

Educational Equality is Central to Ireland's Recovery: Community Education in a Time of COVID-19



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The Voice of
Adult Learning

Introduction

Community education must be effectively funded to address persistent educational inequality in Ireland. In order to build a robust evidence base, for the first time, AONTAS has implemented a broad-scale mixed methods research project, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data. We called it the Community Education Network (CEN) Census to uncover who engages in community education, what courses are provided, identify how it is funded, and most critically, how it effectively supports people to fulfil their potential. This research has taken on even greater importance as it captured the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on 76 community education organisations, who are funded by nine government departments, through 51 funding streams while engaging about 15,000 learners across Ireland. The emerging picture of community education is one of dynamism in responding to learners, inclusiveness in terms of learner cohort and challenge due to unsustainable funding systems.

It is clear that community education improves lives. Based on the *Community Education in a time of COVID-19* report (AONTAS, 2021), this policy paper offers a clear direction for supporting community education through evidence-informed recommendations. The overall aim of this work is in line with the vision of AONTAS, for all adults to achieve their educational aspirations through an equitable lifelong learning system.

Proposal

Given the exacerbation of educational disadvantage arising from COVID-19, AONTAS is calling for an equitable support plan for community education as part of a national tertiary-education wide approach to educational equality.

Recommendations for an equitable support plan for community education

A. Commit to an equitable, sustainable, multi-annual funding package that empowers community education organisations to address the needs of learners and the local communities. This should include:

- I. An annual ***Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund*** (MAEDF) to include the learning from the AONTAS research report (Cobain et al., 2021) on proposed improvements needed
 - Consistency in funding provision processes across all Education and Training Boards (ETBs) (to include all aspects of the fund and include staff costs)
 - An extended timeframe and streamlined, clearer guidelines across each ETB to facilitate an equitable application process
- II. ***Learner wraparound support funding*** for community education organisations to enable access and retention post-COVID-19. Including on-site supports for domestic violence, mental health, family, and childcare that will meet multiple Government Department policy objectives

- III. Ring-fenced ***funding for non-accredited programmes*** to enable marginalised learners to engage in education
- IV. ***An equity of access to accreditation fund*** through SOLAS for community education groups to enable accredited provision (to cover the reengagement and validation costs)

B. Ensure community education is recognised as a key part of creating an equitable tertiary education system

- I. Recognise and name community education as key to supporting access to higher education and include in access policy plans and funding opportunities
- II. Take a tertiary-wide approach to educational access, ensure learners can engage in part-time accredited provision across the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in community education
- III. Include representative structures for community education and educational equality on the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science working groups as part of the Department's Statement of Strategy

C. Support national research to build an evidence base on the impact of COVID-19 on adult learners, with particular emphasis on marginalised learners

- I. Use the *Community Education in a time of COVID-19* report (COVID-19 report) as evidence to inform strategic planning and funding for community education under the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and SOLAS
- II. Develop a long-term strategy to address the educational inequality exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on the role of community education in redressing this impact
- III. Support further research into community education, including mapping, funding systems, and contribution to educational equality



The Value and Impact of Supporting Community Education

Post pandemic, it is essential that we work towards addressing the fallout from COVID-19 on educational disadvantage. Findings from the COVID-19 report note that marginalized learners are the dominant cohort in community education, people are empowered to participate, the focus is often on social change and can contribute to access, basic skills and sustainable employment.

Community education can support an inclusive recovery for the following reasons:

- **Marginalised learners are the dominant cohort** engaging in community education. The findings from the COVID-19 report illustrate the sector's commitment to engaging vulnerable and disadvantaged learner cohorts such as the unemployed; socio-economically disadvantaged learners; people with a disability; lone parents; migrants; Travellers and Roma communities; people experiencing homelessness; substance misusers; people living in Direct Provision; and ex-prisoners.
- **To address the drop in lifelong learning participation rates:** The lifelong learning participation rate for people with *lower secondary education/Junior Cert* halved in 2020 compared to 2019 ([SLMRU, SOLAS, 2021](#)). There was a sharp drop in accreditation awards at NFQ level 1-4 (down 49% from 2019) during 2020 and minor awards (down 27% from 2019). There were 14% fewer active providers of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) awards in 2020 compared to 2019 ([QQI, 2021](#)) meaning there appears to be fewer organisations offering accredited provision. National statistics reveal a drop in Further Education and Training (FET) participation levels of approximately 25% by Travellers and a drop of 15% for people with disabilities, the over 50s and refugees and asylum seekers during 2020. Hard-earned gains to increase access to education are being lost.
- **To empower participation:** Community education empowers learners to engage in their community, to increase agency, capacity and self-confidence. These are the foundational requirements for enabling participation in their community and society. The COVID-19 report highlights the most common objective of accredited and non-accredited programmes is social inclusion. This is further enabled by non-accredited programmes that mainly focus on mental health and wellbeing, and learning to learn/life skills which supports a broader range of national policy goals
- **Social change:** Democracies require debate, critical engagement and to hear all voices. Community education is not just a pathway to further education or employment, but also as a means to debate and challenge inequalities, which is a key aspect of a healthy democracy. Democratic education was a focus on almost a fifth of accredited programmes and community development was a focus of a quarter of accredited and non-accredited programmes.

- **Sustainable employment:** Community education is a route out of poverty. Employability and upskilling were two of the most common type of accredited courses cited. Also, non-accredited programmes are vital for soft skills, teamwork and confidence.
- **To enhance basic skills:** In the context of the new Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Skills Strategy, to enable progression to further and higher education, a diversity of options for accredited provision in a community education context are needed. Digital literacy was a focus of a third of accredited programmes and access to devices and internet was greatly enabled by the MAEDF.
- **To support higher education access:** In the broader scheme of access, the recent Higher Education Authority (HEA) research report (2021),¹ noted that 21% of mature students had previously participated in a course provided by a community education provider. The cohort of learners were predominantly lone parents, people with a disability, people from disadvantaged areas and significantly Travellers. If we do not support accredited provision in community education, it will have a negative impact on progression to apprenticeships and higher education, especially for marginalised learners.

