



The Voice of
Adult Learning

AONTAS – National Coordinator of the European Agenda for Adult Learning

Learning Today for A Better Tomorrow (2015-2017)



1st November 2015
– 31st October 2017



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AONTAS is the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation. As an umbrella body committed to advocating and lobbying for the development of a quality service for adult learners and promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning, **AONTAS** works on behalf of its almost 500 strong membership and regards them as a key resource which provides the organisation with a grassroots, authentic understanding of adult and community education practice and learner perspective. The membership profile comprises a rich mix of statutory, voluntary and community organisations involved in the provision of adult learning as well as individuals who are deeply involved in and committed to the concept and practice of lifelong learning.

AONTAS provides a crucial platform for member organisations to share experience and best practice, promote their work and advocate on the value and necessity of adult and community education.

For more information, visit www.aontas.com.

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“

*It takes just one step
and if you're willing
to take that step
people will be there
to help you.*

”

Noeleen Watson
Adult Learner



FOREWORD



In AONTAS we believe in, and strive to realise, the right of all adults to quality learning throughout their lives. Almost fifty years of working with and for learners in Ireland has consistently proven the multiple benefits of access to education and learning opportunities. Education creates the potential to enable personal and social transformation.

In today's globalised society, national identities and economies are rapidly fracturing and re-forming. We are witnessing the rise of an emboldened inward-looking politics alongside escalating global inequality. In these times of intense transition, the cohesive and empowering role of education is increasingly pertinent to help maximise positive opportunities and outcomes for individuals, but also for the states and regions wherein they reside.

Education and learning help people flourish, supporting their development in myriad ways. They enhance social inclusion, helping foster an active, engaged citizenship that enables countries to thrive. Prospects for obtaining fulfilling employment and for developing within professional settings are also increased, while transversal capabilities that contribute to more robust and cohesive societies are cultivated.

To create a more equal society fit for our shared globalised future, Ireland must widen its participation in lifelong learning. In doing so, Ireland must pay particular attention to those who have been educationally disadvantaged. Currently, only 6% of the population in Ireland avail of lifelong learning, placing the country far behind its European counterparts. At the same time, encouragingly, there is a clear political will at the national level to complement robust grassroots efforts in community education, in academia and in civil society, to rapidly improve the lifelong learning rate in this country.

Crucial steps have already been taken in this regard, and in recent years significant strides have been made to increase peoples' opportunities for engaging in meaningful learning and education. The Irish government's commitment to reach a 15% participation rate in lifelong learning by 2025 is a particularly important policy development. While five years later than the European-wide goal of reaching 15% participation in adult learning across Europe by 2020, the achievement of Ireland's target would result in more than double the number of people engaging in learning opportunities that have the potential to transform their lives.

Ireland's commitment to the European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL) plays a crucial role in achieving the national ambition to improve learning provision and to reach the 15% participation rate. Since its 2012 rollout the EAAL has played an important role in Europe, galvanising governments, civil society and education practitioners to advance educational opportunities and learn from each other's initiatives, setbacks and successes.

The EAAL programme has had a clear and positive impact on the education landscape in Ireland and on the increased availability of learning options for adults across the country. Having proudly accepted the role of EAAL National Coordinator in 2014, today AONTAS continues to strengthen this evolving collaboration. As we progress with the coordination of the latest 2017-2019 EAAL Programme, AONTAS wanted to mark the collective achievements of all involved in the recently completed project. Hence, this publication highlights some of the wonderful outcomes in Ireland of the 2015-2017 'Learning Today For A Better Tomorrow' EAAL programme.

With European targets set to increase from 15% by 2020 (ET2020) to 25% by 2025 (European Pillar of Social Rights), the EAAL's 2015-2017 programme provided invaluable opportunities for AONTAS and its partners to create and run innovative projects. This included the launch of an online blended-learning training programme for community education practitioners with our partner An Cosán Virtual Community College; an additional 8,000 learners accessing the information portal www.OneStepUp.ie, marking a 24% increase on the same timeframe in the previous two years; a successful series of five study and 20 conference visits to and from our European neighbours resulting in new partnerships and projects; engagement with the exciting Skills for Work programme; the roll out of a creative communications and advocacy plan that resulted in messaging about the EAAL, learning opportunities and the role of education reaching 2.5 million people with a social media reach of over one million views. That's just a snapshot of what was achieved!

The realisation of the 'Learning Today for a Better Tomorrow' agenda was also instrumental in expanding strategic relationships and collaborations across the education and learning sector. Through networking, seminars and continual information sharing, spaces were either created or broadened to ensure discussion, connection and cooperation about the importance of adult learning across Ireland. Project events also saw the involvement of new allies who truly enriched discussions and increased momentum around the programme. The 2015-2017 project was invigorated by the participation of individuals such as national state TV broadcaster Brian Dobson; politicians with a passion for adult education, such as Senator Lynn Ruane; learners, practitioners and academics from our European neighbours who generously shared their experience and insights; and the formation of new alliances with businesses such as Irish Rail, GEODIS Ireland and An Bord Fáilte through the Skills for Work programme.

As an NGO, rather than a government policy body, AONTAS leveraged its role as National Coordinator to connect grassroots learners, civil society and education practitioners with policy makers at the local, national and European levels. At each AONTAS-run seminar, partner-run event or EAAL Project Advisory Group meeting, the positive impacts of lifelong learning were consistently demonstrated. Crucially, AONTAS was also able to firmly place learners and their experiences at the heart of any conversation about policy and practice, ensuring their presence

at events, the centrality of their voice in each publication, and amplifying their perspective through strategic promotions and media work. Without those learners, their commitment, determination, passion and willingness to their stories, this EAAL programme would not have been as rich and diverse as it was.

The networks and structures strengthened through the EAAL programme allowed AONTAS and its members, along with other engaged stakeholders, to consistently gather and disseminate best practice. Every opportunity was taken to advocate for a deeper alignment of Irish educational policy with the EAAL agenda of increasing participation in adult learning through enhancing policies and supports for adult learners, and stressing the importance of ensuring sufficient supports and resources for these learners and this vital sector.

AONTAS staff and members wish to express our deep appreciation of, and for, the learners, practitioners, policy-makers and EAAL partners who worked with us on the 2015-2017 'Learning Today For A Better Tomorrow' programme. The final report for the project received the maximum score in: objectives, results and products; management; impact/contribution to EU policy and dissemination by the European Commission Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency. Your outstanding contributions and collaborations led to the many successes outlined in this publication. We can all be proud of the many positive outcomes, each of which will continue to have meaningful impact on the lives of learners, their families and communities into the future. We hope you enjoy reading about all of this.


Niamh O'Reilly, CEO, AONTAS

PS - Until at least the end of 2019, through the EAAL's next exciting 'Upskilling Pathways' programme, AONTAS and our partners will be building on the great progress already achieved. To stay updated on everything we are doing, visit www.aontas.com and follow us on Facebook and Twitter.



LEARNER STORY - NOELEEN



“I could stand there with my head held high and tell my story”

Name: Noeleen Watson

Place of Learning: Roslyn Park College, National Learning Network (NLN),
Dublin/ Bray Institute of Further Education, Co Wicklow

“Sometimes our plans don’t always work out the way we want them to”

In 1990 I completed my Leaving Certificate. I went on to Business College and completed a certificate in business studies. My dream was to become a successful business woman. As we all know, sometimes our plans don’t always work out the way we want them to. I became pregnant in 1993 and stayed at home to care for my daughter. I had three more children after that and then I felt a bit stuck in my life.

