

Submission to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's 2023-2025 Statement of Strategy



April 2023

AONTAS' Submission to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's 2023-2025 Statement of Strategy

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Recommendations:

1. Provide suitable pay and conditions for staff in the Tertiary Education Sector
2. Provide free and increased transport services for adult learners
3. Build accommodation on-site for rural and low-income students
4. Create an all-island adult learning fund for Community Education, learner voice and representation, and non-formal education
5. Address the policy and funding support needs of older learners by increasing the cap from 64 years of age to 70 years of age
6. Provide capital grants for new or improved suitable learning environments in Community Education
7. Provide new Learner Voice staff positions in Education and Training Boards
8. Create a new Tertiary Education transitions model to assist learners moving between all stages of the sector, prioritising groups identified in the National Access Plan
9. Collaborate with the Department of the Taoiseach, the Department of Justice, and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on a social cohesion strategy utilising an interdisciplinary adult learning methodology as a model for positive social outcomes
10. Increase ESOL classes and provide integration workshops through Community Education centres and Further Education and Training colleges
11. Design and implement a new policy and national campaign programme addressing gender violence and sexual harassment for Community Education and Further Education and Training

About AONTAS:

AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, is a membership organisation representing learners, practitioners, providers, and other key stakeholders in adult education for more than 50 years. AONTAS is committed to advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to access equal and equitable adult learning opportunities throughout their lives, and promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning. Through research, advocacy, and communications, AONTAS aims to build a more inclusive, learner-centred lifelong learning system that enables adults to have a transformative learning experience.

AONTAS hosts the Community Education Network, a 150-member network of independently managed community education providers. The network provides a platform for members to work collaboratively and share information and resources. It offers professional development and works to ensure that Community Education is valued and resourced. The National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum, commissioned by SOLAS and delivered by AONTAS, represents the largest Learner Voice project in Europe (AONTAS, 2022). Research conducted by AONTAS contributes to the development of evidence-based policies aiming to alleviate barriers and support meaningful participation for all in education. AONTAS is the National Coordinator for the New European Agenda for Adult Learning and is an appointed SDG Champion in Ireland.

Introduction:

AONTAS welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission for the upcoming Statement of Strategy for the Department of Further and Higher Education Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). Recommendations made in this submission are based on sectoral input at our Annual Policy Day event (which focused on the place of Community Education within the new Tertiary Education System), three consultation sessions, held as part of the AONTAS Strategic Plan 2023-2025 development process, the 2021-2022 AONTAS Annual Synthesis report (representing over 3000 learners in FET), member queries, and evidence from across the sector. Our intention is to provide solution-focussed recommendations that, if implemented appropriately, we believe will contribute to positive social outcomes and an equitable Tertiary Education sector.

1. Provide suitable pay and conditions for staff in the Tertiary Education Sector

At present, there is a range of staff across the Tertiary Education Sector working on short-term contracts, with no pension contributions, no-pay during summer months, and a lack of security in their employment. Examples of this include short-term lecturing roles in Higher Education, tutors in Further Education and Training, and a range of staff in Community Education (summer month pay is specific to tutors). This creates financial insecurity in the current 'cost of living crises and impacts on people's ability to buy a home, organise a loan, or plan for their future. According to the Nevin Economic Research Institute (2023), this impacts on people's health outcomes and their family planning prospects. Staff in the Tertiary Education sector support and impact every area of Irish society including community development, business, health, integration, social cohesion, and mental health. Yet they are negatively impacted by wage inequality and face financial insecurity. While salaries in this sector are impacted by available funds in DFHERIS, AONTAS urges the Department to negotiate a higher budget from the Department of Public Expenditure (DPER) to address this issue. Providing suitable pay and conditions will help to retain staff and protect the capacity and sustainability of the sector. This will ensure learners have access to qualified, experienced, and suitable professional staff.

2. Provide free and increased transport services for adult learners

The National FET Learner Forum Annual Synthesis Report (2022) identified transport as the most frequent barrier faced by learners across ten Education and Training Boards in the 2021-2022 academic year. This included challenges with cost, availability, and frequency of transport. This was particularly difficult for learners in rural areas of Ireland. Many learners argued that this issue impacted class attendance, retention, and timekeeping. This barrier is compounded by a lack of accommodation and the cost of accommodation for learners. This impacts people who do not live near their centre or who do not live within a family environment/unit that can reduce financial pressure while studying. AONTAS recommends a collaborative national transport and education programme which identifies the transport

"Transport is a big issue. I have to travel two hours on the bus every day. It's expensive but it (the learner's transport grant) often doesn't cover it. I am also quite rural and because of a limited timetable, I will often miss a bus and then have to wait hours." - Adult Learner

needs of learners, provides an increased service, and free fares for those accessing education.

