

# AONTAS RESPONSE

PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON  
MATURE STUDENT PARTICIPATION  
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Submitted to Indecon International Consultants  
working on behalf of the Higher Education Authority



WRITTEN SUBMISSION  
Thursday, 30<sup>th</sup> April 2020

Submitted to Dr. Ronnie O'Toole  
Indecon International Economic Consultants  
email: [rotoole@indecon.ie](mailto:rotoole@indecon.ie)

## Public Consultation on Mature Student Participation in Higher Education

### ***Mitigating Higher Educational Disadvantage and Increasing Participation for Mature Students in Post-Coronavirus Ireland***

Submitted to Indecon International Consultants on 30<sup>th</sup> April 2020

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#### **Summary of recommendations:**

- AONTAS propose that the Terms of Reference between the HEA and Indecon be amended to clearly acknowledge the financial impact of COVID-19 on the future of Higher Education Institutions (HEI), and the impact that COVID-19 will have in the short, medium, and long term on the demand for spaces by Mature Students in Higher Education Institutions, particularly those from the underrepresented target groups
  - In order to address the most marginalised groups and support their participation in higher education AONTAS proposes that a new comprehensive funding model is introduced with supports for part-time fees and flexible models of provision
  - AONTAS recommends that the Terms of Reference be updated with a specific reference to addressing the need for specific target levels for first time Mature Students from each of the target groups
  - AONTAS recommends that PATH funding include all community education provision
  - AONTAS recommends Indecon include 'community education learner voice' in its Terms of Reference to obtain the perspectives and lived experience of this set of potential Mature Students and gain their insights into the barriers they face around accessing higher education, particularly as a result of this COVID-19 emergency
  - In tune with the above recommendation, AONTAS suggests that the Terms of Reference ensure that adult and community education providers are considered as key stakeholders when carrying out the study
  - AONTAS proposes that the study assess the potential social and economic gains to be made were there to be meaningful investment in the infrastructure around Adult and Community Education, Further Education and Training, and Higher Education that would ensure increased success for Mature Students from the underrepresented target groups
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## PART 1: Introduction and Comment on the Terms of Reference

### Introduction to this consultation response

With approximately one million people in Ireland now depending on some form of financial support from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection<sup>1</sup> AONTAS believes that higher education equity will have to become one of the primary mechanisms not just for Ireland's economic recovery during and after the COVID-19 emergency, but also for the personal, social and cultural recovery which individuals, their families and every local community will need to benefit from in the coming years<sup>2</sup>. Before delving further, it must be stated at the forefront of our response that it is important that the current Terms of Reference originally published on 27<sup>th</sup> February 2020 should be amended by the HEA and Indecon so that they account for the differences between what it meant for Mature Students to return to Higher Education (HE) before March 2020 and what it now means.

AONTAS is now more concerned than ever about the need to widen the participation of underrepresented Mature Students in HE. Previous inequalities regarding the lack of funding for fees and inadequate financial and social supports for part-time Mature Students are now magnifying the marginalisation of groups of learners who were already disproportionately excluded from accessing and benefiting from HE. The importance of community-based access to HE and, where possible, community-based provision of HE has arguably never been more crucial to the successful engagement, retention and progression of socioeconomically disadvantaged target groups.

In advance of writing this submission a variety of AONTAS members, Mature Student Officers and other key stakeholders within HE were consulted by AONTAS and the suggestions and recommendations made here reflect a broad consensus on the issues under study. The recommendations made here about the proposed reorientation of the Terms of Reference and regarding the barriers and needed supports for Mature Students to access HE and succeed are intended to support Indecon's efforts to better understand the importance of equal progression into Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Our shared aim is to ensure that HE in Ireland, an important constituent within the wider education ecosystem, is a realistic and desirable option for everyone who wants to participate in HE learning, regardless of where they were born or what barriers life placed in their way. As things stood in a pre-COVID-19 world there were a range of structural inequalities and systemic failures that prevented adults from equally participating in and benefitting from HE. These inequalities are widely accepted as evidenced by the body of work describing who is perennially under-represented on campuses<sup>3</sup>. Many of these inequalities are discussed in

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<sup>1</sup> [Over one million now dependent on State income support](#), RTE News, Monday, 20 Apr 2020.

