

# **Submission to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science**

**Apprenticeship Action Plan 2021-2025  
Consultation Paper**

**Date submitted:  
Friday, 18<sup>th</sup> September 2020**



**The Voice of  
Adult Learning**

## Submission to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

### Apprenticeship Action Plan 2021-2025 Consultation Paper

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**Brief outline of submission:** This submission is being made on behalf of AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation and our membership. The submission is being made to highlight areas of importance to AONTAS and our members regarding the development of an Apprenticeship Action Plan 2021-2025. Our aim is to offer constructive recommendations to enable access to apprenticeship for all.

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## Introduction to AONTAS

AONTAS is the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation, a membership organisation representing adult education tutors, providers, learners, and stakeholders. AONTAS is committed to advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to a quality service for adult learners throughout their lives, and promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning. AONTAS supports learners, particularly educationally disadvantaged learners, to engage in lifelong learning, and advocates for more inclusive national education policy. AONTAS achieves our goals through our research, advocacy and communications work.

AONTAS plays a pivotal role in advocating for adult and community education at the national and international level. Our main objectives are to: widen participation in lifelong learning; ensure community education is supported to offer quality learning opportunities to the most educationally disadvantaged; ensure adult learners are central to local, regional, national, European and international adult learning policy; and promote quality adult learning throughout adults' lives.

You can read more about our work and our vision for adult education here:

<https://www.aontas.com/about/what-we-do>.

## Introduction to the Submission

This consultation paper is written in response to the Apprenticeship Action Paper 2021-2025 open consultation call. The paper reviews the current apprenticeship structure in Ireland and calls for innovative ways to increase diversity in the apprenticeship cohort. This is a welcome consideration. Other important considerations in this consultation paper include, but are not limited to, engaging diverse stakeholders in the apprenticeship governance systems, and reviewing the structure and delivery of apprenticeship programmes.

With the announcement of increased investment into the apprenticeship system, it is important we work to ensure that apprenticeships are open and accessible. This will be achieved by increasing accessible pathways to apprenticeships and by increasing participation among under-represented learners on apprenticeships; by underrepresented learners, we refer specifically to women, and the target groups identified by the Department of Education and Skills under the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation learners with low education attainment in employment, lone parents, Travellers, migrants and people with disabilities (Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee Paper, 2019). While it is clear from recent publications, such as the SOLAS *Review of Pathways to Participation in Apprenticeship* (SOLAS, 2018) that these issues have been on the agenda of the apprenticeship industry, further investment and focused policy is required to make apprenticeships an accessible educational opportunity.

This response will focus on barriers to accessing and engaging with apprenticeships and offer potential solutions to these barriers that could be included in the Apprenticeship Action Plan 2021-2025. It will also highlight suggestions for improvements gained from apprentices taking part in [the National Further Education and Training \(FET\) Learner Forum](#) and draw on the learning for the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Working Group.

While a number of topics have been identified in the consultation document, we have chosen to focus on two key issues: governance structures and increasing participation. For each of these topics, we have identified a series of key recommendations.

### **Recommendations for inclusion in the 2021-2025 Action Plan:**

#### **Governance Structure:**

1. Inclusion of stakeholder on the Apprenticeship Council with a remit for educational equality and diversity
2. Integrate learner voice into apprenticeship governance structures

#### **Funding of Apprenticeships:**

3. Create a needs-based funding support scheme, similar to SAF, for apprentices

#### **Increased Participation:**

4. As part of a broader tertiary educational equality structure within DFHRIS an 'Equity of Access to Apprenticeships' apprenticeships framework should be developed to include specific targets for marginalised groups (as identified above).
5. Ensure that new apprenticeship programme employers engage with and actively encourage participation from underrepresented groups
6. Ensure that workplaces in apprenticeship programmes are a safe and supportive environment for female apprenticeships
7. Establish community education pre-apprenticeship programmes to support access for marginalised learners
8. Implement Opportunities for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)
9. Inclusion of minor awards for retention, transfer and progression
10. Extending pathways and access to apprenticeships through community education

## Section One: Governance Structures

The first section of this consultation paper includes an overview of the governance structures for apprenticeship, including the Apprenticeship Council, SOLAS, the industry-led consortia and the committees and programmes groups. These collectives include a wide selection of representatives from academic and professional stakeholder organisations. However, learners, as key stakeholders, are left out of these stakeholder structures. Additionally, representatives with a specific focus on educational equality are not specifically named.

