



AONTAS Submission to the SOLAS FET Strategy 2020-2024 Consultation Call 29th May 2019



Submission to SOLAS
The Further Education and Training Authority
Public Consultation:
Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024

Brief outline of submission: This submission is being made on behalf of AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation and our membership, with whom we consulted broadly as detailed in this document. The submission is being made to highlight areas of importance to AONTAS and our members regarding the development of the next *Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024*.

While our submission discusses the six aspects of further education and training identified by SOLAS and Education and Training Boards (ETBs) during the development of strategic performance agreements, it takes a broader view of challenges facing the sector and proposes specific strategic and policy actions that should be implemented. It is the opinion of AONTAS and our members that implementation of our recommended strategic actions will allow Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland to become more accessible to the whole of the Irish public. Taking the actions of providing sustainable multi-year funding for community education, and embedding learner voice as part of the teaching, learning, and policy development process will truly make FET a viable first option in adult education across the country.

Organisation: AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation

Names and Role in the organisation: Benjamin Hendriksen (Advocacy Lead)

Postal address: AONTAS 2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6, D06 E0H1

Email: bhendriksen@aontas.com

Daytime telephone number: 01 406 8220

Web-address: www.aontas.com

Date of emailing response: Wednesday 29th May 2019

Document submitted to: FETStrategy@solas.ie

Introduction to AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

AONTAS is a highly respected non-governmental membership organisation established in 1969. We represent over 400 members from across the lifelong learning spectrum. The vision of AONTAS is for all adults to achieve their educational aspirations through an equitable lifelong learning system. Our mission is 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.

The work of AONTAS centres on advocating for all adults to achieve their educational aspirations through an equitable lifelong learning system. We place a particular emphasis on those who did not benefit from education when they were young or who are under-represented in learning. Through our work AONTAS seeks to:

- widen participation in lifelong learning beyond the educated segment of the population who already participate;
- ensure that community education provides access to and pathways within education, and supports quality learning opportunities for the most educationally disadvantaged people in Ireland;
- ensure that the voice of adult learners is central to local, regional, national, European and international adult learning policy; and
- promote quality adult learning opportunities for everyone in Ireland.

Drawing on the strength of our members, including through the 100+ strong membership of the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) and relationships with adult learners across Ireland, we advocate for the rights of all adults to achieve their educational aspirations through an equitable lifelong learning system of quality learning. We advocate that this system should be based on a grassroots, authentic understanding of lifelong learning that benefits the social, personal, and skills development of individual adults, their family and community. Our work seeks to ensure that all adults have the right to participate in adult learning that exhibits the following elements:

inclusion	learner support	progression	positive learning outcomes
learner focus	learner choice	positive learning experience	transformative learning

Introduction to the submission

AONTAS' response to the public consultation on the *Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024* focuses on the two primary areas that we believe are crucial to long-term positive development of further education and training, and more broadly, adult and community education, across Ireland during the time of the next FET Strategy.

AONTAS recommends the following two strategic actions within the *FET Strategy 2020-2024*:

- 1) The implementation of a sustainable multi-annual funding model for community education.
 - a. To implement a sustainable multi-annual funding model for community education AONTAS is proposing the creation of a cross-departmental Steering Group Chaired by the Department of Education and Skills. The Steering Group is needed to ensure that a sustainable multi-annual funding model is implemented across all funding Departments. Therefore, high-level Departmental leadership is needed to ensure that the development of community education, as part of the broader FET and adult education offering, receives the resources necessary to allow for clear and efficient community education policy development.
- 2) Further development around learner voice engagement needs to occur which cements the important role that learner voice has in teaching, learning, and policy development processes.

During the period of the current *FET Strategy 2014-2019* there has been significant development of learner voice engagement within the SOLAS funded FET sector. Through implementation by AONTAS of the National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum, in collaboration with ETBs, since 2016 we have developed a robust forum that is the largest qualitative learner voice project in Europe. In 4 years, we have hosted 24 events; 4 national and 20 regionals across all ETBs reaching 1514 learners¹ who have had their experience heard and recorded for the purpose of improving policy development and implementation.

In addition to the two primary recommendations noted, our submission also provides feedback on the six aspects of further education and training presented in the consultation document (see the below graphic) . This feedback originates from the views of our members which were captured during the consultation processes described in this submission.

