

Submission from AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

Future Funding for Higher Education

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www.aontas.com

For further information contact:

Niamh O'Reilly, CEO Designate/
Katie O'Rourke, Communications Officer
AONTAS,
2nd Floor,
83-87 Main Street
Ranelagh,
Dublin 6

noreilly@aontas.com / korourke@aontas.com



About AONTAS

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation, a membership organisation which includes over 500 members nationwide. AONTAS believes that lifelong learning is the key, not just to economic success but also to personal, social and cultural development and as such has a range of outcomes and benefits for the learner. AONTAS promotes adult and lifelong learning, provides an information referral service for adults who wish to return to education, and advocates on behalf of adult learners. With regard to higher education, AONTAS is specifically concerned about the need to widen participation of underrepresented mature students in higher education; the inequality regarding the lack of funding for fees or supports for part-time mature students; and the importance of higher education provision in the community. AONTAS receives funding from the Department of Education and Skills through SOLAS (the Further Education and Training Authority).

Over the past number of years AONTAS has engaged with a significant reform agenda within the further education and training sector, focusing particularly on the impact of the delivery of adult and community education. Throughout the reform process and development of legislation AONTAS has advocated strongly for adult learners to be at the heart of the newly reconfigured further education and training services. AONTAS has also made a strong case for the social dimension of education to be recognised and played a proactive role in the development of the new Further Education and Training Strategy which was published in May 2014. In October 2013, Berni Brady Director of AONTAS was appointed to the Board of SOLAS, the new Further Education and Training Authority.

The Further Education and Training Strategy identifies AONTAS as a lead organisation in the development of a National Adult Learners Forum, which will provide valuable feedback from adult learners as the strategy is implemented. The first meeting of the National Adult Learner Forum will take place on 26th February 2016. We regularly engage with adults seeking to return to education and training through our Information Referral Service, document the nature of their queries and analyse the emerging trends, particularly those which relate to the challenges and barriers experienced by adult learners.

AONTAS is a member of the Advisory Committee for the HEA National Access Policy Office. AONTAS Director Berni Brady is also a member of the Governing Board for the University of Limerick.

Introduction to the Submission

AONTAS understands that although there wasn't an open call for submissions regarding the Funding for Higher Level Education, we welcome this opportunity to contribute to this consultation. AONTAS was also represented at the Consultation Forum that took place on Friday 30th October 2015. AONTAS previously prepared a submission for the National Access Plan, which outlined many of the barriers that adult learners face when returning to education. We recognise the value of third level education in the context of lifelong learning, this is outlined in our current Strategic Plan '[Learning a Lifetime's Work](#)'. In this submission we focus on the need to support flexible pathways to higher education for underrepresented mature students, specifically in relation to fees for part-time courses and the value of supporting community based models of provision. We acknowledge the progress that has been made in relation to access, particularly given the difficult economic circumstances over the past number of years which have affected not only participation levels, but also the capacity of the HEIs to

respond to a changing set of learner needs. We must ensure that any proposed future funding models encourage and support mature students to continue to access third level education.

Our submission is developed based on a strong understanding of the challenges and barriers which adults tell us still persist in accessing third level education, these include funding. Our statistics are further strengthened by data at national level through the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, SOLAS as well as the ESRI who provided research to support the FET strategy. At international level, the publication of the PIAAC¹ research co-ordinated by the OECD and conducted by the CSO in Ireland provides important data relating to the skills levels of adults in Ireland based on age, gender and socio-economic status.