“From that moment on my life changed for the better”

After the birth of my last child I suffered from depression. I hid it pretty well, I always had a smile and a positive word while inside I was dying. I had an accident in Christmas 2009 which left me in a lot of pain. It was a very difficult time in my life but I found help from an amazing counsellor and from that moment on my life changed for the better. The Home School Community Liaison Coordinator suggested I attend a course to help with my confidence. The facilitator was brilliant, helping and supporting me. My confidence grew slowly during the course. I also began a Pain Management course where I learned everything from Yoga to Mindfulness. I then heard about a graphic design course in Roslyn Park College in Sandymount. I couldn’t believe my luck, the idea of this course made my soul sing. I went for the interview and trial day and the tutor told me I had an eye for design. I applied for the course and was accepted.

“I have had a few busy years learning all I can learn”

I have had a few busy years learning all I can learn and this has helped build my confidence. I finished at the National Learning Centre in 2013 and passed all my exams with distinctions. I also completed 3 years of Partners of Education. With the help of an Adult Guidance Counsellor, I decided to apply to Bray Institute of Further Education for a course in graphic design. It was tough and a lot of hard work but in 2015 I received my Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Level 6 in Graphic Design with distinctions. I have done many projects for various clients and I have received great feedback on all the work I have done and look forward to where this will bring me.

“I could stand there with my head held high and tell my story”

I have been asked a number of times to speak about my experience of returning to education, I spoke in front of 70 Home School Community Liaison Coordinators and I never imagined I could stand there with my head held high and tell my story. A couple of weeks later I was asked by AONTAS to speak about my journey back into education and was featured on the One Step Up (www.onestepup.ie) website. Again this was a huge personal achievement and my hope now is that my story might inspire people to return to education. I have been so blessed and lucky that the right people came into my life and supported me. It takes just one step and if you’re willing to make that step people will be there to help you.

EAAL 2017 - 2019: Learning Today For A Better Tomorrow

ABOUT THE EAAL

The European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL) is the European Council's resolution in 2011 to facilitate European cooperation in adult learning policies, which arose from a clear need for increased coherence in adult learning policies across Europe. With the support of the European Commission, all Member States participating in the EAAL were invited to focus on the four objectives outlined in the 2009 European framework for cooperation in education and training (ET 2020).

While many European member states had and have lifelong learning strategies in place, the EAAL aimed to reinforce the priorities outlined in the ET 2020 plan in order to help countries create organised adult learning policies that would achieve the longer term vision of equal opportunity and access to high quality learning across Europe. The priorities for EAAL (2015-2020) are: **Governance**: ensuring the coherence of adult learning with other policy areas, improving coordination, effectiveness and relevance to the needs of society, the economy and the environment; increasing, where appropriate, both private and public investment. **Supply and take up**: significantly increasing the supply of high-quality adult learning provision, especially in literacy, numeracy and digital skills, and increasing take-up through effective outreach, guidance and motivation strategies which target the groups most in need. **Flexibility and access**: widening access by increasing the availability of workplace-based learning and making effective use of ICT; putting in place procedures to identify and assess the skills of low qualified adults, and providing sufficient second-chance opportunities leading to a recognised EQF qualification for those without EQF level 4 qualifications. **Quality**: improving quality assurance, including monitoring and impact assessment, improving initial and continuing education of adult educators, and collecting the necessary data on needs to effectively target and design provision.

The EAAL project is funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union and in Ireland it is co-financed by the Department of Education and Skills through SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority.

In 2014, following completion of the EAAL's first programme cycles, the Irish Government's Department of Education and Skills nominated AONTAS as National Coordinator for EAAL implementation. Since then, AONTAS has coordinated all subsequent project cycles in Ireland, including:

- 2014-2015 *'Taking the Next Steps: Promoting the European Agenda for Adult Learning'*
- 2015-2017 *'Learning Today For A Better Tomorrow'*
- 2017-2019 *'Increasing Pathways, Increasing Participation' programme* (current)

IRELAND:

Influencing Irish Policy, Impacting Lives

The lower someone's education attainment level, the less likely they are as an adult to participate in lifelong learning. Adults who complete secondary education are 65% more likely to participate in adult learning activities compared to those without secondary level education (Global Education Monitoring Report Education for all 2000-2015: Achievements and challenges).

In Ireland, the lifelong learning participation rate ranges from 6% to 7%, lagging behind the EU average of 10%. With less than half the European target of 15% participation of adults between the ages of 25-64 in adult education and lifelong learning here, this can have many important consequences for people in terms of their own development, confidence and access to employment opportunities. Strikingly, it can also affect their life expectancy, which research has shown is linked to educational attainment. For instance, at aged 30, men with higher education can expect to live seven years longer than men who didn't complete secondary school, while for women the difference is four years. (Health at a Glance 2017: OECD Indicators, Figure 3.5)

AONTAS coordinated the 'Learning Today for a Better Tomorrow' project to ensure that each action would build upon advancements in previous projects to strengthen the Irish adult, further and community education sector, helping to increase options and improve outcomes for adults with low skill levels. To extend the project's reach and impact, AONTAS ensured objectives and activities reinforced one another, while also complementing or actively supporting the organisations' broader work. This guaranteed project alignment with the AONTAS Strategic Plan 'Learning: A Lifetime's Work 2015-2018' and with national government policy, particularly the Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2014-2019.

Active engagement with the Department of Education and Skills was key over the course of 2015-2017. While responsibility for drafting and developing education policy in Ireland remained with the Department and a number of other government agencies, including SOLAS, the EAAL coordination role enabled AONTAS to facilitate and enrich discussions and debate at regional, national and European level. This included sharing perspectives and finding common ground on policy developments that could both increase access to and ensure successful economic and social outcomes for adults in lifelong learning and education.



SNAPSHOT: 2014 - 2019

Highlights of Recent Developments in Irish Further Education Policy

Each of these policies aims to increase adult participation in education and lifelong learning

2014 to 2019 Implementation of first 'Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2014-2019'

JANUARY 2016 Launch of new Irish 'National Skills Strategy 2025 – Ireland's Future'

FEBRUARY 2016 The Irish Government committed to the establishment of a forum for adult learners in the Further Education and Training Strategy, published by SOLAS in 2014, which helps place learners at the heart of the FET service. The first forum meeting took place on 26th February 2016 when learners were given the unique opportunity to influence the policy decisions that affect them, followed by a second forum in April 2017.

SEPTEMBER 2016 Launch of new 'Action Plan for Education 2016-2019', complemented each year with a detailed annual action plan, which sets targets for lifelong learning (10% by 2020 and 15% by 2025). While these targets lag behind the EU target, in setting the level for this target the Irish government has increased national stewardship and momentum towards its achievement.

AUGUST 2016 Continuing development of data infrastructure for further education and training, through the Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS), a joint initiative between SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority, and the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). As part of this, a new further education and training course national hub was launched in August 2016 bringing up-to-date information on more than 4,000 FET courses together for the first time. (<https://www.fetchcourses.ie/>)

APRIL 2017 Appointment of the National Skills Council and launch of Regional Skills Fora. The National Skills Council is chaired by the Minister of Education and Skills and includes the network of Regional Skills Fora created as part of the Government's National Skills Strategy. The Fora provide an opportunity for employers and the education and training system to work together to meet the emerging skills needs of their regions. The goal of the fora is to provide a point of contact in each region that allows for a more efficient collection of labour market data, as well as a point of contact for employers to become more involved in promoting opportunities for career progression.

The Irish governments's commitment to reach 15% participation rate in lifelong learning by 2025 is an important development in national policy. Though five years later than the EAAL goal of reaching 15% participation in adult learning across Europe by 2020, if the Irish government and its partners achieve 15% by 2025 it would be a welcome and impressive accomplishment, more than doubling the number of learners participating in learning and education in the country.

LEARNER VOICE:

The Learner Voice at the Centre

“Learner Voice is about empowering learners by providing appropriate ways of listening to their concerns, interests and needs in order to develop educational experiences best suited to those individuals.”

(Walker and Logan, 2008)

AONTAS believes that adult learners are the experts of their own learning and can positively contribute to shaping education provision at local and national level through learner voice activities and advocacy. The perspective of the learner is at the heart of all that AONTAS does, and at the centre of all organisational strategy, decision-making and action.

