



The Voice of  
Adult Learning

# Submission to the Pathways to Work Strategy

AONTAS - the National Adult Learning  
Organisation

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## AONTAS Pathways to Work Submission

### About AONTAS

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland, founded in 1969 and passionately working ever since to make education equal and accessible for all. Backed by our robust research and focused community work, we advocate and lobby for quality education for all adults and raise awareness of the impact of adult learning on people's lives and on society. We work on behalf of our members, who connect with all communities across the island of Ireland. Our members and adult learners inform all our research and campaigns for social change.

### Summary of Pathways to Work Submission

This submission highlights the role of adult and community education in supporting the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups progression to meaningful employment. In an era of near full employment, those that are currently at risk of being left behind will benefit from participation in the supportive space of adult and community education. These learners have often faced multiple personal, social and structural barriers and need access to opportunities that promote personal development in addition to skills acquisition (Darmody & Smyth, 2018; McGuinness et al., 2016; Meyler et al., 2023a). Increased collaboration between education providers and employers, and enhanced supports for these learners, will promote their progression on a meaningful pathway to work (QQI, 2014; Indecon, 2019). However, this will only be achieved through the delivery of adequate resources for the wider FET sector in general, and the community education sector in particular.

### Key Recommendations

1. Expand employer engagement in Further Education and Training, including community education, with a focus on equity
2. Develop accredited, modular, and stackable qualifications at NFQ Levels 1-5
3. Increase access to career guidance and counselling across the wider FET sector, including within community settings.
4. Recognise the value of community education as an entry point to learning and work

## Background

Adult and community education, including the broad range of formal and informal provisions in Further Education and Training (FET) sector, can act as a critical lever for the goals of the next Pathways to Work strategy. A central aim is engaging marginalised groups in pathways to quality employment. This can be achieved through inclusive education ensuring no one is left behind. This sector has proven success in this achieving this goal as is evidenced in the demographic diversity of learners from marginalised backgrounds, including minority communities, unemployed and inactive cohorts (Farrell et al., 2025, forthcoming; SOLAS, 2025; SOLAS 2024).

Within the adult and community education sector, these learners can also benefit from holistic, tailored supports needed to access to education and promote personal development (Cobain et al.,2021; Doody, 2021; QQI, 2025). This is vitally important for learners who experience multiple social and personal barriers to social inclusion, including education and training (Maloney, 2020; Darmody & Smyth, 2018; Meyler et al., 2023a). Evidence from research demonstrates the benefits of participation in adult and community education for these cohorts, including an increase in confidence, self-efficacy, and career clarity that is so pivotal to successful integration into working life (Meyler et al., 2024, Farrell et al., 2025 forthcoming, Cobain & Jackson, 2025 forthcoming).

Learner voice research has captured a range of perspectives across the FET sector and revealed that many learners are highly motivated by a desire to improve their career prospects through learning opportunities and access to work-based learning opportunities and supports (Farrell et al., 2025, forthcoming; Meyler et al., 2024). This emphasises the value of career focused learning in adult education programmes for diverse cohorts with different needs, promoting inclusive pathways to work for the most disadvantaged (Maloney, 2020; OECD, 2017; OECD, 2025; QQI, 2025).

Engaging those learners at risk of being left behind is only one aspect of the value of adult and community education to the Pathways to Work Strategy. In an ever-changing landscape of work, and a need for adaption and response to emerging skills gaps, the true potential of the sector in supporting pathways to work has yet to be realised (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2020; OECD, 2017). Innovation within the adult and community education sector has

demonstrated its capacity to respond to emerging challenges. These include developing the skills for a just transition, addressing unmet digital literacy needs, and supporting accredited pathways to third level education through collaboration with tertiary partners (AONTAS, 2025a; SOLIDAR, 2024; Cobain & Jackson, 2025, forthcoming; Gallagher et al., 2025). This capacity to respond to social challenges and expand pathways to further opportunities can be harnessed to realise the full value of the sector as a lever for progression to employment.

Further development and support for employment focused activities and learning that can build on this potential and amplify its value. This includes expanded collaboration with employers to support the development of relevant skills through experiential work-based learning, and industry relevant learning programmes. If this is implemented with increased resourcing and expansion of career guidance services, learners can be supported to progress to meaningful employment through clear pathways that offer holistic development (Meyler et al., 2024; Farrell et al., 2025, forthcoming).

However, the FET sector, and community education need increased, sustained investment and development for this outcome to be assured. This should include the expanded delivery of accredited options within community settings, stronger linkages with employers, and bolstered supports for learners to achieve this goal. These investments and expanded provisions are essential for broader inclusion, better labour market outcomes, and making Pathways to Work truly work for all.

### **Key Recommendations**

#### **Recommendation 1: Expand employer engagement in Further Education and Training, including community education, with a focus on equity**

Courses with clear employment pathways are highly valued by learners in the FET sector, including those with on-the-job experiential learning (Farrell et al., 2025, forthcoming). Yet, many report difficulty securing placements and want more assistance in navigating access to work based learning (Meyler et al., 2024; Farrell et al., 2025, forthcoming). This highlights a need for deliberate, planned and strategic collaboration between education providers, employers and industry-based networks that expands on current work-based learning practices (Poole et al., 2024; QQI, 2014; QQI, 2025). This collaboration is key to the development of programmes and networks that will support learners' access work-based

learning. It can also reveal opportunities for the development of modules and programmes that are relevant to industry needs (e.g. James Reilly & Laczik, 2021; Poole et al., 2021; QQI, 2014; QQI, 2025).

