

**Mitigate Disadvantage during COVID-19:  
Promote Educational Equality for All**

# **AONTAS Pre-Budget Submission 2021**

**Investing in Inclusion for  
Adult, Further &  
Community Education  
Learners**

## Mitigate Disadvantage during COVID-19: Promote Educational Equality for All

AONTAS has set out six achievable asks that will support educational access for adults across the lifelong learning spectrum

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| Ask 1 | <b>Commitment to Educational Equality Establishment, by DFHRIS, of a specific structure dedicated to social inclusion and educational equality</b>   | <i>Structural</i>                        |
| Ask 2 | <b>A Dedicated COVID-19 Community Education Support Fund</b><br>a. Community Education Learner Assistance Fund<br>b. Reboot Learning through an Outreach, Engagement and Mentoring Fund<br>c. COVID-19 Exceptional Circumstances Fund for Community Education  | <i>€2,000,000 annually for two years</i> |
| Ask 3 | <b>A Sustainable, Multi-annual Funding Model for Independently Managed Community Education Providers</b>   | <i>€10,000,000 increase annually</i>     |
| Ask 4 | <b>Establishment of a QQI Re-engagement Fund for Community Education Groups</b>  | <i>€250,000 once off support</i>         |
| Ask 5 | <b>COVID-19 Learner Support Package across Tertiary Education</b><br>i. Fund IT support and access for community education learners<br>ii. FET Learner Support<br>iii. Mature Student Support - Abolish fees for higher education and introduce SUSI supports for part-time higher education mature students | <i>Structural</i>                        |
| Ask 6 | <b>Implement All Social Inclusion-focused Activities from the Programme for Government, Our Shared Future.</b>   | <i>Structural</i>                        |

## Introduction

'The Coronavirus has caused the largest disruption to education in history impacting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries' (OECD, 2020, p.2). Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, marginalised groups have unequivocally experienced an exacerbation of disadvantage. Many of the supports that were in place now must be offered in a different manner and the barriers that learners faced before that did not have adequate supports are now being compounded as a result of the crisis. Despite efforts to redress potential barriers faced by COVID-19 in Irish education, a significant gap is emerging.

The **AONTAS pre-budget submission sets out a call for immediate action** to address the specific impact this crisis is having on disadvantaged individuals and communities. **To prevent the impact of exacerbated inequalities, differential re-distribution of available resources over the coming two years are essential.** The current crisis, and future provision, will require an of supports to widen access and support participation.

While the Department of Education and Skills quickly established a set of groups in March to support the continuity of FET, HE, and community education provision through the COVID-19 crisis via the Tertiary Education System (TES) Steering Group, we are yet to see the true impact of the crisis on disadvantaged learners. The work of the **Mitigating Educational Disadvantage** (including community education issues) Working Group (MED) continues to examine factors which impact on equity of access and disadvantaged learners and proposes responses to mitigate these impacts. Emerging data points to:

- **A significant reduction in disadvantaged adults participating in education,** particularly accredited programmes at the early levels of the National Framework of Qualifications. *Compared to 2019, in 2020 there was an average **reduction of 50% in QQI Major Awards attainment at NFQ level 1-4.***<sup>1</sup> This compares to an average decrease of 17% for QQI levels 5 and 6. Similarly, compared to 2019, in 2020 there has been a decrease in QQI Minor Awards at Level 4, and Level 5 of 51%, and 28%, respectively.
- AONTAS members report a demand for community education courses, but due to restrictions, **not all learners can be accommodated on-site in centres or learners do not have the IT devices necessary to engage in learning remotely.** This is particularly a challenge for non-accredited programmes. Since non-accredited learning options are often the first stepping stones to further lifelong learning and accredited learning options among disadvantaged learner groups, this means the most marginalised people in society now face continued and further exclusion.

These examples demonstrate there has been an increase in educational disadvantage during COVID-19 and offer a stark warning to the potential effects society will face if immediate action is not taken.

Impact at individual and community level:

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<sup>1</sup> NFQ Level 1 decreasing by 30%, Level 2 by 76%, Level 3 by 67%, and Level 4 by 48% from the previous 2019 figures.

