

BUILDING MEANINGFUL REPRESENTATION FOR ADULT LEARNERS

AONTAS: The National Adult Learning Organisation
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AONTAS 'The Voice of Adult Learning'
2nd Floor, 83 – 87, Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6, Ireland
Web: www.aontas.com
Tel: 01 4068220
Email: mail@aontas.com

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Introduction: How AONTAS works with adult learners

The mission of AONTAS to advocate for the right of every adult in Ireland to quality learning is a testament to our commitment to the adult learner as the central focus of further education and training services. Our current strategic plan¹ is underpinned by three key themes:-

- *Voice*
- *Visibility*
- *Value*

AONTAS articulates as one of its key principles:-

- *to support and affirm the voice of adult learners as the core of its advocacy work.*

In order to put this principle into practice AONTAS engages in a number of activities which are learner specific. These include the delivery of an information referral service for adults returning to further education and training, supported by a web-based information booklet entitled '**What Next**', and capacity building opportunities for learners to become strong role models and advocates for the value of further education and training. AONTAS encourages and supports adults to become advocates in the media and regularly consults learners in the development and preparation of submissions on policy issues which affect their lives. AONTAS also supports learners to participate actively in its membership events and has two spaces on its Board for individual members. Challenges faced by learners and perspectives on their experience are documented and regularly communicated to providers, policy and decision makers.

Our submission to the SOLAS consultation process in January 2012 placed the learner firmly at the centre of the development of the new Further Education and Training Service and called for a Learners Charter to clarify the rights and responsibilities of learners. As part of the Adult Learners' Festival AONTAS organises a Lobby for Learning Day involving learners directly in a dialogue with policy and decision makers which has proven to be both informative and effective. The 2012 and 2013 events focussed on the development of the new FET service and reports from both events are available on our website². In preparation for these events AONTAS engages with providers both in the statutory and non- statutory sector to identify a diversity of learners to participate in a constructive dialogue with policy makers.

AONTAS has taken a keen interest in the whole reform agenda to date and we are determined to do our utmost to contribute to the development of a high quality Further Education and Training Service

¹ Available online from <http://www.aontas.com/membership/strategicplan20.html>

² Report 'SOLAS – Serving Adult Learners' (AONTAS 2012)– available from <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/solas-serving-adult-learners-2012/>
Report 'Community Education – A Strategy for Success' – available from <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/community-education-a-strategy-for-success-lobby-for-learning-report-2013/>

which incorporates the principles and best practice of both the adult and community education sector and the vocational training sector. The importance of building a Further Education and Training sector that is valued, is strongly learner centred and has parity of esteem with other sectors of the education service cannot be underestimated and is a huge step forward in terms of education and training policy. Consultation, dialogue and feedback from learners will be central to that process and we believe will give the new service a solid foundation on which it can grow and develop over time. AONTAS is in an ideal position to assist this process.

The Challenges for Effective Learner Representation

Learners are central to the work of AONTAS and we are committed to supporting their capacity to articulate their needs, influence policy and practice and articulate issues of concern to them. However because adult learners are a diverse range of people with different skills, abilities, motivations, qualifications and responsibilities, and who generally follow diverse learning routes, the challenge is to develop strategies which embrace this diversity and ensure as broad a range of issues as possible is represented. Adult learners lead busy lives with work, family and caring responsibilities and are often not in a position to participate in traditional representative structures such as the Union of Students in Ireland which ably represents mainly full time third level students. In addition, the fluid, changing profile of the adult learner population makes it extremely challenging to build and develop appropriate representative structures.

AONTAS Learner Support Strategies

AONTAS has experimented with a mix of strategies over the years including the development of Learners Networks, the establishment of the Adult Learners Forum of Ireland, The Adult Learners' Festival STAR Awards and various other participatory events and focus groups. Our experience to date has taught us that adult learners like to contribute in different ways depending on their individual levels of confidence and commitments and it is with this knowledge that we have developed our current strategy to ensure the learner voice is heard. This includes a range of ways learners can become involved from sharing their experiences, to participating in working/focus/steering groups, to presenting at events and serving as members of the AONTAS Executive Committee.

Coupled with our experience of working directly with adult learners AONTAS also has a track record of carrying out research on an array of issues affecting them, much of it exploring undocumented territory. A list of our research publications can be accessed through the website³. In 2011 research supported by the Department of Education and Skills was commissioned by AONTAS and focussed on the outcomes and benefits of community education eliciting the responses of over 800 learners between two reports⁴. AONTAS has also supported learners to articulate their issues through local, national and social media and has included a learner ambassador in its delegations to international

³ <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications.html>

⁴ 'Community Education – More than just a Course' (AONTAS, 2011) – available from <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/community-education-more-than-just-a-course-2010/>
Sowing the Seeds of Social Change (AONTAS, 2011) available from <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/sowing-the-seeds-of-social-change-2011/>

meetings such as CONFINTEA VI in 2009 and the General Assembly of the International Council for Adult Education in 2011. AONTAS currently provides a support structure for the Further Education and Training Sector learner representative on the QQI Board through regular meetings, exchange and dissemination of information and feedback from a diversity of learners to ensure she can represent a range of issues.

