



Public Consultation on the Statement of Strategy 2021- 2023

Department of Further and
Higher Education, Research,
Innovation and Science

Date: 18th December



The Voice of
Adult Learning

Summary Recommendations for the DFHERIS Statement of Strategy 2021-2023

- 1. Create a new structure with a tertiary-wide approach for educational equality in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.**
- 2. Ensure that qualitative learner-informed data plays a central role in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research and Innovation's evidence-based approach to policy development.**
- 3. Ensure that the focus on skills in policy and policy implementation includes a broader definition of skills, learner-informed skills, and locally based skill needs.**
- 4. Ensure equality of investment in tertiary education.**
- 5. Ensure the new Statement of Strategy 2021-2023 plays a strong role in implementing the Programme for Government.**

Introduction to AONTAS

AONTAS is a long established (1969), non-governmental membership organisation that promotes that value of adult learning and advocates for the rights of all adult to quality learning across the tertiary education system. We have an unwavering commitment to educationally disadvantaged adults, we offer solutions-focused advocacy that is evidence-based drawing on research and our extensive meaningful learner engagement activities. Our Strategic Plan: A Vision for Educational Equality (2019-2022) is informed by principles of: social justice, feminism, partnership, valuing diversity, advancing equality and supporting social inclusion.

We continually strive to be offer work of the highest quality as an inclusive, informed, dynamic organisation which will act as a cooperative, trusted, critical friend to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. We continually engage with learners and educators from further education and training, community education and higher education on a weekly basis, affording us key insights into practice. We have expertise in educational equality and we advocate strongly for community education, as the most inclusive, yet underfunded part of the education system.



Our work covers: **Research:** Authentically hearing learner voice, particularly those marginalised, through a mixed-methods research project, The National FET Learner Forum. Some recent examples of publications in this area are the 2019 Annual Synthesis Report and the COVID-19 FET Learner Report. Democratising relevant academic work in our well-established peer reviewed journal, The Adult Learner. **Completing Promoting** lifelong learning and access: first week of March the annual AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival (circa 300 events/open days across Ireland), STAR awards recognising excellence in inclusive education projects and an annual Policy Day event. **Encouraging** people to engage in learning: Freephone information referral helpline and website www.onestepup.ie. **Building capacity** and supporting professional development in community education through the

AONTAS Community Education Network (Est. 2007, 10-year anniversary conference opened by Minister Coveney).

We have strong **European** links: designated by the then Department of Education and Skills as the National Coordinator for the European Agenda for Adult Learning, we lead/partner in four EU projects across all levels of Erasmus+, are on the Board of the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) and are linked globally. Co-established the Network of Adult Learning Across Border (NALAB, video) in response to Brexit, at the AONTAS Lifelong Learning Summit, with special guest, Secretary General *Seán Ó Foghlú*. Ultimately, all our work, and communications activities aims to advocate for the rights of all adults to engage in learning so to fulfil their aspirations. Who we represent: Organisations and individuals committed to educational equality for adults: **500 members** [all 16 ETBs, over 120 community education organisations, adult learning/access departments of Higher Education Institutions, social justice NGOs, educators and learners across the Island of Ireland].

Introduction to the Submission

In accordance with the provisions of the Public Service Management Act, 1997, the newly established Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has commenced the preparation of its Statement of Strategy for the period from 2021-2023. The Statement will comprise the key objectives, outputs and related strategies of the Department during this period.

AONTAS welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the new Statement of Strategy, which aims to champion a new strategic and policy direction for further and higher education in Ireland. AONTAS is making this submission in order to highlight the important role that FET learner voice, and adult & community education should play in this new plan. At the outset, AONTAS would like to acknowledge the open, consultative approach of the new Department and its keen focus on educational disadvantage. Going forward we would welcome the opportunity to engage in formal groups set up by the Department (eg steering groups), and provide a specific lens in which is analyse policy and practice from an educational equality perspective. As outlined in our range of work areas, we advocate from an authentic, informed, human-rights framework embedded in the lived experience of marginalised adult learners.

Additionally, AONTAS welcomes the allocation made by Minister Harris TD in Budget 2021 of €8 million specifically aimed at mitigating educational disadvantage which is vital in supporting community education organisation to meet the increased need of their learners arising from the COVID19 pandemic. A further such fund would also support those cohorts of the population who have been most severely impact, the effect of which we are still yet to determine.

Closer collaboration between the Department and the adult and community education sector should act as a catalyst for accomplishing a shared mission, one which ensures that the sector underpins and stimulates 'Ireland's social and economic development, and that the opportunities provided by public investment and policy in the sector are made more widely available to everyone, including the most vulnerable people in society'.

For over 50 years, AONTAS has worked side-by-side with learners, educators, and organisations that have made an invaluable contribution to the structures and experiences of adults returning to education. Adult learners return to education for many reasons, such as improving their lives and improving their family's circumstances. There are, however, broader social reasons, including a desire to lift their communities out of poverty and intergenerational social exclusion; over and beyond the barriers that have traditionally prevented them, their relatives and neighbours from fully participating in and benefitting from the education system in Ireland.



Thus, adult learners can become a positive force for social change. This submission is therefore also being made to ensure the Department's key objectives, outputs and related strategies achieve a vision aimed at promoting education for all.

Given the recent impact of COVID-19, our focus on how to move forward in our quest for educational equality requires us to focus on individuals who have been further marginalised by the COVID-19 crisis. These groups are:

- First-time and part-time Mature Students
- Those living in disadvantaged rural areas
- People in unstable and unsustainable employment
- Migrants
- Low-qualified adults (those with less than an upper-second level),
- Early school leavers
- Individuals experiencing long-term unemployment
- Asylum seekers
- People with disabilities
- Travellers
- Lone Parents
- People experiencing homelessness
- Those in receipt of social welfare payments,
- People living in poverty
- Those from or who have low-income families
- Substance Misusers

The areas spotlighted and the recommendations made here are focused on increasing educational equality of access and equity of outcome across Further and Higher Education, as well as empowering every learner to reach their fullest potential through Community Education provision so that Ireland can take its place amongst the global leaders in lifelong learning. Ireland must strive to achieve this goal in order to meet the challenges contemporary life presents and to cultivate a degree of collective resilience, so that Ireland is prepared to adapt to all of the challenges that lie ahead.

Strategic Direction

1. Create a new structure with a tertiary-wide approach to educational equality in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

‘The Coronavirus has caused the largest disruption to education in history impacting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries’ (OECD, 2020, p.2). Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, marginalised groups have experienced an exacerbation of disadvantage. Many of the supports that were in place now must be offered in a different manner and the barriers that learners faced before the crisis are now being compounded. Despite efforts to redress potential barriers faced by COVID-19 in Irish education, there is a limit to what can be done in the short term and more long-term planning will be required to ensure we come out of this crisis stronger than when we went into it.

