

# Stepping Stones and Stable Roots: The Versatile and Enduring Strength of Community Education

## Policy Brief

**AONTAS Adult  
Learners' Festival 2023**  
**#CreateYourWorld**



Rialtas na hÉireann  
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**SOLAS**  
learning works



The Voice of  
Adult Learning



## Introduction

On 6<sup>th</sup> March 2023, AONTAS, Ireland’s National Adult Learning Organisation, will host an in-person event to discuss the indispensable role of community education in Irish society. ‘Stepping Stones and Stable Roots’ is part of the annual Adult Learners’ Festival, and is a lobbying opportunity for practitioners of adult and community education from across Ireland. The focus for the event is on the relationship of community education to the new Unified Tertiary Education Model, a policy initiative led by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS).

We will also be sharing the results of a national research project, ‘Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland: A Focus on Marginalised and Vulnerable Groups’, which presents new, evidence-based research into the barriers experienced by particular social groups when trying to access education in Ireland and suggests concrete actions to increase educational equality for everyone.

## The Purpose of this Paper

This paper provides the key elements we feel should be considered by policymakers when developing new adult education policy in Ireland and why community education should be recognised and valued. Community education, or learning that takes place in grassroots community spaces, is often seen as a ‘stepping stone’ to Further Education and Training or to Higher Education. While this is one outcome, community education is a distinct model of education, which has evolved from a political movement that prioritises social justice and equality, with clear principles and values including inclusivity and flexibility in learning opportunities. In short, it also offers ‘stable roots’ in a particular community, and fosters a sense of belonging and identity. Due to its civic, social and engagement outcomes for Irish society – including proven benefits to mental and physical health and wellbeing, as well as intergenerational change in communities – we urge policymakers and funders to recognise, value, and explicitly name community education in policy in Ireland.

## Unified Tertiary Education Model

Led by DFHERIS, this new model is a vision for a unified system across education and research. DFHERIS seeks to ‘develop Ireland’s higher and further education and research and innovation systems, to ensure they are capable of meeting the diverse needs of all people’ (DFHERIS, 2022).

The Unified Tertiary Education Model aims to provide clearer pathways for learners and researchers, and integrated further and higher education programmes, to build a cohesive system for all. This new model will bring FET and Higher Education closer together, creating new jointly-designed and co-delivered courses. This aims to improve pathways for learners from FET to university, and collaboration across the tertiary sector.

### **Unified Tertiary Education Policy aims:**

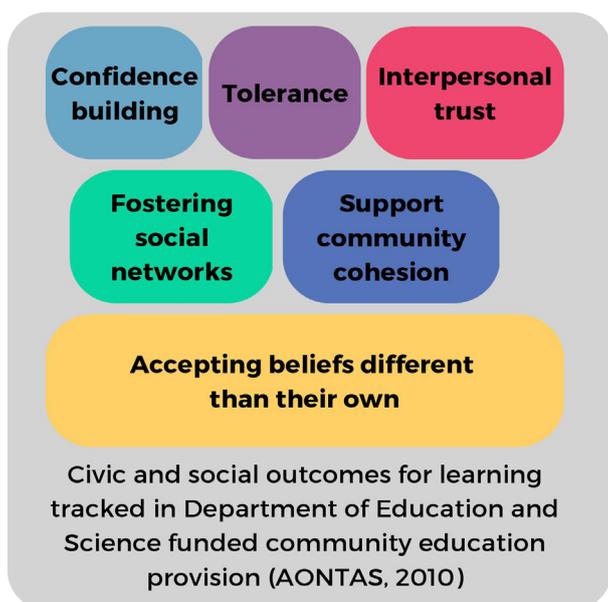
- Offer a wide range of more joined-up learning and development opportunities to learners, researchers and innovators
- Grow equality, diversity and inclusion across the system
- Help the system adapt to change
- Create more regional links
- Supply the skills, knowledge and talent needed by individuals, the economy and society

We are pleased to see many of our recommendations included in the new model, including greater visibility and mainstreaming of learning options through Quality and Qualifications Ireland accredited programmes, as an alternative to the Leaving Certificate.

