

AONTAS

The National Adult Learning Organisation

Proposal for a COVID-19 Community Education Support Fund

“Recognise the role of community education and its vital role in our communities by supporting its schemes and initiatives post COVID-19.”

(Programme for Government, *Our Shared Future*, 2020)

7th July 2020



The Voice of
Adult Learning

Introduction

Purpose of this paper

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, vulnerable groups have unequivocally experienced an exacerbation of disadvantage. Additionally, those with lower levels of qualifications are most likely to have lost their job, have poorer health and have fewer resources to engage in the seismic shift to remote learning. Challenges impacting on learning are complex and are negatively impacted by poverty, poor housing, domestic violence, isolation, mental health, marginalisation and lack of essential supports. This paper has 3 budgetary asks for community education outlined in two parts: Part 1 specifically relates to the needs of community education learners within the COVID-19 context. As such, AONTAS is calling for a **COVID-19 Community Education Support fund for 2020/2021**, which links to the needs of learners, aligns to the Programme for Government, and is costed at **€2.9 million**. Part 2 outlines the longer term needs of community education. This is outlined drawing on the 20-year anniversary of the White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life* (DES, 2000) to set the context of community education within the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. This requires: **multiannual sustainable funding** with appropriate measurement mechanisms and a **fund to cover the costs arising from QQI re-engagement/validation fees, totalling €10 million**. These proposals offer the new Department an opportunity to capitalise on the strengths of community education in achieving its goals for social cohesion, inclusion and equality.

AONTAS

AONTAS is a long established (1969), non-governmental membership organisation that promotes the value of adult learning and advocates for the rights of all adults to quality learning across the tertiary education system. We have an unwavering commitment to educationally disadvantaged adults, and we offer solutions-focused advocacy that is evidence based, drawing on research and our extensive, meaningful learner engagement activities. Our [Strategic Plan: A Vision for Educational Equality](#) (2019-2022) is informed by principles of: social justice, feminism, partnership, valuing diversity, advancing equality and supporting social inclusion. We represent organisations and individuals committed to educational equality for adults: **500 members** [all 16 ETBs, over 120 community education organisations, adult learning/access departments of Higher Education Institutions, social justice NGOs, educators and learners across the Island of Ireland]. We continually engage

with further education and training learners, community education learners and mature students in order to identify how their learning journeys can be supported. Additionally, we engage with educators from further education and training, community education and higher education on a weekly basis, affording us key insights into practice. We have expertise in educational equality and we advocate strongly for community education, as the most inclusive, yet underfunded part of the education system.

Our work covers: **Promoting** lifelong learning and access: in the first week of March the annual [AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival](#) and [STAR Awards](#) recognise excellence in inclusive education projects and an [annual Policy Day event](#). **Encouraging** people to engage in learning: Freephone information referral helpline and website www.onestepup.ie. **Building capacity** and supporting professional development in community education through the [AONTAS Community Education Network](#). Authentically hearing learner voice, particularly those marginalised, through a qualitative **research** project, The [National FET Learner Forum](#). Democratising relevant academic work in our well established peer reviewed journal, [The Adult Learner](#). We have strong **European** links: designated by the then Department of Education and Skills as the National Coordinator for the European Agenda for Adult Learning, we lead/partner in four EU projects across all levels of Erasmus+, are on the Board of the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) and are linked globally. AONTAS co-established the Network of Adult Learning Across Border ([NALAB](#), [video](#)) in response to Brexit. Ultimately, all our work, and communications activities aims to advocate for the rights of all adults to engage in learning to fulfil their aspirations.

Community Education – The Most Inclusive Model of Education for Adults

Community education is the most inclusive part of the tertiary education system as it successfully engages people at a local level, mainly within socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, through a supportive learning environment. Community Education provision encompasses a wide range of flexible, part-time, accredited and non-accredited courses that build a learner's confidence and which frequently come with a package of supports suited to the needs of an individual learner and specific learner cohorts.

People who engage in community education include: early school leavers, lone parents, people in low paid/precarious employment, people who struggle with urban and rural isolation, people living with mental health issues, people who have experienced homelessness or addiction, long term unemployed, people from the Traveller Community, one parent families (mainly mothers) and people living in Direct Provision centres across Ireland. Community education works to mitigate educational disadvantage, combat social isolation and foster personal development.

Services in many community education organisations include: childcare facilities, one-to-one counselling, domestic violence supports, mentoring, one-to-one and small group educational supports, technology-enhanced learning, and access to career guidance.

Retention is supported by a pedagogic process that draws on the theories of Paulo Freire in that it builds on the learner's previous knowledge and experience, reflection, group work, peer assessment and supportive assessment techniques that develop learners' skills so that they succeed. Embedded across the learning experience is a critical education process that builds an individual's and community's capacity for civic engagement and transformation.

The AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) represents a subset of all community education taking place in Ireland. In the CEN, community education is offered by not-for-profit community organisations and charities in communities across Ireland. The scope and reach of its membership is evidence of the significant impact of community education across the country. The AONTAS CEN has over 110 member organisations across 24 counties. Depending on their size, these organisations connect individually with anywhere from 20 to 400 learners every year. Like the communities they serve, the organisations vary in size to meet community needs. The CEN meets 3 times a year and through member webinars (currently weekly). Continuous professional development for community education and resources to support quality (community of practice for QQI re-engagement).

Budgetary Asks for Community Education

Ask 1 *COVID-19 Community Education Support fund for 2020/2021* would address three key areas of concern for community education arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The fund would contain three parts and enable community education organisations to apply for appropriate funding, from their local ETB, based on the needs of their learners and organisation.

- Community Education Learner Assistance Fund
- Reboot Learning through Outreach, Engagement and Mentoring Fund
- COVID-19 Exceptional Circumstances Fund for Community Education

Ask 2 AONTAS and our members from across Ireland are asking for the creation of **long-term policy and funding frameworks for community education provision** that is built upon the all-of-government approach to policy development requested in 2019. To meet the needs of learners and our communities, big and small, around the island, a new sustainable, multi-annual funding model for independently managed community education is needed. AONTAS is calling for an investment of **€9.75 million**.

Ask 3 **Establish a QQI – related costs fund** to enable accredited provision for community education covering the cost of QQI reengagement and programme validation. (**€250,000** maximum depending on number)

Community Education Learner Experience During COVID-19

Key findings from AONTAS' **"Virtual Community Education Learner Focus Group and Learner Survey"** are outlined below. The full report can be read [here](#).

