

Community Education Conference Briefing Paper



The role of community education for skills
development and social inclusion



AONTAS
Community Education Conference
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What is community education?

Community education is a distinct form of adult learning where people come together in their local areas to engage in non-formal collaborative learning, which meets their needs and/or the needs of their communities. In Ireland community education began in the 1980s as a form of adult learning located in disadvantaged areas which aimed not only to provide opportunities for individual personal development but also to give learners the skills to tackle disadvantage and social exclusion individually and collectively. It was spearheaded by local women's groups at a time when women were excluded from statutory training and labour market opportunities because of Live Register regulations. Many of these women developed their confidence and skills within their local community groups and have gone on to become leaders and activists within their own communities, and in the external adult education and community development sectors thus providing testament to the success of community education. Since the 1980s community education has grown and developed in different ways providing accredited and non-accredited opportunities for thousands of learners across the country with courses ranging across the spectrum of personal development, confidence building, skills development, social and cultural activities and civic engagement.

Community education as a distinct strand of adult education provision was recognised in the White Paper on Adult Education, Learning for Life (2000) and its particular role in attracting back to learning people who did not benefit from formal education first time round was highlighted. This is still a huge issue for the Irish education system. For example a report from the ESRI in 2009 on early school leaving revealed that 9000 people leave school before completing the Leaving Certificate every year and this figure has remained steady since the mid 1990s.¹ The National Skills Strategy has set out as its target the upskilling of 70,000 people to Level 3 NQF and a further 260,000 to Levels 4 and 5. So, community education has an obvious and important role to play in the delivery of that strategy.

How has AONTAS supported community education?

AONTAS has been a champion of community education for thirty years and our support for the Women's Community Education Groups and Networks led to the establishment of the National Collective of Community based Women's Networks as an independent organisation in 2003. AONTAS has also over the past five years established and supported the Community Education Network among its members with 120 organisations participating. Key outcomes of the Network include: BAI funded television programmes, Wheel funded advocacy training, 4 manifestos, 12 documented action-focussed meetings, a research informed position paper on funding for community education, a new definition of community education and importantly a cohesive, strong and active collective of community education practitioners.

Two recent research projects have also been undertaken by AONTAS exploring the outcomes and benefits of community education provided both through the Department of Education and Skills funded community education programmes and through programmes provided by organisations aspiring to 'social action' model of community education:-

- The DES research entitled **More than just a Course** was launched during the Adult Learners' Festival in 2011.
- The 'Social Action' model research entitled **Sowing the Seeds of Social Change** will be launched at the AONTAS conference **Making a Living; Making a Life** on November 17th 2011.

Who participates in community education?

In 2010, 56,000 adult learners participated in community education programmes funded by the Department of Education and Skills. AONTAS has estimated that another 30,000 learners participate in programmes run by independent and semi-independent providers but this figure has not been verified in recent years and requires more research. According to both research projects conducted by AONTAS, community education attracts those learners who not only have the least qualifications but who also have the least social recognition, with the 'social action' providers catering for more people experiencing poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion. Generally more women than men participate working out at around a ratio of 85:15 with a higher representation of men in the 'social action' groups at 76:24. The 'social action' groups also attracted a larger

number of younger people with 85% working age and 33% over 55 as compared to 48% of the DES sample. Unemployment is high in the 'social action' sample but comparable to the DES cohort. However the long term unemployment rate for this sample is double the national rate and the DES sample. The 'social action' model research also found that a high rate of learners (64%) experienced one of the deprivation indicators measured. This figure compares to 11.5% nationally and 38% in the DES research. The most frequently named indicator was having problems with money due to ordinary living expenses.

Who funds and supports community education?

Funding for community education is both complex and complicated. The original women's community education groups carried out their work on a shoestring, receiving small amounts of funding from charities, church organisations and some VECs through the Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme (ALCES) budget which was introduced in the mid eighties. The advent of the European Community Initiative, New Opportunities for Women (NOW) in the nineties which was accessed by AONTAS on behalf of its groups transformed the work of the community education groups and enabled AONTAS to lobby for government support for community education. When NOW funding ended in 1998 the work of the AONTAS groups was supported through the DES Women's Education Initiative (1997-2000). The Education Equality Initiative which followed for the period 2000-2006 extended the range of target groups identified under the equality legislation and widened the scope of community education.

The White Paper (2000) recommended both long term and distinct funding for community education. However these recommendations were never implemented except for a ring fenced 10% of the BTEI budget plus increases in the ALCES Budget. While the technical support group for community education envisaged as a substructure of the proposed National Adult Learning Council never materialised, the appointment of Community Education Facilitators to local VECs was a key development in the support of community education within the statutory sector. However there are still many independent and semi-independent providers of community education. As many as 120 of these are members of the AONTAS Community Education Network. AONTAS conducted a small piece of research with a sample of these groups in 2009/10. From the 40 respondents that answered the question relating to the number of funding streams accessed by community education groups **78** funding streams were identified. These included ten separate government departments. AONTAS has proposed and campaigned for a distinct funding stream for community education with multi-annual budgets to allow for strategic and long term planning.

Why should it be supported?

Community education is successful in reaching disadvantaged target groups and has a variety of benefits and outcomes.

There are clear target groups for the provision of DES funded community education and those reflect those prioritised within the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion* and also in European Social Fund requirements². AONTAS research has found that community education is reaching many of those groups but that more resources need to be allocated to outreach and supports in order to engage with those who are hardest to reach. The research also found that learners experienced a range of benefits from community education in terms of qualifications, skills, health and social and civic benefits. 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. These achievements are a pre-cursor for the acquisition of the generic skills outlined in the National Skills Strategy and are a necessary foundation for vocational skills. 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 have had poor experiences of school resulting in their reluctance to engage with new education and training opportunities.

Community education is a gateway to progression to further education, training and employment.

Community education plays a key role in providing the necessary transferable skills required in a changing working world such as:-

- improved communication skills
- working as part of a team
- time management skills
- increased digital skills

Community education also:-

- 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 thus allowing employers and learners to meet and learn from each other; and research as part of learning projects , allowing learners to find out more about their community/topic of interest in a work framed environment³

Community education provision represents excellent value for money

Even with conservative estimates community education almost entirely pays for itself due to the number of learners who begin to volunteer as a result of their time in community education. The AONTAS/DES research estimated a low return of €9.1m and a high return of €28.8m to the state as a result of this activity more than compensating for the €10m spent on the community education programme.⁴ Volunteering, while not a paid activity is an excellent way to use skills acquired through community learning and to practice them in an organised way. Such skills are eminently transferable to a work situation and are vital in keeping connected to the labour market during the current recession.

Why is SOLAS relevant for community education?

The newly established Further Education and Training Authority, SOLAS will be the overarching management structure to deliver quality Further Education and Training and its establishment is one of the most significant developments for adult and community education for the foreseeable future. Further education and training programmes will be integrated within the new VEC structures and it is intended that the learner will be at the centre of the change process with a clearer focus on outcomes and progression for learners and stronger links to the labour market. Adult education is included under the broad umbrella of further education with particular emphasis on programmes giving people a headstart onto the qualifications framework. Given the key role community education plays in attracting adults back to learning and building a foundation of confidence and self esteem its inclusion within the vision and action plan of SOLAS is key to its future development and sustainability. The outcomes of the AONTAS conference will therefore inform the AONTAS response to the draft action plan currently being prepared by the SOLAS Implementation Group.

3 Feedback from CEN providers in relation to their programmes

4 Community Education: More than just a Course: AONTAS 2011

