

'Community education, long term unemployment and the labour market'

Action Plan for Jobs 2014

Submission to the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, and Forfás



On behalf of AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

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Introduction

AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation welcomes progress and development in the area of labour market education and training, namely the rolling out of the Pathways to Work Programme and introduction of Intreo centres, as well as the allocation of additional places under the ICT Skills Conversion Programme, Springboard and the new Momentum initiative. Progress is well underway to establish SOLAS the new Training and Education Authority following the enactment of legislation in July 2013 and 16 ETBs were formally established on July 1st. Relationships with employers have been strengthened both within Springboard and the ICT conversion courses initiative, resulting in better employment outcomes for learners.

Despite these welcome interventions the incidence of long term unemployment remains a significant challenge for policy makers. Long term unemployment currently represents approximately 60% of total employment¹ although it has gradually decreased over the past few months. The OECD has observed that while Intreo services are a positive development, they face a capacity challenge in dealing with people who are long term unemployed. It is widely recognised that people who are distant from the labour market and education are highly vulnerable in the current climate and in need of a more targeted response to bring them closer to employment opportunities. AONTAS proposes in this submission that the community education sector is a highly effective intervention in terms of engaging those most distant from the labour market in education and training, thus enhancing their employment prospects. This submission makes some proposals which could address the issue of long term unemployment through community education. Some examples of best practice are included from different community education providers.

This submission focuses on the theme within the consultation process of *‘Supporting job seekers to access employment through skills development, labour market initiatives or other supports.’* It is also relevant to actions in the plans which *‘support employment at local and community level’*. Community education organisations provide a range of services for the local community; these include training and education programmes, work experience and

¹ <http://www.finance.gov.ie/documents/publications/mcb2013/August2013.pdf>

volunteering opportunities, paid employment, as well as valuable community services such as childcare, eldercare and ICT facilities.

A report which provides further information on the role of independently managed community education² in meeting the needs of the labour market accompanies this submission.

About AONTAS

This submission has been developed by AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, a membership organisation funded by the Department of Education and Skills which advocates for the right of every adult to quality learning throughout their lives.³

AONTAS currently represents over 500 member organisations which include providers in the statutory sector, providers in the community and voluntary sector, researchers, academics and individual adult learners. AONTAS provides information to adults returning to education and promotes and advocates the benefits of adult and lifelong learning. AONTAS also supports a Community Education Network – a platform of 140 organisations delivering community education in a range of settings around the country, both urban and rural.

AONTAS has been actively engaged in the reform agenda within the further education and training sector. Most recently AONTAS made a strong case for the inclusion of community education providers within the Further Education and Training (SOLAS) Bill. As a result, the new legislation commits to consulting with community education providers in the development of the new Further Education and Training Strategy as soon as SOLAS is established.

About Community Education

Community education in Ireland is delivered in both the statutory and non-statutory sector. Community education in the statutory sector is co-ordinated through Community Education Facilitators based in local ETBs. Community education in the non formal sector is delivered through a number of independently managed not for profit providers who receive financial support from a number of government departments, as well as the ETBs through the BTEI initiative. This submission focuses on delivery within the non formal sector which provides programmes for approximately 30,000 people.

Community education has been especially successful in targeting those most hard to reach to engage in education. The range of supports available to learners in this setting is particularly effective and has the capacity to support people to progress through the Qualifications Framework, onto further education, training and employment.

² Community Education, A Strategy for Success (March 2013)

Available from <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/community-education-a-strategy-for-success-lobby-for-learning-report-2013/>

³ See www.aontas.com for further information about AONTAS, including annual reports, strategic plans and research publications.

Over the past number of months, AONTAS has advocated for the value of community education not only in terms of its social outcomes, but also as a valid form of labour market activation which works for people who are distant from the labour market, and who experience educational disadvantage and poverty. As part of making this case, AONTAS facilitated an event in March 2013 where adults who had participated in community education described the successful elements of that experience to policy makers in the FET sector and Minister for Training and Skills Ciaran Cannon. Also at the event community education providers outlined the challenges they face in terms of balancing a range of funding streams and accessing new funding streams, where they struggle to compete with private providers for diminishing resources.⁴

A combination of personal supports for learners, a highly developed outreach strategy, the provision of both accredited and unaccredited learning opportunities and responsiveness to emerging employment opportunities within the local area were some of the factors identified by both learners and providers in terms of describing how community education helps people secure employment or brings them closer to the labour market. Community education also offers value for money.

