

**RESPONSE TO THE REPORT OF THE
FURTHER EDUCATION (TEACHER
EDUCATION QUALIFICATION GROUP) OF
THE TEACHING COUNCIL**

**FROM AONTAS
THE NATIONAL ADULT LEARNING ORGANISATION.
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Introduction

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation, a non-government membership organisation established in 1969. It currently has 569 members comprising 304 organisational members and 265 individuals. Its member organisations are providers of adult and community education both in the formal and non-formal sectors and individual tutors, learners and researchers working and learning therein.

Mission Statement

The mission of AONTAS 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.

Context

AONTAS estimates that more than 200,000 adults participate in learning programmes across the country each year. Many of these are accredited programmes delivered through the VEC network of schools and colleges while others are delivered by locally based community groups which play a key role in attracting learners who have not been served particularly well by the formal education system first time round. Many of the locally based groups deliver accredited courses while others concentrate on ensuring that learners develop self confidence about learning, enabling them to progress to accredited options.

The key Department of Education and Science (DES) funded programmes are identified in the report of the Working Group on the Further Education Teacher Education Qualification (TEQ) compiled by the Teaching Council. It is also important to note that many other learning programmes delivered in the community are funded from an array of government departments and other sources and many operate independently of the VECs. The Working Group rightly recognises the complexity of the sector which has developed in an ad hoc way as a result of a lack of recognition, resources and a strong voice. Unlike the formal education sector which is supported by the powerful lobby that is the teacher unions the adult and community education sector has very relied on its own resources for more than fifty years. Nonetheless it has developed as an extremely diverse and highly flexible sector responding to the needs of adult learners, developing its learner-centred methodology and curricula through many years of experience, and attracting back to education learners with no or low qualifications.

Policy Development in the Adult and Community Education Sector

A key development for the sector was the publication of the White paper on Adult Education, Learning for Life in 2000. The Paper, which was the result of an extensive consultation process with stakeholders in the sector laid out the first policy framework for adult and community education in the history of the



State and, as a result, resources began to flow into the sector through the Government's National Development Plans. The establishment of the National Qualifications Authority in 2001 and the awarding bodies HETAC and FETAC changed the landscape for adult and community education as they began to establish the National Qualifications Framework and assist providers in complying with the FETAC Quality Assurance Frameworks.

Even though it is now ten years since the publication of the White Paper the section on professional development remains hugely relevant and has to be a starting point for discussion of any developments in the field. At the time of its publication it stated the following:-

Many of those employed in the sector have been recruited on the basis of a second level teaching qualification or a trade or business qualification. While many of them will have taken a variety of orientation and other programmes relating to working with adults, they will not in most cases be accorded professional recognition for this. Many tutors with an Adult Education qualification but who lack a formal "teaching" qualification may find it impossible to secure stable employment in their chosen field. Within the community and voluntary sector there are many workers with high levels of experience and expertise but who lack the professional recognition of a formal qualification. (p 152)

Up until the mid nineties in Ireland the adult and community education service was almost exclusively dependent on volunteers and indeed in 2010 a high percentage of the adult literacy tuition is still delivered by volunteers. Within community education much of the work is also done by volunteers or people who have come through community education themselves and learned their skills "on the job". It should be noted however that many community educators had achieved qualifications through 'adult educator development courses' such as the Higher Diploma/MA in Adult and Community Education, or the Certificate in Continuing Education from NUI/Maynooth as well as courses provided by Meitheal, CAN,CAFTA and other community providers. Other programmes such as Women's Studies, Addiction Studies, Community Development courses, Community Arts are examples of training routes used by adult and community education practitioners.

White Paper recommendations

The White Paper on Adult Education (2000) examined the issue of professional development for adult educators and recommended two key developments. One was the establishment of an Inter-Agency Working Group on Professional Development to progress the issue of formal recognition of qualifications for adult education practitioners, and the second was a Forum for Practitioners designed to bring together practitioners in the sector to share ideas and good practice, inform policy development and develop collegiality.

In relation to the Inter Agency Working Group the paper states:-



The Government recognises the need to explore the feasibility of developing a generic training programme in this field to be implemented initially in a modular format on an inservice basis, but ultimately to be available as a pre-service training programme for the sector. As a first step an inter-agency working group is recommended to progress the issue of formal qualifications for adult education practitioners. (p151)

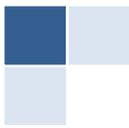
The paper outlines the tasks the IAWG would need to undertake as follows:-

- Represent a wide range of agencies in the field
- Examine the range of qualifications currently available in relation to the needs of the sector
- Identify generic training needs as well as scope the need for specific specialisms on an elective basis
- Explore with third level relevant colleges the scope for a modular and flexible approach to the development of nationally certified inservice and pre-service training programmes
- Make recommendations on the future recognition of qualifications in the adult education sector.

