



**Submission to the Inter-departmental Committee on the
Implementation of the National Skills Strategy**

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Contact; Berni Brady, Director

AONTAS,

National Adult Learning Organisation,

2nd Floor,

83-87 Main Street,

Ranelagh,

Dublin 6.

Tel: 01 406 8220

Email: info@aontas.com

Website: www.aontas.com

“People are at the heart of the knowledge society. Success in the future will be strongly dependent on growing the skills of our population”¹

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. The plan was developed in the context of some of the following statistical information:

- Less than 8% of Irish adults between the ages of 25 and 64 participate in adult education and training opportunities compared with the EU average of 11% and rates of 25 % in the UK and Scandinavia(CSO Quarterly National Household Survey, May 2006)
- Irish adults can expect to spend far less time in non-formal job-related education and training than their counterparts in other European countries. For example Irish adults will spend just over 200 hours in such training throughout their working lives, as compared to 900 hours for their Danish counterparts (Education at a Glance, OECD, September 2006)
- Nearly 30% of the workforce has lower secondary education or less (CSO,2006)
- Nine per cent of the workforce and 115 of the population are immigrants yet there is no coherent strategy or dedicated funding to support the teaching of English to Speakers of Other languages. As a consequence over one third of learners availing of literacy provision are ESOL learners. (NALA 2006)

¹ Higher Education Authority National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-13, Pp.14

- Ninety percent of Irish people with a third level degree participate in the workforce as compared with 52% with lower educational levels. (CSO, 2006)
- Seventy three percent of 55 US companies employing large numbers of people in Ireland report that they have struggled to secure skilled labour in the past twelve months.(American Chamber of Commerce, May , 2006)

Since adopting its current strategic plan the National Skills Strategy Report has been published and the economy has gone into a sharp decline. The current context within which the National Skills Strategy will be implemented is now much more unpredictable than when the report was first published. However because of the changing nature of the economy it is now more important than ever that commitments made within the National Development Plan and the Partnership Framework, ‘Towards 2016’ to lifelong learning are honoured. AONTAS therefore welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the discussion on the implementation of the National Skills Strategy by the Interdepartmental Committee.

To secure Ireland’s competitiveness into the future, the National Skills Strategy must incorporate an implementation plan which attends to the needs of both employees in the workforce and those who are unemployed. In order to achieve the goals set out in ‘Towards 2016’, the Government must , as a key priority, remove barriers to accessing education and training for adult learners. These barriers are discussed in further detail later in this submission. The low levels of participation in further education and training by comparison with other OECD countries must be addressed seriously if a culture and practice of lifelong learning is to be realised.

KEY ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED BY THE INTERDEPARTMENTAL COMMITTEE

1. Adult Literacy

Current commitments from Government for up skilling, which impact on the Adult and Community Education Sector include²:

Increasing literacy/ESOL places. *“The annual student cohort availing of the general national literacy service ...will be significantly increased by the provision of an extra 7,000 places by 2009. There will be a particular focus on increasing the number of migrants receiving an English language service (ESOL)”*³

² Presentation by Minister Haughey to JOC on Education and Science, 3rd July 2008

AONTAS supports the five key points already submitted by NALA in relation to the development of the National Adult Literacy Programme. They are:-

- **Integration of literacy into public funded education/training programmes**
- **A specific approach to engaging the low skilled to up skill and gain nationally recognised qualifications**
- **Funding for distance education at Levels 1-3**
- **Expansion of the workplace basic education fund**
- **Initiatives to increase demand and awareness**

2. English Language Training and Support

In recent years Ireland has been transformed from a country of emigration to one of immigration and migrant workers now comprise 9% of the workforce. The number of foreign nationals at work in Ireland in 2007 was 334,700, an increase of 17% (up 48,700) on 2006. Foreign nationals filled 73% of the 66,800 jobs created in the Republic over the last year (2007). This means that foreign nationals now account for close to one in six of all those who work in the Republic. Given the importance of the migrant population for Ireland's continued growth and prosperity :-

AONTAS advises the Committee to put in place a coherent strategy for delivering ESOL. AONTAS is aware that discussions are already taking place with the IVEA in relation to the delivery of ESOL since the transfer of funding from IILT. AONTAS is also aware of the fact that over one third of adult literacy learners are ESOL learners. AONTAS recommends the provision of a dedicated and increased fund ring fenced within the Adult Literacy Budget to support ESOL both within the VEC school and college network and on an outreach basis through locally-based community groups. The Community Education Facilitators can play a key role in identifying and supporting such groups to deliver language tuition.

