

AONTAS Response to Budget 2019



Lifelong Learning for All in 2019

Introduction

The [2019 AONTAS Pre-Budget Submission](#) was built upon the foundational idea that at a time of continuing national economic recovery we cannot afford to allow the growing trends of widening inequality to continue. This inequality is represented economically in many ways, such as on a rural-urban divide, through gender pay inequities, and most obviously through the wealth gap between the richest people and businesses in Ireland and everyone else. Based on these divides it is good to see Government increasing spending to many social programs that have been drastically reduced since 2008; even if this is only through moderate spending increases. However, what remains disheartening is the continued underfunding of adult education and related learner supports that continue with Budget 2019. While this response notes some positive areas of funding that will benefit adult learners, the majority of what is stated is a continuing disappointment whereby the most educationally and economically disadvantaged, marginalised and underserved people in Ireland will likely continue to be educationally disadvantaged, marginalised and underserved as a result of Budget 2019 inaction.

Lifelong Learning For All

In 2018 AONTAS released several brief policy documents highlighting the important role that adult education and lifelong learning plays in the broader development of a socio-economically just country. The papers which were referenced in the 2019 Pre-Budget submission highlight important benefits that arise from adult education and lifelong learning including benefits to employment and the economy, health and wellbeing of individuals and their communities, social cohesion, and democratic participation and citizenship.

AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation exists to promote the development of a lifelong learning society through the provision of a quality and comprehensive system of adult learning and education which is accessible and inclusive.

AONTAS is a highly respected non-governmental membership organisation established in 1969. Currently it represents over 400 members from across the lifelong learning spectrum. The work of AONTAS centres on advocating and lobbying for the development of a quality service for adult learners; promoting the value and benefits of adult learning; and building organisational capacity.

With particular emphasis on those who did not benefit from education initially or who are under-represented in learning. AONTAS' work is aimed at:

- **widening participation in lifelong learning;**
- **ensuring community education supports quality learning opportunities for the most educationally disadvantaged;**
- **ensuring adult learners are central to local, regional, national, European and International adult learning policy; and**
- **promoting quality adult learning**

Drawing on the strength of our members and meaningful relationships with adult learners we advocate for the rights of all adults to quality learning through their lives based on a grassroots, authentic understanding of lifelong learning that benefits the social, personal and skills development of adults, their family and community. In addition, we promote the value and benefits of lifelong learning. We have a specific focus on the most educationally disadvantaged and our work seeks to ensure that all adults have the right to participate in adult learning that exhibits the following elements: inclusion, learner supports, progression, positive learning outcomes, is learner focused, offers learner choice, a positive learning experience and is transformative.

Budget Points

On Tuesday 9th October Minister for Finance, and Public Expenditure and Reform Pashchal Donohoe presented the Government's planned 2019 budget. While there is an overall increase of 6.7% to the Department of Education and Skills' budget expense planned for 2019, the allocations and commitments announced for new spending leave adult learners with much to be desired.

You can read the Main Budget Features relating to the Department of Education and Skills by [Clicking Here](#).

The brief analysis to the budget announcement provided here is broken into two sections.

Section 1 is the response to the AONTAS budget requests which were made to the Government through several Ministers and the members of the respective Joint Committees on Education and Skills, and on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach. The Ministers contacted included:

Paschal Donohoe
Minister of Finance and Minister of Public Expenditure and Reform

Richard Bruton
Then Minister of Education and Skills

John Halligan
Minister of State for Training, Skills, Innovation and Research and Development

Mary Mitchell O'Connor
Minister of State for Higher Education

The budget requests made in the 2019 AONTAS Pre-Budget Submission were consistent with the three primary requests also made in the 2018 Pre-Budget Submission. The requests were.

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
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Section 2 highlights positive and also concerning parts of the budget which were announced on 9th October.

Section 1: Response to the 2019 AONTAS Budget Requests

The 2019 AONTAS Pre-Budget Submission requests were the same requests made in our 2018 Pre-Budget Submission. These requests are:

- Secure, reliable, and effective funding for the Community Education Sector €2.5million
- QQI fee waiver for the community and voluntary sector; and implementation of a process that make the fee waiver a reality for community education providers €125,000
- Implementation of Option 1 for funding of higher education (Cassells Report) €1.3 billion by 2030.

Unfortunately once again there was no clear positive response to any of these requests in the 2019 Budget presented by Minister Donohoe.

Secure, reliable, and effective funding for the community education sector

While the overall budget request for providers of community education was quite small in terms of the national budget, coming in at €2.5million; no ring-fenced funding for community education was allocated in the budget. However, spending for community education provided through the Department of Education and Skills is administered through SOLAS, the Further Education and Training (FET) authority. As the SOLAS budget for 2019 will not be approved until the start of 2019 there is still an opportunity to meaningfully increase support to community education providers beyond the incremental increases that cover inflationary changes.

As stated in the 2019 Pre-Budget Submission 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. For what is a small amount of money in terms of the larger SOLAS budget that is allocated to community education (€10.8million, or €216 per learner in 2017) community education managed to reach 50,000 learners across the country. The additional €2.5 would have the impact of engaging even more learners in education and thereby further increasing the Irish participation rate in lifelong learning (target of 10% by 2020).

To further highlight the need of secure, reliable and effective funding for community education, 2018 research led by the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) titled [FinALE](#) notes the economic and wider benefits of adult learning. Further, the research documents the myriad funding systems that are in place in Ireland and across Europe to support non-accredited adult education, as well as accredited community education in Ireland. Simply put, the current patchwork funding system for adult education does not ensure the long-term sustainability of the sector.

