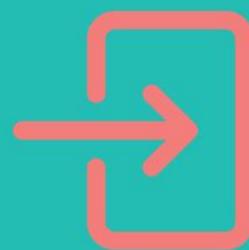


AONTAS

Submission for the Public Consultation on the SUSI Grant Scheme



Date: 16th April 2021



**The Voice of
Adult Learning**

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. 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 7 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

AONTAS welcomes the SUSI Grant Review and the Department's commitment under the current Programme for Government (2020) to address the issues surrounding educational inequality in Ireland. An area which the SUSI Scheme can make significant strides in addressing. Much has changed since the Student Support Act (2011) forming the basis for potential structural reform of the management and administration of SUSI. In this submission, AONTAS will directly refer to the Terms of Reference to outline how the Department could transform SUSI into a comprehensive mechanism for financially supporting a socially inclusive integrated model across tertiary education. These improvements could assist in meeting a range of policy goals within Government strategies including the [National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2021](#). In addition, to leading on the European stage in meeting targets set out in policies such as the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#). For example, some of these include:

- At least 60% of all adults should participate in training every year
- At least 78% of the population aged 20 to 64 should be in employment by 2030
- At least 80% of those aged 16-74 should have basic digital skills, a precondition for inclusion and participation in the labour market and society in a digitally transformed Europe.
- The number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion should be reduced by at least 15 million by 2030

These targets build on those set out in [the European Skills Agenda](#), [the Council Recommendation on Vocational education and training](#), and in [the Council Resolution on](#)

the [European Education Area](#). At international policy level one of the most important areas which the recommendations made here speak to is the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, most specifically [Goal 4](#): ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’.

For any reform of the SUSI to be considered successful by stakeholders across the adult learning and community education sector, a new system of financial supports would have to prioritise and be flexible to the diverse needs of learners in FET and community education programmes. The SUSI has certainly contributed to the country’s educational progress but limited investment yields limited returns. A more ambitious and achievable plan is needed now more than ever to support Ireland’s most disadvantaged adult learners to not only recover from the pandemic but to prosper post-COVID. By placing these learners, their families, communities, and the value for money that greater investment in educational equity brings, at the centre of the Exchequer’s investment in adult learning the SUSI would become a far more comprehensive catalyst for positive educational, economic and social change than it traditionally has been.



TOR 1. To review the following SUSI eligibility criteria:

AONTAS calls for all adult learners, including part-time, on the National Framework of Qualifications to be eligible for the SUSI grant

AONTAS urges the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to view and lead the tertiary education sector as an interconnected holistic ecosystem that benefits and supports all adult learners. If the system is fragmented it limits its capacity to operate in a mutually beneficial manner. All levels on the National Framework of Qualifications play an integral role within the wider education system. They uphold, reinforce, and enable progression and success. An educational pathway must be connected and easy to navigate. According to the [Statement of Strategy \(2021\)](#) one of the Department's goals is to provide: *"Diverse Pathways (and) promote the complementary roles of further and higher education and champion closer alignment and integration, facilitating enhanced information for school-leavers and for all seeking learning opportunities, providing a wider choice at transition points and enabling progression pathways across and between different institutions."* (p 9). Therefore, we must ensure that financial assistance enables adult learning by providing a smooth integrated system whereby all adult learners can avail of financial support, identify their educational pathway, apply through a unified system, and have a quality learning experience. For this model to be holistic, it must include and recognise supports needed at each stage of this journey including literacy, community education, Further Education and Training, and Higher Education.

AONTAS welcomes the inclusion of FET Learners within the scope of the review and the Terms of Reference. However, there are other categories of adult learners within the wider tertiary education ecosystem who should be included if the Exchequer is to see a deeper and wider socioeconomic return on investment. This includes:

- i) part-time learners
- ii) learners at all levels on the NFQ
- iii) part-time learners and those studying off-site

iv) learners on blended and online courses

v) learners repeating a year or moving across rather than upwards on the NFQ

AONTAS calls for a move away from the current criteria towards a broader and flexible understanding of provision that recognises an adult engaging in education and values the time commitment given by a person towards their education. It is this commitment to learning that must be financially supported to enable their success. This means parity of esteem for full and part-time learners, and at each stage of the National Framework of Qualifications.

