

# EXPLORE



*The quarterly magazine from AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation*

aontas



## **In this issue:**

- *Love to learn! The AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival, February 20th to 24th*
- *Grow your own future – through OPEN's FETAC Level 5 in Horticulture*
- *Lessons from Scotland: Measuring outcomes in community education*
- *New agency, new opportunities: SOLAS and the adult and community education sector*

**AONTAS: The Voice of Adult Learning**



Note from the Editor

Hello and welcome to this edition of Explore!

Spring is only around the corner and time for sowing seeds. Freda Keeshan from OPEN's Horticulture programme, tells us about their initiative which is already showing green shoots. Meanwhile, Una Buckley reflects on a recent visit to Estonia as part of the 'Sowing the Learning Seeds' Grundtvig Learning Partnership project.

2012 is already shaping up to be a busy and challenging year for AONTAS and the adult and community education sector. While cutbacks in the Budget affected the further education sector through the capitation grant, and student supports in the form of the Cost of Allowance and postgraduate grants, a number of new opportunities present themselves. The establishment of the new further education and training agency SOLAS has been anticipated for some time, and just before Christmas stakeholders were invited to participate in a consultation process which looks at a number of issues in the establishment of the new body. AONTAS compiled an extensive response to the questions raised – and our submission is discussed in greater detail in an article in this

issue by AONTAS Director Berni Brady.

Other developments to keep an eye on this year include the announcement of a €20 million Labour Market Activation Fund and which was announced in the Budget which will be co-ordinated by SOLAS. The forthcoming rationalisation of the VECs and the establishment of the QQAAI will bring new challenges for the adult education services.

The Adult Learners' Festival is now firmly embedded in the adult education calendar and takes place around the country during the week of February 20th to 24th. AONTAS is delighted to be working closely with a range of new organisations who love to learn – they include the National Museum of Ireland, B&Q and Dublin Bus. You can read a snapshot of some of the events taking place this year inside this issue. Don't forget to check [www.adultlearnersfestival.com](http://www.adultlearnersfestival.com) to keep up to speed with all of the latest developments and STAR Award winners.

Until next time,

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

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New edition of 'What Next' available

AONTAS has just published the fourth edition of 'What Next' our Information Booklet for people – our Information Booklet for people thinking of returning to education as adults. The booklet revises information based on changes announced in Budget 2012 as well as other information and new developments over the past six months. The booklet offers the latest information on funding and finance, how to find a course and the range of options available to people who are unemployed. The booklet is available for download from [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com) but hard copies are also available. Please contact Katie, [korourke@aontas.com](mailto:korourke@aontas.com) if you would like a free copy.



CEN members network during a recent conference

Community Education Network news

The AONTAS Community Education Network is as busy as ever and there is real momentum since the conference 'Making a Living; Making a Life' which took place in November.

The conference explored some of the key challenges facing community education in the current climate. Workshops focused on funding, measuring outcomes, social action, continuous professional development for providers and the experience of learners in community

education. Those who attended the conference contributed to a discussion about the position of community education within the new SOLAS structure. The issues raised in this discussion were used in the development of AONTAS response to the SOLAS consultation process.

Since the conference AONTAS has been successful in securing funding from the Wheel's Training Links Programme on behalf of the CEN which will be used to run an exciting continuous professional development programme for community educators. Part of this new programme will focus on approaches to measuring outcomes. CEN meetings provide

an opportunity to share with and learn from other community education providers and to clarify key aspects of your work. The most recent meeting of the Community Education Network included a dialogue and discussion with FETAC regarding changes to the accreditation process. The network aims to have community education recognised on a par with other education sectors, and advocates for a dedicated funding stream for community education. Participation in the CEN is free for AONTAS members, visit the CEN section of the website or contact Niamh O'Reilly, Head of Membership Services, [noreilly@aontas.com](mailto:noreilly@aontas.com).



# Building a grassroots learner voice

*The Adult Learners' Forum of Ireland meeting took place in October 2011.  
Damien Walshe reflects on what happens next.*



Adult learners discuss local Adult Learner Forums

The second Adult Learners' Forum of Ireland (ALFI) meeting took place on October 26th in the Ashling Hotel, and despite the horrendous weather of the previous days, fifty learners from across the country gathered to discuss and hear about local Adult Learner Forums.

The focus of the day was about building a grassroots adult learner voice and the two main inputs for the morning session came from real-life experience of how Adult Learner Forums work and what they do. Aisling Ryan from the Limerick City Adult Learners' Forum spoke about how the Forum started up, how they work, what they have done and their plans for the future. Aisling gave invaluable advice to other adult learners on what the benefits and also the challenges were of being in a learner forum.

## Guest speakers

John Gates, one of the founders of the Global Learners' Network, spoke about the development of Learner Forums in Wales, focussing on the "Nine Steps for Wales", from the individual returning to education, to becoming an advocate for adult and community education, right up to participation at the Global Adult Learners' Network.

John Lonergan, former Governor of Mountjoy Prison, officially launched 'Hearing the Adult Learner voice: a toolkit for creating a local Adult Learner Forum' and delivered the keynote address, delighting participants with his input on the role of education and the power of positive thinking in bringing about change in society.

## Next steps

The report of the day is now on the ALFI section of the AONTAS website, and includes the inputs from Aisling and John, the discussions among participants on what they could do to start local learner forums, as well as the keynote address from John Lonergan. The aim is that the report will inspire learners and practitioners who read it to see how best learners can organise locally to have their voice heard.

The key purpose of the day was to present local Adult Learner Forums as a way to develop the ALFI as a national platform that genuinely represents adult learners from across the country. One of the most encouraging aspects was that learners recognised their role in starting Local Adult Learner Forums and

committed to talking to other learners about forums and starting meeting about what they could do.

We in AONTAS are committed over the course of 2012 to supporting the development of ALFI structures and emerging local Adult Learner Forums through promotion, networking and information as identified at the meeting. We hope that participants on the day stay linked in with the ALFI to see how their efforts on developing a local Learner Forum have gone since October and keep the momentum. So, if you have spoken to other learners about this, passed on the toolkit, arranged a meeting, asked for support locally - let us know. Your efforts could be the inspiration that other learners need.

Finally, one of the new things we tried to do was to record some adult learners talking about their experience at the ALFI as a way of promoting Learner Forums to people who could not come on the day. These clips are available on YouTube channel, where Andy Kinsella, Michelle Mitchell and Una Buckley spoke about their involvement on the day.

For more information on the Adult Learners' Forum of Ireland visit [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com).

