

# AONTAS

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## Supporting Educational Equality with the Adult Learning Sector in Northern Ireland



## Foreword - Dr Niamh O'Reilly, AONTAS CEO

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Northern Ireland faces persistent under participation in lifelong learning unless collective efforts are made. The lack of a funded civil society body promoting and advocating for lifelong learning has stymied efforts to address issues identified at local level. To support learners and our colleagues in the adult learning community in Northern Ireland (NI), AONTAS commissioned a piece of research to map out the lifelong learning system in Northern Ireland, identify issues faced by community education providers and offer recommendations to support greater educational equality.



Stark predictions lie ahead for adult learning in Northern Ireland. **The lifelong learning participation rate pre-COVID-19 was 10.9%, lower than the Republic of Ireland (12.6%) or the UK (14.8%) and during the pandemic lockdown, only 27% of adults engaged in some form of learning compared to 44% in England (LWI, 2020).** With this backdrop, it is perhaps unsurprising that the projected proportion of people with less than lower secondary education (Junior Certificate/GCSE) in NI, currently 21%, will be 17% in 2030. This projection is vastly different from the Republic of Ireland at 5% in 2030 (LWI, 2020). However, community-based adult learning provision, which reaches learners across communities in areas of high deprivation, has an impressive success rate in bridging the qualifications gap. Data from the [Open College Network Northern Ireland \(OCNNI\)](#), the largest regulator of accredited community-based learning, reveals that over the past three years of the 30,000 registered learners, 72% achieved qualifications, with 50% achieving at least the equivalent of the Junior Certificate. While these achievements were made possible by a range of supports and the provision of non-accredited courses offered to engage people to return to education, the future is uncertain.

Research undertaken in this report noted a range of issues facing community education providers from funding, including the impact of Brexit and loss of European Social Fund (ESF) funding, to relationships with other providers, to the need for a clear understanding of community education provision in NI. Helpfully, community groups put forward a range of ideas to support meaningful shared-island collaboration. Suggestions included: **opportunities for shared learning and dialogue, collaboration, research, promotion, enabling access to funding and strengthened advocacy for lifelong learning between The Forum for Adult Learning in Northern Ireland (FALNI) and AONTAS.**

AONTAS is committed to supporting educational quality for adults in NI in partnerships with our members and stakeholders and through the [Network for Adult Learning Across Borders \(NALAB\)](#). In efforts to address the lack of data, AONTAS will work with colleagues in NI to support replication of our Community Education Network census research<sup>[1]</sup> (Cobain et. al, 2021) to uncover who engages in community education, what courses are provided, how it is funded, and critically how it effectively supports people to fulfil their potential in NI. We look forward to continuing this vital collaborative work through this clear roadmap for future collaboration for the betterment of adult learners across the island of Ireland.

## Executive Summary

This report is in two parts, firstly it maps out lifelong learning provision in Northern Ireland (NI), and secondly, it identifies the needs of adult learning for all-island collaboration, with a specific focus on the potential future role of AONTAS in supporting adult learning.

The level of participation in adult learning is lower in NI compared to the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland, with future projections continuing to highlight this worrying trend. The impact of COVID-19 is yet to be determined, so statistics relate to 2019-2020. The Department for the Economy has responsibility for higher education (HE) and further education (FE), yet there is no specific policy on adult learning, although a Skills Strategy consultation was recently launched. Across the three universities and two university colleges, there are 55,000 enrolments in NI, which offer varying amounts of adult learning and community outreach programmes. There are six further education colleges with 71,000 students and 132,000 enrolments, with the majority of the courses provided at lower than the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Level 5/Upper Second Level (63%). There has been a 42% drop in FE participation over a ten year period, an increase in younger students, less part-time provision, fewer women and a relative increase in courses offered at equivalent to Upper Second Level. Non-regulated courses which do not appear on the Register of Regulated Qualifications (may lead to NFQ level 5) stands at 18% of FE provision. Almost three-quarters of essential skills programmes are offered in FE colleges; however, participation has declined, especially for those over 25 years, by a staggering 80% in the last ten years. Adult guidance services are offered primarily in job centres.

There is a lack of information on community-based adult learning in terms of the number of groups and enrollments, funding structure and level of non-accredited provision. However, accredited community education provision is evident and accounted for through OCNNI, with 159 registered centres engaging over 30,000 learners in the past three years, with qualifications up to NFQ 5 standing at 72%. Also, there is no region-wide organisation focused on adult learning advocacy and promotion. The Forum for Adult Learning in Northern Ireland (FALNI) has supported research, advocacy through EU funding support from the Learning and Work Institute UK under the European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL), enabling engagement with the UK and the Republic of Ireland. With this ending, AONTAS has a role in supporting advocacy for adult learning in N Ireland through FALNI and other AONTAS members.

In the second part of the report, specific advocacy issues are outlined. In 2016, FALNI sought to improve accessible adult learning across N Ireland through eight policy asks in its manifesto cover macro-level actions: To establish a **cross-departmental working group on adult learning, introduce a framework for adult learning, funding for adult learning and recognising equivalences of qualifications, to individual needs such as offering an individual learning budget and career review** for all adults coupled with improving access to learning opportunities for families and communities. This work would be broadly supported by the promotion, research and advocacy of adult learning, through FALNI.

The needs and actions required have been most recently outlined in its contribution to the UK report – [Healthy, Wealthy & Wise \(2017\)](#), covering political commitments **from the Executive that NI becomes a Learning Society and the development of a Lifelong Learning Strategy**, to understanding the system better through a **comprehensive survey of provision**, evaluation and funding (including alternative) of **provision across the sectors, to encouraging collaboration** and facilitating a **Forum for Adult Learning**.

As part of this research, 58 NI groups identified the main issues impacting adult learning. Funding was the top priority, with the impact of Brexit and loss of ESF funding a challenge, together with administrative burdens, lack of funding for community learning and the top-down, short-term nature of funding. Relationships across adult learning providers in NI and the lack of respect, recognition or meaningful engagement with community learning providers were noted. Additionally, space to reflect, promotional campaigns, women-specific programmes with childcare supports were highlighted as needed as well as a directory of providers and the ability of community learning providers to offer accredited provision at higher levels. Many of the issues resonate with community education providers in ROI and reflect in AONTAS advocacy work.