Developments

A number of significant changes have been introduced since the last National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education², which had an impact on mature student participation. In line with other departments, Education and Skills has been subject to a series of expenditure cuts, with the third level sector taking a significant proportion of the cuts. Budget 2013 reduced the allocation to Higher Education Institutions by €25 billion. From a learner's perspective the cost of third level education has continued to rise, with the student contribution fee on the increase each year. Budget 2013 signalled that the student contribution, at €2,500 for the 2013/14 academic year and this has risen by a further €250 in each of the 2014/15 and 2015/16 academic years, to a maximum of €3,000.³ Some mature students may be eligible for the student grant, however Budget 2011⁴ changed the qualifying criteria. Budget 2013 also saw a 3% reduction in the income threshold for entitlement to student grants⁵, although no further changes were made in Budget 2014 or Budget 2015. Higher Education institutions reported a significant increase in demand for the Student Assistance Fund. Last academic year, approximately 13,000 students were given financial assistance. This year, universities, Institutes of Technology and other third level institutes are reporting an average increase in applications to the Fund of 67% to date⁶. Budget 2015 announced that €3million will be allocated to the student assistance fund, details will be available in spring 2016.

The rapid increase in unemployment which resulted from the downturn in the economy prompted a range of new initiatives offering part time, flexible education opportunities for adults seeking to upskill and reskill in emerging employment areas. These include Springboard, MOMENTUM and JobBridge (the National Internship Scheme). In January 2014 the Irish Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan was announced which promised to offer anyone under the age of 25 access to education, training or employment within four months of their becoming unemployed. In Ireland the Youth Guarantee was piloted in Ballymun and is now being implemented nationwide.

¹ <http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/education/2012/piaac2012.pdf>

² http://www.heai.ie/sites/default/files/national_plan_for_equity_of_access_to_higher_ed.pdf

³ <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Financial-Reports-List/Budget-2014-Main-Features.pdf>

⁴ http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2010-Press-Releases/pr_budget_education_2011.pdf

⁵ <http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2013-Press-Releases/PR13-10-15.html>

⁶ <http://www.gotocollege.ie/student-assistance-fund.html>

In 2012 'Pathways to work' signalled wide ranging reform across the delivery of social protection services and supports, and ushered in changes affecting the BTEA (Back to Education Allowance) a mechanism which allows adults in receipt of a social welfare payment to maintain their social welfare payment while they pursue either a second or third level education option. In 2015 The Department of Social Protection identified contractors for the new JobPath initiative⁷. Individuals under the age of 61 who are long term unemployed will be referred to JobPath, where the main focus is to progress them into employment. A stronger referral aspect also applies to JobPath, where a personal advisor will agree education and training with an individual.

In May 2014 SOLAS, the new Further Training and Education Authority launched the first ever Further Education and Training Strategy. The strategy is the culmination of an extensive period of consultation with stakeholders across the further education and training (FET) sector, and proposes five high level goals for FET over the next five years. Providing effective progression pathways for FET graduates to higher education was identified as a specific strategic action of the Plan (3.5).

The range of new educational choices available to adults, the increasing cost of third level education and reduction in financial supports have an impact on participation rates. At the same time, the increasing role of formal referral mechanisms for people who are unemployed may restrict individual choice.

Profile of Adult Learners

The publication of Monitoring Irelands Skills Supply⁸ by SOLAS and the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs in July 2015 indicates a general increase in third level qualifications across the country. The younger age cohorts were more highly qualified: 50% of those aged 25-39 years held third level qualifications however this compared to less than a quarter of those aged 60-64 year olds. Between quarter 4 2009 and quarter 4 2014, the number of third level graduates grew for each age cohort between 30-64 years while there were declines in the numbers with upper secondary education or less.

A recent analysis of callers to the AONTAS Information Referral Service from January 2015 - July 2015 also provides an insight into the needs of adults returning to education. 13% of callers stated that they had at most a Junior Cert qualification, 35% were in employment while 27% were unemployed. The number of people who are unemployed continues to reduce gradually. In October 2015 the number of people signing on the Live Register was 9.3%.⁹ However, over half of those claimants are long term unemployed. The age profile of students, length of time spent outside of the formal education system and employment are important factors which need to be considered by the Expert Group when looking at future funding models for mature students.