- **Tutors were engaging** with learners through a variety of platforms, with text message and WhatsApp being the most popular, followed by email and video chat
- Learners feel well supported by tutors in the move to emergency remote learning
- Many learners still **don't have access to appropriate technology** to complete their coursework, and a majority of learners do not have access to a personal laptop or PC
- Learners continue to experience **WiFi issues**, which make assessment particularly challenging
- Learners identified a range of **barriers to learning at home**, such as ergonomic challenges and home caring responsibilities
- Learners highlighted a range of **benefits to emergency remote learning** including increased flexibility, not having to travel, and getting to sample different courses
- Learners described a range of **health and wellbeing benefits** to engaging in their courses during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Learners highlighted a need for **wraparound supports because of the mental health** challenges which have been exacerbated by COVID-19

Learners feel supported by their tutors and connected to their community education providers

The majority of learners answered either "strongly agree" (40) or "agree" (18) in response to the statement "I am happy with the level of engagement my centre/tutor has provided during COVID-19", with only 4 learners selecting "neutral" or "disagree". All learners in the focus group felt supported in their transition to emergency remote learning. One learner who had been receiving support by phone noted that these check-ins were sometimes "long conversations, could be 30 minutes or more, when I'm troubled". As a learner with a disability, this participant noted the value of having "someone you can talk to", adding "I feel more supported than ever".

Learners lack appropriate technology and face WiFi issues

While learners sought to embrace the new online learning environment, many faced challenges. WiFi coverage and access to devices came through in learner discussions, with one learner describing his/her struggle to complete work on an iPad which s/he found "hard to use". Eight community education learners taking part in the survey indicated that they still do not "have access to a laptop or computer" to complete their work at home. Only 17 learners (32%) were using a "personal laptop (used only by you)" to complete their coursework, while 10 (20%) used a "shared laptop (used by other members of the household)". The largest number of learners, 18 learners, were using "a mobile phone with internet to complete their work". WiFi reliability was an issue for 38% of learners who completed the survey. For some, all of these challenges were present at the same time, as one learner noted: "we only have one laptop and three children using it. The internet access is unreliable at times".

Most learners in the focus group had not engaged in online learning prior to the onset of COVID-19, and a number of learners spoke about positive aspects of learning online. For those who had not been familiar with online learning platforms, the closure of their education facility had provided an “opportunity” for “getting to know online a bit better”, and was a “stepping stone” to their increasing digital literacy

Physical workspace remains a challenge for learners

While some learners noted positive aspects to working from home, such as not having to travel, many explained that this change had also brought a number of notable challenges. Learners shared their workspace and devices with children and other family members. The survey indicated that learners completed their courses in a variety of environments, with the kitchen table (18) and at a desk (15) being the most popular (66%), while 14 stated that they were completing their work on a sofa (6) or in a bed (8). Two of the learners who indicated that they were completing their coursework from “bed” were learners in Direct Provision. The same number of learners in Direct Provision were not able to complete their course work at home without distraction

Community education plays an important role in promoting mental health and wellbeing

Learners pointed to a wide range of benefits of engaging with community education broadly, and particularly during the lockdown. As one learner noted, “I would have been lost over the summer without my classes”. Another learner described how “for about two weeks it was a miserable experience but now [the course] it’s taking up my time, I have a feeling of purpose and accomplishment that online learning gives me”.

Speaking about their experience of “recovery education”, one learner noted that wraparound supports are now “more necessary” than ever “because of the mental health challenges”, which have been exacerbated by “ill-health and fears around COVID-19” as well as “loss of employment” and “restrictions”. As summarised by this learner, such personal challenges can “run you into the ground”. Community education was discussed as a counter-weight to these challenges, with an important range of health, wellbeing and economic outcomes.

Learners would like more support with remote learning next year

The majority of learners would continue with digital learning next year if COVID-19 restrictions remain in place or are reintroduced. When giving recommendations on how to make remote learning a more attractive prospect for the next academic year, learners’ responses referenced “assistance with technology”, “grants for technology – tablets or iPads for example” and “taster programmes to allow gentle introduction to online learning”. Another learner noted “this was all very new for us, but our IT Teacher was very good to support us and get us up and running”. Emphasising, once again, the need for face-to-face interaction, learners also recommended “safe distance meetup[s].”

COVID-19 Community Education Support fund for 2020/2021 would go some way to addressing these key areas of concern for community education arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.



Nora Fahy (Manager) and community education learner at Roscommon Women's Network (March 2020)

 **AONTAS** @aontas · Mar 11

AONTAS has been meeting with groups in Cork to help inform the [#CommunityEdCensus](#). Wonderful to hear of the wide ranging impacts of [#CommunityEducation](#) for learners in Cork. Today we met with 2 [#STARAward2020](#) winning groups- Ability@Work & The Dillon's Cross Project.



Ability@Work

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Southill Family Resource Centre Supports Learners During COVID-19

If you want to see an example of community education in action, Southill Family Resource Centre – based in two adjoining houses in O'Malley Park in Limerick – is a good place to start. It offers a package of supports that enable local people to engage in a range of accredited and non-accredited courses, with a focus on learning in and for the community.

With less than 5 per cent of the local population having a third level qualification, together with high unemployment and approximately 80 per cent lone parent households, education plays an essential role out of poverty.

During the Covid-19 crisis, co-ordinator Jimmy Prior and his staff team have demonstrated exceptional agility in responding to the diverse range of challenges the community faces. The centre has been supporting 220 people weekly via Zoom, WhatsApp, telephone calls and, where possible, classes have also migrated online which teach basic IT as well as focusing on mental health and wellbeing.

Jimmy notes that for many learners, digital literacy and access to digital technology is a real barrier to engaging in courses. "There are still people who do not have a laptop, and who are not aware that you can use your phone fantastically if it's a smart phone," he says. "We still have people, particularly in this area, that do not have internet."

With opportunities for fundraising diminished for addressing the unanticipated demand for IT, the centre has endeavoured to loan a small number of iPads and laptops to learners but many more still lack personal devices. Additionally, demand for learner supports has increased, with a 60 percent increase in counselling requests, offered online or via phone. Building opportunities for people is an ongoing commitment. "When the office closes at 5 o'clock the phone is switched over to my phone," adds Jimmy.

The Southill Family Resource Centre has also facilitated a number of outdoor meet-ups for the women's group where they gather in fours. Some learners have lost loved ones to Covid-19. "The fact that they can come here, talk and say 'I'm really struggling' has made such a difference," he says. There had been an increase in those expressing an interest in courses, many with a view to upskilling. "Because we're local and most people would know us, or know somebody here, they're able to ring us and say, well actually I'm thinking of doing a course and how do you think I can do it?" he says.

In addition to supporting access to learning, Jimmy says the value of community education runs deeper. "It becomes a lot more than the classes and the courses, if I'm honest, and for our learners, it's a lot more; it's the social contacts, it's the personal contacts. For some people and families, it's their lifeline," he says. – Excerpt from Irish Times Opinion Piece by Niamh O'Reilly (12 June): ["A new Department of Higher Education risks creating a two-tier education system"](#)

Part 1 COVID-19 Community Education Support Fund for 2020/2021

AONTAS is calling for a **COVID-19 Community Education Support fund for 2020/2021**. This paper outlines specific budgetary requirements to support community education learners in 2020/2021, in order to support access, engagement, retention progression and a positive learning experience. Based on the work of the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Working Group (MED), the TES Learner/Student Support Framework (Figure 1) was developed and is used as a theoretical framework/guide to identify community education learner needs. Therefore, there is a solid evidence base to support the requirements of community education learners.