Going forward, opportunities for discussions between community education providers across NI and the ROI were suggested, **collaboration of good practice and resources encouraged, exploration of common issues, funding opportunities and stronger capacity building for advocacy were called for**. Clear suggestions include an all-island Festival of Learning, shared annual events, mutual promotion of work, research into community education, building a culture of lifelong learning, securing funding for cross-border community collaboration and creating an online all-island community college. All of the suggestions are possible, especially as there is goodwill and support through the long-term engagement between AONTAS and FALNI.





# Part 1: Adult Learning in Northern Ireland

## Introduction

Recent statistics reported by the OECD<sup>1</sup> and the Learning & Work Institute<sup>2</sup> show that Northern Ireland (NI) falls significantly behind other regions of the UK and other neighbouring countries, such as the Republic of Ireland (ROI), in terms of adult participation in learning.

According to the OECD report, Labour Force Survey results show NI's uptake of learning trailing Ireland and the UK as a whole – figures of 10.9%, 12.6% and 14.8% respectively. The lower participation rates are largely amongst male, older and lower-educated individuals. Approximately 46% of adults in NI were found not to be interested in taking up learning, compared to 37% in England and 36% in Ireland.

The Learning and Work (L&W) participation in adult learning survey for 2020 showed only 27% of people in NI had taken up some form of learning in the period since the first lockdown – compared to Wales (38%), Scotland (39%) and England (44%). This position of significantly trailing the other parts of the UK cannot be explained just in terms of the impact of lockdown, as these annual surveys have shown a marked decline in Northern Ireland's participation over recent years – a marked contrast to its performance earlier this century.<sup>3</sup>

A further report from L&W<sup>4</sup>, in partnership with Open College Network Northern Ireland (OCNNI), found that in 2017, 31% of the working-age population had either no qualifications or low qualifications (below Level 4 on Irish NQF), and only 32% had qualifications at level 4 or above. This compares to the UK as a whole with 26% with having no or low qualifications and 38% with Level 4 or above. The Learning and Work Institute report concludes that, while improving, unless action is taken now, the present trajectory will see NI's qualifications profile in 2030 continue to sit significantly below the UK average and below that in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) too.

## Government Responsibility

In Northern Ireland, the Department for the Economy (DfE) has responsibility for higher education (HE) and further education (FE). There is no specific policy on adult learning, or lifelong learning, it has never had a separate budget line and there are no staff specifically dedicated to it. It has tended to fall under FE strategies and while lifelong learning was forefronted back in the 1990s, subsequently skills became the dominant focus and wider adult learning lost out.

DfE is also responsible for the management of the ESF programme. This has supported learning provision for quite a number of community/voluntary organisations targeting vulnerable groups and with only another year to go for these programmes, there is concern over its replacement – the UK Shared Prosperity Fund – which has not yet gone to consultation.

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1 [OECD Skills Strategy Northern Ireland \(United Kingdom\): Assessment and Recommendations, OECD 2020](#)

2 [Learning through Lockdown: Findings from the 2020 Adult Participation in Learning Survey, L&W 2020](#)

3 <https://learningandwork.org.uk/what-we-do/lifelong-learning/adult-participation-in-learning-survey/rates-of-adult-participation-in-learning/>

4 <https://falni.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/A-Higher-Skills-Ambition-for-NI.pdf>

A consultation for a new Skills Strategy opened on the 27<sup>th</sup> May 2021. The OECD prepared a report with recommendations that will shape this Strategy and one of the four recommendations is to build a culture of lifelong learning. This offers some hope to the adult learning sector of the recognition that skills will flourish best if there is more widespread support for learning. The Forum for Adult Learning in Northern Ireland (FALNI) will be proactive in pushing this recommendation and leading discussion and generating ideas on what it could mean for adult learning in particular.

Although it is not explicit, and therefore rarely recognised as part of adult learning, other departments also support adult learning. These include Dept for Communities (through its general support of the voluntary and community sector and local government), Dept for Justice (prison education), the Executive Office (Good Relations and ethnic minorities funding) and Dept for Health.

Initial consultation has just closed on the broad brushstrokes of the next Programme for Government. This is positive in that it is again taking an outcomes-based approach, but in its submission FALNI called for this to be supported with an outcomes-based budget to avoid continued silo operations and departmental competition for resources. FALNI also asked that Access to Learning becomes a new Key Priority Area (KPA): learning is implicit in many of the suggested outcomes and KPAs, but if it fails to be made explicit it will be harder to argue for its due recognition and support.

## **Statutory Infrastructure**

### **Higher Education**

Higher education in Northern Ireland is delivered through three universities and two university colleges: Queen's University Belfast (QUB), Ulster University (UU), the Open University (OU), St Mary's College and Stranmillis College.

Statistics for 2018/19 show c55,000 enrolments in NI Higher Education Institutions (*the statistics have been more or less static for the past 15 years*). In the same academic year, c1,500 NI based students were enrolled in ROI HEIs.

### **Queen's University Belfast**

Queen's University Belfast (QUB) offers academic degrees at various levels and across a broad subject range, with over 300 degree programmes available. It has over 23,000 students attending, including 1,700 international students from over 80 countries.

Historically QUB ran an extensive extra-mural programme, but like most universities across the UK, this has fallen into steep decline and a once-thriving department now only has three members of staff, based in the School of Education. Courses are still available however as can be seen on [Open Learning](#). In terms of its Widening Access and Participation programme, Queen's University confines this to activities with schools.

## Ulster University

Ulster University (UU) has four campuses in Northern Ireland located in Belfast, Coleraine, Magee College in Derry/Londonderry and Jordanstown. It provides a broad range of career-focused undergraduate and postgraduate courses across a wide range of disciplines.

As well as outreach to schools, the UU programme for Widening Access and Participation includes greater work with local communities through its Community Engagement team. The team works with community organisations to encourage and support access and application to higher education opportunities – see <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/flexible-education/community/community-learning>

## The Open University

As part of the largest university in the UK, around 4,000 students annually study with The Open University (OU) across Northern Ireland. Over 46,000 people in Northern Ireland have studied with the university since it was set up over 50 years ago in 1969. 76% of its undergraduate students in Northern Ireland work full or part-time while they study.

