

Submission from AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

Developing a New Skills Strategy 2015 - 2025

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About AONTAS

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation, a membership organisation which includes over 500 members nationwide. AONTAS believes that lifelong learning is the key, not just to economic success but also to personal, social and cultural development and as such has a range of outcomes and benefits for the learner. AONTAS promotes adult and lifelong learning, provides an information referral service for adults who wish to return to education, and advocates on behalf of adult learners. Our organisation receives funding from the Department of Education and Skills through SOLAS (the Further Education and Training Authority).

Over the past number of years AONTAS has engaged with a significant reform agenda within the further education and training sector, focusing particularly on the impact of the delivery of adult and community education. Throughout the reform process and development of legislation AONTAS has advocated strongly for adult learners to be at the heart of the newly reconfigured further education and training services. AONTAS has also made a strong case for the social dimension of education to be recognised and played a proactive role in the development of the new Further Education and Training Strategy which was published in May 2014. In October 2013, Berni Brady Director of AONTAS was appointed to the Board of SOLAS, the new Further Education and Training Authority.

The Further Education and Training Strategy identifies AONTAS as a lead organisation in the development of a National Adult Learners Forum, which will provide valuable feedback from adult learners as the strategy is implemented. The first meeting of the National Adult Learner Forum will take place on 26th February 2016. We regularly engage with adults seeking to return to education and training through our Information Referral Service, document the nature of their queries and analyse the emerging trends, particularly those which relate to the challenges and barriers experienced by adult learners.

AONTAS welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the discussion on the Development of the National Skills Strategy 2015-2025. To secure Ireland's competitiveness into the future, the National Skills Strategy must attend to the needs of both individuals in the workforce and those who are unemployed. A key priority must be to remove the barriers that adult learners face, particularly the under-represented groups, when accessing education and training options. The relatively low levels of participation in Further Education and Training in comparison with other European countries must be addressed seriously if a culture and practice of lifelong learning is to be realised.

Context

As an organisation we recognise the value of further education and training in the context of lifelong learning, this is outlined in our current Strategic Plan '[Learning a Lifetime's Work](#)'. In this submission we focus on the importance of looking at the adult learners' specific needs, the importance of supporting and encouraging lifelong learning in order to broaden the understanding of the wider benefits of learning that include the social, societal, individual and economic. We acknowledge the progress that has been made in relation to the Further Education and Training sector particularly given the difficult economic circumstances over the past number of years but we must ensure that the future Skills Strategy encourages and supports adult learners to access appropriate education and training options for them, that are suited to their skills level and talents.

A number of significant changes have been introduced since the last National Skills Strategy. A rapid increase in unemployment, which resulted from the downturn in the economy, prompted a range of new initiatives offering part time, flexible education opportunities for adults seeking to upskill and reskill in emerging employment areas. These include Springboard, MOMENTUM and JobBridge (the National Internship Scheme). We now have an Irish Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan which offers anyone under the age of 25 access to education, training or employment within four months of them becoming unemployed. In 2012 *'Pathways to work'* signalled wide ranging reform across the delivery of social protection services and supports. In 2015 The Department of Social Protection identified contractors for the new JobPath initiative¹. Individuals under the age of 61 who are long term unemployed are referred to JobPath, where the main focus is to progress them into employment. A stronger referral aspect also applies to JobPath, where a personal advisor agrees education and training with an individual.

In May 2014 SOLAS, the new Further Training and Education Authority launched the first ever Further Education and Training Strategy. This proposes five high level goals for FET over the next five years. There is now a range of education and training choices available to adults. AONTAS, through its engagement with adult learners, calls for a holistic, person-centred approach to referring people to courses, especially the long-term unemployed and low skilled. We have found that in order to ensure learners complete and progress in courses they must be supported to make informed choices that are appropriate to their learning needs firstly, and then to the needs of the job market. Furthermore, the process of engaging in adult and community education, including non-accredited options is a useful means of raising self-esteem and consequentially removing a significant barrier to engaging in accredited learning. Cedefop (2009) stated that, "It may be argued that rapid economic and societal changes actually increase the importance of adult learning for personal development, while reducing the importance of task specific and narrowly defined, instrumental knowledge and skills. The importance attributed to key competences like learning to learn, communication and teamwork illustrates this."²

The Barriers to Adult Learning

A number of practical barriers remain which prevent adults from accessing education. 'Education at a Glance', published by the OECD in September 2014³, published findings on the 'reasons given for not engaging in more/any learning activity by participation status in formal and/or non-formal education activities' across the OECD countries. In Ireland, the most popular reasons cited by both participants and non-participants in education were the cost of education and family commitments as barriers to education.

