

## AONTAS MEETING WITH MINISTER FOR SOCIAL PROTECTION, EAMON Ó CUIV TD JUNE 2010

### SUMMARY OF KEY ISSUES

AONTAS welcomes this opportunity to meet with the Minister, with a view to giving him a brief outline of our work to date. We would also like to discuss three specific issues with the Minister of relevance to his Department, they include

- The withdrawal of eligibility for the Maintenance Grant, for those on the Back to Education Allowance entering ‘new courses’ this year
- The provision of Information on state supported adult education initiatives
- Education and training in the context of the new Social Welfare Bill 2010.

### ABOUT AONTAS

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

- An Information Referral Service, which last year dealt with queries from over 6,000 learners. AONTAS also produces an Information Booklet, which provides the most up to date and accurate information to those considering returning to education.
- AONTAS organises an Adult Learners’ Festival, a week long programme of over 300 events which take place nationwide during the month of February. The Festival raises the profile of the sector and adult learning in general.
- Networking activities – AONTAS brings various stakeholders in the sector together to identify the challenges to greater levels of participation in adult and community education – Networks established include the Community Education Network and the Senior Learners Network.

### ADULT EDUCATION AS AN INVESTMENT

AONTAS believes that investment in adult learning results in measurable outcomes for individuals as well as the Irish economy. Research has shown that not only does adult learning foster sustainable development, social inclusion and active citizenship but also it results in

health benefits, particularly for older learners.<sup>1</sup> In financial terms it is estimated today that every year the average level of education of the adult population is raised there is a corresponding increase of 3.7% in long-term economic growth<sup>2</sup>.

In 2009, a short research study commissioned by AONTAS showed how access to education resulted in tangible benefits in three different contexts. One of the research participants who availed of education in the workplace progressed into a management position with a higher salary. A second participant who engaged in community education progressed from unemployment to obtain a full time position within her own community. A third participant who was a single parent is now more likely to support her own children to progress through the education system as a result of her experience of education as an adult.<sup>3</sup>

AONTAS also recently commissioned the first extensive research on the outcomes of community education. Funded by the Department of Education and Skills, the research draws on the experience of over 600 learners, along with practitioners and policy makers. Findings of the research will be available in July.

## THE CURRENT CONTEXT

Adult education and community education are key components of our economic recovery. 60% of the the 2020 workforce form part of the current workforce, hence the need to focus on upskilling measures which will prepare people to avail of future opportunities<sup>4</sup>. According to a recent update on the National Skills Strategy, 21% of the current workforce has less than their Junior Cert<sup>5</sup>. Recent research has also pointed to a significant problem of early school leaving at second level<sup>6</sup>. As demand increases for adult and community education, providers are struggling to respond to two very different needs – those who left the system early and who are returning to education as adults, and those who want to upskill and retrain as a consequence of unemployment. Demand for further education has risen across all aspects of the education system – from local VEC services right through to mature student applications at third level (up by 6% from 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> 'Many Happy Returns' – AONTAS Policy Positions for Local and European Elections 2009

<sup>2</sup> Belem Framework for Action, Confintea VI, December 2009

<sup>3</sup> The Costs and Benefits of Undertaking Adult Education, AONTAS February 2009

<http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/the-costs-and-benefits-of-undertaking-adult-education-2009/>

<sup>4</sup> 'Lifelong Learning Opportunities in the workplace for traditionally disadvantaged groups in Ireland, NESC Report 2009

<sup>5</sup> Review of the National Skills Strategy, Department of Education and Skills April 2010 –

<sup>6</sup> Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science, April 2010

Over the past 18 months AONTAS has consulted widely with a number of key stakeholders, to gather information about the challenges experienced by those accessing and delivering adult education. The experiences and queries of those contacting our Information Referral Service are captured and analysed to identify key themes<sup>7</sup>. A series of regional meetings last year in different parts of the country identified common challenges faced by local VEC providers, many of whom are responding to unprecedented demand for their services due to rising unemployment. Finally, AONTAS also consulted with the Community Education Network – which represents 80 groups around the country, many of whom operate in communities experiencing extreme disadvantage which will only be exacerbated in the current economic context.

AONTAS has brought the issues articulated to the attention of the Department of Education and Skills. However rising unemployment means that there is now a greater overlap of these issues with the Department of Social Protection. In particular, AONTAS has identified three key issues relevant to the Department of Social Protection, which we would like to highlight to the Minister.

