



**Submission to the Educational Disadvantage Forum**

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## **The AONTAS Mission**

*AONTAS is the Irish National Association of Adult Education, a voluntary membership organisation. It exists to promote the development of a learning society through the provision of a quality and comprehensive system of adult learning and education, which is accessible to and inclusive of all.*

## **Membership of AONTAS**

AONTAS represents over 450 members with a direct involvement in adult education. These include statutory organisations (80) voluntary and community groups (197) and a range of individual members (177). AONTAS consults regularly with member organisations through a process of regional meetings, allowing the views of those on the ground to be fed into our policies and submissions at national level.

Many of our member organisations in both the statutory and community sectors are already engaged in tackling educational disadvantage. The members of AONTAS share a common concern that educational disadvantage should not be seen as affecting only those of primary and post-primary school going age. It is also essential that the needs of adults in relation to educational disadvantage are recognised and addressed by government policy, especially given the vast numbers of adults who are engaged in formal or informal learning opportunities in Ireland today. AONTAS believes that no competition for resources and supports should arise between these population groups, but that the process of lifelong learning be supported as a singular concern in all relevant government policy initiatives.

## **Adults and Educational Disadvantage**

The expansion of compulsory education in recent years has seen a dramatic increase in completion rates for second level education, but this has not impacted on many adults. Only 31% of adults between the ages of 55 and 64 have completed second level according to the White Paper 2000 *Learning for Life*, and among 45-54 year olds the figure is only slightly higher at 40%. The second quarterly national household survey in 2001 showed that a total of 1,065,400 people aged between 15 and 64 had only Junior Cert or even lower as their highest level of educational attainment.

Policy since the publication of the White Paper has prioritised access to those in the 15 to 54 age group whose highest level of attainment is Junior Cert or equivalent. This has resulted in 'second chance' government initiatives such as the National Adult Literacy Programme and the *Back to Education Initiative*, designed to offer part time and flexible learning options to those with less than upper second level education. While these initiatives are welcome, they are in the early stages of implementation and it remains to be seen how effective they will be in tackling disadvantage among Irish adults.

Although the White Paper has mapped out a framework for the delivery of an improved education service to adults and a number of innovative initiatives have been rolled out, investment remains the most critical factor in determining the quality and extent of the options made available to those adults suffering from educational disadvantage. Overall investment in adult education remains at 2% of the total education budget which is simply not realistic. AONTAS has called for this percentage to increase to at least 10% by 2006.

## **1. LITERACY AND NUMERACY**

The OECD International Adult Literacy Survey 1997 provided a profile of the literacy skills of Irish adults aged 16-64. The survey found that 25% of the Irish adult population, or at least 500,000 adults, were at the lowest level in literacy terms, performing at best tasks which required the reader to locate a simple piece of information in a text. The survey also showed that early school leavers, older adults and the unemployed were most at risk of experiencing literacy difficulties, with participation in adult education being least likely for those with the lowest skill levels.

Since these figures emerged, a substantial investment has been made in the field of adult literacy and a number of innovations have attempted to tackle the literacy problem. The budget for literacy has risen to approximately €16.4m in 2002 from a mere €1m in 1997. The *Read Write Now* series commissioned by the Department of Education and NALA ran in 2000 and 2001 when it attracted a large audience, and Series 3 is currently running. Workplace literacy schemes have been put in place and the overall number of literacy students has risen from 5,000 in 1997 to almost 23,000 at the end of 2001.

While these measures to address the literacy challenge in Ireland have been welcome, it is still the case that when compared to investments in mainstream areas of education, the investment is relatively small. In many areas, literacy students are still only receiving two hours of tutoring a week and this is largely delivered by volunteer tutors. As the Literacy Programme is a key pillar of the White Paper 2000, the service now needs priority investment and substantial expansion if it is to be effective and if progress is not to be lost.

## **2. EARLY INTERVENTION / THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS**

AONTAS sees no dividing line between educational disadvantage as it applies to school going children and educational disadvantage as it applies to their parents and other adults. The role that education can play in breaking down so called 'intergenerational poverty' and disadvantage is well known. According to the 2000 White Paper *Learning for Life*, early schooling needs continued government support so that under-achievement can be countered. However the Paper advises that policies and actions should recognise 'that parental levels of education exert a critical influence on children's participation in education and their school performance' so that 'there is an increasingly compelling case for investment in the education of parents also' (p.49).

The role of parents in supporting, encouraging and assisting with their child's education is a critical role. The key relationship between the mother's educational attainment and the attainment of the child has been well documented, particularly by the Combat Poverty Agency Report on *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland* (1995). That report outlined the clear link between the educational attainment of a mother and that of her household, especially her children. The obvious implication is that in order to break the cycle of educational disadvantage, the development of adult levels of learning must be addressed in conjunction with the education of children. Otherwise investment in interventions geared solely at children and young people's disadvantage will be wasted.

