

LOUDER THAN WORDS

Taking action on the implementation of the recommendations of the White Paper, Learning for Life.

INTRODUCTION

At its Annual Conference in June 1995 AONTAS made a response to the White Paper on Education, **Charting our Education Future**. A number of recommendations for the development of the adult education service were made across three broad themes, **recognition, resources and representation**. AONTAS subsequently adopted the three **Rs** as a means of lobbying for the development of a comprehensive and accessible adult education service. The themes were suggested at the 1994 General Meeting by Ms. Kay Bailey of the ACE Network when she compared the struggle for survival of the emerging daytime adult education groups to that of the 19th Century tenant farmers when they pursued a lobby campaign focussing on 3 Fs. The recommendations were made in relation to the following issues.

1. Equality of Access
2. Advice, Guidance and Counselling
3. Premises
4. Training
5. Accreditation
6. Financial Supports
7. Childcare Facilities
8. Research and Development
9. Local, Regional and National Structures

Four years later in June 1999 the AONTAS response to the first Green Paper on Adult Education, **Making an Impact**, made practically identical recommendations following a broad consultation with its members and other interest groups. The White Paper, **Learning for Life**, was subsequently published in August 2000. At the time of its launch the White Paper was warmly welcomed by a broad range of agencies across a number of sectors involved in the provision of learning opportunities for adults. It marked a watershed for adult education which had been consistently under-resourced for many years. Describing Adult Education as the last area of mass education which remains to be developed in Ireland, Mr. Willie O'Dea announced that the Government White Paper would now provide a framework for its future development.

Ten months later some initial steps for the development of the adult education service have been taken in the context of the National Development Plan but much remains to be done. Now that the initial euphoria has worn off there is a growing sense of frustration about the pace of the implementation of the White Paper's recommendations and a heightening sense of anxiety about the possibility of further implementation being long-fingered. The initiatives which have already been set in place are essentially those which have been earmarked as part of the National Development Plan with the additional inclusion of the funding made available for the

thirty-five new Community Education Facilitators. This was a key recommendation in the AONTAS response to the Green Paper and one which was endorsed subsequently by the White Paper. It is anticipated that the Community Education Facilitators will come on stream later this year.

NATIONAL ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMME

To date the most progress in terms of implementation has been made with the **National Adult Literacy Programme** which was a key strategy of the White Paper. Funding for adult literacy has increased from a base of £.85m in 1997 to £10.766m in 2001. The number of literacy students has increased to 17,150 at the end of 2000 from a base of 5,000 in 1997 already meeting the targets outlined within the National Development Plan. Funding has been targeted at awareness promotion through the media of television and radio, and literacy provision is being developed through a number of projects such as workplace literacy, community employment, and family literacy among others. By the end of 2000 the number of fulltime adult literacy organisers stood at 56 while part-timers numbered 71. Training and staff development has also been a priority in the investment in the National Adult Literacy Programme. However because adult literacy provision had been sadly neglected for many years, it will continue to require more funding if the literacy needs of the 500,000 adults in Ireland identified in the OECD international adult literacy survey are to be fully addressed.

BACK TO EDUCATION INITIATIVE

The second pillar of the Government Strategy for Second-chance and Further Education identified in the White Paper was the expansion of the **Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)**. Its aim is to provide opportunities for adults to return to education and the White Paper proposed an expansion in the categories of people who would be entitled to free education under this initiative. While the thinking behind this initiative was well intentioned in that it aimed to target the most disadvantaged, the reality is that, because of the rapid growth in employment it may now discriminate against low paid workers who do not qualify for free tuition because they are not unwaged. Currently Ireland has the highest proportion of low-paid full-time workers in the OECD countries with 50% earning less than the average industrial wage. (Turner, IBAR, 2000).

In its findings on participation rates in adult education and training, the results of the OECD/IALS study (1997) for Ireland showed that most participants on adult education/training courses paid fees. Almost half of women paid their own fees or were supported by their families, while this was true of only one third of men. On the other hand, the single most likely source of support for males was an employer. Men were more likely to be supported by a government programme.

While statistics show that women have higher participation rates across a range of education programmes, gender inequality in the workplace still persists with women earning 73-75% hourly earnings in comparison to men. Women also have disproportionate numbers engaged in low paid work. At its AGM on May 30th 2001

the AONTAS membership called on the Government **to ensure free access to upper second level education as a right for everyone**. Given that Ireland ranks 22nd lowest out of 28 OECD countries in terms of the percentage of 25-64 year olds with upper second-level education and that almost 1 in 5 are leaving school without a leaving certificate, it is crucial that access to educational opportunities for adults becomes a reality. It is not clear as yet how the Back to Education Initiative will develop as the Working Group set up to progress its implementation will not be in place until the autumn of 2001. In particular the promised fee relief earmarked under the BTEI for part-time courses has not been implemented, an issue which needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

