



The Voice of
Adult Learning

AONTAS

PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION 2024

**AONTAS' Submission on the
Department of Further and
Higher Education, Research,
Innovation and Science's
Estimate bid for Budget 2024**

JUNE 2023

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Summary

In Budget 2024 AONTAS call for:

- a. An increase in the proportion of government and DFHERIS budget allocated towards measures that aim to create equity of access to further and higher education, research and innovation (including increased investment in community education, FET and the National Access Plan and PATH initiatives).
- b. Provision of additional funding to address growing levels of poverty amongst apprentices and FE and HE students as follows:
 - provide an additional ringfenced budget that will enable ETBs to fully address specific barriers to FET faced by learners from all groups that are prioritised in the National Access Plan. The level of additional funding should be sufficient to standardise learner supports available to FE and HE students.
 - address the policy and funding support needs of older learners by increasing the cap from 64 to 70 years of age.
 - provide an education stipend for food and transport specifically for people seeking international protection.
 - introduce additional cost-of-living allowances/a statutory pay rate to supplement/increase the income that apprentices receive and increase fuel and accommodation allowances for apprentices in line with the real costs of fuel and accommodation. Address the distinction between craft and non-craft apprenticeships.
 - ensure affordable childcare is accessible to any learner who needs it by providing funding to ETBs and HEIs to develop onsite childcare facilities and by providing higher rates of childcare subsidy to a broader range of FE and HE learners.
 - allow for the double payment of the community employment and family income supports (as was done until 2012).
 - broaden the criteria for the 1916 bursary so that anyone who needs it can access it (irrespective of where they live).
 - increase and mainstream funding for community education and community services that target learners from groups that are prioritised under the National Access Plan (and provide multi-annual funding).
 - increase grants (in line with cost-of-living) and expand eligibility criteria (in line with average incomes and poverty thresholds) for grants and FET training allowances and make them available to part-time and full-time learners in FE as well as HE (SUSI, SAF and BTEA). Provide comparable financial support to DEIS learners progressing to FE as those progressing to HE.
 - reverse the decision to means test income from part-time work for those in receipt of the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) and extend it to all recipients of the BTEA.
 - introduce additional tax breaks for working learners.
 - increase investment in public transport and make public transport free for FET and HE learners.

- c. DFHERIS to be resourced sufficiently to increase FET and Community Education staff salaries and provide permanent contracts for such staff.
- d. an increase in funding available to Community Education so that it is on a par with the levels of funding available per student in HE and allows Community Education (through a new core/mainstreamed, multi-annual, cross-governmental fund), to:
 - further develop its role across a range of governmental policy priority areas and in responding to emerging community needs.
 - adequately resource wraparound support services needed by learners (e.g., counselling, domestic violence, mental health, family, and childcare).
 - provide non-accredited programmes to enable marginalised learners to engage in education.
 - cover the costs associated with QQI engagement and validation and accreditation of programmes.
- e. provision of capital grants for new or improved suitable learning environments in Community Education.

About AONTAS

AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, are a membership organisation representing learners, practitioners, providers, and other key stakeholders in adult education for more than 50 years. AONTAS are committed to advocating for the rights of all adults in Ireland to access equal and equitable adult learning opportunities throughout their lives and promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning. Through research, advocacy, and communications, AONTAS aim to build a more inclusive, learner-centred lifelong learning system that enables adults to have a transformative learning experience.

AONTAS host the **Community Education Network**, a 150-member network of independently-managed community education providers. The network provides a platform for members to work collaboratively and share information and resources. It offers professional development and works to ensure that Community Education is valued and resourced.

The **National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum**, commissioned by SOLAS and delivered by AONTAS, represents the largest Learner Voice project in Europe. Research conducted by AONTAS contributes to the development of evidence-based policies aiming to alleviate barriers and support meaningful participation for all in education. AONTAS are the National Coordinator for the **New European Agenda for Adult Learning** and are an appointed **SDG Champion** in Ireland.