This collaboration should seek to replicate the success of collaborative partnerships that deliver higher education in community settings. This promotes the engagement of disadvantaged communities in accredited learning in supportive environments, while drawing upon the expertise of tertiary education providers to deliver quality learning that supports progression (Maloney, 2020; Gallagher et al., 2025; Murray & Brennan, 2023). The engagement of employers and industry networks in social initiatives such as this can address the delivery of future proofed skill sets while addressing learners' needs for support to progress to work-based learning.

### **Recommendation 2: Expand part time, accredited, modular and stackable qualifications at Levels 1-5**

The wider FET sector has a role to play in the development of skills relevant in the current context of change, particular for those learners at lower levels of educational attainment (OECD, 2017; OECD, 2023; OECD, 2025). However, many learners, including parents, carers and other low-income groups face practical barriers to participation in career focused learning due to their personal circumstances (Meyler et al., 2023a; Mooney & O'Rourke, 2017). A recent profile of learners published by NALA also revealed that a significant cohort of learners with unmet literacy needs were in employment with implications for their ability to engage in training (NALA, 2024). Ensuring that there are accessible options for education and training in communities will give these learners options to develop relevant skills to participate in an ever-changing employment landscape (OECD, 2017; OECD, 2023; Maloney, 2020).

As mentioned above, there is significant potential to expand part time, flexible, accredited training options into community education in particular, given the success of partnerships that expand access to higher education. Expanding the availability of part-time, modular, and stackable qualifications at levels 1-5 within community settings would allow learners to progress at their own pace, while benefiting from the wraparound supports that facilitate their engagement (Cobain et al., 2021; Cobain & Jackson, 2025 forthcoming; Doody, 2021).

Investing in this approach would broaden the reach of accredited learning to those who might never enter a formal college or training centre. This would strengthen progression pathways from community education into further education, apprenticeships, and sustainable employment (Maloney, 2020).

**Recommendation 3: Increase access to career guidance and counselling across the wider FET sector including in community education.**

Career guidance is hugely valuable for disadvantaged learners. It is a key component of the Learner Support Framework (SOLAS & ETBI, 2024) and an Indecon review of career practice (Indecon, 2019) affirmed its crucial role in breaking cycles of disadvantage. Despite policy recognition of accessible career guidance as a core support, many learners participating in AONTAS research say career supports are under-resourced and difficult to access (SOLAS & ETBI, 2024; Government of Ireland, 2023; Farrell et al., 2025, forthcoming).

This has implications for their capacity to access the help they need to plan their educational journey and work transitions (Farrell et al., 2025 forthcoming). It also risks a failure to realise the benefits of career guidance for personal and social development that is key to workplace integration for groups at risk of being left behind (Government of Ireland, 2023; Indecon, 2019; SOLAS & ETBI, 2024). Expanding access to career guidance and counselling across the whole FET sector, including community education sector, will help those furthest from the labour market to access personalised holistic support in a familiar, trusted environment supporting their pathways to work.

**Recommendation 4: Recognise the value of community education as an entry route to learning and work.**

Community education has a proven track record of engaging marginalised learners who are most at risk of exclusion from both education and the labour market (SOLAS, 2024; SOLAS, 2025). Operating within disadvantaged local communities, they offer flexible, accessible learning environments that meet people where they are (Doody, 2021; Cobain & Jackson, 2025, forthcoming). These groups often need wrap-around supports including learning support, device loans, help with transport/childcare, mental health supports (Cobain & Jackson, 2025; Meyler et al., 2024; Meyler et al., 2023b). However, the engagement of

groups is resource intensive and requires significant time (Mcgrath & Fitzsimons, 2019; Cobain & Jackson, 2025, forthcoming).

The capacity of community educators to deliver these supports, and plan for service delivery is threatened by chronic underfunding (Cobain et al., 2021; Cobain & Jackson, 2025; Magrath & Fitzsimons, 2019). In fact, funding is falling at a time when the cost of delivering services and meeting demands is increasing. In 2024, total community education funding was reduced to €21.5 million, a difference of €800,000 from 2023's allocation of €22.3 million. Yet in the same period, demand for community education was rising. In 2023, approximately 43,000 learners took part in community education (SOLAS, 2024). That figure has since increased to 46,000 learners in 2024. Currently, community education supports 21% of all FET learners but received just 2.1% of the budget.

This chronic underfunding is because the wider FET sector itself is under resourced. While there has been a year-on-year increase on allocations to SOLAS, these increases do not reflect the weighting of learner enrolments in the FET space as part of the wider tertiary system (AONTAS, 2025b; Higher Education Authority, 2023; Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, 2025). Moreover, recent figures show that 1 in 10 adults in Ireland engages with FET, and enrolments continue to rise (Brownlee & Rourke, 2024).

This growth of the sector needs to be resourced and supported if the urgent policy challenges of addressing skills gaps and supporting inclusion for those at risk of exclusion are to be addressed (OECD, 2023; OECD, 2017; Government of Ireland, 2025). By supporting, expanding and resourcing career focused learning, especially in the community education settings, Pathways to Work could embed social inclusion within skills development (QQI, 2025). This will make sure that national targets for participation and employment are matched by meaningful opportunities for those furthest from the labour market.

## Conclusion

Community and adult education are not optional extras in a strategy to support work and inclusion; they are essential. AONTAS' National FET Learner Forum data clearly shows that learners engage, benefit, and aspire to move toward employment and further education, but that barriers remain. By incorporating accredited options within community settings;

strengthening employer linkages; expanding and improving career supports; and investing in a model that provides wraparound supports; Pathways to Work can more fully deliver on its promise of social inclusion as we adapt to social challenges.

The recommendations of this submission demonstrate the importance of collaborative systematic responses to social challenges across departments, agencies and sectors (Devlin et al., 2025). We urge policymakers to work together across departments to take these recommendations forward in Strategy documents. This will ensure a more inclusive labour market, stronger social justice outcomes, and better employment prospects for those most at risk of exclusion.

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