

Aontas Community Education Network

Changing Structures in Education – Implications for the Community Education Sector



Wednesday 13th March

Time 9-45am – 3 pm

Venue: Carmelite Centre Aungier Street

Summary

The 17th meeting of the Community Education Network (CEN) focussed on the changing external environment for adult and further education in Ireland. It also looked explored the measurement of outcomes in community education. In addition the meeting offered an opportunity to reflect on personal practice via a current PhD project and to hear the results of some research into adult education.

Introduction

The Community Education Network offers an opportunity for independent community education practitioners to come together at a national level. The CEN is a key structure within the AONTAS membership which aims to be a -

- Community of Practice: demonstrating the value and outcomes of community education
- Community of Educators: continuous professional development for community education practitioners
- Community of Reflection: facilitating discussion on community education in a changing context - how to maintain its role and ethos
- Community of Advocacy: identifying and lobbying on specific issues relating to community education
- Community of Support: peer support, exchange and shared learning with other community education groups

The objective of the 17th meeting of the CEN was to create a space to offer key information to practitioners on the changing structures in Further Education and Training, their implications for community education and how groups can seek to maximise their impact locally and nationally.

Content of the Day

Sara Bourke introduced herself as the new CEN Co-ordinator replacing Niamh O'Reilly who is on maternity leave with her new baby boy. The agenda for the day was developed with the support of the CEN Steering Group¹ as follows:

9.45 – 10.15	Registration, Tea, Coffee, Networking
10.15-10.55	Updates and Discussion on SOLAS - Niamh Farren, AONTAS What is the current position re the ongoing development of SOLAS. What is the position of Community Education. How can SOLAS be influenced going forwards?
10:55-11:25	Report on Lobby for Learning Day , meeting with Minister Cannon, SOLAS and DSP Senior Officials - Panel Discussion How CEN views were represented and the responses. Discussion of the methodology of the day as a transferable lobbying tool which could be effectively replicated locally and regionally

¹ CEN Steering Group members: Catherine Alymer (LCEN), Avril Bailey (An Cosán), Camilla Fitzsimons (RESPOND! Housing), Colm Kilgallon (All Hallows College), Rachel Morrissey (D8 CEC), Colm Kilgallon (All Hallows College)

11.25 – 11.40	Coffee break/Networking
11.40 – 12.20	Education and Training Boards - Niamh Farren, AONTAS How they are constituted – how they may impact on Community Education Providers on the ground – how they can be influenced Focusing on: What messages community education needs to get across. How can this be done effectively and efficiently.
12.20 – 12:35	Update from QQI on queries from CEN members – Sara Bourke, AONTAS
12:35-12:45	Research into “Philosophical Approaches to Community Education” – Camilla Fitzsimons
12:45 – 1:30	Free Lunch/ Networking
1.30 – 2.45	Measuring the Outcomes of Community Education – Avril Bailey, An Cosán Measuring outcomes realistically, effectively and efficiently is essential for learners, providers and policy. Looking at current practice in the sector and what providers and tutors need to measure and document the outcomes of their work. Final discussion on the upcoming Training Links course which will address the needs identified here.
2:45 – 3:00	Research: Participation in three Adult Learning settings – Tina Byrne, NALA. NALA, An Cosan and DES. Useful statistics and comparison of learner profiles in three contrasting settings.
3:00	Close of Meeting

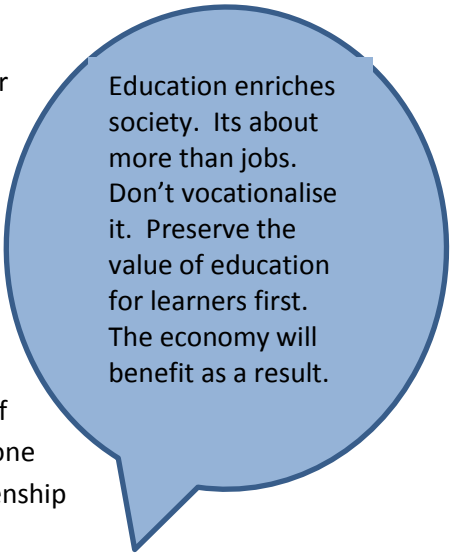
Changing Structures of FET (1) – The Development of SOLAS

