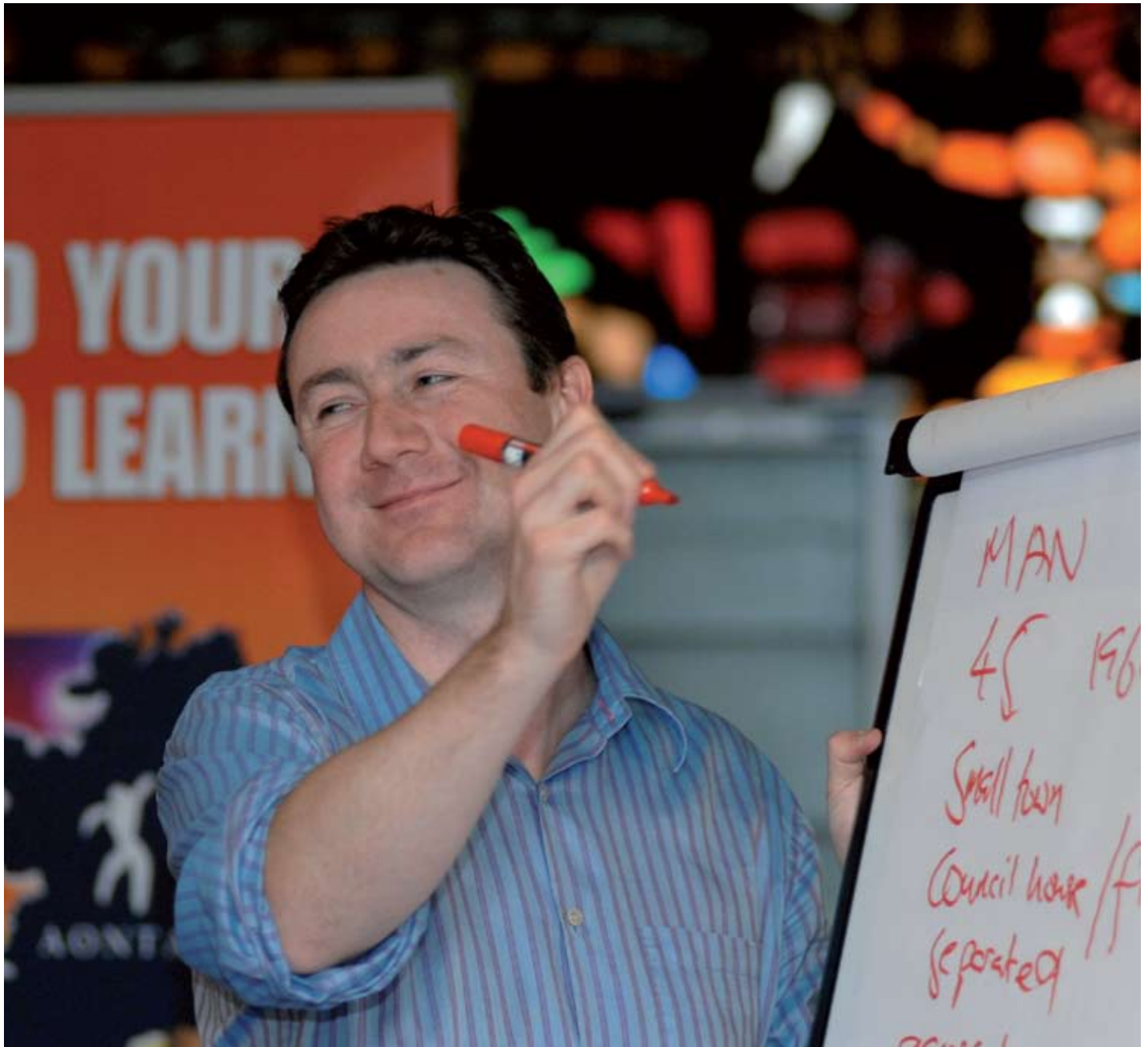


EXPLORE



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

aontas



What are you doing to celebrate learning?

Plus: Experiencing the Adult Education Academy in Uruguay

Uniphar – Taking work based skills to the next level

Development Education in Action in Tanzania

Living Active Citizenship

Note from the Editor

Hello and welcome to this issue of *Explore*!

This issue of *Explore* has an international flavour... from the International Academy in Lifelong Learning in Uruguay and Development Education in Tanzania, to the Adult Learners Festival in the UK and preparation for the AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival in different communities around the country.

In addition to news on AONTAS events and some thoughts on the forthcoming budget, this issue looks in depth at the Adult Learners' Festival. The event runs from February 4th to February 8th and opens with the STAR awards ceremony. This year the number of projects nominated for an award rose to 131, three times the amount received for last year's initiative. This increase reflects a diverse and vibrant adult education sector in Ireland, but is also further evidence of the need for initiatives within the sector to be acknowledged and given recognition. Distance learning projects aimed at increasing the number of female entrepreneurs in Ireland; initiatives aimed at developing the English language skills of immigrant nurses; fishermen in rural Cork developing supervisor skills via videoconferencing and volunteers showing older people how to surf the net in their local libraries – this is just a taste of some of the entries received. Given minimal resources and huge obstacles, the stories of adult learners around Ireland involved in these projects are

truly inspirational. In keeping with this theme, the idea that 'Learning Matters' will be the main message of the Adult Learners' festival this year.

Lifelong Learning is vital for the development of our economy, and the Uniphar group we profiled in an earlier issue of *Explore* is an example of a workplace learning initiative which promises benefits for the company but also for the personal development of employees. We visit the group again to see how the experience has been both for staff at the organisation but also to look at the challenges that the initiative has involved at management level. But the value of learning extends beyond the economic benefit, and with this in mind Berni Brady considers the place of adult and community education within the current dialogue on 'active citizenship'.

This is our last issue of *Explore* before the Adult Learners' Festival, so in the meantime keep an eye on our festival website www.adultlearnersfestival.com for updates. As always, your feedback and ideas for *Explore* are most welcome, and you can always contact me on 01 4068220 / 087 911 0569, or by email at nfarren@aontas.com.

On behalf of everyone at AONTAS, I wish you the very best for the Christmas season and the New Year.

Niamh Farren,
Communications Officer
AONTAS

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Explore offers discount advertising rates to all community and voluntary groups. To find out more about advertising in future issues, contact Niamh Farren, Communications Officer, AONTAS, Tel: 01 406 8220, email nfarren@aontas.com.

AONTAS General Meeting

The end of November saw AONTAS general meeting taking place at the Royal Dublin Hotel in O’Connell Street. AONTAS general meetings give members the opportunity to discuss key issues for adult education, and this occasion was no different.

Workshop discussions considered structural changes in the sector, as well as the role of adult education in supporting active citizenship. These discussions are key to informing AONTAS policy work in the future.

The main focus of the event was the launch of a new resource pack for adult learners which includes the inspirational stories of individual adult learn-

ers to get you thinking about adult education, as well as answering some of the practical concerns you may have about funding and finance. Sean Haughey TD, Junior Minister for Adult Education, launched the new resource pack, which is now available from AONTAS. For more information contact Jenny Gunning on 01 406 8220 or jgunning@aontas.com.

AONTAS Local Links Day

The Royal Dublin hotel was the venue for the AONTAS Local Links Day in September. The day was a chance for all ALF enthusiasts to network, share ideas and make plans for festival events in their own communities. From Co. Down to Dún Laoghaire there were over thirty Local Links present.

The Local Links play a crucial part in planning the Festival. Their role is to enthuse and motivate groups in their own area to run events for the festival, and to ensure that these events are promoted in local media. AONTAS supports the Local Links in a number of ways – by publicising festival events through our website www.adultlearnersfestival.com, by providing publicity material such as posters and a handy guide to using the media, and hands on support with promotion through the AONTAS Communications Officer.

The day featured different presentations about the festival, including a presentation from Marian Duffy outlining her experience as a Local Link during last year’s festival. The afternoon session focussed on the area of PR and media, with Damian O’Broin from Ask Direct taking the group through some practical tips on getting media coverage for festival events.



Small group work at the Local Links Day in September

If you’re involved with an adult education group, why not run an event to coincide with the festival? It could be something as simple as organising an exhibition stand at your local shopping centre, or as ambitious as charting a learning bus to different parts of your area. The sky’s the limit! The Local Link person in your area may be able to advise you. To find out the Local Link in your area, check the website www.adultlearnersfestival.com. If you need help promoting the festival, contact Niamh Farren, Communications Officer with AONTAS, nfarren@aontas.com.

Join the Community Education Network!

If you are involved in community education and want to have a forum for networking with others in the sector and the opportunity to work together for the advancement of policy work in community education – join the Community Education Network! The Network will be open to all AONTAS members involved in Community Education.

Over 30 community education groups from across Ireland participated in the first AONTAS Community Education Network Meeting, which took place on Thursday 8th November. The event focussed on how community education groups can work together in a network to create a stronger voice for community education and to lobby for its

needs. The day set about to establish the network, its aims and objectives and also explored what opportunities are available for community education to effect change. There was a discussion space in the afternoon with Ted Fleming, Lecturer from the Department of Adult and Community Education NUI Maynooth, which was used as a reflective space to focus the work.

During spring there will be another meeting of the network that will look at specific areas for action, we hope to expand this work out, increase the number of community education groups participating and also to look at regional network meetings. We strongly urge community education groups to join the network, for more information please contact Niamh O’Reilly, Membership Development Officer, on 01 4068220 or email noreilly@aontas.com.

Adult Education and Budget 2008

AONTAS is calling on the government to allocate an additional €80 million to adult and community education in next years' budget. Berni Brady, Director of AONTAS, outlines the rationale for increasing resources to the sector.

Recently the Minister for Finance, Brian Cowen has been making some rather ominous statements about next year's Budget indicating that many services will receive much lower levels of investment than in recent years. We are insisting that adult and community education is not one of them.