The Paper, recognising the wide range of interests involved in the sector recommends that *“it will be essential to progress the work on a phased basis, underpinned by an inclusive participative consultation process, systematic research and a review of best international practice”.*(p151)

Developments since 2000

While programmes and funding have expanded since the publication of the White Paper neither of the recommendations on professionalism have been implemented. Meanwhile adult educators continue to avail of a range of courses many of which are now accredited but no regulation still exists within the adult education sector. In the area of adult literacy for example, a qualification has been developed by Waterford Institute of Technology partnered by the National Adult Literacy Agency and some work has begun on the accreditation of prior learning through the Further Education and Training Awards Council. The National University of Ireland/Maynooth as mentioned earlier has a strong track record of providing many excellent training programmes for adult educators yet these go unrecognised as an eligibility requirement for working with adults. Other higher education institutions also deliver a range of programmes relevant to practitioners in the adult and community education sector as do community providers. VECs provide Continuous Professional Development for their staff but the budgets tend to be relatively small and it is up to the providers to decide what is best suited to their staff. Also the range of workers in this sector extends beyond those who are actually involved in teaching activities.



The Teaching Council Proposal

While the recently developed proposal for a Teacher Education Qualification for practitioners working in Further Education to be initiated by 2013 by the Teachers Council appears to be confined to those who already have degrees and is designed to comply with the registration regulations in the formal education sector, it could provide a basis for opening up a discussion on the issue of professional qualifications for adult educators as a whole.

Adult learners like all learners are, in the view of AONTAS, entitled to a high quality service which is inextricably linked to the professional development of adult educators. However the flexibility, learner-centred approaches and diversity which are its key successful components must be preserved and developed within any professional development programme. To do this successfully the nature of the sector needs to be thoroughly understood and the stakeholders in the sector fully consulted.

AONTAS is putting forward the following strategies for progressing the issue:-

Working with Stakeholders in the Adult and Community Education Sector

- In accordance with the recommendation made in the White Paper the Teaching Council should widen the consultation process as far as possible. In particular it should consult closely with people who are already familiar with the sector and working within it.
- The Council should convene a working group designed along the lines of the IAWG to include expertise from the Further Education Section /DES, Adult Education Officers Association/VEC, IVEA, AONTAS, NALA and third level colleges both engaged in teacher training and those engaged in the delivery of adult education training programmes.
- The Council should commission an examination of the range of training programmes currently available to adult educators to be brought forward for discussion and recommendations by the Working Group.
- The Working Group should identify generic training needs as well as specific specialisms needed within the sector and make recommendations on how these could be progressed.

In relation to the contextual issues outlined in the proposal AONTAS is making the following observations:-

- Cognisant of the varied backgrounds and academic and prior experience of those teaching in the adult and community education sector, entry requirements should not just be the prerogative of the colleges offering teacher education qualifications but should be drawn up in consultation with the Working Group.



- Recognition of prior learning and experience is a key element for developing professionalism in a sector where many practitioners have learned their skills through experience or non-formal training within the community. It is therefore essential that any new qualification should have built in mechanisms for recognition of previous qualifications and experience.
- AONTAS is in agreement with the Council about the necessity of flexible delivery of training through modular, online and work-based options and of the need to keep costs to a minimum.

Accreditation

With regard to accreditation AONTAS acknowledges the recognition by the Teaching Council that the variety and level of academic qualifications of people currently working within the further education sector will necessitate a variety of qualifications building on one another. However rather than developing a new qualification:-

- AONTAS strongly recommends that the courses and qualifications already developed in the field of adult and community education be explored as a way forward. Not only are these already tried and tested for students but there is a vast body of knowledge and expertise already built up over the years within the colleges that have developed and provided these courses.

Core Values and Framework

In relation to the core values and framework for a professional qualification once more AONTAS would urge the Council to enter a dialogue with the academic staff who have developed and delivered programmes to adult education practitioners in many cases for the past thirty years. Staff responsible for these programmes have over the years not only worked themselves with a range of adult learners, but have developed in collaboration with their students core values, curricula and frameworks relevant to those working within the sector. Examples of such courses would be those delivered by NUI/Maynooth and Waterford Institute of Technology to name just two.

Conclusion

As stated at the outset AONTAS views the proposal by the Teaching Council as a means of opening a dialogue about professionalism within the adult and community education sector as a whole. The development and recognition of qualifications for adult education practitioners is a key underpinning plank in a good quality service. It is vital however that the knowledge skills experience and research developed within the sector informs this process. AONTAS looks forward to being part of the consultation process with other key stakeholders, and to contributing to this vital development in the adult and community education sector.

Berni Brady, Director, AONTAS, March 2010