

AONTAS

Pre-Budget Submission 2022

An Inclusive Recovery for All: Lessons from the Pandemic for Creating an Equitable Tertiary Education System



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Introduction

Within the AONTAS pre-budget submission put forward in 2020, it stated that “we are yet to see the true impact of the crisis on disadvantaged learners.” Following a number of AONTAS research publications, such as the [Community Education Network \(CEN\) Census Report](#) (Cobain et al., 2021), to understand the impact of COVID-19 on community education, the [National Further Education and Training \(FET\) Learner Forum Annual Synthesis \(AONTAS, 2021\) Report](#), to gain the learner perspective and a range of other reports that have captured evidence that educational disadvantage has been exacerbated during the pandemic and policy interventions are vital for an inclusive recovery.

As we now enter a new era recovering from COVID-19, it is vital that the lessons learned throughout the pandemic do not go unheeded. Inequalities and disadvantages that were exacerbated will not automatically dissipate or improve as time moves on. We cannot afford to regress to how things were pre-COVID nor can we be complacent in addressing the heightened issues that have arisen. Many reactive measures that have been put in place as stopgaps, must now be evolved and integrated within a more durable, flexible and sustainable model of funding to create long lasting, meaningful change. Internationally, supranational organizations emphasising the need to address inequalities: *“Giving everyone a fair chance to obtain a high-quality education is a fundamental part of the social contract. To improve social mobility and socio-economic outcomes, it is critically important to eliminate inequalities in educational opportunities”* (OECD, 2021a, p. 39). In this submission we capture some of the learning from COVID-19 specifically in relation to educational equality.

AONTAS welcomes the opportunity to put forward a pre-budget submission for 2022, and argues that urgent action is required to address the specific impact this crisis has had on disadvantaged individuals and communities. We must also proactively build the infrastructure required to create a brighter future than previously known. This submission makes 15 recommendations across three key areas covering:

- 1. the needs of adult learners;**
- 2. the requirements of the community education sector;**
- 3. and changes needed within the tertiary education system structure.**

We offer recommendations on how to fiscally address the deep-seated issues compromising the integrity of adult and community education in Ireland.

Ask 1	What Adult Learners Need	<i>Equitable distribution of learner supports across community, further and higher education</i>
Ask 2	Increase Community Education Needs (core funding and staff costs)	<i>€10,000,000 increase annually via SOLAS</i>
Ask 3	Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF) & Equity of access to an accreditation fund	<i>€8,000,000 annually €250,000 once off support</i>

Summary of Recommendations

I. What Adult Learners Need

Commit to supporting the needs of adult learners to cover all areas required for successful access, retention, progression and learner success.

1. Meet the Basic Needs of Learners

- All learners must have equal access to vital wrap-around supports such as childcare, financial supports and domestic violence services

2. Promotion of Education Pathways

- Support and promote free adult education guidance and information services across community and further education

3. Fostering Social Capital, Connection and Belonging

- Ensure policy supports innovation and change in educational institutions. The lived experiences of learners must be taken into account as part of the pedagogic process

4. Supporting Wellness to Learn

Develop and fund a mental health strategy for FET and community education:

- Provide free health and wellbeing activities and programmes in all education institutions
- Prioritise provision of mental health supports for vulnerable learner cohorts including Travellers and Roma; learners in Direct Provision; learners with a disability
- Include FET and community education learners in [Higher education national wellbeing support and provision](#)

5. Encouraging New Learners to Engage

Develop targeted initiatives to engage with and fund supports for marginalised learner cohorts most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Initiatives should include financial support for outreach, face-to-face staff resourcing, and a flexible blended model that assists learners to transition back into learning post COVID-19:
 - Outreach initiatives must be targeted to Travellers, Roma, lone-parents, those living in Direct Provision Centres, community education learners, learners aged 55+, and people at the initial stages of the NFQ - specifically Levels 1-3 (see also emerging [data from QQI on NFQ levels 1-3](#))
 - Prioritise vulnerable learners for in-person and peer-learning
 - Fund non-accredited programmes as a mechanism to engage learners
 - Enhance Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes across ETBs and community education providers to increase access for vulnerable learners

- Explore the potential of micro-credentials in supporting learners who did not complete their programme (2020/2021)

6. Enabling Learning in a Changed Digital Context

- Continue to offer blended learning as a flexible model of provision based on learners' needs
- Funding for the provision of devices, internet connectivity and software for learners
- Supports to enhance the digital skills of learners and staff to ensure they can continue meeting the ongoing challenges of remote online learning until a safe return to in-person learning

II. What Community Education Needs (Funding)

Commit to an equitable, sustainable, multi-annual funding package that empowers community education organisations to address the needs of learners and the local communities. This should include:

7. Increase the annual SOLAS budget for community education providers, offered in an equitable manner across ETBs to include core costs, including staffing.
8. An annual ***Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund*** (MAEDF) to include the learning from the [AONTAS research report](#) (Cobain et al., 2021) on proposed improvements needed
 - Consistent funding provision, timeframe and guidelines across all Education and Training Boards (ETBs) – to ensure an equal and fair application process
9. ***Wraparound support funding*** for community education organisations to enable access and retention of learners post COVID-19. This includes on-site supports for domestic violence, mental health, family, and childcare that will meet multiple Government Department policy objectives
10. Ring-fenced ***funding for non-accredited programmes*** to enable marginalised learners to engage in education
11. ***Equal access to an accreditation fund*** through SOLAS for community education groups to enable accredited provision (to cover the reengagement and validation costs)

III. Commitment to Investing in Educational Equality Across Tertiary Education

12. Establish an Educational Equality Across Tertiary Education Structure

- **Aim:** Advise the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science on issues of educational equality for specific groups¹
- **Actions:**
 - Research issues impacting on disadvantaged learners across TES
 - Propose solutions to issues based on a robust evidence base
 - Consult with stakeholders across the tertiary education system to inform the Department's work
 - Embed the voices of learners and members of marginalised communities who are the focus of policy in decision making

This structure would create, for the first time, a bridge between all levels of the tertiary education system in addressing educational equality by focusing on social inclusion.

13. Ensure community education is recognised as a key part of creating an equitable tertiary education system

- Recognise and acknowledge community education as key to supporting access to higher education and include in access policy plans and funding opportunities
- Take a tertiary-wide approach to educational access - ensure learners can engage in part-time accredited provision across the NFQ in community education
- Include representative structures for community education and educational equality on the DFHERIS working groups as part of the Department's Statement of Strategy

14. Support national research to build an evidence base on the impact of COVID-19 on adult learners, with particular emphasis on marginalised learners

- Use the *Community Education in a Time of COVID-19* report (COVID-19 report) as evidence to inform strategic planning and funding for community education under the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and SOLAS
- Develop a long-term strategy to address the educational inequality exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on the role of community education in redressing this impact
- Support further research into community education, including mapping, funding systems, and contribution to educational equality

¹ For the following key populations specific efforts must be made to support educational access: Learners with Disabilities; Travellers and Roma; Home Carers; Women; Learners in Direct Provision; Learners impacted by Homeless; Learners with Literacy, Numeracy and Basic Digital Literacy Needs; Adults with Lower-Level Qualifications; Individuals in receipt of social welfare; and First-Time Mature Students

15. Equitable Access to Higher Education

- Invest in adult and community education focusing on progression into higher education for marginalised learners
- Core funding to Higher Education Institutions must be linked to outcomes that widen access to higher education for groups traditionally under-represented in formal higher education
- An integrated whole-of-education-system approach must be funded to connect schools, literacy programmes, community education, Further Education and Training, apprenticeships and Higher Education
- Learners from under-represented groups in higher education face many barriers in accessing higher education. Funding and the allocation of funding is paramount for equitable inclusion of disadvantaged learners in third level. However, the consolidation of allocated access funding almost exclusively to higher education, and the limits on some of these funding mechanisms, is detrimental to the potential impact and success of a tertiary wide model. AONTAS supports the expansion of true-cost access funding to all areas of the tertiary education sector, with a particular focus on community education, in order to provide equity of access
- Access to higher education - Abolish fees and expand SUSI supports for part-time mature students
- Funding for community education in order to create a more equitable, inclusive higher education sector by improving criteria for PATH 3 funding in a way that supports adult and community education organisations to increase and widen higher education access for the most disadvantaged

Disruption to Adult Learning Participation Rates arising from COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the largest disruption to education in history (OECD, 2020) resulting in the loss of opportunities for people to access all forms of learning, a reduction in adult learning participation rates, and further exacerbation of educational disadvantage. AONTAS argues that the legacy of the pandemic will result in an all-time low for the participation and engagement rates of people from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds unless urgent action is taken to address this situation.

The OECD reported a drop of in the participation of adults in formal and/or non-formal education and training by 26% for Ireland (2021a). However, the impact on marginalised learners is striking.

In 2020, data from SOLAS highlighted the following drop in participation rates:

- **24.3% drop for learners from the Roma and Traveller community**
- **13.6% drop for learners with disabilities**
- **14.9% drop for Refugees and Asylum Seekers**
- **14.7% drop for learners aged over 50**

Furthermore:

- The lifelong learning participation rate for people with lower secondary education/Junior Certificate halved in Q4 2020 compared to Q4 2019 (SOLAS, 2021a)
- There was a 21% decrease in the number of FET learners achieving QQI awards compared to 2019 (QQI, 2020)
- There was a sharp drop in accreditation awards at NFQ Levels 1-4 (down 49% from 2019)
- During 2020 minor awards were down 27% from 2019
- There were 14% fewer active providers of QQI awards in 2020 compared to 2019 (QQI, 2021), meaning there appears to be fewer organisations offering accredited provision

