

# Submission on the Student Support Bill (2008)

By AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

2008



## **Background**

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation, a non-government membership organisation established in 1969. Its mission is to ensure that every adult in Ireland has access to appropriate and affordable learning opportunities throughout their lives, thus enabling them to contribute to and participate in the economic, social, civic and cultural development of Irish society. AONTAS is currently into the second year of its Strategic Plan 2007-2010 which focuses on four key priority areas: policy, promotion, practice and partnership all of which are underpinned by a fifth priority which is organisational development.

AONTAS welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Student Support Bill (2008) and congratulates the Department of Education and Science for addressing the support needs of Third Level students including mature students. AONTAS, as a membership organisation, is well placed to recognise and document the barriers to participation facing adult learners wishing to access educational opportunities at third level. In this submission AONTAS identifies the challenges for this group of adult learners and makes recommendations for amendment to the student support bill (2008) in order to better address these challenges.

## Key Issues to be addressed in the Student Support Bill (2008)

### 1. Part-time Fees

Part 1, Section 9, 9. (1) (b) *requires attendance by a student on a full-time basis*

In its 2007 campaign 'Demand Your Right to Learn' AONTAS called on Government to remove fees for part-time courses in Higher Education Institutions as a means of promoting access to lifelong learning and increasing third level participation for mature students and those in the workforce<sup>1</sup>.

*"Our performance to date in reaching out to adults has been undermined by the limited availability of part-time and flexible learning opportunities at NFQ levels 6-8 (undergraduate level). In the 2006-7 academic year, less than 7 percent of entrants to undergraduate programmes were part-time students"*<sup>2</sup>

If the Irish Government is to meet the future challenges of maintaining competitiveness and growing the 'knowledge economy' the labour force will need access to flexible learning and up skilling opportunities.

The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher education (2008-2013) referred to above suggests that the limited number of courses available on a part-time basis restricts some people from engaging in third level education. *"The current low level of part-time study opportunities limits the accessibility of higher education for working adults and adults with caring responsibilities."*<sup>3</sup> Coupled with the considerable financial expenses inherent in participation, this militates against participation for large numbers of potential adult learners.

The requirement outlined in the Student Support Bill (2008) that students attend a full time course contradicts the very essence of lifelong learning which, by its nature must fit with the work and family commitments of adult learners. In 2007 an analysis of over 3500 calls to the AONTAS Information

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<sup>1</sup> AONTAS has also produced a policy position paper on part-time fees (2007) available on [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com)

<sup>2</sup> National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2008) Pp. 33, HEA: Dublin

<sup>3</sup> Higher Education Authority National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-13, Pp. 33

Referral Service showed that part-time learning and distance education options were by far the most popular modes of study preferred by adult learners and that the biggest barrier to access was finance<sup>4</sup>.

AONTAS has recently made a submission to the interdepartmental committee on the implementation of the national skills strategy which urges the Committee to use whatever influence it has to modify the particular requirement referred to above since it is out of step with the current trends and future development of higher education and indeed with government policies in relation to uptake of lifelong learning opportunities.

The current Government has made a commitment in 'Towards 2016' to establish a fund to support workers wishing to attend a third level part-time course. "A targeted fund will be put in place to alleviate the fees in public institutions for part-time courses at third level by those at work who have not previously pursued a third level qualification"<sup>5</sup> As part of this commitment a Modular Accreditation Programme (MAP) has been successfully piloted in the Institute of Technology, Tallaght. However this is merely one step in the process of providing access.

AONTAS recommends the Student Support Bill (2008) Part 1; Section 9, 9. (1) (b) is amended to read as follows:

***In this Act 'approved course' means a course which requires attendance by a student on a full-time or a part-time basis or through distance education.***

## 2. Access Plans

Part 3, Section 25, 2. (a) *Access to the institution by economically or socially disadvantaged people, by people who have a disability and by people from sections of society significantly underrepresented in the student body.*

A recent study by the Higher Education Authority (2008) which assessed the effectiveness of access plans implemented by institutions found the following:

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<sup>4</sup> AONTAS submission on Open and Distance Learning (2008) to the Higher Education Authority (available on request)

<sup>5</sup> Towards 2016, Pp. 88, 7.9

*“An evaluation of access programmes published in 2006 found that access is still not a central part of the development strategy in many higher education institutions. Access programmes remain peripheral and access personnel are often not involved in strategic planning or decision making at institutional level. There were also concerns about....the coordination of access services and the broader range of student support services.”*<sup>6</sup>

The preparation of draft access plans by an approved institutions chief officer, as outlined in the Student Support Bill (2008), will only be effective in targeting and supporting economically or socially disadvantaged groups, those with disabilities or traditionally underrepresented groups if institutions are required and supported to mainstream these access plans

AONTAS recommends the Student Support Bill (2008) Part 3; Section 25, 2 is amended to include the following statement:

***A draft access plan is implemented and mainstreamed in the activities and strategies of higher education institutions.***

### **3. Special Rate of Maintenance ‘Top Up’ Grant and Back To Education Allowance (BTEA) payment**

The current draft of the Student Support Bill (2008) outlines grants eligibility for mature students whose reckonable income falls below a certain limit, however, the bill in its current form makes no provision for independent mature students, previously in employment, to avail of the special rate of maintenance grant or ‘top up’ grant. Social Welfare recipients in receipt of the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA)<sup>7</sup> and maintenance grant can also apply for a special rate of maintenance ‘top up’ grant. Currently, low income workers wishing to return to second or third level education on a full time basis cannot avail of the BTEA, unless they sign on for a period of 394 days before applying, neither are they eligible for the ‘top up’ grant.

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<sup>6</sup> National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2008) Pp. 32, HEA: Dublin

<sup>7</sup> The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) is a payment offered to social welfare recipients returning to second or third level education on a full time basis. The BTEA replaces the recipient’s original social welfare payment and can be claimed in addition to third level maintenance grant.

The disparity in educational support for low income earners and those in receipt of social welfare payments acts as a significant barrier to accessing second chance education opportunities. Mature students on minimum wage (€17,992 p.a.) earn less than mature students in receipt of the maximum social welfare payment (€18,055 p.a.). However, while social welfare recipients are entitled to financial supports of up to €25,266 per year a mature student who has worked in low paid employment in the year prior to starting a full time course at third level is entitled to only €4,103 per year. Over a three year degree course this leads to a €63,489 disparity in financial supports<sup>8</sup>. At the moment the system penalises those who work and want to up skill. Ultimately people on the same income, no matter what the source, should be treated equally.

***AONTAS recommends the Department of Education and Science engage in negotiations with the Department of Social and Family Affairs (responsible for the administration of the BTEA) with a view to making an immediate change to the qualifying criteria for both BTEA and the special rate of maintenance 'top up' grant to make low income mature students eligible. The outcome of this negotiation should be reflected in any amendments to the Student Support Bill (2008).***

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<sup>8</sup> Financial costs calculated by AONTAS member, Stephen Stewart in his policy proposal on the 'Top Up' grant see [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com)