

EXPLORE



The quarterly magazine from AONTAS, the National Association of Adult Education



***Cover Story: Men's education in rural areas –
special focus on the Education Equality Initiative***

Analysis of the new Social Partnership Agreement

Improving IT Literacy

How CEFs have contributed to community education

Note from the Editor

Welcome to Issue 4 of *Explore*, the quarterly magazine from AONTAS, the National Association of Adult Education.

After the relative calm of the summer, AONTAS is fully geared up for a busy autumn, with a number of important events planned for the coming months. Top of our 'To Do' list for autumn 2006 is the consultation process for the new AONTAS Strategic Plan, which will run from 2007 to 2010. Naturally, we want all of our members and sectoral partners to let us know what they would like to see included in this Plan, and we strongly encourage all of you to get in touch to air your views.

Another major piece of work during autumn will be the planning and preparation of the AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival. Scheduled for the week beginning 22 January 2007, this is the first time ever that such an event will take place in Ireland, and it is a hugely exciting development for the adult education sector. An Awards Ceremony for adult learning projects will be held as the launch event for the Festival, and we hope to receive plenty of nominations from readers of *Explore*!

In this issue of the magazine, we have a special focus on the Education Equality Initiative (EEI), and how it contributes to improving the lives of men in rurally isolated areas (pages 14-17). Featuring inputs from men's groups in Kerry and Donegal, this report shows the important role the EEI plays in tackling educational disadvantage.

Also in this issue, Finola McDonnell, Policy Officer with AONTAS, looks at the new Social Partnership Agreement and its implications for adult education (page 18), while Maureen Kavanagh examines the impact that Community Education Facilitators have made on the adult education service (page 26). Justine Emoe of ICS SKILLS gives details of two new computer courses aimed at improving IT literacy amongst adults (page 8), and Kevin O'Meara, Principal of Plunkett College, describes the success of their Access Programme for mature students (page 11).

In our international section, Frances Killeen profiles Jane Thompson and the work of NIACE (page 22), while Berni Brady writes of a recent seminar she attended in Uruguay (page 24). Our featured adult learner in this issue is Tom Kelly – a Co. Offaly farmer recently awarded a City and Guilds Gold Medal for his learning achievements (see page 12). Helen Johnston, Director of the Combat Poverty Agency, writes about how we can strengthen the policy-making process for anti-poverty policies (page 21), and we also bring you a mix of adult education news from home and abroad.

As always, we would appreciate feedback, or any suggestions you have for news items or articles for Issue 5. You can contact me at mquinn@aontas.com, or by phone on 01-4068220 / 087-9110569.

Until Issue 5!

Martina Quinn
Communications Officer
AONTAS

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AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival

From 22-26 January 2007, AONTAS will host the first ever Adult Learners' Festival to take place in Ireland. The theme of the Festival is 'Equal Learning Opportunities for All', and its aim is to celebrate and highlight the achievements of adult learners, and to promote the importance of adult learning.

The Festival will kick off with an Awards Ceremony for adult learning projects on Monday, 22 January. Awards will be granted to learner-centred projects that demonstrate the highest levels of

collaboration, and a commitment to promoting equal learning opportunities for all. Nomination forms for these awards will be available from AONTAS over the coming weeks.

As well as the Awards Ceremony, the Festival will also feature events throughout the country, ranging from coffee mornings to seminars to exhibitions of learners' work. AONTAS will be supporting groups throughout the country to mark the Festival locally. We will provide promotional materials, advice and publicity for all events taking place at local level. In addition, Festival

Coordinators will be in place in each county throughout the country to assist with the planning and coordination of events.

AONTAS is working with a number of national organisations in planning the Festival, including the Irish Vocational Education Association, the National Adult Literacy Agency, the National Youth Council of Ireland and Active Retirement Ireland, to name but a few.

Further information on the Festival is available from AONTAS, Tel: 01-4068220, Email: mail@aontas.com, Website: www.aontas.com.

Freshstart Expo Coming Soon!

AONTAS will host two further education seminars at the Freshstart Expo, which will take place on Saturday, 30 September, and Sunday, 1 October, in the RDS, Dublin.

The Expo will feature exhibition

and information stands on Further Education, Jobs and Careers, and Starting Your Own Business. AONTAS has teamed up with Freshstart for the Further Education aspects of the event, and will host information seminars over the course of the weekend on the opportunities available to adults who want to return to learning.

Further information is available from Martina Quinn, Communications Officer, AONTAS, Tel: 01-4068220, Email: mquinn@aontas.com, or Freshstart Expo, Tel: 01-8614862, Email: contact@myfreshstart.ie, Website: www.myfreshstart.ie.

New AONTAS Strategic Plan: Contributions Invited

Work is currently underway to develop a new four-year strategic plan for AONTAS.

The plan, which will run from 2007 to 2010, will build on the work of the current strategic plan, *Sustaining Growth and Development*, which ends in December 2006.

A consultation to inform the new strategic plan will be carried out in the coming weeks. Further information will be sent to members shortly.

AONTAS welcomes the contribution of all of its members and other stakeholders in the sector to the future work of the organisation. If you have ideas and suggestions for the new plan, please contact Finola McDonnell or Niamh O'Reilly in AONTAS, or refer to our website for more information. We look forward to hearing from you.



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National Adult Literacy Awareness Week

National Adult Literacy Awareness Week (NALAW) will take place from 25-29 September 2006.

The theme for this year's week – chosen in anticipation of the General Election next year – is 'Political Participation and Literacy'.

The week will focus on the political establishment – from Government Departments and their support agencies, to politicians and political parties, individuals and organisations. The aim is to enable the political establishment to deal more effectively and sensitively with members of the public who are improving their literacy skills.

The week will also examine how literacy issues can be a barrier to understanding and participating in the political system

in Ireland. It will have three sub-themes:

1. Voter participation, including voter registration and understanding elections and referenda.
2. Participation in political parties, including the different parties, how they are organised, what they do, how to join, party manifestos, voting, canvassing, etc.
3. Understanding Government – how local, national and European Government works

Activities during NALAW will include:

- A literacy student voter registration campaign at Dáil Éireann
- The launch of 'A plain English guide to political participation terms' and 'An A to Z of European Terms'
- A national conference on political participation and literacy

Further information is available from www.nala.ie.

English Language Radio Series for Non-Nationals

Community Radio Castlebar (CRC) – a community radio station in Co. Mayo – has launched a special series for those wishing to learn some basic English.

The series is produced by Pat Stanton, Adult Education Officer with Co. Mayo Vocational Education Committee (VEC).

It was devised, written, and is presented by Fiona Quinn Bailie, an ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) tutor with the VEC.

The aim of the series is to help migrant workers in Mayo to improve their English. There are currently 200 non-nationals on English language courses in the county.

The series consists of 12 hour-long programmes, dealing with everyday situa-

tions, such as shopping, finding a place to live, asking for information, looking for a job, etc. It also covers elements of grammar, pronunciation, spelling, and numbers. Participants in the series follow each programme with the aid of a specially written workbook.

The series was launched in July, and will run for 12 weeks. Recordings of the programmes will be made available in the future, so that learners can work independently of the radio programme.

Oireachtas Committee Publishes Report on Adult Literacy

The Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science published its report on 'Adult Literacy in Ireland' in July.

The report calls for a substantially increased adult literacy budget (up to €125 million by 2013), and a target of halving the number of people with the lowest levels of literacy within the next

15 years. It also calls for comprehensive staff structures, including identification of an adult education qualification for literacy tutors.

NALA, the National Adult Literacy Agency, welcomed the report and called on the Government to fully implement the 28 recommendations it includes. "This report clearly demonstrates how the urgent demand for literacy provision in Ireland can be met," said John Stewart, National Adult Literacy Coordinator with NALA. "What Ireland needs now is the

money to do it. The only way this can be achieved is by inclusion of these 28 recommendations in the next National Development Plan."

The Minister for Education and Science, Mary Hanafin TD, is examining the findings of the 'Adult Literacy in Ireland' report, and is due to come back to the Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science this autumn. The report is available to download from the 'Committees' section of the Oireachtas website, www.oireachtas.ie.

ACE Awards 2006

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) and EBS Building Society have announced details of the 2006 Adult Continuing

Education (ACE) Awards.

The awards, which are now in their second year, will take place on 11 November, and will be presented by RTE radio personality, Joe Duffy.

The awards are open to all those involved in adult basic education (ABE). Nominees may come from ABE organisations, the private sector, Government, statutory bodies, and non-government organisations.

The closing date for nominations is 12 October. Nomination forms and further information are available on the NALA and EBS websites, www.nala.ie and www.ebs.ie.

European Year of Equal Opportunities for All

The European Union (EU) has designated 2007 as the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All.

The three key aims of the Year are:

1. To make EU citizens aware of their right to non-discrimination and equal treatment
2. To promote equal opportunities for all

– access to employment, education, in the workplace, or in the healthcare sector

3. To promote the benefits of diversity for the EU.

The Year has four themes: rights, representation, recognition, and respect, and has been designated a total budget of €15 million for the 12 months of activities throughout the EU. This budget will be spent on an EU-wide information campaign; new Eurobarometer surveys

on discrimination and attitudes towards it; an Equality Summit for Ministers, equality bodies, civil society, and social partners; and hundreds of national initiatives in the EU Member States.

In Ireland, the Equality Authority has been appointed as the national implementing body for the Year.

AONTAS intends to mark the year through its Adult Learners' Festival in January, the theme of which will be 'Equal Learning Opportunities for All'.

EAEA General Assembly

The General Assembly of the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) will take place in Spain from 16-19 November this year.

As always, a number of seminars and additional activities have been planned to coincide with the General Assembly, including the Fourth

Grundtvig Award, which this year will be presented to an adult education project with the primary aim of reducing poverty.

Elections for the Officer Board of the EAEA will also take place at this year's Assembly and, once again, Brid Connolly – Secretary of AONTAS, and a member of the EAEA Board for the last four years – will stand for election. As well as Brid,

Berni Brady, Director of AONTAS, and John Ryan, President, will also represent Ireland's adult education sector at the General Assembly in Spain.