Proactively building structures to address the long-term impact of COVID-19 on disadvantaged learners.

The AONTAS Pre-Budget Submission 2021 calls for immediate action to address the specific impact this crisis is having on disadvantaged individuals and communities. To ensure we mitigate against the long-term damage of the crisis, differential re-distribution of available resources over the coming years will be essential. The current crisis, and future provision, will require a suite of supports to successfully increase participation and promote meaningful progression pathways.

While the Department of Education and Skills quickly established a set of groups in March 2020 to support the continuity of Further Education and Training (FET), Higher Education (HE), and community education provision through the COVID-19 crisis via the Tertiary Education System (TES) Steering Group, we are yet to see the true impact of the crisis on disadvantaged learners. The work of the *Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including community education issues) Working Group* (MED) examined factors which impact on equity of access and disadvantaged learners, and proposed responses to mitigate these impacts. Emerging data points to:

- **A significant reduction in disadvantaged adults participating in education, particularly accredited programmes at the early levels of the National Framework of Qualifications.** According to data from Quality and Qualifications Ireland compared to 2019, in 2020 there was an average reduction of 50% in QQI Major Awards attainment at NFQ level 1-4. This compares to an average decrease of 17% for QQI levels 5 and 6. Similarly, compared to 2019, in 2020 there has been a decrease in QQI Minor Awards at Level 4, and Level 5 of 51%, and 28%, respectively.
- **AONTAS members highlight the broader needs of learners participating in adult and community education are not being met.** Some learners with digital skills, thanks to the support from the new MAED fund can engage in blended learning. However, this does not include all learners, especially those with lower levels of digital literacy and in providers who were not successful in securing financial support. In addition, unsuitable or no study space, a lack of peer-support while studying remotely, one-to-one face time with tutors, limited or no access mental health and wellbeing services, and no childcare are still ongoing barriers faced by many learners.

These examples demonstrate that there has been an increase in educational disadvantage¹ during COVID-19 and offers a stark warning to the potential effect society will face if the Department's new Strategy fails to fully address these issues. The observable negative impact so far can be categorised as occurring at an individual and community level with the experiences on the ground at local level being:

¹ The Education Act (1998) defines educational disadvantage as 'the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools. In relation to students in the formal education system educational disadvantage has been also been defined as: 'a limited ability to derive an equitable benefit from schooling compared to one's peers by age as a result of school demands, approaches, assessments and expectations which do not correspond to the student's knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours into which (s) he has been socialised (as opposed to those to which (s) he is naturally endowed)' (Boldt and Devine, 1998, p.10). In policy, the term 'non-traditional student' is used to describe a student who by their class, educational background, race, ethnicity, gender, dis (ability) are less likely to participation in higher education. 'Under-represented' is also used (DETE, 2002; HEA, 2015) to identify particular target groups: Entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education; First time, mature student entrants; Students with disabilities; Part-time/flexible learners; Further education award holders; and Irish Travellers (HEA, 2015, p.27)

- **Significant exacerbation of disadvantage** as those with lower-levels qualifications are most likely to have lost their job, have poorer health, and have fewer resources to engage in the seismic shift to remote learning. It will further marginalise learners who cannot progress in further education and training in a remote context and set back their learning.
- **Notable reduced access and progression options** for disadvantaged learners. QQI Major and Minor Awards act as building blocks to attaining accreditation and supporting progression across the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) through further and higher education. Further drops in these awards, as mentioned above, signals a very concerning trend about the current state and future of education for disadvantaged learner cohorts.

Long-term educational inequality caused by the pandemic remains extremely problematic. At domestic and EU policy level there are a range of areas that are still of serious concern. These include:

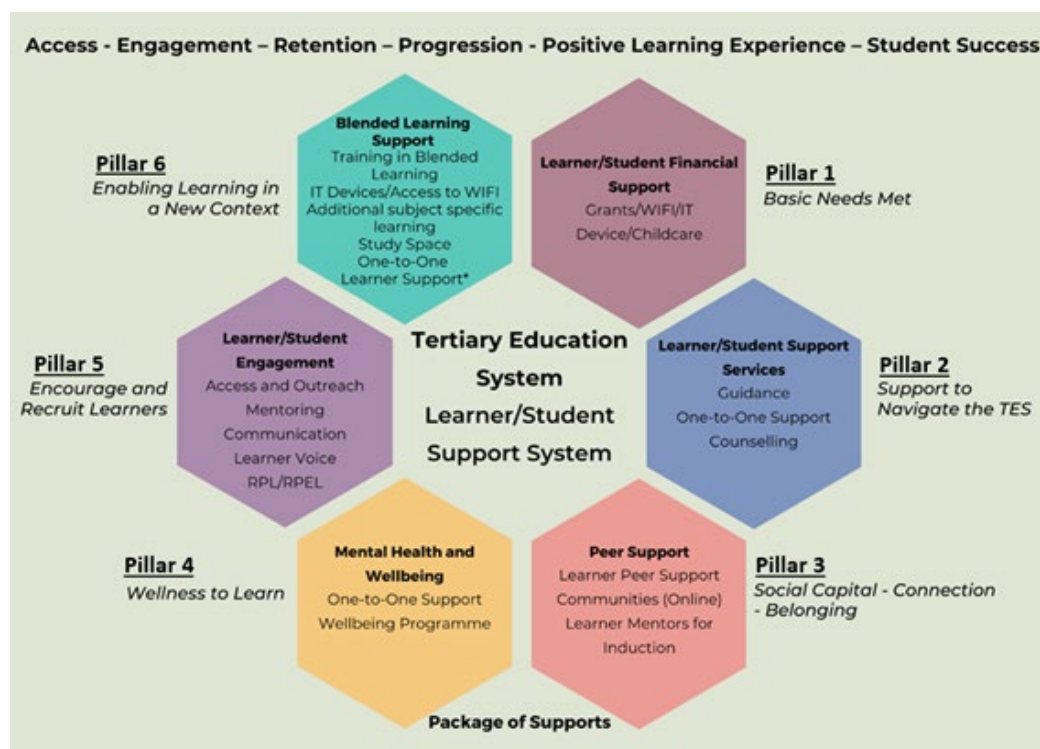
- **Reduced lifelong participating rates.** This reduction will hamper efforts to reach the Programme for Government lifelong learning participation rates target of 18% by 2025.
- **Stagnation in progression of marginalised learners.** This stagnation will stymie access to apprenticeships and higher education options, thereby reducing government targets established in the Action Plan on Apprenticeships and the National Access Plan for Higher Education.
- **Reduced national accreditation levels.** The EU Upskilling Pathways Recommendation aims to support Member States to increase levels of accreditation for all citizens to a Level 5 on the European Framework of Qualifications (the equivalent to a Level 5 on the Irish NFQ).



