

# **AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival Policy Day**

**Community education 20 years  
since publication of *Learning  
for Life: White Paper on Adult  
Education* (2000-2020)**

**Friday, 6th March 2020**

## Introduction

### **Purpose of this pre-event policy paper**

The purpose of this pre-event policy paper is to outline the policy context for AONTAS community education network (CEN) members in the year 2020. This paper also defines the policy ask for the AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival national policy day on 6<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

The focus of this policy day is to recognise the 20-year anniversary of the publication of *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education* (2000) and explore the impact of the White Paper 20 years after its publication, specifically in relation to community education organisations. We are calling for the following statement to be reaffirmed:

*The Government is committed to providing the Community Education sector with the recognition and the resources that reflect its importance and which can release further potential. (DES, 2000, p. 114)*

The event will highlight the purpose and value of community education for learners and the wider society on our island. The day will culminate in a recognition for the need of long-term policy and funding frameworks for community education providers that are built upon an all-of-government approach, and not the traditional approach of siloed departmental funding and policy action.

### **Results of the 2019 AONTAS national policy day**

Community education meets the policy goals of various government departments by helping improve mental and physical health, increasing civic and community engagement, promoting inclusion of marginalised individuals and communities, and responding to the climate crisis to name a few. With this understanding, at the AONTAS national policy day on Friday 8<sup>th</sup> March 2019 we asked government policy makers to develop and implement a national strategy for community education. The goal of this ask was so that government and the community education sector could together start to effectively evaluate, fund, and implement community education provision across the country in a way that efficiently and effectively reaches the greatest number of learners and the most educationally disadvantaged excluded and marginalised people in our society.

From this call to action in 2019 we have seen a positive response from policy makers and politicians over the last 12 months to take more cross-departmental and cross-organisational action on issues impacting adult learners. Building on this progress from 2019 we are hopeful to see action on the following asks in 2020 and beyond.

## Action we are seeking on and after 6th March 2020

On Friday 6<sup>th</sup> March 2020 AONTAS and our members from across Ireland are asking for the creation of long-term policy and funding frameworks for community education provision that is built upon the all-of-government approach to policy development requested in 2019.

To meet the needs of learners and our communities big and small around the island, a new sustainable, multi-annual funding model for independently managed community education is needed. To be successful AONTAS and our members propose that a funding model needs to fulfil certain requirements. A new funding model for community education must:

- be needs-based, ensuring the communities that have greater need receive increased funding. AONTAS proposes that this funding is allocated according to a community needs-based assessment. This process will ensure that communities that require greater education and economic support receive that support and are not overlooked.<sup>1</sup>
- cover the true cost of community education provision including overhead costs, administration, and provision. Too frequently funding only covers tutor-costs, neglecting to account for overhead and administrative costs that allow programmes to be available to learners.
- measure the outcomes of community education effectively, for example by considering the potential of the **distance travelled**<sup>2</sup> tool. The distance travelled by individual adult learners depends on their life experiences, including the opportunities that are and were available to them, as well as the time that has passed since the last time they were in education.

Quantitative assessments of lifelong learning participation that are based on metrics such as completion of a single minor or major award, mask the life and learning experiences of the learners. These assessments offer no insight into the people participating in education and the life challenges they may have had to overcome to participate, as well as the life challenges that education now helps them to overcome. Each learner has a unique experience and success means many things to different people. Success can mean overcoming fears of education by taking a step into adult and community education, to receiving a minor QQI award, to being able to help their child complete their homework. These successes develop into immediate as well as intergenerational social and community benefits.

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<sup>1</sup> Three principles underpin a needs-based approach to funding. 1) Inclusionary philosophies and approaches. 2) A commitment to self-assessment. 3) Assuring a range of outcomes depending on community needs. Fitzsimons, Camilla and Magrath, Conor. *FinALE "Where to Invest" Funding Adult Education*. <https://eaea.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/FinALE-Where-to-invest-Final.pdf> (pp. 135).

<sup>2</sup> The 2018 ESRI evaluation of the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) programme highlighted the necessity to capture intensive work carried out by community development programmes with vulnerable groups more accurately. The report highlighted the use of measuring a person's 'distance traveled' as a tool for capturing this intensive work. *The Goals and Governance of the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) 2015-2017*. <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/media/file-uploads/2018-07/RS68.pdf>. (pp. 155).

- A new funding model must move to a **capabilities** rather than **outcomes** based model of measuring public policy success as it concerns the funding of adult and community education. As Robeyns says in 2005.

“...different people need different amounts and different kinds of goods to reach the same levels of well-being or advantage.” (Robeyns, 2005).

## Why is community education successful in addressing educational inequality?

Community education offers a package of services to people participating in learning. Community education is particularly successful at engaging people within socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Learners are supported to access a range of flexible, part-time educational opportunities that meet their needs, from non-accredited courses to accredited courses across the National Framework of Qualifications.