# Budget 2012

*Budget 2012 was introduced in early December and includes a number of changes that will affect the adult and community education sector*

## Some of the changes include:

- €20 million to be provided under the National Training Fund for a new Labour Market Activation Fund. This fund which will be specifically targeted at people who are long term unemployed will deliver over 6,500 places in 2012.
- €10 million to be allocated to the Springboard initiative to increase the part time higher education opportunities for unemployed people.



Minister for Training and Skills, Ciaran Cannon TD

- No maintenance grants for new postgraduate entrants from the academic year 2012/13.
- A reduction of 3% to the rates of student maintenance grants.
- Capitation grants paid for further education programmes (including adult literacy and community education) will be reduced by 2% in each 2012 and

- 2013 with a further reduction of 1% in each 2014 and 2015.
- A reduction in the Cost of Education Allowance payable to people in receipt of the Back to Education Allowance – reduced from €500 to €300.

More information is available from [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com) or [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie).

# Education and Training Boards

Along with SOLAS, an important development will be the establishment of the new Education and Training Boards. The legislation underpinning this important development is the Education and Training Boards Bill. In October 2011 this Bill was referred to the Joint Committee on Jobs, Social Protection and Education. Speaking about the Bill, Minister

Quinn said 'This new Bill will consolidate the existing nine Vocational Education Acts and will reflect the enhanced future role of the sector.'

Education and Training Boards will take over the work of the VECs and will have an expanded role in the delivery of further education and training across the country. The bill provides for the legal establishment of the new Education and Training Boards, sets out the functions of the boards, taking account of the development of the sector over the years, and facili-

tates further enhancement of the role of the sector into the future including its proposed role in relation to SOLAS. The Bill is expected to be introduced to the Oireachtas early in 2012.

Reacting to new developments in the sector, the IVEA said 'These two initiatives, the establishment of ETBs and the establishment of a Further Education and Training sector under SOLAS (with ETBs delivering the training), represent the most profound reformation of education and training since the 1930s.'



Dates for your diary from Leargas!



The Grundtvig Adult Education Programme 2012

The Grundtvig Programme which forms part of the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) focuses on education for adults, whether through formal, non-formal or informal methods such as autonomous, community or experiential learning. Grundtvig activities are open to any group or institution within the LLP countries, involved in adult education, from community groups to museums to universities.

The upcoming deadlines for 2012 are:

Grundtvig Learning Partnerships projects

A framework for practical co-operation activities between organi-

sations working in adult education. The deadline for applications is 21 February 2012.

Grundtvig workshops

These workshops enable organisations to host workshops which bring together adult learners from several countries for an innovative learning experience relevant to their personal development and learning needs. The deadline for applications is 21 February 2012.

Grundtvig senior volunteering

This action supports bilateral projects which enables senior citizens to volunteer in another European country in a non-profit activity, as a form of informal (and mutual) learning. Deadline for applications is 30 March 2012.

Grundtvig in-service training

This action support those involved in the delivery of adult education in the formal and non-formal sectors to undertake a training course in a participating country of the LLP. Deadlines for this activity are:

- 30 April 2012 for training activities starting on or after 01 September 2012
- 17 September 2012 for activities starting on or after 01 January 2013.

Grundtvig visits and exchanges

This action supports those involved in the delivery of adult education in the formal and non-formal sectors to undertake a work placement, job shadowing activity or attendance at a conference or seminar. The deadlines for this activity are:

- 30 April 2012 for training activities starting on or after 01 September 2012
- 17 September 2012 for activities starting on or after 01 January 2013.

Grundtvig assistantships

These enable present or future staff involved in adult education, whether formal or non-formal, to spend a period of 12-45 weeks assisting at an adult education organisation in another European country. Deadline for applications is 30 March 2012.

EAEA representation

The main focus of the lobbying work of the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), with board representation by Niamh O'Reilly, centres on two specific areas:

1. The renewed Agenda for Adult Learning from the European Commission
2. The new Erasmus for All Programme.

The European Commission adopted a resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning, which is the follow-up to the Action Plan on Adult Learning, on 28th and 29th November 2011. This Renewed

European Agenda for Adult Learning links to the four strategic objectives of "ET2020", the framework for European cooperation in education and training:

- autonomy of the learner but also responsibility for his/her learning pathway and outcomes;
- learning later in life to promote active, autonomous and healthy ageing among seniors and using their knowledge and experience for the benefit of society;
- greater access to higher education for adults;
- developing new skills necessary for active participation in modern society;

- solidarity between different age groups, between cultures and people of all backgrounds;
- designation of national coordinators to facilitate cooperation with the European Commission and effective liaison with multiple stakeholders in each country.

On the 23rd November 2011 the European Commission proposed a new Programme for 2014 – 2020, entitled Erasmus for All, which is the new EU programme for education, training, youth and sport proposed by the European Commission. The proposal is now under discussion by the Council (27 Member States) and the European Parliament will take the final decision on how it will be adopted.

New opportunities for adult and community education

During 2011 a number of new developments occurred which will have far reaching implications for the adult and community education sector. Berni Brady considers the challenges and opportunities within these new developments.

When the White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life* was published in 2000 it was widely welcomed as a clear policy plan for the development of adult education in the Republic of Ireland. Unlike the developments suggested by its predecessors, the Murphy Report in 1973 and the Kenny Report ten years later, this White Paper managed to be adopted as Government policy and implemented in parts. The roll out of the National Adult Literacy Programme, the Back to Education Initiative and the Adult Education Guidance Initiative were key developments for the adult and community education sector bringing funding streams, increased numbers of learners and a new cohort of professionals into the service. Adult and community education experienced for the first time in its history a more systematic approach to the delivery of the service and began to flourish.

While the White Paper with its policies and funding streams expanded a sector which had historically commanded few resources, the silo nature of the funding did not encourage collaborative approaches or joined-up thinking. Furthermore the issue of co-ordination and the development of an overarching

structure to support the sector was not addressed. The National Adult Learning Council proposed in the White Paper was set up on a non-statutory basis and then disbanded without ever performing its key functions. The distinct and parallel arrangements for programmes within the adult, community and further education sector, and in the training sector, continued the separate development of different strands of provision with a plethora of eligibility requirements and payments. From time to time over the years stakeholders in both sectors had broached the subject of a more integrated and collaborative approach to adult education and training both at Departmental and operational level but no serious attempts were made to pursue such a development. Great hopes were held for the National Adult Learning Council with its broad stakeholder representation as a mechanism for tackling this challenge but since its abolition in 2008 little has been done to bring coherence to a greatly fragmented sector.

