



EUROPEAN
ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION
OF ADULTS

Country Report on Adult Education in IRELAND

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Introduction

This Report covers the situation of Adult Education and Lifelong Learning in Ireland. It is divided into two sections. The section *Policy and Politics* gives an overview of the key policy currently in force, and also outlines the main legislation or political situation in the country. *Structure and Providers* gives a more detailed look at the organizational structures, and also outlines the main adult education providers, mainly looking at non-formal and informal learning.

We want to thank our members for their contributions to this reflection on the adult education situation in Ireland as far as possible as of 2010/2011. Inevitably there will be new things emerging within the ever changing situation of adult education, but we believe the majority of the information provided will be relevant and useful for the foreseeable future. However, to keep the resource accurate and up to date we are open to suggestions to improve the texts. If you feel there is something you can add about your country please contact us via email at eaea-info@eaea.org.



Overview

Ireland has a long history of adult education, often also referred to as ‘**adult and community**’ education. This term covers a range of programmes and courses offered by both institutions and adult or community centres. Community and adult education is therefore also often closely connected to the idea of ‘**outreach**’ programmes, which generally take the form of **partnership approaches** to the design of programmes between providers or institutions and community groups. These programmes can vary in content and are designed to reflect different purposes - from access to higher education, leisure, personal development or community development to - in some cases - continuing professional development. Traditionally these qualifications, seen as a form of personal development, did not lead to qualifications which reflected the mainstream education system. Today, however, increasingly the aim is that learners can **integrate their non-formal learning experience** and skills into credit which can lead to formal higher education or vocational training qualifications. [1]

One other main direction of adult education in Ireland is the focus on **adults who exited the traditional education system early**, and how to best re-engage them with the formal education system to increase their qualification level. Included within this system are aspects of further and higher education, continuing education and training, community education and both formal and non formal learning undertaken systematically by adults. [2]

Politics and Law

The main governmental organiser of adult education is the **Department of Education and Skills**. The department is responsible for promoting equity and inclusion, ensuring quality outcomes for lifelong learning; planning for education that is relevant to personal, social, cultural and economic needs; and enhancing the capacity for delivery, policy formulation, research and evaluation. Other related departments include the **Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs** (Gaelic communities), **Department of Social Protection** and the **Department of Enterprise, Trade and Innovation**. [3]

Broadly, lifelong learning has taken a role in many legislation and policy documents, namely: ‘Towards 2016’, the 10-year **Framework Social Partnership Agreement, 2006-2015** (June 2006) and the ‘**National Development Plan**’ (NDP) **2007-2013**, launched in January 2007. Both set out the vision and objectives for Ireland’s socio-economic development and both underline the importance of lifelong learning and set out objectives and action to be taken for the future. The NDP in particular is a high level document which is primarily concerned with promoting regional sustainability and economic frameworks. The document prioritises education as a key component to this, and



makes lifelong learning one of the guiding principles for the policy development in education and training (in accordance with the Lisbon agenda). [4]

Adult education was also the primary focus of an extensive White Paper published in 2000, entitled '**Learning for Life**'. This White Paper outlined the rationale for investing in adult education, and covers the promotion of adult access to further and higher education, the development of the role of the community education sector, enhancing workplace learning, strengthening supporting services such as staff development, national accreditation, guidance and childcare, and the provision of a coherent framework for national and local area-based co-ordination. The recommendations cover issues such as financial support for adult learners (e.g. reducing fees for part time learners who are unemployed), and ensuring good **guidance** is available for adults wishing to re-enter the education system. In addition to this there have also been several important pieces of legislation which have an impact on the delivery of adult education, namely: The Education Act (1998), The National Qualifications Act (1999), National Skills Strategy (2007) and the National Plan for Social Inclusion (2007). [5]

With regards to quality assurance, **all providers of courses accredited** to the Further Education and Training Award Council (FETAC) - after its foundation in 2000 - are required to comply with the FETAC Assurance system as part of the National Qualifications Framework. The NFQ is a system of ten levels, aligned with the European Framework of Qualifications, which incorporates awards made for all kinds of learning wherever it is gained. Separate to this, AONTAS (see 'Structure and Providers') also works in collaboration with women's community education groups to develop a **Quality Assurance Framework for Women's Community Education** specifically. [6]

