

Submission from AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

Towards the development of a new National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education

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About AONTAS

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation, a membership organisation which includes over 500 members nationwide. AONTAS believes in the right of every adult to access learning at any time during their lives. AONTAS promotes adult and lifelong learning, provides an information referral service for adults who wish to return to education, and advocates on behalf of adult learners. The organisation receives funding from the Department of Education and Skills through SOLAS (the Further Education and Training Authority).

Over the past number of years AONTAS has engaged with a significant reform agenda within the further education and training sector, focusing particularly on the impact on the delivery of adult and community education. Throughout the reform process and development of legislation AONTAS has advocated strongly for adult learners to be at the heart of the newly reconfigured further education and training services. AONTAS has also made a strong case for the social dimension of education to be recognised and played a proactive role in the development of the new Further Education and Training Strategy which was published in May 2014. In October 2013, Berni Brady Director of AONTAS was appointed to the Board of SOLAS, the new Further Education and Training Authority.

The Further Education and Training Strategy identifies AONTAS as a lead organisation in the development of a National Adult Learners Forum, which will provide valuable feedback from adult learners as the strategy is implemented. We regularly engage with adults seeking to return to education and training through our Information Referral Service, document the nature of their queries and analyse the emerging trends, particularly those which relate to the challenges and barriers experienced by adult learners.

AONTAS is a member of the Advisory Committee for the HEA National Access Policy Office. AONTAS Director Berni Brady is also a member of the Governing Board for the University of Limerick.

Introduction to the submission

AONTAS welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the development of a new National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education. AONTAS recognises the value of third level education in the context of lifelong learning. In this submission we are primarily focused on participation rates in relation to full and part time mature student entrants. We acknowledge the progress that has been made, particularly given the difficult economic circumstances over the past number of years which have affected not only participation levels, but also the capacity of the HEIs to respond to a changing set of learner needs.

Our submission is developed based on a strong understanding of the challenges and barriers which adults tell us still persist in accessing third level education. These statistics are further strengthened by new data at national level through the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, SOLAS as well as the ESRI who provided research to support the FET strategy. At international level, the publication of the PIAAC¹ research co-ordinated by the OECD and conducted by the CSO in Ireland provides

¹ <http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/education/2012/piaac2012.pdf>

important data relating to the skills levels of adults in Ireland based on age, gender and socio-economic status.

We include feedback on the goals presented within the consultation paper, and make recommendations for actions which might support the achievement of these goals.

As a membership NGO AONTAS has strong connections across the post-secondary education sector and has access to a number of examples of best practice in different settings which facilitate high levels of access and retention in third level. These are referenced within the submission.

Developments since the National Access Plan 2008 – 2013

A number of significant changes have been introduced since the last Access Plan which had an impact on mature student participation. In line with other departments, Education and Skills has been subject to a series of expenditure cuts, with the third level sector taking a significant proportion of the cuts. Budget 2013 reduced the allocation to Higher Education Institutions by €25 billion. From a learners perspective the cost of third level education has continued to rise, with the student contribution fee on the increase each year. Budget 2013 signalled that the student contribution, at €2,500 for the 2013/14 academic year will rise by a further €250 in each of the 2014/15 and 2015/16 academic years, to a maximum of €3,000.² Some mature students may be eligible for the student grant, however Budget 2011³ changed the qualifying criteria. Budget 2013 also saw a 3% reduction in the income threshold for entitlement to student grants⁴, although no further changes were made in Budget 2014. Data from the University of Limerick shows the number of mature students who applied to the Student Assistance Fund has increased in the current academic year to 23% from 16% in the previous year.

The rapid increase in unemployment which resulted from the downturn in the economy prompted a range of new initiatives offering part time, flexible education opportunities for adults seeking to upskill and reskill in emerging employment areas. These include Springboard, MOMENTUM and JobBridge (the National Internship Scheme). In January 2014 the Irish Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan was announced which promised to offer anyone under the age of 25 access to education, training or employment within four months of their becoming unemployed. In Ireland the Youth Guarantee is being piloted in Ballymun with a view to being implemented nationwide at a later date.