### **Inclusion of stakeholder with a remit for educational equality and diversity**

#### *Rationale*

The lack of representation of women and minorities within apprenticeships links to the broader issue of persistent educational and social inequality. Notwithstanding that *a significant minority of the Irish apprentice population comes from lower socio economic backgrounds*, clearly specific needs of learner cohorts who have been identified as vulnerable should be targeted for access to apprenticeships, such cohorts are outlined in the Student Support Act (2011)<sup>1</sup> and the Higher Education Access Plan (2015).<sup>2</sup> Capturing data on such groups is also vital. There is a need to address under participation by some learner cohorts and incentivise employer take up of a broader cohort of apprentices. As outlined in the [MED Discussion Paper Educational Equity and Learner Cohorts](#) the needs of the

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<sup>1</sup> The Student Support Act (2011) defines educational disadvantage as 'the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education'.

<sup>2</sup> Entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education; First time, mature student entrants; Students with disabilities; Part-time/flexible learners; Further education award holders; and Irish Travellers (HEA, 2015, p.27)

following learners should be considered and represented by member(s) of the Apprenticeship Council: 1. Learners with disabilities 2. Travellers and Roma 3. Home Carers 4. Women 5. Learners in Direct Provision and Homeless 6. Learners with Literacy, Numeracy and Basic Digital Literacy Needs. Representation on the Council could be part of a structure within DFHRIS that is responsible for striving for greater educational equality. Additionally, the terms of reference should reflect this focus.

#### **Recommendations for inclusion in the 2021-2025 Action Plan:**

- ✓ Inclusion of stakeholder on the Apprenticeship Council with a remit for educational equality and diversity

*4. How has the Apprenticeship Council functioned as a structure and what, if any, changes should be made to its operation or terms of reference?*

- ✓ The remit of the Council should be extended to include the needs of apprentices: ‘to oversee the development of a range of new apprenticeship programmes outside pre-existing trades and to examine the issues associated with creating a more flexible and accessible model of apprenticeship that could meet the needs of a diverse range of employers **and apprentices**.’

#### **Inclusion of learner voice on the Council - representing Apprentices**

##### *Rationale*

The inclusion of learner voice is an increasingly recognised and valued aspect of further and higher education systems and processes. Research has continuously shown that when learners meaningfully participate in shaping their own learning at micro (classroom), meso (institutional) and macro (systemic) level there are benefits for learners, educators, institutions, and educational systems as a whole. Conversely, a lack of learner voice representation can result in disillusionment and disengagement on the behalf of learners towards their educational process (Rudd, Colligan and Naik, 2006, p.3). AONTAS’ 2019-2022 Strategic Plan acknowledges learner voice as a core value of adult education, and a powerful and transformative tool to build capacity in learners, creating empowered self-advocates. It further acknowledges that “listening to people is becoming the new norm in public policy”, and explains why, “we must listen to the voices...of those who are currently engaging in learning or have completed a course who can share insight into how provision can be improved” (AONTAS, 2019, p.18).

While apprentices are facilitated in sharing their experiences through the complaints procedure detailed in the Apprenticeship Code of Practice for Employers and Apprentices (SOLAS, 2016) this process is reactive rather than proactive, and does not allow for apprentices to engage with the systems underpinning their learning experience as equals. Learner voice could be more embedded into apprenticeship structures through engaging

with the National FET Learner Forum This would provide a large number of apprentices with the opportunity to share their experiences on their programme in a facilitated environment. AONTAS would then feedback these experiences from the Forum through a reporting structure that could be incorporated into Apprenticeship planning. Further, the AONTAS ['Learners as Leaders'](#) programme, an EAAL funded programme aimed at increasing learner capacity to become empowered self-advocates, is another avenue through which interested apprenticeships who take part in the Forum could continue engaging with learner-voice led activities.

Learner voice should also be incorporated into ongoing consultative processes and all future stakeholder consultations. The inclusion of apprentices as representatives on these structures would be a way to ensure that the needs of apprentices are relayed first hand, from those best placed to advise on the experience, benefits from and barriers to undertaking an apprenticeship programme. To ensure that learners are equipped to share their voices and that policy-makers and other stakeholders are trained to listen to learners, a framework of learner voice best practice, through consultation and participation, could be devised and adopted into apprenticeship governance structures (Flynn, 2017). These measures would firmly embed learner voice into all aspects of apprenticeship governance, and ensure that revision and expansion of apprenticeship programmes, through a collaborative approach between apprentice representatives and industry stakeholders, meets the needs of employers and apprentices alike. AONTAS would be happy to share its expertise in learner voice and help create a model of learner engagement that compliments the existing apprenticeship governance structure.

Finally, as a continuation of the fair and open dialogue between apprenticeships and various stakeholders, the apprenticeship governance structures could be expanded to include learner representatives and organisations within the governance structure. Their inclusion would serve to further incorporate learners as key stakeholders into governance structures and provide further expertise on how to meaningfully incorporate learner voice into apprenticeship planning and systems.

#### **Recommendations for inclusion in the 2021-2025 Action Plan:**

- ✓ Increase learner voice in apprenticeship governance structures

## **Section Two: Funding Support for Apprentices**

Section two of the consultation paper lays out the funding structure for craft and consortium apprenticeships. While other aspects of access to apprenticeship programmes such as advertisement are important to consider when looking to increase participation, unless the financial barriers associated with accessing and engaging with an apprenticeship are tackled, lower participation among minority, and economically, disadvantaged groups will persist. Over the past three years of the National FET learner Forum, learners on



apprenticeship programmes have raised concerns about the financial costs associated with taking an apprenticeship, particularly in relation to relocation, accommodation and travel costs. There are concerns that travel and accommodation grants do not cover their true cost, which causes a financial strain for apprentices. Furthermore, the cost of relocation, which in some cases moves apprentices from the family home to rented accommodation in another part of the country, can be a barrier. Through the Forum, one apprentice shared how s/he was involved in informal work in his/her home county, but his/her relocation to another part of the country has closed this source of income and was an additional financial consideration when taking an apprenticeship.

To combat these financial barriers, the Action Plan could include a funding scheme to support apprentices through their programme. Similar to the Student Assistance Fund ([SAF](#)) in higher education, a tertiary-wide Student Assistance Fund is needed to include apprentices. This could be need-based, available through the work and classroom components of programmes, and aim at eliminating the costs associated with relocation, accommodation and travel for apprentices, to make sure anyone who wishes to take part in, and importantly complete an apprenticeship, regardless of cost.

#### **Recommendations for inclusion in the 2021-2025 Action Plan:**

*24. What, are your views on the provision of specific financial and nonfinancial incentives to increase participation by underrepresented groups?*

- ✓ Create a needs-based funding support scheme, similar to SAF, for apprentices

## **Section 3: Increasing Participation in Apprenticeships**

### **Creating a More Diverse Apprenticeship Population**

Widening participation to apprenticeships is vital. There is no simple answer to addressing the lack of diversity in apprenticeships. Access, participation and retention is complex and requires specific expertise, strategies and targets in order to make inroads on this issue. Over the course of the work of the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Working Group the complexity of issues impacting on marginalised groups was evident. Taking a whole-of-tertiary education approach is vital. Purely focusing on apprenticeships without considering the links with second level, community education, broader FET and higher education will have limited impact. Challenges impacting on learning are complex and are negatively impacted by poverty, poor housing, domestic violence, isolation, mental health, marginalisation and lack of essential supports. Over the course of the COVID19 pandemic, we have seen an exacerbation of these issues, the impact of which is still yet to truly emerge. In line with the Programme for Government, this section specifically focuses on enabling factors required in order to reach 'specific targets for the uptake of apprenticeships by women, people with disabilities and disadvantaged groups' (PFG, 2020).