While formal policy forums and public debates can often prioritise the ‘supply’ side of education provision, AONTAS safeguards the presence and prominence of the ‘demand’ perspective. This means that AONTAS constantly stresses the centrality of learner viewpoints on accessibility, affordability and acceptability of available services and learning opportunities. AONTAS also highlights the personal and practical implications of education and training policies on the lives of individuals, their families and communities..

AONTAS developed the ‘Learning Today for a Better Tomorrow’ project in a manner that would place the voice and experience of learners front and centre of all stakeholder discussions. The public communications and promotional methodology positioned the ‘Learner Voice’ front-and-centre. AONTAS gathered and disseminated stories from adult learners whose personal accounts highlighted the many triumphs and barriers they faced when trying to advance in their learning journeys. Analysing and sharing trends from use of the www.onestepup.ie portal also enabled AONTAS to better understand adult learners’ experiences of accessing education, and advocate for improvements.

Wherever possible AONTAS ensured learners were present in person at meetings and events to share their own unique experience, whether in Ireland, Brussels, Malta or during other EAAL study visits to European countries. AONTAS also organised tailored media-training courses for learners to further amplify their advocacy and awareness work, highlighting barriers they faced, challenges they had overcome, and encouraging others in Ireland to take the step and enrol in a course that could significantly impact their lives for the better.

LEARNER STORY - JOHN



“I can honestly say it has been the best decision I have made so far”

Name: John Connell
Place of Learning: Ballyfermot and Chapelizod Partnership

“I have gained qualifications but also important life skills”

In 2011 John Connell was unexpectedly made redundant and was faced with some big life decisions on what his next move should be. He needed a change and decided to visit his local community services, the Ballyfermot and Chapelizod Partnership. The Partnership gave John the encouragement and confidence to return to education which allowed him to gain qualifications and a broad range of skills.

“The expectation from parents and other family members was to go out and get a job”

My experience of education first time around was not positive. Despite this, I did ok in my studies and I received good grades in my Leaving Certificate in 1993. At that time, there were few people progressing to further education and the expectation from parents and other family members was to ‘go out and get a job’ so that’s what I did. I entered the world of work straight from school and continued to work for the same company until I was made redundant in November 2011.

The company I worked for provided no advice on what options might be available and this was extremely difficult. I had been working there since before I even left school and I had no idea what to do next. I decided I needed a change so I visited my local Community Partnership.

“I can honestly say it has been the best decision I have made so far”

I visited the Ballyfermot and Chapelizod Partnership (Obair) to get some information on suitable options. I received useful advice from the wonderful staff there and I was given the encouragement I needed to return to education. I can honestly say it has been the best decision I have made so far. I started with a one year Return to Learning (RTL) course which was challenging but it gave me a taste for learning and I was eager to progress. I completed my RTL course and moved to a QQI Level 5 course in social care, before progressing to a Higher Diploma in applied social studies/social & community care. Despite it being a tough course and suffering a heart attack during my studies, I managed to pass with flying colours in May 2016. I am hopeful that I will find work in this area.

“When I returned to education I could not even type or send an email”

To anyone thinking of returning to education, all I can say is go for it. When I began my journey back to learning I couldn’t even type or send an email but after receiving great encouragement, my eyes have been opened. I have gained great qualifications but also acquired important life skills such as sticking to deadlines, broadening my mind and way of thinking and developing friendships. It’s been a great experience with many benefits. Age is no barrier, just believe in yourself, listen to advice and most importantly don’t be afraid of change.

NETWORKS:

Deepening Partnerships

Throughout ‘Learning Today For a Better Tomorrow’ AONTAS collaborated closely with learners, but also with a wide range of other priority stakeholders, including policy-makers, politicians, education practitioners and civil society organisations. Working to establish deeper networks with and between all these key partners, AONTAS organised multiple networking opportunities and ensured continual information sharing.

In this way spaces were either created or broadened to ensure discussion, connection and collaboration about the importance of lifelong learning across Ireland. As a result, key actors were privy to the same points of fact, leading to increased opportunities for debate and consensus creation.

This was primarily facilitated through the expansion of the Project Advisory Group (PAG), an invaluable structure dedicated to furthering EAAL objectives. The PAG is responsible for EAAL project development, oversight and coordination, and the PAG structure serves to strengthen the network of engaged stakeholders operating across different levels of educational policy and practice in Ireland. In addition to expanding the PAG, networks also flourished through a series of successful seminars with partners, particularly the National Adult Literacy Association (NALA), the Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) and the Skills for Work programme, in addition to EPALE (the online European platform administered by LEARGAS).

The EAAL Project Advisory Group (PAG)

Across the two years the Irish EAAL PAG met six times. Strong member attendance at each meeting was a testament to its success and sustainability. In collaboration with EPALE Ireland, the CEO of AONTAS chaired and convened each meeting, sharing relevant briefing materials and reports, in addition to providing regular updates and soliciting feedback on EAAL workplan outcomes and learning.

During ‘Learning Today For A Better Tomorrow’ membership of the PAG expanded and diversified to make it a truly cross-sectoral forum of leading experts in the field of adult learning. With a membership that is active, articulate and highly supportive of the project, the PAG more than doubled in size from its eight members during the previous EAAL project ‘Taking the Next Steps’ (2014-2015). By the end of 2017 the PAG boasted 20 member representatives, each hailing from a wide variety of bodies across academia, NGOs and government departments. In addition to this, there was a reciprocal engagement with EAAL UK (N. Ireland) through AONTAS participation in the Northern Ireland Impact Forum (EAAL/EPALE) and their participation in the PAG.

With access to a broad spectrum of learners and practitioners, all PAG members received EAAL project material to disseminate to contacts and share with learners, including a 1-page document on the project, a small pocket-sized booklet, an EAAL video explainer, a button for the One Step Up (www.onestepup.ie) website to display and share on their websites, and a video and information on learner stories.

¹ Six Project Advisory Group meetings during EAAL 2015- 2017: 21 June 2016; 11 October 2016; 10 January 2017; 10 April 2017; 13 June 2017; and 24 October 2017.



The diverse expertise within this advisory group was a clear strength. PAG members consistently evaluated the network as a positive and productive space that provided important opportunities for networking and information sharing within a somewhat fragmented sector. The PAG's expansion allowed for in-depth debates about present and future policy initiatives at the national level; facilitated richer engagement with EU projects; and increased reflection on issues arising from the grassroots level, from learners and community education service providers.

During the two-year project, the PAG strengthened its reputation as a trusted resource on adult learning, consistently providing expert advice and guidance. At the final PAG meeting in October 2017, more than 50 project partners - including Skills for Work, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), An Cosán Virtual Community College (VCC) and EPALE - and stakeholders were present at a public seminar presenting the outcomes of the innovative projects organised as part of this EAAL phase. The consensus was that the PAG's collective approach to tackling adult learning had been hugely valuable, allowing Ireland to maximise resources and ideas and to amplify impact - an element that remains fundamental in the subsequent EAAL programme.

“Today really gives us time to reflect on the outcomes of this project. We will continue to build on this excellent work, to strengthen the collaborations and innovations, and to bring the learnings into the next phase of the EAAL project.”

Niamh O' Reilly, CEO, AONTAS

SEMINARS:

Bringing People Together

APRIL 2016: European Policy Impact Seminar and PAG Meeting

On 28th April 2016, AONTAS organised a high profile launch event of the final stakeholder report of the previous EAAL (2014/2015) project and the launch of the new EAAL (2015/2017) at the Clock Tower, Department of Education and Skills, with Board Members of the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), the UK's EAAL national coordinator, high level policy makers and practitioners from across the adult learning field.