Towards 2016, the Framework for Social Partnership, and the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion all allow for some expansion in programmes which will result in more participation in lifelong learning opportunities into the future. Such opportunities however are relatively young and are only recently becoming embedded in the system. Currently more than 400,000 members of the workforce have less than upper second level education with a high percentage working in low skilled jobs. Working on the premise that the key to competitiveness and social inclusion is education and training it would seem obvious where substantial investments should be made.

While the further education sector was described recently in a Seanad debate as having received unprecedented levels of funding in 2007 (€169 million which was a 12% increase on 2006 provision) this investment represents a mere 2% of the overall education budget. It must be remembered that this level of funding has only been achieved by very hard work over the past ten years from a starting point of 0.01% in 1997, and its benefits are only beginning to be felt. AONTAS in its pre-election campaign in spring 2007 called for a cumulative investment of 1% per annum of the total education budget bringing it to 10% by the end of the current Framework for Partnership. In 2008 this would mean an increase of approximately €80 million in 2008 which would make the quantum leap needed to develop the sector to the level needed to meet its many current challenges. AONTAS identified ten key demands in its pre-election campaign but is asking the government to prioritise four of these in the 2008 Budget. These are:-

- 1. Parity of esteem for part time learners in higher education**
- 2. A revision of the eligibility criteria for the Back to Education Allowance to include low paid workers.**
- 3. An extra €4 million investment in the Adult education Guidance Initiative**
- 4. A doubling of the childcare allowance for learners on education and training programmes.**

These four key priorities are designed to build on the access to learning opportunities afforded by programmes such as the National Adult Literacy Programme , the Back to Education

Initiative, VTOS and the Post Leaving Certificate programme and to make it possible for adult learners to progress into higher education.

AONTAS has long championed the case for parity of esteem for part-time learners in higher education by lobbying for free fees. Consistent feedback from adult learners identifies finance as one of the major barriers to adults wishing to increase their qualifications by accessing higher level qualifications. Most adults pursuing higher level qualifications do so through part-time and distance learning options while balancing work and family responsibilities and finding the money for fees is a huge issue for families as a whole. AONTAS is urging the Government to honour its commitment made in its election programme and in the Partnership Framework 'to put in place a targeted fund to alleviate the fees in public institutions for part-time courses at third level by those at work who have not previously pursued a third level qualification'. Coupled with this, the eligibility requirements of the Back to Education Allowance Scheme which has been a key mechanism for access to higher education for people on Social welfare benefits need to be reviewed and extended to people in low paid employment.

One of the most successful programmes piloted during the last national development Plan was the Adult Education Guidance initiative. Targeting adult literacy, VTOS and community education participants it grew over the period of the plan to 38 service centres operated mainly under the auspices of the VECs. Its success has created a much higher demand for the service than can currently be provided. In 2007 it received an extra €2 million which was only barely enough to respond to half of the requests for service expansion. AONTAS is calling on the government to provide an extra €4 million for the Initiative in 2008.

Childcare has been a bone of contention for adult learners for a very long time. Currently programmes that provide assistance for childcare are VTOS, Youthreach and senior Traveller Training Centres. In 2007, the BTEI was allocated a sum of €500,000 for childcare assistance for the first time. However the maximum sum per child per week currently stands at €63.50 which has not been increased since the introduction of the scheme in 1998. AONTAS is demanding that the childcare allowance be doubled in 2008 to €127.00 and reviewed on an annual basis.

Berni Brady, Director

EAEA Appoints New Secretary General

Gina Ebner, recently appointed Secretary General of the EAEA, outlines how she came to be involved in adult education.



Gina Ebner, recently appointed Secretary General of the EAEA

What made you want to work for EAEA?

I was looking for the proverbial ‘new challenge’ – I wanted to move from project officer to more responsibilities; adult education is a field in which I worked for about ten years before coming to Brussels and which is still very close to my heart, so I was very excited to read the job advert. The website, the presentation of activities, the topics all sounded very good to me – I really wanted this job, and fortunately here I am!

You have worked for quite some time in adult education, can you tell us a little about your experiences working in this field?

I started as a freelance trainer for German as a foreign language and English, working in small language schools, various Viennese Volkshochschulen, vocational training institutes. I then worked as a pedagogical manager for the bfi Österreich (Vocational Training Institute), coordinating issues such as gender equality, EU programmes etc. This was where I also learned about the networking and socio-political side of adult education.

Additionally, I experienced the first years of Austria’s EU membership and how it influenced adult education and vocational training. It was a great time. I then moved to Brussels in order to work more internationally; I’m now very happy to be able to combine these two areas!

How would you describe yourself to EAEA members who do not yet know you?

I studied German and English philology in Vienna and women’s studies in the USA, and worked as a teaching assistant in England. I already told you about my work in adult education in Austria. I’ve now been living for more than 5 years in Brussels. I love working on an international level – it’s difficult but rewarding and fun too. I believe in the importance of adult education, on different levels, and I tend to be very passionate about the issues I care about. Besides adult education, this is especially gender equality, but also equal opportunities in general.

This interview was reproduced with kind permission from the EAEA (European Association for the Education of Adults). For more information on the EAEA, visit www.eaea.org.

Adult Education News from the Liberties

Adult Education Providers Network – AEPN: connecting, supporting and facilitating a network of education providers in the south inner city.

Adult Education Providers in the Liberties Area of Dublin have established a new Network. Nine of the major providers of basic adult education and further education in the area agreed to work together to develop a more cohesive and integrated educational service. This will offer wider choice and enhanced opportunities for progression for learners. It is hoped to increase access to and take-up of accredited adult and further education courses within targeted communi-

ties, matching provision to the needs and interests of current and potential learners. The Network partners will also support the design and development of programmes within the network that provide attractive opportunities for accreditation and progression and help to develop strategies and services (e.g. information services, educational guidance) that support access and progression especially for adults in the Liberties area. The Network will also work towards increasing awareness across the community of education and training opportunities and the national framework for qualifications.

At present, funding from An Pobal is employing a part-time worker who will support and facilitate the network members in this work. The proj-

ect will work with each of the members to identify opportunities for and support co-operation with each other including participating in the up-coming AONTAS Adult Learners Festival in February 2008. For more information please contact Gráinne Kehoe at grainne.kehoe@liberties.cdvec.ie or call 087-9947840.

The Adult Education Providers Network Membership includes: Carmelite Community Centre, Casadh, CDVEC & DICP Representatives, Fountain Resource Group Ltd., D8 Community Education Centre, Liberties College, Liberties Learning Initiative, Mercy Family Centre, Oliver Bond CAP, Warrenmount CED Centre, Whitefriar Aungier Area Community Council (WAACC).

Taking the First Step

During September of this year you couldn't miss the NALA advertisements which ran on all major TV channels in Ireland. The highly effective advertising campaign, which placed a strong emphasis on the benefits of learning, was launched at the beginning of NALA's annual Literacy Awareness Week.

The advertisements profile three individuals who have overcome their difficulties with reading, writing and working with numbers and are intended to encourage people with literacy difficulties to make contact with service providers by ringing the NALA freephone support line. The campaign was developed and funded by An Post, in association with the National Adult Literacy Agency and aired on RTE, TV3, Sky, E4 and the Living channel as well as in cinemas.

John Stewart, National Adult Literacy Coordinator with NALA, explained, 'While there are currently 40,000 people taking part in adult literacy courses in VECs around the country, there are still many people who are living with a

literacy difficulty. In the last OECD survey it was found that one in four Irish adults have problems with everyday literacy tasks such as reading instructions on a bottle of aspirin. Most adults with low literacy skills can read something but find it hard to understand official forms and instructions. Some will have left school confident about their reading and numeracy skills but find that changes in their workplace and everyday life make their skills inadequate.'

So what persuaded an Post to get involved? According to Donal O'Connell, Chief Executive with An Post 'We view this as a very important issue for this country, one which impinges on the quality of life of our customers and has the power to help them fulfil their true potential. Equally, it is critical for the future development of our society and our economy. As a company who is at the heart of Irish life, commercially and socially, we want to play our part, by providing long-term support in a meaningful context,' he concluded. Anyone who would like to find out more information can ring the NALA freephone 1800 20 20 65 and arrange a meeting with their local Adult Literacy Organiser.

AONTAS Welcomes New Members

Two organisations have recently joined AONTAS, they are Pitman Training Centre Swords and C & I Systems. AONTAS also welcomes Anne Shortall, John Leslie, Una Buckley, Hussein Saleh Hamed Buhidma, Camilla Fitzimons and Clare Foley who recently joined as individual members. If you would like more information about how and why you should get involved with AONTAS, contact Niamh O'Reilly, Membership Development Officer, noreilly@aontas.com or on 01 4068220.

Living Active Citizenship: A Project for Adult and Community Education?

While the argument for the importance of lifelong learning in the workplace has essentially been won, learning also has the potential to engage us as within our own communities. In this article, Berni Brady considers the role of adult and community education in the debate on active citizenship.

Introduction

In an interview in the Irish Times Magazine of March 24th 2007, Mary Davis, Chairperson of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship talked about what the consultation process engaged in by the Taskforce had picked up from the public. She said that there was a 'longing from the ordinary person in the street to have a voice, an influence about what is happening in their community. Rather than the County Council sitting and deciding what is happening in the community, the people want to be involved, to have a say.' The report from the Taskforce identified strong feelings of disaffection from the political processes by citizens, a lack of accountability by public bodies and a democratic deficit at local level. Davis believes the problem may be about communications. 'I don't know that we are good in Ireland about communicating with people and ensuring that people are informed'.

