



The Voice of
Adult Learning

AONTAS Party Manifesto Analysis Ireland General Election 2020

**Election Day 8 February 2020
#LearnersVote2020
#GE2020**

Analysis by Niamh O'Reilly CEO and Ben Hendriksen Advocacy Lead



AONTAS Party Manifesto Analysis: General Election 2020

AONTAS does not endorse any political party or candidates in General Election 2020. To support our members to make informed voting choices in relation to adult learning and the creation of an equitable lifelong learning system we have reviewed the party manifestos across political parties.

The following analysis includes party manifestos published on party websites by 12pm on the 29th January 2020. We will update this document as soon as possible when additional manifestos are released.

The analysis is completed by highlighting areas and page numbers within manifestos referencing adult and community education. We have not reviewed all the other additional policy areas that enable adult learning to take place and be successful for individuals and society such as access to quality and reliable transportation, childcare, housing, and health care to name only a few.

AONTAS review of the Fine Gael Manifesto



The Fine Gael Manifesto is available online at:
https://election2020.finegael.ie/pdf/FG_GE20_Manifesto.pdf

Issue: Tackling educational disadvantage (p.36)

Party statement: *Targeting access programmes to higher and further education*

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS welcomes activities that support access but also highlights existing good practice in further education through community education.

Issue: Learner Voice (p.37)

Party statement: Involving young people in shaping the future of education We will develop a consultative forum on the future of education, including experts, education partners and most importantly, young people. It will discuss matters including lifelong learning for all, the Irish language, how education can help to stop climate change and other challenges of global citizenship, the impact of social media and technology and the purpose and culture of education in the future.

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS believes all learners including adult learners should be involved in shaping learning. The National FET Learner Forum is an example of this. Learning doesn't stop when people are young, so people discussions about lifelong learning should include adult learners of different socio-economic backgrounds and ages.

Issue: Lifelong learning (p.40)

Party statement: From leaving education to retirement, most people will spend more than 40 years in the world of work. They are likely to have a wide variety of careers and employers, and even if they stay confined to one sector or employer, will see the nature of their work change significantly. To this end, we will ingrain a culture of lifelong learning within the workforce. We will focus on increasing the lifelong learning rate from 9% currently to 18% by 2025. We will examine the feasibility of using the National Training Fund to help workers fund lifelong learning, drawing on the example of other countries, such as France. (p.40)

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS believes that all of society benefits from lifelong learning and not just those in employment.

Although not explicitly mentioned, it would appear that the use of the National Training Fund (NFT) for workers based on the French model points to the implementation of Personal/Individual Learning Accounts (PLA).

AONTAS would caution against the limitations of Personal/Individual Learning Accounts (PLA) that are used to fund lifelong learning, as there are no clear examples globally where PLAs result in a widening of participation in lifelong learning beyond those people already participating.

Personal Learning Accounts (PLA) is a policy whereby governments allocate money to individuals to purchase training. There has been much [debate](#) and [research](#) in this area. It is important to note that at an EU conference in 2019¹, OECD noted that such approaches should not be considered for marginalised and low-skilled target groups. As anyone in adult learning will tell you, the concept of 'choice' is entangled in a web of structural inequalities linked to social class, race, ethnicity, gender, previous educational experience, and poverty. An example of a truly equitable system does not appear to be available through implementation of this policy.

The underpinning assumption of PLAs appears to draw on rational choice theory, but assuming that an individual has the autonomy of 'choice' to spend the allocated funding on an education course is at odds with the experience of educationally disadvantaged learners. At a very basic level what seems obvious is the issue of confidence - a predominant factor in

¹2019 Romanian Ministry of Labour and Social Justice and the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union in cooperation with the European Commission. *Adult upskilling and reskilling conference, Balancing the labour market*. 6th and 7th June 2019, Bucharest.

returning to education is the frequent belief of learners that they do not have the ability to return to learning. PLAs do not lend themselves to act as mechanisms for reaching potential learners who have low confidence. Instead, they are accessible to people who have already attained a certain level of education, and so the PLA system does not seem applicable within the framework of the European Union's Upskilling Pathways which is developed to bring adults into formal education who are currently without an upper secondary level qualification.

According to [the CSO Adult Education Survey 2017](#), cost is a predominant barrier to a person's ability to engage in education. Therefore, loan and PLA schemes do not seem capable of providing education pathways for vulnerable groups to address deep-rooted social inequality. As we know from community education practice, what is needed is targeted outreach, accessible free or low-cost services and a holistic range of supports.