In 2012 'Pathways to work' signalled wide ranging reform across the delivery of social protection services and supports, and ushered in changes affecting the BTEA (Back to Education Allowance) a mechanism which allows adults in receipt of a social welfare payment to maintain their social welfare payment while they pursue either a second or third level education option. Changes in Budget 2010 meant that adults in receipt of the BTEA were deemed no longer eligible for the student grant. The Cost of Education Allowance payable to BTEA claimants, which in 2008 amounted to €500 was discontinued from January 1st 2013. Further changes to the BTEA took effect in June

² <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Financial-Reports-List/Budget-2014-Main-Features.pdf>

³ http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2010-Press-Releases/pr_budget_education_2011.pdf

⁴ <http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2013-Press-Releases/PR13-10-15.html>

2014. All new BTEA claims must now be recommended and approved by a DSP Case Officer in advance of starting a course. The Department of Social Protection is also identifying contractors for the new JobPath initiative⁵. Individuals under the age of 61 who are long term unemployed will be referred to JobPath, where the main focus is progressing them into employment. A stronger referral aspect also applies to JobPath, where a personal advisor will agree education and training with an individual.

In May 2014 SOLAS, the new Further Training and Education Authority launched the first ever Further Education and Training Strategy. The strategy is the culmination of an extensive period of consultation with stakeholders across the further education and training sector, and proposes five high level goals for FET over the next five years.

The range of new educational choices available to adults, and the increasing cost of third level education and reduction in financial supports have an impact on participation rates. At the same time, the increasing role of formal referral mechanisms for people who are unemployed may restrict individual choice.

Profile of adult learners

The publication of Monitoring Irelands Skills Supply⁶ by SOLAS and the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs in September 2014 indicates a general increase in third level qualifications across the country. Ireland has an above average share of third level graduates (41.5% compared to a 28% average across the EU.) However, there is a strong age dimension to the data – while 50% of 25-29 year olds in Ireland have a third level qualification, 47% of 60-64 year olds have attained at most a Junior Cert.

A recent analysis of callers to AONTAS Information Referral Service⁷ also provides an insight into the needs of adults returning to education. 18% of callers stated that they had at most a Junior Cert qualification. 34% were in employment while 37% were unemployed.

The number of people who are unemployed continues to reduce gradually. In August 2014 the number of people signing on the Live Register was 11.2%.⁸ However, over half of those claimants are long term unemployed. Almost 60% of claimants are male.

The age profile of students, length of time spent outside of the formal education system and employment are important factors which need to be considered by HEIs in increasing the participation levels of mature students.

The barriers to adult learning

While there has been some progress in relation to access, a number of practical barriers remain which prevent adults from accessing third level education. 'Education at a Glance', published by the

⁵ <http://www.inou.ie/download/pdf/20140821105619.pdf>

⁶ http://www.skillsireland.ie/media/15082014-Monitoring_Ireland's_Skills_Supply_%202014-Publication.pdf

⁷ <http://www.aontas.com/newsandevents/latestnews/2014/09/04/demand-for-learning-continues-to-grow-amongst-iris/>

⁸ <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/lr/liveregisteraugust2014/#.VBv9xfldU8w>

OECD in September 2014⁹, published findings on the ‘reasons given for not engaging in more/any learning activity by participation status in formal and/or non formal education activities’ across the OECD countries. In Ireland, the most popular reasons cited by both participants and non participants in education included ‘education or training was too expensive/I could not afford it’ and ‘I did not have time because of childcare and family responsibilities’.

In August 2014, an analysis of callers to AONTAS Freephone Helpline¹⁰ indicated that ‘lack of information’ and ‘lack of financial support’ constituted the biggest barriers for adults returning to education. Particular barriers may exist depending on the nature of disadvantage – for example women may have practical needs such as accessible affordable childcare while within the Travelling Community the barriers may be more complex and cultural. Learners with disabilities may face particular barriers depending on the nature of their disability – e.g. the accessibility of venues, or the availability of learning supports. Where an adult experiences multiple disadvantage the combination of barriers may be too great to overcome.

We also note that students from an ethnic or minority background are not named as a target group within the consultation paper. Ireland has a growing student population with diverse backgrounds who experience particular barriers in accessing education – these may include the need for English language supports, lack of knowledge about the Irish education system, lack of qualifications or recognition of qualifications, and excessive fee structures.

