



***The Lifelong Learning Needs of Older People in  
Ireland***

**A Discussion Paper**

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*'Education is the best provision for old age'<sup>1</sup>*  
Aristotle (384 BC - 322 BC)

### **Introduction**

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation. It is a non-Government membership organisation established in 1969. The mission of AONTAS is to ensure that every adult in Ireland has access to appropriate and affordable learning opportunities throughout their lives, thus enabling them to participate in the economic, social, civic and cultural development of Irish society.

In January 2007 the Department of Education and Science approached AONTAS about conducting preliminary research into the lifelong learning needs of older people in Ireland. The findings of the research will be submitted to inform the Department's plans to address the educational needs of older people. In drafting this discussion paper, AONTAS has engaged in comprehensive consultation with various organisations and individuals representing the interests of older people in Ireland, as well as older people directly involved in adult and community education.

This paper locates the discussion on the lifelong learning needs of older people within the context of existing service provision. It identifies the specific learning requirements of older people, the supports needed to ensure older people's involvement in adult and community education and the current gaps in service provision. Finally the paper offers some recommendations to address the future lifelong learning needs of older people.

### **Context**

In 2005 Ireland's older population (age 65 plus) stood at 11.2%. In 2030 this will have increased by over 7% to 18.5% of the overall population. By 2050 this figure will have grown further to 26.3%<sup>2</sup>. People in Ireland are living longer and healthier lives. The majority are benefitting from the increased quality of life brought about by the Celtic Tiger. However, some older people remain marginalised and economically disadvantaged. Strategies to support this section of the community require greater emphasis and targeted funding. The increases in Ireland's older population, while significant, will be smaller and will occur less rapidly than the increases predicted for other OECD countries. Therefore Ireland is embarking on a unique period in its history as the opportunity to learn from the experiences of other countries with

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<sup>1</sup> Diogenes Aeries, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*

<sup>2</sup> *OECD Health Working Paper No. 26 (2007)*

ageing populations presents itself. In the coming decades, Ireland can identify the challenges, the benefits and the successful responses of policy and provision to the needs of older people as they are demonstrated elsewhere in Europe and internationally.

The Irish Longitudinal Study of Ageing (TILDA) which was launched in 2006 will gather data on 10,000 Irish people aged 50 plus over a 10 year period. This ambitious study will be vital in addressing the current dearth of information on this important cohort of Irish society. The study covers social, economic and health issues affecting older people and will inform future policy. The findings of this study and others should help to dispel the pervasive myth that older people are a homogenous group, with indistinguishable attitudes shaped by identical life experiences.

In drafting this discussion paper, AONTAS acknowledges the diversity and heterogeneity of older people in Ireland. AONTAS accepts the varied socio-economic backgrounds of older people and their differing educational needs. Despite these differences however, common issues and challenges facing older people can be identified.

Research has highlighted a positive relationship between education and the economic, social physical and mental well being of individuals. "Education enables older people to face rapid changes in society and in their lives as well as help them continue to participate and be included in their communities. It also helps combat ageism and negative stereotyping"<sup>3</sup>. The White Paper on Adult Education: *Learning for Life* (2000) highlights "the critical importance of access to learning as a key tool to coping with change, and the importance of physical, social and mental activity to general well-being"<sup>4</sup>.

In addition to this, involvement in formal, informal and non-formal learning can empower older people by building their self-esteem, particularly if the learning provides opportunities from the outset for consultation and participation in shaping their educational life.

However negative attitudes toward ageing in society, difficulties in reaching marginalised and socially disadvantaged older people and a shortage of specifically tailored programmes for this age group are cause for concern.

The next section of the paper outlines the research methodologies adopted during this piece of work. Subsequently, the benefits and the challenges for older people's involvement in adult and community education, as identified during the consultation held by AONTAS, are discussed in detail.