## **1. Withdrawal of the Entitlement to a Maintenance Grant for those in receipt of BTEA**

Changes in Budget 2010 now mean that those on the Back to Education Allowance are no longer in a position to apply for the Maintenance Grant. We welcome the Ministers engagement to date with this issue, and the Minister is already familiar with the individual cases of a number of students on an Access Course at NUI Galway in his own constituency who are affected by this particular change.

AONTAS is concerned that this change will affect a broader cohort of adults who are in need of further education, reskilling or upskilling, but also that it contradicts other government commitments in education, namely the National Skills Strategy, and the National Access Plan. Those who will be affected by this particular change include students on PLC or VTOS courses who want to progress to third level, or any adult deemed to be entering a ‘new course’. As stated earlier, 21% of the current labour force are at Levels 1-3 (Junior Certificate and below) and the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs has set a target to reduce this percentage to 7% by 2020<sup>8</sup>. A key tool in achieving this target is the Back to Education Allowance, which acts as an incentive for this cohort to progress to Level 4 and 5 (Leaving Certificate Level). If this change is fully implemented, then this cohort is effectively ‘stuck’ at Level 5, unless they can financially afford to pursue their education at third level. AONTAS is concerned that the removal of

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<sup>7</sup> For more information, see AONTAS Annual Report 2009, enclosed.

<sup>8</sup> National Skills Strategy Implementation Statement April 2010

eligibility for the Maintenance Grant will ultimately act as a disincentive to adults to return to third level.

The number of those qualifying for the Back to Education Allowance has risen by 80% to just under 21,000 people. In 2008-2009, 6,559 students were in receipt of the BTEA Third Level Option, this has risen to 10,351 in 2009 -2010<sup>9</sup>. Data is not currently available on the number of BTEA holders currently in receipt of a Maintenance grant. AONTAS has had recent contact with Labour party spokesperson on Social Protection, Roisin Shorthall, with a view to obtaining these figures from the Department of Social Protection but without success. We believe that this information is key to providing an accurate picture of the financial implications of this particular decision, as well as a clearer picture of who will be affected.

Furthermore, AONTAS believes that although this cut may represent a savings on the short term, it will cost the government in the long term. The benefits of investment in education have already been outlined in this document, including an increase in economic growth. Maintenance grants vary depending on the situation of individual students– from €330 to €6,355 annually; this is a small amount in comparison the cost of long term unemployment on the State. AONTAS is strongly supportive of an activation approach to Social Protection; however it must also be acknowledged that there are situations where adults need to be financially supported to avail of further training and education. Adults returning to education do not have the same support structure as their younger counterparts, and the Maintenance Grant is often used to finance the costs of participation in education – childcare and transport being the key costs cited by adult learners.

## RECOMMENDATION

AONTAS believes that this decision will have far reaching consequences for many adult learners, but particularly a cohort of low skilled adults who are in need of further education. AONTAS believes that without the financial support provided by the Maintenance Grant, many of this vulnerable group will not be able to progress to third level.

We would ask the Minister to liaise with the Department of Education and Skills to make publicly available the numbers of those currently in receipt of both the BTEA and the Maintenance Grant.

Secondly, we would ask the Minister to liaise with the Department of Education and Skills, with a view to reversing this decision.

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<sup>9</sup> National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, May 2010

## 2. Access to clear, accurate and up to date Information

One of the greatest challenges experienced by people contacting AONTAS relates to accessing the most up to date and accurate information. The whole area of entitlements, and the range of new activation measures available calls for a greater collaboration between government departments, key education providers and Jobs Facilitators within the Department of Social Protection. Many adults who contact us report frustration and confusion because inaccurate information has led to a delay in them accessing further education and training. In 2009, 68% of those contacting AONTAS reported that ‘knowing where to access information was a barrier in itself’.<sup>10</sup> This is further supported by evidence from other agencies we work with. For example in relation to changes to the BTEA, the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education recently noted that *‘those providing guidance and advice are encountering a lack of awareness among many students, prospective students and their families as to who is affected by the withdrawal of dual entitlement, and the fact that BTEA holders may still qualify for registration fee support but must make a full application as normal through the maintenance grant scheme’*<sup>11</sup>.

AONTAS has worked closely with the NQAI in the development of the Qualifax website, the HEA in the development of Studentfinance.ie and liaises regularly with both the INOU and the CICs. Two years ago AONTAS identified a serious gap in the delivery of information and produced a comprehensive Information Booklet, which guides an adult through the various issues in returning to education – from funding and finance, entitlements and qualifications, along with personal stories which highlight the benefits of learning. The booklet is widely regarded as an example of best practice and is distributed through networks such as ICTU, the Adult Guidance Initiative, the VECs and the INOU. AONTAS is currently planning a new issue of the booklet which will include information on the new activation measures, and on changes to the BTEA.

