



AONTAS Response to the Department of Education and Skills Statement of Strategy 2019-2021

What areas should the Department of Education and Skills focus on, under the goals below, in order to deploy its resources to have the greatest impact for learners over the next three years?

1. Improve the learning experience and the success of learners

There must be a cross-governmental approach to enabling adults, particularly the most educationally disadvantaged, to engage in learning. A holistic, person-centred approach is vital. Enabling learner success is dependent on individuals having their basic needs met eg: housing, health, food, childcare (as per Maslow's hierarchy of needs). No matter how good a course is, if it is not accessible, provided at a time that fits into an individual's family/employment commitments; if there is no transport available/travel costs; if there is no childcare; the person will not be able to take up learning opportunities.

What is needed?

- i. Funding to cover part-time higher education fees for first-time mature students
- ii. Funding for accessible higher education provision in a community setting through PATH funding
- iii. Increased transport cost support for FET learners
- iv. Ensure that DEASP do not deduct payments for students who miss a day due to illness/unforeseeable issue
- v. Maintain a heterogeneous education system. Ensure learners can engage in a range of accredited and non-accredited learning opportunities, particularly in a community education context
- vi. Multi-annual funding for community education to include any costs for QQI re-engagement
- vii. Ensure there is childcare available for learners – 'no crèche, no class' mantra is still pertinent
- viii. Explore the potential of community education as pre-apprenticeship programmes for encouraging female participation in apprenticeships

a. Learner Voice

Learners themselves are experts in their own learning experience and are thus best placed to identify issues, challenges and effective processes that support learner success.

Supporting learner voice at all levels of the learning experience: micro – (classroom level); meso (at institutional level); and macro (national level) is essential. Meaningful learner engagement is essential for creating open discursive environments where learners, and particularly those least likely to speak in formal representative structures, are supported to share their learning experience. A particular focus should be placed on those who are educationally disadvantaged, are identified as target groups (eg in Upskilling Pathways Recommendation/National Access Plan 2015-2019).

AONTAS has a long history of supporting learner voices. In FET, AONTAS leads the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum (as part of the FET Strategy 2014-2019). AONTAS is happy to share our experience of this model of learner voice engagement so that it can be replicated/adapted to other environments. Since its establishment the Forum, supported by an advisory and international academic expert group, has engaged 909 learners, from 17 SOLAS funded programmes, held 3 national and 12 ETB- based regional meetings documented in 4 public and 7 internal reports. This qualitative research project can add greater in-depth insight into learner experiences in addition to existing quantitative data infrastructure systems.

Learner voice is about offering a range of methods to really listen to the experience of learners in order to improve provision. This goes beyond consultation to active and continuous engagement with learners.

b. Continuous professional development for educators

Teachers/educators are central to the learning experience. Investment in continuous professional development is vital, not limited to specific areas eg e-learning, but expanded to include best practice in teaching and learning, supporting learner voice and engagement.

Documenting and disseminating good practice must be fostered. The AONTAS peer-reviewed Journal of Adult and Community Education, *The Adult Learner*, is a long-standing (over 35 years) journal in which insights and recommendations on theory and practice can be shared.

Investment in the careers of educators from FET to higher education must be prioritised, limiting precarious contracts, enabling outreach activities, reducing administrative burden, and prioritising teaching, learning and community engagement.

2. Improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with special educational needs

Educational disadvantage

Certain sections of Irish society experience persistent educational disadvantage. For adults, community education is a well-established, community-based model of provision that is accessible, flexible, affordable, supportive and effective for engaging educationally disadvantaged groups.

From the Adult Education Survey (AES) 2017 survey conducted by the CSO, if you leave school early and have (primary/less than the Leaving Certificate) as your highest level of education you are 7 times less likely to participate in formal (accredited) education than if you have a Degree (2% compared to 14%). However, it is not to say that people are not engaging in adult learning: 23% of early school leavers chose to engage in non-accredited education. Community education offers educational opportunities for all. From the AES and OECD (2017) data, those least likely to engage in adult learning include: older people; people who left school early (less than upper second level education); people in non-standard employment.

Barriers to participation in adult learning

The Adult Education Survey (AES) 2017 highlighted cost, family responsibilities, location and health and age as significant barriers to participation in lifelong learning. Across the board, family responsibilities is the single biggest factor impeding participation in adult learning. Secondly, across social groups cost (actual or perceived) is one of the main factors that prevents adults from taking up educational courses. Males across most age groups reported that they felt that they could not afford the cost of engaging in adult learning; female reported same in most age groups. Both sexes aged 45-49 years equally reported that the cost prohibited them from participating in FET.

