

AONTAS Adult Education Summit

Shaping Europe's Future through Adult Education

Brochure

Radisson Blu Royal Hotel
21 to 22 October 2026



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Please note that all performers, speakers, sessions, workshops, and exhibitors have been listed alphabetically rather than chronologically in the brochure. Please see the Agenda for the full running order.

FOREWORD

Welcome to the AONTAS Adult Education Summit 2026, *Shaping Europe's Future through Adult Education*.

As Ireland holds the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, this is an important opportunity to think about the future we want to create in Ireland and across Europe, and the role that education must play in shaping it.

Europe is facing significant change. Rapid technological developments, demographic shifts, climate change, growing inequality, misinformation, and increasing political and social division. It's changing how we live, work and participate in our communities. To address this, we need to examine the conditions necessary for a healthy democracy. People need meaningful opportunities to learn, adapt, connect with others and have a say in the decisions that affect them.

Adult and community education has a vital role to play in Europe's future.

Education cannot only be about responding to the needs of the economy. It should help us build stronger communities, deepen democracy, tackle inequality and create opportunities for people who have not always been well supported by our education systems. Across Ireland and Europe, adult learning creates spaces where people can build confidence, take collective action and critically engage with the world around them, contributing to positive change in their families, communities and wider society.

This Summit brings together learners, educators, community organisations, education providers, policymakers, researchers and European partners to ask an important question:

What should the future look like, and how can adult learning help us shape it?

Over the two days, we will explore the ideas and evidence, and share the experiences that can inform our future. We will hear directly from learners and practitioners, learn from approaches across Ireland and Europe, and consider how policy can better recognise and support the full value of adult and community education.

Ireland's EU Presidency gives us an opportunity to bring these conversations to a wider European stage. At AONTAS, we believe that adult and community education is vital for a healthy democracy. Local knowledge, learner voice and the expertise of educators must be central to the decisions we make nationally and at European level.

We must work together to shape the future of Europe.

I hope this Summit gives you space to think, challenge, connect and contribute and that you leave with new ideas, new relationships and growing confidence in what adult education can achieve. Most importantly, I hope you have a bit of craic!

Dearbháil

AONTAS CEO

VENUE INFORMATION

Welcome to the Radisson Blu Royal Hotel, Dublin 8

The AONTAS Adult Education Summit 2026

21 and 22 October

Welcome to the Radisson Blu Royal Hotel, our home for two days of conversation, creativity, solidarity and learning. The Summit brings together learners, educators, researchers, artists and policymakers from across Ireland and Europe.

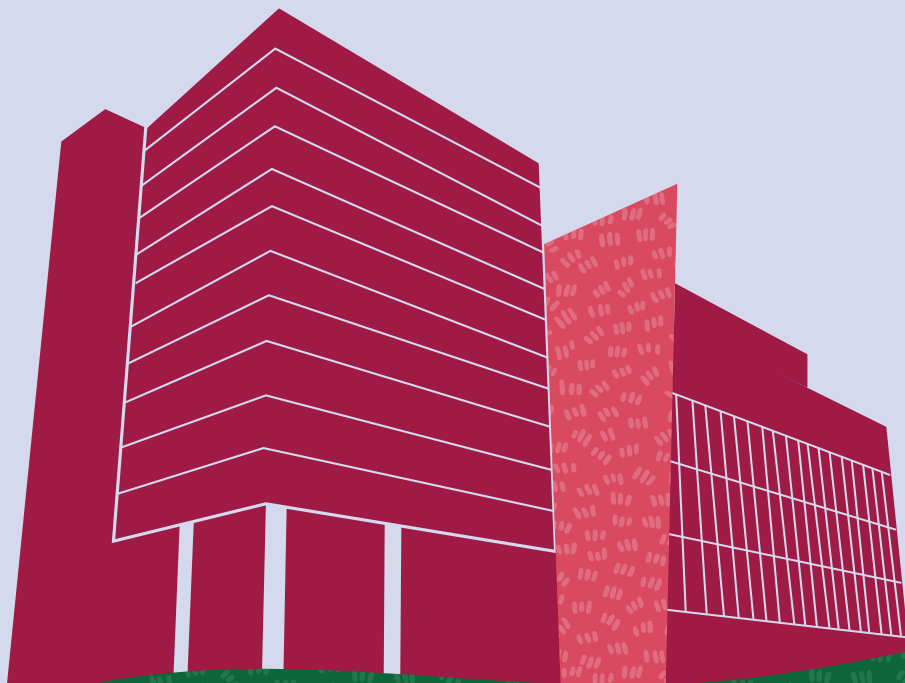
Summit Spaces

Goldsmith Suite - Home to the main Summit programme

Field Suite - Hosting a selection of workshop sessions

Need Help?

Our team will be on hand throughout the Summit. Find a member of AONTAS staff and they can direct you to quiet spaces or help with whatever you need.



AGENDA

Day 1: Wednesday, 21 October

- 10.00 am **Registration**
- 10.30 am **Video: Learner Voice**
- 10.35 am **Welcome**
John D'Arcy, Chair, AONTAS
- 10.40 am **Play: Full Circle**
James Rickard and **Anto Seery**
- 11.05 am **Official Opening**
Minister Marian Harkin TD, Minister of State at DFHERIS
- 11.20 am **Launch of the LVAI Report**
- **Thomas Murray**, Head of Research, AONTAS
 - **Eve Cobain**, Senior Research Officer, AONTAS
 - **Karyn Farrell**, Learner Voice Project Officer, AONTAS
 - **Philip Finn**, Research Officer, AONTAS
- 11.45 am **Panel: Missing Voices in the National Convention on Education: Adult Learning in Ireland's Education Future**
- Chair: **Dearbháil Lawless**, CEO, AONTAS
 - **Fiona O'Byrne**, Assistant Secretary General, DFHERIS
 - **Dr Sarah Sartori**, Higher Education Strategic Project Lead and Sanctuary Chair, South East Technological University (SETU)
 - **Robert Cullen**, Adult Learner and Criminologist, Success Stories Program
 - **Lisa Kilbride**, Adult Educator, Dublin Adult Learning Centre
- 12.40 pm **Lunch and Exhibition**
- 2:00 PM **Workshop 1: Building a Further Education and Training Research Network**
- **Martha Bolger**, Director of Further Education and Training, KCETB
 - **Eve Cobain**, Senior Research Officer, AONTAS
- Workshop 2: Building a National Learner Voice Network**
- **Catherine Shipman**, Head of Engagement and Development, SERC (South Eastern Regional College)
- Workshop 3: Community Wealth Building**
- **Seán McCabe**, Head of Climate Justice and Sustainability, Bohemian Football Club
 - **Katlyne Armstrong**, Education Lead, Bohemian Football Club
- 3.00 pm **Coffee Break and Exhibition**
- 3.20 pm **Keynote Address**
Professor Lyn Tett, Professor Emerita, University of Edinburgh
- 3.50pm **End of Day Responses**
- 4.00 pm **Final Remarks**
John D'Arcy, Chair, AONTAS