As part of a broader commitment to educational equality across tertiary education should include an 'Equity of Access to Apprenticeships' framework, similar to the National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education. A non-exhaustive overview of the barriers facing women and economically disadvantaged cohorts can be found below.

### **Recommendations for inclusion in the 2021-2025 Action Plan:**

*26. What approach to target setting should be taken in the new Action Plan, in relation to participation generally and for underrepresented groups?*

- ✓ As part of a broader tertiary educational equality structure within DFHRIS an 'Equity of Access to Apprenticeships' apprenticeships framework should be develop to include specific targets for marginalised groups (as identified above).

### **Under participation of women enrolled apprenticeships**

Given the significant public investment in apprenticeships the astonishingly low participation rate of women in apprenticeship immediate measures to rectify this inequality must be implemented. Given the 4% female participation rate, there is a fundamentally unequal investment in education for women in FET.

The *Review of Pathways to Participation in Apprenticeship* further highlights a significant number of craft apprenticeships with minimal female representation, for example construction apprenticeship programmes at 0.3% (SOLAS, 2018). These apprenticeships cater to traditionally male-dominated professions. This perception of an apprenticeship as a programme 'for men' can result in women not being encouraged by teachers, guidance counsellors or other education providers to engage in these apprenticeships. An example of this attitude can be found through the AONTAS National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum (2018), where one female apprentice shared how she was discouraged from taking a place on a craft apprenticeship course, and was instead encouraged into the traditionally female-dominated industry of hairdressing. Another shared how the promotional campaigns for the apprenticeship programmes often showed women in construction and electrical apprentice roles, but how in reality there was no female representation on these programmes in his/her training centre.

This reproduction of stereotypical 'male' apprenticeships and professions also has a wider detrimental effect on sectors as a whole; sectors with limited female participation tend to be less agile, creative and innovative, and this arguably puts their long-term sustainability at risk (SOLAS, 2018, p.9). The OECD has also highlighted the "narrow range of ('male') occupations" that craft apprenticeships serve, which has the added detriment of encompassing employment sectors that have been steadily declining since the (2008) economic crisis. The *Review of Pathways* acknowledges that some apprenticeship



programmes have stronger female representation and that the increase in female apprentices is largely in new consortium-led programmes, with finance apprenticeships achieving close to gender parity (*ibid.*) As these apprenticeships are consortium-led and relatively new programmes, they benefit considerably from their lack of designation as 'male' industries in terms of the gender balance. However, for many programmes, the perception that they are not valid options for women and that women are not being effectively targeted means that they are not a real option for many women.

There is further evidence that expanding apprenticeship programmes could increase the number of women taking part. The Learning and Work Institute in the UK (2018, p.5) have recorded increased numbers of women taking part when programmes such as 'business, administration and law' and 'retail and commercial enterprise' were made available. While this expansion of apprenticeship programmes increased the number of women in the apprenticeship system overall, The Young Women's Trust (2017, p.5) caution that the apprenticeship programmes more often undertaken by women (such as childcare and hairdressing) are lower paid in comparison to other, male dominated programmes such as engineering, both during programmes and onwards into employment, risking further entrenchment of economic disadvantage. Thus, when considering expanding apprenticeship programmes it is important that measures increase participation from underrepresented groups, while also tackling pre-existing inequalities and facilitating socio-economic mobility.