In order to enable people to access education, integrated support services in many community projects help learners overcome barriers to access. Services in many cases include: childcare facilities, one-to-one counselling, domestic violence supports, mentoring, one-to-one and small group educational supports, technology-enhanced learning, and access to career guidance. Retention is supported by a pedagogic process that draws on the theories of Paulo Freire in that it builds on the learner’s previous knowledge and experience, reflection, group work, peer assessment and supportive assessment techniques that develop learners’ skills so that they succeed. Embedded across the learning experience is a critical education process that builds an individual’s and community’s capacity for civic engagement and transformation.

*People who engage in community education include:*

Early school leavers, lone parents, people in low paid/precarious employment, people who struggle with urban and rural isolation, people living with mental health issues, people who have experienced homelessness or addiction, long term unemployed, people from the Traveller Community, people living in Direct Provision centres across Ireland.

## Where does Community Education happen?

The AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) represents a subset of all community education taking place in Ireland. In the CEN, community education is offered by not-for-profit community organisations and charities in communities across Ireland. The size and reach of its membership is evidence of the significant impact of community education across the country. The AONTAS CEN has over 110 member organisations across 24 counties. Depending on their size, these organisations connect individually with anywhere from 20 to 400 learners every year. Like the communities they serve the organisations vary in size to meet community needs. While the CEN has over 110 organisations we must state that this is only a small subset of the broader impact of community education organisations across the country.

## Community education and *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education* (2000)

In 2020 we are marking 20 years since publication of *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education* (DES, 2000). Specifically, this policy day is reflecting on Chapter 5 of the White Paper, which spoke of a potential new era for independently managed community education. Chapter 5 articulated the purpose and value of community education in addition to defining the policy actions necessary for the creation and sustainability of its vibrant future. Unfortunately, the vibrant future defined in the White Paper has had to work hard for its continued existence because of the cuts to the sector since the economic crisis. The impact of successive cuts to community education organisations across a range of Government Department funding streams was further exacerbated by a narrow focus on education for skills development and employment (DES, 2014), resulting in an unsustainable funding situation. In effect the last 20 years has side-lined community education's potential and the more vibrant future that could have been.

Exacerbating factors have included political changes, including the changing role of the Minister of State in the Department of Education and Skills with specific responsibilities for adult education. This changing political focus over the intervening 20 years has led to an increased focus on adult education for training and employment outcomes at the expense of the original Ministerial focus of adult education and lifelong learning which, as evidenced in the White Paper, included a focus on community education. Whilst there were significant improvements through the first appointment of a Minister of State in 1997, when the focus was narrowed starting in 2011 to exclude specific reference to adult education and lifelong learning, important areas like community education became marginalised. The reality became particularly acute

starting with the economic crash in 2008 and was accelerated in 2011 when all reference to adult education was removed from the title of the Minister State. Now is the time to bring the full spectrum of adult learning, and specifically community education, together under the remit of a Minister of State so that adult learners can benefit from an inclusive and diverse education system.

### **The changing title of the Minister of State for adult education: 1997 to present day**

1997-2002: Minister of State for Youth Affairs, Adult Education and School Transport

2002-2006: Minister of State for Adult Education, Youth Affairs and Educational Disadvantage

2006 -2011: Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Youth Work and School Transport

2011-2014: Minister of State for Training and Skills

2014-2016: Minister of State for Skills, Research and Innovation

2016-Present: Minister of State for Training, Skills, Innovation, Research and Development

## History of the White Paper

The White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life*, created a vision of adult and community education that focused on transformative learning, both at the individual and societal level. The paper gave significant attention to the role of community education in supporting this vision. Describing community education as “one of the most dynamic and distinctive elements of the Adult Education sector”, the paper did more than acknowledge

the role community education played in the future of Irish adult education, it highlighted it as a model for transformative learning (DES, 2000). It also recognised the community education model as a policy tool for delivering on educational outcomes not only within education policy goals but also across a myriad of other policy spheres, particularly those focused on social inclusion, civic engagement, mental health, discrimination and other goals like these.

The overall vision of the now two-decade old paper made it a progressive document for its time. It set Ireland apart from and above other European nations which were still stuck on stripping down adult education to fit the sector into a narrowly defined economic agenda (Shannon, 2019). The White Paper's more nuanced, progressive and holistic understanding of the value and future potential of this multi-dimensional form of education did not happen by chance or materialise overnight. It was the product of sustained stakeholder input. As a result, the White Paper generated significant support and buy-in from the community education sector. The consultative process undertaken in the lead up to the White Paper reassured educators and community organisers that their experience mattered. It left educators and organisers with a 'sense of validation, of solidarity, and of worth' (Fitzsimons, 2017, p. 114). Since this time however the confidence that the recommendations of the White Paper will be fully implemented has waned. Many feel the key messages of the White Paper were drowned out by a political and policy trend for adult education to exist as a policy tool to meet the needs of the economy. The once very positive collective sense of having unity of purpose, and a shared mission, between policy makers and stakeholders in the community education sector has since thawed. For the benefit of learners, we all need to return to a time where there is a shared mission between politicians, policy makers, and educators and community organisers.

