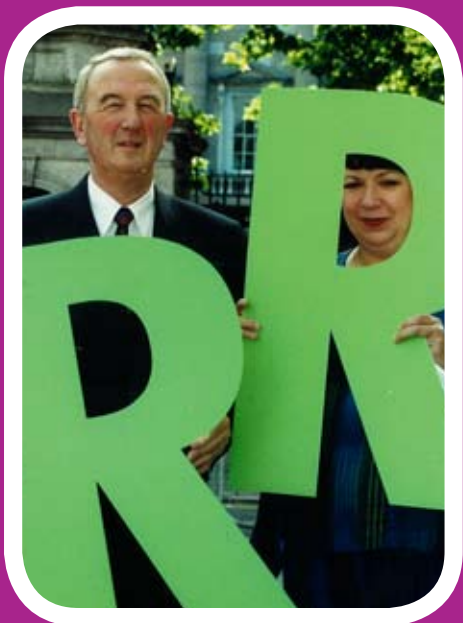
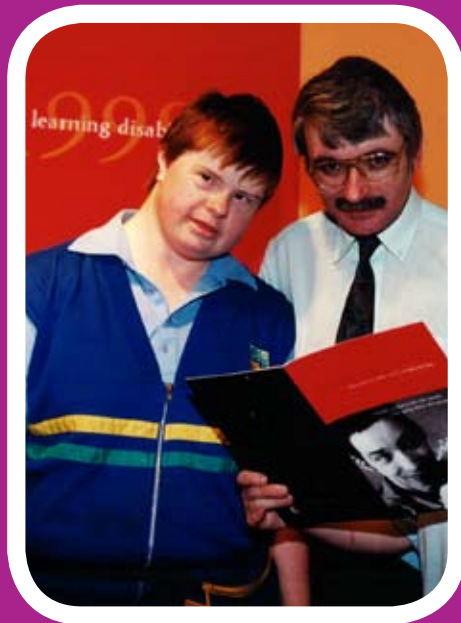
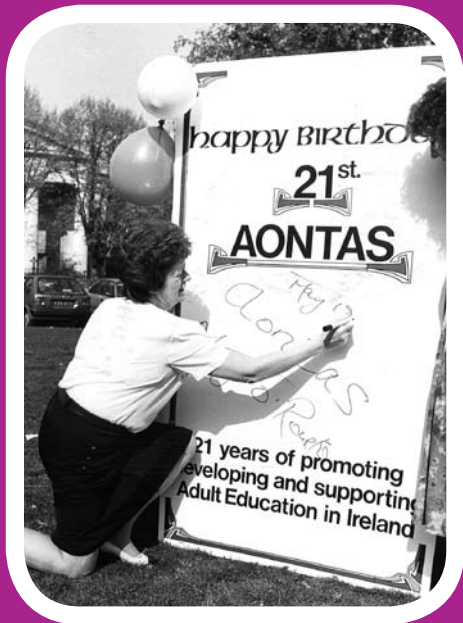




“Many Happy Returns!”

AONTAS Policy Positions
Briefing Paper May 2009





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Introduction

The bewildering context within which adult education providers and learners are working in 2009 really challenges us to draw on our most creative and imaginative capacities as never before. In the short space of eight months, the economy has gone into freefall and no-one could have anticipated the devastating changes which have followed and the rapidity with which they have happened. This paper highlights the main issues currently facing adult learners and the adult learning sector in Ireland as a whole and proposes some responses to those issues. These responses acknowledge the constraints on resources given the current economic climate.



Why is adult learning important in the current environment?

Adult learning as part of the lifelong learning cycle is a valuable instrument for addressing the challenges of a recession at a number of levels including economic, social and personal. Ireland's previous economic success was attributed to a number of factors, including an educated workforce which provided a basis for a knowledge economy. The first significant investments in adult learning are less than ten years old but have already yielded important outcomes, notably an increase in the demand for learning opportunities particularly through literacy and labour market programmes.



The government has acknowledged through its previous National Development Plans the key role of lifelong learning in the economic sustainability of the country. Now the social purpose of lifelong learning needs to come to the fore as a critical process to support people to cope with the devastating effects of unemployment and its consequences; loss of self esteem and social isolation. Research has shown that not only does adult learning foster sustainable development, social inclusion and active citizenship but also it results in health benefits, particularly for older learners.



One example of a country that took the approach of investing in learning as a response to a recession is Finland. In the early 1990s, when unemployment rose to 20% the Finnish Government created a strategy for implementing its vision of a Finnish knowledge economy. Finland employed long-term structural change to invest in its human resources which transformed its economy and created a more socially inclusive society.