Day 2: Thursday, 22 October

- 9.30 am **Registration**
- 10.00 am **Video: Practitioner Voice**
- 10.05 am **Welcome**
Lilian Nwanze-Akobo, Vice-Chair, AONTAS
- 10.10 am **Video Address**
Minister James Lawless TD
- 10.15 am **Musical Performance**
Paul Kelly and **John Ryan**
- 10.35 am **Keynote Address**
Professor Ted Fleming
- 11.00 am **Launch of The Adult Learner 2026**
- **Tom Farrelly**, Gasta Master, Munster Technological University
 - **Patricia Higgins**, Interfaith Minister and Celebrant
 - **John Balfe**, Lecturer in Department of Humanities, SETU Carlow Campus
 - **Colm Downes**, Lifelong Learning Manager, SETU
 - **Lisa Oelschlegel**, Independent Researcher and Consultant
 - **Deborah Odeworitse Oniah**, Trauma Informed Practitioner, Quality Matters
- 11.45 am **Adult Education in Sweden: An Introduction to Folk High Schools**
Felicia Hedström, Principal, Jakobsberg Folk High School, Sweden
- 12.15 pm **Lunch and Exhibition**
- 1.15 pm **Workshop 1: Building a Further Education and Training Research Network**
- **Martha Bolger**, Director of Further Education and Training, KCETB
 - **Eve Cobain**, Senior Research Officer, AONTAS
- Workshop 2: Building a National Learner Voice Network**
- **Catherine Shipman**, Head of Engagement and Development, SERC
- Workshop 3: Community Wealth Building**
- **Seán McCabe**, Head of Climate Justice and Sustainability, Bohemian Football Club
 - **Katlyne Armstrong**, Education Lead, Bohemian Football Club
- 2.15 pm **Coffee Break and Exhibition**
- 2.30 pm **Panel: Adult Learning and Europe's Future: Perspectives from across the EU**
- **Joram Snijders**, Senior Policy Officer, Ministry of Education, The Netherlands
 - **Pia Seidler Cort**, Associate Professor at the Department of Education, Aarhus University
 - **Kathleen O'Hare**, Chair, NI Skills Council
 - **Denise Shannon**, Adult Literacy Organiser, City of Dublin ETB
 - **Dr Vesna Fabian**, Assistant Director, Serbian National Qualification Framework
- 3.30pm **Official Closing**
Colm O'Reardon, Secretary General, DFHERIS
- 3.50pm **End of Day Responses**
- 4.00 pm **Final Remarks**
Lilian Nwanze-Akobo, Vice-Chair, AONTAS

PERFORMERS



FULL CIRCLE

A play by James Rickard and Anto Seery

DAY 1

Full Circle is a powerful story of disability, identity and resilience - from an ambulance school bus to Trinity College and back home. A sharp, honest two-voice story about disability, identity and taking back your power. This is not simply a story about disability — it is a story about ownership. About refusing to be defined by limitation. About falling, recovering, travelling the world, and ultimately returning home.

James Rickard, born in Dublin's inner city, is a psychology graduate of Trinity College Dublin. His work centres on equality, diversity, and inclusion. *Full Circle* is his debut theatre piece.

Anto Seery is an actor and theatre maker from East Wall, Dublin.



PAUL KELLY AND JOHN RYAN

Fiddle and bouzouki players

DAY 2

Paul Kelly is an experienced musician from Tallaght in Dublin, Ireland, who is equally at home in a variety of different styles of music. He has had a long career in the Irish music scene and has been a member of many well-known Irish bands and artists such as The Fleadh Cowboys, The Sharon Shannon Band, singer Eleanor Shanley and more recently The Dublin Legends (The Dubliners). He is a founding member of his current band, The Dixie Micks.

John Ryan has been playing traditional Irish music since his early teens, originally on mandolin and tenor banjo but now primarily on bouzouki. He was a member of the well-known Dublin band Fionnaisce who played and toured extensively in the 1980s. John is a much sought-after accompanist and has played in multiple duos and trios, both in Ireland and the continent. He has also appeared on numerous recordings including those of singer Daoiri Farrell, piper Martin Nolan and fiddle player Ciara McElholm. John is also one of the leading authorities on the bouzouki in Ireland.



SPEAKERS



JOHN D'ARCY

Chair, AONTAS

DAY 1

John is an experienced senior leader in tertiary education. He served as The Open University's Principal and National Director for Ireland from 2010 to 2026. He was also CEO of Colleges NI; Director of BDO Management Consultants; Principal Officer for Research at Northern Ireland's CCEA; and Research Fellow with the Northern Ireland Council for Educational Research. He is currently Vice Chair of the Open College Network and Chair of AONTAS, Ireland's Adult Learning Organisation. He is a former Chair of the Oh Yeah Music Centre, Enterprise NI and Audiences NI and was Vice Chair of Universities Ireland.

PROFESSOR TED FLEMING

DAY 2

Ted Fleming is Emeritus Professor at Maynooth University and Adjunct Professor at Teachers College Columbia University (CU), New York. He holds a BSc and BD from Maynooth and MA and EdD from CU where he was supervised by Jack Mezirow. Later, he studied with Paulo Freire. Formerly, editor/broadcaster (RTÉ), Adult Education Organiser (Louth), lecturer (Dundalk IT), he was subsequently Head of Department at Maynooth, before retiring in 2010. Today he is PhD supervisor at University of Heidelberg, and on the Editorial Boards of five international journals. He received "Jack Mezirow Award" for original contributions to the theory of adult learning (2014).



MINISTER MARIAN HARKIN

DAY 1

Marian Harkin was elected to Dáil Éireann as an Independent TD for Sligo-Leitrim in 2002, 2020 and 2024. She is Junior Minister in DFHERIS, with responsibility for Further Education, Apprenticeships, Construction and Climate Skills. Born in County Sligo, Marian studied Chemistry and Mathematics at University College Dublin and taught maths at Mercy College, Sligo for 23 years. She served as a Member of the European Parliament from 2004 to 2019 and as deputy leader of the European Democratic Party. She was named MEP of the Year in 2011 and 2012. She has a strong interest in balanced regional development across infrastructure, health and education.



