

The Adult Learning Sector in Ireland – Responding to Recession

Introduction

This briefing paper outlines the development of the adult education sector over the decade, and describes how the sector is responding to changing economic circumstances, notably the increase in unemployment which currently stands at 13.7%. The main outcomes are identified since the publishing of the White Paper *Learning for Life (2000)*. There is an urgent need to maintain the core infrastructure for the delivery of the adult and community education service if the growing demand for adult learning is to be met. Even at an early stage of development, the existing infrastructure is delivering a quality, holistic service to increasing numbers of learners each year.

The sector, comprising of statutory providers (namely VECs) and community education providers (non formal sector) has a strong track record of providing value for money. It is accountable and transparent and has a core commitment to the adult learner. As training activities traditionally housed within the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment are realigned to fit within the remit of the Department of Education, there is a real opportunity to provide a seamless, flexible quality education and training service which meets a range of learning needs. However the recently announced changes to the VECs must take serious account of the preservation of the adult and community education service in any proposed restructuring.

This paper also looks at some initial feedback from providers contracted in the Labour Market Activation Measures. Although AONTAS welcomes this substantial investment in education and retraining, there are some inconsistencies within the scheme which need to be addressed.

This briefing coincides with the end of the current European Action Plan on Lifelong Learning¹ and the framing of a new plan which will prioritise both the skills and wider benefits of learning.

About AONTAS

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation, a membership organisation which promotes lifelong learning, adult and community education. AONTAS is funded by the Department of Education and Skills and works closely with officials within the department and with the Minister for Lifelong Learning on issues relating to adult learners and adult and community education providers. AONTAS activities include

- **Promotion of adult learning** – AONTAS provides the latest, most up to date information about learning options and supports for adults. Last year AONTAS dealt with queries from over 6,000 learners. AONTAS has also produced an Information booklet which helps people navigate through the increasingly complex raft of entitlements, supports and courses.

¹ This was endorsed by EU National Education Ministers in May 2008

- AONTAS organises an annual national **Adult Learners' Festival**, a week long programme of over 300 events which take place nationwide during the month of February. The Festival raises the profile of the sector and the benefits of adult learning in general.
- **Networking activities** – AONTAS brings various stakeholders in the sector together to identify the challenges to greater levels of participation in adult and community education. The Community Education Network currently represents over 100 providers of education in the 'non formal' education sector, and in November 2010 AONTAS will launch the National Adult Learners' Forum, which will bring together adult learners from all walks of life with a view to collectively developing a voice for adult learners².
- **Research and policy development** – AONTAS initiates research on aspects of adult and community education as themes emerge. AONTAS is currently concluding the first extensive research carried out on the benefits of community education which has been funded by the Department of Education and Skills. Preliminary findings suggest strong outputs both in terms of skills development and social inclusion.

A Decade of Adult Learning – Key outcomes

The White Paper *Learning for Life* (2000) represents a key milestone within the sector, setting out a framework for a culture of lifelong learning in Ireland. Since the White Paper was published the adult and community education sector has developed extensively, despite commanding only 4% of the overall education budget. The number of adult learners has increased dramatically, and the number of learners accessing adult literacy has increased tenfold over the past decade. Notable outcomes include

- The appointment of Minister for Lifelong Learning in 1997. This appointment has been crucial in terms of giving the adult learning sector a voice in a department which is dominated by powerful interests in the formal education sector.
- Adult Literacy³: Over the past decade the number of learners accessing adult literacy has jumped tenfold – from five thousand to fifty thousand, in line with increased resource allocation.
- The establishment of the Adult Education Guidance Initiative in 2000 including a number of local services which provide both information and guidance to adults. To date almost 70,000 people have used the services of the AEGI⁴.
- The appointment of 37 Community Education Facilitators based within VECs throughout the country.

² AONTAS is liaising closely with the Adult Learners' Forum in England which has been developed by NIACE.

³ Adult Literacy services are provided by NALA (the National Adult Literacy Agency), established in 1980.

⁴ Figures courtesy of the NCGE, October 2010.