Community Education and Active Citizenship

Two things struck me about this statement. First the obviousness of the importance of communication in engaging citizens, something which anyone might have taken for granted,

and secondly the implication that communication is a one way process i.e. keeping people informed. A more in depth examination of the findings of the consultation process and indeed participating in it revealed a deep need to be listened to, to be able to express feelings and opinions and to be involved in and question decisions which have far reaching implications for the lives of ordinary people. Similarly a vox pop on Morning Ireland a week before the General Election in May 2007 revealed that many ordinary people do not regard themselves as having any say in the political processes that shape our country and society. One man in his forties who had never voted said, 'It's nothing to do with me. I have five children, I work hard and I get on with my life'.

AONTAS like many other bodies made a submission to the Task Force arguing that adult education and, in particular, community education plays a key role in the development of active citizenship, civil society and a healthy functioning democracy. Reflecting the belief of Habermas that 'learning democracy is the most important learning project of all', the AONTAS submission outlined the key role of adult learning in enabling people to become engaged citizens and suggested that community education is most relevant to promoting active citizenship as it is developed



AONTAS Director Berni Brady

"...community education plays a key role in the development of active citizenship, civil society and a healthy functioning democracy."

and organised locally by local people... "it is learner centred and based on the principles of empowerment and transformation." AONTAS (2006).

During consultations with AONTAS membership about the development of its Strategic Plan 2007-2010, community education activists were of the strong view that participation in

"Learning democracy is the biggest learning project of all."



Kumi Naidoo, Secretary General of Civicus, addressing the AONTAS Citizen Learner Conference in 2005.

community education is in itself the practice of active citizenship. However they also had grave concerns about the current position of community education, in particular the lack of understanding by government funders and policy makers about the work they do. Their main fear was that the current demands of one kind of accountability, namely quantitative outcomes and compliance with particular kinds of quality assurance, was eroding the radical practice used by community education to foster political activism and transform the lives and situations of adults involved in it.

While the White Paper recognised community education as amongst 'the most dynamic, creative and relevant components of adult education in Ireland' and made a number of recommendations for its financing and support, the reality of developments since

the publication of the Paper means its core project of radical transformation has been eroded rather than supported.

Community Education – Current Challenges

The two major developments initiated by the Department of Education and Science have been the recruitment of Community Education Facilitators and the provision of a Training and Support Programme for them through AONTAS and the establishment of the Back to Education Initiative/Community Strand. While there is no doubt that both developments have led to greater access for many adults, generally speaking the kind of community education being delivered very much fits more neatly into the 'education in the community' type, leaving an ever smaller number of community development type programmes struggling to retain the social action aspect of community education.

There is little space left for the social analysis, consciousness raising and collective empowerment which was the hallmark of community education at its strongest in the late eighties and early nineties. Then community education, spearheaded by the women's groups, was a radical project addressing disadvantage, high levels of poverty and unemployment, isolation and social exclusion in a very different Ireland.

Ireland in the 21st century

In twenty years Irish society has changed dramatically. The most recent census data showed the population at 4.2 million which is well on its way to being twice as large as it was in the

1950s. The results also show that the society we now inhabit is not just bigger but more complex, more diverse and in many ways more fragmented. The increased complexity is evident at every level. Ten per cent of the people living here were born outside Ireland. There is religious and cultural diversity and family structures have changed dramatically. Strong economic growth and competitiveness has seen the highest levels of employment in the history of the state with more women than ever before entering the workforce. The property boom has fuelled the growth of a commuter society with regional towns growing rapidly. While the census figures indicate a growing, dynamic and multicultural Ireland, they also highlight the challenges inherent in the new emerging Ireland.

Creating a Space for Discussion

Presently consumerism and individualism are key hallmarks of our society. There are many deep inequalities in Irish society and a growing division between rich and poor. Ireland now sports multi-millionaires on the one hand and one of the highest incidences of child poverty across Europe on the other. Communities are being eroded by the obligation to move away from family and neighbourhoods in order to find accommodation. Childcare is a commodity that has to be bought for a high price. People are disillusioned by representative politics, and more

"There is a need for education on an ongoing basis both formally and informally."

"The argument for supporting lifelong learning as a key means of ensuring economic competitiveness has essentially been won."

draconian measures are being used to deal with crime in poor communities while those who can afford it live in gated ones. The level of violence in our society and in particular against women is becoming worryingly greater and is now an everyday occurrence. Facilities that are crucial to the integration of our diverse population remain woefully inadequate. Public services including health, education and environmental services stumble from crisis to crisis and the challenges of planning for an ageing society are embryonic to say the least. Corruption at a political level is either denied or taken as a given and those who are corrupt often escape any retribution. In this context it is not difficult to understand the feeling of disconnection of the man interviewed by the Morning Ireland reporter. One could be forgiven for feeling hopeless and helpless in the face of such challenges.

Yet there is a great hunger for something different, for something that feels more caring and human. This need is voiced in the smaller public spheres where discussion is allowed to flourish e.g. among community education groups, in learner networks, in the spaces organised by associations like AONTAS and others, in the responses to the Taskforce on Citizenship, at conferences where radical voices are applauded as a breath of fresh air.

At a recent conference organised by Dún Laoghaire/Rathdown County



Discussing how learning benefits citizenship – a panel of speakers at the AONTAS Citizen Learner Conference in 2005.

Council on the theme of active citizenship the participants included a whole range of people deeply involved and caring about their communities working in both a paid and voluntary capacity as well as elected local representatives. There was no shortage of ideas or motivation to work. Emerging again and again from the lively discussions which took place during the conference was the need for education not just in the formal education system, which is identified as the main locus in the Taskforce Report, but on an ongoing basis both formally and informally at local level.

This is I believe where community education if it is properly supported can contribute to the development of democracy and civil society. But this is not about courses. It is about what Jane Thompson at the AONTAS Conference celebrating the European Year of Citizenship through Education described as: 'spaces within systems that feel oppressive which have to be occupied. They have to be used imaginatively and creatively and subversively, until those spaces are prised open again and contribute to the process of change... If you are intending to have a

fairer and a more just world, then those are the spaces you have to operate in... You have to crack them open in alliance with others who feel the same' (Citizen Learner Conference, 2005).

So what can be done in the current context? Is it any longer possible to create spaces where learning can once again be a project that opens the imagination, that creates possibilities, that in the words of Habermas 'encourages the practice of active citizenship and fosters spaces that engage people in deliberative processes committed to the development of democracy'. I believe it can and I believe the time is right. The level of awareness created by the Taskforce consultation and the creation of the Active Citizenship Office means at least citizenship is now on the political agenda. The argument for supporting lifelong learning as a key means of ensuring economic competitiveness has essentially been won. The next key challenge is arguing for supporting it as a means of achieving a society where people can live together as interconnected human beings, recognising and accepting diversity and having a quality of life that allows for personal, social, cultural and spiritual fulfilment.

Grundtvig – The European Programme For Adult Education And Lifelong Learning

Denise Shannon from Léargas explains how the Grundtvig Programme provides opportunities to benefit your organisation and promote active citizenship.



Lifelong Learning Programme



The Grundtvig Programme invites those working in any institution or organisation from community groups to universities to participate in its range of European projects, professional development opportunities and networks. This is the first year of the new Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-2013 and we hope that you will take this opportunity to discover what this Programme has to offer you, the adult learner, and your organisation. Please visit our website: www.leargas.ie/education or contact us at the Education Service in Léargas.

Grundtvig Learning Partnerships – Promoting Innovation in Adult Education

A Grundtvig Learning Partnership is a process-driven, locally based project which is formed with a view to sharing experience and expertise. The project, which is funded for two years, must involve a minimum of three partner organisations in three participating European countries developing a project on a particular theme.

A Grundtvig project can provide an important innovative space for people working in the area of adult and community education by facilitating the sharing of ideas, best practice and new ways of addressing challenges. This has been particularly important for some of Ireland's Grundtvig projects which have addressed issues around integration of immigrant communities and those working to promote and facilitate active citizenship and participation. Melanie Ní Dhuinn, Education Coordinator with the Wexford Area Partnership, describes their project, PLACE, which is looking at active citizenship through adult learning in a community based personal development project.

PLACE – A Grundtvig Adventure

Wexford Area Partnership's Grundtvig adventure began in October 2005 at a contact seminar in Sintra, Portugal. The theme was *Local Development through Adult Education* and

the Grundtvig Learning Partnership project that emerged – PLACE – involves five partners, Greece, Ireland, Isle of Wight, Italy and Slovakia.

Active Citizenship

The main objective of PLACE is to promote active citizenship through adult learning in a community-based personal development project. PLACE uses a series of modules to focus on personal development of the participants, building self-esteem and self-confidence, exploring leadership and facilitating participation in the community as active citizens. PLACE engages reluctant adult learners in relevant, inclusive and accessible capacity-building programmes and endeavours to provoke change in their lives.

Participation in Society

PLACE facilitates the development of greater levels of learner engagement in society not only at local level but also at a European level. The project endeavours to develop meaningful opportunities for people to become active citizens and thereby become integrated in society within both a local and a European context.

Parents and Schools

At a local level, Wexford Area Partnership has identified a group of adult learners who are parents. The project has worked with these parents through a series of modules including communication, self-confidence, self-esteem, motivation, individual assertiveness, roles, rights and responsibilities, negotiation skills and presentation skills.

The project has developed a toolkit of practical activities for the parents. These include *Headstart*, a pre-school programme, cookery, ICT training (word processing, internet and email), woodwork and crafts, English as second official language, Irish for primary school parents and role play. These activities take



The PLACE Project: European colleagues at a project meeting in the Isle of Wight 2007

place in the school and in a training room at a time agreed by the group of parents. This offers parents an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the school building and also with the teacher and the curriculum.

Teachers talk to parents about the various activities their children are engaging in, the objectives and focus of the activities, the general progress of the children and how they as parents can further enhance the process of learning. Parents—including a number from new communities—welcome this opportunity to talk in an informal but informative, comfortable way with the teachers and to mingle with other parents and exchange ideas and experiences.