MINISTER JAMES LAWLESS

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

DAY 2

James Lawless is the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, appointed in January 2025. He previously served as Minister of State at Transport and at Environment, Climate and Communications. First elected to Dáil Éireann for Kildare North in 2016, he'd earlier served on Kildare County Council and as Mayor of Naas (2015). He holds a Trinity College Dublin degree in Mathematics and Computer Science, studied Law at King's Inns, and practised as a Barrister specialising in maritime and freight law. Starting from grassroots activism on commuter services, he became a leading voice on Technology and Digital Policy, championing social media and cyber harms legislation, and chaired the Justice Committee from 2020–2024.



DR LILIAN NWANZE-AKOBO

Vice-Chair, AONTAS

DAY 2

Lilian is an Assistant Professor in Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University. She co-directs the Initial Teacher Education Programme for Adult and Further Education. An educator, researcher, and speaker, her work centres on educational equity, social justice, participation, and anti-racism. Her doctoral research examined the experiences of Black women in adult education in Ireland and advanced a racially and culturally responsive pedagogy. Through her research and engagement, she contributes to shaping policy and practice. Lilian is Vice Chairperson of AONTAS and serves on several national advisory and governance bodies, including the HEA Anti-Racism Advisory Committee.



COLM O'REARDON

Secretary General, DFHERIS

DAY 2

Colm O'Reardon was appointed Secretary General of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in September 2023. Before coming to the department, he was Head of the Strategic Economic Development Division in the Department of Finance. In previous roles, he was Secretary to the Commission on Taxation and Welfare, and Head of Strategy and Policy at the Department of Health. He is a graduate of Trinity College Dublin, Churchill College Cambridge and Wolfson College Oxford. He holds a D.Phil. in Economics from the University of Oxford, where he was also a Rhodes Scholar.



PROFESSOR LYN TETT

Professor Emerita, University of Edinburgh

DAY 1



Lyn Tett is Professor Emerita at the University of Edinburgh where she is currently investigating the impact of commuting on students at the university. Her research has mainly focused on the factors that contribute to adults' literacy and numeracy difficulties and the forms of learning and education that are most effective in empowering individuals and communities experiencing educational disadvantage. More recently she has been researching the contribution made by the work of community education practitioners to social justice and how they have challenged externally imposed changes that would contradict these principles.

SESSIONS

LAUNCH OF THE LEARNER VOICES ACROSS IRELAND REPORT 2026

DAY 1

The AONTAS Research Team will present the findings of *Learner Voices Across Ireland: The National FET Learner Forum Report, 2025-2026*. This report offers vital, actionable insights into adult learners' views of and satisfaction with their experience of Further Education and Training.

Dr Eve Cobain

Senior Research Officer, AONTAS

Eve Cobain is Senior Research Officer at AONTAS. She has a particular interest in community education and learner voice and has published a range of research reports and book chapters in these areas. At AONTAS, Eve coordinated and delivered the first ever census of community education in Ireland, both North (2023) and South (2021). More recently, she developed and co-authored research on *Measuring the Impact of Adult Education in Northern Ireland* (Alliance for Lifelong Learning, 2025) and *Community Education for Social Transformation* (AONTAS, 2025). Eve currently supports the delivery of the National FET Learner Forum at AONTAS.



Karyn Farrell

Learner Voice Project Officer, AONTAS

Karyn is the Learner Voice Project Officer with the AONTAS Research team. She supports the coordination of the National Further Education and Training Learner Forums, and is responsible for the development, delivery and evaluation of Learner Voice training to learners, practitioners and ETB staff. She has a background in arts development, and in project and events management. She is also an experienced adult literacy tutor. In her spare time, she is a keen photographer and writer.



Dr Philip Finn

Research Officer, AONTAS

Philip is part of the AONTAS Research Team and supports the delivery of all National FET Learner Forum events, including analysing mixed-methods data and developing reports. Philip has a PhD from Maynooth University and has a track record of policy orientated research on issues relating to economic inequality. In particular, his research with unemployed people and people with disabilities uses lived experience to illustrate the barriers to social inclusion, and the supports required to live self-defined meaningful lives. Philip is further interested in Adult and Community Education as avenues for active citizenship, individual empowerment and collective transformation.



Dr Thomas Murray
Head of Research, AONTAS

Thomas leads the AONTAS Research Team to create a robust evidence-base for advocacy and to inform national policy and practice in adult and community education. Thomas was Higher Education Lead at An Cosán, Lecturer in Equality Studies at University College Dublin, and visiting researcher at Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla. His current writing focuses on comparative adult education, learner voice and democracy. He is the author of *Contesting Economic and Social Rights in Ireland: 1848-2016* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).



**MISSING VOICES IN THE NATIONAL
CONVENTION ON EDUCATION: ADULT
LEARNING IN IRELAND'S EDUCATION
FUTURE**

DAY 1

In 2026, the National Convention on Education has put the future of Irish education at the centre of public debate. But the Convention's remit stops at primary and post-primary schooling and the transitions into further and higher education — adult and community education, and the learners it serves, sit outside that conversation entirely. This panel brings together policymakers, practitioners, and learners to ask what's missing when adult and community education isn't part of the national conversation, and what a genuinely complete vision of Irish education would need to include.

Fiona O'Byrne
Assistant Secretary General, DFHERIS

Fiona O'Byrne is Assistant Secretary General at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, where she leads policy and strategy for Further Education, Apprenticeship, and Skills. With over five years in senior leadership roles within the Department, her career spans public service, the private sector and the non-profit sector, including roles in analytics, and consultancy.





Robert Cullen

Adult Learner and Criminologist, Success Stories Program

Robert leads Success Stories Program across both custodial and community settings, supporting participants in self-defining the things most important to them, their beliefs and values while also helping them to understand the harmful impact of patriarchal gender norms. Robert is a Criminologist with lived experience of the justice system. Everything Robert does is in the interest of public safety, and views community education as a vital space for opening up challenging conversations promoting collaboration and inclusion. Robert participated in the AONTAS Learners as Leaders programme in 2025—a programme that supported learners to develop their own community education project.



Lisa Kilbride

Adult Educator, Dublin Adult Learning Centre

Lisa is an adult education practitioner with over 25 years of experience in basic literacy and ESOL at the Dublin Adult Learning Centre. Her work is grounded in critical literacy, with a focus on learning through dialogue and engaging with the context of students' lives. Her doctoral research uses participative walking and mapping methods to explore the connections between lived experience, place, knowledge and action. She is interested in the possibilities offered by community adult education for dialogue and participation in societal decision-making, which are crucial to a healthy democratic society.



