



The Voice of  
Adult Learning

# Department of Social Protection Statement of Strategy 2025-2028

AONTAS' Consultation Submission

March 2025

# AONTAS Submission to Department of Social Protection's Statement of Strategy 2025-2028

## Background to the Submission

**AONTAS are the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland**, founded in 1969 and working passionately ever since to make education equal and accessible for all. Backed by our **robust research and focused community work**, we advocate and lobby for quality education for all adults and raise awareness of the impact of adult learning on people's lives and on society. We work on behalf of our members, who are connected with communities across the whole island of Ireland. Our members and adult learners inform our research and campaigns for social change. AONTAS welcomes the opportunity to submit to the Department of Social Protections consultation to inform the next **Statement of Strategy 2025-2028**.

Learners who have experienced **educational disadvantage and social exclusion** stand to **benefit most from participation in adult and community education** (Cobain et al., 2020; ETBI, 2021). However, research conducted by AONTAS (Meyler et al., 2024; Meyler et al., 2022) and others (SOLAS, 2017; Sartori & Bloom, 2023) has found that **financial barriers often prevent participation in lifelong learning** for these learners.

**Financial supports play a vital role in supporting the participation of many adults in education.** The most relevant supports from the Department of Social Protection for adult learners in the Further Education and Training (FET) sector are the Back to Education Allowance, Back to Education Initiative and the Part-time Education Option. Apart from Apprenticeship payments, access to other financial supports such as Training Allowances is dependent on eligibility for social welfare payments, and time in receipt of allowances. This means that social welfare rates have an influence on financial supports across the FET system.

There is an outstanding need to review the level of financial supports available to learners in the FET sector. Research has shown that financial supports are **inadequate** for learners at risk of disadvantage (Meyler et al., 2023a; Meyler et al., 2024). The current system is also **confusing and complicated to navigate**. There are **differences in the levels of support**

available for learners, this has implications for incomes across the FET system (Meyler et al., 2024; Indecon, 2022; DFHERIS, 2024).

AONTAS welcome the promise to **review the financial supports available** to learners in adult and community education in the recent **Programme for Government**. This submission aims to contribute to this process.

The following recommendations are aligned to the Department's Mission '**to promote active participation and inclusion in society through the provision of income supports, [...] and other services**' and its overall objective to put clients at the centre of all our operations.

### Key Recommendations

AONTAS recommends that the **commitment in the Programme for Government to review the financial supports** for adult learners is integrated into the forthcoming Statement of Strategy. This review should support **the standardisation** of allowances and secondary benefits so that learners in need of support do not experience barriers to participation in lifelong learning. This, in-turn, will enable participation in future employment, social, and educational opportunities.

- **Recommendation 1:** A commitment to **regularly review the adequacy** of all **allowances, secondary benefits** and **targeted supports** so that learners can meet the costs of education. This should include a **reconsideration of income disregards, and eligibility criteria** that may have an impact on learners who face additional costs to participate in education.
- **Recommendation 2:** A commitment to **streamline** and standardise **supports** where possible across the whole FET system to ensure **equity and transparency of access to financial supports**.

### Learner Profiles and Social Inclusion

The adult and community education sector supports a **diverse cohort of learners**. Many of whom have been identified as being at **risk of discrimination and social exclusion** (SOLAS, 2022a; Meyler et al., 2023a). These learners **should not be left behind** through lack of opportunity to participate in education and training that is appropriate to their needs (NALA, 2024; OECD, 2017).

Since 2019, SOLAS (2022a) reported **significant increases in the number of learners choosing FET from marginalised groups**. This included a 50% increase in **learners with a disability** as well as increased participation from learners from the **Traveller and the Roma Communities**. Data collected by SOLAS (2023) also revealed that **31.9% of learners were unemployed** prior to enrolment. The capacity of the FET system to provide **accessible options for education and training** for groups that experience inequality, and social exclusion is a particular strength of the sector.

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) (2022) have also published a report that revealed the relevance of adult education to people with a history of educational disadvantage. This report noted that **31% of learners in the sector had lower secondary education or below**. This engagement of learners with low levels of educational attainment is important given the **correlation between people's level of education and risk of living in poverty** (Central Statistics Office, 2022).

Despite this sector's capacity to engage these diverse learners, **financial barriers** to participation in education are repeatedly cited in literature (SOLAS, 2017; Meyler et al., 2023a; Meyler et al., 2024; Sartori & Bloom, 2023). For example, a mixed method study on the engagement of learners at risk of marginalisation by AONTAS reported that **one third of survey respondents** faced financial barriers to participation in adult education. In **targeted focus group discussions** participants from the most disadvantaged groups, reported **greater challenges** in accessing formal and informal education. This cohort included lone parents, people living in Direct Provision, and ex-offenders who reported **pressure on existing income streams, including social welfare payments** (Meyler et al., 2023a).

As **financial supports play a key role** in supporting access to education for many adult learners, a **review of existing supports, eligibility criteria and conditionality** is urgently needed. This should ensure that no learner faces barriers to participation in education, which can support their social inclusion and wellbeing (OECD, 2017; Cobain et al., 2020).

### **Financial Barriers for Learners at Risk of Disadvantage in Adult Education**

**National Learner Voice research** conducted yearly by AONTAS also draws attention to **specific gaps** in access to financial support, including access to **ancillary benefits** such as fuel allowance or double payments while on a Training Allowance (Meyler et al., 2024). When

these secondary allowances could be accessed, the level of **financial support** for childcare, meals, and transport was found to be inadequate for learners needs (Meyler et al., 2024; Meyler et al., 2023b).

