



**Submission to the Department of Education and Science integration Unit on the  
Development of an Intercultural Education Strategy**

**October 2008**

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## **Introduction**

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation, a non-government membership organisation established in 1969. Its mission is to ensure that every adult in Ireland has access to appropriate and affordable learning opportunities throughout their lives, thus enabling them to contribute to and participate in the economic, social, civic and cultural development of Irish society. AONTAS is currently into the second year of its strategic Plan 2007-2010 which focuses on four key priority areas i.e. policy, promotion, practice and partnership all of which are underpinned by a fifth priority which is organisational development. The Strategic Plan can be accessed through the AONTAS website at [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com).

The White Paper on Adult Education, Learning for Life, published in 2000 was a key development for the sector as it was the first policy framework for adult education in the history of the State. The Paper is underpinned by three core principles one of which is interculturalism, the other two being equality and a systemic approach. When the Paper was being written Ireland had just begun to benefit from the most rapid economic growth in Europe and was experiencing its first wave of inward migration. Over the past ten years the changing demography of Ireland has presented us with many challenges as well as rich opportunities. Currently sixteen per cent of our workforce is comprised of people who were not born in Ireland and according to the 2006 census non-Irish born people make up eleven percent of our population from over 180 countries. The entire education system from primary school upwards now includes people with a wide range of cultural backgrounds and languages. All of these changes have happened very rapidly and in many ways Ireland was not prepared for them. More changes are now taking place with the challenges facing our economy and the implications in practical terms of cutbacks to vital services such as language support and other services provided by the education system.

## **Response by the Adult and Community Education Sector**

The adult and community education service was one of the first of the educational services to take up the challenge of catering for the many and varied needs of immigrants whether they were migrant workers, asylum seekers or refugees. In many cases education was one of the few activities that could be pursued by many of these people and the adult and community education service proved to be responsive and flexible in its actions. One of the first demands was for language classes and in the absence of any planned and resourced provision these have been largely supplied through the literacy service. Over one third of the current adult literacy learners are people who are learning English as a second language. Many of these learners are already well educated in their own language but find that the adult literacy service is their only option to avail of language education at a low or no cost.

As we all know language is not the only thing that people entering a new country needs. The White Paper stated the need to frame educational policy and practice in the context of serving a diverse population thus having implications for the development of curricula, materials, training and inservice, modes of assessment and delivery methods as the norm. This refers not only to combating racism and encouraging participation by immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers in education but also to a

recognition that many minority groups may have distinct needs and cultural contexts which must be respected and reflected in an educational context. The White Paper further states:-

*The challenge of an intercultural education is to simultaneously acknowledge and celebrate the cultural heritage unique to each different ethnic group while contributing to a shared collective awareness of nationhood. It must work towards a view of difference as something to be celebrated and which is enriching to the totality of the society rather than the basis for enmity.*

But this is easier said than done. Irish people would probably pride themselves on being non-racist and indeed it is probably easier to perceive oneself as such if the population is relatively homogeneous. But one only has to look at the treatment of Travellers, or indeed look at the experience in Northern Ireland to see how complex it is to develop a society where equality and justice prevail. While legal arrangements such as the Equality Act outlaw discrimination, the true development of interculturalism requires the nurturing of understanding of difference and support for the practice of living together .

### **The Role of Lifelong learning in promoting Interculturalism**

Lifelong learning has a key role to play in nurturing the learning about one another's lives, beliefs and cultures and in exploring practical ways of living together as human beings. Such connections and spaces for learning have to happen at a number of levels and have to be supported by policies and resources from Government. 2008 was designated by the European Commission as the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. The designation of the year provided an opportunity for AONTAS to focus on how adult and community education can contribute to creating intercultural communities and how its role in this development can be strengthened and supported. AONTAS brought together over 200 people from the adult and community education sector and from 42 countries in Europe in October 2008 with the objectives of:-

- Exploring the concept of intercultural dialogue in the context of a rapidly changing Europe
- Providing a forum for discussion on the meaning of intercultural dialogue in the Irish context
- Showcasing the role of adult and community education in promoting intercultural dialogue through examples of practice
- Exploring ways in which adult and community education can be developed to realise the core principle of interculturalism as identified in the White Paper.