The Challenges Impacting Community Education in a Time of COVID-19

The findings from the *Community Education in a time of COVID-19 report* clearly highlight the underfunding of community education coupled with increased need arising from COVID-19 pandemic. Findings demonstrate the complexity, precarity and loss of funding for community education together with an increased demand for programmes and learner supports. A specific need to fund, support and enable blended learning, accredited and non-accredited provision and vitally outreach and engagement.

The findings from the report note:

- **The complexity and precarity of the community education funding system:** Nine government departments and 51 funding streams fund the 76 respondent community education organisations.
- **Loss of funding for community education:** Almost a third of respondent groups experienced a reduction in funding. Fundraising and social enterprise revenue generating models were reduced in the pandemic. In addition, vital course fees, cited as the second most commonly stated income source, were lost. Also, worryingly, some funding bodies also reduced funding grants due to smaller class sizes which were unavoidable due to health and safety measures. Almost half of all groups cited concerns about on future funding uncertainty.

¹ HEA (2021) Study of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education. What are the Challenges? Recommendations for the future. HEA, Dublin.

- **Backlog and demand for programmes:** There was an increase in demand for many courses while at the same time some programmes were cancelled and could not transfer to online provision. Although almost half of respondents were able to offer their programmes online, a fifth could not and a third were able to do so but at a reduced level. It is suggested that the backlog is potentially due to the learner cohort, programme type, staff capacity, health and health risks of learners, uncertainty, digital poverty and other factors.
- **Increased demand for programmes.** In addition to the existing types of courses, which for accredited courses were predominantly upskilling and employment focused, new courses were developed during the pandemic, especially digital literacy support (Zoom training, basic digital skills) and a wide range of courses to support wellbeing (mental health, resilience training, health and safety during COVID-19 and courses on addiction. As noted: *“for some people and families, it’s their lifeline.”*
- **Increased demand for learner supports:** Findings show that surveyed community education groups were offering a wide range of additional and wraparound supports including information technology (IT); literacy; career guidance; childcare; counselling; disability supports; domestic violence services; family support; financial advice; social work; and transport, which are crucial in engaging “hard-to-reach” learner cohorts. There was increased demand for additional IT support, arising from COVID-19 as well as health and wellbeing e.g. a third of respondents reported increased demand for counselling. Demand for domestic violence supports also increased and was noted as a “huge issue” . In keeping the connection through learner engagement, one respondent noted that their service made “200 calls a week” to learners. Almost all respondents cited mental health and wellbeing support as a key focus post pandemic.
- **Accredited and non-accredited courses need to be supported:** The report noted that respondents provided almost 4 times as many non-accredited courses as accredited, to meet learner need, to support engagement during COVID and possibly due to the challenge or offering accredited provision due to changes in their relationship with QQI.
- **Supporting blended learning post COVID-19:** Educators and learners cited capacity challenges and digital poverty in relation to online provision. Community education organisations noted limited space for current and future social distancing . Also, while a third of learners reported that they didn’t like online learning, almost half said they did enjoy this model. Going forward there is a need for capacity development of educators and learners, addressing digital poverty and equipping organisations for a safe on-site return.

- **Outreach and engagement:** Almost two-thirds of respondents cited outreach as a primary focus to reach new learners and those who could not engage in online learning. Maintaining a community education approach, a safe welcoming environment and more on-site provision was deemed essential.

The Remaining Challenge

The findings from the *Community Education in a time of COVID-19 report* are set against a backdrop of long-standing issues, many based on the unfulfilled recommendations from the White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000) whilst ultimately inhibit community education from reaching its full potential, and thus impeding educational equality in Ireland.

The ongoing challenge includes:

- Current levels of funding for community education do not cover the true cost of provision, including staff costs and immediate action is needed to address the reduction in income arising from the pandemic.
- The MAEDF and Pobal Stability fund are helpful and welcome but do not cover the loss of income, the increased demand for supports, backlog of learners on waiting lists, or the courses needed.
- Community education organisations have no funding source to cover the cost of QQI reengagement or programme validation and there is no other option to offer accredited provision.
- There is a pressing need to reach marginalised learners, those who did not engage in learning during the pandemic and those who wanted to complete accredited courses but could not. Immediate action is required.

The Option

As part of a national approach to address the impact of COVID-19 on exacerbating educational disadvantage comprehensive investment in community education is vital. Community education engages the most marginalised in society and is the arguably the most inclusive part of the tertiary education system. This is made possible through an engaged pedagogic process, wraparound supports and community-informed accredited and non-accredited provision. To ignore the clear need and increased demand for support would set back collective efforts to address educational inequality. A reduction in participation levels in community education will have a knock-on effect in FET and higher education participation. A loss of capacity and funding in community education will impact provision. Without financial support outreach to engage learners and address dropping lifelong learning participation levels will not be possible.

Investing in our Shared Recovery

Given the exacerbation of educational disadvantage arising from COVID-19, AONTAS is calling for an equitable support plan for community education as part of a national tertiary-education wide approach to educational equality.

The findings from the *Community Education in a time of COVID-19 report* clearly highlight the issue of underfunding of community education coupled with increased need arising from COVID-19 pandemic calling for:

- Equitable, sustainable, multi-annual funding
- Ensuring community education is recognised as a key part of creating an equitable tertiary education system
- Supporting national research to build an evidence base on the impact of COVID-19 on adult learners, with particular emphasis on target groups

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