

## **Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education & Science**

**Chair: Deputy Paul Gogarty, T.D. (Green Party)**

**10a.m., 28<sup>th</sup> February 2008**

### **Meeting to Discuss the Fund to Alleviate Part-time Fees for those in the Workforce Who Do Not Already Have a Third level Qualification<sup>1</sup>**

The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science was in public session on Thursday, 28<sup>th</sup> February to discuss the commitment made by Government to provide a fund (estimated at €10 million) to alleviate part-time fees for those in the workforce who do not already have a third level qualification.

#### **A Policy Priority for AONTAS**

The importance of removing part-time fees for all higher education courses was originally outlined in the Taskforce report on lifelong learning where fees were identified as a barrier to participation. The recent AONTAS policy paper on part-time fees (June 2007) sets out the organisation's position on this issue, advocating equality of access for part-time students and parity of esteem with their full time counterparts through the removal of fees. The AONTAS policy position paper on part-time fees also calls for additional supports for part-time students, including maintenance grants, increased childcare provision and access to adult guidance services. To view AONTAS' policy position paper on part-time fees in full [click here](#).

The AONTAS position paper on part-time fees was circulated to the members of the Joint Committee on Education and Science in advance of the meeting held on the 28<sup>th</sup> February. A presentation was made by the National Youth Council of Ireland on this occasion also.

#### **Implementing the Commitment**

The commitment outlined in *Towards 2016* and reiterated by An Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, T.D. last July (2007) at the Congress Biennial Conference was welcomed by AONTAS Director Berni Brady at the time. However, this commitment has yet to be implemented and at the meeting on the 28<sup>th</sup> February the Chairperson of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education & Science, Paul Gogarty, T.D. expressed doubt that the commitment could be implemented in time for the 2008/9 academic year.

AONTAS views the commitment in *Towards 2016* as a step in the right direction toward the eventual removal of fees for all adult learners wishing to engage in part-time third level courses. Implementing the commitment is vital if the recommendation of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs is to be

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<sup>1</sup> Toward 2016 Ten Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement 2006-15, Pp.88, Section 7.9 Workplace Initiatives

achieved. Ireland will require 500,000 adults already in the workforce to be up-skilled by at least one NFQ level by 2020<sup>2</sup>.

Members of the committee were largely in favour of the removal of part-time fees, although a desire to avoid supporting 'eternal students' was expressed by some members present. Opposition members called into question the Government's commitment to remove fees. The suggestion was made that an initiative such as this must involve employers (both in terms of their support and making financial contributions) and other departments, not just the Department of Education, but the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment as well. The need to support some part-time students with grants, as well as free fees was also discussed and agreed to be vital.

While the commitment to alleviate fees for part-time courses in third level institutions for those in the workforce who do not already have a third level qualification has been made in the social partnership agreement and the current programme for Government, a timeframe for implementation has not been agreed and the commitment lacks any sense of urgency.

### **What Next?**

Chairperson Paul Gogarty recommended that organisations advocating for the removal of part-time fees, such as AONTAS, should engage in research locating their lobbying in a sound economic argument, highlighting the long term benefits to the economy of removing fees, which would far outweigh the initial expense. AONTAS would argue that the Irish Government has an equal obligation to spearhead research on this issue since the Irish economy undoubtedly stands to benefit from the up-skilling which the removal of fees would certainly facilitate. However, AONTAS will examine the recommendation from the Joint Committee on Education and will consult with relevant organisations advocating for this change.

For updates on the commitment to alleviate part-time fees for those in the workforce keep checking this website or contact: Adele McKenna, Policy & Research Officer e-mail: [amckenna@aontas.com](mailto:amckenna@aontas.com)

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<sup>2</sup> Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007) *Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy*