



AONTAS Submission to the Royal Irish Academy's Higher Education Futures Group

Date: February 2021

Call for Input: Higher Education Futures Taskforce Questions

Theme: Vision and Value

1. What do you see as the major drivers of change for higher education in the decade ahead?

The establishment of the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Science, and Innovation has opened the door for greater cooperation across the tertiary sector. This is a welcome development, as moving into the future world effectively will require a transparent, integrated, and flexible approach to education across the tertiary sector. The future job market will require continuous lifelong learning and upskilling for all. This will mean learners will need to be able to move between the higher, further and community education sectors easily and throughout their careers to ensure they are able to access learning opportunities to meet their needs. To facilitate this, we must build and communicate effectively the diversity of learning options contained across the sector.

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 (e.g. Travellers, lone parents, learners with low level qualifications, mature learners, etc.) seeking to access lifelong learning opportunities. The [2017 Adult Education Survey](#) has helped to identify who these groups are and the barriers that currently prevent them from accessing lifelong learning. A major focus of the decade ahead should be finding ways to extend learning opportunities to these groups. As a proven vehicle for reaching learners from these cohorts, collaborative work between community education providers and HEIs could help illuminate positive actions to address these gaps.

2. What will the student of 2035 want from his/her higher education experience?

The best way to uncover what the student of 2035 will want from his/her higher education experience, is to reach out to students now and ask this very question. Reaching out to learners currently enrolled in higher education, community education, and further education and training will provide first-hand insight into this question. Lessons on how to go about doing this can be drawn from national learner voice projects already in place, such as the [National FET Learner Forum](#). Ensuring this engagement is meaningful and includes a diversity of learner perspectives, is essential to ensuring that this future vision is broad enough to uncover the perspective of a diverse learner group.

We can, however, draw insights from some of the learner voice work that has already been completed. For instance, from the [COVID-19 FET Learner Report](#), we know learners have benefited from increased flexible learning opportunities provided by the transition to online learning, but that also a number of learners who would like to see a return to face-to-face learner as soon as possible. What this reiterates is the importance of a flexible approach to future learning that presents learners with a number of options designed to meet their needs. These flexible learning options need to be matched with an increase in financial support to allow greater access to learning.

3. What challenges do you think future students will face after graduating? How can a future higher education institution prepare its students for those challenges?

The recent pandemic will have an impact on our current labour market, impacting the opportunities that graduates will have available to them after they complete their education. We already have an indication of this difficulty from the challenges now faced by apprentices in securing apprenticeships and workplace learners in completing the work component of their courses. These challenges will require longer thought-out solutions. In the short to medium-term we should develop measures that support these graduates 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. Promoting a tertiary sector that is supportive and available to learners throughout their careers is of critical importance to the sectors ability to prepare and support graduates in this new world. Likewise, educational institutions need to ready themselves to meet the needs of learners who will bring with them a number of skills they have acquired throughout their professional careers. In order to do this, we must look to a national strategy and implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning Processes to ensure education is valuing the skills that learners bring with them in their return to education. These processes will help to ensure education is not replicating, but in fact enhancing the skills of a highly mobile workforce.

4. How might the consequential changes (regionally, nationally and globally) resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit, influence and accelerate evolution in the HE system in Ireland such as to ensure a sustainable, relevant and impactful future for the sector across the island of Ireland?

The resulting impact from BREXIT may include issues of access to higher education from across Northern Ireland, Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland for learners across the nations. In addition, to professional career opportunities which may no longer be an option for students in different regions depending on their geographical location and available funding. There may also be a loss of social interaction and engagement between groups from different locations as happened previously which could impact on peer learning, understanding and cooperation.

The COVID-19 pandemic could provide certain blended learning opportunities or hybrid models of higher education for learners. This may be beneficial for some cohorts and detrimental for others. AONTAS has found the success of community education in reaching vulnerable learners, for example, is in-part due to the face to face and familial social dynamic of this community led model. Care should be taken to ensure that peer learning, open-door policy, safe and local spaces are a core priority in the delivery of HE going forward to reflect the needs of disadvantaged groups.

Theme: Models of Higher Education

5. From your perspective, what are the strong characteristics and deficiencies in graduates that you encounter today? What should change in order to ensure that future Irish graduates are equipped for life?