## **Chapter 5: Community Education**

The White Paper allocated an entire chapter to addressing the role of community education, which it defined as 'a process of user-driven, learner-centred and communal education' (DES, 2000). It did this largely because it believed in community education's success in reaching hard to reach learners, arguing that the 'uniform and national organised education systems' failed to meet the needs of particular groups such as Travellers and other non-traditional learners (DES, 2000). It recognised that low educational attainment was very often a result of a systemic deficit, rather than a deficit at the level of the learner or local community. The paper contended that:

*While the Irish education system has many recognised strengths, there are inherent inflexibilities within it...it is essential to continue to enhance progression opportunities for students who have left the initial system having failed in it or been failed by it. (DES, 2000, p.33)*

These acknowledged inherent inflexibilities in the state education system 20 years ago placed a clear onus on the state to address these inflexibilities through the funding and resourcing of flexible provision aimed at engaging those furthest from education. This acknowledged the value of community education for contributing to achieving the far-reaching aims of government in the collective interest of the country, as much as for specific local communities.

## Chapter 5 policy commitments 20 years later

The White Paper made a commitment to support the growth of community education. The Paper prescribed a number of welcome calls for changes to community education that were intended to increase the sector's capacity for delivering positive outcomes for communities throughout the country. Included was the creation of the Community Education Facilitator role (CEF) which was created to facilitate the funding and operational success of independently managed and non-statutory community education organisations.

Twenty years ago community education providers and learners in Ireland had good reason to celebrate and stay hopeful for future improvements in the sector. While questions still remained around sustainable funding, there was significant expectation that formal recognition and praise of community education values and practice would lead to tangible material progress. Another aspect important to note was that in the wake of the White Paper there was a sense of having finally arrived as a fully recognised sector of the adult education system. Community education was on the path to achieving a much deserved parity of esteem within the education system. However, as time would prove, a number of the hopes and expectations regarding community education which the White Paper's proposals produced were not formally met (Murtagh, 2014). A number of community education providers have argued that the spirit of the White Paper has been lost and along with it, the financial support required for progress. Over the past 20 years Government policy has perennially

failed to appreciate and harness the power of community education as an equally important and mutually respected constituent part of Ireland's lifelong learning ecosystem. As an example, it is clearly evident in the flat lining of SOLAS spending per learner on community education since 2015.

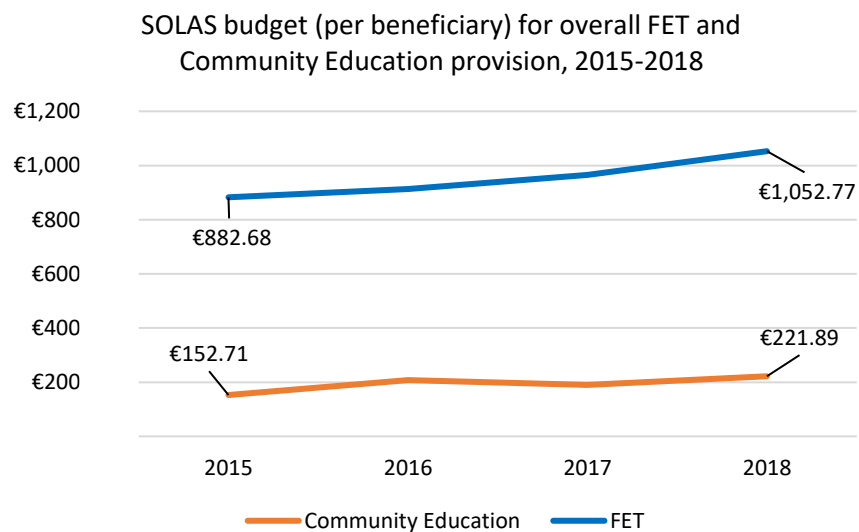


Figure 1 Source is SOLAS Annual Reports (2015 to 2018)

## Funding

The community and voluntary sector has faced harsh and disproportionate government cuts since publication of the White Paper. These cuts are at odds with the White Paper's position of support for community education (Fitzsimons, 2017). In fact, since the paper's publication financial investment was restricted to community education provided by the state through the VECs (O' Grady, 2018), and subsequently Education and Training Boards, instead of directly to the providers. This represents a clear distortion of the White Paper's intended objectives which called for supporting local community education initiatives (Fitzsimons, 2017). Without a sustainable funding model, community education providers are forced to allocate disproportionate amounts of time and resources to securing funding from governmental and non-governmental bodies from year to year. Procuring proper resources keeps community education providers away from what they do best; building relationships with their community, supporting learner engagement and education provision.

