

AONTAS submission to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the Statement of Strategy for the period 2021-2023



Date: 9th November 2020

AONTAS

AONTAS is the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation, a membership organisation representing adult education tutors, providers, learners, and stakeholders. AONTAS is committed to advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to a quality service for adult learners throughout their lives, and promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning. AONTAS supports learners, particularly educationally disadvantaged learners, to engage in lifelong learning, and advocates for more inclusive national education policy. AONTAS achieves our goals through our research, advocacy and communications work. AONTAS plays a pivotal role in advocating for adult and community education at the national and international level. Our main objectives are to: widen participation in lifelong learning; ensure community education is supported to offer quality learning opportunities to the most educationally disadvantaged; ensure adult learners are central to local, regional, national, European and international adult learning policy; and promote quality adult learning throughout adults' lives.

Introduction

Adult learning builds social cohesion, equalises society; supporting greater social mobility, and addresses inequality. It brings people together from across a diversity of backgrounds, ages, and experiences while building thriving communities and partnerships. According to UNESCO (2016) the benefits of adult learning also include improving healthy behaviours and attitudes and enabling better mental health and well-being. Adult learning can be conceptualised as a framework that offers an intervention providing better outcomes for learners, their families, their communities and wider-society. This includes supporting children, young people and people with disabilities, addressing inequality, and fostering integration.

This submission provides a list of key recommendations for the Department identifying systems of supports to address inequality and enable better outcomes. Focussing on adult learners in the areas of childcare, Travellers and Roma, people in Direct Provision, people with disabilities, and gender equality. This document includes AONTAS' priority areas, a list of key recommendations and an evidence base for each recommendation.

Priority Areas in this Submission

Adult learners and the connected areas of:

1. Childcare
2. Travellers and Roma
3. People in Direct Provision
4. People with Disabilities
5. Gender Equality

Recommendations

1. Provision of on-site childcare facilities in all adult learning provision.
2. Create supported pathways for Traveller and Roma learners bridging primary, secondary and tertiary education.
3. Ensure appropriate spacing, access to food and cooking facilities, WIFI, and technology for all learners in direct provision to safeguard the right to education.
4. Implementation of the principals of Universal Design for equitable access to education, and support services for people with disabilities.
5. Fund and promote community education as an intervention model to address gender inequality in Ireland.
6. Work in partnership across Government Departments; including the Department of Education, and the Department of Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in order to build a thriving inclusive and socially cohesive education sector and society.

1. Provision of on-site childcare facilities in all adult learning provision.

Childcare continues to act as a barrier for parents, most notably lone-parents, in accessing and engaging in adult learning. The Adult Education Survey (2017) stated family responsibilities posed as the most significant barrier impeding participation in lifelong learning. Difficulties include paying for childcare, the hours of programme delivery, and complications with accessing social-welfare funding to cover associate costs. As one woman shared at the AONTAS National Further Education and Training Learner Forum ‘I can’t pay someone four hours to look after my daughter’ (2018, p18). During the pandemic, childcare has become a as serious threat to parents’ ability to engage in learning and in addition to tutor’s capacity to work from home and teach. During a practitioner focus group, a tutor aptly stated ‘working from home means we are now childminding from work’ (AONTAS, 2020, p.8).



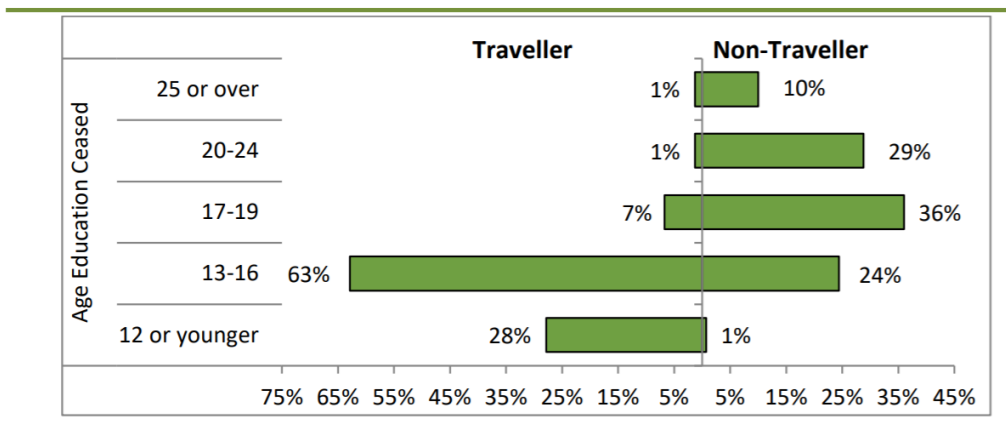
On-site childcare that is free or minimum-cost is utilised as part of a suite of services in different community education providers across Ireland. One example, is [Longford Women’s Link](#). This provider offers childcare, domestic violence support, adult and non-formal education, and higher education in a rural community in Ireland. The immediate and long-term benefits of this model speaks directly to the mission statement of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth as it improves the outcomes for children and young people by educating and supporting their parents. Furthermore, it fosters a more equitable community for the people of Longford. This model can be replicated across

Ireland with adequate funding and recognition of the value of services such as on-site childcare enabling access to adult education.