A strong keynote address by Bashy Quraishy, Chair of the Advisory Council of ENAR (European Network against Racism, Brussels) introduced a discussion on the meaning of interculturalism and how an intercultural approach differed from a multicultural one. A number of interactive workshops were held at this conference and policy themes emerged from these. AONTAS is using the outcomes of this process to contribute to the development of the discussion on intercultural education. A full report of the conference will be available later in the year, and AONTAS also welcomes the opportunity to participate in focus groups to be organised by the Integration Unit.

**At all levels of the education system there needs to be a deep engagement with the concept of interculturalism which is not tokenistic and which involves us having a shared vision and understanding of what it means.**

We cannot assume that everyone shares the same understanding of the concepts of interculturalism and diversity. This understanding must be developed from critical reflection and the idea that moving towards interculturalism is more about thinking about 'us' than about 'them.' The 'us' includes the majority culture and minority groups. Adult and community educators must be resourced and supported to facilitate spaces for discussion and dialogue in order to enable adults to develop a common vision for the society we wish to live in. Some of this work is currently taking place in community education but it is neither very visible or well supported. In order to ensure that this dialogue takes place the following conditions are necessary :-

- Policies must be framed to value social justice, collective action and to challenge inequality, and not only to measure economic outcomes .
- Commitment to long-term strategic planning (joined up thinking) at government and institutional level must be real and serious.
- Integrated agency work between service providers must be explored and nurtured.
- Training in all aspects of diversity, discrimination, racism and interculturalism must be part and parcel of the staff development of all public servants from the Ministers right through the system.

**The unique attributes of adult/community education such as its inside/ out, bottom/ up , flexible and participative approaches create a space for intercultural communication, instill pride and confidence in all learners and can facilitate equality between learners and between learners and facilitators. This space is consistently becoming more difficult to hold as the instrumental purpose for adult/ community education is emphasised and supported.**

An increasing emphasis by decision-makers on the importance of certification and labour market progression makes it difficult for adult/ community education to hold onto the attributes that facilitate intercultural communication. While AONTAS acknowledges the importance of the acquisition of skills and qualifications for the labour market, government must recognise the important social purpose of adult and community education and its ability to organise and include people in their own and their communities' development. Bashy Quraishy argued in his paper at the AONTAS conference for intercultural education which should be used to effect social change. He suggested that this goal incorporates three strands of transformation:-

- Transformation of self
- Transformation of the educational curriculum
- Transformation of society.

He further pointed out that that the development of education on a mass scale throughout Europe succeeded in not only building a great pool of highly qualified workers for the labour market but that mass education was also necessary to create tolerant citizens who respected human rights, peaceful human interaction and who turned their backs on war, prejudice and discrimination. AONTAS agrees strongly with this dual purpose of education and particularly adult and community education. Therefore it proposes that:-

- Funding needs to be made available to meet the needs of adults and their communities, not only in respect of courses delivering skills but also in respect of supporting them to dialogue and make a social analysis of their changing communities.
- Adult and community education groups, supported by skilled and trained facilitators must be allowed and funded to develop their own educational curricula embracing issues of diversity, discrimination, racism, xenophobia etc.
- The outcomes and reflections of these discussions must be documented and taken seriously by government departments, policy makers and funders.
- Groups must be supported to develop new and diverse approaches to learning which include the sharing of information, history , language and culture.
- Groups should be supported and resourced to maintain their own native languages and heritage, as well as learning English language skills.
- Work begun by the National Qualifications Authority in relation to the recognition of qualifications achieved outside of Ireland must be prioritised with a view to making the best use of the abilities and skills of everyone living in the State
- Promotion of the importance of adult and community education such as that organised by AONTAS through its Adult Learning Festival needs to be resourced and supported on an ongoing basis.