<sup>2</sup> See '[Reclaiming University Adult Education: A Freirean Approach to Widening Participation and Tackling Educational Inequality](#)', Moreland, R. and Cownie, E. (2019), *The Adult Learner: The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education*, p57-79. The paper highlights how resourcing higher education to provide educational pathways for adults to re-engage with education has wider long-term and inter-generational benefits for families and communities and thus makes an important contribution to tackling broader issues of inequity via combating educational inequalities.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see [Supporting Equity in Higher Education A Report to the Minister for Education and Science](#), Department of Education and Science (2003). Last accessed 28/04/2020.

the HEA's [National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019](#) and the 2018 progress review of this plan<sup>4</sup>. The groups under-represented on third level campuses include, but are not limited to, people who fall into one or more of the following categories and are also undoubtedly being hardest hit during the COVID-19 emergency:

- First-time and part-time Mature Students
- Those living in disadvantaged rural areas
- People in unstable and unsustainable employment
- Migrants
- Low qualified adults (less than upper second level),
- Early school leavers
- Those experiencing long-term unemployment
- Asylum seekers
- People with disabilities
- Travellers
- Lone Parents
- People experiencing homelessness
- Those in receipt of social welfare payments,
- People living in poverty
- Those from or who have low-income families

In a world impacted by COVID-19 the solutions to issues surrounding Mature Students and mitigating third-level educational disadvantage must begin by assessing the existing and also new combinations of overlapping inequalities and challenges faced by adult learners from the above-mentioned groups. In addition to the task at hand as outlined in the current Terms of Reference, AONTAS would welcome Indecon's efforts to ascertain why and how certain cohorts of adult learners have become even more vulnerable to even greater educational disadvantage as a result of the current health emergency. **To examine and overcome the new and intensified barriers that exclude people from access to HE and ultimately obtaining a HE degree AONTAS encourages Indecon to update its Terms of Reference with the HEA to ensure that the expected increase and breadth of demand for HE is identified.** As this new COVID-19 influenced society and economy develops, HE will become an even more vital pathway for adults to endure what will be the most challenging social and economic circumstances witnessed in Ireland, Europe, and the world since at least the end of World War II.

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<sup>4</sup> [Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021](#), HEA (2018). Last accessed 28/04/2020.

### Specific proposal to revise the Terms of Reference to account for impact of COVID-19

In February AONTAS welcomed the focus of the pre-emergency terms of reference and appreciate them with a renewed sense of urgency and importance in order to realise the vision of the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019*. Since the publication of the Terms of Reference for research into the issues and challenges associated with first-time Mature Student participation in higher education the world has changed in an unexpected way that will not allow for a return to the pre-COVID-19 emergency status quo. With this fact in mind AONTAS is making the argument that before any research begins, and before any recommendations are made about how to increase access, participation in, and ultimately the success of Mature Students in HE, these Terms of Reference should be amended. We propose that the Terms of Reference between the HEA and Indecon be amended to clearly acknowledge the financial impact of COVID-19 on the future of Higher Education Institutions (HEI), and the impact that COVID-19 will have in the short, medium, and long term on the demand of HE spaces by Mature Students, particularly those from traditionally underrepresented target groups.

Many of the barriers to participation, and policy options available for overcoming these barriers that we will discuss in this submission are well known to the HEA and Indecon from past engagement with AONTAS and other stakeholders who work in the field of adult and community education<sup>5</sup>. As the world has rapidly changed, and as government policies have become more interventionist during the COVID-19 emergency, we must recognise that policy options that may not have seemed feasible before might very well not only be implementable now but are now absolutely essential. We hope that this emergency has highlighted the important role that government can and must play in creating opportunities for adult learners, particularly Mature Students. We hope that the Terms of Reference will be amended to reflect these facts, but if not, we trust that these facts will at minimum broaden the perspective of what is possible to support Mature Students to be successful in Higher Education (HE) over the difficult time ahead.

### Comment on the current Terms of Reference and need to engage learners in the research

As mentioned AONTAS believes that the current emergency makes Indecon's task of identifying the barriers and making recommendations for how access to, and participation in, higher education by Mature Students as set out in the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019* (NAP) only more imperative. Widening access and ensuring sustained participation and ultimately success must now form an essential part of any new central strategy of the government which is able to see the NAP as a vital strand of the country's overall response to alleviating the social and economic suffering of the global pandemic.

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<sup>5</sup> See [Understanding and Enabling Student Success in Irish Higher Education](#), National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2019). Last accessed 28/04/20.

The NAP set out five goals and more than thirty actions with the aim of supporting increased access and participation in higher education by six main target groups:

- entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education;
- first-time Mature Students;
- students with disabilities;
- part-time/flexible learners;
- further education and training award holders; and
- Travellers.

