

**AONTAS Submission**  
to the  
**Department of Education and  
Skills Consultation**  
on the  
***Action Plan for Education 2020***



**15th November 2019**

## Brief outline of submission:

The Department of Education and Skills created an open online public consultation as part of its high-level work programme to develop the Action Plan for Education 2020 which articulates the Department's ambition, values and goals based on its Statement of Strategy. The feedback provided by AONTAS as part of this consultation aimed to contribute to the Department's development of the Action Plan for Education 2020.

The consultation process consisted of an online survey. Documented here are the questions asked, and AONTAS' answers as part of the consultation's online survey. The submission outlines the level of satisfaction AONTAS has with progress made to date in implementing the Action Plan.

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## Introduction to AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

AONTAS is Ireland's National Adult Learning Organisation for adult and community education providers, and adult learners. It promotes the value and benefits of adult learning, and advocates on behalf of the adult and community education sector. Founded in 1969, it is an independent NGO, with 400 members nationwide.

In addition to promoting adult learning in Ireland, AONTAS is the national coordinating body for the European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL), which is aimed at increasing participation in lifelong learning across the EU, enhancing policies and supports for adult learners, and gathering and disseminating European best practices.

As a membership organisation we provide a space for members to share experience, promote their work and advocate for the value of adult and community education.

## Questions and AONTAS Answers to the Open Public Consultation.

Below are the questions and answers to the Open Public Consultation on *the Action Plan for Education 2020*.

The survey began by asking: **[A]re you satisfied with progress made to date in implementing the Action Plan?**

Yes

No

### Your comments on the progress made:

Outside of the items which will be discussed below, one of the few commitments in the Action Plan for Education 2019 that refers to adult and community education is the commitment 10.8.12 from the *Programme for Partnership Government*. This commitment states that there will be an independent review of the Further, Adult and Community Education sector by the Oireachtas Committee on Education and an implementation of reforms to ensure the effectiveness of the sector. The purpose of this review as stated in the *Programme for Partnership Government* is meant to evaluate significant change in the Further, Adult and Community Education sector in light of the dissolution of FAS and the VECs, and the establishment of new structures inclusive of SOLAS, Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI), and Education and Training Boards (ETBs). After 3 years of this Government, and at the end of the 2019 Action Plan for Education where the commitment was once again made to undertake the review; this review has yet to take place.

Regarding the other brief commitments to adult and community education in the *Action Plan for Education 2019* there have been more positive outcomes.

AONTAS as National Coordinator for the European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL) in Ireland appreciates the ongoing Department support for the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation in Ireland, though it would be a positive development to see increased support for community education arising from the Recommendation considering the 5 target groups committed to by the

Department are all groups that community education has a history of successfully engaging. The target groups committed to by the Department as the policy targets for the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation are:

- a) Learners with low education attainment in employment
- b) Lone parents
- c) Travellers
- d) Migrants
- e) People with disabilities

The next question in the online survey was '**Question 1. What actions for 2020 should we consider in order to:**

**Shape a responsive education and training system that meets the needs and raises the aspirations of all learners?'**

2019 saw the publication of a comprehensive report from the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills titled the *Joint Committee on Education and Skills Report on Education inequality & disadvantage and Barriers to Education*. This report captures very well the many barriers affecting learners, particularly the most marginalised people and communities in Irish society. Therefore AONTAS strongly recommends that the Action Plan for Education 2020 take into account the recommendations from the Barriers to Participation Report, particularly those recommendations regarding community education funding and support.

There must be a cross-governmental approach to enabling adults, particularly the most educationally disadvantaged, to engage in learning. A holistic, person-centred approach is vital. Enabling learner success is dependent on individuals having their basic needs met (eg housing, health, food, and childcare). No matter how good a course is, if it is not accessible, provided at a time that fits into an individual's family/employment commitments; if there is no transport available/travel costs are unaffordable; and if there is no childcare that allows a parent to focus on studying; the person will not be able to take up learning opportunities and be successful.