Introduction

AONTAS welcome the opportunity to provide a submission as part of DFHERIS' process of formulating its estimates for Budget 2024. Recommendations made in this submission are based on:

- sectoral input at our annual Policy Day event (which focused on the place of Community Education within the new Tertiary Education System; AONTAS, 2023)
- sectoral input at the most recent meeting of our Community Education Network (AONTAS, 2023a)
- the 2021-2022 AONTAS FET Learner Forum Annual Synthesis report (representing 3,164 FET learners; AONTAS, 2022)
- Learner input at 12 regional FET Learner Forums which have taken place over the 2022/2023 academic year (which we are currently reporting on and which included 3,508 learners)
- other relevant internal and external research reports (see bibliography).

Our intention is to provide solutions-focussed recommendations that we believe, if implemented appropriately, will contribute significantly towards positive social outcomes and an equitable Tertiary Education sector. Our recommendations centre around:

1. Access to FE and HE for groups that are prioritised under the National Access Agenda
2. Increased funding for FET learners and ETBs
3. A sustainable, mainstreamed/core multi-annual, cross governmental fund for community education.

1. Access to FE and HE for Groups That Are Prioritised Under the National Access Plan

Ireland's lifelong learning participant rate is 11.8% (Eurostat, 2022). This is below the EU 2020 lifelong learning target of 15% (SOLAS, May 2022). In quarter 4, 2021, 70% of participants in lifelong learning held third level qualifications. Compared to quarter 4 2019, in quarter 4 2021 the number of lifelong learning participants declined across each NFQ level group. The lower the NFQ level, however, the stronger the decline. In 2020, for example, there was a:

- 26% drop in the participation of adults in education/training in Ireland (OECD, 2021a)
- 50% drop in the lifelong learning participation rate for people with lower secondary education (in Q4 2020 compared to Q4 2019, SOLAS, 2021a)
- 49% drop in accreditation awards at NFQ Levels 1-4 compared to 2019 (SOLAS, 2021a).

These figures highlight that there is a pressing need, not just to increase Ireland's lifelong learning participation rate, but to focus particularly on those who are less qualified and have faced social, economic and educational inequality and disadvantage.

In Budget 2024 AONTAS call for:

- f. An increase in the proportion of government and DFHERIS budget allocated towards measures that aim to create equity of access to further and higher education, research and innovation (including increased investment in Community Education, FET and the National Access Plan and PATH initiatives).

If implemented, infrastructure that exists within local communities to support social inclusion and cohesion will be strengthened, and progress towards diversifying the student body, so that it is reflective of the general population, will be accelerated.

2. Increased Funding for FET Learners and ETBs

The Further Education and Training (FET) sector supports approximately 200,000 unique learners. It is intended that FET is for everyone and, within the learner population, there is strong representation of learners with disabilities, migrants, Travellers, the long-term unemployed, people with criminal justice history and learners from other groups that are at risk of education inequality, such as those prioritised in the National Access Plan. In 2019, for example, prior to their enrolment in FET:

- 31% of learners had a lower secondary education or below
- 31% of learners were unemployed (with 40% of these learners being long-term unemployed) (ETBI, 2021).

A key role of the FET sector is to provide a range of integrated supports aimed at enabling disadvantaged learners to overcome barriers to education (e.g., disability and literacy supports, transport, inclusive teaching and learning practice and guidance services).

The restructuring of further and higher education that is ongoing under the new Unified Tertiary Education System policy agenda has been welcomed by AONTAS. AONTAS believe the enhanced valuing of FET, which is evident through this policy agenda, and the more cohesive approach across both the further and higher education sectors which aims to provide wider choice at transition points, will make a significant contribution towards the national access agenda.