The Fourth Spanish Festival of Lifelong Learning will coincide with the EAEA General Assembly, commencing on Saturday, 18 November.

Further information is available from www.eaea.org.



Brid Connolly, AONTAS' representative on the EAEA Board

ICAE World Assembly

The International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) will hold its seventh World Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya from 17-19 January 2007. The theme of the Assembly will be 'Adults' Right to Learn: Convergence, Solidarity, and Action'.

The primary focus of the Assembly will be on providing a collective space to strongly affirm the right of all to

learn throughout life, and to assert the immense value of adult education and learning in enabling citizens to fight poverty, inequality, discrimination, and the exclusion of a large part of humanity.

The Regional African Assembly will take place immediately before the ICAE World Assembly, and the General Assembly of the ICAE (devoted to ICAE governance and constitutional matters) will take place immediately after. The

World Assembly is open to all ICAE members, partners, and friends, as well as to all networks closely aligned with adult education and learning movements that promote adults' right to learn.

The ICAE was established in 1973 as a global partnership of adult learners, adult educators, and their organisations. It is based in Montevideo, Uruguay. Further information is available from www.icae.org.uy.

OECD on Non-Formal Adult Education

The Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development (OECD) has recently opened a section on its website on the recognition of non-formal and informal adult learning. The new section contains information, background materials and useful links.

The definition of non-formal learning given by the OECD is: "learning through a programme, but it is not usually evaluated

and does not lead to certification". Meanwhile, informal learning is defined as "learning resulting from daily work-related, family or leisure activities".

According to the OECD, its purpose in creating this new section is to provide policy makers with useful options for developing effective systems of recognition for non-formal and formal learning, and to effectively implement the 'lifelong learning for all' agenda. Overall, the project aims to:

- Take stock of existing institutional and technical arrangements such as who

pays and who manages the system

- Develop indicators to measure the benefits and risks, and collect evidence on who benefits and who is at risk
- Collect evidence of what is and isn't working within current systems
- Review existing models to identify those that are effective, beneficial and equitable.

Further information is available from the 'Education' section of the OECD website, www.oecd.org.

Moygownagh Art Exhibition

Moygownagh Community Development Project (Women of the North West) held a highly successful art exhibition in Moygownagh Community Centre in June.

According to Marian Flannery, Coordinator of the CDP, the exhibition was about local women seeking a medium of expression. "As a group of rural women, we are all very excited about our new learning," she said. "Moreover, we are finding that Art, as a medium of expression, is a great energiser towards team-building and,

consequently, it is adding to the consolidation of community development in this area of North Mayo."

Beverly Flynn TD officially opened the exhibition, and congratulated all involved on another milestone in the success story of Women of the North West. "Women of the North West... have addressed the old problem of social isolation by giving women a new sense of self-worth, and a belief in their abilities and talents," she said. "Education has been the key to that solution. There is no more liberating experience for the individual than discovering a talent which has never been recognised before."

Marian Flannery thanked the Government Departments and agencies that contributed financial support to the art exhibition, along with Mayo Vocational Education Committee (VEC). Particular appreciation was extended to the late Joe Langan, formerly CEO of Mayo VEC, and to the local Community Education Facilitator, Pauline McDermott. "The project was a collaborative community effort and, without such cooperation, such a positive outcome would be impossible," Marian said. "For this, Moygownagh Community Development Project is blessed to have such a positive operational environment."

Open Days at IADT

Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT), one of the 14 Institutes of Technology in Ireland, will be holding Open Days from 23-25 November at its campus at Kill Avenue, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin.

The Open Days should be of particular

interest to adults hoping to participate in higher education for the first time.

IADT offers a 1-year, full-time, FETAC accredited programme, the Foundation Certificate, which prepares adults with no prior experience of higher education to enter third level education and progress to further studies. The Certificate is most suitable for adults

who have good basic literacy skills, but who have not completed the Leaving Certificate, or who may have completed it some time ago.

For further information on the Foundation Certificate and the Open Days, contact Patricia Byrne, Access Officer, IADT, Tel: 01-2144628, Email: patricia.byrne@iadt.ie.

President Visits Co. Westmeath VEC

The Adult and Community Education Service of Co. Westmeath Vocational Education Committee (VEC) was delighted to receive its first ever visit by President Mary McAleese this year.

Students and tutors took the opportunity to prepare exhibitions of their work, and the Adult Education Centre in Mullingar got a makeover for the visit. Student and staff representatives from the 11 programmes within the Adult Education Service were invited to attend the event, along with individuals from various community and statutory groups in the county.

During her tour of the Adult Education Centre, the President went from room to room and spoke with students and staff about their learning programmes. "Are you not stunned by what you have accomplished?" she asked one art student, and continued, "It must be fantastic to

discover you have this talent and then to find a good teacher who can take that talent and put a shape to it".

Gearóid Ó Brádaigh, CEO of the VEC, congratulated the President on her relaxed manner, admired the way she carried out her presidential duties, and said she was an inspiration to the students.

The highlight of the visit came when the President spoke to all gathered and expressed her deep interest in adult education and, in particular, the adult literacy service. She praised Westmeath VEC's latest innovative development of a mobile IT classroom that fits in a trolley, and which can be folded into the boot of a car. "This is so clever and brilliant. Why has nobody else thought of this?" she said.

Eddie Costello, a student from Shannon Bank Training Centre, Athlone, presented the President with a hand carved bog oak sculpture, which he had carved himself, and was entitled 'Inspirations' – very appropriate on this occasion!



President Mary McAleese, Gearóid Ó Brádaigh, and Eddie Costello.
(Photo by Luke Danniells)

Increasing Computer Literacy Amongst Adults

ICS SKILLS, a national awarding body for a range of Information Technology (IT) skills programmes, has been a member of AONTAS since last year. It accredits test centres throughout the country to deliver training and certification programmes to quality standards. Its main objective is to raise the level of IT literacy in Ireland. Here, Justine Emoe, Marketing Executive with ICS SKILLS, describes Equalskills and eCitizen – two new courses for beginners in IT – and highlights two case studies that prove the success of these programmes.

The European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) was introduced in Ireland in 1997 by ECDL Ireland (now ICS SKILLS). At that time, the IT skills certification industry in this country was almost non-existent. IT skills certifications were confined to professional or end-user qualifications issued by training providers on an ad hoc basis. However, in the 10 years since its introduction, there has been a surge of interest in ECDL. Six per cent of the total population have embarked on an ECDL programme, and over 1000 Irish accredited ECDL test centres are now established.

Left Behind

Despite this obvious success, however, certain sections of the population have not experienced the benefits that IT learning has brought to Ireland. "ICS SKILLS is a not-for-profit organisation, and our motto is 'IT Certification for All,'" says Eileen Glackin, Regional Development Coordinator with ICS SKILLS. "The ECDL certification has been hugely successful in Ireland, and continues to be. However, we are conscious that certain Irish people – particularly the many adults who don't work in an office, or who left education before IT training became commonplace in schools – have been left behind."

With this in mind, ICS SKILLS has launched two basic-level computer training programmes, which have been specially designed for people with little

"I describe Equalskills as a life-changing event because you go from having zero knowledge to having access to the digital age in one short, fifteen-hour course"

or no experience of using a computer. Equalskills is an introductory guide to basics in computer use, while eCitizen also teaches beginners-level computers, but focuses on internet use. Both training programmes are widely available in Ireland and ICS SKILLS has received very positive feedback about them from course participants.

Equalskills

Eileen is enthusiastic about both programmes. "Equalskills is targeted at absolute beginners, particularly those who might be nervous learners," she says. "It assumes that candidates don't know how to switch on the computer and, from that point, we get them to the stage where they are able to create documents, word process, recognise file extensions, send and receive emails, and use a search engine on the internet. The use of very simple language is key to the programme's success. I describe Equalskills as a life-changing event because you go from having zero knowledge to having access to the digital age in one short, 15-hour course."

Equalskills candidates receive a workbook when they start the programme. The workbook goes through each procedure step by step and incorporates tasks for the candidate to complete after each section. One of the key features of Equalskills is that, although it is a certification programme, there is no test at the end. "Nervous beginners sometimes find the thought of a test off-putting, so Equalskills uses continuous assessment, by the trainer, of the workbook-based tasks, and ICS SKILLS issues a certificate based on that," explains Eileen.

ICS SKILLS is the national accrediting body for Equalskills. However, unlike all



Eileen Glackin and Justine Emoe of ICS SKILLS

of its other programmes, Equalskills centres do not have to be accredited ECDL test centres. This has made it particularly easy and cost effective for the local training centres, schools, Vocational Education Committees (VECs), and FÁS centres to offer the programme to date.

eCitizen

In addition to a lack of basic computer skills, ICS SKILLS is also concerned about low skill levels in internet and email use. A 2005 Joint National Listenership Research survey of over 11,000 Irish adults revealed that 69 per cent of those surveyed had never bought a holiday or a flight online. While lack of access to the internet has played a part in this statistic, public ignorance of the capabilities of the internet and how to use it is also a key factor.

eCitizen is the second ECDL Foundation beginners programme that ICS SKILLS has introduced in Ireland. The programme aims to give the candidate the confidence to participate in society as an eCitizen. It makes candidates aware of information and service resources available online from a wide variety of areas, including news, Government, consumer, travel, education and training, employment, health, and business. The

“A 2005 Joint National Listenership Research survey of over 11,000 Irish adults revealed that 69 per cent of those surveyed had never bought a holiday or a flight online”

programme is suitable for confident beginners, as some basic computer skills are covered at the start of the syllabus.

“We have developed a very useful web-based tool to assist with the training delivery of eCitizen,” says Eileen. “Safety Net is our custom-built website, which adds a practical dimension to the programme by

recreating various online experiences. By using Safety Net, candidates can practise booking tickets, banking, and shopping online, all in a safe, simulated environment.” Approximately 25 hours of class time is required, and a 45-minute supervised test must be passed before certification is awarded.