A **lack of clarity** around **eligibility** for financial supports is also clear in research conducted by AONTAS. This results in anxiety about income assessment processes, and the impact of participation in education on income for disadvantaged learners (Meyler et al., 2023a). In addition to this challenge, **eligibility criteria have also resulted in financial hardship for learners** who could not demonstrate sufficient time on welfare before participating in education to access allowances (Meyler et al., 2024).

“Your social welfare is changed to the training benefit, so it’s paid through the college. [However], the social welfare doesn’t register that you’re still getting a payment. So, for the double payments and the fuel allowance we’re not entitled to it but we’re still in full-time education. You’re kind of being punished for it. And you see everyone in the class going, ‘Double payment now’. It’s serious. The cost of living doesn’t stop for us. Whereas everybody else gets it but we don’t get it. It’s still hitting us the same way.” (Learner Voice, 2024)

The **complexity of funding supports available** has also been noted in the annual Funding the Future Options Paper (2024) published by DFHERIS. Learners who participate in various types of adult education can be in receipt of different forms of supports, and there can be a disparity in the level of support that they receive. In addition, this complexity creates a national challenge to ensure fairness and equity among learners. It also creates additional barriers for people living in poverty with low educational attainment, and it increases people's fear of losing the supports they currently access (Meyler et al., 2024; Sartori & Bloom, 2023).

Much work has been done in recent years to widen supports available to learners in the FET system. This includes the **retention of welfare allowances** when on an approved Level 6 -10 part-time course that is relevant to employment skills, or one that is agreed with a deciding officer as part of an activation plan. Access to a **student hardship fund** in certain fulltime courses, or part-time offerings for particular **target groups is also a welcome development**.

However, not all learners who need supports can access them as noted in the eligibility gap mentioned previously. Recent **PIACC** (OECD, 2024) findings reveal that the proportion of

adults in need of literacy support has risen from **18% to 21%**. This rising need for literacy supports in Ireland highlight a need for financial support for learners on Level 1-4 programmes.

Research also reveals that there are disadvantaged learners in **low-paid employment** who may be excluded from existing financial supports (Meyler et al., 2023a; NALA, 2024). These learners may need Level 1- 4 programmes in literacy and numeracy but are not supported financially to take up these courses. This need for access to Level 1-4 supports is currently not supported by the National Training Fund. Consideration of **supports that would promote engagement** with adult education at lower NFQ levels is warranted. Financial support for adult learners with unmet literacy needs at these levels would promote social inclusion and **mitigate the risk of the ‘low skills trap’** (OECD, 2017:112).

### Rationale for Key Recommendations

The research cited here (Meyler et al., 2023a; Meyler 2024; Sartori & Bloom, 2023; Indecon, 2022) highlights the need to implement our key recommendations.

**Recommendation 1:** A commitment to **regularly review the adequacy of all allowances, secondary benefits and targeted supports** so that learners can meet the costs of education. This should include a **reconsideration of income disregards, and eligibility criteria** that may impact learners who face additional costs to participate in education.

This review is in line with the affirmation of the **importance of ancillary benefits and eligibility criteria to vulnerable groups** contained in the previous Statement of Strategy (Department of Social Protection, 2023: 18). The review should inform the development of a suite of financial supports that is **equitable for all learners**. Additional costs for education should be avoided so that lifelong learning can support the goal of social inclusion (OECD, 2017; DFHERIS, 2024).

While a review of allowances is necessary to ensure equal access to financial supports, a commitment to **regularly examine the adequacy of financial supports** for adult learners is also needed in the next Strategy. This would be of particular benefit for the one-in-three

learners in receipt of social welfare who are at most risk of marginalisation (SOLAS, 2023; Indecon, 2022; VMR, 2024).

A recent report from the Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2024) highlighted an increase of 18.6% in the level of income needed to maintain a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) with an increase of 10.6% in the last year alone. This rise in MESL has **reduced the spending power of households**, particularly those in receipt of social welfare where increases in allowances to date have been insufficient to address the rising costs of living in Ireland (VMR, 2024).

This is an issue as participation in education can generate substantial additional costs. Indecon's Review of the Student Grant Scheme (2022) estimated that engaging in full-time **FET learning costs €1,112 per month and €10,004 per academic year**. This is a substantial cost given the lack of earnings for learners and the impact of the cost-of-living crises on families and those on welfare (Sartori & Bloom, 2023; Roantree & Doorley, 2023).

**Recommendation 2:** This review needs to be underpinned by a commitment to **streamline and standardise supports** where possible across the whole FET system to ensure **equity and transparency of access to financial supports**.

This activity should **protect, enhance, and ensure access to secondary benefits and supports**. This will promote the full participation of learners, particularly those who have experienced educational disadvantage and exclusion (Meyler et al., 2023a; Meyler et al., 2024). This would remove financial barriers to learning for adults and would ensure that no one is left behind when it comes to access to quality education (SDG 4).

### **Value of Supporting Participation in Adult Education**

The new Programme for Government's commitment to **review financial supports** for learners in the FET sector can be realised if it is **affirmed as a key action** in the Department of Social Protection's Statement of Strategy 2025-2028. This is essential in a context where income inadequacy is affected by yearly increases in the cost of living (VMR, 2024).

A regular cycle of reviews is needed to ensure that supports offered align with the Department of Social Protection's (2023) own goal of promoting "**active participation and inclusion in society through the provision of income supports, [...] and other services**". This

would also ensure that those in receipt of supports are “at the centre of services” by eliminating disparities and inequities for adult learners.

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