Niamh Farren, Policy and Communications Officer with Aontas gave a presentation on the current situation with regard to SOLAS, the new Further Education and Training Authority. SOLAS will have an overarching policy role which aims to build “the identity and values of a world-class integrated FET system”. It will “manage, co-ordinate and support the delivery of integrated FET by Education and Training Boards, to monitor delivery and provide funding based on good data and positive outcomes and to promote FET provision that is relevant to individual learner needs and National Skill needs.”² The legislation³ contains the following definition: *“Further education includes further education provided for the purpose of obtaining an award within the meaning of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 at a level that is not higher than level 6 specified in the National Framework of Qualifications....”* The full presentation can be accessed [here](#).

² An Action Plan for SOLAS, <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/An-Action-Plan-for-SOLAS.pdf>

³ <http://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Legislation/Further-Education-and-Training-Bill-2013.pdf>

Following the presentation, CEN participants discussed the implications for the sector. They welcomed the information but it raised a number of issues. The definition of FET was considered to be very narrow and not to include the many varied dimensions of community education, levels beyond Level 6 and unaccredited or non-formal learning. This was considered to be a very serious deficiency, which threatened the very core of independent community education and its resourcing via the new structures. There was concern that the emphasis on the acquisition of skills for jobs, while important, did not account for the learning needs of people outside the labour market – older people, those with disabilities, lone parents, home carers etc. In addition, the role of education in active citizenship and community development was not recognised.



Education enriches society. Its about more than jobs. Don't vocationalise it. Preserve the value of education for learners first. The economy will benefit as a result.

CEN members considered that there was a need to lobby actively to seek to have the legislation amended to broaden the definition of FET within the bill and to also seek to have Independently managed Community Education named specifically within the legislation. They suggested that AONTAS should draw up a Pro Forma letter which could be used to lobby TDs and Senators, in particular in the run up to the Committee Stage of the Bill on 1st May.

- Definition of FET is too narrow and needs to be expanded to include Community Education, levels beyond Level 6 and unaccredited or non formal learning.
- Education must not be confined to vocational training for the labour market.
- How is lifelong learning recognised under the new structures
- With the emphasis on learners being on the Live Register, how can others access further education and training – particular concern for people with intellectual disabilities, New Irish and other disadvantaged groups.
- What are the implications for Community Employment Participants who wish to access training.
- This has very serious implications for funding, and ultimately for centres. It is very hard to plan ahead in the changing structures.
- It may force a change of focus for community education – no longer for social change and personal benefit.

Participants were asked to put their comments in a short Tweet! Message.

- It is vital that SOLAS does not exclude Community Education, its role to reach the “hard to reach” benefits us all socially and economically.
- Shocking exclusion of Community Education from the SOLAS and FET Bill rubber stamps the continued diminution of the sector
- Appalled the definition of FET hangs on “purpose of obtaining an award”. What about informal non accredited learning.
- Community education provision is not just about skills for jobs, but also skills for life
- Stunned by the definition of FET being focussed purely on certification – Learners and providers are not the focus, but they should be the main focus.
- We will have an erosion of the value and provision of community education and resulting demoralisation amongst providers and recipients



Lobby for Learning Day – Meeting with Minister Cannon and key officials

Sara Bourke presented a short report on the meeting which took place on Friday March 1st. The full presentation can be accessed [here](#). This was followed by a panel discussion with three providers and a learner who participated in the day. Policy makers from DES, SOLAS and DSP accompanied the Minister to the roundtable event involving both learners and providers. The theme of the day was “Community Education – a Strategy for Success” and it sought to highlight the proven track record of Community Education in supporting people to return to work. Policy makers were particularly impressed with the learner stories which gave clear examples of how the holistic approach and supports of community education were essential to their progress. It also highlighted the diversity of provision and approach and the flexibility of community education.