A key learning from the MED group was the value of a singular focus on disadvantaged learners, bridging the gap across community, further and higher education in furthering efforts to mitigate educational disadvantage exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In taking a tertiary-wide approach to addressing educational disadvantage, high-level themes related to access were identified, resulting in a *Tertiary Education Student/Learner Support Framework*. AONTAS brought together six key overarching pillars impacting on access, whilst allowing for appropriate sectoral responses. In recognising the complexity of access issues, persistent structural marginalisation of learners, and a commitment to medium and longer-term monitoring of the impact of COVID-19, AONTAS highlighted the need for a comprehensive package of supports to ensure learners are not left behind by COVID-19. Regarding the Department’s role for social inclusion and to provide educational opportunities to everyone, including the most vulnerable, AONTAS proposes specific actions to meet this aim.

Figure 1: Tertiary Education Student/Learner Support Framework



During the COVID-19 pandemic, by drawing on the expertise of AONTAS and the MED working group, **we have learned that issues impacting educational access have commonalities across the tertiary education system.** They are expressed in this Tertiary Education System learner support system framework. The support needs for each pillar of the Framework is assessed for that context to showcase an inclusive model designed to redress the challenges learners will face across community education; further education and training; and the higher education sectors.

Establishing a tertiary structure to respond to learner-informed research, propose solutions to mitigate disadvantage, and adapt to the evolving long-term impacts of COVID-19.

Concern about the lasting impact of COVID-19 also made essential the collation of learner-informed, qualitative and quantitative research on disadvantaged learners. The purpose of this research being to generate evidence-based methods to mitigate the impact of this damage. In closing the MED group in December 2020, there was broad agreement that the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, under the leadership of Minister Harris TD, has an opportunity to make headway in its quest to further its social inclusion agenda. This aim can be achieved by building on the work of the MED, as a unique structure that focuses on educationally disadvantaged learners. It should take a holistic, learner-centred, rights-based approach, thus ensuring that the Irish tertiary response to COVID-19 **keeps the learner at the centre of its future policy**. This cross-sectoral approach, drawing on the expertise of community education organisations, FET providers, higher education institutions, civil society organisations, learners and additional experts would offer a coherent structure drawing together the knowledge, experience and evidence to inform the Department's access policy priorities. The new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science led by Minister 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".

Ireland has specific structures to shape tertiary education policy (e.g. The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs); however, there is no specific structure that is dedicated to educational equality across the tertiary system. Internationally, growing concern regarding the fallout from COVID-19 in widening inequalities has led the OECD to establish a Centre on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunity (WISE), that will focus specifically in generate data and solutions **"to improve people's well-being and reduce inequalities and better understand the impact of policies and business actions on people's lives today and in the future"**. The formation of this structure shows the need for a similar style focused

response in Ireland to ensure that national progress remains at the forefront of the global response to the pandemic.



Given that participation by educationally disadvantaged groups must be of primary concern in developing this Strategy, the barriers to a quality learning experience, equal access, equity of outcome, and learner success can only be properly addressed when the **community, further and higher**

education sectors are brought together and understood as mutually beneficial constituents of Ireland's educational ecosystem. Therefore, a structure to enable success across tertiary education is needed. 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 Homelessness; 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. A cross-tertiary structure focused on educational equality would bring together voices, and expertise, from each sector working directly with these groups.

AONTAS proposes that an educational equality oversight structure within the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science be established to continue the success of the MED Working Group on issues surrounding educational inequality to oversee the implementation of the new Strategy. This structure would be well placed to address the need for the Department to take an **overarching view of policies that need to be knitted together to encourage, develop and promote the agenda of the Department alongside the Programme for Government**. For example, the new Strategy should be close-fitted to the Action Plan on Apprenticeships (2021-2025) and the new National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (post 2021) to ensure success over the Strategy's period.

Strategic actions, as overseen and implemented by the structure, must be designed for bringing about sustainable positive change. Any actions within the Strategy to encourage, develop and promote educational equality must appreciate that although the barriers learners face when trying to fully participate in the wider education system may seem like discrete and separate obstructions that can be tackled and resolved at the individual personal level, they are, in fact, interconnected outcomes of systemic problems: **the living legacy of intergenerational educational inequity and the educational disenfranchisement of members of our society by gender, ethnicity, ability, immigration status, poverty** and so on. To be successful this Strategy must therefore take actions which fundamentally address the underlying issues that have created and exacerbated the current disparity between those who have higher educational attainment and those who have not. In short, narrowly focusing this Strategy's efforts on individual learners alone will most certainly squander the opportunity the new Department has to make educational history and make the necessary systemic changes really required for entire communities and society as a whole to benefit from the potentially infinite richness and diversity of educational outcomes Ireland has to gain in the long-term

Role of the Educational Equality Across Tertiary Education Structure

Aim: To advise the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science on issues of educational equality and provide them with an innovative evidence-informed policy making tool.

This groups should be:

- Independent, strategic thinking, networking
- Dynamic and collaborative
- Representative of the tertiary sector, taking a non-institutional, cross-sectoral approach to equality that allows for equal collaboration across the sector
- Collaborative, featuring representatives from NGOS, external academics, access professionals, and a mix of key stakeholders
- Learner-centred, grounding all work in the interests of student/learner issues, with a focus on marginalised learners

- Grounded in expertise, featuring experts who can add value to discussions
- Equipped with a secretariat and staff to ensure work is action effectively

This group should have:

- a defined scope to think strategically
- a holistic view shaping its mission
- ongoing analysis structures to review issues and generate recommendations for action
- a medium to long-term action plan
- a mandate to research and report on issues impacting disadvantaged learners across the tertiary sector
- consultation structures to engage with stakeholders within the sector

The 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. With the Minister and DFHERIS' commitment to educational equality and a clear collective effort as a community of stakeholders to promote educational equality, it is a critical moment to make significant, systemic inroads in making education for all a reality.