Like the UU, the OU sees part of its widening participation remit as reaching out to communities. It also has built strong links with the trade union movement.

## Stranmillis University College

Stranmillis University College is a university college of Queen's University Belfast and has about 700 students. Its main purpose is to provide teacher training; however, in recent years, in recognition of the multi-professional approach that is critical to the education of children, they have expanded their undergraduate portfolio to offer a wider range of professionally related academic programmes – a BA in Early Childhood Studies and BSc in Health, Physical Activity and Sport. It has c1,500 students.

Stranmillis also has a [lifelong learning programme](#) similar to the Open Learning programme of QUB and attracting a similar demography – namely predominantly middle-class graduates.

## St Mary's University College

It is a specialist and distinctive Catholic HEI which specialises in the education of teachers and also offers a Liberal Arts degree programme. Their academic community works within a framework of religious, academic, civic and professional values and integrates Christian faith and learning. It has c1,100 students.

## Further Education

Northern Ireland's six further education (FE) colleges operate across over 30 campuses and through outreach community locations. Each college offers a wide range of programmes ranging from GCSEs

and A levels to BTECs, HNCs, Foundation Degrees, Apprenticeships, Degrees and other specific training programmes. They are also primarily responsible for the delivery of Essential Skills courses (ie literacy, numeracy and basic IT which are free courses).

- **Belfast Metropolitan College (BMC)** – covering Belfast city area with 4 campuses, it is the largest of the six and indeed one of the largest FE colleges in the UK
- **Northern Regional College (NRC)** – covers all of Co Antrim and parts of Co Derry/Londonderry, with campuses in Ballymena, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Larne, Magherafelt and Newtownabbey
- **North West Regional College (NWRC)** – covers most of Co Derry/Londonderry and part of Co Tyrone, with campuses in Derry/Londonderry, Strabane and Limavady.
- **South Eastern Regional College (SERC)** – covers Co Down, with campuses in Ballynahinch, Bangor, Downpatrick, Holywood, Lisburn, Newcastle and Newtownards
- **Southern Regional College (SRC)** – covers Co Armagh and part of Co Down, with campuses in Armagh, Banbridge, Lurgan, Newry and Portadown
- **South West College (SWC)** – covers Co Fermanagh and most of Co Tyrone, with campuses in Cookstown, Dungannon, Enniskillen and Omagh

In addition, there is the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) with campuses in Antrim, Cookstown and Enniskillen. It has about 1,600 students across the campuses studying for Foundation and/or Honours Degrees in agriculture, horticulture, food or equine studies. CAFRE also provides postgraduate courses from Graduate Certificate to Masters in Business for Agri-food and Rural Enterprise.

## Statistical Analysis<sup>5</sup>

### Latest Figures – 2019/20

In 2019/20, there were just under 71,000 students accounting for c132,000 enrolments, **22% full-time and 78% part-time** (it needs to be noted that this academic year started to be impacted by the COVID-19 crisis). There were more men than women enrolled overall (54% vs 46%): this gender imbalance is particularly evident in the 19 and under age group, and reversed in the over 25 age group.

In terms of levels of study, 21% enrolled at Entry and Level 1 (equivalent to Levels 1-3 on Irish NFQ), 43% at Level 2 (Level 4 on Irish NFQ), 27% at Level 3 (Level 5 on Irish NFQ) and 10% at Level 4 and above (Level 6 and above on Irish NFQ).<sup>6</sup>

In 2019/20 72% enrolled on FE courses, 10% on HE courses and 18% on Essential Skills courses.

### Trends over the past decade

- from 120,102 students in 2009/10, to 70,222 in 2019/20 there has been a fall of c42%. While there are some explanatory factors such as a ‘demographic dip’ in 16-19 year-olds and the start of the Covid impact, that is still a very steep decrease
- the student population is becoming younger – in 2009/10 50.5% were aged 19 and under, compared to 62.6% in 2019/20
- while part-time provision remains most popular, this has fallen from 85% in 2009/10 to 77.6% in 2019/20
- there has been a marked swing in the gender split. In 2009/10 53.2% of enrolments were female compared to most recent figures of 46%
- changes in terms of level of study show a slight increase of study at Level 3 and above, a shift which is in line with FE policy to move to higher levels of provision

	Irish NQF equivalent	2013/14 <sup>7</sup>	2019/20
<b>Entry and Level 1</b>	Levels 1-3	22.3%	21.1%
<b>Level 2</b>	Level 4	46%	42.6%
<b>Level 3</b>	Level 5	23%	26.7%
<b>Level 4 and above</b>	Level 6 and above	8.2%	9.6%

5 These statistics produced by the Dept for the Economy cover the six FE Colleges and do not include students at CAFRE. While it is known that significant numbers of students in the border colleges of SRC, SWC and NWRC in particular come from Rol I have not been able to find recent statistics.

6 For a comparative table of qualifications see <https://cea.org.uk/downloads/docs/regulation-asset/European/UK%20EQF%20NCPs%20Guide%3A%20Qualifications%20can%20Cross%20Boundaries%2C%20A%20guide%20to%20comparing%20qualifications%20in%20the%20UK%20and%20Ireland.pdf>

7 Earliest statistics available for levels of study on the Dept for the Economy website

## Regulated vs Non-regulated Provision

Prior to 2013/14 non-regulated courses were those recognised as being hobby or leisure. There was then a change to define non-regulated as are those which potentially lead to a formal qualification (at 'Level 3 or below' ie on Irish NQF Level 5 or below) but do not appear on the RRQ (Register of Regulated Qualifications) or where a qualification is not expected, typically hobby & leisure, or recreational courses.

By 2013/14 the proportion of non-regulated courses had already fallen sharply as successive Government departments pushed for colleges to increase regulated provision. There had previously been a strong culture of 'evening classes' at colleges attracting large numbers.

