

AONTAS submission to the Department of Education and Skills on the Statement of Strategy for the period 2021-2023



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AONTAS submission to the Department of Education and Skills regarding the public consultation on developing the new Statement of Strategy for the period 2021-2023

November 2020

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.

Following the appointment of Ms. Norma Foley TD as Minister for Education and in accordance with the Public Service Management Act 1997, the Department of Education and Skills is developing a new Statement of Strategy for the period 2021-2023. This Strategy will be informed by the Programme for Government, key Government priorities, policy frameworks and other significant issues, and will set out the Department's high-level goals for the period 2021-2023 to be progressed to achieve their mission:

To facilitate individuals, through learning, to achieve their full potential and contribute to Ireland's social, economic and cultural development.

The Department has been seeking views on any key strategic issues that should be considered in the development of the new Statement of Strategy and high-level activities for inclusion in the 2021 Work Programme. AONTAS welcomes the opportunity to submit a response to this consultation, as outlined below.

Programme for Government – Our Shared Future

Mission: Better Opportunities through Education

The Programme for Government – Our Shared Future sets out the Government's commitment to education which is founded on the principles of excellence, inclusion and sustainability.

The following are the high level goals for education that have been identified in the Programme for Government:

- Improving the learning experience and success of learners.
- Increasing progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage and learners with special educational needs.
- Helping those delivering education to continuously improve.
- Building stronger bridges between education and the wider community.
- Providing better national planning and support services.
- Implementing evidence-based policies.

This public consultation via online survey tool began by asking responders to prioritise the above high-level goals in order of importance. The AONTAS response is below:

- **First**

Goal 2: Increasing progress of learners with educational disadvantage and learners with special needs

- **Second**

Goal 1: Improving the learning experience and success of learners

- **Third**

Goal 5: Providing better national support services

- **Fourth**

Goal 4: Building stronger bridges between the wider education community

- **Fifth**

Goal 3: Helping those delivering education to continuously improve

- **Sixth**

Goal 6: Implementing evidence-based policies

Respondents were then asked to (a) provide three key actions per Goal, along with (b) a brief description of the measure of success were each Goal to be achieved. The AONTAS response is outlined as follows in line with the specific formatting of the online survey tool.

Goal 1: Improving the learning experience and success of learners

(A) Key Actions

1. Consider effective pedagogy in adult learning as a model for an engaged, inclusive curriculum. There is a benefit of moving away from a ‘banking model’ of learning towards a learner-centred problem posed curriculum. Utilising critical thinking, creativity and personal development. The ‘banking model’ of education is criticised by educators including Paulo Freire (1970), Bell Books (1994) who advocate for humanising pedagogical practice.

- Engage students in empowering change-oriented activities.
- Provide all learners with access to multiple forms of assessment techniques
- Ensure all learners have the opportunity to re-sit an assessment within the academic year to avoid further marginalisation by focussing on a 1- or 2-day examination process per subject.

2. Create an integrated lifelong learning pathway for students across all levels of provision. The strategic framework for European cooperation ([ET2020](#)) is designed to cover all levels of learning, supporting engagement from early childhood to adult learning. The concept of lifelong learning acknowledges the importance of bridging each stage of the educational journey for learners.

- Create a mentoring mechanism and connect all levels of provision with intergenerational peers, and practitioners acting as facilitators.
- Explore ‘access’ model of focussed) learner cohorts and create relationships between institutions for smoother transitions for all learners.

- Provide higher education in rural and lower socio-economic locations through community education providers. Utilising best practice examples including [Longford Women's Link](#) and [An Cosán](#) and promoting this as an option in secondary education.

3. Develop an integrated outreach model supporting families and communities. Create integrated outreach teams from across primary, secondary, adult and higher education working directly in communities normalising and promoting education.

- Identify and provide opportunities inviting families and communities to engage within adult and higher education institutions in an effort to remove barriers and build 'ownership' of these spaces.
- Provide funding for community building activities that is focussed on lifelong learning across primary, secondary, adult, and higher education

(B) The measure of success

The successful implementation of these three strategic actions centre around how well the Department and its partners perform in relation to upgrading the forms of pedagogy, pathways and provision envisaged here that are capable bringing the Irish education system in line with contemporary international best practice. Indicators here would need focus on how empowering and transformative learners' experiences are. When measured alongside lifelong learning participation rates, the Department would be able to demonstrate how sets of knowledge, competences and skills acquired do not only enhance employability but also show positive outcomes regarding contributions to strengthening democracy, Human Rights, mental and physical health, as well as individual and collective resilience. In assessing the success of outreach models, increased intergenerational educational attainment levels of learners from traditionally underrepresented social groups would provide the Department and stakeholders with the clearest picture whether or not efforts were producing the desired outcomes.

