



AONTAS Pre-budget Submission 2023

Addressing the needs of adult and community education post COVID-19



About AONTAS

AONTAS is the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation, a membership organisation representing adult education educators, providers, learners, and other stakeholders. AONTAS is committed to advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to access quality adult learning opportunities throughout their lives. We promote the value and benefits of lifelong learning. We support adult learners, particularly those most educationally disadvantaged, to engage in lifelong learning. And we advocate for more inclusive and accessible national education policy.

AONTAS achieves these aims through research, communications and advocacy. Our work is aimed at working towards an inclusive, learner-centred lifelong learning system that enables adults to have a transformative learning experiences.

AONTAS also hosts the Community Education Network, a 150-member strong network of independently-managed community education providers. The network provides a platform for members to work collaboratively and share information and resources. It offers professional development and works to ensure that community education is valued and resourced.

Further information on our work is available at www.aontas.com

Introduction

AONTAS welcomes the opportunity to provide a list of evidence-based recommendations for the 2023 Budget. We ask the Government to consider an equitable financial approach that recognises targeted support for educationally-disadvantaged learners.

This approach must address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on adult learner who are learning under the initial stages of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (Levels 1-4). The approach must prioritise inclusive practice, such as community education. In addition, the approach must fund the Further Education and Training sector to enable progression and pathways within the tertiary education sector.

AONTAS advocates for the needs of learners, tutors, staff, and providers, and asks the Government to prioritise a collective, holistic, and transformative model of adult learning.



Recommendations

Actions for Learners	Actions for Tutors and Staff	Actions for Community Education	Actions for Tertiary Education
<p>AONTAS calls for a ‘true-costs’ grant system to adequately provide adult learners with travel, meals, and materials costs for their courses.</p>	<p>AONTAS calls for improved working conditions for staff, including an increase in staff salaries and permanent contracts for those delivering community education, and Further Education and Training.</p>	<p>AONTAS calls for a commitment to an equitable, sustainable, multi-annual funding package that empowers community education organisations to address the needs of learners and the local communities.</p>	<p>All publicly-funded projects in Higher Education should include specific targets and provide public reporting (including diversity and climate action goals)</p>
<p>Provision of free child-care for all learners engaging in adult learning programmes.</p>	<p>Provide a category for ‘staff days’ to ensure that staff costs are covered within the delivery of future “Reach” fund, formerly the MAED Fund, and within other projects.</p>	<p>Ensure the next iteration of the Reach Fund can meet the needs of providers by re-developing the conditions and reporting requirements, and including staff costs.</p>	<p>Provide all refugees and International Protection Applicants in Ireland with the same education access and financial support to ensure an anti-racist and fair approach in adult learning.</p>
<p>Ensure suitable inclusion of learners with disabilities in adult education. Provide an inclusion grant for learners and providers that covers tutor-hours, materials and software for those with additional or different needs.</p>	<p>Prioritise funding staff who work with educationally-disadvantaged learners. This will help to increase diversity in education, protect vulnerable cohorts, and ensure staff are supported.</p>	<p>Ensure consistent dissemination of funding for community education across the island of Ireland (including within the Reach Fund).</p>	<p>Require all higher education institutions to increase their intake of a greater diversity of learners through diverse channels (including HELS, mature-student applicants, and FET) to a minimum of 50%</p>
	<p>Provide paid staff days for professional development in the areas of digital literacy, diversity and inclusion, and wellbeing.</p>	<p>AONTAS calls for a dedicated grant to protect the status of community education groups as accredited providers.</p>	<p>Provide ETBs with funding for staff roles and activities that focus specifically on pathways and progression within FET and across the tertiary education sector</p>

How can we include, engage, and support adult learners?

True-Cost Grants

At present, the current grant model does not meet the needs of adults engaging in education. As part of the research for the National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum, AONTAS (2022) has found that there is insufficient funding for transport, accommodation and meals. Most notably, apprentices are expected to travel extensively across the country as part of their course, and receive insufficient funding to do this.

"That's why there's so many young people dropping out of college after a year or two - the expense of it. They're trying to keep cars going, they're trying to pay rent," (AONTAS, 2022b)

In addition, many learners reported that local transport is unreliable or inaccessible, particularly in rural settings. Without reliable transport or sufficient funding for travel, many learners may be forced to withdraw from their courses.

AONTAS encourages the Department of Further Education and Training, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) to increase the financial supports to those engaged in

"[My children] have to be sorted (minded) first before I can learn, and then it's the worry, 'do I have enough money to do both?'" (AONTAS, 2019).

literacy, community education, and FET. This will further enable socioeconomically-disadvantaged learners to engage and succeed in education.

