

Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including Community Education issues) Working Group

Challenges facing Learners and Community
Education Providers within Tertiary
Education - *A Discussion Paper*

Draft Paper

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Mitigating Educational Disadvantage¹ (including Community Education issues) Working Groupⁱ Challenges facing Learners and Community Education Providers within Tertiary Education

A Discussion Paper

This paper sets out to highlight a range of recommendations that will support equality and safeguard the needs of disadvantaged students and learners. We would ask that such recommendations are considered when actions by the education institution are made in relation to the theme of the paper. No doubt after this crisis the education system as a whole will be collectively judged on how it mitigated disadvantage.

The Paper is specifically focused on the challenges facing Community Education learners, and both statutory (ETB) and non-statutory providers of Community Education. It is focused on supporting learners who are adults living in disadvantaged areas, both urban and rural, first-time mature students, low qualified migrants, low qualified adults (less than upper second level), early school leavers, long-term unemployed, asylum seekers, people with disabilities, Travellers, Lone Parents, Homeless, people in receipt of social welfare, living in poverty and low-income families and other vulnerable learners.

Key Recommendations

Immediate-Term (crisis support):

1. Ensure emergency financial support for non-statutory community education providers without DES funding. This contingency support must take into account all costs associated with provision, which encompasses more than just tutor hours e.g. full cost recovery.
2. Develop a cross-departmental approach to funding for Community Education (ensure funding from HSE and SICAP, DEASP etc. remains intact for non-statutory providers).

¹ The *Student Support Act* (2011) defines educational disadvantage as ‘the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education. In relation to students in the formal education system educational disadvantage has been also been defined as: ‘a limited ability to derive an equitable benefit from schooling compared to one’s peers by age as a result of school demands, approaches, assessments and expectations which do not correspond to the student’s knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours into which (s) he has been socialised (as opposed to those to which (s) he is naturally endowed)’ (Boldt and Devine, 1998, p.10). In policy, the term ‘non-traditional student’ is used to describe a student who by their class, educational background, race, ethnicity, gender, disability are less likely to participation in higher education. ‘Under-represented’ is also used (DETE, 2002; HEA, 2015) to identify particular target groups: Entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education; First time, mature student entrants; Students with disabilities; Part-time/flexible learners; Further education award holders; and Irish Travellers (HEA, 2015, p.27).

3. Provide funding for initiatives that support health and wellbeing for educationally disadvantaged groups who will be most impacted by the Covid-19 crisis.
4. Phone support is vital. For non-statutory providers who are operating with reduced income, funding is needed to ensure that they can stay connected to learners. This is time intensive 1:1 work by phone.
5. Increase support services to assist learners with completing social welfare forms.
6. Learners on time-limited programmes should not have the time of the shutdown of educational institutions counted as time spent on the course. Extensions should be given to these learners.

Medium to Long-Term:

1. Provide specific funding that allows for outreach in autumn to re-engage hard to reach and vulnerable learners in Community Education (learner cohorts as identified).
2. Research required on different methods of education delivery – away from technology and back to more basic methods for those who cannot engage online.
3. Propose a metric that demonstrates the budgetary biasing of spend in Education towards mitigating the effect of Covid-19 on disadvantaged learners.
4. Propose a timeline for the deployment of these interventions (e.g. when will resources be known so as to give certainty and focus to developmental work).
5. The availability of technology, tutor funding, intention and participant engagement, will not be enough without building the capacity of tutors to engage with the types of factors that we might anticipate for Autumn 2020 & Spring 2021 (social distancing, trauma, more blended learning needs, using various technologies, new tutoring practices...) – resourcing for tutor training and a Summer timeline needs to be proposed.
6. Remove the minimum number cap for starting new programmes such as Local Training Initiatives to allow for longer periods of outreach and recruitment.

Introduction

This discussion paper attempts to scope out the main issues arising from the Covid-19 crisis that are impacting disadvantaged learners participating in Community Education courses across the country.