The National Skills Strategy must consider the most effective approach to education provision, not just in terms of the types of courses but how learners find, engage and succeed in courses. It has been well documented that the barriers to education include: provider-related (entry requirements, cost, location information (level of access to good and timely information)); situation of hard-to-reach learners (cultural value, family circumstance); and disposition of hard-to-reach learners (low self-

¹ <https://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/JobPath.aspx>

² Cedefop (2009) European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (p.46)

³ Available from <http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm>

confidence often linked to failure in previous educational experiences). There is no one-size fits all approach to engaging all learners, rather taking a number of approaches that support meaningful learner participation in lifelong learning has proven to be successful. This point was articulated by learners in the AONTAS Lobby for Learning Day – ‘*SOLAS: Serving Adult Learners*’⁴. Firstly, good guidance support and clear independent information should be provided through a variety of channels and outreach approaches. The learning environment should be a welcoming and supportive one that increases learner confidence and sets learners up for success. Importantly, provisions for childcare, part-time flexibility and transport supports should be included. Time and support should be provided for people who have not engaged in lifelong learning, or those who have negative school experiences: taster courses and non-accredited personal development courses play a valuable and often overlooked role in supporting people into accredited provision. Finally, to meaningfully engage hard to reach groups in learning, provision must be tailored to the learner as best possible and be mindful that multiple forms of disadvantage call for multiple approaches: including a range a services from across governmental departments e.g. housing, addiction as well as education.

Theme 1: Developing Relevant Skills

1. Relevant Skills

What do you consider to be the relevant skills for development in the period to 2025?

AONTAS believes that, as well as vocational skills, broad transversal skills are an important, and often overlooked area for development which must be considered. Rather than merely limiting the concept of ‘*relevant*’ skills to a narrow set of subject areas, there needs to be due consideration for skills for life, learning to learn, problem solving, communication skills, teamwork as well as active citizenship, personal development and community engagement. Following years of austerity, the impact of long term unemployment, particularly for individuals who left school early, requires a learning experience that increases their ability to engage in learning again.

Therefore we recommend:

- Non-accredited programmes for people who are returning to education after a long absence, to focus on ‘learning to learn’ skills and personal development.

Do we have the right mix of initiatives to deliver the future needs of enterprise, the economy and society?

Whilst AONTAS recognises that great strides have been made to develop responsive skills for the economy, within educational programmes there is a distinct lack of support for the needs of society. Strong cohesive communities are essential for a functioning society to ensure social inclusion and civic engagement. However, with the reduction in funding for community education and community development, and the bulk of funding being directed to labour activation measures, education for engagement has been lacking. Although education and training for society and for the economy are not mutually exclusive, strong cohesive and equal societies are essential for economic development.

⁴ http://www.aontas.com/download/pdf/solas_serving_adult_learners.pdf

Most importantly measures are required to ensure that this area of the education and training system is not excluded from national policy.

We would recommend:

- Non-accredited programmes in community education that promotes civic engagement and builds the capacity of communities to recover from the effects of recession.
- An increase in funding for flexible, modular accredited programmes in community education whereby a learner can build up to a full QQI award over time, taking cognisance-of the commitments of adult learners, e.g. family obligations and childcare needs
- Accessibility to local education and training opportunities is essential for adult learners, particularly those who experience poverty and social exclusion. We recommend an increase in the number of local, community based education programmes, both accredited and non-accredited.

How can employers and education and training providers work more effectively to identify and address skills needs and ensure the “work readiness” of learners?

Work readiness is a complex concept and is not merely the outcome of gaining a qualification. A variety of factors are important: a thorough understanding of the previous educational experiences of the learner, current levels of skills and abilities, suitability of the course for the learner; appropriate supports provided so that they can successfully complete the course; the courses content; the right qualification; the transversal skills gained; and the opportunity to engage in the real life work environment.