In the absence of a formal or traditional representational structure for adult learners AONTAS has represented their issues on a range of committees and advisory groups established by government departments from time to time. The authority for this work has come from the consultation processes we use to communicate with and listen to learners. Recent examples include the organisation of the Lobby for Learning day event in February 2013 where learners were supported to discuss community education as a labour market activation strategy with the Minister of Training and Skills and key policy makers, as well as the organisation of a focus group of learners who were either already in higher education or aspiring to access it to feed into the National Access Office's new strategic plan.

Building a learner voice

AONTAS believes that for representation of learners in the sector to be effective it must be underpinned by two actions:-

- 1. Supporting learners themselves to become advocates by enabling them to develop the confidence and skills necessary for representational work*
- 2. Supporting the development of structures and strategies at a local level through which learners can participate and contribute to policy and decision making at a national level.*

Supporting Learners

While formal representation on decision making and governance structures is a welcome development in ensuring that adults are actively involved in policies that affect their lives, AONTAS believes that this representation must be supported through a number of activities to ensure that the representation is meaningful, accountable and reflective of the diversity of learner issues. How learner representatives communicate a diversity of issues and how and to whom they feed back their experiences at governance level is vital to making the best use of the representative role. On July 1st 16 new Education and Training Boards were established following the enactment of the Education and Training Bill 2013. The Act stipulates that in developing their strategies the Boards should consult with learners. It also allows for a learner representative on the new Boards although it is not clear how those learners will be selected and supported.

Some examples of mechanisms or actions which could support learner representation proposed by AONTAS include:-

- At a local level the establishment of a small advisory or steering group of adult learners facilitated by the local ETB through a resource worker to support the local learner representatives in their role and to provide experience on a broad range of learner issues. The resource worker who would report to the Adult Education Officer would work with local

learners to ensure that the membership of the group is refreshed from time to time so as to reflect the changing nature of adult learning.

- The hosting of regular focus group meetings by AONTAS to explore particular challenges faced by both learners and policy makers. These could be organised along the lines of the Lobby for Learning day event, where a broad range of learners communicated their experiences of, and suggestions for further education and training to the Minister of Training and skills and relevant policy makers. Facilitation, preparatory work, learner support and follow-up was provided by AONTAS to create a constructive space for dialogue. Focus groups could be held to coincide with particular policy developments (e.g. the development of the FET strategy) to communicate a broad, diverse learner perspective. This worked very well in the UK, where NIACE the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education organised learner focus groups to coincide with the development of the National Skills Strategy.
- The use of social media/web fora and other technology to engage with and communicate with a wider group of learners.
- The development of a Learner Ambassador Initiative (already piloted by Co Westmeath VEC) which supports learners to become role models for others. AONTAS is working with DES and other stakeholders in the FET sector on a project funded by the European Commission which aims to raise awareness about the benefits of adult learning and to promote the EU Agenda on Adult Learning. Part of this project will involve training 40 Learner Ambassadors nationwide from across the FET services who will promote adult learning within their local communities and through local media.
- The development of a Learner Charter as part of the new Further Education and Training Strategy facilitated by AONTAS.

Supporting the development of structures and strategies at a local level

Building mechanisms for involving learners at a local level will be crucial to the effectiveness of the learner representative. No research has been done on how learners engage at a local level but there are already some models which could be drawn upon.

- Limerick City Adult Learners' Forum started in 2005 as a project to celebrate the European Year of Citizenship through Education. From a consultation process with 150 learners, where representatives were nominated from adult learning centres across Limerick city to come together to develop a Learner Charter. The Charter lists what learners expect from other learners, tutors and learning centres. The Limerick City Forum had their Charter printed and distributed to learners, tutors and co-ordinators as a way of promoting the benefits of adult and community education and how best practice results in attracting adults back to education

and training. The Forum nominates learners on to the Limerick Community Education Network which co-ordinates adult education activities in Limerick and is an active member of the AONTAS Community Education Network. Of crucial importance to its success has been the strong support and involvement of the VEC staff.

