

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

**Exploring How Community
Education Fits with the New
Unified Tertiary Education System**

**Report on the 2023 AONTAS
Adult Learners' Festival Policy Event**



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

SOLAS
learning works



The Voice of
Adult Learning

Contents

Introduction	3
About Policy Day 2023	4
Format	
The Unified Tertiary Education System	
What AONTAS Are Now Doing With Input and Recommendations	
Keynote Address: William Beausang, Assistant Secretary General of DFHERIS	6
Summary of Stakeholder and Roundtable Discussions and Recommendations	9
The Unique Value of Community Education Needs to be Fully Recognised	
Community Education Within the ‘Unified Tertiary Education System’	
Learner-centred Education	
Policy Response: Andrew Brownlee, CEO of SOLAS	16
Appendix: Agenda	18

Introduction

On 6th March 2023, the annual AONTAS Policy event brought together community education representatives (learners, practitioners, managers, facilitators, etc.) and policy makers to explore the place of community education within the 'Unified Tertiary Education Sector'. The event title was 'Stepping Stones and Stable Roots'.

This report provides background information and summarises key points made by guest speakers William Beausang, Assistant Secretary General, Department for Further and Higher Education, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and Andrew Brownlee, Chief Executive Officer, SOLAS. It also summarises key points and recommendations explored through roundtable and stakeholder panel discussions. It is accompanied by a video that includes snapshots of the learner panel discussion which took place on the day.



About Policy Day 2023

A Policy Briefing, [Stepping Stones and Stable Roots: The Versatile and Enduring Strength of Community Education](#), was prepared by AONTAS and circulated in advance to help inform discussions.

The Day sought to:

- highlight the unique value of community education in addressing inequality, in supporting the personal and social development of learners (in particular those who are most distant from the education system) and in building communities.
- raise awareness amongst community education providers of the Unified Tertiary Education System and its implications and opportunities for them.
- explore the potential of a greater role for community education within a 'Unified Tertiary Education System'.
- share findings and recommendations from [AONTAS' Lifelong Learning Research](#).



Format

Through table discussions and learner, practitioner and stakeholder panels, almost 100 participants considered:

- the benefits and challenges to the inclusion of community education within the Unified Tertiary Education System.
- how the unique role of community education can be maintained, valued and reflected within a Unified Tertiary Education System.
- what good practice already exists in collaborative working between community education, further education and higher education.
- what community education needs in order to engage meaningfully in the Unified Tertiary Education System.
- how the personal and social development of learners, particularly those who are at risk of being disadvantaged within the education system, can be supported within a Unified Tertiary Education System.
- how the development of communities, particularly those who face socio-economic or other challenges and difficulties, can be supported within a Unified Tertiary Education System?

The Unified Tertiary Education System

The 'Unified Tertiary Education Sector' is a DFHERIS policy vision for a more unified tertiary education and research system. It is part of DFHERIS's mission to develop Ireland's higher and further education and research and innovation systems, to ensure they can meet the diverse needs of all people.

Among other things, the policy vision aims for:

“More diverse and aligned learning and development opportunities across a broad spectrum with clear and extensive pathways for learners.”

“An intensified focus on a more consolidated approach to inclusion across the whole of the tertiary system to enhance strategies to address socio-economic disadvantage and the underrepresentation of groups.”



What AONTAS Are Now Doing With Input and Recommendations

Discussions and recommendations made by participants at Policy Day (summarised below) will be a key source of evidence that will inform AONTAS' pre-budget submission 2024 and AONTAS' Advocacy Action Plan 2023 – 2024. In June/July 2023, drafts of AONTAS' pre-budget submission 2024 and AONTAS' Advocacy Action Plan 2023 – 2024 will be circulated to participants for information and input. These documents will be further refined based on participants' input before finalisation.

