

RECLAIM THE RIGHT TO LEARN

IMAGINE • QUESTION • READ & WRITE

**REPORT ON THE AONTAS CONFERENCE
OCTOBER 16 & 17 2002
GRAND HOTEL, MALAHIDE**

FOREWORD

RECLAIMING THE RIGHT TO LEARN: ADULT EDUCATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

At the Fourth International UNESCO Conference on Adult Education in 1985 the unanimous declaration adopted defined the right to learn in the following terms:

- The right to read and write
- The right to question and analyse
- The right to imagine and create
- The right to read one's own world and to write history
- The right to have access to educational resources
- The right to develop individual skills

Seventeen years later we have entered both a new century and a new millennium. This AONTAS conference set out to examine whether and how the right to learn is exercised by adults in Ireland today.

Since 1985, this country has changed from a place that experienced high unemployment and mass emigration, to one that has seen the highest economic growth and the lowest unemployment rates in Europe. Immigration is presenting Ireland with new challenges as it struggles to become a multicultural and inclusive society. Although we pride ourselves on having a well-educated workforce, nonetheless there are still large numbers of Irish adults with less than adequate literacy skills and approximately a million people with less than upper second level education. While significant investments have been made in the adult education service in recent years, participation in education and training is still hindered by a lack of facilities, funding, childcare and other supports and incentives for adult learners.

The White Paper 2000 on adult education, *Learning for Life*, laid down a framework for the development of the adult education service and moved it from the margins of the education agenda towards the mainstream. Meeting the growing demand for a skilled workforce is one of the main driving forces behind the long awaited investment in the service and is an important and necessary objective. But adult learning in fact has much broader outcomes. Personal, social and community development are equally important in building a civil society. Community-based responses to social exclusion, educational disadvantage and poverty using education as a tool have emerged all over Ireland in recent years. Community education meets the needs of learners and is designed and driven by the learners themselves. However, while such responses are a hallmark of adult learning in Ireland, they are still poorly recognised, resourced and represented.

With the adult education service in Ireland at a crucial stage of development and a period of economic uncertainty ahead, we must ensure that all investments made will effectively meet the needs of adult learners and establish learning as a right for them. This AONTAS conference provided an opportunity to reflect on recent policy developments, discuss the underlying vision and direction of adult education, showcase learner-centred models of good practice and ultimately inform future policy direction. This conference report is intended to capture some of the atmosphere and many of the recommendations and issues arising from the two-day event.

CONTENTS

CONFERENCE OPENING SESSION	4
Welcoming Comments	4
Opening of Conference	5
KEYNOTE ADDRESSES IN SUMMARY	7
Ms Margaret Kelly	7
Ms Eileen Curtis	9
Dr Paul Bélanger	11
Dr Tom Collins	16
WORKSHOPS: PRESENTATION OF GOOD PRACTICE	20
Overview of the Projects	20
Stepping Stones	21
Educate! Create! Advocate!	22
Sherkin Island Development Society	22
Workplace Basic Education	23
National Collective of Community Based Women's Networks	24
Drama Presentation: ACCESS 2000	25
ISSUES RAISED IN DISCUSSION GROUPS AND OPEN FORUM	27
APPENDIX 1: PARTICIPANT LIST	36
Conference Delegates	36
Facilitators, Rapporteurs & Contributors	41
APPENDIX 2: CONFERENCE AGENDA	42

CONFERENCE OPENING SESSION

WELCOME ADDRESS

Mr John Ryan, President of AONTAS, addressed the Conference.

Mr John Ryan AONTAS President welcomed the participants to the event, in particular the Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science, Ms Síle De Valera.

He noted the significance of the event. Being the first AONTAS conference for two years it provided an opportunity for reflection on developments since the publication of the White Paper on Adult Education 2000. Progress had been made in a number of areas, he said, but more thought and planning was needed to ensure the future development of the adult education service.

It was also significant, Mr Ryan observed, that we had recently been given stark warnings about potential government cutbacks across a whole variety of sectors. It was critical in a period of economic slow down, that investment in adult education be maintained so that the fledging service would not be severely stunted.

Mr Ryan thanked the previous Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science, Mr Willie O'Dea, for the tremendous commitment and effort he had shown to the adult education field. He hoped that over the course of the following two days, new ideas and useful discussion could be generated so that the policy initiatives set in train during Mr O'Dea's era could now be built upon and improved.

He then called on the Minister of State, Ms Síle De Valera to formally open the Conference.

OPENING OF CONFERENCE

Opening Address by the Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science, Ms. Síle De Valera.

The Minister expressed her delight at being able to open this conference on the theme 'Reclaiming the Right to Learn.' She noted that it had been 17 years since the UNESCO conference defined the right to learn as a combination of the rights to:

- Read and write
- Question and analyse
- Imagine and create
- Read one's own world and write history
- Have access to educational resources
- Develop individual skills

The Minister felt this conference provided a great opportunity to look back at how we in Ireland had progressed in the course of the past 17 years in realising these 'rights'. She felt the conference could 'look at how much progress has been made in achieving these goals, examine our future directions and set out examples of good practice in learner centred adult education.'

Ms De Valera then went on to outline many of the key developments in Irish adult education since the recruitment in 1979 of the first Adult Education Organisers within the VECs, and the establishment in 1980 of an Adult Education Section in the Department of Education.

She acknowledged that 'it was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that funding provision for adult education began to increase significantly, with the establishment and growth of the VTOS programme for adults who were unemployed, and the introduction of the Back to Education Allowance Schemes by the then Department of Social Welfare.'

The Minister traced the emergence of the various key strands of adult education and training that are in place today. These included the growth in the PLC sector, the establishment of FÁS and its schemes, the emergence of the literacy and community education budgets and the substantial growth in both community education and community development programmes.

On the policy front, the government papers produced within the past five years were crucial to the development of the service. Ms De Valera described the Green Paper of 1998 and the 2000 White Paper on Adult Education as 'landmarks' which had inspired both consultation and debate.

In terms of structures, the Minister felt that the setting up of the National Qualifications Authority, the National Adult Learning Council, the Adult Education Guidance Initiative and the National Childcare structures would prove critical in building the sector. In particular she stressed the

importance of the culture change in education and training in Ireland, which was beginning to see a shift away from the idea that academic education and vocational training are two separate fields, and that work-based learning and school-based learning are incompatible, towards:

‘a model where learning is recognised as taking place in a variety of sites; in education and training settings, at work, at home, through television and the Internet, in community, sport and cultural and trade union settings etc. The importance of flexibility, of recognising and validating all learning no matter where it occurs, of being able to accumulate credits for single subjects or modules towards full awards, of mechanisms for accreditation of prior learning, and of involvement of education, training, employer, learner and community interests in the development of systems are all major tenets of the new framework of qualifications being developed by the NQAI. This period has also seen an increased blurring of distinctions between education and training generally.’

Despite all these developments and the growth in international learning partnerships between Ireland and other European countries, the Minister acknowledged that there still remained much to be done in terms of improving the adult education field in Ireland. Not only are current services in need of development, but there are also a whole series of new challenges to be faced. She named some of these challenges as ‘changing demography, technology, globalisation and skill needs.’ She also noted the key role of adult education in creating an inclusive and democratic society.

In conclusion, Minister De Valera said she hoped she had covered the main themes in relation to the development of the adult education service in the course of recent years, and had in that sense mapped out the foundations of this conference. She challenged all present to ‘look forward and to help frame the future’ through ‘stimulating and informed debate’ and wished the conference every success.

The Minister then declared the conference proceedings to be officially open.