2. Create supported pathways for Traveller and Roma learners bridging primary, secondary and tertiary education.

The Equal Rights Review suggests there are many reasons why Traveller and Roma communities are disengaged with or absent from education institutions and other services. This includes but is not limited to; discrimination, the educational attainment of parents, ill treatment from peers, and social and economic reasons (2012, p.93). These issues have continued to persist with the community still facing extremely low educational attainment. The ESRI (2017) states there is a dramatic difference between Travellers and the rest of the population regarding early school leaving, with 91 per cent of Travellers leaving school at age 16 or younger, compared to 25 per cent of non-Travellers.

Figure 2.1 Age Education Ceased Among Those Aged 25 and Over, 2011



Source: Census of population micro-data for 2011; persons aged 25 and over in private households, analysis by authors.

(ESRI, 2017, p.29)

In addition, Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre (2018) found that Roma parents had faced discrimination, segregation and had come from family circumstances of poverty and low educational attainment. Travellers and Roma communities are two distinct ethnic minority groups. However, negative experiences in formal education and low educational attainment are issues faced by both communities.

The Irish education system must ensure we provide safe, quality and respectful learning environments for Traveller and Roma communities. This means building our understanding of their ethnicity, culture, values and traditions to inform and improve our practice and our relationships with learners, and their families. The Equal Rights Review (2012) stated a lack of understanding about these communities can mean that cultural differences are not appropriately supported or dealt with.

Travellers and Roma should be supported to reach their educational aspirations across the education system. Policy and practice should bridge pathways between each level of learning provision. We need to create effective supportive pathways from primary to secondary and into tertiary education that is accessible, respectful and informed with a commitment to fairness, equity and anti-discrimination at every stage.

3. Ensure appropriate spacing, access to food and cooking facilities, WIFI, and technology for all learners in direct provision to safeguard the right to education.

‘..Direct provision is like a prison to me. The system we go through makes me feel so hopeless. You are not allowed to cook for yourself. We are like prisoners. I don’t understand this government, bringing in multinational companies, charging low taxes, and bringing us in and treating us like this. I don’t know about university. SUSI has its own requirements. My school here is my favourite place. It treats me so well, like a human. We are young people who are very frustrated. There is a lot of depression in the hostels. There is a lot of loneliness. I should be able to apply for university.’ -Young man in Direct provision centre

(Edmund Rice Trust, 2019, p.7)

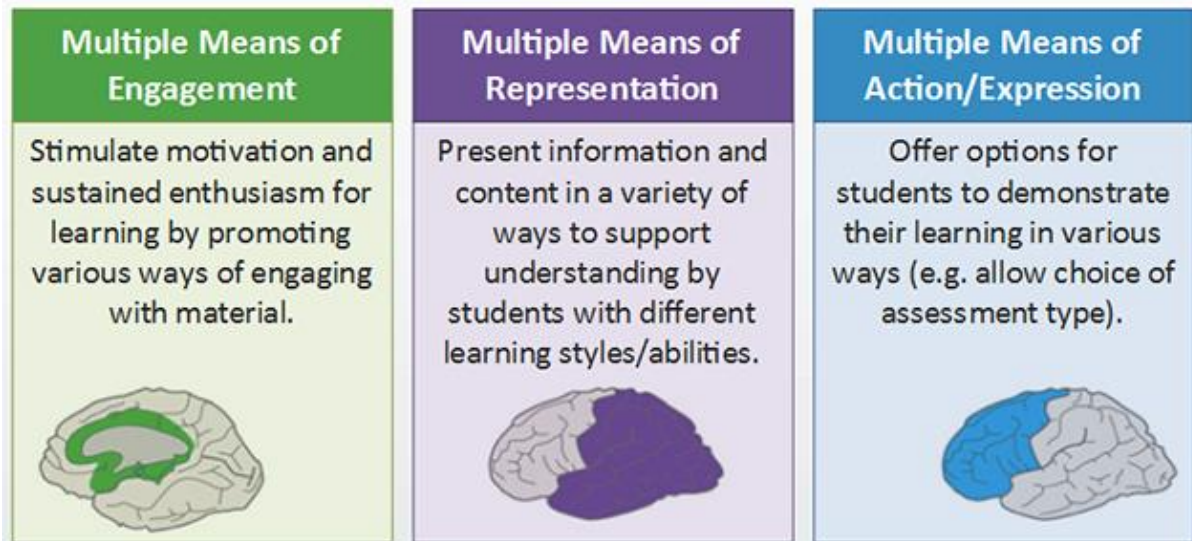
The direct provision model in Ireland is directly creating barriers for young people and adults accessing and engaging in learning. The above statement is from a young man living within the system who describes how basic needs such as cooking for yourself are denied. AONTAS engaged with adult learners during the pandemic and found that 43% of learners living in direct provision were struggling with their mental health because of this crisis, compared to an overall average of 32% (2020, p.20). There is a lack of basic amenities including access to food, technology, WIFI, and space to study. Many learners are sharing overcrowded rooms. Education provides a mechanism for integration and fosters well-being. ‘The opportunities I am currently receiving through Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board are providing me with the confidence to integrate in the Irish communities, as well as skills to have better chance of accessing the labour market in Ireland’ (AONTAS, 2020). In this statement, Innocent Umezuruike Iroaganachi, a young refugee tells us how important his FET course is in supporting him to have better outcomes in Ireland and for his future.