All of the known and unknown factors experienced over the past eighteen months have had, and will continue to have, severe knock-on effects for every sector within the wider education ecosystem; and on the rates of all forms of participation. The gap between the educationally advantaged and disadvantaged, could not come at a worse time. Ireland's social resilience and economic recovery hinges on including as many engaged adult learners from marginalised backgrounds as possible. There is a direct and reciprocal relationship between **(a) ensuring an economically prosperous future and (b) the need for greater public investment in adult learning**. Equal access, participation, progression and equity of educational outcomes for every learner are all absolute necessities if Government are to play a significant role in rebuilding the country's human capital and increasing our collective capacity to adapt to the present situation and for future-proofing of marginalised adults and communities against the scale of unknown socioeconomic challenges that lie ahead.



Impact of COVID-19 on Community Education

Marginalised learners, who are the dominant cohort in community education, have experienced an increase in educational inequality during COVID-19, as demonstrated in the AONTAS *CEN Census 2020: Community Education in a Time of COVID-19* report (Cobain et al., 2021). The CEN Census 2020 represents 76 community education organisations, who are funded by nine government departments, through 51 funding streams while engaging about 15,000 learners across Ireland.

“Because we’re local and most learners would know us, or know somebody here, they’re able to ring us and say, well actually I’m thinking of doing a course and how do you think I can do it” – community education practitioner

The pandemic had an overwhelming impact on disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, manifesting in digital poverty and aggravating other persistent issues such as mental health and domestic violence. Indeed, findings from the AONTAS CEN Census 2020 demonstrate an increase in demand for wraparound supports including information technology (IT); literacy; career guidance; childcare; counselling; disability supports; domestic violence services; family support; financial advice; social work; and transport, which are crucial in engaging “hard-to-reach” learner cohorts. Community education’s dynamic response to a diverse range of learner needs during this time has further clarified the significance of community education and its attendant support structures.

“I would have been lost over the summer without my classes” – community education learner

Additionally, over one third of the respondents to the CEN Census 2020 developed new courses in response to COVID-19, particularly on health/wellbeing and information communication technology (ICT) support. Respondents to the CEN Census 2020 and AONTAS COVID-19 Further Education and Training (FET) Learner survey (Dowdall et al., 2020) highlighted the social, physical, and psychological benefits of engaging in non-accredited provision, benefits that became even more significant during this global pandemic.

“All the classes are adapted to suit the current climate, because a lot of people are struggling with their confidence and mental health” – community education practitioner

While community education providers showed their experience and adeptness in mitigating educational disadvantage during these times, additional resources, such as staffing costs, infrastructural costs, and funding for additional learner supports, were required to meet the needs of the sector. Sustainable funding to meet these needs continues to be required. Sustainable funding has been a historic challenge for community education providers, with groups often depending on project-based funding from a wide range of different government departments and other sources. More than one third of the 76 groups surveyed in the CEN Census reported more than two unique funding sources, each of which carries individual reporting requirements. Moreover, the fact that several groups reported learner fees and fundraising as income sources indicates the sector’s reliance on non-governmental funding. Further challenges around sustainable funding surfaced during COVID-19 and more

than half of the surveyed groups directly experienced funding cuts or anticipated a reduction in funding because of the pandemic.

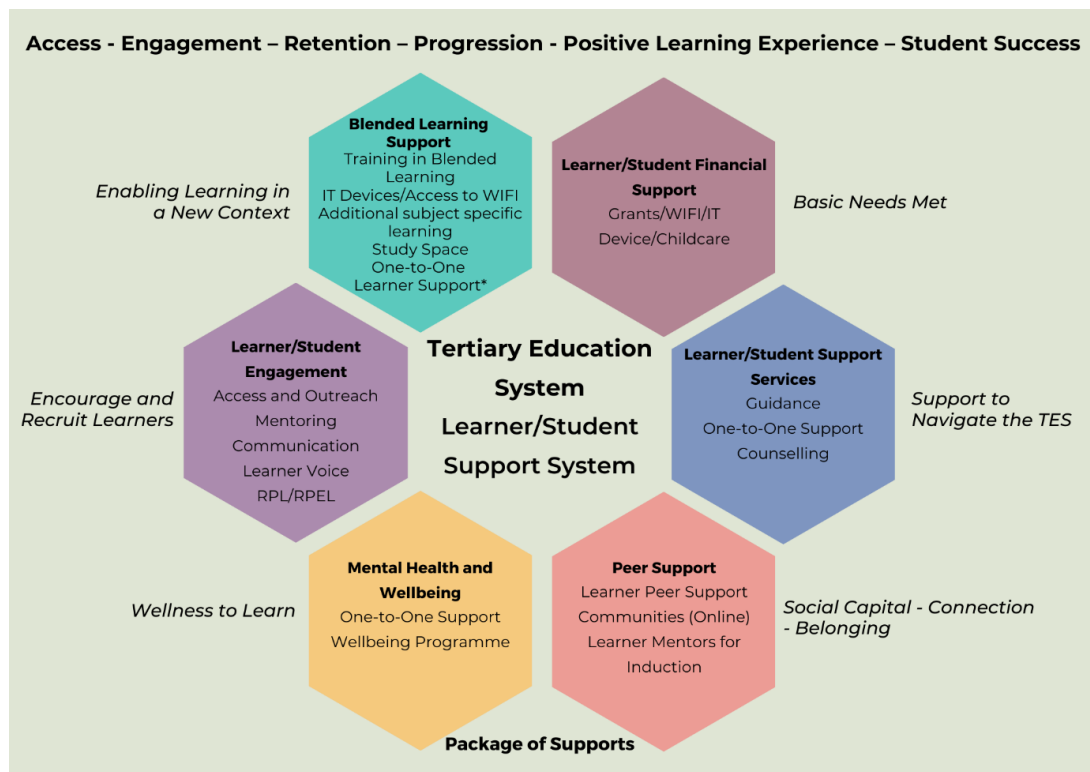
In 2020/2021 the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF) has made progress in addressing the challenges faced by groups in the short term. It was a vital support measure during the initial COVID-19 restrictions. However, there are key areas that could not be provided for as part of this fund including vital staffing costs. As noted by a practitioner in a recent AONTAS focus group, in terms of funding, providers face a continual challenge to *“keep your head above water and maintain everything you have ... the MAED Fund was good but we need core funding.”*