Mitigating Educational Disadvantage:

Recent changes in criteria have shown success in providing a more inclusive model with additional learners in Direct Provision now engaging in Higher Education. According to Minister Harris, there has been a “five-fold rise in number of people qualifying for support” (Irish Times, 2020). Learners who are educationally disadvantaged and underrepresented in higher education require suitable support systems, including appropriate financial means to engage in education. “Many lone-parents who seek support from SVP have expressed their interest in attending Higher Education on a part-time basis but the fact they cannot receive the SUSI grant is a major barrier” (SVP, 2020). The advocacy and support organisation for lone-parents One Family recommends that SUSI should be available parents engaging in education regardless of the age of their youngest child (up to 18). In speaking with the Irish Traveller Movement on the SUSI Grant Review, Director Barnard Joyce told AONTAS “the lack of grant support disproportionately impacts on Travellers returning to third level and their opportunities.” Mr Joyce says current supports including the 1916 Bursary are for full-time students and the SUSI application and other systems can be difficult to navigate. Therefore, reinforcing our recommendations for an all adult learner system with increased supports, that includes part-time learners in order to support Travellers to engage in education. In addition, the ESRI (2011) tell us that through Rational Access Theory (RAT)

learners and their families will make decisions on their educational opportunities based on rational behaviour and choose programmes based on their perceptions of costs involved, benefits gained, and potential success. Therefore lone-parents, members of the Traveller community, or working-class people due to persisting financial barriers and narrow provision may continue to be underrepresented in higher education unless there are systematic changes to remove barriers for their access, engagement and success in education.

‘The impact of education, particularly to improve the lives of the most disadvantaged, cannot be overstated. It is a Constitutionally-protected right for all and contributes to the well-being of our citizens. Investment in education at all levels and throughout the life cycle can deliver a more equal society and prepare citizens to participate in a democracy. Access to appropriate education and skills development from early years to adulthood is one of the key public services that enables participation in society, public life and the labour market. The potential impact of digital transition on the labour market makes access to education and training throughout adulthood a priority’ ([Social Justice Ireland 2021, 226](#))

There is a need to mitigate educational disadvantage and provide necessary supports in order to address the imbalance, where certain groupings are under-represented in our student and learner population

“The provision of a more integrated holistic approach to promote learning opportunities for all members of our society throughout their life course is fundamental to creating a society that genuinely values each individual member equally. Equality of opportunity in education can only be achieved through cohesive planning, and appropriate funding and support mechanisms across all generations of learners.”

- AONTAS member survey response on April 4 2021

TOR 2: To review the current income thresholds:

AONTAS calls for long-term investment in Irish society through realistic financial support via the SUSI grant scheme.

This includes:

- i) Increasing the income threshold and ensuring no student is in debt from engaging in education
- ii) Recognising learners that are financially independent under the age of 23



Increasing the financial threshold to ensure socioeconomically disadvantaged learners can access and succeed within all forms of education is a must. The long-term returns on this investment for the Exchequer, the Department, the State and Irish society far outweigh savings rooted in short-term planning. This reform will support Ireland in combating poverty, improve health outcomes, develop digital literacy, critical thinking skills and democratic participation (including protecting vulnerable populations against online ultra-nationalist right-wing populism) due to the benefits of adult learning. As outlined in The Path Ahead (2021) upskilling and reskilling in order to adapt to a post-COVID society, to post-Brexit conditions, a digital industrial landscape, enhancing employability as well as civic participation and democratic engagement enriches the lives of our people and would support fundamental dimensions of the country's recovery and resilience.

Accessing financial support in Ireland should not be viewed as a competitive race for those in need. In 2019, it was reported that there had been a 6% fall in the number of students receiving SUSI grants over a three-year period (O'Kelly, 2019). This drop could have been attributed to current thresholds no longer providing a realistic bar for entry to target applicants due to changing economic conditions. It is therefore recommended that a review in accordance with current economic trends is undertaken, to ascertain a fairer and more accurate threshold. This threshold should be reviewed on 2-3-year basis to reflect the current costs of living and engaging in education.

In addition, a potential recipient of the SUSI grant should not be in fear of losing access to other social benefits, in order to comply with eligibility criteria. People living in poverty or with difficult financial circumstances should not be forced to decide between a grant enabling access to education or other social supports that help pay for healthcare, food, or rent.

Recognising Financial Independence:

Learners under the age of twenty-three must have the opportunity be recognised as financially independent from their parents. This cohort are a diverse group which includes younger people who may have had to leave home, those who are working to support their parents, people with children as dependents, those who are homeless, and people who have moved out and can no longer seek support from their parents or guardians.