In their “Community Education Programme Operational Guidelines (2012)” the Department of Education and Skills defines Community Education in Ireland as “outside the formal education sector, with the aims of enhancing learning, fostering empowerment and contributing to civic society.”² Community Education “is located in communities which can be area-based or issue-based, or around some other value”, meeting the needs of those who wish to access learning locally, as a step to more active community involvement or certified learning. The DES outlines a number of target groups for Community Education, notably learners who consistently experience “acute barriers to participation in adult learning”; this

² “Department of Education and Skills Community Education Programme Operational Guidelines (2012)” <<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Further-Education-and-Training/Adult-Literacy/Community-Education-Operational-Guidelines-to-VECs.pdf>>

includes, but is not limited to, “Adults with low or no formal qualifications or low literacy levels”, “one parent families”, “Travellers”, “Migrants/refugees/asylum seekers”, “People with a disability”, “The homeless”, “Substance misusers”. While these learner cohorts are represented across all tertiary education, Community Education in Ireland has a long history, and track record of engaging these “hard to reach learners” in their own domestic or local settings, who often will be experiencing higher levels of disadvantage. This engagement is likely to be of a co-constructivist as opposed to a simple service delivery nature, where the learner is a primary producer of the process as a whole. As a process of co-creation, community education provides a distinct avenue of connectedness between some of the most disadvantaged groups in Irish society and statutory and voluntary services now dealing with the Covid-19 crisis. Deeply marginalised groups such as Travellers, Roma, asylum seekers in direct provision, residents in homeless hostels and others in congregated settings present a direct challenge to the communications capabilities of agencies dealing with the spread of the virus and to the social distancing options available to them. A leadership cadre from within these groups is essential if the individuals and family units are to be successfully reached in the current crisis. Community Education has the networks and approaches to hand to be deployed in this crisis if called upon and resourced to do it.

Community Education provision encompasses a wide range of 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. Indeed, Community Education learners are not a homogenous group and the supports (and level of support) required to facilitate learning (practical, emotional etc) will therefore vary widely. These support services can include, but are not limited to childcare, guidance, counselling, etc. Drawing strongly on a “‘community development’ model under which education is delivered in local areas in response to the community’s identified needs”³, community education works to mitigate educational disadvantage, combat social isolation and foster personal development. As the Department’s operational guidelines make clear, “community education can transform individual lives and contributes to social cohesion”; these functions are now even more urgent and necessary within a Covid-19 context.

In capturing the challenges faced by learners in community education, this paper draws both from the experience of the ETBs and members of **AONTAS’ Community Education Network (CEN)**. The CEN is a network of over 100 independently managed community education providers who work collaboratively, sharing information and resources, engaging in professional development and working to ensure that community education is valued and resourced. Since the Government’s announcement on 12 March, AONTAS has been interacting with CEN members to ascertain the challenges that community education providers are facing. Over the past month, key information on challenges arising from the Covid-19 crisis has been gathered through **48 individual interactions** including **calls, emails and responses to a member survey**, sent through AONTAS’ Member Newsletter on 20th March. Additionally, AONTAS’ weekly **member Webinar** has facilitated **100 face-to face interactions**, and provided a necessary space for peer-to-peer support. The information gathered through these interactions was collated in the MED Scoping Document, which brought to light a number of barriers to learning for participants in community education (including the cohorts listed above) and concerns from providers regarding continuity of

³ “Department of Education and Skills Community Education Programme Operational Guidelines (2012)”

provision where resources were lacking (income loss, tutor loss, lack of appropriate technology etc).

12 of these Community Education providers followed up with AONTAS to provide further detail, including **number of learners participating** in programmes prior to closure, details on **learner profile/target groups and list of funding source(s)**.

From data gathered, it emerged that **1265 learners were participating in Community Education across these 12 groups**; these learners were all personally affected by the crisis in various ways, and a large proportion were experiencing various kinds of disadvantage.

The same 12 Providers **cited the following learner cohorts as target groups** (many of which are also identified in the DES “Operational Guidelines” (2012): people experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage; the most socially excluded; young mothers; lone parents; new communities; Travellers; refugees; people recovering from addiction; people with low levels of education; empty nest; those upskilling for better employment prospects; those disengaged from the labour market; those with a disability (including intellectual disability; ASD; learning difficulties); mental ill health; carers; women; victims of domestic abuse; homeless and at risk of homelessness; ex-prisoners; people living alone; older people with many health issues.

Sources of funding for these providers included: ETB funding; Skillsnet Ireland (DES); DEASP (including DEASP Activation & Family Support Programme); SICAP (Department of Rural and Community Development); HSE (including Slaintecare); Department of Justice; Department of Housing Planning and Local Government; Pobal (Community Services Programme); TUSLA; Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL); NCCWN (National Collective of Community Based Women’s Networks); Roscommon County Council (Local Agenda 21); other County Councils; Local Partnership; Dormant Accounts Funding; Ulster Bank Skills and Opportunity Fund; Patagonia.

In some cases learners were able to access a variety of **grants to pay fees**: sources included (but were not limited to): ETBs; AMIF Funding Department of Justice; Social Innovation Fund; Irish Refugee Council Education Fund; St Vincent de Paul Education Fund. Other members stated no main source of funding, citing their income as generated from “small community grants from county council, credit union, donations from the students, but mainly fundraising”.