New structures in adult education

In July 2011 the new Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairi Quinn



Marie Keegan of Crosscare and Anne Brophy, CAFTA

announced the establishment of SOLAS and the disbanding of FÁS to create a new Further Education and Training body whose role it would be to co-ordinate a new integrated further education and training service. The proposed merger of the 33 VECs into 16 Local Education and Training Boards (LETBs) was also announced earlier that year. The new LETBs would now be responsible for all further education and training and would incorporate personnel who were formerly employees of FÁS. The disbandment of FÁS and the merging of training under the new Local Education and Training Boards presents a complex set of challenges for staff at all levels within the service. The differing environments, culture and training





Berni Brady with Liz Waters, CEO of an Cosán

levels of personnel within each of the agencies will have to be managed carefully if the reformed education and training service for adults is to be a success. Furthermore the relationship between the Department of Social Protection which is rolling out the new National Employment and Entitlements Strategy (NEES) and the further education and training sector poses more new challenges which will need to be addressed in tandem with the development of SOLAS.

### Focusing on the adult learner

While all of these changes pose significant challenges for everyone working in the sector they also extend a unique opportunity to frame the future service. The recent call by the Department of Education and Skills for feedback to its consultation document on SOLAS provided an opportunity to be part of that process. AONTAS has responded to the call and has emphasised the importance of focussing on the adult

learner. We believe that approaching the development of the new improved further education and training service from the perspective of those who will be using it is the best way to inform its development. AONTAS is of the view that an integrated quality service should take account of the non-homogenous nature of adult learners and cater for their wide range of learning needs, spanning across skills for the labour market, upskilling and personal development as well as social, cultural and civic development. SOLAS at the outset must draw up a Vision Statement for Further Education and Training which takes account of the whole spectrum of learning needs and the range of service providers. Such a statement should ensure parity of esteem for different providers and equality for all learners whether they are on the Live Register or not.

At its national conference on community education in November 2011, entitled 'Making a Living; Making a Life', AONTAS emphasised the two

important roles of community education i.e. preparing people for both earning and learning, and asked participants to develop some key messages for the SOLAS Implementation Group. These deliberations have informed the AONTAS response to the Department's consultation. In particular AONTAS has called on SOLAS to recognise the key role of community education in attracting the most disadvantaged adults back into education and training as well as its capacity to develop the generic skills outlined in the National Skills Strategy. Coupled with recognition of its key role AONTAS is also urging SOLAS to look more comprehensively at the broader outcomes of adult education and training and has used its research on the outcomes and benefits of community education to support our proposals.

### Service level agreements

Since it seems likely that funding will be drawn down from SOLAS by the LETBs, of crucial importance to the success of a new and equitable service will be the Service Level Agreements which will be drawn up between SOLAS and the LETBs, and between LETBs and local community education and private providers. While Service Level Agreements have been in place between some VECs and FÁS for some time, reports on how they work in practice vary depending on the working relationships between staff at a local level. How SLAs will work in the future should not be left to chance, so it is important that they are negotiated between the key actors and

that their workability is monitored and reviewed. As well as the paper agreement, support and training in team approaches and change management for local staff will be crucial to their success. It is also vitally important that processes are transparent and fair particularly in relation to how funding allocations are dealt with. AONTAS has suggested that SOLAS appoint an Arbitration Committee whose role would be to investigate appeals by groups who are not satisfied with the decision-making process in relation to funding.

### Towards a quality service

As mentioned earlier AONTAS has focussed on the learner as the key informant about how a quality integrated service should develop in the long term. We have proposed the idea of a Learner Charter outlining the roles and responsibilities of providers and learners, and the development of a Learner Passport to assist in the collection of data on the learning paths and progression of adult learners. AONTAS is in a position to assist in these develop-

ments through its connections with adult learners who are involved in the Adult Learners' Forum of Ireland established by AONTAS in 2010. As part of the Adult Learners' Festival AONTAS is organising a learners' round table discussion to celebrate Lobby for Learning day on February 24th. The Minister of State, Ciaran Cannon, along with members of the SOLAS Implementation Group have agreed to participate in a discussion on how a quality service could be developed from a learner's point of view. This is a unique opportunity for both the learners and the policy makers to share a dialogue and inform new policy and practice in the future development of the service.

Of course when any major change happens a great deal of fear and anxiety is generated and assumptions and perceptions can take on a life of their own, leading to confusion and negative thinking. One of the major fears being expressed by some adult and community education providers is that what they can offer the new service in terms of expertise, experience and flexibility could be

swamped by the more instrumental demands of up and reskilling for the Labour Market, and that their vital work with those adults who may need more time and support before taking up accredited options could be discounted and excluded because they are not deemed to be good value for money in the narrowest sense. It is therefore of the utmost importance that SOLAS takes on board the fact that there are many outcomes and benefits to be gained by learning as an adult, including improvements in family and community life, health and social connection. The initial consultation should be the first step in an ongoing and participative process leading to the development of a responsive, quality service for all adults regardless of their personal, economic or educational status. AONTAS is prepared to play an active role in that process and contribute to its development.

*The full AONTAS response to the SOLAS consultation process can be accessed at <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/aontas-submission-on-solas-consultation-process/>*



Focusing on the adult learner at the National Adult Learner Forum meeting in October 2011



# Travel diary of an adult learner

*Una Buckley was one of four Irish adult education delegates to visit Estonia as part of a Grundtvig Learning Partnership project in October 2011.*



*A Recognition Ceremony for adult learners in Tallinn*

Before I start my diary, I would, again, like to acknowledge the role of AONTAS, *the Voice of the Adult Learning* – in my journey to Estonia.

I travelled with Niamh Farren Communications Officer, AONTAS, Eleonora Peruffo, Resources Officer, AONTAS and John Wynne, Adult Education Guidance Co-ordinator, Co Waterford.

Their advice, encouragement, kindness and company were invaluable to me during our time in Estonia.

Also attending were delegations from: France, Turkey, Hungary, the Netherlands and Slovenia.

We were a motley crew who met very early at the airport on the 5th October. We did not know each other at all – other than over the telephone or email. John had never met any of us in person.

We travelled to Copenhagen and then care of Estonia Airlines onto

Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. On arrival, we went by taxi to our hotel. The city had a look of Eastern Europe, with large grey square buildings. This changed completely when we arrived at our hotel, situated in the beautiful old medieval city. In the lobby we met one of the Turkish delegation, Ibrahim. When introduced to John Wynn he said “Hello John Wayne, that’s easy to remember”. Needless to say John became “John Wayne” for the rest of the trip. We had dinner and then went to bed, it had been a long day.