ADULT EDUCATIONAL GUIDANCE INITIATIVE

The **Adult Guidance Initiative, (AEGI)** which aims to develop a comprehensive system of educational guidance for learners in the further education sector began its work in early 2000. Its target groups include adult literacy students, VTOS participants and learners involved in adult and community education. The initial pilot projects are already up and running and an evaluation is in progress to monitor their work. The Initiative is set to enter its second phase of development with an additional amount of £.6m to come on stream in the second half of 2001 to support eight new pilot projects. This initiative has been earmarked for an investment of £35m over the life of The National Development Plan. While the focus of the initiative is targeted at the most disadvantaged and is a welcome development, **AONTAS will continue to campaign for a comprehensive service which meets the needs of adult learners across the spectrum**. Initial reports from the pilot projects highlight the need for the development of integrated and learner friendly strategies to reach the most disadvantaged adults. Community-based education which has a proven record in reaching such learners can play a much greater role in the delivery of such services. The development therefore of partnerships between community education groups and statutory providers, which provide for equality of access are of the utmost importance as the service develops.

COMMUNITY EDUCATION

The recognition of **Community Education** as a key player in adult education and lifelong learning, in particular the acknowledgment of its role in attracting adult learners who are hardest to reach, was a major breakthrough. The invisibility of this important and vibrant sector meant years of under-funding and fragmentation. The White Paper recommends that 10% of the annual increase provided under Back to Education Initiative will be allocated on an ongoing basis exclusively for the development of Community Education ensuring at least £20m extra investment over the years of the National Development Plan in addition to the £1m base provision allocated through the VEC Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme (ALCES). The commitment of £20m will result in an additional £3.3m(approximate) plus the current £1m giving an approximate total of £4.3m for community education per annum over the life of the plan.

Given that there are nearly 1000 daytime education women's groups alone in the country as well as men's networks and other groups which cater to the needs of

anything from 30,000 to 100,000 participants, the level of funding for this sector is far too low to allow it to develop properly. Local groups are now also increasingly being faced with the challenge of integration of new ethnic groups and cultures into their communities. Such challenges cannot be faced without appropriate planning and resources. **AONTAS calls on the Government to provide for 10% of the BTEI budget, amounting to £100m over the life of the National Development Plan as opposed to the recommended 10% of the increase which amounts to only £20m** to support the community education sector. The 2001 budget has allocated funding for the recruitment of 35 Community Education Facilitators who will be employed by the local VECs in the autumn of this year. Their role will be crucial in supporting the development of community education and ensuring smooth linkages between community and mainstream further and adult education.

ACCREDITATION

One of the main concerns in relation to accreditation will be the establishment of progression routes which will provide access to a range of mainstream opportunities for adults who return to education through the community education route. The establishment of the **National Qualification Authority of Ireland** in April 2001 will have a key role to play in this regard. AONTAS as a member of the Community and Voluntary Accreditation Forum (CVAF) lobbied strongly for representation of the community education sector on NQAI and was successful in this objective. Nomination to this seat was processed through the Community Pillar, an issue which will be addressed under representation, and NALA, as a member of the Community Platform currently represents this sector. The challenge for NALA will be how to bring the accreditation needs and issues of the whole sector into the remit of the NQAI. The establishment of linkages with the broader community education sector will therefore be essential to its work on the Authority.

The Further Education and Training Awards Council (**FETAC**) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (**HETAC**) have just been established and, once more, in the case of FETAC, the Department of Education and Science has chosen to use the Community Pillar as the vehicle for representing the voice of learners engaged in further education and training programmes. This poses a problem as to how the broad range of adult education interests are to be heard. This issue will be addressed by AONTAS in a political context through negotiation with the relevant Government Departments. It is vital that progression routes are established between the formal and non-formal sectors of adult education so that adult learners, regardless of their starting point, have the opportunity to achieve qualifications up to the highest level and within flexible systems including systems designed to accredit prior and experiential learning.

CAPITAL EXPENDITURE

Of major concern to adult education providers is the lack of suitable premises and other technical equipment and ancillary services needed for the provision of an adequate service. In a survey conducted by AONTAS in 1991 among 92 locally-based education groups, the findings showed that the majority of local groups carried out their work in a variety of settings ranging from portokabins to parish halls, with 15%

using private homes. Only 21% were hosted in schools and even then they usually had access to spaces which were unsuitable and ill-equipped. A review of the research in 1996 showed that there were no significant changes in the situation. Recent research conducted by the National Adult Literacy Agency among 71 Literacy Schemes showed that one third of respondents had problems with room shortages, lack of specialist rooms and crowded and cramped conditions. They also reported poor facilities and resources and high levels of dissatisfaction with the conditions of their learning environments. The expansion of the adult education service depends upon the provision of access to space, equipment, caretaking and ancillary services as a matter of course. The White Paper recommended that **the Government would provide a specific capital allocation for the Further Education sector increasing on a phased basis up to £10m per annum**. AONTAS calls on the Government to act upon this recommendation in the context of the next budget.