KEYNOTE ADDRESSES IN SUMMARY

ADULT AND FURTHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND

Margaret Kelly

Margaret Kelly was Principal Officer in the Further Education Section of the Department of Education and Science until February 2003. She was responsible for policy development, funding, co-ordination and monitoring of Further Education in Ireland, and also for general policy matters in vocational training and adult education. She and her team were responsible for the publication of the Green paper on Adult Education in 1998 and the White Paper 2000. She is a member of a range of inter-Departmental fora and EU groups on lifelong learning, employment, labour market and equality issues.

LIFELONG LEARNING

Margaret's presentation looked in detail at the major developments in Irish adult education since 1985, some of which were briefly touched upon in the opening address by Minister De Valera. She commenced her presentation by defining lifelong learning as 'a continuum from early childhood through to, and throughout adulthood, embedded in a national framework of qualifications' with a seamless interface between levels, flexible modes of learning, recognition of multiple intelligences and the availability of comprehensive support services. This, she said, is what we are currently seeking to achieve in Ireland.

Naming the most significant developments since the mid-1980s, Margaret highlighted the growth in PLC schemes, the establishment of VTOS, the funding of various initiatives through the EU, the roll out of the Community Development Programme and the setting up of NCVA in 1991 as landmarks. She also located the development of adult education firmly within the development of overall government structure and policy. The establishment of the Area Partnerships, the emergence of Social Partnership and overarching policies such as the National Anti-Poverty Strategy provided a context for a culture of lifelong learning to emerge.

PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION

Margaret presented the most recent figures for participation across a wide range of programmes in education and training. According to her figures there are currently just under 59,000 participants in Department of Education funded further education schemes (Literacy, Youthreach, VTOS, Traveller Training, PLCs). A further 147,000 adults she stated, are currently involved in self-funded further education programmes. This did not include the large numbers participating in higher education.

Although these figures seem quite high, Margaret pointed out that a key aim of the White Paper 2000 was to provide a framework by which participation levels could be increased. This was especially so given that about a million adults had less than upper second level education according to a 2001 household survey. Furthermore, the OECD survey of 1995 showed that about

25% of the adult population had a low level of literacy. A key pillar of the White Paper had therefore been the Adult Literacy Strategy, which now had almost 23,000 participants. Another key pillar was the Back to Education Initiative which will provide 20,000 part time places in Further Education by 2006.

Since investment in the literacy strategy had been increased from about 1m in 1997 to 16.4m in 2002, much progress had been made. As well as increased participation, NALA had developed a Quality Framework for the schemes. Nationally certified tutor training was now available, as were family learning schemes, workplace schemes and programmes directed at non-nationals with English as a second language. The Read Write Now series had made literacy more accessible and was a major success.

The Back to Education Initiative, Margaret stated, was mainly aimed at disadvantaged groups with less than upper second level education. The idea was to provide more flexible course times and options, with free provision for those with medical cards and other welfare recipients. Ten percent (10%) of places were also reserved for community education.

SUPPORTS AND STRUCTURES

Specifically in the field of Community Education, 34 Community Education Facilitators were in the process of being recruited across the country. This, said Margaret, would undoubtedly improve the structure and delivery of this type of education.

To support these developments, the Adult Guidance service was being phased in throughout the country. Other key supports were also in development such as projects looking at access and disability issues, and the development of a quality assurance framework by FETAC. The new Qualifications Framework would become available in 2003 and provide opportunities to value learning where this had previously been absent.

Margaret concluded her presentation by touching on the work of the National Adult Learning Council, which she hoped would draw together many of the policy strands of adult education provision and provide coordination. She saw a positive future for the service, given all the developments which are currently in train. However, she conceded that problems still remained and new challenges were emerging: The need for more childcare places, for greater flexibility in learning methods, and to build interculturalism were just three of these challenges. However, she felt confident that we could meet these challenges and wished delegates well in determining their particular priorities for the future of adult education.

CINDERELLA MEETS AD HOC AGAIN

Eileen Curtis

Eileen Curtis is an Adult Education Organiser with Co. Kilkenny Vocational Education Committee. She has many years experience in the field of adult education and has been responsible for the development and promotion of many adult education initiatives in Co. Kilkenny. A central feature of her work has been her involvement with a broad range of community groups. She has a particular interest in women's education. She completed her M.A. in Adult Education in NUI Maynooth in 1996. The title of her thesis was 'Beyond the Myths and the Magic: Naming the Place of Women in Adult Education.' She is the author of a number of articles on adult education.

In her presentation, Eileen examined 'the right to learn' as a theme from a very local perspective. She reflected on some of the key issues that had arisen in the past number of years at the local level of provision. She outlined the kind of local service that she feels is emerging and named the issues which need to be addressed in the short term if the fledgling adult education service is to develop further.

According to Eileen, the late 1980s and early 1990s were difficult times for local adult education providers. Circular Letter F49/87 which introduced the self-financing principle to adult education had severe repercussions throughout the country, most especially in rural areas. In many respects it changed the geography of local adult education provision forever. The economic circumstances of the time and the thinking which informed the concept of 'availability for work' placed a stranglehold on local development within adult education. Evening classes were in those days the hallmark of adult education, and the provision of education to people beyond school age was seen as somewhat frivolous and an unnecessary expenditure: There was little recognition of any 'right to learn.'

Despite the setbacks of the 1980s, Eileen maintained, there was one significant ray of light. The introduction of the Adult Literacy and Community Education Budget in 1985 offered local providers discretionary funds in relation to the development of second chance education provision. This new Adult Literacy and Community Education Budget, Eileen argued, was in retrospect perhaps the most significant initiative ever introduced to adult education. The seeds of many of the present developments in literacy and community education were fostered during those difficult years and this budget sustained the service during the late eighties and early nineties.

Gradually, through the last decade, came the initiatives that have become the new hallmarks of a local service; the introduction of VTOS and Youthreach, the substantial increase in Literacy provision with its associated programmes like Return To Education, Workplace Literacy and so forth. 'We have also' said Eileen, 'seen modest increases in the Community Education Budget, although these need to be much more substantial'. The growth in Community Education courses,

mainly organised and run by women, has been hugely significant at local level.

Eileen welcomed the recent introduction of the Adult Guidance Initiative and the Back to Education Initiative. Though driven by economic imperatives these are the elements that now create the framework for the development of our 'Cinderella' service. It is around these and the underpinning vision of the White Paper that the future must be fashioned.

Despite the various policy and structural developments currently underway at a national level in Irish adult education, Eileen argued strongly that the issues emerging at local level would have to be sorted out before real progress could be made. In light of an ever growing demand for education services, some of the major needs and resource issues that she drew attention to were:

- The need for more and better premises
- The need for more thorough learning supports
- Disability access issues
- Childcare provision
- Transport
- Identification of service gaps
- Increased funding to community education groups
- Better information and guidance for learners

Eileen then argued that these particular needs could only be met by embracing the Lifelong Learning philosophy and moving beyond programme based provision. The developing service would need to recognise and respect people's right to learn in their own time and in their own way. Eileen felt that an initial step in this direction could be taken at the local level with the right structure. This would involve having:

- A coherent local organisational structure
- Appropriate management structures
- Appropriate administrative budgets
- Distinct service budgets
- Capital budgets
- Appropriate personnel

Eileen ended her address by looking to the future where she hoped to see an integrated service, strategic management and planning and quality provision for all. 'Whether or not we would see a fairytale ending for the 'Cinderella' service that is adult education', she concluded, 'was entirely dependent on choosing the right path. This meant doing away with the 'ad hoc' approach to adult education that had characterised provision in the past and creating a planned and structured service for the future'.

