20% higher than those with non-tertiary education."

Removing fees would also benefit primary care givers who remained in the home either to provide childcare or eldercare and who cannot avail of free full time education but are prevented from accessing part-time education due to the financial costs.

"One of the reasons we are interested in part-time education is because we think it will reach out to a cohort of people who missed the opportunity to go to third level at school leaving age but who could take advantage of the opportunity later in life". This would also satisfy the commitment made by Fianna Fail in the party's recent manifesto to "enable more people with work or family commitments to avail of opportunities at third level".

Greater Supports for Part-Time Students

A strong and recurrent theme throughout the consultation process centred on the importance of providing adequate supports to part-time students in a flexible and responsive manner, including making part-time students eligible for maintenance grants. A recommendation from the 2005 HEA report suggested introducing financial supports for part-time students as a way of increasing participation. This initiative could also "link in where appropriate to work based initiatives such as One Step Up". Removing fees was recognised as a vital component to widening access but is not considered the only obstacle to participation. Fees for part-time students are "one piece of the jigsaw" while comprehensive supports, including financial assistance are also required if the student is to pass through the system successfully.

A dedicated policy outlining supports for part-time students, including targets for lower socio-economic groups and backed by adequate funding would make it possible for Fianna Fail to deliver on their promise to "further increase third level participation rates, with a special focus on those from disadvantaged areas" as outlined in their General Election manifesto 2007.

"Abolishing part-time fees would have an impact on increasing access for marginalised and disadvantaged groups but access is about more than just removing fees, it is also to do with the supports that are available for those who wish to pursue education, such as adequate main-

"Fees for part-time students are "one piece of the jigsaw" while comprehensive supports, including financial assistance, are also required if the student is to pass through the system successfully."

tenance grants, delivery, the motivation within the institution to accommodate individuals from non-traditional backgrounds, the number of courses available on a part-time basis, types of infrastructure and public service supports which are sadly lacking and which are a disincentive to people who want to learn, so we need a more holistic approach. There are a plethora of things, which need to happen which go beyond the fees issue".

A number of stakeholders argued the importance of adequate maintenance grants if adults from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular are to be encouraged into third level education as part-time students. *"The disadvantaged should be supported through a much better grants system".* It was also recommended that the

qualifying criteria for maintenance grants be broadened to allow a greater number of low and middle-income students to benefit from the support.

If part-time fees are not removed what are the alternatives?

Among stakeholders consulted endorsement of the position to abolish part-time fees was overwhelming. However, if for any reason the new Government is unable to commit to abolishing fees for part-time students in third level education a number of alternatives, which were generated by the consultation, are suggested below.

In the *Towards 2016 Partnership Agreement* "a targeted fund will be put in place to alleviate the fees for part-time courses at third level by those at

work who have not previously pursued a third level qualification". It is not yet known if 'alleviation' of fees will amount to the full payment of part-time fees by Government and it excludes those who have already obtained a degree or equivalent level of education, however the clause in the Partnership Agreement could be used to open up the possibility of accessing third level education by disadvantaged or low skilled workers who would otherwise not have had the opportunity. AONTAS would recommend opening this scheme up to the wider public as a less advantageous alternative to the introduction of free fees for all part-time third level courses.

For Further information contact Adele McKenna at AONTAS 01 406 8220

The following interview was conducted in August 2007 and profiles the new Minister of State with special responsibility for Lifelong Learning, Mr. Seán Haughey, T.D.

Q: Minister, your title has changed somewhat since the creation of the new coalition Government, from Minister of State for Adult Education, to Minister of State for Lifelong Learning; why was the decision taken to change the title?

Lifelong Learning, as defined by the Minister, aims to improve knowledge, skills and competence which continues throughout life from pre-school to post-retirement. This new role, therefore, is very different to the previous ministry of adult education.

The Minister emphasised the importance of lifelong learning in the context of the EU Lisbon Agenda (2000), within the huge economic and social changes taking place in Europe over the last number of decades, the rapid evolution of the knowledge society and the demographic pressures resulting from an aging population “so lifelong learning comes into its own in that context”.

As a result of the EU Lisbon Agenda (2000) it was agreed that a fundamental change in approach to education and training was needed as people’s skills and knowledge require regular updating. “Learning throughout life is required to ensure employability and personal fulfilment of present and future generations to ensure their inclusion in society and to promote active citizenship. This is a noble aspiration which requires partnerships at a number of different levels, between the EU and member states, partnership between social partners, between business and training institutions and partnership between the different branches of education and training and

“Learning throughout life is required to ensure employability and personal fulfilment of present and future generations to ensure their inclusion in society and to promote active citizenship.”



Seán Haughey, T.D. Junior Minister for Lifelong Learning, with Adele McKenna and Niamh Farren of AONTAS

partnerships between Government departments and agencies, all to ensure the development of integrated policies at Government level”.

Q: Minister, does this change in title herald a greater cross-departmental focus for your role? If so, would you explain further?

The ministry will provide a cross departmental focus in education and

training programmes at Government level, as Mr. Haughey, T.D., has been appointed Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, as well as Minister of State at the Department of Education.

“I have had discussions with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE), with Minister Michéal Martin and the Secretary General and I have been given a des-

"Further education for adults must build upon initial learning and promote independent thought and the spirit of innovation in learning."

ignation of function by the DETE; essentially it states that 'I, Minister of State Haughey, will co-ordinate programme implementation across the Departments of Education and Science and Enterprise, Trade and Employment with the aim of progressing the lifelong learning agenda and will ensure the delivery to target groups of relevant programmes across the two Departments and their agencies and offices, including FAS'... So it's a bit of a mouthful! Obviously I'm very excited about taking on the role and the cross departmental role between the two departments."

