

EXPLORE

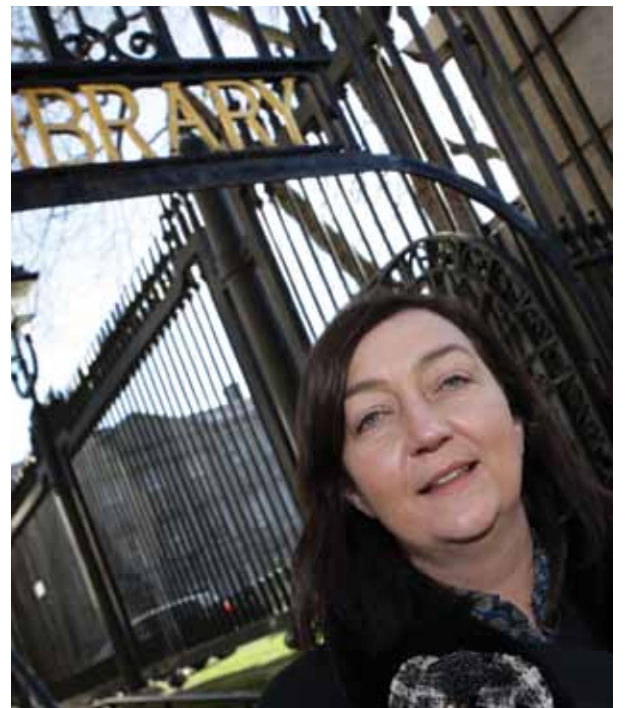


The quarterly magazine from AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

aontas

In this issue:

- *The challenges of delivering adult education during a recession*
- *Adult learning in small firms – 'an investment rather than a cost'*
- *Promoting your event in the media*
- *Collaboration and the Adult Learners' Festival – because we are 'Better Together'!*



Note from the Editor

Hello and welcome to this issue of *Explore*.

Following a busy couple of months, preparations for the Adult Learners' Festival are now in full swing. This edition of the magazine is designed to support you and your organisation to take part in the Adult Learners' Festival.

Firstly, it contains information on some of the current challenges within the adult education sector, as explained to us by all of you in our recent roadshow meetings around the country. From Cork to Cavan, there are huge similarities between the difficulties faced, and the Festival is a real opportunity to highlight how the sector must be resourced if it is to rise to the challenge of preparing people for employment.

The social purpose of education must not be forgotten in the debate. While we get caught up in discussions about unemployment and recession, adult learning is playing a vital role in keeping people busy and bringing people together. Cutbacks to the community sector threaten this position. Let's not forget that along with skills for employment, education brings things that are harder to quantify – citizenship, critical thinking, leadership, and analysis. These are the building blocks of a sustainable economic future, and a thinking society.

Another building block featured in this issue is www.BlueBrick.ie, a new initiative from the Institutes of Technology in Ireland based on the notion of flexible learning. The Congress

Centres Network explains their role in delivering education and information in local communities. We profile a company in Walkinstown which has a strong learning philosophy and invests extensively in training their employees – from professional qualifications in accountancy to drumming!

With all the bad news, it's easy to lose sight of positive stories. That's why the STAR awards are so important. This year AONTAS received 110 nominations for awards – a huge achievement given the difficulties of current circumstances for those involved in adult and community education. We look forward to showcasing them at the opening ceremony for the awards on February 22nd and will shortly publish the judges shortlist of projects for each category.

Finally we want to give you the tools to promote adult learning, and get involved in the Festival. There are tips on how to engage with media, a sample press release, and ideas for events and activities that you can run on a shoestring. During this year's Festival we aim to promote the work we are already doing in the sector. As is the case every year, www.adultlearnersfestival.com is full of ideas, and our Event in a Bag will help you mark the occasion.

I hope that 2010 will bring renewed enthusiasm and energy to your involvement in adult learning, as a provider, volunteer, or learner.

With best wishes,

Niamh Farren,
Communications Officer
AONTAS

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Community Education – Coming to a television near you

Over the past number of months, AONTAS has been collaborating with DCTV (Dublin Community Television) on an exciting initiative which will bring community education to the small screen. 'Beyond the Classroom' is a series of television programmes that will raise awareness about community

education, as well as showcasing practices within the sector. In partnership with AONTAS, DCTV drew down a grant from the BCI Sound and Vision Fund allocated from the Television Licence Fee, which supports the independent broadcasting sector to produce programmes with a public service remit. The programmes will for the first time, document the emergence, development and practice of community education in Dublin. Programmes will see practitioners analyse and discuss the unique features and

approach of community education, and will also provide an insight into learners experience of participating in community education. The series will be available widely on DVD and online, following the launch during the Adult Learners' Festival. For more information contact Niamh O'Reilly at AONTAS, or keep an eye on the CEN page of the AONTAS website. DCTV is currently available in Dublin on NTL channel 802. Programmes are also available on www.dctv.ie.

AONTAS hosts European Adult Education Network Conference

The European InfoNet Adult Education Network met for its annual conference in The Marino Institute in Dublin in November 2009.

At the 2009 annual conference of the European InfoNet Adult Education project in Dublin, the Minister for Lifelong Learning, Sean Haughey, praised InfoNet as a "very valuable resource, not just for journalists, but for everyone who is interested in adult education". The conference, attended by 30 partners of the Europe-wide network, was opened by the Minister with a short address.

The joint workshops on further improving the reporting of adult education in Europe were the focus of the conference. The conference was organised by AONTAS, as the local partner, in collaboration with The German Catholic Association for Adult Education (Katholischen



Members of the InfoNet Adult Education Network conference at the Marino Institute in November 2009

Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft für Erwachsenenbildung) which is the coordinator of the Infonet project. The network is planning to establish itself as a central information medium in European adult education using a new marketing strategy and providing extensive coverage. Approximately 25 journalists, editors and other experts came together in the network to gather and circulate information.

European InfoNet Adult Education will be promoted as a Grundtvig net-

work within the European Union's Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP). With 30 partners, it is currently the largest project in this programme.

A further highlight of the event was a reception at the Mansion House by the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Cllr Emer Costello. The Infonet delegates met the Lord Mayor who outlined her experience with transnational adult education projects and encouraged them to keep up the good work.

CONFINTEA VI

CONFINTEA is the acronym for the series of international, inter-governmental conferences on adult education which take place every 12 to 13 years. CONFINTEA V took place in Germany in 1997, and marked a turning point in the global recognition of and commitment to adult learning, and reaffirmed the position of adult learning within an overall framework of lifelong learning. Key outcomes of CONFINTEA V included recognition of the role of adult learning in relation to democracy, peace, human rights, respect for diversity and conflict resolution, economic

and ecological sustainability and workforce development. However, progression of these issues at national and international level was mixed. CONFINTEA VI was held in Belem, Brazil, at the beginning of December. The objectives of the CONFINTEA VI included:

- To assess how commitments made in 1997 have been implemented and to renew political momentum and commitment
- To push forward the recognition of adult learning and non-formal education within the perspective of life wide and adult learning
- To strengthen the integration of adult learning and non-formal

education within national sector-wide strategies

- To highlight the crucial role of adult learning and education for the realisation of current international education and development agendas
- To develop the tools for implementation in order to move from rhetoric to action.

Representatives from Ireland who attended CONFINTEA included Berni Brady, Niamh O'Reilly and Una Buckley from AONTAS, along with Mary Kett from the Department of Education and Science. A full report will shortly be available from www.aontas.com.

New commissioner appointed

On November 27, 2009, European Commission President José Manuel Barroso nominated his new Commission. Andrulla Vassiliou was appointed as the Commissioner of Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth. She was commissioner of Health in the former Barroso Commission (from March 2008).

Ms Vassiliou studied Law at Middle Temple Inn of Court, London (1961-1964) and International Affairs at the London Institute of World Affairs, (1964-1966). She practiced Law in Cyprus for twenty years (1968-1988). During this period she acted as Legal Advisor to The Standard Chartered Bank and later, to the Bank of Cyprus. She has also been on the Board of many public and private companies.

She gave up her legal practice in 1988, upon her husband's election to the Presidency of the Republic

of Cyprus. As First Lady she was very active in social, cultural and other fields. For many years she was actively involved in the work of the United Nations Association of Cyprus and was elected President of the Association for four consecutive terms.

During her parliamentary years she served on the following committees: Foreign Affairs Committee, Legal Affairs Committee, Committee on Education and Culture, Committee on Environment and the European Affairs Committee. She was also a Permanent Member of the delegation of the Cyprus Parliament to the Inter-Parliamentary Union. For more information visit:

http://ec.europa.eu/commission_barroso/vassiliou/index_en.htm.

Meanwhile, the European Commission has appointed Jan Trzczyński as Director-General of the Education and Culture DG.