## Day 1: Thursday 6th October

After breakfast, we walked, with all the other delegations to our first workshop. This was held in the Tallinna Vanalinna Upper Secondary School for Adults. The theme of the workshop was “Involving outstand-

ing learners in learning promotion”. We were put at different tables and we worked with members from the other delegations. Practically all could speak English.

The outcomes/ideas were written mostly as bullet points on large sheets of paper. Each group nominated a speaker to present their work. They all had very interesting ideas. The last speakers had used a translation software programme to make his presentation while another one drew cartoons to make his point. It had a dramatic effect – cartoons used for adult education. It was fantastic. We were given a tour of the school by the school principal. Her pride in the history of the old building was palpable.

After lunch we were taken to see and take a ride on the “Learning Tram”, a new experience for all of us. It was the same as the Luas travelling on a loop around Tallinn. The



*How to involve adult learners in Learning Festivals*

windows were covered in posters and advertisements for adult education courses and contact information. Teenagers handed out sweets and pens to people as they got on the tram. Playing on the sound system were learners telling their stories of returning to education and the positive effect it had on their lives. There was even a blank poster for you to fill in the name of your favourite book. Lots of titles were on it. Cyril, our Slovenian animator, drew cartoons depicting the “singing revolution” of which I knew nothing. He told me that the revolution in Estonia against the Russians was known as the “singing revolution”. Thousands of people had gathered in towns and cities and sung songs for their freedom.

We had dinner and got to know the other delegates a bit better; then back to our hotel.

## Day 2: Friday 7th October

After breakfast, we were taken by bus to Rapla approx 40 km

from Tallinn. We attended the National Opening Ceremony of the Estonian Adult Learners’ Week at Rapla Vesiroosi Upper Secondary School. This ceremony was three hours long without any English – other than an input from Niamh. A Government Minister spoke, as well as other dignitaries. A 2012 calendar was launched celebrating adult learners. An outstanding learner from each county had been selected. Their picture and story of returning to education was used for each month of the year, with the overall Learner of the Year on the cover of the calendar. After each speaker there was music, the school choir, the school band, solo singer even the M.C. sang. I could see how important music and song is in Estonia. The music brought joy to the celebrations. It also helped all our delegations, as it broke up the ceremony. We could also enjoy the celebrations through the music and song.

We then visited the Central Library of Rapla County and the Rapla Upper Secondary School for

Adults. We received information from the Head Librarian and Head Teacher about the running of both.

Then onto the Kohila Training Centre at Tohisoo Manor. This is a converted Manor house, which is now dedicated to the education of adults. We toured the building. There were rooms full of rows of desks with sewing machines, another with weaving equipment, rug making equipment, woodworking, and ceramic pottery. These are all crafts and skills that the local people have asked to be taught at the school. The classes are all very well attended. They even run summer schools for adults from all over Europe. When we were about to leave, an adult choir arrived who were performing at the Manor that night. They were kind enough to sing a couple of songs for us. Again music and song to celebrate our visit!

At dinner, that night, songs were sung and the Turkish lads had everyone up dancing and singing. I found it amazing watching all these different cultures mix and laugh all through dancing, music and song



– even though no one understood the words. We stayed in lodges in the countryside.

Day 3:  
Saturday 8th October

After breakfast we visited a craft fair in Rapla.

More singing on the bus back to Tallinn. People were singing as naturally as if they were speaking. In the afternoon, we attended the Adult Education Awards Ceremony of Tallinn and Harju County at the, majestic, Tallinn Town Hall. The M.C.s were both teenagers. The awards were handed out. In between the awards, the Estonian Children’s National Choir sang the most haunting and beautiful songs. (Their singing could bring a tear to a glass eye!)

The recipients of the awards were all adults, some very senior in age. A lovely reception was held after the ceremony with drinks and food.

There was so much joy in the room with family members being so proud

of their parents and even grand parents achievements.

The final get together of all the delegates was dinner that night. Yet more singing and dancing. Cyril, our animator, insisted that he would sing the final song – especially for the Irish delegation. He gave a wonderful rendition of the “Parting Glass”.

In conclusion:

The meeting was called “Sowing the Learning Seeds”. Did it succeed? In my opinion: a definite yes. For the following reasons:

- 1. It showed me how other cultures involve their adult learners.
- 2. In Estonia they include all ages in their Awards ceremonies. This is lifelong learning in practice. The young school children, teenagers, adults and seniors are all part of the ceremonies.
- 3. The children can witness their elders' education achievement and realise that learning does

not have to end when you leave school or college.

- 4. Awarding nominated individual adult learners annually. This could be considered as part of the Star Awards.
- 5. The important role music, song and dance can play in ceremonies.
- 6. Animation can communicate to all ages not only small children.
- 7. Adult education can be “advertised” and “celebrated” anywhere i.e. trams, buses, trains, planes and automobiles.
- 8. Classes for the old skills like knitting, sewing, weaving, pottery, etc, could be very successful – even from a tourist point of view offering week long summer schools.

There is a saying “Travel broadens the mind”. This is true of my time in Estonia. I will always treasure and be grateful for, the memories, people and places from this trip.



Una Buckley at the Adult Learners’ Forum of Ireland meeting in October

Measuring outcomes

The conference ‘Making a Living; Making a Life’ identified particular challenges for the community education sector. One of these is how to measure outcomes within community education. In this article, Jim Mc Harg, a contributor at the conference draws on the experience of Scotland.



Considering the challenge of measuring outcomes

Do we too often assume that we provide good quality learning? Welcome to the journey of reflection.

How often are we tempted to say after completing a piece of work “that was brilliant”? Now be honest, most of us want recognition for our contribution, but could we prove to an independent observer, that we had undertaken ground breaking community education that was sector leading, worthy of dissemination and continued funding...?

That’s where we were in Scotland not so long ago. We knew what we did made a difference to people’s lives, but how could we prove it in a way that measured quality as well as quantity?

In Scotland, prior to May 2002, there was no Scottish wide system for self evaluation of community education activity and HMIE Inspection reports showed a very wide range of provision with too little work assessed as being of exceptional quality.

Contrast that to the current position where around 80% of reports have scored community learning activity as at “good or higher” within the 6 point scale, denoting that strengths have a significant positive impact on learning and you can measure the distance travelled on a journey, that has greatly improved the learning outcomes for adult and young learners across the country.