THE DIFFUSE CAPACITY FOR INITIATIVE AND COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE

Dr. Paul Bélanger

Based at the Interdisciplinary Research & Development Centre on Lifelong Learning at the University of Quebec in Montreal, Paul Bélanger is President of the International Council for Adult Education. He was Director of the UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE) from 1989 until 1999, and is an architect of UNESCO's fifth International Conference on Adult Education. Until 1984 he was General Director of the Canadian Institute for Adult Education in French-speaking Canada. He is also former Director of the Institute of Applied Research on Work in Canada and the Chairperson of the Public Commission for the Evaluation of Junior Colleges.

After completing a Master's Degree in Philosophy at the University of Ottawa, a Master's in Social Science at the University of Montreal and a Postgraduate study in Adult Education at Manchester University, he also completed a PhD at the Sorbonne. He received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Surrey in 1998.

THE GROWTH OF ADULT EDUCATION

Dr Bélanger opened by reminding us of the sheer numbers of adults involved in education and training in the present day:

'The number of adults joining organised learning in many countries, exceeds the total number of young people registered in initial education. The social demand for organised learning among the adult population is growing in all regions of the world.'

This global trend towards lifelong learning, he argued, could no longer be ignored, and was attracting the attention of governments in many countries.

Despite the fact that adult learning is becoming more commonplace worldwide, Dr Bélanger argued that all too often, governments give preference to the development of their industrial equipment and their technological capability, rather than to the development of their people. He maintained that investing in adult learning is still often seen as a bit of a luxury, even though an educated and skilled population is the key resource needed to pull through economic crisis.

Dr Bélanger wanted to examine these themes more thoroughly in the main body of his presentation, which covered the following four broad areas:

- Learning demand and learning rights at work
- Rising learning aspirations outside the area of work
- The difficult expression of learning aspirations among the adult population
- Inequalities in lifelong learning: A critical question

LEARNING DEMAND AND LEARNING RIGHTS AT WORK

Dr Bélanger directly connected the growth in the provision of adult learning opportunities worldwide to the transformation of the global economy and methods of production. In his view, the growth in technology and in 'knowledge intensive' commercial activity makes high levels of education and skill among the workforce essential. Moreover, the recent trend towards flexible working practices means that a much wider range of skills and abilities is required of workers across a whole range of sectors.

What is happening, he maintained, is that workers are being forced to take greater responsibility for themselves, and to show a high level of initiative in the workplace. As workers move into more service based positions, and away from the industrial and repetitive jobs of the past, investment in individuals and not machinery becomes the key element in achieving economic success.

Yet the increased flexibility of the workplace has brought with it a decrease in job security, Dr Bélanger pointed out. It has become much less common to find a job for life, leading to a gold watch at retirement age. 'We observe the emergence of many forms of insecure employment status; full time but contractual; regular but part-time; hired on short-term contracts; working without contracts and so on.'

While many firms provide training and development opportunities to permanent staff, Dr Bélanger said, these learning opportunities are rarely available to staff with less secure employment status. Bearing in mind that subsidised government training schemes are often only available to those who are actually unemployed, Dr Bélanger noted that a huge portion of today's workforce in insecure employment cannot therefore access a learning opportunity unless they resource it themselves. Yet surely, he argued, investment in these kinds of workers would help not only to prevent their becoming unemployed, but also strengthen the economy from within.

The conclusion Dr Bélanger came to on this point was that if the national economy and the firms within it are the beneficiaries of adult learning, surely they ought to be prepared to invest in such learning. He posed this question:

'People are ready to invest their private time to join sessions and to study on their own. People are ready to negotiate the constraints that their participation in adult learning brings to their life partners and children. People are ready to invest their own money to cover part of the costs. Where

is the give and take if governments and firms, who will benefit from it, do not join in this national effort required by our knowledge intensive economies?’

RISING LEARNING ASPIRATIONS OUTSIDE THE AREA OF WORK

And yet, it is not only within their working lives that adults are now seeking to access learning opportunities. Dr Bélanger pointed out that increased interest in a whole range of issues; from health to computers, from local government to community development, from cooking to history, is also leading people along the path towards adult education.

He argued strongly that at the wider community level, and in terms of building a democratic society, providing adult learning opportunities is now increasingly important.

He argued that all those involved in learning, however recreational, are consciously or unconsciously having a major impact on the shaping of our society:

‘All these various and numerous learning events and initiatives taking place every day and evening in all cities and villages, are making silently and profoundly, a huge difference in our society. This large-scale and extremely diverse learning creativity experienced and lived in a thousand discussion and learning groups around the country, constitutes a fantastic investment in this society’s capacity to solve many of its problems, to tackle on its own many challenges, to move ahead in so many areas, to grow from within.’

Often this kind of learning is non-formal or informal in nature. Yet informal learning is complementary to formal learning; increasing a parent’s ability to support a child through school; allowing a worker to learn a second language; giving people social awareness. Therefore, Dr Bélanger was disturbed by the idea that formal and non-formal learning should somehow be in competition for resources:

‘To oppose as competitive areas formal and non-formal education, work and non-work related adult learning, child literacy and adult literacy, flower arrangement and technical training is, from an investment perspective and from the perspective of lifelong engineering *depassé*.’

Lifelong learning has to be seen as all embracing to be a success. He hoped the new Qualifications Framework being developed for Ireland would help us build a more seamless learning life.

THE DIFFICULT EXPRESSION OF LEARNING ASPIRATIONS AMONG THE ADULT POPULATION

Dr Bélanger emphasised that it is often difficult for an adult to find the confidence and the initial motivation to access organised learning. He argued strongly that it takes a number of years to build a culture of lifelong learning, where adult education becomes commonplace and people feel at ease with the idea of taking up a learning opportunity:

‘To invest in the creation of such a learning environment at local and national levels through the media takes time and remains fragile. It would be tragic if budget cuts, even for a few years, would destroy the cumulative building of these upstream conditions for the development of adult learning.’

He was therefore adamant that we in Ireland need to continue to expand our current level of investment in adult education, so that we would not lose ground. He also argued that we should not fear creating a greater learning demand than our resources currently allow us to meet. Again there was a question to consider. Drawing on his previous point that learning creates more active citizens, he asked:

‘What is more risky - to have a temporary crisis in coping with the increasing demand, or to hinder the capacity of a society to solve its problems?’

INEQUALITIES IN LIFELONG LEARNING: A CRITICAL QUESTION

Bringing education to those who are traditionally least likely to access education is crucial in developing a learning society, said Dr Bélanger. Educational disadvantage he said, could only be solved with effective targeted initiatives and not through general investment in lifelong learning. He warned that targeted interventions need to be very well planned so that they help those most in need because all too often:

‘Even organisations with pronounced ambitions to reach disadvantaged groups end up with provision that unintentionally corresponds best to the demands of the advantaged.’

Expanding on this point, Dr Bélanger stated that those most likely to continue learning later in life are those with higher levels of early schooling. It is therefore essential, he argued, to tackle this inequality so that education is open to all adults and not just those with positive experiences of initial schooling.

The final and central point of Dr Bélanger’s address was to underline that learning is a right, not

only in a philosophical sense, but in a real and legal sense. He stressed this point very heavily and went on to outline the legal context:

‘Obligatory education means not only the obligation of children to attend school but also the obligation of governments to provide all citizens with nationally recognised basic education, not only those in extreme difficulty. The European Charter of Rights and the UN Convention on human rights stipulate, both of them, that discrimination on the basis not only of gender or religious beliefs, but also on the basis of age is prohibited.’ It should therefore be possible to access one’s basic education at any stage in one’s life, not simply in childhood.

Dr Bélanger is monitoring the development of a number of legal test cases based on this right. He suggested that in Ireland we should also begin to examine this approach.

In conclusion, Dr Bélanger emphasised that human creativity is just as important, if not more important than knowledge. By claiming our right to learn, he said, we are claiming our right as human beings to lead more fulfilled lives.

