



**PROMOTING ANTI-RACISM AND INTER-CULTURALISM
AT ALL LEVELS OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM**

**Submission to the
National Action Plan Against Racism**

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The AONTAS Mission & Core Values

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.

- The members of AONTAS share a passion for lifelong learning and a commitment to the belief that learning throughout life provides a means by which people can grow and develop and make an active contribution to the development and transformation of their own community and the wider society in which they live
- AONTAS recognises the key political role adult and continuing education plays in combating poverty, inequality and social exclusion as well as promoting democracy, creativity and economic development
- AONTAS is committed to the development of a system of Adult Education which is accessible to and inclusive of all citizens throughout life particularly those who experience educational, social and /or economic disadvantage
- AONTAS recognises the importance of building partnerships at local and national level, which will ensure the active involvement and empowerment of adult learners
- AONTAS is committed, through a process of action and reflection, to its growth as a learning organisation, as a model of good practice and a centre of expertise in the field of adult learning

The Current Strategic Objectives of AONTAS

AONTAS is currently in the process of implementing its second strategic plan 'Moving Forward' for the period 2001-2003. This plan, developed in consultation with membership, aims to build on the achievements of the adult education sector since the publication of the Green Paper 'Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning' in 1998, and the White Paper 'Learning for Life' in 2000. The central objectives mapped out in this plan are to:

1. Promote the importance and value of adult learning as a key part of Lifelong Learning
2. Participate in the development of adult education policy by working towards the implementation of the proposals and recommendations of national policy initiatives including the National Development Plan, the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness, White Paper: Learning for life, White Paper: Supporting Voluntary Activity and others

3. Support and represent the membership of AONTAS to articulate the needs of adult learners and providers at local and national level
4. Identify and strategically respond to changing and emerging needs within adult education by promoting, piloting and lobbying for the mainstreaming of models of good practice
5. Build positive working relationships and partnerships with relevant organisations nationally and internationally
6. Build the reputation and status of AONTAS as a leading player in the field of research in adult education
7. Develop AONTAS as a learning organisation committed to embodying the principles underlying its core values

AONTAS Membership and Inter-culturalism

AONTAS represents over 450 members with an interest or direct involvement in adult education in Ireland. These include statutory organisations (80) voluntary and community groups (197) and a range of individual members (177). Many of our member organisations in both the statutory and community sectors are already engaged with issues of race and inter-culturalism either as their core service or as an aspect of their work. A number of member groups are representative of the traveller community and have dealt with issues of race and cultural difference in educational settings for many years. However in recent years, many more groups have encountered new challenges in relation to the needs of refugees, asylum seekers and the growing numbers of migrant workers in Ireland. Given these developments, AONTAS has been examining its own role in relation to issues of race, and the role of adult education in civil society more widely. As one of the above listed strategic objectives highlights, AONTAS is conscious of the need to identify and strategically respond to changing and emerging needs within adult education. The growing area of anti-racism and inter-culturalism presents itself as such an emergent issue.

The Adult Education Policy Context: The White Paper on Adult Education 2000

The 2000 White Paper on Adult Education 'Learning for Life' marked the most important development in Irish adult education policy to date, and addressed many of the issues AONTAS has lobbied on over a long period of time. The Paper, which outlines a framework for the structure and delivery of the adult education service in Ireland, recommends that adult education be underpinned by three core principles, promoting:

- **A Systemic Approach** - requiring that '...educational policies must be designed to embrace the life cycle, reflect the multiplicity of sites, both formal and informal, in which learning can take place, provide for appropriate supports such as guidance, counselling and childcare, and for mechanisms to assess learning..' (p. 12)
- **Equality** - 'of access, participation and outcome for participants in adult education, with proactive strategies to counteract barriers arising from differences of socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity and disability..' (p. 13)
- **Inter-culturalism** - 'the need to frame educational policy and practice in the context of serving a diverse population as opposed to a uniform one, and the development of curricula, materials, training and in-service, modes of assessment and delivery methods which accept such diversity as the norm. This refers not only to combating racism and encouraging participation of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers in education, but also to a recognition that any minority groups such as travellers, people with disabilities, older adults, participants in disadvantaged areas may have distinctive needs and cultural patterns which must be respected and reflected in an education context. It also envisages a more active role by adult educators in the promotion of the Irish language and culture.' (p. 13)