Rationale and Labour Market Context

This submission is made in the context of a number of important developments in the Further Education and Training sector, and the recognition of the role of further education and training and adult learning initiatives, in supporting people who are unemployed to upskill and retrain for employment purposes.

*A well educated workforce remains one of Ireland's strengths. It is clear, however, that the main challenge in delivering on the NSS is upskilling those within the labour force (employed and unemployed) with low levels of qualifications.*⁵

The establishment of SOLAS (the Further Education and Training Authority) and the 16 Education and Training Boards present timely opportunities to reshape the services to ensure the development of quality further education and training services for all adults. Within these developments cross departmental connections and communications involving DES, DSP and DJEI are crucial in terms of optimising outcomes from scarce resources and strengthening the role and identity of the FET sector in addressing unemployment.

⁴ Philip Boucher Hayes from RTEs Drivetime programme attended and reported from the event. Available to listen from <http://www.rte.ie/radio/radioplayer/rteradioweb.html#!rii=9%3A10115269%3A83%3A01%2D03%2D2013%3A> (Last segment – 2 hrs and 11 mins into the programme)

⁵ (Action Plan for Jobs, 2013 P. 75 <http://www.djei.ie/publications/2013APJ.pdf>)

In the short term the FET services will have to address the challenge of unemployment and in particular long term unemployment. A number of agencies and review exercises have focused on the outcomes of programmes within the current model of delivering further education and training, in particular their labour market outcomes. These include a recent review commissioned by DES and carried out by the NESC on the value of FET for people who are long term unemployed. In September 2013 the OECD Economic Review⁶ provided feedback on a range of labour market initiatives. AONTAS is also actively engaging with the ESRI and SOLAS in the development of the Further Education and Training Strategy which will inform and shape the delivery of FET services over the next five years. As part of that process the ESRI is conducting a mapping exercise of provision in the independent community education sector on behalf of SOLAS.

A consistent recommendation emerging is the level and range of supports required by people who are long term unemployed to bring them closer to the labour market. While initiatives such as Jobsbridge have demonstrated strong outcomes for people who are already qualified, they are less successful in supporting people who are long term unemployed.

Community Education in action – some examples of best practice

AONTAS regularly documents examples of best practice from the community education sector. For example An Cosán,⁷ a community education centre in Jobstown, Tallaght provides valuable community services, education, training and employment opportunities in an area of Dublin experiencing extreme educational disadvantage. The average level of unemployment in Tallaght West is 40% (in comparison with the national average of 19%). 38% of the population in Tallaght West are lone parents. Intergenerational educational disadvantage is a fact of life for people in Tallaght West. According to an Cosán, *‘in a country which is populated by an increasingly skilled and educated workforce, the figures indicate that the people in communities such as Tallaght West will struggle to compete for jobs against the wider population due to this gap.’* A survey carried out with learners at an Cosán in 2012 revealed three reasons why people choose to learn there:

- To increase their confidence
- To get a job
- To get a qualification.

An Cosán has developed a range of highly successful education interventions to respond to these needs. Their approach to developing and delivering education is underpinned by the following ethos and experience:

⁶ <http://www.oecd.org/economy/ireland-2013.htm>

⁷ <http://www.ancosan.com/>

'An informal outreach programme, with lots of taster sessions, coffee mornings is important if those most hard to reach are to be persuaded and encouraged to return to education. Our experience indicates that learners returning to 2nd chance education generally opt for a non accredited programme initially. However, a positive learning experience, and increase in self confidence and an opportunity to build core skills eg. communication, team working, literacy and leadership results in learners setting new goals including progression to accredited options and employment.'

An Cosán has high learner retention rates, with the initial provision of non accredited learning opportunities yielding even greater outcomes for participants who pursue both further education and higher education at the centre.

Overall out of the 1,500 learners that have engaged in Early Childhood Education Programmes over the past ten years at an Cosán, data indicates that at least 1,200 are now in employment. An Cosán's third level retention rates are higher than the national average. Of the first cycle of 17 students on the BA Degree in Leadership and Community Development, 16 graduated with a Degree and one student graduated with a Higher Cert. That represents a 100% retention rate.

