

EXPLORE



The quarterly magazine from AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

aontas



In this issue:

- *The Southill Men's Shed Challenge*
- *Community Education Facilitators celebrate ten years*
- *Local Elections 2014 and the Education and Training Boards*

AONTAS: The Voice of Adult Learning

Note from the Editor

Hello and welcome to this issue of *Explore!*

2014 is set to be an important transition period for all of us working in the area of further education and training, adult and community education. Key developments during this transition period are explored in depth in this issue. A new FET strategy led out by SOLAS will provide us with a unified vision of an integrated, learner centred service. On May 23rd we will go the ballot box to elect local authorities who will nominate representatives onto the newly formed Education and Training Boards. Suzanne Kyle from the Limerick Community Education Network outlines how groups in Clare and Limerick are preparing to engage with their local ETB.

Berni Brady considers the challenges in the context of evidence provided by PIAAC, the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies. This extensive study carried across OECD countries and beyond for the first time gives us concrete, robust data about the challenges for policy makers and providers across the education and training spectrum.

We also profile two European projects which we have been involved in – The One Step Up project, which includes a website, Freephone Helpline and calendar of events with our partner organisations, and the VITA project, which provides an innovative approach to measuring the development of soft skills in an adult education setting. Both of these projects were supported by the European Commission Lifelong Learning Programme.

Being a champion for community education, and putting the adult learner at the heart of the new FET services are two areas of work which we hope to build on over the coming year. We welcome the appointment of our Director, Berni Brady onto the Board of SOLAS (the new Further Education and Training Authority) and plan to contribute to new developments in the sector. We look forward to engaging actively with our membership in the months ahead.

Until next time,

Niamh Farren, Communications Officer, AONTAS

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Front cover photos: L-R (1) Community Education Facilitators at the recent launch of their DVD celebrating ten years (2) The new SOLAS Board with Minister for Education and Skills Ruairi Quinn and Minister for Training and Skills Ciaran Cannon (3) Noeleen Costello and Patrick Duffy at the AONTAS GM (4) Members of the Southill Men's Shed Group celebrate receiving their VITA awards.

Explore offers discount advertising rates to all community and voluntary groups. To find out more about advertising in future issues, contact Niamh Farren, Communications Officer, AONTAS, Tel: 01 406 8220, email: nfarren@aontas.com.

Transfer of SOLAS Training Centres

The transfer of SOLAS Training Centres to ETBs is well underway with two training centres, in Ballyfermot and Finglas, now under the auspices of City of Dublin ETB. Training centres in Baldoyle, Tallaght and Loughlinstown, are moving to Dublin and Dun Laoghaire ETB. One training centre each will move to Cork (Bishopstown) and Kerry (Tralee) ETBs. A further 12 training centres will transfer from SOLAS to other

ETBs in the coming months. Announcing the move, Minister Quinn said, "This marks an important further step in the development of an integrated high-quality Further Education and Training sector, following the establishment of SOLAS last October. The training centres will offer a range of modules which will meet the needs of learners together with the needs of society and of the economy. This latest development is in line with our Troika commitments and represents further evidence of this government's commitment to transforming the education and training landscape in Ireland."

Review on Apprenticeship published

The Minister for Education & Skills, Ruairi Quinn T.D., has published a comprehensive review of the system of apprenticeships. The review was undertaken by an independent group chaired by Kevin Duffy, chairperson of the Labour Court.

Among the recommendations of the group are an expansion of apprenticeships to new business and industrial sectors. Employers are a vital stakeholder, according to the review, and they should identify

the occupations which would be suitable for new apprentices. An Apprenticeship Council should also be established and employers should pay apprentices in the new areas for both on the job and off the job periods.

With regard to existing apprenticeships, the Review Group, recommended that programmes should be continued and adapted over time, with issues such as duration and the level of qualifications being decided on a trade by trade basis. The curriculum for trades should be examined and updated as a matter of urgency and, where feasible, common modules across apprenticeships should be provided. Other skills such as literacy, numeracy, maths, science

and ICT should be integrated into courses. Minister Quinn welcomed the report and said "Apprenticeships are essential for the future economy. They should be seen as a partnership between education and enterprise. In order to produce an apprenticeship system fit for the 21st century we need to have the business community on board.

"Education will fulfil its responsibility with regard to the off the job training while industry needs to fulfil its role in identifying the areas for new apprenticeships and ensuring there are meaningful placements", the Minister concluded.

New Further Education and Training Strategy underway

SOLAS is currently engaged in a consultation process which will feed in to the development of a five year Further Education and Training Strategy to be signed off

by Government in April this year. The strategy will be delivered by the 16 Education and Training Boards established in July 2013. A crucial challenge will be to develop a distinct identity for Further Education and Training which will have parity of esteem with Higher Education, and to promote its value as a successful life choice. The consultation process is being conducted by the ESRI on behalf of SOLAS and with the input of an advisory group representing relevant stakeholders.



Fiona Hartley, Executive Director, FET Strategic Services, SOLAS

AONTAS Out and About Fairs and Exhibitions 2013

BY KATIE O'ROURKE

AONTAS staff have been very busy in 2013 attending various education fairs and exhibitions throughout the country. As a national organisation it offers us a great opportunity to meet potential adult learners face to face and to network with other organisations. The events also give us an opportunity to celebrate adult learning and promote our Adult Learners' Festival which will take place from 24th February – 1st March 2014.

The sheer amount of information can be overwhelming for learners and following the changes that have taken place within the Further Education and Training Sector we have completely redesigned the Information booklet "What Next". Our aim was to produce a straightforward guide on returning to learning that includes a broad financial supports section, a thorough list of learning opportunities including upskilling and training options and further education programmes.

The *Which Course* Expo, Dublin's largest course fair took place in January 2013 for the first time and the event was held in the Mansion House on Dawson Street. AONTAS attended the event which was aimed at prospective students in the Greater Dublin area. There was a large turnout of people looking for information on courses and returning to education. Events like these give AONTAS a chance to make valuable connections with adult learners so we can best represent their voice and the challenges that they are facing in returning to education and training. *Which Course* took place again in August and AONTAS was also in attendance.