- **Exacerbation of disadvantage** as those with lower levels of qualifications are most likely to have lost their job, have poorer health, and have fewer resources to engage in the seismic shift to remote learning. It will further marginalise learners who cannot progress in further education and training in a remote context and set back their learning.
- **Reduce access and progression** options for disadvantaged learners. QQI Major and Minor Awards act as building blocks to attaining accreditation and supporting progression across the NFQ through further and higher education. Further drops in these awards, signals a concerning trend about the state of education for disadvantaged learner cohorts.

Policy level:

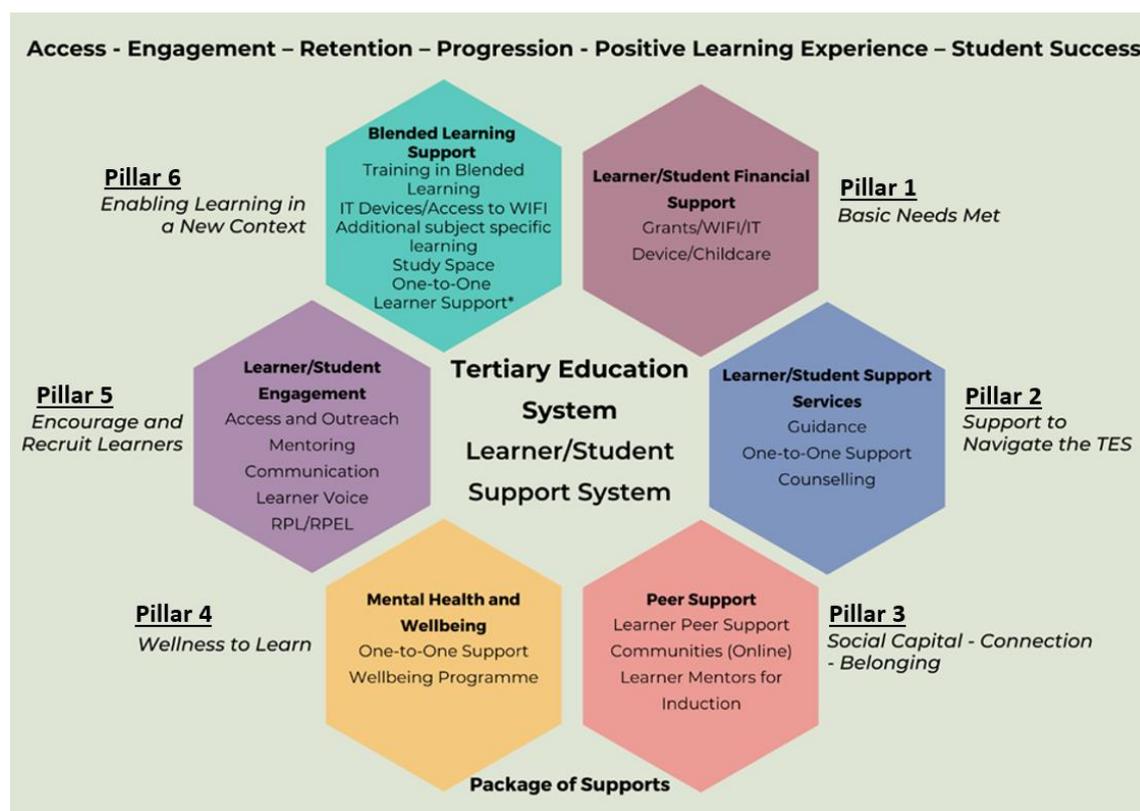
- **Reduce lifelong participating rates**, thus hampering efforts to reach the Programme for Government lifelong learning participation rates target of 18% by 2025.
- **Stagnate progression of marginalised learners** thereby stymieing access to apprenticeships and higher education options, reducing government targets established in the Action Plan on Apprenticeships and the National Access Plan for Higher Education.
- **Reduce national accreditation Levels.** The EU Upskilling Pathways Recommendation aims to support Member States to increase Leaving Certificate levels of accreditation across the population.