AONTAS also facilitated a focus group session on behalf of the HEA in May 2013. At the meeting, adults with experience of learning at third level identified the challenges they outlined, ranging from the lack of learning supports, lack of information, financial barriers and the need for more flexible models of delivery.

Adult learners are not a homogenous group and a ‘universal design approach’ may not therefore be practical at national and local level or deliver on the targets proposed. Changes in employment status (including unemployment), access to financial resources, transport, family and caring responsibilities are just some of the diverse challenges which learners can expect to encounter depending on how their lives develop. These factors are more likely to emerge in the context of a longer term commitment at third level such as a degree. Feedback to AONTAS from adult learners from a variety of educational settings indicates the need for a system which is highly flexible and which can respond to the diverse needs of adults as they emerge.

The impact of the current third level funding arrangements on adults has already been documented by AONTAS, particularly in relation to part time fees. While an adult may qualify for the Free Fees Initiative and pursue a full time degree with support from the state, he/she can expect to pay full fees to do the same degree on a part time basis.¹¹ Given that adults with family or work commitments may prefer to pursue a degree part time, the cost presents a significant challenge.

⁹ Available from <http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm>

¹⁰ <http://www.aontas.com/newsandevents/latestnews/2014/09/04/demand-for-learning-continues-to-grow-amongst-iris/>

¹¹ <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/part-time-fees-2007/>

Response to the Goals and High Level Objectives

AONTAS broadly welcomes the goals identified within the consultation paper. Specific comments on each goal are included below.

Goal 1: Promoting access to higher education by underrepresented groups

AONTAS welcomes the commitment to promote access to third level education for disadvantaged groups. The benefits of third level qualifications range from personal through to economic, and have been well documented in research, notably the recent PIAAC study. PIAAC shows that the longer an individual stays in the education system, the higher the skills level achieved by that individual. Individuals with better skills have greater access to professional occupations and earn higher incomes. PIAAC and other studies including one conducted by AONTAS¹² have documented some of the wider benefits of learning – e.g. health improvements, increased levels of voluntary activity amongst others. PIAAC also looks at the influence of parental education attainment – where *the average literacy mean score for adults aged 16-24 with at least one parent attaining tertiary education (283) is significantly higher than both those with at least one parent attaining secondary or post-secondary, non-tertiary education (269) and those where neither parent attained upper secondary education.*¹³ Investment in the educational levels of parents today may generate a significant impact on the future educational levels of their children.

Incentivising best practice in access

We support proposals to engage with relevant stakeholders in identifying actions which promote participation from underrepresented groups (e.g. Travellers), which build on the success of pilot initiatives and which begin to practically address the challenges we know faced by learners who do not take up third level education. We have access to a number of case studies which highlight best practice in individual HEIs, and we believe that it is time to move forward and implement these examples in a more strategic way, either on a regional or national basis.

AONTAS co-ordinates the annual STAR Awards, a nationwide initiative which showcases examples of best practice in the adult learning sector. Examples drawn from the third level sector include ‘DCU in the Community’¹⁴ an initiative which promotes access to third level education in an area experiencing high educational disadvantage. Supports such as study skills, mentoring and access to guidance have helped adults in the area to take up and complete third level education opportunities. The ALBA (Adult Learning BA) pioneered by All Hallows College has also seen over 200 adults gain a third level qualification through a modular, innovative, highly flexible programme which is also offered at a lower cost. ALBA has been particularly successful in engaging learners who would have struggled with a more traditional, third level experience. There is a need to gather data on the effectiveness and outcomes of initiatives across both the higher and further education sectors to identify good practice and to learn what interventions work best for what target groups. Data and outcomes generated from the implementation of initiatives at regional and national level.

