

Submission to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's Statement of Strategy 2025-2028

**AONTAS - the National Adult Learning
Organisation**

MAY 2025

About AONTAS

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland, founded in 1969 and passionately working ever since to make education equal and accessible for all. Backed by robust research and focused community work, we advocate and lobby for quality education for all adults and raise awareness of the transformative impact of adult learning on individuals and society. We represent a diverse, community-based membership network across the island of Ireland. Our members and adult learners inform all our research, campaigns, and policy recommendations, ensuring that our work reflects real needs and drives social change.

Recommendations in Brief

AONTAS make the following recommendations which are aligned to the Department's strategic priorities of Quality Education; Education Supports; Skills and Apprenticeships; and System Reform.

1. **Quality Education:** Ensure fair and sustainable funding for community education as a foundation for an inclusive society.
2. **Education Supports:** Review existing supports and develop new, flexible options to meet learners' diverse needs. Consider the value of Learner Voice in identifying challenges and generating incisive solutions.
3. **Skills and Apprenticeships:** Design access, transfer, and progression pathways that harness community education's capacity to reach underrepresented groups.
4. **System Reform:** Promote inclusive practices and access to education through dedicated research and the establishment of an EDI Taskforce.

Background

The Role of Adult and Community Education in a Changing Society

Adult and community education plays a critical role in shaping inclusive, responsive societies. It addresses key social challenges, promotes full participation among groups at risk of disadvantage, and contributes to overall societal well-being. Rooted in the principles of

democracy, dialogue, and collectivism, this sector actively advances equality and inclusion (Fitzsimmons & Magrath, 2017).

With the support of DFHERIS and other Government departments, adult and community education provides proactive, innovative programmes that meet the evolving needs of communities and offers solutions to pressing social issues (AONTAS, 2023; Meyler et al., 2023a). These include:

- Addressing unmet and emerging literacy needs across multiple domains, including digital literacy, and voter education (CSO, 2024; OECD, 2024; AONTAS, 2025).
- Promoting sustainable practices and a just green transition (OECD, 2017; Solidar, 2024)
- Enhancing health and well-being (Meyler et al., 2023b; Meyler et al., 2024)
- Fostering social cohesion, democratic participation, and a sense of belonging (Cohen et al., 2024; BEEP, 2024; Meyler et al., 2023b).

The Value of Adult and Community Education for Adult Learners

The transformative impact of adult and community education on learners and communities across Ireland is well documented (Meyler et al., 2023b; Doody, 2021). It is particularly valuable for individuals and communities experiencing disadvantage. Demographic analysis confirms that the Further Education and Training (FET) system supports a highly diverse learner population, many of whom require additional supports (Doody, 2021; SOLAS, 2024b). Notably, this diversity is more pronounced than in the broader tertiary education sector, which is a testament to the inclusivity of the sector and its programmes (Sartori & Bloom, 2023).

This responsiveness to learner diversity is made possible by the sector's provision of flexible, part-time learning opportunities, coupled with comprehensive wraparound supports. These features enable the participation of marginalised groups, including those facing community isolation, or people from minority backgrounds (Cobain et al., 2021; Meyler et al., 2023a; Meyler et al., 2024). In doing so, the sector supports inclusion, personal development, and

well-being while building practical skills and promoting lifelong learning (Doody, 2021; Meyler et al., 2023a).

The recommendations presented in this submission align with the wider policy landscape. These include, as expected in the forthcoming FET Strategy, a focus on fostering inclusion; supporting the diversity of holistic and inclusive practices outlined in the Community Education Framework (2024); and a commitment to diversity of representation in the National Access Plan (2022-2028). In addition to this, a commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion throughout system performance review processes to ensure the Public Sector Duty (IHREC, 2014) is upheld.

AONTAS Recommendations

In order to capitalise on the potential value of adult and community education there are a number of key recommendations presented here. These recommendations are aligned to key strategic priorities of the Department, reflecting the commitments of the new Programme for Government.

Recommendation 1: Ensure fair and sustainable funding for community education as a foundation for an inclusive society.

The forthcoming Statement of Strategy should commit to improving funding for community education. This aligns with the Department’s strategic priority to provide high-quality education.

Despite its proven impact, the community education sector continues to face persistent challenges in funding (Cobain et al., 2021; Cohen et al., 2024). The sector is constrained by precarious and fragmented funding streams, which hinder programme delivery, long-term planning, and learner engagement—particularly for those most at risk of disadvantage (Meyler et al., 2023a; Meyler et al., 2023b).

