AONTAS Community Education Network Submission to the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

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Submission to QQI

Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines and Criteria for Voluntary Providers of Further Education and Training

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Introduction

The AONTAS Community Education Network[1] welcomes the opportunity to engage in the QQI consultation process and this submission represents its commitment to the process. The paper outlines the main issues for community education organisations in order to shape QQI policies and procedures for the benefit of community education learners.

Comments on the Draft Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines and Criteria for Voluntary Providers of Further Education and Training

What is a Provider?

Regarding *Section 4.4. What is a provider?*

It states that the provider should "have sufficient resources" (page 4), it has been broadly documented (Harvey, 2012), (AONTAS 2011), (Cork City-Wide Community Education Network, 2015) that community education has faced harsh cuts since the recession. Furthermore, funding for Community Education from SOLAS distributed funds at €10.58 million represents 1.64% of total SOLAS FET budget (not including PLCs) and is only 0.11% of total education budget. It is important to recognize that community education is a poorly resourced part of the education system, but has built its capacity to deliver effective programmes (AONTAS, 2009, LCEN, 2011 and Cork City-Wide Community Education Network, 2015). The concept of 'sufficient resources' must be considered broadly rather just on monetary income e.g. volunteers play a significant role in community education provision thus bolstering its ability to deliver programmes within a context of financial constraints.

10. Criteria for Establishing Provider Capacity

Programme Development and Provision Criteria

Have a fit for purpose and stable complement of education and training staff (p.25)

It is important to recognize that this issue of occasional/adjunct staff is prevalent across the education sector and due regard is necessary when making such assessments. It is not confined to the voluntary sector, for example, in higher education institutions it is estimated that a significant proportion of courses are provided by precarious workers (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015).

Fees

The issue of fees for reengagement is a recurring theme that arises for members of the CEN. The reason fees are such a stumble block for reengagement are as follows:

1. Under FETAC, community education legacy providers have demonstrated their ability to maintain their QA. The helpful QA guideline comparison document details the additional QA requirements, however the ability to meet the new guidelines is not the issue, rather it is the fees.

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[1] The AONTAS Community Education Network comprises over 100 independently managed community education organisations which work collectively to gain recognition for community education, raise its profile and lobby to ensure it is adequately resourced.

2. It is difficult for community education legacy providers to plan the best method of reengagement without clear information on fees.
3. The prospective cost of fees takes away valuable resources which would otherwise be put into education provision. For example, it has been estimated that the €5000 reengagement fee could cover the complete cost of a QQI level 5 Minor award for 20 hard-to-reach students who would not otherwise engage in further education and training.

Sharing of Programmes

The ability of community education legacy providers to continue to share programmes is essential. It avoids duplication and maximizes resources and local expertise.

In order for community education legacy providers to make an informed decision on reengagement, additional guidelines on both *collaborative sharing* and *collaborative development* would be welcomed.

Templates

Members of the CEN have called for the publication of templates for specific areas of QA, in order to support a mainstreamed approach and as a tool to share expertise. In the absence of which, if each organisation has to create their own systems it is a waste of valuable resources. Rather than seeing a template as a check list, it would be useful to publish specific tools that support effective QA e.g. self-assessment report.

Information and Communication

The seminar held on June 30th was a positive step to opening up the flow of communication between QQI and community education legacy providers. It is important that this open communication is maintained and supported. The number of participants at the seminar reflected both the need for information and also the commitment of community education legacy providers to the QA process and QQI reengagement. We would welcome further QQI events that support information sharing, the sharing of expertise and support for QQI reengagement. This would be particularly beneficial in terms of maximizing resources and supporting the development of local networking around QQI QA requirements.

The suggestion to implement a Frequently Asked Questions section to the website appears a sensible step to improving communications.

Conclusion

AONTAS CEN has made over 20 submissions to the QQI in recent years, AONTAS draws on the experience and expertise of its members and views it as a valuable resource. Therefore, we recommend that the QQI strongly consider the points raised in this submission in order to collectively develop strong QA within the community education sector.

The AONTAS Community Education Network is committed to continued engagement with the QQI in order to ensure that community education legacy providers are afforded the best possible opportunity to reengage with the QQI and thus deliver accredited programmes to adult learners.