Keynote Address: William Beausang, Assistant Secretary General of DFHERIS

William Beausang, Assistant Secretary General, DFHERIS made the following key points in response to the question, **‘What role does community education have within the new Unified Tertiary Education System?’**

- Hearing learners’ insights and perspectives on community and adult education is very valuable for DFHERIS.
- Lifelong learning is a key priority for DFHERIS under the Tertiary Education System project and is particularly important within the context of a world that is changing at an accelerated pace due to technological developments.
- It is important to make sure that all parts of the Tertiary Education System are joined up and link better together. There is a lot to learn from the experience of practitioners in community education to make it all work better together. It is important to foster a further deepening of connection and alignment of community education with all the other elements of our Tertiary Education System.
- DFHERIS has had valuable input on its work on the Unified Tertiary Education System from AONTAS, in gathering input of learners and representatives of community education. This has been important in helping DFHERIS in ensuring the policy is anchored in a real world, on the ground, understanding of the lived experiences of learners. This will be important in ensuring that the Unified Tertiary Education System delivers on inclusion, particularly when we are talking about some of the most disadvantaged groups in our communities.
- For the Unified Tertiary Education System to work, there is a need to develop a very clear and accessible message about what a Unified Tertiary Education System is.

The Unified Tertiary Education System should deliver on inclusion and every sector within the system should be supported on this.

The current range of initiatives aimed at supporting this include:

- Funding the Future of Higher Education (work to review and refine how Higher Education is Funded).
- FET Transforming Learning Strategy (and the strategy which follows it).
- Work that is beginning within the DFHERIS in looking at the staffing structure in FET.
- The establishment of FET colleges of the Future.
- The establishment of a Framework for Community Education (an important part of the current FET Strategy).
- More unified frameworks and policies to address and prioritise equality, diversity and inclusion (with greater consistency of support for learners, emphasis on building more accessible pathways for learners, and emphasis on greater diversity of learning and learners (including digital skills and digital literacy)).
- The development of quality and accreditation frameworks aligned to learners’ needs, in particular Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).
- The over-emphasis on the leaving cert needs to be reduced, with greater recognition of alternative pathways.

- The Tertiary Education System project was only kicked off in May 2022, but already it is beginning to work in practice, through the following developments:
- The establishment of the National Tertiary Office – an important initiative in terms of joint programmes between Further Education and Higher Education.
- Apprenticeships are a great example of where Further Education and Higher Education come together in terms of learning objectives, but there is more to do to bring them closer together.
- Guidance is being prioritised by DFHERIS this year. Work will take place on a ‘One Stop Shop’ - an online portal – for guidance services for learners. However, an online portal is not a solution to all the challenges relating to access to guidance. The purpose of the planned online portal is to strengthen the guidance services that are there – but learners still need professionals that they can interact with.
- The work that the OECD are doing for DFHERIS on the Skills Strategy for Ireland.
- The appetite for lifelong learning is high in Ireland and outcomes are better than the EU average. However, our outcomes fall short of the societies that we emulate such as Sweden.
- There are significant financial and non-financial obstacles to greater participation in lifelong learning. These disproportionately impact on the most disadvantaged groups in our communities and present a challenge for us in terms of the mantra not to leave anyone behind. We need to think about the solutions to these obstacles to lifelong learning and AONTAS has come up with a number of important approaches to addressing this risk.



Mr. Beausang closed by quoting the Secretary General of DFHERIS, Jim Breslin, at AONTAS’ AGM 2022, when he said, *“The importance of collaboration across the Tertiary Education System to deliver effective community education at local level cannot be overstated, it is a priority for my department. Community Education is the cornerstone of lifelong learning options and the sector must be supported”*.



Summary of Stakeholder and Roundtable Discussions and Recommendations

During the day, eight roundtable discussions took place with approximately eight participants in each, including a mix of adult learners, policy officers from non-governmental organisations (or similar), Community Education Facilitators, community education managers, community education practitioners, other Education and Training Board (ETB) staff (e.g. Adult Literacy Coordinators or Adult Education Officers), statutory sector policymakers (or similar), Higher Education representatives (e.g. access officers, students or similar). Additionally, a key stakeholder panel discussion took place, including: Dáire Keogh, President, Dublin City University (DCU); Fiona Maloney, Director, National Tertiary Office; Melíosa Bracken, Community Education Facilitator, CDETB, and; Tara Farrell, Chief Executive, Longford Women's Link. This subsection summarises some of the key discussion points raised during the stakeholder panel and roundtable discussions.