EURES Fairs

In April of this year we attended the Blanchardstown Jobs and Advice Fair which took place in the Blanchardstown Shopping Centre. Organised by the International Employment Services/EURES, it was an extremely successful event with thousands of people in attendance over the two day period. The event was aimed at Irish and EU workers looking for jobs locally and throughout Europe, as well as people who were interested in education and training options. It was attended by local employers and locally based employment advice agencies as well as organisations offering upskilling opportunities. AONTAS dealt with a lot of queries on what upskilling programmes were available to assist people back to work. A similar EURES event took place in Dun Laoghaire in November.

AONTAS around the country

In April and September AONTAS attended the Mayo Training and Education Fair in Kiltmogh and Ballina. It was organised by the Mayo County Development Board and 200-300 people attended both events. They are always very well run events with various workshops for learners including 'Presentation of CVs & Interview Skills for Job Seekers'. It was a great opportunity to promote the Adult Learners' Festival in the Mayo area and to find out what issues are affecting learners at a regional level.

We also attended the Cork Adult Education Fair which took place in City Hall in Cork in September and was organised by the Cork Adult Education Council. It was a fantastic event with a great range of organisations in attendance catering for a wide range of needs. An excellent workshop took place during the event providing lots of great tips for learners. We made lots of great connection with other organisations as well as learners in the Cork area.



Katie O'Rourke and Kathryn Laing promoting 'What Next' at the Cork Education and Training Exhibition



AONTAS took part in exhibitions around the country during 2013, promoting our Information Referral Service and 'What Next'



Meeting Minister Quinn at the ETBI congress in September

Ploughing Championships

AONTAS attended the Ploughing Championships for the first time in September 2013. Almost 230,000 people visited the three day event in Ratheniska near Stradbally in Co Laois. It was a great experience and there was a great mix of people attending, young and old and from every corner of the country. It offered AONTAS chance to promote our work and to disseminate information to potential adult learners and the rural community.

AONTAS staff are available to attend Adult and Community Education Fairs and Exhibitions. Attendance will be subject

to staff resources available. If you planning any event in 2014 and would like AONTAS to attend please email Katie, korourke@aontas.com, or call 01 4068220.

Do you have an information event happening in 2014? Want to let people know about it? You can include details of your event on the new One Step Up online calendar – where people can sign up for text and email alerts for events in their area. See OneStepUp.ie for details.

You can access a copy of 'What Next' online at www.aontas.com/whatnext.

Events that AONTAS has attended in 2013:

- Whichcourse, Dublin, January
- Central Library Stand, Dublin, February
- Cavan Adult Learners Fair, February
- Monaghan Adult Learning Event, February
- Sinn Fein Ard Fheis, Castlebar, April
- EURES Fair, Blanchardstown, April
- Kiltimagh Education Fair, Mayo, April
- Whichcourse, Dublin, August
- Cork Education and Training Fair, September
- Ballina Education and Training Fair, September
- ETBI Congress, September
- Ballymun Education Fair, September
- Ploughing Championship, September
- Roscommon Education and Training Fair, October
- EURES Fair, Dun Laoghaire, November
- Sharing and Caring Conference, Duleek Women's Forum, Drogheda, November
- Dublin Inner City Fair, November
- Ahead Better Options Fair, December

Community Education Network News

Niamh O'Reilly returns to AONTAS and, in her capacity of Head of Membership Services, resumes coordination of the AONTAS Community Education Network. Sara Bourke provided maternity leave cover for this work and focused on responding to the QQI consultation from the network's perspective, keeping members up to date on developments with SOLAS, organising training in measuring outcomes and supporting the network with national meetings. This year the Network will be re-evaluated in light of the forthcoming AONTAS strategic plan with the aim of facilitating members to work as a collective in supporting community education at this time of change. If you are an independent community education group that aspires to a social action model of learning provision you are welcome to join this 140 member strong network.

For more information please go to the **AONTAS website** or contact noreilly@aontas.com

AONTAS Director appointed to the Board of SOLAS

In November 2013 AONTAS Director Berni Brady was appointed to the Board of SOLAS. SOLAS has been established to develop and give strategic direction to the Further Education and Training sector in Ireland. It is responsible for funding, planning and co-ordinating a wide range of training and further education programmes and has a mandate to ensure the provision of 21st century high-quality programmes to jobseekers and other learners. The other members are: SOLAS CEO, Paul O'Toole; Paul O'Sullivan, DIT; Sean Burke, CEO, Limerick and Clare ETB; Cathriona Hallahan, M.D. Microsoft Ireland; David Barrett, founder of MBCS, an Enterprise Ireland supported export company; Liz Cassidy, consultant and business coach; Patricia Carey, former President Skerry's Business College, Cork; Darragh J Loftus, Executive Partner-Manager at VMware, a cloud computing company; Kenneth Whyte, Principal, Presentation Brothers College, Cork; Cecilia Munro, Principal, Dun Laoghaire College of Further Education and William Egerton, Managing Director, Dromone Engineering, Oldcastle, Co Meath.

For more information visit www.solas.ie

AONTAS Strategic Plan

In preparation for our next strategic plan AONTAS has taken the necessary step of developing an interim plan for 2014. This will allow full and meaningful consultation with our membership, and other stakeholders, at this time of large-scale change and uncertainty. This interim plan will take the form of a wide ranging consultation process. Initially a discussion document will be disseminated to all members and this will act as a basis for discussion followed by a range of consultative mechanisms. This year long process will allow AONTAS and its membership to plan the direction of the organisation, particularly in light of emerging key policy developments e.g. the new SOLAS 5 year Further Education and Training strategy which will be published this spring.

We believe this approach offers our membership the necessary time to reflect on AONTAS' values, role and direction over the coming years. For the first time in the history of adult and community education, it is now linked to a new national structure which has a legislative base and strategy to guide FET, we want to ensure that we are correctly placed to engage in this work in an effective manner.

The consultation process will include regional meetings and one-to-one meetings, focus groups, telephone interviews, online submissions and importantly the AONTAS General Meeting in May. The process will be evolving and further actions will be carried out as its necessity arises. Active engagement of members in the consultation is essential for developing the organisation and we will have a specific section of our website devoted to such. For further information contact Niamh O'Reilly on noreilly@aontas.com.