## ASK 1: Commitment to Educational Equality

The new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science led by Minister Harris TD has the opportunity to spearhead a new vision for education in Ireland. *“The department’s role is to ensure that these sectors underpin and stimulate Ireland’s social and economic development and that the opportunities provided by public investment and policy in the sectors are made more widely available to everyone including the most vulnerable in society”<sup>2</sup>*. Regarding the Department’s role for social development and to provide educational opportunities to everyone, including the most vulnerable, AONTAS proposes specific action to meet this aim.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, by drawing on the expertise of AONTAS and the MED working group, we have learned that issues impacting educational access has commonalities across the tertiary education system. They are expressed in this Tertiary Education System learner support system framework. The support needs for each pillar of the Framework is assessed for that context to showcase an inclusive model designed to redress the challenges learners will face across community education; further education and training; and the higher education sectors.



**Figure 1: Tertiary Education Student/Learner Support Framework**

Ireland has specific structures to shape tertiary education policy (e.g. The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs); however, there is no specific structure that is dedicated to educational equality across the tertiary system. Given that participation by educationally disadvantaged

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/c481f-about-the-department-of-further-and-higher-education-research-innovation-and-science/>

groups is of concern<sup>3</sup>, access can only be properly addressed when it brings together the community, further and higher education sector. Therefore, a structure to enable access across tertiary education is needed.

For the following key populations specific efforts must be made to support educational access: Learners with Disabilities; Travellers and Roma; Home Carers; Women; Learners in Direct Provision; Learners impacted by Homeless; Learners with Literacy, Numeracy and Basic Digital Literacy Needs; Adults with Lower-Level Qualifications; Individuals in receipt of social welfare; and First-Time Mature Students. A cross-tertiary structure focused on educational equality would bring together voices, and expertise, from each sector working directly with these groups. This would ensure the focus of access would go beyond educational sector, thereby revolutionising a learner-centred, tertiary education system that builds seamless access and transitions among these key learner groups.

### **Role of the Educational Equality Across Tertiary Education Structure/Agency**

**Aim:** Advise the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science on issues of educational equality

Actions:

- Research issues impacting on disadvantaged learners across TES
- Propose solutions to issues based on a robust evidence base
- Consult with stakeholders across the tertiary education system to inform the Department's work
- Embed the voices of those who are the focus of policy in decision making: learners and members of marginalised communities

This would be an example of innovation and evidence-informed policy making. The Structure would create, for the first time, a bridge between all levels of the tertiary education system in addressing educational equality by focusing on social inclusion.

'Social inclusion is a process which ensures that those at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life and to enjoy a standard of living that is considered normal in the society in which they live. It ensures that they have greater participation in decision making which affects their lives and access to their fundamental rights' (European Commission, 2004, p.10).

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<sup>3</sup> The Education Act (1998) defines educational disadvantage as 'the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools'. In relation to students in the formal education system educational disadvantage has been also been defined as: 'a limited ability to derive an equitable benefit from schooling compared to one's peers by age as a result of school demands, approaches, assessments and expectations which do not correspond to the student's knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours into which (s) he has been socialised (as opposed to those to which (s) he is naturally endowed)' (Boldt and Devine, 1998, p.10). In policy, the term 'non-traditional student' is used to describe a student who by their class, educational background, race, ethnicity, gender, dis (ability) are less likely to participation in higher education. 'Under-represented' is also used (DETE, 2002; HEA, 2015) to identify particular target groups: 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)



## Ask 2: Dedicated COVID-19 Community Education Support Fund

### ***Why is community education successful in addressing educational inequality?***

Community education offers a package of services to people participating in learning. Community education is particularly successful at engaging people within socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Learners are supported to access a range of flexible, part-time educational opportunities that meet their needs, from non-accredited courses to accredited courses across the National Framework of Qualifications. In order to enable people to access education, integrated support services in many community projects help learners overcome barriers to access. Services in many cases include: childcare facilities, one-to-one counselling, domestic violence supports, mentoring, one-to-one and small group educational supports, technology-enhanced learning, and access to career guidance.