We would recommend:

- Choice: learners must have the opportunity to engage in courses that are appropriate for them and suited to their skills level and talents. The role of impartial adult education guidance is essential in this. Learners should not be directed into unsuitable programmes purely to meet economic need/pressure to participate in labour activation programmes. If learners are placed in the correct course it not only benefits the learner but is also cost saving in the long run due to increased retention.
- A broader understanding for the need of transversal skills, some of which can be obtained in non-accredited programmes, has a large part to play in work readiness.
- Work readiness also requires a whole person approach, whereby the persons’ needs: education, housing, childcare, addiction supports etc. are viewed in terms of assessing their work readiness. Work readiness goes beyond just skills attainment and as such, a multi-agency approach is required.
- The opportunity to attain experience in a work environment is also very important, therefore programmes should incorporate meaningful internships and opportunities for work experience. Such an approach requires the co-operation and collaboration of employers with service providers.

2. Measurement & targets

The current Skills Strategy focuses on targets related to NFQ levels to be achieved by 2020. There are a number of other relevant targets in related strategies such as the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy⁵ and EU targets on school leaving and participation⁶.

What indicators should be used to measure progress in the new Skills Strategy (e.g. NFQ levels, Employer surveys, other)?

From international studies, we know that those who are most likely to engage in lifelong learning are those who have already achieved qualifications at the higher end of the National Framework of Qualifications. While we welcome the current targeting of individuals at the lower levels of the NFQ, it is important to note that many learners without qualifications engaging in education seek to build up their qualifications at an appropriate pace and to an appropriate level for them. For example, in community education, many learners will initially start in a non-accredited course, go on to achieve a minor QQI award and then progress to a higher level on the NFQ, for example to achieve a level 5 qualification. Therefore, a set target to move from QQI level 1 or 2 to a major award at level 3 is an arbitrary target. Furthermore, employers generally require NFQ level 5 award or beyond so a flexible approach to accreditation attainment is important. Minor awards play a crucial role in supporting progression. However progression is not linear and meaningful progression through the NFQ, in a flexible manner that allows learners to build up minor awards which result in achieving a major award is vital.

We would recommend:

- The target should include minor, as well as major, QQI awards in terms of one step up on the NFQ.
- A target that includes the importance of qualifications gained from a range of providers: ETBs, training centres but also community education organisations. Diversity of accredited provision is needed to widen participation particularly for the educationally disadvantaged.
- Research to measure the broader outcomes of learning needs to be developed and linked to successful progression both to and within the workplace.

3. Life Long Learning

The lifelong learning rate in Ireland at 7.3%⁷ is well below the EU average of 10.5%⁸. The gap between Ireland's lifelong learning participation rate and the EU average has increased since 2009. Data also shows that lifelong learning participation tends to decline with age and the higher the education attainment level, the more likely adults are to participate in lifelong learning. As highlighted earlier in this document, there has been a relative decline in investment in training by Irish employers, compared to traditional lifelong learning leaders across the EU.

⁵ https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/lit_num_strategy_full.pdf

⁶ http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic_reports/163EN.pdf

⁷ http://solas.ie/docs/Adult_Lifelong_Learning_Q4_2014.pdf

⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Lifelong_learning_statistics

How can we motivate more people to participate in life-long learning?

AONTAS believes that motivation is related to a range of issues, personal, provider and policy related. Based on feedback and engagement with adult learners through our Information Referral service, our advocacy work and our promotional work, AONTAS recommends that the National Skills Strategy pays attention to the following points in order to increase motivation to participate in life-long learning:

1. **Information:** that learners are aware of the opportunities available. AONTAS welcomes the proposed national course database by SOLAS.
2. **Guidance:** Adults need to have the opportunity to explore the variety of courses available and to navigate the most appropriate choice according to their needs.
3. **Flexibility of provision:** local, part-time provision that enables adults to manage other life commitments (e.g. work and family) is essential.
4. **Teaching process:** the teaching and learning techniques must value the lived experience of learners and engage active participation thus supporting retention and completion of the course.
5. **Appropriate learning opportunities:** Adult learners must have the opportunities to engage in appropriate courses, including potential for online learning.
6. **Prerequisite requirements:** prior educational attainment to gain access to an education programme should be considered to include recognition of prior experiential learning
7. **Cost:** the cost must not prohibitive learners from accessing the appropriate option for them.
8. **Supports:** Learners must have access to adequate supports such as childcare, transport and financial support.
9. **Holistic supports:** Learners with a variety of needs, housing/addiction/health should be considered when supporting people into educational courses.
10. **Commitment from employers:** Employers must provide suitable learning opportunities, particularly to those in low paid jobs and those with qualifications at the lower end of the NFQ.

What are the attitudinal and structural barriers to learning that need to be overcome?

AONTAS believes that a number of factors are essential in order to overcome attitudinal and structural barriers.

AONTAS recommends the following:

- **Opportunities to engage without long-term commitment:** Adults must be given the opportunity to participate in taster courses in order to determine the most appropriate course for them. This is essential for engaging adults in learning. Funding must be in place to offer a range of short taster courses so there is a low/no cost to learners.
- **A welcoming educational environment:** we must take cognisance of the fact that that some learners will have had a negative past experience of education, particularly those who left school early. A way to address this is to ensure there is an open welcoming environment in all educational institutions leading to:
 - **Normalising adult learning:** there is a current perception that learning is only for the young, we must normalise the benefits of learning and achieving ones' potential at any age. Examples of how to do this include promotional campaigns, adult learner ambassadors and sharing learner stories.

- **Guidance:** as we mentioned previously providing guidance throughout the learning experience in order to support progression and direction.
- **Removing structural barriers:** structural barriers can prohibit adult learners from accessing suitable education and training options. These can include:
 - **Lack of local provision:** we must increase funding for community education in order to expand local provision on the ground.
 - **Lack of supports:** we must increase guidance services, provide childcare and transport costs in order to support adult learners and ensure that retention rates are high.

What actions can be taken by employers to support and encourage increased participation in lifelong learning?

Employers must make a commitment to support and encourage increased participation in lifelong learning. They can do this by providing opportunities for workplace learning and/or adequate supports to help people with learning opportunities. Good models include Skillnets, which supports and works with businesses in Ireland to address their current and future skills needs and the Skills for Work programme, which provides training opportunities to help employees deal with the basic skills demands of the workplace.

Examples of other supports include:

- Developing a culture of learning in the workplace through supporting workplace learning and CPD.
- Committing a portion of funding to staff development.
- Stronger collaboration with service providers in the provision of internships and/or work experience.
- Paid time off work to attend courses.
- Financial support to help cover the cost of the course, particularly to those in low paid jobs.
- Support for learners to engage in learning specifically at the lower end of the NFQ.

What actions can be taken by education & training providers to support and encourage increased participation in lifelong learning?

We would recommend that education and training providers explore a range of options to raise awareness of the value and benefits of lifelong learning. Close collaboration between the service providers and organisations such as AONTAS and NALA would assist them in this process. For example during the EAAL project⁹ which AONTAS has just been completed, all 16 ETBs were supported to organise promotional activities. They used a wide variety of strategies and methods which engaged almost 2000 learners. The service providers were encouraged to do so with the offer of €600 per ETB and the support of the EAAL project co-ordinator (AONTAS). Such models of practice could be developed and resourced. Similarly participation in the National Adult Learning Festival, coordinated by AONTAS, offers an opportunity to advertise and draw attention to the service at a local level. In 2015 over 350 events were held across the country.

Some examples of actions include:-

⁹ <http://www.aontas.com/international/citizenship.html>

- **Open Days:** where providers can demonstrate the quality and inclusiveness of their service and provide information to potential learners.
- **Outreach activities:** Bringing the notion of lifelong learning to local groups in their own environment. This would help to engage with the local community.
- **Using learners as role models:** this has proven to be one of the most effective ways of engaging adult learners.
- **Use of social media and visual media to promote their services**
- **Taster courses:** these could be offered at different times of the year and at times when learners can participate (needs analysis could help direct this).
- **Flexible, modular provision:** this allows learners to build up minor QQI awards to achieve a major QQI award or to move to a higher level of the NFQ.
- **Literacy support:** This must be integrated into all courses. A system of effective referral must also be in place.
- **Support continuous professional development of staff:** this ensures good adult education practice.
- **Learner engagement:** Mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that learners have the opportunity to voice their opinion and influence provision and teaching processes in an open inclusive environment, informally and through the learner. Examples of learner engagement are outlined in the *AONTAS report: Engaging the Learner Voice*.¹⁰

What actions can be taken by the State to support and encourage increased participation in lifelong learning?

