

Developments: New framework highlights the value of community education

The situation of adult education in Ireland has improved over the last year. In July 2020, Ireland launched a new Further Education and Training Strategy which will continue until 2025. This new strategy includes a Community Education Framework which is a positive step for community based and non-formal education and adult learning. In recent years adult education policy in Ireland has been almost exclusively focused on reskilling, upskilling and more broadly an agenda focused on skills for employment. The new FET Strategy highlights the value of community education and the broader purpose of adult learning and education.

In 2019, a new Government Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science that covers the tertiary education sector with a new Ministerial position was set up. In addition, AONTAS CEO was invited by the Department of Education and Skills to chair a tertiary-wide working group on mitigating educational disadvantage during COVID-19. Furthermore, the Government has now committed 8 million to mitigating educational disadvantage as part of the 2021 Budget.

Summary of significant policy developments in Ireland

The most recent and significant policy developments in Ireland have been:

- The creation of a new Ministerial position alongside a new Government Department
- The launch of a new Further Education and Training Strategy (FET) by SOLAS, the

statutory body with responsibility for Further Education and Training

- The remit by the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, responsible for policy, funding and governance of the Higher and Further Education and oversight of the state agencies, includes the adult and community education sector, taking over from the Department of Education.
- The new FET Strategy recognises the valuable contribution adult and community education providers play in the adult education sector and will develop the first ever national Community Education Framework with collaboration from SOLAS, Education and Training Boards, the FET sector, community education providers, learners and other relevant stakeholders (including Departments, and civil society organisations, like AONTAS).

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) has been implemented in some areas, but AONTAS is not aware of a civil society consultation process at present. The European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL) is one of the elements that was promoted by the EPSR, promoting cross-collaboration and keeping a policy spotlight on important developments. AONTAS is the national coordinator for the EAAL in Ireland and has, alongside EAEA, successfully advocated for a continuation of EAAL past December 2021. Upskilling pathways has been implemented in some areas and there have been some new strategies for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goal, closely linked to the EPSR.

Challenges: Impact of COVID

on adult learning in Ireland

Adult learning in Ireland has continued, where possible, through emergency response remote-teaching, VLE, emails, phone calls and other mechanisms. However, access to devices, WIFI, digital skills and suitable learning spaces remains a challenge across the sector. AONTAS (2020) reported 52% of learners surveyed, who self-identified from Traveler and Roma communities did not have access to a laptop for their course work.

Despite the positive efforts from tutors and providers in communicating with and supporting their students, the pandemic has adversely affected marginalized and vulnerable learners. Literacy based programs or 1-to-1 sessions have been paused in many centers due to social distancing measures or prioritization of accredited programs. Thus, further marginalizing the most vulnerable cohorts of adult learners. In addition, peer-support is difficult to facilitate in an online environment, while this should be a core part of the adult learning experience.

In August, 17,000 devices were ordered to support blended and online learning in addition to funding packages to support FET and Higher Education in their COVID-19 specific needs. AONTAS shared concerns on behalf of their non-statutory community education members, who at the time of writing, had not been allocated devices for their learners, many of whom are disadvantaged.

Efforts to support adult learners during the pandemic continue. However, access to devices or WIFI is not guaranteed and there is a broader range of issues including the loss of personal connections in an online environment and the digital capacity of both learners and educators themselves, during and post COVID-19.