This untenable never-ending struggle by community education providers to find adequate funding has become a necessity to ensure that doors stay open, learners have tutors, and that learners can benefit from participation and progression in education in the communities where they live. Being forced into top-down government funding structures that must be adhered to in order to remain open hinders instead of helps the mission of community education providers. Moreover, this approach to funding community education is the mirror-opposite of the very model of provision that was praised in the White Paper. This feature of sustaining community education in Ireland can be viewed through the lens of the White Paper as not only unsustainable and unjust but also as unjustifiable. No other key player within the education system, especially one that delivers such a positive impact for people most in need of educational and social equality, is or would ever be subjected to such models of funding.

From available data through SOLAS reporting of community education spending it is clear that the community education system receives significantly less investment per learner than does the broader further education and training system. In 2018 SOLAS reported that the €10.9 million spend on community education



provision benefited approximately 50,000 learners which equates to €218 per learner. Regarding total further education and training provision costs (excluding community education) SOLAS spent €472.5 million benefiting approximately 288,000 learners which equates to €1641 per learner. The funding for community education simply does not cover the true cost of provision<sup>3</sup>. To comprehensively diagnose the extent of the problem presented by the underfunding of community education further investigation is needed. To fully appreciate the depth and scale of the negative impact of underfunding, AONTAS will be launching our Community Education Census in 2020. This will allow for a better understanding of the funding shortfalls and administrative complexities of AONTAS Community Education Network members.

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<sup>3</sup> See the 2018 Annual Report and Accounts.

## **Community Education Facilitators**

The creation of the Community Education Facilitator (CEF) role, based on the direction of the White Paper role was a significant step in meeting the goals of the White Paper. New CEFs around the country began to engage community educators, helping independent education organisations to access funding, and building networks of likeminded organisations. However, as the years have worn on CEFs are spending disproportionate amounts of time and energy working behind desks to complete paper work such as filling-in reporting forms like the Programme Learner Support System (PLSS) and quality assurance documentation. This results in relinquishing their original and primary purpose of engaging with communities to deliver positive educational social benefits for people across Ireland.

It is essential in the next 20 years that government facilitates quality adult and community education. AONTAS and our members are seeking what is in the collective mutual interest by calling for a sustainable long-term funding and policy model for the community education sector. The policy and funding framework that is needed to implement sustainable long-term funding will not be possible without engaged frontline stakeholders like CEFs across the country.

### ***A reflection on Chapter 5 of Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education***

In the year 2000 policy makers drafting the White Paper had a nuanced grasp of what could and should be achieved by independently managed community education. Twenty years on from the publication of the White Paper it is clear that much of the ground that should have been gained, and the momentum that had grown has not been capitalised upon. However, hope continues due to the fight of hundreds of organisations around the country to meet the social, environmental, and economic needs of their communities.

In 2020 the hope is that decision makers learn from the past so we can go beyond merely recapturing the promise of the White Paper and making up lost ground. It is imperative to push further ahead so that in the coming decades Ireland is not only a best case example of an equitable and successful lifelong learning system, but is also in pole position in many other spheres thanks to the contribution made by community education.

By 2040 Ireland should be enjoying the return on its investment in community education. Decision makers that are familiar with community education appreciate how the sector plays a meaningful role in today's adult education sector. However, there is a challenge around making those outside of community education aware of what a privileged position Ireland is in in comparison to other jurisdictions. Community education is by design a transformative process that transcends the dominant policy focus of education systems on increasing the population's skills to plug labour gaps for specific industries. Favouring job activation over learning for broader economically inter-connected social aims is a model that is ultimately limiting the potential of our country. This approach hamstring learners while constraining the country's human capital from flourishing and achieving goals across the full range of national strategic policy plans.

Ireland needs to consider if adult education that is solely focused on upskilling and reskilling is meeting the needs of the state. To tether adult education to these employment concerns alone ignores the fact that adult learning contributes more to our society than positive employment statistics. The countries who are open to a broader approach to adult education and increasing equality across all communities unsurprisingly have some of the highest rates of lifelong learning participation. They also score best on indicators of wellbeing and lead the world in relation to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals<sup>4</sup>. An economic-only focus for education also ignores the very important fact that individuals who were underrepresented in lifelong learning, as well as social and economic life 20 years ago when the White Paper was published (i.e. women, lone parents, Travellers, etc.) remain underrepresented today (Central Statistics Office, 2018). The White Paper directed Ireland toward a vision of adult education that challenged government to include those most far-removed from equal access to, and equal benefit from, the education system and society. While Ireland must concentrate on remaining internationally economically competitive and cooperative we should not lose sight of the vision set out in the White Paper. The vision of the White Paper and Ireland's economic success are not mutually exclusive.