### RECOMMENDATION

An analysis of traffic on the AONTAS website indicates a high level of referral from the Department of Social Protection website through an existing link. AONTAS would ask the Minister to consider that the Departments website host a direct link to the Information Booklet, with a view to providing the highest quality and most accurate information to people who have been made unemployed.

<sup>10</sup> AONTAS Information Statistics December 2009

<sup>11</sup> May 2010

### 3. The Social Welfare Bill 2010

AONTAS is supportive of 'a general move away from the long-term and passive income support' as outlined in the new Social Welfare Bill, and the Bill opens some long needed dialogue on how people can be enabled to progress from unemployment into education and employment.

Two issues concern us within the Bill – the first relates to the changes in the one parent family payments. In a similar vein to as has been already expressed in this document, AONTAS believes that in order to move from unemployment into meaningful employment or education, adults, and particularly those who are parenting alone, will need a support system in place. Two elements are key to this support system, one being accessible and affordable childcare, the other is flexible learning models which can be combined with parenting. AONTAS is happy to provide the Minister with examples of best practice initiatives around the country in this regard.<sup>12</sup>

The second concern relates to the proposed cut in Jobseekers allowance to those who refuse an offer of employment, education and training. In relation to education and training, our contact with providers indicates that demand is particularly high, with waiting lists and bigger classes now a fact of life for many of those returning to education. From our own information analysis, a quarter of those who were unemployed and who contacted us last year stated that the courses available do not suit their own needs. 25% of those contacting us last year said that there were no progression routes available to them from participating in ad hoc short courses at local level.<sup>13</sup> Take up of training and upskilling measures introduced as part of the Emergency Budget in April 2009 has been mixed – reasons cited include the mismatch between skills shortage areas and the needs and expectations of participants, as well as a lack of co-ordination between Education and (then) Social Welfare – often leading to confusion about the eligibility criteria of applicants.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, applications to PLC courses are oversubscribed.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no 'quick fix' or 'one size fits all' solution to the upskilling challenge. Adults will have different needs depending on their education, employment and life experience to date, and will require different interventions. The priority is that initiatives must be meaningful and lead to progression – either to further education, or to employment. An individual who takes up a course place solely for fear of losing out financially will ultimately not benefit from the experience, and is depriving someone else of the opportunity at a time when the demand for education and training is unprecedented. Short term interventions which do not result in

<sup>12</sup> Mothers Making a Difference, (MMAD) an interagency collaborative initiative based in WIT

<sup>13</sup> AONTAS Annual Report 2009

<sup>14</sup> Adult Education – A Current Diagnosis and Measures for Recovery, AONTAS February 2010

employment or further education will only lead to frustration and disappointment for those participating.

There needs to be greater levels of collaboration within the infrastructure which assists an individual to find the course that is right for them – this means strengthening the connections between Adult Guidance, Jobs Facilitators, providers and other stakeholders with a view to fast tracking people into the pathway that is right for them. The Adult Education Guidance Initiative has an excellent track record in terms of placing and supporting their clients – and boasts high rates of retention and progression, but is also struggling to meet the demand for its services.

## CONCLUSION

The economic context in which adult education providers has changed dramatically over the past two years with unprecedented level of demand in line with rising unemployment. Government responses include investment in a number of new initiatives, as well as regular reviews of existing schemes (eg the Back to Education Allowance). This has resulted in a system which is complex and difficult for adults to navigate, particularly those who find themselves unemployed for the first time. The delivery of information is key to ensuring that adults can access the education and training options that suit their needs and that enable them to progress.

Greater collaboration between Departments is vital to meeting the substantial upskilling challenge which lies ahead. Collaboration needs to take place both at service level but also at policy level. The withdrawal of eligibility to the Maintenance Grant for BTEA holders is an example of how policy change in one Department can impact on the implementation of a vital strategy promoted by another. AONTAS has consistently monitored developments on the Back to Education Allowance, having carried out research on BTEA funded by the Department of Social and Family Affairs in 1997<sup>15</sup>.

We are keen to strengthen our relationship with the Department of Social Protection with a view to promoting greater levels of participation in education and training, and ensuring that the adult and community education play a substantial role in Ireland's economic recovery.

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<sup>15</sup> Everything to Gain – A Study of the Third Level Allowance 1997