

Response to the Additional Funding Allocated in the Fund for Students with Disabilities

Friday, 22nd January 2021



Response to the Additional Funding Allocated in the Fund for Student with Disabilities – The Need for a Whole of Tertiary Education Approach

AONTAS welcomes the Minister Simon Harris' recent announcement allocating 5.4 million in funding to support students with disability in higher education institutions (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science, 2021). The value in the expansion of the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) is evidenced in the significant number of learners supported by the Fund over the last ten years. Given the current COVID-19 context and the impact the transition to online learning has had on learners with disability, this Fund will play a timely and vital role in helping to build the necessary processes and infrastructure to support learners with disabilities in a remote learning context. While this additional funding is an important step forward in ensuring our higher educational institutions are empowered to improve learning support processes for learners with disabilities, we would also like to express our support for similar additional investments to be made in supporting learners across the tertiary education sector, including those in further and community education. We commend the commitment of Minister Harris and his Department to inclusion and now suggest consideration of the needs in FET and community education.

To ensure access for all, equity in learner supports at all levels of Further and Higher Education is needed. Based on engagement with Further Education and Training learners and AONTAS members, key areas for future consideration include: increased resources for disability supports for Further Education and Training learners and community education learners. An increase in resources could also include extending the Fund for Students with Disabilities across the FET system. Additionally, processes that ease the recognition of a disability is needed, for example, through a 'learner passport' type service. This service would remove some of the unnecessary barriers experienced by learners with disabilities, for example, many have to re-apply for support in every centre and fill in forms and reproduce documentation.

Further Education and Training (FET)

In 2019, there were 13,098 learners enrolled in FET who reported having at least one type of disability. This figure constitutes 7.3% of all learners enrolled that year. There were also 91.2% of learners that reported a disability who partially or fully completed a course in 2019. The certification rate for those learners who reported a disability and completed certified courses was 62.4% in 2019, up from 56.4% in 2018. A total of 10,314 FET learners reported one type of disability, 2,088 learners reported two, and 696 reported three or more (SOLAS, 2020). These figures tell us not only that FET is not only supporting a significant population of learner with disabilities, but that learners FET is providing a valuable service to these learners. The success rates of learner with disabilities on FET courses demonstrate how effective the sector has been in providing these supports. Additional funding would help ensure these good practices are expanded, and even greater numbers of learners with disabilities are supported across FET.

It should be noted that the numbers in FET only paint a partial picture of the true figures of learners with disabilities currently being supporting, largely because of challenges adult learners face in receiving a formal diagnosis. Through learner feedback in the [National Further Education and Training Learner Forum](#), we know learners who are enrolled in FET courses may have an undiagnosed disability, but due to the cost associated with seeking a formal assessment, continue learning without a formal diagnosis. As one learner in the Forum described, “I was assessed by teachers, but then I had to go for outside tests and it costs 500 Euro. I struggled with the cost” (Dowdall et al., 2020b). For learners like this, a formal diagnosis may not be possible. For this reason, we welcome initiatives within FET such as the promotion of Universal Design of Learning, which play an important part of support learner needs across the sector. Nevertheless, this undocumented reality of the number of learners in FET who potentially have an undiagnosed learning disability is important to consider because it speaks to the significant number of learners who would benefit from increased supports across the sector.

The need for further supports for learners with disabilities in a COVID-19 context is also important. We know from research from AHEAD (2020) and AONTAS (2020) that learners with disabilities have been impacted greatly by the transition to remote learning. In AONTAS’ COVID-19 Learner Survey, 95 out of total 900 learners self-identified as a person with a disability (Dowdall, et al. 2020a). Among those, when asked whether to agree with the statement “I have a disability and I feel my needs are being met”, approximately 33% of applicable responses (31 out of total 93 responses) chose the answer “neutral” (21), “disagree” (8), or “strongly disagree” (2). When asked about barriers to learning, those learners who self-identified as a person with a disability expressed more needs for support. One learner explained:

“There was a change in my home life during this time and also meetings with my mental health team were very limited. I found it hard that my routine was disturbed and the support from my mental health team was cut to a roughly 20-minute phone call every 2 weeks, from over an hour meeting face-to-face every week and extra phone calls if needed.”

In more recent unpublished Learner Surveys a substantial number of learners still expressed the lack of satisfaction with the disability services and supports. When asked, “[h]ow satisfied were you with the disability services in your centre?”, 63 out of 231 applicable responses chose “neither satisfied nor dissatisfied” (50), “dissatisfied” (5), or “very dissatisfied” (8). During discussions, learners expressed similar concerns citing a lack of promotion and awareness of supports available in a remote learning context as a major factor. As one learner surmised, “these supports need to be visible.”

Additional funding to support learners with disabilities in FET would provide the resource needs to address these evolving challenges for FET learners and help ensure that FET, a sector supporting a number of learners with disabilities, is able to respond equitably to the changing demands of recent times.