The proportion of non-regulated provision has stayed relatively stable in the years between 2013/14 and 2019/20, at around 18%. However, as is the case with all aspects of provision, there can be considerable variation between colleges: in 2019/20 just 8% of provision at Belfast Metropolitan College was non-regulated (a fall of 50% from 2013/14), whereas non-regulated provision in South West College accounted for 30.8% (a rise of c33%).

## Essential Skills

As mentioned above, Essential Skills covers literacy, numeracy and basic IT: provision is offered free, primarily through FE Colleges (72% of provision). The Essential Skills for Living Strategy was launched in 2002 and has not been revised since, although DfE say that to reduce the number of strategies produced and managed, plans for Essential Skills will now be incorporated under the new Skills Strategy (mentioned above).

In the 18 years since the initiation of the strategy 233,257 learners have been engaged, equating to 585,454 enrolments, over half of which have come from the two most deprived quantiles. Almost two-thirds of enrolments results in a qualification.

60% of enrolments are from the 16-19 age-group – with 26% alone coming from learners aged 16. There is then 23% in the 20-35 age-group and the remaining 17% is in the 35+ age-group.

Since 2010/11 there has been a steady decline in enrolments across all age bands, but more markedly amongst those 25+. The number of enrolments for the under-25s has almost halved, while the decline in enrolments for those over 25 is almost 80%.

The [DfE report](#) reviewing performance over the 18 years explains this as – likely to be in part due to the potential supply decreasing over time, as many have already achieved Essential Skills qualifications or equivalent. Relatively low unemployment levels in recent years may also have been an important factor. It fails to acknowledge that capturing the 16-19 age-group is very much easier through FE provision, and the inclusion of ES courses in apprenticeships for example, than attracting adult learners through community or trade union access. When talking of where ES courses are delivered the report

fails to acknowledge providers other than FE colleges, although 28% of provision happens elsewhere. The implied claim in the above quote that those aged 25+ requiring Essential Skills has been largely met seems dubious to this author.

Looking across the three subject categories it is noticeable that there is a sudden shift of interest to IT in those in the 45+ age-group, reflecting the lack of opportunity to learn such skills when that age-group were at school and the need for those skills in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages)**

The Department for the Economy currently funds the delivery of ESOL Formal Language Training through its network of 6 local further education (FE) colleges in Northern Ireland. This provision is free to all asylum seekers, refugees and those granted humanitarian protection. Migrant workers from the EU and elsewhere are required to pay a fee contribution towards the costs of courses. Voluntary and community organisations also deliver mainly informal English classes to speakers of other languages settled in Northern Ireland including economic migrants, international students, refugees and asylum seekers within the community setting.

### **Relationship with the Voluntary/Community Sector**

Colleges engage with community organisations both as outreach centres for delivery and also as partners in projects. However, it is quite difficult to find information on the scope of these relationships. Most college websites do not offer this information, which may give an indication of the importance placed on these partnerships relative to those with local business – and to be fair that is in line with the policy brief for colleges.

From the six college websites the only one where ‘community’ is prominently portrayed is North West Regional College, where there is a specific prospectus listing 52 local community partners acting as outreach sites. Southern Regional College’s site gives some evidence of its community involvement, but sadly the information is somewhat dated (a 2018 Newsletter).

Personal contacts and appeals brought some further information and it seems all colleges have links with between 40 and 50 community organisations, although this outreach work has been badly hit by Covid and the necessary switch to online provision.

### **Northern Ireland College of the Future**

In March 2021 a report was published on the [NI College of the Future](#) – this resulted from a UK-wide commission on the college of the future which produced reports for each of the four devolved administrations.

The report contains a number of statements of ambition and recommendations that are of particular interest in terms of adult and lifelong learning:

The College of the Future will empower people throughout their lives with the skills they need to get on in life, support better productivity and innovation of businesses, and strengthen every community's sense of place. (p21)

Citizens need to be able to engage with and benefit from education and training throughout their lives to have the skills and opportunities they need for good jobs and to live well. The college of the future will offer flexible and blended learning and guidance to empower each person to get a job, progress in their career and be an active citizen. (p22)

Colleges are important anchor institutions in communities right across Northern Ireland, but this dimension needs to have far more recognition and to be incentivised to a greater extent. The college of the future must have this role as a central part of its strategic mission, including for example promoting social inclusion, health and wellbeing - with clear alignment with other partners and areas of strategic priority. (p22)

Amongst its recommendations it states - A statutory right to lifelong learning should be established. As set out in our UK-wide report, this should include a free level three entitlement. It should also see funding to be equalised across further and higher education routes, with students able to access the maintenance support they need to engage in education and training (p46), and the establishment of a network of Community Hubs in disadvantaged communities combining a 'one-stop shop' for a range of community services including health, employment education with a specific role in addressing digital poverty. (p51)

## Careers Guidance

The [Northern Ireland Careers Service](#) within the Department for Economy provides an all-age careers education and guidance service to promote employment, education and training opportunities. Careers advisers operate throughout Northern Ireland from Job Centres, Jobs and Benefits Offices and stand-alone careers offices. Advisers also work with careers teachers in schools and further education colleges to provide advice and guidance to pupils from 14 to 19. In Northern Ireland, careers education is a statutory area of learning in the common curriculum for all grant-aided post-primary schools. In addition, further education colleges and higher education institutions also offer careers guidance to their students.

In its recommendations for the new Skills Strategy the OECD calls for the enhancement of the quality and consistency of career guidance and improved dissemination of career guidance information. It also suggests that there should be a greater role for employer involvement in the provision of career guidance.

## Voluntary and Community Sector Provision

There is a vacuum in terms of data on community-based adult learning provision – currently no-one

can say how many groups are involved or how many adults enrol. The CommunityNI website lists 445 organisations that categorise themselves as providing education or training, but many of these do not work with adults; other organisations which are involved in adult learning provision, may have chosen to categorise themselves under headings such as community development, women or health and wellbeing.

According to the Charities Commission for NI just over half of all charities registered (3,698 out of 6,836) declare that they are involved in the advancement of education: however again many of these will not work with adults (e.g. youth organisations, PTAs, bands), or would not view themselves as operating in the field of adult learning (e.g. cancer charities), and it is not possible to search more accurately within the category.