The NAP also indicated subgroups that require particular support, including lone parents, teen parents and ethnic minorities. The priority goals of the plan are to:

- mainstream the delivery of equity of access in higher education institutions;
- assess the impact of current initiatives to support equity of access to higher education;
- gather accurate data and evidence on access and participation and to base policy on what that data tells us;
- build coherent pathways from further education and to foster other entry routes to higher education; and
- develop regional and community partnership strategies for increasing access to higher education with a particular focus on mentoring.

With an awareness of how each of the above-mentioned groups will have been unprecedentedly and disproportionately impacted by the current global recession, AONTAS applauds Indecon for disseminating an online survey to listen to the 'Mature Student voice' and for taking this research opportunity to directly engage with Mature Students who have been successful in accessing and participating in higher education in the past. It is equally as important to learn about and from those who were not successful in completing their HE journeys. To be effective this survey must reach as many current and past Mature Students as possible, as well as people who were prevented from becoming a Mature Student due to barriers. To do this the HEA and Indecon will need to use many different communication channels to reach the widest number of people possible. AONTAS has shared the online survey with AONTAS members and Mature Students within its networks in support for Indecon's inclusion of learner voice. This is an important dimension to the study because while there is a lot of numerical data that exists about completion rates, demographic information, socio-economic standing etc, and many ways that information can be analysed, without speaking to past Mature Students themselves this research would be missing vital

nuances about what stops learners from accessing HE and what makes them successful, or conversely what stops them from being successful<sup>6</sup>.

## **PART 2: Identifying Barriers, and Detailing how Adult, Community and Further Education and Training is a Policy Tool for Overcoming those Barriers**

This part of the submission will focus on highlighting the barriers to participation and outline the effectiveness of further, adult, and community education and training (FACET) as a tool for widening participation and ensuring the success of Mature Students in HE. It is also worth highlighting here that community education providers are not only key constituents within the Tertiary Education ecosystem, they are models of best practice as successful providers of third-level education that already ensure the participation of learners from the underrepresented target groups. For sections of Irish society who experience persistent educational disadvantage, community education is a well-established, community-based model of provision that is accessible, flexible, affordable, supportive and effective for engaging educationally disadvantaged groups<sup>7</sup>.

### **Identifying the Barriers**

The barriers to HE access for Mature Students are well known and have been highlighted by other organisations responding to this consultation, including the Society of St. Vincent DePaul, Mature Students Ireland and the Union of Students in Ireland to name some. Further, the primary barriers to participation<sup>8</sup> are clearly outlined in numerous research studies<sup>9</sup> and policy documents across the tertiary education sector, in AONTAS publications, and most succinctly, in the 2019 Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills' [Report on Education inequality & disadvantage and Barriers to Education](#). Echoing what is already known by stakeholders across the sector and highlighted in policy documents like the 2019 Joint Committee Report, the main barriers to participation can be broken down into the following areas:

- Financial
- Situational

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<sup>6</sup> For examples see Graham, H. (2015) [Re-engaging with Education as an Older Mature Student: Their Challenges, Their Achievements, Their Stories](#); Kenny, A. (2010) [Where Next? A Study of Work and Life Experiences of Mature Students \(incl. Disadvantaged\) in Three Higher Education Institutions](#); Farrell, A. (2012) [The experience of progressing from Community Education to Third level Education from a learner's perspective](#).

<sup>7</sup> See [AONTAS Response to the Department of Education and Skills Statement of Strategy 2019-2021](#), AONTAS (2019). Last accessed 28/04/2020

<sup>8</sup> [Identifying and reducing barriers to participation in adult literacy and numeracy tuition](#). NALA (2010). Last accessed 28/04/2020.

<sup>9</sup> For example, see *The Influence of Social Background on Participation in Adult Education: Applying the Cultural Capital Framework*, Cincinnato et al. (2016) *Adult Education Quarterly* 2016, Vol. 66(2) 143–168.

