Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including Community Education issues) Working Group

Tutors and Practitioners on the Front-line During COVID-19 Emergency Response Education - *A Discussion Paper*

Draft Paper

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AONTAS

The Voice of Adult Learning

Mitigating Educational Disadvantage
(including Community Education issues) Working Group[i]
Tutors and Practitioners on the Front-line During COVID-19
Emergency Response Education

A Discussion Paper

This paper sets out to highlight a range of recommendations that will support equality and safeguard the needs of disadvantaged students and learners. We would ask that such recommendations are considered when actions by the education institution are made in relation to the theme of the paper. No doubt after this crisis the education system as a whole will be collectively judged on how it mitigated disadvantage.

The Paper is specifically focused on tutors and practitioners during COVID-19 delivering emergency response education in relation to educational disadvantage. By tutors and practitioners, we mean all educators across the tertiary education sector including teachers, lecturers, facilitators, etc. This paper is focused the ability of tutors to support learners who are adults living in disadvantaged rural areas, first-time mature students, low-qualified migrants, low-qualified adults (less than upper second level), early school leavers, long-term unemployed, asylum seekers, people with disabilities, Travellers, Lone Parents, Homeless, people in receipt of social welfare, living in poverty and low-income families and other vulnerable learners.

Key Recommendations

- **Research the new pedagogic approaches required to reach disadvantaged learners in the 'new normal'**. Research is needed on different models of education required for online, blended and face-to-face learning to support disadvantaged students and learners across tertiary education. This would support the 'new normal' as we offer an effective range of teaching and learning approaches. Not all learners can be supported through technology-related pedagogy (people with special needs especially)
- **Develop Digital and Distance Teaching Guidelines** with specific instruction on expectations, teaching methodologies, quality of programme delivery, and best practice models of delivery and engagement considering the needs of specific disadvantaged learner cohorts in addition to **CPD support** for inclusive remote learning practices and digital teaching
- **Develop a national e-course for practitioners** on how to effectively deliver FET programmes remotely. It should consider the diversity of programme types in FET and the challenges remote FET learners might encounter. Digital accessibility should be covered in this programme to ensure disabled learners can engage equitably

- **Increase IT capacity, support and devices** from technical staff, FESS (Further Education Support Service), access officers, and students supports to meet new demands of remote learning environment

- **Capture best practice through a coordinated and systematic approach**, identifying professional development needs, and proactively addressing employment-related concerns
- Create a cross-tertiary sharing of learning by building **online communities of practice and support for tutors** who are engaging with vulnerable learners

Introduction

Tertiary Education is a widely diverse and complex space within the education sector. Tutors and practitioners work in statutory and non-statutory bodies across Community Education, Further Education and Training (FET), and Higher Education. This traditionally fragmented arena is also impacted both by the Leaving Certificate model of assessment, CAO application system and the complex pathways of progression across the tertiary infrastructure with learners moving between institutions.

During COVID-19 educators and staff are faced with teaching in an emergency response approach. Their online and distance-based methodologies are not carefully designed and planned in advance, like modern blended learning programmes, with suitable resources and conditions ensured for educators or learners. It is a reactionary model of education conducted during a worldwide pandemic that poses professional, personal and societal challenges for all involved.

This paper seeks to highlight some of the challenges and barriers faced by tutors and practitioners across the sector in the delivery of their education programmes. This is a combination of issues flagged by members of the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including Community Education issues) Working Group and experiences shared by tutors and practitioners during AONTAS COVID-19 webinars whom are representatives from across the Tertiary Sector. Furthermore, this paper offers a guideline on the protections and supports needed for educators during COVID-19, highlights innovative best practice and opportunities for reflection and change, and draws together recommendations for moving forward.

Barriers and Challenges Faced (staff, learners, institutions)

The sentiment "it is not business as usual" continues to echo from representative bodies. Many programmes are unsuited to online and distance teaching including placement, practical modules, and literacy-based course work from Levels 1 to 3. Adult learners coming from disadvantaged and vulnerable groups many of whom need additional resources and face to face supports, especially those having returned to education after a long period of time, are struggling with the current education climate.

Tutors working with learners that have disabilities or learning difficulties, are members of the Traveller and Roma communities, or with poor health face complex barriers in reaching out and continuing to provide quality learning. In many cases, this is not suitable or possible. In addition, there is a complexity of personal barriers faced within homes due to care duties, unsuitable and unsafe environments, a lack of equipment, and fear of COVID-19 for high-risk adult learners that may be unknown to practitioners and staff. Maintaining the delivery of programmes and relationships with learners places pressure on tutors and practitioners. Education is a front-line caring profession and continuity of tutor-learner relationships,

among others, is vital for the education sector. This paper cannot fully explore the complexity of these issues due to the timeframe of COVID-19 response work. However, it will seek to highlight the barriers faced by educators and staff re-affirming and validating their contribution and role within emergency response work and recommend actions that may support the continuation of their work.