A year of Happy Returns and Mixed Blessings

In this article, Berni Brady looks back on an eventful year for AONTAS and the adult education sector in Ireland.



L-R: Michael Moriarty, Berni Brady, Minister Sean Haughey, Marian Duffy

The traditional resilience of the adult and community education sector is being sorely tested by the challenges of the current recession in Ireland. At its AGM in May 2009 AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation celebrated forty years of Irish adult and community education and took the opportunity to illustrate and record its development. During those four decades the sector has faced many challenges, ranging from surviving on minimal resources courtesy of the many excellent volunteers who delivered the ser-

vice, to more optimistic times following the publication of the White paper, Learning for Life in 2000. In the Supplementary Budget in 2009 the adult and community education service suffered cuts like everyone else but the government did recognise the vital role adult education had to play and provided for extra places in further education under an 'activation' measure. This consisted of providing 6,910 places mostly in higher education with an additional 1500 places on the Post Leaving Certificate Programme. However the

rate at which unemployment levels have risen has rapidly swamped the capacity of the service to meet demand and has raised questions about the appropriateness of these interventions.

The demand for learning

AONTAS's Information Referral Service showed an increase in demand over 2008 of 500% by the end of October with a total of 5,217 queries dealt with by the service. The majority of these were newly

unemployed people and a staggering 67% were men. This is a major turnaround for a service that is traditionally accessed by far more women than men. Research has shown that adults with higher levels of qualifications are most likely to participate in additional learning activities throughout their lives, but the recent trends show that 81% of all individuals contacting the service this year have been out of education for more than ten years. 52% of this cohort has been out of education for more than 20 years and a further 4% have stated that they had not been involved in any educational activity for more than 30 years. These data show that Ireland still has a long way to go in the process of embedding a culture of lifelong learning in its educational psyche. During the boom years AONTAS consistently drew attention to the fact that while Ireland had the lowest level of unemployment across Europe it also had the highest level of low skilled, low qualified workers.

The need for basic skills

Labour market activation measures put in place after the April Budget have had disappointing levels of uptake perhaps because they have been pitched at too high a level. A quarter of unemployed people contacting the AONTAS Information Referral Service stated that the



Berni Brady, Director of AONTAS, speaking at the AONTAS AGM 2009

courses available did not suit their needs. One third of those contacting us feel that there needed to be greater choice and diversification of provision at local level and more than one quarter felt that there are few places to progress to after doing short courses thus questioning their value. The National Adult Literacy Agency believes that labour market activation measures need to address adult literacy, numeracy and basic skills development. It further argues that targeted and appropri-

ate activation measures to address the unacceptable low literacy levels in Irish society are cost effective to individuals, their families, society and the economy. The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs recommended in 2007 that basic skills (in particular literacy) 'should be prioritised and embedded into all publicly funded education and training provision in so far as possible.' The government has adopted this recommendation as policy.

According to NALA an adult between the ages of 18 and 65 with literacy difficulties and who has been on the Live Register for three months has limited options. S/he can access between 2 to 4 hours literacy tuition per week through the local VEC literacy scheme

A quarter of unemployed people contacting the AONTAS Information Referral Service stated that the courses available did not suit their needs.

or perhaps gain a place on an intensive basic education programme, or apply for a Community Employment place where if and when accepted they may be able to get a place on the FÁS/VEC Return to Education Programme. However a limited number of places are available.

Challenges to delivering the service

Together with the soaring demand for places on adult education and training courses some of the adult and community education services are coming under serious pressure as a result of the moratorium on the recruitment of personnel in the public service. The current definition of frontline staff in the education sector is confined to those who are teaching in the classroom. However the complexity of the adult and community education service is such that many of those involved in it have managerial, co-ordination or administrative roles such as Adult Education Officers, Adult Literacy Organisers, Guidance staff and so on. For example 68% of adult literacy tutors are volunteers who need to be trained and supported by the Adult Literacy Organisers. If these organisers are absent for reasons of sick/maternity leave or retirement they cannot be replaced, thus reducing the capacity of the service to deliver a quality service at a time when it is most needed.

Significant funding cuts are also being experienced by many community groups especially those which are not directly funded by

Investing in our existing strengths is vital not only to economic survival and renewal but also to the development of a strong civil society based on equality and democracy.

the Department of Education and Science, while demand for community education provision has risen exponentially. Many community education groups must apply for funding from an array of funding sources including as many as ten government departments, a situation which hampers the provision of a sustainable service. Currently there is great uncertainty about the future of the community and voluntary sector, in terms of the possible abolition of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and the effect of the Centre of Effective Services review of the Local Development and Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP) and the Community Development Programme (CDP).

Lifelong learning and education is a key instrument for addressing the challenges of a recession. Ireland's previous economic success was attributed to a number of factors, one in particular being the educated workforce which provided a basis for a knowledge economy. Investing in our existing strengths, in order to transform the current situation, is vital not only to economic survival and renewal but also to the development of a strong civil society based on equality and democracy. Reskilling and upskilling are essential; so too is providing a variety of educational opportunities, both formal and non-

formal to enable people to regain their confidence and self esteem and to explore new options in a rapidly changing world. The key strengths of the adult education sector are its resilience, its capacity to respond to the needs of adult learners and its flexibility in adapting to changing circumstances. However its development is hampered by its lack of visibility, the erosion of its resources and the fragmentation which is endemic in the system.

Recognition and collaboration

AONTAS members have called on the government to recognise the role adult and community education has to play in the renewal of the Irish economy and civil society and ensure that the core work of the sector is sustained through the recession. Already providers on the ground are collaborating in an effort to serve the needs of adults especially those who have been hit hardest by the economic collapse and are providing good value for money. AONTAS's work for the coming year will be to support that work by ensuring that the voice of the sector is heard and translated into government policy, and to publicly demonstrate its value through its Adult Learner's Festival in February.

Better Together – Outcomes of AONTAS Regional Meetings

Last autumn AONTAS embarked on a series of regional meetings across the country in order to identify the key challenges currently facing the sector, and to demonstrate the importance, value and innovation of the work done by adult and community education providers. VECs in different parts of the country acted as partners in the hosting and planning of the events. Meetings took place in Carlow, Cork, Cavan, Galway, Donegal and Dublin, with almost two hundred individuals participating.



Considering the findings at the General Meeting in November 2009

The regional meetings took the same format in each area but content was developed in collaboration with the VECs in order to give the meeting a local angle. All meetings were opened by the host VEC and featured an example of collaboration at local level. These examples are included as short case studies at the end of this report. An input about the Adult Learners' Festival was followed by a presentation from an organisation which had run an event for the Festival. Although attendance primarily involved those employed within the VECs.

Workshops focused on participants' views on the current challenges for the sector, and how collaboration could help them to meet those challenges. What kinds of barriers prevent organisations from working together more collaboratively? Finally, those participating were asked to identify particular messages they wanted to promote during the Adult Learners' Festival. A brief summary of the challenges is presented here, whilst feed-

back on the Adult Learners Festival will be incorporated into the Festival planning.

Whether they are working in urban or rural settings, a number of common challenges emerged over the course of the meeting. This article provides a snapshot of these challenges, as well as some consideration of how they might be addressed. AONTAS will publish a more extensive paper highlighting these issues in Spring 2010.

Current challenges facing Adult Education provision

1. Increasing demand with decreasing resources: balancing provision with the needs of learners

Across the country members have voiced concern about the increasing demand for adult learning opportunities while resources are decreasing. The demographic of learners seeking courses has changed significantly,

For learners and participants, adult education is not only about the acquisition of skills, but is also vital in terms of keeping people's minds active and helping people cope with recession.

and there is an expectation that the service will meet their needs. Many services are full to capacity, there is a lack of continuity between courses, and there is a mismatch between courses and the current jobs market. Short-term interventions are only papering over the cracks in the service. These trends have also been identified in the AONTAS Information Referral Service.

Mismatch of provision

A quarter of unemployed people contacting the AONTAS Information Referral Service stated that the courses available don't suit their needs. A third of all people contacting the service over the past three months feel that there needs to be greater choice and diversification at local level and a quarter of all individuals contacting the service in 2009 have stated that there is no progression routes available for them from ad-hoc short courses being delivered at local level.

Going forward:

There needs to be an overall strategy for utilising the current adult education service more effectively, courses must be learner centred, flexible and with progression options. Not only is this good adult education practice but is also the most effective and sustainable approach to supporting people for the social and economic challenges that they and the country face.

2. Funding and moratorium on staff

In order to meet the needs of learners there must be an effective adult education system, however a number of significant stumbling blocks have been noted across the country. The moratorium on staff has had a negative effect on the service as a large proportion of staff is female and those on maternity leave are not replaced. The loss in staff has an effect on service provision as there is less capacity at a time when it is most needed.