Benefits of the Grundtvig Project

The Wexford Area participation in the Grundtvig adventure to date has been interesting and educational. With one very busy and productive year behind us, our appetites have been whetted for the second phase of our project. Year 2 will see our learners participate at a transnational level and meet their counterparts from other partner countries. This experience will serve to produce even greater learning, which will inform future activities, while developing the project as a model of good practice in the adult education field.

The next deadline for Grundtvig Partnership Project Applications is 15 February 2008.

Grundtvig Contact Seminars in Europe – 2007-2008

If you are interested in becoming involved in a Grundtvig project, contact seminars are one of the most successful and enjoyable means of sourcing European partners. Opportunities are available for those working in the area of adult education and lifelong learning to attend seminars across the participating countries on a variety of themes including active citizenship, intercultural dialogue and inclusion of adults with dis-

abilities, to name but a few. Participation in these seminars is fully funded by the Education Service of Léargas.

Details of upcoming contact seminars are available on our website: www.leargas.ie/education. Application forms for participation in a contact seminar can be downloaded from the website. Alternatively contact Kathleen Carey at Léargas at (01) 873 1411.

Grundtvig In-Service Training – Professional Development of Adult Education Staff

Grundtvig In-Service Training enables persons working or training in adult education institutions in the broadest sense to undertake training of up to six weeks in another European country. The training can take the form of a structured course or job shadowing/work observation period in a relevant organisation involved in adult education.

Kerstin Walsh, a social care worker from Wellsprings in Cork city, works with young women learning to live independently. Kerstin attended an in-service course, *Becoming Fluent in Creative Writing and Multimedia*, in Italy, which looked at creative approaches to facilitating people to use writing as a form of expression. Kerstin is very positive about her experience.

'My skills improved, but what had greater impact was the idea that I am on the right track with my work. Meeting people from other countries showed me where we are in Ireland in terms of working creatively and I found that there is much work to be done. My own experiences were also interesting for the colleagues on the course. I now have the tools with which to work and the literature and experiences to support these. I hope that these will help me to change ideas around creativity in my organisation and in social work.'

An online database of training activities is available to help applicants identify training which best meets their needs: <http://ec.europa.eu/education/trainingdatabase/>. Those interested in in-service training may also source a suitable course outside this course database.

The next deadlines for Grundtvig In-Service Training Grants are:

31 January 2008 for training starting between 1 April 08 and 30 June 2008

31 March 2008 for training starting between 1 July 2008 and 30 September 2008

30 June 2008 for training starting between 1 October 2008 and 31 December 2008

30 September 2008 for training starting between 1 January 2009 and 31 March 2009

For further information on Grundtvig In-Service Training please consult the Education Service website www.leargas.ie/education/grundtvig/action3.html or contact May Diamond at (01) 873 1411 or mdiamond@leargas.ie. Léargas, 189 Parnell Street, Dublin 1, Tel: (01) 873 1411.

Celebrating Adult Learning in the UK

In the lead up to the Adult Learners Festival 2008, Ciara Murphy considers the experience of the UK in running an Adult Learners' Week.

AONTAS Adult Learners Festival Runs from February 4th to February 8th this year. Ireland is one of many countries in Europe and around the world which run an Adult Learners' Festival.

While the AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival is still in its infancy, NIACE Adult Learners' Week is a veteran at bringing together learners, policy makers and practitioners to celebrate the positive impact learning can have on a person's life. Since 1992, NIACE (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) has coordinated the UK's largest celebration of learning, a celebration of how learners from all walks of life have transformed themselves and those around them through learning. The objectives are to equally raise the public awareness of adult learning opportunities and encourage more people to seek advice and guidance about returning to learning and to celebrate the success of exceptional learners and innovative learning organisations.

Each year around 10,000 events take place throughout England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, attracting up to 100,000 visitors and participants. While NIACE coordinates the week nationally, strong regional networks consisting of practitioners from all sectors from learning partnerships to the media to government representatives gather to consider how to maximize the success of Adult Learners' Week at regional level. The most important feature of Adult Learners' Week is its absolute commitment to place learners at the heart of its national and regional activities. Activities include thousands of locally organised events, a national free phone advice line 'LearnDirect' and broadcasting through the local and national media that brings to life the extraordinary achievements of ordinary people.

Adult Learners' Week is also the time when adults from across the UK are awarded for their remarkable learning achievements through the Adult Learners' Week Awards. Adults who've learnt as individuals, as families or as part of a group can be nominated for the awards as well as organisations which have created new and innovative opportunities for adults to learn. Each year NIACE receives over 1,000 nominations from colleges, businesses, adult education providers, museums, libraries and elsewhere about extraordinary and inspiring adults who have transformed their lives through

learning. Awards are made at national and regional ceremonies during Adult Learners' week and during a sister campaign that takes place every September, Sign Up Now.

Award winners are the heroes of Adult Learners' Week. Their remarkable stories inspire and motivate others to get involved in learning and show at first hand the power of learning to change a person's life for the better. Joanne McMahon won an Individual Learner Award as part of the 2006 Adult Learner Week. Joanne was a single parent without any formal qualifications until she made the courageous decision to return to learning and seize control of the direction she was going. At the same ceremony, Pam Haywood-Reed was presented with the National Senior Learner of the Year Award. Pam missed out on learning as a child because she spent a lot of time in hospital and was then encouraged to work in a factory. However, after her retirement she received the ECDL in 2003 and has went on to tutor 144 older people in basic computer skills. Undoubtedly, each year Adult Learners' Week highlights the creativity and energy, learners, both young and old bring to their learning.

With innovative and exciting events happening throughout the UK and through its reflection on learners' and practitioners achievements, Adult Learners' Week provides a great service to adult and community learning. The Week manages to raise the profile of adult learning as well as capturing the imagination, enthusiasm and support of learners, practitioners and policy makers alike.

For further information on NIACE, please visit www.niace.org.uk. For further information on the Adult Learners' Week, please visit www.alw.org.uk.

"Whatever you want out of life, learning can steer you in the direction you want it to go in. Each Adult Learners' Week is a great opportunity for you to get a taste of the positive impact that learning could have on your life."

Rachael Thompson, Senior Campaigns Officer, NIACE

STAR Gazing

The STAR Awards Ceremony is the opening event for the second Adult Learners' Festival. Niamh Farren spoke to Loretta Needham, to find out what winning a STAR award in 2007 meant for Tuam Community Development Resource Centre.

The AONTAS STAR awards will be presented at Dublin Castle on February 4th 2008. This year we received 131 nomination forms – three times as many as last year, and an independent panel of judges will announce the winners in a total of eleven categories on December 7th this year. Minister for Lifelong Learning Sean Haughey TD will open the ceremony and well known broadcaster Micheal O'Muircheartaigh will present the winners with their awards. For a full list of projects nominated go to www.adultlearnersfestival.com, or contact the AONTAS office on 01 406 8220.

So what does winning a STAR award mean? We spoke to Loretta Needham from Tuam Community Development Resource Centre and found out what has been happening with the group since.

Tuam Community Development Project was nominated for a STAR award last year in the first AONTAS Adult Learners Festival and went on to win in the Connaught category. Loretta Needham from the group explained how they were nominated for the award. 'West Training and Development LTD nominated us, because they felt that our group deserved recognition for some of the projects we are running. At the time we were running an Equality for Women Measure. This involved women's leadership training and social change. The women involved went on to set up Ard Na mBan, a women's group, and to complete the Training for Transformation course.'

The Community Development Project has been busy continuing their work since they received their award in January this year. The training has been the catalyst for a number of other exciting initiatives – these include collective community responses to issues such as childcare and violence against women – and a global link through an exchange with the Tanzanian Gender Networking Programme. The women are also in the process of establishing 'LETS' – an innovative cooperative system which will allow women to directly exchange particular supports they need. 'It's a barter-

"I think we were taken more seriously as a group after we were given the award."



Change caption on photo to: Dr Hugh Brady presents representatives from Tuam Community Development Resource Centre with a STAR Award in January this year.

"It was great for participants to get the acknowledgement they deserve."

ing system', explained Loretta. 'For example, the LETS scheme would assist a woman to find someone to look after her children while she attends a women's group meeting or takes an evening course. She will then offer to do something else in return. Often these small favours can make a big difference to women participating in activities outside the home.'

The STAR award wasn't the only recognition the group received, they were also given an Irish Rural Links award. Loretta emphasises how important this recognition has been to the group. 'First of all we raised our profile and gained more media coverage. Secondly, I think we were taken more seriously as a group after we were given the award. We developed a particular approach to English classes for immigrants which was highly successful and which has now been replicated by the VEC. Finally it was great for participants in the project to get the acknowledgement they deserve. They really enjoyed the event in Dublin. Sometimes we're so swamped here that we don't get the time to acknowledge the great work that goes on.'

Who's Involved?

A Steering Group assists AONTAS staff to review and plan work for the Adult Learners' Festival. The group brings together representatives of different agencies and organisations, all with an interest in adult education. Here's an idea of who's involved.

The ALF Steering Committee meets regularly to plan and review the work of the festival. Three AONTAS staff members are involved in the committee – Berni Brady, AONTAS Director, Jacinta Cuthbert, Head of Organisational Development, and Niamh Farren, Communications Officer. A number of relevant agencies and organisations are also included on the Steering Committee, they include the following:

Mary Hilda Cavanagh represents IVEA, the national representative body of the VECs, on the AONTAS Executive committee. Her work involves liaising between IVEA and AONTAS in the promotion and fostering of adult education and in increasing understanding and co-operation between stakeholders in the sector. IVEA is the national representative body of Ireland's 33 VECs. The VECs are the main providers of adult education in Ireland and have been at the forefront of adult education provision for decades. A former secondary school teacher, Mary Hilda has been a member of Co. Kilkenny VEC from 1974 to date. She served as chairperson of the VEC for 16 years. She is a former chairperson of the VEC's Adult Education Board and is involved in Youthreach and the Boards of Management of a number of Post-Primary Schools. Mary Hilda is also a qualified Adult Literacy Tutor.