Read our response to the launch here: [‘A step closer to educational equality’ says AONTAS CEO Dearbháil Lawless.](#)

## Why is Community Education so Valuable?

Community education has been defined as ‘a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level’ (DES, 2000, p. 110). Community education in its truest form is a change-oriented model of adult learning, one that is not focussed on employment and skills but the creation of social change using inclusive and action-focussed methodologies. Using a grassroots approach and based in local communities, it is closely aligned with community development and youth work due to its processes of collective action for social change. It is often the first point of contact with learning – particularly for people who, for example, had negative experiences with education, have experienced trauma, or are struggling with addiction or poor mental health.



Education theory provides an academic framework for developing and implementing community education. Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and activist, is a significant figure in the field. He saw learners as active in their education and drew attention to the lack of neutrality in all education design. Key concepts arising from his work include problem-posing education and conscientization (Freire Institute, 2023).

In 2000, the *Learning for Life: Whitepaper on Adult Education* stated that ‘the community-based sector is amongst the most dynamic, creative and relevant components of Adult Education provision in Ireland’ (DES, 2000), and the first Community Education Facilitators (CEFs)

were appointed soon after the Whitepaper was published. In the early 2000s, community education began to see more focus in government policy (Fitzsimons, 2017), but where does community education currently sit in the new Unified Tertiary Education policy direction? We’re hoping to explore this question in our discussions at this year’s policy day.

## Current Context of Community Education in Ireland

In Ireland, community education provision is delivered both through independently-managed organisations and as part of the broader statutory Further Education and Training sector. This includes part- or fully-funded programmes. The AONTAS Community Education Network has over 100 members spread across the island of Ireland who identify as ‘independently-managed community education providers’. Community education in the Republic of Ireland is, according to the AONTAS CEN Census conducted in 2020, largely delivered by small, locally-based organisations, supporting an average of 200 learners per year (AONTAS, 2020).

In 2021, AONTAS conducted an exercise to estimate the number of providers delivering community-based learning. 983 groups registered with the Irish Charities Regulator were identified in the community and voluntary sector, whose services included ‘the advancement of education’.

AONTAS are currently developing an interactive map of community education in partnership with Community Education Facilitators (CEFs) and other members and key stakeholders. This will provide a clear and informed overview of the sector.

Many community education providers deliver both employment and skills-focussed programmes, and non-formal education and change-oriented learning. Each provider is unique. Their choices for programme design and delivery are localised and within the context of current policy, funding, and learner needs.

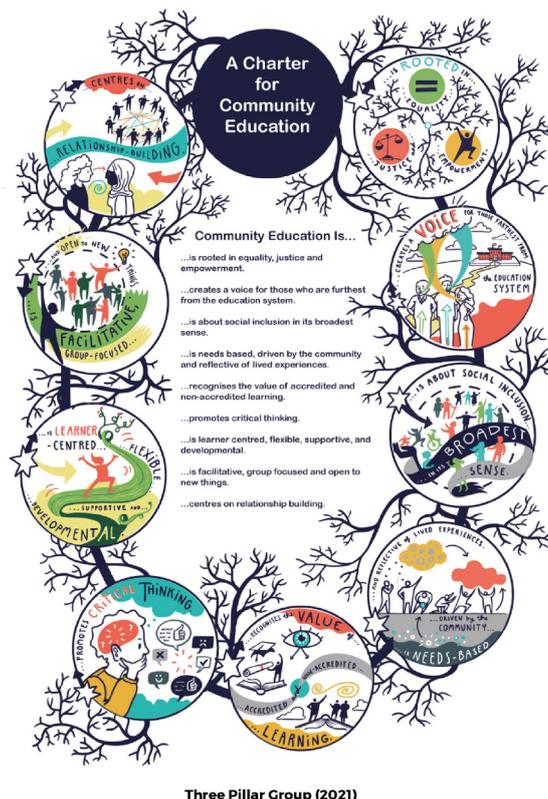
### FET Community Education

In 2021, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) published a [Community Education position paper](#), which AONTAS supported through focus-group engagement and sharing written and published materials. The position paper provides a clear picture of FET community education provision and outlines SOLAS and ETBI’s policy commitment and vision for this model:

ETB FET Community Education is an integral part of FET and is at the heart of FET’s transformational role. It is described in the National FET Strategy as being ‘critical’ to FET provision. The strategy commits to the development of a Community Education Framework which will “provide an enhanced basis to both record and promote national and local good practice, learner achievement and progression, and the overall benefits of community education (2021, p. 10)

### Profile of Adult Learners in Community Education

A significant social impact of community education is engagement and support of a diverse cohort of adult learners. Our new report, ‘Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland: A Focus on Marginalised and Vulnerable Groups’ (2023), identifies barriers to adult learning participation. These include digital literacy, stigma and discrimination, isolation, prior negative experience in formal education, financial barriers, lack of childcare, a lack of choice in modules, course schedule design, a lack of certification or accreditation and an absence of hybrid learning options.



