Improvements that lead to uncertainties: the fragmented situation of VET, ALE and higher education in Ireland

There have been important developments in Irelands adult learning and education (ALE) landscape. In recent years, policy recognition of community education has improved. In 2024, SOLAS (the national agency responsible for ALE) published a Community Education Framework aimed at achieving consistent and positive changes in how we learn, provide, coordinate and fund community education in Ireland. Despite this progress, many community education providers continue to face significant financial and structural challenges.

Adult learning and education in Ireland falls under the responsibility of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. In 2024, the department received 3,618 million in funding; in 2025, this allocation increased to 3,850 million - a 6.4% rise. The department oversees higher education, vocational education and training (VET), research, and ALE.

However, much of the funding increase appears to be directed towards VET and market-oriented skills development, leaving regional and community-based ALE providers with persistent funding constraints.

EAEA's member AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland, notes that both EU and national/local funding are still inadequate to ensure the sustainable development of ALE in Ireland. The situation is particularly challenging for the private

sector, and overall, most adults continue to face barriers in affording learning and training opportunities.

Skills dimension

When it comes to policymaking in Ireland and across Europe, skills for employment are often prioritised over education as a public good. As a result, formal education serving the economy and labour market tends to take precedence over learning that fosters personal development, community wellbeing, and social cohesion.

AONTAS expresses concern about the growing policy emphasis on skills and stresses the urgent need to reintroduce a culture of care in ALE policymaking in Ireland. The care-based model underpinning the community education sector addresses social challenges through place-based and values-led approaches. Community education offers a space for collective empowerment and social change.

AONTAS believes that current European policy, with its narrow focus on ALE for employability and activation, overlooks this essential dimension of adult education as a driver of inclusion, participation, and democratic resilience.

AI in adult learning

AONTAS stated it doesnt make any use of AI due to ethical concerns.

Participation in decision-making

Although learners themselves are not included in policy-making processes, in 2024, AONTAS actively engaged in a wide range of national consultations and policy processes, contributing to evidence-based policymaking in adult and community education. Key

engagements included:

- Pandemic Evaluation Meeting - On 19 February 2024, the AONTAS CEO participated in the Department of the Taoiseach Independent Pandemic Evaluation meeting.
- National Access Plan Steering Group - AONTAS contributed to meetings on 14 March and 9 May, providing input on the implementation of the National Access Plan.
- Community Education Framework Implementation Group - Ongoing participation throughout 2024.
- DFHERIS Cost of Education Event - On 11 April 2024, AONTAS facilitated the participation of 27 adult learners at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) Cost of Education event in Portlaoise.
- SOLAS Digital Learning Working Group - The Policy and Development Officer prepared a policy paper summarising research on digital learning and attended meetings on 25 March, 23 May, and 5 December 2024.
- Pre-Budget Submission 2025 - Submitted to DFHERIS on 24 June 2024, followed by a meeting with DFHERIS officials on 16 July 2024.
- Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Steering Group - Participated in a meeting on 12 September 2024 and submitted a report on UNECE ESD on 27 September 2024.
- College Connect Regional Steering Group - Attended meetings on 29 January, 20 May, 26 August, and 21 October 2024.
- Department of Social Protection Pre-Budget Forum - Attended on 11 July 2024 and submitted key recommendations on community education and financial support for adult learners.
- Submission to the forthcoming Women and Girls Strategy - Submitted on 14 October 2024.

- Submission to the forthcoming SOLAS FET Strategy - Submitted on 19 December 2024.
- AONTAS Manifesto - Written and published in October 2024.
- Submission on the Northern Ireland Draft Programme for Government - Submitted in 2024.

Irish member's view on the PIAAC results

AONTAS agrees that the results are representative of the situation in the country.

Funding of adult education

According to AONTAS, the funding situation of adult education in Ireland has slightly improved in 2024-2025. Although the overall financial situation has slightly improved compared to 2023, it remains insufficient to meet existing needs and regional challenges persist.

The organisation mentions multiple sources of funding, including:

- project funding
- programme funding
- operating grants/structural funding
- fees paid by individuals
- contribution paid by employers
- formula funding
- paid training leave
- donations and other philanthropic funding

Recommendation to the European Commission

AONTAS calls on the European Union to adopt a more holistic approach to adult learning and education (ALE) - one that moves beyond market-driven provision. Adult and community education are of vital importance in todays context of rising hate, inequality, social polarisation, and persistent literacy challenges faced by many adults across Europe. ALE can and should play a central role in addressing these issues.

AONTAS recommends an increase in funding levels through the European Social Fund (ESF) and other appropriate mechanisms. Research conducted by AONTAS (Meyler et al., 2024; Meyler et al., 2023a; Meyler et al., 2023b) consistently highlights the need for targeted support to overcome barriers faced by learners at risk of marginalisation and discrimination. If ALE is to fulfil its potential in promoting social inclusion for disadvantaged learners, greater investment in wraparound supports - such as childcare, transport, and tailored guidance, is essential. The EU should explore how it can help Member States provide and sustain such support.

Finally, AONTAS urges the European Union to ensure meaningful adult learner participation in policy development. Establishing a European Adult Learner Forum that directly contributes to policy design and implementation would represent a crucial step toward more inclusive and learner-centred governance in adult education.

DISCLAIMER ON THE PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING DATA: the data focuses on formal and non-formal education and training, excluding guided on-the-job training. Participation is higher when on-the-job training is included. Data coming from

sources such as OECD and the monitoring framework of the European Pillar of Social Rights may differ from the presented data.