

ADULT EDUCATION

A CURRENT DIAGNOSIS AND MEASURES FOR RECOVERY

RESOURCES, RECRUITMENT, STRUCTURES

AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, has been making the case for investment in adult education and lifelong learning since its establishment in 1969. There is now an opportunity for the sector to play a meaningful role in our economic recovery. Latest unemployment figures (January 2010) stand at 12.7%. Retraining and upskilling opportunities are the most effective response in countering unemployment, by preparing people for new employment opportunities when they arise and assisting people to cope with the loss of confidence that often accompanies redundancy and unemployment.

THE DEMAND FOR ADULT EDUCATION

The following information shows the increase in demand for adult education:

- **The AONTAS Referral Service** - the number of queries has doubled from the number handled in 2007- to a total of 6,038 in 2009.
- **PLC Courses** - 37,000 applicants for 13,000 places in October 2009
- The number of **applications through the CAO** has increased – up by 10% on last year, and including an increase of mature student applications.
- **IOT (Institute of Technology) applications** - increased by 19.5% in 2009 from 2008.
- **University courses based in the UK** - a 50% increase in the number of Irish applicants – with UK authorities citing an increase in the number of mature student applications, rising by 63% of those over 25.
- **VTOS places** - 50% increase in demand, according to data from the National Association of VTOS Co-ordinators.
- **BTEA (the Back to Education Allowance)** applications – 18,700 applications approved in October 2009, up on total figures from the previous year of 11,646 applications.

How has the government responded to unemployment?

In April 2009, as unemployment figures stood at 11.2% the government introduced a new activation measure, which promised upskilling and retraining measures valued at €4 million, and which amounted to 6910 places on a variety of part time, and full time third level courses as well as short term initiatives.

Reaction to the initiative has been mixed, with PLC courses over subscribed, while there is a relatively slow take up for shorter initiatives. Reasons cited include the mismatch between skills shortage areas and the needs and expectations of participants, as well as a lack of co-ordination between Education and Social Welfare – often leading to confusion about the eligibility criteria of applicants.

Budget 2010 earmarked additional funds for retraining and reskilling in 2010 as unemployment increased to 12.5%:

- €56 million is being made available to FÁS for short term courses;
- €20 million allocated to an Activation Fund which will involve an open call for innovative proposals that have the capacity to provide work, education and training;

TOWARDS RECOVERY

Three key issues emerge which must be addressed if the adult education sector is to meet its potential and play a full part in assisting our economic recovery.

1. Resources – Funding for providers, and financial supports for learners

In 2009, adult education accounted for 4.37 % of the overall education budget. This amounts to 0.22% of GDP and 0.27% of GNP. Spending has increased only marginally since 2000 and does not take into account the current demand. This is putting providers under extreme pressure, while for learners, the demand for adult education means increased competition for places. Recent changes in Budget 2010 also have implications for the supports available to adult learners.

The reality for providers.....

- Providers are struggling to cope with the demand for courses. Long waiting lists for courses and guidance as well as larger class sizes are now routine as the demand increases.

The reality for learners.....

- As an adult, if you return to education part time, you will have to pay full fees, unlike your full time counterparts.
- From September 2010, if you qualify for the Back to Education Allowance, or a VTOS allowance for a PLC course you will no longer be eligible for the student maintenance grant, which could support your participation by an additional €6,690 each year.
- Budget 2010 disbanded the Millennium Partnership Fund, which provided some financial support for adult learners, particularly those from disadvantaged communities.
- If you are eligible for a student grant, then you can expect to receive a reduction of 5% in accordance with changes announced in Budget 2010.

2. Recruitment - The Public Sector Embargo

In March 2009, the Department of Finance introduced a recruitment embargo in the public sector which has a direct impact on staff employed within the adult education service. The embargo was accompanied by an Incentivised Scheme of Early Retirement, as well as a Special Civil Service Incentive Career Break. The embargo applies to all staff within the service apart from tutors who are classified as frontline and therefore exempt. The classification of frontline staff in the education sector as those who deliver classes does not take account of the nature of the adult education service where staff such as Adult Education Officers or Guidance personnel or Adult Literacy Organisers play a key role in the delivery of the service. AEOs do not only perform an administrative role – they are crucial in the development of the service, they manage and co-ordinate volunteers as well as paid staff, and are ultimately responsible for the recruitment, retention and support of learners.

The reality for providers...

- The loss in staff has a detrimental effect on service provision as there is less capacity at a time when it is most needed. In Co. Mayo, for example, both AEOs retired in 2009 meaning that there is now no AEO in place for the entire county.
- The inability to replace staff on maternity leave, or those on sick leave, is also placing undue strain on local services.
- There are real concerns amongst providers about the ability to deliver a quality service given the demand on the service and current capacity.

The reality for learners...

- Less staff employed in the service ultimately mean fewer learning options for people in the area.
- Waiting lists are common across the services, but also for ancillary supports such as Guidance which are crucial in assisting people to access appropriate education and training as quickly as possible.
- Access to the most up to date accurate information about adult learning is especially important as qualifying criteria change and new education and training measures are introduced.

3. Structures – Planning nationally, delivering locally

The adult and community education service has to date developed in a disparate and ad hoc way.. Many adult education programmes have developed separately and work independently of each other; thus affecting the visibility, coherence and effectiveness of the service.

Budget 2009 officially disbanded the NALC. Meanwhile, a national agreement between FÁS and the IVEA has still to be fully implemented at local level. If implemented, this agreement would allow for greater collaboration and referral between providers, prevent duplication, and ultimately bring about better results for learners and course participants.

The reality for providers...

- The work of the sector suffers from a lack of visibility and coherence
- Collaborative practices often develop in an ad hoc way, rather than being formally integrated into the culture and work practice of an organisation.

The reality for learners...

- Learners miss out by not having access to a more integrated service in their local area – which can result in misinformation about course criteria, and lack of clarity about progression routes.

THREE MEASURES FOR RECOVERY

It is estimated today that for every single year that the average level of education of the adult population is raised there is a corresponding increase of 3.7% in long term economic growth and a 6% increase in per capita increase. (*Belem Framework for Action 2010*).

Adult learning can play a significant role in economic recovery; however three key actions are needed.

1. Resources:

While economic constraints call for careful management of the public finances, the current level of funding to the sector must be maintained given the demand for the service. The Belem Framework for Action, adopted at Confintea VI in December 2009, recommends investment of at least 6% of GNP in education, and working towards increased investment in adult learning and education.

2. Recruitment:

Staff managing the adult education service must be considered frontline staff and should be exempt from the moratorium on recruitment. Examples include AEOs, CEFs, ALOs, Guidance Councillors, Information Officers, and BTEI and VTOS coordinators.

3. Structure:

In the absence of a national coordinating body a lightweight structured forum should be created with the aim of facilitating partnership, collaboration and the sharing of best practice, and informing policy development on an ongoing basis. The forum could comprise the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, IVEA, AONTAS and NALA at the outset with inputs from other stakeholders as appropriate. This will ensure that funding earmarked for activation measures will benefit participants, and stimulating our economic recovery.



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