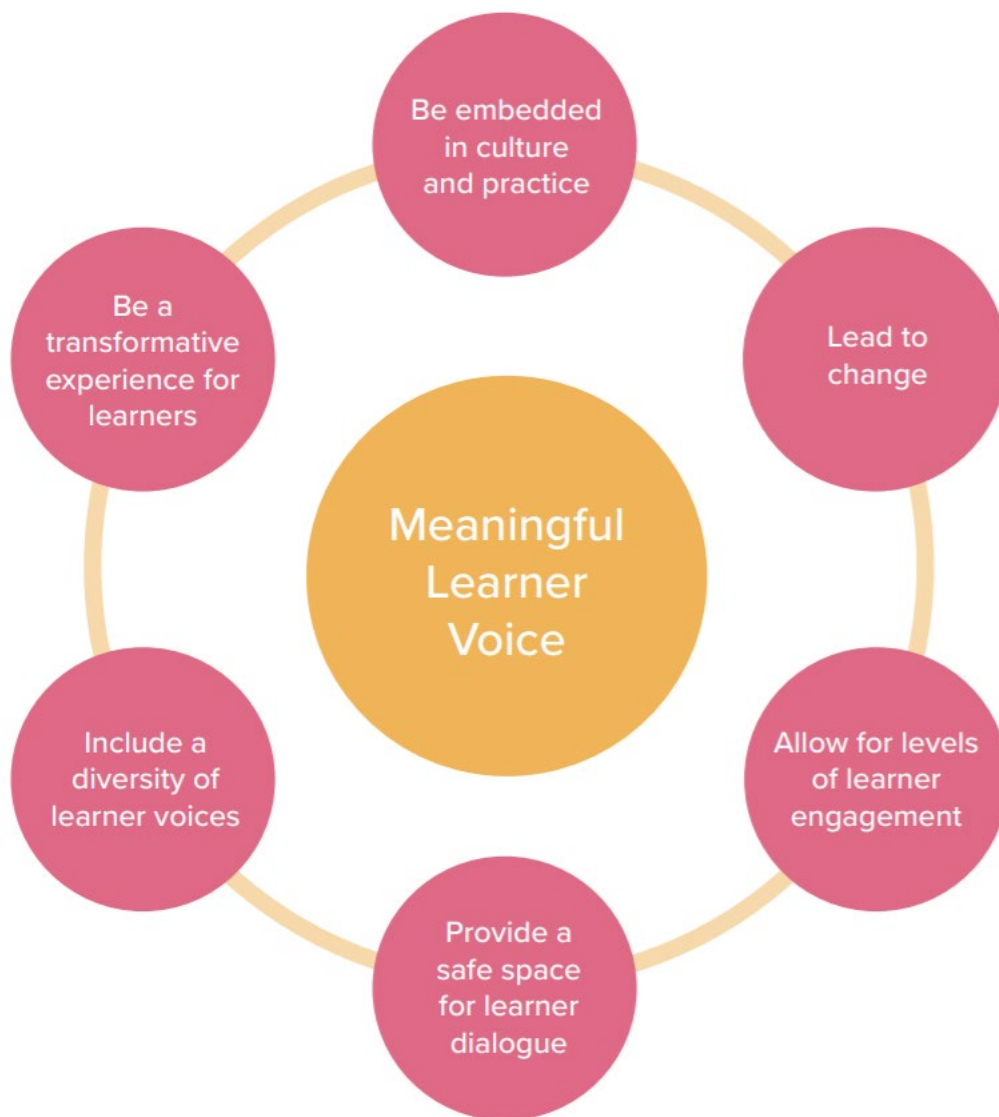
² The European Commission (2004) states that Social inclusion is a process which ensures that those at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life and to enjoy a standard of living that is considered normal in the society in which they live. It ensures that they have greater participation in decision making which affects their lives and access to their fundamental rights' (p.10).

Education Policy:

2. Ensure that qualitative learner-informed data plays a central role in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research and Innovation's evidence-based approach to policy development.

The importance of gathering data, qualitative and quantitative, from learners and educators

AONTAS urges the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to ensure policy is developed with qualitative and learner-informed data. Evidence-based policymaking requires comprehensive and credible data that measures learner engagement and learners' needs. While macro-level data such as the number of enrolments and qualifications is useful to see an overall general trend, data from individual learners, including priority groups, is essential to understand the needs and situations of marginalised learner groups. Learners' needs and their learning contexts are diverse. While the Department and its agencies may need to identify the number of participants, attendance, programme completion and trends in subject engagement and pathway progression through quantitative figures, it is important to contextualise these figures alongside qualitative learner research that deepens our understanding of the challenge's learners are facing. It is only by engaging with learners directly that a true understanding of learners' needs, satisfaction and the quality of their learning experience can be understood. Importantly, this engagement must be large-scale and strategic, ensuring that it includes a diversity of learner voices (Flynn 2017; Walker and Logan 2008). A framework of what this engagement should look like featured in the AONTAS I'm A FET Learner booklet (2020) and can be found overleaf.



Due to the Department’s previous commitments to learner-centred policy making, structures for this type of feedback are already in place at both the higher and further education level. As evidenced through the QQI COVID-19 report on Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, many of the issues faced by learners were clearly identified through learner feedback gathered by USI, AHEAD and AONTAS, where large-scale learner structures helped to capture a picture of the impact of COVID-19 on learners (Quality and Qualifications Ireland 2020).

“As a person, one of the things that has contributed to who I am today, has been listening to people tell their own experience and learning from it. The Forum provided the opportunity for me to hear and share in people’s joy, in their challenges, and put myself in their shoes” Adult Learner, AONTAS (2020)

The value of this joint approach is clear, because it provides us with some of the solutions needed to address problems identified through the quantitative data. For instance, the numbers tell us that learners at Level 1-3 were less likely to continue their courses during COVID-19, but we know from the learner engagement why this may be. Learners at Levels 1-3 were more likely to report mobile phones as their primary form of engagement (32% compared to 27% of learners on Level 4 courses and 6% on Level 5 courses) (AONTAS 2020a, p.17).

In addition, **quantitative research can miss a certain subset of learners, as marginalised groups may not have a means to access the process whereby quantitative data are being collected.** For example, our COVID-19 report found that “learners on Level 4 were more likely to have their work mailed to them by post (40.3%), followed by learners on courses Levels 1-3 (25.7%), and Level 5 (16%)” (AONTAS 2020a, p.16). If an online survey was used for data collection, it would mean that the data obtained had come only from learners who had sufficient digital literacy to use the internet and complete the form online; therefore, the voices of the learners who do not have such skills would not be represented. It is not implausible to suspect that learners with most difficulty are those who are least likely to have the capacity to participate in researchers’ data collection process. For example, our COVID-19 report found:

Of the learners who identified as members of the Traveller or Roma community, 52% reported not having access to a laptop to complete their coursework. 68% also indicated they relied on a mobile phone for their learning. This was higher than the overall survey population that saw 16.5% of the 723 respondents indicated that they did not have access to a laptop or computer and 13.6% relying on mobile phones to complete their assignments (AONTAS 2020a, p.16).

