The Voice of Adult Learning

18th February 2011

<u>**AONTAS Submission on:**</u>

1. **The Contribution of the Further Education Sector, in Particular Community Education Programmes, in meeting the Skills Strategy Objectives**

2. **The Role of Further Education and Community Education Programmes within the Overall Further Education and Training Sector.**

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1. Overview

AONTAS: The Voice of Adult learning

Mission Statement:

The mission of AONTAS is to advocate for the right of every adult in Ireland to quality learning.

What AONTAS believes in

AONTAS as a membership organisation believes in the right of all adults to continue their learning throughout their lives. We believe that adult and community education are equal and key components of the lifelong learning spectrum and are of vital importance to both the individual and to society as a whole. As such the further, adult and community education sectors play a key role in providing access to quality education and training opportunities.

Why is adult learning important?

National and international research has shown that:-

- Adult learners have greater earning capacity – through opportunities for learning new skills, job promotion, and changing careers.
- Adult learners are healthier and live longer and better lives.
- Adult learners are more likely to have strong social networks thus preventing isolation and social exclusion.
- Adult learners are less likely to be at risk of poverty and unemployment.
- Adult learners are more active in their communities, and are more likely to volunteer and to vote.
- Adult learners are better able to help children with their homework and support them through their education, breaking the cycle of disadvantage**.**

Who are adult learners?

The White Paper, Learning for Life (2000) defines adult learning as follows:-

"…*systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education and training"*

This definition encapsulates by far the majority of the population and thus has enormous implications for how adult, community and further education is understood and resourced. While it

risks becoming a catch-all, spreading limited resources too thinly in an effort to respond to an enormous range of learning needs, nonetheless it is a key part of the continuous learning process necessary to having a fulfilling and healthy life. Obviously resources have to be targeted strategically to ensure that those most at risk of being left behind are fully supported to achieve their potential.

Participation in Adult Learning

The number of adults engaged in adult education has increased dramatically over the past two years reflecting the increase in unemployment. A comparison between figures from the Department of Education and Science in 2008, and more recent figures from the Department of Education and Skills for 2010 show an increase of approximately 36,000 learners participating in adult, community and further education initiatives such as adult literacy, VTOS, PLCs, Senior Travelling Training Centres, Youthreach, and Community Education programmes bringing the numbers to more than 130,000 adults.

These figures exclude adults who participate in evening courses as well as those taking up third level education. AONTAS estimates that as many as 30,000 learners participate in non-formal learning in community based projects funded by a mix of government departments and sundry sources (See Appendix 1) ,while FAS provided 157,000 places in 2010.

Further education acts as a progression route to higher level education; this contributes to the fact that one in every five applicants to the CAO in 2010 was a mature student. 21,500 applicants had been approved for the Back to Education Allowance, with the final number of applicants expected to be even higher. In addition 12,000 adults will avail of the new Labour Market Activation Measures targeting people who are unemployed, an initiative welcomed by AONTAS.

2. Structure of Submission

The submission focuses on the contribution of the further education sector, in particular community education, to meeting the Skills Strategy objectives and the role of further education and community education programmes within the overall further education and training sector.

In terms of meeting the Skills Strategy objectives, further education and community education can deliver successfully in a cost-effective manner on the following key areas:

1. VECs act as established, high-quality adult education providers of a range of programmes targeting the populations identified by the NSS, as well as programmes funded under the Labour Activation Measures.

2. The VEC adult education guidance service has proven itself to be essential for creating informed choices regarding courses options, the accreditation process and progression paths.

3. Community education is highly effective in developing generic skills.

4. Community education is successful in reaching disadvantaged target groups.

5. Community education is a gateway to progression onto, and through, the National Framework of Qualifications.

6. Community Education develops skills and progression for employment.

7. Further, and community, education, is an effective flexible option for adults who wish to develop both generic and vocational skills and qualifications.

The role of further education and community education programmes within the overall further education and training sector

1. Further and community education is an essential part of the education and training sector as it:
   a. Delivers a second chance option for early school leavers
   b. Provides an effective way for adult to engage in accredited learning at FETAC levels 1-5.
   c. Prepares learners to access and progress to HETAC levels 6+
   d. Has the capacity to engage in collaborative models of working with other education and training providers.
   e. Delivers information and guidance to clients in the target groups.

3. Further and community education meet the Skills Strategy objectives

The National Skills Strategy identifies particular target populations in relation to meeting the current and future needs of the labour market. The following targets have been set for 2020:-

- 48 percent of the labour force should have qualifications at NFQ Levels 6 to 10;
- 45 percent should have qualifications at NFQ levels 4 and 5; and
- The remaining 7 percent will have qualifications at NFQ levels 1 to 3 but should aspire to achieve skills at higher levels.

In terms of participation rates an additional 500,000 individuals within the workforce will need to progress by at least an NFQ level in order to achieve these targets as follows:- :

- 170,000 to levels 6 to 10
- 260,000 to level 4 & 5
- 70,000 to level from level 1 & 2 to level 3

Further, adult and community education straddle all these target groups with a particular focus on the needs of learners at levels 1-5 of the NQF Framework. This submission will outline how further and community education is meeting the NSS objectives.

3.1 VECs act as an established, high-quality adult education provider of a range of programmes targeting the populations identified by the NSS including programmes funded under the Labour Activation Measures

The VEC sector with its network of schools and colleges is a key provider of further, adult and community education programmes which have been previously identified in this submission. Through the delivery of these programmes and their more recent involvement in Labour Activation Measures the VECs are obviously in a key position to deliver on the NSS objectives. Their current collaboration with FAS in the delivery of programmes is of vital importance bringing more coherence and integration to provision.   VECs have a long track record in dealing with the educational needs of adults and have core teams of professional staff with many years of experience in this regard. VEC provision is quality assured by FETAC and by far the majority of FETAC accredited awards are delivered through VEC Programmes thus meeting the NSS targets.

Statistical data from FETAC[1] issued in March of 2010 shows that around 175,000 learners received a total of almost 315,000 FETAC awards (disaggregated) in 2009. This represents a dramatic increase over the numbers of learners achieving awards in 2008, which reached 131,000 and continues an upward trend. Almost one million certificates have been issued by FETAC since 2001. The majority of learners in 2009 received Component Certificates i.e. minor awards with almost 29,000 learners receiving major awards. With regard to the target groups identified in the NSS the FETAC reports that,

"Awards at levels 1 and 2 were achieved by learners in 2009, marking the second year that awards were achieved at these levels. At level 1 there were c. 70 major awards and c.200 minor awards achieved. At level 2 there were c.195 major awards and c.340 minor awards achieved. There was significant growth at both levels and for major and minor award types; except for minor awards at level 2 which saw a decline in absolute numbers."

While this may seem very small in the context of the task of achieving 'one step up' it does illustrate the need for recognition that learners at the lower levels of the Framework require significantly more support to achieve their targets. This presents a huge challenge for further education and training and requires continuous targeted investment in the sector.

FETAC has reported that in general there was an increase in the number of minor awards achieved across all levels with the exception of level 2 in 2009. The activity at level 5 showed a rise of 70% since 2007 while minor awards achieved at levels 3 and 4 increased significantly over the 2008 to 2009 period bringing a cumulative increase of 50% and 12% respectively at levels 3 and 4 from 2007 to 2009. An analysis of the FETAC data would suggest that the farther up the qualifications ladder learners go the more likely it is that they will find it easier to enhance their qualifications, so building a strong foundation for people with no or low qualifications is crucial to their success.

Currently twelve VECs are providing a range of programmes under the Labour Activation Measures ranging from core skills to a diverse range of programmes linking into areas identified within the NSS. An example from Co. Galway VEC is a programme delivered over ten weeks focusing on four key areas; Tourism, Aquaculture, Media, Energy, all growth areas. The programme is delivered on three days each week with additional modules in IT, Personal Development, Mathematics, Enterprise Skills and Communications all accredited at FETAC Level 3/4. One hundred and fifty

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[1] FETAC Awards Report 2009, FETAC. 2010

adults participate on these programmes throughout the county. Those that are ready to go through the CAO System have completed applications and others are progressing on to additional courses through BTEI. According to the local provider this model of integrated learning works and should be continued as it is a clear introduction to those wishing to reskill/ retrain. Vital integrated elements are adult guidance and literacy support as part and parcel of delivery. It is in this integration of personal and vocational development that the VEC adult education service excels and as such should be supported and developed.