- Informational
- Educational
- Cultural
- Lack of Opportunities for access and progression

The EU<sup>10</sup> has identified the barriers to participation of adults in education as follows:

- Policy-related:
  - Provider-related: entry requirements, cost, level of learning support, nature of learning outcomes, etc.
- Informational:
  - Level of access to good and timely information
  - Lack of information on the supply
- Situational:
  - The cultural value attached to education; the extent to which the life situation or the family and social environment of the adult supports participation
  - Demand-side reasons are often the most serious barriers: lack of time, due to work or family reasons
  - Lack of financing
- Dispositional:
  - The self-esteem and self-confidence of the adult as a learner, often linked to failure in previous educational experiences
  - Lack of awareness and motivation, as people do not see learning valued or rewarded enough and hence fail to perceive its benefits<sup>11</sup>

### The Bigger Picture: Widening Access to Participation

In a previous submission made directly to the Higher Education Authority in 2015, entitled [Future Funding for Higher Education](#)<sup>12</sup>, AONTAS outlines the context and range of barriers standing between adult learners and achieving a higher education. This submission brings into focus the issues surrounding the relevant funding and social welfare supports available<sup>13</sup>. That almost all of the issues previously covered still broadly apply five years later is noteworthy in itself and should prove useful in the development of future funding models

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<sup>10</sup> See [Adult learning: It is never too late to learn](#). European Commission (2006). Last accessed 28/04/2020.

<sup>12</sup> [Future Funding for Higher Education](#), AONTAS (2015). last accessed 20/04/2020.

<sup>13</sup> In the section on re-configuring the post-secondary landscape, the Cassell's Report (2016) notes the specific link needed for a more integrated approach to lifelong learning to support access to higher education. "This will mean appropriate approaches to funding that support different types of part-time provision, module-based delivery systems, collaboration across education and training providers (including between HE and FE) and access by, and retention of, all potential lifelong learners" (p.61). See Cassells, P. (2016). *Investing in National Ambition: A Strategy for Funding Higher Education Report of the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education*. <https://www.education.ie/en/publications/policy-reports/investing-in-national-ambition-astrategy-for-funding-higher-education.pdf>. Last accessed 28/04.2020.

for HE. Also worth considering are recommendations made in 2015 around the need for a more strategic and co-ordinated approach when looking at the issue of funding.

**In order to address the most marginalised groups and support their participation in HE funding support for part-time fees and flexible models of provision is essential<sup>14</sup>.** Included in this 2015 submission are case studies which bring to life the positive impact of community-based part-time provision as best practice models for engaging low-paid workers, the unemployed and educationally disadvantaged groups to successfully access and complete higher education courses. Furthermore, Part-time higher education learners make up some of the most under-served groups of learners in terms of financial supports<sup>15</sup>. Innovative methods for HE engagement through supportive part-time provision should continue to be supported through funding for part-time fees and financial supports for part-time learners.

Notwithstanding the specifics around various funding measures to supplement individual learners, the [Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021<sup>16</sup>](#) makes clear that adult learners from marginalised groups require structural supports and systemic adaptations to overcome the permutations of combined barriers that are financial, situational, informational, educational, cultural and pertain to a lack of opportunities. These supports and adaptations are required in order for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to appeal to, engage with, include, and deliver for adult learners. The interventions must also be designed to overcome the often-intergenerational inequalities and accumulated disadvantage which stands between Mature Students and their ability to participate in and obtain a higher education. As rightly pointed out in the Higher Education Authority's 2017 document [A Data Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education](#):

it is important to situate these disparities in relation to the education system as a whole. Social inequalities accumulate across the life cycle and develop incrementally within each level of the education system. "Joined-up policies" which seek to understand how inequalities are structured at a systemic level require a "joined-up evidence base". As far as higher education is concerned, this means analysing the interface between post-primary, further and higher education and seeking to understand how participation and achievement are structured in and across the different components of the education system (page 4)<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> According to the HEA's [KEY FACTS AND FIGURES Higher Education 2017/18](#), 8% of full-time undergraduate new entrants were Mature Students compared to 83% of part-time undergraduate new entrants were mature.

<sup>15</sup> The amount of the SUSI grant has not been increased since 2012, and falls far short of the cost of living in pre-Coronavirus Ireland. Supports must be mature-student-centred and based on need. Other stakeholders such as the USI have written in more details about these issues and have made a submission to the Joint Oireachtas committee on SUSI reform and that submission can be seen [here](#). There are similar concerns around the Back to Education Allowance, also outlined by the USI and that can be found [here](#). last accessed 20/04/2020.

<sup>16</sup> [Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021](#), last accessed 20/04/2020.

<sup>17</sup> Higher Education Authority (2017) [A Data Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education](#). Last accessed 20/04/2020

## Supporting adult, community, and further education and training as access points to participation in HE

Community-based adult education is learning which takes place in local settings, it is learner-centred and responds to the needs of the local community in a unique way within the tertiary education system. The non-threatening and supportive environment in which community education takes place has the effect of increasing the engagement of socially excluded adult learners and improving the lives of their families and communities. It is by design a transformative process that mitigates educational disadvantage and increases all forms of equality by empowering the learner and their community simultaneously.

