



2 June, 2017

## Consultation response: Higher Education Authority Stakeholder Consultation on new Strategic Plan

Consultation response submitted electronically to [policy@hea.ie](mailto:policy@hea.ie).

Thank you for taking the time to review, reflect upon, and analyse the views of AONTAS as it concerns the Higher Education Authority (HEA) stakeholder consultation on the new 2017-2021 strategic plan. During the development of your strategic plan, if you would like to speak further about any issues highlighted in this consultation document; or about an issue you believe AONTAS can effectively contribute to, please do not hesitate to contact me at the phone number or email address provided at the end of this letter.

### About AONTAS

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation, a voluntary membership organisation. AONTAS exists to promote the development of a learning society through the provision of a quality and comprehensive system of adult learning and education which is accessible to and inclusive to all. AONTAS believes that lifelong learning is the key, not just too economic success but also to personal, social, and cultural development. AONTAS receives funding from: the Department of Education and Skills through SOLAS; through the European Commission as part of project funding; through membership fees; and through other sources that may arise from time to time.

The members of AONTAS number approximately 500 individual, organisational and partner members. AONTAS promotes the importance of adult and community education as a key part of lifelong learning. AONTAS influences the development of policy and lobbies on behalf of sectoral members who work to provide effective and efficiently run adult education. AONTAS also facilitates networking among members and supports their individual work. AONTAS is the voice of adult learning in Ireland where we work to ensure that the voice of learners is heard during the consultative process. The Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy identifies AONTAS as a lead organisation in the development of the National FET Learner Forum which provides valuable feedback directly from adult learners about how the FET Strategy is implemented. The Forum has now been running for two consecutive years.

### AONTAS and higher education advocacy

Regarding higher education, AONTAS is focussed on the need to widen participation of underrepresented mature students in higher education; inequality arising from education funding structures for students, particularly part-time students; and the importance of higher education provision at an accessible community level.



### Submissions should address the following questions

**1) What changes in the higher education landscape would enable you to judge that the HEA strategy has been a real success?**

Changes in the higher education landscape that would enable external stakeholders to judge that the HEA strategy has been a success will of course depend on the final strategic plan and commitments made within the document. However from the position of AONTAS changes that would show positive developments in the higher education sector are increased flexibility and funding for learners [for example; greater supports for learners participating in part time education and supports for learners with commitments outside of higher education]. While it is true that part time learners are a small proportion of the total higher education cohort they include a considerable proportion of adult learners and learners from more disadvantaged parts of Irish society. A significant effort to include what is proportionally a small number of higher education learners can have a considerable impact on making the higher education system inclusive of a larger segment of Irish society.

**2) What do you think are the key barriers/obstacles to achieving progress on the realisation of a strong and innovative higher education sector in Ireland**

The key barriers to higher education for learners in Ireland are clear and unfortunately well ingrained. In response to consultations completed by AONTAS in December 2015, titled *Future Funding for Higher Education* AONTAS outlined some of the barriers facing learners. These barriers and others continue today. One of the most important things to remember when understanding barriers to education is to not fall into the belief that barriers are ubiquitous across all populations of learners. Learners are not homogenous. Learners across demographic and geographic distance face different challenges and therefore to be truly successful in realising a strong and innovative higher education sector, the higher education system needs to ensure that it is responsive and flexible in a way that responds to the needs of learners, rather than creating a system whereby learners must respond to the needs of higher education.

Below I will describe some of the barriers to education which AONTAS is most familiar with through our work advocating for a quality learning across Ireland.

#### Funding

Various funding policies across government focus upon increasing the participation rates of adult learners (mature students), particularly those from groups that are traditionally underrepresented in the Irish higher education system. Over the past several years as Ireland has battled with and then begun to emerge from the financial crisis funding systems have changed frequently. These changes in funding streams for learners in higher education is significant as these funding tools impact the delivery of services like guidance and childcare which adult and disadvantaged learners depend on more than the average student in higher education.

To be considered successful at the end of the HEAs next strategic cycle as it concerns funding for higher education it would be important for the HEA to have established a clear, accessible, and consistent funding model for the provision of education to part-timer learners and learners from disadvantaged groups that require great supports than the average Irish participant.



### Part-time fees

Related to the institutional barrier of funding detailed above it must be recognized that the single biggest barrier for most adult learners are the fees associated with part-time higher education. Fees associated with part-time education are particularly restrictive for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups who for a variety of reasons are not in a position to return to high-education full time. According to the HEA's 2012 report *Part-time and flexible higher education in Ireland* 93% of part-time learners in higher education are mature applicants over 23 years of age. This compares with only 13% of full time applicants coming from that same cohort of mature students.

Part-time higher education must be funded, and monies distributed in such a way that learners wanting to participate in higher education are able to do so without financial barriers keeping them from reaching their potential.

### Flexibility

As already discussed flexibility in provision is an incredibly important part of the successful provision of higher education that is accessible to all learners, regardless of their age or position in life. Most adult learners who are approaching higher education later in life are doing so while doing one or many of the following; working, taking care of family (children, elderly parents, or both), and participating in their community. If Ireland is to become a leading country in the provision of higher education it needs to expand access beyond those in society privileged enough to afford current fees and afford the time to attend classes on a full-time basis.

### **3) What are the ways that the HEA can most effectively deliver on its strategic goals?**

To effectively deliver on the new strategic goals of the HEA once they are established in the second half of 2017 it will be critically important to work with stakeholders; work across government; and work with students.

#### Work with stakeholders

To be successful in the delivery of government strategy it is important that government bodies continuously feedback to and hear from their many stakeholders. HEA must continue to speak with and consult stakeholders at any major decision or implementation point in the delivery of coming strategic goals if you are to be effective.

#### Work across government

The HEA works in the world of higher education, however the issues dealt with by the HEA cut across all facets of government. As discussed at the HEA Forward-Look Forum on 31 May 2017 at the Davenport Hotel in Dublin, the issues facing learners, and in particular the most disadvantaged learners in society, are affected by government policy far beyond the Department of Education and Skills. Issues concerning financing of HEA, childcare, student transportation, and social protection payments to name a few are indicative of the many issues that impact the accessibility and provision of higher education of Irish students.



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### Work with students

Students are the reason the HEA exists and students are the primary customers of the educational services provided by institutions of higher learning. It is always important for government bodies to remember the populace they serve and in the case of the HEA you exist to serve students of higher education in Ireland. From the perspective of AONTAS we would hope and expect that attention will be paid to the adult learners in the higher education sector and the unique needs they have as they progress through the higher education system.

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Thank you again for taking time to review the AONTAS submission. We welcome the opportunity to participate in the strategic planning consultative process. **In the future please feel free to contact me, Ben Hendriksen, directly about other consultation requests concerning issues related to the work of the Higher Education Authority (HEA).** I note specifically how important it is for organisations like the HEA to consult with the public and interest organisations and how important it is for organisations to inform your work. Therefore I can say with confidence that AONTAS will whenever possible participate in and work with the HEA in whatever way and in whatever capacity we are able.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'B Hendriksen', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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