Members of the AONTAS Executive pictured at the AGM in May 2013

AONTAS goes to Brussels

Emer Costello MEP hosted a visit of a group of AONTAS representatives to the European Commission offices in Brussels at the beginning of December 2013. Ten representatives from AONTAS took part, including members of the AONTAS Executive, staff and four adult learners. During the visit the group took part in the EUCIS Conference on Lifelong Learning at the European Parliament, and spent some time in the Parliament learning more about the European Parliament, Commission and Council of Europe, as well as the work of MEPs. Following the study visit, Una Buckley (adult learner representative on the QQI) took part in a policy roundtable organised by the EAEA and focusing on the findings PIAAC.



Berni Brady, Director of AONTAS, with Emer Costello, MEP

New European funding programme launched

Details for Erasmus +, the new funding programme which brings together a number of funding strands in the area of education, training and youth, were finally announced in December 2013. The new programme was launched during the Lithuanian presidency of the EU, and was finalised following intense negotiations during the Irish Presidency. €1.8 billion of funding will be made available during 2014 and the programme is open to organisations active in the area of education, training, youth or sport.

Learning Mobility activities will continue under the new scheme, and the deadline for applications is March 17th 2014. Leargas, the National Agency will host an information session on Friday February 21st for organisations in the adult education sector interested in the opportunities under Erasmus +. The deadline for the receipt of proposals under Erasmus + is March 17th. Consortia, coordinating organisations and groups can submit a single application on behalf of a number of organisations.

For more information on how to apply visit:
www.leargas.ie

PIAAC Roundtable Event

In December 2013, the EAEA held a roundtable discussion about the implications of PIAAC (the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies), the study co-ordinated by the OECD.

A key finding of the study was that approximately 20% of adults across Europe lack proficiency in basic skills such as literacy and numeracy. The gap in literacy proficiency between the generations is also getting wider. The PIAAC findings also showed that skills decline over time as people get older. This finding makes a strong case for lifelong learning and investment in adult learning, which helps people retain those skills over time.

The main challenge lies in what to do with the valuable information contained within PIAAC, in particular what can be done at European level. During the roundtable, a representative from the European Commission expressed an interest in working together with the EAEA to engage with the data and strengthen the position of adult education.

Antra Carlsen from the Nordic Learning Alliance outlined how the data provided a useful lobbying tool for civil society organisations.

AONTAS Director, Berni Brady and Communications Officer, Niamh Farren attended the event, while Una Buckley, learner and member of the QQI Board was one of the speakers.

Disability Activation Project (DACT) – Training Options

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has been selected to offer training and support to people with disabilities. The Disability Activation Project (DACT) aims to increase the capacity and potential of people on disability/illness welfare payments to participate in the labour market. Congress plans to deliver

education and training to enhance the competencies of people with disabilities in a range of personal development, Information Technology and work related programmes.

The Disability Activation Project is jointly funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Department of Social Protection (DSP) and is targeted at the Border, Midlands and Western region (BMW). The target group for this funding is people with a disability, 16 to 65 years of age, in receipt of disability/illness welfare payments who reside in the BMW region.

To be eligible for the (DACT) Training Options programme, participants/applicants must be in receipt of one of the following welfare payments:

- Disability Allowance
- Invalidity Pension
- Illness Benefit
- Blind Pension
- Disability Benefit
- Incapacity Supplement
- Injury Benefit

Benefits to employee:

- This is a 12 week programme which will include achieving three (3) FETAC accredited certificates
- 10 days practical work experience
- Individual Employment Plan
- On the job support and coaching
- Follow up support and coaching
- Follow up support and mentoring
- Assistance with workplace integration
- Advice on employment benefits and entitlements

The range of supports for employers include:

- Database of skilled jobseekers
- Access to a committed workforce

Grants and Financial Supports Available include:

- Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS)
- Workplace Equipment/Adaptation Grant (WEAG)
- Job Interview – Interpreter Grant (JIIG)
- Personal Reader Grant (PRG)
- Employee Retention Grant Scheme (ERGS)



A meeting of DACT stakeholders in Donegal

For further information visit:

www.welfare.ie or www.ictu.ie/projects/workway/ and www.ictu.ie/projects/disability-champions/

Contact: Sylvia Ryan, Programme Manager – DACT Project 01 889 7745 / sylvia.ryan@ictu.ie

Thriving and surviving in changing structures

Suzanne Kyle from Limerick Community Education Network describes how community education providers are collectively engaging with their local ETB.

"A great opportunity for people to work together and plan for the future of community education in Limerick and Clare" was how one participant described a regional networking event that took place in Limerick in October 2013.

VECs were the main providers and funders of community education in counties Clare and Limerick as well as Limerick City. On July 1st 2013 the three VECs were amalgamated into one new authority - Limerick, Clare Education and Training Board (LCETB). LCETB will have community representation although it is not yet clear how this community representation will be managed.

Information sharing

In order to ensure that community groups involved in the provision of adult community education are informed about the changes taking place and given the opportunity to discuss the implications of these changes, Limerick Community Education Network (LCEN), Limerick City Adult Education Service, Clare VEC and Limerick VEC came together to organise a networking event for groups from the three areas with the aim of providing information and discussing representation of the community education voice on the LCETB.

A precedent for this type of collaboration was set in 2012 when twenty groups from the three areas jointly made a submission on the formation and work plan of SOLAS.



LCEN participants at a regional networking event

A first meeting took place last October attended by representatives of community groups from Limerick City, Limerick County and Clare. The event included inputs from Mary Hamilton (LCAES) on the changes taking place locally, and Berni Brady (AONTAS) on those at national level. These inputs were followed by a lively discussion facilitated by local Rapid Co-ordinator, Sinead Doody on the implications of these changes for community education.

Next steps

The feedback from the group was very positive with members expressing a wish to meet again in order to be proactive in ensuring communities are supported during the process of change and look at how to engage effectively with the LCETB.

A follow up meeting was organised in collaboration with AONTAS and took place on January 14th this year. Niamh Farren and Berni Brady facilitated this meeting which covered collective lobbying and relationship building as well as interactive group work sessions on the following: campaign planning, representation, campaign messages and slogans, and preparation for an interview on local radio.

The workshops allowed the group to focus on their next steps and look towards developing a specific plan aimed at awareness raising about community education and community representation on the new LCETB.

The group, which has the potential to be regional community education network, looks forward to continued collaboration advocating for community education in the run up to the local elections this year, and into the future as a representative voice for the new LCETB.