What factors currently affect adult learning in Ireland?

A large cohort of the Irish population still has a low level of educational attainment. Less than 8% of Irish adults aged between 25 and 64 participate in adult education and training compared with the EU average of 11% (CSO Quarterly National Household Survey, 2006). From the last Census (2006), the highest educational level of one in six of the population over the age of 15 was primary school and 36% had not completed secondary education. In relation to adult literacy, the only statistics currently available are those from the IALS (International Adult Literacy Survey) which was last carried out in 1995. Data gathered from the survey was published in 1997 and found the literacy level of 24% of adults in Ireland to be below that required to fully participate in Irish society. These figures need to be revisited and updated in order for government policy and services to address current levels of literacy as well as measuring the effectiveness of investments made so far. The next survey, PIAAC¹ is due to be carried out in 2013. In September of last year, Minister for Lifelong Learning Sean Haughey made a commitment to Ireland participating in the initial phases of this survey. However Ireland's full participation in this survey is now in doubt given the current economic crisis.

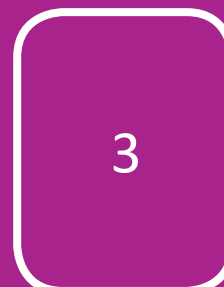


Despite the economic downturn there are still skill shortages in particular professions for example Information Technology, Health and Social Care, Financial and Marketing and Sales at the higher end of the skills scale.




Policy Context

Policy within the adult and community education sector is informed by the Government White Paper, 'Learning for Life' (2000), which sets out a framework for the development of the sector, and has identified adult learning as a way of helping people cope with change. It also outlines six priority areas for adult education i.e. consciousness raising, citizenship, cohesion, competitiveness, cultural development, and community building.




1 <http://www.oecd.org>




Implementation of the vision set out in the White Paper is also affected by the availability and allocation of resources and cutbacks across the board will have major implications for the delivery of the adult education service. In October 2008 the Budget included cutbacks of 500 places to the Back to Education (BTEI) initiative, as well as cuts to the Senior Traveller Training Centres and language supports for immigrants.

Supplementary Budget 2009



Following a disappointing Budget in October 2008 in which cuts were made to the adult education sector, the measures contained in the recent supplementary budget recognised lifelong learning and education as a key instrument for addressing the challenges of a recession. The Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment, The Department of Education & Science and The Department of Social & Family Affairs agreed a joint approach to support those who lose their jobs. Latest Live Register figures stand at 371,271², with the ESRI estimating that unemployment will rise to 17% by the end of 2010³. If this is the case then the activation measures proposed will fail to meet a greater public demand for adult learning. The measures include:

- An additional 6,910 places for unemployed people in the further and higher education sectors including 1,500 PLC places, 700 Redundant Apprentice IoT Scheme places, 280 Accelerated Level 6 Certificate Programmes places, 1,500 part time third level places and 930 part time transition courses places.
- Additional Training Initiatives Strategy places including 12,015 ten week and 1,833 twenty week training courses.
- A pilot scheme for short-term workers which will provide training and income support to 277 workers considered to be in vulnerable employment.



While these activation measures are welcomed they do not go anywhere near addressing the human fallout of our rapidly deteriorating economy. For example if the ESRI predictions hold true half a million people could be facing unemployment in 2010. Already the pressure on providers is beginning to show with a reported increase of 25% in demand for services in the first quarter of 2009. The effects of the 3% reduction in the budget of the VEC announced in October 2008 and the prospect of a staff embargo will add to the difficulties faced by providers trying to cope with the new situation.

2 Live Register, March 2009 www.cso.ie

3 ESRI Quarterly Report April 2009 www.esri.ie

AONTAS and Adult Learning in Ireland

AONTAS policy positions are informed through consultation with a variety of different stakeholders. These include :-

- **Our Executive Committee** which includes representatives from the formal and non formal adult learning sector, as well as individual adult learners
- **Our membership** (standing currently at 600, and comprising individuals, community groups, and service providers)
- **Our Networks** (Our Senior Learner Network includes over 200 older learners throughout the country. Our Community Education Network has a membership of approximately 50 community education organisations throughout Ireland.)
- **Our Information Referral Service:** AONTAS provides information to the general public about their learning options and supports available. In 2008 almost 7000 learners contacted AONTAS about further education and training – this was double the number of queries received in 2007. An analysis of figures to date in 2009 indicates that AONTAS has dealt with just over 2,000 queries in the first quarter.

Data gathered from stakeholders indicates trends and patterns experienced by providers and learners in delivering and accessing adult learning throughout Ireland, and informs AONTAS responses to the current crisis.