**Facilitating intercultural communication in adult/ community education needs to be adequately resourced in terms of funding and materials.**

Funding must be ringfenced to facilitate intercultural communication including the training of educators in approaches and materials developed to support that work. Supports must also be put in place to ensure that minority ethnic groups are able to participate in adult/ community education. AONTAS proposes the following actions:-

- Government in consultation with education stakeholders including NGOs and the community and voluntary sector must develop as a matter of urgency a distinct policy for ESOL which brings with it ring-fenced funding.
- Adult and community education needs to be funded to provide information in many languages. This would include the development of the local guidance services to enable them to develop materials, information systems and outreach strategies which are designed to attract newcomers into further education and training.

- Regular intercultural training and anti-racism training needs to be put in place for all staff working in the sector as part and parcel of their continuous professional development.
- Intercultural anti-racism training should be a core part of adult education and teacher training.
- Development of teaching and learning materials, forum/ websites which address the diverse needs of learners in an intercultural setting must be supported.
- Funding support for existing intercultural work especially that which is dependent on volunteers.

**Minority ethnic groups including Travellers must be involved in the planning of services and adult/ community education and equality of access and participation in those services must be guaranteed.**

There is nothing more powerful for motivating learners than having strong role models who can inspire, encourage and lead. This has worked successfully in the area of adult literacy where learners demonstrated their ability to learn ,to motivate others and to become involved in the organisation and delivery of learning for their peers. Interculturalism cannot be achieved unless this approach becomes embedded in the everyday activities of the education system as a whole. AONTAS therefore proposes:-

- Supports for learners to enable them to access adult and community education, in particular information and guidance, language support, childcare, transport and financial supports where appropriate. Such supports must take into account the particular cultural beliefs and conditions of newcomers.
- Involvement of members of different ethnic groups in training and education from planning and design to implementation and delivery.
- Support and promotion of role models e.g. teachers /trainers/facilitators from minority cultures.
- Regular monitoring and evaluation of programmes to ensure that the needs of a diverse range of learners are being met.
- Documentation and promotion of models of best practice with a view to mainstreaming intercultural processes in adult and community education.
- Exploring the processes used in other countries and learning from their mistakes and successes.
- Developing transnational links through programmes such as Grundtvig to learn and share best practice.

**The use of media literacy and awareness to promote intercultural learning**

Media literacy has been shown to have an important place in adult and community education and could be an effective tool to facilitate learners' awareness of interculturalism. AONTAS has successfully promoted and highlighted the role of adult and community education through local and national media during its learning festivals and campaigns. The National Adult Literacy Agency has also used the media to great effect to promote adult literacy. Since the media can have a powerful influence both in

negative and positive ways on the perceptions of people who are different from 'us', and often constitutes the way by which people learn about other cultures, proactive work needs to be developed with media to promote knowledge and understanding of what it means to live in an intercultural society.

### **Conclusion**

This short submission outlines the key issues which have been raised within the adult and community education community in relation to the development of intercultural education and AONTAS would welcome the opportunity to contribute to that project in whatever way it can. In saying that AONTAS expresses its extreme concern at the post budget developments such as the reduction of language support teachers in schools and the treatment of the NCCRI by the Department. AONTAS believes strongly that in the current economic climate, anti racism and interculturalism work is even more important for the development of a cohesive society. Ignorance as we know breeds prejudice and hatred, so never before has the work done by organisations such as the NCCRI and other bodies involved in the support of equality and human rights been more crucial. Developing a civil society where people can live in harmony and mutual understanding can only be done through creating not just legislative structures but also investing in lifelong learning and supporting a continuous open dialogue and awareness of our changing society.

We need to recognise that this project will take time and that change can be slow. A strategic approach means having joined up thinking between agencies and departments, taking a whole organisation approach to facilitating interculturalism, learning from our mistakes and having an evidence base for the approach we take. The vision of a diverse education system designed to suit a diverse society as outlined in the White Paper is still a long way off but is one which we have no option but to develop if we are to embrace the rich opportunities which a truly intercultural society captures.

Berni Brady, AONTAS Director, October 2008.