Goal 2: Increasing progress of learners with educational disadvantage and learners with special needs

(A) Key Actions

1. Creation of an 'Educational Equality Forum' led in partnership by the Department of Education and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

- Invite specialists, experts, practitioners and learners from across all levels of education provision to examine the issues, share expertise and develop policy.

- Ensure learner voice is at the centre of all policy development
- Ensure intersectional representation at all levels of policy and decision-making processes.
- Focus spending on community-based outreach and community partnerships to engage families in learning activities and build trust in statutory institutions.

2. Consider the use of universal design approaches in school curriculum to be more inclusive of diversity in teaching and learning, and is accessible for students.

- ‘Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn, including Students with Disabilities’ ([Ahead, 2020](#)).
- Ensure the learning environment, teaching materials and curriculum content is representative and inclusive of all people in Ireland and not the majority population.
- Provide choice of method as a fundamental design in teaching and learning.
- Design learning environments and materials that accommodate a variety of learning needs and provide space and time for learning equipment.

3. Ensure appropriate resourcing for disadvantaged students and those with special needs.

- Ensure there are appropriate numbers of teachers and special needs assistants in classrooms.
- Remove financial barriers for disadvantaged students through a free education models that covers all costs associated with education access.
- Provide family learning opportunities in partnership with adult education providers to build the capacity of educational support at home for students from families with low educational attainment.

(B) The measure of success

Perhaps the most necessary and important sign of success in the context of an overall evaluation of the Department’s effectiveness in achieving these five goals would be the establishment, and adequate funding, of an inter-Departmental Educational Equality Forum. This Forum would have to include stakeholders from the wider educational ecosystem whose statutory responsibility it would be to ensure that schools adopt a universal design approach that is inclusive of diversity in teaching and learning. Inclusion of targets on resourcing for disadvantaged students and those with special needs in the Forum’s Terms of Reference would be instrumental for achieving success in this context.

Goal 3: Helping those delivering education to continuously improve

(A) Key Actions

1. Prioritise teaching and learning methodologies that focus on empowering learners.

Community education fosters social and human capital. It provides opportunities to build skills for personal development and it enhances community development, as well as trust and tolerance within communities. Utilising this methodological approach in schools can create positive social change within and surrounding education providers and their connected communities.

- Learning from the success of community education provision in Ireland, CPD for school teachers can offer new methodologies that foster inclusive and empowering learning environments.

2. Create peer learning professional development opportunities across all levels of educational provision.

- Our educators have a wealth of experience and expertise to share. The creation of peer-learning activities may promote and encourage the sharing of best practice across all levels of provision.
- Build networks of support among educators for their wellbeing and to protect them from 'burnout'.

3. Explore experimental pedagogy's that include development education and change-oriented education models.

- Focussing on critical thinking, problem solving, active citizenship and democracy education for the provision of an ethical education protecting and supporting marginalised and vulnerable learners.

(B) The measure of success

Staff and educators also benefit from empowering, supportive learning environments underpinned by critical thinking, problem solving, active and global citizenship education which incorporate ethical education provision that protects and supports marginalised and vulnerable learners. Success regarding Goal 3 would see an increase in the prioritisation of teaching and learning methodologies that mutually benefit teachers and students. Building educators' capacity in this regard would require an inter-disciplinary approach where peer-led CPD opportunities are created and evaluated. Educators from Development Education and practitioners of transformative pedagogical approaches across the wider education system should be brought together locally, regionally, nationally and internationally to share

their skills and knowledge in a structured way. CPD credits should be offered and recorded. The learning generated within and across such complementary professional networks of support could be captured and fed back with recommendations to the Department on what is working for educators and what needs to be improved. Evaluation models for assessing this professionalisation process should be investigated and employed.

Goal 4: Building stronger bridges between the wider education community

(A) Key Actions

In line with [the European Pillar of Social Rights](#), equitable access to all forms of post-primary and secondary education must become the common goal that unites the wider education community in its shared mission to support every learner to reach their fullest potential through the education system.

1. Increase needs-based financial supports for learners' progression to Further Education and Training (FET), as well as other adult learning opportunities within Community Education settings. Learners who are members of marginalised communities that experience the double injustice of poverty and educational disadvantage continue to face significant barriers when seeking their right to progress their education (see [AONTAS Response - Public Consultation on Mature Student Participation in Higher Education](#)).