The Unique Value of Community Education Needs to be Fully Recognised

The need for the unique value of community education to be fully recognised was discussed at all tables throughout the day. There was a sense of need for participants to come together as a community, with support from AONTAS, to reassert:

- the social justice principles fundamental to community education
- community education as a unique model of education, with a specific pedagogical approach (a Freirean critical approach with transformative impact) and as a space to examine and address power dynamics within society.

It was noted that community education should be linked to the reference to social justice within the Irish constitution; state obligation to social justice should be remembered in advocating the role of community education in Irish society. Several participants across the discussion tables spoke about the need for a strong, adequately resourced, promotional campaign for community education (akin to the communications campaign led by NALA, National Adult Literacy Agency, for adult literacy).

The value of community education was discussed across all tables throughout the day. Discussions focused on the uniqueness, flexibility, diversity and benefits of community education to individuals, families, communities and society more generally. The unique ability of community education to reach, retain and support learners who have been marginalised within the education system is well evidenced and was noted across all tables. To maximise the value of this ability, community education needs to be adequately resourced. The ability of community education to be responsive to the needs and interests of different groups of learners, in different local contexts, experiencing different challenges was highlighted. The expertise of tutors was described, with their in-depth understanding of learners' lived experiences (often because they share these lived experiences) and their trusted relationships with learners. Because of these unique assets, community education was able to be very responsive to the needs that emerged within communities during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was noted across tables that community education is much more capable of creating dynamic learning environments but faces many challenges, with independent providers struggling to keep their heads above water.

The wraparound supports provided in community education (including childcare supports, therapeutic supports, key workers, warm, caring, safe and welcoming environments, maintained spaces with access to IT) were identified as critical to removing barriers to adult education.

It was also noted that the way community education, Further Education and Higher Education are often described can be misleading when there is a lack of acknowledgement of the provision of education up to levels 9 in community education settings. The value of importance of such provision was discussed at most tables, in terms of making Higher Education more accessible to learners who have been marginalised within education.

Community education providers are at the frontline in dealing wide ranging, challenging issues amongst the learners that they work with (e.g., language barriers, trauma, domestic violence) and this role needs recognition.

When learners shared their stories during the learner panel discussion earlier in the day, all these attributes of community education were discussed highlighted.

Recommendations

1. **For Policy-Makers:** Community education supports the priorities of many different governmental departments, so a cross-governmental approach should be taken to funding and developing community education.
2. **For AONTAS:** Regular networking opportunities are needed to provide a space for the sector to come together to articulate its position and the unique role it plays in Irish society. AONTAS is ideally placed to facilitate such networking opportunities.
3. **For AONTAS:** A strategic campaign should be undertaken by the community education sector to reassert its position and highlight its unique value to Irish society. AONTAS is ideally placed to lead out on this.

Community Education Within the 'Unified Tertiary Education System'

The place of community education within the 'Unified Tertiary Education System' was discussed across all tables. Concern was raised by many around risks that community education might lose its identity and specific characteristics if included within the Unified Tertiary Education System, and these risks need to be mitigated. Many felt that there is a need to bring Higher Education closer to the learner and that this need is particularly acute now considering the cost of living and housing crises. The value of Higher Education being delivered within community education settings – in improving access, which is especially beneficial for learners from marginalised communities – was noted. Suggestions were made about Higher Education resources being used to fund posts in community education settings. Several examples where the delivery of Higher Education in community education settings was happening effectively were provided (e.g., Longford Women's Link partners with Southeast Technical University in Carlow in the delivery of level 8 and 9 bachelor's and master's degree programmes; Higher Education programmes are provided by An Cosán).