This paper seeks to address the most immediate challenges facing learners enrolled on community education courses while also examining the longer-term challenges that pose a threat to independently managed community education providers and their continued support of these learning cohorts. At a conservative estimate there are **51,157 community education places** in Ireland, but we know community education is also funded (and data collected) by a range of other Government Departments (a number of which are highlighted above). Many non-statutory groups are now concerned about the continued viability of the various funding streams that allow them to keep their doors open; as such, a cross-departmental approach will be required to ensure this valuable work can continue. Furthermore, many groups, particularly those who operate a social enterprise, have already suffered a loss of income (through course fees, rent etc). Such groups have no financial safety

net, and if they do not receive sufficient support in the coming months, the immediate loss of income and the economic aftershocks could be devastating. Moreover, the mental load of this crisis is significant – for learners, tutors and staff. If groups do not have the resources to weather the storm, or are required to curtail their provision and support services, the impact will be profoundly felt by the most educationally and socioeconomically disadvantaged learners. There are a large number of community-based groups Nationally who provide education opportunities as part of their range of activities. Through various services (including community education) these community groups re-create broken pathways to those who are disadvantaged or disconnected from the mainstream. Without these pathways, education opportunities for these disadvantaged groups will be thrown back years (for example: educational opportunity, one of the social determinants of health, being un-equally distributed will create health inequalities). These pathways, many depending on long development work, relationship building, sensitivity, trust, social connectedness and practical services are being significantly impacted by the current situation.

Indeed, this impact will be severe for communities who have been affected by the cutbacks of **ten years of austerity**. These cutbacks have eroded and undermined the support structures to disadvantaged communities, which had been gradually evolving and developing throughout the 1990s and up to the financial crash of 2008. The EU (through, for example, Global Grants for Local Development, the LEADER Programme, and the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation) as well as Pobal and FÁS, channelled a significant amount of financial and other resources to disadvantaged communities in a variety of self-help initiatives up to 2008. With the financial crash these supports, if they did not entirely evaporate, were greatly depleted. This has had the effect of leaving communities and community support systems weakened and ill-prepared for the crisis which Covid-19 now poses. The case for a **highly targeted and substantial redistribution response** to these most disadvantaged groups is now required.

Access to appropriate technology and digital literacy skills

- Many learners in Community Education do not have **access to the necessary technology** to engage in online learning.
- Many learners cannot afford to pay extra costs such as **added data charges** by their mobile phone providers; they are using their phones as personal hotspots to access online classes in order to continue learning.
- Rural based learners have **limited access to broadband**. A number of CEN members have been supporting learners to engage in online classes by providing phone support and in some cases, engaging with their broadband providers/engaging in 1:1 calls to support learners to communicate by email. Much of this work cannot be done without local knowledge. There are also those who cannot avail due to broadband issues or a complete lack of familiarity with it which cannot be addressed by phone.
- Some learners do not have the **digital literacy skills** that are required to engage in online learning. This can be a source of stress for learners. Many CEN members are exploring the option of posting of materials to learners with no access to technology or email /followed by scheduled phone call for additional support. Resources might

be required to conduct research on different methods of education delivery – away from technology and back to more basic methods for those who cannot engage online. A number of CEN members have expressed a concern that courses such as “hair dressing, dog grooming etc can't be conducted online”.

- Learners with disabilities are facing additional challenges in engaging with online platforms. As one CEN member noted: “we work with people with intellectual disabilities. We looked at zoom or social media contact ... but we concluded that this was not possible as we would have to deal with boundary issues, IT and literacy problems. We would also exclude our non-verbal students. We have told our students we call them every week and not to worry about their studies.”
- Learners from the Traveller community have reported sharing IT equipment such as phones and laptops, and post containing educational materials have been delayed or sent to the wrong family member. CEN members working with the Traveller community are using mixed communication tools depending on the needs of their learners. This complex system relies heavily on tutor capacity and can't meet all the learning objectives of their programmes. In addition, learners with **lower levels of literacy are facing additional barriers** as they require face to face support with all of their work. Managing these practices within the constraint of social distancing is an additional challenge. If restrictions due to Public Health concerns linger it could well be into Autumn or Spring 2021 before face-to-face learning can resume.
- It is important that providers **embed digital literacy assessment** and provision in all course delivery where relevant and helpful going forward.
- It must be noted that some courses either are not suitable for online delivery or will require significant work to ‘convert’ – this places additional resource burdens on providers and ultimately impacts the learner.
- For many learners, online delivery is a short-term option to ensure continuity of learning but is not a feasible long-term solution.
- It is difficult to get funding from government departments for non-accredited online courses which would have a significant impact on learners in terms of building their digital confidence and for many, would lead to further engagement.