TOR 3: To review the current maintenance grant which is a contribution made towards a student's day-to-day living expenses and is paid in nine monthly instalments.

AONTAS calls for a move away from a financial contribution towards a model of living financial support whereby the SUSI grant:

- i) Covers the true costs of attending courses, including equipment and materials needed for educational purposes**
- ii) Reviews net income instead of gross income to account for living costs**
- iii) Ensures there is no negative impact on social welfare payments for learners**
- iv) Provides 12 monthly payments throughout the year with no part-time job implicating a student's eligibility**

A 'contribution', as it is currently understood and defined within SUSI's grant system is not enough to breakdown financial barriers for those seeking to engage in education. Families from disadvantaged communities are already struggling to survive in current economic conditions. Research conducted on the Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) found

participants, half of which were employed, did not have adequate income to meet current living standards (SVP, 2020).

This lack of meaningful financial support perpetuates a cycle in which a range of groups cannot access education, especially career areas with long placement hours including medicine as students could not work to financially contribute to their costs. Internships and placements are also required for many degree programmes, and this lack of meaningful financial support excludes students who need to work to earn and supplement their income, or who simply cannot afford to commit full time to an unpaid internship while financially unsupported, which later places them competitively at a disadvantage within their career. AONTAS urges the Department to provide a true cost grant that meets the financial needs of those engaging in education. This includes registration, materials, rent, food, living expenses and other items. This should also include a 12-month grant scheme to support learners during the summer period. A year-round grant would absolve a number of inequalities experienced by those who may feel the need to prematurely leave their courses in order to avoid lost income or those who secure summer jobs that barely provide a living wage, in order to stay within the SUSI eligibility criteria. Within the context of the pandemic, many students could not work to support themselves throughout the summer month period and now have no financial support as a starting point to supplement their income.

Given the shift to online remote learning and the expected hybrid/blended model of provision into the future, 'day-to-day' living expenses must also include internet connection costs and the technology needed to participate fully in a course. Over the course of the pandemic, a blended model of learning has become the dominant mode of delivery with varying levels of onsite and online delivery aligned to public health advice and to the needs of different disciplines and different learner cohorts. Notwithstanding substantial investment in mitigating measures, a number of concerns are now mounting that the mitigating measures being deployed may not be sufficient to fully address the growing gap being created by a lack of access to onsite learning and experience.

Specific issues are also presenting for the further education and training (FET) sector, include:

- Lack of sufficient digital skills to deal with the move to online teaching and learning.
- Access to I.T. equipment and connectivity issues.
- Provision of vocational, practical and work placement content.
- Exacerbation of disadvantage for marginalised groups.
- Balancing caring or family responsibilities with trying to continue engaging with the learning process'

(Department of the Taoiseach, 2021).

TOR 4: To review the current adjacent/non-adjacent rates of grant and cost implications of making any changes to the present rates.

AONTAS recommends 'top-up' financial support for students attending education in high-rent areas such as Dublin or Cork.

Ciara Fanning, President of the Irish Second-Level Students Union, (ISSU) told the Oireachtas Education Committee in 2019 that “where once a maintenance grant of 3,000 euro may have covered the full cost of accommodation for the academic term, now it does not even cover half in Dublin, Cork and Galway” (McCurry, 2019). To reflect this situation, AONTAS recommends a top-up system for students attending institutions in higher rent areas including Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway etc. This system would reflect and account for the difference in living costs from city to city, using a purchasing power parity. This would create a more equitable grant system that accurately reflects and accounts for county specific housing and living conditions, instead of leaving learners to grapple independently with the particular economic market conditions set within their institution’s county.

Additionally, there is a high number of students travelling two hours or more each way on their commuter journey, sometimes while living and studying within the same county, due to a lack of local travel infrastructure and affordable housing opportunities (Census, 2019). This places additional stress on learners, and reduces their capacity to engage in student activities such as study groups, clubs and societies, while also impacting the ability of a student to enter employment, placement or volunteering for anything other than weekend hours.

Private accommodation is gaining income from the Exchequer due to schemes such as the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and this impacts on the housing and social situation in Ireland (Ireland's Housing Magazine, 2020). While this situation continues to escalate, it is necessary to create a system that addresses the negative repercussions felt by those most vulnerable in adult learning. Financial support is critical for enabling learners to live close to their institution in order to have a quality and successful learning experience.