Michael Moriarty, IVEA General Secretary

Going forward:

Funding for frontline staff must be maintained. Due to the nature of the adult education system people managing the service must be considered frontline staff, for example AEOs, CEFs, ALOs, Guidance Counsellors, Information Officers, and BTEI and VTOS coordinators.

3. The social purpose of education

Throughout the country providers emphasised the valuable social role of adult and community education. For learners and participants, adult education is not only about the acquisition of skills, but is also vital in terms of keeping people's minds active and helping people cope with recession. Adult education and learning fosters sustainable development, social inclusion, active citizens (democracy, tolerance, active citizenship, equity, intercultural dialogue) and also results in tangible health benefits, particularly in older learners.

Overall strategy

Visibility and promotion

There is a significant need to increase the visibility of the adult education sector, amongst stakeholders and to the general public. The lack of visibility between providers results in a block in the flow of information regarding collaborative models which are operating a local level. More promotion is needed in order to contribute towards a better understanding of adult education, and showcase the diversity of the sector.



Fiona Maloney, AEO with Co. Cavan VEC

Structures

The disparate nature of the adult education service can be attributed to the number of stakeholders and providers that operate without an overall co-ordinating body. Many adult education programmes have developed separately and work independently of each other; this affects the visibility and effectiveness of the service. Where national collaborative agreements exist, such as that between FÁS and the VECs, the collaborative role of staff at local level should be clearly identified and supported.

In the absence of a national strategy which would facilitate collaboration, local partnership work often emerges in an ad hoc way and can depend on individual members of staff or the ethos of a particular organisation. This is unsustainable for developing the adult education system nationally in an efficient, cost effective manner. While models of collaborative practice are evident at local level, there needs to be greater collaboration at departmental level.

Building a platform

Members have voiced the need to create a space for discussion and policy development. However, Budget 2009 formally disbanded the National Adult Learning Council (NALC) which has had grave consequences for the development of a national framework for adult learning and education. This will ultimately have a nega-

tive effect on the coordination of, and development of policy in adult learning and education.

Going forward:

- i. To increase visibility of the sector AONTAS and the IVEA need to have a strong promotional strategy built into their work.
- ii. In the absence of a national coordinating body a lightweight structured forum could be created to inform policy development with the aim of facilitating partnership, collaboration and the sharing of best practice. The forum could include the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, VECs, community education providers, NGOs and other stakeholders.

Collaborative work highlighted during the AONTAS regional meetings

Co. Cavan 'Learning Bus'

Co. Cavan VEC was the lead agency in this innovative approach to the delivery of adult education in a rural area. Other organisations involved included FÁS, the County Cavan Childcare Committee, Stepping Stones Playgroup and Cavan Area Rural Transport. €100,000 was secured from Pobal for the purchase and equipping of the facility. The bus is used for the provision of basic adult

While models of collaborative practice are evident at local level, there needs to be greater collaboration at departmental level.

education, education guidance, community education, youth drop in centre, citizen's information, and a drop in facility. The bus will visit various communities in the Cavan area, thus providing access to a number of people around the county.

Co. Carlow Education and Training Alliance

The adult education service in Carlow VEC some years ago had success in meeting the needs of ESOL learners through a collaboration involving a number of partners. The success of this approach prompted the recent formation of the Local Education and Training Alliance. The Alliance brings together stakeholders involved in education and training, including: Union Learning Representatives, Jobs Facilitators, FÁS, the VEC, the Community Services Centre, SIPTU, local partnerships, adult literacy services, the County Enterprise Board, Chamber of Commerce, and Skillsnets. As the alliance is not a formal structure, other organisations involved in the delivery of learning initiatives may be co-opted over time. The alliance is in its early stage of development but has decided on some initial activities, including an information booklet and an Agency Exchange Day. More strategically, the Alliance will focus on the inclusion of its activities under the brief of the County Development Board, where it can be checked, monitored and reviewed.

Cork Adult Education and Training Exhibition

The Cork Adult Education Council funded by the VEC organises this joint initiative which focuses on meeting the needs of people who are newly unemployed. The exhibition includes stands hosted by a range of providers, from private to third level and leisure courses. The success of the initiative can be attributed to the collaborative efforts of agencies involved, which results in a high level of course referral and easy access to information for those wishing to pursue education and training. The event is also highly interactive, including workshops and guidance sessions.

Workshop themes focus on the needs of men; stimulate rethinking and using the recession to change direction or career. Extensive promotion of the event through a variety of media and word of mouth ensured a high attendance.

Donegal Adult Guidance Service – ‘The Joint Referral Model’

This collaborative initiative between Donegal VEC and the Department of Social and Family Affairs is designed to help unemployed people engage with education and training. Jobs Facilitators employed by the Department and staff within the Adult Guidance Services recognised the potential for them to deliver a better service together, as well as to maximise use of decreasing resources. They established the ‘Joint Referral Model’ which involves Jobs Facilitators referring unemployed clients directly to the guidance service, which offers them one to one support in accessing training and education appropriate to their own needs, as well as information on funding and finance available. This is particularly important in reducing the level of drop out in courses. 73% of those availing of the service progressed onto education, training and employment.

City of Galway VEC – Promoting the Traveller Economy through a Social Enterprise Model

City of Galway VEC is a partner in this initiative of the Galway Traveller Movement, which focuses on promoting the Traveller economy using a social enterprise model. Other agencies involved include City of Galway Partnership, Pobal and Sustainable Energy Ireland. The initiative targets low income households and voluntary housing association tenants to provide insulation. Sustainable Energy Ireland provides the materials, Pobal funds the manager and three workers, while CG VEC provides the tuition and training. Another outcome of this partnership is the establishment of Galway Recycling Co-operative.

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Thematic Days

The Adult Learners' Festival 2010 is a nationwide celebration of adult learning coordinated by AONTAS.

The Adult Learners' Festival is about

- Celebrating adult learning and the achievements of adult learners
- Showcasing the work of adult education providers
- Promoting the work of AONTAS and the adult education sector
- Ensuring that adult education is placed firmly on the political agenda
- Showcasing learning opportunities for adults in a variety of settings, both formal and informal

Now in its fourth year the theme of the 2010 Festival is 'Better Together'. The Festival showcases collaborative practice amongst stakeholders in the sector. The Festival will also highlight the role of adult and community education in combating poverty and social exclusion as part of the 2010 European Year. This year, the Festival is kindly sponsored by the Department of Education and Science, FETAC, ICTU's Union Skills Network, ASTI and TUI and www.BlueBrick.ie.

Monday, 22nd February 2010: Celebrate Learning

The Adult Learners' Festival 2010 kicks off with a day to celebrate learning! Whether you are an adult learner or an adult and community education provider, Monday is the day for you to celebrate your successes and call attention to your achievements! AONTAS is encouraging learners and providers throughout Ireland to celebrate learning through exhibitions

of work, performances, learning trees and presentation ceremonies. The Festival will be officially opened in Dublin at the STAR Awards Ceremony for Adult Learning Projects. The STAR Awards is an awards initiative coordinated by AONTAS to showcase teamwork and award recognition to innovative adult learning initiatives. The ceremony will see over 150 representatives from adult learning initiatives come together to celebrate and recognise the priceless contribution adult learning make to the economy, society and community.

Tuesday, 23rd February 2010: Green Learning

The idea of sustainable living has come to the fore in recent years. Green Learning day takes place on Tuesday and highlights the role adult learning can play in creating green citizens. Adult learning initiatives are encouraged to launch a community garden, hold a sustainable living workshop or have a taster gardening lesson.

Wednesday, 24th February 2010: Learning Communities

A key learning site for adults is the community. Adult learning takes place throughout the community – in the local library, community centre, active retirement group and much more! Wednesday also recognises the role community education in particular plays in the development of communities as a whole and in the participation of citizens in that

development. In Dublin, AONTAS will screen 'Beyond the Classroom' – a series of programmes about community education.

Thursday, 25th February 2010: Learn @ Work

There has never been a better time to maintain the ability and motivation to learn and adapt quickly to changing economic times. Learn @ Work day takes place on Thursday and is supported by a notable organisations including ICTU, SFA, NCPP and IBEC. It aims to draw attention to the importance of workplace learning and skills. Organisations are encouraged to hold fun and business-related learning activities to help their staff learn new skills that they can put into action at work. By getting involved in the biggest annual celebration of workplace learning you could discover new skills, build new partnerships and help reach your organisations targets – all at the same time.

Friday, 26 February 2010: Lobby for Learning

In a time of cutbacks, a public sector recruitment embargo and a severely underresourced adult education service, AONTAS is encouraging adult and community education groups nationwide to lobby local and national politicians for a better resourced adult and community education sector. AONTAS will host a policy focused event to mark the end of the Adult Learners' Festival 2010.