Technology is an excellent option for some learners but it can only achieve so much in terms of engagement. The references to ‘new ways of learning’, for example, is **overwhelming many learners** in an already stressful time.

Loss of income (learners)

Learners who have lost a part-time job during the current crisis, or whose family members have lost an income, may struggle to continue their learning at this time and will need to receive additional support. Learners may not be aware of welfare entitlements and providers should ensure learners are informed about their **eligibility for Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment payment**. Loss of income can cause major personal setbacks and stress that will also affect learning; many learners in Community Education were already experiencing **financial hardship** even before the onset of the current crisis.

Learning Environment

Having to spend prolonged periods of time in the home, **and finding adequate time and space** to engage in learning, is posing a major challenge for many learners in Community Education within this current context. Learners have also **lost access to public spaces** that are crucial to their learning. As one Dublin-based CEN member described “it is our experience that many learners use and rely on access to public libraries which has been a [loss] to many when they need them most”. Learners with overcrowded living conditions, as well as learners experiencing homelessness (living in family hubs or hotels) and those in Direct Provision are at a particular disadvantage. Another Dublin-based CEN member highlighted that “participants in DP centres are confined to their bedrooms – often with kids in confined spaces difficult to have space for online class, on top of regular mental health issues experienced by those living in DP centres, the additional stress and anxiety of catching the corona virus is making it very tense in the centres in this ongoing emergency.” ETB members who send Community Education tutors into homeless accommodation centres have noted the significant additional pressure that the staff in the homeless services are under and their inability at this time to continue to support Community Education initiatives during the crisis.

Childcare facilities associated with Community Education centres are now closed, meaning that childcare becomes a fulltime responsibility for so many learners engaged in Community Education. A large number of learners are now home-schooling their children. In addition, elder care or care of disabled relatives has become a full-time responsibility for many, where community care services are reduced. This burden of care will invariably impact upon a learner’s ability to engage with their course(s), and can negatively affect their general wellbeing.

Domestic violence rates are increasing during the crisis and some learners find themselves living in an unsafe environment. For some learners, staying at home does not keep them safe and is in fact a dangerous place for them and their children. This also has an impact on continuity of learning. ETBs who are providing Community Education programmes in refuges are finding that staff in the refuges are under significant pressure and community education initiatives cannot be their priority at this time. Tutors are continuing to provide support to learners through a wide range of means where possible and appropriate.

A **distinction between rural and urban experience** is important when in considering the challenges faced by learners in the current context. While a learner in Dublin may be required to expend more energy avoiding contact with others (and may feel a heightened threat of contracting the virus), a learner in rural Longford or Roscommon could be isolated for a sustained period of time with little connection to the outside world.

For some learners, external factors may make engaging in learning seem an impossibility at this current time. As such, it is important that learners are provided with adequate support to continue their courses where possible, and that they are not at a disadvantage if they choose to suspend their learning and resume their course when ready.

Support networks and wellbeing

For many learners engaging in Community Education, the social dimension is a key; working with peers builds confidence and has a wealth of personal and wellbeing benefits. Many community education **learners are facing isolation** in this crisis, detached from learning networks that supported them previously. Indeed, the physical space of learning and the human connection that comes with their courses is what learners miss the most in these times. Providing tailored support for Community Education learners in response to the crisis has been acknowledged by CEN members as an incredibly time-consuming but necessary process, as learners need to hear a friendly and familiar voice. As one Longford-based CEN member noted, “At present we have 36 learners engaging in non-accredited learning and a further 20 due to start in April 2020. To give an example of the engagement levels, our programme mentor has made approximately 40 calls in the last 7-10 days. Some of these are up to an hour long.”

Learners in Community Education often rely on **additional supports** such as guidance, counselling, disability supports, older person supports, family support and childcare however many of these supports have been disrupted or curtailed due to the current crisis. Meanwhile, as one Dublin-based CEN member highlighted, learners are facing challenges from every direction: “lack of money, partners jobless, tensions in the house, some still living in hotels”. This member noted that “all are resilient but to a point”, but described the pressure their learners were under as bringing them to the “point of cracking”, noting how during this critical time, “learners are missing the supports”. Another Limerick-based member echoed this, explaining that the loss of these supports means that the “most vulnerable in our community can be further isolated. The wider benefits of learning are often spoken about and the community engagement that is lost when it's unavailable is huge.”