Today's graduates have shown resilience and adaptability in a curtailed and ever-changing educational environment. They are entering a world increasingly challenged by urgent global issues. AONTAS' core belief is that education should be transformative, and have wide ranging benefits at an individual, community, and societal level. To ensure this, programmes should prioritise and value transversal skills. Linking these skills to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals such as ethical consumerism, climate crises, critical thinking, resilience, civic participation, gender equity, intercultural awareness, digital literacy, and democratic literacy, would provide future learners with a rounded transversal knowledge base. This should not be restricted to the humanities, but be applied more broadly across STEM programmes. One way of achieving this is adapting a Bildung approach to education in universities, which calls for education to respond to current political, social and economic challenges and to empower people with the personal, interpersonal and civic skills that they need to become active and engaged citizens.

The digitalisation and automisation 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 with a wealth of skills that have been gained through diverse means. In order to capture these skills and encourage potential graduates to engage or re-engage with higher education, AONTAS recommends Irish universities adapt comprehensive Recognition of Prior Learning processes, and include the option of development of supported individual learning pathways. This would ensure graduates are provided with support to re-engage with learning, and the flexibility to apply their knowledge base to their education.

6. How do you envisage partnership between universities and external stakeholders (business, cultural organisations, voluntary bodies) in co-delivering education (especially experiential and lifelong) evolving and operating in the future?

Partnerships between universities and external stakeholders must be undertaken with an ethical and sustainable approach. They should focus on learner experience and opportunity, and on supporting local communities. Partnerships must be equitable with a recognition for, and valuing of, the knowledge, capacity and expertise of the stakeholder e.g. voluntary bodies. Horizontal power relations, of working with partners, is needed. This includes the sharing of resources in the co-delivery of education. Service learning should also be considered for HEI students with credit given for engagement.

Universities can engage meaningfully with local businesses through robust and responsive apprenticeship programmes. In its recent submission to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science Apprenticeship Action Plan 2021-2025 Consultation Paper, AONTAS detailed their vision of creating an apprenticeship structure that supports learners and local communities alike. HEIs can work collaboratively with local businesses to ensure apprenticeships provide a rounded experiential and classroom-based learning programmes, showcasing different learning models and the rich educational opportunities that apprenticeship programmes provide. There is also scope for Universities, FET centres, community education providers, and local businesses to work collaboratively, to create accessible pathways to apprenticeships. This would ensure apprenticeships are a lifelong learning option for all potential learners, focusing specifically on groups underrepresented in apprenticeship programmes such as learners with disabilities, Travellers, Roma, home carers, women, mature learners, learners in Direct Provision, and learners with literacy, numeracy and basic digital literacy needs.

7. What reforms do you recommend in order to convert Ireland from a globally average research performer and innovator to a leader in the next 10 years?

Improving Ireland's research performance and reputation will require increased investment in all aspects of research. On an individual level, specific investment and funding structures should be created to support progression for disadvantaged and underrepresented learners into postgraduate programmes, to ensure that Irish universities are nurturing the full wealth of Irish research talent. This diversification of the field of postgraduate research would only benefit the Irish research landscape. Such an initiative could be created through the Irish Research Council, with specific focus on spaces and funding for disadvantaged learners. On an institutional level, universities should prioritise collaborative research across public policy and civil societies, to ensure research design and output is supporting and engaging with the needs of wider society. On a global level, the increasing importance of engaging in research on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals give Irish research the opportunity to become a world leader in high-quality research into these goals. To do so, HEI could engage in collaborative projects and strategic research partnerships with HEIs in the in the global south. This would ensure HEIs were collaborating with institutions best place to engaged with this work, and cement their position as innovative partners in global research.

8. What should universities change to grow their impact and influence?

Universities should engage in equitable, collaborative partnerships in their local communities. This is a form of impact and influence which is often not given parity of esteem, but should be prioritised. Engagement with communities can take many forms, including access programmes, research initiatives, volunteering programmes, community outreach programmes, and co-developed community projects. This would strengthen the link between universities and the communities in which they are based, and the standing of universities in their localities.

Stronger links should be made between universities and local FET and community education providers. These should primarily take the form of accessible pathways for learners wishing to progress into higher education. FET is gaining increased legitimacy as a post-leaving cert option for second level students, and is also the most accessible option for adult learners wishing to return to education. A collaborative approach to create clear progression pathways to third-level would strengthen universities impact and influence across the tertiary education sector.