For those experiencing educational disadvantage, health and age are likely to impede lifelong learning participation. For example, 21% of people whose highest level of education was primary level cited their health and age as the reason they could not participate in education; 15% of those with a lower secondary qualification cited same. Only 4% of those with third level qualifications cited health and age as a barrier. In the border region, the location of training was 6 times more likely to be an issue than for people in Dublin.

We can infer from the AES that the following will support greater lifelong learning participation the following action is required:

- Ensure there is no financial cost for FET programmes in the Skills to Advance framework - Keep FET accessible by ensuring there is not cost for participation, particularly for people in non-standard employment
- Support diversity of education provision available, non-formal and formal options, particularly through part-time provision so adults can manage other responsibilities (family/caring/employment)
- Widen access to accredited provision for adults in a range of education contexts, particularly community education, to address the low formal education participation rate
- Community education – Provide multi-annual, sustainable funding for community education so that communities are empowered to address the regional disparities in lifelong learning participation

a. Supporting employees participation in lifelong learning

There is a close correlation between educational attainment and labour market outcomes suggesting that adults with low levels of education are at a real disadvantage in terms of employment and life chances (OECD, 2017, p.109).

This is evident from data collected by the OECD for Ireland (2017):

- 48.8% of 25-64 year-olds with less than upper secondary level education are in employment
- 68.9% of 25-64 year-olds with a minimum of upper secondary level education but not tertiary education are in employment; and
- 82.1% of 25-64 year-olds with tertiary education are in employment

These statistics show that for learners their chance of employment increases by nearly 20 percentage points for each additional level of education achieved: (<https://data.oecd.org/emp/employment-by-education-level.htm>). When compared to other OECD countries this benefit is more pronounced in Ireland than the OECD average. In Ireland your earning potential with a third level degree is approximately 60% higher than someone with an upper secondary level of education (Education Matters 2017).

With lifelong learning becoming the new norm for employees, it is important that all have the opportunity to participate to improve their employment prospects. The AES states that those who were unemployed were over three times more likely to participate in formal education than those in employment (28.2% versus 7.6%) possibly due to labour market activation policies. Additionally, employed persons were more likely to have participated in non-formal education than those who were unemployed (59.3% versus 38.3%). A higher proportion of persons in employment participated in lifelong learning than those who were unemployed (62.6% versus 52.9%). We know you cannot view people in employment as a homogenous group; the OECD report of 2017 stated that there are stark difference in access:

- i. Non-standard workers (part-time, temporary and self-employed) are more likely to be women, receive less training, and have less employment stability. In Ireland, every tenth employee is an involuntary part-time worker (OECD, 2017, p.110)
- ii. Full-time temporary workers are 20% less likely, and part-time workers 40% less likely, than standard workers to receive training and skills development which leads to further wage inequality (OECD, 2017, p.111)
- iii. Immigrants and workers low in skills receive less education and training from employers

Generally in OECD countries employers spend twice as much on employees with tertiary education as they do on those lower in skills

Action required:

- In the Skills to Advance policy framework, include funding for community education to reach people in non-standard employment, offering them the opportunity to engage in learning
- Identify non-standard employees as a specific target group for the Skills to Advance framework
- Ensure FET opportunities are clearly communicated to the general public and employees in precarious/non-standard employment
- Offer guidance for employees in non-standard employment

b. Improve access to apprenticeships for women

The State is investing in apprenticeships and it is vital that opportunities are open to all and the system is equitable. In 2018, Irish apprentices are almost exclusively

(85%) young men under 25 years of age. Of 14,953 apprentices completing training in October 2018, just 332 or 2% were women. People with disabilities are also under-represented, comprising 423 or 2.8% of apprentice population. There is no nationally collected data on the socio-economic or ethnic background of Irish apprentices. It is vital that working class people, minorities and women have access to apprenticeships. This section focuses on issues identified by learners in relation to apprenticeships.

From a learner perspective:

1. **Gendered nature of apprenticeships.** Concern that **women have less opportunities** for apprenticeships; and that apprenticeships are not effectively targeted to welcome women; this all means that apprenticeships are not a real option for many women
2. Concern over the **perceived increased academic nature and requirements** of apprenticeships
3. Concern that apprenticeships are becoming **more closely aligned to higher education** and traditionally working class people are being pushed out (real or perceived)
4. Concern about **lack of prerequisites** of English and Maths for apprenticeships which leads to learners not being prepared for their apprenticeships and therefore not being able to effectively participate
5. Concern that the **lottery process for participation in apprenticeship courses** is not equitable or engaging, particularly for adult learners. Learners with families who are required to move may not be able to participate due to limits on entry in certain regions of the country
6. For adults wishing to change career and take up apprenticeships, a common deterrent/factor is a **fear of ageism and a fear of returning to learning**. This needs to be faced at all levels of engagement with adult learners, to help give them the confidence to participate

Potential Solutions

***Community education* can contribute to increasing access to, and retention within, apprenticeships and addressing the above issues, specifically focusing on:**

1. Bridging the gap between school and apprenticeships

Basic general learning has been proven to support learning new skills, building confidence, and providing a learner-centred support for completing academic requirements of accredited provision so that further academic courses become a real possibility for learners.

