

What is Happening in Adult Learning and Education (ALE)?



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What is Happening in Adult Learning and Education (ALE) in Ireland?

Introduction

On 22nd March, AONTAS joined with our fellow adult learning civil society organisations worldwide to promote the understanding and practice of adult learning and education. The International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) leads the 5-year campaign and notes the central role of adult learning in attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the need for adequate funding and the value of adult learning and education (ALE) in a healthier planet and a better, more just world. The purpose is to speak with one voice in advancing the value of adult learning for all. As part of the “*we are adult learning and education*” (#weareALE) campaign, this short report outlines the context for Ireland, what is happening at a local level for learners, the rapidly changing policy context at the national level and notes pertinent European policy developments.

Due to public health restrictions arising from the pandemic adult, further and community education is now provided online, resulting in a drastically different learner experience. Moreover, we know that online learning needs three things: **devices, the internet and the skills to engage**, and digital poverty is a prominent issue facing adult learners, in addition to existing barriers to participation. In pre-COVID-19 times (2019), the lifelong learning participation rate in Ireland was approximately 12.5%, yet for those with less than a Leaving Certificate level qualification, it is about 3%. As there has been an unequivocal exacerbation of educational disadvantage over this time, we are yet to see the actual impact on participation rates.

The prolonged impact of the pandemic warrants a long-term commitment to addressing the fallout from COVID-19 on those most educationally disadvantaged across the tertiary education system. **AONTAS calls for:**

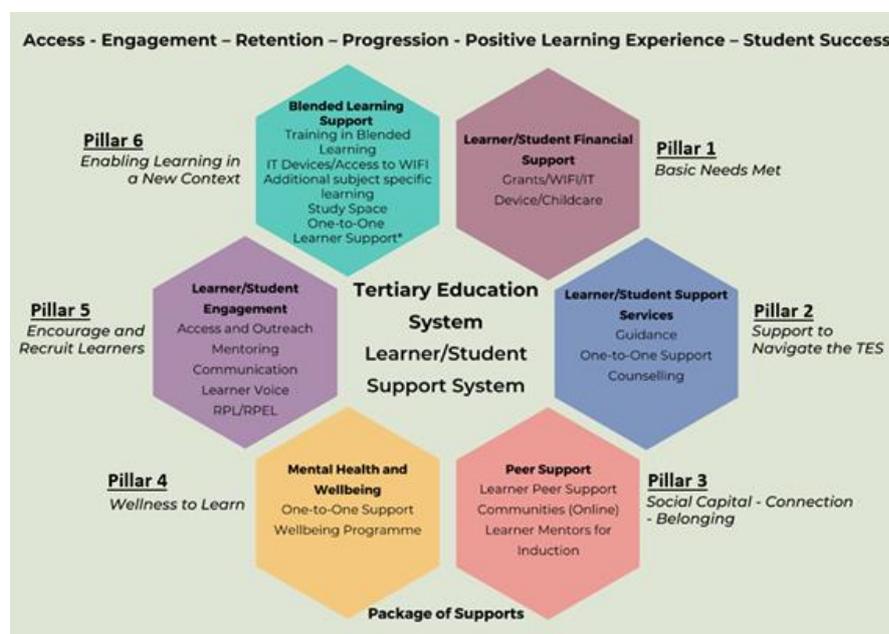
- An **action-focused, resourced, strategy to address the long-term impact of COVID-19** on engagement, retention and progression across tertiary education, with a specific focus on marginalised learners and the community education and FET sector. This would include:
 - An **extended MAEDF**¹ that builds on the [reported learning of round one of the fund](#)
 - Equity in learner supports (including financial) across community, further and higher education
 - Addressing the ongoing issue of digital poverty (devices, broadband, skills)
 - A resourced outreach and engagement initiatives to engage marginalised learner cohorts

¹ Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund – [financial package of €8million for community education](#)

Local Level – What is happening on the ground in practice?

AONTAS has written extensively on the issues affecting learners. As chair of the now-closed Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Working Group, throughout 21 meetings, ten papers were produced: [Digital Learning](#), [Assessment](#), [Learner Engagement](#), [Community Education](#), [Educational Equity and Learner Cohort](#), [Tutors and Practitioners](#), [Financial Barriers](#) and [Mental Health](#), [Progression](#) and [Barriers in the Return to Remote Learning](#). Although mainly written in April-May 2020, the same issues apply to a greater or lesser extent. Across the tertiary education system, a range of learner supports are needed, especially for marginalised learners (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Tertiary Education Student/Learner Support Framework



Despite the significant effort made by providers and learners, and additional funding supports, since the onset of the pandemic, there has been a **reduction in participation²** in adult learning by specific cohorts of society. For Further Education and Training (FET), this includes:

- A 25% reduction in certification at National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) levels 1-4
- A 24% reduction in participation in FET by Travellers and Roma
- A 15% reduction in participation by Refugees and Asylum Seekers
- A 15% reduction in participation by people over 50 years
- A 14% reduction in participation by people with disabilities

² As per input from SOLAS CEO at the AONTAS Policy Day 5/3/21

The perspective of Adult Learners

Since March 2020, qualitative and quantitative data gathered from 21 FET Learner Forum events involving 2,254 FET Learners across seven ETBs have provided insights into the learner experience during COVID-19. Learners from the [National FET Learner Forum](#) are telling us that:

- They appreciate the efforts made by tutors and their ability to access laptops
- Online learning is stressful and in itself negatively impacts on mental health (challenging regarding skills, assignments and lack of peer interaction)
- Learners need access to WiFi/reliable internet connectivity to support remote learning
- Worryingly many learners say, especially those at the early levels of the NFQ, that they wouldn't take up an online course again
- Placements for courses are a challenge
- They are less satisfied with disability supports in an online context

Mental health is having an increasing impact on FET learners in this current lockdown wave:

- 32% of surveyed learners in the emergency phase (March 2020) reported their mental health as being impacted by the current crisis. This figure has increased to 57% in the recent lockdown.

The **lack of structure** to remote learning is proving increasingly problematic for FET learners:

- 38% of the surveyed learners in the emergency phase reported they agreed with the statement, *"I struggle with the lack of structure to my day."* More recent survey data shows this figure rising to 54.2%.

Perspective of Community Education providers

Since March 2020, over the course of 40 weekly membership webinars, six Community Education Network ([CEN](#)) events and our CEN [census research activities](#), a number of themes are emerging:

1. The Mitigating Against Education Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF) was very helpful, and a further such funding is needed, [see report here](#).
2. Community education groups are innovating to meet the needs of their learners through online learning.
3. Despite efforts, marginalised learners are currently having difficulties engaging in learning, and many require face-to-face, on-site learning opportunities.
4. New cohorts of the population are now seeking to engage in community education.
5. There is a huge need for learner supports arising from the increase in domestic violence, unemployment, isolation and poverty, all of which have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

National Level – What is Happening at National Policy Level?

With the establishment of the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) under Minister Simon Harris TD and Minister of State Niall Collins TD, policy developments are progressing rapidly. There is a strong focus on inclusion, learner pathways across Further Education and Higher Education; the green agenda; the new [Action Plan for Apprenticeships](#) (including widening access) and microcredentials.

Key policy developments of interest to AONTAS members include:

- [Statement of Strategy 2021-2023](#) for the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
- [The FET Strategy, Future FET, Transforming Learning \(2020-2024\)](#)
- The Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF)
- New 10-year [Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Skills Strategy](#)
- The representation of AONTAS on the COVID-19 Tertiary Education System Steering (TES) Steering Group

The New [Statement of Strategy 2021-2023](#) for the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) was launched on 8th March 2021 by Minister Simon Harris TD, Minister of State Niall Collins and Secretary General Jim Breslin. AONTAS made a [submission to the consultation](#). While there are many positive aspects to the Statement of Strategy that focuses on inclusion and the wider benefits of learning, however, community education is not explicitly named. Conscious that it is a high-level Strategy and granular detail is not included; however, the centrality of learner voice in shaping provision as we go forward was also a significant omission.

Six goals set out to guide the Strategy: **talent** – develop talent and skill, **innovation** – promote research, knowledge, and innovation, **inclusion** – support learning for all, **international** – succeed on world stage, **governance** – good governance to enhance quality and **capacity** – the Department is “fit-for-purpose”.

There is huge scope for the new DFHERIS to lead positive change for adult learners and the **strategic context outlined (p.8) covered areas of inclusion and mitigating educational disadvantage**. The potential “*to seize the opportunity by the new Department to include a focus on social sustainability*” is welcome. Additionally, a recognition of the challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic on learners and also “*the need to mitigate educational disadvantage and provide necessary supports in order to address the imbalance, where certain groupings are under-represented in our student and learner population*” (p. 8) is also welcome. The resourcing implications of the need for increased lifelong learning due to demographic and labour market changes were also noted, and a welcome focus on climate change and critical thinking.