This event highlighted the importance of EU membership for Ireland, with attendees encouraged to more deeply engage in EU projects. Taking place while the EAEA Executive Board was having a meeting in Dublin, AONTAS organised the seminar to explore the impact and potential of European policy on adult and community education. Almost 40 stakeholders from Ireland and Europe attended, with Liz Waters, AONTAS President, opening the seminar and introducing Per Paludan Hansen, EAEA President.

Niamh O'Reilly, AONTAS CEO and EAEA Board Member then launched the AONTAS report 'European Agenda for Adult Learning Report – Taking the Next Steps' looking back at the successes and lessons learned from the previous EAAL project, and forward towards the plans for 'Learning Today For a Better Tomorrow'. Gina Ebner, Secretary General of EAEA then presented the impact of European policies on adult learning.

“National policy makers look at best practices in other European countries to see how to achieve positive changes in

their countries. This is why transfer of innovation for policies and programmes is hugely important. From a civil society perspective, Europe is a driving force in countries where adult education is weaker.”

Gina Ebner

Secretary General of EAEA



NOVEMBER 2016: Harnessing the Power of a Story, EPALÉ/Léargas

On 8th November 2016, Léargas, the coordinator for EPALÉ in Ireland, organised a seminar through the EAAL programme, attended by 100 participants with two strong keynote speakers, and a series of three practical workshops.



This successful 'Harnessing the Power of the Story' seminar explored how to maximise the impact of a story across media outlets and reach potential and present learners as well as funders. The seminar included high-profile speakers from outside the education sector for the

seminar to bring in their expertise and perspective - for example, Brian Dobson, one of the chief news presenters from the Irish national television broadcaster, RTE, was able to provide insight at the 'Harnessing the Power of the Story' seminar from 'outside' audiences (general public - including potential learners, news editors, journalists) that EAAL, AONTAS, and the education sector are trying to reach.

AONTAS sent out a press release and tweeted throughout the seminar, with the event trending nationally on the Irish Twitter Platform that day under the hashtag #WhatsYourStory and obtaining news media coverage. For example more than 10,000 people read an article on online news site The Journal.ie, and local radio in Cork County interviewed AONTAS CEO Niamh O'Reilly about the seminar, the benefits of returning to education as an adult, the AONTAS STAR Awards and the Adult Learners' Festival.

The seminar was positively evaluated and increased the sector's capacity to share learner and education stories. Resulting in a marked increase post-seminar in the number of blogs contributed to the EPALÉ portal by AONTAS-members and education sector users. By the end of 'Learning Today for a Better Tomorrow' AONTAS staff and membership had contributed more than 40 articles and blogs to the EPALÉ website.

MARCH 2017: EU Seminar: "European Union: Solidarity in a time of uncertainty"

On the last day of the AONTAS 'Adult Learners' Festival in March 2017, the Minister of State for Training and Skills opened the AONTAS-run seminar, 'European Union: Solidarity in

² <https://www.nala.ie/events/literacy-and-wellbeing-seminar>

a Time of Uncertainty'. Centred on a topic of high relevance to the Irish education sector considering the political realities of Brexit, this popular seminar welcomed close to 100 people, listening to and exchanging views with a panel of high profile policy and practitioner speakers from across the education sector. Twelve Slovenian adult learning practitioners and learners also participated in the morning's proceedings, as part of a week-long study visit to Ireland. The event provided an opportunity for exchange, debate and discussion with the diverse speaker panel of ten, including the keynote address from David Mallows, University College London lecturer and UK EPALE thematic coordinator, and from learner advocates such as Una Buckley.

“Adult learning is narrow and skewed towards those who are already educated. In order to ensure that opportunities are provided to those who were previously overlooked, we must increase and widen participation”.

David Mallows



MAY 2017: Literacy and Wellbeing Seminar, organised with NALA and the ETBI

AONTAS collaborated with NALA and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) to organise another successful seminar on 5th May 2017 exploring interesting ways to achieve the EAAL objectives of increasing options and learning for low-skilled people.

The half-day seminar on 'Literacy and Wellbeing' at the Department

of Education and Skills' Clock Tower in Dublin was live streamed on Facebook. The goal of the seminar was to provide educational advisors and tutors with new ideas, resources and methods to support adults who are referred to their education service. The format and content were designed to ensure the provision of information and ideas to educators to help them better understand and support the mental health of adult learners and to improve the adult learners experience in the learning environment. Three high profile speakers from the fields of health, sociology and psychology provided inputs during the seminar. Seminar speakers were tagged in tweets in the run up to the event to generate interest and momentum, and the event was live streamed on Facebook.

There were excellent questions and engagement from attendees, with provision of positive feedback in evaluation forms. The 85 attendees in the room acquired new knowledge with regards to literacy and wellbeing, with a particular emphasis on the mental health of learners. Following the event there was increased interest in the NALA-run 'Well Now!' health and wellbeing programme and exploration of how to best bring it into the education and training sector.



APRIL 2017: PAG Seminar, EU Focus:

On April 10th 2017, AONTAS organised a special seminar with a distinctive EU focus as the fourth meeting for the PAG. The seminar offered PAG members an opportunity to explore new, highly relevant developments

at the European level, specifically the finalisation of the European Council's 'Upskilling Pathways' Recommendation and the accompanying call for funding (EACEA No 02/2017). The meeting provided a collaborative, cross-sectoral space for reflection; particularly relevant given that Ireland's National Implementation Plan will be submitted in mid-2018.

Senior Expert, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (Martina Ní Cheallaigh) presented on the European Council Upskilling Pathways Recommendation, followed by extensive discussion and debate. To further enrich the seminar, AONTAS had also invited ten representatives from the Netherlands to participate. Capitalising on their presence for a study visit in Ireland organised through an Erasmus + funded project 'Extending the Literacy Houses Approach', AONTAS invited them to the PAG, where they shared information on the objectives and progression of their EAAL project, and worked with PAG members to identify synergies and potential collaborations.

This resulted in an invitation from the Dutch delegation to AONTAS, to deliver two workshops on 'stakeholder engagement' for participants at the final Dutch, 'Brick by Brick', in Breda, Netherlands, on 6th October 2017, with Ms. Tara Farrell, a member of the AONTAS Board, traveling to deliver both workshops, further forging relations and future collaborative opportunities.

EUROPE-WIDE COLLABORATION

A fundamental component of the EAAL approach is to increase Europe-wide best practice, through the sharing of information and learning and by facilitating collaboration between national coordinators in the European Union. AONTAS also hosted study visits which included EAAL national coordinators - Malta, Norway, Greece, Netherlands, Slovenia - and actively participated in the EU Vocational Skills Week in Brussels in both 2016 and 2017, guaranteeing the full participation of adult learners.

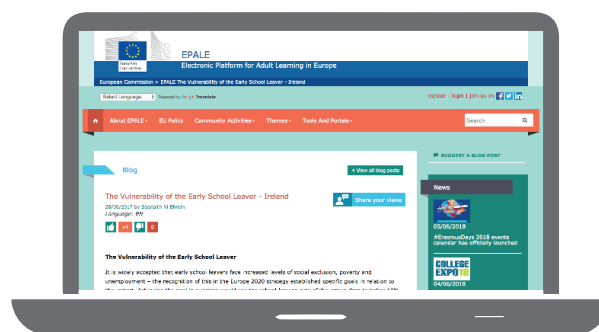
EPALE and the PAG

EPALE (Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe) is a multilingual open membership community for teachers, trainers, researchers, academics, policy makers and anyone else with a professional role in adult learning across Europe. Contributing to EPALE was a key way to deepen collaboration between National Coordinators, and complimented the study visits, seminars, inviting guest speakers, and input into other EAAL events across Europe.

All PAG meetings included an agenda slot for Léargas, the national agency responsible for EPALE Ireland to deliver a presentation on upcoming initiatives of interest that Léargas/EPALE or other groups were organising in connection to the EAAL objectives. The PAG also had a private group on EPALE where all documentation was posted in advance of meetings, with PAG members in regular contact with AONTAS staff between meetings, proactively sharing information within their own networks.