Many learners (and their family members) are in recovery from drug and alcohol abuse (and a number of community education groups, including ETB community education tutors, work specifically with this learner cohort). As such, the loss of necessary supports during this stressful time poses very particular health risks for some learners. In light of these risks and challenges, there is a need for increased availability of over-the-phone supports including counselling services in the short term, and an increase of one-to-one support services in the wake of this crisis, when learners will be dealing with the long-term impacts.

Community providers are well-placed to deliver courses with a specific focus on health and wellbeing. ETB community education tutors provide courses in a wide range of community mental health services. Many of the learners engaged in these courses have significant mental health problems and are now trying to cope with the added pressures of social isolation and heightened anxiety. It is not appropriate to attempt to continue some of these courses remotely in the absence of the interdisciplinary support teams normally present in the community mental health service facilities.

Before the closure of education facilities was announced, many Community Education providers were delivering health initiatives and training within the Community, including classes on handwashing. Community Education plays a key role in communicating key health

messages at this time. Indeed, as the crisis is ongoing groups are offering and promoting online courses and workshops that encourage positive mental health – in the wake of this crisis increased funding should be made available for the delivery and promotion of such courses.

Continuity of learning and the risk of high attrition

Community Education providers have voiced a concern over reduced **motivation to stay engaged in learning** and increased attrition rates. Access is a key issue to continuation but many learners will require 1:1 phone contact and support to remain connected. There are some who will have no difficulty migrating to online learning and will see it as an opportunity in the short term but this is not a long-term option as it does not have the 1:1 and peer contact that makes Community Education so unique and so valuable for learners.

Community Education providers have invested months and in some cases years of time and energy into supporting learners to engage and in being that connection for those that are furthest from the system. The impact of a protracted lock down and extended duration of social distance requirements would have a devastating impact upon this kind of frontline engagement. Some learners who were in the initial stages of overcoming barriers in returning to education and who need the classroom environment are now positioned back to the start of their journey.

While Community Education providers are exercising incredible creativity, the additional burden on learners cannot be underestimated. Accommodations will have to be made so that learners who are unable to continue their course at this time can return to learning when they're able to. **Outreach will be key** in the coming months and increased funding to support outreach work will be necessary.

Loss of income and funding issues (non-statutory providers)

Funding is a critical issue for independent Community Education providers at this time. As one Longford-based CEN member noted, “those of us who operate under the social enterprise model now have NO income streams. [Our] education income stream ceased overnight (course fees, room rental). We estimate a reduction in income of at least €25,000 from now until the summer period – this is a conservative estimate at this point and is assuming that we will be operational by September. In terms of core funding itself, all of our earned income streams for the organisation (some of which go towards core training and education costs e.g. salary, overheads) have now ceased. We do not receive any funding from DES so we are in a critical position.”

Key funding issues

- **Support for 1:1 contact:**

For providers who are operating with reduced income, funding is needed to ensure that they can stay connected to learners. This is time intensive 1:1 work by phone. We are doing this because we know where the gaps are – what our learners need and how to refer sensitively and maintain the connection. For example, those without digital skills are very unlikely to pick

up the phone to another organisation to ask for help. This is not about being territorial – it's about knowing our learners.

- **Specific issues e.g. QQI**

Six Community Education providers are due to re-engage this year. While the communication from QQI has been very up to date and welcomed, we are concerned about the associated fees for not for profit providers. This has always been an issue but that concern has magnified considerably at this point given that our income streams have ceased. While the re-engagement dates may be deferred until a post-pandemic time, the issue of fees remains for providers.

As noted by one Kildare-based CEN member, “many tutors in this area are also disadvantaged by being precariously employed. It's difficult for them to support learners when they are under stress themselves.”

Funders must make reasonable allowances and agree to maintain funding at a proportionate level based on organisations' financial needs.

Conclusion

Assuming this pandemic situation comes to a natural end, we need to look ahead to where the sector will be in the aftermath. As noted by one CEN member, “it may never be the same again, and we need to co-create the new 'normal'.” The economic impact of Covid-19 is going to leave communities and families with trauma due to losses of many types, including short term un-employment, loss of tourism, loss of social connection etc. Depending on how the country and wider world recover, an important question arises: is there a new category of disadvantage emerging?

We already know that the Community Education system receives significantly less investment per learner than does the broader further education and training system. AONTAS research on Community Education funding in 2011 and 2017 has shown the complex web of funding non-statutory providers already navigate. What we do now will have a significant impact and what we need to do now is hold our learners, keep them connected and keep them engaged. This all requires targeted resources. In order to ensure there is still a sector that can reach those who are furthest from the system, we have to put resources behind it.

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**The Voice of
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