3.2 The VEC adult education guidance service is essential for creating informed choices regarding courses options, the accreditation process and progression paths

The role of the VEC adult guidance service cannot be underestimated in ensuring that adult learners have access to the right programmes to meet their learning development and skills needs. During 2009 when the unemployment figures were rapidly increasing the AONTAS Information Referral Service fielded more than 6500 calls. Eighty per cent of callers who were unemployed had not been involved in any education and training for more than ten years and 50% of this cohort had been out of education and training for more than twenty years. This information highlights the extent of the challenge facing the education system as whole and in particular the further education and training sector to whom it falls to respond to these challenges. Seventy one per cent of these callers articulated the need for clear, concise, accurate and accessible information from front line services.

Accessing information continues to be a significant barrier for many adult learners and it is not just access to information. Adults are faced with the challenge of negotiating learning opportunities suited to their abilities, expectations, life circumstances and employment prospects, all of which requires guidance as well as information. AONTAS is currently documenting our analysis of the 2010 use of the Information Referral Service for our Annual Report which will be available at our AGM in May, but we already know that finding and pursuing the right learning opportunity is a key issue for unemployed adults. Many callers have expressed dissatisfaction with front line service providers such as FAS and the Social Welfare Offices which are usually their first port of call. Many are completely unaware that an adult guidance service exists but when referred on they are generally relieved that there is someone out there who will provide assistance and listen to their concerns.

The central role of educational guidance for adult learners, in particular, for the progression of disadvantaged learners is acknowledged in *Towards 2016* and the *National Skills Strategy* but significantly not within the *Draft National Reform Programme* . The Adult Education Guidance Initiative, co-ordinated by the National Centre for Guidance in Education is responsible for providing guidance to adults in community education, adult literacy and Vocational Training and Opportunities Scheme services provided by the VEC. Each VEC has its own Adult Education Guidance Service. A recent evaluation of the Initiative indicated significant regional variation in targeting of community education clients by these services, particularly BTEI clients.[2] The evaluation recommended that progression and support of learners should be encouraged through an integrated response at VEC level involving the guidance service, adult literacy service, education providers and partnership agencies. Given the current demand for further education and training the services need to be extended beyond the current target groups and greater collaboration between services needs to take place at local service level. Many of the services have already established models of good practice in this regard. However feedback to the AONTAS Information Referral service indicates that the Public Service Recruitment Embargo is having a significant effect on the capacity of the service to deliver in the current economic context.

3.3 Community education is highly effective in developing generic skills

As indicated earlier the National Skills Strategy targets for 2020 include moving 70,000 people from Levels 1 & 2 on the NFQ to Level 3 and 260,000 up to levels 4 and 5. It also highlights enhancing generic skills in the population including literacy and numeracy, the ability to work autonomously, be self managing, think creatively, work as part of a team and adapt to change. Learning that takes place in community education settings is learner centred   involving both group process and supported independent learning, and is therefore an ideal setting in which to develop generic skills ,especially for those with lower levels of formal education. Much of the provision is targeted at people at Levels 1 through to 3 on the NFQ but many community groups offer options at higher levels as well.

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[2] Eustace, A. and S. Phillips. (2010). *Overarching Research on the Adult Education Guidance Initiative 2000-2006.*National Centre for Guidance in Education. Ireland.

AONTAS will launch a research report on the outcomes of Department and Education and Skills-funded community education on February 23rd 2011 during the National Adult Learners' Festival. Entitled 'More than just a Course',[3] the research found that DES community education provision is very effective at fostering the personal development of learners and assisting their persistence and retention. It also represents excellent value for money, as even with conservative estimates it almost entirely pays for itself due to the number of learners who begin to volunteer as a result of their time in community education. Volunteering, while not a paid activity is an excellent way to use skills acquired through community learning and to practice them in an organized way. Such skills are eminently transferable to a work situation and are vital in keeping connected to the labour market during the current recession.

3.4 Community education is successful in reaching disadvantaged target groups

The target groups prioritised for community education match those in the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion* and also in European Social Fund requirements.[4] The community education research found that the DES funded community education is reaching many of the disadvantaged target groups it has prioritised, with 74% of the overall sample of community education learners who took part in the survey coming from one of those groups. For instance, in the survey sample, 45% of people 16-64 left school at lower secondary or before, and 36% were living with a disability.

The research also found that learners experienced a range of outcomes from community education. In particular, community education is very effective in achieving outcomes related to personal development such as enhancing self-confidence and self-esteem. For instance, 85% of learners surveyed experienced positive change in their self-confidence and 80% experienced a positive change in their sense of purpose or hope. Community education has also shown itself to be extremely learner friendly which is particularly important in the case of people who have been out of education for a very long time and/or had poor experiences of school which is often a key barrier for people with literacy difficulties.

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[3] Community Education: More than just a Course, 2011. AONTAS
[4] Government of Ireland. (2007). *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion, 2007-2016.* Government Stationary Office: Dublin. Also see Government of Ireland. (2007). *Human Capital Investment Operational Programme: 2007-2013.* Government Stationary Office: Dublin.

3.5 Community education is a gateway to progression onto, and through, the National Framework of Qualifications.

A key element of the National Skills Strategy is progression on the NQF. The thinking on progression contained within the Strategy is a linear one with learners expected to move up the Qualifications ladder in progressive steps. However both anecdotal and research evidence shows that adults have a much more complex learning path depending on their work, educational or family situations. For example a person may be perfectly competent in a practical skill at a high level while lacking IT or writing skills and so on. That person may need to move back and forth on the accreditation framework depending on the skills he/she needs to acquire. In an environment which is dominated by the linear progression models of the formal education system the learning paths followed by adult learners are often ignored, and no longitudinal research has been undertaken in Ireland to examine this. However, research undertaken in other countries gives us insights into these learning paths and is of vital importance in informing both policy and practice.

For example a wider view on the concept of progression allows us to show how adult learning can have long-term impacts, but that those impacts may not emerge in a linear way and may have wider benefits than educational or labour market progression. Vorhaus[5] proposes that progression be distinguished in these ways:

1. Progression – involves moving along one dimension, e.g. moving from a FETAC Level 5 award in childcare to a Level 6 in childcare management.
2. Development – moving forward along two, not necessarily related dimensions, i.e. learners may engage in learning, then disengage and then jump back into something unrelated to what they did before. This experimentation is essential for educationally disadvantaged learners to gain confidence. Ultimate progression may take time to emerge so a more developmental approach acknowledges the real learning paths and patterns for adult learners.

While community education is most often identified with levels 1 to 3 of the NQF the fact that many community education groups provide courses at higher levels on the Framework often goes

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[5] Vorhaus, T. (2000). "Learning Outcomes in a Non-accredited Curriculum: a View from the Adult Education Sector." In Jones, H and Mace, J eds. *Outcomes of Learning: taking the Debate Forward.* Further Education Development Agency: UK.

unrecognised. AONTAS recently carried out a snapshot piece of research with Its CEN member groups on the accredited options provided by them. Of 43 respondents:

- 6 did not provide accredited courses
- 28 provided courses at FETAC level 5 +
- 7 at up to FETAC level 3 and
- 2 at up to FETAC level 4.

Courses at Level 5 included childcare, desktop publishing, business administration, communications, web design, healthcare support and retail sales among others. Other community groups link in with higher education providing access routes, Certificates and Diplomas. The mix of accredited and non-accredited programmes allows for the highest level of accessibility for learners at all levels of the learning spectrum and this is a key feature in the success of community education.

Such evidence suggests not only that community education is currently on track in addressing the most challenging strategic objectives of the NSS, i.e. attracting back into education the most disadvantaged learners, but also that it can ,with appropriate resources, contribute to the achievement of targets   across all the strategic objectives.