¹² ‘More than just a Course’ (AONTAS, 2012) available from

http://www.aontas.com/download/pdf/community_education_more_than_just_a_course.pdf

¹³ PIAAC Study P. 50

¹⁴ <http://www.dcu.ie/community/DCUcommunity/welcome.shtml>

It is our view that subjecting HEIs to financial penalties in the event that they do not reach the targets is a regressive step and one which will not benefit either the state or the learner. Firstly, mature student participation rates are not only influenced by the HEIs, they are also subject to changes in the broader policy environment, some of which have been identified earlier in this submission. Factors in the external environment which may influence mature student participation include personal income levels, access to childcare services and qualifying criteria for social welfare entitlements. The introduction of new measures such as Springboard, the Youth Guarantee, JobBridge and ongoing changes to the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) offer additional choices to learners and may reduce the numbers of adults opting for a traditional third level degree. These factors are beyond the remit of individual HEIs.

The University of Limerick, for example has developed a proactive response to increasing participation from mature students. The model of supporting mature students includes the following elements:

1. Pre entry activities (eg outreach, information, open evenings, pre course guidance)
2. Flexible entry routes (Access Certificate, Mature student assessment)
3. First year student experience (Welcome programme, peer mentoring and support)
4. Supporting students through programme of study (Referral to student assistance fund, access to career advisor).

Despite this model of best practice, data from the University already shows a decrease of 4% in participation rates from the 2012/13 to the 2013/14 academic year. Current mature student participation rates stand at 8.5%.

The University notes the provisional targets set by the HEA as a real challenge, given the changes in the Back to Education Allowance, the declining levels of mature student income, the lack of availability of guidance¹⁵ along with ‘the continued experience of entry and participation rates for mature students’.

AONTAS urges the HEA to consider alternative approaches to financial penalties. For example, the University of Limerick is proposing that the age category for mature students is lowered to 21, similar to the UK. The lowering of the age could provide greater scope for HEIs in meeting the proposed targets.

AONTAS also proposes a *system of incentives* where HEIs benefit from introducing innovative, sustainable and long term approaches to engaging and retaining students from underrepresented groups. Incentives could include financial, as well as recognition through publicity and sharing of best practice. This would benefit both individual learners and the state.

¹⁵ Closure of the Downtown Guidance Service

Engagement with the community education sector

We welcome the inclusion of the community education sector as a key stakeholder in increasing access by underrepresented groups. AONTAS estimates that the community education sector in Ireland supports approximately 30,000 people each year to avail of some form of education, accredited as well as non-formal. The community education sector has developed particular expertise and skills in relation to breaking down the barriers for learners experiencing disadvantage, helping them to access education and supporting their progression through the qualifications framework. Even at initial qualifications levels (1-3) community education programmes have been effective at building confidence and self-esteem for learners which is vital to helping them progress to the next stage. In February 2013 AONTAS organised an event 'Community Education, a Strategy for Success'¹⁶ where learners from a community education setting communicated what made that experience so effective in helping them to progress into higher education.

'For me, the outreach programme was essential. I couldn't have gone straight back to third level education and the support from the centre continued even when I moved on.'
(Community Education Learner).

'I completed a few taster courses to help me decide which course to take on, I am now doing a course that I love and I plan to apply for my Masters next year.' (Community Education Learner).

AONTAS currently supports the Community Education Network, which includes over 100 community education groups throughout the country. The Network acts as an important platform and presents opportunities to engage with community education in a structured way. Individual organisations within the network can also offer examples of new and stronger approaches to reaching out to disadvantaged communities.

Funding and finance

A number of financial policies impact on the participation rates of mature students, particularly those from underrepresented groups. These include the Back to Education Allowance, fees for part time students, and the Student Assistance Fund. Changes to institutional funding arrangements for individual HEIs also have an impact on mature student participation as they can affect the delivery of services such as guidance or childcare. AONTAS calls for a more co-ordinated approach in the development and changes to policies which have an impact on underrepresented groups participation in both further and higher education, and which would ensure better outcomes for them.

Regarding the ongoing issue of fees, AONTAS urges all stakeholders to address the inequity which currently applies to part time learners within the third level system.

AONTAS welcomes the commitment of the HEA to reviewing and evaluating funding initiatives such as the Fund for Students with Disabilities and the Student Assistance Fund, to ensure that they

¹⁶ <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/community-education-a-strategy-for-success-lobby-for-learning-report-2013/>

support the wider goal of access. Within the scope of any review, AONTAS asks that learners themselves be consulted about the effectiveness of such initiatives.