3. Build accommodation on-site for rural and low-income students

St Vincent de Paul provided €2 million supporting students in Higher Education in 2022 with financial aid. The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) reported hundreds of phone calls per day regarding accommodation concerns leading up to the 2021-2022 academic year. In 2023, this persistent shortage of rental accommodation continues to impact on learners and students across the Tertiary Education sector. AONTAS urges DFHERIS to purchase local buildings and build accommodation on-site as student-specific accommodation. In addition, we argue that priority should be given to rural, and low-income students.

4. Create an all-island adult learning fund for Community Education, learner voice and representation, and non-formal education

The significance of a shared and peaceful future across the island of Ireland on the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement must recognise the role and impact of adult education in shaping our future. According to the Shared Island programme investment opportunities include Further and Higher Education to ensure a regionally balanced and prosperous island. AONTAS argues that adult learning is integral to an inclusive and shared community both sides of the border. There is a dangerous gap in collaborative opportunities in Northern Ireland and a lack of infrastructure to enable it. A situation worsened by the removal of the European Social Fund since Brexit. While AONTAS is currently undertaking the first ever census of community and adult learning in Northern Ireland, and organising workshops and dialogue opportunities, DFHERIS has an important role to play. AONTAS calls for the creation of an all-island adult learning fund for Community Education, learner voice and representation, and non-formal education.

5. Address the policy and funding support needs of older learners by increasing the cap from 64 years of age to 70 years of age

The number of people over the age of 65 in Ireland has continued to grow over the last decade (TCD, 2022). In 2022, we had approximately 768,900 people over the age of 65 (Statistica, 2023) compared to 535,716 in 2011 (TCD, 2022). Older learners are actively involved in the adult learning sector. A lifelong learning approach, with engagement at the

later stages of life, was clearly reflected during the pandemic whereby digital literacy was essential for preventing social isolation and ensuring health and safety regulations were met. However national and European policy prioritises and funds learners below the ages of 65 for adult learning. In addition, key policy related research captures and analyses the needs, competencies, and occupation status of those under the age of 65 (SOLAS, 2023; Eurostat 2023). AONTAS urges DFHERIS to lead a new European standard of inclusive adult learning policy by increasing the standard age to 70 years. This will re-engage and support later life learners and meet the demands of a changing society and older workforce.

6. Provide capital grants for new or improved suitable learning environments in Community Education

AONTAS met with over 180 people from across the Tertiary Education sector as part of our Strategic Plan consultation series in January 2023 and our annual Policy Day event in March 2023. This included sessions in Cork, Dublin, and online. The profile of attendees included a large geographical spread and participation from Education and Training Boards, Community Education centres, and other service providers. A clear ask at each of these sessions was the creation of a capital grant fund and increased Government owned buildings for the delivery of adult learning in Community Education. Attendees outlined the importance of suitable, equipped, and professional learning environments for adult learners. The positive impact on the Further Education and Training sector in this area is welcomed. However, many Community Education providers are still faced with insecure locations and less equipped premises. Dublin 8 Community Education centre, which supports both local people and newly arrived refugees from Ukraine, is currently at risk of losing its premises, for example. AONTAS encourages the Department to create a new capital grant for Community Education providers in addition to securing other buildings (such as Church owned locations used for the community and voluntary sector) as spaces for the provision of adult learning.

7. Provide new Learner Voice staff positions in Education and Training Boards

AONTAS welcomes the increasing momentum and support for learner voice, including learner representation, research, capacity building, and engagement across FET and Community Education. Education and Training Boards (ETBs) across Ireland have proactively contacted AONTAS to engage in the National FET Learner Forum (NFLF). Many have set up

local learner voice groups after completing training with AONTAS (for example, the Learner Voices Group in Cork). Others have utilised learner voice in their communications and in the profiling of their centres. This inspires local people to engage in adult learning, including models such as apprenticeship. We are continuing to work in partnership with ETBs to share expertise and create enabling conditions for authentic and meaningful learner voice across the sector. While AONTAS is currently redesigning our services to meet this need, its success and the impact on institutions and learners directly, will be limited unless there is appropriate staff time and resources dedicated at local level. Adult learners are a highly diverse group of people with complex needs. There is significantly greater representation of people from marginalised groups in adult and community education than in other parts of the Tertiary Education system (AONTAS, 2020). Many are in education for shorter time periods and have commitments, such as family or work, outside of their studies. For these reasons AONTAS argues that the traditional models of student representation used in Higher Education would not work in adult learning. However, with a framework of supports including the NFLF, local learner-led groups, capacity building, and peer advocacy at regional and national levels, impactful learner voice is possible. Positive sectoral changes, with learners represented on ETB Boards, learners informing planning and decision-making, learner-led campaigns, and learners acting as champions and advocates, will continue to grow with support from AONTAS, ETBs and Community Education centres. The inclusion of a post within each ETB, dedicated to learner voice, will provide the time and support needed for facilitating these changes and ensuring positive impacts.