1. Adult Education providers must be resourced to meet the current demand.

Data gathered from our membership and information service indicate that recent cutbacks in education are stretching an already under- resourced sector. Meanwhile, pressure on the services of providers and support services such as Guidance Counsellors and Information Officers is on the increase in response to a greater public demand for adult learning.

47% of those who contacted AONTAS in the first quarter of this year indicated that they had recently been made unemployed. AONTAS has also seen a rapid increase in the numbers of men contacting the service. 67% of the men contacting the service indicated that they had recently been made unemployed and wanted to return to education.

However a further 39% of these men stated that they couldn't find courses at FETAC Level 3 and Level 4 which is a growing concern as most of these individuals were not yet ready to progress to Levels 5 and above. These trends are similar to those currently experienced by the Adult Educational Guidance Service which has reported a 25% increase in clients in the first quarter of 2009.


General feedback from support services throughout the country also indicates concerns about cutbacks and budgets and that there is a shortage of Adult Education courses available locally and regionally in some areas. It is clear that if providers are expected to deal with the needs of the newly unemployed, that resources need to be put in place to enable them to do this. Recent announcements in the Supplementary Budget are completely inadequate to meet demand.

2. People must have access to the most recent, accurate information about their learning and support options.

Users of the AONTAS Information Referral Service report general confusion about the range and location of training and education options, their own eligibility status and the financial and ancillary supports available to them. 68% of learners contacting the service indicated that knowing where to access information is a barrier in itself. This situation is becoming more complicated since the introduction of new initiatives in the Supplementary Budget. Out of 1571 people who contacted AONTAS in the first quarter of 2009, 1257 requested a copy of the AONTAS Information Booklet. It is therefore evident that clear, concise information of this nature should be widely accessible by both referral services and clients.

The role of guidance must be strengthened. Adult educational guidance services are often the first port of call for those who have recently been made redundant and who want to go back to education. While information is available to any person requesting it, the restriction of guidance services to






particular target groups means that newly unemployed adults have no access to guidance services. Furthermore the services are currently operating within restricted budgets while at the same time demand is growing rapidly. In the current crisis there is a strong argument for the expansion of the service as a means of helping people cope with the recession at a personal and professional level.

Referral and support systems must work coherently to ensure the best possible service to the client. In particular, strong links must be developed and fostered between the staff of the Department of Social and Family Affairs, the Local Employment Services, FAS and the AEGI. Staff in these services need to be supported to liaise with one another on a continuous basis with a view to keeping lines of communication open and ensuring a freeflow of information.




3. Community education and community development budgets must be protected to ensure that community groups can provide necessary supports to prevent social isolation and marginalisation.

Community education in non formal settings plays a valuable role in moving people out of poverty and into employment. Community education groups are local, self-managed, voluntary organisations and are supported for their education and social inclusion work through a range of agencies and government departments, including the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.




The Supplementary Budget has cut back expenditure in the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs by €47.4 million with the overall revised budget for this Department now standing at €443.7 million. While the revised estimates for how this will impact on the community and voluntary sector are not yet published, the Department has already indicated its intention to make savings of €16.2 million from agencies and organisations which fall under its remit, including the community and voluntary sector.⁴

Community and voluntary sector organisations are key to engaging target groups in further education, especially those experiencing educational disadvantage, and are already under-resourced to carry out this work. A weakened community and voluntary sector infrastructure will not be able to engage in outreach and support required by adults experiencing educational disadvantage and social isolation.



Community education groups involved in the Community Education Network established by AONTAS in 2007 have identified ways in which they could be supported in their social inclusion work.⁵ Community education groups must have a stronger voice within local authority structures. This could be achieved through representation on local VEC committees. Social Inclusion Officers within the local authority need to work closely with community education providers.

4. Cutbacks to the National Women's Strategy and the Equality for Women Measure will prevent women from accessing further training and education.



The cross-departmental nature of funding to community education makes it extremely vulnerable to cutbacks from other government departments. Both the National Strategy for Women and the Equality for Women Measure have recently been cut by over 50%. Feedback from AONTAS membership highlights that initiatives which target women are being scaled back significantly. These initiatives are crucial to enabling women to access further education, but also to moving into leadership and decision-making roles in Irish society. Latest figures from the CSO also indicate that female unemployment is on the rise, with the percentage increase in April 2009 higher than it was for men⁶.

4 Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Press Release April 7th 2009 www.pobail.ie

5 Community Education Network Manifesto April 2009 www.aontas.com

6 CSO April 2009

5. Adult learning initiatives which target educational disadvantage, such as VTOS, BTEI, and adult guidance, must continue to be funded and strengthened.