The voice and needs of marginalised learners must be at the heart of any learner-informed research

The voice of marginalised learners, in particular, needs to be considered in any research that is developed. From learner research conducted to date, we know that **learners in Direct Provision or from the Roma/Traveller community are more likely to face difficulty finding**

an appropriate learning space at home; the COVID-19 pandemic has had a greater negative impact on mental health among learners in Direct Provision or from the Roma/Traveller community, and those with disabilities; and that female learners are the majority group who has reported managing to learn while taking responsibility for childcare and other home caring during the pandemic (AONTAS 2020a, pp.18-20).

In addition to what insights can be gained to informing effective responses moving forward, there is also a deeper value in investing in supporting learner voice structures at this critical time. With growing evidence of learners feeling disconnected from their classmates and learning, the communal identity that holds the education sector together is being challenged. Investing in learner voice is also an investment in the wellbeing of individual learner and the broader learning community. Now more than ever, it is imperative to ensure we build structures that can withstand the physical distance and the mental challenges that this pandemic has caused.

AONTAS therefore calls on the development of evidence-based policies for learner-centred education. To be able to achieve this goal, it is essential to collect learner-informed data that is robust, reflects the diversity of the sector, and grounded in a mixed-methods approach. By utilising both quantitative and qualitative data, research can provide a richer and more informed understanding of learners' needs (for the virtue of mixed-methods research, see, for example, Lieberman 2005). Learners need to be involved at the heart of this action, as they will benefit not only from the solutions that are generated by this information, but also from engaging actively in the process of itself.

3. Ensure that the focus on skills in policy and policy implementation includes a broader definition of skills, learner-informed skills, and locally based skill needs.

Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 states that 'Education and training providers will place a stronger focus on providing skills development opportunities that are relevant to the needs of learners, society and the economy' as one of its core objectives (p.11). The Strategy also notes that upon their consultation transversal skills were highlighted as an important skill focus. However, skills are often defined in terms of employability instead of the broader purpose of skill development as funding and education and training initiatives focus on the contribution citizens can make towards the economy. Although it is important for learners to acquire skills to increase their employability, AONTAS calls for a broader understanding of skills that includes a focus on social inclusion, critical thinking, personal development, wellbeing, and democratic engagement. While some policy may note these areas, the general discourse and the implementation of policy often relates back to economic contributions and fails to recognise the true significance of a broader understanding that contributes to benefitting learners, their communities and a socially inclusive society.

"Think for a moment about the person who has got into a good routine. They might have been 6 months out of work, they met new people, they met likeminded people, they had a reason to get up in the morning and, whether they got a certificate or not, in the end they had a sense of achievement or self-esteem. Those things don't show up on any government balance sheet so to speak. The learner voice process highlights those other important benefits of education" Adult Learner Liam Shorthall, AONTAS (2020)

The National FET Learner Forum demonstrates the impact of adult learning and skill development on the lives of individuals taking part in FET programmes. Many learners state their reason for taking courses is to deepen connections within their communities or broader their social networks. In the 2019 FET Learner Forum events, out of total 958 survey responses, 13% chose "meet new people," 10% "improve mental health," and 10% "get out of the house" as their reason(s) for taking a FET course. The event report found that by

increasing learner self-confidence and broadening social networks, FET is in part building a stronger and more connected society. This was also confirmed by research conducted in the Higher Education sector where the National Forum for Teaching and Learning. A broader focus may help to support the strategies focus on 'making Ireland a better place to live' in addition to making it a better place 'to work' (Ireland's National Skills' Strategy, p.69).



FET Learner (AONTAS, 2019).

Ireland's FET sector is divided into provision across 16 ETB's. Each having their own local remit, funding, policy, and provision of courses. In addition, the learners participating in programmes come from a diversity of geographical locations and learner cohorts. The local and individual context of skills' needs must be considered when developing national level policy and evaluating the implementation of education provision. Regional Skills Fora should would benefit from the inclusion of a community education and learner perspective.

4. Ensure Equality of Investment in Tertiary Education

AONTAS urges the Department to recognise the disparity of financial investment across the tertiary education sector. Given the challenges that the community education sector has faced during COVID-19 and its role in supporting marginalised learners, it is important that we support the sector, looking to address the historical gaps that have contributed to its under resourcing (MED, 2020). While AONTAS welcomes the Department's recent commitment to supporting community education groups through this critical period and investment in the sector, through the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Fund, we would like to see this commitment continued moving forward. We also would like to see a broader aim that seeks to redress the funding challenges faced by the sector and a revaluing of the critical work community education providers are delivering.

Community education is a vital component of the adult learning sector in Ireland, yet, the sector faces major challenges in terms of sustainable, streamlined funding and does not always receive the formal recognition it desires for the valuable role it plays. By virtue of its location, and rootedness in the community, **community education has the ability to provide increased opportunities for many who are marginalised and with low educational attainment.** Engaging individuals from groups traditionally furthest from education, community education provides the necessary supports to engage in learning and helps learners build the confidence they need to achieve educational success. Community education also promotes pathways into further and higher education.

Winnie Coakley, an adult learner, describes her experience of Dublin Adult Learning Centre (DALC), a community education centre, as 'a place of healing'. (AONTAS, 2020). Lee Carroll, Access 2000 Wexford, echoed this sentiment stating: "Community education has given me confidence and belief in myself and opened doors." The value of community education goes beyond the individual learner and reaches broader society as a whole, making investment in the sector more than an individual one.

Funding Community Education

The impact of COVID-19 will be severe for communities who have been affected by the cutbacks of ten years of austerity. These cutbacks have eroded and undermined the support structures to disadvantaged communities, which had been gradually evolving and developing throughout the 1990s and up to the financial crash of 2008. Addressing this gap has been even more challenging given the diverse range of Government Departments and non-governmental funding sources that support community education providers. As part of an ERASMUS+ KA2 project, FinALE, AONTAS commissioned a study that identified 12 unique funding streams, representing 8 government departments (FinALE, 2017). 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. This assortment of funding providers, each offering 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.

For example, one community education organisation located in a rural setting and addressing the needs of marginalised women, does not receive any SOLAS funding via the ETB. Although engaging 344 learners per year, the provision of services to enable access require funding through multiple departments – including Department of Social Protection, Department of Housing Planning and Local Government, Department of Social Protection – with smaller grants such as banking corporate social responsibility programmes and student fees.

Without a sustainable funding model, community education providers have been forced to allocate disproportionate amounts of time and resources to securing funding from year to year. Procuring proper resources keeps community education providers away from what they do best: building relationships with their community and supporting learner engagement. 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. 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 challenged by such a precarious model of funding.

