

AONTAS

Pre-Budget Submission 2020

A Vision for Educational Equality



AONTAS Pre-Budget Submission, Budget 2020

Introduction: A Vision for Educational Equality

The AONTAS 2020 pre-budget submission continues the organisation's 50 year-long tradition of tackling educational inequality for systemic social change so that all adults in Ireland have the opportunity to achieve their educational aspirations through an equitable lifelong learning system. It is based on our mission to advocate for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives, and to promote the value and benefits of lifelong learning. AONTAS developed this pre-budget submission based on our extensive ongoing engagement with adult learners, community education providers, Further Education and Training (FET) practitioners and adult education practitioners across the field of lifelong learning including at higher level. The proposals in this submission seek to create a fairer lifelong learning system for all adults, not just as a compensatory measure, but to enable a truly positive, learning experience that develops over the lifetime.

The AONTAS pre-budget submission coincides with the recently published Joint Committee on Education and Skills Report on Education Inequality & Disadvantage and Barriers to Education (May, 2019) and specifically supports the recommendations of that report, and most specifically those regarding Community Education.

Adult learning is transformative with wide-ranging benefits at the personal, community and societal level. Ireland already lags behind other European countries in lifelong learning with an 8.9% participation rate¹, of even greater concern is the very low lifelong learning participation rate of people who left school early (2.5%)². However, educationally disadvantaged adults are participating in adult learning: 23% of those who left school early (without Upper Second Level) participated in non-accredited education in 2018 (CSO 2018). This suggests that these learners are more likely to return to education by taking non-accredited courses. If the Government truly wishes to improve the lifelong learning rates of the most educationally disadvantaged, then their needs should be considered. Those most



¹ The percentage of persons aged 25-64 who received formal and/or non-formal education and training in the four weeks prior to the survey.

² <https://www.aontas.com/knowledge/blog/aontas-welcomes-increase-in-lifelong-learning-participation-rate-to-8.9>.

educationally disadvantaged engage least in lifelong learning and their needs must be prioritised in Government policy.

Adult Learning is Not a Cost, It's an Investment (FinALE, 2018)³.

We know the financial impact of adult learning at micro (employment opportunities, earnings, career development) meso (productivity) and macro level (economic, crime reduction, social cohesion and health)⁴. We also know that for every Euro invested in adult learning, there is a wide-ranging return on investment. For example, using a Well-Being Valuation Approach, research by NIACE in the UK it was suggested that the return on a 30 hour course offered were: health benefits €150; improvement in social relations €700 and increase in earnings €250 (FinALE, 2018).⁵

A Vision for Adult Learning

The impact of those experiencing educational disadvantage are vast and last a lifetime from a lower quality of life, poorer health, precarious employment conditions, poverty as well as homelessness and addiction; we must commit to breaking the cycle and guarantee quality adult education for all⁶. There is a growing understanding that a complex range of factors impact on a person's ability to engage in education.



This submission focuses on:

- Supporting the transition of adults into education through community education
- Supporting adults to do well and progress by responding to their needs
- Supporting adult learning to fulfil its potential contribution to society by supporting the provision of adult learning broadly

³ http://www.financing-adult-learning.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=265:adult-education-it-s-not-a-cost-it-s-an-investment&catid=126:news&Itemid=648.

⁴ <https://eaea.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/FinALE-Indicators-final.pdf>.

⁵ <https://eaea.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/FinALE-Indicators-final.pdf>.

⁶ [Joint Committee on Education and Skills Report on Education inequality & disadvantage and Barriers to Education 2019.](#)