## **A new future and a new commitment to community education**

Appreciating the commitments made 20 years ago and the reflection on policy proposals made in the White Paper in the intervening years, we must look to the next 20 years as a chance for community education to achieve its full potential. We must acknowledge community education's importance as a policy tool for helping the state meet innumerable policy goals in the process.

### **A new sustainable, multi-annual funding model for community education is needed**

At the start of this paper AONTAS defined the policy action we are seeking from this 6<sup>th</sup> March 2020 Policy Day as a new sustainable, multi-annual funding model for community education. Community education is already funded across numerous Departments, yet there is no national strategy or plan for cohesively and sustainably prioritising and directing this funding. For Government and civil society to be confident that public funds are being spent in an effective and efficient way, a new sustainable, multi-annual funding model for community education is needed.

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<sup>4</sup> See Social Justice Ireland's *Measuring Progress: The Sustainable Progress Index 2020*. <https://www.socialjustice.ie/sites/default/files/attach/publication/6248/measuringprogress-thesustainableprogressindex2020new.pdf?cs=true>. [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

## Who currently funds community education?

An immediate challenge for community education providers and learners is the longstanding lack of sustainable funding for community education across all government departments and agencies. Grassroots level research has been completed in 2016<sup>5</sup> and 2017<sup>6</sup> that demonstrates the range of Government Departments and non-government funding sources who are involved in funding community education across the country. This assortment of funding providers, each providing funds for specific purposes, has led to an overly complicated funding system that has yet to be fully deciphered by all funders and funding recipients alike. In short, the funding foundations of the sector have been exposed to be unclear and unstable which leads to further questions about funding options and accessibility.

In 2011, AONTAS published a position paper about creating an effective funding mechanism for community education. From n40 organisations, a key finding of this 2011 research was that 10 Government Departments were providing funding for these AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) members. These Departments were primarily

- the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government
- the Department of Education and Science
- the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

The same study also identified other funding sources, namely charities, businesses, and EU funding.

Looking at members of the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) in 2017 the Erasmus+ funded FinALE research “*Where to Invest*” *Funding Adult Education*<sup>7</sup> again explored how CEN members (n45) self-declared the origin of their operating funds. Similar to the research in 2011, the FinALE research found that organisations receive their primary and secondary funding from a multitude of department and agency sources, as well as from philanthropy, learner fees, religious organisations, and community grants. Half of these 45 organisations relied on more than one source of funding.

In 2019, the OECD report *Getting Skills Right: Future Ready Adult Learning Systems* cited the FinALE research and stated:

*Project-based funding is temporary by nature which can undermine the financial sustainability of adult learning system; and procedures for accessing external funds can be complex and time-consuming, which can result in gaps in adult learning provision and can absorb a significant amount of human and financial resources which could otherwise be available for training.*

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<sup>5</sup> AONTAS (2011). *Position paper on creating an effective funding mechanism for community education.*

<https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Policy/Position%20Paper%20-%20Effective%20Funding%20for%20Community%20Education%20Feb%202011.pdf>. [Accessed on 25 February 2020]

<sup>6</sup> Fitzsimons, Camilla and Magrath, Conor (2017). *FinALE “Where to Invest” Funding Adult Education.* <https://eaea.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/FinALE-Where-to-invest-Final.pdf>. [Accessed on 25 February 2020]

<sup>7</sup> The FinALE research looked at 56 members of the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN). Forty-five of these organisations provided information about funding by Government Department (principal and secondary funders).

## Why should community education receive sustainable, multi-annual funding?

Community education supports government policy objectives to reach the national target for lifelong learning participation (15% by 2025). More importantly the sector increases participation by those who were underserved by the formal education system. The participants include people like early school leavers and people in the Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) OECD category.

The current lifelong learning participation rate for Ireland is 12.5%. However, this freefalls to 4% for people who left school early.

In 2017 the CSO Adult Education Survey<sup>8</sup> identified a range of socioeconomic inequalities that act as barriers to lifelong learning participation, which community education provision helps learners to overcome. With adequate sustainable, multi-annual funding the sector can further support government to address inequality by supporting learners to participate in learning.

*Eurostat, 2018*

### **Regional inequality: Location is a barrier to access in parts of the country.**

The ability to get to a training location was six times more likely to be an issue for people in border regions, than for people living in Dublin. By definition community education is locally based, and also available in rural communities across the country, while state provision tends to be centred in larger cities, and towns.