These events were supported by The Advocacy Initiative, as part of a broader programme of meetings around Ireland to look at the future of social justice advocacy at local level.

For more information contact Suzanne Kyle on: 087 7903275 or email Lcencitycentre@gmail.com

Celebrating 10 Years of Community Education in VECs

DVD Launch in Athlone

2013 marked 10 years of Community Education Facilitators in the VEC sector, and CEFA (the Community Education Facilitators Association) produced a DVD to mark the occasion.



Professor Pat Dolan, guest speaker

DVD Launch in Athlone

A large group of people gathered in Athlone in late November 2013 to view the premiere of a DVD marking ten years of Community Education classes in Ireland since the appointment of Community Education Facilitators in the VECs/ETBs. Community Education participants, tutors and organisers attended the launch of the DVD 'Community Education in Action' in the Sheraton Hotel on Tuesday 26th November. The DVD was produced by CEFA, the Community Education Facilitators' Association and it showcases the involvement of local people in activities ranging from carpentry, art and canoeing to cookery, gardening and music. The DVD was officially launched by Fiona Hartley, Executive Director of SOLAS who launched the DVD on-line at the same time.

Nuala O' Brien, Chairperson of CEFA, welcomed guests from all over Ireland, from Donegal right down to Kerry, and from Louth to Waterford. She thanked the Community Education Groups who were the stars of the DVD: men and women from

Family Resource Centres in Athlone and Clare, Men's Groups from Offaly, Clare, Tipperary, Wicklow and Wexford, along with various community groups from Galway, Meath and Longford. Acknowledging the groups' contribution Nuala said their co-operation in the making of the DVD meant it was a highly personalised account of the benefits of participation in community-based learning and the clear message from the DVD is that '*Community education is for everyone!*'

Community education activates communities

Guest speaker at the event was Professor Pat Dolan, from NUI Galway, who spoke about the important role Community Education can play in activating individuals and regenerating communities. Professor Dolan pointed to the benefits of social, as well as technical learning, and he linked community connectedness to the concept of resilience, the ability to bounce back from negative circumstances.

A learner's voice

Community education focusses on the needs of the learner and their community and this was eloquently expressed by Kitty Flynn, a lifelong participant in community education in Kilbeggan, Co. Westmeath, who has recently graduated with a B.A. in Community and Family Studies from NUI, Galway. Kitty recounted her many years of life-long learning, starting with her involvement in Kilbeggan ICA in the 60s, and including her participation in Kilbeggan Development Association, Locke's Distillery Development Group and, more recently, Kilbeggan Young at Heart Active Retirement Association.

Community Education Facilitators are employed by local Education and Training Boards (formerly VECs) and Dr. Christy Duffy, Chief Executive of Longford and Westmeath ETB spoke at the launch of the DVD on behalf of the Chief Executive Officers of all 16 ETBs. He remarked that Community Education would play an important part in the Further Education Strategies that each ETB would be preparing under SOLAS, the new Further Education and Training Authority. Christy praised Kitty Flynn's life-long involvement in adult education and remarked that she always endeavoured to bring her learning back to her colleagues in the various community groups in Kilbeggan. Kitty and Christy then went on to ceremoniously cut a birthday cake marking the ten years of CEFA.



Dr Christy Duffy, CEO Longford Westmeath ETB with Kitty Flynn, community education learner

Community education in action

The guests then settled back for the first public viewing of 'Community Education in Action'. During the 20 minute-long DVD they heard about how Community Education transformed people's lives, gave them the confidence to try new things and make changes in their communities. One of the participants from Wexford Men's Group said "Community education is very necessary for men cos it's as varied and diverse as each individual's life experience." Sheena Lawless, co-ordinator in the Monsignor McCarthy Family Resource Centre, Athlone commented on the importance of tutors in Community Education. 'When you have a tutor that comes into the community they get a feel for the community, they go with what it is that the community wants and they work with the community development principles, which is that the people from the community will dictate what it is they want to learn'. One of the women from Scariff Women's Group, County Clare remarked about a Personal Development and Leadership course 'It was brilliant, absolutely brilliant. I'll actually miss it'.

The video 'Community Education in Action' is available at www.cefa.ie.



Nuala O'Brien, Chairperson of CEFA

A New Dawn for Education in Ireland

2013 was a year of huge change for the adult and community education sector, with the establishment of both SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards. In addition, 2013 saw the release of data from PIAAC (the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) which for the first time gives us real insights into the skills levels of Irish adults. Berni Brady considers the findings and the implications for both the reform agenda in FET along with the wider education sector.



Des Mooney and Olive Phelan (adult learners) discuss their priorities for the Education and Training Boards

The PIAAC Survey

On October 9th 2013 the results of the PIAAC survey were announced following a major piece of research across 22 OECD and 2 partner countries. PIAAC which stands for the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies focussed on three specific skills or domains, namely literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology rich environments. The OECD has labelled these areas "key information processing skills" because they are necessary for fully participating in the labour market, education and training, and social and civic life. The CSO was contracted to carry out the survey of the Irish population which involved a sample of almost 6000 people between the ages of 16 and 65 with a 72% response rate, the third highest of the participating countries. Literacy and numeracy skills were categorised from Level 1 to Level 5 (with Level 1 corresponding to the lower end of the skills scale), while there were three different proficiency levels in 'problem solving in technology rich environments'.

From PIAAC to PISA

The data produced by the PIAAC survey and the disappointing results for Ireland have wide implications for the Irish education system as a whole and not just the adult/further education and training sector. While the research showed that the proportion of Irish adults scoring at lower levels when tested for literacy skills dropped by 4% compared with the adjusted results of the 1996 IALS study, 17.9% of adults still scored at or below Level 1 placing Ireland 17th out of the 24 participating countries taking part in the survey. Even poorer results were recorded for numeracy with just over 25% of Irish adults scoring at or below Level 1 compared to an average of just over 20% for participating countries, placing it 19th out of the 24 participating countries. These results echo the findings of previous international research such as PISA (2010) where Ireland ranked 14th out of 34 for reading literacy and 26th out of 34 OECD countries for Maths while the findings for Science were slightly above average at 14th out of 34. PISA, the Programme for International Student Assessment tests the skills of 15 year olds every three years. It assesses students'

performance on 'real life tasks that are considered relevant for active participation in adult society and lifelong learning'. The scores show that between 2006 and 2009 Ireland dropped from 5th to 17th place for reading literacy, from 16th to 25th place for mathematical literacy, while results in scientific literacy remained more stable. While the 2013 PISA results were more encouraging showing an improvement across the board and in particular for mathematics, Ireland is still just above the OECD average ranking 20th out of 65 countries so there is little to be complacent about.