- Build stronger bridges between the wider education community and focus on the promotion of a diverse range of educational pathways into tertiary education that match the aspirations and needs of learners.

2. Increase communication of the benefits of community and FET adult education pathways for learners.

- Through its research on the [National FET Learner Forum](#), AONTAS has found that learners would like clear and up-to-date information about progression options, grants, and allowances for higher education. The [National Centre for Guidance in Education](#) and the [Adult Guidance Association](#) must be supported by the Department to draw on their areas of expertise and strengthen their vital role within the wider education system. As crucial information brokers guidance already plays an invaluable role that must continue through the lifecourse.

3. Increase the promotion of adult learning options in all schools including apprenticeships, FET, and community education. Engaging in the tertiary education sector for young adults increases the likelihood of their progression to higher education as a 'stepping stone' and capacity building model. In addition, they quality of life for

individual learners, and are shown to improve the lives of learners' families and increase wellbeing within and across their communities (See AONTAS [2018 Annual Synthesis Report](#)).

- Guidance services and school career guidance should continue to actively encourage learners to consider their options across all areas of tertiary education to set learners up to succeed in pathways that match their needs and aspirations.

(B) The measure of success

This time last year 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 at that time by AONTAS as part of that consultation outlines a number of recommendations that are highly relevant for measuring success in relation to Goal 4 (see [AONTAS Submission to the Department of Education and Skills Consultation on the Action Plan for Education 2020](#)).

The introduction of the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Innovation and Science since then clearly has implications for developing and embedding structures, policies and a culture of cross-departmental collaboration that places the learner and their community at the heart of matters. In short, success in relation to Goal 4 would see a truly learner-centred approach in place that builds learners' capacity to reach their educational aspirations across all forms of post-primary and secondary education. Furthermore, building stronger bridges between guidance services and the wider education community requires a whole-of-sector approach. Current initiatives that work well would be better supported through multi-annual funding, as well as the creation of new partnership structures that can be held to account by learners. Placing learners' own voices at the heart of performance indicators would not only be a healthy democratic step to take, it would significantly facilitate both Departments, and wider educational stakeholders, to guarantee better quality educational provision and more socially inclusive outcomes that benefit learners, the economy and Irish society as a whole. For more on the value of Learner Voice and pertinent recommendations click [Here](#).

Goal 5: Providing better national support services

(A) Key Actions

Due to the complexity of issues that educationally disadvantaged learners face, a diversity of services and supports at national level, and in the national interest, are required to enable access and meaningful progression. Pre-pandemic, there was an unequal distribution of privilege in the education system. Any effective supports and services must be designed to

overcome the gamut of issues such as poverty, housing, domestic violence, mental health, and which support learners to learn, like childcare and transportation. There is an even more urgent need to remove barriers that prevent learners from socioeconomically disadvantaged groups from fully participating in and progressing beyond second level.

1. Strategically align national support services to centre around the educational aspirations and needs of learners and their communities

- Develop a whole-of-government approach for the implementation of national services and supports capable of fully addressing the legacy and systemic nature of the depth and breadth of persistent intergenerational educational inequality in Ireland (click [Here](#)).

2. Ensure educational policy and indicators of success focus on increasing wider participation and progression for marginalised and vulnerable learners.

- Between the Climate Crisis, Brexit, COVID-19 and other social and economic challenges such as the increasing digital divide, Ireland can no longer afford the economic or social cost of leaving any of its citizens out or behind. Education has a universal impact beyond the siloed remit of one Government Department (click [Here](#) for more), promoting social inclusion; mental health and wellbeing; civic engagement and equality.

3. Provide learners from groups traditionally underrepresented in and underserved by the education system with a genuine opportunity to engage with and benefit from education in Ireland at every level on the National Qualifications Framework.

Suggested practice:

- Build partnerships between all levels of education and diversify access pathways and assessment mechanisms to facilitate a more inclusive education system.

(B) The measure of success

Indicators used by the OECD, such as [PIAAC](#), [PISA](#) and [Education at a Glance](#) provide essential starting points for the Department to measure where it is succeeding and where requires a more concerted effort. Quantitative frameworks, however, can only provide the Department and relevant stakeholders with a partial picture. [Learner Voice](#) makes an invaluable contribution here by providing a fuller and clearer assessment of meaningful success. Those most affected must be heard. When empowered and listened to, learners provide that vital, and yet often neglected, qualitative piece of the puzzle which allows policy-makers to understand and improve services and supports.

In terms of assessing success, the OECD country profiles offer some useful insights. [Slovenia](#) and [Finland](#) for example, bring together numerous government departments for developing and implementing national strategy. They also have system-level policies that encourage quality and equity. The Department of Education and Skills, alongside the Department of Further and Higher Education would benefit greatly from borrowing what works well in other jurisdictions.