Issues presented by tutors working with disadvantaged and vulnerable cohorts of learners include:

- High-risk groups fearing for their life during COVID-19
- Learners with disabilities or learning difficulties that need specific resources and support
- People living in dangerous and unsuitable conditions whom are without a safe learning environment and may be dealing with trauma
- Programmes not suited to online or distance learning
- Learners with low self-confidence who are not ready to engage in a hybrid or blended programme
- Learners with no access to WIFI, no laptop or sharing equipment and no access to software (Higher Education Institutions have licenses for most programmes. This is not the case across much of the FET or Community Education settings)
- Learners who have stopped responding or engaging and may be at risk of not completing their programme
    - If this learner returned to education after a long period of time and has now disengaged this could [take] years to resolve and can have a ripple effect on family members and family learning in terms of building trust with statutory services and/or self-esteem
    - "*It's the most disadvantaged ones (learners) that are dropping out or can't engage*" – Tutor, Community Education Organisation in a rural location.
- Learners expressing fear of 'the new normal' who particularly within community-based programmes do not wish to continue if a programme becomes a hybrid model of teaching and learning. This is not the open door and welcoming space they registered with in previous times.

Wrap-around services no longer available for learners that previously engaged with counselling, addiction support or other therapies with their education provider that supported their learning. To address these challenges, tutors would like clear guidelines on how to best meet the needs of individual learners in a remote environment. Professional development opportunities on inclusive remote learning and Universal Design Learning methods would be welcome, in addition to the sharing of innovative practice occurring across the field.

Tutors also recognise that disadvantaged learners, particularly those who have fallen away from their courses, will need more supports to reengage moving forward. To help support this, tutors would like to see an increase to FESS (Further Education Support Services). Currently, the support service has five officers to support the FET sector (compared to 200 PDST supporting 2nd level, 100 supporting Junior Cycle and 50 supporting curriculum

development). Tutors would also like to see the addition of at least one access officer to each ETB to start to support disadvantaged students, perhaps even more considering geography or student numbers. In addition to this, tutors would like to see ETBs consider moving toward modular delivery so students who leave higher education by Christmas could join a course in January rather than waiting a full year. Tutors would like to see ETBs allowed to deploy more staff to student supports as opposed to primarily being appointed to teach. There is no General allocation model in FET so many learners can get lost very early on. Without proper supports in place, this problem could increase in the current climate. Finally, to ensure teaching needs are met, tutors would like to see the creation of an additional SEN teachers' group (as delivered by DCU for DES) for the next ten years just for FET teachers to ensure more practitioners are qualified to support students.

Teaching in Emergency Response

Tutors and practitioners have shown exemplary practice in the current times. Teaching in an emergency response during a global pandemic poses personal and professional challenges in their role and within their organisation or institution. They need to be protected, supported and consideration should be taken for the following issues:

- **Personal health and wellbeing:** educators and staff in the tertiary sector are caring for learners while also experiencing COVID-19 restrictions and difficulties themselves. The phrase 'you can't pour from an empty cup' reminds us that we must protect and support their health and wellbeing and check-in on their needs too. Many tutors are trying to contact learners daily, re-develop their materials and teach online and have less access to resources and support than before. They may have caring responsibilities at home or other personal challenges and experience high levels of stress trying to navigate their role in an emergency response situation. It is important to consider that some tutors themselves fall into high-risk categories. Provisions for their health and safety must be adequately considered when developing plans on new teaching and learning environments.
- **Capacity to teach online:** Tutors have mixed ability and experience with creating online programmes, navigating software platforms and teaching digitally. This is an additional challenge and may pose a barrier to practitioners across the sector. This includes access to IT equipment, stable WIFI and software licenses that may be needed to teach online. Some Learning Management systems require a higher capacity for tutors to run courses. Tutors need to be provided with WiFi booster devices necessary to overcome these challenges. There are also needs to be a further investment in IT supports available to educators in FET. There are no technicians to support the move to blended/ online learning. Most centres have a support contract for minor support of a few hours per month. If we are truly digital next year, IT support will need to be made available to meet the demand.
- **Teaching Environment:** The shift to working from home has resulted in tutors delivering education in new spaces. Tutors are now working from their homes where they are sharing spaces with family members, caring for children, and dealing with WiFi challenges, similar to learners. Tutors have described delivering classes from bedrooms or at shared kitchen table spaces.