3.6 Community Education develops skills and progression for employment

In relation to employment, community education plays a key role in providing the necessary transferable skills required in a changing working world. Skills development is impossible to separate from key personal and generic skills identified above. Community education :

- allows for ease of entry to qualifications
- 'tailors' learning to what is needed by both learners and the community they are living in
- makes real links between learning and work through:
    - placements as part of learning projects – allowing employers and learners to meet and learn from each other
    - research as part of learning projects – allowing learners to find out more about their community / topic of interest in a work framed environment

o   by being around community projects, learners are exposed to a variety of work, activities and opportunities that can stimulate their curiosity and desire for work

Community projects also see their learners as part of their community and therefore offer more support and possible direction to people as they seek work. They also link in with LES and local enterprises when planning courses. The transferable skills are:

- improved communication skills
- working as part of a team
- making the effort to come to a class at a particular time thus increasing learners' time management skills
- increased digital skills – a requirement in most jobs today

3.7 Further, and community education, is an effective flexible option for adults

Learning is lifewide as well as lifelong. As well at the lifelong dimension of adult and community education contained in The White Paper, it also identified the lifewide dimension, something which is infrequently mentioned in policy reports and documents. This refers to the multiplicity of sites in which learning takes place encompassing educational institutions, training centres, the home, the community and the workplace. Increasingly as technological advances progress, e-learning is becoming a vital means of accessing flexible learning options. While the concept of lifelong learning has been embedded at least in the vocabulary of educational policy, far less attention is paid to the implications of a lifewide agenda. This is because a real commitment to a lifewide concept poses particular systemic challenges.

The White Paper proposes that these include:-
"the appropriate resourcing of different learning sites... ease of movement and progression between learning sites based on **parity of esteem** between providers; the development of methods of assessment of learning independently of the context in which such learning occurs; the need to provide the requisite infra-structural supports to the learner in the form of guidance and counselling; the provision of childcare and transport and appropriate mechanisms of accreditation and assessment"[6]

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[6] Learning for Life, White Paper on Adult Education, 2000. P.32

The concept of lifewide learning is an interesting one especially in the current context where high levels of flexibility are required to address the diverse needs of different target groups, in particular taking into account their life circumstances. Below are some examples of some different and flexible modes of learning.

3.8 Case Studies: Community Education in Action meeting the National Skills Strategy

3.8.1 Women Returners: Longford Women's Link

Longford Women's Link offers its FAS-funded CE scheme through its 'Catkin's Nursery' childcare service, and in administration through its Reception section. In addition to being a CE employer, LWL is also an ECDL and FETAC Quality-Assured and registered education centre, and thus able to offer 'in-house' certified training to CE participants. The Women's Link does this using the Women's Community Education approach, a participant-led approach that focuses on women learning from, as well as with, other women. LWL is one of the providers which completed the Quality Assurance Framework training delivered by AONTAS in 2008.

Thirty four women have participated in LWL's CE programme over the last three years.

- Of these 34, fourteen currently remain employed at LWL, i.e. 41 % of total CE participants
- Of the 20 women who have left LWL having completed their CE placement, fourteen have secured some further form of employment, (70% of leavers)
- Having developed an awareness of their specific goals through participation in the CE Scheme, together with the confidence to pursue further training/education opportunities with LWL, a further three are currently under-taking further education having finished the Scheme, that is a further 15% of leavers

3.8.2 Irish Men's Sheds Forum

Disadvantaged men are a notoriously difficult target group to reach and made up just 22% of the sample of participants in the recent AONTAS research. AONTAS has worked with the Further Education Development Unit to produce provider guidelines for the participation of men in further education.[7] AONTAS had already published two seminal pieces of research on men in education, Men on the Move, 2000 and Gender and Learning, 2003. The AONTAS/DCTV television

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[7] Increasing Men's participation in adult Learning, 2008. Further education Development Unit, DES

programmes, 'Beyond the Classroom' launched during the Adult Learners Festival 2010 portrayed the work done by men in an inner city group and can be accessed via the AONTAS website: http://www.aontas.com/commed/networkcen/workofcen.html

These documents show that, in order to attract disadvantaged and unemployed men innovative approaches need to be engaged in, and they almost always centre on some kind of skills-based approach.

An example of such an approach is one in which AONTAS recently collaborated with County Wexford VEC i.e. the launch of the Irish Men's Shed Forum. A Men's Shed is any community-based, non-commercial organisation which is open to all men where the primary activity is the provision of a safe, friendly and inclusive environment where the men are able to gather and/or work on meaningful projects at their own pace, in their own time and in the company of other men and where the primary objective is to advance the health and well- being of the participating men. It has the potential to provide a means of developing new skills and sharing ones that could be lost as a result of unemployment. The work done by the men's sheds was recently featured on RTE's Prime Time portraying their potential not just in engaging men in learning but also in providing opportunities to keep skills fresh and to transfer skills amongst the group.

The Irish Men's Sheds Forum (IMSF) is being set up to act as a resource for Men's Sheds in Ireland and to promote the idea of Independent Community Men's Sheds. The forum aims to represent and promote the Shed movement which was started in Australia, and to act as a communications hub with their website being a key mechanism.

3.8.3 E-Learning

E- learning is becoming more and more important and attractive to adults as they become more competent in the use of information technology and where busy lives limit the opportunity to physically attend a course. NALA's Write on 4 Work, the free Level 3 FETAC qualification is now available to do online. The programme is funded under the labour activation measures and is currently proving to be extremely successful with learners. Not only does e- learning diminish the barriers attached to returning to learning especially for people who want to improve basic skills but it also develops and enhances IT skills themselves The NALA programme offers major awards in

Employability, ICT and General Learning and is completed primarily online with free tutor support available by telephone.

Another e-learning programme which has been highly successful and has attracted almost 4000 learners during 2010 is the FAS 'E-learning at the Library project'. Delivered in more than 100 public libraries throughout the country it is an excellent example of collaboration between FAS and the National Library Council. Both these programmes reach learners with lower educational qualification in non-threatening and supportive environments.

4. The role of Further Education and Community Education Programmes within the Overall Further Education and Training Sector

Further, and community, education is an essential part of the education and training sector as it:

    a. Delivers a second chance option for early school leavers

    b. Provides an effective way for adult to engage in accredited learning at FETAC level 1-5.

    c. Prepares learners to access and progress to HETAC levels 6+

    d. Has the capacity to engage in collaborative models of working with other education and training providers.

    e. Delivers information and guidance to clients in the target groups

All of these factors will assist in meeting the targets of: 170,000 to levels 6 to 10, 260,000 to level 4 & 5 and 70,000 to level from level 1 & 2 to level 3. The main focus of further, and community, education is specifically at levels 1 to 5, and it is from this basis that adults engage in progressing to higher levels on the NFQ. In addition, a key strength of the sector is its learner-centred approach. It has developed strategies, approaches and supports that aim to address the main obstacles facing adults accessing and participating in education and training, namely dispositional, attitudinal, institutional and informational.

Further, and community, education is unique in that it meets the national policy priority for all learners, including targeting the most disadvantaged groups, at the qualification levels identified in the National Skills Strategy whilst meeting the needs of the learner, thus creating a highly effective, responsive form of education provision.

5. Challenges for Further, and Community Education.

As can be seen above the adult, further and community education sector is a key player in the delivery of the NSS objectives but it needs to be invested in and supported if it is to deliver In a coherent and successful way. In its recent extensive consultation process with over 600 members and external stakeholders to develop our new strategic plan AONTAS identified two key issues affecting the development and delivery of a quality adult education service -:

- **The adult and community education services are stretched to meet the current demand for adult learning.** The public sector recruitment embargo means less staff to support and develop adult learning. The concept of 'frontline staff' needs to be redefined to take account of the co-ordinating and developmental work of staff in the sector.

- **There is a huge interest and enthusiasm for adult learning but it needs to be affordable.** Tuition fees, transport and childcare costs are still real barriers to adults taking part in education. Supports for adult learners have been eroded during the last two budgets both in terms of allowances and places and, if continued, will serve to exclude adults especially those most at risk, from accessing learning opportunities.

AONTAS members have identified key priorities for both providers and learners and have included these in our pre-election material which we have circulated widely.

5.1 Provider Priorities

- **Retain the Minister for Lifelong Learning** to provide a voice for adult learning within the sector, and help raise the visibility of the sector. This Minister should work across three key departments – Education and Skills, Social Protection and Department of Enterprise and Employment, in order to ensure greater policy coherence.

- **Maintain** the existing adult education infrastructure. Redefine 'frontline' in the context of the adult education services, recognising the role of adult education personnel such as AEOs, ALOs, CEFs and Information Officers within adult guidance, roles which go beyond administrative duties. The application of the embargo to additional services offered by VECs (e.g. LMA measures) should be lifted.