AONTAS recommends a number of actions that can be taken by the State to increase the participation of lifelong learning.

These include:

1. Increased funding for adult and community education programmes.
2. Ring-fenced, sustainable funding for community education provision so that it can provide responsive, local provision for hard-to-reach learners.
3. Recognition and support for all modes of lifelong learning, including:
 - Community education (both accredited and non-accredited).
 - Modularized accredited provision.
 - Non accredited courses.
 - A diversity of courses which are appropriate to the local learner context.
 - Increase in non-formal and informal learning opportunities.
 - Strengthen links between all education providers: *community education, FET, higher education, libraries and cultural centres*.
 - Broaden the variety of stakeholders involved in policy development to include:
 - *Community/voluntary organisations*
 - *Libraries*
 - *Cultural (museums)*
 - *Adult Learners*
 - *Governmental stakeholders involved in social protection, health, housing and addiction supports*

¹⁰ http://www.aontas.com/download/pdf/learner_engagment_seminar_report_final.pdf

- *Academics*
- Increased support and funding for the adult education guidance service, including the introduction of a Freephone help line.
- Increased awareness raising and promotion of the value of adult learning, using adult learners as ambassadors.
- Increase information provision through a variety of communication channels to the public .

How can we give recognition to prior learning including skills acquired in work, home or community settings?

- **Community Setting**

The recognition of prior learning (RPL), including experiential learning, is an important step and remains a key policy priority in Europe. However, this can only be made possible through the engagement of QQI with all education providers. There appears to be a disconnect between national policy and the QQI: national policy focuses on increasing qualification levels, particularly of the unemployed and low skilled and the QQI does not. The proposed introduction of fees by QQI for re-engagement, validation of programmes etc. is contrary to widening the potential of learners to gain accreditation. For example, in the context of community education the imposition of QQI fees will force community education providers out of accredited provision thereby impacting on the potential of the most disadvantaged learners to gain a nationally recognised qualification. Whilst RPL is a complex and labour intensive process, the current system of enabling non-formal education organisations, i.e. those in the voluntary sector to offer programmes offers a recognised process for accreditation attainment with a history of success (FETAC).

In addition AONTAS questions who will provide the process for the recognition of prior learning. The Education and Training Boards (ETBs) play a central and important part of FET provision and could potentially be in a position to offer a RPL service. However, this would need significant investment and training of staff in order to meet the demand.

- **Outside the NFQ**

Alternatively, skills attained in work, home and the community do not necessarily have to lead to a qualification i.e. minor or major QQI award. Non-accredited programmes could use a process for measuring the wider benefits of learning which would capture the personal, community and employability outcomes of learning. The ETBI has made strides in researching and developing a template for piloting and this process would make the skills attained from non-accredited programmes more visible. Further research and support to identify appropriate models of recognising prior learning could be explored.

What barriers need to be addressed to encourage disabled people to engage with education and training?

For advice on encouraging disabled people to engage with education and training contact AHEAD: the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability. They work to promote full access to and participation in further and higher education for students with disabilities and to enhance their employment prospects on graduation. www.ahead.ie.

4. Real World Experiences for Learners

Initiatives like Momentum and Springboard demonstrate that skills development is more effective if the world of learning and the world of work are linked. Hands-on workplace training and experience can help smooth the transition from education into the labour market and also give people an opportunity to learn ‘hard’ skills like working with cutting edge equipment and ‘soft’ skills of communication, team work, good decision making and negotiation.

How can the range of work place experiences be expanded, particularly in SMEs, to increase opportunities for learners to gain practical experience as part of their education and training programme?

- Incentives for SMEs to provide work placements.
- Better links between FET providers and employers, including SMEs.
- More work placement opportunities integrated into FET programmes.

