



Pre-Budget Submission 2017

*Investing in Community Education as an Effective
Mechanism for Widening Lifelong Learning Participation*

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 sector. Founded in 1969, AONTAS is an independent, authentic, grassroots membership organisation which draws on the expertise and experience of over 500 members across the lifelong learning spectrum.

Mission

The mission of AONTAS is to advocate for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives, and to promote the value and benefits of lifelong learning.



Introduction

In 2015 (Q4) Ireland's lifelong learning participation rate was 7.2% which is half the level of participation by our closest neighbours, the UK at 15.7%, and lags behind the European average of 10.7%¹.

More pressing however is not just the participation rate, but the need to widen access particularly for those who finished school early. Unfortunately, the 'Matthew effect' exists in adult learning whereby the most educated participate to a greater extent in lifelong learning. This could potentially be exacerbated if we fail to respond to the need for 'learning to learn' skills.

In 2015, 59% of those participating in lifelong learning were third level graduates compared to 7% who held qualifications at lower secondary or less².

The inequity in lifelong learning participation is stark. Although Ireland's participation rate in formal learning is the 6th highest in the EU, it lags behind in non-formal learning. In the Irish context, community education offers non-formal adult learning which takes place in local community settings across the country. It is learner-centred and responds to the needs of the local community. It has been proposed that: "the greatest progress towards improving the lifelong learning rate could be expected to come from expanding opportunities for non-formal learning"³. The non-threatening and supportive

1. In Q4 2015 <https://www.djei.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Lifelong-Learning-among-Adults-in-Ireland-Quarter-4-2015.pdf>.

2. In Q4 2015 <https://www.djei.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Lifelong-Learning-among-Adults-in-Ireland-Quarter-4-2015.pdf>.

3. <https://www.djei.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Lifelong-Learning-among-Adults-in-Ireland-Quarter-4-2015.pdf> p. 6.

environment in which community education takes place increases engagement by socially excluded adult learners and those who have had previous negative experiences of education.

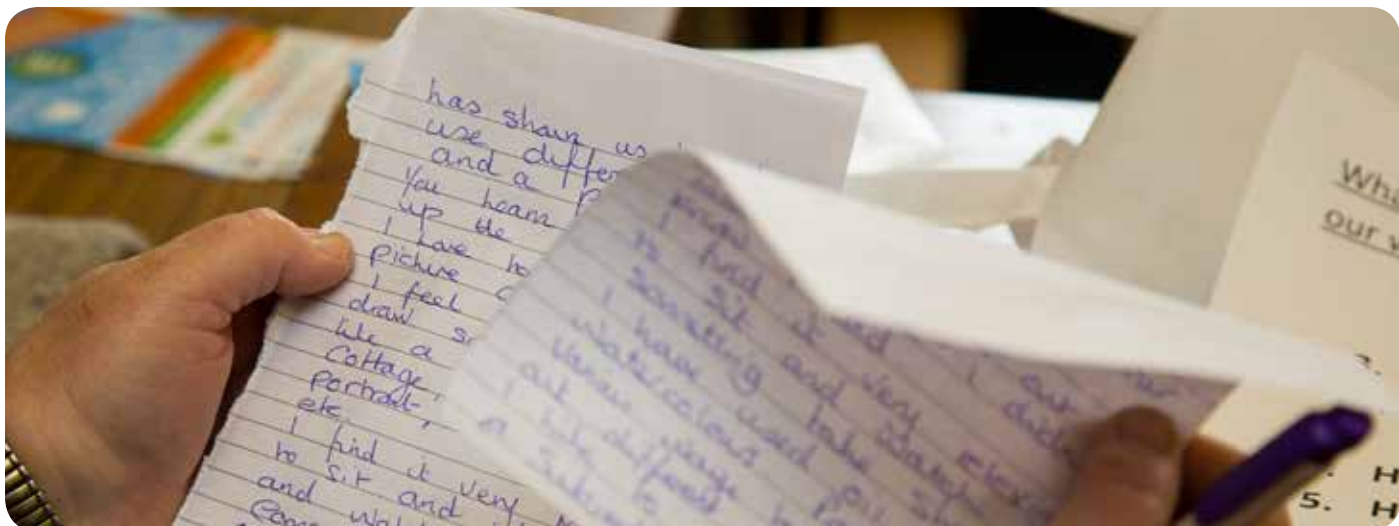
AONTAS has long argued that community education has a proven track record in effectively engaging the most educationally disadvantaged learners and providing quality educational experiences that meets their needs. Furthermore, community based adult education provision has been cited in a number of high profile international reports (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice)⁴ as an effective mechanism to increase lifelong learning participation. Investing in community education means widening lifelong participation, particularly for those who are most educationally disadvantaged.

AONTAS REQUESTS

AONTAS requests that this government prioritise educationally disadvantaged adult learners by committing to the following:

1. A sequential increase in investment for community education by increasing the percentage of SOLAS funding for community education programmes from 1.6% to 3.2%.
2. Ring-fenced funding for community education providers who wish to offer accredited programmes by re-engaging with QQI.
3. A waiver of QQI re-engagement and programme validation fees for community education providers.