Given how nearly half of all 25-64 year-olds (47%) have attained a tertiary education and that adults with a bachelor's degree earn on average 81% more than those with an upper-secondary education ([OECD 2019](#)), the resulting inequity for underrepresented target groups was a stark pre-Coronavirus educational emergency. AONTAS ([2018](#)) has previously outlined that while overall progression rates into higher education have increased in recent years (from 55% in 2007 to 69% in 2016), participation rates of mature learners in Irish higher education have remained relatively stagnant. [The Higher Education System Performance Report, 2014-2017](#) found that Mature Students entering higher education from 2011 to 2016 remained at 14%, despite smaller increases present in participation rates of students with disabilities and students from the underrepresented target groups. In response to these findings, the report recommended that the HEA work with Education and Training Boards (ETBs) to develop clear progression pathways from Further Education and Training (FET) into higher education. Similarly, in the [Progress Review of the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 – 2019](#) it is also highlighted that alongside increasing progression targets, ETBs, QQI, and SOLAS should work together to explore ways to increase flexibility in progression pathways. Furthermore, through the [National FET Learner Forum](#) learners have continuously voiced their recommendation that HEIs and ETBs work more closely to increase the number of reserved places for FET learners in HEIs. Recognition of the need for greater integration between FET and HE is not new<sup>18</sup> AONTAS welcomes and highlights the consensus between these key stakeholders in the above equation. It is worth recognising and building on how HEIs, ETBs, FET, and adult learners who have returned to education and succeeded through community-based provision, are in agreement about what can and should change to increase equity in higher education. In light of this perhaps a more useful reformulation of the main question of the forthcoming study is to ask 'what are the barriers preventing FACET learners from successfully accessing and succeeding in HE?' or 'how can learners accessing and progressing from community education to FET be better supported on their journey into HE?'

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<sup>18</sup> See [Ireland's National Skill's Strategy 2025](#). Department of Education and Skills. last accessed 29/04/2020.

## Who engages in community education?

This form of community-customised education provision is delivered across cohorts that essentially cross-cut every target group described in the Terms of Reference<sup>19</sup>. They include but are not limited to:

- Early school leavers,
- lone parents,
- people in low paid/precarious employment,
- people who struggle with isolation in urban and rural areas,
- people living with mental health issues,
- people who have experienced homelessness
- people who have experienced addiction and substance mis-use,
- people who are experiencing long-term unemployment,
- people from the Traveller Community,
- people living in Direct Provision centres across Ireland.

Community education has been an inter-generational feature of overcoming barriers to access. Twenty years ago, the [White Paper on Adult Education](#)<sup>20</sup> allocated an entire chapter to addressing the role of community education, which it defined as ‘a process of user-driven, learner-centred and communal education’ (DES, 2000, 28). It did this largely because it is believed in community education’s success in reaching hard to reach learners, arguing that the ‘uniform, nationally organised education systems’ failed to meet the needs of particular groups such as Travellers and other non-traditional learners (DES, 2000, 49). It recognised that low educational attainment was very often a result of a systemic deficit, rather than a deficit at the level of the learner or local community. The paper contended that:

While the Irish education system has many recognised strengths, there are inherent inflexibilities within it...it is essential to continue to enhance progression opportunities for students who have left the initial system having failed in it or been failed by it. (DES, 2000, p.33).

Twenty years later it is simply unacceptable to still have the same groups underrepresented in HEIs and still facing similar barriers. **AONTAS recommends that the Terms of Reference be updated with a specific reference to addressing the need for specific target levels for first-time Mature Students from each of the target groups**<sup>21</sup>. Current quantifying of the

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<sup>19</sup> The main socioeconomic groups catered to by community education providers are also those groups with the lowest levels of progression to and within Higher Education, i.e. ‘the traditional working classes, with non-presence rates between 17 and 19% among the Skilled, Semi-Skilled and Un-Skilled socioeconomic groups’ (see [A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education](#), HEA (2010), page 38. Last accessed 22/04/2020.

<sup>20</sup> Department of Education and Science. (2000). Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education. Dublin: Stationary Office. <https://assets.gov.ie/24723/8eaa8222690f43279dd017f686427e9b.pdf>. Accessed 28/04/2020.

<sup>21</sup> While there can be some extrapolation from the HEA and CSO’s figures there needs to be more and more accessible data around participation rates by target group. For example, we know from the last Census in 2016 that of the 30,987

true rate of Mature Student participation are unclear. Without hard data on numbers of each target group it is very difficult to (a) have clarity and transparency around the level of need and (b) set targets for participation rates that are meaningful.