The Barriers to Adult Learning

While there has been some progress in relation to access, a number of practical barriers remain which prevent adults from accessing third level education. 'Education at a Glance', published by the OECD in

⁷ <https://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/JobPath.aspx>

⁸ http://www.solas.ie/docs/MonitoringIrelandsSkillsSupply2015_Report.pdf

⁹ <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/mue/monthlyunemploymentoctober2015/>

September 2014¹⁰, published findings on the ‘reasons given for not engaging in more/any learning activity by participation status in formal and/or non-formal education activities’ across the OECD countries. In Ireland, the most popular reasons cited by both participants and non-participants was lack of financial supports and childcare and family responsibilities.

In 2015, an analysis of callers to AONTAS Freephone Helpline also indicated that ‘*lack of financial support*’ constituted as one of the biggest barrier for adults returning to education. Particular barriers may exist depending on the nature of disadvantage – for example, women may have practical needs such as accessible affordable childcare while within the Travelling Community the barriers may be more complex and cultural. Learners with disabilities may face particular barriers depending on the nature of their disability – e.g. the accessibility of venues, or the availability of learning supports. Where an adult experiences multiple disadvantage the combination of barriers may be too great to overcome.

Ireland has a growing student population with diverse backgrounds who experience particular barriers in accessing education – these may include the need for English language supports, lack of knowledge about the Irish education system, lack of qualifications or recognition of qualifications, and excessive fee structures.

AONTAS also facilitated a focus group session on behalf of the HEA in May 2013. At the meeting, adults with experience of learning at third level identified the challenges they outlined included financial barriers.

Adult learners are not a homogenous group and a ‘universal design approach’ may not therefore be practical at national and local level. Changes in employment status (including unemployment), access to financial resources, transport, family and caring responsibilities are just some of the diverse challenges which learners can expect to encounter depending on how their lives develop. These factors are more likely to emerge in the context of a longer term commitment at third level such as a degree. Feedback to AONTAS from adult learners from a variety of educational settings indicates the need for a system which is highly flexible and can respond to the diverse needs of adults as they emerge. The entry requirements of higher education programmes must also take into consideration the life/work experience of adults. Furthermore, the transition from FET to HET should be transparent and easy to navigate. Entry requirements should be open to alternative methods for admissions based on a variety of criteria: work, life and prior education experience.

1. Funding

A number of financial policies impact on the participation rates of mature students, particularly those from underrepresented groups. These include the Back to Education Allowance, the fees for part time students, and the Student Assistance Fund. Changes to institutional funding arrangements for individual HEIs also have an impact on mature student participation as they can affect the delivery of services such as guidance or childcare.

Regarding the ongoing issue of fees, AONTAS urges the Expert Group to address the inequity which applies to part time learners within the third level system. Research and data on how the current

¹⁰ Available from <http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm>

system of financial supports enables or prevents adults in accessing and completing a third level qualification would also assist in the reform of supports administered by other stakeholders. AONTAS would also urge the Expert Group to consider providing funding for Community Education models and take into account the specific needs of the mature student cohort when deciding on future funding of third level.

2. Part Time Fees

Fees for part-time higher education is the main access issue for prospective learners. Fees are particularly restrictive for underrepresented groups who for a variety of reasons, are not in a position to return full-time to higher education. Part-time students are generally mature students: according to the HEA 93% of part-time entrants to higher education in Ireland are mature students, compared with just 13% of full-time entrants.¹¹ Figures published earlier this year from the CAO show there is 2% drop in the number of mature applicants (those over 23) through the CAO in 2015. Although detailed information on part-time students is not available, UK research found that part-time study challenges social inequalities. 44% of part-time learners are the first in their family to access higher education and 29% are from low income groups¹² (Callender 2011). From anecdotal evidence, higher education learners which AONTAS has engaged with generally have left school early or are lone parents and prefer to engage in part-time education provision, particularly in an outreach mode of provision in the community. However, the main issue that learners raise is the imposition of fees.

Part-time provision must be funded in order to engage these adult learners, particularly those experiencing poverty and social exclusion as it offers them an alternative route to higher education. It is estimated that nearly forty thousand students are studying part-time in higher-education institutions in Ireland.¹³ Part-time students now represent 16% of the student cohort at undergraduate level, up from seven per cent in 2008¹⁴ and it is estimated that only 10% of HEA-funded of part-time undergraduate programmes receive support with their fees¹⁵.