- **Guidelines and information:** A recent survey of FET practitioners completed by AHEAD, revealed that 90% of practitioners who completed the survey had never taught online before ([AHEAD FET Practitioner Survey, May 2020](#)). The new environment in which tutors now find themselves poses a number of challenges for tutors. They have expressed concerns on the uncertainty they now face and have expressed a concern about a significant gap in policies and procedures related to working under these new conditions Across statutory and non-statutory organisations and institutions expectations on what exactly is expected with contact time, navigating the quality of programme delivery and ensuring programmes are on-track differs greatly. Management and administration have been supportive, encouraging and are working within the unknown themselves but may have authority to propose or implement changes and get updates from governing structures. For example, educators have raised questions around GDPR restrictions in current climate and have pointed to a level of uncertainty on the methods and tools most appropriate to engage with learners. Tutors on the ground are often removed from information that would provide clearer understanding on the processes involved and the expectations placed upon them in their teaching practice.
    - **"***I feel like I'm flying blind. I've no idea what's ahead of me on Monday. I've been in contact with learners but everything is very broad and open to interpretation.***"** – Tutor, Education and Training Board in rural location.

To ensure tutors are equipped with the resources and information needed to effectively deliver inclusive and meaningful remote lessons and assessments to learners across the tertiary sector, a best practice guide on remote teaching, learning and assessment strategies should be developed. This guide is to include guidelines on the following:

- How to engage 'hard to reach' learners
- Guidelines on teaching remotely on practical courses
- Clarity on GDPR and reaching out to learners
- How to continue disability support provision remotely
- Further support on alternative assessment arrangements
- Learner wellbeing and mental health (guidance, procedures, referral)

In addition to the development of these guidelines, more peer networking opportunities needed to be provided for tutors to share the knowledge and skills they have developed. Given the diversity of the FET sector, a national e-course for practitioners on how to effectively deliver FET programmes remotely which considers the diversity of programme types in FET and the challenges should also be developed. Digital accessibility should be covered in this programme to ensure disabled learners can engage equitably.

- **Fear of job loss:** During the last recession cuts were made across the board that impacted on the education sector. This was particularly difficult for those in independent centres in Community Education who generate income from social enterprise and rely on public donations for funding. As a result of the crisis, tutors are worried about their job status. The level of worry is very different across the tertiary system depending on setting, union status, contracts, etc. Those working

with the most educationally disadvantaged are often the most disadvantaged/precarious in terms of their employment. Many tutors on short-term contracts have already reported loss of hours. This will have long-term effects on the sector as non-permanent part-time staff are very vulnerable and may be forced to forge careers outside of the sector. This could pose a major challenge for providers who seek to recruit tutors in the Autumn and into 2021.

- **Validation of new skills:** Educators are pushing innovation in education to a new level. They are developing plans and ideas quickly to address an ever-changing situation. As part of this, they have upskilled in a number of areas including remote learning and teaching. In the long-term, offering opportunities for tutors to receive formal Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for this work would be a welcome measure to validate their efforts during this time. CPD for tutors within this context is also necessary and should be adequately resourced.

Highlighting Innovative Best Practice

Exceptional efforts have been shown across the tertiary sector. Education is a core part of Irish society and networks of educators, staff and institutions continue to hold steady in communities, supporting people with their academic studies and a personal level. Examples of this include:

- Organising IT equipment including phones and laptops and sending this to learners
- Providing one to one support on the phone, video calls and by post
- Sending postcards, letters and learning activities to learners who can't engage digitally
- Offering to organise shopping or making referrals for particularly vulnerable and isolated learners
- Redeveloping programmes into live classes, webinars and workshops
- Removing costs for courses and sharing access to resources across tertiary education
- Creating social network and app-based groups on Facebook or WhatsApp to support peer relationships between learners
- Redeveloping content into activities including taking photographs and holding discussions on the different images shared for learners with lower digital skills
- Encouraging learners to meet online and support each other as a class or group
- Organising mentors within groups

There should be a coordinated approach to not only document this innovative practice, but a transformation of examples into tools that can be used across the sector. This effort should be made in conjunction with increased opportunities for professional development in the area of inclusive remote learning practices and digital learning.

Opportunities for Reflection and Change

Tertiary education is a largely diverse sector and unique in catering for learners from levels 1 to 10. Its complexity can be difficult to navigate for learners as pathways between institutions are often based on locally defined agreements (FE2HE, 2016). The Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including Community Education issues) Working Group brings together

representatives from across tertiary education including providers, policy makers, and advocacy organisations. Discussions are rich and help to inform cross-sectoral understanding, with learners continually placed at the forefront of discussion at all times. Building upon this work can support institutions to work more closely in the future. This will impact positively on the experience of tutors and practitioners as the sector, strengthening and ultimately enriching this space for learners.

- **Partnership approach across the sector:** Currently institutions and organisations are sharing resources and materials and providing expert guidance between practitioners within the sector. This is happening on a small scale due to Working Group connections but it could support growth and take place at all levels if this partnership continues.
- **Educator and learner partnership:** Discussions on the responsibilities of learners continues to arise. Advocates experienced in protecting vulnerable learners note this responsibility for adult learners but also remind us of the power dynamics within education settings, calling instead for partnerships between educators and learners.
- **Models of assessment:** current situations have shown us how summative models of assessment rely heavily on certain conditions. It may be a time for reflecting on the ultimate purpose of assessment and the impact on disadvantaged and vulnerable learners using these models.

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