Developing a framework

In 2006 when the revised National Self Evaluation Framework, *How Good is our Community Learning and Development 2* was published, the Senior Chief Inspector HMIE in Scotland said, “It is important that the framework is owned by those who seek to use it for self evaluation leading to improvement” and this led to a sea change, with professional staff, partner agencies and learners, planning, managing and delivering continuous improvement against clear guidance.

A unified system for measuring, assessing and evaluating, outcomes and impact, had begun to coalesce the profession and helped to protect a disparate and vulnerable sector, by giving community education/learning as an approach, a prominence and focus nationally. The fact that we have survived and in many cases thrived, at a time when there is enormous competition from higher education and further education for community based learning resources, is testament to the benefit derived from engaging with learners, to capture the social, economic and personal growth that results from learning within the community.

Improving community learning in Scotland has not happened by accident, it has been achieved by educationalists, local and national government officers and politicians working with communities, to encourage rigorous and sys-

tematic evaluation of our work. And as a result, we need to lose the image of being the “Cinderella” service, the community education approach has come of age and we don’t need a prince to rescue us and bring us to the ball – although we might still need to kiss a few frogs!

Recognising the role of community learning

The Skills Strategy for Scotland recognised that people needed an appropriate combination of essential and vocational skills, to enable them to secure and retain employment and a more coherent, flexible and responsive post compulsory learning system that balanced the needs of the individual with the needs of employers was required, with investment made to develop the community learning (community education) approach.

In my opinion, the improvement agenda for community learning in Scotland was a three step process:

- Improving the quality of professional learning: at University and Higher Education establishments delivering courses in community education and by introducing continuing professional development for practitioners
- Introducing a National Learning, Evaluation and Planning Framework with national standards for community engagement



- Introducing and updating a National Self Evaluation Framework for community learning.

With improvements in the training of professionals and in the planning and evaluation of community education work in Scotland, at a time when Government finance was becoming scarce, community educators had manoeuvred to a position of strength, as politicians quite correctly, began to question the value and benefit they received from their investment of resources, in the myriad of learning and training opportunities. The Scottish profession were well placed after they embraced the changes, to prove the quality, reach and educational value of their work, in an empirical and structured way. This seem to mirror closely what is being played out in Ireland at the moment.

### Agreeing a shared approach

The AONTAS membership clearly have a lot of experience in capturing what individual community education organisations and agencies are delivering as educational outcomes, but do you have a common system for self evaluation, which applies equally whether you are in Letterkenny, Cork or Dublin?

The question is not should we adopt an outcomes focused approach to evaluation, but “how” will we adopt a uniform approach, which will enable benchmarking of the quality of community education provision and as a result, drive up the quality and standards of the sector.

### Lessons from Scotland

Community learning and development (formerly known as community education in Scotland) is learning and social development work with individuals and groups in their communities using a range of formal and informal methods. A common defining feature of community learning is that programmes and activities are developed in dialogue with communities and participants and that they engage voluntarily within learning activities without compulsion.

The enduring challenge is to demonstrate year on year improvement through the development of quality work which is cost effective, encouraging individuals and communities to be more successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. If you are to maintain State funding, attract new funding and demonstrate sector leading practice, then you need to embrace the regime of best value and continuous improvement, which will deliver benefits for individuals, communities and the community education profession.

Don't learn by making unnecessary mistakes and remember the wheel was discovered millennia ago, look at how the Scottish approach can be incorporated within your own sector, to demonstrate the considerable value and worth of community education, which encourages self efficacy, aspirational learning, active citizenship, achievement, attainment and improved skills for employability.

Community education is a holistic model of approach, with wide ranging benefits for individuals, families and communities and that is especially why, we need to plan, capture and demonstrate outcomes and impact, which will help retain the current level of funding and attract additional resources in a very competitive educational market. Learners and participants deserve access to high quality, effective and efficient learning, within a variety of approaches which meet individual learning styles.

The impact of learning on our learners and participants must be captured, demonstrated and celebrated as it answers the “So what” question, demonstrating “what difference” learning has made to a persons life, for themselves, family and community.

### Six high level questions

Do we too often assume we provide good quality outcomes for learners? Ask yourselves the following six high level questions and critically reflect on your answers.

1. What key outcomes have we achieved?
2. How well do we meet the needs of our stakeholders?
3. How good is our delivery of key processes?
4. How good is our management?
5. How good is our leadership?
6. What is our capacity for improvement? (Do we have sufficient evidence to justify our outcomes, do we have data that enables benchmarking with other similar organisations, can we demonstrate positive trends from the information recorded, can we measure learner progression, do we have individual learning plans in place, do we know what needs to be improved?).

### Moving to an outcomes based approach

The general consensus from the Scottish discussion of an outcomes based approach in 2008, was that adult learning has been historically strong at measuring outputs and the discipline of collecting information, but not so good at determining what information and evidence needed to be collected and analysed, to effectively demonstrate performance against outcomes.

We have now moved on considerably and that is why we are learning to write outcomes, outputs and collate impact statements, which link with national and local policy and deliver improved quality and performance in line with funders expectations.

Are you “brilliant” at what you do as a provider? Do you adopt an outcomes based planning approach? Are you familiar with the Logic Model and results chain approach? There is so much to explore in the world of quality improvement, are you on the journey?

*Jim McHarg is Assistant Manager of Community Development with North Ayrshire Council. He can be contacted on [jmcharg@north-ayrshire.gov.uk](mailto:jmcharg@north-ayrshire.gov.uk). Jim is also a Board member of Scotland's Learning Partnership.*

# How learning should happen

*Community education is education for everyone, according to Marie Mulvihill, Director of D8 Community Education Centre.*

Each October, D8CEC (Dublin 8 Community Education Centre) holds an Awards Ceremony to present certificates to our learners. This is always an occasion to celebrate achievements, especially so in the past few years, when such occasions have been thin on the ground.

We celebrate the achievements, the efforts, the positive attitude, the thirst for knowledge and also for accredited learning of the members of our community in Dublin 8.

We celebrate the existence of a place where this can happen, where the real meaning of education prevails, where community education is possible.

The essence of community education is growth – personal growth of learning, confidence and self-esteem. This happens in an atmosphere of respect, where sharing, discussion, conversation, laughter and enjoyment are all part of the learning experience.

On the day the Junior Cert results were published in 2011, I heard an interview with a teacher who had been teaching the new Project Maths syllabus. She was full of praise for it because her students had talked, discussed, shared and helped each other when solving problems. This, she said, was how learning should always happen! Well, we've got news for her – that is how learning happens, always, in community education! We have a model of education that we know works; all we need now is for mainstream education to learn from us.