AONTAS recommends:

- Free fees for part-time students who are from underrepresented groups (unemployed, low skilled, early school leavers).
- Enable part-time undergraduates to avail of Funding Support e.g. Student Assistance Fund.

3. The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA)

The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) scheme facilitates the long-term unemployed, lone parents and other social welfare recipients in gaining access to second chance education, either at second or third level, by payment of a weekly allowance. The objective of the scheme is to raise educational

¹¹ http://www.heai.ie/sites/default/files/part_time_report_0.pdf

¹² Callender C (2011) Widening Participation, social justice and injustice: Part-time students in higher education in England, International Journal of Lifelong Education. 30(4), 469–487

¹³ http://www.heai.ie/sites/default/files/final_key_facts_figures_2013_14.pdf

¹⁴ http://www.heai.ie/sites/default/files/consultation_paper_web.pdf

¹⁵ http://www.heai.ie/sites/default/files/part_time_report_0.pdf

qualifications and skills levels among the long-term unemployed and other disadvantaged groups in order that they will meet the requirements of the modern labour market.

However a number of changes have taken place in recent years that have had financial impact for those accessing BTEA. In 2012 'Pathways to work' indicated wide ranging reform across the delivery of social protection services and supports, and ushered in changes affecting the BTEA (Back to Education Allowance). Changes in Budget 2010 meant that adults in receipt of the BTEA were deemed no longer eligible for the student grant. The Cost of Education Allowance payable to BTEA claimants, which in 2008 amounted to €500, was discontinued from January 1st 2013. Further changes to the BTEA took effect in June 2014. All new BTEA claims must now be recommended and approved by a DSP Case Officer in advance of starting a course. There are many additional costs associated with attending higher education including travel and childcare costs and it is important that mature students are provided with adequate funding supports to cover the 'real' cost of higher education.

AONTAS recommends:

- Maintain the BTEA as a second chance educational payment option for the unemployed.
- Maintain the Part-time Option for the Back to Education Initiative.
- Reinstate the Cost of Education Allowance for Full-time learners.
- Introduce the Cost of Education Allowance at a pro rata basis for part-time learners.

4. Flexible, effective modes of part-time higher education provision

In addition to flexibility of provision, part-time higher education courses are viewed as adaptable to the needs of the economy¹⁶. Springboard is a very welcome initiative to widen participation in part-time higher education courses in areas where there is a specific need for employees. However, such courses require a high level of skills, mainly maths due to the Degree topics, that early school leavers may have difficulty in gaining access to. Therefore, a broadening of the topics and modes of provision is urged.

Outreach is a proven mode of higher education provision that reaches underrepresented groups. Higher education provision in a community setting is an excellent, proven method for engaging hard to reach groups in higher education, in offering higher education in a welcoming environment, and overcoming transport and occasionally childcare challenges. Resourcing different modes of this education provision is necessary to increase higher education participation by underrepresented groups.

5. Case Studies: Outreach Higher Education Provision in a Community Education Setting

AONTAS established The Community Education Network in 2007. The network comprises of over 130 community education organisations which work collectively to gain recognition for community education, raise its profile and lobby to ensure it is adequately resourced. It is unique in that it is the only national network that is dedicated to independent voluntary community education groups who

¹⁶ Universities UK (2013) The Power of Part-time: Review of Part-time and Mature Higher Education.

are committed to social change. Some of these organisations provide outreach higher education provision and examples of good models include: Longford Women's Link, based in Longford Town; An Cosán in Jobstown Tallaght; An Cosán's Virtual Community College and the Loreto Centre in Crumlin, Dublin 8.

