

Developments: Educational inequality has increased

Our Irish member, AONTAS- Ireland's National Adult Learning Organisation, observes a slight deterioration on the current situation of adult learning and education in Ireland.

Educational disadvantage and inequality have been exacerbated during the pandemic and public policy interventions have been vital in responding to the crisis. Many of these interventions have been reactive measures in the form of funding for specific items such as digital hardware and health and safety equipment to support continuity of learning. These were important and necessary but have been put in place as stopgap temporary measures. These must now evolve into more durable, flexible, and sustainable funding models if Ireland is to recover its access, participation, and progression rates and build on these positive policy interventions and seize the opportunity to bring about lasting positive and equitable outcomes for all learners.

Ireland is collecting data on the impact of COVID-19. Although the funding measures are a stopgap they have been given funding for independently-run community education/non-formal education providers. This is a positive contribution for addressing the urgent needs of disadvantaged learners and the organisations that support them.

AONTAS established three main areas that still require urgent attention:

1. Needs of adult learners
2. Requirements of the community education sector
3. Changes needed within the tertiary education system structure.

New policies and strategies in Ireland

Ireland has introduced the following new key ALE policies and strategies in 2020/2021:

- Adult Literacy for Life' - a 10-year adult literacy strategy
- Irelands National Skills Strategy
- Reform of the Higher Education Authority Act, 1971
- Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021 to 2025Future FET: Transforming Learning
- Irelands National Skills Strategy
- National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2021
- Action plan for increasing Traveller participation in higher education

As observed, there are multiple important changes within the Irish organisation.

Establishment of the new [Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science](#) is one of the most relevant structural changes. Being responsible for adult learning in Ireland it had significant implications for public policy in ALE. The department was established in 2020 and manages significant amounts of funding . One positive development has been the establishment of a new unit within the Department focused on mitigating against educational disadvantage as well as policies around equality, diversity, and social inclusion.

AONTAS confirms their involvement in CONFINTEA VII process and delegation of Ireland.

Changes in funding policy

According to AONTAS, there is a slight improvement in the ALE funding in Ireland. ALE is financed through project and programme funding, structural funding, fees paid by individuals or employers, formula funding (funding of learning activities based on the number of participants) and private income. Many local community-based adult learning providers are also social enterprises with charity shops and innovative projects that generate some income.

During 2020/2021, there has been some changes in the funding policy. The new Government Department has increased public funding in adult literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy. In addition for the past two years SOLAS administered a Mitigating against Educational Disadvantage Fund which provides funding to support educationally disadvantaged learners in participating in community education.

Civil society has an active role in the design and implementation of ALE policies in Ireland. AONTAS continues working to lobby key politicians, political parties, and decision-makers in local and national government to improve the function, sustainability, and amount of funding made available for adult learning in Ireland. Some examples of this work are:

- [Success of previous annual policy day events in 2020](#)
- [Success of previous annual policy day events in 2021](#)
- [CEN Census 2020 Policy Paper - Educational Equality is Central to Ireland's Recovery: Community Education in a Time of COVID-19](#)
- [AONTAS Pre-Budget Submission 2022](#)
- [What is Happening in Adult Learning and Education \(ALE\) in Ireland?](#)

[Policy papers and publications](#) can be found at AONTAS website.

COVID-19 impact

COVID-19 pandemic has increased the digital gap in Ireland. There was a significant drop in participation rates throughout the pandemic. Those that already have very good digital skills were able to further improve their digital skills. Shifting learning activities to a digital environment also attracted new groups of learners. However, learners who don't own the right devices, have low level of literacy, struggle with physical and mental health or do not receive financial support have stopped courses. Disadvantaged people may

also have poor internet connectivity or unsuitable home environments to online learning. This may have resulted in a stagnation of their digital skills. Although MEAD funding provided technology and internet for some learners, the most disadvantaged learners could still not engage due to the challenges mentioned before.

Outreach has required much more effort on the part of ALE providers than before the pandemic. Also the costs of learning provision have increased. New technological environments, including software, stable Internet connections, and hardware had to be introduced. Irish ALE organisations and providers received more public funding and fewer participant fees.

Sustainability

AONTAS considers social and environmental sustainability very important, and they have a strategy to promote sustainability in their work procedures. There have been public consultations on the topic in Ireland, and national strategies are being developed in relation to Education for Sustainable Development and embedding the SDGs in adult learning and education provision.

Challenges: Risk for permanent setback in participation in adult learning

The pandemic had an overwhelming impact on disadvantaged and vulnerable groups,

manifesting in digital poverty and aggravating other persistent issues such as mental health and domestic violence. Throughout the period of March 2020 to March 2021, there was a high demand for community education courses, including interest from new learner cohorts. The continued demand combined with COVID-19 restrictions resulted in waitlists for many groups; according to the CEN Census, at least 2,226 learners were waitlisted during this period or were unable to take up courses. While community education providers showed their experience and adeptness in mitigating educational disadvantage during these times, additional resources, such as staffing costs, infrastructural costs, and funding for additional learner supports, were required to meet the needs of the sector.

Sustainable funding has been a historic challenge for community education providers, with groups often depending on project-based funding from a wide range of different government departments and other sources.

Hard-earned gains in recent years to increase access to education by disadvantaged groups risk being set back permanently if there is no action from Government. For example, the lifelong learning participation rate for people with lower secondary education halved in 2020 compared to 2019 (SLMRU, SOLAS, 2021). National statistics reveal a drop in Further Education and Training participation levels of approximately 25% occurred for marginalised groups who already experience extreme educational disadvantage, such as Travellers and people with disabilities. There was a drop of approximately 15% for older adult learners and refugees and asylum seekers during 2020. Read more in [National FET Learner Forum synthesis report](#).

AONTAS calls for all EAEA members to collect data that facilitates identifying the level of disruption to learning and generate a robust evidence-based for advocating for increased funding and policy progress to support ALE across the EU.

Looking Forward

For the upcoming year 2021/2022, AONTAS will continue to advocate for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives. This work focuses on three main interconnected areas:

- Creating an inclusive lifelong learning society
- Thriving community education sector
- Lifelong learning for sustainability

AONTAS recommends the Irish Government to establish a new sustainable multi-annual funding model for community education provision to achieve real educational equality for all adults to access tertiary education and lifelong learning opportunities. AONTAS believes this proposal would ultimately support more equitable outcomes for learners from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities.