Dublin 8 Community Education Centre⁸ based in the inner city commits to delivering education and training based on the needs of the local community, in a warm and caring environment. In response to the high incidence of unemployed, former construction workers, D8 CEC worked in collaboration with the local South West Inner City Local Employment Centre to develop a re-training course for people formerly employed in the construction sector. This included modules in ICT training; Office Skills; Facilities Management; Health & Safety; Security; Renewable energy; Preparation for Work, learning support and, where necessary, literacy help. D8 CEC has adapted its education and training to respond to employment opportunities in the area, e. g. with Diageo, and has supported learners with relevant education and training but also job preparation in order to progress to employment.

The 'New Futures' programme developed by One Family offers personal development and career planning opportunities for lone parents who are already distant from the labour market. Their 'Options' programme allows for participants to experience 'taster sessions' in a variety of subject programmes thus allowing participants to explore different career options. Both programmes offer progression routes to further education and training. The programme also includes action planning, SMART goal setting, managing parenting when returning to work, stress management, CV and interview skills, work and college shadowing.

⁸ <http://www.d8cec.com/>

Similar programmes have been developed and piloted throughout the country, to address the confidence and 'soft skills' needs of various targeted groups. However, they have been delivered in an 'ad hoc' way.

Proposed activities within the Action Plan for Jobs

Based on the knowledge and experience of independently managed community education providers, possible actions are proposed below which could fulfil and enhance the objectives of the Action Plan for Jobs.

We firstly propose recommendations for greater flexibility in the administration of existing Labour Market Education and Training Fund (LMETF) which currently supports the Momentum initiative. We then propose a separate initiative which would engage the community education sector in preparing people for further education, training and employment.

1. Recommendations for administering existing funding under the LMETF

In December 2012 the government launched the Momentum Initiative, which supported education and training programmes from 36 providers around the country. Momentum focuses on people who are unemployed for one year or more and offers skills opportunities between Levels 3 and 6. Funding was predominantly allocated to providers in the statutory and private sectors. While in theory Momentum is open to all providers, a number of administrative requirements meant that community education providers could not submit applications to the fund. While the fund itself is welcome, in its current format Momentum does not support and resource communities themselves to address their own learning needs.

Feedback from the Community Education Network on the application process for Momentum indicates that:

- Community education providers are not in receipt of core funding, therefore lacked the capacity and resources to comply with validation requirements under the new QQI qualifications regime.
- The 'payment by outcomes' model is not suitable for community education providers, which requires an organisation to have substantial cash reserves in place in order to deliver on outcomes.
- Cost per student allocated within the fund may vary depending on the needs of each individual student. Prior educational experience and literacy skills influence the level of support required by a student thus possibly requiring additional investment on behalf of the education provider. These supports need to be in place in order to deliver a quality service to learners.

It is vital that initiatives under a Labour Market Education and Training Fund enhance and complement existing community infrastructure, rather than duplicating existing initiatives. A more flexible administrative funding model would allow for greater participation from the community education sector. In addition, the following recommendations should be considered when resourcing education and training initiatives for people who are long term unemployed.

- Funding arrangements should support activities beyond tutor hours, such as outreach, progression supports including mentoring and guidance, and practical supports such as childcare.
- The creation of a positive learning environment is crucial to generating better outcomes. Participants who are encouraged and motivated to learn are more likely to persist with their learning rather than those who are forced onto courses.

In terms of the timeframe for this activity, evaluation of the current Momentum programme is already underway and provides a timely opportunity to review the existing initiative with a view to enhancing labour market outcomes for learners in further rounds of the fund.

Engaging the community education sector would require an initial investment to ensure the sector has the capacity to deliver on the objectives of the scheme. Community education organisations could be supported to apply on a regional basis in line with the new ETB areas.

2. Resource a national programme with the community education sector which would engage people most distant from employment, and prepare them for further education, training and employment.

Examples provided earlier in this submission demonstrate the potential of community education in terms of supporting people who are long term unemployed. In September 2013 the OECD recommended that *'Progression pathways between different educational levels need to be established and people who are long term unemployed may require some pre-training schemes before entering other education programmes.'*⁹

Given the expertise and experience of the sector in terms of what interventions work for people who are unemployed, there is scope to build on best practice and to resource a community based programme at national level through the community education sector.