Research and data on how the current system of financial supports enables or prevents adults in accessing and completing a third level qualification would also assist in the reform of supports administered by other stakeholders. The HEA should engage with the Department of Social Protection to ensure that reforms do not create additional obstacles for adults experiencing disadvantage who wish to return to education.

The impact of reform in Social Protection supports

The Back to Education Allowance has been subject to a series of changes since it was introduced as the 'Third Level Allowance Scheme' in 1996. BTEA is a mechanism which supports eligible adults to retain their social welfare payment while they return to education either at second or third level. Approximately 25,000 people each year avail of the BTEA. A high level review paper released by the Department of Social Protection in 2013 indicated that expenditure on BTEA had increased threefold between 2006 and 2012.¹⁷ In June 2013 a Joint Committee on Public Service Oversight and Petitions heard that *'at the end of April 2013 there were 27,830 people engaged with BTEA, 91% of whom originated from unemployment payments.'*¹⁸ At the time of writing BTEA is under review and the ESRI has been engaged by the Department to evaluate its effectiveness.

Recent changes to BTEA have already resulted in a stronger role for DSP case officers in the application process. While the reforms are being introduced to ensure best use of resources, AONTAS also cautions that Case Officers must be supported with regular CPD so that they can assist potential applicants to make an informed choice about their options. Formal referral systems between DSP and the Adult Education Guidance Service should be established to support this process. Similar arrangements should apply to JobPath providers. Clear information on rights and entitlements should also be made available to adults considering their options from the outset.

To summarise, key activities which AONTAS believes will contribute towards greater levels of mature student participation within Goal 1 include the following:

- Provide greater levels of information about higher education options, entry criteria and who to contact
- Access to quality adult guidance services at point of entry and during the course
- Strengthen connections with community education providers and stakeholders within the broader community sector (the existing Access Advisory Group mechanism provides an example of how this could work in practice)
- Incentivise HEIs to develop innovation and best practice in engaging disadvantaged learners.
- Conduct research and produce data on the impact of financial supports in access and participation in HE
- The need for a national policy approach which links the areas of social protection, with employment, student and institutional funding to produce better outcomes for learners.

¹⁷ <https://www.welfare.ie/en/pressoffice/pdf/High%20Level%20Issues%20Paper%20-%20Employment%20Support%20Schemes.pdf>

¹⁸ Available from www.oireachtas.ie/parliament/.../3.-DSP-opening-Statement-final.doc

Goal 2: To put in place coherent pathways from 2nd level, further education and other routes of access

AONTAS believes strongly that strengthened connections between the further education sector and the third level sector can provide alternative routes for students from disadvantaged communities who may not have previously considered a third level education. The establishment of SOLAS and the new Further Education and Training Strategy¹⁹ provides a timely opportunity to strengthen the links between FET and HE. Data from QQI in June 2013²⁰ shows that there were just under 15,800 QQI-FETAC applicants to the Central Admissions Office (CAO) (up from c. 15,300 in 2012), representing one-fifth of all CAO applicants. While a key objective of the FET strategy is to build a strong identity for FET as a quality, alternative education option for learners, FET can also play a valuable role in supporting the progression of learners into higher education. For learners who encounter difficulties with the formal education system, or who grow up without exposure to third level education, FET may be their first choice, and a first step back into education. *'I needed the time to try out courses and test my own abilities before I could take on something more serious'* said one learner who participated in an AONTAS roundtable event.

Regarding the 10% target rate, AONTAS is disappointed with the low levels of progression from the FET sector to date and consequently the low target rate. Goal 2 raises two critical issues which need to be addressed, these are; the need to raise awareness about possible pathways from further to higher education, secondly the need to expand RPL across the system.

Raising awareness and providing quality information

For many years adult learners have stated that finding the right information about their learning options is a real challenge. The variety of programmes and initiatives on offer, the range of entitlements and differing qualifying criteria can be overwhelming for many learners. While most information is available online, a learner may have to search through a number of websites and agencies in order to find the latest, updated quality information. Information about higher education including deadlines, entry criteria and application processes should be streamlined, clear and accessible.