### **Health inequality: People need a range of supports to enable access, including health support.**

25% of people who left education after primary school (and 16% of people who left school after the Junior or Inter Certificate) cited health and age as a reason they could not participate in lifelong learning. Whereas only 4% of those with third level qualifications cited health and age as a barrier to participation in lifelong learning. Community education offers mental health support in some centres (counselling). In fact some community education organisations including several AONTAS members have as their primary pedagogy the recovery education model of education.<sup>9</sup>

### **Educational inequality: Non-formal education (eg non-accredited community education) is the most popular choice**

23% of people who were early school leavers want to return first to non-formal education. Community Education offers non-accredited programmes which are popular with people who left school early. Adult learners tell AONTAS that a wide range of learning options are needed. The options are met by community education. Education is available not only through specific vocationally-orientated courses but also through non-accredited courses where learners can build confidence, develop learning to learn skills, and take time to decide on which area of learning they wish to invest their future efforts.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Central Statistics Office. *Adult Education Survey 2017*.

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/aes/adulteducationsurvey2017/>. [Accessed on 25 February 2020]

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/mental-health-services/advancingrecoveryireland/recoverycolleges/> [Accessed on 25 February 2020]

<sup>10</sup> UNESCO (2017). CONFINTEA VI Mid-Term Review 2017: the status of adult learning and education in Europe and North America; regional report. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000259721>. [Accessed 28 February 2020]

## European policy

At European level, the European Commission is exploring new innovative approaches to engaging early school-leavers or otherwise marginalised people including ‘community lifelong learning centres’.<sup>11</sup> The concept of these centres are similar to that of community education in Ireland. The goal is to offer a range of supports to enable educationally disadvantaged people to access learning on-site, but is also connected into service providers at a local level facilitating progression for learners. A community-based approach for engaging so-called hard-to-reach groups has similarly been widely recognised as effective by the OECD<sup>12</sup> and UNESCO (OECD, 2019<sup>13</sup>; UNESCO, 2019<sup>14</sup>).

## Pedagogic practice

At national level pedagogic practice has gained greater prominence in higher education policy as a tool to overcome barriers to participation (NFTL 2019; HEA 2015)<sup>15</sup>. A focus on **process not product** that fosters a sense of belonging is becoming a central theme to good teaching and learning practice. This approach is embedded in adult education practice and especially common in community education which is underpinned by an educational philosophy based on dialogue (Freire, 1970). The approach builds on a learner’s lived experience through a pedagogic process that recognises their knowledge builds individual capacity and confidence. The impact of which is the high rate of participation and retention in community education by early school leavers and target groups.

## Transversal skills

Transversal skills (OECD, 2017<sup>16</sup>; WEF, 2017<sup>17</sup>) feature strongly as key skills required for the fourth industrial revolution: critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, teamwork etc. which are developed through participatory teaching and learning processes which foster dialogue and reflection. What community education can offer is a space to develop these abilities, much of which is dependent on personal development and learning to learn skills.

Community education practitioners know that in order for such learning outcomes to take place, there is no quick fix as self-directed learning is part of the education process (Knowles, 1973) and not an initial starting point. Becoming a lifelong learner is critical due to the rate of change and particularly for those affected by automation many of whom are low qualified. Therefore, it is essential that our education system builds people’s capacity to

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<sup>11</sup> What Role For Community Lifelong Learning Centres? The Potential Of One-Stop-Shops For Preventing Youth At Risk From Disconnecting On 29th May 2019; <http://llplatform.eu/events/event/what-role-for-community-lifelong-learning-centres-the-potential-of-one-stop-shops-for-preventing-youth-at-risk-from-disconnecting/>. [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

<sup>12</sup> OECD (2019), *Getting Skills Right: Engaging low-skilled adults in learning*. [www.oecd.org/employment/emp/engaging-low-skilled-adults-2019.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/employment/emp/engaging-low-skilled-adults-2019.pdf). [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

<sup>13</sup> OECD (2019), *Getting Skills Right: Future Ready Adult Learning Systems*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264311756-en>. [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

<sup>14</sup> UNESCO (2019) *4th global report on adult learning and education: leave no one behind: participation, equity and inclusion*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000372274>. [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

<sup>15</sup> National Forum on Teaching and Learning (2019). Report on Student Success: Barriers and Facilitators. <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/Student-Success-Barriers-and-Facilitators.pdf> [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

<sup>16</sup> OECD (2017). *Educational Opportunity for All Overcoming Inequality throughout the Life Course*. [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/educational-opportunity-for-all\\_9789264287457-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/educational-opportunity-for-all_9789264287457-en). [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

<sup>17</sup> World Economic Forum (2017). *Lifelong learning helps people, governments and business. Why don't we do more of it?* <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/07/lifelong-learning-helps-governments-business/>. [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

become lifelong learners on their own terms which nurtures their talents and abilities.

Simply put, community education can; increase learners and workers' resilience to adapt to technology-driven economic change which helps to future-proof the potential labour force and communities that may be hardest hit by economic downturns.