Congress Centres – The Trade Union movement in the community

Many people will be familiar with the role of ICTU which currently represents some 55 different unions throughout the state. Less familiar is the work of the Congress Centres, (formerly ICTU Network of Unemployed Centres). In this article, Sylvia Ryan, Training and Development Co-ordinator with the Centres, writes more about their activities.

The Congress Centres Network (CCN) includes 25 Congress Centres across the country, north and south, offering a range of services to people who are unemployed as well as those in employment. Congress Centres have built a strong presence in their local communities, where they have well-established links and are recognised as providing quality services and supports to those communities.

The first Congress Centres were established by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) in the 1980s to support the large number of workers made unemployed during successive periods of economic recession. However since then services and supports provided by individual Centres and the Congress Centres Network as a whole have grown in response to the changing needs of the communities they serve.

The Congress Centres Network is the trade union movement's outreach into the community. CCN is sponsored and resourced by ICTU, with support from FÁS and the Department of Social and Family Affairs. The Network central office is based at ICTU in Dublin and has three full-time staff: a Programme Manager, a Training Co-ordinator and an Administrator. Each Centre has



ICTU group of coordinators and tutors that took part in the Leonardo Mobility Project 2009

a Co-ordinator and its own Board of Management made up of local trades council representatives, union activists and members from the local community. The Centres sponsor CE programmes funded by FÁS and accommodate 400 participants approximately nationwide. Centres and CCN are represented on a wide variety of bodies and organisations at local, regional and national levels. These include the Community and Voluntary Pillar, local area partnerships, RAPID, the Irish National Organisation for the Unemployed and FÁS.

Who do we support?

The Congress Centres Network works to represent and further the

interests of the trade union movement at local level in pursuit of a just society which recognises the rights of all workers and citizens while supporting and servicing:

- workers out of and in employment, including the migrant labour force;
- unions;
- union members;
- members of local communities and those experiencing disadvantage and social exclusion.

The Congress Centres Network will strive to achieve social cohesion and social justice by upholding the values of solidarity, fairness and equality through training, education, advocacy and other services in communities.

How are the centres funded?

Funding for the Congress Centres is obtained by sponsoring various projects for various Government organisations including FÁS, DSFA, Leader, Equality and Law Reform, and Pobal. Provision of rooms and private training courses also generates a small income. In addition centres participate in many fundraising activities to meet the costs of overheads incurred to ensure they stay open and provide much needed services to the local community.

Upskilling and retraining initiatives

The Employment Development and Information Centre in Longford is just one of the Congress Centres that is at the forefront of identifying niche training ideas that will be sustainable. At the moment the EDI centre is running a programme called Revamp Recycle and Reuse. Fourteen young men are part of the Local Training Initiative and are learning the skills of upholstery, woodwork and tiling as part of their FETAC certificate. Furniture is refurbished by the trainees and available for purchase in the Revamp store at an affordable rate. This is one example of a green project that is sustainable and has an impact on the community on a number of levels.

Dundalk People's Centre for Information and Training opened a second premises in Dundalk this year to accommodate a crèche. This project saw the Congress Centre working in partnership with many gov-



Tony Lynch Coordinator of the REVAMP project in Longford

ernment bodies and realising a state of the art facility for the children of Dundalk. Dundalk Congress Centre will be providing childcare training that meets the FETAC standards in the coming months. A facility that offers affordable childcare is a very important asset for Dundalk, community education and for the many parents that want to avail of training but childcare is a barrier for them.

Future concerns

Like all community and voluntary sector organisations the Congress Centres operate on a not for profit basis. As avenues of funding started to evaporate in 2009 the challenge for 2010 will be surviving the effects of the budget and potential cut backs proposed within the McCarthy Report.

In the current economic downturn the Congress Centres, 19 of them being FETAC accredited, have the potential to collaborate with the DSFA and FÁS and assist in the provision of quality assured cost effective training.

The experience the Congress Centres have in assisting unemployed people by delivering labour market activation programmes that lead to employment and recognised training awards is second to none. Being based within the community and offering an open door policy for access to community education gives the Congress Centres an edge when it comes to providing training for re-entering the labour market. We feel that the network of Congress Centres nationwide can act as an infrastructure, for the government departments concerned with the challenging task of upskilling the workforce. The Centres can provide a cost effective collaborative way to prepare workers for the upturn, provide accurate information for the newly unemployed and be advocates for those most vulnerable in society.

AONTAS acknowledges the support of ICTU Union Skills Network in the Adult Learners' Festival 2010. For more information about the Congress Centres, visit <http://www.ictu.ie/ccn>.

‘An Investment rather than a Cost’

At a time when companies are more inclined to cut costs rather than spend more, one Irish small firm explains how they have reaped rewards from investment in training and development for their employees.



The management team at Kevin Dempsey Distributors

Kevin Dempsey Distributors (KDD) is a small firm in Dublin which manages Prestigious Textiles and Styleline Blinds. The company designs and develops their own exclusive collections of home furnishing products which they market and distribute to retail and interior design markets all across the country. Currently twenty nine people are employed at the company base in Walkinstown. Staff roles at KDD are primarily focused in the area of sales, business development or accounts. A smaller number of employees (11) are involved in warehouse and production functions.

A strong people culture

Kevin, the Company Director, and Joyce Dempsey, HR Director, are proud of the strong people culture at KDD. Kevin explains how this evolved over time. ‘The early days of a business are all about survival’, he explains. ‘In the early years our main focus was on

our customers, but the company always had a strong interest in the development and promotion of people from within. In addition, the company has a great record of giving an opportunity to young unskilled people, many just out of school who developed into long term, solid performers through a combination of their strong work ethic and personal development plan agreed with them over time.’

There are three different strands to training and development activities at KDD. Essential skills are those which are relevant to the individual’s roles and responsibilities. A second element includes professional development programmes such as courses and degrees that an individual decides to undertake even if it is not essential to their current role. The company also actively encourages their employees to pursue personal interest courses – in the past employees have

taken courses on beauty, music, photography, even welding! These three elements are weaved together to form a Continual Professional and Personal (CPP) programme that is individually designed for each employee in the company with their own input.

He stresses that it's not enough to offer training. 'You have to draw people out.' That's why we have annual reviews. In terms of persuading people to take up training, it's more of the carrot rather than the stick approach. 'We don't bully them, we encourage them.' All training activity is recorded on a training log – so that employees can see at the end of the year what they have achieved. If courses chosen require exam and study leave, these are agreed with the employee before they start.

Training and development at KDD incorporates a mix of courses delivered in-house and externally. Follow up to training pursued is a critical part of the learning cycle. Both Joyce and Kevin emphasise, 'you really need to have the facility in-house, to take them through what they learned, and how they will implement it within their work.' This follow up is a crucial part of the HR strategy within the organisation.

An investment, rather than a cost

Kevin is keen to point out that contrary to what you might think; this doesn't involve huge expenditure on the part of the company. Although the company funds these activities 100%, 'the financial cost is relatively very small', he says 'at approximately 2% of total turnover. We don't actually see it as a cost; we see it as an 'investment' in the future of our business and the individual people here.'

Marketing is a big activity in this company, and Kevin is certainly a great salesperson for workplace learning. 'There is a common held belief that as soon as you spend money training your people to a higher level, that they just up and leave to a better job', he explains. 'We would strongly challenge that view by asking, what happens if you don't train them, and they decide to stay? Now, that is a bigger problem. We want people to stay, so long as we all get some degree of continuous improvement relative to their personal

Staff morale, a low level of absenteeism, and high morale are evident.

circumstances. We now have a great team of very experienced people and these are the same people who grew the business with us and these are the people who will be prepared to work on getting us out of the economic difficulties and back to growth again.'

Both of them are adamant about the benefits that arise from investing in training and development – and not just when it comes to higher level of productivity from the staff team. Staff retention, a low level of absenteeism and high morale are evident. 'There is an extremely low turnover of employees. People do not leave our company', says Kevin. Because training and development activity is part of the company ethos, employees are supportive of their colleagues engaging in training. 'Our people have always been prepared to compromise and provide cover to one another when required. If someone has to leave early to attend a class, they cover each other. They realise that they may need that back up themselves in the future.'

Changing and challenging times

Training and development is also an important factor in term of how the company retains its edge in uncertain times. Kevin describes how the sales environment has changed radically during the economic recession, and the need for training that responds to that change. 'In the recent boom years, sales people had it relatively easy, the sales function was a transactional one and they were more order takers than they care to acknowledge' he observes. Nowadays, the new sales environment that is emerging for 2010 is much more challenging. Sales activities need to be much more focused on the professional relationship with the customer and on what the customer wants – the customer is once again king.' he says. This will require salespersons undergoing reskilling and retraining. 'We are running a twelve month programme of retraining salespeople which is a difficult process', he says. 'It doesn't happen overnight.'



