



The Voice of
Adult Learning

QQI (2024) Green Paper on Access, Transfer and Progression

AONTAS' Submission

March 2025

Background

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland, founded in 1969 and passionately working 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 connect with all communities across the island of Ireland. Our members and adult learners inform all our research and campaigns for social change.

Introduction

This submission provides a commentary on QQI's (2024) Green Paper on Access, Transfer and Progression, with a view to ensuring that this policy: a) recognises the value of adult and community education and b) supports Access, Transfer and Progression for learners from under-resourced communities. This paper will draw on a recent consultation process with adult and community education providers, and the findings of a development group convened as part of an EU-funded project that explores Upskilling Pathways for disadvantaged learners.

Translating ATP Policy to Practice – Key Considerations

AONTAS has developed five key considerations in response to the Green Paper on Access, Transfer and Progression (QQI, 2024).

1. Reform the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELs) and support transition from FET to HE
2. Recognise and support the community education sector in ATP policy and practice
3. Empower community education providers to implement RPL and ATP processes
4. Use qualitative Learner Voice measures of impact of ATP and RPL practices
5. Consider cross-sectoral collaboration to enable implementation of ATP policy.

These considerations are expanded on below.

General Comment on the Access, Transfer and Progression Green Paper (QQI, 2024)

AONTAS welcomes the Green Paper and the progressive view of Access, Transfer and Progression that is outlined in this document. In particular, AONTAS welcomes the move

towards parity of esteem between similar levels of awards across the Further Education Training and Higher Education sectors. The inclusion of definitions of access and transfer that centre learner objectives as a key consideration in ATP policy is an important addition. We also welcome the recognition of lifelong engagement in education as opposed to linear progression through a system of qualifications (QQI, 2024:15 & 21–23), which recognises education as a social benefit and public good.

However, the focus on awards and skills in the overarching vision may not adequately capture the value of adult and community education, where personal development, confidence building, social connections and finding a passion for learning are key outcomes. The policy's vision would benefit from recognising learners' journeys and their holistic development at an early stage, including community education, toward higher levels of attainment. This is crucial given the high numbers of learners from under-resourced communities in the wider FET system, and their underrepresentation in higher education (Gallagher et al., 2025; Meyler et al., 2023). It could promote parity of esteem for the sector, engagement in diverse forms of education, and significant data on the learning journey.

The Value of Adult and Community Education

The value of adult and community education in engaging and meeting the needs of diverse cohorts, including communities that have been marginalised, is well established (QQI, 2023, SOLAS, 2022, Meyler et al., 2023). This form of education spans the full breadth of options from entry levels and literacy supports through to higher education qualifications offering learners multiple routes into education (e.g. Gallagher et al., 2025; SOLAS, 2024a). Despite its breadth of provision, it is rooted in local communities where values-led, learner-centred programmes that are responsive to diverse needs for support in accessible formats are delivered to communities who are considered hard to reach (ETBI, 2021; Cobain et al., 2021). By virtue of these practices, the sector has a key role to play in fostering the inclusion of disadvantaged learners in education that are aligned with their interests and personal goals (Cobain et al., 2021; ETBI, 2021; QQI, 2023). For this reason, it is of utmost importance that the forthcoming Access, Transfer, and Progression Policy captures the experiences of these learners in adult and community education in a meaningful way.

Translating ATP Policy to Practice – Key Considerations

1. Reform the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELs) and support transition from FET to HE

While progression routes from FET to HE are improving, further work needs to be done to support equitable progression from FET to HE. The Higher Education Links Scheme (HELs) provides a progression pathway from FET to HE. In 2023, a [review examining ATP practice in Ireland](#) commissioned by QQI, asserted that over 88% of HE courses on the CAO have a QQI link through the HELs, compared to 100% for the Leaving Cert (O’Sullivan, 2021). Students progressing from FET to HE using the HELs scheme are only allowed to compete with a maximum of 390 points. This places FET learners at a distinct disadvantage compared to peers using the Leaving Cert to access HE. The new ATP policy should address this issue and commit to reforming the HELs system. A simpler and more streamlined pathway from “FET to HE would be a significant move towards equity of access to higher education” (O’Sullivan, 2021).

