

# Who Does It Cost? How Greater Investment in Adult Learners Will Strengthen Irish Society

**Discussion Paper**

**AONTAS Adult  
Learners' Festival 2024**  
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AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival 2024 Discussion Paper

Monday 4<sup>th</sup> March

Richmond Education Centre, Dublin

## Overview

Every year, as part of the Adult Learners' Festival, we at AONTAS host a discussion on adult learning policy and agree advocacy actions and goals for the coming year. This year, we will come together to identify specific policy solutions to the **growing issue of poverty and income inequality for adult learners**.

At "Who Does It Cost?", we will:

- identify **specific financial challenges** that people are confronted with when trying to take part in an adult or community education programme, especially people at risk of or living in poverty, and people who have been let down by formal education in the past
- examine how our current education system can **perpetuate unequal access to education**, particularly for people from under-resourced communities, people living in poverty, and people receiving social welfare or working in low-paid jobs
- highlight why it is important to have policies that enable **sufficient and stable financial supports** for people to have equal access to education
- discuss how greater investment in adult learners will strengthen Irish society.

AONTAS will soon launch a **national advocacy campaign** calling for **changes in education policy** that will make adult learning a **realistic option** for people, with a focus on the financial supports adult learners need. This campaign is still being developed, and we want it to be informed by our members and stakeholders. Attendees at "Who Does It Cost?" will be invited to share ideas for this campaign, and how we can successfully advocate for greater investment in adult learners.

## Context

The purpose of our “Who Does It Cost?” policy discussion is to inform attendees about the potential impact of additional investment in adult learners. We will raise awareness about the existing policies and hear ideas about what investments are needed to allow all adult learners in Ireland to access education, regardless of their circumstances.

What is the impact of insufficient funding for adult learners?

Our research and ongoing engagement with learners found instances such as:

- a young mother who has started an adult education course working 50 hours a week to fund day-to-day expenses
- an apprentice sleeping in their car while on training because there is no affordable accommodation
- a hungry learner stealing a lunch from an adult education tutor
- an adult education centre opening its doors early to provide hot drinks and snacks to hungry learners.

Through research and personal learner stories, we will show how growing issues of poverty and inequality in Ireland can harm people’s ability to learn, and prevent potential learners from even trying to return to learning.

We will invite attendees to explore existing financial supports for learners in adult and community education, and collectively reflect on what needs to change to create the necessary conditions for adult learners to thrive.

We will consider how greater investment in adult learning means policymakers can fulfil their commitments for an equal Unified Tertiary Education System. The current Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy states that “FET ensures that supports are available to allow any individual, regardless of background or formal education level, an opportunity to learn and develop.”

## Research and Evidence

According to our CEO Dearbháil Lawless, “greater investment in adult learning would help address poverty, and work towards addressing inequalities in Irish society.”

We have chosen to focus on this topic based on our research with adult learners through our national research project the [National Further Education and Training Learner Forum](#); our ongoing discussions with learners; and our regular meetings with community education providers through the Community Education Network. **The most prominent issue arising is cost-of-living increases and struggles with bills.**

## Discussion Scope

Our research shows a strong correlation between people’s level of education and risk of living in poverty. The [National Anti-Poverty Strategy](#) says that people are living in poverty if their income and resources are so inadequate that they can’t have “a standard of living that is regarded as acceptable by Irish society,” and that people in this position “may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities that are considered the norm for other people in society.” According to the [Central Statistics Office](#), 13.1% of the Irish population – 668,126 people – are at risk of poverty.

Insufficient investment in adult and community education means that people across Ireland, particularly those from under-resourced communities, are **excluded from education and consequently from job opportunities, and from full participation in their communities as active citizens.**

For our “Who Does It Cost?” policy discussion, we will take inspiration from the community education groups who are working to address these inequalities in local communities across Ireland. According to Liz Waters, former CEO of An Cosán, community education can bring about a “one generation solution”, where a lone parent educated to degree level will earn 40% more than someone without a degree, allowing their children to exit poverty. Community educators attest that education also has an intergenerational effect, which children of parents who are educated more likely to progress in their own education. In addition, we see again and again that community educators continue to value **each** learners’ personal experiences, regardless of qualifications and traditional ideas of “success”.