One of the most innovative features of the PIAAC research was the introduction for the first time of an assessment designed to measure the extent to which adults use and are familiar with Information and Communications Technology. In Ireland 10% of adults indicated no computer experience either at work or at home while nearly 5% failed the basic computer assessment. A further 17.4% opted for a paper – based assessment compared to the study average of 9.9% even though they had previously indicated some computer experience.

The reason that the PIAAC results have implications for the whole education system is that we cannot separate what happens within the formal education system from what happens outside of it. Furthermore, the adult/further education and training sector cannot be expected to compensate for its shortcomings. The quality of teaching and learning within the formal system especially at first and second level is crucial to the development of a love of learning and self esteem which, as adult educators, we know to be key factors in continuing to learn and upskill throughout life.

What's happening in the formal education sector

Ireland has long prided itself on having one of the best education systems in Europe with the percentage of adults with a third level qualification at 48% in 2011, rising from 22% in 1996. Notwithstanding the overall improvement of the general educational attainment of the population which shows that 23% of the population aged between 16 and 65 in 1996 had primary education or lower compared to 10% in 2011, and that the age at which people ceased full time education also rose steadily between 1996 and 2011, current results of both the PIAAC and PISA research raises serious questions about the quality of teaching and learning across the board, the nature of the curriculum and the outcomes and

choices for the learner. It also raises questions about the vision and purpose of education and the coherence of Irish education as a system rather than a collection of disconnected services at primary, secondary and tertiary level.

Early School Leaving

Apart from our poor literacy and numeracy results at an adult level there is also a persistent attrition rate of approximately 9% of young people from the second level system with a higher number of males than females not completing second level school. In the ESRI report, *No Way Back: The Dynamics of Early School Leaving (2010)* results of the research show that:-

- Every year, around 9,000 young people leave school before taking the Leaving Certificate.
- Early leaving rates differ markedly by social class background, with much higher levels among young people from working-class and unemployed households. Working-class young men are particularly likely to leave school early. Disengagement from school is therefore a significant source of inequality in Irish society.
- Early school leaving has its roots in early experiences of educational failure and early school leavers struggle with schoolwork, often as far back as primary level.
- Drop-out rates tend to be higher in schools with a concentration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Ability grouping (allocating students to base classes according to their academic ability) has a significant effect on school drop-out. Students allocated to lower stream classes experience a climate of low expectations and negative student-teacher interaction, and are much more likely to leave school early.
- The school climate, that is, the quality of relations between teachers and students, emerges as a key factor in young people staying in education. Negative interaction with teachers is commonly reported by early school leavers, with many feeling they did not receive the help they needed or were not listened to.



Una Buckley, Learner Representative on QQI at the recent EAEA Roundtable

On Post-School Pathways the results show:

- Most early leavers experience unemployment at some point after leaving school. Where they obtain jobs, they tend to be insecure and/or in low-skilled areas. They are therefore particularly vulnerable to the current economic conditions.
- Young people regret having left school early because they see their lack of qualifications as a barrier to employment or further education/training. However, they generally see 'no way back' to second-level education to improve their prospects.

The last finding quoted is, I believe, one of the most serious effects of negative experiences of early learning and one of the most difficult to overcome once the young person has left the system. Encouraging adults who have had poor school experiences to re-engage with education and training post school is one of the biggest challenges for the FET sector as research shows that those with the least qualifications are also the least likely to pursue post school learning. *No Way Back* contains many more insights into the processes shaping early school leaving. The authors highlight issues for policy development, in particular that a positive school climate, more active teaching methods and flexible ability grouping would help to engage young people with learning and encourage them to complete second level education. The report also points to the importance of providing clear pathways back into education and training for early school leavers.

Early Childhood Education

With regard to early childhood education Ireland has no formal structured programme in place. The age for compulsory primary education in Ireland is 6 years though most children participate in some form of early learning at earlier ages. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs which has responsibility for early childhood education describes the services on its website as follows '*With the exception of some targeted programmes such as the Rutland Street Project and Early Start, early childhood education and care services in Ireland are delivered outside the formal education system, by a diverse range of private, community and voluntary interests and are described variously as crèches, nurseries, pre-schools, naíonraí (Irish language pre-schools), playgroups and daycare services*'. In 2010 a free pre-school year was implemented by Government for children between 3 years and 2 months and 4 years and 7 months. While over 60,000 children participate in this form of education recent reports suggested that the quality of the learning opportunity is patchy, and poor in many cases mostly due to the lack of high level qualifications of professional staff. Recent research from DES shows that 55% of early leavers now engage with FET but it is too early to assess the outcomes.

Reforming the system

Currently the formal education system is engaged in a number of reforms such as the rolling out of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy in schools, the revamping of the Junior cycle at second level and so on, but the second level school agenda is still largely dictated by the Leaving Certificate exam and the race for points to gain access to higher education

which is seen in Ireland as the Holy Grail. Vocational Training is often seen as a second rate option for those who can't quite hack the requirements of the academy. Research entitled *Young People and Vocational Choices in Ireland*, published by City and Guilds in 2013 gives a fascinating insight into the perceptions of young people of Vocational Education and Training. It showed that only half of the 508 young people surveyed understood the term, that 60% regarded higher education as the preferred option and that young people generally regarded VET as less challenging and less prestigious than the academic option. These perceptions are strongly influenced by parents but the report also shows that information and guidance in schools are also more likely to promote the academic option with little information available about vocational choices.

Adult / Further Education and Training

Major reforms are also taking place in the adult/ further education and training sector. SOLAS is currently engaged in a wide consultation process to develop a five year strategy for Further Education and Training which will integrate for the first time two sectors which have different histories, cultures and funding streams. The amalgamation of the 33 VECs into 16 Education and Training Boards presents enormous challenges at a number of levels and how those challenges are managed will be crucial to a successful outcome. The objective of the strategy is to develop a high quality and flexible service which will serve the needs of learners as well as the skills needs of business and industry.