The **formal education system** in Ireland is somewhat distinctive, and comprises levels, award-types and named-awards. It has **ten levels** spanning from the very initial stages of learning to the most advanced - here considered research at doctoral level. Level 3 covers what is called the **Junior Certificate level**, which is the end of compulsory education (up to 16 years), levels 4 and 5 are included in the Leaving Certificate (between 17 and 19) which will qualify the student to undertake undergraduate university education. Levels 6 to 10 cover the range of higher education from undergraduate through postgraduate and master's levels, up to doctoral research. The State Examinations Commission is responsible for levels 3-5, the Further Education and Training awards council for level 6 and the Higher Education and Training awards council and the Dublin Institute of Technology from between 6-10. Universities are also responsible for levels 7-10 as independent institutions. [7]



Future trends/key concerns/directions

The global financial problems which are still affecting many countries to date (late 2010) are having a significant impact on the situation of adult education provision for Ireland. On the one hand, there is an **increased demand** for adult education, particularly **vocationally driven education**, as there has been a rise in **unemployment**. On the other hand, the problem is made more difficult as government **funding cuts and freezes** or reductions in employment in the public services have made the provision of this education increasingly difficult. At the moment it is difficult to see how many of the key directives from the White paper of 2000 and other reports will be able to be translated into practice (for instance it is expected that more cuts will come in to effect after the December budget of 2010); and therefore to understand the future trends which may emerge as a result.

Structure overview

The governmental structure of the provision of adult education in Ireland is firstly covered in part by the **Department of Education and Science**, which provides for some adult education programmes, such as:

- Post Leaving Certificate courses (Leaving Certificate being the standard formal education qualification usually attained between ages 16-19),
- **The Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme** for the unemployed,
- **Adult literacy** and **community education**; and,
- **Senior Traveller Training Centre** programmes for young and adult Travellers who have left school early (Traveller communities are semi-nomadic communities somewhat akin to Gypsy or Roma communities in other parts of Europe).

In addition to this the **‘Back to Education’** initiative (introduced in the 2002/3 school-year) provides for the increased number and flexibility of part time options across post compulsory formal education so that adults can **return to learning** whilst still meeting existing responsibilities such as work and family. As part of this initiative, there is a supporting financial system with the **‘Back to Education Allowance Scheme’**, to support those financially less stable, such as the unemployed, single parents or people with disabilities undertaking approved second or third level courses . Until September of 2010 learners on this scheme were also entitled to maintenance grants, although this has been now withdrawn as part of the cuts made in response to the current economic situation (see **‘Policy and Politics’**). [8]



Key Providers/Main institutions/Sources for Adult Education

Vocational Education Committees (VECs) provide the majority of Adult Education, including formal Further Education for adults, which is also provided through some secondary level schools. The courses offered often link to other sectors, such as employment, schools, youth and welfare work, and the voluntary sector. Programmes at this level can also be provided through other Government Departments through training agencies, such as FÁS, **Fáilte Ireland and TEAGASC**, and by **community organisations**. **National certification** is provided by the Further Education and Training Awards Council, and courses can be linked to the student gaining the Junior or Leaving Certificates (standard formal education qualifications, see ‘Policy and Politics’ for an overview). [9]

Each VEC employs an **Adult Literacy Organiser** (ALO) to organise Adult Basic Education support in their local area. This service aims to be free and confidential, where adults without basic literacy skills can take courses in an **informal and relaxed** environment either in groups or on a one to one basis. VECs also provide **Post Leaving Certificate** courses in a range of subjects. These courses are offered to school leavers and adults who wish to return to education and aim to prepare students for work by giving them specific skills and training and also act as a stepping-stone to other third level qualifications at universities or other colleges. The entry requirements for a mature student entering a further education course usually include either the standard Leaving Certificate (or an equivalent qualification), or experiential learning. [10]

The system of the adult and community education sector in Ireland has **grown organically** over the past forty years, with some major changes within the past ten years. Therefore, the sector contains a variety of personnel with an equal variety of skills and qualifications. **Specific adult education qualifications are not required** to work in the sector, although qualifications do range from informal training to accredited courses at third level including certificates, diplomas and masters awards in adult education. [11]

‘Non-Formal’ Learning

- Evening Courses / Day Courses are available in a variety of subjects. There are many different providers of these courses, including **secondary schools** or community resources such as **libraries**. These courses offer a number of diverse learning opportunities for adults (from art classes to computers for beginners’ courses) and are concerned with offering opportunities to meet new people and learning for enjoyment as much as learning new skills.