Kevin receives a Deloitte award from President Mary McAleese

We will have a relatively high investment again this year, because we have to keep up the ‘servicing and maintenance’ on our most valuable assets.

What about the recession – will that have an impact on their expenditure in this area? ‘Not at all’, he responds. ‘We believe and have solid evidence to support this belief, that so long as an individual is developing even if only on a personal basis, then they are adding value to themselves and in turn to their contribution to the business. We blew the budget out of the water last year, and we will have a relatively high investment again this year because we have to keep up the “servicing and maintenance” on our most valuable assets. Our people also want more training and development now because they know that it gives them an edge, this is not the time to cut back.’

The benefits of investment

Carl O’Brien started his employment with KDD back in 1996, when he took up a position in the warehouse. Since then, Carl has availed of a number of training opportunities – anything from sales training, to customer service, to ECDL. As his number of qualifications expands, so to has his role within the company progressed initially to Warehouse Supervisor, then moving on to a role in customer service, then Customer Service Supervisor, and finally moving into field sales, where he is now the leading sales person. ‘The company has paid for any and all training I have undertaken and have also provided access to online learning resources and personal coaching services. I have completed a Sales Management Programme and intend updating the skills learnt as I now move into a more active Sales Management role along with retaining my core customer base.’ The future for Carl at KDD is now full of opportunities. ‘I have developed a good relationship with the management team at KDD and have been invited to join the management team in 2010 as we now plan for recovery from the economic down turn in 2010’.

2010: European Year of combating Poverty and Social Exclusion

Adult learning has an important role to play in moving people out of poverty. The theme will be strongly reflected by AONTAS during this years' Adult Learners' Festival.

The European Council and the European Commission have designated 2010 as the European Year for combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. The year intended to reaffirm and strengthen the initial political commitment of the EU at the start of the Lisbon Strategy, March 2000, to making “a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty”. In the European Union, 78 million people are currently living at risk of poverty – this amounts to roughly 16% of the EU population.



Community education: combating poverty and social exclusion

Objectives

The European Year has four main objectives:

- Recognition of the right of people in poverty and social exclusion to live in dignity and to play a full part in society
- An increase in the public ownership of social inclusion policies, emphasising everyone's responsibility in tackling poverty and marginalisation
- A more cohesive society, which recognises that society as a whole benefits from the eradication of poverty
- Commitment of all actors, because real progress requires a long-term effort that involves all levels of governance.

Throughout 2010 events and activities will take place across Europe to increase public awareness of the existence of poverty and social exclusion, how it affects people and societies, and how it can be eliminated. The Year also aims to give a voice to those experiencing poverty and social exclusion by encouraging marginalised groups and disadvantaged communities to get involved in organising and participating in events.

In each Member State a National Implementing Body (NIB) has been appointed, which will organise the country's participation in the year. The NIB in Ireland is the Social Inclusion Division within the Department of Social and Family Affairs. The NIB is designing the

overall strategy, selecting national, regional and local initiatives. When establishing and carrying out their national strategies, each NIB will consult and cooperate closely with a National Advisory Committee – NAC – composed of a broad range of stakeholders, including civil society organisations representing the interests of people in poverty, national parliament representatives, social partners, and regional and local authorities.

In November 2009 a funding initiative was launched inviting organisations and networks to apply for small grants to run events throughout the country. More information about these events and the European Year is available from www.socialinclusion.ie.

The STAR Awards Judging Panel: Who decides?

Over the past number of months, an independent panel of judges has been reviewing the 110 nominations submitted for this year's awards. The panel represents a broad range of interests within the sector, and also draws on expertise from academia, workplace learning as well as the learner's perspective. Nominations are allocated to three smaller judging panels within this group of sixteen, in order to make the process of judging projects run smoothly and quickly.

Here's the rundown of who's on the panel

Dr Liam Bane worked as an Adult Education Organiser with Co. Dublin Vocational Education Committee from 1980 until his retirement in 2003. During that time, he established the first journal of adult and community education in Ireland, the Adult Learner. He served as editor of this journal until 2003.

Ann Devlin has recently retired as the Training Officer with Bord lascaigh Mhara (BIM). She represented FETAC on the judging panel, having had a long association with FETAC through her work with BIM. As well as having worked in the adult learning sector, Ann is also a keen participant in adult education courses herself and has taken part in various night courses down through the years.

Claire Byrne is the Director of Corporate Affairs and Communications with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. She has worked with the Qualifications Authority since its establishment in 2001. She has responsibility for the management, development and implementation of all key corporate functions. Her role extends to include the promotion of the National Framework of Qualifications to achieve a widely

known, understood, used and valued qualifications framework both nationally and internationally.

Vivienne Glanville's involvement in community education began when she undertook a personal development course in a local women's group Ronanstown CDP. She started a Certificate course in Women's Studies in 1999. Vivienne she has just completed her Masters and is currently Co-ordinator of Ronanstown Community Development Project.

Dr Ted Fleming is Senior Lecturer in Adult and Community Education at Maynooth. He was previously Adult Education Organiser for County Louth and is now Director of the Centre for Research in Adult Learning and Education at Maynooth. Ted is a member of the Editorial Board of The Adult Learner since 1995 and was a member of the AONTAS Executive in the 1980s.

Maureen Kavanagh was appointed CEO of Active Retirement Ireland in April 2008. Prior to this, Maureen worked in a management position with AONTAS. She became involved in the area of adult education and community work in 1986 firstly as a volunteer. Having participated in a wide range of learning opportunities over the past twenty years, Maureen holds

a Masters in Adult and Community Education from National University of Ireland Maynooth.

Bernie McDonnell has worked for Pobal for the past eight years, initially as National Education Coordinator with the Local Development Social Inclusion programme, and latterly as Programme Manager for the Equality Programmes in Pobal. Bernie is a Board member of the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education and of Familiscope – a community-based organisation offering early childhood care and education services to children and parents in Ballyfermot.

Helen Keogh is National Co-ordinator of VTOS (Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme). She is a member of national and international committees on adult learning. She has been actively at all levels in the development of the European Commission's Grundtvig programme since 2000. She was a member of the advisory groups that produced the European Commission's Communications on adult learning in 2006 and 2007 and is currently a member of a follow-up Focus Group on analysing national reforms in education. She is author of the recent report for the UNESCO



Claire Byrne from the NQAI

Regional CONFINTEA VI preparatory Conference for Europe, North America and Israel held in Budapest, December 2008.

Avine McNally is Assistant Director with the Small Firms Association. The Small Firms Association (SFA) is the national organisation exclusively representing the needs of small enterprises (i.e. those employing less than 50 employees) in Ireland.

Kevin Hurley is a former Director of Adult Education at UCD and an individual member of AONTAS. He is a former tutor, coordinator of the Return to Learning Programme and Facilitator of the Quality Framework at the Adult Learning Centre, Dun Laoghaire VEC and a VSO Volunteer in the higher education sector. Kevin is currently a PhD candidate, researching adult education as a site for equality at the Department of Equality Studies, UCD.

Bill Halliden is Director of Union Learning with the Union Skills Network, supported by ICTU (Irish Congress of Trade Unions).

Edna Jordan is Head of Workplace Learning and Development at the National Centre for Partnership and Performance. Edna joined the NCPP in 2002. Prior to this, she was



Avine McNally from the SFA

a senior official at the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), with responsibility for the delivery of its Professional Development and Training programme. She holds an MBS in Management and Organisational Studies.

Eithne Ni Dhonnchadha is Adult Education Officer with Co. Galway VEC. She is Hon Secretary of the Adult Education Officer' Association and is a member of the AONTAS Executive. Eithne was a teacher for 16 years with Co. Dublin VEC and held a number of adult learning posts including VTOS Director and Community Education Facilitator with Co. Galway VEC. Eithne is a member of the RAPID Board, Ballinasloe, Galway Childcare Committee, Galway Rural Development Committee (Education Sub Committee) and the County Learning Forum.

Donal Walsh is the Community Education Facilitator in the City of Galway VEC since 2003. The community education programme has about 1300 learners annually and works closely with over 70 community and voluntary groups throughout the city. The Community Education service provides grants to community education groups, supports a community education network and delivers a



Dr Liam Bane at last year's ceremony

Diploma in Community Development (Community Education).

Dr Richard Thorn is currently on secondment from his position of President of the Institute of technology in Sligo and is running national projects on flexible learning and research. He is EURASHE's representative on the Expert Advisory Group for the EU's Multidisciplinary Global University Ranking project. He has held teaching/research and management posts in Dublin Institute of Technology, Trinity College Dublin, Institute of Technology, Sligo and Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) and has held visiting lectureships in Coventry and Middlesex Universities.