Everyone is extremely conscious that in the current Irish economic climate the needs of the labour market are paramount and many fears have been expressed about the possibility of losing the kind of provision that has essentially addressed the social purpose of learning. I believe that this is a legitimate fear but the challenge is to interrogate the disconnection between the labour market agenda and the social inclusion agenda and find a common core. I believe that common core is the learner. We need to change our focus from the needs of providers to the key needs of adults which include making a living as well as making a life. A crucial challenge for SOLAS will also be to develop a distinct identity for Further Education and Training which will have parity of esteem with Higher Education and to promote its value as a successful life choice. I do not believe that this is the responsibility of SOLAS alone. Such a task requires a radical rethink of the overall vision for Irish Education at all levels and

the development of strategies which link the separate sectors in a coherent way.

Looking ahead

So returning to PIAAC, what does the report say to us in terms of education policy, planning and investment? The study confirms the importance of lifelong learning and the need for proactive policies and investment in it as formal education can only provide a foundation for learning, a foundation which in many cases is itself questionable. Countries performing well in the PIAAC survey such as Finland and Japan have established systems which combine high quality initial education with opportunities for the entire population to continue to develop their skills inside and outside the workplace. The survey reinforces information that we already know i.e. people with lower proficiency in literacy are more than twice as likely to be unemployed; are less likely to improve their skills through education and training; report poorer health; believe that they have little impact on political processes and are less likely to participate in civic life. Their children are also more at risk of continuing the cycle of disadvantage. Can we as a country struggling to rebuild our economy and communities after the recent economic crash afford to ignore the PIAAC evidence? I think not.



Berni Brady with Donal Kelly from the CSO (PIAAC National Project Manager)

Measuring soft skills - the Southill Men's Shed Challenge

In early 2013 we announced the exciting development of the VITA project (validation of personal competences in informal and non-formal learning for the labour market). In this article we report on how the pilot project went and what learning outcomes emerged. BY ELEONORA PERUFFO

VITA was a European project which aimed to develop a methodology for measuring soft skills in adult learning. The methodology uses software and is known as 'VITA LEVEL5'. AONTAS worked with the Southill Men's Shed group in Limerick to pilot the methodology in an Irish, community based setting as part of a European wide project. The group took on a personal development course called "the Southill Men's Shed Skills Challenge". The aim of the course was to enhance the problem solving, leadership and networking skills of the participants. The men's skills were assessed at the beginning of the project, and the VITA LEVEL5 methodology was used to measure the development of these skills as the programme progressed. The software takes into consideration three dimensions of the learners' experience: cognitive, activity related and affective learning outcomes. Those dimensions were monitored while the learner is attending the course. The tutor or, in some cases, the learner can input their progression data using the software.

Accrediting soft skills

At the end of the course the Southill learners received the VITA certificates showing their progress. The certificate includes an illustration of a cube which demonstrates the learning achieved by the men who took part across all three dimensions.

"This programme was unlike anything I had run before" said the tutor. "The group dynamic was by far the biggest asset to the success of this project. The group were a tightly-bonded team, who supported each other throughout the weeks." The practical dimension of the course was highlighted by learners who preferred it to 'sitting down all day looking at notes'. The course worked well in a community context, where the language was geared towards the learners, and experiences and examples were proposed by the group, rather than brought in from the outside. The evaluation process was very lengthy but it gave clear indications of the levels of progression of the individuals.



Minister for Training and Skills Ciaran Cannon with members of the Southill Men's Shed Group

VITA in a European context

Pilot projects were also organised by other VITA partners. LEVEL5 has been applied in very different learning contexts ranging from 11th-12th-grade volunteer students in a "Club GREEN" (Turkey) to students on an obligatory practice placement during their BA in education as counsellors (Lithuania) and workplace-related courses for supermarket employees (Germany) and managers in daycare centers (Denmark) whose employers had a strong expectation that they were going to participate.

Ultimately, the pilot phase of VITA LEVEL5 shows us that adults gain personal skills in a community setting, and the experience of adults in Southill who took part indicates that adults at the lower end of the skills stand to benefit most personally.

For more information visit www.vita-eu.org or www.europass.ie.

New EU campaign encourages adults to take their learning ‘one step up’

One Step Up is the new EU campaign developed and managed by AONTAS on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills, and a steering committee of other organisations including ETBI, NALA, AEOA, Léargas and NCGE. The campaign aims to help adults to enhance their learning by promoting access to learning opportunities for all adults through a new website www.onestepup.ie, a Freephone Helpline 1800 303 669 and online calendar of learning events. The campaign is funded by the European Commission as an initiative to promote the EU Agenda on Adult Learning. BY BRID GREENAN



Noleen Costello and Patrick Duffy, adult learners promoting the new One Step Up website

One Step Up will support the existing work of education and training providers by directing adults who are looking for a particular course, advice, or information about funding or finance to local services quickly and easily. By answering a series of four simple questions the user is given contact details for their local FET services, as well as a range of useful resources and websites. The website is easy to navigate and has been especially developed for use on a smartphone, but fully accessible on a tablet or PC. The website includes topical Frequently Asked Questions and a number of video testimonials from adult learners who describe their own experience of returning to education to encourage other people.

Another feature of the website is an online calendar of learning events. Education and training providers will be able to publicise informal or formal learning opportunities taking place within their own community or organisation on the calendar of events. This learning event could take the form of a book club, education and training fair or a community education event. Adults will be able to search by area and category to find local events or sign up for email or text messages to hear about learning events taking place in their own area.

The project was launched in mid-November through a national radio campaign and will continue to be promoted over the coming year through radio advertising, an online marketing campaign, as well as other promotional activities around the country. This project runs until September 2014.

To check out the new website, promote an event or listen to the learner stories visit www.onestepup.ie or for further information about this project contact Bríd on bgreenan@aontas.com.

One Step Up is funded with support from the European Commission, as an initiative which promotes the EU Agenda for Adult Learning.