4. http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic_reports/179EN.pdf.



1. An increase in the percentage of SOLAS funding for community education programmes from 1.6% to 3.2%

What will this investment mean?

The allocated SOLAS funding for community education equals €10.58 million (1.64% of the total SOLAS FET budget or 0.11% of the total education budget). AONTAS is calling for this figure to be increased over a 3 year period.

AONTAS calls for an increase of the SOLAS community education budget to 3.2%



2016	1.6%	€10.58m
2017	2%	€13.23m
2018	2.6%	€17.19m
2019	3.2%	€21.16m

Community education has a history of successfully engaging the most hard-to-reach learners and supporting them to achieve their potential and progress to further studies and employment. The impact of years of austerity and long term unemployment, particularly on individuals who left school early, requires a learning experience that increases adults’ ability to engage in learning again.

Community education offers quality education provision, both accredited and non-accredited. It provides an essential ‘first step’ back into education for adult learners and supports their progression, thereby addressing inequality within the education system.

We believe that the most educationally disadvantaged groups deserve and require more sustainable investment in their futures.

Community education is a means by which the government can achieve such objectives, and increase and widen participation in lifelong learning.

AONTAS calls for an increase of the SOLAS community education budget to 3.2%, with a focus on supporting independent community education organisations.



2. Ring-fenced funding for community education providers who wish to reengage with QQI

The 2016 Programme for Government, highlights the recent significant changes in the Further Adult and Community Education sector, with the establishment of new structures (SOLAS, QQI and ETBs), and gives a commitment to ensuring that: “these new structures and systems are empowering those who did not get an equal opportunity for education in their youth”. It also highlights that: “the provision of relevant educational programmes, specifically aimed at early leavers and second chance learners should be made available throughout the year, on a modular basis.”

Following the establishment of QQI, legacy providers who wish to continue to offer awards on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) must re-engage with QQI. Under FETAC, community education legacy providers have demonstrated their ability to maintain their Quality Assurance (QA). The re-engagement process involves assessment by QQI of each provider’s QA policies and procedures. Education providers who previously had a relationship with FETAC are referred to as ‘legacy providers’.

Approximately 50 organisations in the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) are legacy providers. These FETAC legacy providers are in a position to independently provide the opportunity for adults, from the most disadvantaged communities in Ireland, to access accredited courses recognised on the NFQ.

Community education organisations offer a variety of courses, from non-accredited to accredited, up to QQI level 6, or even higher level courses through arrangements with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), mainly on a modular basis. The diverse range of programmes have been developed in order to meet needs within local communities.

In 2015, 1,318 QQI major awards and 15,103 minor awards were achieved by learners within the community and voluntary sector⁵.

The AONTAS CEN has undertaken extensive work regarding the future of accredited provision in community education⁶. It is likely that a number of organisations will wish to re-engage with QQI directly while others may consider engaging as a collective via a consortium. At present there is no fund earmarked for any method of community education re-engagement with QQI. In order to ensure community education organisations can adhere to the new QQI QA Core Guidelines, investment is required to meet the quality assurance requirements which are essential to the integrity of the NFQ.

AONTAS calls on the Government to ring-fence funding to support effective QQI re-engagement by community education providers.

5. <http://qsearch.qqi.ie/WebPart/Search?searchtype=dataexports>.

6. http://www.aontas.com/download/pdf/scenarios_for_qqi_reengagement_paper_updated_2015.pdf.



3. A waiver of QQI re-engagement and programme validation fees for community education providers

QQI proposes to charge a fee for existing registered, quality assured community education providers who wish to continue to provide accredited programmes under the NFQ. AONTAS CEN members have expressed great concern about this proposed 're-engagement' fee, which may amount to €5,000. This is in addition to other fees, including fees for validating programmes. Community education groups do not have the funding to cover fees such as this.

We estimate that if 15 legacy providers in the CEN seek to re-engage directly, the waiver would be approximately in the region of €75,000.

The prospective cost of fees takes away valuable resources which would otherwise be put into education provision.

For example, it has been estimated that the €5,000 re-engagement fee could cover the complete cost of a QQI level 5 Minor award for 20 hard-to-reach students who would not otherwise engage in further education and training.

As a result of this there is great uncertainty for the future of accredited learning opportunities by community education providers. The cuts to the sector over the past ten years have already left many community education providers under-funded

and under-resourced. Such a fee is likely to result in community providers having to pass on the cost to learners. Section 80 of The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 states that QQI may determine the fees which apply to the providers with which it engages, and to seek the consent of both the Minister of Education and Skills and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform in this regard. The fee does not distinguish between not-for-profit and private providers.

QQI also states that⁷:

- Exemptions and waivers may be provided for in specified circumstances
- Fees will be set at a level that is sustainable both for QQI and for the education and training sector
- The determination of fees will have regard to the nature, type and mission of providers and the programmes they offer

AONTAS calls on the government to recognise the unique and valuable role community education plays in addressing educational disadvantage and to support the sustainability of this sector by waiving QQI engagement fees and programme validation fees for community education providers.

7. <http://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Fees%20for%20QQI%20Services.pdf>.

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