Despite this, however, AONTAS' National FET Learner Forum¹ finds that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to face a range of financial challenges that impact on their engagement and progression in FET. Our report (Farren, et. al, 2022) from the 2021/2022 academic year highlighted the following financial barriers for learners:

- Transport was identified most frequently as a barrier to FET, with many learners noting that transport allowances do not cover transport costs and that challenges remain in terms of accessibility and frequency of services in many areas: *"Learners experienced challenges with the cost and availability of transport to their centres."*
- Financial support: *"Learners suggested revisions to the financial support that they receive"; "Learners found unforeseen costs of their courses a challenge".*
- Childcare: 24% of participants reported childcare as a barrier to engaging in adult education: *"Learners spoke of the challenges that act as barriers to their learning such as shortages in childcare and transport provision".*

Our 2022/2023 series of 12 FET Learner Forums (which we have analysed data from and which we are currently reporting on) are finding even greater financial barriers for current and potential FET learners than in 2021/2022 as we see the medium-term impacts of Covid-19 and with the cost-of-living crises. Over recent weeks AONTAS have been working with a group of 16 learners (who are currently or have recently been in FET), who we supported to attend the DFHERIS consultation event on the cost of education at the Alex Hotel on 25.05.23. The above findings from the AONTAS FET Learner Forum were explored in more depth with this group, with specific focus on the cost of education to them and their families. These learners emphasised the following issues as creating challenges to their successful FET journeys:

- **Poverty** is impacting many of the FET learners and their peers. Allowances have not changed significantly in many years, are not reflective of current costs of living, and are a barrier to potential learners availing of FET courses. There is an urgent need for allowances and apprentice pay rates to be reviewed. One apprentice, for example, explained how many of his peers were going hungry due to the inadequate payment and allowances that they received; many of his peers sleep in cars or commute long distances (over three hours/day) during the in-college phases of their apprenticeships because they cannot afford accommodation. The hourly payment for all (craft and non-craft) apprentices should be increased to the living wage and fuel and rent allowances should be increased in line with the cost-of-living.
- Lack of access to **affordable childcare**: One learner (a lone parent who had progressed from FE to her first year in HE) explained how she was using her SUSI grant to supplement childcare costs and described the negative impact this was having on her family, with her having to choose childcare over other essential items needed by her children. This learner explained her concerns about whether she will be able to complete her degree due to financial pressures.
- Community education schemes: Learners (lone parents) highlighted how the removal of **the double payment of the community employment and family income supports** (as was allowed for pre-2012) had resulted in the loss of significant numbers of marginalised learners from the system and pushed them into precarious, undervalued work by removing incentives to upskill.
- 1916 bursary: Learners reported the need to **broaden the criteria for the 1916 bursary**. Two lone parents noted they received different levels of this bursary, even though they were in identical financial situations. The lone parent who received the lower-level bursary explained how this was creating concerns as to whether she would complete her degree.
- Community education and community services: These services have played a key role in the educational progression of several of the learners and they highlighted the need for **increased and sustainable funding for community education and community services**.
- **Grants/financial support for FE and HE students** should be made more widely available to address growing issues of poverty among learner populations, as follows:
 - SUSI needs to be increased/expanded to cover the real cost-of-living and the eligibility criteria should to be broadened to include a broader range of learners and all of FE provision.
 - The Student Assistant Fund needs to be expanded to cover FE and for there to be consistency across colleges and institutions as to how it is administered.
 - Back to Education payments should be available to all part-time workers/learners.
 - Grants should be made available to part-time learners pro-rated on the basis of numbers of hours studied/week.
- Many learners must work long hours (significantly more than in previous years due to increases in the cost-of-living) in addition to studying. **Tax breaks** should be available for such learners so that they can reduce working hours.

Other research by AONTAS (e.g., 'Meyler, et. al., 2023) highlight specific financial barriers for learners from groups that are at risk of educational inequality, such as older learners, refugees and International Protection Applicants. A lifelong learning approach, with engagement at the later stages of life, was clearly reflected during the pandemic whereby digital literacy was essential for preventing social isolation and ensuring health and safety regulations were met. However national and European policy prioritises and funds learners below the ages of 65 for adult learning. In addition, key policy related research captures and analyses the needs, competencies, and occupation status of those under the age of 65. AONTAS urge DFHERIS to lead a new European standard of inclusive adult learning policy by increasing the standard age to 70 years. This will re-engage and support later life learners and meet the demands of a changing society and older workforce. Learners who live in Direct Provisions miss meals when they attend FE, cannot afford transport and have limited, if any, access to childcare (within Direct Provision Centres or FET colleges).