### **Why is community education successful in addressing educational inequality?**

Regarding the effectiveness of further, adult, and community education and training (FACET) as a tool for widening participation and ensuring the success of Mature Students in HE: simply put, community education offers a unique package of services that are customised to fit the people and their communities participating in learning. Community education is particularly successful at engaging people within socioeconomically disadvantaged areas<sup>22</sup>. Its success is due in large part to how learners are supported to access a range of flexible, part-time educational opportunities that meet their needs, from non-accredited courses to accredited courses across the National Framework of Qualifications. Community projects support learners in overcoming barriers to access through practices that empower people<sup>23</sup>. This includes supporting people to access information and guidance to find out about their education options and also to avail of integrated support services that facilitate their learning journey. Listed below are just some of the key aspects and supports provided by community education providers that (a) are vital to their success regarding engagement, retention, and progression; (b) contribute to breaking down barriers for first-time Mature Students from target groups to enter Higher Education; and (c) Higher Education should consider adapting, or expanding where already in place, in order to improve engagement, retention and progression of Mature Students from the target groups:

- Childcare facilities,
- One-to-one counselling,
- Domestic violence supports,
- Mentoring, one-to-one and small group educational supports,
- Technology-enhanced learning,
- Access to career guidance.
- Retention is supported by a pedagogic process that builds on the learner's previous knowledge and experience, reflection, group work, peer assessment and supportive assessment techniques that develop learners' skills so that they succeed.

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Travellers in Ireland only 167 Irish Travellers held a third level qualification and only 55 held a Degree. See <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8itseah/>. Last accessed 28/04/20.

<sup>22</sup> In their [Community Education Programme Operational Guidelines](#) (2012) the Department of Education and Skills outlines a number of target groups for Community Education, notably learners who consistently experience "acute barriers to participation in adult learning"; this includes, but is not limited to, "Adults with low or no formal qualifications or low literacy levels", "one parent families", "Travellers", "Migrants/refugees/asylum seekers", "People with a disability", "The homeless", "Substance misusers". While these learner cohorts are represented across all tertiary education, Community Education in Ireland has a long history, and track record of engaging these "hard to reach learners" in their own domestic or local settings, who often will be experiencing higher levels of disadvantage.

<sup>23</sup> See [AONTAS Annual Policy Day 2020 Pre-Event Paper](#) (2020) AONTAS. Accessed 29/04/2020.

- Embedded across the learning experience is a critical education process that builds an individual's and community's capacity for civic engagement and transformation.

The community education approach has a significant contribution to make to access-enabling pedagogy where dialogical processes harness the lived experience of learners within small class settings. This approach can be adopted by and tailored to the Further Education and training sphere and Higher Education setting as ways to increase engagement, retention and progression rates. As noted in the Hunt Report:

Community education strategies have proven very effective in reaching out to non-traditional students and are purposely designed to build up and maintain resources within communities (pages 76-77)<sup>24</sup>.

In sum, community education essentially already provides a fit-for-purpose ready-made infrastructure for increasing the participation of Mature Students from underrepresented groups, albeit an under-funded and under-valued infrastructure. AONTAS suggests that the study focus on AONTAS Community Education Network members that provide higher education to learn more about this area. Below are case study examples from two of these AONTAS members.

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### Higher Education in An Cosán

Since Sept 2018 [An Cosán](#) has delivered Higher Education courses to 500 individual Learners (not including 34 learners on a BA Hons in Early Childhood Education & Care hosted in Jobstown Dublin 24 by An Cosán and delivered by IT Carlow).

We also delivered a range of further education Level 4, 5, 6 to approximately 200 learners in the same period and a range of unaccredited courses in Digital Skills, Literacy and Wellbeing.

These learners are typically

- Early school leavers
- Young people over 18 who have been in care
- Lone parents
- Young people 18-30 seeking alternative routes to higher education
- People who struggle with disadvantage
- People in low paid, low skilled precarious employment – or subject to technological displacement
- People who struggle with urban and rural isolation
- People who have experienced homelessness or addiction
- Long term unemployed
- People living in the Traveller Community
- People living in Direct Provision centres across Ireland
- We also offer CPD & Certificate programmes for professionals who work in the community and adult education sector.

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<sup>24</sup> [National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 - Report of the Strategy Group - Report of the Strategy Group](#), Department of Education and Skills (2011). Last accessed 28/04/20.