Sarah McNerney works with FÁS, the National Training and Employment Authority and is based in their Head Office as part of the Employment Services Support Unit. Sarah is a representative from FÁS on the Advisory Group to Pilot Projects on Adult Education Guidance Initiative. Prior to joining FÁS, Sarah has been a member of Macra Na Feirme which is a rural youth voluntary organisation. She is currently the President of Kildare Macra Na Feirme and has been a member of the organisation for over 13 years.

Hold a Festival Event or Activity!

If you are part of large national organisation or a small adult learning initiative, your participation will make the Adult Learners' Festival a success. Here are some ideas on how to get involved and mark the Festival in your area!

Celebrate Achievements

Exhibit artwork, stage a drama, screen a DVD or hold a presentation ceremony! Celebrate the achievements of your learners and invite potential learners along to discover how adult learning can change lives for the better! Why not host the event in collaboration with other organisations in your area such as the local library or arts centre?

Grow a Learning Tree

This initiative allows learners to reflect on what they have achieved through learning as well as providing inspiration for prospective learners.

- You can use a poster or a real tree to represent your learning tree.
- Encourage learners to write or draw the impact adult learning has made on their lives and hang it on the learning tree.
- Collate all the contributions into a booklet or display the learning tree in your premises.

Silver Surfers/Click Start!

Why not open your doors to learners with little or no IT experience. The focus of this activity is to create small groups in communities within which learners can become engaged with technology.

- Run a free session on e-mail. Learners can use their own e-mail to contact politicians about learning issues!
- Buying a computer – the jargon explained.
- Open your library doors to research your family tree on the internet.
- Open your bank's door with free sessions on on-line banking.

Learning Needs Noticeboard

This initiative allows those members of staff with specific areas of expertise to help others with day to day tasks.

- Put up a notice board and call it the 'Learning Needs Notice Board'. Provide a supply of cards and pens nearby
- Add a brief list of instructions including what the board is for and how to use it.

Instructions

Staff should write on a card what problem they are having. This could be related to work such as 'how to create a formula in Excel' or it could be for personal knowledge such as 'how to make a white sauce for a dinner party'. They should date the card and also include a realistic date as to when they need help by. They should also include their full name and an extension number or e-mail address.

- Encourage staff to visit the board at least once a week.
- Staff who are able to help should remove the card and contact the member of staff before the deadline.

I'm a Politician, Get Me Outta Here!

A key aim of the Adult Learners' Festival 2010 is to keep adult learning on the political agenda. Why not invite local politicians to take part in a panel discussion, question and answer session or to meet learners face to face to listen to their concerns.

Quick Fixes

- Hold a workshop on job seeking skills in partnership with local organisations.
- 'Meet the Tutors' – set up an information stand in your local shopping centre potential adult learners.
- Organise a taster class for potential learners.
- Behind the scenes... at the museum/at the university/at the library/at the art gallery.
- Launch adult learning research or statistics.
- E-mail your local and national politicians about your concerns for the adult learning sector.

We understand that it's often difficult to find the time to hold an event or run an activity. However, you can still be part of the Adult Learners' Festival – why not schedule an existing event during the festival (22 – 26 February 2010). Don't forget to keep AONTAS up to date on events or activities you have planned and use the materials provided by AONTAS to promote your event. Our website www.adultlearnersfestival.com will provide updates on all the various activities happening around the country but we can only do this if you let us know!

Promoting your event in the media

The Festival is a great opportunity to promote your project and its activities. By promoting your own event and the Adult Learners' Festival, you are part of a national campaign which promotes the benefits of adult learning. This section of the magazine aims to give you some tips and ideas about how to maximise media coverage in the lead up to and during the Adult Learners' Festival.

Preparation is everything

In the lead up to the Festival, try and get contact details for journalists, reporters and researchers in broadcast media who you think might be interested in covering your event. News journalists and magazine programmes on radio are ideally placed to cover your event or story. This will form the basis of a good database for sending invitations and press releases.

The press release

AONTAS will issue a press release to national media for the Festival. A copy of this, with some suggestions as to how you adapt it for your own local media, will be made available to you before it is released. You can use parts of the press release and change it to promote your own event. The press release will also be made available on www.adultlearnersfestival.com.

The press release is a really important element of your media strategy. If you write a good press release, it will be used by the paper even if a journalist is unable to attend. Make sure to include plenty

of quotes – from keynote speakers, chairperson or manager of your organisation, as well as people that have used your service. Check with your local paper to see when they need your press release so that it is included in the next issue of the paper. Generally, an advance notification with some details about the event is issued to media a few days before the event, with a press release about the event issued on the day of the event. Always include a 'hook' – or an interesting angle to your release.

You should send your press release as an email, NEVER as an attachment; just include it in the body of the email. Don't forget a contact number preferably, a mobile. If you are sending your press release to multiple recipients, hide the list of names in the bcc field of the email. Keep the most important information in the first paragraphs of the release, and try and include a catchy headline. See page 24 for more tips on how to

present your press release.

Follow up with journalists a day or so after you have sent the email. Spam filters can sometimes block emails; your email may be forgotten or have been overlooked, so a phone call to a journalist can help remind them or persuade them to cover your event.

Photographs

Local media is generally under resourced and diminishing revenue from advertising in the current climate means fewer reporters and photographers available to physically attend events. Check and see if your local paper would be willing to accept photos from you. If hiring a professional photographer is not an option for your budget, then perhaps there is someone within your organisation who can take a good photograph. You will also need a good quality digital camera, as many papers will have criteria about the technical quality of images they include. Don't send

If you write a good press release, it may be used by the paper even if a journalist is unable to attend.

Spokespeople for your organisation should be confident about being interviewed on radio, and learners will make great advocates for your work.

photos with your press release – include a note at the bottom of your release.

AONTAS will have a professional photographer to cover some of the events happening in Dublin such as the STAR Awards Ceremony. If you or someone from your area is attending one of these events, you can arrange with AONTAS to have a photo taken which you can use for your own local media work.

Photos from these events will be made available online the day after the event.

Spokespersons

Make sure that you have identified people within your organisation, as well as those who have used your services who are willing and prepared to deal with media. Learners you know will make a powerful impact in both the print and broadcast media. Talk to the journalist in advance and find out what they are looking for. Brief your spokespeople as follows:

- Ensure that they are familiar with the aims and activities of your organisation
- They should be ready to mention your organisation's name throughout the interview
- Learners or people who have used the service should be clear on what they are willing to

share with the media in advance of any interview

- Concentrate on one or two key messages about your organisation that you want to communicate, and use the interview as an opportunity to communicate these issues.

AONTAS can help you prepare for a media interview if you are unsure.

Print media

When you are dealing with local media, be sure to give them plenty of advance notice about your event, as local papers are often printed on a weekly basis. The paper will go to print a few days before it is distributed. Invite a journalist from your local paper to attend your event. You can then write a press release about your event which should be available on the morning of the event. This should give the journalist enough information to write a short article about your event.

Broadcast media

There are a number of different options for you in terms of local broadcast media. You or someone from your organisation may be asked to do a short soundbite for news – if your press release is deemed newsworthy enough. Morning magazine programmes may give you the opportunity to

discuss your organisation and activities in greater detail. Spokespeople for your organisation should be confident about being interviewed on radio, and learners will make great advocates for your work.

Community radio is a great way to gain experience of using the media, as well as publicising your event. There are now over twenty community radio stations around the country. In addition to airtime, you may be able to avail of radio training at a community radio station in your area. For more information about community radio stations and where they are based, visit www.craol.ie.

The most important thing to remember with broadcast interviews is to practise! The more broadcast interviews you take part in, the more confident and articulate you will become.

Internet

As soon as you have decided on the format for your event, contact AONTAS or go onto the Festival website www.adultlearnersfestival.com. There is an online form where you can fill in all of the details about the event. Once you complete the form and enter details about the location, your event will be displayed on our Festival map. AONTAS has also been exploring the use of social networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter, which will be used extensively to promote events and our campaign. For more details visit our website.

GET COVERAGE:

Your press release should follow a basic format. Here are some tips which may help you when putting together a press release for the Festival.

[Your organisations name]

PRESS RELEASE

[insert the date here]

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE?

If not, include an 'embargo' – i.e. hold back the story until a specific time, e.g. after a Ministers speech.

[Insert a catchy headline for your press release here – something to grab the attention of the person reading it]

The first paragraph of the release should be short and get straight to the point of the press release. Are you holding an event for the Adult Learners' Festival? Are you celebrating your achievements winning a STAR award? Do you want to highlight a particular aspect of your service?

Include more details about the event or issue – answering the following questions, who what, why, when, where and how? Are there photo opportunities – describe them.

Can you include any relevant statistics in this paragraph? Numbers of people using your own

service, numbers available at national level, or use AONTAS statistics available from our website. The statistics you use should illustrate the point you are trying to make.

Can you identify a human interest story within your organisation? Do you know a learner who has benefited from using your service and would be willing to share their story? Use direct quotes where possible.