¹ 2016: One National event - 70 learners, 15 ETBs represented. 2017, one National event, three regional events reaching 16 ETBs and 254 learners. In 2018 to date one National event, nine regional events reaching a total of 595 learners.



We understand that the new *Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020-2024* will reflect and incorporate policy direction established in the *Department of Education and Skills' Statement of Strategy 2019-2021*², and *Action Plan for Education 2019*³. These documents promote the implementation of the European Commission Upskilling Pathways' recommendation, and corresponding supports, for target groups identified to the European Commission by the Department of Education and Skills as requiring particular attention and support. Without properly supporting the target groups through the Upskilling Pathways it will be difficult for the wider adult and community education sector, and FET offering in particular, in Ireland to claim success at the end of either the *Department of Education and Skills' Statement of Strategy 2019-2021* or the *Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020-2024*. Whilst FET is diverse and inclusive, funding must be more equally dispersed across target groups, for example in 2017 community education comprised 15% of all FET learners funded by SOLAS, yet received only approx. 2.2% of SOLAS funding (2.3% in 2017). Greater equality of funding for programmes across FET learners must be considered.

Consultation Process

The development of the next *Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020-2024* is extremely important for the members of AONTAS. A large portion of our membership are directly involved in the provision of SOLAS funded FET or are involved in education provision, advocacy, and research, concerning the development of accessible and quality adult and community education and lifelong learning in Ireland. Further education and training provision across the country is a critical component of creating an accessible and quality offering of adult and community education over the next five years.

² Department of Education and Skills. *CUMASÚ Empowering through learning Statement of Strategy 2019-2021*. <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Strategy-Statement/statement-of-strategy-2019-2021.pdf>. [Access 23 May 2019].

³ Department of Education and Skills. *CUMASÚ Empowering through learning Action Plan for Education 2019*. <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Strategy-Statement/statement-of-strategy-2019-2021.pdf>. [Access 23 May 2019].

It has been of critical importance to AONTAS to engage with our members during this period to both inform them about the consultation process and to hear their views of the development of FET.

To engage AONTAS members across the country we used the following platforms:

Regional CEN Consultation

Facilitated a consultation session on 10th May with 26 members of the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN). This session was facilitated by Dr Liam McGlynn, Lecturer in Community and Youth Development at TU Dublin, and was held at the Central Hotel in Donegal town, County Donegal. The session was attended by a mix of CEN members and other community education practitioners from across Ireland. The groups attending represented providers including Donegal ETB itself, as well as a mix of not-for-profit community education providers representing both ETB funded and non-ETB funded community educators from across the country.

Online Consultation

An online call for feedback to the consultation which included use of a short questionnaire asking for members' views of what has worked and not worked during the period of the current FET Strategy 2014-2019, and what they would see as implementation of a successful FET offering at the end of the next strategy 2024.

AONTAS AGM Consultation

On 22nd May AONTAS held its 49th Annual General Meeting at the Ashling Hotel in Dublin. The meeting included an opportunity to engage with the SOLAS Executive Director for Strategy and Knowledge Andrew Brownlee who attended the AGM in order to engage AONTAS members directly. The presentation from Andrew Brownlee was followed by a consultation discussion session and feedback process.

Together, these points of engagement with more than 100 AONTAS members helped to develop this submission on the coming *FET Strategy 2020-2024*.



Members of the AONTAS Community Education Network meeting in Donegal to discuss the *FET Strategy 2020-2024* [10 May 2019]



AONTAS Members at the 2019 AONTAS AGM discussing what they want to see in the next *FET Strategy 2020-2024* [22nd May 2019]. SOLAS Executive Director for Strategy and Knowledge presenting the proposed next *FET Strategy 2020-2024* at the 2019 AONTAS AGM [22 May 2019]

