

AONTAS Pre-Budget Submission 2019



Lifelong learning for all policy papers

In 2018 AONTAS released the first in a series of one page policy papers highlighting the need to create a lifelong learning society in Ireland.

Links to the papers are available here.

1. [Why Lifelong Learning for All Matters in Ireland](#)
2. [Employment and the Economy](#)
3. [Health and Wellbeing](#)
4. [Social Cohesion, Demography, and Migration](#)
5. [Democracy and Citizenship](#)
6. [Policy Action](#)

Ireland lags behind the European average in lifelong learning with a 8.9% participation rate. A primary concern at AONTAS is the very low lifelong learning participation rate of people who left school early (2.5%). This low participation is why our submission focusses on funding that gives people the opportunity to participate in the social and economic life of Ireland.

The Irish Government has set a target of 10% participation by 2020. In the map countries in dark green are over 20%, light green are 15%-20%, yellow 10-15%, orange 5-10%, red <5%.



Lifelong Learning for All in 2019

Introduction

At a time of economic recovery we cannot afford to continue a national trend of widening inequality. The latest OECD policy brief on inclusive growth highlights the need to ensure opportunities for all, including opportunities for lifelong learning. The recent ESRI evaluation of the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) highlights the necessity to more accurately capture intensive work carried out by community development programmes with vulnerable groups, with the proposal of the oft-cited 'distance travelled'. This is true for adult learning – the distance travelled by each learner varies, particularly for those who leave school early. Each learner has a unique experience, and success means many things; from receiving a minor QQI award; to being able to help their children with homework; to upskilling for new employment opportunities.

The value of lifelong learning is far-reaching from the perspective of civic, social, economic, and health and well-being benefits, to increasing tolerance, trust, and community engagement. Current debate on lifelong learning centres on the need for adults, regardless of educational background, to be continually engaging in learning in order to keep up with constant rates of change. As an OECD business brief stated: 'Being educated is no longer about how much you know, but about having the skills and motivation for lifelong learning so that you can learn new knowledge whenever you need to.'

2019 Budget Requests

The 2019 AONTAS pre-budget submission is focused on three specific policy areas which we also advocated for in our 2018 submission. In the case of sustainable funding for the community education sector, and funding for a QQI fee waiver for community education providers, we have been advocating for these issues for several years. We believe, and have been arguing for years, that the implementation of these policies will have a strong positive impact not just on the individual lives of people participating in education, but in all the towns and cities across the country where learners live.

1. Secure, reliable, and effective funding for the Community Education sector

New spending
€2.5 million

2. QQI fee waiver for Community and Voluntary sector and
2a. Implement a fee waiver process

New spending
€125,000

3. Implementation of Option 1 for funding of higher education (Cassells Report)

New Spending
€1.3 billion by 2030



Connecting learners in their communities

Community education has a history of successfully engaging the hardest to reach learners and supporting them as they achieve their personal potential and progress to further studies.

Community education meets learners in their communities and in settings which are more welcoming and informal than traditional classrooms. This welcoming environment allows new learners to ease their way into adult education and onto the road of lifelong learning.

Cost-Benefit

In 2017 SOLAS reported 50,000 learners in community education at a small overall cost of €10.8 million (or an average of €216 per learner.)

Wider benefits for communities

Research and policy implementation around the world shows time and again the wider benefits of education. While many learners entering formal and non-formal community education do ultimately enter employment (if they are not already employed) the benefits to these learners and wider Irish society extends beyond employment.

Independent Funding

For community education to thrive organically across Ireland, SOLAS funding for community education needs to be independently available from ETBs. Independent community providers need the option of engaging directly with SOLAS if they choose.

Budget Request 1

Secure, reliable, and effective ring-fenced SOLAS funding for community education - New spending €2.5 million

Funding Increase

To ensure that quality education is available to all adults in Ireland regardless of their socio-economic position **AONTAS calls on the government to increase the SOLAS managed community education budget to a minimum of €13.23 million from current levels, continuing our 2017 and 2018 pre-budget submission calls for an increase to funding. This would increase the community education budget to 2.3% of the 2017 budget from the current 1.9%.** Though we have made this request for a meaningful increase to community education funding in the 2017 and 2018 pre-budget submissions, SOLAS spending for community education has remained stagnant at between €10.5 to €10.8 million between 2016 and 2017.