Dearbháil Lawless, Panel Host

CEO, AONTAS

Dearbháil is AONTAS' CEO. She has studied at Dún Laoghaire Further Education Institute, Dublin City University, Trinity College Dublin, and she is currently undertaking a PhD at Maynooth University. Her research examines working class women's experiences in adult and community education. In 2022, she received a DCU Alumni Award and was previously shortlisted for Excellence in Academic Teaching. Dearbháil is on the Board of SOLAS, Dublin 8 Community Education Centre, Vice President of the European Association for the Education of Adults, and a civil society representative at the INGOs Council of Europe Conference. She views adult education as a social justice movement.



Dr Sarah Sartori

Higher Education Strategic Project Lead and Sanctuary Chair, SETU

Sarah holds a PhD in Adult and Community Education and is currently the Strategic Project Lead for Higher Education at South East Technological University, where she manages pathways for students from further education into higher education. She is a proud recipient of SETU's Vicky Phelan Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Award 2025 and chairs the university's Sanctuary Working Group, as well as leading a scholarship programme for displaced Gazan students. An adult educator who has been working with Irish prisons since 2010, Sarah established the Maynooth Mountjoy Partnership and the "Footbridge to the Pathway Project" in Portlaoise Prison.

ADULT EDUCATION IN SWEDEN: AN INTRODUCTION TO FOLK HIGH SCHOOLS

DAY 2

For more than 150 years, Sweden has educated adults through the folk high school system. This is rooted in the concept of Bildung—a tradition that encompasses both education and personal development. Through this approach, folk high schools have helped strengthen people, democracy and civic engagement. Felicia hopes to facilitate an interactive session where participants can try out various folk high school teaching methods.

Felicia Hedström

Principal, Jakobsberg Folk High School, Sweden

Felicia Hedström is the principal of Jakobsberg Folk High School, one of 152 such schools in Sweden. She has worked in adult education for nearly 15 years—initially as a journalism instructor. She has a background as the editor-in-chief of a youth magazine that covered young people's civic engagement. She also hosts a podcast about adult education in Sweden, where she speaks with policymakers, educators, and experts.



LAUNCH OF *THE ADULT LEARNER* 2026

DAY 2

Launch of the 2026 edition of *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner* which explores the theme of power and participation. Contributing authors will explore their articles, presented in the fast-paced Gasta format led by Dr Tom Farrelly.

John Balfé

Lecturer in Department of Humanities, SETU Carlow Campus



John Balfé is a lecturer and researcher in the department of humanities at South East Technological University, teaching on programmes in social care, early childhood and child, youth and family. John has 14 years' experience working in the Irish Probation Service and prisons as a Senior Probation Officer and has research interest in restorative justice. John is a CORU registered Social Worker and Social Care Worker and holds a master's in social work, a master's in teaching and learning, and is currently in year four of his Doctorate in Social Science at University College Cork specialising on regulation of the social professions.

Colm Downes

Lifelong Learning Manager, SETU



Colm Downes is a Project Manager in the Faculty of Education and Lifelong Learning, South East Technological University, bringing over 25 years of experience across adult, community, further, and higher education sectors. With a specific interest in access to higher education and social inclusion, his career has spanned roles in Dublin City University, Technological University Dublin, Maynooth University, and the Irish Universities Association, where he has contributed to a wide range of educational initiatives and policy development. Through innovative project management and strategic collaboration, his current work focuses on increasing participation in education for individuals and communities who are most distant from traditional learning pathways.



Dr Tom Farrelly

Gasta Master, Munster Technological University

Tom Farrelly is a Social Science lecturer at Munster Technological University (MTU) whose own academic career began with an Open University (OU) degree, shaping him into a committed lifelong learner. Drawing on his past experience as a Further Education (FE) teacher and Adult Literacy Tutor, Tom champions accessible education and innovative digital pedagogy. Tom is best known as the creator of the Gasta presentation format. Derived from the Irish word for “fast,” Gasta challenges speakers to deliver energetic, five-minute talks driven by audience participation, bringing fun and spontaneous interaction to academic conferences in Ireland and abroad.



Patricia Higgins

Interfaith Minister and Celebrant

Patricia Higgins is an interfaith minister, spiritual accompanier and intercultural community worker based in North Donegal. Drawing on practitioner experience in interfaith ministry, Ignatian accompaniment, and community development, she accompanies adults navigating inherited beliefs and co-creating ceremonies rooted in their values. Her autoethnographic research explores spiritual literacy for pluralist adult education settings. She is a writer and speaker on faith and spirituality, having published articles on spiritual empowerment in Irish contexts, including contributions to Womancraft Publishing’s most recent compendium on Women’s Circles.



Deborah Odeworitse Oniah

Trauma Informed Practitioner, Quality Matters

Deborah Odeworitse Oniah is a lawyer, researcher, writer, and speaker whose work bridges law, trauma studies, and lived experience. As a migrant woman and single mother who journeyed through Ireland’s Direct Provision system, she brings a powerful rights-based and survivor-informed lens to her scholarship and advocacy. Deborah’s research explores access to justice, integration policy, domestic violence, and the structural dimensions of inequality. She is the author of *Beyond the Label*, a reflective work on migration, identity, and resilience. Through her writing, teaching, and community engagement, Deborah amplifies marginalised voices and champions dignity, participation, and transformative change.



Lisa Oelschlegel

Independent Researcher and Consultant

Lisa Oelschlegel holds an MSc in Psychology of Global Mobility, Inclusion and Diversity in Society and an MA in Peace and Conflict Studies. Over the past decade, her work has combined research and practice across Europe and Latin America, collaborating with international and community-based organisations as well as public institutions in the areas of migration, violence prevention, and social inclusion. She currently works as an independent researcher and consultant alongside her role as national coordinator of the Alternatives to Violence Project Ireland, a volunteer-driven organisation delivering participatory workshops across Irish prisons.

ADULT LEARNING AND EUROPE'S FUTURE: PERSPECTIVES FROM ACROSS THE EU

DAY 2

Bringing together European policymakers, education leaders, researchers and practitioners, this panel will explore the evolving role of adult education in building an inclusive, and democratic Europe. Panellists will share perspectives on emerging European priorities, innovative approaches, and the partnerships needed to ensure adult education continues to meet the needs of learners, communities and society. The discussion will consider how policy, research and practice can work together to strengthen lifelong learning systems and shape the future of adult education across Europe.

Pia Seidler Cort

Associate Professor at the Department of Education, Aarhus University

Pia Seidler Cort is associate professor at the Department of Educational Science at Aarhus University, Denmark. Her main fields of research are lifelong learning and lifelong guidance with an emphasis on adult education and vocational education and training. She is interested in exploring the relationship between policy and practice and the implications of policy for organisations, professionals and individuals. At the moment, she is exploring the EU policy of micro-credentials and its translation into the Danish context of higher education, VET and non-formal learning.



