

Adult and Community Education: Widening Participation in Higher Education

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About AONTAS

1. AONTAS are the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland. Backed by our robust research and focused community engagement, 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 do this work on behalf of our members and adult learners who inform our research and campaigns for social change across the island of Ireland.

AONTAS' Work in Northern Ireland

2. AONTAS was founded in 1969, and since then stakeholder collaboration across the island has been key to our work. In Northern Ireland, **AONTAS are a founding member of the Alliance for Lifelong Learning in Northern Ireland (ALL)**. We have worked in partnership with other ALL members such as the Open College Network NI, the Open University and ICTU to support and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all across Northern Ireland. AONTAS has worked to build the evidence base for the sector, most notably through the first-ever Northern Ireland Community Education Census (Cobain et al., 2023). As a member-based organisation we convene regular meetings, webinars and events to bring a wide variety of stakeholders together to share experiences and learning. **A recent AONTAS online event brought 60 members from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland together** to discuss options for cross-border collaboration.
3. Our robust research covers practice in Northern Ireland and delivers insightful recommendations for policy. This includes the **AONTAS Northern Ireland Community Education Census (2023)** which surveyed 60 providers who were delivering 798 courses to 50,285 learners in 2022 (Cobain et al., 2023). This report highlighted the sectors capacity to support communities and groups most at risk of being left behind, including unemployed people, people in disadvantaged communities and women. These learners were provided

with enabling supports, responding to learner needs around mental health, and other practical supports.

4. Recent AONTAS research which looked at **Community Education for Social Transformation (2023) across the whole island** further explored the value of community education to learners and communities (Cobain & Jackson, 2025). This research found that the underpinning ethos of the sector, grounded in social justice, relational practice and empowerment, was a key driver of transformational outcomes. This includes removing barriers to learning for learners with histories of educational disadvantage.
5. Another piece of AONTAS research conducted on behalf of ALL, **Measuring the Impact of Adult Education in Northern Ireland (Cobain & Neilands, 2025)** highlighted a need to expand evaluations of outcomes, beyond “counting numbers”, particularly given the high numbers of providers delivering non-accredited learning. This points to a need for having greater recognition for qualitative outcomes, particularly relevant to the progression of learners who are furthest from formal education in their educational journeys.

Recommendations at a glance

6. Drawing on AONTAS’ expertise in research, community and sectoral engagement, and learner voice, **five key recommendations** are put forward for consideration by the Committee for the Economy. These recommendations are as follows:
 - a) **Recognise adult and community education as a distinct pathway into higher education**, with parity of esteem in policy, planning and funding.
 - b) Develop and resource **flexible progression pathways** from **community education into further and higher education**.
 - c) Promote the **recognition of non-traditional qualifications across higher education to widen participation**.
 - d) **Establish systematic independent mechanisms for capturing Learner Voice in Northern Ireland** with tools for capturing outcomes in adult and community learning contexts.
 - e) **Support the development of cross border projects** that harness the potential for collaboration and learning.

What is Community Education?

7. As stated in the AONTAS Northern Ireland Community Education Census (2023)- Community education helps people who want to return to education or learning but may not have the confidence or opportunities to do this in a formal setting. It is rooted in values of equality, justice and empowerment. It creates a voice for those who are furthest from the education system, and – crucially – it is based on what people need and is driven by communities.
8. Community education, operating in the most local of settings, opens doors to people who might be apprehensive about taking the first step on their educational journey. In doing so, it creates the conditions of trust, belonging and mutual recognition in diverse settings that enable learners from marginalised groups to progress in their educational journey (Cobain et al., 2023). This social value is not captured in qualification frameworks or employment outcome measures, yet it is **foundational to the Programme for Government's (NIE, 2024) objectives of safer communities, social inclusion and wellbeing for all.**
9. Community education in Northern Ireland is often delivered through voluntary and community sector organisations that are **characterised by trusted relationships, local embeddedness, flexible and non-formal provision, and a capacity to engage those furthest from formal education.** Research by AONTAS (Cobain et al., 2022; 2023; Cobain & Jackson, 2025) and the Learning and Work Institute (Southgate et al., 2021) demonstrates that this sector provides the entry points, enabling supports and progression pathways for those that are furthest from education.
10. **Examples of community education providers in NI** we have recently engaged with:
 - Ballybeen Women's Centre
 - Clanrye Group, Newry
 - Conway Education Centre, Belfast
 - Derry Youth and Community Workshop
 - East Belfast Mission
 - Fermanagh Trust
 - Glór na Móna, Belfast
 - Harmony Community Trust, Down
 - Phoenix Education Centre, Belfast
 - Rural Community Network NI
 - Start 360, Belfast
 - Strabane Community Unemployment Group
 - U3A Foyle
 - Women's Tec, Belfast