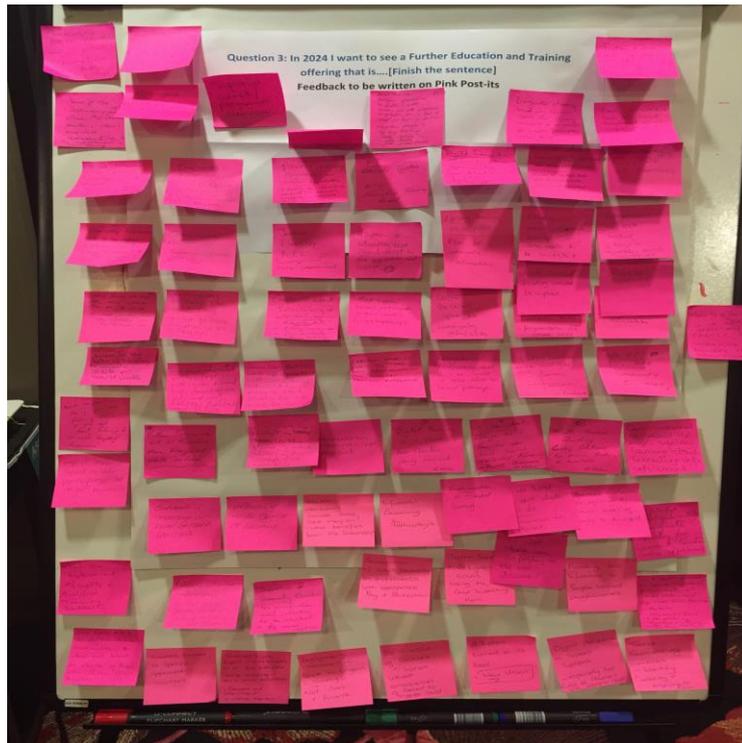
In 2024 Ireland should have a FET offering that is...

In order to capture the idea of what FET should be, we asked members at our Annual General Meeting on 22nd May 2019 to finish the following sentence: 'In 2024 I want to see a Further Education and Training offering that is...'

A selection of the answers documented are recorded below, which together show the opportunity available to SOLAS, Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and all interested stakeholders to create a FET sector that meets the needs of current and potential learners. As you can see from the responses AONTAS members believe that a successful FET offering will exist in Ireland when it is capable of first meeting the needs of learners. When the FET offering meets the needs of learners by providing learner pathways into, across, and out of the FET sector it will be creating a population that is participating in lifelong learning; therefore meeting the needs of the learner themselves, and the learner's community; which includes the social and economic needs of the community.

Question at 2019 AONTAS AGM: In 2024 I want to see a Further Education and Training offering that is...

- providing multi-annual funding for community education
- supporting learner mentorships and workplace learning
- hearing and responding to the concerns of learners regarding the collection of their personal data for the purpose of tracking their progression
- allowing learners to access education at the level they need it
- recognising access to basic-skills as a clear need as they relate to learner pathways
- consistent across the 16 ETBs
- incorporating new learning methodologies (blended learning and flipped classroom). If you don't change as a business you won't survive
- responding to the needs of learners at all ages. Later retirement ages require a commitment from government to fund lifelong learning
- responding to the fact that 'progression' is non-linear – lifelong learning starts and stops throughout life.



Strategic actions 2020-2024

Based on the consultation process and discussion we have undertaken with our membership during the month of May 2019 AONTAS proposes the following two strategic actions for implementation during the *Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024*.

- 1) Implementation of a sustainable multi-annual funding model for community education
- 2) Cementing the important role that learner voice has in the teaching, learning, and policy development process

Sustainable multi-annual funding model for community education

Strategic Action: Implementation of a sustainable multi-annual funding model for community education

Community education is a non-formal system of adult education that has existed in Ireland for decades.

Community education's purpose is to educate while pursuing social

inclusion, equality, diversity, and sustainability across Ireland's towns and cities. The development of community education as a form of education capable of reaching out to the most marginalised segments of our society in a non-threatening, transparent, and open way was recognised by Government in the White Paper *Learning for Life: Whitepaper on Adult*

Community Education is the process whereby marginalised groups formulate a process of user-driven, learner-centred and communal education.

Learning for Life: Whitepaper on Adult Education. 2000. https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/fe_aduled_wp.pdf. pp 26. [Accessed 23rd May 2019].

Education, published in 2000.⁴ While implementation of the White Paper's policy framework was not perfect, from 2000 to 2008 there was meaningful support to community education providers as the Department of Education and Science sought to ensure that adult community education provision was able to succeed in Ireland, while working to build our communities socially and economically. With the economic crash in 2008 things changed for the worse, both for community education provision, but more importantly for the learners within Ireland's unique and varied communities that these providers served.