TOR 5: An international comparison of the cost of attending Higher Education Institutions

AONTAS urges the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to provide free, inclusive and flexible education for students as modelled in Denmark, Norway, Finland and others on the international stage.

In Minister Harris' own words during his [speech to the TUI Annual Congress 2021](#) on the €168 million fund provided to the tertiary education sector for tackling educational disadvantage during the pandemic:

“It is a real proof of concept that targeted investments can make a massive difference in the delivery of adult education in the community and can, quite frankly, be transformational in terms of impact...[A]nd of course other measures like the student support payment, the doubling of the Student Assistance Fund and the laptop funding and extra mental health funding I have referred to have made a real difference and we must now build on them... Some people believe in incremental change. They believe if you do a little bit this year and another little bit in a few years eventually things will improve. I don't accept that. We need a fully integrated third level sector in Ireland. People have been pointing this out for decades but it remains undone. This means we have yet to reach our full potential... You can have all the lofty ambitions and plans you want but to make them a reality we need to properly fund third level education. Being honest, I feel this is an issue which has been ducked and dodged for far too long. We have made some progress in recent years and investment levels have increased but it is not where it needs to be.”

(Department of FHERIS 2021).

For the country's tertiary education system to reach its full potential and deliver value for money to the Exchequer, Ireland must join those jurisdictions with the most developed and equitable lifelong learning systems. Transforming the SUSI so that it may evolve into a truly universal and fit-for-purpose policy tool would see us join countries like Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway and Sweden.

Below is a list taken from Studyportals.com comparing how well European countries rank in this regard:

Country	EU students (fees per semester in Euros)	Non-EU international students (fees in Euros)
Austria	Free (also some developing countries)	727 (applied sciences 727 – 7500 per semester)
Denmark	Free	6000 - 16000
Finland	Free	BA - 5000 – 13000 MA - 8000 - 18000
France	170 - 650	170 - 650
Germany	Free (BA and MA to anyone from anywhere)	*Except Baden-Württemberg who charge non-EU 3000
Italy	Public 0 – 5000 yearly	
Netherlands	Public 700 - 2100	
Norway	Free (BA, MA and PhD to anyone from anywhere)	
Spain	Set by regional governments Public BA – 1500- 3500 MA – 300 - 3500	Some are the same for non-EU students, others charge 1000 euro more
Sweden	Free BA or MA all EU/EEA, Swiss or Nordic students PhD free to all international students	BA or MA – 7500 – 25500 euro 85-euro application fee
Switzerland	BA and MA – 400-3,700	BA or MA - 400 – 3700

		PhD – 100 - 900
United Kingdom	Prior to Brexit EU students paid the same as UK students they increase from August 2021	Non-UK students (£) BA – 7000 – 40000 MA – 8000 – 45000 MBA's over 50000

Furthermore, the countries with free models of education highlighted in the above table place Ireland a step behind internationally. The Department set out a plan in Innovation 2020 to make Ireland a global leader in innovation, science and technology. This Strategy key goals are:

- Excellent research will be performed in strategically important areas with relevance and impact for the economy and society
- Ireland will have a strong, innovative and internationally competitive enterprise base, growing employment, sales and exports
- The development of a renowned pool of talent in Ireland's public research system and in industry, which maximises exchange of talent and knowledge between the two
- A coherent, joined-up innovation ecosystem, responsive to emerging opportunities, delivering enhanced impact through the creation and application of knowledge
- An internationally competitive research system that acts as a magnet and catalyst for talent and industry

If Ireland cannot compete in the world marketplace for both attracting top international academic talent while also failing to incentivise keeping the best homegrown researchers, scientists, professors and so on then it is difficult to see how the Department will achieve

the above. Transforming the SUSI grant to expand the potential pool of talent to include more under-represented groups in FET and Higher Education in Ireland would be a significant step towards making Ireland a world-class centre of excellence in adult learning, research, innovation and science where investment in human capital produces both one of the best tertiary education systems and one of the most equitable lifelong learning societies in Europe and the globe.