Community Education – A solution to persistent challenges

11. The ongoing development of community education pathways is crucial to access in the further and higher education sector. The lifelong learning participation rate in Northern Ireland stands at 35%, against a UK average of 42%, and Northern Ireland has consistently recorded the lowest rate of job-related education or training of any UK region (Phipps et al., 2025; Pelan, 2023). Adults in the lowest social grade are 16 percentage points less likely to participate in learning than those in the highest, and **half of those who left school at 16 or earlier have never returned to learning at any point** (Phipps et al., 2025; Wood et al., 2024).

12. Participation in further and higher education is strongly shaped by prior educational attainment. **Adults who left school at 18 are 20% more likely to engage in learning than those who left at 16**, and those with higher qualifications are significantly more likely to continue learning throughout their lives (Phipps et al., 2025). This represents a cycle of exclusion in which those with the greatest need for education are the least likely to access it through formal routes. **Breaking this cycle requires investment in accessible, community-based provision that can reach people where they are** (Cobain et al., 2023; Cobain & Jackson, 2025).

Recommendation 1: Recognise adult and community education as a distinct component of Northern Ireland's further and higher education system, with parity of esteem in policy, planning and funding across the Department for the Economy, Department for Communities and Department of Education.

13. Community education is not an add-on to the education system—it is one of its most powerful engines of access, progression, and transformation. It opens doors that formal pathways too often leave closed, providing a distinctive and proven route into further and higher education for those who have been least well served by traditional routes (Cobain et al., 2023). Rooted in local communities, it meets learners where they are, rebuilds confidence, and creates stepping stones from exclusion to participation.

14. The **AONTAS Northern Ireland Community Education Census (Cobain et al., 2023)** documented **60 community education organisations delivering almost 800 courses to over 50,000 people during the 2021 to 2022 academic year alone**. These organisations provide accredited and non-accredited learning at Levels 1 to 3 of the Qualifications Framework, functioning in practice as informal bridging and linkage partners for the further and higher education system. Learners reported significant gains in confidence and self-esteem that opened doors to further learning (Cobain et al., 2023).

15. Furthermore, the OECD (2025) reports that non-formal adult learning now far exceeds formal adult education in scale across member countries, with **37% of adults engaged in non-formal learning compared to only 8% in formal adult education**. This increase is mirrored in Northern Ireland, where **22% of adult learners are now engaging in learning in community contexts, an increase from 18% in previous years (Phipps et al., 2025)**. This is where adult learning is happening. Policy must follow it.

16. For this to happen, a **clear policy framework** is needed so that its particular qualities, and practices are protected and promoted as part of the wider education ecosystem. The development of an Adult Learning Strategy is long overdue and is needed to ensure that adult and community education is integrated into progression pathways (NI Audit Office, 2024; Cobain & Neilands, 2025; Cobain & Jackson, 2025). Learning from the republic suggests that having policies in place, such as the Community Education Framework (SOLAS, 2024) are key to recognition, visibility and legitimacy for the sector, which precedes partnerships and collaboration to achieve policy goals (Cobain & Jackson, 2025). This policy should be developed and implemented in collaboration with the sector so that it is rooted in the ethos of empowerment and inclusion that drives practice.

Recommendation 2: Develop and resource flexible progression pathways, including bridging and linkage programmes between community education to further and higher education at Levels 1 to 5, with dedicated funding for part-time, flexible and community-based delivery.

17. These pathways should be designed in partnership with community education providers and higher education partners and embedded across the various recognition of prior learning/ accredited prior learning frameworks. These pathways must support the engagement of the groups who are furthest from education.

18. **Disabled learners face some of the greatest challenges in participation. The evidence on who is most underrepresented in lifelong learning in Northern Ireland is consistent and clear.** Pelan (2023) documents that only **12.3% of adults aged 25 to 64 with a disability participated in education or training in 2021, compared to 19.0% of those without a disability.** This points to the importance of accessible, flexible, community-based provision as the appropriate first point of contact in widening participation in higher education (Cobain et al., 2023; Cobain & Jackson, 2025).