There is a traditional intergenerational path to some apprenticeships, as well, where apprentices follow fathers or other family members into apprenticeships and, in some cases, into family businesses. This may dissuade women and those from working class or economically disadvantaged backgrounds from doing an apprenticeship, especially if they do not have the real or perceived connections required to successfully complete an apprenticeship programme.

### **The role of employers in encouraging female participation in apprenticeships**

Access and acceptance on to apprenticeship courses must include women (and other underrepresented groups, such as Travellers, learners with a disability, and lone parents). Employers who are hosting apprenticeships should play an active role in diversifying the apprenticeship cohort. New apprenticeship employers should be asked to ensure that they actively encourage applications from women and other underrepresented groups, and to provide proof that they are actively engaging with diverse populations when recruiting for apprenticeships programmes. Moreover, targets should be set for employers regarding participation of females. This would combat the perceived gendered and intergenerational nature of apprenticeships, and help transform the image of apprenticeship as a traditionally 'male' sector.

In supporting women's participation in apprenticeship the following aspects need consideration, including:

- ✓ **Affordability/flexibility** – including the cost of caring responsibilities
- ✓ **Health and Safety** – ensure all equipment involved is suitable for women
- ✓ **Mentoring and Support** – peer support is essential for retention
- ✓ **Sexual Harassment** – create safe environments for women

#### *Affordability/flexibility and Support for Parents - Childcare*

Through the National FET Learner Forum, apprentices, particularly women, have shared how childcare concerns can be a barrier for parents wishing to become apprentices. As many apprenticeship programmes continue into the summer months, some apprentices have described being unable to source full-time childcare for the summer period. This barrier has also been highlighted by Learning and Work Institute (2018, p.5), which found that women, lone parents and people with disabilities would greatly benefit from flexible and part-time apprenticeship options, and would be more likely to engage with a part-time or flexible programme. Furthermore, one apprentice explained how insufficient notice for beginning a training placement or unforeseen delays in beginning training placements made it difficult to organise childcare and could result in unforeseen financial costs for parent apprentices. The relocation aspect of apprenticeship training was also seen as particularly difficult for apprentices with children or other home caring responsibilities. Lack of suitable childcare is a barrier to creating a more diverse apprenticeship cohort.

#### *Health and Safety*

As noted in Union Learn (2018) in the UK “Some employers fail to consider women and men's differing health, safety and welfare needs. A survey by Prospect, revealed only 29 per cent of women had access to personal protective equipment (PPE) that had been designed to fit women. 57 per cent said their PPE sometimes hampered them because of this, and some reported having to change roles while pregnant or during the menopause because of PPE unsuitability.” Employers should ensure women's needs are specifically addressed in health and safety management.

#### *Sexual Harassment*

Employers also have a role to play in ensuring workplaces are a supportive and safe learning environment for female apprenticeships. Sexual harassment is more prominent in male dominated environments and traditionally male professions, and young women are most likely to experience high levels of sexual harassment in the workplace (Union Learn, 2018, p.15). A hostile working environment for women is likely to contribute to low levels of female engagement in apprenticeship, along with lower completion rates than their male

counterparts. Employers who are hosting apprenticeships should ensure that their workplace is safe and supportive environment for women, by implementing measures including:

- Ensuring that the workplace has a zero-tolerance policy to sexual harassment
- Underpinning anti-harassment policy with clear and well-documented procedures for anonymously reporting harassment and submitting complaints
- Training management, staff and apprentices to identify and report workplace sexual harassment

Assurances of safe learning environments for female apprenticeships, by including stipulations on sexual harassment policy and procedures for all employers seeking to engage with an apprenticeship programme should be implemented going forward. All apprenticeships, particularly women and apprentices from underrepresented groups, should also be facilitated as much as possible by their ETB and other stakeholders in finding a replacement employer, in incidences where the apprentice has reported a hostile work environment through the apprenticeship complaints procedures.