Today community education provision is underfunded; funded through a diverse and disorganised mix of funding streams; and is at risk of dying off. A new sustainable multi-year funding model for community education must measure the 'distance travelled' of each learner rather than a standard view of success that is based on easier to capture metrics like QQI awards attained, or employment gained post-course-completion. For the most educationally disadvantaged and marginalised people, who experience challenges like homelessness, mental health issues, domestic violence, addiction, and systemic inter-generational poverty to name but a few, funding opportunities for community education providers cannot simply be measured according to the basic metrics of accreditation and employment. Community education is about building a supportive education system around an individual, ensuring that the education offering is truly learner-centred and working to build their capacity to reach their educational aspirations.

A system of multi-annual funding must be available to non-state community education providers in order to create an education system that is responsive and certain about its continued existence year-to-year.

The *FET Strategy 2020-2024* must commit to sustainable multi-annual funding for community education so that it covers the full cost of running a community education organisation, from the logistics of paying for premises and keeping the lights and heat on, to paying for tutors, and covering administration costs required by other government agencies such as QQI re-engagement and programme validation fees [in the case of QQI fees, payment is necessary for continued provision of accredited learning in community education centres around the country].

The Irish community education sector effectively tackles educational disadvantage at a community level. The ethos of Irish community education as a grassroots and learner responsive form of adult education is the envy of Europe as is evidenced by the many conferences, events, and organisations across the continent whom AONTAS and our members are asked to present to and partner with on different projects each year.

Community education provides a warm, welcoming environment, participatory educational methodologies, holistic supports such as counselling and vital 'make or break' supports such as childcare and financial support. The outcomes are broad, from basic skills education in

⁴ *Learning for Life: Whitepaper on Adult Education*. https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/fe_aduled_wp.pdf. pp 112. [Accessed 23rd May 2019].

literacy and numeracy to social inclusion. For example, Warrenmount Community Education Centre in the heart of the Liberties meets the accredited and non-accredited learning needs of hundreds of learners every year, and in 2018 provided accredited learning to 264 learners, including 51 ESOL awards. Similarly Longford Women's Link's Retail Skills Programme provides an opportunity for rural women to participate in education otherwise unavailable. In 2017, 52 learners participated in this course, 31 gained a QQI qualification, and 7 secured employment before the programme finished. Transformative College in Mullingar, which receives no State funding and offers vital community education programmes for the promotion of mental health and addiction recovery welcomes people into education who need wrap around supports for educational participation that is unavailable in state-run provision.

As mentioned previously, the ability to engage in lifelong learning must be viewed in the context of a person's life situation and journey. Similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, until the most immediate rudimentary barriers come down, systemic educational inequality will persist. Integrated whole-system approaches with wrap-around supports are needed to bridge gaps to engaging and retaining educationally disadvantaged learners. Community education has traditionally offered an alternative and, more fit-for-purpose set of supports. For example, counselling services, mentoring, and childcare are not only more person and learner centred, they are features of best practice models that enable education to become an empowering force in the lives of learners with positive effects on their families and within their communities; yielding deep and wide positive socio-economic impacts, and improved health dividends for all members of society.

As we celebrate 50 years of AONTAS in 2019 and reflect on the history of adult and community education policy in Ireland we observe that, unfortunately, issues regarding equality of education and access are not new. An extensive review of all 35 years of *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner*⁵ highlights a number of recurrent themes: 1) the need to cover costs and ensure there are no fees for learners; 2) the need to provide adequate childcare and revive the mantra of 'no crèche, no class'; 3) the need to offer a holistic range of supports for learners. What we have learned over the 50 years of AONTAS is that policy makers, civil society, think-tanks, and society broadly do have the answers to such questions about what supports learners need and about the ways that are successful in engaging and retaining adult learners in a system of lifelong learning. Diversity of adult learning provision is vital: part-time, flexible, accredited and non-accredited learning; clear progression paths; recognition of prior learning (RPL); learner supports (including financial) in formal and non-formal (ie non-state-run community education) contexts; effective learning methodologies; and integrating learner voice across provision.

⁵ Golding, Barry and Harvey, Jack. *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner*. AONTAS. 2019. [Forthcoming publication in June 2019].