***“I wouldn't have just walked straight in, not in a million years [to a formal FET centre] - I would have thought, I couldn't do that. I wouldn't have the brains for that.”*** Louise Finnegan, adult

**Independent community education providers are not included within the Government's current financial support package, yet they work with the most marginalised learners in the tertiary education system.**

### **Dedicated COVID-19 Community Education Support Fund**

The fund requested should contain three parts and enable community education organisations to apply for appropriate funding from their local ETB. This funding would be based on the needs of learners and the organisations supporting them:

#### ***i. Community Education Learner Assistance Fund (€500,000)***

Community education learners are amongst the most marginalised adult learners within tertiary education and have the fewest resources. Similar to the Student Assistance Fund (SAF) in higher education, a learner support fund distributed to community education groups would enable learners to gain essential materials for blended learning, which should be provided (e.g. for mobile data cards/low-cost tablets, IT support, dongles, etc.).

#### ***ii. Reboot Learning through Outreach, Engagement and Mentoring Fund (€500,000)***

Outreach has historically been important to the success of community education and its ability to reach marginalised communities. With high unemployment rates expected to continue once the economy reopens, we need to reinvest in community outreach to ensure learners are encouraged to engage in local learning opportunities.

#### ***iii. COVID-19 Exceptional Circumstances Fund for Community Education (€2,000,000)***

A specific fund is required to support community education learners. This fund should cover learner/support, peer support, mental health and wellbeing and blended learning, in addition it should cover social distancing adaptation costs for community education providers. This will require discretionary funding to empower community education organisations to respond to learner needs.



### Ask 3: A sustainable, multi-annual funding model for independently managed community education

AONTAS and our members from across Ireland are asking for the creation of long-term policy and funding frameworks for community education provision. In order to meet the needs of learners and our communities, big and small, around the island, a new sustainable, multi-annual funding model for independently managed community education is needed.

Improving the quality of basic adult education for everyone results in higher productivity and greater employability, and ensures that the benefits of economic growth are more equally shared across the population. (OECD, 2012)

**AONTAS (2020) is calling for an investment of €9.75 million for community education. To be successful AONTAS and our members propose that a funding model needs to fulfil certain requirements.**

**A new funding model for non-statutory community education must:**

- **Be needs-based**, ensuring communities that have greater needs receive increased funding. AONTAS proposes that this funding is allocated according to a community needs-based assessment. This process will ensure that communities requiring greater education and economic support receive that support and are not overlooked.
- **Cover the true cost of community education provision** including premises, staffing, overhead costs, administration, and provision. Too frequently funding only covers tutor-costs, neglecting to account for overhead and administrative costs that allow programmes to be available to learners.
- **Measure the outcomes of community education effectively.** Quantitative assessments of lifelong learning participation that are based on metrics such as completion of a single minor or major award, mask the life and learning experiences of the learners. These assessments offer no insight into the people participating in education and the life challenges they may have had to overcome to participate; failing to account for the life challenges that education continues to help them overcome. Each learner has a unique experience and success means many things to different people. Success can mean overcoming fears of education by taking a step into adult and community education, to receiving a minor QQI award, to being able to help their child complete their homework. These successes develop into immediate as well as intergenerational social and community benefits.

Challenges impacting adult learning are complex and are negatively impacted by poverty, poor housing, domestic violence, isolation, mental health, marginalisation and lack of essential supports.



#### Ask 4: Establishment of a QQI Re-engagement Fund

An integral part of independent community education provision is the sector's capacity to design and offer accredited courses based on the needs of local people. This means that programmes are specifically focused on the societal, economic, and cultural context in which they are based. For example, community education providers have offered a Heritage Course within a Dublin museum, an Equestrian Programme in Kildare, and a Women in Leadership course in Longford. Due to structural changes there is now a QQI re-engagement fee. This is a new policy requiring renewed quality assurance mechanisms, which result in additional administration costs. For small, independent organisations this is creating a barrier for accredited provision.

"It is amazing seeing people that have struggled, marginalised people, pick themselves up and build their confidence. Education is the biggest thing you can have, that anyone can have. It is that extra door, an opportunity. You start to believe in yourself" Adult learner, INOU (AONTAS, 2020)

**AONTAS (2020) calls for the establishment of a €250,000 re-engagement fund for independent community education providers covering the costs associated with re-engagement and programme validation.**





## Ask 5: COVID-19 Learner Support Package across tertiary education

- i. Fund IT support and access for community education learners
  - ii. Expand FET Learner Support
  - iii. Promote Mature Student Support by abolishing fees for higher education and expanding SUSI supports for part-time higher education students
- i. Provision of IT equipment for disadvantaged learners in non-statutory and independent community education provision including non-accredited education**

Although the Government has invested in IT devices across tertiary education, community education organisations are yet to secure devices for their learners.