Throughout 'Learning Today For A Better Tomorrow' AONTAS regularly contributed to EPALE on best practice and updated the portal about new initiatives. In this way AONTAS fostered collaboration with EPALE Ireland through digital media, curating blogs from AONTAS members in addition to the monthly blog submissions and themed articles from AONTAS staff. In total, AONTAS staff and membership published more than 40 blogs and articles on EPALE, with AONTAS further disseminating the blogs via its Facebook and Twitter accounts. This work helped increase knowledge transfer and idea

exchange between the National Coordinators involved in the project, in particular, but also of all EPALE members.



ec.europa.eu/epale/en/about

Transnational Cooperation: Conferences and Study Visits

During the project there was excellent collaboration between national coordinators, which continues into the current 2017-2019 phase of the project. AONTAS presented the outcomes of EAAL projects at four EAAL closing events in Europe, presented the Irish EAAL project at two external conferences and hosted five study visits with EAAL National Coordinators. These visits from Greece, Malta, Slovenia, an Erasmus + project from the Netherlands, and from adult learning practitioners from Norway allowed AONTAS to disseminate best practice in Ireland and learn from the successes and challenges of other EU country projects. As a result of the above study visits, a number of reciprocal invitations were then extended to AONTAS.

AONTAS was also proud to **increase engagement with the UK and Northern Ireland through the EAAL**, particularly pertinent pre- and post-Brexit. This resulted in AONTAS presenting at the Northern Ireland closing event for the EAAL, and in an exciting new development for 2018 - where the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland ran their annual learners' festivals together for the first time. In March 2018, the Belfast Festival of Learning and the AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival took place over the same week (5th - 9th March) across the island, and a new learning exchange between the CEOs of the Irish and the UK's National Coordinators organisations is now also in place for 2018.

EAAL 2015 – 2017:

Transferring knowledge and exchanging good practice with European partners

- **Nov 2016**, UK- Niamh O'Reilly, AONTAS CEO, presented at UK EAAL event - the Adult Learning Conference 'Connected Communities' - in Cardiff, Wales
- **Dec 2016**, Belgium: Two AONTAS Adult Learners participated at the Adult Skills Conference, while two AONTAS members (An Cosan VCC and Longford Women's Link) profiled their work and their organisations at workshops during the conference in Brussels, Belgium
- **Jul 2017**, France - Tara Farrell, member of the AONTAS Board, delivered a workshop on a 'work study training programme' at the French NC/EPALE meeting in Paris, France
- **Sept 2017**, Slovenia - Niamh O'Reilly, AONTAS CEO, gave a virtual presentation at Slovenian EAAL Final Conference, with additional in-person workshops from AONTAS Vice-President Jim Prior and practitioner Catherine Aylmer in Slovenia, with a particular focus on the inclusion of the Learner Voice throughout the Irish campaign
- **June 2017**, Spain: Presentation on the 'I'm an Adult Learner' campaign at the EAEA General Assembly in Girona, Spain
- **Oct 2017**, Northern Ireland - Niamh O'Reilly, AONTAS CEO, presented at UK EAAL (N. Ireland), Final Conference in Belfast, Northern Ireland
- **Oct 2017**, Malta - AONTAS President, Liz Waters, delivered the keynote address at the Malta EAAL Final Conference in Valetta, Malta
- **Oct 2017**, Greece - Brid Greenan, Information Officer, presented on the One Step Up service at the Greece EAAL Final Conference in Athens, highlighting the value of information provision for learners, and of the data gained from user surveys for advocacy
- **Oct 2017**, The Netherlands - Tara Farrell, member of the AONTAS Board, delivered two workshops on stakeholder engagement at the International conference 'Brick by Brick: Extending the literacy houses approach' in Breda, The Netherlands
- **Oct 2017**, UK - Niamh O'Reilly, AONTAS CEO, participated in UK EAAL Final Conference in London, UK



ONE STEP UP

41,682 LEARNERS ACCESSING INFORMATION THROUGH ONE STEP UP

“Life is about learning. You will learn something new, without doubt. But you will also meet new people, who are feeling the same emotions as you, and together you will reach the mountain top of achievement.”

Learner who had called the One Step Up National Freephone Helpline, and then later responded to an AONTAS service-use survey

As the ‘Learning Today for a Better Tomorrow’ project cycle commenced, AONTAS knew from a survey that people responded to after accessing the One Step Up Helpline in 2015 that one in five (14/67, 21%) of the service users had cited ‘finding information or finding the right information’ as a clear barrier to further education and training progression. This was echoed in further feedback provided by additional learners in the first months of the ‘project lifecycle, during the 1st meeting of the National Adult Learner Forum in February 2016.

Increasing the quality of information available to people, in addition to improving their access to this information, was essential, and AONTAS worked towards this objective by continuously strengthening the AONTAS-run Information Referral Service. Through these services (Freephone Helpline and dedicated One Step Up website) potential and current learners are supported in accessing information on education and training opportunities, in addition to finding information about relevant education-related events in their region of the country.

AONTAS expanded the One Step Up services across the projects’ lifespan. A full-time staff member, the Information Officer, Brid Greenan, managed the website, ensuring a full and updated events calendar (<http://www.onestepup.ie/calendar/>) and handling all queries via the Freephone Helpline, through the One Step Up website, or if people filled out a query through the ‘Information on Adult Learning’ dropdown option on the AONTAS website’s Contact page. The Information Officer also conducted an internal review of the website, and following this review, a number of changes were made. The PAG were also consulted on the website, with a view to making further changes and modifications in the future.

The Information Officer heavily publicised the website among key audiences, both online and offline. A Google Grants agreement between AONTAS and Google, to the value of USD 10,000 per month was in place for three-quarters of the ‘Learning Today For A Better Tomorrow’ project, and helped ensure steady online promotion of the One Step Up website and Freephone Helpline.

During the project, the One Step Up website publicised 660 different learning and education events across the country. Increasing the profile of such events is important for highlighting the breadth of options available across the country, particularly as of the biggest obstacles facing potential learners is their lack of access to information about possible options. This is a barrier learners have repeatedly shared with AONTAS and the One Step Up Information Officer, and was also raised during both national learner forum events,, where learners explained that there needs to be more open days in their communities and local areas for them to find out about learning and education options.

Consistently promoting the One Step Up service at stands during local and regional events and seminars or at fairs run by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs), organised in conjunction with the national Department of Social Pro-



tection also helped increase its profile and reach. The relevance and benefit of One Step Up presence at these events is easily illustrated by the example of the April 2016 ETB Fair in the Ballyfermot area of Dublin, that was attended by 1,000 unemployed people or people registered as lower-income from the area. Such events are invaluable for increasing awareness of the helpline, booklet and website services with groups of people who can really benefit from access to further information that could open up options for further learning and development opportunities.

AONTAS also researched, drafted and designed a dedicated One Step Up Booklet (<http://www.onestepup.ie/information-booklet/>) as a resource for both learners and course providers. To develop the booklet AONTAS spoke to many organisations providing courses, information, advice or support in adult and community education. To ensure accessibility the booklet uses symbols to direct readers to information on a range of issues, including guidance; where to find courses; funding options; and contacts for local Adult Education Guidance and Information Services, community education groups and third level organisations.

AONTAS officially launched the booklet on 17th August 2017 during its month-long awareness campaign. Launched at a time when thousands of adults are considering taking up education and training options and when there is significant coverage in the media of education related topics with the release of the 'Leaving Certificate' (Irish final exams in secondary school) results in mid August. AONTAS sent out a press release that complemented its other external media releases during the campaign featuring adult learners. Between the booklet's launch and the end of 'Learning Today for A Better Tomorrow' in November 2017, AONTAS distributed 4,000 booklets to just over 1,000 strategically chosen contacts across the country, including home school liaison officers, managers from the Department of Social Protection, INTREO Officers, Youth Reach Centres, Libraries, and more.

