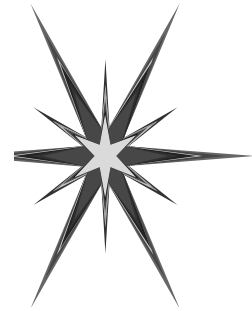


AONTAS



SUBMISSION TO EU MEMORANDUM ON LIFELONG LEARNING



AONTAS

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SUBMISSION TO THE EU MEMORANDUM ON LIFELONG LEARNING FROM AONTAS

INTRODUCTION

AONTAS is the Irish National Association of Adult Education, a voluntary membership organisation. It exists to promote the development of a learning society through the provision of a quality and comprehensive system of adult learning and education that is accessible to and inclusive of all.

AONTAS has developed a second strategic plan, which will underpin its work until the end of the year 2003. The priority of this plan will be the implementation of the recommendations of the White Paper, Learning for Life and the embedding of adult education into a national strategy for Lifelong Learning. The EU memorandum on Lifelong Learning comes therefore at an opportune time. While recognising that Lifelong learning encompasses all learning throughout life in a variety of settings, the response of AONTAS as the National Association for Adult Education will focus specifically on adult education as a key part of that learning and particularly on those adult learners who are educationally, economically and socially disadvantaged.

RESPONSE

AONTAS welcomes the breadth of the memorandum in particular its recognition of different settings for learning both formal and non-formal. While developing human resources in order to increase and sustain economic development is an important reason for access to learning throughout life, of equal importance is the development of people to participate fully in civil society. The recognition within the memorandum of the importance of encouraging and equipping people to participate more actively in all spheres of life is crucial to the development of social cohesion and inclusion.

In Ireland where six years of extremely strong economic growth has seen unemployment levels drop to under 4% and long-term unemployment also falling to under 3% we have many advantages. However a significant number of people have not benefited from the Celtic Tiger economy. A report on income distribution commissioned from the ESRI for the Combat Poverty Agency shows that better off households are gaining from the economic boom to a greater extent than those who are less well off. The report shows that in terms of income distribution Ireland is one of the most unequal countries in the EU. In her article **Richer but More Unequal**, (Poverty Today, no. 49) Clare Farrell states:

“ It is worth noting that the small group of EU countries with high levels of income inequality to which Ireland belongs, is in the same cluster of countries which has relatively high levels of child poverty.”

The consequences of such inequalities is a growing division between rich and poor and a growing disconnection and disenfranchisement of the least well off in our society.

Recent research by Clancy and Wall on the Social background of Higher education entrants shows that, while overall rates of admission to higher education have risen from 20% to 45% between 1980 and 1998 the differences between participation rates from higher and lower socio-economic groups still persists. The authors conclude that inequalities need to be tackled throughout the system as well as at higher level.

The relationship between poverty, unemployment, social exclusion and educational disadvantage has been well documented. The importance therefore of access to education and training opportunities throughout life for all citizens is of crucial importance. While many of these opportunities are implemented through the formal school and state training systems and indeed through targeted programmes geared towards increasing employability, those who are most disadvantaged continue to fall through the net. The notion within the memorandum of bringing learning opportunities as close as possible to people recognises the importance of community-based learning for those who are most disadvantaged. Much of the work done in Ireland through community based learning initiatives shows that when the needs of hardest to reach adults are recognised and catered for in a sensitive and caring way then people develop the confidence to pursue learning opportunities.

Two recent pieces of research published by AONTAS, **Men on the Move**, which looks at barriers affecting the participation of marginalized men in education and training opportunities, and **At the Forefront**, which looks at the role of women's community- based education groups in combating poverty and social exclusion, shows that educational initiatives which are based locally and which have a high level of input into the learning programme by the learner, a high level of support in terms of information and guidance, childcare and study support and most importantly no high fees have no difficulty in attracting adult learners. Other crucial elements are time, flexibility of timetables and progression routes and links to the formal system. Literacy providers have also recognised and employed these methodologies for many years. Such initiatives have struggled to survive on small amounts of short term funding. Until relatively recently resources for adult literacy provision have been minimal, but spurred on by the stinging results of the OECD/IALS survey the literacy problem is finally being tackled though the National Literacy Initiative.

