

Public Consultation — Invitation for Submissions

HEA Policy Study on Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) has undertaken a policy study on open and distance learning (ODL). ODL is one approach to the introduction of more flexible learning opportunities for students who are in employment or who are unable to commit to regular attendance at higher-education institutions. As such it has an important contribution to make to national objectives in up-skilling and higher education participation.

The HEA has established an expert group to bring forward recommendations to the Authority on the future role and potential of ODL in Irish higher education. The full terms of reference for this policy study are available at www.heai.ie/odl or by contacting Valerie Hayes at (01) 2317 166.

As part of the exercise, the HEA is engaging in a public consultation process. Submissions to the expert group are invited from members of the public and other interested stakeholders on the opportunities for the further development of ODL in the Irish higher-education sector. Submissions should be made following the template provided at www.heai.ie/odl.

Please forward your views to:

Ms Valerie Hayes,
Open and Distance Learning Study,
Higher Education Authority,
Brooklawn House,
Crampton Avenue,
Shelbourne Road,
Dublin 4.

or e-mail odl@heai.ie.

The closing date for receipt of submissions is 25th April 2008.

**HEA Policy Study on Open and Distance Learning (ODL)
Submission Template**

In order to effectively collect a range of information, the HEA has composed several questions which address specific areas of concern/debate in respect of open and distance learning. These questions are provided as a guideline only. Should you have additional information or wish to make a freeform submission please feel free to do so.

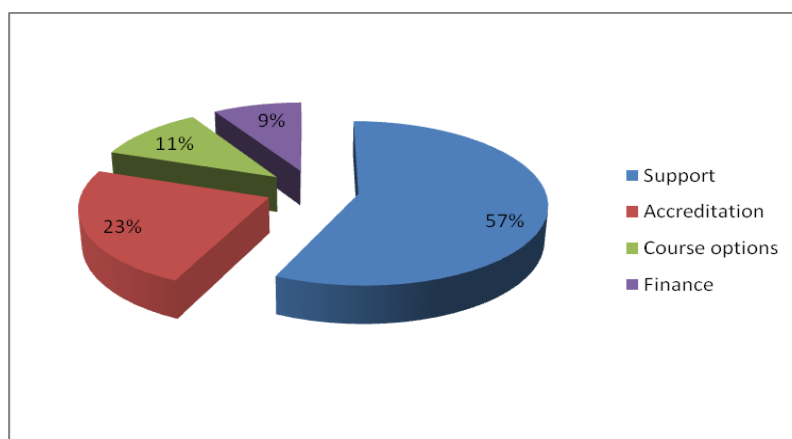
1. Open and distance learning is often seen as a flexible learning opportunity for those in employment and/or those unable to commit to regular attendance at higher education institutions. As part of this call for submissions we would like to develop a vision for Open and Distance Learning and how this vision could be implemented in Ireland. What do you think Open and Distance learning in Ireland should consist of?

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation. Our mission is to ensure that every adult in Ireland has access to appropriate and affordable learning opportunities throughout their lives, thus enabling them to contribute to and participate in the economic, social, civic and cultural development of Irish Society. AONTAS is conscious of the low levels of participation by adult learners in higher education by comparison with the other OECD countries. Statistics quoted in the recent National Report on Lifelong Learning prepared by a research team in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra show that less than 7% of learners in higher education are adults compared with 38% in Sweden. Adult learners are almost always workers and parents so pursuing further and higher education must fit with their work commitments and life style thus making open and distance learning an attractive option for them.

In the White Paper, Learning for Life published in 2000 one short page (p144) was devoted to distance education. Its recommendation was that the National Adult Learning Council and the Higher education Authority would be asked to work closely on this important area. *'A particular priority will be to explore mechanisms to provide financial support for initial course development work targeted at strategic areas, maximising the use of ICT and broadcasting in delivery'* Since the National Adult learning Council was effectively suspended in 2003 little progress has been made to date in this important area. AONTAS therefore welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultation process on behalf of adult learners.

AONTAS INFORMATION REFERRAL SERVICE

AONTAS Currently provides an information referral service for potential adult learners and in 2007 almost half of those who contacted the service were seeking information in relation to Distance Education. The chart below indicates a breakdown on what these queries were in relation to;



Working from feedback from adult learners AONTAS firmly believes that Open and Distant learning in Ireland should demonstrate a number of key features:-

- Flexibility
- Adequate financial supports
- Excellent tutor support
- Access to information and library systems
- Technical support
- Good quality information on choices and accreditation
- Educational and career guidance support
- Networking and communication systems for students
- Quality Assured courses

2. Ireland's future social and economic progress is dependent on the ability to continue to increase the skills of the population. Can you identify how in your opinion the implementation of an Open and Distance Learning strategy could assist in this goal?