Currently, community education supports approximately 20% of FET learners but receives only 2% of the overall FET budget (AONTAS, 2024; SOLAS, 2024a; SOLAS, 2024b).

Furthermore, core funding, tutor hours, and small grant provision has been reduced again in 2024 for community education providers, due to apprenticeship commitments. This funding

disparity must be urgently addressed through a comprehensive review of resource allocation for community education providers.

Recommendation 2: Increase Access to Education Supports – Responding to Need

2.1 Name Learner Voice in the Strategy as a key mechanism for identifying gaps and challenges in learner supports, and the generation of incisive solutions.

Learner Voice is a concept in education that means that learners should have a say in decisions about their own education. It means that those who learn, not just those who teach, should influence the educational experience. Learner Voice emerges from long-standing values of democracy, equality and empowerment in adult education and further seeks to extend those values beyond the classroom into institutional and policy-making domains (Meyler et al., 2024; Dowdall et al., 2019).

According to Meyler et al., (2024) Learner Voice has a key role to play in the identification of gaps and challenges in learner supports, and the generation of incisive solutions. It fosters improved, egalitarian relationships between learners, educators, and other stakeholders. Enabling learners to be influential partners in their own learning increases meaningful engagement in education. Despite Ireland's recognised success in this area, further action is needed to provide a responsive, flexible tertiary education sector.

2.2 Initiate the Government's commitment to reviewing financial supports for adult learners.

Financial constraints are a key barrier for marginalised learners in the wider FET system. A review of provisions is urgently needed to ensure equal participation and progression through educational pathways (Meyler et al., 2023; Sartori & Bloom, 2023).

The current level of financial support is insufficient, and access is not straightforward and subject to eligibility constraints (Meyler et al., 2024). Similar supports in higher education are often more readily available, again highlighting a disparity within the tertiary education system (Indecon, 2022).

SOLAS' data shows that one in three FET learners are unemployed, with many more in low paid employment (SOLAS, 2024) and with a low level of formal qualification before starting

programmes in FET (SOLAS, 2024). According to Social Justice Matters (2024) people with lower qualifications are at higher risk of poverty.

Many financial supports in FET require learners to be in receipt of certain social welfare payments (Indecon, 2022). Whilst these have been raised in previous two budgets, basic social welfare rates remain inadequate when considering the current ‘poverty line’ in Ireland (MESL, 2024). This also means that almost one in three FET learners are impacted by policy relating to social welfare payment rates.

2.3 Provide further wrap-around supports to achieve social inclusion and social cohesion goals set out in the new Programme for Government.

To address social inclusion, there is an urgent need to protect and improve the level of wrap around supports available in adult education (Meyler et al., 2023a; Meyler et al., 2023b; Meyler et al., 2024). People from communities that have been marginalised succeed in community education centres because there is on-site wrap around supports.

When these supports are resourced and made available, participating in community education significantly improves people's mental health, self-confidence, and sense of belonging, enabling them to overcome isolation and trauma while fostering personal transformation (Eustace et al., 2023). It also facilitates progression to further education, employment, and community involvement, positively impacting their families and creating a ripple effect of enhanced wellbeing for participants and their children (Eustace et al., 2023).

“It [community education] has saved the Government a fortune not having to treat me for mental health” – Community Education Learner (Cobain et al., 2023)

2.4 Take a whole of Government approach to providing wrap around supports.

AONTAS’ research shows that barriers to educational participation are further compounded by the provisions of different government departments, including those responsible for welfare, and health (Meyler et al., 2024). For this reason, the design and delivery of learner supports should incorporate a whole of government approach. This investment in time and resources from Government can help to ensure that the supports delivered are needs-based and promote equitable access to education across all levels of the tertiary system.

Recommendation 3: Further develop pathways for underrepresented groups

The Department's Statement of Strategy should consider the role played by community education in achieving its goals related to Skills and Apprenticeships.

Community education's capacity to reach underrepresented groups, including Travellers, the long-term unemployed, and migrant communities, highlights its importance in delivering flexible, accessible upskilling opportunities (SOLAS, 2024b; Sartori & Bloom, 2023; Meyler et al., 2024; DFHERIS & HEA 2022). In contrast, certain cohorts, such as socio-economically disadvantaged learners, people with disabilities, and minority groups remain underrepresented in higher education (Sartori & Bloom, 2023:21).