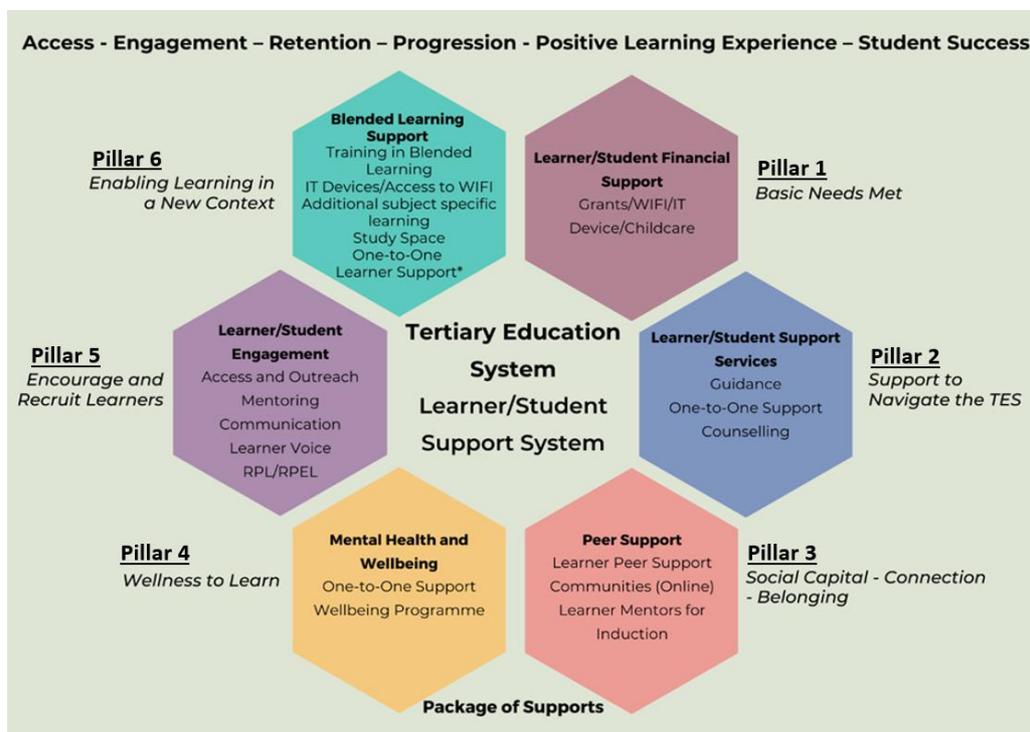


Figure 1: Tertiary Education Student/Learner Support Framework

Within the TES Learner/Student Support Framework, six pillars will require investment to support access, retention, and equality of opportunity. It also needs to safeguard against an exacerbation of disadvantage in a community education context. Following the work of the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including community education issues) working group, and the development of a discussion paper on the [Challenges facing Learners and Community Education Providers within Tertiary Education](#), and extensive AONTAS Member engagement, in line with the new Programme for Government¹, please find below an outline of a proposed **COVID-19 Community Education Support fund for 2020/2021**.

¹ Recognise the role of community education and its vital role in our communities by supporting its schemes and initiatives post COVID-19.

COVID-19 Community Education Support fund for 2020/2021 would address three key areas of concern for community education arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. **Firstly, it will financially support community education learners directly**, thereby enabling access and retention. These community education learners receive no financial support at present (no SUSI grant or Student Assistance Fund, SAF). Secondly, it will support **extensive outreach and engagement activities** in order to encourage a return to learning. Thirdly, it will address **organisational/contingency costs arising** from COVID-19 adaptation requirements for the new learning context. The supports outlined in the *COVID-19 Community Education Support fund for 2020/2021* equate to a maximum of €20,000 per community education group or a total of **€2 million** for an estimated **100 groups** across all ETB areas, if they were to avail of the funds. An additional, **€960,000** investment would support outreach to reengage vulnerable learners.

COVID-19 Community Education Support Fund for 2020/2021

The fund would contain three parts and enable community education organisations to apply for appropriate funding, from their local ETB, based on the needs of their learners and organisation.

- Part 1 Community Education Learner Assistance Fund
- Part 2 Reboot Learning through Outreach, Engagement and Mentoring Fund
- Part 3 COVID-19 Exceptional Circumstances Fund for Community Education

Part 1 Community Education Learner Assistance Fund

Addressing Pillar 1: Student/Learner Financial Support (Basic Needs Met)

Immediate Learner/Student Hardship support needed arising from the Covid-19 pandemic (area 1). Similar to the Student Assistance Fund ([SAF](#)) in higher education, a tertiary-wide Student Assistance Fund is needed to include community education learners, a large cohort of which are vulnerable learners.

Detailed analysis of financial issues impacting on vulnerable learners is outlined in the MED Discussion Paper, [Financial Issues impacting Learners/Students in Tertiary Education](#) in addition to the community education discussion paper.

A report on the *Virtual [Community Education Learner Forum and Learner Survey \(12 June 2020\)](#)*, is available, demonstrating the need for small investments to enable learning in the COVID-19 learning context 2020/2021.

Community education learners are amongst the most marginalised adult learners within tertiary education and have the fewest resources. Similar to the Student Assistance Fund (SAF) in higher education, a learner support fund distributed to community education groups would enable learners to gain essential materials for blended learning, which should be provided (e.g. for mobile data cards/low-cost tablets, IT support, dongles, etc).

Dependent on learner numbers and profile, a fund should be made available equating to €5000 per independently managed community education provider for use as they deem necessary for the provision of learning. To ensure these learners have equal access to funding supports provided in the HE sector (and recommended for the FE sector), a fund should be created for community education learners that equates to €5000 per community education group for 100 groups (€500,000).

Part 2 Reboot Learning through Outreach, Engagement and Mentoring Fund

Addressing Pillar 5: Learner/Student Engagement (Encourage and Recruit)

A specific focus on recruitment and engagement of new learners is essential, particularly to reach the most marginalised and those recently unemployed. As outlined in the Programme for Government, further development of access in further and higher education is required.

Specifically, in relation to community education reengaging marginalised learners, particularly for those who left the learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, is essential. Outreach has historically been important to the success of community education and its ability to reach marginalised communities. With high unemployment expected to continue once the economy reopens, we need to reinvest in community outreach. This is particularly important for women who have been engaged in community education programmes but who bore the brunt of caring responsibilities during the pandemic and who have experienced greater impact on their wellbeing (NWCi; CSO, 2020). The proposed fund would be used to support outreach activities for community education groups.

Detailed analysis of learner engagement needs for vulnerable learners is outlined in the following Papers: [MED Discussion Paper, Learner/Student Engagement across Tertiary Sector and Challenges facing Learners and Community Education Providers within Tertiary Education - A Discussion Paper](#),

- A fund of €5000 to be allocated per community education group, for this purpose which would include the cost of phone calls, publicity in local centres (leaflets) and a member of staff allocated to spend time on outreach work.
- Create an effective structure for outreach within a community education context in order to engage hard to reach groups. 16 community-based Outreach Support Workers, based in community education organisations and supported by AONTAS, would implement a community based outreach strategy within a COVID-19 context. Please see appendix 1 for more details.