### **Programme design, delivery, progression pathways or other key features to improve the attractiveness of apprenticeships to young people and adults (question 23)**

In answering this question, this subsection focuses on:

- ✓ Implement Opportunities for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)
- ✓ The inclusion of minor awards for retention, transfer and progression
- ✓ Harnessing the power of community education to increase access to apprenticeships

#### *Implement Opportunities for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)*

RPL in the context of further and higher education can be described as “the process by which prior learning is given a value. It is a means by which prior learning is formally identified, assessed and acknowledged” (NQAI, 2005). RPL can encompass previous formal learning, informal learning, learning from experience and work-based learning. It can be used to gain admission to education and training programmes where an individual may not have obtained the standard admissions requirements, to gain credit towards a programme of study, to avoid duplicating learning outcomes already acquired, to gain exemptions from an education and training programme and to attain an award. It is of particular importance in adult education, where learners come to their course with a rich variety of prior learning and experiences that should be valued and recognised throughout their education journey.

While all 27 trade apprenticeship programmes under the remit of SOLAS have RPL processes, concerns have been raised about the efficacy of these processes. QQI’s

Recognition of Prior Learning in Irish Further Education and Training (FET) report (2017) quotes a SOLAS representative, stating:

The first phase they (apprentices) do off the job is very broad and also the programmes are not like in academia where it is broken into different subjects so it's very hard to break them up into practical and academic learning. It's all or nothing. It's either give them a full exemption or no exemption. That can be contentious for us." (QQI, 2017, p.37)

The report further elaborates how the lack of a licensing system for Irish apprentice programmes gives no opportunity to those with previous qualifications outside Ireland to align their qualification (ibid., p.38). Through the National FET Learner Forum, apprentices stated they were unaware whether or not these processes existed within their apprenticeship programmes, and some expressed frustration that they were not given an opportunity to benefit from RPL processes. One apprentice explained how s/he had had six positions before taking on his/her apprenticeship, but was told that there was no exemptions or prior learning experience considered, and that s/he would work through the phases as normal despite his/her prior experience. Furthermore, for adults wishing to change career and take up apprenticeships, a constant element of adult learning is a fear of ageism and a fear of returning to learning. A recognition of their experience via RPL could also contribute to participation.

These gaps in apprenticeship RPL processes could be improved by the inclusion of a review of the existing processes in the Action Plan, alongside the expansion of RPL processes to all consortium-led apprenticeship programmes. The focus on RPL also links to the Programme for Government (2020) *'Develop and implement a standardised system of accreditation of prior learning, taking account of previous education, skills, work experience and engagement in society.'*

#### *The inclusion of minor awards for retention, transfer and progression*

The opportunity to obtain a recognised QQI award qualification is a highly valued component of all apprenticeship programmes. However, those who are unable to complete their apprenticeship or do not reach the completion requirements for their programme receive no qualification. This means that those who do not complete their apprenticeship receive no accreditation of their acquired knowledge. It can also be a deterrent to potential apprentices who learn before commencing that they will not receive any official recognition of their learning if they do not complete their apprenticeship (ETBI, 2014, p.8). Completion rates for apprenticeship programmes fell to particularly low levels during the last recession, with completion rates in some craft apprentices as low as 49%, due in part to redundancy (DPER, 2019, p.21).

While completion rates have improved since and are particularly strong among consortium-led programmes, the structure of apprenticeships is optimal for incorporating component-based minor awards. Component minor awards should be awarded upon completion of each apprenticeship programme phase. This would give apprentices with official accreditation at each phase of their programme. This recommendation is also in keeping with the Further Education and Training Strategy (2020-2024) regarding micro-credentials, and the recondition of building up awards. The benefits to incorporating minor awards into the qualification framework of apprentices include:

- Improving retention by allowing apprentices to take time out of an apprenticeship if necessary and continue at a later day without repeating prior learning
- Enabling easier transfer from one apprenticeship programme to another by giving apprentices certified recognition of any transferable skills gained in their original programme
- Increasing progression options for apprentices by providing official recognition of the composite skills gained while taking their programme

Including minor awards in apprenticeship programmes would also facilitate part-time and flexible apprenticeship options, which would in turn encourage women and other underrepresented groups to engage with apprenticeships.

