

Friday 25 May, 2018

Attn: Dr. Greg Swinand  
Indecon Economic Consultants and the Department of Education and Skills

## AONTAS Submission on the Career Guidance Review

First let me begin by thanking Indecon and the Department of Education and Skills for taking the time to contact AONTAS and requesting a submission concerning the Career Guidance Review. The value of a free, professional, dedicated, impartial, informed, and accessible guidance service cannot be underestimated when accounting for the long-term social and economic success of learners who are able to engage with such services. The Adult Guidance and Information Service within the Education and Training Boards, and similar services are examples of well-run professional services that prove value for money in terms of the impact they have on learners with whom they engage. The challenge is that most learners are not given the opportunity to engage with guidance professionals and so are left on their own to navigate complex systems. Similarly challenging, others are left to receive guidance from people that might mean well but who are not professionally trained.

### 1) From your experience how could existing career guidance tools and career information for students and adults be improved, so that they have a greater impact on students making course and career choices?

The position of AONTAS in all our work is informed by the voice of our membership and the voice of learners themselves. Listening to our members and learners over the years the focus of this submission focuses entirely on the needs of these groups and ensuring that the systems and people providing guidance to learners are well resourced and as efficient and effective as possible.

The two primary improvement areas noted in this submission concern issues of learner accessibility to guidance services and the effective and efficient delivery of those services once they are being accessed.

#### Accessibility

The most significant issue facing learners as they seek guidance in their return to and progression through education is access. Through various learner engagement opportunities as well as through information heard from AONTAS members about their learners' experiences, the issue of accessibility to an impartial and well-informed guidance service is a significant challenge across Ireland.

Due to an under resourcing of dedicated and person-to-person guidance professionals available around the country, learners are often forced to seek information themselves (often online) or accept advice from people (such as administrative staff or tutors in education intuitions) who are not guidance professionals. Trying to navigate the complex world of educational options for adults returning to education is a daunting task.

Many adult learners in Ireland return to education after years of being outside the formal education system and face the often intimidating and complex world of acronyms, qualification levels, and program offerings. Even once a learner manages to find a pathway into education,

and commit to returning to learning, the challenge then becomes finding the information they

need to select the right course(s) that will meet their needs not just in the short term but also in the medium and long-term.

Due to resourcing and availability of guidance professionals, course tutors and often general administration staff throughout further education, community education, and higher education institutions find themselves providing triaged guidance services to learners seeking support and an informed understanding of the system they now find themselves inside. During the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum (2016, 2017, and 2018) which is funded by SOLAS and managed by AONTAS we have heard often from learners that they are also receiving guidance from social workers in the Department of Employment and Social Protection (DEASP). These examples of triaged supports are qualitative evidence of a gaping hole that exists in the provision of professional guidance around the country. While all of these supporting individuals in the educational sphere are providing information as best they can and out of the best intention of helping learners, this information is not being provided in a systematic way by guidance professionals. There is the risk that guidance information provided in this informed way is incorrect, contains incomplete information, or doesn't provide the learner with the long-term whole of life approach to guidance that would otherwise be provided by a guidance professional.

Continuing from the above, while the development of online information resources for learners like [fetchcourses.ie](https://fetchcourses.ie) are a positive development in terms of making more information available to learners there are negative effects that result. Rather than developing online resources as tools to supplement the data already available to learners, AONTAS has heard from many learners during the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum, as well as through the AONTAS managed One Step Up program that they have been directed to [fetchcourses.ie](https://fetchcourses.ie) by the previously mentioned triaged supports in order to find the information they require. While the provision of online information may seem like an efficient process for getting information to learners it also leaves the most vulnerable learners in our society, such as those with literacy and digital literacy skills at a severe disadvantage. Even for learners who do not have challenges of literacy and/or digital literacy the [fetchcourses.ie](https://fetchcourses.ie) website and other similar online resources can be a challenge to navigate or access. As evidenced and reported in the 2017 National FET Learner Forum Learner Report a learner is quoted as stating "You could be all day and all night on the Fetch Courses website looking and looking; and unless you know what you're looking for or where to look, it is quite difficult to find." Furthermore on the issue of access there remain significant areas of rural Ireland where access to reliable internet connections remains a barrier to information.

Saying all of the above, there has to be real tangible solutions that are available to learners that accounts for limits on available government resources. A viable option that has been broached in discussions during the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum as well as discussions of learners consulted as part of the HEA Access Plan mid-term review, is to provide at minimum a short guidance consultation appointment to adult learners entering education

after years outside the formal education system. One of the challenges recognised by AONTAS over the years is that learners looking to return to education had difficulty finding a single

resource that was easily understood and accessible, and which provided information about their options for returning to education that focused on their needs and ambitions over the course of their life, rather than only on the short-term availability of what courses may be available in their immediate region. Most adult learners returning to education and seeking guidance support are doing this because they are seeking a new career or other life path. Therefore they need to be aware of all their options available to suit their ambitions.

To overcome this challenge of segmented information AONTAS developed and launched our current [One Step Up Information Booklet](#) in 2017. The One Step Up information booklet which is also available online provides information on adult learning options whether it's a course, funding information or local education contacts. The booklet provides information to learners on where to find information and guidance support they need to make informed decisions about their future. While the One Step Up website and information booklet has been a great success over the past year the reason for its creation was due to a recognition of gaps in easy to understand services available to adult learners.