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<sup>3</sup> Mercken, C. (2004) *Education in an Ageing Society* Pp.9

<sup>4</sup> *Learning for Life* (2000) Pp. 167

## **Methodology**

Research commissioned by the Department of Education and Science into the lifelong learning needs of older people was conducted internally by AONTAS. An initial mapping exercise identified the statutory and voluntary organisations representing the interests of older people in Ireland. The policy/research support worker with AONTAS drew up a list of contacts within these organisations and arranged meetings with a representative sample, including meetings with older people already engaged in lifelong learning. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted, including telephone interviews and the content analysed to inform this discussion paper. Desk based research identified existing literature on the subject of ageing and education both at national and international levels.

## **Specific Learning Needs of Older People**

Consultation with the relevant stakeholders established that older people learn differently to other age groups, they learn better from other older people and prefer to learn in groups of their peers rather than intergenerational groups. Certain courses and computer skills training in particular are considered more suitable to undertake with peers, as it can build confidence to be surrounded by people of the same generation, who learn at the same pace. “There is a need for education providers to offer ...teaching methods, which are tailored to meet the specific needs of older people as individuals and in groups”<sup>5</sup>.

It is important to note however that many older people may enjoy courses run in intergenerational settings e.g. creative, sporting and recreational activities. Within the current primary and secondary level syllabi many older people are involved in intergenerational projects as informants on local history or forgotten crafts etc. and are valued as educators who provide a wealth of knowledge, skills and experience to pupils in primary and secondary schools.<sup>6</sup>

In relation to lifelong learning, the importance of consultation with older learners cannot be overemphasised. “*You are pushing an open door with older people, provided the learning is done in a way that they want it to be done. It boils down to consultation first and foremost, to knowing your client base and knowing the population you are trying to accommodate. It is all about conducting needs assessments and then specifically tailoring the service to their needs.*”<sup>7</sup>

In general, older people wish to participate in meaningful activity which interests them, and which has a practical and functional dimension rather than the tokenism associated with taking part in an activity just for the sake of it. Some older people may be sensitive to the

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<sup>5</sup> Age Concern NI (2003) *Lifelong Learning* Policy position paper

<sup>6</sup> [www.olderinireland.ie](http://www.olderinireland.ie)

<sup>7</sup> Interview (NCAOP)

perception within certain sections of society that older people are somehow worthless or unproductive. Older people want to make a contribution, which is recognised and valued by their community.

In order to be successful, projects need to engage older people, help develop their confidence and self esteem and have a positive effect on their lives. In one such programme, run over a 10-year period: *“They benefited from better self-esteem and greater self-actualisation, which gave them the courage to confront challenges in other aspects of their lives”*<sup>8</sup>.

Consultation with other stakeholders emphasised the importance of celebrating achievement. *“It is essential to celebrate the success of the trainees and recognise the efforts of the volunteers”*<sup>9</sup>

### **Barriers to Access**

A number of issues were identified during the consultation, which could act as barriers for older people accessing education. In some instances routes to education and training for older people can be blocked by the use of criteria, which are labour market focused, since Government policy on adult education in recent years has tended to value up skilling and employability as the need to sustain economic competitiveness increases.

Consultation with stakeholders revealed a consensus that one of the greatest barriers to participation for older people was ageism, which, it was felt is rampant within Irish society and is also equally ingrained in the psyche of older people. One stakeholder suggested that some older people are complicit in this, describing them as *“their own worst enemies”*<sup>10</sup> since they may internalise this ageism and therefore perpetuate it. This prevents many older people from engaging in social or educational activities.

Studies suggest that the type of older people taking part in formal, non-formal and informal education already have high levels of educational attainment and are generally well off financially<sup>11</sup>. The financial limitations experienced by some older people, particularly after retirement need to be addressed in order to increase older peoples' participation in lifelong learning.

While older people are generally happy to contribute to the costs associated with running an educational programme, it was stressed during consultation that the sum should constitute an affordable amount of money given the older persons potentially limited means. *“It doesn’t*

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<sup>8</sup> Interview (Dept. Adult Ed., NUI Maynooth)

<sup>9</sup> Interview (Age Action Ireland)

<sup>10</sup> Interview (Dept. Adult Ed., NUI Maynooth)

<sup>11</sup> Learning For Life (2000)

*have to be free but the costs should be reasonable*<sup>12</sup>. Consideration should be given to the provision of subsidies or financial supports e.g. grants, as a means of attracting greater numbers of older people who are marginalised or less well off.

