

# EXPLORE



The quarterly magazine from AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

aontas



This is an interactive PDF. Please click the links on the Table of Contents to go to each individual section or use the links below to navigate, back and forth, from page to page.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

- *VTOS, the success story that is open ended*
- *Making a case for investment in adult learning*
- *Senior Learners – What's stopping you now?*
- *Lifelong learning: in the workplace, the community, and your local library!*

# Explore

## Note from the editor

Hello and welcome to this edition of *Explore*!

If you didn't manage to make it to any of the events or activities during this last Adult Learners' Festival, this issue of *Explore* will give you a taste of what you missed.

Despite unexpected snowfalls and uncertain times, adult learning organisations around the country managed to double the number of events that took place last year. And although in some cases the weather meant that events had to be cancelled, the indications are that attendance was up on previous years.

Thomas F. Woodlock, a former editor with the Wall Street Journal once said 'Times of stress and difficulty are seasons of opportunity when the seeds of progress are sown'. Festival organisers were busy sowing seeds of progress in their communities. Different service and information providers came together at open days and coffee mornings; there were creative approaches to encourage informal skills sharing which didn't require huge resources, and events which responded to the particular learning needs of a diverse group of adults. This year's Festival gave us information on upskilling, Computers for the Terrified, while also catering for bookworms and knitting enthusiasts around the country.

At AONTAS, once again we were struck and in awe of the happy endings we heard throughout the week. From the stories of an underfunded inner city project which uses art and drama to support former drug users to find new lives, to the woman with no job who, through adult education and support from a women's group, found employment doing something she loves in her community and has been promoted three times throughout her recent career.

The number of queries received by AONTAS rose dramatically this year in contrast to previous years. 1571 learners contacted the service over the period of the Festival. 1257 learners received a copy of the AONTAS Information Booklet. 500 of those who contacted us indicated that they had recently been made unemployed or redundant. It seems that for many people, learning is the way out of the recession. Over the coming months, AONTAS's campaign in the lead up to the local and European elections will outline the role for adult learning in thinking, learning and talking ourselves out of recession. More details on how you can get involved and spread the message are available on [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com).

Until next time,

**Niamh Farren,**  
**Communications Officer**  
**AONTAS**

## List of contents

	Page
<a href="#">Festival Highlights</a>	3
<a href="#">AONTAS News</a>	4
<a href="#">Festival Themes</a>	5
<a href="#">Learning our way Through the Recession</a>	
<a href="#">Berni Brady on the importance of keeping mind and body active</a>	
<a href="#">The STAR Awards</a>	7
<a href="#">Details on the winning projects in fourteen categories</a>	
<a href="#">Festival Around the Country</a>	11
<a href="#">Event organisers and local links report on what happened in their area</a>	
<a href="#">Accreditation</a>	19
<a href="#">FETAC – Local Classes, National Awards</a>	
<a href="#">Twenty Years of VTOS</a>	21
<a href="#">The Success Story that is Open Ended</a>	
<a href="#">Jim McNamara writes about a conference in Castleconnell celebrating 20 years of the Vocational Training and Opportunities Scheme</a>	
<a href="#">Ask Jenny</a>	25
<a href="#">Jennifer Gunning answers your learning queries</a>	
<a href="#">Senior Learners – What's stopping you now?'</a>	26
<a href="#">How learning helps you stay Forever Young</a>	
<a href="#">Policy</a>	30
<a href="#">I'm an adult learner, invest in me!</a>	
<a href="#">Three different stories of the costs and benefits of adult learning</a>	
<a href="#">International</a>	34
<a href="#">A look at the Adult Learners' Festival in different countries around the world</a>	
<a href="#">Diary of an Adult Guidance Counsellor</a>	35
<a href="#">by Jason Donohue of Co. Cavan VEC</a>	

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**BACK TO CONTENTS**

## Themed days

For the first time, this year's festival focused on a number of different themes. Tuesday was 'Learn in your Community Day', with organisations such as Focus Ireland and the Blayney Blades women's group running events to tie in with that theme. On Thursday, AONTAS organised the first national workplace learning day. 'Learn @ Work' was organised with the support of ICTU and IBEC. ICTU promoted workplace learning extensively through their Union Learning

Representatives (ULRs) who encouraged workers to think about learning, and distributed the AONTAS Information Booklet. IBEC promoted the initiative through their diverse membership and networks of companies and businesses.

On the day a number of organisations ran events to promote workplace learning. In Dublin, McDonalds started a new English course for their internal staff team at their O'Connell Street branch. Standard Life have an impressive e-learning platform which

offers 3000 different courses and this was promoted to staff free of charge. Abbott Ireland in Sligo organised a range of activities, workshops and events designed to get their employees thinking about returning to learn. The VECs also used the occasion to promote further learning amongst their own staff – Meath VEC held a seminar highlighting research on teaching and learning methodologies, Sligo VEC organised internal brain teasers for staff and Cavan VEC held a skills swap shop!

## Festival in the media

Promoting adult learning in Ireland is one of the main reasons behind the Festival. This year's Festival succeeded in attracting substantial media coverage. The RTÉ programme Nationwide produced a feature about the Festival and adult learning in An tIonad Glas Organic College, Dromcollogher, which was broadcast on March 18th. A special feature on the Festival was included in the Irish Independent the week before the Festival. The feature was part sponsored by ICTU and included articles on both ICTU and FETAC. City Channel, TV3 and Channel

South all took an interest in various aspects of the Festival. As is the case each year, the Festival was promoted and covered widely in local broadcast and print media around the country.

Local Links Amanda Smyth, Lorraine Cunningham and others were interviewed on their local radio stations. NEAR 90 fm and Raidio Corca Baiscinn organised outside broadcasts from events in their area. Newstalk 106 interviewed the Leinster STAR award winners, and Liffey Sound produced a one hour programme documenting different aspects of the Festival throughout the week.

An extensive print and broadcast advertising campaign featuring RTE presenter Mary Kennedy also ran in the lead up to the Festival. The ad, which promoted the Festival website, as well as the text line, ran on 10 local stations, RTE, Newstalk and 20 community radio stations throughout the country. Print ads ran in national daily newspapers such as the Irish Independent, the Sunday Independent and the Irish Examiner. For more information on media coverage visit the festival website [www.adultlearnersfestival.com](http://www.adultlearnersfestival.com).

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

## Sponsors and support

This year's Festival would not have been possible without the support of a number of sponsors. Making the Adult Learners' Festival a financially sustainable event is an objective for AONTAS over the coming years. AONTAS would like to thank a number of organisations for their financial support of the Adult Learner's Festival, primarily funded by the Department of Education and

Science. AONTAS would like to thank FETAC, the ESB, the Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) and ICTU (the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.)

The development of the Festival this year was also supported and encouraged through the Festival Steering Committee. Members of the Committee this year included Kevin Molloy (Active Retirement Ireland), Clare McNally (NALA), Deborah Brock

(TALENT and Tallaght Partnership), Fionnuala Anderson (FÁS) and Mary Hilda Cavanagh (IVEA).

Finally, huge thanks are due to the network of local links and event organisers who worked tirelessly in their own communities on events and promotional activities. This year 41 people in 29 different countries took on the role of local link. This year's Festival saw the number of events rise to 250.



**The Community Education Network and the Training Links programme**

Last year AONTAS and the CEN received funding under the Training Links Programme administered by the Wheel, to run a follow up training programme to training completed

in May 2007. This new training programme which aims to support community education groups to lobby and campaign around the local and European elections began at the end of March and is running in three different locations around the country – Dublin, Donegal and Limerick. The training will include an overview at both local and European level, the identification of

key issues, and is being delivered in a way that builds the capacity of the network by encouraging members to share their own experiences of being involved in successful campaigning work. The training is being delivered to groups free of charge. For more information, contact Niamh O'Reilly, Head of Membership Services.

**Local and European election campaign**

The local and European elections take place in June this year, and AONTAS is organising a campaign to promote the value and benefits of adult and community education. The theme of the campaign is **'Adult Learning – Many Happy Returns'** – reflecting the fortieth birthday of AONTAS, but also highlighting the positive outcomes of engaging in adult learning. In the lead up to the elections, AONTAS will be working closely with others in the sector, to promote positive messages about adult and community education. These messages include:

- **Promoting the social impact of adult learning:** Engaging in learning helps individuals and communities cope with change and helps counteract isolation.
- **Upskilling and retraining opportunities:** Adult and community education already provide the infrastructure for adults to upskill and train, at a variety of levels. This infrastructure needs to be maintained and further developed.
- **Adult Learning, and in particular community education enables people to move out of poverty into to employment** through confidence building and enabling people to participate more effectively in the decisions that affect their lives.
- **The Intergenerational case for adult learning –** initiatives which focus on the learning needs of parents have a longterm economic impact for future generations.

Over the next few months, AONTAS will be working closely with the Community Education Network and the Senior Learners' Network, as well as other organisations in the community and voluntary sector. Visit [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com) for more information on how you or your organisation can get involved.



*Reviewing documentation at the AONTAS AGM 2008*

**Annual General Meeting – Happy birthday AONTAS**

This year, the AONTAS Annual General Meeting takes place on May 6th. The AGM will take place at the Ballsbridge Court Hotel (formerly the Berkeley Court Hotel). This year's AGM will be of particular significance given that AONTAS is forty years old this year. The event will incorporate a retrospective on the major developments in the sector over the past four decades. Tom Collins, Professor of Education at NUI Maynooth, will address the meeting and look back over forty years. An exhibition space incorporating photographs and other documents from throughout the years will be in place during the event. The AGM will also involve the election of the AONTAS Executive Committee and the presentation of the Annual Report and audited accounts. For more information about the AGM, visit [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com) or contact Niamh O'Reilly, Head of Membership Services.

**BACK TO CONTENTS**

# Learning our way through the recession

*Berni Brady considers the importance of keeping mind and body active during a time of recession.*



*Professor Tom Collins of NUI Maynooth, with Berni Brady Director of AONTAS*

The bewildering context that adult educators and learners find themselves in 2009 really challenges us all to draw on our most creative and imaginative capacities as never before. Looking back to this time last year there is no comparison to the context in which we were then working. By the middle of 2008 the economy began to go into freefall and no-one could have anticipated the devastating changes that were to follow and the rapidity with which they have happened.

Who would have foreseen that the banking system, the backbone of capitalism, would be on the verge of collapse and would only survive through government support with tax payers' money? Who would have predicted that unemployment levels of around 4% which were almost taken for granted could soar to almost 10% and growing? Who would have

predicted that highly skilled people as well as those working in sectors like construction would lose their jobs at such a frightening pace as the cold winds of recession began to bite?

Whether we believe that the Government which has held power now into its third term could have done so is neither here nor there at the moment, as wasting time on a blame culture seems to be the worst way of expending energy. Let's leave that to polling day and concentrate instead on how adults are going to cope in a situation which feels a bit like an earthquake, where the surprise of the solidity of the earth moving underfoot takes the breath away.

For the past ten years as the adult and community education service developed with comparatively substantial funding strands, the emphasis has been on creating a highly

skilled and flexible labour force. The instrumental and economic purpose of adult education and lifelong learning has been to the fore. The current trends in unemployment including of those who are already skilled has dealt a body blow to the upskilling approach promoted by government as a way forward. What do you do if you are already a graduate and there are no more jobs in your area of expertise or locality? Consider the experience of a recent McDonald's outlet advertising 50

*"Building the economy back to sustainable levels looks like it is going to be a much longer process."*

**BACK TO CONTENTS**



*Minister for Lifelong Learning, Sean Haughey TD, with Marian Duffy, President of AONTAS, Berni Brady, AONTAS Director and Mary Kennedy*

jobs having to close its trawl after more than 500 people including third level graduates who have suddenly found themselves unemployed were seeking to be considered. And what effect will the surplus of highly qualified people have on the chances of those who have less qualifications competing for employment? Adding to the woes is the grim reality that emigration, the great eighties option is no longer a solution as the global economy collapses.

### **The social purpose of adult education**

Building the economy back to sustainable levels looks like it is going to be a much longer process than previously anticipated and in the meantime people who find themselves

*"People who find themselves in unprecedented situations must be supported to survive this recession."*

in unprecedented situations must be supported to survive this recession. Apart from the practical supports and policies which need to be put in place by government such as those needed for saving one's home or paying one's way for example, human beings also need to be able to develop strategies to do two key things vital to their survival i.e. to combat social isolation and to keep the brain and body active. Adult and community education as a social, civic and cultural activity can provide them with the means to do both. This social purpose of adult education is its great strength and comes to the fore in critical times such as those we now live in.

Consider the eighties when the funding landscape for adult education was more of a desert than a prairie and unemployment, poverty and emigration were at its highest since the fifties. Then people, and women in particular, took the bull by the horns and community education flourished and grew, providing connection and solidarity as well as skills. It is said that there are no new ideas, only old ones refashioned in new contexts. What might be considered an old-

fashioned notion of keeping active and getting connected with your community, particularly after an era of extreme consumerism, may well contribute to understanding the fundamental causes of our current predicament and finding creative and human solutions to it.

### **'Beware of the chair'**

Last year following its research into the lifelong learning needs of older people AONTAS established a Senior Learners' Network. The level of interest, motivation and enthusiasm among the older learners who came to the meetings was astounding as was their determination to keep on learning. At one of their meetings they coined the slogan, 'Beware of the Chair', meaning that it is all too easy to sit there and not become involved, but instead become increasingly disconnected from the outside world. Many lessons can be learnt from this approach by a group of people who are not considered eligible for the workforce and therefore don't figure in the upskilling plans, but who have a formidable range of skills and life experience and a steely determination about making sure they use them. They have been a highly vocal group at a political level but they also are involved at a local level in every facet of life as volunteers contributing not just to their own well being, but that of their families and communities. And how? Through lifelong learning.

The older learners are not the only group that we can learn from but they make a very good start. The old adage, 'mens sana in corpora sano' might be a very good reason for ensuring that the adult and community education service now more than ever must be supported to make sure adults can learn their way through this recession.

**BACK TO CONTENTS**

# STARS claim their moment in the sun

*If you were around Dublin Castle on February 2nd, you may have been witness to strange scenes of Celtic warriors storming Dublin Castle, or the Minister for Lifelong Learning wearing a hard hat. Niamh Farren goes star spotting at an awards ceremony for adult learning.*

An unexpected snowfall and a grim economic forecast couldn't prevent over 150 representatives from the adult and community education sector from turning up to celebrate the achievements of adult learners at the third STAR awards ceremony in Dublin Castle on February 2nd.

The ceremony is now firmly embedded in the calendar of adult and community education groups, showcasing a variety of learning methodologies, practices and outcomes.

This year's initiative saw the number of nominations rise to 158. In addition, AONTAS introduced a number of changes to the categories. A new 'Projects in Progress' category was established, as well as one for 'Once Off Initiatives'. Finally, a new Workplace Learning category was introduced for the first time this year, bringing the number of categories in total to fourteen.

## Tough decisions

Last year's initiative had stretched a judging panel of five, so AONTAS set about drawing together a larger and more diverse panel with experience in different aspects of adult and community education. The panel included representatives from NUI Maynooth, the AEOA, FETAC, the National Centre for Partnership and Performance, VTOS, as well as tutors and learners. Two groups then took responsibility for seven categories each and presented their decisions to AONTAS staff in the middle of January. Liam Bane and Ann Devlin chaired each panel, ensuring that there was a consensus on the decisions made.

Although an unusual weather forecast threatened to reduce the numbers on the day, it was apparent that nothing would stop the winners in each categories from having their moment in the sun. A group from the RADE project descended on Dublin Castle, warrior like, dressed in costumes from their 'Raders of the Tain' play. The 'Integrate – We all play a Part' Project in Laois brought learners from Poland, and Sri Lanka, bearing photos of their experiences on the project. Meanwhile, representatives from the Learning to Grow in North and West Clare project had left a sleepy Ennis in darkness, having started their journey at six thirty a.m. Outside the conference room representatives from the winning proj-

ects stood proudly in front of backdrops summarising their achievements. In the grounds of Dublin Castle, Minister for Lifelong Learning, Sean Haughey posed complete with hard hat, high visibility jacket and toolbox with members from UNITE, the union, and Northern Ireland Water, to promote workplace learning. Also on the scene was RTÉ presenter Mary Kennedy, keynote speaker for the event and willing to brave the cold for the obligatory photo shoot. As a former teacher, she has been hugely supportive of the initiative, assisting with promotion and advertising in the lead up to the event.



*Minister for Lifelong Learning, Sean Haughey*

## Adult education and the economy

It's undeniable that the economic situation is taking its toll on the sector. Some projects have already been affected by cutbacks; an uncertain future is ahead of others. Despite the gloom, it was clear that this was a day for temporarily setting aside those worries. There are words of encouragement from Minister for Lifelong Learning,

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



Representatives from LIFE (Leading into Further Education), winner in the Nationwide category

Sean Haughey. 'Increased competition, a continuing need to upskill, more leisure time and an emphasis on social and cultural development are all factors which make it vital that we continue to develop our adult education services. Nowadays it is more important than ever to improve our skills base and further our knowledge to keep pace with a fast changing world.'

Minister Haughey also welcomed the introduction of a new workplace learning category. The winning project in the category was **Promoting Lifelong Learning through essential skills training within NI (Northern Ireland) Water**. The project was started in an attempt to address the learning needs of an ageing workforce at NI Water. The initiative is a shining example of what can happen from a partnership, as Unite, the union were involved in promoting the activity amongst the workers. The programme combined basic literacy, numeracy and IT skills to deliver an 'essential skills' package to employees, but was also carefully constructed as a gateway to further learning and education. The company demonstrated its commitment to the initiative by allowing fully paid learning leave for those taking part, while the Union Learning Representatives worked with other unions and promoted participation in the programme to all employees regardless of whether they were part of a union.

**Learning @ Work** was highly commended in the same category, offering flexible and part time learning opportunities for people with minimum qualifications in the workforce. And although it was entered in the Regional Ulster

category and went on to win the award, the **Equals Project** also combined elements of workplace learning, by enhancing the skills and knowledge of advice workers to provide information, advice and guidance to individuals and communities on energy efficiency.

### Reflecting society

Mary Kennedy pointed out how the projects reflect many of the underlying themes in society in Ireland today. Projects working with recovering drug addicts featured strongly – in the Dublin Local category the winner was **RADE (Recovery through Art, Drama and Education)**. The project uses creative activities such as art, creative writing, drama, film and Tai Chi. The group has already produced and performed the play 'Raders of the Tain', and has also produced a publication of creative writing. All creative activities are a collective effort with the aim of combating isolation and encouraging teamwork. Public performances build the confidence of participants, transforming them from passive consumers to active agents. The project works in partnership with the Local Drugs Taskforce, FÁS, the VEC, as well as arts organisa-

*'It is more important than ever to improve our skills base and further our knowledge to keep pace with a fast changing world.'*

**BACK TO CONTENTS**



*Members of the Lab Theatre Company perform a drama piece at the awards*

tions such as the Gaiety School of Acting, the Project Arts Centre and Filmbase.

Also in that same category the **SAOL project** was highly commended. SAOL works directly with women recovering from addiction, most of whom have left school without a formal qualification. Highly commended in Dublin City and County was **'Returning to Learning'**, a five month course which prepares people recovering from addiction or on methadone for going back to third level.

A record number of initiatives based on the learning needs of men were also recognised at the ceremony. **The Traveller Men's Project** in Tuam was highly commended in the Regional Connaught category. Men on that project took part in a number of different learning activities based on their needs but also built a traditional horse drawn wagon in the process. **The West Sligo Rural Men's Project** was the winner in the Local Connaught category. This FÁS funded Community project successfully targets men at the risk of social exclusion, but also refers them onto other organisa-

*A record number of initiatives based on the learning needs of men were also recognised at the ceremony.*

tions. The men's work on the project resulted in the town being awarded €1,000 in the Tidy Towns Competition. Meanwhile in Co. Donegal, the **Men's Education Initiative** was the winner of the award for 'Once off Initiatives' for their production of a short film called 'High Jinks in High Glen' based in the local community. The film developed as all men in the group took responsibility for different aspects of the production – from writing the script, right through to acting, producing and lighting. Also in Northern Ireland, the **Accelerate Project** was highly commended for their successful techniques in attracting men back to education through a training programme in minibus driving. Finally, the **Engage Project** based in New Ross is setting about training the next generation of male community development workers, in order to encourage more positive role models for men in community development. The project was the winner in the Local Leinster category.

Women have always been at the forefront of community education and this year was no different. The winning project in Dublin City and County was **Clondalkin Womens' Education Forum**, which aims to boost the numbers of disadvantaged women entering third level education. **Mothers Making a Difference**, in Waterford was highly commended in the local Munster category, for their work in supporting women to have a more positive experience of education. **Steps to the Future** was the winner in the Local Ulster category. This project uses different models of assessment and a supportive learning environment to target women expe-

**BACK TO CONTENTS**

riencing multiple disadvantage. In Limerick, eleven Traveller women were part of the **Primary Healthcare Programme** which won the Projects in Progress award.

Integration is still an important theme which informs adult and community education, and **'Integration: We all play a part'** is an example of how adult education can meet the needs of immigrants in Ireland. For example, when learners indicated that understanding correspondence from their children's school was an issue, the project set about organising meetings with the home school community liaison teachers. The project was the winner in the Regional Leinster category. An initiative which explores how development issues can be used in adult literacy training was highly commended in the Once Off Initiatives category. The booklet, called **'It's a Small World'** is a resource which explains ten themes relating to the developing world.

Two projects using gardening received awards – the **Learning to Grow in West and North Clare** project was given the award in the Local Munster category. The project started out as training in horticulture, and resulted in the development of the West and North Clare Growers Association. In the Local Ulster category, highly commended was the **Community Horticultural Enterprise**, which has transformed a former dump into a sanctuary for personal and community well being.

Addressing the focus of the Digital Divide was a theme in two of the winning projects: The **Embrace IT over 55s** project was highly commended in the Projects in Progress category. Based in Drogheda, the project aims to train older people in the use of internet and mobile phone technology. In the local Connaught category, the **Mohill Computer Programme** was also highly commended for providing people who are unemployed with the opportunity to progress into employment in the information technology sector.

### Working in partnership

Partnership is an important element in assessing the nominations. The winner of the Nationwide award is a real example of partnership in action. The **LIFE (Leading into Further Education)** project is run by Dun Laoghaire VEC, the Health Service Executive and St. John of Gods, Carmona Services aimed at young adults with an intellectual disability moving from second level education. The programme incorporates one to one and group guidance and a tailor-made auxiliary programme designed and delivered by St. John of Gods, Carmona Services. The Highly Commended Project in the Nationwide category was **Creative Exchanges**, which has also been extremely successful in taking a partnership approach – promoting creativity in older people in care settings through a specially



*Representatives from 'Integration: We all play a part' receive their award in the Regional Leinster category*

designed training programme. In the Regional Leinster category the Highly Commended award went to the **Acorn Project** which targets young people between the ages of 12 and 18 who are at risk of early school leaving using a multi agency approach. In Dundalk, the **Muirhevnamor Local Training Initiative** was highly commended for engaging a group of young people in the refurbishment of a local authority house and gaining accreditation in the process. The **Clare Family Learning Project**, winner in the Regional Munster category, involves Home School Liaison Teachers, local school teachers, community organisations and many others, in a partnership approach which unites parents and children in a positive educational experience. Not too far from Clare the, **Shanagolden Education Resource Centre** was highly commended in the same category for its work in providing second chance education using a holistic approach.

Finally, and last but not least was the **Access Music Project**, winner in the Regional Connaught category, which provides a special training programme designed for people who have a basic knowledge, interest and ability in music and who wish to pursue further training in music and the arts. The project has enabled those taking part to progress onto employment in music and the arts. 'The Access Music Project has changed my life and given me the chance to make a living from music,' said one person who took part in the project.

Adult learning, changing lives. You can't ask for a better outcome than that.

*For more information on the STAR Award winners, visit [www.adultlearnersfestival.com](http://www.adultlearnersfestival.com).*

**BACK TO CONTENTS**

# Adult Learners' Festival around the country

*During this year's Festival 250 events were scheduled in different parts of the country. Here's a snapshot of what happened from those involved in organising events and promoting the Festival in their communities.*

## Lifelong learning in Leinster

"Snow didn't cool the desire for learning as the Adult Learners' Festival in Meath was a great success", explained Amanda Smyth, Education Development Officer at Meath County Council.

As part of the AONTAS Adult Learners' festival Meath VEC in partnership with Meath County Council hosted a range of lectures, seminars and workshops for adult learners from 2nd-6th February.

Despite the snow County Meath played host to a number of third level lecturers from surrounding education institutes. Michael Kenny lecturer in NUI Maynooth (NUIM) hosted a discussion group in relation to the changes facing rural society, while Dr. Conor Brady from Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) presented the latest findings from his research on Bruna Boinne. The Ashbourne Library mother and toddler group welcomed Clodagh Byrne, Mature Student Officer from Trinity College Dublin to talk about barriers facing mature learners. Oldcastle library also hosted a lively afternoon of history and music presented by Malachy Hand, NUIM graduate.

Individuals interested in setting up their own business were able to avail of advice and guidance on the Enterprise Bus. Experts from Meath County Enterprise Board and Bank of Ireland offered information to callers interested in developing or establishing their own business.

The closing event of the Festival in Meath was a presentation from Dr. Kevin Howard DkIT to the 'Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme' (VTOS) group in Meath VEC. Dr. Howard presented his own story of leaving education at an early age only to return as an adult learner and progress to Ph.D level. He encouraged learners to believe in their own abilities, drive and motivation.

Both Eilis Coyne, Information Officer Meath VEC and Amanda Smyth, Education Development Officer Meath County Council were delighted with the support shown to festival events. Unfortunately in order to take account of the bad weather some lectures by National College of Ireland, Open University and IT Sligo were postponed and will be rescheduled for April.

Westmeath VEC organised an adult education Information roadshow, which dropped into St. Kieran's Community Centre in Athlone. The roadshow showcased literacy, VTOS, the Back to Education Initiative, Community Education and the Guidance Service. Information stands highlighting ancillary services were also set up on the day.

In Wicklow, Bray Area Partnership and Bray Adult Education organised an Adult Education Open Day. There were stalls from services and groups offering advice and support to people considering returning to education, such as the Citizens Information Service and MABS.



*Open Day at TARGET in Donaghmede*



*Basic Education Service Tallaght displaying some of their crafts*

**BACK TO CONTENTS**

## Explore

### OAK promotes adult learning

A number of events were organised in North Offaly during the Adult Learners' Festival. The Festival provided an opportunity to promote adult learning in the area and to celebrate the achievements of adult learners and the organisations that support them.

Representatives from the Acorn Project attended the AONTAS STAR Awards ceremony in Dublin on Monday 2nd February. The Project Co-ordinator, Kevin Farrell, was presented with a Highly Commended Star Award 2009 (Leinster Region) which recognised the Acorn project as a successful learning centre for quality education. Catherine Gavigan, Adult Guidance Counsellor with Offaly VEC, held an outreach clinic in Edenderry on Thursday 5th February and had a busy day meeting with individuals who are considering returning to education. Anyone interested in meeting with Catherine can contact her on 057 9327104.

Because of the bad weather, a coffee morning aimed at helping anyone interested in learning how to text, had to be cancelled. This session will be rescheduled. Participants from Rhode Foundation for Employment and the Computer and Office Skills Programme based in Rathangan joined forces on the afternoon of Thursday 5th February to celebrate the achievements of the learners. 7 Participants from the Rathangan Local Training Initiative and 20 participants from the Rhode Foundations programme were presented with certificates for the successful completion of a range of FETAC modules. Karina Curley, Education Co-ordinator with OAK Partnership, opened the event by describing the background and aim of the AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival. "Events like this are important as a way of celebrating learning and marking achievements", stated Ms. Curley. Pat Leogue, Manager of OAK Partnership, congratulated the participants on their awards and urged them to continue on the learning path.

Two participants shared their personal experiences of returning to learning and spoke of the tremendous effort and courage that it required. Lorraine, from the Rhode Programme, spoke about her improved confidence and the joy of learning and succeeding. Referring to the LTI programme, Regina, stated that "I found the course to be very helpful, and not only has it improved my computer skills to an excellent level but it has given me the confidence to go for interviews and believe that I now have the skills to do these jobs".

Jim Dowling, representing, FÁS presented the participants with their certificates and spoke of the benefits of OAK and FÁS working together to provide people with an opportunity locally to build on their basic education, and increase in confidence. He highlighted the importance of FETAC certification that is recognised academically and by employers.

## Festival: Around the Country



*Top: The Enterprise Bus in County Meath*

*Bottom: County Manager, Meath County Council, Amanda Smyth, Meath County Council, Kevin Stewart, Director for Economic Development*

This week's events ended with an information stand in the Downshire shopping centre. Staff from OAK Partnership, Offaly VEC, Offaly Outreach Education Project and FÁS were on hand with information on every aspect of learning, including Literacy and Numeracy, Basic Education, evening classes, a range of specific Skills Training programmes, courses for Women Returning to the Workforce, Career Planning and Job Seeking.

The Adult Learners' Festival is now established as an annual event in North Offaly, and the organisations involved welcome the opportunity to work together to promote the positive benefits of adult learning.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

## Explore



*Representatives from JADD Positive Intervention, Jobstown at their colourful stand*

On the northside of Dublin, TARGET in Donaghmede hosted a very successful open day event. According to Heidi Beddell, TARGET Co-ordinator 'It was well attended and we all had a great day. NEAR gofm was broadcast live from the premises and people were on live radio for the first time in their lives!' Minister for Lifelong Learning, Sean Haughey launched the 'Novel Interculturalism' radio bookclub series at NEAR go fm. Also on the northside, Grange Community College organised an Open Day for anyone interested in finding out more information about the facilities and courses on offer.

In the Liberties, the AEPN (Adult Education Providers Network) organised a multimedia exhibition for two days during the Festival. The exhibition took place at the Digital Exchange building and included work from 10 different groups from the Liberties area in a wide variety of media including paintings, ceramics, needlework, decoupage, multimedia projects, writings, and local heritage.

### **Third TALENT Adult Learners' Fair: a success in Tallaght**

Mayor Marie Corr officially opened the TALENT Adult Learners Fair at the County Library Tallaght on Thursday 5th February. TALENT is an active Tallagh-based network for all those involved with Adult and Community Education, and is a collaboration between Dodder Valley Partnership, Institute of Technology Tallaght, Co. Dublin VEC, South Dublin County Council and the Dept of Education and Science Tallaght Regional Office.

## Festival: Around the Country



*Jillian Harrison with members of the Beara Camera Club*

This is the second year that the County Library Tallaght has hosted this event, and it is indeed a fitting venue given the commitment of public libraries to supporting life-long learning and making it available to all members of the community.

The annual Adult Learners' Fair provides an opportunity to showcase the work of local education groups, VEC centres, community education groups, family resource centres and further and higher education. It is a convenient and accessible way for those interested in starting, continuing or resuming life-long learning to find out about the courses and venues most suitable for them.

At the Adult Learners' Fair there were over 30 information stands with experienced education providers ready to help with information, advice, and guidance. A broad range of agencies were represented including: Dodder Valley (Tallaght) Partnership, Co. Dublin VEC, ITT Dublin, TAES (Tallaght Adult Education Services), Access Ireland Skills for Work, FÁS, the National Learning Network, The Priory Institute, Tallaght Youth Information Centre, Tallaght Intercultural Action and lots more.

*The Fair provides an opportunity to showcase the work of local education groups, VEC centres, community education groups, family resource centres and further and higher education.*

**BACK TO CONTENTS**



*Learning Tai Chi in the Liberties*

Some organisations brought great colour to the Fair with samples of artwork and crafts made by participants in their programmes. These organisations included BEST (Basic Education Service Tallaght), JADD, Positive Intervention from Jobstown, Killinarden Family Resource Centre and The Blossom Art Project from the Firhouse Day Activity Centre.

There were also activities for all including the Tree of Learning, Fun Science Demonstrations, IT demonstrations by the CONNECT project, face painting for children and lots more. People attending the Fair were invited to share their experiences of adult learning and education which were then placed as leaves on the Tree of Learning. Over 2,000 people visited the County Library making for a very successful fair which TALENT and South Dublin Libraries hope will continue from strength to strength in the future.

RADE (Recovery through Art, Drama and Education) won their first STAR Award this year for their creative approach to adult learning. The programme is operated on daily basis. Learners engage in different creative activities such as art, drama, creative writing, film and tai chi.

***There was a very relaxed environment where visitors asked questions, drank tea and learnt that learning can be fun, interesting and exciting.***

The group were awarded for the following:

- outstanding performances in “*Raders of the Tain*” which performed in 5 venues to audiences of over 500 people throughout Dublin last summer
- inspirational creative writing in “*Raders of the Tain*” which aligned their worlds with that of ancient Ireland’s as written about in the old Irish myth, the Tain
- colourful artwork that again followed the theme of the Tain
- a DVD documentary which mapped their creative process throughout the year.

Winning the STAR Award was a wonderful achievement for RADE. The group are extremely proud of the work they produce and delighted that their efforts have been recognised. The award was presented to Manager, Michael Egan and participant, Emma Ryan. Emma was thrilled to be present at the award ceremony in Dublin Castle. “It was a really special way to mark the occasion”, she said. Also present were Ken Farrell, Des Walsh and Eddie Geraghty.

As well as winning an award RADE also held an open day during the AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival. Participants were encouraged to invite at least one friend to RADE. On arrival visitors were entertained by a Tai Chi display performed by the group. They were also shown the group’s DVD documentary “*Raders of the Tain*” which outlined the hard work and dedication put in by each participant. Over 20 people visited the project on Friday

**BACK TO CONTENTS**



*Members of the RADE Group*

6th February. There was a very relaxed environment where visitors asked questions, drank tea and learnt that learning can be fun, interesting and exciting.

## **Northern Ireland**

In Donegal, Mevagh Resource Centre celebrated the achievements of 'High Jinks in High Glen', the STAR award winner in the Once Off Initiatives category. In addition, sixty people took part in an adult learning day. Information was available to encourage people back to education and training. Edel Flynn, Civil Defence officer and Sarah McBride, an adult learner, both outlined their experiences of returning to learn. Representatives from different agencies and organisations including FÁS, the Department of Social and Family Affairs and the Co. Enterprise Board took part.

## **Cavan celebrates the achievements of over 150 local learners**

For the second year running, Co. Cavan VEC's Adult Education Services held its annual presentation of certificates to learners during the Adult Learners' Festival. According to Fiona Maloney, AEO with Co. Cavan VEC, 'this year's event was a great evening of celebration and recognition of the hard work of 154 learners who attended courses at Cavan Adult Learning Centre and community education programmes throughout the county. Learners were presented with their certificates by Minister for Agriculture, and fellow Cavan man, Brendan Smith TD'.

Congratulating the learners on successfully completing their varied programmes, CEO of Co. Cavan VEC, Mr. Colm McEvoy said that it was apt that the presentation of certificates should be held during a week when the spotlight was on adult learning. He welcomed Niamh O'Reilly, Head of Membership Services at AONTAS, and thanked her for providing a national perspective at the evening's events.

95 learners from Cavan Adult Learning Centre were presented with certificates at levels 3 and 4 on the national framework of awards. This number included 38 foreign nationals who received tuition by tutors from Co. Cavan VEC in partnership with FÁS through its "Return to Work" programme and with Cavan Partnership. Co. Cavan VEC's learning partnerships with local manufacturer, Pauwells Traffo, and with Cavan County Council were also celebrated through the achievement of awards by 25 staff at the former and 9 staff at the latter.

*It allowed the groups to showcase their training courses, services and a host of other information that sometimes may be difficult to access.*

**BACK TO CONTENTS**



*Lorraine, Marlea, Olive and Eileen from the Blayney Blades at the awareness day in Co. Monaghan*



*Jobstown Adult Education Network answer questions*

Learners from community education programmes were well represented on the evening with 23 learners receiving ECDL certification and a further 36 receiving FETAC certificates in Childcare at level 5 and Computer Literacy at level 3. Indeed those learners who studied childcare are a unique group at Co. Cavan VEC – they are the first learners to receive tuition through the mode of video-conferencing. Fiona Maloney, Adult Education Officer, hailed the achievements of the learners and tutors of this course who participated simultaneously in classes held at opposite ends of the county: “Video-conferencing is among some of the many interesting projects now up and running at Co. Cavan VEC, with lots more in development.”

### **Learning goes from strength to strength in Monaghan**

According to local link Lorraine Cunningham, the Festival was truly celebrated in Castleblayney on Tuesday February 3rd when more than 30 groups from County Monaghan participated in the first AONTAS adult education awareness day. Blayney Blades in conjunction with the groups are hoping to make this an annual event. It allowed the groups to showcase their training courses, services and a host of other information that sometimes may be difficult to access. The day was very busy with enquiries being answered and the groups themselves networking and availing of each others information. This highlighted the whole subject of opportunities regarding adult learning.

A huge amount of information was shared and we had the commitment from the two local radio stations LMFM North East Radio and Northern Sound Monaghan and Cavan who both ran the theme of adult education that week. Lorraine did an interview with both stations to highlight the importance of adult education and the feedback was tremendous. The local paper also ran an article for us. On the day we hosted the Mayor of Castleblayney, Marlea Kelly and the Mayor of Newtownabbey, Victor Robinson who both spoke of the importance of adult education and the work of AONTAS highlighting this issue. Celine Mc Arde also spoke of the challenges and barriers that community groups come up against all the time. Victor who had worked with Lorraine on a cross border cross community training project between Drogheda and Newtownabbey was the recipient of one of the AONTAS Star awards in 2008. Lorraine has been a local link since the onset of the awards and is delighted to be part of such prestigious event and thanks the staff of AONTAS for all their back up and support all during the year, not just for the awards.

### **A taste of learning in Munster**

Gillian Harrison reported how the Beara Camera Club and some of its visitors ran two short drop-in sessions complete with workshops to demonstrate how to get the best out of your digital camera and tips on how to take a better picture. Both of these and more could be learned through participation in a friendly, community based, non-formal setting. Through the local BTEI co-ordinator, a taster session on Computer Aided Design was held at the local community school. This proved very popular and the FETAC Level 3 course is now fully subscribed. The newly opened Beara Education Centre held an open afternoon to provide information on its services and facilities.

**BACK TO CONTENTS**



Photographed from Left to right: Noelle Staunton, Mayo VEC; Barbara Ronayne, Guidance Counsellor; Shiela McGee; Paul Derrig, Tutor; Jackie Evans, Tutor; Fiona Quinn Bailey, Tutor; and Pat Higgins, Adult Education Officer. Photograph: Keith Heneghan/Phocus

In West Clare, the Clare Local Development Company hosted a cookery and container garden demonstration in the Vandaleur Walled Gardens. Learners from the Hotel and Catering Course gave a lesson on how to make potato and leek soup, and the ingredients for the dishes were provided by learners on the horticulture course. Local community radio station Raidio Corca Baiscinn did a live broadcast from the event.

From Limerick, Julie White from the Hospital Family Resource centre explained, 'The Hospital Family Resource Centre held an Adult Learner's morning on Wednesday 4th February to launch their computer classes for 2009. During this morning the learners had an opportunity to browse the internet and speak to the computer trainer about the upcoming course. The specialised software on the computers was demonstrated to the computers. Jaws and Zoom Text

is available to learners with visual and hearing disabilities. Almost 40 learners have signed up to our computers course. The learners also were told about the benefits of adult learning and the supports available to them.'

### Connaught activities

Noelle Staunton from East Mayo VEC reported a great turnout at their Adult Learners' Fair in the McWilliam Hotel in Claremorris on Friday the 6th of February. It was designed to help adults find out how to learn new skills, or brush up on existing skills, take a second chance course, do an access course or a higher certificate, find information on education, grants, and avail of Department and Social and Family affairs Back to Education schemes. This event marked the third annual nationwide Adult Learners' Festival in the East Mayo area.

The Adult Learners' Fair provided an opportune way to showcase the work of local education groups, VEC centres, community education groups, family resource centres and further and higher education. The Fair was a really unique event that brought together all those involved in the community, workplace and further and higher education in Mayo. Various organisations took part and people had an

*The fair was a really unique event that brought together all those involved in the community, workplace and further and higher education in Mayo.*

**BACK TO CONTENTS**

## Explore

opportunity to talk to local providers about what courses and training are on offer. Among the Further Education Services displayed were Adult Learning Centres, Back To Education Initiatives, VTOS, Youthreach, St. Catherines Senior Travelling Training Centre, Adult Guidance, Castlebar College of Further Education (CCFE), Family Resource Centre, Claremorris, Curam, Claremorris, Community Development Project, Kiltimagh, Cosgallen, Charlestown, South – West Mayo Development Company, GMIT and St. Angelas College, Sligo.

