



National Adult Learning Organisation
2nd Floor, 83 -87 Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6.
Tel: 01 4068220/1 Fax: 01 4068227
E-mail: mail@aontas.com www.aontas.com

Ms Andrina Wafer
Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)
East Point Plaza
East Point Business Park,
Dublin 3

Wednesday 6th April 2011

Re: The AONTAS Community Education Network Response to the FETAC Common Award System

Dear Andrina

I recently attended the briefing session on the common award system in the Gresham. AONTAS has received a large number of queries with regard to the new system and we would welcome the opportunity to work with FETAC, and the Further Education Section of DES, in supporting community education groups in the process. AONTAS can offer its expertise in the area of community education together with access to community education groups, via our community education network, as a means to ensure effective transition to the New Common Award System.

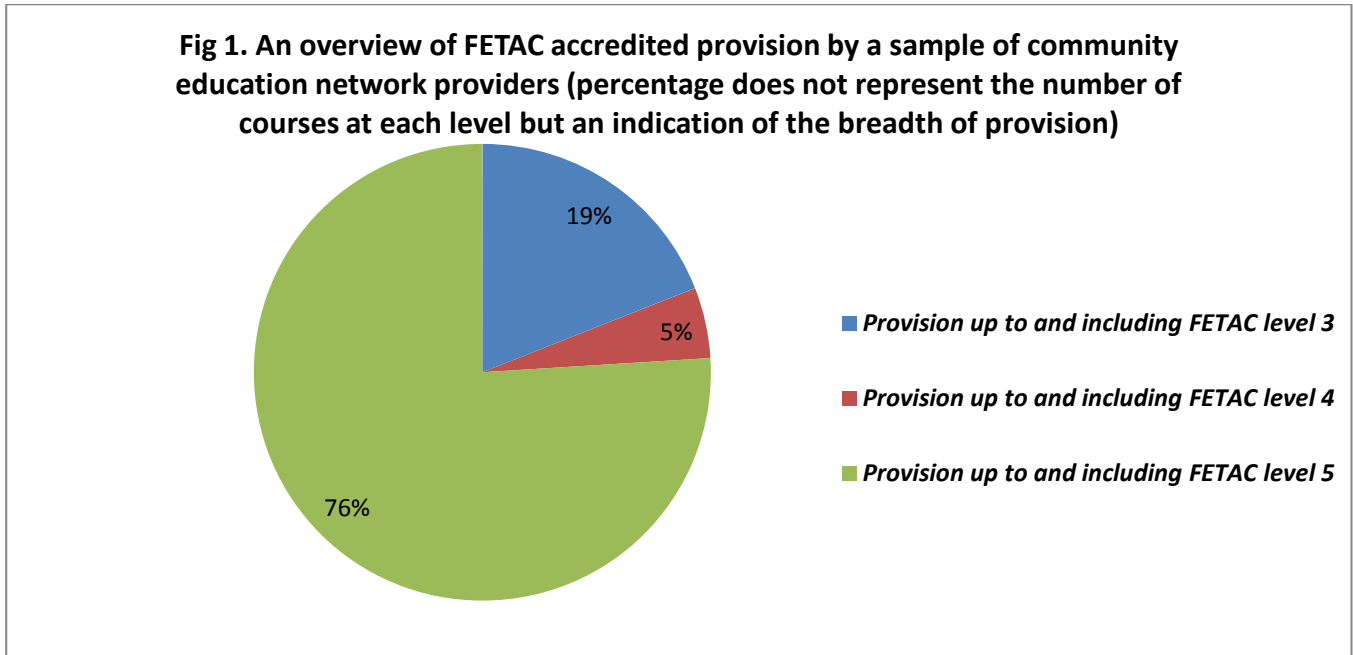
This letter outlines the queries posed to FETAC by the AONTAS Community Education Network with the aim of highlighting the challenges, and proposed solutions, of the new FETAC Common Award System in order to inform future development of this work. This letter outlines the following areas:

- The AONTAS Community Education Network
- FETAC Common Award System
- Challenges posed by the Common Award System process
- Impact of the Common Award System process on community education provision
- Summary

1. Community Education Network

The AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) comprises over 130 community education organisations which work collectively to gain recognition for community education, raise its profile and lobby to ensure it is adequately resourced. It was established in 2007 and has three national meetings per year. It is unique in that it is the only national network that is dedicated to independent voluntary community education groups who are committed to social change.

A significant proportion of CEN members are quality assured FETAC providers. As a snapshot of the CEN, a small piece of research¹ was carried out and the following information was gleaned: of the 43 respondents 86% provided FETAC courses of which the breakdown of provision is expressed in fig. 1. The chart represents the breadth of provision, not a list of the number of courses provided at each level, but rather the range of FETAC provision, e.g. up to and including level 3 is 19%.



2. FETAC Common Award System

The CEN understands that the Common Award System for the further education sector is an important development in creating quality accredited learning opportunities. In order to assure ease of transition to the new system the CEN would like to put forward a number of challenges that should be addressed. These issues can be grouped by a) challenges posed by the common award system process and b) the impact of the process on community education provision.

Approximately 22% of FETAC providers are from the community and voluntary sector, which is a significant proportion compared to VEC (35%), FAS (25%) and private providers (18%). This sector has specific benefits and challenges, as it is highly responsive to local learning needs through being learner and community led. It lacks a coherent support structure, secure and long-term funding and administrative supports and it is within this context that the following challenges are presented in order to inform future work relating to implementing the Common Award System.