AONTAS Prebudget Submission Asks for an equitable adult learning system

A Thriving Community Education Sector	Learner Voice for Action: Creating an Inclusive Lifelong Learning Society	Lifelong Learning for Sustainability
Community education will be sustainably, funded, effectively measured and recognised on an equal footing with other areas of the education system. It will be recognised as having a specific and crucial role in supporting educational equality.	Everyone should have the opportunity to actively participate and succeed in adult learning and to fulfil their educational ambitions regardless of their past educational experience, social class, sexual orientation, civil status, gender, race, ethnicity, religion or disability. The policy and practice in the adult, further, community, and higher education systems should be continually shaped by acting on a diverse range of authentic learner voices.	Policy makers will recognise the role lifelong learning plays in achieving social, civic, environmental and economic sustainability.
Funding to support sustainable provision	Learner Voice	Funding for adult learning programmes
1. Multi-annual funding for independent non-profit community education organisations	1. Invest in continuous professional development for educators regarding teaching and learning, including engaging the learner voice	1. Maintain a heterogeneous education system with a specific focus on adult learning programmes that support critical thinking and active citizenship
2. Increase funding for SOLAS funded community education by €5 million with a specific designated budget for quality assurance and QQI reengagement	2. Continue to support the National FET Learner Forum as part of the FET Strategy. Use the Forum as a model of qualitative data collection for meaningful learner voice engagement across the education system (as appropriate)	
Accredited courses for community education learners	Further Education and Training	2. Ringfence funding for adult learning provision across community education and further education with a specific focus on environmental sustainability
3. Multi-annual funding for community education to include a budget line for quality assurance costs	3. Increased transport cost support for FET learners	
4. No QQI fees for reengagement	4. Ensure that DEASP does not deduct payments for students who miss a day due to illness/unforeseeable issue	
Innovation to develop the potential of community education	5. Ensure there is childcare available for learners – ‘no crèche, no class’ mantra is still pertinent	
5. Ensure community education groups can maintain their ability to provide accredited provision on the NFQ	6. Identify non-standard employees as a specific target group for the Skills to Advance framework	
6. Funding for accessible higher education provision in a community setting through PATH funding	7. Ensure FET opportunities are clearly communicated to the general public and employees in precarious/non-standard employment	
7. Support for interdepartmental communication of the potential of community education to support educational equality	8. Offer guidance for employees in non-standard employment	
8. Explore the potential of community education as pre-apprenticeship programmes for encouraging female participation in apprenticeships	Mature Students	
9. Ensure quantitative measurement is not overly burdensome and is fit for purpose in measuring outcomes – implement the new POBAL ‘distance travelled’ tool for DES funded community education	9. Funding to cover part-time higher education fees for first-time mature students	
10. In the Skills to Advance policy framework, include funding for community education to reach people in non-standard employment, offering them the opportunity to engage in learning	10. Let lone parents access SUSI as part-time students given their specific parenting, childcare and accommodation challenges. (DES)	

1. A Thriving Community Education Sector



Community education effectively engages hard to reach groups, particularly women, lone parents⁷ and those from ethnic minority migrant backgrounds due to its location, accessibility and outreach, in addition to the supports it provides such as childcare. In many cases community education provides the only accessible educational opportunity for adult learners.

Community Education:

- ✓ **Offers a range of learner-centred provision** which is locally-based education provision offered in a community organisation that can be accredited or non-accredited
- ✓ **Supports educational equality:** it has a history of successfully engaging the hardest to reach learners and supporting them as they achieve their personal potential and progress to further education and employment⁸
- ✓ **Has an inherent in-depth understanding of social exclusion and poverty** which informs community education practice
- ✓ **Meets learners where they are at:** in their communities and in settings which are more welcoming and informal than traditional classrooms
- ✓ **Impactful broader outcomes** on local communities are significant based on research carried out in Ireland⁹ and across Europe¹⁰

The Issue: Unsustainable Funding Model of Community Education

AONTAS has raised the issue of the underfunding of community education and the detrimental impact this has on the most educationally disadvantaged learners. AONTAS research in 2012¹¹ and 2017¹², as well as ongoing work with the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) identifies the issues for community education funding as:

⁷ When assessing the position of lone parents in Ireland [the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection](#) positively supported research which suggests an ‘education first’, rather than a ‘work first’, approach to interventions which, in the longer term, will lift families out of poverty and into employment.

⁸ <http://www.cefa.ie/publications.html>.

⁹ [The Social Value of Community-Based Adult Education in Limerick City; Purpose, People, Process Community Education in Donegal 2018.](#)

¹⁰ Learning and Work Institute (2017) [Healthy, Wealthy and Wise: The impact of adult learning across the UK.](#)

¹¹ [AONTAS. Position paper on creating an effective funding mechanism for community education.](#)

¹² [Fitzsimons, Camilla and Magrath, Conor. FinALE “Where to Invest” Funding Adult Education.](#)

- Unstable precarious funding that inhibits planning, provision and expansion
- A range of government departments (approx. eight), and a plethora of funding streams, are needed to cover the true cost of community education provision (tutor hours, premises, staffing etc). The complexity and lack of a joined-up funding approach by government results in excessive administrative burden on community education providers in terms of their capacity to complete multiple funding applications all with different templates followed by compliance with different administrative, financial and data recording and reporting processes.