³ Towards 2016, Pp.50

3. Overcoming Barriers to Access

Of particular concern to AONTAS is the most recent information on entry rates to higher education by socio-economic group provided by the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2008-2013)⁴ launched on July 9th 2008. A comparison of entry rates between 1998 and 2004 shows increases for all socio-economic groups except for 'non- manual' which actually shows a decrease of 2% over that timeframe. The occupational profile of the non-manual group includes; clerical and office workers, sales occupations, personal service and childcare workers, central and local government workers, garda and army occupations, social workers and related occupations. People in these occupations are generally low to mid income earners and a high proportion are women.

AONTAS through previous research has identified three main barriers to access for these groups, namely finance, transport and childcare. A further barrier includes exclusion from adult educational guidance support. The Government has committed to increasing opportunities within the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI). *"The Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) will be expanded by 2,000 places by 2009"*⁵. This programme offers flexible part-time opportunities for people to engage in second chance education.

AONTAS commends the Department of Education and Science's decision in September of 2007 to broaden the eligibility criteria for BTEI to include low income workers but urges the Committee to examine how other supports can be put in place to ensure that these workers can take up the places on offer. The key support most often articulated by adult returners is funding their studies.

4. Finance

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"*⁶ 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.

⁴ National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2008-2013) Pp. 89

⁵ Towards 2016, Pp.50

⁶ Towards 2016, Pp. 88, 7.9

AONTAS urges the Committee to prioritise the implementation of a scheme for fee supports for people in work who do not have a first degree as promised in 'Towards 2016'.

5. Back to Education Allowance

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. Social Welfare recipients in receipt of the BTEA 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.

This disparity in educational support between adult learners, many of whom are low income earners and adult learners in receipt of social welfare payments acts as a barrier to up skilling. 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 supports⁷. 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 advises the Committee to negotiate with the Department of Social and Family Affairs with a view to making an immediate change to the qualifying criteria for both BTEA and the special rate maintenance 'top up' grant to make low income mature students eligible. This measure would go a long way to addressing the need to up skill members of the workforce who fall into the 'non-manual' category.

⁷ Financial costs calculated by AONTAS member, Stephen Stewart in his policy proposal on the 'Top Up' grant see www.aontas.com

6. Expansion of Part-time Study Options

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”*⁸ Coupled with the considerable financial expenses inherent in participation, this militates against participation for large numbers of potential adult learners. In this context AONTAS has particular concerns in relation to the new Student Support Bill, in particular Section 9(1) which defines an approved course as one which *“requires attendance by a student on a full-time basis.”* This particular requirement 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 call to the AONTAS Information 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.

AONTAS urges the Committee to use whatever influence it has to have the particular requirement referred to above modified 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.

7. Gender-based supports

The current economic climate in Ireland and the downturn in industry, especially in construction, represent one of the biggest challenges for the Committee. Construction industry peaked at 13.7% (284,600) in the final quarter of 2006 but fell by 5,600 to 279,000 in 2007.⁹ *“Building and civil engineering’ accounts for 26.2% of the increase in redundancies on the live register”*¹⁰. This slowdown in the economy is currently impacting on men for the most part. *“Men accounted for 66% of the monthly increase in the Live Register; however the annual increase is 77%”*¹¹

⁸ Higher Education Authority National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-13, Pp. 33

⁹ *‘Employment Growth Slows but Jobs up 3.2% on 2006’* Irish Times, 6 March 2008

¹⁰ INOU press release, 4th July 2008

¹¹ INOU press release, 4th July 2008

While men are feeling the impact most, women have filled almost 7 out of every 10 jobs created in recent times. By the end of 2007, women accounted for 43.2% of the national workforce. This growth is facilitated by the expansion of the services sector and by the growth in part time employment. Of the 66,800 jobs added to the national workforce over the period 55% (36,500) were part time jobs. Women filled three out of every four of the additional part time jobs.¹² Most of these jobs fall into the 'non-manual' category mentioned earlier so women are less likely to be in a position to avail of further education and training opportunities. They are also more vulnerable to unemployment as the economy slows down. Investment in upskilling therefore requires a gender- proofed approach which takes into account in particular the roles of women in relation to family responsibilities of child bearing, rearing and eldercare.

AONTAS recommends that the Committee reviews childcare supports attached to education and training programmes which have remained at the same level since they were introduced in 1998. AONTAS identified the doubling of childcare supports and yearly reviews as one of its key demands in its pre-election campaign, 'Demand your Right to learn' in 2007. Such a change would go a long way towards supporting women back into the workforce.