The VEC also took this opportunity to present Adult Learners from the East Mayo area with FETAC awards. Dr. Katie Sweeney (CEO Mayo VEC) presented the awards to the learners and then invited participants to take the opportunity to visit the displays and gain information about educational services in the area.

### Something for everyone in Sligo

According to Josephine McGread, local link in Sligo, a number of activities took place during the Festival. They included an Internet Awareness Session in Sligo Town, Keash Community Centre and Ballinafad. There were computer classes for local farmers and Literacy, Maths & Communication. The VEC staff had promotional stand in local shopping centre with information on all VEC programmes. A Health module commenced for a men's project in Easkey, while

## Festival: Around the Country



*Left to Right: Fiona Quinn Bailey, Tutor; Kazadi Kanyebe, Student and Paul Derrig, Tutor. Photograph: Keith Heneghan/Phocus*

Child Development, FETAC Level 4 commenced at Easkey Family Resource Centre. Karin Kennedy gave presentation to Leaving Certificate & IT Groups. One to one discussions followed. 'Learn at Work' Day involved an online quiz for Co. Sligo VEC staff. The Festival was also widely promoted – Sinead Osgood, South Sligo Resource Worker, spoke on Mid-West Radio to promote activities, and there was also an advertising campaign in the Sligo Champion.

### From your local library

In the past libraries have been viewed as places of quiet solitude or 'study', but if you dropped into your local library during the Festival you would have been proven wrong. All over the country libraries were buzzing with the energy of people learning new skills. Book clubs traditionally hosted by the libraries scheduled their meetings to coincide with the Festival dates. But the week also saw libraries offer introductory courses in all sorts of unlikely topics.

Enniscorthy Public Library offered taster courses in computers and using the internet. Libraries in Cork saw the launch of Simply Surf – a basic guide to using the internet in your local library. Fermoy library hosted a bookclub, a comhrá group and even a knitting group. Mallow Library organised a craft exchange, a Comhrá and Failte session and a bridge group. In Kerry, libraries from Castleisland to Cahirciveen offered basic email and internet training over the week. Tralee local library also hosted a major exhibition from the Royal Irish Academy entitled 'My Gentle Harp' – the Life of Thomas Moore. Information was available in all Kerry libraries about the Kerry Archaeological and Historical Society – which hosts a series of lectures and

outings during the year as well as producing an annual journal and magazine. Leixlip Library ran sessions on 'What you can find in our library and how to find it!' The sessions included an exhibition of books, DVDs, and other materials related to all sorts of lifelong learning. The library offered free tours with a member of staff or the option of doing your own tour with the help of a written guide. Free internet classes, information on VTOS and FETAC, and a selection of literacy aids were also available.

Meanwhile, in Tipperary, North Tipperary VEC joined forces with the local library to promote information about adult learning by holding free drop in sessions. Clonmel Library had learning trees on display to highlight the achievements of past adult learners. They also mounted a display of materials and information available to anyone interested in going back to education.

Each branch of Waterford City Council Library Service had its Lifelong Learning resources on display during the Festival and for the month of February. Enniscorthy Library focused on third level, with information available on third level colleges. The same library also offered computer courses for senior learners.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

# Local classes, national awards!

*FETAC was one of the sponsors of the Adult Learners' Festival. In this article, Susan MacNeill, Communications Officer with FETAC, explains how the organisation has become a unifying force for the sector.*

FETAC was delighted to support the recent third annual AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival, incorporating the STAR Awards. The festival, which celebrates adult learning and showcases the work of adult education providers, has gone from strength to strength and is an important event for all learners and providers involved in further education and training.

Further education and training in Ireland offers more opportunities than ever before and FETAC has become a unifying force for the sector. Since its foundation in 2001 FETAC has made over 600,000 quality assured awards to learners at all ages and stages of learning, opening doors to new or better jobs, further education or contributing to personal development. With over 700 registered providers offering further education and training courses in approximately 1,300 centres, FETAC gives people the opportunity to gain recognition for learning. Learning takes place in education or training centres, in the community and in the work place.

There are hundreds of FETAC awards available including everything from childcare to catering, fishing to floristry and the craft apprenticeships. All FETAC awards are quality assured, nationally and internationally recognised and form part of The National Framework of Qualifications.

The National Framework of Qualifications is a system of ten levels which incorporates qualifications for all kinds of learning, wherever it is gained. FETAC awards are placed on the framework at levels 1 to 6. The



*Mary Kennedy and Minister for Lifelong Learning Sean Haughey TD with Susan MacNeill and Andrina Wafer from FETAC*

framework brings greater clarity to the Irish education and training system, making it possible for learners, providers and employers to understand and compare different types of qualifications – nationally and internationally. For further information on the National Framework of Qualifications visit [www.nfq.ie](http://www.nfq.ie).

FETAC awards enable access opportunities for progression to 3rd level education in over 41 higher education

***FETAC gives people the opportunity to gain recognition for learning***

institutions, with FETAC applicants accounting for over 10% of all applicants to the CAO. For further details see the FETAC publication Progression from FETAC Level 5 Certificates and Level 6 Advanced Certificates to Higher Education Courses 2009.

So whether someone is in school, returning to learning, upskilling in their work or thinking about taking their education and training to the next stage, it's now easier for everyone to recognise and understand the national qualifications system.

Further information on FETAC can be found on [www.fetac.ie](http://www.fetac.ie).

To search the national database of courses leading to FETAC awards visit Qualifax at [www.qualifax.ie](http://www.qualifax.ie).

**BACK TO CONTENTS**

# Learning locally, celebrating nationally

*This year during the Adult Learners' Festival a number of VECs throughout the country decided to celebrate the achievements of adult learners by organising presentation ceremonies. Here are some of the ceremonies that took place during the Festival.*

Eileen Curtis, AEO with Kilkenny VEC summarised it aptly when she said 'this Festival is an opportunity to showcase the range of educational opportunities available within the sector nationally.'

She was speaking as 260 adults were the proud recipients of awards at Kilkenny Adult Education Service, and presented the awards along with Cllr Marie Fitzpatrick, Chairperson of Co. Kilkenny VEC. Students received awards in areas such as arts and crafts, childcare including special needs, IT, personal development, dressmaking, horticulture and healthcare support. Major awards were presented at Level 5 and minor awards at Levels 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Meanwhile in Cavan Junior Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Brendan Smith TD presented awards to 150 adult learners, who had studied subjects as varied as childcare, English language, communications, computers and ECDL.

In Mayo 130 learners were presented with FETAC Awards ranging from level 3 to level 5 in a variety of courses including full Awards and component certs in Youthwork Level 5, Childcare Level 5, Business Studies Level 5, Classroom Assistant Level 5, Information Technology Skills Level 4, Computer Literacy Level 3, Personal Effectiveness Level 3, Maths Level 3, Communications Level 3 Graphic Communications Level 3 and English as a Second Language Level 3.

Also during the week learners



*Above: Co. Cavan VEC Presentation of Certificates Ceremony*

*Below: Mayo VEC presented Adult Learners from the East – Mayo area with FETAC awards during an Adult Learners Fair in the McWilliam Park Hotel in Claremorris. Photographed were front row from left to right: Eileen Gibbons, Claremorris; Sheila Charles, Claremorris, Geraldine O'Haire, Tutor; Denis McGrath, Ballyhaunis; William Vize, Claremorris; and Maureen Bourke, Services Manager, Western Alzheimers, Ballindine; and back row from left to right; Mairtin O'Morain Tutor; Raymond Kelly, Brickens; Sean Conboy, FÁS Supervisor; Michael O'Connor, Brickens; Frank Kelly, FÁS; and Pat Staunton, Mayo VEC. Photograph: Keith Heneghan/Phocus*

at St. Josephs Training Centre in Ennis received their awards, while at St. Patrick's/St. Brigid's National School there was a FETAC Certificate Presentation morning where Co. Louth VEC's Community Education Facilitator presented FETAC Component

Certificates to learners who successfully completed Level 3 and Level 4 IT modules. In Dundalk Tara Education Centre hosted a presentation of FETAC, Junior and City and Guilds Certificates to adult learners by Acting CEO of Co. Louth VEC, Eugene Winters.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

# VTOS – the success story that is....open-ended

*This year sees VTOS (Vocational Training and Opportunities Scheme) – celebrate 20 years of delivering second chance education opportunities in a hundred different centres around the country. During the Adult Learners’ Festival a major conference took place in Castleconnell Co. Limerick, to look at the major developments in the programme since its beginnings, and how to rise to the challenges ahead. Jim McNamara from An tIonad Glas reports.*

Unfinished business, a work in progress, a bold fresh start; some of the phrases used in 2009 as we celebrate and reflect on some of the anniversaries this year brings. Yes it's one hundred years since the founding of the Transport Union (now S.I.P.T.U.), ninety years since the first Dáil met and the Limerick Soviet was formed. All of these in different ways made a bold claim for fair share, for democracy, for equality, inclusion and empowerment.

Compared to these momentous events the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) is just a youth of twenty summers. VTOS co-ordinators gathered in Castleconnell Co. Limerick during the Adult Learners' Festival, to celebrate, review and re-envision the programme in a new century. The review featured keynote addresses, a civic reception, panel discussions, workshops, music, songs, a rich ferment of reflection, some serious analysis and pointers for ways to improve the service in the years ahead. This account features some of the issues raised in the presentations and subsequent discussions.

## Building dynamic learning communities

This was one of the themes of AONTAS President, Marian Duffy in a keynote address where she outlined the “ripple-up” effect of a VTOS student finding a meaningful learning experience with others in a supportive centre. "Tracing the transition and growth of a parent, frustrated with being unable to help the children with homework, coming to confront the barriers, finding the voice to tell her story, experiencing the help, solidarity and joy of being with co-learners was" she said "the key to building learning families and learning communities". This intergenerational education is

also vital particularly for building new communities that are often without the wider family support structures.

Giving adults the language, analysis and tools to challenge politicians and candidates, was an ongoing theme of a number of speakers and one of the greatest hopes for meaningful change in the future.

In affirming the learner-centered ethos of VTOS Ms. Duffy quoted Kahlil Gibran “No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge.” She firmly believed in W.B. Yeats view that “Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire.”