Better Quality of Life

Eileen is keen to promote courses for beginners because they are beneficial on many levels. “Beginners level courses in IT are very worthwhile,” she says. “The candidate benefits because, by gaining access to the information society, their quality of life can be greatly enhanced. The confidence that these courses pro-

vide can lead to an interest in learning more about IT, so these courses are an ideal stepping-stone to other training programmes. They can lead not only to ECDL, but to other specialist courses like ECDL Webstarter, which is a basic-level web design course, and ECDL Imagemaker, which is a new certification designed to give candidates the basic skills required to use and manipulate digital images.”

ICS SKILLS recognises that the key to success in IT training is the provision of a continuum of training levels – starting at basic beginner’s level. **Further information is available from www.ics.ie or www.ics-skills.ie.**

Case Study: Joe Walsh TD Completes eCitizen

Joe Walsh TD has achieved eCitizen certification, and is enthusiastic in his praise of the programme. The Clonakilty-based TD is keen to encourage others to complete training in internet use, and has highlighted the particular benefits of eCitizen. “I enjoyed the practical, hands-on approach to learning about computers and the internet that eCitizen offered,” he says.

Deputy Walsh’s work in politics at a constituency and national level will benefit from his studies. However, his motivation

to learn more about the internet was also rooted in his love of horse-racing. “I have always had an interest in horse-racing and the internet provides a great means of studying form!” he explains. He also mentions that he was one of the first people to use Ryanair’s online check-in service when it was introduced earlier this year. “I was traveling to the Cheltenham Festival and found the online check-in service very convenient,” he says.

His Dáil colleague, Mary Hanafin TD, Minister for Education and Science, presented Deputy Walsh with his eCitizen certificate at an awards ceremony held in West Cork.



Joe Walsh TD accepting his eCitizen certificate from Education Minister Mary Hanafin

Case Study: An Older People’s Network Gets to Grips with Computing

Members of the Older People’s Network in Dublin have completed Equalskills at the Rathmines Information Centre. The group, whose average age is 74, studied for two hours a week under trainer Edward Ryan, himself a retired teacher. Edward was impressed with the enthusiasm of the candidates. “They worked very hard, didn’t miss a class – they were great,” he says. The students found the course a little challenging at first, but were keen to stress that they soon got to grips with the world of computing. “It was alien to some of them,” says Edward. “About half of them had done a basic course, but the rest had never used a computer before. But they persevered. They came in petrified, and left realising that it was just a machine. The ladies from the group are finding their new skills particularly useful for emailing family abroad.”



The Older People’s Network pictured with (back row, left to right): Edward Ryan, Trainer; Sandra Byrne, Community Development Worker; and Gillian Farrar, ICS SKILLS Regional Development Officer

Leaving Cert Success for Adult Learners

Majella Mackin, Guidance Officer with the Westmeath Vocational Education Committee's Adult Educational Guidance Service, outlines how a group of Traveller women from Mullingar achieved Leaving Cert success this year.

16 August 2006 was a nerve-wracking day for thousands of people in Ireland. On that date, the 50,000 plus students who sat the Leaving Cert last June finally received their results. For some this was a day of great joy; for others, it was a cause of despair!

A Historical Date

For the Mullingar Senior Education and Training Centre in Co. Westmeath, 16 June was a historical day. On that date, 12 adult learners from the local area received the results of their Leaving Cert Applied – the first group ever to complete the Leaving Cert with the Centre. This group of learners was made up of Traveller women, ranging in age from 19 to 44, and their fantastic Leaving Cert achievement is the culmination of two years of hard work for the learners and tutors in Mullingar. The achievement of these women is even more significant when you consider that none of them had ever attended secondary school.

The group of 12 women includes five members of the same family, and spans two generations. Some of the women juggled their Leaving Cert studies with the demands of motherhood, while one member of the group is a grandmother. Fittingly, a number of the women were involved in setting up the Mullingar Traveller Action Group, back in 1995, which in turn helped to establish the Mullingar Senior Traveller Training Centre (now known as the Mullingar Senior Education and Training Centre). Over the last decade, the range of educational

“The achievement of these women is even more significant when you consider that none of them had ever attended secondary school”



The group of women who recently completed their Leaving Cert Applied with Mullingar Senior Education and Training Centre

“Some of the women juggled their Leaving Cert studies with the demands of motherhood, while one member of the group is a grandmother”

options within the Centre has grown from strength to strength and FETAC accreditation is now offered at Levels Three and Four.

Course Content

The Leaving Certificate Applied Programme was introduced in the Centre for the first time in September 2004, and the 12 women enrolled on the course. Over the two-year programme, they worked very hard to meet all the deadlines for submitting the coursework for each module. They also had to sit five final examinations in English, Mathematics, Social Education, two vocational modules, and a language. For the majority of the group, this involved learning Irish and French for the first time. Other modules included Information Technology, Childcare, Art and Design, Hair and Beauty, Hotel Catering and Tourism, Physical Education, and so forth.

As part of their Leaving Cert Applied, the 12 women also completed a Vocational Preparation and Guidance module. I

delivered the Guidance component to the group, in my capacity as Guidance Officer for Westmeath Adult Educational Guidance Service. This module enabled each student to compile a career action plan. These career plans are much more feasible for the 12 women, now that they have overcome this major hurdle and obtained their Leaving Certificate Applied qualification.

Future Plans

In September 2006, another group in the Mullingar Senior Education and Training Centre will start the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme, hoping to achieve the same high standard of success. According to Tony Barry, Director of the Centre, the example set by the first group of 12 has proved inspirational. “There is a real sense of achievement for all those involved in the Centre,” he said. “It’s been a long struggle to get where they’re at, but they’ve stuck with the programme, and been very positive. They put in a tremendous amount of effort.”

Now that they’ve completed the Leaving Cert Applied, and successfully received their results, the 12 women have various plans. Some say they are looking for jobs, while others don’t intend quitting the books just yet, and are making plans for further study. Undoubtedly, after two years of great effort, whatever they do next, they are sure to find success.

Model of Best Practice: Access Programme for Mature Students

In the first issue of Explore, Finola McDonnell looked at recent developments aimed at improving access to third level education for mature students. Here, Kevin O'Meara, Principal of Plunket College, outlines what his college is doing to improve access for adult learners.

Plunket College is a post-primary school, based in Whitehall, Dublin, which caters for students from first year to post-Leaving Certificate and adult education level. The college falls under the remit of City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (CDVEC).

Access Programme

The Third Level Access Programme for mature students in Plunket College commenced in 1995 under the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme. Its aim from the outset was to provide a foundation in subjects that students might wish to study at third level.

The Programme introduces students to methods of study, writing skills and research skills. The course is designed for mature students (aged 23 and over), who were previously unable to fulfil their educational potential and now wish to complete a foundation course in preparation for third level studies. There are no formal educational requirements, though evidence of recent commitment to learning is expected.

Access Programme students study the following modules: English Literature, Psychology, Philosophy, Classical Studies, History, Mathematics, Information Technology, Applied Communications, and Personal and Professional Development. The objective is to introduce students to a range of subject areas that they may wish



Kevin O'Meara

to pursue at third level, and to enable them to make more informed choices when it comes to submitting applications to third level colleges.

Partnership with Trinity

A partnership arrangement was developed in 2004, involving the Trinity Access Programme (TAP) and three CDVEC colleges providing access courses – Plunket College; Pearse College, Crumlin; and the Liberties College of Further Education. Students from the three CDVEC colleges attend a scheduled number of 'taster' activities in Trinity College during their year on the Access Programme. These 'taster' activities include an induction day; attendance at broad curriculum lectures; workshops on educational guidance, study and library skills, exam preparation and financial support; and various other activities. This gentle initiation into life at university has made a strong impact on many of our students, and has had the effect of increasing their motivation to succeed on the Programme and to progress to higher education.

Course Certification

Certification of the Access course has been a challenging issue since the course commenced. Students were awarded a local college certificate on successful completion of the course from the outset. However, it was always a source of regret and concern that there was no appropriate national certification in place for this type of programme. There was no existing NCVA (National Council for Vocational Awards – predecessor of FETAC) Level 2 award deemed suitable for a Liberal Arts / Foundation programme of this kind.

A significant milestone was reached in 2004, when the three CDVEC colleges – together with the TAP office, and with assistance from CDVEC's Curriculum Development Unit – began work with FETAC, the Further Education and Training Awards Council, to explore appropriate national accreditation for the courses. In March 2005, the FETAC Policy Committee approved the proposal of the three CDVEC colleges for a Liberal Arts award at Level 5 – ELAXX. This programme is now operating very successfully on a pilot basis in the three colleges.

Conclusion

Much work remains to be done to increase participation rates for mature students at third level. However, the partnership arrangement between the CDVEC colleges and the Trinity Access Programme provides a model for continued co-operation and development between the higher and further education sectors. Let's hope such models are mirrored in access work in future years.

Further information on adult education courses in Plunket College is available from: Admissions Office, Plunket College, Swords Road, Whitehall, Dublin 9, Tel: 01-8371689 / 8371680, Email: info@plunket.cdvec.ie, Website: www.plunketcollege.ie

"The partnership arrangement between the CDVEC colleges and the Trinity Access programme provides a model for continued co-operation and development"

Going for Gold

Tom Kelly – a 62 year-old farmer from Offaly – was awarded a gold medal for his learning achievements earlier this year. At an awards ceremony in March, he came face to face with President Mary McAleese, before jetting off to London for a gala dinner for medal-winners from Ireland and the UK. Martina Quinn met Tom recently to hear his inspiring story..

The Ireland of the 1940s and 1950s was a very different place to the Ireland we know today. Heavily dependent on agriculture, and the reluctant supplier of emigrants to America and the UK, it was seen by many as a bleak and dreary country, where people struggled to fend off poverty. In this climate, the destinies of children in rural families were often a foregone conclusion – they either got on a boat to England, or stayed at home to eke out a living on the family farm.