An Cosán do not currently collate data on each learner as to their background / target categorisation but we know inherently that we have learners who have completed foundation (unaccredited), further education, or higher education modules from each of the areas listed above across our service in An Cosán and through the virtual community college.

In the academic year 2018-2019 An Cosán delivered HE courses to 194 individual learners.

- 95 taking standalone modules for CPD purposes. (professionals working in the sector)
- 99 of which many were making their first journey into higher education

Of these 73 learners decided to continue their learning journey into the next academic year.

The picture in terms of learner expectation has changed dramatically over the last year with many of our learners having increased confidence seek to continue their learning journey to degree level.

In the academic year 2019-2020 An Cosán is currently delivering HE courses to 157 individual learners.

A synopsis of estimated learner outcomes is shown below.

		Estimated Learner Trajectory for Sept 2020				
		Single or multiple (10 ECTS) modules completed. Consider next steps.	Average of three modules completed this academic year.	Commence Year 2 of Level 7 Degree	Commence final stage of Level 7 Degree	Level 7 Degree completed
New Learners 2019-2020 (including 8 advanced entry)	84	36	21	19	0	8
Continuing Learners 2019-2020	73	14	10	10	19	20
<b>Total Current Learners</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>28</b>

Flexible provision in terms of time and location, as well as the building of a learning community has played a huge role in terms of retention.

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## Higher Education in Longford Women's Link

[Longford Women's Link](#) (LWL) is a QQI registered centre and delivers courses at QQI Levels 3, 4, 5 and 6. LWL has a strong tradition of enabling the delivery of third level education in Longford since the foundation of the organisation in 1995 and has worked with UCD, NUI Maynooth, An Cosán VCC and IT Carlow to bring and make third level accessible in a county that does not have a third level institute and which has been shown in numerous research papers and statistical analyses to be economically and geographically disadvantaged.

In addition to learners attending third level higher education courses, LWL worked with 344 learners in accredited and non-accredited courses in 2019.

LWL has been a community partner with [An Cosán VCC](#) since 2014 offering QQI Level 6 and 7 modules that allowed the learner build towards a degree at their own pace through blended learners. This Community Partnership has had approximately 40 learners access An Cosán VCC courses. The blended learning approach allows for the delivery of educational mentoring supports within the community setting (LWL) while receiving technical and academic support from the VCC.

Since 2016 LWL has established a collaborative partnership with IT Carlow offering two QQI Level 8 Honours Degree courses and two Higher Certificate courses, with approximately 91 learners from the Midlands accessing these courses onsite in our dedicated Education and Training facility.

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## Barriers facing learners in Further Education and Training

AONTAS has provided extensive data about the barriers facing learners in the Further Education and Training (FET) setting through [the National FET Learner Forum \(NFLF\) Reports](#), as well as through its ongoing research and consultation with [Community Education Network](#) members<sup>25</sup>. **Another rich data set that would be useful for the study would require investigating 'community education learner voice'<sup>26</sup>. Obtaining the perspectives and lived experience of this set of potential Mature Students would contribute invaluable data to the HEA and Indecon's study. AONTAS would therefore recommend that this avenue be included in the Terms of Reference.**

The following offers an insight into some of the main challenges facing FET learners regarding access and progression to HE. Drawing from the NFLF Reports the points below are useful findings in and of themselves. However, they also demonstrate what is to be gained by ensuring that learner voice plays a central role in conducting the study at hand.

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<sup>25</sup> See [Community Education: More than just a course Exploring the Outcomes and Impact of Department of Education and Skills Funded Community Education](#), AONTAS (2010). Last accessed 28/04/2020.

<sup>26</sup> For more details on the range and nature of challenges facing community education learners see [Challenges facing Learners and Community Education Providers within Tertiary Education](#), Mitigating Educational Disadvantage1 (including Community Education issues) Working Group (2020). Last accessed 22/04/2020.

The main areas raised by learners in the [National FET Learner Forum Annual Synthesis Report 2018](#)<sup>27</sup> include

- Lack of information and clarity on Higher Education progression options/how to progress to Higher Education
- Poor staff training/lack of understanding between DEASP and FET/HE
- Lack of information on financial supports available to learners wishing to progress from FET to HE
- Lack of funding to progress from FET to Higher Education
- Lack of availability of progression options to Higher Education in rural areas
- Childcare needs / family responsibilities / lack of access routes for women into HE
- Lack of foreign language courses to support learner progression to HEIs

### **Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH)**

[The Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021](#) states that

[A] marginal increase has also been recorded in respect of participation rates by holders of further education and training qualifications. The scale of the challenge to realise the 10% target for 2019 is significant. However, PATH 3 partnerships between higher education institutions and further education institutions should help the achievement of this target (page 29).