In their 2019 Annual Report, SOLAS, the National Further Education and Training Authority reported 51,550 ‘community education beneficiaries’ making it the largest government body funding and gathering data on community education. According to SOLAS’ 2019 Annual Budget, only 1.8% was allocated to supporting community education groups. Additionally, SOLAS funding is distributed regionally through Ireland’s 16 Education and Training Boards. There is a geographical inequality in how this funding is distributed. As you can see from the Table below, some regions spend a greater percentage of the overall budget on supporting community education groups than others.

Table: SOLAS Funded Community Education Provision by Education and Training Board in 2019

Education and Training Board	Amount of Community Education Funding	Percent of Overall Education and Training Board Programme Grant Funding
Cavan and Monaghan	457,000	5.4%
City of Dublin	2,364,000	6.8%
Cork	1,275,000	6.9%
Donegal	357,000	3.7%
Dublin and Dun Laoghaire	1,755,000	8%
Galway and Roscommon	546,000	2.6%
Kerry	205,000	2.7%
Kildare and Wicklow	480,000	2.6%
Kilkenny and Carlow	385,000	4.4%
Laois and Offaly	193,000	2.5%
Limerick and Clare	889,000	3.9%
Longford and Westmeath	341,000	4.7%
Louth and Meath	420,000	3.1%
Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim	632,000	5.1%
Tipperary	680,000	1.1%
Waterford and Wexford	704,000	3%

A significant issue that needs to be addressed is the manner in which this funding is distributed to community education groups, as it often varies, often due to legacy agreements. Some groups have historical agreements that allow them to access core funding from year to year while others access support through tutor hours alone. This inconsistency of approach to funding community education organisations across ETBs further complicates the issue, ultimately impacting on community education learners.

Investing in Community Education is an Investment in Women

Community education remained a core facet of many early women's collectives in the 1970s and 80s (Connolly, 2005 and O'Grady, 2018). Research conducted in 2001 further confirmed this reporting that 'an estimated 80 % of community education participants [are] women' (AONTAS, 2001). In research conducted by AONTAS in 2010 (Bailey et al.), 85% of the learners in community education were women and 15 % were men. The link between the women's movement and community education even led to the development of guidelines (Quality Assurance Framework) specifically to support women's community education groups that could be used across the sector (AONTAS, 2009).

The importance for community education in supporting women is noteworthy, because access to education, particularly full-time education remains a challenge for women. The 2017 Adult Education Survey (CSO) on adult learning in Ireland found that females are more likely to report some form of unmet demand in lifelong learning with 35.8 % of females reporting this gap compared with 29.0 per cent of males. Nationally, the most common difficulty women cited to accessing education was that women 'did not have time due to family responsibilities (43.7% per cent). Similar findings were reported in the National FET Learner Forum, where access to childcare featured as a key recommendation, particularly for female participants in SOLAS funded courses.

Increasing access to childcare and supporting one parent families therefore became an avenue for increasing educational access to women. Community education was recognised as an effective vehicle to do this, through its ability to offer part-time and flexible learning options that came with wraparound support services. The Department of Education and Skill's 2012 Operational Guidelines for Providers of Community Education identified one

parent families as one of the fourteen target groups who would best be supported through Community Education provision, while explicitly stating that the purpose of its provision was to ‘reduce educational and social disadvantage’. The position implied that community education had a role to play in elevating the financial and social position of women, particularly those caring for children alone. This belief was backed up by evidence from research that argued that community education had a vital role to play in combatting poverty.

In this past year, AONTAS has taken active steps to recapture this message, highlighting the value community education brings, particularly to marginalised learners. In October 2020, we launched the inaugural Community Education Census to map community education provision nationally. While data gathering and analysis is still underway, initial findings already confirm the role community education providers play in supporting women. Of the 76 groups who have complete the Census to date and are providing community education courses to 12,288 learners, 69% of the learners supported by these groups are women.

Gender Bias of Financial Investment in Adult Learning

AONTAS urges the Department of Further and Higher Education, Innovation, Research and Science to recognise the gender bias that currently exists across the tertiary education sector in terms of financial investment. While we welcome the success of the new Generation Apprenticeship programmes and the efforts shown to support diversity and inclusion in this area. For example, the investment in the predominantly male-dominated apprenticeship programmes (circa 95%) is significantly higher than the female-dominated community education programmes (circa 69%). Notwithstanding the different focus, as a point with regard to investment in the most marginalised, and given the return on investment regarding the benefits of engagement in education, there are stark differences in resource allocation. This deepens social inequality, further marginalising women by investing less in the education models they choose to engage with, and must be addressed in the new Statement of Strategy.

5. Ensure the new Statement of Strategy 2021-2023 plays a strong role in implementing the Programme for Government

The new Statement of Strategy should play a strong role in the implementation of the Programme for Government (PFG) making direct connections across these two policies. In AONTAS' response to the PFG there are a number of important and highly relevant areas worth noting (AONTAS, 2019). For example, AONTAS welcomed the Government's recognition of community education's vital role in our communities by pledging support for its schemes and initiatives post COVID-19. However, the legacy of the negative impact of the pandemic on learners and on the sector will be lasting and irreversible if the Department's new Strategy fails to successfully support the sector's return to full capacity in supporting learners in local communities. That said, this Strategy must go beyond efforts of restoration so that the sector can once again replicate its pre-COVID levels of achievement with Ireland's most vulnerable learners and disenfranchised communities. In addition, the Strategy must make provisions for increasing public investment to build up the sector's capacity to a level that not only properly reflects the full value of its social and economic returns, but also to a level that can fully facilitate delivering on and implementing the PFG. AONTAS has welcomed the catalogue of progress promised by the Programme for Government.

Table 1. Key PFG area most relevant to the development of the DFHERIS' new Strategy.

Apprenticeships	The focus on addressing the under-participation in apprenticeships by certain cohorts, specifically women, people with disabilities and those disadvantaged groups listed above. For more please see the <i>AONTAS Submission to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science Apprenticeship Action Plan 2021-2025 Consultation Paper</i>
Education for sustainability	Regarding Ireland's responsibility to implement the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 4.7, an increased emphasis on sustainability through agricultural colleges on education in the areas of agroecology, climate action and biodiversity and the link to land use, soil health and agriculture is required. In a broader sense the adult and community education sector is extremely well suited to ensuring that the population is not only aware of the issues at hand but is also empowered to take local action and become agents of positive change collectively and individually in their own locality.
Education for women returning to work	The introduction of 'returnships' in partnership with employers, to support women who have taken time out of work to raise their families or care for loved ones, to re-enter the labour market through new education, training and