“The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in a significant increase in online learning by adults. Much of the training that had started as face-to-face in classroom environments, has now been pursued online. Individuals are being encouraged to use the time freed up by short-time work schemes to take up new training. As such, the crisis provides a powerful test of the potential of learning online. It also highlights its key limitations, including the prerequisite of adequate digital skills, computer equipment and internet access to undertake training online, the difficulty of delivering traditional work-based learning online, and the struggle of teachers used to classroom instruction.”<sup>11</sup>

**The most disadvantaged learners within the Irish Tertiary Education System require equal access to the necessary IT equipment required to complete learning safely during this pandemic.**

The social impacts of community education align with Government aims across a range of areas including health, employment, climate justice, and gender equality. This means community education offers huge value for money in terms of Government investment. However, non-statutory providers are not included within COVID-19 education emergency response funds and this means many of their learners will not have access to the equipment they need to continue their learning.

There are more than 50,000 people participating in community education in almost every constituency across Ireland. Community education supports people who benefit least from the formal education system.

Equal access to IT devices and support digital skills training.

**ii. FET Learner Support**

To ensure FET learners are supported to have equal access to education, a complete learner student support system must be put into place. The above featured framework is designed to ensure learners will be supported to engage throughout the COVID-19 crisis. The passages below are evidence to support this framework gathered from the [FET COVID-19 Learner Report](#).

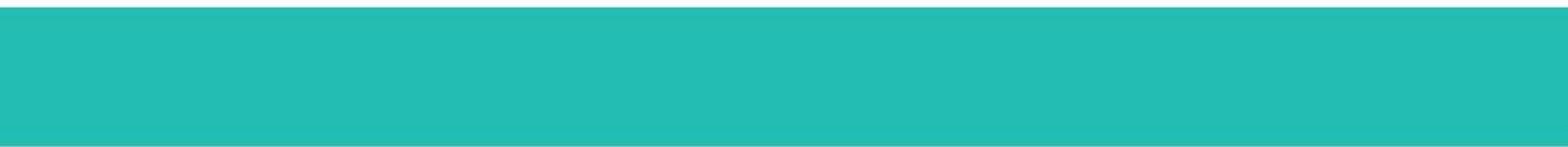
| TES Framework  | FET Learners' Issues and Perspectives  | Programme for government   | Action Required  |
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| <b>Pillar 1: Student/Learner Financial Support (Basic Needs Met)</b>     | <p>Issues such as access to devices, reliance on mobile phones, and caring responsibilities posed a significant barrier to a learner's ability to engage in remote learning. Access to devices remains a challenge, particularly for Traveller and Roma populations. Of the learners who identified as members of the Traveller or Roma community who participated in our survey, 52% reported not having access to a laptop to complete their coursework. Reliance on mobile data to complete course work remains a key issue as well particularly for learners on lower level courses, with 32% of learners on level 1-3 learning on their phone, compared to 6% of learners on level 5 learners. Learners from Travellers and Roma populations (68%) were more likely to rely on a mobile phone to complete their course work, as well. For learners in these groups, unlimited mobile data packages would need to be made available to ensure continued access to learning. A further 25.3% of surveyed learners reported juggling childcare responsibilities with their learning. This figure rose to 45% among women and 42% of learners living in Direct Provision. As one learner surmised, "I am more worried about my children's homework. My focus is there now."</p> | <p>It is vital that we invest in our Higher and Further Education sectors, so we can continue to tackle inequality, based on race, gender, and socio-economic background.</p>  | <p>Tertiary Wide Student Assistance Fund (TES SAF)</p>   |
|  |  | <p>The ambition of this Government is to provide each citizen with accessible and affordable health care, housing, education, childcare and disability services, as well as a living wage, upskilling, and a dignified retirement.</p> <p>It is vital that we invest in our Higher and Further Education sectors, so we can continue to tackle inequality, based on race, gender, and socio-economic background. Support access routes and inclusive education initiatives to learners with intellectual disabilities.</p> | <p>Tertiary Wide Fund for Students with a Disability</p> |
| <b>Pillar 2: Learners/ Student Support Service (Support to navigate)</b> | <p>One-to-one supports remain a critical element to learner success. While learners praised efforts made by tutors to stay connected in a remote learning context, overall 32% of learners responded that they needed more one-to-one support from their tutor.</p>  | <p>Enable a culture of lifelong learning within the workforce, with a focus on increasing lifelong learning from its current rate of 9% to 18% by 2025. Continue with, and expand, the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education and develop a National Traveller Education Strategy, including a plan to improve access to Higher Education for members of the Traveller Community. Support access routes and inclusive education initiatives to</p>   | <p>Creation of FET Access Officers</p>                   |

