

# Public Consultation on the Irish Aid Development and Global Citizenship Education Strategy 2021- 2024: AONTAS Submission

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**Date: 19<sup>th</sup> March 2021**

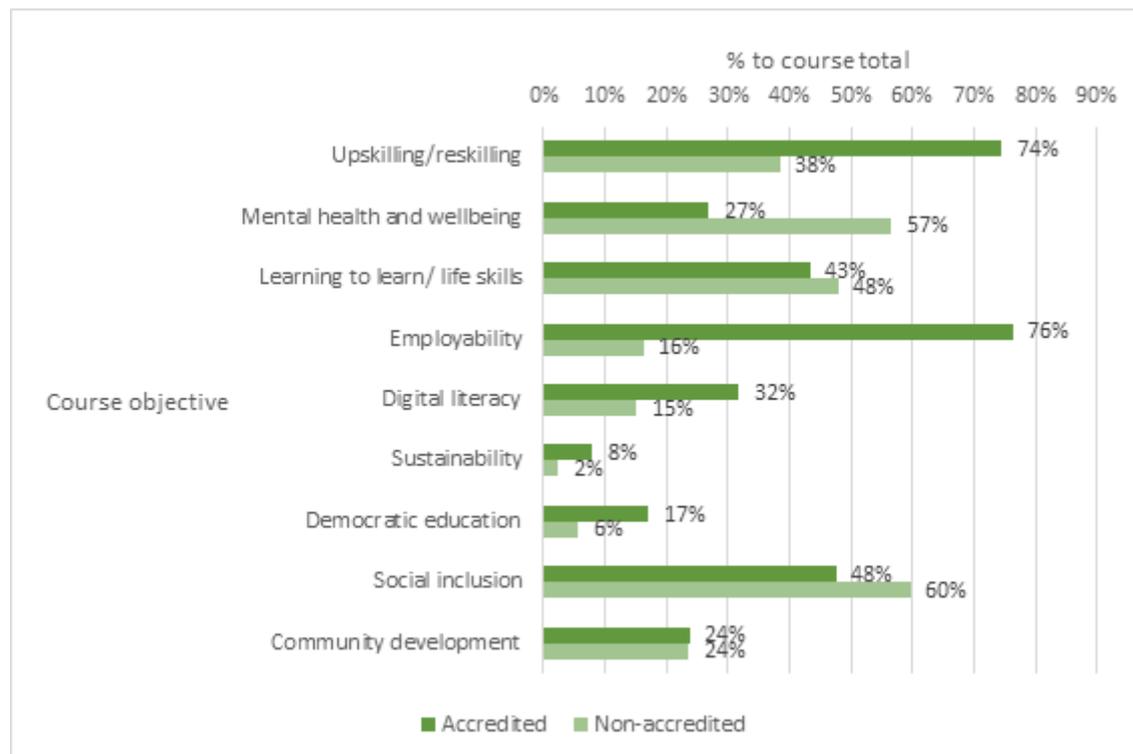


## About AONTAS

AONTAS is a long established (1969), non-governmental membership organisation that promotes that value of adult learning and advocates for the rights of all adult to quality learning across the tertiary education system. We have an unwavering commitment to educationally disadvantaged adults, we offer solutions-focused advocacy that is evidence-based drawing on research and our extensive meaningful learner engagement activities. Our Strategic Plan: A Vision for Educational Equality (2019-2022) is informed by principles of: social justice, feminism, partnership, valuing diversity, advancing equality and supporting social inclusion. We continually strive to be offer work of the highest quality as an inclusive, informed, dynamic organisation which will act as a cooperative, trusted, critical friend to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. We continually engage with learners and educators from further education and training, community education and higher education on a weekly basis, affording us key insights into practice. We have expertise in educational equality and we advocate strongly for community education, as the most inclusive, yet underfunded part of the education system. Our work covers: Research: Authentically hearing learner voice, particularly those marginalised, through a mixed methods research project, The National FET Learner Forum. Some recent examples of publications in this area are the 2019 Annual Synthesis Report and the COVID-19 FET Learner Report. Democratising relevant academic work in our well-established peer reviewed journal, The Adult Learner. Promoting lifelong learning and access: first week of March the annual AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival (circa 300 events/open days across Ireland), STAR awards recognising excellence in inclusive education projects and an annual Policy Day event. Encouraging people to engage in learning: Freephone information referral helpline and website [www.onestepup.ie](http://www.onestepup.ie). Building capacity and supporting professional development in community education through the AONTAS Community Education Network (Est. 2007, 10-year anniversary conference opened by Minister Coveney). We have strong European links: designated by the then Department of Education and Skills as the National Coordinator for the European Agenda for Adult Learning. We lead or partner in 8 European funded projects across all levels of Erasmus+, are on the Board of the European Association for Education of Adults (EAEA) and are linked globally. Co-established the Network of Adult Learning Across Border (NALAB) in response to Brexit, at the AONTAS Lifelong Learning Summit, with special guest, Secretary General Seán Ó Foghlú. Ultimately, all our work, and communications activities aims to advocate for the rights of all adults to engage in learning so to fulfil their aspirations. Who we represent: Organisations and individuals committed to educational equality for adults: 500 members [all 16 ETBs, over 120 community education organisations, adult learning/access departments of Higher Education Institutions, social justice NGOs, educators and learners across the Island of Ireland].