#### *Extending pathways and access to apprenticeships through community education*

Community education is proven to widen educational participation and reduces educational and social disadvantages by supporting learners from disadvantaged populations. It often focuses on improving basic skills such as literacy and numeracy and can be used to complement other formal and informal learning opportunities and signpost other educational opportunities for learners. It is thus optimally placed to increase access to, and retention within, apprenticeships by addressing some of the issues discussed above. The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills Report on *Education Inequality & Disadvantage and Barriers to Education* (2019) contains multiple examples of how community education has provided a pathway for educationally disadvantaged learners to engage with further educational attainment.

#### **Specifically, Community Education could:**

1. **Increase apprenticeship pathways for women:** Community education could provide pathways that are local and accessible to women including pre-apprenticeship programmes. Community education has historically supported large populations of women, particularly those from disadvantaged background. Apprenticeships could

also look to community education groups who focus specifically on employment opportunities for women, to see what support structures are in place to increase access and support successful progression pathways.

2. **Increasing apprenticeship pathways for marginalised learners:** Community education engages with some of the most disadvantaged learner populations. As an entry point for many learners returning to education, community education providers can provide informed and supported progression pathways into apprenticeships if structured pathways were to be developed.
3. **Provide flexible learning options and wraparound services for lone parents:** Community education often allow for flexible and part-time learning options and can provides childcare services within the local community, allowing lone parents to access them. Apprenticeships could look at these models to how they could incorporate flexible or part-time options into their programmes, as well as childcare options for lone parents on apprenticeships
4. **Bridge the literacy and numeracy gap:** Community education has a long history of improving basic skills for learning and preparing learners for further educational attainment. It could provide pre-apprenticeship basic skills programmes in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy based on local needs.

### *Developments Underway*

This section of the consultation document focuses largely on the 'Generation Apprentice' promotional campaign and the expansion of pathways to apprenticeship programmes in colleges of further education. AONTAS' ['One Step Up'](#) website is online resource dedicated to signposting learners to accessing education through providing clear and comprehensive information on courses, funding and services. This resource could be harnessed by Generation Apprentice, and AONTAS would be glad to collaborate on ways to ensure any learner interesting in learning about an apprenticeship has access to clear and accessible information.

While advertisement is an important and welcome step in increasing participation, these measures do not appear to have the specific aim of increasing accessibility for underrepresented groups. Engaging with a wide variety of stakeholders to communicate the benefits of apprenticeship to reach prospective learners, through adult education guidance services, NGOs, community groups could extend the reach in accessible formats.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to present the views, knowledge and expertise of AONTAS, adult learners and our 500+ members, in a submission centred around ensuring access and inclusion for any learner wishing to undertake an apprenticeship programme. AONTAS would welcome the opportunity to discuss any points in the submission or provide any additional information.

## **Recommendations for inclusion in the 2021-2025 Action Plan:**

1. Inclusion of stakeholder on the Apprenticeship Council with a remit for educational equality and diversity
2. Integrate learner voice into apprenticeship governance structures
3. Create a needs-based funding support scheme, similar to SAF, for apprentices
4. As part of a broader tertiary educational equality structure within DFHRIS an 'Equity of Access to Apprenticeships' apprenticeships framework should be develop to include specific targets for marginalised groups (as identified above).
5. Ensure that new apprenticeship programme employers engage with and actively encourage participation from underrepresented groups
6. Ensure that workplaces in apprenticeship programmes are a safe and supportive environment for female apprenticeships (incl. flexible with childcare supports)
7. Establish community education pre-apprenticeship programmes to support access for marginalised learners
8. Implement Opportunities for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)
9. Inclusion of minor awards for retention, transfer and progression
10. Extending pathways and access to apprenticeships through community education



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