

**Address By**

**Ciarán Cannon T.D.,  
Minister for Training and Skills**

**At the  
VITA Conference**

**All Hallows College, Dublin**

**9th October 2013**

Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to join you here at All Hallows College for today's conference, marking the end of the VITA projects. I would like to thank Liz Waters for her warm welcome. My thanks also to Eleonora Peruffo from AONTAS for her kind invitation to join you today.

Indeed, I extend my own warm welcome to all of the European partners who have come to Dublin especially for this event and of course to those attending from the adult and community education sector here in Ireland - céad míle fáilte daoibh go léir.

VITA (Validation of service related learning outcomes with an IT based assessment and evidencing system) is a European Grundtvig project funded by the European Commission under the Lifelong Learning Programme. Lifelong learning encompasses all forms of formal and informal learning from pre-school to post-retirement, and Grundtvig in particular has, since 2000, been aimed at providing adults with ways to improve their knowledge and skills, facilitate their personal development and boost their employment prospects.

At the end of this year the Lifelong Learning Programme which includes Grundtvig, will come to a close to be replaced by Erasmus+ from 2014 to 2020. Erasmus+ will support activities in education, training, youth and sport in all sectors of lifelong learning and I am delighted that as part of the Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union agreement was reached on this new programme and paves the way for the Erasmus+ programme to be formally adopted during Autumn 2013.

All Hallows College has a great history of learning from its early role in training priests, many of whom served abroad all over the world, to its current position as a part of Dublin City University. Courses provided to students over the generations focus on serving, supporting and developing communities.

The focus of the conference today, organised by AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation in Ireland fits in very well with the ethos of this great institution. AONTAS is the principal organisation in this country representing learners of all ages in the area of personal and community development. For over forty years AONTAS has played an important role in the promotion and development of the adult and community education sector. The organisation has also engaged in many European projects and represent learners on various groups working on behalf of the adult and community education sector abroad. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Berni and the staff of AONTAS for their excellent work over the last

four decades. I look forward to working together with you in the new era that will be developed under SOLAS, the Further Education and Training authority, which will be established shortly.

Today's conference is the culmination of two year's work which has been exploring the validation of social, personal and organisational competences across a range of education sectors in 10 European countries. These soft skills, as they are often referred to, can be difficult to measure but are a very important aspect of today's global labour market place. Such skills may not be learned in a formal setting but are often acquired in informal settings, through day to day interactions - at school, at home, in the workplace or through active citizenship in your local community. These skills have become a competitive factor in the labour market and through this project, VITA's aim is to build a standardised method of measuring these softer skills.

This conference is also quite timely as it comes the day after the launch of the PIAAC Report, which was a survey of adult skills in 24 countries. The report shows that we need to keep working on improving our people's skills particularly those skills which are required on a daily basis.

The Project in Ireland was based in the Southhill Mens Shed group. Ten men of various ages took part in a skills challenge where they undertook activities such as organising a networking event and a quiz. The benefit to the participants was about teamworking and proving to yourselves that you can achieve various goals that you may never have considered before. Congratulations to all who have taken part in this project. I hope you all enjoyed working together and benefitted from the experience. I look forward to meeting you shortly during the presentation of certificates. Well done also to all of you who helped to organise and assist with the setting up of the Men's Sheds.

The Men's Sheds movement is quite a recent concept but one that has expanded greatly since its inception in Australia in the Mid Nineties. It is now a worldwide movement including many Men's Sheds right throughout the island of Ireland. A Men's Shed is a place where men, young and old, can share skills and knowledge with others, learn new skills and develop your old skills. It is beneficial both for yourselves and your communities.

In recent economic times, a strong emphasis has been placed on upskilling and retraining for the labour market which has been necessary with the current high levels of unemployment. We are now part of a global labour market which is rapidly evolving. There is a constant need to update our skills and to develop new skills including our social, personal and organisational skills. While this may seem to lessen the focus

on the community education sector, the upskilling of those with low basic skills is of immense value with a dual benefit to both our economy and also to our society. Increased education brings increased social awareness, better health and active citizenship which are key to addressing social inclusion in Ireland.

Our citizens too want to learn, to acquire new skills and further their knowledge whether that motivation is derived from personal or economic circumstances. Learning opens new horizons to us all, gives us confidence and improves our self-esteem. Now, more than ever, we know that learning takes place anywhere and everywhere, not just in the classroom or lecture hall. Learning achieved in an informal setting like one's local community can be just as valuable as learning achieved in the classroom. Community Education is one means of providing opportunities for those learners who need help with improving personal development and building self-confidence. These are fundamental strengths for learners to possess to engage successfully in learning and also participate in their local community. It will also better equip them to avail of employment opportunities.

I would like, in particular, to commend the participants from Southhill Men's Shed group for taking part in this project and for their hard work and dedication to it. I am delighted to be here to present you with your VITA level 5 Certificates. I congratulate you on your achievements and wish you well in future learning endeavours.

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, I congratulate you all for your participation on this transnational project. I am sure that you will find today's concluding conference to be both enjoyable and productive and I wish you well in your deliberations.

Thank you