Part 3 COVID-19 Exceptional Circumstances Fund for Community Education

Addressing Pillar 2: Learner/Student Support Service; Addressing Pillar 3: Peer Support; Addressing Pillar 4: Mental Health and Wellbeing; Addressing Pillar 6: Blended Learning Support

A specific fund is required to support community education learners regarding learner/support, peer support, mental health and wellbeing and blended learning, in addition to social distancing adaptation costs. This will require discretionary funding to empower community education organisations to respond to learner needs.

Community Education plays a vital role in supporting mental health and wellbeing. The ability of Community Education providers to deliver these vital services have been challenged by the current COVID-19 context. Therefore, a specific emergency fund would allow groups to avail of the financial supports necessary to continue to effectively provide mental health and wellbeing supports to disadvantaged learning populations, in a remote learning context.

As outlined in the Programme For Government², overcoming the challenges impacting on TES due to the COVID-19 crisis, and thus the seismic shift to remote learning, is essential. This is of particular concern in community education as support for upskilling staff is essential to quality learning provision in an online context. Additionally, community education learners require specific intense support to engage in online/remote learning, whilst cognisant that not all learners can engage in online provision thereby further emphasising the need to support a blended (in person) and online.

Also, given that there will be a cohort of learners who will not be in a position to engage online, adaptation of community education organisations to accommodate social distancing due to a lack of space/ventilation is essential. Access to public premises for community education classes, or funding to cover the temporary renting of spaces.

Detailed analysis of learner support needs for vulnerable learners is outlined in the [MED Discussion Paper Educational Equity and Learner Cohorts](#); the mental health impacts of COVID-19 for vulnerable learners is outlined in the [MED Discussion paper, Learner Mental Health and Wellbeing in COVID-19](#); blended learning needs for FET Learners and Practitioners is outlined in the [MED Discussion Paper Digital Learning and Disadvantage across Tertiary Education](#); blended learning CPD needs for FET practitioners is outlined in the [Med Discussion Paper Tutors and Practitioners on the Front-line During COVID-19 Emergency Response Education](#)

² *Higher and Further Education have been greatly affected by the COVID-19 crisis and we will support the sector through these challenges to ensure that educational opportunities remain and are made more accessible to everyone, particularly the most vulnerable in our society' (p.97).*

Provide an emergency fund that can be applied for by community education provider organisations to support blended learning, wellbeing classes, administration, adaptation to social distancing, masks, temporary rental costs, IT costs. Approximately €10,000 per provider depending on learner numbers and learner profile.

Budget Estimate for TES Learner Student Support for Community Education

The following budget estimates are made to support community education groups. These independently managed community education providers support the most educationally disadvantaged learners back into education. The supports outlined in the **COVID-19 Community Education Support fund for 2020/2021** amount to approximately €20,000 per community education group amounting to a conservative estimate of **€2 million** for an estimated **100 groups to a maximum of €4 million for 200** across all ETB areas, if they were to avail of the funds (also depending on learner number and profile).

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 further education and training provision costs (excluding community education) SOLAS spent €472.5 million benefiting approximately 288,000 learners which equates to €1641 per learner. An increase to this budget would go some way toward closing the inequity in this gap in funding for community education. It would also address the persistent financial issues that community education learners face, and who are not entitled to any financial supports for engaging in education.

Budget Estimate for TES Learner Student Support for Community Education

COVID-19 Community Education Support fund for 2020/2021

TES Framework	Programme for Government		Action Required	Estimated Costs
Pillar 1: Student/Learner Financial Support (Basic Needs Met)	An Inclusive Vision for Education Provide additional supports for students who are homeless, resident in family hubs, or in direct provision. Further develop access programmes to Higher and Further Education for students from disadvantaged groups, including members of the Traveller Community, those in direct provision and those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged.	1	Part 1: Community Education Learner Assistance Fund €5,000 per group (x100 groups)	€500,000
Pillar 5: Learner/Student Engagement (Encourage and Recruit)	Access to FET and HE Further develop access programmes to Higher and Further Education for students from disadvantaged groups, including members of the Traveller Community, those in direct provision and those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged.	2	Part 2 Reboot Learning through Outreach, Engagement and Mentoring Fund A fund of €5000 to be allocated per community education group, for this purpose which would include the cost of phone calls, publicity in local centres (leaflets) and a member of staff allocated to spend time on outreach work. €5,000 per group (x100 groups)	€500,000
			16 Community –based Outreach Support Workers	@ 60k salary = €960,000 annually
Pillar 2: Learner/Student Support Service; Pillar 3: Peer Support; Pillar 4: Mental Health and Wellbeing; Pillar 6: Blended Learning Support	Further Education and Community Sectors: Recognise the role of community education and its vital role in our communities by supporting its schemes and initiatives post COVID-19.	3	Part 3 COVID-19 Exceptional Circumstances Fund for Community Education Provide an emergency fund that can be applied for by community education provider organisations to support their administration, adaptation to social distancing, masks, IT costs. Approx €10,000 per provider (x 100 groups)	€1,000,000
Estimated total costs for 100 community education organisations				€2,960,000

Proposed process for administering COVID-19 Community Education Support fund for 2020/2021

The funds would be ring-fenced for community education organisations and administered by their local ETBs over the academic year 2020/2021.

Key principles for administering the COVID-19 Community Education Funding

Using Department of Education and Skills Community Education Programme Operational Guidelines for Providers, 2012 as a basis in terms of criteria and the following:

1) Grant funding rather than tutor hours

We know community education is funded through a variety of government departments and streams. At ETB level, there a number of models used for funding community education groups, from tutor hours to a core grant. The latter can provide more security to groups in terms of planning, tutor hours can work for some groups but can be limiting, as it does not provide for full cost recovery e.g. heat, light, rent. The COVID-19 Community Education Fund should be available to community education providers to administer based on the immediate needs of providers and learners in the post-COVID landscape.

- 2) **Strategically focused:** the fund will be focused on areas of high disadvantage, regardless of previous ETB engagement with the community education groups.
- 3) **Learner Centered:** It will be focused on learners who are vulnerable and most impacted by COVID-19 in terms of unemployment and marginalisation. The Community Education Learner Support Fund will be administered with minimal administration whilst adhering to all reporting requirements. Community education groups will have autonomy over the use of the fund for learners, and document all spending in line with standard financial requirements. It will be a locally administered fund so that it can be responsive to immediate learner needs. The amount of funding should also relate to the number of learners and the learner profile (e.g. if they require intensive supports).
- 4) **Reporting:** Reporting of funds should consider progression in the broadest terms with consideration to the learner cohorts who are most marginalised. Therefore, outcomes may not always equate to completion of accredited provision. A longer-term view of learner engagement is required in a post-COVID-19 context.
- 5) **Multi-annual budget:** To cover 2020-2021, give the longer-term nature of reengagement required.