In 2018 SOLAS reported that the €10.9 million spend on community education provision benefited approximately 50,000 learners which equates to **€218 per learner**. Regarding total FET provision costs (excluding community education) SOLAS spent €472.5 million benefiting approximately 288,000 learners which equates to **€1641 per learner**¹³. **The funding for community education simply does not cover the true cost of provision.**

Also, over the past decade little has changed in terms of funding for community education; in 2009 it was **€181 per learner** (AONTAS, 2010). A cost benefit analysis demonstrated that the shortfall in funding for community education must be recouped through a complex range of additional funding (AONTAS, 2010)¹⁴. In that study, it was estimated that that true cost of provision for community learners was **€676** - spent per learner per annum. **If it costs three and a half times more to fund community education than that received, this inevitably leads to an unsustainable model of community education.**

This disparity in funding is clearly not a fair reflection of the value for money which community education comparatively delivers in terms of the wide range of benefits for individual community education learners, their families, wider communities and society as a whole. We support Social Justice Ireland's Pre-Budget submission regarding the need to increase funding for community education by €5 million per annum¹⁵.

The underfunding of community education has also been noted by **the Joint Committee on Education and Skills** who observed that there are key areas and transitions where education outcomes are at risk of deteriorating, one specifically being: "in adult and community education settings where funding is sparse" (Conclusion 3, p.21). AONTAS fully supports the **Joint Committee's** recommendations that:

- support is given to Community Education to achieve parity of esteem with other sectors in the formal education system
- funding for community education is increased in future budgets (Recommendation p.25)

¹³ [The 2018 Further Education and Training \(FET\) Services Plan.](#)

¹⁴ https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/AONTAS-Research/community_education_more_than_just_a_course.pdf.

¹⁵ <https://www.socialjustice.ie/content/policy-issues/budget-2020-must-take-heed-deficits-irelands-education-system>

The recent **OECD report** (2019), which cited the FinAL€ research project of which AONTAS was a partner, stated that the current funding system for community education is ineffective. It explained:

‘project-based funding is temporary by nature which can undermine the financial sustainability of adult learning system; and procedures for accessing external funds can be complex and time-consuming, which can result in gaps in adult learning provision and can absorb a significant amount of human and financial resources which could otherwise be available for training’ (OECD, 2019, p.94).

Community education should be sustainably funded, effectively measured and recognised on an equal footing with other areas of the education system. It should be recognised as having a specific and crucial role in supporting educational equality.

The Primary Ask:

Funding to support sustainable community education provision

- 1.** Multi-annual funding for independent non-profit community education organisations
- 2.** Increase funding for SOLAS-funded community education by €5 million with a specific designated budget for quality assurance and QQI reengagement

In order to be successful in meeting the needs of learners and communities a new sustainable multi-annual funding model must:

- Be a needs-based, multi-annual funding process that responds to community-based needs assessments
- Cover the true cost of community education provision including overhead costs, administration, and provision
- Measure the outcomes of community education by including the ‘distance travelled’ of the learner¹⁶

Cost-Neutral Measures to Support the Development of Community Education

- 1.** Multi-annual funding for community education to include a budget line for quality assurance costs

¹⁶ The ‘distance travelled’ by each learner varies depending on their life experiences and the time passed since they were last in education. Quantitative assessments of lifelong learning participation that are based on metrics such as completion of a single award mask the life experience of a learner, offering no insight into the people participating and the challenges that education helps them overcome. Each learner has a unique experience and success means many things; from overcoming fears of education by taking a step into adult learning, to receiving a minor QQI award, to being able to help their children complete homework, thereby developing intergenerational as well as immediate social benefits.

2. No QQI fees for reengagement
3. Ensure community education groups can maintain their ability to provide accredited provision on the NFQ
4. Funding for accessible higher education provision in a community setting through PATH funding
5. Support for interdepartmental communication on the potential for community education to support educational equality
6. Explore the potential of community education in the delivery of pre-apprenticeship programmes as a means of encouraging female participation in apprenticeships[1]
7. Ensure quantitative measurement is not overly burdensome and is fit for purpose in measuring outcomes – implement the new POBAL ‘distance travelled’ tool for DES funded community education
8. In the Skills to Advance policy framework, include funding for community education to reach people in non-standard employment, offering them the opportunity to engage in learning

“Access to all at all levels should available in all communities; irrespective of status, description, location, etc.; should have access to sustainable yearly funding allowing them to operate affordable training for their communities. Certification and qualification should be available; achievable; reachable to all”
– AONTAS member in County Kildare



2. Learner Voice for Action: Creating an Inclusive Lifelong learning Society

Everyone should have the opportunity to actively participate and succeed in adult learning and to fulfil their educational ambitions regardless of their past educational experience, social class, sexual orientation, civil status, gender, race, ethnicity, religion or disability. The policy and practice in the adult, further, community, and higher education systems should be continually shaped by acting on a diverse range of authentic learner voices.

