

AONTAS PRESENTATION TO THE MEMBERS OF THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND SOCIAL PROTECTION ON THE ROLE AND POTENTIAL OF COMMUNITY EDUCATION

February 26th 2014

Berni Brady, Director, AONTAS

AONTAS welcomes this opportunity to present to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection. This presentation will focus on

- How community education has developed in Ireland
- Why community education is relevant in the current social and economic context
- The challenges for community education in fulfilling its potential in reaching those most distant from the labour market, in building strong communities and as a labour market intervention.

About AONTAS

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation, a membership organisation funded by the Department of Education and Skills. Its mission is to advocate for the right of every adult in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives. AONTAS currently represents over 500 member organisations which include providers in the statutory sector, providers in the community and voluntary sector, researchers, academics and individual adult learners. AONTAS also supports a Community Education Network, a platform of 140 organisations delivering community education in a range of settings around the country, both urban and rural.

The key role of AONTAS is promoting and advocating for the value and benefits of adult and lifelong learning. It also provides a platform for adult learners to voice their needs, views, issues and concerns in relation to the services they receive. AONTAS has been actively engaged in the reform agenda within the Further Education and Training sector. AONTAS made a strong case for the inclusion of community education providers within the Further Education and Training (SOLAS) Bill. As a result, the new authority has consulted with community education providers in the development of the new Further Education and Training Strategy. Berni Brady, Director of AONTAS was appointed to the Board of SOLAS.

About Community Education

Community education in Ireland is delivered in both the statutory and non-statutory sector. Community education in the statutory sector is co-ordinated through Community Education Facilitators based in local ETBs. Community education in the non- statutory sector is delivered through a number of independently managed not for profit providers who receive financial support from a number of sources including government departments, as well as the ETBs through the BTEI initiative.

Who participates in Community Education?

Community education has been especially successful in targeting those most hard to reach to engage in education. These groups include early school leavers, lone parents, long term unemployed, ethnic minorities, people experiencing physical and mental illness, addiction, homelessness and other forms of marginalisation. In 2013 approximately 58,000 learners participated in Department of Education and Skills funded community education programmes while AONTAS estimates that as many as a further 30,000 learners participate in programmes funded by independently managed community groups. Learners who do not participate in courses delivered by statutory providers, or who may require a more resource intensive intervention, can take the step back into learning through community education.

What makes community education so effective?

The range of supports available to learners through community education is particularly effective and has the capacity to support people to progress through the Qualifications Framework, onto further education, training and employment. These include:-

- **Being located in local community projects and resource centres**
- **Having skilled outreach development staff to connect with “hard to reach” potential learners and encourage them to participate**
- **Focussing on the whole person as a learner taking into account their economic, social, cultural and emotional needs and circumstances**
- **Providing childcare, mentoring, study supports, guidance and counselling**
- **Providing literacy, numeracy and IT supports**
- **Providing follow-up supports after formal courses are completed**

What kinds of programmes does Community Education offer?

Community Education offers a range of courses that respond to learners in their community: these include accredited and non-accredited courses. This choice is crucial to supporting learners to engage in learning at a pace and format which is tailored to suit them. This is particularly important for learners who have had poor experiences of the formal education system and who do not regard learning as being ‘for them’. Non-accredited learning has a specific role in terms of access, transfer and progression onto the National Framework of Qualifications. This is particularly evident for those most marginalised, as it builds confidence around learning and encourages learners to take up accredited learning. Non-accredited courses might include taster courses, short courses over a period of weeks and longer courses over a period of one year. Programmes range from personal development through life skills to new skills and interests.

One of the most important developments in recent times has been the capacity of community education providers to offer accredited courses which allow learners to take that step towards achieving a full award, to progressing to further accredited learning and ultimately secure employment.

Among the accredited programmes offered by community education are:-

- **Courses leading to certification from Level 1- 3 (40% achieved FETAC Level 3 in 2012)**
- **Minor (or component) awards with a focus on basic skills/ courses for employment from level 1-5. This allow learners to build accredited learning on a gradual basis and on the basis of 'filling the gaps' in knowledge.**
- **Major awards with a focus on basic skills/ courses for employment**
- **Courses up to Level 7 (Degree) in response to community need**

What are the outcomes of Community Education?

AONTAS's and other research shows that community education has a range of outcomes for the learner and communities

- **New skills – both personal and vocational**
- **Mainstream employment**
- **Pathways to Further Education and Training**
- **Work experience programmes**
- **Personal development and confidence building**
- **Active citizenship, community activity and empowerment**
- **Social inclusion and connection**
- **Volunteering**
- **Improved quality of life for individuals, their families and communities**

AONTAS has advocated for the value of community education not only in terms of its social outcomes, but also as a valid form of labour market activation which works for people who are distant from the labour market, and who experience educational disadvantage and poverty. As part of making this case, AONTAS facilitated an event in March 2013 where adults who had participated in community education described the successful elements of that experience to policy makers in the FET sector and to Minister for Training and Skills, Ciaran Cannon. Also at the event community education providers outlined the challenges they face in terms of balancing a range of funding streams and accessing new funding streams, where they struggle to compete with private providers for diminishing resources.

A combination of personal supports for learners, a highly developed outreach strategy, the provision of both accredited and unaccredited learning opportunities and responsiveness to emerging employment opportunities within the local area were some of the factors identified by both learners and providers in terms of describing how community education helps people secure employment or brings them closer to the labour market.

Community education also offers value for money. The AONTAS research, [More than just a Course](#) showed that learners who start to volunteer as a result of community education contribute a high return of €28.8 million to the State and a low return of €9.1million per annum.