Early School-Leaver

Tom Kelly grew up in this era. As the youngest in his family, it fell to him to remain at home on the small family farm in Croghan, Co. Offaly, caring for his elderly parents. When he began working fulltime on the farm, he was only 14. He abandoned school prematurely to help at home while his mother was sick in hospital. “I’d a couple of months to go, and I just stopped going,” he explains. “My father and mother had a small farm. And when you finished school that time, you’d be kind of surviving – you wouldn’t be making a great living. But one member of the family always stayed at home. And, as I was the youngest... I stayed on.”

Although Tom had enjoyed his early years at school, he was happy enough to leave education at the age of 14. “For the first few years, I liked it very well,” he says. “But I think it was after third or fourth class, I just felt I couldn’t compete... At that time, I had a stammer, and I was fit to cover it up very well, but the more I said things, the more the teacher got me to repeat them. And this didn’t help. A big deal for me was the roll call... you just had to call out your name, and sometimes you could get it right, but other times I couldn’t. I couldn’t learn at all. For the last two years in school, I couldn’t come quick enough for me so that I could get out.”

Missing out on the free secondary education scheme by only a handful of years, post-primary education was never an option for Tom. “There was no future education wise unless

“When you drive up the car the first day, and you think ‘This is great’ – you’re driving into a university. It was a dream come true.”



Mary McLoughlin, Adult Literacy Organiser, Co. Offaly VEC, President Mary McAleese, and Tom Kelly

you had money,” he says. “My parents wouldn’t have been able to pay for me to go from Croghan to a secondary school in Tullamore... I missed out on Donagh O’Malley, when he brought in the free educational scheme, which meant that everyone was equal and there was a bus in from Croghan, and the choice was there if you wanted it.”

Fulltime Farmer

Although Tom saw no real future for himself in agriculture, he remained farming fulltime until the early 1990s. “I was working as a small farmer – a mixed farm of calves, cows, and whatever. That was it – there was no future for me. Really and truly, I knew that I never was going to get anywhere on the land but, as I say, I was kind of caught – you know, with your parents you really don’t just walk out on them. If I went that time, probably they’d have ended up in nursing homes. They didn’t.”

Towards the end of the 1980s, and after the death of both his parents, Tom began receiving farm assistance. “Farming, at that stage, was beginning to go downhill, and has since gone downhill now very, very quickly,” he explains. “I was getting what was called the farmers’ dole... and, with that, you could

“I remember getting a letter at home, seeing this letter from City and Guilds, and I just opened it slowly, thinking this is probably saying sorry or whatever”

qualify for your local Community Employment [CE] scheme.”

Tom joined a CE scheme, and started work as a caretaker in Croghan Community Centre – a position he holds to this day. At the same time, he was heavily involved in a lot of local political and community organisations, and his role as Chairman for some of these organisations brought to light some difficulties. “I couldn’t spell that well,” he explains. “I could read and write – I never had any problem reading... but my spelling wasn’t great... One day, Pat Swaine [Tom’s CE supervisor] said to me, ‘There’s a woman coming out from the Adult Learning Centre in Tullamore, and she’s looking for volunteers to go in’. They wanted us to do something educational as part of the FÁS scheme. And he said, ‘Would you be interested?’ And I said I would, so I went down the next day to meet her.”

Return to Learning

As a result of this meeting, Tom enrolled in a Return To Learning course at Co. Offaly Vocational Education Committee’s Adult Learning Centre. Since then, he has attended numerous courses with the VEC centre, including local history, Junior Certificate studies, and communications skills. One of the highlights of his return to learning was his participation in a course held in NUI Maynooth.

“There was a new teacher brought into the Adult Learning Centre here – a man called Arthur Broomfield, from Laois,” he explains. “And Arthur was doing a course here, and he is around my age, and he had gone back to education and got his degree in history and, in fact, is doing his Masters now. And he did a course here with us, and I liked it, and he said, ‘Look, for someone who has a lot of interest in history, there is a course in Maynooth, which you should do, called a Return to Learning course’. And I applied for it, and was accepted. That was about two years ago, and I did a 12-month course in Maynooth.”

Tom travelled to the university in Maynooth twice a week during the 12 months of the course, and found the experience extremely positive. “It was great that first morning going in,” he says. “When you drive up the car the first day, and you think ‘This is great’ – you’re driving into a university. It was a dream come true. I couldn’t believe myself in it. Here you were in Maynooth – something you had heard tell about. Here you were in university, doing a course.”

Since his course in Maynooth, Tom has continued his education with Co. Offaly VEC, completing a history course and the Junior Cert English exam this year. As a result of his learning

achievements, he was awarded a City and Guilds Medal for Excellence last March. The medal was presented to him by President Mary McAleese at a ceremony in Ballymascanlon House, Co. Louth. Tom was later flown to London for a gala celebration in honour of City and Guilds medal-winners from throughout Ireland and the UK.

Gold Medal Win

“Winning the gold medal was absolutely brilliant – I couldn’t believe it,” he says. “We didn’t know if I had any chance. I remember Mary [the Adult Literacy Organiser with Co. Offaly VEC] saying we stand a good chance. I suppose maybe going to Maynooth did give me the edge... And I remember getting a letter at home, seeing this letter from City and Guilds, and I just opened it slowly, thinking this is probably saying sorry or whatever. And they said ‘We would like to congratulate you on winning the gold medal...’ and I couldn’t believe it! So I remembered to ring Mary back here, and she was nearly going through the roof! ... It was great that day in Dundalk... To get an award from the President – it was great.”

“There was no future education wise unless you had money... My parents wouldn’t have been able to pay for me to go from Croghan to a secondary school in Tullamore”

In between attending university and winning prestigious awards, Tom also found time to speak on national television about his experiences of adult learning. Three years ago, he appeared on *Read, Write Now* – the television programme produced by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA). “I was just asked would I like to take part in it, and I said I would,” Tom explains. “I had to tell my own story, in the school in Croghan – the Community Centre where I now work.” Tom also appeared on RTE’s *Afternoon Show* during National Adult Literacy Awareness Week, again speaking about his own experiences in order to highlight the importance of adult learning.

Tom says the biggest challenge for him in returning to education was his lack of confidence. Having overcome this, however, he believes the benefits of his return to learning are greater than he ever imagined possible. He is currently toying with the idea of doing a Diploma course in Maynooth, or even going on to do a degree. “When somebody says, ‘Why are you doing it?’ or ‘Why would you bother doing it?’ the day I drove in through the gates of Maynooth – that was the day I knew,” he says. “I had gotten somewhere. And when I received my gold medal, I thought, ‘This is what it’s all about’. If I never do anything more, they are two things I can point to.”

Further information on Co. Offaly VEC’s Adult Learning Centre is available from 057-9352580. Email: adultlc@eircom.net

Striving for Educational Equality

Denise Shannon, Education Equality Initiative (EEI) Coordinator with Léargas, gives an overview of the Initiative, and its work to date.

Background

The EEI was established by the Further Education Section of the Department of Education and Science to address educational disadvantage through the strategic allocation of funding (€3.5 million for 2000-2006), with assistance from the European Union, as part of the National Development Plan.

The purpose of the EEI is to address gaps in learning provision for educationally disadvantaged adults by carrying out outreach and predevelopment work; building local capacity; developing support structures; accrediting learning; encouraging partnerships; analysing and informing policy; mainstreaming learning processes; enabling progression in education; and enabling participants to shape their education.

Target Groups

EEI Phase 1 (EEI 1) funded 17 projects from 2000 to 2003 and the current phase of EEI, EEI 2, is funding 10 pilot projects. EEI 2 projects address the educational disadvantage experienced by adults with a learning disability, adults with self-experience of mental illness, deaf adults, marginalised rural men, the Roma community in Ireland, and Traveller and other parents seeking to become actively involved in their children's education.

The approach adopted by the EEI is that of funding a small number of pilot projects that address the learning needs of educationally disadvantaged individuals within a range of specific target groups. Approaches adopted by EEI 2 projects to

promote educational equality include:

- Addressing gaps in the provision of learning opportunities
- Promoting partnership between statutory and voluntary agencies
- Developing innovative approaches to outreach
- Developing innovative approaches to teaching and learning
- Developing local learning support structures
- Facilitating progression of the identified target groups

Overall Goal

The overall goal of the EEI is to ensure that the learning and good practice generated by the projects are identified, documented, analysed, and disseminated throughout the adult education community. The ultimate aim is to embed these lessons in policy and practice, improving provision for educationally disadvantaged adults, and promoting educational equality.

Léargas is Ireland's national agency for the management of transnational programmes in the areas of youth work, primary and secondary education, vocational education and training, and lifelong learning. It was appointed by the Department of Education and Science as the Support Service for EEI 2 projects. The EEI is also supported by a representative working group from key agencies involved in responding to educational disadvantage.

Profile of an EEI-funded group: Dóchas Dingle Men's Group

Noel O'Neill is Project Coordinator with the Dóchas Dingle Men's Group, a community group targeted at marginalised rural men, and funded under the EEI. Here, he explains how the group came about, and the type of work they do.

Dóchas Dingle Men's Group was set up in 2000 in response to four suicides in one particular area of West Kerry, and 12 suicides over a 15-month period on the Dingle peninsula. All these suicides, bar one, involved single men.

Research

In 2001, with the help of Nexus Research Co-op and funding from the local partnership, Comhar Dhuibhne, we carried out research into the causes of this drastic suicide rate, and the needs and challenges of single men living on the Dingle peninsula.

The results of this research did not surprise us – early school-leavers, depression, alcoholism were all to the fore. When you go into these men's pasts, you find the reasons for their problems today. The education system in the 1940s and 1950s was such

that lessons were more often beaten into them than they being encouraged to learn in a gentle, caring manner. Being constantly told they were thick and stupid did nothing for their self-esteem, and this lack of self-esteem, in turn, led to isolation, despair, and depression. In a society that idolises what people call 'the Celtic Tiger', there are people in rural Ireland that are being left behind at an increasing rate.