The same thing cannot be said for community based education although some significant developments have been initiated in recent years notably the Women's Education Initiative (WEI) now the Educational Equality Initiative (EEI). Within AONTAS a programme of support for Women's Networks, STANCE (see attached leaflet) has finally been mainstreamed courtesy of funding from both the Departments of Education and Science, and Social Community and Family Affairs. This is an example of a programme, which developed as a result of the pilot initiatives funded under the EMPLOYMENT /NOW programme between 1992 and 1998. European funding was crucial to the strengthening of this sector allowing models of good practice to develop. The STANCE programme which will be evaluated as it progresses is a concrete example of how community based groups can be supported to help themselves and how government departments can co-operate to ensure such work is properly resourced. The new EEI programme will also hopefully produce some good responses to educational disadvantage, which will inform government policy and action in the area of lifelong learning in the immediate future. Such

interventions are the key to the opening up of access to those who are most educationally and economically disadvantaged. From the perspective of these adult learners the most important paragraph in the memorandum reads as follows:

‘People will only plan for consistent learning activities throughout their lives if they want to learn. They will not want to continue to learn if their experiences of learning in early life have been unsuccessful and personally negative. They will not want to carry on if appropriate learning opportunities are not practically accessible as far as timing, pace, location and affordability are concerned. They will not feel motivated to take part in learning whose content and methods do not take proper account of their cultural perspective and life experiences. And they will not want invest time, effort and money in future learning if the knowledge, skills and expertise they have already acquired are not recognised in tangible ways, whether for personal reasons or for getting ahead at work. Individual motivation to learn and a variety of learning opportunities are the ultimate keys to implementing lifelong learning successfully’.

Within this paragraph is the recognition that adults in particular will learn at their own pace, in their own time and where best suits them. These are issues that have been consistently fed back from providers and learners to decision and policy makers in government and thus this paragraph is a key statement. In particular the recognition of non-formal and informal learning as key parts of lifelong learning is welcome and the concept of life- wide learning encompassing a more holistic approach is a step forward in terms of policy. The message that has been coming from broad consultations conducted by AONTAS after both the Green and White Papers on Adult Education published by the Department of Education & Science and the White Paper published by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs on Supporting Voluntary Activity has been that; while employment is a key outcome of successful learning, social exclusion rests on more the having paid work. These findings bear-out the statement within the memorandum:

‘Learning opens the door to building a satisfying and productive life, quite apart from a person’s employment status and prospects’.

This is of crucial importance to all adults but it is particularly important for groups of people who are classified as being economically inactive, e.g. women working in the home and who are involved in all kinds of voluntary activity within their communities people who for a variety of reasons cannot engage in paid work, disabled people, older people. The breadth of thinking within the memorandum is one of its greatest strengths and is of crucial importance in an era where learning is often regarded as purely functional. With regard to the key messages AONTAS would like to respond in the following way.

Key Message 1 – New Skills for all

AONTAS recognises that today’s labour markets demand ever-changing profiles of skills, qualifications and experiences. It is a fact that skill shortages is one of the issues affecting the continuing growth of our economy. People are now likely to

make frequent career changes and need to be adaptable as workers. While there is great emphasis on the development of ICT skills and functional knowledge, which are very important, it is also important to remember the importance of so-called soft skills.

Increasingly the workplace requires teamwork skills, strategic thinking, the ability to adapt to change, communication skills, negotiation skills, and problem solving to name but a few. These are also the skills required to live in society, to raise children and to participate in the development of communities. Adult community based education employs models of practice which are based on holistic approaches to the development of the person and these approaches could be incorporated into formal education and training programmes with a view to developing a whole range of basic skills.

While it has been acknowledged that basic literacy and numeracy are the rights of all citizens and that adult students in Ireland can access provision free of charge, AONTAS would urge the Government to go much further and make provision for all citizens to achieve, at a minimum, upper second level education or its equivalent free of charge. The White Paper, **Learning for Life** recommends the abolition of the self-financing rule for certain categories of student who will access basic and second chance education under the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI). Already however some categories of adults wishing to access basic education are falling through the net. This specifically affects women working at home whose means are assessed in the context of the family income and low paid workers who cannot avail of concessions for the unwaged. This issue needs to be addressed further to ensure equality of access for all citizens.

With regard to the development of ICT skills among Adult Learners AONTAS would encourage the Government to implement as quickly as possible the recommendations for a National Adult Basic ICT Skills Programme.

Key Message 2 – More Investment in Human Resources

The most important asset of any country is its people.

In Ireland we are in the happy position of having achieved almost full employment. However a significant number of people work in low paid jobs with little access to further education and training. In the current climate the attractions of financial rewards albeit low rewards are a powerful pull for young people in particular. The anecdotal information coming from schools and colleges suggests that lack of study time due to the demands of part-time work is affecting the performance of students. It is also suggested that this is a factor in the high dropout rates of students in higher education.

Labour laws protecting young people from exploitation need to be rigidly enforced. Employers should be encouraged and where necessary given incentives to build in staff training and development to their organisational development processes as a

matter of form. According to the **Employment Action Plan 2000**, a survey carried out by IBEC indicated that expenditure on training by the business sector is higher than previously thought at 3% of the payroll. However more research needs to be done across a range of sectors to establish the level of staff training and development with a view to establishing where supports and incentives are most needed.

Key Message 3 – Innovation in Teaching and Learning

One of the key underpinning philosophies of adult education has been recognition of the learner as the central figure in the learning process and respect for his or her ability to take control of this process. Those who work with adult learners in whatever setting must be trained to support learners to take charge of their own learning.