Part 2 Sustainable Funding for Community Education

“...different people need different amounts and different kinds of goods to reach the same levels of well-being or advantage.” (Robeyns, 2005).

Ask 2 AONTAS and our members from across Ireland are asking for the creation of **long-term policy and funding frameworks for community education provision** that is built upon the all-of-government approach to policy development requested in 2019. To meet the needs of learners and our communities, big and small, around the island, a new sustainable, multi-annual funding model for independently managed community education is needed. AONTAS is calling for an investment of **€9.75 million**.

To be successful AONTAS and our members propose that a funding model needs to fulfil certain requirements. A new funding model for community education must:

- be needs-based, ensuring the communities that have greater need receive increased funding. AONTAS proposes that this funding is allocated according to a community needs-based assessment. This process will ensure that communities that require greater education and economic support receive that support and are not overlooked.
- cover the true cost of community education provision including overhead costs, administration, and provision. Too frequently funding only covers tutor-costs, neglecting to account for overhead and administrative costs that allow programmes to be available to learners.
- measure the outcomes of community education effectively, for example by considering the potential of the distance travelled tool. Quantitative assessments of lifelong learning participation that are based on metrics such as completion of a single minor or major award, mask the life and learning experiences of the learners. These assessments offer no insight into the people participating in education and the life challenges they may have had to overcome to participate, as well as the life challenges that education now helps them to overcome. Each learner has a unique experience and success means many things to different people. Success can mean overcoming fears of education by taking a step into adult and community education, to receiving a minor QQI award, to being able to help their child complete their homework. These successes develop into immediate as well as intergenerational social and community benefits.

Ask 3 **Establish a QQI-related costs fund** to enable accredited provision for community education covering the cost of QQI reengagement and programme validation. (**€250,000** maximum depending on number)

Community education and *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education* (2000)

In 2020 we are marking 20 years since publication of *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education* (DES, 2000). Specifically, reflecting on Chapter 5 of the White Paper, which spoke of a potential new era for independently managed community education. Chapter 5 articulated the purpose and value of community education in addition to defining the policy actions necessary for the creation and sustainability of its vibrant future. Unfortunately, the vibrant future defined in the White Paper has had to work hard for its continued existence because of the cuts to the sector since the economic crisis. Over the intervening 20 years, community education has had to work against all odds to realise the potential defined in the White Paper. Successive education policies, and the slashing of budgets during the economic crisis led to an overwhelming focus on education for skills development and employment (DES, 2014). In effect the last 20 years has side-lined community education's potential and the more vibrant future that could have been.

Exacerbating factors have included political changes, including the changing role of the Minister of State in the Department of Education and Skills with specific responsibilities for adult education. This changing political focus over the intervening 20 years has led to an increased focus on adult education for training and employment outcomes at the expense of the original Ministerial focus of adult education and lifelong learning which, as evidenced in the White Paper, included a focus on community education. Whilst there were significant improvements through the first appointment of a Minister of State in 1997, when the focus was narrowed starting in 2011 to exclude specific reference to adult education and lifelong learning, important areas like community education became marginalised in national policy. The reality became particularly acute starting with the economic crash in 2008 and was accelerated in 2011 when all reference to adult education was removed from the title of the Minister of State.

The changing title of the Minister of State for adult education: 1997 to present day

1997-2002: Minister of State for Youth Affairs, Adult Education and School Transport

2002-2006: Minister of State for Adult Education, Youth Affairs and Educational Disadvantage

2006 -2011: Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Youth Work and School Transport

2011-2014: Minister of State for Training and Skills

2014-2016: Minister of State for Skills, Research and Innovation

2016-2020: Minister of State for Training, Skills, Innovation, Research and Development

2020: Minister of State for Skills and Further Education

History of the White Paper

Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education created a vision of adult and community education that focused on transformative learning, both at the individual and societal level. The paper gave significant attention to the role of community education in supporting this vision. Describing community education as “one of the most dynamic and distinctive elements of the Adult Education sector”, the paper did more than acknowledge the role community education played in the future of Irish adult education, it highlighted it as a model for transformative learning (DES, 2000). It also recognised the community education model as a policy tool for delivering on educational outcomes not only within education policy goals but also across a myriad of other policy spheres, particularly those focused on social inclusion, civic engagement, mental health, discrimination and other goals like these.

The overall vision of the now two-decade old paper made it a progressive document for its time. It set Ireland apart from and above other European nations which were still stuck on stripping down adult education to fit the sector into a narrowly defined economic agenda (Shannon, 2019). The White Paper’s more nuanced, progressive and holistic understanding of the value and future potential of this multi-dimensional form of education did not happen by chance or materialise overnight. It was the product of sustained stakeholder input. As a result, the White Paper generated significant support and buy-in from the community education sector. The consultative process undertaken in the lead up to the White Paper reassured educators and community organisers that their experience mattered. It left educators and organisers with a ‘sense of validation, of solidarity, and of worth’ (Fitzsimons, 2017, p. 114). Since this time however the confidence that the recommendations of the White Paper will be fully implemented has waned. Many feel the key messages of the White Paper were drowned out by a political and policy trend for adult education to exist as a policy tool to meet the needs of the economy. The new Department of Further and Higher Education, Innovation, Research and Science offers an exciting prospect to reignite the social cohesion mission of community education.

Chapter 5: Community Education

The White Paper allocated an entire chapter to addressing the role of community education, which it defined as ‘a process of user-driven, learner-centred and communal education’ (DES, 2000). It did this largely because it believed in community education’s success in reaching hard to reach learners, arguing that the ‘uniform and national organised education systems’ failed to meet the needs of particular groups such as Travellers and other non-traditional learners (DES, 2000). It recognised that low educational attainment was very often a result of a systemic deficit, rather than a deficit at the level of the learner or local community. The paper contended that:

While the Irish education system has many recognised strengths, there are inherent inflexibilities within it...it is essential to continue to enhance progression opportunities for students who have left the initial system having failed in it or been failed by it (DES, 2000, p.33).

This acknowledgement 20 years ago of inherent inflexibilities in the state education system placed a clear onus on the state to address these inflexibilities through the funding and resourcing of flexible provision aimed at engaging those furthest from education. This acknowledged the value of community education for contributing to achieving the far-reaching aims of government in the collective interest of the country, as much as for specific local communities.

Chapter 5 policy commitments 20 years later

The White Paper made a commitment to support the growth of community education. The Paper prescribed a number of welcome calls for changes to community education that were intended to increase the sector’s capacity for delivering positive outcomes for communities throughout the country. Included was the creation of the Community Education Facilitator role (CEF) which was created to facilitate the funding and operational success of independently managed and non-statutory community education organisations.