*What is needed?*

- i. Funding to cover part-time higher education fees for first-time mature students
- ii. Funding for accessible higher education provision in a community setting through PATH funding
- iii. Increased transport cost support for FET learners
- iv. Ensure that DEASP do not deduct payments for students who miss a day due to illness/unforeseeable issues like child or parental care
- v. Maintain a heterogeneous education system. Ensure learners can engage in a range of accredited and non-accredited learning opportunities, particularly in a community education context
- vi. Multi-annual funding for community education to include the real costs of administration, such as costs for QQI reengagement and programme validation
- vii. Ensure there is childcare available for learners – 'no crèche, no class' remains a real need
- viii. Explore the potential of community education as an education policy tool for pre-apprenticeship programmes for encouraging participation in apprenticeships. This can

be simply linked in through a commitment to the 5 target groups identified in the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation.

**Question 2. Advance the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage and learners with special educational needs in order to support them to achieve their potential?**

Both of these groups, learners at risk of (and already) educationally disadvantaged are both target groups of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation. Therefore there is a policy tool already in place to help focus action for these learners. Further to this point there are several other areas, issues, items, and actions that can be taken to help lift people from educational and socio-economic disadvantage, while also helping to stop other people from experiencing this same disadvantage.

Comments on several areas like this are outlined below.

***A) General Comments on Educational Disadvantage***

Certain sections of Irish society experience persistent educational disadvantage. For adults, community education is a well-established, community-based model of provision that is accessible, flexible, affordable, supportive and effective for engaging educationally disadvantaged groups.

From the Adult Education Survey (AES) 2017 conducted by the CSO, if you leave school early and have (primary/less than the Leaving Certificate) as your highest level of education you are 7 times less likely to participate in formal (accredited) education than if you have a Degree (2% compared to 14%). However, it is not to say that people are not engaging in adult learning: 23% of early school leavers chose to engage in non-accredited education. Community education offers educational opportunities for all. From the AES and OECD (2017) data, those least likely to engage in adult learning include: older people; people who left school early (less than upper second level education); people in nonstandard employment.

***B) Barriers to participation in adult learning***

The Adult Education Survey (AES) 2017 highlighted cost, family responsibilities, location and health and age as significant barriers to participation in lifelong learning. Across the board, family responsibilities is the single biggest factor impeding participation in adult learning. Secondly, across social groups, cost (actual or perceived) is one of the main factors that prevents adults from taking up educational courses. Males across most age groups reported that they felt that they could not afford the cost of engaging in adult learning; females reported same in most age groups. Both sexes aged 45-49 years equally reported that the cost prohibited them from participating in FET. For those experiencing educational disadvantage, health and age are likely to impede lifelong learning participation. For example, 21% of people whose highest level of education was primary level cited their health and age as the reason they could not participate in education; 15% of those with a lower secondary qualification cited same. Only 4% of those with third level qualifications cited health and age as a barrier. In the border region, the location of training was 6 times more likely to be an issue than for people in Dublin. We can infer from the AES that the following will support greater lifelong learning participation the following action is required: - Ensure there is no financial cost for FET programmes in the Skills to Advance framework - Keep FET accessible by ensuring there is no cost for participation, particularly for people in non-standard employment - Support diversity of education provision available, non-formal and formal options, particularly through part-time provision so adults can manage other

responsibilities (family/caring/employment) - Widen access to accredited provision for adults in a range of education contexts, particularly community education, to address the low formal education participation rate - Community education – Provide multi-annual, sustainable funding for community education so that communities are empowered to address the regional disparities in lifelong learning participation

**Question 3. Equip education and training providers with the skills and support to provide a quality learning experience?**

Teachers/educators are central to the learning experience of people participating in adult and community education. Investment in continuous professional development is vital, not limited to specific areas eg e-learning, but expanded to include best practice in teaching and learning, supporting learner voice and engagement. Documenting and disseminating good practice must be fostered. The AONTAS peer-reviewed *Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner*, is a long-standing (over 35 years) Journal in which insights and recommendations on theory and practice can be shared. Investment in the careers of educators from FET to higher education must be prioritised, limiting precarious contracts, enabling outreach activities, reducing administrative burden, and prioritising teaching, learning and community engagement.

