



Concerns articulated by the AONTAS Community Education Network Regarding new FETAC Processes and the Position of Community Education in the new Authority - Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

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The AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) has sought to raise the voice of, gain recognition for and advocate for effective funding for the community education sector for the past 6 years. The CEN comprises over 130 independent voluntary community education groups who are committed to social change. Since the establishment of the Network in 2007 the context for community education has changed dramatically, from the absorption of Community Development Projects (CDPs) into Local Area Partnerships, changing economic contexts, reduced funding, increased demands on services, changes to the FETAC process; all in addition to the existing challenges for community education, as it seeks to retain its identity in the context of the development of SOLAS and the new integrated Further Education and Training Service. At present the CEN is seeking to understand how the current changes will influence the practice of community education groups and to build strong relationships with the new structures in order to ensure that community education remains a vibrant part of the adult education sector. As part of this work the CEN will meet with Minister Ciaran Cannon to discuss its new Position Paper and to clarify issues that groups believe they are facing. On behalf of the AONTAS membership and the CEN Niamh O'Reilly and Berni Brady will meet representatives of the QQI to share information about changes, challenges and how the organisations can work together to support community education providers.

The CEN has previously worked with FETAC in addressing the challenges of the Common Award System (CAS) and in seeking clarification regarding issues it faced. By way of letter the CEN documented its challenges and FETAC responded to the issues and also kindly provided an input at a previous national meeting of the CEN. At meeting 13 of the CEN, 1st February 2012, following an input by Orla Lynch (FETAC) regarding validation community education groups decided that there was a need to come together to support each other with the validation process in order to provide access to programmes for smaller groups, reduce time spent on FETAC and share expertise and resources. The CEN adopted this approach on 18th April and compiled a list of courses that groups need validation for and the courses they are willing to share with others. Therefore on the basis of the FETAC input the AONTAS CEN is supporting groups to share validated programmes amongst each other and to facilitate consortia to submit joint validation applications to FETAC.

Current perceived challenges of the new QQI and community education as articulated by the CEN

The positioning of community education following the amalgamation of FETAC with other accrediting bodies into the *Qualifications and Quality Ireland* (QQI) is unclear. Overall there is an air of tension as in addition to the validation of programmes under the CAS there is a sense that community education is being channelled into instrumental models of further education and pressured to only provide courses at the lower levels of the NFQ. Furthermore, there is uncertainty regarding the ability of community education groups to obtain, and maintain its own quality assurance (QA) in order to independently provide accredited learning opportunities.

With the amalgamation of HETAC, FETAC, NQAI and the Irish Universities Association the drive towards a more centralized system of accreditation appears to be at play, questions surrounding how this will operate at local level are also raised as QA may become centralized at a local level in that only LETBs will be able to provide or be responsible for this process. In order to protect community education there is a need to address the questions around QA, this complex issue is not merely about being able to provide accredited learning but to meet demands of funding streams, many which stipulate that the organization must have its own QA, having control over the tutors employed and thus the ability to provide the kind of community education provision that is in keeping with both the ethos of the organisation and the demands of the community it serves.

Summary of questions arising from CEN members are:

1. Will small community education organisations be able to become quality assured within the new QQI structure?
2. How will community education organisations keep their autonomy: if QQI quality assurance is a prerequisite for funding streams, it will then have a knock on effect on securing funding and the hiring tutors?
3. Can non-DES funded community education providers, including those previously supported by FAS, have access to LETBs (FAS and VEC) newly validated programmes under the Common Award System?
4. Is there the potential for groups to provide accredited learning at all levels of the NFQ? Will they be limited to lower levels of the NFQ?

Proposed solutions to the challenges include:

- All community education groups should be able to apply for QQI quality assurance and, upon meeting the criteria, be supported in maintaining it.
- Community education groups should not be restricted to providing courses at the lower levels of the NFQ.
- All quality assured community education groups, as not-for profit entities in the voluntary sector, should have access to new validated programmes under the Common Award System for sharing with the VEC/FAS/LETBs, regardless of their funding source.

Invitation to the QQI

The CEN would like to invite representatives of the QQI to the afternoon session of the next Community Education Network Meeting on Wednesday 21st November in the Carmelite Centre, Dublin 2. The aim will be to share information, clarify issues and to begin to develop a strong relationship between the CEN and the QQI.

The proposed format for the day is for a CEN member to start with a short input on why accreditation of community education is important, a QQI representative will share information on the new changes in the authority, and for small discussion groups to take place in order to outline the questions they have for the QQI which can be answered on the day or at a later stage. The CEN feels that it is important to open the channels of communication so that community education groups can gain clarity of the new processes and to enable members of the authority to hear first hand of how important accreditation is to community education groups. This draft outline is open to change by the QQI.