I. What Adult Learners Need

The status quo of the tertiary education system (TES) does not serve all learners as educational inequality is persistent. Change is vital but must be informed by learner needs. Mechanisms to support learner voice engagement across the TES is vital to improve practice and future provision.

During COVID-19, through the work of the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Working Group, we learned the key elements needed for success in learning. It is important to remember however, that many of these inequalities existed prior to the pandemic, and while they have deepened over time, the full extent is still unknown. Meeting learners' needs to widen access is a complex matter. While progress has been made, these issues have not been fully addressed. AONTAS offers a comprehensive, multi-faceted plan to ensure those most disadvantaged have equity of access. Within the Proposal for a COVID-19 Community Education Support Fund, AONTAS outlined an engagement plan, aimed at widening access and improving learner experience (AONTAS, 2020, p.8). We recommend that the pillars of this plan be considered as a means of re-engaging learners following COVID-19, and alleviating longstanding barriers to access for disadvantaged groups. These 6 pillars are outlined in the below diagram:

- 1. Basic Needs Met**
- 2. Support to Navigate the Tertiary Education System**
- 3. Fostering Social Capital, Connection and Belonging**
- 4. Supporting Wellness to Learn**
- 5. Encouraging new Learners**
- 6. Enabling Learning in a Changed Digital Context**



Dr Niamh O'Reilly

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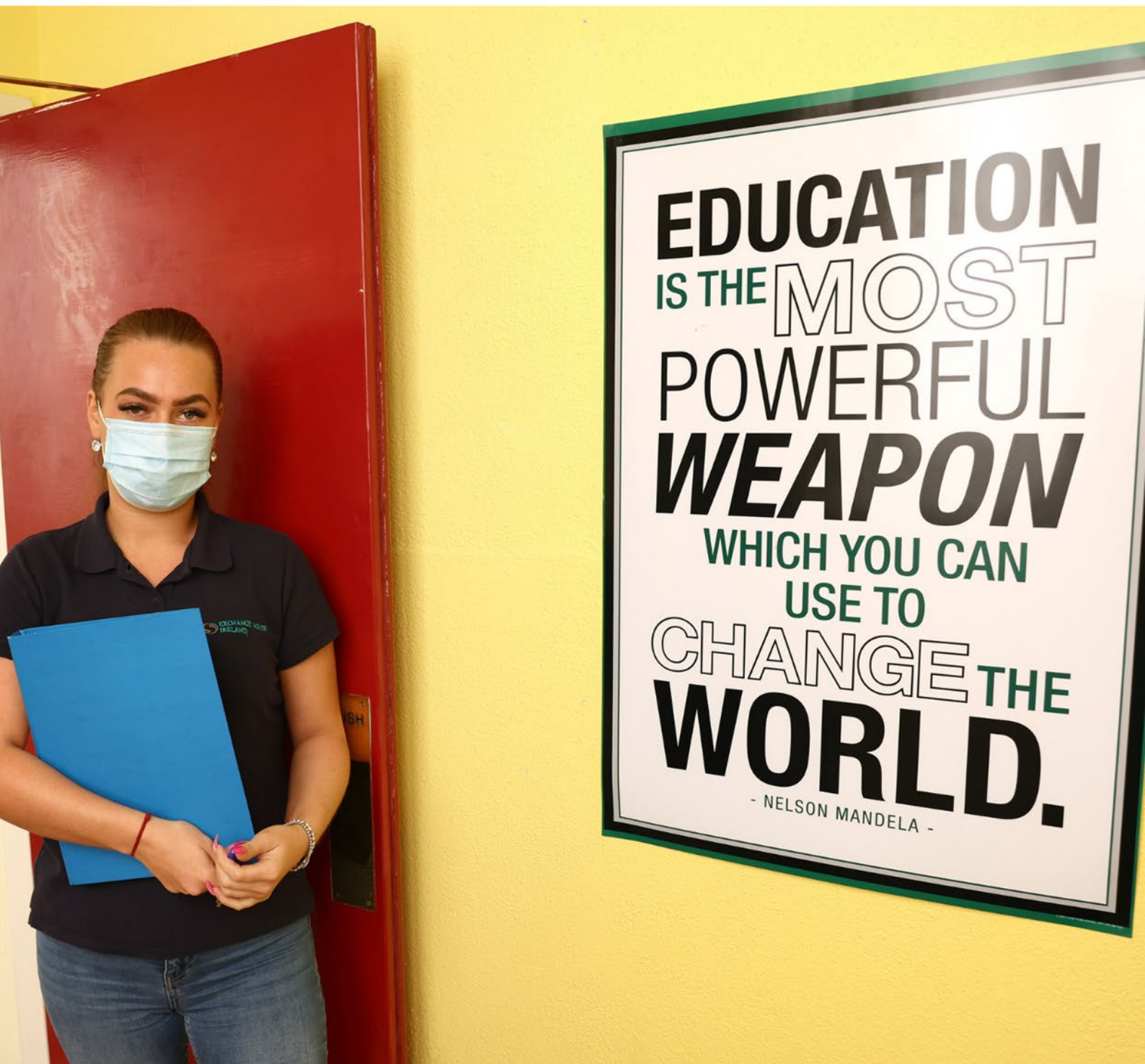
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 - Explore the potential of micro-credentials in supporting learners who did not complete their programme (2020/2021)