In broad strategic terms, the community, further and higher education sectors must be brought together to work multilaterally with stakeholders under the remit of the Department of Education concerned primarily with primary and second-level. An ecological approach would help set learners of all ages and stages up for success. Evaluating their success must involve a structure that spans primary, secondary and tertiary education to ensure educational equity occurs from cradle to grave and can be measured in terms of [EU lifelong learning targets](#).

Success must be understood not only as increased and wider access, progression, retention and positive outcomes for more learners with Disabilities; Travellers and Roma; Women; lone parents; in Direct Provision; experiencing Homelessness; with literacy and numeracy needs; in receipt of social welfare. Success must also involve measuring the quality of their learning experiences.

Goal 6: Implementing evidence-based policies

(A) Key Actions

Experts and organisations in the field of evidence-based approaches to policy formation must continue to play a significant role in building the capacity of both the Department and stakeholders across the wider education system so that a mutual partnership model may produce positive policy results rooted in efforts to achieve more equitable educational outcomes.

1. Build the capacity of decision-makers, and stakeholders alike, to access, gather and use data of what works well where and why to facilitate the development and implementation of policy which benefits learners and their communities.

- Increased funding for recruitment and training so stakeholders can build their capacity to work in genuine partnership with the Department. Ensuring policy formation and decision-making is both a top-down and bottom up process based on the best quality data and analysis. Similar to any key set of competences required for authentic collaboration, stakeholders and decision-makers have to be equipped with a similar level of knowledge and know-how to produce effective efficient interventions for learners and their communities.

2. Embed a collaborative approach across all relevant Departments to the development and implementation of policies which affect learners' progression and outcomes.

- Put in place an inter-Departmental working group that also consists of stakeholders that can contribute to and be held responsible for the development and implementation of policies put into practice for future evaluation.

3. Conduct evaluations of projects, programmes and services which make best use of self-evaluation practices.

- The Department must enter into a learning journey with education providers across the wider education system to develop a common language around shared priorities, activities and strategies. Capacity to conduct self-evaluations must be supported by the Department as an integral piece of overall evaluations of what works well and what falls short for learners and providers.

(B) The measure of success

In time, the measures of success for Goal 6 can be gleaned from the level of success found across the other five goals. An ethos and application of using an evidence-based approach to policy formation and decision-making must be established and made sustainable so that results clearly show (a) more learners from groups traditionally underrepresented in and underserved by the education system are benefitting from progression into tertiary education and (b) their learning experiences are positive ones that are passed down through generations. An ultimate measure of success of whether or not the abovementioned have succeeded will be gauged by how much education policy in Ireland has genuinely offered learners, their children and their grandchildren who are experiencing educational disenfranchisement can fully participate in and benefit from a route that results in a more inclusive and equitable system. The legacy of success here would be to have developed, implemented and evaluated policies proven to produce positive sustainable collective outcomes for learners of all ages. The value to be reviewed would stem from and act as a catalyst for improving all forms of learning options across the lifespan, particularly in relation to those farthest from and left behind by previous educational models. Success would witness and depend on a deeper embedding of organisations and experts in the field of evidence-based approaches so they may play a more active role in providing the Department and stakeholders with the technical, theoretical and applied capacity required to bring an education system truly founded on the principles of excellence, inclusion and sustainability outlined in the Department's current [Statement of Strategy 2019-2021](#) and the [Programme for Government: Our Shared Future](#).

Concluding remarks

AONTAS welcomes this opportunity and future opportunities to support the Department and contribute to its work on building a whole of system approach to strategic planning and development to ensure a coherent approach across the continuum of the education system to benefit every student in primary and post-primary education so they can access, participate and benefit from tertiary education options fully and equally.

As Ireland transitions into a post-pandemic society and economy, the wider educational ecosystem will have to play an even more concerted and important role in overcoming what will surely be the most challenging times ahead for Ireland in living memory. The still unknown social, economic and educational fallout from the Climate Crisis, Brexit and COVID-19 means it will only become more important to ensure more learners of all ages and life stages from underrepresented target groups succeed in all forms of education. AONTAS encourages the Department to fully and accurately examine the new and intensified barriers that are and will increasingly exclude people from equal participation in primary, post-primary and adult learning contexts to ensure the Department is successful in its mission ‘to facilitate individuals, through learning, to achieve their full potential and contribute to Ireland’s social, economic and cultural development’.



**The Voice of
Adult Learning**

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