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|   |   | learners with intellectual disabilities.   |   |
| <b><u>Pillar 3:</u></b><br><b><u>Social</u></b><br><b><u>Capital,</u></b><br><b><u>Connecti</u></b><br><b><u>on,</u></b><br><b><u>Belonging</u></b> | Peer learning is a key aspect of the learning process. For many learners, the benefits of peer learning were lost in remote learning context. As one learner explained, “We learn more from class discussions and social interaction than anything else. The interaction is part of the learning, so this needs to continue somehow.” Another learner echoed this loss stating, “I miss the interaction with others. Meeting new and like-minded people who potentially can become friends. Having a classroom of people helps make that connection to others. I miss the feeling of inclusion and being a part of something.” Learners believed peer learning could play an important part of remote learning and “looked forward to the expanded use of (digital platforms) to enable peer to peer learning.” |  | Maximise on-campus experience for FET learners          |
| <b>Pillar 4:</b><br><b>Mental</b><br><b>health</b><br><b>and</b><br><b>wellbeing</b><br><b>(Wellness</b><br><b>to learn)</b>                        | Mental health is a growing concern for learners engaging in remote learning, particularly for marginalised groups. Overall 32% of learners in FET reported struggling with mental health. A notable number of learners with a disability (47%) reported struggling with a lack of structure to the day and 42% reported struggling with their mental health as a result of the crisis. A similarly high number of learners from Travellers and Roma populations (48%) and learners in Direct Provision (43%) reported struggling as well with their mental health as a result of the crisis as well. Increased mental health supports would improve learners’ experiences of learning remotely and ensure learners are equally supported to engage meaningfully in their learning experience.                   | Ensure that mental health supports are available for students in Higher and Further Education. | Consistent access to mental health counselling services |

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| <p><b>Pillar 5: Learner/student engagement (Encourage and recruit learners)</b></p>   | <p>One of the key themes to learner success in the transition to remote learning during COVID-19 was the tutor-learner relationship. As one learner described, “For me it would almost be impossible. If I were starting out on a new course in September and under these restrictions, I don’t think it would work for me. It’s okay for now because I know the tutor and I know my group but if I was starting a new course in September I wouldn’t be able to manage the remote thing.” To ensure learners can continue to engage in this context, there needs to be outreach and access supports in place that allow learners to build these relationships and feel supported to embrace remote learning options.</p> | <p>Recognise the role of community education and its vital role in our communities by supporting its schemes and initiatives post COVID-19.</p>                | <p>Community Outreach System</p> |
| <p><b>Pillar 6: Blended Learning Support (Enabling Learning in a new context)</b></p> | <p>The spaces in which learners are engaging in their learning courses have changed and do not always provide the supports necessary for learner success. Travellers, Roma, and learners living in direct provision are among the most affected by lack of appropriate study spaces. Of the overall learner population completing their coursework in a bed (7.9%), on a sofa (6.3%), on a floor (5.1%), the most common group was people living in direct provision (14.7%) followed by Travellers and Roma (4.4%). For learners in these contexts, access to support learning spaces remains a key issue for success.</p>   | <p>Prepare detailed contingency plans for further potential school closures, while also investing in teacher CPD to support distance and blended learning.</p> | <p>Blended Learning Support</p>  |

- iii. Promote Mature Student Support by abolishing fees for higher education and expanding SUSI supports for part-time higher education students

AONTAS supports the proposed abolition of fees for higher education and financial support for part-time mature students as an essential step to supporting increased access to higher education among marginalized learners.