Community education has consistently met the needs of the most educationally disadvantaged; empowered communities, particularly women; and contributed to cross-generational educational equality as a home-grown, community-centred model of holistic education provision. Ireland's success in developing effective community education programmes has in some respects set the standards and led the way in Europe. To realise an equitable vision of adult learning it is time we gave community education the recognition, resources and respect it deserves. In 2000 this recognition was given in the *White Paper on Adult Learning*. In 2020 through the FET Strategy we need to see action. Community education is not just about building bridges between education and the community; community education is of and for the community.

VIDEO

This video captures the impact of non-state adult community education on the lives of women in Irish communities. Video from the AONTAS 2019 Policy Day [8th March, 2019 (International Women's Day)]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5RLMonkKt8&feature=youtu.be>

Practical action for implementation of a sustainable multi-annual funding model for community education

To implement a sustainable multi-annual funding model for community education, AONTAS is recommending a practical action; the creation of a cross-departmental Steering Group for implementation of a sustainable multi-annual funding model for community education. AONTAS is proposing a cross-departmental Steering Group chaired by the Department of Education and Skills. The Steering Group is needed to account for the fact that funding for community education currently originates from 10 different Government Departments. Therefore, Departmental leadership is needed to ensure that the development of community education, as part of the broader FET, and adult education offering beyond FET, receives the attention necessary to allow for clear and efficient community education policy development across all funding Departments.⁶ At local level we recommend the inclusion of **community education on the Regional Skills Fora so that links with FET at local level are made for the benefit of learner progression.**

Learner Voice for teaching, learning, and policy development

Strategic Action: Cementing the important role that learner voice has in the teaching, learning, and policy development processes

Learners themselves are experts in their own learning experience and are thus best placed to identify issues, challenges and effective processes that support learner success. Supporting learner voice at all levels of the learning experience: micro (classroom level);

⁶ Fitzsimons, Camilla and Magrath, Conor. *FinALE "Where to Invest" Funding Adult Education*. <https://eaea.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/FinALE-Where-to-invest-Final.pdf>. [Access 23 May 2019].

meso (institutional level); and macro (national level) is essential to ensuring that learners are able to participate in teaching, learning, and policy development processes. Meaningful learner engagement is essential for creating open discursive environments where learners, and particularly those learners least likely to speak or respond in formal representative structures like student unions, class representation, and course surveys where they can be identified, are supported to share their learning experience. A particular focus of the next *FET Strategy 2020-2024* should be placed on hearing the voice of those who are educationally disadvantaged, or who are identified as target groups of the FET sector (eg in the *Upskilling Pathways Recommendation / National Access Plan 2015-2019*), as these are the learners least likely to tell their positive, and negative experiences in education.

AONTAS has a long history of supporting the documentation and amplification of learner voices in the teaching, learning, and policy development process. Under authority of the current *FET Strategy 2014-2019*, AONTAS leads the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum (NFLF). AONTAS is happy to share our experience of this model of learner voice engagement so that it can be replicated and adapted to other environments. Since its establishment the NFLF, supported by two advisory groups, one made of interested stakeholders, and another of international academic experts in learner voice, has engaged more than 1000 learners from every type of SOLAS funded programme. AONTAS has held 4 national fora since 2016, and regional fora in every one of the 16 ETBs at least once.

These events has been documented in national and regional fora reports that have been provided to SOLAS for the purpose of analysis as part of the policy development and evaluation process. This qualitative research project adds greater in-depth insight into learner experiences, in addition to the quantitative data infrastructure systems that exist within SOLAS. Learner voice is about offering a range of methods to really listen to the experience of learners in order to improve provision. This goes beyond consulting learners to active and continuous engagement with learners.

As part of the *FET Strategy 2020-2024* support needs to be given to providers of SOLAS funded further education and training (ETBs and community education providers) to support them in the development of learner voice as a policy tool for engaging learners in the teaching, learning and policy development process.

VIDEO

This video from the 2019 National Further Education and Training Learner Forum highlights the potential for effectively using learner voice as a tool for policy analysis.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WdczhvUiSU>

Positive ideas and critiques within the 6 proposed aspects of the proposed framework

The SOLAS consultation document focuses the discussion around six core aspects of further education and training identified through the strategic performance agreements between SOLAS and ETBs. Through our own review of the identified six core aspects and our consultation with members we identify what is positive about the proposed aspects and what our concerns are arising from the identification and categorisation of the six core aspects.