All practitioners of Adult Education should be given the opportunity to avail of professional training which should take account of the previous qualifications and/or experiential base from which adult educators come and designed to meet their particular needs. Teachers who have trained in the formal sector to deal with younger children should be required to take modules of training geared towards preparing the teacher to work with adults. This could be done in a number of ways i.e. either as a post graduate qualification, as in-service training modules for which the teacher is allowed study leave, or as an integrated part of the teacher training programme.

For tutors who have acquired their skills through the experience of working with adults, which is particularly the case in the non-formal sector, qualifications must be developed through Accreditation of Prior Learning. Partnerships need to be developed between the community and statutory sectors to enable such qualifications to be developed.

Research should be undertaken to identify models of practice already in existence with a view to developing quality assured qualifications. The documenting of practice with a view to mainstreaming should also be applied.

Key Message 4 – Valuing Learning

Coupled with the development of flexible training and qualifications for teachers and trainers, innovative forms of assessment and recognition are also priority area for adult education. The Irish education system is extremely rigid and school based qualifications such as the Leaving Certificate examination are still the main criteria for entry to higher education. While higher education institutions have different ways of assessing the suitability of mature candidates there is no consistent transparent process in place as yet. This is an issue, which has been raised by the Action Group on Access to Higher Education for the Disadvantaged and also by the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning. AONTAS would urge the Government to issue these reports and to act on the recommendations contained therein.

Key Message 5 – Rethinking Guidance and Counselling

The issue of good quality educational guidance and counselling is one which has been consistently raised by AONTAS and a variety of other organisations. The Pilot Initiative implemented under the auspices of the National Development Plan is already well in train supporting eleven educational guidance and counselling projects and the second phase has been announced. The evaluation of the pilots will be a key factor in the development of an infrastructure of guidance support for adults, which should be integrated with other services already in operation on the ground such as the Employment Support Services. One of the issues already emerging is the necessity for integration of the service within educational settings. This is an important emphasis of the memorandum, which states that guidance services must be locally accessible in order to be effective. In order to attract learners who hardest to reach services must be tailored to suit their particular needs and circumstances.

One of the case studies (Newbridge VTOS) examined by AONTAS Researcher, Ms. Toni Owens in her work with men, showed very clearly that the integration of guidance and counselling support as part of the overall learning programme was very successful for male students in particular. It is essential that as the national service grows, resources be allocated to provision of services by locally- based community groups, as well as the statutory adult education service. Coupled with the growth and development of the service, professional training for guidance staff is a key factor in quality provision.

Key Message 6– Bringing the Learning Closer to Home

For the past ten years AONTAS's experience of working with locally based groups leads us to believe that flexible community-based provision which is accompanied by student supports such as lower fees, childcare and transport is a successful model in attracting the hardest to reach participants.

Women's Community based education is well established although not as well resourced as we would like (To the Forefront, WERRC for AONTAS 2001) and has been in reality to the forefront in establishing locally based provision. More recently the emerging men's networks, some of which have been allocated resources under the auspices of EEI are endeavouring to establish ways of supporting marginalized men back into education. Such models of practice need to be evaluated, documented and supported. They also need to be linked into the formal education system delivered by the statutory agencies through established accredited progression routes.

The new National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has a key role to play in this regard. The Community and Voluntary Accreditation Forum (CVAF), which had already done some, ground-breaking work through its research, **Towards an Integrated Accreditation Framework** (Nuala Lennon, 1999) is a vehicle, which could easily be resourced to assist in developing progression routes within the Community and Voluntary Sector.

With regard to funding for community education it is not yet clear how the recommendations of the White Paper will be implemented. The Government has already agreed funding for the employment of thirty five Community Education Facilitators. These workers will have a key role to play in linking the work done within communities with provision of the local statutory agencies in particular the VECs. It will be essential that these workers will have knowledge of, and a track record in working with community- based groups. The development of distance learning opportunities will be a crucial factor for adults in rural and isolated areas but must be linked to locally-based learning centres which could provide support for distance learners.

Conclusion

The EU Memorandum reiterates the thinking and recommendations of many groups involved in the development of adult education as a legitimate and key part of lifelong learning for the past ten years. In Ireland there has been a plethora of pilot projects funded under the Community Initiatives which have revealed the same barriers to access for adult learners and which have developed many excellent models of practice. The work of groups such as the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning, the Action Group for Access to Higher Education, P2000 Report on Access for Women to the Labour Force and the Green and White Papers on Adult Education and Supporting Voluntary Activity have all made key recommendations about the development of access to education for all. Research by organisations such as AONTAS and others bears out the messages from these working groups. In many ways there is little left to be said other than it is time to implement the recommendations and monitor their development.

BERNI BRADY, DIRECTOR,

AONTAS, APRIL 2001