AONTAS believes effective learner voice structures must be part of any healthy educational system. Learners play a vital role in creating a solutions-based model that is adaptive to the changing needs of the learner population. A meaningful learner voice structure must allow for the voices of the most marginalised to rise to the highest thresholds of policy planning and developing. To ensure these processes are in place, it is important that learner voice is funded and that administrators and teachers are given continuous professional development on how to meaningfully engage learner voices. This investment will have a guaranteed return because when implemented effectively learner voice can highlight

- the needs of the most vulnerable learning populations
- reveal previously undiagnosed challenges learners face in access and progress
- promote democratic values
- Build a more open educational community



We have seen the value of this already through the National FET Learner Forum. Since its launch in 2016 the Forum has allowed over 1500 learners to share their opinions on what is working well and what can be improved in Irish further education and training. From these participants we have heard that cost remains a central issue. Transportation costs remain a continual challenge for learners. The travel allowances that are in place do not currently meet the real cost of transport. As one learner pointed out, 'the bus is €40 both ways, but I only have €11.90 travel allowance.' For women who made the decision to stay at home to care for their children access to, and the cost of, childcare remains a critical barrier. As one learner argued, 'there needs to be the childcare spaces.' We also know from the Forum that awareness of adult education options still remains low. This is a significant challenge particularly for learners left outside of government systems such as those in precarious or low-pay work. Learners have suggested remedies to this problem such as eliminating

acronyms and jargon from all advertisement of educational options, diversifying advertisement platforms, and developing ambassadorial programmes with current learners. Since a number of learners are referred into adult education through the DEASP, learners would also like to see a more learner-centred approach upheld. Learners have also expressed an interest in using further education and training and community education as a 'stepping stone' into higher education. A number of these learners, however, have pointed out the challenges of making this transition given the lack of funded part-time options available to mature learners. If Ireland is to continue to develop its educational system then it must place learners at the centre. Learner voice is a way to ensure this progress happens. We hope that learner voice processes like that National FET Forum become the norm in Ireland and that new innovative ways to deepen learner voice engagement continue.

Pre-Budget Asks:

Learner Voice

1. Invest in continuous professional development for educators regarding teaching and learning, including engaging the learner voice
2. Continue to support the National FET Learner Forum as part of the FET Strategy. Use the Forum as a model of qualitative data collection for meaningful learner voice engagement across the education system (as appropriate)

Further Education and Training

3. Increased transport cost support for FET learners
4. 'Work collaboratively with the DEASP to establish processes that support learner success in adult education by creating learner-focused referral processes and removing financial punishments for course absences'
5. Ensure there is childcare available for learners – 'no crèche, no class' mantra is still pertinent
6. Identify non-standard employees¹⁷ as a specific target group for the Skills to Advance framework
7. Ensure FET opportunities are clearly communicated to the general public and employees in precarious/non-standard employment
8. Offer guidance for employees in non-standard employment

Mature Students

9. Increase funding to cover part-time higher education fees for first-time mature students
10. Let lone parents access SUSI as part-time students given their specific parenting, childcare and accommodation challenges. (DES)

¹⁷Includes part-time work, temporary work, fixed-term contracting and subcontracting. Non-permanent full-time employees are likely to be women; receive less training; and have less employment stability. • Part-time employees are 40% less likely than full-time employees to receive training from employers. • Immigrants and low skill workers receive less training than all other demographic groups (OECD, 2018)

3. Lifelong Learning for Sustainability

Policy makers will recognise the role lifelong learning plays in achieving social, civic, environmental and economic sustainability. We will also ensure the sustainability of AONTAS as an organisation.

1. Maintain a heterogeneous education system so learners can engage in a range of accredited and non-accredited learning opportunities that best suit their needs and aspirations, particularly in a community education context
2. Ring-fence funding for adult learning provision across community education and further education with a specific focus on environmental sustainability
3. Ring-fence funding for adult learning programmes that are focused on strengthening democracies



‘The challenge of climate change requires a just transition solution, which will involve adult and community education in two ways. Firstly in terms of proactive retraining and reskilling for workers in vulnerable jobs such as those dependent on fossil fuels towards low or no carbon areas eg oil and gas boiler installers switching to heat pumps, electric car maintenance etc. This needs to be carried out in a learner-centred way and cognizant of the fear and disruption that this change will cause to the individuals most affected. It also needs to be resourced imaginatively now in a way which will encourage mature workers to retrain ASAP. The second area is general awareness and understanding of the challenges and solutions around climate change. [...] to embed a new approach and to support learners (and by extension the wider community) towards a low carbon and more sustainable future.’
– AONTAS member, Tipperary

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