For the past two years AONTAS has been training leaders in women's community education groups to deliver a women specific Quality Assurance Framework following a three year pilot project (2003-2005). This process has been resourced by the Department of Education and Science and has greatly enhanced the capacity of women's groups to deliver what could be defined as pre-vocational training to disadvantaged women. The groups have been key to attracting women who are unlikely to return to education and training in an institutional setting for a variety of reasons. However their work and capacity have been eroded over the past five years by lack of recognition of the specific needs of women, at a policy level, and inadequate, short term funding and support at a practical level.

AONTAS recommend that the Committee implement a cross-departmental strategy of multi-annual funding for women's community education groups to enable them to do their work.

¹² Employment Growth Slows but Jobs up 3.2% on 2006' Irish Times, 6 March 2008

Successful models of practice have already been implemented by this sector and have been documented in research by AONTAS and other agencies. AONTAS as a key supporter of women's community education is in a position to supply the committee with evidence of the success of their approaches.

In relation to the take-up of opportunities by men It is apparent that non-skilled, manual and low skilled workers require targeted supports to encourage their uptake of education and training opportunities and to return to employment in the event of their losing current jobs. Existing programmes such as the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) offer flexible solutions for addressing these issues and there are plans for their expansion which AONTAS urges government to adhere to. However a review of the BTEI in 2006 revealed that just 25% of participants were men. Research has been conducted by AONTAS (Gender and Learning, 2002 and Men on the Move, 2000) showing that disadvantaged men require specific approaches in order to attract them back to learning.

AONTAS has recently contributed to the resources which service providers can draw on to encourage men to get involved in second chance education, in the drafting of *Best Practice Guidelines for Increasing Male Participation in BTEI*¹³. Providers should be resourced to put these guidelines into practice through training for staff and the development of outreach processes. Models of practice for attracting disadvantaged men back to education and training developed under the auspices of the Education Equality Initiative which ran from 2003-2006 should also be revisited and implemented as a matter of urgency.

8. Workplace Learning Initiatives

A workplace learning strategy will be vital to the sustainability of competitiveness and economic growth. The context for such a strategy was outlined in the White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life*, 2000. Ireland has seen a rise in numbers of high-skilled jobs requiring third level qualifications, a decline in labouring and agricultural jobs, skills shortages in a number of key service areas and an increasing dependence on migrant workers to fill skills gaps in the economy.

¹³ Unpublished, due for release Autumn 2008

Patterns of early school leaving have been slow to change; breaking the cycle of low educational attainment and poverty among disadvantaged communities proves a difficult and complex task¹⁴. Recent statistics also show that there is a continuing problem with early school leaving particularly among boys, despite large amounts of money being invested in educational disadvantage initiatives at school level¹⁵. There are therefore significant numbers of people in the labour force who are poorly qualified and vulnerable to unemployment and exclusion.

The National Adult Literacy Agency has a track record of involvement in Workplace Basic Education through a number of initiatives. The Agency has identified that demand currently exceeds supply in the WBE fund and have recommended that the fund should be increased on a phased basis to €12 million per annum and its systems and structures reinforced. AONTAS supports this recommendation. AONTAS also recommends the continued strengthening and development of innovative programmes such as Skillnets and ACCEL.

9. A Funding Model for the Support of Workers in Education and Training

According to the NESF, level of education achieved prior to entering the workforce has a big bearing on the level of education attained while in the workforce – those with third level education are 10 times more likely to avail of education/ training opportunities while in work than those with no qualifications.¹⁶ As identified earlier a key problem in developing workplace learning opportunities for those with poor qualification levels is cost: *'There is currently no agreed national consensus on a formula for the sharing of the costs of workplace training. This is a main challenge for Government, employers and unions'*.¹⁷ A model for sharing this cost should be developed urgently¹⁸. Currently employers carry the majority of the cost of expenditure on education and training of people at work¹⁹. However, average spending by companies in Ireland, as a percentage of payrolls has declined from 3.85% in 2001 to 3.13% last year (2007).²⁰

Multi-nationals continue to lead the way in staff training, with expenditure of just over 4% of total employee costs, but this is still below the EU average of 4.15%. A recent report by the IVEA suggests that the annual funding cost of €150 million for up-skilling to levels 4/5 should be paid for by the State. The

¹⁴ Early School Leavers Report (2006)

¹⁵ Early School Leavers Report (2006)

¹⁶ NESF, p. xviii

¹⁷ NESF, p. xviii

¹⁸ AONTAS Submission to NDP

¹⁹ EGFSN report, Pp. 57

²⁰ National Study of Learning and Development Practices (2008) University of Limerick & Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

2006 White Paper on FE Reform in Britain gave an entitlement to those aged 19-25 to free training to achieve a full level 3 (British system) qualifications.

