



ROUNDTABLE SEMINAR REPORT

The Emerging Role of AONTAS and Adult and Community Education in Irish Civil Society

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11th April 2002

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

One of the strategic organisational objectives of AONTAS is to identify and strategically respond to changing and emerging needs within adult education. In 2001, AONTAS supported the Adult Education Organisation's Association to produce the 2001 edition of the Adult Learner "**Acknowledging Difference**" which was dedicated to the issue of refugees and asylum seekers. AONTAS made a proposal to the Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform under its anti-racism public awareness programme to organise a roundtable discussion on "*The Emerging Role of AONTAS and Adult and Community Education in Irish Civil Society*".

Berni Brady, director of AONTAS, opened the roundtable seminar by giving a brief history of the work of AONTAS and outlined the background to the development of this seminar. AONTAS, which is a national voluntary membership organisation, consists of groups and agencies from the statutory, community and voluntary sector and individual members. Some of these groups are responding to the needs and issues of asylum seekers and refugees around the country. Berni pointed out that this session was an exploratory discussion to look at the role of education in civil society and where AONTAS links into this.

PRESENTATIONS

Liam Bane – AEO, Co. Dublin VEC - Editor Acknowledging Difference – Summary of Speech

The topic for the 2001 edition of the Adult Learner attempts to explore some of the implications of what being multicultural means for Irish society and, because of the nature of the journal, for adult education in particular. Contributions were made from a number of authors to this edition. Tom Inglis, a sociologist, looks at the problem of racism and the fear of others. Tanya Ward and Mairide Woods contributed informative and interesting pieces based on their research in this area and referred to the difficulties and the needs of refugees and asylum seekers.

Acknowledging Difference is only beginning to explore what is a major and complex topic and it is a start in some way to begin a process of reflection, discussion, debate and dialogue. This seminar today is part of that.

Liam outlined two challenges, which our society is confronted with:

- How to make accommodation for refugees/asylum seekers in a secure internal environment.
- How to influence an external environment that is often hostile and unwelcoming.

These are two aspects of a problem, which this edition of the Adult Learner attempts to address. He continued by stressing the need for legislation to be put in place, which criminalizes racism and discriminatory behaviour and the need for awareness raising campaigns.

He concluded his speech by highlighting the need in education to develop a strategic approach based on the evidence, from research being currently undertaken by Tanya Ward which looks at "*The Language Needs of Asylum Seekers in Dublin: A Community Based Approach*". He also recommended that a task force be put in place either within the Department of Education and Science or a junior ministry, within the Department, which would have overall responsibility for dealing with all aspects of immigration.

Director: Philip Watt - National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI) – Summary of Speech

Philip provided a brief overview of the work of the NCCRI. The Committee was established in July 1998 and its overall role is to contribute to the development of public policy in relation to racism and interculturalism and to encourage integrated action towards acknowledging, understanding and celebrating cultural diversity in Ireland.

He outlined existing policy commitments with regard to addressing racism in Ireland and which include:

- The White Paper on Adult Education (2000) and the core principles of lifelong learning, equality and interculturalism which is explicitly mentioned in the document
- Policy on the Integration of Refugees arising from the Government's Report: '*Integration: A Two-Way Process*', including an anti-racism public awareness programme
- Ongoing work being done in the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors

Forthcoming Policy developments, which are beginning to be developed, include:

- The setting up a committee within the Department of Education and Science to promote interculturalism in education
- Research on what interculturalism and racism means in terms of the adult education sector.
- DJELR National Action Plan Against Racism in Ireland

He then highlighted some of the challenges/opportunities, which we face as a society in the future:

- General hostility which exists towards asylum/refugees
- The inconsistencies of service provision nationwide
- The importance of acknowledging and highlighting good practice and developing this as a strategy to ensure key stakeholders are working together on the issue

- The need to be strategic and policy focussed
- Challenges faced in terms of the need for education services to support migrants and children
- To meet the challenge is to promote conceptual issues

He concluded by suggesting a role which bodies such as AONTAS could play in addressing the issue of racism:

- To complement the work of other organisations
- To be strategic and policy focussed and not service provision
- To draw on good practice
- To look at what are the most important initiatives in the adult and community education sector and to build these into plans which also would have a proofing process

GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND FEEDBACK

Two small groups were then set up to:

- (a) Discuss the role adult and community education is playing and could play in the development of a multi-cultural inclusive society
- (b) Discuss the role that AONTAS could play in the future

The following is a summary of issues discussed in the two groups:

- The need for the provision of a comprehensive programme of education for asylum seekers/refugees/migrants
- Awareness raising is a two way process. A mentor system and a developmental process needs to be put in place for Irish people. Myths and barriers need to be broken down.
- The need for interculturalism and anti-racism training
- Explore terminology – multiculturalism versus interculturalism
- Refugee studies – why are people coming to Ireland? What is happening in their countries that forces people to come to Ireland? What are their most pressing needs? What about people who are not allowed to work?
- Forthcoming research by Tanya Ward on *The Language Needs of Asylum Seekers in Dublin: A Community Based Approach* – key to informing the needs of refugees and asylum seekers in Ireland
- Adult education is the main service provision along with the Health Board services. There is a need for a transformation of adult education centres in terms of:
 - Looking at their own policies
 - Codes of practice
 - The need for all staff to have education awareness training
 - Record keeping on legal status
 - How to consult with target groups
 - Qualitative approach
- The need for education programmes to be accredited
- The provision of mother tongue languages
- Funding needs to be broader than just for literacy provision

- The setting up of an implementation group similar to the DSCFA within the DES to monitor developments

ROLE OF AONTAS

- Immigration Residents Bill has an Internal working group and there is a Department of Education and Science (DES) rep sitting on this – can AONTAS influence this group in anyway?
- AONTAS could make a submission to the DJELR National Action Plan on Combating Racism.
- Promoting education as a civil right.
- Monitor developments that are happening with regards to the interculturalism committee – can AONTAS influence this group?
- Recommendations in the White Paper on Adult Education (2000) – lobby for the implementation.
- Is there a research role for AONTAS to identify models of good practice that is happening on the ground?
- Can AONTAS be influential in policy development for interculturalism?

CLOSE

Berni Brady closed the meeting by thanking the speakers and participants for attending the roundtable discussion. The session was a good opportunity to invite the different stakeholders to come together to discuss to explore different experiences and issues in relation to adult education and the needs of asylum seekers/refugees and migrants. She also highlighted how this session proved to be very informative for AONTAS regarding the issues and the organisation will now look at ways of working strategically with relevant Departments and agencies in the future.

PARTICIPATION LIST

NAME	ORGANISATION
Liam Bane	Co. Dublin VEC
Kathleen Forde	City of Dublin VEC
Genevieve Halkett	SPIRASI
Maride Woods	SSRC UCD
Tanya Ward	CDVEC
Mary Elliott	Co. Dublin VEC
Susan Dunne	Co. Kildare VEC
Michael McLoughlin	Co. Dublin VEC
Philip Watt	NCCRI
Patricia Roullier	Longford Women's Centre
Alex Reid	FAS
Breda Naughton	Refugee Integration Agency
Emily Smartt	Clondalkin Women's Network
Lorcan O'Malley	DSCFA
Susan Cullinane	Network Kildare/Kildare VEC
Fergus Dolan	NALA
Michael Moriarty	IVEA