While information may assist learners in making a decision about what course is right for them, potential learners in disadvantaged communities also need to be encouraged to pursue learning at third level. HEA has already mapped out the geographic nature of disadvantage in Dublin and the links with third level participation. This suggests a cultural or class dimension to third level participation, as well as the wider challenge of educational disadvantage which persists in particular communities. Stronger links or even formal partnerships between HEIs and the community education sector can help address this issue. For example, in Jobstown, an Cosán, a community education centre is currently delivering a third level qualification in community and leadership studies accredited by IT Carlow.

Approaches which increase participation can include anything from open days, induction sessions and taster lectures, of which there are multiple examples. AONTAS and other organisations have developed models of promotion such as Learner Ambassadors where learners are encouraged to act

¹⁹ <http://www.solas.ie/docs/FETStrategy2014-2019.pdf>

²⁰ http://www.fetac.ie/fetac/documents/QQI_FETAC_Awards_Report_2013.pdf).

as role models within their communities; these have been extremely effective as has the use of learner stories and videos in social media campaigns²¹. The potential of social media to target learners using demographic and geographic data presents substantial opportunities to reach out to potential learners based on age, gender and where they live.

The expansion of RPL

We welcome the commitment to expand provision of RPL within the third level sector in line with the EU Council Recommendation²² on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, as well as new QQI policies focusing on RPL. RPL is an important part of the infrastructure which will enable learners to progress from further education to the appropriate stage of their third level education. RPL is a practical response to the changing needs of adult learners, who may already have substantial experience of their chosen subject. The FET strategy also includes a commitment to a national strategy for RPL and this will present opportunities for greater connections across the sector.

The development of the standing of FET in providing quality education and training for learners should also encourage HEIs about the benefits of greater engagement with the FE sector. Experience of FE can help build a learners confidence and skills, particularly for those who have been out of the formal education system for some time.

In summary, under Goal 2 the priority actions include:

- HEA should facilitate formal, stronger connections between HE and FET, so that learners who wish to progress are supported to do so. This should include the expansion of RPL
- HEIs should engage with the community sector in raising awareness and providing information about opportunities at third level
- HEIs should be supported to incentivise participation through a range of awareness raising activities, and should be encouraged to share experience of successful approaches.

Goal 3: To increase progression rates by underrepresented groups through targeted supports for students at risk of non-completion

AONTAS cautions that in developing targets for underrepresented groups, HEIs must also be mindful of supporting learners not only to access, but to stay in and complete the course undertaken. McCoy's research (2010)²³ on behalf of the HEA indicates that 'prior educational attainment is the strongest predictor of successful progression through HE'. She continues: 'minimising students' non-completion of courses is an important part of ensuring that the resources available to the higher education sector are utilised with maximum efficiency'.

²¹ The OneStepUp.ie campaign was promoted extensively through social media from May – September 2014.

²² Recommendation number(2012/C398/01) EU COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 20 December 2012

²³ http://www.hea.ie/sites/default/files/study_of_progression_in_irish_higher_education_2010.pdf

A second similar study²⁴ published by the HEA in July 2014 further confirms the role of prior educational attainment in progressing through third level. The study found that within the mature student population ‘the non-progression rate at level 8 in universities is 13% compared to 8% for those under 23.’ This statistic is an increasing cause for concern, suggesting that even when some adults make the decision to return to education, for a variety of reasons they are unable to complete the course. Learners who come from a disadvantaged background may not have fared well in the formal education system and they may lack confidence about their ability to re-engage particularly at third level. This makes them particularly vulnerable to ‘dropping out.’

AONTAS believes that mature students must be supported to make choices about the course that is right for them. This is a key determinant in whether they will stay the course or not. Access to quality guidance services, in advance of and during the course will enhance the mature student experience and provide support, thus increasing retention. The example of practice from UL referenced earlier in this submission highlights possible approaches.

A further factor in retention is the role played by teachers and the necessity for quality teacher training. AONTAS engagement with learners to date indicates that tutors in adult learner settings play a central role in shaping a positive learning experience and supporting learners to stay with the course. Continuous professional development which helps teachers develop their skills and which helps create greater awareness of both the barriers and needs of disadvantaged learners would help increase both access and retention at third level. The changing profile of learners brings new sets of challenges – from bigger class sizes, to individual language needs. While continuous professional development is available and encouraged in some of the institutions (e.g. IT Carlow, Griffith College), it is still not standard practice across the sector. This is particularly important given the changing age profile of learners. In a recent focus group meeting which AONTAS facilitated on behalf of the HEA, learners highlighted the need for support in study skills and academic writing, particularly given long periods of time out of the formal education system.