Include a quote from somebody in your organisation about the event. If you have a local elected representative speaking at your event, get a quote from their speech in advance of your event and include it in your release.

Mention that your event is part of the Adult Learners' Festival – a nationwide event, and give details of dates and where someone might find further information. Where should people go to get more information about your event?

ENDS

Contact details: For a spokesperson, or someone to handle media queries.

NOTE TO EDITOR

- Include any additional background information about your organisation or event here.

NOTES ON STYLE

- Keep your sentences short and communicate information as clearly as possible.
- Always use active rather than passive language.
- Make sure the most important information about your release is contained in the first paragraph.
- When quoting someone in a press release, always use 'said', i.e. 'Speaking at the launch, the Minister said'...
- Use colourful quotes. Metaphors and comparisons work well. Always include an 'authoritative voice' within the release.
- News editors base their decisions on numbers and readership. Describe the impact of the issue you are communicating through figures and statistics.
- The final test: Ask yourself the question 'Why should someone care?'

Ask Jenny...

In this article, Jenny Gunning looks back on the main trends from your queries to the Information Referral Service in 2009.

AONTAS delivers an Information Referral Service which provides both direct and referral information on adult education to individuals and groups. The success of the three previous years Adult Learners' Festivals coupled with increased media coverage and a stark increase in the number of unemployed people contacting us as a result of the economic downturn has led to a continued increase in queries. The amount of queries now being handled by the Service has doubled since 2007. Over the past twelve months AONTAS has fielded 5,407 calls from prospective learners seeking information on courses, entitlements and grants. When analysed, queries to the service over the past eleven months yield interesting insights on the current challenges in relation to adult education and lifelong learning.

Increased demand

The continued increase in calls indicates that AONTAS continues to be a very important starting point for many learners. There were several peak periods for the service; January, June, July and August. This is a stark contrast to previous years when summer months were generally quieter for the Referral Service. 529 learners contacting the Service over the last four months stated that there is a need for courses to be delivered during the summer months, so that people can continue to upskill and stay motivated. From the figures for August and September 316 individuals stated they were on the waiting list for adult education courses. Individuals contacting the service continue to voice their concerns about the lack of courses available and the decreasing resources available at local level. A quarter of unemployed people contacting the AONTAS Information Referral Service stated that the courses available don't suit their needs. A third of all people contacting the service over the past three months feel that there needs to be greater choice and diversification at local level and a quarter of all individuals contacting the service in 2009 have stated that there

is no progression routes available for them from ad-hoc short courses being delivered at local level.

The demographic of learners seeking courses has changed significantly, most notably the increase in unemployed young men with poor literacy levels. Approximately two thirds of queries handled this year were from men.

Unemployment and education

An overwhelming majority of people contacting the service are considering returning to education due to losing their jobs in the down turn. To date 3,590 individuals stated they were unemployed, 2,807 of these indicated they were newly unemployed having lost their jobs in the past twelve months. 4% of individuals contacting the service stated that they had been out of education for 5 years or less, however there continues to be an increase in individuals contacting the service have been out of education for significantly longer periods of time. Many of these individuals comment on suffering from low self-esteem and lack of confidence.

The importance of accurate information

Feedback from the Referral Service suggests that accessing information continues to be a significant barrier for many adult learners. This year 71% of learners contacting the service have stated there is a need for clear, concise, accurate and accessible up to date information from front line services.

Finance and childcare continue to be a barrier for unwaged and unemployed individuals wishing to return to education this year. Many people recently unemployed seeking to upskill or retrain have expressed that their biggest concern is funding for courses and meeting childcare costs. In 2009 4,591 of all individuals contacting the service requested information on course options and funding available to them.

Need Answers?

Contact AONTAS on 01 406 8220, or visit our website 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.

Who's involved?

The success of the Adult Learners' Festival can be attributed to the support of a variety of stakeholders within the adult education sector, as well as organisers on the ground who make events happen.

Sponsors

The Adult Learners' Festival continues to develop this year with a number of organisations involved. The Festival is kindly supported by the Department of Education and Science. FETAC, who have supported the Festival since it was first run in 2007 are once again a Festival sponsor this year. In addition, both the TUI and ASTI are sponsors, as well as ICTU Union Skills Network, which is a government funded initiative which provides employees with the opportunities to upskill and retrain. The initiative particularly targets those who have not yet had the opportunity to gain a third level qualification. Finally, AONTAS is pleased to announce the arrival of a new sponsor BlueBrick.ie. This is a web based portal which provides centralised access to accredited modules provided by Irish academic institutions.

Partners

In addition to our sponsors, AONTAS has been working with a number of strategic partners within the adult education sector and beyond, in order to ensure that we increase the number and range of events taking place each year. Over the past six months we have met with a number of organisations and agencies who will be involved in this year's Festival. These organisations include:

- The VECs – In addition to their role in second level education, the VECs provide a range of education and training initiatives for adults around the country.
- The Library Council – Last year a number of libraries organised events as part of the Festival. This year AONTAS met with members of the Library Council to discuss how we might engage with libraries around the country and what they might need to participate in the Festival.

- IBEC – The Employers Federation will promote Learn @ Work Day. IBEC has also helped us connect with the Small Firms Association, who will promote Learn @ Work Day within small firms in Ireland and promote us with case studies of their members.
- The Arts Council – Museums, galleries and cultural institutions are also learning sites. AONTAS met with the Council to identify how we might engage with the arts and cultural sector and encourage them to host events.
- The Community Education Network – AONTAS is encouraging members of the Community Education Network to organise events or activities which promote the role of community education in combating poverty and social exclusion – in line with the European Year 2010.
- ICTU Union Skills Network – The Union Learning Representatives are involved by promoting lifelong learning and the AONTAS Information Booklet.
- The Irish Film Centre – The centre has an educational remit and supports 'Wild Strawberries' – a film club for older people. This group will organise a screening as part of this year's Festival.

Event organisers and local contacts

Last year 250 events took place during the Festival – allowing people in communities all around the country the opportunity to get a taste of learning. AONTAS also has an extensive contact list available on www.adultlearnersfestival.com – so if you want some practical advice about organising an event in your area, check the website for contact details.

AONTAS continues to work closely with VECs around the country in the development of the Festival.

Better together – All your achievements count with FETAC

Susan McNeil, Communications Officer with FETAC, explains the increasingly important nature of accreditation in a changing work environment.



Andrina Wafer and Susan McNeil of FETAC, along with Mary Kennedy and Minister Haughey at last years STAR Awards

FETAC, as the national awarding body for further education and training in Ireland, is delighted yet again to support the AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival and the theme of 'Better Together'. The Festival, through its Star Awards and many diverse events running throughout the festival week, showcases collaborative practice in lifelong learning amongst stakeholders in the Adult Education sector.

Practitioners and providers all around Ireland are working together with FETAC to make sure that learners achievements are recognised as part of the National Framework of Qualifications. The National Framework of Qualifications is a ten step sys-

tem for recognising learning and enabling all learning achievement to be better understood by employers and others.

How a FETAC Qualification can help

FETAC awards are at levels 1-6 and are delivered by over 800 providers who have agreed quality assurance systems and procedures with FETAC, all over Ireland. With some 1500 centres offering programmes leading to awards, there's bound to be one close to you. Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate, Degrees and FETAC awards, including those for Craft Apprentices are also all part of the National Framework of Qualifications. This means that

FETAC awards can be recognised internationally also for those who plan to travel abroad. Awards that are part of the National Framework of Qualifications create opportunities for progression to further and higher education and training, to employment and within employment. 13.5% of all applicants to higher education through the CAO in 2009 used a FETAC award as the basis for their application. All the awards can be achieved at the time and pace that suit the learner. Employers and higher education institutions know that when they see a FETAC award it is quality assured.

In 2010 FETAC will celebrate making its 1,000,000 th award. A million learners all agreed – you are better, together with a FETAC award.

FETAC awards are the awards of choice for so many because they are quality assured, nationally and internationally. The standards are agreed together with industry and expert practitioners. The extensive range of awards helps people to get the skills and knowledge they need, whether in community activism, consumer awareness, communications, business, information technology and web authoring, retail skills, childcare or simply learning for pleasure and personal enrichment. There is a step on the

framework and an award that is right for everyone.

Collaborating with other organisations

Providers of education and training, in the community, in VECs, in FÁS centres, in hospitals and health centres, in higher education institutions, and in trade unions have all agreed quality assurance systems and procedures together with FETAC. Their commitment to make

the quality of services and provision better together is critical to all of us achieving our potential and playing our part. FETAC monitors and supports providers offering registered programmes so that learners participating can be confident in the quality of learning and the currency of the awards. FETAC cannot do this alone.