In the context of Ireland and Europe’s economic recovery from COVID, The European Social Pillar of Human Rights makes clear that ‘increasing adult participation in training to 60% is paramount to improve employability, boost innovation, ensure social fairness and close the digital skills gap. Yet, by 2016 only 37% of adults were participating in learning activities each year. For the low-qualified adults this rate only reached 18%. A key factor of success to ensure that adults are able to engage in up- and reskilling later in life is a strong foundation of basic and transversal skills acquired in initial education and training, in particular among disadvantaged groups. In 2019, 10.2% of young people left education and training with maximum lower secondary education and were not anymore involved in education and training activities. These figures risk to worsen as a result of the current crisis. Efforts must therefore be strengthened to increase adult participation in training and to improve the levels of achievement in initial education and training’ (p 11).



TOR 6. To ensure that the aforementioned SUSI eligibility criteria are explored

AONTAS calls for a systematic review of the system every 2-3 years that accounts for the changing economic and social situation in Irish society

In its recent [submission to the Royal Irish Academy’s Higher Education Futures Group](#), AONTAS outlined how the major drivers of change for tertiary education in the decade ahead will be complex. This complexity demands high level of flexibility and learner-

centredness. For example, the pandemic will continue to have an impact on our labour market, affecting the opportunities that graduates will have available to them after they complete their education. This includes barriers faced by those currently in education attempting to undertake work placements during the pandemic. These challenges will require long-term solutions and constant monitoring as emerging economic trends unfold. AONTAS recommends that changes to the SUSI be reviewed every 2-3 years to account for and adapt to the changing economic and social situation in Irish society and include an analysis of the rising cost of living alongside various other pertinent economic indicators such as inflation.

In the short to medium-term expanding the SUSI eligibility criteria would be an optimal measure for supporting all adult learners through these uncertain times to ensure they are not left behind as result of the crisis. In the longer-term graduates will have to face a rapidly changing economy that requires employee agility and consistent retraining and upskilling. The digitalisation and automation of the workplace will result in an uptake in mature learners returning to education, with the aim of upskilling or reskilling for employment. These learners will return to education at various life stages and will have more complex financial needs will need to be met before they can equally participate in post-secondary education of any kind. AONTAS therefore recommends amending the SUSI eligibility criteria accordingly.

Promoting a tertiary-wide solution is of critical importance to the sector's ability to prepare and support adult learners in this new economic landscape. Likewise, all educational institutions need to ready themselves to meet the needs of larger numbers of learners with more diverse financial needs. In order to do this, a more inclusive and extensive set of eligibility criteria for the SUSI is necessary. AONTAS urges the Department as part of this reform to consider net rather than gross income.



TOR 7. To consider current supports available to Further Education and Training (FET) learners

AONTAS recommends all learners in Level 5 & 6 programmes are included within the SUSI Grant System

‘In terms of access to formal learning higher education has a key role to play in providing people with the resources and conditions necessary to cope with, inform and shape a rapidly changing society. The major challenge facing higher education comprises a culture of change at an institutional level to move away from the traditional emphasis on front-loading initial education for full-time students to embrace a more diverse student cohort with equally diverse needs. This requires a corresponding culture of change within higher education policy to translate policy into practice in real terms so as to ensure equality of opportunity through appropriate funding and support mechanisms.’

-AONTAS member survey response (2021)

The establishment of the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has opened the door for greater cooperation in adult learning. This is a welcome development, as progress toward a more equitable lifelong learning society will require a fully integrated and flexible approach to education across the tertiary sector. The future economic environment and jobs market will require continuous lifelong learning and upskilling for all. This will mean learners will need to be able to move between community, Further Education and Higher Education sectors easily and throughout their careers to ensure they are able to access learning opportunities to meet their personal wellbeing and employment needs. As continuous learning will be essential to keep up with the modern changing economy, we must focus on removing barriers that remain in place for particular groups with lower level qualifications and low incomes who have traditionally been excluded from full participation such as Travellers, lone-parents, those with disabilities, health challenges, as well as mature students, older adult learners and so on. The [2017 Adult Education Survey](#) has helped to identify who these groups are and the barriers that currently prevent them from accessing their Further Education and Training options. A major focus of the SUSI Review should be finding ways to extend financial support to these groups. The most recent meeting of the National Access Steering Group on February 11th 2021 highlighted an average of 10% of disadvantaged

learners represented in higher education. This was down to 5% in IADT, TCD, and UCD. However, there was an average of 20% coming from affluent backgrounds across the institutions. Previously, according to the Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021; in 2017, there was an estimate of 6,617 students from the category of employers and managers and yet this compared to just 1,840 from semi-skilled and 751 learners from unskilled backgrounds. There is an overrepresentation of certain groups in Irish Higher Education institutions and an underrepresentation of people from working class backgrounds who experience financial and other barriers in accessing education (HEA 2019). This highlights a clear need for improvements to the SUSI in the areas of equality, diversity and inclusion.