The Minister stated that he is committed to ensuring the people, who have already been failed by the system, to have access to an education that suits them at their pace and time of life. The Minister is determined that the new SOLAS will be flexible and totally learner centred. At an earlier event he also stated “Community Education in particular provides opportunities for adults to gain new skills and garner more confidence. Education that starts within the community provides a supportive environment that can build a solid foundation for the lifelong learning journey. Community Education also reaches a wide range of members of our communities that may not engage with other education and training provision.”

On the issue of the definition, it was stated that the definition in the legislation was not an exclusive definition, and could be interpreted more widely operationally and as the FET strategy is developed. Some comments from the policy makers included:

“My improved understanding, and appreciation of, the value of Community Education will be of great assistance in my future work with SOLAS.”

“We appreciate the opportunity afforded us to participate and look forward to continued and structured engagement with AONTAS as we embark on the process of developing a strategy for Further Education and Training.”

Education and Training Boards

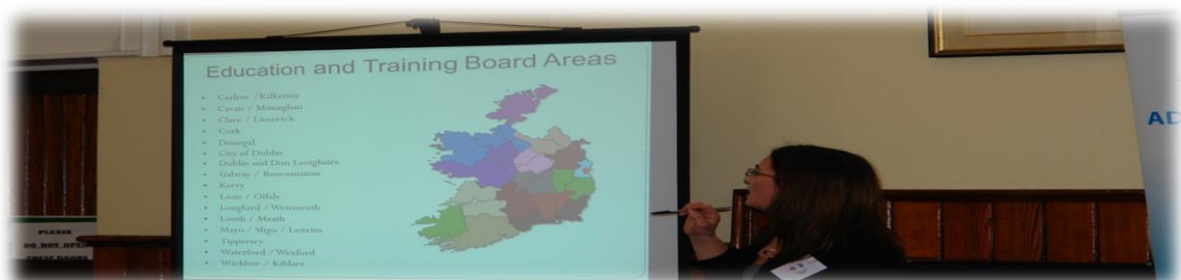
Niamh Farren then made a presentation on the new ETBs which can be accessed [here](#). She outlined the realignment of the VECs and the merging of the FAS Training Centres into the 16 Education and Training Boards. She also outlined the structure of the Boards of the ETBs and the existence of three “community “ seats.

There was a lively discussion on how best to ensure that Independent Community Education had a voice in the local structures. It was noted that there is still uncertainty as to how the ETBs will roll out on the ground and the type of Service Level Agreements which they will enter into both with SOLAS and with providers. The position of FAS funded programmes such as LTIs is also unclear. At present the VECs have ad hoc Adult Education Boards, but it is not known what the structure will be for the oversight of FET going forward.

The following actions were suggested –

- Community Education Groups should come together locally to decide on a strategy. Make contacts with other providers in your area and make sure they are aware of the issues.
- Keep up to date with developments and support Aontas position in in lobbying to have the voice of Community Education explicitly mentioned in legislation and Service level Agreements.
- Seeking representation on the main Board of ETB
- Seeking representation on a FET sub committee of ETB
- Seek allies in the other representatives on the Board eg Councillors, parents etc who may have a good understanding of Community Education.
- Raise awareness in ETB areas of the contribution of Community Education, ensuring that it is clearly named.
- Lobby TDs with a template of a letter from Aontas.
- Use learner feedback and personal stories strategically.

This piece of work must be taken on by groups themselves, but AONTAS and CEN can offer some supports.



QQI Update

Following the presentation by QQI at the last CEN, members submitted their issues regarding accreditation to AONTAS. The issues were collated and submitted to QQI who produced a written response which can be downloaded [here](#). The response was summarised [here](#).

Briefly QQI are setting out a consultation process for their new policies which will include the CEN. In the meantime, any updates to FETAC procedures re validation are on the website and providers are advised to check it regularly.

Research

Camilla Fitzsimons, a community educator working with both Respond! VHA and the Dept. of Adult & Community Education at NUIM is currently carrying out extensive research on Community Education and Community Educators in Ireland as part of a PhD. It's an ambitious project that hopes to gather some sense of the extent of community education and the thoughts of practitioners and issues it faces.