Issue: Committed to expanding further education (p.40)

Party statement: Fine Gael have a plan to grow apprenticeships and traineeships to give an exciting career path for many young people. We want apprentices and trainees to acquire applied, technical skills within a variety of sectors, and provide a very practical grounding which will stand to them as they move through their career and take advantage of promotional opportunities.(p.40)

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS welcomes the commitment to further education and addressing the low participation rate of women in apprenticeships. The Manifesto specifically identifies employer incentives to engage women. AONTAS would also draw attention to the need to offer pre-apprenticeship programmes which are part-time and include childcare to greater enable women's participation. See our full [review of this here](#).

Issue: Working with our libraries to continue evolving, innovating and serving communities (p.93)

Party statement: *In 2019, we launched the new public libraries strategy Our Public Libraries 2022: Inspiring, Connecting and Empowering Communities. Since 2016, we have invested over €11 million in library buildings and over €10 million on ICT upgrades and innovative initiatives. We are also extending the My Open Library service, which allows branches to open from 8am to 10pm, as well as additional library services 365 days a year. This is only the start. We will work with our network of libraries in evolving and innovating to meet the needs of our ever-changing society.*

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS supports efforts to expand access to library and public services more broadly through new funding. One part of policy that is required to create a more equal education system is access to ICT which this policy takes steps to address.

Issue: Strengthening community development funding (p.30)

Party statement: While many towns and villages have bounced back economically from the recession, there are others in need of further targeted support. We will seek to refine and build upon a range of programmes to support communities throughout Ireland, as outlined in the following table: SICAP (social inclusion and community activation programme). Investing €190 million between 2018 and 2022. Since 2015, the SICAP has supported 150,000 people and 8,000 groups (p.30).

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS recognises the important role of SICAP in the funding of community education.

Issue: Returnships (p33)

Party statement: Fine Gael will make it easier for women to re-enter the workplace with the introduction of ‘returnships’. This new initiative will support women, in the main, who have taken time out of work to raise their families or care for loved ones, to re-enter the labour market through new education, training and personal development programmes. We will work in partnership with employers across the country, with a view to matching returners with employers.

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS recognises and promotes the long-established role of community education in supporting women to return to education and employment. We specifically highlight community education’s range of personal development courses and the social supports that community education provides for learners to meaningfully participate in their learning.

AONTAS review of the Fianna Fáil Manifesto



The Finna Fáil Manifesto is available online at:

<https://www.fiannafail.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Fianna-Fail-General-Election-Manifesto-2020.pdf>

Issue: Reverse cuts to the Rehabilitative Training Allowance (p. 52)

Party statement: The allowance, which is a mere €31.80 a week per student, is designed to help people with disabilities develop life, social and basic work skills so that further education and employment options are more accessible to them. We believe this decision is short-sighted and cruel. It will affect the most vulnerable the most and the savings will be minimal. We will reverse this decision at a cost of €3m.

We will reverse cuts to the Rehabilitative Training Allowance.

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS has lobbied with partner organisations to reverse this cut and is supportive of this proposal.

Issue: Establish a new Department of Higher Education and Research (p.77)

Party statement: The time has come to consider the separation of Higher Education and Research from the broader education system. Our first and second level system is facing rising demands which differ greatly from those of higher education. If we are to truly grasp the nettle of higher education reform, we must do so with a level of focus and dedication which has not been evident to date. Competing priorities mean that higher education is often marginalised, and not given the focus it needs as a driver of social change. Fianna Fáil is committed to developing a new relationship between our third-level intuitions through this department by providing the leadership and dedicated funding to address the crisis at the heart of Higher Education.

We will establish a new Department of Higher Education & Research

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS has lobbied for funding for accessible higher education provision in a community setting through PATH funding. With a proposed elevation of higher education at the cabinet table we would not want to see a relegation of adult, community, and further education as priorities of Government. If this proposal is implemented we see an even greater reason to implement our first [AONTAS Election Priority](#) and create a new role of Minister of State for Adult, Community, and Further Education and Training.