Supporting job creation

Positive ideas

Positively, the area recognises that over the course of the *FET Strategy 2014-2019* unemployment has decreased from a high of 12% in 2012 to the current rate of 5.4%.⁷ By recognising this point the consultation document notes that future provision must be planned according to the needs of people in employment, 'without losing sight of the need to provide activation for those who remain outside the labour market.'⁸

Critiques

While it is positive to see the recognition that FET provision must change over the course of the next FET Strategy in order to meet the needs of a learner cohort that is more likely to be employed, there are several gaps that arise from what has been proposed.

- 1) The overall consultation document makes positive comments about the importance of the community-based education ethos which should run through the foundations of FET provision. This is continued with the closing remark in the opening section of the document which says that FET must continue to 'meet Ireland's societal and economic needs over the next 5 years.'
 - However this focus area of 'Supporting Job Creation' neglects to account for the important role that community education and the decentralisation of provision to community education providers has on the proactive processes of understanding and responding to the economic (employment) and social needs of communities.
 - Course accessibility cannot be determined only according to the lagging indicators analysed by the SOLAS Skills and Labour Market Research Unit in Dublin. It must also account for the lived experience of employees, employers, entrepreneurs (including social) and education providers who see the changing needs of their communities months and years in advance of changes taking root,

⁷ Central Statistics Office. *Monthly Unemployment Series*.

⁸ SOLAS *Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2020 Public Consultation 2019* Document

occurring, and later being reported in statistical documents analysed by central government.

- 2) The wording of the overall area is 'Supporting Job Creation'. However, the role of the FET sector should not solely be to create jobs, but rather to educate, train, upskill, and otherwise improve the capacities of the Irish population as learners so that they can gain necessary skills which are then of value to society, and/or potential employers; or which can be used to start a new business themselves which meets a need in their community. There are fundamental limitations and issues if SOLAS and education providers narrowly focus on providing a skills service to the economy. Learners will be successful in society and the economy when they participate in education they deem as valuable. Learners will apply the benefits of their education for employment which provides economic and/or social value to their community. Ultimately, in order to increase participation in FET, learners should be central and treated as an equal partner in decisions on the kinds of provision offered.

Learning Pathways

The points made in the consultation document regarding learning pathways are positive to see and identify the key issues that pathways are not only about continued upstream pathways into higher education, but also about moving laterally within the FET system.

Positive ideas

Positively this area of focus identifies the importance of guidance for learners. As many adult learners have been removed from the formal education system for many years; within which time the system has changed drastically, it is important that knowledgeable and impartial guidance professionals and services are available to help them. Related to this, it is positive to see the aspiration to create a system that allows for programme access which is both linear as well as non-linear, allowing learners to access courses when they want, and according to their needs.

Critiques

There is a need for *Supported Learner Pathways*. While the consultation document briefly notes the importance of creating clearer pathways 'into FET, within FET, and out of FET', none of the features of this core area identified in the consultation document respond to the first step in to a learner's FET journey which is access into FET. Learners require funding to cover basic needs so that they can access FET (RPL, childcare, travel costs, training payments), supports (library access, guidance, counselling, disability supports) and a quality effective learning provision (that is based on their needs, participatory and facilitates peer support and peer learning).

To be successful at developing and supporting learner pathways for all potential and current learners, implementation of the next FET strategy must spend considerable time and effort

listening to potential learners about how the system can effectively break down barriers and increase access to the FET system. More than 1500 current FET learners have already had their voices heard over the past four years (2016-2019) as part of the SOLAS funded National Further Education and Training Learner Forum. Expanding efforts to hear from potential learners would allow SOLAS to identify currently unidentified barriers to access.

When completing work to implement successful pathways into FET, Ireland is fortunately in that voluntary community education provision already exists as a best-practice model of reaching out to the most marginalised and educationally disadvantaged populations and individuals in our society. Community education provision, which is funded by SOLAS as well as several other Government agencies and departments can provide a model of best practice for overcoming barriers to access which can be emulated by the wider FET and adult learning sector.

Active inclusion

The term active inclusion is a term which has significant negative connotations within the adult and community education sector since its introduction into the policy vocabulary during the economic crisis. It is the recommendation of AONTAS that based on our analysis of what is being proposed in the consultation document, that the *FET Strategy 2020-2024* change to using the term 'Social Inclusion', or otherwise incorporate both elements of inclusion and reword the core area as 'Active and Social Inclusion'.