She is seeking the opinions of facilitators/tutors who are currently working or have in the past two years worked in community settings (*i.e. outside of a Higher Education or Further Education setting and local to participants*), to fill out this anonymous survey questionnaire. It takes about 20 minutes and is at this link: <https://www.survey.bris.ac.uk/nuimaynooth/communityeducation>. The first page of the link gives more information on the research and the researcher.

When the research is complete, Camilla has agreed to come back to the CEN and present her results. They should add significantly to the body of research available on Community Education in Ireland.

Measuring the Outcomes of Community Education

After lunch the meeting turned to the topic of measuring the outcomes of Community Education and defining the parameters for the upcoming course on the topic. Avril Bailey of An Cosán led a discussion which looked at what outcomes are currently measured, why those are chosen and some of the methodologies used to collect and present data.

All participants do measure outcomes and record them in a wide variety of ways including Excel, Salesforce, IRIS, Include and other systems. The data collected varies widely also. Basic data includes personal details (gender, age, social welfare status, prior educational level etc) and course details (programmes commenced, attendance, completion, certification, progression etc). Groups also measure wider benefits by a variety of methods, quantitative and qualitative, using questionnaires or specific instruments i.e. the LCEN wider benefits tool, logic models, individual learning plans, case studies etc.

Overall the main driver behind what data is collected is the funders and their requirements, and organisations may collect different data depending on the programme a learner is enrolled in, and what data gathering system is required i.e. IRIS for partnerships, Include for HSE. Groups also see the measurement of outcomes as key to strategic development within the organisation and to continuous improvement. In some cases the data collected is based on discussions with learners about their definitions of success and their own goals and how they are achieved. It was agreed that

it is important the learners identify a benefit to collecting data, even if it is just to improve a programme for people coming after them.

In terms of challenge, all groups found that measuring outcomes was very time consuming and that when resources are so tight it is hard to do the kind of strategic work in this area that they would like to do. Systems such as IRIS are cumbersome and take up a lot of resources entering data defined as useful by Pobal, but considered too narrow by the groups or the learners. There was unanimity that any new data collection systems must not duplicate existing work and must be seen to add real value. Measuring “soft skills” and outcomes was seen as a particular challenge. Other challenges included not intimidating or overwhelming the learners with a barrage of questions, and making the data collection relevant to them. Long term tracking of learners to identify continuing benefits to themselves or their communities was considered important, but often too resource intensive to be done properly. Participants were also concerned about data protection given that some of the information collected is extremely sensitive.

Many participants identified challenges in using the data collected to the maximum, and noted that sometimes data on a programme is reviewed for the next funding application and not used again. These participants were seeking ways of using the data better for strategic planning, programme development and a “whole centre” approach.

The need for a common language discussing outcomes was also highlighted, and the idea of the CEN getting a system and presenting it to SOLAS got support.

There was a robust discussion about language, some participants suggested that we should use the “funders language” and talk of job readiness, employability, transferrable skills, Social return on Investment, Social capital etc. Others felt that we should not “give in” on the language and ethos of community education in terms of empowerment and social change.

There was universal agreement that the opportunity to work collectively on the issue in the Training Links programme was important and timely in the current change.

With regards to the logistics of the proposed programmes the key areas participants wanted to work on in order of preference were

1. Developing a draft generic template to measure the outcomes of Community Education
2. Methods and design for data collection
3. Identifying what outcomes to measure
4. Understanding terminology of measuring outcomes
5. Organisational planning to measure outcomes systematically
6. Analysing and collating data and using it to maximum effect
7. Specific models eg the LOGIC model

The CEN steering group will now take on the organisation of the training which will take place over two days in May/June.



Presentation of research on Learner Profiles in 3 Adult Education Settings

Tina Byrne from NALA presented data on learners in 2011 in the Adult Literacy Service, Online learning and Community Education. Her presentation compared the gender, age, educational and employment of learners, and a link to the report is [here](#).

Conclusion

The meeting was well attended with active participation from all in lively discussions and information exchange. The key actions coming out of the meetings are

- Development of a letter re SOLAS for use by groups to lobby their TDs and Senators
- Local groups to come together in ETB areas and to decide on and implement a strategy to ensure their voice is heard at local level.
- Training Links programme on Measuring Outcomes to be progressed.