AONTAS believes that an upskilling and retraining strategy should utilise existing adult education infrastructure. While the introduction of new initiatives such as the Pilot Training Scheme for Workers on Part Time is welcome, there are also initiatives in place which can fulfil this function. In addition the adult education sector has developed significant expertise in meeting the learning needs of communities throughout the country.

The Back to Education Initiative is the 'first rung on the ladder' for many of those most in need of upskilling or retraining, as it allows lower skilled members of the workforce to take part in flexible and accessible learning activities. Similarly, the demand is rising for places on the VTOS programme which offers second chance education. Both of these schemes have a track record in moving people into employment and enterprise.

Budget 2008 announced cutbacks of 500 places in the Back to Education Initiative, and made no further provision for the expansion of VTOS. This contradicts government commitments to retraining and upskilling and should be rescinded.

6. The third level fees structure must recognise the inequity experienced by adult learners.

AONTAS is fundamentally opposed to the re-introduction of third level fees which will act as a disincentive to adults who may already be juggling the responsibilities of parenting, caring, and paying a mortgage. AONTAS believes strongly that the barriers to accessing third level education go beyond the financial, to include social and cultural factors. Access courses, guidance and initiatives which support adult learners must continue to be resourced to improve current participation rates in third level among those experiencing educational disadvantage.

Ireland's third level fees structure must commit to parity of esteem for part time adult learners. Adults in employment tend to favour part time study options which allow them to combine their study with employment. In the first quarter of 2009, AONTAS received almost 400 queries from adults interested in availing of part time courses. Flexible models of learning which allow adults to study while remaining in employment are crucial. The inequity which exists for part time adult learners must inform any review of the current third level fees structure.

7. Financial supports for adult learners need to be continually reviewed and changed in order to make adult learning a more realistic option.

Over the past number of years, AONTAS has made a case for the revision of the qualifying criteria for the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA), a second chance educational opportunities scheme for people on welfare payments who wish to participate in full-time education and who would not otherwise be able to do so.

The objective of the scheme is to equip people on social welfare payments with qualifications that will enable them to obtain employment in the modern labour market. Changes to the BTEA in 2008 allow those who qualify for statutory redundancy to be eligible for the scheme in addition to those on jobseekers allowance. Further changes in the Supplementary Budget announced a revision in the qualifying period for BTEA; from twelve months to nine months for the third level option, and to three months for the second level option.

AONTAS is concerned that a number of people still do not meet the qualifying criteria for the Back to Education Allowance. These are people vulnerable in the current economic climate and most at risk of long term unemployment. They include:

- People in temporary part time employment
- People in low skilled, low income employment
- Carers



- Workers not in receipt of statutory redundancy
- People who are self employed

AONTAS recommends that the qualifying criteria for BTEA be further revised to include these categories. Those who lose their jobs should automatically qualify for BTEA, so that they are not forced to spend time on the live register in order to qualify for the supports they need.

Preparing for the Local and European Elections 2009

Recognising that adult learning has a vital role to play in the development of the Irish society and the economy, AONTAS will raise these issues in the lead up to the Local and European Elections in June 2009, through a campaign entitled 'Many Happy Returns'.

AONTAS has developed a range of tools and strategies that can be used by adult learners and adult learning organisations engaging with local and European candidates, as well as local media. These include the following:

- **An election toolkit** – This includes a birthday card which can be used 'on the doorstep' to raise issues with candidates running for election. The toolkit also includes online resources such as a sample press release, a sample letter, details of public meetings and a number of useful websites.
- **Senior Learners Manifesto** – developed by over 200 senior learners regarding older learners' access to learning initiatives. The Manifesto is being disseminated to older learners throughout the country through an extensive network of organisations working with older people – these include the Active Retirement Association, Age Action Ireland, Age and Opportunity and the Older and Bolder Campaign. The manifesto is available online or in hard copy from AONTAS.
- **A Community Education Network Manifesto** – The main issues for Community Education Groups throughout the country include a stronger voice for community education within the VEC, as well as the inclusion of community education within the local authority infrastructure and planning. Community education groups have recently participated in a training programme designed to increase their awareness of local authority structures and will be actively engaging with candidates on these issues.

AONTAS will also raise the issues highlighted in this paper at public meetings taking place in the lead up to the elections, and will also engage with media on these issues. Meetings will be arranged with the education spokespeople of the political parties and questions will be raised in the Dail where appropriate. Campaign updates will include regular press releases and the use of new technologies and social media to raise awareness about these issues.

For more information about AONTAS campaign visit www.aontas.com or follow AONTAS campaign on www.twitter.com.





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