Twenty years ago community education providers and learners in Ireland had good reason to celebrate and stay hopeful for future improvements in the sector. While questions still remained around sustainable funding, there was significant expectation that formal recognition and praise of community education values and practice would lead to tangible material progress. Another aspect important to note was that in the wake of the White Paper there was a sense of having finally arrived as a fully recognised sector of the adult education system. Community education was on the path to achieving a much deserved parity of esteem within the education system. However, as time would prove, a number of the hopes and expectations regarding community education which the White Paper’s proposals produced were not formally met (Murtagh, 2014). A number of community education providers have argued that the spirit of the White Paper has been lost and along with it, the financial support required for progress. We are yet to harness the power of community education

as an equally important and mutually respected constituent part of Ireland’s lifelong learning ecosystem. Evidence for this neglect can be found in the SOLAS spending per learner on community education since 2015.

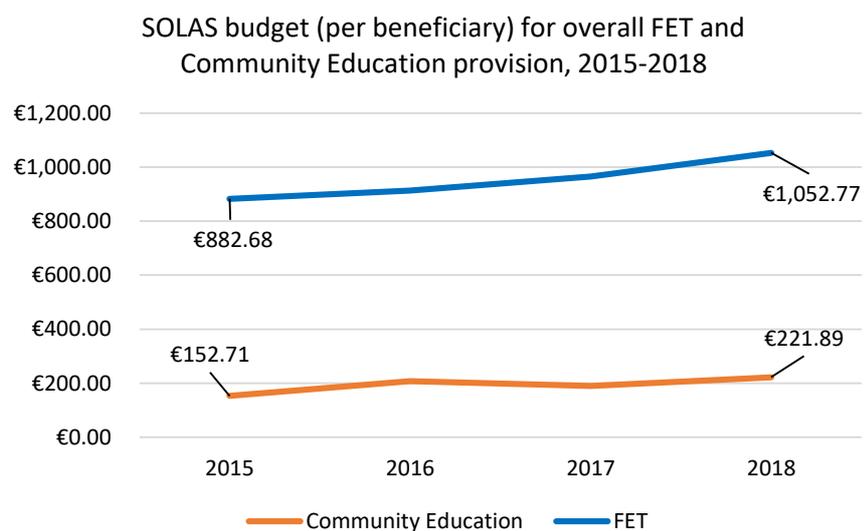


Figure 1 Source is SOLAS Annual Reports (2015 to 2018)

Funding

The community and voluntary sector has faced harsh and disproportionate government cuts since publication of the White Paper. These cuts are at odds with the White Paper's position of support for community education (Fitzsimons, 2017). In fact, since the paper's publication financial investment was restricted to community education provided by the state through the VECs (O' Grady, 2018), and subsequently Education and Training Boards, instead of directly to the providers. This represents a clear distortion of the White Paper's intended objectives which called for supporting local community education initiatives (Fitzsimons, 2017). Without a sustainable funding model, community education providers are forced to allocate disproportionate amounts of time and resources to securing funding from governmental and non-governmental bodies from year to year. Procuring proper resources keeps community education providers away from what they do best: building relationships with their community and supporting learner engagement.

This untenable never-ending struggle by community education providers to find adequate funding has become a necessity to ensure that doors stay open, learners have tutors, and that learners can benefit from participation and progression in education in the communities where they live. Being forced into top-down government funding structures that must be adhered to in order to remain open hinders instead of helps the mission of community education providers. Moreover, this approach to funding community education is the mirror-opposite of the very model of provision that was praised in the White Paper. This feature of sustaining community education in Ireland can be viewed through the lens of the White Paper as not only unsustainable and unjust but also as unjustifiable. No other key player within the education system, especially one that delivers such a positive impact for people most in need of educational and social equality, is or would ever be subjected to such models of funding.

From available data through SOLAS reporting of community education spending it is clear that the community education system receives significantly less investment per learner than does the broader further education and training system. As mentioned earlier, 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 further education and training provision costs (excluding community education) SOLAS spent €472.5 million benefiting approximately 288,000 learners which equates to €1641 per learner. The funding for community education simply does not cover the true cost of provision³. To comprehensively diagnose the extent of the problem presented by the underfunding of community education further investigation is needed. To fully appreciate the depth and scale of the negative impact of underfunding, AONTAS will be launching our Community Education Census in 2020. This will allow for a better understanding of the funding shortfalls and administrative complexities of AONTAS Community Education Network members.

³ See the 2018 Annual Report and Accounts.

Community Education Facilitators

The creation of the Community Education Facilitator (CEF) role, based on the direction of the White Paper role was a significant step in meeting the goals of the White Paper. New CEFs around the country began to engage community educators, helping independent education organisations to access funding, and building networks of likeminded organisations. However, as the years have worn on CEFs are spending disproportionate amounts of time and energy working behind desks to complete paper work such as filling-in reporting forms like the Programme Learner Support System (PLSS) and quality assurance documentation. This results in relinquishing their original and primary purpose of engaging with communities to deliver positive educational social benefits for people across Ireland.

AONTAS and our members are seeking what is in the collective mutual interest by calling for a sustainable long-term funding and policy model for the community education sector. The policy and funding framework that is needed to implement sustainable long-term funding will not be possible without engaged frontline stakeholders like CEFs across the country.

A reflection on Chapter 5 of Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education

In the year 2000 policy makers drafting the White Paper had a nuanced grasp of what could and should be achieved by independently managed community education. Twenty years on from the publication of the White Paper it is clear that much of the ground that should have been gained, and the momentum that had grown has not been capitalised upon. However, hope continues due to the fight of hundreds of organisations around the country to meet the social, environmental, and economic needs of their communities.

In 2020 the hope is that decision makers learn from the past so we can go beyond merely recapturing the promise of the White Paper and making up lost ground. It is imperative to push further ahead so that in the coming decades Ireland is not only a best case example of an equitable and successful lifelong learning system, but is also in pole position in many other spheres thanks to the contribution made by community education.

By 2040 Ireland should be enjoying the return on its investment in community education. Decision makers that are familiar with community education appreciate how the sector plays a meaningful role in today's adult education sector. However, there is a challenge around making those outside of community education aware of what a privileged position Ireland is in in comparison to other jurisdictions. Community education is by design a transformative process that transcends the previously dominant policy focus of education systems on increasing the population's skills to plug labour gaps for specific industries. Favouring job activation over learning for broader economically inter-connected social aims is a model that is ultimately limiting the potential of our country. This approach hamstring learners while constraining the country's human capital from flourishing. The new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science offers the opportunity to capitalise on the strengths of community education in achieving its goals for social cohesion, inclusion and equality.

The countries who are open to a broader approach to adult education and increasing equality across all communities unsurprisingly have some of the highest rates of lifelong learning participation. They also score best on indicators of wellbeing and lead the world in relation to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals⁴. An economic-only focus for education also ignores the very important fact that individuals who were underrepresented in lifelong learning, as well as social and economic life 20 years ago when the White Paper was published (i.e. women, lone parents, Travellers, etc.) remain underrepresented today (Central Statistics Office, 2018). The White Paper directed Ireland toward a vision of adult education that challenged government to include those most far-removed from equal access to, and equal benefit from, the education system and society. Twenty years on those who have been left outside and behind the education system are even further behind socially and economically today compared with those who did and do benefit from fully participating in education. While Ireland must concentrate on remaining internationally economically competitive and cooperative we should not lose sight of the vision set out in the White Paper. The vision of the White Paper and Ireland's economic success are not mutually exclusive.