EEI Funding

In 2004, through Nexus, we heard about the EEI, and were successful in acquiring funding for a project in west Kerry. We then had the task of finding out what the men would like out of the project. We organised a meeting with them in Dingle, and spent some time discussing our various options.

What we came up with was outreach one-to-one computer lessons. As we had only one worker, we had to find volunteers to help out, and we identified three men, who were only too willing to do the tutoring. We now have 12 men doing computers on a one-to-one basis through our outreach programme. We find the one-to-one computer classes are far better than sitting in a classroom setting, which two women now taking classes with our group found very difficult, as some were more advanced than others on computers, and they felt left behind.

Digital Photography

Last January, we also started a digital photography course, again suggested by the men. To me, this photography course is an example of job satisfaction at its best. How do you get 20-plus single men in West Kerry out of bed on a Saturday morning? – put a digital camera in their hand, and tell them you will meet them on Clogher beach at 11 o'clock!

The effect of the photography course is that people who lived in isolation are now getting out more; socialising; making new friends; having a laugh together like human beings should. There is less depression, less hospital and doctor visits, and the sense of well-being is very evident when you meet these people out in public.

Satisfaction

To see a 73-year-old man, who did not know how to turn on a laptop two years ago, learning how to work a computer, and producing a booklet of short stories, based on incidents that happened during his life, is job satisfaction to me. A man who suffers badly from depression, who up to two years ago was a patient, on a regular basis, in the psychiatric ward of Kerry General Hospital, is now an active member of our group. A laptop and one-to-one outreach computer lessons was all that was needed to change his life around, and save the State a considerable amount of money. That to me is job satisfaction.

What we have done is an example of what should be done on a national basis. The satisfaction I get on a Saturday morning, walking on the beaches, visiting the historic sites, taking photographs, and then developing them on a laptop and printer, is nothing to the feeling I get when I see 15 or more people – men and women, all single, and living alone – out together, enjoying each other's company, having a bit of craic, living like human beings should, and learning in a fun way; not sitting at home, wasting away, going further and further into depression, thinking that the only way out is to take their own lives.

The Dark Night of the Outreach Worker

Noel Bradley is an outreach worker with the Mevagh Resource Centre in Downings, Co. Donegal. He works with isolated, disadvantaged rural men through the Mevagh Men's Education Initiative, an EEI project. Here, he outlines some of the difficulties currently facing outreach workers in Ireland.

I would like to explore, in this short article, some of the pain that I, and my organisation, are going through at this time. I believe other outreach workers and organisations are going through something similar.

Bleak Situation

Recently, I attended a gathering of representatives of EEI projects, organised by Léargas, the support service for the EEI. The big worry for all present was: "How are we going to continue next year?"

As the discussion went round and round about adult and community education, the Government, and what we are trying to do, the situation seemed to get bleaker and bleaker. The phrase 'the dark night of the innovator' was used, and I thought to myself, "What an apt phrase to catch the feeling of what is involved in outreach work at the present time!"

The Dark Night of the Soul

The phrase 'dark night' is often used in the writings of the Catholic Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross, and it might be helpful to borrow a little from him. It seems that there are two

dark nights: one, the 'dark night of the senses'; and the other, the 'dark night of the spirit'.

When you are in the 'dark night of the senses', things are hard on your senses, and there is little comfort or pleasure. Somehow, however, you can manage, and are able to keep going, even if it always seems to be up-hill, and there is little joy. All of the outreach workers at our meeting would have been in that place at one time or another.

The 'dark night of the spirit' is even harder still. The meaning of your work seems to go; the light goes out inside you; you

"Is scrambling and competing for funding the intelligent way to go? Is it not inherently unjust and – by going along with it – are we not letting the Government and State bodies off the hook?"



Participants in the Mevagh Men's Education Initiative on a day trip to Tory Island

wonder, "What is the point?" Your spirit seems to go down into a very dark place – a loss of meaning seems to be at the core of it. This is far more painful than the dark night of the senses, but some of us present at that meeting were beginning to feel this is the kind of place we were in.

The Original Sin of Injustice

I need to remind you of the context of our work, and what the original problem is. Briefly, we live in a very unjust world, structured in such a way that the people 'at the bottom' feel like outsiders to the economic, political, and educational structures of the State. They are, of course, responsible for the choices they have made in their lives, and what they have become by those choices, but the structures within which they have made their choices have been a dominant determinant in shaping their lives.

We don't all start from the same starting line. Structures structure us. Think of the influence of family and school. A lot of people were victimised in one way or another. For example, a lot of the men I meet have been brutalised during their earlier education. This has closed many doors to future upward mobility, and left them feeling very inadequate. Add to this the rural isolation, maybe living alone, unemployed or under-employed, over 60 years of age, often too fond of the drink, no car, poor health, poor house-keeping abilities... The Celtic Tiger has just roared on past them! Knowing them in the immediacy of their lives can weigh heavy on the heart of an outreach worker.

Down the Old Bog Road

The difficulty for the outreach worker is that these socially excluded people are hard to reach and generally not interested in changing, surpassing themselves, or going

beyond their present horizons. They don't particularly want you calling at their door 'offering' or 'selling' something. Building up a friendship is the only thing that might open them to new possibilities, but that is a very slow, delicate process that calls for different rules than what many of us are used to in our managerial roles. It means finding them and visiting them on their turf, not rushing, taking the cup of tea if you get invited in, chatting, 'wasting time' talking about local gossip and the weather, being respectful, accepting, and supporting in any little way you can.

All this can be very slow and hard work, and often you feel as if you are going through a dark night of the senses. But if, on top of the outreach work, you have to do evaluations (as well as your normal reports), framed with an eye on funders – competing with other groups doing similar valuable work – and all this is taking time, money, interviews, meetings... giving you less time for your work, and leaving you in a state of anxiety about your future and the future of your project, then you really can be dropped into a 'dark night of the spirit', wondering "What is the point?"

All the King's Horses and All the King's Men

This might sound like a gripe from a poor outreach worker. But the burden is carried also by the organisation working with and supporting that worker. Both can be dropped into a 'dark night of the spirit'.

This was very evident at our recent meeting with Léargas, and later confirmed at a conference where three rural men's groups made presentations of their findings. All present agreed about the isolation, depression, difficulties with service providers, etc. To make matters worse, we heard things like the following: "Government thinks of this kind of outreach work as too expensive", "It's too labour intensive", "The EU has education and training as a priority, but are not really committed to social inclusion", "The Government has a policy of bringing people into the economy – if you are not able or on for that, there is little interest in you" and "The policy is that 'to him or her who has more shall be given, and to him or her who has not, even the little they have will be taken away'".

To cap these comments off, we also heard, "There is no incentive for a change of policy or structures in the upper levels of the various Departments". Is this not truly a 'dark night of the spirit' for any outreach worker and their organisation?

Hope Springs Eternal

Of course, it should not be like that. Is scrambling and competing for funding the intelligent way to go? Is it not

inherently unjust and – by going along with it – are we not letting the Government and State bodies off the hook? I know it is the real world, but do we have to collude with it to the extent that we do?

The State is responsible for all its citizens, and so health and adult and community education must also reach the most abandoned. A trickle-down structure of funding does not do justice to the most isolated and disadvantaged, or to the organisations supporting them. Instead of competing and struggling and colluding within an unjust set-up, could outreach workers and their organisations not put their energies into a united and constant voice saying we do not want such a set-up? A more simple, straightforward alternative system could be worked out, whereby large amounts of money (compared to the present) could be allocated for the human enhancement of those most marginalised. If it is true that the incentive is not there with those who have the power to do this, then the challenge is one of compassion. Do they really want to build up a caring and just society?

Perhaps it is time for a conversation about our values and the kind of society we want. In the meantime, in your own

dark night, you might take some strength from Séamus Heaney when he writes:

History says, Don't hope
 On this side of the grave.
 But then, once in a lifetime
 The longed for tidal wave
 Of justice can rise up,
 And hope and history rhyme

 So hope for a great sea-change
 On the far side of revenge.
 Believe that a further shore
 Is reachable from here.
 Believe in miracles
 And cures and healing wells.

(From *The Cure of Troy*)

Conclusion – We Need To Listen To The Evidence

Maureen Kavanagh, a member of the working group that supports the EEI, looks at the lessons to be learned from the experiences of the men's groups in Kerry and Donegal.

Two approaches to outreach are described in the stories told here. One is the extension of learning out to the homes of isolated, rural men and the other is the development of a relationship of trust that will encourage men to come to a local centre.

Undoing Past Wrongs

Noel O'Neill reflects on the impact of taking a learner-centred approach that uses men's own homes as learning sites, where the men are treated with respect and consideration, leading to their lives being changed for the better. Noel Bradley talks about the difficulties associated with outreach work – the long hours, hoping for results. He offers us a perspective on adult and community education that endeavours to undo the wrongs of past education provision and create a vision for education for change.

In working with any person who is educationally disadvantaged, a range of approaches needs to be considered. Prolonged and targeted outreach is essential in encouraging educationally disadvantaged adults to even consider participating in learning. Introductory learning activities provide that key bridge into other learning

“Policy-makers, funders, and adult education providers must rethink support to provision and imagine a much broader, more inclusive type of adult education”

activities while building learners' confidence levels and self-belief.

Proven Success

If adult education for those that are educationally disadvantaged is to be successful, there needs to be a broader understanding of learner-centred approaches used by groups such as Mevagh and Dingle. Policy-makers, funders, and adult education providers must rethink support to provision, and imagine a much broader, more inclusive type of adult education that is organic, dynamic and empowering for all. The models described in the EEI show that adult education contributes to good health, increased self-esteem and employability. This can be backed by solid evidence through learners' stories on how their lives have changed. This qualitative evidence needs to be listened to.

Towards 2016: What's in the Social Partnership Agreement for Adult Education?