FETAC is better, together with all 800 providers, together with

a million learners, together bringing the National Framework of Qualifications to life. 800 providers and 1,500 learners, big and small, are better together, innovating, developing, connecting, responding and making sure that everyone matters, and that their learning counts. 'All your achievements count with FETAC'.

For details on FETAC awards see www.fetac.ie.

'Meet the Neighbours'

A new project on flexible learning pioneered by the Institutes of Technology in Ireland aims to make learning in IOTs much more accessible. Richard Thorn explains the background to www.BlueBrick.ie and how it works.

Meet Dave and Joan, your neighbours

Dave and Joan met in the early 1990s when they were both studying in their local Institute of Technology. Joan holds a National Diploma in Business Studies (HR) and Dave a National Diploma in Engineering (Mechanical). Having spent a few years working in England both came back to Ireland when things picked up in the mid 90s and both have been working in the medical device sector since then. In the late 90s they married and have two children. Although they bought into the housing market before the craziness of the noughties they still have an hour long commute to their place of work.

Dave and Joan have been careful with their money and have some saved for the proverbial rainy day. Although there is no immediate threat to the company they work in Dave and Joan are worried about their future and that of their children. They have seen similar companies closed down and production shifted to the Far East. They see unemployment rising to about 14% during 2010 and wonder will they be part of that group. They are worried that Ireland will go the way

of Iceland and that the savings they have will end up being worthless. They see people graduating from the Institute of Technology they went to with Level 8 and Level 9 qualifications (they knew them as Honours Degrees and Masters but they were not available then in their Institute). They feel threatened by these new graduates who are better qualified academically than they are and who seem far more confident and bullish about the future. Dave and Joan are fearful and this is very understandable.

Going forward vs going back

Dave and Joan know that to help secure their future they need to improve their qualifications, possibly by upskilling or possibly by reskilling but they have concerns. They are not sure if they have the discipline or the time to undertake the studies necessary. They don't know whether they can cope with the upheaval to their family. They are concerned with the negative connotations associated with 'going back' to college. After all, who wants to 'go back'? They like the idea of studying but not the idea of lifelong learning – seems like a sentence. They are also worried that if they pay



Richard Thorn with Minister for Education and Science, Batt O'Keefe at the launch of BlueBrick.ie

all the money to get new qualifications (unlike their neighbour's children who, because they attend college full time, do not pay fees) will they be any better off? Dave and Joan would be even more worried if they knew that Ireland has one of the poorest track records in the EU in providing for the needs of adult learners, particularly those in the workplace.

The importance of flexible learning

Dave and Joan are, of course, mythical but they are a composite that emerges from detailed market analysis undertaken by the Institutes of Technology as part of a major project on flexible learning, i.e. learning that is at a pace and in a place that meets the needs of the student and not those of the university or institute of technology.

All 14 of the institutes of technology, recognised some time ago that increasing the provision of flexible learning opportunities was critical to Ireland's future prosperity as a society and as an economy. Reskilling and upskilling those in and out of employment is a major strategic objective for the Institutes and the project, which is funded by the HEA and the Institutes themselves, is concerned with increasing the capacity

of each institute to deliver courses flexibly and developing a collaborative approach to promoting flexible learning. The market research undertaken has shown that a key requirement for Dave and Joan is information about where flexible and part time courses are offered and how to access them. At the moment all they have is a Google search and no way of applying easily to institutes.

How BlueBrick can help

Enter www.BlueBrick.ie. This portal has been launched by the Institutes to help Dave and Joan search for courses, save searches, compare courses in a variety of ways, filter their searches and apply online having created their profile once only. Dave and Joan do not have to pay for this service as it is being provided by the Institutes. There are over 250 courses up on BlueBrick and the number is growing all the time as each of the Institutes converts courses from a traditional delivery format to a flexible format. At least for Dave and Joan one concern is being removed.

Why don't you 'BlueBrick' today? You might find something you would like to do.

The Adult Learners' Festival: International Relations

The Adult Learners' Festival is not unique to Ireland; in fact it takes place in a number of different countries around the world. In November, Niamh Farren was invited to Estonia to share the Irish experience of running an Adult Learners' Festival, and met organisers from countries hosting similar events. Here's a quick tour around some of the European countries which host festivals.

Estonia

Adult Learners' Week as it is known in Estonia, has been running since 1998. The Festival is funded by the Ministry for Education and Research, but also through the European Social Fund as well as the Council for Gambling Tax established in Estonia. Like Ireland, a broad range of organisations are involved – from cultural institutions such as libraries and museums, to local government agencies. In advance of the week, regional co-ordinators based in the different counties around Estonia draw down small grants and organise activities and events to coincide with the Festival. Estonia is sparsely populated – so the event makes creative use of different modes of transport to bring learning into communities. A bus, train, and even a boat which travels from Tallinn to Helsinki have all been used during the week.

Slovenia

Adult Learners' Week in Slovenia has been organised for the past sixteen years, making it one of the most well established events in Europe. The week has grown through the development of an extensive Lifelong Learning Network in Slovenia. This network consists of over 700 education providers. At the core of the week lies the ambition to truly embed a culture of lifelong learning in Slovenian society. The promotional campaign uses the experiences of almost 160 Learning Ambassadors who receive awards and who act as role models for people interested in returning to education. General planning for the week is supervised by a National Committee, which brings together representatives from three different Government Departments, the Trade Unions, Chamber of Commerce, the Slovenian Adult Education Association and event organisers.

Similar to the Estonian experience, co-ordinators in different regions are key to the success of their festival.

Hungary

In Hungary, the first nationwide Festival took place in 2002, but the scarcity of resources means that the Hungarian Folk High School society, organisers of the event are only in a position to run the event every second year. Events cater to a broad range of tastes and interests, from prison education programmes, to activities based in museums or those which involve elderly people. This year, the Festival in Hungary saw almost 120 different event providers receive a small grant in order to carry out their activities. Over 50,000 people took part in the initiative through different events around the country. Regional co-ordinators apply for the grants and are involved in organising activities. The society provides a range of PR tools, such as videos, posters and flyers.

Lithuania

The slogan for Adult Learners Week in Lithuania is 'Fly High' – with the Festival appearing as an annual fixture now for ten years. The week is organised by the Lithuanian Association of Adult Education. While the week aims to raise awareness about the benefits of adult education, equally important is the strategic objective of bringing together a number of agencies – educational institutions, social partners, local authorities amongst others, to collaborate on joint initiatives. A different theme is selected each year, with a strong focus on the social value of adult learning and the particular European Year. Sponsors include the Lithuanian Ministry for Education, the Lithuanian National Commission for Unesco, and the Lithuanian Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

What use is Art?

Majella Breen of Bray Travellers Community Development Group ponders this eternal question.

While carrying out a routine evaluation with a student I recently found myself completely floored by the above question.

As the co-ordinator of a back to education and training programme for Traveller women, I am obliged to ensure that the participants understand the course content meets their needs and assists their progression.

The programme is based around core skills such as literacy, numeracy and IT skills. However, informed by educationalists such as Maxine Greene, we endeavour to include the opportunity for creative expression and have run various art related modules.

I felt admonished to “Stick to the facts” as headmaster Gradgrind advises in the opening of ‘Hard Times’ by Charles Dickens.

Thoughts regarding dominant values, the hegemony of hard skills over soft, flooded my brain: all utterly useless in terms of a response. I stuttered and stammered and the best I could come up with was that some of the students on the course enjoyed doing art.

Recovery time was short as the next issue of the day presented itself for resolution and by the time I was driving home that afternoon my mind was occupied by something entirely different.

Unknown to my conscious self, however, I had stored the question away in a quiet recess of neurons. Normally I sleep through the night



The freedom of flying

but at approximately four o'clock, in the morning I awoke from the symbolism of my dreams feeling elated by what was now obvious to me.

A couple of days later I set some time aside in my class and wrote on flipchart: What use is Art?

The programme participants came up with the following responses:

- Using imagination
- Relaxation

The first response was particularly gratifying for me to hear, as the title of the aforementioned Maxine Greene's book is 'Releasing the Imagination', and this is precisely what we seek to do.

At this point I wrote up my response:

- Using symbolism

As human beings we have the ability to think in the abstract and to use symbols to represent our ideas. Letters, numbers, images,

sounds all have the ability to be used as symbols.

Recently my organisation (Bray Travellers Community Development Group) published a booklet of stories by our programme participants. The Art tutor and I chose the illustrations for the individual chapters from etched prints created by the women.

I asked the class why they thought we had chosen images of a butterfly and birds to illustrate the chapter called 'Travelling'. The following is a synopsis of their responses.

Butterflies and birds can fly. Flying represents freedom; creatures that fly find it easier to roam. Specifically in this case, what is being represented could be the freedom of travelling or the freedom to travel. An important point is that there can be more than one interpretation of what is being represented.

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