

AONTAS Response to Budget 2018

Description of AONTAS

AONTAS is Ireland's national adult learning organisation for adult and community education providers and adult learners. It promotes the value and benefits of adult learning, and advocates on behalf of the sector. Founded in 1969, it is an independent NGO, with 500 members nationwide.

In addition to promoting adult learning in Ireland, AONTAS is the national coordinating body for the European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL), which is aimed at increasing participation in adult learning across the EU, enhancing policies and supports for adult learners, and gathering and disseminating best practices.

As a membership organisation we provide a space for members to share experience, promote their work and advocate for the value of adult and community education.

Our Work

With particular emphasis on those who did not benefit from education initially or who are under-represented in learning, AONTAS' work is aimed at:

- Widening participation in lifelong learning
- Ensuring community education supports quality learning opportunities for the most educationally disadvantaged
- Ensuring adult learners are central to local, regional, national, European and International adult learning policy
- Promoting quality adult learning

Drawing on the strength of our members and meaningful relationships with adult learners we advocate for the rights of all adults to quality learning through their lives based on a *grassroots, authentic understanding of lifelong learning that benefits the social, personal and skills development of adults, their family and community.*

Introduction

Tuesday 10th October saw the announcement of Budget 2018 which included a number of welcomed measures including an increased investment in higher education. The main points relating to education can be viewed [here](#).

Advocating for the Right of All Adults in Ireland to Quality Learning

As an organisation, we are committed to advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives, and to promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning. As part of our ongoing advocacy work in 2017 we have produced, in collaboration with our rich membership base:

- AONTAS response to the public consultation process for the National Open Data Strategy 2017-2022 - view a copy [here](#)
- AONTAS SICAP Submission - view a copy [here](#)
- AONTAS Submission to the Higher Education Authority (HEA) Strategic Plan – view a copy [here](#)
- AONTAS response to the consultation on Proposed Exchequer- Employer Investment Mechanism for Higher Education and Further Education and Training – view a copy [here](#)
- AONTAS Submission on the new National Women’s Strategy and Action Plan 2017 – 2020 – view a copy [here](#)

Pre-Budget Submission

In preparation for Budget 2018, AONTAS made a pre-budget submission. The focus of our pre-budget submission was to ensure the existence of a national lifelong learning infrastructure that is effectively funded and accessible to all citizens across Ireland.

In this submission AONTAS provided requests for budgetary action that would effectively and efficiently support the community education and higher education sectors widening access and participation beyond those who already partake in lifelong learning – view a copy [here](#).

Specifically AONTAS called for the following:

- 1. QQI waivers for the community education sector**
1b. Implement a fee waiver process
- 2. Secure, reliable, and effective funding for the community education sector**
- 3. Implementation of Option 1 for funding of higher education (Cassells Report)**

Unfortunately, the requests were not specifically detailed in Budget 2018, however AONTAS welcomes the overall increased investment in education and also welcomes a number of other measures that look at supporting increased educational equality. These measures are listed below:

Access for Adult Learners

AONTAS welcomes:

- Additional measures that will increase equity of access for adult learners, particularly support for part-time higher education opportunities, namely the additional 1,000 Springboard places and enhanced post-graduate funding and bursaries for disadvantaged student

However AONTAS would call for greater flexibility for learners, particularly those who are educationally disadvantaged. Suggested measures would include:

- Broadening the Springboard Programme to include community education based higher education provision
- Providing core funding for community education organisations providing higher education courses to disadvantaged groups
- Establishing a clear mechanism that enables no part-time fees for educationally disadvantaged students

AONTAS welcomes:

- Additional funding for further and higher education

However AONTAS highlights the importance that this increased allocation includes community education. Community education which has a track record for engaging the most hard to reach adult learners in an effective, holistic manner and must be supported.

Wider Benefits of Learning

AONTAS welcomes:

- The focus on wellbeing of students as a key priority for government and the measures announced such as additional guidance posts

However AONTAS calls for this focus on wellbeing to be extended to adults, particularly those most educationally disadvantaged.

The proven outcomes of adult learning and non-vocationally orientated programmes on mental health and wellbeing are well documented. AONTAS would like to see increased investment in education as a public good that encompasses a good balance of choice for learners including community education (accredited and non-accredited).

AONTAS welcomes:

- Increased €10,000 funding allocation for Family Resources Centres

Family Resource Centres are at the heart of many communities, many of whom are active in the provision of community education. These centres provide intergenerational learning hubs at local level thus breaking down the cycle of educational disadvantage and poverty.

National Training Fund – Proposed Review

As the voice of adult learning, AONTAS strongly recommends that learners are meaningfully consulted in relation to this review. In addition to employer views, the government should also take into account the recipients of the training, the learners who can offer valuable insights into educational offerings.

International research, including the World Economic Forum propose *‘the need for learner-centred approaches, learning that adapts to the needs and interests of the individual and encompassing a wide range of skills and training, rather than traditional subject-focused learning noting the need for complex problem solving; critical thinking; creativity; cognitive flexibility together with communicative skills of: people management; coordinating with others; service orientation; and negotiation for the Forth Industrial Revolution’* (World Economic Forum, 2017).

In order to respond to the needs of the economy learner-centred education and learner involvement must be a part of the policy making process.

Conclusion

Whilst we welcome certain measures outlined in Budget 2018, additional measures need to be put in place to help widen participation in adult learning to include those that are most educationally disadvantaged. As an organisation AONTAS will continue to advocate for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives, and promote the value and benefits of lifelong learning.

For More Information

Department of Education and Skills Press Release – view a copy [here](#).

Main Education Budget features - view a copy [here](#).