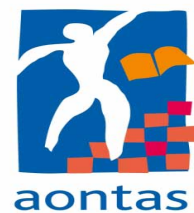


AONTAS

The Voice Of Adult Learning!



Raise your Voice for Adult Learning!

The Adult Learners' Festival from February 21st to 25th 2011 is the ideal opportunity to raise the profile of adult learning in advance of the General Election 2011. Raise your voice for adult learning and be part of a national campaign.

Why is Adult Learning Important?

AONTAS as a membership organisation believes in the right of every adult to continue their learning throughout their lives. **The mission of AONTAS is to advocate for the right of every adult in Ireland to quality learning.**

We believe that adult and community education are of vital importance to both the individual and to society as a whole. National and international research has shown that:-

- **Adult learners have greater earning capacity – through opportunities for learning new skills, job promotion, and changing careers.**
- **Adult learners are healthier and live longer and better lives**
- **Adult learners are more likely to have strong social networks thus preventing isolation and social exclusion**
- **Adult learners are less likely to be at risk of poverty and unemployment.**
- **Adult learners are more active in their communities, and are more likely to volunteer and to vote.**
- **Adult learners are better able to help children with their homework and support them through their education, breaking the cycle of disadvantage.**

Because of this **we know** that adult learning has an important role to play in our *economic* recovery, the rebuilding of our communities and the reform of our political structures. **We want the next government to know that too and to provide resources to enable the adult and community education sector to meet the demand for adult learning.**

Who are Adult Learners?

AONTAS estimates that there are approximately 200,000 adults involved in formal further education programmes. These are adults availing of education through local VECs (including adult literacy, community education, Youthreach, VTOS, Back to Education Initiative, PLC programmes and Senior Traveller Training Centres). Over the past two years over 10,000 adults have entered third level education, and there are now almost 160,000 adults on FÁS programmes. A further 30,000 adults are estimated to take part in non-formal community education.

During the boom years, it is estimated that one in every five people was employed in the construction sector in Ireland. Over the past two and a half years, employment in the construction, manufacturing and retail sector has declined dramatically. With little immediate prospects for employment, many of those employed in these sectors have no other option other than to upskill or retrain. Also an increasing number of highly skilled adults have also found themselves unemployed and adult education is providing a gateway for them to change career. This has led to a dramatic increase in the numbers of adults requesting further education and training making the sector one of the largest growth areas of the whole education system.

Two Big Issues in Adult Learning

The adult and community education services are stretched to meet the current demand for adult learning. The public sector recruitment embargo means less staff to support and develop adult learning. The embargo applies to all staff – except tutors and guidance counsellors. Adult Education Officers, Community Education Facilitators, Adult Literacy Organisers, Information Officers – all of these roles cannot currently be replaced if existing staff retire, develop illness or go on maternity leave.

There is a huge interest and enthusiasm for adult learning – *but it needs to be affordable*. Transport and childcare costs are real barriers to adults taking part in education. Following this year's drop in the number of mature student applications Jill Barrett, career adviser was quoted in the Irish Independent as saying "When even middle-income householders are being forced to make a choice between food and heat, education is much further down the shopping list."

Did you Know?

- The government has commitments to increase the number of mature students, through the Higher Education Access Strategy, and the National Skills Strategy. The recently commissioned Hunt report proposes a level playing field for part time and full time students in terms of funding. *But these strategies need to be implemented.*
- 21% of the current workforce has less than their Junior Certificate – a huge challenge to our economic recovery.
- There has been a gradual erosion of the financial supports for adult learners – adult learners on the Back to Education Allowance are no longer eligible for the Maintenance Grant. Mature students also no longer qualify for the non adjacent rate of payment of the grant. Mature students often have to provide for themselves and their families, and may not have the option of moving closer to their educational institution of choice.
- Adult, further and community education, currently commands *approximately 4%* of the overall education budget.
- Positions in the adult education services currently affected by the Recruitment Embargo include Information Officers within local VECs despite the fact that agencies and learners have identified information as a major barrier in accessing adult and further education.
- Despite the new Higher Education Strategy, a working adult pursuing a third level education part time now has to pay full fees, a student contribution fee and can now only claim tax relief for fees over and above €1000.

As a membership organisation, AONTAS has consulted widely on the priorities for adult learners and for adult and community education providers.

Here's what we have been told:

Provider priorities

- **Retain the Minister for Lifelong Learning** to provide a voice for adult learning within the sector, and help raise the visibility of the sector. This Minister should work across three key departments – Education and Skills, Social Protection and Department of Enterprise and Employment, in order to ensure greater policy coherence.
- **Maintain** the existing adult education infrastructure. Redefine 'frontline' in the context of the adult education services, recognising the role of adult education personnel such as AEOs, ALOs, CEFs and Information Officers within adult guidance, roles which go beyond administrative duties. The application of the embargo to additional services offered by VECs (eg LMA measures) should be lifted.
- **Strengthen** the role of adult guidance in supporting the role of activation policies. Adult guidance ensures that adults have access to training and education appropriate to their needs, thus resulting in greater levels of retention and ultimately best use of scarce resources.

Adult Learner priorities

- **Make education affordable for adults** – transport and childcare are two big costs that adults have to budget for if they return to education. The loss of eligibility for the higher Education grant for those on the Back to Education Allowance is a particular barrier to those who want to progress – from an Access/PLC or VTOS course onto third level.
- **Provide accurate and up to date information about adult learning.** Information on adult learning is currently provided by a number of agencies and actors. Changes in the criteria for courses and entitlements, along with new training and education responses must be communicated effectively to ensure that adults can be supported into training and education that is right for them as soon as possible.
- **Provide access to education which is meaningful, flexible and leads to progression onto employment or further education.** Short courses which lead to dead ends are not the answer. Many adults need support and advice to make important choices about retraining and changing careers. State investment in adult guidance is vital in helping adults make these choices.

What Can You Do?

The AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival from 21st to 25th will see events taking place all around the country. Here are some things you can do:

Find out what candidates are running in your area. Invite them to attend your event to meet learners, staff, volunteers and those who benefit from your services.

Have you invited a speaker to address a group at your event? Make sure they remind people to use their vote to ensure support for adult learning.

Prepare learners, volunteers and staff within your organisation. Get them to ask the candidates about their commitment to adult learners.

Inform the candidates about adult learning priorities, either at a Festival event, or on the doorstep.

Let AONTAS know what commitments candidates make. Contact us at mail@aontas.com, via Facebook or Twitter.

Quiz Your Candidates!

Here are some questions that you can ask your local candidates:

- What will you do to ensure that adults, particularly those with low skills, will be supported to pursue their education, either through adult/community education or higher education?
- What are your views on the public sector recruitment embargo, particularly in relation to the delivery of adult education?
- What will you do to ensure that adult education has a voice in the Department of Education and Skills?
- What will you do to ensure that adults have access to clear and up to date information about their learning options?

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