**Question 4. Intensify the relationships between education and the wider community, society and the economy?**

There is a close correlation between educational attainment and labour market outcomes suggesting that adults with low levels of education are at a real disadvantage in terms of employment and life chances (OECD, 2017, p.109). This is evident from data collected by the OECD for Ireland (2017):

- 48.8% of 25-64 year-olds with less than upper secondary level education are in employment
- 68.9% of 25-64 year-olds with a minimum of upper secondary level education but not tertiary education are in employment; and
- 82.1% of 25-64 year-olds with tertiary education are in employment

These statistics show that for learners their chance of employment increases by nearly 20 percentage points for each additional level of education achieved:

(<https://data.oecd.org/emp/employment-by-education-level.htm>).

When compared to other OECD countries this benefit is more pronounced in Ireland than the OECD average. In Ireland your earning potential with a third level degree is approximately 60% higher than someone with an upper secondary level of education (Education Matters 2017). With lifelong learning becoming the new norm for employees, it is important that all have the opportunity to participate to improve their employment prospects. The Adult Education Survey states that those who were unemployed were over three times more likely to participate in formal education than those in employment (28.2% versus 7.6%) possibly due to labour market activation policies. Additionally, employed persons were more likely to have participated in non-formal education than those who were unemployed (59.3% versus 38.3%). A higher proportion of persons in employment participated in lifelong learning than those who were unemployed (62.6% versus 52.9%). We know you cannot view people in employment as a homogenous group; the OECD report of 2017 stated that there are stark difference in access:

- i. Non-standard workers (part-time, temporary and self-employed) are more likely to be women, receive less training, and have less employment stability. In Ireland, every tenth employee is an involuntary part-time worker (OECD, 2017, p.110)
- ii. Full-time temporary workers are 20% less likely, and part-time workers 40% less likely, than standard workers to receive training and skills development which leads to further wage inequality (OECD, 2017, p.111)
- iii. Immigrants and workers low in skills receive less education and training from employers. Generally in OECD countries employers spend twice as much on employees with tertiary education as they do on those lower in skills

A policy tool available for intensifying the relationships between education and the wider community, society, and the economy is to fund community education.

Community education is completely underfunded and where funded does not account for the real costs of keeping a community centre open and operating, or for the true costs of providing accredited education, as accredited education requires reengagement and programme validation costs to QQI.

Funding requirements for education must also take into account the ‘distance travelled’ of each learner, appreciating that success for one person is different from success for the next person. For the most educationally disadvantaged, who experience homelessness, mental health issues, domestic violence, addiction, it is not simply a case of a person undertaking a course and then gaining employment. It’s about building a supportive education system around that individual, ensuring that it is truly learner-centred and building their capacity to reach their educational aspirations. Funding must cover the full cost of running a community education organisation, and also must take into account the range of outcomes and the distance travelled of learners. Community education effectively tackles educational disadvantage at a community level and is the envy of Europe. Now is the time to recognise its value at national level. Community education provides a warm, welcoming environment, participatory educational methodologies, holistic supports such as counselling and vital ‘make or break’ supports such as childcare and financial support.

The ability to engage in lifelong learning must be viewed in the context of a person’s life situation. Supports regarding health issues, access to affordable quality accommodation, and alleviating poverty all contribute to the likelihood of participating in lifelong learning. Similar to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, until the most immediate rudimentary barriers come down educational inequality will persist. Integrated whole-system approaches with wrap-around supports are needed to bridge gaps in engaging and retaining educationally disadvantaged learners. Community education has traditionally offered an alternative— and, arguably more fit-for-purpose — set of supports. For example, counselling services, mentoring, and childcare are not only more person- and learner-centred, they represent straightforward features of leading best practice on what works well in enabling education to become an empowering force in the lives of learners with positive effects on their families and within their communities; yielding deep and wide socio-economic, and improved health dividends for all members of society as a whole.