Local Elections 2013 and the Education and Training Boards

The Local and European Elections take place this year on May 23rd. Where are the opportunities to advocate for adult and community education? By NIAMH FARREN



The Local and European Elections take place on May 23rd

2013 is a critical year for political anoraks with the onset of the Local and European Elections 2014. These elections are set to provide to provide endless speculation for armchair spectators – with new electoral boundaries for the European elections, the dissolution of smaller town councils, and will provide the first opportunity for the Irish electorate to articulate their perceptions on how the current government is performing. A date of May 23rd has been set for the elections with an interesting and varied spectrum of candidates setting out their stalls on the various party websites and beyond. The elections will also no doubt see the emergence of a number of independent candidates running on 'single issues' which may include anything from local health services to water charges. We can also anticipate technology, in particular social media playing a big role as the drama unfolds.

The Local Elections 2014 should be of particular interest to the adult and community education sector for one important reason and that is their role in building the new Education and Training Boards. Following the dissolution of 33 VECs, the Education and Training Boards legislation outlines the structure for 16, leaner Boards which will be the key players in co-ordinating and delivering further education and training at local level. Competition for positions on the Board will be high, and there will be an additional challenge faced by ETBs whose remit will broaden to include two or in some cases three local authority jurisdictions.

Composition of the Board

Part 3 of the Act outlines how each ETB will be structured. An

overall gender balance policy will apply to each ETB, which requires representation of at least 40% male and at least 40% female.

A total of 21 places will be available on each ETB to include:

- 12 Councillors will be drawn from local authorities in each ETB area, where the Minister will decide how many councillors from each local authority, and each local authority chooses which councillors go forward;
- 2 members of staff of the ETB (to be appointed in consultation with ETBI);
- 2 parents representatives (who must be living in the area, and must be parents of a student under 18 attending a centre in the ETB area). Nominations will be made by a national parents association, to include one man and one woman;
- 5 representatives under 'Section 11'.

Section 11

Section 11 was the focus of lobbying activities from a number of sectors during the passage of the Bill. As a result, the legislation states that 'The Minister shall for the purposes of Section 1d, specify a number of bodies, which in his or her opinion have a special interest in or knowledge of education and training.'

These bodies will propose nominations relevant to the following categories:

- At least one will be 'a body representative of business'
- At least one will be 'a body representative of learners'
- At least one will be 'a body established to represent management or leadership in schools'

Nominating bodies named by the Minister will be required to propose one male and one female candidate for these categories.

Board appointments

Education and Training Boards are essentially examples of local democracy in action, hence the first people to take up

their position on the Board will be the councillors from each local authority area to be served by the ETB. Once they are in place they will appoint staff and parents representatives on the basis of the nominations they receive. Following those appointments the Section 11 representatives will be agreed by the Board.

Information on nominating bodies is not yet fully clear – however they will be expected to facilitate access to candidates who reside in the ETB area. Regarding the appointment of candidates from the employers sector, at last years ETBI conference in September the Minister signalled that ISME, IBEC and Chambers would be invited to nominate at least one man and one woman. Similar 'panels' of candidates are expected to be established for both the learners and the management positions.

Role of the ETB

The Act outlines how ETBs will 'plan, provide, co-ordinate and review the provision of education and training including education and training for the purpose of employment.' The legislation defines a strengthened role for ETBs not only in terms of geography, but also in the context of the further education and training strategy at national level managed by SOLAS. SOLAS Training centres are in the process of transferring to the relevant ETB area, and ETBs will be required to submit both a strategy statement and a service plan to SOLAS before it is approved for funding. According to the legislation, both of these plans must be made available online.

Key priorities for the sector within this emerging local landscape include the place of community education within the strategy statement and the development of Service Level Agreements between ETBs and community education providers. Representation of adult learners at Board level will be a challenge, in terms of communicating the diversity of learners experience, ensuring that they are supported to participate and that their voice and experience is heard. The local elections and the subsequent restructuring period provide an important space and platform for us to consider these important questions.

AONTAS is preparing a toolkit for AONTAS members to lobby locally in the lead up to the local elections. Contact Niamh Farren, Communications Officer, nfarren@aontas.com/ 01 4068220.

Adult Learners' Festival 2014: Learning Today for a Better Tomorrow

The eighth Adult Learners' Festival will take place from the 24th February - 1st March 2014 and AONTAS is encouraging organisations and learners nationwide to hold their own events or activities to mark the Festival. Whether you are part of a large national organisation, a small adult learning initiative or an individual learner, your participation will make the Festival a nationwide success. In these challenging times it is vital that the profile of adult and community education is raised. Through participating in the festival you can help us highlight the value of the adult learning sector.

By KATHRYN LAING, FESTIVAL ADMINISTRATION OFFICER



A group of adult learners with walking tour guide Pat Liddy on last years 'Love to Learn' bus tour.

There are numerous ways to get involved with the festival.

For example you could:

- Organise an event during the Festival
- Schedule an existing event during the week of the Festival
- Organise a learning event in your workplace
- Contact one of the organisations already involved to see if you can join forces
- Circulate information about the Festival through your contacts
- Attend a local Festival event. Find out what's happening in your local area by visiting the Festival Calendar of Events.

During the festival each day of the week will have its own theme. These are:

Monday, 24th February 2014:
Celebrate Learning

Tuesday, 25th February 2014:
Green Learning

Wednesday, 26th February 2014:
Learning Communities

Thursday, 27th February 2014:
Lobby for Learning Day

Saturday, 1st March 2014:
Family Learning Day

If you are interested in organising an event remember though that you do not have to hold your event on these specific days if it does not suit your organisation. The themes are there as guidelines and you could have a green learning event that takes place on the Saturday. To get some event ideas why not have a look at our A – Z of event ideas at www.adultlearnersfestival.com/yourarea/holdanevent/eventideas which has a broad range of suggestions on it.

We also understand that time and resources are limited for a lot of people so this is how AONTAS can help you with your event. We can provide you with:

- A free Event in a Bag jam-packed with everything you need to promote your event
- A local contact to talk to who has previous event experience
- Festival Toolkits full of activity and event ideas
- The opportunity for your event to be part of a nationwide advertising campaign
- A calendar of events on both www.adultlearnersfestival.com and www.onestepup.ie
- AONTAS staff who are available by email or phone for any guidance and assistance you might need

If your organisation would like to become involved in the 2014 Festival, please contact AONTAS on 01-4068220 or e-mail: klaing@aontas.com if you have any questions or queries. If you want to keep up to date with all the latest Festival news you can find us on Facebook and Twitter or you can subscribe to our newsletter at www.adultlearnersfestival.com.