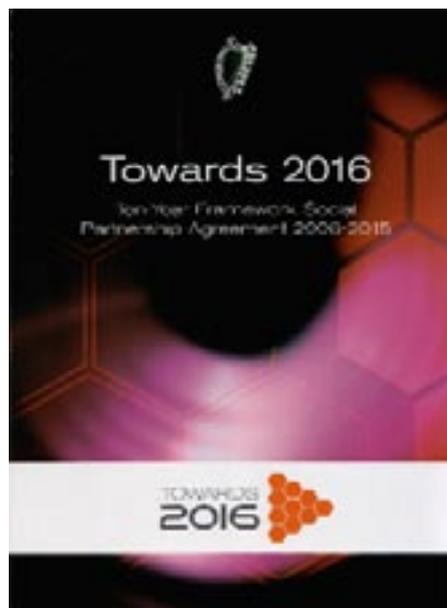
Finola McDonnell, Policy Officer with AONTAS, looks at what's in store for the adult education sector as a result of the new Social Partnership Agreement.

It was a long time coming, but the new draft Social Partnership Agreement, *Towards 2016*, was finally published in June. The long-awaited document runs to 140 pages and, unlike previous three-year agreements, takes a longer-term view of how Ireland's economic and social policy should be developing. The 10-year strategy provides a very broad framework, within which the new National Development Plan and other national action plans will allocate specific resources. For those interested in the adult education agenda, reading the Agreement gives a useful sense of how adult education is seen to underpin national economic and social policy.

New Approaches

Organisations working in the social policy field have welcomed the fact that this Agreement acknowledges the importance of social development alongside economic development – a first for Irish Partnership Agreements. A main goal of the Agreement is to nurture “the complementary relationship between social policy and economic prosperity” (page 10). The vision for Ireland outlined is for a “dynamic, internationalised, participatory society and economy with a strong commitment to social justice, where economic development is environmentally sustainable and is internationally competitive” (page 10). Although there is still a strong focus on growing the economy, there is also an admission that social justice should also be a national priority.

An innovate feature of this Agreement is its adoption of the so-called ‘life cycle framework’, set out by the National Economic and Social Council (NESCC) in its 2005 report *The Developmental Welfare State*. This framework looks at the needs of the individual at various



stages of their life, and outlines policies and actions to meet those needs. Lifecycle groups identified are: children, young adults, people of working age, older people, and people with disabilities. The issues of income, social services, and participation in society are then addressed for each group.

As usual, the Partnership Agreement is in two parts. The first part outlines economic, infrastructural, environmental, and social policy priorities, while the second looks at pay, workplace, and employment issues and rights. Both sections have interesting things to say about adult education and lifelong learning. How they will translate into actions and be allocated resources – for example

"Although there is still a strong focus on growing the economy, there is also an admission that social justice should also be a national priority"

through the National Development Plan – remains to be seen.

Workers and Vulnerable Groups

Because a central theme of this Agreement is the maintenance of Ireland's level of competitiveness and economic prosperity, there is quite a bit in the Agreement about skills development and workforce education. There is a commitment to invest in human capital and adapt the education and training systems with the aim of “upskilling those already at work and those who wish to return to work, including older people, and those whose need for learning is greatest, and focusing on increasing education participation and completion at all levels and all sectors” (page 16). In a later section, there is further reference to measures to “support upskilling of low-skilled workers in the manufacturing sector” (page 20). Given our now high levels of employment in Ireland, these commitments are very welcome.

In Section 17, which is dedicated to Education and Training, there are a variety of commitments of relevance to the adult education sector. There is a stated intention to “drive the lifelong learning agenda by enhancing access to training, the development of new skills, the acquisition of recognised qualifications and progression to higher-levels qualifications”, and to provide “learning opportunities for adults targeted at vulnerable groups and those in disadvantaged communities with low levels of educational attainment” (page 31). Specific actions for the next two to three years are the further development of second-chance educational measures for vulnerable groups, and better integration of services and partnership working at national, regional, and local level.

Lifecycle Stages

Within the lifecycle framework, there are focused commitments for specific age groups. In regard to early school-leavers, there is a promise to provide an additional 1000 places on the Youthreach scheme by 2009. In the section that deals with people of working age (30-64), it is stated that “every person of working age should be encouraged and supported to participate fully in social, civic and economic life” and also “have access to lifelong learning” (page 49). Low-skilled workers are identified as needing particular attention, and adults in disadvantaged communities and rural areas are to be encouraged into education and training. Named initiatives to be developed or expanded include the Skillnets programme, the FÁS One-Step Up Programme, and the Workplace Basic Education Fund.

One of the most significant commitments outlined is that to provide “targeted support for employees participating in part-time courses at third level”, something which is reiterated in the pay agreement within the section on workplace pay and conditions. This marks a step forward on the part-time fees issue, although the commitment given is vague. Other commitments given for the 30-64 age group include a small expansion of the Back To Education Initiative (BTEI) by 2000 places by 2009, establishing a Family Literacy Project, and the preparation of concrete proposals about the future of the Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) sector.

With regard to older people, the Agreement commits to targeted adult and community educational opportunities. Older people are to be encouraged

“Named initiatives to be developed or expanded include the Skillnets programme, the FÁS One-Step Up Programme, and the Workplace Basic Education Fund.”

to access further and higher education and a set of targets is to be developed for their participation. There are also commitments to increasing education and training opportunities for older workers, to decrease their vulnerability within the workforce. They should also benefit from advisory services and increased access to Information Communications Technology (ICT).

Not surprisingly, adult literacy is named as the key priority within adult education. Under this heading, there are commitments to expanding the numbers of migrants accessing English language provision, and implementing aspects of the plan published recently by the National Adult Literacy Advisory Group. The Agreement also recommends creating an extra 7000 places in the Vocational Education Committee (VEC) literacy service by 2009. However, NALA – the National Adult Literacy Agency – has reacted with disappointment to the content of the Agreement with regard to adult literacy, stating that it fails to address the problem properly. The growth levels committed to in the Agreement, NALA argues, are lower than current growth levels. The recent Joint Oireachtas Committee report on Adult Literacy contains more ambitious recommendations for the future of the literacy service.

Community and Voluntary Sector

Community and voluntary organisations will be pleased that there is a section in the Agreement on support and funding for the sector. It reiterates the Government’s commitment to the 2000 White Paper on Supporting Voluntary Activity, and the putting in place of charities regulation. As regards funding, there are commitments to increasing the community services programme by €30 million by 2009, a further €5 million a year to support volunteering, as well as a recognition of the sector’s role in evidence-based policy making. The sector is also recognised as a main vehicle for people’s participation in society and their community.

“There is a stated intention to ‘drive the lifelong learning agenda by enhancing access to training, the development of new skills, the acquisition of recognised qualifications and progression to higher-levels qualifications”

Conclusion

Overall, the Agreement says a lot about adult education. However, although there are several references to encouraging social and civic participation at all stages of the lifecycle, the initiatives described are largely targeted at employability and workforce skills. The inclusion of many commitments about lifelong learning and adult education is positive, but we now need the actions to achieve those commitments.

There is a lot of vagueness in this Agreement, but that is the nature of Social Partnership Agreements. The commitments to expand second chance educational opportunities, to target disadvantaged communities with learning opportunities, and to expand access for older people are very open-ended. The proposed fund to alleviate part-time fees has no stated parameters. There is little detail, little by way of action points, and only very few figures in terms of numbers of people or amounts of funding are identified. We can only hope that the forthcoming National Development Plan will allocate specific funding to these initiatives to get them off the ground and that the aspirations in this Agreement become a reality sooner rather than later. If the commitments given could be put into action over the next 10 years, then we would certainly have tackled some of our adult education issues in a meaningful way.

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Strengthening Participation in Anti-Poverty Policy

Combat Poverty is the state advisory agency responsible for developing and promoting evidence-based proposals and measures to tackle poverty. Here, Helen Johnston, Director of Combat Poverty, outlines a programme aimed at empowering those directly affected by poverty to contribute to anti-poverty policy...

Partnership

In Ireland today, many decisions regarding major social and economic policies involve some kind of partnership between the State and major social or economic groups. At local level, County Development Boards, Strategic Policy Committees, Social Inclusion Measures groups and so on bring community interests together in joint planning.

Many groups working to tackle poverty have a say in these policy structures but are faced with many challenges, including:

- Trying to do the best for your family and make ends meet on a low income makes it difficult for people to act and work for change in their lives
- People do not always share equal capacity to participate in committees and policy structures. When anti-poverty groups do take part in policy consultations, a lack of back-up resources, time, training, policy information, and research impact on how effective they can be
- The terms of participation in structures may not always be clear – who is invited to participate? Is the involvement at the level of consultation, partnership, or shared decision-making? Or is it tokenism?
- Many anti-poverty groups can be stretched just staying on top of day-to-day needs, finding funding, and keeping services running, and thus find it difficult to tackle the wider causes of poverty

Having Your Say

The best policies are made when the people affected state their needs and are heeded. Because of this, Combat Poverty launched a three-year programme in 2005, called *Having Your Say*.

The *Having Your Say* Programme aims to promote the right of people living



Helen Johnston

and dealing with poverty to influence the policies that affect them. It works to support people living in poverty, and their organisations, to get involved in the structures where policies are made, to work with policy makers to ensure the effective participation of excluded groups in policy making, and to build into Combat Poverty's own policy advisory role the anti-poverty experiences of the community and voluntary sector. The Programme is guided by the principles of partnership, participation, and empowerment.

Key Activities

The Programme runs from 2005-2007. Key activities to be completed during 2006 include:

- A conference in Croke Park on 17 October, the United Nations Day for the Eradication of Poverty
- Publication of three new resources: Community Development and Public Policy, Community Development and Health, and Integrating Policy into Work Planning
- Research to map the policy learning experiences, needs, and supports within the Community Development

Programme, the Family Resource Centres' Programme and the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme

- Research to establish baseline information on policy learning opportunities within third level community development education
- Four policy skills workshops: three in the border region on gender, youth and ethnic minorities, and one workshop on health policies
- Development of an educational resource on understanding economics and poverty
- Development of four guides to policy-making in relation to social welfare, local government, the Budget and health

Who is the Programme for?