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- Continue to offer blended learning as a flexible model of provision based on learners' needs
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The Learning Experience during the COVID-19 Pandemic

After the transition from emergency provision to remote learning, blended learning (a combination of remote and in-person classes) became an option for some learners. The availability of this option was increasingly acknowledged as a ‘unforeseen benefit’ of learning post-pandemic. Through the [National FET Learner Forum Annual Synthesis Report 2020-2021](#), 17.3% of learners stated that they were engaged in blended learning, a number which we suggest may rise as COVID-19 restrictions are lifted (AONTAS, 2021). Learners highlighted benefits of the blended learning model as *“the best of both worlds”*. Many learners including lone parents, first-time mature students, those with a disability and rural learners appreciated the flexibility that blended learning offered which enabled them to overcome long-standing barriers such as childcare and transport. Also, the new skills they had gained as a result of blended learning, and how the combination of online and in-person classes allowed them to maintain social ties with their peers was welcomed.

However, caution should be exercised when considering the adaptation of blended learning to courses and programmes. We must make sure that no learner is disadvantaged as a result of the move to a blended learning model. In order for blended learning to be successful, learners must be fully equipped with the necessary digital devices and competencies. Wraparound services must also be maintained for learners, regardless of whether they are learning at home or in the classroom. Finally, there are some practical courses, and non-formal change-oriented programmes and others including literacy, numeracy and digital literacy classes that are not suited to a blended learning model. Learners must be given a choice to continue to engage in in-person learning or blended learning based on their own needs.

Ensure that underrepresented learners are not further disadvantaged in the future

Underrepresented and marginalised learners have been disadvantaged due to COVID-19, worsening already significant access and retention issues in FET. The [National FET Learner Forum Annual Synthesis Report 2020-2021](#) includes key recommendations on how to alleviate challenges faced by groups such as learners living in Direct Provision, learners with disabilities, Traveller and Roma learners and lone parents. For example, learners in Direct Provision were *‘substantially less likely to feel supported to learn remotely (65% vs. 77%)’* and Traveller or Roma learners were *‘substantially more likely to struggle with motivation or a lack of structure (71% vs. 54%)’* during the period of remote learning (AONTAS, 2021, p.11). AONTAS member One Family’s [pre-budget submission](#) also highlighted access to education for lone parents as a core ask. Learners with disabilities are another group that experienced additional barriers during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as a lack of structure and worsening mental health. The Association for Higher Education Access & Disability (AHEAD) recommends funding for live caption recording (via financial supports for assistive technologies to address these barriers. AONTAS supports this call.