The most useful statistics come from the Open College Network Northern Ireland (OCNNI), which is the largest regulator of accredited learning in the Voluntary Community Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE). OCNNI has 159 registered centres in the VCS. Over the past three years there have been 31,997 registered learners, with 23,157 or 72% achieving qualifications from Entry Level to Level 4 (almost 50% achieving at L1).<sup>8</sup> These statistics including the past 12 months when learning has been hard hit by Covid and lockdowns, so the average of c10,000 registrations annually may be slightly under-representative.

### **There are still no statistics collated for non-accredited learning.**

There are now no longer any region-wide organisations wholly focused on the adult learning field. In 2007/08 the Dept for Employment and Learning (the predecessor of the current Dept for the Economy) made a sudden decision to withdraw contracts from the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), the Ulster People's College (UPC) and the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA). All three had had long-standing governmental support – the WEA since the 1950s, UPC from the 1980s and EGSA from the 1960s. This decision led to the eventual demise of all three organisations within a period of six years as the loss of support was substantial (eg in the case of the WEA it amounted to c£1M or c65% of its income) and could not be sustainably replaced from other sources. The WEA would probably have averaged 6500 learners a year so the loss was considerable (DEL claimed that FE colleges would pick up this loss).

Many VCSE organisations would not identify themselves with the provision of adult learning, as the medium is lost in the primary categorisation of activities, such as health provision, good relations or elderly care. This is a challenge for adult learning recognition, not just from groups but also their funders.

### **Funding for Community Provision**

The list of funders is long and further demonstrates the difficulty in collating data and achieving due recognition for the sector's contributions to adult learning.

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8 On the Irish NQF this range is from Level 1 to Level 6. Level 1 equates to Level 3 on Ireland's NQF

This list is probably far from complete, but funders would include – Dept for Economy - ESF, PEACE IV (administered by SEUPB and local councils), Dept for Communities – Voluntary Community Unit, Dept for Health and local Health and Social Services Boards, Dept for Justice, Executive Office, Arts Council for NI, Erasmus+ (until Brexit), local government, The National Lottery Community Fund, Community Relations Council, Halifax Foundation, Ulster Garden Villages and Esmee Fairbairn Foundation

## Advocacy for Adult Learning

Given the withdrawal of government support from key voluntary sector agencies in 2008, there was clearly a need for a strong, unified voice for adult learning to counter the lack of understanding of the role of non-statutory provision. EGSA and the WEA led on an initiative to build an adult learning voice and in 2010 formed the Forum for Adult Learning NI (FALNI), with the WEA acting as the secretariat.

Initially membership was for organisations in adult learning with a region-wide brief and included – EGSA, WEA, NICVA, Rural Community Network, Open University, OCN NI, CollegesNI (umbrella group for FE, no longer in existence) and University and College Union. The group did not constitutionalise and has always remained an informal network to support members and promote adult learning. It kept a minimal Adult Learners' Week going for a number of years and also produced a Manifesto for the 2011 NI Assembly elections.

When the WEA was forced to close in June 2014, the secretariat transferred to Colin Neilands (former Director of the WEA) who had been its Chair. In the autumn of 2014 FALNI was approached by the Learning & Work Institute to join its EAAL programme and form the NI Impact Forum on Adult Learning, one of four across the UK. This contract has continued to-date and as the first income that FALNI has had has enabled significant growth and an opportunity to engage more fully with Government (although this was impacted by the suspension of the NI Assembly for three years).

The EAAL work has allowed the Forum to run 3-4 seminars/webinars a year with attendance of up to 70 delegates. It has linked NI not just with the other parts of the UK through partnership with the Learning and Work Institute and Scotland's Learning Partnership, but also with Ireland: AONTAS staff regularly attend Forum events and FALNI sits on AONTAS' advisory group for European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL).

FALNI has contributed to UK EAAL reports, including the 2017 report *Healthy, Wealthy and Wise: the impact of adult learning across the UK*, and in 2020, in partnership with Belfast Learning City, produced the *Learn Well, Live Well: adult learning and health and wellbeing report*.<sup>9</sup>

FALNI has made responses to the last two draft Programmes for Government and (thanks to support from Mervyn Storey MLA) has worked with the Research and Information Service of the NI Assembly to cross-reference key recommendations from the *Health, Wealthy & Wise* report to these drafts (an update to reference the latest draft PFG should be complete by summer 2021).

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<sup>9</sup> <https://falni.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Healthy-Wealthy-Wise-Report.pdf> and <https://falni.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Learn-Well-Live-Well-Report-Final.pdf>

In anticipation of the consultation on the new Skills Strategy (see p2) FALNI is taking the recommendation made by the OECD on the **building of a culture of lifelong learning and involving members in discussion over the coming months on creating a vision, engaging participation, building collaboration and supporting resources**: about 30 members are involved in these working groups.

In 2018 FALNI hosted a conference which brought together representatives from the five nations, which gave rise to the formation of NALAB (Network of Adult Learning Across Borders).

FALNI now has a website ([www.falni.org](http://www.falni.org)) which means for the first time ever stakeholders in adult learning in NI have a site to share good practice and access resources.



**Part 2:  
Identification of Current  
Needs for Adult Learning in  
Northern Ireland and Ideas  
for All-Island Collaboration,  
specifically with AONTAS**

## Summary

The Forum for Adult Learning in Northern Ireland (FALNI) seeks to improve accessible adult learning across Northern Ireland (NI). The needs and actions required have been most recently outlined in its contribution to the UK report – Healthy, Wealthy & Wise (2017), additionally, grassroots groups have noted a range of issues from funding (including the impact of Brexit and loss of ESF funding) to relationships with other providers and the need for a clear understanding of community education provision in NI.

There is clear support for all-island collaboration based on the findings from a consultation process (March, 2021) with 32 groups via a webinar and questionnaire. In terms of all-island collaboration, specific benefits noted by community education groups in Northern Ireland include the opportunity for shared learning and dialogue, collaboration, exploring common issues, access to funding and strengthened advocacy between FALNI and AONTAS. Examples of options for North-South cooperation include **capacity building, an all-island Festival of Learning, annual shared events, social media support, research into the contribution of community education providers, building a culture of lifelong learning, securing a fund specifically for cross-border community collaboration and potentially creating an online all-island community college.**

The clear assessment of need, expression of support for collaboration and examples of options provide a robust, evidence-based roadmap for future collaboration for the betterment of adult learners across the island of Ireland.