8. Create a new Tertiary Education transitions model to assist learners moving between all stages of the sector, prioritising groups identified in the National Access Plan

People in Further Education and Training are less likely to take up on offer in Higher Education (HE) compared to those with CAO offers (DES, 2020). There is a range of issues, including fear, that act as barriers for those considering HE as their next step. This includes socio-economic background, administrative and hidden costs, and the 'fear of the unknown' (College Connect, 2023). In adult learning settings people are provided with small class sizes and above-average tutor support. The profile of diversity in these areas reflects the positive outcomes of this inclusive model. However, there is a gap of support for people in the transition period between institutions. To address this and in-turn increase the

diversity of students in Higher Education, AONTAS recommends creating a new transitions model. We believe this will provide key support for underserved communities and help to address the policy goals of the National Access Plan.

9. Collaborate with the Department of the Taoiseach, the Department of Justice, and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on a social cohesion strategy utilising an interdisciplinary adult learning methodology as a model for positive social outcomes

The profile of Irish society is changing with increased diversity and the potential polarisation of political views as core components in recent months. An estimated 50,000 plus people took part in the recent Dublin 'An Ireland for All' march (Irish Times, 2023) in support of inclusion and diversity in March 2023. It is argued that the majority of Irish society welcomes diversity. However, challenges faced across all communities due to pressure on accommodation and resources are contributing to community tensions with some refugees facing unwelcome protests upon their arrival. The situation is worsened due to our housing and cost of living crises which impacts unequally on those less privileged. In addition, according to INAR (2020), people who have been victims of racist incidents are now reporting less of these cases to the Gardaí. This means that while tensions are building there is a potential mistrust with the Gardaí that might reduce our evidence-base and misinform future planning, funding, and safety needs.

Adult education is a model of participation and democracy with a core focus on the individual and the common good (Connolly, B. 2023). It can be utilised in an interdisciplinary approach within a community development model and/or a national programme to create positive social change. AONTAS encourages DFHERIS to collaborate with the Department of the Taoiseach, the Department of Justice, and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on a social cohesion strategy utilising an interdisciplinary adult learning methodology as a model for positive social outcomes. Engaging a range of statutory and community and voluntary groups working in a social partnership model to protect the future of Irish society.

10. Increase ESOL classes and provide integration workshops through Community Education centres and Further Education and Training colleges

Staff and learners have highlighted the need for increased ESOL classes at AONTAS consultation sessions and learner focus-groups, across Ireland. Learners reported that they were pleased with the opportunity to engage in ESOL and felt supported. However, at present many only receive one class per week. This means their ability to speak English and opportunities for community engagement are limited.

AONTAS recommends increasing ESOL classes through ETB's and Community Education centres. In addition, to increase social cohesion and support integration, we encourage utilising the adult learning sector as a space for integration workshops with opportunities to meet local people and create peer intercultural learning.

11. Design and implement a new policy and national campaign programme addressing gender violence and sexual harassment for Community Education and Further Education and Training

AONTAS welcomes the recent movements to end sexual violence and harassment in Higher Education Institutions. The phenomenon of 'Femicide' where women and girls are killed by men (Women's Aid, 2023) is ever present in Irish society. From 1996 to April 2023, there has been 258 women killed by men in Ireland. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (2017) it is estimated that 1 in 10 women have experienced a form of cyber violence by the age of 15 globally. In addition, young women face higher experiences of severe types of cyber harassment, including stalking and sexual

He sent her messages on Snapchat because he knew they self-deleted. The messages were sexual, rude, and inappropriate. She reported it but the staff believed him instead of her. He lied and said it was a misunderstanding. There was no consequences for him. She has since left the course because of it. It has damaged her education, her sense of safety, her trust in institutions, and her wellbeing.

(Issue reported to AONTAS 2023)

harassment. Despite national programmes and broader awareness raising campaigns, this issue remains and women are not safe. Training of staff, clear policy guidelines, and consent and information workshops are needed in all adult and community education centres.

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