Dr Vesna Fabian

Assistant Director, Serbian National Qualifications Framework

Vesna Fabian holds a PhD in Andragogy from the Department of Andragogy at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade. Throughout her career, she has focused on lifelong learning, adult education and recognition of prior learning (RPL), with particular emphasis on strengthening the relevance and responsiveness of education and skills systems to labour-market and societal needs. She currently serves as Assistant Director for the National Qualifications Framework, where she works on enhancing the quality, relevance and transparency of the qualifications system. She is author of several academic and professional publications, chairing the Sector Skills Council for Education.



Kathleen O'Hare

Chair of the Northern Ireland Skills Council

Kathleen O'Hare OBE is Chair of the Northern Ireland Skills Council and a Co-Lead on the Minister's AI Advisory Panel. A former headteacher of two large post-primary schools - St Cecilia's College in Derry and Hazelwood Integrated College in Belfast, she has extensive experience across education, curriculum, skills and leadership. She has served on the boards of CCEA, Queen's University Belfast and Belfast Metropolitan College and has worked internationally with the British Council. Her work in Northern Ireland focuses on strengthening collaboration between education, government and industry, and supporting upskilling and reskilling for a rapidly changing economy and world of work.



Denise Shannon

Adult Literacy Organiser, City of Dublin ETB/FET

Denise Shannon is an Adult Literacy Organiser based in Dublin's north inner city. She has been working with City of Dublin ETB since 2001. Prior to this she held strategic lead for Adult Education in the Lifelong Learning Programme and later Erasmus+ in Léargas, the Irish National Agency. She is currently completing a PhD in the Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University. Her research focus is on EU and national policy language and its meaning for the work of adult and community education.



Joram Snijders

Senior Policy Officer, Ministry of Education, The Netherlands

Joram Snijders is a public policy professional working at the Netherlands Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and is the Dutch National Coordinator of the New European Agenda for Adult Learning. He has experience in education policy, with a focus on basic skills for adults, equal opportunities, and lifelong learning. Joram studied at the London School of Economics and Political Science and has held various policy roles within the Dutch public sector.



WORKSHOPS

BUILDING A FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING RESEARCH NETWORK

This participatory workshop will bring together adult education practitioners, university researchers, and NGO representatives from across Ireland to explore the potential for a Further Education and Training (FET) Research Network. Through group discussions, participants will consider what such a network might look like in practice, who should be involved, and how it could operate effectively. Together we will reflect on how a FET Research Network could strengthen knowledge exchange, support collaborative research, amplify learner and practitioner perspectives, and contribute to the development of adult education in Ireland.

Martha Bolger

Director of Further Education and Training, KCETB

Martha Bolger is a Director of Further Education and Training with Kilkenny and Carlow ETB. During Martha's career in FET (over 30 years) Martha has worked with adults and young people through Community and Adult Education initiatives, all the while facilitating inclusion for the marginalised cohorts in society. Martha holds a MA in Adult and Community Education, as well as additional qualifications in Education Management, and Equality and Diversity.



Dr Eve Cobain

Senior Research Officer, AONTAS

Eve Cobain is Senior Research Officer at AONTAS. She has a particular interest in community education and learner voice and has published a range of research reports and book chapters in these areas. At AONTAS, Eve coordinated and delivered the first ever census of community education in Ireland, both North (2023) and South (2021). More recently, she developed and co-authored research on *Measuring the Impact of Adult Education in Northern Ireland* (Alliance for Lifelong Learning, 2025) and *Community Education for Social Transformation* (AONTAS, 2025). Eve currently supports the delivery of the National FET Learner Forum at AONTAS.



BUILDING A NATIONAL LEARNER VOICE NETWORK

Using South Eastern Regional College's (SERC) learner voice journey as a case study, this interactive workshop will encourage participants to share experiences, explore effective approaches, and identify practical ways to increase learner participation and influence. Through discussion and reflection, attendees will consider the key ingredients for successful learner voice initiatives and the role a national network can play in supporting shared learning, partnership, and sector-wide improvement.

Catherine Shipman

Head of Engagement and Development, South Eastern Regional College

Catherine Shipman MBE is Head of Engagement and Development at South Eastern Regional College (SERC). With more than 18 years' experience in further education, she has dedicated her career to supporting learner success through engagement, inclusion and participation. Catherine leads a wide range of initiatives spanning learner voice, student development, social inclusion, community partnerships and lifelong learning. A strong champion of learner advocacy, she has worked extensively to develop meaningful and accessible student voice structures that empower learners to influence decisions, improve services and shape positive change within their institutions and communities.



COMMUNITY WEALTH BUILDING

This workshop will explore community wealth building as a practical approach to economic development that aims to keep wealth, ownership and decision-making rooted locally rather than flowing outward to distant interests. Through interactive engagement we will focus on the benefits of cultivating and supporting locally-rooted ownership, place based assets, and collaborative practices in local economies. In doing so participants will reflect on the democratic possibilities and the ways in which communities can have a real say over the economy shaping their lives.

Katlyne Armstrong

Education Lead, Bohemian Football Club

Katlyne Armstrong is Education Lead at Bohemian Football Club. Katlyne has a background in anthropology, community development, and social and environmental justice. She now leads the development and delivery of the Education and Community Participation Hub at The Bohemian Cooperatives, a new not-for-profit to be established this year with the purpose of building a community wealth building ecosystem in Dublin. This education work sits at the heart of the wider initiative, building a movement for collective action and real pathways for learning and employment.



Seán McCabe

Head of Climate Justice and Sustainability, Bohemian Football Club

Seán McCabe is Head of Climate Justice and Sustainability at Bohemian Football Club, the fan-owned Dublin club. The community led climate work at Bohemians grounded in community education so those most affected can shape the response. Education is a central pillar of The Bohemian Cooperatives, the club's new community wealth building strategy tackling inequality and the climate crisis together. Seán's career spans climate policy with the Mary Robinson Foundation, environmental protections in Sierra Leone, children's environmental rights with UNICEF and the UNCRC, and "The People's Transition" with TASC and FEPS.



EXHIBITOR SHOWCASE

DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY ACCESS OFFICE

 Ollscoil Chathair Bhoile Átha Cliath Dublin City University	 www.dcu.ie/access	 /AccessDCU	 @dcuaccess
	 @DCUAccess	 /school/dcu-access	 @unitydcu

The Dublin City University (DCU) Access Service aims to increase the number of students from under-represented groups in DCU, ensuring that our student body reflects the diversity of Irish society. Within Access, the Community Outreach team works alongside statutory, community, and voluntary groups to support individuals from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who are considering re-entering education. We offer a range of initiatives and programmes under three pillars: (1) Raising College Awareness: Introducing the college experience to under-represented groups; (2) Preparing for College: Supporting individuals and groups from NAP groups interested in pursuing HE; and (3) Supporting Communities: Introducing DCU Access to local communities and collaborating to design programmes tailored to specific needs identified by community groups.