Issue: Provide an additional €100m per Year for Higher Education Funding (p.77)

Party statement: The 2016 Cassell's report highlighted the scale of the financial challenge facing our higher education sector. Four years later, and with no major changes to the funding of higher education the decline in our universities status in international rankings illustrate the systematic underinvestment by previous Fine Gael governments. Pending the findings of the ongoing work of the European Commission, we will provide an interim funding model that can sustain the sector into the future and ensure it is an engine of economic growth and opportunity. A comprehensive funding commitment is vital to reduce staff/student ratios, enhance student outcomes and improve research.

Commit to an additional €100 million of exchequer funding per annum pending the result of the Commission's ongoing review

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS has lobbied for higher education that is no-cost to the learner for first time mature students and particularly those in part-time courses. We continue to argue the case that access to higher education that is no-cost to the learner is critical for creating a more equitable learning system.

Issue: Freeze Student Fees (p.78)

Party statement:

Freeze student fees.

Ensuring both high quality and broad access to third-level education is vital to both our economic success into the future and to broadening out educational opportunity. We will freeze student fees to ensure working families are not penalised with onerous charges for third-level. Combined with our clear commitment on funding for Higher Education Institutions this will ensure financial certainty for the universities and ITs.

Ensure Full Restoration of Postgraduate Grants

Expanding educational opportunities is at the heart of Fianna Fáil policy. Fianna Fáil has already secured a partial row back on those measures, but further action is needed. We are committed to opening postgraduate qualifications to all students, regardless of income backgrounds and will completely reverse the Fine Gael cutbacks.

Fully restore postgraduate grants. This measure will cost €44.1m.

Increase the Undergraduate Maintenance Grant by 20%

The maintenance grant is a key tool to help students and alleviate the pressure on parents assisting them. The Cassells report specified the need for an additional investment is needed to deliver a more effective system of student financial aid.

Increase the maintenance grant by 20% at a cost of €34m. • Increase Student Assistance Fund by €4.9m

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS has lobbied for increased financial supports for first time mature students.

AONTAS could not find reference to adult and community education, lifelong learning or further education and training within the Fianna Fáil Manifesto.

Review of the Green Party Manifesto



The Green Party Manifesto is available online at:

[https://www.greenparty.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/GREEN PARTY TOWARDS 2030-WEB-VERSION.pdf](https://www.greenparty.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/GREEN_PARTY_TOWARDS_2030-WEB-VERSION.pdf)

Issue: Employment

Party statement: 6.5 Employment Affairs (p.28)

- Support the vital role that trade unions can play in ensuring that workers have access to further training and education and that their rights and interests are upheld.
- Reform the Back to Education Allowance with a view to improving third level educational opportunities for mature students.
- Ensure that all labour market activation services are provided on a public, community or not for-profit basis and that activation policies place jobseekers at their centre.

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS has lobbied for the rights of all adults to quality education throughout their lives.

AONTAS has lobbied for BTEA financial supports for first time Mature Students (BTEA)

AONTAS would argue for effective career guidance that is person-first rather than job-seeker first, considering the long-term needs of the person beyond just short term employment prospects.

Issue: Digital Economy

Party Statement: 6.7 *Digital Economy* (p.29)

Support digital literacy education for all ages across the country, to allow people of all ages and backgrounds to benefit from IT. (p.30)

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS is supportive of this proposal. The future economy and society is one that is dominated by life online and it is important that all residents in our country have access to the tools and knowledge they need to participate in social, civic, and employment.

Issue: People with Disabilities

Party statement: 8.2 People with Disabilities (p.36)

The extension of funding supports for people with disabilities in education to part-time students.

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS believes that regardless of a learners' physical or intellectual abilities, as well as their ability to participate in full or part-time education, that a learner should have the financial support they need to fully participate in education.

Issue: Traveller education

Party statement: 8.7 Travellers (p.38)

Instruct the Department of Education and Skills to draft and implement a Traveller Education Strategy.

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS would be supportive of this proposal. Travellers are one the most underrepresented populations and the Government needs to treat the lack of Traveller participation in formal and non-formal education as the crisis that it is both for the future success of the Traveller community but also the country. AONTAS would press the Government to recognise the success of community education as a policy tool for engaging communities like members of the Traveller community that are furthest from education.

Our November 2019 submission to the Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community highlights many of these points and can be found by [Clicking Here](#).

Issue: Forester education

Party statement: 9.4 Forestry (p.42)

Increase investment in higher and further education and training for foresters.

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS believes in supporting a sustainable future for our economy, country, society, and planet. We are supportive of initiatives like this that will make that sustainable future a reality.