- The introduction of the Back to Education Initiative in 2002, which provides flexible, part time learning opportunities to people who are unemployed, but also people on low incomes.
- The launch of the National Framework of Qualifications in 2003, which provides a mechanism for recognising education and training in Ireland.

Adult learning in the current climate

With unemployment at 13.7%, adult learning is becoming an increasingly popular choice for those who have lost their jobs since the economic decline. The decline in construction, manufacturing and retail sectors has left a substantial cohort vulnerable to long term unemployment. A recent review of the National Skills Strategy found that 21% of the workforce had attained Junior Certificate at best. In relation to Upper Secondary education including Leaving Certificate qualifications, recent statistics indicate that the percentage of the labour force with this level between 2005 and 2009 remained at 40%.⁵ Ireland simply cannot participate in discussion about the Knowledge Economy with these levels of educational attainment.

The adult education services are also coping with a national problem of early school leaving. With recent data showing that the dropout rate has gone from one in five to one in six, progress over the past decade on this issue has been disappointing⁶.

Adult education is simply the most effective first intervention for adults in this situation. Through a combination of literacy, guidance and other supports, adults can be fasttracked into quality educational opportunities that meet their own needs, and that will help them progress onto employment or further education. The development of new approaches – such as a semesterised structure to courses, shows that the sector is willing and creative enough to respond to challenges and learning needs.

The demand for adult learning

Since the economic decline, AONTAS has been documenting an unprecedented level of interest in adult education. The following trends offer a snapshot.

- In 2007 AONTAS received 3,845 queries about adult learning – this number doubled in 2008 with 6,927 people contacting us. The number remained similar in 2009 with 6,538 callers to the service.
- Data from individual VECs suggests that there are three applicants for every place offered on one of their courses (the total number of places on VEC adult education courses amounts to 31,500).
- A record 14,606 mature applicants sought third level places through the CAO out of a total of 77,126 applications to date⁷.

⁵ <http://www.deti.ie/press/2010/20100320.htm>

⁶ Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education: Report Launched May 2010

- An unprecedented figure of 10,351 adults in receipt of the BTEA (Back to Education Allowance) in the 2009-10 academic year– up from 6,559 on the previous year.

This level of demand means that the sector is stretched to capacity.

Challenges of delivering and accessing adult education

AONTAS active membership of 600 providers, networks and individuals offers opportunities to gain important insights into the impact of policy on those involved in the provision of adult education, as well as those trying to access the services.

A series of regional meetings conducted in autumn 2009, thematic network meetings involving community education providers, and direct contact with adult learners have identified a number of key challenges and stumbling blocks.

This consultation is also informed by a realistic awareness of the reality for officials and elected representatives in policy formulation as well as willingness on the part of AONTAS to communicate issues in a constructive manner, and to engage in dialogue with policy makers on behalf of our members.

The current key challenges can be described briefly as follows:

1. **The public sector recruitment embargo:** The classification of frontline staff in the education sector as those who deliver classes does not take account of the nature of the adult education service, where staff such as Adult Education Officers, Guidance personnel, Information Officers or Adult Literacy Organisers play a key role in the delivery of the service. AEOs do not only perform an administrative role – they are crucial in the development of the service, they manage and co-ordinate volunteers as well as paid staff, and are ultimately responsible for the recruitment, retention and support of learners.
2. **The supply cannot meet the demand:** The current demand for adult learning is outlined above. For learners this means that courses are often oversubscribed with long waiting lists. This is problematic particularly in the case of adult guidance, which requires time and often high levels of support for individual clients.
3. **Financial supports for learners:** Budget 2010 also introduced a dramatic change which is affecting many adult learners – the withdrawal of the entitlement to the Maintenance Grant for those in receipt of the Back to Education Allowance⁸ and who are entering ‘new’

⁷ Irish Independent, July 2010

⁸ The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) allows people in receipt of certain social welfare payments to retain those payments while they are on a course approved by the Department of Social Protection. People must be at least nine months on a social welfare payment in order to qualify for BTEA. (Third level)

courses⁹. While AONTAS understands that resources are scarce, this will ultimately discourage those who most need a third level education from pursuing it. Particularly affected are adults with young families who are already struggling financially.