AONTAS calls for a 'true-costs' grant system to adequately provide adult learners with travel, meals, and materials costs for their courses.

Lone-Parent Support & Childcare

AONTAS (2022) found that 191 learners reported childcare responsibilities as a barrier to engaging in adult education. This refers to 24% of the learners who engaged with AONTAS research during the 2021-2022 academic period. This does not represent the lone-parents who could not engage in education due to their caring responsibilities. In addition, learners in Direct Provision were identified as being less satisfied with childcare and financial supports than those not in Direct Provision.

"I found, as a single mother, I was told they would arrange the course around it to facilitate it with childminding, I end up [...] not being able to follow the course because I need childminding support and transportation," (AONTAS, 2022c).

AONTAS argues that childcare provision to be included as a core support service and be made available to adult learners. If this gap is not addressed, we will continue to exclude a large cohort of people, especially lone-parents. **AONTAS calls for the provision of free childcare for all learners engaging in adult learning programmes.**

Disability Support in Adult & Community Education

According to the National Disability Authority (2022), the participation rate of people with disabilities in education is significantly low. This is problematic because education can provide empowering opportunities and experiences that shape a person's identity and their life experience.

“For people with dyslexia there's not enough support or help”
(AONTAS, 2022b)

“Education is a process of sharing, developing, building, strengthening, encouraging and recognising the abilities of people” (NDA, 2022)

For an equitable and inclusive system, we must ensure that people with disabilities have the appropriate supports in place to meet their needs.

Learners in the National FET Learner Forum (2022) called for a review of the supports available in ETBs and a strategic approach to ensure all needs are met.



AONTAS encourages DFHERIS to provide funding for people with physical and learning disabilities across the adult and community education sector. This should include additional tutor hours and assistive technology, as well as suitable physical supports. The provision of supports for people with disabilities is fundamental to their inclusion and engagement in adult education.

Ensure suitable inclusion of learners with disabilities in adult education. Provide an inclusion grant for learners and providers that covers tutor-hours, materials and software for those with additional or different needs.

What actions are needed to support tutors and other staff in the adult learning sector?

The most important and valuable resource in education is our staff and tutors. They are passionate, caring, and knowledgeable professionals that welcome learners, guide them through their learning journey, listen to their needs, and provide a range of supports along the way. They must be protected, thanked, and paid appropriately in order to sustain the quality and success of the adult and community education sector.

At present, working in the adult learning sector remains a precarious occupation. Committed, qualified and passionate staff are often unsure whether they will have sufficient income to get by from one term to the next. Coupled with this, many staff have to 'sign-on' for jobseekers' allowance during holiday periods. These are conditions of employment which are simply unacceptable.

Furthermore, due to the pandemic, current living costs, and other societal factors, teachers are dealing with additional stress in an already challenging profession. AONTAS (2021, 2022) found that while providers in community education welcomed the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund, now the Reach Fund, the key gap was **staff costs**.

A study conducted by RAND (2021) found that stress was the most common reason for teachers leaving their profession. The pandemic exacerbated this stress for staff and many chose early retirement or changed profession. This piece by RAND, from an international perspective, reflects the experiences reported by teachers and tutors in Ireland, and cautions us to retain and protect adult education staff.

Protecting staff refers to a range of factors, including providing learning opportunities for staff in the areas of digital literacy and education software, social inclusion approaches and methods. Staff must continually adapt to changing environments to meet learners needs, and must be supported with paid professional development that reduces the pressure and challenges faced by staff which, in turn, will positively impact the learning environment.

“One of our teachers just doesn't know how to use Moodle so all our assignments from that particular module are uncorrected and we have no feedback. We spend 20 minutes every class trying to help her to get onto Moodle” (AONTAS, 2022a, p. 14).

Actions for the benefit of Tutors and Staff:

- AONTAS calls for improved working conditions for staff, including an increase in staff salaries and permanent contracts for those delivering community education, and Further Education and Training.
- Provide a category for 'staff days' to ensure that staff costs are covered within the delivery of future "Reach" fund, formerly the MAED Fund, and within other projects.
- Prioritise funding staff who work with educationally-disadvantaged learners. This will help to increase diversity in education, protect vulnerable cohorts, and ensure staff are supported.

- Provide paid staff days for professional development in the areas of digital literacy, diversity and inclusion, and wellbeing.

How can we ensure community education groups can provide accredited programmes and include a diverse cohort of adult learners?

The AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) Census (2020) found that the majority of learners in community education are from disadvantaged communities. This reflects the capacity of this specific model of learning to engage vulnerable learners through inclusive practice and provides an accessible model of education.

Community Education centers are grassroots community-based education providers, typically located in socioeconomically-disadvantaged areas and are focused on meeting local needs. Staff are local people, many of whom have had similar lived experiences to their learners and can act as role models. Community education centers offer a supportive, holistic approach that focuses on personal development and confidence-building. They provide a wide range of flexible, part-time, accredited and non-accredited courses, often combined with wraparound supports. Examples include Longford Women's Link and An Cosán, organisations which both successfully provide higher education and capacity-building opportunities in local communities, and have influenced national political engagement. When well-resourced, the potential of community education is exponential.

The value of community education is now being recognised at a European level. Recently, a Council Resolution on the new European Agenda for Adult Learning (2021-2030) stated that "adult learning can contribute to active citizenship and community learning," (Council of Europe, 2021).

As community learning and education are now entering discourse at EU level, Ireland would be well served by leading in this area. As a "country whose defining competitive advantage is talent" (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022b), it is imperative this talent and potential for active citizenship and creativity is nurtured throughout our education system.

Minister Simon Harris TD said recently that he wants "a system where, irrespective of whether a learner enters into further or higher education or a research career, the system responds to their individual talents, ambitions and motivations, ensuring that their every step is a step forward" (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022c). We would like to see a similar commitment made for those who enter the system via community education pathways, so that every step they take on their education journey is forward. To achieve this, a sustainable and equitable funding model is essential.

Community education can help achieve goals relating to access to higher education set out by DFHERIS. Currently, only 10% of the student population in Higher Education in Ireland

come from disadvantaged backgrounds (AONTAS, 2021b). Despite years of investment and commendable programmes at local and national level, this figure remains stubbornly low. Community education is a powerful tool that should be used to support equity of access objectives as well as supporting the well-being of people who live in under-resourced communities. **AONTAS calls on DFHERIS to ensure funding for community education in order to create a more equitable, inclusive education system.**

Despite the many benefits related to the provision of community education, the sector remains inequitably and unsustainably funded. AONTAS calls on DFHERIS to provide the following actions for community education:

- AONTAS calls for a commitment to an equitable, sustainable, multi-annual funding package that empowers community education organisations to address the needs of learners and the local communities.
- Ensure the next iteration of the Reach Fund can meet the needs of providers by re-developing the conditions and reporting requirements, and including staff costs.
- Ensure consistent dissemination of funding for community education across the island of Ireland (including within the Reach Fund).
- AONTAS calls for a dedicated grant to protect the status of community education groups as accredited providers.



What can we do to foster a collective, fair, and consistent approach within the tertiary education sector?

An integrated tertiary education sector in Ireland requires a transparent, fair, and equitable system. This must be equitable for learners and ensure parity of esteem for all models of learning provision. At present, there are stark differences in the numbers of disadvantaged learners engaging in community education, FET, and Higher Education.

For example, the Higher Education institutions have an average of 10% of disadvantaged student participation, and only 5% in so-called 'elite' institutions such as Trinity College Dublin, Royal College of Surgeons Ireland, University College Dublin, and the Institute of Art, Design and Technology Dún Laoghaire (NAP Steering Group 2021). This continues, despite the stated vision "to ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population," (HEA, 2021).

AONTAS argues that institutional autonomy must not be used to exclude communities in Irish society. AONTAS calls for funding in national projects to have financial implications which would see a decrease in funding if these targets are not met. This can help to address

issues such as social inclusion and climate action. In addition, to enable progression and provide clear information and integrated pathways, we must dedicate resourcing to staff in the FET sector. With further staff support in the 16 Education and Training Boards, learners will have a better understanding to understanding of their options, and be able to identify pathways, and progress, if they wish, into new or higher programmes. This new staff role will also be a support system within the FET and higher education spaces. It may also allow for dedicated staff time focussed on integrated programmes and improved relationships between institutions.

AONTAS recommends the following actions for the Tertiary Education Sector:

- All publicly-funded projects in Higher Education should include specific targets and provide public reporting (including diversity and climate action goals)
- Provide all refugees and international protection applicants in Ireland with the same education access and financial support to ensure an anti-racist and fair approach in adult learning.
- Require all higher education institutions to increase their intake of learners through diverse channels (including HELS, mature-student applicants, and FET) to a minimum of 50%
- Provide ETBs with funding for staff roles and activities that focus specifically on pathways and progression within FET and across the tertiary education sector

Conclusion

This submission contains a set of comprehensive developmental recommendations to sustain and empower Ireland's community and adult education sector. These recommendations are supported by AONTAS's research, which is learner-led and is conducted in partnerships with ETBs.