To bridge this gap, the following actions are essential:

3.1 Reform the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS) to increase the number of QQI routes to higher education, aligning them with traditional Leaving Certificate pathways (QQI, 2023; Transitions Reform Working Paper, 2020).

3.2 Enhance Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) by allocating targeted resources to adult and community education providers (DOES, 2020; Staunton, 2021; QQI, 2024:18).

3.3 Expand part-time and flexible provision, backed by equitable recognition within the ECTS system, to support meaningful progression and enhance access to higher education over time (DOES, 2020).

3.4 Embed collaborative practices between FET and higher education institutions to ensure the transfer of learning is recognised as valid, credit-bearing experience (DOES, 2020). In addition to creating systematic and expected cooperation and shared learning that ultimately improves the system and increases diversity in HE.

Recommendation 4: Promote inclusive practices and access to education through dedicated research and the establishment of an EDI Taskforce.

Recent PIAAC Survey results show that literacy needs in Ireland have risen, with one in five people struggling with reading and understanding everyday text, like bus timetables or medicine instructions (CSO, 2024). Furthermore, the survey does not engage with people in Traveller or homeless accommodation – meaning these results may be far worse in some

cases. The participation of disadvantaged students in higher education remains significantly low despite access policy (HEA, 2021) and Traveller educational attainment reveals a consistent failure in creating positive changes or addressing discriminatory attitudes (Carron-Kee et al., 2024). Yet, despite greater success in reaching and supporting people from marginalised communities in adult education, the broader picture highlights persistent educational inequalities that ultimately reflect and contribute to social disparity and economic injustice.

AONTAS' consultation with learners has highlighted a negative impact of eligibility criteria for entry to tertiary education for new communities, and a lack of access to financial supports (Meyler et al., 2023a; Meyler et al., 2024). This is in addition to far greater competition for people with QQI certification compared to the Leaving Certificate in progression to third level.

We urge the Department to organise an independent review and evaluation of current practices and policies around access, transfer and progression for minority communities, and groups that have been marginalised. To ensure we achieve the goal of a vibrant and diverse student body that is representative of society as a whole (DFHERIS & HEA, 2022). This process of review and reform should be overseen by a newly established Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Taskforce, including learner and civil society representatives. Ensuring that Ireland is a champion of equality, particularly in the current international political climate and that no group is at risk of discrimination under the Equal Status Acts (2000-2018).

Conclusion

AONTAS is committed to supporting DFHERIS in delivering on its Statement of Strategy 2025–2028. As a key stakeholder in the sector, AONTAS offers access to a broad network of education providers, high-quality research and evaluation expertise, and a proven model of meaningful Learner Voice consultation. We look forward to continuing our collaboration with you to provide a tertiary education system that is inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the needs of all learners.

References

- AONTAS (2023) **Stepping Stones and Stable Roots: The Versatile and Enduring Strength of Community Education**. Available at: [SteppingStonesStableRootsEventReport_AW.pdf](#)
- AONTAS (2024) **National FET Strategy 2025-2030 - Consultation Submission**. Available at: [AONTAS_NEAAL_Digital_Learning_Research.pdf](#)
- AONTAS (2025) **Digital Learning Research Summary: Key findings from AONTAS research studies**. Available at: [AONTAS_NEAAL_Digital_Learning_Research.pdf](#)
- BEEP (2024) **Basic Education and Empowerment for Political Participation Research Report**. Available at: [Research Results – Beep](#)
- Carron-Kee, E., McGinnity, F., and Alamir, A. (2024) **Understanding attitudes to Travellers and Roma in Ireland**, Jointly-published Report 9, ESRI and DCEDIY. Available at: [Understanding attitudes to Travellers and Roma in Ireland | ESRI](#)
- Central Statistics Office (2024) **Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) 2023**. Available at: [Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies \(PIAAC\) 2023 - Central Statistics Office](#)
- Cobain, E., Dowdall, L., O'Reilly, N., and Suzuki, A. (2021) **CEN Census 2020: Community Education in a Time of Covid-19**. Available at: [15525_AONTAS_CEN_Census_V12-Sept.pdf](#)
- Cohen, S. Lartigau, J. & McDonough, T. (2024) **Civil Society Under Duress: Assessing the Impact of Political, Financial, and Governance Pressures on CSOs**. Available at: [civil_society_under_duress_report-compressed_final.pdf](#)
- Department of Education and Skills (2020) **Further Education and Training (FET) Progression to Higher Education (HE) - Resource A: National Policy Framework and Strategies**. Available at: [Transitions Reform Sub-Group – Further Education and Training \(FET\) Progression to Higher Education \(HE\) – Resource A: National Policy Framework and Strategies](#)
- Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2022) **National Access Plan 2022-2028 -A strategic action plan for equity of access, participation and success in higher education**. Available at: [NATIONAL ACCESS PLAN A STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN FOR EQUITY OF ACCESS, PARTICIPATION AND SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION 2022-2028](#)
- Doody, S. (2021) **A Study of the Role, Contribution and Impact of Education and Training Board (ETB) Further Education and Training Provision and Support Services in Community Education in Ireland**. Available at: [ETBI-Community-Education-Position-A4.pdf](#)
- Dowdall, L. Sheerin, E., & O'Reilly (2019) “The National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum: the Benefits and Challenges of Transforming Learner Voice into Policy Change” in *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education – Adult Learner 2019*. Available at: [15010_Aontas_Adult_Learner_2019_WEB.pdf](#)
- Eustace, A., Bailey, I., and Tubridy, A. (2023) **Community Education as a Support for Lone Parents: Thematic Analysis of Eight Case Studies**. Dublin: The Centre for Effective Services.
- Fitzsimmons, C. & Magrath, C. (2017) **FinALE Report: “Where to Invest” Funding Adult Education**. Available at: [FinALE-Where-to-invest-Final.pdf](#)