**BACK TO CONTENTS**

**‘Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire’**



Leaving Cert Result Day

### A course at which you will succeed

This was the motto of Helen Keogh the National Co-ordinator of VTOS, who has guided the programme and supported learners throughout the country for several years. Outlining the growth and impact of the programme, some of the key elements of its success were its accessibility in over 100 centres around the country, its adult ethos and its professionalism. The centres she said had upskilled people but with an educational focus and over five thousand adults had benefited annually. The flexibility and diversity of its provision was special and this allows VTOS and its learners to respond particularly to the challenges of today. The programme, she considered was the “anchor tenant” in a patchwork of provision for adult learners.

### Looking beyond the demands of the market

Dr. Kathleen Lynch, professor of Equality Studies in UCD, gave a keynote address in which she called for an informed intellectual debate on the kind of society we want to create and the kind we want to avoid.

“We have a choice: we can either create a highly unequal and polarised society with a minority of very wealthy people and a rising number of poor and vulnerable people, or we can create an egalitarian society, where no one will be destitute, where there will be high quality health care and excellent education for all age groups; where each will have a safe and secure home; where there is a well resourced welfare system based on a concept of rights rather than discretion and

charity; where there is an accessible and affordable public transport system and proper supports for both the care of children, and of older and other vulnerable people.”

In a wide ranging address Ms. Lynch exploded the myth that we have the most caring society and the best education system in Europe. “We have one of the lowest rates of social expenditures on education, housing, transport and welfare within the EU. Our lack of commitment to the public sphere is evident in many concrete ways, from the lack of public spaces for play for children (especially safe indoor places) to the lack of public sports facilities, to the lack of investment in parks and public amenities in so many towns and villages.”



*Leslie Liston, a student with An tIonad Glas, the Organic College*

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



*The conference organising committee left to right: Ann Slevin, Wexford; Helen Keogh, VTOS Co-ordinator; Jim McNamara, an tIonad Glas; Delores Hartley, Waterford; Aine McLaughlin, Donegal; Miranda O Bolguidir, Wexford*

**BACK TO CONTENTS**

**“Learning to think care-fully”**

This she suggested essential and in calling for a review of the purely economic skills, Professor Lynch quoted Kittay. “For most of humanity, much of life is lived in a state of profound and deep interdependency and for some prolonged dependency”. Humanity may be characterised as *homo sapiens* or *homo economicus* but we are also undoubtedly '*homo interdependicus*' and at times '*homo dependicus*'. It is time to take love, care and solidarity work seriously in education”.

**The language for a new vision**

Calling for more informed political and social education in schools and colleges, Professor Lynch observed that young people become adults without knowing the difference between left and right, between liberal and conservative, socialist and capitalist, feminist and anti-feminist, egalitarian and anti-egalitarian. All they are exposed to are sound-bites and diatribes.

They have no political vocabulary in which to analyse and to speak. And this is why we find it hard to create a new vision, and a new politics. The intellectual ground is arid; people literally do

not know what you are talking about. In this vacuum we were reminded that “the view from nowhere is nothing”.

In the discussion that followed Ms. Lynch outlined the need for all schools and colleges to promote an egalitarian culture among its staff and students. The right of adults to a meaningful education, in a visually stimulating environment, the need for respect for dissent and to look out for the most vulnerable was also raised.

The proposed new entrance requirements for mature students to universities were of particular concern in that the criteria was narrowly market focused, expensive and suited only to those with high IT skills.



*VTOS County Challenge Day, the winners*

**BACK TO CONTENTS**

## Future focus

The globalised market has dislocated communities in Ireland and across the world in the name of cheap goods, services and “free trade”. In this climate, education must not be considered another commodity to be short-term traded between those who could pay for it.

Quality educational services across Europe had come from long-term investment and many of the outcomes are not immediately quantifiable. The issues of ethical procurement, fair trade and local sourcing were the business of all educational providers, particularly those which deal in citizenship, democracy and inclusion.

Up-skilling with reflection, was called for particularly in the context of an

unstable financial world, diminishing oil energy reserves and accelerating climate change. Attention to building core competencies and skills in communities towards increasing the levels and scope of the “literacies”, including digital and eco-literacies were also considered.

Work/life balance, food, health, learner supports and IT issues were discussed in a range of workshops.

Intercultural diversity was rated as strength of VTOS centres and a well of knowledge to be tapped further in the years ahead. The harvesting of ideas and wisdom from the many cultures which now enrich us, as well as from Irish culture, was seen as a challenge that is only beginning to be explored.

As this conference on VTOS concluded, one was reminded that it

was the voters of Limerick East some 40 years earlier, who elected a Minister for Education who declared that secondary education would be free to all. A vision and a plan in difficult economic times... still some unfinished business?

It was the Inis Mór poet Máirtín Ó Direáin who advised us of the need to ‘Coigil aithinne d’aislinge’. Let’s refuel our vision.

Details of the events of the VTOS 20 conference are available on the website [www.navc.ie](http://www.navc.ie). VTOS centres around the country may be contacted through the local VEC or through the Department of Education and Science. [www.vtos.ie](http://www.vtos.ie).

*Jim McNamara is the current chairperson of the National Association of VTOS Co-ordinators and may be contacted at [jimm@organiccollege.com](mailto:jimm@organiccollege.com).*

# Ask Jenny...

**Jenny Gunning from the AONTAS Information Referral Service answers your adult education queries.**

Dear Jenny,

My name is Gary and I work as an office administrator for a marketing company based in Dublin. I have several certificates in business and 13 years experience working within the marketing business. At this point I feel I'm not being challenged enough and I'm now ready to learn new skills and update my C.V. I'm not sure if my employer can support me financially or how my employer will react to my decision to return to learning. However before I approach him I need to know what is on offer course wise and where to find a suitable course? In the current climate I want to make sure that I make an informed decision.

Please help

Gary

Hi Gary,

It is clear that you already have a wealth of experience in your field and there are many courses on offer for people looking to upskill. In times of uncertainty, employers love loyalty. Your eagerness to upskill will show your employer the value you bring to their business by building up your skill set. It might also enable you to take on additional responsibilities; which is a great way to add value to your role. Upskilling ultimately makes you a more attractive employee and improves your employment prospects.

There are many part-time courses and flexible learning options on offer. These would allow you manage to study along with your work life. Many course providers now recognise prior learning so you may be offered exemptions for the courses you have already completed. If the course you choose is of benefit to your employer perhaps he/she will help fund the course. If you are attached to a member of a trade union, contact them as most of them actively promote workplace learning. You may also get some financial support by means of a grant or scholarship from them. Alternatively you take a look at the range of course on offer on each of the course databases mentioned below:

- [www.qualifax.ie](http://www.qualifax.ie)
- [www.nightcourses.com](http://www.nightcourses.com)

Good luck,

Jenny.

Dear Jenny

I was recently made unemployed and since this happened I have been thinking about returning to education. I completed my Leaving Certificate in 1992 and although I have completed several on the job training courses I now want to pursue a full-time Back To Education Allowance approved course in Third Level. I hope to apply for the maintenance grant but I am not sure that if this will make me ineligible to receive the BTEA? Also I have two young children who are in childcare and I am just wondering does the BTEA make provisions for childcare, will I receive a childcare payment?

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sinead

Hi Sinead,

Firstly your eligibility for BTEA is not affected by any maintenance grant you may get. However, under the terms of the BTEA no provision is made for an additional specific payment for childcare. Although, if you have two dependants, this will be reflected in the social welfare payment that qualifies you for the BTEA and will continue to be reflected in the BTEA payment.

Speak to the college Access Officer and ask him/her is there an creche on-campus, as they often provide a limited amount of childcare places for students at a subsidised rate. Also ask him/her about the Student Assistance Fund. The purpose of this fund is to assist students in a sensitive and sympathetic manner that might otherwise, due to financial reasons be unable to continue their third level studies. Each institution receives a limited amount of funding on a per-capita basis. If you are eligible for assistance the amount you can receive will depend entirely on your circumstances.

Another avenue to pursue would be the annual Cost of Education allowance, which is part of the BTEA scheme, and may be of help with the childcare costs.

Best of luck,  
Jenny.

## Need Answers?

Contact AONTAS on 01 406 8220, or visit our website [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com). AONTAS recently produced an Information Booklet for adults returning to education – give us a call and we'll send you a copy free of charge.

**BACK TO CONTENTS**

## What's stopping you now?

*In February 2009 over 100 older learners came together during the AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival. Niamh Farren discovers why it's never too late to learn.*



*Coffee Time at the Senior Learners' meeting*

Education is a right for all, and not just for education purposes. It is an essential ingredient in the lives of older people and they have the right to access quality education opportunities that meet their needs. Education can support people to develop interests and passions; it encourages community engagement and a sense of belonging; it improves health and overcomes isolation. It also facilitates the sharing of knowledge and experience between generations. These were the themes which struck a real chord with the 120 older people who attended a meeting of the Senior Learner Network during the Adult Learners' Festival. The meeting was about mobilising for change, but also about celebrating the benefits of learning.

We live longer lives now. By 2025 it is predicted that 36% of the population will be aged 50 plus. In fact by 2036 it is estimated that older people (65 years and older) will account for one fifth of the population. The health benefits of education have already been documented by the Institute of Public Health, which has identified a link between lower levels of education and poor health. The research identified

how taking part in some form of education in later life helps keep both body and mind active. It is also an excellent way to overcome social isolation and to open up the world of information technology, mobile phone texting, internet and emailing, which prove very popular courses. These findings were illustrated by AONTAS research conducted last year on the lifelong learning needs of older people entitled 'Don't Stop me Now.'

'The research identified that one of the main issues faced by older people returning to learn is that many of the courses on offer are geared around employment', explained Berni

***"We need appropriate teachers. It depends on who is there and if they empathise with older people. Young teachers can just race on."***

***Margaret Tallon, Tullamore***

**BACK TO CONTENTS**

Brady, AONTAS Director. 'For example older people expressed a huge interest in learning how to use technology more proficiently. Social networking, and mobile phones provide fantastic opportunities for older people, particularly those who are housebound – but the training needs to be delivered according to the needs of older people themselves. The social aspect of education is really important for older people. It's not just about learning a new skill; getting out of the house and meeting new people is also hugely important.'

Máire Hctor, TD and Minister for Older People launched the report. Speaking at the launch, the Minister said "Don't Stop Me Now" highlights the wealth of skills and experience that we have in this country. Older people can and want to contribute, the challenge is to provide them with the opportunity to participate in meaningful and purposeful education".