19. **Migrants, including refugee and asylum-seeking communities,** also face particular barriers to participation in formal education in Northern Ireland. The AONTAS submission to the Programme for Government (AONTAS, 2024) highlighted the importance of community education as an accessible entry point to education affirmed the value of enabling supports that are responsive to diverse needs as a driver of participation. The current funding model, with its narrow focus on economic activation criteria, is least well suited to supporting these communities' participation in education. Their needs are social, linguistic and relational as well as economic (Meyler et al., 2023). Community education with its holistic focus on development and inclusion is well placed to support the integration of new communities into the wider education system (Cobain et al., 2023; Cobain & Jackson, 2025).

20. **Women are also disproportionately affected by barriers to participation** and are less likely than men to be economically active and more at risk of socio-economic exclusion (Northern Ireland Executive, 2024). For women, the evidence from the **AONTAS NI Census (Cobain et al., 2023) on the need for support is particularly focused on childcare. Learners in focus groups described the provision of free or low-cost on-site childcare as the single most critical enabler of their participation in community education.** Many had no other family support available and would have been entirely unable to attend classes without it. Women

described knowing their child was cared for in the same building by qualified staff as allowing them to relax into their learning and to experience what they described as precious time for themselves and a chance to reconnect with other adults. **This evidence is a direct argument for community education as a route to further and higher education through the engagement of women in learning at early stages of their educational journey.**

21. Despite this value for communities, **people in rural areas face additional barriers of isolation, transport and limited provision.** Addressing these disparities requires a deliberate expansion of community-based provision, targeted at underserved groups and locations, in order to reduce structural barriers to participation and ensure that lifelong learning opportunities and progression to higher education is genuinely accessible to those who currently remain furthest from education.

Recommendation 3: Promote the recognition of non-traditional qualifications across higher education institutions to widen participation.

22. Qualifications delivered through **voluntary and community sector organisations must be recognised as valid and valued routes into further and higher education.** Technical barriers relating to recognition of learning that prevent community learners from accessing progression routes available to learners in adult and community education must be identified and removed.

Recommendation 4: Establish a Learner Voice Forum for Northern Ireland and develop tools for capturing outcomes in adult and community learning contexts.

23. Realising the value of adult and community education in Northern Ireland requires **representation from adult and community education learners in key decision-making fora.** This will ensure that the sector is recognised in skills reviews, consultations and widening participation strategies. AONTAS has developed a model for structured learner voice participation in the Republic of Ireland through the National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum, which brings together thousands of adult learners to share their

experiences and influence policy. Learner voice has proven to be an invaluable tool for informing decision-making, civic engagement and quality assurance in further education in the Republic of Ireland (QQI, 2023; QQI, 2024). And the National FET Learner Forum in particular has been identified as demonstrating good practice in learner participation and influence in adult education (EPALE, 2025).

24. For this reason, AONTAS are well placed to provide the structured mechanism through which the experiences of **adult learners in Northern Ireland could directly inform the Department for the Economy and the Department for Communities in the development and review of their policies**. Learner voice indicators can also support the measurement of the impact of adult education and drive the development of the education ecosystem that supports increased access and widened participation for marginalised groups (Cobain & Neiland, 2025).

Recommendation 5: Support the development of cross border projects that harness the potential for collaboration and learning while unlocking funding opportunities across the adult and community education sector.

25. AONTAS are an all-island organisation and bring a distinctive perspective on the potential for North-South collaboration in adult and community education. There are key examples of cross-border projects from AONTAS research (Cobain & Jackson, 2025) which show the potential for the extension of community-to-higher-education progression pathways. For example, the **Rural Community Network NI currently delivers a Level 7 Diploma in Community Development Practice accredited by the University of Galway**, demonstrating the potential of structured collaboration between community organisations and higher education institutions (Cobain & Jackson, 2025). In addition to this example, in the **PEACE PLUS North South ESTEEM project the Atlantic Technological University, Ulster University, Northwest Regional College and Donegal Education and Training Board are jointly working to simplify and strengthen cross-border education and employment mobility** (SEUPB, 2025). These examples show that community-to-higher-education pathways are achievable and effective if resourced and supported.

26. A **Northern Ireland Adult Learning Strategy** should explicitly plan for **cross border collaboration** between further and higher education providers, building on existing partnerships and the Shared Island Civic Society Fund's investment in cross-border civic collaboration to widen participation in higher education.
27. **AONTAS' all-island reach** means it is well positioned to facilitate this **North-South dimension, supporting NI community education providers to access cross-border partnership opportunities**, share practice and engage with the governance structures of both jurisdictions. This is consistent with the objectives of the Good Friday Agreement and the Windsor Framework and represents a concrete expression of the Shared Island agenda in the domain of lifelong learning.

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