The full text of Dr. Belanger’s address is available on the AONTAS website: www.aontas.com

IMAGINING THE FUTURE

Dr. Tom Collins

Tom Collins is currently Director of Dundalk Institute of Technology. He completed his PhD at NUI Maynooth in 1987, and held the post of Director at the Centre for Adult and Community Education at NUI Maynooth from 1994 to 2001. He was previously a Senior Lecturer at the Centre.

Dr. Collins has been active and involved in the policy side of adult education in Ireland and at European level. He was Government Advisor through the development of the Green Paper on Adult Education in 1998, and the White Paper, *Learning for Life*, in 2000. He has also acted as external examiner to a number of Higher Education institutes, including the University of Ulster, Glasgow University and Trinity College Dublin.

INTRODUCTION

Dr Collins examined further the idea of 'collective intelligence,' which had been raised as a theme by Dr Paul Bélanger. He developed some thinking about the future challenges for adult education in Ireland, based in the notion that we are experiencing profound changes in the collective beliefs and values of the Irish people.

He observed that not only was this the first post-White Paper conference at a national level in the sector, but that it was also the first post-Celtic Tiger Conference. That in itself said Dr Collins, was going to pose serious challenges to the future of adult education, and needed some further reflection.

Conferences, he believed, could generally be seen as opportunities to pause and reflect. Yet, having spent 25 years working in adult education, Dr Collins also wanted to think about his own legacy. He felt that others who had been involved in the sector for many years should be thinking about their legacy, to better understand where the next generation would take the adult education service and what the requirements would be.

Dr Collins is currently working with eighteen year old students, and noted that they have a totally different memory set to himself and his generation: 'This is a generation of young people who don't remember the world without a mobile phone: They actually think the mobile phone was always there. They have also grown up with the Internet and they have no memory of a world without it whereas I remember a world without the motorcar!' he said. He felt that we needed to think more about present day values before we could design a suitable education service to meet our future needs.

A CHANGING IRISH CULTURE

Tom Collins arrived in Maynooth on the same day in 1979 that Pope John Paul II arrived. It seemed to him at the time, he said, like the beginning of a new era, a chance to re-invigorate the idealism of Catholic Ireland, a chance for the country to be saved. Ironically in retrospect, he could now see that this had in fact marked the beginning of the end of an era and a shift in Irish consciousness:

‘From the 1980s, Carl Rogers took over where God left off and a whole new kind of idealism began to take hold in the Irish consciousness. The clerical church-based idealism was replaced gradually by a different kind of idealism and a different kind of conviction and a different kind of search, and I think it was a great privilege for adult education over the past twenty five years to actually have been in many cases, the vehicle of that search.’

Not only was the influence of the Church going into decline in late 1970s Ireland, but new kinds of radicalism related to global movements were emerging. Dr Collins noted the emergence of the poverty movement in Ireland at that time, the growing commitment to Third World issues that emerged, the growth in community movements and also in community education. However, the single most important development of the era had been, he argued, the emergence of the women’s movement.

Although the benefits of the change in women’s position in Irish society had not yet been fully realised, Dr Collins insisted that this change ‘which so differentiates the life of the modern woman from the life of her mother’ was profound:

‘54% of the population of third level students in Ireland now are female which means that 46% are male. All of the high status occupations with the exception of architecture now have a predominance of females.’ Dr Collins also argued that in societies where such profound shifts in the social power base had taken place, this had generally been preceded by a period of growth in education.

THE INDIVIDUAL IN IRISH SOCIETY

Historically, said Dr Collins, Irish people had a very strong sense of identity: They were associated with a particular locality, they had a long family line - they knew their place. ‘But in a changing society identity is increasingly not inherited and people in a sense do not know their place and not knowing their place has a disorientating quality to it. ‘I do not know who I am.’

This sense of dislocation in an ever more fragmented society, he felt, provided a great opportunity for people to renegotiate and build their own identity. Adult education had had a key role to play in helping people to build their identity in this new society. However, Dr Collins felt that we in Ireland

have a long way to go in building new identities, especially given the increasing numbers of non-nationals living in the country who must also have a share in our Irish identity.

Something that Dr Collins feared was emerging in Ireland was a growing ideology of 'commodification.' This current generation of young people seem in his view increasingly obsessed with material goods and to have lost the convictions and constructivism that drove previous generations. He felt there was a danger of 'nihilism' or at least apathy taking over people's attitudes.

ENVIRONMENTAL DEPLETION

And so, what kind of context are children in modern Ireland growing up in? Tom Collins argued that in times previous, the environment for children was much healthier here.

Children grew up playing games in the streets, listening to stories, being engaged in communities. Now said Dr Collins:

'There is in a sense a collapse of social spontaneity which has happened in the way we are structuring life in modern Ireland: The way we have set about the structures and instituting it, the way in which we organise work, the way in which we organise housing and the way in which we organise housing estates. This process of depletion of social capital will have a huge impact on future generations if something is not done soon'.

Although Ireland has been good as a state at learning new ways of doing things, Dr Collins argued that unless there are serious interventions made in certain areas, so called 'active citizenship' will be a thing of the past. He observed for example that we allow no role models from minority communities to emerge, and then we wonder why these same communities are not more willing to participate in our society:

'To the best of my knowledge there has never been a Traveller trained as a primary teacher in Ireland. I don't know if there has ever been a Traveller trained as a nurse in Ireland but I am pretty certain there was never a Traveller trained to be doctor in Ireland.'

Sometimes, Dr Collins maintained, things couldn't be allowed to take their own course, but proactive intervention is needed to allow everyone to fully participate in society.

ADULT EDUCATION: A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH

The reason why adult education had been a relative success story over the past 25 years in Ireland, claimed Dr Collins, was that it fitted so well with the idea of building one's own society and identity and being involved in movements and issues. Where other elements of the Irish education system

were still trapped in the instructional 'learning by heart' approach and methodology, adult education allowed individuals to determine their own outcomes and contribute to the learning process.

In a sense, the shift in Irish society and culture to a position where people are less active citizens and more 'nihilistic' means that a rethink for the adult education sector is now necessary. In the context of economic downturn, this may mean adult education taking on some kind of new role which had not yet been determined.

Dr Collins concluded by asking how we could change adult education to meet this new context and these new challenges. But he remained hopeful, saying:

'If in adult education we can learn to think our way through problems, then we are still making a contribution. Its just that the problems of the next 20 years might be different to those that we saw.'

The full text of Dr. Collins's address is available on the AONTAS website: www.aontas.com

WORKSHOPS: PRESENTATION OF GOOD PRACTICE

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECTS

Representatives from five projects presented models of good practice at the workshop sessions, three of which are projects funded through the Education Equality Initiative (EEI), a measure aimed at targeting educational disadvantage among both adult men and women. The EEI projects presenting were the Ballymun Men's Centre, DIT / Sherkin Island Development Society and Educate! Create! Advocate!

The EEI is funded through the National Development Plan (2000-2006), and seeks to build on the work of the previous Women's Education Initiative (WEI) which funded thirteen projects providing opportunities to educationally disadvantaged women.

There is a recognised need for targeted provision for adults suffering from educational disadvantage in Ireland, in addition to targeted initiatives which are aimed at school aged children. EEI Phase 1 (2000-2003) funds a number of pilot projects to develop models of good practice in relation to disadvantage and exclusion among marginalized groups. Eighteen projects are currently funded working with groups such as adults with mild learning disabilities, those in treatment programmes for addiction, traveller men and women, isolated rural communities and others.