- **Strengthen** the role of adult guidance in supporting the role of activation policies. Adult guidance ensures that adults have access to training and education appropriate to their needs, thus resulting in greater levels of retention and ultimately best use of scarce resources.

- **A new mechanism for funding community education:** The attached position paper (Appendix) outlines what a new funding model could look like and how it will be more effective in supporting this very important part of the education system. It will cover the true cost and save money on unnecessary application – whilst ensuring the best community education service for learners.

5.2 Adult Learner Priorities

- **Make education affordable for adults: Tuition** fees, transport and childcare are two big costs that adults have to budget for if they return to education. The loss of eligibility for the higher education grant for those on the Back to Education Allowance is a particular barrier to those who want to progress – from an Access/PLC or VTOS course onto third level. The application of a fee for PLC programmes introduced in the 2010 budget is a worrying development for the sector, once more targeting those most at risk.

- **Provide accurate and up to date information about adult learning:** information on adult learning is currently provided by a number of agencies and actors. Changes in the criteria for courses and entitlements, along with new training and education responses must be communicated effectively to ensure that adults can be supported into training and education that is right for them as soon as possible.

- **Provide access to education which is meaningful, flexible, and leads to progression onto employment or further education:** Short courses which lead to dead ends are not the answer. Programmes need to be tailored to address both the needs of the individual person and the labour market and have real accreditation as an outcome. Many adults need support and advice to make important choices about retraining and changing careers. As indicated earlier State investment in adult guidance is vital in helping adults make these choices.

6. Conclusion

There is no doubt that the further, adult and community education sector is making a real contribution to the targets set out in the NSS and could do so much more effectively with greater recognition and resources. It is interesting to note that within the Draft National Reform Programme the further, adult and community education sector is neither recognised nor treated as a sector in its own right. It is not included at all in Target 4- Education suggesting that the lifelong learning aspect of education is still not embedded within the thinking and actions of government. Adult and further education opportunities receive one short paragraph within Target 1- Employment. Much more needs to be done at government level to ensure that the further, adult and community education sector achieves parity of esteem with other sectors within the formal system since it is expected to respond to the needs of large sections of the population who have either been failed by that system or for whom it is unsuitable as a way of learning. It is here that the concept of lifewide learning needs to come to the fore.

In the targeting of resources government should look to the track record and capacity of the sector to deliver a quality, holistic and integrated service to adult learners. The old divisions between vocational training and further education, with their disproportionate budgets must finally be laid to rest and collaborative and integrated ways of working must be recognised and supported.

Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications has enabled accreditation of lifewide and lifelong learning thus facilitating a greater level of options for adults returning to education. In order to accurately evaluate if the targets of the National Skills Strategy are met, it is essential that national data on the number of learners engaging in accredited learning is recorded, the level of qualifications attained identified and the subjects established. Furthermore, in order to effectively develop policies for further, and community, education it is important to learn more about the learners who participate, their background, their level of qualifications, their learning patterns and paths and the outcomes of engaging in further education. AONTAS would recommend the development of a piece of longitudinal research on learners in the FE sector using the wealth of statistical data already available within organisations such as FETAC.

Finally unless the sector is placed on a par with other sectors of the educational system it will be unable to fulfil its potential as a key and equal part of the lifelong learning spectrum. In order to do

this it must be planned and developed in a coherent way taking into account its cross-departmental connections. A continuing weakness for the sector has been the lack of structural co-ordination which was identified as a key issue by the White Paper and which has never been adequately addressed. Indeed it could be argued that government policy actively resisted the establishment of a coherent structure with its lack of support and subsequent abolition of the National Adult Learning Council. A recent proposal put forward by the Department for the establishment of a Back to Education Forum in an attempt to provide a space in which administrators, providers and stakeholder representatives could discuss any and all issues pertaining to adult literacy, community education and BTEI, and could assist in providing a clear structure for informing policy was welcomed by AONTAS. Such thinking is forward looking and essential to the overall vision and long-term development of services to adult learners. With the transfer of FAS training services to the Department of Education and Skills there is now a clear opportunity to develop a broader forum which would incorporate both education and training and which would establish the sector in the way it deserves. AONTAS is willing to contribute our ideas, experience and expertise to such a plan.

Appendices

Appendix 1. THE AONTAS Community Education Network Position paper on creating an effective funding mechanism for community education

February 2011

THE AONTAS COMMUNITY EDUCATION NETWORK

Position paper on creating an effective funding mechanism for community education

"Community education is essential to surviving the recession: it is an investment in our future"

Contents

1. Introduction

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation. The mission of AONTAS is to ensure that every adult in Ireland has access to appropriate and affordable learning opportunities throughout their lives, thus enabling them to participate in the economic, social, civic and cultural development of Irish society. AONTAS created a Community Education Network in order to raise the voice of the community education sector in order to ensure that it gains its rightful place in the adult education system. An outcome of the work of the network is this position paper which outlines the issues with the current funding system for community education and how this could be resolved in order to create an effective community education sector.

1.1 Community Education

Defining community education is not a straightforward task. In Ireland, two views exist within the Governmental White Paper[1]; on the one hand community education is seen as an extension of the service provided by second and third-level education institutions into the wider community. In the other, it is viewed as a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level... "it is as an interactive, challenging process, not only in terms of its content but also in terms of its methodologies and decision making processes." Its characteristics are outlined in the White Paper also, please see appendix 1 of this document.

Following extensive discussion and consultation the Community Education Network definition of community education is: [2]

> *"Community education is a process of personal and community transformation, empowerment, challenge, social change and collective responsiveness. It is community-led reflecting and valuing the lived experiences of individuals and their community. Through its ethos and holistic approach community education builds the capacity of groups to engage in developing a social teaching and learning process that is creative, participative and needs-based. Community education is grounded on principles of justice, equality and inclusiveness. It differs from general adult education provision due to its political and radical methodologies."*

1.2 AONTAS Community Education Network

The Community Education Network (CEN) is a political platform of independent community education groups within the AONTAS membership and serves under the organizational development section of the AONTAS Strategic Plan. The Network directs its work and actively participates in developing immediate and long term strategies in order to achieve the aim of securing a distinct funding stream for community education through actions based on the three themes of: resource, recognition and raise profile. This is the only national network dedicated to independent community education groups at national level and it constantly works to ensure that it operates effectively through engaging in ongoing evaluation and critical reflection. It has been in existence for over two years and has met on eight occasions, a report and details of all meetings are available from the AONTAS website: http://www.aontas.com/commed/networkcen.html

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[1] White Paper on Adult Education: Learning for Life (2000). Dublin
[2] To learn more about community education watch this short film here

Any local, self-managed, independent community education organisation committed to raising the profile of, and lobbying for, a community education sector that is committed to social change can join the Network. A total of 134 organisations from 19 Irish counties have registered to be part of the Community Education Network. The mission statement of the Network is: "to achieve a greater public understanding of the value of community education and have it recognised as a distinctly funded sector of the Irish Education system."

This position paper was the result of a collaborative process which has developed through various consultative methods (national meetings, regional visits, subgroup meetings and online discussions).Three national meetings of the community education network focused on various aspects of creating a mechanism for funding community education. The last meeting on May 5th aimed solely at this work and provided a solid grounding on what needs to be funded and how funding should be delivered. It was further developed and shaped by a voluntary subgroup of the community education network.[3]

1.3 Importance of Community Education

Community education is a progressive, inclusive and effective form of education that happens in the community.[4] It empowers adults, has a beneficial impact on their families and community and reaches people who wouldn't otherwise engage in education. Community education ensures equality of opportunity for marginalised groups and also contributes to the economic regeneration of communities.

Community education is a **fundamental** component for bringing us through the recession. It has a proven track record for creating a supportive environment that **encourages** learners back into formal and community education, **enables** individuals to develop their **skillset** and **competencies,** and is the **bridge** to further learning and employment. Given the current economic crisis, finding approaches to expand participation by adults in education and skills development generates wealth and well-being. Community education grew in an environment of **economic difficulties**, the 1980s; it developed **effective** methods for addressing social issues by helping communities **tackle** unemployment, social problems and low civic participation. It is a key element to addressing intergenerational consistent poverty and education disadvantage. Community education **enables** individuals to reach their potential; it **empowers** the individual and builds confidence; also it nurtures community cohesion.