The ‘Digital Divide’ must be closed and further funding must be allocated to address digital literacy and digital poverty

The digital divide within Ireland is a problem that is ever widening, exacerbated by the pandemic. Heydi Foster Breslin, the CEO of An Cosán, articulated the danger of allowing this divide to continue festering by stating *“We must address this growing and deepening divide that is creating a new underclass; the digitally disadvantaged.”*

Within the Annual Synthesis Report published by AONTAS, learners spoke of their struggles with digital poverty and literacy. *“Broadband is problematic, and a lot of learners have not got internet. Money towards getting an internet connection, maybe like 20 euro, would help”. “I have four children and they are all at home, and all studying too. We just have to get on with it. We have to share phones and a computer, and just take turns”* (AONTAS, 2021).

The digital divide is a phenomenon that was well documented prior to the pandemic, but the situation surrounding COVID-19 has put an immediate and intense spotlight on the inequalities suffered across Ireland as a result of it. This is not an issue likely to disappear with the end of the pandemic, but rather one that will leave fraught and fragmented pieces left to put back together, to form a picture that was already missing critical parts. Solution focused actions that were already overdue in addressing the matter of digital exclusion and poverty now poses a crisis level of urgency.

Addressing the digital divide is now a core condition which must be met for adults to engage in learning. If this is not addressed, it will impact on people’s basic right to education. Digital exclusion offers tangible barriers in accessing education, particularly within the context of the pandemic. Without a stable internet connection, the digital literacy to download and access Zoom, or even the simple possession of a smart phone or laptop, accessing education in any regard becomes an impossible task, leading in tandem to severe isolation.

Funding is needed to rectify this issue and to address learners’ needs. Simply providing material and equipment is not sufficient if the necessary software, training or broadband cannot be accessed.

Prioritise wraparound supports for a holistic model of adult learning

Wrap-around support services such as childcare, counselling, and family support are key in the provision of a holistic and inclusive model of education that enables the access and engagement of marginalised and vulnerable learner cohorts. It is not reasonable to believe that without such supports, adult learners are free to engage in education subject solely to their own desire and motivation. These services are fundamentally and inseparably entwined with the *integral* provision of adult learning.

The struggles of learners facing additional needs while on a path to attaining further education are well documented within a number of AONTAS publications. Within the Census report published by AONTAS, it was reported that *“Marginalised learners are the dominant cohort engaging in community education”* (Cobain et al., 2021) and FET learners within Annual Synthesis Report stated that they were struggling with their mental health, *“I am struggling with my mental health as a result of the crisis”*.

These documented struggles are not abstract issues, but cries for help pointing directly at the source of the problem. Learners have articulated their needs, and it is necessary for the Government to fund these services therefore and put the necessary structures in place to breakdown these barriers. If not addressed, this lack of support will continue to marginalise learners and create a periphery with different cohorts of learners on each side. Those with resources and those without.



II. What Community Education Needs (Funding)

Given the exacerbation of educational disadvantage arising from COVID-19, particularly for many of the learner cohorts engaging in community education, AONTAS is calling for an equitable support plan for the community education sector as part of a national tertiary-education wide approach to educational equality.

AONTAS Recommends:

Commit to an equitable, sustainable, multi-annual funding package that empowers community education organisations to address the needs of learners and the local communities. This should include:

7. Increase the annual SOLAS budget for community education providers, offered in an equitable manner across ETBs to include core costs including staffing.
8. An annual *Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund* (MAEDF) to include the learning from the AONTAS research report (Cobain et al., 2021) on proposed improvements needed:
 - Consistency in funding provision processes across all Education and Training Boards (ETBs), to include all aspects of the fund and include staff costs
 - An extended timeframe and streamlined, clearer guidelines across each ETB to facilitate an equitable application process
9. *Learner wraparound support funding* for community education organisations to enable access and retention post COVID-19. Including onsite supports for domestic violence, mental health, family, and childcare that will meet multiple Government Department policy objectives
10. Ring-fenced *funding for non-accredited programmes* to enable marginalised learners to engage in education
11. *An equity of access to an accreditation fund* through SOLAS for community education groups to enable accredited provision (to cover the reengagement and validation costs)

III. Commitment to Investing in Educational Equality Across Tertiary Education

The new DFHERIS led by Minister Simon Harris TD has the opportunity to spearhead a new vision for education in Ireland. *“The department’s role is to ensure that these sectors underpin and stimulate Ireland’s social and economic development and that the opportunities provided by public investment and policy in the sectors are made more widely available to everyone including the most vulnerable in society”*. The Statement of Strategy 2021-2023 for the DFHERIS launched on 8th March 2021 has many important actions that aim to address educational inequality.

There is huge scope for the new DFHERIS to lead positive change for adult learners and the strategic context outlined (p.8) covered areas of inclusion and mitigating educational disadvantage. The potential *“to seize the opportunity by the new Department to include a focus on social sustainability”* is noted in the Statement of Strategy. Additionally, a recognition of the challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic on learners and also *“the need to mitigate educational disadvantage and provide necessary supports in order to address the imbalance, where certain groupings are under-represented in our student and learner population”* (p. 8) is also welcome.