Up-skilling & Training for the Workforce

The Human Capital Programme of the NDP 2007-13 allocates €25.8 billion for the expansion and up-skilling of the workforce. By 2020 500,000 adults already in the workforce will need to be up-skilled by at least one NFQ level¹. An additional 70,000 will need to up skill from levels 1-2 to level 3 (FETAC /Junior Certificate); 260,000 will need to up skill to level 4/5 (Leaving Certificate/FETAC); 170,000 should up-skill to levels 6-10 (including 140,000 up-skilling to levels 6/7)

According to the National Office for Equity of access to Higher education in its draft plan for 2008-2010. *'Our performance to date in reaching out to adults has been undermined by the limited availability of part-time and flexible learning opportunities at NFQ levels 6 to 8. In the 2006-07 academic year less than 7% of entrants to undergraduate programmes were part-time students. The effectiveness of part-time courses in reaching out to mature students is evidenced by the fact that 86% of those part-time undergraduate entrants were aged 23 and over and 60% were over 30. The current low level of part-time study opportunities limits the accessibility of higher education for working adults and adults with caring responsibilities. It also limits the study options available to traditional school leavers who may need to combine work and part-time study'*. Given the current levels of employment in Ireland the development of open and distance learning opportunities could serve as a way of expanding opportunities for adults in the workforce and at the same time work towards meeting the needs of the labour market as identified by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs.

While economic concerns are obviously a key feature of lifelong learning AONTAS believes that social, civil and cultural development is crucial to the development and sustainability of civil society. Lifelong learning is the key. Access to training in the use of information technology and as a consequence to flexible learning methods also needs to be developed for people who are marginalised by not being part of the workforce, in particular people who are working in the home, those with disabilities and older people.

¹ Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007) *Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy*

3. Taking into account the questions set out above, please elaborate on any issues you consider might act as barriers to the effective implementation of Open and Distance Learning in Ireland.

Distance learning is an excellent method of reaching the adult learner. It also has great potential to reach those who are living in more rural areas. Because of the competing priorities of work, home, and school, adult learners desire a high degree of flexibility. The structure of distance learning gives adults the greatest possible control over the time, place and pace of education. However, it is not without problems.

Barriers encountered by learners pursuing courses through open and distance learning opportunities fall into several distinct categories:-

Costs.

Finance has been identified as the major barrier to access for adult learners. Currently the distance education student receives no funding and is not entitled to apply for any of the educational scholarships. Students can only claim back 20% of the previous year's tax. Of major concern is the definition of appropriate courses identified within the recent Student Support Bill as being only fulltime courses. If a culture of lifelong learning is to be truly embedded within our education system then the issue of supports for flexible learning opportunities must be included in the development of financial supports. Flexible ways of using the National Training Fund should be explored as part of this research.

Feedback and tutor contact,

A major area of concern for the distance education student is the perceived lack of feedback or contact with the tutor. Because there is no daily or weekly face to face contact with tutors through lectures etc, students may find it difficult to keep motivated and to evaluate their own progress. It is important that systems are in places which provide prompt and constructive feedback to the student as well as a space or forum for interaction.

Access to information technology

Advances in telecommunications technology has opened up the possibility of personal and group interaction in distance education. However in Ireland as of last November the number of people who have broadband connection in their homes was 31% which means that for 69% of the households in Ireland there is no equality in access. This is of particular concern to those students who live in more rural areas. They may not have access to reliable telecommunications, computers, and postal mail. The analysis of contacts with the AONTAS information referral service suggests that geographical isolation has been identified as one of the major problems for distance students.

Another problem encountered by students is the lack of knowledge and experience of using information technology (particularly among older students). Many adults have not had the opportunity to learn to use computers and the Internet. Using electronic media in distance learning can inadvertently exclude students who lack computer or writing skills. These skills are required if computer technology is used. Students will typically be offered volumes of electronic-based information. Using this information will be a problem for some non-technical students. They need to be supported to manage, not only their study time, but the materials presented as well.