2. Recognise, name and support the community education sector in ATP policy and practice

Community education plays a vital role in Access, Transfer and Progression in the Irish tertiary education system. Data collated by SOLAS (2022, 2024b) demonstrates the relevance of the wider FET system for learners who face the greatest barriers to education, and the recognition of this value by QQI (2023) is most welcome. We commend the commitment to recognise both formal and informal modes of education in ATP processes (QQI, 2024). Despite the value that community education offers for learners (particularly those at risk of educational barriers), the sector faces challenges with resources and funding, which has implications for the implementation of Access, Transfer and Progression policies in this context (AONTAS, 2024). This issue has been highlighted in stakeholder discussions around the place of community education in the wider tertiary sector and its particular value for learners (AONTAS, 2023). By explicitly naming community education in the policy, the outcomes of participating in this model of education will gain recognition and support disadvantaged learner engagement in ATP processes.

3. Empower community education providers to implement RPL

Engagement with Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and accreditation processes is potentially difficult for smaller organisations who operate with limited resources. The capacity of organisations to engage with bureaucratic processes, such as quality assurance, has already

proven difficult (AONTAS, 2023; Staunton, 2021). For this reason, there is a need to ensure that community education providers are involved in the development of ATP and RPL processes, policies, and standards (QQI, 2023:48). Due to low budgets and small staff teams, funded staff time, the provision of expenses, and outreach may enable this engagement. By working with community education providers, it will help to facilitate the recognition of adults' prior learning that is rooted in learner experience and allow providers to engage meaningfully with RPL processes (Staunton, 2021; QQI, 2024:18).

4. Use Learner Voice to inform the development and evaluation of ATP practices

AONTAS recommends that the success, impact and further development of ATP policies are informed by Learner Voice through participatory methods. We welcome and affirm the acknowledgement that learner impact and successful participation in education cannot be measured solely through quantitative outputs and the demonstration of hard skills in the recent QQI (2023:76) insights paper. This issue was also highlighted in a recent AONTAS (2024) workshop that supported the generation of insights on Upskilling Pathways for learners who may experience disadvantage.

The engagement of learner voices in the development and evaluation processes for Access, Transfer and Progression can ensure that these processes recognise what matters most to learners on their journey and the complexity of their experience. Active participation in decision-making and planning processes can ensure that policy and practices in educational settings are relevant and effective and rooted in learner needs (Dowdall et al., 2019, Government of Ireland, 2019).

Using qualitative data collection, including learner voice, will support both provider engagement and the involvement of learners from underrepresented groups (QQI, 2023:73). This is because quantitative data collection is a challenge for community education providers due to competing demands of existing data collection processes for funding obligations. This method of data collection would also be difficult for learners to engage with so qualitative methods may be preferred (Smyth, 2025).

The National FET Learner Forum, led by AONTAS, could provide a model of practice for the development and assessment of ATP policy and practice. A national forum could be held to gather learner/student experience of ATP specifically and generate insights that are relevant

to learner interests. Likewise, Community Needs Analyses (CNAs), such as those carried out by College Connect (Sartori & Bloom, 2023), provide a possible framework for evaluating the impact of ATP policy and practice. This process used Participatory Action Research to explore the needs of particular cohorts for learners.

5. Cross-sectoral collaboration to address policy interactions affecting access and progression for disadvantaged learners

A cross-sectoral collaborative approach to the implementation and review of ATP policy is of utmost importance given the dependency of many learners on financial and learner-centred supports to realise their educational goals. This reliance on various supports as a key access mechanism has previously been highlighted by QQI (2023) insights paper on cultivating participation in education.

AONTAS' (2024) *Learner Voices Across Ireland* report highlighted critical issues with supports that impact access and progression through adult learning. These included challenges with financial supports, childcare, accommodation, and mental health. In the National FET Learner Forum, learners themselves have consistently highlighted these critical issues in Irish society and the need for policymakers to recognise and mitigate their impact on adult learning. Furthermore, a recent AONTAS workshop on Upskilling Pathways highlighted the fact that social and structural barriers can impact on the engagement of learners from under-resourced communities (AONTAS, 2024b), echoing the insights in the recent QQI (2023) paper on cultivating participation in education.

Cross-sectoral collaborative planning, and reviews should be a key part of any ATP policy going forward to ensure that institutional processes such as guidance, skills assessment, and RPL, and credit accumulation are delivered alongside holistic supports for learners. This will ensure that interactions between policies and programmes can be evaluated when considering the impact of ATP policy in the future.

Summary

The vision for Access, Transfer and Progression policy outlined in the Green Paper is progressive and well developed. However, the impact of learning in the adult and community sector needs to be better understood through the engagement of learners and providers in the development of ATP and RPL processes.

Individual, social, and structural factors can influence Access, Transfer and Progression policy, and institutional processes cannot support learner journeys without complementary action being taken to address these issues. This policy's interaction with the wider policy field in education needs to be recognised so that the impact of the policy can be evaluated in terms of wider influences in the area of adult education.

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