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**Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and
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Members of the Oireachtas
Committee on Education and Skills

Pre-Budget Submission: Secure and stable funding for adult education

We write to you today on behalf of AONTAS membership to submit our proposals for consideration and action during the writing of Budget 2018.

The focus of our pre-budget submission is on areas impacting voluntary non-profit community education providers, as well as providing our perspective on the options for higher education funding as outlined in the Cassells report [[Investing In National Ambition: A Strategy For Funding Higher Education](#), March 2016].

AONTAS advocates for action by government and civil society on a multitude of issues concerning adult education beyond those mentioned in this submission. AONTAS also collaborates with SOLAS as part of the Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy to ensure quality FET provision. However, we are highlighting three items as being extraordinarily important for action in Budget 2018 and onward. Taking action on these three items is an indicator to AONTAS membership of government's commitment to ensuring the right of all adults in Ireland to quality and inclusive lifelong learning throughout their lives. The importance of inclusive lifelong learning to both support people to participate fully in society and manage successful transitions in the labour market is one of the key principles of the European Union's [Pillar of Social Rights](#). Furthermore, the Action Plan for Education (2016-2019) goal of increasing the Irish lifelong learning participation rate, which currently stands at 6.5%, to 15% by 2020 needs immediate action if we are to meet this target. We highlight three items specifically as we trust that they are all financially feasible within the current and planned fiscal outlooks of government as outlined in the *Spending Review 2017* and *Government's Summer Economic Statement 2017*.



Three policy areas requiring action

1. QQI waiver for the Community Education sector. As part of the 2017 pre-budget submission AONTAS sought a waiver of QQI re-engagement and programme validation fees and we will continue to do so in the future should that be necessary. The long-term viability of voluntary non-profit community education providers depends on the avoidance of expenditures that consume valuable and limited resources otherwise available for the provision of education. Many of these providers are joined together as members of the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) in order to support one another in their work.

The re-engagement fee for existing registered quality assured community education providers wanting to provide accredited programmes under the NFQ is currently set by QQI at €5,000 per organisation. This €5,000 is in addition to programme validation fees that vary depending on the level of qualification being sought by the provider.

As a result of these fees and inaction by QQI to waive them for the voluntary community education sector there is ongoing and increasing uncertainty for community education providers. Many providers are at a critical point where they must choose whether or not to continue providing accredited programmes as a way of ensuring the viability of the rest of their non-accredited programming. This is a difficult decision to make for community education providers in a precarious financial position, many of whom receive the limited funding they do have because funders are particularly supportive of the accredited programming they provide.

1b. Implement a fee waiver process. In separate letters dated 17 July 2017 to Minister Bruton and Minister of State Halligan, AONTAS requested that QQI waive fees as described above. Appreciating that after more than three years of lobbying on this issue AONTAS membership has seen no change in policy from QQI. We ask that at minimum a process be developed by QQI to evaluate and accept applications for waivers as permitted under section 80 (3) of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act [2012]. At present the ability to grant an exemption exists in legislation but a process by which to grant such an exemption has not been developed and been made publicly available by QQI. Allowing voluntary not-for-profit community education providers the opportunity to individually apply for a fee waiver under an objective process would go a long way to ensuring there is a future for voluntary not-for-profit community education providers and their learners, while also ensuring the success and financial viability of the QQI validation process.

QQI Fees and Community Education by the numbers

- If the reengagement fee was waived AONTAS estimates that €5,000 saved would cover the participation cost of 20 learners in accredited education. Even more funds will be kept in the community education sector if a fee waiver for programme validation is also granted.
- A reengagement fee and programme validation waiver would positively impact AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) financially.
 - **KEY POINT!** QQI will still exist if a waiver is granted. However CEN members across Ireland may realistically disappear as a result of the financial pressure that reengagement and program validation fees place on their operations.

2. Secure, reliable, and effective ring-fenced SOLAS funding for Community Education.

Community education has a history of successfully engaging the most hard to reach learners and supporting them as they achieve their personal potential and progress to further studies. Community education meets learners in their communities and in more informal settings open to their participation. In many cases the personal and educational progress made by learners results in employment. Beyond employability, learners leave education as more engaged citizens.

To ensure that quality educational opportunities are available to all adults in Ireland regardless of their socioeconomic position **AONTAS calls on government to increase the SOLAS managed community education budget to €13.23 million from current levels**, continuing our [2017 pre-budget submission](#) call for an increase. Recognizing that the budget was not increased to this level in 2017 we are asking for action now.

In AONTAS' 2017 pre-budget submission we called for a doubling of the community education budget from €10.58 million in 2016 to €21.16 million in 2019. AONTAS is pleased that SOLAS funding for non-accredited courses has at minimum been maintained over the last several years as other parts of government expenditure have been reduced. However as wide ranging social supports for the most underserved in our society were eroded over the past decade, community education providers have been stretched financially. In light of the severe cuts to the community and voluntary sector since 2008, which have impacted on community education provision across the country, it is now important to increase funding for community education. Community education helps people actively participate in society, build self-esteem, improve skills, and in many cases take the first steps toward employment.

Community Education by the numbers

- 53,835 participants in SOLAS funded community education programmes in 2016 according to the SOLAS 2016 Annual Report
- €10,727,731 provided to SOLAS funded community education in 2016.*

*The 2016 Further Education and Training Services Plan [SOLAS]

3. Implementation of the Cassells' Report Option 1 for funding Higher Education. The 2016 Cassells Report, known formally as *Investing In National Ambition: A Strategy For Funding Higher Education*, provides government with three clear policy options capable of increasing, and then sustaining funding for an effective higher education system over the next one to two generations.