Establishing Outreach programmes was also suggested as an effective way of encouraging older people to engage in adult education, particularly the socially disadvantaged and the hard to reach. It was felt that any educational programme, which aims to reach marginalised or disadvantaged older people, must be based locally within communities. Another stakeholder suggested that an older person's programme might increase its chances of successfully targeting hard to reach older people if it emulated the approaches taken by youth services i.e. integrating with an existing locally based service with strong links to the community and utilising the local knowledge found in other successful community groups e.g. approaching women involved in mother and toddler groups about their ageing parents etc. in order to gain access to the hard to reach.

Practical access issues such as transport can also be important for older people, particularly in rural areas. Older people are more likely to attend facilities, which are accessible, and familiar so co-ordinating classes which are locally based is usually best.<sup>13</sup>

The International Adult Literacy Survey (1997) revealed lower literacy levels among older age groups than other sections of the population. Difficulties with literacy levels could make some older people feel self-conscious about taking part in any form of learning including creative, sporting and recreational activities. Low self esteem can be a problem for older women in particular. The literacy levels of a group need to be considered when developing any educational programme and appropriate provisions made if undertaking a pilot scheme.

### ***Employment***

Consultation with stakeholders revealed an interest among some older people in the workforce to continue working past retirement age, largely in a part-time capacity. There is also a widespread desire among working older people for gradual retirement, i.e. reducing the number of hours, or days, worked per week before stopping completely<sup>14</sup>. Continuing education, training and up-skilling is particularly important in helping older workers adapt to changing demands and new technologies in the workplace. Encouraging and facilitating training and education through part-time courses, e-learning or on-the-job training is particularly important for those older people wishing to remain economically active. A study by the National Council on Ageing and Older People (NCAOP) found that employers who were consulted were very positive and complimentary about their older employees but felt that the

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<sup>12</sup> Interview (NCAOP)

<sup>13</sup> Price and Lyon (1982)

<sup>14</sup> [www.ageaction.ie](http://www.ageaction.ie)

older workers would benefit greatly from training and up skilling, particularly in relation to computer skills.

Older people wishing to return to employment after an extended absence may face similar challenges. In a study of 250 people<sup>15</sup>, aged 55-69, who were not in full-time employment, a quarter (either retired or women engaged in home duties) were interested in getting a job outside the home. About two-thirds of the unemployed men were actively seeking work, but only a minority expected to be successful. A number of factors were identified as barriers to employment, one of which was low skill/education levels. *“Demand for new skills and knowledge places older workers at a disadvantage as skills and training developed earlier in their lives become obsolete”*<sup>16</sup>. Adult and community education has a role to play in assisting older people to face the challenges associated with remaining in or returning to employment upon reaching retirement age.

### **Supports & Guidance**

Undertaking a learning journey whether it takes place in formal, informal or non-formal settings, requires motivation on the part of the learner but it also requires advice, encouragement and empowerment of the individual. Adequate information provision is also very important for older people embarking on new learning journeys. *“With information, often the language and the jargon used can be totally off-putting. So information shouldn’t be put in a patronising or infantile way rather just put in simple English”*<sup>17</sup>. If an older person is interested in returning to further or higher education, then counselling and guidance on the opportunities, on accreditation and certification and on the progression routes available will also be needed. In many circumstances this will be a role for the Adult Education Officers (AEOs) and Community Education Facilitators (CEFs) based in the Vocational Educational Committees (VECs) locally.