1. Longford Women's Link

Introduction

Longford Women's Link (LWL) is a women's centre based in Longford town. Founded in 1995, LWL is a long standing provider of Community Education in Longford town and county with education and training delivered according to the principles of Women's Community Education (WCE). They provide a wide range of services, including Education and Training (QQI Centre) using their Integrated Service Delivery Model. In September 2011 LWL opened a dedicated WCE Facility and is an Outreach Centre for An Cosán's Virtual Community College, NUI Maynooth and the Irish Academy of Public Relations. This provides much needed access to third level education and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) in Longford. Longford is the fourth most disadvantaged local authority area in Ireland and in terms of higher education, the proportion of adults with third-level education in County Longford is more than eight percent below the national average, and remains to be the second lowest proportion pertaining to any county. In addition, female educational attainment rates in Longford are low with only 29% of females in the county having completed third level education (CSO, 2011).

LWL's purpose is to link women with the resources to change their lives and transform their communities and they have a long history of promoting the transformative nature of WCE.

In 2014:

- 348 students completed 49 courses/modules ranging from interest courses to University outreach
- In total, 271 QQI component awards were achieved and retention rates are consistently high, (90-100%).
- From a third level perspective, LWL has a retention rate of 94% on the two NUI Maynooth certificates (Level 7).
- For over ten years LWL were a Third Level Outreach Centre for UCD, providing third level access to over 150 students in the field of Women's Studies (Level 7).

This programme was part-funded by the former Longford VEC but this funding was withdrawn following the establishment of the new Longford Westmeath ETB. This is just one impact from the VEC merger and reflects the uncertainty within which many community providers operate.

With regard to local factors and challenges, there is a high proportion of one-parent families in Longford – on average 23% of families are lone mothers with children but this increases to 43-44% in some areas which is extremely high by national comparison (CSO, 2011). Those in receipt of One Parent Family Payment have the highest rate of consistent poverty among all social welfare recipients and have fallen further behind income trends for the rest of the population. The reasons behind poverty are complex but one of the main reasons behind lone parent poverty is that welfare to work supports were designed for unemployed people and simply extended to lone parents without any

adaptation to take account of the specific needs of one parent families. Lone parents who wish to avail of education and training opportunities at LWL face additional barriers of childcare and transport facilities and rural isolation for those living outside urban centres. LWL, throughout its 20 years in existence have identified key barriers to participation in education, specifically experienced by women in Longford.

These include:

- Rural isolation
- Experience of domestic violence
- Lack of access to childcare and transport
- Lack of third level opportunities in Longford and;
- Absence of financial support for part-time students.

Outcomes:

LWL continuously strive to address these challenges, thereby meeting the needs of learners in the region and their recent partnership with An Cosán Virtual Community College has enabled them to offer blended, distance learning programmes at Level 7. In 2014, LWL delivered the QQI Level 7 Special Purpose Award in Community Education, a CPD programme designed for tutors in community education through a blended virtual learning process. Such was the demand for this module that it was repeated in 2015 and a third module is currently underway. Again, retention rates for the first two modules have been very positive – 90%. Recognition of the quality of LWL’s Community Employment scheme as one component of the overall ISD Model resulted in LWL being selected as Lead Sponsor for Longford for the Department of Social Protection childcare model – at present there is a 95% occupancy for this scheme and already a 75% progression rate into employment/further education. The next challenge will be to source accessible, affordable higher education pathways for all of their learners.

2. An Cosán Virtual Community College

Introduction

The HEA position paper 2009 “Open and Flexible Learning” makes the point that: “from a learner’s perspective, access to higher education is no longer an “either/or” issue entailing access via ODL or campus based learning. In the past three to five years in particular, since the introduction of Web 2.0 technologies, access to learning has become hugely flexible and learners can chose from a blend of different approaches. The current trend in education and training identifies methods and tools for delivering just-in-time, on-demand learning opportunities tailored to individual learners, taking into consideration their differences in skills level, perspectives, culture and other educational contexts.”