Challenges for Community Education

The unique role of community education needs to be recognised

While community education has been recognised within the context of the new FET strategy as an important strand of Further Education and Training its outcomes in terms of accreditation and employment cannot compete with other better funded and more time intensive FET programmes. This is because working with the most marginalised and distanced from education and training requires extra time, supports, outreach, mentoring and most importantly providing learning at a pace that suits the learner. While SOLAS aims to focus on the twin agendas of economic success and social inclusion the challenge will be how to connect the work of community education with the mainstream while preserving its capacity to be a key access point and supported pathway for marginalised people.

The development of new Service Level Agreements presents the opportunity to establish relationships at local level between ETBs and providers which are equal and which offer a range of choices and supports for learners.

Generally speaking community education is the least well funded stream of provision within the system. The lack of multi-annual funding and a distinct funding stream leads to an inability to plan long term and a high dependence on volunteering. Fundamentally, the most underfunded part of the FET system is working with learners who need the most time, support and flexibility in order to ensure they participate and complete their learning programmes. Swift outcomes are not possible when dealing with the most disadvantaged learners.

A whole organisation approach to funding and resources is needed

Community education is currently funded by a combination of state supports through ETBs, SOLAS, POBAL, a range of government departments and funding from charitable and private sources. In general different funding streams for community education support various aspects of the work of a community education organisation, for example funding for tutor hours merely covers one aspect of community education provision. This cannot not sustain the community education organisation compelling it to seek funding from a range of sources which is both time consuming and often unreliable, thus making it impossible to plan long term approaches to provision. AONTAS has proposed a model for funding which takes a whole organisation approach as follows.¹

¹ http://www.aontas.com/download/pdf/final_cen_position_paper.pdf

What needs to be funded



How community education can be funded

1. Funding will cover the true costs of community education
2. Multi-annual funding scheme for community education groups
3. Education provision that will be covered by the fund will include: vocational and non-vocational learning
4. Education provision that will be covered by the fund will include accredited and non-accredited learning
5. Funding mechanism will be locally managed
6. Funding will not be target-led but community-led
7. Funding administrators will have specific expertise in community education

The QQI Fees Schedule will have an impact on the delivery of community education

Linked to the funding issue is the new, potentially devastating prospect of fees associated with QQI. The fees proposed are unsustainable and out of reach for community education providers who are already operating on low and precarious funding. Community education engages hard to reach learners, the majority of whom have not achieved Upper Second Level Education through formal education. These second chance learners are also specific target groups for education and training/activation: long-term unemployed, lone parents who would not normally engage in formal education due to previous negative experiences. As a result, community education providers cannot pass on the fee cost to learners, unlike private providers.

As it currently stands there is no differentiation in QQI fees between FET providers: statutory, voluntary or private provider. The fees also do not take into account the target group of learners which the provider engages.

Feedback from members of the CEN to AONTAS indicates that the Fees Schedule proposed by QQI will result in the following:

- Community Education providers Inability to access funding as the criteria for such is often contingent on the delivery of accredited training
- Loss of QA (Quality Assurance) for groups due to their inability to pay fees may result in a loss of autonomy for community education groups and ultimately the loss of a vital access and progression point for the most disadvantaged learners. AONTAS supports the points made by ICTU to the Committee on this issue on February 19th.

Case Study: Community Education as a labour market intervention

An Cosán

An Cosán, a community education centre in Jobstown, Tallaght provides valuable community services, education, training and employment opportunities in an area of Dublin experiencing extreme educational disadvantage. The average level of unemployment in Tallaght West is 40% (in comparison with the national average of 19%). 38% of the population in Tallaght West are lone parents. Intergenerational educational disadvantage is a fact of life for people in Tallaght West. According to an Cosán, ***'In a country which is populated by an increasingly skilled and educated workforce, the figures indicate that the people in communities such as Tallaght West will struggle to compete for jobs against the wider population due to this gap.'*** A survey carried out with learners at an Cosán in 2012 revealed three reasons why people choose to learn there: ***to increase their confidence; to get a job and to get a qualification.***

An Cosán has developed a range of highly successful education interventions to respond to these needs. Their approach to developing and delivering education is underpinned by the following ethos and experience:

'An informal outreach programme, with lots of taster sessions, coffee mornings is important if those most hard to reach are to be persuaded and encouraged to return to education. Our experience indicates that learners returning to second chance education generally opt for a non-accredited programme initially. However, a positive learning experience, and increase in self confidence and an opportunity to build core skills e.g. communication, team working, literacy and leadership results in learners setting new goals including progression to accredited options and employment.'

An Cosán has high learner retention rates, with the initial provision of non-accredited learning opportunities yielding even greater outcomes for participants who pursue both further education and higher education at the centre. Overall out of the 1,500 learners that have engaged in Early Childhood Education Programmes over the past ten years at an Cosán, data indicates that at least 1,200 are now in employment. An Cosán's third level retention rates are higher than the national average. Of the first cycle of 17 students on the BA Degree in Leadership and Community Development, 16 graduated with a Degree and one student graduated with a Higher Cert. That represents a 100% retention rate.

References and further reading

- *Creating an effective mechanism for funding community education* (AONTAS Position Paper, 2011) available from http://www.aontas.com/download/pdf/final_cen_position_paper.pdf
- *Community Education, Long Term Unemployment and the Labour Market* (AONTAS Submission to the Action Plan on Jobs, 2013) available from http://www.aontas.com/download/pdf/aontas_submission_action_plan_on_jobs_2014.pdf
- *'More than just a Course'* (AONTAS Research on the outcomes and benefits of Community Education, commissioned by DES 2011) available from http://www.aontas.com/download/pdf/community_education_more_than_just_a_course.pdf
- *Community Education: A Strategy for Success* (AONTAS Report from Lobby for Learning Day 2013) available from <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/community-education-a-strategy-for-success-lobby-for-learning-report-2013/>