These principles illustrate the ethos of inclusiveness that underpins current policy thinking in the adult education sector, and are to be welcomed. However, much remains to be done in practical terms to make this inclusive vision a reality. AONTAS welcomes the acknowledgement in the White Paper of the experiences and work of groups already dealing with race issues, and hopes that this work will be drawn upon in the design and implementation of policies affecting adult education. Many of the member groups of AONTAS have such experiences, and can bring valuable knowledge to the fore as regards the practical needs of culturally diverse groups. As the White Paper notes this work 'already constitutes a significant reservoir of expertise and progressive thinking which could be of great benefit to educational planners in shaping their agendas for an inter-cultural future' (p. 51).

AONTAS Projects and Work Promoting Anti-Racism and Inter-culturalism

In view of the recent developments in policy and in member experiences, AONTAS has been working on a number of projects involving an examination of the educational needs of immigrants and asylum seekers. What follows is an outline of three such areas of work in which AONTAS has taken and is continuing to take an active part:

1. **The Adult Learner 2001: Acknowledging Difference**

Journal Publication, 2001

The Journal of Adult and Community Education in Ireland 2001, *The Adult Learner*, carried the title *Acknowledging Difference*. Edited by Liam Bane, Adult Education Organiser (AEO) with South County Dublin VEC, the journal was produced by the Adult Education Organiser's Association with support from AONTAS.

This publication attempted to explore and develop an initial understanding of what multiculturalism involves in the Irish context. Contributions came from a mix of sources, including Tanya Ward, Researcher with CDVEC, describing her own research into the language needs of asylum seekers. A key observation in this chapter was that 'asylum seekers are one of the most materially disadvantaged groups in Irish society and no amount of high quality education and language projects will ensure that their most fundamental needs are met. Therefore, any progress in education needs to be accompanied by improvements in other areas of provision.' (p. 23)

Further contributions came from social scientists, representative bodies in adult education and perhaps most essentially, from refugees themselves. **Particular needs identified in the journal included:**

- Better information for immigrants on where and what classes are available to them
- Practical courses for daily life, on form filling, banking, measurements, transport
- Childcare and family supports for those with children and elderly dependants
- Methods to address the particular issues affecting women immigrants
- Uniform methods for assessing the prior qualifications, skills and learning of immigrants, so that previous educational attainment can be used and developed
- Importance of using qualitative research and information when seeking to understand the issues affecting immigrants, as statistics alone will not adequately describe need

Acknowledging Difference marked a beginning point in exploring what is a major and complex topic and the start of a process of reflection, discussion, debate and dialogue in the adult education sector.

2. **Role of AONTAS and Adult and Community Education in Irish Civil Society**

Roundtable Seminar on Refugees & Asylum Seekers, April 2002

Following the publication of *Acknowledging Difference* and in light of the increasing numbers of adult asylum seekers, refugees and migrant workers seeking to or needing to access training and education,

AONTAS organised an exploratory meeting to identify the relevant issues for the adult education sector. This roundtable seminar was arranged with funding support from the Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform's *Anti-Racism Public Awareness Programme*, and brought together a range of appropriate stakeholders including:

National Adult Literacy Agency
Refugee Integration Agency
SPIRASI
Vocational Education Committees
Women's Networks
Social Science Research Centre UCD
FAS Asylum Seekers Unit
Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs
National Consultative Committee on Racism and Inter-culturalism (NCCRI)

Liam Bane, Editor of *Acknowledging Difference* and AEO with County Dublin VEC, and Philip Watt, Director of the NCCRI delivered inputs to the roundtable. Participants identified challenges to the adult education sector and potential approaches to meet those challenges: ***Current challenges and opportunities identified in Adult Education included:***