The *Having Your Say* Programme is for anti-poverty groups and projects, including community development projects, family resources centres, and local development social inclusion programmes. It is also aimed at third-level colleges involved in community development education, community education and anti-poverty interests, as well as Government Departments and policy makers.

It is hoped that at the end of the Programme there will be greater participation in national and local policy making by socially excluded groups; excluded groups will be better able to influence policy; and public officials and the anti-poverty sector itself will have a better understanding of how the right of people and groups to play a role in deciding policy can best be undertaken. Combat Poverty will also have a model code of practice on involving excluded groups in its policy advisory work.

An introductory brochure, *Having Your Say*, and further information on the three-year programme, is available at www.combatpoverty.ie.

Rooting for Radical Change

NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education – England and Wales, is AONTAS’ counterpart in the UK. The organisation was established in 1921 and, over the years, has grown considerably as an advocacy body. With its head office in Leicester, NIACE employs over 250 people throughout England and Wales. Recently, Jane Thompson, Principal Research Officer with NIACE, was in Ireland. AONTAS’ Frances Killeen took the opportunity to speak to her about lifelong learning in the UK and to find out more about her organisation.

For those of you not familiar with Jane Thompson, here’s a brief introduction: in the past, she has been described as a ‘radical feminist’, a ‘socialist’, a ‘Marxist’ and an ‘academic’. Prior to joining NIACE in 1999, she was the Dean of Studies at Ruskin College, Oxford and Lecturer in Women’s Studies at Southampton University, and, over the years, she has built up a reputation as a leading expert in adult education. She defines adult education as “a resource for personal, political, and social development which, throughout life, can inform and fulfil intellectual curiosity, creativity, critical consciousness, and personal pleasure, both for individuals and in society”.

Challenges in England and Wales

Jane Thompson works for NIACE, the UK equivalent of AONTAS. Similar to the present situation in Ireland, adult education in England and Wales is currently under serious threat – budgets are being squeezed, and adult education centres are having their classes and staff numbers cut.

Jane explains how these damaging developments have taken effect: “Unfortunately, the UK Government believes that lifelong learning is only about skills, geared towards employment. What funding there is, gets decided by this restricted version of reality. Providers and practitioners who have gone along with all of this, in an attempt to give the Government what they want, have helped to change the face of adult education for the worse. Attempting to influence Government by going along with an increasingly narrow and instrumental view of adult learning hasn’t done anyone any good, least of all those who are now seeing their jobs and classes cut.”

“Unfortunately, the UK Government believes that lifelong learning is only about skills, geared towards employment”

Jane elaborates on current UK adult education trends: “There are a number of worrying developments in adult education in the UK. Most money is spent on young people in a context in which there are now more people aged 60 and over in the population than 16 and under. In addition, it seems as though adult and community education is no longer voluntary – it is increasingly seen as a condition of benefit, work, or citizenship and, in the process, of behaviour modification. If you don’t agree to go on particular courses, your benefits are likely to be cut and people – especially poor and powerless people – are being forced into classes they may not want to be in.”

Jane is concerned that the changing emphasis within organisational and political climates is having devastating effects on adult and community education. “Within the public sector, there is now less attention paid to the social purpose and significance of education, health care, and social services, and more emphasis on the management of systems,” she says. “Top-down forms of managerialism – targets, performance indicators, red tape – are being used to bully the public sector, at a time when even the private sector, which once invented such things, now recognises you have to trust people more... Huge social inequalities – originating in poverty, class difference, racism, and powerlessness – are rarely seen as social justice issues; they are seen as social problems that can be remedied by endless projects and initiatives concerned to keep people busy. So, often these days, adult and community educators are employed to help deliver all this, in ways that are more about managing and stupefying the poor, rather than liberating them.”

“I always like coming to Ireland – the people I meet here seem to be much more irreverent and open to the possibilities of subversion than many of my friends back home!”



Jane Thompson

Work of NIACE

I ask Jane about NIACE's advocacy role: is it being hindered by the current problems, or working to find a resolution? "NIACE tries to be a 'critical friend' of Government, but also 'an independent voice' on behalf of adult learning," she says. "It's a difficult path to tread when so much of NIACE's funding comes from Government, and when the present Government seems increasingly paranoid about constructive criticism. I fear we speak out less than we should on occasion. A more critical stance might have led to a less cosy relationship, but perhaps to a more principled and less pragmatic one."

NIACE is currently collecting evidence about the impact of funding cuts and closure of classes, and has instituted the 'Big Conversation', which is trying to get a popular debate going about who should pay for adult education – the Government (as a human right, and public service), employers (since they benefit from so much of it in terms of trained workers), the taxpayer (which is how Government derives its funding for public services), or individuals (who want to attend classes).

Jane explains: "When you ask people who they think should pay for adult education – the taxpayer or the individual? – most people say it should be the individual, despite all the issues about individuals who can't afford to pay. But, when you say, 'Should the Government or the individual pay?' – on the understanding adult education is a public service – people say it should be the Government. They don't really realise that the Government and the taxpayer are the same. Most people don't have the strategic information upon which the decisions

"Attempting to influence Government by going along with an increasingly narrow and instrumental view of adult learning hasn't done anyone any good, least of all those who are now seeing their jobs and classes cut"

about funding adult education are made. And because adult education has rarely presented itself – or, indeed, behaved – as though it is a radical, creative and political resource for everybody, which can help to right wrongs and change lives, it is hard to persuade people to make a fuss about the service being effectively phased out."

Jane's Role

As Principal Research Officer with NIACE, Jane's role involves mostly research and development work. She is also involved in campaign work and, in recent years, has been working to make sure that other people's voices are heard – supporting the development of The Learners' Network and publishing writings produced by learners.

She has also been involved in creating resources for community groups, aimed at empowering citizens to take action on their own behalf. She is currently working on materials that can be used by refugee-led organisations and people working in museums and galleries to widen participation to cultural rights, and has just helped to publish a stunning collection of artwork, personal writing, and poetry, produced by people with mental health difficulties.

Speaking about her plans for the rest of 2006, Jane's enthusiasm is infectious. "I am going to work on a collection of essays, which will be political essays in the old campaigning sense of the term," she says. "Over the last few years, I have been spending most of my time getting other people's voices heard, and providing resources to enable other people to take action, and I haven't really done anything very serious myself. So, before I hang up my boots, so to speak, I am going to have one more go at writing something about all of this – maybe a collection of radical essays for our times... ruffle a few feathers and cheer up those who feel hopeless about what's happening."

Radical Tendencies

I couldn't let the interview end without asking Jane whether or not she agrees with those who describe her as a 'radical'. "I don't feel very radical anymore," she says. "I feel a pale imitation of my former self. And in my country, these are not radical times. The baton has definitely been passed to activists in the Global South, especially women! But it's all relative. Anything I have ever written for NIACE that has been commissioned by the Government has always ended up in huge arguments about 'You can't say this', 'I will say this' and so on. So I suppose I am still regarded as being not entirely under anyone's control! Which is why I always like coming to Ireland – the people I meet here always seem to be much more irreverent and open to the possibilities of subversion than many of my friends back home!"

Further information on NIACE is available from www.niace.org.uk.

Making Another World Possible

In June of this year, Berni Brady, Director of AONTAS, was invited by the International Council for Adult Education and the Uruguayan Ministry of Education and Culture to participate in a seminar entitled 'Education and Citizenship of Youth and Adults: Learning and Unlearning in the Elaboration of New Proposals'. Here, she recounts her experiences of the seminar, and gives details on forthcoming international adult education events.

The Bigger Picture

The Uruguayan seminar was organised by the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) and Uruguay's Ministry of Education and Culture, together with the Adult Education Council of Latin America (CEALL), the Popular Education Network of Women from Latin America and the Caribbean (REPEM), the National Administration of Public Education (ANEP), and the Ministry of Social Development (MIDES). This was my first time in Latin America, and the prospect of engaging in debate and discussion on adult education in an international setting – looking at 'bigger picture' issues – was exciting and thought-provoking.

The objective of the seminar was to generate an international space for the exchange and analysis of policies, emerging ideas, new trends, and experiences in youth and adult education, with the aim of proposing possible action guidelines for the Uruguayan Government. The seminar was organised in the context of an education debate, where several issues were being discussed, among them a new Education Act.

Political Context in Uruguay

In March 2005, President Tabare Vazquez, from the broad front coalition, became Uruguay's first left-wing Head of State. Vasquez, when elected, announced that he would pursue a moderate political course, with the emphasis on alleviating poverty. On taking office, he announced a \$100 million emergency plan to help the poor. The emergency plan includes improving educational opportunities for young people and adults, and developing a flexible system that recognises and values the many spaces in which people learn – both formal



Berni Brady (second from left) speaking at the seminar in Uruguay

and non-formal (though these terms were strongly contested by some participants at the seminar).

To enable the development of such a system, Uruguay's Director of Education, Luis Garibaldi, has initiated a consultation process, inviting a range of actors to contribute their ideas and experiences. The Uruguayan Government has illustrated its commitment to this important debate through the creation of a non-formal education council within the Ministry of Education and Culture, and through inviting several networks from civil society, including ICAE, REPEM and CEALL, to be part of the task-team on non-formal education. This action has facilitated a rich mix of dialogue, and an exploration of strategic approaches to the role of adult learning and the development of civil society.

Seminar Proceedings

As well as the organisations mentioned above, a number of other international speakers from Latin America, Europe and North America – including myself – participated in the seminar, thus producing a further mix of ideas, models of practice, analyses, and dialogue. The first two days of the seminar consisted of a number of panels and round table discussions, addressing the concept of education as a human right, and the implications for the educational policies of national governments in accepting this concept. Discussions also took place on the themes of citizenship and democracy, and education for inclusion.