In summary, key points under Goal 3 include:

- Raising awareness about the role of Guidance
- Provide ongoing access to study supports (eg academic writing, study skills)
- Provide CPD opportunities for lecturers and staff in third level.

Goal 4 – To support evidence-based policy formulation

AONTAS welcomes the proposals for more robust approaches to data gathering with a view to providing richer insights into participation levels.

The estimated breakdown of participation rates by both county and within Dublin highlight the potential to understand how disadvantage is experienced by particular geographic communities and to provide interventions at community level. Furthermore, the acknowledged success of early

²⁴http://www.heai.ie/sites/default/files/a_study_of_progression_in_irish_higher_education_institutions_2010-11-2011-12_0.pdf

childhood interventions would suggest that a strategic approach to enhancing access should start at a much earlier stage.

While a number of data sets are already available (e.g. the QNHS and PIAAC) the samples are still too small to predict particular patterns of participation at community level. There are opportunities within the Census data to examine educational levels in particular communities over time and profile whether changes have occurred over a given period.

With regards to the barriers to learning, it is AONTAS view that there is a wealth of data already generated about the challenges that individuals experience in accessing learning. How these challenges overlap and play out at community level provides a more complex picture of access, and one that has more significant implications for the planning of interventions and services across a range of Departments. In this context the proposals to work by regional clusters and develop pathways to higher education would be welcome. Examples of best practice in the community education sector could inform this approach. An Cosán, a community education centre in Jobstown, Tallaght, an area which experiences high levels of educational disadvantage organises a third level degree in Community Leadership skills accredited by IT Carlow. This programme has been particularly successful in terms of access, but has also managed high retention rates of almost 100%. This is largely due to a bespoke combination of supports which recognise the barriers faced by participants, which include childcare, mentoring and peer support and financial support. The course is delivered in a community setting with high levels of community support. An Cosán has also recently launched a range of educational opportunities online.

In 2015 the OECD will make the 'Education and Skills Online' assessment tool publicly available. This assessment tool was originally used by the CSO as part of the PIAAC research study. The tool will be available for use by educational institutions, companies, workplaces and individuals to assess their own skills levels.

AONTAS is happy to facilitate appropriate focus groups with mature students as the plan is implemented and in the context of a review in 2016.

Conclusion

AONTAS welcomes the opportunity for discussion on widening participation to higher education. In particular we welcome the more robust and strategic approach to data gathering, and the commitment to greater engagement with both the further education and training sector and the community education sector. In relation to the targets proposed we would encourage the HEA to be mindful of the external policy environment and how it affects participation. The experience of individual HEIs, e.g. the University of Limerick indicates that even where interventions are made, reaching existing targets still presents a significant challenge. We encourage the HEA to consider alternative options to penalising HEIs who cannot reach the designated targets.

While we acknowledge continual need for evidence and data, we also believe that there already exists a wealth of information, in particular relating to the barriers which adults continue to face in their efforts to access higher education. In addition to those already mentioned, adults who return to higher education as mature students often cannot engage with campus life in the same way as traditional graduate students. Given family and work commitments, the experience of being a

mature student can be challenging and sometimes isolated. This requires greater levels of support throughout the learning experience.

We strongly believe that access policies should be accompanied by interventions at both national level as well as at the individual HEI level, to ensure that adults who make the decision to return to third level education are supported to stay with their chosen course. The impact of a range of factors outlined in this submission highlights the need for a more strategic and co-ordinated approach at national level in terms of creating a policy environment which supports learners from disadvantaged groups and communities to access and complete higher education. The commitment to review progress in 2016 presents an opportunity to review and assess progress on an ongoing basis.

AONTAS is committed to ensuring that the experience of adult learners is heard in the development of accessing a variety of learning options across the post-secondary education sector. We welcome the opportunity in facilitating the HEA to engage with learners on an ongoing basis, with a view to increasing participation.

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