Our recommendations will help the sector to flourish and, will support the achievement of other Government goals, such as increasing the participation rates of marginalised groups in Higher Education.

Research shows that greater investment in adult and community education has other favourable economic outcomes. For instance, Wellbeing Valuation Approach research by NIACE in the UK, can be applied in an Irish context, and suggests that a 30- hour course can exhibit a return of health benefits of €150; improvement in social relations worth €700 and an increase in earnings of €250 (finALE, 2018).

Moreover, the impacts of community education align with the aims of Government across numerous and overlapping policy aims, with positive outcomes across areas such as health, employment, crime and justice, climate justice, antiracism, and gender equality.

This means adult and community education offers huge value for money in terms of the return on Government investment. This under-funded sector also plays a vital role in facilitating Ireland's transition to a more sustainable green and digital economy.

Budget 2023 must therefore reflect the true value of the adult and community education sector's capacity for creating a more equitable Ireland.

This submission was written by Dearbháil Lawless, AONTAS CEO, Conor Thompson, Capacity-Building Officer, Aisling Meyler, Research Officer.

For more information, please contact Dearbháil Lawless, AONTAS CEO at dlawless@aontas.com

References

- AONTAS. (2022a). *National FET Learner Forum Regional Report, Louth and Meath Education and Training Board* [in print].
- AONTAS. (2022b) *National FET Learner Forum Regional Report, Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board, 2022.* [in print].
- AONTAS. (2022c) *National FET Learner Forum Regional Report, Cork Education and Training Board, 2022.* [in print].
- AONTAS. (2021a) *The National FET Learner Forum Annual Synthesis Report 2020-2021.* https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/AONTASResearch/Annual_Synthesis_Report_2020-2021. [Accessed on 3/6/22]
- AONTAS. (2021b) *Submission for the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2022-2026.* https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Submissions/AONTAS_Submission_NAP_2022-2026.pdf [Accessed on 3/6/22]
- AONTAS. (2021c) *AONTAS Submission for the Public Consultation on the SUSI Grant Scheme.* <https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Submissions/AONTAS%20Submission%20for%20the%20SUSI%20Grant%20Review.pdf> [Accessed on 3/6/22]
- AONTAS. (2019) *National FET Learner Forum Regional Report, City of Dublin Education and Training Board.* [unpublished].
- Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021-2030 (2021/C 504/02). *Official Journal of the European Union.* Available at [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32021G1214\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32021G1214(01)) [Accessed on 3/6/22]
- Dáil Debates (20 May, 2021)., Question no. 124. Deputy Marian Harkin asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. . [accessed on 3/6/22 at <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2021-05-20/124/#pg-answers-124>]
- Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2022a). 'New third-level access support for autistic students and students with an intellectual disability announced by Minister Harris.' <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/9b8cc-new-third-level-access-support-for-autistic-students-and-students-with-an-intellectual-disability-announced-by-minister-harris/> [Accessed on 3/6/22]
- Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2022b). Funding the Future - Investing in knowledge and skills: Ireland's competitive advantage. <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/49e56-future-funding-in-higher-education/> [Accessed on 3/6/22]

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2022c). Unified tertiary education sector - public consultation. <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/982e2-unified-tertiary-education-sector/> [Accessed on 3/6/22]

FinALE (2018). *An advocacy toolkit for Financing Adult Learning in Europe: Why and where to invest*. https://eaea.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/finale_advocacy-toolkit_2018.pdf [Accessed 8/6/22]

Higher Education Authority. (2021) *National Access Plan 2022-2026: Consultation Paper*. https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2021/04/National-Access-Plan-2022-2026_Consultation-Paper.pdf [Accessed on 3/6/22]

National Disability Authority (2022) Education <https://nda.ie/disability-overview/key-policy-documents/report-of-the-commission-on-the-status-of-people-with-disabilities/a-strategy-for-equality/a-strategy-for-equality-report-of-the-commission-on-the-status-of-people-with-disabilities/education/> [website accessed 3/6/22]

RAND (2021) Stress Topped the Reasons Why Public School Teachers Quit, Even Before COVID-19: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA1100/RRA1121-2/RAND_RRA1121-2.pdf [Accessed 5/6/22]



The Voice of Adult Learning

AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation
2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street,
Ranelagh, Dublin 6, D06 E0H1
www.aontas.com
01 406 8220

RCN 20013042
Chy. Reg. 6719
Co. Reg. 80958