While AONTAS membership is relieved that funding for community education has not decreased as a line item in SOLAS spending over the last 10 years; education providers have been stretched financially as wide ranging social supports for the most underserved in our society were eroded. The start of a restoration to funding is needed.

Community Education for Upskilling Pathways and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

For several years AONTAS have been advocating for a restoration of funding to community education after 10 years of stagnation. This call is even more important now as the government works to implement the EU Council Upskilling Pathways Recommendation, and provide RPL to citizens with the lowest levels of accreditation.

Providers of community education have precarious funding streams ([highlighted by research in 2017](#) that looks at funding of non-formal adult education in Europe). In order to reach the Government's target groups as defined by the Department of Education and Skills an overall increase in funding as well as a specific Upskilling Pathways Fund should be put in place to increase the number of learners in community education, increase accredited community education provision, and to offer organisations the ability to provide RPL to learners.

Without a restoration in funding, community education providers will not be able to efficiently meet the demand of learners seeking accredited provision.



Budget Request 2

QQI fee waiver for the not-for-profit community and voluntary sector - New spending €125,000

Waiver Cost

In July 2018 AONTAS spoke to Community Education Network (CEN) members who currently provide accredited programming. 25 members stated they plan on reengaging with QQI. If a fee waiver were permitted for these providers it would cost €125,000. This fee waiver would support these organisations which together awarded more than 2500 major and minor QQI awards across Ireland in 2017.

Fees are a cut to funding

Many community and voluntary groups that AONTAS is advocating for receive a portion of their funds from Education and Training Boards [the amount of funding per provider varies]. By implementing this fee without a corresponding increase in funding to cover the cost, government policies from different agencies are effectively cutting the resources of community education providers who reach the most vulnerable and underserved members of Irish society. These providers often provide a first chance to participate in accredited learning.

Inequity (profit and not-for-profit pay the same fees)

An inequity exists in the implementation of QQI quality assurance fees whereby profit and not-for-profit education providers pay the same fees for reengagement and program validation. This inequality where fee charging and profit making institutions pay fees equal to not-for-profit organisations which often provide accredited educational opportunities free of charge to the most underserved and least qualified members of society does not make sense when Government speaks of creating an inclusive Ireland.

As part of our 2017 and 2018 pre-budget submissions AONTAS has requested that not-for-profit community and voluntary groups providing QQI accredited courses receive a fee waiver for the €5,000 cost of reengagement. AONTAS has also requested a fee waiver be granted for the programme validation fees that these groups must pay to QQI in order to have their courses quality assured. As stated in the side bar to the left a reengagement fee waiver for Community Education Network members would cost approximately €125,000. This is a small amount of the total spending on FET in 2017 (€568 million).

Impact on long-term viability of community education providers

Not-for-profit community and voluntary groups have already begun to pay programme validation fees. The payment and administration of the fees have significant costs for the community education providers who are trying to provide consistent services to their communities. These groups are spending resources to meet the financial and administrative demands that comes with reengagement and program validation. Implementation of the fee waiver would help reduce some of the costs impacting providers and learners.

Funding streams to pay QQI fees is limited

The challenge of paying QQI fees is not simply a challenge of not having enough funds. The challenge is also a lack of funding sources that allow spending on anything other than direct programme provision. This problem is highlighted in a recent submission from AONTAS to the working group on implementation of the EU Council Upskilling Pathways Recommendation. As funding sources are usually restricted to specific uses, community educators don't have budget flexibility to pay these fees.

The 2017 ERASMUS+ transnational project FinALE drew on research from n56 members of the CEN. The most common form of funding for community education is direct, programme, project and formula funding...formula is probably the only potential source for funding fees but this makes up only 10% of CEN members. CEN members do not have the funding to cover the proposed fees.