AONTAS therefore urges the Department to consider questions including:

1. What is the social and economic benefit of supporting marginalised and vulnerable learners in adult learning?
2. How can the cross-departmental collaboration improve the system while saving money for the exchequer?
3. How can connecting FET and HE increase the diversity of students in higher education?

[The Impact of COVID-19 on QQI Awards](#) Report from QQI demonstrates the worrying decrease in numbers of learners since 2019. Expanding the SUSI eligibility criteria would be an efficient and effective policy tool for (a) rapidly restoring numbers of learners progressing into in FET and HE back to desired pre-COVID levels and (b) making sure that Ireland has a chance of reaching its EU Lifelong Learning target commitments. For context, at the last AONTAS annual policy pay event SOLAS CEO Andrew Brownlee discussed the trend of reductions in participation due to COVID-19:

- 24.3% drop for Learners from the Roma and Traveller community
- 13.6% drop for learners with disabilities

- 14.9% drop for Refugees and Asylum Seekers
- 14.7% drop for learners aged over 50

As a proven vehicle for facilitating the progression of learners from these cohorts into Further and Higher education, community education learners must also ultimately be considered alongside current supports available to Further Education and Training (FET) learners. Community education is the most inclusive part of the tertiary education system as it successfully engages people at a local level, mainly within socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, through a supportive learning environment. Community Education provision encompasses a wide range of flexible, part-time, accredited and non-accredited courses that build a learner's confidence. The expansion of the SUSI eligibility criteria to include such learners must be sensitive and flexible to their financial circumstances and funding needs. To further develop access programmes to Higher and Further Education for students from disadvantaged groups, including members of the Traveller Community, those in Direct Provision Centres and those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged requires that access programmes are expanded to incorporate community education provision which delivers positive outcomes in this crucial area. For example, there are AONTAS members and independent community education providers that see high progression rates from their programmes to Further and Higher Education courses. In fact, since September 2018 An Cosán has delivered Higher Education courses to 500 individual learners (not including 34 learners on a BA Hons in Early Childhood Education & Care hosted in Jobstown Dublin 24 by An Cosán and delivered by IT Carlow). They have also delivered a range of further education Level 4, 5, 6 to approximately 200 learners in the same period and a range of unaccredited courses in Digital Skills, Literacy and Wellbeing. These learners are typically

- Early school leavers
- Young people over 18 who have been in care
- Lone parents
- Young people 18-30 seeking alternative routes to higher education
- People in low paid, low skilled precarious employment
- People who struggle with urban and rural isolation
- People who have experienced homelessness or addiction

- Long-term unemployed
- Members of the Traveller Community
- People living in Direct Provision Centres

Another model example is Longford Women’s Link (LWL). Since 2016, LWL has established a collaborative partnership with IT Carlow offering two QQI Level 8 Honours Degree courses and two Higher Certificate courses, with approximately 91 learners from the Midlands accessing these courses onsite in our dedicated Education and Training facility.

Through the [National FET Learner Forum](#), learners have shared how they entered FET as a “stepping stone” higher education for learners ([National FET Learner Forum Annual Synthesis Report 2019](#)):

“I never saw myself going back to third level, but now after doing this, I’m looking at going back next year.” / “I’ve already thought of a couple more things I can do from the course, so it really broadens your horizons.”

Learners asked for clarity on the progression pathways from Further Education to Higher Education:

“I think the Education and Training Board [should] link the courses up. They need to think about the following level to see about the higher level. There is no continuity of the courses.”

In response to questions around current FET funding models, learners expressed confusion around eligibility for grants, and the structuring of grants meant that they did not cover the real costs of learning:

“They give you either a travel allowance or an accommodation allowance. But even if you move accommodation, you’re still driving, so you still need the travel allowance.” / I get the SUSI grant but I don’t get any major grants so I actually have

to work to pay my rent and bills.' / "I get €17.50 travel allowance per week. I wish I got more in travel expenses, that's all. It's €50 in and out every week."