As AONTAS celebrates our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2019 and as we reflect on the history of adult and community education, we can observe that, unfortunately, these issues are not new, nor are they exclusive to Ireland. An extensive review of all 35 years of *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner* highlights a number of recurrent themes: the need to cover costs and ensure there are no fees for learners; the need to provide adequate childcare and revive the mantra

of ‘no crèche, no class’; the need to offer a holistic range of supports for learners. What we have learned over the 50 years of AONTAS is that we do have the answers to such questions through the wealth of knowledge from our membership and adult learners. Diversity of adult learning provision is vital: part-time, flexible, accredited and non-accredited; clear progression paths; recognition of prior learning (RPL); learner supports (including financial) in formal and non-formal (ie community education) contexts; effective learning methodologies; and integrating learner voice across provision. Community education has consistently met the needs of the most educationally disadvantaged; empowered communities, particularly women; contributed to cross-generational educational equality as a home-grown, community-centred model of holistic education provision. Ireland’s success in developing effective community education programmes has in some respects set standards/led the way in Europe. To realise an equitable vision of adult learning it is time we gave community education the recognition, resources and respect it deserves. Community education is not just about building bridges between education and the community; it is of and for the community. The action we want to see from Action plan for Education 2020 which will link education with the wider society and the economy is to commit to multi-annual sustainable funding for community education, which includes the cost of provision, as well as provision such as QQI reengagement and programme validation costs.

**Question 5. Lead in the delivery of strategic direction and supportive systems in partnership with key stakeholders in education and training?**

In order to lead in the delivery of strategic direction and supportive systems AONTAS provides a list of actions that we believe should be taken and which we first proposed in our 2018 submission to the consultation on the 2019-2021 Statement of Strategy.

- i. Commitment to multi-annual sustainable funding for community which includes the cost of provision, as well as provision such as QQI reengagement and programme validation costs
- ii. Maintain a heterogeneous education system. Ensure learners can engage in a range of accredited and non-accredited learning opportunities, particularly in community education contexts
- iii. Funding to cover part-time higher education fees for first-time mature students
- iv. Funding for accessible higher education provision in a community setting through PATH funding
- v. Increased transport cost support for FET learners
- vi. Ensure that DEASP do not deduct payments for students who miss a day due to illness/unforeseeable issue
- vii. Ensure there is childcare available for learners – ‘no crèche, no class’ is still pertinent
- viii. Explore the potential of community education as a pre-apprenticeship programme for encouraging participation in apprenticeships, particularly among females
- ix. Ensure quantitative measurement is not overly burdensome and is fit for purpose in measuring outcomes – see SICAP as a model of ‘distance travelled’ as a tool for measuring learner outcomes
- x. Invest in continuous professional development for educators regarding teaching and learning, including engaging the learner voice
- xi. Continue to support the National FET Learner Forum as part of the FET Strategy. Use the Forum as a model of qualitative data collection for meaningful learner voice engagement across the education system (as appropriate)

- xii.** In the Skills to Advance policy framework, include funding for community education to reach people in non-standard employment, offering them the opportunity to engage in learning
- xiii.** Identify non-standard employees as a specific target group for the Skills to Advance framework
- xiv.** Ensure FET opportunities are clearly communicated to the general public and employees in precarious/non-standard employment
- xv.** Offer guidance for employees in non-standard employment

The final and mandatory question of the online survey was:

**Please state if you are a: (this is a required field):**

Learner  Parent  Educator  **Organisation**  Other

**If you chose organisation please state the name of your organisation:**

AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation

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