These themes and the role of lifelong learning in active citizenship have enormous significance for all of us, but espe-

"The Uruguayan Government has illustrated its commitment to this important debate through the creation of a non-formal education council within the Ministry of Education and Culture"

The role of lifelong learning in active citizenship has enormous significance for all of us, but especially for people who have lived under a military dictatorship, as the Uruguayan people did during the 1970s and 1980s”

cially for people who have lived under a military dictatorship, as the Uruguayan people did during the 1970s and 1980s. The day generated lively debates on the nature of citizenship and democracy. Not for the first time, it struck me how much we in the northern hemisphere take for granted and, yet, how much more difficult it is to draw attention to issues of equality and social inclusion in the context of strong economic growth. Many familiar themes emerged from the discussion, including the importance of access to learning throughout life, the need for professional development among teachers of adults, and the recognition of different kinds of learning taking place in a variety of settings. It also highlighted the many challenges facing adult educators in Latin America, some of whom work in extremely difficult and sometimes dangerous circumstances for little financial reward.

Learning from the Irish Experience

The third and fourth day of the seminar opened the debate nationally to a range of people working in education in Uruguay, and closed with a number of workshops that addressed practical issues moving forward. I was invited to present ‘The Irish Experience’ and, in my paper, examined the development of policy in adult education and how the adult education service has developed in practice since the adoption of the White Paper, *Learning for Life*, as Government policy in 2000. My paper also examined the learning and challenges faced by adult educators, providers, and learners as we move forward, and what lessons we can share with one another. This was interesting for my Uruguayan colleagues, as they are currently developing their own national policy framework for adult education, and our White Paper is relatively recent.

“The seminar highlighted the many challenges facing adult educators in Latin America, some of whom work in extremely difficult and sometimes dangerous circumstances for little financial reward”

I think they can learn from our experience. This space also gave me a fantastic opportunity to learn about the different approaches adopted by our Latin American colleagues and to be inspired by their enthusiasm and motivation.

Future International Events

The seminar in Uruguay provided a forum for discussion on plans for the next UNESCO Conference on Lifelong Learning, Confintea VI, which is due to be held in 2009, possibly in Brazil. It also facilitated preparation for the ICAE World Assembly in Nairobi in January 2007. The World Assembly is open to all ICAE members (AONTAS is a member), partners, and friends, as well as all those networks aligned closely with adult education and learning movements promoting the right to learn for adults. The primary focus of this Assembly will be to provide a collective space to strongly affirm the right to learn throughout life, and to assert the immense value of adult education and learning in enabling citizens to fight poverty, inequality, discrimination, and exclusion. The Assembly is being organised alongside the World Social Forum 2007 in order to demonstrate solidarity with other social movements for change and to demonstrate the strategic importance of adult education in making another world possible.

“The ICAE World Assembly is being organised alongside the World Social Forum 2007 in order to demonstrate solidarity with other social movements for change and to demonstrate the strategic importance of adult education in making another world possible”

A virtual seminar was organised by the ICAE in April to establish broad themes for the Assembly, including such issues as HIV/AIDS, health and poverty, conflict resolution, cultural diversity, organisation and financing, gender equality, and sustainable development. All of these issues feed into the active citizenship agenda, and various commissions will be working during the Assembly to analyse the challenges for adult education and explore strategic responses in a global context. The papers presented at the seminar will be published in a special edition of *Convergence*, the journal of the ICAE in the autumn.

The ICAE is currently trying to raise funds to support people from the Southern hemisphere, especially African delegates, to participate in the Assembly. If any of AONTAS’ member organisations would like to ‘buddy’ a participant, please get in touch with Berni Brady, Tel: 01-4068220, Email: bbrady@aontas.com.

Has the CEF Made a Difference to Community Education?

Maureen Kavanagh, Coordinator of the National Training and Support Programme for Community Education Facilitators (CEFs), documented the difference the role of CEF has made to community education as part of her Masters of Arts (MA) in Adult and Community Education in NUI Maynooth. Here, she evaluates the usefulness of the CEF role.

Introduction

The Community Education Facilitator (CEF) was a policy initiative identified in the White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life* (Department of Education and Science, 2000), as a key support for community education.

The White Paper recommended that CEFs be employed at local level, and work to programmes determined by the Adult Education Boards (Local Adult Learning Boards, when established). In the absence of these boards, the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) appointed the national team of 37 CEFs, with responsibility for promoting the development and nurturing of community-based learning groups, developing partnerships and links with statutory agencies, and sharing models of good practice.

Role of the CEFs

The White Paper identified a number of broad groups engaged in community education, with which the CEFs should work, including women's and men's groups, ethnic minorities, older people, and people with disabilities. The Department of Education and Science also included groups dealing with homeless people and people re-entering the community after prison. As well as working with a wide range of community groups and statutory agencies, CEFs are

“Through the work of the CEFs, around 30,000 learners are now participating in community education activities supported by the VECs.”

also expected to “demonstrate a deep-rooted knowledge of the communities they serve and a clear understanding and empathy with the philosophy and processes of community education” (*Learning for Life*, page 115).

I decided to document the difference the key role of CEF has made to community education as part of my MA in Adult and Community Education. Four themes emerged when I looked at the impact the CEFs have made:

1. Understanding Community Education

The White Paper proposes two ways of understanding community education: one is as “an extension of the service provided by second and third-level education institutions into the wider community.... it is education in the community but not of the community”. The second view sees community education in “a more ideological sense, as a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level”. (*Learning for Life*, page 110).

Each view informs a particular approach to adult and community education – from the instrumental, universal approach to delivery, where programmes are developed centrally and delivered by tutors in local centres; to a more Freirean approach, which values learner participation in the planning, development and delivery of programmes.

While all CEFs who participated in the study I conducted strongly believe and support the second view of community education, in practice they find they need to consider both views



Maureen Kavanagh

depending on the capacity and level of understanding of community education within the communities where they worked. In taking both views into account, the CEFs are able to negotiate a deeper understanding of community education for change with the groups and their adult education service. This approach by the CEFs enables the VEC and community system to change its way of looking at community education without polarising the different views. Through the work of the CEFs, around 30,000 learners are now participating in community education activities supported by the VECs.

2. Identity of the CEF

The CEF is seen as being able to work across the systems of the VEC and the community. The CEF is clearly identified with the VEC adult education service, yet their approach to community education is informed by both the service and the groups with which they work. This has brought a deeper understanding of

“The CEFs have significantly impacted on community education at local level by taking a Freirean approach to their work with groups, agencies, and the VEC adult education service”

community education to the VEC, and a good understanding of the VEC to the community. The CEF has a key role in developing relationships between the VEC, agencies and community groups. This is done through building up relationships of respect and trust. Community education processes are about human contact – they are organic and dynamic – and it is these elements that the CEFs reflect in their work. The CEFs bring these experiences to planning and development within the VEC.

The CEF’s work covers a broad range of areas, and a variety of target groups. This diversity of groups is welcomed by the CEFs, as they feel it is in line with their own thinking on community education (i.e. that community education is learner-centred and responsive to local needs). Their work involves getting to know local areas and groups, and negotiating supports with them. This may mean being very hands-on in supporting a group to plan education activities or linking the group to other agencies and, in many cases, it is ensuring the VEC resources the group’s community education activities.

The CEFs see themselves as supporting development (but not as development workers) as some groups need a lot of assistance in getting started. The CEFs are supporting over 1500 community-based groups through a range of supports, including tutor hours, grants and the Back To Education Initiative (BTEI).

The CEFs identified themselves as working between systems, or as boundary workers. Boundary work requires skill, flexibility, and the need to have a clear sense of identity of oneself within the systems.

It would be very easy for the CEF to lose their way in the complex system of adult education. Therefore, knowing their identity is very important.

3. Collaboration

The CEFs see developing links with agencies as vital to their work. The agencies they work with include: FÁS, the Health Services Executive, RAPID, Pobal, County Childcare Committees, County Councils, Local Employment Services, the Home School Liaison Service, the Money Advice and Budgeting Service, LEADER Groups, Community Development Projects, Family Resource Centres, and other community organisations that deliver community education to the target groups.

Networking between promoters of adult education and agencies is vital to meeting local community education needs. Creating links between agencies and local groups has become a much more strategic approach for the CEFs in supporting communities to tackle the disadvantages that exist. The CEFs see themselves, and are seen by their VECs, as networkers – working in a community, making informal contacts; understanding problems; listening to the needs and interests of learners and groups, and identifying those that are educational.

The CEF also works as part of an interagency team in the context of capacity-building and support to developing communities. This way of working is a two-way communication between community and agency. This approach implies working with, and facilitating, groups to identify needs and develop responses – not coming with ready-made solutions.

4. Power and Resistance

The CEFs are clear that it is, at times, necessary in a developing community to begin with the provision of a set of courses, but early on in the provision the learners are introduced by the tutors to dialogue and participation, leading them to make decisions on their next learning opportunities. This

sees the CEF as working a balancing act between provision of the service and supporting participative education for empowerment. This also sees the CEF on the boundary of the systems of traditional adult education and radical adult education. This way of working has allowed the CEFs to work across and within the different systems, the VEC, and the community.

To view this approach by the CEFs to their work through a system-thinking lens, their work across systems is not separate but complex, holistic, and interdependent. A system-thinking approach would call the CEFs “fully awakened” people who are willing to take risks in order to seek enduring solutions to problems instead of quick fixes. In understanding the complexity of the adult education system, the CEFs have also begun to understand where power and resistance lie. This is essential for workers such as the CEFs who have to find “cracks” or spaces in the system to bring about change.

Conclusion

The CEFs have significantly impacted on community education at local level by taking a Freirean approach to their work with groups, agencies, and the VEC adult education service. Paulo Freire, Brazilian adult educator and theorist in adult education, envisioned education that encouraged people to reflect upon their own lives to uncover the root of their oppression and fight for change. Community education encourages learners to ask questions about who benefits from this education, who plans it, and what change happens as a result.

By taking a holistic, people-centred approach, the CEFs have enabled many groups to reflect on and understand their practice. The CEFs have also brought this inclusive approach to their work in the adult education service. Their flexible, creative, and dynamic ways of working must be encouraged and supported by all elements of the system.

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