Q: Would you detail what this change in role will mean in practice for Ireland's 300,000 adult learners?

"Ultimately, the new role will see an improved, integrated approach between the education and training areas. The Government has set out its targets for the development of education for adults in the Agreed Programme for Government (2007-2012) and the aim is to develop the Further Education Sector to enable it to play a strong role in providing 'employment relevant' education and training opportunities and to serve as a gateway to Higher Education. This is backed up in the programme by increased investment. My aim and that of Government is to cater for the educationally disadvantaged and those who lack

basic skills and that would be the cornerstone of Government policy".

Q: What is your personal vision for the future of the adult and community education sector Minister? What factors have influenced this vision?

"In my role as a public representative, I meet with many educational groups, particularly in disadvantaged areas. I can see the real success stories of individual people. To meet with people and to see the sense of satisfaction and enjoyment that real people get from their participation in these programmes and from succeeding, is really, really rewarding and would spur me on to do everything possible to promote the sector.

Since my appointment as Minister, I have met with many adults participating in programmes. I have met with various groups, met with AONTAS and so forth and all of that stresses the importance to me of adult and further education and community education generally. But I think it is the real life success stories that inspire me to do all I can in this regard. Further education for adults must build upon initial learning and promote independent thought and the spirit of innovation in learning. Equality of access and participation, relevance and quality assurance are the cornerstones of education policy and would be very much part of my vision as well. This would sow the seeds for a lifelong learning society.

So it is a very exciting challenge to me, taking on this Ministry. To go back to what influenced my vision; it is dealing with the disadvantaged in particular and seeing the rewards people can secure from undertaking the various programmes and I would stress again that the focus for me would be on the economically disadvantaged and those who lack basic skills".

Q: The recent initiative under your ministry to widen access to BTEI has been welcomed by AONTAS as it will ensure parity of esteem for students by eliminating fees for adults with less than an upper second level education. In our pre-election campaign 'Demand Your Right to Learn' AONTAS also called for paid educational leave for workers with less than upper second level education as another means of increasing participation in education among this group. What is the Government's position on this suggested initiative?

"Obviously, I was delighted to announce the extension of the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) and that comes into effect on the first of September of this year.

Paid educational leave for workers is a complex area. It would either be the employers or the Exchequer who would end up paying and I suppose

"Ultimately this new role will see an improved, integrated approach between the education and training areas."

the employers would be reluctant to go down that road in any major way, as they would see it as threatening their ability to compete. You are dealing with 1 million adults in this context so it would be a substantial cost to the Exchequer as well.

The two top priorities in the education programme of the National Development Plan (NDP) would be the large number of Irish adults who have not completed upper second level education and their educational needs will be fully considered over the next number of years. That is the official policy of the NDP. There are very good examples of adult and further education in the workplace. The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is doing very good work in that regard. There is also a scheme for Local Authority outdoor staff, in relation to literacy and there are literacy programmes in the Health Service Executive (HSE) for employers of the HSE, run by the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee. There are initiatives in respect of the Community Employment Schemes also whereby people can take time off to improve their literacy.

There are difficulties with the demands of AONTAS and I wouldn't like to underestimate these difficulties but it is something that is always under active consideration".

Q: AONTAS is calling for an increase in funding for the Adult and Community Education sector, from 2% to 10% of the overall education budget by 2013. What efforts are you and your staff making to ensure that adult education receives the increase in funding supports it so rightfully deserves, both now and in the future?

"I think we have made a lot of progress in recent years in relation to funding, €169 million for Adult Education

"I am very anxious to get out of my Department as much as possible and to meet the real people benefiting from the various programmes and initiatives in place."

in 2007, which was a 12% increase over last year. The overall Adult and Further Education Budget has increased by 50% in the last 5 years so I think the commitment to Adult Education has been proven in regard to increased expenditure. I would also highlight increased expenditure on community education as well. In 2006 funding of €9.4 million was distributed to VECs to implement their community education programmes and this year that figure is €10 million. There has been increased funding for the Back to Education Initiative (Community Strand) as well, with over €2 million this year and €110,000 to consolidate women's participation in Community Education, that was negotiated recently also. In a nutshell, my priority in Adult Education is to continue the development and expansion of the Adult Education sector as resources permit. I am sure AONTAS will continue to lobby me in that regard and I will certainly do all I can to ensure the funding increases in the coming years".

When pressed further as to whether he felt achieving 10% of the Education Budget by 2013, was a viable target, the Minister had this to say:

"It is always difficult to put out specific figures, we have seen that in relation to figures for overseas development assistance and the targets

aren't reached. I wouldn't like to commit myself to it (the 10% target) but certainly I will do everything possible to try and reach it or come as close to it as we can, given the conditions which prevail over the coming years and resources and so forth. We will do the best we can, having regard to resources in any particular year".

Q: Finally, Minister, can AONTAS members rely on your continued support for and attendance at events held during our annual Adult Learners Festival?

"Absolutely! I took this position in December 2006 which was a very good time because your first Adult Learners' Festival was about to take place in January 2007, so it was a very good opportunity to meet many of the players in Adult Education and many of the participants in the various programmes around the country. The STAR Awards was a great ceremony and a lovely occasion.

I am very anxious to get out of my Department as much as possible and to meet the real people benefiting from the various programmes and initiatives in place. I have presented many certificates during my short term in office and I love doing it. You meet the families of the participants and it is a great celebration so I will attend as many events as I possibly can. I look forward to working closely with AONTAS and having ongoing meetings with AONTAS and I'm sure next year's Adult Learners' Festival will be equally as successful as the first one and will go from strength to strength".

The second annual Adult Learners' Festival will run from the 4th to the 8th of February 2008. For further information on nominations for the AONTAS STAR Awards see www.adultlearnersfestival.com or www.aontas.com



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