5. Skills Infrastructure

AONTAS agrees that there will be an increasing demand for more flexible learning opportunities in the foreseeable future. It is essential that adult learners will have access to a varied range of upskilling and reskilling opportunities whether they are in employment or unemployed. There are a wide range of providers that can offer education and training opportunities such as work place learning, e-learning, short courses, part-time and distance courses.

Is the structure and architecture for the education and training system fit for purpose?

In May 2014 SOLAS, the new Further Training and Education Authority launched the first ever Further Education and Training Strategy¹¹. The strategy is the culmination of an extensive period of consultation with stakeholders across the further education and training sector, and proposes five high level goals for FET over the next five years. ETBs need time to adjust to the differing demands and ethos of vocational training, funding and accounting systems as they evolve. The Public Service Recruitment Embargo had a serious effect on the levels of staffing in the adult education sector and while the moratorium has eased somewhat staffing remains an issue.

Of considerable concern to AONTAS is the understanding of the key role of a non-governmental agency which is funded by government and the added value it can contribute to the strategy through its grassroots involvement and years of expertise in advocacy and promotion. SOLAS is currently putting in place data collection systems which should lead to better evidence collection and a stronger base for policy development but these are at a pilot stage. Also SOLAS has committed to evaluating a range of programmes and this is a work in progress. Monitoring the progress of the strategy over the

¹¹ <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Further-Education-and-Training-Strategy-2014-2019.pdf>

next four years will be crucial to answering the question about whether the structure and architecture is fit for purpose and it is important that all voices are heard in this regard: learners, practitioners, service providers and employers.

- **Community Education**

AONTAS believes that community education provision offers a flexible education and training structure that caters to local needs. It is by its nature responsive to the community and it offers part-time learning options that allow learners to build minor QQI awards. However the current infrastructure for community education organisations to provide accredited programmes is not fit for purpose. The proposed QQI reengagement fee, of approximately 5000 euro will reduce the number of centres offering accredited programmes. This will create a barrier and prevent these centres from providing accredited provision in a flexible, response and part-time manner. An outline of this issue is detailed in an AONTAS paper¹². Furthermore, community education is underfunded and a whole organisation approach to funding is required in order to offer and plan future community education programmes. A proposed model for funding community education was developed by the AONTAS Community Education Network.¹³

Furthermore there are new developments in online community education provision that should be explored and supported with a view to expansion and development of more flexible learning options. For example An Cosán Virtual College offers online education within local community education centres. This combines both the ability to offer lectures in hard to reach areas, whilst in a supportive environment that allows interaction with a facilitator and peers to enable engagement and retention of learners.

Higher education:

- **Access**

The entry requirements of higher education programmes must take into consideration the life/work experience of adults. Furthermore, the transition from FET to HET should be transparent and easy to navigate. Entry requirements should be open to alternative methods for admissions based on a variety of criteria including work, life and prior education experience.

- **Part-time provision**

AONTAS calls for fees for part-time higher education provision to be funded in order to engage adult learners, particularly those experiencing poverty and social exclusion. Part-time provision allows increased participation by adults as it facilitates family/work commitments.

¹²

http://www.aontas.com/download/pdf/the_qqi_reengagement_fee_the_case_for_a_waiver_for_independently_managed_community_education_providers.pdf

¹³ http://www.aontas.com/download/pdf/final_cen_position_paper.pdf

- **Outreach provision**

Higher education provision in a community setting is an excellent, proven method for engaging hard to reach groups in higher education, in offering higher education in a welcoming environment, and overcoming transport and occasionally childcare challenges. Resourcing different modes of this education provision is necessary to increase higher education participation by underrepresented groups.

How can we encourage the provision of a range of programme offerings by education and training providers that are relevant to learners and enterprise needs?

- Integrate learner engagement/feedback into all FET programmes.
- Better dialogue between employers and FET providers e.g. Regional Skills Fora.

What can institutions do to ensure their policies and practices are inclusive and open to people with disabilities and other underrepresented groups?

- Get learner feedback from underrepresented groups and learners with disabilities.
- Develop learner charters and monitor them on a regular basis.
- Seek advice from organisations such as AHEAD – The Association can advise on inclusive policies and practices.
- Dedicated access officer/staff member that can support underrepresented groups.