The 18 EEI projects encompass a number of innovative approaches to targeting disadvantage, and key areas of practice being developed include:

- Outreach strategies to attract the most marginalized
- Innovation in teaching and learning methodologies
- Developing and building practical support measures
- New ways of accrediting and certifying learning
- Developing new partnership approaches

It is hoped to mainstream the policy lessons from EEI to improve future provision for educationally disadvantaged adults in Ireland.

Two further presentations came from projects addressing educational disadvantage through different means. The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) presented an outline of their Workplace Education Programme 'Return to Learning', which targets Local Authority workers seeking basic education and skills training. The National Collective of Community-Based Women's Networks (NCCWN), a group established to lobby on behalf of women's education networks, also made a presentation about their origins, role and work to date.

All of these projects in some way address adult educational disadvantage, which is a key strand of

current government policy on education. They each also illustrate how the following rights identified by the UNESCO Declaration might be addressed.

- The right to read one's world and write history
- The right to imagine and create
- The right to have access to educational resources
- The right to read and write
- The right to question and analyse

1. STEPPING STONES: Ballymun Men's Centre

'The right to read one's world and write history'

Ballymun Men's Centre is at the heart of men's development. It addresses the inequality that many men experience and provides opportunities for the promotion of men's well-being, education and development. The centre acknowledges the right of all men to decide their own role in today's changing society. The work of the men's centre has included:

- Providing a haven for men to drop in and be accepted as they are
- Providing facilities for reflection in a stigma free environment and to play cards, darts, or borrow books from the mini-library
- Participate in drama, arts, communication, personal development, social skills training
- Connecting men with their community groups and services e.g. computer training, literacy and counselling courses
- Initiating the Dublin Men's Coalition

The B.M.C. caters for all nationalities and ethnic minorities who experience disadvantage. The services are available to men aged 18 years and over. The typical users to date have been middle-aged men who have retired and at times younger men.

The conference presentation included the background to the Ballymun Men's Centre; activities at the centre; how men are recruited and retained at the centre and on courses; issues such as funding, staffing, future plans and future development.

2. EDUCATE! CREATE! ADVOCATE!: Blue Teapot

The right to imagine and create

In 1996 a drama project with a group of adults with learning disability was set up across four centres run by the Brothers of Charity in Galway. Initially the aims of the project were to provide a creative outlet for self-expression to participants, to build self-confidence and to have fun. From the initial workshops a devised show, *The Drummer Boy*, was produced.

Since 1996 the company has gone from strength to strength under the guidance of Catherine Seale, Fiona Coffey and Claude Madec. Blue Teapot has continued with workshops and productions and in 2000 the Blue Teapot went on tour and received a *Better Ireland* award for their work.

In 2001 Blue Teapot is embarking on a new chapter. Having accessed funding for the Educate, Create, Advocate project from the Education Equality Initiative, the company has hired a fulltime co-ordinator/trainer, Niamh Dillon. This will allow a 5-day a week, year round drama programme be set up and various diverse drama projects created.

The aims of the project are to develop the performance skills of the 17 participants, develop life skills and to empower participants through the medium of drama to create performance pieces on diversity issues and present them to local communities.

3. PILOT PROJECT IN ART & CULTURE : Sherkin Island Development Society

The right to have access to educational resources

Sherkin Island Development Society (SIDS) Ltd. is a non-profit organisation, which provides development support to six islands in West Cork. The aim of this project has been to develop, with the Dublin Institute of Technology, a prototype degree programme in Art and Culture for mature students. The programme is delivered through intensive workshops and tutorials on Sherkin Island, using information technology to facilitate distance education from D.I.T. There is also a D.I.T lecturer on site. What is emerging is:

- A mixed methodology suitable for use by other third level institutions in remote communities throughout Ireland
- Economic opportunities for professionally qualified artists in West Cork and a more socially attuned community, in the information society

Innovative elements of this degree course include:

- Negotiation of a partnership between an education centre and a marginal community
- Use of IT without losing the informal experiential aspects of learning
- Contribution to the creation of an added intellectual presence in a rural community

4. WORKPLACE EDUCATION PROGRAMMES: NALA

The right to read and write

Workplace basic education programmes are an innovative way of improving adult literacy skills. They aim to give employees an opportunity to attend a course in their own workplace to improve their skills based on their needs. Programmes include literacy and numeracy, communication, computer and interpersonal skills, problem solving and report writing. They run on site or in a convenient location for at least 4 hours per week for 20 to 30 weeks.

The Return to Learning Project is a partnership initiative between the Local Authority National Partnership Advisory Group (LANPAG) and the Department of Education and Science (DES), supported by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA). In 2000/01 the project was piloted in five counties: Mayo, Meath, Offaly, South Dublin and Tipperary South. A total of 120 people, mainly men, completed the course in the five pilot areas.

The total budget for the pilot was €133,000 funded 50% by LANPAG and 50% by DES. The programmes were piloted through each Local Authority Partnership Committee. The local VEC literacy service were the providers of the programme in each of these areas, and the VEC appointed Co-ordinators who ran the programme in conjunction with the VEC Adult Literacy Organisers. The programme consisted of 4 hours per week over a 20-week period (80 hours in total) on work time, designed and delivered in a flexible and adaptable way to meet the needs of the participants.

The evaluation report (written by an external evaluator Patricia Conboy, February 2002) of the pilot project showed employees benefited in the following ways:

- An increase in self-confidence, with spin-offs in terms of communication and interaction with others
- Literacy skill development reported in relation to their handling of specific literacy tasks, such as form-filling, letter-writing and newspaper reading
- Greater familiarity with computers and some development in computer skills
- The positive influence of participation in Return to Learning on home and family lives
- A re-awakening of an interest in learning and a desire to continue to learn now that this interest had been triggered for them

In 2002 the Return to Learning initiative is being rolled out to the remaining 29 local authorities in conjunction with their local VECs. LANPAG and DES are partly funding this roll out phase, 70% and 30% respectively. The Local Authorities must also commit funding to this initiative. There are currently 50 groups of 7-8 people, mainly men, participating in programmes throughout the country.

5. NATIONAL COLLECTIVE OF COMMUNITY BASED WOMEN'S NETWORKS

'The right to question and analyse'

The National Collective of Community-based Women's Networks (NCCWN) was formed in 2002. NCCWN has 23 affiliated networks from around the country. Women's networks were set up in the early 1990s by women's groups, to support them to network, share information, provide training and address issues at local, regional and national levels. These networks have constantly recognised the need to have an independent national structure to ensure that the concerns of community-based women's networks are acted on.

The vision of NCCWN is:

'In recognition of the diversity of women's lives, the National Collective of Community-based Women's Networks aspire to empower grassroots women's networks to effectively participate in national policy making in order to make positive changes in women's lives.'

The main objectives of the Collective are:

- To provide support for women's networks locally, regionally and nationally
- To share models of good practice in the work
- To disseminate information and support information sharing
- To seek representation on relevant decision making bodies
- To develop models of training to ensure equal participation by members
- To support the sharing of experiences as a learning tool
- To identify and build relationships with relevant agencies
- To encourage added resources into the Women's Community Sector

The presentation outlined the history of the development of women's groups and networks in Ireland, and the experience of being involved from the perspective of a women's network.

DRAMA PRESENTATION

ACCESS 2000 Wexford and Waterford Women's Centre

On day two of the Conference, the morning plenary session ended with a powerful dramatisation of the effectiveness of women's community education in tackling the barriers faced by many women seeking to access learning in Ireland today.

In 1995 representatives from women's groups in Waterford and Wexford met to explore the possibility of getting a qualification for women community activists from the region. European funding under the New Opportunities for Women (NOW) Community Initiative was secured, and a partnership between ACCESS 2000, Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT), FAS and Ferns Diocesan Youth Service was developed. A National Certificate with necessary supports such as childcare, transport subsidies, training allowances and mentoring was designed and delivered by WIT. While attending the course, participants also worked with women in their own communities.