In light of the importance of widening participation and lifelong learning at all levels, and the role that technology could play in including previously excluded populations, it is important that formal educational institutions engage with the informal community education sector. This will ensure that access is available for non-traditional students from those groups in society that have been previously excluded. A key to ensuring such access is the development of a partnership which merges the skills, knowledge and competencies of each sector together with key government departments to engage

non-traditional students in a regional, national and global context. A crucial element of such partnerships would be the engagement of learning technologies as a pathway to ensure access is available for non-traditional and educationally excluded students.

In line with this perspective, An Cosán developed an innovative and visionary strategic goal in 2013: *To scale An Cosán's social impact to allow other communities living with the injustice of poverty benefit from the social innovation that is An Cosán.*

To achieve this An Cosán developed an award winning initiative 'Virtual Community College' (VCC) to deliver education, particularly higher education, to that cohort of students from disadvantaged communities that rarely access higher education. Traditionally non-participating groups in tertiary education are the young unemployed, and adult returnee's. Poorer groups defined by unemployment, low wage, occupational class, gender, area of residence, have low participation in learning, as do ex-offenders, part-time or temporary workers, those with low levels of basic skills, and some ethnic groups (Godard et al., 2000)¹⁷.

An Cosán Virtual Community College, working in partnership with IT Carlow, is at the forefront of virtual learning in Ireland. The VCC has connected the curriculum, teaching, student support and ethos of An Cosán through virtual learning technology to ensure learners can access affordable, high-quality higher education whenever and wherever they wish.

Using a blended online model of live lectures with offline activities and assignments, combined with face to face workshops, they ensure that students have access to the up-to-date technologies and teaching methods to enable them to engage and learn effectively at a pace that suits them. It allows students to access course work at a time that suits them best and fits their learning around their own schedules. VCC partners with community education organisations, both local and national, to support students to access virtual learning programmes at a more affordable rate and empower individual learners, their families and communities. Centres provide facilities where students can access the technology required to begin or sustain engagement, in virtual learning and create collaborative peer learning communities.

Additional supports are required in order for each student to achieve their educational potential. VCC works to ensure that each student has the right supports for their needs. Blended, online learning provides the pathway to usually excluded students to access higher education.

VCC provides a range of tailored student supports including:

- An Online Student Mentoring System developed in collaboration with Three Ireland
- Small group tutorials
- Collaborative learning groups – centre led
- Peer support groups – learner led

¹⁷ Godard, S., Selwyn, N., & Williams, S. 2000. Must Try Harder! Problems Facing Technological Solutions to Non-participation in Adult Learning. British Educational Research Journal, 26(4): 507-521.

- Low cost counselling service

Current Programmes on offer:

- Certificate in Learning to Learn at Third Level (QQI Level 6)
- SPA Community Leadership (QQI Level 7)
- SPA Citizenship and Social Action (QQI Level 7)

Continuous Professional Development:

- SPA Technology Enhanced Learning (QQI Level 7)
- SPA Transformative Community Education (QQI Level 7)
- BA in Community Education & Community Development from Sept.2016 (*currently awaiting validation*).

Outcomes to date:

- To date 50 students from 6 locations have engaged in these programmes with 98% retention and 98% achievement of awards.
- Currently 60 students are undertaking awards.
- Jan 2016 will see a further 60 students taking higher education programmes.
- By December 2017, they expect to see 1,000 students undertaking courses with VCC annually

Key challenges for students that prevent access to higher education:

- Part time students are not eligible for student grants.
- Student fees of €2,000 annually are a considerable barrier for individuals in low paid jobs.
- Students on social welfare benefits have a considerable struggle to access higher education.

VCC is developing a nationwide local scholarship scheme to support local businesses to fund scholarships for local students. They propose a three year national scheme run locally where there is a built in incentive to double committed scholarship funding to a national ceiling of €50,000. VCC consider there is a major inequity on the issues of fees and grants between part time and full time students. This issue needs to be addressed urgently.

VCC recommends:

- Free fees for part-time students who are from underrepresented groups (unemployed, low skilled, early school leavers).
- Enable part-time higher education learners to avail of Funding Supports e.g. Student Assistance Fund.