Gendered nature of apprenticeships

Issue: women are disproportionately underrepresented in apprenticeships. Community education is very much focused on women's rights to education and offers a learner-centred provision that meets their needs, builds confidence, learning

to learn skills and offering the accredited prerequisites for further courses. This is identified in the [Irish Times article](#) shared with yourselves last week.

Future potential: Community education and pre-apprenticeship courses. Bridging the divide, supporting progression and widening participation.

Community education could offer subject specific pre-apprenticeship courses depending on the needs of the local community and the local apprenticeship offering. It is already happening with An Cosán. AONTAS could work with policy makers and community education organisation members who have the scope, capacity, interest and potential to deliver specific pre-apprenticeship programmes that have a specific focus on:

- Women who would like to engage in an apprenticeship but would like to learn skills before entering an apprenticeship programme (also community education offers childcare to make this a reality)
- Those who left school early and require greater academic support
- Those who have been out of education for a long period of time and require development of their skills before returning to full or part-time formal education
- Those who have multiple issues, addiction etc, and can be supported through a variety of services to work towards taking on an apprenticeship

Learning from our partners

AONTAS is in communication with colleagues in the UK regarding a potential model that would also draw on the experience of our counterparts, the Learning and Work Institute in the UK, who have been very involved in pre-apprenticeship development.

<https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/our-work/work-and-careers/pre-apprenticeship-programmes/>

3. Help those delivering education services to continually improve

- i. Ensure measurement of learning outcomes are not overly burdensome and are fit for purpose. The outcomes of learning are measured too narrowly using a certain catalogue of indicators and standards that are simply not fit for purpose (for example, the vocabulary around progression, employability statements and so on). As we know, a person's ability to gain employment is not solely related to the skill set they possess, it also includes their credentials, employment history, and ability to present at and perform during interviews. Furthermore, underpinning and throughout the learning-employability life-course of any learner is that they must first be able to meet their basic needs (from housing and healthcare to safety and social supports). Determining the success of a course based on progression alone puts a massively disproportionate expectation on only one piece of a much larger puzzle of supporting someone's progression to employment. The recent ESRI (2018) evaluation of the [Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme \(SICAP\) programme](#) highlighted the necessity to capture intensive work carried out by community development programmes with vulnerable groups more accurately, 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 left school early. Quantitative assessments of lifelong learning

participation mask the bigger picture, offering no insight into the people participating and their stories. Each learner has a unique experience and success means many things, from overcoming fears of school by taking a step into adult learning, to receiving a minor QQI award to being able to help their children with homework.

- ii. Empower adult education providers to offer courses that not only meet the needs of employers but also learners. Continue to fund non-accredited courses are vital for that initial engagement with educationally disadvantaged learners.
- iii. Create spaces for educator voice. Educators need to be part of creating sustainable improvements and it is essential that their views are part of shaping policy.
- iv. There is often an inaccurate assumption that non-vocational courses don't support progression to employment. However personal and professional development mutually emerge and this can act as the empowering catalyst for many learners to enter the labour force.
- v. Ensure that educators can create learning pathways for learners to move from non-accredited to accredited provision in a community education context.
- vi. Invest in quality. Allocate funding for ensuring high level quality assurance processes in a community education context. AONTAS is happy to support in any way in this regard.

4. Build stronger bridges between education and the wider community

Building the capacity of communities to meet the learning needs of people in the locale through community education, outreach, meaningful collaboration with education institutions is vital. Community education is adult learning which takes place in local community settings across Ireland. It is learner-centred and responds to the needs of the local community. Community education has a track record of effectively engaging with people who wish to return to education but may not have the confidence or opportunity to do so in a formal setting.

Community Education

Community education is completely underfunded and is at risk of dying off. Funding must take into account the 'distance travelled' of each learner rather than a standard view of success. For the most educationally disadvantaged, who experience homelessness, mental health issues, domestic violence, addiction, it is not simply a case of a person undertaking a course. It's building a supportive education system around that individual, ensuring that it is truly learner-centred and building their capacity to reach their educational aspirations. Funding must cover the full cost of running a community education organisation, and also must take into account the range of outcomes and the distance travelled.