HEA (2021) **Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021**. Available at: [Higher Education Authority - Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021](#)

Indecon (2022) **Review of the Student Grant Scheme**. Available at: [\[MAIN HEADING\]](#)

Meyler, A., Cobain, E., Budds, C., & Lovejoy, L. (2023b) **FET Learners and Mental Health in Ireland: Identifying Supports**. Available at: [Mental health report_FINAL.pdf](#)

Meyler, A., Farrell, K., Lovejoy, L., & Murray, T., (2024) **Learner Voices Across Ireland National FET Learner Forum Report 2023-2024**. Available Online at: [AONTAS_Learner_Report2024_Web_AW.pdf](#)

Meyler, A., Lovejoy, L., & Swan, L., (2023a) **Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland- A focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups**. Available Online at: [AONTAS_LLL Research Report_Final Digital Launch.pdf](#)

O'Sullivan, R. (2021) 'The FET to HE Pathway: A Tale of Two Certifications', in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2021, Further Education & Training. Education Matters*. Available at: <https://irelandseducationyearbook.ie/downloads/IEYB2021/YB2021-FET-02.pdf>

OECD (2017) **Educational Research and Innovation: Educational Opportunity for All – Overcoming Inequality throughout the Life Course**. Available Online at: [Educational Opportunity for All | OECD](#)

OECD (2024), **Do Adults Have the Skills They Need to Thrive in a Changing World?: Survey of Adult Skills 2023**. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1787/b263dc5d-en>.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (2023) **QQI Insights - From Counting to Cultivating Successful Participation A Review of the Landscape of Practice Supporting Access Transfer and Progression in Irish Education and Training**. Available at: [qqi-insights_from-counting-to-cultivating-successful-participation-a-review-of-the-landscape-of-practice-supporting-access-transfer-and-progression-in-irish-education-and-training-2023.pdf](#)

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (2024) **Green Paper on QQI's Access, Transfer and Progression Policy**. Dublin; Quality and Qualifications Ireland.

Sartori, S., Demir Bloom, D. (2023) **A Community Needs Analysis with Further Education Students: Thoughts Around Progression from Further Education and Training Higher Education**. Available at: [A Community Needs Analysis with Further Education Education Students: Thoughts Around Progression From Further Education and Training Higher Education - MURAL - Maynooth University Research Archive Library](#)

SOLAS (2024a) **Community Education Framework**. Available at: [community-education-framework.pdf](#)

SOLAS (2024b) **This is FET Facts and Figures 2023**. Available at: [This is FET Facts and Figures 2023](#)

Solidar (2024) **National Background Paper: Just Transition, Lifelong Learning and Adult Education in Ireland**. Available at: [backgr1.pdf](#)

Staunton (2021) "The Recognition of Prior Learning in the Community Education Sector" in the *Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education 2021*. Available at: [The Recognition of Prior Learning \(RPL\) in the Irish Community Education Sector](#)



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