### Efficient and Effective

Once accessible there are gaps in the provision of efficient and effective guidance that are noted by learners and also AONTAS members. Two significant challenges are the 1) administrative requirements of guidance professionals that take them away from their primary task of assisting learners and 2) the lack of whole of life guidance available to learners.

On the issue of administration AONTAS has heard from members and other stakeholders who provide guidance services that increasingly heavy administrative requirements without a corresponding increase in resources mean that they are less able to effectively meet the needs of learners. To support adult learners returning to education it is important that the educational system also support guidance professionals. As new administrative requirements are developed there can't be an expectation that existing services won't suffer as a result. Going forward it would be beneficial if this guidance review ensured that there is clarity about the roles of guidance professionals as it concerns provision of services to learners in balance with their administrative requirements.

On the point of providing guidance from a whole of life approach, it is important that guidance services provided to learners try and help them understand their learning options according to their desired long-term outcomes. Too often learners have told AONTAS that information they have read or been provided has focused only on the short-term issue of entering specific courses in their geographic area. To be truly helpful to learners and to benefit Ireland socio-economically, learners must be given support to look at their options both in the short and long-term.

Guidance professionals associated with the AEGI provide this type of lifelong guidance well; but other triaging guidance services discussed earlier are often not as effective. Learners at the 2016

and 2017 National FET Learner Forum as well as learners in the HEA mid-term review of the Access Strategy talked about challenges faced by not having effective long-term guidance. Based on the short-term information they received throughout their journey back to education

learners spoke often about how they could think they were taking the right steps but then when they reach the next stage of their career or education they would hit road blocks in terms of entry requirements, or career requirements; all because they did not have correct or complete information earlier. Increased guidance services to support course selection, progression and career development is an extremely important need that must be met, particularly for adult learners who are often returning to education after many years outside the formal education system.

2) **In your opinion, how do learners form their opinions around career choice including when, who and what influences these choices and which mechanisms and formats have the greatest impact on students and adults career choices?**

The response to this broad question of career choice and education will inevitably be broad as well. While the individual choice of learners varies widely there is no doubt that many adult learners returning to education are influenced heavily by their economic opportunity in the regions of Ireland in which they live. Learners have told AONTAS often in various fora that their economic opportunities are often a driving indicator of the courses in which they enrol. Information about their economic opportunity however often comes not from guidance professionals, but from the triaging professionals mentioned earlier in this submission such as social workers, administrative staff, or tutors working with providers, such as ETBs.

While it is logical that many learners choose their educational opportunities according to their economic opportunities the danger is that their decisions are being made according to incomplete information as has been written about previously. Without a professional guidance service informing learner decisions from a lifelong approach, the information learners act on can often be incomplete and may not be in their long-term interest.

3) **Outline what measures could be designed and what framework created to enhance enterprise engagement with the education and training system in relation to providing information on career pathways for students and adults.**

To develop a successfully integrated system where guidance service that is linked to education and training services it is important for professional guidance to be available in all regions of the country and engaged with education providers in their regions. Guidance services must be aware of the opportunities available to learners locally and nationally, as well as with regards to opportunities in community education, further education, and higher education, so that learners have the best information available for decision making depending on their needs and motivations for learning, whether economically motivated or not.

To ensure that learners have the best information available about their options throughout the education system and into employment, guidance services must be accessible and impartial. A challenge that AONTAS has heard from many learners during the National Further Education and

Training Learner Fora in 2016, 2017 and 2018 is that information provided from the triaging guidance providers are often deemed unhelpful and/or seen to be pushing learners into a course for the purpose of maintaining social payments or filling a course. Guidance of this nature is neither helpful to the learner nor helpful to the wider socio-economic standing of the country.

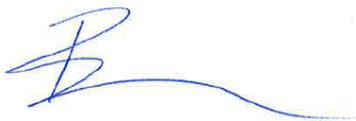
## Conclusion

I want to thank you for taking the time to request and consider this submission from AONTAS regarding the Career Guidance Review. I want to take this opportunity to clearly state that any effective guidance system must keep as its core purpose the needs of learners as it regards access to information about their future. Too often in the public policy process the needs of the citizens/learners trying to be served come second place to the needs or expectations of the systems providing services. For this reason it is very important that Indecon is including in its review process a survey of learners from across the education spectrum so that a clearer understanding of learner needs and expectations can be considered as part of the ongoing development of a world class guidance service in Ireland. AONTAS will share the opportunity for learner engagement in this process with our membership.

We hope that our comments have an impact on the Career Guidance Review in a way that positively impacts learners by providing them with the resources they need to make informed, short, medium, and long-term decisions about their future.

Thank you again for your time and we look forward to further contributing to consultation processes that will come as part of this Review should those opportunities for discussion and engagement arise. If you have any questions about this submission please do not hesitate to contact me. Further if you are seeking to link with practitioners or learners across the country please let us know and we would be glad to connect you directly with membership.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'B. Hendriksen', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Benjamin Hendriksen  
Advocacy Lead  
AONTAS