## Introduction

A significant number of AONTAS members and adult learners make invaluable contributions every day to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, as well as a range of Irish Aid’s policy objectives, through adult learning provision and community education practice. Below are figures gathered through AONTAS’ [Community Education Network Census](#):



(Figure 1. Community Education Network Census 2020)

As members of both [Coalition 2030](#) and the [Irish Development Education Association](#) (IDEA), as well as partners in the Saolta consortium, AONTAS shares many of the Irish Aid’s strategic goals. This submission is therefore made by AONTAS as part of the public consultation process for the development of the new [Irish Aid Development and Global Citizenship Education Strategy 2021- 2024](#). AONTAS welcomes this opportunity to engage with Irish Aid in the knowledge that the Adult and Community Education sector is well positioned to support, implement and further the new Strategy.

As outlined in the guidelines for the consultation process AONTAS’ recommendations are made under the following eight questions Irish Aid has provided:

1. How can Irish Aid support life-long learning and increase public understanding of and engagement with development and global citizenship issues as well as increasing awareness of the Irish Aid programme?
2. Are there other groups or organisations we should seek to work with in order to build this awareness and engagement?
3. What has changed in the external environment since 2017, both in the education sector and broader societal changes nationally and globally, and how should that be reflected in our priorities, our relationships and in our revised strategy?
4. What do you consider to be the key areas of progress made since 2017 in the implementation of the Irish Aid Strategic Planning process? Are there any key lessons learnt or gaps in the current response?
5. With reference to the five output areas of the current Irish Aid Development Education Strategic Plan, what do you consider the key priorities for 2021- 2024 should be?
6. Irish Aid is considering changing the name of the programme and strategy to Global Citizenship Education, do you have any comments or concerns in relation to this suggestion?
7. What opportunities have arisen from the COVID-19 experience and how can we learn from it in order to reach a broader audience?
8. How can technology and digital outreach help us?

**1. How can Irish Aid support life-long learning and increase public understanding of and engagement with development and global citizenship issues as well as increasing awareness of the Irish Aid programme?**

AONTAS welcomes Irish Aid's commitment to building the capacity of the Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector to further embed Development and Global Citizenship Education (DGCE) in the daily lives of all communities across the country by investing in adult learners. It is AONTAS' position that the many providers in the ACE sector already delivers good practice examples for success in this regard. However, given what is at stake in terms of the worsening climate crisis, increasing socioeconomic as well as educational inequalities, the worrying fallout from both the ongoing pandemic and Brexit, as well as rising right-wing populism, and the rise of ultra-nationalism and racism being experienced today, it is clear that action must be taken to support lifelong learning and increase public understanding of and engagement with development and global citizenship issues via the Irish Aid Programme. AONTAS

encourages Irish Aid's renewed efforts to adequately resource the ACE sector and continue delivering positive outcomes across the five areas of the current Irish Aid Development Education Strategic Plan. AONTAS recommends that adequate resourcing of ACE sector organisations, including those reliant on the community and voluntary sector, in the form of multi-annual sustainable funding streams, be flexible to the needs of learners and their communities. To protect the autonomy of the pedagogical methodology of ACE organisations which is proven to have positive outcomes in terms of social cohesion (see Bailey et al. 2010). In addition, increased investment in the ACE sector should build the capacity of organisations and practitioners within the sector to deliver more provision in the areas of DGCE (see Saolta 2020; AONTAS 2008) and promote the Irish Aid programme.