A new future and a new commitment to community education

Appreciating the commitments made 20 years ago and the reflection on policy proposals made in the White Paper in the intervening years, we must look to the next 20 years as a chance for community education to achieve its full potential. We must acknowledge community education's importance as a policy tool for helping the state meet innumerable policy goals in the process.

A new sustainable, multi-annual funding model for community education is needed

Now is that time to offer a new sustainable, multi-annual funding model for community education. Community education is already funded across numerous Departments, yet there is no national strategy or plan for cohesively and sustainably prioritising and directing this funding. For Government and civil society to be confident that public funds are being spent in an effective and efficient way, a new sustainable, multi-annual funding model for community education is needed.

Who currently funds community education?

An immediate challenge for community education providers and learners is the longstanding lack of sustainable funding for community education across all government departments and agencies. Grassroots level research has been completed in 2016⁵ and

⁴ See Social Justice Ireland's *Measuring Progress: The Sustainable Progress Index 2020*. <https://www.socialjustice.ie/sites/default/files/attach/publication/6248/measuringprogress-thesustainableprogressindex2020new.pdf?cs=true>. [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

⁵ AONTAS (2011). *Position paper on creating an effective funding mechanism for community education*. <https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Policy/Position%20Paper%20-%20Effective%20Funding%20for%20Community%20Education%20Feb%202011.pdf>. [Accessed on 25 February 2020]

2017⁶ that demonstrates the range of Government Departments and non-government funding sources who are involved in funding community education across the country. This assortment of funding providers, each providing funds for specific purposes, has led to an overly complicated funding system that has yet to be fully deciphered by all funders and funding recipients alike. In short, the funding foundations of the sector have been exposed to be unclear and unstable which leads to further questions about funding options and accessibility.

In 2011, AONTAS published a position paper about creating an effective funding mechanism for community education. From n40 organisations, a key finding of this 2011 research was that 10 Government Departments were providing funding for these AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) members. These Departments were primarily

- the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government
- the Department of Education and Science
- the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

The same study also identified other funding sources, namely charities, businesses, and EU funding. Looking at members of the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) in 2017 the Erasmus+ funded FinAL€ research “*Where to Invest*” *Funding Adult Education*⁷ again explored how CEN members (n45) self-declared the origin of their operating funds. Similar to the research in 2011, the FinAL€ research found that organisations receive their primary and secondary funding from a multitude of department and agency sources, as well as from philanthropy, learner fees, religious organisations, and community grants. Half of these 45 organisations relied on more than one source of funding.

In 2019, the OECD report *Getting Skills Right: Future Ready Adult Learning Systems* cited the FinAL€ research and stated:

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.

Why should community education receive sustainable, multi-annual funding?

Community education supports the Programme for Government, Our Shared Future (2020) policy objective to reach the national target for lifelong learning participation (18% by 2025). More importantly the sector increases participation by those who were left outside and behind by the formal education system and society. The participants include people like early school leavers and people in the Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) OECD category.

The current lifelong learning participation rate for Ireland is 12.5%. However, this freefalls to 4% for people who left school early.

Eurostat, 2018

⁶ Fitzsimons, Camilla and Magrath, Conor (2017). *FinALE “Where to Invest” Funding Adult Education*. <https://eaea.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/FinALE-Where-to-invest-Final.pdf>. [Accessed on 25 February 2020]

⁷ The FinAL€ research looked at 56 members of the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN). Forty-five of these organisations provided information about funding by Government Department (principal and secondary funders).

In 2017 the CSO Adult Education Survey⁸ identified a range of socioeconomic inequalities that act as barriers to lifelong learning participation, which community education provision helps learners to overcome. With adequate sustainable, multi-annual funding the sector can further support government to address inequality by supporting learners to participate in learning.

Regional inequality: Location is a barrier to access in parts of the country.

The ability to get to a training location was six times more likely to be an issue for people in border regions, than for people living in Dublin. By definition community education is locally based, and also available in rural communities across the country, while state provision tends to be centred in larger cities, and towns.

Health inequality: People need a range of supports to enable access, including health support.

25% of people who left education after primary school (and 16% of people who left school after the Junior or Inter Certificate) cited health and age as a reason they could not participate in lifelong learning. Whereas only 4% of those with third level qualifications cited health and age as a barrier to participation in lifelong learning. Community education offers mental health support in some centres (counselling). In fact some community education organisations including several AONTAS members have as their primary pedagogy the recovery model of education.⁹

Educational inequality: Non-formal education (eg non-accredited community education) is the most popular choice

23% of people who were early school leavers want to return first to non-formal education. Community Education offers non-accredited programmes which are popular with people who left school early. Adult learners tell AONTAS that a wide range of learning options are needed. The options are met by community education. Education is available not only through specific vocationally-orientated courses but also through non-accredited courses where learners can build confidence, develop learning to learn skills, and take time to decide on which area of learning they wish to invest their future efforts.¹⁰

European policy

At European level, the European Commission is exploring new innovative approaches to engaging early school-leavers or otherwise marginalised people including ‘community lifelong learning centres’.¹¹ The concept of these centres are similar to that of community

⁸ Central Statistics Office. *Adult Education Survey 2017*.

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/aes/adulteducationsurvey2017/>. [Accessed on 25 February 2020]

⁹ See <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/mental-health-services/advancingrecoveryireland/recoverycolleges/> [Accessed on 25 February 2020]

¹⁰ UNESCO (2017). CONFINTEA VI Mid-Term Review 2017: the status of adult learning and education in Europe and North America; regional report. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000259721>. [Accessed 28 February 2020]

¹¹ What Role For Community Lifelong Learning Centres? The Potential Of One-Stop-Shops For Preventing Youth At Risk From Disconnecting On 29th May 2019; <http://llplatform.eu/events/event/what-role-for-community-lifelong-learning-centres-the-potential-of-one-stop-shops-for-preventing-youth-at-risk-from-disconnecting/>. [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

education in Ireland. The goal is to offer a range of supports to enable educationally disadvantaged people to access learning on-site, but is also connected into service providers at a local level facilitating progression for learners. A community-based approach for engaging so-called hard-to-reach groups has similarly been widely recognised as effective by the OECD¹² and UNESCO (OECD, 2019¹³; UNESCO, 2019¹⁴).

National pedagogic practice

At national level pedagogic practice has gained greater prominence in higher education policy as a tool to overcome barriers to participation (NFTL 2019; HEA 2015)¹⁵. A focus on **process not product** that fosters a sense of belonging is becoming a central theme to good teaching and learning practice. This approach is embedded in adult education practice and especially common in community education which is underpinned by an educational philosophy based on dialogue (Freire, 1971). The approach builds on a learner's lived experience through a pedagogic process that recognises their knowledge and builds individual capacity and confidence. The impact of which is the high rate of participation and retention in community education by early school leavers and target groups.