3. Challenges posed by the common award system process

The main issues faced by community education groups include the following:

- High demand on time
- Cost
- Difficulty implementing the change

¹ [AONTAS \(2008\) Summary report on small scale research into the funding streams accessed by the community education network.](#)

High demand on time

The validation process is very time-consuming; it requires a significant amount of work in order to complete the process, even for practitioners highly experienced in the FETAC process. It has been proposed that the administrative demands (including time) increases yearly which impacts on the time taken from working with learners. This also impacts on cost, as there has been no additional funding to support additional administrative work.

Cost

The impact of the financial costs of FETAC in the current economic climate was highlighted by a number of community education organisations. The increasing costs are located in the following area:

- The cost of the external authenticator for assessment must be borne by the organisation; it is not included in funding from DES.
- Time taken to engage in the validation process and validation seminars.

The use of a consortium approach to create the programme has been effective but it is dependent on the local structures and capacity of groups to identify, organise and create a consortium for developing a programme. However, as each organisation must validate individually there is still a large element of time and cost involved.

Proposed solutions:

- Time: FETAC should be mindful of the lack of administrative support, and funding, of community education organisations which challenges their capacity to engage in the process.
- Cost: An arrangement should be made by FETAC and the Department of Education and Skills to cover the cost of the external authenticators for assessment for community education providers.
- In the consortium approach each organisation must validate individually there is still a large element of time and cost involved.

Difficulty implementing the change

Groups have noted that the process for validating a new programme at FETAC level 3 is difficult. Directions are given but they are unclear and difficult to follow. Furthermore groups have found that the information provided by FETAC has been inadequate, unclear and unwieldy.

Proposed solution:

- Further in-service support is needed.
- The Further Education Support Service website is very useful. It should be promoted by FETAC at consultations. <http://www.fess.ie/>

4. Impact of the Common Award System process on community education provision

The main issues articulated by community education groups include the following:

- Change in awards
- Time allocated to fulfilling award requirements
- Rigidity of provision
- Cost for learners

Change in awards

The Common Award System has created changes in the kinds of awards which can be provided:

1. The locally devised modules have not been included in the awards directory of FETAC (and therefore cannot be included in the level 3).
2. Some popular modules have not been included e.g. Home Study Skills is not on the award list.
3. Confusion regarding the position of Highscope modules, are they part of the new common award system?
4. There is a shift away from the provision of minor awards. This is problematic as community education focuses on creating effective learning environments whereby learners can build up accredited courses at a pace they are happy with. This generally results in a number of minor awards being undertaken over time. Minor awards are essential for attracting, retaining and progressing, particularly, second chance learners.

Proposed solution

- FETAC should reconsider the inclusion of locally devised modules in the awards directory.
- FETAC should recognise the value of minor awards in building a learner’s capacity to gain a complete major award.
- Clarify the position of HighScope modules.
- FETAC to compile a list of New Common Awards and post onto the website.

Time allocated to fulfilling award requirements

Community education groups have expressed concern regarding the proposed time requirement to achieve an award. It is understood that a FETAC level 3 award requires 30 hours contact time and 70 hours non-contact time per module. The implications of this are:

1. If the learner engages in learning with 45 hours contact they can obtain FETAC level 4, so if they complete 30 hours (FETAC level 3) plus an additional 15 they will only get level 4 – not both level 3 and 4.
2. It appears that this approach was adopted from Youthreach
3. It runs contrary to the ‘learning outcomes’ approach as it focuses on inputs, in this case time, rather than outcomes. If a learner can do the course in 30 hours, why are 45 hours required?

Proposed solution

In order to respond to learners, the proposed timescale for delivery should be flexible. A ‘one size fits all’ approach is not appropriate for adult learners. Furthermore, providers must be able to respond to the needs of the learners, otherwise it negates the entire ethos of community education. Flexibility can be possible when an effective QA process is in effect.

Rigidity of provision

The added value of community education organisations is their ability to create and adapt new programmes to the needs of learners and the community. As programmes must be validated before they can be delivered there is a delay. There needs to be some flexibility for pilot programmes which are accredited.

Proposed solution

- FETAC should consider allowing centres to pilot stand alone minor awards and provide validation retrospectively. This flexibility is essential and should be maintained.

Cost for learners

The revised charging for certificates has put further financial demands on community organizations. The new rates are -

- Component certificate - €20.00
- Full Award Certificate (8 modules) - €50.00

Fees are not payable by those who are in receipt of an unemployed payment or have a medical card. However, many community education learners are women who are not on the live register and therefore do not qualify for exemption. For many adults returning to education it is important for them to receive a certificate particularly for the first couple of modules which they complete. They may be only entering one module at a time for assessment, this means a further €20.00 every time they want to undertake a module – potentially FETAC could get €190.00 for a student – 7 components and a full award.

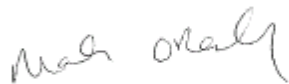
Proposed solution

- FETAC to reconsider the cost for certificates for low income learners.

5. Summary

The AONTAS community education network (CEN) has articulated a number of challenges posed by the new Common Award system, in terms of the process and the implications. Whilst welcoming the development of the FETAC system, it cautions against drives to standardize the process. The strength of FETAC lies in its flexibility, inclusiveness and proactive consultation with stakeholders. It is hoped that FETAC will maintain an accreditation system that allows flexibility of provision whilst being cognisant of the challenges facing community education. The CEN welcomes FETAC's response to the proposals within this letter and/or clarification on the issues raised.

Yours sincerely



Niamh O'Reilly on behalf of the Community Education Network