At several tables, there were discussions around the need for balance in the systems and processes that community education providers are expected to comply with. The Programme Learner Support System (or PLSS is a system for collecting and storing data on learners within Further Education) was raised by many as an example of a system that was being applied across Further Education, but which is disproportionately challenging in community education provision. It was noted that community education providers are expected to adhere to the same quality assurance (QA) processes to other providers in the tertiary education system but without comparable levels of funding.

There were discussions around what community education would need to engage in the Unified Tertiary Education System in a meaningful way – suggestions included ‘a seat at the table’, parity of esteem and comparable levels of funding, and recognition of the unique role of community education.



The importance of creating genuine conversations and building innovative connections and partnerships across the tertiary education system were discussed across all tables throughout the day. Learners, ETBs, Reach and community education groups, and higher education institutions should be included in collaborative activity. Learning spaces should be built collaboratively by these players. There were wide ranging discussions on the different types of partnerships that could help maximise the impact of community education. An 'Open Schools' model was suggested, where entire communities engage in the delivery of education in schools (e.g., including local business, public services, etc.). An example was given by a community education manager who brings in external organisations to co-create learning opportunities that respond to learners' particular needs and interests. The need to share good practice in terms of collaborative work across different actors within the Unified Tertiary Education Sector was noted. The need for funding to sufficiently resource meaningful collaboration across the Unified Tertiary Education System was also noted. Competition within the system was identified as a barrier to effective partnerships.

It was noted that there is a need for Higher Education access programmes to be much more ambitious and to focus beyond just getting learners from under-represented groups enrolled but also to focus on retention, success and what happens after Higher Education.

The importance of outreach work at all levels of the tertiary education system focused on the engagement of learners from marginalised groups was highlighted and it was suggested that it needs additional resourcing.

There were discussions at several tables around the use of exclusionary language such as a 'Unified Tertiary Education System'. Linked to this PLSS, and the language it uses, was raised as a concern in terms of being exclusionary and off-putting for marginalised learners.



The need for clearer learning pathways across the Unified Tertiary Education System and how these should not always emphasis going upwards was raised by several participants. It was seen as important that community education is valued and not only seen as a step in a pathway towards accredited learning. To support access and inclusion, there is a need for a variety of access points; the development and expansion of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is positive and should continue. There is a need for a focus on what happens after education – for working class communities there are challenges relating to job types, roles, access to better pay, etc.

Several tables discussed the need to diversify staff in Higher Education and at post-primary levels. This was seen as important in educational equality as tutors and teachers are role models. The potential of role models and mentors in teacher development and Higher Education more generally was also discussed at several tables.

Recommendations

1. Ensure the unique model of community education is not lost in the development of a Unified Tertiary Education System.
2. Expand on the delivery of Higher Education within community education settings to enhance access for learners from marginalised communities.
3. Use Higher Education funding for posts based in community education to support national access objectives.
4. Make good practice of collaborative work between community education, Further Education and Higher Education visible through developing and disseminating case-studies.
5. Ensure adequate funds are available within the Unified Tertiary Education System for collaborative initiatives that include community education.
6. Refine the PLSS system so that it is more user-friendly in community education settings to ensure it does not create barriers to education for learners from marginalised communities.
7. Refine QA processes so that the work required of community education is proportionate to the level of funding received.
8. Increase and streamline funding available for Higher Education access programmes so that they can be more ambitious and effective.
9. Fund outreach work at all levels of the tertiary education system focused on the engagement of learners from marginalised groups.
10. Use plain and accessible English across the Unified Tertiary Education System to support inclusion.
11. Further develop and expand Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) across the Unified Tertiary Education System with a particular focus on access and inclusion for marginalised learners.
12. Develop and deliver special initiatives aimed at diversifying education staff in post-primary, FET and HE.