QQI fee waiver

With more than 5 years of lobbying on the need for a fee waiver for the community and voluntary sector as it concerns fees for QQI reengagement and program validation, a fee waiver has still not been granted. Community education providers have started to pay these fees and the fees are impacting the financial strength of organisations, and making organisations consider whether or not they will be able to continue provision of accredited courses into the future. Therefore fewer Irish people who are the hardest to reach and most educationally disadvantaged will continue be left behind in both socially and economically.

As stated in the Pre-Budget Submission If a fee waiver were permitted for these AONTAS CEN providers it would cost approximately €125,000. This fee waiver would support these organisations which together awarded more than 2500 major and minor QQI awards across Ireland in 2017.

Implementation of Option 1 for funding of higher Education (Cassells Report)

While the Government has yet to announce implementation of any one option that was outlined in the 2016 Cassells Report new funds for higher education has been committed in the 2019 budget. As a total new or reallocated spend, higher education will receive €57.4million new in 2019. This includes increased funding allocation that results from gained revenues arising from a 0.1% increase to the National Training Fund.

Section 2: Positive and concerning parts of the Budget 2019

There are several Budget 2019 spending announcements which are positive, require watching, and also are concerning.

Positives

Springboard: Continuing a commitment made in the 2018 Budget where the Government allocated €3million to create 1000 new Springboard places; the 2019 Budget is allocating an additional €4million to create another 1000 Springboard places. This commitment if implemented will bring the total Springboard budget to €34million in fiscal year 2019.

However, AONTAS requests that greater flexibility be permitted within Springboard so that learners; particularly those who are educationally disadvantaged have greater accessibility to learning. Suggested measures include broadening Springboard to include community education based higher education provision; providing core funding so that community education providers are able to provide higher education courses in more communities around the country than is currently possible in traditional institutions; and removing fees for part-time participation in higher education so that more learners are able to participate in education. The results of the [Adult Education Survey 2017](#) show that a person's lack of time due to family responsibilities, and conflicts with work were the top reasons for women and men respectively to not participate in learning. Therefore more flexible offerings for all educational opportunities would help create a broader based lifelong learning culture across the country.

Additional funding to account for demographic change: In Budget 2019 the Government is committing to an additional €21.3million spend to create 3500 new spaces in Higher Education. The goal of this spend is to meet the expected growth in demand as a result of demographic change.

While adding resources that will support the system as it copes with broad demographic change is important, the focus of this money should go to supporting learner groups who are already being targeted by the [National Access Plan 2015 to 2019](#). The aim of the National Access Plan is to increase demographic participation in higher education by six primary group including people with disabilities; mature students; students with socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds; students progressing from further education; part-time students; and members of the Irish Traveller Community. The National Access Plan is already highlighting the need to expand diversity in higher education and therefore the additional funding announced in Budget 2019 should support this existing work.

To Watch

Human Capital Initiative: The Human Capital Initiative is a new ring-fenced policy announced by the Department of Education and Skills, and is being created to focus surplus' raised through the National Training Fund on spending at levels 6 and 8. The spending will amount to €60million per year starting in 2020 and continuing to 2024. The broad policy objective is to meet the priority skill needs of enterprise, to drive regional jobs growth and development, and support key economic sectors in responding to the challenges of Brexit. With little additional context and information at this time this is a policy to watch over the long term.

However based on these policy objectives it must be argued that the National Access Plan provides clear target groups and data about participation that can help the Government target its resources to groups that are underrepresented in higher education. Targeting groups like those highlighted in the National Access Plan will allow government to support underrepresented target groups while also driving regional growth and supporting key economic sectors.

Concerns

Cuts to social programs supporting underserved and disadvantaged learners: Access to quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for the most underserved and disadvantaged learners depends on learners receiving vital supports. Cuts to the Back to Education Allowance from €72.9million in 2018 to €61.7million in 2019 announced in Budget 2019 as well as a lack of new supports and entry points to education which are best exemplified through community education means that many learners are left outside the education system. While it is unclear from the Budget proposal whether the cuts to the Back to Education Allowance are being made as a result of an expected reduction in need resulting from higher employment figures or not, this cut remains concerning.

The cut to BTEA is particularly concerning given previous 2011 cuts to maintenance grants available to BTEA learners. In 2015, Dr. John Sweeney, formerly of the National Economic and Social Council, estimated that removing access to the now named SUSI maintenance grant saved the Government €15million. In order to ensure that learners have the financial resources they need to meaningfully participate in further education and training or higher education AONTAS is requesting that the government reallocate the funds from the 2019 BTEA cut and reinstate the SUSI maintenance grant for learners receiving the BTEA.

The time to invest in the members of our society who are furthest from educational opportunity is now, when the economy is showing strength and fewer people are requiring state supports.

Conclusion

The AONTAS response to the 2019 Budget matches the analysis provided by many other media and civil society analyses to date. The Budget provides limited benefits to many but little significant benefit to anyone. Particularly as it regards adult education policy and spending the Budget provides new limited benefits to learners, particularly those in Higher Education, but no significant benefits that are likely to drastically improve access to lifelong learning in 2019. With this said, beyond Budget 2019 there are important policy and programme improvements that can be made to improve learner access and experience and these are the areas AONTAS will continue to fight for as the current fiscal debates comes to a close.

As an organisation AONTAS will continue to advocate for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives, and to promote the value and benefits of lifelong learning at a national and European level.