Review of the Labour Party Manifesto



The Labour Party Manifesto is available online at:

https://www.labour.ie/download/pdf//labour_manifesto_web.pdf

Issue: Reducing the cost of education, particularly third level education (p.23)

Party statement:

Labour will progressively and sustainably reduce the cost of secondary and third level education. Everyone should have the opportunity to learn and to develop, at any age and regardless of their background. Core education from pre-primary through to third level should be genuinely free of charge, and lifelong education should always be affordable.

Labour will develop an implementation strategy to increase university funding, for both teaching and research, building on the recommendations of the Cassells report. Third level research is part of the engine of long-term economic growth and it is essential for Ireland's future prosperity. Labour will investigate drawing on the National Training Fund and other sources of funding to find a sustainable way to end the current crisis of funding at third level, and to reduce casualisation of staff in this sector. This implementation strategy will include a review of the third-level grant system, including its assessment process, to ensure grants are better targeted at those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS has lobbied for free higher education for first time mature students and particularly those in part-time courses and are therefore supportive of policy proposals to make education available at no-cost to learners.

Review of the People Before Profit Party Manifesto



The People Before Profit Party Manifesto is available online at:

<https://manifesto.pbp.ie/>

Issue: Lifelong education (p.24)

Party statement: Education should be about helping individuals to develop their full potential. An educated society is not just more productive – it is also balanced and more critically aware. There are many positive points about Irish education. There is a high level of participation in third-level institutions and proficiency in reading and maths is quite high. However, there are also significant weaknesses. There is a lower number of adults who return to some form of education after their formal schooling ends. Rote learning and preparation for exams dominates, rather than a focus on critical thinking.

AONTAS analysis: A core focus of AONTAS advocacy is for politicians and Government to recognise and fund education for the broader purpose of learning including critical thinking. We therefore are supportive of this position.

AONTAS has lobbied to widen participation in adult learning also.

Issue: Higher Education (p.26)

Party statement: People Before Profit believe that university education should be free and nobody should be put off going to college for lack of money. We will, therefore:

- Abolish all fees. Currently, the 'registration fee' has been steadily increased so that, in reality, it has become a new fee.
- Restore proper maintenance grants to guarantee access to students from low-income backgrounds.
- Restore funding for third-level education. State funding for third level was relentlessly cut during the crash. Third-level institutions are in crisis and increasingly rely on private philanthropy. Students and staff are paying the price in an underfunded sector, capitation should be restored.

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS has lobbied for free higher education for first time mature students and particularly those in part-time courses and are therefore supportive of policy proposals to make education available at no-cost to learners.

Issue: Migrant education

Party statement: Give proper recognition to the qualifications of non-EU migrants. This will help to integrate communities. (p.33)

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS has been advocating for a clear approach to the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Ireland for several years. At present the policy and practice around RPL is ad-hoc and inconsistently available. In order to create a welcoming and successful like for new migrants to Ireland we need to develop these process which will help new immigrants see their economic and social opportunities in Ireland.

Review of the Sinn Féin Manifesto



The Sinn Féin Manifesto is available online at:

https://www.sinnfein.ie/files/2020/SF_GE2020_Manifesto.pdf

Issue: Funding of third level education (p.35)

Party statement:

- Abolishing third level student fees at a cost of €243 million
- Increasing the student maintenance grant by 10%
- Ensuring adequate funding is provided to higher education institutions to the benefit of students, staff and the wider economy alike

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS has lobbied for free higher education for first time mature students and particularly those in part-time courses and are therefore supportive of policy proposals to make education available at no-cost to learners.

AONTAS is also supportive of the proposed increases to the Maintenance Grant as this recognises the wider costs that learners bare when returning to education. Implementation of this policy alongside the introduction of no-cost third level education would help to reduce financial barriers currently faced by adult learners, thereby in the long-term reducing systemic educational inequality.

Issue: Digital literacy (p.39)

Party statement: Digital champions to promote digital literacy in all schools

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS believes that all Irish citizens must have access to education that educates for a digitally literate Ireland. While supportive of developing digital literacy in schools we believe that supports must all be provided to adults, including parents of children supported in schools, as adults must complete in an increasingly digital economy and must also access an increase level of government and business supports online.