How can education and training providers and employers work together more effectively to respond to the results of the Employer Survey to achieve greater satisfaction amongst employers in future with the skills of graduates?

- Continue an open dialogue at Regional Skills Fora.

Theme 2: Activating Skills Supply

The consultation document states that many individuals, particularly underrepresented groups, are out of the work force by choice due to personal reasons or because there are no financial incentives to work. AONTAS would argue that a lack of adequate supports is what prevents people from entering the labour market e.g. childcare supports for lone parents. In order to integrate underrepresented groups into the labour force adequate supports must be provided. We must also be aware that when engaging with underrepresented groups there is not a *'universal approach'*. In order to engage individuals in education and training we must remove the barriers that exist for these individuals.

Activating Skills Supply

As mentioned previously in this report the government have introduced a number of significant changes since the last National Skills Strategy in response to a rapid increase in unemployment. This has prompted a range of new initiatives offering part time, flexible education opportunities for adults

seeking to upskill and reskill in emerging employment areas including Springboard, MOMENTUM and JobBridge (the National Internship Scheme). The Irish Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan is also in place. 'Pathways to work' and the JobPath initiative¹⁴. Individuals under the age of 61 who are long term unemployed will be referred to JobPath, where the main focus is to progress them into employment. A stronger referral aspect also applies to JobPath, where a personal advisor will agree education and training with an individual. SOLAS have also launched the first ever Further Education and Training Strategy which proposes five high level goals for FET over the next five years.

While there are now a range of education and training options available to adults but we must constantly monitor how those measures are in tune with skills demand and supply. We must also monitor the level of supports and the mechanisms for activating unemployed people to ensure that there is a balance between the choices available to the learner and the needs of the Labour Market.

What changes can be made to the approach to training and skills development to improve the employment prospects of people who are unemployed?

AONTAS understands that a labour market approach is necessary when developing training and skills for the unemployed; however in order to improve individuals' engagement with these programmes, especially from underrepresented groups, a broader approach must be taken. As previously mentioned in this submission, AONTAS believes that broad transversal skills are crucial. Limiting the concept of 'relevant' skills to narrow set of subject areas prevents certain groups (early school leavers and those on the lower levels of the NFAQ) from engaging with the programmes. Individuals who left school early, require the opportunity to increase their ability to engage in learning again in a flexible manner and at their own pace.

How can the education and training system better engage with unemployed people with low levels of educational attainment?

Individuals with low levels of educational attainment need to be supported in order to engage with education and training. There must be an awareness that some learners will have had a negative past experience of education, particularly those who left school early.

Some suggestions to engage with these groups include:

- **Outreach provision:** providing education and training courses within the community setting in order to better engage with people.
- **Guidance:** Adults must have the opportunity to explore the variety of courses available and to navigate the most appropriate choice according to their specific needs. We must ensure that good quality guidance is happening within the referral services e.g. Intreo.
- **Literacy support:** Again this must be integrated into all courses. A system of effective referral must also be in place.
- **Induction to programmes:** Inductions should take place with each programme so learners get a taster, before they fully sign up to a course.

¹⁴ <https://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/JobPath.aspx>

- **Flexible, modular provision:** which allows learners to build up minor QQI awards to achieve a major QQI award or to move to a higher level of the NFQ.

How can we encourage people with disabilities and other under - represented groups to return to education or to retrain for employment?

For advice on encouraging disabled people to engage with education and training contact AHEAD: the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability. They work to promote full access to and participation in further and higher education for students with disabilities and to enhance their employment prospects on graduation. www.ahead.ie.

What measures can be taken to improve the progression of young people from education and training as well as those not in education or training including early school leavers to employment?

Similarly to people with low levels of education, young people must be supported in order to engage with education and training and progress to employment. Again they may have had a negative past experience of education, particularly those who left school early and may have experienced long term unemployment most of their adult life. This can dramatically affect young peoples' confidence, self-esteem and may prevent them from progressing into employment. Young people must also be given a choice when it comes to education and training programmes, this will allow them to take ownership of their learning and help them progress into employment. Revisiting models of best practice in the Youthreach Programme for example could also be a good starting point.