In the wake of the 2008 announcement regarding changes to the criteria for medical cards for the over 70s, older people found their voice. Taking to the streets with placards, they joined a worldwide army of activist movements for older people such as the Grey Panthers and the Raging Grannies. And so it was that this meeting invited those attending to put together a manifesto for older learners.

Those who attended the meeting listened to Tom Collins, Professor of Education at NUI Maynooth, as he talked them through decades of great change in Ireland – change that had impacted on their lives, but also change that they had initiated. Speaking about the current economic climate, Professor Collins said that we needed to 'begin to talk ourselves out of the recession, by bringing people together.' He outlined the social arguments for investing in adult learning, particularly in older people. 'If we think about the quality of life in a community', he said, 'adult education can enrich it by providing new ways of gaining physical and mental aliveness and alertness by maintaining the health of an ageing population. In fact, I would think that an educational approach to health and well being for older people would be far more beneficial and cost effective than any way we know. The possibilities of adult learning include the way which it can promote and sustain independence. Sustaining independence for as long as a persons life ultimately represents a phenomenal savings to the state, because otherwise that person literally becomes an encumbrance on the state. So, managing a life that is full, that is life giving, that is physically, socially, intellectually and emotionally alive and enriched – this is what adult education offers. And, in its absence, the alternatives include medication, long term care, a reliance on an overstretched healthcare system and a gradual decline into dependency.'



*Minister for Older People, Máire Hctor is serenaded by older learners*



*Professor Tom Collins, NUI Maynooth addresses 150 older learners*

***"Managing a life that is full, that is life giving, that is physically, socially, intellectually and emotionally alive and enriched – this is what adult education offers."***

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



*Putting together the Manifesto for Senior Learners*

## **Towards a learning manifesto for older people**

The challenge for the day was how to get agreement from those taking part on five simple points to be included in the Manifesto. Niamh O'Reilly, Head of Membership Services, explains 'We split those taking part into discussion groups, with a facilitator working with each group. We asked each group to identify what they felt was important to retain for older learners. Then we asked them to consider what was stopping them. Each group then had to select five of those issues to present to the wider group. The issues were all displayed in the room and each participant votes for those they think are most important. The top five results chosen overall by the group form the basis of the Manifesto.'

The discussion was lively and stimulating. All learners took part in discussion groups and all worked collectively to create their manifesto which highlights the 5 demands for senior learners. All agreed that adult learning for older people is essential, that the benefits are great and that it is fundamental for good health and an active social life.

***"Transfer of skill is important. Show me how to knit a jumper and I'll pass it on."  
Pat Fern, Whitehall, Monday Club***

## **Forever young**

Some light relief and entertainment on the day was provided by the Forever Young Chorus. The Chorus meets in Finglas village weekly to practice, and is coordinated by the education action group to work with committee of the Finglas/Cabra Council for Older People. The choir consists of thirty members, four men and twenty six women. A music director, Ms. Chiara Browne, was contracted (with some funding from the local VEC) by the Finglas Cabra Partnership which supports the education action group; to work with the choir between January and June 2008. The choir's repertoire includes interpretations of modern pop songs from such well known artists as U2 and Sinead O'Connor. Christine Ryan, a member of the choir and a volunteer with the education action group committee explained 'we really enjoy every minute of it and love the singing'. The group has Concerts performed in the Axis Theatre on the Dublin City University (DCU) campus, in the Finglas Youth Resource Centre and in East Belfast on various dates in May and June 2008. The choir also participated in the Age and Opportunity Bealtaine Festival 2008.

***"Beware of the Chair" i.e. not to end up your days just sitting in a chair all day!!***

**BACK TO CONTENTS**



*Towards a Manifesto for Senior Learners*

## Manifesto for Senior Learners

1. Acknowledge and value the wisdom of senior learners by facilitating the 'passing on' of information
2. Create and distribute information on the learning opportunities for older learners in every community
3. Ensure accessible, locally based courses for senior learners
4. Specific funding must be allocated to quality adult and community education courses for older learners
5. Retain Minister of State for Older People at all costs (with enhanced responsibilities and influence).

***"Give access to patients in nursing homes. They should have as much access as other learners."  
Anne Cummins, An Cosán***

## Next steps

AONTAS and the Senior Learner Network will circulate the Manifesto in the lead up to the Local and European Elections Campaign. If you agree with the ideas in this manifesto, please discuss them with others and take action to support them. You can use this Manifesto to:

- Inform discussions about the wider purposes of learning for older people with election candidates, policy makers, education and community workers and other learners
- Help make a case for supporting senior learners' rights to educational opportunities
- Draw up a learning charter for your organisation
- Campaign to protect other learning outcomes such as personal and community development, active citizenship and social justice.

*For more information about the Senior Learners' Network, contact Niamh O'Reilly on 01 406 8220 or [noreilly@aontas.com](mailto:noreilly@aontas.com). If you would like a copy of the Senior Learners' Manifesto, please contact AONTAS. If you would like a copy of the research report 'Don't Stop me Now' contact AONTAS or download it from the website.*

**BACK TO CONTENTS**

# I'm an adult learner, invest in me!

*The closing event of the Festival traditionally focuses on a policy theme and this year was no different. In the lead up to the event, AONTAS conducted a snapshot study on the costs and benefits of returning to learn, based on the experiences of three very different adult learners. The idea was to identify the monetary outcomes of returning to learn – thus making a case for investment in adult learning. Jennifer Gunning, Information and Research Officer, worked with the support of Eibhlin Hudson, a PhD student based in UCD. On the day, the three individuals spoke about how their education had benefited them. Jennifer Gunning presents a summary of their stories.*

The study looked at the costs of returning to learning for three adults, Vivienne, Samantha and Seamus under a number of headings, such as fees, books, transport, photocopying, subsistence and childcare. Each adult received subsidies for their courses which was a significant factor in their decision to pursue further and higher education. Projections across their working lives show significant monetary benefits ranging from €18,000 to €650,000 depending on the ages of the learners. 'The research shows that monetary benefits are not the only ones accumulated by the learners' explained Berni Brady, AONTAS Director. 'Gaining confidence, providing role models for children and young people, health and community involvement were found to be important spin-offs from their educational pursuits.'

## **Vivienne Glanville's story**

"My educational progression opportunity arose from strong passionate women who acknowledged the need to support non-traditional students to access third level opportunities in their community with supports built around their needs. I didn't realise I had a brain or academic abilities until I was allowed the space to fit it!"

Vivienne is currently the Co-ordinator of Ronanstown Community Development Project in Clondalkin. It was through joining Ronanstown women's group that Vivienne herself began her own personal lifelong learning journey. She met plenty of local people and took part in classes in personal development, art and other new disciplines. As her confidence grew, she decided to take on an official qual-

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

*Vivienne Glanville, Co-ordinator of Ronanstown Community Development Project*

ified programme. Little did she know that when she signed up to begin a Certificate course in Women's Studies in 1999 that she would be competing for her Master's in 2008. Through the local women's group in Ronanstown Vivienne was very fortunate to be able to access the Certificate course being delivered by UCD through a Community Outreach Programme. Upon reflection she feels that the course gave women's community education a forum.

### A taste for learning

At first Vivienne wanted a taste of third level education and the Certificate course certainly facilitated this. However when the course ended Vivienne had a new way of thinking and wanted to build on this knowledge. The Certificate was so successful in the area that the demand led to UCD offering to deliver a follow on with the introduction of a Diploma in Women's Studies.

Over the years Vivienne like most learners encountered challenges in her education. The financial costs of continuing education along with feeling alone in your study can be very difficult to overcome but not for her. She had the support of the now established Clondalkin Women's Community Education Forum. Through this she found the vital study support she needed to continue her learning. In response to the financial and social burdens the learners were experiencing the CWCE Forum itself took steps to support the group. These steps included; childcare support, offering study space for the group to come together, provided learners with laptops, mentoring, study skills support, allowed learners to use photocopying and printing facilities and above all it offered each learner encouragement.

Vivienne finished her Diploma and then began an H.Dip which allowed her to advance to the Master's Programme with UCD. Vivienne acknowledges that gaining a qualification enabled her to gain employment and on a personal level she feels very lucky to have gained employment in her community. This education also has been a catalyst in her community activism and volunteering in the community to bring about change.

***This education also has been a catalyst in her community activism and volunteering in the community to bring about change.***



*Seamus Dowling*

According to the study, 'the main benefit was a €35,822 increase in income. All other things equal Vivienne intends to work for another 27 years. Using a discount rate of 4% the net present value of this increase in income is about €658,342.'

### Seamus Dowling's story

"In my opinion once you start learning, no matter what level you start at, you will develop a thirst for learning and want more. For an adult like myself the first step or course is the biggest challenge and the scariest. You have to deal with all sorts of baggage from the past bad experiences in school, a sense or fear of failure and just the feeling that you might not be as good as everyone else. For this reason a supportive and non-threatening environment is essential for success."

Seamus Dowling is from a rural village called Ballon in Co. Carlow. He left school at 17 when he completed the Inter Cert and took up employment as a semi skilled tool maker. In the 1970s leaving school at this age was common and university was beyond his families means and hardly ever came into consideration. As such the Leaving Cert was not considered relevant or valuable.

He was very lucky in that the company that he started to work for – Lapelle from Germany had a very enlightened and proactive approach to employee training and development. Lapelle, unlike a lot of indigenous companies took a view that the cost of training was not only a benefit to the company but a necessity. The company had difficulty finding or sourcing qualified tool makers in the region and as

**BACK TO CONTENTS**



*Making the case for investment in adult learning*

a result provided opportunities for sem-skilled tool makers to upgrade their skills. The training also embraced a whole range of personal development options.

Seamus also became involved in the trade union movement and that opened up a whole new range of educational opportunities for him. This was mainly in the area of industrial relations but also led to him completing, in his own time, a part time two year HETAC course in Trade Union Studies.

Once on the learning curve he was bitten by the learning bug and eventually went to UCD to complete a Diploma. He is now in the process of completing a Degree in Business Studies and Human Resource Management.

Reflecting back on his learning journey to date, Seamus is surprised at how far he has come because when he left school, University was the farthest thing from his mind and without the experience and confidence he gained through doing courses with Lappelle and the trade unions he feels he would never have taken the first step on the journey.