## Micro-credentialing

Micro-credentialing is frequently discussed in the context of future learning environments (WEF 2018<sup>18</sup>). Notwithstanding the issue of maintaining the ability to provide accredited provision<sup>19</sup>, community education has predominantly focused on short courses and non-accredited learning if required by learners. Micro-credentialing offers a future space for flexible community education and supports the findings of a study that found that the majority of community education learners would like to see their learning accredited, even as they often enter education for reasons other than labour market access (AONTAS, 2011<sup>20</sup>).

The World Economic Forum *Global Social Mobility Index* reveals that there are only a handful of nations with the right conditions to foster social mobility which centre on four factors: fair wages, social protection, working conditions and **lifelong learning** (WEF, 2020)<sup>21</sup> Social mobility in Ireland is stagnant and depends upon creating greater opportunities that support educational equality. Community education has a long history of engaging educationally disadvantaged people in an authentic and effective manner.

## Changing demographics and precarious employment

Educational inequalities persist - only 4.4% of adults who left school early participate in lifelong learning (Eurostat, 2018)<sup>22</sup>, compared to the national average of 12.5%. Precarious employment is increasing<sup>23</sup> and providing educational opportunities to enable people to gain sustainable, decent work is essential for a more equitable society. AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) members are engaging with people on zero contract hours many of whom are immigrants. This educational engagement offers a gateway to decent work through an educational experience that promotes a sense of belonging, increased confidence, foundational learning-to-learn skills, in addition to the accredited courses.

People earning a low wage, and people in temporary, part-time or self-employment are less likely to participate in lifelong learning. In Ireland, every tenth employee is an involuntary part-time worker (OECD, 2017<sup>24</sup>). Non-standard workers are more likely to be women, who

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<sup>18</sup> World Economic Forum (2018). *Towards a Reskilling Revolution A Future of Jobs for All*. [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_FOW\\_Reskilling\\_Revolution.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_FOW_Reskilling_Revolution.pdf). [Accessed on 27 February 2020].

<sup>19</sup> Issue of community education organisations re-engaging with QQI.

<sup>20</sup> AONTAS (2011). *Sowing the seeds of social change: The Outcomes and Impact of a Social Action Model of Community Education*. [https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/AONTAS-Research/sowing\\_the\\_seeds\\_of\\_social\\_change.pdf](https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/AONTAS-Research/sowing_the_seeds_of_social_change.pdf). [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

<sup>21</sup> World Economic Forum (2020). *Global Social Mobility Index 2020: why economies benefit from fixing inequality*. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-social-mobility-index-2020-why-economies-benefit-from-fixing-inequality>. Accessed on 27/02/2020.

<sup>22</sup> Eurostat (2018). Participation rate in education and training (last 4 weeks) by type, sex, age and educational attainment level. <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>. [Accessed 28 February 2020]

<sup>23</sup> Nevin Economic Research Institute (NERI) (2019). *Precarious work in the Republic of Ireland*. [https://www.nerinstitute.net/sites/default/files/research/2019/precarius\\_work\\_in\\_the\\_republic\\_of\\_ireland\\_july\\_19\\_fina.pdf](https://www.nerinstitute.net/sites/default/files/research/2019/precarius_work_in_the_republic_of_ireland_july_19_fina.pdf). [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

<sup>24</sup> OECD (2017). *Employment by education level*. <https://data.oecd.org/emp/employment-by-education-level.htm>. [Accessed on 27 February 2020]

receive less training and have less employment stability. Part-time temporary workers are 40% less likely than standard full-time workers to receive training and skills development, which leads to further wage inequality (OECD, 2017).

## Community education and national policy

We look forward to the publication of the new Further Education and Training Strategy and the inclusion of community education within the document. In addition, community education achieves the goals of a range of national policy priorities. The outcomes of an educated and socially engaged society have positive knock-on benefits for the successful implementation of all of these policies and we are sure many more that have not been captured here.

To show the direct impact we have provided an analysis of five of the strategies listed in this table; showing the parts of those strategies directly connected to success of a well-funded community education sector.

Government Strategy	Potential impact of a more education and socially engaged population
<i>Department of Education and Skills Statement of Strategy 2019-2021</i>	<p>The goals of the strategy are to create an inclusive education system.</p> <p><i>'We will advance the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage and learners with special educational needs in order to support them to achieve their potential'</i></p> <p>Community education is proven to meet exactly this goal.</p>
<i>Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025</i>	<p>The Roadmap seeks to build inclusive communities, extend employment opportunities to all who can work, and reduce poverty among people with disabilities, among 7 total goals. These goals in particular are impacted positively by community education provision as evidenced by the winners of the 2020 STAR awards. Specific points in relation to the potential of community education to meet a range of goals include:</p> <p><i>2. Develop and publish a new Further Education and Training Strategy for the next five year period from 2020, ensuring that it includes specific provisions to support socially excluded groups access training and education support.</i></p> <p><i>4. Review existing programmes as part of the new employment services strategy, to cater for the needs of marginalised groups/ socially excluded people</i></p> <p><i>11. Examine options to further support carers who wish to increase their level of engagement with or transition into full time employment, education or training</i></p> <p><i>31. Introduce a range of measures to improve the quality of early learning and care services to better contribute to positive experiences and outcomes for babies and young children, including increasing qualifications for those working in Early Learning and Care and developing the infrastructure of Continued Professional Development (CPD) supports and mentoring</i></p> <p><i>38. Identify specific measures and actions which can increase employment rates among lone parents as part of the new employment services strategy</i></p> <p><i>52. Renew and refresh the system and level of engagement between Government bodies and the community and voluntary sector</i></p>