In addition to promoting the service, and responding to all incoming learner queries and requests, AONTAS collated, analysed and disseminated service users' data from the website and helpline, in line with national data protection



legislation and regulations. This quantitative data helped deepen understanding of the barriers facing learners in accessing both information and services, in addition to urgent gaps in service provision. Forming a core component of the AONTAS advocacy strategy throughout the project, these findings were regularly shared within the PAG group, and were presented at conferences, including at the Irish EAAL project's closing ceremony in October 2017.

The obstacles most regularly cited were a lack of funding for part-time courses and a lack of suitable courses to fit the needs of the learners. A short follow-up survey was conducted with 10% of users by phone 3 to 12 months after they contacted the service to see if they had acted on the information given to them. This second survey gave an indication of some of the key contact points that learners access when looking for options and information. They included the Education and Training Boards and the Adult Education Guidance and Information Service, highlighting the importance of further promoting these services at a local level and ensuring they are adequately resourced.

AONTAS also shared the learnings and analysis with other EAAL National Coordinators, including presenting the One Step Up project as a best practice element at the closing EAAL conference in Athens, in the National Library of Greece, which was attended by more than 130 stakeholders from Ministries of Justice, and Social Integration, Universities, NGOs and Lifelong Learning Centres.

To continue to reach learners, particularly low-skilled adults, and support them in their learning journey, AONTAS will continue to invest in the One Step Up service, through continuously reviewing the user experience of both the Helpline and the website; adapting and improving the website structure; promoting the service through press work and paid advertising promotion; and extracting the user data to analyse trends and follow up with learners about their needs and any barriers they face for accessing learning opportunities.

EAAL 2015 - 2017

One Step Up Highlights

Increased the profile and traffic of the One Step Up website: During the project (1st November 2015 to 31st October 2017) the One Step Up website saw an increase of 24% on the same timeframe in the previous two years, with numbers jumping from 33,632 up to 41,682 users.

Helped almost 1,000 people with queries through the Freephone Helpline: 977 people contacted the Freephone Helpline during the project (Nov 2015 – end Oct 2017).

Promoted 660 relevant learning or education events across the country on the One Step Up website during the project.

Researched, designed and printed 12,000 booklets for the One Step Up service, creating an easy to read, accessible document that brings together all the information and learning options available for adult learners in Ireland, and that helps to further promote both the One Step Up Helpline and website.

Disseminated more than 10,000 One Step Up information booklets to targeted stakeholders, which included 4,000 'What Next' Information Booklets, and following its design and printing in 2017, the dissemination of 6,576 new 'One Step Up' booklets; the distribution of 700 One Step Up fliers, 2,545 posters, and 3,780 bookmarks.

Conducted a user survey with learners and potential learners. AONTAS followed up with 10% of all people who contacted the One Step Up service to find out about their experience of the service, through a six-question survey on Survey Monkey.

Created an effective advocacy tool through analysing the survey data to create a report providing a detailed breakdown of the events promoted on the website, and summarising the profile of the users of both the One Step Up Information Referral Website and the Freephone Helpline, broken down by location, age, employment status, reasons for getting in touch, reasons for returning to education and barriers to education.

Shared One Step Up data analysis with key policy makers and practitioners, through PAG meetings, via the project's final closing seminar through the dissemination of the document to strategic stakeholders, and the inclusion of the data in AONTAS advocacy messages.

SKILLS FOR WORK:

Innovation, Employment and Reaching New Learners

With the 2015 - 2017 EAAL programme seeking to reach new groups through forming and advancing innovative partnerships, the collaboration with the Skills for Work programme continued to develop and grow. Through its delivery of training courses to full- and part-time employees the Skills for Work approach fits perfectly with the EAAL objective of reaching those who have been disadvantaged in terms of access to education.

The Skills for Work programme aims to provide educational opportunities to adults in employment who may have left school early with no formal educational qualifications, or a qualification which may be out of date, and who wish to upskill with the support of their employer. Skills for Work courses provide workplace education courses to more than 2,700 employees each year. It significantly benefits both employers and employees, allowing employers the opportunity to provide quality training to their team without tuition costs. The courses generally runs for 35 hours, with options of daytime, evening or weekend programmes - all of which are delivered by qualified tutors in groups of between six-to-eight students.

AONTAS worked in close partnership with Skills for Work over the course of the EAAL project to increase awareness of the programme, build on employer engagement, and share experiences of the Skills for Work approach with EU partners and key national stakeholders. Ms Marian Lynch, the National Coordinator of the Skills for Work programme also held a seat on the Project Advisory Group during the 'Learning Today For a Better Tomorrow' programme.



One of the many highlights was the EU 'Exchange for a Better Tomorrow' visit to Malta of Skills for Work staff, AONTAS staff, and learners. This study visit resulted in strengthened links between the Irish and Maltese EAAL National Coordinators and with other important education and adult learning stakeholders in both countries.

Not only was the model promoted as an example of best practice, but the visit also helped increase learner capacity and confidence. In the post-study-visit evaluations learners explained that their confidence had grown as a result of the Media and Public Relations Training they received before the Study Visit, from the activities and approach during the entire trip, including from the personal development training they had the opportunity to follow while in Malta.

The trip also resulted in significant positive local and regional Irish media coverage. During the visit AONTAS

published a blog, which included the voices of all the participants, from the employers to staff members of Education and Training Boards, and in particular the different learners who had taken courses as part of the Skills For Work programme. All study visit participants live tweeted while in Malta, and AONTAS also sent out a series of press releases to the national and in particular local media in the areas where the learners lived or worked, resulting in significant media coverage.

The visit forged a longer-term collaboration between the ETBI and the Ministry of Education and Employment in Malta. In fact, the Skills for Work model is now being used as a starting point to inform the development of a workplace-learning model in Malta too. In May 2017, as a direct result of the success and networking of the Malta visit, Skills For Work and AONTAS hosted a reciprocal study visit in Ireland from the Maltese Ministry of Education and Employment, with Maltese visitors hosted by a number of companies, state, community, and non-governmental educational bodies.



In October 2017, the Skills for Work policy seminar, marking the end of the 2015-2017 EAAL project, welcomed more than 50 project partners, education stakeholders and employers. Major employers expressed the benefits they had seen as a result of their staff's involvement in the Skills for Work transnational visit in terms of confidence and pride. Those learners who had travelled to Malta or engaged in a learning programme, spoke from the podium about their pride and the positive changes they had made in their lives as a result of their learning journeys and their trip abroad.

Following their involvement at EU level, the Skills for Work Programme submitted a nomination for the EU Vocational Skills Week Award for Training at Work. On Friday 24th November 2017 they were announced winners by the European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility Ms Marianne Thyssen in Brussels, which is a testament to the strength and positive impact of this flourishing programme. The increasing international awareness of the programme as a best-practice example has also increased enthusiasm and support for the programme among those involved in Ireland. AONTAS is excited to continue working with Skills For Work across the next two-year EAAL programme to further capitalise on these exciting achievements.

COMMUNITY EDUCATION FOR A BETTER TOMORROW, AN COSAN VCC

AONTAS' Community Education Network (CEN) was founded in 2007, and in 2017 had more than 150 nationwide members, all of which are local, self-managed, independent, community education organisations committed to social change. In recognition of the important role of this under-resourced and underfunded community education sector, through the EAAL programme AONTAS sought to provide quality opportunities for the continuous professional development (CPD) of community education staff and volunteers, with the ultimate goal of increasing the sector's capacity to better assist people with low levels of educational qualifications.

As a first step, a survey exploring the needs of community education practitioners was disseminated through Survey Monkey to members of the CEN. Thirty-one respondents identified the following training needs: **Quality Assurance**; **Transformative Community Education**; and **Governance and Organisational Development**.