A recent study conducted under the College Connect PATH programme² found the above barriers also impact on rates of progression from FE to HE. FET learners who participated in this study, *“emphasised the importance of getting back to employment and becoming self-sufficient after a period of relying on others (while they studied in FE), and others questioned their financial capacity and IT capacity to be able to attend HE. Others spoke of the ‘hidden costs’ associated with university, such as transport, food, accommodation and the lack of or loss of earnings that would be incurred by attending university. Many participants highlighted the income thresholds for fees support, particularly in households with grown-up siblings where several family members might be working. Some participants pointed out that the prolonged financial effort required to obtain a university education might not guarantee the kind of employment or return that would be worth the outlay”* (Sartori et. al., 2023).

Part-time options are a key feature of FET provision, offering flexible day, evening, on-line and blended opportunities that makes FET accessible to a diverse cohort of learners including those in employment, long and short-term unemployed, early school leavers, new migrants, Travellers, people with disabilities, ex-offenders, and women returners. In 2019, 56% of the 170,000 enrolments in FET were on part-time programmes (ETBI, 2021). Learners can complete accredited programmes at NQF levels 1 – 6 and non-accredited courses (which often focus on the wider benefits of education, and which address issues in relation to marginalisation, community and personal development, and active and social inclusion). Part-time provision supports the development of foundational, bridging, and vocational skills. Adult Literacy programmes provide learners with the core skills necessary to progress to FET and potentially on to HE. Community Education offers a steppingstone into or back to education, and Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) programmes provide learners with opportunities for accreditation at NFQ Levels 4, 5, and 6. Part time programmes are frequently the only option for learners to participate in education and training as they coordinate recovery or work with family life (ETBI, 2021). These learners are often the most disadvantaged and face a range of barriers to education – the same as those experienced by HE learners – but they do not have access to funding mechanisms available to learners on full-time programmes, are more vulnerable and have less opportunities due to the level of their education. Currently there are inequalities in terms of supports available to learners in FE in comparison to those in HE. There are fewer financial supports available to DEIS school learners progressing to FE than to HE. This creates a barrier to progression for many learners. For a truly inclusive and unified Tertiary Education System, the provision of FET learner supports at a national standard and on a level with supports provided in HE is critical.

Addressing the above financial barriers to FET courses and to progression from FE to HE should be prioritised in Budget 2024.

In Budget 2024 AONTAS call for:

- g. Provision of additional funding to address growing levels of poverty amongst apprentices and FE and HE students as follows:
- provide an additional ringfenced budget that will enable ETBs to fully address specific barriers to FET faced by learners from all groups that are prioritised in the National Access Plan. The level of additional funding should be sufficient to standardise learner supports available to FE and HE students.
 - address the policy and funding support needs of older learners by increasing the cap from 64 to 70 years of age.
 - provide an education stipend for food and transport specifically for people seeking international protection.
 - introduce additional cost-of-living allowances/a statutory pay rate to supplement/increase the income that apprentices receive and increase fuel and accommodation allowances for apprentices in line with the real costs of fuel and accommodation. Address the distinction between craft and non-craft apprenticeships.
 - ensure affordable childcare is accessible to any learner who needs it by providing funding to ETBs and HEIs to develop onsite childcare facilities and by providing higher rates of childcare subsidy to a broader range of FE and HE learners.
 - allow for the double payment of the community employment and family income supports.
 - broaden the criteria for the 1916 bursary so that anyone who needs it can access it (irrespective of where they live).
 - increase and mainstream funding for Community Education and community services that target learners from groups that are prioritised under the National Access Plan (and provide multi-annual funding).
 - increase grants (in line with cost of living) and expand eligibility criteria (in line with average incomes and poverty thresholds) for grants and FET training allowances and make them available to part-time and full-time learners in FE as well as HE (SUSI, SAF and BTEA). Provide comparable financial support to DEIS learners progressing to FE as those progressing from DEIS schools to HE.
 - reverse the decision to means test income from part-time work for those in receipt of the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) and extend it to all recipients of the BTEA.
 - Introduce additional tax breaks for working learners.
 - Increase investment in public transport and make public transport free for FET and HE learners.