Impact on educational opportunities and the Upskilling Pathways

The target groups for Upskilling Pathways are more likely to be unemployed/in non-standard employment, live in poverty, and require affordable childcare, transport and financial support. Community education provides a range of supports that enables their participation in accredited learning, thereby supporting the Upskilling Pathway goal of reaching a qualification at EQF 3/4 (NFQ 4/5). However, there is little scope at this time to increase provision in community education given the current funding levels; the complex systems through which funding is accessed; and the additional costs that QQI fees place on providers. While additional, stable, long term funding for community education is needed, the waiving of QQI fees would provide immediate relief to community education providers.



Key Point!

While the cost of the fee waiver would need to be paid for, QQI will still exist and operate with or without the implementation of such a waiver. The fact that a fee waiver exists in respect of further education and training award (certification) fees for social welfare recipients and/or medical card holders is proof that a fee waiver is possible if Government wants to promote inclusive educational opportunity.

Since discussions of QQI fees began in 2012 more than 20 AONTAS CEN members have decided to cease plans for ongoing provision of accredited programming. The fee for QQI reengagement is already having the effect of reducing the availability of quality assured accredited programming.

Submissions about a fee waiver

AONTAS has made many submissions to QQI (2013, 2014, 2015) clearly highlighting the QQI reengagement fee issue. AONTAS produced two detailed policy papers on the issue of fees (2014) and the scenarios of reengagement (2015) in advance of meeting officials from the Department of Education and Skills and QQI (2015). AONTAS and CEN members participated in all 7 Joint QQI / Community and Voluntary Sector Working Group meetings in 2015. Additionally, the issue was raised in our submission to the National Skills Strategy (2015), Pre-Budget Submissions in 2016 and 2017, and letters to former Minister Jan O'Sullivan (2015/6) and Ministers Bruton, Donohoe, and Minister of State Halligan (2017).

Budget Request 2a

Develop a clear and simple process for implementation of a QQI fee waiver

AONTAS and our members are focused on providing solutions to policy problems. For several years we have advocated for the waiving of QQI fees for reengagement and program validation for the not-for-profit community and voluntary sector. In this time we have also engaged with QQI policy makers so that together we can create a solution that is financially and administratively feasible for QQI, not-for-profit community education providers, SOLAS, and other impacted stakeholders. With these points in mind AONTAS has established a subgroup of the CEN to focus on issues of quality assurance. **We have established a QQI fees working group specifically so that our membership have a place to discuss the impact of QQI policies and so we can help create a solution that is good for QQI and providers across Ireland. This subgroup is ready to engage with QQI in order to draft a fee waiver policy that is practical and fair.**

Criteria development

As noted by AONTAS several times in the past, Section 80(3) of the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act* states that QQI may provide for different fees, exemptions from the payment of fees, and waivers, remissions or refunds in specified circumstances. While this authority exists in legislation QQI has not developed a process that provides clarity for organisations to apply for waivers.

Allowing voluntary not-for-profit community and voluntary providers to apply for a fee waiver under an objective process would help ensure there is a future for these organisations, while also ensuring the strength and reliability of the QQI validation process.

Solutions focused

AONTAS is committed to ensuring that community education learners have the opportunity to access accredited programmes on the National Framework of Qualifications. This is particularly relevant with implementation of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation. The Department of Education and Skills is targeting populations with whom community education providers have long standing connections. However without a reduction in financial pressures community educators will not be effective at engaging the most vulnerable and underserved learners participating in accredited education.

AONTAS has met with DES, SOLAS, and ETBI to explore solutions and has a long-standing and positive relationship with QQI, who have presented at circa 10 CEN national meetings between 2013 and 2018. Of the national AONTAS CEN meetings which were held during this period, QQI reengagement was a feature on the agenda in all 15. A key point raised by members is that only those who have the capacity to reengage wish to do so directly.



Budget Request 3

Implementation of the Cassells' Report Option 1

New Spending €1.3 billion by 2030

Benefit of higher education

The social value of higher education has been evidenced extensively. It is the position of AONTAS that the benefits of higher education should be shared equitably across society, particularly for first time mature students and socially excluded groups.