## **2. Are there other groups or organisations we should seek to work with in order to build this awareness and engagement?**

In order to implement the new Strategy and fully achieve its objectives throughout 2021-2024, Irish Aid should foster relationships with all stakeholders within the wider education ecosystem. AONTAS fully supports Irish Aid's increased engagement with and support of the ACE sector in its efforts to make sure that informal and non-formal adult education is able to play its pivotal role. There are a range of stakeholders within this field which Irish Aid would benefit from working with. Through our partnerships and projects in Ireland and Europe including IDEA, INAR, [SAOLTA](#), [FutureLabAE](#) and [Communicating Europe Initiative](#) AONTAS is aware of the vital role played by adult educators in community settings in achieving policy objectives which align strongly with Irish Aid's key focus. A significant number of AONTAS members are on the frontlines of ensuring there is public awareness of and engagement with development and global citizenship education issues.

Given how DGCE is widely understood as being such a good 'fit' within ACE provision (AONTAS 2009), we look forward to working with Irish Aid where appropriate to continue cultivating a shared understanding of development education and active citizenship and supporting AONTAS members with this important work. AONTAS recommends providing further support and investment in mapping the provision of DGCE within the ACE sector in order to continue developing a living knowledge-bank where models of best practice can be identified and used to replicate what works well. [Irish Aid's Development Education Strategy 2017 – 2023](#) recognises the complexity of the community education sector and the reach of provision through numerous bodies (CDPs, FRC, NGOs etc.) and recognises the need for engagement with many and varied audiences (page 32). Through its national Community Education Network (CEN), AONTAS provides a forum for such diverse groups to work collectively towards common goals. AONTAS recommends identifying and working with the full range of social justice

focused organisations in the community and voluntary sector to promote GCDE in their work.

The AONTAS Community Education Network Census (2020) found 15 ACE organisations out of 76 respondents are directly working on issues surrounding sustainability and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. AONTAS can provide further information on these groups and their programmes, with the consent of respondents, for Irish Aid in the future.

Colleagues within Development Perspectives, the lead partner in the Saolta consortium, have been mapping DGCE provision within the sector. For more visit <https://www.developmentperspectives.ie/saolta-research> or see the [Report on the Initial Mapping of Development Education in the Adult & Community Education Sector](#) (Saolta, December 2020).

**3. What has changed in the external environment since 2017, both in the education sector and broader societal changes nationally and globally, and how should that be reflected in our priorities, our relationships and in our revised strategy?**

Irish Aid's priorities and relationships have to adapt to a range of fundamental alterations to the environment since 2017. To list some of the main changes which echo other stakeholders' perspectives:

- An increase in educational inequity experienced during COVID-19 (OECD, 2020).
- Greater cohesion within the ACE sector around the climate crisis and DGCE issues ([See Roscommon Women's Network for an example of best practice](#))
- The new Erasmus+ Funding cycle 2021 – 2027 that can provide opportunities for developing European collaboration and resources for the sector
- A new SOLAS Further Education and Training Strategy which includes a commitment to the development of a Community Education Framework
- Brexit – and threats to the cohesion and solidarity of the EU
- Mass adaptation to online learning and digitalisation
- The COVID-19 pandemic and medium to long-term impacts on education, poverty, and social inclusion
- Rising right-wing populism, xenophobia and racism threatening the health of Irish and international democracy
- Increased awareness of and support for Black Lives Matter movement(s)
- Greater awareness of local-global interdependence
- New Dept. of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Focussing on the COVID-19 pandemic for example, the negative impact of the pandemic has resulted in a worrying reduction in courses and where courses are able to continue, much of the focus has been on improving digital skills and bridging the digital divide rather than on participatory, transformative learning processes which are invaluable to a healthy educational infrastructure that embeds DGCE (see AONTAS, April 2020). The lack of social interaction has resulted in increased isolation and fewer opportunities for the type of engagements that enhance community cohesion and solidarity between communities. The associated fallout from the pandemic will likely include increased unemployment alongside lower levels of educational attainment and rates of participation in lifelong learning. In addition, there is an increasing threat of right-wing conservative populism gaining a stronger foothold within sections of the population that are more vulnerable to manipulation for variety of reasons including digital poverty and low educational attainment. This is heightened in online and social media spaces. The fostering of negative attitudes towards democratic institutions, immigrant communities alongside increased xenophobia and racism combined may pose a serious threat to the policy objectives of Irish Aid and its shared goals within the ACE sector and highlights the need for a strategic collaborative approach going forward.

**4. What do you consider to be the key areas of progress made since 2017 in the implementation of the Irish Aid Strategic Planning process? Are there any key lessons learnt or gaps in the current response?**

AONTAS echoes the points raised and recommendations made by the IDEA Adult and Community Education Task Group in the collective's submission regarding the Irish Aid Strategy Review last October 2020; and in the Task Group's submission made by Task Group as part of this consultation (available from IDEA).

