

AONTAS

Response to Budget 2017



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About AONTAS – The Voice of Adult Learning

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. As an independent and authentic NGO with a strong grassroots membership of over 500, our work draws on the expertise and experience of our members across the lifelong learning spectrum, whilst keeping learners at the centre of our work.

In addition to promoting adult learning in Ireland, AONTAS is the National Coordinator for the European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL), which is aimed at increasing participation in adult learning across the EU, enhancing policies and supports for adult learners, and gathering and disseminating best practices.

Introduction

Tuesday 11th October saw the announcement of Budget 2017 which included measures relating to adult education such as a policy review, with the aim of designing and implementing a sustainable and predictable multi-annual funding model for higher and further education and training, and a package of €8.5million to support disadvantaged students, including lone parents and Travellers, to attend higher level education.

The purpose of AONTAS' Budget response is to focus on a few specific measures outlined in Budget 2017, whilst giving members an overview of some of the main points relating to education. The main points relating to education are available [here](#).

Advocating for the Right of All Adults in Ireland to Quality Learning

As an organisation, we are committed to advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives, and to promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning. AONTAS believes that lifelong learning is the key not just to economic success but also to personal, social and cultural development and as such has a range of outcomes and benefits for the learner. These benefits include: developing confidence and skills essential for personal development, employability, nurturing creativity, promoting good health, enhancing family relationships and enabling civic participation.

This ethos underpins all of our advocacy work and in 2016 we have produced, in collaboration with our membership base, a number of documents relating to government policy including:

- Pre-election manifesto which focussed on the main issues facing our membership - available [here](#)
- General Election postcard as a tool for members – available [here](#)
- Response to the Programme for Government – available [here](#)
- Submission to the Department of Education and Skills (DES) Statement of Strategy 2016-2018 – available [here](#)

Pre-Budget Submission

In preparation for Budget 2017, AONTAS produced a Pre-Budget submission titled: *'Investing in community education as an effective mechanism for widening lifelong learning participation'* that was distributed to relevant policy makers – available [here](#).

Specifically AONTAS called for 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.

Unfortunately, these requests were not specifically detailed in Budget 2017, however we strongly believe that they could be addressed with smart investment that would reap returns for adult learners, particularly those most educationally disadvantaged.

Welcome Measures

Despite our specific requests not being detailed in Budget 2017, AONTAS welcomes a number of measures that look at supporting adult learners to access education. Whilst we welcome measures that aim to increase and support the participation of adults in education, we would stress the importance of measures that widen participation to include those who are most educationally disadvantaged.

AONTAS welcomes:

- €4 million to reinstate maintenance grants from September 2017 for the most disadvantaged postgraduate students

However consideration must be made to the need for financial support for part-time mature students and to maintain existing supports, especially the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA). AONTAS previously called for this in our Submission on Future Funding for Higher Education – available [here](#).

AONTAS welcomes:

- €31 million to provide for increased demand, further development of technological universities, research and targeted funding for initiatives in the areas of skills, apprenticeships, educational inclusion and flexible learning

Increased funding for educational inclusion and flexible learning is a positive measure, however as detailed in our Submission to DES Statement of Strategy – available [here](#), we would encourage funding for courses that offer greater flexibility for learners, particularly those who are educationally disadvantaged by:

- broadening the Springboard Programme to include community education based higher education provision
- providing core funding for community education organisations providing higher education courses to disadvantaged groups
- establishing a clear mechanism that enables no part-time fees for educationally disadvantaged students

AONTAS welcomes:

- The policy review for a funding model for higher and further education and training, outlined in the DES Main Features of the 2017 Estimates, that states:

“as part of the Budget, the Minister for Education and Skills and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform are announcing a policy review with the aim of designing and implementing a sustainable and predictable multi-annual funding model for higher and further education and training involving increased Employer and Exchequer contributions from 2018. This review will be undertaken as part of the overall response to meeting the anticipated skills needs in the economy over the coming years, in line with the policy framework set out in the National Skills Strategy. This review will include (i) analysis of the business case for enhanced investment in the higher and further education and training sectors in this context (ii) identification of key elements of the new funding model (iii) identification of expected impacts including on employers. The review will include consultation with stakeholders.”¹

1 <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Estimates/2017-Budget-Main-Features.pdf>

Recommendation

AONTAS strongly recommends that adult learners are meaningfully consulted in relation to this new funding model for higher and further education. We would also highlight the need to broaden the scope of the review to take into account the wider benefits and contribution of learning to society, beyond skill needs of the economy. To reduce the impact to merely skills development would underestimate the contribution of adult learning to society and the economy.

AONTAS welcomes:

The whole-of-government approach to health and wellbeing and the establishment of the “Healthy Ireland Fund” to allow for “joined-up working” between Government Departments on evidence based projects, programmes and initiatives that support the implementation of Healthy Ireland”¹

Recommendation

Adult learning has a far-reaching societal impact beyond skills, in particular, community education. The involvement of community education groups in the Healthy Ireland Framework will help embed Healthy Ireland programmes at local level and will benefit socially excluded communities. For this to happen successfully AONTAS recommends that community education organisations are specifically included in calls for the Healthy Ireland Fund.

Snapshot Overview

AONTAS' budget response focuses on a number of specific measures relating to adult learning that could have the potential to enhance the educational opportunities and experience for adult learners, however the detail and implementation of these measures is key. To give a broader overview, here is a snapshot of the main education budget features:

Overall Investment

This budget measure represents the first significant additional investment in higher education in a decade - €36.5million in 2017 and €160million over the next 3 years.

Higher Level for Disadvantaged Groups

Over 3,000 students from disadvantaged groups will benefit from an additional package of €8.5million to support more disadvantaged students, including lone parents and Travellers, to attend higher level.

Maintenance Grant

This includes the introduction of full maintenance grant (worth almost €6000) from September 2017 for 1100 postgraduate students in the lowest income category. €4 million to reinstate maintenance grants from September 2017 for the most disadvantaged postgraduate students.

Flexible Learning

€31 million to provide for increased demand, further development of technological universities, research and targeted funding for initiatives in the areas of skills, apprenticeships, educational inclusion and flexible learning.

Policy Review

The Department will undertake a review and consultation with the aim of developing a multi-annual funding model for higher and further education and training. This review will be undertaken as part of the overall response to meeting the anticipated skills needs in the economy over the coming years, in line with the policy framework set out in the National Skills Strategy.

Overview of Programme Expenditure

Public services in education is divided into four programmes. Funding for Programme B – Skills Development which includes further education remains largely unchanged from 2016 and Programme C – Higher Education has received a 4% increase. See Estimates for Public Expenditure (pg.52, 53) - available [here](#).

Programme B – Skills Development

The aim of this Programme is to provide opportunities for up-skilling and re-skilling that meet the needs of individuals and the labour market. In particular, the budgetary and estimates decisions mean that the Department and its Agencies will:

- Provide for Further Education and Training places during 2017, including through SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards
- Continue implementing the Further Education and Training Strategy and the National Skills Strategy
- The expansion of existing apprenticeships and the introduction of new apprenticeship schemes in key economic areas

Programme C – Higher Education

Continue to promote and widen access by under-represented groups by providing grants and other supports for third level students, including the reintroduction of targeted supports for post graduate students.

For more information:

Department of Education and Skills (DES) Press Release – available [here](#).

Main Education Budget features - available [here](#).

Conclusion

As an organisation, we are committed to advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives, and to promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning. Whilst we welcome certain measures outlined in Budget 2017, we would make various recommendations that would enhance the implementation of these measures and help to widen participation in adult learning to include those that are most educationally disadvantaged.