1.4 Providers of Community Education in the AONTAS Community Education Network

Community education is provided in a number of forms: as accredited (or non-accredited) education in the community through the VEC supported Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) community strand or the ALCES budget. Community education is also provided as accredited (and non-accredited) education in independent community education groups (NGOs) who have a focus on social change through a variety of funding streams. This paper focuses specifically on the social change model of community education and as such has the following features: it generally takes place outside institutions and responds to the needs of the community. It is education in the community, with the community and by the community. Community education groups are local, self-managed, voluntary organisations and are supported by a range of agencies and government

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[3] Funding mechanism for community education subgroup: Noel Fitzgerald (Draiocht), Marie Keegan (Crosscare), Avril Bailey (An Cosan), Joe Murdiff (Men Alone in No-man's Land - Main), Camilla Fitzsimons (Respond! Housing), Catherine Aylmer (Limerick Community Education Network).

departments for their education and social inclusion work. Community education is a vital part of community development. Therefore, in terms of funding this paper is only seeking change to the funding of community education for independent community education groups and not community education that is provided by statutory bodies such as the VEC.

1.5 Outcomes of Community Education

The outcomes and impact of Department of Education and Skills funded community education has been researched recently. This research charts the role of community education in terms of access and retention, civic and social engagement, impact on the health of learners, progression and also how it contributes to a fairer more just and prosperous Ireland.

Some of the key findings conclude that community education[5]:

- The openness of the learning environment is the key aspect of community education that allows outcomes to happen. It is essential that the group is a resource for the learning. This approach needs to be maintained in community education.

- There are wide benefits to community education across all the outcome areas, CSE, health and progression, but social engagement outcomes were the ones most frequently identified by learners. There would appear to be an emerging Human Capital Theory (HCT) emphasis in community education that some learners are in favour of. Providers and VEC personnel might benefit from promoting the role of community education for both individual and collective development to avoid it being perceived as functional adult education in local areas.

- About half the learner's sample were interested in accreditation for learning. Providers could respond to this desire by providing optional certification for learners. This desire does contribute to equality as it helps those learners with no qualifications to gain them. The role of the NFQ needs to be better promoted.

- Community education makes a substantial contribution to a more just, equal and prosperous Ireland. This contribution needs to be consistently tracked by collecting data that takes into account all the outcomes of community education, not solely progression rates.

- Community education represents value for money for DES as even with conservative estimates, learners who start to volunteer as a result of community education could provide a high return of 28.8 million to the State and a low return of 9.1 million per annum.

Further outcomes of community education have been documented by community education groups, for example by An Cosan. The outcomes of the work include: **TBC.** Full details of this case study are documented in appendix 2.

1.6 Community Education and Community Development

Community education can provide a vital first step for many learners in entering, or re-entering, vocational and personal educational opportunities and many 'first step' programmes favour non-accredited learning as the

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[5] Exploring the Outcomes and Impact of Department of Education and Skills (DES) funded Community education (Draft, July 2010, p. 8)

most effective method for initial engagement in education. However the importance of the non-accredited learning runs deeper than offering an initial entry point to education due to its role in community development practice. Community education is understood as a socially transformative process with practitioners' acting as critical educators. Taking everyday issues as their cue, they facilitate a problem posing process that encourages communities to interpret their world in a critical way. This new reading then informs community development collective actions, underpinned by corresponding reflection, undertaken to promote egalitarian change. This approach often works in a way that is non-accredited as it favours collective advancement over personal advancement.

"community development without the essential elements of emancipatory learning domesticates the activists and subverts the possibility of radical social change…adult education without the conduit of community development remains located in the personal" (Connolly, 1996, p. 40).[6]

1.7 Priorities for Community Education

1.7.1 The importance of non-accredited learning - it builds the capacity of a person to have choices

Non-accredited learning is an essential part of taking the step onto the National Framework of Qualifications; it acts as a strong foundation on which to build one's learning journey. Non-accredited courses are essential for building the necessary skills for further learning such as: increased confidence and prerequisite skills such as self management and gaining a positive experience of learning and understanding. Non-accredited learning also addresses isolation, builds community and essentially builds the capacity of a person to have choices. Please see figure 1.

"Non-accredited learning is a gateway to getting onto an accredited course; it builds your confidence and lets you know about what accreditation is, it doesn't seem so off putting." Learner from Limerick
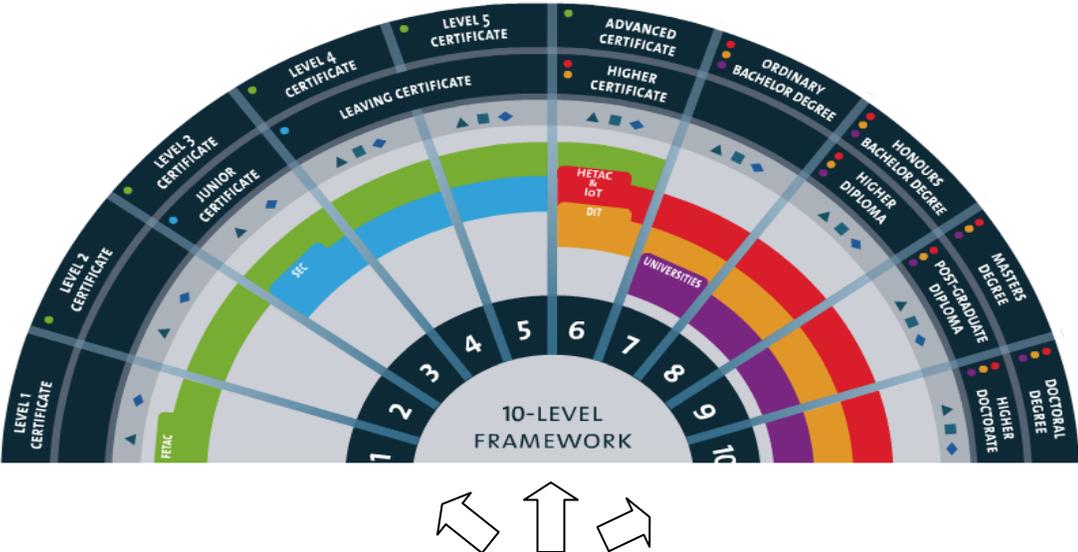

Fig. 1 Non-accredited community education (gateway to the national framework of qualifications)

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[6] Connolly, B. (1996) "Community Development and Adult Education: Prospects for Change?" in Fleming, T., Connolly, B., Ryan, A. (Eds.) Radical Learning for Liberation. Centre for Adult and Community Education. St Patricks College, Maynooth.

1.7.2 The role of community education in access, transfer and progression.

<u>Non-accredited</u> and <u>accredited</u> community education is central to access, transfer and progression due to its unique nature, from a community education network perspective this can also be encapsulated as follows:

Access: The student centred methodology takes cognisance of the lived experience of the person and gives the tools to build the capacity. Community education builds the capacity of individuals to engage in learning, for many it is the first step for accessing further learning.

Transfer: Transformation based on the lived experience of the person occurs during the process of community education. Transfer also occurs in the following ways also: from non-accredited to accredited learning and from non-formal to formal education. Community education acts to bridge the cultural shift from non-formal to formal. Community education learners are supported to move from lower to higher levels of the national qualifications framework.

Progression: This is assisted through the nature of community education: its location and part-time & flexible provision. Community education has accessibility attributes (example of Young Women's Course in An Cosan) furthermore non-accredited learning has a real and important role in the process as demonstrated in Year 1 of the Young Women's course (see appendix 1).

2. Funding Community Education

Preliminary research carried out by the National Collective of Community Based Women's Networks (NCCWN) focused on a small number of women's community groups which receive funding from a variety of sources, this illustrated the variety of funding sources accessed by groups (some from 13 sources). Furthermore, the *Community Education and Social Change* research carried out by Co. Donegal VEC, noted the issue of funding and its implications for groups, however it was not examined in detail.[7]

It appears that no extensive study on funding for community education has been undertaken at a national level. The sector cannot move forward to gain greater independence for growth and development if it is not funded appropriately; in turn this requires a full understanding of the funding environment. A small scale piece of research was carried out with the AONTAS community education network in 2009-2010 which sought to provide an overview of existing funding structures for community education with the aim of creating an informed position paper on the funding mechanisms for community education in terms of how it could benefit community education groups, learners and funders.