The programme could be modelled on the basis of examples provided and adapted at community level to cater to the needs of a number of different target groups experiencing or at risk of long term unemployment e.g. lone parents, members of the Travelling community, and people with disabilities. The programme could include a range of learning ('taster')

⁹ <http://www.oecd.org/economy/ireland-2013.htm> (P. 35)

opportunities, study skills, mentoring, guidance and communication skills. Outcomes would be measured in terms of retention, participation and progression and referral onto further education and training. Benchmarks for success could include participation and progression routes to further education and training, work experience opportunities such as Tús, Community Employment, JobsBridge etc.

Timeline for delivery and impact

When it comes to supporting the needs of people who are long term unemployed, there are no quick fixes. Low levels of education attainment, lack of motivation, negative experiences within the formal education system and a lack of confidence and self belief mean that the learner requires a range of supports. An Cosán believes that in realistic terms, a two year timeframe is what is needed in order for someone to make significant progress and gain proximity towards the labour market. This proposed programme would provide the initial foundation for someone to progress onto further education or training and eventually employment.

Short term outcomes would include greater levels of confidence and self-esteem, better communication skills, engagement and completion of the programme. Medium term impact or outcomes could include accreditation, career or employment objectives, and measurable skills for employment. In the long term the main outcome would be decreasing the level of intergenerational disadvantage and reducing the risk of unemployment for future generations. In September the OECD warned that *'In particular, persistent long term unemployment may translate into structural unemployment and contribute to a lost generation of young talent.'*¹⁰ (Recent research by the ESRI¹¹ indicates that 22% of Irish population live in jobless households, this is double the average across Europe. The risk of living in a jobless household is higher for people with lower levels of educational attainment. The positive outcomes yielded by investment in parental education (particularly mothers) is already well documented, where educational attainment even in areas of high deprivation increases where a parent is encouraged to learn, become a positive role model for their children and is equipped with the skills to support their children through the education system. In the long term, targeted investment towards the incidence of long term unemployment in communities experiencing disadvantage could potentially yield huge savings for the state.

Resources needed

Resources required to run this initiative could be based on existing community education provision, on models such as FÁS Local Training Initiatives or BTEI. Resources would need to include more than tutor hours and take account of the following needs:

¹⁰ <http://www.oecd.org/economy/ireland-2013.htm>

¹¹ http://www.esri.ie/news_events/latest_press_releases/work-and-poverty-in-irela/

- Community outreach, to ensure that those most distant from the labour market are engaged in education and training
- Progression supports, such as mentoring, adult guidance
- Practical supports, such as childcare, transport where necessary.

Who should be responsible for implementing this action?

Responsibility for this action rests with a number of government departments. These include Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Social Protection, and the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. While the actions are proposed here in the context of the Action Plan for Jobs, they are also relevant to developments such as the Further Education and Training Strategy to be developed by SOLAS.

Addressing the issue of long term unemployment is a complex challenge which requires a co-ordinated approach from the Department of Enterprise, Jobs and Innovation, the Department of Education and Skills, and the Department of Social Protection. AONTAS is willing to engage with the Department at any stage with a view to providing further feedback and discussion with community education providers.

Conclusion

AONTAS welcomes this opportunity to outline the potential of the community education sector in meeting the challenge of unemployment, in particular how they can support people who are long term unemployed to build up their confidence and progress onto further education and training, and eventually employment. A set of recommendations are proposed relevant to the delivery of existing initiatives, as well as a new initiative which could enhance access to existing programmes.

The OECD Economic Review in September 2013 points out how the community sector has been underutilised in job creation. *‘Irish social enterprises, which encompass non profit institutions and for profits whose driving purpose is social, employ a large number of marginalised or disadvantaged people, but the sector is underutilised in comparison to other OECD countries, and has the potential for expansion. To realise its potential, the sector should have the same kinds of support as conventional enterprises, including access to finance, knowledge sharing and business support services.’*¹² While resources are scarce, and during a transitional time for services in the area of FET and social protection, the community education sector can bring valuable knowledge and experience of engaging those most difficult to reach.

The accompanying report includes reflections from people who accessed community education and who progressed onto employment as a result. *‘Without community education supports*

¹² <http://www.oecd.org/economy/ireland-2013.htm> (P. 34)

such as personal development and mentoring, I wouldn't have gained the confidence to secure employment' concluded one learner.

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