Learner-centred Education

The development of learner-centred education, which meets learners and their communities where they are at, and the inclusion of Learner Voice in the development of the Unified Tertiary Education System, were raised as important across all discussion tables. The experiences of learners from under-represented groups in Higher Education needs special attention and such learners require additional support to help them feel like they belong and to ensure they do not become isolated from their communities. Peer support is valuable for such learners. Justice and equality-centred education, with flexible and hybrid learning opportunities that support inclusion, were seen as important.

There were discussions across all tables about the profile of the learners engaging in community education. There was a strong sense of need for bespoke support to address barriers to education faced by groups such as lone parents, women with addiction issues, Travellers, Roma, learners with disabilities, older learners and asylum seekers and refugees. Financial challenges are faced by many learners from marginalised communities. Many participants raised the challenges faced by learners with disabilities, and it was proposed that Universal Design for Learning (UDL) be integrated across all aspects of education with training for teachers and tutors on disability. Hybrid learning opportunities were noted as important for inclusion in education, particularly for people with disabilities and lone parents. Issues with SUSI were discussed at several tables, such as lack of knowledge amongst learners about it and the need for part-time learners to have access to it. The National College of Ireland's (NCI) Early Childcare Scheme was put forward as a model of excellent practice, with full-time courses being delivered in very flexible ways.

Recommendations

1. DFHERIS to continue to engage Learners in the development of all aspects of the Tertiary Education System.
2. Expand on existing programmes of support targeted at learners from under-represented groups in Higher Education
3. Expand on flexible and hybrid learning opportunities that support inclusion across the Tertiary Education System.
4. Expand on financial and non-financial support to address barriers to education faced by groups such as lone parents, women with addiction issues, Travellers, Roma, learners with disabilities, older learners and asylum seekers and refugees.
5. Integrate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) all aspects of education with training for teachers and tutors on disability.
6. Undertake awareness raising campaigns about SUSI targetted at groups who are under-represented in Higher Education.

Policy Response:

Andrew Brownlee, CEO of SOLAS

Andrew Brownlee, CEO of SOLAS, was invited to respond to what he had heard during the day and the AONTAS Policy Briefing that was circulated in advance of the day. This subsection summarises the key points he made.

- A lot of positive things have happened over the last three plus years. Although Covid-19 was very difficult for our society and for learning, some of the ways we were able to respond have left us in a really good place now and have provided us with an opportunity to tackle some of the issues which have been discussed today.
- Government has placed considerable value on community education over the past few years. It sees its value as a mechanism to reach people that other parts of the system cannot reach and as a distinct model of education with its own unique benefits. While SOLAS would like to see more pathways from community education, there is also recognition of community education on its own. An increase in the budget for community education (€21 million this year) demonstrates this – including the Reach fund, the budget is double that which government was investing just before the pandemic (although this is still probably not enough). Community education does not need a separate strand in terms of government policy or funding.



- The MAED fund, which became the Reach Fund, was the product of a range of stakeholders working together on a Covid emergency response, trying to keep the learners engaged, in particular those who did not know what online learning was. The MAED fund was borne out of community education having a seat at this table through AONTAS. While these stakeholders came together in response to Covid-19, the model of working was a good example of community education having a seat at the table, having its needs met. This model could be an effective way for community education to inform government policy and have a seat at the table now that we are not in an emergency situation anymore.
- A lot of learners were lost during the pandemic. 33,000 learners were officially registered in community education in 2019; this figure dropped to 21,000 learners in the early years of Covid-19. Positively, 35,000 learners registered in community education in 2023.
- During the pandemic, there was a lot of concern for those at risk of exclusion. Participation of such learners plummeted in 2020 and 2021, but they are back in greater numbers than in 2019 and this is largely due to community education.