3. An Cosán, Jobstown, Tallaght

Introduction

An Cosán has been delivering Higher Education in collaboration with IT Carlow since 2008. Over the previous 25 years An Cosán, in collaboration with local community stakeholders, recognised the need to provide a progression route for its current and past students and beyond to Higher Education. Research has highlighted the gross educational inequality and injustice experienced by individuals from marginalised and disadvantaged communities. In the greater Dublin area 47% access 3rd level, in Tallaght the figure is 29% and this figure is represented nationally in other areas of disadvantage.

An Cosán's model of community education is rooted in the following:

- Well-documented research which shows that socially marginalised groups, Lone Parents, travellers, people who speak other than English at home, people with a disability and those grounded in poverty, drop out of formal education at an early age and become further alienated as a direct result of their lack of qualifications and skills.
- Current government and European policies recognise the need to engage this cohort group in lifelong learning, educational professional development and progression.
- Located as we are in the heart of a socially deprived community, An Cosán has vast experience and is well-placed to understand the learning and support needs of this target group.
- A strong record of retention as a result of collaborative relationships, peer learning and a strategic supports for learners. (see appendix A)
- A continuously developing and expanding curriculum that provides opportunities for transfer and progression.
- Flexible learning arrangements that accommodate personal commitments and different learning styles.
- Creative and dynamic methodologies.

Outcomes:

Since 2008 more than 150 students have graduated with certificates, diplomas and degrees in Higher Education in An Cosán.

- The results achieved by these students are equal to and on occasion exceed the national average.
- The retention level is above the national average and averages 90%.
- 55 % of students are early school leavers.
- 45% are lone parents or separated.
- 70% are in low paid employment at entrance level, following student graduation, this statistic moves into a reversal pattern.
- 12% of students have received VDP, Simon and Redress Board Grants to contribute to their fees.
- 15% of students represent the rich cultural diversity of the community of Tallaght and beyond.

Challenges:

A significant number of students who come through higher education experience multiple challenges and An Cosán recognises that these challenges can and are barriers to individuals accessing 3rd level. In particular these challenges include:

- Part time students are not eligible for student grants.
- Students' fees in excess of €2,000 annually are a considerable barrier for individuals in low paid jobs.
- Students on social welfare benefits have a considerable struggle to access higher education.

It is important to note that a number of students who came through higher education in An Cosán received significant financial sponsorship through An Cosán's Scholarship fund. This fund was hugely supported by both corporate and philanthropic sponsors and An Cosán over the years. This fund has been significantly compromised during the period of austerity and as core funding has also been diminished it has become increasingly difficult to financially support students.

An Cosán Recommends:

- Student grant system be amended to include part time Higher Education.
- The Springboard Programme to be broadened to include community education.
- Provide Core Funding for community education organisations providing higher education courses to disadvantaged groups.

1. The Loreto Centre, Crumlin, Dublin 8

Introduction

The Loreto Centre in Crumlin was established in January 1998 to meet the needs of people in the local community, mostly women, through the provision of opportunities for personal and community development. The Centre aims to help people realise their own self-worth and potential and develop resources for a more creative and effective living. The Loreto Centre provides a friendly, safe, supportive and challenging environment for all who come to the centre. The centre provides both Adult Community Education and Psychotherapy services.

The Loreto Centre run a variety of community education programmes which include Personal Development, Creative Skills and Stress Management. For the last fourteen years the Loreto Centre has provided a Level 7 Outreach Programme in Women Gender and Social Justice Studies in collaboration with UCD.

This programme is hugely popular and offers a pathway for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds to access higher education. The programme is open to early school leavers (both employed and unemployed). Participants come from varied backgrounds and some work in the local community, for example in the Citizen's Information Office. This outreach programme allows them to access higher education on a part time basis without paying full fees. It also greatly enhances and supports their work within their community.

Outcomes:

The retention rate of the course is 97% and approximately 30 participants do the course each year. Learners also have access to additional supports which include counselling services, mentoring and access to a library on site. Many of the women have stated that they would not have the capacity to attend the course in UCD as there are no suitable transport links to the University and the cost of transport is also a barrier. Outreach is their only option to access higher education.