2.1. Funding Structures for Community Education

This summary gives a snapshot of the current funding received by a number of members of the CEN: the funding streams, the government departments involved in funding community education, time taken in the application process and the impact of the current funding structure on learners and organisations. A full report of this work is available online.[8]

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[7] *Community Education and Social Change* (2009) Co. Donegal VEC
[8] www.aontas.com

Funding streams for Community Education

From the 40 respondents that answered the question relating to the number of funding streams accessed by community education groups **78** funding streams were named of which the average number access was 4.5 for 07-08 and 4 for 08-09. An outline of the number of funding streams accessed by groups is illustrated in fig. 2.

Some streams were accessed more than others, the majority of funding accessed originated from 10 separate governmental departments (on 92 occasions), the remainder from charitable trusts (26), businesses (5), EU funding (2) and other sources (7). Of the governmental departments, those most commonly accessed is illustrated in the graph, fig. 3.

Fig 2. Graph of the number of funding streams accessed by community education organisations for the years 2007-2008 and 2008-2009.
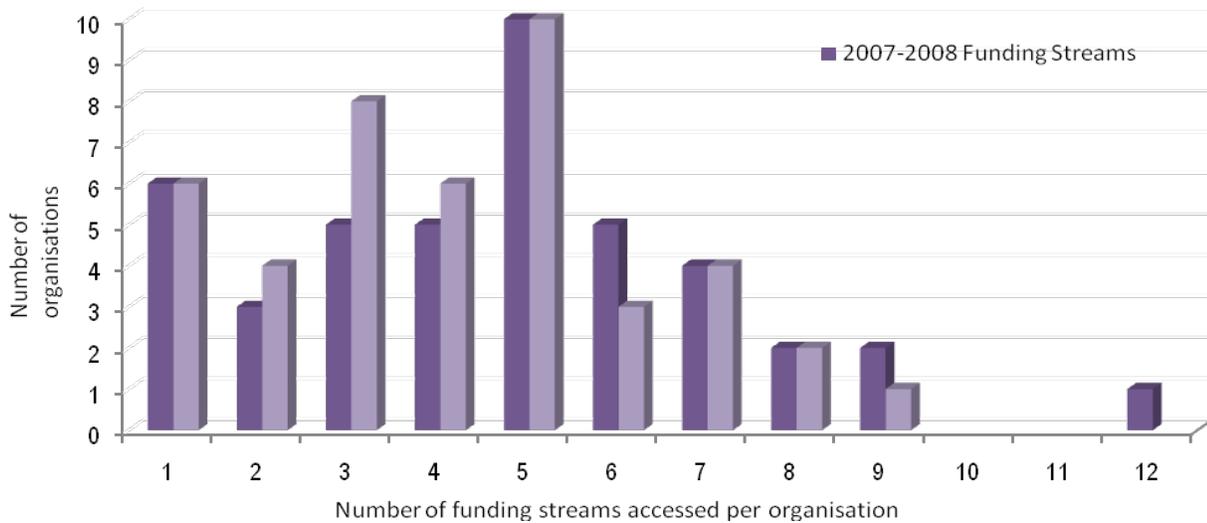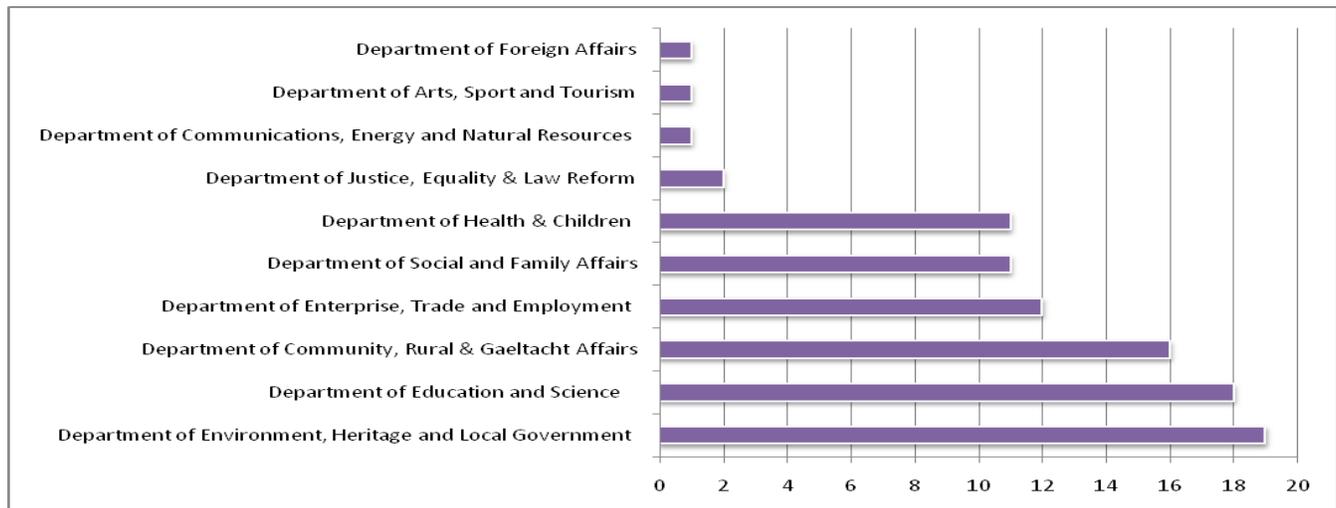

Fig 3. Graph of the number of times funding streams from various governmental departments are used by the respondents.

2.2 Challenges with the Current Funding System for Community Education

Of 40 respondents, an average of 4.5 funding streams was accessed to support their work for the period 2007-2008. This value decreased to 4 funding streams for the following year. The bulk of funding comes from 10 separate governmental departments, with the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local government, the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs comprising the main sources of funding. Further funding mainly originates from charitable trusts.

With regard to the time spent by organisations on the funding process there are huge variations, this may be due to the size of the organisation, the number of classes run and the level of funding they receive. Of the 32 respondents, two-thirds spend an average of between 1-200 hours per year. For voluntary time spent on the funding process it also varied greatly, with two-thirds of the respondents spending time of the application process – ranging from 2 hours to 2000 hours.

Regarding the impact of the funding process on community education provision to learners the main issue that arose was the time. This resulted in less time for course planning and time spent on a one to one level with learners. The lack of continuity between courses was also noted as an impact of the funding process. One could view this in terms of value for money; staff time would be better deployed to learners than to the funding process. Further impact to learners is the type of courses that can be offered, as funding criteria is often linked to the type of courses that can be delivered, courses such as personal development are often difficult to fund as they are not accredited. The opportunity to provide access to third level courses is uncertain and funding for such programmes is unpredictable.

3. Creating a new mechanism for funding community education

3.1 What does funding support?

In general different funding streams for community education support various aspects of the work of a community education organisation for example VEC funding for tutor hours only covers one aspect of community education provision. However, in order to create a full source of funding for community education a number of funding streams must be accessed (which is demonstrated in fig. 2), which is both time consuming, ineffective (in terms of time taken) and also does not lend itself to a sustainable sector as long term planning is thwarted due to the short term nature of funding schemes.

3.2 What needs to be funded?

In order to create an effective funding mechanism for community education it is necessary to get a clear picture of what needs to be funded. Following consultation with the community education network a detailed account was collected and three themes emerged with their corresponding specific examples (please see figure 4). This graph outlines all the areas that must be funded in order to run a community education organisation.

It becomes obvious from the multitude of areas to be funded that if funding for tutor costs is only received that all other areas must be met from additional funding. This is an ineffective process as numerous funding streams must be accessed in order to create 'whole funding' for a community education organisation. This will also explain why the average number of funding mechanisms used by community education groups in the CEN totals 4 (some with as many as 12).[9] The inability to sustain a community education organisation with one of the

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[9] CEN Research Report on Funding Streams Accessed by CEN members

existing funding streams points to the need for an alternative, multi-annual funding mechanism that is cost-effective in the long term. Currently, the time allocated (both staff time and voluntary) to funding applications ranges from 2 – 1000 hours depending on the size of the organisation, number of learners and the kinds of funding streams being used.[10] Maintaining this system is both ineffective (cost and time) and also creates an uncertain community education service where access, transfer and progression for learners is limited due to the lack of certainty around funding and continuity of courses.

Fig.4 Three core areas to be met by a ring-fenced funding mechanism.