Community education effectively tackles educational disadvantage at a community level and is the envy of Europe. Now is the time to recognise its value at national level. Community education provides a warm, welcoming environment, participatory educational methodologies, holistic supports such as counselling and vital 'make or break' supports such as childcare and financial support. The outcomes are broad, from basic education to social inclusion, for example: Warrenmount Community Education Centre in the heart of the Liberties, which met the educational needs of **478** learners from **54** countries in 2017; Non-accredited learning programmes run by the Loreto Centre, Crumlin; Longford Women's Link

Retail Skills Programme in which 52 rural women participated, 31 gained a QQI qualification and 7 secured employment before the programme even finished; Transformative College in Mullingar, which receives no State funding and offers vital community education programmes for the promotion of mental health.

As mentioned previously, the ability to engage in lifelong learning must be viewed in the context of a person's life situation. Supports regarding health issues, access to affordable quality accommodation, and alleviating poverty all contribute to the likelihood of participating in lifelong learning. Similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, until the most immediate rudimentary barriers come down educational inequality will persist. Integrated whole-system approaches with wrap-around supports are needed to bridge gaps in engaging and retaining educationally disadvantaged learners. Community education has traditionally offered an alternative – and, arguably more fit-for-purpose – set of supports. For example, counselling services, mentoring, and childcare are not only more person- and learner-centred, they represent straightforward features of leading best practice on what works well in enabling education to become an empowering force in the lives of learners with positive effects on their families and within their communities; yielding deep and wide socio-economic, and improved health dividends for all members of society as a whole.

As we move towards 50 years of AONTAS and reflect on the history of adult and community education, we can observe that, unfortunately, these issues are not new, nor are they exclusive to Ireland. An extensive review of all 35 years of *The Adult Learner* Journal publications highlights a number of recurrent themes: the need to cover costs and ensure there are no fees for learners; the need to provide adequate childcare and revive the mantra of 'no crèche, no class'; the need to offer a holistic range of supports for learners. What we have learned over the 50 years of AONTAS is that we do have the answers to such questions through the wealth of knowledge from our membership and adult learners. Diversity of adult learning provision is vital: part-time, flexible, accredited and non-accredited; clear progression paths; recognition of prior learning (RPL); learner supports (including financial) in formal and non-formal (ie community education) contexts; effective learning methodologies; and integrating learner voice across provision.

Community education has consistently met the needs of the most educationally disadvantaged; empowered communities, particularly women; contributed to cross-generational educational equality as a home-grown, community-centred model of holistic education provision. Ireland's success in developing effective community education programmes has in some respects set standards/led the way in Europe. To realise an equitable vision of adult learning it is time we gave community education the recognition, resources and respect it deserves. Community education is not just about building bridges between education and the community; it is of and for the community.

Action: Commitment to multi-annual sustainable funding for community education to include any QQI reengagement/programme developments costs.

5. Improve national planning and support services

- i. Commitment to multi-annual sustainable funding for community education to include any QQI reengagement/programme developments costs
- ii. Maintain a heterogeneous education system. Ensure learners can engage in a range of accredited and non-accredited learning opportunities, particularly in community education contexts
- iii. Funding to cover part-time higher education fees for first-time mature students
- iv. Funding for accessible higher education provision in a community setting through PATH funding
- v. Increased transport cost support for FET learners
- vi. Ensure that DEASP do not deduct payments for students who miss a day due to illness/unforeseeable issue
- vii. Ensure there is childcare available for learners – ‘no crèche, no class’ mantra is still pertinent
- viii. Explore the potential of community education as a pre-apprenticeship programmes for encouraging female participation in apprenticeships
- ix. Ensure quantitative measurement is not overly burdensome and is fit for purpose in measuring outcomes – see ESRI study of SICAP as a model of ‘distance travelled’
- x. Invest in continuous professional development for educators regarding teaching and learning, including engaging the learner voice
- xi. Continue to support the National FET Learner Forum as part of the FET Strategy. Use the Forum as a model of qualitative data collection for meaningful learner voice engagement across the education system (as appropriate)
- xii. In the Skills to Advance policy framework, include funding for community education to reach people in non-standard employment, offering them the opportunity to engage in learning
- xiii. Identify non-standard employees as a specific target group for the Skills to Advance framework
- xiv. Ensure FET opportunities are clearly communicated to the general public and employees in precarious/non-standard employment
- xv. Offer guidance for employees in non-standard employment

Any Other Comments:

Thank you for the opportunity to present the views, knowledge and expertise of AONTAS, adult learners and our 400+ members. AONTAS would welcome the opportunity to discuss any points in the submission or provide any additional information.

Kind Regards,

Niamh O'Reilly



CEO, AONTAS