For too long now, community education has played the Cinderella role in the eyes of those who make the decisions about education in this country. As an example, *The Irish Times* of October 4th, 2011 listed the 50 most influential people in Irish education. On the list were 9 university or college heads; 7 academic researchers; 6 Department of Education officials; 5 politicians; 4 trade unionists; 4 state agency heads; 2 second level teachers; 1 philanthropist; 1 economist; 1



*Audience at Dublin 8 CEC Awards Ceremony*

archbishop; 1 representative of parents. If we believe the paper of record, it would appear that there are no influential people in adult community education or in any of the VECs, in fact that this sector of Irish education can safely be ignored.

Meanwhile, we continue to offer courses to our community that the community wants; to provide them in a community setting and to have them delivered by members of the community – and our learners are proof that this is the way education should be for everyone. In the process, we provide excellent value for money, because not alone do we know the cost of everything, we also know the value of what we offer.

Perhaps that's why we are educationalists and not economists.

In the world of community education, the most influential people are the learners; their input, comments and feedback are what informs D8CEC; and this is true of other providers in the sector.

Perhaps that's another lesson the wider field could learn.

*Marie Mulvihill is the Director of D8CEC. Further information about the organisation is available at [www.d8cec.com](http://www.d8cec.com).*



# Breaking new ground and cultivating links

*The Grow your own Future Certificate in Organic Horticulture (FETAC Level 5 Major Award) is delivered by OPEN – the National Network for One Parent Families – and targets lone parents in the Greater Dublin Area. Niamh Farren spoke to Freda Keeshan, Project Manager with the initiative which is already showing signs of green shoots.*



*Aisling with borage and nasturtiums*

'Grow your own Future' was conceived out of an idea in a different time – at the height of the Celtic Tiger in Ireland. While it may be difficult to remember Ireland with low levels of unemployment, there were still people at a distance from the labour market. A number of different elements conspired and Mount Street Trust Employment Initiative was born. 'At the time the Mount Street Trust, a philanthropic organisation, was interested in providing finance for labour market responses targeting vulnerable groups in society' explains Project Manager Freda Keeshan. 'They were interested in an inclusive labour market model.' At the same time, OPEN was concerned that training and edu-

cation programmes for Lone Parents were limited and generally centred on the '3 Cs' – computers, childcare and communications. 'There was a need for other types of training to engage learners in different ways, and provide employment opportunities in different sectors.' OPEN was also conscious about the threat of a new form of exclusion within the emerging green agenda – how could lone parents begin to conceive of the opportunities that were presented if they didn't have the skills?

The Mount St Trust Employment Initiative provides funding for three interlinked projects – The 'Building Futures' programme developed by the



*Carolyn, one of the graduates of the 2011 course*

INOUE, 'Emerge', a project delivered by the Ballymun Job Centre, and the 'Grow your own Future' Project, developed and pioneered by OPEN. The Initiative is supported and monitored by the WRC. Setting up the project provided immediate challenges. 'We had to find a land base which had a classroom facility. We made connections with Gaelscoil Uí Earcáin based in Finglas. This gives us access to land to develop, to training facilities and even a toolshed.' 'We also developed links with the OPW in the Phoenix Park – this is where our participants do their work experience – it is a privilege for participants to work in the Victorian walled gardens there.'



*Practising skills in the garden*

Getting an initiative like this off the ground is no easy feat, and Freda describes it as 'a real learning curve' for all involved. OPEN has made connections and found assistance from a number of sources. Wexford Organic Centres was incredibly helpful in the development of the training, says Freda. Funding secured from the FÁS Local Training Initiative has also helped support this ambitious programme. The development of an advisory group which includes representation from Teagasc, an Taisce, Healthy Food for all and other agencies helps develop the initiative, bring in additional expertise and identify progression opportunities for course participants.

## Supporting learners

The experience of OPEN with lone parents has been particularly useful in developing the course content and methodologies. 'We had to make sure it was flexible' says Freda. 'We delivered the modules over 48 weeks, three days each week. We started at ten each day to facilitate childcare arrangements. Funding from the Mount Street Trust allows us to make a financial contribution towards the cost of childcare. We also place a strong emphasis on one to one support and group work. We're conscious that some people in

the group may have been out of education for some time. Anxiety levels can be extremely high entering a course like this – and some of the modules that can be quite challenging. We try and mix formal learning with other activities like field trips and even work experience. Everyone in the group has their own plot which they have responsibility for.'

The retention levels reflect the success of the approach taken and supports provided. Sixteen out of eighteen participants completed the training programme in 2011. Course participants are recruited through OPENs members and links, as well as other community groups, the LES and FÁS. 'We hold a taster programme for people interested in the course' says Freda. 'They can find out more information about what's involved, how it affects their entitlements – basically they can see if it's right for them. People can sign up for the course if they are interested, and we follow up with them then and interview people.' Career guidance is also included both during and following the course. Participants can avail of interview skills, e-guidance, life coaching, talks and information sessions about further education. Work experience placements and even Start your own Business modules help participants to



*The outdoor classroom*

really explore some of the opportunities that are available to them.

## Initial outcomes

Even though it is only in its second year the project is yielding results. 'Two of the women who took part in the course are already in the process of setting up their own cleaning business. Another participant was awarded a First Steps business loan to set up a catering business. One graduate is now teaching horticulture in a Community and Youth service and another graduate from the course has developed a social enterprise project in an old walled garden.' There is also strong evidence that participants are making a difference in their communities as a direct result of the course – using their skills to develop community gardens. One of these gardens is the recipient of an award from Dublin City Council. The second group of sixteen eager trainees started the course in January.

*For more information about the Grow your own Future project, contact Freda Keeshan at OPEN, fkeeshan@oneparent.ie.*



# Turning learning on its head

*Open Learning Ireland is a non profit group working to create an open access non profit learning space in Dublin. In this article, Dr Gareth Stack, a member of the group explains some of the thinking behind the new development.*

Lets start with a thought experiment, imagine a baby learning to talk – getting out its first few syllables, imitating it's parents, until finally it can say a word, a complete sentence. Now imagine a curriculum for learning to talk, there'd be a textbook naturally, flashcards, phonemes to remember, competition, and of course punishment if baby got it wrong. Would our imaginary child be enhanced as a result?