- **Community education groups** are another local source of adult education, they are often self-managed, voluntary organisations who are supported by agencies and government departments for their education and social inclusion work. These groups are usually linked to communities (such as traveller groups or refugee groups), voluntary groups (such as for people with disabilities or the elderly) and local interest groups (such as local arts or women's groups). [12]

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

- **AONTAS**, (the National Adult Learning Organisation), is a non-government membership organisation which aims to ensure that every adult in Ireland has **access** to appropriate and affordable learning opportunities throughout their lives, thus enabling them to contribute to and participate in the **economic, social, civic and cultural development** of Irish society.[13]

- **AEGIS** (Adult Education Guidance and Information Service) provides an educational **guidance service** for adults, which is about connecting adults with learning opportunities, especially related to adults who left schools early and wish to **re-enter the formal education system**. [14]

- **NALA** (National Adult Literacy Agency) is an independent charity which helps people with **literacy and numeracy** difficulties to fully take part in society and have access to learning opportunities that meet their needs.[15]

- **The National Centre for Guidance in Education** is an agency of the Irish Department of Education and Skills. Its main roles are to support and develop guidance practice in areas of education and to inform the policy of the Department in the field of guidance, including **supporting teachers** and guidance counsellors and practitioners in education, including those working in adult education. The Management Committee of the National Centre for Guidance in Education is appointed by the Minister of Education and Skills. [16]

Vocational Institutions and career-related training

- **Workplace learning** can be organised independently by employers, or can be provided externally by providers and delivered in the workplace, the classroom or by distance learning. This training is often organised through **trade Unions**, or is undertaken informally during the course of employment. [17]

- **VECs**. As outlined above, a major provider of adult and vocational education are the Vocational Education Committees (VECs). The Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA) is the national representative association for Ireland's VECs and aims to promote vocational education and training, and support the VECs as a governing body. [18]



Universities

Foundation or **access courses** have been established in many third level institutions (university level) to prepare mature students for higher level study, especially if they have been out of education for some time. These courses are primarily focused on improving student's **skills, confidence and knowledge** in order to progress into higher education on a level standing with younger students. Courses can be full or part time, usually over one year, and some courses are very specific to subject (for example in Engineering or Science) while others provide a general preparation for courses in Humanities and Social Sciences. [19]

e-learning

-In Ireland a number of providers are exploiting e-learning opportunities and they have developed, and continue to develop, **distance learning** strategies. For example, Oscail, the National Distance Education Centre has (since 1982), offered third level distance education to adults. It currently offers six programmes (three leading to Honours Bachelor Degrees and two leading to Masters Degrees which are accredited by Dublin City University). [20]

- **The Open University** is one of the biggest providers of Distance Education in the UK and Ireland. The Open University offers more than 360 **undergraduate and post graduate courses** in Arts, Modern Languages, Social Sciences, Health and Social Care, Science, Maths, Computing, Technology, Business and Management, Education and Law. The average time taken for a degree is six years and are run with various **combinations of online and 'face to face' tutorials**. [21]

- **Oscail** is the **National Distance Education Centre of Ireland**. It is based on the Dublin City University campus and offers an opportunity to receive an Irish university qualification, through Distance Learning. Oscail offers **face-to-face tutorial support** and support through **email and telephone**. No previous qualifications are required for undergraduate programmes for those over 23.

- **FAS Net College** provides a range of E-learning courses, aimed at employers, employees and unemployed people. These courses fall into the category of Business, Office Applications, Web Design / Programming, Technical Support Courses, Soft Skills / Personal Development Courses and Apprenticeships. The courses are delivered **entirely over the Internet** and participants have access to the courses for 6 months once they have registered with FAS Net. Many of the courses are certified by relevant bodies. [22]



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