Various initiatives have sought to increase parental involvement in the schooling of children. The function of Home School Liaison and similar schemes in maintaining parent involvement is key to breaking a cycle of disadvantage. Not only are parents considered as key agents in supporting their children's development, but they are given the opportunity to advance their own education in various ways. A report by the Community Workers Cooperative notes that parents can 'analyse and challenge the issues of social and educational disadvantage and

develop their capacity to lobby for enhanced provision' as well as 'tackle literacy and numeracy problems and facilitate their own progression to further training' (p.21).

There is a particular opportunity in the delivery of such schemes to address parent's own negative attitudes towards early schooling which may be based on personal experience, to avoid a negative attitude towards education being passed from one generation to the next. However, particular supports in terms of teacher training (addressed at a later stage), information services and others are needed to make initiatives involving parents effective.

### **3. COMMUNITY NEEDS WITH REGARD TO EDUCATION**

Increasingly it is being recognised that education plays an indispensable role in addressing and overcoming poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion. Yet over the years, the inflexible formal education system in Ireland gave rise to a need within many communities for more accessible forms of education to provide opportunities to those suffering from exclusion in its many forms. This need was met, and is still being met, by the emergence within communities of a distinctive and organic form of education, now recognised as 'Community Education'. It is described in the White Paper 2000 as 'amongst the most dynamic, creative and relevant components of Adult Education in Ireland' (p.112).

Hundreds of community-based groups around Ireland are involved in providing services which encourage and support disadvantaged adults to participate in adult education thereby widening their ability to tackle poverty. These community-based groups act as an access point for thousands of disadvantaged adults who would otherwise be excluded from second chance education. AONTAS counts among its membership 197 of these community-based groups and organisations. They include locally based women's groups, men's groups, lone parent groups, literacy groups, unemployment centres, family resource centres, traveller groups and adult education centres all around Ireland.

One key initiative which has been put in place in recent years to address adult educational disadvantage across a range of these groups is the Education Equality Initiative (EEI). Funded under the NDP and building on the work of the previous Women's Education Initiative, the 18 projects involved use innovative and flexible approaches to bring the most disadvantaged men and women into education. According to the Department of Education, a key aim will be to mainstream the good practice emerging within the EEI. AONTAS urges that this aim be followed through and this good practice built upon in the immediate future.

#### **Women's Community Education**

Women suffer from particular forms of disadvantage in Ireland, not least in relation to education. For women low educational levels have a negative impact on gaining full time employment. According to the *P2000 Working Group on Women's Access to Labour Market Opportunities* (1999) 53% of unemployed women have less than upper second level education, as opposed to 39% of men. Women are often excluded from opportunities to access education and training due to their absence from the Live Register, financial dependence on partners and childcare and eldercare responsibilities. Lone parenting is also critically tied up with educational disadvantage.

For many of these women, locally-based women's groups have acted as a first point of contact, enabling women to develop confidence and skills, gain qualifications and explore the possibility of further education and training. AONTAS research conducted by WERRC/UCD, recognised the contribution of these community-based women's groups and networks in combating disadvantage, and called for:

- Acknowledgement of the barriers that exist for women
- Interdepartmental core-funding and programme funding for community education
- Additional funding for childcare, transport and monitoring supports
- Representation of women at all levels of decision making and training in this work
- A system for accreditation of women's community-based education
- Progression routes within the formal educational systems at second and third level
- Further research on the long-term impact on women's economic and social position of their participation in community-based education

AONTAS urges the government to further support the community education sector in tackling disadvantage through the further progression of these recommendations.

#### **4. CHALLENGES TO TEACHERS**

To effectively tackle educational disadvantage, there is a real need for professionals, tutors and volunteers involved at all levels of the education service to have a solid knowledge of life long learning and the key issues in relation to educational disadvantage.

Teachers working in mainstream primary and secondary schools need to be fully informed about adult learning issues and this should be an integral part of their training. This training would cover adult learning styles, the literacy problem, all relevant methodologies and the sensitivities involved with these various issues. Especially where teachers are engaged in Home School Liaison work, or where they are becoming directly involved with the delivery of schemes to adults e.g. VTOS and similar initiatives, it is vital that training and support is provided so that their involvement can be effective. It is also essential that teachers are aware of the work being carried out by other local agencies and groups in relation to adult education and support, so that effort is not duplicated within given communities.

Adult education tutors and volunteers need to be similarly trained and adequately supported to carry out their roles. New challenges are constantly emerging in Irish society, for example recent growth in immigration has created a major challenge to all those delivering education services. The White Paper 2000 made a series of recommendations in support of the *professionalisation* of the adult education service and the development of clear career routes for practitioners. AONTAS strongly urges the implementation of these recommendations and the prioritisation of investment in this crucial area.

#### **5. WAYS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Community education and its methodology is increasingly being recognised as effective in addressing educational disadvantage. The bottom-up approach employed leads to the collective empowerment of communities as well as individual development for adults, which are key to tackling many forms of social and educational disadvantage in the longer term. Although some aspects of the community education approach such as 'learner-centredness' have been incorporated into mainstream educational initiatives, there is still a need for these methods to be further integrated to the formal sector.