- 4. Access to information:** Two budgets in 2009, along with the introduction of the Labour Market Activation Measures have created an 'Information Deficit' – where people are confused about their options and entitlements¹⁰. In 2009, 68% of callers to AONTAS indicated that not knowing where to access information was a barrier in itself. An elaborate information infrastructure including a range of actors within different departments is not meeting the information needs of the public. This is leading to delays, confusion and ultimately frustration on behalf of those attempting to pursue training and education.

AONTAS current focus

The last AONTAS Strategic Plan (2007-2011) was developed at a time when greater resources were available. A new strategic planning process launched by AONTAS at the AGM in May 2010 will identify the particular challenges faced by our 600 members as well as the role of AONTAS in meeting those challenges. AONTAS is facilitating this process to fully engage with our members, and the data will be further enhanced through a series of interviews with key stakeholders in and ancillary to adult education. Three themes have emerged through the process so far.

- The **Value** theme acts as the key anchor of the work of the organisation. It sets out the understanding and vision of AONTAS on the importance and role of adult and community education to individual and societal development and the importance of a quality service for adult learners.
- The **Voice** and **Visibility** themes incorporate actions through which the value of adult and community education can be supported, promoted and developed. Key activities in this regard include the promotion of adult learning in a variety of settings, and communicating key challenges experienced by learners and providers to government policy and decision makers.

AONTAS is also organising the fifth Adult Learners' Festival which takes place from February 21st to Friday 25th of February 2011. The Festival will showcase and promote best practice in adult learning through an awards ceremony; and will highlight the key challenges currently facing providers and learners. AONTAS collaborates with a variety of stakeholders to develop the Festival.

⁹ Recommended within the McCarthy Report, November 2009

¹⁰ This is further supported by other agencies we work with, eg National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, May 2010

Key priorities for the adult learning sector

A commitment to adult learning

Although it commands a relatively small proportion of the overall education budget (4%), the adult learning sector is playing a strong role in meeting the needs of people who are newly unemployed, as well as providing crucial later interventions for those who have not completed their formal education.

The sector is already taking a substantial cut – the public sector recruitment embargo, cutbacks in the community and voluntary sector, the loss of the Maintenance Grant for adults for those in receipt of the BTEA¹¹, and the forthcoming rationalisation of VECs from 33 to 16 are having a huge impact at a time when the services are needed most. AONTAS is extremely concerned that any restructuring of the VEC sector will pay attention to the preservation and development of the adult and community education service and that it will a timely opportunity to review the public sector recruitment embargo with a view to ensuring that resources are allocated on the basis of needs rather than across the board.

AONTAS calls on the all political parties to include a commitment to maintaining the existing adult education infrastructure, with a view to increasing the budget available once the economic situation has stabilised.

The Labour Market Activation Measures

AONTAS has welcomed of the Labour Market Activation Measures, which recently channelled resources of €32 million into retraining and upskilling initiatives throughout the country. Since the initiatives were launched, AONTAS has actively promoted the courses available, as well as information on course criteria. AONTAS also promotes the site Qualifax which hosts information on the measures.

In addition to a promotional role, AONTAS has already communicated with a variety of those contracted to deliver the measures. Although the scheme is still quite new, a number of issues are emerging which should inform the future development of these initiatives.

There are benefits of adopting an open tendering process in presenting new learning and training models. The broad spectrum of those delivering the measures is welcomed – allowing adults greater choice about where and how they want to study.

However it needs to be recognised that providers from different sectors work differently and naturally have different criteria by which they measure success. In the case of the existing state funded infrastructure (i.e. VEC bodies) – adults can avail of a suite of services – from literacy and ESOL, through to guidance, before making a choice about the course that is right for them. Although

¹¹ According to Budget 2010, adults starting 'new courses' and in receipt of the BTEA are no longer eligible to apply for a Higher Education Maintenance Grant. AONTAS met with Minister for Social Protection Eamon O Cuiv in June 2010 to highlight this issue.

this model takes time, it is ultimately of benefit to the learner and makes best use of resources available. There is strong evidence that interventions such as adult guidance result in higher course retention, and greater progression onto further education or employment¹². This is a crucial factor as there are fewer resources available. In addition, over the past number of years VEC providers have developed extensive, accountable mechanisms by which they can measure the success of their services.