If the above measures are included within budget 2024, there will be higher rates of access, retention and progression of learners from our most marginalised communities within the FET and HE systems and a range of wider societal impacts such as reduction in long-term unemployment, reduction in crime, and improved community integration.

At present, there is a range of staff across the Tertiary Education Sector working on short-term contracts, with no pension contributions, no pay during summer months, and a lack of job security. This includes FET tutors and a range of staff in Community Education (many HE staff are also affected). This creates financial insecurity in the current cost of living crises, and impacts on people's ability to buy a home, organise a loan, plan for their future, as well as on mental health. Providing suitable pay and conditions will help to retain staff and protect the capacity and sustainability of the sector.

In some FET settings, recruitment and retention challenges are putting huge pressure on staff who are having to take on additional workload, which is reducing the time they have for learners. In some situations, administrative staff are acting as tutors, which is impacting on the quality of service provision³.

In Budget 2024 AONTAS call for:

- h. DFHERIS to be resourced sufficiently to increase FET and Community Education staff salaries and provide permanent contracts for such staff.

Implementation of the above measure will help address the current challenges in recruitment, retention and progression of FET and Community Education staff (which risks reducing the range and quality of local adult education services over the coming years).

3. Sustainable, Core/mainstreamed Multi-annual, Cross-governmental Fund for Community Education

Community Education is a powerful tool in the pursuit of educational equality (Dowdall, Dr. et al, 2021) and there is great potential for it to be harnessed further as a first response mechanism to community needs arising out of the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the cost-of-living crises. Community Education Providers are often situated within socio-economically disadvantaged communities. Staff are often local people, many of whom have had similar life experiences to their learners, are trusted, and act as role models. Community Education offers a holistic, learner-centred, needs-based education that emphasises confidence-building and personal development. It provides a wide range of flexible, accredited and non-accredited courses, usually combined with wrap-around supports that enable learners' access, retention, and progression (e.g., childcare, recovery, and mental health supports). It supports the development of learner identities and learning skills – prerequisites for success in FE and HE. Non-accredited courses within Community Education often act as the first step on the pathway of a successful educational journey for learners who have been disadvantaged within the education system and disengaged in the past.

Most learners in Community Education come from underserved communities that other providers can struggle to engage with – for example, there are much higher proportions of early school leavers, people with disabilities and unemployed people in Community Education than in the general population (Bailey et al, 2010). Forty-five percent of Community Education providers state that members of the Travelling community are part of their learner cohorts (for comparison, in 2021, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) reported that there were only 110 Travellers within the entire student population in higher education, Cobain, Dr. et al, 2020). Seventy-seven percent of Community Education learners are women and more than 50% are over 55 years of age. Over two-thirds of learners live in areas with above average levels of deprivation, with 22% of learners in areas that are designated as disadvantaged (Doody, 2021).

Dr Katriona O'Sullivan's recently published memoir, 'Poor,' provides an important case-study in describing the critical role that Community Education played in her recovery from a traumatic childhood, addiction, in reengaging her in education as an early school leaver and lone parent, and in placing her on a very successful academic journey (O'Sullivan, 2023, Pp. 183 – 191). In her book O'Sullivan lists Community Education providers and other community-based services, and financial support streams, that supported her on this journey and her peers in similar journeys, that no longer exist. O'Sullivan explains how, due to the loss of such services (due to lack of resources) many people in similar positions now are unable to move on from poverty, trauma and addiction in the way that she and her peers could.

