

Adult learning is making an impact, but equitable access to learning requires stable funding

According to EAEAs Irish member AONTAS, there is a pressing need for more sustainable funding streams and improved staffing conditions in Ireland.

The majority of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) provision in Ireland is carried out by Education and Training Boards (ETBs) across the country. Adult education is also provided by independent Community Education providers, who run innovative programmes which respond to the needs and aims of a community. While state funding supports these modes, structural funding issues persist. Adult education tutors were recently promised improved contracts, providing more stability and security. These contracts are essential in retaining committed and experienced adult educators in the sector.

In quarter 4 of 2022, Ireland's Lifelong Learning Participation was 11.8% (in the preceding four weeks). Nearly three quarters of this group already held third level qualifications. This demonstrates a clear inequality - those with higher levels of qualifications are much more likely to take part in ALE.

Adult learning policy landscape in Ireland

According to AONTAS, policymakers widely recognise the importance of ALE in Ireland. There is a positive acknowledgment of ALE's role in addressing societal challenges, responding to labour market needs, and fostering social cohesion.

In 2022/23, adult education in Ireland has experienced a slight improvement, marked by strategic policy initiatives and increased financial allocations. There are several noteworthy policies:

Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) strategy

A significant recent development is the implementation of the ALL Strategy, a cross-governmental initiative aiming to create an Ireland where all adults have the literacy skills to enjoy a good quality of life. The strategy encompasses commitments across four pillars, emphasising accessibility, expansion of learning opportunities, and empowerment.

Increased funding for Community Education

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 education setting. Community Education received a welcomed 22% increase in funding in 2022 from the Irish government. This, combined with the development of a Community Education Framework represents improvements in terms of policy and funding provision. However, many programmes are still funded precariously, leading to closures of some independent providers. More investment is needed.

National tertiary education courses

The introduction of unified tertiary courses in 2022, set to launch in 2023, signals a

critical step in integrating higher education and vocational training. This collaboration aims to make university education more accessible to adults without upper secondary qualifications.

National Access Plan 2022-2028

The fourth National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028, to be known as the National Access Plan, focuses on equity, targeting underrepresented groups such as socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals, Irish Traveller and Roma communities, and students with disabilities.

Both learners and civil society organisations are actively engaging in adult learning policy-making processes in Ireland. According to AONTAS, they have sufficient opportunities to voice concerns and their perspectives are considered in policy development. Civil society is also involved in implementing UNESCO's Marrakech Framework for Action policies.

According to AONTAS, the European Commission's Country Reports and Recommendations accurately reflect the ALE situation in Ireland. Regarding funding for Erasmus+, they state that ALE organisations are aware of Erasmus+ mobility opportunities but may not have the capacity to apply for funding.

Stable funding for Community Education remains an issue

The funding situation of ALE has slightly improved in Ireland. At the time of responding, AONTAS doesn't have detailed information on the funding allocation for 2023, but in 2021-2022 the total funding for Further Education and Training (FET) has increased about 7 %. The introduction of the Adult Literacy for Life strategy has seen ongoing

release of funds across 2023, with the latest package of 1 million being allocated to 50 innovation projects.

Funding sources of adult education in Ireland are:

- Project funding
- Programme funding
- Operating grants/structural funding
- Fees paid by individuals
- Contribution paid by employers
- Formula funding

Active advocacy and involvement of learners voice

In 2022/23 AONTAS Conducted various advocacy activities, including:

- Facilitated adult learners to take part in and contribute to a number of policy and funding consultations with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.
- Launched the National Further Education Learner Forum research report, involving 3,164 learners. The launch event included a Learner Panel where learners spoke directly to decision makers about the changes they want to see in ALE in Ireland.
- Organised "Stepping Stones and Stable Roots" Community Education Policy Day for learners, providers, and policymakers.
- Ran the One Step Up campaign in September 2022 and January 2023 to encourage members of the public to get involved in adult education.
- Implemented "Together in the Telling" program for migrant women, focusing on their achievements and challenges.

- Conducted "Creativity Takes Courage" program for older learners, exploring digital skills and artistic expression.
- Hosted "Later Life Online" event in Dublin, facilitating discussions on challenges older citizens face in getting online and gaining digital skills.

AONTAS engaged in several consultations with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science including the further education and training funding, higher education funding and pre-budget submissions for 2023 and 2024.

AONTAS placed emphasis on advocating for sustainable funding models for community education growth and increased support for underrepresented groups in post-compulsory education. They also took part in several consultations led by Quality and Qualifications in Ireland (QQI).

Sustainable development is an important focus in Ireland

AONTAS runs the annual STAR Awards, to recognise the value and impact of community education in Ireland. These awards include a Global Citizenship Education award. Sponsored by SAOLTA, this category is open to adult learning initiatives that empower learners to assume active roles to resolve global challenges.

AONTAS is also an SDG Champion in Ireland. The SDG Champions Programme was developed to raise public awareness of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. AONTAS promotes sustainable development through their involvement in the Generators for Sustainable Development Erasmus+ project.

Budget increase needed to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities

AONTAS recommends the national and local decision-makers in Ireland increase government budget allocation to enable equitable access to further and higher education for underrepresented groups. They need to also sufficiently resource ALE providers to provide permanent contracts to the staff.

They suggest establishing a multiannual, cross-governmental fund for Community Education to

- Address policy priorities and emerging community needs
- Resource support services needed by learners (e.g., counselling, mental health, family, and childcare)
- Increase funding for non-accredited programmes to enable marginalised learners to engage in education
- Provide of capital grants for improved learning environments in Community Education

The New European Agenda for Adult Learning is an underused resource

According to AONTAS, the New European Agenda for Adult Learning is a valuable resource, but it is undervalued and underspent in some EU countries. They suggest that the new programme should come with predetermined criteria to include civil society organisations and learner voice.

AONTAS's recommendations to the EU decision-makers are:

- Increase funding for non-formal education programs in areas like wellbeing, community development, and social cohesion.
- Reduce invasive data collection on ALE learners to build trust.
- Prioritise 'Individual Learning Accounts' incentives for those with lower education levels and avoid administrative burdens.
- Hold each country to account for underspending of ALE funding (like the New European Agenda for Adult Learning) and lack of appropriate and inclusive ALE programmes.
- Address inaction on ALE funding as it is indirect discrimination particularly impacting marginalised communities like Roma people, Travellers and people experiencing homelessness.

New strategy showcases the impacts of adult learning

AONTAS has recently launched its strategic plan for 2023-2026, outlining key actions to drive change in the adult and community education sector. These actions include:

Connect and Engage

- Creation of a Community Education Map of Ireland to visually represent the impact of community education and engage policymakers.
- Working from an all island standpoint, such as the publication of a [Census of Community Education in Northern Ireland](#). The report shows that the providers in Northern Ireland have faced huge challenges due to the lack of ESF funding in their State. This is an example of the impact and importance of EU funding.

Advocate for Change

- Campaigns for increased financial support for learners in Further Education and Training (FET), aligned with higher education standards.
- Ongoing advocacy for enhanced, multiannual funding for community education in Ireland.

Empower the Change

- Implementation of Learners as Leaders programs and Learner Voice training for Education and Training Boards' staff.
 - Active promotion and support for AONTAS members work for democracy initiatives during the 2024 local, European and potentially national elections.
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