During the next phase of NOW an add-on Diploma was delivered to twelve women. A pre-development course, 'Women Making Choices' was designed and delivered to many groups in Wexford and Waterford by the ACCESS 2000 facilitators. A 'Training for Trainers' programme in community facilitation was also delivered during this phase to eight women. This course provided practical skills training and supervised practice.

In 1999 ACCESS 2000 Waterford received ERDF funding and the Women's Centre was purchased and renovated. The Centre was opened in September 2001 and provides a drop-in information service for women and children on site. Needs-based pre-development training programmes are developed and delivered on site and on an outreach basis. Principles of community education underpin the development and delivery of these programmes. The Centre also provides a space for groups to meet.

ACCESS 2000 Wexford went on to move into new premises in Wexford Town. The project delivers community education programmes to women both at pre-development and progression stages. They are currently delivering a 35 week community education programme to rural and urban women. ACCESS also facilitates the development of community women's groups and actively supports women to participate in local decision making structures that focus on equality, inclusion and anti-poverty work.

The Drama

Nuncie Murphy, Breda Murphy, Pauline Ennis, Eleanor Dalton, Caroline Stokes and Dolores Tracey from ACCESS 2000 Wexford and Waterford Women's Centre devised this drama during the STANCE training programme at a workshop on Community Education. It demonstrates the

principles of Community Education and highlights the importance of outreach in order to engage the people who are most excluded. The facilitation and empowerment enables groups to work collectively in order to remove barriers for themselves. It is not about giving information, it is about providing space and support where people can flourish, recover and regain power in order to identify the changes they want to make and then make them.

DISCUSSION GROUPS AND OPEN FORUM

Delegates took part in group discussions on the second day of the conference. They were asked to consider the issues raised by the keynote speakers, and also any further concerns they had in relation to adult education. To provide a framework for discussion, delegates were given the following statement and question to consider:

'The White paper on Adult Education 'Learning for Life,' laid down a framework for the development of the adult education service, and from perching precariously on the margins of the education agenda it has been catapulted into the mainstream. While supplying the growing demand for a skilled workforce is one of the main driving forces behind the long awaited investment in the service and is a necessary objective, adult learning is about much more than this. Personal, social and community development are equally important in building a civil society. Community based responses to social exclusion using education as a tool have been a hallmark of learning in Ireland. With the adult education service in Ireland at a crucial stage of development, how can we ensure that investments made will meet the needs of the adult learner in the establishment of a learner centred service where learning is a right for them?'

The following is a summary of the feedback received from the discussion group rapporteurs, which has been grouped under general themes and headings. Issues that emerged in the open forum during the plenary sessions are also included.

LIFELONG LEARNING: A GENE

Delegates further argued that in the lifelong learning context, education needed to be seen in a more holistic light by both policy makers and employers. Seeking only 'quantitative' returns on their investment in education in terms of increased employability or profitability was clearly a dated approach. More value needed to be placed on education as an investment in society, in community and in the personal development of our population. This was particularly so, delegates felt, given the new challenges we face in relation to immigration and inter-culturalism in modern Ireland.

From this general discussion on the importance of achieving the goal of a lifelong learning culture, the discussion groups moved to look at more specific issues in relation to adult education. Delegates attempted to identify the practical measures that would be necessary in order to achieve the lifelong learning context.

INVESTMENT

The key requirement identified by groups for achieving a lifelong learning environment was substantial investment in the adult education service, to bring it into line with investment in other education sectors. The current disparity between for example investment in third level education and adult education was seen as unacceptable. If all learning at all levels was to be truly valued and encouraged, this imbalance in terms of investment needed to be addressed as a priority.

One of the main divides to be bridged in terms of funding and investment was identified as that between so called non-formal or informal learning, and the more formalised learning sector. In a lifelong learning context it seemed counter-productive to try and separate out these areas, and there was certainly nothing to be gained from setting them up in competition for resources. More specifically, representatives of the community education sector still felt community education was the poor relation of adult education, and yet it can often be the starting point for returning learners. There was recognition that the community education sector itself needs to be more strategic in terms of promoting its work. However, better recognition and resources would help to achieve parity with the formal providers.

For all providers of adult education, the need for funding to be sustained over longer periods of time was stressed. This would allow real strategic planning and management methods to be introduced where they are currently lacking. At present there is a great deal of uncertainty with regard to government funding across a range of adult education programmes. Few guarantees have been given that planned initiatives which we have been awaiting since the publication of the White Paper 2000 are going to proceed. There is also funding uncertainty in the community development sector which is often closely linked to education at local level. This uncertainty is causing the continuation of what Eileen Curtis called the 'ad hoc' approach to adult education. Delegates were keen to see this uncertainty ended.

STRUCTURES

Participants identified a need to quickly build the structural base of the adult education service so that any gains in investment could be used to the greatest effect. There was a good deal of discussion about the national and local structures being set up to 'steer' adult education and whether or not they would actually be effective in the short term. Many of the structural issues addressed in the White Paper 2000 came up for debate.

Participants in the groups felt that the Local Adult Learning Boards (LALBs) should be set up as a priority to prevent a continuation of the top down approach to developing the service. There was disappointment about the length of time being taken to set up these structures, which many had expected to already be in place. From the perspective of small local providers the national agenda in education seems less significant than the local agenda. Providers felt undervalued by the delay in giving them adequate support in their own areas and were left feeling disconnected from the national policy agenda. This was something to be addressed as soon as possible.

One significant development at local level was happening in the field of Community Education. Margaret Kelly mentioned in her speech the recruitment of 34 Community Education Facilitators and this was welcomed by groups. But participants felt that these workers would need to have administrative support and local advice to function properly and effectively. With no local learning board, this was going to be difficult.

Finally in terms of structures, there was some discussion of the role of the National Adult Learning Council (NALC). Delegates felt that the establishment of the technical units of the Council should happen quickly so that its work in coordinating sector policy and development could progress. The establishment of the unit dealing with the development of the Community Education sector should be established as a priority, given that the local Facilitators were in the process of being recruited by the VECs. The overall view expressed by the groups was that the various structural developments in adult education were welcome, but only an integrated approach across local and national levels would actually prove effective.

PROFESSIONALISATION

It was not only in the area of policy and coordination that the discussion groups saw a need for better structure and cohesion. Delegates felt strongly that the professional structures within adult education also had to be improved if the service was going to be on an equal footing with the other areas in education. As a starting point this would mean implementing the recommendations of the Green and White Papers in relation to the development of career paths for those in the sector. This is difficult at the moment, partly due to the insecurity of funding resulting in a lack of job security in adult education.

The National Adult Learning Council would be looking at the career path issue when it was fully operational. Therefore the speedy development of that body was also named as an important requirement for the future development of the sector.

As an extension of the 'professionalisation' debate, participants wanted to see improvements in tutor training not only in adult and community education, but across all areas of the education system. The point was made that in order to achieve a lifelong learning culture and to better integrate education services, all those teaching or tutoring learners in any age group needed to share basic skills and training.

What is needed is therefore training in the broad range of methodologies used in education, which would encompass such areas as experiential learning, dealing with literacy difficulties etc. There is also a need for better training in such areas as guidance and mentoring. Teacher and tutor training and support needs to be better resourced, and delegates named the NALA training for tutors scheme as an excellent example of a support and development model.

There was a widespread feeling coming from both the VEC sector and the community sector that the budget for administration would have to be improved if real progress in adult education was going to happen on the ground. Tutors need to be freed up to support learning and mentor individuals. Adequate administrative support would leave those teaching and mentoring with more time on their hands to do their work well. This would in turn lead to a more focused and professional approach throughout the sector.

