

Delivering on the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation through Sustainability of Accredited Community Education Provision

2nd May 2018

The Ask - QQI Fee Waiver for Community Education Organisations

AONTAS asks on behalf of our membership that a fee waiver be granted for community education providers that are:

- seeking to reengage with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI);
- seeking QQI validation of programmes.

The allowance for a fee waiver is legislated for under section 80(3), and 80(4) of the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act [2012]*. In order to make the fee waiver process fair, equitable, and effective, we propose the development of a process for QQI to accept applications for fee waivers from providers seeking reengagement and programme validation.

The Issue

Community Education as facilitator of Upskilling Pathways

Community education is effective in engaging learners across NFQ levels and successfully supporting access and retention of educationally disadvantaged people who have less than upper second level education. The potential of community education in supporting the implementation of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation (EC, 2017) is significant, having developed learner-centred *assessment, offering learning provision* on-site with a particular focus on accredited programme from *NFQ level 3, 4 and 5*.

QQI Fees as an Impediment to Accredited Community Education Provision

QQI have initiated the re-engagement process for community education providers with proposed completion dates in 2019. The unresolved issue of fees for community education groups is significant, whilst collaborative pilot projects with QQI have demonstrated the challenge of re-engagement, the AONTAS CEN members voiced the proposed QQI fees as the biggest stumbling block to reengagement. Without clarity of re-engagement process, or alternative arrangements in place, AONTAS is supporting and ensuring CEN members (FETAC legacy providers) have the capacity to reengage.¹

That whilst acknowledging the need for QQI to generate fee income, depending on community education organisations as a funding source is entirely unsustainable. The 2017 ERASMUS+ transnational (Ireland, Portugal, Germany, Denmark, Austria, Switzerland) project FinALE drew on research from 56 members of the CEN. The most common form of funding for community education is *direct, programme, project* and *formula* funding coming from: six Government Departments, SICAP, philanthropic, learner fees and other sources. Given funding criteria *formula funding* is probably the only potential source for funding fees but this makes up only 10% of CEN members. CEN members do not have the funding to cover the proposed fees of (€5000 for reengagement in addition to programme validation fees of €1000 to €2000 per programme).

¹ Thorough CEN national meetings with QQI inputs and in 2017, through the European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL, 2015-2017) project, AONTAS supported 30 CEN members to participate in an 8-week online virtual training programme in 6 hubs across Ireland (Cork, Dublin, Limerick, Longford and Wexford) to ensure CEN members can meet QQI QA core guideline requirements for reengagement through the provision of continuous professional development.

Working Towards a Solution

AONTAS has made tens of submissions to QQI (2013, 2014, 2015) clearly highlighting the QQI reengagement fee issue. AONTAS produced two detailed policy papers on the issue of fees (2014) and the scenarios of reengagement (2015) in advance of meeting DES officials and QQI (2015). AONTAS and CEN members participated in all 7 Joint QQI / Community and Voluntary Sector Working Group meetings in 2015. Additionally, the issue was raised in our submission to the National Skills Strategy (2015), Pre-Budget Submission in 2016 and 2017, and letters to former Minister Jan O’Sullivan (2015/6) and Minister Bruton and Minister of State Halligan (2017).

AONTAS is committed to ensuring that community education learners have the opportunity to access accredited programmes on the NFQ. It is both a matter of educational equality and national and EU policy importance. AONTAS has met with DES, SOLAS, ETBI to explore solutions e.g. consortia, and has a long-standing and positive relationship with colleagues in QQI, who have presented at circa 10 CEN national meetings over between 2013 and 2018. Of the national AONTAS CEN meetings which were held during this period, QQI reengagement was a feature on the agenda in all 15, and a key point raised by members is that only those who have the capacity to reengage wish to do so directly. Looking ahead, AONTAS has committed to supporting CEN members before and after QQI re-engagement with continuous professional development to ensure learners engage in high quality provision.

The Need for A Fee Waiver

The QQI fee issue will have an impact on accredited learning opportunities in educationally disadvantaged communities. **In 2017, AONTAS member Longford Women’s Link (LWL) awarded a third of all NFQ level 5 awards in Longford².** All LWL QQI awards are delivered under DEASP/philanthropic funding/fees and with no DES/SOLAS funding. Operating in one of the most economically disadvantaged regions of the country, with one of the highest rates of lone parents who are most likely to live in consistent poverty, LWL and community education providers like it around the country reach the people that the formal education system is otherwise unable to reach.

This demonstrates the impact of accredited community education provision, but behind each number is a person with educational aspirations. The target group of Upskilling Pathways are early school leavers who are more likely to be unemployed/in non-standard employment, live in poverty, and require affordable childcare, transport and financial support. Community education provides a range of supports that enables their participation in accredited learning, thereby supporting the Upskilling Pathway goal in reaching a qualification at EQF 3/4 (NFQ 4/5). Community education groups do not have specific funding for a QQI fee, even if it was available CEN members estimate that the €5000 reengagement fee could cover the complete cost of a QQI level 5 Minor award for 20 hard to reach learners.

Next Steps

Community education can deliver on the *two steps* of the *Upskilling Pathways Recommendation: assessment and learning offer*. It will reach early school leavers and those identified as target groups. However, it can only implement the *third step: validation and recognition* at NFQ level 4 or 5 with a **QQI fee waiver**. AONTAS welcomes the opportunity to explore the criteria for a QQI fee-waiver for community education organisations.

² Based on <http://infographics.qqi.ie/>