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[10] CEN Research Report on Funding Streams Accessed by CEN members

3.3 The White Paper on Adult Education: Chapter 5 Community Education

The need for adequate resourcing of the community education sector was highlighted in The White Paper on Adult Education, Learning for Life in chapter 5[11]: Community Education. It states that:

> "as part of the consultation in preparing the White Paper, community-based groups drew attention not only to the inadequacy of the financial and other resources at their disposal, but also to the short-term nature of much of their funding; the multiplicity of funding sources; the differing demands of the respective funders and the fact that many of these groups were the indirect beneficiaries of funding allocated to other bodies rather than allocated directly to the groups themselves." (p. 115)

As demonstrated in this paper the funding challenges still face community education groups ten years after the publication of the White Paper on Adult Education.

In addressing these issues the following objectives were stated (p. 116):
(a) a more streamlined funding mechanism;
(b) long-term funding;
(c) a separate budget line for Community Education in the non-statutory sector, to be funded in the longer term locally through the Local Adult Learning Boards.

However the main stumbling block to the progression of this funding mechanism is that it was envisaged that the "Department of Education and Science and the National Adult Learning Council" will allocate the funds (p.116). As the National Adult Learning Council and Local Adult Learning Boards did not come to fruition, this paper endeavours to provide a valid, effective, practical alternative to that which was proposed in the White Paper. The next section will outline what needs to be funded for the effective community education sector and guidelines to how this can be achieved.

4. Proposed mechanism for funding community education effectively

In order to create an effective funding mechanism for community education, one government department must take the lead role in this process. Although community education and community development are interlinked the government department most suited for responsibility for community education is the **Department of Education and Skills**. Community education is a vibrant and important part of the adult education system and it must be seen within the context of the entire education system in order ensure: its recognition and a cohesive and complimentary education system that promotes access, transfer and progression within and between education sectors (formal education and community education).

It is proposed that one main source of funding to cover the complete cost of community education will be provided by the Department of Education and skills. In terms of what should be funded, the complete cost of community education must be taken into account otherwise the community education sector will continue to be blighted by insecure, unsustainable funding from a variety of sources. A set of proposed guidelines for the

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[11] White Paper on Adult Education: Learning for Life (2000). Dublin

provision of ring-fenced, as outline funding it outlined below. The aim of the guideline is to ensure that funding provided is an effective use of resources that ensure quality education provision for learners.

4.1 Guidelines for effective funding mechanism

1. **Funding will cover the true costs of community education**
   Rationale: If only funding for tutor costs is received then all other areas must be met from additional funding. This is an ineffective process as numerous funding streams must be accessed in order to create 'whole funding' for a community education organisation. The inability to sustain a community education organisation with one of the existing funding streams is an issue for the community education sector. The complete cost of funding community education must be central to the new funding mechanism.

2. **Multi-annual funding scheme for community education groups – 3 year cycles**
   Rationale: In order to create a sustainable effective sector long-term planning must be possible therefore multiannual funding must be secured. This was also noted in the White Paper on Adult Education and 3 years was also suggested (p. 116).

3. **Education provision that will be covered by the fund will include: vocational and non-vocational learning**
   Rationale: Community education is important for building the social fabric of communities and therefore it is essential that a variety of learning options are presented which meet the requirements of the community. Therefore there is a role for both non-vocational and vocational learning whereby both have equal weighting due to the complementary and important role them play for learners.

4. **Education provision that will be covered by the fund will include accredited and non-accredited learning**
   Rationale: This point is constantly raised by both practitioners and learners (in the Community Education Network and the community education research[12]). Non-accredited learning is hugely important in the context of lifelong learning and as a gateway to the national framework of qualifications. It is imperative to taking the first step back into education and its funding must be on a par with accredited learning.

5. **Funding mechanism will be locally managed**
   Rationale: For ease of administration and effectiveness funding should come from a central source but be delivered locally. This was also proposed in the White Paper, whereby the Local Adult Learning Boards would have taken on this role in the administration of funding for community education.

6. **Funding will not be target-led but community-led**
   Rationale: One of the most valuable aspects of community education is its ability to respond quickly and effectively to the community. In order to maintain this flexibility and approach funding criteria should not be restrictive or target-led as this is in contrary to the very purpose and benefit of community education.

7. **Funding administrators will have specific expertise in community education**

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[12] Exploring the Outcomes and Impact of Department of Education and Skills (DES) funded Community education (Draft, July 2010, p. 8)

Rationale: Community education is a complex and often misunderstood part of the adult education sector. In order to effectively fund the sector administrators must have the knowledge of how community education groups use funding and what methods of evaluation are effective.

8. **Effective and authentic evaluation for the funding process**
   Rationale: Evaluation of funding is essential; however it is imperative that it reflects the true outcomes of community education, which often cannot be measured through standard methods. Effective evaluation will also benefit the sector and research in terms of its possible role in a longitudinal study on outcomes of community education. In order to do this the following is proposed: The creation of an effective evaluation mechanism for the funding scheme will be led by a Department of Education and Skills working group whereby one member will be represented by the AONTAS. AONTAS will work with the community education network in creating an effective proposal for funding evaluation that will feed into this process.

5. Conclusion

In order to create an effective and sustainable community education sector it must be adequately and effectively funded. The mechanism proposed looks at both what needs to be funded and how it can be funded with the aim of creating a new funding mechanism for community education that takes into account the nature of community education and the context of reduced resources. It aims to make the best use of resources, avoid duplication in terms of time taken in the funding application process, and provide sustainable long-term funding that will ensure a community education sector that meets the requirements of communities and learners. It is based on current research together with the grassroots views of members of the community education network which have shaped the document and therefore it accurately reflects the community education sector.

What needs to be funded

How community education can be funded

1. Funding will cover the true costs of community education
2. Multi-annual funding scheme for community education groups
3. Education provision that will be covered by the fund will include: vocational and non-vocational learning
4. Education provision that will be covered by the fund will include accredited and non-accredited learning
5. Funding mechanism will be locally managed
6. Funding will not be target-led but community-led
7. Funding administrators will have specific expertise in community education

Appendices

Appendix 1: White Paper on Adult Education: Characteristics of Community Education

Chapter 5 Community education

5.5 Support to the Development of Community Education (p. 113)

Key characteristics of the community education sector are:-

- its non-statutory nature;

- its rootedness in the community, not just in terms of physical location, but also in that its activists have lived and worked for many years within the community, have a deep knowledge and respect for its values, culture,

- and circumstances, and an understanding of community needs and capacity;

- its problem-solving flexible focus based on trust;

- its process rather than syllabus focus - participants are engaged from the outset as equal partners in identifying needs, designing and implementing programmes, and adapting them on an ongoing basis;

- its respect for participants and its reflection of their lived experience;

- its concern with communal values and its commitment to match curriculum and pedagogy with the needs and interests of students;

- its promotion of personalised learning and flexibility within the environment of a learning group. Its goals include not just individual development but also collective community advancement, especially in marginalised communities;

- its placing a key emphasis on providing the supports necessary for successful access and learning -- particularly guidance, mentoring, continuous feedback and dialogue, childcare etc;

- its collective social purpose and inherently political agenda - to promote critical reflection, challenge existing structures, and promote empowerment, improvement so that participants are enabled to influence the social contexts in which they live;

- its promotion of participative democracy. It sees a key role for Adult Education in transforming society.

"This is the first exam I have ever completed and I am 47, I am so proud. If only I had had a teacher like Nyamwenda years ago who believed in me - imagine what I might have done."

The outcomes of community education impact the learner, their families and the community. Due to the diversity of provision available within the one organisation learners can move fluidly from basic to higher education. An Cosán houses the Shanty Educational Project Ltd. Since 1985 The Shanty has developed and refined a distinctive model of community education. "Transformative Learning" embodies a curriculum that touches the mind, heart, body and soul in a belief that it can generate enough individual and communal energy to change lives and communities.

"I was scared going into the class initially, mixing with people from so many different cultures. In case I said the wrong thing but it has been fantastic - we are a great team!"

In The Shanty a wide range of programmes span from basic education to third level education. Most are open to all local women and men while some cater for specific target groups (e.g., including young women, older people and community workers). Essential adult learner supports ensure that all participants reach their goals. Since 1999 The Shanty has welcomed over 6000 participants through its doors, 1251 awards were achieved by students on courses accredited by FETAC and HETAC (Further and Higher Education and Training Awards Council) and ICS 6 and 7 (Computer Skills).