In the case of private providers, there is an urgent need to fill courses, without necessarily assessing the needs of the learner. While progression may be a benchmark for a statutory provider, the benchmark here may relate to filling course places as quickly as possible – on a ‘first come first served basis’, rather than on the experience and needs of the learner.

This is one of the fundamental inconsistencies with this approach. Additional issues emerging are listed below.

1. **Recruitment** – There is a lack of a centralised promotion and recruitment strategy for the courses. Providers funded under the scheme are currently engaging in diverse recruitment strategies throughout the country in order to attract participation. Organisations and personnel within the existing infrastructure such as Jobs Facilitators, Adult Guidance, as well as civil society organisations such as the INOU and ICTU who deal directly with people who are unemployed, need to be fully involved, and resourced in promoting the initiative from the outset.
2. **Promotion:** A centralised, accessible online resource needs to be established with details about the initiatives. This could be promoted through a national advertising campaign and resourced through the fund itself.
3. **Staffing** – Administrative back up is needed in order to ensure recruitment and retention of learners on the LMAF, as well as tracking the progression of learners through data collection. *VEC providers who successfully access funding under the LMAF are prohibited from recruiting or replacing additional administrative staff under the Public Sector Recruitment Embargo.* This means that in the case of Co. Dublin VEC, 750 learners will take part in courses in fourteen different adult education colleges throughout County Dublin – without any additional administrative back up. There is a danger that VECs, whose capacity is already stretched due to existing demand, may not be in a position to participate in future rounds due to the lack of administrative support. Meanwhile private providers are funded to provide programmes without any guarantees of successful outcomes for learners.
4. **Evaluation** – An evaluation which documents models of best practice amongst current LMAF providers, and which considers the success of the initiatives from a variety of perspectives, should be commissioned, with a view to informing the roll out of any similar initiatives.

¹² ‘Better Together’ – a report of regional meetings carried out by AONTAS in Autumn 2009 highlights a case study of Co. Donegal Adult Guidance Initiative.

AONTAS calls on the Fine Gael Party to ensure that future funding initiatives in this area make best use of, and strengthen the existing adult education infrastructure. Allocation of funding should be made on the basis of track record, and should meet the existing demand first.

Conclusion

There has never been a greater need for adult education services. A significant proportion of the workforce who have not completed their formal education, a changing employment landscape, and an extensive period of unemployment for a growing percentage of the population – all require the intervention of an adequately resourced adult education service.

Adult education has moved on from the stereotypes of evening classes and leisure activities to providing flexible, learner centred opportunities for people to upskill or fully reskill themselves for when the economic situation improves. In order to continue in that role, a basic infrastructure needs to exist.

AONTAS also asks the political parties to recognise the social benefits of adult learning, which go beyond the acquisition of skills and which constitute an investment in communities and societies in the longterm. Adult learning has a key role to play in developing healthier, happier and more engaged citizens.

AONTAS asks political parties in their future manifestos to commit to the following

1. That the embargo be lifted so that each VEC will retain the basic infrastructure required for the services i.e. an Adult Education Officer, a Community Education Facilitator and an Adult Literacy Organiser. The embargo should not apply to statutory providers who are contracted to deliver initiatives such as the Labour Market Activation Measures.
2. That future Labour Market Activation Measures funding is first allocated to organisations or bodies with a track record of delivering a quality service, and where demand already exists. Future funding should also consider ringfencing for financial supports for adult learners – particularly adults who fall into the priority target groups identified by the Department, and whose financial situation is a barrier to them accessing further education.
3. That the parties commit to a comprehensive information strategy about adult education, which includes the strengthening of relationships between key information providers across a number of departments. This should also include a transparent and accountable recruitment strategy.
4. That parties commit to extending the proportion of the education budget currently allocated to adult education – from 4% to 10%, once the economic situation stabilises.

AONTAS looks forward to engaging with all parties on trends and developments within the adult education sector in Ireland.