

‘Building meaningful representation for adult learners’

AONTAS Position Paper

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AONTAS and adult learners

The mission of AONTAS to ‘advocate for the right of every adult in Ireland to quality learning’ is a testament to our commitment to the adult learner as the central focus of further education and training services. In our current strategic plan¹ which is underpinned by three key themes; voice, visibility and value AONTAS articulates as one of its key principles:-

- *to support and affirm the voice of adult learners as the core of its advocacy work.*

In order to support this principle AONTAS engages in a number of activities which are learner specific – these include information referral for learners and adults returning to education and training and capacity building opportunities for learners to become strong role models. AONTAS encourages and supports adults to become advocates in the media, and regularly consults learners in the development and preparation of submissions on policy issues which affect their lives. Membership of AONTAS is open to both organisations and individuals.

The reconfiguration of further education and training, the establishment of SOLAS and LETBs, along with new legislation provide a welcome opportunity for learner representation at governance and decision making level. The recent Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Bill provides for the expansion of board membership to include two learner representatives – one to be nominated by USI and the second to be identified from the adult and further education sector.² NALA (The National Adult Literacy Agency) has recently launched a campaign for a learner representative on each of the new Local Education and Training Boards.

This paper sets out AONTAS position on how the learner voice can best be represented in order to reflect the diversity of adult learning and to ensure that learners have more of a say in service delivery. In making a case for learner forums, NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education in the UK has already outlined how learner engagement can provide for better decision making, more effective services and greater cost effectiveness in designing services³. In this paper a number of activities and mechanisms are proposed which could support and enhance learner representation across the further education and training services.

¹ Available online from <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/strategic-plan-20112013>

² <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/2012/07/05/00013.asp>

³ Learners’ Forums – a guide for learners (NIACE, 2008)

A learner centred approach

AONTAS has a track record of carrying out research on an array of issues affecting adult learners much of it exploring undocumented territory. A list of our research publications can be accessed through our website. In 2011, research supported by the Department of Education and Skills and commissioned by AONTAS focused on the outcomes and benefits of community education eliciting the responses of over 800 learners between the two reports⁴. AONTAS has also supported learners to articulate their issues through the local, national and social media and has included a learner ambassador in its delegations to international meetings such as CONFINTEA VI in 2009 and in 2011 at the General Assembly of the International Council of Adult Education in Sweden. AONTAS has a strong track record of representing the issues of adult learners on various advisory committees established by government departments from time to time. The Executive Board of AONTAS has two places for individual representatives and learners are encouraged to put themselves forward for election to these places.

AONTAS believes that representation must be underpinned by two actions – by supporting learners to become advocates, and secondly by supporting the development of structures from grassroots level which can contribute to the national policy making arena.

Adult Learners' Festival - promoting adult learners

In practical terms, for the past six years AONTAS has organised the National Adult Learners' Festival, creating a platform for demonstrating the capacity and creativity of adult learners and promoting the role of adult learning in personal, skills and social development. The STAR Award recipients have become strong ambassadors for adult learning and have highlighted the benefits of their experience through key events as well as local, national and social media. An advertising campaign in the lead up to the Festival features adults with a passion and enthusiasm for learning who we identify from our strong links with both the non formal and statutory adult education sector.

Our *Lobby for Learning* day, the closing event for the Festival regularly provides opportunities for learners to interact with policy makers. This year the event featured participation from

⁴ Available from <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/community-education-more-than-just-a-course-2010> and <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/sowing-the-seeds-of-social-change-2011>

almost thirty adult learners and has proven to be an effective way of engaging with, and influencing policy and decision makers.⁵

Adult Learners' Forum of Ireland

A key concern for AONTAS has been the lack of a representative structure which could capture and reflect the diversity of issues facing learners from basic education right through all levels of the qualifications framework.

In this context in 2010 AONTAS established a National Adult Learners' Forum, the first meeting of which in November of that year was attended by over eighty learners from a broad spectrum of experiences of adult and community education⁶. During the initial development of the Forum AONTAS looked to the experience in the UK and Wales and invited learners involved with networks established in those countries to share their experiences with learners in Ireland.

Following the publication of a research report on the benefits of learning to older people⁷ AONTAS also worked closely with older peoples organisations to establish a Senior Learners' Network. One of the main outcomes of this work was a 'Senior Learners Manifesto'⁸ where AONTAS consulted approximately 300 older learners.⁹

Following the recruitment of a Learning Advocacy Officer at the end of 2010, AONTAS went on to further develop the Adult Learners' Forum of Ireland (ALFI for short)¹⁰. The purpose of the Forum is:

- ***To articulate and represent the issues adult learners face on returning to education and training***
- ***To share information and build the capacity of adult learners to bring these issues to the attention of policy and decision makers***
- ***To promote the value of adult and community education***

⁵ See <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/solas-serving-adult-learners-2012> for a report of this event.