## Introduction

The Forum for Adult Learning NI (FALNI) was established in 2010 to create a voice for adult learning in Northern Ireland. It is a non-constituted alliance of stakeholders from across all sectors, but has a particular concern to represent organisations from the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector which has less political muscle than adult learning providers based in statutory sector. FALNI has reflected on the needs of adult learning in NI throughout its existence, producing manifestos for the 2011 and 2016 NI Assembly elections. Since 2014 FALNI has been part of the UK European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL) programme which has raised its profile and allowed wider, strategic consultation on adult learning needs.

This paper reflects on the needs identified by FALNI and also on more grassroots needs identified through a webinar hosted by AONTAS in March 2020, for NI community organisations and by follow-up questionnaires. The paper goes on to identify ideas generated by FALNI leadership for collaboration with AONTAS, where all-island projects might help address certain of these needs.

Organisations in attendance at the AONTAS webinar included: *Age NI, Ballybeen Women's Centre, Belfast Recovery College, Ceres Europe (NI) Ltd, Conway Education Centre, CRAICNI, Crescent Arts Centre, Derry City and Strabane District Council, DSC, First Steps Women's Centre, Kilcooley Women's Centre, Northern Ireland Adult Education Impact Forum, OCNNI, Rural Community Network, Southern Regional College, U3A Foyle, Ulster University, WRDA and Yallaa CIC.*



## Needs Identified by FALNI

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Through consultation with its members FALNI produced manifestos before the 2011 and 2016 NI Assembly elections.

### **The 2016 Manifesto had 8 asks:**

- 1. Establish a cross-departmental working group on adult learning**
- 2. Introduce a framework for adult learning**
- 3. Increase funding for adult learning covering different delivery environments**
- 4. Provide an individual learning budget**
- 5. Offer a career review for all adults**
- 6. Improve access to learning opportunities for families and communities**
- 7. Recognise equivalences of qualifications - academic, vocational, formal and community-based**
- 8. Support the promotion, research and advocacy of adult learning**

With the collapse of the NI Assembly in January 2017, and no resumption until January 2020, there was little opportunity to press politicians on these asks.

FALNI was involved over 2016-17 with its UK EAAL partners in the production of the Healthy, Wealthy & Wise Report<sup>10</sup> which looked at the impact of adult learning on the economy, health and community. The report includes sections on each of the four jurisdictions of the UK, analysing their contexts and identifying regional/national needs.

For NI seven actions were identified which expand on some of the needs from the 2016 Manifesto and add other strategic objectives:

- 1. A commitment from the Executive that NI becomes a Learning Society which promotes, funds and celebrates learning, in formal and informal settings, throughout the lives of its citizens, for the betterment of their health, economic, social and cultural wellbeing.**
- 2. Adopt a Lifelong Learning Strategy – recognising that, with current and future technological and demographic changes, learning must extend throughout and across life and is essential for individuals and communities to achieve their full potential.**
- 3. Undertake a comprehensive survey of provision across all sectors to establish a baseline, leading to a review of current delivery and funding to develop a system that both enables the individual to progress into and throughout work and enables the development of stable, inclusive communities.**
- 4. Provision across the sectors should be evaluated (and funded) in accordance with impact indicators; successful innovation should receive funding to become mainstreamed.**
- 5. Identify alternative funding to ensure continuity of delivery in key areas of employability and peacebuilding.**
- 6. Encourage collaboration between policymakers and professionals across education, health,**

**work and employment and community development. This should be the norm and expected by government and funders in line with the spirit of the draft Programme for Government.**

- 7. Facilitate a Forum for Adult Learning – to promote adult and lifelong learning, advise on policy (including the creation of a Lifelong Learning Strategy), facilitate collaboration between providers and develop best practice through association with the other nations of the UK.**

While the NI Assembly remained in suspension until January 2020, FALNI engaged as much as possible with key civil servants to press these points.

In 2021 FALNI responded to the consultation on the next Programme for Government. It took the opportunity to call again for the Executive to make a core commitment to making NI a learning society – something in line with the recommendation from the OECD report supporting the next Skills Strategy, which calls for the creation of a lifelong learning culture in NI.

## **Needs Identified from Survey of Grassroots Groups<sup>11</sup>**

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The return of responses came from a broad sampling of the VCSE sector, small and large organisations, specialist and umbrella bodies, and there is a consistency of themes, albeit with somewhat different emphases from different organisations.

### **Funding**

This was the top priority for most, perhaps not surprisingly as fundraising dominates the work of almost all groups in the VCSE sector. A number of different concerns arose:

- concern over the **imminent end of the European Social Fund (ESF) and over its replacement scheme which is yet to be opened for consultation**. This was an important fund for quite a few organisations working with ‘hard to reach’ groups. VCSE organisations have had concerns about the restrictions placed upon their delivery (not allowed to deliver beyond Level 1) and would hope that the Shared Prosperity Fund (its replacement) would offer greater opportunity (this is a UK-wide fund so negotiations happen at national level and when Stormont was suspended political representation for NI was limited). As a fund ESF has also favoured larger organisations which have the capacity to manage complex and admin-heavy programmes.
- funding for learning, including ESF, is primarily focused on 16-25 year-olds and it **seems like ‘older’ learners are not considered important**
- funding is short-term in nature, there is **very little core funding for community groups** anyway and it too can be subject to annual renewal. Most funding for learning provision is project-based which only rarely goes beyond three years. The good practice built up is never enabled to be mainstreamed.
- there is **no dedicated fund for adult learning in the community**. As explained in Part 1 of this report, there is a long list of funders each with their own emphases and requirements for provision and reporting.

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11 Respondents came from a list of potential AONTAS members compiled and submitted to AONTAS in late 2020 – see Appendix

- funders, particularly Government funders, can **fail to understand what communities actually need. Funds tend to be set up without consultation with those at the coalface** and are driven by what the state needs in terms of skills and qualifications, rather than what communities themselves might prioritise. Organisations can feel frustrated at not being able to provide according to the needs that they witness. There are honourable exceptions, eg the National Lottery Community Fund will only fund on evidence of need, but even there, there are still parameters placed around prioritised themes etc.