Some other suggestions would include;

- Tailored supports e.g. personal development.
- Programmes with relevant work experience.
- Good quality guidance.
- Integrated literacy support.
- Induction to programmes.

How can we encourage older people to reskill and retrain and continue to participate in the labour market? What skills will they require?

Feedback to the AONTAS information referral service tells us that older people feel that there are limited options open to them. Many of the labour market activation measures are aimed at the younger generation. Tailored programmes and supports to cater to the needs of older people would greatly encourage them to continue to participate in the labour market.

We recommend:

- Ensure that there is adequate funding available for educational opportunities for older people, both accredited and non-accredited.
- Widen the scope of activation measures.
- Provide tailored supports for older people.
- Assist people to develop skills portfolios and develop RPL systems to fast track older people into new skills areas.

How best can this reskilling and retaining be facilitated?

Community education provision offers a flexible education and training structure that caters to local needs. It is responsive to the community and is proven to be successful for hard to reach learners. Community education is a popular option for older peoples, from the AONTAS research *More than Just A Course* (2010)¹⁵, it emerged that 27% of learners are over the age of 65.

Theme 3: Effective Use of Skills

What changes could be made to ensure that future skills needs of the economy can be anticipated and communicated most effectively to education and training providers, employers, students and those already in employment?

- Regular consultation and communication between with all stakeholder groups especially between employers and education and training providers.
- Continued engagement through Regional Skills Fora.

How can all stakeholders work more effectively to increase awareness of skills requirements and career opportunities among both school leavers and those already in the labour market?

- Better links between employers and education providers to identify specific skills needs e.g. Network of Regional Skills Fora.
- Better guidance services for school leavers and those that are unemployed.
- Employers should provide adequate support to encourage those people already in the labour market to upskill.
- Development and implementation of SOLAS communication strategy and branding.

How can the new Network of Regional Skills Fora best contribute to the development of the skills base in each region?

The Fora should continue to build links between education and training programmes, employers and other regional stakeholders, in order to build skills in regions across the country. AONTAS would recommend that there is a good representation of community employers on these networks.

The Fora should;

- Inform the delivery of programmes by the FET sector.
- Inform employers about the range of services and supports available to them to upskill their workforce.

¹⁵ http://www.aontas.com/download/pdf/community_education_more_than_just_a_course.pdf

- Ensure that future training provision takes into account the skills needs in each regional area.

How can we promote a more effective use of skills at work? In particular how can managers be supported to identify effective work and organisational practices that make the best use of skills available to them?

- Training and Information resources for management to enable them to identify skills gaps and promotional possibilities among staff.
- Highlight models of best practice in the work place.
- Promote the benefits of training programmes such as e.g. Skills for Work programme.

How can this best be promoted amongst SMEs?

In order to promote effective use of skills at work to employers it would be useful to link in with organisations such as Enterprise Ireland, IBEC etc.

- Develop a campaign that would highlight the benefits of these effective use of skills at work.
- Provide employers with guidelines on best practice.

How can SMEs be better supported and encouraged to engage with training?

- Provide specific programmes for employers e.g. Skills for Work.
- Financial support incentives to take part in training.

Conclusion

AONTAS welcomes the opportunity to feed into the Development of the National Skills Strategy. As an organisation we are committed to ensuring that the experience of adult learners is heard in the development of a Skills Strategy. The Skills Strategy must take into account supports for adult learners, especially those from disadvantaged groups, early school leavers and those with low levels education. They must have access to a wide variety of flexible education and training options whilst receiving the necessary supports to help them progress on their chosen path. AONTAS believes that broad transversal skills are an important area for development. We must not limit the concept of ‘relevant’ skills to narrow set of subject areas and we must also focus on other vital skills including: skills for life, learning to learn, active citizenship, personal development and community engagement.

Adult learners are not a homogenous group and a ‘universal design approach’ may not therefore be practical at national and local level. Changes in employment status (including unemployment), access to financial resources, transport, family and caring responsibilities are just some of the diverse challenges which learners can expect to encounter depending on how their lives develop. We need to create a system which is highly flexible and which can respond to the diverse needs of adults as they emerge in order to support them to engage with education, training and access employment.