On a national level, universities should aim to improve the accessibility of their research to wider society. Their influence and impact could be greatly expanded by increasing the availability of information, and by adopting a "learning society" model to published academic research. This

would allow those outside the sphere of formal academic learning access. With this in mind, research design should be heavily influenced by an “Action Research” methodology, seeking transformative change through research and critically reflecting on the impact of research on communities and wider societies.

Theme: Regions and Place

9. How can we ensure that the new, and pending, technological universities maximally benefit the regions they serve?

To ensure that the new, and pending, technological universities maximally benefit the regions they serve there are a number of key actions required:

- Conduct a consultation process in partnership with the full range of local communities residing within the regions being served to map out their needs and co-develop criteria for what success in this area should look like
- Draw on and harness the knowledge that already exists within and across stakeholders in the FET and CE sectors to develop actions which would support rural and regionally isolated learners to progress to and successfully participate in technological university programmes.
- Form collaborative partnerships with community education providers that are aimed at including local learners and residents from traditionally under-represented social groups into Higher Education courses. For models of best practice in this area see [An Cosán](#); [Longford Women’s Link](#); [Loretto Centre Crumlin](#);
- Develop sustainable mechanisms for learners who have progressed from FET and adult and community education to be involved in all relevant decision-making processes to the strategic direction of Higher Education in the region.

10. Should a cross-border university for the ROI and NI be considered? What needs could this university address?

AONTAS encourages any cross-border collaboration that places educational equity, and the needs of adult learners and their communities, at the centre of participating in higher education. Were a cross-border university established, with part of its mission being to address the needs of the island’s most marginalized learners and disadvantaged communities on both sides of the border, the following areas would need to be considered:

- Importance of funding for Erasmus+ programmes to offset any negative impact on adult learners due to the UK’s departure from the EU

- Ensuring valuable authentic learning experiences for learners across the island of Ireland within and across disciplines
- Learning from and consulting with the [Network for Adult Learning Across Borders](#) and the [Forum for Adult Learning Northern Ireland](#) as partners to ensure what works for learners in adult and community education to progress to higher education is adopted and supported
- Harmonising policies in both jurisdictions around access for mature students, Recognition of Prior Learning and the provision of financial supports which set older adult learners up to succeed in higher education
- How the university would serve to ensure that increased access and participation in higher education by traditionally under-represented social groups would play a central role in the future relationship between both jurisdictions; and how a focus on educational equity provides mutually beneficial social, as well a economic, dividends for adult learners across the border region.

11. In the aftermath of Brexit, how can we ensure that HEIs have a positive impact on regional and economic development, supporting human capital and improving social equality?

Any strategic vision aiming to be a fit-for-purpose solutions-centred response to the aftermath of Brexit must include and understand the vital role played by adult and community education in promoting rural and community development, and supporting vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout the island of Ireland. HEIs are an important constituent within the wider tertiary education system on the island of Ireland; so too are the Further Education and Training sector, and the Adult and Community Education sector. Every form of education will have to step up and play an increased and more cogent role in responding to and mitigating the negative impact of the UK leaving the EU. AONTAS welcomes further strategic thinking and activity around building Ireland's 'human capital'. An ecological approach to tertiary education, with a renewed sense of unity of purpose around the Sustainable Development Goals is needed to ensure successful outcomes in regional and economic development, supporting human capital and improving social equality.

The success of any regional higher educational initiatives and infrastructure, such as developing campuses in locations and communities traditionally under-served by HEIs, must ultimately be evaluated through the lens of rural development and authentic equity for learners in rural regions. HEIs role in securing equity in human capital for regional populations must involve developing new and stronger reciprocal ties with community-based adult learning providers. For some examples of best practice in this area see [An Cosán](#); [Longford Women's Link](#); [Loretto Centre Crumlin](#)

12. How might the changes to teaching and learning instigated by the COVID-19 pandemic be best utilised by HEIs to support regional and human capital development?