AONTAS believes in order to realise the goals of DFHERIS, specific actions to address educational disadvantage are needed, especially the noted ‘flexible offerings and diverse pathways’. We see community education as key to this. *“Increasing levels of inclusion through the provision of high quality, more accessible and flexible education and training programmes and supports suited to the identified needs of individuals, with the aim of enabling every citizen to participate fully in society.”*

AONTAS Recommends:

12. Establish an Educational Equality Across Tertiary Education Structure

- **Aim:** Advise the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science on issues of educational equality for specific groups²
- **Actions:**
 - Research issues impacting on disadvantaged learners across TES
 - Propose solutions to issues based on a robust evidence base
 - Consult with stakeholders across the tertiary education system to inform the Department’s work
 - Embed the voices of learners and members of marginalised communities who are the focus of policy in decision making

This structure would create, for the first time, a bridge between all levels of the tertiary education system in addressing educational equality by focusing on social inclusion.

² For the following key populations specific efforts must be made to support educational access: Learners with Disabilities; Travellers and Roma; Home Carers; Women; Learners in Direct Provision; Learners impacted by Homeless; Learners with Literacy, Numeracy and Basic Digital Literacy Needs; Adults with Lower-Level Qualifications; Individuals in receipt of social welfare; and First-Time Mature Students

13. Ensure community education is recognised as a key part of creating an equitable tertiary education system

- Recognise and acknowledge community education as key to supporting access to higher education and include in access policy plans and funding opportunities
- Take a tertiary-wide approach to educational access - ensure learners can engage in part-time accredited provision across the NFQ in community education
- Include representative structures for community education and educational equality on the DFHERIS working groups as part of the Department's Statement of Strategy

14. Support national research to build an evidence base on the impact of COVID-19 on adult learners, with particular emphasis on marginalised learners

- Use the *Community Education in a Time of COVID-19* report (COVID-19 report) as evidence to inform strategic planning and funding for community education under the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and SOLAS
- Develop a long-term strategy to address the educational inequality exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on the role of community education in redressing this impact
- Support further research into community education, including mapping, funding systems, and contribution to educational equality

15. Equitable Access to Higher Education

- Invest in adult and community education focusing on progression into higher education for marginalised learners
- Core funding to Higher Education Institutions must be linked to outcomes that widen access to higher education for groups traditionally under-represented in formal higher education
- An integrated whole-of-education-system approach must be funded to connect schools, literacy programmes, community education, Further Education and Training, apprenticeships and Higher Education
- Learners from under-represented groups in higher education face many barriers in accessing higher education. The consolidation of allocated access funding almost exclusively to higher education, and the limits on some of these funding mechanisms, is detriment to the potential impact and success of a tertiary wide model. AONTAS supports the expansion of true-cost access funding to all areas of the tertiary education sector, with a particular focus on community education, in order to provide equity of access
- Access to higher education - Abolish fees and expand SUSI supports for part-time mature students
- Funding for community education in order to create a more equitable, inclusive higher education sector by improving criteria for PATH 3 funding in a way that supports adult and community education organisations to increase and widen higher education access for the most disadvantaged

Learning from the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic is a major historical change. It has shifted our way of working, teaching, learning, and living. Our transition towards a post-pandemic era must be informed with key learnings that will support a thriving, equitable and inclusive society for all.

AONTAS shares the following key learnings:

a) Large structural changes are possible

The tertiary education sector stepped up, took immediate action and worked collaboratively in making structural changes to bring the sector online to address educational disadvantage during the emergency response period. There is often a discomfort with breaking from tradition, and systems such as the traditional Leaving Certificate are viewed as fair due to their longstanding history, but this can be harmful for equity and inclusion. Education models must be proactive, flexible, and inclusive. The pandemic has taught us that we can make immediate changes when needed and we must continue to do this.

b) Collaboration and cooperation in the tertiary education sector is vital and must continue

The Tertiary Education Steering Group and the Mitigating Educational Disadvantaged Working Group (including community education) are two examples whereby all key stakeholders worked together to focus on the needs of learners. It has strengthened relationships, improved communication, and informed our understanding and knowledge. Maintaining structures that links all partners in the tertiary education system has value.

c) Recognition of educational disadvantage

Educational disadvantage has been a prominent agenda item in all adult learning discussions since the start of the pandemic in March 2020. This is the highest recognition and action it has seen the launch of the White Paper (2000). For many practitioners and policy-makers, learners' lack of internet connection and technology, overcrowding and unsafe conditions in the home, and low levels of digital literacy finally became apparent. This lack of basic resources to access and engage in education is not new. We must continue to realise the severity of these issues and address this adequately.

d) Technology, internet connection and digital literacy are a core condition of adult learning

We have moved rapidly into the new digital age and blended learning and online learning is now a feature across all sectors. Learners cannot access or engage in education without technology, internet connection and digital literacy. We must ensure that all learners have equal access and use of these supports to ensure their basic human right to education.

e) Enabling Learning in a Changed Digital Context

We learned from the pandemic that we need to take a balanced approach to the potential longer term use of online learning as a model of provision. Blended learning can support or hinder access, retention and progression based on the kinds of programmes offered and importantly the learner cohorts that attend.