Mary Hilda hopes that the Adult Learners Festival increases awareness of the availability and value of adult education. 'I hope that it encourages more people to take the step necessary to engage in adult learning. In particular, I hope that the Festival communicates the value of adult learning for personal development and fulfilment, and that education in this country is recognised as something more valuable than an economic resource' she says. 'The Festival can benefit the sector by promoting awareness of the availability of adult education and communicating the positive messages associated with adult learning.'

Marian Duffy is an Adult Education Officer with Co. Carlow VEC and has responsibility for nine interlinked and integrated services provided through the VEC. These are adult literacy, VTOS, BTEI, Adult Guidance, Senior Traveller Education, Youthreach Childcare Provision, community education and adult education

"I hope the festival communicates the value of adult learning for personal development and fulfilment."



Marian Duffy from the Adult Learners' Festival Steering Committee, at the AONTAS Local Links Day in September 2007

"Every Day we learn we should be celebrating"

classes/evening programmes in VEC schools. Marian is also involved with CANDO Community Partnership in Carlow and St Catherines Community Services, Carlow.

As an AEO, Marian has a pivotal role within the VEC. The role of AEO is one which understands the wider educational landscape, and the diversity of different environments where people learn. Her role has a specific interagency dimension linking into a number of different initiatives from school completion programmes to a Traveller Strategy. She strongly believes that adult education should be an enabling environment which engages learners where they're at.

Marian hopes that by being involved in the Steering Committee that she would 'bring a continued awareness of what learning really is, so pervasive is it in all our lives. We need to stop associating it with a particular period of our lives', she explains. 'Every day we learn we should be celebrating. Learning gives us freedom – we're all affected by our experiences, and if we are learning, thinking people then we are liberated from those experiences'. Marian hopes that the Adult Learners' Festival will

help to get that message across and that eventually 'learning becomes something we can't avoid... it's inherent to our lives.'

Fionnuala Anderson is the FÁS representative on the ALF Steering Committee. She is a Manager in FÁS Community Services and is responsible for policy and programme development for FÁS supported Community Training Centres and local training initiatives. FÁS has a particular role in the provision of training and education opportunities to assist participants enter employment. In this context Fionnuala's role on the ALF Steering Committee involves disseminating information and supporting projects to get involved in the festival and the STAR awards. She would like to see the festival 'putting learning on the agenda' and promoting wider recognition of the value of formal and informal learning. Although FÁS is primarily involved in the delivery of training initiatives for employment purposes, FÁS also recognises the importance of personal development to support learners in this regard. Fionnuala believes that 'learning is a key issue for everyone' and hopes that the festival will promote more people to get involved in learning whenever and wherever they can, and that the festival provides an opportunity to recognise adult learners.

Flan Garvey is a former National School Principal, having taught in Dublin and Clare for over 37 years. He is a present member of Co Clare VEC and a former chairman of same.

He represents the Co. Clare VEC on the Standing Council of the IVEA and is currently Vice President of the IVEA. He is also Chairman of the Institute of Technology Tralee. Flan is very keen on Adult Education because he knows from experience that many people in Ireland in the past didn't have an opportunity of a primary school education. He is very much aware that education is for lifelong learning and that there are courses available that meet people's needs. Flan is also studying for an MA degree.

Kevin Molloy represents the Federation of Active Retirement Associations (FARA) on the ALF Steering Committee. Kevin retired from working with Gorey Post Office in 2002, and describes retirement as a great opportunity to keep mind and body active. He has always been actively involved in a number of voluntary organisations, from the GAA to the local credit union. His retirement prompted him to get involved in the Gorey Active Retirement group. He went on to be elected as the President of Active Retirement Ireland in 2006, and was re-elected in April 2007. As he put it himself, he was determined 'not to end up sitting with a zapper in front of the television all day'. Kevin's love of learning began with the Go for Life programme run by Age and Opportunity and funded by the Irish Sports Council. He has since become a trained Physical Activity Leader (PAL). Kevin's connections with older peoples organisations through the Federation of Active Retirement Associations will ensure that



Clare McNally, Public Relations Officer with NALA at the AONTAS GM.

the Adult Learners' Festival reflects the diverse contribution and participation of older people to lifelong learning.

Clare McNally is the Public Relations Officer in the National Adult Literacy Agency and her work centers around the agency's mission to make sure people with literacy and numeracy difficulties can fully take part in society and have access to learning opportunities that meet their needs. Her role primarily involves raising awareness of the literacy issue in Ireland throughout the year and organising National Adult Literacy Awareness Week in September. Another part of her work involves highlighting what adult literacy means for wider social and economic development in Ireland.

NALA believes it is very important to support the Adult Learning Festival as it raises awareness of all the different learning opportunities that exist around the country. It's also a great chance for groups that offer adult learning to highlight their work. 'Very often people can feel apprehensive about taking-up learning as an adult, but this doesn't have to be the case. That's why the Adult Learning Festival is such a good idea – it highlights how much is on offer and how easy it is to get involved' says Clare.

NALA hopes that the Adult Learning Festival 2008 will once again highlight all the benefits there are to returning to learning and encourage people to make contact with local groups. There are huge benefits to returning to learning. First and foremost there's the often life-changing personal benefits that individuals gain when they learn something new. And there are many other benefits, such as those to society and even the economy.

"It's a great chance for groups that offer adult learning to highlight their work"

AONTAS Adult Learners Festival: What's On?

Here's a taste of what groups are planning to celebrate learning during the week of the festival February 4th to 8th.

Apart from the STAR awards ceremony, there will be many other events taking place throughout the country during the Adult Learners' Festival, February 4th-8th 2008. Keep an eye on the special festival website www.adultlearnersfestival.com which will be updated as AONTAS receives information on the various activities being organised.

Your group can also organise an event – contact the local link in your area for more information. A full list of local links is available from www.adultlearnersfestival.com, or if you contact the AONTAS office. AONTAS can assist you with posters and publicity for your event.

Stuck for ideas? Here's a sample of what groups are planning around the country to mark the festival and celebrate learning.

A Preview of the Adult Learners Festival

In Clonmel, the VEC is planning a drama production highlighting and celebrating Adult Education for Friday 8th of February. They hope to involve groups all over South Tipp from different sections such as Community Ed, BTEI, Adult Literacy, and non-Irish nationals. Information stalls will be set up on the morning and tea/coffee and scones available. They also hope to have a learner and a tutor talk about their experience to date as an adult learner. For more information contact Veronica Crowe vcrowe@tippsouthvec.ie.

In NUI Maynooth, Local Link Stephen Stewart is busy developing their festival theme this year. 'We love to learn' is their chosen theme, and there will be an open coffee morning taking place this year. Drop in and meet adult learners and get some information about adult education initiatives in Maynooth. This event will be supported by a number of groups active in the college. You can contact Stephen at crockshane@gmail.com.

In Clondalkin, Rowlagh women's group is organising an exhibition stand at Clondalkin shopping centre. Over the course of the week members of the group will be available to talk to anyone interested in their training and education activities, from arts and crafts to alternative health or even salsa dancing. Contact Bernie for more information on 01 623 0574 or oliveadmin@oceanfree.net.

TALENT in Tallaght will follow the success of last year with the Tallaght Adult Learners Fair on Thursday February 7th. TALENT is a network which brings together Tallaght Partnership with the VEC, Tallaght IT, the library services and Co. Council. The fair will take place at Tallaght Library and will include stands, workshops, and demos all on the theme of adult education. You will have the opportunity to try out anything from reflexology to drama. Deborah Brock in Tallaght Partnership and Maggie Ryan in Tallaght IT can be contacted for more information; they are also available to support other community groups and family learning centres to run their own events. Deborah can be contacted on 01466 4280 and Maggie can be reached on 01 404 2173.

On Tuesday 5th February, DIT Conservatory of Music and Drama (Chatham Row) will offer adults the wonderful experience of being in a music class. Marian McRory, lecturer in adult musicianship, will bring the group on a musical journey by introducing the basic elements of rhythm, melody, singing and notation. Find out how to listen to music, get a flavour of musical styles and try a little conducting! The class will last for 1 hour at the end of which participants can ask questions about Continuing Education Music Courses at the DIT. There will be an opportunity to meet current and past adult music students, some of who have achieved diplomas and degrees at Bachelors and Masters levels. To find out more contact Marian: marianmcr@yahoo.co.uk DIT ext: 4027650

If you are involved with a community group and are interested in running an event, you should contact the local link in your area. A list of the local links is available on the website www.adultlearnersfestival.com, or telephone the AONTAS office on 01 406 8220. AONTAS can also help you to publicise your event, contact Niamh Farren, Communications Officer.

Ask Jenny...

Jenny Gunning from AONTAS Information Referral Service answers your adult education queries.

Dear Jenny,

I'm 32 and seriously considering relocating to the UK to study full-time. I have looked at several websites in relation to this; however I'm a bit overwhelmed by all the information out there. How do I go about applying? Do you have any idea of the costs involved?

Thanks, Conor

Hi Conor,

I understand all the information can be very confusing however the main website you want to be concerned with is www.ucas.com. UCAS is the equivalent of the CAO in Ireland, it is a centralised service that looks after admissions on behalf of all the universities and colleges in the UK. If you visit this website you can ask them to send you a UCAS Handbook and an application form. The UCAS system is more complicated than the CAO as it takes into account the student's capabilities and personality also. When completing the application form remember to "sell" yourself, they like to see that an applicant is involved in things like sport/music/voluntary work and has some relevant work experience in the field they wish to do further study in. Take the time to compose a statement demonstrating your strengths. All applications can be submitted online via the UCAS website. This facility allows students to track their application over the internet. Mature students are required to detail all prior study. However if you are hoping to enter higher education through the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) or the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), you must apply through UCAS, but you should contact your chosen universities and colleges first. The deadline for applications is generally in January however some programmes require applications to be received by October.