As part of research conducted by AONTAS into the experience of Learners in Further Education and Training (see *COVID-19 Further Education and Training Learner Report*), as well as in adult and community education settings (*Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including Community Education issues) Working Group, Barriers in the Return to Remote Learning - A Discussion Paper*), there are a number of recommendations relevant to better supporting the regional and human capital development of learners:

- Traditional, online, hybrid and blended learning provision (where suitable) must remain flexible to the learning needs of adult learners
- Flexibility is also required in circumstances where a return to face-to-face in person learning is vital to the success of a Learner
- The development of peer-to-peer networks and peer-led supports around the lived experience of remote learning
- The creation of learning programmes must involve processes by which decision-makers have identified, and deepened their understanding of, the level and nature of educational disadvantage being faced by those who have the digital literacy to engage with online learning, as well as for those who are unable to continue their learning due to the digital divide

AONTAS recommends placing Learner Voice at the centre of HEIs efforts to better support the ‘regional and human capital development of learners. Learners themselves are best placed to articulate the supports they need which, in turn, guarantees that the changes to teaching and learning instigated by the COVID-19 pandemic result in positive outcomes for learners and do not become another barrier they face.

Theme: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

13. What do you think the obstacles are to improving equality, diversity, and inclusion in higher education on the island of Ireland for students? For staff? For funders? For policymakers?

Education is a public good and specific access targets needs to be linked to HEI funding. Accountability to widen access should be embedded within HEI funding agreements with DFHERIS.

Improving EDI in higher education involves recognizing and addressing barriers faced by marginalized and vulnerable cohorts in accessing higher education. These barriers include, but

are not limited to, financial barriers, situational and dispositional barriers and the competitive nature of current pathways into higher education. Please see recommendations and further detail in 'AONTAS Response Public Consultation on Mature Student Participation in Higher Education' which provides considerations for mature student applicants.

AONTAS recommends building structural supported pathways from community education into higher education, and delivering higher education within community education settings. 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 and which frequently come with a package of supports suited to the needs of an individual learner and specific learner cohorts. In addition, the philosophical framework and the principals that underpin community education build the capacity of learners to understand and make sense of their lived experience which in-turn enables them to succeed in accredited and formal provision, including higher education (Moreland and Cownie, 2019).

The provision of higher education on-site within community education means this diverse and inclusive model of learning transforms into a local higher education space, e.g. Longford Women's Link, An Cosán VCC; Power and Participation Project.

14. Do you think that the sectorial initiatives relating to EDI go far enough? If not, what areas could be improved?

Initiatives related to EDI would benefit from utilizing a holistic approach which recognises the broader needs and experiences of the learner in addition to understanding their identity and former educational experience as factors impacting on their trust and engagement with formal institutions such as Higher education providers. This holistic approach could address policy, informational, situational and dispositional barriers that exist for adult learners. AONTAS recommends 4 key areas to improving current initiatives:

1. Developing inclusive pedagogy and institutional cultures based on transformative theory including the works of Paulo Fréire, Bell Hooks and Jack Mezirow. Best practice models can be found in community education organisations.
2. Integrated inclusive models of higher education that are provided within community and adult education settings in rural parts of Ireland and inner-city settings. They could serve local

communities and engage vulnerable cohorts of learners that may not find success in larger traditional models.

3. Equal transitions from FE to HE with guaranteed reserves spaces for successful learners annually.

4. A specific structure dedicated to social inclusion and educational equality in the Department of Education, Research, Innovation and Science

15. What data do you use in making EDI decisions?

AONTAS uses a range of research reports in accessing appropriate data for building our understanding of equality, diversity and inclusion. Internally as a membership organisation, we engage with our 500 members nationwide to identify their needs, perspectives and experiences. This is conducted via focus groups, surveys, and other membership communications. In addition, our research team lead the National FET Learner Forum and develop regional reports throughout the year and national reports annually which we utilize for our evidence base in advocacy and the development of policy papers. The AONTAS Research Team also undertake projects to identify and highlight best practice in adult learning and the needs of adult learners. Please see our COVID-19 Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Report here. You can also find a list of publications, including the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Working Group policy papers here.

Externally, AONTAS monitors national and international research and policy reports from stakeholders and initiatives including, but not limited to DFHERIS, SOLAS, ETBI, QQI, HEA, RIA, NALA, NAP, ESRI, OECD, European Commission.

16. How do you think that the higher education sector on the island of Ireland can improve in terms of equality, diversity, and inclusion and do you feel that the sector would benefit from a national charter on EDI?