- Drawing on the experience of the Limerick City Adult Learners Forum AONTAS developed a toolkit for creating local adult learner forums⁵ to assist in building platforms at a local level which would give a voice to adult learners and develop a structure for feeding their issues into the ETBs and into policy at a national level. However buy in from the local service providers will be the key to their success. AONTAS is in a position to take an active role in working with local service providers to assist and support them in developing those structures.
- NALA, the National Adult Literacy Agency works with literacy learners to develop student networks and support literacy students to represent their views and issues in a number of fora. The Agency has a student sub-committee consisting of fifteen literacy students and a representative of the Adult Literacy Organisers Association. They organise student days and participate in a range of activities such as how to set up student sub committees, provide information at events such as the national ploughing championships, profile the Agency's work on the media etc. Members of the sub –committee have also been involved in Eur-Alpha project to produce a Rights Charter for literacy learners across Europe. However the work of the Agency in regard to learners is confined specifically to literacy and it does not purport to represent the broader diversity of adult learners.
- NALA also has a student development fund which is used to support students to engage in activities outside the formal learning situation. It enables students to network, exchange information, try out alternative modes of learning and get to know one another. A report of the use of the fund can be accessed on the NALA website. The fund model is an interesting one and could be adopted by ETBs to assist learners to develop local fora.

Representation on National Boards and Committees

As stated earlier, while AONTAS welcomes learner representation at all levels of the system we have also outlined some of the challenges of feeding in a diverse range of views and issues from a highly diverse cohort of learners as well as contributing to the corporate governance role of national boards and structures. All members of such structures require a high level of skills, experience, time and commitment.

⁵ Available from <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/hearing-the-adult-learner-voice/>

QQI Learner Representative

The model used by the current QQI Board where AONTAS was invited to propose a learner who had a range of skills and experience which would enable that person to make a meaningful contribution in a corporate governance role has worked successfully for a number of reasons. The representative has direct experience of adult learning, both as a learner who has progressed through the system later in life, and as a volunteer delivering adult literacy. She also has:-

- Experience of serving on the Board of AONTAS for two years along with experience of representing AONTAS at national and international events.
- Support from AONTAS, through regular meetings, preparing and debriefing for meetings of the Board of the QQI, exchanging information and ensuring she is connected into as broad a range of issues as possible so that she can communicate a diversity of learner issues to a key decision making arena.

Nonetheless the workload is considerable including regular attendance at meetings, a high volume of reading material and participation at events outside of the board meetings. When invited to provide feedback on her experience of being a Board member of QQI to date the learner representative shared the following observations:-

- A thorough understanding of the role of legal and governance issues and of the role of the learner representative is essential.
- Strong support is vital, in my case from AONTAS to enable me to advocate for learners.
- Confidence is required to be able to participate in discussing the items on the agenda. It is also needed to ask 'the hard question' or what sometimes feels like 'the stupid question' and realising that other members might need the same information but are reluctant to ask.
- You need to remember you are an equal member of the Board and not be intimidated by others you may think of as being 'more qualified'.
- You have to have time to commit to a certain number of Board meetings per year. In addition other informal meetings could be called or you could be asked to chair committee meetings on behalf of the Board. Preparation requires a vast amount of reading including minutes of meetings, agendas, background reports and so on.
- Consultation and communication with all stakeholders is vital, therefore mechanisms need to be in place for this for example regular advisory meeting to elicit the views of learners.

Representation by AONTAS

An alternative model is representation drawn from the adult learning organisation where the representative role and responsibilities are supported by the organisation through time and other

resources. This has worked very well in the past where AONTAS has represented the issues of adult learners on a range of committees and working groups. Some examples include: -

- The Educational Disadvantage Committee where the AONTAS representative participated actively in the work of the committee including organising a learners forum, drawing on research and writing material for inclusion in its final report, 'Beyond Disadvantage' (2005).
- The High Level Group on Access to Higher Education where the AONTAS representative co-wrote the section on Mature Students for the final report (2000). The National Access Office was set up as a result of the work of this group and an AONTAS representative currently serves on the advisory group bringing the issues of adult learners to the table.

The success of this model depends on the use of active consultation mechanisms with adult learners like the ones described earlier in this paper. The advantages of using this model are that the representative has a ready made support structure, is allocated a time commitment as part of his or her work, has up to date knowledge and information about what is happening in the sector as a whole and has the opportunity to work with a range of stakeholders.

Conclusion

AONTAS has extensive experience of engagement with a variety of adult learners at various stages of the qualifications spectrum. This perspective has strengthened our work as an organisation, and we look forward to communicating that experience across the new further education and training services as they take shape. In this paper we have proposed a number of mechanisms whereby new opportunities to represent the learner voice can be strengthened and supported to promote a range of learner issues. While representation at Board level is important, likewise it is also important to ensure that the experience and perspective of learners becomes an integral part of FET policy both at local and at national level on an ongoing basis through strong consultative processes.