The absence of a gender focus is increasingly apparent in government education policy and action. For the most part definitions and policy statements treat educational disadvantage among adults as a phenomenon which affects men and women similarly. AONTAS acknowledges in its research documents *At the Forefront* and *Men on the Move* that men

and women have specific needs in relation to disadvantage. It is vital that more of a focus on these distinctive needs in relation to supports, information and access be included in the development of future policies.

A further piece of research has been commissioned by AONTAS looking at men and women's distinctive learning styles, which is due for publication shortly. It is hoped that the findings of this research will feed into mainstream policy and allow those who are most marginalized to be attracted back into education.

## **6. ACCESS TO AND RETENTION WITHIN EDUCATION**

In relation to access, AONTAS has always been clear that this term means more than 'entry' to a course of education. Supports and guidance which are needed to help adults successfully participate in learning are key to making opportunities 'accessible'.

There are many pertinent 'access' issues for adults returning to education. These include financial support, allowances, childcare, information, guidance and accreditation of prior learning to name but a few. In relation to financial supports, AONTAS has consistently demanded that in relation to third level education, fees for adults taking part time, modular and distance learning options be abolished. Although tax-relief is available in some cases, this does not send a strong message that third level is really accessible.

In terms of supporting allowances, there have been some advances. The *Back to Education Initiative* is designed to attract adults in receipt of various social welfare allowances. However, while BTEI was originally targeted at the most disadvantaged i.e. social welfare recipients, employment levels have risen dramatically since its development. There are now large numbers of low paid and shift workers with less than upper second level education who are not eligible for this scheme. Such workers are extremely vulnerable in the context of a downturn in the economy.

Another key access issue is childcare. Although the National Development Plan has prioritised childcare and a major programme of investment is underway, those wishing to access adult education are still not in receipt of adequate allowances. AONTAS urges that childcare be an integral part of all schemes developed for adults, and not simply an add-on.

Further issues in relation to adult guidance and information are currently being addressed, and we recommend that such schemes be expanded. The Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI) is currently in its pilot stage, and will hopefully be extended to provide a national service as soon as possible. We also urge that information and guidance protocols being developed at present by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) will be implemented as quickly as possible by all further and higher education providers. In relation to accreditation, it is hoped that the new Qualifications Framework and its associated policies will go some way to addressing the problems that have previously arisen for adult learners, especially in community education.

We are particularly worried by the recent €5m adjustments to the access programmes, affecting the most disadvantaged. AONTAS strongly urges that this removal of funds be redressed in the immediate future so that the negative message it sent can be corrected. We also urge that the recommendations of the *Action Group on Access to Third Level* and those of *Taskforce on Lifelong Learning* are implemented as a priority.

## **7. STRUCTURES – LINKING SERVICES**

The White Paper 2000 sets out a framework of structures through which an adult education service can be delivered in Ireland. The service has suffered because of the *ad hoc* way in which it has been delivered over the years, where models of good practice have not been built upon, targeted initiatives have not been joined up and ground has been lost on many occasions due to funding cuts and a lack of coordination. The White Paper recommendations are therefore welcome but need to be fully implemented.

The National Adult Learning Council (NALC) will have a key coordinating role and was set up in 2002. However, the establishment of its technical support units has not yet happened, and we urge that this be progressed as quickly as possible. At the local level, the Local Adult Learning Boards (LALBs) will be key to strategic planning but have not yet been established. These structures need to be set up as a priority. AONTAS welcomes the recent advertising of the Community Education Facilitator posts as a step in coordinating that sector, but these Facilitators will need the LALBs to be in place quickly if their work is to be effective.

## **8. FLEXIBILITY WITH REGARD TO THE EDUCATION SYSTEM**

Current mainstream education in Ireland is not flexible or imaginative enough to address the needs of those adults experiencing educational disadvantage. There has been some progress towards the development of flexible educational provision, including part time learning options within the *Back to Education Initiative*. However this does not extend widely enough and does not provide for distance learning and other options. AONTAS urges a greater emphasis on flexibility, especially given the numbers of adults experiencing rural isolation, who are currently being excluded from participation in learning.

Another obvious area in which flexibility needs to be improved is in relation to entitlements to learn and associated learning allowances. We urgently need increased eligibility for those in low income households and additional financial allowances for participants in education. Motivation and enticements are needed to break the cycle of disadvantage and encourage the first move towards a return to education. Expansion of eligibility beyond such common criteria as being on the live register and holding a medical card is key to tackling educational disadvantage in adults.

A related issue is that of outreach, or the process by which potential participants can be encouraged back to learning. Vast amounts of time is currently spent by adult education providers in approaching the most marginalized and in pre-development work with those people so that returning to education becomes a less daunting task for them. The importance of this work is not currently recognised by the system and is not government funded as part of project costs. If the very disadvantaged are to be helped this situation will have to change and more flexible forms of funding will need to be introduced.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is an outdated approach to look upon formal and non formal education, child and adult literacy, work and non-work related learning as in competition; they must all be addressed within the single realm of lifelong learning. It is cumulative learning that counts, young learning leads to adult learning, adult learning is needed to support the next generations and so the cycle continues. AONTAS urges that the recommendations contained in this paper, and those consistently made from within the adult education sector be at the heart of government policy when strategies to tackle educational disadvantage are developed.

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