⁶ A report of the meeting is available from <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/solas-serving-adult-learners-2012/>

⁷ *'Don't stop me now! A report on the lifelong learning needs of older people in Ireland* (AONTAS, supported by Age and Opportunity, 2008). Available from <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/dont-stop-me-nowolder-people-research-2008/>

⁸ Available from <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/manifesto-for-senior-learners/>

⁹ Members of the Senior Learner Network subsequently became members of the ALFI

¹⁰ National Adult Learners Forum was renamed the Adult Learners' Forum of Ireland

Membership of ALFI is open to adults who are planning to, or already pursuing second chance education opportunities with particular emphasis on Levels 1-6 on the National Qualifications Framework. Learners who are pursuing higher education opportunities for the first time as an adult are also welcome to join the ALFI. The development of the network was supported by a small steering committee.

At the ALFI meeting on October 26th 2011¹¹, AONTAS launched a toolkit for creating local adult learner forums with a view to supporting learners to build platforms at a local level which would give a voice to adult learners and develop a structure for feeding their issues into the national forum.

AONTAS took inspiration from the Limerick City Adult Learners' Forum which started in 2005 as a project to celebrate the European Year of Citizenship through Education. From a consultation process with 150 learners, representatives were nominated from adult learning centres across Limerick city to come together to develop a Learner Charter. The Charter (Appendix1) lists what learners expect from other learners, tutors and learning centres. The Limerick City Forum had their charter printed and distributed to learners, tutors and co-ordinators as a way of promoting the benefits of adult and community education and how best practice results in attracting adults back to education and training. The Forum now nominates learners on the Limerick Community Education Network which co-ordinates adult education activity in Limerick. Of crucial importance is that the forum is strongly supported by the staff of Limerick City VEC and this support is recognised and acknowledged by adult learners as playing a key role in its success.

AONTAS recently undertook a review of our work with learners in the context of a changing policy environment. Priorities for AONTAS over the coming months include delivery of the Information Referral Service, the development and support of learning ambassadors and the profiling of existing local models of learner engagement at VEC level. The development of a Learners Charter which was outlined in the SOLAS consultation process is also an area where AONTAS is keen to contribute and ensure strong participation from learners.

¹¹ Report available online from <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/report-of-the-adult-learnersforum-of-ireland-alf/>

International models for learner representation

There are some examples of learner representation from other countries which provide some food for thought. Our nearest neighbours NIACE¹² have developed work to support the learner voice¹³ as have the Scottish Learning Partnership with whom AONTAS worked in preparation for Confintea VI.

The clearest example of a working structure comes from the Wales Adult Learner Network¹⁴. John Gates representing WALN at the ALFI meeting outlined the “9 steps for Wales” which took some time to develop but which is an interesting model that could be adapted to an Irish context (See Appendix 2 for further information).

The work of the Learner Forums in Wales is now beginning to bear fruit. For example ESTYN (the Inspectorate for Wales) has employed adult learners to evaluate how education providers are listening to learners and discussing their learning with them. This has been a major step forward as it puts the learner at the centre of evaluation. This is the clearest example of an organisation putting into practice a way of ensuring that learners are at the heart of the delivery of adult and community education.

Building meaningful representative structures

AONTAS strongly believes in adult learners having a representative voice, which must be supported through a number of mechanisms. Of key importance is the recognition that the adult and community education sector contains a complex mix of learners with a wide range of abilities, qualifications and needs. Unlike learners in the formal education system adult learning is rarely organised in large visible institutions; adults learn in all sorts of settings e.g. on and off the job, through experience and through systematic study. Adults lead complicated lives with myriad responsibilities into which they fit learning opportunities which may have to be rescheduled to accommodate other priorities such as family, work, financial or community commitments and they may want to resume learning when circumstances and time allow. The adult learning population is therefore highly transient and does not easily lend itself to structured representation in the way for example third level students can form a Union.

While formal representation on decision making and governance structures is a welcome development in ensuring that adults are actively involved in policies which affect their lives

¹² <http://www.niace.org.uk/>

¹³ <http://www.niace.org.uk/current-work/area/learner-voice>

¹⁴ <http://www.blanchedesigns.com/waln/index.html>

both at national and at local level, AONTAS believes that this representation must be supported through a number of activities to ensure that the representation is meaningful, accountable and reflective of a diversity of learner issues. How learner representatives communicate a diversity of issues and how they feedback their experiences at governance level is vital to making best use of a representative role.