**5. With reference to the five output areas of the current Irish Aid Development Education Strategic Plan, what do you consider the key priorities for 2021- 2024 should be?**

AONTAS supports the strategic areas and actions proposed by the IDEA Adult and Community Education Task Group in their submission to Irish Aid. This includes:

- **Communication and advocacy**
- **Policy Development and Coherence**
- **Curriculum Development and Integration**
- **Capacity Building**
- **Programme Evaluation and Research**

In addition, AONTAS recommends ensuring that learners at all levels are at the heart of the future strategic plan with learner voice embedded within its policy recommendations. As an organisation with an all-island reach and evolving regional

relationships (see [NALAB](#)), as well as a strong presence at [European level](#) AONTAS is well positioned to support Irish Aid with actions regarding **communication, advocacy, learner voice, and capacity building**. AONTAS and our members look forward to working with Irish Aid to ensure that adult learning plays its role and makes a valuable contribution to our shared policy objectives for a better world.

**6. Irish Aid is considering changing the name of the programme and strategy to Global Citizenship Education, do you have any comments or concerns in relation to this suggestion?**

AONTAS recommends that Irish Aid be mindful of the expertise of those within the sector who support the name change as much as those who reject it or are ambivalent towards evolving terminology. Through increased dialogue and consultation with the diverse voices within the sector, Irish Aid could be inclusive of all names which the organisations and practitioners themselves decide best captures their work and the value of the learning outcomes. The success of those organisations within the ACE sector who specialise in what is being termed 'DGCE' for the purpose of this submission is derived from their diverse perspectives. Diversity here is a strength that should be respected and nourished in order to develop, implement and achieve more and faster through the new Strategy. Terminology should be flexible and allowed to change or remain the same depending on how the language best fits the reality of the work of those at the coalface of provision on the ground. AONTAS therefore recommends that any change of the language used would be followed by a process aimed at promoting a common understanding of Global Citizenship Education, Development Education, Social Justice Education and Global Justice Education which aligns with [the principles and indicators within the Code of Good Practice for Development Education](#) (IDEA 2021).

**7. What opportunities have arisen from the COVID-19 experience and how can we learn from it in order to reach a broader audience?**

The pandemic has provided us with the opportunity to experience and learn from digitalisation within our communities, and the impacts of inclusion and exclusion. While there have undoubtedly been more opportunities for a greater reach and accessibility for some as they can join in from home instead of travelling. We have also witnessed a lack of access to technology, poor connectivity, and low digital skills as barriers for many in accessing learning opportunities. In addition, to the loss of face to face interaction and the importance of social connection with peers are a must for many of our learners within community education. AONTAS therefore encourages Irish Aid to combine actions around DGCE with digital literacy and digital skills in the new Strategy,

and support community organisations to deliver programmes in a flexible manner in order to meet the diverse needs of adult learners across Ireland.

## **8. How can technology and digital outreach help us?**

Building on points made above, members of the public, adult learners and their communities who struggle to participate and benefit equally from being online must be placed at the centre of efforts to leverage technological and digital outreach. AONTAS encourages Irish Aid to work closely with learners and the ACE sector in order to meet the goals of the new Strategy and ensure a collective ownership within Irish communities.

## **Conclusion**

The ACE sector includes a network of organisations, educators, practitioners and learners that work from the principles of social inclusion, advancing equality, social justice, feminism, and partnership which echo and support the mission of Irish Aid. This means they have a collective voice and offer a unique position that can contribute to this work, promote it, and further embed it within local communities and Irish society. AONTAS recommends financial investment in and collaboration with this sector in order to meet the future policy goals of the new Irish Aid Strategy. If invested in and supported to deliver their work autonomously and flexibly, practitioners and providers can embed transformative dialogical pedagogy in their work, and assist Irish Aid in their vision for the future. AONTAS looks forward to working with Irish Aid and strengthening Ireland's contribution to a sustainable and just world through development and global citizenship education.

This submission was developed by Dearbháil Lawless (Head of Advocacy), Dr Niamh O'Reilly (CEO), Dr Sam O'Brien-Olinger (Information and Policy Officer) and Suzanne Kyle (CEN Co-ordinator) as an organisation response on behalf of AONTAS. Contact [dlawless@aontas.com](mailto:dlawless@aontas.com)

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## The Voice of Adult Learning

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