Cassells 2016

The 2016 Cassells Report, known formally as *Investing In National Ambition: A Strategy for Higher Education*, has now been sitting for 2 years without action. The report which was [welcomed by Minister Richard Bruton](#) in 2016 provides the Government with clear policy options for increasing and sustaining funding for an effective higher education system over the next one to two generations.

Action needed

Without action to implement Option 1 Irish institutions will fail adult learners. Under the National Access Plan 2015-2019 the goal is to increase the rates of full-time mature students as a percentage of all new entrants to higher education from 13% to 16% and full and part time mature students as a percentage of all new entrants from 19% to 24%. Mature students are known to have obstacles like work, childcare, parental care etc. to consider when choosing to return to higher education. Implementation of Option 1 would alleviate some of the financial burden associated with returning to education.

Implementation of Option 1

Along with the Coalition for Publicly Funded Higher Education, a group comprising of USI, SIPTU, IFUT, IMPACT and TUI, AONTAS is making the argument that Government should implement Option 1 of the Cassells Report; thereby creating “a predominately state funded higher education system”.

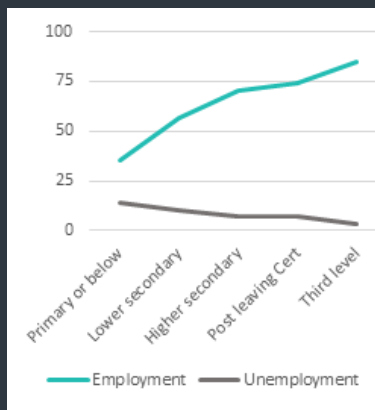
Over the last century, governments across the world have been using a predominately state funded primary and secondary education system as a policy tool to create more equitable societies as is evidenced by EU funded research from 2016 titled *Creating More Equal Societies: What Works?*. In order to reduce inequality it has been the norm in Ireland to provide public funding for primary and secondary education. Why then are other forms of education such as higher education not seen as worthy of meaningful public funding?

The simple fact is that by charging learners for their education as is proposed by Options 2 and 3 of the Cassells Report, government policy is helping to perpetuate social inequality as only wealthier learners can afford to attend higher education. Having learners continue to pay at the time of provision is a symbolic closed door to those without the funds available to them at the time of accessing provision. Having learners pay for their education after provision according to means testing is effectively a tax on success that would otherwise allow for social mobility.

By the numbers

There is a close correlation between educational attainment and labour market outcomes, particularly in the highly educated Irish economy. The chart below shows that for learners in Ireland, their chance of employment increases by nearly 20 percentage points for each additional level of education.

This reality about the benefits of education to personal employment opportunity provides a strong case for investing in lifelong learning and upskilling for Irish workers.



In the news

At an event in June, Minister of State Mitchell O'Connor stated that new funding is needed for higher education if institutions are going to maintain their quality while meeting the additional demand from increasing enrollment. Author of the Cassells Report, Peter Cassells also stated that it was necessary for Government to take action on the recommendations two years out from publication of the report.

Conclusion

The purpose of this pre-budget submission is to promote pragmatic recommendations for policy action and resource allocation that will help achieve a more equitable Ireland while also helping Government achieve tangible policy goals in the areas of Upskilling Pathways, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), and higher education provision. We believe that implementation of these policy initiatives will help ensure the right of all adults in Ireland to quality lifelong learning.

<p>1. Secure, reliable, and effective funding for the Community Education sector</p> <p>New spending €2.5 million</p>	<p>2. QQI fee waiver for Community and Voluntary sector and 2a. Implement a fee waiver process</p> <p>New spending €125,000</p>	<p>3. Implementation of Option 1 for funding of higher education (Cassells Report)</p> <p>New Spending €1.3 billion by 2030</p>
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AONTAS knows that the Government has difficult decisions and many priorities to balance when writing Budget 2019. As it concerns the effective and efficient funding of an education system that promotes a culture of lifelong learning, and which promotes inclusive growth through improved economic and social outcomes, we hope through this submission that it is clear that the benefits of education accrue to all society. Therefore, all society should proactively invest in the policies that help create these outcomes.

Resources

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AONTAS *Lifelong Learner for All in Ireland* policy papers

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