As a fulltime student you can expect to pay up to €4500 a year for your course. The level of fees also varies depending on the course subject. You may have the option to pay this up-front, or alternatively take out a student loan. You may also be eligible for a maintenance grant in the UK. The most important thing to do is to research. Good luck with your study.

Jenny

Hi Jenny,

I'm currently considering moving from the private sector into the public sector and I am looking for advice on how to go about entering this sector. I have seen a few jobs advertised that seem very interesting but I'm very nervous to apply as I am aware you have to do both an interview and an entrance exam. As I have been out of education for over fifteen years I would like some advice on how to prepare for one of these exams. I would also like some interview tips off you as I have been in my job the last eight years so it sure has been a long time since I did one!

Thank you, Denise

Hi Denise,

I strongly recommend you take a look at the website www.public.jobs.ie. This site will help you find out about recruitment to the various departments in the Civil Service, Local Authority and Health Services sectors.

Entry for this type of position involves an entrance exam and interview. You can access sample exams on this website. Different tests are used for various grades in the Civil Service such as Clerical Officer and Executive Officer and familiarisation material will be sent to you or made available on the website prior to your attending a test session. Remember to find out as much as possible about the job you are applying for and the company/organisation. You should also:

- Check out their website.
- Check the newspapers for any recent press releases on the company.
- If possible, talk to some people in the organisation.
- Know the skills required for the job.
- Identify & memorise your best selling points for the job & practice how you can communicate them in the interview.
- To build confidence, try to run through what you would say in the interview with a friend or colleague.
- Know your strengths and focus on the ones that are most relevant to the job you are applying for.

I hope this information is of some assistance to you and good luck.

Jenny

Need Answers?

Please contact AONTAS if you have a question about adult education and we will do our best to point you in the right direction. Jenny can be contacted by telephone 01 406 8220 or by email on jgunning@aontas.com.

Uniphar: Taking it to the Next Level

In May this year, Maureen Kavanagh and Martina Quinn visited staff at the Uniphar group to see how 'Skills for Work' – a workplace learning initiative had progressed. In this follow up article, Niamh Farren looks at the successes and challenges for staff and management in delivering this programme.

In an earlier issue of *Explore* this year we featured a special report about a unique workplace learning initiative run by the Uniphar group in Tallaght. This initiative targets employees who may not have had the opportunity to complete their formal education, and offers them training in subjects such as communications and computer skills. *Skills for Work* is a national initiative aimed at providing opportunities to assist employees to engage in learning and increase their knowledge in key areas such as computers and communications. The initiative is aimed at employees who have not completed formal education. Skills for Work is funded through a Workplace Basic Education Fund (WBEF), set up by the government under the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The fund is managed by FÁS and guided by a national steering group.

Given that a number of employees had completed the training, it was timely to revisit the group and to see how the initiative was progressing. From the outset, it's clear that the impact has been overwhelmingly positive for most of those taking part. 'We learned a lot, the environment was brilliant', said Will. 'One of the things that I was afraid of was that it would be like going back to school, but it wasn't like that at all, it was a lot better.'

Personal Gains and Building Confidence

The training in computers was seen as particularly beneficial, not only for work but personally as well. *Skills for Work* has had an impact on work relationships within the organisation itself. For Will, this realisation happened at work, when he was able to show a colleague how to use a computer more effectively. 'She [A work colleague] was chuffed when I was able to show her a quicker way of using Microsoft Excel, she said I saved her so much time.' Another employee is in agreement. 'It's been good for my work. I can do a lot of stuff now, like printing up labels



Employees at the Uniphar group

on a computer, where before I wouldn't have had a clue.' The experience of learning within a group setting has also helped some employees complete the training, through supporting each other to learn, and offering lifts to colleagues who lacked transport. Management in Uniphar has also noticed a more upbeat and positive work environment since the training began. The introduction of the initiative coincides with the relocation of the Belgard Road warehouse, but Breda Muldoon was anxious to point out that these two new developments within the company were not connected. 'This is about work life balance, she explained. 'This is about progressing in the workplace. It's about self-confidence as much as anything else.'

The Wider Benefits of Learning

Whether it means being able to support their children through school and college, or discovering the fine art of googling, it's clear that the employees of Uniphar have made huge personal gains through work based learning, and this has whetted their appetites to continue. But beyond the experiences of individual learners, how has it worked out for the organisation? Lisa Grassick, of the Human Resources Department was aware that this initiative was going to involve a learning curve for the company as well as learners. 'I think from a logistics point of view we can now use this as a test case' she says, 'we've done it now and it'll be much easier for us to roll it out on other sites'. For example, in some cases the different skills level within the

"This is about progressing in the workplace. It's about self confidence as much as anything else."

"The way we're going to sell this is through the positive reactions of the learners themselves."

group made learning difficult for some. 'This can be further compounded by previous negative experiences in school, which can bring out an atmosphere of anxiety about learning.

A Changing Organisational Culture

Uniphar itself is a national and transnational operation with its head office based at the Belgard Road. The company supports seven different businesses, with sub-depots as far as Sligo and Cork, but work based learning is currently only available to those employees in the Belgard Road and Longmile Road locations. Does Breda think that this initiative would work at other locations throughout the country? 'The interest from other site managers is big' she says. 'I think the way we're going to sell this is through the positive reactions of the learners themselves. We did have to do quite a hard sell initially at this site.' One of the challenges has been the transition from an organisation which exclusively invested in training for management staff, to one which is more inclusive and which is prioritising the learning needs of all staff. This also required some new thinking in terms of the human resources needed to support this type of initiative, and in fact Uniphar's HR Department has only been in existence for the past two and a half years. 'In previous projects, maybe the administration wasn't there. It's taken quite a bit of my time and Breda's time to get this rolling. But look at the benefits there now. You have to look at the bigger picture; it's about changing the culture of the organisation. Up until two and a half years ago we didn't even have a HR department.'

Another challenge has been accommodating the needs of a diverse workforce. The warehouse itself employs up to 300 mostly part time workers of mixed age groups. The workforce is predominantly female. Employees themselves can avail of flexible work arrangements, such as shift work, and this has made the scheduling of training somewhat difficult. Where training was held in the evening, it was not possible for some workers to attend. 'Once we've rolled out this project' says Lisa 'we can look at organising something in the mornings to facilitate them.' Immigrant workers also constitute another important target group for this initiative. As Breda explained 'They're some of the most qualified employees we have, but their lack of confidence in their ability to speak English is holding them

"The training ensures that everyone is valued in the company and feels included."



Lisa Grassick and Breda Muldoon of Uniphar

back.' With this in mind, the company has introduced a module in 'Technical English' designed to build the confidence of migrant workers, who make up approximately one third of the current warehouse team.

The Future

Both Breda and Lisa see this is the beginning of a meaningful training culture within the organisation. 'We never found a way before where we could see everyone involved in some kind of training' says Breda. 'Training is still a barrier with some people. In the future we would like to develop in house training which uses the expertise of people internally.' Lisa also agrees that this is a priority for the organisation. 'Skillsnets is where I'd love to see training go eventually, but we need to get our in-house training up and running first', she says. 'The training ensures that everyone is valued in the company and feels included. When you have someone who's highly skilled and trained in an area but who can't move outside of that area, that's when this initiative can really work.'

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) reports of substantial evidence pointing to the fact that certain key generic skills are growing in relative importance in the workplace: basic skills, people-related skills and conceptual skills. 'The main way that these skills will be acquired is through adult education and training.' (EGFSN report 07, p.96)

The report also states that the up skilling of employees will require a systematic approach with a number of interlinked elements such as individual and business needs assessment, greater awareness of the benefits of learning, flexible provision, accreditation and funding. The Uniphar Group through its engagement with the Skills for Work in partnership with the Co Dublin VEC has put this interlinked model in place. Breda Muldoon and Lisa Grassick in conjunction with the VEC team have managed to create a great success story in relation to adults learning through the workplace.

Development Education in Action

A memorable two weeks in Tanzania offers a unique insight into another culture. Niamh Farren took part in an exchange organised earlier this year by Banúlacht: Women in Ireland for Global Solidarity.

From Dublin to Dar es Salaam

I arrive in Dar es Salaam Tanzania to a sunny September morning. I'm greeted by a collection of exotic and unrecognisable smells, an unfamiliar landscape and kaleidoscope of colours. It's only dawn, and already the heat is stifling. The anticipation of entering my two week adventure in Tanzania and Zanzibar fills me with energy, despite minimal sleep on a long flight. Backpackers, and honeymooners spill out of the plane, to create memories of climbing Kilimanjaro, and spice tours in Zanzibar. Almost everyone on the plane is white.

This trip is the outcome of an incredible amount of preparation and planning. We are eight Irish women active in the community sector, all from different parts of the country and who have signed up for this experience. Over the past few months we've cautiously volunteered some personal information about ourselves, given that we'll be living out of each other's pockets for the next little while. We've devoured the Lonely Planet, taken a crash course in Swahili, and googled every unfamiliar place mentioned on our itinerary. Our bags are stuffed with products designed to protect our western skin from unfamiliar climates. Our two week itinerary is packed – from attending the Gender Festival organized by the Tanzania Gender



Niamh Farren of AONTAS, and voluntary Executive member of Banúlacht

Networking Programme, to a field trip to a rural housing project in rural Mwanza at the foot of Kilimanjaro, and onto experiencing Ramadan on the exotic island of Zanzibar.

Linking Local to Global

Banúlacht, a feminist NGO based in Ireland organised an exchange between Irish women and women in Tanzania, with the aim of deepening the understanding between women in Ireland and women in the Global South. Over the past two years I've been a member of the Banúlacht Executive, and this exchange has constituted a key part of our workplan during that time. Banúlacht has cultivated a strong

relationship with TGNP (the Tanzanian Gender Networking Programme), and invited both Mary Rusimbi and Gemma Akilamale to speak at conferences and meet with women's groups all around Ireland. The exchange is funded through the Development Education Unit of Development Co-operation Ireland, Trócaire and Concern, all of whom support the work of Banúlacht. In addition, each exchange participant was required to fundraise in order to get here – by packing bags at the local supermarket, organising table-quizzes – one woman even climbed Croagh Patrick barefoot to fund her contribution.

Banúlacht works in the context of development education by organising training and capacity building initiatives, and raising awareness about

women's human rights issues. Irish Aid defines development education as 'an educational process aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of the rapidly changing, interdependent and unequal world in which we live. It seeks to engage people in analysis, reflection and action for local and global citizenship and participation. It is about supporting people in understanding, and in acting to transform the social, cultural, political and economic structures which affect their lives and others at personal, community, national and international levels.' This is the theory behind why I'm here. While my experience has given me some insight into the reality of women's lives in Tanzania, my perceptions and attitudes are very much shaped by the images of Africa that haunt mainstream media. I'm wondering if being here in person will change that.

Tanzania is one of the poorest countries in the world following an economic crisis in the 1980s and has been identified as one of eight priority countries in Africa by Irish Aid, the Irish governments funding programme which targets 'developing countries'. The statistics speak for themselves and make the case for funding – life expectancy averages 46 years; almost one third of adults living in rural areas have no formal education. Poverty is further exacerbated by a high incidence of HIV/ AIDS. In 2005 it was estimated that almost one and a half million people were living with HIV AIDs in Tanzania. But it's not only through aid that Ireland and Tanzania are connected – the cultural ties run deeper, when you think that Nyerere, the African socialist who was president of Tanzania up until the mid eighties was educated by Catholic missionaries.



A meeting at a Credit Co-operative in Lugoba village

Lost in Culture

The Gender Festival hosted by TGNP is an event that happens every two years. We arrive the day before the beginning of the festival as the shady grounds surrounding the offices are converted into workshop spaces, exhibition stands and market stalls. The festival is a four day event which this year aims to explore the theme of 'African Feminist Struggles in the context of Globalisation' – the first day providing some of the context, the second day identifying the key issues, the third day is about 'putting patriarchy on trial' and the fourth and final day examining the way forward. Workshops group participants together according to their interests – from education and information to gender based violence, women's participation in politics and decision making. The participants may be speaking Swahili but the similarity of the issues is striking.

The event is a dizzying and vibrant display – from the colours of local kangas (traditional Tanzanian dress) to the fiery outbursts that follow the keynote address, the personal experiences that have been rehearsed and are now articulated with emotion to an audience of over one thousand. A roving mike and facilitator allows the opportunity for these very personal stories to be told. But this isn't only about the serious business of gender and development; it's also an opportunity for dancing, performing and celebration. From the provocative theatre piece 'Putting Patriarchy on Trial' to the alternative Miss Tanzania competition, this is an event which experiments with every creative option in order to engage everyone present. The other thing that surprises us is the visible presence and participation of men in the festival.

We're not just lost in translation, we're lost in culture – the cultural



The Exchange Group with Irish Ambassador to Tanzania Anne Barrington

framework here is so different, that it defies and challenges our own western analyses. In Mwanza we learn how older women in rural communities have recently become a target for violence. The type of cooking fuel used by the women often causes their eyes to go red by the time they reach 60 and in some cases these women are branded as witches. They now constitute an extremely vulnerable group in society. Local community initiatives have developed a new type of cooking stove which prevents the women from developing red eyes, and now what they really want to do is run an educational campaign on this issue in order to try and change people's attitudes.

Working in Solidarity

Another challenge faced by community initiatives in the rural village of Lugoba involves dealing with the impact of HIV and AIDS on rural com-

munities. A unique peer education model in operation there trains local people so that they can identify the symptoms of HIV/ AIDS and promote preventative measures, but also link those who are HIV positive into existing services in the area. Later that day I meet a teenage girl who is raising six children because her mother died of AIDS, which really brings reality home to me. It was an emotional few days for everyone in the group – the personal stories of abuse, poverty, and the level of violence experienced on a daily basis by women made for difficult listening. Obviously, these projects and initiatives are desperately in need of resources. But this is only one part of a more complex solution. Sometimes the expectations around what aid can achieve over a short space of time can be unrealistic. 'Capacity Building and community development takes time' says Ashililya Nyanda, Manager of Mwanza Rural Housing Scheme. Maimuna Kanyamala of the Kivulini women's rights organi-

sation also points out the need for research and statistics, which document the levels of violence experienced by women around the country, thereby making the case for additional resources or changes in legislation. The women we meet also encourage us to talk about what we have seen, and to raise awareness to the reality of women's lives in Tanzania. Globalisation connects us all, and we have the opportunity, but also the responsibility to advocate in support of organisations like TGNP that are working in the face of huge challenges to advocate for women's rights in Tanzania.

A Learning Experience

There's not enough space to list all the things I've learned from being part of this exchange. Maybe not just what I've learned, but how I learned it. From the politics of aid to my very basic greetings in Swahili, things I would



Rural women take us on a tour of their village

never have learned about Tanzania in an academic environment. Although women in Tanzania experience difficulties, they believe they have come a long way. Within the credit co-operative in Lugoba, women occupy positions of power that they would never have years ago. Men are seen as partners in the struggle for gender equality, although the key decision-making roles within TGNP will always be occupied by women. Better access to edu-

cation is giving women more choices. That our own solutions may not always be the most appropriate. The individual and collective stories of women, setting up their own small enterprises, walking for miles to attend classes, gathering in community centres and making changes happen in their communities, despite huge obstacles, will continue to be an inspiration for those of us who were lucky enough to meet them. And that inspite of our differ-

ences, we have so much in common. Our final day in Tanzania included a meeting with the Irish ambassador to Tanzania and embassy staff who manage the Irish Aid programme. We talk to them about what we have seen, and raise the issues that the women have spoken of. It seems like a small thing, but a few days after our return we get an email from Maimuna telling us that the Embassy will be visiting Kivulini Women’s Rights group with a view to discussing funding. Let’s hope that it goes well.



Niamh Farren represented NEAR fm on this recent exchange. She recorded interviews with the group with a view to producing a one hour radio programme documenting the experiences of the group. The programme received funding from the BCI (Broadcasting Commission of Ireland) under the Sound and Vision Broadcasting Funding Scheme. For more information on the exchange see www.banulacht.ie.

Opening Learning Gateways to Higher Education

In this feature, we profile a new example of practice in the adult education sector. This month we're featuring an initiative on access and lifelong learning in Limerick, The Shannon Consortium Downtown Centre. Rhona Sherry, Centre Manager, spoke to Niamh Farren.

Q. Rhona, what is the Shannon Consortium?

A. The Shannon Consortium is a partnership between four higher education institutions in the Mid-West region – Limerick Institute of Technology, the University of Limerick, Mary Immaculate College and the Institute of Technology Tralee. The partners came together with the aim of strengthening regional capacity in the areas of Access, Teaching & Learning, Lifelong Learning, and Research through collaboration and building on the current strengths and initiatives in the partner institutions. With the assistance of funding from the Higher Education Authority's Strategic Innovation Fund, the Shannon Consortium has recently opened a Downtown Centre, based in Limerick City.

Q. What does this new Centre aim to do?

A. The Centre has two main roles; one is to offer an educational guidance service to adults over the age of 18 who want to get into, or return to, third level education. This service, which is confidential, free and independent, provides information about access for adult learners to third level education, as well as assisting clients to explore their learning options and to make informed decisions and choices. This service is delivered by my colleague Patricia-Anne Moore who has a background in career guidance, lifelong learning and coaching. The second main role of the Centre is to develop programmes, workshops and other activities which will encourage adults to engage with higher education learning. One of these programmes is a new Foundation Certificate in Business and Community Studies which is commencing in January 2008.

Q. That sounds interesting. How would you say that your service differs from for example, the AEGI (Adult Educational Guidance Initiative) service offered through the VECs in the area?

A. We hope to complement the services offered by other guidance providers in the City and region. Our service is focused exclusively on connecting people with third level. As we say on our advertising material, we are "opening learning gateways to higher education" and that third level access focus is what makes our service different.

Q. Is there a fee for the programme?

A. Yes, students will pay a fee of one hundred Euro.

Q. You mentioned that you also have a new Foundation Programme available – can you tell us about that?

A. Yes. The four consortium partners have worked together on developing a Foundation Certificate which is being accredited by FETAC to offer a Level 5 award. Subjects offered include Communications and Personal Effectiveness, Information Technology and Community and Enterprise Studies. Classes will be taught partly in the Downtown Centre itself and partly in the partner institutions. The programme also offers a choice of specialist electives – Humanities, Science and Mathematics – and depending on which elective is chosen, the student can gain direct entry to a range of undergraduate programmes within each partner institution. We expect to start advertising this programme in November, with a view to interviewing potential students and making offers of places before Christmas for a January start date.

Q. Is there any financial support, such as for childcare or transportation, for people who would like to take part?

A. At the moment we are talking to the relevant Department about having the programme listed under the Back to Education Initiative. Also, part of the reason for opening the Downtown Centre in the heart of Limerick city was to make the Centre accessible to as many people as possible in the area.

Q. Does the Centre plan to offer other programmes?

A. Part of our remit is to engage with community groups and the general public to find out what they want or need from the partner institutions with respect to initiatives which will encourage adult learners into higher education, and to reflect that back so that courses can be designed or modified accordingly. So at this stage we are establishing ourselves in the Centre, preparing to offer the learning space as a resource and as a place in which dialogue between communities and the higher education institutions can happen. We are meeting as many community groups as we can and are currently networking and developing ideas for possible future implementation.

Good luck with the project Rhona and we wish you and Patricia-Anne every success.

The Shannon Consortium Downtown Centre is located on the 2nd Floor of the Limerick Diocesan Pastoral Centre, Denmark Street, Limerick and can be contacted by phoning 061-233701 or emailing info@downtowncentre.ie.

ICAE Academy of Lifelong Learning Advocacy (IALLA)

Niamh O'Reilly, Membership Development Officer with AONTAS, recently attended the ICAE Academy of Lifelong Learning Advocacy (IALLA) in Uruguay. Through her participation, AONTAS hopes to strengthen the global perspective of the adult and community education sector in Ireland. The Academy provides a unique opportunity for practitioners in the sector to further develop their own skills and understanding of adult education. In this article, Niamh writes about her experiences in Uruguay.

The ICAE Academy of Lifelong Learning Advocacy (IALLA) is a training course for lifelong learning advocacy leaders which is organized by the International Council of Adult Education (ICAE). In its third year, a call for applications was made in April 2007 and from a response of ninety, thirty participants were chosen. The three week course focused on generating a broader vision on adult education within the framework of human rights and active citizenship and developing linkages with the most important globalization issues that affect the world. This global perspective was discussed and related to the national and local level contexts of the participants that hail from 26 countries– this is my experience of the course...

Montevideo, Uruguay in the southern part of Latin America is home to ICAE and this year's IALLA course, which was held from September 24 – October 12. Rather than describe the content of the course, I have chosen to highlight the elements that relate to the Irish perspective of adult education and how it fits in a global context, for this I will briefly discuss globalization, CONFINTEA VI and the global adult education movement.

Globalisation and Adult Education

The phenomenon of globalization and how it relates to our daily lives has been debated and is a contentious issue, however, how it relates to the context in which adult education exists is also an area for

discussion. The effect of globalization on Ireland is enormous, for example in terms of economic investment and the technological advances that have become the norm. To define "Globalisation", one could view it as a word to signify 'global interconnections and can take many forms, in different terms and cover different types of relations' (Doreen Massey 2000) or the 'interrelations and interdependency among many social actors that create multiple dynamics and social processes' (Mato 2000). Others could view it that we now have a new sense of space and time (Castells), complicating a vision of the future that at the same time incorporates the uncertainties of everyday life, or even a Global Empire – the expansion of a state's sovereignty. Others view it as an



A workshop during the ICAE Academy in October.

" Through my experience of IALLA I was struck by the similarity of issues that affect adult learners globally, from Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, Canada, India, Bolivia and the Philippines..."

Imperialist globalisation – a new phase in the expansion of western capitalism. Without going into the debate regarding the pros and cons of globalisation but just to reflect on its effect, it could be viewed that this new information age demands new knowledge, questions prior truths and modifies categories of learning. As adult educators and activists we could pose the questions, does it drive one form of learning and value it over another, is the main goal to keep up with the advances in technology and is adult education existing solely to serve this purpose? One could argue that the driving element of adult education is for 'social change', if this is the case how can it be integrated into adult education within a context of globalisation? The participants of IALLA discussed their international perspectives on the matter and it arose that it can be seen as a double-edged sword in that, mass communication and interaction has allowed greater access to information and encourages greater understanding of other cultures and realities: however the driving force of globalisation could be viewed as the capitalist agenda and that it promotes one set of values. This on the other hand has enabled a different kind of discourse, an alternative to the current system, global movements can gain great critical mass due to mass communication, for example, the Drop the Debt campaign, and events that offer a different discourse exists, including the World Social Forum.

Civil Society, Adult Education and Social Change

Civil society groups across the globe, including adult education groups, community groups, women's groups, learner groups, and other nongovernmental organisations can offer adult learners a method to effect change. These groups represent the voice of the learner, promote active citizenship and participation which leads to a fairer distribution of resources and enable individuals to influence the current governments. Together, they represent the opportunity for a strong global adult education movement that promotes the value, necessity and ethos of adult education. Through my experience of IALLA I was struck by the similarity of issues that affect adult learners globally, from Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, Canada, India, Bolivia and the Philippines. The common issues that emerge read as if taken from the AONTAS Demand Your Right to Learn Campaign. A common issue is the lack of funding; the many and complicated funding streams that exist for adult learning projects and the lack of continuity of resources; structures, the disparate nature of adult education and lack of overall co-ordination that has a knock-on effect in funding; delivery of service and professionalisation; supports, the lack of funds available for adult to participate in learning opportunities at a time and method conducive to effective learning and the main common issue that resonates globally – the lack of political will.

This final point has an effect on structures, supports and funding. If there is no political will to implement effective policies that allow all adults to par-

"Adult Education is a Lifelong Commitment..."

ticipate in lifelong and lifewide learning then few improvements for learners are possible. However, with these issues comes the opportunity to work together on the commonalities of the obstacles that face adult and community educators and learners at an international level – and to create an effective movement that puts adult education back on the political agenda.

Making a Lifelong Commitment to Learning

The most imminent forum for discussion that represents an opportunity for adult and community education groups to bring forward its ever-changing issues and challenges and to effect change at a global level is CONFITEA VI, UNESCO International Conference on Adult Education. This conference was first held in 1949 and has taken place every 12 years thereafter. The next conference will take place from the 25-29 May 2009 in Brazil, with regional meetings taking place next year in Europe.

Adult learning organisations throughout the world see the CONFITEA as an ideal platform to raise common issues that affect adult learners. AONTAS will be working with international organisations in preparation for the conference, and most importantly, will be seeking to engage with AONTAS members to raise the issues particular to adult learners in Ireland. The resounding message that radiated throughout the IALLA course was 'adult education is a lifetime commitment', and we need to convince our governments to make a commitment to ensuring education for all. Let's work in global partnership to achieve this vision.

Further reading:

www.forumsocialmundial.com.br

www.globalcampaignforeducation.org

www.icae.org.uy

www.unesco.org/education/uie/confitea/documents.html

Goodbye Bourdieu. Hello Life!

Diary of an Adult learner

In the third instalment of this series, Berni shares her experiences of adult learning, having returned to NUI Maynooth 2006 to study for a Doctorate in Education.

Well dear friends, things have changed dramatically since I last wrote in March. Then I was struggling to put a shape on my position paper to get it ready for May 3rd which was the last day of term. However AONTAS intervened and the volume of work spiralled to a frenetic level. We launched a new, ambitious strategic plan; we ran a very successful pre-election campaign; work started for the next ALF which involved a whirlwind round of meetings with a wide range of organisations who are interested in becoming involved in the Festival; we set up the mainstreaming phase of the QAF etc, etc, etc. Involvement with international work meant lots of travel and by May I felt like the hamster on the wheel. While I had actually managed to get a substantial amount done on the dreaded paper which had now taken on a life of its own, and a scary one at that, I didn't feel it was quite ready for public scrutiny by May 3rd. My term didn't end well.

My stress levels began to soar. I felt completely torn between my responsibilities to my organisation and the need to meet the requirements of the course. A little worm was eating away at my equilibrium and my inner voice was in a constant struggle to maintain it. My life pattern has been one of always being able to cope with the many challenges that life throws up, and not being able to deal with this one in the way I wanted bewildered me. I was careful not to talk about it too much lest I bored all my friends to death or was dismissed as a whinger who just couldn't get her act together. Then the awful truth finally dawned on me. I realised finally that in order to run a national organisation and do a Doctorate at the same time I really needed a clone... and a large block of



AONTAS Director Berni Brady

dedicated time. Well neither option was available to me. I am not disappointed by my decision not to return to the course in September. In fact I'm quite relieved as I feel an enormous weight has been lifted from my shoulders and I am beginning to feel my confidence in my abilities and experience flowing back. I was offered the option of transferring to a PhD programme and I gave that some serious thought but you know what, life's just too short.

But all is not lost dear readers. In the process of trying to do the undoable I have learned a number of important things about myself and a number of serious questions have arisen for me about the nature of learning itself, what gets identified and valued as learning and how learning gets interwoven with life. I've had a look back at my reasons for applying for the course in the first place. I know that I needed a space where bigger picture issues could get

discussed and which would feed my thinking about the needs of the sector. I was influenced by the memory of the rich discussions we had in Maynooth when the White Paper was getting written, how we were able to brainstorm and just think out loud, and then it turned into national policy. Whohoo! All of my career I have been a strategist, an innovator, a person who relishes ideas and who is not afraid to take a risk. By the end of May 2007 I had begun to question my ability to think, to write, even the quality and value of my experience as more and more I realised I was never going to fit into what is required by the academy. The tyranny of the academy, in my view, negates all kinds of learning and even when institutions try to be innovative with new courses like this one, essentially if it doesn't fit in a particular box it's not going to get the 'q' mark. I found out that I need to learn in a different kind of way.

An interesting thing happened to me on this particular learning journey. After I started to write the diary I would go to meetings or social gatherings and inevitably someone would move up to me almost secretively and whisper, 'You've written what I'm feeling' or 'Do you really believe anyone's ever actually read that stuff' or 'At the end its all about the thesis' or 'I didn't realise I was so thick, ill read, unable to assert myself'... I could go on. And I thought why isn't anybody talking about this publicly. Why are people afraid to question the exclusivity of the academy and its power to decide what gets validated as acceptable learning. My inner voice emerges from its quiet space.....' So why don't you go and research that one Berni Brady.' Retirement project?



Why Not Celebrate Learning By....

- *Organising a coffee morning or open day for adult learners*
- *Organising taster workshops of different adult education initiatives in your area*
- *Invite a local elected representative to visit your group during Adult Learners' Festival*
- *Organising a Learning Bus to bring people to different adult education venues in your area*
- *Set up an information stand in your local shopping centre*
- *Organise a public debate on adult learning or a related theme*
- *Display festival posters in your premises and in your community*

AONTAS Local Links are promoting the festival all around the country. If you want to find out who is the Local Link in your area, visit www.adultlearnersfestival.com or ring the AONTAS office. AONTAS can also help you promote your event, and can provide you with posters and other publicity materials. Contact us on 01 406 8220.