Student supports and services,

Learners who opt for open and distance education modes of learning often do not anticipate the challenges presented by the isolation which can be a feature of the process. It is therefore imperative that supports and services are put in place to ensure that the learner completes his/her learning journey successfully. Feedback from adults contacting the Information Referral Service suggests that key supports include contact with tutors who themselves understand the difference between traditional and distance learning modes and who are trained to meet the needs of the learners they serve. Such training should include academic planning and scheduling and technical assistance. Students need tutors and academic planners to help them complete courses on time and to act as a support system when stress and isolation becomes a problem.

In addition to the practical problems of contact with academic and administrative staff, distance education students often encounter problems in accessing study materials and library facilities. Study materials must take into account the significant proportion of students who enrol with little or no experience of distance study. These students are at risk of dropping out unless they develop study survival skills as

rapidly as possible.

Keeping connected and motivated

Distance education students suffer from the disadvantage of being unable to interact with other students and are often denied the experience of belonging to an academic community. Some of the people contacting AONTAS had said that the lack of this interaction can often lead to feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, and a lack of confidence in their own abilities. Networking with other students is essential and ways need to be explored to develop these networks. Currently institutions providing distance learning options offer tutorial, residential weekend and other spaces. Online student forums and peer mentoring systems should be developed to enable students to interact with one another. Also open and distance learning students should have access guidance and counselling support as part and parcel of their course of study

Quality Assurance and accreditation

Of key concern to students pursuing open and distance learning options is that their course of study is quality assured and that accreditation is awarded by a reputable and recognised awarding body. Currently there is a plethora of organisations advertising on the internet courses of study which may seem attractive to prospective students. The Higher Education Authority in collaboration with the National Qualifications Authority should develop a system whereby learners have access to good information on reputable providers. AONTAS in its Information Booklet has included a section on Distance Education which includes a list of such providers. Providers offering courses should be obliged to quality assure their courses so that they comply with national and international standards.

4. What specific support service provision or requirement met would offer greatest assistance to those who may wish engage in Open and Distance Learning in Ireland? In particular what would assist prospective learners to overcome any barriers which you may have suggested in answer to question 3 above?

- Following on from the barriers outline above the main areas of assistance are as follows:-
- Development of a vision for lifelong learning which breaks free from traditional thinking and modes of learning in academic institutions especially within the university sector
- Financial supports including inclusion in supports outlined within the Student Support Bill. Flexible use of the National Training Fund.
- Definition of appropriate courses defined in the Student Support Bill to include open and distance learning courses
- Fees to include technical supports such as broadband access and supply of a laptop for the duration of the course
- Training in the use of Information and Communications technology
- Good information and guidance especially at the point of entry to courses but also at intervals as courses of study progress
- Access to learning materials, library and web-based information facilities
- Systematic access to tutors who are trained to support the needs of distance education students and who are familiar with the philosophies and methodologies of adult learning
- Planning and developing course materials and assessments to take account of the work/life responsibilities of adult students
- Development of systematic networks of support for students including online for a and peer mentoring
- More courses offered at post-graduate level
- Systems for ensuring quality assurance and recognised accreditation

5. Do you have any experience of Open and Distance Learning processes as they operate outside Ireland? Are there any examples of international best practice that you would support?

AONTAS has listed in its Information Booklet the following providers as a starting point for adult learners. The Distance Education section of this booklet provides information on entry requirements, assessment processes, exemptions for previous qualifications gained and general learner support tips.

The following are a list of names of providers of Distance Education that AONTAS has researched and recommends to learners on an ongoing basis;

1. The Library Council
2. NALA
3. FAS Net College
4. The National College of Ireland
5. Open University
6. Oscail
7. University College Dublin
8. Atlantic University Alliance
9. Hibernia College
10. Kilroys College

If you would like further information on the courses on offer or contact details for the above colleges please refer to the AONTAS Information Booklet which can be downloaded in pdf format or if you wish to get hold of a hardcopy please contact Jennifer Gunning – AONTAS Information Officer jgunning@aontas.com

6. Please provide any other comments or relevant information which may assist.

As part of the AONTAS Strategic plan it was identified that we would actively support our members to promote the value of adult and community education, profile their work and engage with local media and key agencies. The collection of case studies was seen as an integral part of this work and will complement our policy and promotional work. As a result of this work being undertaken by the Information Officer AONTAS is in a position to supply case-studies of learner's experiences in distance learning and of models of best practice in term of the provision of distance education.

If you would like to be contacted as part of the consultation process please provide your contact details below. (Optional)

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