**“I was concerned that if I went on a course, any grant that I would get would affect my social and my rent.”**  
- Adult Learner

This reflects previous findings from the CEN Census (AONTAS, 2020) which demonstrated that community education most benefits disadvantaged groups, including people who are unemployed, people with a disability, lone-parents, migrants, socio-economically disadvantaged learners, Travellers, Roma, people living in Direct Provision, people impacted by addiction, people impacted by imprisonment, and people experiencing homelessness.

**“I had SAOL supporting me when I went to college last year to do social care and I’m going back this year to do Youth and Community Work. I would have never gone to college only for SAOL being there as a support for me the whole time”**  
- Adult Learner

## Wrap-around Support Services and Non-Formal Education

Two core elements of community education provision are wrap-around support services and non-formal education, which allow many people to access, and remain in, education. Wrap-around supports and non-formal education enable socially-inclusive adult learning and are based on learners’ needs, including support for addiction recovery, IT support, literacy, childcare, social work, disability, domestic violence support, finance and transport (AONTAS, 2020).

The AONTAS CEN Census suggests that community education provision across Ireland consists of more non-formal or non-accredited courses than accredited courses: ‘3,147 community education learners were enrolled in accredited provision, compared to 12,226 in non-accredited provision’ (2020, p.26).

According to our new *Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland: A Focus on Marginalised and Vulnerable Groups* report, ‘community education is characterised as providing a healing space for those who have suffered adverse life experiences among a majority of the groups we consulted’ (2023, p.33).

As FET and Higher Education are unified within the new Unified Tertiary Education policy framework, we must collectively recognise both the distinct challenges faced by many learners in community education settings, and the potential for community education to create healing spaces and a more truly inclusive tertiary education system in Ireland.

## Key Considerations for Policy

- Community education provision reduces barriers for marginalised and vulnerable learners (AONTAS, 2020; 2023).
- Wrap-around support services for learners provide a space of healing (AONTAS, 2023). This creates a greater impact for wider society, addressing the needs of people affected by addiction, imprisonment, discrimination, or trauma associated behaviours (SAMHSA, 2014).
- Non-formal education can address immediate local and national needs (AONTAS, 2020). It is an integral part of the re-engagement and trust building process in grassroots community learning.
- Tutors and staff are supporting learners with a range of needs beyond their teaching, including traumatic experiences (AONTAS 2020, 2023).
- Adult learners are not a homogenous group. For the tertiary education sector to be inclusive,

to engage people from all backgrounds, and enable people to complete their programmes and courses, we need diverse methodologies, programmes, and providers.

- Ireland is undergoing landmark positive changes in the field of adult learning that will shape the future of policy, education, and society. However, we cannot foresee the future representatives, policymakers or leaders in this field. If community education is not named and protected in national policy, it may be isolated or face further pressures that cause irreparable damage and closures. This, in turn, will further marginalise vulnerable communities and decrease engagement in education.

## Initial Recommendations

- Explicitly name community education as a strand within the new Unified Tertiary Education system.
- Recognise and use community education provision as a tool for creating positive social change through the creation of joint multi-annual funding, in collaboration with the Department of Justice and the Department of Social Protection.
- Enable opportunities for innovation through distance-travelled (progress made relative to an initial starting point) and social-outcomes reporting in community education.
- Protect the sustainability, quality, and expertise of adult learning provision by protecting its most valuable resource: tutors and staff.

At the ‘Stepping Stones and Stable Roots’ event on 6th March 2023, we will further discuss these issues. It will be an opportunity to ask questions and make recommendations directly to policymakers from DFHERIS. Policymakers will have a chance to hear directly from community education providers and adult learners. Following on from the event, we will develop recommendations for policy changes, based on our collective voices and actions.

[Click here for more information about ‘Stepping Stones and Stable Roots’, and details of the agenda](#)

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