With these ideas in mind, we will consider what additional investments in adult and community education will create the conditions where adult learning becomes a realistic option for people, especially those at risk of or living in poverty, so we can work towards greater equality in Irish society.

## Ideas for Action

### 1. Fund part-time FET learners

Part-time learning is not supported by grants or payments to FET learners. Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), College Connect, and SOLAS have all found that more support is needed for FET learners on part-time programmes. The recent ETBI report on [Learner Mental Health and Wellbeing](#) found that part-time learners “are often the most disadvantaged and face a wide range of barriers to participation,” but they do not “have access to funding mechanisms available to learners on full-time programmes.”

Many FET learners must work while learning. Our own research also shows that learners who are in low-paid employment are often excluded from existing financial supports, but are working long hours to make ends meet while continuing their education. It is difficult to get a FET certificate for progression while holding down a full-time job, often in low-paid employment. It is also difficult, in this situation, to earn enough money to stay above the poverty line, especially with the current cost-of-living crisis and the housing crisis. Funded part-time courses for learners on low incomes would allow people to learn without such financial pressure, to complete their course, and to progress to higher education, and gain more skills and better jobs.

### 2. Increase existing supplementary allowances and social welfare payments

Financial supports for accommodation, food, and travel are inadequate when we consider the rise in cost of living and rent.

AONTAS are advocating for an increase in supplementary allowances by 50%. The ["Funding the Future" Options Paper](#) proposed this increase. This was not included in Budget 2024. We think it should be included in Budget 2025.

Recent research from SOLAS shows that one in three FET learners are unemployed. This means that one in three FET Learners are impacted by policies relating to social welfare payments. The impact of social welfare cuts has been highlighted by [St Vincent de Paul](#). Most weekly payments are €86 below the poverty line. We recommend an increase in social welfare rates in line with the inflation and the cost of living. Social welfare should be benchmarked to an adequate level so that learners’ basic needs are met, and they can enter and succeed in education as adults.

As reflected in a recent paper from [TASC](#) (the Think-Tank for Action on Social Change), many people from under-resourced communities feel that returning to education would not benefit them enough, given the costs involved. [Indecon's](#) Review of the Student Grant Scheme (2022) estimated that engaging in full-time FET learning costs €1,112 per month and €10,004 per term. This does not, according to [College Connect](#), consider the loss of earnings for learners and their families. The current model of financial support sees the “typical student” as a young person aged 18-22, living at home, financially supported by other family members, perhaps working part-time. Adult and community education learners are often people from a variety of backgrounds, ages, and experiences – and may be coping with different challenges while trying to learn. **But adult and community education learners are an essential part of tertiary education in Ireland. These learners, and the adult and community education sector that supports them, should be recognised and supported. To reduce poverty in Ireland, we must increase investment in adult learners and potential learners.**

### 3. Broaden financial support for learners at NFQ levels 1-4

Our research with learners, and our ongoing discussions with members and stakeholders, shows that there is unequal access to funding for adult learners involved in community education and in FET at the earlier stages of the [National Framework of Qualifications](#). These learners are not eligible for SUSI grants or similar education related financial support. Many are currently living in or at risk of poverty and in need of support for day-to-day expenses like food, bills, travel, and learning materials. We need funding to support these people to access and stay in adult learning.

### 4. Close the Information Gap

There is also no dedicated, streamlined information system for potential adult and community education learners so they can easily understand how to get the financial supports they need. There are many different sources of funding and grants. But the information about who can qualify can be unclear and inconsistent. This is a significant deterrent for people who consider returning to education. We need a source of consistent information nationally about what financial supports are available to different types of learners.



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