Some examples of mechanisms or actions which could support learner representation proposed by AONTAS include:

- The establishment of a small advisory group or steering group of adult learners, to support the learner representative in their role and to provide experience on a broad range of learner issues.
- The hosting of regular focus group meetings to explore particular challenges faced by both learners and policy makers. These could be organised similar to the *Lobby for Learning* day event, where a broad selection of learners communicated their experiences of further education and training to members of the SIG and the Minister for Training and Skills. Facilitation, preparatory work and learner support was provided by both AONTAS and NALA to create a constructive space for a policy discussion.
- The use of social media/ web fora and other technology to engage with and communicate with a wider group of learners.
- The sharing and promotion of best practice within the statutory sector regarding local decision making structures which allow for enhanced learner participation in service delivery. VECs are currently required to establish mechanisms to consult with learners and good examples of this in practice should be promoted more widely throughout the statutory sector. AONTAS has also compiled a toolkit to assist providers in setting up a local learner forum.¹⁵
- The development of a Learner Ambassador initiative (already piloted by Co. Westmeath VEC¹⁶) which encourages learners to become role models for others and to become involved in their own learning. Co. Westmeath VEC was a partner in a European project which developed a training programme to support disadvantaged adult learners to become learner ambassadors.

¹⁵ <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/hearing-the-adult-learner-voice>

¹⁶ <http://www.attractandretain.eu/start.htm>

- The development of a learner charter (as outlined by DES in the context of SOLAS) by learners with the support of DES, AONTAS, NALA and other relevant organisations. At local level, the development of a charter by the Limerick Adult Learners' Forum (See Appendix 1) helped articulate the needs of learners in Limerick to inform service providers.

Conclusion

In summary, AONTAS believes that

- Learner representatives must be supported to communicate with and feedback to a broader constituency of learners. As a national NGO, AONTAS is ideally placed to provide this support to a learner representative.
- Training in advocacy and governance issues must be available to learners if needed to support them in their representative role.
- Representation must be accompanied by greater buy in from both providers and policy makers. This is ideally achieved through developmental activities such as charters, focus groups and local learner forums which can feed into local provision.

Next steps

AONTAS is currently developing a workplan for the development of Learner Voice which will be discussed and agreed with the AONTAS Executive, the ALFI and the ALFI Steering group. Over the period of its current strategic plan AONTAS intends to support adult learners to contribute to policy and decision making at all levels including feeding into the new SOLAS structure.

We welcome the commitment of the Minister to consult with regard to the appointment of a learner representative to the newly formed QQAAI. Through our membership and communications with providers of further education and training AONTAS has regular contact with a number of learners many of whom have returned to education following a long absence and who have made remarkable educational achievements as adults. We would be delighted to nominate or propose learners in the context of a consultation process with the Minister. AONTAS is also willing to support learners in that role to ensure positive and meaningful representation for learners.

Appendix 1

Charter for Learning (Limerick City Adult Learner Forum)

Good Learning for us is when:

- We are given a choice in what we learn
- We learn by doing. Everyone gets a fair chance to try things out
- We respect and support each other in and out of class
- The more we enjoy, the more we learn
- We get information in a way we can understand
- We have the opportunity:
 - To build our self-confidence
 - To get a cert
 - Meet others and make friends
 - Celebrate our achievements
 - Get a job
- Tutors are well prepared and easy to learn from
- If we don't understand we can ask. We can make mistakes
- The place where we learn is:
 - A comfortable place
 - Bright and cheery
 - Not like school

Appendix 2

The 9 Steps for Wales

1. Learner

The individual decides to become a Learner

2. Learner Activist

The Learner is encouraged and decides to become a Learner activist

3. Learning Centre

The Learning Centre is the home of the Learners' Forum and is where potential activists are identified, nurtured and supported. Learners gain and practice the skills they need to develop for effective representation such as identifying goals, speaking in public and evaluating outcomes.

4. County Level

Learner Forums link in with 22 Learning Festival Meetings, County Learning Reviews and County Learning Plans

5. Regional Level

Forums link in with Learning Festival Meetings, Regional Learning Plans North across Wales

6. National Level

Links with the Adult Learners Forum of Ireland (ALFI)

7. United Kingdom Adult Learners' Network

Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England

8. European Adult Learners' Network

9. Global Adult Learners' Network

John and other learners including Una Buckley from Ireland participated in CONFINTEA VI in 2009 and advocated for three things:

- Recognition of the Learner voice

- Acceptance of the [Learner charter](#)
- Recognition of the concept of Learner Ambassadors.