John Holt was a teacher in the Colorado and Boston public schools of the 1950s and 60s. Watching the students that passed through his private school classes (some of the most elite in the country), he saw that rather than being active engaged learners, these kids were in fact terrified. School was a frustrating battleground full of potential failure and public humiliation, and examination was constant. Success in school was shaky at best, and students were rewarded for guessing at the right answer rather than really knowing the material.

Our public education system, with its segregation by age, gender and test performance, its uniforms and its teacher at the top of the classroom, is based around the schools of the early 19th century Prussian empire. This system was not designed to create articulate well-rounded adults. Rather it was a one-size fits all authoritarian approach, intended to inculcate 'fixed habits of reaction to authority'. To deselect those judged eugenically 'unfit' and supply workers for the factories of the burgeoning industrial revolution.

## Responding to the needs of learners

Perhaps, after two centuries of educational psychology, after Vygotsky and Dewey and Holt and Ivan Illich, we can do better. Maybe it's possible to build a school designed around the needs of learners and our understanding of learning.



*Electronics hacking at 'Learn something, share something, do something!' at Dublin Contemporary 2011*

Finland has made the attempt. In the 1970s their economy was based almost entirely on logging. To revolutionize it, they needed to reform their education system, and to do that they needed to reform teaching. Today you need a master's degree to be a teacher in Finland (it can't be in education), and only 10% of those who apply make it into the profession. The results speak for themselves. Despite having all but abolished mandatory testing and streaming, Finnish schools are ranked highest in the West by the OECD Programme for international student assessment. There's less than 4% difference between the best and worst performing schools. Finnish teachers spend half of their paid time outside the classroom, preparing lessons, working with their colleges to craft an integrated curriculum, and continuing their own learning.

But there's still a set curriculum. Even in Finland students are ultimately sent down an academic or vocational path, navigating a curriculum tailored to the states' utility rather than their individual needs.

Another model is practiced by the thousand or so Waldorf schools, founded in the early 20th century by



*Spontaneous children's art workshop at 'Learn something, share something, do something!'*

Rudolf Steiner, which practice a curriculum based around art and music. Here academics and literacy are delayed till late in a child's development, textbooks are crafted by the kids themselves and the emphasis is on play and a comprehensive integrated curriculum acknowledging individual learning modalities and developmental schedules. Waldorf graduates are more engaged, positive and pro-social, and Waldorf schools are leaders in educating together the children of fractious communities in places like South Africa and Israel / Palestine.

More radical still are the 30 or so Sudbury Valley schools in the United States. These schools lack anything resembling a curriculum. In fact, they do away with classrooms and teachers all together. Students spent their days at whatever takes their fancy. These schools are gymnasiums for learning, full of musical instruments, computers and games; and 82% of graduates complete university or vocational education. Sudbury graduates score very highly on measures of vocational outcome satisfaction.

## A vision for a new learning centre

I want to suggest that in the era of MIT Open Courseware, of the Maker Movement, of the Khan Academy that it's time to do this everywhere. It's time to build what Ivan Illich called 'reference services to edu-

*Maybe it's possible to build a school designed around the needs of learners and our understanding of learning.*

cational objects', peer driven free learning centers where citizens of all ages can study whatever takes their fancy. These would be places full of tools, of academic books and journals, available to anyone for free. Places fusing the best aspects of library, maker workshop, salon and community art collective. Such volunteer run institutions would encourage social engagement and autonomy and build more rounded adult human beings. Visiting lectures could be provided by artists, artisans, scientists and engineers, filmed and made available for free online. Learning resources from the community and the wider city could be brought together in an accessible and integrative way.

The potential for autonomous, consensus driven institutions has been ably demonstrated by social and art centers like Seomra Spraoi and Exchange Dublin. An ongoing series of lectures called Knowledge Exchange has already offered free talks on everything from bio-hacking to artificial intelligence, while classes in bicycle repair and Spanish have been provided free for years in Seomra.

These ideas have led to the founding of Open Learning Ireland, a new non-profit group dedicated to building an open learning institution in the capital. So far we've run two weekend long 'pop-up unschools' to test the concept – the first as part of the Dublin Contemporary 2011 Exhibition, and the second in conjunction with the Dublin Skillshare Festival ([www.diyskillshare.org](http://www.diyskillshare.org)). You can learn more about Open Learning Ireland, and join in the discussion around how we can create a new learning institution in the city at our website – [www.openlearningireland.com](http://www.openlearningireland.com)

*Gareth Stack is a graduate of the Trinity College Dublin's psychology programme, a trainee psychotherapist with the Institute for Integrative Counseling and Psychotherapy in Tallaght, and a co-founder of Open Learning Ireland, a non-profit group working to create an open access, non-profit learning space in Dublin City.*



# Adult Learners' Festival 2012

## – Love to Learn!

*Hundreds of events happened around the country to celebrate the Adult Learners' Festival. So whether you were looking to upskill to improve your employment prospects or pursue a hobby or interest, the Festival offered many opportunities to see what was available on your own doorstep.*

This year AONTAS decided to launch the programme of events a week ahead of the Festival. We were delighted to have the support of Dublin Bus and the National Museum of Ireland for that launch event. A learning bus sponsored by Dublin Bus brought a group of learners around to visit some of Dublin's best known cultural institutions. The Museum of Natural History, the Museum of Archaeology and the Museum of Decorative Arts and History all hosted visits for the group, many of whom had not been into the museum in a long time! The group all finished up at St Patrick's Cathedral to enjoy some of the amazing views of Dublin from the tower. All four of these institutions have a strong commitment to adult learning and offer regular learning opportunities through talks, lectures and courses.

As is the case each year, the Festival is supported through the participation of our member organisations, such as VECs and adult learning centres, who host information days, coffee mornings and events which provide information on the educational opportunities available for adults. AONTAS has also worked closely with the Library Council to develop a strong partnership with libraries around the country. There are no fixed dates to sign up for learning opportunities in your library; they are available to you all year around.

Every year AONTAS has developed new partnerships with organisations who love to learn. Over the past few years these include organisations such as Teagasc, the ICA (Irish Country Womens'



*The Adult Learners' Festival took place from February 20th to 24th* Association), the Irish Men's Sheds Association and GIY (Grow it Yourself). The involvement of these organisations shows how learning happens in a number of different spaces.

Here's a snapshot of some of the events that took place by county.

In **Kildare** there was great participation from the libraries this year. Athy, Leixlip, Kildare, Celbridge, Naas and Maynooth Community Library all hosted events during the week. Events included talks on genealogy, knitting workshops, creative writing workshops, art and meditation or relaxation techniques.