Issue: Adult literacy and numeracy (p.39)

Party statement:

- A cross-departmental approach to literacy, and the development of a Government Strategy to increase literacy and numeracy
- A Plain Language Act which makes both state and public services materials more accessible to readers
- Appointment of a Junior Minister with responsibility for the implementation of the strategy

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS are supportive of these policy proposals. As per AONTAS' own election priorities we would argue that the next Government appoint a Minister of State for Adult, Community, and Further Education and Training. We believe this Minister of State should be responsible for implementation of a new strategy for literacy and numeracy.

Issue: Transitioning beyond post-primary level education (p.39)

Party Statement:

- Increasing the number of apprentices to 53,000 over the first term of Government and 60,000 subsequently, and raise the number of women in apprenticeships.
- Rolling out the Walk Peer Programme
- Increasing supports for students with disabilities in further and higher education

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS' Vision is for all adults to achieve their educational aspirations through an equitable lifelong learning system. These policy proposals to support women in apprenticeships, and support people with different abilities to participate meaningfully in learning support this Vision of an equitable lifelong learning system.

Issue: Community development (p.82)

Party Statement:

- Implement the National Development Strategy for the community and voluntary sector
- Facilitate growth with the social enterprise and community co-operative sector through our newly established Co-Op Development Agency
- Develop a framework for collaborative working between voluntary organisations and their statutory counterparts
- Provide additional supports and guidelines for charities seeking to merge or collaborate
- Convene a working group to include sector representatives and relevant Government departments to develop a multi-annual funding structure - a simplified compliance and regulatory environment and a professional enhancement support similar to that provided by small businesses by Local Enterprise Offices
- Amend Charities Act to include the 'Advancement of Human Rights' as grounds for charitable tax exemption
- Increase the number of Community Employment places by 1,000 at a cost of €5.4 million

AONTAS analysis: For several year AONTAS has been advocating for sustainable and multi-annual funding for community education providers. The policy proposals made here for the wider community and voluntary sector meet these goals while also reducing the administrative burdens faced by AONTAS and our members. We are in full support of these community development proposals.

Review of the the Social Democrats Manifesto

Social
Democrats

The Social Democrats Manifesto is available online at:

<https://www.socialdemocrats.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Invest-in-Better-GE2020-1st-Feb.pdf>

Issue: Reduce costs and improve supports for students for third level and FET learners(p. 72)

Party statement:

- Reduce third level fees by phasing out the student contribution charge
- Reduce the ‘no maintenance support’ area of students’ commute from 45km to 25km
- Increasing funding to the SUSI grant scheme by 7%, and eliminate the delays in payments which cause significant stress and hardship for students
- Reinstate maintenance grants for post-graduate students
- Recognise the work of Postgraduate Research Students and guarantee fair pay and working conditions

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS works to see our Vision of creating an equitable lifelong learning system come true. The policy proposals put forward here work to achieve this Vision by removing barriers to participation, particularly financial barriers, by allowing learners furthest from educational opportunity the chance to participate in learning.

AONTAS recommends additional policy proposals surrounding access to and participation in community education as tools for supporting student access to third level and FET. AONTAS recognises and promotes the long-established role of community education in supporting adults’ return to education and employment. We specifically highlight community education’s range of personal development courses and the social supports that community education provides for learners to meaningfully participate in their learning.

Issue: Apprenticeships (p. 72)

Party statement:

- Springboard+ to be adapted to include school-leavers
- Promote digital apprenticeship programmes through initiatives like the UK’s “Tech Partners” scheme
- Investigate the introduction of an ‘apprenticeship levy’ to encourage major companies to develop their own apprenticeship programmes
- Greater funding for apprenticeships in state bodies and semi-state companies

- Ensure improved participation in apprenticeships for women and for people with disabilities
- Reform junior apprenticeship scheme for post-Junior Cert students
- A national campaign to inform students, parents, teachers and counsellors about the advantages of apprenticeships

AONTAS analysis: AONTAS supports the policy proposals to ensure that apprenticeships reach beyond the usual cohort of male learners who have completed their Leaving Cert, to a wider breadth of learners, and in a broader range of learning areas. We do want to highlight the wider benefits of learning beyond employment that should and must be recognised in the FET sector and beyond which we hope will be supported by any future Government.



AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation
2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street,
Ranelagh, Dublin 6, D06 E0H1
www.aontas.com
01 406 8220

RCN 20013042
Chy. Reg. 6719
Co. Reg. 80958