An Cosán Virtual Community College (VCC) (<http://ancosanvcc.com/>) was identified as the partner that was best-suited, in terms of ethos, personnel and infrastructure, to support the design, delivery and roll-out of a virtual classroom format training programme. AONTAS and its members already had a strong professional relationship with An Cosán VCC, with many CEN members having previously undertaken one or more previous training programmes with this organisation.

To ensure a nationwide reach for the training, AONTAS sent out a request to members of the CEN to self-identify as potential hubs, with a number of organisations then expressing interest in hosting the online training in their centres (Cork, Dublin, Limerick, Longford and Wexford). AONTAS was keen to engage small organisations to contribute to building their organisational capacity, and with a selection criteria of accessibility, experience, location and technical requirements, selected a total of six hubs nationwide. A small budget was made available for hubs to host, as community education centres are severely under-resourced and under-funded. This allowed for room rental and for teas and coffees for participants.

Drawing from the findings of the survey and in consultation with the development team, a learning programme was developed to roll out across Ireland. The initial programme was non-accredited with an emphasis on progression, and an estimated monetary value was EUR 300 per participant.

'Community Education for a Better Tomorrow' is an innovative blended learning programme for community education practitioners. This programme offers community educators opportunities to up-skill, enhance their capacity to engage with quality assurance structures and systems, and participate in the creation of quality assurance standards and processes specific to community education. The eight-week course involves six online sessions, self-directed learning, and two face-to-face workshops. A flipped classroom approach underpins teaching and learning strategies that allow participants to co-create knowledge about quality assurance in the community education sector.

An invitation to participate in the training was extended to all CEN members for a total of 48 places. Due to additional interest and demand in the Dublin areas, where many CEN members are concentrated, AONTAS increased the number of places available in the two Dublin hubs.

Training Phase I: (October to December 2016) In partnership with An Cosán VCC, AONTAS co-hosted an 8-week virtual training programme designed following the needs-based analysis survey with the CEN. The training included two face-to-face workshops at the start and end of the programme and six virtual sessions in six different hubs across Ireland. Places for 48 participants were available, with a total of 30 participants completing the programme. At the EU Seminar in March 2017 all programme participants were presented with their certificates. All evaluations of the programme were positive, with learners fully committed to and engaged with the courses.

Training Phase II: (September to November 2017) Following the success of Phase I, AONTAS submitted an amendment to the European Commission requesting to host a second phase for a select number of participants interested in progressing to an accredited course and to provide bursaries to support their participation. A total of 10 learners were then supported to participate in Phase II of the training programme.

EAAL 2015 - 2017

Highlights of 'Community Education For A Better Tomorrow'

Provided an innovative, blended learning and training programme 'Community Education for a Better Tomorrow' for community education practitioners.

Conducted Preliminary Needs-Analysis Research: The needs analysis survey beforehand informed the content and design of the training, in addition to further securing the buy-in and support of the community education network from the outset.

Established a Working Group: A development team was established, consisting of three AONTAS staff members, as well as two An Cosán VCC staff members. Drawing from the findings of the survey and in consultation with the development team, a learning programme was developed to roll out across Ireland.

Thirty participants from across the Community Education Network completed Phase I of the training programme between October and December 2016, which included two face-to-face workshops and six virtual sessions in six hubs across Ireland (Cork, Dublin, Limerick, Longford and Wexford).

Phase II then enabled ten of these learners to progress further onto an accredited training programme also run by An Cosán VCC. These learners had completed Phase I and then expressed interest in continuing towards an accredited programme, so AONTAS facilitated this through the support of the EAAL project, with the training programme taking place between September and November 2017.

Commenced creation of a **handbook for EU-wide dissemination, documenting the An Cosan VCC training methodology** as a best practice programme to help upskill those trying to reach low-skilled adult learners and to assist those most distanced from learning.

PROMOTING THE EAAL: Increasing Awareness Of Adult Learning

CLOSE TO **19 million** VIEWS OF AONTAS EAAL MESSAGING ACROSS THE TWO YEAR PROGRAMME, VIA EXTERNAL MEDIA AND AONTAS MATERIALS

MORE THAN **2.5 MILLION** PEOPLE REACHED THROUGH AONTAS MEDIA ONLY IN 2016-2017

A robust Communications and Promotional Strategy throughout the project allowed AONTAS to reach huge sections of Irish society with the EAAL messages, including the key target stakeholders, of low-skilled workers and those in policy and practice who have contact with them. AONTAS' consistent dissemination of project information and learnings through traditional and digital media; the production of diverse content that was then spread out through effective and innovative tools, including video, infographics, photos, blogs and press releases; and the sharing of project information and learnings through creative campaigns and the organisation of well-attended, informative events resulted in significant coverage, with AONTAS succeeding in reaching the targeted audiences in addition to the general public.

The Communications Strategy stated that "the adult learner's own experience best demonstrates how adult learning can transform lives", and set forth plans to ensure that learner stories would be a consistent component of the project. AONTAS fulfilled the strategy commitment to release learner stories as part of each activity and event, in addition to creating stand-alone profile pieces at different stages over the two years, to help ensure momentum and continual presence of the learner voice in the public sphere. In addition to the Communications Strategy and the consistent dissemination of learner stories, AONTAS also organised a month-long Awareness Raising Campaign each year, and ensured that information sharing and awareness raising across a diverse number of platforms and networks amplified the debates and dialogues around adult learning approaches and policies.

Highlight: Information Campaign 2016

In March 2016 AONTAS launched a 10-month promotional campaign, entitled #ImAnAdultLearner. The campaign was created to share inspiring learner stories at regular and strategic moments, with the goal of encouraging members of the public, in particular those with basic skills, to return to education. The learner stories were specifically chosen to highlight the impact that education and learning can have in transforming peoples' lives.

On Monday mornings throughout the campaign, AONTAS shared a learner story from interviews it had compiled for the campaign. Using the #MondayMotivation hashtag, AONTAS shared them through its social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) and the AONTAS website, resulting in a social media reach of 100,000 people - with one of the learner stories gaining a reach of almost 8,000 views alone.

At the end of the campaign, AONTAS collated 24 powerful learner stories to create a colourful,

accessible, portraiture publication, entitled “I’m an Adult Learner 2016: *Inspiring learner stories from across Ireland*”. The booklet’s production was the result of a collaboration between AONTAS and SOLAS (the state organisation with responsibility for funding, planning and coordinating Further Education and Training in Ireland) that arose as a result of the popularity and impact of the #Monday Motivation learner stories, and the other learner-centred events AONTAS organised throughout the Information Campaign.

With a Foreword from AONTAS CEO, Niamh O’Reilly, explaining that “as National Coordinator for the European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL), we have decided to launch this publication as part of the European Vocational Skills Week”, the 66-page booklet gathered the learner stories under six themes (Positive Learning Experience; Learning Outcomes; Learner Supports, Progression; Social Inclusion).

Funded under SOLAS, the Irish Minister for Education and Skills Richard Bruton helped AONTAS launch the publication. By the end of the ‘Learning Today for a Better Tomorrow’ project in October 2017, AONTAS had distributed approximately 10,000 of the ‘I’m An Adult Learner’ booklets to a targeted range of stakeholders, thereby further extending the reach of the successful 2016 Information Campaign.

Throughout the project, AONTAS consistently produced and disseminated innovative and creative communications products, including sending out a total of eight project-specific press releases, more than 40 blogs and articles, videos, infographics and multiple tweets connected to the project, with all external communications work achieving an audience reach of an estimated 19 million people, with clear positive outcomes in terms of project visibility, acceptance, understanding and influence.

All relevant press releases and external communications products included strong representation of the learner voice, through profiling the ‘champion’ role models and other learner stories. Each of these ‘champion’ learners who agreed to share their stories publicly was supported by AONTAS staff as they engaged with the media, giving interviews with local and national print and broadcast media. This aspect of the promotional strategy not only fulfilled the objective of increasing awareness among key policy and practitioner stakeholders about the gaps and barriers still facing learners, but also helped further empower and motivate learners. As learners engaged with media interviews and accepted speaking slots at seminars and conferences, they fully embodied the courage and success already clear from the stories they shared of their individual learning experiences.