### **Learning pays off**

As you can imagine this transition after 32 years service in a manufacturing environment was an immense challenge for Seamus but he took it in his stride. He now feels that the benefits of his education are now coming into play and have started to pay real dividends. Seamus has recently taken up the role of Regional Training & Development Co-ordinator in the UNION Skills Network.

The Union Skills Network is a strategic alliance between FÁS and Congress which will seek to reach workers with

low skills/educational levels and encourage them to realise the benefits of education, provide them with opportunities to grow and develop new skills. The project will do this by recruiting workplace learning representatives who will work with their peers to provide advice and guidance to those in most need of training. The ULRs and the Regional Co-ordinators will be there right through the process to support and encourage the learners and overcome and fears or anxiety they may have about returning to learning. A key element of the process will be a personal learning plan which will set out the road map for the learners to keep them on track to achieve their learning goals. The ULRs will be drawn from affiliated unions from right across the trade union movement.

In addition to the very important work that the project will do in providing people with opportunities to gain new qualifications it will also serve to inform and influence future Government policy in this area.

According to the study, 'The main benefit was a €7,000 increase in income. All other things equal Seamus intends to work for another 9 years. Using a discount rate of 4% the net present value of this increase in income is about €59,047.'

***He now feels that the benefits of his education are now coming into play and have started to pay real dividends.***

**BACK TO CONTENTS**

## Samantha Mortell's story

*"Now I am much more assertive and confident. I learned how to work and be part of a group, I developed facilitation skills and broadened my general knowledge and now know more about the spectrum of society around us all"*

Samantha Mortell is a 37 year old mother of two from Waterford City. Samantha left school in 1998 after completing the Inter Certificate. In 2001 she decided to return to learning. One of the main reasons Samantha returned to learning was to help her children with their school work and to be a role model for them.

Samantha initially completed a childcare course which only fuelled her passion for learning. She then went on to complete a pre-development course which was being delivered by her child's school liaison team and also in conjunction with the Department of Social and Family Affairs. Samantha then decided to build on this and participated in the Mothers Making A Difference Project (MMAD) which was a Waterford Institute of Technology-led programme designed to raise mothers' expectations of their children's education. The Mothers Make A Difference (MMAD) project works by bringing together relevant agencies and organisations to provide educational opportunities for disadvantaged mothers and help them to have a more positive experience of education.

MMAD is unique in that it blends all levels of educational providers – primary, secondary, further and higher education – in a partnership which works from a holistic perspective. The partnership has worked closely with other support agencies to develop best practice in terms of educational provision for those who may not have traditionally accessed further or higher education.

Although Samantha is in the early stages of her own learning journey she is now in a position to help her own children with their learning. Samantha acknowledges that she is very much a role model for my children now. She said "I will always advise them on college life and encourage, support and motivate them to go further with their education after second level." Samantha always tells them that education isn't only about earning an income and that it's not just about the uniform. She now thinks that education infiltrates every part of our lives and it's all about valuing the importance of lifelong learning. Samantha feels lucky to have had the opportunity to go so that she can pass on her values, experiences and knowledge to her children.

Reflecting on her experience to date she said she would have never participated in discussions or spoken up for herself and now she has the confidence to be assertive, to share her opinions and feel that her opinion is valued. She



Heidi Bedell from TARGET makes her case

now has the ambition and motivation to go on learning, and to be confident speaking on topics that she is passionate about. Samantha continues to give back to her community by getting involved in homework clubs, mentoring clubs, and parents committees.

One of the magic moments for her was when she received The FETAC Level 5 Certificate as it re-assured her that she can do it and that she has the courage to try to succeed.

The table below summarises the key monetary outcomes for the learning of all three participants. The study concludes 'It is clear that there is a large variation in the costs and benefits experienced by the individuals studied. All three individuals here experienced a net benefit as opposed to a net cost. However, these figures may underestimate the value of lifelong learning, as there are many positive externalities to society of lifelong education. These wider benefits would be taken into account in studies examining adult learning from a societal perspective.'

Table 1. Costs of Adult Education

Case	Costs	Benefits	Net Benefit
Seamus	€3,434.91	€59,000	€62,482
Vivienne	€8,260.07	€658,342	€650,172
Samantha	€469.08	€18,370	€18,839

To download a copy of the document in full, visit [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com).

**BACK TO CONTENTS**

# Adult Learners' Festival – around the world

*In this article, Ciara Murphy writes about the phenomenon that is the Adult Learners' Festival around the globe.*

It's called *He Tangata Matauranga* in New Zealand, *Woche der Erwachsenenbildung* in Austria, *Täiskasvanud õppija nädal* in Estonia and *Féile Aosfhoghlaimoírí* as Gaelige. Despite the different names and education systems, adult learning festivals worldwide share common goals – to celebrate learning, to promote the role of adult learning in transforming the lives of individuals and communities and to provide a voice for adult learners.

Festivals and events to celebrate adult learning are not new. International Literacy Day (ILD) has been celebrated since 1967, and has been the focus of learning festivals held over the years. The move to create a wider celebration of adult learning began with the American Association for the Advancement of Education (AAAE) in the late 1980s. The US week focused on a Congressional Breakfast for outstanding adult learners backed by an activities pack for AAAE members. NIACE followed in 1992 with the Adult Learners' Week while Australia held their first ALW in 1995. Since then, over 50 countries, from Indonesia to Iran have celebrated learning by organising a national adult learning festival.

Worldwide there are diverse events dedicated to people of all ages, needs and education levels. Russia's first Week of Adult Education in January 2000 took place on a train travelling from St. Petersburg to Vladivostock. The train visited 15 towns in 12 regions, using this huge cultural potential to contribute to learning knowledge. Teachers, representatives of educational establishments



*Sirje Plaks, Programme manager with AEAE Andras (Adult Learning Organisation in Estonia) who attended the STAR Awards Ceremony, together with Minister for Lifelong Learning, Sean Haughey TD, Mary Kennedy, and Marian Duffy, AONTAS President*

and students met to exchange experience while debating subjects such as skills development and retraining.

During Australia's Adult Learners' Week, 'Seniors Online Day' aimed to encourage older people to get online, perhaps for the first time, and to show that using the Internet could benefit their lives. Libraries, adult and community education centres, senior learners' organisations and online users were encouraged to introduce older people to the net.

A learning tram was on the move in Tallinn during Estonia's 10th Adult Learners Week in 2008. The tram was named 'Take Pleasure in Learning', and students of Tallinn Adult Gymnasium disseminated information about learning possibilities. Travellers solved education-related crosswords and the very best were rewarded with free course at Tallinn Folk High School.

Fathers and kids boarding another special tram in Bern during Switzerland's second **Lernfestival** had the chance to read and learn together, the dads picking up tips about their role

as educators. Participants reflected on the "one-hour-a-day" motto, which aims to demand one hour a day for learning as everyone's right and duty.

In the UK, a literacy storyline was woven into Brookside. The programme was backed up with free information packs from NIACE and local learning centres where people could go to improve their reading and writing. Over 10,000 people enquired about literacy courses in response to the programme. Agnes, a 70-year-old from Belfast who couldn't write her own surname, went along to a learning centre and now has achieved qualifications. She said: "If I can do it, you can do it!"

Agnes's learning journey sums up the importance of adult learning festivals worldwide – a learners festival can provide that first important step back into learning and transform the lives of individuals and communities that participate.

*For more information, visit [www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk) or [www.adultlearnersweek.org](http://www.adultlearnersweek.org)*

**BACK TO CONTENTS**

# Diary of an Adult Education Guidance counsellor

*In this article, Jason Donohue describes the service provided by him as an Adult Education Guidance Counsellor in Co. Cavan VEC.*

Instead of giving you a snippet from a day in the life of an Adult Guidance Counsellor it may be more beneficial to answer this question. What can someone get from the service?

## Information, support and encouragement

Permit me to explain a little more. As one adult learner reminded me recently 'a picture speaks a thousand words', so I have made use of pictures to aid with the explanation. I will expand a little more on their significance below.

I am often reminded that men rarely ask for directions and so often lose their way. I think we all need to turn to different people in our lives at different times to seek advice, to talk things through and to get some idea where we are going. Going it alone can often result in ending up in the wrong place. That leads me to the first picture.

### (a) Where am I?



The compass represents finding direction. In times of confusion or at times when the way ahead is unclear we need to slow down and find our present location. Guidance I believe involves helping people take stock of where they are. It is about helping to create a space to view their current situation and look at the experiences and skills collected along the way. It is facilitating individuals to harness their personal strengths.

### (b) Where from here?



This picture is of a sat nav. When we know where we want to go it is obviously easier to get there. Another aspect of the service is helping people to look at where they want to go, and then help them plot the journey. Enabling people to look at options, to explore possibilities, to believe in their own ability, to discover what training is needed, where they can do it.

### (c) I'm on my way



Setting off on a new journey can be both a nervous and exciting experience and, of course, it is very natural to get such feelings. The picture of the young cyclist who has cast off the training wheels reminds me of new beginnings. At first you move cautiously, wobbling a little but not wavering. The training wheels are off but you know they are there if needed. In the same way, returning to education is a big step and the longer we are away from it the bigger it may appear. In supporting adult learners, we find that they gain in confidence, gather momentum, make progress. The Guidance Service like the 'training wheels', moves aside, but is always there if and when required.



### (d) You can do it!



The last picture represents something I believe we all need – encouragement. We can all doubt our own ability or lose motivation and as such may need a boost or a lift to keep us going. The service provides such encouragement to the adult learner.

When we take this time to look at ourselves we often have two options – to accept conditions as they exist for us or accept the responsibility for changing them. In wanting to change or indeed seeking direction one can work with the Adult Education Guidance Counsellor who will in turn endeavor to help people see choices and aspire to their potential.

Good luck to you all in finding and taking the next step on your journey.

*To find a guidance counsellor in your area, visit [www.qualifax.com](http://www.qualifax.com).*

**BACK TO CONTENTS**



# ADULT LEARNERS' FESTIVAL

2nd – 6th FEBRUARY 2009



**“As a former teacher, I’m a strong advocate of the value of education and learning. It’s not just about what you learn, but also the confidence, growth and self esteem that learning brings”**

Mary Kennedy

AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation would like to thank all of those who made the Adult Learners’ Festival 2009 a great success.

To all our members, partner organisations, supporters, local links and event organisers,

**Thank you.**



**AONTAS**  
ADULT LEARNERS'  
FESTIVAL



**BACK TO CONTENTS**