INISHOWEN DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIP

 Inishowen Development Partnership  People Place Progress	 www.inishowen.ie	 @inishdevelopmentpartnership
	 @IDPinishowenDev	 /InishowenDevelopmentPartnership
	 /company/inishowen-development-partnership	

Inishowen Development Partnership (IDP) is an integrated, community-led local development company delivering social inclusion and rural development programmes in the Inishowen peninsula, Donegal. IDP develops and co-designs locally appropriate and tailored supports across Inishowen so that individuals, businesses, and communities can reach their full potential while building resilience and wellbeing for all within our community. We aim to provide opportunities for those living in Inishowen to participate in all aspects of cultural, educational, health, social and economic opportunities. We promote community-led, sustainable local development built upon the values of integrity, connectedness, innovation, and inclusivity. IDP provides a range of community and adult education programmes, and is the lead partner of ChangeMakers Donegal, a global citizenship education (GCE) and action for adults.

LÉARGAS / EPALE

	 www.leargas.ie/	 @leargas.ireland
	 /Leargas.Ireland	 /company/leargas

Léargas manage international and national exchange programmes in education, youth and community work, and vocational education and training. These exchanges connect people in different communities and countries, and bring an international dimension to the work of organisations across Ireland. We are the National Agency for Erasmus+ in Adult Education, School Education, Vocational Education and Training, Youth and Sport, as well manage initiatives such as EPALE, eTwinning, YouthWiki and Eurodesk. We have built a national and international reputation for effectively managing significant levels of funding to support international collaboration and exchange. We have also built a reputation for a friendly and supportive approach to programme applicants and beneficiaries.

MARINO INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

	 www.mie.ie	 @marinoinstitute
	 @marinoinstitute	 /marinoinstituteofeducation
	 /company/marino-institute-of-education	

Marino Institute of Education (MIE) is a teaching, learning and research higher education institution and associated college of Trinity College Dublin, committed to inclusion and excellence in education. With a proud history spanning over 100 years, MIE has played a significant role in initial teacher education (ITE). In recent years, MIE's academic mission has expanded beyond the classroom to support the continuum of teacher education and the development of specialist practitioners across early years, primary and further education sectors. In collaboration with Trinity College Dublin, MIE offers undergraduate, postgraduate and professional development programmes. These include the Professional Diploma in Education (Further Education), providing a pathway to a professional FE teaching qualification, and the master's in Education Studies (Further Education), supporting research-informed practice, educational leadership and professional development. Through its commitment to research-informed teaching and lifelong learning, MIE equips educators with the knowledge and skills needed to contribute to Ireland's evolving education sector.

NATIONAL LEARNING NETWORK

	 www.nln.ie	 @nlnireland
	 /NLNireland	 @nlnireland
	 /company/national-learning-network/	

National Learning Network (NLN), part of the Rehab Group provides life-changing education and training. Each year, NLN supports thousands of people with disabilities and mental health challenges to achieve qualifications, move into further or higher education, and secure meaningful employment. Through accessible programmes and tailored supports, NLN creates pathways that enable students across the country to thrive in their own way. NLN works with more than 700 employer partners nationwide, supporting real pathways into the workplace. Funded by Education and Training Boards Ireland and the HSE, NLN's work not only transforms individual lives but also benefits communities and wider society through higher earning potential, increased tax contributions and reduced reliance on social welfare. At NLN, education is about more than qualifications. It is about confidence, independence, purpose, and real opportunity.

PREM RAWAT FOUNDATION

	 www.premrawat.com	 @premrawatfoundation
	 /company/tprf	 /PremRawatFoundation

The Prem Rawat Foundation (TPRF) is a nonprofit organisation that advances dignity, peace and prosperity by addressing the fundamental human needs of food, water and peace through a variety of programs and initiatives. Its Peace Education Program consists of a series of facilitated video-based workshops to help people discover their inner strength and personal peace. Proven to be effective in a wide variety of settings in over 80 countries, TPRF provides access to the course materials to organisations and volunteers free of charge. Here in Ireland, the Peace Education Program has been offered by trained volunteers to community centres, libraries, prisons in Dublin, Roscommon, and Cavan and also at a Direct Provision centre in Co. Mayo.

QUALITY AND QUALIFICATIONS IRELAND

 Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann Quality and Qualifications Ireland	 www.qqi.ie	 /showcase/europass-ireland/
	 /company/quality-and-qualifications-ireland-qqi-/	

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is the national agency responsible for assuring the quality, integrity, and reputation of Ireland's further and higher education and training system. QQI hosts several key functions, including the National Academic Recognition Centre for Ireland (NARIC Ireland), Ireland's National Europass Centre, and the National Coordination Point for the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). QQI has established various online resources that support learners, providers, employers, and other stakeholders. The Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ) provides information on qualifications and programmes included on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), while Qualifax offers a comprehensive search service for education and training opportunities in Ireland. For international qualifications, the NARIC Ireland Foreign Qualifications Database provides comparability statements, helping users understand how foreign qualifications relate to award types and levels on the Irish NFQ.

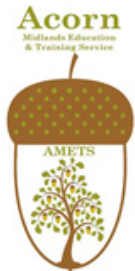
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN (TCD) - DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING (DIFET) PROGRAMME

 Trinity College Dublin Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath The University of Dublin	 www.tcd.ie/education	 @schoolofedtcd
	 /education.tcd	 @SchoolofEdTCD
	 /school/trinity-college-dublin-school-of-education/	

The DIFET programme in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin is a specialist postgraduate framework programme developed in partnership with the City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETb). Designed for educators, trainers, leaders and other professionals working across the FET sector, DIFET supports participants to develop inclusive, evidence-informed practice that responds to the diverse needs of learners. The programme combines theory, critical reflection and professional application, with a strong focus on equality, diversity, inclusion and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Through postgraduate certificate, diploma and master's years, DIFET contributes to growing expertise within the FET sector and fostering learning environments where all learners can thrive and participate fully. A key feature of the programme is its commitment to practitioner research, with master's students undertaking original research projects that contribute to the evidence base on policy, practice and learner experiences across the FET sector.

CEN EXHIBITORS

ACORN MIDLANDS EDUCATION AND TRAINING SERVICE, YOUTH WORK IRELAND MIDLANDS

	 www.youthworkmidlands.org
	 @acorntrainingywim
	 /ametstraining

AMETS is a Community Education Provider based in The Acorn Project, Edenderry. AMETS was officially established in 2015 with the aim of providing holistic, adult education programmes in Edenderry and surrounding areas. The Acorn Project is a Youth Diversion Project working with 'at risk' young people. Within this context the need for progression routes was identified. AMETS now provides educational programmes in the areas of Beauty Therapy, Business Studies and Sound Production. Our QQI Youth Work programmes is now delivered on a national level through our Youth Work Ireland Way programme. Our aim was to provide a wrap-around service where young people up to adult learners can avail of our services. The vision was to create a level playing field within our communities where education is accessible, available and opportunities exist for all.