The diversity of learner profiles and of their learning journeys had an important amplifying effect once shared through AONTAS communications channels and external media. They included learner stories from government Senators who grew up in inner city Dublin, to women who run guesthouses in the Irish-speaking Gaeltacht areas of Donegal in the north of Ireland, to mechanics working for the national rail station, to hairdressers, to men in their fifties returning to school and taking their final exams (Leaving Certificate) at the same time as their daughter, and many more. Potential learners who identified with or who were touched by these individual stories of adversity and triumph often felt bolstered to make further enquiries about possible learning opportunities. For example, following AONTAS’ proactive publicity during the AONTAS 2016 Information Campaign, including the popular and powerful story from an early school leaver’s speaking of his return to secondary education to finish his final exams at the same time as one of his own children, calls to the Helpline, visits to the website and requests to the Information Service saw a clear increase. For instance, the number of calls to the One Step Up Freephone Helpline increased by 15 %, with the Information Officer receiving 53 calls, compared to 46 calls in the previous month.

The high level of public relations and communications work around project moments and themes had a clear impact on engagement with AONTAS digital platforms, with an additional 3,040 users following the organisation through Facebook and Twitter over project lifespan. The AONTAS Facebook: gained an additional 1,590 followers, an increase of 70% increase when compared to the start of the project, while the AONTAS Twitter account gained an additional 1,460 followers, a 42% on the number of followers at the start of this project. In addition to all the events AONTAS organised or attended, the team also organised two dedicated information campaigns in 2016 and 2017, as part of the Communications Strategy. Overall, AONTAS achieved a combined total public audience reach of 19 million over the two-year project when adding the reach for each action, campaign and promotion connected to the project's Communications Strategy.

WEBSITES

AONTAS WEBSITE - WWW.AONTAS.COM

Over project lifetime visits increased by 185,692 - an increase of 15% since October 31st 2015, receiving a total of 391,178 views across the project's lifespan.

ONESTEPUP WEBSITE - WWW.ONESTEPUP.IE

Over project lifetime the One Step Up website saw an increase of 24% visitors, with numbers jumping from 33,632 at the end of October 2015 up to 41,682 users by the end of October 2017.

SOCIAL MEDIA

FACEBOOK: [HTTPS://WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/AONTASADULTLEARNING/](https://www.facebook.com/aontasadultlearning/)

Had a cumulative reach of 8.5 million views as a result of all the online promotion during the project, with the AONTAS Facebook gaining an additional 1,590 followers, an increase of 70% when compared to the start of the project in November 2015.

TWITTER: @AONTAS

The AONTAS twitter account gained an additional 1,460 followers, a 42% increase on the number of followers at the start of this project, and achieved a cumulative audience reach of 1.25 million through its online promotion throughout.

FOLDERS/BROCHURES/NEWSLETTERS/FLIERS/BOOKLETS/POSTERS

AONTAS E-BULLETIN: 75 AONTAS e-bulletins sent out to 790 subscribers during project lifetime.

BROCHURE: 1,000 'Learning Today For A Better

Tomorrow' brochures were printed and distributed to stakeholders.

BRANDED CONFERENCE PULL UP: Learning Today For A Better Tomorrow.

BRANDED INFOGRAPHICS: Infographics shared connected to 'Learning Today For A Better Tomorrow'.

ONE STEP UP BOOKLET: More than 10,000 One Step Up information booklets disseminated to targeted stakeholders, which included 4,000 'What Next' Information Booklets, and following its design and printing in 2017, the dissemination of 6,576 new 'One Step Up' booklets.

ONE STEP UP FLIER: 700 fliers distributed.

ONE STEP UP POSTERS: 2,545 posters disseminated.

ONE STEP UP BOOKMARKS: 3,780 posters disseminated.

RADIO/TV/NEWSPAPER CAMPAIGNS

AONTAS ran two separate Information Campaigns in 2016 and 2017, which resulted in a total estimated reach of 3,479,499 people.

FAIRS/LIFELONG LEARNING DAYS

AONTAS promoted the project and its initiatives at 20 Fairs and Lifelong Learning Days, and also presented elements of 'Learning Today For A Better Tomorrow' at 20 different seminars, conferences and events in Ireland and the EU.

LEARNER STORY - WILLIAM



“There was always lots of support and encouragement”

Name: William
Place of Learning: Skills For Work programme through GEODIS Ireland Ltd.

“I’ve met so many wonderful people who have taught me so much”

Returning to education for me was quite a big deal. I was educated by the Christian brothers many years ago. Most of our lessons were spent doing music rather than reading, writing and arithmetic, never mind history, geography or anything else. I went to secondary school not knowing how to read or write. This meant that I was completely behind my classmates as the school was concentrating on teaching me how to read and write. I failed my Inter Cert because of my lack of knowledge in other subjects and this had an effect on my confidence and self-esteem.

At 16 years of age I arrived in school one morning and the head teacher told me I was wasting my time and should just get a job. I arrived home to my mother that evening, announcing I had a full-time job. I can’t say my mother was too pleased that I had left school!

“There was always lots of support and encouragement”

I had no aspirations to ever return to education until one day in my current job the Skills for Work Coordinator told us about the opportunities for workers to do basic courses. I had no computer skills and thought I would like to try and learn. My employer was very supportive and gave us the time to participate in the course. The tutor was extremely patient and helpful and throughout the course we were always treated as equals. Our lack of knowledge was never a problem. There was always lots of support and encouragement. The coordinator called to the class quite often and at one stage spoke to us individually about progression. I mentioned I would love to do Maths as I had never had the opportunity to do Maths. She referred me to the local Adult Education Centre where I was placed in a small class and I am now excelling in this area.

I plan to take up another Skills for Work course in January where I will learn basic spreadsheets. This will be great for my job role as I work in a warehouse and use spreadsheets a lot.

“Do not think twice about returning to education”

The advice I would give to anyone who finds themselves in the same situation as myself would be, do not think twice about returning to education. The benefits are huge. I am not afraid to use a computer and sending emails is a common occurrence for me now.



I met so many wonderful new people who have taught me so much

My increased self-esteem and confidence alone has enabled me to participate in a study trip to Malta with AONTAS, where I met so many fantastic people. The outcome of this trip is that I have learned to do things I would never have dreamed of. I can now use Twitter, WhatsApp, and other apps on my phone, I wouldn't have tried. I met so many wonderful people who have taught me so much. I have volunteered to speak at various events, something which would never be in my wildest dreams. I am so looking forward to progressing and developing myself professionally. All thanks to Skills for work!!

CLOSING WORDS

'Learning Today for a Better Tomorrow' brought the European Agenda for Adult Learning forward in Irish discourse engaging at every level with adult learners, practitioners, policy makers, and Government and European partners. In closing out this project we will build on its outcomes and work with stakeholders and learners to make lifelong learning a reality for all through the next EAAL project; 'Increasing Pathways, Increasing Participation' (IPIP). AONTAS will continue to highlight key EU policy pertaining to adult learning such as the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation in addition to the European Agenda for Adult Learning and its priority areas of: governance; supply and take up; flexibility and access; and quality. Highlighting best practice across Europe, communicating updates from the European Commission, and acting as a key information point and guide in the education sector in Ireland. Building connections with partners across Europe and ensuring the Irish voice is centre stage in Brussels.

We will work more closely with the business sector in order to engage low skilled employees and increase adult participation in lifelong learning among less visible target groups.

Our new EU Project Officer; Dearbháil Lawless will be managing the current phase of the project 2017 – 2019, ensuring that we continue to make a European impact on a national level while supporting adult learners and increasing their participation in lifelong learning.

Dearbháil can be contacted on **00353 1 406 8220** or dlawless@aontas.com.

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