Positive ideas

Positively this core area identifies the need for the FET sector to engage marginalised groups so that they can develop the skills they need to engage in society. Social inclusion is about addressing the 'opportunity gap' and not just the skills gap. It is not just about providing learning opportunities but the social network within an education context that can support social engagement and inclusion and social mobility.

Critiques

Use of the term 'Active Inclusion' results in a negative response from many practitioners and participants in the FET sector across Ireland. The term as defined by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion 'means enabling every citizen, notably the most disadvantaged, to fully participate in society, including having a job'.⁹ The definition further defines active inclusion by noting that people become involved in their society when they are employed and have a job.

AONTAS supports the contribution that adult learning makes to sustainable employment. However, there is broad agreement in research and from a practitioner and learner perspective that the intrinsic nature of adult learning can be transformative. This enables a

⁹ Definition of 'Active Inclusion'. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1059&langId=en>

person to develop and engage in society in whatever way they are able and in whatever way they deem appropriate; whether that participation be through employment, or through other avenues like participation in civil society, political engagement, volunteerism etc.

The features of the 'Active Inclusion' area in the consultation document speak to the social and personal development of education that would be described by AONTAS members as 'Social Inclusion'. Features like *Targeting of socially, economically and educationally disadvantaged groups *Personal and community development, and *Equity of access across the FET sector show an understanding of the important role that education plays beyond employment.

To more accurately reflect this and for clarity of purpose and vision, we recommend this area of the FET Strategy be renamed as **Active and Social Inclusion** to account for the dual purpose, role, and understanding that education has in modern Irish society, and which is reflected in this subsection of this consultation document, if not in the title 'Active Inclusion'.

Lifelong learning and workforce upskilling

The inclusion of an area of focus on lifelong learning is an important policy development for the next *FET Strategy 2020-2024*.

Positive ideas

Highlighting lifelong learning for specific attention as a core area in the next *FET Strategy 2020-2024* is a positive development. The attention that the consultation document pays to ensuring a flexible and responsive sector is also very important. If the next *FET Strategy 2020-2024* commits and implements the following points that are presented in the FET Strategy consultation document, then FET available in Ireland will have changed significantly toward working for the benefit of learners. The consultation document states that:

'The embedding of more flexible delivery models for FET will be key to the effective development of lifelong learning in the future. Flexible provision that is: more accessible (e.g. in the workplace, in community facilities); at times to suit participants (evenings, weekends); via blended learning to reduce the requirement for physical attendance and associated travel; or tailored to suit particular backgrounds and settings (e.g. family initiatives, group working).'¹⁰

Critiques

During the consultation with AONTAS members there was unease from many practitioners and stakeholders with seeing the distinct ideas of lifelong learning and workforce upskilling

¹⁰ SOLAS. *Further Education and Training Strategy 2020 – 2024 Public Consultation 2019: April – May 2019*. http://www.solas.ie/Documents/Public_Consultation_2019.pdf. [Accessed 1 May 2019]

combined into one single idea. Lifelong learning should be about more than only employment and upskilling. Learning starts at birth and should continue to the grave. As the draft consultation document recognises, FET is not just about employment but also personal and social development.

Further education and training for the purpose of employment is captured across the rest of the proposed *FET Strategy 2020-2024*. Therefore, it would be a significant positive development for lifelong learning to be decoupled from the term 'Workforce Upskilling' in the coming strategy.

It is widely acknowledged that adult learning has vast potential to address many of the current challenges facing society however there has been a legacy of disproportionately and narrowly focusing learning systems and policies on a single area: the skills agenda. This has been to the detriment of achieving more social dividends in relation to wider and deeper threats. Lifelong learning is specifically named in the Sustainable Development Goals (4.7) because it has a pivotal role to play in environmental sustainability, the democratic process, for social integration and it is essential for intercultural appreciation in a post-Brexit Ireland. The FET Strategy must not overlook the vital contribution that it needs to make at societal level. **Funding for programmes that focus on sustainability, the environment and tackling societal issues must be foregrounded.**

Meeting key skills gaps

The purpose of this area is stated as strategically planning education and training to match provision to the needs of the labour market in order to help workers and employers across all sectors and occupations to adjust successfully to changes in technology and markets.