- General societal hostility which exists towards asylum seekers and refugees
- Meeting the burgeoning need for education services and appropriate supports for immigrants
- Inconsistency of service and support provision nationwide
- Importance of highlighting and utilising existing good practice
- Importance of being strategic in policy development
- Ensuring that key stakeholders plan and work together

Recommendations Arising: Participants urged that the following key issues be further explored at this early stage of policy development in the area of adult education and inter-culturalism:

1. Researching the Needs of Asylum Seekers/ Refugees /Migrants to Ireland

Detailed examination of the educational needs and the motivations of immigrants should be carried out, so that educational service provision is suitable and effective. A piece of research currently being undertaken by Tanya Ward on behalf of City of Dublin VEC will be critical for this work. The research report, entitled 'Asylum Seekers in Adult Education: A Study of Language and Literacy Needs' is due for publication in autumn 2002, and could guide initial efforts to meet the educational needs of immigrants. However, this should be followed up with further in-depth research and needs analysis, also focusing on areas outside Dublin, as services nationally can be inconsistent.

2. *Development of Awareness Raising as a Two-Way Process*

It will be crucial to the success of any inter-culturalist strategy in adult education that information and mentoring be available to both the immigrant community and the indigenous Irish community. The adult education sector is well positioned to tackle societal inequality through an anti-racist approach. By engaging both those who experience racism and those who are members of the dominant culture in an examination of issues, adult education offers a unique setting in which to promote awareness. However, this means that policy must not be aimed solely at accommodating immigrants and their needs, but should be developed in consideration of the needs of the indigenous Irish culture.

3. *Anti-Racism and Intercultural Training*

Stemming from the previous recommendation, there is an urgent requirement for training in anti-racism and related topics. This training would be beneficial not only to those in frontline roles in adult education, acting as tutors and mentors, but also to those in support and policy making roles, facing new challenges in terms of understanding the issues associated with racism and inter-culturalism in Ireland. In particular, there is a need to examine the terminology of anti-racism, which can be confusing. Exploring such terms as *multiculturalism* and *inter-culturalism* would help clarify what is needed in terms of information and training programmes.

4. *Increased Breadth of Funding*

Funding provision for adult education and training opportunities for refugees/ asylum seekers/ migrant workers needs to go beyond the provision of literacy and language training. Otherwise, real inter-culturalism will not be achieved, and the potential of adult education in promoting anti-racism will not be adequately tapped.

5. *Accreditation of Adult Programmes*

Adult education programmes need to be better accredited in many cases, so that they become more attractive, useful and compatible with the needs of immigrants.

6. *Review of Internal Policies of Adult Education Centres*

Adult education centres need to look at their own policies and practices in relation to anti-racism promotion, service provision for immigrants and related human resource issues. This would involve:

- Examining policies
- Examining codes of practice
- Addressing staff training needs
- Collection of qualitative data on immigrant needs
- Consultation with other providers / best practice
- Record keeping on legal status of participants

The roundtable closed with general agreement that opportunities for strategic thinking lie ahead for those working on policies affecting asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants. In particular, the role of

Departmental working groups and committees within the Department of Education focused on anti-racism and inter-culturalism will have a role to play in this respect. AONTAS looks forward to working with these committees in future.

3. Experiences of the Community Education Model

S.T.A.N.C.E. Programme and Women's Community Education

AONTAS has worked for many years towards achieving recognition for the community education approach to adult learning in Ireland. The significance and success of community education is highlighted in the White Paper 2000, wherein a chapter is dedicated to the field. The Paper highlights the contribution of community education in:

- Reaching large numbers of participants, frequently in disadvantaged settings
- Pioneering new approaches to teaching and learning in non-hierarchical, community based settings
- In taking the lived experience of the participants as a starting point (p. 110)

Increasingly it is being recognised that education and training play an indispensable role in addressing poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion across a variety of groups and communities. Adult community-based programmes, in particular those delivered by women's groups and networks, play a major role in helping learners to examine the circumstances which contribute to their poverty and disadvantage, and enable them to develop strategies to participate in discussions on the issues that affect their own lives and those of their families and communities. Particularly for women, community education can lead to empowerment and social integration, which is not as readily achievable through more formal modes of education and training.