In relation to supporting marginalised and socio-economically disadvantaged older people, the Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI) has as a priority, a social inclusion focus and specifically targets those in literacy programmes, on VTOS, in community education and second chance education. The initiative offers an outreach service and one-to-one and group guidance sessions which cover topics such as stress management, personal development, interview techniques, etc. The sessions are tailored to the needs of each group in consultation with the tutor. A breakdown of the age analysis of AEGI participants for 2006 reveals 8% of users were aged between 50 and 57 years old. Three percent were between 58 and 65 years old while only 0.69% of users availing of the service were 65 years old or over<sup>18</sup>. While early indicators suggest that these figures will increase for 2007, a dedicated strategy aimed

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<sup>15</sup> Public and Corporate Economic Consultants (PACEC), 2000

<sup>16</sup> Age Concern NI (2003) *Lifelong Learning* Policy position paper

<sup>17</sup> Interview (NCAOP)

<sup>18</sup> National Centre for Guidance in Education

specifically at older people, would encourage and support greater numbers of older people to participate in education courses through to completion. Marginalised older people in particular would benefit from such a service.

Older people also need to be represented directly on the various bodies that carry forward lifelong learning proposals to the Department of Education and Science. Any steering groups/working groups should prioritise older people as members. The importance of consultation cannot be over-emphasised. It is vital in order to allow older people to direct and shape their educational journey.

### **Research & Pilot Schemes**

The importance of engaging in further research on this topic was raised during consultation, as was the potential for developing a pilot scheme at a later date. These ideas were met with a lot of interest and positive feedback, especially from older people themselves.

Another stakeholder suggested that a pilot should consist of a number of taster courses to begin with as such courses are a good way of introducing older people to a variety of educational programmes and activities. Once a taster course has been completed, the participants will be better placed to instruct the co-ordinators in precisely the areas of education they want to focus on in the future.

The Department of Education and Science was urged not to set up a short-term pilot scheme however, unless it was committed to rolling out subsequent programmes. It was felt that any programme, which might be established as a result of the research, should be set up with the intention of continuing into the long-term future. *“Everyone nowadays is on a pilot programme. We are all sick of pilot programmes. You can’t do something for 10 weeks, get peoples hopes up and then leave them high and dry; it isn’t fair”<sup>19</sup>.*

In short, it was felt that a pilot scheme should emerge following further research including a consultation with older people; there should be continuous assessment throughout the pilot and an in-depth evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the programme at the end of the pilot. Based on the evaluation and further consultation via steering groups, the new programmes should be developed. These programmes should be tailored to suit the needs and particular learning styles of older people. Some of the suggestions from the older people consulted included art appreciation, English literature, Greek civilisations, music appreciation, drama and reminiscence.

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<sup>19</sup> Interview (Dept. Adult Ed., NUI Maynooth)



## **Suggestions Going Forward**

By their own admission and also backed up by numerous research studies, it is evident that older people who become involved in educational, cultural and social activities are healthier than their inactive counterparts. They have higher levels of confidence and self-esteem and experience a greater sense of well being. Any investment by the Department of Education and Science in the educational needs of older people either through further research or the development of a long-term programme would be both worthwhile and welcome.

To ensure the success of such an endeavour AONTAS suggests:

- Consultation with older people from the outset and throughout the process.
- Partnership between the Departments of Education and Science and Health and Children to highlight the health benefits to older people of engaging in lifelong learning and to promote services available to older people, particularly the marginalised and disadvantaged.
- The development of tailored programmes to suit the needs and particular learning styles of older people. Funding strands for these programmes might include the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) or Special Initiatives for Disadvantaged Adults Scheme (SPIDAS).
- Commitment to creating a programme of learning with a long term focus
- Providing funding subsidies and adequate financial supports for those who need it.
- Commitment to providing locally based and easily accessible learning venues.
- Support & guidance tailored to the needs of older people, which empowers and enables older people and recognises the unique contribution they can make to communities.
- Recognition of the barriers to participation including low levels of literacy and the need for Outreach work.
- Addressing the needs of older people in the work force to up-skill, particularly in relation to Information and Communication Technologies. This might be achieved as part of the Towards 2016 Partnership Agreement in which a targeted fund will be used to alleviate the fees for part-time courses at third level by those in the workforce who have not previously pursued a third level qualification.