4. Implementation of the principals of Universal Design for equitable access to education, and support services for people with disabilities.

Ahead (2020) states that Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a set of principles for curriculum development that aims to provide an inclusive and more equitable learning environment for all learners, including those with disabilities. It seeks to improve the educational experience. Universal Design provides more flexible methods of service provision, teaching and assessment by catering for the different needs and different learning styles of learners. It aims to provide a culture of inclusion and recognises the different needs of learners. It is an evidence-based framework that is supported by research in the field of neuroscience with the aim of improving the educational outcomes for all

learners. Furthermore, this framework requires a cultural and behavioural shift in thinking and educational delivery from providers at an institutional level.

Universal Design tells us that educators should follow three core principles when designing and delivering education:



(AHEAD, 2020).

5. Fund and promote community education as an intervention model to address gender inequality in Ireland.

AONTAS promoted the model of community of education as an intervention model for supporting gender equality as part of our policy day event in 2019; 'The Impact of Community Education on the Lives of Women'. The following is excerpt is taken from a discussion paper disseminated in advance of the event. You can find the paper [here](#).

Community education is locally based education provision that can be accredited or nonaccredited. Community education addresses socio-economic inequalities and barriers to social inclusion as it supports people who are often early school-leavers or otherwise marginalised and excluded from wider social participation. It addresses educational and social inequality, particularly for women, and in doing so meets a multitude of national policy priorities; including but not limited to increasing lifelong learning participation rates, improving qualifications and skills for employability amongst the most underqualified members of society, improving social inclusion, and improving mental health and well-being (AONTAS, 2019, p.3).

The 'National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020' was presented by Government in April 2017 as a policy framework to achieve progress under three overarching themes: Equalising socio-economic opportunity for women; Ensuring the wellbeing of women; and Engaging as equal and active citizens. To achieve progress under these themes the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020 has put in place an ambitious but practical series of strategy actions that reach across all government departments and into every sector of Irish life.

Community education has a long and proven track record of responding to these same needs identified in the 'National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020' including:

- advancing socio-economic equality for women and girls;
- advancing the physical and mental health and wellbeing of women and girls;
- ensuring the visibility in society of women and girls, and their equal and active citizenship;
- advancing women in leadership at all levels;
- combating violence against women; and
- embedding gender equality in decision-making.

These are all goals which lie at the very heart of community education values and practice. Empowering women within their local communities through education is understood as both a means and end in itself for achieving the aims of the 'National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020'.

6. Work in partnership across Government Departments; including the Department of Education, and the Department of Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in order to build a thriving inclusive and socially cohesive education sector and society.

The Centre for Effective Services (2014) highlights the value of cross-departmental collaboration for the successful implementation of strategy and policy objectives. It is suggested that working together involves more than a 'horizontal approach'. They advocate for the inclusion of connected practices, systems, and the integrated work of policy makers, practitioners, and commissioners of services

'Given the range of Government departments that have a remit for children and families, there is also a need to achieve considerable joining-up and integration of policies at 'whole of government' level. The rationale for whole of government work is to eliminate 'silos', or departments working in isolation from one another, to achieve seamless government. It aims to avoid having different policies cut across and undermine each other, and to optimise the impact of government by using all of the instruments at the disposal of the State in an integrated way in support of particular outcomes.'

(Colgan et al., 2014).

In order to create better life opportunities and outcomes for children, young people and their families, AONTAS urges the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to focus on a strategically aligned cross-departmental approach involving multiple departments, agencies and stakeholders for addressing inequality in Ireland and building a thriving and inclusive society.

Submission Details:

Organisation: AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation

Postal address: AONTAS 2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6, D06 E0H1

Contact email: dlawless@aontas.com

Daytime telephone number: 01 406 8220

Web-address: www.aontas.com

Author: Dearbháil Lawless, Head of Advocacy

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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