### **Relationship with other providers**

This is mostly around relationships with FE colleges. As described in Part 1, all colleges have relations with many of their local community organisations, either as outreach centres for delivery, or as partners in projects.

Respondents felt they needed:

- **respect and recognition for the value of community provision and integration into the mainstream framework of adult learning**
- **a review of the conditions for outreach classes from FE which are at variance with the spirit of provision that VCSE groups would espouse, eg minimal class sizes where if the community group is one short the course doesn't run which in the view of the community organisation means that nine people might be lost to learning. Also, the curriculum on offer is solely in the hands of the college and concession fees for older people are no longer offered.**
- **to have real and valued cooperation. The colleges pride themselves on being based in and serving their communities, but it doesn't always feel that way to VCSE groups.**

Other identified needs/issues:

- **space and time to reflect. Groups are always evaluating learners and provision but often have no time to reflect on what they gather and see how this evidence could be used for advocacy.**
- **a campaign to promote the value of learning at any age**
- **continued need for women-specific learning programme with adequate childcare etc.**
- **a directory of community provision**
- **the impact of Covid on the most vulnerable in society and the role community learning provision could play in recovery**
- **Apprenticeships for older adults who have had to retrain due to COVID-19**
- **VCSE organisations permitted to deliver higher level qualifications**

## Reflection on Identified Needs

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FALNI and the grassroots organisations (many of whom attend FALNI events) express similar core concerns and needs, although in slightly different language.

- i. Of primary concern to grassroots organisations are funding issues which encompass financial assistance but also funding relationships. While FALNI expresses concern over funding on a larger strategic level, for these organisations it can be a matter of their survival. Both agree that the loss of ESF funds will hit provision in the VCSE sector hard and that equivalent support needs to be secured. Even the substantial ESF funds however fall into the project-based funding that is only ever available to VCSE organisations for learning provision. Endless short-term projects supported by a cornucopia of funders are not going to address on-going learning needs and is an inefficient methodology – there needs to be a more strategic approach. The challenge is how do adult learning stakeholders from the VCSE sector position themselves (ideally collectively) so that Government sees them as integral to its plans and wants to fund them?

**There is a need to raise the capacity of these groups to build cohesion amongst themselves, tap into the power of their learners and act either as direct advocates and/or through FALNI.**

The VCSE groups need to believe in their strength, and this then needs to be realised by decision-makers. The review of provision named in the Healthy, Wealthy & Wise report, FALNI sees as particularly needed in the VCSE sector to enable its current delivery and potential to gain greater recognition, to show that it deserves to be a significant stakeholder in future planning and provision of adult learning. From the Open College Network Northern Ireland (OCNNI) statistics, it emerges that at least 10,000 learners a year are engaged by community providers in accredited learning – if non-accredited learning were to be added (and there are no statistics available for this) then that figure probably more than doubles. The depth of this engagement and the sector's capacity to attract those most unlikely to enrol in statutory provision are strengths that should be at the core of future advocacy.

**However, as one respondent put it, there seems to be no time or space to reflect.**

- ii. Collaboration is one of FALNI's key principles and is also a concern for respondents from grassroots groups. FALNI would see collaboration as needed within sectors as well as across them, but the VCSE respondents were more focused on inter-sectoral relations, specifically with their local FE colleges.

How well do stakeholders from different sectors understand the constraints and strains under which the other operates? How easy is it to scapegoat 'the other'? A problem is that there are few opportunities for the sharing of experiences, few for a where different sectors come together. FALNI offers some opportunities and could do more if it had more capacity. Trusted relations between all providers, which are learner-centred, and which define roles and responsibilities and respect one another's strengths and limitations, will ultimately benefit adult learning as a whole.

- iii. Raising the profile and value of adult learning is a common concern. FALNI has raised with officials the lack of any festival of adult or lifelong learning in NI in contrast to all other parts of the UK and Ireland. Such a celebration could particularly help raise the profile of the contribution made by the VCSE sector and be something to build a sense of common purpose.
- iv. A more secure, better-funded FALNI could go a long way towards addressing these identified needs. The precariousness of the Forum's funding is not widely-known – certainly not by officials, but also not by the majority of 'members'. It's a delicate negotiation with officials – not wanting to make the Forum seem ephemeral or transient, but also needing to point out the limitations in its capacity to undertake work without additional resources: similarly with members, FALNI needs them to invest in the Forum, support it and not feel that it will be yet another short-lived hope for adult learning.

## Ideas for All-Island Collaboration

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Universally those at the AONTAS webinar in March 2021 and respondents to the follow-up survey feel that north-south collaboration in adult learning would have positive benefits. They point out that learners and workers move freely across the border, and many organisations operate on an all-island basis. Points raised include:

- **people from both sides of the border learning together creates opportunities for dialogue, healthy debate and greater understanding**
- **collaboration for adult learning stakeholders would enable the sharing of good practice and resources**
- **the exploration of common issues (eg digital poverty, the impact of COVID-19, diversity) could lead to joint projects**
- **opportunities to access funds that otherwise could not be applied for**
- **FALNI and AONTAS working together would help strengthen one another's advocacy**

## Ideas from FALNI

As well as the general support that FALNI is already experiencing in work to date with AONTAS, developing joint projects and finding ways in which each organisation becomes better known outside its current geographical parameters would strengthen the relationship and make it more visible and tangible to members and other stakeholders.

Some options to explore with AONTAS include:

- **capacity building for community groups, covering collaboration, leadership and advocacy – this would help build a sense of collective amongst community providers in NI as currently they have no structure for coming together to build support and identify issues for advocacy that could then be passed to FALNI for action. FALNI does not currently have the capacity to meet**

this need and recognises the strength of AONTAS in this area. This might also be the way to build membership of AONTAS in the north – many will not see belonging as a good investment unless there is local return.