Setting aside how targets may need to change in a post-pandemic Ireland, AONTAS believes that for the same reasons that PATH partnerships exist between FET and HE, there is a necessity for community education to play a greater role in developing PATH partnerships at the local, regional and national level. AONTAS therefore recommends that PATH funding include all community education provision.

Community education providers are key stakeholders within the education ecosystem and are closest to the deeply disadvantaged learners who make up the underrepresented target groups. As noted in the [Report on the Programme for Access to Higher Education \(PATH\) Seminar \(2018\)](#)<sup>28</sup> '[E]xclusion begins early in education and effects future options; therefore, it might be better if initiatives started much earlier than 3rd level' (page 7). 'Earlier' in this sense should not only be understood in terms of age group but also as the stage of a person's learning journey. This ensures that adults returning to education to complete their Leaving certificate, for example, are supported to continue progressing and their potential to become a first-time Mature Student in HE can be reached. This Report also notes a key learning from reviewing PATH initiatives: stakeholders are well aware of the scale of the challenge and that '[S]upport for disadvantaged communities and students is a long-term prospect' (page 12). For approximately 50+ years AONTAS and adult and community

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<sup>27</sup> For example see the [National FET Learner Forum Annual Synthesis Report 2018](#), AONTAS (2019). Last accessed 28/04/2020.

<sup>28</sup> HEA (2018) [Report on the Programme for Access to Higher Education \(PATH\) Seminar 23rd November 2018 Tullamore Court Hotel, Co. Offaly](#). Last accessed 23/04/2020.

education organisations have been at the coalface delivering on this mission. At the core of ensuring equity in HE is recognising the ‘...importance of engaging with ‘on the ground’ expertise in a real way and directly involving the communities where people live and have experience. The role of communities is especially important in terms of adopting a prevention and early intervention approach’ (page 5). **AONTAS therefore suggests that the Terms of Reference ensure that adult and community education providers are considered to be key stakeholders for and elemental to carrying out the study.**

## Final remarks

As Ireland transitions into a post-pandemic society and economy, higher education will have to play an even more vital role in overcoming what will surely be the most challenging time witnessed in Ireland in living memory. The social, economic and educational fallout from COVID-19 means it will only become more important to ensure more adult learners from underrepresented target groups succeed in HE. AONTAS encourages Indecon to update its Terms of Reference with the HEA to ensure that the expected increase and breadth of demand for HE is identified in order to fully and accurately examine the new and intensified barriers that are and will increasingly exclude people from equal participation in HE.

Stop-gap measures that only serve to paper over the cracks which Mature Students have continued to fall through is unsustainable and unjustifiable from an equality perspective as much as from a value for money and public expenditure perspective. A model is needed that enriches everyone's lives in the common interest that involves removing the burden of fees as one of the most obvious fundamental barriers facing potential and enrolled Mature Students. The social and economic dividends of ensuring that Tertiary Education System can act as a public good could not be more important than at this historical moment. For generations higher education has simply remained unobtainable for many of the most marginalised learners, their families and communities. What is needed now more than ever is a long-term sustainable 'supply chain' put in place to ensure year on year increases in the numbers of Mature Students from the target groups are progressing, accessing and succeeding in HE. Equity must underpin this process which is why the role of community education must be understood as central. **The new study must be open to and honestly assess the range of potential social and economic gains that can be made by meaningful investment in the infrastructure around developing and expanding relationships between all of the mutually important stakeholders within the Tertiary Education ecosystem.** Doing so would certainly help ensure that the unacceptable and persisting policy gaps which have left behind so many disadvantaged learners are finally made visible and are permanently closed.

## Introduction to AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

AONTAS is Ireland's National Adult Learning Organisation for adult and community education providers, and adult learners. It promotes the value and benefits of adult learning, and advocates on behalf of the adult and community education sector. Founded in 1969, it is an independent NGO, with 400 members nationwide. In addition to promoting adult learning in Ireland, AONTAS is the national coordinating body for the European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL), which is aimed at increasing participation in lifelong learning across the EU, enhancing policies and supports for adult learners, and gathering and disseminating European best practices. As a membership organisation we provide a space for members to share experience, promote their work and advocate for the value of adult and community education.



AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation  
2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street,  
Ranelagh, Dublin 6, D06 E0H1  
[www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com)  
01 406 8220

RCN 20013042  
Chy. Reg. 6719  
Co. Reg. 80958