STAR Awards Shortlist 2014

After a month of hard deliberation the independent STAR Awards Judging Panel drew up a shortlist of projects from 71 fantastic nominations. A total of 34 projects have been shortlisted from the five categories. The winners from each category will be announced at the STAR Awards Ceremony on February 24th in the DoubleTree Hotel in Dublin. There can only be five winners but choosing them is going to be hard for the judges this year! Here is a taste of the shortlisted projects and see who you think the winners will be.

Ulster

- Accredited Advocacy Training for Northern Ireland
- Donegal Change Makers
- Higher Attainment through Cross-border Hubs (HATCH)
- Loaf
- Man Matters
- S.E.E.K (Skills, Education, Employment & Knowledge)

Connaught

- ALá Community Theatre
- An Seid-Cumann na bhFear
- Blue Teapot Theatre & Performing Arts School
- Soundscape Music Project
- The Harvest Studios

Nationwide

- Crafts Council of Ireland Ceramics & Jewellery Skills Training Programmes
- Deaf Communications Infrastructure Development Project (DCID)
- Latch-On Adult Literacy Project
- Project FUTSAL.
- The Irish Men's Sheds Association

Munster

- Ballyduff Community of Excellence in Promoting Mental Health Awareness and Well-being
- Blackguarded: Our Vagina Dialogues
- Developing Community Education as a Conduit for Fostering Cultural Knowledge Engagement through Educational Access
- E-Learning @ The Library
- Leadership and Advocacy Programme
- Mahon Young Unemployed Men's Group
- The Clare Adult Education Service Community Music Project
- The UCC Ace Certificate in Autism Spectrum Studies

Leinster

- 1913 Lockout Centenary
- Boxing Clever Programme
- CRC Talks 3
- Evolve Project
- Kildare Lifelong Learning Initiative
- M.A.D.E. (Making a Difference Everywhere)
- Monsignor McCarthy Family Resource Centre
- PETE
- The Healthcare Support Programme for People who work as Carers
- The Second Half - A men's health initiative

Do it for yourself!

This month's inspiring learner is Joe Mc Donagh, from the Adult Education Centre in Shannon.



Joe Mc Donagh, 'I am the first one in my family to get a qualification'

I left school at the age of fourteen with no qualifications, I never liked school anyway. I started working and I loved it, I was getting money into my pocket and money for my mother to help her run the house. I worked in manual labour jobs and I got by without being able to read and write. Travelling for work was very challenging as I couldn't read road signs. I figured out that if I identified landmarks for myself then I knew where I was going.

I got by fine until one afternoon in 2010 my step granddaughter asked me to help her with her homework. She had asked me many times before but this time she was insisting that I help her. She asked me if I could read and I told her that I could, she then asked me to read a page, I told her that I had to leave and she insisted that I read one page before I left. She smiled at me and she said you cannot read can you? Her mother, father and grandmother were all just staring at me. I thought oh my god what do I do now. Finally a seven year old had got me to admit the truth that I couldn't read or write and I was so embarrassed.

Her father looked at me in shock I felt the blood drain from my body. Her mother looked amazed and she said I cannot believe at this stage of your life that you cannot read and write. She said maybe I should look into evening class. My wife looked down at the floor with embarrassment for me.

She had known all along because she did all the reading and writing for me.

When I took Mia to school the next morning she decided to tell her teacher what had happened. The teacher took me to one side and said if you want to learn to read and write you should go to the Adult Education Centre in Shannon. I phoned two days later and I got an appointment.

No going back

When I arrived at the centre, I was sick with nerves as I didn't know what to expect. I knocked on the door and I knew that there was no going back. A lovely lady opened the door. I now know her to be Máire Dempsey. The interview went well. She asked me about my past education and why it was important for me to come back to education, she made me feel so relaxed.

I started classes the following week and all the tutors were so kind and understanding. Shortly after I started I began to think that I was wasting my time there and other people's time. I now know that it was just my nerves speaking. I met some lovely people and they encouraged me to keep going if only to get me out of the house. I was going through a bout of depression at that time.

Life could not be better

As time went by I really got into learning. I got my first certificate for computers and I couldn't stop smiling for weeks. It made me push for more. I went on and did the English Junior Cert. I sat it in Ennis last June and got a B. I was so proud, I wanted the whole world to know. I am the first one in my family to get a qualification, I am now studying for my Leaving Cert English and life could not be better. I no longer feel embarrassed or scared about trying new things. The most important thing to remember is that you must do it and want it for yourself, not for your wife or your grand children.

**Are you an inspiring learner? Share your story by contacting Katie O'Rourke, Learner Support Officer
korourke@aontas.com or 01 406 8220**

Join AONTAS today!

Be part of a wider collective of individuals and groups involved in adult learning

With over 550 members AONTAS regards its membership as a key resource that offers a grassroots, authentic understanding of adult and community education practice from both a practitioner and learner perspective. Our members span the lifelong learning spectrum: community education groups, Family Resources Centres, Education and Training Boards (ETBs), Third level providers as well as tutors and learners. In return our members avail of a range of key services.

Advocacy and lobbying

Draw on our partnerships and representation at national and European level - *Get up to date information, gain opportunities to influence policy*

Networking

Opportunities at national and local level from across the lifelong learning spectrum - *Share experience and get engaged with others in the adult learning field*

Information

A source of relevant information about adult learning - *Use the information referral service, weekly ebulletin, Explore Magazine, AONTAS publications*

Promotion

Highlight your adult learning activities, events and achievements - *AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival, AONTAS website and social media*

Learners

Shape a national strategy that supports learners to improve their learning experience - *Share your story, become a learner ambassador, influence national policy*

How can you join AONTAS?

Find out more at www.aontas.com/membership or fill in our online membership form. For information on Individual or Organisational membership contact Mairéad Tynan on 01 4068220 or email: mtynan@aontas.com

Membership Type	Membership Category	Annual Income Band	Annual Fee
Individual membership	Regular fee		€30
	Reduced fee (Unwaged)		€20
Organisational membership	Small Organisations	€0 - 80,000	€30
	Medium Organisations	€80,000 - 250,000	€100
	Large Organisations	€250,000 +	€200
Associate membership organisations	Overseas individuals & Organisations		€100



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