LEARNER SUPPORTS

INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE

Individual and system-wide supports in various guises already exist for adult learners. However, delegates felt that improvements should be made in some key areas in order to enhance learners' potential for engaging in lifelong learning. The key support issues raised were information, guidance, childcare and finance.

Access to comprehensive and clear information is essential in determining the kinds of education paths that become open to people. There is a lack of awareness among adults not only about the kinds of options that are available in terms of programmes, but also the benefits, supports, grants and entitlements that are also available to them. Suggestions emerged about the potential for developing a centralised database which would hold this kind of information, because currently it is often the case that providers have to be approached on an individual basis for details of their courses.

As a back up to the provision of information, and in order to make information truly accessible, the importance of a comprehensive guidance service for adults was stressed. Some delegates welcomed the roll out of the Adult Education Guidance Initiative which is currently underway but others had no real knowledge of this service, which demonstrates the need to make it available nationwide as soon as possible. Guidance services should promote a learner centred approach and be accessible to people in marginal and remote communities as needed. The new National Framework of Qualifications should help to open more learning options for people, but it will also increase the need for advice and help on accessing those options.

CHILDCARE

The need for expanded and improved childcare provision was identified as on previous occasions, with women learners in particular being affected by the patchiness and cost of supply. There was concern about the function of the new childcare structures and some confusion in people's understanding of the role of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform in administering childcare grants. A need for better communication of the role of various bodies in relation to childcare was highlighted.

FINANCE

Not only was the cost of childcare a deterrent for many potential learners, but group discussions moved to look at other financial barriers to the individual engaging in education. The cost of learning to an individual relative to their income can be very high, and therefore allowances for learning should better reflect cost and be more realistic. Financial support is a key incentive to learn as well as a support, and if the central aim of the government is to benefit the economy by developing the labour force, then surely it is in their interest to help resource more education and training where people are keen to participate. Dr Bélanger had also argued that industry and employers should absorb some of the cost of learning and there was support for this among delegates.

The idea of a personal learning budget or account for everyone in Ireland was floated. This would be a standard amount for all, and would be available to draw down at any stage through life. This in theory would promote equality, and allow people the autonomy to determine their own path through education and their own costs. It would also tie into the idea of a more learner-centred approach to education, and indeed underpin the argument that the learner should be recognised as a customer.

FLEXIBLE PROVISION

It was not only in the area of supports that the principle of a learner centred approach was promoted by delegates, rather it was their view that the principle of learner centred-ness should underpin all aspects of the adult education service. One of the key areas identified in which this principle should be applied was more flexible provision.

Flexibility in relation to the provision of modular learning options, part time options, evening options and distance learning packages is still one of the major gaps to be addressed in the Irish education system. Opportunities to engage in learning are limited for many adults by their employment status, their family responsibilities or the particular area of the country in which they live. For example, it is difficult for part time and shift workers in urban areas to access courses at a time which suits them, apart from the fact that their employment will render them ineligible for financial support. In rural areas, it is often difficult to access education because of distances and lack of transport. Higher education in particular is very inaccessible to those in isolated rural communities.

Initiatives like the *Back to Education Initiative*, which provides part time and modular options to some 6,000 learners this year, are welcome but are not widespread enough to benefit many. Serious investment in the development of outreach strategies, of distance learning packages and in the development of a less centralised education system was named in the discussion groups as a key requirement to achieving genuine lifelong learning in Ireland. This would also require that policy makers regard learners as customers, and seek to supply a service that actually meets with customer demands.

PROGRESSION AND ACCREDITATION

To complement the expansion of flexible and accessible provision, delegates stressed the need for better progression routes and accreditation for learners. These would need to be flexible and link to the learner centred approach already outlined. There was recognition by many that the new National Framework of Qualifications, once it becomes operational, would greatly improve the opportunities to progress and to access qualifications for all learners.

A related aspect of government thinking that was welcomed in group discussion was the shift away from seeing education and training as distinct areas. Participants welcomed the idea that prior and experiential learning would be recognised in the context of the new Qualifications Framework and felt that this would help to make vocational type training and life experience as highly valued as academic qualifications.

Delegates hoped to see a shift in the entry requirements for programmes towards recognising experiential learning, as well as the development of more practical assessment procedures for learners. This would help not only adults, but potentially those of school age with less academic leanings. The importance placed on the Leaving Cert at the moment was seen as unacceptable and made entry to third level and other options particularly difficult for adults. It was also noted that the title 'Leaving Cert' had a finality to it which did not encourage learning beyond school age.

The view was also voiced that while accreditation is important and there is an increased demand for accreditation, it is not the most important aspect of lifelong learning. Accessing accreditation should not, delegates felt, be made obligatory when government run schemes were being devised, as had been the case with the *Back to Education Initiative*.

EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

A final and significant theme which came up repeatedly in all discussion groups and also in the open sessions was that of educational disadvantage. There was a general consensus that until the most marginalized people were brought into education and were able to negotiate the system, that the lifelong learning project would not have succeeded. The new Minister for Education and Science Noel Dempsey had already stressed publicly his commitment to targeting disadvantage, and indeed the Minister of State Ms Síle De Valera had been given specific responsibility for the area. Delegates felt that the time was therefore right to focus attention on targeting marginalized groups.

'People don't know what they don't know'

As the key note speakers had themselves recognised, there is a very real need for the development of better ways of engaging those learners who are hardest to reach. Expansion of outreach provision and further investment in community education would be a good starting point in this regard. Many delegates felt that pre-development work should be an integral part of all adult programmes and programme funding. It was also felt crucial to have development workers engaging with groups and bringing them into education and learning. A particular focus was deemed necessary to encourage men's participation.

Given the government cut backs recently announced in access programmes designed to target disadvantaged groups, the need for new initiatives was seen as more urgent than ever. The view was expressed that budgets for educational disadvantage in adult education should be ring-fenced and protected. The Drama presentation from ACCESS 2000 Wexford and Women's Centre impressed many participants at the conference, and again highlighted the benefits of outreach when it was made available to people. This kind of work, delegates felt, should be brought to the attention of relevant policy makers.

One particular aspect of educational disadvantage discussed was the lack of effort and funding currently going into improving disability access for adults in education. While there is funding available to schools who have registered disabled students under the Special Fund for Students with Disabilities, there is little help available in the adult education sector. Participants called for this to be addressed and Margaret Kelly responded to this in the open session. She conceded that the problem exists, but named a number of research and pilot initiatives that are underway in the VECs, the Institutes of Technology and in Higher Education. She hoped to see further progress in these pilots by 2003, which is of course European Year of People with Disabilities.

CONCLUSION

The discussion groups provided a rich source of recommendations for the progression and development of the adult education service in Ireland. In particular, the focus on building a lifelong learning culture proved very worthwhile, and allowed participants to think about all learning opportunities and not only those currently available through adult education programmes. It was also valuable to consider learning as a right.

Delegates called for the issues outlined above to be taken up by the Department of Education and Science and welcomed the presence of departmental representatives to hear their concerns. AONTAS will also be taking up these issues in the relevant policy fora, and is already lobbying on a number of key concerns outlined here.