<p>Action to implement changes proposed in the 2016 Cassel's Report</p> <p>&amp;</p> <p>The National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2015-2021</p>	<p>The Expert Group on Future Funding's <b>Cassells Report</b> (2016), specifically identifies 'Increasing access and participation in higher education as a part of the social contract' as one of the four pillars through which higher education has made a major contribution to Irish development.</p> <p>Statements in the Cassell's Report speaking to this idea include:</p> <p><i>A recommendation to extend "...the two student access funds to part-time students and increase the level of funding accordingly (p.46).</i></p> <p>In the section on re-configuring the post-secondary landscape, the report notes the specific link needed for a more integrated approach to lifelong learning to support access to higher education. <i>"This will mean appropriate approaches to funding that support different types of part-time provision, module-based delivery systems, collaboration across education and training providers (including between HE and FE) and access by, and retention of, all potential lifelong learners" (p.61).</i></p> <p>Community education also provides a space for offering career guidance to higher education.</p> <p><i>"Regional structures should be embedded and strengthened to support the development of an enhanced and integrated post-second level education offering, with coherent academic planning and clear student pathways" (p.61).</i></p> <p>Within the <b>The National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2015-2021</b>: <i>The chances that a student has of participating in higher education are directly related to the community the student comes from, and it is very clear that there is much lower participation in higher education among people from communities experiencing socio-economic disadvantage (p.20).</i></p> <p>The communities discussed in this quotation are the exact communities in which community education providers are active around the country. Responding to this fact the <i>National Access Plan</i> regional clusters should include community representation particularly regarding PATH funding initiatives (p.31). Finally, the plan also proposes to strengthen the linkages between higher education institutions and local communities, a proposal that would directly be supported by community education provider participation in higher education policy development and discussions and actions to that support broadening learner pathways. Community education providers should be included in such regional structures to enable a greater reach for higher education institutions across the Irish communities. At present there is no community education representation on Regional Skills Fora of HEI clusters.</p> <p>Community education helps reduce barriers to education by building people's capacity to progress, by being located in areas of deprivation (the focus on the geo-coding measures for access targets) and offers third level programmes in several communities across the country (e.g. Longford Women's Link and An Cosán).</p>
<p>The Sustainable Development Goals National Implementation Plan 2018-2020</p>	<p>Community educators across Ireland are supporting implementation of the SDGs. Not only SDG 4, Quality Education, but other SDGs as well. Community development education across the country, from Donegal to Cork to Dublin is focused on creating a culture of access and community action.</p>
<p>Public Library Strategy 2018-2022</p>	<p>In communities across the country, our libraries remain the core location for learning. Our libraries and adult learning organisation can work together to benefit one another mutually for decades to come.</p>
<p>20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language</p>	<p>9 areas of action are specified in the strategy with the first being education. Also included are the community and economy as areas of action for implementation. Community education providers in the Gaeltacht and beyond can help ensure the sustainability of the Irish language through formal and non-formal learning</p>

## Next Steps

For 50 years AONTAS has been working to ensure that adult and community education is recognised in regional, national, and European policy and funding commitments. This work has involved advocating for equal access to education and equity of outcomes, not just equity of access, for learners who actively participate in adult and community education.

Over the coming years of our current AONTAS Strategic Plan 2019-2022 we will continue this work and advocate for a sustainable multi-annual funding model for community education. The starting point to achieve improved outcomes is to:

- 1** Bring about a more complete understanding of community education across our society;
- 2** Identify the wide policy achievements of community education through qualitative and quantitative research
- 3** Acknowledge how community education may be harnessed to meet national policy objectives but importantly make a commitment to keeping our focus on meeting the needs of communities and learners.

Following the Policy Day on 6<sup>th</sup> March 2020 AONTAS will continue our lobbying of the new Dáil TDs and new cabinet to appoint a Minister of State of Adult, Community, and Further Education and Training. We will also continue to make the case to politicians and policy makers about the value of community education as a policy tool for widening access to education, and for meeting the needs not just of education related national policies, but also national policies seeking to improve social, and environmental policies to name two.

Within today's global climate of economic instability and political unpredictability now is the time to develop educational systems that can fully meet the current and future learning needs of Ireland's increasingly diverse communities.

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