AONTAS welcomes the action to (18) Support Flexible Offerings and Lifelong Learning, stating, *“Increasing levels of inclusion through the provision of high quality, more accessible and flexible education and training programmes and supports suited to the identified needs of individuals, with the aim of enabling every citizen to participate fully in society.”*

Aspects of inclusion within the strategic goal, **Talent**, range from ‘individual talent’, whereby the diverse and progressive pathways ‘for everyone’ that empowers learners is encouraging; ‘Human Capital’ that notes the need to support people into sustainable and quality employment; and ‘Diverse Pathways; to facilitate progression pathways across further and higher education is also welcome.

In terms of the **Innovation** goal, it was good to see the community and voluntary named and the focus on addressing significant societal challenges within Action 2: connected Research System. Also good to see reference made to further and higher education within regional clusters (goal 3).

It is very positive to see **Inclusion** as a goal within the Strategy. AONTAS advocated for a range of areas, which have been included, namely: an effective policy framework to support access and progression, learners supports especially for the most marginalised. However, it would be helpful to name specific learner cohorts. We also welcome support for literacy, numeracy and digital skills, the championing of equality and welcoming diversity.

Under the **International** goal, it is encouraging to see Enhanced North/South Cooperation. AONTAS has been instrumental in developing the Network for Adult Learning Across Borders ([NALAB](#)), and welcomes the focus on North-South and East-West, especially given that educational disadvantage has no borders; we welcome the focus on N/S cooperation. AONTAS engages in 7 EU funded projects, including ERASMUS+ and we welcome the focus on ‘advancing with EU Partners’, and reference to the EU Pillar of Social Rights, of which the first principle is Education, Training and Lifelong Learning .

For the **Governance** goal, we welcome the focus on sustainable funding for further and higher education, and one would hope community education is included within that statement. AONTAS welcomes the cross-governmental collaboration, particularly if the focus is on the seamless transition of learners across the education system. Engaging with stakeholders is essential and effective structures are needed, and a balance of all voices across further and higher education is required.

[The FET Strategy, Future FET, Transforming Learning \(2020-2024\)](#), is led out by SOLAS and delivered primarily through the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and other providers. It focuses on three strategic areas: **fostering inclusion, building skills and enabling pathways**. Of particular interest to AONTAS members is the proposed **Learner Supports Framework** and the **Community Education Framework**. AONTAS calls for equitable learner supports

(including financial) across community, further and higher education³ and sustainable multiannual funding for community education. The Apprenticeship Action Plan is also in development, and the [AONTAS submission](#) outlines the need to widen participation, particularly for women. AONTAS wants access to micro-credentials for all, particularly at the early levels of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

The Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF), announced by Minister Harris in Budget 2021, was a welcome lifeline to community education providers. [AONTAS advocated in 2020](#) for a specific fund to support community education during COVID-19 and welcomed the €8 million announced. Before the end of 2020, €5.9 million was distributed to projects across Ireland, [as outlined here](#), and SOLAS promoted the impact of the fund. Following the dissemination of the fund, in February 2021, AONTAS conducted two **surveys to capture the processes and impact of MAEDF** through the perspective of community education groups and ETB representatives who administered the fund. A brief [report](#) developed by AONTAS was launched at the Policy Day Event on Friday 5th March as part of the AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival. This report celebrates the positive contribution of the fund, and, taking a reflective view, considers what we have learned from this first iteration to help inform future processes.

Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Skills Strategy (ALNDS) (10-year plan) is currently in development following [extensive consultation](#) by SOLAS. AONTAS is represented through CEO Niamh O'Reilly on the Steering Group, which is Chaired by Minister Harris TD and on the Technical Advisory Committee, which is Chaired by SOLAS CEO, Andrew Brownlee. AONTAS has made a [submission](#) and follow up responses to support a learner-centred strategy that sees ALNDS as a human-right, foundational to lifelong learning. We focused on the importance to learn local (provision, outreach and promotion): learner agency (learner-centred provision and learner voice as an embedded process) and appropriate measures of success (learner-informed and encompass the transformative nature of learning).

The COVID-19 Tertiary Education System Steering (TES) Steering Group is chaired by the Asst Secretary in DFHERIS, attended by Minister Harris TD and meets every second Friday. Members include AONTAS (CEO), Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), SOLAS, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), Union of Students in Ireland (USI), Irish Universities

³ Public [Consultation on Review of Student Grant Scheme](#) - SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) – including FET

Association (IUA), Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) and other representatives from across further and higher education. The TES Steering Group acts as a forum to identify, discuss and resolve the ongoing challenges and issues created for the sector by COVID 19.

The meetings aim to ensure a focus on the following themes for the academic year 2020/21, considering the Ongoing coherence in response to the public health crisis; the promotion of student and learner engagement and wellbeing in the academic year 2020/21; Ensuring the quality of teaching, learning and research; and ensuring that disadvantage is not exacerbated.