Transversal skills

Transversal skills (OECD, 2017¹⁶; WEF, 2017¹⁷) feature strongly as key skills required for the fourth industrial revolution: critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, teamwork etc. which are developed through participatory teaching and learning processes which foster dialogue and reflection. What community education can offer is a space to develop these abilities, much of which is dependent on personal development and learning to learn skills.

Community education practitioners know that in order for such learning outcomes to take place, there is no quick fix as self-directed learning is part of the education process (Knowles, 1973) and not an initial starting point. Becoming a lifelong learner is critical due to the rate of change and particularly for those affected by automation many of whom are low qualified. Therefore, it is essential that our education system builds people's capacity to become lifelong learners on their own terms and which nurtures their talents and abilities.

Simply put, community education can kill two birds with the one stone; increasing learners and workers' resilience to adapt to technology-driven economic change helps to future-proof the potential labour force and communities that may be hardest hit by economic downturns.

¹² OECD (2019), *Getting Skills Right: Engaging low-skilled adults in learning*. www.oecd.org/employment/emp/engaging-low-skilled-adults-2019.pdf. [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

¹³ OECD (2019), *Getting Skills Right: Future Ready Adult Learning Systems*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264311756-en>. [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

¹⁴ UNESCO (2019) *4th global report on adult learning and education: leave no one behind: participation, equity and inclusion*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000372274>. [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

¹⁵ National Forum on Teaching and Learning (2019). Report on Student Success: Barriers and Facilitators. <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/Student-Success-Barriers-and-Facilitators.pdf> [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

¹⁶ OECD (2017). *Educational Opportunity for All Overcoming Inequality throughout the Life Course*. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/educational-opportunity-for-all_9789264287457-en. [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

¹⁷ World Economic Forum (2017). *Lifelong learning helps people, governments and business. Why don't we do more of it?* <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/07/lifelong-learning-helps-governments-business/>. [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

Micro-credentialing

Micro-credentialing is frequently discussed in the context of future learning environments (WEF 2018¹⁸). Notwithstanding the issue of maintaining the ability to provide accredited provision¹⁹, community education has predominantly focused on short courses and non-accredited learning where possible. Micro-credentialing offers a future space for flexible community education and supports the findings of a study that found that the many community education learners would like to see their learning accredited, even as they often enter education for reasons other than labour market access (AONTAS, 2011²⁰).

The World Economic Forum *Global Social Mobility Index* reveals that there are only a handful of nations with the right conditions to foster social mobility which centre on four factors: fair wages, social protection, working conditions and lifelong learning (WEF, 2020).²¹ Social mobility in Ireland is stagnant and depends upon creating greater opportunities that support educational equality. Community education has a long history of engaging educationally disadvantaged people in an authentic and effective manner.

Changing demographics and precarious employment

Educational inequalities persist - only 4.4% of adults who left school early participate in lifelong learning (Eurostat, 2018)²², compared to the national average of 12.5%. Precarious employment is increasing²³ and providing educational opportunities to enable people to gain sustainable, decent work is essential for a more equitable society. AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) members are engaging with people on zero contract hours many of whom are immigrants. This educational engagement offers a gateway to decent work through an educational experience that promotes a sense of belonging, increased confidence, foundational learning-to-learn skills, in addition to the accredited courses.

People earning a low wage, and people in temporary, part-time or self-employment are less likely to participate in lifelong learning. In Ireland, every tenth employee is an involuntary part-time worker (OECD, 2017²⁴). Non-standard workers are more likely to be women, who receive less training and have less employment stability. Part-time temporary workers are 40% less likely than standard full-time workers to receive training and skills development, which leads to further wage inequality (OECD, 2017).

¹⁸ World Economic Forum (2018). *Towards a Reskilling Revolution A Future of Jobs for All*.

http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_FOW_Reskilling_Revolution.pdf. [Accessed on 27 February 2020].

¹⁹ Issue of community education organisations re-engaging with QQI.

²⁰ AONTAS (2011). *Sowing the seeds of social change: The Outcomes and Impact of a Social Action Model of Community Education*. https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/AONTAS-Research/sowing_the_seeds_of_social_change.pdf. [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

²¹ World Economic Forum (2020). *Global Social Mobility Index 2020: why economies benefit from fixing inequality*. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-social-mobility-index-2020-why-economies-benefit-from-fixing-inequality>. Accessed on 27/02/2020.

²² Eurostat (2018). Participation rate in education and training (last 4 weeks) by type, sex, age and educational attainment level. <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>. [Accessed 28 February 2020]

²³ Nevin Economic Research Institute (NERI) (2019). *Precarious work in the Republic of Ireland*. https://www.nerinstitute.net/sites/default/files/research/2019/precarious_work_in_the_republic_of_ireland_july_19_fina_l.pdf. [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

²⁴ OECD (2017). *Employment by education level*. <https://data.oecd.org/emp/employment-by-education-level.htm>. [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

Community education and national policy

Community education achieves the goals of a range of national policy priorities ([See page 15](#)). The outcomes of an educated and socially engaged society have positive knock-on benefits for the successful implementation of all of these policies and we are sure many more that have not been captured here. To show the direct impact we have provided an analysis of four of the strategies listed in this table; showing the parts of those strategies directly connected to success of a well-funded community education sector.

Government Strategy	How Community Education meets the policy objectives
<p><i>Programme for Government 2020</i> <i>Our Shared Vision</i></p>	<p>Community Education Recognise the role of community education and its vital role in our communities by supporting its schemes and initiatives post COVID-19.</p> <p>Lifelong Learning Further promote a culture of lifelong learning within the workforce, focusing on increasing the lifelong learning rate from 9% currently to 18% by 2025.</p> <p>Education and training for people recovering from addiction. Create a path for people in rehabilitation from drug addiction to access education and training facilities in their local areas</p> <p>Education for women returning to work Introduce returnships in partnership with employers, to support women 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.</p> <p>Access to FET and HE Further develop access programmes to Higher and Further Education for students from disadvantaged groups, including members of the Traveller Community, those in direct provision and those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged.</p> <p>Support access routes and inclusive education initiatives to learners with intellectual disabilities.</p> <p>An Inclusive Vision for Education Provide additional supports for students who are homeless, resident in family hubs, or in direct provision. Further develop access programmes to Higher and Further Education for students from disadvantaged groups, including members of the Traveller Community, those in direct provision and those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged.</p>

Next Steps

Community education is about building agency, building communities and enabling marginalised learners to fulfil their educational aspirations. In response to COVID-19 we have seen community education organisations respond with innovative practices. Respecting the enormous good will and support by community education during COVID-19 demands an immediate response to supporting learners in the upcoming academic year 2020/2021. Never has there been a more pertinent time to address the underfunding in community education so that it may respond to marginalised communities and never has there been such potential within a new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to respond to this need. AONTAS would welcome further engagement to discuss this paper.

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