A third of the women who access the outreach programme have come from non-accredited courses in the Loreto Centre. These starter courses allowed them to build their confidence in a safe and supportive environment before progressing to the outreach higher education programme. As the participants are early school leavers, this level of support and encouragement in the local community is vital in helping them access this type of education. Approximately 10 of the women have progressed to Masters level after completing this outreach programme.

The Loreto Centre funds this programme and each participant is asked to pay a registration fee of €70 (if they can afford it). Initially the programme was partly supported by UCD who received some funds for their outreach programmes from the Higher Education Authority. This has since ended and the Loreto Centre have to now find alternative ways to fund and support this programme which is hugely problematic for them. The Loreto Centre hope to continue to run this programme in 2016 but are unsure if they will be able to source the necessary funds.

Conclusion

AONTAS welcomes the opportunity for the discussion on funding for higher education. We are committed to ensuring that the experience of adult learners is heard in the development of future funding models for higher level education. We would welcome the opportunity in facilitating the HEA to engage with learners on an ongoing basis in any future discussions. In addition to those already mentioned, adults who return to higher education as mature students often cannot engage with campus life in the same way as traditional graduate students. Given family and work commitments, the experience of being a mature student can be challenging and sometimes isolated. This requires greater levels of support throughout the learning experience. The impact of a range of factors outlined in this submission highlights the need for a more strategic and co-ordinated approach when looking at the issue of funding. Any future funding models should support learners from disadvantaged groups to access and complete higher education. As outlined in this submission, in order to address the most marginalised groups and support their participation in higher education funding support for part-time fees and flexible models of provision is essential. The impact of community based part-time provision as demonstrated in the case studies from Longford Women's Link, An Cosan Tallaght and Loreto Centre Crumlin engages low paid workers, the unemployed and educationally disadvantaged groups to successfully engage and complete higher education courses. Furthermore, innovative methods for higher education engagement through supportive part-time provision outlined in the Virtual Community College should also be supported by way of funding for part-time fees and financial supports for part-time learners. Part-time higher education learners are the most under served in terms of financial supports, we call for a more equitable approach to widening higher education participation to include such learners, particularly the disadvantaged.

Summary of recommendations regarding funding for higher education:

AONTAS recommends:

1. Free Fees for undergraduate study

- Maintains the view that there should be no fees for higher education.
- Free fees for part-time students who are from underrepresented groups (unemployed, low skilled, early school leavers).

2. Financial Support for part-time students

- Enable part-time undergraduates to avail of funding support e.g. Student Assistance Fund.
- Enable part-time undergraduate students to avail of the student grant system.

3. Back to Education Allowance (BTEA)

- Maintain the BTEA as a second chance educational payment option for the unemployed.
- Maintain the Part-time Option for the Back to Education Initiative.
- Reinstate the Cost of Education Allowance for Full-time learners.
- Introduce the Cost of Education Allowance at a pro rata basis for part-time learners.

4. Supporting outreach provision in the community

- Broaden the Springboard Programme to include community education based higher education provision.
- Provide Core Funding for community education organisations providing higher education courses to disadvantaged groups.

Appendix A

A key aspect of the educational ethos of An Cosán is the recognition that students from disadvantaged areas, who experience a variety of complex educational and social challenges, require a series of dedicated supports. The supports available to the Degree students include:

- Learner centred teaching and learning
- Methodologies which build on prior learning and experience of students
- Integration of study skills across the programme
- Mentoring
- Tutorials
- Fostering of a community of learners, which
- recognises the value of both collective and individual learning
- Counselling
- Childcare
- Access to computer facilities
- Library of core texts

These supports ensure that students gain the knowledge, skills and competencies required to achieve the stated learning outcomes of the programme.

Our methodology focuses on participatory and peer quality of learning and we create an environment and experiences whereby students discover and construct knowledge for themselves. (Barr and Tagg 1995)