At present, hundreds of community-based groups around Ireland are involved in providing services that encourage and support disadvantaged adults from all backgrounds 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 now counts among its membership almost 200 of these community-based groups and organisations. They include locally based women's groups, men's groups, lone parent groups, literacy groups, unemployment centres, resources centres, traveller groups and adult education centres all around Ireland (AONTAS 2001, p.4).

AONTAS is currently providing support and capacity building training to 25 women's networks, with an information service to a further 51 locally-based women's groups. Funding for this work was originally made available from the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs and the Department of Education & Science. **The STANCE Programme** (Strategies to Advance Networks Collective Empowerment) aims to empower women's networks involved in community education to be more effective and strategic in addressing women's disadvantage.

Many women's networks and groups are dealing everyday with issues concerning refugees and immigrants, and taking a frontline role in addressing the needs of these new disadvantaged groups. The views and experiences of groups working with immigrant communities, particularly immigrant women, are being fed into AONTAS and include the following **practical experiences**:

- **Community Education Model:** Community education is believed by women's groups to be a good model within which to work with immigrants, women in particular, because
 - Programmes provided take into account the learning base and needs of the learners
 - Classes are often practical and life oriented, addressing such issues as opening a bank account, cooking Irish foods and other such everyday tasks
 - The community setting allows better integration with other women experiencing disadvantage, albeit in different forms
 - The informal atmosphere is less intimidating to non-English speakers

- **Difficulties with National Planning Decisions:** One women's group in particular experienced disappointment when a group of immigrant women they had been working with for a considerable period of time were moved from the community setting, in which they were integrating well, into a camp style facility at Mosney. The group maintain:
 - Movement of groups of refugees / asylum seekers between areas can be resource intensive for the community groups and centres working with them
 - Community education providers can feel emotionally and physically drained when such national decisions affect the work of groups at the local level

The overall feeling emerging from women's networks involved in the STANCE programme is that while community education presents itself as a suitable model for non-Irish groups and individuals, further support and resources need to be given to providers and centres as they tackle this relatively new challenge. It is vitally important that adequate resources be in place to fully involve refugee or immigrant groups in the development and organisation of suitable education programmes, so that their community involvement is genuine, rather than mere tokenism.

Conclusion

The issues of inter-culturalism and anti-racism in Ireland are not new, but have existed in various guises over a long period, as groups involved in the representation of traveller issues can attest. However, in recent years the growing population of asylum seekers, refugees and migrant workers has brought a whole range of new challenges to policy makers and practitioners at all levels of education, both nationally and locally. Those involved in the field of adult education are very often at the forefront when it comes to meeting the immediate and longer-term needs of immigrants to this country. Indeed, much work has been and is being done on a daily basis by statutory and voluntary groups around Ireland, who have little option but to meet these new challenges as they emerge. While much work in the adult education sector has been successful and innovative, and we would hope to see good practice recorded, continued and developed, much remains to be done in terms of developing and implementing a coherent national service for immigrant groups and speakers of other languages.

AONTAS, like other representative bodies, is at an early stage in exploring the issues linked to the educational needs of immigrants. The work carried out thus far by the organisation, as outlined within this document, is at a developmental and exploratory stage: We have yet to fully understand and research the needs of immigrants in the Irish context, which is an essential starting point to the implementation of policy and practice in adult education. However, we hope to see further supports put in place which will allow the necessary research, discussion and debate to take place around these issues, and look forward to taking part in adult education policy development as regards inter-culturalism and anti-racism. AONTAS sees the achievement of a comprehensive system of education and training for immigrant groups and indeed all groups experiencing educational disadvantage throughout Ireland, as something which should be a priority for those working across the education sector, and in government.

References:

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