*A taster session in physical fitness at South Tipperary VEC from 2011*

The **University of Limerick** held an open day for mature students on Tuesday 21st. This was an ideal opportunity for adults interested in pursuing a third level qualification to see what was involved.

An Open Day for the Ceramics Skills and Design Course took place in Thomastown, Kilkenny. This was an opportunity to meet up with students and tutors on the course. The next intake for this course which was established by the Crafts Council of Ireland is in September.

**Longford** loves learning and Co. Longford VEC organised an exciting outside show broadcast live in conjunction with Shannonside Local Radio. The Joe Finnegan show broadcast live from the VEC premises on Wednesday 22nd, highlighting the Adult Guidance Services, courses and other services available.

Events in **Dublin** go from strength to strength where a number of the city's favourite cultural institutions offered free tours of their premises. Members of staff were available to speak about lectures and courses that they offer. Participating institutions included the National Library of Ireland, St Patrick's Cathedral, the Museum of Natural History, the Museum of Archaeology, the Museum of Decorative Arts and History and Dublinia. D8 Community Education Centre held a 'People, Pancakes and iPads' event which was intergenera-

tional in theme. B&Q in Liffey Valley ran basic DIY classes for beginners all during the week where they showed people how to use power tools, prepare walls for painting and glossing, and how to make basic changes around the house, to improve energy efficiency and save money. The Institute of Technology in Blanchardstown is organised a three day course aimed at people thinking of changing career. The course covered learning styles, interview skills, CV preparation and career guidance. The Open Training College in Goatstown held a coffee morning on Tuesday 21st to showcase their distance learning opportunities.

In **Tipperary**, South West Tipperary VEC showcased the results of their work, while the libraries hosted craft circles and book clubs. In Bray the Adult Education Network had an information stand highlighting learning opportunities for adults on Monday 20th. In **Wexford**, the libraries are organised a range of talks, readings and activities throughout the week.

*More information on events which took place during the Adult Learners' Festival this year is available from [www.adultlearnersfestival.com](http://www.adultlearnersfestival.com). The next issue of Explore magazine will be a special Festival edition, featuring reports from local event organisers. If you organised an event and would like to tell us how it went, please contact Niamh Farren, [nfarren@aontas.com](mailto:nfarren@aontas.com).*



# A real achievement

*This year 119 projects were nominated for STAR Awards. Out of those 41 were shortlisted, and five were chosen as this year's winners.*



Members of Limerick Community Education Network, winners in the Munster category

## Connaught Croi na Gaillimhe Resource Centre

The Centre is based in Galway city and is part of the St Vincent de Paul society. Croi na Gaillimhe Resource Centre provides a social club for older people. It provides educational and developmental supports for young people and a wide range of educational programmes for the wider adult population. It also has a very active volunteer programme and an innovative intergenerational programme of learning.

## Munster Limerick Community Education Network

Limerick Community Education Network (LCEN) is a network of on-the-ground providers of community education and statutory agencies in Limerick City. Its aim is to ensure the continuation and further development of quality learning opportunities for adults. It provides a mechanism for community education providers to identify learners' needs and to work together to provide appropriate learning opportunities in a co-ordinated manner.

## Leinster Knockmay Women's Voice Quilting Project

The aims of the project was for the Knockmay Women's Voice Group to build the capacity of local women living in poverty and social exclusion, to empower the local women to express their experience of poverty and social exclusion and their dreams for change. This was done

through a quilt of creative imagery and poetry. The completed quilt was hung in the foyer of their brand new community resource centre which was built as part of the regeneration of the Knockmay estate.

## Nationwide Getting Started Programme: Age Action Ireland

The Getting Started Programme teaches older people (over 50s), basic computer and Internet skills. Teaching takes place on a one to one basis and is done by volunteers. The individual attention from tutors, who all give of their time for free, works very well with the older generation and builds confidence in their sense of being able to give this a go. These classes are taught in libraries, community centres, workplaces and in the Age Action offices.

## Ulster Destined Level 3 Award in Effective Management

Destined for Success is an innovative 4 day bespoke accredited learning and development programme delivered by NICVA aimed at helping Destined's Directors and Management Team develop the skills needed to perform their duties as the decision makers for the organisation. Destined's core ethos is based on the involvement and full participation of its members with a learning disability in all aspects of activity and at all levels of the decision making process. Their mission statement "access to citizenship through empowerment" reflects the importance placed on personal development for every member.

# Inspiring adult learners

*Paula Lynch now has the 'know how' to get a childcare qualification –through an Cosán in Jobstown.*



Paula Lynch, learner at an Cosán

My learning journey began when I started basic English classes. I brought my mother up for registration day in An Cosán in West Tallaght. I dropped my mother at the door and told her not to be long – sign up and get out – but in order to hurry her up I went in with her – in my PJs and all! I ended up signing up for basic English classes too. Another reason I started was that my son, Jonathon was getting older. I hated him coming home from school asking me to help with homework and I couldn't help him.

This was getting harder and more embarrassing – I knew I had to do something.

Returning to class was so different. I had great support from the tutors in An Cosán and NALA. It was very friendly – a great group. You are not made do anything – I say what I want to learn. It is all explained – they show you how to do it. There is no pressure, nobody looking over your shoulder all the time. I discovered I could learn. It is a fantastic feeling. I have the 'know how'. My tutor introduced me to the computer and the NALA set up of learning online. As I got used to it I started doing it at home and could phone a tutor in NALA. I went from FETAC Level 2 to starting FETAC Level 4.

My dream was always to work in childcare – now I know that I have the 'know how' to get a childcare

qualification. I have the confidence to go on. I started FETAC Level 4 childcare and have completed 4 modules but my daughter was sick and had to stop as it was too much pressure. I decided not to skip stones and this year my goal is to complete all the FETAC L4 childcare and enjoy the experience more.

I am achieving my goals and love to learn. I know I can get my qualification in childcare – it is all possible.

I am now at a level where I can help my son Jonathon and it feels so much better. No more arguments about homework – we can actually have a laugh and it is great.

I would like to say a big thank you to all my tutors but especially my husband Stephen – he is brilliant – and my mother Anne. Their support and love is fantastic.

I would like to encourage anyone to go on and follow their dream of getting an education and a FETAC qualification if they want. It is possible and fun too!

*If you would like to share your journey back to education and what it has meant to you, contact contact AONTAS on 01 406 8220. You can also visit the inspiring learners section of our website at [www.aontas.com/information/learnerstories](http://www.aontas.com/information/learnerstories).*





**AONTAS:** *The Voice of Adult Learning*

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