APPENDIX 1: PARTICIPANT LIST

CONFERENCE DELEGATES

Aine Ahern	
Vincent Ahern	Co. Cork VEC
Catherine Alymer	Our Lady of Lourdes
Kay Bailey	Ruhama Project
Liam Bane	Co. Dublin VEC
Julie Barkman	LES
Pat Barrett	North West Inner City Women's Network
Marie Barry	Network Kildare
Sean Beirne	Co. Roscommon VEC
Mary Blake	
Josephine Boland	Women's Studies Centre NUI Galway
Liam Bolger	South East Men's Network
Denis Bourke	Tipperary South VEC
Noel Bourke	Co. Offaly VEC
Valerie Bowe	Lourdes Youth & Community Services
Mary Hilda Cavanagh	IVEA
Sara Bourke	Tipperary Women's Network
Sean Bracken	Leargas
Anne Brennan	South Co. Dublin Adult Education
Maria Brennan	ACCESS 2000
Ruth Burke	Southill Development Programme
Lar Byrne	Co. Offaly VEC
Tom Callaghan	Co. Roscommon VEC
Sandra Carpenter	Rowlagh Women's Group
Elizabeth Chute	CDVEC
Ursula Clarke	Western Health Board
Brenda Clerkin	TARGET
Peter Coffey	CDVEC
Stella Coffey	
Sean Conlon	Co. Clare VEC
Teresa Conneely	Mary Immaculate Secondary School
Dominic Connolly	Co. Roscommon VEC
Teresa Corcoran	Waterford Women's Centre
Sr Mary Corr	Mercy Education Office
Ray Cribbin	Co. Laois VEC
Chris Cronin	Co. Wexford Partnership
Sean Cunnane	Co. Kildare VEC
Lorraine Cusack	City of Dublin YMCA
Jennifer D'Arcy	Bray Partnership
Angie Daly	Combat Poverty Agency

Anna Dangerfield	Crosscare
Fiona deBuis	Tech Amergin
Pat Deedigan	Southill Development Programme
Tony Deffely	TUI
Martin Delany	NUI Maynooth
Ann Dinan	JMB
Sean Doherty	Co. Laois VEC
Anne Dolan	Mary Immaculate College
Marion Donegan	ACCESS 2000
Margaret Dorney	Collinstown Park Community College
Tony Downes	
Caroline Duffy	Co. Dublin VEC
Maria Dunne	Deansrath Women's Group
Paul Dunny	National College of Ireland
Patricia Egan	Mercy College
Mary English	Second Chance Education Project
Annette Ennis	Women Together Tallaght
Eileen Fahy	Roscommon Partnership Company
Marian Fitzgibbon	Athlone IT
Derek Fitzpatrick	Dublin City Development Board
Anne Flannery	Clondalkin Women's Network
Bairbre Fleming	University College Dublin
Dermot Fleming	FAS Employment Services
Christine Flynn	Waterford Women's Centre
Jennifer Flynn	Shanty Education & Training
Mary Flynn	Presentation Education Office
Susan Foley	Rowlagh Women's Group
Mary Foudy	
Rita Frawley	Co. Offaly VEC
PJ Garvan	Co. Dublin VEC
Anne Geoghan	Discovery Advice Centre
Carmel Geraghty	CDVEC
Edel Geraghty	Limerick Women's Network
Francis Gilmartin	Co. Leitrim VEC
Christy Glancy	Co. Carlow VEC
Wendy Goggin	Southill Development Project
Margaret Golden	Co. Dublin VEC
Bridget Gormley	Copping-On Westside Centre
Martin Gormley	Co. Donegal VEC
Fred Goulding	Co. Dublin VEC
John Grant	VTOS Colaiste Dhulaigh
Maura Grant	Department of Education & Science
John Griffin	Co. Limerick VEC

APPENDIX 1: PARTICIPANT LIST

Fiona Hayes	Cork County Council
Margaret Healy	Presentation Education Office
Ashling Heely	Dublin Inner City Partnership
Marietta Herraghty	Mevagh Resource Centre
Carol Herron	Cavan Partnership
Sinead Howard	Bord Iascaigh Mhara
Ellie Hughes	ACCESS 2000
Kevin Hurley	
Tom Hussey	Co. Galway VEC
Deirdre Johnson	Discovery Guidance Centre
Anne Joyce	Killester College of Further Education
Bernie Judge	Further Education Development Unit
Lisa Kavanagh	Waterford Women's Centre
Bernie Keane	Duagh Family Centre
David Kearney	City of Dublin YMCA
Bob Keating	Co. Tipperary VEC
Winnie Keegan	Pavee Point
Diana Kelly	Dublin Institute of Technology
Bernadette Kennedy	South West Kerry Women's Association
Damien Keoghan	Lourdes Youth & Community Services
Mary Kett	Further Education Development Unit
Liam Kilbride	Presentation Education Office
Caroline Lambden	Westmeath Partnership
Elaine Lawless	Tallaght Partnership
Moira Leydon	ASTI
Catherine Lynch	NCCRI
Patricia McCarthy	Carrigaline Community School
Jarlath McDonagh	Co. Galway VEC
Bernie McDonnell	ADM
William McEvoy	Co. Laois VEC
Gerry McGee	Co. Leitrim VEC
Rosemary McGill	Co. Dublin VEC
Eileen McGlynn	Doras Luimni
Matt McGrath	Co. Tipperary VEC
Josephine McGread	Sligo Adult Guidance in Education
Cathy McLoughlin	CE Network Support Services
Gerry McNamee	TARGET
Tom Meade	TARGET
Amanda Milne	Clare Women's Network
Eithne MhicDhonnchadha	Co. Galway VEC
Johnny Molloy	Co. Galway VEC
Michael Molloy	Dublin City Public Libraries

Valerie Moore	Institute of Technology Tralee
Maria Morgan	Co. Louth Adult Learning Centre
Dr. Anna Murphy	NQAI
Don Murphy	Co. Wexford Partnership
Fergus Murphy	Sherkin Island Development Society
Finian Murray	North Eastern Health Board
Helen Murray	Women Together Tallaght
Paddy Murray	NALC/IBEC
Des Murtagh	Co. Dublin VEC
Luke Murtagh	Tipperary North VEC
Carol Nash	South West Kerry Women's Association
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APPENDIX 2: CONFERENCE AGENDA

WEDNESDAY

- 12.00 – 2.00pm** Registration and light lunch
- 2.30 – 2.45pm** Welcome and Introduction. Mr. John Ryan, President, AONTAS
- 2.30 – 2.45pm** Opening of Conference. Ms. Síle DeValera TD, Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science
- 3.00 – 3.45pm** Plenary Session
Chair: Mr John Ryan, President, AONTAS
Theme: Policy Developments in Adult Education
Key Speaker: Ms. Margaret Kelly, Principal Officer, Further Education Section, Department of Education and Science
- 3.45 – 4.15pm** **Coffee Break**
- 4.15 – 4.45pm** Theme: A Local Perspective
Key Speaker: Ms. Eileen Curtis
Adult Education Organiser, Co. Kilkenny VEC
- 4.45 – 5.00pm** Open Forum
- 7.30pm** Conference Dinner

THURSDAY

- 8.30 – 9.30am** Registration
- 9.30 – 10.30am** Plenary Session
Chair: Professor Noel Whelan, Chairperson, National Adult Learning Council
Theme: The Right to Learn: An Investment
Key Speaker: Dr. Paul Bélanger, President, International Council for Adult Education
Open Forum
- 10.30 – 10.45am** Drama Presentation
Access 2000 Wexford and Waterford Women's Centre
- 10.45 – 11.15am** **Coffee Break**
- 11.15 – 12.45pm** Discussion Groups
- 12.45 – 2.15pm** **Lunch**
- 2.00 – 3.30pm** Exercising the Right to Learn
Case Study Presentations (5 parallel sessions)
- 3.30 – 4.00pm** **Coffee Break**
- 4.00 – 5.00pm** Plenary Session
Chair: Ms. Brid Connolly, Hon. Secretary, AONTAS
Theme: Imagining the Future
Key Speaker: Dr. Tom Collins, Director, Dundalk Institute of Technology
Open Forum
- 5.00 pm** Close of Conference