	<p>personal development programmes is an area where community education programmes excel for a host of reasons related to the inherently feminist, supportive, flexible and learner-centred pedagogical approach AONTAS members nationwide take to set learners up to succeed.</p>
FET for people with disabilities	<p>The PFG states there will be an audit conducted of equity of access to further education and training (FET) for those with disabilities. The new Strategy must ensure a provision that the Department and SOLAS will act on the recommendations of the audit to improve accessibility.</p>
Access to FET and HE	<p>To further develop access programmes to Higher and Further Education for students from disadvantaged groups, including members of the Traveller Community, those in Direct Provision Centres and those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged requires that access programmes are expanded to incorporate community education provision which delivers positive outcomes in this crucial area. For example, there are AONTAS members and independent community education providers that see high progression rates from their programmes to Further and Higher Education courses. In fact, since September 2018 An Cosán has delivered Higher Education courses to 500 individual learners (not including 34 learners on a BA Hons in Early Childhood Education & Care hosted in Jobstown Dublin 24 by An Cosán and delivered by IT Carlow). They have also delivered a range of further education Level 4, 5, 6 to approximately 200 learners in the same period and a range of unaccredited courses in Digital Skills, Literacy and Wellbeing. These learners are typically</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early school leavers • Young people over 18 who have been in care • Lone parents • Young people 18-30 seeking alternative routes to higher education • People in low paid, low skilled precarious employment • People who struggle with urban and rural isolation • People who have experienced homelessness or addiction • Long-term unemployed • People living in the Traveller Community • People living in Direct Provision centres across Ireland <p>Another model example is Longford Women’s Link (LWL). Since 2016 LWL has established a collaborative partnership with IT Carlow offering two QQI Level 8 Honours Degree courses and two Higher Certificate courses, with approximately 91 learners from the Midlands accessing these courses onsite in our dedicated Education and Training facility.</p>
Expanding the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education	<p>In order to ensure that this National Plan can develop alongside other reciprocal and mutually reinforcing Strategies –such as a National Traveller Education Strategy to improve access to Higher Education for members of the Traveller Community and a new National Action Plan to eliminate all forms of discrimination and racism in Ireland- it is vital that the Department’s new Strategy includes ethnic identifiers to monitor the progress of increased participation by racialised minority communities who continue to be under-represented and excluded from FET and HE.</p>
An Inclusive Vision for Education	<p>Another important area where the new Strategy can aid the implementation of the PFG is the Government’s stated commitment to the provision of additional supports for students who are homeless, resident in family hubs, or in direct provision. Should the new Strategy further develop access programmes to Higher and Further Education for students from disadvantaged groups, including members of the Traveller Community, those living in Direct Provision Centres and those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, as outlined above- then the</p>

	<p>adult and community educations sector is poised to play a significant role in delivering all relevant positive outcomes because these target groups make up a significant cohort of community education learners.</p>
Springboard	<p>The Government has committed to expanding Springboard throughout Further and Higher Education will offer upskilling in areas of skills shortages to those who want to upskill, to those who are re-entering the workforce, or to those who have been made redundant. A tertiary approach to springboard must also be clearly stated in the new Strategy to include community education. Reasons for this are related to points made above in relation to the proven formula which community education provision offers learners so they can reach their full educational potential if they decide to pursue pathways into Further and Higher education.</p> <p>In a similar vein, in consultation with stakeholders, the Government intends to utilise the surplus from the National Training Fund to implement an upskilling and reskilling programme, along with additional funding for Further and Higher Education institutions. For the Government to achieve successful results in this area, the adult and community education sector should be considered a key stakeholder.</p>
Community Development Projects	<p>The PFG aims to introduce, on a phased basis, a number of projects similar in approach to Community Development Projects (CDPs). This community-based approach must involve partnerships and other innovative collaborative structures for involving local community education organisations so they may continue play their pivotal development role in empowering the communities they serve and are a valued member of.</p>
Capital Grant for Community Centres	<p>The commitment to the introduction of an annual small capital grants programme administered through local authorities for the maintenance, improvement, and upkeep of community centres is most welcome given that these centres often have a strong community education remit. If this is included in the new Strategy it may go some way to redressing the depletion of funds due to costs associated with health and safety regarding COVID-19, such as Personal Protective Equipment.</p>
The Social Innovation Fund Ireland (SIFI) and the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)	<p>The Government’s plans to enhance the Social Innovation Fund Ireland (SIFI) programme to help secure additional philanthropic funding sources specifically for community-based programmes and projects in the areas of climate justice, rural and community development is an important strategic action AONTAS welcomes. Ensuring that this is achieved via the new Strategy will ensure that the community education groups that depend on the SIFI can continue their work in relation to the country making a just transition to a more environmentally and economically sustainable future for everyone and each community.</p> <p>Similarly, the new Strategy must contribute to the Government's plans around refining and building on a range of programmes to support communities which includes the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP). Many AONTAS members rely on SICAP to carry out their work and any improvements would have a positive impact on that work in achieving the goals of SOLAS and the Department.</p>
Universities of Sanctuary	<p>The Programme for Government recognises the vital work of the Universities of Sanctuary project and commits that the State will further increase the supports for people living in the Direct Provision system to access third level education. The new Strategy should include goals, actions and indicators which recognise and support community education’s role in making sure that adults living in Direct Provision Centres across Ireland can access education and more fully participate in society. From AONTAS members experience of empowering</p>

	<p>learners in this situation it is clear that community education facilitates that invaluable sense of belonging to the benefit of the learner themselves and to the benefit of those in the local community where everyone calls 'home'. Similar to the positive spaces created by Universities of Sanctuary, adult and community education is exceptional at creating opportunities for intercultural integration and organic relationships to thrive. The new Strategy must recognise this work and support the sector to increase its achievements in combating racism, xenophobia and enhancing racial justice.</p>
<p>Recognition of Prior Learning</p>	<p>The Programme for Government seeks to develop and implement a standardised system of accreditation of prior learning, taking account of previous education, skills, work experience and engagement in society. This approach to learner-centred education is core to provision in the adult and community education sector. The new Strategy should therefore factor in and increased focus on recognition of prior learning (RPL) and its role in support the educational rights of everyone in every community. Prioritising RPL in the new strategy would be a clear and achievable objective where the sector can play a key role in delivering the Department's goals and the Government's Programme.</p>
<p>Striving for Excellence in Education</p>	<p>The establishment of a Citizens' Assembly on the Future of Education that is outlined in the Programme for Government and should also form an integral part of the new Strategy. The reason for its inclusion is to ensure that the diverse voices of those being educated, and those closest to their education, are not only heard but amplified. AONTAS recommends that the new Strategy seriously consider all of the benefits of creating a Citizen's Assembly on the future of education. It is vitally important that the Department, and key stakeholders like AONTAS, embrace this progressive direction for the country's future. Taking a leading role in making every effort to engage as many diverse voices as possible, especially within the most educationally disadvantaged social groups described above, should serve as a catalyst for bringing about transformative positive social and educational change which best reflects and champions the most democratic ideals and egalitarian values at the heart of the Programme for Government, the mission of the Department and Ireland's tertiary education system.</p>

Conclusion

This submission makes a number of recommendations which AONTAS hopes to see reflected in the Department's new Strategy. To summarise, they are:

1. Create a new structure with a tertiary-wide approach to educational equality in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.
2. Ensure that qualitative learner-informed data plays a central role in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research and Innovation's evidence-based approach to policy development.
3. Ensure that the focus on skills in policy and policy implementation includes a broader definition of skills, learner-informed skills, and locally based skill needs.
4. Ensure equality of investment in tertiary education.
5. Ensure the new Statement of Strategy 2021-2023 plays a strong role in implementing the Programme for Government.