A lack of clarity around grants was raised as a barrier for FET learners to progress to Higher Education. One learner stated:

"I was sitting there thinking 'Are there grants? Am I going to be financially ok if I do this?' I quit my job to come and do this. It's putting your life on the line." / "make it clear about what you're entitled to because some people are talking about grants and some people are talking about back to education allowance and you don't know which to apply for and which is which."

The sentiments above were also echoed by AONTAS members surveyed. For example, as one survey respondent stated:

'[There is a] great need for clarity in terms of pathways options between community education, FET and higher education offerings. This requires adult learning and education career advice provision independent of any one institutional/educational setting to assist adults to have the necessary information and support to inform their own decisions - rather than being 'Sold' programmes which may not respond fully to their interests and needs.'

-AONTAS member survey response (2021)

Overall, the feedback from FET Learners highlights that current grant structures do not cover the true costs incurred by the FET learner for such things as travel, particularly where grants cannot be used in conjunction with each other (i.e. accommodation and travel).



Furthermore, were the SUSI to fully support FET learners in Level 5 and in part-time courses who have childcare costs then more women in particular would be able to access and succeed in FET. Therefore, AONTAS would welcome a common cross-FET student financial

support system being incorporated into the SUSI, and strongly recommends all learners undertaking Level 5 and Level 6 programmes are included within the SUSI Grant System.

TOR 8 - To consider current supports for postgraduate students and explore the impact of extending these supports to include maintenance grants at the same level as the current undergraduate supports.

AONTAS calls for a continued financial support system for learners in postgraduate programmes. This would take the form of a universal, flexible support model which;

- i) Supports the inclusion of underrepresented learners in postgraduate programmes**
- ii) Considers the situation and needs of each individual learner**
- iii) Invests in Ireland's human capital**

Current SUSI funding for postgraduate learners is based partly on access considerations, including underrepresented socio-economic groups, first-time mature students, and Irish Travellers (HEA, 2017). While AONTAS acknowledges these considerations and welcomes the commitment from the government to address the gap in postgraduate grants, equality of access for disadvantaged learner at postgraduate level has not been reached. The HEA data shows that on average 10% of Irish third level students come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Furthermore, the mean deprivation index for postgraduate learners stands at 3.8%, compared to 1.5% for undergraduate learners, suggesting that postgraduate students are on average more likely to be from affluent backgrounds than undergraduate students" (HEA, 2019). This means that the already low representation of disadvantaged learners in Higher Education decreases from undergraduate to postgraduate level.

[The Independent Review to Identify the Supports and Barriers for Lone Parents in Accessing Higher Education and to Examine Measures to Increase Participation](#)

highlighted the inconsistencies in eligibility for childcare schemes, housing and rental allowances for lone parents in full and part time postgraduate education (Maynooth University, 2017). Comprehensive funding that considers

diverse needs such as childcare, housing and rent, sustenance, and travel, would help bridge the gap of participation by disadvantaged learners in postgraduate education.

A comprehensive funding model that covers the true costs of postgraduate education is vital to increase access to postgraduate programmes for underrepresented groups.

Increasing financial supports for postgraduate access is an important investment for Irish society. It will enable disadvantaged learners to compete and succeed in their careers, increase the educational attainment of learners which supports human capital and it will further implement the National Skills Strategy 2025. In our [Submission to the Royal Irish Academy's Higher Education Futures Group](#), AONTAS called for comprehensive funding structures to support the progression of disadvantaged and underrepresented learners into postgraduate programmes. This was recommended not only to create an inclusive and diverse Irish postgraduate sector, but to ensure that Irish society can nurture and benefit from the full wealth of Irish talent in all of our communities (AONTAS, 2021).

TOR 9. To objectively determine the real cost of attending further education and the real cost of attending higher education in the State; and determine what proportion of the cost is met by the student grant system in Ireland.

AONTAS recommends for all learners to receive a 'true costs' grant that reflects the actual expense of engaging in education. This should include the educational materials, rent and other expenses.

AONTAS recognises the vital role the SUSI grant plays in enabling access to further and higher education for learners across Ireland. We urge this review to move the grant away from a 'contribution' to a true costs model reflective of current economic conditions and

one that removes barriers of full participation in the education experience for adult learners.