The societal value of higher education has been evidenced extensively by international research, it is the position of AONTAS that the benefits of higher education should be shared equitably across society particularly for 'first time mature students' and educationally disadvantaged groups. Therefore it is the responsibility of all Irish society to financially support those participating in higher education, in the same way we support children and teens in primary and post-primary education.

AONTAS asks that the government fully support the implementation of Option 1: A predominantly state-funded system of higher education. The benefits of state funded education should also be extended to part time and post-graduate students as expressed on page 8 of the Cassells report. AONTAS ensured this position was heard during recent public consultations on the proposed Exchequer-Employer Investment mechanism. We intend on continuing to make this position heard as conversations about funding for higher education continue into the future; including during the work of the [Steering Group review of the National Training Fund \(NTF\)](#).

The central recommendation of the Cassells report “is that Ireland needs to substantially increase the level of investment in higher education to ensure that the system is able to deliver fully on its role in supporting our national economic and social development. This investment must be linked to enhanced quality and verification of outcomes.” To achieve this central recommendation the report lays out three options, each with varying degrees of state support and each with different reasons for selecting the option.

When debates about government program funding arise the arguments from all sides inevitably turn to the question of who should pay based upon who will receive the benefits of spending. Options 2 and 3 of the Cassells Report leans upon a perspective that since students receive personal benefit from higher education then they should pay a significant portion of the overall cost. While significant state-funding remains built into all of these options it is clear that the primary goal of Options 2 and 3 is to have students assume considerable financial costs.

(Submission on the Cassells’ report cont’d on next page)

Funding higher education by the numbers

- University Enrolments 2015/2016*
 - Full-Time 100,793
 - Part-Time 15,574
 - Remote 3,431
- The 15,500 part-time learners deserve access to the same funding opportunities as full time learners. Part-time education is often the only opportunity for adults in education who balance careers and family
- Funding for Higher Education per student has been decreasing since 2008 even as students pay more**
- The ratio of students to staff members has been increasing since 2008. Ireland has the highest ratio of students to staff of any north-west European states**
- The unemployment rate decreases amongst population groups with higher education highlighting the need to widen participation***

* Irish Universities Association website

** Cassels Report [2016]

*** Consultation Paper: Proposed Exchequer - Employer Investment Mechanism for Higher Education and Further Education & Training [2017], pg 7.

Education is a policy tool used by government to create a more equitable society with opportunities for all. The simple fact is that by charging learners for their education, as is proposed in Options 2 and 3, government policy helps to perpetuate inequalities. Having learners continue to pay at the time of provision is a symbolic closed door to those without funds available to them at the time of accessing education; Having learners pay for their education after provision according to means testing is effectively a tax on success that would otherwise allow for social mobility.

Conclusion: The benefits of education avoid the costs of unemployment and poverty

The focus of our pre-budget submission is to ensure the existence of a national lifelong learning infrastructure that is effectively funded and accessible to all citizens across Ireland. Achieving these goals will ensure the right of all adults to quality and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning throughout their lives.

In this submission AONTAS has provided requests for budgetary action that will effectively and efficiently support the community education and higher education sector widening access and participation beyond those who already partake in lifelong learning. Budget making requires hard decisions by government and highlights the priorities of those involved in the process. As it concerns the funding of education we hope we have made the case that the benefits of education accrue to society and not just individuals.

To conclude, below are some statics from a 2017 publication by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) titled [*Investing in skills pays off: the economic and social cost of low-skilled adults in the EU*](#) that show the importance of effectively investing in the educational futures of adults.

A selection of statistics from [*Investing in skills pays off: the economic and social cost of low-skilled adults in the EU*](#)

These statistics include individuals from across the EU-28

- On average, 33% of individuals aged 16-64 without upper secondary education are low-skilled in literacy and 38% in numeracy
- In 2015, only 63.6% of adults with low qualifications actively participated in the labour market, compared to 79.9% with a medium educational level and 88.8% of those with tertiary education
- Between 2007 and 2015 the employment rate of adults with low qualifications decreased in the EU-28 from 57.1% to 53.2%, compared to a decline of only 1.1 percentage points for highly educated individuals (from 85.2% to 84.1%).



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AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation exists to promote the development of a learning society through the provision of a quality and comprehensive system of adult learning and education which is accessible, and inclusive to everyone.

AONTAS is a highly respected non-governmental membership organisation established in 1969. Currently it represents over 500 members from across the lifelong learning spectrum. The work of AONTAS centres on: Advocating and lobbying for the development of a quality service for adult learners; promoting the value and benefits of adult learning and building organisational capacity. With particular emphasis on those who did not benefit from education initially or who are under-represented in learning. AONTAS' work is aimed at:

- widening participation in lifelong learning;
- ensuring community education supports quality learning opportunities for the most educationally disadvantaged;
- ensuring adult learners are central to local, regional, national, European and International adult learning policy; and
- promoting quality adult learning

Drawing on the strength of our members and meaningful relationships with adult learners we advocate for the rights of all adults to quality learning through their lives based on a grassroots, authentic understanding of lifelong learning that benefits the social, personal and skills development of adults, their family and community. In addition, we promote the value and benefits of lifelong learning. We have a specific focus on the most educationally disadvantaged and our work seeks to ensure that all adults have the right to participate in adult learning that exhibits the following elements: inclusion, learner supports, progression, positive learning outcomes, is learner focussed, offers learner choice, a positive learning experience and is transformative.

Kind regards,
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