- The Adult Literacy for Life Strategy dovetails with the work SOLAS are doing around developing a Community Education Framework. The natural synergy here should be developed further.
- There is a need to create a cross-governmental approach to supporting community education because, even though we are doing more than we were doing in 2019, there are still people facing exclusion and disadvantage and we need to find a way to do more. SOLAS is concerned about the inconsistency that exists across the country in terms of support for community education. This inconsistency has been highlighted by analysis of data that has been collected through SOLAS' learner record system and information on the funding SOLAS has invested in community education. This analysis revealed that if you are a community education provider or learner, the experience that you have in different parts of the country, can be very different. This is something SOLAS will be addressing. At the moment in Donegal, for example, you are ten times more likely to be a community education learner than in some other ETB areas. If you are in the City of Dublin ETB there are five times the amount invested in community education relative to the population than you would find in some other ETB areas. Last year, CMETB got five times the amount of Reach funding than some other ETBs get, because they did the outreach, supported the community education providers, etc. The average cost/funding per community education learner, is eight times the level in some ETB areas than in others. SOLAS are interested in finding out what the underlying reasons for these inconsistencies are, and in addressing them, through the Community Education Framework, which they are developing, and which will be informed by the discussions at Policy Day. In this Framework SOLAS are:
 - * looking to further develop the ways in which they are gathering data from FET providers and learners, which will address some of the concerns of community education practitioners.
 - * looking at how they can support community education providers to continue and grow their services without the financial and resource intensive requirements around quality assurance.
 - * exploring ways that they can ensure the wraparound support that all learners need are there, but this is challenging, because of the complexity involved in providing funding to individuals, where there are risks of SOLAS turning into a massive bureaucracy if it takes on this role.
 - * exploring how community education can be made into a cross-departmental issue, including health, justice, community development and local government, with a cohesive funding strategy for community education. The Adult Literacy for Life Strategy demonstrates how this might be done.
 - * planning to explore ways of capturing on the wider benefits of learning and the distance travelled models for community education, that are not overly onerous for either providers or learners.
- SOLAS, DFHERIS and others are working to modernise the funding of FET, including the terms and conditions for tutors in FET. Legacy structures and systems mean that many staff have temporary contracts. There is a need to recognise the value of community education and FET with a more consistent framework in terms of terms and conditions for staff.

Appendix: Agenda

- 9.30** **Registration**
Tea/Coffee/Pastries
- 10.00** **Welcome and Introduction**
John D’Arcy, Chairperson, AONTAS
- 10.10** **Launch of the Lifelong Learning Research Report**
Lauren Swan, Head of Research, AONTAS
- Lived Experience: Learner Interactive Response -
Chaired by Ecem Akarca, EU Projects Coordinator, AONTAS
Deborah Oniah, CETB
Niamh Murray, LCETB
Catherine Gore, CDET B
- 10.45** **Keynote Address: What role does community education have within the new Unified Tertiary Education System?**
William Beausang, Assistant Secretary General, DFHERIS
- 11.05** **Stakeholder Panel Discussion -**
Chaired by Dearbháil Lawless, Chief Executive Officer, AONTAS
Dáire Keogh, President, DCU
Fiona Maloney, Director, National Tertiary Office
Melíosa Bracken, Community Education Facilitator, CDET B
Tara Farrell, Chief Executive, Longford Women’s Link
William Beausang, Assistant Secretary General, DFHERIS
- 11.50** **Comfort break and conversations:**
‘The indispensable role of community education in Ireland’
- 12.10** **Practitioner and Policy Engagement: Roundtable Discussion**
Tutors, staff and policymakers table discussion
- 12.45** **Policy Response**
Andrew Brownlee, CEO, SOLAS
William Beausang, Assistant Secretary General, DFHERIS
- 1.00** **Close**
Dearbháil Lawless, CEO, AONTAS
John D’Arcy, Chairperson, AONTAS
- 1.15** **Lunch**

Contact us:

AONTAS
The National Adult Learning Organisation
2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street,
Ranelagh, Dublin 6

T: 01 406 8220
E: mail@aontas.com
www.aontas.com

Charity Reg: 6719
Company Reg: 80958
RCN: 20013042



Follow our work on:

