

POLICY PROMOTION PRACTICE PARTNERSHIP

National Adult Learning Organisation





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WHAT IS AONTAS?

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation. It is a non-government membership organisation established in 1969. The name AONTAS is an acronym in the Irish language, Aos Oideachais Náisiúnta Trí Aontú Saorálach, meaning 'national adult education through voluntary unification'. The word AONTAS itself is also the Irish word for 'unity' or 'union', so the intention of the original group of interested individuals was that the Organisation would be identified by its inclusiveness. It is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. It is core funded by the Department of Education and Science and receives project funding from other sources from time to time.



MISSION OF AONTAS

The mission of AONTAS is to ensure that every adult in Ireland has access to appropriate and affordable learning opportunities throughout their lives, thus enabling them to contribute to and participate in the economic, social, civic and cultural development of Irish society.

CONTEXT

In 2007 AONTAS will embark on its fourth strategic plan which is designed to take it to the end of 2010. An extensive consultation process has been completed both internally and externally and the final shape of the plan is based on feedback from this process.

While much has been achieved since the publication of the White Paper, Learning for Life (2000), during the past three years adult and community education has received mixed attention from policy makers. The overall budget for education for 2007 stands at approximately €8 billion yet adult and community education resources still commands just approximately 2% of the budget, even though programme funding has increased by 50%, rising from €113m in 2004 to €169 in the estimates for 2007. Our plan has been developed in the context of some of the following statistical information.

- Less than 8% of Irish adults between the ages of 25 and 64 participate in adult education and training opportunities as compared with the EU average of 11% and rates above 25% in the UK and Scandinavia: *CSO Quarterly National Household Survey, May 2006*
- Irish adults can expect to spend far less time in non-formal job-related education and training than their counterparts in other European countries. For example Irish adults will spend just over 200 hours in such training throughout their working lives,



as compared to 900 hours for their Danish counterparts:

Education at a Glance, OECD, September 2006

- Nearly 30% of the workforce has lower secondary education or less: *CSO, 2006*
- Nine percent of the workforce and 11% of the population are newcomers to Ireland yet there is no dedicated funding to support the teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages. Over one third of learners availing of literacy provision are ESOL learners: *NALA, 2006*
- Ninety per cent of Irish people with a third level degree participate in the workforce as compared with 52% with lower educational levels: *CSO, 2006*
- Seventy three percent of 55 US companies employing large numbers of people in Ireland report that they have struggled to secure skilled labour in the past 12 months: American Chamber of Commerce. *May, 2006*

Obviously much remains to be done in embedding lifelong learning into education and training policy. New opportunities now present themselves in the formation of the new National Development Plan, Transforming Ireland (2007-2013) to which AONTAS made a detailed submission and the Ten Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement, Towards 2016 which has as an underpinning principle, *a focus on upskilling, early school leavers, literacy,*

lifelong learning and particular emphasis on retraining those with least educational attainment (p.23). The forthcoming General Election also presents an opportunity for renewed commitment to adult and community education. For the first time in the history of the State the availability of financial resources is no longer an issue. The Government is now in a position to make a quantum leap in terms of developing a seamless educational system which really embraces lifelong learning. Political commitment to adult and community education as a distinct sector of the education system with recognition and resources on a par with other sectors is paramount to the development of the full potential of every adult living in Ireland today.

AONTAS through this strategic plan will work actively to make the most of these opportunities by building on the work that has been done and ensuring that adult and community education plays a major role in the development of the social and economic objectives of Ireland up to 2010.



ACHIEVEMENTS

While the context in which AONTAS has had to work during the period of its last Strategic Plan has been difficult, nonetheless it can list a number of significant achievements. During the past three years AONTAS has:

- Worked consistently to ensure that adult and community education remained part of the overall political agenda.
- Expanded its membership by 17 per cent.
- Upgraded its support for members through the work of the Membership Development Staff Team.
- Developed a promotional strategy which includes upgrading of its website and the publication of the Explore magazine.
- Provided an information referral service to adult learners.
- Established the Training and Support Programme for Community Education Facilitators as a model of best practice.
- Established, in partnership with NALA, the Irish Research Association for Adult and Community Education (IRAACE).
- Developed and piloted a Quality Assurance Framework for Women's Community Education.
- Supported the development of the Management and Steering Groups of the National Collective of Community-based Women's Networks through training for its members.

- Published a number of important policy and discussion documents and made submissions on a variety of issues and concerns for the adult and community education sector.
- Organised a successful local election campaign highlighting the needs of adult learners.
- Represented the concerns of adult learners at a number of important fora including:
 - Educational Disadvantage Committee
 - Advisory Group on Access to Higher Education
 - Steering Group, Education Equality Initiative
 - Steering Group, Adult Education Guidance initiative
 - Consultative Group, National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
- Increased and improved its financial and technical resources.

WHAT IS ADULT LEARNING ALL ABOUT?

Learning is an essential part of the human condition and we are constantly learning throughout our lives. However it is almost always associated with going to school or college and adult education activity is most often associated with basic education or hobby or leisure activities. This is because adult literacy has received the most attention over the past ten years as a consequence of the poor results of the OECD International Adult Literacy Survey in 1996, which spurred the Government to take action to address it. Adult education has also been seen as a way of spending spare time and money pursuing an activity for pure enjoyment. But with the increasing demands of the knowledge society, learning continuously is seen as the key to developing our full potential and participating actively in society as a whole. The Communication from the European Commission (May 2006) defines adult learning as all forms of learning undertaken by adults after having left initial education and training. As adults our learning takes place in four key sites:

- The home
- The workplace
- The community
- The educational institution

Much of this learning could be classed as formal e.g. the pursuit of a course which has recognised credentials and which is done either



within, or in collaboration with an educational institution. Other learning could be classed as non-formal e.g. learning gained from experience or practice such as that learned on the job or being active in one's community; or informal such as the learning we gain from everyday life, for example managing home and family. In the current economic context, learning which is aimed at preparing for the labour market carries the highest currency and is generally better resourced than learning which is pursued for personal, social or cultural development.

ADULT EDUCATION PROVISION

Currently the Government funds a number of programmes designed to enhance skills and attain qualifications. Examples of these are the National Adult Literacy Programme, the Back to Education Initiative, the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme, Youthreach, Senior Travellers' Training Centres and Post Leaving Certificate courses. These programmes are delivered by the Vocational Education Committees' vast network of schools, colleges. VECs also provide and support a range of community education activities and other schools and colleges provide self-financing programmes. Adults also participate in courses at higher education institutions. There is no conclusive data available for the number of full or part-time adult learners in third level education; however, the national target of 15% has yet to be achieved. There



is no accurate statistical data for workplace education and training although OECD figures suggest it is lower than the EU average.

COMMUNITY EDUCATION

While the current emphasis of funded programmes in adult and community education is focused on the labour market, it is important to recognise the role community education in particular plays in the development of communities as a whole and in the participation of Irish people in that development. AONTAS defines community education as education that is rooted in a process of empowerment, social justice, change, challenge, respect and collective consciousness; it is with the community and of the community reflecting the developing needs of individuals and their locale.

While active citizenship is a contested concept, nonetheless many of the activities engaged in by community-based groups could be described as citizenship in action as they empower people to question and challenge the many inequalities which exist in Irish society, and to develop strategies to address these. Women's groups have been to the forefront in the delivery of this kind of community education and have been consistently supported by AONTAS since the early nineties. Currently community education is funded from a variety of agencies and government departments.



CORE VALUES

The work of AONTAS over the next four years will be underpinned by five key values:

- AONTAS is committed to the concept of lifelong learning and its role in enabling people to participate in the human, social, economic and cultural development of Irish society.
- AONTAS affirms and supports the key role of adult and community education in combating poverty and social exclusion and ensuring that everyone benefits from, and contributes to sustainable economic development.
- AONTAS is committed to the concept of equality of access, participation and outcomes in adult and community education.
- AONTAS affirms and supports the key role of adult and community education in promoting democracy and active citizenship.
- AONTAS is committed, through a process of action and reflection, to its growth as a learning organisation, a model of best practice and a leading centre of expertise in the field of adult learning.

FOCUS OF THE STRATEGIC PLAN

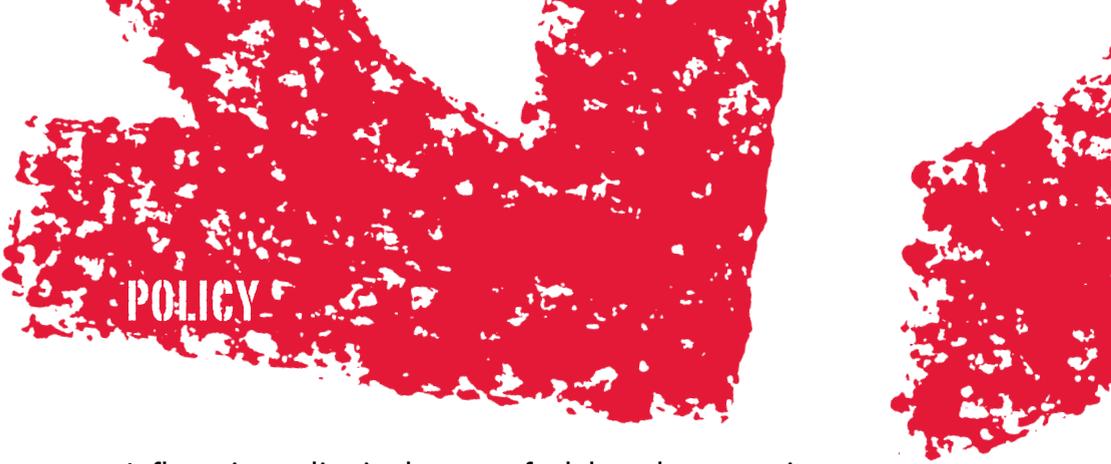
In keeping with our core values AONTAS will work for an improved adult and community education service by focussing the Strategic Plan on four key priority areas:

- Policy
- Promotion
- Practice
- Partnership

These four areas are interrelated with, and underpinned by a fifth priority which is organisational development.

These priorities will enable AONTAS to be at the forefront of policy development in adult and community education and represent the voice of the sector, to be the chief promoter of the significance and value of the sector and a leading body for supporting and sharing best practice for an improved adult and community education service. Research, partnerships with key agencies and our membership will compliment and inform this work.

The Strategic Plan has been organised under each of these priorities with one main goal and ten distinct actions. The Strategic Plan and its progress will be subject to continuous review.



POLICY

Influencing policy in the area of adult and community education has been a key focus of the work of AONTAS since its first strategic plan, *A Vision for the Future*, 1998-2000. In this fourth strategic plan AONTAS will work to ensure that adult and community education is firmly established as part of the education system on a par with other sectors of the system. It will do this through lobbying for recognition and resources, challenging government policies, developing policy papers and using membership feedback to inform future developments. AONTAS will build on this work through research and partnership with other stakeholders in the sector.

GOAL

AONTAS will play a lead role in influencing and participating in the development and implementation of policy for adult and community education.

AONTAS will:

- Establish a policy think tank to include staff, Executive Committee members and other key partners.
- Develop a distinct plan of action for policy work based on the issues and concerns of adult learners and taking into account key developments in government policy on education and training.



- Fight for the recognition of adult and community education as a distinct sector of the education system with resources on a par with other sectors of the system.
- Challenge government policies which do not support the development of a well resourced and organised adult and community education service.
- Build strong links with political parties and government departments to ensure the visibility and inclusion of adult and community education on the political agenda.
- Represent the issues and concerns of adult learners on key committees and working groups.
- Consult with membership to contribute to the development of policy positions and strategies.
- Develop and disseminate policy papers among members and other key individuals, groups and agencies.
- Engage in research with a view to contributing to evidence-based lobbying and policy development.
- Monitor and evaluate progress of policy work at regular intervals.



PROMOTION

AONTAS believes that building the profile of adult and community education is very important. Building awareness of the value of adult and community education will be a priority over the next four years ensuring that state agencies and politicians understand the contribution that adult and community education makes to our economy and society. It will also profile the work of adult and community providers, celebrate this work through the Adult Learners Festival, strengthen relationships with government departments and support the membership to highlight their practice and outcomes. AONTAS will ensure that the issues that effect adult and community education provision will raised through media work and representation.

GOAL

AONTAS will promote the importance, value and role of adult and community education as a key part of lifelong learning locally and nationally.

AONTAS will:

- Develop and promote a clear description of adult and community education and the range of learners who avail of it.
- Take a lead role in speaking on issues relating to adult and community education.



- Identify and engage in research with a view to building a strong body of knowledge about, and for, adult and community education.
- Expand and develop the media strategy with a view to raising the profile of adult and community education.
- Establish the Adult Learners Festival as an annual event.
- Actively support membership to promote the value of adult and community education, profile their work and engage with local media and key agencies.
- Profile and celebrate the work of adult and community education through conferences and seminars.
- Build and strengthen relationships with government departments, civil servants and public representatives.
- Organise political campaigns to ensure public representatives are fully informed about the importance of supporting adult and community education.
- Develop and disseminate a range of publications highlighting the work of the adult and community education sector.

PRACTICE

AONTAS members who are providers of adult and community education endeavour to provide a flexible, responsive and quality service to adult learners throughout the country. AONTAS plans to support the development of that practice through research and promotion with a view to ensuring that the work is valued and invested in by government.

GOAL

AONTAS will contribute to and support the growth and development of high standards of excellence in adult and community education practice.

AONTAS will:

- Take a lead role in building a research base in adult and community education by engaging in and promoting research initiatives that will inform and develop practice in the sector.
- Work with the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA) on the development of a policy paper on professional development for the sector.
- Facilitate discussion fora for practitioners in the sector with a view to exchanging information and practice.
- Mainstream the Quality Assurance Framework with Women's Community Education groups and networks.



- Continue to provide the Community Education Facilitators(CEF) Training and Support programme on behalf of the Department of Education and Science.
- Support members to document and profile models of best practice in the adult and community education sector with a view to improving that practice and feeding into policy on professional development.
- Highlight the unique role of community education not only in attracting hard to reach learners but also as a means of providing alternative routes to further and higher education.
- Demonstrate the role of community education in promoting equality and active citizenship.
- Continue to lobby to remove barriers to access to learning opportunities and for increased resources for all adult learners regardless of gender, abilities or situation.
- Further develop adult learner networks as fora for exchange of information and practice and support learners to participate in the work of AONTAS.

PARTNERSHIP

Currently a broad range of agencies and funders provide and support adult and community education. Therefore AONTAS recognises the importance of working collaboratively with key stakeholders in the adult and community education sector at both local, national and international levels and developing partnerships with them with a view to tapping into and sharing information, experience and expertise.

GOAL

AONTAS will build and strengthen links with agencies at local, national and international levels.

AONTAS will:

- Continue to build and strengthen links with key stakeholders such as the Irish Vocational Education Association(IVEA), National Adult Literacy Agency(NALA), National Collective of Community-based Women's Networks(NCCWN) and social partners.
- Identify, promote and research common areas of policy and practice in partnership with key stakeholders.
- Work with key stakeholders towards the development of a national co-ordinating structure for adult and community education.



- Build and strengthen links with a range of government departments engaged in supporting adult and community education activities with a view to ensuring such work is valued and continues to be supported.
- Encourage members to identify and develop links with agencies at a local level and explore ways of working collaboratively.
- Profile models of collaborative work at a local level with a view to developing local co-ordinating structures.
- Celebrate models of collaborative work in the adult and community education sector through the annual Adult Learners Festival awards ceremony.
- Identify and research models of partnership work at national and international level and disseminate the learning from these.
- Build on our involvement with the European Association for Education of Adults (EAEA) and the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) with a view to influencing policy, exchanging learning and sharing best practice.
- Explore the development of transnational partnerships under the Grundtvig Programme.

ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

AONTAS is first and foremost a membership organisation and it is committed to the support and development of its members. It is also committed to developing itself as a learning organisation, a centre of expertise and a model of good practice for the sector.

GOAL

AONTAS will continue to develop the capacity of AONTAS as a learning organisation and a model of best practice for the adult and community education sector.

AONTAS will:

- Continue to expand the membership base of AONTAS through an ongoing process of recruitment.
- Create a community platform/working group of AONTAS members to promote the meaning of community education and to act as a political platform for shaping policy.
- Expand and develop networking opportunities for members to enable them to learn from one another.
- Identify the experience and expertise of member groups and develop strategies to utilise these to the benefit of AONTAS and to adult and community education as a whole.

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- Develop meaningful working relationships between staff and Executive Committee members through working groups.
 - Develop an Executive Committee members induction scheme with a view to making the best possible use of their experience and expertise.
 - Support adult learners to become involved in the work of the Executive Committee.
 - Develop the capacity of the staff team to ensure that it is able to deliver on the work outlined in the strategic plan.
 - Explore possibilities for the diversification of funding resources for AONTAS.
 - Monitor the progress of the Strategic plan through annual reviews of the work.



GLOSSARY

AONTAS	Aos Oideachais Náisiúnta Trí Aontú Saorálach, meaning 'national adult education through voluntary unification'.
CEF	Community Education Facilitator
CSO	Central Statistics Office
EAEA	European Association for Education of Adults
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
ICAE	International Council for Adult Education
IRAACE	Irish Research Association for Adult and Community Education
IVEA	Irish Vocational Education Association
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
NCCWN	National Collective of Community Based Women's Networks
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
VEC	Vocational Education Committee



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