## Ask 6: Implement all social inclusion focussed activities from the programme for Government

The Government must adequately invest in people and their communities by supporting social inclusion activities across Ireland. Adult and community education spans across all cultural and social spaces. Adult learners and their families will benefit from the Government actioning on their promises as outlined in ‘Our Shared Future’; the programme for Government. Promised social inclusion activities include, but are not limited to:

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| <b>Community Education</b>   | <b>Reskilling</b>   |
| “Recognise the role of community education and its vital role in our communities by supporting its schemes and initiatives post COVID-19.”   | “Work with Further and Higher Education institutions to put in place a strategy to develop new fast track mid-career educational models that can meet the rapidly evolving needs of our new economy.”             |
| <b>Lifelong Learning</b>   | <b>Education and training for people recovering from addiction.</b>   |
| “Further promote a culture of lifelong learning within the workforce, focusing on increasing the lifelong learning rate from 9% currently to 18% by 2025.”   | “Create a path for people in rehabilitation from drug addiction to access education and training facilities in their local areas.”  |
| <b>Apprenticeship</b>  | <b>Education for sustainability</b>   |
| “We will publish an updated Apprenticeship Action Plan to look at new ways of structuring, funding and promoting apprenticeships. It will have specific targets for the uptake of apprenticeships by women, people with disabilities and disadvantaged groups.”  | “Ensure an increased emphasis through our agricultural colleges on education in the areas of sustainability, agroecology, climate action and biodiversity and the link to land use, soil health and agriculture.” |
| <b>Education for women returning to work</b>   | <b>FET for people with disabilities</b>   |
| “Introduce returnships in partnership with employers, to support women who have taken time out of work to raise their families or care for loved ones, to re-enter the labour market through new education, training and personal development programmes.”   | “Conduct an audit of equity of access to further education and training (FET) for those with disabilities.”   |
| <b>An inclusive vision for education</b>   | <b>Recognition of Prior</b>   |
| “Provide additional supports for students who are homeless, resident in family hubs, or in direct provision. Further develop access programmes to Higher and Further Education for students from disadvantaged groups, including members of the Traveller Community, those in direct provision and those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged.” | “Develop and implement a standardised system of accreditation of prior learning, taking account of previous education, skills, work experience and engagement in society.”  |

(Table 1: AONTAS Response Key Highlights in Programme for Government ‘Our Shared Future’, 2020, pp2-6)

## Conclusion

At a time of COVID-19, the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science has an opportunity to build back better together through a concerted effort to promote educational equality.

People now, more than at any other time in living memory, will need to implement every possible form of educational support if Irish society is to weather the current and oncoming storms of COVID-19 along with another economic recession and the fallout from Brexit. Building a more equitable lifelong learning system, that includes Ireland's most marginalised learners and their communities will only enhance social inclusion, develop democratic infrastructure, and improve our collective health and well-being.

In Ireland, the adult learning is a key net contributor within the wider community and voluntary sector, playing a crucial role within the tertiary education system by consistently delivering beneficial outcomes across national strategies and departmental policy objectives. Moreover, adult and community education has earned parity of esteem with other education stakeholders by nourishing shared values of social justice; increasing gender and racial equality; embedding democratic engagement; and empowering learners, their families, and entire communities. The intrinsic value of lifelong community-based adult learning can be measured and understood by its positive impact on the civic, social, economic, and health, in addition to the everyday lived experience of learners, their families and their communities. In time, it may also be measured by how it facilitates Ireland to adapt to the Green and Digital Industrial Revolutions still unfolding. A budget that reflects the true value of this unique public good is long overdue and needed now more than ever. AONTAS holds the position that a clear catalyst for ensuring the country's collective resilience, recovery and ultimate prosperity is to back an equitable education system for everyone, especially for those most disadvantaged and traditionally excluded from its benefits. The Six Asks in this submission therefore extend beyond purely fiscal recommendations, it is an appeal to Government decision-makers to recognise the potential of Ireland's greatest resource: its people; and to invest appropriately and wisely in our shared future.

## 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.

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| Ask 6 | <b>Implement all social inclusion focused activities from the <i>Programme for Government, Our Shared Future</i>.</b>  |

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