Negotiations with relevant stakeholders in the business sector and the trades unions should be undertaken with a view to finding innovative and flexible ways of investing in and supporting workers to take up further education and training opportunities. Such initiatives might include individual learning accounts, paid educational leave, incentives for employers and so on.

10. Educational Guidance

The success of the Adult Educational Guidance Initiative which was established as a pilot programme during the period of the National development Plan 2000-2006 and which is now being mainstreamed as an integral part of the adult education service delivered by the VECs, demonstrates the importance an value of good information, advice and guidance in making good career choices. However at the level of current resources the service is confined to particular target groups i.e. adult literacy learners, VTOS students and adults wishing to engage in adult and community education. The latter category has inevitably presented problems to the service as it could be defined either very broadly or very narrowly depending on the service provider. The AEGI is currently being evaluated but feedback to the Advisory Committee to the Initiative over the past eight years suggests that there is a need to expand the target groups of the service to include in particular low paid and middle income workers as a matter of course. This will involve expansion of the service with adequate resources to support this expansion. In 2008 the AEGI was allocated a sum of €2 million for expansion. This was wholly inadequate and only allowed for expansion in half the services who applied for it.

AONTAS recommends that funding for expansion of the Adult Educational Guidance Service should be doubled as a matter of priority and increased on a phased basis on the foot of reviews of the service to include services for low paid and middle income earners.

11. Co-ordination and Structural Development

Perhaps one of the greatest failures of the current education and training systems has been lack of collaboration, co-ordination and 'joined-up thinking'. Funding for adult and community education has really only been a feature of the education system for less than ten years with comparatively large

investments being made after the publication of the White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life* (2000) and as part of the National Development Plan 2000-2006. While this funding, in particular for the National Adult Literacy Programme, the Back to Education Initiative and the AEGI began to breathe life into a sector which was struggling to survive, the programmes were rolled out in a parallel fashion with little connection to one another and even less connection to training programmes already in place.

The structural developments at local level recommended by the White Paper were effectively ignored and the National Adult Learning Council disbanded without explanation. In effect this has meant that there is no forum where partner stakeholders and government departments can come together to develop policies and strategies for lifelong learning and to monitor the effectiveness of programmes. It also means that hard statistical data is not gathered in a comprehensive way. Without a coherent approach which involves all of the key providers across the education and training spectrum the delivery of the National skills Strategy may well suffer the same fragmentation as other programmes before it.

The Educational Disadvantage Committee which reported on its three year work programme from 2002-2005 in a publication entitled, *'Moving beyond Educational Disadvantage'* devoted a key section to guidelines for effective services to address educational disadvantage. It outlined a framework proposed by Professor Peter Evans of the OECD in his keynote address to the Educational Disadvantage Forum in November 2002. While Professor Evans was referring to the school system his observations could equally be applied to adult education and training services. One could substitute the workplace for school and workers for pupils.

"Based on an analysis of international practice, Professor Evans articulated a number of principles of effective service delivery in areas that experience high levels of educational disadvantage. In the best models of practice, services are community-based; are delivered to the school and to the home, are accessible and flexible; involve parents; support pupils in enhancing their learning with minimal disruption ;reduce dependence; promote as normal a lifestyle as possible ;avoid fragmentation and duplication, and are accountable through the determination of clear authority and responsibility lines."²¹

In the absence of any coherent overarching structure for the development and delivery of lifelong learning AONTAS strongly recommends that the Committee consult as widely as possible with stakeholders across the board, that it adopts transparent processes in its work, that it feeds back in an

²¹ *Moving Beyond Education Disadvantage*: Report of the Educational Disadvantage Committee 2002-2005 (2005) Pp.10

open way its proposed strategies and produces a timeframe for its implementation plan. The development of coherent structural supports should be part and parcel of the implementation of the National Skills Strategy

AONTAS would welcome the opportunity to participate in any forum, think tank or committee which may be established to support the implementation plan and is willing to contribute its skills, knowledge, expertise and research to this work.

Berni Brady,

Director, AONTAS July 2008