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 a clear overrepresentation of certain groups in Irish higher education institutions and an underrepresentation of people from

those in working class backgrounds who experience financial and other barriers in accessing education. It highlights a clear need for improvements in the areas of equality, diversity and inclusion.

AONTAS welcomes the idea of a national charter on EDI and recommends this being led by a specific structure dedicated to social inclusion and educational equality in the Department of Education, Research, Innovation and Science. This charter could provide institutions, learners and educators with key principles, inclusive pedagogy, and learner voice informed recommendations that raise expectations and improve the quality of the learning experience in higher education.

Theme: Research and Innovation

17. How can we encourage and support excellence to flourish within the Island of Ireland research and innovation eco-system (within both NI and ROI and collaboratively)?

Further investment and funding options into cross border collaborations are necessary to ensure that we are awarding research that supports research and innovation across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. This research should be focused on collaborative action and seek to address the shared problems of the modern day. Consultation with cross-border organisations, such as the Network for Adult Learning Across Borders, can be starting point to identify key areas of research that are needed and the type of funding structures necessary to facilitate cross border research exchanges.

Building a strong research community requires empowering strong future researchers. Investment in teaching pedagogy and building research capacity needs to take an entire tertiary approach. The recently formed Department of Higher and Further Education, Research, Innovation and Science, has already taken an important step in providing a structure of this type of tertiary exchange. Investment in research that explore how to better train and empower future researchers would be a welcome development in building a strong pathway for future research across Ireland.

18. What are researchers/research funders/policy makers on the Island of Ireland not doing that would increase and strengthen its international research and innovation reputation?

Research needs to meet the needs of citizens and help drive public policy. Building stronger structures between research institutes, public policy bodies, and civil society organisations is necessary to ensuring this process is realized. Investment that awards these collaborations would help ensure collaboration between these partners remains a priority of any future research agenda. While welcome first steps in this direction, such as the RIA series on Research for Public Policy given hope to developments in this area, more can still be done, particularly around ensuring that considerations are made for the role that civil society organizations can play in these exchanges. The current Irish Research Council funded New Horizon's Project, Community Engagement Praxis for Research in the Arts and Humanities (CEPRAH), being undertaken by AONTAS and the Trinity Long Room Hub for Arts and Humanities is an example of how fruitful these relationships can be.

19. What are the systemic deficiencies (within both NI and ROI and collaboratively) that need to be addressed in order to enhance the system and supporting excellent research and innovation that will have greatest impacts in Ireland and globally?

Greater investment in research is a positive way to increase Ireland's profile and global impact in research. This investment must cross all disciplines and provide equitable funding to humanities and social science projects. Ensuring diversity and equity in the types of research that is funded will help ensure that research remains central to Ireland's vision forward.

Priority should be given to research projects that address international questions and challenges of the modern day (e.g. the SDGs). As we move out of COVID-19, the importance of the shared experience, can provide us with new opportunities to interrogate what it means to be part of a global society. Giving priority to research that explores these questions, and more importantly, shares its findings through a variety of mechanisms to broader Irish society should be emphasized.

20. What mechanisms or solutions (within both NI and ROI and collaboratively) should be put in place in order to achieve the ambition of establishing the island of Ireland as a global leader in R&I and of becoming an 'island of talent' for internationally relevant research and innovation? What are the current barriers to this? How can we attract, retain and develop talented and diverse people in R&I?

Creating an 'island of talent' should involve enabling access of research participation to a diverse group of researchers, thus enriching the diversity of our knowledge base in research. Further exploration into the structural issues that hinder access to underrepresented groups, would be welcome. However, there is a lot of research on barriers that prevent access to learning opportunities in both the FET and HE sectors that can be used as a starting point. For instance, knowing the importance of part-time funded learning opportunities on extended greater access to lifelong learning to disadvantaged learner groups, AONTAS has continuously advocated for the part-time funding for higher education learners. The same should be applied to research opportunities as well, where part-time research projects are funded.

Given the role that community education plays in supporting educational opportunities among disadvantaged learner groups, great potential could be unlocked by working with community education organisations to build pathways for diverse learner groups into research careers. These partnerships could aim to build structured pathways and inform measures to curtail barriers preventing access for disadvantaged groups.



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