AN COSÁN

	 www.ancosan.ie	 @ancosan.ie
	 /AnCosan	 /company/an-cosan
	 @ancosantallaght	

An Cosán is a community education organisation founded in 1986 in Jobstown, Tallaght, Dublin. We support adults, children, families and communities experiencing social and educational inequality, prioritising those with the fewest opportunities. Our holistic, person-centred approach recognises each individual's strengths and circumstances. We meet people where they are, helping them build confidence, realise their potential and achieve personal, educational and employment goals. Through our Early Years education and care programmes and Lifestart programme, we support children and parents, recognising that strengthening families creates lasting opportunities. We provide wraparound supports including childcare, counselling, laptops, literacy and digital literacy support, and learner guidance, helping remove barriers to participation and progression. An Cosán offers pathways from Access and community education programmes to accredited further and higher education through flexible classroom, online and blended learning. Since 1986, we have supported over 21,000 people to gain qualifications, confidence, independence and new opportunities.

THE BRIDGE PROJECT



BRIDGE



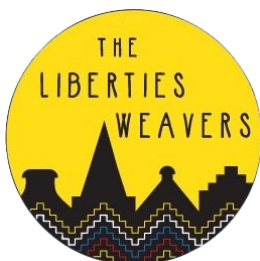
www.bridge.ie



[/company/thebridgeproject](https://www.linkedin.com/company/thebridgeproject)

Bridge is a community-based organisation in Francis Street, Dublin 8. We support adults who have experience of the criminal justice system, drug addiction or both to move forward and build a stable and fulfilling life. Our work combines practical support with opportunities. Participants can meet with a key worker, engage with the Probation Service, take part in recovery supports, and access education, training and personal development. We offer courses and activities that build confidence, skills, wellbeing and connection, alongside Community Employment placements that help people gain work experience and prepare for employment. Bridge runs Clean Slate Property Services, a social enterprise that creates employment opportunities for people who may face barriers because of a criminal record. Our approach is holistic and respectful. We work with each person's strengths, goals and circumstances, helping them reconnect with learning, community and meaningful work. In short, Bridge helps people create second chances and futures.

THE LIBERTIES WEAVERS



www.thelibertiesweavers.ie



[@thelibertiesweavers](https://www.instagram.com/thelibertiesweavers)



[/thelibertiesweavers](https://www.facebook.com/thelibertiesweavers)

The Liberties Weavers is a multi-award-winning community heritage project honouring a thousand years of textile and weaving heritage in The Liberties, Dublin, breathing new life into weaving in its historic centre. Founded in 2021, we revive this rich textile heritage through traditional weaving workshops, educational walking tours, exhibitions, oral history and authentic, locally made woven products - connecting the area's industrial and craft heritage with contemporary communities of all ages and backgrounds. Our weekly programme welcomes learners aged 26 - 82, alongside school programmes, public tours and community events, working with local organisations, artists, historians and educators. Recognition includes the Community Archive Heritage Award and Pride of Place Creative Spaces.

RADE

	 www.rade.ie	 @rade.dublin8
	 RADE CLG	 @raderade8534
	 /recoveryartdramaeducation	

Established in 2004, RADE (Recovery through Arts, Drama and Education) is a community-based programme supporting people whose lives have been affected by drug or alcohol use. RADE offers a welcoming, creative and supportive environment where participants can focus on their recovery, build confidence, develop new skills and explore what comes next for them. Our programme combines arts-based activities, including drama, music and visual arts, with education, training, personal development and individual support. Participants can also access external training and opportunities that support progression towards further education, employment and greater independence. At the heart of RADE is the belief that creativity, learning and connection can play an important role in recovery. We aim to provide a place where people feel included, valued and supported to recognise their strengths and move forward at their own pace.

SECAD

	 www.secad.ie	 @secad.partnership
	 /secadcork	 /company/secad-partnership-clg

Founded in 1995, SECAD Partnership CLG is a leading rural and community development organisation promoting social inclusion and sustainable development across South, East and West Cork. Through programmes including LEADER, SICAP, Tús, the Rural Social Scheme, LAES, WorkAbility Cork, AMIF and Community Connections, SECAD supports individuals, families, community groups and enterprises to thrive. A key focus of SECAD's work is education, training and inclusion. Through job-centric skills training, community group training and English Conversation Clubs, SECAD helps people build confidence, skills and pathways to employment and active participation in society. These supports particularly benefit people experiencing social exclusion, including those living with disabilities, people facing long-term unemployment, and individuals seeking international protection. Through Community Connections and initiatives such as the Our Voice Podcast, SECAD fosters dialogue, understanding and stronger social bonds between local communities and newcomers, while also delivering environmental, biodiversity and community development initiatives.

START 360

	 www.start360.org
	 /Start360
	 /company/opportunity-youth
Start360 is a Northern Ireland-based charity with over 30 years' experience supporting people to make positive and lasting change. Through 25 services across Health, Justice and Employability, we support more than 21,000 people each year, including individuals and families experiencing multiple disadvantage, substance use, involvement with the criminal justice system, poor mental health and barriers to education and employment. Our vision is Every Person Stronger. We believe people should be active participants in shaping the support and opportunities that affect their lives. Participation lived experience and learning are central to our approach. We create pathways from service engagement into volunteering, accredited learning, employment and leadership, while lived experience within our workforce helps shape service development. Through the Synergy partnership, Start360 also delivers Lundy Model of Participation training, supporting organisations to embed children and young people's right to have their views heard and taken seriously.	

ST. ANDREW'S RESOURCE CENTRE

	 www.standrews.ie/
	 @standrewsfrc
	 /StAndrewsResourceCentre
St. Andrew's Resource Centre has been serving the Pearse Street and City Quay community since 1989. What began as a response to local need has grown into one of Dublin's most respected community resource centres. The Centre is home to a range of departments meeting the needs of the local community, including an Education and Training Hub, a childcare centre, a youth service, family support services, community employment, and a Day Centre for the elderly. The Education and Training Hub has continued to expand its reach and impact across the local community, maintaining strong engagement levels and supporting adults through adult education, construction skills training, retrofit programmes, cleaning Skills courses, welfare rights and information, guidance services, and outreach activities. Adult education offers a range of learning and wellbeing activities, including Walk and Talk events, cultural projects, and community learning sessions. Adult education remains one of the Centre's most active and valued departments.	