STRUCTURES

While the developments which are already in train are most welcome, feedback from those involved at a local level suggests that the extra investment in adult education will lead to further fragmentation unless it is co-ordinated in a coherent manner. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the issue of structures is addressed as a matter of urgency. At a recent Conference in Kildare organised by the Adult Education Organiser's Association an example was cited of a particular area where some eleven different agencies were addressing the needs of the same target groups. This is not a new problem. **Local structures need to be immediately put in place so that a strategic plan for the development and delivery of an integrated adult education programme can be implemented.**

AONTAS is calling on the Government as a matter of priority for the immediate establishment of the National Adult Learning Council (NALC) and its concomitant technical support units. For many years the key stakeholders in adult education have called for the co-ordination of policy and practice in adult education. The ad hoc pattern of growth in the sector has plagued its development resulting in fragmentation, lack of partnership structures, territorialism and waste of precious resources. If the Government continues its investment plans without the establishment of national and local structures it is in danger of putting the cart before the horse and allowing further fragmentation and unplanned growth. AONTAS's priority for the coming year will be the establishment of National Adult Learning Council and the development of the Local Adult Learning Boards.

REPRESENTATION

The implementation of the recommended structures raises the thorny issue of representation. The proposed structures comprise a broad range of stakeholders including AONTAS itself. Of particular concern to AONTAS is the proposal that nominations for the four community and voluntary seats on the local adult education boards be processed through the community and voluntary pillar. It not clear whether this refers to the Community and Voluntary Pillar, which operates at national level or not. The Community Pillar which consists of eight groups was brought together in

the context of the need for a representative structure and negotiating voice for the sector in the discussions that led up to Partnership 2000 and the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness. It has been used as a mechanism for addressing issues of poverty and disadvantage at national partnership level. While this is a valid and legitimate strategy and one which has made great headway on many important issues, it is not inclusive of all areas of civil society and in particular adult and community education. If the Government intends to use the Community and Voluntary Pillar as a mechanism for representation at local level AONTAS would strongly oppose this on the grounds that the Pillar does not include a comprehensive range of interests in the area of adult and community education, nor does it have not have mechanisms at a local level to ensure representation of the sector. Already at a national level, the practice by some Government departments of using the Pillar as a convenient mechanism for nomination to national bodies has caused concern.

AONTAS supports the development of community fora and the creation of networks at local level, which would be more transparent and democratic mechanisms for nominations to the Local Adult Learning Boards. Again the Community Education Facilitators will have a key role to play in this regard. In particular AONTAS supports the claim for representation of Women's Networks, which were, and still are to the forefront in the development of community-based education and which have a long track record of involvement in this area. AONTAS has recently compiled a Directory of Women's Networks which shows that these groups already perform a representative function across a wide range of agencies at a local and regional level. The AONTAS **STANCE** Programme (Strategies to Advance Networks Collective Empowerment) will be supporting the Networks over the next three years to develop their capacity to influence policy at local, regional and national level. The Programme, which is jointly funded by the DES and the DSFCA also aims to facilitate the groups in developing an infrastructure which will support their work.

HIGHER EDUCATION

With regard to **Higher Education** one of major disappointments for AONTAS was the Government's reluctance to abolish fees for part-time adult learners. Adult learners are a good investment, as they tend to be highly motivated and have been shown to have high rates of course completion. While AONTAS welcomes the broadening of the categories for inclusion of specific target groups on first-degree, diploma, certificate and access courses, the issue of financial support for adults who work in low-paid jobs is a major concern. Such workers are most at risk in the event of a downturn in the economy, yet they are now a group which have least access to education and training. With regard to the proposed supports for adults who are now eligible under the BTEI, these recommendations have not yet been implemented nor has the allocation of the support fund for mature students been put in place. **AONTAS urges the Government to publish the reports of the Action Group on Access to Higher Education for the Disadvantaged and the Taskforce for Lifelong Learning and to act on their recommendations.**

PROFESSIONALISATION

Of concern to AONTAS members during the consultation process was the issue of professionalisation of the Adult Education Sector. Apart from the developments which have been implemented for the professional training of adult literacy workers, no progress has been made on general staff development, in particular the development of qualifications for adult educators. **The setting up of the Inter Agency Working Group (IAWG) and the Forum for Practitioners are dependent on the establishment of the National Adult Learning Council, hence another argument for its immediate action in this regard.** Already the issue of qualifications is emerging as one of concern to the embryonic adult educational guidance service and will almost certainly be of concern across a range of roles within the adult education service.

CONCLUSION

There are many other issues which will need to be addressed as the adult education services develops but AONTAS has prioritised those of immediate concern. AONTAS recently adopted its second Strategic Plan at its Annual General Meeting on May 30th 2001. The main thrust of this plan is the implementation of the recommendations of the White Paper. Next year, if not sooner, we will see a general election. Before the last election AONTAS campaigned with its sister organisation NALA for a political commitment to adult education. The ensuing developments, including the appointment of the Minister of State at the Department of Education & Science, Mr. Willie O'Dea, and the subsequent publication of the Green and White Papers were critical in making the progress which has been made over the past three years. **It is vital that adult education does not lose this ground.** The pre-election campaign, which will be launched by AONTAS on September 10th 2001, will lobby strongly for the implementation of structures and for continued realistic investment in the adult education sector. AONTAS will, through its regional meetings support its membership to campaign at a local level in the run up to the election. The words have been written in the White Paper and read by the stakeholders in the adult education sector; now it is time for action.

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