Positive ideas

The positive outcome of implementing this area will be the ongoing implementation of the Regional Skills Fora, as well as the development of what are referred to in the consultation document as soft skills. In the 21st century soft skills are the skills that allow people to participate meaningfully in employment and in wider society, and it is these skills which are most effectively developed through participation in adult and community education. Community education organisations need to be represented on the Regional Skills Fora.

Critiques

The concept of key skills gap needs to be unpacked. There needs to be consideration of the key skills gap of employers/the economy to the key skills gap of the prospective learner. As is gaining greater traction, the opportunity gap is even greater than the skills gap. However, soft skills in conjunction with increased social capital that is enabled through the collective learning is often a key skill gap for learners. Learners tell AONTAS that a key skills gap is the need for increased confidence and 'soft skills' – transversal skills as outlined but the World Economic Forum (creativity, critical thinking, teamwork). These soft skills are behavioural and are often 'hard to get', yet are deeply prized by employers. These fundamental

capabilities have an impact: increase civic engagement, build learning-to-learn skills, mental health and wellbeing; combat intergenerational educational inequality; support community and increase potential for sustainable employment. The need for unaccredited programmes to build these skills, particularly in a community education context, are required in addition to accredited programmes.

A challenge to the actions identified for implementation of the action 'Meeting Key Skills Gaps' is that the careers and opportunities of the future are dependent on lifelong learning. To get to the point of meaningfully including people in lifelong learning we first need to have people accessing FET and the other accredited and non-accredited education offerings available to adults in Ireland.

As stated previously in this submission under 'Supporting Job Creation' Course accessibility cannot be determined only according to the lagging indicators analysed by the SOLAS Skills and Labour Market Research Unit in Dublin. Course delivery will be flawed if SOLAS and ETBs try to match past lagging indicator labour market needs to potential learners, and not according to the lived experience of employees, employers and education providers who see the changing needs of their communities months and years in advance of changes happening.

New models of delivery

Positive Ideas

After 4 years and hearing from more than 1500 learners during the National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum it is encouraging to see that learner voice is having an impact on the provision of SOLAS funded adult education. Throughout 2016, 2017, 2018, and now into 2019 learners have been consistently highlighting the need for flexible provision, particularly as it relates to course scheduling and access to classes.

It is a positive step therefore to see clear statements that the creation of flexible learning opportunities including through online learning, blended learning, modular learning and semester and evening course delivery are going to become a priority of the new *FET Strategy 2020-2024*.

As SOLAS develops these points of access through new models of delivery it is recommended that SOLAS look closely to many of the community education organisations (many of which SOLAS provides funding for through ETBs) who are best practice examples in creating accessible and flexible learning environments. All of the models that will be new or less familiar to the state-run FET sector have been in operation among different community education providers across the country for years and often decades.

Critiques

To ensure that flexibility does not create unintended consequences for reducing accessibility the next *FET Strategy 2020-2024* must ensure that access to technology does not become a barrier to participation in these new models of delivery. If ownership of technology becomes a requirement for participation in education then the new models of delivery will themselves contribute to a continuation of socio-economic class separation whereby people with the financial means to afford technology can participate in FET and those without the financial means will not be able to participate. This concern about access to technology has been mentioned often in the 4 years since learner voice has been systematically collected as part of the *FET Strategy 2014-2019*.

Conclusion

The past decade has been a decade of upheaval and change for Ireland. After a decade of austerity, and five years of change during implementation of the current *FET Strategy 2014-2019*, the coming *FET Strategy 2020-2024* is a chance to build socially inclusive and progressive further education and training adult education offering within the new structures developed over the last five years. With national unemployment currently below 6%, but with higher regional unemployment rates a result of systemic socio-economic issues that will not be solved by upskilling alone, it is time that we invest in our communities by listening to the voices of the current and potential learners themselves. Hearing what they want as they progress through a lifetime of learning is needed for successful policy development and implementation. It is also time that we recommit to the idea of education as a public good, one that meets not only the short term social and economic needs of the adult learner but also of their families and the communities in which they live.

In the month since the consultation on the *FET Strategy 2020-2024* was released on 30th April AONTAS has reached out to hear the voices of our members. This submission is a reflection of their voice.

AONTAS

2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street,

Ranelagh, Dublin 6

www.aontas.com

01 406 8220

Company Registration Number: 80958

Registered Charity Number: 6719