Community Education

Learners with a disability are strongly represented in community education as well and are named as a target cohort in the Department of Education and Skills' Community Education Programme Operational Guidelines (2012). The holistic and learner-centred approach modelled in community education ensures that learners with a disability are supported to achieve their goals in learning. Data captured in the [AONTAS CEN Census 2020](#), which represents 76 community education groups in Ireland, gives an indication of the level of support provided for learners with a disability through community education:

- 67.6 % of groups surveyed stated they were working with learners with a known disability
- 22.1% stated that they provide free disability supports to learners engaging with their courses
- 19.6% of groups surveyed stated that they had seen an increase in demand for Disability Supports during COVID-19

Within the context of COVID-19, community education organisations have reported that learners with a disability have been disproportionately and acutely impacted. The context of remote working has posed specific challenges for learners with a disability (both known and undiagnosed), who are not able to receive the same level of support traditionally offered within a community education setting. As one respondent to the CEN Census noted: "as we deal with people with intellectual disabilities it was impossible to teach QQI modules online". Additional supports are therefore required to ensure that learners with a disability engaging in QQI courses do not reach an impasse in their learning journey on account of the remote learning context.

Supporting learners through COVID-19 remains a key priority for community education groups; however, this support has taken on a different character during the pandemic and can be hugely resource intensive. In an AONTAS Community Education Learner Focus Group, one learner with a known disability who had been receiving support by phone noted that check-ins were sometimes, "long conversations, could be 30 minutes or more, when I'm troubled" (AONTAS, 2020, p.7). As a learner with a disability, this participant noted the value of having "someone you can talk to", adding "I feel more supported than ever". This learner described how COVID-19 had in fact created new opportunities to engage in learning, with the availability of additional online courses which "save hassle by cutting out travel" (AONTAS, 2020, p.9). The online environment was felt to be particularly conducive to learning for this individual, who noted that Zoom "helped to create a sense of calm where people take their turn" to speak (AONTAS, 2020, p.9). The online learning space was described as new and exciting, free from the hang-ups that had resulted from initial schooling. If learners with a disability are engaging in new ways with community education courses through online and blended learning they must also receive support to do so and initial steps to re-engage in learning could act as an important bridge to further and higher education opportunities.

In summary, while community education organisations have a strong track-record of supporting learners with a disability, they require additional resources in the context of COVID-19 to ensure all learners are able to realise their goals, whatever their support needs.

Key commitments made in the Programme for Government

Educational equity for people with disabilities can only be achieved as part of renewed social contract that ends poverty, Ableism, and places equality at the heart of public policy. AONTAS has previously welcomed commitments made in [The Programme for Government: Our Shared Future](#) (Department of the Taoiseach, 2020) regarding access and affordability of 'health care, housing, education, childcare and disability services...founded on the principle of equality and ensuring that every citizen can achieve their full potential' (p.74). Other crucial areas with AONTAS will continue to pressure Government to keep their promises on include:

- publishing 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.
- Conducting an audit of equity of access to further education and training for those with disabilities.
- Supporting access routes and inclusive education initiatives to learners with intellectual disabilities.

AONTAS supports the continued focus on bringing public funding of education into the 21st Century, taking a holistic and lifelong approach to tertiary education and the focus on building connections across the education system. We believe this will support a more equitable approach for every adult learner, which ultimately benefits everyone in society. As outlined in the Programme for Government:

"We are committed to addressing the funding challenges in third-level education. We want a Higher and Further Education sector that sees education as a holistic and life-long pursuit. We will continue to build strong connections with other education sectors and wider society, while recognising our global and environmental responsibilities. It is vital we invest in our Higher and Further Education sectors so we can continue to tackle inequality..." (p.97).

Conclusion

The increased funding announced is a positive development which should improve the experience of learners with disabilities in Ireland's universities. AONTAS would like to encourage the Department to continue in this vein by taking a more holistic cross-tertiary education approach to the need for educational equity. Underpinning such an approach is the understanding that community education and further education and training, very often play a fundamentally important role in supporting the journey of learners with disabilities to access and succeed within higher education. One practical change that could be made to facilitate a more seamless transition between these mutually important constituents of the wider education ecosystem is the introduction of a learner passport service. This service would reduce the unnecessary barriers associated with learners with disabilities who have to re-apply for support in every centre and fill in forms and reproduce documentation.

The pathways into higher education produced by community education and FET sector provide that vital initial stepping stone to fully unlocking the educational potential of thousands of people who aspire to go to college. Given the value of the supports put in

place by AONTAS members working on a daily basis with learners with disabilities, it would make sense for the Department to give due consideration to offering a similar fund that supports learners with disabilities across the wider tertiary education system so that community education, and further education and training provision, can continue to increase its contribution to this progressive initiative and to deliver even more positive outcomes for all learners with disabilities in Ireland.

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