LEARNERS AS LEADERS

In July, AONTAS supported 11 adult learners to participate in the Learners as Leaders 2026 programme. The programme took place at Maynooth University, where learners from organisations across the AONTAS Community Education Network attended a two-day residential workshop. All participants applied to the programme with an existing idea or initiative they wished to develop in support of their community. Following the residential training, learners returned to their local communities and began designing and delivering their own projects.

At the AONTAS Adult Education Summit, attendees can meet Learners as Leaders participants at the exhibition stand, see their projects, learn about their initiatives, and engage with learners on the impact within their communities.

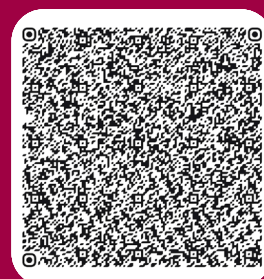


MEET THE NEAAL NATIONAL COORDINATORS

The NEAAL National Coordinators represent diverse adult learning systems and contexts across Europe. They play a key role in promoting lifelong learning, sharing innovative practices, and strengthening collaboration between policy, research, and practice.

We encourage you to learn more about the Coordinators before the Summit and take the opportunity to connect with them throughout the event. Their expertise and experiences offer valuable insights into adult education developments across Europe and can help foster new ideas, partnerships, and collaborations.

Learn more about the NEAAL National Coordinators:



BECOME A MEMBER

We have your back.

If you are working with adult learners or returning to learning yourself as an adult, becoming an AONTAS member is for you.

We have been advocating for adult learning since 1969, and we are deeply committed to amplifying learner voice, widening participation in education and increasing inclusion and social justice across the island of Ireland.

We have a vibrant community of **over 520 members**, connecting **over a thousand people committed** to adult learning. Our members come from many types of organisations and backgrounds.

These include:

- Community and voluntary organisations
- Statutory organisations
- Adult learners and tutors
- Nongovernmental organisations





Our mission is to advocate for empowering adult learning that drives social equality, justice, and collective action across the island of Ireland.

Whether you are a small, medium, or large organisation or an individual who is committed to quality access to adult learning, social justice, and supporting social inclusion, we would love to welcome you to our community.

There are sustainable membership tiers for all groups. Connect with our Membership team for details.

With AONTAS Membership you get:

- Access to AONTAS events and webinars
- Access to the Community Education Network if you work in community education
- Access to the AONTAS Members Hub
- Opportunities to influence policy at local, national, and European levels
- The support of our Communications, Impact and Engagement, Advocacy and Policy, and Research teams

Become an AONTAS member today!

membership.aontas.com



SAVE THE DATE: **ADULT LEARNERS' FESTIVAL 2027** **1ST - 5TH MARCH**

Looking back on the 2026 festival

Thanks so much to everyone who joined us for this year's Adult Learners' Festival, which celebrated *Spring Into Learning*. The adult and community education sector came together to hold **172 events** across **27 counties**. There were celebrations, information sessions, open days, taster sessions, walks, workshops and so much more!

The festival's national communications campaign reached over 4.2 million people across media and social media, including more than 4 million through national media outlets such as RTÉ Radio 1, RTÉ.ie, The Irish Times and the Irish Examiner.

Adult learning opens doors for people to take a full part in life, as workers, neighbours, parents and citizens. Community education is at the heart of this. It meets people where they are, grows out of the communities it serves, and welcomes those who have been away from learning for a long time. In local, learner-led spaces, people find the confidence to share their ideas, ask questions and get involved, and learn from each other's different views. That is how communities grow stronger, and how people come to know that their voice counts.

Every year, the Adult Learners' Festival is where we celebrate that, in events across the country.



Register your interest to be a part of the 2027 festival!

BE A PART OF THE ADULT LEARNER: CALL FOR ARTICLES 2027

2027 Edition

AONTAS are delighted to announce that we are now accepting submissions for the 2027 edition of *The Adult Learner*.

This year's edition of *The Adult Learner* will explore the theme of “**Adult Education for Climate Justice.**” It considers how the sector is responding to the magnitude of the climate crisis and invites reflection on how adult and community education bolsters engagement with issues relating to climate justice, creating a space for personal growth and collective action. Articles may explore some of the themes below:

- Climate education and community responses to climate crisis
- Developments within the sector to support green skills and the green transition
- Adult education, democracy and climate justice
- Inertia, disempowerment, and climate inaction
- Climate crisis and the impact on vulnerable or marginalised communities
- Adult education, the climate crisis and migration
- Global citizenship education
- Adult learning, feminism and climate justice
- Adult learning, AI and the environmental impact of data centres.

We welcome submissions from learners and first-time writers, as well as more experienced authors. The deadline for submitting an article is **5pm on Monday, 1 February 2027**, and we are here to help you develop your ideas right up until then.

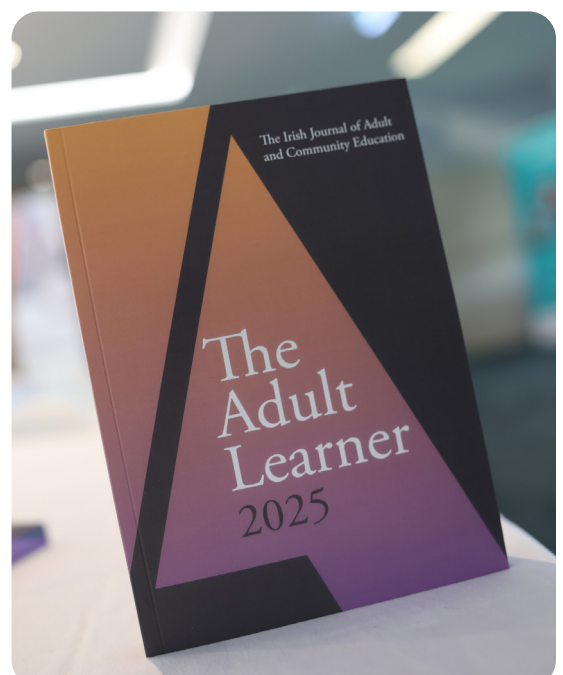
How to get involved

All submission documents and requirements, including the official Call for Articles and *The Adult Learner* Style Guide, may be found and downloaded from the AONTAS website:

www.aontas.com/research/adult-learner-journal/

Want to learn more?

Please reach out to the Editorial Office of *The Adult Learner* at journal@aontas.com. We're here to answer any questions you may have.





Contact us:

AONTAS

The National Adult Learning Organisation
2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street,
Ranelagh, Dublin 6

T: 01 406 8220

E: mail@aontas.com
www.aontas.com

Charity Reg: 6719

Company Reg: 80958

RCN 20013042

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