Last year, the curriculum of The Shanty responded to the changing needs of the community by:

547	Student places were accessed
186	New students to the centre
32	Classes to choose from
14	Accredited options were available to participants. On the National Qualifications Framework and range from FETAC Level 2 to HETAC Level 7.
214	Accredited certificates awarded to 131 students

In addition **student supports** are provided including: supervised study, ICT, Moodle, peer study groups, tutorials, one-to-one and literacy supports. Through the supportive, learner-centred approach retention rates are high, e.g. the BA Degree Programme in Leadership and Community Development has 100% retention.

"I look forward to this all week. I was so isolated and introverted".

Learner progression is central to ensuring learners can move onto appropriate courses, as such all tutors pay close attention to supporting students to identify 'next steps' on their learning journey**.** For example, **a** progression pathways workshop is held for past and current students of the Diploma in Community Drugs Work

programme. As a result of the 17 students who completed the course 9 were pursuing degree programmes and 4 were taking up employment.

"I am on the Young Women's Education Programme and my 2 year old son gets minded every morning so I can study. This programme has been a great experience; my computer skills are much better and I am much more confident using the computer. Computers are the future and I want to study to further my career, and I hope to get a place on one of the courses I have applied for next year."

Volunteering is central to the functioning of the organisation. There are eight core volunteers in The Shanty alone, 7 of whom have participated in courses at the Shanty. The nature of community education supports people to engage in learning, to successfully complete a course, to volunteer at the Centre and often to take up employment in the sector. It grows its own supports and volunteers

"My biggest achievement is how much I have changed within my work and how much it has benefited the work overall. I also acquired a full time job as a result of this course and one that I really enjoy and am passionate about."

The Challenges

The biggest challenge to the work of An Cosan, and its education project – the Shanty, is funding. It is not merely an issue of the amount of funding but they way it is administered. For the year 2010, in order to maintain the work of An Cosan **13 government departments' funding streams** were accessed. The time taken by a part-time grant writer, centre managers, co-ordinators and financial staff was approximately **1500 hours** (for the year).

An associated challenge that this process poses is that the funding applications are different for all 13 streams. This means that a different process is required for each: different data is required and different terminology used. This has a knock-on effect for reporting, all 13 streams require a report and again the format and process for each differs. Furthermore, the administrative cost of the funding application process is generally not covered by the funding stream.

Given the strain that the funding process presents time is taken away from working with learners and there is a friction between responding to the needs of the community and learners and the requirements of the criteria of the funding stream. In order to create learner-centred community education that is effective and value for money – a change to the funding mechanism is needed.

This case study demonstrates the value of community education and the need to provide a distinct funding stream for community education which is administered in a standardised manner with clear guidelines for application, data collection and reporting purposes.

AONTAS Response to Developing Recognition of Prior Learning in the context of the National Skills Strategy Upskilling Objectives

Berni Brady and Niamh O'Reilly

22nd November 2010

AONTAS is the National Adult learning Organisation. Our 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.

Initial Response to the Document

The document is very comprehensive setting out key information and the underpinning principles of RPL and why it is important. An important distinction has been made between formative and summative approaches and while the summative approach is the one emphasised by the EGFSN it is important to note that an affirmative approach may not only be necessary, but more appropriate for people with low levels of educational qualifications or who have been out of formal education for a long time. Statistics from the AONTAS Information Referral Service in 2009 when unemployment was rising rapidly showed that 81% of unemployed individuals contacting the service stated that it had been more than ten years since they have been in education. 52% of these individuals have been out of education for more than twenty years and a further 4% stated that it had been more than 30 years since they were in education. Many people with low qualifications have also had poor experiences of formal education and may be reluctant to engage in further education and training. Using an initial formative approach and moving into a summative approach when confidence building has taken place could be a useful way to proceed with this cohort of people.

Observations to the text

Benefits to the learner

- RPL values different knowledge and skills
- Builds knowledge through the process of portfolio building.

Benefits to organisations

- RPL values different knowledge
- RPL values different teaching processes and portfolio creation promotes critical reflection
- RPL could be possible for learners at lower levels of the NFQ.

Context

One of the main roles of the adult educator is to value the lived experience of learners, therefore by its very nature adult education lends itself to the recognition of prior learning. RPL is not merely an administrative process but an educational activity that engages the learner with their learning histories which in turn gives rise to new knowledge. Through the process of critical reflection learners can relate their knowledge to a corresponding standard level of learning. It is within this context that we are suggesting the following recommendations with regard to the practical application of the RPL process.

A. Put mechanisms in place to ensure that those most educationally disadvantaged benefit from the RPL process.

It is important to consider that those most educationally advantaged could be further advantaged by their ability to engage in the RPL process. Therefore if RPL is to have significant effect in promoting social inclusion "a realistic dialogue would have to be realistically possible between what is enshrined in curricula and individuals' prior learning."[1] In this case those who are most educationally disadvantaged require a process that values their lived experience, improves their capacity to engage in RPL and sufficiently supports their participation in the RPL process. The White Paper on Adult Education, Learning for Life (2000) proposed a national training programme to develop a pool of highly skilled Learning assessors(p 133) whose role would be guiding and assessing individual learners through the assessment process. This proposal could be revisited in the light of current developments as a way of supporting lower qualified people through the RPL process.

B. Support those at the lower (1-3) and mid (4-5) levels of the National Framework of Qualification to engage in the RPL process.

This cohort constitutes the largest proportion of individuals targeted for upskilling and therefore an effective, learner-centred approach should be adopted to ensure maximum participation in RPL. In order to engage learners at the lower levels of the NQF a key consideration should be paid to building the capacity of learners to identify the value, applicability and feasibility of RPL through effective facilitation and support. Coupled with the first recommendation, and in order to provide learners with sufficient support in the process, a group approach could be taken rather than viewing RPL solely as an individual endeavour. Benefits of a group approach include: reduced costs in facilitating the process; peer support; and as a learning activity in itself. Through the process of group learning agreed assessment methods could be identified in order to provide the most effective

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[1] Harris, J., (1999) Ways of seeing the recognition of prior learning (rpl): what contribution can such practices make to social inclusion? *Studies in the Education of Adults*. Oct 99, Vol. 31 Issue 2.

approaches to competence identification. The group approach to RPL has been identified in the UK[2] and in Switzerland[3] however research has generally focused on RPL in a higher level context, different approaches may be required for basic education (in addition to online). Adult and community education is ideally positioned to contribute to the development of such approaches.

C. Commitment to ensuring RPL is accessible to all students in higher level education, particularly mature students.

Mature students have been recognised as exceptional students who not only bring a vast wealth of lived experience to college but are defined by it, it creates their learner identity.[4] RPL would provide an excellent tool for valuing and validating the experience of mature students and assist in facilitating access and shortening the time spent on a course through module exemptions. Mature students must be aware of the possibility and value of the RPL process before and during the third level education experience.

Action

Key issue for successful implementation of recommendation A and B:

Build the capacity of, and support, learners (NFQ 1-5) to identify the value of engaging in a RPL process. A key driver for implementation is adult and community education organisations.

- Support education organisations, particularly community education, to create sessions for a group of learners to explore RPL and support the compiling of portfolios etc. The group support would be needed to empower learners to recognise the value of their lived experiences and unearth existing skills.
  - ➢ RPL could be built into part of unaccredited personal development courses.
  - ➢ Predevelopment work, with respect to building the capacity of learners, would be essential at this level.
  - ➢ A small financial support could be offered to encourage education providers of unaccredited courses to incorporate a level of validation into the current provision.

Key issue for successful implementation of recommendation C:

Create awareness and understanding of the potential of RPL amongst potential and current mature students. A key driver would be Mature Student Officers/Access Officers in Third Level Institutions.

- Incorporate RPL into all information sessions for mature students.

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[2] 2000. The Learning Trust. Effective Practice in APEL, UK
[3] Werquin, P. (2009) Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning: Islands of Good Practice, OECD, Paris.
[4] Murphy, M. & Fleming, T. (1998). *College knowledge: Power, policy and the mature student experience at university*. Maynooth: MACE.

- Incorporate RPL into all induction and support sessions.

Recommendation 4 (from discussion document)

Of key importance is the training of staff involved in the RPL process, In particular they must be trained in adult learning processes.

Recommendation 6 (from discussion document)

Both AONTAS and NALA could play key roles in the communication of RPL and could be added to the bodies already identified.

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