

Department of Education consults AONTAS on new Student Support Bill

25th February 2008

AONTAS met with staff from the Higher Education – Equity of Access section of the Department of Education & Science this week to discuss changes to existing provision of student grants as proposed in the new student support bill.

Earlier this month AONTAS issued a press release welcoming the new bill, particularly the move to streamline the administrative procedures for the management of the student grant awarding process. To read the press release in full click [here](#).

The new bill explained

The existing system for processing and administering grants is both inconsistent and confusing. The new bill will simplify the process by limiting the grant awarding bodies to VEC's alone. This should make accessing information easier and improve levels of consistency and quality of service.

The existing application form will also be streamlined and will be available to complete on line in the future.

The new student support bill will also require third level institutions to draw up access plans for targeting minority groups, these plans are meant to encourage access to third level among groups who are under represented in these institutions, including mature students.

Challenges facing adult learners

During this meeting with the Higher Education – Equity of Access section of the Department AONTAS raised a number of issues relating to the student support bill which have either been raised by or directly affect many of our members.

Firstly the definition of independent versus dependent mature student currently used in determining eligibility for grants acts as a barrier for many adult learners wishing to return to education full time. Many adult learners living with parents and seeking the grant are being assessed under their parent's income despite supporting themselves through paid employment for many years and leading financially independent lives. This leads to many mature students being denied grant supports on the grounds of income.

Similarly, AONTAS highlighted the added challenges facing part-time students in higher education who are not eligible to apply for supports such as student grants and are also paying high fees, despite the fact that many earn low incomes. AONTAS supplied the Department with copies of our [policy position paper on part time fees](#), where this issue is elaborated on.

AONTAS will continue to "*lobby to remove barriers to access to learning opportunities*"¹ such as these, through consultation with and submissions to relevant sections within the Department.

The new grants scheme will not be rolled out until the 2009-10 academic year at the earliest, while extra staffing provision for VEC's will help facilitate the change-over.

¹ AONTAS Strategic Plan 2007-10, Policy Promotion Practice Partnership, Pp.19