- For some learners blended learning can enable access and retention as it addresses long-standing issues related to in-person provision
- Many learners cannot engage due to digital poverty and lack of access to devices, Wi-Fi and skills to learn online
- Some learners can only engage in person, particularly those who left school early and are nervous about returning to education
- The suitability of blended learning (in person and online) is dependent on the learner cohort, learner need, the kind of provision and the capacity of the education provider (tutors/equipment/software/skills)

f) The most marginalised and vulnerable learners are always the most at-risk

The 'Matthew Effect' teaches us that those with higher levels of education are the most likely to re-engage in education. This is because they have the resources and capacity to re-enter education and are surrounded by affluent and well-educated people in their family and community. Disadvantaged learners do not have access to resources, or a social capital net to catch them during difficult times. In addition, due to their low educational attainment, social stratification, or social situation they are the most at-risk of being excluded and isolated in all educational circumstances. The drop in participation rates from Levels 1-4 during 2020 and [AONTAS \(2020\)](#) research on marginalised cohorts reaffirms this.

g) Non-formal education is key in addressing social issues and including marginalised learners

During the pandemic AONTAS found that community education providers offered non-formal or non-accredited programmes to support learners in engaging in online learning such as 'getting online', to help understand health and safety concerns, and to bring local people together. In addition, the CEN Census (2020) highlighted a range of courses such as 'recovery and wellbeing', and 'money-management' to help people address everyday needs.



Conclusion

The consequences of COVID-19 for adult learners, their families and communities has highlighted the urgency of need for increased educational equity in Ireland's tertiary education system. The adult and community education sector is a key net contributor within the wider education ecosystem and consistently delivers beneficial educational and social inclusion outcomes across a variety of national strategies and inter-departmental policy objectives.

We know the positive impact of adult learning at micro (employment opportunities, earnings, career development) meso (productivity) and macro level (economic, crime reduction, social cohesion and health) has significant value. For every Euro invested in adult learning, there is a wide-ranging return on investment. For example, using Wellbeing Valuation Approach research by NIACE in the UK, it was suggested that the return on a 30-hour course included: health benefits €150; improvement in social relations €700 and an increase in earnings €250 (EAEA, 2018). Moreover, the impacts of community education align with the aims of Government across numerous and overlapping policy aims with positive outcomes across areas such as health, employment, crime and justice, climate justice, antiracism, and gender equality. This means adult and community education offers huge value for money in terms of the return on Government investment.

This under-funded sector also plays a vital role in facilitating Ireland's just transition to a more sustainable green and digital economy. **Budget 2022 must therefore reflect the true value of the adult and community education sector's capacity for delivering such a unique public good.**

Investing in the adult and community education sector and creating structural changes in the tertiary education system can:

- **Ensure the social inclusion and education commitments made in the Programme for Government are delivered;**
- **Facilitate each Department in progressing its domestic national strategies;**
- **Support Ireland to achieve the lifelong learning participation rate of 18% by 2025;**
- **Honour our international commitments regarding the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all**

Community education and FET offer pathways to learners who traditionally have been unable to access higher education. Increased investment in such pathways can secure progression routes they need to overcome structural inequalities and systemic barriers to participation. Simply put, expanded sustainable funding, in turn, expands and sustains access, progression and equity of outcome for learners from under-represented groups.

Ensuring true-cost funding for community education provision supports under-represented groups to participate and succeed in all other forms of tertiary education. In terms of direct cost-benefit, funding community education is therefore also a potential investment in each constituent within the tertiary education system which represents even greater value for money to the Exchequer.

The 2022 budget will have the challenging task of elevating the Irish economy, society, and specifically the education sectors following the detrimental effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in this challenge also lies the opportunity to provide real sustainable support and parity of esteem to the Irish adult and community education sector, and tackle long-standing barriers that stop those most disadvantaged engaging in education.

AONTAS has detailed a three-part plan, focusing on the **needs of learners, community education, and a tertiary-wide model**. The existing and evolving needs of learners must be met to ensure that, following a period of great upheaval, the pre-entrenched inequalities they face do not create further barriers to accessing education. Community education must be recognised as the most accessible form of adult learning that meets the needs of the most disadvantaged learners. Equitable, sustainable, multi-annual funding must be provided to ensure the sector is protected and it continues to make such a valuable social and educational impact in Irish society. Finally, a tertiary education model with accessible, funded pathways from community to further and higher education would create a more inclusive, equitable higher education sector, and allow for equity between all facets of further and higher education sectors. Having no sector undervalued and no learner left behind will have longstanding benefits on Irish communities and society as we strive to rebuild and look towards to a better future.

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