AONTAS welcome the increasing recognition of the role of Community Education within the broader Unified Tertiary Education System, for example, with the development of a Community Education Framework by SOLAS, and the establishment of the REACH fund as a regular feature of the Unified Tertiary Education System. A 2022 AONTAS survey of members of the Community Education Network found the REACH fund (then the Mitigating against Educational Disadvantage Fund) to be an important and appreciated fund, which enabled providers to engage learners in new ways during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. The report noted that the fund has been successful in achieving its mission in reaching educationally disadvantaged learners. It also found, however, that, with the average amount of funding received by respondent providers being €2,579/annum, there remained significant unmet and long-standing funding needs which hampered Community Education providers' abilities to engage marginalised learners and address community needs.

At this year's annual AONTAS Policy Day event, which brought community education facilitators, managers, practitioners and learners together with together policy makers and ETB staff, the significant recent increases in SOLAS funding for Community Education were welcomed. There was discussion across the roundtables at Policy Day about the growing range of community needs/challenges which community educators are responding to – needs/challenges linked to the aftermath of Covid-19, the war in Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis. It was raised by many that the funding increase was not sufficient to enable community education to maximise its potential in addressing emerging community needs (AONTAS, 2023). The Community Education sector remains chronically underfunded with levels of funding per learner still considerably lower than levels of funding per learning in HE (AONTAS, 2020). Further, in addition to its role in engaging marginalised learners in education, Community Education plays an important role across a broad range of government policy areas, of relevance to the Departments of Agriculture, Food and the Marine; Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; Enterprise, Trade and Employment; Housing, Local Government and Heritage; Rural and Community Development; Social Protection; Environment, Climate and Communications, and; Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

Community Education is at the coalface of the current 'polycrises'. At the most recent meeting of the CEN³, members from across Ireland talked about how they are responding to the emerging community needs that public services have not yet developed the expertise and capacity to respond to including food, fuel and other forms of poverty, social isolation, community tension, a mental health epidemic arising in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and related issues such as domestic violence and addiction (AONTAS, 2023b). Increased investment now will pay dividends later in terms of ameliorating the longer-term impacts of such current challenges facing our society. Due to this, one of the recommendations that came from the AONTAS Policy Day event was, *"Community education supports the priorities of many different governmental departments, so a cross-governmental approach should be taken to funding and developing community education."* (AONTAS, 2023, p. 10).

AONTAS met with over 100 people from across the Tertiary Education sector as part of our Strategic Plan consultation series in January 2023. Attendees included representatives of ETBs, Community Education centres, and other service providers from across Ireland. A clear ask at each of these sessions was the creation of a capital grant fund and increased Government owned buildings for the delivery of adult learning in Community Education. Attendees outlined the importance of suitable, equipped, and professional learning environments for adult learners. The positive impact on the FET sector in this area is welcomed. However, many Community Education providers are still faced with insecure locations and less equipped premises. Dublin 8 Community Education centre, which supports both local people and newly arrived refugees from Ukraine, is currently at risk of losing its premises, for example. There is a need for a new capital grant for Community Education providers and securing other buildings (such as Church-owned locations used for the community and voluntary sector) as spaces for adult learning.

In Budget 2024 AONTAS call for:

- i. an increase in funding available to Community Education so that it is on a par with the levels of funding available per student in HE and allows Community Education (through a new core/mainstreamed, multi-annual, cross-governmental fund), to:
 - o further develop its role across a range of governmental policy priority areas and in responding to emerging community needs.
 - o adequately resource wraparound support services needed by learners (e.g., counselling, domestic violence, mental health, family, and childcare).
 - o provide non-accredited programmes to enable marginalised learners to engage in education.
 - o cover the costs associated with QQI engagement and validation and accreditation of programmes.
- j. provision of capital grants for new or improved suitable learning environments in Community Education.

If implemented, infrastructure that exists within local communities to support social inclusion and cohesion will be strengthened, mitigating against community challenges that are growing/emerging as a result of the current 'polycrises'.

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