AONTAS CEO, Niamh O'Reilly, focuses on the National FET learner voice and issues raised by FET learners from the National FET Learner Forum; issues relating to community education and marginalised learners from across the further and higher education system.

Part of that DFHERIS structure includes pop-up working groups which AONTAS is represented on:

- The Connectively Working Group (represented by AONTAS Head of Research, Leah Dowdall) where we raised the issue of a change by mobile data providers who no longer offer unlimited data ([see our news piece](#))
- the Student and Learning Wellbeing and Engagement Working Group (represented by AONTAS Head of Advocacy, Dearbháil Lawless and AONTAS Head of Research, Leah Dowdall) and its subgroup (Head of Advocacy). We focus on marginalised learners, FET learners and issues relating to community education)

Other Developments during COVID-19, DFHERIS launched a new webpage that brings together information on the courses, supports, information and guidance available:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/f205a-the-right-course/>

European Level – What is Happening at EU Policy Level

European policy relating to adult learning is primarily set within the Development Goal (DG) Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. At the National Coordinators for the European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL) meeting (February), the European Commission emphasised a number of policy documents and frameworks. Relevant updates are outlined below.

- [**European Skills Agenda, for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience \(2000\)**](#) The European Skills Agenda is a five-year plan with 10 actions. Of most relevance to adult learning is Action 8 'Skills for Life' that names the European

Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL). Linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the EAAL *aims to*⁴:

- *Reach out to those **most in need of learning***
- *Prioritise non-formal, intergenerational, intercultural and **community education***
- *Take a more integrated approach to learning provision at **local level***

The EAAL also focuses on the [Upskilling Pathways Recommendation](#), which was adopted by the European Council in 2016. It aims to help adults acquire life skills to Leaving Certificate Level or equivalent to National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) level 4 or 5. There are three steps: **skills assessment, learning offer and validation/recognition**. The EU Skills agenda also includes tools and initiatives relating to lifelong learning pathways, **Action 9**: Initiative on individual learning accounts and **Action 10**: A European approach to micro-credentials. While broadly, there has been significant development and investment in micro-credentials, EU policy also focuses on adults, including those at the early levels of the NFQ. Also, **Action 11**: [New Europass platform](#), which is helpful for developing a CV online.

The new [Communication on the European Education Area \(EEA\)](#) was published on the 30th September 2020. It lays out a pathway to achieving the EEA by 2025. One of the five areas for this vision for a European Education Area is that “*everyone should be able to access high-quality education, irrespective of their socio-economic background*”. The second of the six dimensions of the communication is ‘*inclusion and gender equality*’ in education.

The **European Pillar of Social Rights** is the first set of social rights proclaimed by EU institutions since the [Charter of Fundamental Rights](#) in the year 2000. The first of the 20 key principles is ‘**Education, training and life-long learning**’. Whereby it states that ‘*Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market.*’ The Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights was launched on 4th March 2021 and includes a specific target set for lifelong learning of at least 60% of all adults should be participating in training every year by 2030.

On 10th February 2021, the European Parliament confirmed that the [political agreement reached on the Recovery and Resilience Facility \(RRF\)](#) Regulation in December 2020. The fund makes €672.5 billion in loans and grants available to Member States to support reforms and investments. There is a specific focus on education and training, including adult learning, FET, disadvantage and digital skills.

⁴ “towards building comprehensive, quality and inclusive adult learning systems, which reach out to all, including seniors and in particular those most in need of access to learning, including through distance and online learning. It will prioritise non-formal, life-wide learning, intergenerational, intercultural and community learning. Local learning centres, libraries and the wider community and civil society will be supported to work together to motivate and enable adults to learn, thus supporting crisis resilience.”

Conclusion

Globally, the COVID19 pandemic has exacerbated educational disadvantage. Since March 2020, through our advocacy, research, communications and capacity building activities, AONTAS has captured the impact of the pandemic on education provision at a local level. Through insights gained from educators and learners, we have a strong sense of what is required to support access, engagement and a positive learner experience. While an online/hybrid learning model appears to be a feature of future adult learning provision, it has limitations, including the issue of digital poverty. There has been a reduction in the participation levels of marginalised learners, with many educators attributing this to the need for on-site learning and increased outreach activities.

Nationally, AONTAS has engaged with the new Minister and government department, DFHERIS. There is a welcome focus on inclusion within the Statement of Strategy and the raft of other policies. There is also a growing recognition at EU policy level for community education, outreach, engagement and micro-credentials. However, AONTAS calls for an increased focus on supporting educational equality recommending a national strategy to address the fallout from COVID19 on marginalised learners across the tertiary education system.

Dr Niamh O'Reilly

AONTAS CEO