AONTAS recommends that the true cost be a flexible metric, that covers all expenses that may arise for learners. Learners frequently encounter

AONTAS recommends a formalised, ongoing consultation process with learners. This would give consultative bodies a first-hand understanding on the vital nature of the grant, its values, and its shortcomings.

hidden costs in their programmes and this has been documented by AONTAS through the National FET Learner Forum, in which one learner, for example, explained, “It [the syllabus] had information down on kits and funding and exams, but when it came down to it we’re not supplied with a kit. It could be €300, we have to go buy everything” (AONTAS, 2020). These incidences can have detrimental effects on access, retention and progression of learners, particularly those from disadvantaged or target groups. €300 is a very high amount of money for a lot of people living in financial difficulty.

True cost grants should consider the broad nature of expenses that could be encountered by learners throughout a course, including travel and commuting, sustenance, materials, optional additional educational programmes (i.e. field trips, first-aid courses etc.). This flexibility is vital to ensure no learner is caught off-guard with an expense that could jeopardise their engagement.

AONTAS recommends that the grant be reviewed on an ongoing basis to match the ever-changing lived-economic reality of attending a third-level Institution. Ireland is widely recognised as one of the most expensive countries in the European Union, and increasing costs of living in Ireland are well documented by the Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2021). These increases will be felt keenly by those engaging with third level education over the coming years, and any grant system that aims to meet the needs of learners must reflect this.

In addition, AONTAS urges this review to consider the unforeseen fallout of global issues such as Brexit and COVID-19 on the Irish third-level landscape. The ongoing COVID-19 restrictions has exposed wide inequalities in Irish society, and the future reality of third-level education in Ireland remains unclear. The economic impacts of COVID-19 may also result in a huge increase in learners applying of a SUSI grant due to the changing economic climate

and its impact on employment and family income (USI, 2020). Even without fully knowing the extent of the consequences, there has never been a more important time to guarantee a fit-for-purpose funding system for Irish learners, and to ensure it remains so throughout the coming years.



10. To translate the research findings from the above Terms of Reference into recommendations on future policy initiatives

As part of this consultation AONTAS reached out to other organisations and intuitions concerned with the financial assistance needed for adults engaging in education. In this section we will share key recommendations made by [The Irish Traveller Movement](#) and [One Family](#):

Supporting Travellers in Education:

- a) SUSI must be extended to cover part-time and mature students as well
- b) as all registration and associated costs. This would support the community as many prospective Traveller students are mature and part-time applicants
- c) The SUSI application process and other third level systems can also be difficult for Traveller students to navigate and access the information they need. Students and prospective students would benefit from more guidance and support on how to go about this process and to look at how it can be made more accessible (and one easy to navigate system may improve this experience)
- d) The threshold should be increased, it can be a disincentive for Traveller families trying to support Traveller students to access third-level education
- e) The Irish Traveller Movement would strongly urge the SUSI grant to be revamped on threshold income limits and increased for those most impacted and removed from third level education

Supporting Lone-Parents in Education:

- a) Expansion of the scheme to include part-time, online and blended learning
- b) SUSI should be available parents engaging in education regardless of the age of their youngest child (up to 18)
- c) The Department should take a more nuanced approach to the assessment of students' dependency on relatives
- d) SUSI should be available to lone parents in receipt of the Back to Education Allowance
- e) Grant levels should be reviewed and increased
- f) Additional funding should be made available to lone parents in acknowledgement of the additional childcare costs associated with accessing education
- g) SUSI and BTEA should be integrated with all housing support
- h) Lone parents in receipt of Rent Supplement should get access to SUSI and OPFP or JST

- i) Provide more guidance, awareness raising and information for lone parents eligible for SUSI and other supports

Conclusion

Ireland is in a period of great change. We are working together facing the COVID-19 pandemic, a post-BREXIT climate, right-wing conservative populist political issues, and a digital transformation. In this time, we have the opportunity to learn and grow together. Our adult learners in the tertiary sector must play an integral role in shaping this change and leading us in to the future. AONTAS recommends using this review as an opportunity to invest in adult learners, to mitigate educational disadvantage and to create positive social change. By providing a true costs model of financial support, including part-time learners, learners in Further Education and Training, learners in community education, and increasing the grant threshold; we can provide a more inclusive and equitable tertiary education sector.

“Allow part-time students the same access to SUSI as full time. Part-time students, in a lot of cases are pursuing their studies in this way because full time is not affordable or practical around work and family. Also, SUSI grants are not open to students who may be pursuing a QQI level below their highest QQI qualification. This has been my experience.”

- AONTAS member survey response on April 8 2021

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