- an all-island Festival of Learning – FALNI will continue to press at every opportunity for funding to hold an annual celebration. Minimally AONTAS could provide learning from its many years of experience. Initially the festivals might well be separate as a base would need to be built in NI first of all, but they could run in parallel and longer-term the possibility of a single festival could be investigated. The organisations should also explore collaboration with UNESCO Learning Cities and their festivals.
- annual shared event(s) – minimally a joint conference/seminar once a year on a shared theme/issue where greater understanding of similarities and differences could be built, as well as relationships between members.
- support via social media - making collaboration more visible on both websites, by advertising events (as appropriate), news items of common concern, perhaps regular updates from each organisation.
- research into the contribution of community providers – the need for this in NI has already been raised earlier in this report, but it is probably a common need. Perhaps funding could be accessed for a whole-island project – minimally there would be strength in ensuring that there would be read-across of any parallel projects.
- building a culture of lifelong learning – this is the core focus of FALNI currently, with exploration of the issues via working groups, leading to an autumn conference and then a report of initial findings and recommendations. This could hopefully be a theme to explore with AONTAS as a common advocacy issue.
- securing a fund specifically for cross-border community collaboration – exploration with funders such as Cooperation Ireland on funding to help community providers to share practice through joint projects.
- create an online all-island community college – as the pandemic experience has clearly demonstrated, borders and distance no longer restrict the provision and sharing of learning thanks to online opportunities. Could the ethos and essence of community provision be captured and transferred online? This might also be an opportunity to explore a self-financing model for leisure learning? Possibly a social enterprise that could support the work of both agencies.

## Concluding Remarks

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Adult learning has increasingly become the 'poor cousin' in Northern Ireland over the past 20 years, with a lack of policy recognition, the loss of major infrastructure in community provision and funding becoming harder than ever to access. Sadly this is a pattern that is also found elsewhere in the UK and Ireland, and indeed further afield, as the emphasis shifted so strongly to skills and qualifications acquisition. However recently there has been a growing recognition that lifelong learning can be a significant facilitator of economic, social, health and cultural wellbeing and prosperity.

Thanks to the UK EAAL programme, FALNI has had a new lease of life and over the past 5-6 years has gained many new followers and supporters and is starting to receive some recognition from policy-makers. This is done on a shoestring budget, with a 'worker' who is freelance and whose contract amounts to 3-4 days a month and thanks to much voluntary effort also. The potential for more work is huge and this paper shows the scale of need that is readily identified and for which FALNI, with relationships with all sectors of stakeholders, is uniquely placed to achieve. However, at the time of writing there are no funds secured past the end of 2021 and it is difficult to identify a funder that would cover its core activities. Uniquely in these islands NI lacks a stable advocate for adult learning and the experience of FALNI over the past six years of animation with EAAL support has shown the hunger and need that exists.

The new Skills Strategy, and in particular its recommendation on building a culture of lifelong learning, may hold out hope for adult learning receiving greater recognition and hopefully support – but, all stakeholders in adult learning need to be mobilised and united to ensure that this potential is not lost, as is so often the case when initial vision becomes watered down to fit more constrained goals. This is a time when a strong advocate for adult learning is really needed to influence the outworking of the strategy.

Until such times as FALNI gains Government support (in line with adult learning advocacy in other parts of these islands), its capacity to deliver will remain lower than the needs of its members. Partnership working with AONTAS could provide much needed support, drawing on its expertise and building an all-island adult learning community to the benefit of all.

## Appendix

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AONTAS would like to thank all the groups for their participation. Your involvement in this research is greatly appreciated. We hope that this report will be a resource for you and for your organisation.

The following groups were contacted for their views on the needs of community-based adult learning provision in N Ireland and their ideas for all-island collaboration and are all potential partners in future FALNI/AONTAS projects.

Where a location is not specified the group has a regional remit.

- **Action Mental Health**
- **Advice NI**
- **Age NI**
- **Artsekta**
- **Ashton Centre, Belfast**
- **Atlas Women's Centre. Lisburn**
- **Ballybeen Women's Centre, Belfast**
- **Belfast Recovery College, Belfast**
- **Bogside & Brandywell Health Forum, Derry/Londonderry**
- **Building Communities Resource Centre, Ballymoney**
- **Causeway Rural and Urban Network, Coleraine**
- **Ceres Europe, Limavady**
- **Chrysalis Women's Centre, Craigavon**
- **Community Arts Partnership**
- **Conway Education Centre, Belfast**
- **CRAIC NI**
- **Crescent Arts Centre, Belfast**
- **Derry Well Women, Derry/Londonderry**
- **Donegall Pass Community Forum, Belfast**
- **esc films, Belfast**
- **Falls Women's Centre, Belfast**
- **Family Caring Centre, Antrim**
- **First Steps Women's Centre, Dungannon**
- **Focus on Family, Coleraine**
- **Footprints Women's Centre, Belfast**
- **Foyle Women's Information Network, Derry/Londonderry**
- **Galliagh Women's Group. Derry/Londonderry**
- **Gems**
- **Greenway Women's Centre, Belfast**
- **Groundwork NI**
- **Kilcooley Women's Centre, Bangor**
- **Libraries NI**

- Nerve Centre, Derry/Londonderry
- NI Rural Women's Network
- NIACRO
- NICVA
- NIPSA
- NOW Group
- Old Library Trust, Derry/Londonderry
- People 1<sup>st</sup>
- Princes' Trust
- Shankill Women's Centre, Belfast
- Springboard Opportunities, Belfast
- Springvale, Belfast
- Start360
- Step, Cookstown
- Strathfoyle Women's Activity Group, Derry/Londonderry
- Supporting Communities
- The Verbal, Derry/Londonderry
- Tides Training
- Training for Women Network
- U3A Foyle, Derry/Londonderry
- Upper Springfield Development Trust, Belfast
- Waterside Women's Centre, Derry/Londonderry
- Windsor Women's Centre, Belfast
- Women's Centre Derry, Derry/Londonderry
- Women's TEC, Belfast
- Women's Resource and Development Agency

Contact us:

**AONTAS**

The National Adult Learning Organisation  
2nd Floor, 83–87 Main Street,  
Ranelagh, Dublin 6

T: 01 406 8220

E: [mail@aontas.com](mailto:mail@aontas.com)

[www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com)

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RCN: 20013042

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