The constructive commentary and recommendations made here stem from an understanding of education as a fundamental Civil and Human Right that everyone should be able to access, enjoy and benefit from. The vision and actions described in this submission which AONTAS hopes will be reflected in the new Strategy have grown out of and contribute to a Human Rights-based framework embedded in the lived experience of marginalised adult learners and their communities. We know that the impact of educational inequality is vast and has lasting consequences, for numerous generations and for society. There is a growing understanding that a complex range of systemic barriers which impact on a person's ability to engage in education exists. Furthermore, not being able to engage in education correlates with and results in less civic engagement and democratic participation, lower quality of life, poorer health, precarious and exploitative employment conditions, poverty, as well as homelessness and addiction. This new Strategy presents all stakeholders with the opportunity to directly address these issues and improve the life circumstances of adult learners and in-turn support their families and communities. Together, DFHERIS, SOLAS, AONTAS and the wider-tertiary education system can collectively break the

structural cycle which has traditionally disempowered so many of Ireland’s most vulnerable individuals and marginalised groups. AONTAS looks forward to playing its role in continuing to work with the Department, SOLAS and alongside all of the stakeholders concerned in order to ensure that the new Strategy is one which focuses on quality education and equity in education by listening to and working in partnership with adult learners.



Authors: Dr Niamh O’Reilly (CEO), Dearbháil Lawless (Head of Advocacy) Dr Sam Olinger O’Brien (Information and Policy Officer), Dr Leah Dowdall (Head of Research), Dr Eve Cobain (Research Officer)

References

- AONTAS (2001). *Women at the Forefront the Role of Women's Community Education in Combating Poverty and Disadvantage in the Republic of Ireland*. Available at: <https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/AONTAS-Research/Women-at-the-forefront.pdf>
- AONTAS (2009). *Flower Power: A Guide to Best Practice in Women's Community Education*. Available at: https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Community-Education/flower_power_womens_community_education_qaf.pdf
- AONTAS (2019). *National Further Education and Training FET Learner Report*. Available at: <https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/AONTAS-Research/2019%20Learner%20Report%20-%20FINAL.pdf>
- AONTAS (2020). *AONTAS COVID-19 Response* [online] Available at: [AONTAS COVID-19 RESPONSE: Collective Responsibility to Support Adult Learners during the COVID-19 Crisis](#)
- AONTAS (2020). *AONTAS Pre-Budget Submission 2021: Investing in Inclusion for Adult, Further, and Community Education Learners*. Available at: https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Submissions/Pre-Budget%20Submission%202021_12%20FINAL.pdf
- AONTAS (2020). *COVID-19 Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Report*. Available at: <https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Learner-Work/AONTAS%20COVID-19%20Learner%20Report%20-%20Final.pdf>
- AONTAS (2020). *I'm a FET Learner: Celebrating FET Learner Voice from the National FET Learner Forum*. Available at: <https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Learner-Work/I'm%20a%20FET%20Learner.pdf>
- Bailey, N., Breen, J., and Ward, M. (2010). *Community education: More than just a course*. Available at: https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/AONTAS-Research/community_education_more_than_just_a_course.pdf
- Central Statistics Office (2017). *Irish Adult Education Survey*. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/aes/adulteducationsurvey2017/>

Connolly, B. (2005). Learning from the women's community education movement in Ireland" in I. Crowther, V. Galloway, & J. Martin (eds.). *Popular education, engaging the academy, international perspectives*. Leicester: NAICE.

FinALE (2017). "Where to Invest" Funding Adult Education. Available at: <https://eaea.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/FinALE-Where-to-invest-Final.pdf>

Dowdall, L. and Sheerin, E. (2019). *The 2018 National FET Learner Forum Annual Synthesis Report*. Available at <https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/AONTAS-Research/2018%20Annual%20Synthesis%20Report.pdf>.

Dowdall, L., Lovejoy, L., and Farren, K. (2020). *COVID-19 Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Report*. Available at: <https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Learner-Work/AONTAS%20COVID-19%20Learner%20Report%20-%20Final.pdf>

European Union (2016) *Official Journal of the European Union: COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 19 December 2016 on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults*. Available here: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016H1224\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016H1224(01)&from=EN)

Government of Ireland (2020) *Department of Further and Higher Education, Innovation, Research and Science* [online] Available at: [gov.ie - About the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science \(www.gov.ie\)](http://www.gov.ie)

Flynn, P. 2017. *The learner voice research study: embedding student voices in education discourse, curricular construction and development*. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Paula_Flynn/publication/324942944_The_Learner_Voice_Research_Study_Embedding_student_voices_in_education_discourse_curricular_co-construction_and_development/links/5aec2c86aca2727bc003f679/The-Learner-Voice-Research-Study-Embedding-student-voices-in-education-discourse-curricular-co-construction-and-development.pdf

Lieberman, E.S (2005). Nested analysis as a mixed-method strategy for comparative research. *American Political Science Review* 99 (3): pp.435-452

O'Grady, M. (2018). Existence and Resistance: The Social Model of Community Education in Ireland, *Social Sciences*, 1-12 Available at: <http://waterfordwomenscentre.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Existence-article-socsci-07-00270-1.pdf>.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (2020). *The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education A QQI Evaluation 2020*. Available at: <https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/The%20Impact%20of%20COVID-19%20Modifications%20to%20Teaching%20Learning%20and%20Assessment%20in%20Irish%20Further%20Education.pdf>

SOLAS (2020). *Annual Reports and Accounts 2019*. Available at: <https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/c755bd73ba/solas-annual-report-english.pdf>

Walker, L. and Logan, A. (2008). *Learner Engagement: A Review of Learner Voice Initiatives across the UK's Education Sectors*. Available at: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/futl80/futl80.pdf>.



**The Voice of
Adult Learning**

AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation
2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street,
Ranelagh, Dublin 6, D06 E0H1
www.aontas.com
01 406 8220

RCN 20013042
Chy. Reg. 6719
Co. Reg. 80958